

**Z=mc²:
Time-Travelin' Zombies
vs. the Garden State**

By Kelly Jameson

Thank you to all who helped me bring this masterpiece to fruition. I'm guessing they don't want to be named publicly.

Also by Kelly Jameson

Dead On

Desperate, Deranged, Disturbed, and Double-Lattéd: Short Stories

Shards of Summer

What Remained of Katrina

“This is one nifty book.” J. Senare

“Move over Toxic Avenger. If you are ready to read an extremely gory cheese fest, then this book is for you. This book’s taste is so foul and absurd it is pure genius. I just don’t know why all books can’t be like this.” L. Gundersent

“The only zombie story I know of that boasts an exploding golf cart, a lesbian love scene set inside a giant time-traveling egg, and a cross-dressing character who speaks in Ed Wood movie lines. This book made me sick to my stomach.” A. Bronicote

“There’s two hours of my time I won’t be getting back.” R. Cuthbertson

“Fred the Praying Monkus Rules!” A. Lorrained

“What’s a zombie?” B. Burnetto

“I’m pretty sure the author is going to hell.” J. Gratedonmynerves

“Yeah, there’s zombie gore. But the bad puns alone will make you want to puke!” J. Bronitoe

“What an amazing freakin’ book. The special effects were awesome considering there was no budget. And the diner fight reminds me of my childhood.” D. Bortzus

Copyright © 2011 by Kelly Jameson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

No distribution or reproduction is permitted without the written permission of the author. For more information write keljameson@yahoo.com

Prologue

July 2015

9:35 PM

Pablo stood in his stained white apron, smoking a cigarette behind Karadag's Kitchen at Ong's Hat, New Jersey. In his free hand he clutched the remains of an entrée called "Chicken Martini," heedless of the congealed grease on his fingers, the smell of chicken and crabmeat.

He took a long draw off his coffin stick, glanced at the bright, light-up watch on his hairy arm. Just a few minutes more.

He threw his cigarette down, mashed it out with his black Converse sneaker. Today's soup of the day? Cream of Turkey or Beef Orzo. Pablo didn't like either one; he had taste. Unlike cats. Cats were stupid. A saucer of milk, a hunk of chicken, beef orzo in aspic. Some cold, smelly crabmeat. They'd eat almost anything that wasn't a vegetable.

He'd taken it on himself to rid this small part of the world of the annoying feral creatures that roamed his dumpster looking for a handout. He hated the little fur balls. They made him sneeze and itch. Plus, had a girlfriend once whose cat hated his guts. That cat was ferocious. It scratched, clawed, and bit anything that came near him. He leaped out from hiding places at Pablo, delivered fat, stinging lacerations, then skittered off, laughing his evil kitty-cat laugh. One night just as Pablo got amorous with said girlfriend on a living room couch that fucker cat leaped out and clawed him through his jeans, lacerating his left nut.

Pablo, the cat-hater, had stumbled on the dumpster solution by accident. Never seen anything in his life like *this* dumpster. It was simultaneously solving all his problems and making garbage disappear. It was like magic ... or something.

He squatted close to the open dumpster, waved the smelly tidbits in the air. “Venir aquí estúpido gatos!” he called. And waited.

The magic dumpster ate things. It didn't hurt him and it took his garbage so his boss didn't have to pay for pickup service.

This was the power of the dumpster: Though he was forty years old, single and lived at home with his nagging mother and her sordid collection of Cheshire cat figurines, their eyes huge and grotesque and bulging, the dumpster made him feel special—like he'd been chosen. Like he'd finally stepped from the putrid river that was his life, dried himself off, and begun to live. It gave him the time he needed to think all the things he thought because he didn't have to handle as much trash after he finished washing the restaurant's dishes.

He threw all kinds of stuff in the dumpster; there was a flash of light, and poof! It was gone. Just like that. He'd thought about throwing his mother in it, but compromised by tossing some of her Cheshire cats in there instead. She'd purchased the figurines a long time ago, many of them from Buzby's in nearby Chatsworth, and owned so many she hadn't yet realized some had crawled off to a miserable, stinky fate.

It was dark. The wind carried a million gruff, fragmentary odors. They slid over Pablo's body, into his sniffling nose, from the trash he'd just hefted into the dumpster. He'd gotten used to the smells over the years.

“Venir aquí estúpido gatos ... hijos de puta”

He watched their yellow eyes glow and blink in the buttressed dark and knew that he was once again bending down to touch a small miracle.

He was in the zone. For a brief, glorious moment, he forgot he had been slaving away at the same restaurant for more than half his life, a place where you could get a great burger and walk outta there with a full lunch tab of seven dollars. He forgot that his mom still scolded him about picking his dirty socks and underwear up off the floor and playing too much *X-Box Call of Duty World at War*. He forgot that the tires on his midnight blue, pockmarked Toyota were nearly bald. He forgot the endless procession of idiots he always encountered at Walmart. That he didn't have a girlfriend now. The one with the cat dumped him after she'd seen him go "Mike Tyson" on the fleabag's furry little ass.

Checked his watch again. Started to count softly. Then he hurled chunks of chicken and whatever into the air. Several cats darted from the shadows and jumped into the dumpster after the food. It was like a circus. A circus of idiot, garbage chasing cats. 9:41 PM Eastern Standard Time. Like clockwork.

Pablo stepped away from the dumpster as it lit up the night. The light was mesmerizing and fantastical. A triangle of color beyond orange and gold, as cool and as lavender as ice. He stared, despite the fact that afterward he always got a throbbing headache. He couldn't *not* look at it. Even stranger, the light seemed to do things to his brain.

Lately, he could predict the weather weeks in advance; he could understand geometry (it's not that he was stupid in high school, just average). He'd developed a love for fractals and strange attractors, hydraulics and fluid turbulence. Instead of empty dullness and permanently memorized one-liners from *Family Guy*, there was now a robin of intriguing questions in his mind. His mind was, in fact, like a shifting algorithm. For the first time, he enjoyed jazz and

poetry. He felt like a beautiful, mystical man who lived in an odiferous, shallow world. He could play classical symphonies on the piano and he didn't even own a piano.

The light flashed off. Darkness. Again. The cats and all the garbage, he knew, were gone. The dumpster spotless. He didn't know where they went and he didn't care. He lit another cigarette, studied the weird fractional-dimensional shapes underlying the swirls of smoke, thought about how Ernest Hemingway had shared his Key West home with more than 30 cats. *Disgusting*. His thoughts turned to Johannes Brahms, a man who, for relaxation, supposedly sat at an open second-story window and targeted the neighborhood cats with a good, old-fashioned bow and arrow.

A light rain started to fall. Pablo turned his face up, enjoyed the wet, sloppy warmth, then sighed and headed inside to take a dump.

Even with the extra time Pablo had to think, he'd never wondered if things came *out* of the dumpster. Until now. "Eh," he said to himself, flushed the toilet, pulled up his pants, zipped, and washed his hands.

He looked in the mirror at his ridiculous hair net. Enrique Iglesias he was not. But he thought he was still decent looking. There were more lines around his eyes, his mouth. Had a potbelly. Hair was thick and black with a little gray. Mustache needed trimming. But his last girlfriend liked his eyes.

It was late. He was tired. He smelled like a double-bacon cheeseburger and his apron was a sheaf of grease. All night washing dishes. All night waiting for that magic moment at the dumpster.

The diners, waitresses, and busboys were gone; it was time to close up shop for the night. His boss was no doubt upstairs tallying the day's receipts. One more cigarette wouldn't hurt. He stepped outside again.

Flicking his lighter, Pablo walked toward the dumpster, which sat across the parking lot behind the abandoned building next door. He smoked, grateful for the silence, occasionally bouncing on the balls of his feet. The dumpster growled suddenly and lit up the night. The cigarette in his mouth bounced on his lips. The lighter clacked to the asphalt.

"Dios! I didn't throw anything in there this time."

As was often the case after being exposed to the light, he saw colorful fractals twist in his mind. He bent down to get his lighter, stood up and nearly jumped out of his skin. A girl stood in the darkness, just a few feet from him. He could make out that she was barefoot, dressed in torn jean shorts and a red T-shirt with some sort of symbol on it.

"Mierda . . ." he said, as his body released tension. "I didn't hear you walk up."

He couldn't see her face. He could feel her stare, though. She stood very still. His brain buzzed.

"So, chica—you come here often?" he tried to break the ice. "I hear the Chicken Martini is to die for." Nothing. She stepped closer. Was that a foul odor from the dumpster or did she have *really* bad breath?

"What's your name, chica?" he asked. He took a half-step back.

As he tried to discern her female shape, her face, she brushed up against him. Again a nasty smell filled his nostrils and he nearly gagged. He was reminded of a palliative care unit without air-conditioning on a ninety-five-degree day when they served nearly expired sauerkraut and rubberized hotdogs for lunch. He used to work in such a place.

Then the dumpster flashed again and he got a quick look at something, a dark bulge beneath one of her arms. It made a noise. Kind of like a cat. Un gato tonto.

This is some weird shit, he thought as he took another step back. Then again, it'd been a long time since he'd been with a woman—maybe a shower and some soap and she'd clean up okay. *Maybe*. He flicked his lighter and she swung clumsily at it; it flew from his hand. A brief glimpse of her hair and her face reminded him of Shemp Howard of *Three Stooges* fame. Shemp—notoriously phobic, afraid of airplanes, cars, dogs, and water. She looked like she could be phobic herself. Or maybe it was just bad lighting.

"You're kind of ... bonito," he lied. Still she said nothing.

"Meowoff," the thing under her arm made a noise.

"Do you like Bon Jovi?" he asked.

"eee ... eee"

"Okay, well, I'm Pablo. I love Bon Jovi but I've never been to one of their concerts. It's on my bucket list. Si, I'm a big fan of Bon Jovi and Springsteen, too. The last time I saw someone in concert it was Enrique Iglesias."

"Urgh ... kinda ... waaaaant"

"Si," he said. And waited. Sweat dripped down his back beneath his clothes, into the crack of his ass.

He said, "Current interpretations of astronomical observations indicate that the age of the universe is 13.73 billion years—plus or minus 0.12—and that the diameter of the observable universe is at least 93 billion light years, or 8.80 by 10²⁶ meters."

He felt dizzy. The girl made a low sound in her throat.

"Anyway, it's really old. Es *muy* viejo. The universe, I mean."

"Kind uh ... kind uh ... waaaaaant ..."

"You want to have dinner sometime, chica?"

" ... eat yooouuu!"

She dropped the furry thing under her arm and it skittered off into the cracked boil of night. Her jagged fingernails lanced his face, his arms ... blood ... stinging pain ... her lips and teeth were suddenly on him, gnawing his flesh. Before he could react she ripped off his left ear while with brute force she grasped his right arm and tore it off ... he didn't have time to scream.

Blood spattered the wall behind Pablo, squirted into his eyes, galoshed down into the tops of his sneakers, squished around in his cotton socks. He fell with a thud. Looking up, he couldn't see the girl in the darkness at all now. Heart pounding, he reached blindly into his pocket for the lighter with his left hand. Produced it, somehow flicked it on.

She stood over him in the glow of the slight flame, her face mottled and gray, almost purple, a crescent-shaped dimple creasing her cheek. As she chewed, the dimple stretched and revealed a gaping hole in her flesh, rank decayed gums, and teeth the color of rancid butter. She nibbled quietly, like a rabbit. Never mind that she chewed on his severed arm. That was particularly hard for him to take.

Her eyes were dead, lifeless, he thought, and the way her face was mangled gave her the look of a grinning illiterate. Someone who'd never read Gabriel García Márquez or Mark Twain or Lewis Carroll or *Einstein: His Life and Universe* or Dr. Phil's *Love Smart: Find the One You Want—Fix the One You Got*, or even *How To Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

He flicked the lighter over and over with his left thumb, as long as he could, the little orange flame all he had now as he watched the brittle husk of the chica turn away from him and

slide-stumble toward the woods, the arm of a dishwasher and fry cook in her mouth ... *his* arm ... her lips gnawing away.

He couldn't move, could no longer feel his heartbeat. His clothes were drenched in sweat and blood. The pain was unbearable.

Yet, as he stared at the blank wall of the universe he thought it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He knew, in the same way he knew that people were not *things* in the same way that atoms were not *things*, that his sneakers were old and blood-soaked, that he'd pissed himself, hadn't had a chance to smoke his last cigarette, had just four dollars and an unopened condom in his wallet, nobody really loved him, and he'd never seen Bon Jovi or Springsteen live.

Then she turned back toward him and, holding up his own dismembered arm and hand, gave him the finger with it as he writhed on the ground in agony.

Sweet.

Just before Pablo closed his eyes, the light in the dumpster flashed again and suddenly Albert Einstein stood over him, fat cigar dangling from his fingers, electrodes taped to various parts of his body. He recalled that Einstein had fallen in love with the only woman in his physics class, they'd had an illegitimate daughter, married and had two sons, and later divorced. Bitterly.

Pablo thought Einstein's hair was a great argument for chaos theory. With a Herculean effort, he opened his eyes one last time and yelled after the departing genius, "Espera ... Wait! When does a wave become a particle? At the moment of observation? What do you think of Schrödinger's cat?"

"Unstipopomgoodoo!" Einstein barked as he moved toward the woods like an old humpback whale in search of a fat school of sand eels.

As Pablo lay in the dirt in an obscure location in Southern New Jersey next to a magic Lite-Bright dumpster, he thought, surely ... surely “Unstipopomgoodoo” meant something brilliant, something earth shattering. But he would never know. And he realized something else with final clarity.

Schrödinger was a *dog person*.

Chapter 1

There was something on Arvin Hickey's face. Warm and wet like blood. He swatted at it, tried to palm it away. *Panic thumped in his chest.* It smelled like road kill. Felt like a curtain of rotten flesh had just slunk across his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, his eyes, his lips.

He sat up, blinked in the darkness. Rubbed his eyes, his face. He wasn't sitting in a pool of blood, as he had so often dreamed lately. His boxer shorts and dark green T-shirt were not blood spattered. He had not, as far as he could tell, missed an important newscast about the beginning of the apocalypse in Jersey. He didn't have sand in his mouth, his eyes, his ears.

He was in his bedroom.

The numbers on the digital LED display on his alarm clock changed, from 11:31 to 11:32 PM.

"Pain in the ass dog," he grouched at the mutt beside him as he sat up in bed. "If my nightmares come true, I'll taste a lot different, Wart, and I don't think you're gonna like it."

Wart, a short-coated terrier mix, stared at Arvin with pleading doggy eyes and wagged her tail. She was a trained psychiatric service dog. She sensed when he was anxious, when he was having nightmares, and woke him up by licking his face like it was a sinfully meaty bone. He shook his head. He preferred his face slobber-free but was grateful to be pulled away from his dark dreams.

He adored Wart but he had a little thing about germs. A former girlfriend used to love it when Wart licked her face; according to her a dog's mouth was a lot cleaner than a human's.

“Not true,” Arvin had argued. “Dogs eat *poop*. They lick their *buttholes*. Their mouths are teeming with *bacteria*; it’s just that it’s *species-specific* bacteria.”

That one hadn’t lasted long. The sex was good, but afterward they couldn’t find much to talk about besides the pros and cons of butt-licking dogs. Probably wasn’t her fault, he figured, since at forty-two he’d yet to succeed in any long-term relationship, let alone get married.

Nowadays, living alone but for Wart, he reveled in the quiet of the South Jersey Pine Barrens. He didn’t miss Manhattan as much as he thought he would. He didn’t miss the courtrooms or trials, the trumpet sounds of traffic, the smell of piss and garbage and cologne, or the throngs of people with their glazed eyes, parading down blocks of hot concrete toward their destinies. Most of which, he was convinced, would be stupid and meaningless destinies. People did stupid things. Most lived meaningless lives. He knew. He’d been a personal injury lawyer. But it reached the point where he would rather be anywhere but a courtroom.

“It’s a good thing you’re so fucking cute,” he said to Wart, scratching her behind the ears as he climbed out of bed. Padding to the bathroom, he washed his face, then slipped socks and sneakers on his feet and a pair of shorts over his lean hips. He leashed Wart, grabbed a flashlight, and took her out to do her business.

Arvin breathed deep, enjoyed the clean, woodsy air as he scanned the tree line that surrounded his farmhouse. For miles around, pines and oaks squeezed together in a mutually beneficial relationship. Generations of families had lived off the land here, their stories rich, colorful, and strong. Long forgotten ghost towns were scattered throughout the region. Endless sandy roads cut through the forest, snaked past the ruins and foundations of towns that had once bustled with life and activity.

Maybe he'd felt called to this place because he was sort of a ghost himself. He'd left so many pieces of himself in other places he thought he had almost disappeared like those vanished, forgotten towns.

Wart watched the woods, too. Her compact, muscular body assumed the familiar tense posture that usually meant she'd spotted a squirrel or another dog. She growled, a savage growl he'd only ever heard her use once or twice before. Twigs snapped. In the silence, it sounded like bones cracking.

Brush rustled and Wart went crazy, straining at her leash, barking, growling. As Arvin tried to bring her to heel she slipped out of her collar and charged into the woods.

“Wart!” he called out. “Come!”

One place he didn't want his dog getting lost was in the Pine Barrens, the largest surviving open space on the eastern seaboard between the northern forests of Maine and the Everglades of Florida. More than a million acres. Vast stretches of forest. Myriad lakes and rivers.

Arvin raced after Wart. He followed the sound of her barking—so loud it could give David Lee Roth incurable tinnitus and partial deafness