

An Unexpected Muse

By Scott Cimarusti

Andrew Simmons was actually considering nailing his mailbox shut.

Maybe that would finally stop the seemingly endless stream of depressing mail that greeted him each day.

He thumbed through his most recent batch on his walk back to the house. If there was anything he hated worse than credit card bills, it had to be the rejection slips. And it looked like he had been cursed with more than his share of both today.

Andrew shut the door behind him against the bleak October afternoon, the somber gray sky clouding his mood even more. He slit open the envelopes with his thumb and surveyed the contents. Three credit card bills—all past due. And that wasn't the worst of it; there were also three rejection slips from three different publishers. It was beginning to look like his latest article would never grace the printed page.

He sighed and shook his head, running a weary hand through his windswept sandy-blond hair. He tossed the bills into the designated “in” box on Diana's desk, and chucked the crumpled-up rejection slips into the nearby wastebasket. The only thing worse than being an out-of-work writer, was being said writer with no prospects.

Tomorrow would be a month shy of a year since the magazine had let him go. Evidently, six years of faithful service hammering out science and technology articles for today's discerning consumer meant nothing when management needed to trim the budget. Fortunately, he was able to coast on his reputation for a few months, reeling in some freelance articles to keep up with the bills. But about three months ago, the freelance prospects dried up—along with their savings.

Luckily, Diana still had her administrative job with the software development company downtown. If it weren't for that, they would be in even more trouble. And though she never voiced the stress she felt being the sole breadwinner in what used to be a two-income family, he could read the disappointment in his wife's eyes—especially when she sat down to do the bills each month.

Andrew sighed heavily and plodded through the kitchen, passing Fred, their Bassett hound, napping by the back door. Fred didn't even bother to lift his head to acknowledge his master, settling instead for merely opening one eye to follow Andrew's passage down the basement stairs.

In one corner of the unfinished basement, under the dim circle of a single hanging bulb, a dented and dinged metal desk straddled a braided rug. Atop the simulated woodgrain finish, his outdated, yet reliable PC hummed and whirred busily. Next to the desk, a wobbly bookcase proudly displayed his previously published works.

Even though it was cold and dank down here, Andrew savored the solitude of his basement office. He could remove himself from all the distractions of the house; the phone, the TV—even Fred when he insistently sought a playmate. Back in the days when Andrew could find his “zone”, cranking out page after page as the hours ticked by, his surroundings melted into a blur. Sometimes, it almost seemed as if he had achieved some higher level of consciousness when he was in that “zone”, leaving his physical form and its habitat behind.

Every time Diana tried to convince him to move his stuff upstairs to a more hospitable room, he would try to explain the “zone” to her. Invariably, she would roll her eyes and chuckle before dropping the subject for the time being. She just didn't understand, and that was fine—she wasn't a writer.

Now that he thought about it, Andrew found he couldn't remember the last time he was in his “zone”.

He slumped into the squeaky office chair that he picked up at a garage sale three years ago and stared at the glowing monitor. The blank white page on the screen was still endless tundra before him. He was beginning to wonder if he would ever conquer that void and discover signs of life somewhere on that page.

He buried his face in his hands, praying for some divine spark. Something so brilliant and insightful, that it would virtually guarantee publication and a few hundred bucks in the bank—better yet, a cool grand.

Naturally, the more he yearned for this inspiration, the more elusive it became. That was the vicious cycle that he had been trapped in for the past three months, like a hamster's wheel going nowhere. The more rejection he received, the harder it became to fill those endless blank pages.

Footsteps upstairs interrupted his train of thought and granted him a temporary reprieve from confronting his writer's block.

“Andy, I'm home!”

He checked his watch—5:30 already. Where the hell did the time go... He called up the stairs. “I'm down here!”

“Come on up, I have a surprise for you.”

What, a divorce? He thought bitterly. Not that he would blame her. Even though their marriage seemed to be

weathering this latest squall fairly well, he was well aware of his financial impotence.

He marched up the bare wooden stairs, the third step creaking on cue. He found Diana standing by the back door, Fred scampering around her feet, anxious to go outside. She tossed her purse onto the kitchen counter and flashed him a smile punctuated by a quick peck on the cheek. “Come help me bring in your surprise.”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed, desperately hoping that it wasn’t anything expensive.

She read his expression. “Relax—it was free. And I think you’re going to love it.”

He followed her out into the driveway, nearly tripping over a very satisfied Fred who finally got to tend to his pressing business against a nearby evergreen shrub. Diana stopped next to their van and made a sweeping game show hostess gesture with her arm. “Ta-da!”

Crammed into the back of their minivan was what appeared to be a piece of furniture.

“Lisa in accounting is moving, so she was giving away this desk for free. I thought it would look nice in your office. I think it would look *better* upstairs, but since you can’t get into your ‘groove’ in the living room...”

Andrew corrected her. “It’s not a ‘groove’, it’s a ‘zone’.”

She chuckled and rolled her eyes as usual. “Whatever. What do you think?”

He popped the rear hatch for a closer look at the desk. It looked like an antique, though probably not a valuable one, by his admittedly amateur estimation. It was dark mahogany and carved with ornate scrollwork and detailing. Something about it conveyed a refined elegance.

Diana read his mind. “It sure beats the hell out of that piece of crap you work on now.”

He smiled and gave her a hug. “It’s great. Thanks.”

She circled her arms around his neck, her soothing grey eyes finding his. “I know you’re in a writing slump right now, and I know how much it’s bothering you.” He lowered his gaze. “Something will happen soon—it has to. You’re too talented. Who knows? Maybe the new desk will inspire you.”

Andrew looked up at her and wondered how he got to be so lucky to find a wife who not only encouraged his writing endeavors, but supported him even when it wasn’t in their best interests financially. Hopefully, her attitude wouldn’t change when she saw the bills in today’s mail.

He kissed her lips and gave her another squeeze.

She pulled away and grabbed one side of the desk. “Come on, let’s get this thing downstairs.”

He wedged his way in the side door of the van and gave the desk a gentle shove until his end was balanced precariously on the rear bumper. Then he came around and hoisted it up again, the two of them both taking rapid little shuffle-steps toward the back door as they struggled to keep it balanced. As they carefully maneuvered the desk down the basement stairs, Andrew was able to examine it more closely. Aside from a few minor blemishes, it was in great shape. Sturdy construction, too—not like those ready-to-assemble kits that you bought nowadays. This was created back when artisans took pride in their craft.

After a few near drops and slight bumps—and scooting his old metal desk aside—the new desk took its place on the rug in the corner. Fred had even followed them down and was investigating the new addition to the basement.

Diana stood back and brushed her chestnut hair off her forehead. “I think it’ll look nice down here. It matches the décor of the furnace and water heater.”

Andrew ignored her jab and began unplugging his computer and all the peripherals.

She giggled at her own joke and began up the stairs before stopping and turning around. “Oh, there’s one thing I forgot to tell you—you’ll get a chuckle out of this; Lisa told me the desk is haunted.”

Andrew gaped up at her. “What?”

She smiled. “Yeah, Lisa says that after they bought it, weird things started happening in their house.”

“Like what?”

“Little things. Like lights turning on and off...cold drafts... Stuff like that.”

Andrew arched an eyebrow. “I thought only houses could be haunted. Or cars, like in that Stephen King book, *Christine*.”

Diana laughed. “Oh come on, you don’t really believe in that stuff, do you?”

He snorted. “Of course not. Diana, I used to write for a science magazine, remember? Science, not science fiction.”

“Good—because it’s ridiculous. Besides, you know how Lisa is.” She twirled a pointed finger around her ear in the universal sign for “crazy”. Then she looked as if she had been struck by an idea. “Hey, if it *is* haunted, then at least you’ll have some company down there.”

Andrew shook his head and resumed setting up his computer.

With a departing chuckle, Diana left him to his work and headed back up to the kitchen to make grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for dinner.

Andrew volunteered to clean up the kitchen after dinner, then headed right back downstairs. His computer now totally reassembled and repositioned on his new desk, he stood back to admire his new set-up. He couldn't help but notice that his garage sale office chair now looked even more unsightly next to the far superior piece of furniture.

Fred had followed him down and was now curled up in his customary post-dinner napping spot beside the bookcase, but not without a few quick investigative sniffs at the new desk.

Andrew settled into his rickety chair and flipped on the computer. As it booted up, he could hear the muffled laugh track of the sitcom *Diana* was watching upstairs. Fred was already starting to doze, his belly full of grilled cheese crusts and Fritos, his breathing rhythmic and steady. Andrew could hear the furnace gearing up and the water heater gurgling, and he smiled at the comfortable and familiar sounds.

The computer chimed and beeped, signaling him that it was primed and ready for his next literary masterpiece. Now if only he was. He opened the word processing program and found himself staring at that blank white page again. Still nothing. His muse—if he ever even had one—must be on sabbatical somewhere. Or maybe she had quit altogether.

Andrew leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers along the smooth edge of the desk, once again admiring the craftsmanship.

On impulse, he typed:

`My desk is haunted.`

He chuckled and then deleted the sentence with the backspace key.

Then he wheeled over to the bookcase and began thumbing through some of his more recent publications, hoping for inspiration. As he skimmed through them, his eyes were inevitably drawn to the by-lines. Seeing his name in print seemed so surreal to him now, as if it belonged to a stranger. After a few minutes of reminiscing through his past glory, he shelved the files and scooted back behind the desk.

Writing was a lot like sex, the more you obsessed about it, the more likely your performance would suffer. He just needed to relax and let his mind wander. Maybe if he hopped on the internet and caught up on the day's news, an idea for an article might come to him.

When he looked at the monitor, he noticed the words "My desk" were still displayed on the screen. He reached for the backspace key then paused.

Didn't he delete that sentence earlier? Maybe he just missed those first two words. Whatever. He made sure he erased them this time and exited the program, opening the internet browser instead.

Andrew spent about an hour going to different sites to read the day's headlines and specifically, the science and technology news. He was right in the middle of a blurb about a professor at a Midwestern university who was rewriting the theory of microbial evolution, when the overhead light suddenly dimmed.

He looked up from the computer terminal. The bulb was flickering like a guttering candle. He stood up and tapped it with his index finger and it returned to its normal brightness. He would probably have to replace it soon.

He sat back down and resumed reading the news article, when the light flickered a second time. This time, it winked out completely before coming back on.

Andrew raised his eyes again, expecting the bulb to go dark. But after several seconds of steady light, he felt satisfied enough to return his attention to the computer.

Then it flickered a third time.

Now he was annoyed. He stood up to go fetch a replacement bulb and almost tripped over Fred.

The dog was no longer napping next to the bookcase. He was standing to one side of the desk, the hair along his spine sticking straight up. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

Andrew shouted in surprise. "Fred! What the hell are you doing? I almost broke my neck tripping over you!"

Fred quit growling almost immediately and wagged his tail tentatively. But he didn't move, nor did his attention leave the desk.

Andrew stepped over the stubborn dog and headed to his tool bench on the other side of the basement, where he kept the light bulbs. He tugged the pull chain overhead for better light, and after a few minutes of rummaging around, all he could find were empty boxes. He'd have to buy some more bulbs tomorrow—he couldn't work down here without light.

He pulled the chain again to switch off the light, and suddenly found himself in complete darkness, broken only by the dim bluish glow emanating from his computer monitor. Even the light from the stairwell had gone out this time.

Fred began to bark urgently.

"Fred! Be quiet!" Andrew gingerly fumbled his way through the dense, flickering shadows toward the computer's glow, expecting to stub his toe on something at any time. When he finally got within a few feet of the

desk, both lights suddenly came back on at full brightness. Fred stopped barking immediately and loped up the stairs.

Andrew heard Diana's voice from the top of the stairs. "What's going on down there?" Fred padded past her and into the kitchen.

"Something's wrong with the lights down here, and I don't have any new bulbs. I think Fred got a little spooked."

"I hope it's not the wiring...this house is pretty old, you know."

Andrew shook his head. *Why was everything the worst-case scenario with her?* "It's not the wiring. I've got a computer, scanner, printer, and fax machine down here—and I've never had any problems with them. I'm sure it's just the bulbs."

Diana shrugged and followed Fred back to the living room.

Andrew resumed his place at the computer to finally finish the article he'd been reading when a thought occurred to him. Didn't Diana say that the previous owners of his new desk experienced incidents with lights flickering?

Although the idea should have seemed absurd to one who specialized in reporting scientific facts, Andrew suddenly felt very vulnerable and exposed. His eyes roamed the basement, flitting from one shadow-shrouded corner to the next. He tried to concentrate on his reading, but his gaze kept wandering away from the computer monitor and back to the dark areas of the basement. Eventually, he gave up. This was the problem with distractions; once you were interrupted, it was almost impossible to get back on track. Which was why he preferred working alone in the basement. He logged off the computer and shut down all the machines.

As he climbed the stairs, he found himself sneaking glances back over his shoulder. He couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that he was being followed. It was the same sensation he used to get when he was a kid living in his parents' house. He had always dreaded when his mother had asked him to go down to the basement to get something for dinner from the deep freezer they kept down there. Venturing down there wasn't too bad, because he could turn on every light he passed to keep the darkness at bay. It was the return trip that was far more grueling. He would have to switch off each light with a quick jerk on the pull-chain, then dash to the next one, always anticipating a cold, clammy hand to reach out of the darkness and curl around his ankle before he could reach the next safe circle of light. Then he would make the final sprint up the stairs, climbing them so fast—sometimes two or three at a time—that he would bash his shins on the edges of the steps, still expecting that same ghoulish claw to trip him up and reel him back down into the blackness. Once he reached the haven of light and safety at the top of the stairs and the panic subsided, he would finally become aware of the sharp flares of pain in his shins and the resulting bruises from his frantic escape. Then he would shut his eyes tightly and sneak an arm back around the corner behind him to turn off the last remaining light switch before slamming the door shut and ensuring his safety until the next time his mother needed something from the freezer down there. And even though he would have escaped another excursion into the basement unscathed with his task completed, he would then find himself in the grip of nagging doubt, wondering if he had missed turning off one of the lights in his harried flight up the stairs. So he would have to screw up his courage once more to make a final inspection. And every time he did so, he could vividly picture himself opening the door to reveal any variety of nightmarish creature standing right at the top of the stairs (since it had been right behind him in his own mind), shattering his false sense of security the instant before it sunk his claws into him and dragged him back down into the blackness to be devoured.

All these childhood fears and emotions came flooding back to Andrew now, making his knees a little unsteady. He forced a laugh to help him regain perspective. Here he was: a thirty-three year old married man still afraid of shadows in the basement. Perhaps the childhood fears of monsters hiding in the basement, under the bed, or in the closet are never completely vanquished; they simply get piled beneath all the problems and issues of adolescence and adulthood. But somewhere deep down, those fears still lurk in the deepest levels of the subconscious, coiled and ready to strike.

He shook his head, hoping that Diana was nowhere nearby to see him acting like such an idiot—she would never let him hear the end of it. He reached the top of the stairs and was about to shut the door when it dawned on him that he had forgotten to turn off the last light. He looked around to make sure Diana was still nowhere in sight. Then he shut his eyes, curled his arm around the edge of the door, flipped the switch, and slammed the door; all in one fluid and practiced motion.

Later that night, after an unexpected but welcome session of love-making, Andrew found himself wide-awake, staring at the shadows on the ceiling instead of dozing peacefully beside his wife.

He felt restless. But it wasn't the productive restlessness that used to sustain his writing until all hours of the night. He wasn't sure why he couldn't relax—and that only fueled his frustration.

Finally, he grew fed up with watching the digital numbers on his alarm clock change, so he decided that he should make the most of this idle time.

He slid out of bed and tiptoed past Fred, who was snoring and stretched out on his usual spot on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Out in the hall, Andrew could hear the clock in the living room chime three times. He made a quick stop at the fridge for a gulp of orange juice straight from the carton (Diana, of course, was asleep and would not be able to reprimand him for this bad habit). He replaced the carton and closed the door, then noticed something unusual.

A dim sliver of light coming from under the basement door.

He froze, his pulse fluttering like a trapped bird.

Someone must have broken in.

But how? He had been awake for the past two hours at least—he would have heard something. And if he didn't, Fred definitely would have—hell, the dog was inclined to bark when he heard activity going on across the street.

Then it occurred to him: he must have left a light on down there.

No...he could recall his momentary revisit to childhood as he turned off the last switch.

Maybe Diana was right. Maybe there was something wrong with the wiring in the house. Which would also explain the flickering bulb.

Andrew closed his hand around the knob and hesitated.

He swore he could hear from behind the basement door the muffled tapping of keys on his computer keyboard.

It had to be his imagination. His restless body was keeping his fatigued mind awake, and it was rebelling by fabricating imaginary sounds to freak him out as punishment.

Still...

He retreated a few steps back into the kitchen and unsheathed a butcher knife from the block on the counter. Brandishing the knife in front of him, he felt even more ridiculous now. He looked around to make sure Diana hadn't gotten up and wasn't watching him with that familiar expression of disbelief and amusement.

Andrew pressed his ear to the door, and was almost certain he did hear typing coming from the basement.

A nervous chuckle escaped him as he imagined a crew of benevolent elves down there, dressed in green tunics and pointed red caps. Instead of cobbling shoes, like in the old fairy tale, these elves came in during the night to write articles for him, since he couldn't seem to do it himself anymore.

His heart was racing even faster now. It was time to reveal his mysterious, typing intruder. Perhaps it was another frustrated and unproductive writer who broke into other people's homes and tried writing on their computers in an attempt to conquer *his* writer's block. Andrew could relate to that level of desperation.

He shut his eyes, counted to three, and flung open the door.

When he opened his eyes, he discovered that while the basement appeared to be predictably deserted, the light over his desk was indeed on.

He advanced down the stairs slowly, his knees still shaking and his heart pounding. He lowered his head to peer under the overhanging ceiling for a better view of the entire basement.

Still no sign of elves or desperate, psychotic writers.

Then the furnace roared to life, and Andrew almost hit the ceiling.

He dropped the knife and it clattered to the cement floor.

After he caught his breath, he stepped over the knife and continued over to his office area just to verify that his mind had been playing tricks on him.

His computer monitor was dark. Everything was as he had left it.

Now he felt really stupid. Time to go back to bed. He had planned on trying to do some writing since he couldn't sleep, but he was obviously in no mental state to produce anything coherent.

Shaking his head, Andrew tugged the pull-chain above his desk and switched off the light.

Total blackness. He couldn't even tell if his eyes were open or closed.

He had been so focused on exposing his intruder that he had neglected to turn on the light over the stairs before heading down; the one over his desk had been enough to see by.

Andrew waved his arms above him, trying to locate the pull-chain, but it seemed oddly out of reach. Since he couldn't seem to find it, he decided to fumble his way back toward the stairs in the dark. He began by extending his right foot, and waving it back and forth in an arc to probe for the bottom step.

He was suddenly reminded of *The Pit and the Pendulum* by Edgar Allan Poe. The narrator of that story had also been trapped in total darkness, feeling his way around his prison, sensing, rather than locating, the nearby abyss. Then there was the pendulum, slicing the air above him in wide arcs, gradually lowering until...

Slicing.

The discarded butcher knife was still on the floor somewhere. Stepping on that would not be good.

Andrew stopped.

He could picture himself slicing open his foot on the discarded knife and bleeding to death down here in the darkness while Diana dozed upstairs, oblivious to his calls for help.

Now he was trapped.

He could feel the onset of panic jittering into his limbs. He felt completely helpless. He could try calling for Diana. But even if in the off chance she did hear him, he would have to explain to her how he got lost in his own basement. She would have a field day with that.

Andrew huddled his arms around him. The basement was freezing—even for this time of year. The soles of his feet were growing numb on the frigid concrete floor.

Enough was enough. He needed to find a way out.

He decided to chance stepping on the knife, rather than risk the embarrassment of calling for Diana to come rescue him. So he proceeded forward, stepping slowly and tentatively with his arms outstretched. He had hoped his eyes would be accustomed to the darkness by now, but he still had no idea where the stairs were.

He had taken a few steps when the light over his desk flickered.

And in that brief flash of light, a face appeared right in front of him.

A pale alabaster face with hollow black eyes.

Andrew screamed.

His knees buckled, and he stumbled backward and fell to the floor.

One thought kept racing through his panicked mind; the owner of that face was somewhere in the darkness with him.

His breath whistled in his throat. Terror clenched his windpipe in a tight, icy fist. He clawed his way along the smooth cement floor, fear driving him away from the direction where he had seen that face.

Then a bright light speared through the darkness.

“Andy?”

He squinted against the harsh light coming from above. He could hear hurried footsteps coming down the stairs, and the familiar creak of that third step.

“Andy, are you OK?”

Diana rushed over to him, nearly tripping over the butcher knife. Fred was close on her heels.

She found Andrew cowering against the far wall, a few feet from his desk, his eyes wide and wild, his hair in dark, sweaty tangles despite the chill of the basement.

Diana crouched down closer to him, her voice urgent with concern. “Andy, what happened?”

He struggled to find his voice. He was having trouble focusing on Diana’s face, his eyes still adjusting to the light; that, and he couldn’t shake the vision of that eerie face with the blank, vacant eyes. Every time he blinked, he could still see its afterimage.

“I don’t know...” he stammered. “I...I couldn’t sleep...came down here...do some writing...” His words came between ragged gasps for air. “Light under the door...no one here...dark...” His eyes grew wider at this point. He almost let it slip about the spectral face he saw. But he bit his tongue just in time. He didn’t want to frighten her. Or worse yet, he didn’t want her to think he was nuts. He stalled, trying to think of something to say. “Then I...”

She cut him off, gently pulling him to her and cradling his head against her chest. “You must have been sleepwalking again. Remember when you went through that bout of sleepwalking a few years back right after your dad died?” She caressed his cheek with a tender finger. “Poor thing. This writing block is really wearing on you, isn’t it?”

All he could do was nod vacantly. Fred came over to offer his brand of comfort by licking Andrew’s numbed toes.

Diana gestured over the discarded knife on the floor. “Maybe I should put the knives away somewhere else.”

He was about to object, but then decided against it. Better she think that he was a potentially dangerous sleepwalker than a basket case who saw phantom faces in the basement.

She held his face in her hands. “You OK?”

He urged himself to his feet and took a deep breath. His legs were still a little unsteady. “Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry if I gave you a scare.”

She smiled. “Come back to bed. I may be able to help you get back to sleep.” She favored him with a sly wink.

As tempting as her implied offer would be any other minute of any other day, all he could do was force a smile in reply.

She stood up and headed for the stairs, scooping the knife off the floor. Andrew was right behind her, but then turned back to look for Fred. The dog was sniffing around the desk again, his hackles up.

“Come on, Fred—back to bed.”

The dog reluctantly followed, casting a wary glance back at the desk before hopping up the stairs.

Andrew paused before turning off the last light. He forced himself to look back down into the basement, almost hoping to see that face again in the gloom; just to prove to himself that he did in fact see it, and that he wasn't losing his already tenuous grip on his sanity.

No face appeared, however, and that was sufficient to set Andrew's mind at ease for the time being. After he flicked off the switch and shut the door, he looked down to make sure there wasn't a sliver of light sneaking out the bottom of the door.

His brow furrowed. It had to be another trick of his weary imagination.

While there was no light coming from under the door, he thought he could hear typing again.

Diana's alarm clock went off way too soon later that morning. Andrew buried his head under his pillow to escape the unforgiving bright sunlight and the classic rock blaring from the clock radio. Finally, Diana slapped the OFF button and tumbled out of bed. Once Andrew heard her turn on the shower, he ventured a peek out at the morning. A snuffling, cold wet nose and soulful brown eyes greeted him. Naturally, Fred needed to go out.

Andrew slipped on a t-shirt and sweatpants and shuffled through the kitchen. He opened the back door and released Fred out into the fresh morning air before making coffee.

While the coffee maker gurgled and hissed, Andrew ventured over to the basement door. Last night's ordeal now seemed a faded and distant memory in the sensible light of day. He pulled open the door and peeked downstairs.

Though the sun still managed to peek through the shrub cover outside the narrow basement windows, it was still pretty gloomy down there.

Definitely no lights on. And even more reassuring, no sounds of typing.

His experience last night must have been a volatile concoction of fatigue, frustration, and stress—and maybe even a nightmare thrown in for good measure. He heard the coffee maker finish its brewing cycle, so he closed the basement door and treated himself to a steaming cup to sweep away the last of the mental cobwebs.

He was standing at the sink, watching through the kitchen window as Fred went about his morning routine when Diana came up behind him.

“Good morning.”

Andrew turned around. She was wearing a blouse and skirt this morning, her hair still damp. “You look nice.”

“Thanks.” Her eyes lit up. “Oooo—coffee.” She poured herself a cup. “So what was the deal last night?” She regarded him suspiciously. “Are you really OK?”

He smiled. “Yeah. I think maybe I had a nightmare or something and wandered down into the basement for some reason. Who knows...”

Diana grabbed a muffin and went over to the kitchen table; she hesitated before sitting down, as if bracing herself. “Andy...maybe it's time you started exploring other career options...”

He hung his head. It had been awhile since they had this conversation. He figured he was due. “Diana...”

She raised a hand. “Just for the time being. Look: you could get a full-time job doing something else, and still write in the evenings.”

“Diana, I'm a writer. I don't even know what else I *could* do.”

She took a sip of her coffee. “Look in the paper or on-line. I don't know...sales or marketing or something.”

Andrew winced. The thought of having to shroud himself in a suit and suck up to clients all day made his stomach churn. Even back in college, Andrew had known he was not cut out for that kind of work, his spirit requiring a more creative outlet. Client-schmoozing and paper-pushing just wouldn't do it for him.

Sure, it had taken him awhile to break into full-time writing, but it had been well worth the uphill climb. It wasn't that long ago when he used to wake up each day, primed and eager to go to work, grateful for the opportunity to get paid for doing something he loved, work that fed his soul. And as he sped past his fellow morning commuters, he would spare them a glance and, occasionally, pity; knowing that their destination was probably a passionless job amidst a maze of cubicles.

It was hard for Andrew to admit that Diana was probably right. But it was true; he couldn't keep ignoring the fact that his writing prospects were looking bleaker and bleaker each day. And his impenetrable writer's block certainly wasn't helping. Overdue bills...rejection slips... It wasn't fair for her to have to continue shouldering their financial responsibilities alone.

Though he couldn't verbalize it, his biggest fear was that once he turned away from writing—even just

temporarily—he would get lost and never find his way back.

Diana finished her muffin and sighed. “I know writing is your passion. I’m not asking you to give that up. But we can’t keep subsisting on my salary alone while you struggle with your writer’s block and wait for your muse to appear.”

Andrew nodded, defeat weighing down his shoulders. “I know.”

She lifted his chin. “Just give it some thought, OK? Please?”

“I will.”

She drained her cup and placed it in the sink. “Gotta run. Call me later.” She breezed by him and snatched a kiss. “Have a good day.”

“You too.”

She returned from the hall closet with her jacket, grabbed her purse, and headed out the back door, holding it open long enough for Fred to meander back in. Andrew could hear their van start up and drive away. He slumped into a chair at the kitchen table and hung his head in his hands.

Perhaps it was time for him to move on to something else. Maybe he had ridden his writing career as far as he could—farther than most people. Now he needed to step up and be a responsible adult.

A hollow feeling seeped into his gut. He sighed heavily and stood up. He would give himself until the end of the week to jackhammer through his writer’s block. If nothing came to him by the time the Sunday paper was delivered, he would go straight to the classified section and start looking.

In the meantime, though, he would focus his remaining energies into his writing, and hope for some divine inspiration to save him from becoming one the countless occupationally unfulfilled.

But before he could do anything, he needed to run to the store and get some new light bulbs. He couldn’t afford any distractions now—including the lights winking on and off.

Not quite an hour later, Andrew Simmons was seated in his unsightly, yet comfortable garage-sale office chair. His computer was booted up, and his hands were poised above the keyboard like hovering birds of prey. A recently installed brand-new light bulb glowed reliably overhead.

The page on the screen, however, was dauntingly blank as usual.

But Andrew was determined. Hopefully, the threat of having to find a “regular job” was just the motivation he needed to finally plunge through his insurmountable writer’s block and revive his failing writing career.

Yet the words still eluded him.

He thumped his head on the monitor in frustration.

Desperate for inspiration, he wheeled over to the bookcase, grabbing another handful of previously published articles. Maybe he could find something in them that merited a follow-up piece—just to get him started.

He scooted back over to the desk, propped his feet up next to the monitor and began thumbing through the stack.

As he read, he could feel his attention wandering, his eyes slipping out of focus. A yawn slipped out. Then another. His eyelids were becoming difficult to keep open. He tried shifting in his chair in an effort to stay awake, but it was no use. Mental exhaustion and lack of sleep had finally caught up to him. His chin drooped to his chest, and the sheaf of papers slipped from his hand and wafted to the floor. Even in this seemingly uncomfortable position, sleep took him.

And Andrew dreamed.

He is standing in a dimly-lit parlor. Even though the Great Depression has ravaged the rest of the nation, there is no indication of a floundering economy in this room. Exotic ferns in ornate ebony planters flank the panoramic bay window overlooking the west lawn. A roaring fire in magnificent fireplace splashes flickering shadows on the cream-colored wallpaper. To one side of the fireplace is a familiar-looking desk, the mahogany finish aglow in the comforting light. Seated at the desk, upon a matching velvet-upholstered high-backed chair, is a young woman. Her features are delicate, her hair meticulous. She has a slightly olive-colored complexion, smooth and flawless like an artist’s sculpture. Her wide, expressive green eyes are intently focused on several sheets of paper fanned out before her while an ivory hand dances across them like a fluttering dove, the fountain pen cradled in her slender fingers trailing spidery letters behind it. Suddenly, the woman looks up. Andrew recognizes her. He has seen that face before. Somehow he knows her name is Regina Forsythe. He watches her expression of contentment wither with alarm. She scrambles to gather her papers and stuff them into the desk drawer. A man suddenly storms into the room. His dark hair is slicked back from a severe forehead and harsh features, a neatly-trimmed mustache below his blade of a nose. But it is the man’s eyes that are the most unsettling; they are smoldering coals of insanity. The man must be the woman’s husband. Andrew isn’t sure how he can possibly know this, but he is

certain of it. Regina stands humbly defiant behind the desk. Her husband points an accusing finger at the desk drawer, his eyes narrowing. Although Andrew can hear no sound, he knows that the man standing before her is demanding to know what she is hiding. Regina shrugs her shoulders innocently as he bulls his way around to her side of the desk and shoves her aside. Reaching into the drawer, he removes the sheets of paper and thrusts them in her face. He begins to scold her, gesturing to the papers. She tries to explain that it's just a harmless story that she's been writing in her spare time, a tale of romance. He reminds her that no wife of his will embarrass him and bring ridicule to his family name by writing such frivolous drivel. It is not a woman's place to write—or even read, for that matter. She needs to quit this foolishness and concentrate on her duties of being a good wife instead. He will not tolerate this insolent behavior from her anymore. Regina promises him that no one will ever read her words; the story is just for her. Ignoring her pleas, he shoves his way past her and begins tossing the pages into the fireplace. She begs him to stop, tears streaming down her face. The dancing orange flames eagerly devour the pages, their edges curling and blackening. In a last desperate effort, Regina grasps her husband's arm and reaches for the remaining pages. In response, he hurls her to the floor and in a fit of rage, begins to kick her savagely, his face a contorted mask of fury, his hair hanging in his eyes, spit flying from his leering rictus. Andrew can feel each excruciating blow from the man's heavy boot, and he can hear Regina's whimpering pleas for mercy as she tries to shield herself with her arms. Then her husband's eyes find the nearby fireplace poker. He snatches it both fists, raising it above his head. With a silent scream, Andrew reaches out to shield Regina from the inevitable final blow, but he trips, falling...falling...

Falling...

Andrew tumbled out of his chair, banging his knee on the edge of the desk.

He sat up abruptly, his hands shaking. Disoriented, he clutched his bruised knee and surveyed the basement. His clothes were drenched in sweat, even though the basement seemed colder to him now.

Andrew slowly rose to his feet and eased into the chair, wincing at the pain in his knee. The clock on his computer display indicated that less than an hour had gone by, but he felt like he had been asleep for hours.

What a dream. He couldn't begin to imagine what had brought that on. The images were still disturbingly vivid; especially the brutal beating and murder of the young woman (what had her name been?). He took several deep breaths and tried to collect his thoughts.

He resumed his seat in front of the computer and was in the process of gathering his fallen papers when he thought he detected movement out of the corner of his eye. He sat up, and in the computer monitor he saw the reflection of a silhouette standing behind him.

He whirled around.

An icy cold draft moved through him.

His skin instantly broke out in gooseflesh. And he was quickly overcome by a powerful sense of emptiness, loss, and regret; the depths of which he had never known before and prayed he would never know again. He suddenly felt on the verge of tears. He gasped aloud as his breath caught in his chest.

Then as suddenly as it came, the chill was gone.

His eyes wide and his heart racing, Andrew remained completely still, the expectant silence broken only by the steady hum of the computer's cooling fan and his own pulse thudding in his ears.

Seconds stretched into minutes as Andrew's eyes darted around the basement, from one shadow to the next.

Then he caught a hint of perfume.

It was definitely not Diana's—she had never worn perfume like this. It was the fragrance that an older woman would wear, something reminiscent of her youth. It was very subtle, but unmistakable.

What the hell was going on down here?

Then he remembered Diana joking about his new desk being haunted. He quickly tried to dismiss that thought, but the proof was building.

He had seen this desk in the bizarre dream.

Andrew continued to remain rigidly still for several minutes while he struggled to file all this strange phenomena into one of his internal folders of fact and reason.

Unable to make any sense of it, he finally succumbed to impulse and spoke.

“Hello?”

His own voice startled him; it sounded so small and timid in the deserted basement. Receiving no response, he tried again.

“Who are you?”

The expectant silence lingered for what seemed like hours, before it was broken by the soft clicking of keys on the keyboard in front of him. Andrew glanced down to see some of the keys pressing down in sequence to spell out

a word:

muse

He backed away from the desk, feeling his arms break out in gooseflesh again. His pulse was throbbing in his head.

He found a reserve of courage and whispered.

“Regina?”

More typing on the keyboard.

yes

Andrew’s hand crept up to his gaping mouth in an expression of disbelief, his mind racing to comprehend what was happening.

He swallowed and spoke again.

“Was that you I saw down here last night?”

Again: yes

Andrew thought a minute. His idea sounded crazy, but maybe it was worth a try.

“What can I do? How can I help?”

The echo of his wavering voice faded. Several more seconds passed. He was beginning to convince himself that this was yet another symptom of his stress and fatigue, when the keyboard came to life again.

And Andrew read the words.

Diana walked in the back door, almost tripping over Fred, who—if he were human—would have been jumping up and down with his legs crossed. She looked down at him with an expression of pity and scorn. “Don’t tell me he forgot to let you out today...”

The dog scampered past her and into the backyard.

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “Hello? Anyone home?”

After several seconds, Andrew’s voice drifted up from the basement. “Yeah—down here.”

She followed his voice down the stairs.

“What have you been doing? Fred almost knocked me over when I walked in. Didn’t you—”

Andrew was typing furiously on the computer, and he cut her off with a raised hand.

She arched an eyebrow and set her hands on her hips. Any initial resentment she felt at being silenced melted away as she watched him type, his hands a blur above the keyboard.

After several minutes he finally paused and looked up at her. He was still dressed in the t-shirt and sweatpants from this morning, his hair in unruly sleep-tangles. His brow was damp with beads of sweat, his face flushed with exhaustion.

And he was beaming.

“Andy? Have you been down here all day writing?”

His grin never faltering, he leaned back in his chair.

“I think I finally found my muse.”

Andrew never told Diana about Regina. Not even after his debut novel became an unexpected overnight success. Keeping his muse’s identity a secret was a guilty pleasure for him. He figured that Diana wouldn’t have truly believed him anyway. And that was fine.

Since his Depression-era romantic mystery was such a triumph, Andrew was soon offered a three-book deal with a relatively well-known New York publisher for a respectable sum of money. They were able to pay off their bills, finally, and Diana could quit her job. Several weeks later, they put a down payment on a spacious four-bedroom house in suburban New York—which they hoped to fill quickly with a growing family. It hadn’t taken too long for their modest little house to sell, either—they even made a little extra money on the deal.

A week before their moving day, Andrew found himself wandering through the quiet and still house. Most of their non-essential belongings were now packed in boxes stacked everywhere. Diana was out running a few errands, and Fred was napping in a shaft of sunlight in the living room. Andrew took advantage of this opportunity to walk through the house and take inventory of the memories.

As he passed the basement door, it occurred to him that he hadn’t heard from his muse in awhile. And now that he thought about it, he realized that it must have been because he hadn’t been down in his office in over a month.

With the whirlwind trips to New York to finalize the purchase of the house, and the book promotion commitments, there wasn't much time to write lately.

He tugged open the door and descended the stairs, smiling wanly as he heard the third step creak. He turned on the light over his office area and powered up his computer. Tracing a finger through the thin layer of dust on the mahogany desk, he anticipated a tingle or a chill; some sign from his muse.

He settled into his chair and waited for the computer to boot up, reminiscing about that morning a few months ago when he had discovered the identity of his mysterious guest.

Regina Forsythe had wound up being more than just a restless spirit attached to her former desk; she had also been the inspiration for his breakthrough novel. And although the publisher classified it as historical fiction (Andrew had changed the names, of course), it was based entirely on her tragic true story; the tale of a gifted and promising writer oppressed by an insane and abusive husband who finally murdered her in a fit of rage. The only difference was, in the book, the crime was solved by a clever, enterprising newspaper reporter who pointed the police in the right direction and uncovered her hidden manuscripts.

While Andrew churned out page after page of the compelling story, Regina would pay him occasional visits. Sometimes he would feel her presence as a chill on one side of his body, as if she were looking over his shoulder at what he was writing. Or else the light over his desk would mysteriously flicker two or three times in rapid succession, no matter how new the bulb was. And sometimes he would also catch a slight whiff of her perfume.

But he no longer feared her visits; in fact, he eagerly awaited them.

Initially, he had decided to put Regina's story to paper in the hopes of bringing peace to her troubled spirit. Then, after reading the manuscript a few times, and getting Diana's enthusiastic (and tearful) stamp of approval, he decided to pitch it to publishers—but only after securing what he believed to be Regina's consent.

While negotiating the terms of publication, there was only one item that Andrew would not waver on—the dedication to Regina. The publisher complied, and for some reason, Diana never pressed Andrew about it. Maybe she was too grateful of their recent turn of good fortune to question anything.

Andrew's computer finally finished booting up, waiting expectantly for input of some kind. Andrew clicked on the word processing program and opened a new document.

There was that blank page again. Only this time, it didn't seem quite so formidable.

After all, he had his muse now.

Speaking of whom...

He always felt self-conscious at first, addressing what appeared to be an empty basement.

"Regina?"

No response.

"Regina, are you here?"

Still nothing.

Andrew remained there for over an hour, waiting and hoping for a sign from her, but none ever came. Since their "introduction", Regina had rarely gone this long without making her presence known to him.

He continued to stare at the blank page, feeling a wave of sadness and loss descend upon him. He suddenly felt very alone and abandoned.

Then, a flicker of hope.

He realized that maybe he had accomplished what he had initially set out to do. Maybe by documenting Regina's story, he had somehow indirectly fulfilled her own failed dreams of being a writer, and, at the same time, brought peace to her troubled soul, and she was finally able to move on.

He smiled wanly as he realized that he was already missing his ethereal muse—though it was tempered with a sense of relief and accomplishment at the idea that she may have finally found peace because of his efforts. Besides, he felt sure that a part of her would always be with him as long as he kept her desk.

And as long as he kept on writing.

Andrew sighed and cracked his knuckles—his traditional warm-up before writing a masterpiece.

He thought for several minutes then began to type.

Andrew Simmons was actually considering nailing his mailbox shut...