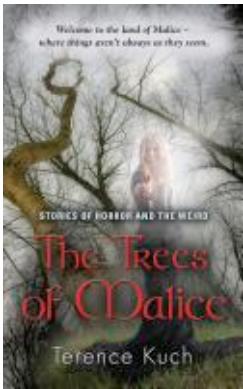


Welcome to the land of Malice –
where things aren't always as they seem.

STORIES OF HORROR AND THE WEIRD

The Trees of Malice

Terence Kuch



Clarence Avery is having dinner at home when TV News reports that a man named Clarence Avery is wanted for murdering his boss and co-workers. Clarence doesn't remember doing that. Tyler's buddy Miguel is recruited by a strange mind-bending cult. Tyler escapes to find that the U.S. is being quietly overrun. He meets Micki, the only other person he can find who hasn't been Changed. Claire and Donald buy their starter home, a 1950's Cape Cod. In their back yard, they discover a long-forgotten underground fallout shelter. Inside is a body. *The Trees of Malice* contains these stories, and more. Here are people like you, caught up in events where the world they know crumbles. Some of these stories could happen, even if unlikely; others take place only in the improbable world of the mind. Welcome to the land of Malice - where things aren't the way they seem...

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Stories of Horror and the Weird

Terence Kuch



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Clarence Avery

Clarence Avery ate a forkful of microwaved lasagna. Not bad. He thought he might buy the frozen seafood next time, or some of those stuffed jalapeños that looked so inviting behind glass in the local supermarket.

Suddenly he glanced up from the shiny pan, fork in mid-air. What was that? Had he just heard his name? “Clarence Avery,” a voice said, very softly. From where? Someone outside in the yard? Then he heard it again: “Clarence Avery.” Was it the TV, he wondered? Yes, that was it. He looked around for the remote, found it, toggled the mute button from half-sound to full. The newscaster’s voice rose from a mumble to the modulated shout peculiar to that trade. “Clarence Avery of Austin,” the voice said, “was detained today as the prime suspect in the gruesome...”

Surely it was some other Clarence Avery. Here he was at home, eating lasagna. There was no pounding at the door, no calls of “we’ve got you surrounded” or “come out slowly with your hands in the air.” That could have been exciting, he thought, an interesting comma in the run-on sentence of his life.

Wonder if he’s related to me, that other man? Clarence did have cousins. One as near as Waco, wasn’t it? Could have moved back to Austin, he supposed. What was his name? Don? Ron? Could one

of Uncle Harry's idle brood have got into trouble? But he had no relations named "Clarence"; none at all.

He listened more closely.

"... shot his supervisor, Mel Peterson. Co-workers expressed shock and outrage at the crime."

The screen cut to a shocked and outraged woman. Carla! That girl down in Accounting, and here she was on TV, burbling tears, looking completely stupid. Finally, since the camera didn't flinch from her embarrassing display, Carla looked up at it.

"Nobody ever thought," she said. "... much attention, ever, y'know, ten years he was here but nobody ever thought that Clarence could do a ... could actually kill ...!" She wiped a tear and blew her nose as the camera cut to a fat man whose face seemed split-screened between revulsion and contempt.

"... always thought there was something queer about him. Not in the sexual sense, I mean, don't want to insult any minorities, now, but I doubt if Avery ever had sex at all, that jerk. Who would ... Just ... you know, this ain't the post office but ya just looked at him and thought 'postal. Gonna go postal.' Hope there aren't any more people like him! Just the ..."

The program weighed anchor and the ship of news sailed its unsteady way between the shoals of fact and opinion.

"Thank you, Gloria. And in other local headlines, traffic on Mopac was tied up for three hours this morning when a refrigerator"

Clarence lost all thought of frozen food and refrigerators. He stood up confused, napkin dangling

from his shirt collar. He felt his heart racing. He had killed someone! But no, that couldn't be. The newscast said the killer had been arrested, and here he was at home, eating lasagna. There must be another Clarence Avery in Austin; could be two or even three of them, he supposed. But there on TV was Carla from Accounting, whining and going on and on right in public, and this fat guy whose name he could never remember. So the crime must have taken place at FlexiCorp, his own employer. And Mel Peterson, his own supervisor, had been killed. Was he really a murderer?

But it couldn't have happened. He didn't remember killing anyone, much less his boss. Some YouTube hoax, that's it. He felt a flush of gratitude that his co-workers had thought enough of him to stage such an elaborate and cruel joke, to sneak into his house and run a wire from a hidden laptop to his TV, override the cable feed. Clarence Avery felt relieved. He laughed a nervous "ha ha," finished the lasagna, and tossed its crinkled aluminum pan in the garbage.

There was one way to know for sure that this wasn't a hoax. He turned on his computer, went to news8austin.com, clicked on "headlines." The first story was about a proposal to extend the city limits again. Suburbanites were seeking an injunction. The second story reported that another attempt to fund a light rail system had failed. "A sad day for Austin," the mayor was sadly quoted. But then,

Man slain by co-worker in Highland area; three critical

Austin: Melvin James Peterson, a supervisor at FlexiCorp in the Highland area, was gunned down this morning by an assailant police identified as a subordinate, Clarence Avery, 42. Three others in the building were also shot, two critically. Avery is in custody and is now being questioned. Grieving families are awaiting news of whether or not their loved ones will....

No, no no. It didn't happen. It couldn't have happened! Someone must have hacked into the channel 8 website. Even though he'd had bad, evil thoughts about Peterson, had consoled himself with warm fantasies of revenge, pulling a pistol out of his belt, squeezing off perfectly aimed round after round, others cowering under their desks. But he'd never used that pistol he'd bought all those years ago. Never fired it. Probably never would.

Just to be sure, he went to the coat closet, reached up behind his rain hat, brought it down. He held the .38 in his hands. It was covered with dust, hadn't been fired in years, if ever. And the small box of bullets – full, none missing. And he was supposed to have shot three-four people that day? No, your honor, and anyway I'm a terrible shot, broad side of a barn and all that, more danger to myself than....

Was he really going crazy after all these years? Or maybe Clarence Avery had done those grisly things, but someone else was Clarence Avery, not him. Maybe he was really a different person, a Jones or a Johnson or a Brown. He searched the house frantically, piled up the evidence. Here, your honor, see this stack of utility

bills? See who they're addressed to? And my college ID card from long ago? But all the documents spelled out "C-l-a-r-e-n-c-e A-v-e-r-y."

He sat down, tried to calm himself. Just go to work tomorrow as usual. Nothing happened today. Nothing will happen tomorrow. It will be a day like all other days. People will nod and hand him things to do and tell him to have a nice day. He will process things and expedite things and follow procedures. Then he will go home and nuke a frozen dinner and watch the TV news and it will all be over, all this doubt and confusion and worry.

The next morning Clarence Avery dressed, drank a cup of tea, and took the early 320-route bus to the FlexiCorp building. His security card admitted him. The elevator ascended him. The department's door opened silently at his touch. No one seemed to be at work yet. He walked to his cubicle, saw the note: "Clarence, please come to Mr. Peterson's office as soon as you arrive!"

He approached Peterson's office, knocked, entered. The room erupted in laughter, applause, and balloons.

"Happy anniversary, Clarence!"

"Here's to another ten!"

"Hope you enjoyed our tricks!"

"Best wishes."

A smiling Mel Peterson held out a plaque toward him. "Ten years of faithful service, Clarence." Carla from Accounting and the fat man were grinning. Half a dozen others stood by, clapping noisily. "Always here,"

Peterson continued, “never complaining, always up for jobs that no one else” Peterson collapsed on the floor, blood spurting from his neck. Calmly, Clarence turned and fired at the others. One, two, three. He walked out the door, out of FlexiCorp. Boarding the 320-route bus again, he heard the sirens wailing their songs of lost love.

At home he sat quietly, waiting for the pounding at the door, the cries of “we’ve got you surrounded” and “come out slowly with your hands in the air.” It was all over, ten years of meaningless work and meaningless smiles, ten years of nice days. He turned on the TV news. Clarence Avery knew exactly what the lead story would be. He’d seen it all before.

Happy Birthday!

Andy was a problem. Not his fault, of course, and we loved him dearly, but then I lost my job back in 2012, and Doris was still troubled by her hip after she slipped on the ice that one winter. Well, we economized, made the unemployment checks stretch as far as they could. I even gave up beer and smoking, and Doris stopped buying those fancy coffee drinks.

Andy's fifth birthday was coming up the next Tuesday, and he was all excited about it. He was just old enough to understand the spot we were in, financially that is, and he was worried that he wouldn't get a special present this year. I looked Andy in the eyes and said there'd be something really special for him on that day. God knows how I hated to say that, even though it wasn't exactly a lie.

It took quite a while for Andy to get to sleep that night, and then I couldn't. Get to sleep, that is, not for a long time. I was remembering the day he was born; blue eyes, a wisp of red hair. Kinda like me. And then the diapers and the ear infections and shots for this and that, but Andy was a real trouper through it all, not a fussy kid at all. I got sad just thinking.

We had a lot of enjoyment from him, watching him struggle to say his first word (what was it?), be toilet-trained a couple of years ago, learn to tie his

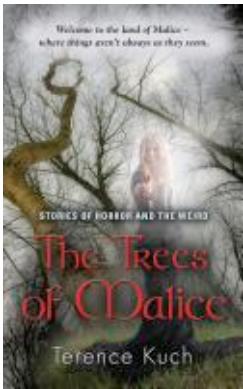
shoes – we’re still working with him on the shoe-tying, or were until a few days ago when there didn’t seem to be much point. Anymore.

When Tuesday came we bundled Andy up because it was cold, even for March. Andy was all excited but Doris told him to be patient. I sat in back with him, held his hand. Doris drove our old car. It was one of the last gas-burners, awful expensive to gas up so we didn’t drive much, but we couldn’t afford an electric.

In an hour we got to the plant. Andy was pretty quiet by then, like he knew what was up, and prob’ly he did.

Well, we went inside and signed some papers to “put him down” – that’s what they called it. Very heartless thing to call it. They recycle the ashes, they said, and the smoke.

Maybe someday we’ll have another Andy. When the economy’s better.



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