

Scary Stories:
A Collection of Horror
Volume 2
Chamber Of Horror Series
By
Billy Wells

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

A father buys purple fruit at a roadside stand that turns his youngest son into a ravenous ghoul.

DROOL

The city is swarming with zombies as Jerry and Maggie leave to find refuge at his grandma's farm in the country

SOMETHING IN THE ICE

A teenager finds a monster frozen in the lake on the same day big cats have escaped from the local zoo and are gobbling up the town folk.

THE REFRIGERATOR

A man finds a message for help in a used refrigerator that was once owned by vampires in the house where his father died ten years before.

FINE PRINT

A computer fanatic finds a game where the players act as judge, jury, and executioner to mete out justice to evildoers.

TIL DEATH DO US PART

A serial killer gets his kicks by torturing and murdering beautiful women once they agree to marry him.

SOMETHING IN THE DARK

A woman plagued by recurring nightmares that have plagued her since she was a little girl seeks help from the most expensive shrink in NYC to effectively save her life.

THE PACKAGE

A doctor receives a ransom note in a gift wrapped with ribbons and a bow from a G. Reaper.

SOMETHING IN THE CAVE

Mysterious things begin to happen when two friends explore a cave over a thousand feet deep and find a myriad of tunnels someone created long ago.

GOR

An alien seeks revenge when a hunter enters the forest where he made his home and kills three of his animal friends.



FORBIDDEN FRUIT

Up ahead Wesley saw a fruit stand on the right shoulder of the road and slowed his SUV.

"I feel like having a cantaloupe or a watermelon," he said loudly as he pulled into a parking place in front of the line of large rectangular boxes full of various kinds of fruit.

Turning to his wife, Lisa, and looking back at the two kids, Jason and Brent, he saw all three either texting or playing a video game. He said louder, "Does anyone want some watermelon or cantaloupe?"

Wesley was totally surprised when Brent, not looking

up from his game, said, "Sure, Dad. I'd like some."

"How about you, Jason?"

"Not now, Dad. I'm concentrating on staying alive. I only have one life left. Oh! It's too late. They got me. Jeepers, Dad," he groaned.

"Don't blame me for your ineptitude. Do you want some watermelon?"

"Okay," Jason said, putting aside his Starship to Oblivion game in disgust. "Now that the Cyborg blitzed me, I might as well."

Lisa was immersed in an incredible YouTube video about climbing Mount Everest that was so gripping she ignored Wesley's gibbering about fruit.

Wesley shook his head, perplexed at how hard communicating had become since everyone had a Smartphone. He rarely had an intelligent conversation with anyone in his family anymore.

Leaving the mesmerized threesome in the SUV with the AC running, a blast of summer heat took away his breath for a moment as Wesley approached the boxes of fruit.

"Hello there, sonny," an old geezer in the straw hat wheezed. "What will it be today? Watermelon? Peaches? Or maybe some juicy tangerines?"

"Boy, all of them sound so mouthwatering, it's hard to decide. I think I'll have a bag of each. My wife and my boys are too busy texting and playing games to tell me what they want, so I guess I'll have to choose myself."

The old man filled several bags with the fruit and brought them all to the small cash box. He manually wrote up a striped green receipt and, without the use of a calculator, arrived at the \$21.50 total.

Wesley looked at the receipt, checking the math on his phone and arriving at the identical figure, then replied,

"Wow, I can't believe you came up with the total so fast and even added the tax. It's hard to find someone who can do that without a calculator these days."

"My third-grade teacher, bless her soul, taught me the old-fashioned way. By the way, did you ever try one of these?" the elderly man asked, grabbing a purple fruit about the size of a grapefruit and holding it up. "This is something new in genetic engineering. Some scientist fiddled with several different types of fruits and came up with what they call 'purple passion.'"

"Something about making fruit in a laboratory doesn't sit well with me. I just saw an old movie where some researchers genetically altered cockroaches to stem a deadly disease and inadvertently created a giant bug, hell-bent on wiping out the human race."

"Believe me, when you taste purple passion, I guarantee this will be your favorite fruit from now on. Like a potato chip, I'll bet you can't eat only one. Tell you what. I'll give you a sample to try. There are four of you ... yes? Two adults and two children." The old man placed four of the purple fruit in another bag and, with a warm smile, handed it to Wesley.

"Thanks a lot. I'll try it, based on your glowing recommendation." After counting out the \$21.50, Wesley grabbed the four bags of fruit and got back into the SUV.

Looking at the others and seeing no indication they had even noticed he had returned or had left in the first place, he announced, "I just won the lotto for \$92 million, and I've decided to take a rocket ship to the moon." It didn't surprise him when no one said anything at his remark. While Wesley waited for an oncoming car to pass, Lisa looked up from the Mount Everest video and saw the old man's face from the produce stand framed in the window. He gave her a subtle wink and waved as they pulled into the highway.

When the family arrived home, Lisa started making grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch, and Wesley cut up several pieces of the fruit and put them in a large bowl in the center of the kitchen table.

They all sat down to eat, and, while waiting for the sandwiches, Wesley and the boys began to munch on the succulent cubes of watermelon, peaches, tangerines, and the new purple passion fruit that resembled a pear on the inside.

"Wow, Dad!" Jason blurted out excitedly, "What is this new fruit? I've never tasted anything like it before."

"It's called purple passion. I must say, the old man was right. He said, once you tasted it, it would be your favorite from now on." After eating the sandwiches, the family gobbled up every morsel of the fruit before they went about their afternoon activities.

* * *

At three o'clock in the morning, an odd noise—which sounded like a muffled scream from the direction of the boys' rooms—awakened Lisa. She heard the pounding rain on the roof and the rumble of thunder. Lightning lit up the windowpane as she looked at the clock on the table and saw no digital readout. The electricity was apparently off.

She shook Wesley and aroused him from a deep sleep, saying, "I think I heard one of the boys cry out. I believe it was Jason."

"I didn't hear anything," Wesley muttered, barely awake.

"Really, darling, you wouldn't hear a bomb go off in the next room. You know how soundly you sleep."

"I don't hear anything now, except ... is that thunder? Damn, it's raining really hard. Look, maybe Jason was having a bad dream. In fact, maybe you were having a bad dream."

"Even after I was awake? I don't think so. I tell you I heard the tail end of a scream or someone crying out," Lisa said, staring into the blackness beyond the open door.

"Well, why don't you check while I get some sleep? Why should both of us go?"

"Something is not right, Wesley. I can feel it. I want you to go with me. The electricity is off."

"Damn, why does this happen every time there's a storm? Well, all right," he groaned, rising from the bed with a big yawn. "You know I have to get up at six o'clock."

Wesley took a small flashlight from the end table, and the two of them made their way into the hall.

Immediately they detected an odd smell. Not a sharp odor but dull, like a recent fart, and yet not exactly like a fart.

"What's that smell?" Wesley finally asked, sniffing the air.

At the door to Jason's room, the smell grew more pungent. Wesley led with the flashlight through the open door and slipped on something slick on the tile floor. He was on his butt before he could fathom what he'd seen in the bed.

"What the hell is this on the floor?" Wesley shouted, with the back end of his pajamas soaked. As he struggled to his feet, the beam of light fell on the scene that would live in their nightmares forever. The room was swimming in blood. It was on the floor, the walls, the bed; and what was left of Jason was covered with it.

Lisa screamed, and Wesley ran to his son's bedside and threw back the blood-soaked sheet. They both stood there with their mouths agape and emotions soaring, glaring at the handiwork of what had to be some kind of wild animal attack. So much of Jason's torso and face were missing

that their oldest son was barely recognizable as a human being.

Immediately realizing there was no way to help Jason, Lisa shrieked, "What about Brent?"

"My God," Wesley gasped, struggling for breath.

Without the slightest regard for a beast that could still be lurking in the house, the two of them bolted into the hallway.

Before them, in the beam of the flashlight, they saw, with shocking clarity, Brent sitting on the floor sucking on what looked like a slab of raw meat. His face and his pajamas were soaked with blood.

"What are you eating?" Lisa screamed.

"I couldn't help it, Mommy. I was so hungry."

"Hungry?" Lisa murmured as Wesley sank to the floor and began to sob. "You killed your brother because you wanted to eat him?"

Ten minutes later, the police and EMTs converged on the house and filled the driveway and the street with vehicles. A young police officer stared in disbelief at Brent in his bloody pajamas. The officer had already seen Brent's older brother and couldn't comprehend how a little boy no more than eight years old could be responsible. He withdrew his handcuffs and started to cuff the youngster, but the look in his mother's eyes dissuaded him. As an alternative, he took Brent by the hand and led him to the cruiser outside as a detective approached Wesley and Lisa on a sofa in the living room.

"I'm Lieutenant Barnes. I can't begin to comprehend what you're going through right now. This is the most horrific crime scene I've ever seen. If you can't talk now, we can wait until later. I'm terribly sorry, but I need to ask you some questions about what happened as soon as you can manage it."

Wesley sat in a daze on the sofa staring into space. Barnes turned to Lisa and continued, "It appears your husband has lost it, at least for now. Can you tell me anything about what happened?"

Lisa looked up at him, her face wet with tears and said, "Our lives are over. A few hours ago we were the Moores, a typical suburban family looking forward to a bright future ..."

"What happened, Mrs. Moore?" Barnes interrupted.

She glared at him and said, "My eight-year-old son got hungry. He went to his brother's room, clubbed him to death with a baseball bat, and started eating him. You saw what he did. That's all there is to say."

She began to cry uncontrollably. Barnes stopped writing, and a tear rolled down his own face. Brushing it away, he gathered his composure and said sadly, "It doesn't look like something an eight-year-old boy could do. Do you have any large pets?"

"No," Lisa said coldly, looking extremely exhausted.

"It certainly looks like your oldest son ..."

"His name was Jason," Lisa said.

"It looks like Jason was attacked by some kind of wild animal that somehow got into the house. We've taken your youngest son into custody based on your assertion that he committed this unspeakable murder. Did you or your husband actually see him kill Jason?"

"No," Lisa said in the same tone as before. "I didn't see him do it, but he told me that he did. He said he got hungry, and Jason's room was the first door he came to with the baseball bat."

"You told one of the officers that you don't think he had an argument with his brother, and, although he had no motive you know of to kill him, you believe he did it. You

don't think for a minute an animal might have done it?"

"No, a mother can tell when her little boy is not telling the truth. I know my son. He told me that he did it, and I believe him."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Moore. I'm still trying to get my mind around what you're telling me. I have two sons at home myself. I can't imagine one of them murdering the other and eating him, but you can. Did your son have some kind of peculiar psychosis or a personality disorder?"

"None whatsoever."

"Did he mistreat pets? Was there ever any clue that he might become dangerous?"

"No," Lisa said softly. "He was a normal eight-year-old boy. He loved his brother and had a lot of friends. He got good grades in school and never did anything to suggest he would become violent." Lisa rose from the sofa unsteadily and said, "I'm sorry, Lieutenant Barnes. I've told you everything I know, and I am exhausted. If you want to keep beating a dead horse, it'll have to be tomorrow."

"I understand. I'm so sorry to have to trouble you at a time like this." Wesley's brother and his wife were standing in the next room, and Barnes led Lisa toward them.

The woman took Lisa in her arms, and they both started to sob loudly. The EMTs escorted them out the front door as the coroner and the crime scene unit continued to search for clues.

As the Moores headed toward vehicles parked along the street, a shrill scream brought several police officers running toward the cruiser where the young officer had taken Brent.

Looking through the side window, the first one who approached the car saw Brent feasting on the young officer. Brent's face was wet with new blood, and slivers of

flesh dangled from his teeth. The victim's open eyes were dead and unseeing. A large hole in his neck was still spurting blood.

When the policeman jerked open the door and pulled the boy from the car, Brent grinned sheepishly at him, like a child who had just done something naughty and really enjoyed it.

Another police officer said, "Can you believe what the little monster did to Phil in no more than ten minutes?"

"How did he kill him?"

"Dunno ... My guess is, from the missing chunk in Phil's throat, that the kid came from behind and, with his teeth, tore out Phil's jugular."

"Phil didn't cuff him?"

"Hey, he's only eight years old. Have you ever cuffed a kid that young?"

"No, but I will from now on, that's for sure."

After a month of ineffectual therapy, Wesley's psychiatrists committed him to the Montgomery Sanitarium. The prognosis for a complete recovery appeared doubtful, but Lisa had not given up hope despite the doctors' negative outlook. The autopsy proved that Jason Moore's death had not come from a wild animal attack. The contents of Brent's stomach confirmed he had devoured his brother, but it did not prove he had killed him. However, the boy's bloody fingerprints on a baseball bat proved enough to convict him of the heinous, premeditated murder.

The coroner concluded that Brent's maniacal outburst was the result of ingesting the strange purple fruit. Although all four members of the family had eaten it, Brent's allergic reaction to the food, similar to that of an allergy to dogs and cats, had caused his sudden insanity attack.

* * *

As the days passed, Lisa could not get the old man's smug wink out of her mind. It was branded forever in her memory. He had ruined their lives, and she was convinced the act was intentional. She believed he had known the fruit would be catastrophic to certain people who ate it.

But why would this madman want random people to suffer? Did he consider himself a satanic messenger or did he simply enjoy wreaking havoc on innocent people for some other misguided reason?

Lisa decided she would spend the rest of her life pursuing the old man, and, since she believed he was evil incarnate, she decided to call him Beelzebub until his real name could be determined.

Wesley had put away a considerable amount of money for their retirement and their children's education. At this point, since their medical insurance was paying for her husband's shock treatments and institutionalization, and the state had custody of Jason and his care, she planned to use their savings to find Beelzebub. She didn't know what she would do when she found him, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

Before beginning the journey that might take weeks, months, or even years, she arranged to visit Wesley and Brent one last time. All the previous visitations were fruitless, but she was still a dutiful wife and mother for better or for worse.

In the past when she visited her husband, she found him strapped to a chair on the patio staring into space, saliva usually oozing down his chin onto his hospital gown. She would talk with him for half an hour and never see any sign he knew she was there.

Brent lived in the maximum-security section of the same facility. Each time she visited him, she had to speak

to him through small holes drilled into a thick Plexiglas shield placed over the bars of his padded cell. He always wore a straitjacket over a jumpsuit and a mouthpiece to prevent him from chewing off his tongue and eating it. His doctors indicated his strange malady made him ravenously hungry, and, if allowed to eat his fill, he would keep eating until his stomach exploded. A strong retractable cord prevented him from battering his head against the bars that separated the cell from the visiting area. A guard watched eight different patients in his ward on separate monitors.

Lisa cried for hours after those visits with Brent. What was there to say to a raving psychopath who had eaten his brother and would have tried to eat Wesley and her if the master bedroom had been one door closer?

Brent couldn't speak to her with the Hannibal Lecter-type mouthpiece, but he didn't want to talk to her anyway. Lisa could see the hunger in his beady little eyes as he stared fixedly at her like a juicy slab of beef or a french fry loaded with ketchup. The icy stare reminded her of a ravenous beast always ready to spring if he got the chance. Every time she returned to her car, she wondered why she had made the trip. Both her little boys had died that night. The thing in the padded cell was certainly not her precious Brent, the cutest little boy who had ever walked the earth.

Regardless of the anxiety and the hopelessness she felt from the visitations, she decided to go one more time before she left to hunt down Beelzebub.

Arriving at the facility, she stepped into the cool, air-conditioned space and went directly to the front desk. When Lisa informed the receptionist that she was there to visit her son, the woman smiled, but, after referring to her computer screen, her smile changed to a frown. She pushed a red button on the desk and said sternly, "I'm sorry to inform you that Brent has been moved to another

facility. His condition demanded a higher degree of security than we can offer here."

"A higher degree of security?" Lisa replied, shaking her head in disbelief. "How is that possible? He wears a straitjacket and a mouthpiece and is confined to a padded cell. What greater security can there be?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Moore. The CDC and the FBI have become involved in your son's case, and I am not at liberty to divulge his whereabouts at this time. This is now a matter of national security. Here is a number you can call for more information, but that's all I've been instructed to say."

An elderly man she recognized as Dr. Printz, Brent's psychiatrist, entered the room and approached her with a long face.

"Where have they taken him?" Lisa pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Moore. I don't really know, and, even if I did, I couldn't tell you. I think the agent said it was somewhere in the Southwest."

"Southwest? You mean Nevada, New Mexico, that Southwest?"

He stared at her blankly and said nothing.

"If I didn't know better, it sounds like he may have gone the way of the aliens in Area 51." Lisa feigned a chuckle, trying to lighten the conversation to pry more information from the doctor.

The doctor didn't smile or react to her remark in any way. He just shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm sorry. Call the number the receptionist gave you. That's all I know." He turned and walked away, leaving her standing with her mouth agape.

When she arrived home, Lisa called the number and got the runaround by several military officers. They told

her that she would be notified when she could visit her son once he was ready to receive visitors.

Early the next morning Lisa started her search for Beelzebub. Each time she saw a vender selling anything along the road, she stopped to peruse the sellers. Every day or so someone said they remembered the elderly man with his purple fruit. They remembered the fruit especially since none of them had ever seen it before.

* * *

After a month, the trail seemed to be leading south along Interstate 75.

Finally one day a young teen told her an old man was selling purple fruit only a few days before. Lisa's excitement grew at the thought of finally confronting the human monster at last. She wondered what she would do if she did find him. Stare him to death? Kick him in the balls? She didn't have a weapon, and, even if she had bought a gun, she had never even touched a pistol or a rifle in her life.

One morning while having a cup of coffee at a pancake house, she bought a newspaper and started browsing through it. Suddenly, as she focused on the local section, a headline jumped out at her: Outbreak of Strange Malady from Eating Purple Fruit in Atlanta. The article read:

Thirty-one citizens of an Atlanta, Georgia, suburb were stricken after eating a purple fruit they had purchased from a roadside vendor. Approximately eight hours after eating the fruit, random children from various families went berserk and began to devour other members of their family. The CDC and the FBI are investigating the outbreak that has occurred in a number of small towns along Interstate 75 South. The malady, much like a rabies attack, is not contagious and can only be contracted by the consumption of the fruit, which is a deep purple color

on the outside and resembles a pear on the inside. The CDC would not confirm to this reporter how many cases of the apparently incurable disease have occurred. All victims have been transported from the local hospitals to a special disease center in New Mexico. The federal government has enlisted a team of doctors to determine why only some of the people who eat the fruit are transformed into—as one researcher described—“crazed, ravenous ghouls.”

Lisa could not believe her eyes. Her son was not the only one who had killed other people after eating the fruit. The FBI was combing the Southern states, particularly Georgia and Alabama, for an elderly male, about seventy years old, wearing blue jeans, suspenders, and a straw hat, selling the deadly fruit. She wrote down the number to call if she located him.

It was good to find out this new information, but, at the same time, if the FBI had a bulletin out for the old man, she doubted she would ever find him at a roadside stand.

That afternoon she placed ads in several local papers that read Purple Passion Fruit Wanted. Will Pay \$100 for a Dozen, with the number to call. She didn't believe for a moment anyone would respond to the ad, but what else did she have to do with the rest of her life?

At eleven o'clock the next day, the phone rang, and, picking it up, she said, “Hello.”

Someone who sounded like a teenager said, “I see in your ad that you'll pay \$100 for purple passion fruit?”

“Yes, I've been dying to try some. I've heard it's the best-tasting fruit ever. Do you have some for sale?”

“Not exactly. I don't have the fruit, but how much would you pay to find out where there's a whole grove of it?”

"A whole grove of it!" Lisa blurted out excitedly.

"Are you the police?" the teen asked nervously. "You know the FBI is looking for the old man who sells it."

"I'm not the police. I just have a bone to pick with the seller. Look, I'll give you \$500 to show me where the grove is. Where can I meet you?"

The boy on the phone hesitated and said nothing, apparently pondering his next move. Then he said, "Go to the entrance of the Atlanta Braves stadium. No one should be there today. Wear a red scarf around your neck. If I see a policeman, I'll split, and you won't get the information."

As soon as she ended the call, Lisa went directly to her bank, withdrew \$500, and placed it in an envelope. She drove to the stadium, parked in the deserted lot, and took a seat on the bench at a bus stop directly in front of the entrance.

Fifteen minutes later she wondered if she had received a prank call since no one had shown up. Then she saw a teenager approaching on a bicycle in the distance. The teen saw her on the bench and pulled his bicycle beside her.

"Did you bring the money?" he asked sullenly.

"You're the one who called?"

"Did you bring the money?" he repeated and looked about nervously for possible escape routes if someone else interrupted them.

Lisa held out the envelope. "I have the money. Where can I get the fruit?"

The boy reached for the envelope, but she pulled it away. "How do I know you'll give me the money if I tell you?"

"How can I be sure you know where the fruit is?"

He took out a picture from his shirt pocket and gave it to her.

Sure enough, it was a picture of a field of purple fruit trees. On the back someone had written an address.

"Well, I fulfilled my part of the agreement, so give me the money. I earned it."

"Have you seen the old man who sold the fruit?"

"I see him now and then. He used to be my soccer coach. He's been laying low ever since the FBI put his face on a poster in the post office."

"I care more about finding him than the fruit," Lisa explained.

"Look, I'm going to need more dough for that."

"Fat chance," Lisa grouched.

"All right, lady, he works at the defense center where they grow the purple fruit trees. Give me the money."

"That's bullshit. This man is a farmer. He wears a straw hat and looks like my grandfather."

"That's just a disguise he uses when he sells fruit. He used to be my soccer coach. I know him well. He's no farmer. He's a bigwig at the defense plant. You wouldn't even recognize him if you saw him on the street. Give me the money, so I can go."

Lisa paused, and, somehow believing the rattled teen, she handed over the money.

He grabbed the envelope and took off, looking in all directions for someone who might be following him.

Lisa returned to her car, put the address from the photo in her GPS, and took off. The device indicated the location was only five miles from where she was now.

As she approached from the top of a hill, she saw a

sprawling complex that looked like a prison, since it was surrounded by barbed wire with sentries positioned around the perimeter. There was no sign identifying the facility, only one on the wall nearest the fence that read Top Security, No Entry. In a field behind the building, she saw rows of vegetables and fruit trees. Among them was a row of the purple fruit trees. The teen was right about the fruit trees, but was he right about the old man being a top executive at this very facility?

Lisa went to Wal-Mart and purchased a pair of high-powered binoculars. She began her vigil the next morning, armed with a cooler full of water and enough high-calorie snacks to make her a diabetic. The surveillance was extremely tedious, particularly watching everyone who came and went through the binoculars.

Finally, on the second day, she saw a fancy vehicle driven by an older man dressed in a business suit pass through the security gate a little faster than most of the other people—who had to show the guard several pieces of identification. He looked a lot younger than the man who had sold the fruit, but, for some uncanny reason, Lisa thought he could be the old man who wore the straw hat.

At two o'clock that afternoon, she saw the same car exit the gate. She verified the make of the car and the license plate number she had written down that morning. It matched.

She followed the vehicle to a large house in a prestigious development of multimillion-dollar mansions overlooking an enormous lake. The economy rental car she drove stuck out like a sore thumb compared to the other luxury cars in the neighborhood. She was surprised the residential area did not have a security gate, but that lack allowed her to follow the suspect long enough to see him walk right to his door without any problem. Before confronting the man who had ruined her life, Lisa decided to find out all she could about him.

Driving about the back roads that wound through a forest of pines overlooking the lake, Lisa discovered a side road that wound directly above the suspect's home. With her binoculars, she could watch the front, the right side of the house, and the backyard without anyone seeing her.

On the third day she saw the door open on one of the four garage bays, and then a middle-aged woman backed out in a red Corvette convertible. She was a handsome woman and tastefully dressed. Lisa guessed she was probably an upstanding citizen in the community. Lisa assumed this was the man's wife or his girlfriend. Probably the former.

The next day was Saturday. At about 1:00 p.m., a Lincoln Town Car pulled into the driveway. Lisa saw a man and a woman, each about thirty years old, and two children, maybe middle-school age, exit the vehicle.

Through the binoculars she saw the front door swing open, and the defense department executive and the woman she'd seen the day before rushed to meet the young family in the driveway. After some hugs and kisses, they disappeared inside the house. An hour later, she saw them in lawn chairs around a substantial pool in the backyard. It appeared they were having chips and salsa, with margaritas for the adults and soft drinks for the children.

The young family left about six o'clock that evening after what seemed to be a weekend family gathering of food, drink, and communion. Tears rolled down Lisa's face at the realization that she would probably never know this type of family get-together again.

In only a few minutes of surfing the web, Lisa determined Beelzebub's real name was Harold Baxter. During the next several weeks, Lisa researched his life every way she could. He had risen on a fast track to the top of the research and development department of the

army's Weapons of Mass Destruction Unit, rising through the ranks to become a colonel. He had started as a buck private and achieved a service appointment to West Point. He moved into research as soon as he had graduated. He didn't seem to be a person who would be involved in raising fruit trees. All of his past work related to anthrax and Ebola research. After he had spent thirty years in the field, Lisa assumed he knew how to make people sick and how to kill them.

Checking her messages on her home answering machine, she received a voice mail from a stern no-nonsense army captain. He indicated that she could arrange a meeting with her son since his malady was more controlled now. If she chose, she could have one visitation each month. However, she would have to meet with him at a military base in New Mexico.

Lisa didn't know what to make of this news. Could Brent really be improving? Was it possible he could actually have a viable life in the future? Land a job, get married, and raise a family?

Refusing to dwell on the negative, she arranged to meet Brent one week later at the designated facility in New Mexico. For the first time in a long time, in spite of her previous skepticism, she wanted to believe Brent could be rehabilitated.

After a pleasant flight that morning, Lisa arrived at the airport in New Mexico about three o'clock in the afternoon. She rented a cheap compact Chevy. The rental agent at the desk gave her an odd look when she asked about the rehab center where Brent was. She wondered what the guy behind the counter knew about it that she didn't.

After about forty minutes she approached what looked like an oasis in the middle of the desert. The white stucco buildings surrounded by pinyon trees, boulders, and

scrub brush looked new and were set back off the dedicated road that led to them. The complex of buildings struck her as more like a condominium project than a hospital. Lisa was bubbling over with excitement and anticipation when she parked the car and headed for the entrance.

The atmosphere of the lobby was bright and cheerful, unlike where Brent had been before. After signing in at the front desk, the receptionist called the person who would escort Lisa. Soon a well-dressed young woman appeared from one of the rooms down the hall. Dressed in an impressive beige suit, she introduced herself as Carolyn Tisinger. She didn't smile or make small talk of any kind but immediately led Lisa to a beautifully appointed room with pleasant modern furniture. She motioned Lisa to one of the four brown leather chairs situated around a coffee table. An urn of coffee and a pitcher of orange juice were on the table.

Lisa took a seat, anticipating the woman would do the same. Lisa hoped they would have a few minutes together so Lisa could ask some questions before Brent joined them. But, to her surprise, the woman remained standing and said coldly, "Brent will be with you shortly." Afterward she walked briskly away before Lisa could pose the first question.

Lisa had gone to the beauty parlor and was wearing a new dress she had bought specifically for this occasion. She wanted Brent to see her in the best light possible since, during his months of rehabilitation, he had always seen her crying her eyes out with her hair a disheveled mess.

Lisa reached for a cup to pour some coffee, but, when she saw how badly her hand was shaking, she decided not to have any. Maybe later, after she cracked the ice with her son.

Finally the moment came. The door opened, and a different woman escorted Brent to a chair directly across the coffee table from his mother. He took a seat. The young woman, who wore a nurse's uniform, cracked a smile but then, just like the first woman, turned abruptly and left the room, as if she were trying to avoid something unpleasant.

At first glance Lisa noticed Brent was taller and leaner than before. He had on a casual shirt and Dockers, and looked much like any boy his age. Lisa bolted from her chair and, rushing to her son, threw her arms around him and smothered him with a hug and a heartfelt kiss on the cheek.

"Hello, Brent. I love you so," Lisa said warmly, her face beaming with new hope after so much time had passed.

Brent continued to sit stoically in his chair, staring into space, as Lisa stooped lower to see his face. He didn't attempt to shrink away from his mother's warm embrace and sudden burst of affection; he simply ignored her entirely.

Feeling the cool reception, Lisa wondered if she had come on too strong for their first meeting. She backed away and returned to her seat. Brent continued to stare into space from his chair without acknowledging her presence.

Lisa tried to recover from what had become an embarrassing start. "Well, Brent, how do you like your new place?"

Brent continued to stare straight ahead and said nothing. He showed no sign of nervousness and didn't seem the least bit unstable. Instead, to her surprise, Brent appeared relaxed, confident, and aloof to everything around him.

Periodically she asked Brent a question, and, when she got no response, she simply tried to make small talk during the rest of the hour-long visit. Brent never focused on her and gave no indication he knew she was there. A feeling of disappointment welled up inside of her, and she started to cry.

Her son was no longer violent, but now he was more like the proverbial vegetable than a human being. For all practical matters he seemed brain-dead and stripped of all emotion.

Lisa pushed the intercom button on the table and stood. Brent continued looking at the space on the wall he'd been fixed on since he had sat down. The second woman she'd met returned and, trying not to make eye contact, took Brent's hand and led him away like a toddler.

Lisa assumed the first woman would return next to escort her out. Even if the unfeeling female tried to give her some bullshit about Brent's progress, she had no interest in hearing about it.

She stood and went to the doorway. Looking around, she saw a ladies' room halfway down a long hallway and made her way toward it. She also found a bank of elevators as she passed another hall leading farther to the right, down another long corridor. Hospital personnel wearing green scrubs went about their daily tasks and paid her no mind. She didn't see anyone who looked like security anywhere. She spied a water fountain adjacent to another elevator bank, walked to it, and pretended to drink while surveying the surroundings to get her bearings.

On the buttons to select a floor in front of the elevator, Lisa was shocked to find there were ten floors descending into the depths of the building that, on the outside, appeared to be a low-rise structure. This rehab center was much larger than it looked from the street. In

fact the three other adjacent buildings might also have ten floors belowground.

She saw a cart loaded with hospital uniforms and, seeing no one nearby, grabbed a few, and scurried into the ladies' room across the hall.

Once inside she entered a stall and tried one on. She was delighted when the first one fit reasonably well. After placing her purse and street clothes on the top shelf of the utility closet, she peeked into the hall and, seeing no one looking in her direction, returned to the elevators in hopes of inspecting a few levels below the first floor. She pushed the Down button and waited. She placed her trembling hands behind her back and pursed her lips to keep them from quivering. When the doors opened, she entered the empty cab and selected the fifth sublevel.

The car descended more rapidly than the standard elevator she was accustomed to and stopped abruptly with a whoosh. Bracing to be discovered when the elevator door opened on the fifth sublevel, she was relieved when no one was there.

Moving into the long, bright corridor, she discovered a hotel kind of atmosphere, except each small room had a large interior picture window instead of a wall. Anyone passing in the hall could easily see what the occupant inside was doing.

As she made her way down the hall, she saw zombie-looking patients with vacant eyes shambling about on a plastic chain affixed to the floor inside the first several rooms. Some were men, some women.

The hapless man in the fourth room looked at her like a juicy steak the same as Brent had done on her first visitations. This guy had somehow freed one of his arms

from the straitjacket, and his teeth were bloody. Lisa saw to her horror that three of his fingers were missing at the knuckles on his left hand, and blood was spraying from the stumps onto both his straitjacket and his white hospital gown underneath. Lisa surmised that the bloody tidbit he was gnawing on was probably one of his fingers. He had an unnerving wide grin on his face that was streaked with gore and slivers of flesh. Lisa grimaced and felt queasy as she forced away her gaze and moved farther down the hall, yet taking a quick look into each room as she passed.

She paused several more times, recoiling in disbelief from similar depraved acts of two more patients who had escaped the bonds of their straitjackets. Where were the orderlies? Did no one care about the poor devils that were feasting on various parts of their own bodies in plain view of anyone who happened to pass? The horror of what she had witnessed was surreal.

She thought of Brent and what might happen to him if someone forgot to give him his medication. How many ravenous ghouls were in this facility? She couldn't believe that the federal government could be involved in such a diabolical experiment, but the evidence confirmed it.

Lisa envisioned an army of these things trucked into an enemy village and then turned loose to devour everyone that they could sink their teeth into.

She cautiously made her way back to the main level. After several close encounters with security and the hospital staff, she stopped at various water fountains and detoured into ladies' rooms several times to avoid contact with anyone who might suspect she shouldn't be here. Her nerves were shattered as she finally found the restroom where she'd hidden her clothes.

When she entered, the young woman who had initially escorted Brent to the receiving room, stood primping at the mirror. Before the nurse recognized Lisa dressed in hospital garb, Lisa scurried into the first stall she came to and quickly closed the door.

Her heart was beating so loudly she thought the woman would hear, but finally Lisa heard her footsteps crossing the room, and, from the corner of her eye, she saw a huge cockroach crawl up the wall behind the toilet. She stifled an audible gasp as the woman crossed the room, pushed open the outer door and left.

When the sound of footsteps disappeared in the hall, Lisa quickly retrieved her clothes from the utility closet, returned to the stall, and put them on.

"Whew," she said aloud as she dumped the scrubs on the top shelf of the closet, walked swiftly through the lobby, and hurried to the parking lot.

As she drove farther and farther away, she kept one eye on the rearview mirror. As far as she could tell, no one was following her.

She smiled, thinking how a housewife had cracked the tight security at the Pentagon-like army rehab facility. She couldn't fathom how, with no planning whatsoever, she had managed to get into the lower levels of the highly guarded complex and out again without being apprehended.

The trip to the patient holding area had changed her plans entirely. She knew now exactly what she wanted to do no matter what the consequences.

During more weeks of surveillance on Colonel Baxter's estate, she saw his son and his family several more times, other important dignitaries, military brass,

and many well-dressed civilians. Still Lisa waited for the perfect moment to put her plan into action.

Finally one Saturday morning a caterer's truck pulled into the Baxters' driveway and began to haul trays of food and refreshments inside. Apparently the colonel had invited some friends and associates for a brunch.

Lisa immediately picked up the phone and called Benny, a very unsavory individual she had hired in advance to help her in whatever way she required at whatever time she required it. As the phone continued to ring, she wondered if Benny would really be here as he had promised on a moment's notice.

He'd given her the special telephone number to call when his services were absolutely and unequivocally required. He reminded her several times not to confuse this number with the other one he'd given her for normal business matters since his services on this number would cost \$5,000 for each hour.

Lisa prayed her initial plan would succeed without a hitch, but, if it didn't, Benny was prepared to send in some thugs with machine guns to crash the party. It was not the way she wanted it to go, but, regardless, the people who were responsible for ruining the lives of her loved ones and so many others would feel her wrath soon one way or another.

She remembered the old adage: Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Truer words were never spoken, she thought as her weathered face, lined with months of anxiety, morphed into something demonic and without pity.

* * *

At two o'clock in the morning, Lisa pulled up in the driveway of Baxters' estate, exited the car, and, quickly making her way to the front porch, rang the doorbell.

After considerable time had passed, a light came on inside. Finally Lisa saw a bedraggled face with mussed hair peer through the right-hand glass panel of the massive entry door.

She immediately recognized the colonel. She had branded his real face into her memory even without his straw hat and wig. Baxter threw open the door dressed in pajamas and a black robe and stepped onto the porch. He stood glaring at her with an assault rifle pointed at her midsection. "Ah, Lisa, I've been wondering when you would arrive. I have already triggered the alarm for my security guards. I guess I shouldn't be surprised you were smart enough to find me at my home. Most of the misguided rabble that want to stop me from saving the old US of A are looking for an aging farmer in a straw hat. But after cracking the security at the funny farm ... Oh, pardon the humor. That's what my colleagues call the rehab center where your son resides. After that, nothing you could do should surprise me."

He paused and looked into the night sky and toward the highway leading into the sprawling complex of luxury estates, then continued, "We have all of your movements on tape, but the glitch occurred when the security man, who was supposed to be watching the monitors, was instead porking the woman who had escorted your son in to see you. After his failure to follow protocol, the woman he was with was supposed to escort you out of the facility, but she failed on that score as well. It was a circus of errors, and both incompetents have been eliminated. Oh, well, it doesn't matter now. My men are coming. I won't be seeing you again."

Lisa stood silent, listening to his prattle, and was happy he had apparently not received any of the calls she expected him to receive as yet. She didn't care what happened to her now.

"If I'm not mistaken, you will probably meet with an unfortunate accident on your way back to the base," Baxter said calmly, beaming from ear to ear. "I certainly don't want a lot of blood darkening my doorstep. It's almost impossible to get blood out of concrete."

Baxter paused to allow Lisa to speak, but, when she didn't, he continued, "What's the matter, Lisa? Has the cat got your tongue? I suppose you came here to tell me what kind of monster I am to create such a diabolical defense weapon with the purple passion fruit."

"Not exactly," Lisa finally said. "I'm sure nothing I could say would mean a thing to an unfeeling piece of shit like you."

They heard the roar of helicopters above and saw the headlights of vehicles approaching in the distance.

Baxter looked at her solemnly and said, "Someday soon, my dear lady, when China, Russia, North Korea, and possibly Iran have wiped out our country with their own self-made viruses, plagues, and weapons of mass destruction, you will see the need for my supposed madness. Certainly you must realize that sacrificing someone's family for the sake of the survival of the United States of America and its allies around the world is no different than asking young soldiers to march into a wall of machine-gun fire for the sake of life, liberty, and the American way. Sacrificing a few thousand people, well, maybe more than that, to save everyone is simply collateral damage that takes place in any war. It's a calculated loss that cannot be avoided. It's for the common good."

Ten military vehicles encircled the house and armed men in black uniforms approached Lisa from all sides. Two helicopters hovered overhead with snipers visibly pointing rifles at her from above.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring a weapon of some kind," Baxter mused. "Were you just planning on tongue-lashing me to death with your rhetoric? If that's why you came, your performance has certainly been lackluster up to now." He chuckled with delight and began to turn to his house.

Two soldiers grabbed each of Lisa's arms and started to pull her away when she cried out, "I just wanted to know if you enjoyed the fruit salad you had at your brunch today."

The colonel stopped in his tracks as if he'd walked into a brick wall. He slowly turned to face her and saw the unbridled hatred and loathing in her eyes. The underlying weight of her words filled him with sheer terror.

"After all, Colonel," she said with a blood-curdling, cruel smile on her lips, "sacrificing a few of the rabble for the sake of this great country is a price any patriotic American would pay gladly. Right? You sanctimonious asshole."

Lisa tried to spit in his face, but he was too far away. A bigger grin than the colonel's earlier one lit up her face as the men in uniform dragged her away.

Suddenly in the beam of the headlights fixed on the front door of the mansion, a small figure appeared holding a bloody butcher knife. The boy's pajamas were soaked in blood as he lurched forward, stabbing the air with the menacing long blade.

Every soldier encircling the porch looked to the colonel for direction as the boy grew alarmingly closer. The little monster had a bone-chilling, maniacal frenzy in his eyes and slivers of bloody flesh stuck to his jowls.

Just before the soldiers opened fire to save the colonel, the boy said in his small, innocent voice, "I'm sorry, Grandpa. I was so hungry."



DROOL

As Jerry wrapped his infected shin in the only rag he had left, he said with a grimace, "My darling, Maggie, you know I worship the ground you walk on. You're the only girl I've ever loved, and I will do anything to protect you. I couldn't bear to see you hurt or suffering."

Maggie looked up at him with fond affection, brushing his hair back from his eyes, and said softly, "I know."

"As long as I'm alive, I'll never let those things get their hands on the girl I love with all my heart."

"I know," she said again, now feeling his forehead. "I know how much you love me, but you're burning up with fever. The sooner we get to your grandma's house, the better. Maybe she has some medicine we can put on your leg. It looks awful."

Jerry groaned. "Yes, but let's rest for a minute. I'm so weak from not eating for so long."

The world had gone mad. Zombies roamed every street in the city. Jerry and Maggie had decided their only chance of survival was to leave their hometown and take refuge at Jerry's grandma's farm in the country.

On their way back to Jerry's parents' home to get food and his father's gun, they were attacked by zombies and barely escaped with their lives. In trying to jump a barbed-wire fence, Jerry had torn a big gash in his leg from his ankle to his knee. The wire had been rusty, and now his leg was seriously infected.

Arriving at the house, they filled a backpack with what they could carry and made their way out of town. Fortunately not far away, they had found a motorbike overturned with the keys still in the ignition and a half a tank of gasoline. By sundown, they were miles away and heading south.

For a while the munchies had sufficed. They should have eaten them more sparingly, but Jerry never thought it would be hard to find food in the surrounding countryside. Moreover they wouldn't have to contend with the citywide marauders who were killing each other for any edible morsel they discovered.

The motorbike eventually ran out of gas, so they continued on foot deeper into the rural areas on their way to Jerry's grandma's farm. Jerry used a sturdy broken branch as a crutch, but every step was painful.

Then the final bag of Fritos was gone, and thirty-six hours had passed before they found the mangy dog by the side of the road. He was almost dead anyway when Jerry broke his neck. They cooked him over the campfire that night. The old critter didn't taste too bad as hungry as they were.

After another day of finding nothing to eat, Jerry noticed a tomcat that kept following them, and Jerry actually started to drool. He never thought he could catch the feral animal, but something, possibly a lingering wisp of Maggie's perfume, lured him in until Jerry could bludgeon him with a tire iron he'd found along the road. They didn't like the taste of the cat as much as the dog, but it got them through another two days.

"What are we going to do, Jerry? Your leg is turning green, and it's full of puss. You can barely walk. How far is it to your grandma's farm?" Maggie asked, her small face creased with worry.

Pointing toward a mountain in the distance, Jerry said, "It's still a ways over yonder, but don't worry, darling. I was in the Boy Scouts. I thought we'd be there by now, but this damned leg is making the trip harder and longer than I figured. We're gonna have to stop for a while so I can build a rabbit trap out of these sticks I've been collecting along the way. It's still too far to make it to Grandma's without food."

"Oooh, rabbit," Maggie groaned.

"You can't be so picky now, my love. Rabbit tastes almost like chicken. You won't know the difference, I promise."

Maggie looked at him with her innocent, pouting eyes and snuggled closer to him.

"I'd never let anything happen to you," Jerry promised with conviction, despite his condition. "You know how much I love you. Do you still love me?"

"You know I do, silly."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Always and forever," Maggie said sincerely. This was the response Jerry expected when he said *cross your heart and hope to die*. She leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips.

The howling of wolves in the distance iced their veins as they peered into the underbrush for any sign of other wildlife.

Jerry only had three bullets left in his father's old gun. The first three had blown the heads off of three of the band of zombies who had attacked them on the way to his house for supplies.

He had to make the next bullet count since he wanted to save the last two for them, in case the whole world turned completely to shit. If all were lost, he would do her and then himself. Like the ending of Stephen King's movie *The Mist*, which still made Jerry shudder. The father in that story had been faced with keeping his last bullets for his wife and child to save them from a terrible death at the hands of unspeakable monsters.

While Maggie took refuge next to an oak tree and napped, Jerry began to make the rabbit trap as he remembered it from the Boy Scouts' manual. The pieces of wood from along the road made it easier to construct, and he filled in with short branches until he was sure it would work. He found a few berries and wild greenery which rabbits like and placed them inside. When he finished, he returned to where Maggie was sleeping and lay down beside her. He was so weak from hunger that he drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

When Jerry awoke the next morning, he limped painfully to his trap to see the results. He could see it had worked because the door had fallen. Unfortunately someone had killed whatever varmint Jerry had caught and had stolen the meat while they had slept. Jerry saw the fur, the guts, and the blood on the ground, and then faint footprints leading into the underbrush.

Neither of them had eaten since they had devoured the final scraps of the cat, and Jerry had grown considerably weaker during the night. To make matters worse, his leg had swollen bigger and had turned bluish-black below the knee when he had inspected it earlier that morning.

Maggie looked dejectedly at the empty cage and said, "Some bad person took our rabbit."

They heard the howling of wolves again in the distance and stared into the cold, unforgiving wilderness before them.

Jerry smiled wearily and said, "They took something, maybe a rabbit. I thought you didn't like to eat fuzzy little bunnies anyhow."

"I guess I wanted to try it after all. I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse. What are we going to do? Sounds like that howling is getting closer."

"Don't worry, darling, we'll set another trap. We'll have to watch it more carefully this time. Remember I have a gun, and I know how to use it."

Maggie looked at him with her dark beautiful eyes, and a ray of sunshine suddenly broke through the trees and illuminated her face with a heavenly glow. The worry seemed to dissipate from Jerry's face as if he considered this a sign that their luck was about to change for the better.

Not far away they came upon several bushes of wild

berries. Neither of them knew what kind these were, but Jerry and Maggie immediately started to cram them into their hungry mouths. After eating their fill, they lay back against a tree trunk, and Maggie started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Jerry asked.

"I don't know. Things have been so bad I just felt like laughing."

"You know those berries might be poison."

"I know." She grinned and burst into more uproarious laughter and added, "But they taste good."

After about an hour Jerry sat up holding his belly and groaned, "My stomach is feeling a little queasy."

Not long after, he hobbled into the bushes and vomited up all the berries he'd eaten followed by a bad case of diarrhea.

Later, while he rested next to the large oak, he thought the howling of the wolves seemed even closer than before and the sound of something moving in the woods became clearer.

"Are you any good at climbing trees?" Jerry asked, inspecting the one they were leaning against.

"My daddy said I was a real tomboy when I was growing up. We had a tree house in the backyard I had to climb almost every day."

"We need to get off the ground so the wolves can't get to us, and this is a perfect tree. It has several limbs I can reach to climb up on."

He motioned for her to stand, and, placing his hands together to form a step, he told her to put her foot in his hands, and he would lift her up. Maggie complied willingly as the howling seemed only a stone's throw away.

Cringing in pain from his injured and infected leg,

Jerry lifted Maggie upward so she could grab a limb. Once she reached the first one, she easily climbed farther onto the others higher into the tree. Ignoring his distress, Jerry jumped as high as he could and just barely grabbed hold of the bottom limb. Pulling himself up to that first limb so he could reach the upper ones was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Straining with all the strength he could muster, he finally struggled to where Maggie was perched in the tree above. The agony in his shin felt like hot needles piercing every inch of the throbbing gash. His heart was beating so fast he thought it might explode. Then the thrashing they'd heard was closer yet, and a dark shape emerged from the bushes behind the tree they had just climbed.

Suddenly an armless zombie in tattered rags shambled into view and approached their tree. It sniffed the air like a bloodhound, and it wasn't long before it looked up and saw them peering down at him. A big gob of drool seeped from his black tongue and oozed onto the ground. The abhorrent, decomposing thing's jaw was broken, and its chin and the lower row of yellow teeth dangled below the upper row of rotten teeth.

"I thought all the zombies were in the city," Maggie whispered in Jerry's ear.

"That's what I thought. Maybe some farmer died and became one of these things himself. They say the dead are coming back alive and eating the flesh of humans."

Maggie gave a low moan and closed her eyes. It was hard to look at the monstrosity with his missing arms, his protruding black tongue that seemed longer than Gene Simmons's of Kiss, and his jaw of hideous teeth bobbing up and down upon his neck.

Jerry shook his head and grimaced. "Why would someone go to all the trouble to mutilate the thing when they could have smashed in his head with a rock?"

Everyone knows by now how to kill a zombie. At least they do in the city."

"It's so cruel," Maggie whimpered, trying not to look.

Suddenly two dark shapes bolted from the underbrush and pounced on the armless, slack-jawed, undead thing. Maggie turned toward the commotion below, but one glimpse of the grisly act of ripping away flesh sent her snuggling back into the protection of Jerry's arms.

Jerry sat in disbelief at the horror of the two wolves tearing at the hapless zombie, who could only try to kick them away. It wasn't long before several other wolves fell upon the half-eaten zombie, still thrashing and shrieking madly.

Jerry never imagined feeling sorry for a zombie, but he did for this pitiful creature. He had no idea if being eaten alive was as painful to an undead zombie as to a human, but Jerry couldn't bear to watch the unbridled horror of it for fear it would drive him insane. The pack of snarling, ravenous wolves gobbled up the thing's legs, leaving only a head without a jaw and a shredded torso of exposed ribs writhing on the ground. Jerry put his hands over his ears to keep from hearing the relentless chewing and sucking of the rotten flesh, and the noise of the bones breaking, while the undead thing squealed until its vocal chords were torn out.

Finally the wolves seemed to have eaten all they could and scurried off. Except for a pile of gnawed bone fragments, the zombie's head was all that was left for the maggots. The nose, the ears, and the cheeks were gone, and only the top row of yellow teeth remained, still trying to bite without its lower jaw. One eye kept moving back and forth in its socket.

(Continued)

From Billy Wells

Thanks for reading my book. I hope you enjoyed it.

Reviews In Today's World

In the past, when everyone knew everyone else in their neighborhood, people used to share information about the good and bad things they discovered to help each other in their day-to-day living.

Now, in this global village where we are in touch with everyone and everything in nanoseconds, Amazon monitors what readers say about the books they read in order to distinguish the good from the bad. Amazon is particularly interested in what the readers that actually bought the book say about it.

Since reviews are the life's blood of today's authors, and we depend on them more than ever before, I would sincerely appreciate it if you would place a review of this book on amazon.com. It does not have to be long; only a minimum of twenty words is required.

This link below will take you to the Amazon page to place your review for *Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror-Volume 2*.

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A compilation of 31 of my most gruesome stories from *Black As Night* and *Shivers and other nightmares*

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My second compilation of 30 short stories, mostly horror with surprise endings. The book includes some thriller and chiller stories as well.

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Scary Stories: A Collection of Horror –Vol. 1

A collection of ten short stories, mostly horror with surprise endings. This book contains longer stories than my others, and in my opinion, some of my best work to date.

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Billy Wells Horror Anthology I

A compilation of my first two books, *Black As Night* and *Shivers and Other Nightmares* containing 62 mostly horror stories with surprise endings.

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A collection of fourteen of my best horror short stories with surprise endings selected from my five books. The title of each story begins with *Something In the*

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A collection of ten short stories, mostly horror with surprise endings. This book contains longer stories than even Volume 1.

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Three hunters are missing and bloody body parts of headless torsos have been found at Widow's Peak. Is there really a hairy monster on the mountain killing hunters or is this a ruse by Bubba Rexrode to attract business to the dying town?

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