

**First Hand of the Night:
A Collection of Five Early Stories**

By Liam R.W. Doyle

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PREVIEW OF: Smashwords Edition

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**The following is a preview of the six stories contained in the collection:
First Hand of the Night by Liam R.W. Doyle.**

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Thank you for your interest – that's all I ask for. Enjoy!

A Price in Every Box

This story was originally published in Moon City Review 2009.

A suitcase was an embarrassing container for the evil of the world, but it was all Pandora had in her apartment to store him in. The wheels on the suitcase broke off when she got it nearly to the first landing of her apartment building. While they weren't a great help, the plastic rollers had, for a while, helped her round the top of each step.

She pulled and strained halfway to the second landing when Craig from 3C ascended into view and offered a hand. Craig was annoying, crude, and every afternoon when they passed in the foyer he would give his latest unasked for assessment of what was helping the country descend to hell in a hand basket. Fearing what she would have to gift him in increased attention in return for his assistance, she reluctantly dismissed his offer to help her—but he would have none of it. With a smile and a grunt, Craig grabbed hold the bottom of the suitcase and helped lift the container to Pandora's fourth floor landing. He gave her a wave and a "Have a good day," and flitted back down the staircase whistling a cheery tune. Craig: still annoying, though now *differently* annoying.

Craig was just the latest in a disturbing trend she noticed. An hour after evil's capture and already things all around her started to seem different. She realized she hadn't heard a car horn in quite some time, the constant buzz of people yelling at each other from open windows had transformed to the bleat of compliments and well-wishing, and the only time she heard a siren—it was followed by the laughter of children the cop had been entertaining.

She had been searching for evil, for *him*, how long now? So long she couldn't recall. In fact, there were years, centuries, in there she had even forgotten her search altogether. Nevertheless, she finally remembered earlier this year, after she dumped her latest boyfriend (and it was she who dumped him, don't let him tell you any different) when her existential angst led to her realize she had been asleep on the job.

It was a lucky break when she found him conveniently down the block from her apartment, across from the Fifth Street deli she ate much too many carbs in. And now it sat in a scuffed Samsonite, leaning against her apartment door. She didn't give much thought as to why he, it, evil personified was in the city, her own city, on the same block that she took her morning jogs down. But if there was anything "Uncle" Zeus had constantly scolded her on, it was her thoughtlessness. Now she would show him, she thought.

She got evil . . . him, it (she always did have problems with what to call it, him, her, since he liked to change shapes and genders at a whim—one of the reasons recapturing him after she released him from his golden cage had proven nearly impossible) across her threshold and unceremoniously plunked the suitcase on its back in the hallway. She latched the three locks on her door, even though she realized it probably was no longer necessary. Pandora sat on the deep walnut-brown wood floor next to the suitcase. He hadn't made a sound all this time since Pandora accosted him on the street, which she found quite odd. No complaints, no bargaining, no threats. She knew he was the master of trickery and deception, so she couldn't quite understand why he put up no fight and didn't attempt to trick his way out of this.

Unless, his silence *was* a trick.

Pandora fingered the diminutive silver padlock that bound the zippers together. She should check, just to make sure he was in there. Maybe he'd escaped. Maybe, somehow, he had swapped something else in his place at the last second and she never realized. She imagined flinging open the suitcase to find a fire hydrant or a potted plant or a flood of endless joke springing snakes. She had to know . . . *had* to make sure. . . .

The matching diminutive key found its way home, she started to turn it, expecting the dry *chunk* of the lock popping open—when the ring of the telephone snapped her out of the trance. She pocketed the key with a glare at the luggage, blaming it for being inherently cruel to her overactive sense of curiosity, and padded to the telephone in the living room.

"Where is he?" the fierce and earnest voice on the other end immediately demanded.

"Who? What?" She was still somewhat addled from her earlier reverie.

"You know I know when he's contained; we're bonded."

"Skathi? How did you get my number?" Pandora was rattled: The women of the Norse pantheon always intimidated her. Her fellow Olympian immortals were generally haughty at best and passive-aggressive at worst. The Norse were just aggressive.

"Like I can't use Information?"

"But I'm not—"

"I called Nezha, alright?"

God, Pandora thought. *I go out with the guy for one decade and ever since he's still stalking me, keeping track of me—and everyone knows it.*

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Detuned Radio

John didn't know exactly when it was he'd become a zombie. Time seemed to slip by unnoticed a lot more these days. It had always had a sort of slippery quality, passing by his awareness with ease despite a rotund and heavy disposition. But now, since he'd changed, the days passed as a snowy gray blur. He had tried to pin down when he'd stopped being alive—it may have been last week sometime. He had a feeling it might have been longer. There was no particular moment, no significant event marking the change. It must have been a gradual process that started weeks or months ago, for all John could tell.

He sat at the breakfast table of his comfortable suburban house, spacious and child-free, while his wife, Julia, stood at the sink with her back to him. She kept the house immaculate. She seemed to have the extra time John felt was siphoning away. In addition to her hobby of keeping house, she was also an avid gardener and worked three days a week at a local florist. She had been generally unavailable for most of their marriage; she was even scarcer since John changed. He couldn't blame her, really—but it didn't make him feel any better. Although, he had stopped feeling much of anything some time ago. He sat staring at the empty plate in front of him, placed there every morning, originally from a sense of hope, then habit.

Julia rinsed out her coffee mug and placed it upside down on a washcloth. She left the room having said nothing all morning. John stared at the empty Pfaltzgraff plate in front of him until his watch beeped to tell him to go to work.

By mid-day John had accomplished a few tasks, filed a few files, typed a couple of reports. He didn't remember doing any of it. His productivity had noticeably decreased over the last few weeks, but he still managed to keep his supervisor off his back. At first Joe would come by his cubicle once in a while and ask him if everything was OK, if he was feeling well, if everything was fine at home. If he'd seen a doctor yet. Finally, he stopped coming around at all, except once a day he'd walk by and glance at John and walk quickly on, perhaps just seeing if that day was the day John stopped coming in. He felt like it would be acceptable, maybe even encouraged, for him to stop coming in to work. But he was compelled: Work had to get done.

He noticed he had been staring at the fabric wall of the cubicle. He looked down at the report he was working on and realized he couldn't make out his own writing. This filled him with a misty anxiety that swirled around his consciousness, creating thick and thin patches in his already foggy thoughts.

One thought stuck out in the mist and he lingered over it—there was another reason he found himself coming to work. Sarah. She worked in an alcove across the long, squat room filled with the maze of cubicles. He had always appreciated her presence, her flowing brown hair, her softly-angled face, the sweet smell of apples that seemed to float around her whenever she walked by or he had the good fortune to have reason to stand next to her by her desk, leaning down to look at something on her monitor. Her hair absorbed the falsely natural light from the fluorescents, somehow converted it to a brilliant and warm glow magnified and reflected back at him. Sarah.

His mind danced through these old and indelible thoughts more easily than anything else of late. They came to him effortlessly and stayed in his mind longer than thoughts of Julia, or his supervisor, or even how to spell the word "report."

John found Sarah, who was attractive and charming and compelling enough before, even more appealing now that she too had started to amble in a certain way. Her skin, still smooth and soft, had gradually lost some color. At first, John could tell she had tried to use makeup to cover her changing complexion. But sometime last week she stopped trying. Like John, she seemed to be going through the motions of the day, a musician playing an old tune—her muscles performing on their own while her thoughts were elsewhere. Sarah. Whom he shared something with, like an experience they alone participated in and had to keep secret, even from each other, as they went along their day pressing keys on keyboards, moving papers from one place to another, absently avoiding stumbling into people in the narrow walkways.

The day passed unnoticed until noon when the sound of bustling grew, and loud and laughing voices from various locations discussed lunch plans with each other. John grew excited. He almost felt his heart race. He put down the pen he'd been holding unnoticed, clenched, and opened his fist to work away the stiffness from gripping it for so long. Lunchtime was enjoyable now: not because of the pause from work, which used to excite him, but because for the last two days Sarah had come over to sit by him in the building's commissary.

Even after he found eating lunch increasingly unfulfilling, he continued to sit at his usual spot during lunchtime out of habit. For several days he still bought his regular sandwich, sliced apples, and diet soda, though he would end up throwing most, then eventually all, of the food away after sitting and staring at it for an hour. He vaguely sensed people beginning to appear uneasy with him around, but finally he was ignored altogether like furniture or one of the maintenance people he used to not notice. A couple of days ago, Sarah, who used to eat with another woman on their floor, (Becky, who had evidently found a new place to eat lunch and with new people), sat across from John without a word. She pulled out the chair and lowered herself with a slightly awkward grace John could still appreciate. She sat, staring at the plastic salt and pepper shakers, hands dangled at her sides, as if this was the place she was relegated to and had no choice in sitting.

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The End of the Beginning

This story was originally published in 2009's M-BRANE SF #10.

Ash was too late to see the end of the universe; it was already dead when he woke up.

At first, he had no idea what had happened. He'd expected to be floating in the secured testing area in high Martian orbit, or at least find himself surrounded (cosmically speaking) by the familiar planets and moons of his solar system. Instead, he seemed to be nowhere. Outside the viewports was complete blackness. The sensors picked up nothing nearby, then nothing at a distance, then nothing as far as they could scan. Not a single photon nor x-ray nor infrared wave nor alpha particle. Nothing.

He thought he must have still been asleep. The situation seemed too surreal, too hard to wrap his mind around, like trying to read a sign in a dream: no matter how hard one tries the words may change and shift or become meaningless. Ash tried to understand what the readings told him, but they made no sense. He would look out a port, see a part of the outside of his capsule in the dim illumination of one of his own exterior lights—but beyond that the dark was an oppressive, suffocating thing. His eyes kept trying to view through and past the impenetrable obscurity, into infinity, at something. The dark was absolute, unyielding and his eyes grew weary of working at focusing on the featureless black.

He considered the possibility that he was trapped in an alternate dimension. The entire process of time travel required the manipulation of at least two of the other seven dimensions humans could not directly perceive. A process barely understandable by those who discovered and developed the technology but made it work anyway. At least, they had made it work with countless unmanned probes. Ash was the first human to make the trip into the future. He was the "person of the bravest heart and noblest of will who would risk experiencing the greatest unknown yet to challenge the human race," so said the Prime Minister to the handful of scientists and technicians collected on the facility where the secret project was housed. No sense getting the hopes of the other twenty billion citizens of the doomed Republic up too early. After all, despite the fact that every one of the last several probes came back with convincing data proving its trip ten, one hundred, one thousand years into the future, the visual data was always blank with only vague hypotheses of quantum-uncertainty-this or Schrödinger-apprehension-flux-that, to explain it. It would require a human mind and adaptability to make sense of it.

It didn't make sense to Ash. He thought maybe this was why the probes came back with nothing to see—but at least they had telemetry data and sensor readings of being near the test theater above Mars. Readings of solar activity, debris density. Ash's readings, on the surface, came up zero for everything.

Then, after a couple days (according to the Martian Local Time the capsule continued to calculate) of sleepless investigation and increasing body aches and illness, the answer became undeniable. Something had gone wrong, that was apparent from the beginning: He hadn't been sent one day into the future as had been planned; he had been sent hundreds of billions, trillions, perhaps googol years into the future—where all matter has decayed and there is nothing left in the universe except an ever-expanding fabric. This reality became apparent when the results of the dark matter analysis completed: The concentration of the invisible and normally imperceptible matter was a percent of what it should have been, which also explained why the failsafe return, should anything go wrong in transit, had failed. The dimension fold system was powered by the (previously) ever present and bountiful dark matter. But whenever he was, it was so far into the future that even the dark matter had either decayed or expanded so thin as to be, for all practical purposes, non-existent.

The moment Ash realized the unavoidable truth of the matter, he collapsed back in the only chair in his capsule. Part of his mind was relieved by the resolution of the mystery, the other was devastated by the realization that he was trapped. There was no possible way to return to his own time, his home (State provided of course), his daughter Lahya.

He dimmed the already faint cabin light all the way out and the console lights to as few and as low as he could, and stared out the main viewport. At one moment, he imagined the blackness was a cover over the glass, the next he imagined he could see the infinity of space. If he tried hard, he could see for an instant a field of stars hanging in the ink. But it was only fleeting phantasms. He thought about the fact that regardless of when he was, technically he was still at the same point in space he occupied countless epochs ago. Well, Ash mused, that's not exactly right. By this time, the eighty cubic meters or so of volume that his capsule once occupied was probably stretched tens of kilometers, at least, in all directions around him. He wondered if the expansion of space had indeed continued to accelerate, what its rate was now and whether it was affecting him in some way.

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At Least There's No Traffic



Actor and writer Wil Wheaton, and multi-award winning sci-fi author John Scalzi, set up writing contest challenging people to write a fan-fic that explains this painting by artist Jeff Zugale below. So, I gave it a shot.

The style is a departure from my usual fare, as the story embraces surrealist absurdity. But, look at the picture that inspired it—how could it not!?

It contains many in-jokes that only fans of Wheaton and Scalzi are likely to get—but I think it should still be enjoyable as well to those who don't get it.

Enjoy.

* * * *

And so as I write this, the hordes are massing. This may be

"Master?"

This may be the final entry I write, dear reader.

"Master. . . ."

The pencil paused over the discolored page. Wil Wheaton clenched his hands into fists. "What. What is it? I'm writing. You know I'm not to be disturbed when. I. Am. *Writing.*"

"I . . . there's a Scalzan at the gate, Master."

Wheaton sighed. "There are many Scalzans at the gate."

"I know, Master. What I mean is there's one requesting audience."

Wil turned the chair to face his servant. The creak and moan from the battered chair accentuated the tension in the broken room. "And what does the misshapen creature want?"

"He brings word from Lord Scalzi, Master."

"I'm sure it's too much to ask that it's a surrender."

"Master?"

"Nothing. I'll be right there."

"Yes, Master." The servant scurried away on four legs. Wil closed his eyes, flopped his head back, and sighed.

After a moment, he rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands and turned back to his pages. He scribbled several more lines, read what he wrote, then shuffled the pages into a neat pile. Wil bound them with a rusty paperclip and placed the stack carefully in an accordion folder—each pocket marked with a month and each month sorted by dates. It was the only way he had left to remember what day it was. He wound the string around the grommet, securing the folder shut, then placed it carefully in front of the row of similar folders on the shelf.

Shaking out the cramps in his hand, Wil crossed the expansive room with one and a half walls left standing and descended the staircase to the main hall. He hadn't cared that the room he chose as his study was more a rooftop than a room—it no longer rained and the view of the glowing pyroclastic flows in the everlasting night was inspiring. Plus, the ravine that encircled the gated community he and his people lived in kept his building at a safe distance from Scalzian catapult and trebuchet attacks. The room could actually be quite peaceful at times.

He reached the cracked marble ground floor and checked his posture. Tall, stern . . . good. Breathing controlled. Hand on his side— no, in his pocket. No, on the banister. Good. He nodded to the doormen. They lifted the bar and one of them pulled open the left-side door revealing a stocky, orange and green mottled figure in scale armor made from soup cans. "Enter." Wil's voiced boomed impressively in the stark chamber.

The once human creature walked at a casual pace to the center of the room. His grin revealed a row of teeth broken off at the gum-line. "I have a message for you from The Great and Terrible Lord High Scalzi."

"Really? That's what he's using?" The question was rhetorical but Wil paused regardless. "Why couldn't he have just sent it over the wall with the last barrage of useless junk?"

"Lord High Scalzi, in his graciousness, thought you would appreciate the . . . human touch." The messenger sniggered at his own expense.

Wil sighed. "Fine. Let's hear it and be done with it."

"Indeed. Lord High Scalzi wishes to grant you one last opportunity to hand over Rancho Stucko Estates and all properties within its confines, else he shall take it by force."

And there it was. The final, formal declaration he'd been waiting weeks to receive. No more targeted strikes, surprise raids, hours long bombardments. Scalzi was getting as tired with this siege as he and was going to make a final, all-out strike with his army.

"When?"

"In one hour."

Crap! Now *that* was unexpected; though, really, not surprising. Wil had been keeping his forces on alert the last several days, expecting either a warning such as this followed by a day to consider and worry, or no warning at all. Deep breath . . . but not *too* deep. Don't look flummoxed—just calm.

Wil strode to the messenger in measured strides. "You tell your Lame and Ridiculous Mister Stoned Scalzi that I have received his message, and he is welcome to come and try to take my lands if he thinks he can. You tell him I think if he had the ability, he'd have done so by now instead of wasting my time with his annoying pea-shooters."

The messenger cackled and said, "Lord High Scalzi said you'd posture like a boy playing king —"

Wil closed the last few feet between them, grabbed the messenger by the single, wood-like horn protruding from the side of the shocked man-creature's skull, and pulled his head down to poise his right eye over the tip of the sharpened pencil in Wil's right hand. "I ought to kill you right here and now and throw your corpse back at Scalzi as my answer."

The messenger licked his lips and cleared his throat. "I would be happy to deliver your reply verbally." His putrid, infected breath wafted up to Wil's nose and he grimaced in reflex. Wil continued to hold the creature's head over the pencil for a beat, then threw him from his grasp. He wiped his hand on his shirt as the messenger recovered from stumbling.

"Out of my sight," Wil waved him off and turned his back to him. He heard the man chuckle, no hint of fear or anxiety. Wil closed his eyes and listened to the receding footsteps and the barring of the door. He took a deep breath . . . exhale.

He turned back to the hall, "Sandra!"

"Here, Master." A tall, rubbery figure stepped from the shadows. Her skin was as black as what she'd stepped from, her hair flowed behind her like a silk cape. "Your orders?"

"Ready all forces. Make sure there are scouts at length along the wall to watch for flanking attacks, but keep it as small as possible. I need all available troops in ranks at the front gate. We shall meet them on the field."

"Yes, Master." She began to slip away.

"Sandra."

"Master?"

"Also, ready Fluffy Bitterpants. I shall ride her into battle."

"Master." She was gone.

Wil mashed the palms of his hands into his eyes and shook his head. He climbed back up the stairs, already battle worn.

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The Sword Remembers

None of us was surprised by the flash or the thunder; the body that fell from the sky, though, was unexpected. It didn't fall far, maybe four feet. We were expecting lightning, or fire, or even swarms of three-eyed monkeys—but when I saw Laonid also looking perplexed, I knew the surprise appearance was not *his* doing.

Jon, being the kind of person to act first and let someone else think later, was first to shrug off the event. He threw his axe directly at Laonid's chest. As expected, it bounced off the magician's invisible shielding. This time, however, it was just enough of an added distraction following the odd body appearance that Laonid stumbled and didn't react as fast as he should have. This gave me the opportunity to move in with Scarab, my blessed dagger, and cut through the magician's shielding—and throat. I held onto the dagger as Laonid pulled it down to the ground with his collapse. I gave it a quick turn for good measure, then jerked it out and let his lifeless body fall beside the one that recently appeared. Eager sparks of energy jumped off the mage's body and disappeared into the air as the flesh gave up the gift of magic as it was already giving up its heat.

I looked around. Jon was picking up his axe; Terrin was sitting against a nearby tree, pressing a wadded cloth against his bleeding face; and our new guest lay at my feet. I knelt close, as I rebound my fallen hair into the leather band, to see if this fellow was any livelier than Laonid and watched the stranger's chest move shallowly but regularly. That was something. Life established, I examined his appearance: Odd clothing—too clean and well tailored to be one of us, a commoner, yet too flimsy and simple to be well-born. He had no armor, weapon, or tool on him to confirm what his clean, soft face and hands already told me—he was neither a soldier nor laborer. He *must* be well-born. Perhaps he was recently robbed of the rest of the clothing people like him tended to wear.

"Terrin," I called out looking up and over the stranger. He was gingerly touching at the edges of the slice on his cheek. At my hail he snapped to and came over to kneel next to me.

"So, what have we here, Sarah? Obviously not an illusion."

I nodded. "He lives too. Out cold. His hair and skin make him out as a Northerner, beyond the Range, but his clothing seem much more suited to the warmth of the southern lands."

"He doesn't exactly have the build of a Northerner. Do you think he might have been robbed?" I smiled and told Terrin that had been my guess as well.

Jon finished tapping Laonid with his toe and came over beside us. "Did the spell-slinger there create it or something else-" and that's when the stranger decided to wake up, screaming. Even Jon was startled and backed up a step. Poor Terrin had yelped and rolled back off his heels, flopping ungracefully in the dirt. My reaction was somewhere between the two. The stranger stopped and took a breath, then for the first time looked around at us. He looked as if he wasn't quite sure what he was seeing, also looked a little scared. I had to feel bad for him: wherever he came from, he had been doing something somewhere far away and was suddenly whisked here surrounded by people he'd never met. I almost remembered to what it was like when I first encountered the unusual and unexpected myself. Many years ago. Almost.

Terrin had lifted himself to his elbows and rose up beside the stranger. The man watched Terrin, his eyes constantly looking at the gash in my companion's face that had started bleeding again. "Don't be frightened; we're not going to harm you. What's your name? Where do you come from?"

The stranger looked at him, then back at Jon and me before resting his gaze back at Terrin. For a moment I was afraid he couldn't understand until he replied, "M-my name is Randy. Randy Collins. I, well, I'm from Kansas City." I looked to Terrin, and Jon, both shrugged at each. "Where am I? How'd . . . how did . . . where am I?" he stammered as he looked about himself. He still had the look of someone that had just woken up and was unsure if he was still dreaming.

"Well, you're just outside the town of Fade," I began. The stranger scowled. "Which is near the High Woods." He continued scowling. "In the Kingdom of Dellerin," and that's when he looked decidedly shocked.

"Kingdom? What do you mean '*Kingdom*'?" None of us was sure how to answer that. "Last I remember I was hiking through the woods and then *bam!* A white light . . . and, and then I was here."

Jon tried to help with, "Look, let's cut to it. This bastard," he tapped the body with his foot, again, "evidently tried to cast something nasty at us. Instead he. . ."

"Summoned," Terrin offered.

"Yeah, summoned you from wherever you came from by mistake. Which allowed us to kill him. The bastard." He tapped the body with his toe again for clarification, in case we forgot who he was referring to.

"I . . . but, I, . . ." Randy kept looking back and forth among us. When he fainted, I think we were relieved.

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