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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 17
26TH AUGUST 2018

CHERRYHILL

BY JCD
KERWIN
"MR. BLACK
AND MR.
WHITE?"

SUICIDE IS NOT ENOUGH

BY ISHMAEL
SOLEDAD
A LITANY OF
FAILURE...

THE GIRL IN THE CAVE ROB BLISS

IN THE KINGDOM OF REMAYNE DAVE LUDFORD

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 17

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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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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Vacation in Mordor* by Dawn Endico. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, the inhabitants of an idyllic community learn that things are not always what they seem. A failure resolves to go back to the start. A porn addict has a strange encounter in a cave. The kingdom of Tharpe reaches a conclusion about the Congress of Nations. And in a dystopian UK of the future, there's droid trouble.

General Howe concludes his address. Ned Malone, ardent with his first love, resolves to make something of his effete Edwardian life. And in the South Seas, Throck and the explorers realise that the grey rock is a door. But where does it lead?

—Gavin Chappell

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



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK PAUL, NOBODY'S PERFECT."

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

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

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

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CHERRYHILL by JCD Kerwin

The men came with the cicadas of July. They wore matching blue suits—no ties—and kept their hands firmly in their pockets. The younger one wore his hair slicked back; a pair of black sunglasses sat upon his head. His elder companion parted his hair neatly down the middle, and a pair of gold-rimmed glasses sat on the bridge of his nose.

They stirred up little fuss at first, just harmless curiosity. If they drove a car, the townspeople had no idea where it was hiding. Don Harrison at the local garage offered to check the oil, but the strangers refused, instead asking where to get lunch. They ordered sandwiches and two sodas each at Charlie's Diner, and ate without a word except "thanks" and "how much do we owe you?" They were out-of-towners, for sure, but from where, no one had a clue.

"They're politicians," Frank Nyquist, the butcher, had guessed.

"I bet they're auditors," Laverne Doyle had gossiped, cutting Mrs. Anderson's hair.

Still, Doc Graham had his own idea. "They're traveling salesmen, that's all."

The rumours spread just as fast as the men arrived, and by late afternoon the whispers had already reached the ears of Maxine Jones at the town motel. So, she wasn't the least surprised to see the two strangers walk in the door at quarter to five.

"Hello there!" she greeted them from the front desk. Her hair was a mess in a loose ponytail and her makeup had long worn off: the physical proof of being a hotel manager and a single mother.

The older man nodded his head briefly. "We're in need of a room."

"Well you've come to the right place," the manager said. "How long will you be staying with us, here in Cherryhill?"

"Not sure, ma'am. That's to be determined."

Maxine blinked at the visitors. "Okay. No problem. If I could just see some identification. I'll give you room ten, right on the end."

"Very obliged."

The young man didn't say a word, but he, too, pulled out his ID card and handed it over.

Maxine looked them over and then the two men. "Mr. Black and Mr. White?" They nodded.

"Well, okay then. What a strange coincidence!" She laughed, but stopped when it fell on silence. She cleared her throat. "You're all set. Here is your key. I'm Max, if you need anything."

The older man, who took the Mr. White ID card, took the key. "Thank you," he said.

He turned to go, with younger Mr. Black tailing close behind.

“They’re creeeepy.”

Maxine spun around. Her eleven-year-old daughter stood with a broom, looking after the two gentlemen.

“Josephine! Don’t say such things. You don’t know where they’ve come from,” she scolded.

Josephine turned her head to her mother. “Yeah, that’s why they’re creepy.”

“They’re just visiting.”

“Mr. Black? Mr. White? Come on, mom.”

Maxine looked at her disapprovingly. “You should be sweeping.” She pointed to nowhere in particular.

“Fine. But then I’m going to go hang out with Scotty.”

“After dinner.”

Josephine mumbled as she stabbed the broom into a dusty corner. A spider scurried away, very much bothered by her intrusion. The girl wrinkled her nose and thought about the two strange men now occupying space in her mother’s motel.

#

“They’re aliens,” Scott Davies said, flinging a smooth, flat rock into the river. It skidded three times before disappearing below the surface with a “plop.”

Josephine flung her own rock. “My mom just says they’re stopping by on their way to someplace else.”

“Could be, but they’re awful suspicious, don’t you think?”

“Sure as shit yeah I do.”

Scott spun towards her. “You said shit!”

“Darn tootin’ I said shit, and I’ll say it again if I wanna.”

Scott shook his head, then hunted around for another stone. “Josie, you’re just about the craziest girl I know, you know that?”

She seemed pleased at the recognition and kicked some dirt.

“I think we should investigate,” she said.

Scott shrugged. “Why we gotta go through all the trouble?”

“You don’t want something crazy to happen, do you?”

“What crazy thing could happen?”

“I dunno, the town blow up?”

Scott eyed her. “Or, you mean, the scary aliens will start abducting us one by one?”

She hit him on the shoulder. “Come on, Scotty. We gotta find out what these guys want.”

He was curious, too, for no other reason than they were the first strangers the town had seen in quite some time. What else was there for two kids to do on a summer day, anyway? They were two of the oldest kids there, and had already played enough catch to last them well into October; swam far too many laps around the pond; and eaten enough ice cream to spoil all their dinners ‘till school started again.

“Abducted,” Josephine snickered. “Sure, Scott, like we’ll all just disappear...”

But he was exactly right.

Mayor John Clarke was the first to go. It was Thursday. When he didn’t come out of his office to congratulate the winners of the “ten-year-old and under” fishing derby, his staff became curious. They grew worried when they learned he wasn’t in the building. Concerns only heightened when Mrs. Clarke reported he wasn’t at home. By noon, the town was at high alert.

Two search parties combed the expanse of the town—from the gas station all the way to the county line bridge, just on the other side of the old abandoned dairy farm. The mayor was nowhere to be found. Calls to his personal cell phone garnered no answer and Mrs. Clarke declared all luggage in the house was accounted for. He had simply vanished.

The police set up shop out of the Clarke’s home and went to work reviewing last known whereabouts and contacts of the mayor. It was, admittedly, the most excitement the small force had ever seen. Visitors came to see the hysterical Mrs. Clarke all evening, offering comfort and potluck.

By Sunday, the rumours had grown wild. In church, the reverend prayed for the mayor’s safe return. In the beauty parlour, they whispered about the official’s suspected infidelity. Reports passed around that the mayor could not handle the pressure and he had quit. He’d skipped town with only the shirt on his back, they said.

They would've believed all that had George Carvin, the editor of the town newspaper, not disappeared the following Monday. He was succeeded by Dr. Maureen Cunningham, the three school teachers Kyle Montgomery, Eleanor Havaford, and Denise Wyatt, and the butcher Frank Nyquist.

By the seventh of August, the remaining townspeople were in the midst of chaos. They huddled together in the hot, cramped school gym, trying to make heads or tails of their most dire situation.

"They can't have just run away!" someone shouted.

"Were they kidnapped?"

"They've abandoned the town!"

"People, please," Undersheriff Kurt Longmire begged, holding out his arms. Sherriff Greene had suspiciously not shown up for work that day, but Longmire was not about to tell the mass of worried citizens before him. "If we all could just calm down," he tried.

Gradually the din lessened, so the undersheriff let his hands fall to his sides. He looked around the large room and tried to think of something reassuring to say.

"I'm sure Mayor Clarke and George and, and, and them all, I'm sure they're all doing just fine," he said. "Maybe this is part of some town council thing and they're part of it. Maybe it's a team building exercise—"

"Team building! They're gone!" someone shouted from the crowd.

"Yeah, you don't just vanish for a team building exercise, Kurt," the librarian put in curtly.

"Alright, alright," Kurt said. "Well wherever they are, we'll find them."

"How can you be sure?"

"You've done a lousy job!"

"You guys haven't found squat!"

The crowd erupted in a cacophony of insults and accusations toward the town's small police force. The undersheriff did his best to quiet them, but to no avail. Soon, he gave up and shuffled his way to the back.

He found Maxine and Josephine Jones by the rear exit. Maxine wore a frown and shook her head side to side.

"There's no calming them, Kurt," she said.

“They’re right, though,” he answered, “We haven’t found anything.”

“Maybe you just don’t know where to look,” the young girl offered. She raised her shoulders and waited for a response.

Kurt dropped a hand on top of her head. Her braids dangled by her ears. He tussled her hair just the same.

“I wish I knew where to look, Josie,” he said.

“Scotty and I will help!” she said, pulling away. She wore a confident smile on her lips.

“You and Scott Davies can help by staying where your moms can see you. And keep out of trouble.”

“That’s what I tell her,” Maxine said, “but she insists on running off.”

“I can take care of myself,” Josephine said. She folded her arms. “Bet we’ll solve this case before you do.”

Quite surprisingly, the case didn’t need solving at all. The very next afternoon saw every missing person suddenly walking into his or her home as if they had simply been out for a refreshing walk about town. Mrs. Clarke was beyond herself with joy. All families were, of course.

Joy quickly faded when the missing persons said neither a word nor made any indication of where they had been. They simply stood there, expressionless, yet eager to get back to their jobs. Frank Nyquist’s wife pleaded with him to say something, by God!, but Frank was only concerned with donning his apron and getting back to the butcher’s shop. The teachers had no one to teach, sure, but that did not stop them from pulling out their books and making up lessons plans.

Undersheriff Longmire had enough to worry about without having to answer the phone calls from these concerned families. Sheriff Greene had reappeared, for sure, but had not left his office for three hours. He spoke to no one and preferred to stare at his computer.

The townspeople were quite worried and rumours once again spread. At the curious centre of it all were the two, strange out-of-towners. They ate Linda’s famous apple pie at the diner and shrugged their shoulders.

“It looks like it all worked out then,” Mr. White said, his mouth full of cinnamon apples and whipped cream.

His young counterpart nodded furiously. He waved a fork in agreement.

Mr. White glanced around the place. Curious patrons sat interested in his lackadaisical attitude

concerning the disappearances and sudden reappearances of their beloved friends and neighbours.

“It’s what that sheriff said, then,” the stranger continued, “they were just at some conference.”

Mr. Black nodded and shoved a large bite into his mouth.

No one said anything. They let Mr. White keep talking to himself. “It’s probably best not to ask them too many questions. It’ll just make them nervous. You know how it is.” He smiled at the waitress. “Another piece, if you don’t mind.”

At the video game in the corner, Josephine Jones and Scott Davies eyed the two men suspiciously. Scott slurped his soda.

“Conference my left big toe,” Josephine whispered.

“Why are they so sure anyhow?” Scott put in.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

“We ought to follow them.”

Josephine nodded. As far as she was concerned, it was up to them to figure out what was going on in their sleepy little town.

“Well, this is some mighty fine pie, but we really should be going now,” Mr. White was saying as he shoved the last bits of his second piece in his mouth. “My compliments to the chef, of course.”

They both got up to leave and Mr. White nodded around him. “I hope you all stay out of trouble,” he said with a large, chilling grin. “We wouldn’t want any more people to go disappearing.” He laughed and the two men departed.

“Come on, Scotty, let’s get to the bottom of this,” Josie said, hitting her friend on the shoulder. In a rush, they too, were through the diner door.

#

“They’re functioning at ninety percent,” Mr. White was saying.

Scott and Josephine crouched down just outside the motel window. They peered through the open screen. The curtain partially blocked their view, but they could hear conversation just the same.

Mr. White stood over one of the twin-sized beds with a small flat computer. He poked around at the screen and read off a few numbers. Mr. Black sat at the small table and appeared to be typing the numbers into a laptop.

“Send those through immediately, Chris,” Mr. White ordered. Mr. Black nodded. “It looks like we may have caught it just in time. But unit 27 is experiencing some glitches. We should go check it out.”

He glanced up at the younger man who was about to say something. “I know what you’re thinking, Chris; we should just let them handle it,” he said. “But we may as well check it out since we’re here.”

Chris turned up his hands but didn’t argue. They both stood and retrieved their jackets. Josephine and Scott ducked from the window seconds before the two men made for the door.

“Go, go!” Josephine ordered her friend. He scooted away, and rounded a car. The two hunkered by the vehicle’s rear wheel.

They watched the two men start off down the road and quietly slipped in and out of the shadows behind them. They stayed near the shrubbery and were sure not to follow too closely. Soon they found themselves on the sidewalk just outside the school nurse’s house.

“What are we doing here?” Scott whispered as they peered from a bush.

“I don’t know. Maybe Miss Tompkins is going to help one of them with a cold, since the Doc is still acting all weird.”

Miss Tompkins almost too readily invited the two strange men inside. Josephine and Scott quietly ascended the porch steps. Mr. White and Mr. Black were declining an offer for tea when the children hunched down just outside the nurse’s living room window.

“What’s going on—” Josephine started when they had been crouching for a good several minutes. She was cut off, however.

Mr. Black pulled out a portable computer tablet and, before Miss Tompkins or the children knew what was happening, the nurse had suddenly grown quite still. In fact, she was so still, you could probably tap her and she would fall right over in that position.

Mr. White quickly pulled out a similar tablet and hit a few buttons. Josephine slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. Miss Tompkins’s body wasn’t solid at all. Instead, it appeared to be made up of static, electric lines which waved in and out whenever Mr. White or Mr. Black did something with their tablets.

The older man pointed to electric Miss Tompkins in an as-a-matter-of-fact gesture. Chris nodded. They punched buttons and soon the school nurse snapped out of whatever trance she was in. She stood there, motionless, a vapid expression on her face. She blinked once and then not again.

“What just happened, Josie?” Scott squealed.

She shook her head. "I don't know! I don't know!" She desperately wished she could hear the conversation inside.

"Let's get out of here!"

"Right. We gotta go tell someone..." Josie's voice trailed off. Who would they tell? What would they say?

Mr. Black glanced at the window. Josie gasped.

"Run, Scotty, run!"

They took off in a run and did not stop until they were at the police station.

Undersheriff Longmire could barely calm them down. It took two hot chocolates each, and a trip to the vending machine before they would even stop talking over each other. They sat in Kurt's office, looking very uneasy and demanding the government be called in to help.

"I think I better call your parents to come pick you up. It's pretty dark out now anyway," the undersheriff said. He nodded to an officer in the room to do just that.

"You need to get over to Nurse Tompkins's house right now. Those two creepy dudes did something!" Scott said.

"They turned her into electricity or something!" Josephine added.

Kurt Longmire tilted his head at them. "Electricity?"

They nodded furiously. "We saw it!" They said in unison.

He looked between them. "I think you have way too much free time this summer." He hunted around his desk. "There's this camp I heard about..."

Josephine slapped her hands on the chair arms. "No, we're telling the truth!"

Kurt was about to say something to her, but straightened and pointed at the door. Instead, he said, "Ah, well maybe Miss Tompkins can clear this all up."

The two children simultaneously jumped out of their chairs and spun to face the door.

"Miss Tompkins?" Josephine asked cautiously.

The nurse did not give any recognition, just entered and stood. "Undersheriff Longmire, I believe there has been some confusion," she said. Her voice was quiet, yet even and calm. "I'm here to clear up any misunderstanding."

Kurt Longmire seemed taken aback by her cold demeanour but nodded anyway. “Uh, yes. Please, come in.” She refused to sit, so he cleared his throat and gestured to the kids. “It seems these two thought they saw two men attack you this evening. Can you let them know you’re perfectly fine?”

“Of course,” she said. “Those two men were simply helping me clear some things up in my father’s will. We were just getting down to business when I spotted a spider and well, you know how I am. I simply froze with fear and they did their very best to make sure the wretched thing was gone before I fainted on the spot.”

Josephine and Scott exchanged incredulous looks. “That’s not—” Josephine started.

“Those gentlemen really have gotten such a bad reputation around here, but I just didn’t want to start any fuss. You understand how some people can get with lawyers and all that,” the nurse finished.

The undersheriff raised his hands and gave an understanding nod. He turned to the youngest of the room’s occupants. “There, are you satisfied?”

Scott made fists. “No, we certainly are—”

“Yes, we’re fine. That’s just fine.” Josephine put in. Scott shot her a look but she held his arm.

“Well, thank you for coming in, Miss Tompkins. I’m terribly sorry for all this. And don’t you worry, we’ll be handling the matter of trespassing.”

“Oh that’s fine. I won’t be pressing charges,” she said. She turned to the children. “They are just kids, that’s all.”

Kurt Longmire led her out and then faced Josephine and Scott. He put his hands on his hips and twisted his mouth around. “What d’ya got to say for yourselves?”

“Josephine Marie Jones!” Maxine called, rushing into the room. She was followed closely by Scott Davies’s mother, who was also scolding with the boy’s middle name.

“I’m fine, mom,” the girl started.

“Oh, I know you’re fine. Spying on neighbours! You’re about to grounded, young lady,” the motel manager threatened.

“Just a harmless misunderstanding,” the undersheriff tried.

“Mom, we saw something!” Scott put in.

“You saw nothing,” Mrs. Davies said. “You’re coming home this instant.”

Scott looked at his shoes as he was led out the door. Josephine's mother apologized to the undersheriff before she, too, led her daughter through the doorway. Josephine stopped and turned to him.

"Kurt," she said. It caught him by surprise. "You gotta believe us. You gotta keep an eye on those guys."

The severity of her warning made him blink in surprise. She was gone before he could say anything.

#

"This is ridiculous," Kurt Longmire mumbled to himself.

He had followed the traveling lawyers (or so Nurse Tompkins said) to the general store. It had not yet opened so the undersheriff was a bit curious as to why the out-of-towners were looking to visit.

"It's not ridiculous," Josephine said. Kurt jumped.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, looking around.

"I was out sweeping and saw you sneaking around. I thought I'd come with you."

"This is no place for you," he warned.

"You're lousy at following people, by the way. They could've seen you."

"Josephine, go home."

She shook her head. "Nah, I wanna see what you're gonna do."

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm just..." His voice trailed off. He actually didn't know what he was going to do at all.

"Hey look, they're going inside," Josephine said. She looked at her pink cartoon watch. "I thought Mr. Blake didn't open until nine."

The undersheriff watched the store owner usher the two men inside. He did not appear under duress and even smiled as he closed the door. Longmire ordered Josephine to stay put before he crossed the street and slinked along the wall. She followed anyway.

"I told you to stay put," he said with a scowl.

She smiled. "Come on, let's see what they're up to."

She tried the door, which was surprisingly unlocked.

“Let me go first,” her elder ordered, pushing her behind him. He quietly entered the shop with Josephine tailing behind.

They heard voices as they rounded a few shelves before spotting the general manager and the two strange men. Undersheriff Longmire put a finger to his lips and gestured for Josephine to stay down. They peered past the green peas at the exchange.

It happened just as it had before. Mr. White and Mr. Black pushed buttons on their portable computers and Mr. Blake turned static. Josephine’s eyes widened and she whipped her head toward Longmire. The undersheriff was not sure what he was seeing, but he knew it was nothing good. He looked at Josephine and pointed toward the door. She shook her head and he frowned.

“Freeze, don’t move!” the undersheriff ordered, leaving his hiding spot. “Put your hands up now. Step away from Mr. Blake.”

Mr. Black and Mr. White didn’t seem altogether surprised to see the policeman. They looked up, then at each other, then slowly raised their hands.

“Josephine, leave right now. Go straight to the station and tell them where I am. Then go straight home!”

“But—”

“I said go!”

The young girl ran without another word.

“Mr. Longmire,” Mr. White started, “Kurt. May I call you Kurt?”

“No you may not. You can stand right there and tell me what you’ve done to Gregory.”

Mr. White glanced at the frozen Mr. Blake and scratched his head. “Ah, well, we’re helping him out, you see.”

“What are you talking about?”

Mr. White sighed. “Oh this is hardly the place...”

“You’re both under arrest. Now back away from Gregory very slowly. That’s right, in front of me.”

“It can’t be helped, Chris,” Mr. White mumbled, following Longmire’s directions.

“Not another word. We’ll figure this out at the station.”

“As you wish.”

“I’ll be right back, Gregory. Help is on its way!” the undersheriff called to Mr. Blake. Mr. Blake, however, did not speak or move. Static waved and the electric lines in his arm wavered.

#

“They’re definitely not lawyers,” Kurt Longmire said, sipping his coffee.

He eyed the jail cells across the room. Mr. Black and Mr. White sat inside, calmly holding a conversation. Maxine and Josephine had stopped by with a thermos of coffee and news that the nurses at the doctor’s office still could not move Mr. Blake from the floor. In fact, they couldn’t even touch him. Whenever they made advances to, their fingers swept right through him. It was rather alarming.

“People think they stowed Mr. Blake away somewhere and put some sort of hologram in his place,” Maxine explained, sipping her own steaming beverage.

“This is insane. Why our town?” the undersheriff asked, gripping his hair. He turned to an officer. “Have we still not heard back from our contacts at the FBI?” he asked loudly. “These guys have to be on a list or something.”

“I don’t think you’ll be hearing from anybody, Undersheriff Longmire,” Mr. White shouted.

“What?”

Mr. White gestured for the policeman to come over. He did.

“What are you talking about?” He exchanged looks with Maxine.

“I don’t think you’re going to be able to get in touch with anybody, Kurt.”

Longmire glanced at Josephine. She tilted her head suspiciously. “And why’s that?” he asked.

Mr. White held up his hands. “Because there’s nothing out there.”

“What do you mean there’s nothing out there?”

“What are you talking about?” Josephine blurted. Maxine hushed her.

Mr. White clarified, “I mean, besides this town, there is nothing out there. You can see if you want. Drive around for a while and you’ll just end up coming back here.”

Wrinkles formed in Kurt Longmire’s forehead. He looked at nearby officers and then back at the men in the cage. “What the hell are you—?”

“Nothing else has been written in the program yet,” Mr. White answered quickly.

“Written in...Program...What are you talking about?”

“Go ahead. Go to the bridge over by the farm. Start walking, see where you go.”

The undersheriff did not know how to respond. Soon he just shook his head. “You guys are freaks, you know that?”

He stomped away before Maxine or anyone else could stop him. In an instant, he was out the station doors.

Before he knew what he was doing, Kurt Longmire was standing at the old bridge just at the outskirts of town. He stared at the dusty road disappearing into the distance. Blue skies met the horizon. Fields of summer wheat lined the sides of the road.

“What is he talking about?” he mumbled. “This is nonsense.” He clenched his fists, and for some reason, his heart beat fast. “Nonsense,” he said again. He took two steps forward, then two more steps, and then still more.

He blinked and looked around. He was still standing on the bridge. The old farm was off behind him, to his right.

“What the—?”

He stared at the road in the distance. He walked again. He landed in the same spot, again. Again he walked. Again he stopped by the farm, on the bridge, over the small stream.

He breathed fast. He ran. He ran to nowhere. He doubled over and stared at his knees. He moved his head to stare at the dilapidated barn: that damn, broken down barn that was always there.

He heaved for air. “What is going on?” he hissed to no one in particular.

Ten minutes later, he burst through the doors of the police station. Maxine and Josephine were still there. Kurt Longmire ignored them both. He went for the cell. He rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin.

“What the hell is going on, you sonovobitch?” he demanded just above a whisper.

Mr. White stood up. “So you tried it out?” he asked.

“Don’t play games with me. What the hell was that?”

“Kurt, what happened?” Maxine asked from behind.

Josephine was concerned, too. “Mom, what’s going on?”

“He’s just discovered that your town is literally the entire world,” Mr. White said.

“You better start explaining,” Longmire ordered.

“I suppose it can’t be helped at this point,” Mr. White said, looking over his shoulder to young Mr. Chris Black. The young gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

“Enough. Spill it,” the undersheriff ordered.

“Perhaps you could let us out?”

“You’re fine right there.”

“Very well.” Mr. White sat back down. “What I’m about to tell you will shock you, I’m afraid.”

“We can handle it,” Maxine suddenly put in.

Mr. White looked between the two adults. “You, and everyone in this town, do not exist.”

“What?” Longmire spat.

“What do you mean?” Maxine asked.

“This town is a computer program. It is a virtual reality developed by the company I work for. We have been testing VRs as a way to simulate real-life situations that we could use for military training.”

“You’re nuts,” Kurt Longmire finally said.

“You saw it. There is nothing beyond this town, because we didn’t design anything beyond this town,” Mr. Black said. They were surprised to hear the young man talk.

“But I’m real,” Maxine said.

Mr. White shook his head. “I’m sorry. You’re all just computer programs.”

“No we’re not. I’m a person. I’m real. I bleed, I sleep. I dream. I have memories…”

“All simulations,” Mr. Black answered simply.

“Mommy,” Josephine whined. Her mother pulled her close.

“The mayor, the butcher, the others,” Mr. White explained. “Their units contracted a computer virus. They needed to be shut down and re-booted. That’s why they seem a tad boring right now.”

They've restarted at their basic programming, which is just their job duties and background. It'll take a few days before their personality protocols kick—"

"No, it's not true!" Josephine shouted, covering her ears.

Mr. Black frowned. "We're very sorry to tell you. You weren't supposed to find out."

Undersheriff Longmire glared at him. "We weren't supposed to find out?" He shook his head. "No, I don't believe you. This is crazy."

"Answer me this, Kurt," Mr. White said, "Do you ever remember leaving this town?"

"What? Yes, of course I do. I—" But he couldn't finish. He actually could not recall leaving the town once. More than that, he could not remember anyone ever leaving the town. "I...we..." His voice trailed off.

"Now I'm sorry, but we're going to have to reboot you, too," Mr. White said.

"What? What do you mean?" Maxine asked. There was no time to argue.

The two men pulled out smaller computer devices. Obviously they had not been patted down by the officers very well. They punched a series of buttons and in a few seconds Maxine Jones and Kurt Longmire were frozen electrodes.

"No, no, no," Josephine pleaded, backing away.

The two adults remained still for a few more seconds and then, like a light switch being turned on, seemingly returned to life. Maxine blinked and turned to face the undersheriff.

"Why hello, Josephine. Don't you have chores to do?" she asked, matter-of-factly.

"Hello. Good day, young lady," Kurt Longmire greeted.

Josephine's stomach leapt into her throat. "No, mommy!" She knocked over tables and ran out the doors. The last she looked behind her, an officer was releasing the strange men.

She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, all the way to Scotty's house. She skipped the steps and pounded on the door.

"Please open the door!" she pleaded.

Shortly, Mrs. Davies opened wide the door. Scotty stood close by.

"Thank God! You're not going to believe what happened. This is crazy. I don't believe what's going on—" Josephine spluttered.

“Hello. Would you like to play?” Scotty interrupted. He blinked.

Josephine froze. She looked at his mother.

“You can come in, dear. I can make sandwiches.”

“No, no, no. Not you, too!” she shouted. “Scotty!”

She backed away from the porch, and ran down the stairs and off down the sidewalk.

“This isn’t happening,” she reassured himself. “This isn’t happening.”

She didn’t know where she was going, but she had to get out of there. She spotted Don Harrison’s garage at the edge of town and heaved for air. She had to get out of Cherryhill. She would get to the next town and tell them what was happening. She would get far away, far away from the nightmare.

She glanced over her shoulder at Don Harrison’s garage. Then again, and again. She stopped short.

“What?”

Josephine looked around. It was as Mr. White had said. There was nothing more. She ran again and again, but she still ended up by the garage.

“No, no, no!” she shouted, falling out onto all fours. She grabbed at the pebbles and dirt. “No, no.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Josie,” Mr. White said. She jumped. The two men were standing in front of her. “This seems very scary now, but trust me, it will all be over soon and you can go back to playing with your friend.”

“Stay away from me!” she screamed, scrambling to her feet. She tripped over her feet and fell again. “Someone help me! Mommy!”

“You’ll feel much better when you’ve been rebooted,” Mr. White continued.

“Trust us, you won’t even remember this happened,” Mr. Black added.

They pulled out their computer tablets.

“No, get away, please!” she begged. She held out her hands and squeezed her eyes shut.

A breeze blew and birds chirped. Josephine opened her eyes and looked around. She got to her feet, quite puzzled as to why she was on the ground. Two men in suits stood in front of her. They smiled.

“Um, hi. What are you guys doing?” she asked. “Are you guys coming to stay in town?”

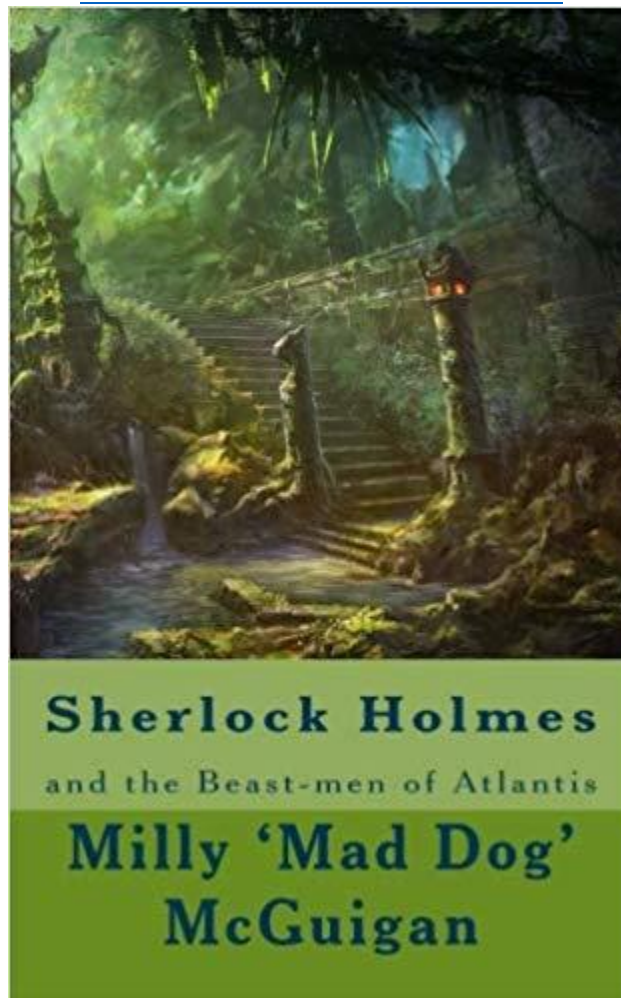
The older man shook his head. “Actually, we were just on our way out.”

The girl nodded. She dusted off her shorts. “Well, come back again soon, okay?” She waved as she skipped away.

“Oh, we’ll be sure to,” the man said as the young girl headed back into the sleepy town of Cherryhill. “We’ll be sure to.”

THE END

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SUICIDE IS NOT ENOUGH by Ishmael Soledad

She was stone, with none of the histrionics, tears or emotion that marked the other fault lines of a crumbling marriage. The earth had split asunder soundlessly, deliberately, and nothing would heal the breach. After making sure their son was safely buckled in Pat turned, wound down the window.

“It’s taken years but you’ve convinced me, Aaron. You’re a loser, a waste of my time and everyone else’s. Don’t try to find me, don’t call, it’s over.”

The car drove slowly away from 5 Rose Lane. She didn’t spare him a backwards glance, closing curtains all that greeted him as the neighbourhood gossips hid as he turned to go inside.

The kitchen table was no friendlier. A pile of final demands and bills competed with another of rejections, both put to shame by foreclosure notices. At least it would make property settlement easier, half of nothing is nothing. This time next month it would be all over, nothing left, no prospects, just a litany of failure. The only thing left was to wipe his life from the face of the earth.

He glared at his pills. Three failures proved they couldn’t do it. How a whole bottle couldn’t kill you was beyond him, beyond even the paramedics claiming it was a miracle he was alive. Arseholes.

He shrugged on his coat, walked out leaving the door swinging. He gave the finger to Mrs. Rosendahl as he turned the corner, he couldn’t see her but he knew the old bat was always watching, sniping, gossiping.

Aaron wandered aimlessly until he found himself staring at a simple door plaque announcing the office of ‘Erasure Inc.’. He laughed. At least my subconscious is working properly. He pushed the door open and made his way up the narrow flight of stairs. A small, balding man bearing an uncanny resemblance to a large rat greeted him.

“Hello, I’m Johann Renck, manager. You can call me Johann if you like, Mister...?”

He stared at the outstretched hand, unwilling to take it.

“Kelly, Aaron Kelly.”

“Mr. Kelly, yes. Please take a seat.”

Johann sat down delicately across from him. The office was as plain and dour as the man.

“So you wish to use our services?”

“Yes, I’ve read your ... offering on the net. It’s really totally painless, you’ve had no complaints?”

“Absolutely. It’s not the sort of business where customers can complain, Mr. Kelly.”

“How much, I mean, the cost, I couldn’t see what it was.”

“There is none, it’s free. Money’s quite irrelevant really, we can’t actually take any payment.”

“Why?”

“The ... process ... makes it quite impossible, quite impossible. But don’t worry for the business Mr. Kelly, we receive payment for everyone we help so we aren’t impoverished.”

“And the rest, free too?”

“Part of the service we are proud to offer of course.”

“How can you—”

“Ah, now, Mr. Kelly, if everyone knew where would my business be? In any case I will be happy to tell you when the process commences, if you decide to go ahead.”

“I’m decided, I want to go with it as early as possible.”

“Very good. Let me check. Jenny!”

A woman, his twin in appearance and dress, stepped in and handed Johann a tablet. He scrolled quickly, made a hurried note on the back of a business card and handed it to Aaron.

“Thursday, ten a.m. Does that work for you?”

Aaron stood, offered his hand.

“Yes, perfectly. Thursday it is.”

“Excellent. No food or drink for twelve hours beforehand please, Mr. Kelly, we must minimize the physical aftereffects.”

Pat carefully placed the china cup on the saucer and smiled. Aaron may never have liked his mother but by some strange quirk she got along famously with her. He might not visit but she did every Thursday morning. Kid at school, work on hold for a few hours it was pleasant enough.

“So it’s over?”

“Yes, Tuesday morning. Aaron’s not said?”

“No, Pat, he hasn’t and I wouldn’t expect him too. He might be my own flesh and blood but I know an idiot when I see one. I thought maybe he’d improve with you but it’s not the way things went.”

“I thought kids might have helped, maybe marriage, but honestly, Dot, he’s a lost cause.”

“At least you’re free of him, dear.”

He closed his eyes waiting for the first punch. The Ryan kids kept at him all morning about his dad and mum splitting. Shoulda ignored them but I didn’t, now it’s gonna hurt.

A hand wrenched his arm from his face. Jake started to shake, the school bully towering over him.

“I’m not thumping you, Jake.”

“Whatcha gonna do, Ted?”

“Nuthin’, just like nobody else.”

Ted scowled at the circle of kids, grabbed Jake by the shoulders and half guided, half pulled him to the school gate.

“Let’s have some fun.”

Jake followed him as he vaulted the low chain-wire fence and walked towards the mall.

“My parents split too, so if they’re gonna pick on you they’ll hafta pick on me.”

Roxy lifted the trowel, twisted it a half turn then chopped the potting mix back into the planter. She straightened, took one step back and sat down. *It may be only two bedrooms on the fifth floor but a south facing apartment in the city’s a good thing. I’d wanted a house, a decent yard to grow and plant but we just missed out.*

I really don’t like living in the city, the flat’s good but I can’t relax, I never feel comfortable walking down the road Clay had died on, the signs of the hit and run still etched into the brickwork and steel. You’d think after time the pain would ease, perhaps just a little.

The gurney was comfortable. Johann fussed over a few small wires, handed him a small glass of

clear liquid.

“A relaxant, nothing more. Just helps our machine do its job. Your last chance, go or no go. Drink it and we’ll proceed.”

Aaron drained the glass in one swallow. Slightly aniseed, sweet.

“So, we begin. Everything is automatic now, when it’s time the machine will send you into a gentle sleep, do its work and that’s that. I believe I said I’d explain it to you. Do you still want me to?”

Aaron felt tipsy, slightly high. Explanation? Why not.

“Sure, but keep it simple, time is money.”

“Indeed it is, indeed it is. It’s very simple, Mr. Kelly. The machine is a failed experiment, my failed experiment, one of the old DARPA time travel boondoggles. As far as they could figure it was a disaster. No travel, just destruction, cancellation. It was a failure so, naturally, I was too. You know what they say, Mr. Kelly, success has a thousand fathers, failure’s an orphan. So I changed it, just a little, and here I am.”

He tapped Aaron gently on the headband.

“This tunes the machine to you, your fingerprint in time. It traces you all the way back from when it starts the process to the moment you were conceived. As it’s doing that, as a side-effect really, it erases each and every point from your timeline until, literally, you have never existed and never did.”

“And then? At the end?”

“I won’t remember you; you won’t remember you; no one will. All there will be is a lump of flesh, a shell that is nothing.”

He turned, moved to the screen on the desk.

“It’s why we can’t charge you. You could give us the money but that will be erased, written over and reset. It’s just a minor, unnecessary complication. Are you ready?”

“Born ready.”

Johann tapped the screen then went to the open door. He paused briefly before going through.

“Goodbye, Mr. Kelly.”

The small jolt through his head sent him into a pleasant, waking dream. Happy, relaxed, totally unable to move he was watching the movie of his life spool backwards slowly, but with

gathering pace. His eyes closed, breath shallow, all sense of the room left him as dream became reality.

Maybe, just maybe, Pat and I can manage, can get through it, I've just got to try just that bit harder, be more positive and thorough.

"So you're still arguing, still shouting?"

"Yes, sometimes, Dot, but we're trying to at least get him more positive."

"We tried for years, his father and me, a lifetime, but we couldn't even scratch the surface."

"The wedding seems to have helped."

"It's early days yet, Pat, early days."

"You like *Doom*?"

A brace of daemons exploded as Jake let off another RPG.

"Yeah, never played it on this big a screen tho'. My dad's got it on Xbox but we only have a small TV."

"Least your dad's home, mine's always out with my aunties. Mum says they're his girlfriends, they keep shouting."

A horned beast jumped up, a quick swipe of a chainsaw finishing it off.

"Mine keep throwin' and breakin' stuff, then dad just cries in the kitchen all night."

"Stupid parents."

"You bet."

Carol looked over her coffee at Roxy.

"How long you lived here?"

"Two, maybe three years."

“Seriously, you need to get out more, enjoy it. Past’s past Roxy, Clay wouldn’t want you sad.”

“I know, I know. Still hard though.”

The spirit level never lies but there’s no requirement to believe it. Clearly the mailbox was not straight but it was rapid set concrete and it was on his land. His land. All that mattered. A house, a kid and a woman. Aaron smiled. They’d nearly been outbid by that other couple but that little extra push and now it was theirs.

He stood, stretched, and looked out from 5 Rose Lane over his domain. Roots. Roots make the difference, keep the tree grounded, and now he had them. Roots. A home. Maybe this would do it.

“So maybe a wedding later, now you’ve your own home?”

Pat laughed, took another sip of tea.

“Maybe. Perhaps. He seems happier but we’ve managed okay without one up to now, Dot.”

“I’m sure many young couples do these days, quite sure.”

“You’re lucky.”

The aliens melted as Jake sprayed acid over them.

“Huh?”

“You gotta house and all, I’m still in the van park.”

“I guess.”

“No guess, I wish I had my own room.”

“You coming or what?”

Clay looked back, laughing as Roxy tried to balance her handbag and jacket in one hand while fiddling with her shoe with the other.

“Wait up a bit, I don’t know this city like you.”

He took her jacket in one hand, steadied her with the other.

“Now just take your time. We can take a shortcut down the alleyway, it’s narrow but we’ll get there on time.”

“Can’t we stick to the sidewalk?”

“And miss the show? Hell no! If you’re gonna live in the city you might as well learn to enjoy it.”

She jumped him right at half time, five foot eight of brunette straddling him like a prize bull. She wrapped her arms around his neck, dragged his face closer until their noses touched, gave him a lascivious grin.

“Children.”

“What?”

“Children, now, Aaron.”

“But you said—”

Pat switched the TV off and threw the remote away.

“That was yesterday. Now is now.”

“Are you sure?”

She threw him down on the couch, staring down at him.

“Positive.”

“My son seems quite serious about you, Patricia.”

“Please, call me Pat. And yes, we’ve been together for a while now.”

“And you must call me Dot, none of that ‘Mrs. Kelly’ nonsense. He’s talked a lot about you but honestly there’s nothing better than actually meeting you.”

“I’m glad I could drop over, Thursday mornings always seem easier for me to get time from

work.”

“Oh, why?”

“Stock filling Thursday mornings, not much I can do without the consumables.”

“What did you say you did again?”

He hated playing by himself but hated school and the other kids more. The teachers didn’t care, just like mum and dad they seemed happier when he wasn’t around.

None of the other kids understood, no one else had parents who always shouted, hit each other, hit him, stayed away nights with other people then went soft and soppy on him.

His soldier died, last of his lives gone. Top score again. The screen flashed for his name. ‘T—E—D—O—1’ he put in.

Shame there was no one to see it.

Clay filled the cups slowly. With one arm around Roxy he looked out from the front veranda of 5 Rose Lane. Another peaceful Thursday morning at home.

“Carnations.”

“What?”

“Carnations, honey, I think we need carnations. Maybe reds.”

Roxy nodded, placed her cup down.

“And yellows, don’t forget the yellows.”

She was out of his league and if his inner voice wasn’t enough his friends were there to remind him. The dance floor seemed miles wide, boys round one edge, girls the other. He was committed, the dare accepted and no way out. He walked haltingly forwards, a lone figure heading to the unknown. He stopped in front of her.

“Ah, I’m, ah ... hello, do you want to ah ...”

She grabbed him by the hand, smiling, led him away.

“Dance, Aaron? Yes, about time you asked.”

“I’m sorry. I really can’t remember.”

They stood in the doorway, the old lady and the young staring in amusement at each other.

“Well let’s say it’s an old woman’s mind going. Once I remember I’ll get in touch. What was your name again?”

“Patricia, Patricia Jenkins.”

“Well, Miss Jenkins, it’s been a pleasure ... I think.”

“Same here, Mrs. ...”

“Kelly, Dorothy Kelly.”

It was all loud and interesting, sometimes scary, some things happened again and again. There was that shape, the one that was there when he fed, it was a smell and a feel that was familiar, comforting. As he fell asleep it would make soft noises, as he woke it would slowly brush itself against him. It felt safe, smooth.

Then the other one, the one that felt not smooth, that was louder. It didn’t have milk, it didn’t make soft noises when he grew tired, it wasn’t there when the soft shape was here. It was here now, making hard noises.

“You little shit, if I had my way you’d’ve been aborted. You chained me here, ruined my life, I hate you.”

Traffic was light for a weekday, she’d made it in easily for midday. Another Thursday morning window shopping, coffee for one and not much else. A simple life uncluttered by others Pat was reasonably happy. Or at least not sad.

The clock struck twelve, chimed, then continued on its way to one o’clock. Dot regarded it coldly, cursing its echoing through the empty house. What’s the point of marking empty hours in an empty life, reminders of what wasn’t and isn’t? No family, no friends, just time.

The bell chimed.

“Another one?”

“Seems so, Jenny.”

They walked into the room. A man lay on the gurney, vacant eyed, drooling. At least this one hadn't soiled itself. He pulled the surgical gown off exposing a small tattoo on the left breast.

“Jake. Hmm. Hello whoever you are, welcome to the rest of your life. Jenny, I'll call Forma if you'll prep him.”

She moved her gaze from the man's groin.

“A bit of a waste.”

“Well, you've missed your chance, he's not good for anything now.”

He turned to the door. Jenny laughed, called after him.

“You're not going to help? Getting squeamish?”

“You would too, the food and air lines are one thing but watching the catheter insertions still gives me the creeps.”

Pat changed into her lab coat, pushed through the swing doors. Erica was at the far end of the room starting the prep. Products still need to be tested, reactions gauged even if animal cruelty laws were enforced. *Well, we'll never run afoul of them again.*

“Hey, Erica, how many?”

“Just the one, good subject though.”

“Plugged and ready?”

“Uh huh, prised and strapped. What are we running?”

Pat crossed the room, looked down.

“See what you mean, we might get six months out of this one.”

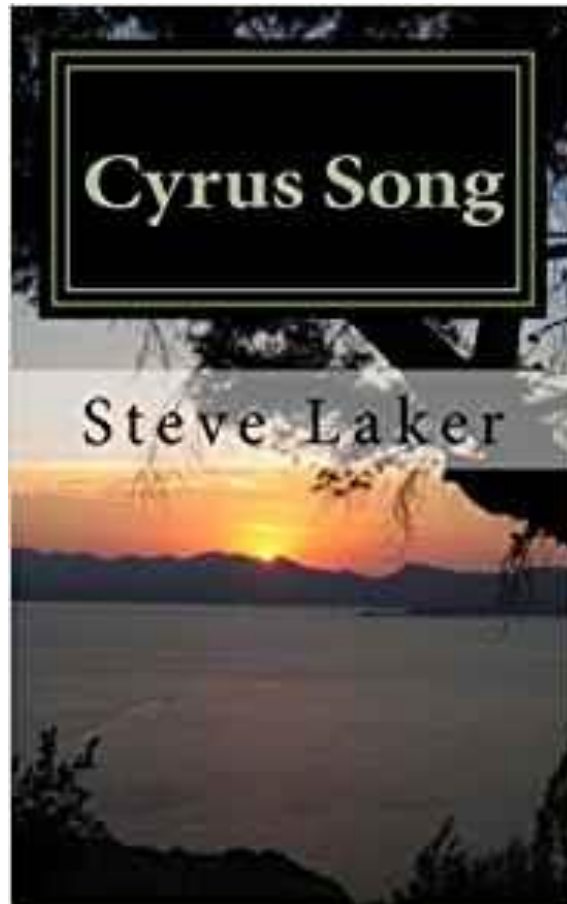
She turned, picked up her clipboard.

“Okay, series five and six, chemical toxin irritants skin and eyes for J.D.J. Rips and drips, Erica.”

She looked at the subject now ready and prepped. His skin was clean, eyes bright if a touch weepy, a near perfect test subject. Only one small flaw but that was easily worked around. She snapped on her rubber gloves, stepped back.

“Welcome to Forma, Jake. I promise this will hurt a great deal.”

THE END



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GIRL IN THE CAVE by Rob Bliss

Andy had spent his life collecting pornographic magazines. He had been adopted at birth, his father and mother flower children who were terrified of growing up and having a baby, so they broke up. They both had red hair, but Andy was blonde. A gene must have been skipped, he always assumed. One hippie parent went to a drug flop house in Montreal and the other rode the rails to the B.C. coast.

Andy's porn habit started when he was about ten years old (he can never remember what age he was during any life event) when he found a weathered, sun-faded magazine. Its pages torn and chewed by rodents, made into nest material, but enough left intact in the ditch of the country road where he grew up with his adoptive parents. After that first magazine, he found his father's stash, but he didn't steal any of those. He bought two Playboys for fifty cents at a garage sale, hiding them by sandwiching them between a Sports Illustrated and a National Geographic.

When he was old enough, he bought stacks of old porn magazines from used book shops, magazines from the '70s and '80s, the eras of his youth and sexual development. Every apartment he lived in soon acquired its own collection, which he would always regretfully throw in the nearest Dumpster (for some other lucky porn addict) before he moved away.

He always moved. From job to job, town to town, never wanting a trade or skill, a solid career. Never wanting friends. He wanted to be left alone with the women from the magazines. Their long hippie hair or Afros, thick black eyelashes, tie-dye shorts and rainbow-striped leggings. They were his girlfriends, his wives, his many mistresses. With too many he fell in love, sometimes cried when he had to throw them away. Another town called, another job. But he always memorized the names of the girls, the years, the issues of the magazines they were in.

Finally he moved to a town he liked. A small coastal town facing the Atlantic Ocean. Andy loved the smell of salt water and ocean breeze. He worked at a grocery store, ignored the girls who flirted with him, and his only friend was the sixty-year-old man who owned the used book store.

Andy liked the town well enough to venture outside of the bachelor apartment he rented in the basement of a retired couple's house to explore. A cold wind smelling of fish blew down the narrow streets, and Andy loved it, fed off it. He found his way to the fishing boats tied up, and further to the beach.

He spent days, weeks, exploring the endless beaches. Until he found a cave eroded into a cliff face, large stones and sand as its base, the water sliding only a little way into the cave mouth. There were no signs that people had found the cave before him. It went back deep, and Andy soon brought a flashlight with him.

He laughed to himself that the cave was larger than any apartment he had ever lived in. Which gave him an idea. In a knapsack, a few issues at a time, he brought his growing porn stash to the cave. Stored it there, deep in the darkness, away from wind and water and other explorers.

The last time he went to his 'second home', he did what he usually did. Built a fire near the cave mouth, carried his stash into the fire light, spread the pages open to have all the girls surrounding him.

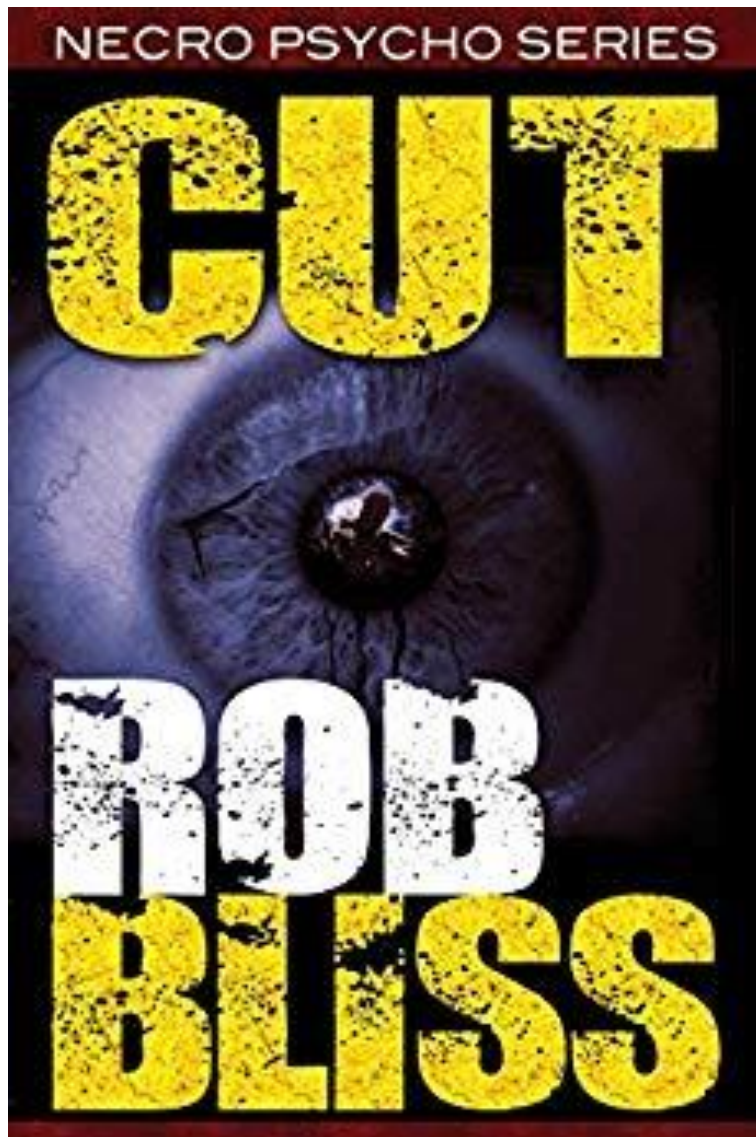
He stripped naked and talked to the women while gazing out of the cave mouth at the ocean. He was in love with a redhead centrefold, told her not to be jealous of the other girls, asked if she found him handsome.

She said yes. She stood in the fire, naked, her flesh flickering yellow and orange, not being consumed by the flames, her long red hair flying up to swarm her head in a fiery halo.

She beckoned Andy, and he rose to his feet.

Sweat covered his body. His penis was erect. His heart felt about to burst, loving the woman come to life. The magazines surrounding the fire burst into birds of flame with blackened wings flying high, women eroding into charcoal and ash, as Andy entered the fire to embrace his love.

THE END



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IN THE KINGDOM OF REMAYNE by Dave Ludford

It went something like this...

During the first decade of the second reign of King Thrum (the first ended, as you may remember, over that silly business with the chambermaid and the donkey) the Grand Council decided to hold a plebiscite on the question of whether to remain a member state of the Congress Of Nations. The kingdom of Thrarpe had been part of the CON for longer than anyone could remember, although the memories of Thrapians were notoriously short, making those of goldfish seem positively elephantine in comparison. In fact they had only been part of that great and august body for a little over three weeks.

Membership of the CON brought many free trade and employment benefits to all state signatories to the Treaty of Raman (totalling twelve in all, out of the twenty that made up South World. Middle and North Worlds had their own arrangements.) This was not including the importation of useless plastic novelties which could be produced cheaply enough within home markets without the need to ship in further quantities. Each member state had an excess stockpile of children's plastic bath ducks, for example, but were too polite to refuse the import of even more of the damned things. Luckily most Thrapians couldn't remember where they'd come from, though, and so it continued.

Thus Thrum called together his Grand Council to discuss the issue of the vote although nobody could remember why there was a need to hold one. Thrum himself made the inaugural speech of the current session.

"Ladies and gentlemen here gathered, I've called this meeting to discuss...oh, I can't really recall why I called it now...something to do with a vote on plastic ducks...my memory is so shocking these days..."

"Let me pick up from there, Your Majesty, if I may." This interjection was from Lionel, the Council Elder (although he wasn't the eldest. That honour went to Hubert but he spent most council sessions asleep and nobody could remember who he was anyway, or what he was doing there.) "I took the trouble of writing down some of the proceedings of the last session of council, so I would have an instantly accessible aide memoire. Now, where did I put that damn folder...? Ah, here it is. Ahem. I quote: 'Council voted by a margin of 18 to 6 in favour of holding a plebiscite to determine whether our great nation should remain a part of the CON.' And that's it, I'm afraid. I didn't take any more notes having quite forgotten why I was doing so in the first place. But I believe that's the position we're in. I vaguely recall we decided that we'd wait the month between sessions until...until...oh, hang it all, I've forgotten." Lionel sat down quickly, then even more quickly shot back up again. "Oh, and by the way," he added, "sod alone knows what the CON is."

Business concluded, he sat himself down again, but this time in a more sedate and gentlemanly manner. Silence reigned for what seemed like eternity, the king and his council a sea of confused and baffled faces, one looking to another in the vague hope of enlightenment. Had anyone any pins upon their person and had happened to drop one the noise would have shattered the palace

walls. Finally a solitary voice spoke up: nervous, hesitant. It was that of Tobias Meek, the youngest councillor, whose memory wasn't quite as bad as everyone else's.

"Err...everyone? May I say something? Sire? Lionel?"

The sea of blank faces turned as one to regard the young man; he responded by blushing heavily and looking down at his feet.

"Pray, carry on, young sir," the king said. Lionel nodded in agreement and encouragement. It took several minutes for Tobias to compose himself and pluck up the courage to continue.

"Well," he eventually managed, "it's just that...well...I think being a member of the CON is a good thing. Just to remind everyone that it stands for Congress of Nations. And being a member of it is good because our economy depends upon it for trade and employment. Except for the plastic children's bath ducks, but I've thought of a plan for those."

Here Tobias paused.

"Please continue," said Lionel. Tobias nervously and hesitantly dug inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a single sheet of paper and a pair of circular, wire-rimmed spectacles; the latter perched on the end of his nose whilst he unfolded and read aloud from the former.

"We can melt them down, and use the plastic to make other things, like washing-up bowls, or food packaging, or even garden furniture, perhaps. And these things could then be exported to the other CON states, making us even more money."

Lionel began to nod his head; the king and then all of the other councillors soon followed suit. The nodding became more and more vigorous; Tobias beamed a huge, satisfied smile in response.

"Genius! Pure genius!" the king exclaimed. "A brilliant plan indeed, from what I can remember of it! What do you think, Lionel?"

"I agree with Your Majesty," Lionel replied. "An awesome plan, although I'm struggling to remember some of the finer details. But we must put it to the vote. Ladies and gentlemen, forward to the voting chamber, if you please. We have serious business to conduct!"

And so the councillors walked away as if in a daze, patting Tobias on the back as they filed past him, uttering such things as "good man!" and "genius!" as they did so. They couldn't believe that their little problem had been solved so ingeniously.

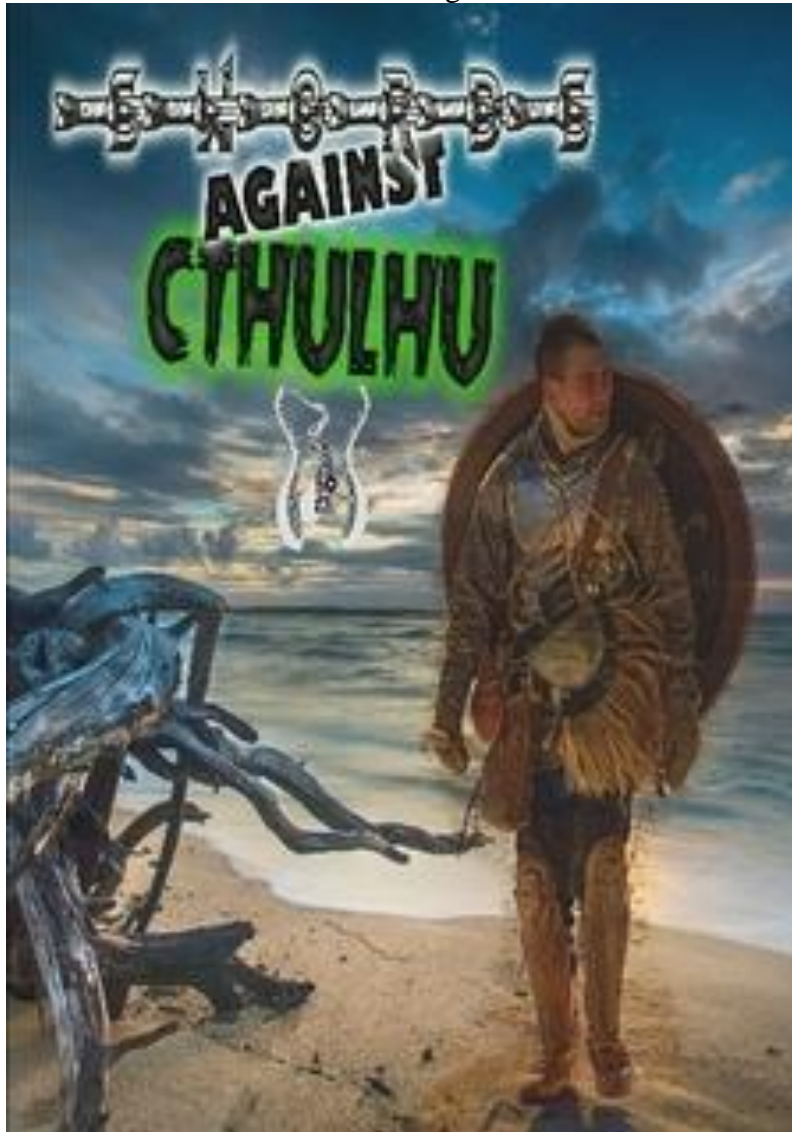
The council had voted as one in favour of Tobias' plan, with no dissenting voices. The economic prosperity of the kingdom was assured, and Tobias himself was a national hero. The king declared that the date of the historic vote would henceforth become an annual national holiday,

and there would be a statue of Tobias cast in bronze, which would stand in the market square. Furthermore, the kingdom of Thrarpe would be renamed 'Remayne' so that everyone would be reminded of the momentous event that had taken place that day. Were you to look inside an atlas, you would see that the little state is still thus called to this day.

That evening Tobias retired to bed early, shattered as he was by the day's very tiring events. He was feeling distinctly happy, but for the life of him couldn't remember exactly why.

THE END

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DEFEATED BY THE SYSTEM by Norbert Gora

Midnight on June 5, 2094...

Arthur Bealler emerged from the subway of Edgware Road Station. A brisk breeze ruffled his faded, thick hair. An InfoShip was floating a dozen metres above him. It belonged to the most popular TV operator in UK—Independence. Huge-sized LED display transmitted the latest news. A tired journalist in black suit mentioned something about launching of software update for droid guards.

Finally, Arthur thought with a sneer. They have been spoilt recently. Sighing, he straightened his official uniform and headed toward the Eastwhite Centre.

Another, twelve-hour shift in the centre for people with mental disorders. Night by night he felt as though he came closer to their condition and could possibly explode at any moment, pouncing on whomever happened to be near and beating them with his fists.

Although he repeatedly told himself that everything would be all right, he slowly felt that his job didn't make sense.

Weakened by mental illness, Great Britain had a population of only fifteen million people, of whom more than half were in guarded centres, under the watchful eyes of cameras twenty-four hours a day. The pace of life in this century exhausted people. From year to year they were becoming more and more “defeated by the system”, as they were generally called by staff. A bit more and...

“Don't think about it, man,” Bealler whispered under his breath and quickened his pace. Hoping silently for a quiet shift, he stood in the front of the huge door of the Eastwhite Centre.

At the main monitoring place, Arthur was greeted by Seamus—one of the droids that were described on Independence TV. He watched what was happening in individual rooms.

“Hello, Mr. Beller. Beautiful weather, isn't it?” Seamus asked and glanced at Arthur, who sniffed and lowered his head.

“Bealler! My surname is Bealler! Can't you remember?” he growled and looked at the long hallway in the front of him, bathed partly in the dark. Seamus only shrugged. He didn't feel offended. The creators of this model didn't pre-program feelings in order to prevent the writing of a Constitution for robots in the near future. It would have been absurd.

Bealler blinked, moved closer to the supercomputer at which sat Seamus and frowned. Something didn't suit him. He scanned one by one all the rooms, counting on fingers the number of "defeated by the system". When he came to the sixth, his eyes widened.

"My God," Bealler mumbled and held out his hand toward the screen. Touching it, the image increased. The room was empty. Person MBW2221/1 had disappeared.

"You piece of metal! Where is this man?" Arthur roared at Seamus, pointing at the screen.

"Who?"

"MBW2221/1. He is not in the room. How did it happen?"

"I don't... I don't know," Seamus stammered. Arthur wanted to bash him in the head with something hard, but instead waved his hand and ran towards the empty room.

Bealler couldn't believe his eyes. The electronic lock on the door had been decoded.

"What the..." Arthur whispered under his breath and began routine inspection. This cubicle was too small to accommodate any device, and besides, none of them were allowed to even touch such a tool. It was a few moments before he heard the alarm. The corridor glowed with red, intense light. Arthur suddenly stood.

No, he thought. Someone unauthorized had to leave the Eastwhite Centre.

"Person MBW2221/1 has already left the centre. I repeat..." an electronic voice informed him, coming from the place just below the siren.

"Sweet Jesus," Bealler groaned and started running towards the exit.

Fifteen minutes later, breathless, Arthur came to the Edgware Road station. He pushed people standing in his way, without any apology, trying to track down the fugitive. Person MBW2221/1 previously seemed to be improving and on the way to leave the centre.

"Catch that man!" Bealler shouted, pointing at the man who stopped at a black line painted on the concrete floor of the subway station.

People looked at Arthur with surprise and then, as he requested, two tall men caught the fugitive. MBW2221/1—dressed in gleaming, white material, with a long black beard—smiled.

"What is so funny?" Bealler asked him.

“You,” replied the fugitive, as if nothing had happened.

Arthur frowned.

Seamus watched another room on the monitors, when suddenly, as if by a touch of a magic wand, the image began to fade.

“What is going on?” he asked himself and touched the screen of the supercomputer. To the surprise of the droid, the machine stopped working. After a moment the lights in the control room went out.

“Power...” Seamus didn’t finish. The voice of a blaring siren interrupted him.

Bealler cleared his throat before speaking.

“What is that supposed to mean? Am I really funny or what?” he shouted and almost punched the escapee in the face, when MBW2221/1 began to chortle like a man possessed. Bealler froze.

“Don’t look at me like that, man,” the fugitive whispered and winked at Arthur.

“You shouldn’t think that I didn’t know about the problems with droids. Maybe I have a mental disorder, but I am an engineer. I know all about electronics. The creator of the robots designed a monitoring system for you with various security features. When I figured out how to spoil the droid, the elimination of this whole mess was only a matter of time.” The man paused and chuckled. A minute later Bealler’s telecom rang. Arthur pulled it from the pocket of his uniform and his eyes widened in shock.

“Warning, unauthorized object left the centre... I repeat... Alarm, alarm... three unauthorized objects left the centre... I repeat... Alarm, alarm...” droned a mechanized voice coming from the telecom. Bealler looked at Person MBW2221/1, concern replacing the shock.

“It was only a matter of time,” the fugitive repeated. It was the end of the world, which Arthur and his colleagues tried so hard to prevent.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Five

The news General Howe broke sent a shock throughout the populated regions of the Solar System. From Mercury to Callisto, no one had had any idea whatever of the numbers of Scroungers who preyed upon colonists and shipping lines from Mars to Jupiter.

Even the Scroungers themselves had no idea of their own numbers. Temperamentally, they took little interest in such dry matters as censuses, demographics and statistics. Those who made it their business to monitor all interplanetary communications were, of course, quick to share this news with their fellows. The news of their numbers – a million or more – invigorated them. Many had already been emboldened by the failed attack on Callisto. Yes, the attack was a failure, but that any band of Scroungers was audacious enough to launch the attack in the first place was an impressive act. And if it could be done once, it could be done twice...

And in the populated regions of the Solar System, the numbers of the Scroungers were terrifying, for all in an instant, the understanding they had of the Scrounges collapsed. They had grown up from childhood, thinking of the Scroungers as rare and exotic threats, boogeymen who dwelt, if they were real at all, only at the furthest fringes of the civilized world. Few in number and hardly organized themselves, their examples had been used by parents to terrorize the recalcitrant among their children into obedience.

`And that is what happens to children who wander too far from home,' is how many of these moral tales closed, taming the wanderlust of some of those children. For years piling on top of years, until whole centuries had passed, the Scroungers had served as cautionary examples, and those who grew up on those tales came, in their adult years – to begin to doubt the reality of these Scroungers? Did they really exist? Or were they unrelated gangs and bands, all thrown together under the misleading rubric of `Scrounger'?

So it was that many of those children were able to assuage their childhood fears.

Until General Howe's announcement. Now, and very suddenly, the Scroungers were once again forced upon their attention, and with a magnitude greater than they had ever imagined.

General Howe was perfectly conscious of the impact his words would create, and they did, indeed, create the furor he fully expected. He paused for a full minute to allow the meaning of his words to fully sink in.

Even here, in the crowded conference hall where Howe made this announcement, the unrest was profound. Breaking all decorum and protocol, people throughout the hall began heated discussions among themselves. The silence that was expected of all who were present was drowned under a deluge of controversies. Questions, fearfully expressed, bounded through the hall. Challenges and arguments broke out, heated side discussions threatened to overwhelm Howe's presentation.

Howe let the controversies play themselves out. He stood patiently next to Secretary Benson's chair, and overshadowing the man. Benson scowled, a gesture no one noticed for a scowl was his normal state.

At last the hubbub subsided, and after allowing another moment to pass, General Howe took several more paces around the table. He could feel the rage building up inside the man. Howe sensed the temper of his audience. The mood ranged from outright fear to vague and poorly defined anxieties. Secretary Benson's manner offer them no comfort. Though he said not a word, his manner offered not comfort. Howe, on the other hand, spoke with a calming, almost fatherly tone which soothed the audience with words of common sense.

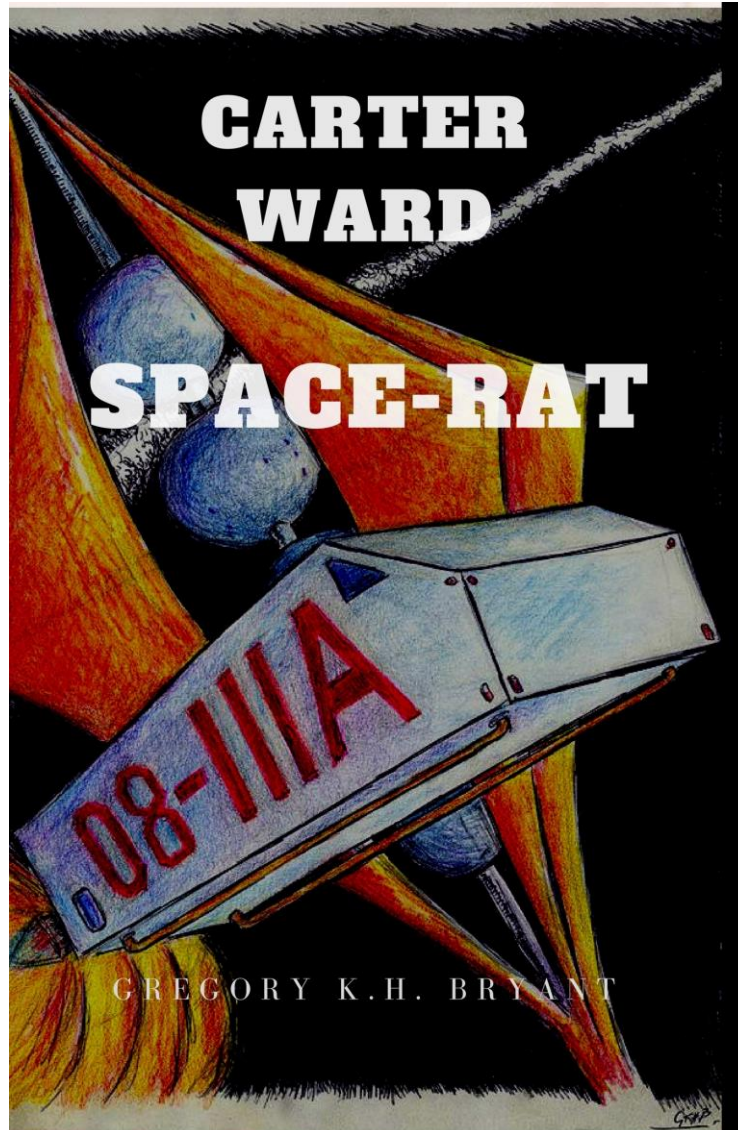
"Before we allow ourselves to get too worked up over these numbers," Howe cautioned, "Let us remember that one million, though a seemingly large number in some regards is, in fact, a rather small quantity when compared to the one hundred and twenty billion human beings who currently inhabit our Solar System.

"So, even if our Scrounger friends did launch a campaign against us, it would be but a futile gesture.

"This finishes our history lesson. Now we must consider the present," Howe said, wrapping up the first part of his presentation.

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



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter I: "There Are Heroisms All Round Us"

Mr. Hungerton, her father, really was the most tactless person upon earth,—a fluffy, feathery, untidy cockatoo of a man, perfectly good-natured, but absolutely centred upon his own silly self. If anything could have driven me from Gladys, it would have been the thought of such a father-in-law. I am convinced that he really believed in his heart that I came round to the Chestnuts three days a week for the pleasure of his company, and very especially to hear his views upon bimetallism, a subject upon which he was by way of being an authority.

For an hour or more that evening I listened to his monotonous chirrup about bad money driving out good, the token value of silver, the depreciation of the rupee, and the true standards of exchange.

"Suppose," he cried with feeble violence, "that all the debts in the world were called up simultaneously, and immediate payment insisted upon,—what under our present conditions would happen then?"

I gave the self-evident answer that I should be a ruined man, upon which he jumped from his chair, reproved me for my habitual levity, which made it impossible for him to discuss any reasonable subject in my presence, and bounced off out of the room to dress for a Masonic meeting.

At last I was alone with Gladys, and the moment of Fate had come! All that evening I had felt like the soldier who awaits the signal which will send him on a forlorn hope; hope of victory and fear of repulse alternating in his mind.

She sat with that proud, delicate profile of hers outlined against the red curtain. How beautiful she was! And yet how aloof! We had been friends, quite good friends; but never could I get beyond the same comradeship which I might have established with one of my fellow-reporters upon the Gazette,—perfectly frank, perfectly kindly, and perfectly unsexual. My instincts are all against a woman being too frank and at her ease with me. It is no compliment to a man. Where the real sex feeling begins, timidity and distrust are its companions, heritage from old wicked days when love and violence went often hand in hand. The bent head, the averted eye, the faltering voice, the wincing figure—these, and not the unshrinking gaze and frank reply, are the true signals of passion. Even in my short life I had learned as much as that—or had inherited it in that race memory which we call instinct.

Gladys was full of every womanly quality. Some judged her to be cold and hard; but such a thought was treason. That delicately bronzed skin, almost oriental in its colouring, that raven hair, the large liquid eyes, the full but exquisite lips,—all the stigmata of passion were there. But I was sadly conscious that up to now I had never found the secret of drawing it forth. However, come what might, I should have done with suspense and bring matters to a head to-night. She could but refuse me, and better be a repulsed lover than an accepted brother.

So far my thoughts had carried me, and I was about to break the long and uneasy silence, when two critical, dark eyes looked round at me, and the proud head was shaken in smiling reproof. "I have a presentiment that you are going to propose, Ned. I do wish you wouldn't; for things are so much nicer as they are."

I drew my chair a little nearer. "Now, how did you know that I was going to propose?" I asked in genuine wonder.

"Don't women always know? Do you suppose any woman in the world was ever taken unawares? But—oh, Ned, our friendship has been so good and so pleasant! What a pity to spoil it! Don't you feel how splendid it is that a young man and a young woman should be able to talk face to face as we have talked?"

"I don't know, Gladys. You see, I can talk face to face with—with the station-master." I can't imagine how that official came into the matter; but in he trotted, and set us both laughing. "That does not satisfy me in the least. I want my arms round you, and your head on my breast, and—oh, Gladys, I want——"

She had sprung from her chair, as she saw signs that I proposed to demonstrate some of my wants. "You've spoiled everything, Ned," she said. "It's all so beautiful and natural until this kind of thing comes in! It is such a pity! Why can't you control yourself?"

"I didn't invent it," I pleaded. "It's nature. It's love."

"Well, perhaps if both love, it may be different. I have never felt it."

"But you must—you, with your beauty, with your soul! Oh, Gladys, you were made for love! You must love!"

"One must wait till it comes."

"But why can't you love me, Gladys? Is it my appearance, or what?"

She did unbend a little. She put forward a hand—such a gracious, stooping attitude it was—and she pressed back my head. Then she looked into my upturned face with a very wistful smile.

"No it isn't that," she said at last. "You're not a conceited boy by nature, and so I can safely tell you it is not that. It's deeper."

"My character?"

She nodded severely.

"What can I do to mend it? Do sit down and talk it over. No, really, I won't if you'll only sit down!"

She looked at me with a wondering distrust which was much more to my mind than her whole-hearted confidence. How primitive and bestial it looks when you put it down in black and white!—and perhaps after all it is only a feeling peculiar to myself. Anyhow, she sat down.

“Now tell me what’s amiss with me?”

“I’m in love with somebody else,” said she.

It was my turn to jump out of my chair.

“It’s nobody in particular,” she explained, laughing at the expression of my face: “only an ideal. I’ve never met the kind of man I mean.”

“Tell me about him. What does he look like?”

“Oh, he might look very much like you.”

“How dear of you to say that! Well, what is it that he does that I don’t do? Just say the word,—teetotal, vegetarian, aeronaut, theosophist, superman. I’ll have a try at it, Gladys, if you will only give me an idea what would please you.”

She laughed at the elasticity of my character. “Well, in the first place, I don’t think my ideal would speak like that,” said she. “He would be a harder, sterner man, not so ready to adapt himself to a silly girl’s whim. But, above all, he must be a man who could do, who could act, who could look Death in the face and have no fear of him, a man of great deeds and strange experiences. It is never a man that I should love, but always the glories he had won; for they would be reflected upon me. Think of Richard Burton! When I read his wife’s life of him I could so understand her love! And Lady Stanley! Did you ever read the wonderful last chapter of that book about her husband? These are the sort of men that a woman could worship with all her soul, and yet be the greater, not the less, on account of her love, honoured by all the world as the inspirer of noble deeds.”

She looked so beautiful in her enthusiasm that I nearly brought down the whole level of the interview. I gripped myself hard, and went on with the argument.

“We can’t all be Stanleys and Burtons,” said I; “besides, we don’t get the chance,—at least, I never had the chance. If I did, I should try to take it.”

“But chances are all around you. It is the mark of the kind of man I mean that he makes his own chances. You can’t hold him back. I’ve never met him, and yet I seem to know him so well. There are heroisms all round us waiting to be done. It’s for men to do them, and for women to reserve their love as a reward for such men. Look at that young Frenchman who went up last week in a balloon. It was blowing a gale of wind; but because he was announced to go he insisted on starting. The wind blew him fifteen hundred miles in twenty-four hours, and he fell in the middle of Russia. That was the kind of man I mean. Think of the woman he loved, and how other women must have envied her! That’s what I should like to be,—envied for my man.”

“I’d have done it to please you.”

“But you shouldn’t do it merely to please me. You should do it because you can’t help yourself, because it’s natural to you, because the man in you is crying out for heroic expression. Now, when you described the Wigan coal explosion last month, could you not have gone down and helped those people, in spite of the choke-damp?”

“I did.”

“You never said so.”

“There was nothing worth bucking about.”

“I didn’t know.” She looked at me with rather more interest. “That was brave of you.”

“I had to. If you want to write good copy, you must be where the things are.”

“What a prosaic motive! It seems to take all the romance out of it. But, still, whatever your motive, I am glad that you went down that mine.” She gave me her hand; but with such sweetness and dignity that I could only stoop and kiss it. “I dare say I am merely a foolish woman with a young girl’s fancies. And yet it is so real with me, so entirely part of my very self, that I cannot help acting upon it. If I marry, I do want to marry a famous man!”

“Why should you not?” I cried. “It is women like you who brace men up. Give me a chance, and see if I will take it! Besides, as you say, men ought to MAKE their own chances, and not wait until they are given. Look at Clive—just a clerk, and he conquered India! By George! I’ll do something in the world yet!”

She laughed at my sudden Irish effervescence. “Why not?” she said. “You have everything a man could have,—youth, health, strength, education, energy. I was sorry you spoke. And now I am glad—so glad—if it wakens these thoughts in you!”

“And if I do——”

Her dear hand rested like warm velvet upon my lips. “Not another word, Sir! You should have been at the office for evening duty half an hour ago; only I hadn’t the heart to remind you. Some day, perhaps, when you have won your place in the world, we shall talk it over again.”

And so it was that I found myself that foggy November evening pursuing the Camberwell tram with my heart glowing within me, and with the eager determination that not another day should elapse before I should find some deed which was worthy of my lady. But who—who in all this wide world could ever have imagined the incredible shape which that deed was to take, or the strange steps by which I was led to the doing of it?

And, after all, this opening chapter will seem to the reader to have nothing to do with my

narrative; and yet there would have been no narrative without it, for it is only when a man goes out into the world with the thought that there are heroisms all round him, and with the desire all alive in his heart to follow any which may come within sight of him, that he breaks away as I did from the life he knows, and ventures forth into the wonderful mystic twilight land where lie the great adventures and the great rewards. Behold me, then, at the office of the Daily Gazette, on the staff of which I was a most insignificant unit, with the settled determination that very night, if possible, to find the quest which should be worthy of my Gladys! Was it hardness, was it selfishness, that she should ask me to risk my life for her own glorification? Such thoughts may come to middle age; but never to ardent three-and-twenty in the fever of his first love.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter IV: The First Vanishings

“We carried Thora back, down to where Edith was waiting. We told her what had happened and what we had found. She listened gravely, and as we finished Thora sighed and opened her eyes.

“‘I would like to see the stone,’ she said. ‘Charles, you stay here with Thora.’ We passed through the outer court silently—and stood before the rock. She touched it, drew back her hand as I had; thrust it forward again resolutely and held it there. She seemed to be listening. Then she turned to me.

“‘David,’ said my wife, and the wistfulness in her voice hurt me— ‘David, would you be very, very disappointed if we went from here—without trying to find out any more about it—would you?’

“Walter, I never wanted anything so much in my life as I wanted to learn what that rock concealed. Nevertheless, I tried to master my desire, and I answered— ‘Edith, not a bit if you want us to do it.’

“She read my struggle in my eyes. She turned back toward the grey rock. I saw a shiver pass through her. I felt a tinge of remorse and pity!

“‘Edith,’ I exclaimed, ‘we’ll go!’

“She looked at me again. ‘Science is a jealous mistress,’ she quoted. ‘No, after all it may be just fancy. At any rate, you can’t run away. No! But, Dave, I’m going to stay too!’

“And there was no changing her decision. As we neared the others she laid a hand on my arm.

“‘Dave,’ she said, ‘if there should be something—well—inexplicable tonight—something that seems—too dangerous—will you promise to go back to our own islet tomorrow, if we can—and wait until the natives return?’

“I promised eagerly—the desire to stay and see what came with the night was like a fire within me.

“We picked a place about five hundred feet away from the steps leading into the outer court.

“The spot we had selected was well hidden. We could not be seen, and yet we had a clear view of the stairs and the gateway. We settled down just before dusk to wait for whatever might come. I was nearest the giant steps; next me Edith; then Thora, and last Stanton.

“Night fell. After a time the eastern sky began to lighten, and we knew that the moon was rising; grew lighter still, and the orb peeped over the sea; swam into full sight. I glanced at Edith and then at Thora. My wife was intently listening. Thora sat, as she had since we had placed

ourselves, elbows on knees, her hands covering her face.

“And then from the moonlight flooding us there dripped down on me a great drowsiness. Sleep seemed to seep from the rays and fall upon my eyes, closing them—closing them inexorably. Edith’s hand in mine relaxed. Stanton’s head fell upon his breast and his body swayed drunkenly. I tried to rise—to fight against the profound desire for slumber that pressed on me.

“And as I fought, Thora raised her head as though listening; and turned toward the gateway. There was infinite despair in her face—and expectancy. I tried again to rise—and a surge of sleep rushed over me. Dimly, as I sank within it, I heard a crystalline chiming; raised my lids once more with a supreme effort.

“Thora, bathed in light, was standing at the top of the stairs.

“Sleep took me for its very own—swept me into the heart of oblivion!

“Dawn was breaking when I wakened. Recollection rushed back; I thrust a panic-stricken hand out toward Edith; touched her and my heart gave a great leap of thankfulness. She stirred, sat up, rubbing dazed eyes. Stanton lay on his side, back toward us, head in arms.

“Edith looked at me laughingly. ‘Heavens! What sleep!’ she said. Memory came to her.

“‘What happened?’ she whispered. ‘What made us sleep like that?’

“Stanton awoke.

“‘What’s the matter!’ he exclaimed. ‘You look as though you’ve been seeing ghosts.’

“Edith caught my hands.

“‘Where’s Thora?’ she cried. Before I could answer she had run out into the open, calling.

“‘Thora was taken,’ was all I could say to Stanton, ‘together we went to my wife, now standing beside the great stone steps, looking up fearfully at the gateway into the terraces. There I told them what I had seen before sleep had drowned me. And together then we ran up the stairs, through the court and to the grey rock.

“The slab was closed as it had been the day before, nor was there trace of its having opened. No trace? Even as I thought this Edith dropped to her knees before it and reached toward something lying at its foot. It was a little piece of gay silk. I knew it for part of the kerchief Thora wore about her hair. She lifted the fragment. It had been cut from the kerchief as though by a razor-edge; a few threads ran from it—down toward the base of the slab; ran on to the base of the grey rock and—under it!

“The grey rock was a door! And it had opened and Thora had passed through it!

“I think that for the next few minutes we all were a little insane. We beat upon that portal with our hands, with stones and sticks. At last reason came back to us.

“Goodwin, during the next two hours we tried every way in our power to force entrance through the slab. The rock resisted our drills. We tried explosions at the base with charges covered by rock. They made not the slightest impression on the surface, expending their force, of course, upon the slighter resistance of their coverings.

“Afternoon found us hopeless. Night was coming on and we would have to decide our course of action. I wanted to go to Ponape for help. But Edith objected that this would take hours and after we had reached there it would be impossible to persuade our men to return with us that night, if at all. What then was left? Clearly only one of two choices: to go back to our camp, wait for our men, and on their return try to persuade them to go with us to Nan-Tauach. But this would mean the abandonment of Thora for at least two days. We could not do it; it would have been too cowardly.

“The other choice was to wait where we were for night to come; to wait for the rock to open as it had the night before, and to make a sortie through it for Thora before it could close again.

“Our path lay clear before us. We had to spend that night on Nan-Tauach!

“We had, of course, discussed the sleep phenomena very fully. If our theory that lights, sounds, and Thora’s disappearance were linked with secret religious rites of the natives, the logical inference was that the slumber had been produced by them, perhaps by vapours—you know as well as I, what extraordinary knowledge these Pacific peoples have of such things. Or the sleep might have been simply a coincidence and produced by emanations either gaseous or from plants, natural causes which had happened to coincide in their effects with the other manifestations. We made some rough and ready but effective respirators.

“As dusk fell we looked over our weapons. Edith was an excellent shot with both rifle and pistol. We had decided that my wife was to remain in the hiding-place. Stanton would take up a station on the far side of the stairway and I would place myself opposite him on the side near Edith. The place I picked out was less than two hundred feet from her, and I could reassure myself now and then as to her safety as it looked down upon the hollow wherein she crouched. From our respective stations Stanton and I could command the gateway entrance. His position gave him also a glimpse of the outer courtyard.

“A faint glow in the sky heralded the moon. Stanton and I took our places. The moon dawn increased rapidly; the disk swam up, and in a moment it was shining in full radiance upon ruins and sea.

“As it rose there came a curious little sighing sound from the inner terrace. Stanton straightened up and stared intently through the gateway, rifle ready.

“‘Stanton, what do you see?’ I called cautiously. He waved a silencing hand. I turned my head to look at Edith. A shock ran through me. She lay upon her side. Her face, grotesque with its nose

and mouth covered by the respirator, was turned full toward the moon. She was again in deepest sleep!

“As I turned again to call to Stanton, my eyes swept the head of the steps and stopped, fascinated. For the moonlight had thickened. It seemed to be—curdled—there; and through it ran little gleams and veins of shimmering white fire. A languor passed through me. It was not the ineffable drowsiness of the preceding night. It was a sapping of all will to move. I tried to cry out to Stanton. I had not even the will to move my lips. Goodwin—I could not even move my eyes!

“Stanton was in the range of my fixed vision. I watched him leap up the steps and move toward the gateway. The curdled radiance seemed to await him. He stepped into it—and was lost to my sight.

“For a dozen heart beats there was silence. Then a rain of tinklings that set the pulses racing with joy and at once checked them with tiny fingers of ice—and ringing through them Stanton’s voice from the courtyard—a great cry—a scream—filled with ecstasy insupportable and horror unimaginable! And once more there was silence. I strove to burst the bonds that held me. I could not. Even my eyelids were fixed. Within them my eyes, dry and aching, burned.

“Then Goodwin—I first saw the—inexplicable! The crystalline music swelled. Where I sat I could take in the gateway and its basalt portals, rough and broken, rising to the top of the wall forty feet above, shattered, ruined portals—unclimbable. From this gateway an intenser light began to flow. It grew, it gushed, and out of it walked Stanton.

“Stanton! But—God! What a vision!”

A deep tremor shook him. I waited—waited.

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