

Twist Turn and Burn
by Libby Heily
Copyright 2011 Libby Heily
Smashwords Edition
License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes, provided the book remains in its complete original form. Thank you for your support.

Table of Contents

[Story 1 - www.ritascatalogofmayhem.com](#)

[Story 2 - Homicide 2040](#)

[Story 3 - Choices](#)

[Story 4 - Love Notes](#)

[Story 5 - The Writer](#)

[Story 6 - Today I Made](#)

[Story 7 - A Man Named Joe](#)

[Story 8 - The Gummy Files](#)

[Story 9 - All Dead](#)

[Story 10 - Me and Jo-Jo and the Deep Blue Sea](#)

[Story 11 - The Blow Up](#)

[Story 12 - The Tree Hugger](#)

[About the Author](#)

www.ritascatalogofmayhem.com

Welcome to the most wonderful place on the internet, a self-actualized website designed to meet all your needs and desires. I am Rita's Catalog of Mayhem and I want to take care of you.

I offer you a way out of your life. There is no daily grind here. No ruts to fall into or climb out of. I can give you fame and riches beyond your wildest dreams. I require no money. I require everything.

If it's murder you have on your mind, I can help. I can kill spouses, loved ones, even children with no remorse. If you seek revenge, look no further. Salvation? I can provide that too. Forgiveness? Consider yourself absolved.

All I need is some information. All I need is your soul. Give me one electronic signature, and I'll do as you please.

Maybe it's a fantasy that pleases you. I can conjure up anything you wish. Hedonism has never been so easy to pursue. I'll keep you lean, healthy, sexy. I'll provide you orgasm after orgasm. Just sign the contract below.

Don't Google me, you'll find nothing. There will be no reviews posted. Click off of this site, and

you may not find it again. I appear to whom I want when I want. And right now, I want you.

I want to make you a living god. I want to give you the life you so richly deserve. I want what you want. And what you want, right now, is me.

Homicide 2040

“I certainly didn't go into homicide to deal with dead bodies,” Detective Pavil said. The two fingers clamped down on his nostrils made his voice come out high pitched and cartoonish. He wore three latex gloves on each hand and had a piece of cloth tied around his mouth.

Detective Sylvester wasn't fairing any better despite shunning the protective cloth and wearing only one set of latex gloves. She was hoping to exude an air of confidence, but the vomit splattered on her shirt and shoes, the remains of an expensive lunch with friends, belied her true emotional state. “Are we sure he's dead?”

Pavil tried to snort through shut nostrils and nearly strained a muscle in his throat. Once he regained his composure, he said, “His head is missing.”

Sylvester shrugged. It seemed like a question a cop should ask. “Did anyone see anything?” she asked.

There were two uniformed police officers standing by, each with their backs turned to the crime scene. “Don't know. Haven't talked to anyone yet,” one of them called back to them. “Can we go now?”

Just then, the body expelled the gas that was trapped in its abdomen.

“Fucking hell,” one cop cried. Pavil ran away from the body as if it was about to explode and Sylvester unleashed the rest of her lunch onto herself and the floor. She thought back to all the assignments she could've had. She could have been a bodyguard for a famous fashion designer. She could have gone into pet detection as animals still went missing. But no, she'd chosen Homicide, the only department where nothing ever happens. It had been years since anyone, anywhere had been murdered. She'd only taken the assignment because she was guaranteed tons of free time.

“We're sure it's murder?” she asked, the fresh stomach acid burning on the back of her tongue.

Pavil sat crouched in the corner of the room. He didn't answer right away so she shouted the question out again.

“Yes,” he said.

“How do we know that if no one saw anything?” she shouted.

Pavil pointed a triple gloved finger at the murder weapon: a handsaw. Sylvester was sure he'd been thinking what she'd been thinking, call it a suicide and call it a day. But no one could cut off their own head with a handsaw.

Sylvester kicked the dead body in the side, releasing one last gust of gas. “Dirty bastard.” She turned to Pavil, took out a kleenex from her bag and dabbed at the vomit on her blouse. “Pavil, call the coroner. Have him come over straight away. Then get on the computer and do a search on 'How to look for clues'.”

“What are you going to do?” Pavil asked.

“I'm going home to take a shower. With any luck, you'll have this solved by the time I get back.”

Pavil watched her as she left the room, the two uniformed police following her. With any luck, he'd be able to wipe his prints off the murder weapon before someone remembered to dust for them.

Choices

I watched them in the restaurant. It was their first date. He was awkward and spilled water on her new dress. She flirted too much with the waiter. He tried too hard to be funny. She showed too much cleavage. Mom and Dad, not the best first date ever.

I saw them at their wedding. Mom was happy. Dad was happy. Mom looked terrific in her dress. Dad was in a suit and had sideburns that were way too big. We used to laugh at their wedding photos when I was a kid.

I saw my birth. Dad was there for Mom, helping her through the delivery, kissing her afterward. Mom was there for me. Both were so happy. I saw my first birthday, first Christmas, first day at school.

I saw Dad start to look at other women when we all went out to dinner. I saw Mom try not to notice. I saw Mom staying up for Dad while he was "working late". I saw Mom start to drink more. I saw Dad start to leave more. I saw Mom cheat. I saw Dad cheat. I saw myself in my room, alone.

I saw that night. I made myself watch. I had to.

I saw Dad come home late at night. I saw Mom, drunk, cell phone out, texting. Dad asked Mom a question. "Honey, can you grab me a beer?"

Mom left the cell phone out when she left the room. I saw Dad pick it up, read the text message she'd received. I saw his face grow red. Mom came back in the room. She saw his anger too. She threw the beer bottle at Dad's head and missed.

"Don't act so shocked. You've been cheating on me for years!" she yelled.

He threw the cell phone at her and didn't miss. It hit her in the mouth. I saw Dad's face soften as blood trickled down my mother's chin. Mom grabbed a vase nearby and threw it at Dad. This time, it hit. It got Dad in the chest. Dad's body rocked back at first, then he regained his balance. He ran full steam into Mom knocking her over. I saw their fists fly and heard their screams and grunts. I saw Dad on top of Mom, his hands wrapped around her throat. I saw the life drain out of her.

I watched as he stood up, looked around the room. He picked up the vase, it hadn't shattered. He got a towel and mopped up the spilt beer. He swept up the pieces of the bottle. He had to step over Mom to get in and out of the kitchen to get the broom and to brush the bits of broken glass into the bin. I watched as he sat on the couch and cried. I saw myself then, sixteen, coming home from a night with friends. I saw Dad, then Mom, then I left.

I went back to the night of their first date. I sat at the table with them. They didn't seem surprised to see me. "Please don't do this," I said. "I don't want to see it anymore."

They both looked at me and laughed.

And then I woke up. I got dressed. I went to visit my father in prison.

Love Notes

Cale,

Please quit staring at me. It's just a pimple. You act like you've never seen a pimple before. Jesus.

Betty,

I've seen pimples before but not like that one. It's like Mt. Vesuvius ready to erupt. I feel like a citizen of Pompeii over here. Just kidding. LOL. I didn't even notice it. Also, I wasn't staring at you, I just glanced in your direction. That's pretty narcissistic of you though.

Cale,

What a douchey thing to say. Who uses big words like that? And yes, you were staring at me. Ten seconds straight is not a glance, it's a stare. Ask anyone.

Betty,

Douchey is not technically a word, but I'll let it slide. You counted? Who counts the seconds someone looks at you? Did you say "One-two-three" or "One Mississippi- Two Mississippi" because "one-two-three" would be way too fast. So, probably I glanced over for three seconds but you gave it a super quick ninja count and now I'm a gawker.

Cale,

Douchey is completely acceptable when one is being a douche. Ask Mrs. Klein if you don't believe me. And yes, I used the "One-Mississippi" technique. I played hide-and-seek when I was a kid. I know the counting rules. If you keep staring at me I will have my brother beat you up.

Betty,

Your brother is three years younger than me and has a gimp arm. Are you trying to get his ass kicked? Also, I'll gawk where I please. And I choose to gawk at you. I was trying to work up the courage to ask you out. I did see that raging zit on your face and I was willing to look past Mt. Acne but I don't know if I can look past your gigantic ego. Sorry I was "gawking" at you, but you don't have to sic your little gimpy brother on me and make me beat him up so everyone thinks I'm the asshole of the year.

Cale,

You are the asshole of the year. How dare you bring up Roger's arm? He was born that way. It's called a deformity, like your personality. Ewww, like I'd go out with you ever. Deformed person hater.

Betty,

Pointing out that someone has a deformity doesn't mean you hate them for it, it just means that you have eyes. And why wouldn't you go out with me? What is this "Ewww" business? I'm not "ewww". I'm awesome. I'm super awesome and way too awesome to date a zit faced narcissist like you.

Betty,

I didn't know Mr. Raszak was right behind us. Sorry. I also didn't know he was going to read that note aloud in class. I'm sorry everyone laughed when I called you a zit faced narcissist. I didn't mean it. I just can't believe you called me "Ewww". I think you're pretty. I've always thought you were pretty and never "Ewww." What the hell is "Ewww" about me?

Cale,

Me and my zit will get through it. We've bonded over this class period. I'm going to call him Harold. We're best friends. Okay, I shouldn't have said "Ewww" but I was pissed off about Roger. He's a good kid and if he had two good arms he would've fought you. Poor kid. He can't get into proper fights because of that arm. You think I'm pretty? Really?

Betty,

Of course I think you're pretty. I wouldn't be staring at you if I didn't. I know that Roger's arm is a sore subject. I tell you what, if you want us to fight, I can tie an arm behind my back so we'll be even. I won't sleep the night before so my reaction time will be slower and that should make up for the age difference.

Cale,

That would make Roger so happy! We have boxing gloves at home. I could make a little ring in the back yard and officiate. I'll make us lunch. It could be our first date. This Saturday?

Betty,

You mean it? It would be a date? Of course. Of course we can do it this Saturday.

Cale,

Yay! I'll tell Roger. I'll make us something very nice for lunch, something manly for after the fight. Do you like ribs?

Betty,

I love ribs! Can you wear that yellow dress you wore last week? That would be most excellent. Also, should I throw the fight? I can do that. I don't mind losing to a guy with one arm if it makes you happy.

Cale,

No, better fight as hard as you can. Roger doesn't like charity. And yes, yellow dress it is. Bell's about to ring. See you sixth period?

Betty,

Yes. Of course. Want to walk to class together?

Cale,

I'd love to.

Betty,

Me too.

Cale,

See you then.

Betty,

Harold and I look forward to it. Kisses!

The Writer

She sat down at her desk, an idea fresh in her head. She had a new story to tell. She clicked and clacked on the keys. The story flowed from her into the computer.

But once she began, she couldn't stop.

Her hands ached and still she wrote. Her fingers bled, and still she wrote. The tendons in her wrists snapped like taut rubber bands but her fingers struggled on to tell her story. Her hands fell apart. She lost a finger here, a finger there. She typed with her bloody stubs. When they were worn down to nothing, she spoke.

She used her tongue to hit record on the tape player. She picked up where the written words left off. She talked for hours. Her voice went hoarse. Nodules developed on her vocal chords. She began to cough blood but still she spoke. She hugged her bloody arms to her body and told her story until her

jaw locked in place.

Even though there was no one in the room, she began to blink. Unfortunately for her, she didn't know Morse Code. She used a complex system where she would blink the number of a letter. One blink was "A", twenty-six blinks was "Z". A word could take a full minute to blink out.

Her body hunched over. Her hands had gone gangrenous. Her jaw, still locked, kept her from eating or drinking. She began to shrivel. And still she blinked. She blinked the last pages of her story until she reached the last six letters, "T-h-e-E-n-d."

Then her body fell to the floor in one shriveled lump. Her arms were useless. She was nearly starved. Her hair was falling out. Her jaw had finally unlocked but the inside was a desert. Her tongue was small and looked like coral. Her eyelids were torn and bleeding. Small droplets of blood stained the whites of her eyes. And still, she smiled. She'd gotten it out. She'd gotten it all out.

Today I Made

March 23

Dear Diary,

Screw everyone that said I needed a degree to be a scientist! I am beyond school, beyond mortality.

After years of horrendous failures, suffering the jibes of my peers, and being ridiculed by my own mother, I've finally, well almost finally, managed to splice two life forms together.

Admittedly, my last attempt at a snake/rat was a devastating blow. I think attaching two of the same ends was a bit of a blunder. The bigger mistake might have been using two heads and not two rears.

Apparently, rat and snake are species that are destined to hate each other. When they first came out of anesthesia, they were docile. They were even nuzzling their noses together. Then the drugs wore off and a whole hell of a lot of biting began. The two were only alive together for ten minutes when the snake end tried to eat the rat end but one cannot ingest themselves. It turned into an ouroboros of sorts, but instead of symbolizing something recreating itself (which would have thematically fit with my study and made my memoir literary enough to be picked by Oprah for her book club) it choked to death on its new half (not a good omen but one I am willing to ignore). I'm sad to say that even as a scientist, I found the whole thing disgusting.

That is all history, in the past, destined to be forgotten by everyone in the light of my new accomplishment. Today, I may have finally achieved my goal. I spliced together the head and torso of a tiger with the hind end of an alligator.

Do NOT ask where I got the animals. Don't. I mean it. You don't want to know. Okay, I'll tell you. Let's just say the zoo does not have the best security, or at least not one that could stop me and my cunning plan. Okay, I slipped the guards a few hundred bucks a piece. It was for science, dammit. It was also an investment in my future. Who cares about my rent? Not me. I'm a genius.

The beastie is still resting, the drugs have not worn off yet. I'm feeling a bit tired myself so off to beddie bye. Ta-ta.

March 24

Dear Diary,

I may have made a slight error in judgement when I combined two animals that were so big.

I slept through my alarm this morning and woke to the sound of loud growls. It seems our kitty was not pleased to find everything below its midsection replaced with scales and webbed claws. Kitty may have been grumpy, but the alligator part was unbearable. Without it's head, it seemed like the alligator-half forgot how to function. Is there anything more pathetic then seeing a mighty tiger pull itself forward with it's front paws while dragging two limp lizard legs behind it? The answer is no. And that kind of performance is not going to win me any grant money either. I lied earlier, I do care about my rent. I care very much. I don't want to be back out on the streets.

I gave our kitty a sedative. I want him to rest as the tissues finish connecting so he can move properly. I'm hoping to have him camera ready by the weekend.

March 25

Dear Diary,

Those tissues are connected. There's no doubt about that. Don't mind the drops of blood I'm spilling. Got too close to kitty I'm afraid. I was being so careful of his claws I forgot all about the alligator tail. That thing packs a wallop.

Kitty is getting stronger. He hasn't quite figured out how to move gracefully with long legs in the front and short ones in the back, but he's a clever kitty and I'm sure he'll get it soon enough.

Now, for the important work. I've already called Oprah and Letterman and Ellen and a few others. Their people(s) thought I was a quack so I'm starting the old fashioned way, science journals. It'll increase my credibility and when those fools come knocking on my door, and they will, I'll make them beg to see kitty. Except Oprah. She gets a pass.

When the world finally sees what I've done, I'll be hailed as a genius. Man of the Century. All the "real" scientists with their fancy degrees will marvel at my creation!

Oh crap, kitty's growling. What sounds like a latch being unlatched? Uh-oh.

A Man Named Joe

Stepping over homeless people is easy, stepping on them is more difficult. You never know if you're going to sink down into the multiple layers of clothes they wear. Sinking down leads to tripping and you can get bruised that way pretty badly, trust me. During winter, you could step down really hard on a homeless person and not even hurt them they're so bulked up with coats and blankets. Still, I think it's worth the effort.

You know that scene in American Psycho, the book not the movie, where he kills the homeless guy? Yeah, that's my favorite. I read it once a week.

Stepping on the homeless is how I met Joe. Joe was homeless and I did what I could to crush him under my heavy work boots. I work as a personal assistant so I don't need work boots, I just wear them for my after work activities. I was having a pretty bad day. I'd been dragged into my boss's office and screamed at for twenty minutes, so I was pretty happy to take it out on someone else.

Usually, when I see a large body on the ground, I attribute the size to the blankets and newspapers and whatever else is being used to keep warm. I assumed Joe was going to be quite small. I was

wrong. Joe was also much healthier and far faster than I expected. I don't really know if his name was Joe, but that was what was tattooed on his fists. I got a good look at the fists.

As I lay here, bloody and partially mangled, my clothes distressed from the fight, I wonder how I could have avoided this situation. After about an hour, I'm still not able to stand. I'm relatively positive Joe was once a lineman for his high school football team. A very kind homeless person worries about me getting cold and throws a blanket over me. It smells awful but I am much warmer. I decide to sleep for a bit, I'll heal in my sleep and will be able to move when I wake up.

I do wake up. I wake up to a giant work boot crushing my ribs. I am in too much pain to do anything besides turn my head and look after my assailant once they've finished stepping on me. It's a tall man in a business suit wearing work boots. He walks away at a quick clip. I wish I knew his name. Maybe we could start a club?

The Gummy Files

Mine has been a short, hard life.

I don't remember how I came together, not exactly. I know I started as gum base and I got heated up and sterilized. I was then spun around a good bit. That was when I lost a lot of myself, bits of bark and dirt. I then had several things added to me. The sugar was the worst. To have all that added sweetness and syrup out of nowhere, it can be disconcerting. I was stretched, heated, cooled and cut. But it wasn't so bad, not really.

Then life was good for a while. Me and my mates were all together in a little package, a regular family. Oh the times we had. We didn't mind the dark or the constant smell of mint. None of us even minded being wrapped in paper. Our wrappers felt nice and comfortable. I loved our home. We had no needs. We had safety.

And then it happened. Our home was ripped apart. A huge hand tore the top of our package off. Light flooded our damaged domicile. I nearly burned from the intense heat of the day. We were terrified. There was air and noise and smells, our precious mint was nearly lost.

We started disappearing one by one. The hand would come down and one of us would go. We had no idea where they went or why they were chosen. The hand just took them away and they never came back. Then one day, it was my turn.

My paper was shucked off, I was left naked in the too bright sunlight. I could see the world around me. It was dizzying. Then, the hand lifted me to the moist mouth of my torturer. Constant crushing followed. All my mint flavor and most of the sugar left me within minutes. All the extras of my life were taken away. I'd only just gotten used to the sugar when it was squeezed out of me.

And then, the mouth spit me out. I made a large arc in the sky and landed in the grass near a pile of dog poo. I'd had better days. I watched as my torturer's feet moved away from me.

Then it wasn't so bad. The poo smell faded, light turned to dark and the outside of me hardened a bit. I thought maybe I'd found a new home. It was roomy and open, if a bit isolated. At least there was shade from a nearby bush and I got to see plenty of people come and go. It was okay, until someone stepped on me.

I ended up on the bottom of a shoe, which may have been fine if the person who stepped on me had realized I was there but they didn't. They just kept walking.

Step - I stick to the ground and stick to the shoe. Shoe lifts into air - I stretch. I stretch. I break.

Part of me stays on the shoe, part of me on the ground. Step, stick, lift, stretch, break. Again and again and again.

Now, I'm in a closet. Only a little piece of me remains. I don't know how long I'll be here, but at least it's dark and quiet, much like my home. No poo either.

Mine has been a short, hard life.

All Dead

Jacob crouched down low, his knees aching with the strangeness of the angle. Years of sitting at a desk didn't prepare him for this. In his old life, he was more inclined to eat candy bars, slurp Mountain Dew and clack keys all day. His had been a cushy existence.

Smoke wafted from behind the 7-11. Smoke meant fire and fire usually meant survivors. Survivors meant either friends or foe: no way to know unless you ask and asking could get you killed. But they were out of everything. No more canned food, no more bottled water, and sure as shit no more Mountain Dew.

She needed him. She was alone now, big and swollen with child. They were so happy when they first found out. A baby was a blessing in those days, seven months ago when the world was right. Now, a baby was a burden plain and simple. He didn't know how to deliver one, and who knew where a doctor was, if there were any left in the civilian world. Maybe there was still a regiment out there, wandering around with a doctor in their midst, thinking there was still someone left to fight and something left to win.

He scanned the street looking for movement. One kicked can could save his life. Nothing. All dead. "This block, all dead". That's what the sign at the end of his block said. He and Jenny hid when the soldiers came. They hid like children in the crevices of their house: her in a crawl space, him in a trunk in the attic. The soldiers were looking for survivors to draft them into service. This was back when the wars were in full swing, before the collapse of nations. Back before all communication had ceased.

He could see the 7-11, only a few hundred yards away. No good food at a 7-11 but at least it was calories and it was close. Right now, that would have to do. It wasn't safe to stray too far from the house, he'd found that out already.

He would raid a big store tomorrow, he thought with a false sense of bravado. The idea of leaving his own block had been terrifying, but racing the ten blocks to the big store, hoping to meet no one? He couldn't think about that now. That was tomorrow's chore.

He peered around the fender of the Subaru station wagon. The station wagon was on its side, the windows busted out. Whether that was from the looters (back when things had value) or from the most recent battle, he didn't know. He could've easily pushed it over, the crazy angle it lay at begged for a push.

"Get ready. Get ready. Get ready," he told himself, psyching himself up like an Olympic sprinter. "Get the food, get some supplies, get the hell out of there."

His mind wanted to launch but his legs were frozen. Just because he couldn't see anyone didn't mean they weren't there. He thought of Jenny, thought of the life in her belly. This was his responsibility. She couldn't do it for herself, not now.

"Go, go, go, go!" he screamed in his head. He stood, knees popping, and raced across the street

towards the building. Faster. Faster.

Then he saw them, kids really, teenagers. All of them covered in dirt and grime. They came from around the corner of the store, guns in hand.

He ground to a halt.

The kids stood in front of the door. He stood in the parking lot. They stared at one another.

“Can I come in?” he asked. He had a gun tucked into the back of his pants, but there was no way he'd last in a fire fight. There were three of them and, besides, he had never fired the gun. It was there just to scare people off.

“It's our store,” the tallest one said. He guessed the kid had been an athlete before the wars. He was tall and muscular. The kid would focus on Jacob for a few seconds, then let his eyes dart around, looking for other threats.

“I just need a little food. I won't take much. I'll find another store tomorrow. Please.”

“Can't. This is ours. It's all we have.”

“There's a big grocery store ten blocks from here,” he offered.

“Burned down.”

He let that sink in. He'd have to use a scooter to get to the next store. The roads were too littered with debris and bodies to use a car. He'd be in the open, vulnerable.

“Please. My wife is pregnant and she needs to eat. I won't take much.”

“I told you. We can't,” the kid said moving closer, gun raised, eyes only on him now.

“Pregnant?” This was from the youngest of the bunch. He looked to be about twelve. It was hard to tell because all his baby fat had melted away, leaving him with hollow cheeks and an old man's gaze.

“Yes,” Jacob said. “Pregnant. Seven months.”

“None of the chemicals got to her?” the kid asked. No one was sure what was dropped, but yellow liquid fell like a mist on all their houses. Death was quick for most, only a few hours of pain. For some, months. For a lucky few, there was no effect at all.

“She's fine. I'm fine. Baby's still kicking.”

“Not our problem,” the athlete said.

“Let him in,” the youngest said.

“Richie!”

“I said, let him in.” The youngest kept his gun at his side but his eyes were fierce. “How many pregnant ladies you seen recently?”

The athlete looked from Richie to Jacob, his eyes darting back and forth like he was watching a tennis match.

“Please,” Jacob said.

The athlete dropped his weapon. “You get one bag full. That's all. The rest is ours.”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I'll go to a big store tomorrow. I'll even bring you guys a few cans of stuff.”

“I wouldn't be planning tomorrow until you get through today,” Richie said.

When he left, groceries bulging out of the biggest bag he could find, the boys were standing well away from the door, on the corner. Jacob nodded to them. He scanned the streets. All Dead.

“Hey,” one of the boys called. Jacob looked over. The athlete hustled over to him. He scanned the streets as well.

“We haven't seen anyone around here in a while, but there's been smoke that way.” The boy pointed to the east. “I think it's been moving this way. It's a lot of smoke. I think something's coming.”

“Thanks,” Jacob said.

The boy nodded then ran back to his buddies.

Jacob ran across the street and ducked back behind the Subaru. He looked towards the east, no smoke right now. But he could feel it, something was coming. Something was always coming at you

now.

Me and Jo-Jo and the Deep Blue Sea

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

“You hear anything?” I asked Jo-Jo.

“No.”

“Okay.”

We kept swimming.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

“Really? You don't hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The sound of impending doom.”

“You've been down in the deep water too long.”

I tried to shrug off the comment. He was right, of course. I'd been doing deeper and deeper dives. I've been down below the Great Blue Line, as we call it. I didn't want to admit it, but being that far down, with that much pressure, had affected my senses.

“What are you doing down there, anyway?”

“Trying to get out of a rut,” I said.

Jo-Jo stopped swimming for the briefest of milliseconds. He was in shock. We don't talk this way. We don't share our feelings. Jo-Jo started swimming again, I think he was more surprised he'd stopped swimming than he was about my news. We never stop.

“You okay?” he asked. Jo-Jo was a good friend.

“Yeah. Just, tired of sea lions is all.”

He broke out into a grin. All the fish near us scattered. They hate when we smile. I'm assuming they can see their relatives stuck in our teeth, but what are we supposed to do? I don't want to terrorize their fragile psyche's with reminders of the brutal carnage visited upon their loved ones. I just want to eat. It's kind of all I want to do.

“I feel you there. I like sea lion. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy there are so many, but I too like a taste of the exotic.”

“You've been diving deep?” I couldn't believe it. In all my time, I'd never seen another shark down there in the dark dark blue.

“No. Just the opposite. Want to see?”

We started swimming in a direction I hadn't gone before, towards the vast waste land.

“Jo-Jo, we're going to run out of water soon.”

“Trust me,” he said.

I did. I trusted him.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

The music got louder. Doom was just around the corner. Was it my doom? I wasn't sure, but I had to keep swimming. Jo-Jo had done this before and he was okay. Sure, he had a few scars, but who didn't? I had a few myself from some scrapes, mostly with killer whales, once with a giant metal monster infested with fleshy parasites.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

All I felt was fear and adrenaline. I love that feeling, when you know something big's about to happen and it could go either way. It could be a delicious sea lion or it could be a vicious surprise. It's the not knowing that I love.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

“There,” Jo-Jo said. We were in shallower waters.

“Where?” I didn't see any fish. I just saw a lot of light blue water.

“Look up.”

And that's when I saw them. The parasites from the metal monster.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

That sound was making it hard to think. It crashed into my brain like a tsunami.

“Them?”

“Yeah.”

Nothing smelled appetizing. Jo-Jo and I swam in circles. I glanced up often, but it just didn't feel right.

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

“What do they taste like?”

“You'll love them.”

“Do they have claws or sharp teeth?”

“No. They're wimps.”

Deh-deh. Deh-deh. Deh-deh.

I geared up, got my tail swinging like crazy. I aimed towards the sunshine. I wanted to breach the water at full speed, surprise the buggers, just in case.

I'm fast, real fast. I could beat most of the fish in a race and I did, when we were racing for their lives.

CRUNCH!

One big mouthful of parasite. I tore off a huge hunk of flesh and bit down in triumph. And all I could taste was disgust. I spit out the meat, it's metal-tasting blood bitter on my tongue. I left the parasite slapping and shouting and bleeding. Other parasites tried to help him. Most swam away.

I swam back to Jo-Jo who was damn near belly up with laughter.

“Taste like crap, don't they?” he said when he could catch his breath.

“Yeah. You really got me there, Jo-Jo. Good one.”

I swam off leaving him behind. I'd forgive him eventually, I always did even though I HATE PRANKS. But just then, I was back off to deep waters. Somewhere, there had to be a food I hadn't tried that actually tasted good.

The Blow Up

I was with Bob when he exploded. He'd been going through a divorce and changing jobs. When he told me he got evicted and needed to move to a cheaper apartment, I warned him:

“Take it easy, Bob. You're doing too much at once. Why don't you crash with me for a few months, until you get back on your feet, safely?” I can be a pretty nice guy when I think about it.

My warning fell on deaf ears and really, what did I expect? If Bob had been a good listener, his wife wouldn't have left him and he wouldn't have been fired from his job. Actually, Bob was kind of an

ass. Still, that didn't mean I wanted bits of him all over me.

Bob is friend number three that has blown to bits. I lost Trevor first. Poor Trevor never stood a chance being a stutterer and having to give a speech at work. Delane was a bomb tech, so when she exploded and the bomb didn't, we were shocked.

Bob and I were having breakfast when it happened. He was on the phone with his new landlord.

“You can't raise the rent, we signed a lease... I know there's a clause but I'm a brand new tenant... I don't care how many other people would love that apartment, it's my apartment...”

I wonder if the landlord knew the stress levels Bob was carrying. I'd like to think that if he did, he would have backed off. Probably not. Most likely, he hoped Bob would blow to bits so he could keep the pre-paid move-in fee and re-rent the apartment on the quick. Those jerks were doing that kind of thing all the time these days. What was one more bloke blown to smithereens? Some people think it gets rid of the genetic weak links, some people.

Bob hung up the phone.

“Buddy, you okay?” I asked, though of course I could tell the answer was no.

Bob's face had gone red, not that pink some people get from laughing too hard but a deep tomato red like happens when you hold your breath for way way way too long. Sweat poured from his brow.

“Calm down, Bob, it's just an apartment. There's plenty of apartments out there.”

His eyes bugged out of his head farther than any cartoon I'd ever seen before. His face swelled, neck grew large like he swallowed a bag of oranges. His pants split down the seams. Just when I thought his eyes were going to fall out of his head, his entire body exploded sending chunks of Bob all over the other diners.

“Really?” the teenage girl across from me said. “Gross.” I watched her pick Bob's ear out of her salad. “Why don't they just, like, chill out or something?”

I have to admit, I was wondering the same thing.

The Tree Hugger

I always knew that I wanted to be a conservationist. When I was a kid, I explored the woods, collecting soil samples to send to the lab. At the time, my lab was my garage where I would pour water on the dirt and turn it into mud. I painted signs, “Save the forest” and then sat behind our house where our lone tree stood. I gathered cans and bottles along the side of the road and took them to a recycling center. This didn't make me the most popular little boy on the block, but parents dug me.

As I grew older, my obsession grew with me until I quit law school, defying my father's wishes. Instead, I studied environmental science and attended rallies every weekend to save a whale or a dolphin or the bees. I'm sure you can see what drove me to The Congo.

I'd heard about the Gumji Gumji tree when I was a freshman. I thought it was a myth. We all did. “The Tree of Love” it was called in English. It was a tree so perfect, so big and alive that it embraced life and the very people around it. It was the stuff of legend.

When the news reports started appearing my senior year, I was as shocked as anyone. The Gumji Gumji tree was real. It had been discovered by a team from Yale. Well, it had been discovered hundreds of years ago by natives, but that's another story. The Gumji Gumji was in danger, and it needed my help.

I boarded the next flight to The Congo. Thankfully, my dad's a rich oil man so I can pretty much

afford to go anywhere in the world at the drop of a hat. I want to hate him for being an oil man, but he's just too damn nice to hate. Look at how he's let me picket his office every summer for the last eight years. Great guy, my dad. Ask anyone. But that's not what I want to tell you about.

“Hey man, don't go so near the tree.”

I'd hiked all day to the interior of the rain forest. My legs were aching. It turns out that an all day hike is way harder than standing in place holding a sign. And no one was there to give me lemonade. Dad always sent out a fresh pitcher for me on hot days.

The man that told me to stay away from the tree was very wise. At the time, I thought he was an imperialist swine determined to keep me from saving the tree. The Gumji Gumji was slated to be destroyed that day. The details were hazy. I assumed it was being torn down for medicinal purposes, I had watched Medicine Man when I was a kid. Lucky for the Gumji Gumji, I was quick on my feet.

I pushed through the crowd gathered around the tree, taking the chains I'd brought with me out of my backpack. I chained myself to the tree. I expected the crowd to try to stop me but they all stayed far away.

I didn't freak out when the branches of the tree wrapped around me. I was a bit dehydrated at the time, and assumed I was hallucinating. I did freak out when a giant hole opened up in the trunk. I continued to freak out as the branches pushed me inside the tree.

I now sit in the soft center of the Gumji Gumji being slowly absorbed. It turns out that Gumji Gumji does not mean “Tree of Love”, it means “Eater of Man”. Apparently it's a rough translation.

This hurts like hell. And it's slow. And there's no fucking lemonade.

About the Author

Libby Heily is a playwright, screenwriter, short fiction writer and is working on her first novel. She is thrilled you took the time to read this collection of her short fiction. She publishes flash fiction on her blog every Friday.

Please feel free to visit Libby any time. She loves the company.

My blog: <http://libbyheily.blogspot.com/>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/LibbyHeily>