

LORI R.

LOPEZ

*Mister Macabre*

*Presents*

CRYPTIC  
CONSEQUENCES

LORI  
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**Mister Macabre Presents**  
**Cryptic Consequences:**

**A Trio Of Tingling Tales**

by Lori R. Lopez

Fairy Fly Entertainment

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Ghoulish Horror Host MISTER MACABRE introduces three Shorts by Lori R. Lopez to read before turning off the lights and allowing Night's inhabitants to roam.

*Cryptic Consequences* unfolds a trio of distinctly uncanny stories in which there lie stiff penalties for those who invite, let down their guard against, or ignore the warnings of all that may occupy Nocturne! Balancing humor and suspense, these fables allow the Reader to spectate or step into the scene. A frost with an appetite penetrates a house where "The Chill" can be deadly. In the wee hours, when all sorts of thoughts can run through the mind, your home is invaded by a sinister presence and a fear-mongering narrative in "Night Sweats". A young woman's family reunion dredges up old memories or dreads that were better left far behind in "The Mumsies".

Look for the author's Ghost Collection, *Spooktacular Tales*, which will feature many ghastly delights and more Mister Macabre!

"We could all use a little help when the world is dark, the night stirring with clumsy creatures who bump things and possibly you! Why, even Mister Macabre himself may tremble a twitch at eerie noises and knockings when the lights are dim or go out. So duck under the covers with a lamp as you savor these bedtime stories for Insomniacs and Night Owls . . ."

\* \* \*

## **Cryptic Consequences**

*From ghoulies and ghosties  
And long-leggedy beasties  
And things that go bump in the night,  
Good Lord, deliver us!*

*(Traditional Scottish Prayer)*

## **The Chill**

A tendril of frosty vapor rolled under the door. A sinister trickle reaching from Night with beastly hunger. Out on the street, nothing alive or visible stirred before the squat one-story abode except a lawn decoration, a metal painted Whirligig of a monkey in green overalls riding a blue bicycle, suspended on a thin spike driven into soil. The monkey appeared to be terrified. Perhaps he had good reason.

Within the residence a prominent Television flickered and droned, flashes of light from its screen bathing the countenances of viewers feigning concentration, pretending to be enthralled by a program neither had chosen. Lack of agreement led to Stalemate — as in stale mates — resulting in neutral acceptance of whatever came next. A political Talk Show, the opposite of entertainment. They had argued until purple in the face as couples would do. On a vague and minor topic; about everything. Then sat in stony silence, arms folded, and let Fate determine what to watch since they could not.

A stubborn glacier of distance had settled with them on the short sofa. It was a moment that might blow over like a passing Zephyr. A moment that might sink down in a rocky standoff and define their relationship as closely as a Burial Shroud.

Creeping in, the pall approached Hector and Luz. Blithely wove around and betwixt their feet. Scaled upholstery to perch in that icy spot dividing them. A brazen chummy intruder, absorbing a block of resentful lingering spite; solidified yet emanating frigid fumes, this wallish obstruction subtly announced its presence.

Luz shivered and hugged herself harder, forehead crinkled.

Hector uncomfortably squirmed, resettling, brief furrows marring his brow.

The pair refused to look at each other, else they could have noticed something terribly off in the middle of their spat. Something that joined them — separated them — menaced them in the sanctity of their living-room. They were not alone, even as they were not together. It lurked in the sensitive gulf that had grown, the temporary chasm of conflict that developed like a mood with a mind of its own. Occupying, replacing an atmosphere of general harmony and oneness for a brick barrier of contradiction.

Luz wanted to itch her nose. It was so far to touch, a remote glazed promontory. Changing position would be an enormous feat.

Hector sneezed. Loudly. Scaring her.

“Salud,” mumbled Luz — automatic, as if conditioned. *Health*. Then peevishly added, “I didn’t mean that.”

Was the last part an apology? Or a jab? Hector frowned with a shake, his mouth compressed. He couldn’t be positive.

Each withdrew farther into their private corners of the small divan. They had assumed a Love Seat would be cozier than a couch.

The intervening lapse in conversation subverted . . . loaded with unspoken barbwire thoughts; grievances for annoying habits, irksome mannerisms that never seemed to make a huge difference. Perspectives altered. Conclusions insinuated to strangleholds.

Individually, internally they dwelled on a recent statement or deed that riled. Building it into an obsession. *Boy oh boy! Unbelievable!* fixated Luz. *Wow. Man! Que loca!* chafed Hector.

With a jolt of surprise, Luz realized her breaths fogged the air. What was happening? Where did the bitter snap come from?

“I need a b-blanket.” Hector’s body convulsed from head to foot.

So they were speaking again? Just like that? Luz began shuddering too. “Go g-get it yourself. And b-bring one for me.”

Attracted by the dip in temperature of their relationship, the invader usurped what heat remained, causing them physically as well as emotionally to lose affection, passion. Both love and hate. Sapping the ability to either bond or fight. To care or engage in combat. There was a

point when what mattered was keeping warm. They might have gravitated nearer, if they could still move.

The Chill gained substance and strength, its shapeless form drawn by anger. Enwrapping, delving for any fond glow housed in cells. Hugging their contours like a parasitic mantle, a pulsing aura that fed on human discord. At first it almost felt consoling and snug, less isolated. Gradually all they could sense was the draining of their energy, the burning of their emptiness, till they had been reduced to congealed marble statues, unable to communicate despite being more connected than ever — by an expanse of unbending coolness. Permanent, arctic, rime-laden.

Clenched tooth and fist, secluded, a yoke of disparate mentalities thickened. Torpid. Unyielding. Only their piping scream of anguish could escape the suit of armor that encased the couple. Their final act of unity, the combined tone escalated, vibrated, promptly shattered them to freeze-dried bits . . . a mound of dark brittle shards resembling Instant Coffee, which crumbled to powder when gathered by Forensic Paranormal Investigators. One of many teams tracking the cold trail of an eldritch horror through quiet neighborhoods.

Long hours before this, a random roaming malice had thawed back to brume and slipped away to seek its next welcome. A frozen spot, beside tasty hot morsels of blood and flesh.

\* \* \*

## Night Sweats

I am the whisper of unbearable portents. A cautionary tale of turmoil, prodding you. Begging to heed warnings, and not dismiss the obvious. Those noises you hear in the Twilight Hours . . . when your lamps are off and you're feeling vulnerable. When you just about convince yourself they're imagination: the overworkings of an under-the-blankets mind peeping out at shadows that creep and shift, watchful, anticipating. Then it dawns, whether in the Gloaming or that darkest-hour gloom, they are not figments. They are not make-believe, mere tricks of the eye or sleights of hand. Neither are they smoke and mirrors, but *bone*-afide authenticity, as real as it can get. And they are in your face, or will be very quickly if you remain cringing in bed and do nothing! They will find you, hunt you down with phantom treads and furtive stealth, donning crafty leers, orbs and wet toothies agleam. Cunning, they slink and skulk, stalking through the wilds of the nightscape — where anything might lunge, snap, claw.

And you want so badly to ignore the disturbance, go on sleeping, go on breathing, safe and secure beneath covers that are practically no protection yet you have drawn past ears and eyes like a comfy quilt of patches and fluff to lull yourself into complacency. An oblivious denial, while inside you know. You suspect. Your subconscious isn't fooled.

It can be easy, once you let your fancy go unleashed with canine urgency at a park . . . to conjure all sorts of hocus-pocus nonsense, transform the flits and flirtings of Paranoia into garishly gaunt gremlins and wraiths!

It is madness to surrender, to permit entry for even the slightest of terrors or tremors. Vulnerability must be suppressed. Weakness must be tightened. Trepidation must be reined. Held fast in the grip of sanity, or you will succumb to them, rigid and soaked. A lather of chills.

## Night Sweats.

There is no going back from that brink. Once you set foot over the edge. In the midst of obscurity, in the terse blink of a bulging eye. As you contemplate whether the noises do or do not exist, and balk at appearing ridiculous even to yourself . . . as if your worst public gaffe were nil in comparison to the acute embarrassment of jumping at nothing. As if being afraid of your own heart in your ears, the echo of your taps on a deserted street, your elongated shadow on the wall were cause to check yourself into the nearest Asylum, where you might at least feel safer locked in a padded room!

How could you reach this stage? Perspiration sliding down forehead. Pulse knocking like hollow knees as clamminess beads your cheeks and brow; conviction lies within your soul that whatever made the creak, thud, click was no phantom of your intellect but a genuine threat.

And it is out there, waiting.

You cannot hide or abide till morning. You have to peek. And that could be the loneliest second of your life, for there is no greater fear than The Unknown. *Unless* it's seeing . . . The Unthinkable.

Unshod soles touch the floor. A cold surface invigorates. Finally, things are getting interesting! It isn't just another boring day, the usual non-events. Part of you wishes to observe from a distance, a gleeful spectator. Out of Harm's clutches. You inhale deep, lids shut, then slowly exhale. Eyes round, you begin a journey.

What can you use? Perhaps you should have armed yourself. There's something to be said for self-defense. How unfortunate you cannot find more effective protection than a narrow crystal vase. This has to be a dismal dream. Hopefully you'll wake up. Why didn't you take that Judo Class? Or keep that Bee-Bee Gun? (Real guns give you the willies after shooting your foot by mistake. It still hurts.) Meekness and overthinking are seldom the best policies in a case like this. You'd better cross your fingers that instinct kicks in rather than squeamish hesitation. Of course, aggression can backfire. Especially if you miss. You'd better not miss.

Advancing down the hall, you pause and grit your teeth at the squeal of a floorboard underneath. Don't be concerned. You are where you should be, doing what you were meant to do. Fate will have the last laugh. This night you are taking control in one heroic act. There is no button or switch for going back to Start, no lever to reverse once you traverse that threshold between cowering and investigating.

Softly you pad forth, bolstered by the ample heft of your weapon. And discern it again, less faint. Though you still cannot identify its origin. Bracing, abject, you wipe the saltwater from your temple on the knuckles of a hand and wonder at the impulsive courage or ego that possessed you to risk well-being in order to satisfy curiosity. Perhaps survival is so ingrained, you find yourself in awe of those who fight for every breath, every shred of life — refusing to give up! Exercising a stubborn will to live that counters the suicidal urges undermining others in the hour of need. This challenge will measure your tenacious spirit, test your mettle, overcome any malevolent whims or whispers that urge the opposite: to crouch in the corner bowing to fright. Or diminished by Phobia, Depression, Anxiety . . .

There are those who suffer incredible, inexorable amounts of agony, injustice, yet they go on. They fight and strive and yearn to persist, to hang on no matter what they must endure. You understand what drives them, unable to grasp the contrary decision to end it, throw life away in one blind leap, in favor of a possible void or abyss. An eternity of darkness that some label Peace. Who knows what lurks there? Confidence has fled. And now it seems cowardice to quit,

not give it your maximum effort. Death is the ultimate uncertainty . . . as certain as it may seem that it will arrive!

Hear my tocsins. My drab forebodings . . .

Do not dispel me while you waver, poised amid a quandary. My narrative is an amplification of your innermost qualms. Now is exactly the time. This question ought to be met with an open mind, an attitude of slack-jawed wonder. What if it is permanent, a one-way trip that isn't a vacation? Whatever one's faith or lack thereof in a spiritual realm, until each confronts their ultimate instant and departs their flesh, they do not know. They cannot be sure. The tiny voice of Doubt, the minuscule nagging moment of Dread tarries . . . before Death claims you like baggage at an Air Terminal.

You may cling to the view that the world exists through your eyes and it isn't feasible to no longer exist. You have seen lives end. You may even have consumed them as if some are more valid than others.

What if you are just gone? Converted to dust, the stuff of stars or some down-to-earth sediment, and you are never actually awarded the answer? What if Life's biggest riddle, the quintessential puzzle, is a tremendous cosmic joke since it cannot be solved in either state?

Wrestling with the vagaries of a sleepless night, the stakes are never more steep. Among these umbral trenches when the weightiest inquisitions plague, the Past revisits like roots from its grave — piercing to your depths, hauling guilt and sorrow. Losses, frets and failures rewind on a mental screen.

A frown as you resist. Molars gnash.

Listen.

You disregard the voice, stifle the race of thoughts and pulse. This cannot be happening. You refuse to pay attention.

*There.* Confirmation. It isn't in your head. A flood of dismay. You're not ready to go. Inside you intuit a grander purpose behind the noise that strummed your nerves, a bad chord. If only you could spy the impending future that burdens you with worry and pressure. A cumbrous Albatross, dragging you under waves of woe, an anchor and chain wrapped about your neck. Why did you ever get out of bed?

You are suddenly — swiftly — petrified. Unable to call for help. Mortal misgivings swim your veins like eels in canals, seeking fortitude, teeming to devour. Life feels utterly precious. How could you recklessly gamble, take it for granted, even curse it? Your glistening eye-dribbles infinite, more vital than a raindrop in the Sahara! A tear on the cheek of a comatose patient as relatives ponder the duration of their vigil, gripping a cord that leads to the plug.

Everything is at stake.

Tensely you shrug off this reverie, one of those bursts of clarity. The type that often flashes and is gone, but for a vague strobe of apprehension or confusion. This is different, more of an epiphany. The kind you will not soon forget. Carving a rut in your memory, a wrinkle of impression. And then it fades. You blink as the fabric is stirred by a breeze, the veil dancing in place. Brushing it aside as if wading through cobwebs, you barrel beyond the limits of caution and plunge over the precipice of danger, to stop in frustration.

Whatever it was evades detection. Emotions dangle your body and brain in prolonged suspense . . . with space for hyperventilating and Second Thoughts. For rational notions to temper the rash. Instinct advises a flight-or-fight response. Intellect can tiptoe by these alternatives and choose a third. Mulling the consequences of action or inaction. One may lead to dire results. The other might trigger a Panic Attack.

It occurs you could be doing something better, could be at the park flying a kite, attempting to set a World Record for altitude. You could be hearing birds sing. You could be playing Chess or Bridge. If it weren't so late, so early. You could be crossing bridges when you come to them instead of rushing into perilous situations!

You listen, breaths shallow and rapid, surrounded by profound stillness. An eerie calm at the core of unpredictable repercussions. Bathed in moisture, a sauna-sheen of dampness. Illusory shadows conspire, teasing your widened orbs. Senses clang, nerves tingle. Smelling a skunk. It's you. A thump alerts. *That was real.*

Inexorable steps carry you to the source of further sounds. You halt astonished, blinking at a familiar mug. An oddball neighbor. Rummaging through drawers in the moonlight of your kitchen, snatching a roll of Duct Tape with a triumphant expression. He notices you. "I ran out." A simple excuse. Bits and pieces flow together. Suddenly you're Sherlock. Poirot. Connecting dots. The wife who deserted him. The female voices you didn't recognize. Aware of pacing. A slammed door close to Three A.M. The Television turned up at all hours. A drop of red on his shoe. The muffled argument. Heavy bundles of trash being toted at arcane intervals. An incomprehensible shout or screech that compelled you to ask if the wife returned, only to receive a vacant stare.

"You should have stayed in bed," he remarks. An ominous statement. An ordinary tone. Regretful. Mildly accusing. "You leave me no choice."

The sharp ripping of tape from the roll causes you to wince as he moves forward, murder in his gaze, menace in his stride. The vase slips out of sweaty fingers to land on your scarred foot then tumble as you stagger in retreat, gasping, heart banging.

How can the story conclude like this?

Belated, you glimpse the immediate future — that you will struggle to preserve your life against a serial maniac who lives on your street. Knowing full well he's correct: You should have stayed in bed.

\* \* \*

## The Mumsies

My body has levels of Stress. Creative ways of hinting I need to slow down, relieve pressure. I know when I'm dizzy, when the room wheels around me, it's growing worse. And if a muscle under an eye twitches, or my mouth spasms, it's pretty bad. Once the nightmare returns, I've entered the Danger Zone. Not sure what happens after that. Something extreme. It's a sign I should pull an Emergency Brake as I hurtle toward the edge.

The dream is always the same. A memory.

Hands clutch my arms. "Beware The Mumsies." I'll never forget my aunt's tone. And her eyes. "Be as quiet as them or they'll get you."

The warning is clear. The words unnecessary. I'm petrified by her voice. I believe her, and that's the trouble.

"I mean it, Darla, not a peep!"

I close my eyes and nod, an unwilling participant, falling for the panic. Her dramatic flair. Caught up in the suspense. It's probably why these days I react poorly to tension and tribulations. The woman intended no harm, yet disciplined me to be nervous. A worrywart. I can't help it. My heart is thumping in the dream. I sob, an audible note of despair. Then freeze, aware that I goofed, I disobeyed. Eyelids crack. Through slivers I discern no glimpse of Charlene. My scared marbles open wide. She's gone. They got her!

It didn't happen. I don't believe anymore. I convinced myself they were just pretend. Never did I hear or spot the creatures that terrified her, that frightened me and Joyce indirectly. I didn't need to; the damage had been done.

Maybe if I went to counseling or told my parents, spoke with a teacher, a professor about the nightmare . . . it might be different. I might be normal, "well-adjusted" if that's possible. All of these years later, I might still be whole.

The reverie surfaced from the past, numbing, traumatic. I should have let go yet it lingered, a cruel remnant, burrowed in my subconscious. I hoped this trip would mend me, repair some of the fissures, nip and tuck my emotional scars. It would be a chance to put "The Mumsies" in perspective, cram them where they belonged: at the bottom of a mental attic box containing fairytales and make-believe costumes, toys and old Barbie Dolls . . .

On the trainride to visit Joyce, I was excited as a little kid. Scenery and clatter dissolved, the window becoming a nostalgic screen for reliving the happy times, our most carefree moments. We were Best Friends as long as I remember. Adulthood projected us on separate journeys like a Catapult. I studied in Europe and now gave Museum Lectures, half-dating a New York sculptor; a portion of the month needing more privacy, space of my own. Joyce went searching for herself and wound up selling handmade bric-a-brac in a West Coast tourist community. Wanting to get away from her mother's iron code of conduct. I wouldn't call it an *escape* exactly. They were always close, looking out for each other since before her daddy's Cardiac Arrest. His heart stopped one day, and it broke both of theirs. Mine too. My parents were divorced — Pop remarried, Mom devoted to a career in regional sales. I leaned on Aunt Charlene and Uncle Henry, my cousin Joyce. They were my true family I felt, and I cherished the stays with them.

But my aunt could be superstitious. The principle flaw in a sweet lady. She had a ton of rules.

"Hush, child, or I'll sew your lips. They took the dog. They won't hesitate to come for you."

"Take off your shoes by Sunset. The Mumsies tiptoe and stalk on cat feet. You need to be a mouse."

"Never run inside at Dusk. It invites them to chase you."

"Don't sing or whistle at night. It will draw them as if you rang a bell, which you mustn't do, whatever the hour!"

"You should never hum in the dark, or trim your nails. It's when they hear the best."

"If you break a mirror, you won't have to fret over bad luck. They'll pounce before you can knock on wood. And if you knock on wood for another reason, they'll grab you too!"

Regular activities such as cooking and baking, viewing television, listening to music, playing out loud and laughing had to be done by Daylight's end. The evening was a period for gestures, pantomime. Drawing, reading, Jigsaw Puzzles. Mutely sharing meals.

"Refrain from slurping your soup at dinner. It's the same as yelling to a Mumsy."

"Never spill Salt after Sundown. They can hear each grain of it land. Tap, tap, tap."

“Do not eat crackers or cookies that crunch at Midnight. They’ll be on you before you swallow.”

There were strict commandments for going to bed.

“Always sleep on your side so as not to snore.”

“Don’t holler if you have a nightmare. You’ll wish you were still dreaming!”

“If you feel the tickle of a twilight sneeze, the slightest cough, bury your face in a pillow and pray.”

“Close the door softly at the Gloaming or you *know* what will happen. They’ll find you!”

“And then what?” questioned Joyce.

I held my breath. The sky didn’t collapse or rain fire. Burning with a curious nature, I chimed in: “What would they do?”

“I don’t know, girls. I try my best to be careful. They didn’t come for me yet. Maybe you should listen.” Charlene winked at us. Patting our heads with flour-stained fingers, she slid lumps of dough on a tray into the oven.

We didn’t ask again . . . until we were Teens and pointed out contradictions, the plotoles in her logic. Thinking we were smart. Cynical at Thirteen, we challenged everything Grown-Ups advised.

“If we do all of that, will we be safe?”

“You’ll be a lot safer.”

“Why don’t they get us when we’re asleep?”

“They will if you snore.”

“Why can’t they hear us at Noon?”

“Because they’re Nocturnal.”

“How do you know this stuff if you haven’t seen them?”

“I see with the corners of my eyes. Flits of shadow. Darts of movement. I sense their presence and guess what?” She canted forward to confide, “They’re as real as that pimple on your cheek!”

Joyce and I groaned in unison, awkward and coltish, a couple of matchsticks with elbows and knees.

“Even if you don’t believe me, it’s better not to risk,” my aunt stoically asserted.

“But what are they?” I cried.

She attempted to explain, describing them as the silence of eyelashes flapping. Butterflies caught in jars. “Before the wings strike glass. Again and again and again, a woeful tick of impact . . .” She faltered as if confused. Or afraid.

“They’re like Butterflies?” A sad picture sprang to mind.

“No.” Charlene cautioned, “It’s the lulls you should avoid, when it seems too quiet. That’s when The Mumsies are about. They flutter curtains when you think it’s a breeze. They’re the shiver up or down your spine. That soft thud you imagined, beyond your periphery.”

Joyce and I turned to look then peered at each other. *Obviously nuts.*

She clarified, “They’re mischievous shades, stretching through the Veil, clad in secrecy like a shroud. The Mumsies use the absence of sound. That’s their sheet.”

I angled to Joyce and whispered, “Your mom’s lost it.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you saying they’re ghosts?” I hugged myself, torn between belief and skepticism.

“How can they be a thud if they’re silent?” Joyce folded her arms, defiant.

“You ought to be in bed, not interrogating people.” Charlene’s primary line of defense was to scold.

I blinked. My chest heaved a sigh. The train halted at a Station. Timber Flats. Gripping a carry-on satchel, I descended to meet the solitary figure on the platform, her aspect semi-concealed by large black sunglasses. I recognized the hair, straight and limp, curled behind an ear, though it was shorter, cut below a weak jaw. The grim mouth, the shape of her nose, the contours and clothing were foreign to me. Tentative, uncertain, we confronted new versions practically as far from the girls we had been as two strangers. Doppelgängers. Changelings. Wild notions clouded my brain. Cousin Joyce reached to embrace me like an old friend. A lost relative. The contact was welcome. I needed a hug. I guess she had a similar need, for I detected a whimper. Embarrassed, we stepped back. I waited. “Nice to see you,” she greeted hoarsely.

Stiffness resumed on the drive to her home, a rustic dwelling with a workshed almost the size of the cabin. She inhabited stark surroundings despite her occupation, the knickknacks mentioned in a letter. I found no traces of our childhood, her parents. Not even a framed photograph.

Joyce and I sat in her kitchen nursing cups of Chamomile-Lemon Tea out of cheap blue mugs. Not the flowered porcelain cups I vividly recalled. We shared a plate of Saltine Crackers topped by layers of Peanut-Butter. The meal tasted so good! In a trance I had watched a butterknife slather the squares. It was just like old times, except it wasn’t. There were discrepancies. And her eyes when she removed the dark glasses were distracted and dull, a thousand miles or years distant, with smudges beneath from lack of rest.

I wanted to inquire how she was. Disturb layers of dust and calm because *somebody* had to, and Joyce did not appear inclined to speak.

My cousin interrupted. “I’m glad you’re here. You shouldn’t be.”

The deadpan expression alarmed me. “Why not? Is something wrong?”

She failed to answer, a fingertip idly drawing a groove in the Peanut-Butter on a cracker. Abruptly Joyce bit the Saltine, controlled, the crunch suppressed. I regarded her careful chewing and wanted to revive our sisterlike bond from childhood. It seemed irreparably disconnected.

I smacked the tabletop, startling her. “I know! Let’s make some noise! We can be as loud as we want.” My cheery declarations caused what color remained in Joyce’s complexion to drain. It was as if she were haunting herself.

“No we can’t,” she whispered so softly I had to ask her to repeat it. The second utterance had an uncanny quality, a deeper resonance.

“Yes! We need to celebrate.” Hoping to elevate her from these doldrums, I clasped her wrist and the arm jerked. A puddle of tea spread on the table. I lurched from my chair to fetch a rag from the counter and mop the spill. “Sorry. I was excited at seeing you again. You look tired.”

“It’s late,” she agreed. “We have to keep very still.”

The words shocked me and my shoulders trembled, a reflex. I stood, chin and lips aquiver, gawping at her.

Joyce deliberately rose from her chair and approached, kind of weird, posture spooky. I resisted an urge to retreat, thoughts clamoring Red Alert. Dreading what came next. The dream .

..

“Beware The Mumsies.” Hands clutched my arms, stinging, colder than ice. I would never forget my cousin’s tone. And her eyes. So much like her mother’s gaze. Paranoid. “Be as quiet as them or they’ll get you.”

The warning was clear. The words unnecessary. I believed her. Convinced again.  
“I mean it, Darla. Not a peep.”

The shadows traversed, dense and oily, emitting vapors, enveloping us. Face to face we held our breath, a pair of statues. Nodding, I closed my eyes, unwilling participant, seized by phobia. Tangled in threads of actions and consequences; a silken mesh.

My heart bass-drummed. A frightened sob emerged. I was holding mine in. Eyelids cracked. Joyce shook a frantic head, stricken, apologetic. My orbs widened. We traded a stare, helpless, emotional, racked by shudders. Then Joyce was snatched.

They got her.

I sat on a train wearing dark glasses, a souvenir of the final visit with my cousin who was officially missing. I had nothing else to remind me of her.

At first I was a suspect. The only witness to an unsolvable case. What would I report, that spirits abducted her? Soon as I could leave the town I did — with a promise to stay in touch — mourning, for I knew she was gone — traveling to an empty apartment on the opposite coast. Yet I wasn't alone. I had company.

A legion of wisps, they steal out to skulk during the silences between bumps. Born of superstition, fear. Or the depths of Night. Were I stronger, maybe I could banish them. But they're all I have left, other than sunglasses. All that remains of my family.

If they do exist, they might one day be the magician's cloak that makes me vanish. If they aren't real, aren't responsible . . . it's too ghastly and distressing to contemplate.

*Quiet.* Don't tell.

Mum's the word.

\* \* \*

“That was fun! I really must stay home more often to cower in bed. Or below it. Hello down there. I see you hiding. You can come out now. The ghoulies and ghosties are all gone, I promise. *Wink, wink.* Well, maybe not entirely. It's their home too. They have slipped from the shadows like me, bent on providing a howl or two. A splitch or splotch of merry madness and mayhem. What more could you want? Just sit tight and revel in the unnerving suspense, the acute panoramic *scarousel* of delights that me and my fiends have in store for you next!”

## About Mister Macabre

Harboring a penchant for the underside of Day, this trenchant fellow prowls and cavorts with a villainous leer, always ready to invite an unlucky passerby into his basement, and possibly a jar or two on a shelf of his appalling Apothecary. Never pick up a Silver Dollar rolling down the street. Never venture alone in his part of town after Dusk, unless you are incredibly brave!

Mister Macabre was invited to be the Horror Host for *Spooktacular Tales* in July of 2018.

## About the author and artist

Lori R. Lopez seldom reveals what she keeps beneath her hats, but she does on occasion let loose the spectral imaginings that ferment between her ears. While her stories are usually longer than these, a fascination for Crypts began as a child when hanging around Graveyards. There are no Crypts or Cemeteries in “The Chill”, “Night Sweats”, and “The Mumsies” . . . but they do pop up in some of Lori’s darker tales and verse.

Reading her writings, you can almost hear her laughing like a loon, typing away at Midnight in her corner of the world as the lamp flickers and bat wings flap outside the window. At least, that’s what she dreams of if she can sleep. The rest of the time she paces like a wraith, pondering the arcane, mumbling about plots and characters.

These Flash Stories, assembled under “Cryptic Consequences”, were composed for the Ghost Collection *Spooktacular Tales* in 2019.



**More works by Lori R. Lopez**

Look for the author's [ghost collection](#) *Spooktacular Tales*, containing "Cryptic Consequences"!

Lori and her talented sons have a creative company at [fairyflyentertainment.com](http://fairyflyentertainment.com).

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