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Here's a peek at just a few of the exciting pieces *Ink Stains: A Dark Fiction Anthology Volume 7*—Decay has in store!



from Robert Mayette's "Christmas in Connecticut"

I'm Joyful. It's still my name, that part won't change. You get to call yourself what you want when in the service of Santa.

This is the Field. This is where we crashed.

Time feels like it's flown out of me, though sunrises and sunsets would have come and gone, it's still Christmas Eve. It's still Christmas Eve because there are the gifts—right there—that large now-orderly stack of broken packages and tattered burlap bags are them. And they are not where they're supposed to be. So, it must still be Christmas Eve.

When the night began, I was with Leela, Brazen, and Chompy. We'd stashed ourselves in the back of the sleigh. Only elves know that Santa takes naps during the night when he crosses the two big oceans, otherwise he'd never make it around the world without collapsing. Some elves like to reindeer surf when he's asleep. I don't think he'd mind it if he were awake, but no one wants to be the elf that took Santa off task. That happened once, in the 40s. Entire town of Duluth, Minnesota forgotten about because some jerk asked Santa about how to remember the names of the Great Lakes. The day after, the toys in assembly for next year were cleared off the entire stretches of workstations and all the elves wrote apology notes for everyone in Duluth.

They made me sign them all, of course.

I wish I could just sign something this time.



from Rhonda Zimlich's "Ignorance Is"

Steadying herself near the edge of the fire escape of the fourteenth floor, Rainy Marriski dared to look down at the place she guessed she would hit, a grey rectangle of sidewalk darker than the neighboring sections.

Her stomach lurched at the smallness of the street below. Gripping the railing, she lifted her eyes to the horizon, scanning the erect blocks of skyscrapers and the silvery harbor beyond, and fought the tug of a sudden updraft, her wings tucked close to her back.

Yes, she had wings. Giant, awkward, cumbersome. Each wing was over six feet long with a featherless span of mottled, flesh-colored latex. When she extended them—which she rarely did—they stretched across the room. They protruded above her head by a foot when she stood straight. The membranes trailed behind her like a veil, as close to a bridal train as she might ever know.

What if the wind caught her wings just so? What if she were strong enough to pull their span outward against the fall, to at least glide? But the reality of her predicament crept back.

She was a freak of science now; that was all she could be. When she climbed out on the ledge, she knew she was done pretending. She had lost the hope of flight. She had lost many things.

But she still clung to curiosity. As morbid and terrifying as it had become, curiosity seemed to be the one thing she had left.



from Travis D. Roberson's "Stikini"

The hooting came in the middle of the night and echoed through the hotel room. Lloyd

lifted his head from the pillow. For a long time now, his mind had been drifting through the strange purgatory between consciousness and sleep, where time moves like a shadow and the world seems a fog. But the hooting brought him out of it.

One lonesome bar of moonlight slipped through the curtains, illuminating what little bit was left inside the Jim Beam bottle on the bedside table, highlighting the naked shoulder of the Seminole girl sleeping next to him. She hadn't drunk nearly as much as he had, and she seemed completely undisturbed by the hooting, as if it weren't there at all.

He pulled open the bedside table's drawer, took out the Beretta resting inside, and racked a bullet into the chamber. He walked over to the window, made a small opening in the curtains, and took a peek. It was quiet again. The hooting had stopped.

Lloyd scanned the street down below, all awash in the grainy orange of streetlamp. Nothing.

He let the curtain go and made for the bed but stopped. Had he heard it again?

He pulled back the curtain. Down below, across the street, stood what looked like a woman. Her defining qualities were obscured in silhouette, but Lloyd could see she was short and stout, maybe old. She was staring up at him, but she didn't move. He kept his eyes on her.

A raspy voice came from the bed. "What're you doing?"

"There's a lady out here," Lloyd said.

"So?"

"You hear that owl earlier?"

"Huh?"

"Few minutes ago. There was an owl. Sounded like it was right outside the window."

"You're drunk, man."

"She's still there. Just starin' at me."

"Probably 'cuz you're staring at her."

"No," he said. "There's somethin' that ain't right about it."



from Heather Sullivan's "The Leaf People"

Jack opened the window shade and stared at Ashley's trees—the real ones—the ones that stalked his thoughts and urged him to excel. Their brittle winter skeletons were heavy now with buds: pitiful cocoons clinging to pitiful twigs, leaves waiting for Nature's permission to bloom. The neighbors' virtual trees remained full and green despite the seasons, reminding Jack that he could not yet afford such a landscape. *Soon*, he thought. *Soon*.

He was startled by the *thunk thunk thunk* of Ashley's prescriptions landing in the drop-off chute. Annoyingly located below their bedroom window, it was easy access for both parties involved: the delivery van, as this chute was close to the street, and Ashley, as her side of the bed was at arm's length from the convenient metal handle. All she had to do was fling her wrist from beneath the sheets, pull, and reach into the dark cave that bestowed these weekly goods. This time, Jack noticed, she did it without looking: head on pillow, eyes closed, her fingers—like greedy tendrils searching for rich soil—burrowed until they clutched the bottles. Then they retracted, dropping their gifts on Ashley's stomach.

Jack knew that these movements had become ritual, just like her hand slapping the snooze button on that relic she insisted upon keeping. Every morning the alarm clock wailed like a tortured bird, and even though Jack had installed the silent *Gentle Nudge* program into their bed's hard drive months prior, Ashley still refused to use it. She refused to use a lot of things. Mainly his expert advice on psychological disorders.

"Jack, I am not a hypochondriac," she'd said. "Nor am I pretending to be in pain due to some deep-rooted emotional issue. My limbs *really* ache and my muscles *really* burn. My doctor is almost certain I have fibromyalgia."

"Which, might I remind you, was once considered a disorder of the mind."

"That's *exactly* my point. *Now* they know better. *Now* it's a *real* disease with *real* physical symptoms, so save your jargon and help me rub this cream into my back."

Then she'd lie there dousing herself with anti-itch lotions and muscle-tension relievers, swallowing pills, and squeezing drops of wart-remover randomly on skin that, to Jack, appeared fine—beautiful actually, for his wife had perfect skin.

It was her mind that was flawed.

