

PARANORMALS

A Novel by
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FIVE YEARS AGO

EMMETT

Emmett Morris was at home the Night of the White Flash.

As a twenty-seven-year veteran of the United States Postal Service, Emmett appreciated his routine. Never having the public relations skills necessary for a position as a clerk — and pulling in every favor he earned to stay forever out of the backrooms and warehouses — Emmett enjoyed his pickup-and-delivery beat just fine, thank you very much. The few individuals who took the time to greet him were usually the nice sort (unlike the perpetual bitchers who flooded the lobby every weekday, and Saturday mornings, too), and he rarely had trouble with neighborhood dogs. Bad weather generally didn't bother him, either; for every day of showers, there was another of crisp sunshine. The quiet routine provided him with plenty of time for reflection and amateur poetry writing, though if he had a dollar for every line he'd lost when he didn't take the time to write it down because he was just *sure* he would remember it later, he could retire to the Bahamas. Unlike so many in his age group who found themselves longing for some other career — usually *anything* besides what they had chosen to do with their lives — Emmett Morris had no complaints.

Well ... maybe one complaint: Bone spurs.

In the last few years, Emmett had developed bone spurs, essentially little spikes, on the heel of his left foot. He'd tried changing his shoes and adding special pads to the interiors, but any relief provided by these measures was nominal. His family doctor had informed him that these things weren't uncommon with individuals who spent a great deal of time on their feet. They had treated the condition twice now with injections of cortisone, but each time the little bastards crept back out, and the doctor was hesitant to recommend a third cortisone shot because of the long-term effects it could have on the bones of his whole foot. The spurs were like having little bits of gravel stuck in his shoe, and the worst part was his doctor's warning

that it was possible — maybe even likely — that he would eventually get them on his right heel, too. A couple of tablets of Bufferin with breakfast and lunch held the nastiest ache at bay as he performed his rounds, but by the time those last letters left his hands, he felt like he was walking on glass.

So, combining both his doctor's advice and his own assumptions, Emmett had taken to keeping off his feet whenever possible ... which was pretty much from the minute he got home until the minute he went to bed, calls of nature notwithstanding.

And it didn't take very long for this to first annoy, then irritate, then wholly *piss off* his wife.

Judy was almost ten years younger than Emmett, and though she never had cause for complaint before, she "sure as hell" wasn't ready to spend her every evening lounging around the house. She had a day job, too — the nice little *sitting* job of a secretary — and when she came home, the first thing she wanted to do was go back out.

At first, Emmett had tried to compromise. Her favorite activities weren't that demanding — dinner, a movie, visits to the shopping mall, whatever. But as the bone spurs sharpened their way into his flesh, Emmett found it easier and easier to resist her whining, which soon turned into all-out bitching.

Emmett had no desire to listen to the same tone of voice at home that he so steadfastly managed to avoid by keeping away from the Post Office front desk, so he encouraged Judy to go out *without* him. And she did, rarely coming home before nine o'clock, and returning after midnight on one occasion.

It wasn't until about a year ago that Judy stopped wanting to have sex with him. Emmett assumed that it was her way of getting back at him for making her go it alone so often. Truth be known, as he approached the big Five-Oh, he found that his potency wasn't what it used to be, so if it was revenge she was after, he hoped she never realized that it wasn't bothering him ... at least, not much.

So Judy Morris pretended to be frigid as a punishment to her lazy husband. That was what Emmett Morris decided.

And that was what he continued to believe, until the Night of the White Flash.

Emmett was one of the few people to actually *see* the Flash. Many

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people caught it out of the corner of their eye, and many more noticed the pulse-like brightening that never quite dimmed back to its original levels. But Emmett was actually looking up into the sky at the time.

As he often did during warm summer nights, Emmett was sitting out on the front porch in his rocker. The battered notebook that he used to doodle out his novice lines of poetry was on his lap, but his muse was somewhat quiet this evening, so he had turned off the porch light and taken to stargazing — frustration from writer's block aside, he didn't mind the lack of attention the darkness offered from the local insects. He was rocking gently to and fro, careful as always to use the toes of his good foot, never allowing the traitorous left heel to so much as touch the wooden deck. "How Am I Supposed To Live Without You?" whistled through his pursed lips. He would have preferred if Judy had been here with him, of course, but otherwise, he was about as content as could be.

The White Flash originated just to the left of the Little Dipper. The display was actually less dramatic than accounts to later generations would suggest, but it was still a sight to see. The tune dried up between Emmett's lips as his eyes widened. It was like something out of a science-fiction movie, like the Death Star blowing up at the end of *Star Wars* ... no, wait, that wasn't it. It was like that other sci-fi series, *Star Trek*. In one of the films, the opening credits had climaxed with the explosion of a Klingon moon. There had been a flash, and then a shockwave of pure energy shooting outward like a ripple in a pond. *That's* what this was like. Just off the Little Dipper, a pulse of brilliant light, then a wave of energy shooting out three-hundred-sixty-degrees. The wave spread from the point of origin to the edge of the horizon in less than five seconds.

A lot of people panicked that night, but for some reason, Emmett did not. He was captivated by the sight of what the White Flash left behind: What before had been a relatively clear portion of sky now showcased a new, very prominent star. Or at least, Emmett thought it was a star, at first. Upon closer scrutiny, he realized that it was in fact *several* stars — seven, if he was counting correctly. They were clumped together in the tightest constellation Emmett Morris had ever seen — people around the world would soon be referring to them as the Seven Stars.

Emmett sat there for several long minutes, staring intently at these Seven Stars. He paid no attention to the sirens that began wailing in the distance. Somewhere fairly close by, a woman screamed, but he paid no more attention to this than he did the sirens. He simply gazed up at this fascinating new constellation, his breath tight in his excited chest.

Then he saw something else.

It's not that it obscured his vision — he could still see just fine. It was more like a double image, some sort of *overlay* that he had again seen in the movies. His *eyes* still saw the sky and the Seven Stars; his *mind* saw a motel room.

In this motel room, a man lay upon a bed. He grunted and flexed and panted and humped. Emmett did not know this muscular, dark, thirty-something man.

Also in this motel room, a woman knelt upon the man. She also grunted and flexed and panted and humped. Emmett *did* know this woman, knew her very well.

Emmett watched in numb, nauseating, growing horror as his wife rode the younger man, and rode him hard. She pulled his hands to her breasts and urged him on and showered him with lewd compliments that she had never offered to the man she had vowed to honor and cherish for the rest of her life.

A whimpering sob escaped his trembling lips as Emmett shut and covered his eyes. But he only succeeded in blinding himself to the celestial display — his vision of the motel room remained.

Judy was having an affair.

He forgot all about the White Flash, the Seven Stars. He forgot about his bone spurs as he reopened his eyes and clambered to his feet. The double image of visual and mental caused him to stumble and bump into things as he found his way back into the house.

He ascended the stairs, hoisting himself hand-over-hand along the railing, and he nearly fell over backwards at the top as he saw ... no, not "saw," *witnessed* ... as he *witnessed* Judy move off the younger man and onto all fours, encouraging her partner into a position that she had always told her husband she did not care for because it was too awkward.

Finding his way into the bedroom, some small part of Emmett that was chiefly self-respect, and self-preservation, realized what the

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majority of the shocked and shattered Emmett was planning to do. That small portion pleaded with the rest of him: She wasn't worth it, not *this*. Didn't he want to know what had happened in the sky tonight? Wasn't he *enthralled* by this new ability, regardless of what it had unfortunately selected to show him first? Didn't he want to explore the possibilities, try out what promised to be an all-new and different life? *Didn't he?!*

It didn't matter. None of it did. Maybe he didn't feel like going out with her anymore, and maybe he didn't lust for her like he once did, but the inescapable fact was that Emmett Morris loved his wife, dearly, and she was rutting with another man in a motel room even as he ... *witnessed* from home.

Emmett pulled the .45 caliber pistol from the shoebox on the top shelf of the closet. He confirmed that it was loaded, pulled back the hammer, and placed the barrel between his teeth.

For God's sake, pleaded the little voice one last time, *aren't you worth more than this?!*

In the motel room, Judy Morris screamed with orgasm.

In their bedroom, Emmett Morris pulled the trigger, and the vision, mercifully, ceased.

SARAH

Sarah Baxter was asleep the Night of the White Flash.

Sarah was a kind woman, a gentle soul probably doomed to die an Old Maid thanks to a defective thyroid that left her nearly four-hundred pounds overweight and gaining. Her youngest sister — an eternally petite goddess whom everyone adored — had delivered five children to three different husbands, and come what may, every single one of the little angels considered Sarah their favorite aunt in the whole wide world.

On the Night of the White Flash, Sarah had agreed to babysit the children while her sister went out on a date with the man who seemed likely to become Husband Number Four. The youngest of the bunch, David, had been having serious nightmares in the last few weeks, so all adults and the three-year-old himself were in perfect agreement that if the Sandman chose to be cruel again this night, then it was far better for David to scream his way straight into Aunt Sarah's all-encompassing arms than those of just any old sitter.

All the children, except for the oldest, were already in bed when the White Flash occurred, and she was upstairs about to fall asleep in front of her favorite video game. Sarah sat upon the love seat with David nestled upon her considerable lap; the sofa, which normally seated two comfortably, was just enough for Sarah's girth. She had planned to stay awake until David's mother came home — *if* she came home this evening — but a day with a little too much excitement for her vying heart had drained her more than she realized, and she was soon snoring so loudly, it was a wonder that she didn't wake up poor little David.

Both aunt and nephew entered REM sleep at the same time. David's dream began as it had over and over again: He was in the backyard, playing in his sandbox. The sun passed behind a cloud, and the wind acquired a bit of a chill. David shuddered against the cold for

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a few minutes, then decided enough was enough and headed in to watch some TV. The part of David that was observing the dream rather than interacting with it dreaded what he would find inside, but he was helpless to prevent this horrific drama of his subconscious from playing itself out.

Sarah dreamed of a beach in Mexico. In reality, she had appreciated the salty air while sitting fully dressed on a bench overlooking the hundreds of shapely tanned figures, male and female alike. In her dream, *she* was one of the shapely figures — perhaps the shapeliest of them all — and she did not sit upon a bench perched on the pier above, but lay sunning herself in the skimpiest bikini the beach would allow, and this was not a conservative beach.

Sarah had dreamed of this beach periodically over the years since her actual visit. In spite of the pang of disappointment she inevitably suffered upon waking to her usual, bloated physique, Sarah always considered this a good dream, a pleasant vacation from *herself* that she was otherwise incapable of experiencing. She had decided long ago to treasure the good over the bad, and accept things for what they were.

And that was how she continued to feel, until the Night of the White Flash.

A whimper slipped from David's tight lips, and a smile played across Sarah's, as the Seven Stars pulsed into view overhead, the White Flash stretching out over the dome of night.

In Sarah's dream, an Adonis of a surfer was approaching her. Sometimes she played coy with him; sometimes she gave in to his lures, and on those nights, Sarah's dream had been known to turn a bit more erotic. She waited for him, casually deciding if she was in the mood this time.

Her first clue that something was changing was in the sounds. Almost before she realized it, the crashing of the surf, whistling of the wind, and calling of the seagulls had given way to something else. A television broadcast, she decided. It sounded, of all things, like someone was watching an old episode of *Family Ties*.

The surfer stopped before her and spoke, but no words came from his lips. She stood and cast about for the source of intrusion.

A sharp breath escaped her as she spied the gateway, a rippling in the air before her ... no, not in the air, in the very *fabric* of her dream.

Like water splashing back and forward at a vertical angle, heedless of and perhaps even mocking gravity's laws.

Over the din of Michael J. Fox's dialogue, she could hear another voice. It was not speaking per se, more that it was *quivering*, but she knew it regardless, knew it with the heart of a favorite aunt. *David* was in there, and he needed her.

Without instruction or intellectual understanding of any kind, Sarah Baxter stepped forward and crossed the bridge from her own dream into her nephew's.

She found herself in a strange living room, a large spacious setup that was both unknown and yet vaguely familiar. The television to her left did in fact offer a viewing of *Family Ties*, and to her right sat David on a couch, his bottom lip trembling as he sobbed.

Though the transition did mystify and fill her with wonder, what truly mattered to her was that her nephew was upset and needed her help. She would deal with all the rest later.

"David?" she said.

He looked at her with a mixture of surprise and relief, though he did not recognize her, at first; he had never in his life seen his aunt as a Size Three.

"Aunt Sarah?" he asked, the incredulity and desire for comfort still dancing a balanced tango upon his face.

"Yes, David, it's me," she assured as she approached and knelt before him.

"You're *skinny!*" he observed.

"I know," she smiled. "David, are you all right? Why are you crying?"

"'Cause it's hapnin' again, Aunt Sarah!"

"*What's* happening again, David? Tell me."

"I never 'member when I wake up, but I 'member now," he told her. "It hasn't started yet, but I know what's gonna happen."

"What, David? *Tell me,*" she insisted once more.

David opened his mouth to speak, then his gaze caught on something over her shoulder and he gasped. Sarah whirled around.

On the television screen, a spider crawled across Michael J. Fox's face.

Then it all rushed back to her. Years ago, she had seen a film about

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spiders overrunning a small town. *That* was why this living room had seemed strangely familiar — it was from that movie.

“David,” she said, never looking away from the spider, “did your brothers let you watch *Arachnophobia* without telling your mommy?”

Eyes wide, David nodded.

Sarah cursed under her breath. No wonder the poor child was having nightmares!

In the movie, she recalled, the spider had simply been crawling across the TV screen. In David’s version, it was actually *in the image*, literally crawling over the actor’s face.

“David,” she said, turning away from the sight that made even her adult flesh crawl, “this is not real. I need you to try and wake up. Wake up, David, and then you and I can talk about how we shared this ...”

Her voice trailed away. More spiders were crawling from the woodwork — from the edges of the windowsill, from behind the bookcase, and pictures on the wall. This was the part in the movie when the spiders had swarmed, minutes before Jeff Daniels would fall through the floor and discover their nest. She didn’t know if dying in your dreams would make you die in real life, but if David’s subconscious mind allowed these little bastards even a *fraction* of the venom they had possessed in the film, she believed they could be in trouble.

Sarah rose and gathered David to her. He was whimpering uncontrollably now, and she could not count on him to move on his own. She fled the living room only to find more spiders covering the front door, and more and more pouring from the walls and ceiling. David’s subconscious fears had taken the terror of the movie and magnified it. There had been hundreds of spiders at this point in the film; David had made it *thousands*.

Following Jeff Daniels’ example, Sarah moved for the stairs. Maybe she could mimic the plot far enough to get David out onto the roof. If *she* got stuck inside like ol’ Jeff, then so be it.

Sarah did not pause at the top of the stairs, nor did she bother closing the bathroom door, knowing/remembering that the spiders would fit through the space at the bottom and even the doorknob frame just as quick as could be. She opened the window and deposited her nephew through it.

That was when the first spider landed on her neck.

The fear permeating David's dream spread to her as she jumped up and down in place and swatted at the creature like a mad woman. She managed to knock it away, but it was replaced by another and another as they descended like rain from the ceiling. They crawled over her flesh, through her hair, into her nose and mouth. In no time at all, she was a frantic, screaming mass of little brown legs and eyes and teeth. Not a single spider had yet to bite her, but they seemed content to drive her insane with their tickling, hideous inspection.

She could barely see as she dove into the shower. She needed water, water to wash them away, water to cleanse herself even if for the briefest of moments. She somehow managed to find the knob and looked up as the faucet deposited a steady, strong stream of crawling, curious arachnids onto her face. She fell backwards into the tub, and the level of spiders soon rose over her entirely and overflowed.

Sarah heard David screaming — somehow that penetrated the moving, creeping mass of horror. A small part of her, a part not unlike the little voice that tried to stop Emmett Morris from shooting himself, spoke up.

This can't go on, Sarah. You've got to end it soon. You may dream that you're a petite, fit, little nymph, but the inescapable fact is that you are actually a dangerously overweight, middle-aged woman, and how much longer do you think your heart, your real heart, can take this kind of stress? Now, you were on to something with the water idea. Come on and put two and two together, would you?

She did.

Reaching out, Sarah opened the gateway. She opened it right beneath her, and she very strategically placed the other end not over the sandy beach, but about fifteen feet out from shore.

Sarah fell back across the dream bridge and into the salt water of the Gulf of Mexico. With a splash that felt like a gift from God Himself, the water rushed around and over her, washing the foul little creatures off her body like so much filth — Sarah could almost have sworn she heard the little devils gasp in shock as they became so much fish food.

As much as she longed for the luxury of raking her hands over her body to assure herself that no little hang-ons remained, Sarah followed

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her duty first — her duty to a frightened little boy.

The gateway flickered back once again, and she reached through just long enough to snatch David from the rooftop where the spiders had surrounded him.

He continued to cry for a time, and she let him, carrying him to shore and holding him to her. Eventually his tears and fears subsided enough for him to take a look around at his radically new surroundings.

“Where *are* we?” he asked with irresistible wonder.

“We’re in *my* dream now,” she said.

“I know that,” he said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I mean where’s *this*?” He pointed at the beach with one hand and the ocean with the other.

Sarah laughed. “Mexico, David. This is Mexico.”

“It’s pretty.”

She hugged him closer.

The Adonis approached her again as if she had never left.

“Hey,” his tenor voice purred, “do you mind if I join you?”

“Maybe later,” Sarah told the epitome of Mel Gibson and Brad Pitt wrapped up in one. “I’ve got company right now.”

The Adonis went away.

“Now, David,” Sarah said, “when we wake up, Aunt Sarah will have some things she’ll need to work out. And we’ll have to discuss the rules about what we can and cannot watch on TV,” David looked away at this, “but for now ... isn’t this a *much* better dream to have?”

“Yeah!” he agreed, grabbing a handful of sand.

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, you’ll never have a nightmare, ever again. Not as long as Aunt Sarah is here. Now, I’ll race you to the water!”

And back on the loveseat, where David slept on Sarah’s girthy lap, both aunt and nephew shared the same, peaceful smile.

THE CHILD

The child — whose name would have been Tran Nguyen — was inside her mother's womb on the Night of the White Flash.

The child was entering her third trimester of existence, and the rudimentary higher brain functions that could be construed as “thoughts” — a relative term for an entity with virtually no intellectual understanding of her own self, let alone existence beyond her five budding senses — remained absent. The child's mother was violently addicted to heroin, and she had not allowed anything so incidental as a pregnancy to curb her habit. The child had been conceived in error, but her mother had not wanted to risk her still deceptively-clean legal record to subject herself to doctors with their tests for an abortion. She had considered trying some self-induced home version until the thought had occurred to her that a good deal of money might be made from selling the baby, money that would keep her well supplied with *hits* for the foreseeable future.

So the child who would have been Tran Nguyen, regardless of entering her third trimester or third *decade* of life, would never develop the mental capacity to equal a lower primate, much less a homosapien.

Straight intelligence was one thing. *Emotions* and *sensations* were something else.

The child might not have understood her surroundings or herself, or the sounds that perpetually filtered through her mother's flesh and muscle and amniotic fluid, but she did *feel*, and a vast majority of the time, she felt uncomfortably hot.

Through the miraculous tragedy of chemical interactions, the mother's narcotic habits left herself and the child with an incessant fever. The mother's body temperature rarely dropped below 100, and spent a fair percentage of its time hugging just over 101. The mother paid no heed to the flushed constant — so long as she had her special stash, she paid heed to very little.

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The child, on the other hand, with her limited capacity of sensation, found the excessive warmth quite unpleasant. The periods of increased temperature had threatened to stop her developing heart more than once, but what was a fetus to do?

So the child suffered an existence of physical discomfort, never comprehending that there was any other kind of existence to be had.

And that was all she *could* comprehend, until the Night of the White Flash.

The child's mother currently resided in Garden Grove, California, so the Seven Stars appeared a little further to the east and the White Flash took a bit longer to cross over the horizon than it did for Emmett Morris and Sarah Baxter's parts of the country. The child's mother was oblivious to this, of course, and would have given it only the briefest attention if she had bothered to notice. She was sealed up in her tiny studio apartment, enjoying her latest hit and wondering if a woman roughly seven months pregnant could still manage to sell her body for a few more dollars. The White Flash did not affect her as it was a growing handful around the world.

It did, however, affect the child.

As Emmett Morris witnessed what he would never have asked to witness, and as Sarah Baxter developed both the ability to dream-link and the gut instincts to use it, the child who would have been Tran Nguyen had a revelation on her own, limited level of comprehension.

It suddenly "occurred" to the child that perhaps she did not *have* to be so hot all the time. This was the worst it had been in a while and her heart was fluttering in response, but maybe there was something ... else. How could a brain-damaged, unborn child understand the possibility of another, as yet unknown condition of life? She did not. She simply *felt*, much as Sarah Baxter did, and acted on those feelings.

Invisible waves of power flowed outward from the child's underdeveloped mind, and almost instantly the surrounding heat began to abate. The child knew a relief unlike anything she had ever experienced, and when she found something that she enjoyed and gave her pleasure, as children of any age are prone, she wanted *more*. She reached out with her new power, more fiercely this time.

The child's mother was overcome with a terrible chill. The elevated warmth she had known almost constantly since she was

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twelve left her without warning, and if she hadn't known better, she would have sworn the temperature in the apartment had just dropped ten degrees. She stumbled to her feet and stole a glance at the thermostat, but it insisted that nothing of the sort was transpiring. The child's mother cursed loudly, throwing around accusations of cheap equipment to no one and nothing in particular, and clutched at herself, shivering. Her teeth chattered, and her belly felt as though a bucket of ice had been poured into her bowels. She wandered back to her familiar paraphernalia and managed to deliver herself a tremendous hit. If the chill wouldn't go away by itself, she would simply numb it away...

The child felt a sudden wave of heat threaten to overwhelm her once more. With a child's rage, she fought back ...

The child who would have been Tran Nguyen would never know — and would never have understood, anyway — that the cost of her immediate gratification would cause her mother to die of internal hypothermia in the middle of summer, and that said death would swiftly end her own life as well.

But even if she *could* have known these things and understood them ... based on her life experiences thus far, it is doubtful that she would have cared.

PATRICIA

Patricia Brown was walking her dogs on the Night of the White Flash.

Lifelong lovers of animals, Patricia's parents successfully urged her to follow her natural inclinations and pursue veterinary medicine as a career. Her parents loved every four-legged creature under the sun, but while Patricia enjoyed helping any animal in need, she had always been partial to dogs.

Big dogs, medium, small, toy dogs — Patricia loved them all. One of the reasons her parents' guidance had proven so frictionless was due to an event before Patricia's eighth birthday. One night, a young Collie had been struck crossing the main road near her home; the driver had not bothered to stop the car and see how the animal had fared. Patricia found the dog the next morning, its hind legs broken, its tail hanging loose and limp. The pain-stricken, terrified animal had bitten her twice as she transported it home. Her parents were still asleep, and rather than take the time to rouse them, she had called the closest animal hospital herself.

The Collie had lived, and thrived. The dog had no collar, and none of the neighbors recognized it. The vet suggested that someone might have brought the unwanted pet from the city to get rid of it. In the end, Patricia had been allowed to keep the Collie, and her bond to canines was forged forever.

While her internship could have been more pleasant — she had taken an offer in Louisiana, only to discover that the white pet owners there didn't particularly like a black woman caring for their little darlings — this past year had found her as the third partner of a successful animal hospital ... and proud owner of *six* dogs, a personal record-breaker for Patricia.

On this particular evening, she was walking three of her beloved kiddies — her black Labrador, Winston; her Pug, Brutus; and her

Boston Terrier, Cookie. Despite his greater size, Winston was, as always, the easiest to handle on these ventures. Brutus and Cookie managed to tangle themselves, Winston, and Patricia together in the leashes so frequently that it tested even her monumental patience from time to time. Amber, Chelsey, and Pop-Eye had already had their daily walks — she avoided walking all six at once for obvious reasons — and now she needed to get these three done. But the night was warm if a bit windy, and she was in a good mood, so she and Winston let the wild pair have their fun. Patricia loved her dogs, oftentimes understanding their wants and needs better than those of other people, and she felt that she was as close to them as a human being could be.

She only felt this way, of course, until the Night of the White Flash.

The park where Patricia walked her dogs had a longstanding reputation for being quite safe. Local parents could even allow their children to play after dark without excessive cause for concern. Patricia had developed a passing acquaintanceship with a few of the other dog lovers who walked their prides and joys at this park. Brutus and Cookie pulled her back and forth and sometimes in opposite directions, marking territory and “checking messages,” as Patricia called it. Winston quietly did his necessary business, then joined Patricia in sighing at the smaller and younger ones, occasionally throwing her a sympathetic look that seemed to say *They’re so silly, aren’t they?* Patricia offered no arguments.

Patricia was chastising Cookie for another wrap-Mom-up-with-the-leash job when the Seven Stars burst into sight. The pulse of light from above confused her enough that by the time she looked straight up, the White Flash had almost reached the horizon. Brutus barked, while Cookie remained oblivious. Winston merely stared up with her.

“What in the world was *that*, Winston ...?”

Anthony Deutsche, the man lurking in the bushes and shadows a few yards ahead of Patricia, glanced up with little interest. He had seen the pulse of light wash over the land, but his skyward view was blocked almost entirely by the lush foliage of a tree, so his curiosity died quickly, and his attention returned to his intended victim. He was perturbed that Patricia wasn’t carrying a purse, but she was wearing a fanny pack, so he figured there might be hope yet.

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Patricia stared after the wave of the White Flash, but there was no encore performance of this phenomenon. The Seven Stars shone brightly above, but Patricia had never been much of a stargazer and so did not notice. In the distance, she heard a siren wail, and Brutus felt the urge to join in.

“Come on, kids,” she said, “let’s head home.”

Winston stood ready to go, but Brutus continued to howl at the alarm, and Cookie searched for fresh territory to investigate.

“Come *on*, fellas, okay? Mom wants to go home now. Brutus, knock that off!”

Then Cookie stopped sniffing at the ground and instead stared ahead, straight into the shadows where Anthony Deutsche stood in silence. An unimpressive growl rumbled through the Boston Terrier’s little throat.

bad man

Patricia looked around, startled. She could have sworn that she heard someone speak, but she appeared to be alone.

bad man

The voice, or the *echo* of a voice, floated to her again from some unknown source. “What?” she said aloud. “Who’s there?”

Anthony stiffened. Had he given himself away somehow?

bad man Winston over here bad man Brutus over here

Patricia was confused and frightened now. The words weren’t really *words* — except for the echoes of the Lab and Pug’s names, which came through clear as a bell. They were more like ... *impressions*. Less than words, more than feelings.

Brutus stopped howling and glanced in the same direction as Cookie. Winston stepped forward, his attention following the Boston’s as well.

where?

bushes

sure he’s bad?

bad man bad man

Cookie right Winston smell him too man bad man

Patricia’s educated mind struggled to reject what she thought she was hearing. She was so caught up in the wonder and impossibility of it all that she didn’t pay attention to what her dogs appeared to be

saying to one another.

“Winston?”

The Lab looked up at her. *Bad man Mom bad man ...* Then the words/impressions paused, and Winston assumed the most human-looking expression of bafflement Patricia had ever seen. If her mind had not been such a whirlwind, she would have laughed. *Mom you hear Winston Mom?*

“Yes,” Patricia blurted through a strained chuckle, seriously entertaining the distinct possibility that only a crazy woman would answer a question she thought was directly posed by her pet. “Yes, I hear you, Winston, and I think that Mom needs a drink.”

no time for fuzzy stuff, Winston scolded her, *bad man in the bushes Mom bad man you need to go*

Winston!

Winston!

When Patricia appeared to start talking to her big dog — actually carrying on a conversation with the damned mutt! — Anthony decided that enough was enough. A retard would be that much easier to handle, anyway. He stepped from the shadows, waving his knife back and forth so that the blade would glisten in the scattered park lights.

“Gimme your pack,” he threatened curtly, stepping close.

Patricia gaped at him. The startling events were making it difficult for her to shift gears — at first, she even thought he was referring to her *dogs*. “Wha—?” was all she managed to say.

Brutus and Cookie barked at Anthony. Winston growled.

“Don’t push me, bitch,” he snapped. “Hand over the pack or I’ll cut you. And your little dog Toto, too.” When Patricia still failed to move, Anthony reached down with impressive speed and plucked Cookie up by her collar. She yelped, both in the real world and in Patricia’s mind. “I’m not fooling around, bitch. Hand it over.” He held the blade against the Boston’s throat.

The man could have intimidated Patricia all night, and in her current state of mind, she probably would have just stood there like an idiot. But when he made the mistake of threatening one of her kids, her disposition turned icy cold.

“Fine,” she said. Dropping the leashes and reaching back to unclasp the pack, she said, “Put her down first.”

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“You’re not in the position, lady,” Anthony leered. He flicked the blade and Cookie yelped as he cut her. Not too deep, not yet, but enough to draw blood. Brutus and Winston growled in unison. “Better keep the Lab back, too. Now hand it over.”

*bad man hurt Cookie get him Winston get him
can't he has shiny sharp metal might hurt Mom*

“How do I know you won’t hurt her anyway?” Patricia demanded.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, that’s *it!*” Anthony threw the Boston down hard and kicked the Pug harder as he moved on her. The blade came at Patricia’s throat now ...

... but not before Winston’s jaws locked onto the man’s wrist.

Giving the devil his due credit, Anthony did not cry out or panic as others might have. He merely grunted and, without missing a beat, started pounding the Lab in the face with his free hand.

ow ow ow ow

Patricia could sense Winston’s discomfort, but the husky dog refused to let go. Patricia leaped at the man, too, clawing at his face.

“Shit!”

Anthony shoved her away, knocking her to the ground. He hit Winston again, and a squeak of pain made its way from behind the man’s trapped arm.

And *that* was enough of *that!*

Cookie, Brutus, she called in the same fashion she had heard, and with the same instincts employed by Emmett, Sarah, and the Would-Be-Tran, *his feet! Get his feet!*

The smaller dogs rushed to obey their mom. They each went for an ankle.

Cookie, your mouth’s too small. Get his shoe laces, his shoe laces!

Cookie was familiar enough with chewing on Patricia’s shoes to know exactly what she meant.

Bite him hard, Brutus. Hard!

Anthony had stopped beating Winston now, and was trying desperately not to lose his balance.

Winston, hold on!

yes Mom

Scrambling to her feet and charging forward, Patricia slammed into Anthony as hard as she could — and while she was nowhere near

Sarah Baxter's size, Patricia was far from a petite lady herself. Anthony went down on his back, the breath exploding from his lungs as a rock broke one of his hind ribs. Winston lost his grip on the man's wrist in the tumble, but his teeth raked deep valleys in the bad man's flesh, and the knife dropped away.

Cookie, Brutus, get his hands. Bite down on his fingers, bite hard. Winston, get his throat, but don't bite down. Not yet.

yes Mom yes Mom yes

The dogs did as told, and Anthony was soon helpless, trying to do nothing but draw a breath as Patricia knelt over him, her knees in his gut. His eyes bugged and gawked at the Black Lab perched at his throat.

"All right, mister," Patricia did not bother to hide her satisfaction, "let's see what you've got. Winston, if he moves, kill him." She reached under him and felt his back pockets. Sure enough, she came back with the mugger's own wallet. "Gosh, aren't we cocky? You stupid asshole."

Patricia opened the wallet, going straight for the driver's license.

"Well, *Anthony Deutsche*, looks like you're up shit creek without a paddle."

She climbed off him, making sure to really grind her knees while doing so, and stepped back.

"All right, kids, back off," she ordered as she stooped and delicately picked up the man's knife. *But growl at him*, she added mentally, *growl at him* loud. *Really give him a good show. Especially you, Winston.*

The dogs retreated a few feet and inundated Anthony with the noise of their fierceness.

Anthony carefully rose to his feet, dividing his attention between fearful glances at the militant dogs and dagger-looks aimed at Patricia.

"I'm not prepared to escort you halfway across town, mister, but you'll be hearing from the police soon enough." She waved the knife and wallet at him. "Now turn and walk away. Stick to the path so that I can see you in the lights all the way out of the park. And if you try anything clever, I'll have Winston here rip your *balls* off and share them with Brutus and Cookie as a snack. Comprehend?"

Anthony begrudged a glum nod and limped away, keeping to the

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path as instructed.

“Good work, kids.”

Bad man we bit the bad man and helped Mom we get treats when we get home?

Patricia laughed and answered Brutus and Cookie, “Sure, kids, you get treats. Double helpings.”

Even though she answered with her mouth instead of projecting with her mind, it was evident that they understood her better than ever before. Brutus and Cookie jumped up and down in excitement, Cookie throwing a bark or two after the bad man.

Winston looked up at Patricia with eyes that now seemed uncannily wise to her.

how Mom? he asked. *how can you hear us?*

I don't know, Winston, she answered, *but I do know one thing ... I'm about to become the best damn veterinarian this world has ever seen.*

She smiled and, removing their unnecessary leashes, led the kids home.

PHILIP

Doctor Philip Seymour was in an emergency room on the Night of the White Flash.

Some men and women pursue the study of medicine because they sincerely want to heal their fellow mankind. Others choose the field because of family tradition; said person's parents and grandparents before them are esteemed professionals in the medical field, leaving the child with a sense of obligation toward upholding the familial reputation. Still others are pushed towards the profession by parents with strictly vicarious motives; if *they* could never amount to anything, then, by God, their *child* would.

And then some, like Philip Seymour, choose to be doctors for one reason and one reason only: *Money*.

Raised by a single father, who slaved away for the city as a sanitation worker, Philip grew up with the notion that all doctors were rich — indeed, this stereotype was probably closer to the truth when he was a child. Philip attacked his education aggressively, achieving top marks not so much through raw intelligence as through fierce determination. He managed to get enough financial aid to make it into college, and by the time he was ready for his Masters degree and then medical school, he had gained enough momentum that there was no stopping him.

Finally, Doctor Philip Seymour graduated ... and was stunned when an affluent, private practice did not fall right into his lap.

The problem, put quite bluntly, was that Philip Seymour was something of an asshole.

Philip did not make friends through any of his schooling. He kissed up to Deans and top Professors, but rudely snubbed all of his peers. The occasional instructor might have enjoyed his offerings as a Yes-Man, but a majority frowned upon what, at the very least, amounted to a shitty bedside manner. They gave him high marks

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because his test scores demanded it, but their support ended there. Their letters of recommendation were hardly that — more than once, a followup phone call to the potential retirees looking for a replacement killed what little shine the letters had to offer in the first place.

Philip Seymour was left with a covertly unsupportive list of pedagogues, and an openly disparaging class of associates who wanted to do anything but *associate* with him. And both groups were more than happy to spread the word as far as it would go.

So Philip found himself, not as a lone, illustrious, rich doctor, worshiped by all, but as one of many, working with a stream-lined staff and subject to budget cuts as the hospital board of directors saw fit. He was not surrounded by patients ready and willing to spend top dollar for his coveted services, but by medical interns and drunk vagrants and insurance forms up to his ass, with no escape in sight.

No escape, that is, until the Night of the White Flash.

Philip was taking a coffee break — alone, of course — when the Seven Stars appeared and the White Flash washed over the world. Its effect on him was as immediate as with Emmett, Sarah, the would-be-Tran, and Patricia. However, unlike those individuals, Philip did not realize his change right away.

Within the hour, the victims began to flow into the ER. The White Flash caused more than paranormal abilities in a small number of people that night — it caused an unprecedented number of accidents, automobile and otherwise. As millions of eyes turned skyward, seeking the source of the pulse of light and occasionally noticing the new seven-star constellation in the heavens, cars crashed into one another, pedestrians, and other objects usually avoided with ease. People dropped things, ran into things, fell off things. The effects of the White Flash would soon be observed in all parts of the world, but it was night in the Western Hemisphere, and that's where the immediate action took place.

Philip sighed at the inflow of people, at the sound of returning ambulances. Half of these idiots would fill out the forms incorrectly, some out of ignorance, some intentionally. The directors would bitch and complain, and the shit would roll downhill. Sometimes Philip thought of his deceased father, and wondered if being a trash man had really been all that bad.

A patient was escorted behind a privacy curtain, and the nurse commented that Doctor Seymour would be with him shortly. Philip sighed again, adding a curse under his breath for good measure, as he perused the chart. Blow to the head, lacerated scalp, nurse added a note giving her opinion that some x-rays might be called for. Like she knew what the hell she was talking about — *he*, after all, was the one with the “Dr.” in front of his name.

“Okay, Mister Wright,” he said as he stepped through the curtain, offering only the faintest effort at a smile, “let’s see what we have here—”

“It hurts!” the idiot cried, holding his hand to the cut. Someone had already made a respectable attempt to clean the wound and staunch its blood flow, but the man seemed determined to get it going again.

“I understand it hurts, Mister Wright,” Philip said, mentally adding *you whiny shitbag*. “Let me take a look at that.”

“I need stitches and I have a concussion,” the man proclaimed as he withdrew his hand and blood-soaked cloth.

“A strictly medical opinion, I’m sure,” Philip grumbled.

“It’s *my head*,” the man spat. “I know my own body, Mister High-and-Mighty M.D., so don’t talk down to me again or I’ll sue you and this whole damn—”

Philip had already been reaching for the man’s head before the onslaught. Biting back his anger to the minimum degree that his profession regrettably demanded, he seized the man’s scalp as forcefully as he could later justify if the man actually tried legal action.

He wanted to cause the man discomfort, that much was certain. But the end result stunned him as much as it did his patient.

As soon as Philip’s hand made contact with the man’s forehead, a connection formed that went beyond the mere flesh-to-flesh. It was as if some part, some *new* part, of Philip reached into the man’s soul and seized it, fiercely. Mister Wright’s breath caught short, his threats drying up like leaves in a drought, and his eyes bulged out. The connection held for a moment, then it began to flow back into Philip ... and it brought part of Mister Wright with it.

Philip experienced a rush of energy, of potency, that was nearly orgasmic in its intensity. In proportionate riposte, Mister Wright sagged out of his hands, falling back against the thinly cushioned bed as

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though he had just finished a marathon — indeed, his heart raced and he panted like a sprinter against the tape.

“Wha— wh— wha ...” was all the crass man had to offer.

Philip looked down at his hands, then clenched them. By God, he felt as though he could pick up the man before him and toss him about like a rag doll ... or maybe the whole bed, with Mister Wright right there on it.

Smiling like a vampire over his victim, Philip considered the patient only briefly before diving back in for seconds ...

A minute later, Mister Wright was dead.

Philip struggled to contain himself. Only a close examination of the fit of his clothes convinced him that he hadn't physically grown in size. How could this feeling of strength, of *power*, possibly be contained within the confines of his fragile body? He looked at Mister Wright, saw no telltale sign of what had really happened, then stepped out of the curtain.

“Nurse!” he called to the woman who had first seen the man.

“Yes, Doctor Seymour?” she said with barely hidden distaste.

She'd better watch the way she speaks to me, he thought. *They had all better watch it from now on*. “This man was injured far worse than it first appeared,” he told her. “He just died right in front of me.”

“Code Blue—!” the nurse started to call out.

Philip seized her shoulder. “It's too late for that.”

“But Doctor—”

“There are people here who need our attention,” he rumbled, “and we can't waste our time with a lost cause like this one — it's called ‘triage.’ Are you questioning my medical judgement, *nurse*?”

For a moment, he thought she might. Then she said, “No, Doctor Seymour, of course not.”

Something in her voice told him that she would be reporting this. He considered moving his hand from her shoulder to the exposed flesh of her neck, then thought better of it. He would deal with all else later — tonight, he needed to make sure that he was by the side of every seriously injured patient who came through the door.

“Good,” he said at last. “Take care of him, would you? I have other patients.”

It never occurred to Philip Seymour to question *how* he had

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suddenly gained this amazing ability. Instead, he decided that, if he could not have money, then maybe there were *other* kinds of power to be had in this world. And, not caring what the nurse might think, he allowed himself a heartfelt laugh.

YESTERDAY

To All Faculty and Staff:

The following is a report presented to me by Jeffrey Lawrence, one of my 5th grade students. Jeffrey recently returned to class after missing two weeks, courtesy of the chicken pox, and had fallen considerably behind. Rather than force the young man to attempt two weeks' worth of backed up homework, I offered him the option of instead completing an extra credit assignment. My suggestion had been a book report, but I left the proposition intentionally vague, hoping to see if he would come up with something on his own.

He did.

Upon reading his essay — an effort that took him a mere two days to complete and return to me — I felt that perhaps we would all benefit from reading it. It offers us an insight into how our youth perceives these frightening times in which we now live, times that we could not have imagined (or, perhaps, could *only* have imagined) at Jeffrey's age, but that our children and grandchildren will now grow up without knowing anything else.

It is my further suggestion that we consider setting aside a day as soon as possible to discuss the paranormals with our student body as a whole.

Perhaps *together* we can find a light at the end of this increasingly dark tunnel.

Barbara Wallis

THE PARANORMALS
BY JEFFREY LAWRENCE
5TH GRADE - MISS WALLIS

Almost 5 years ago, the Seven Stars appeared in the sky. The White Flash that followed their appearance scared a lot of people, but the White Flash did a lot more than people first realized.

Scientists still have not figured out exactly what the White Flash was. Some say it was a kind of radiation that we have never seen before that caused mutations. Some people think that maybe God or the Devil did it, but the Scientists won't listen to that explanation. They also can't figure out if the Seven Stars just came into existence, or if they were always there and the Earth just could not see them until now. The people who work for S.E.T.I. (that's for "Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence") have also started picking up strange sounds on their big radios, but so far no one can agree on what they are or what they mean.

More important, though, is what has happened here on Earth. Some people were changed by the White Flash, something the Scientists call the "Paranormal Effect."

Not very many people have been changed by the Paranormal Effect. According to a report on "60 Minutes" last week, the Scientists say that less than 1/10th of 1% of the people of Earth were changed, and less than 1% of those have changes that are any big deal (my Dad heard about a man at his

company who could change the color of things; this is not something the Scientists would call a “Class 1,” but I think the man got fired from his job, anyway, and that is sad).

Some people were changed right away, and these people had mostly mind powers. Some people hid their changes, so it took a while before the Scientists could start studying them.

After about a year or so went by, other people started changing, too, and some of the powers started getting more and more physical. Some people are really strong, others can run fast or fly or shoot laser beams and stuff from their eyes. After a couple of years, other people even got changed in the way they look (there was a sad story on the Internet about a man who grew bat wings and got burned by his church because they thought the Devil turned him into a gargoyle). The Scientists can’t figure out why some people change and others don’t. Old people, young people, black and white and Asian people, tall people or short people all change. Some babies even change before they are born. The only family members who sometimes change together are identical twins, and Scientists think this is because of something called “DNA,” (that’s “DeoxyriboNucleic Acid”) and that’s really close together in identical twins. We don’t know if Paranormal parents can give their powers to their kids yet, but the Scientists think it could happen.

People were changed by the Paranormal Effect all over the world, but most seem to be in North and Central and South America. The Scientists think this is because it was nighttime here when the White Flash happened, and it hit this side of our planet.

After a bunch of bad guys started using their

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powers for crime, the United States started a group called the "P.C.A." (that's for "Paranormal Control Agency;" their symbol looks like this: **PCA**). They took agents from the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. and the Secret Service and gave them the job of stopping the bad guys. They call the bad guys "Rogues." Later they started a P.C.A. Academy, and this is the first year people will work for the P.C.A. who graduated from the Academy.

I think it is really sad that so many people changed by the Paranormal Effect want to be Rogues. My big brother has always read comic books and he read comic books to me when I was a little kid. I think it's so sad that no Paranormals want to be super-heroes. Why don't they want to be like Superman or Spider-Man or the X-Men? In the comic books the bad guys always lose, but how can they lose in the real world if there are no super-heroes to fight them? There are some Paranormals who work with the P.C.A. against the Rogues, and that's a good thing, but it would be cool if somebody wanted to be a real, live super-hero. If I ever get changed by the Paranormal Effect, that's what I'm going to do.

A lot of people are scared by the Paranormals and hate them just because they got changed, and I think this is sad, too. In Miss Wallis' class, we learn about stuff like Civil Rights and how prejudice is bad, so I think people should remember these things when they think about the Paranormals. The Paranormals are just people like you and me who got changed and they did not ask for it to happen to them. The Rogues are uncool and should be punished, but regular people who turn Paranormal should not be punished if they aren't Rogue.

Paranormals are just like you and me, only

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different, and if people with different colored skin and who have different religions should be treated equal, then a man who can change the color of things should be treated equal, too.

My name is Jeffrey Lawrence, and if another kid in my class turned Paranormal, I would still be his friend, and I hope that if I turned Paranormal, other kids would still be my friends, too.

And if a Paranormal decided to be a super-hero, I think that would be really, really COOL!!!

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