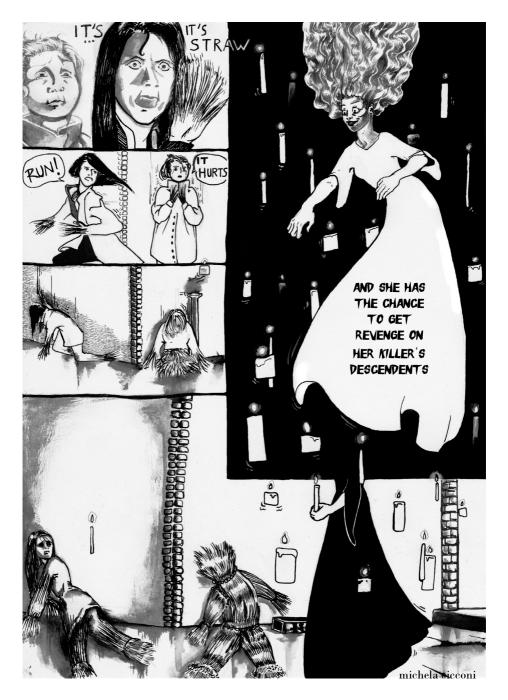
Who's There?

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The Boilers Last Winter- Alison Little

Sal steps onto the stairs bearing a large Pot of boiling water towards the bathroom. She struggles slightly as it is heavy, the handle and it's counterpart on the other side are are glowing from being on the gas rings. The boiler had started to go last year, it still produced some boiling water but not enough for a hot bath or could it dribble out more than a lukewarm filled sink for a morning facial wash. They were being evicted from the house after the holiday season, the Bank were repossessing the little three bedroom terrace which they claimed was legally theirs, the courts being obliged to agree . The building trade had been hit hard by the nineties recession and Sals Dad could no longer make the mortgage repayments. Only safe for a few more days she thinks....

She takes another step up the stairs, steam coming from the bubbling water of the large cooking pot. The cast aluminium vessel was meant for Jam and wine making, both activities enjoyed by her parents, it had then come in handy when the boiler had stopped being forthcoming with enough warm water for a bath. Sal' parents had brought it second hand from a car boot sale before she was born, it was from an era when things were made to last, coming with its own fully interlocking and steamer spout lid. Heavy-duty and fully functional which easily outstripped contemporary demand for cheap, press formed imports flooding the cookware markets. It was the fourth of four pots of boiling water of this size, plus a few kettles and smaller pots. She had decided to get it really hot and add bubble bath, take her time and relax while she was still safe.

Her foot raises over the creaky step, an automatic response as she had been doing so since childhood. Not that it made much difference now, the carpet had gone, her parents had held back on replacing it as they had been making the pennies stretch, then when they knew the house was being taken they didn't bother to fund a new one. Her Dad had felt like this about everything in the house for the last year since the threat of Bankruptcy had become a reality. He had become miserable about everything, the voice of doom and gloom flooding the small interior on every possible occasion. His recession-depression had even destroyed Christmas, there was no real happiness and the presents were even grudgingly wrapped. Only safe for a few more days.....

Sal enters the bathroom and pours the last pot of water into the steaming hot tub, the bubbles frothing up, even more, inviting than normal as luxuries such as bubble bath had been neglected as of late. It was cold outside, Sal looked out at the back garden as she closed the frosted glass window. The white on the grass had still not defrosted, the shed and the roofs of the terraces opposite still glistened from a night of below zero temperatures. The small plum tree looked dead from winter's worst weather and there was no sign of any hope from a robin or a starling joining the form. Shivering slightly she locks the door and begins to undress, slowly taking off her clothes item by item. She looks down at her breasts, although she was seventeen she looked much younger, they had hardly developed at all. Her hands felt over the miniature bosom form, she had no real cleavage of any form and looked unlikely to start developing one any day soon. She thought of the other girls at six form she envied, those who looked their age and could fill out low cut cleavage exposing tops. Sal stretches back in the bath thinking through the plans she had made for next week, she had arranged to work extra shifts at her part-time job and knew what days she could stay late in the six-form centre, ensuring her Mum and Dad would be at home when she returned. Sal relaxes in the tub of luxurious steamingly hot water, she knew she will get very little sleep next week, remember how on edge she was last time he was there. She had re-arranged her box room, she had the bedstead against the wall by the door so she can hear if he tries to come in. The bedside table ready to be moved across the opening edge of the door, the small latch locked, both should be enough to bar entry while she dosed.

She lies back with conditioner soaking in, she would try and make her hair look nice and add makeup to try and look older later on when she gets out the bath. Surrounded by the comfort of the bubbles as she gazes towards the door they begin to burst rapidly. She remembers back to how it had all began, Jack her elder brother had been at home from the Army on Leave. He had always found ways to terrorise her and her other Brother Craig, this time he began by pretending he didn't know she was there, walking around naked from the bathroom, deliberately forgetting a towel when he knew they were alone in the house. This had progressed to Jack starting to play with himself, casually as if it was normal behaviour. He went further, asking Sal to play with it for him, telling her I bet she did that for all her boyfriends.

From that point onwards Sal had made it her mission to never be alone with Jack in the House again. Rising off the conditioner she heard her Mother come in the main door, trying to make the most of things she was singing silly songs and telling her Dad off for complaining as they brought in the food shopping. Sal remembers the weak part of her plans, the Sunday morning when her parents go food shopping, she would get up early at the same time as then and take the dog for a long walk. Her lovingly affectionate furry fox terrier would enjoy a two to three-hour ramble down by the river, she would be safely out of the house. Sal hears a kind of hissing sound from the airing cupboard behind her head, then she can smell smoke drifting into the bathroom. It really was the boilers last Winter, it was no more.













Stear

always loved to go on walks. I'd walk around the quiet town I've lived in all my life, passing by the same things that had always been there. In quiet towns like this, nothing much happens and everything stays the same.

In my head though, things were different to the calm, beautiful surroundings that accompanied my journey. I'd walk out into the iso lated country side and nearing some particularly heavily wooded area I'd think to myself; "What if I found a dead body here?"

What started off as a small insignificant thought grew every day until it was all-consuming. I'd find myself looking, truly Searching, for a foot sticking up through the crisp autumn leaves, still in a black boot or maybe a frozen hand, palm upwards as if reaching for someone to pull them out of their makeshift grave of gravel and dirt. Winter walks always proved a more magical time for these sorts of thoughts, the morning frost capturing everything in a perfect state, so poetic and beautiful yet my thoughts would inevitably wander to that same maca bre thought. People pessing me on the way to the shops to buy some milk or a newspaper would smile politely at me and I would nod in acknowledgement. They had no idea my eyes wandered past them to the ditches at the side of the road, seeking terrible and horrifying things.

> It's the kind of thing you near on the news; early morning joggers making grizzly discoveries, their mundane week suddenly changes completely... their mundane lives changed forever. How could these people ever be the same?

> > I'd always think these thoughts as I walked the soggy wet path of the canal or as the cold winter wind howled around my ears, and I'd never be sore if it was the chill of the wind or the chill of these thoughts that made my heart race.

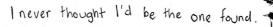
But as things stayed the same, as things do in these towns, I started walking out later than I should at night. I became determined I would one day be the person to make that disovery.

It was only a matter of time ...

The night can be dark, too dark in our woods. On cold winter nights you can barely see your foggy breath in front of you and the dark ness closes in and disorientates.

I didn't hear anyone behind me...

I always thought about the discovery, but I never thought about the event behind it all, how that person came to be there and why.



So as I lie frozen in this year's first winter frost, my hand pointing towards the main road where cars are passing by, I wonder who will find me. I wonder if they ever thought one day they'd find a body in the woods. I wonder how their lives will change and how that was never meant to be my fate.

Story by Charlotte Stear Illustration by Mike Apnea







The candle was all that lit the room. The master's face was sallow and pale, even close to the flame. He looked waxy, like the candle, and I knew he would be hungry. He smiled with pointed teeth as I rolled up my sleeve and sat down. His eyes wandered over the white scars and back to my face.

"I need you to do something for me," he said.

"Anything, master," I said.

"I need you to go to the hospital. You understand?"

I paused. "The hospital here is much smaller than what we are used to."

"They will still have the necessary supplies." He reached across the table. His cold finger grazed my wrist, stroked my veins. "You know it's my favourite type."

"I'll go at once, master."

The master smiled.

Outside, I squinted in the light. I shut the front door and checked over the bolt and then the lock. With a last glance to make sure the window shutters were all closed, I crossed the road and waited for the number three bus.

The driver smiled as I got on, then shrugged when I didn't return it. School kids laughed on the back row. A mother held her wide-eyed toddler up to the window. Trees blurred as we picked up speed. I road five stops and got off.

The hospital wasn't as busy as I'd hoped, and I wondered if I should have come at night. I paused to read the hospital signs. ICU. Oncology. A&E. A receptionist with piled hair looked at me over horn-rimmed glasses.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"No," I replied, picking a corridor.

My shoes squeaked against the checked floor, and the air stank of alcohol. Not the brown, mind-numbing, blissful kind. The clear, squeaky-clean, germ-killing kind. I shuddered as it clawed its way into my lungs. No matter how many times I came to these places, the smell always got me. No amount of disinfectant can smother the dead or the dying. I steered left at a fork, following the directions to the operating theatre.

I paused by a drinking fountain as an orderly stacked a cupboard, checking things off a clipboard as he went. I let the cool water rush over my cracked lips, watching from the corner of my eye until the corridor was quiet. It was just me and the orderly.

He was big, but I was bigger. A quick thwack on the back of his neck sent him crumpling to the ground. I shoved his unconscious body inside the cupboard, hiding him amongst the boxes of syringes and bandages. I took his scrubs, face mask and hospital ID.

The corridor outside was quiet. Gurneys were lined against the wall, drip stands waiting to be attached to patients. I moved along, looking in the rectangular windows for the right room. The doors were sparser and heavier now. Small shiny boxes to swipe your ID. Sharp metal clicks as they closed behind you.

Controlled air vents hummed above my head as I entered the right room. My breath came out in white puffs as I adjusted to the drop in temperature.

I readied my bag and strolled past the wide metal fridges. AB+, A-, B+. I paused outside the fridge marked O-. His favourite. I took every last pouch, filling the bag. Each one brought me closer to the master's promise. I slung the heavy weight over my shoulder and turned the lights off as I left. I made my way back down the corridor.

A groan escaped the orderly as I went back inside the cupboard. Another calculated punch to the side of the head had him unconscious again. I changed back into my own clothes, taking care to keep the orderly's ID and scrubs. I knew the master had an appetite.

I ignored the receptionist's gaze as I left. I crossed the motorway to wait for the number five bus to take me back to the edge of town.

"You have done well," the master said on my return. He rubbed his hands as he received the bag, lifting it from my arms with an ease that sparked envy.

"Return to me in three days."

I hovered, and the master raised an eyebrow.

The master's chill hand cupped my cheek. His thumb ran over my cheekbone and I shuddered, goose bumps breaking out across my skin.

"All in good time," he said.

"You have time!" I bit my lip as his hand flinched away.

"Return to me in three days," was all he said.

 $\ensuremath{\,\rm I}$ stared at my shoes as I walked to the door, closing it on the slurp and smack of satisfied lips.

Three days later, I returned as instructed. The master's face was flush with stolen blood, and he looked me over with a small smile. I glanced around the room, away from his feigned sympathy. Empty pouches littered the floor. Each one drained of every red drop. Some had tears in them where I guessed the master had been too impatient to decant them into a wine glass. The floor had telling dark patches that I would need to clean.

"You smell," he said through his teeth.

I shifted, folding my arms over my chest. $``\ensuremath{\mathsf{I}}$ went drinking. To numb the pain."

The master nodded at the statement. "I need you to go back to the hospital." "Again? Master?"

"Yes. I have a friend who will join me shortly. She will need provisions. Bring my favourite." $\!\!\!\!$

I frowned. "It would be risky to go again so soon."

"Do whatever you need to do," the master said, waving his hand.

Silence lapsed between us, and I didn't move from my seat. Then the master was at my side, closing the distance between us in a blink. "Do this for me and I will be… indebted to you," he whispered in my ear.

"I'll do it, master," I promised.

I waited till Friday evening. When A&E would be crawling with drunken mishaps and slurred lies. The air outside the entrance way was flavoured with tobacco, and my fingers twitched as I considered asking a smoker for a cigarette. No, no, I told myself. Later, maybe. When the master had fulfilled his promise.

Security had been heightened, either because of me, or because of the underage drinkers who stumbled around the hospital at 3AM. I walked the familiar corridor to find a man in uniform outside the blood room. Definitely because of me, I decided. He looked me over with a bored stare as I flashed the orderly's ID at him.

I swiped it through the box on the wall. The door did not release. The uniform looked at me with renewed interest.

I grabbed the cosh from his belt before he could. Even dying I was quicker than the living. There was a satisfying smack-smack as the cosh hit his head, and his head hit the wall. He collapsed to the floor in a tumble of folding limbs. I took his ID to open the room, dragging him inside.

The fridges were sparsely stocked. I took what I could, noting the O- fridge had barely even a third of what it had last time. I swore, emptying it. The master would not be pleased. The bag was not as heavy as last time.

The master smiled as I stepped in through the door, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. A figure sleuthed from the darkness behind him. A woman with skin as pale as paper, and eyes as dark as ink.

"Mistress," I nodded, sliding the bag across the table.

The master pulled it towards him and leafed through it. He tutted. "There is not much here."

"The fridges were empty, master. It was too soon."

The master passed a pouch to the woman. She cut the plastic with a fingernail and sucked on it like a lolly. Her black eyes closed as she concentrated. The bag drained.

"I think these are satisfactory." She grinned with red teeth.

I edged closer to the table. "Is it--is it time?"

"Oh yes," said the master. "It's time."

I swallowed as he snaked towards me, his movements smooth and fluid like a serpent. I found myself taking a step back, and the master laughed. "Is this not what you wanted?"

I planted my feet together, clenched my fists. "Yes. It is," I said. "I want to be like you." I held out my arm, rolling my sleeve for what I was sure would be the final time. The master batted it away and I raised an eyebrow.

Then, he was upon me. His sharp teeth broke my skin, sinking into my neck. He held me off the ground as he drank from my artery, one hand holding the back of my head as his face pressed against me in an embrace that anyone from afar might have thought was loving.

I felt a sting on my forearm, and saw the mistress digging her thumbnail into me. She lifted my arm above her lips. A line of red trickled into her open mouth.

My fingers and toes felt cold. I gasped as a numbress spread through my body. Ice seeped into my bones and left my breath ragged. I sank to the floor. The master smacked his lips, wiped his mouth with a long finger.

"My favourite," he said. The mistress shrieked a laugh.

I crawled on my belly to the front door, pushing it open and slipping like a worm into the night. I pulled myself by my hands to the main road. Heaved myself in front of oncoming headlights.

A screech of tires. Slamming doors and raised voices.

"...get him to the hospital ... "

"Wait," I croaked, as hands shunted me onto a backseat.

Street lights flickered in and out the window above my head as we rode the short distance. The car door opened. More shouts for help.

The bright yellow glow of a torch made me blink back to consciousness. A paramedic was bent over, inspecting me. "Sir, sir, can you hear me?"

"Yes," I said.

"Sir, you need a transfusion. Do you know what blood type you are?"

A thought stirred in my head, and I felt my lips curl into a smile. ``O-,'' I said.

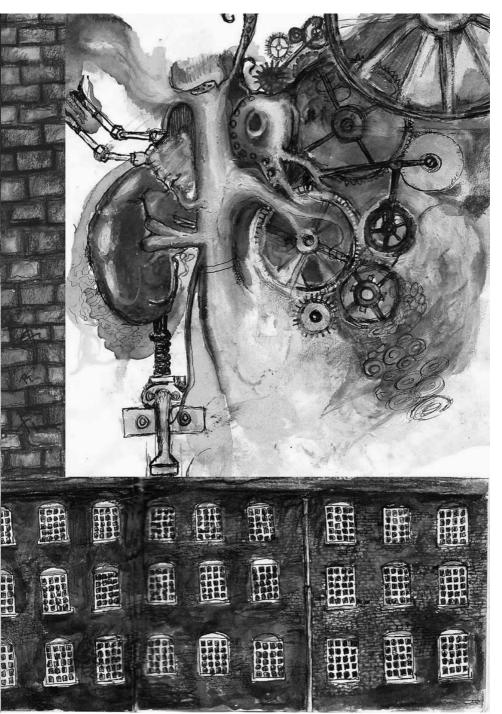
The paramedic paled and turned to a colleague. "All the O- has been stolen!" He turned back to me. "Your blood type--it can't receive anything else."

A dry wheeze escaped my throat as I tried to laugh.

The torch light was dimming, the voices fading. Then there was nothing. Suffocating, eternal nothing.

END











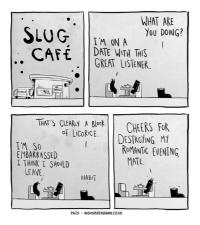








Hello and welcome back to The Ghoul Guides, we're delving into the comic book world of Highgreen Dawn and Slug Cafe from the fantastic imagination of Liam 'Pace' Hill.



Liam is a fantastic artist, writer and musician from England. You may see him bouncing around the Sheffield area with various bands (check out www.paismaycare.co.uk for more), but the majority of his work is with Highgreen Dawn and the Slug cafe, which you can check out through hgdawn on Tumblr, Highgreen Dawn on Facebook or support his creative endeavours on his Patreon through www.patreon.com/highgreend awn and purchases on shop.highgreendawn.co.uk

If you're looking for something alternative, with a dash of nihilism, a splash of pop culture reference, and a slug trail worth of sarcasm then look no further. Highgreen Dawn is currently on the tails of its second book release "Highgreen Dawn 2". Which we were lucky enough to be sent a copy of here at Ghoul Guides headquarters. Along with the brilliant Slug Cafe which follows the unusual, and mundane goings on at a ...would you guess it.. a slug cafe. Whether that he snails attempting to infiltrate, or a not so successful gig night. Slug Cafe comic strips are hilariously dry humoured four paneled shorts.

As a purveyor of a huge range of comic designs I can say that Highgreen Dawn & Slug Cafe are delightfully anti- mainstream; whilst heavily referencing pop culture, and current affairs in a highly humorous way. They buck the trend of many long comic strips and choose to instead focusing on more short panels. Personally I feel in these short bursts Liam's comics really pack the punch, and delivery brilliant comedy timing. In an age where we want our information quick and without all the add

Having spoken with Liam he told us that Highgreen Dawn has been a labour of love for over five years now, with more planned for the future. The initial idea and the basis for Highgreen Dawn is "Zombie



apocalypse happened, and two voung adults still are inexplicably trying to make it as rock stars in a post-apocalyptic world," As niche themes go, he pretty much nailed it with that concept which does feature throughout the books. Liam stated that he has wanted to expand the characters and world in which they exist, but has found himself sticking with the shorter single jokes.

With everything already available to sink your teeth into. there is yet more to come. Currently Liam is working on a book/series called new "Cobweb Galaxy", which is at the moment his top priority. Cobweb Galaxy is a more child friendly. character based adventure. This will

undoubtedly open his works up to a much larger audience. We can also look forward to Slug Cafe two out in the foreseeable future.

So you marvellous monsters head over to Face Book, Tumblr, and Patreon and find Highgreen Dawn, and Slug Cafe and check them out. I guarantee you will not be disappointed. Help support our comic book community and keep the art flowing.

Remember – Keep it Creepy and Sharing is Scaring!!!

Pippa xox





HIGHGREENDAWN, CO.UK