

# MONSTER ZINE

PARVASSUS  
2020

VOL. I



## MONSTROUS THINGS *a creative-writing course*



Class: 19:00 – 20:00  
Location: Oudestraat 201  
Cost: € 204

Yael van der Woude

25 March

1 April

March 8 April

March

ampires, zombies  
talk about the

During this  
finalized at  
in the form

Who

and write a short story  
strengthen your writing  
apply narrative techniques  
the cultural significance of

— they are never just monsters. Monsters  
are us, fascinate us, that demand stories  
get to create your own "monsters"  
the stories of your fellow course members

they are a tool  
end of the course, your  
will be collected and printed

of editing  
(e.g., etc.)

# MONSTER ZINE

---

PARNASSOS  
2020

The short stories in this MonsterZine are written by students of the creative writing course 'Monstrous things' at Parnassos cultural centre of Utrecht University led by Yael van der Wouden.

## Authors

Rosanne Michielsen  
Nina Vredegoor  
Iniyavan Elumalai  
Luuk Buijs  
Jessica van Essen

## Illustrations

Frontpage The Wolf: Rosanne Michielsen  
Rest: Jessica van Essen

## Lay-out:

Jessica van Essen

2020 Copyright by authors and illustrators



Dear humans,

It has been a pleasure. You are such a vibrant bunch, so full of energy, so explorative and so inventive. I need to be very thankful to you, you gave me great opportunities. Opportunities to develop myself, to grow, change and be effective.

I really enjoyed our little competition. I got a quick start with the element of surprise, but I must admit the initial defence you pulled threw me back. Yes, these were your smart ones at work. But fortunately for me I can always count on the stupid ones. They gave me wings to fly and that helped me a lot. My movements became fast and swift and I could give you a real blow. I could swipe away three-quarters of your pawns! You should really work on your communication skills...

But now with so few of you left, your hand is strong. You are hard to find and the ones that are still there have built a good defence. I know I cannot breach this defence just now and that's okay, because I think this is already a nice result. For now I can keep silent. You probably interpret this as your victory. But do we play by the same set of rules? I think it's only half-time.

So, when will we meet again?

Well, as soon as you fuck up again. And I know you will. It's in your nature. You are such a destructive bunch, so arrogant, so selfish. So I will take this half-time to reconsider my techniques, incorporate some tiny adjustments... And I will choose my vessel carefully. Maybe a golden monkey or a naked mole rat, as I know someday there is one of you that's going to exploit this poor being. And then I will fire my final blow.

So you decide when half time is up. I'll be ready.

Good luck and goodbye.



# The Wolf

*by Rosanne Michielsen*

She stares at me through the bars of her cage. I try not to look at her face, the wild look in her eyes makes me feel uncomfortable.

Since we locked her up, the human in her appeared to become smaller every day. Today, when we shoved her food through the hatch just above the floor, I noticed she even kind of walked on all fours. Although, this might be due to the low ceiling: she can just not stand upright in her cage.

I watch her, as she paces from one side to the other, her breath goes a little fast, and it sounds heavy.

Sweat is dripping from her hair and her back shows large dark, wet spots. Sometimes she coughs, loud and with a lot of gurgling phlegm.

The sounds of summer pour in from between the cracks in the door: Crickets, a laughing kid and twittering sparrows.

I smell shit, it probably comes from the bucket standing in the back left corner. Flies are buzzing around my head.

I wish I hadn't promised to watch her this night.

\*\*\*

Later we realized, she herself was the one starting the rumours of sheep disappearing from the fields and some lost chickens. We realized that she was the one who had first mentioned the werewolf. I have no idea where she got that idea from, and actually, at first, nobody had lost any sheep or chickens at all. The idea of a werewolf roaming around our village at night was merely food for jokes and scary stories.

But then, Pete found one of his sheep dead in the fields. He was all over the place, telling everybody that there was no way a dog that would do this. That it must have been a wolf. Some of us tried to calm him down, saying that it might have been a wolf, but that it is more likely to be a large dog. There haven't been wolves in this region for decades after all.

The following day, Rose, or perhaps it was somebody else, claimed she was missing some chickens. She ensured us they were probably stolen, but I think we couldn't be sure of this. And even if they were stolen, I wasn't sure if it was any different from normal. In our village, chickens are rather abundant, and they could disappear all the time. Caught by a weasel or by a hawk flying by.

Nobody really pays attention to these kind of things, normally.

But, the tension in the village increased. Everybody talked about the disappeared chickens, that it couldn't be a coincidence that this happened only a day after those sheep were killed and that we should quickly find the one responsible, and that, in that sense, it was unimportant whether it was a dog or a wolf.

Or a werewolf.

We said to each other that it should be captured as soon as possible, before it would kill more sheep or chickens. Or a child. Children were no longer allowed to play outside. People took turns keeping watch at night, and gossiped during the day, about what or who to suspect, in case new dead animals would be found.

We started to whisper stories, the stories she started, of howling at night, strange silhouettes against curtains and large tracks on the forest trails, leading to our little village. We still joked about it, tried to scare each other, trying not to admit we lay awake at night, woken up by a scraping sound at the door, trying not to hear howling carried to our houses by the wind.

I am not sure how we got to suspect her, but I have to say she behaved unusually these days. She moved around in the shades, talking to herself, a skittish look in her eyes. Some said she seemed to be trying to hide. Sometimes she would grab somebody by their arm with both hands, and whisper in their ears about the wolf. About a werewolf being out there, impatiently waiting between the trees of the forest, waiting for a chance to grab their dog, horse or little child. On other days we would find her hanging around the henhouse, the one the chickens disappeared from, apparently.

I wouldn't say this is enough evidence to accuse her, but when my friend Thomas' favourite dog returned home limping and with the skin of its neck hanging in bloody strips from its body, the village council declared that she might be dangerous, and that we should at least investigate her.

I think they were happy to have such an easy target. One that could easily be blamed to release the tension among the villagers.

Nobody instructed anybody to imprison her. But nevertheless, when some diligent young men awaited her at sunset, threw her on the ground and dragged her with hands and feet tied to her cage, no one objected.

\*\*\*

We have kept her in the cage for thirty nights now, and no sign of a wolf has shown so far. At least, not in the way we would think a werewolf would look like, with fur, large ears and big teeth. Not in any way other than that she seemed to behave like one, perhaps play like one.

We assumed the werewolf in her would show during the very first night, but when it didn't, the village council decided it was impossible to guarantee she was not the werewolf, since nobody knew for sure how to recognise one. So, we kept her in there.

She is walking on all fours, from left to right to left, and keeps staring at me, her breath goes a little fast, and it sounds heavy. Every now and then a cough escapes from her lungs, loud and rattling, and she spits out a dollop of phlegm.

The sounds of summer still pour from between the cracks in the door:

Footsteps of a running child, humming bees, the song of a blackbird. Probably the one that always sits on the rooftop of the school in summertime.

Sweat is dripping from my hair into my eyebrows and I feel how my back and armpits are getting wet.

Through the smell of the shit in the bucket, I can just smell the honeysuckle that is flowering next to the door.

"It's your own fault," I say to her. "You shouldn't have started those rumours. Shouldn't have scared everybody."

She doesn't respond, only holds her stare, coughs and keeps pacing.

"It was probably just a mad dog, a big one," I continue. "But people are pissed off, angry and scared, you shouldn't have messed with us the way you did."

Flies try to crawl into my ear, I wave my hand to make them fly away.

"You gave them a reason to be scared of you, to blame you and to hate you. A reason to do this to you. It's your own fault."

She stands still and grabs the bars with her hands and stands up almost straight. She holds her head slightly tilted against the ceiling, and grins her mouth open.

Flies are buzzing around my head.

The smell of faeces mixed with honeysuckle makes me dizzy.

I try to not look her in the eyes, try to avoid their wild look.

She reaches out her hand to me. It's dirty, probably from the pacing through the cage, but has long slender fingers and a delicate wrist.

I remember I once hold her hand. When I was a teenager, when she was a teenager, I was madly in love with her. Then she was a happy and a little bit crazy girl. But crazy in a good way, not crazy like this.

Not crazy like a wolf.

Her voice sounds hoarse when she speaks, it is probably not used for days: "Hold my hand," she says and coughs. She stretches her fingers "please, hold it".

Her eyes are still hard and wild, but her mouth shapes into a pleading smile. "Please" she whispers.

I hesitate, but then I stretch my arm towards her, to hold her hand.

She laughs, raspy and triumphant when she grasps my wrist with both hands and pulls me against her body, the cool iron bars in between us.

I feel her breath on my face and smell old sweat and urine.

"It's in the saliva," she whispers, and runs her tongue over her teeth "If it bites you, or spits you in the mouth, you'll become one too".

I look at her, stunned, not knowing what to think or what to respond.

Her grin exposes her teeth. They look healthy: white in pink gums.

Outside the blackbird is still singing, but I don't hear any kids playing anymore.

Flies tickle my legs.

She keeps staring at me when she releases my hand and takes a step back.

Another cough comes up from her lungs. Her body arches a bit forward, she clenches her fists, opens her mouth wide and sprays the interior of her windpipe all over my face.

I try to protect my face with my arms, but I am too late. I feel droplets land on my nose, eyelids and mouth.

I am not sure if it's just her creepy behaviour, or that I am really scared of her and the droplets that I still feel on my lips, even though I wiped them off immediately.

I scream at her that that she is a filthy, scary bitch, I kick the bars of the cage and decide that I can't stay in this stinking, cramped hot place for a moment longer, I need some fresh air. She just laughs when I scream at her.

They told me to not let her alone for a minute, to keep an eye on her at all times, but I don't care at this moment.

A werewolf, what a nonsense!

That there, is a woman, a woman going crazy from being locked up in a cage. But a woman.

She still laughs, when I run out of the door.

It's already dark outside and the blackbird is gone. The evening is warm and filled with the sounds of crickets. A full moon sheds its light on the village and on the branches of the oak tree.

Perhaps the blackbird was actually sitting in the top of that oak tree, it looks like a perfect spot for a blackbird.

Her voice echoes in my head:

"If it bites you, or spits you in the mouth, you'll become one too"

Something rustles behind me. When I turn around, I can only see a shadow in the shade of the building, but it seems to be something like a dog, a big one. I can hear how it runs through the bushes, probably to its home where it expects to find a bowl of dog food waiting.

It's just a dog, so I focus my thoughts on the moon and the oak tree again. Still, I can't repress a shiver running down my back.

When I re-enter the building, flies are buzzing and the bucket stinks.

The door of the cage is open, and the cage is empty.

The key; the one they gave me to keep safe, the one to lock the door and to keep her in the cage, the one I thought that was still in my pocket, that key is in the keyhole.



# AIN'T NO GRAVE

(GONNA HOLD MY BODY DOWN) 

by Nina Vredegoor

It all started with a haunted house job. Seemingly your run-of-the-mill exorcism. The realtor tried to sell the dilapidated house for months, but when she showed potential buyers around, stuff happened. Just standard ghost stuff: doors slamming, creaking stairs, falling paintings. The realtor had tried everything. She had hired folks to clean away the dust and grime, to redecorate the rooms full of broken furniture, to remove all the weeds from the overgrown garden. But every single one of them worked for a day at most, and then never returned.

“Please Father, you’re my last hope.” With desperate eyes, the realtor had smiled her most charming smile. Fortunately for her, I am weak to charming smiles. The whole celibacy thing was never for me.

Surrounded by a rusty fence, the garden was overgrown with thorny bushes. In the middle of the greenery was one giant tree, which covered the house and garden in dark shadows. It must have been the biggest oak tree I have ever laid my eyes on, the trunk broader than the front of my 1981 Ford Fairmont. As no sunshine found this place, it was cold for a late August day and my cigarette slightly trembled between my shivering fingers. I am not sure if it was because of the chill in the air or the scene in front of me. I guess

a bit of both. But a job's a job and reluctantly I threw away the cigarette and pushed the gate open. It screeched like a banshee and the unholy sound sent shivers down my spine. Pebbles crunched under my feet like tiny bones, all the way down to the creaking porch. The front door opened easily enough, but slammed shut behind me. In the dark hallway, I flicked on my flashlight. Somehow, these old houses all look the same: cracked floorboards, dusty corners, cobwebs everywhere. Dust tickled my nose, which was better than the smell of dead animals that lingered in the hallway. Then, a loud boom from upstairs. While I held up my wooden crucifix, I carefully maneuvered around several broken steps. The house was an absolute death trap.

**I**n the master bedroom, the furniture was broken and the wallpaper hung in shreds. The dust in the room was still twirling in the beam of my flashlight. "Gotcha." I mumbled, as I put down the flashlight and took out the holy water. It was in its usual container: a small water gun. "Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus." I only just started reciting the Latin incantation, when she showed up. Appearing out of nowhere, she manifested into the faint light, screeching louder than a foghorn. That was an impressive feat, as her mouth was filled with maggots, which fell out like loose teeth. Black holes gaped where her eyes used to be, the skin only just clutching to her skull. Her hair hung in clumps on one side of her head, as the other half of her skull was completely gone. Dressed in a tatty dress that had been in style 50 years ago, her feet dangled above the floor.



“Exorci..” I started again, holding up the cross.

The creature screamed louder this time, but then started to cough and hack, white maggots flying everywhere.

“ENOUGH, you holy bastard! What do you want?” Her voice grated like rocks.

I am never one to be stunned, but here we were.

“Speak! Or prepare to meet your precious Maker.”

Although I opened and closed my mouth, no sound came out.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?” she hissed, slowly closing the distance between us. The smell of death and decay filled my nose. I swallowed down a lump that felt the size of a tombstone, finding my voice again.

“You... speak English?”

She halted in her descent upon me.

“Are you deaf?! Yes, I clearly do!”

“Uhm okay, that’s new. Well, I guess, be gone, evil spirit!”

In spite of her complete lack of human facial traits, her tired annoyance was obvious. She even crossed her meatless arms like an angry mum.

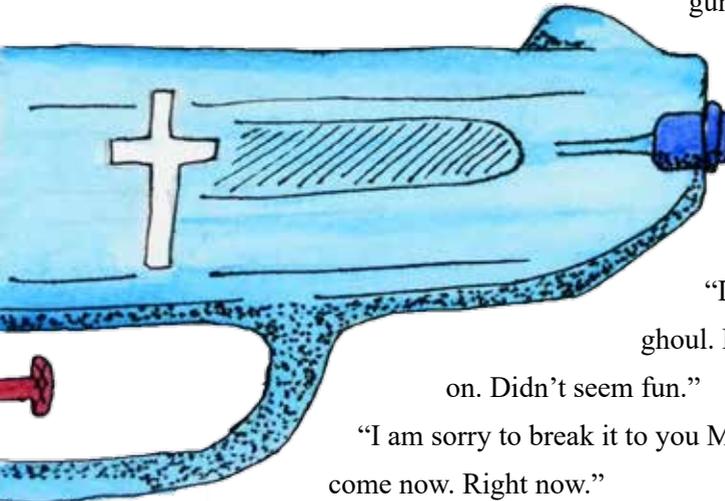
“Or else Father? You’re going to shoot me with that?” She nodded at my water

gun. The nodding made her spine crackle and I wondered if her head would fall right off. “It’s very effective against demons.”

“Demons? I am just a ghoul. Died here. Never moved

on. Didn’t seem fun.”

“I am sorry to break it to you Ma’am, but that time has come now. Right now.”



And then we just stared at each other like cowboys meeting at dawn. Well, as much as you can have a stare-off with an empty skull.

“That feisty realtor lady won’t give up then, eh?”

She looked around, then sighed deeply, spraying more maggots around. “Tell you what,

I am done here. You’re the first person I have spoken to, really spoken to, in decades. I am bored to death.

No pun intended.”

“Hell is full of people to talk to.”

“No Sir, I don’t think so.” She looked at me, appraisingly.

“What’s your game priestboy? Exorcisms, ghost hauntings, blessings?”

“Whatever pays well.”

“Can’t be easy.”

“You have no idea.”

She looked me up and down, like I was livestock she was considering buying. Then, she held out a bony hand wrapped in sticky wrappings.

“You’re in need of an assistant?”



She’s handy to have around, being able to speak with the dead and the wicked. But by the grace of our Lord, those maggots are a menace to clean up. I never get used to the maggots.

# The Wise Wolf

by Iniyavan Elumalai

Once upon a time there lived in a certain forest a wise wolf, the most educated animal the forest had ever seen. He had read all the books and the scriptures written in the animal kingdom. Every animal in the forest would go to the wolf for advice. He always helped them with his wisdom and generosity. He was highly respected by all the animals in the forest.

But the wolf had one life-long worry. Every time he would look in the mirror, he would get repulsed by his own appearance. His long furry ears were never upright, dangling like those of a goofy rabbit. His thick bushy tail always came in the way of his enormous hairy feet, making him walk like a clumsy penguin. Age also had not been kind to the wolf. His skin was wrinkling and folding in all places. If I had a wish to ask for, the wolf would always say:

Not a bag of gold, nor a throne to hold,  
Not a plate of game, nor a dearly dame,  
But a baggy cloak, made for me bespoke.  
Hide 'em features quick, for they make me sick.

\*



One day, as the wolf was taking his evening stroll in the woods, he met a young girl. She was wearing a beautiful cape of red velvet.

“I love your cape, little girl,” said the wolf.

“Thank you kindly, wolf. My grandmother made this for me. She makes many beautiful clothes. In fact, I am going to see her now.”

“Where does your grandmother live, little girl?”

“Just a good quarter of a league further in the woods. You know the three large oak trees, right under them.”

The wolf thought to himself, “What a lucky girl! To have someone make such beautiful clothes for her...”

He then got a cunning idea and walked along the girl for a while telling her, “Look girl. Why don’t you pick out some of the beautiful flowers around here to give your grandmother? I am sure she would appreciate it.” The girl found it a good idea and strayed from the path into the woods to look for some nosegays.

The wolf started walking swiftly towards the oak trees, muttering to himself:

For the ends to meet, I seek to deceit,  
Tis a sin to cheat, this urge hard to beat.  
My mama gave me cunning, trait that’s not so winning.  
This plight ever thinning, for soon I’ll be sinning.

\*



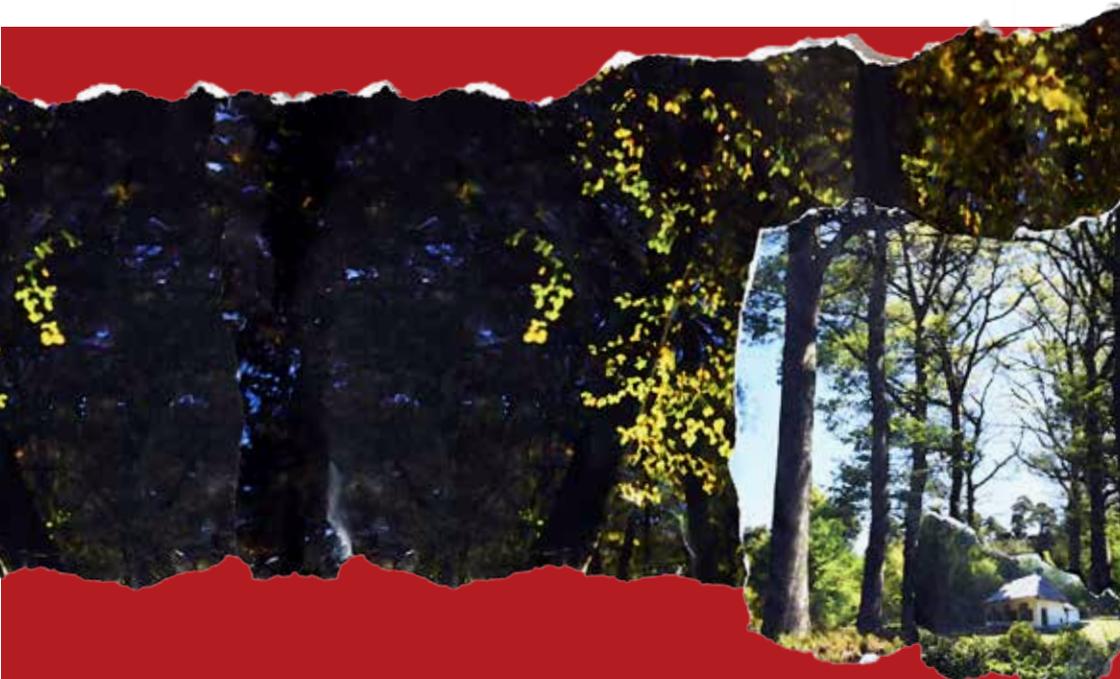
By the time he neared the grandmother's house, he had lost his moral rationale, all he felt were the cunning ways of his mother. He knocked at the door. Tap. Tap. Tap. He didn't hear any response. He knocked again, only to find a note by the latch. The grandmother was away to the tailoring shop, she would be back soon. What fortune, thought the wolf.

The wolf pulled the bobbin, and the door opened. He tiptoed into the grandmother's bedroom and opened her closet softly. He first saw a soft, white nightgown. This must be big enough, thought the wolf. He picked it up and slipped into it carefully. He then added a frilly sleeping cap, and for good measure, put on grandma's old stockings over his feet. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, he never felt more at peace with his appearance. All he missed in his life so far were these nice, beautiful clothes.

He looked back into the closet. There were so many clothes in so many shelves. He sang merrily:

Handsome hats, all the better to hide me with,  
Silky scarves, all the better to shroud me with,  
Comfy capes, all the better to cloud me with,  
Dainty dress's, all the better to drape me with.

\*



He suddenly heard a knock on the door. This must be the little girl, the wolf panicked, I should hurry now.

“Grandma, it’s me, Little Red Riding Hood. Open the door. I brought you a custard and a little pot of butter,” the little girl cried out to the door. “Oh... also I met this wolf in the woods who told me to bring you some flowers. What a thoughtful, wise wolf!”

Hearing this, the wolf dropped all the clothes he had been frantically piling under his arms. He jumped out the back door, and walked through the garden into the woods. A wise wolf!, the wolf exclaimed wryly. Would a wise wolf resort to deceit? Would a wise wolf not ask for help first?

After a long, reflective walk, the wolf reached home, made himself a nice dinner and slept well for his next day.

\*

Look at this dress here, in rich, soft cashmere,  
With a neat little bow, many months did I sew.  
Lovely granny at my side, boy do I gleam with my pride.  
A wolf so wise, and pretty who? That’s me, that’s me, arh-woooo!



# Prosody

Not a / bag of / gold, / nor a / throne to / hold, /  
Not a / plate of / game, / nor a / dear ly / dame, /  
But a / bag gy / cloak, / made for / me be / spoke. /  
Hide 'em / fea tures / quick, / for they / make me / sick. /

For the / ends to / meet, / I seek / to de / ceit, /  
Tis a / sin to / cheat, / this urge / hard to / beat. /  
My mama / gave me / cun ning, / trait that's / not so / win ning. /  
This plight / ev er / thin ning, / for soon / I'll be / sin ning. /

Hands ome hats, / all the / bet ter / to hide / me with, /  
Silk y scarves, / all the / bet ter / to shroud / me with, /  
Com fy capes, / all the / bet ter / to cloud / me with, /  
Dain ty dress's, / all the / bet ter / to drape / me with. /

Look at / this dress / here, / in rich, / soft cash / mere, /  
With a / neat lit / tle bow, / man y / months did / I sew. /  
Love ly / gran ny / at my / side, / boy do / I gleam / with my / pride.  
A wolf / so wise, / and pret / ty who? / That's me / that's me / arh -woooo! /





# A DEMON'S TEAR

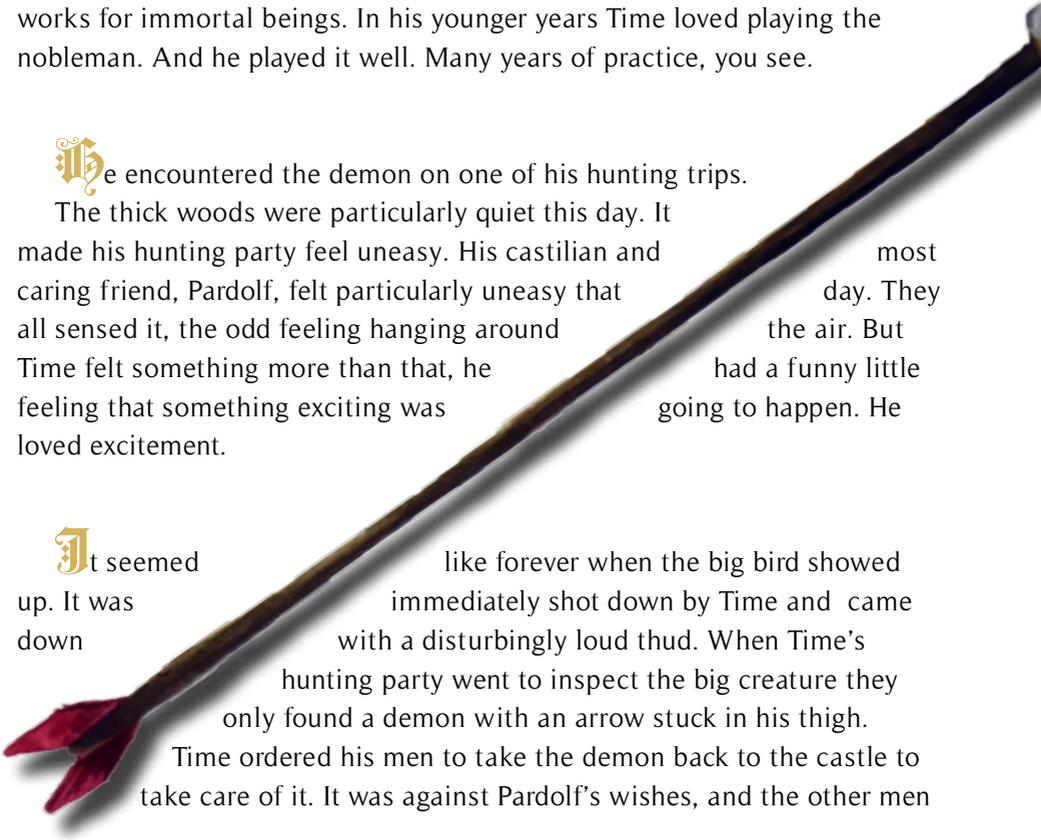
by Luuk Buijs

**S**tructurally clumsy Time's day had been. Chaotically organised. It made him think back of his youthful years, when changes came not everyday but every year. When the everyday life was boring if there was not something overly exciting to do. There had been a whole year where he was like this, like how today had been. He remembered that year with quite the mixed feelings, the year of his first encounter with the devil and his spawns.

It must've been early medieval, during his mid-twenties, or however that works for immortal beings. In his younger years Time loved playing the nobleman. And he played it well. Many years of practice, you see.

**W**hen he encountered the demon on one of his hunting trips. The thick woods were particularly quiet this day. It made his hunting party feel uneasy. His castilian and most caring friend, Pardolf, felt particularly uneasy that day. They all sensed it, the odd feeling hanging around the air. But Time felt something more than that, he had a funny little feeling that something exciting was going to happen. He loved excitement.

**I**t seemed like forever when the big bird showed up. It was immediately shot down by Time and came down with a disturbingly loud thud. When Time's hunting party went to inspect the big creature they only found a demon with an arrow stuck in his thigh. Time ordered his men to take the demon back to the castle to take care of it. It was against Pardolf's wishes, and the other men



did not have anything good to say about it either, but Time's sense of honour, and excitement about having something interesting happening again, made him bring the wounded being home.



The entire castle was ill at ease with the demon in its care. But Time made sure the demon would receive the best care, for now.

It seemed the demon had developed serious fever, it would take some time for it to heal, concluded Time's personal healer.

Guilt stricken, Time went to visit the demon. Time and the demon talked for a long time. The demon, named Kelmozad, explained that he was a son of Satan. He often mentioned that Time had been a fool, taking in a demon to his care, as demons are evil by nature. A statement Pardolf and other scared castle inhabitants could all too well agree on. Kelmozad also explained it was him that caused most of the unfortunate happenings surrounding Time's castle and farms. He was personally sent by Satan himself, who did not like an immortal being roaming the world without ever having to face him. Interesting, Time could only think of this.

He has done evil things. Has done harm to Time's livelihood. All under Satan's order. Whatever Kelmozad and Pardolf said, it did not matter to Time, he would take care of the demon as long as it was needed. He wanted the demon to recover.

"Sir, I beg of you," Kelmozad tried one time. "Please reconsider having a demon in your castle. Think of the harm I will do once I'm recovered. Do not trust me, for I trust not even myself. I'm bad." A genuine desperation could be heard from his voice.

"I hurt you, dear Kelmozad, so it is my duty to make sure you live. I do not care what you have done in your past, to me and my people. I'm not

out for revenge.” Time answered, sounding convincingly caring. What Time did not know, though, was that Kelmozad had been feeling better for days now. He pretended to still feel the illness to stay with time as long as he could. At first it was Kelmozad’s plan to exploit the opportunity given and make his father Satan proud. But the longer he stayed in time’s care the more intrigued he became of the caring nature of the immortal man. It was something he had not priorly seen. He thought it was, well, beautiful.

**K**elmozad had a plan. It would get him disowned by Satan and he would not get a nice welcome when he returned to hell, but he needed to do it, he needed to give something back to the caring immortal and his people. He planned to turn back all the bad things he did to these lands and people. To make it thrive in a way that it has never done before. He was excited to tell Time, who had been getting close with him in the weeks of kelmozad’s supposed recovery. They’d become friends even.

**W**hen Time visited his demon friend he saw him out of his sick bed waiting with an impatient glee.

“You’re up?” Time observed.

“I am, and I have to tell you something, you’ll like it.” Kelmozad said. He started telling time about his idea with great excitement. When he was finally done he asked, “So, what do you think?”

Time only responded with a dagger thrust in Kelmozad’s chest. “That I have no longer use for you, my friend.”

Kelmozad fell down, with a disturbingly loud thud. He tried asking why and for what reason, but his life was fading away before anything could come out of his mouth. The last thing he saw was Time standing over him with a only a little regret on his face. Then the only tear a demon has ever cried erupted from his eye.



**T**ime had a wry smile as he thought back of this past adventure. To mock Satan, that had to be his greatest achievement in his immortal life. To make a son of Satan care for a human, only for the son to be betrayed. It's almost Ironic.



# John and Margot

by Jessica van Essen

She was worried. In her hand she held two more bills. They were quite expensive. One was for her visit to the hospital and the other for her medication. Both were only partially covered by the insurance. The money in their account was shrinking rapidly and groceries for this weekend needed to be bought. She needed to feed four mouths and with these bills added the account would probably overdraw. Last month she already lost six pounds and the medic warned her that this would increase her risk on severe complications. They couldn't continue this way, she needed to talk to her husband.

She had met her husband six years ago. He was a nice man in a suit and with a big car. He owned his own lumberjack company and was doing quite well. He had about twenty employees doing the hard work and he himself directed all the processes with polished shoes and clean fingernails. There were several governmental owned pieces of forest he maintained and where he could extract the lumber for selling. She couldn't say that she really fell in love, but the prospect of having a man with money made her happy, as the bills for medical support were getting higher every month. Of course she only told him about her medical problem when their relationship proved quite firm. She apparently chose the right time perfectly as he responded with a: 'No worries, I will take care of you,' and to prove this, he added: 'Would you marry me?'

He needed a woman to look after his two teenage kids.

And then two years ago it all went downhill. Environmental issues caused the government to withdraw the forestry permits and on top of that, climate change and all its effects threw the world into a deep recession. The firm went bankrupt and jobs weren't available. Money was no longer flowing in, it only flew out. And now the bottom-line showed.

'We need to talk,' she said to her husband. He looked up from his newspaper and looked into her grey skinned face with its deep lines and tight mouth. She didn't look healthy.

'Yes?' he said.

'We can no longer afford to buy this many groceries. We need to make choices, otherwise I will end up in hospital, with all the financial consequences. We've got two close to fully grown adults in the house and I think it's time they move out and start to make their own living.' She saw his bewildered look in his eyes. Of course he wouldn't like to throw out his seventeen year-old darling Margot and her two year older brother John. They are his connection to the love of his life, she knew that. Therefore she had already undertaken some action to provide him with a safe option.

'I spoke to my cousin,' she said. 'She lives alone in a little cottage in the Green Woods. She's in her sixties and told me she could use a hand with the care taking of her farm and herself as she's getting more visually impaired every day. She suggested to take John and Margot in for room and board in return for their help. I think this would solve a great deal of our problem.' It took her quite some more convincing, but finally he gave up and agreed. She felt happy. Not only for the bills, but also happy to get these kids out of the house. Their nagging and bickering and hanging around the house doing nothing cost her a lot of energy. Energy she could better use for staying healthy.

So next weekend she took the whole family on a trip. She had told John and Margot they would visit one of her cousins, who had a small cottage in the forest, next to a nice lake where they could swim and fish and have some relaxation time as a family. They would stay overnight so she had asked them to pack some essentials. They had reacted decently enthusiastic, but she wasn't sure whether they believed this story as she heard a floorboard creak when she had that talk with her husband. It wouldn't be the first time they were eavesdropping on her.

The trip to her cousin was quite a drive, out of the suburbs, through the rustic agricultural scenery and then into the forest. A big oak with a trunk the size of a small car stood at the entrance of the forest. Its thick branches powered over the

road as if it was keeping watch and decided who could enter and who could not. And although the road had still an asphalt pavement this entrance was a bumpy one, as the tree had folded it with its roots. 'Probably buying decision time,' she thought and for a split second she expected to be stopped, but they were not.

She drove them into the forest. With every meter it grew darker as the thick canopy blocked the sunlight. Soon the road became a mud road and after a while just a track. Birds started singing their evening song and more undefined forest sounds became louder and louder. And then they arrived at an open spot. A small hut surrounded by a neat little garden and a beautiful lake loomed into view. She parked the car next to the apple tree, pleased to see it was still there. It was such a serene place, that the whole family got out silently.

She knocked on the door.

As soon as the door of the little hut opened a smell of freshly baked bread and apple pie was caressing their noses. The old woman that was standing on the doorstep had a big inviting smile and looked like a real granny. A bit stout, jolly



face, grey bun on the head and in a colourful dress with small flowers. A small pair of thick glasses balanced on her nose.

‘Come in, come in, sit down, sit down! How nice of you to visit an old woman!’ The four of them were ushered in with a fast waving hand and they entered a small living room kitchen. A big oak table stood in the centre and was filled with a variety of pies and pastries and other delicacies. Next to this mouth-watering laid out table, two other items were standing out; the first was a big oven, lit by an open fire, which promised more high quality food and the second, very curiously, a large birdcage which was hanging from the ceiling. It was empty but a person could easily fit in.

They were directed to seats around the big oak kitchen table. ‘That must have been quite a long journey, you must be thirsty and hungry. Let me pour you a nice cup of herbal tea, that will get you comfortable. And please do take some pie.’ This first piece of pie tasted like heaven, it was with custard and blueberries and walnut and a dot of perfectly whipped cream on top. It reminded her of her first visit to her cousins house. She must have been about thirteen. She helped picking the blueberries and raspberries and her cousin taught her how to bake different pies. That month she also learned to maintain the kitchen garden and how to fatten a pig. After this, every school holiday she went to her cousin and learned more about growing food and how to appreciate what nature was throwing at your doorstep.

After this delicious blueberry pie, they had some apple-pie and a cheese pastry. It soon turned out they had to try all the flavours set on the table. ‘Please try a piece of meatloaf, I really need to know what you think of it’. It really was too much, but you just couldn’t say ‘no’ to this nice old lady. They had never experienced such a warm welcome and hadn’t eaten so much in weeks!

As they ate and chattered the sun set and candles were lit as there was no electricity in this little house. ‘Let me show you your rooms for the night, before it gets too dark,’ her cousin said to John and Margot and the three of them went upstairs.

'That was clever of her', she thought and as soon as she heard the upstairs door close, she got up and walked towards John's jacket that was hanging from a branch that served as a coat rack.

'What are you doing?' her husband asked.

'They heard us talking,' she replied, 'I heard the floorboard creak. I'm pretty sure they put on their GPS, so they can find the way back home. We need to take their cellphones.' She found John's cellphone, took out the battery and put all components at the bottom of her own bag. She fumbled Margot's jacket, but she couldn't find the cellphone there. Damn, where would that one be. She heard the up-stairs door open and silently re-took her seat at the table.

Margot and John came down the stairs. 'Granny asks if you can come upstairs, she wants to show you something.' She went upstairs and found her cousin in the room at the front of the house. 'I can't find Margot's cellphone,' she whispered. 'I think she keeps it in her pocket.'

'I will take care of that later this night,' her cousin replied. 'And here this is for you.' She took the envelope that was offered to her. She knew she should feel reluctant to take it, but when she held it she only felt relief. This money would be enough for the next three treatments and then she would be cured.

'Thank you so much, this will save my life,' she said.

'Well, same counts for me,' her cousin replied.

Months went past. The house in the suburbs was nice and quiet. There was enough to eat for both of them, she even gained some weight. She had had the three necessary treatments and felt her best since years. She even had the energy to go with her husband to the sea for a stroll. She had felt the wind on her face and they had sat down for at least an hour chatting and watching the sea moving back and forth. They hadn't done that for years. Yes, she could say that she felt... happy!

But then one morning she woke up with a terrible headache. She tried to eat something but her body would immediately reject it. This wasn't good. She had a panic attack when she called the doctor, which made the sweet assistant arrange a doctors appointment that same day. That week she had two hospital visits for additional research and then the doctor confirmed it: the disease had returned and was spreading fast. They gave her no hope for recovery, they could only ease her pain. For minutes she felt like she was falling down into a well with no bottom. Finally her husband could reach out to her and after she came to her senses a little she said she wanted to die at home, in her own bed. 'No more hospitals, 'she said hoarsely.

Now her husband was sitting next to her and was holding her hand. She suddenly was full of regret, only six months she had gained. How much pain had she caused this man?

'I am sorry,' she whispered very softly.

'What?' he said.

'I am so sorry,' she repeated a little louder.

'For what?' he said.

'That I sent away your kids,' she said hardly audible, 'I shouldn't have done that.' There was a moment of silence.

'Well, I can pick them up again,' he answered, but as soon as he had said it he felt an uncertainty arise. For minutes he saw the numbers of the alarm clock turn to the next.

'No you won't,' she whispered with a gasp and turned her head away from him. A tear rolled over her cheek. He let go of her hand. No more words were spoken in her last two days.

Two months later a news reporter was standing in a forest in front of the blackened remains of a little hut. Scourged trees were surrounding it. It must have been quite a fire.

'Last afternoon two visitors of the Green Forest found this burned down little hut in this centre part of the forest. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, were found at the scene, completely in shock. Who they are is still unknown. A first survey of the site showed that one person was a victim of this fire. For now the police assume the remains belong to the owner of the house. Anyone who has information about this drama or recognizes these children are asked to call the local police.'

A picture was shown of quite an obese young man and a girl dressed in an 18<sup>th</sup> century servant outfit, both standing in front of the remains of the hut. Not mentioned by the reporter but very curiously, a blackened carcass of a very large birdcage with its door open arose from the haze of smoke within the ruins of the little hut.







*"Fellow students, it has been a pleasure."*