

Hi! I'm Tonia Thompson--horror writer and creator of NIGHTLIGHT: The Black Horror Podcast. This week we have a story from an author I hadn't read before, Lamar Giles. After reading this story, I can't wait to read more of his work. I'm excited for what's coming soon and I think you will be too.

Wilson's Pawn & Loan

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"It has to be here." The woman's conviction was weak. "Mr. Wilson said I had ninety days to claim it." She tapped the handwritten claim ticket with his father's signature on it for the fifth time. "See? I'm only a week late."

For the fifth time, Eddie read it:

Item 10329754-A

Gold, heart-shaped locket and chain

QTY: 1

His father's prissy-neat signature verified the ticket's authenticity. Like she said, she was a week past the agreed-upon claim date. Still, he felt no better.

Eddie had been in charge of the shop for the last three weeks and he hadn't sold the woman's locket. Which meant his

father had breached the agreement.

No surprise there.

"Eddie," Pop had told him on more than one occasion, "sometimes you can tell they ain't coming back. If you got a buyer in the door looking to pay top dollar, you got to look out for the shop."

Yeah, he thought, try telling her that.

The woman let out a series of hitching sobs that had Eddie scared she might go into an asthma attack, "I shouldn't have . . . done this. Things were tight but I . . . shouldn't . . . have . . . done this."

"I could just be looking in the wrong place." Another lie. He knew where Pop kept the good shit. "How about I keep looking? It might turn up in a day or so." He didn't know why he said it, but hope glistened in her watery eyes.

She blinked away her tears. "Really? You'd do that?" Eddie swallowed hard. "Sure."

"Thank you so much." She flipped over her claim ticket and scribbled her name and number. "Please call me here as soon as you find it."

On her way out, Eddie couldn't help but notice the thin patches at the elbows of her sweater and the pilling of her stretched, too-small skirt. A nylon rag tied her hair and the

sole of one shoe flapped like a jawbone. All that going on and she still managed to scrape up the required ninety dollars to buy back her locket. He wondered whose picture he'd find in it, if it were possible to find it at all.

Chimes sang when she opened the door. At the threshold, she said, "Your father would be proud of you, Little Eddie."

Then the pneumatic arm swung the door shut behind her. Eddie said, "You must not have known Pop very well." He was alone again in a prison of other people's things. Thanks a lot, Pop. Then, as an afterthought: Bastard.

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The blanket of night had been draped over the birdcage that was Portside, VA. Eddie sat under yellow light bars in the empty store while his mother detailed the mini-feast she'd prepared just because.

"Ma, you don't have to . . . why are you slaving over a stove on a Wednesday? I told you. . . fine, fine. I'm about to close anyway . . . okay, I'll lock up and come straight home . . . love you, too. Bye." Eddie hung up, and checked the five alarm clocks--priced from ten to thirty dollars--next to the phone. 6:45, fifteen minutes until closing.

He tapped the register. His plan: eject the tape and do the day's accounting at home. He nearly wet himself when he glanced

up and saw the man leaning over the knife display.

"Shit," he shrieked, stumbling off his stool. "When did you come in?" He hadn't heard the door chimes.

"Only a moment ago," the stranger said. His voice was a mix of Barry White and Darth Vader, soothing and terrifying. "I wanted you to finish your conversation with your mother before we our business." He stood--more like unfolded--to his full height.

Easily seven feet tall, he could dent the plaster ceiling panels with his head if he suddenly hopped. He wore a dark fedora, and a pale jaw was the only part of his face visible beneath the brim's shadow. His trench coat was black, its sash double-knotted and cinched so tight around his narrow waist that the bottom portion flared like a ball gown. Eddie couldn't see his feet beneath the hem.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, something irrational screamed, That's Death, man!!!

"What business do you and I have, mister?"

"None." The stranger glided to Eddie's counter. "My dealings are with your father."

Are. Not were. Present tense. This guy didn't know Pop was dead. If he was Death, or an agent of, he hadn't been checking his email.

Eddie relaxed and cursed his silliness. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but my dad passed almost a month ago."

Usually, folks offered their condolences when given the news. This man reached into the inner flap of his coat and returned with a creased, yellowed slip of paper. He placed it on the counter. "I have a claim ticket."

Eddie retrieved it. Unfolding the slip, he saw the shop name first--Wilson's Pawn & Loan--and instantly recognized the wrongness: It was the ampersand.

The place was called Wilson's Pawn and Loan. It used to be the other way, when Eddie was still a kid, but he remembered when Pop changed it. An S & K Menswear had opened on the same street as the shop. Shortly after, a billboard went up for the country/western radio show, Donkey & Kim In The Mornings. Eddie had come from school one day and overheard his father ordering a new neon sign and stationery; he suddenly felt the store's name was, "Too much like the white folk."

Still, though unusual, it wasn't impossible for the guy to have a ticket from back in the day. Whatever he'd come to claim was surely long gone, but the ticket could exist. It was the next bit--the item number below the old letterhead--that proved the guy was trying to run some kind of game.

It read: 1.

"Okay, man. What's the deal?" "I've come to claim what's mine." "With a fake ticket?"

He showed no emotion, no signal that he was busted or embarrassed or offended. "The ticket is genuine. Please collect my merchandise."

It was time to school this joker. "Pay attention, okay. I'm going to show you why this ticket can't be real." He walked to a slip of paper under spotless glass on the wall behind him. "See this? This is a carbon of the first claim ticket my Pop ever filled out."

The fedora brim tilted in the direction of the frame.

"The item number on this ticket is 2. The reason it's not number 1 is because my dad messed up on the first ticket and had to throw it away. So your ticket can't be genuine. The item number 1 ticket was gone before I was even born."

"And you father isn't above lying, of course." There was no inflection, no indication that the words were a question or a statement. But Eddie's mind created its own implications.

Defensive now, "Fine. You want to play games. Since you've got the very first claim ticket to ever come out of here, let's see what it's for." He read the description. "An Umbra Stone? What's that supposed to be?"

"It is about this size." With hands as ghostly pale as the

exposed portion of his face, he indicated something roughly the size of a ping-pong ball. "An oval cut ruby."

"It looks like a ruby?" "It is a ruby."

Yeah, right. Eddie pointed to the jewelry display to the stranger's left. "As you can see we carry a wide array of all the finest stones from quartz to precision crafted cubic-zirconias.

Unfortunately, rubies are currently out of stock. Beyoncé and Jay-Z cleaned me out like an hour ago."

No smile, scowl, or anything from the stranger. "It would be in the safe. The one in the floor, beneath the filing cabinet."

Sweat beaded on Eddie's chest and back, pasting his undershirt to him. That safe was his father's most closely guarded secret. Even Eddie hadn't known about it until the old man revealed the combination on his deathbed. When he'd passed the knowledge onto his mother, she was as shocked as he.

Of course he'd checked the safe since his dad's death-- nothing there but two-hundred dollars cash and some pictures from old titty-magazines--but, this guy even knowing about it was . . . unsettling.

"What did you say your name was, man?" Still expressionless. "Check the safe, please."

Without another word he trudged into the office, slid the file cabinet aside, pried up the floor tile with his house key, and spun the dial left-right-left. The door swung outward and, for a moment, he saw what he'd left in the safe the last time he'd opened it: legal documents regarding the store, and dust. He blinked.

When he looked into the safe again, the air wavered like gas fumes on hot asphalt. He blinked again.

A small bundle rested in the safe now. "What the hell?"

He reached for it, hesitated, then grabbed it. Something was rigid beneath the dirty cloth.

He tugged at the folds of the rag and revealed an angular, red facet.

Eddie glanced toward the front of the store. From there he couldn't see the stranger and the stranger couldn't see him. Yet he had a feeling that the stranger would know exactly what he'd found.

Fuck it. He tried his hardest not to think about the fact that he couldn't have overlooked this item in the tiny safe. Just give it to him. Whatever gets him out of here.

He swung the safe door closed and returned to the storefront. "It's weird, but I guess you were right, Mister,"-- please take it and go--"I'll get a bag for you."

The bags were under the counter. He knelt to retrieve one, scanning the cubbyholes beneath the register while he unwrapped the jewel. His fingers tingled.

He looked to the stone, the apparent source of the pins and needles.

Oh, God.

His throat cinched like a fist; his heart raced like a rabbit's in a snake's cage.

The flat face of the ruby was a translucent red window--the window to a cell. In that cell a small, naked man pressed his face to the glass. His little fists pounded silently. His screams went unheard--at least in this world.

Eddie didn't mean to speak. His body remembered how to breathe, though, forcing him to suck down a lungful of air and immediately vomit it back up in the form of a single word.

"Pop?"

He stood quickly and backed into the worktable behind the counter. His feet scrabbled at the floor; he was going nowhere fast.

The Stranger extended one hand palm up and said, "Hand over my property, please." He was smiling, now.

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"That's my property you're holding," the Stranger said

again. "Give it to me." "What is this?" Eddie held up the ruby.
"What's going on?"

That chalky grin widened. "I don't think I really have to tell you. I believe you're smart, despite the things your father told me. You can figure it out."

Maybe. In the back of his mind there was a theory--a twitching, scurrying thing that wanted to come into the light. Eddie shut the hatch on it, refusing to go there.

"Who are you? I can't figure that out on my own."

"At one time, I was a silent partner in this," he sneered, his fedora brim swaying like a turret as he surveyed his surroundings, "establishment. It's all yours now. As soon as I collect my dividends, that is."

"My father didn't have any partners. He opened this shop with his own blood, sweat, and tears." He realized he sounded like a human recorder, playing back his father's tired spiel verbatim.

"Again, if Big Eddie said it, then it must be true."

This guy was crazy. That's all it was. Simple solution for that, though. "Look, I don't know you and I don't buy your BS. You've got to go. I'm calling the cops."

Not taking his eyes off the Man in Black, he scooped up the receiver, Instead of a dial tone, he got screams.

"Don't give me to him, son. If you ever loved me, don't give him the stone. Please!" Eddie slammed the receiver back on its cradle hard enough to crack the plastic casing.

The Stranger chuckled, a low grumbling like gears in a huge clock.

No more denying that something wasn't right here. This was beyond the scope of an off- his-rocker customer. This was supernatural. Evil.

Eddie snatched the pump-action shotgun from the catch beneath the counter. "You've got five seconds to get out of here."

The fedora titled sideways; the expression beneath the brim nonplussed. "You're throwing me out? I thought you wanted to know my name."

"It's going to be 'victim' if you don't roll up out of here."

The Stranger held up his clenched fist, knuckles down. The fingers uncoiled, and two red shells the size of C batteries bounced, then rolled off the counter. "You may wish to load it first."

Eddie worked the pump. No shells ejected. The gun was empty.

He dropped it and ran for the back of the store, slipping

the stone into his pocket. At the exit door, he twisted the thumb latch and lunged into the alley. Only . . . it wasn't the alley.

His hips collided with the countertop. The Stranger's open hand was inches from his face.

Somehow, somehow, he was back where he started.

"My name is R. S. Skinner." He lowered his hand. "I met your father long before you were born; helped him accomplish select goals. He, in turn, made a promise. I imagine you can guess what the promise was and that you understand what it is you hold in your hand."

"It's a rock. That's all."

"Let's stop this game, Little Eddie. You know what it is."

It wasn't the bright, shimmering red of Dorothy's slippers. The ruby was murky, the color of scabs. Yet clear enough for him to see his father inside.

It wasn't his father though. Not exactly. Men of flesh and blood don't shrink to fit inside jewels. But what of their spirits?

Like the stranger--Skinner--said, he knew what it was.

"Are you," he took a deep breath, and forced the question that had to be asked, "are you the devil?"

"Hardly. But we do deal in similar goods." He huffed. "The

Devil. Maybe you are as dense as Big Eddie claimed."

Indignation stabbed Eddie's stomach. "If you met my dad before I was born, then there's no way he could've said that about me."

"If? I have no reason to sully your father's name. He did that well enough on his own, wouldn't you agree?"

Eddie said nothing.

"I met him before you were born, and we've spent much time together since. Often, it was Atlantic City where our paths crossed. Black Jack was his game. Whenever he went on a losing streak he'd bring you up. Funny, he always equated you with bad luck."

Nice try, buddy. "You've got the wrong guy. My dad never gambled. He said it was just another way for fools to part with their money."

"Poor Little Eddie, still clinging to your father's word like a buoy in a storm. Tell me this, what kind of business trips does a sleazy pawn shop owner like Big Eddie Wilson need to take? Since you've taken his post, have you been invited to any Pawnbrokers of America conventions?"

He opened his mouth to utter some other feeble defense of his dad--another lie. He could not force another untruth past his lips.

"Another question for you, Little Eddie. If your father was so great with finances, where's the money now?"

Eddie lowered his eyes, not out of fear of R. S. Skinner-- though he was afraid--but because he thought the man was reading his mind. He'd asked himself the same questions in the last few weeks.

"I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I? Let's talk about something else."

Skinner glided to a display case full of everything from iPods to old smoking pipes. He passed his pasty fingers over the glass with a whisper. "What a gorgeous pistol. Your father planned on selling it to a man named Lance Dartin. Lance works for a criminal group known as The Organization. A fixer, if you will. He can't buy guns through the usual channels, but your father didn't judge a man by his colored past." Skinner's fedora rose. "It was all green to him.

"Dartin used to pay Big Eddie double for the . . . convenient shopping. Unfortunately, your father died before he could put this baby in the killer's hands."

"You can't know that." His voice sounded small.

"Oh, but I can. Just like I know you don't doubt what I'm telling you." "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? I just want my stone."

Eddie was tempted to toss the stone into the black shadow beneath his hat. He wanted Skinner gone. Forever. But something still gnawed at him. As wrong as this whole conversation was, there was something else not right tugging at him.

"Now that I've met you, I think you would've done all right at Commonwealth University."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

Skinner's grin returned. "Big Eddie used to tell me over the Roulette wheel about your desire to teach, that's all."

When Eddie was a junior in high school he'd brought college up to Pop. The response was a grunt followed by, "Waste of time and money."

All he saw in his son's future was pawn broking.

After a while, his college dream faded like every other dream he'd had outside of this damned shop. "My dad talked to you about my schooling?"

"Only that you wanted to go," Skinner said. "Personally, I thought it was a good idea." "Well I already know what he thought about it. So don't bother with the mudslinging."

"You're right. No need to open up old wounds. It's a shame though." He examined an electric guitar on the far wall. "You'd think if he was willing to pay Terri's tuition, he would've paid yours."

Eddie was in motion before he knew he was. He rounded the counter, crossed the sales floor, and yanked Skinner around by his coat arm. From this close, he thought his initial estimation of seven feet may have been conservative. radiator hot, to the point of discomfort.

But Eddie was heated, too. "Who the fuck is Terri?"

"Merely your father's friend. A female."

"He had a mistress?"

"I wouldn't go that far, Little Eddie. Your father's tastes weren't like that of a young man's. He enjoyed spectating more often than not. From what I understood, the young lady was an excellent entertainer."

"You're saying he paid some stripper's way through school?"

"Don't sound so put out. It's not like anyone was going to leave her a claim on the family business. I believe she's a teacher now. Isn't that something?"

"That mother--" he stopped, snatched the stone from his pocket and directed his anger towards it, "--you mother fucker. How. . .how could you? I'm your son."

"Don't take my word for it," Skinner said, breathing ice upon him. "I'm a stranger remember. You don't know me from Adam. I could be making all of this up."

He wasn't though. That was the thing. Eddie knew his father

was capable of the lying and the cheating. He had a black heart and bottomless soul, and he hadn't care about anyone but himself.

But, a slithery voice in the back of his mind hissed, who's got his soul now? The little man inside the ruby continued pounding on the walls of his prison. "Are you going to give me my merchandise now, Eddie?"

Something sparked in Eddie's mind. Something small and bright enough to be visible through the angry fog that clouded his mind. His mental recorder--the same one that had sucked up so much of his father's bullshit over the years--played back what Skinner just said.

Are you going to give me my merchandise now, Eddie?

It rewound farther, to when he'd attempted to call the cops and heard his father's shrieking, fearful voice through the receiver.

Don't give me to him, son. If you ever loved me, don't give him the stone.

That word. Give.

"Mister Skinner, I have another question for you." "What else do you want to know about Daddy dearest?"

"No. My question's about you," Eddie said, shaking his head, "Why haven't you just taken the stone from me?"

Silence.

"You're not a man--I know that now. Why try to outsmart one? That is what you're trying to do, isn't it?"

Skinner's voice turned indignant. "I wanted to open your eyes, Eddie. Your father's been cruel to you in ways you couldn't even see. I just wanted you to know the truth."

"I thought you just wanted your stone."

The air changed. It was hotter than before and crackled with unseen electricity. The hairs on Eddie's neck and arms rose like porcupine quills.

Mister Skinner's coat suddenly seemed too small for his frame. Where he was slim before, he'd thickened. The fabric flexed and bulged like a sack of snakes. "I'm going to give you one more chance to hand it over."

Eddie stood his ground. "If it were that simple, you would've done it at first. You can't take it from me, can you?"

"Be done with my stone, boy," Skinner spat, "you owe your father nothing. He's trapped you in a meaningless existence and erased your future. Give him to me and he'll pay for what he's done. If anyone deserves the torment I have in store, it's him."

The guitar fell from the wall. Two display cases exploded. The shotgun shells on the floor went off, spraying a back wall with buckshot. Through the display window, Eddie saw a car veer

off the road, onto the sidewalk and back on the road, barely missing a telephone pole.

Still, he did not budge. "I'm not giving you this stone."

Skinner's chest heaved for a few scary moments, then his breathing steadied. He shrank back into his previous form and tugged on the lapels of his coat primly. "Even after all I've told you and all you already know, you won't hand him over to me?"

"I don't know what you are, Skinner. But I'm not giving him to you. He's a messed up guy, but he's still my dad."

The brim of the hat shook side to side. Skinner lowered his head and spoke to the floor, "You're still a cheat, Big Eddie. Even in death."

Eddie didn't know what that meant, but when the fedora brim rose again, he saw Skinner's eyes for the very first time.

They were two rubies--Umbra Stones. In each, his father shrieked and pounded the wall.

The stone in Eddie's hand became so hot so fast that he had a second degree burn on his palm before his brain could send a signal to drop it. He let the Umbra Stone fall to the floor, where it shattered into a thousand clear pieces. It had turned to glass.

The Man in Black turned for the exit.

"No, wait," Eddie ran to grab him, but he spun, spotlighting Eddie in those blood red eyes. "You can't take him. I didn't give him to you."

"I already have your father, Little Eddie. From the moment his final breath left his worthless carcass he was mine."

"That's not true. Why'd you come here then?"

"A man like your father doesn't have the power to trade his soul for the meaningless things he desired. His willingness to barter on that level already guaranteed that someone like me would lay claim on his essence when he died."

Skinner, apparently done with the conversation, turned to leave once more.

Eddie pounded on his back with his good hand. "No. You came here for me to give him to you. You can't just take him."

Skinner didn't look back when he spoke. "I came here hoping you would be willing to give him up. I'd been counting on it. When I met Big Eddie, he was single with his life in the toilet. He told me he wanted a business, money, and women. In return, I needed something that he was capable of coming up with on his own. The ingrate couldn't even get that right."

An invisible rubber band drew taut and snatched Eddie off his feet, and into a display wall. A rainstorm of merchandise followed, showering him, causing bruises, nicks, and cuts.

From beneath all the junk, he watched Skinner step onto the sidewalk. Watched his black elbows piston as he undid the sash at the front of his coat. The thing that was Skinner shook off the garment, revealing no body, no true arms or legs. There was only a swirling mass of shadow and blood. An inky tendril yanked off the hat and tossed it. The shadow split into blotchy winged shapes and flew away.

The wind from their wings sounded like his father screaming. What had just happened?

. He pulled himself up, his eyes watery, and went to the glass shards on the floor. Before he could kneel and examine them more closely, a snatch of yellow caught his eye.

On the counter, Skinner's claim ticket spun like a top in the draft from the open door. Eddie snatched it up and read the print. It was different from before.

Wilson's Pawn & Loan Item #1

Wilson's Corrupted Soul Qty: 2

Quantity 2?

With that, Eddie understood. His father hadn't sold his own soul to R. S. Skinner. He'd offered it as a down payment. The balance was a soul that had yet to be corrupted

A soul that didn't even exist at the time of the deal.

A soul that wasn't supposed to care--let alone fight--for a

loved one.

You're still a cheat, Big Eddie. Even in death.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW: Lamar Giles

TONIA: Today, we have with us Lamar Giles, the author of "Wilson's Pawn and Loan". Lamar, can you tell us a little bit about the inspiration for this story?

LAMAR: Sure. "Wilson's Pawn and Loan", that's sort of my thesis on the Faustian deal, that concept in horror fiction. I've been a horror reader my whole life. It always fascinated me. It bothered me that people could deal with demons on the level of selling their soul for profit, because being raised in church, it just always occurred to me that if someone's willing to deal on that level, the demon could probably get to them eventually anyway without giving anything up.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And so it just occurred to me that if you had to deal and it had to be equitable, what could you offer in addition to your own soul? And that's sort of where "Wilson" spun out of, because I thought about the allure of being able to corrupt an innocent. And have the demon play that game with someone without them knowing, and their own innate goodness would save them.

TONIA: Wow. That's a really interesting twist on the Faustian deal. I'm a big fan of like, crossroads spirits and things like that. I find them really interesting. What gave you the idea of wanting to see how someone would corrupt an innocent?

LAMAR: Well, probably just having grown up with an odd relationship with my own father, him not being very present as I grew up. And I still have a fondness for him, like we get along well. There's no animosity there. And in the case of Eddie and Big Eddie in the story, it occurred to me that a son who had much harsher father than mine might be easily tempted to punish that man. But being that Eddie isn't his father's son, he hasn't succumbed to the full influence of Big Eddie. It's just not in him to be that bad. And I wanted to play with that a little bit to see how the game of cat and mouse goes., and the fact that Big Eddie always sort of discounted Eddie Jr.'s smarts. He's smart enough to figure out what's happening with Mr. Skinner and save himself. And it just... I guess it comes back to the idea that even if the patriarch in your life doesn't do what they're supposed to do, you still have the power to control your own fate and live well.

TONIA: When I first read it, you know, I thought I knew how it was going to go and then it didn't go that way, and I was

like, "Oh, wow". I really like that you didn't go with the obvious route. I thought that was pretty cool.

LAMAR: Well, out of curiosity now I'd like to know, where did you think it was going?

TONIA: So I thought this guy's here to trade souls, but I didn't see him trading Eddie's soul. I just thought, "Well, okay, he's gonna give him Big Eddie's soul and be done with it because, you know, he's not playing no games. He doesn't want to deal with that". And then when it came down to it's also a bargain for his soul, but he had to give it up, you know, willingly or be tricked into it, I guess I should say, I didn't see that part coming, that it was actually a deal for two souls rather than one. That's what stood out to me because it's usually when you talk about these bargains, it's usually you can trade your own soul, but you can't trade anyone else's soul.

LAMAR: Well, I'll tell you, I've not had the chance to talk about this story in many years. It's half Faustian deal and half Rumpelstiltskin, the idea of trading a first-born child for whatever. So I just wanted to tell you that's where that part came from.

TONIA: That's amazing. I think that's where a lot of the good ideas come from. You know, you grab something from one place and something from a different place that, you know,

people normally wouldn't associate together, and you bring them together into a really compelling, fresh story that people aren't able to predict the ending for and don't see it coming, even when they think they see it coming. So, how did you get started as a writer? When did you start writing?

LAMAR: Well, I started writing when I was eight years old. I was in third or fourth grade, I can't remember exactly which. And our school had this competition called a Young Author's Competition, and up till then I'd been a prolific reader. My mom was really big on us having book in the house and going to the library, and I'd never really considered that people actually wrote the stories. I grew up in a factory town next to an army base, so the people I knew were factory workers or soldiers, not writers.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: So, when the teacher gave us this assignment to make up a story and illustrate it, I sort of went all in. I probably took it more serious than anybody else in my class. I ended up winning that competition. I wrote a story called "Giant Dinosaur Inside" about a kid who pulls a giant dinosaur out of a cereal box.

TONIA: Oh, that's cool.

LAMAR: Yeah, and they liked it and it gave me a boost. Ever

since then, I've played with words, and I wanted to see what other stories I can make up. And I never even considered writing being a career until I read "It" by Stephen King. And when I started to learn more about Stephen King and understanding like, that book, he used words we use every day to make me feel physical fear. I'm like, "I gotta learn how to do that".

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And so, I spent my teen years sort of playing around, messing with different starts and stops on novels, and I got sort of frustrated because I didn't see people like me in any of the stories I liked to read and write.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: So, ended up coming back to science fiction, fantasy and horror when I discovered people like Tananarive Due, Steven Barnes, Brandon Massey. And when I was in my early twenties in college, I said I'm gonna take a crack at it and ended up selling my first short story. Didn't sell any stories for three years after that, all rejections. Then ended up selling stories to Brandon Massey, and it sort of snowballed from there. I sold my first novel when I was thirty-one, and have been at it pretty much full-time ever since.

TONIA: Awesome, that's amazing. What's the name of your novel?

LAMAR: The first novel... Okay, I self-published some novels in my mid-twenties, and they're more of the fantasy/horror stuff, like you see in "Wilson's Pawn and Loan". Some of those novels are called "Live Again", I had a short story collection called "The Shadows Gallery", I co-wrote a fantasy book with a friend called "The Serpent and the Stallion", and some other little things here and there. As far as big publishing, my first novel sold to a big New York publisher, HarperCollins. It's my Young Adult mystery novel, "Fake ID".

TONIA: Oh, Young Adult. I love Young Adult stuff.

LAMAR: Oh, wow. Okay, I hope you give it a try.

TONIA: Absolutely, absolutely. I'm intrigued now.

LAMAR: And I've published several since. My novel "Endangered" came out after "Fake ID". Last spring I had another mystery come out called "Overturn". And in 2019 I have two books out, another mystery called "Spin" and a middle grade fantasy novel called "The Last Last-Day-of-Summer".

TONIA: Nice. You're pretty busy then.

LAMAR: Yeah, yeah, it's been a busy couple of years and it's good.

TONIA: Yeah, that's amazing. That's great. So, you said you started off self-publishing, and then you sold a novel to a New York publisher. How did that process kind of come about? Like,

how did you decide to start self-publishing and then how did that morph into more traditional publishing?

LAMAR: Well, the self-publishing sort of came out of frustration.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: Because I had been trying to sell novels or get an agent, rather, for many years and it just never worked out. And I knew I could improve as a writer, but I also knew I was writing stuff good enough to at least get a second look and it just wasn't happening. I believe a lot of it had to do with me being a black male.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And in the industry I was trying to break into, there's just not a ton of us working.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: So, I decided to self-publish while my novel "Fake ID" was with my new agent. And she was getting pushback trying to sell that to major publishers, and I was just determined not to let strangers in New York determine my publishing fate.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And I sort of forgot about "Fake ID", just focused on the self-publishing. And actually was on a train to a conference to promote my self-published work when I got the

phone call from my agent that "Fake ID" had sold to HarperCollins.

TONIA: Nice.

LAMAR: So, I started being more traditionally published.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: That's mostly been the gig since then. That was back in 2011 when that phone call came. But you know, I think there's benefits to both sides, traditional and self-publishing. I hope to get back to self-publishing someday.

TONIA: Yeah, definitely. I went to a conference called Blacktasticon in the middle of June this last year, and you know, one of the things we talked about on one of the panels was how, in general, traditional publishers don't necessarily know how to market to a black audience. Even if you're a black writer the things you write certainly can be mainstream. Anyone can enjoy a lot of it, but they look at you and they say, "Okay, this is a black author. They're gonna have a black audience". And then they still don't even know how to market to a black audience because they're assuming black people don't read, or black people don't like fantasy, you know, whatever the case may be. And one of the things that a lot of people said there was they wanted to self-publish because they felt they could market their work better than anyone else. It kind of got me thinking

about as a black writer if, kind of going that self-publishing route and building your own audience first, and then letting other people kind of put in their money to grow that would work really well because it sounds like it's worked really well for you.

LAMAR: Well, you know, and I always say when you're talking about having a professional writing career, it behooves you to learn as much about the industry as possible. That includes self-publishing, that includes traditional. And I think what happens is, like you said, you have the power to market yourself in a way that a publisher may not care to.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: But I think it also behooves you to know that certain product may do better in the self-published arena versus traditional. And if you have opportunity to explore both I think there's benefits, because I don't think my children's books would do as well self-published as they have through a traditional publisher.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: Just because of the way those systems are set up with libraries and schools and things of that nature.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: But I certainly believe I have adult work still in

me that my traditional publisher may not be interested in. I think you want to be as well-versed in all aspects of publishing as you can if you're thinking about making a go at it.

TONIA: Yeah, yeah, most definitely. I think a lot of people overlook the fact that writing is a business. You're the products, writing the products so you can't discount that side of it. It's never gonna be you just write and that's it, you know, unless you blow up like, real big. Like, Stephen King, all he has to do is write, he doesn't have to worry about anything else. But he had to worry about that at the beginning, so... I think it's important that people think of it as a business as much as they think of it as a creative endeavor.

LAMAR: And to use King as an example, I mean, even after he was "Stephen King", he was still exploring ways to change the business model to his favor. I don't know if you know much about the way his deals work, but he's like a partner with his publishers now. So, he's not one of the writers who takes advances, like the rest of us do. He actually puts money into the marketing, the publication and printing. So, he splits profits 50/50, where the rest of us get a much lower percentage.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: So, that's another example of even if you find success, you still have to figure out ways to maneuver in the

business in ways that are smart for wherever you are at that point.

TONIA: Yeah, I think it's... You always have to be thinking. And I do think traditional publishers... You know, while it's great to be traditionally published and all of that, there's definitely a gap, I think, between what people are looking for as readers, and what traditional publishers are doing to reach them and things like that. I feel like there's a disconnect there and writers are much more connected to their audience than publishers are. You know, publishers know what libraries and booksellers want, but they don't necessarily know what readers want, I think. And I think it's important if as a writer you are involved in that process, you know what your readers want, you know what your readers like. And you're going to be able to do a better job of reaching your readers than a traditional publisher might. They can reach booksellers and libraries better than you could, so... You know, looking at it as a partnership, I think. I think that's smart.

LAMAR: Yeah.

TONIA: For sure. So, you said you write some young adult, middle grade. What books do you think are out right now that you would recommend for middle grade, YA... Anything for someone out there who's looking for something written by a black author. You

know, they're looking for something that's horror, because you know that's another thing. There's a lot of Young Adult, middle grade. People are wanting horror, not a whole lot of it out there. Are there any authors that you could recommend?

LAMAR: Certainly. Tracey Baptiste, who does a series called "The Jumbies" which deals with some creatures of Caribbean folklore, I think would fit pretty well. There's... I have to be careful here, and the reason why, I'm a National Book Award judge in the children's category this year, so I can't really publicly talk about new books.

TONIA: Okay.

LAMAR: But I can name authors, and I'm trying to think of some authors who... Justina Ireland, who I think has done an episode of the podcast, or her story was featured. She's definitely one to check out.

TONIA: Yes.

LAMAR: Tananarive Due and Steven Barnes did a couple of Young Adult novels a few years ago. "Devil's Wake" and I think "Domino Falls".

TONIA: Oh, I didn't know... I didn't know they had done Young Adult stuff.

LAMAR: Yeah, they were zombie novels in the Young Adult space. Jennifer Bosworth is an author I enjoy. She's done some

stuff with supernatural powers and things of that nature. I feel bad because I tend to have to like, pull out my iPad and look through my Kindle list to remind myself of stuff that fits.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: But those are some names that come to mind.

TONIA: Yeah, I mean, those are all great. I read a book last year... year before last called "Hoodoo".

LAMAR: Oh, yeah, by Ron Smith, right?

TONIA: Yes, yes, by Ronald Smith. And I thought it was amazing. If I'd have had this book as a kid, like it would have been lit. I was really excited about it. So I think that it's good that that kind of stuff is finally getting out there because I certainly didn't have access to that kind of literature growing up. Pretty much all I read was R.L. Stine, Christopher Pike. You know, I didn't read anything with a black main character in it until I was well into adulthood. So, what would you say influenced you as a writer knowing that there wasn't a whole lot out there that let you see yourself in the literature?

LAMAR: Well, I'll tell you honestly, as a teen, I sort of started to hate reading and writing because of that very thing. And it was wholly the books of Tananarive Due and Steven Barnes that sort of brought me back into the fold. Then I would later

discover Octavia Butler, come across Brandon Massey, L.A. Banks, may she rest in peace. She's been gone for a while now, but her books were fantastic.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: So, names like that sort of made me realize that there were people doing the sort of stuff that I was missing. But we definitely needed much more, and I felt like if I could improve, if I could get my skills up, then maybe I could be one of those contributing people. And that's sort of where I focused my attention going into the Young Adult space. There's kids out there who are like me.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And I can maybe give them the sort of thing I could never find.

TONIA: Right. So, I have an eight-year-old son, and people who have watched some of the videos I've done for Nightlight have seen him coming in the background, like he's very, very involved. But, you know, he doesn't have to imagine a world like ours where he didn't see himself. He's able to read all of these books and all of these stories where people that look like him and have experiences like him are the main characters in books. And it's wild to think about the kids growing up today don't know what that's like to not have, you know, that reference that

you could see yourself.

LAMAR: I know, I know. And it's amazing, right? I think about my nephew, you know, the fact that I grew up being a big comic book fan. And I can take him into a comic book store and show him many examples of people who look like him. I mean, Captain America was black for a while.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: It's wild, and I'm happy. I mean, it's the sort of thing that we've been working for, right?

TONIA: Yeah, yeah, definitely. So, what would you say... I want to ask you about YA or middle grade. What would you recommend to anyone who's looking to read horror by a black author in the adult space?

LAMAR: Hmm. I'm trying to, because... It doesn't have to be recent?

TONIA: Correct.

LAMAR: Okay, so... I really love, and I keep bringing her up because I've yet to meet her face to face. It's one of my dreams to meet this author. I keep bringing up Tananarive Due.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And "The Good House" is the sort of thing that chilled me to the bone when I first read it.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: And I go back to it often. It's one of those stories that's just so perfectly done and just so devastating when you read it. That's always like, my go-to. Now I'll mention something that's more in the fantasy space, but I think there's some dark imagery there that will align with horror fans. Have you read any N.K. Jemisin?

TONIA: Yes.

LAMAR: You're familiar with the "Hundred Thousand Kingdoms"?

TONIA: Yeah. I've heard of it, but I haven't read that though.

LAMAR: Okay, so I think that's fantastic. I think it does some incredible things with like, deities and how dark that can get. I think about growing up and always being exposed to Greek mythology.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And even though this is set in a different world where it's not attributed to any culture that we know, the stuff she does with mythology, I think, fits a more Afro-centric vibe.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: And I would recommend her work as well.

TONIA: So, in terms of films, what would you recommend?

LAMAR: Ooh, so films. Obviously, we've all seen "Get Out"

by this point.

TONIA: Hopefully. If you haven't, I don't know why you listen to this podcast.

LAMAR: I know, right? Well, goodness, what have I seen lately? I'm looking forward to "Lovecraft Country", which is the new show Jordan Peele is supposed to be producing. That book was well done. I mean, the thing... We know it wasn't written by a black person, but it's about black people. So, that's... What else have I seen? I haven't seen a lot of horror movies other than "Get Out" that feature black folks. Have you seen anything that you can recommend?

TONIA: Actually, yeah. On Netflix there's a film called "Transfiguration".

LAMAR: "Transfiguration", right.

TONIA: And it's about a black boy who wants to be vampire. And I think it's really well done, it's really... It's a really good movie. But yeah, other than that there's not a whole lot, especially new stuff. I don't think there's a lot of stuff out there, I hope that's going to change, especially with the success of "Get Out". I think a lot of studio executives are starting to really key in on maybe there's some money to be made.

LAMAR: Well, I know... Can I back up a second? 'Cause some

things...

TONIA: Of course.

LAMAR: You asked me about books earlier. Anything by Victor LaValle.

TONIA: Oh, yes, yes.

LAMAR: One of my favorite things that I read in the last few years was "The Ballad of Black Tom". And when I brought up "Lovecraft Country" I was trying to think, like why that bothered me so much when that was coming out, and it was because at the time I didn't know that "The Ballad of Black Tom" was being adapted. I was like, "Oh, man, someone's doing 'Lovecraft Country', but no 'Black Tom'"? But Victor announced they're actually going to be doing a TV series of that, so that is something to read and definitely watch when it comes out.

TONIA: Right. And they're also doing "The Changeling".

LAMAR: I heard, I heard.

TONIA: If they're doing it as a film or doing it as a series, I'll have to look and see. But he announced that a couple weeks ago and I was like, "Yes." 'Cause "The Changeling" was really good.

LAMAR: Yes, fantastic and I don't know if you're into comic books at all, but this comic book "Destroyer", which is a take on Frankenstein is fantastic.

TONIA: All right, I'm gonna make a note of that. I like we're both just like, trading notes. These are all things we should be listening to or watching or reading.

LAMAR: I just, I read so much I can hardly think of anything off the top of my head, I pull my ipad out. Yeah, but definitely anything by Vic.

TONIA: Yeah, yeah. He's great. He was a big supporter of the podcast. He helped amplify it when we were raising money for our first season, so... He and Tananarive both have been very helpful at getting the word out about the podcast.

LAMAR: Yeah, they're both fantastic. Amazing.

TONIA: Great people, great writers. Just... yeah. All around great. Yes, Tananarive Due, I think... Her name comes up a lot when I ask people who influenced them, or what was kind of the first thing that they read. It's her and Octavia Butler. I think there's something to be said about that. It's two black women. You know, black men were writing horror as well, so I'm curious to hear your thoughts about why perhaps black men haven't been as influential in horror as black women, at least in the last couple of decades. I think that's changing, but I don't think that was always the case.

LAMAR: I think there's just this lasting mythology about black men's place, or men's place in literature, where... we

just don't read as much. Just don't write as much. And people just don't spend a lot of time trying to push males because there's still this like, self-fulfilling prophecy that only women are going to read, so we have to push the women writers. And if males break through, they break through because it tends to be on their own.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: I think that probably has more to do with it than anything. If you're talking about the black community, I can speak to like, growing up in the South. Like, just the vow to not be involved in anything dark, or spiritual that isn't church.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: I can remember growing up and enjoying the things I do, and the church folks around me were saying, "You messin' with them spirits. You messin' with them demons, that's not good. You need to get away from it". And I think, you know, a lot of times, that's part of it too. It's just, it's weird in our community how overtly or covertly we push boys and men away from the written word. And I think that probably has a lot to do with what you asked.

TONIA: Yeah, yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. There definitely is a... I think too if you look at schools and

things, you see little girls reading a lot more, whereas if you see a little boy reading, he's more likely to get picked on.

LAMAR: Yeah, I got picked on, so I know. I know firsthand, just like, how bad an idea it was just to walk around my neighborhood with a Stephen King book.

TONIA: Right.

LAMAR: I think a lot of that attitude still persists. I like that I'm seeing like, with the rise of comic book movies, the Marvel cinematic universe, it's becoming more accepted to see a little boy walking around at the very least with a Spiderman comic.

TONIA: Right, right.

LAMAR: I couldn't do that when I was young, so I mean I think we're having a bit more enlightenment these days.

TONIA: Yeah, for sure, it's moving forward. And I think it's amazing that you're a part of that. You know, you're writing middle grade stuff and Young Adult stuff because I think that that's one of the things needed the most right now is to make sure these kids have these experiences. And as they grow up, making sure we're writing things for adults as well, but it's... There's something about having literature that affirms who you are as a child... you know, your brain is still developing and all this other stuff. You know, I think that that

changes the world more than, you know, adults changing things that affirm.

LAMAR: I agree.

TONIA: I think it's important, but I think they're important in different ways.

LAMAR: I agree. A friend of mine named Kwame Alexander, a notable Young Adult author, he's won the prestigious Newberry Medal. He makes this joke, you know, that he's given up on the adults and he's just focusing on the kids now. It's just, I mean, not to be cliché, but children are the future. I mean, adults have... We're fading out, we're messing up a lot.

TONIA: Yeah.

LAMAR: So, they need to be ready to step in and fix this garbage fire that we're dealing with in society right now.

TONIA: Train them through literature.

LAMAR: Yes, yes.

TONIA: I like that. So, can you tell us a little bit about what you have coming up. Is there anything you want to promote, that you think we absolutely must read of yours. Tell us everything you want us to know about you.

LAMAR: Well, certainly. If there's anyone out there who enjoys my latest mystery novel "Overturn" is available. It's about a young poker player in Las Vegas who has to figure out

who framed her father for murder. It's got a lot of twists and turns if you like that sort of thing. Give it a try.

TONIA: Yes.

LAMAR: Next month, the anthology I edited called "Fresh Ink" will be available, and that features some of the rock stars of Young Adult literature right now. So, that will be a good one to share with children and adults alike.

TONIA: Excellent.

LAMAR: In January, my next mystery novel "Spin", which about two friends who have to solve the murder of an up and coming DJ or face the wrath of her online fandom, that will be in stores January 29th. And then my middle grade fantasy "The Last Last-Day-of-Summer" about two cousins who accidentally freeze time on the last day of summer.

TONIA: Ooh.

LAMAR: That will be in stores April 9th.

TONIA: That sounds amazing. I'm in with that. Let's freeze time on the last day of summer.

LAMAR: I'm so looking forward to it. It's a new direction for me, writing something supernatural for an audience so young.

TONIA: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR: What I can't wait for people to see is the artwork

that accompanies this book. We have an artist out of London called Dapo Aiala, and he's doing some fantastic illustrations that I think are gonna blow people's minds.

TONIA: I can't wait to see it. I'm excited, I'm excited about this. So, can we pre-order any of this stuff yet? Is it up for pre-order?

LAMAR: "Spin" and "Fresh Ink" are available for pre-order. "The Last Last-Day-of-Summer" is not quite available for pre-order yet. But my website is lamargiles.com. Go to the "Books" page and you'll find links there.

TONIA: Okay, excellent. So, I'll put links in the show notes to pre-order the two that are available to pre-order now, and when the link is available to pre-order "The Last Last Day of Summer", hit me up on Twitter, email, whatever and I'll post it on the Twitter account so everyone can get on that. Thank you so much for your time today, Lamar. I hope everyone enjoyed his story. I'll be sharing those links to the books in the show notes, and Tweeting everything out as well as we hear about "The Last Last-Day-of-Summer".

This week's episode was narrated by Rodney Blu.

Thanks for joining us again this week. And thanks to our

new patrons: Shronda, Curtis, and Kenesha. We couldn't do this without you. If you want to see more Black authors paid for their work, visit [patreon.com/nightlightpod](https://www.patreon.com/nightlightpod) to chip in. You can also help by sharing the podcast with your friends and by leaving us a review on iTunes. And guess what?! We now have merch on the website. Go to [nightlightpod.com](https://www.nightlightpod.com) to order your very own hoodie or t-shirt.

Show Notes:

What happens when the devil comes to collect on a soul he was promised? This week's story is from author Lamar Giles.

Narrated by Rodney Blu.

You can find more of Lamar's work by visiting [lamargiles.com](https://www.lamargiles.com).

If you want to pre-order his YA mystery, SPIN, visit [https://amzn.to/2u3yebR](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B083YEBR)

To pre-order his YA anthology, Fresh Ink, go to [https://amzn.to/2NEMR21](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082NEMR21)

And if you're like us, and can't wait to read more of Lamar's work, why not grab a copy of Fake ID, his YA Thriller? [https://amzn.to/2L6x2ep](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B082L6X2EP)