

Horror, Horror Everywhere

stories written for the NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2015

by L.S. Christopher

Preface

The Short Story Challenge run by NYC Midnight at the beginning of each year draws a lot of diverse writers, mainly because of the diversity built into its format: Writers are randomly assigned to heats for each round, and the heat they get determines what genre and prompts they have to write with. Oh, and there's a word limit that decreases each round...just like the time you have to write the story, which sinks from a week to three days to 24 very short hours if you make it all the way to Round 3.

Did I mention you have to have some kind of writerly masochistic streak to repeatedly enter this thing? Consider it mentioned. Some of us love the format, though, so we keep coming back year after year.

2015 was my last year for entering SSC, and it was also my weirdest. Because in 2015 I entered and got assigned to my first round heat, which had a genre of Horror. I wrote a classic existential horror story and won, which meant I got to go on to Round 2.

Round 2's assigned heat also had a genre of Horror. I went a different direction and wrote psychological horror. Won again, on to the finals for Round 3.

Round 3 was open genre, I figured what the hell, third time's the charm—more Horror! Went with a noirish sort of supernatural revenge story this time. Didn't even get an honorable mention—my take on the prompts wasn't what the judges were looking for, it happens—but a few judges did compliment my story when they reviewed it.

Want to hear the funny part? I don't normally write horror, I've always said it wasn't really my genre.

Anyway, this little ebook contains all three stories from SSC 2015, exactly the way they were submitted for judging. The only one I plan to revisit in the future is the last one, "Wish Granted", because that story is actually part of a larger universe I came up with while I was writing it—and because, due to the ridiculously small word count I had to pare it down to for the final round, the story I submitted is merely a shadow of what I actually wrote.

LS. Christopher
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Sharing

Round 1: Heat 3 first place winner, NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2015
by L.S. Christopher

Emily's charges that night were a pair of beautiful little twin girls, whose mother said they had some problems with the concept of 'sharing'. But how bad could it really be?

Their mother would later blame the entire incident on the cab driver. Who had been impatient when his fare had not come out of the house immediately, and who had honked his horn in a rudely demanding way to hurry her up. Because the girls *had* been asleep before he'd honked. She'd hoped that the sound hadn't echoed up to the second floor and into the room where her daughters were sleeping, but hoping was all she'd gotten to do because the babysitter the lawyer had sent had all but pushed her out of the door and then she'd had to hurry to the cab to prevent the driver – rude, impatient man that he was – from honking again. He'd even started driving away almost before she'd gotten the door pulled closed, but she hadn't wasted time being angry with him. Instead, she was craning her neck to look out the back window, making sure the light didn't come on in the upstairs bedroom.

It still hadn't by the time the cab was too far away for her even to imagine she could still see it, so she sat back against the stiff seat and closed her eyes and thought over all of the things she was going to say to the lawyer once she got to his office. He was a new lawyer, the old one having moved or retired or some such thing she'd been too flustered to remember at the time, and he simply didn't understand. The old one had known that she didn't like to leave the girls with anyone because they could be...difficult about sharing. So after the last incident, the old lawyer had always sent paperwork to her via a courier, who would stand on the porch while she signed things and then take them right back to the lawyer's office. She sighed, clasping her hands together tightly in her lap, hoping that this visit wouldn't take too long.

Back at the house, Emily, the babysitter the lawyer had hired, watched until the cab was gone, shaking her head. She couldn't believe she'd actually had to push the children's mother out the door and then shut it behind her. The nervous woman had kept the cab waiting a good ten minutes while she'd rattled on about how her twin daughters didn't like to share, and how bad the resultant tantrums could be if one of them got more of something than the other one did – screaming, hitting, and kicking were all apparently ways they made their displeasure known, and she'd been saying something about them getting carried away and biting when the cab driver had honked and she'd run to the door to try to get him to stop. She seemed terrified by the idea that the girls might wake up and find out she was gone.

Not really unusual behavior for an overprotective later-in-life mother of little twin girls. Emily guessed they'd probably been preemies, too. And the pictures of them in the living room were precious. Tiny, blonde and blue-eyed, and dressed up like little china dolls in long ruffled dresses and oversized hair bows. Their mother had probably spoiled them rotten, but it was obvious she took good care of them. The house was clean and didn't smell weird, and she'd been clean and neat herself even though she'd been so frantic. The carpet was stained in places –

maybe they'd had a dog? – but according to the lawyer the mother was living off alimony payments so she probably just hadn't had the money to have it replaced.

Emily waited for about half an hour, enough time for the girls to go back to sleep if the cab's horn had woken them up, and then she made her way upstairs to check on them. There weren't any pictures on the walls of the upstairs hallway, but there was a princess plaque on one door that said 'Elma & Alma' in flowing script with lots of added glitter. She eased the door open, glad the hinges didn't squeak, and saw a large room dimly illuminated by two nightlights, one on either side. The furniture on each side was identical, with the beds together in the center and divided by a thick curtain. She could see both of the girls from the door, the one on the right sound asleep...and the one on the left looking at her with big, blue eyes. Emily smiled. "You need to go back to sleep, sweetheart," she whispered. "Your mommy had to go out for a little bit, she left me here to look after you until she came back."

The little girl nodded. "I'm thirsty. Can you bring me a drink of water? Please?"

Emily started to tell her she could get up and get it herself, but it was possible the girls' mother had told them not to get out of bed. "Okay, just don't wake your sister..."

"I'm Alma, she's Elma."

"Don't wake Elma, I'll be right back." She went downstairs again and got a plastic sippy cup with a princess on it, filling it halfway with water and then taking it back upstairs. Alma beamed when she saw the cup, stretching out her little hands for it and then almost snatching it out of Emily's hands, sucking the water out of it greedily.

And noisily. The curtain stirred as though another small hand had slapped at it, and then a sleepy, questioning sound was immediately followed by a frightful shriek that made Emily jump; Alma just kept drinking. "Where did you get it!?!?" the other sister screamed. "You can't, you can't, you can't! We have to have just the same!"

"The babysitter gave it to me," Alma said smugly, smacking her lips.

Emily backed up so that she could see around the curtain, where another pair of big blue eyes were staring at her. These eyes, however, were teary and hostile. "Your mommy will be back soon," she soothed. "Alma woke up and wanted a drink. Do you want one too?"

"I have to have one! I have to!"

"She doesn't," Alma countered, sucking down the rest of her water with a rudely loud slurping sound. "She only wants it because I had it. She's not thirsty *at all*."

That brought another shriek from Elma, and Emily leaned over to take the empty cup out of Alma's hands. "I can get her some if she wants it..."

"No!" This time Alma was the one who screamed. "No, she can't have any! I'm ahead, I'm ahead now and she can't catch up with me, she can't!"

"Alma!" the sitter scolded. "That's just horrible, stop it! Your sister can have a drink if she wants one, it doesn't hurt you any if she does."

"She's trying to hurt me," Elma sniffed. "She's trying to get ahead, waiting until Mommy was gone and then trying to trick you into helping her."

"I did, I did!" Alma squealed. The expression on her face was odiously triumphant. "I'm ahead now, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

Emily sighed. She'd been right, the twins were spoiled brats, plain and simple. "You're both being horrible," she told them. "I'm going back downstairs now, you just go back to sleep. And I'm going to tell your mother about the way you're both acting, I'm sure she won't be happy."

A really terrible giggle came from Alma. “She won’t know how much I had,” she singsonged. “You’ll never catch up, Elma. *Never.*”

Elma screamed in rage and swatted at her through the curtain, and a slapping sort of fight started to happen. Emily sighed again and yanked back the curtain so they wouldn’t pull it down on top of themselves. “Stop it!” she ordered, and the two identical faces looked up at her in shock. “Don’t you even try that look on me, girls. You’re old enough not to behave this way, you should be ashamed...” And then she stopped, because something wasn’t right. Were they sharing a bed? She went back to the door, turning on the overhead light.

And then she screamed.

Elma and Alma were tiny, yes, and their blonde hair had been perfectly brushed and plaited and beribboned before they’d been put to bed in their lacy ruffled nightgowns. But they were nowhere near being the very young children she’d assumed they were, or that they had looked and sounded like in the dim room. In the harsh light from the overhead bulb, they could have been any age between ten and twenty. And when they sat up, the writhing flail of limbs both under and above the bedclothes straightening and stilling, it became all too obvious why they were sleeping in the same bed. “You...you...”

“Everything has to be even,” Elma hissed at her, one hand yanking on her identical sister’s identical blonde plait. “If we don’t get exactly the same, one of us will get stronger.”

“And the strong one will start taking from the weak one – the doctor said,” Alma added smugly. The singsong voice came back, grotesque now. “I had mo-ore, I had mo-ore.”

They started to fight again, squealing and kicking and pulling each other’s hair, and Emily backed through the door and slammed it shut. And then from inside the room...silence. Followed by the sound of the bedclothes hitting the floor, and then a scrabbling noise that resulted in something else hitting the floor.

Bare feet. And hands. Of course they couldn’t walk upright, Emily’s horrified mind noted as she backed toward the stairs. They were attached from shoulder blade to hip, melted together in the womb like candle wax. Four arms, but only three legs. She could hear them scuttling crab-like across the floor, panting and grunting. The knob rattled.

Emily broke and ran like the devil himself was after her, all but throwing herself down the stairs. They wouldn’t be able to follow her, wouldn’t be able to manage the stairs without help...but she heard the bedroom door open and bare feet and hands scuttling across the hall floor and she ran again anyway, fleeing the house, leaving the door standing wide open as she dashed to her car and raced recklessly off into the night hoping the horror would not follow her.

It didn’t. Alma and Elma plopped down at the top of the stairs, scowling. “You’re ahead,” Elma complained. “You’re trying to kill me.”

“You tried to kill me last time.” A really terrible giggle. “This one was smart, though. Remember how the last one didn’t think we could get down the stairs?”

And Elma smiled, licking her perfect pink lips at the memory. “I was ahead that time.”

Baby of Mine

Round 2:Heat 1 fourth place winner, NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2015
by L.S. Christopher

Jared had always known the baby wasn't his. And then, finally, he figured it all out.

Jared had always known the baby wasn't his, always. It had looked a little bit like him, yes; enough that even his friends had sworn he was just crazy and needed to get over it. It had been born with his hair and what looked like his eyes, and after they brought it home his mother had sworn that it did things the same way he had right after he was born, and that it even had his burp.

Jared knew, though. He knew Mary had cheated on him, even though nothing he'd tried had gotten her to admit it. Nothing. His stupid bitch of a mother-in-law had stuck her nose in at one point and tried to get Mary to leave him, but he'd thrown her out and told her not to come back. Just because he'd never willingly touch Mary again didn't change the fact that she was his wife, 'til death do them part. Vows were vows, whether she'd broken them or not. And even if it hadn't been for their marriage vows, there was no way he was going to let her take off and go running to whoever the bastard was she'd cheated with.

Not that Jared didn't know who the guy was. He'd had plenty of time to think about it after being laid off, and he'd figured it out – he felt like an idiot for not figuring it out sooner, actually. The guy had been at the hospital when Mary had been having the baby! He'd said his baby boy was being born any time, he was just waiting for a chance to go into the delivery room without getting killed. He'd said that right to Jared's face, laughing like it was a really great joke. And at the time Jared had laughed right along with him, because he hadn't realized the joke was at his expense.

It had taken him a while to track the guy down, but finally he had. A salesman in a car lot, high-end little import cars that no real man would drive, but then no real man plants his seed in someone else's wife's womb, shows up for the birth to have a good laugh, and then trots back off to find another slut to bang and expects someone else to pay for raising his kid. Just like real men don't let it go when their wives break their wedding vows and then start calling them crazy and abusive and threatening to leave.

Jared had already made sure Mary couldn't leave, of course. So she'd been a horrified captive audience while he told her about finding her lover, about how the guy hadn't recognized him at first and then finally had, about how much of an idiot the guy was because he'd acted like he was actually happy to see Jared and had even asked how his wife and the baby were. Jared had decked him for that, of course, and then several other salesmen on the lot had come running to their colleague's rescue and someone had called the cops. Not being stupid, Jared had left before the cops showed up and gone back home. Where he'd told Mary all about how he was going to hunt down the car salesman later and make sure he'd never stick his dick into someone else's marriage ever again, and then she'd cried and begged him not to do it and he'd told her that if she'd just tell the truth he'd forgive her and let the guy live. So she'd tearfully asked him to forgive her, and Jared had reminded her that only Jesus can forgive someone's sins and then finished what he'd started with the superglue so she could ask for that forgiveness in person.

The police got there before he could figure out what he wanted to do with the car salesman's baby – dumping it off at the car lot had sounded like a good idea, although he'd also

considered stuffing it back inside of Mary and dropping the whole package off but hadn't been sure the baby would fit anymore. The police had assured him they would take charge of the baby, however, so Jared had very helpfully told them who the kid's father was and where he worked. The police had been very interested in his story, too. They'd escorted him to the station and made him tell it over and over again, and then they'd left him alone in the little concrete room once he'd realized they weren't going to let him leave and had demanded a lawyer.

That had been a while ago, maybe even a few hours. He'd finished the cup of shitty coffee they'd given him earlier and waited, not really impatiently. He knew he was probably in a little bit of trouble for hitting the car salesman, but considering what the car salesman had done to him Jared thought a lawyer could probably get the assault charge dropped. Other than being concerned about how much the lawyer's services might cost, though, Jared wasn't really worrying. He looked up when the door opened, frowning at the man who walked in and ignoring the armed guard who stepped in right behind him. "You aren't a lawyer."

"I don't have to be, I'm not here to ask you any questions." The man put down a stapled sheaf of papers in front of him. "Kind of pointless, I think, serving you the papers *now*, but bureaucracy, you know? Maybe you can sell the movie rights to someone, make some cigarette money." And with that incomprehensible remark, he turned on his heel and left the room, the guard going out with him.

Jared looked at the papers, the top one of which appeared to be a form, then picked them up. Petition for adoption of minor child? He recognized the car salesman's name as the petitioner and smirked, not bothering to read the rest. Stupid bastard, had he really thought Jared wanted to keep the fruit of someone else's loins and raise it? He flipped pages, growing more and more amused. Three pages in was the paternity test, uneven typewritten letters spelling out for all the world to see that Mary had always been a lying slut. He was vindicated. He was going to make photocopies of this piece of paper and send them to everyone who'd ever know him with the words I TOLD YOU SO written at the bottom in big red letters. And he was amazed his lawyer wasn't already in the room plotting out Jared's defense with the paternity form as Exhibit Number 1.

Jared was still chuckling when he flipped the form over, wanting to see what other goodies the court papers had in store for him. A copy of the paternity form was next, this one with his name on it. They must have run it both ways to be sure, make an airtight case and all that. Someone had gotten sloppy, though, because the name of the offspring was wrong. It was a different kid's name, 'Timothy', and the last name was the same as the car salesman's...

But if it was a mistake, why did it say at the bottom that 'Timothy Brenner' was Jared's kid? And why did the next page say something about 'supervised visitation only'? Why did they think Jared would want anything to do with someone else's kid, especially one that belonged to the guy who'd stuck it in his lying slut of a wife and tried to force Jared to raise the result?

Jared ripped through two more pages, and then the explanation was there in the form of a second court document. A case being brought against the hospital, for damages and pain and suffering and all the usual petty bullshit lawyers liked to stuff into a case when they went after something big enough to pay off. A whole bunch of legal gobbledygook swirled around words like 'criminal negligence' and 'falsification of medical records' and 'failure to commit due diligence'.

Slowly, the meaning became clear. Someone at the hospital had realized, fairly early on, that two babies had been sent home with the wrong parents. It wasn't an uncommon mistake, although it wasn't always easy – or cheap, for the hospital, anyway – to correct. So the someone

had tried to cover it up, had been found out when Jared had told the police who the actual father of 'his' child was and they'd checked into it, and now that someone and the hospital they worked for were about to get the living shit sued out of them.

For not telling anyone what Jared had known all along, that the kid he and Mary had brought home hadn't been his son. But vindicated as he felt, Jared realized that he now had an even bigger problem he – and his lawyer, who still hadn't shown up – would have to solve. Because the car salesman had possession of Jared's son, and that just would not do at all. Did he think he was going to get to keep him? Flipping back to the first page and reading the rest of the petition for adoption confirmed it; the slick bastard was actually trying to *adopt* Jared's son, which definitely wasn't going to be allowed to happen.

"Guard!" Jared yelled, and kept yelling until the man opened the door again, looking annoyed. Jared didn't care. He shoved the wrecked pile of papers across the table. "Give those to my lawyer," he ordered. "And tell him to get off his ass and get in here, I need him to draw up custody paperwork. That bastard I 'assaulted' has illegal possession of my kid and I want it back. Now!" he insisted when the guard didn't move. "Get him now!"

The guard stepped aside, and two burly police officers came in and told Jared to stand up. The detective from earlier was behind them, saying something about murder charges and booking and coming along quietly. Jared rolled his eyes but stood up and let them put the restraints on him. "Give those papers to my lawyer," he ordered the detective. "This has all been a mistake, and those charges are going to be dropped. And I need him to draw up custody papers based on those paternity results." The detective picked up the papers, not even looking at them, and Jared let the officers pull him out of the room. The lawyer would sort it out, he wouldn't be in jail for long – the judge would understand that it had all been a mistake, that Jared had only acted the way any other husband would have. And in spite of current circumstances, Jared was actually feeling quite happy and already making plans for the future.

He'd always wanted a son, after all.

Wish Granted

Final Round entry, NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2015
by L.S. Christopher

Making sure his wife was taken care of was all Hank really cared about. But if he could get his revenge at the same time...well, that would just be the cherry on top.

He'd been at this job for years, and for years he'd taken pride in his work and done it perfectly. Today was no exception. No fingerprints on the doors or rails. No trash anywhere. Not a single footprint or speck of dust showing on the polished marble floors. Hank smiled at the gleaming floor, a little sadly. He'd put in a complaint two weeks ago about slick spots after polishing, filed an incident report about a fall that hadn't happened a week after that. And he'd sent his union rep a message a couple of days ago about his supervisor blowing off both the complaint and the report, which was her usual way of dealing with complaints.

The union rep was on vacation and not checking his mail; Hank had counted on that. All the evidence would point to an accident and the insurance would pay up for his wife. It wasn't a lot, but it would be enough to see Helen comfortably taken care of for the time she had left. That was what he'd cared about most. He had also wanted to get some revenge on the greedy bitch who'd further shortened his Helen's life, though. He'd found a ritual online, a dark and bloody calling for vengeance, but if it worked his death would accomplish both of his goals instead of just one. That way he wouldn't be leaving any loose ends; everything would be taken care of.

Hank checked his shoe covers and walked across the marble floor just as cautiously as he usually did, pulling his mop bucket along beside him. The service elevator was right by the back stairs, and he let the bucket swing a little wide so it would tip, giving himself the opportunity to try to stop it, to let the tractionless shoe covers cause him to slip and fall into the stairwell. He aimed himself to slide under the rail and go plummeting into the three-story concrete void head-first. And as he fell, he mouthed the final words of the ritual: "*My only wish...*"

Kandi stalked down the uneven sidewalk in a snit of epic proportions. She tugged at her sequined bolero jacket, tempted to take it off because her sweat was making it itch but not wanting to carry it and risk dropping it in the street. The current heat wave had turned the city into a hot, muggy mess, sweltering during the day and swimming in sticky yellow fog at night. Consequently, business was nonexistent – most johns didn't want to do it in the open because cop shows had made them afraid of cameras being everywhere, and going inside anyplace for even half an hour guaranteed that everyone involved would need a shower or four to get the stank off. Not like the hourly rentals had air conditioners, after all.

Hence her detour into the warehouse district tonight – not to mention the professional detour she'd taken weeks ago which had necessitated it. She didn't like being down here, but if she wanted the money, this was where she had to go. Damn that guy, anyway. Maybe she'd tell everyone at the bar that he was into kinky shit, mess things up for him as payback for inconveniencing her. The thought made her smile, glossy cherry-red lips stretching into an unfriendly curve. It would serve the bastard right.

She'd just barely missed stepping into a stiletto-eating grate in the sidewalk when she finally saw anemic red neon poking through the fog: Lucky's Bar. The sign was over a dull steel door with a little caged window in it, and the aged, faded brick of the surrounding walls was

unbroken by any other opening until the next door down, whose barely visible yellow-lit sign seemed to indicate that tattoos were available inside. Kandi's lip curled. She'd moved past visiting holes like this years ago, she was definitely going to tell everyone the guy only liked it doggy style and barked all the way through. And if anyone gave her shit, she was going to double the price for him getting his wallet back.

The door opened with a groan from fog de-lubricated hinges, letting out a hot cloud of smoke and the smell of cheap whisky and sweat. Great, no air-conditioner in here, either. The lights inside were yellowed and dim, casting dirty shadows that made the narrow space look even smaller. There were a few battered tables, one populated by two fat old blue-collar guys nursing tap beer in dingy glasses. Neither of them so much as glanced up when she came in, although another fat old guy sitting at the bar looked over his shoulder and sort of rolled his eyes before going back to his own drink.

The bartender was a big guy himself, with a jowly red face and gray hair, and he didn't look pleased to see her. He slapped a meaty hand down on the bar when she started to sit down. "Little out of place in this neighborhood, aren't you?"

Kandi shrugged and sat down anyway. "One of my johns told me to meet him here, so here I am. You don't like me, take it up with him."

He blinked at her, shaking his head. "None of my regulars told a whore to meet them here, try a different lie."

Triple, she was charging the bastard triple. "He left a message saying I could find him here, okay? The guy owes me money, I'm here to collect it. His name's Hank. When's he usually come in?"

"Usually? Never," the big guy told her. "Hank's not one of my regulars. I know why he sent you here, though." He held out his hand. "Give, I'll take care of it."

Kandi scowled at him. "Unless he left the money with you, no way."

"He did say he wanted you to have something," the bartender allowed, drawing his hand back. "You called his wife, right? You know, she tried to kill herself over that. She was sick already and botched it, ended up about as lively as a potted plant."

"Not my problem – he shouldn't have been cheating on her, should he?"

Much to her surprise, he smiled. It wasn't like any other smile Kandi had ever seen in her life. It was wide and amused and somehow...nasty, the kind of nasty that makes you want to go find a shower and scrub your skin raw to get the feeling off. "Aw, isn't that sweet – a whore that thinks she should be the morality police and get paid for it. New business venture, is that it? I guess you are getting a little old to draw them in with your looks."

Her mouth dropped open, but before she could say anything the guy sitting further down the bar snorted into his drink. "Ought to be out there taking advantage of the fog, keeps them from seeing you're too old to pull off that outfit."

Kandi shrieked in outrage, sliding off the barstool. "You...you bastards! I wouldn't do either one of you if you paid me a thousand dollars – I wouldn't have done your buddy Hank if I hadn't needed the money, he was old and fat and smelled like bleach! And he wanted..."

"Nothing special, just something he couldn't go through with?" The bartender was still smiling. "He smelled like bleach because he was a janitor, over at the courthouse – honest profession, something you wouldn't know anything about. Hank was a good guy, loved his wife a lot."

"But she'd been sick a long time and he was getting kind of...desperate," one of the guys back at the table put in. "Poor bastard."

“Yeah, and then this washed-up whore stole his wallet and tried to blackmail him,” his buddy added. “What’s the world coming to, Lucky?”

Lucky, the bartender, shook his head. “A heap of shit,” he answered. “With rotten little cherries like this one riding on top. What do you say, boys, should we pluck this one off for Hank? It was the poor guy’s last wish, after all.”

Kandi made a dash for the door. The men were laughing as she yanked on the door too hard and made it fly open, stumbling out into the sickly fog, abandoning the sidewalk to run across the pitch-black street. Halfway across, the heel of one of her stilettos caught in a manhole cover and she fell flat on her face. The semi driver never even saw her, blaming the bump on shitty roads.

Her death barely made the news, just a third-page blurb about an unidentified hooker found dead in the warehouse district, having apparently been run over by a truck during the night. The police couldn’t figure out what she’d been doing there, since there wasn’t anything on that street or for blocks in either direction, and the only clue to her identity was a fresh tattoo of a cherry on her chest with the stem flowing into the scripted words, *Wish Granted*.

