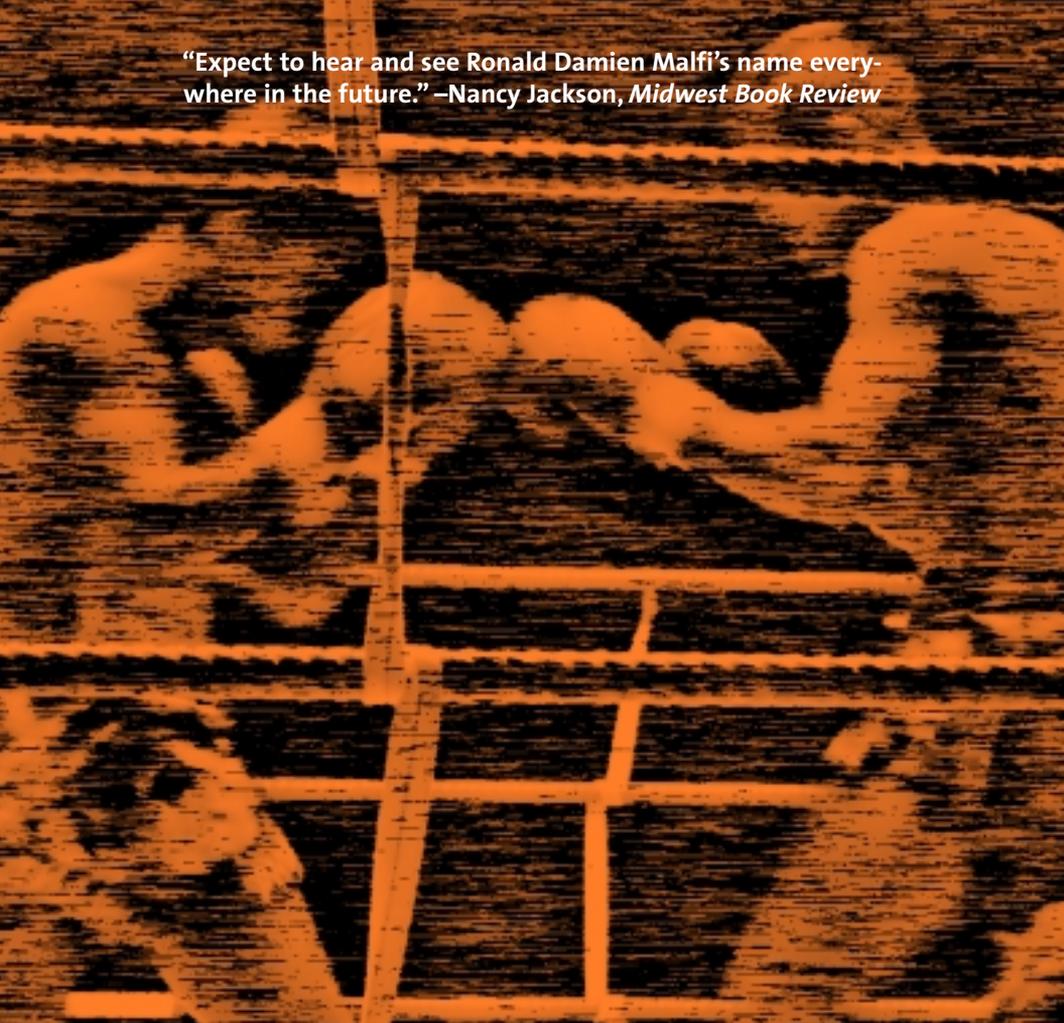


"Expect to hear and see Ronald Damien Malfi's name everywhere in the future." —Nancy Jackson, *Midwest Book Review*



the nature of
MONSTERS
Ronald Damien Malfi

Author of *The Fall Of Never* and *The Space Between*

Acclaim for
RONALD DAMIEN MALFI

“*The Fall of Never* is a dark, suspenseful descent into the wild heart of dream, where the primal power of the imagination can turn reality into nightmare. Ronald Damien Malfi has crafted a novel you will not want to miss, filled with mystery, wonder and terror. Smooth writing, a sure voice, and emotional truth keep his engaging cast of characters rolling through the lonely territories of the human heart and mind. Grab this book and settle in for a hell of a ride that ends, as all journeys worth taking must, with surprises, thrills and chills.”

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“Part modern gothic and part psychological nightmare journey, Ronald Damien Malfi’s audacious *The Fall of Never* seethes with simmering danger and suspense, proving that ‘quiet’ horror can still quicken the heart. With allusions from Shakespeare to Poe and a cataclysmic climax, Malfi’s second novel reminds us that our minds are sometimes more frightening than the monsters of yore.”

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“I enjoy books that make me think... I think that I will add *The Space Between* by Ronald Damien Malfi to that list now, too... [Malfi] does manage to evoke some beautifully poetic images throughout this ‘literary suspense’—my words, not the publisher’s.”

-SFF.com

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THE FOURTH FLOOR HALLWAY WAS DARK and had only one window at the end of it, the pane filthy and covered in hand-prints. The air was stale and the light that came in through the window was a tawny red-brown. As Ms. Calbrinez had promised, there was a man standing outside Robert Crofton's apartment, stooped over in a khaki trench coat with the collar pulled up. His hands were in his pockets, his head bent slightly down and out of the rust-colored light coming in through the single window. Robert did not trust the man and paused at the end of the hallway, the key to his apartment squeezed between the thumb and index finger of his right hand. Beside him Sweeny, too, hesitated—then took a deliberate step toward the stranger and called out to him.

"Hello? Is there something you need help with, friend?"

"Mr. Crofton," the stranger said. "Robert."

"Yes," Robert said, unmoving.

The stranger's eyes seemed to glitter—but it was only the daylight reflecting off the man's spectacles. With his head up now, Robert recognized the man as Luther Treemont, Rory Van Holt's manager. For some reason, this did not make him feel any more comfortable.

"Mr. Treemont," he said, and approached the man.

"A friend of yours?" Sweeny said, following Robert.

"Hello," Luther Treemont said, pulling one hand from his trench coat and holding it out for the shaking.

"This is Rory's manager, Luther Treemont," Robert told Sweeny as he switched his key to his left hand and shook Luther Treemont's hand.

"This is my cousin, Nigel Sweeny."

"Pleasure," Treemont said and shook Sweeny's hand as well.

"I wasn't sure who'd be up here waiting," Robert began, and Luther Treemont laughed. It was a musical, even laugh.

"I was just preparing to leave, actually," Treemont admitted. "I came for the car."

"Car?" Sweeny said.

"Yes," Robert said. "The Cadillac. It's in the lot out back."

"Terrific," Treemont said.

"Cadillac?" said Sweeny.

"You didn't have to make the trip all the way out here," Robert began. He found he could not take his eyes from the man's even teeth. It seemed Luther Treemont would never stop grinning.

"Oh, no," Treemont said, shaking his head. "Rory's working out in a gym a few blocks away. We've been in the city all morning. In fact," he continued, "he was hoping you'd stop by and see him."

"Oh," Robert said.

"What Cadillac?" Sweeny said.

"If you're not too busy right now," Treemont went on, "It'd be a great help for you to follow me to the gym in Rory's car. Rory," Treemont said, "he's been asking about you all morning, Robert."

Robert thought about Donna Taylor and about how she'd gotten drunk the night before. He thought about the broken wine glass and the spilled wine and the dirty dish towel he'd left in the kitchen sink after sopping up the wine. He wondered just what she'd told Rory about last night... or what she hadn't and what he assumed. Thinking of it now, it seemed bad, although he couldn't tell just why.

"Is something the matter?" he heard himself say.

"The matter?" Treemont said. "There's nothing the matter. Should something be the matter? Rory just wanted to speak with you." And Treemont's eyes shifted to Nigel Sweeny. "You can bring your friend, if you like."

Outside in the parking lot, Robert and Sweeny pushed through the cold and through a crowd of vehicles until they reached Rory Van Holt's Cadillac. Sweeny paused beside the passenger side door, the rucksack flannel shirt loaded with painting supplies still in his arms, and allowed his eyes to trace the lines of the vehicle.

"Son of a bitch," Sweeny muttered. "You had a Cadillac sitting here all morning and you didn't say anything?"

"It's Rory's car."

"You had a Cadillac sitting here all morning and we spent the day walking around the neighborhood in the cold?"

"It's Rory's car. I drove it home last night."

"Son of a bitch, Robert," Sweeny said. He was squinting at his reflec-

tion in the tinted glass of the passenger side window. "What in the name of Moses is the matter with you? A goddamn *Cadillac*? And we've been strutting around Baltimore like two of the Dead End Kids all morning. In the cold, even." Sweeny shook his head. "You baffle me, man."

"Just get in."

"Let me drive."

"No."

"Come on," Sweeny said. "It won't do any harm."

"No. Just get in."

"You should see me drive this thing," Sweeny told him. "I'd drive this thing like an animal, man. Like something you've never seen."

"I never *will* see it because you're not driving. Now get in."

"A Cadillac," Sweeny muttered, and opened the door and slipped into the passenger seat. "Who the hell would believe it?"

Robert started the car and maneuvered through the other vehicles parked in the lot. As they emptied out into the street, Robert spied Luther Treemont's Lexus idling against the curb. When Treemont saw Rory's Cadillac pull out, the Lexus pulled away from the curb and eased out onto Astor Street. Robert followed, very conscious of his driving. He wondered if Luther Treemont was watching him in the rearview mirror. He wondered if Luther Treemont was curious about how well Robert drove Rory's car. He wondered if Luther Treemont was going to report his driving skills to Rory, and would they hold him accountable for any dings and scratches and dents in the paint?

Sweeny tossed his rucksack shirt in the back seat and leaned forward, rubbing a hand along the upholstery, along the dashboard.

"I can't believe you had this damn car sitting in a parking lot all morning."

"Give it up already," Robert said.

"I mean, you know where you went wrong, right? I don't have to explain the situation to you, do I?"

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"Oh, hell," Sweeny said. "Just forget it. If you don't get it then you're a lost cause and I won't waste my breath. And for the love of my unborn children, Robert, don't say 'heck.' Say 'hell' or 'Christ' or 'fuck' or 'frig' or anything other than 'heck.' You sound like a goddamn yokel, a real churl. I am completely embarrassed sitting in this car alone with you."

Robert frowned and did not look at Nigel Sweeny.

"So now what?" Sweeny said. "We have tea with the grand goddamn Duke of Punch? Splendid. Glad I wore my party dress."

“Please don’t say anything rude,” Robert said.

“Rude? Me? To the great Rory Van Holt, face-puncher to the third power? The boxing debutante of Charm City? Brilliant! Anyway, I’m glad we’re going. I’d like to have a few words with your boxing buddy, teach him how to treat a friend. Some goddamn fellow, and I don’t care what you say, Robert.”

“I don’t want you to say anything at all,” Robert said.

“Does this brute truly think he can walk all over everyone? Just because he’s smacked a few featherweights around, does he think he pisses like a thoroughbred? Does he think he craps in neat little packages adorned with colorful ribbon?”

“You don’t even know him, Nigel.”

“Sure I do,” Sweeny said. “I know him very well, Robert. I’ve lived in this city a long time and I’ve met many Rory Van Holts. Boom-boom.”

“He doesn’t even live in the city.”

“That’s half my point. And anyway, what the hell is the matter with you? You look like someone’s just bit your leg.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you look upset, man.”

“I’m fine.”

“What is it? What are you thinking? Tell me something good.” Sweeny laughed, startling Robert. “Come clean, joker, and tell me what the hell really happened last night, already, will you? Don’t make me pull it out of you. I will, so help me, so make it easier on yourself. I’ll let you maintain some ounce of dignity if you tell it now and truthfully and right away.”

“Don’t you ever shut the heck—the *hell*—up?”

Again, Sweeny laughed. “Tell,” he repeated.

Robert chewed at his lower lip and followed Luther Treemont’s tail-lights through the city streets. Finally, after too long a pause, he said, “Donna, Rory’s fiancée—I drove her home last night and she got drunk and passed out.”

“Oh?” Sweeny’s eyebrows arched. He looked like someone being slightly prodded on the posterior with a burning ember. “And?”

“And what?”

“And what’s the rest of the story, you dolt.”

“There is no rest of the story. That’s it. She broke a wine glass and I cleaned it up and helped her into bed—”

“And helped her into bed!” Sweeny crooned.

“And helped her into bed,” Robert repeated, his words now deliberately slowed. “I *helped* her, Nigel—”

"I'll bet you did, you kinky freak."

"I *helped* her and watched her fall asleep and cleaned up the wine and left the house. That's all that happened. That's the whole story."

"Bull."

"Really?"

"Honest?"

"Why would I lie?"

"It's a rather boring goddamn story, then. Very disappointing. In *bed*, you say? Who would have thought a drunk woman in bed would make such a lousy goddamn story? Jesus, cousin, what the hell am I going to do with you?"

"She was drunk," he said. "Anyway, she's Rory's fiancée. They're going to be married, for Christ's sake, Nigel."

"Your point?"

"My point," he said, "is that you have no respect for anyone."

"What's respect got to do with it? This isn't a story about respect. This isn't an Aesop fable about respecting the institution of marriage."

"No?"

"Hell, no!" Sweeny said. He tapped a finger on the Caddy's dashboard. "This is a story about *opportunity*, cousin. An opportunity that was given to you and you so unwittingly passed it up. You truly are a country rube. Do me a favor and go back to saying 'heck,' will you? You're really beginning to embarrass me."

"It wasn't like that," he said. "It wasn't like any of that. You weren't even there so you don't know."

"I know," Sweeny insisted. "I know the situation just as well as I know people like Rory Van Holt. And anyway, if that's all that happened why do you look like you just got caught with your peter in the cookie jar?—to, I guess, mix—what?—metaphors—I think..."

"Do I?"

"Very much so, yes."

"I don't know."

"Are you embarrassed? Is that it?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell have you got to be embarrassed about? You helped a poor drunk slob into bed—"

"Don't say it like that," Robert said quickly.

"Fine—you helped a poor *inebriated* slob into the *sack*. However the hell you want it, it really doesn't matter to me. Sounds like you did a hell of a deed, though, and that you're a stand-up guy, Robert Crofton

from Kentucky. Sounds like you're some angel from heaven with a pretty face and a clean conscience. And so now you're embarrassed?"

"The situation was uncomfortable," he said. He suddenly did not want to talk about last night with Nigel Sweeny. It was a mistake to have brought it up. "I don't even know what she told him, if she told him anything at all."

"Where was the bulging brute, anyhow? How did you get stuck chauffeuring his wife-to-be around the state of Maryland?"

"He was talking business with some men at the bar. He asked if I'd take her home."

"Very upstanding."

"Of me?"

"Of him. It's called sarcasm, you twit. This simpleton has the gall to ask you to drive his girl home after he spent—what?—an entire week avoiding your phone calls? Sounds like one hell of a citizen. I'd like to shake the senator's hand, please; I'd like to kiss all the filthy, squirming, fussing babies; I'd like to bob my head to the crowd of aimless wanderers and religious fanatics and political zealots and showy, flag-burning, self-indulgent—"

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Forget it. The guy sounds like a grade-A son of a bitch," Sweeny said. "I stand by my initial impression."

Robert said, "You can't have an initial impression of someone unless you've already met them."

"Horseshit," Sweeny said. "Now pull the hell over and let me drive a while."

RONALD DAMIEN MALFI is an award-winning novelist and short fiction writer with over 500 publications to his credit, including the modern gothic novel *The Fall of Never*, which was released in 2004 to critical acclaim. In 1999, he received an English degree from Towson University, and has since spent much of his time traveling across the United States visiting the obscure yet notable locales which serve as the backdrop for much of his fiction. Malfi started writing *The Nature of Monsters* in the late fall of 2002. After completing a draft of the first few chapters, the author set the work aside and did not pick it up again until nearly a full year later. Even after the manuscript's completion, and due to the story's unspecific genre, Malfi tucked the finished manuscript away, unsure what to do with it. As the author has stated, "So again it sat and waited. And waited. And I waited. And together we both waited. And we drank some Red Stripe and smoked some Al Capone cigarillos and boiled pots upon pots of Ramen Noodles and still waited." Until now.