

# **CHILLING TALES**

**IN WORDS, ALAS, DROWN I**

**EDITED BY  
MICHAEL KELLY**



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# BREATHING FRESH LIFE INTO NEW MONSTERS

✧ MICHAEL KELLY ✧

Welcome to the second iteration of *Chilling Tales*, the all-Canadian horror anthology. This volume is subtitled *In Words, Alas, Drown I*. It's apt, I think, because as an editor with an open reading period, it sometimes felt like I was drowning in words. It's worth it, though. As you'll see.

The first volume in this series, *Evil Did I Dwell; Lewd I Did Live*, was, by all accounts, a great success. Two stories from that first volume — Leah Bobet's "Stay" and David Nickle's "Looker" — were reprinted in *The Best Horror of the Year Volume 4*. A further 11 stories received Honorable Mention. Sales, as well, have been steady. Therefore, I thank you, dear reader, for making this possible. In addition, if you haven't read the first volume yet, I urge you to do so. You won't be disappointed. The hope is that there will be a third volume, and a fourth, and a fifth, and so on. For that to manifest, we need you.

In my introduction to *Evil Did I Dwell; Lewd I Did Live*, I postulated that not only was Canadian horror fiction as good as any dark fiction being written, but that it was, for lack of a better term, distinctly *Canadian*. A type of fiction writing that held a certain disquieting solitude. And I believe that to be true. Indeed, some of the subtleties and nuances may be lost on the

less sophisticated reader — not you, of course! — but they are there just the same. You just have to peer a bit deeper into the abyss. That's why I believe we need volumes like this. Books that showcase Canadian talent, and books that take chances. So, many thanks to Brian Hades at EDGE for his staunch support of short fiction, and Canadian writing.

You see, this isn't your standard horror anthology. If you read the first volume, you'll note that there was a distinct absence of the familiar genre trappings, which, invariably, lead to musings from some quarters about what constitutes *horror*. How dare we try something different? Where are the zombies? Indeed, the habitual tropes — werewolves, vampires, zombies — are a very hard sell with me. That doesn't mean there aren't a couple recognizable horror tropes present in this volume. There are. However, they are written with such care and craft that they are fresh takes on the familiar. Contrary to what some may believe, I have no problem with anyone who wants to read about zombies and vampires. Read whatever makes you happy. But I'm mostly interested in new fears, the new monsters: bigotry, religious intolerance, racism, xenophobia, jealousy, secrets, despair, madness, and revenge. Perhaps some of those aren't exactly new ideas, but they are fertile ground for new approaches from Canada's dark scribes.

There are tens of thousands of books out there with zombies, vampires, etc. Some, like EDGE's *Evolve* series, are entertaining and do a good job with their subject matter precisely because of their conceit: they are looking at the trope with fresh eyes, free of jaundice, and taking a different tact. It isn't the same-old, same-old. Yet for the few books that do take a different approach, that do take chances and rise above the pedestrian, the mediocre, and the banal, there are also a number of books that just regurgitate the same tired clichés. So, to borrow another cliché: it's time to breathe fresh life into the monster.

Behold the new monsters. Look around. You may recognize some of them.



As editor, **Michael Kelly** has been a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award, and the British Fantasy Society Award. He edits the acclaimed journal *Shadows & Tall Trees*. As a writer his fiction has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, including *Black Static*, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*, *Postscripts*, *Tesseract 13*, and *Tesseract 16*. He was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.





# BLACK HEN A LA FORD

✧ DAVID NICKLE ✧

We cooked her, feathers and all, during the last hundred miles of that long drive to Agatha's Perch... and oh, her fume filled the cab with such a wonderful, peaceable scent. One might drift off to sleep by it— and that is precisely what I did.

I dreamed of the kitchen, hot with the afternoon sun and fire of the wood stove, the steam off the slowly-cooling meat pies on the sill... Gudrun, my dear sister, humming an old chant as she rolled out dough for more out of sight, in the pantry...

Were it not for that, I almost might have forgotten — what I'd come to do.

William had gutted her with an old scaling knife. After wiping the blood off, he applied the blade to coring crab-apples we'd filched from the same farm as we'd found her. He stuffed them up inside the cavity until she was ready to burst. He shoved salted roast peanuts and some pork rinds up between skin and breast, and he took two layers of thick-gauge tinfoil, wrapped her up tight and wedged her against the exhaust manifold. Then he turned the oven on— the oven of his truck that's to say, by driving it, fast on the straight-aways and too fast on the turns, into the foot hills, up to the Perch.

"Black Hen a La Ford," he said when he finally cracked the hood and pulled her free.



She was hot in her bright shell, and he tossed that hen from hand to hand as we all gathered in the late afternoon haze, in the shade of that old house on the ridge.

“Voila!” he hollered, and we all howled.

William is a good grandson. Not the best, but I’d never dream of telling him that.

There were a lot of grandchildren at the Perch already and more to arrive before nightfall. Grandchildren, and nieces and nephews—great-grand-children, maybe even a great-great grandchild.

I lose track of them all, but I know the families: Alfred’s and Rainer’s, Kerr’s and Lars’, and of course Gunnar’s.

It was their turn this time. So of course they were there.

Janet, Gunnar’s wife, had set up long tables on the front lawn, and dangled paper patio lanterns above them from the tree branches. She’d even arranged for two old blue plastic privies, side by side next to the old garden house.

Not far from that, a long green hose dribbled water into the grass. It was a good idea; you could wash up after doing your business, without ever feeling need of setting a foot indoors.

Janet took the chicken from William and ran up the path to the house so William could go to the back and get my things.

There wasn’t much to get: just an old suitcase with a new frock and a set of iron fry-pans — wrapped up in newspaper and covered in a green garbage bag. I packed them myself, two days back, with great care. Wouldn’t do for them to rust; it’d taken decades to season them right.

William carried them in one trip to the long porch, set them down next to where Janet had laid his offering. Then it was off to the privy. It’d been a long drive and we’d only stopped the once. Janet took me by the arm, hauled me over to a big green Muskoka chair at the head of the first table.

She said, “You look good, Granny Ingrid,” which I didn’t care for. No one tells good-looking people they look good.

Janet, now. What Janet looked was tired. There were new lines around her eyes, and her face was red with sunburn. She had probably earned it. The drive was long enough for William and me. We weren’t hauling a trailer up the mountain road; there were no children in William’s truck. William was young

enough to have reserves. I'm old enough to know my limits. Janet, stuck between us, would have wrung herself dry with work, and with worry.

"Where are the girls?" I asked.

She pointed over to the Lookout. My great-grand-children were there, on their toes, peering over the stone wall that came up about to their chins. That was good. The drop off the lookout was fierce and far, and Lars and his boys had built it so even a grown man would have to mean it, to tip over that edge.

"They're getting big," said Janet. "Amanda's going to be in high school next year." She saw my perplexity, and pointed to the one on the left, coppery hair cropped short at her shoulders. She was bigger than I remembered. But it had been five years. One can't expect time to stand still, where a child's concerned.

"Mandy. And Lizzie—" the smaller of the two, with darker hair braided down her back, was bending down to pick up a pebble "is she talking yet?" Last time, Liz only spoke to scream, and there were no words. She was five years old. We'd made a chant then — one of so many — that she wouldn't grow up a retard, but I hadn't much hope for her.

"She is," said Janet. "We put her in a special program at school. Now you can't shut her up."

Liz flung the pebbles overhand, and they rattled through the branches of the poplar trees below.

"Well that's a blessing."

Janet smiled, and waved to her daughters. "Come on over and see Granny Ingrid!"

Amanda waved back, and nudged her little sister, who looked over at us with a stricken expression.

"Oh, let them have their fun. I should go unpack," I said, "before the rest get here."

Janet smiled thinly, and nodded toward the porch.

"That's been taken care of," she said, and I looked over and saw it was true.

The porch was empty. While we were talking, Gudrun had collected my things, William's bird — and carried them all inside.

"I've got lots to do," said Janet. "Talk to your great-grand-daughters. She... Your sister can wait."

Janet left just as her girls arrived. I made a smile for them, and gave them both hugs, and asked them only a few questions before they set in with their talk.

Amanda was enrolled in a basketball program and she was very good at it, thank you very much. Lizzie was learning how to play chess and she wasn't very good yet, but would be soon. Amanda and Lizzie were both fond of a series of novels about a girl a few years older than they were, and her lover, a young man a few years older than she. According to Lizzie, Amanda had let a boy who was also a few years older than she kiss her, and when Amanda shouted no, Lizzie said all right, Amanda had kissed the boy, and asked if that was better? I believe that Lizzie was trying to shock me, but it wouldn't work.

"Are you going to cook today?" asked Lizzie, and Mandy said, "You don't have to," and thought about what she said, and added, "I didn't mean that I don't like your food," which scarcely made matters better.

"We'll see how it goes," I said.

"Mandy means you can let Granny Gudrun do it if you're too tired," said Lizzie.

"I don't think that would do," I said, and lied: "The recipes take two to make their magic work."

"Magic!" said Lizzie. "Black magic!" Her sister shushed her.

"It's just cooking," said Mandy, and then she said to me: "It's not black magic." And after a heartbeat or so, she asked:

"Are you angry with us?"

Now that made me smile. Mandy had put her arm around Lizzie and her eyes were round. Lizzie was a step behind her sister, but as I watched tendrils of worry crossed her face, like cloud over moon.

"I'm not angry," I said finally. "I'm not tired either. I had a wonderful nap in your Uncle William's truck on the way up. I'm ready for whatever the night brings. Black magic or not."

Mandy tried to smile, tried to laugh, failed at both. Lizzie did better just keeping quiet. I could barely see her trembling as I heard the familiar footsteps approaching behind me.

"You're good girls," I said. "You can run along now."

"They don't have to be told twice," said Gunnar as he stepped around the chair and bent to give me a kiss. "Help your mother!" he called after them as his daughters ran toward their family's van.

Gunnar opened a canvas chair beside me and sat in it.

"You look good," I said, and I *wasn't* lying. Gunnar's daughters had grown beyond recognition, splendid little weeds that they were; Janet's sun-burned face was gradually taking on the

texture of cow-hide, and she was, to be honest, going to fat. Yet Gunnar — here was the same handsome, strapping lad I'd hugged the last time we'd gathered here. He had cut off most of his long blond hair, and shaved the little pirate beard he'd been so proud of. Past that — the years had treated my eldest grandson tenderly. One might even say neglectfully.

"I don't know what you said. But you scared the noses off my girls," he said.

"They scared their own noses off." I reached over and tapped the end of his nose, and finished with that old trick that had made him laugh so when he was but a tike; lifted my fist, with thumb poked out, nose-ish, between index and middle fingers. "I'll give them this one. They can fight over it."

And that was all it took to make my Gunnar laugh again. But the laughter passed too soon.

"You have to go in soon," he said.

Soon didn't mean right away. Before I went, I made sure Gunnar brought me up to date.

It had been a good five years since the last hootenanny. Gunnar began the first year still working for Mr. Oates at his construction company. By the end of the year, he was promoted, and in the middle of the second year was promoted again to a job in the office. At three years, Mr. Oates named him his second-in-command. Four years in, and he was a partner. Last year, Mr. Oates took ill, and went home, where he would probably stay until the end. Fingers crossed, I said to Gunnar.

They had a house now. In its back yard was a swimming pool. At the side was a garage, big enough for the minivan and one other car, a fast little red machine that was Gunnar's alone. The house backed on to a shallow ravine with pine trees. It wasn't too far from the office. The girls were happy there, as was Janet.

I too was very happy about all that and said so. I kept my peace when Gunnar leaned close and told me about Marissa, the accommodating young girl from the city that Gunnar would visit twice a week. I couldn't say anything— for that too had been on his list, five years ago. Whatever I might think of it, he had wanted that too.

And then it was time to go inside.

"Good luck, Granny," he said, and gave me a hug. I held it longer than he offered it— though not a quarter as long as was my due.

I found more offerings on the porch when I climbed the steps: a ring of green Jello, inside of which were suspended slices of frankfurter, three daisies and perhaps a dozen insects, including a hornet and an enormous dragonfly; long links of a black blood sausage, coiled on a green-tinted plastic platter; a casserole dish, covered in tinfoil and smelling not unpleasantly of paint thinner. It was heavy as a pile of bricks when I tried to lift it. So I left it with the sausage, and carried the Jello ring into the foyer.

Not much had changed here in five years. The wallpaper was the same geometric pattern, unlovely three decades ago. It smelled sweet, of pastry and cabbage. I let the door shut behind me, and the smell intensified.

"Hello Ingrid."

"Hello Gudrun." She was in the doorway to the kitchen where sunlight silhouetted her. She was sitting, slumped a bit. "Wheelchair now?" I asked.

She coughed, but not in a worrying way. "Wheelchair now. Yes. What's that?"

"Gelatin," I said, and she said, "Bring it here to me."

Gudrun was as fat as one would expect, living her days here at the Perch. Fat was what put her in the wheelchair as much as the years. She held her hands out for the gelatin. I helped her bring it down to her lap, jiggling with its bugs and its meats and its petals. She ooh'ed at it like it was a newborn.

"Oh, this is *lovely*. Who made it?"

"I don't truly know. I didn't see who set it there."

She sniffed at it. "Well it's very creative. It will do fine, I think. Better than the chicken."

"Nothing wrong with the chicken," I said, and she smiled so her lips drew back under her teeth, and squinted down at the offering.

"I suspect Rainer's daughter. Always partial to the insectile. But it will all sort out. We'll take it all up to the Perch later," she said, meaning of course I would take it. I lifted the gelatin away and the wheels on the front of her chair squeaked as she turned around, leading me back into the kitchen.

It was not much changed — or to put it another way, what changes there might be were too small for me to be certain of. For years, we had all but lived here — hauling firewood, cleaning floor and countertop, doing the work of the young... But I had not been by for five years now, then five years before that,

then five again and again and again. Did the ceiling always warp down so, over the refrigerator? Were there so many flyspecks in the bowl of the lights? Did the wood stove gleam so brightly, as the light struck it from the high windows on the west wall? Had the shelves that covered three walls been painted, again?

And as to the smell of it...

Did the larder always smell so?

"Now," Gudrun said, taking her place in the middle of the floor, where the sun always hit this time in the afternoon of a hootenanny, "it's time to work, little sister." She clapped her hands, and grunted. "Find your apron. Fetch the knives. There are mouths to feed."

Gudrun surprised me then. For I was expecting her to sit there in the warm sun, reminding me where things were, correcting my kitchen chants, demanding spoonfuls of broth for inspection, watching me sweat and bleed and cry, from her wheeled throne.

But no. That had never been our way. And so—

She tilted her head, and drew a long and sore breath...

...and up she got, swaying and tottering on her thick, inadequate legs. Her grin was fierce as ever as she stumbled to the counter, caught and steadied herself. Huffing, Gudrun held out her hand, and I pulled a long steel flensing knife from the block, passed it to her.

"More and more mouths," she said when she caught her breath, "every time."

Carcasses were first. They were stacked on the counter between the sink and the stove, on long platters: goose and pig and sheep, venison and rabbit. The beasts had been skinned and gutted, but not very much butchered. We set at them fast and hard, Gudrun with knife, I with cleaver. There was a technique to it — we had been rending the carcasses for the better part of a century, Gudrun and I, and we knew our way around a butcher block — but it was not a mindful thing. If blood and gristle splattered — well, that is why we wore aprons, and tied our hair high. We were deft enough that the blades didn't slip, and none of the blood would be ours. In the end, the meat would be ready, stacked in glistening piles of fowl and swine and vermin, ready for flame.

There were vegetables to prepare — a bushel of potatoes mingled with other roots as we required — long stalks of rhubarb and a bucket filled with water, where leeks floated like the pale

fingers of children. But we stopped a moment, to rest. I pushed the wheelchair closer so that Gudrun could sit in it, but she swatted it away.

"Embarrassing." She looked at the hallway, the windows. Like someone might be watching. Someone might be, I thought, considering it.

"Fine," I said. "I'll sit in it myself." And I plunked myself down in the chair. Gudrun turned so she leaned against the counter. Her face was as slick as the meat; she was sweating like a farmhand.

"It suits you," she said, "better than me."

I laughed, but dutifully.

"You might learn a thing or two," she went on. "Be a better person for it."

I shook my head and smiled. Gudrun could try all she wanted; she wouldn't draw me out.

Still she tried. She ran water in the sink and filled two glasses for us, and wondered how it would have gone with Sam, my first husband, if my spine had stayed bent. I sweetly suggested he might have gone with Gudrun. "He wouldn't have found comfort in *my* bed," she sniffed as she handed me my water in an old jelly glass. "Not my sort."

We set to work on the vegetables then, peeling and chopping with fresh knives, and Gudrun set about reminiscing, with an eye to enumerating all the ways Sam wasn't her sort. He drove like an old woman, she said; he was too thin, and couldn't dance well, nor could he play an instrument. "I don't trust a fellow who's not at least musical. I don't see the sense of one," she said. "It's uncomely."

"He's gone now," I said.

"Yes. We didn't chant *him* well, did we?"

I took a breath, and bore down on the potato. It split like a stump under the weight of the knife, and me.

I might have returned fire. I might have wondered at Gudrun's own marriage, and the way her life had warped about it. We had never properly shared Sam; he was mine. But for a time — for quite a time — we'd both shared bed with the master of Gudrun's house.

Of course, pointing that out... well, that would be too cruel. So I kept my peace.

The flames had lived in the stove since dawn. But I threw in another log after we put the meat in the ovens— before we started work on the sauce.

We had branches of rosemary— garlic cloves, peeled and ready to crush under a stone mortar; pink runoff from the carcasses, collected in narrow grooves on the butcher block's edges; and in a tall glass jar, salt, grains as thick as pebbles...

Sauce always being improved with salt.

Gudrun stopped goading me now that we put down our knives and stood before the fire. I set one of my pans over the firebox then, and we added parts, taking turns, and calling back chants at one another, stirring and stoking. It was work now, and tricky work at that. Everything could be undone if we missed a note, a beat...

We got on best at moments like these.

The sun crossed the kitchen as it filled with smoke and fume, and we sang and chanted the usual storm: begged for health and well-being for the assembled families— good pay, light work for the fathers... for dire circumstances to fall on those who might stand against them. We put our heads together and got nearly all the names right, and Gudrun had a list of them tacked onto the refrigerator so we'd be sure. We poured off the sauce, tar thick, the color of beets, into an urn, and I slid it into the warming oven next to the first platter of meat.

"They'll be getting hungry," said Gudrun. "It's nearly eight."

I nodded. "Later than usual, but not much."

Gudrun wiped her arm across her forehead, and motioned for the wheelchair. I brought it, and helped her back into it. She was sweaty and slow, and her breathing was shallow.

"You watch the roasts," I said. "You can do that from the chair."

"Not if I have to haul them out I can't."

"There's time on them yet." I looked out the door to the hall, the stairs. "But you're right. They will be getting hungry. I'd best get up there."

She didn't argue this time. Just settled back, folded her hands and drew in the scent of the cookery.

"Don't forget the Jello," she said, and pointed to the table where I'd put it, hours ago. The evening light refracted around the wieners and insects, and made it glow.



Three trips up and down two flights of stairs and a ladder, and I was ready. At the north corner of the widow's walk, I set the Jello. The southern corner, underneath the rooster weather vane, was where I left the blood sausage. I uncovered the casserole dish, and set it in the east.

And William's chicken — that I carefully unwrapped, and took it to the western corner — where I set, cross-legged, with the bird in the lap of my apron.

The sun was low enough that the flat spot on the roof was actually in shadow, though no tree drew this high. Peering over the edge, I could see the entire world it seemed, to the far horizons; green farmers' fields nearest, dotted with woodlots and finally stretching far to clots of housing. Houses such as that were the due of the families— Gunnar kept his family in one such as that. From the Perch, those modest homes did not seem so much to ask.

Stars began to appear. From below, I could hear the families, their murmured conversations, some laughter. It was hard to make out precisely what was being said, from so high. But I knew my progeny. They were hungry, they were. Hungry for life; for wealth; for one another, finally.

These offerings they had made— they weren't offerings, not really. They were demands.

The air was sweet up on the Perch. An evening breeze blew across the treetops, light as a young boy's touch on my cheek. I lifted the chicken William — William and I — had made, into the breeze. The hour was about right now — soon, they would come.

The first lighted on the rooster. Its wings were wide, like crumpled paper. They were maybe wide as my hand. Thick antennae turned toward me, sniffing the offering. I stretched as high as I could without standing. And the moth took off, and circled overhead.

I felt the second on my hand, like the brushing of a curtain.

More would come soon.

When Gudrun and I were young, so many came— Gudrun claimed she near suffocated under their weight, as they made a blanket over us. It was all I could do not to leap off the Perch, tumble down the steep roof. Oh, such terror— such terror as grows on the flesh of the young. It seemed then that death might have been preferable, to the wings of the moth.

In my head, I can remember that terror so well. In my heart — it fades.

It was all done in an hour — more, or less.

Put it this way. The stars were fulsome when I could see again. The breeze had shifted, and was cooler on me. Below, the families had become boisterous, percussive— pounding with their fists on the outside of that plastic privy, it sounded like. They all howled like hounds.

In the kitchen, as I stole past, to the celebration outside: silence. Blessed, final silence.

An hour would be about right.

William caught me coming out. He was dangling a beer bottle between two fingers and wiping face with sleeve as he climbed the steps to the porch. He'd been into the meat.

"Good food," he said, and I smiled at him, patted his arm. He wanted to ask me how the hen had gone over— how he, *we*, had fared. I could tell. But he wouldn't ask. So we walked quietly down to the families, for most part gathered under the fickle glow from the paper lanterns.

The meat was all out now, on rows of platters along three picnic tables pushed together. There were a half dozen of our folk lined up on both sides of it. Flesh drooled off their plates, and still they stacked more.

"They don't know when they're full," said William.

"Oink oink," I said, and he laughed. "I'd like some meat myself. I'm surely not full. Could you gather me a plate?"

I let go of his arm then and took charge of one of the lawn chairs. William scooted off to the tables, to do as he was told. I settled down on my own — I'm surely not so old, either — and I leaned back in the chair, tilted my head back to look up into the glow in the branches, from the lanterns. For a time — for a short time — they left me alone, to count the crooks in the branches of the maple tree here. When I'd come here first — the tree mustn't have been more than a sapling. It would be fine to say I remembered that sapling, but really — I couldn't say such a thing. Agatha's Perch has so many trees on it. One's liable to lose track.

"Thank you, Granny Ingrid."

I brought my eyes back down, and looked at Liz. She had crept up on me. I made to smile. "Did you enjoy the meat?"

Liz shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes. "I guess," she said. Her mouth was clean of grease — she hadn't had that much, all things considered.

"You *guess*. Did your mother tell you to come over and thank me?"

"No," she said. "Dad did." When I didn't answer, she went on: "Dad said you gave me a holy gift with this meal. He said you blessed all of us with this meal. He said I should say thank you."

"And you have."

I looked back up into the branches.

"Granny," said Liz.

"Yes, child?"

"It seems like a lot of work to do what you do."

"It is a lot of work."

"Why do you do it for us?"

"Love," I said. "I do it out of love."

"Oh Granny!"

And before I could do anything to prevent her, the wretched child — the dear little *retard* — had grappled me around my shoulders, and pressed her face into my breast, and cried out: "I love you too!"

It took all the will I had — but I kept my peace.

William made me a modest plate. There was a thigh-bone from one of the ducks, and a glistening slice of pig belly — and the haunch of a rabbit. I took it, and set the plate on my lap.

"Is that all right?" he asked, and I said, "just fine."

He stood quiet a moment, rocking back and forth on his heels as I cut into the duck, and finally, he dared ask: "How'd the hen go down?"

I chewed the duck-flesh carefully — wouldn't do to choke on it. And then, since he'd asked...

"Gudrun's dead."

He nodded. William couldn't really do anything else — he had killed the hen and wrapped it up and tossed it into the belly of his own truck — the same truck he used to bring me here. He'd wished his own wishes, same as I'd wished mine.

"She's in the kitchen," I said.

"She was old," said William, uncertainly.

"She was. The gathering's a lot of work. Even with help."

William started to work it out, and I pursed my lips and nodded.

"I should go in," he said, and I said, "Yes. There's cleaning to be done."

"I should go," William said again. He backed away and half-ran back to the porch. William is a good grandson. When the work becomes clear, William sees to it.

I didn't finish the plate, but others finished theirs, and the night went on. Rainer went into the back of his truck and pulled out his 12-string guitar, and the children gathered 'round him as he began to play. Rainer fancied himself a blues player, but what he really was, was undisciplined. Fifteen years ago, he had baked a cat into a pie-shell, and brought it to the gathering. I wouldn't touch the filthy thing, but Gudrun carried it to the Perch, and set it out properly, and when the moth-wings were gone— so was the pie.

Rainer made two record albums and one of them was very popular with certain sorts. But he lacked the discipline to take it any further. So now, he shared his gift with the family, at the gathering, and that was all. Although it is not my cup of tea, I must admit it does have its effect.

Rainer had two young sons, and one of them joined him on harmonica, while the other — little Peter, just five years old — pounded on a tambourine. His daughter Freya sang along. Lizzie and Mandy hung close— the older boy, James, would be a handsome specimen in a few years. At twelve, he already had his two young cousins hypnotized.

If they were my daughters, I would have just pulled them away.

But their mother Janet scarcely noticed them.

She hung at the very edge of the lantern light. Her shoulders were slumped— her head bowed into one hand.

I might have wondered if she hadn't just heard about Gudrun— if she hadn't some reason for mourning my elder sister. She seemed like a woman grieving. I might have gone to her, and put my hand on her shoulder, and said, 'there there dear,' the way that people are wont.

As I watched, she stepped back from the circle, and moved off. At this, I did push myself from my chair, and make to follow her. And as I did so— I did wonder.

Could she have heard of Gudrun? Could someone else have seen my sister, slipped past the quiet kitchen as did I? She tarried close to the steps of the house, as though she might go inside.

Was that how it was to be? In spite of myself, I drew a breath, sharply. She climbed the steps to the porch, and cast about, as though looking for someone — as though making certain someone was *not* there.

I should not have been there. I should have let matters unfold as they were laid out. A watched pot never boils, yes? But of course that's not true. A flame will heat water, whether it's eye-balled or not.

She walked along the porch — peered into a dark window — ran her hands through her hair, as though making up her mind. As if it hadn't already been made up, for her.

I might have joined her on the porch. I might have told her how well she had planned the gathering — how beautiful the lanterns were, how the picnic tables were just right... how wonderful a touch, were the privies, set so far from the old house that old 'Aga — Agatha — had bequeathed us, when we all came here those hundred years past — with nothing but bad luck and worse debts.

I might have told her how so very *worthy* she was.

But I didn't. I held back, as she went back to the screen door, pulled it open, and went inside.

I stood still on the dark lawn, as Rainer finished his song and a cheer went up. "Another one!" cried a child, and Rainer laughed and said, "well one more," and started to pick at his guitar again, and a light went on in the window. Was William finished? It was difficult to tell, for there was no commotion that followed, as more lights went on — as Janet explored her new home... met her new master.

I found myself humming along with Rainer's song. It was a French song and I don't speak French, but it had a happy tune. It was time to turn from the house, and I continued down the path — until I stood at the lookout. The music grew quieter, and I could hear bird-song — the cool breeze rattling the branches of the trees down the deep slope.

The wall here was high. It wasn't meant to be easy to go over it... you had to really mean to clamber up, and launch yourself into the air off Agatha's Perch. By the time you were up, you'd know whether you had reason to stay.

I drew a deep lung-full of the night air, and placed my hands on the round river rocks that made the wall, and I held that breath. It wasn't long, although it seemed an eternity.

When I exhaled, I turned and saw Gunnar. He stood tall, and shirtless— smeared with congealing grease and sweat, and gristle. The moonlight made hollows of his eyes. His mouth hung open...

I opened my arms for him, and dutifully, he came to me. And he kissed me, my favorite grandson did, as I had always dreamed and wished and hoped.



**David Nickle** is the author of the novels *Eutopia: A Novel of Terrible Optimism* and *Rasputin's Bastards*, as well as numerous short stories, some of which are collected in *Monstrous Affections*. In 2010, *Monstrous Affections* was awarded the Black Quill Reader's Choice Award for best dark genre collection. His fiction has been published in magazines, anthologies and online, and been adapted for television, and "Looker," from the first volume of *Chilling Tales* was selected for *The Best Horror of the Year Volume 4*. He lives and works in Toronto.

