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Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 12, ISSUE 4
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HARSH COYOTE: THE PALE OF THE EYE

**BY WALTER G
ESSELMAN—
“THEY’RE HERE!”
CRIED THE MAN IN
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SEX WITH SPIRITS

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THE MESSAGE BY RICHARD D PRICE

THE BOOK OF LOKI

BY MATHIAS JANSSON

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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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!

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EDITORIAL

This week, Dr Asima Chatterjee finds herself drawn into a bizarre world of cloak and dagger and Scarecrows. Kate's inability to achieve an orgasm and her husband's obsession with online gaming leads her up some strange spiritual pathways. Nigel is shocked to learn that her mother believes she has been contacted by his years dead father. And the trickster god meets his match on the moors of Mannaheim.

Stephen Hernandez reviews Steve Laker's novel *Cyrus Song*, and Ash Pryce pops in to give us the lowdown on this month's Edinburgh Horror Festival. Emily and Jeffrey are rescued, while Turhan Mot proves to be a coward. And the colonists on the Mysterious Island ponder the equally mysterious death of the convicts.

And we're pleased to announce that [Schlock! Vol 12 Issue 2](#) is now available on Google Play for download to Android. Hopefully, this will be the first of many.

—Gavin Chappell

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HARSH COYOTE: THE PALE OF THE EYE by Walter G Esselman

Dr Asima Chatterjee tried, unsuccessfully, to relax in the driver's seat. They were parked in a strange place, waiting behind a small, nondescript government building, waiting for someone to flash a stupid flashlight through the pouring rain. Asima was struck by the oddity of this cloak and dagger foolishness, and she wondered what the heck was she doing here. Not here at this particular moment, but here instead of doing rounds in a hospital like a normal doctor.

"They're here!" cried the man in the passenger seat. Suddenly awake, the man, Wolfrum, cowered by the door looking around wildly. His stark white hair only emphasized his terror.

"It's okay," said Asima softly, gently. "You're safe. You're safe."

Wolfrum panted with fear, but seeing Asima calmed him down. Though she did not think that she was anything special to look at.

Wolfrum's shoulders, under his brown bomber jacket, loosened slowly.

"You're okay," he sighed happily.

"Should I not be?" asked Asima, who was pleasantly bewildered.

"I had a bad dream. From the hospital," said Wolfrum, so quietly she almost did not hear him over the pounding of rain on the rooftop.

Reminded of that night at the hospital, Asima's breath suddenly hitched for a second.

"The Scarecrows?" she asked in a bare whisper.

Wolfrum just nodded. Asima remembered the militiamen with their Kevlar masks painted like scarecrows. Even now, the thought of them gave her the screaming willies. But she saw the fear in Wolfrum's eyes so, like a professional, she took a deep breath and pushed down her own fear.

"It's okay," she said gently. "We're away from them."

Wolfrum looked around as if the Scarecrows might pounce out of the back seat. But it was just the two of them in the car. Wolfrum's breathing slowed as he glanced out the front windshield, which was covered in sheets of rain.

"We still waiting?" he asked.

"He said that it would be about midnight," replied Asima.

Suddenly, she wondered what her mother would say, and that thought gave her a warm smile. Asima imagined her mother speaking in her soft Southern accent, "A man wants a good woman with a stable job who will be at his back. Not some girl on the run from the law. How are you going to pick the kids up at school? In a getaway car?"

“I hate this waiting!” wailed Wolfrum, and he turned to Asima. “What are we doing here anyhow?”

“I don’t know?” admitted Asima. “Lassiter just asked that we meet him here.”

“Okay, that’s weird,” murmured Wolfrum. “I mean, we owe the guy and all. But I hate this sitting around.”

Asima focused on the man. Wolfrum was of average height, but lean and coiled like a steel cable. In addition to his brown leather bomber jacket, Wolfrum wore a pair of red Converse All-Stars that they had found at the Salvation Army. And that was all she really knew of him. Or, he of himself.

“Is the medicine working?” asked Asima.

“No migraines so far,” shrugged Wolfrum with a tiny, hopeful smile. He had been suffering from crippling migraines lately, but she was hoping the new medicine would work. He grinned at her. “Here’s hoping that...”

A light flashed from a door in the back of the building.

“That’s it!” crowed Wolfrum. He jumped out of the car, and started sprinting across the parking lot. Asima braced herself and wished she had brought a coat. But it had not been raining when they had left their safe house.

Gritting her teeth, Asima jumped out into the cold, driving rain. The wind almost knocked her off her feet. Triumphantly, she stayed upright, and out of a mud puddle. Moving as quickly as possible, she focused her eyes on the wet ground, and she wrapped her arms around her annoying too-large-of-a-chest. The front door seemed a million miles away.

Then the rain stopped as a brown leather bomber coat flew over her like a cloak. She looked up into Wolfrum’s grinning face.

“Come on,” he coaxed. Wolfrum led Asima through the open back door, and into the back of the bland government building. Despite her shivering, Asima started to take off his coat.

“Sorry, I forgot my coat, here’s yours back,” she said.

“Hold on to it,” said Wolfrum as he stepped away from the proffered coat. “I’m okay.”

Asima pulled the warm coat back around her gratefully. Before she could say ‘thank you’, a gruff voice interrupted while the back door closed. A few buttons pressed and the alarm was set while Wolfrum suddenly looked upward.

“Isn’t this cute,” said the grumpy voice dryly. She turned to Special Agent Lassiter Longe. “Can we get to work?”

“We don’t even know why we’re here,” countered Asima tartly. “Do you run this building?”

She nodded her chin at the alarm pad.

“The security guard owed me one, so he’s taking a break,” said Lassiter as he softened his voice. “And I needed your expertise.”

“Mine?” asked Asima.

“Definitely a Dr Chatterjee question,” said Lassiter, but then he looked at Wolfrum who stood there grinning affably. While Wolfrum was pale and lean, Lassiter was large with dark skin. In fact, Asima always thought the FBI man’s hands might be capable of crushing bear skulls.

“You remember anything yet?” asked Lassiter of the lean man.

Wolfrum’s smile dampened a bit. “Nothing.”

“So, before you found yourself stumbling in a cornfield, half-frozen....?” started Lassiter coaxingly.

Wolfrum’s smile faded completely. “It’s all darkness before.”

“Is this an interrogation?” asked Asima sharply of Lassiter. The FBI agent’s look softened again as he focused on Dr Chatterjee.

“Sorry,” said Lassiter sincerely. “I just don’t like mysteries.”

Wolfrum’s affable grin returned. “So I must drive you crazy.”

“You, cornfield, half-frozen was bad enough, but then the fact that people--even in my beloved FBI--want you dead,” said Lassiter as he stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I gotta stop thinking of it, or I’m going to give myself a headache.”

“I know that feeling,” nodded Wolfrum sympathetically.

“It’s not that we’re not grateful for all the help you’ve given us, finding a safe place to stay until we find out who wants us dead,” said Asima as she tried hard for a civil tone. “But it’s the middle of the night.”

“No, you’re right,” said Lassiter as he pulled on the back door to make sure it was secure, and that the alarm was set. He beckoned them down the hall. Asima was sure this was a morgue, and she was disappointed to see that she was right.

Lassiter took them into a clinical area where, due to the curves, Asima deduced there was a woman under a sheet. The woman, Ms. Weaver, was apparently ready on a metal table.

“I usually work on the living,” said Asima carefully.

“Ms. Weaver here called my office about a problem at work,” said Lassiter. “She worked for a subsidiary of AngelEyes Inc.”

Wolfrum and Asima looked up at that, and Lassiter nodded.

“Right. Our old friends who sent out those, whatta you call them?”

“Scarecrows,” supplied Wolfrum.

“Right, them after you,” said Lassiter, and his voice dropped to a deep growl. “Because every corporation needs their own private army.”

“So you think...” started Asima.

“The Medical Examiner said that it was a heart attack,” said Lassiter.

“But you don’t think so,” replied Asima.

“Exactly, but before I go off half-cocked, I need some type of confirmation.” finished Lassiter. “I know this is unorthodox, but I really need a medical expert I can trust.”

“Okay,” said Asima after taking a deep breath. She looked around when Lassiter picked up and proffered her a box of latex gloves.

“Looking for these?” asked Lassiter.

“Yes, thank you,” said Asima as she slipped on a pair, but hesitated at the edge of sheet. Then she picked up the corner and peeked underneath.

“What’s wrong?” asked Lassiter.

Asima looked up at the FBI agent.

“You have to watch this,” she said, and then she turned to Wolfrum. “But you, you need to make yourself scarce.”

Wolfrum raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“The young woman under this sheet is naked,” explained Asima.

Wolfrum just blinked in confusion at her.

“It’s bad enough that she’s dead,” said Asima kindly. “But I don’t want to expose her to everyone. If I could, I’d get Special Agent Lassiter to turn around.”

“But I have to watch because Dr Chatterjee might find evidence,” finished Lassiter with a heavy voice. He did not sound like he wanted to watch either.

“So shoo,” said Asima waving her hand at Wolfrum.

“Oh, okay,” said Wolfrum, and he turned around a little unsure of where to go.

“And don’t touch anything,” called out Lassiter.

Wolfrum walked out into the hall and disappeared. Asima turned to the body of the young woman and began her examination. Pulling back the sheet she looked over a young woman who was in her mid-twenties. Ms. Weaver's pale, dead eyes looked almost accusatory at her.

"Lots of bruises," commented Asima.

"She was found dead at the bottom of a flight of stairs," said Lassiter.

"Still that seems like a lot of bruises for one flight of stairs. Well, let's look further."

*

"Look here!" said Asima suddenly. Lassiter straightened from where he had been leaning against another metal table. It had been almost an hour, and he looked tired. But now his eyes lit up.

"Did you find something?" asked Lassiter.

"Your medical examiner might have honestly missed this," said Asima as she waved a penlight that she had borrowed from Lassiter. "It's in her nose."

"What?"

"There is a puncture mark from a needle in her nose," explained Asima.

"Ew!" exclaimed Lassiter, and his hand unconsciously went to his own broad nose.

"I think someone held her to inject a poison, which would explain the stopped heart, and then after, threw her down the stairs."

"It was in a secluded stairwell that didn't have any cameras," said Lassiter. "Ms. Weaver often took the stairs for exercise."

"Well, that backfired," mumbled Asima to herself.

The door banged open and Wolfrum appeared looking concerned.

"I think we got..." started Wolfrum when the lights went out. "Trouble."

"What did you see?" asked Lassiter as he switched on another small flashlight.

"More like heard," said Wolfrum. "I was sitting by the back door when I heard the alarm go out. And then someone started picking the lock at the back door."

"How do you know that the alarm went out?" asked Lassiter as the emergency lights kicked on with a muted light.

"The alarm made a little noise that went away," said Wolfrum as if everyone could hear security alarms. And then he looked down and saw the naked woman. He covered his eyes. "Whoops sorry!"

“What do they want?” asked Asima of Lassiter, but the special agent was already looking at the body of Ms. Weaver. Asima nodded. “That’s what I thought.”

“Hurry, this way,” said Wolfrum, and he beckoned them with his free arm while keeping his eyes shielded with the other. Wolfrum turned and stood in the doorway.

“You two need to hide,” ordered Lassiter.

“You need our help,” replied Asima.

“Hurry,” hissed Wolfrum.

“Crap,” growled Lassiter. He pulled the sheet back over the body of Ms. Weaver.

Gently, he scooped her off the table as if cradling a child. Wolfrum beckoned them frantically towards the door. Lassiter and Asima followed Wolfrum out.

Dropping his hand from his eyes, Wolfrum suddenly stopped and stiffened. He turned towards the front of the building.

“We gotta move fast,’ he whispered.

Leading them quickly, he reached a door labelled ‘Maintenance’. Wolfrum ushered both of them into the small room, which had a ceiling covered in old pipes. The room had shelves against either wall stuffed with tools, duct tape, spare parts and cleaning solutions, as well as a small sink against the back wall.

“We’ll be trapped in here,” commented Lassiter.

“We’d never make it to the doors,” said Wolfrum in almost an apology. “They’re all over us. Like rats.”

Asima cocked her head and listened. “I don’t hear anything.”

Wolfrum looked at them in surprise. “You don’t? They’re not exactly being quiet.” He turned his ear back towards the door. “Yep, they found that the morgue is empty, and... wow, that is some really colourful language.”

“Are they mentioning any names?” asked Lassiter who leaned against an empty bit of back wall to try and hold Ms. Weaver more comfortably.

“No,” replied Wolfrum.

“Well, I couldn’t be that lucky,” sighed Lassiter with a smirk. “I, DB Cooper, am here to steal this body.

“Wait,” said Wolfrum. “You really couldn’t hear the alarm go out? Is that weird?”

“Well...” admitted Asima. “It’s not usual.”

“I mean...you guys really couldn’t hear that? Or those guys in the other room?” asked Wolfrum as he searched their faces to see if they were joking. “Really?”

“Sorry,” said Asima.

Wolfrum’s face turned self-conscious. “Great, something else freakish about me?”

“No, no, no,” said Asima and she started to walk forward to console him.

“Then what’s happening to me...?” started Wolfrum when he stiffened and turned towards the door. He held up a hand. Asima did not reply, and then she could hear a soft sound. The doorknob rattled, but Wolfrum had locked it. Asima looked behind her, and then she stepped over the mop bucket to move closer to Lassiter. The FBI agent shifted Ms. Weaver in his arms and he reached for his shoulder holster.

Someone kicked open the door, which sent a spray of wood slivers, that were painted a boring grey, into the room. A bright light taped to the front of an AR-15 levelled at Asima, Lassiter and the late Ms. Weaver. As the light swept the room, she saw that the man’s Kevlar mask had been painted like a hideous scarecrow. This first Scarecrow, who had left his arms bare to show off his ripped muscles, focused on them.

“Body snatching? That’s our job,” sneered the Ripped Scarecrow. He levelled his AR-15 at Asima. Lassiter moved in front of her, while still trying to hold Ms. Weaver awkwardly. His hand moved away from his shoulder holster though.

“Hand her...” started the Ripped Scarecrow.

There was a noise like fabric ripping as Wolfrum dropped from the pipes above. He landed just behind the Ripped Scarecrow wielding a roll of duct tape. Wolfrum stuck the duct tape over the Ripped Scarecrow’s mask so that it stuck fast and blinded the mercenary.

“What the...!” cried the Ripped Scarecrow. Wolfrum saw the mercenary’s hand shift on the AR-15. Still holding onto the ends of the tape, Wolfrum pulled back, like he was pulling on a horse’s reins. The two spun around as the Ripped Scarecrow swore viciously, and then he squeezed the trigger of the AR-15.

“Wait...” started a second Scarecrow out in the hallway, because the AR-15 was now pointed at him. The bullets caught the second Scarecrow, and he fell back in a bloody heap. The AR-15 clicked empty, and Wolfrum pulled on more duct tape to tie the Ripped Scarecrow’s tanned arms to his side.

Wolfrum looked up. “More coming!” Dropping the tape, he pushed the Ripped Scarecrow to the ground, and then waved to Asima and Lassiter. “This way!”

They ran out of maintenance room.

“Less noise this way,” said Wolfrum quietly. They moved out of the medical part of the building and into an office area populated by desks.

“Wait,” panted Lassiter. “Wait.”

The FBI Agent leaned down to sit Ms. Weaver on the edge of a desk. He reached into his coat and took out his Glock. Hoisting Ms. Weaver up, he looked around and froze.

A light snapped on through a glass door.

“Move, and we shoot!” barked a shrill voice. Behind the glass door, a Tubby Scarecrow held his AR-15 on them, while a Short Scarecrow cautiously opened the door. As both militiamen moved forward into the room, Tubby Scarecrow was sweeping the light that was attached to his AR-15. The light danced across Wolfrum’s face quickly, flashing back and forth.

Wolfrum’s eyes grew wide, and then he started to wobble. He started to pitch forward when Asima grabbed his arm. She steadied him from falling.

“I said ‘don’t move!’” growled the Tubby Scarecrow as both militiamen took a step forward.

“Are you okay?” asked Asima of Wolfrum as she ignored the gunmen.

“Head!” was all Wolfrum could get out. She saw that the Scarecrow was still shining his light right in Wolfrum’s face.

“Migraine?” she asked. But all he could do is moan.

“Turn off your light!” she snapped at the Tubby Scarecrow.

“You don’t give me orders!” spat back the Scarecrow. So Asima put her hand over Wolfrum’s eyes because the bright light was hurting him.

“He’s sick, and you’re making it worse!” said Asima.

“Maybe I should help then,” chuckled the Tubby Scarecrow horribly as he pointed the AR-15 right at the centre of Wolfrum’s head.

“Don’t you...” growled Asima when Wolfrum started to shake.

“Oh no!” he whined.

Asima propelled Wolfrum at the Tubby Scarecrow. Wolfrum deftly side-stepped past the AR-15, without thinking about it, and grabbed the sides of the militiaman’s bulletproof vest for support. Suddenly, he threw up what seemed like ten meals. Even Lassiter looked impressed.

“Stop!” wailed the Tubby Scarecrow in a high-pitched whine. The militiaman tried to move away, but Wolfrum kept clinging to him so that he could keep standing. The Tubby Scarecrow raised the butt of the AR-15 to crack Wolfrum’s skull open.

Lassiter, who had been waiting for his opening, fired his gun. The Tubby Scarecrow’s head snapped back, and he fell back with Wolfrum on top of him. As the Short Scarecrow raised his rifle, Asima whipped off Wolfrum’s bomber jacket like a cape. She covered the Short

Scarecrow's head and pushed him over. As the militiaman fell over, his head hit the side of a metal desk with a loud noise.

The Short Scarecrow collapsed, and did not even twitch. Asima pulled off the bomber jacket, and she saw, with relief, that the militiaman was still breathing.

"Tactical Vomit. Nice. Now get our boy up!" ordered Lassiter. The FBI agent was covering the door that they had just come from. "Hurry!"

Asima swung on the bomber jacket and leapt over to Wolfrum. She needed to see if the Tubby Scarecrow was indeed dead. But then she saw the man's Kevlar mask. There was a mark where the bullet had bounced off the mask.

"He'll live," said Lassiter, a little grudgingly. "Let's move."

Asima let out a little sigh of relief. She did not like the Scarecrows, but she did not want them dead either.

Grabbing Wolfrum, Asima helped him up. His front was now covered with sick like Tubby Scarecrow, but she'd had seen a lot worse as a doctor; often stuck up people's nether regions. She moved him to a side door that announced that this was a fire door, and one should not open it willy-nilly.

"Power's still out," said Lassiter as he used his hip on the handlebar to push the door open. The rain was still coming down strong. Lassiter led them out towards an old Dodge truck. He shifted Ms. Weaver's body into a fireman's carry.

"Your car is right over there," said Lassiter as he dug out his keys. "Just get out of here fast before the reinforcements arrive."

Asima was going to move, but she stopped. "You going to be all right?"

"I'll take Ms. Weaver to my office and show everyone there. That will make it harder to cover up her murder. And will probably get me yelled at, but that's okay," said Lassiter. "Now hurry."

As Lassiter put Ms. Weaver into the passenger seat and buckled her in, he watched as Asima walked Wolfrum over to their car.

Asima heard Wolfrum mumbling something. Leaning down, she could hear.

"Sorry, sorry, medicine didn't work, sorry," moaned Wolfrum in a soft litany.

"It's not your fault," said Asima a little loudly to get over the roar of the falling rain. She got him to the passenger door and leaned him against the side of the car. She took out the keys and looked at the front of his clothes covered in rain soaked vomit. "Shirt off."

"What?" mumbled Wolfrum.

“Smelly clothes off,” said Asima as she squatted down. She untied his shoes and pulled off his red Cons. Even they had been splattered.

“No dinner first?” smiled Wolfrum weakly.

A light shined on them. Two Scarecrows stood away from their car aiming AR-15s. They were shouting, but Asima could not hear what they said over the rain. She was about to put her hands up when headlights lit the militiamen up. The Scarecrows were just turning to look when Lassiter’s truck walloped into them. The militiamen skidded farther down the parking lot and did not get back up.

Asima went back to work. She pulled off Wolfrum’s T-Shirt and undid his pants. She carefully lowered his pants, but managed to keep his boxers on.

Thank God he doesn’t go commando, she thought. But then she realized, in surprise, that she was lying to herself. Wolfrum turned towards the car door.

Asima whipped off his jacket and went to put it over his shoulders. But she caught herself pausing to look at his back, and then she chided herself. Stop admiring his latissimus dorsi muscle, she admonished.

Wrapping Wolfrum in his coat, she put him in the passenger seat. Closing the door, she dropped the messy clothes into the trunk before getting into the driver’s seat.

“Well, that was...” started Asima, when she noticed that he had fallen asleep. She buckled them both in and started the car. As Lassiter’s truck drove off, she pulled into light traffic and found herself grinning.

What was she doing with all cloak and dagger foolishness? Oddly having a great time, she thought.

THE END

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SEX WITH SPIRITS by Sara Connell

Steve blamed the Grants but the fight started a few weeks before the visit, the day Kate and Steve met with the sex therapist.

“He’s like an addict,” Kate said.

Kate told the therapist, whose name was Susan, that over the summer Steve had installed a seven-foot-tall projector screen in the basement for the purpose of playing a live action video game called WAR DAY. It was the kind of simulcast game where players wore headsets and chatted with each other “offline” and used lingo like AFK (away from keyboard) when they left the room.

“It’s a World War II history game,” Steve said. “She acts like I’m watching porn.”

Susan asked how long Kate and Steve had been married (one year), about the frequency of Steve’s playing (daily), the time of day (every night after work and weekends), and Kate and Steve’s feelings about it (Steve: “great,” Kate: “not good”), and agreed that Steve’s obsession with gaming could be contributing to the couple’s intimacy issues.

Kate smiled and Steve moved an inch away from her on the couch.

It wasn’t just the game either, Kate told Susan.

“He’s gone almost every weekend: golf outings, white water rafting. During the week, it’s bicycle pub crawls and happy hours at the private club he joined.”

“Those are business events,” Steve said. He leaned toward Susan and adopted the tone he used to pitch a new client. “I’m a rep at a medical device company; our product T233 cures tinnitus—you know, ringing in the ears. I have to sell or we don’t get paid.”

“It’s always something,” Kate said. She worked in public relations for a large not-for-profit. She also had donors to schmooze, conferences to attend. But she managed to be home by six most nights and not work on weekends. “He’s either out or downstairs playing The Game.”

“It’s not just a game,” Steve said, “it’s a community of people who love military history.” He’d been a history major at Michigan, he told Susan. “I like the intellectual stimulation.”

Kate wondered if this was a dig. She’d gone to Princeton, she almost said aloud. A school ranked higher than Michigan in every conceivable way. Instead, she described the bulbous leather easy chair Steve had purchased to go with the game console, and the grainy projections of Sherman tanks and Spitfire planes parked in a digital hanger that captured his attention for entire weekends.

Susan wrote something on a legal pad. For at least a minute, she let them hang in the silence.

“We’re here because Kate can’t have an orgasm,” Steve said. “I just came for support.”

The second therapy session was scheduled to take place by Skype (this was a thing therapists did now, apparently) the same day the Grants were due to arrive from San Francisco. Susan was speaking at a trauma conference in Copenhagen and was going to dial in from her room.

“I don’t understand why your friends can’t get a hotel,” Steve complained as Kate dragged two chairs from the dining room in front of his laptop and they waited for Susan to call.

“They’re economical,” Kate said. “They like to keep a low carbon footprint.”

“Who’s economical?” Susan’s face appeared in the Skype box on the screen.

“Some friends from California are staying over tonight,” Kate offered. “Elizabeth and Jerry Grant—they’re shamans.”

“How’d you meet them?” Susan asked.

“A friend took me to a retreat at their house in Sonoma,” Kate said. “We kept in touch. They’re coming to town to film an episode of America’s Most Haunted.”

“They’re awful,” Steve said. “I met them at a party in San Francisco last year. Jerry asked if I could see his aura.”

“They work with trauma victims,” Kate said.

At the Grants’ retreat, Kate had met women Elizabeth had cured of insomnia, anxiety, Crohn’s disease, infertility. In their cramped living room, Kate had watched Jerry hold a giant crystal obelisk over the chest of a man whose brother had been shot and bled to death in his arms after a gunfight in South Central Los Angeles.

Since his brother’s death, the man had suffered from night terrors and PTSD. He’d undergone electroshock therapy, hypnosis, psychotherapy. Nothing had helped.

The man was splayed out on their couch. He was tall enough that his feet dangled off the upholstered armrest. Jerry spun his crystal up and down the man’s body, pulling at invisible cords through the air. The man’s dark hair became matted with sweat as Jerry worked the crystal over his body. When Jerry reached his heart, the man screamed and gripped at the couch cushions with his fingers. Elizabeth brought a yellow pail to the side of the sofa. The man opened his eyes, stared around the room as if he’d forgotten there were twenty people watching the Grants’ work, and vomited into the pail.

After the healing, Elizabeth asked Kate to make the man a cup of tea in the kitchen. Under the track lighting, Kevin, the man’s name was Kevin—told Kate he’d seen a spirit helping Jerry work. Jerry called him The Grandfather.

“He’s seven feet tall. Wrinkled face like a plum,” Kevin said. “I saw him right before I puked. The Grandfather pulled a chunk of wood out of my gut.” The man took a sip of tea and whistled through his teeth. “It was two feet long, dark and splintered and rotted with mealworms. Did you see it?” he asked Kate. “The rotting wood? The Spirit of The Grandfather?”

Kate told him she had not. She didn't tell him she thought the screaming and writhing seemed like play-acting. Or that she'd just come to the Grants' to accompany her friend who, since enrolling at Berkeley, had twisted her hair into dreadlocks and begun each day by choosing an Oracle card from a deck she kept next to her bed. Kate didn't believe in the supernatural. She was intrigued by it, sure, the way she had been as a child, playing with her cousin's Ouija board. She believed the vomiting, though, it would be kind of hard to fake that.

The man shrugged. He smiled wide and leaned back so his neck and shoulders hung off the back of the chair. "Well, I feel clear as a crystal glass," he said. "Someone could run a finger around me and I'd sing."

"They're being sued," Steve said. He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out his phone. Kate wondered if he was going to check his WAR DAY app or his text messages right in the middle of their therapy session. He moved his thumbs over the screen and thrust the phone up to the computer's camera so Susan could read. It was the article from the San Francisco Chronicle. Kate could recite the story: twenty-five-year-old student Alicia Jones had suffered a psychotic break during a shamanic ceremony at the Grants' Sonoma home earlier that year.

"It's an allegation," Kate said. "No one was convicted of anything."

"The doctor in the article used the word 'lobotomy,'" Steve said.

Kate wished she didn't have to involve the Grants at all. But like Kevin that day in the Grants' living room, she had run out of options. The doctors she'd seen had all started out optimistic. She'd been orgasmic. Then she'd suffered a trauma. They said she had every reason to believe she could have orgasms again. The doctors had administered drugs, prescribed meditation, support groups. From the holistic therapists, there had been herbal supplements, teas and supposed aphrodisiacs: Peruvian maca, horny goat weed, damiana, tribulus terrestris, passionflower, rows of small glass bottles from China. Steve had licked and stroked and tickled every centimetre of her and not once produced the ultimate contraction of her pelvis.

She wished she'd asked the Grants for help at that first retreat. She could have. But she'd been too ashamed then. Too ashamed to name her problem aloud. To undergo the public undulating on the couch, the screaming, the retching that went with the Grants' work.

Not now. She would vomit through her eyes if it meant she could shiver with ecstasy again, if she could be liberated.

She hadn't told the Grants about the favour she intended to ask. She would give them a good meal first, open a bottle of the Barolo Jerry liked to drink, spray the pillowcases in the guest room with lavender, place a vase of lilacs, Elizabeth's favourite flower, on the bedside table. Then she would ask. And pray that, finally, her problem would be fixed.

The Skype box on the computer screen froze, then broke apart. Susan's face became fragmented, like a portrait by Braque or Gris. The sound kicked back in.

“When was the last time you had an orgasm?”

Kate took short, fast breaths. She would not say how she had her first orgasm by accident, by opening her legs over an underwater jet in her neighbour’s pool when she was thirteen. Nor how orgasms came easily to her from there—how she hardly had to touch herself at all while reading a book she’d swiped from a pile next to her older sister’s bed. Nor how orgasms with men had been readily available too, how she’d frequently come by sliding herself up and down the leg of her high school boyfriend while they were both still fully clothed.

Susan swivelled toward Kate, waiting for an answer.

“She had them until Roger,” Steve said. Kate knew Steve was trying to help but she wasn’t sure she liked him being the one to volunteer the information. She’d told Steve about the experience of course—on the third date, the same way she’d told everyone she’d dated since Roger—the way some women disclose an STD.

“Roger and I travelled around Europe the summer after senior year of college,” she explained to Susan. “First love. Paris, Barcelona, by Eurail pass—the whole thing.” Sex in the train bathrooms, in hostels, behind a hedge of trees in the middle of the night at a park before watching the running of the bulls in Pamplona, she thought but did not say. “We were supposed to fly home from Rome. He wanted me to extend the trip and meet up with a friend we knew in Prague. My parents had lined up a job for me in August. We had a fight. Something stupid—he’d looked at another girl too long in a restaurant. I told him to go without me.” A freak accident, that’s what the therapist Kate had gone to see afterwards had called it. “A taxi came around a corner too fast. The pavement was wet from an afternoon rain. Roger was wearing dark clothes.”

Someone from the study abroad program had translated the medical report to Kate. Roger Aimes. Age twenty-one. Killed on impact. Kate remembered going numb between her chest and thighs when the call from Roger’s parents came.

After that, no orgasms.

“I’m just glad you weren’t there,” Steve said.

Unlike some of the men Kate had told, Steve had embraced her unconditionally. He’d wooed her with the same vigour he infused into every new business venture. And his hope had changed her. She’d started to share his optimism. He’d cracked his knuckles and moistened his lips before they crawled into bed. They’d bought vibrators and magic wands and something called a Jimmy Jane that was supposed to simulate a tongue. She recalled how buoyant he’d been—until months went by and no victory came. Then he got drunk and demanded one night that Kate pull up old pictures of Roger on Facebook, asking what her ex had that he didn’t. Now, most nights, they didn’t attempt sex, and he just slunk downstairs to play The Game.

“And it bothers you? Not to climax?” Susan asked.

Of course it bothered her. Kate crossed her arms over her chest and looked out the window to the row of old elm and maple trees beyond the edge of their yard.

“She almost didn’t marry me,” Steve said to Susan.

“It’s true,” Kate said.

Who wants a wife who’s frigid? Kate said the day Steve lowered himself to his knee and opened the blue velvet box. She told him she didn’t want to deprive him of a full sexual experience, but what she really meant was, she did not want a life where every sexual encounter was a reminder of her failure as a woman. She wanted pleasure. She wanted aliveness. She wanted to be peeled open like a ripe fruit. She’d read that line in a book of erotic stories someone left behind at a hotel they visited last year. It was silly, a cliché. But she’d felt a tingle in the tip of nerves between her legs when she’d read it and then a dull ache that had lasted for several hours afterward. There were moments when she thought, despite the past failed years, that she did still have the ability.

“What about you, Steve?” Susan asked. “Does Kate’s problem bother you?”

“I accept and love Kate as she is. Steve said. “I’m with her no matter what. She’s the whole list.”

“List?” Susan said.

“I wrote a list during my MBA senior year— qualities in my perfect mate: Loyal, Adventurous, Kind, Beautiful, Intelligent. Kate’s all of it. She’s everything to me. I just want her to be happy.”

Susan smiled at Steve and told them to have hope. “Nature has a cure for every problem,” she said.

Kate bristled. This was the kind of thing every doctor she consulted said until they gave up on her and told her to “look on the bright side!” Did she know, one doctor asked, that a woman had come in that day who was born without a uterus? Kate’s uterus was young and the lining plump, the perfect wide inverted shape to nurture a child. Kate had nodded at the doctor like she agreed. People had things much worse—lost limbs, paralysis, cancer. She was young and healthy, married to a great man. She was lucky, really, when you thought about it.

Susan reminded Steve to stay off WAR DAY and told them to do the first two chapters in the intimacy workbook she’d recommended. Kate huffed as she pulled the chairs back to the dining room. She didn’t need a workbook. She needed a miracle. Or an exorcism. She looked at the time. Her stomach pinched. The Grants’ flight from San Francisco would be landing in an hour.

“My cherie,” Elizabeth said when they arrived. She hugged Kate and kissed both of her cheeks as if they were in France.

Jerry pulled a lighter out of his pocket and lit the fat end of a bundle of sage.

“It smells like weed,” Steve said. He waved his hands in front of his face and walked to the bar he’d set up in the kitchen.

Elizabeth moved into the living room with her arms pushed out from her body, as if she had lost sight and was forced to feel her way around in space. She wore a tower of thin gold bracelets over the black sleeves of her dress, and when she moved the bracelets cascaded up and down her arm like a slinky. Jerry walked past her toward the table in the living room. He wore a leather jacket the colour of butterscotch over a black T-shirt and jeans. When he bent over to sniff the cheese on the blue tray, Kate saw the obelisk. It hung tight against his body in a black holster, the way some men might carry a gun. The sharp edge of the obelisk caught light from the halogen spots Steve had installed in the ceiling. If she leaned forward, she could touch it.

“God,” Steve said. He handed out wine glasses one at a time while fanning the sage smoke from his face with his free hand.

“Sage provides cleansing and protection,” Jerry said.

“Protection from what?” Steve asked.

“Spirits,” Elizabeth said. “You have a portal to the Otherworld right . . .” She held up her arms again and walked toward the fireplace. “Here,” she said.

“Right,” Steve said. Kate felt him trying to make her look at him.

At dinner, Jerry ate two plates of tikka masala while Elizabeth told them about how they had performed a space clearing of Elijah Wood’s new house when he returned from filming *The Lord of the Rings*.

“Elizabeth and I knew Elijah in a previous life,” Jerry said.

Steve finished his first glass of wine and poured another, filling the glass up to the rim. “How is your student?” he asked. “The one in the mental institution?”

Kate tried to interrupt. Her voice made a high squeak in the air.

“We were horrified about Alicia,” Jerry said. Elizabeth moved her chair closer to him. Her bracelets tinkled. “Rarely happens in this kind of work, but it does happen. We take people to a different state of consciousness, and sometimes they can’t come back.”

“Doesn’t seem ethical to do the work at all, if there’s even a chance,” Steve said.

Kate pushed her chair back from the table. She was wrong to think Steve would be anything but a hindrance to the evening. Elizabeth reached for the decanter but Kate pulled it close to her plate. She clasped the neck with her fingers. They were all getting drunk. She needed to ask about the healing.

“We’ve stopped doing ceremonies,” Elizabeth said.

The glass felt heavy in Kate’s hands. She suctioned her palms to the sides to keep it from slipping. “You’re not doing any all?” she said. She located the bulge in the side of Jerry’s jacket. He’d brought the obelisk. Surely they’d make an exception for her. She could sign something, draft a legal document.

Steve set his hands on the table. “Seems really responsible.”

“In some ways, it’s been a good break,” Elizabeth said. “It’s a lot—holding all that pain for so many people.”

The light in the room intensified, as if a lens had twisted into focus. Kate leaned across the table. She ignored Jerry and Elizabeth. She grabbed Steve’s face and kissed him. She pressed her tongue into his mouth in a way she hadn’t in months.

“I must have drunk more than I thought,” Steve said.

Kate smiled at Steve and turned to the Grants. “Steve plays this awesome WWII game,” Kate said. “Friday is a big night.”

“Don’t let us keep you, Steve,” Jerry said. He poured the last of the wine into Elizabeth’s glass.

Kate guided Steve through the kitchen to the top of the basement stairs.

“We promised Susan,” he said.

“I’ll tell her it was my idea,” Kate said. “I’ll even bring you snacks.” If Jerry and Elizabeth did what Kate asked, they would have something far better to report to Susan next week.

Steve walked unsteadily down the stairs. Kate waited at the top until she heard the synthesizer music that played as the game loaded onto the screen. She returned to the living room at a trot. All she needed was, what, forty-five minutes, a half hour? The healings in the Grants’ house in California could not have been any longer.

She found the shamans on the couch. Jerry was holding a bottle of Steve’s eighteen-year-old scotch. Elizabeth held a tumbler glass, three quarters empty, in her right hand. Her head lolled onto Jerry’s shoulder. Her bracelets lay in a column on her wrist. Behind them, outside the bay window, the trees were a tangle of ochre branches that reached into the sky. Elizabeth was out, but Kate only needed Jerry.

She pointed to the obelisk. “Would you use that on me?”

Jerry rubbed his hand up and down his arms like he was trying to get warm. “For you, Katie, I would have,” he said. “But”—Jerry lifted up the bottle— “damn Talisker.”

Kate attempted to hide her despair. Jerry yawned.

“Okay if we just lay down here?” Jerry said. Kate was appalled she had not shown them the guest room where she had ironed the sheets, plugged in space heater so they’d be warm in the morning when that side of the house became cool or the tray in the bathroom where she’d arranged small bottles of shampoo and body lotion she’d saved from her one overnight in a five-star hotel. All that work, thinking everything would be different for her by the time they went to bed.

Jerry’s eyes closed. Kate tried to shake him awake. She tried to lift Elizabeth from the couch by her armpits. A car from America’s Most Haunted was coming for them at seven the next morning. She’d missed her chance.

Jerry’s fingers rested on the holster pocket, covering the obelisk. He slumped against Elizabeth and blew air through his lips the way Kate had seen babies do when they slept.

Kate watched them for several minutes. The edge of the crystal moved fractionally forward as Jerry breathed. She waited until the puffs of air became predictable, tiny compressions and expansions. Carefully, making only small, silent movements, she slid the crystal out of Jerry’s hand.

The obelisk was heavier than she expected, the weight of a small dumbbell. The shaft was a single piece of clear quartz with three sides that made a prism.

Elizabeth snorted in her sleep. If Kate tilted her head, she could hear the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. Every few seconds, beneath her feet, she felt a spider web of vibration in the floorboards, set off by some explosion in Steve’s game.

Kate lifted the obelisk by its shoestring cord and began to twirl it in front of her body. She gripped the string closer to the base and attempted to mimic the motion she’d seen Jerry use in his house. She spun the prism faster, until her eyes stopped being able to make out the individual edges. The crystal made a soft whistle as it rotated around.

Nothing happened. No invisible cords pulled from her body, no spirit of The Grandfather appeared. The spinning made Kate dizzy. She grabbed for the side of the couch but missed. She stopped her fall with her left hand. The obelisk fell onto the rug.

Her face was still near the carpet when a sour smell of wet leaves and peat smoke filled the room. A flood of light poured in from the windows, like water. The air around the light shimmered and the light began to arrange itself into a shape, as if by one atom at a time. Kate stood up slowly. She would not have believed it, but something was undeniably there.

The shape took the form of a large man. His skin was thin, the translucent green of a raw onion.

“Grandfather?” Kate asked.

He looked nothing like the sinewy, tall presence Kevin had described in the Grants’ kitchen. This being had a bare chest. Muscles creased his arms. In the centre of his head, large, round, yellow eyes opened into a face almost covered with leaves. The leaves glowed, tinged with radioactive shades of red, blue, and green. Every few seconds, some dropped from his face and head and fluttered to the floor, making a kind of blanket on the ground.

The man moved toward Kate, pelvis first, like a stag. Kate stepped back. He moved closer. His body smelled like cinders and horse sweat. The gold from the leaves reflected in his eyes. He reached his hand forward and cupped her right breast. The audacity of the gesture shocked her. She should scream, run away. She commanded this of herself but she stayed where she was. Through her thin sweater she could feel his hands, warm and rough like bark. He moved his hands to her shoulders. Her breast ached when his hands moved away. He stared at her for a few seconds then swept his arms over her back and hips. She was close enough that the leaves on his face scratched her forehead. She should have been terrified—ashamed at least. But warmth spread across her chest, her blood rushed up close to the skin. The tip of nerves between her legs tightened. For the first time, she understood why people called this a fever. Something inside her was ripping apart. The pain was exquisite. Better than Roger. Better than anything she'd felt. Her sexual arousal was not, as she'd feared, frozen under ice at the bottom of some arctic ravine. She felt an overwhelming desire to cry.

For months, since Jerry and Elizabeth said they were coming, Kate had imagined the healing they would perform. She imagined the obelisk whirring above her as her skin felt as if it were burning and that the wound that was created when Roger was mowed down by that taxi would come crawling out of her gut. She would squirm and vomit out all the guilt about the fight, about telling Roger to go to Prague alone—all the shame of her defectiveness, would be pulled out of her brain like in a child's fairy story, the whole thing shrunk down into a gelatinous, shining orb. She would feel as clear as Kevin in the Grants' kitchen that day, see the pink, shiny bubble lift and float over her head and laugh at how infinitesimally small it was and how it could never hurt her again.

But instead this leaf man was stroking her, combing his fingers across her body. She was lit up. Her nerves, which had so long been dormant, had become conductors of heat and sensation.

The being continued to stroke her back. Even more than with Roger, she wanted to be spread open and pulled apart. How would the bark hands feel on her thighs, the sandpaper fingers inside her? She grabbed the spirit's hands and pulled them across her torso and down the front of her belly.

Internal pressure, like water moving fast, splashed up against the side of an invisible wall. The spirit rubbed and circled his fingers inside her. Amazingly, her body continued to advance. Susan had been right! Nature did have a cure. She was pressing toward something, throttling forward. Faster and faster the sensation accelerated until she shattered, like a billion icicles breaking against a black sky.

"Jesus!" Jerry jumped off the couch. He grabbed the obelisk from the floor and wiped it on the inside of his jacket. He twisted his body, pulled the obelisk up high above his head, yelled something guttural from the back of his throat, and then cut the air with the crystal, bringing it down to the floor in front of his legs. He repeated the motion from the opposite side, making an invisible X in the room.

The spirit snorted and pawed at the ground with his feet. Jerry squatted and dipped his shoulders right and left. He made the sound again and spun the crystal fast in front of the spirit.

The leaves and muscles and headdress stretched and grew thin until the molecules of light began to dissipate. The spirit pulled away from Kate and evaporated. The emptiness his presence left was so great that for several seconds she could not inhale.

“What the hell?” Steve stood in the archway between the living room and the dining room table.

The table was strewn with napkins and empty tumbler glasses. Sunlight fell in panels through the living room blinds. The amber liquid at the bottom of the glasses gave the room a stale, sharp smell. Kate was crumpled on the couch. Her chest was damp, she’d sweated through her clothes. No sign of the shamans.

The nubby wool of the couch scratched at her back. She leaned forward, put her face between her legs, and squeezed the side of her head with her knees.

Steve reached under the table and lifted the empty scotch bottle from the floor. “Ninety dollars’ worth of single malt scotch. Apparently they have no problem with a high carbon footprint when it’s someone else’s money.”

The clock on the table next to the couch showed 8:00AM. Elizabeth had left a note. “Gone to show taping. Thank you for the lovely dinner, and night.”

Kate didn’t know where they’d slept.

Her temples pulled at her eyes, the skin stretched tight across her skull. She carried the tumbler glasses, the plates smeared with curry and coconut juice, to the kitchen sink and washed them until they gleamed, like a penance. Each time she thought of the creature from the night before, warmth spread across her groin.

Her phone pinged. An e-mail from Jerry with an illustration of a man with leaves half-covering his body. The face was almost feline in the illustration, huge yellow eyes set above a wide, strong nose.

The Green Man. An archetype of masculine energy. Both a monster and mentor.

“Not one of our regulars,” Jerry wrote. “Impressed you summoned him.”

The ache in Kate’s head rolled down into her stomach. Had she summoned the creature? What would have given her this power? Could she summon him again? She wanted to ask if it was cheating if the other party was not human, but she felt too ashamed to reply. She threw the phone and it landed between two cushions, the corner pointed up like a shark fin.

Wind whipped against the side of the house. A block of clouds moved in front of the sun. Kate waited for something to happen. She sniffed the air in the centre of the room where the Green Man had touched her. She hunted for the smell of smoke and wet leaves. The room smelled like whisky and, behind it, propane from the gas fireplace. The clouds shifted to the left.

Wind moved through the trees, bending the branches. Kate wanted to feel disgust for what happened. Anger at herself for letting the creature touch her. For enjoying it. Instead, she felt longing like she used to feel for her mother when she was sick. The feeling scared her.

After the Grants' visit, she'd gone to see Susan for therapy, on her own this time. She worried Susan would prescribe lithium, demand she turn herself over to the psychiatric ward, when she described her encounter with the spirit. But Susan said she was encouraged.

"Think of it as a very powerful dream," she said. "It shows you have the capability. You can bring your new sexual capacity into your relationship with Steve."

Kate entertained only the tiniest blink of hope that she could experience the ecstasy of the Green Man with Steve. They had attempted sex once since the Grants' visit. He'd pawed and licked her and she'd felt as numb as the day she listened to Roger's mother's sobs through the phone.

Against Susan's advice, Kate confessed the incident with the Spirit. Steve was unthreatened—said spirits weren't real—of course she'd dreamed the man. But he looked at her differently now. Sometimes the pupils of his eyes contracted and she thought she saw a shard of hatred, and the hatred made her feel better. Hatred was the way you looked at someone who'd betrayed you. Which, no matter what Susan or Elizabeth or Jerry said, she had.

Or maybe she had only imagined the hate. Since the visit, Steve had stopped playing WAR DAY. He'd declined invitations to the 40 Under 40 Golf Invitational, the MS Walk, the Otolaryngologist annual conference in San Diego, the polar bear "Swim for the Cure." He'd checked with Kate before replying yes to any dinner invitation. When she asked if he was going to make his numbers, he'd shrugged and said their marriage was more important.

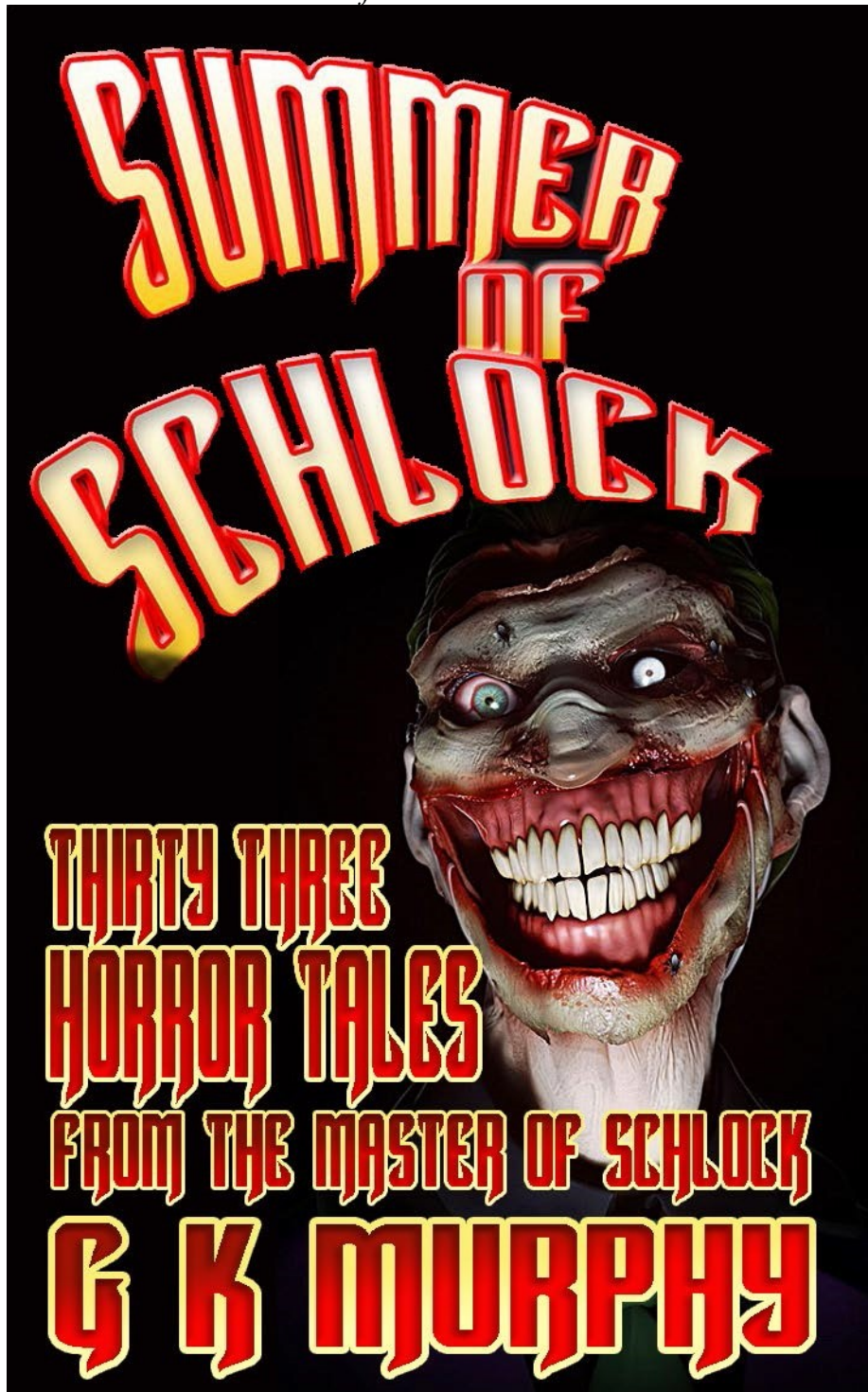
He was home so often she made up errands to get him out of the house. "We need bleach, laundry detergent, toothpaste," she'd say when she felt him prowling around her desk. "How about getting the good challah bread from Mid-Town Bakery for the dinner party tonight?"

As soon as he left, Kate skulked to her laptop to look up obelisks online. She bought a quartz stone from a crystal shop downtown and practiced twirling it fast in front of her fireplace. She was unable to conjure even a wisp of smoke. She fantasized about moving to California and becoming a shaman so she could summon spirits at will. Then, frustrated at the insanity of this idea, she would lie on top of the bedspread and push her hand under the elastic band of her underwear. She tried to conjure up the rising pressure, the splintering open, and then the mild cramps, the rush of energy into her crotch that almost hurt, like a long-held fist did when the fingers reopened. She thought about how amazing it was that a body could do that, be encoded with such potential for delight. She rubbed and pressed, stroked and flicked. She scrunched her eyes closed and imagined the Green Man spreading her legs open, the skin between her legs plumping, growing swollen pink and red.

Sometimes, she felt a slight spark of arousal. A flush across her cheeks. But alone, her body stopped just short.

THE END

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THE MESSAGE by Richard D Price

“What did you say?” asked Nigel, his face showing surprised incredulity, his voice rising in pitch as he uttered the question. He looked at his elderly mother with wide eyes, beseeching her to repeat the statement she had just made. Gwendoline Norris duly obliged.

“Your Dad has been trying to call me,” she stated in a matter of fact voice. So he had heard her correctly. He quickly felt the need to remind his mother that his dear father was deceased and did so with a trace of sarcasm.

“Mom...Dad has been dead for nearly three years now,” he said as he rubbed his hand through his thinning grey hair.

“I know that...I’m not senile yet,” snapped his mother. Nigel agreed fully with this sentiment. He had always thought that his ninety-two-year-old mother was sound of body and mind and would live to receive the telegram from the Queen. However, if she thought that her dearly departed husband was trying to get in touch via a telecommunications device then perhaps his former assessment was not entirely accurate. He decided to probe further, his curiosity aroused.

“So how has Dad tried to contact you from beyond the grave?” he asked with mock amusement. This should be interesting he thought.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” replied his mother in a stern tone of voice that he recognised from her days as a school headmistress. “I don’t expect you to believe me.” Nigel sighed and counted to ten to compose himself as he did genuinely want to hear more.

“Sorry Mom,” he started apologetically and then with greater sincerity, “So tell me why you think Dad has been trying to get in touch with you?” His mother’s eyes narrowed suspiciously on her heavily wrinkled face but she decided to elucidate further.

“Well, there was a missed call on my mobile phone and when I looked it was your Dad’s number.” Nigel had bought both of his parents cheap mobile phones several years ago. They were basic, standard Nokia handsets with pay as you go contracts, there simply for emergencies. Neither of them had particularly embraced new technology and a ten pound top up would usually last them for six months.

“Hmmm, there must be a rational explanation,” mused Nigel. “Perhaps you accidentally caught Dad’s old mobile phone and it called you by mistake.”

“I couldn’t accidentally dial a number,” she retorted haughtily.

“Numbers are automatically stored on mobile phones Mom. Presumably Dad would have called you most often so perhaps you caught the last number redial or something,” he explained rubbing his hand through his hair again, a gesture he often did when frustrated.

“Humpff,” grunted his mother, “I don’t know about any of that new-fangled malarkey and you’ll go bald if you keep rubbing your hair like that. You’re already going thin on top. I don’t know where you get it from...your Dad still had a lovely head of hair when he passed.” Probably from Granddad who was as bald as a coot or perhaps the stress of visiting you three

times a week thought Nigel but decided not to voice any of this. Better to get back on track with the mysterious story than his impending hair loss.

“So you’re sure you didn’t accidentally catch Dad’s phone by mistake?” he asked, seeking clarity.

“No, I’ve told you this. You’re not listening properly. I couldn’t have accidentally dialled my own number because I don’t have his phone,” she explained a tad rudely and bordering on the stern headmistress voice again.

“Where is it then?” asked Nigel.

“What?” shrieked his mother. Nigel sighed in frustration but checked his hand before it could get to his hair. It appeared that his mother’s hearing aid was acting up again. Why didn’t she get a better one? She had enough money he thought, with bundles of cash stashed around the house in various hiding places and multiple bank accounts. His suspicions were correct as his mother fiddled with the volume control on the device accompanied by a low burst of static. When she had finished, he repeated his question.

“Where is Dad’s mobile phone?” he asked, enunciating each word more clearly. His mother scowled at him.

“You don’t need to talk to me like I’m some kind of simpleton,” she muttered indignantly. “I don’t know where the phone is...I haven’t seen it since he passed.” She momentarily misted up at the memory of her late husband. It had been nearly three years and every day without him was like a hardship that was almost intolerable to bear. They had been together for over seventy years when he died and she had lost her soul mate. Nigel knew this only too well. He was an only child, born relatively late in their lives and he often felt like an afterthought or an inconvenient hindrance. Reflecting back on his childhood, he believed that it felt more like a teacher/pupil relationship as opposed to mother/son. This perhaps explained his negative attitude when it came to his parents.

“Perhaps he took it with him?” he mumbled in a low inaudible tone.

“What?” shrieked his mother again, tapping her hearing aid.

“Nothing,” replied Nigel smiling.

“Don’t you be getting smart with me boy,” rang out the all too familiar tones of a retired headmistress. She still referred to him as “boy” in her demeaning manner despite the fact that he was fifty-seven himself and had been married and divorced twice, working two part time jobs to keep himself in a lousy flat whilst supporting two families that had little to do with him, other than collecting a monthly cheque. His lifestyle was one of takeaway meals resulting in a portly, obese body whilst his ex-wives dined in opulence at his expense. He composed himself again and this time failed to quell his nervous habit as he rubbed both hands through this thinning, grey pate.

“Sorry Mom. Have you tried calling Dad’s phone?” he suggested helpfully.

“Don’t be silly. He’s not going to answer it. He’s not with us anymore,” she retorted.

“No, I mean to try and locate the phone. If we call the number, we may be able to hear the ringtone and then we can find the phone and perhaps solve this little mystery,” he sighed wearily.

“Humpff, you’ll have to do it then as I don’t think there’s much money on my phone.” Nigel sighed again. His dear, old mother, always the skinflint despite her array of wealth and riches. She resided in a four-bed detached house with a huge garden that was far too big for her. It served as a constant reminder to Nigel of his own failings in life when compared to his little flat. He opened his mobile and flicked to the phone contacts. There under D for Dad was his father’s mobile number. He had never been able to delete it since his Dad’s demise. He pressed the call button and waited. There was a moment of silence, followed by a click and then to Nigel’s surprise, the phone connected. He had half expected the flat, monotonous tone signalling a dead phone battery or a mobile that had been switched off but instead the phone was calling. His mother looked at him expectantly.

“It’s ringing,” he said.

“I can’t hear anything,” she replied. And neither could Nigel. He strained his ears to listen for the sound of a ringtone somewhere in the house but couldn’t detect anything. He let it ring out until the call automatically disconnected, walking around the house, his ears listening attentively.

“Perhaps it’s on vibrate,” he thought aloud and re-dialled the number a second time, exploring more rooms in the expansive house that his mother now occupied alone.

“Don’t you mess anything up in my best room,” called his mother as he moved about the house, trying to listen for a vibrating noise but his search drew a blank. He allowed himself a mischievous tinkle of the piano keys in the “best room” before returning.

“Well?” she asked when he came back into the living room.

“I can’t hear anything inside the house,” he explained, noticing that his mother now sat drinking a cup of tea which she had clearly made herself whilst his explorations had been underway. He also noticed that there wasn’t a cup for him.

“There’s a cup of tea steeping in the pot if you want to pour it,” she said, aware of his sullen observations. She still made tea the old fashioned way with tea leaves in a teapot and he went to the kitchen to pour a cup via the sieve before rejoining his mother in the living room.

“I couldn’t find it,” he repeated as he returned again, this time with a cup of tea in hand.

“I should think not as your father must have it with him if he’s trying to call me,” stated his mother earnestly. Nigel sighed for the umpteenth time.

“Did you get rid of the phone?” he asked. He was trying to think of an explanation as to why the phone wasn’t as dead as the person supposedly using it to call his mother. Perhaps she had given the phone to someone else or maybe she had cancelled the phone and the number had ported over to another person. The first theory seemed more likely as it would be somewhat co-incidental for the new owner of the number to call his mother.

“I don’t remember getting rid of it. I thought it might come in handy if my phone ever broke plus there was still some money on it,” she explained. Nigel thought it was unlikely that there was any credit left as he was pretty sure it expired after a certain time period but better not to tell his mother this.

“I think it was slightly better than mine,” she continued in a somewhat accusatory tone.

“They were both the same, Mom,” he confirmed as he mused some more about the mysterious subject matter. “Are you sure it was Dad’s number?”

“Of course I’m sure. The phone said missed call from Don,” she said grumpily. Donald Norris was the name of his late father and Gwen’s beloved husband. “He called the house phone as well,” she continued.

“You never mentioned that before. When did it happen?” asked the surprised Nigel.

“Last Saturday,” she replied.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” he asked solemnly.

“Because I thought you would think I was going loopy but then he called me on my mobile so now I know that he is trying to make contact with me,” she explained.

“So what happened when he called the landline?” asked Nigel.

“Well, I had gone up town to get a bit of shopping and as I opened the front door, I could hear the phone ringing. So, I put my shopping down on the floor and went to answer the phone but it rang off just as I picked it up. Well, anyway, I did that 1471, you know when it tells you who has called, and wrote the number down and when I checked it in my phonebook, I realised that it was your Dad’s number. You can see where I wrote the number down on the pad by the phone,” explained his mother. Nigel listened with growing intrigue and pondered potential explanations.

“Are you absolutely sure?” he asked.

“Of course I’m sure,” she barked moodily. “I told you I’m not senile yet. I still have all my faculties. The number’s over there on the pad where I wrote it down. Go and check it if you don’t believe me.” Nigel wandered into the hall where the landline resided and glanced down at the adjacent pad where his deceased father’s mobile number was written down in his mother’s spidery handwriting. He returned to the living room and asked to look at his mother’s mobile phone. She handed it over to him and a cursory glance identified that there had indeed been a missed call from his father’s mobile phone number.

“I do miss him so terribly you know. He was my rock,” she said emotionally. Her eyes momentarily drifted away, her thoughts focused on the gap in her life that had been left by her husband’s departure. He handed her mobile back, breaking the reverie.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked.

“I think you need to answer the phone a bit quicker. You might find out what he wants then,” teased Nigel before standing up to go. He visited his mother three times a week but it felt more like a chore than a genuine desire to see her. He found the visits loathsome as his mother almost inevitably managed to get under his skin but felt compelled to do them because she depended upon him as he was her only child. His own life was so depressingly dull that it was also good to get out of his lonely flat and visit his mother’s palatial, detached abode. Another plus was that she sometimes cooked an amazing Sunday roast which made a pleasant change from his life of takeaways but did nothing for his expanding waistline. It was almost as if she could read his thoughts.

“I do enjoy your visits you know. It gets so lonely on my own. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t talk to anybody all week,” she stated. Nigel kissed her goodbye and sighed. She always knew how to make him feel guilty. He knew she was ninety-two but it would help if she made more effort to go out. Other than a weekly shopping trip, she led a reclusive lifestyle and only really spoke to her next-door neighbour Mrs Roberts, herself an elderly spinster of eighty-three.

“Mom, you know that you meant everything to Dad. You were his whole world. He would have done anything for you so perhaps he really is trying to make contact with you from across the astral plane,” he said in a comforting fashion before leaving. Gwendoline Norris watched him go with a scowl, as although the words were truthful, she sensed the lack of sincerity from her only son.

Nigel continued to visit his mother three times a week and she continued to miss the odd call from the number that used to belong to Donald Norris, sometimes on her mobile but usually on the landline. Without fail, the phone always rang off just before she could answer. She tried returning the call but the phone simply rang out in what she believed was some other dimension. So whilst it seemed that her deceased husband was desperately trying to contact her from beyond the grave, it appeared that he became shy and hung up before imparting any out of world message. That was until last Saturday. Nigel received an agitated call from his mother to say that there had been a message left on her answering machine. He had originally sorted this for his mother to stop infuriating cold callers but decided it would also be a useful opportunity of potentially capturing a ghostly message from the afterlife.

He rushed to his mother’s house where she explained that she was just returning from her routine, weekly shopping trip when she once again heard the phone ringing. It rang off as usual but this time a message had been left. The light which indicated a message had been recorded was blinking hypnotically.

“Have you listened to it?” he asked.

“No, I wanted to wait for you. I was scared,” she replied and did indeed seem nervous.

“Okay, here goes,” said Nigel and pushed the blinking button. The message played back and a low, whispered voice intoned the name of his mother.

“Gwennnnnnnnnn,” it rasped painfully in a rustling, susurrating manner. It sounded like the owner of the voice was having great difficulty in forming the word and it was taking a monumental effort.

“Oh Don,” cried his mother emotionally. “I knew it was you.” Nigel replayed the message back several times to hear the same elongated word. It didn’t sound like his father. In fact, it almost didn’t sound human at all. Nigel’s facade took on a puzzled expression.

“Well, what do you think?” said his mother, looking at him expectantly. She so wanted to believe.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head, “could it be?”

“It must be him. I knew he was trying to get in touch with me,” cried his mother, desperate to convince herself.

“There must be some sort of explanation,” insisted Nigel, as the alternative seemed so implausible.

“Well, I wish you could explain it to me. It seems like you don’t want me to be happy,” complained his mother petulantly. Nigel shook his head in a confused manner, giving the impression that he was reluctantly starting to believe.

The next message was left exactly one week later. It appeared that a pattern was developing as the calls seemed to happen just as Gwendoline Norris returned from her regular Saturday shopping excursion. When he arrived, his mother pushed the answer phone play button and the same rasping, pained voice struggled to articulate three simple words.

“I missssss youuuuuuu.” Nigel shook his head and played the message again, listening intently.

“Sounds like he’s saying I miss you,” he stated after a moment’s thought.

“Well, yes, that’s exactly what he’s saying. I have played it over and over again,” she confirmed. Nigel noted that his mother no longer held any terror regarding the answer phone messages and seemed utterly convinced as to their authenticity.

“It doesn’t really sound much like him,” observed Nigel.

“Oh, it is him, I feel certain of that,” she insisted, her spirit refusing to be dampened.

“Is that really his voice...I’m not sure?” continued Nigel.

“I know deep down in my heart that it is my Don. He wants to let me know that he’s okay on the other side. Oh, I miss him so much,” stated his mother unequivocally. She was now totally certain of the source of the ghostly messages and Nigel felt certain that he could not dissuade her from her convictions. She seemed excited to receive the messages but they acted as a reminder that her beloved husband and soul mate was no longer with her. The excitement spiralled into despondency as she realised how much she missed him.

There was no message the following Saturday which was lucky because Nigel had to work away and was unable to visit. The lack of a message and absence of her son sent Gwendoline into a deeper depression and she started to question her existence. However, the following Saturday, the routine returned and a further message was left on the answer phone. His

mother was sobbing when she called him and he rushed to her house. The voice remained raspy but was a little clearer as if the ghostly voice of his deceased father was finding it a little easier to form words.

“Love you Gwencyyyyyyyyyy,” grated the voice.

“Well, don’t you see, it has to be him. Only my Don called me Gwency,” she cried and began to sob again. She had initially been elated by the message but Nigel watched as the euphoria quickly faded to be replaced by a thoughtful melancholy. He replayed the message again, although he had clearly heard the statement in what he had now started to consider as his dead father’s spirit voice. Gwency was indeed his father’s pet name for his mother, a fact that only a handful of people knew. Perhaps the messages really were from the late Donald Norris.

Nigel’s phone rang on the following Saturday.

“Hi Mom, are you okay? Any more messages?” he asked jovially. He was greeted by a baleful sob.

“Mom, what’s up?” asked Nigel, concern pervading through his voice. There were more sobs from the other end of the line.

“Mom, speak to me, what’s the matter?” cried Nigel with a growing sense of urgency.

“Sorry son...but I have...to go,” she spluttered between cries.

“Go? Go where Mom? Mom?” spluttered Nigel as realisation dawned upon him.

“Goodbye son...love you,” replied his mother which shocked Nigel as she had never said those words to him before.

“Mom, wait. Don’t do anything stupid. I am coming down now,” he cried.

“It’s too late,” she wept, “my mind is made up.” The phone clicked down as Nigel implored her to stay on the line. He quickly grabbed his car keys and hurried out of his flat to drive the short distance to his mother’s home. Upon arriving he strode up to the front door and after getting no response from the doorbell, he let himself in with the spare key that his mother had given him after his father had died. He entered the house with a cautious trepidation and was greeted with a metallic odour. He followed the smell to his mother’s living room and peered through the door.

Gwendoline Norris was slumped in her favourite chair. Her pallid, wrinkled face was gaunt but seemed at peace. Both of her arms hung limply down at either side of the seat. Blood trickled down from both wrists and was congealing in a pool on the carpet at the foot of the chair. As Nigel surveyed the horrific scene, he noticed a trail of blood spots from the phone to the chair. Nigel absorbed all of this and quickly concluded that she had slit her own wrists before calling him and had then walked back to die in her favourite chair. There was nothing he could have done and he knew that she was gone. He then noticed an upturned plastic cylindrical container of pain killers that had rolled under the chair, spilling out some of the contents into the bloody mess. She had either taken the tablets to quell the pain or to make

doubly sure that her life was going to end. He would never know for sure but she had probably dropped the container as the life had ebbed from her body.

The answer machine light was blinking with a new message and Nigel was pleased of the distraction from the horror of his mother's dead body. He walked into the hall and past her weekly shopping to press the play button.

"Pleaseeeeeee...come and join me now, Gwencyyyyyy," rasped the now familiar voice from the previous messages. He knew that his mother had been sinking into a depression and this message must have pushed her over the edge. She had gone to be with her husband in the afterlife. Nigel smiled to himself before erasing the message. He then erased the previous messages that his mother had saved before pulling an old Nokia mobile phone out of his pocket, one that was identical to his mother's. Nigel walked outside to the shed where he retrieved a hammer before smashing the phone and then dropping it into the bin.

The initial conversation with his mother about the calls from beyond the grave had given him an idea. A macabre plan to solve many of his problems. A timely end to his monetary struggle and no more tortuous maternal visits. He had been unable to locate the mobile phone on that first occasion but had stumbled upon it not long afterwards when helping to clean out the garage. The phone was in the glove compartment of his Dad's car; a car that hadn't moved out of the garage in three years. He had always wondered why his mother had never sold it but perhaps she was still clinging to memories of her husband, a little bit like he had been unable to delete his Dad's phone number. The car still had the tobacco aroma of his pipe-smoking father and it was comforting to sit inside the vehicle and reminisce. It was whilst doing this that his eyes had alighted upon his Dad's mobile phone and he had hatched his plan. If questioned about his mother's gruesome demise, he could articulate truthfully his growing concerns regarding his mother's descent into depression and her insane ramblings.

He stood to inherit everything, the house, the tobacco smelling car, the multiple bank accounts, the hidden bundles of cash. He would enjoy the prospect of searching for them later. Nigel just had to ensure that the two leeches that masqueraded as his ex-wives didn't deprive him of the small fortune. He glanced back at his deceased mother and contemplated his next move. He had known that he could drive her to suicide but was shocked at the way she had taken her own life. Perhaps it was one final prod at him, hoping that the sight would emotionally traumatise him. He wasn't quite sure what to do next and who you were supposed to call in this situation. He opted to call 999 so that he could explain what had happened. He prepared himself for the call as he needed to ensure that he sounded properly distressed. When he was ready, he took a deep breath and reached for the phone. However, before his outstretched finger could dial the first nine, the phone burst into life, startling him. He hesitated before picking up the receiver on the third ring, his heart beating faster.

"I will make you pay for this, son," growled his father's voice, oozing controlled rage. Nigel's eyes widened in fear and shock. A searing pain ripped through his heart as the main artery burst and he clutched frantically at his chest before collapsing to the floor.

"It was a terrible tragedy," stated Mrs Roberts, Gwen's neighbour for the last thirty odd years. The funeral service had just finished and she was talking to Reverend Sansome outside the local church. There were more people than expected at the service to say that Gwendoline Norris had led a reclusive last three years of her life but Mrs Roberts suspected that some

attendees had come along out of morbid curiosity. She also noticed both of Nigel's ex-wives who would presumably be seeking to get their hands on the sizeable inheritance.

"It was indeed," agreed Reverend Sansome soothingly. Gwendoline Norris was not a practising Christian but her last will and testament requested a burial in the plot next to her deceased husband and left a small sum of money to the church.

"I knew poor old Gwen was missing Don but to take her own life in that terrible manner," commented Mrs Roberts shaking her head. "And then for Nigel to find her like that."

"The shock must have been too much for him," concurred Reverend Sansome.

"He was devoted to his mother. He always came and visited three times a week. She was ever so happy when he came," explained Mrs Roberts.

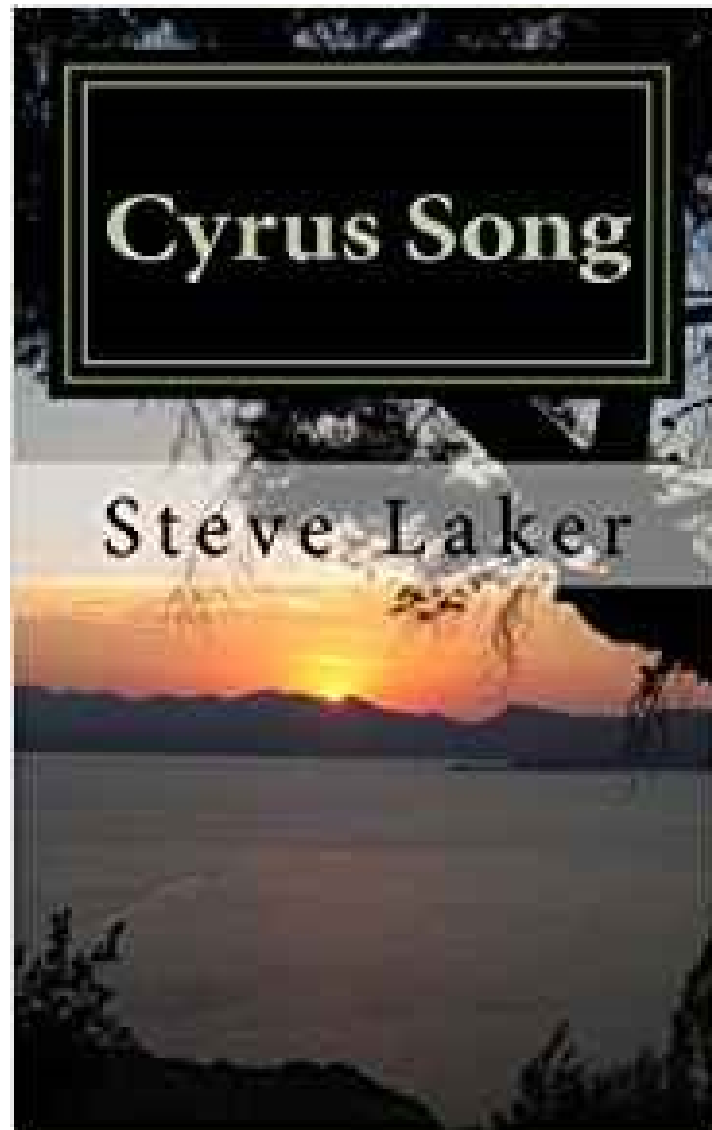
"Indeed," agreed Reverend Sansome again.

"His face was full of anguish when they found him," continued Mrs Roberts. "Just a pity that he couldn't be buried in the same plot." Unfortunately, the Norris plot had no room for interring a third body so Nigel's body had been buried in another part of the cemetery.

"Yes, very unfortunate but we must remember that they are all together with our Lord and Saviour now. We must pray for their souls."

The day was mild but as the Reverend spoke, a gentle breeze picked up and rustled the branches of a tree that was adjacent to the Norris burial plot, almost as if mocking his words.

THE END



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THE BOOK OF LOKI by Mathias Jansson

Listen, and I will tell you
the tale about the book of Loki
Loki son of Farbaute
shapeshifter and shadowwalker
travelled nine worlds
disguised in many forms
listen in secret to old spells and magic
ancient wisdom found
among gods, giants, and the dead

Wrote down his knowledge
on scales from Jormungand
used ink made of Fenris saliva
and finally carved a book cover
of bark from Yggdrasil
with images skilfully picturing Ragnarok
the serpent and the wolf
battling with the gods

With a spell of secret runes
Loki created a lock
commanded the dead warriors of Hel
to protect his formulary

On his way to Jotunheim
disguised as a young maid
Loki passed the moors of Mannaheim
met an old man
presenting himself as Sote.

Sote, an old wizard
suspected magic at once
through his iron ring
a sibling to Oden's Draupner
he gazed at the fair maiden
and saw her true being

With cunning Sote gave Loki
sweet mead spiced with herbs
and magic of Sváfnir
soon Loki fell asleep
under the stars

Sote took the book
and left in a hurry
under his cloak he tightly pressed
the book against his body

THE END
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CYRUS SONG BY STEVE LAKER reviewed by Stephen Hernandez

The book begins with a bizarre, Kafkaesque occurrence. Although, in this book, the author would not be Kafka but Douglas Adams, the untimely late, famous author of 'The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy', a book which is central to, and has a great bearing on this book—sorry, if this is all getting a bit complicated, but then we are dealing with 'The Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything'.

Simon Fry, the hero of this novel, is faced with perhaps the same problem as Arthur Dent the hero in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*: saving humanity from itself and discovering the meaning of life, which, is of course: 42. So, back to the bizarre occurrence: A writer, it is he Simon Fry, is staring absentmindedly at the page he has just written on his typewriter, whilst listening to Pink Floyd's album, 'The Division Bell', in particular the ninth track: 'Keep Talking', and the quote contained therein by Stephen Hawking: 'For millions of years, mankind lived just like the animals. Then something happened which unleashed the power of our imagination. We learned to talk...' (the full quotation is also central to the theme of the book), when he notices two random marks on the page, a dot and a dash, which he could not remember typing. He notices the characters are moving across the page, seemingly in a self-determined fashion denoting some kind of intelligence. He captures the minute 'creatures' and takes them to a veterinary clinic.

The vet, an attractive female named Hannah Jones, examines them under a microscope and makes a surprising discovery: The apparent microscopic creatures are minute warships, and are inhabited or crewed, one by animals commanded by Black Mambas, and one by humans. It is then that the vet reveals to Fry something even more remarkable (if possible), she has invented a very powerful and unique software programme called Babel fish (after the translating fish in the *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*), which interprets animal languages. She lets him use it in her clinic so he can 'listen' in on the patients, something she refuses to do as she feels it would take away her objectivity with regards to treating the animals.

In between listening in on animals and looking at alien spaceships through a microscope, Simon Fry manages, along with a Norwegian coastal tour guide and micropalaeontologist named Gilbert Giles, or in shortened Nabokov terms—Gil Gil, to make a clone of himself (Simon Fry II), and also take the Babel Fish out of the lab and into the wide world like a latter-day Dr Doolittle (which he is in more ways than one).

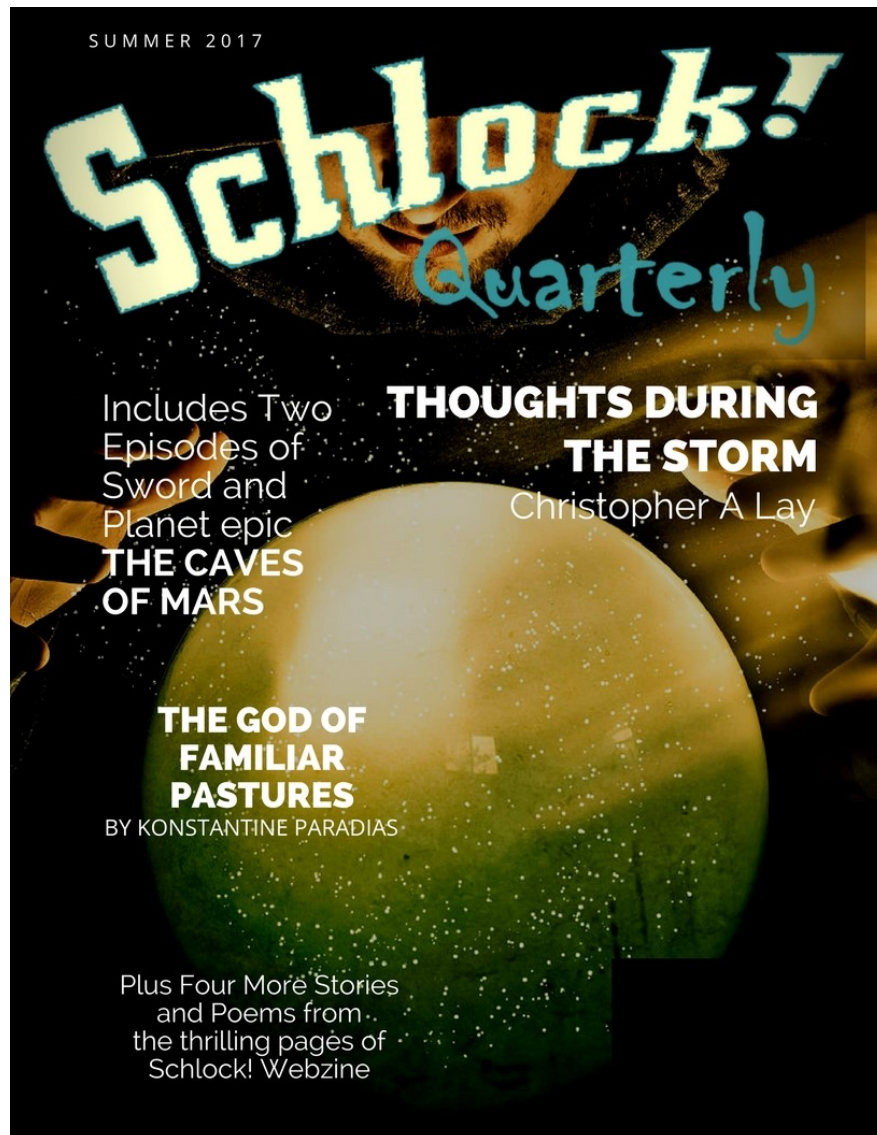
The three of them form an unlikely trio and with the Black Mambas help they attempt to somehow save the planet and mankind.

If it all sounds a bit weird, that is, because it is. But it all somehow works and knits together in the manner of surrealist writers like Julio Cortazar and Otroya Gomas, with a substantial nod, of course, to Douglas Adams, who can make the impossibly strange seem mundane and ordinary. Steve Laker pulls this extraordinary juggling act off admirably well, producing a very good, thought-provoking, page-turning, and also at times darkly comic read.

Who knows—if you are looking for the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything, you might just find it here, or in the 'Cyrus Song' of our planet. In the meantime, taking Steve Laker's and Stephen Hawking's advice, we all need 'to keep talking', and as long as there are books like these—keep reading.

Steve Laker's novel [Cyrus Song](#) is available from Amazon.

THE END



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Rise from your graves! The Edinburgh Horror Festival brings spookiness to the masses

Edinburgh is notorious for its dark history. With its tales of murder, stories of spirits, bricked up and sealed underground cities, it is no wonder it holds a reputation as one of the most haunted and scariest sites in the world. From October 27th to 31st, the second annual Edinburgh Horror Festival will bring out more goosebumps with performances to make your hair stand on end.

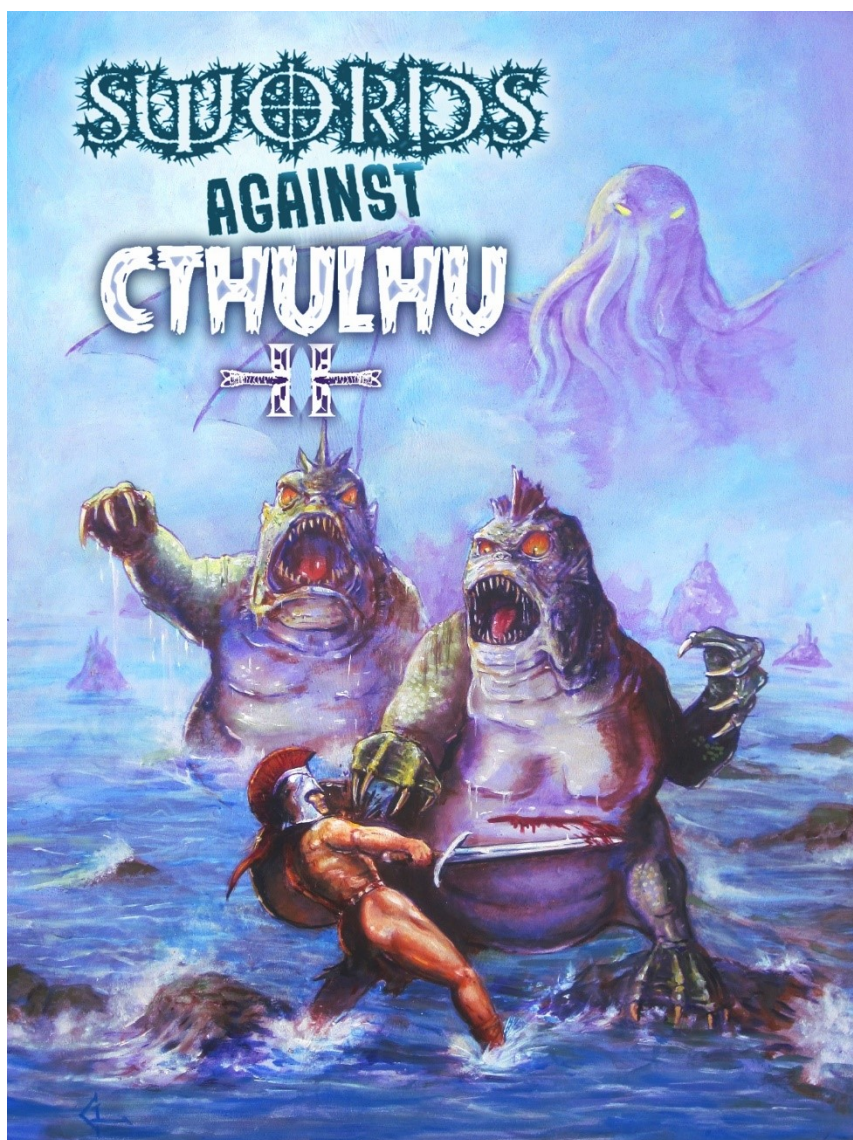
“We’re really excited about our 2017 programme” says chair and co-founder Ash Pryce, who also organises the Edinburgh Geek and Nerd Festival in May. “We’re expanding in ways we couldn’t possibly have imagined a year ago. As with last year we’ll feature an array of shows from established and emerging artists from all walks of life. Prominent Edinburgh Fringe performer Ross Hepburn will be encores his sell-out show, Beetlejuice’d, which explores the comedian’s life growing up with Aspergers and how a certain film gave him the encouragement he needed, while councilman and tour guide Alex Staniforth will be presenting his unique improvised horror storytelling act, Stand Up Horror.

Having started out in 2016 with just four venues, the Festival is hosted by nine spaces over seven venues and boasts over 200 performances of theatre, comedy, magic, film, gameshows and more. And the vast majority of these events are free entry. Other stand-out events in the programme include a special series of performances at Lauriston Castle including a séance and a children’s interactive adventure show. There will be a selection of virtual reality, immersive horror games at Ocean terminals E-VR, and Pryce will be staging his own horror-themed magic and mentalism show, Keep Calm and Scary on.

“With everything we have on, we’re confident that we will be able to provide something for everything. We’ve ensured the programme is as wide and varied as possible, and can’t wait to continue expanding the festival and its programme in the years to come.”

Apart from organising the event, the committee will be staging their own work too—Pryce and Staniforth’s work already mentioned—there will be comedy from Oliver Giggins, and from local director, writer, and Some Kind of Theatre founder, Emily Ingram, the debut of The Grandmothers Grimm, a one-act play telling the story of the Brothers Grimm’s sanitisation of original European scary fairy tales.

The full programme is live and can be viewed at www.edhorrorfest.co.uk



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Twenty-Seven

The pain of her broken arm woke Emily. Pain marred her face, as she opened her mouth in a silent ‘Owww...’

“Emily,” Jeffrey said on seeing her awake. “You’re alive.”

She blinked through her tears and looked at her brother.

“Jeffrey?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Those men...”

“They saved us... just in time... they...”

“What?”

Jeffrey said nothing about the man named Harvey, who had carried Emily away from the explosive destruction of the dome. He’d lost his life. Jeffrey only said, “They got us away from there... and then...”

“And then what?” Emily demanded.

Jeffrey found it hard to speak. He only looked toward the rubble of the that had housed the Municipal Building that housed the Education Centre they had fled early in the evacuation. Emily did not recognize it as first. She saw only piles of smouldering steel and broken panels, with Stan and Sergeant Dennison of Emergency Services working hard shovelling into the piles of rubble.

As they watched the rescue, more members of Callisto Emergency Services, all in their orange suits and helmets, quickly approached the scene. Rescue robots began burrowing into the ruins, while trucks unloaded scanners that would soon scan the scene for any evidence of life. Sirens screamed. Orange, red and yellow emergency lights flashed. In moments, dozens of personnel had come to the site.

“Where are we?” Emily asked.

A rescue worker approached Jeffrey and Emily.

“This isn’t gonna be safe for you guys,” he said. “Do you know where your parents are?”

Jeffrey silently shook his head.

“Where are we?” Emily demanded, again.

“Don’t you know? That’s the Education Centre. There’s about eight hundred students in that pile. We gotta get them out.”

Emily’s eyes grew wide. She stared at the heap that only scant hours before had been her school.

“The Edu...”

“Don’t you worry, little girl,” the emergency worker said. “We’ll get them out of there. But you and your friend...”

“Brother...” Jeffrey corrected.

“Brother. Okay. You and your brother can’t stay here. It’s going to get real busy, real fast,” the emergency worker said.

As if to emphasize his words, more emergency vehicles crowded into the plaza outside the entrance of the ruined Municipal Building. Several screamed to a halt within feet of Emily and Jeffrey.

“If I can help you two guys...” the emergency worker began.

“No. It’s okay,” Jeffrey said, rising. “We’ll go.”

“Ow!” Emily said, as she rose.

“Are you all right, little girl?”

“My arm,” Emily said.

“I think she’s broken it.”

“Lemme see if I can getcha patched up,” the emergency worker said.

He unshipped his backpack, dropped in on the ruined sidewalk and rolled it open.

He quickly removed what he needed to splint Emily’s arm and put it in a sling. Done with that, he opened a packet.

“You got any allergies?” he asked her.

“No... I don’t think so.”

“Any allergies to medicine... pain killers?”

“No.”

“Have you ever taken any pain killers?”

“Uh...”

Emily, exhausted and confused, did not know how to answer.

“The dentist, once,” Jeffrey answered.

“He gave her something.”

“Okay,” the emergency worker said. “This patch has morphine. It’s going to deliver it straight through your skin. In a minute or two, you won’t be feeling any pain.”

Turning to Jeffrey, pulled two more patches from the packet and handed them to him. Jeffrey quickly put them in a breast pocket.

“This should be enough to keep her out for pain for twenty hours. After that, well, you two should go find your parents as quickly as you can. And get to a doctor. All the medical personnel are going to be too busy here to do much for you. But if you can go find your parents...” he stopped, seeing the hopeless look on Jeffrey’s face.

“You all right, there, chief?” he asked.

“Our parents. They were in the civilian housing. That... there...”

The civilian housing was attached to the Municipal Building. From where they stood, it was impossible to see whether the civilian housing section had withstood the collapse.

“Oh, man... I’m sorry for you kids. Maybe you better get over that way and see if you can find your parents. Or maybe...”

He was cut off by shouts from the rubble.

“Blaine! Get over here now! We need ya!”

The emergency worker gave Jeffrey and Emily a quick salute, touching the rim of his helmet with two fingers.

“Sorry, kids. I gotta go.”

“Yeah,” Jeffrey said, gathering Emily under his arm. “Okay.”

Emily was already feeling the morphine pulsing through her. The relief from the pain was intoxicating. She found herself feeling dreamy.

“Thank you... Mister Blaine,” she managed to say.

Blaine, the emergency worker, laid his hand on Emily’s blonde head. “You kids take care of yourselves.”

Then he turned away from them and ran toward the smouldering pile of rubble where, already, a hundred men and women were working frantically to pull survivors from the ruins.

Jeffrey led Emily away, down the length of the plaza, to an intersection some yards away.

Then he turned the corner, into another plaza that faced the building where civilians lived.

The building still stood. But it tottered. Crowds stood outside, watching it, even as many others were fleeing from the shaking building.

“Do you see them?” Emily asked, her voice rising in near panic. “Mom? Dad? Do you see them?”

Illara had just caught up with Mud as Ward shouted his obscene notice almost in Mokem Bet’s ear. She carefully stepped into Mud’s range of vision, just outside the reach of his arms. He was in full fighting fury now, as she was herself. Startling the man now would be as dangerous as it was stupid.

But Mud caught the motion of her body as she stepped within his range of view. His head snapped to the right, and then, recognizing her, he grinned.

And it was at that instant that Carter Ward hurled himself at Mokem Bet, shouting loudly, “HEY! ASSHOLE!”

Mokem Bet was facing three Scroungers when that obscenity was shouted so close to his ear. He had not time to turn away from the three before Ward was upon him.

Ward’s knife was out. It flashed once, but Mokem Bet blocked the slash with his wrist.

The Scroungers guarding the transport ship hesitated. They did not know who the enemy was.

Mud was quick. At the instant that Carter Ward threw himself at Mokem Bet, Mud followed on his heels. He drew his pistol on Turhan Mot and fired.

But Turhan Mot was already in flight. He had recognized Carter Ward, and Illara, and instantly, he ran into the Scroungers’ ship.

He gestured at Carter Ward and Mokem Bet, locked in a death grip, and Mud, and Illara.

Turhan Mot said, “Kill them! Kill them all!”

Then he leaped into the ship, slamming shut the hatch behind him.

Mud held up his hand and said, “He’s stealing your ship.”

The Scroungers, confused, paused. Who were these people? They did not know. They did know that the one man, Mokem Bet, had killed several of their comrades. These others, Ward, Mud, Illara—they did not know them. But they did see that Ward was punching Mokem Bet, and trying to get his combat knife between the man’s ribs.

That was enough for them to settle the question.

They hurried to the hatch that Turhan Mot had closed behind him. It was locked. Of course.

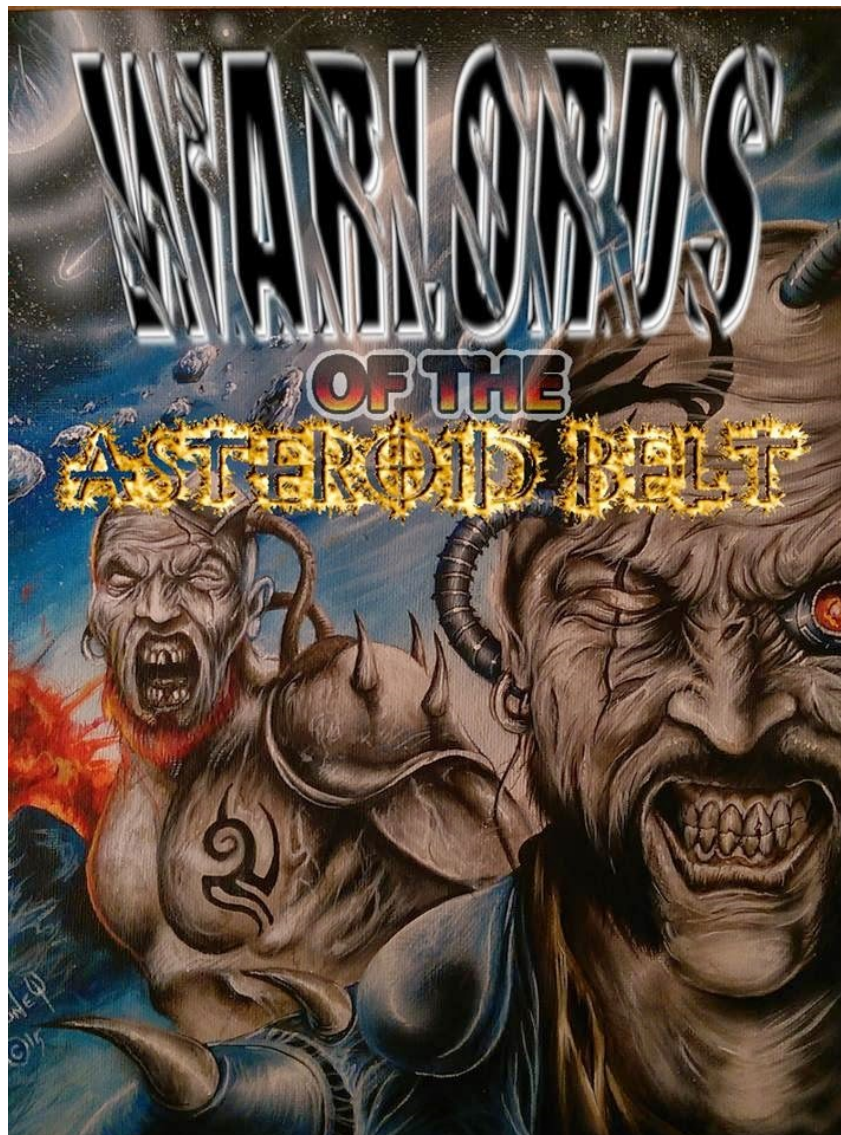
But these men knew this ship, and they knew how to force the lock. It would take some time. But they could get the door open, if only they managed to do it before Turhan Mot took off, which he clearly intended to do. They ignored Mud and Illara, and put all their efforts into opening the hatch.

The ship's warning lights came on.

Yes. Turhan Mot was starting the ship.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Carter Ward's earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 13

How had it happened? who had killed the convicts? Was it Ayrton? No, for a moment before he was dreading their return.

But Ayrton was now in a profound stupor, from which it was no longer possible to rouse him. After uttering those few words he had again become unconscious, and had fallen back motionless on the bed.

The colonists, a prey to a thousand confused thoughts, under the influence of violent excitement, waited all night, without leaving Ayrton's house, or returning to the spot where lay the bodies of the convicts. It was very probable that Ayrton would not be able to throw any light on the circumstances under which the bodies had been found, since he himself was not aware that he was in the corral. But at any rate he would be in a position to give an account of what had taken place before this terrible execution. The next day Ayrton awoke from his torpor, and his companions cordially manifested all the joy they felt, on seeing him again, almost safe and sound, after a hundred and four days separation.

Ayrton then in a few words recounted what had happened, or, at least, as much as he knew.

The day after his arrival at the corral, on the 10th of last November, at nightfall, he was surprised by the convicts, who had scaled the palisade. They bound and gagged him; then he was led to a dark cavern, at the foot of Mount Franklin, where the convicts had taken refuge.

His death had been decided upon, and the next day the convicts were about to kill him, when one of them recognized him and called him by the name which he bore in Australia. The wretches had no scruples as to murdering Ayrton! They spared Ben Joyce!

But from that moment Ayrton was exposed to the importunities of his former accomplices. They wished him to join them again, and relied upon his aid to enable them to gain possession of Granite House, to penetrate into that hitherto inaccessible dwelling, and to become masters of the island, after murdering the colonists!

Ayrton remained firm. The once convict, now repentant and pardoned, would rather die than betray his companions. Ayrton—bound, gagged, and closely watched—lived in this cave for four months.

Nevertheless the convicts had discovered the corral a short time after their arrival in the island, and since then they had subsisted on Ayrton's stores, but did not live at the corral.

On the 11th of November, two of the villains, surprised by the colonists' arrival, fired at Herbert, and one of them returned, boasting of having killed one of the inhabitants of the island; but he returned alone. His companion, as is known, fell by Cyrus Harding's dagger.

Ayrton's anxiety and despair may be imagined when he learned the news of Herbert's death. The settlers were now only four, and, as it seemed, at the mercy of the convicts. After this

event, and during all the time that the colonists, detained by Herbert's illness, remained in the corral, the pirates did not leave their cavern, and even after they had pillaged the plateau of Prospect Heights, they did not think it prudent to abandon it.

The ill-treatment inflicted on Ayrton was now redoubled. His hands and feet still bore the bloody marks of the cords which bound him day and night. Every moment he expected to be put to death, nor did it appear possible that he could escape.

Matters remained thus until the third week of February. The convicts, still watching for a favourable opportunity, rarely quitted their retreat, and only made a few hunting excursions, either to the interior of the island, or the south coast.

Ayrton had no further news of his friends, and relinquished all hope of ever seeing them again. At last, the unfortunate man, weakened by ill-treatment, fell into a prostration so profound that sight and hearing failed him. From that moment, that is to say, since the last two days, he could give no information whatever of what had occurred.

"But, Captain Harding," he added, "since I was imprisoned in that cavern, how is it that I find myself in the corral?"

"How is it that the convicts are lying yonder dead, in the middle of the enclosure?" answered the engineer.

"Dead!" cried Ayrton, half rising from his bed, notwithstanding his weakness.

His companions supported him. He wished to get up, and with their assistance he did so. They then proceeded together towards the little stream.

It was now broad daylight.

There, on the bank, in the position in which they had been stricken by death in its most instantaneous form, lay the corpses of the five convicts!

Ayrton was astounded. Harding and his companions looked at him without uttering a word. On a sign from the engineer, Neb and Pencroft examined the bodies, already stiffened by the cold.

They bore no apparent trace of any wound.

Only, after carefully examining them, Pencroft found on the forehead of one, on the chest of another, on the back of this one, on the shoulder of that, a little red spot, a sort of scarcely visible bruise, the cause of which it was impossible to conjecture.

"It is there that they have been struck!" said Cyrus Harding.

"But with what weapon?" cried the reporter.

"A weapon, lightning-like in its effects, and of which we have not the secret!"

"And who has struck the blow?" asked Pencroft.

“The avenging power of the island,” replied Harding, “he who brought you here, Ayrton, whose influence has once more manifested itself, who does for us all that which we cannot do for ourselves, and who, his will accomplished, conceals himself from us.”

“Let us make search for him, then!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Yes, we will search for him,” answered Harding, “but we shall not discover this powerful being who performs such wonders, until he pleases to call us to him!”

This invisible protection, which rendered their own action unavailing, both irritated and piqued the engineer. The relative inferiority which it proved was of a nature to wound a haughty spirit. A generosity evinced in such a manner as to elude all tokens of gratitude, implied a sort of disdain for those on whom the obligation was conferred, which in Cyrus Harding’s eyes marred, in some degree, the worth of the benefit.

“Let us search,” he resumed, “and God grant that we may someday be permitted to prove to this haughty protector that he has not to deal with ungrateful people! What would I not give could we repay him, by rendering him in our turn, although at the price of our lives, some signal service!”

From this day, the thoughts of the inhabitants of Lincoln Island were solely occupied with the intended search. Everything incited them to discover the answer to this enigma, an answer which would only be the name of a man endowed with a truly inexplicable, and in some degree superhuman power.

In a few minutes, the settlers re-entered the house, where their influence soon restored to Ayrton his moral and physical energy. Neb and Pencroft carried the corpses of the convicts into the forest, some distance from the corral, and buried them deep in the ground.

Ayrton was then made acquainted with the facts which had occurred during his seclusion. He learned Herbert’s adventures, and through what various trials the colonists had passed. As to the settlers, they had despaired of ever seeing Ayrton again, and had been convinced that the convicts had ruthlessly murdered him.

“And now,” said Cyrus Harding, as he ended his recital, “a duty remains for us to perform. Half of our task is accomplished, but although the convicts are no longer to be feared, it is not owing to ourselves that we are once more masters of the island.”

“Well!” answered Gideon Spilett, “let us search all this labyrinth of the spurs of Mount Franklin. We will not leave a hollow, not a hole unexplored! Ah! if ever a reporter found himself face to face with a mystery, it is I who now speak to you, my friends!”

“And we will not return to Granite House until we have found our benefactor,” said Herbert.

“Yes,” said the engineer, “we will do all that it is humanly possible to do, but I repeat we shall not find him until he himself permits us.”

“Shall we stay at the corral?” asked Pencroft.

“We shall stay here,” answered Harding. “Provisions are abundant, and we are here in the very centre of the circle we have to explore. Besides, if necessary, the cart will take us rapidly to Granite House.”

“Good!” answered the sailor. “Only I have a remark to make.”

“What is it?”

“Here is the fine season getting on, and we must not forget that we have a voyage to make.”

“A voyage?” said Gideon Spilett.

“Yes, to Tabor Island,” answered Pencroft. “It is necessary to carry a notice there to point out the position of our island and say that Ayrton is here in case the Scotch yacht should come to take him off. Who knows if it is not already too late?”

“But, Pencroft,” asked Ayrton, “how do you intend to make this voyage?”

“In the ‘Bonadventure.’”

“The ‘Bonadventure!’” exclaimed Ayrton. “She no longer exists.”

“My ‘Bonadventure’ exists no longer!” shouted Pencroft, bounding from his seat.

“No,” answered Ayrton. “The convicts discovered her in her little harbour only eight days ago, they put to sea in her—”

“And?” said Pencroft, his heart beating.

“And not having Bob Harvey to steer her, they ran on the rocks, and the vessel went to pieces.”

“Oh, the villains, the cutthroats, the infamous scoundrels!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Pencroft,” said Herbert, taking the sailor’s hand, “we will build another ‘Bonadventure’—a larger one. We have all the ironwork—all the rigging of the brig at our disposal.”

“But do you know,” returned Pencroft, “that it will take at least five or six months to build a vessel of from thirty to forty tons?”

“We can take our time,” said the reporter, “and we must give up the voyage to Tabor Island for this year.”

“Oh, my ‘Bonadventure!’ my poor ‘Bonadventure!’” cried Pencroft, almost broken-hearted at the destruction of the vessel of which he was so proud.

The loss of the “Bonadventure” was certainly a thing to be lamented by the colonists, and it was agreed that this loss should be repaired as soon as possible. This settled, they now occupied themselves with bringing their researches to bear on the most secret parts of the island.

The exploration was commenced at daybreak on the 19th of February, and lasted an entire week. The base of the mountain, with its spurs and their numberless ramifications, formed a labyrinth of valleys and elevations. It was evident that there, in the depths of these narrow gorges, perhaps even in the interior of Mount Franklin itself, was the proper place to pursue their researches. No part of the island could have been more suitable to conceal a dwelling whose occupant wished to remain unknown. But so irregular was the formation of the valleys that Cyrus Harding was obliged to conduct the exploration in a strictly methodical manner.

The colonists first visited the valley opening to the south of the volcano, and which first received the waters of Falls River. There Ayrton showed them the cavern where the convicts had taken refuge, and in which he had been imprisoned until his removal to the corral. This cavern was just as Ayrton had left it. They found there a considerable quantity of ammunition and provisions, conveyed thither by the convicts in order to form a reserve.

The whole of the valley bordering on the cave, shaded by fir and other trees, was thoroughly explored, and on turning the point of the southwestern spur, the colonists entered a narrower gorge similar to the picturesque columns of basalt on the coast. Here the trees were fewer. Stones took the place of grass. Goats and musmons gambolled among the rocks. Here began the barren part of the island. It could already be seen that, of the numerous valleys branching off at the base of Mount Franklin, three only were wooded and rich in pasturage like that of the corral, which bordered on the west on the Falls River valley, and on the east on the Red Creek valley. These two streams, which lower down became rivers by the absorption of several tributaries, were formed by all the springs of the mountain and thus caused the fertility of its southern part. As to the Mercy, it was more directly fed from ample springs concealed under the cover of Jacamar Wood, and it was by springs of this nature, spreading in a thousand streamlets, that the soil of the Serpentine Peninsula was watered.

Now, of these three well-watered valleys, either might have served as a retreat to some solitary who would have found there everything necessary for life. But the settlers had already explored them, and in no part had they discovered the presence of man.

Was it then in the depths of those barren gorges, in the midst of the piles of rock, in the rugged northern ravines, among the streams of lava, that this dwelling and its occupant would be found?

The northern part of Mount Franklin was at its base composed solely of two valleys, wide, not very deep, without any appearance of vegetation, strewn with masses of rock, paved with lava, and varied with great blocks of mineral. This region required a long and careful exploration. It contained a thousand cavities, comfortless no doubt, but perfectly concealed and difficult of access.

The colonists even visited dark tunnels, dating from the volcanic period, still black from the passage of the fire, and penetrated into the depths of the mountain. They traversed these sombre galleries, waving lighted torches; they examined the smallest excavations; they sounded the shallowest depths, but all was dark and silent. It did not appear that the foot of man had ever before trodden these ancient passages, or that his arm had ever displaced one of these blocks, which remained as the volcano had cast them up above the waters, at the time of the submersion of the island.

However, although these passages appeared to be absolutely deserted, and the obscurity was complete, Cyrus Harding was obliged to confess that absolute silence did not reign there.

On arriving at the end of one of these gloomy caverns, extending several hundred feet into the interior of the mountain, he was surprised to hear a deep rumbling noise, increased in intensity by the sonorousness of the rocks.

Gideon Spilett, who accompanied him, also heard these distant mutterings, which indicated a revivification of the subterranean fires. Several times both listened, and they agreed that some chemical process was taking place in the bowels of the earth.

“Then the volcano is not totally extinct?” said the reporter.

“It is possible that since our exploration of the crater,” replied Cyrus Harding, “some change has occurred. Any volcano, although considered extinct, may evidently again burst forth.”

“But if an eruption of Mount Franklin occurred,” asked Spilett, “would there not be some danger to Lincoln Island?”

“I do not think so,” answered the reporter. “The crater, that is to say, the safety-valve, exists, and the overflow of smoke and lava, would escape, as it did formerly, by this customary outlet.”

“Unless the lava opened a new way for itself towards the fertile parts of the island!”

“And why, my dear Spilett,” answered Cyrus Harding, “should it not follow the road naturally traced out for it?”

“Well, volcanoes are capricious,” returned the reporter.

“Notice,” answered the engineer, “that the inclination of Mount Franklin favours the flow of water towards the valleys which we are exploring just now. To turn aside this flow, an earthquake would be necessary to change the mountain’s centre of gravity.”

“But an earthquake is always to be feared at these times,” observed Gideon Spilett.

“Always,” replied the engineer, “especially when the subterranean forces begin to awake, as they risk meeting with some obstruction, after a long rest. Thus, my dear Spilett, an eruption would be a serious thing for us, and it would be better that the volcano should not have the slightest desire to wake up. But we could not prevent it, could we? At any rate, even if it should occur, I do not think Prospect Heights would be seriously threatened. Between them and the mountain, the ground is considerably depressed, and if the lava should ever take a course towards the lake, it would be cast on the downs and the neighbouring parts of Shark Gulf.”

“We have not yet seen any smoke at the top of the mountain, to indicate an approaching eruption,” said Gideon Spilett.

“No,” answered Harding, “not a vapor escapes from the crater, for it was only yesterday that I attentively surveyed the summit. But it is probable that at the lower part of the chimney, time

may have accumulated rocks, cinders, hardened lava, and that this valve of which I spoke, may at any time become overcharged. But at the first serious effort, every obstacle will disappear, and you may be certain, my dear Spilett, that neither the island, which is the boiler, nor the volcano, which is the chimney, will burst under the pressure of gas. Nevertheless, I repeat, it would be better that there should not be an eruption."

"And yet we are not mistaken," remarked the reporter. "Mutterings can be distinctly heard in the very bowels of the volcano!"

"You are right," said the engineer, again listening attentively. "There can be no doubt of it. A commotion is going on there, of which we can neither estimate the importance nor the ultimate result."

Cyrus Harding and Spilett, on coming out, rejoined their companions, to whom they made known the state of affairs.

"Very well!" cried Pencroft, "The volcano wants to play his pranks! Let him try, if he likes! He will find his master!"

"Who?" asked Neb.

"Our good genius, Neb, our good genius, who will shut his mouth for him, if he so much as pretends to open it!"

As may be seen, the sailor's confidence in the tutelary deity of his island was absolute, and, certainly, the occult power, manifested until now in so many inexplicable ways, appeared to be unlimited; but also it knew how to escape the colonists' most minute researches, for, in spite of all their efforts, in spite of the more than zeal, —the obstinacy, —with which they carried on their exploration, the retreat of the mysterious being could not be discovered.

From the 19th to the 20th of February the circle of investigation was extended to all the northern region of Lincoln Island, whose most secret nooks were explored. The colonists even went the length of tapping every rock. The search was extended to the extreme verge of the mountain. It was explored thus to the very summit of the truncated cone terminating the first row of rocks, then to the upper ridge of the enormous hat, at the bottom of which opened the crater.

They did more; they visited the gulf, now extinct, but in whose depths the rumbling could be distinctly heard. However, no sign of smoke or vapor, no heating of the rock, indicated an approaching eruption. But neither there, nor in any other part of Mount Franklin, did the colonists find any traces of him of whom they were in search.

Their investigations were then directed to the downs. They carefully examined the high lava-cliffs of Shark Gulf from the base to the crest, although it was extremely difficult to reach even the level of the gulf. No one! —nothing!

Indeed, in these three words was summed up so much fatigue uselessly expended, so much energy producing no results, that somewhat of anger mingled with the discomfiture of Cyrus Harding and his companions.

It was now time to think of returning, for these researches could not be prolonged indefinitely. The colonists were certainly right in believing that the mysterious being did not reside on the surface of the island, and the wildest fancies haunted their excited imaginations. Pencroft and Neb, particularly, were not contented with the mystery, but allowed their imaginations to wander into the domain of the supernatural.

On the 25th of February the colonists re-entered Granite House, and by means of the double cord, carried by an arrow to the threshold of the door, they re-established communication between their habitation and the ground.

A month later they commemorated, on the 25th of March, the third anniversary of their arrival on Lincoln Island.

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