

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 22
30TH SEPTEMBER
2018

DEATHBIRTH

BY CHRISTOPHER
T. DABROWSKI
YOU GO TO A
UNIVERSITY AND
BECOME STILL
MORE STUPID...

STORAGE SPACE

BY ROB BLISS
MY HERO WAS
THE ZODIAC
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THE ISLAND CALLS AARON ALAN PFAU

THE PLAN STEVEN HAVELOCK

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Schlock! Webzine

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Monika Olasek, Aaron Alan Pfau, Steven Havelock, Gregory KH Bryant, Jonathan True, Sir
Arthur Conan Doyle, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Mirkwood entrance* by [Dominik Matus](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week we have a surreal story of inverted existence, a serial killer storage hunter, a disturbed young girl haunted by the horrifically dead, a plan of vengeance that rapidly gets out of control, and two best friends who find themselves in an unimaginable situation.

Out in space, Carter Ward flees Mokem Bet through the darkness of the Derelict. In the Albany, Malone hears of Lord John Roxton's crusade against slavers. And Goodwin and his companions plan their descent into the Moon Pool...

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: [*Lovecraftiana: Lammas Eve 2018*](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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DEATHBIRTH by Christopher T. Dabrowski. English translation by Monika Olasek

I remember a bright, blinding light, the feeling of immeasurable happiness and all-embracing love. I was awakened from that state. Sucked into a dark tunnel. Grasped by two luminous creatures. The wonderful light drew further and further away until it completely disappeared... paradise lost. I did not feel any fear, everything was delightfully neutral.

After we flew down to the ground the creatures released me. I was next to my own body. I just stood there and watched. At first I did not care at all—as if I was watching some boring museum piece—but then something made me enter that body and my feelings changed completely. I woke to life. I was lying on the pavement, feeling as if I had a big weight on my chest. I slowly came to my senses. It was my deathbirth—I appeared to this world with a massive heart attack.

In one moment I saw the whole of my life in front of me. The strangest thing was that I knew every detail of it ever since I was a little child. I knew that for some forty or fifty years I would be a librarian and my dreams of being a real writer would never come true. What cruelty—a man appears to this world and knows that he will be nobody, that his future will bear boring years full of disappointment and the feeling of unfulfillment.

The worst thing is the knowledge that everyone has to live until his unbirth; mine will be in 78 years, three months and five days. For some period in life the passing of years is a blessing. You are still stronger, affected by less and less diseases. You get more and more fit, both corporally and intellectually. Unfortunately, when you are a bit over twenty the first symptoms of what is still in front of you are beginning to show. You do more and more stupid things. You have less and less life experience and money. Finally you end up totally financially dependent on your parents. You go to a university and become still more stupid. The maximum of dumbness is at the beginning of the primary school. You get juvenile dementia. You cannot read or write. The state of your mind is disastrous.

When I recall the youth that is still before me, I remember the family dinners. It will be a real, everyday rite. It begins when a mother smudges plates and cutlery in a sink and then goes backward towards the table. She puts all the dirty dishes on the table and then in various order we sit down and begin our meal. At first I unchew food coming out of my guts. At the end of this unchewing a piece of pork chop comes out of my mouth. I immediately stick my fork into it and put the meat on my dirty plate. After a while I add another piece into that bite and within a quarter of an hour I have a whole, hot and fresh pork chop!

After dinner, when everything is on the plates, my mother takes it to the kitchen to put our dinner divided into various parts into the fridge. What happens next with the meal? After a few days the mother takes it out of the fridge, puts it into bags and goes with my father to take it back to the store. They come back with a lot of new money in their wallets. The only problem with the dinners is that afterwards you are hungry for a while...

Childhood is a nightmare. You shrink, lose your mind. You spend more and more time playing silly, careless games like unbuilding block houses or sandcastles. As time passes by, you know fewer and fewer words. Then you start emitting strange sounds and cannot even poo on your own. These are the symptoms of an infancy, when you shrink drastically and don't have much awareness. It has, however, some advantages—including the fact that you are not aware of the coming unbirth. And it is the end of your way down here. It happens when you are as dumb as a bowl of pudding. You go with your mother to the hospital and her organism absorbs you. Then you are carried around in her belly for nine months until you completely disappear, but you don't care—you don't exist.

Back to my life. Now I am 78. In three years my lovely wife, Anne, will be deathborn. Now my memories of her are pale because of the passing of time but I know that they will come back with blaze of colours and sharpness at the moment of her deathbirth.

Before the moment of deathbirth and before the soul steps down, the body must mature in the inside of Mother-Earth. A skeleton is created from the dust, and then it is covered with guts and muscles, and with an epidermis. A few days before the deathbirth, the body is cold and pale. We take it out of the ground at a place called the cemetery. As time passes by, the soul penetrates into the body and a new life begins.

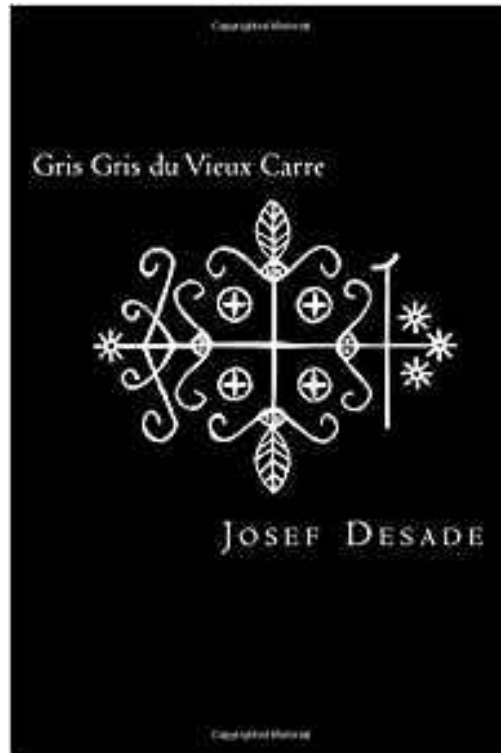
After my wife was deathborn I felt as if somebody turned something on in my head, starting a new perception of reality. It was the end of my solitude. Now she was a part of my life. I felt a deep friendship and connection; as if she was a part of me. In a moment I realized that through thick and thin, it will be a part of our life. In 54 years we will have a passionate, full of ecstasy romance, which will precede... her disappearance from my life. It is horrible, that I will have to lose her one day. One day I will forget that she ever existed. It is so depressing that words can hardly describe it; unfortunately, everyone has to go through this.

Soon my parents will be deathborn, only a few years after the deathbirth of my wife. Their souls will enter their bodies during a terrible car-crash. They will accompany me in my last moments.

It is funny how mankind is becoming dumb. Something exists and then it doesn't. People use inventions that disappear—the scientists forget about them. And so we recede in an unexplained way—and it is natural. Our civilization fades away. I don't know what happened before my deathbirth. Unfortunately, with every moment we forget what happened before. We lose it irretrievably. I imagine that as humankind we were far more advanced. From different sciences I will be taught at schools when I am young, I will learn that our civilization is on the decline. There will be two cruel world wars. Computers, television sets and cars will disappear. We will

end up as wild ape-men with clubs but... but it is not my problem. I have 78 years of dull, predictable life and a few moments of joy. I will long for them before the end of my life comes.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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STORAGE SPACE by Rob Bliss

I had been killing out east and had never been caught. My hero was the Zodiac Killer. Wonder what ever happened to him? I stood on the shoulders of a giant, but knew I needed to make my mark if I wanted to be remembered. I had killed five victims—the minimum to be declared a serial killer, unless they lowered it—but I never knew if the police ever pieced together that they were all mine. I had no mark to put on the corpses. I was a younger man, still learning my trade.

I moved west to California to be safe, and to be closer to the stomping ground of my hero. Too many of our kind stay in one spot for too long, which is how we sometimes get caught. But I wasn't one to be a transient killer. My aim was to kill again in one spot, but to make it memorable. With a unique signature on my victims, I would again waylay capture by moving from the west to somewhere else.

Never fond of carving up bodies in a particular manner (I actually don't like blood), I needed a mark that wasn't a serial killer standard. I found it when I was watching television.

One of those storage space shows where people bid on the contents before the goods are revealed. Renters who don't pay their bill after three months have their lives exposed on national television. And the owners move far away, never to return. Perfect.

I knew how to elude identification from my experiences out east. There were security cameras throughout the storage facility, a man at a desk who processed my credit card (belonging to my last victim, still not found, not declared dead, his card not cancelled), and who had me sign a contractual agreement. If I didn't pay each month, the contents were auctioned to the highest bidder. A wig and make-up changed my face, a thin layer of melted wax on my fingertips, a false name signed with my left hand ... got me a storage space.

I moved all my equipment in after-hours. Stolen plates, out of state, a battered pick-up truck easily disposed of. Six large blue plastic barrels, industrial grade, with sealed lids secured by metal clasps and a lock each. (Easy to bolt-cut, when the eventual new owners wanted to see their fortune inside.)

Diluted formaldehyde filled each barrel to at least halfway. Preserving fluid, cloaks the smell of decayed flesh with its own pungent odour. But the lids were well-sealed. Once they were opened, the owners may vomit, but they will wonder what the preserving fluid is preserving. It always preserves flesh, everyone knows this.

I went out killing. Bought a small trailer that I towed to a piece of forest by a river. Easy to clean up after a kill. Picked up hookers, hitchhikers, runaways, the usual. There's always prey for the taking. Drugged them, drove them to the trailer, had myself some bodies.

Bought used luggage at thrift stores (Dahmer did this, so too the barrels; the shoulders of giants). Put the hacked-off body parts in garbage bags to keep in any remaining fluids after I had bled each upside-down, ankles tied to a tree, arteries slit. The bags then went into the luggage, which were the disguise for when I drove them to the storage. The cameras always watching, my

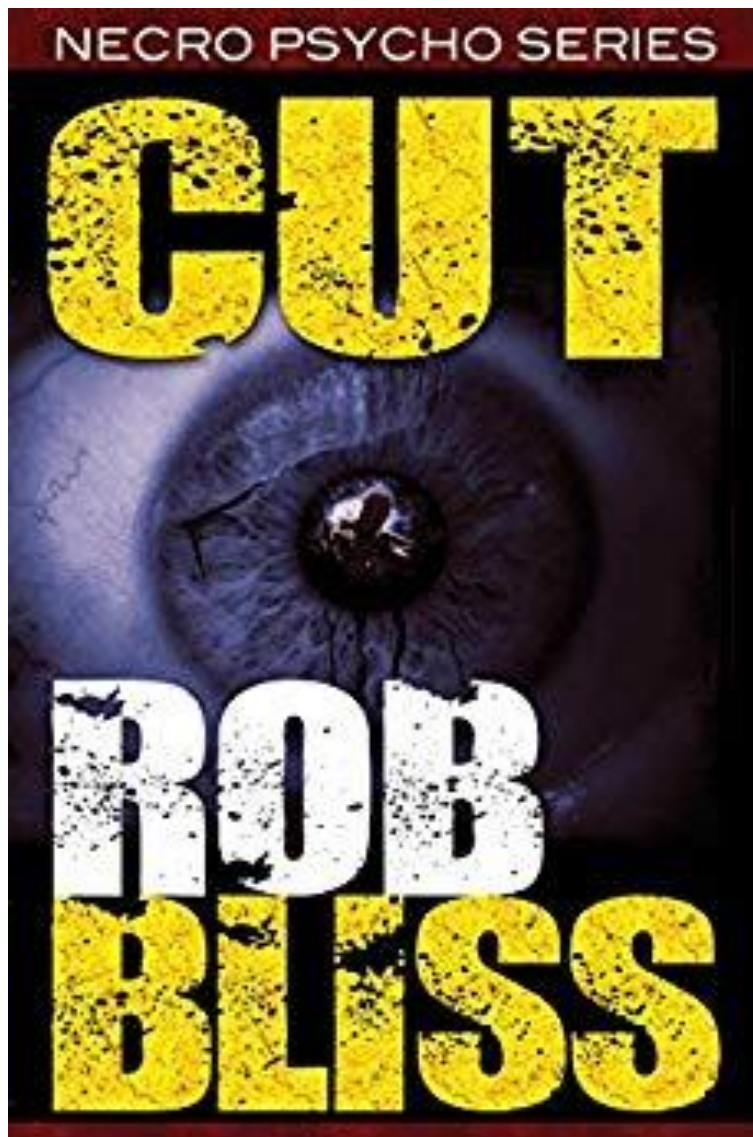
disguise always worn. Took me eight months to fill all barrels. One can pack two well-dismembered bodies into a single barrel.

The heat was on. Too many missing-persons reports, no clues. The cops didn't know what they had, and wouldn't until my credit card ran out and the auction began. Time to leave town.

I had twelve victims waiting to be discovered. My kills would be discovered and make not only national television, but television history. And I'd be far away, south or north—all four compass directions bearing my mark. Then perhaps to another country while the manhunt expanded nationally.

Never caught—my goal. It will make me anonymously famous, which is good enough. I'm not in it for the fame, just the kill.

THE END



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THE ISLAND CALLS by Aaron Alan Pfau, Story by Alan Pfau

~Gratefully dedicated to my father, Alan Pfau~

I.

I expected to see the lake. It was there.

Of course, it was.

Lakes, like memories, don't disappear. They flow, unstopped unless by divine interference, just as death impedes the flow of human memory.

I am looking out at Lake Thompson through eyes hidden behind a pair of thick bifocals that my doctor persists are necessary. The lake has not aged. A little receded, like my hairline, but it is fall. The secrets of the lake lay nakedly exposed on the shore. Come spring, the lake will rejuvenate with youth. I will not. I am 46 now and unless that same divine interference that I've spoken of before has its way with me, I will be 47 then.

And yet, in complete contrast, looking out at Lake Thompson now I can feel that same regeneration that it must feel come that magical time of spring. To my back is the house that I grew up in, unoccupied now, the sale hasn't gone through yet. The purchasing family seems able and they have a daughter that bears an uncanny resemblance to my own sister at her age. More submerged memories come back. A dusty photo album springing to life. Not all of the pictures in it are happy ones. They are not coherent either. Unlike the lake, they do not flow. They sprout irregularly up from nowhere. Like islands.

A grim October wind sweeps off the lake like a runner. There are no boats. No lazy pontoons with fishing lines jetting out from the sides. No jet skiers raising their own particular brand of hell. No kids in kayaks or canoes.

I wonder if it's still there, though, I already know the answer. Like the lake, it too still occupies its familiar place. Unemployed for decades, leaning against the large oak that overlooks the edge of the water, bared now of its lustrous pine coat. The canoe looks practically grown into the trunk of the tree, which is knotted and gnarled. It's a snapshot from my childhood that's as vivid as a photograph. The lake that I spent so much time exploring and the canoe which guided me in my travels. Well, me and my sister, that is. Another grim wind blows.

Upon inspection, I find that the canoe is still intact. Battered and time worn but able to serve its main function dutifully.

The lake beckons me. The canoe feels warm in my hands, both of which feel 20 years younger. I drag it across the overgrown grass to the surface of the lake. Once an easy task, like sliding a sled across wet snow. Now, it could be a sled weighed down with burlap sacks of cement. I watch for any bemused bystanders. I have not canoed in a great many years and it was liable to show. But there was no audience to witness my possible folly. It was fall, as I said, and the lake

was mine for the taking. There's an audible crack as I sit down in the bottom of the canoe, and it's not from the wood. Bad joints. Using the wooden paddle that sits across the bottom of the craft, I push off from the shore.

I can almost hear the whish of time being rewound. It's not just my hands that feel warm but everything around me, for it's now the summer of 1993. The sun beats down upon my tan 12-year-old body, glistening with sweat, and into my eyes, sharp and free of spectacles. I can smell the sweet honey aroma of burnt BBQ, for this particular date is the fourth of July. I can even hear-

II.

-Casey Kasem rang out through the portable AM/FM radio cradled in the nook between my arm. Gypsy Woman by Crystal Waters. Up next, Ice Ice Baby by Vanilla Ice. It was the 90's, alright.

The rushing surges of wind felt good in my hair, shaggy and disobedient. In my left hand was a can of Mr. Pibb, Dr. Pepper's redheaded brother by adoption. In my right was a wooden paddle lazily drifting on the surface of the water.

"Give me a pop," Brooke called out doggedly from behind.

My sister, younger by one year, was doing the brunt of the paddling. Her face, freckled and sunburnt. Her hair, cornstalk yellow, knotted into rough ponytails.

"Last one," I replied, shaking the can to illustrate. The remaining few drops splashed against the side of the can. Gulping them, I tossed the empty one into the bottom of the canoe, where the remnants of a six-pack sang out in chorus. Beside them were our explorer tools; a tangle of rope, a spade for digging, and my trusty BB gun. This last item was brought stealthily aboard without our parents' approval.

"But I've only had two," she said, calculating on her fingers. "That means you had four. You said that if I do the rowing we would split it 50/50."

"I'm the one who returned cans to buy it in the first place," I said, "and at this rate we won't make it to the island until next fourth of July."

Sulkily, Brooke resumed rowing.

"By the way," I added, "we're gonna score big once we get to the island."

"Yeah?"

"You bet. Shit-faced people are always leaving their empty cans behind."

The island in the centre of the lake was the resident hotspot for kids who wanted to get bent and leave all traces of evidence behind. Once, we had found the combined sum of 24 fallen soldiers,

all spread across the beach like a scene from Normandy. Not a bad plunder.

“What’s shit-faced?” she asked, squinting.

“Really, really drunk.”

“Oh.”

I could tell that the colourful bit of playground poetry was immediately filed away in her mental cabinet, either for personal use or for ammunition when she wanted to get me in trouble later.

We came upon the island from the side hedged with overbrush. A flock of swans bobbed delicately in the water, spreading their wings. Passing one with its head submerged, Brooke suddenly slapped the paddle against the lake’s surface, screaming, “Gotcha!”

I regarded my sister sharply, who just grinned sheepishly back.

The island looked, from above, almost like a complete circle. Once, it may have been a perfect circle, but that was before erosion ate away at the perfection. Beach channelled all sides except the south. The sand there had fallen away into the lake and the tangled knots of brush met the surface of the water without intermission. In the centre of the island was a single birch tree, standing upright but with a noticeable sag that became more noticeable with every passing season. All of the leaves were gone too. Mom had always told us that the island had once met the park on shore, a nearly 30-yard distance. That was well before our time. That there used to be a sandbar you could walk across, like a long floating sidewalk. An umbilical cord tethering the island to the rest of the world. That when the lake was down you could walk across it without getting so much as your feet wet.

It was the erosion that made it look like the island was moving. Season after season, it never looked like it inhabited exactly the same place in the lake as before. Sometimes, out of the corner of your eye, I once told my sister by the ghoulish light of a campfire, you can see the island creeping. It creeps. It waits until you have your back turned, but sometimes you can catch a glimpse of it creeping slowly across the water. It moves so slowly because the creature below has to dig each of its big, lumbering fingers into the sand one at a time and pull its belly across the bottom of the lake.

Brooke pulled the canoe on shore as I cased the beach on the other side of the overbrush. Burnt logs rested in a pit where a campfire had once been. Nearly 12 empty cans of Miller Lite lay on the sand, their silver bodies gleaming like shell casings. Score.

“Round ‘em up,” I said.

“Nuh-uh,” she replied, hands on her hips like King Tut. “Get to work, peon.”

Dramatically, I thrust my left hand above my beating heart.

“Is that all I am to you, empress? Forced labour?”

“Mush puppy.”

“So that’s to be my fate, is it? Work or the dungeons. Very well, but heed my words, I’ll have my freedom yet.”

“I will not stand this in-sol-e-nce,” she replied, hardly being able to hold back a suppressed laugh.

I tossed the empty beer cans into a plastic Kroger bag, which I tied off. All the while groaning and sighing in exaggeration, a portrait of misery. Afterward I stooped before Brooke and dropped down on one knee.

“The work is done, my empress.”

“You shall be spared from the dungeons, peon.”

Suddenly, I rose, stick in hand, and held the dull point to my sister’s neck.

“Mutiny!” she cried, and I chased her around the beach, both of us laughing uncontrollably.

After a while of this we both successfully managed to whup ourselves out and decided to play *zombie invasion* instead. Zombie invasion was a game of Brooke’s delectable imagination, inspired by the black and white horror movies that we were sometimes allowed to watch and the colour horror movies that we would sometimes watch but were never allowed to. For, while we could never rent any of the really bloody movies—the ones with enticing taglines like, when there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth—we did both have something of an imagination. We were kids, after all.

“Say, you remember when dad tricked us into helping him find the underground septic tank by telling us we were digging for buried treasure,” I said, fetching the spade from the canoe.

“Maybe there’s buried treasure here,” Brooke said, laying down in the sand.

I piled heaps of sand over her body until nothing but her head peeked out. The sun was now beginning its eager descent and a chill tingled the back of my neck when Brooke rose from the earth and lumbered behind me moaning.

“My turn to play zombie,” I said, throwing Brooke the spade and taking my accustomed place in the sand.

“How’d you die?” Brooke asked.

“What does it matter?”

“Well, some zombies limp and some zombies crawl. What kind are you?”

“I’m a crawler.”

“So, how’d you die? Were you a good guy or a bad guy?”

“I killed eight people with my bare hands. They had to electrocute me three times before it finally worked.”

“But I thought you said you were a crawler?”

“Oh, yeah,” I contemplated. “So, I am. They had to electrocute me in my wheelchair. I was also handicapped.”

Brooke stabbed the end of the spade into the sand.

KA-BOOM!

Her face registered confusion and dread. So did mine, for that matter, as we had both been so caught up in our game that we hadn’t noticed the fireworks display starting above. A golden orb outlined the back of my sister’s head in silhouette, and then mushroomed into dozens of brilliant rays.

“Come on!” I said, pouncing to my feet and padding off down the beach, completely forgetting about my role. It’s a miracle, he can walk!

Brooke didn’t move. She was gazing intently down at the spade with its head buried in the sand. Her features were compact, her expression puzzled. It was the same expression you see on a student staring at a complex math problem with the belief that if they simply stare at it long enough it will all just come together. The birch tree crooned overhead like a deformed giant. Another explosion filled the sky, jack-o-lantern orange.

“Come on,” I repeated, “we’re gonna miss it.”

KA-BOOM!

“What?”

“The fireworks,” I said, “we’re gonna miss them!”

Brooke gazed absently into the sky, as if she had just taken notice of the large artillery fire above.

“Fireworks!” she suddenly cried. “Oh, come on, we’re gonna miss them.”

Running down the beach, I could see my sister looking back over her shoulder at the spade,

sticking diligently up from the sand like a knife wedged into a board.

We played foxhole for a while, pretending we were troops abandoned on the shores of Normandy as the Germans dropped bombs from above. Whenever a KA-BOOM issued in the sky, we'd scatter and dodge like we were in a firefight. Brooke and I trading off who got to hold the BB gun and shoot up into the sky. However, after a while we both succumbed to the soft sand by the water's edge and laid down on our backs to watch the spectacle.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I guess I did, because the next thing I knew I woke up on the beach. I think it was the sounds of the grand finale that woke me, for when I opened my eyes the last ghost of the celebration was fading in the sky. The faint sound of people clapping and cheering from the park on shore floated across the water. One more firework exploded in the sky, as if answering the cries of encore. A brilliant red, white, and blue one. We were victorious. The Germans had left the beach and fled to Paris. Brooke and I both received a purple heart from Roosevelt. Nazi bodies were piled up in force.

(when there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth)

"I love you, Devin," Brooke said, and clasped a hand around one of mine.

I kicked the sand sulkily with my bare feet. "Even if I'm a handicap zombie?"

"You saved us from the Germans."

"You're the one who shot down that B-52," I replied. "By the way, we both got purple hearts from Roosevelt. You weren't there, so I had to accept it on your behalf."

"No, thanks."

"What, you don't want it?"

"I'd have to rearrange my room. I have enough stuff. Are the Nazis gone?"

"They ran off to Paris," I said. "But we'll have to liberate Paris tomorrow. I'm tired and I told mom and dad that we'd be back right after the fireworks."

"Mom and dad don't care about Paris?"

"Paris will be fine. They have croissants."

"DEVIN!" My sister's voice, faraway. "DEVIN! HELP ME!"

Oh, Jesus, I thought.

"DEVIN!" My sister's voice, again, pleading, well off in the distance.

Then whose hand am I holding?

I awoke with a start on the beach, soaking with sweat. My sister was gone.

“Brooke?”

No reply. Headlights acted like spotlights in the sky. The people who had gathered at the park to watch the fireworks were now leaving.

“Brooke?” I called out.

Nothing.

I rose in a flash and ran madly into the overbrush, prickly bushes slashing at my skin.

“Jesus, Brooke,” I said, exhaling a caught breath. My sister was digging in the sand with the spade. The hole she dug practically touched her knees. “What are you doing?” I asked.

If Brooke heard me, she showed no signs of acknowledging it. The spade sliced into the sand and dispatched a fresh lump of it.

I grabbed Brooke by the shoulder. She turned around with an animal-like swiftness. Her eyes bulging from their sockets, her face as pale as the moon, which was now beginning to show through the clouds.

“Devin?” she said, looking into my face as if she had just taken notice of it.

“Why’d you call out?”

“I didn’t call out.”

“Well, what are you digging for, anyhow?”

She looked down at the hole emptily, and then back to me.

“I don’t know. They wanted me to.”

“Who?”

“The dead soldiers, I guess.”

“You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Come on, I told mom and dad we would be back right after the fireworks.”

We made the canoe ride back without conversation. I was paddling this time and dedicated my mind to the occupation. I still felt uneasy from my dream and wanted something to distract myself by. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Brooke glancing back towards the island anxiously, biting her lip.

“Devin?” she asked, once.

“Yeah?”

“Paris tomorrow, right?”

I shivered, but agreed, “Paris tomorrow.” The full moon shined on.

III.

The following morning, I met Brooke in the hall. She had blood on her fingers. I had a toothbrush in my mouth. It fell to the carpet when I screamed. I screamed because she was screaming. She was screaming because she was certain that she was bleeding to death. At that moment, so was I.

Dad held an arm out to prevent me from following as mom corralled Brooke back into her room. I could see that the bedsheets were stained with drops of blood.

“Girl stuff,” dad said inadequately.

I waited for Brooke outside around the back of the house. The basement window was open, and I could hear the regular thumping of the washing machine inside, like the heart of a grinding monster. A sweet, soapy lavender smell floated out that made me nauseous and mad. I felt like picking up one of the brown bricks that dad had set aside on the ground for work on the patio and smashing the window in with it.

“Earlier and earlier,” I suddenly heard mom’s voice from inside the laundry room.

And dad responding, “It’s all that processed crap that they put in those microwavable dinners. Hormones, you know.”

“Still, 11 years old.”

“Kids are growing up faster these days, and I’m not just talking about emotionally.”

“I suppose.”

IV.

“We’re too late,” I cried, leaping out of the canoe and back onto the island’s sandy beach later

that morning.

I waved my hand out across the deserted thoroughfares of Paris, where dozens of bodies were strewn. I was 12 and knew France only from the cartoons that I watched on TV, so they were all naturally dressed in black and white mime clothes and holding shopping bags with tall baguettes sticking out from the top.

“That’s fine,” I added, “I didn’t really feel like fighting Nazis today anyhow. How much do you bet that I can start a campfire with sticks?”

“Shouldn’t we bury them?” Brooke asked, pulling the canoe on shore.

“What for?”

She shrugged. “In case they’re zombies.”

“Well, you can bury the kids but I wanna make a huge pyre to burn the rest of the bodies in, alright?”

Brooke grinned and got diligently to work. She liked it when I gave her things to do and I didn’t really want her looking over my shoulder and asking a bunch of questions, mostly in case my efforts proved to be a horrible failure.

The slicing of the spade continued faithfully as I found some dry leaves and brush on the south side of the island, which I gathered into the metal campfire ring. I then located two sturdy branches and tried the old Indian trick of rubbing them together. I’d seen it done in plenty of movies, usually ones starring John Wayne or Gary Cooper. They always made it look so easy, the same way that John Wayne could light a match with a quick swipe across his jeans. I was too young to notice the conspicuous splicing of film as he did so.

I blistered the palms of my hands for nearly half an hour to no avail. Stealthily, I then palmed a small matchbox from the pocket of my jeans and struck one against the side of the box, fully aware that in my hand I was holding a year’s worth of groundings if mom or dad were to ever find out. The dry brush went quick and before long I had a respectable campfire burning. Back in the canoe I had a bag of marshmallows wrapped up in my shirt that I had hoped to surprise Brooke with. I had already forgotten nearly everything about the night before, but there was enough unease left in me to make killing Nazis sound less appealing when I woke up that morning.

I traipsed back to the east side of the island, where Brooke was still digging graves in the sand. Four waist deep holes displayed her dedication.

“Campfire’s lit,” I said, not choosing to disclose the matchbook in my pocket. “And you’ll never guess what I stole from the pantry?”

Brooke didn’t say anything. She just threw up more spadefuls of sand with a look of fixed

determination on her face.

“Marshmallows!” I announced, fetching the bag from the canoe. It was tucked away beside a fresh six pack of Mr. Pibb that the beer cans from the day before bought. A well-balanced breakfast.

No reaction.

“Come on,” I said, “we have marshmallows and zombies to burn.”

“But I’m not done digging graves yet.”

“Forget about it.”

“But the kids want me to dig.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause, they tell me to.”

“The kids will all fit in there,” I said, pointing to one of the holes. “Now stop being stupid and come on.”

She hesitated for a moment. “It’s just a game, right, Devin?” she said, at last. “They’ll stop when we’re done playing, right?”

“We’ll play later, alright crazy?”

Brooke looked at me doubtfully and then back to the spade.

“No thanks. I think I’ll just keep digging.”

“You really have lost your marbles,” I said. “Whatever, then I guess I’ll just have to eat all these marshmallows by myself.”

I walked slowly, hoping to hear Brooke’s footsteps eventually lagging behind, but they never did. Just the spade cutting into the sand, over and over.

The campfire was in its extremity when I returned. I tried breathing life into it, but nothing going. I settled for dangling the marshmallows over a bed of smouldering coals. It hardened the skins but didn’t quite give them that roasted ashy flavour. I was almost halfway through the bag when I decided to go back and show Brooke how little remained, just to illustrate that I was plenty serious in eating them all.

When I came out through the overbrush Brooke was sitting in the sand surrounded by a dozen holes, the spade still clutched in the palm of her hands. Tears were running down her cheeks,

both of which were sunburnt and caked with dirt.

“I didn’t eat them all,” I said reassuringly, and held the bag up. “Here, you can have the rest.”

“They won’t let me stop,” she cried.

“You can stop,” I said, and grabbed the spade from her.

Brooke seemed to be comforted by this. She wiped her eyes and looked up at me hopefully.

“It’s just make-believe, right? It’ll all stop when we’re done playing?”

“It’s all make-believe,” I agreed, not exactly sure what I was agreeing to. It seemed to help though.

“We’re not done playing yet, are we, Devin?”

“No,” I said. “No, we’ll always play together, dum-dum.”

I thought back to the image of Brooke with blood on her fingers and how I still didn’t understand what it meant. Looking at her now, I felt as though I understood her as well as a dog understands the mechanics of the fire hydrant it pees on. All I knew then is that I never wanted her to change or to grow-up.

V.

Dad had already coolly decided that Brooke was going to be grounded until the turn of the century. According to mom, heads were going to roll.

We awoke the next morning to find both Brooke and her shoes by the door missing. The threat of rain was in the air and her raincoat was gone too. It was the first time that Brooke had ever wandered off by herself without warning, and mom was quick to assure me that it would be the last.

However, as the minutes doled by, I could tell that they were getting frightened.

The grocery store was three blocks from our house. Mom took the Dodge to the store while dad and I drove around downtown in the Buick, looking down sidewalks and into storefronts, his eyes occasionally glaring up with apprehension at the darkening sky.

When we rendezvoused back home the tone of the conversation was less judicial. Threats of punishments were no longer being traded.

This is serious, I told myself, and for the first time it sank in. Missing, is the word that came to my mind. It was a word that I always visualized in big bold letters on the back of a milk jug, or on a piece of paper stapled to a telephone pole.

“I can look in the park,” I volunteered.

“I’ll take you,” dad said, throwing another glance at the sky from out of the kitchen window. “I don’t like the look of those clouds.”

“It’s faster if I bike. I can be back in five minutes.”

“If it starts to rain I want you to turn back immediately,” mom said. “There’s no sense in both you and your sister catching pneumonia.”

On any other occasion I would have been thrilled at playing detective, riding around the park like a kid on a mission. However, I was becoming afraid myself. By now it had been nearly three hours since we woke up to find Brooke missing. When I left for the park mom had even thrown out the dreaded P word. Police. A deadly finality cradled that word. Brooke wasn’t missing, couldn’t be missing, I told myself. Not until the police were called. That’s when it becomes real.

I passed through the cemetery, the playground, and our favourite fishing local at the edge of the park, where I stopped and looked up at the sky. It was the same colour as the lake below, a stormy grey. The winds had picked up as well and waves crashed against the jagged rocks that nestled the water’s edge. It was then that I saw the canoe.

In hindsight, I should have noticed that it was missing when I went around the house to get my bike.

Even from 30 yards away I could see the canoe pulled up on the sandy beach of the island. I immediately began peddling back as fast as I could. Our speedboat would get us to the island in less than three minutes. I had just started peddling when the sky opened up, and a hard rain fell.

“You’re going to flood the engine,” mom cried out.

“The engine will be fine,” dad replied, and cranked the level all the way up.

The speedboat shot through the wake like a bullet, jetting up frothy white waves behind. The rain had announced itself and we were all three getting soaked to the skin. Thunder rumbled above, and I wondered how long it would be before lightning crashed on the horizon.

I jumped out of the speedboat before dad had even brought it to a stop and ran headlong onto the island. Brooke was sitting on the beach, completely covered with dirt, her hands blistered and red.

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?” I screamed over the rain.

She looked at me curiously. “They didn’t stop.”

“What?”

“You said they’d stop when we’re done playing. You said it was all make-believe.”

Mom and dad rounded the corner. Mom gasped with relief and dad cursed underneath his breath. In another second they were both smothering Brooke with hugs.

Brooke was sitting in the speedboat wrapped in a bundle of wet towels. Dad had just pushed off from the sand when I asked him about the canoe.

“Tether it to the back,” he said, “and we’ll tow it.”

“They want my help,” Brooke said. “They want me to find them. Devin, it’s not make-believe.”

“What’s she talking about?” mom asked.

“It’s just a stupid game,” I said sharply, and Brooke’s expression dropped.

I then took off through the overbrush. When I came out on the other side, I had to stop and stare, literally breathless.

Not just a dozen holes, but a dozen dozen, taking up the entire width of the beach. All dug waist deep.

VI.

But the story didn’t end there.

Brooke was given a week’s grounding, no parole. I had never seen anyone change as much as my sister did during that week. She became virtually unresponsive to me and it wasn’t long before mom and dad even started to notice that she wasn’t eating or saying much at all. I may be wrong, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that they blamed me in part for putting those macabre fantasies in my sister’s head and egging her on. Maybe they were right. I wondered about it for a long time afterward. Wondering if I was simply trying to keep things status quo indefinitely.

Eventually, they succumbed to the go-to resort of all confused parents. They sent Brooke to a psychologist.

Our relationship was never as strong afterward. Brooke improved and some of the light returned to her face. She even started joking and playing with me again. But there was hole missing that would never be completely filled. Brooke would be eating dinner or watching TV, and then something would just click. I don’t know what, but she would go pale, sweat forming beads on her forehead, her hands clenching up into tight fists, and I could tell that she was frightened.

We never did return to the island. I no longer had any desire to and Brooke wouldn’t even set foot in the lake, let alone go canoeing or on a boat ride with mom and dad. When we’d pass it on the bike trail at the park, Brooke would always grow silent, keeping her eyes dutifully fixed on

the path ahead, and said nothing until the island was well out of sight.

And that was it. When I turned 18 I started community college, and the following year Brooke moved three hours away to attend KSU.

But that wasn't it.

No, the real story came five years later.

I don't really remember anything after I picked up the phone. I remember dad's hysterical voice on the other end, and the sound of mom screaming in the background, but that was it. Everything that happened afterward seemed to move in a blurry slow-motion. It wasn't until Brooke's funeral that time finally caught up with me.

She had taken a bath after consuming an entire bottle of prescription sleeping pills. Three days after the funeral, I received Brooke's letter. It had been sent delayed mail.

They never stopped, it said.

I would drive through the park road every time that I stopped to visit mom and dad and observe the slow shrinking of the island with every passing year. I believe it was 2016 when the news story broke. It was the most sensational news story to rock the city of Belmont since the 1920s.

In the early 1920s, Belmont resident Ronald Madison made not only the local paper, the Belmont Journal, but all of the major papers nearly twenty county lines in each direction. The Saint Bernard Killer, a journalist with a touch of zest branded him, and the moniker stuck. The sum total, still disputed, accredited Mr. Madison with the murders of fourteen young children. A keen neighbour observant to a bad odour, a cigarette, and a single strand of Saint Bernard hair led to his arrest. None of the bodies were ever found.

In 1931, Mr. Madison and his property on 1606 Stoneway Drive, dubbed by an inspired community as the devil's lair, both received the death penalty. In mid-September Mr. Madison faced the electric chair. A month later the house was demolished. The blast could be heard, it was written, by the residents of Owens, a town approximately thirty miles west.

When the island did finally erode away into nothing, the skeletons of five young children, all below the age of 12, floated up to the surface, revealing one of his burial sites. That was back when the sandbar connected the island to the park, and I gather that he used it as means of burying his victims.

At first, the fisherman in the pontoon boat assumed they were a bunch of dead fish bobbing on the surface of the water. He swooped his fishing net into the lake and brought up a child's jawbone.

VIII.

Passing over the nondescript patch of water where the island had once been, I glance down into the depths of Lake Thompson, wondering what other mysteries are submerged beneath. Mysterious that are bound to eventually resurface. That's the thing about water; it'll keep your secret, but not forever.

Wading through the vacant marshland on the far side of the lake, I start paddling for the first piece of solid land that my eyes catch. Every joint in my 46-year-old body feels like it's on fire. The sun is setting triumphantly over the tops of the trees and everything that its fingers touch is painted blood red.

Panting, I haul the canoe on shore. A weeping willow tree governs overhead, its low hanging branches forming a wall around me.

I sit down to catch my breath, looking out at the full panorama of the lake.

A smile folds across my lips when I spot another occupant doggedly enjoying the final fling of summer. A young boy in a yellow kayak.

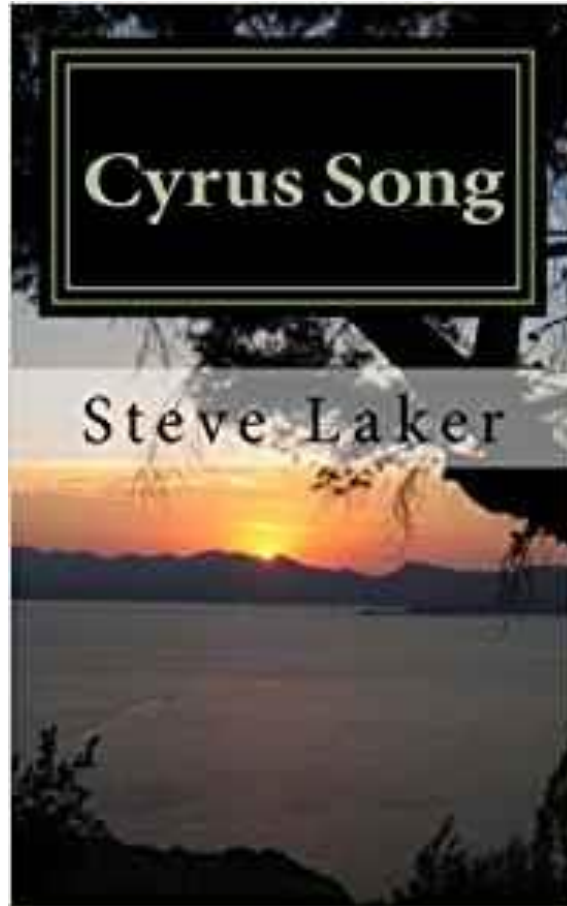
He can't see me through the sheet of branches. I keep still, not wanting to startle him, but watching with a wistful kind of nostalgia. He bears little resemblance to myself at his age, but the reckless boyish determination painted writ large on his face is a blast from my own past.

I observe him as he pulls up on a patch of solid ground, much like the one I am resting on now, and grounds the kayak. Then, reaching into the bottom, he brings up a shovel.

His face as pale as bone, his expression puzzled and frightened, his lips silently murmuring. My smile is instantly extinguished as he starts to dig.

THE END

Aaron Alan Pfau is a budding horror writer living in Michigan. A taste for the macabre, he is a loyal devotee of Lovecraft, Poe, and King. A criminal justice student, he hopes to make a difference.



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THE PLAN by Steven Havelock

Jamie was in shock.

I can't believe it. The dirty bitch has been cheating on me!

Jamie had just logged onto his and his wife's computer, his wife Sarah had left her email logged in. One of his wife's emails had caught his eye.

The subject line was: 'See you later for some fun hun.'

I really don't want to read this.

In an instant he had read it and his world had suddenly turned upside down. His face turned red with anger and jealousy.

I can't believe it. The dirty bitch has been cheating on me!

He read some more...

She's doing it with her boss, Jason.

The knife dug deeper.

Jason had seemed a nice enough bloke. I never thought either of them would stoop so low.

Sarah had been working at Delicious Donuts for three years now.

He looked through more emails.

She's been having an affair for nearly two years!

He sat staring at the screen completely stumped.

What do I do? I can't just stand by and do nothing?

A plan started to form in his mind.

I will kill them both. First I will get rid of Jason and then I will get rid of Sarah. Sarah's asleep next door.

Jamie went to the hallway closet and opened Sarah's handbag. Inside he found a key to Delicious Donuts. He knew Sarah had the key as she opened the place up at 8:30 am every day.

My plan is simple; I will poison them both with anti-freeze.

He kept the anti-freeze in the glove compartment of his car. Thirty minutes later on a late November night, he was outside Delicious Donuts.

God! It's cold tonight!

He used the key to open the door and entered.

Jason drinks every day without fail. This will be so easy...

He entered the establishment and walked to the back where the office was. Two wine bottles stood on the shelves behind the office desk. He flipped off the cork from them both and poured a large amount of anti-freeze into each.

There. It's done. Now I just have that silly cow to deal with.

Just then he heard a noise.

Someone's upstairs!

Jason was startled; trying to think what could have awoken him.

There it is again! Someone's downstairs in the shop! A burglar!

His face turned red with anger.

I don't have a lot, but no one is going to take what little I do have! I've been sleeping above the shop for the last two weeks, to try and save money as the business is going kaput; but only I and Sarah know this.

He picked up one of his golf clubs from the corner of the room and slowly started to descend the stairs.

Blast! The light switch is at the bottom of the stairs.

In the almost pitch black darkness he descended as silently as possible. Just then he saw and heard someone making a dash for the interior door which separated the front of the premises from the back. Instinctively he descended the last few stairs as fast as possible and swung the golf club.

He heard a thud as someone collapsed to the floor. He switched on the light.

It's Jamie! What the hell is this idiot doing in my shop?

He saw a middle aged man wearing a dark coat, collapsed on the floor and blood pouring from his head.

Oh my God! I killed him!

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking. He hadn't noticed it when he had descended the stairs as the adrenalin had been running through his veins, but now...But now the fear had caught up with him. He stared at his shaking hands unable to make them stop.

I need a drink! A stiff drink will sort me out.

In the office in the back of the building, he sat down at his desk. Normally he would put his feet up on the desk but he didn't this time.

He uncorked the bottle and put it to his lips and took a large swig.

I feel a bit better. Now I got to ring the police. I just hope I haven't killed the idiot.

He dialled the police. A few minutes later as the wine made its way through his system and with the police on their way he felt better.

He had nearly finished the bottle.

I don't feel well. My head is spinning, I'm about to pass out!

The wine bottle fell from his grasp.

God! I feel awful! My head is spinning and my vision is going dim.

Jason heard the faint noise of a police siren in the distance but for him it was too late. He collapsed to the floor.

Jamie awoke slightly.

God! I feel dreadful. My head hurts like hell and my stomach is burning. My chest, oh my god, my chest is burning!

"He's coming round."

Jamie opened his bleary eyes slightly and saw the blue uniforms of two police officers.

God, I feel like crap!

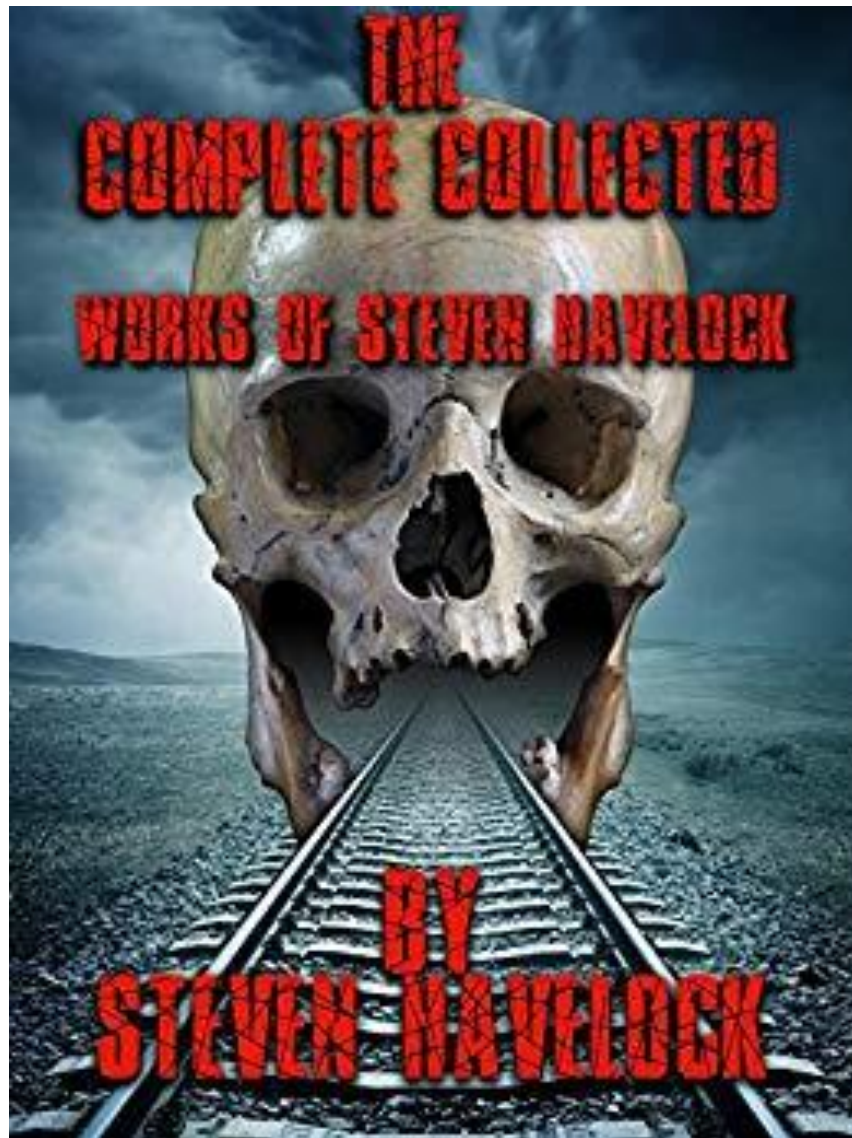
"We couldn't wake you," said one of the police officers.

I feel like I'm going to pass out. My head is spinning and my vision is going dim.

“We had to give you three swigs of this wine bottle to get you to come round.”

The colour drained from Jamie's face. He gave a low scream as he passed out into oblivion.

THE END



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THE SILO by Jonathan True

Tiffany Maelstrom felt the throbbing pain of a hangover. She couldn't remember what happened the night before. An impenetrable mental fuzz blocked the way.

"Tssss...Aaaaah, what the...?" she stopped herself.

This was not her bed. Disoriented, and now concerned, she opened her blurry eyes. Her face stuck to the concrete floor. She sat up and wiped the drool off of her cheek and out of the corner of her mouth. A small puddle was evidence of where she slept. Tiny flecks of rock fell away when she brushed her hands against her face. Tiffany felt oily and dirty. She wanted to brush her teeth and take a shower. As she rubbed her eyes her vision slowly cleared. Out of habit she reached for her glasses. She felt nothing but the surrounding cold hard floor.

Tiffany was legally blind without her glasses. As long as she could remember, she had always had to wear them. But since her twentieth birthday, her vision was progressively growing worse. It was no real surprise to her. Her Nana (her mother's mother) had plastic rimmed coke bottle glasses that she had been wearing as long as Tiffany could remember.

Sitting there on the concrete floor, she couldn't see much more than shadows and colours. It was a circular room about twenty five feet wide and just as tall. It could have been an empty grain silo, or perhaps a missile silo. She had never seen one, but it would not surprise her if she had woken up at the bottom of a missile silo. She could not see a door, but it was possible, she thought, that she just couldn't make it out with her bad vision.

The young woman, with her almost cute round cheeks, started to become more concerned. "No no no. This can't be happening..." her voice trailed off with a little whimper.

She was slightly overweight, not quite medically obese, but she had always been a bit bigger than the other girls in her circle of friends. Her thick glasses and body shape caused the people around her to treat her like a stereotypical smart, overweight bookworm.

As with any child, they will be what the people around them expect them to be. Treat a child like a criminal, and they will become a criminal. Treat a child like a librarian, and they will become... a librarian. Her teachers expected her to be smart and studious. Any slacking was met with shame and disappointment. She flashed back to memories of the in-crowd girls. They all acted so stupid; she resented them. She resented the way they got anything they wanted by becoming the objects the boys and men around them wanted them to be. She hated them, but secretly wondered what it would be like to have life so easily handed to her. Tiffany always had to work hard, and for the most part, she was alone.

A memory floated past the haze, Dottie Short was her best friend since high school. Dottie was skinny enough to be one of the cool girls, but she was always a bit too tall, a bit too clumsy, and far too poor. Growing up Dottie's clothes were riddled with patches, hand-me-downs from her older cousin. The other girls were cruel and ridiculed her, but Tiffany was always supportive, she could see Dottie for the kind person and true friend that she really was. The kind of friend she

needed with her through thick and thin. Now, more than ever she wanted Dottie by her side.

The previous night, Tiffany remembered that she sat at her kitchen table finishing up some reports for work. Mindless red tape that she quietly enjoyed. She liked the simplicity of it. It was a task she was rewarded for; a task she excelled at, or so she was told. It was time consuming, but she took pride in doing a good job and doing it right. On top of that, her co-workers always complained about it, so she did the reports for her team. In her mind that made her kind of a hero, and that made her happy.

“Let’s get a drink, Tiff. You and I, ya know, we deserve it. Take a break, kick our feet up. Maybe going dancing... and then, hmm. Oh! Stafellies after. You know you love it.... That warm, fresh, baked bread and that ooey-gooney cheese. Oh my God! I’m making myself hungry,” said the awkward kinky haired brunette.

“Yeah, I could go for some Stafellies.” said Tiffany, “but do we have to go dancing first? I always feel so out of place.” She frowned with theatrical, quivering, pouty lips.

Tiffany did feel out of place dancing, like she was never quite sure how to move, what the right thing to do was. Most of all, she didn’t like people looking at her. She felt their eyes watching her; judging her for being someplace people can see. Or maybe, perhaps worse, what if someone was watching and they liked what they saw? “What if a guy tries to talk to me? I really don’t want to go.”

“Don’t worry, Tiff; I’ll protect you. If the guy seems like a creep, I’ll scare him away.” The words “Don’t Worry, I’ll protect you,” rang out clear in her mind like a lighthouse in the fog.

A movement on the other side of the room caught her attention. She couldn’t make out a face, but it was definitely a person. The person moved her leg. Light caramel skin under khaki shorts, just long enough to be respectable and short enough to keep cool in the hot Florida summer. Tiffany cautiously stumbled towards the injured woman.

“No, God, no. Please no.” The scene became clear when she got within a few feet. It was Dottie. Her face was badly injured; a few teeth were scattered on the ground. Crimson, clotted blood was thick on the floor in her hair and around her head. Her skin had an unusual grey tinge covering the normally prevalent dark freckles on her cheeks. Dottie was going into shock.

Fear swept over Tiffany’s face. The only person that would miss her, or call the police... her rescuer was on the floor. There would be no rescue.

“HELP!!!! CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME?!!!! PLEASE, MY FRIEND IS HURT!!! PLEASE, HELP!!!!”

This continued in vain until she literally could not scream anymore. Unable to make any sizable sounds, and dizzy from the screaming she fell to her knees and began to cry. The only sounds

that she could make were tiny, demoralizing squeaks. She had always felt powerless, and now more so than ever. Tiffany sighed a gasping, trembling gulp of air when her tears ran out. She wasn't good in situations like this. She couldn't think clearly. Her life was in danger, and to make matters worse, her best friend's life was on the line, too. She did the only thing she thought would help. Tiffany laid down behind Dottie, gently placed her arm under Dottie's head, held her close, and went to sleep.

Dottie Short was a long ways from home. She grew up in Mitcham, a smallish, quietish suburb of London. Dottie's family moved to the US when she was fourteen. She was devastated to leave all of her friends behind. Her father, Colin, moved the family to Tampa Bay when he accepted a job there working as the manager of a small software development team.

"Chin up, luv," he said. "You'll meet plenty of new mates in Florida."

A shooting pain shot up Dottie's arm followed by an almost blinding pain from her head. "My arm, I think it's broken," she mumbled. One eye was swollen shut. She felt the horrible jagged pain of broken teeth as her tongue moved in her mouth. She sat up and winced in agony. Dottie looked around to get her bearings. Tiffany was still lying beside her. She looked alright for the most part. A little worse for the wear, but nothing that couldn't be fixed. Not on the outside at least.

Tiffany opened her eyes, realized where she was, and saw her friend. Elation and a momentary relief flashed over her face before remembering she didn't know where she was or how she got there. Still, she couldn't help hugging her long-time friend.

Tiffany said "God, I thought I lost you," as Dotty exclaimed "Careful, please."

Dottie's left forearm didn't look straight to Tiffany. There might, she thought, be bone poking up from under the skin. It was so swollen that it had started to rip in several places. Tiffany couldn't help but wince in empathy for her friend's condition.

"Dottie, what's happening?" she whispered, "What are we doing here? I...I can't remember anything. You talked me into going out. I remember we got to the club...and... I don't..."

"I'm so sorry; it's all my fault. I just wanted to dance a little, have a little fun. I guess that's TOO MUCH TO FUCKING ASK!" Dottie screamed at the ceiling.

Dottie could see more clearly, with her one good eye, than Tiffany. The ceiling that she screamed at had a thick metal hatch slightly larger than a manhole cover. A few steps of a solid-looking steel ladder protruded a few feet downward, leaving twenty feet between the bottom rung and the floor. The dim light in the room came from a small hole, about six inches in diameter, and about four feet from the centre of the room. Directly below the hatch, on the floor, was a metal plate with small quarter-sized holes drilled in it for drainage. The concrete of the floor was poured and levelled at such an angle to direct all water to the drain, while being nearly

imperceivable to anyone actually standing on the floor.

“It was a guy. You didn’t see him,” started Dottie speaking uncharacteristically slow. “You were driving, and pulled into the parking lot across the street from The Palms. I wasn’t paying attention. I was checking my stupid makeup.” She was angry at herself. She was the eldest of three children and had always felt like the protector. She knew the world didn’t rest on her shoulders, that it wasn’t her fault, but she always felt like she could do more, should do more. That it was her responsibility to do more. “I was checking my makeup,” she started again. “You got out of the car and he was right there, waiting. He took you from behind. You... you never had a chance. There was a rag he put over your mouth and nose. I saw you go limp. By the time I ran over to him you were already in the van. I fought the fucker, I fought with everything I had, but it wasn’t enough.”

Dottie showed off her war wounds. She was missing the fingernail from her middle and ring fingers on both hands and half of the pinkie fingernail on the right. There were bloodied and bruised bands around her wrists where she had been subdued and zip tied. Although she couldn’t see it, the back of her head, just above the spinal column, had a nasty bruise and cut from the assailant knocking her out with the base of his gun.

The hatch above them began to move. The locking wheel spun several times allowing the hatch to swing open. A six foot tall, white male looked down at them.

There was a moment of anxious anticipation. The women held hands in mutual support; whatever would come, whatever the future held, they were in it together. Was this their saviour? Perhaps some passer-by happened upon them, wherever they were. Dottie hoped for the police. She fantasized there was a manhunt out for the criminal who abducted two young women. Dottie knew that in America the media doesn’t care about crime against black women, but Tiffany was young, pretty, and as white as freshly fallen snow. That should rally up the media enough to force the police into a manhunt, maybe even the FBI . . . or so she hoped.

They weren’t far. She was not out for more than a few hours, and she saw Spanish moss hanging from the trees outside. With any luck, the abandoned car was reported. Maybe an investigation team was sent out. Forensics matched a tire mark with the van they had been kidnapped in and narrowed the search to just a few people, one of which was an obvious psychopath! She dared not hope this was her rescue, but her heart could not help to be hopeful.

The man had an undeniable military look, although he was not dressed in any military uniform. It was more the way he carried himself, his clean shaven face, and his high and tight haircut with a short blond tuft of hair on top. He wore a solid grey t-shirt and a pair of tan cargo pants. On his black belt was the knife sheath of a sizable blade. Although the women could not see from their perspective, he was wearing a pair of solid black jungle boots, perfectly suited for the hot Floridian summer.

Tiffany was only able to see the light above her and a khaki coloured shadow move in and out of view of the hatch opening. She looked to her friend to see what Dottie was going to do. The shadow crouched as if to get a better view of his captives. She whispered, “What’s going on?”

Dottie remained silent.

This, Dottie thought, was the man who had beaten her and thrown her in a hole. She studied him as he looked down at them. What type of man would do this? What was his purpose? It was no one, a complete stranger. Why? Why would he do this? Why them? The questions ran across her face.

“Y’all comfy down there?” The man spoke with a very slow, very strong southern drawl. His words echoed in their concrete cell. There was no reply.

“I should pro-ly introduce maself. Thas just good manners and everythin’. My name’s Rickki. You’re my new pets. I never was very good a keeping pets. Cats, dogs, lizards, alluv ‘em keep on dyin’ off. People last a little longer. I gots a couple of thins for ya.”

The man reached down to the ground behind him. It was a can of Spam and an apple in a white plastic bag. He threw the food down the hole.

“There’s somethin’ for y’all to eat, and y’all can poop in the bag. Play nice and I’ll even clean your cage for ya. OH! And I found this in the back uh the van. I’m guessin’ one of ya need this.” He threw a pair of prescription glasses down the hole. Tiffany, desperate to not see them damaged, tried her best to catch them. The glasses hit her hands and bounced off before she could close her grasp around them. She had never been coordinated, or athletic. This was just one more demoralizing blow, but not as demoralizing as when she picked them up, put them on her face, and realized they were smashed on the left side.

“Don’t sweat it, Butterfingers; it was broken before it fell.” The intimidating man looked down the hole at the two women, pondering for a moment. He started pulling his hair with one hand. Visibly agitated, and becoming increasingly so. He started patting the side of his head, and then slapping it. He collapsed; his hands on the edge of the portal. Vomit sprayed from his mouth down the hole. More than you would expect from a man that size.

The women involuntarily screamed and tried making a hasty retreat. Tiffany fell backwards, tripping over herself, and landed on her back. A majority of the pungent yellow-green fluid landed close to the drain cover. Only small specks splattered onto Tiffany. Almost none at all splattered onto Dottie’s shoes. The man peering over the edge spit on the ground outside to get the taste out of his mouth. For a moment, he gasped for air, and then, regained his composure. He slowly stood up and rolled his head around popping his neck. “Ah, eto namnogo luchshe. Teper’, gde my byli? Ah yes... It’s, how you say, dinner time. You two enjoy your meal.” He sounded entirely different. He now spoke with a thick Russian accent. The man smiled a bright, wide grin while running his fingers slowly through his hair.

The hatch appeared to be quite thick and solid, but the man standing above them made it look like paper. He picked up the unattached side, pivoting it on its hinge, looked down at the terrified women and said, “Good night, sleep tight, and don’t let Mr. Hasty bite...” He sneered and ran his tongue over his right canine tooth. His eyes locked with Tiffany’s and a shiver went down her spine. His voice had taken on a different quality, almost inhuman, as he closed the hatch. The

sound of metal on metal clanked as the hatch door fell into position. The locking wheel spun all the way around three times, squeaking as it came to its final resting place.

The man could be heard walking away through the small breathing hole. It was the sound of boots on a dry dirt road, a sound Tiffany easily recognized. It was the same sound her own boots made when walking on a trail in the Smoky Mountains. Her mind receded with the fading boot steps. It was just about this time last year. She, Dottie, and Candace, a girl from the office, all decided to rent a cabin for the week in East Tennessee. It was late summer, and the morning mist was invigorating. The cabin was built on a hillside overlooking a valley thick with trees. It was made completely of logs, but it was anything but rustic. Inside the log cabin was spotless. It had a full kitchen, four bedrooms, and a massive sofa in the living room facing a wall-sized window that overlooked the valley treetops. Outside was a full wraparound porch, all in thickly lacquered maple with a built-in hot tub for five.

Tiffany woke up to Candace cooking breakfast. Candace was always a wiz with food. The petite Vietnamese-American woman stood in front of a large, white stove. The sound of a fan built into the stove hood and the sizzling of food in a hot skillet greeted Tiffany as she walked into the kitchen. Mouth-watering aromas of maple flavoured sausage, scrambled eggs, and bread toasting filled the cabin.

“That smells amazing. I have an idea: let’s go out for a morning hike before it gets too hot. Apparently, there’s a waterfall around here people keep talking about. That would be a perfect place to relax. Take some selfies for my family... Sounds like the perfect morning,” said Tiffany, who was wearing a pair of comfortable blue sleeping shorts that were actually workout shorts but were never used as such.

“I really wanna hit the hot tub. The call of the hot tub must be heeded!” Electric excitement sparked in Candace’s eyes; “Crank the jets on, turn the bubbles up...ummm...that’s gonna hit the spot.” Candice replied with a mischievous grin. She wanted to bounce with excitement and clap her hands, but was trying to lose the cheerleader stigma and become more respected by her peers at work. Candice put on what she thought was a more mature expression and said, “How about we put together a picnic, we can eat lunch at the falls and relax our feet in the hot tub when we get back?” She figured including good food and a reward of relaxation afterward would go over well with Tiffany... and she was right.

It wasn’t long before Tiffany was ripped back to her present personal hell. She was thinking about the fierce, roaring waterfall up in the Smoky Mountains, the cool mist in the air; wet moss covered stones glistening in the late morning sun. She snapped back when the sound of the roaring waterfall in her memory was replaced with the roar of thunder.

Dottie and Tiffany were quickly finding themselves in the dark. Only the dimmest rays of light found their way through the thick clouds overhead and into the six inch wide breathing hole twenty-five feet above the concrete floor. A flash of light followed by rolling thunder proceeded the first drops of rain. Dottie stood up, moved over to the pouring water, and began rinsing the

blood off of her face. She stuck out her tongue and began to drink. They were both very thirsty, and she was the first to realize this might be the last water they get for a long time.

“Tiff! Grab the bag.” Tiffany fumbled in the dark for a few seconds. “Never mind, I’ve got it.” Dottie said while running over to their limited food supply. She dumped the untouched apple and spam onto the cold concrete and increasingly damp floor. “God...don’t stop, don’t stop!” A flash of lightning provided some reassurance the storm was not over. Dottie made a valiant effort there in the dark with a broken forearm, to hold the bag open under the rain water. It was, however, too much for her to bear. “Ahhhhh...Bloody hell! Be a chum. Give us a hand here, Tiff.”

The twenty-three year old Ms. Maelstrom ran quickly to her friend’s aid. There they stood, catching the rain in a plastic bag until it was full to overflowing. Tiffany, now feeling a profound sense of accomplishment, took the bag into both hands, and used the handle to tie it up tight, double, triple, quadruple knot.

“If we’re going to be suck in this pit for a while, we’d better plan for the future.” A shiver went through her body. Tiffany had always felt like a victim. For a decade now Dottie had been her protector, her big sister, her BFF. She thought of a documentary she had recently watched. It was all about guinea pigs. Her brow crumpled as she remember how they were everybody’s favourite snack. They had no defence, and no will to defend themselves. They were content to be eaten. A morbid chuckle escaped her lips. She thought about their timid little squeaks and how it sounded to her like an invitation to the other animals: “Please eat me. I’m so tasty and fat.” Tiffany realized she was the guinea pig. She had just resolved to live down here in the hole. She wasn’t making a plan to escape; she was making a plan to survive. Saddened, Tiffany took the short walk to the wall of her new home, placed the bag carefully on the ground, and sat down beside it.

Dottie knew, almost instinctively, how her friend was feeling. She wiped the last of the rain out of her eyes and said, “Chin up, Tiff; we’re going to be alright. Just you wait and see, right as...” She put her hand into the pouring water, “rain.” She gave the most honest and reassuring smile she could muster up with her half swollen face and broken teeth. Dottie sat down, put her good arm around Tiffany, and dozed off to the hypnotizing sounds of quiet rain and their own personal waterfall.

“Dottie...Dottie! Wake up!” a frantic Tiffany whispered. The sound of the pouring water had become thunderous. It was now hitting standing water when it reached the bottom of the pit. “The drain isn’t working. We’re going to drown.” It was near pitch black in the concrete cylinder. There was no real way to tell what time it was, but it had the feeling of three in the morning: impossibly late and way too early to wake up. Panic set in. Their hearts were racing.

Not fully awake, Dottie said, “Get the grate off; check the drain; we need to get out.” She stumbled to her feet. Her broken arm throbbed with stabbing pain. “Fuuuuuck!” The once beautiful kinky-haired English woman cradled her arm. The pain was intensifying, if that was possible. And the blood pressure drop from her standing up reminded her things were going to

get worse before they got better. "Get that grate up for fuck's sake." Dottie went over to help Tiffany the best she could with her one functional arm. There was just barely enough room to get their fingers in the drainage holes of the metal plate. "On three... pull. One, two, threee.....arrrrrah!!!" The metal cover did not budge at all. As they leaned over, the water splashed their faces. If it kept raining like this they would not be able to keep trying for long without holding their breath.

"I think... yeah. There are screws; I can feel them. Big, flat, screws. Like the line, not the cross." Tiffany was gasping for air and stalling. Her body wanted time to recover from the exertion, so she talked to buy time. "Screws, yeah, I can feel them," she said feeling around the perimeter of the metal cover. "Four... no, five. Tell me you have a screwdriver. You're always ready for anything." Tiffany said smiling. It was far too dark to see much in the way of facial expression, but Dottie could hear the smile in her voice.

The rain continued its deluge. Dottie's brain was scattered. She was running on pure, frantic, irrational emotion. "I can't think, breathe, Dottie, breathe." She said to herself. She knew if she did not concentrate, she was going to die here with her friend. Dottie's mind raced. She closed her eyes, quieted her thoughts, one long slow exhale... There, now she could think again. "Step one, what's the problem?"

"We need to open this grate to find out why it's not draining. Maybe we could Shawshank our way out of here!" Tiffany chimed in.

"Step two, what do we need to do to fix the problem?" Dottie said knowing the answer.

"We need a screwdriver, or maybe the jaws of life."

"Or something like a screwdriver," said Dottie, nearly yelling. The pouring water echoing in the chamber was unbearably loud. She stood up and wedged her hand into her pocket. "I fucking hate women's pockets. It's like they don't expect us to actually use them. The fucking handbag companies must be in bed with the clothing designers." Dottie's eyes lit up when she found what she was looking for. "Brilliant!" She held the re-discovered tooth in front of her as though she was holding a gold doubloon recovered from a sunken treasure ship.

Dottie had been saving the tooth. Originally she was hoping it could be put back in when they were rescued... but the prospect of a rescue seemed a long way off at this point. She reached down into the water once more with her lateral incisor between her fingers. The flat side fit perfectly into the screw. Her frustration mounted as she tried uselessly to turn the screw with the tiny tooth between her fingers. "I just don't have enough strength! It's my left hand, I just don't have enough strength in my left hand." Dottie Short held up her swollen right arm in the dark as though her friend needed evidence of the situation.

The two women were trembling in the cold, dark, relentless waters. Tiffany put both hands over Dottie's enamel treasure, the key to their salvation. She felt the tiny tooth between her fingers. At this point the women had to hold their breath to reach the screws. Tiffany put the incisor between her thumb, pointer, and middle fingers of her right hand. She held her breath and ran her fingers

underwater with her eyes closed. Her left hand ran along the coarse concrete, past the groove where metal met rock, along the smooth cold metal plate, and finally over one of the screws. Tiffany, nearly out of breath, locked the tooth in place, and turned it with all her might. A sickening gritty crumble ran up her fingers. Their one hope, gone like sand in the waves.

Tiffany spit the water out of her mouth and wiped off her closed eyes. "There's nothing left, I'm so sorry." Dottie was silent.

"I'm so sorry..."

"Please say something..."

"Dottie?"

Dottie stood in the ever-rising water completely silent. She was not focused on her friend at all. She was looking straight up.

"T...Tiff...There's something up there, can you hear it?"

Soaked, cold, terrified, and hungry Tiffany Maelstrom looked pointlessly at the black roof above her. One single point of light shown where the water was coming in through the breathing hole. She saw nothing else up there but inky black. She was too frightened and hungry to worry about some giant tropical spider that had made its web on the ceiling or whatever Dottie was focused on.

"You see it right? Stand really still. Over in the corner. Just kind of hanging off of the ceiling... you see it there?" She dared not point, she could not risk provoking it. Dottie's voice was filled with terror, low, quiet, she was looking at something older than mankind. She knew there was nothing she could do but accept her fate. The creature was darkness personified. "Like black smoke..." she whispered. When it wasn't moving rows of jagged teeth was all she could make out. Claws as long as its forearm. The outline of its body was like vapour, constantly shifting.

Something bumped Tiffany's leg, floating in the water. It was the apple. The apple that was thrown at them yesterday, untouched. She now felt silly for filling a plastic bag of water. "Don't really need the bag of water now do we?" Tiffany laughed nervously. "Wonder where the spam floated off to..." She looked around. Sure enough, there in the water, was the blue labelled can of spam. Tiffany went to retrieve it splashing through the water. She picked it up, and there on top she found the answer. It was a metal tab to open the can with, built in, and there the whole time. She thought for a second, "If I break this thing off the can won't be open...it might be really hard to get open later... but if I do open it that nasty water will get in it." Tiffany broke off the key. Either way, she wasn't going to eat swamp-water-logged spam for breakfast.

With the key in hand, Tiffany set out removing the screws, one at a time. Taking a deep breath, going under the water, finding the screw, and using the spam tab on each screw. Within two minutes, the shivering woman had all the screws undone. She was unbelievably proud of herself. Looking a little smug, but mostly desperate she said, "Dot, help me move the grate!"

Dottie turned around, pulled her attention away from the ceiling, and looked back at her long-time friend. "Yeah, sure. On three. One... two... three..." Both went under, into the black abyss. Desperately, they grabbed the metal plate, stuck their fingers in the holes for grip, and pulled with all their combined might. As they expected, the metal plate was heavy. The water provided a large amount of resistance, but it came up nonetheless.

There was some amount of excitement welling up. For a moment, Dottie forgot about the sounds she heard coming from the top of their entrapment. They just celebrated their small victory. Dottie let go of the drain cover. It was about three feet in diameter, just large enough for someone to get through, or so she hoped. Tiffany dove down to feel down the drain. It took very little time for her to start dredging up the blockage. She started pulling up large amounts of thick sludge and hair. It took most of her concentration not to throw up.

The cauldron quickly became filled with the smell of faeces, and to make matters worse, they were standing in it. With every dive, the water became more and more polluted, until Tiffany finally made a breakthrough. The water started to drain more quickly, and with the more powerful suction, the drain cleared itself out. It was all the women could do to remain standing. Backing away from the drain, Dottie realized she was now on a timer. She was standing in raw sewage. She was covered in raw sewage, and more importantly her swollen, open wounds were now covered in sewage, too. There was no place to sanitize; there were no antibiotics. She needed to leave, and it had to be now.

The rain continued well into the morning. The smell in their cell was overwhelming; it was in their damp clothes, in their hair, smeared over every inch. They had both stepped into the pouring rain, trying to shower off. The muck was thick and sticky; it felt more like they were smearing it around than coming clean.

When dawn came, Dottie started staring at the ceiling again. Tiffany covered her nose and mouth with her arm and looked over the material that had been blocking the drain. The daylight confirmed what she had thought she felt when she was dredging it out.

"Looks like hair..." Tiffany's voice trailed off. "Blond, brown, red, black, straight, curly...Oh God." The realization swept over her like an avalanche. "We aren't the only ones. This has happened before..." She anxiously poked through the sludge some more. "Shit, looks like there's teeth in here." Tiffany slowly backed away. The horror set in, gripping her like cold death itself. "We're going to die down here. Those are people. People washed down the drain. What the FUCK does that do to people?!!" She looked at Dottie still staring at the ceiling. "Jesus, what are you looking at? You're starting to freak me out. Do you hear me?! You're starting to freak me the fuck out!"

Dottie started whispering. Her lips moved, but nothing intelligible came out. Over and over the same movements from her mouth. Fear, like a deer in headlights, took over Tiffany's body. She had to find out what Dottie was saying; she couldn't help herself. The short-haired dirty blonde moved forward, slowly, carefully. Her long-time friend was not acting like herself. The person she most trusted was now acting altogether different. It became obvious that Dottie was sweating

profusely. Dottie was burning up with fever.

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

“Mr. Hasty’s laughing.”

Tiffany stepped back terrified, shaking her head in disbelief. Without warning, Dottie removed her gaze from the ceiling, looked Tiffany dead in the eye, completely devoid of emotion. Dottie’s eyes rolled back into her skull. Only the whites of her eyes were showing when her body snapped backwards. It looked as though she was being snapped in two by an outside force. Tiffany watched helplessly.

Dottie’s legs fell out from under her. Spitting blood she came crashing to the ground, convulsing, writhing in the filth that now covered the concrete floor. The shaking was so violent she was rubbing the skin right off of her body. Tiffany’s heart raced; there was nothing she could do. She wanted to help, but she couldn’t think. She wanted it to stop, but she was not in control. Her mind had left. Her instincts kicked in: she had to get out. She had to get out!

Tiffany tried escaping the only way she could. She went head first into the drainage pipe. It was just wide enough to squeeze into. She put her hands in front of her, clawing for grip to move forward. There wasn’t enough room to get up on her knees, and she could barely breathe. Her legs useless, trapped, so she tried backing out. She was trapped laying in the remains of others. She couldn’t get enough purchase with her hands alone. There wasn’t enough room to get her arms under her. Her feet were useless trying to back out of her tomb. She couldn’t breathe; hyperventilating, she laid alone there in the dark, cold muck retching in anger and fear. She started to cry, but there was not enough room for her lungs to expand.

Tiffany was losing her mind. The more she tried to pull herself forward, the more desperate she became. Her body was contorted, smashed into position. She couldn’t breathe, only inching forward. She started to thrust her body against the drainage pipe desperately. Hardly able to move at all, completely exhausting herself, she threw her head back in mad desperation. The warm trickle of blood ran down her face.

A scream escaped her lips, quiet at first, more of a growl, quickly escalating. It was the lament of the dying. A blood curdling scream made only from someone who still fears death and dying. Someone who is not ready for their last breath, but is having it forced upon them. Tiffany screamed until she could see stars. Then, just as things were at their darkest, there was a singular bright blotch in front of her. She calmed down. There it was again, followed by distant thunder.

“That’s it! There’s a hole up there.” Tears of overwhelming joy started to stream down her face.

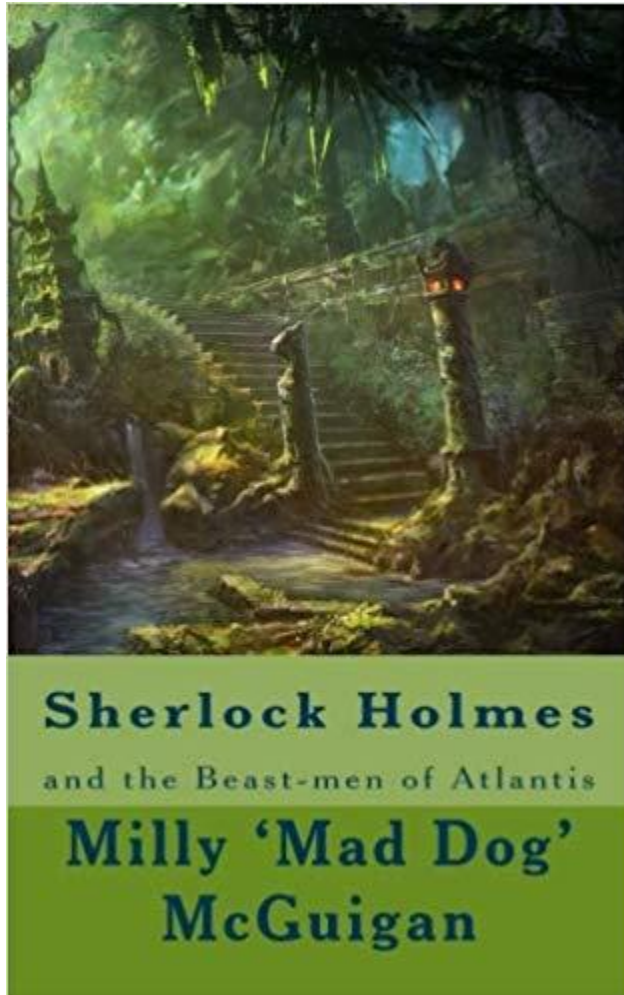
She was not ready to die. Every muscle in her body moved in symphony toward the singular goal of achieving freedom. It was three hundred and thirty feet to the end of the pipe, but nothing short of a heart attack was going to stop her. The rain had started again; water flowed around her as she used every last ounce of energy to pull herself out of the pipe and slide into the swamp.

Still alive, and gasping for breath, Tiffany Maelstrom stood up in the waist high swamp water. Rain pouring from the sky, she looked up to the heavens and yelled victoriously. Thunder and lightning clashed in response. She had crawled her way out of the side of a cliff, maybe thirty feet high. The drain was at the bottom of the cliff, only a few inches above the currently flooded swamp. Spanish moss covered mangrove trees lined the shores that she waded towards. Exhausted, she sat down on the roots. She could see nothing but swampland for miles around. No city lights, no houses, no light poles, not power lines, absolutely no sign of people save the metal drain that she had just squeezed herself out of.

A voice in the back of her mind told her something was not right. She looked around the mangrove trees. The young woman looked to the top of the cliff; she could not see anything. Her eyes glanced at the drain; water poured out into the swamp... but there was something, something else. Something she couldn't quite see, maybe the shape of a head? Maybe the shape of a smile, the shape of an inhumanly, large smile shifting, filled with pointy teeth. She stared for a moment. There was a sound she could almost make out. A sound too quiet to hear over the pouring rain. It was almost the sound of...of...laughter. Mr. Hasty's laughing...

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Thirty

As the cages fell, Ward leaped upward from the cage he clung to, to the steel ledge that ran about the circumference of the bridge. Hanging from the ledge, Ward began to make his tedious and painful trek to the hatch three feet off that would allow him to climb into the bridge, and, from there, search for the O8-111A, and make contact with Dimara again. She was, no doubt, searching painstakingly for Ward, even as the “Derelict” was being rocked from within by the falling cages.

From below came the howls and the screams of those who were being crushed under the tons of metal that were the cages. For a moment, Ward’s thoughts turned to Lacey.

“Sorry about that, kid,” Ward said to nobody.

He searched further for any evidence of his ship, as the hellish screams of the dying below crowded his ear, but none came to him.

From the darkness and the cacophony of the dying came a green flash of light that left Ward dazzled, nearly blinded. The flash of the laser blast, Ward rightly guessed, was fired at him by Mokem Bet’s fighter. Nor was it intended to kill. As he and Turhan Mot had worked it out, Mokem Bet was carefully herding Ward away from the O8-111A to a spot at the further end of the ‘Derelict’. Neither Turhan Mot nor Mokem Bet understood the dangers that Ward’s ship posed to them—the few Scroungers who had met Dimara did not live long enough to share their tale, and the memory of the actions of the O8-111A during the Battle of IPS-3. It was uncanny, the way that ship dominated the battle, first by destroying the solar sails that gave the Interplanetary Station its spin, from which it derived its artificial gravity, then by methodically cutting down everything that came in its line of sight. It was also as if the ship was under the control of some hyper-intelligence, when they knew perfectly well that the ship was empty, seemingly abandoned of its purpose. Was Ward commanding the ship remotely? How, though, since no lines of communication were open to them.

Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet had also seen the vicious responses of the ship, when under attack. A more deadly, bloodless and inexplicable killing machine they had never encountered before, in any of countless skirmishes. They did not understand it, so they kept away from it, and they were determined to keep Ward away from it, too.

Ward crawled along the ledge. It shook wildly in the near darkness. He ducked and leaped to avoid the shots fired by the two pirates, all the while the groans of the near dead and the dying came up from below, from the ruins of the collapsed and bloodied cages.

Four more quick laser blasts hit the bulkhead between Ward’s hand and his face.

Ward heard Mokem Bet’s raucous laughter ringing out through the hulk of the ruined ship.

“Haw! Haw! Haw!” Mokem Bet bellowed. “Hey! Asshole! How the hell are ya doing? We come a long way lookin’ for ya!”

Ward unholstered his laser pistol. Keeping a tentative grip to the terrace surrounding the bridge with one hand while allowing his legs to drift in the near weightless environment, he fired back at the region of darkness from which Mokem Bet’s mocking laughter came.

Ward heard a low thud, followed by a groan. Ward was pleased. He scored a hit. He doubted that Mokem Bet was dead (“Nah, I’m not that lucky,” he reminded himself.). But he did score a wound against the man. Ward pulled himself up onto the ledge, and cautiously raised his head to peer into the bridge. It was illuminated by a sickly greenish light. A dozen crewmen crowded the bridge, searching the loading bay below. Using the reflections on a visiscreen on the far wall to gauge every crewman’s position, Ward raised his laser pistol above the edge of the shattered window. He pressed his head close to the bulkhead, and fired twelve blasts from his laser pistol, cutting down all twelve crewmen in a single sweeping action.

Two green flashes hit the bulkhead next to Ward’s face. He pushed himself away from the place where they had hit, leaving behind them a smouldering cloud of charred ash. Turning to see what this new antagonist was, Ward found himself staring into Mokem Bet’s angry face. The nose of the fighter ship was Mokem Bet was sporting a new scar, running along the side of his head. It smouldered. Ward grinned without humour.

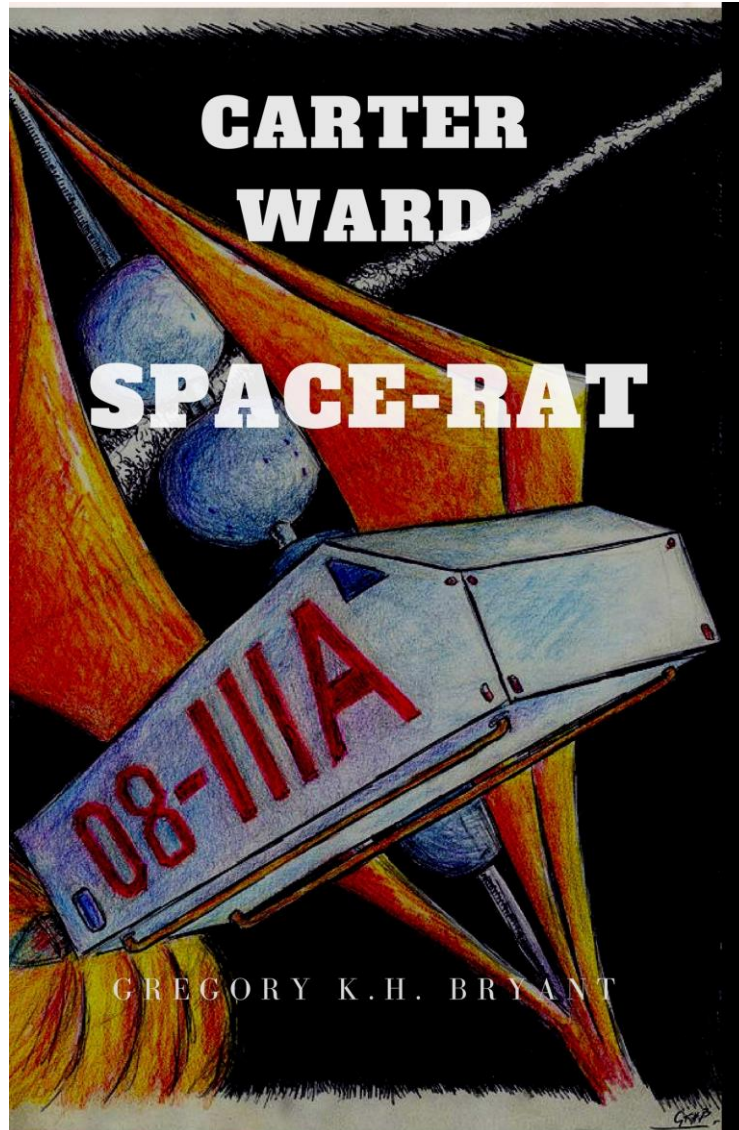
Ward pulled himself up and through the window, spilling out onto the floor, into the greenish light of the bridge. Mokem Bet fired continuously, barely missing Ward over the course of several hundred shots. One lucky shot did connect. Ward felt a searing blast. It scalded his inner thigh from his groin to his knee. Green flames leaped along the line left by the laser blast.

Pulling a flattened roll of gauze from a pocket in his jumpsuit, Carter bound his leg together. He managed to staunch the blood blow, but the pain he would have to tolerate. Morphine and opiates would cause him to lose his edge, if not his consciousness.

Mokem Bet fired into the bridge, setting it aflame. The consoles exploded.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*Carter Ward—Space Rat*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter VI: "I was the Flail of the Lord"

Lord John Roxton and I turned down Vigo Street together and through the dingy portals of the famous aristocratic rookery. At the end of a long drab passage my new acquaintance pushed open a door and turned on an electric switch. A number of lamps shining through tinted shades bathed the whole great room before us in a ruddy radiance. Standing in the doorway and glancing round me, I had a general impression of extraordinary comfort and elegance combined with an atmosphere of masculine virility. Everywhere there were mingled the luxury of the wealthy man of taste and the careless untidiness of the bachelor. Rich furs and strange iridescent mats from some Oriental bazaar were scattered upon the floor. Pictures and prints which even my unpractised eyes could recognize as being of great price and rarity hung thick upon the walls. Sketches of boxers, of ballet-girls, and of racehorses alternated with a sensuous Fragonard, a martial Girardet, and a dreamy Turner. But amid these varied ornaments there were scattered the trophies which brought back strongly to my recollection the fact that Lord John Roxton was one of the great all-round sportsmen and athletes of his day. A dark-blue oar crossed with a cherry-pink one above his mantel-piece spoke of the old Oxonian and Leander man, while the foils and boxing-gloves above and below them were the tools of a man who had won supremacy with each. Like a dado round the room was the jutting line of splendid heavy game-heads, the best of their sort from every quarter of the world, with the rare white rhinoceros of the Lado Enclave drooping its supercilious lip above them all.

In the centre of the rich red carpet was a black and gold Louis Quinze table, a lovely antique, now sacrilegiously desecrated with marks of glasses and the scars of cigar-stumps. On it stood a silver tray of smokables and a burnished spirit-stand, from which and an adjacent siphon my silent host proceeded to charge two high glasses. Having indicated an arm-chair to me and placed my refreshment near it, he handed me a long, smooth Havana. Then, seating himself opposite to me, he looked at me long and fixedly with his strange, twinkling, reckless eyes—eyes of a cold light blue, the colour of a glacier lake.

Through the thin haze of my cigar-smoke I noted the details of a face which was already familiar to me from many photographs—the strongly-curved nose, the hollow, worn cheeks, the dark, ruddy hair, thin at the top, the crisp, virile moustaches, the small, aggressive tuft upon his projecting chin. Something there was of Napoleon III., something of Don Quixote, and yet again something which was the essence of the English country gentleman, the keen, alert, open-air lover of dogs and of horses. His skin was of a rich flower-pot red from sun and wind. His eyebrows were tufted and overhanging, which gave those naturally cold eyes an almost ferocious aspect, an impression which was increased by his strong and furrowed brow. In figure he was spare, but very strongly built—indeed, he had often proved that there were few men in England capable of such sustained exertions. His height was a little over six feet, but he seemed shorter on account of a peculiar rounding of the shoulders. Such was the famous Lord John Roxton as he sat opposite to me, biting hard upon his cigar and watching me steadily in a long and embarrassing silence.

"Well," said he, at last, "we've gone and done it, young fellah my lad." (This curious phrase he

pronounced as if it were all one word—"young-fellah-me-lad.") "Yes, we've taken a jump, you an' me. I suppose, now, when you went into that room there was no such notion in your head—what?"

"No thought of it."

"The same here. No thought of it. And here we are, up to our necks in the tureen. Why, I've only been back three weeks from Uganda, and taken a place in Scotland, and signed the lease and all. Pretty goin's on—what? How does it hit you?"

"Well, it is all in the main line of my business. I am a journalist on the Gazette."

"Of course—you said so when you took it on. By the way, I've got a small job for you, if you'll help me."

"With pleasure."

"Don't mind takin' a risk, do you?"

"What is the risk?"

"Well, it's Ballinger—he's the risk. You've heard of him?"

"No."

"Why, young fellah, where HAVE you lived? Sir John Ballinger is the best gentleman jock in the north country. I could hold him on the flat at my best, but over jumps he's my master. Well, it's an open secret that when he's out of trainin' he drinks hard—strikin' an average, he calls it. He got delirium on Toosday, and has been ragin' like a devil ever since. His room is above this. The doctors say that it is all up with the old dear unless some food is got into him, but as he lies in bed with a revolver on his coverlet, and swears he will put six of the best through anyone that comes near him, there's been a bit of a strike among the serving-men. He's a hard nail, is Jack, and a dead shot, too, but you can't leave a Grand National winner to die like that—what?"

"What do you mean to do, then?" I asked.

"Well, my idea was that you and I could rush him. He may be dozin', and at the worst he can only wing one of us, and the other should have him. If we can get his bolster-cover round his arms and then 'phone up a stomach-pump, we'll give the old dear the supper of his life."

It was a rather desperate business to come suddenly into one's day's work. I don't think that I am a particularly brave man. I have an Irish imagination which makes the unknown and the untried more terrible than they are. On the other hand, I was brought up with a horror of cowardice and with a terror of such a stigma. I dare say that I could throw myself over a precipice, like the Hun in the history books, if my courage to do it were questioned, and yet it would surely be pride and fear, rather than courage, which would be my inspiration. Therefore, although every nerve in my

body shrank from the whisky-maddened figure which I pictured in the room above, I still answered, in as careless a voice as I could command, that I was ready to go. Some further remark of Lord Roxton's about the danger only made me irritable.

"Talking won't make it any better," said I. "Come on."

I rose from my chair and he from his. Then with a little confidential chuckle of laughter, he patted me two or three times on the chest, finally pushing me back into my chair.

"All right, sonny my lad—you'll do," said he. I looked up in surprise.

"I saw after Jack Ballinger myself this mornin'. He blew a hole in the skirt of my kimono, bless his shaky old hand, but we got a jacket on him, and he's to be all right in a week. I say, young fellah, I hope you don't mind—what? You see, between you an' me close-tiled, I look on this South American business as a mighty serious thing, and if I have a pal with me I want a man I can bank on. So I sized you down, and I'm bound to say that you came well out of it. You see, it's all up to you and me, for this old Summerlee man will want dry-nursin' from the first. By the way, are you by any chance the Malone who is expected to get his Rugby cap for Ireland?"

"A reserve, perhaps."

"I thought I remembered your face. Why, I was there when you got that try against Richmond—as fine a swervin' run as I saw the whole season. I never miss a Rugby match if I can help it, for it is the manliest game we have left. Well, I didn't ask you in here just to talk sport. We've got to fix our business. Here are the sailin's, on the first page of the Times. There's a Booth boat for Para next Wednesday week, and if the Professor and you can work it, I think we should take it—what? Very good, I'll fix it with him. What about your outfit?"

"My paper will see to that."

"Can you shoot?"

"About average Territorial standard."

"Good Lord! as bad as that? It's the last thing you young fellahs think of learnin'. You're all bees without stings, so far as lookin' after the hive goes. You'll look silly, some o' these days, when someone comes along an' sneaks the honey. But you'll need to hold your gun straight in South America, for, unless our friend the Professor is a madman or a liar, we may see some queer things before we get back. What gun have you?"

He crossed to an oaken cupboard, and as he threw it open I caught a glimpse of glistening rows of parallel barrels, like the pipes of an organ.

"I'll see what I can spare you out of my own battery," said he.

One by one he took out a succession of beautiful rifles, opening and shutting them with a snap

and a clang, and then patting them as he put them back into the rack as tenderly as a mother would fondle her children.

“This is a Bland’s .577 axite express,” said he. “I got that big fellow with it.” He glanced up at the white rhinoceros. “Ten more yards, and he’d would have added me to HIS collection.

‘On that conical bullet his one chance hangs, ‘Tis the weak one’s advantage fair.’

Hope you know your Gordon, for he’s the poet of the horse and the gun and the man that handles both. Now, here’s a useful tool—.470, telescopic sight, double ejector, point-blank up to three-fifty. That’s the rifle I used against the Peruvian slave-drivers three years ago. I was the flail of the Lord up in those parts, I may tell you, though you won’t find it in any Blue-book. There are times, young fellah, when every one of us must make a stand for human right and justice, or you never feel clean again. That’s why I made a little war on my own. Declared it myself, waged it myself, ended it myself. Each of those nicks is for a slave murderer—a good row of them—what? That big one is for Pedro Lopez, the king of them all, that I killed in a backwater of the Putomayo River. Now, here’s something that would do for you.” He took out a beautiful brown-and-silver rifle. “Well rubbered at the stock, sharply sighted, five cartridges to the clip. You can trust your life to that.” He handed it to me and closed the door of his oak cabinet.

“By the way,” he continued, coming back to his chair, “what do you know of this Professor Challenger?”

“I never saw him till to-day.”

“Well, neither did I. It’s funny we should both sail under sealed orders from a man we don’t know. He seemed an uppish old bird. His brothers of science don’t seem too fond of him, either. How came you to take an interest in the affair?”

I told him shortly my experiences of the morning, and he listened intently. Then he drew out a map of South America and laid it on the table.

“I believe every single word he said to you was the truth,” said he, earnestly, “and, mind you, I have something to go on when I speak like that. South America is a place I love, and I think, if you take it right through from Darien to Fuego, it’s the grandest, richest, most wonderful bit of earth upon this planet. People don’t know it yet, and don’t realize what it may become. I’ve been up an’ down it from end to end, and had two dry seasons in those very parts, as I told you when I spoke of the war I made on the slave-dealers. Well, when I was up there I heard some yarns of the same kind—traditions of Indians and the like, but with somethin’ behind them, no doubt. The more you knew of that country, young fellah, the more you would understand that anythin’ was possible—ANYTHIN’! There are just some narrow water-lanes along which folk travel, and outside that it is all darkness. Now, down here in the Matto Grande”—he swept his cigar over a part of the map—“or up in this corner where three countries meet, nothin’ would surprise me. As that chap said to-night, there are fifty-thousand miles of water-way runnin’ through a forest that is very near the size of Europe. You and I could be as far away from each other as Scotland is from Constantinople, and yet each of us be in the same great Brazilian forest. Man has just made

a track here and a scrape there in the maze. Why, the river rises and falls the best part of forty feet, and half the country is a morass that you can't pass over. Why shouldn't somethin' new and wonderful lie in such a country? And why shouldn't we be the men to find it out? Besides," he added, his queer, gaunt face shining with delight, "there's a sportin' risk in every mile of it. I'm like an old golf-ball—I've had all the white paint knocked off me long ago. Life can whack me about now, and it can't leave a mark. But a sportin' risk, young fellah, that's the salt of existence. Then it's worth livin' again. We're all gettin' a deal too soft and dull and comfy. Give me the great waste lands and the wide spaces, with a gun in my fist and somethin' to look for that's worth findin'. I've tried war and steeplechasin' and aeroplanes, but this huntin' of beasts that look like a lobster-supper dream is a brand-new sensation." He chuckled with glee at the prospect.

Perhaps I have dwelt too long upon this new acquaintance, but he is to be my comrade for many a day, and so I have tried to set him down as I first saw him, with his quaint personality and his queer little tricks of speech and of thought. It was only the need of getting in the account of my meeting which drew me at last from his company. I left him seated amid his pink radiance, oiling the lock of his favourite rifle, while he still chuckled to himself at the thought of the adventures which awaited us. It was very clear to me that if dangers lay before us I could not in all England have found a cooler head or a braver spirit with which to share them.

That night, wearied as I was after the wonderful happenings of the day, I sat late with McArdle, the news editor, explaining to him the whole situation, which he thought important enough to bring next morning before the notice of Sir George Beaumont, the chief. It was agreed that I should write home full accounts of my adventures in the shape of successive letters to McArdle, and that these should either be edited for the Gazette as they arrived, or held back to be published later, according to the wishes of Professor Challenger, since we could not yet know what conditions he might attach to those directions which should guide us to the unknown land. In response to a telephone inquiry, we received nothing more definite than a fulmination against the Press, ending up with the remark that if we would notify our boat he would hand us any directions which he might think it proper to give us at the moment of starting. A second question from us failed to elicit any answer at all, save a plaintive bleat from his wife to the effect that her husband was in a very violent temper already, and that she hoped we would do nothing to make it worse. A third attempt, later in the day, provoked a terrific crash, and a subsequent message from the Central Exchange that Professor Challenger's receiver had been shattered. After that we abandoned all attempt at communication.

And now my patient readers, I can address you directly no longer. From now onwards (if, indeed, any continuation of this narrative should ever reach you) it can only be through the paper which I represent. In the hands of the editor I leave this account of the events which have led up to one of the most remarkable expeditions of all time, so that if I never return to England there shall be some record as to how the affair came about. I am writing these last lines in the saloon of the Booth liner *Francisca*, and they will go back by the pilot to the keeping of Mr. McArdle. Let me draw one last picture before I close the notebook—a picture which is the last memory of the old country which I bear away with me. It is a wet, foggy morning in the late spring; a thin, cold rain is falling. Three shining mackintoshed figures are walking down the quay, making for the gang-plank of the great liner from which the blue-peter is flying. In front of them a porter

pushes a trolley piled high with trunks, wraps, and gun-cases. Professor Summerlee, a long, melancholy figure, walks with dragging steps and drooping head, as one who is already profoundly sorry for himself. Lord John Roxton steps briskly, and his thin, eager face beams forth between his hunting-cap and his muffler. As for myself, I am glad to have got the bustling days of preparation and the pangs of leave-taking behind me, and I have no doubt that I show it in my bearing. Suddenly, just as we reach the vessel, there is a shout behind us. It is Professor Challenger, who had promised to see us off. He runs after us, a puffing, red-faced, irascible figure.

“No thank you,” says he; “I should much prefer not to go aboard. I have only a few words to say to you, and they can very well be said where we are. I beg you not to imagine that I am in any way indebted to you for making this journey. I would have you to understand that it is a matter of perfect indifference to me, and I refuse to entertain the most remote sense of personal obligation. Truth is truth, and nothing which you can report can affect it in any way, though it may excite the emotions and allay the curiosity of a number of very ineffectual people. My directions for your instruction and guidance are in this sealed envelope. You will open it when you reach a town upon the Amazon which is called Manaos, but not until the date and hour which is marked upon the outside. Have I made myself clear? I leave the strict observance of my conditions entirely to your honour. No, Mr. Malone, I will place no restriction upon your correspondence, since the ventilation of the facts is the object of your journey; but I demand that you shall give no particulars as to your exact destination, and that nothing be actually published until your return. Good-bye, sir. You have done something to mitigate my feelings for the loathsome profession to which you unhappily belong. Good-bye, Lord John. Science is, as I understand, a sealed book to you; but you may congratulate yourself upon the hunting-field which awaits you. You will, no doubt, have the opportunity of describing in the Field how you brought down the rocketing dimorphodon. And good-bye to you also, Professor Summerlee. If you are still capable of self-improvement, of which I am frankly unconvinced, you will surely return to London a wiser man.”

So he turned upon his heel, and a minute later from the deck I could see his short, squat figure bobbing about in the distance as he made his way back to his train. Well, we are well down Channel now. There’s the last bell for letters, and it’s good-bye to the pilot. We’ll be “down, hull-down, on the old trail” from now on. God bless all we leave behind us, and send us safely back.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter IX: A Lost Page of Earth

When I awakened the sun was streaming through the cabin porthole. Outside a fresh voice lilted. I lay on my two chairs and listened. The song was one with the wholesome sunshine and the breeze blowing stiffly and whipping the curtains. It was Larry O'Keefe at his matins:

*The little red lark is shaking his wings,
Straight from the breast of his love he springs*

Larry's voice soared.

*His wings and his feathers are sunrise red,
He hails the sun and his golden head,
Good morning, Doc, you are long abed.*

This last was a most irreverent interpolation, I well knew. I opened my door. O'Keefe stood outside laughing. The Suwarna, her engines silent, was making fine headway under all sail, the Brunhilda skipping in her wake cheerfully with half her canvas up.

The sea was crisping and dimpling under the wind. Blue and white was the world as far as the eye could reach. Schools of little silvery green flying fish broke through the water rushing on each side of us; flashed for an instant and were gone. Behind us gulls hovered and dipped. The shadow of mystery had retreated far over the rim of this wide awake and beautiful world and if, subconsciously, I knew that somewhere it was brooding and waiting, for a little while at least I was consciously free of its oppression.

"How's the patient?" asked O'Keefe.

He was answered by Huldricksson himself, who must have risen just as I left the cabin. The Norseman had slipped on a pair of pyjamas and, giant torso naked under the sun, he strode out upon us. We all of us looked at him a trifle anxiously. But Olaf's madness had left him. In his eyes was much sorrow, but the berserk rage was gone.

He spoke straight to me: "You said last night we follow?"

I nodded.

"It is where?" he asked again.

"We go first to Ponape and from there to Metalanim Harbour—to the Nan-Matal. You know the place?"

Huldricksson bowed—a white gleam as of ice showing in his blue eyes.

“It is there?” he asked.

“It is there that we must first search,” I answered.

“Good!” said Olaf Huldricsson. “It is good!”

He looked at Da Costa inquiringly and the little Portuguese, following his thought, answered his unspoken question.

“We should be at Ponape tomorrow morning early, Olaf.”

“Good!” repeated the Norseman. He looked away, his eyes tear-filled.

A restraint fell upon us; the embarrassment all men experience when they feel a great sympathy and a great pity, to neither of which they quite know how to give expression. By silent consent we discussed at breakfast only the most casual topics.

When the meal was over Huldricsson expressed a desire to go aboard the Brunhilda.

The Suwarna hove to and Da Costa and he dropped into the small boat. When they reached the Brunhilda’s deck I saw Olaf take the wheel and the two fall into earnest talk. I beckoned to O’Keefe and we stretched ourselves out on the bow hatch under cover of the foresail. He lighted a cigarette, took a couple of leisurely puffs, and looked at me expectantly.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well,” said O’Keefe, “suppose you tell me what you think—and then I’ll proceed to point out your scientific errors.” His eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Larry,” I replied, somewhat severely, “you may not know that I have a scientific reputation which, putting aside all modesty, I may say is an enviable one. You used a word last night to which I must interpose serious objection. You more than hinted that I hid—superstitions. Let me inform you, Larry O’Keefe, that I am solely a seeker, observer, analyst, and synthesist of facts. I am not”—and I tried to make my tone as pointed as my words—“I am not a believer in phantoms or spooks, leprechauns, banshees, or ghostly harpers.”

O’Keefe leaned back and shouted with laughter.

“Forgive me, Goodwin,” he gasped. “But if you could have seen yourself solemnly disclaiming the banshee”—another twinkle showed in his eyes—“and then with all this sunshine and this wide-open world”—he shrugged his shoulders—“it’s hard to visualize anything such as you and Huldricsson have described.”

“I know how hard it is, Larry,” I answered. “And don’t think I have any idea that the phenomenon is supernatural in the sense spiritualists and table turners have given that word. I do think it is supernormal; energized by a force unknown to modern science—but that doesn’t mean

I think it outside the radius of science.”

“Tell me your theory, Goodwin,” he said. I hesitated—for not yet had I been able to put into form to satisfy myself any explanation of the Dweller.

“I think,” I hazarded finally, “it is possible that some members of that race peopling the ancient continent which we know existed here in the Pacific, have survived. We know that many of these islands are honeycombed with caverns and vast subterranean spaces, literally underground lands running in some cases far out beneath the ocean floor. It is possible that for some reason survivors of this race sought refuge in the abysmal spaces, one of whose entrances is on the islet where Throckmartin’s party met its end.

“As for their persistence in these caverns—we know they possessed a high science. They may have gone far in the mastery of certain universal forms of energy—especially that we call light. They may have developed a civilization and a science far more advanced than ours. What I call the Dweller may be one of the results of this science. Larry—it may well be that this lost race is planning to emerge again upon earth’s surface!”

“And is sending out your Dweller as a messenger, a scientific dove from their Ark?” I chose to overlook the banter in his question.

“Did you ever hear of the Chamats?” I asked him. He shook his head.

“In Papua,” I explained, “there is a wide-spread and immeasurably old tradition that ‘imprisoned under the hills’ is a race of giants who once ruled this region ‘when it stretched from sun to sun before the moon god drew the waters over it’—I quote from the legend. Not only in Papua but throughout Malaysia you find this story. And, so the tradition runs, these people—the Chamats—will one day break through the hills and rule the world; ‘make over the world’ is the literal translation of the constant phrase in the tale. It was Herbert Spencer who pointed out that there is a basis of fact in every myth and legend of man. It is possible that these survivors I am discussing form Spencer’s fact basis for the Malaysian legend.¹

“This much is sure—the moon door, which is clearly operated by the action of moon rays upon some unknown element or combination and the crystals through which the moon rays pour down upon the pool their prismatic columns, are humanly made mechanisms. So long as they are humanly made, and so long as it is this flood of moonlight from which the Dweller draws its power of materialization, the Dweller itself, if not the product of the human mind, is at least dependent upon the product of the human mind for its appearance.”

“Wait a minute, Goodwin,” interrupted O’Keefe. “Do you mean to say you think that this thing is made of—well—of moonshine?”

¹ William Beebe, the famous American naturalist and ornithologist, recently fighting in France with America’s air force, called attention to this remarkable belief in an article printed not long ago in the Atlantic Monthly. Still more significant was it that he noted a persistent rumour that the breaking out of the buried race was close.—W.J. B., Pres. I. A. of S.

“Moonlight,” I replied, “is, of course, reflected sunlight. But the rays which pass back to earth after their impact on the moon’s surface are profoundly changed. The spectroscope shows that they lose practically all the slower vibrations we call red and infra-red, while the extremely rapid vibrations we call the violet and ultra-violet are accelerated and altered. Many scientists hold that there is an unknown element in the moon—perhaps that which makes the gigantic luminous trails that radiate in all directions from the lunar crater Tycho—whose energies are absorbed by and carried on the moon rays.

“At any rate, whether by the loss of the vibrations of the red or by the addition of this mysterious force, the light of the moon becomes something entirely different from mere modified sunlight—just as the addition or subtraction of one other chemical in a compound of several makes the product a substance with entirely different energies and potentialities.

“Now these rays, Larry, are given perhaps still another mysterious activity by the globes through which Throckmartin said they passed in the Chamber of the Moon Pool. The result is the necessary factor in the formation of the Dweller. There would be nothing scientifically improbable in such a process. Kubalski, the great Russian physicist, produced crystalline forms exhibiting every faculty that we call vital by subjecting certain combinations of chemicals to the action of highly concentrated rays of various colours. Something in light and nothing else produced their pseudo-vitality. We do not begin to know how to harness the potentialities of that magnetic vibration of the ether we call light.”

“Listen, Doc,” said Larry earnestly, “I’ll take everything you say about this lost continent, the people who used to live on it, and their caverns, for granted. But by the sword of Brian Boru, you’ll never get me to fall for the idea that a bunch of moonshine can handle a big woman such as you say Throckmartin’s Thora was, nor a two-fisted man such as you say Throckmartin was, nor Huldricsson’s wife—and I’ll bet she was one of those strapping big northern women too—you’ll never get me to believe that any bunch of concentrated moonshine could handle them and take them waltzing off along a moonbeam back to wherever it goes. No, Doc, not on your life, even Tennessee moonshine couldn’t do that—nix!”

“All right, O’Keefe,” I answered, now very much irritated indeed. “What’s your theory?” And I could not resist adding: “Fairies?”

“Professor,” he grinned, “if that Thing’s a fairy it’s Irish and when it sees me it’ll be so glad there’ll be nothing to it. ‘I was lost, strayed, or stolen, Larry avick,’ it’ll say, ‘an’ I was so homesick for the old sod I was desp’rit,’ it’ll say, an’ ‘take me back quick before I do any more har-rm!’ it’ll tell me—an’ that’s the truth.

“Now don’t get me wrong. I believe you all saw something all right. But what I think you saw was some kind of gas. All this region is volcanic and islands and things are constantly poking up from the sea. It’s probably gas; a volcanic emanation; something new to us and that drives you crazy—lots of kinds of gas do that. It hit the Throckmartin party on that island and they probably were all more or less delirious all the time; thought they saw things; talked it over and—collective hallucination—just like the Angels of Mons and other miracles of the war. Somebody

sees something that looks like something else. He points it out to the man next him. ‘Do you see it?’ asks he. ‘Sure I see it,’ says the other. And there you are—collective hallucination.

“When your friends got it bad they most likely jumped overboard one by one. Huldricksson sails into a place where it is and it hits his wife. She grabs the child and jumps over. Maybe the moon rays make it luminous! I’ve seen gas on the front under the moon that looked like a thousand whirling dervish devils. Yes, and you could see the devil’s faces in it. And if it got into your lungs nothing could ever make you think you hadn’t seen real devils.”

For a time I was silent.

“Larry,” I said at last, “whether you are right or I am right, I must go to the Nan-Matal. Will you go with me, Larry?”

“Goodwin,” he replied, “I surely will. I’m as interested as you are. If we don’t run across the Dolphin I’ll stick. I’ll leave word at Ponape, to tell them where I am should they come along. If they report me dead for a while there’s nobody to care. So that’s all right. Only old man, be reasonable. You’ve thought over this so long, you’re going bug, honestly you are.”

And again, the gladness that I might have Larry O’Keefe with me, was so great that I forgot to be angry.

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