



MERCY

STREET

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Dublin Fain was on the phone with a psychic when they came for him. A stinging barrage of pinpricks on his arms, legs, back and chest. It was not enough to hurt him – just get his attention.

Oh Christ, no.

“Listen, Jackie, I’m not feeling so good ...” His voice shaking. Then something hard rammed him up the ass.

"*Jesus Christ!* What? No, I'm okay, Jack. I'm just not feeling well... must be something I ate, huh?" He laughed feebly, his shirt already drenched with sweat. "Look, let me go, okay? I'll get back to you on that séance, er, exorcism thing. Yeah, thanks. You too."

He was at the “Good Morning, Philly” studio with his “Supernatural Safari” producer, Josh Larson, to hype the show’s new season, its sixth. He was due to talk to the host -- Megan? Regan? -- in three minutes but this couldn’t wait.

Dublin dashed for the men's room and headed for the handicapped stall at the far end because it held a sink and mirror of its own. Once inside, he stripped off his shirt and looked at the scars hidden beneath. Nothing.

He splashed cool water on his face with shaking hands. Ran wet fingers through his dark hair, and stared at his shock-white face and the sudden dark circles under his eyes.

Why now? They'd never come during the day before. Never.

Then the deep, black despair he'd fought so hard to beat slammed into him and knocked him to his knees. The hard white tile cold on his palms and forehead, but it couldn't save him from the sour churning in his gut. As soon as he tried to raise his head, he threw up.

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The interview went like shit, of course. His Irish accent kept slipping, and when he coughed to cover it up, he could see it in the bitch’s (Megan? Regan?) eyes -- *faker*.

She knew.

Even worse, Josh knew she knew.

Ah, you're in the shite now, sonny, as his granddad used to say.

Dublin was second generation, but when no one showed any inclination to fund his paranormal series idea he decided to turn on the Irish charm. And it worked beautifully. But it never came naturally, so he always had to think about it. Especially when he was tired, and he’d been tired a lot lately.

Fuck it. There were bigger things to worry about. He had to get home. There he could take care of things.

“Josh,” he said once they were off the set. “Me stomach’s killing me. You can handle lunch today, right?”

“For fuck’s sake, Dub. Take a fucking Pepto. This is an important meeting. This could lead us to big things. Or do you want to be on basic cable *all* your fucking life, ‘cause I sure as hell don’t!”

Josh glared at him. There was no sign of the “we’re in this together, brother” look that Dublin had seen in the early days of the show. Now all he saw was *business*. Had it been there since Brazil? No, earlier. Since Japan. He swallowed hard, remembering.

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Early in their second season they'd spent all day in that Suicide Forest, *Aokiga-whatever-the-fuck*, at the foot of Mt. Fuji. They'd snagged lots of creepy (but dull) footage of empty nooses hanging from trees, and of piles of clothing sitting by the trail. Dublin was miked and kept up a steady stream of narration for the viewers, but an eerie silence filled every bit of the forest whenever he paused. The sound guy kept lifting his earphones off to listen, then cursing as he put them back on. So when they came upon a yellow tent sitting deep in the woods, surrounded by plastic tape, Josh insisted he look inside. Their translator, Kazumi, got all agitated, yelling *gaki gaki*, and tried to stop Dublin from getting any closer, but Josh grabbed her and told him to keep going. When Dublin yelled that the tent was zipped closed, Josh pushed the camera guy over to him.

"Get the shot, Mike, and Dub, remember – respectful."

Dublin exchanged a look with Mike. Standing this close to the tent the smell of blood was *rank. Fresh*. The last thing Dublin wanted to do was see what was causing it. Mike nodded grim-faced and Dublin unzipped the tent. The raw, wet stench of blood and decay ballooned out of the opening. Dublin doubled over, faint. He was sure he was going to vomit, but kept it under control. Barely. Mike looked very green, but he held it together too.

The guy inside looked like he'd been in a shredder. What was worse – it looked self-inflicted. The floor of the tent was strewn with bloody razor blades and bits of flesh.

They got the shot, Josh shouting directions from behind the tape, in a weak attempt to placate their angry translator who kept screaming at them all in Japanese. Finally, satisfied that they had wrung every last bit of horror and pathos out of it, Josh said, "We hit the jackpot with this one, Dub."

Then Josh told the translator she could call the police. As she shrieked into her phone, Dublin and Mike shared a hit off Dublin's flask full of Japanese whiskey.

"Smooth," Mike gasped after the first swallow. He grinned at Dublin, but his eyes were wild.

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That night it started.

Josh had booked them all in some ratty little guesthouse a few miles from the forest. The cheapest place he could find. Dublin's roommate, Dougie the sound guy, had gone in search of female company. Dublin just wanted a shower. When he stepped out of the shower something bit him on the ankles -- hard. He yelped and jumped, searching the floor for a spider. Or a rat. As he crouched nervously peering under the bed he was attacked again.

Invisible, they flew at him from all sides -- pinching, grabbing, poking, punching, kicking, scratching, and tearing. A wet, glutinous wad was stuffed in his mouth. Dublin gagged reflexively, which only served to suck it down his throat.

Jesus Christ. He couldn't breathe!

He struggled furiously against his unseen attackers, twisting and coiling and arching like a worm on a hook. One bit him on the back of his neck, so he smashed his back and head against the floor. Something else grabbed his dick

with steely claws, and he rolled on top of it, whimpering. Just as he felt himself slip into greasy unconsciousness, Dublin spotted a hard glitter on the floor under his bed.

A pack of straight-edged razors lay sharp and clean under there.

He threw himself forward in a desperate lunge and seized the blades, breaking open their plastic case. Frantic and pain-racked, Dublin accidentally cut himself with the razor he'd intended to use for his defense.

A fairly deep cut, it flayed open the meat of his middle finger. His blood ran all over his hands and onto the floor. Dublin grabbed a pair of dirty socks lying nearby to staunch the flow.

All that blood -- his blood -- made his stomach heave. It took him several moments to realize that the attack had stopped. Even that shit in his mouth was gone.

Cautiously, Dublin stood up and looked around the room, his body tensed for another attack. It seemed to be over. He made his shaky way down the hall to the bathroom, where in the harsh fluorescent glare he took stock of the damages. Other than a generally wild look on his face, and the cut on his finger, he was unhurt.

Impossible. He knew something -- several somethings -- had attacked him, had even tried to kill him. So why didn't any of it show? And why had they stopped? Dublin thought he knew why they had stopped. It made him sick to his stomach, but he was too smart to deny the connection.

Just as he was coming out of the bathroom, a large bandage on his finger, he heard Mike screaming in his room down the hall. By the time everyone arrived it was all over. Mike lay on the floor, blood pouring out of every orifice of his body. Cause of death was later determined to be "suffocation."

For the rest of their Japan trip -- God knows the loss of one, measly cameraman wouldn't stop the money juggernaut that was "Supernatural Safari" -- Dublin spent his waking, sober hours waiting for the screams of the rest of his companions to ring out in the dark. But after a decent period of mourning for Mike (one night when they all got drunk at a local bar), the crew carried on as usual. Dublin reluctantly came to the conclusion that the only screams in the night were his (muffled by his pillow), and that Josh -- and the rest of the crew -- who had kept a nice, safe distance from all the nastiness in the forest had *escaped* whatever had attacked him, and killed Mike. Those fuckers.

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So that's when it began. That night. For the next three years they came to him. Not every night, but only at night. Ever since then he had played the diva and insisted on a room of his own whenever they went on location. Josh had bitched, and bitched hard, but he finally gave in. And, just as on that first night, whenever Dublin cut himself, they went away.

Sometimes for several weeks.

Sometimes just for the rest of the night.

Sometimes only for a few hours.

Or a few minutes.

However long it was, Dublin was grateful for the respite.

He'd done some research, and found out that *gaki* meant "hungry ghost,"

and that there were all kinds of “hungers.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” His drunken chuckle echoed in the empty luxury apartment.

Over the years he developed various tactics designed to get him through the night. He drank. He watched TV. He masturbated. He listened to music. He drank some more. He took drugs. He ranted at the walls. He wept. A lot. And then finally, when he couldn't stand it one second longer, he'd pick up one of Remington Steel's finest and slit his flesh.

There. There. And there.

When it was all over for the night, Dublin's blood flowed in thick red ribbons from cuts in his arms, his legs, and his chest. Then he'd open a large bottle of peroxide as if it were a celebratory bottle of champagne and pour it, hissing and foaming, over his body -- redeemed once again.

Many times, his semen mixed with the pink foam pooling at his feet.

Sometimes he wondered how other people spent their evenings.

Then about a year ago, Dublin left his apartment one night after they'd had their way with him. He wandered blissfully through a freezing December rain. Every scar on his body ached with the cold and damp, but the exquisite solitude overrode every other sensation. Daydreaming at midnight, his face and head soaked, he stopped at a light to let the traffic go by. That's when he saw a street sign sparkle in the glittering drops of rain clinging to his eyelashes -- Mercy Street. It beckoned with a lover's promise: *mercy mercy mercy mercy mercy....* If anyone needed mercy, it was he. Dublin found a house there and moved in a month later.

The day after he unpacked, the attacks suddenly, miraculously, stopped. After an entire week of agonized suspense, he considered happiness a possibility in his life. When one week followed that, and another, and another, Dublin dared to believe that he'd finally found a talisman to fend them off for good.

And so it seemed, for the past six months.

Until today, when they'd actually attacked him at work and when he wasn't alone. All firsts in his experience with them, and doubly unpleasant for that reason alone. Even more disturbing however, was his suspicion that after being held at bay for so long they would want more than just a little blood and pain tonight.

He had to get home. Now.

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“Josh, get them to postpone, wouldya? We'll do dinner tonight, instead, tell them. My personal treat. Okay? It won't cost you, or the show, anything. Oh, it'll be fookin' grand, I promise ya.” Laying the accent on thick.

Josh agreed with even less grace than usual, but Dublin didn't care. As soon as he stepped through the revolving door of the studio building, Dublin was greeted by a blast of hot, humid, August air. He never took off his jacket, or rolled up his sleeves. The sweat poured down his body and made his scars crawl. He ignored it. As Dublin strode through the damp, steaming crowds of mindless lunchtime shoppers, his thoughts raced.

Why had they come back *now*, after six glorious months of peace? His certainty that it would start all over again tormented him. It was unbearable. He

wouldn't let them control him again. Not anymore. He'd die first. And take the rat bastards with him, too.

When he halted abruptly for a red light, he tucked his hand in his pocket and felt the pack of blades there. He smiled. The city might be a dirty, malignant hellhole, but it did have one saving grace -- you could spend a whole year and never visit the same drugstore twice. (Ordering off Amazon be damned. He liked the small, shifting weight of the blades in their box when he carried them to the checkout.) The light changed and he was off again. Just a few more blocks and he'd be home -- not necessarily safe and sound, but home.

Turning onto his beloved Mercy Street at last, Dublin stopped dead. Some kind of crude surgery was going on. Down the center of the asphalt ran a huge, ragged incision. The wound was a disembowelment surrounded by several large, yellow trucks and a dozen workers in municipal uniforms -- a dirty, noisy, operating theater.

Dublin's haven was now filled with a harsh, brown glare as sunlight mixed with machine-spewn dirt and cement-dust. Huge construction-orange instruments howled, drilling and chopping up asphalt and cement -- *chunk chunk chunk*. Strangers in hard hats shouted and cursed.

His thoughts pounded on the wet insides of his skull.

I'm in Hell. Hell. Hell. Hell...

It was then he noticed that the street sign had been taken down. His blood froze solid. Why in God's name did they need to remove that to work on the street? Dublin's scars throbbed painfully as he stared at the naked metal post. Without its nameplate flying at the top like some jaunty, little flag, it looked like an iron spike stuck in the belly of the sky.

Cold, jagged fear settled in his gut -- was it still his Mercy Street with the sign gone? And if not, then how was he going to get through this night?

Despite the brightness of the afternoon, Dublin walked the last few feet to his door like a man who expected to be kicked and beaten to death before he got there. The missing sign was an ill omen if there ever was one.

Just before he reached his house, Dublin ducked under a barricade near a group of men in yellow hard hats and tapped the nearest worker's shoulder.

"Do you mind puttin' that sign back up then, fella?" Dublin put on his nicest, sanest face for him.

The guy wheeled around and stared, looking him up and down. "You're not allowed in here, sir. It's too dangerous. "

"Wait, I want to --"

"Sir, you have to leave the area." The man gestured to another man in a white hard hat, waving him over. Dublin staggered away, stricken by the thought they might have him arrested. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like if he landed in jail tonight. He scurried for his front door, aware that the workmen watched him. He had to get inside, now. Even so, Dublin dreaded the idea of being alone in the house with them.

Especially now that he was defenseless.

That they had somehow arranged this, he had no doubt.

"Christ." He put his face in his hands. Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

Two hours later, Dublin watched the sun set. He stood at the window with a nearly empty bottle of cheap whiskey in his hand. Long, strange shadows

poured down the street, trailing off the abandoned machines outside. It would be dark soon, and tonight they would come for him in a frenzy. He could feel it in his scars.

He sat on the edge of the white leather couch and carefully placed the small plastic pack of razor blades in the center of his glass table next to his cell phone. On the table and the floor surrounding it were his other weapons -- cocaine, more whiskey, pills, a gun. The rest of it -- his possessions, his money, his show -- was bullshit. There was nothing else in the world but those blades. There could be nothing else. Not for him. Not tonight.

He lifted the pack from the table. Carefully, he opened the little case and took one out; a single-edged Remington Steel Supreme, and it *was* supreme -- a real little beauty.

Dublin watched the fading sunlight from the window glide along its finely honed edge like molten illumination. If he looked closely, he could see tiny rainbows there, glimmering fitfully, seductively. He laid the blade down on the glass and snorted another line of coke. His nose, hell his *face*, was numb. Just about ready, he began to undress.

Beneath his Brooks' Brothers suit lay Dublin's second suit -- one of scar tissue. It covered nearly the same, exact ground as the cloth one. From wrist to wrist and from ankles to collar bone, his body belonged to them. Beyond those boundaries, Dublin dared not go for fear of disclosure. The *gaki* demanded secrecy for their rites. And on this one point he agreed with them -- no one must know. No one must see. Secrecy bound them together.

Without warning his hungry ghosts were upon him, swarming all over him in a kind of obscene longing. Their sandpaper tongues flicked at his face and neck. Their shark teeth tore at his nipples. Their searing talons raked his groin and anus. Dublin groaned from a confused mixture of desire and revulsion. He hated their attentions to his flesh. Hated the mutilations and insistent demands for his blood... but then, he supposed, all lovers were demanding about something.

In the past, they'd taken the time to pleasure him, before claiming their tribute of blood and pain. But not now.

Tonight they were eager for him, anxious to make up for lost time.

They tormented him with the fierce determination of hungry rats. He fended them off -- his jaw clenched tight, tears rolling down his face. He didn't have much free skin left, and what was left was in very tender, very dangerous areas.

Dublin spent the next few hours in an agony none of his colleagues could ever imagine. He cut and cut and cut until all he saw was red. Blood coated his torso until he looked like a man flayed alive.

And still they came.

With slick, trembling fingers, Dublin grasped the razor blade and, pressing firmly, cut into his right foot. Slitting the flesh between the big toe and the next all the way up to the ankle. He hissed at the pain, but quickly sliced between the rest of the toes on that foot. Pressing too hard for the foot's relative fleshlessness, he split it open -- splaying it the way a thoughtless butcher's apprentice might, idly destroying a piece of meat because it wasn't a popular cut with the customers. He knew he'd never walk again, but that hardly mattered.

Trying to beat the bullet of pain he knew was coming he took a mighty swig of whiskey. He almost passed out before he could swallow it. The pain in his

foot detonated in his brain. He cried out helplessly, screaming.

"You dirty fucking BASTARDS! Are you happy now!?"

Only silence, mixed with the stench of his blood and fear, greeted him.

Dublin took another long, boozy swallow. He reached down with shaking hands to cradle his genitals. Waiting to see if they would be pacified with merely crippling him. Or would they want *more*?

The blood from his ruined foot poured onto the hardwood floor. He pushed back the dizziness threatening to plunge him into total darkness. He needed to be sharp right now. Sharp and clear. The first blade was too greasy to hold, so Dublin fished for another. He took a long, careful breath and waited. They'd stopped. A minute passed. Then another. After ten agonizing minutes, Dublin lost control and began to weep.

"Oh God, oh God."

He moaned over and over. They'd gone. He'd had to destroy his foot to do it, but it had been worth it. Oh, Christ, yes.

When he finally managed to make his fingers work again, he carefully set the blade on the table and reached for his peroxide bottle. But before he even got the cap off, they laid into him from all sides.

It was as if he'd fallen into a river of famished piranha. The pain glittered brightly; like nothing he'd ever experienced before. Even more horrifying was the sight that greeted him when he glanced down -- every scar on his body split open, bleeding profusely. Gasping, Dublin stood shaking as they devoured him -- adding fresh wounds to his flesh even as they tore open the old ones. He flung himself mindlessly against the bone white walls, a howling madman, covered from neck to soles in the red, glycerin skin of his own blood.

"WHY!? Why are you doing this to me, you fucking --"

His cell phone rang. Josh's ringtone. The dinner. It rang and rang. Finally stopped.

In the silence that followed, Dublin heard their soft, papery voices for the first time. Their words filled with cold, acid scorn.

We are hungry. So very very very hungry. There is no way to escape us. You beloong to us. Feeeeeeeed us...

But they were wrong. He *did* know a way. Someone else had found it in a tent in *Aokigahara* three years ago.

As they swarmed over him once again, their insect laughter tickling his eardrums, Dublin Fain grabbed the sharp, clean blade, raised his head to take one last look at the naked sign post outside.

Finding no mercy there, he brought the glistening edge up to his throat and cut one last time.

END.



About the Author

Gwendalyn Cope grew up in a bad neighborhood in Philadelphia and to this day remains a hopeless outcast from polite society. She started her higher education at the University of Pennsylvania as a pre-med major, but eventually moved to the midwest and graduated summa cum laude from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Gwen has worked as a carny, a picture framer, an oil burner nozzle-driller, a waitress, a gas station attendant, and a government worker.

In 2007 Gwen wrote, directed, and produced (with her husband) a low-budget, feature-length, digital, indie movie called Gameheads. It's a comedy about a bunch of role-playing gamers, with the logline Imaginary swords, REAL problems. It premiered at the St. Louis science fiction convention, ARCHON, and was also shown at a small film festival in Oklahoma.

To see more from Gwen, check out her blog at gwendalyncope.com.