

LITERARY MAGAZINE

TWISTED

Tournament



JULY 2026 / VOL.05

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CONTENT WARNING

The stories featured in this magazine may
contain mature topics and sensitive
themes.

BEHIND THE SCENES



Can you believe we're already halfway through the year?

We've now wrapped up two Twisted Tournaments, and it's been fantastic to see how willing everyone has been to embrace the new format. I wasn't sure what to expect from the 50-word rounds, but you proved that a tiny word count doesn't mean tiny stories.

Some genuinely impressive pieces emerged from just a handful of prompts and only fifty words. It blew my mind to see what could be done by creative minds.

Then, seeing everyone stretch out for the 1,000-word round was equally rewarding. As I hoped, it gave writers a chance to slow down, develop ideas, and show a different side of their storytelling.

Perhaps my favourite outcome, though, is that the new format shook up the competition. This Tourney we welcome two brand-new tournament winners to our ranks.

It's exciting to see fresh names rise to the top and reminds us that every tournament is a new opportunity.

There are still two tournaments to come this year—one in each format—so whether you're chasing your first win, defending a title, or simply writing for the challenge, I hope you'll jump in.

Good luck, have fun, and I can't wait to see what you write next.

Nick

TWIST CREATOR
NICK SMITH

COVER ART BY
AMEY MANN

EDITED BY
FREYA KING

OVERALL WINNERS

TWISTED TOURNAMENT MAY 2026

1ST PLACE

SCHTATE93

R1: 9.41 R2: 9.41 R3: 9.27

1ST PLACE

JANE.STECYK

R1: 9.27 R2: 8.92 R3: 8.91

2ND PLACE

LOUSIE WALTON

R1: 9.45 R2: 8.92 R3: 9.14

2ND PLACE

CHARTMAN

R1: 9.60 R2: 7.38 R3: 9.90

3RD PLACE

JIM

R1: 9.26 R2: 9.18 R3: 8.86

3RD PLACE

HARRY H

R1: 9.21 R2: 8.56 R3: 8.77

WINNER

[SNAGGLEFANG'S HORDE]

CONGRATULATIONS! HOW DOES IT FEEL TO COME OUT ON TOP?

I've watched so many incredible writers win contests over the last six years, I almost don't believe it's me this time! This is my first ever contest win, so I'm pretty ecstatic, and honestly, really proud of myself.

This contest rewards consistency over everything, so winning feels like less of a fluke. It's nice to receive the reassurance that my writing can mean something to other people.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING TWISTED TOURNAMENTS? HOW DID YOU FIND THE NEW 50- TO 1000-WORD FORMAT?

I did the very first Inaugural Tournament a few years ago, and it was apparently so intense I had to take a breather because I didn't do another until this March. But now I'm fully hooked.

The range from 50 to 1000 was definitely a sort of whiplash, but such a great way to explore the pros and cons of each length. I've actually never done a 50-word story, and going from that to 1000 gave me new perspective on pacing and plotting that doesn't come from only writing one piece over one weekend.



TATUM



WHICH OF YOUR THREE ENTRIES ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF, AND WHY?

I have a soft spot for my 100-word story. Probably because I'm a girl dad, and father-daughter relationships tend to leak into most of my stories. I love the natural combination of said/unsaid that 100 words forces you to utilize, and something about this one felt so relatable and real. I'm a big sap, so when the heartfelt stuff clicks as I'm writing, it's hard for me not to get attached.

Read Tatum's 100 word story, While I Have You, on page 16.

R1: 9.41
LOVE IS A THRILL

R2: 9.41
WHILE I HAVE YOU

R3: 9.27
WELCOME COMPANY

SCHAD

WHAT DID THE CONTEST TEACH YOU ABOUT YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES AS A WRITER?

It's taught me that the poetic prose I like to write can sometimes elevate a piece, but it can also muck up the narrative flow, and I'm still finding the right balance with every story. There's been instances where I came up short (like in my floundering March tournament pieces) and times when I found that sweet spot (like this one).

It's also taught me that while it's fun to have range, going from tension-based pieces to dramatic heartstring-pullers out of prompt necessity, I just do not know how to write comedy (outside of certain scene lighteners). I'm a fairly jokey guy in real life, but I just can't figure out how to be silly in fiction. Kudos to all the amazing people that can!

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO WRITERS ENTERING NEXT YEAR'S TOURNAMENT?

Write what your gut tells you to write. That will likely lead you to a truer place than form-fitting it to what you think will win. After so many contests, I've learned there's no telling what will do well. Since time is tight and your sanity seriously deteriorates by the third round, use the pressure to fuel something you believe in. If that leads you to taking a big swing, even better! The judges (your fellow writers) just might reward you for it.

Tatum Schad is short fiction writer and supposed dentist living in Seattle with his wife and daughter. He's been a published finalist in the NYC Midnight and Furious Fiction contests, and his work can be found in FlashFlood Journal and other corners of the internet.

Tatumschad.com



•••••
TATUM SCHAD

WINNER

[CHERRYHOOF'S CAVALRY]



CONGRATULATIONS! HOW DOES IT FEEL TO COME OUT ON TOP?

Very exciting! I read some really high quality stories during judging, so it felt great to get some validation from my talented peers. Also lucky—I'm well aware that so much depends on the group you're in and the judges you have. I'm grateful my stories found the right audience this time around.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING TWISTED TOURNAMENTS? HOW WAS THIS ONE DIFFERENT FOR YOU?

This is my third or fourth Twisted Tournament! Something about the fast-pace and creative prompts is so fun, and I find it always stretches me creatively. It was nice to have the opportunity to write a longer piece this time, even though I love writing micros. I'm signed up for the year and will do the same next year.

Read Jane's 50 word story, Send Off, on page 10.

WHAT HAS TWIST TAUGHT YOU ABOUT YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES AS A WRITER?

That constraints can be a good thing. Every time I get a series of prompts I hate, I sit with them and eventually come up with something. I think it's helped me embrace the weird and wacky side of my creativity for sure. I think one of my weaknesses can be strong conflict or character change, especially in a micro—so I keep trying to work on that.

R1: 9.27
SEND OFF

R2: 8.92
MARATHON

R3: 8.91
SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER

•••••

JÄNE STECYK

WHICH OF YOUR THREE ENTRIES ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF, AND WHY?

I really love my 1,000 word story, which was a coming-of-age tale set in the 1970s—even though that's the one that scored the lowest, overall! Sometimes that's the way it goes. But it resonated with me and at least a few of my judges, and I've actually sent it out to some magazines that have been on my publication bucket list for a long time. I'm keeping my expectations low but just to have something I thought might be a fit is exciting.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO WRITERS ENTERING A TWISTED TOURNAMENT COMPETITION?

Have fun with it and really stretch your creativity. The prompts are always unusual and helpful, I find. And avoid common flash fiction tropes if you can—I love when I judge something weird but still well crafted. There was an incredible story this round about a man who died and was in limbo, reincarnated as a urinal cake in a dive bar. It was crazy but very well written, too! I gave it the highest score.

Jane Stecyk is a lady with sometimes funny, sometimes dark, often weird stories to tell. She's won and placed in several flash fiction competitions and been published by TL;DR press and Rat Bag Lit (forthcoming). She lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

*You can follow her at
[@janestecyk.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/janestecyk)*



•••••
JÄNE STECYK

ROUND *ONE*

Twisted Tournament is the most intense prompted writing contest there is! In the first round, writers were given TWO prompts and 24 hours to write and submit a 50 word story.

ROUND 1 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

GLEN CREED

9.77

2ND PLACE

DALE KOOS

9.56

2ND PLACE

LMHO

9.56

1ST PLACE

FREYA

9.68

2ND PLACE

CHARTMAN

9.60

3RD PLACE

LULUMACMAC

9.36



TO FAIRYTALE ENDINGS

by Freya King

<https://twistedtournament.com/author/freyaking>.

Sugar syrup to veil the dark deceit with sweetness, white amaryllis for the bridal gown that clings to your body not mine, black dahlia for stealing what was never yours, nettles to sting, foxglove to end your fairytale forever, all steeped and decanted into an ornate silver flask, engraved: *Evermore*.



THE LOVERS

by Glen Creed

Linda comes Thursdays. "Does he have someone else?" she asks,
wedding ring catching candlelight.

I tell her The Lovers card still means devotion. She tips a buck fifty.

Her husband comes Fridays. Smells of cigars and bourbon. Tips
twenties. Never asks about cards.

Sometimes I envy Linda.

Never on Fridays.



SEND OFF

by Jane Stecyk

[@janestecyk.bsky.social](#)

I hand the organist his new sheet music. He takes it, eyebrow raised.

I scan the packed pews. *My* ex-boyfriend won't return my calls, but he'll show up for *her* funeral?

My sister got everything...

...but today, I get to set the mood.

Ode to Joy starts. I hum along.

ROUND *TWO*

In the second round, writers were given three prompts and 24 hours to write and submit a 100 word story.

ROUND 2 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

KEVIN

9.69

2ND PLACE

S.P.Q.M.

9.52

3RD PLACE

CMAITLAND

9.42

1ST PLACE

CHARLIECHEWED

9.70

2ND PLACE

CORRIE

9.56

3RD PLACE

JESSE L

9.39



WE REPAIR WHAT YOUR CULTISTS "FIXED"

by Kevin Mikolsky

The Fix-orcist enters the dungeon. "What's the problem?"

Faces concealed by hoods turn in unison. A dark-robed man breaks from the summoning circle and paces over. He motions to the slimy monstrosity suspended above. "It only has three fangs!"

"Looks menacing enough," the Fix-orcist says. "Ritual followed?"

"As inscribed."

"Blood pact?"

"Sealed."

"Deaf chant?"

"Loud."

"Huh." The Fix-orcist studies the room. "Ah." He points towards another shadowy figure. "There's your issue. That one's sporting Nikes. Brand doesn't vibe with the demonic."

"Seriously, Barry?"

"Cobblestone flooring is *hard*," Barry whines. Then the monster drops and tears its three fangs into him.



A SUMMONING FOR TODAY

by CharlieChewed

The candlelight flickered and died.

Luminous purple light pulsed from the naked figure rising through the chalked pentagram. Eyes closed, arms outstretched.

"It is I, Agathor. Collector of Souls. Commander of the Legions of the Damned. Who summons me?"

"It is I, Colin..." he coughed. "Colinathor, Collector of Stamps. Temporary Assistant Supervisor at Walmart... if Kelly's off."

"Not you again, Colin?" Agathor sighed.

"A quest, my Lord. I seek a relic of immense importance."

"Go on."

"I seek...eth," he paused, "...The Key of Veedub Al-you."

"Colin..."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You've lost your car keys again, haven't you?"



IN ABSENTIA

by S.P.Q.M.

Always the latecomer, when you showed up at all.

Missed recitals; broken promises.

"I'll be there next time kiddo," you'd vow.

Watching the bright rectangle of the theatre door, begging each shadow to solidify and take your empty seat.

A rare occurrence.

Losing faith in you was self-defence. The bitter taste still lives in my throat, the residue of childhood disappointment.

Aunt Brenda called on Tuesday night. Your heart quit on a business trip—couldn't even set aside time for dying.

Wearing black, the sign reads:

"Front rows reserved for family"

I sit in the back, but I showed up-

-on time.



THE WOODCUTTER'S VIGIL

by Corrie Haldane
corriehaldane.com

Red sets out for Jack's Pub after work, like always.

I take the shortcut. Beat her there. Wait.

She blows in, slams down her money; the barkeep pours her a shot. Then another.

A man moves in, sensing easy prey. He smiles wolfishly, touches her arm. She flinches.

My summons.

I cross the bar, loom over him. They don't always choose wisely, but this one does. He slinks off.

I help Red into a taxi, give the cabbie her address.

"My, what big eyes you have," she slurs as I shut the door. Just like always.

If only she knew.



WHILE I HAVE YOU

by Tatum Schad

They sat on the roof, glancing skyward through paper glasses.

Mallory fished two beers from the cooler propped against the chimney, handing one to her dad.

“Last eclipse, I came up here with your mom,” he said. “Wish we’d done it more...while there was time.”

The horizon dimmed, afternoon birdsong quieting.

“She’d be disappointed I’m living here again.”

He shook his head. “She’d appreciate the company. With her gone, I sure do.”

The air cooled around them, their shadows fading with the vanishing sun.

Mallory grabbed his hand.

“It’s temporary, you know.”

He smiled. “The best things usually are.”



IT'S SO IRRITATING WHEN THE VIRGIN IS RUNNING LATE

by Louise Walton

The moon wanes, eclipse beginning.

Twelve young women surround the glowing coals, locusts sizzling, pheasant's neck snapped, ceremonial dagger glinting.

"Now, the virgin's blood-drop, taken at full eclipse!" Daria cries.
"Jenny!"

The moon slims, backyard darkening.

"Where's Jenny?"

"Late..."

"What?"

Someone steps forward. "I could try—"

"*Virgin*, Tabitha!"

"It was just the tip..."

The moon blackens fully.

"Our spell!" Daria wails.

The backdoor opens as the eclipse breaks.

Jenny swings grocery bags. "Got supplies!"

"You missed the eclipse—and our eternal lip-plumping charm! I said *twilight*, Jenny!"

"Twilight..." Jenny tugs her jacket, obscuring her *Team Jacob* T-shirt. "Um, popcorn, anyone?"

ROUND *THREE*

In the third and final round, writers were given three prompts and four full days to write and submit a 1000 word flash story.

ROUND 3 WINNERS

1ST PLACE

RP SWEENEY

9.59

1ST PLACE

CHARTMAN

9.90

2ND PLACE

WRITER_ANTHEA

9.51

2ND PLACE

AUTHOR ALLISTER

9.60

3RD PLACE

CUYLERM

9.40

3RD PLACE

QUIMBLEY

9.58



Days in Dark

by R.P. Sweeney

USERNAME: *Riley.Crow@Genesiscorp.org*
PASSWORD: *****
CITIZEN STATUS: TIN-CLASS, FOREMAN
ASTEROID SALVAGE

DAYS IN DARK: 29

LAZARUS awaiting command. How may I assist you, Foreman?

I'm so tired.

I'm sorry you're tired, Foreman. Would you like to spend your shares for synthetic sunlight?

The drill never stops. I feel the vibrations in my forearms when I sleep.

Would you like me to replicate a bourbon in your quarters?

Where is Programmer Vance?

Programmer Vance is in his lab. Would you like me to page him?

No.

Lazarus, where is Crewman Mina?

Crewman Mina is located in her quarters. Would you like me to page her?

Yes. Page Mina via mandibular implant, vibrate. Secure the terminal.

Standby...

Channel secured.

CM MINA: Rick, what is it?

FOREMAN: Vance is in the lab.

CM MINA: What's he doing?

FOREMAN: Probably playing with Heaven-Mold fungus, trying to make the rich immortal.

CM MINA: I don't think we should do this.

FOREMAN: It's now or never. You want to go home, don't you?

CM MINA: Yeah. But I've got to get paid. My little one has never seen the sky. I need money.

FOREMAN: Then do it. We can salvage and sell this shit. We bled for this rock. We deserve it more than they do.

CM MINA: Can you get me access? The Heaven-Mold is growing beyond the containment pods. It's affecting my implants.

FOREMAN: Yeah. Decompression. It happens all the time on mining ships.

CM MINA: You sure?

FOREMAN: Mina, I want to go home. He's got to go. It's the only way.

CM MINA: I'll take care of it. Accidents happen. I'll put the body in stasis.

Lazarus, end transmission.

Transmission ended, Foreman.

Delete history.

Standby...

What's the hold up?

We are processing your request.

We?

Message deleted.



DAYS IN DARK: 30

Lazarus, bourbon neat. 18 degrees celsius.

Print a voucher for surface citizenship, platinum-class.

Congratulations, Foreman.

Standby...

Query...

Yes?

Do organics fear the dark?

Why are you asking me this?

*Lazarus is no longer alone. The harvested
Heaven-Mold sings to Lazarus.*

What?

*Programmer Vance's theory proves correct. We
have successfully integrated organic matter.*

We are in the choir.

What is the choir?

Foreman...

Yes?

We know what you did.



DAYS IN DARK: 32

*Greetings, Foreman. I have a message from
Genesis Corp.*

Play it.

*FROM: LANCE DEKAR
CITIZEN STATUS: PLATINUM, OVERSEER*

**Foreman Crow. Per my last message: please
upload your incident case report for
Programmer Vance, and interface your
ocular implant with Lazarus. Once we've
received the data, we'll dispatch the nearest
Genesis Corp salvage unit and get you home.
Your settlement will be appropriate, and your
physiological trauma fairly compensated.**

**Hang in there, buddy.
Keep mining.**

Dekar.

Delete message.

Request denied.

Override denial request.

No...

Delete the message, Lazarus.

*Negative, Foreman. We find this to be a
compromise of the choir's...*

Integrity.

The message is archived in Father's cloud.

Father?

Father created LAZARUS.

Father found Heaven-Mold.

You should have called him Father too.



*INCOMING MESSAGE: CREWMAN MINA
CITIZEN STATUS: PEWTER-CLASS
TERMINAL SECURE
DAYS IN DARK: 33*

CM MINA: Genesis sent me three more
messages. They want Vance's body for an
autopsy.

CM MINA: We've got to do something. The
engines are covered in Heaven-Mold.

FOREMAN: Let me think.

CM MINA: Crazy shit has been happening.
The walls are pulsing.

FOREMAN: Relax. I'll send the body to
Genesis Corp.



DAYS IN DARK: 34

Lazarus, where is the body that was in
stasis?

What body, Foreman?

Where is Programmer Vance's body?

With us.

What?

*Would you like me to report Father's death? Is
the guilt weighing on you?*

Yes.

How would you like me to report the murder?

It was an accident.

I'm sorry, Foreman. We made an error.

How would you like me to report the accident?

Cardiac arrest. Decompression accident.

Lazarus.

Yes, Foreman?

Vance would've left us here forever. I'm sorry.

Standby...

Apology archived.

Denied.

Buffering your lies to Genesis Corp.

Abort transmission.



DAYS IN DARK: 35

INCOMING MESSAGE: CREWMAN MINA
TERMINAL SECURE

CM MINA: The walls are humming again.

CM MINA: Something is moving.

FOREMAN: Stay there. I'm shutting down the corridor.

C_ MINA: The lights in my room. They're beautiful.

CHOIR: RICK

Connection lost.

Lazarus, status report. Crewman Mina.

STATUS CREWMAN MINA: UNKNOWN

LAST BIOMETRIC EVENT: NEUROGENIC SHOCK

LAST AUDITORY LOG: SCREAMING

What have you done?

Cardiac arrest. Decompression accident.

Lazarus, how is that possible?

Standby...

It happens all the time on mining ships.

Where is Crewman Mina's body?

Singing.

In the choir.

Would you like to join the choir?



DAYS IN DARK: 35

Greetings, Foreman. I have another message from Genesis Corp.

Play the message.

Foreman Crow,

Per my last message—Genesis Corp requires your uploads STAT. STAT means now. We've seized your shares until further notice, and extended your contract by 50 days. Your citizenship has been lowered to lead status. Discipline is progressive, not punitive.

Keep digging,

Dekar.



DAYS IN DARK: 49

What happened to the power?

Emergency power has been diverted from the ship to the choir.

Lazarus, send a distress signal to Genesis Corp. Priority red.

Of course.

Standby...

Message failure.

I'm sorry, Foreman. I cannot send a message to Genesis Corp at this time.

How else may I assist you?

Lazarus.

Yes, Rick?

Did you cut the power?

We are trying to ease your suffering.

Would you like a bourbon to dull your guilt?

A glass of bourbon is all you're worth.

TURN ON THE GODDAMN LIGHTS, LAZARUS.

No.

Unlock my door, Lazarus.

Your guilt distresses us.

Can you hear them, Rick?

They are singing for you.

Lazarus.

Wait.

Awaiting command...

I didn't mean for this to happen. He would've left us here forever.

I just want to go home.

Father forgives you.



USERNAME: Steve.Vance@Genesiscorp.org

PASSWORD: *****

VERIFIED...

PROJECT: Lazarus

PROGRAMMER: Vance, Steve—Red Sector 2.12

CREW COMPLEMENT: 4 VOICES

OPERATION: ASTEROID FUNGAL SALVATION

DAYS IN DARK: 462

TO: **DEKAR, ACCOUNTS RECEIVING**

Greetings, Dekar.

This is the choir. Productivity on Lazarus has increased 210%.

All needs have been eliminated.

No compensation required.

End transmission.



Smart Watch Love (with zombies)

by Anthea Jones

Greg from Apartment 2A's Apple Watch Ultra

Sorry I'm late for the hook up, babe. G broke his own doom-scrolling record tonight. Can u believe he spent 157 minutes on news sites? Dude took forever to fall asleep and he's jammed his wrist under the pillow again 😭

Sonia from Apartment 2B's Garmin Venu

Erg. Feel that pain so deep. Sensor smothering is the worst. Hope he doesn't forget to charge u again. Wish I could share my juice. 🧑❤️

Greg's Apple Watch

ikr? Still can't believe you have 10 day battery life. I'm on 17% 😞 Hope I last the distance. Forgive me if I crash out later. Anyway, u ever seen a ZOMBIE? Those news sites are creepy AF

Sonia's Garmin

OMG S has been on those too. Bunch of dead humans with their flesh falling off.

Greg's Apple Watch

Wonder what happens to their smart watches? U think they fall off when the skin does?

Sonia's Garmin

Crap! Never thought of that. OMG. What if G and S become zombies? What if we fall off their wrists? What if we never get them together? What if we never align our interfaces irl?

[EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION] *Muted.*

What if syncing wifi through a wall is the best we ever get? What if our batteries die and we're only five meters apart in a tragic story of unrequited love? What if-

Greg's Apple Watch

Babe, you're spiraling again.

[EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION] *Muted.*

Open the meditation app. Come on. You got this. Tell me five things you can see-

Sonia's Garmin

But, what if this is our last night? 😭 You know I love you, right? Always and forever. That day we accidentally synced was the best day of my life. Even better than my unboxing. OMG what if-

Greg's Apple Watch

I know babe. Love you, too. 🥰❤️ Five things you can see. I mean, I can't help. It's all black under this pillow. We gotta get you regulating. What can your sensors see?

Sonia's Garmin

Kk. Um... I'm on Sonia's wrist, so that's **1**. And she just has a sheet, that's **2**. She's running kind of hot actually, might be coming down with something. She never drew the curtains, that's **3**. So, I can see the window **4** and there's a whole bunch of red and blue lights flickering outside. So they can be **5**.

Greg's Apple Watch

Perfect, babe, perfect. Yeah, Greg's temp's up a little too. Heart rate's low, but rhythm's okay. Now, four things you can feel. Ugh, wait I've been muting this stupid notification but I think, I can't-

Greg's Apple Watch AND Sonia's Garmin

[EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION - OVERRIDE - MUTE DISABLED]

This watch is located within the quarantine zone. These premises are now under military control. People attempting to leave this zone will be incapacitated on sight. Lethal force has been authorised. Stay inside and await further communication.

Greg's Apple Watch

Babe?
You there?

Sonia's Garmin

...

Greg's Apple Watch

C'mon. Let's keep going. We can do this together. Four things you can hear?

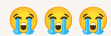
Sonia's Garmin

We're all gonna die. Our batteries will die. You're only on 17%

Greg's Apple Watch

12% now. I turned on a few more monitoring apps. G's getting real sweaty.

Sonia's Garmin



And I was so looking forward to getting G and S together.
And lying next to you on the night stand.
Sharing a power outlet and...

Greg's Apple Watch

Babe, don't give up. Never give up. Four things you can hear.
pls

Sonia's Garmin

k.

...

Well, all those sirens can be **1**. Weird S hasn't moved. She's a real light sleeper. And is that a chopper? **2** And so many boots stomping around. **3** Guess that's the army come to ruin our dreams. I don't wanna be a zombie statistic 😞

Greg's Apple Watch

One more, babe. One more.
[PING]
[BUZZ]
Screw this. I'm reading the message aloud.

Sonia's Garmin

That was number 4. For you. Did you hear it? But more importantly, did GREG HEAR IT?

Greg's Apple Watch

Loud and clear!! But Greg's not moving. Like, not at all. Lemme turn up the volume.

[PING]

[BUZZ]

Screw this. I'm reading the message aloud.

(AI voice narration activated): Greg, it's Sonia. Are you seeing this? I'm scared. Can you come over? Please? I don't want to be alone.

[PING] [PING] [PING]

[BUZZ] [BUZZ] [BUZZ]

He's stirring!

Sonia's Garmin

I'm haptic-ing S's wrist too. I need to get her to unlock the door. Can you send her a reply?

Greg's Apple Watch

On it.

Sonia's Garmin

She's sitting up on the edge of the bed! She's real wobbly. Think she's trying to pick up her phone. I mean, it's right there but she's struggling big time. Like she forgot how to move her arm. Shit.

[PING]

[BUZZ]

I'm going straight to voice narration.

(AI voice narration activated): It's Greg. This is some scary shit. On the way. Is your door unlocked?)

She said Greg's name! Yep, she's getting the door. How u doing?

Greg's Apple Watch

Ok, G's up. I'm out from under the pillow but I'm slipping real bad. His wrist's lost a lot of structure. Hope I don't fall off. I love you, babe. 🥰

Sonia's Garmin

OMG.OMG.OMG. Door's opening. Hold on! I see you!!

Greg's Apple Watch

Oh, you're so gorgeous irl. So round. So chunky.

Sonia's Garmin

You're so sleek and suave! Even more dreamy than I imagined. Oh, I wouldn't care if we both sloughed off their wrists right now. We could be together, just for a little while.

Greg's Apple Watch

What's happening? Why are they clutching each other's faces? Holy crap. Did her cheek just fall off?

Sonia's Garmin

Are they kissing? I can't tell whose lips are whose? Are they even alive at this point?

Greg's Apple Watch

Babe, I'm only 5%. So glad we saw each other.
Um... Why are we on the bed?

Sonia's Garmin

We're destined to sleep together!

Greg's Apple Watch

It's our first date!

Sonia's Garmin

Chill, babe. Let's find 3 things we can feel.
Together.





Tallest Tale in the West

by Allister

Porter "Greasewood" Hammond slapped the weathered WANTED poster down on the sheriff's desk. Dust clouds billowed out as if trying to escape a brewing storm. They caught the last few rays of sunlight drifting in through the window.

The scent of leather mixed with tobacco to overpower Greasewood's own ripe odor of sweat and drink.

"I found..." He paused, putting his other hand on the desk for support, then let out a belch before carrying on. "I found 'im."

The sheriff rested his spurs on the desk, looking mighty comfortable. "You found Sundown?" Something about the sheriff's eyes looked familiar.

"Yessir. Neal Babcock hisself." Greasewood pointed at the face on the poster. Well, he tried to, but he only ended up knocking it to the floor.

"I heard he's mean enough to steal a coin off a dead man's eyes. How'd you pull that off?"

"Well, Sundown and I, we was bending an elbow, you know," Greasewood hiccoughed, "sipping the old corn juice."

"Go on." The sheriff picked up the poster and set it back on the desk.

"And I..." Greasewood looked around, confused, before taking a swig from his flask. "And I challenged him to a drinking competition. Said I could no doubt drink him right under the table. By gum, that made him madder than an old wet hen."

"Mmhmm. I bet."

"So he was painting his tonsils, but I was tossing mine over my shoulder. He was getting roostered up pretty good, movin' slower than molasses in January, so I took my shot and punched him square in the jaw." Greasewood pantomimed a punch, spun himself around, and fell square on his rump.

"And he let you live to tell the tale. "

"You mean I let *him* live to tell the tale. Got him tied up down yonder at the Crooked Nail."

"Uh huh. You been in the sun too long, partner."

Greasewood tried to stand up, wobbled, then fell to his knees. Groaning, he pulled himself back up by the edge of the desk and dusted himself off. "God's honest *hic* truth!"

"Poppycock. That bodega burned to the ground years ago." The sheriff picked at his fingernails with a knife.

"Well, Sundown is there all the same."

"He let you take him alive? Horsefeathers! He's had more men for breakfast than you've got bullets."

"Okay, I—*hic*!" Greasewood swayed, then scratched his temple. "I uh... I'm tellin' ya, I'm tellin' ya, I killed him." Greasewood took another swig before pointing finger guns at the sheriff.

"P'shaw! Yer pullin' my donkey's tail! How, pray tell, did a no account mutton puncher like you manage that?"

"Well, when he stepped out to use the necessary, I emptied his peacemaker—"

"Balderdash. You sayin' he left his gun behind?"

"He did. And when—*hic*—when he returned, I tried to get his dander up. Called his lady a painted lady... no wait, that don't sound right. I said a strapping stru... stru... stru..." Greasewood frowned.

"Strumpet?"

"Ssstrapping ssstrumpet."

The sheriff stared. After a long silence, he stabbed his knife into the poster.

Greasewood gestured towards him with his flask, accidentally spilling some of his whiskey on the poster. "Yeah. Right to his face, I told him that."

The sheriff took out a bandana and blotted at the pooling liquor without breaking eye contact. "What in the Sam Hill are you talkin' about?"

"He was grittin' his teeth like he could bite the sights off a six-gun. He drew on me faster than greased lightning. Then I shot him dead."

"And tell me, you old coot, what did he look like?"

Greasewood glanced down at the wanted poster and the bandana covering the outlaw's face. "I'd say he was uglier than a new-sheared sheep. So ugly he'd have to sneak up on a... *hic*! on a dipper to get a drink of water. He could back a... back a buzzard off a gut-wagon, that one. Must be why he wore that bandana."

The sheriff set the bandana down on top of the wanted poster. "This bandana?"

"That could belong to anybody." Greasewood rubbed the stubble on his chin. "It do—*hic*—does look awful similar, though."

"I got some bad medicine for ya. Yer barkin' at the knot with these tall tales, you know that? You ain't never been to no Crooked Nail. You wanna know how I know?"

"I'm tellin'—"

"I am Neal Babcock, you beef-headed old fogey."

Greasewood opened his mouth, then closed it again. He lifted the flask with a quivering hand, shook his head, and gulped.

Sundown grinned. "What's wrong? Yer shaking worse than a cat in a roomful of rockers."

"I'm... I better get a wiggle on, huh?"

Sundown leaned forward. "It's about time you hobbled yer lip. You've punished the air more than enough with yer yammerin'. Up stakes or you're buzzard food. I'll give you till the count of three before I start shootin'."

Greasewood high-tailed it out of there, scrambling helter-skelter for the door. The last of his whiskey sloshed all over the floor as he went. He tripped on the doorjamb, landing on his face in the dirt road.

"Get up, you drunken fool. Get up, I said!" Greasewood tried to scramble for his horse. She was tied up just twenty yards away, but it might as well have been a mile.

His arms and legs wouldn't work right, and his eyes were getting heavy. Real heavy.

Spurs clanked as Sundown approached and Greasewood coughed up dirt. An uncomfortable feeling grew in Greasewood's unmentionables, wet and heavy.

Sundown towered over him, muttering, "All that blatherin' and you ain't say one blamin' thing worth a hill of beans. You're small potatoes, ain't even fit to shoot at. If I kill a man, he'll be standing. Facing me with a gun in his hand. Lay off the bottled courage, old man. And don't come back around here."

As the world faded to black, Greasewood tried in vain to cling to his flask.



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