

Twisted Imaginings: Vol 3

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Cover art and layout by Garry Charles

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Smashwords Edition

Published by Garry Charles at Smashwords

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THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT

Sixteen, in love and, at any other time, without a worry in her life. But this wasn't any other time; this was now and she had more than one worry on her mind. In fact she had quite few.

Melissa Howard was late; late home which would get her into a whole world of trouble with her parents. She was also late in another way; a way that would make that whole world of trouble seem like an insignificant spot in a universe of grief. The latter was the reason for the former, both late occurrences linked together by an outside source.

His name was Will and he was the love of Melissa's life. He was also half the cause of her main worry. She couldn't shoulder all the blame on him; after all, she'd been more than willing to take him in her adolescent embrace of passion.

It had been no more than a few minutes of entwined bodies, throaty moans and mashed together lips, but in that short space of unadulterated sex they'd done so much more. She hadn't realised at first, but after two months of no show in the monthly department she'd begun to panic.

"Are you sure?" He'd asked when they'd met less than half an hour ago.

"Pretty much," she'd answered sheepishly, scared that he'd turn and walk away.

"Really sure?"

"As sure as I can be." She'd tried to read the look in his eyes, but his face had been a blank.

“Do you think it’ll be a boy?” He’d asked, his eyes finally jumping to life at the prospect of fatherhood. “Come here,” he’d cried, pulling her off her feet and spinning her around.

“I love you.” She’d leant in and kissed his neck.

“You too,” Will yelled as he continued to spin on the spot.

“But I’m scared,” she’d whispered in his ear and the spin slowed as he came down to earth.

Melissa pulled her thoughts away from the end of the conversation; she couldn’t bear to think of how her parents would react. It was bad enough that she was out after dark; especially now. She shuddered as the wind picked up and she realised that dusk was slowly becoming the full blown shroud of night.

She’d promised them she’d be home before dark, not just for their peace of mind, but for her own. The small town of Westow wasn’t the safest place to be after dark; especially if you were a young girl. Melissa suddenly wanted to think about the life growing within her and the coming confrontation when she announced it, but it was too late. Her mind was already moving on, picturing the photo of the first missing girl.

Elizabeth Mounten; Lizzie to her friends had gone missing two years ago. At the time it was thought to be one of those horrible things that happen. A sad disappearance that would never be explained. But that was two years ago and, in the intervening time, another five had gone missing.

“Stop it,” Melissa told herself off and increased her space. “Not now,” she spoke aloud, but her mind refused to listen to the good advice on offer.

Heather Chapman, daughter of the Reverend Chapman had been the second. All they had found was her bible sitting on the swing in the playground, a sad reminder of what everyone said had been such a sweet girl. Like the first her body was never found, another unexplained missing girl.

“I said no,” her voice rose a few octaves as a new fear began to creep into her stomach. It was then that she heard the footsteps behind her.

“Now look what you’ve done.” She blamed her overactive mind for the imagined sound.

It was then that she heard the cough.

“Fuck,” the curse escaped as a high pitched squeal as imagination was replaced with reality.

A reality that was following her.

The knock at the door was quiet, almost unheard by the occupant of the house as she switched the dishwasher to eco-wash. She stood still for a moment, unsure if she had really heard the announcement of visitors or not. Then it came again, a feeble tapping of knuckles against wood.

Maureen smiled, smoothed her dress and approached the front door at a quick walk. She was always happy to receive guests, especially on the evenings her husband was out. As she reached the door the tapping came once more and Maureen's smile grew as she reached out, turned the handle and opened the door wide.

"Maureen," a pale faced Betty Norgate cried.

"Whatever is it, my dear?" The smile fell from Maureen's face, replaced with concern for her friend. "Is it bad again?" She knew why Betty was there and readied herself for bad memories to resurface before the visit was over.

"It's always bad, Maureen," Betty shuddered as she was ushered into the hallway. "It's just worse than usual."

"Well you get inside and I'll put on a brew," Maureen spoke softly as she led Betty to the kitchen.

"I think I need something stronger than tea tonight." Tears stained Betty's face.

"Just sit yourself down and tell me everything," Maureen urged, but in truth she had listened to Betty so many times that she knew what was coming.

She knew her friend had never recovered from the disappearance of her daughter just over a year ago and from personal experience she knew it was hard to do. They had been friends before and Betty had comforted Maureen when her little angel had been taken away, only for the favour to be returned. But, unlike Maureen, Betty had never come to terms with the loss of Josie. The pain, even after so much time still ate away at her soul, destroying her on a daily basis.

Maureen hated these meetings, but she could never turn Betty away. It wasn't in her nature, but each meeting reminded her of her own loss, her own sacrifice, and she had to fight hard to suppress the cancerous emptiness that threatened to engulf her.

"I visited her grave today."

Despite no body having been found the Norgate family had insisted on a service. It had been meant to give Betty closure, but the charade hadn't worked.

"You know it only upsets you," Maureen cooed as the kettle boiled.

"I know, but I just wanted to feel close to my baby." Betty knotted a damp handkerchief between her fingers. "I sat for hours, but she's not really there."

"So why torment yourself so?" Maureen filled the two cups with boiled water.

“Because she was my little girl,” Betty sobbed. “That grey headstone is all I have left.”

Leaving the cups to steep, Maureen made her way across the kitchen and wrapped her arms tightly around the friend she was so firmly linked to. Tears of her own sprang forth and she silently cursed herself for the sign of weakness. Her baby had gone because God had seen fit to take her. She had to hold onto that belief or all was lost. Without that belief she would become nothing more than the shivering wreck she held in her arms.

Melissa’s head hurt and she felt groggy as her eyes slowly opened. She was disorientated and it took her long moments to realise she was no longer on her feet. She felt a wave of dizzy nausea rip through her at the realisation she was hanging up side down, her feet already numb because of the tightness of the bonds at her ankles.

With her eyes fully open the sense of unbalance was made worse by the lack of light. She could make out shadows, varying shades of black, but none of them had any correct form or shape. She tried to make out the blurred outlines of objects that appeared darker than their surroundings, but it didn’t help the situation.

And then, as her vision lost its blurriness and began to grow accustomed to the gloom she wished she had kept them shut. The confusion of hanging upside down was lost as it dawned on her what she was looking at and her stomach tried to escape through her throat at the vista of death around her.

She could see the sky which was now fully night and no longer dusk. Grey clouds floated above in a sky of black that held a shining ball of silver. A shining ball that allowed her to see the bodies in a monotone hue that increased the nightmarish scenario she found herself trapped in.

She tried to ignore the bodies that shared the unusual room with her, the room that appeared to be made of transparent walls.

Glass walls.

A greenhouse.

The small deductive task only momentarily took her mind off the situation before she felt her mind forcing her back to those on either side of her.

Five; she counted five and not all of them were dead. Not yet anyway. At least three of them were passed the need for help, the wrinkled corpses partly buried in split open compost bags that sprouted twisted, underdeveloped vine-like plants. One of them could have been sleeping or dead, from her disadvantaged position Melissa just couldn’t tell.

The remaining two were definitely alive. One of them was wheezing as they exhaled long yet shallow breaths and the second was gently stroking the palm of Melissa's dangling hand.

"Where am I?" Melissa asked in a whisper.

"Best not to ask." The reply was weak.

"Why not?"

"He doesn't like us to question."

"Betty," Maureen soothed. "You should visit the church with me more."

"Why?" Betty pushed her friend away and looked at her accusingly. "So I can pray to a God that let my little girl be taken away," the statement was said harshly, with hatred.

"His reasons are not ours to question," Maureen defended the one who kept her sane at moments like these, but deep down she had already begun to doubt.

"What possible reason could he have for taking a twelve year old girl?" Betty snapped. "I don't question him. I don't even believe in him anymore."

Maureen didn't reply. What could she possibly say to take away the pain inside her friend? Nothing; not when she knew in her heart that the woman was right.

"Do not doubt," the tiny voice in her mind cried out. *"God is right."*

Melissa had hung quietly for what felt like an eternity, her ankles having passed the pain margin. Now they were numb, cold from the lack of blood that had seemed to fill her head and made the thinking process hard.

Earlier she had tried to swing around in an attempt to get a better look around her windowed prison, but her view had been limited and dulled by the poor moonlight that continued to shift behind moving cloud.

"Who are you?" She finally asked her fellow inmate; the one who continued to stroke her palm.

"Heather. Heather Chapman," the girl answered sadly.

Melissa gasped in shock. She had known Heather before she went missing. They hadn't been close, but they had spoken on more than one occasion. She'd been missing for so long yet she was still alive. Melissa held onto this knowledge with hope for herself.

"I'm Melissa," she wiggled her fingers in introduction. "We went to school together."

“I’ve almost forgotten that life,” Heather wasn’t crying, but her words held an indescribable sadness. “How long have I been away?”

“Nearly a year and a half,” Melissa answered, surprised at how long it had been.

“It feels like longer.”

“Are they all here?” Melissa took over the questions. She wanted to know as much as she could and as quickly as she could.

“These ones are all from the village,” Heather explained in a whisper. “They kept me company for a while.”

“What happened to them?”

“He punished them,” Heather choked back a sob. “He punishes them all, but he gets rid of the strangers when he is done with them.”

“There was more?” Melissa’s slice of hope dwindled fast.

“Yes, but they didn’t stay long.”

“Does he punish you?” Melissa asked the question gently.

“In more ways than one.”

“Who is he? Have you seen him?”

Before Heather could answer the door to the green house squealed open, fresh night air seeping in before it was quickly shut again.

“Good evening my dears,” the voice was deep, resonant and vaguely familiar. “I hate to have kept you waiting, but I had work to do before returning.”

The shadow draped figure raised his arm, lifting his hand and what it held in front of Melissa’s face. At the same moment the moon was released from its curtain of cloud and vomit filled Melissa’s throat at the object he dangled before her.

“*Will!*” Her mind screamed out as liquid acid filled her nose and mouth.

“Yet another sinner I was forced to punish,” he snarled, tossing the severed head onto the compost pile of death. “Fornicators must answer to the almighty.”

Melissa heard his words as she drowned in her own bile. Thanking God she would not suffer at the hands of the voice she finally recognised.

“You’re so lucky to have faith Maureen,” Betty had finally calmed and was sat sipping delicately at her tea. “The Reverend is a good man and you’re blessed to have him as a husband.

“I suppose I am.” Maureen Chapman smiled sourly.

“Where is he tonight?” Betty asked innocently.

“Oh, he’s out in the green house,” she replied, the grin fixed firmly on his face. “He says the peace and quiet helps him with God’s work.

MESSIAH

“I wasn’t born in the natural way. I wasn’t created like most babies. My parents broke every taboo and possibly most of the laws about childbirth and the conception of new life. Science played no part in my unique life and, unlike other children; I did not come in to this life from a tube in a lab. I was an abomination. I was the first one to enter the world via the fleshy lips of my mother’s vagina.

My conception was kept a close guarded secret by all of those involved. My part in their bigger plan was something that could never be uncovered. The close circle that did know the truth were all family members, sworn by oath to keep the knowledge of my creation a secret. The family could always be trusted and they knew that their children’s future rested on my, as yet, unborn shoulders. If I had known the weight I was expected to carry would I have remained in the womb, clinging tightly to the safety of the umbilical cord? I don’t know; much has happened in that time and it is a question I am unwilling (or is that unable) to answer.

I have been told that my birth was not the easiest of matters. The family may have been close, but no one had the knowledge to bring a child into the world. It was beyond their simple existence. They had hoped it would be an easy affair, nothing more than a push and out I would come. This is not the way it came to pass. Unfortunately outsiders had to be brought in.

They brought two of them back to the valley, a doctor and a nurse. It has all been documented and it can be found in the Third Bible. The Book of Sacrifices. Matthew 2.1. I understand that this won’t be something you know of, this heathen world you call society has no such history. Religion is a concept that was stripped away many moons ago, after the fire burned the sky and the sea. But I can assure you that the message I bring is the only truth left. It saddens me to see how you all live your lives with blinkered vision. If only you would open your eyes and accept the words I offer you.” The long haired man paused.

He looked around the crowded room and smiled at them. The smile was obscured by the ragged beard that covered his lower face, but many were comforted by the softness

in his expression. They would never be able to explain the feelings this stranger aroused deep in their being. This was a culture unused to emotions and the very ideas of happiness, sadness and fear were alien to them. They knew that the programme kept them in a state of normalcy, but they could never understand what it was to have fun. Yes, they cheered when they were ordered, but why they did this was something they couldn't grasp. It was how things were meant to be.

But now *he* had arrived and was asking them to question the way of the world. They didn't want to listen; they wanted the programme to continue so they could complete their task.

"Who the fuck is he?" Malcolm Hendrix asked as he barged his way into the control centre. "And what the fuck is he doing in my station?"

Unlike the masses Hendrix had full control of his emotions, something that made him better than the commoners who filled his studios everyday. He was put on this Earth to control and pacify, a job handed to him by the man at the top. He could still remember the day, all those years ago, when the president had called him into the sanctum and passed on the role. It was the day he had waited for all of his life, hell, it was the reason he had been cultivated. It had said so on the test tube.

"PRESIDENT"

He still had the glass receptacle that had been his birth womb. The words were now old and faded, but it was all the proof he needed. That, and the signature of the man himself. He was taken from the President's stem cells and the next President had been taken from his. It was the way things worked. And it worked well. Order was kept and everyone knew their place.

Everyone, that is, except the man sat centre stage in the main studio. The man with the long hair and the beard. The man who kept the audience in place and unable to leave.

"Is anybody gonna answer my fucking question?" He glared at the unmoving workers sat motionless at their screens.

They were doing their job; just as they had been raised to do. Nothing would ever take their attention away from the screens. They never left their work station, fed through one tube and the waste taken away by another. Efficient workers who require no pay, no time off for holidays and never went to the toilet. Hendrix would usually stand and watch their perfection for hours, but today he needed answers.

"Fucking morons," Hendrix screamed, slamming the door on the way out.

"Sir, is this a problem?" The young boy could have been no older than ten but he was already suited out like a seasoned professional.

“Nothing to worry about, Son,” Hendrix replied, looking the child up and down with admiration.

One day the boy would make a fine President.

“On the night I was born the thunders crashed and the sky was illuminated by the flash of lightning. The doctor and nurse worked hard, but they had never seen anything so horrible occur to another human being. They feared my mother would be split in half by the damnation sprouting from between her legs.

My father had to hold a gun to the doctor’s head as he explained that this was the true beauty of creation. The doctor spat in my father’s face and called my mother a monster, an inhuman beast. The doctor’s brains christened me in warmth as I slid from the womb and began to cry.

The nurse did her best, cleaning up my blood covered body and wrapping me in a blanket. My mother lay limp on the bed, her life having passed as mine had begun. The nurse did what she thought was right, cleaning the gore from my tiny frame and announcing to the room that I was a boy. My father thanked her, took me in his free arm and looked me in the eyes. I swear I can remember his smile.

My father then looked at the nurse, raised his gun and fired. She did not suffer, but she couldn’t be allowed to live. She wasn’t family and the secret would have been in jeopardy if she had return to this world.” The young man stopped and brushed his fringe from his eyes.

The audience felt his stare and it relaxed them more than his smile. If they had known what special was that is the word they would have used to describe him.

“Get security up there,” Hendrix barked into the wall mounted intercom. “NOW!”

“Why not cut the signal?” asked his lab created son.

“Believe me, I would if I could.” Hendrix shook his head.

It was impossible for any one other than him to change programming, but this intruder had managed just that. Not only had he taken over the studio, he had also gained control of the airwaves. Every channel was now broadcasting live and Hendrix was locked out of his own system. One hundred thousand channels and he had lost control of them all. If he didn’t get it back soon he would lose his grip on society.

He stormed along the hallway, glancing into the offices either side and despising the drones within. On his left was one of the many call centres that filled the building. Drones constantly answered the phones as the populace rung in for competitions that would never be won. Not that anyone was ever told this. Not one set of adverts went out without an announcement for the next winner of a holiday to the Space Station Jupiter.

People were such fucking idiots and Hendrix took full advantage of their ignorance.

There was no Space Station Jupiter, in truth there was no space programme at all.

If the society he controlled were to lose what he offered them they would start to look around them and it wouldn't take them long to realise that everything was a lie. The world wasn't what it had used to be. If they looked hard enough they would discover the fraud that surrounded them and all would be for nothing.

The long haired freak threatened the security of society and Hendrix had to stop him before it went any further. This kind of rebellion was prohibited and the source would be found and punished. Hendrix listened to the tale the young man was spitting out over his airwaves.

How dare he?

Hendrix stopped at the elevator and called the carriage to the control floor. Whilst he waited he continued to listen to the uninvited preacher.

"I have spent my life learning the words that were given to the world by God." The audience murmured at this unknown name, a shiver of unsettledness coursing through them.

"His story was originally told in The First Bible, a book of only which remains one. A book guarded by the family over the generations and passed down from father to son ever since the great fire. It tells the tale of how one man – a messiah – sacrificed his mortal body for the good of mankind. It is a book that taught many how to live life. A book that was hunted down and burned by those in power, those who brought the red hot flames of destruction down upon our ancestor's heads.

These same people took away everything good in this world in the advancement of their own riches. They did not care for the people who looked up to them for guidance. They propagated war for the sake of power and it was to be their downfall.

But in this world of greed and avarice there was still a chance. People were individuals, they had hope and they had dreams. Men and women experienced love for one another and the world was a place of colour and sound.

For many generations you have lived a falsehood, a way of life enforced upon you by those who caused our downfall. Whilst you dwell in a pit of indifference the family have continued to follow the word of God and they now number in the thousands."

Hendrix felt his blood boil as the voice came out over the internal speakers of the elevator. He knew of history and he understood that every word was true. How could this have happened? The public were never to know of free will and the thought of a populace

with emotions was unbearable. His rule was the only ideal. The people were safe and there was no war, no crime. This world was peaceful.

“What does he mean, Father?” the son asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Hendrix snapped. “It’s all lies.”

“But a world of colour sounds like fun,” the boy stated innocently.

“I’ll not hear such talk.” Hendrix lashed out at his engineered son, a backhanded blow that knocked the child to the floor.

“Father?” The boy cried.

Hendrix glared at his replacement, disgusted at the feeble tears running down the young cheeks. Emotion was not allowed to be used in such a way. The President was only given the ability of emotion so he could rule with an iron fist. It wasn’t a gift to be wasted on weak natured outbursts. The child at his feet was no good to anyone, nothing more than a faulty product.

Hendrix kicked out savagely at the huddled figure, smashing his boot down again and again. He didn’t stop until the sobbing had ceased, along with any breath left in the wasted lungs. He felt no loss at having murdered his son.

He could always get another.

“Who are you?” called out a female from the audience, surprised at the strength in her own voice.

The bearded man left the chair he had been sat on and moved towards the crowd filled seats. The cameras followed him, the operators moving fluidly around the tubes that entered and exited their bodies. They zoomed in and out as required and ensured a perfect picture at all times.

“My name is Luke,” he answered the answer, standing before her. “And what is your name, my child?” He rested a hand upon her head and looked down at her.

“One Two Nine,” she replied.

Luke shook his head with sadness, a single tear forming in the corner of his left eye.

“No person should be labelled with a number,” Luke whispered. “From now on you will be known as Judith.” As he spoke he placed his hand on the side of her face and traced out a cross on her forehead.

“Thank you,” she cried, actual tears pouring down her face.

“And you, my son?” Luke turned to the man next in line.

The elevator door slid open and Hendrix stepped out to meet the guards. In his arms he carried the ruined torso that had moments before been a young life. At least the boy wouldn't be a total waste; he would serve as a warning to others.

"Follow me," Hendrix ordered.

The guards fell in line behind their leader, guns ready for use at little more than a nod of the head from Hendrix. Their one and only purpose was to guard. It didn't matter to them what they were protecting as long as they did their job. Underneath the visored helmets they all looked the same, straight-faced and steely-eyed. They knew no compassion. All they knew was how to aim and fire with deadly accuracy. Anything less was failure and a one way ticket to the recycling centre to be pulped and used to feed the office workers.

Society had become a glorified battery farm and nobody cared. To some it was the perfect solution, the rest didn't matter and they didn't care. At least they hadn't until today.

"Tom, Susan, Randolph, Brett, Elizabeth, Scott, Paula, Michael." The bearded man named Luke moved around the auditorium and gave those who wanted to be saved a name.

As he touched each person a change came over them, as if a spell had been broken and they would break down in tears, of what they realised were joy. Some would fall to their knees and attempt to kiss Luke's feet, but he would quickly move on to the next new soul needing his salvation.

Somewhere above the doors burst open and the room once again fell silent. A dozen armed guards fanned out along the gallery, each of them drawing a bead on Luke.

"Welcome," Luke said and held out his arms to them.

"How dare you!" Hendrix entered the room with all the authority he had been endowed with via his birth right. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" His stare burned with hatred.

From behind Hendrix appeared more guards and they wasted no time in moving around to Luke's rear, guns pointing at his head.

"I am Luke and I'm here to save you." Luke smiled.

"Save me," Hendrix snarled. "Why would I need saving by a weak willed rodent like you?" Hendrix didn't wait for an answer. "This is what happens to the weak." He raised the corpse of his successor and threw it at Luke's feet.

“Even a murderer can repent,” Luke stated calmly and crouched next to the small body. “I can show you the error of your ways.” As he spoke he laid his hands on the dead boy.

The room was filled with hushed whispers, a hundred eyes all focused on Luke. Another million watched via satellite, entire families sitting in silence as they witnessed the miracle from their cramped living abodes.

Luke moved his hands in a circular motion, a dim light radiating from under his palms. He slowly moved the right hand from its place above the boy’s heart to his forehead.

“Will somebody please shoot this prick,” Hendrix ranted, but nothing happened. “That is an order.”

The guards did not respond. Like everyone else they watched the stranger. Luke ignored the room and focused on the boy, his concentration centred on the work that had to be done. He breathed deeply, noting the twitching of the boy’s eyelids. Luke moved his hands faster and faster and his breathing was matched by that of the boy. Luke slowed his movements and helped the boy to sit.

“You shall be known as Adam.” He smiled at the boy and then looked up at Hendrix. “I am here to save you.”

“I don’t need a fucking messiah,” Hendrix growled and charged.

Adam moved from Luke’s arms, standing with a swiftness that belied his age and build. In a single movement he spun, snatching a pistol from the nearest guard and turning it on his father. Hendrix stopped in his tracks and sneered at the child.

“You’re too weak to use it.”

“I think you are the weak one, Father.” Adam pulled the trigger.

Hendrix heard the retort of the weapon and grinned. The stupid little bastard had missed. The smile collapsed into a slack jawed grimace as the pain enveloped his head, the rear of the skull exploding in a display of red, pulped grey and shattered white bone fragments. Hendrix, his face coated in fresh blood, staggered slightly and then fell to his knees. Adam dropped the gun and took a step towards his father. He kissed the dead man on the cheek and whispered in his ear. “You should have taken salvation.”

Luke turned slowly and faced the guards who surrounded him. He looked at them one at a time with the soothing smile still on his face.

“Would you like to be saved?” he asked.

The guards were already removing their helmets and tears could be seen on their cheeks.