

V O I C E S



FROM A COMA

ISSUE ONE

Edited by Shaun AJ Hamilton

Imaginalis Presents

VOICES FROM A COMA

#1

Featuring:

Mark West, Sean P Chatterton, Jeremy Simons, Dave Fragments, Bryn Fortey &
Jonathan Anderson

<http://imaginalis.org/>

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Introduction

By Shaun AJ Hamilton

Hello, fellow reader, and welcome to the first edition of VOICES FROM A COMA, an anthology designed to introduce you to writers both new and familiar. The hope is that you'll come along, have a look, have a read, experience a scare or two and then go out and research our authors a little more. Find out what else it is they have to offer. Is all of their work similar to that shown in 'Venus' or 'The Ilizarov Apparatus' or do they hold something else in their locker? Something just as brilliant, but a little less cruel or horrific, perhaps?

This is the main reason for VOICES. Whilst it's important to support experienced writers by giving them a new, fresh place to showcase their work, I cannot deny that I feel it is more important to offer that same platform to new writers. The inexperienced. The fledgling, eager voices who are more used to rejection slips than positive emails. I've been writing for ten years (more off than on but it all counts) and yet I remember how difficult it was to get my early work published. That's not to say everything I write now sees print – my god how I wish that were the case – I simply now have a better understanding of the industry so I don't take those familiar refusals so personally now (they still hurt though). In those early days of naivety and arrogance I couldn't understand why people were turning me down. Everyone from the biggest magazines to the smallest websites were giving me the 'thanks, but no thanks' response and I had no idea why. I felt – knew - I was better than a lot of the stuff out there but for reasons beyond my own comprehension no one was willing to accept me. But I kept working, I kept trying and submitting until someone finally said 'yes.'

Amazing news! Superb news. Wonderful, outstanding, glorious news.

Until I saw it in print.

That's when everything came together. That's when I understood why so many (but not all) had turned me down.

There was no putting my finger on it, but when I saw my work alongside that of veteran writers, I realised how much work I still had to do. Structure? Grammar? Dialogue? These and more. They weren't poor – if they had been I would never have seen publication – but they weren't quite there for me. There was something missing that no one else would ever be able to point out, but was abundantly clear to my own eyes.

That's why VOICES exists.

It's to give writers of all types to see their work alongside others and to learn from it. It's to entertain readers, but it's also to give a platform for authors to use as a tool in their career.

It's early days. We're a free publication and money is zilch. So don't go expecting brass whistles and fireworks. I'd describe us as a digital version of the folded A4 paper fanzines of old. When photocopiers were the big thing and people received everything via post and fax. We're hoping that from this small acorn a half decent anthology will grow. Only time will tell. Only the readers will judge.

And only the writers can dictate.

The Ilizarov Apparatus

by Mark West

The car came out of nowhere.

Ian Maxted had been riding for long enough that he knew when and where to look, knew the sounds to listen for and the changes in the atmosphere. Most vehicle users generally tried to give the cyclist some room but often they either couldn't get far enough over or they misjudged the gap. They weren't really the problem - though he often gave them the finger as they drove away - it was the ones who knew he was there and resented his presence on the road that were the worst. Sometimes they'd try and squeeze him beyond the white lines into the treacherous six inch gap where road detritus gathered and drains gaped a threat.

Ian was coming home from work, his suit folded neatly in his backpack and had pulled off the main Gaffney road, preferring to take the lesser used Chaton road to miss the heaviest traffic and shorten his journey by ten minutes.

He could hear birds singing in the trees, the swish of his thin tyres on the tarmac, the distant rumble of the dual carriageway behind him and then the engine was there. A high, keening sound that was almost a protest and the hissing screech of tyres desperately trying to gain traction.

Ian glanced over his shoulder and the Volvo was all he could see. It was almost upon him, the headlights blank eyes, the grill like the terrible mouth of a Great White, opening to engulf him.

At the point of impact, all sound cut off. The car hit him just below the knee and Ian felt a single, almost exquisite, bolt of pain that ran down to his toes. The car kept coming, pushing on his leg, jamming it against the frame of the bike. The handlebars

jerked and he felt something in his left thumb pop, as it was pulled by the brake handle. The car rolled his leg down the bike, glancing away as the cycle mounted the verge with a jolt that he felt in his belly.

The front tyre bounced up and his head whipped back, his vision filled with blue sky and clouds.

Am I dead?

The rear tyre hit the verge and the bike was suddenly weightless. He tried to grab the handlebars but his left hand didn't want to move and sensations of pain were now running into his wrist.

Sound came back, abruptly and way too loud, car brakes and tyres squealing and air rushing past his ears. He landed, tangled with the bike, in the ploughed field, mud filling his mouth and grazing his cheek.

It took him a moment or two to come to his senses and he slowly sat up, favouring his left hand. His thumb was folded back on itself and it burned. He spat out mud as, from behind him, came the sound of someone slipping down the verge.

"Shit, mate, are you alright?"

"No," said Ian, "I think I've broken my fucking thumb."

The man came around and stood over him, the sun behind his head giving him a halo he didn't deserve. "Shit," he said.

Ian looked up, shielding his eyes with his right hand. "You're a twat, how fucking fast were you going?"

"I'm sorry mate, I didn't see you."

"I couldn't be wearing any more hi-vis stuff, how could you not see me?"

The driver nodded, then turned away and vomited. Ian looked away, disgusted and noticed that his right leg was pointing at an odd angle. There was something on the skin, just below the knee. It was white but muddy, as if he'd rolled through chalk or something that had been buried in the soil.

His hand touched the object and pain rushed to fill his head.

"Fuck," muttered the driver, wiping his mouth. "I'll ring an ambulance."

Ian put his hands under his knee, wanting to avoid the bone was poking through the skin but his leg was floppy. "What've you done to me, you bastard, what've you done?"

Ian was taken directly to Gaffney General Hospital and rushed through into surgery. Although he was sedated as soon as he entered theatre, he was later told that the medical team had been able to reset his leg and the fractured tibia and fibula were being treated with the use of an Ilizarov apparatus. His thumb was dislocated but easily re-set.

A day later, he was visited on the ward by Dr Ramprasad, a tall and urbane Indian man who exuded calm. "You are very lucky," he said, checking details on Ian's records, "it was a clean break. Since you are a fit man, you should not have any problems with the physiotherapy and, if that is the case, you should soon be walking with barely an issue."

"What about cycling?"

"Oh yes," smiled Dr Ramprasad, putting the clipboard back on the end of Ian's bed. "Well if you can face getting back onto a bicycle, you should be able to ride it."

Ian spent the third day of his stay reading and looking out of the window, at the bright sun in an almost cloudless sky. As the hours wore on, the sound of birdsong was joined by children playing in the park and he longed to be outside in the warm fresh air.

He was still getting used to the Ilizarov apparatus, three metal rings that circled his lower leg and held pins that ran through his bones. It was cumbersome and painful and the very thought of it made him feel ill, his skin stained by dark blood at the penetration points and traces of iodine elsewhere. When his wife Myra first saw it, the colour had drained from her face but after a while she observed it was as though Dr Frankenstein had been given a Meccano set for Christmas. The big bandage over his thumb made her smile too.

The first night was the worst, on the assessment ward surrounded by injured people who cried, shouted or whimpered in pain through the night. He tried to do none of that, even though the very act of moving his leg slightly made him nauseous. But once he'd spoken with Dr Ramprasad, understood what the apparatus did and how best to move it, things got a lot better. They improved further when he was moved up a couple of floors to his new ward, which he shared with Mr Jonathan, a huge man who rarely moved, didn't say much and hardly had any visitors. Plus Ian was next to the window.

Dinner had been palatable - a 'traditional' spaghetti Bolognese whose closest link to Italy was the nationality of the van driver - but was made better by the fact that Myra arrived as he was finishing his rice pudding.

Their enforced separation made her look more beautiful than ever to Ian, as his day was focussed around the brief moments he saw her. Working in London and

dependent on the trains, she either arrived in the middle of visiting time or towards the end but just to see her was a delight, to hold her and kiss her and listen to her day. She sat beside his bed and held his hand and they talked easily and with contentment. As she left, like always, she squeezed his hand and hugged him and kissed him hard, then stroked his face.

“See you tomorrow, darling.”

Ian watched her to the door, smiling as she turned and held the frame, kicking one leg back coquettishly as she pouted a kiss. Then she was gone, leaving only the scent of her perfume and the taste of her lip-gloss.

The medication trolley came and went, his painkillers delivered with a smile from the cute Irish nurse with twinkling eyes and a ready smile. Twilight was gathering, the birds had gone home along with the children and he watched the sky darken. Mr Jonathan, judging by his steady breathing, had fallen asleep. The visitors were now gone, the late shift staff were quietening down, lights were being dimmed or turned off. A nurse walked along the corridor and Ian listened to the squeak of her soles against the tiles. He read a few more chapters of his book, then put it on the bedside cabinet and settled himself down gently, arranging the covers so that they wouldn't pull on the Ilizarov and closed his eyes.

A noise woke him.

The hospital stay had attuned Ian's ear to sounds that, as foreign as they were, he now almost took for granted - machines beeping, footsteps, other people sleeping or calling out - and as he listened he couldn't work out what was different.

Mr Jonathan's heart monitor still beeped, from somewhere along the corridor he could hear soft crying and a lift wheezed into motion behind the walls.

Somebody else was in the room.

The realisation was stark and Ian opened his eyes. He'd rolled partly onto his side, facing the bedside cabinet, his back to his neighbour. The light in the room was dim, the only illumination coming from the corridor through the ward door. He reached for his watch and pressed the button on the side, lighting up the face. It was 2:15.

Frowning, he gently moved himself so that he could see across the room without disturbing his leg. Someone was leaning over Mr Jonathan's bed. Ian could see the shape of the big man's legs and belly in the covers but couldn't hear his snoring.

Ian shifted further, moving his right leg as slowly as he could but it still sent a short bolt of pain up and down the limb. He watched the back of the nurse as she administered efficiently to Mr Jonathan. There was no fuss or hurry, no alarms and no other medical personnel in attendance even though it was clear that his neighbour wasn't snoring and it didn't sound as if he was breathing either. The machine by his bed continued to beep.

The nurse took a step to her right, treading into the rectangle of light that came through the door. She was heavysset and wide, her black tights straining to contain her calves and her dress was riding high.

She didn't look right, was all Ian could think. He didn't know all the nurses and usually slept through the night so wouldn't have seen half the nightshift crew but there was a nagging sensation that something was off.

The nurse moved, out of the light, her shoe squeaking. She looked down at it, her face in shadow, then went back to her patient. The big man jolted, rocking the bed and the nurse pressed on his chest and belly. As she moved her hand, Ian noticed that the wire from the heart monitor was attached to her finger and not Mr Jonathan's.

"Now," Ian heard her say, the rest of her words lost in a whisper. She leaned over Mr Jonathan, her left arm moved and then the big man jolted one last time before settling.

The nurse stood upright and rolled her head on her neck, arching her back in a stretch. As her left arm rose, the sleeve pulled tight at her elbow, as if she was wearing a uniform that was far too small for her.

The lift wheezed in the walls again. Ian tried to keep his breathing steady though he wasn't sure why - it wasn't as if he could hide from the woman, was it?

The nurse turned, her upper body in shadow and Ian closed his eyes as she crossed the gap between the two beds until he could sense her standing beside him.

"Now then, Mr Maxted," she said in a voice that was far too deep.

Ian opened his eyes as the nurse leaned over. Even in the poor light he could see the thick dark beard that seemed to cover the bottom half of the face and the thin red lips that pressed out between the wiry hair. Dark eyes regarded him, set too far back in their sockets.

"Hello there, sleepyhead," said the nurse and his left hand pressed down hard on Ian's chest, pinning him to the bed.

"What the fuck?"

“Now, now,” said the nurse, “we don’t need that kind of language in here, do we?”

“What’re you doing, what’s going on?” The nurse pressed harder on his chest.

“Let me go.”

Ian arched his back, reaching for the call button on the wall panel above the bed.

The nurse swatted his hand away.

“No need for the ladies,” the nurse said, “I can deal with you.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with me, I’m not resisting you.”

“That’s good to hear,” said the nurse and took something out of his pocket with his right hand. Ian squinted, trying to see what it was in the gloom but it was only when the nurse lifted it to his mouth, bit on a plastic cap and spat it away he realised it was a hypodermic syringe. “Good job you don’t have a monitor on too, I’m running out of hands.”

The nurse brought the syringe down and a drop of liquid squeezed out of the needle. It smelled foul. Ian braced his hands against the nurse’s solid chest and tried to push backwards but he had no leverage. The nurse pressed harder on Ian’s chest and, gasping for breath, he reached down to push it away. The nurse was too strong, the hand wouldn’t move at all then Ian’s fingers tangled in the monitor wire. Ian pulled and the clip slipped off the nurse’s finger. He threw it across the room and Mr Jonathan’s monitor beeped twice, loudly, then sounded an alarm.

“Fuck it,” said the nurse, letting go of Ian and turning away, going down on his hands and knees. Sucking in deep lungfuls of breath, Ian tried to turn in bed and moved his right leg, wincing, as he reached for the call button. It wasn’t there. He

looked at the nurse, who was now pulling on the monitor wire, coiling it in his hand. It wouldn't take him long to find the clip and put it back on.

Ian knew he had to get out of bed and threw off the sheet, the metalwork glinting in the light. He tried to lift his leg but the pain that ran up and into his groin almost made him wet himself. He considered shouting for help but it wouldn't take the nurse long to get up and hit him and that'd end things really quickly.

Ian put both hands under his right knee, took a deep breath and bit his lip, then lifted.

The pain was sweet enough to taste, filling his mouth and his nose. His ears rang, his eyes stung, every hair on his body pulled taut. He swallowed back vomit as his stomach heaved and dots of white heat ran across the small of his back. The room seemed to tilt, the colours shifting in a rainbow of shades he barely registered.

But he kept lifting, shifting himself on the bed so his legs were hanging over the edge. And as he let go of his knee, the vomit came, splattering onto the floor and splashing the back of the nurse's leg and the soles of his shoes.

The nurse glanced around, still coiling the wire.

Ian pushed himself off the bed, standing uncertainly on his left foot until he could settle his right. It hurt but not as much as he'd expected. He took a step, the pain racing up his body and touching parts in his brain that made his vision darken. He bit it back, bit everything back and took another step, then another - two more and he'd be at the door.

He was aware of the nurse standing up, the monitor beeping again.

Ian was out in the empty corridor. He knew the nurses station was to the right and so he turned in that direction, risking a glance back. The nurse was coming after

him but Ian could see that if he got far enough away, the monitor would have to be unhooked again for the pursuit.

Another step. This time it didn't feel so bad, though Ian knew it must be because his body was starting to over-ride the pain with adrenaline or something. He didn't care what it was, just so long as he could keep moving.

Another step. On his left, three or four paces ahead, was a door labelled 'Cleaners Cupboard'. On his right, a couple of paces beyond that, was another ward.

"Help!" Ian called, his voice sounding weak and hollow in the corridor. "Help me!!"

Nobody came, nobody shouted, nobody moved. Ian glanced back and saw the nurse standing in the doorway. In the light, his dress was so small it didn't do up in the front properly and the tights had ladders in both thighs. The hat was pushed down onto thick hair and the man's beard looked wilder than ever.

Ian took another step as he heard Mr Jonathan's machine beep loudly. Heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor and the nurse clattered into him and they both fell. Ian tried to keep his leg steady but as he fell it rocked up and hit the wall. The pain was so intense he bit his tongue and drew blood, whilst his vision darkened so much he thought for a moment he'd closed his eyes. The darkness flickered away and he saw the nurse to his side, on hands and knees. Ian tried to roll the other way, reaching for the cleaners door.

The nurse was up on his feet, breathing heavily as he looked around. He smiled at the cleaners door. "Perfect," he said.

“Fucking leave me alone,” shouted Ian, though his voice sounded weak and not loud enough to carry. None of this seemed right, it was like trying to escape in a dream where nothing is as it should be.

“Not yet,” said the nurse and he reached down to grab the upper ring of Ian’s Ilizarov apparatus.

“No, no...”

The nurse pulled hard, yanking Ian’s leg with him.

The pain came as an explosion, filling every inch of Ian’s being as the steel pins pulled hard on skin and bone. He wanted to scream but nothing came out of his mouth except for hurried, injured breaths. Sound faded, the nurse’s laugh rolling like a badly tuned radio and shades of black settled over the walls.

Dimly, Ian watched the nurse pull open the door of the cleaners cupboard and then everything faded.

“Mrs Maxted, I’m afraid there was nothing more that we could do, my team worked very hard but the accident shattered his tibia and fibula and there was no way we could repair them.”

Myra sounded as if she was trying to hold back tears. “I understand, doctor, I really do but...” She didn’t say any more.

“There are many ways around it,” said the doctor carefully, “if he still wants to use a cycle then there are companies which adapt machines.”

Ian struggled to open his eyes but he couldn’t. He tried to speak but there was something in his mouth and up his nose.

“He likes to be active,” said Myra, “I don’t know how he’s going to cope.”

“It will be difficult,” stressed the doctor, “let us not make any mistake over that. But it can be done.”

Ian braced himself for the pain and moved his right leg. There was no resistance and no pain. He reached down, his fingers sliding along his thigh until he reached his knee. There was a bandage there, thickly wrapped. It didn't make sense. Ian reached further.

“They tried the best they could in the ambulance, my team worked as hard as they could, but it was impossible to save the leg, it had to be amputated.”

Amputated? The word rang through Ian's head like a funeral bell. That couldn't be, they'd saved his leg and fitted that thing and all was well.

“He's heavily sedated,” the doctor said, “and we're transferring him to the ward now.”

Ian forced his eyes open, but the lids barely moved. He could see shapes moving - that might be the doctor, that might be Myra - and then another was coming towards him, a porter perhaps. The man came around the bed and stood behind Ian and leaned over.

“Hello mate,” said the man with the wild beard, “looks like you've been in the wars.”

Mark West lives in mid-Northamptonshire with his wife Alison and their son Matthew. Writing fiction since he was 8, he discovered the small press in 1998 and has been publishing regularly in it since, with over seventy short stories, a collection, two novels, a chapbook and a novelette to his name. His novella "Drive" has just

been published by Pendragon Press. He likes reading, walking, watching films and going on biking adventures with his son

Small Still Voices

By Sean P Chatterton

'We can't tell anyone about this, we simply can't. Absolutely no one must know.'

'No, it's you that can't tell anyone, who've I got to tell?'

The cold, wet winter rain was finally starting to let up. Staring out of the attic window, Josh wished it was summer again. Already it felt like it was a year since the accident. In reality it was only three months, the first four weeks of which he had spent in hospital. Now he was back home and re-located to the attic so his aunt could tend to him.

'Why the attic?' Josh wondered, 'It was so much nicer in my old bedroom.'

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye, and then tears started flowing ...

The autumnal trees lining the avenue were a lovely lustrous rustic colour, that terracotta hue they always seemed to have just before the leaves start their annual fall. The setting sun was low on the horizon casting long shadows which stretched right across the road. Susan pulled the visor down to shade her eyes then looked to the left to see if her sunglasses were still in the car. They weren't. It meant she had to squint to see the road properly. She could see young teenagers playing in the park to the left and cars parked tightly on the avenues right side.

Susan snapped her head round as one of her two boys on the back seat screamed.

'What's the matter Joel?' She asked.

Joel screamed again, clutching at his legs, 'Waaaa' he repeated, yelling at the top of his voice.

Susan heard a loud honk of a horn, whipping her head back round she realised she had crossed the centre of the road and gone through a red light. Just then she caught in the headlights in the corner of her eye of a large truck approaching fast from her right.

The sound of the crash had all of the kids in the park come running to see what had happened. The oldest and tallest carried a mobile phone and he used it to call the emergency services as soon as he saw the wreckage. The large truck had hit the car side on and pushed it into a lamppost on the opposite side of the road. It looked like it had almost cut the car in two.

As Mandy pushed Katie's buggy through the schools gates, she spotted her friend Lucy entering the nursery's door. She waved but Lucy wasn't looking her way.

A minute later Mandy was unstrapping Katie from her buggy and ushering her into the nursery for what Katie called her 'Katie play time'. As Katie ran off to her friends, Mandy approached Lucy: 'Have you got time for a coffee this morning? I need a chat.' She asked.

'Sure. Yours or mine?'

'I've got chocolate biscuits.'

Laughing, Lucy replied; 'Yours then.'

Sitting at the breakfast bar in Mandy's kitchen Lucy recognised the look on Mandy's face. The crinkles at the corners of her eyes gave her away. She was clearly worried about something. The last time she saw her like this, Mandy had thought her husband Jeff was having an affair.

'So what's up Mandy? What's the problem?'

Sitting down and cradling her cup in both hands, Mandy pursed her lips, clearly deciding what to say, or how to say it.

'Come on. Spit it out girl.' Lucy said struggling to sound cheerful.

Mandy took a slow sip of her coffee and replied: 'Last Friday, there was a problem at the nursery. They "lost" Katie for over an hour.'

'What?' Lucy said incredulously.

With that Mandy told her the saga of what happened on Friday.

Katie had wandered off. She had managed to get through a security door and entered the main school where she had been found talking to an older girl who was sobbing. Another pupil found the pair of them in the toilets.

'Apparently the other girl had just lost her father and Katie was cheering her up as much as she could.'

'Well that's typical Katie. She is the caring type.'

'Yes, but that's not the problem Lucy. Somehow Katie managed to get through a locked door. One with one of those key code punch the numbers in things.'

'That's odd, how did she do that? I thought only the teaching staff had those door numbers?'

‘That’s right. But Katie said her granddad had given her the number as they walked together to the other girl.’

‘I thought her granddad was dead?’

‘Yes he is. He died just before Katie was born.’

Slightly perplexed Lucy thought about this for a moment then asked: ‘Could it have been, I dunno, a caretaker claiming to be her granddad?’

‘No. She described Jim perfectly. Right down to that awful green cardigan he wore all the time.’

Carl was folding his karate suit and putting into his sports bag when he heard his mother come down the stairs. He swore under his breath as he had hoped to avoid another confrontation, especially as he had a grading tonight. He went to the sink and filled his water bottle. When training he lost several pounds of body fluid, just sweating it out, and if he didn’t replace it he would quickly feel faint.

‘You still here Carl?’ Katherine called as she reached the hallway.

Carl didn’t know if to reply, and face another argument or try and slip out the back door. ‘I’m just about to leave mom.’ He replied half-heartedly.

Katherine entered the living room, a look of disdain twisting her face as she saw the state of it. His clothes were everywhere; empty pizza boxes and beer cans littered the floor. It could have been a student’s flat, if Carl weren’t approaching forty.

‘Are you ever going to tidy this room?’

‘Yeah, sure. Later.’

Looking at the sports bag clutched in his hand, she said reproachfully; 'You're not off to your bloody karate thing again are you? Don't you have better things to do?'

'No I don't so yes I am off training again, and yes I will be going for a beer afterwards before you ask.'

Katherine crossed her arms and stood with her back straight, 'Carl you are a mess. You don't see your sons. You spend all of your time at karate and in a bar. You need to get a grip. You are a single father now. You have to care for your boys.'

'Get a grip? I have a cabbage tied to a life support machine in hospital. The other twin is dead from the neck down, and my ex-wife' he spat as he said this, 'My ex-wife caused this by not paying bloody attention when she was driving the car. What could I possibly need to get to grip with?'

His anger rose as he spoke. He knew he shouldn't be angry. His grief councillor told him that it was one of the typical stages of grief; that he had to let go of it if he wished to move on in his life. But he couldn't help it. Susan had crashed their car, killed herself, and damn near killed their twins, Josh and Joel. Damn, why did this fucking mess make him so angry.

Katherine uncrossed her arms and moved to offer Carl a compassionate embrace, but he shied away. To mask her discomfort, she sniffed, wrinkling her nose.

'You best have a shower before you train. You stink.'

'There's a shower at the gym, if I leave now I'll grab a shower before I start my grading.'

'You better, or your stink will knock your opponent out let alone your kicks.'

She chuckled.

Carl's shoulders sagged a little, 'Will do mom, catch you later.'

'Oh and don't forget you have an appointment at the hospital tomorrow. We have to discuss Joel's treatment with Doctor Roberts.'

Carl grunted, gave his mother a peck on the cheek and left.

Staring at Joel lying on the hospital bed Carl didn't know what to think. The ECG showed minimal brain activity. There were drips and other things attached to his son. He looked frail. Not how a normal ten-year-old should. He should be up and running around with his friends. Not lying there, looking like a corpse. A solitary tear escaped from his left eye.

'As I said, Mister Holmes, we have to make a decision.'

The voice of Doctor Roberts snapped Carl out of his reverie.

'What happens if he doesn't respond?'

'Basically, there are two likely outcomes.' The tall grey haired doctor looked at his notes, flicking through the pages on the clipboard as he spoke.

'Joel is currently assisted by the life support machine. We don't know how much his body has become accustomed to this. We are hoping he doesn't need it, but we don't know. This is why we would like to switch it off and monitor his vitals.'

'But surely switching off his life support kill him.'

'As I said, one of two things will happen. Either he will remain the same, in this vegetative state, or he will deteriorate. But until we switch the machine off, we won't know, not for certain.'

'I need to think about this.'

'Of course. Take as long as you need, but be aware the longer you leave it, the more likely it is that Joel's body will become dependent on the life support machine.' Doctor Roberts paused. 'And as much as I hate to say this, such a thing has financial ramifications.'

Carl felt his face redden with anger.

'That's all you doctors think about isn't it. The bloody money!' With that, he stormed out.

Mandy opened the door, to discover her brother Carl standing in front of her.

Throwing her arms around him, she hugged him tight. When she eventually disentangled herself, she invited him in.

Over several cups of coffee (and a fair few chocolate biscuits) Carl explained how doctors wanted to switch off the Joel's support. He couldn't afford the medical bills and his insurance were starting to write letters in red ink. He half sobbed as he talked. The decision was crippling him.

'Have you talked to Mom about this?' She asked.

'How can I? She moved in with me to provide constant care for Josh. I can't ask her for dad's money as well.'

'She would give you the lot in a heartbeat if it would help and you know that Carl.'

He turned the cup in his hands, staring at the dregs as he did.

'I don't know what to do, Sis.'

They talked some more, with Carl admitting that he even missed the way the twins would finish each other's sentences, despite the way it *used* to be annoying.

Mandy stood, putting her arms around Carl's sagging shoulders. He sounded beat; ground down. This wasn't her big strong brother, the one who waded into the pond when her small boat had over turned to save her from drowning. The fact the duck pond was only a foot deep and she could have easily stood up hadn't stopped her from being terrified and him from becoming her hero. Ever since that day they had been close, as close as any other brother or sister had ever been.

She noticed the time on the kitchen clock. 'Shit'

'What?' asked Carl.

'I have to collect Katie from school I should have been there five minutes ago.'

'I'll drive you.' Carl said.

'It's quicker to walk through the alleys. Want to come?'

'Sure.'

At the school, they found Katie helping the nursery staff do the washing up, completely not bothered about her mum being a little late. Mandy apologised profusely to Katie's teacher Mrs Cody and helped Katie dry her hands on the towels and got her ready to leave.

'Mrs Coates, do you mind if I ask, has Katie mentioned her granddad to you?'

Mandy stopped in her tracks; a slow and quizzical 'yes' emerged from her lips.

'Katie tells us she talks to him a lot, and apparently he's a lovely man. I ask because we are having a help the aged event in a couple of weeks, and we wondered if he might like to come along.'

'I doubt it.'

'Well if you could ask Mrs Coates.'

'I can't ask him. He's dead.'

Carl asked back at Mandy's house 'How long has Katie been talking to her dead granddad then?' She couldn't quite tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

'I found out about it a couple of weeks ago when she wandered through a locked door at nursery. Apparently Jim told her the door lock's numbers.'

'Seven, one, eight five?'

Mandy snapped her head round so fast she heard it click, 'What the...'

Carl absently scratched his head.

'How did you know the number?' she demanded.

'Sorry. The number just came to me.'

'Shit' Mandy took a gulp at her coffee, wishing it were something stronger.

'Why are things getting weird around here?' she asked no one in particular.

Katie wandered into the kitchen, the shouting distracting her from her cartoons on the television.

'Mummy. What's up?'

'Nothing dear. Your Uncle Carl and I were just talking about how you have been talking to Granddad, that's all.'

'Katie darling?'

'Yes Uncle Carl.'

'How long have you been talking to Dad, sorry, Granddad?'

Katie pouted her bottom lip as she thought about this. As she shook her head from side to side her blonde hair shook in a way that reminded Mandy just how cute and adorable she could be, especially when she tried to wrap herself around Mandy's little finger to get a new toy, or something that she wanted.

'Since Auntie Susan went to live with him, I think.'

Carl dropped the cup he was holding. It shattered on the tiled floor. His mouth sagging open.

Mandy got up to deal with the spillage. 'Katie, darling, I want you to stop talking like that. You've upset uncle Carl now. Say sorry for saying such silly things.'

Carl found his voice, 'Do you speak to Auntie Susan as well?' His whisper was the kind that carries miles.

'No, she's never liked me so I don't talk to her. I think Granddad does, do you want me to ask him?'

'Yes please.'

'Okay' with that Katie turned to stroll from the kitchen as if she had been talking about nothing more significant than combing the hair on her 'My Little Pony'.

'We have to tell dad.'

'How?'

'We can't let them pull the plug on your life support. It will kill you.'

'But you are not working. Your body doesn't do what you want to. It's broken.'

'And you're in a coma.'

'Can't you talk at all?'

'Tried, but all I can do is squeak.'

'We have to find a way.'

The phone woke Carl from his drunken slumber. He had fallen asleep on the sofa again. Rolling off the stained couch, he crushed several empty beer cans and food packets as he lumbered over to the phone.

'Yeah'

'Good morning to you as well Carl.'

Carl slumped back down on a chair piled high with dirty washing. 'What 'cha want sis?'

'You're not going to believe this, but I got a message from Dad.'

Carl's foggy mind didn't connect the dots straight away, 'What does he want?' He said this before his brain engaged, 'Hold on! He's dead. How did you get a message from him?'

'Katie said she asked him about Susan for you.'

Carl tried to swallow, but the huge lump in his throat wouldn't let him.

'You still there, Carl?'

He managed to croak a reply; 'I'll be over as soon as I can.' Putting the phone down, he put his face in his hands and cried.

A little over two hours later he was knocking on Mandy's door. She answered, still in her dressing gown, looking like she had cried herself out of tears. They went through

to the kitchen where Katie was eating a bowl of Cheerio's. She looked up and waved to Carl as he entered.

'Katie dear, can you tell Uncle Carl what you told me this morning.'

Katie finished her mouthful. 'Granddad said Auntie Susan says sorry.'

Carl felt like a hammer had hit him. It took him a minute to find his voice;

'Anything else?'

'Yes. Auntie Susan asked me to tell you the boys are broken. They need to hold hands to fix the break.'

Carl reached for the counter to stop the world swaying. He felt queasy, numb, dislocated from this world.

'Was that it?'

'Yup, other than to say do it soon, or they'll both be joining her.' She went back to her Cheerio's for another mouthful before ending "I like her now, she is a lot less angry than she used to be.'

With that Carl collapsed to the floor.

'This is most irregular.'

'I don't care Doctor Roberts. It's something I have to do.'

'But I don't see any medical reason for it. There is no precedent.'

'I still don't care. I want you to arrange for Josh to be moved to this hospital so he and Joel can hold hands when you unplug his life support.'

'Mister Holmes, I understand your concerns about your twins, but there is no benefit to moving Josh here. As you know, and must understand, he's broken his

neck, which means he is immobile from the neck down. In my medical opinion, it won't make the slightest bit of difference if the two boys are holding hands. None.'

'I don't care. It's what they, sorry, I want.'

'There will be risks involved with moving Josh. After all, it's not something we do every day.'

Carl stood adamant. He would not be denied this. He had showered and shaved. For the first time in ages he had a purpose. He had put on his clean suit and even brought Mandy with him for back up. He was going to do what Susan had said.

'OK, we'll get this arranged. But it will take a day or two.'

Once they were back in the car Mandy spoke for the first time since their visit to the hospital and speaking to Doctor Roberts.

'You only have the word of Katie about this.'

'I know, but I *feel* it's the right thing to do.'

'I really don't know what Mum will say. If she found out Katie was speaking to Dad, she'd freak out I'm sure.'

Three days later Carl, Mandy, and Katherine were in the private room with Joel, as they waited for an orderly to bring Josh up from the ambulance bay.

Katherine held Mandy's hands in hers. They had a whispered conversation as Carl just watched Joel's laboured breathing. He desperately hoped he hadn't left it too late.

'Carl.'

'Yes?'

‘How do you tell the twins apart? I thought they were identical.’

‘Something Dad spotted when they were six months old. Josh has a spot green in his eyes, whereas Joel’s are all blue.’

‘Aah, yes I remember now.’

Just then the orderly knocked on the door and pushed the bed with Josh on into the crowded room. A little shuffling took place before he could get the two beds alongside each other. Carl walked between them in the small gap and picked up Joel’s right hand. As he picked up Josh’s left hand, he thought he could sense a tingle. Putting the boys’ hands together he gave the nod to Doctor Roberts.

Doctor Roberts moved over to the life support machine, noted the numbers on the dials, then pressed the large, round red button to switch it off.

Nothing happened.

Everyone waited for several minutes, and still nothing happened.

Joel continued breathing, Josh still not moving.

‘I’m sorry Mr Holmes, but as I did tell you, I really didn’t expect it to make any difference.’

Katherine clung to Mandy’s arm, sobbing gently. ‘I wanted it to do *something*.’ She told her mum.

Carl stared at the twins, to Josh on his right, Joel on his left. Then Joel slowly opened his eyes, blinking several times. Turning his head to his father, he weakly croaked, ‘Dad, we...’ On Carl’s right, Josh raised his hand and completed the sentence ‘love you.’

‘Granddad?’

'Yes Katie.'

'Should I tell Josh and Joel we can hear their mind talk?'

'No darling, let's keep that a secret for the moment.'

Sean has been a reader of Science Fiction and Fantasy since he could read.

Introduced to Tolkien's middle earth, and to the grand fathers of modern SF: Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C Clarke and E. E. "Doc" Smith, at a young age gave Sean an active imagination and a yearning for something more.

Now as an adult, he works on internet marketing. Which pays the bills, but isn't what you can call world changing. The death of his older sister from cervical cancer in 2010 made him realise that his childhood ambition of being a writer would slip him by if he did not make serious efforts to make that dream come true.

It took him just one year to get his first short story published, and like the world famous grandfather of modern SF, Sir Arthur C. Clarke, his first published short story was of a teleport accident. This was sheer coincidence but one that Sean is very proud of. He now produces short stories on a regular basis and has nearly a dozen published stories to his credit.

The first full length novel is on its way...

Sean's website is: <http://www.seanpchatterton.co.uk/>

Here are a couple places of where Sean has been published:

www.absentwillowreview.com; www.365tomorrows.com

The Man in the Hills

By Jeremy Simons

The place was Ward 5, Louisiana. Just off to the right of Highway 4 West, there was an old dirt road. It was actually the first true road after entering the county of Ward 5. It was really more of a beaten path rather than road thanks to lack of upkeep. Yet, a few years back when the Census came through making their pretty little green signs for all of the side roads in Caldwell Parish, they had put one up here as well. After all, it was on all the maps. The given name to this road was Hideaway Lane. Very few people actually knew this. Most didn't know this because they had never been down it; some because they were scared even to look in that direction when they passed by it; the majority of people didn't know this because the road sign was never there. The parish put up a new sign nearly every month. Each one lasted a week at the very most before it disappeared.

The road was a dead end in more ways than one. It led to absolutely nowhere. There had only been one house—more of a shack—on this road in its entire existence. It was perched atop a hill in the middle of the woods. It was said to have been abandoned for decades now. No one was sure if it was truly uninhabited or not.

All the residents of Ward 5 were afraid of this house. They were afraid of the road. In fact, nearly all of Caldwell Parish was afraid of it. The legend had stretched on to kids in LaSalle and Ouachita Parish as well. Well, they were actually more afraid of the only man said to have ever lived there. He was said to have been dead for many years now, but no one actually knew whether this was true or not. He had

not been seen for quite some time, but he had never been seen that much when he was actually believed to be living.

The man who was said to have lived there was a loner. Some would even go as far to say that he had been a hermit, a recluse. He never came down from atop the hill. How he managed to survive as long as people said he had baffled everyone. He had no friends; no family; no means of transportation; no electricity. He had no material things whatsoever.

Perhaps, that was why all the vicious rumours began spreading throughout the town about him. Some said he hunted and fished the creeks and ponds to take care of his hunger. They said he had an old well that he pumped water from. They said he made his own clothes from the animals he killed. No one knew for sure, though. In fact, most people questioned whether the man had ever really been seen or not. Most thought it was simply a tall tale started up by some over protective parent that wanted to scare their child from wandering off in the woods by themselves.

There had been so many adaptations of the story over the years that no one knew which was true (if in fact any were true). Some people said that he was crazy. Some thought he was ill. Some believed he was mentally handicapped. Some thought he just simply feared human interaction. The only similarity with the different stories was that everyone agreed that the man was far from normal.

A lot of people truly believed that there was not even a man in the hills.

Thirty years ago, the road received its fearful forthcoming when four teenagers were found brutally murdered inside the shack atop the hill. The man was never found but assumed dead.

Now, thirty years to the day of those horrendous and brutal murders, the man (or woman) that had committed those murders was still on the loose. No further evidence had ever been upturned on the case. In fact, other than the urban legends about that night, no one in Caldwell Parish talked about it. No one had been back up to that house since the cops and ambulances left there thirty years ago.

Four kids were traveling from downstate up to Arkansas. There were two guys and two girls. They decided to pull over in Caldwell Parish for the night and get some rest. All were college students and had limited funds. Rather than staying in the parish's lone motel or one of the few bed and breakfasts around, they chose to just rough it. They were traveling on Highway 4 West when the driver, Mark Staley, noticed the old dirt road that should have been labelled Hideaway Lane to their right. He could tell even at night that it was seldom travelled and thought, *what the hell. We can pull over and sleep for the night.*

The plan was just to pull off the highway and sleep, but that was not good enough. Mark announced that he didn't think it wise to leave the car parked in sight of the highway. They had all been drinking heavily and smoking marijuana. If a cop happened upon them while they slept, there was a possibility that all of them could end up in jail. Mark definitely didn't want that; he had a future to think of; they all did. He convinced the passengers to let him drive up the dirt road some. Mark noticed the lack of the road said and had no way of telling whether it was a dead end or not, but he didn't care. He drove well up the road making sure that no one was going to find them.

He pulled up in front of the shack, and since the road went nowhere past this, he had no other choice but to stop. Sleep was near for Mark until one of the

girls recklessly announced that they would be stupid for sleeping in the car when there was a house right behind them. It was a valid point. Each exited the confines of the car. Marissa, since it had been her idea in the first place, knocked on the door.

After realizing that no one was going to answer, Mark kicked in the door. It fell in on the first hit just as it had thirty years ago when the police first discovered the murders. They searched the home and found no one. They decided to sleep in the house. There were a few questions about what would happen if someone did show up, but there was never a definitive answer. The conversation ended with Mark saying what did it matter anyway; he explained they would all wake up as soon as the sun came up and be on their way. No harm, no foul.

Nearly an hour later, around two o'clock in the morning, the door entering the house from the back porch creaked open. A man entered the house. He looked to be much older.

Jason Reed, who was passed out at the kitchen table just inside the door, woke quickly. He felt the presence lurking behind him and immediately turned. The man loomed in the darkness. Jason panicked. He let out a scream that awoke Mark and Marissa, who were asleep in the lone bedroom. They came running.

Mark noticed the man standing near the open doorway. He was a rather small man, a bit stocky, but there were four of them. They could easily handle the situation if need be...or so he at first thought. Mark noticed the man was holding something firmly in his right hand. It appeared to be a machete.

"Who in the hell are you?" Mark asked. His eyes never left the machete behind the man's back except to try and warn Jason of its presence.

"I live here," the man said simply.

Jason and Marissa exchanged worried glances. It was at that time that Sara stumbled into the kitchen from the living room. She looked from Jason to her other two friends, then to the man. She started to speak, but the words were stuck in the back of her throat.

"We're sorry, man," Jason said defensively. "We didn't think anyone lived here. The place seemed abandoned. We can leave right now and pretend none of this ever happened."

"It's fine," the man said. His eyes never left Mark. This particular person could be trouble for him. He didn't like the way this kid was looking at him at all. "I own the place, but even I ain't brave enough to stay here."

"What do you mean by that?" Sara muttered.

"Y'all must not be from around these parts," the man spat as he took a seat at the table across from Jason. He laid the machete down atop the table.

"Is it that obvious?" Mark chimed in and laughed hesitantly. They all laughed.

All except the man.

"No, we're from down south," Marissa said. "We're just passing through and needed a place to stay."

"Quite alright, pretty lady. Anybody from around these parts knows all about this place. They steer clear of it, so I never have to worry about the place. I never thought I'd have to worry about out-of-towners."

Marissa grabbed Mark's hand and gave it a squeeze. She was uncomfortable, and it was obvious to everyone. *Pretty lady*. Just thinking the words sent a cold chill

creeping down her spine. "What happened?" she said, suddenly a little more courageous.

"Murder." The man couldn't have been any blunter than that.

"It's gonna take more than that to scare us away," Jason said. His eyes were fixated on the machete; it was smeared with red stains all up and down the blade.

"Murder occurs pretty frequently where we're from."

The man laughed. "That's good to know. Thirty years ago, four teenagers, two boys and two girls, were butchered in this very house. Body parts were missing. Bodies hung from the rafters. There was a head in the refrigerator. You may be used to murder but not this. This was one sick son of a bitch, kids, and the worst part is, he was never caught."

"Sounds like a tall tale to me," Mark said despite the gooseflesh dancing up his arms. "If you want us to leave, just ask."

"No need. You seem like good kids." His eyes wandered to a half-smoked joint resting atop an empty beer can sitting in the centre of the table. "I just saw your car sitting outside and thought I'd come warn you. If you're brave enough to stay here, then so be it. I won't stand in your way. Just don't wreck the place." The man laughed once more.

Mark and Jason exchanged glances once more as the man rose from the table.

Jason examined the blade once more as the man scooped up the machete. "I don't mean to pry, but what are you doing out with a machete this late at night?"

"I told you, I seen your car and came up to warn you."

"Do you really need the machete?" Jason asked.

“Yeah, there’s crazy people out here,” the man said and laughed hysterically.

The four of them watched the man exit through the back door and watched him disappear down the backside of the hill. They stared at each other in silence.

“Well that was sweet,” Mark finally said.

“Do you think he was for real?” Marissa asked.

“No way. I’m sure everyone is a little crazy in this hick town. He probably gets his rocks off on scaring out-of-towners. I don’t think we’ll be seeing him again. Let’s get some sleep.”

“You can’t be serious,” Sara said shakily. “I say we leave and never look back.”

“And go where?”

“What about that motel? I think we can afford one night in a cheap motel.”

“And who’s going to drive, Sara?” Mark asked. “I don’t know about y’all, but I know I’ve had way too much. I’ll be lucky if I can walk back into that bedroom.”

Jason laughed. “Yeah me, too.”

“I know I can’t drive,” Marissa chimed in.

“It looks like you’re on your own,” Mark said. He reached into one of his pockets and pulled the keys. “If you want to go, here.” He tossed them to her. “I think you’re on your own, though. It’s only a few hours until daylight. I say we get some rest and pull out first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Sara spat. “There is no way I can sleep in here after that.”

“Then leave, Sara.”

Sara looked comfortingly at her boyfriend, Jason, but Jason said nothing. "I don't feel comfortable driving."

"Then we stay here," Mark said. "If you want to stay up and keep watch, then suit yourself. You can sleep in the car tomorrow."

Mark and Marissa ventured back into the bedroom. Sara stood momentarily in the doorway between the kitchen and living area. She stared condescendingly at Jason. Jason flashed a wan smile as he patted his lap.

"You can't be serious," Sara said angrily. "I don't even want to look at you right now. Way to stand up for me back there." She stormed back into the living room leaving Jason alone.

But sleep did come for Sara, and it came quite quickly. It came quickly for all four of them.

Jason was once more passed out at the kitchen table nearly two hours later, at nearly four o'clock in the morning when the back door creaked eerily open yet again. An unopened can of Bud Lite sat in front of him. The half-smoked joint was now missing.

The man with the machete appeared behind him, but this Jason did not awake. The man reached out and grabbed a handful of the Jason's jet black hair. Jason's eyes slowly opened. They opened just in time to see the glistening blade of the machete coming at him. Jason couldn't fight back; he didn't even time to react. The machete sliced straight through his neck. The man sat the severed head down into the lap of the decapitated body.

The man had yet to make a sound. Without hesitation, he walked into the living room where he found Sara sleeping peacefully in the recliner. He sat the

machete down on the floor and walked in front of the sleeping girl, hovered over her momentarily before reaching down with both hands, grabbing her head, and snapping her neck like a twig. He lifted the deceased girl up on to his shoulder, scooped up the pillow that had been resting behind her head, picked up the machete, and made his way to the bedroom.

There he found Mark and Marissa sleeping soundly in his own bed. He laid the girl in his arms down quietly and slit both of their throats without so much as a second thought. After this task was done, he calmly placed the pillow over the girl's face in the bed. He reached into the front chest pocket of his overalls and pulled out a small pocket knife. With the knife, he slit both of the girl's wrists. Blood poured from her wrists, soaking his mattress red.

Despite the man's somewhat small stature, he lifted the boy from the bed with the littlest of effort. He proceeded to drag him out of the bedroom, through the kitchen, and on to the back porch. Once there, he strung him up from the rafter stretching out over the steps just as he had thirty years before.

Afterwards, he made his way back in to the bedroom. He pulled the girl from the recliner up off the bedroom floor and dragged her into the bathroom by the hair of her head. Once inside, he picked up the corpse and tossed it into the bathtub. He opened up the cabinet underneath the sink and reached in. After fumbling around in the dark for a moment, he pulled out an old and rusted hacksaw. He reached over in to the tub and proceeded to sawing on the girl's leg. It took some time and effort, but he managed to get the job done. With this done, he placed her left hand on the side of the tub making sure to keep her thumb on the inside and her pinkie on the

outside. He cut into her ring, middle, and index fingers simultaneously with the saw. It only took a few strokes before the fingers came free.

The man reached cautiously into his back pocket and revealed an empty, black Hefty bag. He put the machete in the bag first being careful not to rip through it. Then he bent down, found each of the three fingers, and tossed them in. He lifted the blood-soaked leg from amongst the bloody tub and flung it into the bag. He grabbed the saw and scurried off in to the kitchen.

The man sat the bag on the back porch and threw the headless body on top of the kitchen table. He then commenced with the hacksaw. He hacked off all four of the boy's limbs and hurled them into the bag. This was no doubt the longest and most difficult part of the entire procedure, but he got through it.

The man picked the head up which had fallen to the floor when he lifted the body and stopped cold. He was looking into the eyes of the head. He didn't like this. He pulled the pocket knife back out and carved out the eyes. He shoved both of them into his hip pocket. He also cut out the tongue and tossed it into the bag. He thought of taking the head with him but decided to leave it in the refrigerator.

He forced the pocket knife back into the same pocket with the eyeballs and scooped up the hacksaw. He stumbled out on to the back porch and scooped up the Hefty bag with his free hand and slung it over his shoulder. Without even questioning what he had just done, he departed the establishment. None of it at all weighed on his conscience in the slightest bit. He reached the edge of the woods at the bottom of the hill just as the sun began rising. He paused for a minute. He turned and took one final look back at the house, at his home. And finally, he was gone. He disappeared into the woods.

Nearly a week later, the Caldwell Parish Sheriff's Department received a rather odd phone call. It was from an anonymous caller and a blocked number. All there was to be known about the caller was that it was, in fact, a man. He said he was out late running errands a few nights before. He said he had seen a car pulled over at the bottom of Hideaway Lane. The dispatcher needed directions to know what road the mysterious man was talking about. He explained, and then he went on to state that the car had sat there for a minute or two and then went up towards the house. Also, he said that to his knowledge the car had yet to come back down.

Immediately after receiving the phone call, deputies went back out to the lone house on Hideaway Lane. The two officers were amazed to find an identical crime scene to the one that they had only heard about from thirty years before.

"Sheriff? There are four of them They're all dead," a deputy shouted over the radio. "It's just like the last time."

"And him?" the captain questioned.

"He's gone," the officer hesitantly replied. "We searched everywhere but couldn't even find a trace of him. He's long gone."

"That's too bad," the Captain said as he clicked off the radio receiver and began laughing uncontrollably.

Jeremy Simons lives with his wife and three young daughters in Grayson, Louisiana. He writes constantly in his spare time and is trying diligently to procure

representation for his four completed novels. His dream is to someday write full-time.

Jeremy has stories published across the internet with Carnage Conservatory and two with Aphelion. He also has one published in print in the 2014 summer edition of The Horror Zine.

MetalCrank

By Dave Fragments

Our room is a crooked, narrow off-ramp to mental hell. We kneel penitential in ashes and sackcloth by day and sin by night. It's almost morning before Tyler's key rattles in the lock. I hide behind the door. He stood bare to the waist, black grease streaking his flesh, his right hand glinting in the light. We share a bed and dreams ... engines throbbing between our legs, our bodies all hard and metallic.

"You're using?" I grab his arm and twist it to reveal a glittering metal hand turned to a living steel remnant. The drug takes your money first and your flesh slowly. He grabs a pitcher of water with the metal hand and drinks.

"It's not an artifact, just a dream figment. It'll be gone tomorrow."

"We agreed no more joy rides."

"No, you agreed. I didn't". I have bigger dreams: war machines ... cannons, tanks, troop carriers, gunships. I can kick my whenever I want." Tyler drinks a second glass of water, gulping mouthfuls. His hand changes back to flesh and blood. The rehydration causes vertigo and tremors. He grabs at my shoulder to steady himself. His heart is racing, his chest hot and hard against my chest.

"We keep doing this, we're doomed," I open his jeans and let my hands roam over his body. Sex, my human solution. My false hope. My bulwark against fate. Sex, my act of rebellion. We can't remain human and still abuse the drug. It's the final step into the gutter. We fall on the bed and he sleeps. I never tire of his body. But I can't sleep. My sweaty back sticks to the sheets. The nightly batch of crime calls chatters from the police scanner. Too many riders fused to bikes, the brain and body

in metal embrace, riding, crashing, burning, dying. Metallized fools remembered not in graves, but by burn-scarred concrete and pockmarked asphalt.

They call it MetalCrank. We call it heaven and hell.

The distinctive tap of metal-clad feet on wood stops outside our door. Our tickets slide under the door in a manila envelope. I stare at them for a very long time as the rays of the sun march across the floor past morning, past noon and into evening before Tyler stirs. He smiles and picks up the envelope.

“We should eat before I take you to the junkyard.”

“I’m broke. My trust fund is tapped out.” I lie. He laughs and throws the overdue bills at me.

“The Man said he didn’t want us starving and weak. We have enough left for a last meal.”

“Starving and weak? The aliens only care about our minds and my heart. Speaking of my heart, I simply closed my eyes and aimed my parents Beemer at a wall. I was hoping for coma and no resuscitation.” My parents are Earth worshipping fools. They think the Newcomers want to strip the planet of ores and upload our oceans for their starships. They want the Newcomers to create an agrarian paradise growing food for billions of explorers. Instead, mankind will be the foot soldiers, the fighting machines, the instruments of war.

“And became their poster-boy.”

The hair on my head hid the scars, but nothing hid the scar on my chest where they opened me for a new heart and lungs. I’m proud of my efforts.

“The Newcomers never thought that their poster-boy would end up living with another man, abusing drugs, and peddling his ass to strangers.”

“One good deed deserves another. I sold us,” Tyler kisses me.

“Too soon.”

“You'll love every minute.”

He knows what makes my blood rise. I crave to become what my family despises -- a metal monstrosity fighting aliens on strange planets. An overdose of MetalCrank is a one-way ticket. The Newcomers would hail use me as the mechanized soldier of the future. The only catch is that no matter how fast I sneak up on the mirror, my reflection always looks me straight in the eye.

We go to the kitchen and eat leftover Chinese takeout and stale pizza. Tyler's hand twitches as he opens the envelope. Our rides are confirmed. Soon whatever metal we touch will become permanently affixed to our flesh.

We steal my neighbor's hooptie. It isn't a real car. Real cars aren't allowed. The Newcomers took the old internal combustion engines and gave back fuel cells that don't pollute. The Junkyard is over a mile away. It deals with lost souls and discarded motors, transmissions, generators, and old turbines; once useful machines that mankind abandoned for Newcomer technology.

The owner waits, metal teeth gleaming, eyes twinkling from implants. Across one shoulder is a leather strap that ends in a black holster, pregnant with a 45-caliber revolver waiting to give birth to a bullet for the unworthy.

“You're late.” He isn't Miss Manners.

“I trust you made arrangements for both of us,” Tyler says.

“Word Bitch! It's not your usual motorcycles and dirt bikes. You've outgrown those toys. Motorcycles are so passé for the career of a lifetime. I have what you need.”

“Confucius say there are only two knights on a chessboard for a reason.” I make Tyler nervous. My words are nonsense and the Salvor sneers.

“We are in your hands obedient as junkyard dogs,” Tyler says. We walk through cast off metal stacked ten feet high to a brick shack. The place has that distinctive smell one finds in anterooms of hell and metal smelting plants. On a workbench behind some half-assembled metal bodies, something watches. It seeks pity.

“Someone else in here?” I ask.

“Only the vermin that crawled in from the streets.” He touches a control panel and a roller desk opens to reveal what was once a man. It lays an operating-table-like device, legs splayed, waiting for motors and gears, arms mere stubs with attachments for tools instead of hands. I gasp, step closer. Its torso is open, revealing artificial organs and metal organs throbbing inside. Machines feed it. Its eyes, well, its eyes are the *Pièce de résistance* of Newcomer tech; two metal orbs on stalks bobbing in and out of blood-red sockets. Specialty implants for only the most faithful of Newcomer stooges. This thing is aware, not comatose. It’s feeling the merging of metal with flesh, mind with silicon chips. My heart races. My manhood stiffens. My passions run amok. It fears both life and death and what it is becoming. I want to say, “Be not afraid. You are becoming divine.” I want to fall to my knees and beg the Salvor to do me like that, to rebuild me in the image of this boy-god.

Tyler nearly pees his pants in fear. His body shakes like a leaf on a dying tree.

“Christ, you are one sick fuck,” he says.

“What do you care? He can’t feel anything. He’s in a coma, waiting on more parts.” It was a lie, a damned lie. I wanted to be him because I would appreciate

what we would be when finished. The Salvor didn't stop at those words. "The little shit came here drunk, broke, begging for MetalCrank. I told him I'd rebuild him. Give him all the MetalCrank he craves ... When I'm finished, he'll call me father and I'll call him son."

They moved away but my eyes wouldn't leave the half-man on the table. Like me, he'd grown up obsessed with the sheer physicality of his body, grown too fast into manhood while still a little boy from living a life of pleasure, a life leaching off others, ill-formed, pampered. Our worlds begin and end in nihilism and oblivion. I wanted to be this torso, let the Salvor pluck me from the street, limb from limb, rip mind from body, and lay my soul bare on a steel table.

"I would worship you as god almighty when you were done," I say. The Salvor smacks the back of my head. Our eyes meet and lock.

"You're not worthy to wipe his ass,"

Tyler stopped the coming confrontation.

"Let's not forget why we're here. I want a fast ride in a big machine. Me first,"

"Your business is out back," the Salvor answers and we exit the building.

Two machines burn my eyes like a shot of whiskey burns the throat. Tyler stares at his vehicle: an off-world tank transport with giant treadles, energy beam weapons, launchers, comm-links, and four-inch cannon mounted where the driver might stand. My vehicle is a metal colossus, a hardened steel and heavy armor foot soldier.

Tyler throws a tantrum.

“Yo Dude, I wanted one of those big bikes with the three wheels or a four wheeler not a war wagon. I told you before, I don’t like being sealed in a metal box. I like being outside.” Tyler whines.

“Yo dude, do I look like I’m listening?” the Salvor shoves a hypodermic of MetalCrank into Tyler’s arm and empties it. It is too late to object. In a few minutes his flesh will transform into any metal it touches.

“Bastard.”

“Stand on the mounting bolts.” The Salvor points to the deck of the transport. Slowly, Tyler climbs onto the deck, slips off his shoes, and positions his feet. Auto-bolts twist into the bones of his feet and clamps spin around his ankles. MetalCrank turns the pain to pleasure. The Salvor steps behind him and cuts Tyler’s jeans and t-shirt from his body. He stands naked, metal creeping up his legs like a silver fungus.

“I don’t want to be a cannon.” Tyler’s voice is a high, whiny singsong.

“They tell me when the cannon fires it feels like an orgasm.”

“Suck my balls.”

“There you go, flapping your lips like a fat-ass brat.” The Salvor positions armor plates against both sides of Tyler’s legs. Auto-bolts fasten around his body. The upper assembly of the cannon -- the loading mechanism, recoil, and rear sights -- slides above Tyler’s head.

“Get this, and get it straight. Guys like you never learn until the likes of me teaches you a lesson. On Earth, you’re on a loser’s road to the gutter, prison and worse. Out there, you have a chance to live a life of honor and distinction.”

Defiant, Tyler curses and guides his arms into the upper assembly of the cannon. Several tons of steel encase him. The breech will fire through his chest. I can hear him moaning as the metal bonds with his body. The Salvor isn't done. He adds side-mounted machine guns and a dozen more weapons. Tyler is a war wagon, a human brain operating an artillery piece, the point man for a platoon.

"That's one helluva ride," I say. I remove my shirt. Sweat drips from my body. I need this change to be my suffering, my hell, my payment for a dissipated life.

"Your ride's over there."

"I want ... "

"You want shit." The Salvor readies my dose of MetalCrank.

"You don't understand. I want what you did to that man in your workshop," I blurt out my desires. His eyes narrow, bore into mine. I put my hand on his shoulder trying to reassure him. He shrugs me away. My thoughts swirl like fallen leaves.

"You playing me for a fool?"

"I sold the fatted calf for the banquet. I pawned my ten golden talents. The world needs to know how wrong I am. Make me something evil, something hateful. Any life is better than polishing my knob in Daddy and Mummy's basement until I die. I want the life of a derelict, a life to make those that raised me regret what they did."

"This isn't Judgment Day." His eyes lock on mine as he hoists the upper half of the armored automaton into the air. It waits. My heart pounds like a jackhammer. He makes me a pincushion of MetalCrank and I black out.

I wake naked, clamps hold me to the back half of the armor, stretch my body to fit the oversized framework. My joints and muscles burn.

“I'll give you a life of pain and regret, bitch,” the Salvor snarls. He presses my fingers into their depressions and screws the upper part of my new metal hands over my old ones. I wiggle my fingers and the metal underneath responds. The metal sucks at my flesh. He bolts metal arms over my arms, metal legs over my legs. Motors replace biceps and triceps, hydraulics replace thick calves, bolt-joint replace knees, and gears replace hips.

A highly instrumented and computerized metal breastplate will bevy new chest. More metal stabs me like bad seeds rooting for moisture.

“One day, you'll thank me,” the Salvor says, holding up the mask.

It's specially grim, stolid. It has those red LED eyes. He grins maniacally as he holds a knife above my face. He laughs with bloody delight as he cuts flesh away and gouges at my eyes. My skull creaks as he bolts the alien eyes into empty sockets. Then he cuts out my voice-box. Locks my jaw. Closes my nose. Removes my ears. My mind screams.

I can't control myself. I'm wired to a remote control. He makes me march into a shipping crate. I listen as he hammers boards and plywood, sealing me inside. I fall into a coma and let my flesh and bone turn to metal.

When they open the crate and walk me out, I am on an orbital platform circling a catalogued sun. I, who was once the clown-prince of the rich, a spoiled and supercilious brat, am a tool of the military. Life blows the big hairy schlong. They load me with ammunition and ship me to the surface of a planet. I kill strange bipedal creatures, lots of strange bipedal creatures. I pour my hate into their deaths.

Five planets, eight wars, and a century pass before I see Tyler again.

It's between missions. I'm assembling a new invasion force for an assault on Tau Ceti Prime. Tyler commands Squadron Red Alpha. It has the reputation for the highest victory and re-up rate in the army. Tyler is a leader: vital and integrated with his squad in ways that would be impossible had we remained together. His crew is fast, efficient, careful as it replaces his worn treadles, mounts a new cannon, adds new gamma-power energy motors, better armor, x-ray death beams, and the latest telemetry equipment. They do this in record time. He has found respect, valor, and honor.

Silence is the better part of wisdom today. I speak through the radio with a nondescript voice and hide my ID beneath my armor. He thinks I'm dead and I want no one to learn otherwise. I no longer need family, need friends, or confession. MetalCrank made me the ultimate weapon. My accomplishments will be a spectacular list of unexplained deaths that will never be less than Top Secret, Eyes Only. Mine is a centuries-old profession.

In the last great war on Earth they named me, for my type of war. I am RattenKreig. I hide and kill -- silent, unseen, unknown. My actions are unexpected. It is my life and your death if you oppose us.

Dave Fragments retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer and squirrels to write short stories and an occasional poem. He has published over 60 short stories in online publications and print anthologies plus poetry. For many years he did research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis

Messages From

By Bryn Fortey

What did I know about planets? Until my father started his rambling, nothing at all. Music is my bag, not space. Prior to this recent strangeness, Dad had no special interest in the subject either.

Delving into pop history, I knew there had been two different songs entitled *Venus*. America's Frankie Avelon and British singer Dickie Valentine had battled with their versions of Song A in 1959. Song B, the other *Venus*, charted three times: Dutch group Shocking Blue in 1970, Britain's Bananarama in 1986 and Don Pablo's Animals, from Italy, in 1990. Add in Mark Wynter's 1962 hit *Venus in Blue Jeans* and the famous Venus de Milo statue, and that was it. In other words, I knew nothing at all about the planet.

And then suddenly my father had claimed to be its representative on Earth!

Well, sort of...

Winter had supposedly moved to spring when a message had me driving back to the town of my birth. A bleak and unfriendly place even when a busy industrialised hub, which had worsened when the steel works closed and unemployment gripped the area in a cold embrace. Not a good place for someone whose musical ambitions stretched far beyond the gobby punk band limitations I'd grown up with.

Dad and I spoke at least once a week on the telephone and he would visit me a couple of times a year. Once it had been the two of them, but my mother had gone to her rest ten long years before. It had been a phone call that summoned me into this particular homecoming.

“Hello. Dan Jacob speaking.”

“Dan? Danny? This is Arthur Hemmings, I live two doors from your father.”

“Of course, Mr Hemmings,” I responded, knowing full well that this was likely to be a bad news call. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Danny. It’s your father, he’s in hospital...”

The long and the short of it was that Dad had suffered a stroke and if I wanted to see him before he died I had better get down there pretty damn quick. I called the hospital and had Mr Hemmings’ account verified. Yes, someone confirmed, his lasting was being considered in hours rather than days. A few more calls put my life on temporary hold and then I’d set off.

It was cold and damp, with a bitter wind blowing as I hurried from the car park to the entrance of the old King George Hospital. I had already been told that visiting times did not apply. The seriousness of his condition ensured I would be admitted at whatever time I arrived and could stay as long as I wanted.

Though everything I’d been told should have prepared me for the worst, it was nevertheless a shock when I saw him in one of the small single-bed rooms leading off the main ward. Dad, ghostly white and unmoving, was attached to an array of medical paraphernalia. There were normal hospital noises drifting in from outside, but within that small room there was only the beep and hiss of his mechanical aids.

“Dad?” I asked quietly, even though I’d been told he was not conscious. My voice sounded out of place, almost like an intrusion.

There was no response.

“Dad?” I repeated, but louder. “It’s Danny. I’m here now, Dad. For as long as it takes.”

Though he gave no sign of hearing me or of being aware of my presence, I had heard of cases where supposedly unconscious people had known what had been happening around them. So I stroked his cold hand and spoke occasionally, on the off chance that some sort of internal awareness would record that his son was with him.

Later, having been assured by a doctor that there were no signs of any immediate change in his condition - though that could not be guaranteed of course - I made my way to the little terraced house where I’d spent the formative years of my life. The hospital had both the house landline and my mobile number and would ring if need be.

After switching on the living room’s coal-effect electric fire, hoping it would at least reduce the chill, I went back out and rang the bell two doors away.

“Ah, Danny,” said Mr Hemmings. “You made it then.”

“Of course. I just wanted to thank you for letting me know.”

“It’s why I had your number. Your father asked me to ring you if anything ever happened to him. Have you been to the King George yet?”

“Yes,” I replied, nodding. “I sat with him a spell. I’m just checking the house now, maybe have a bite to eat, then go back in.”

“I’ve just put the kettle on,” said Mr Hemmings, opening the door wider and standing to the side. “Come on in and have a cuppa. There is something I think I should mention, about your Dad.”

And so I learned that my father had developed a strange fixation with the planet Venus a couple of months before being laid low by the stroke. I wouldn't have guessed he even knew the planet's name, let alone become interested in it.

"Ted got me to Google it and print off every scrap I could find about it on the internet," Mr Hemmings told me.

"Huh!" I snorted. "I wanted to buy him a computer but he wouldn't let me."

"You'll find a folder somewhere in the house, full of everything Venus related he could get his hands on."

We both sipped our hot teas. His, I'd noticed, well sugared. Mine, always with an eye on my waistline, unsweetened. "He never told you what sparked this sudden interest?" I asked.

"No, afraid not."

I let the conversation drift into generalities and once my china mug was empty I refused the offer of a refill and made my excuses.

Back at dad's house I found a tin of soup which I heated in his microwave and after that made my way back to the hospital. I would look for the Venus folder some other time.

It had been a severe stroke, a doctor told me, and though they were doing all they could the prognosis wasn't good. To put it bluntly, my father was not expected to survive. He might possibly achieve brief moments of consciousness, even awareness, though maybe neither.

As I sat by his bed I could feel panic spreading through my mind. Though nothing had been said, I guessed that if he didn't die naturally it would eventually be

suggested that his life support systems be turned off, and I would be expected to say yes or no!

Could I make that sort of decision?

“Don’t worry, Danny, it won’t be on your shoulders.”

Shocked, I looked up. Dad was still lying there, still joined to the various life sustaining nuts and bolts, but his eyes were open and looking straight at me.

“Dad!” I gasped. “You’re awake! Shall I get a nurse? Call the doctor?”

“Just listen to me, son. I have to try and tell you where I go, what I see...”

Bloody hell! I thought. Was this a miracle or what!

“I walk through the dry desert, past large slab-like rocks. I see evidence of volcanic activity...”

His voice was firm and clear, with none of the tremulous tones I would have associated with someone in his condition. “Where is this, Dad?” I asked, wondering if I should really be reporting his improved situation to one of the nursing staff.

“Venus,” he replied.

Mr Hemmings words came flooding back to me. Venus? And this from a man who would not even cross the channel and visit France! “Nobody has been to Venus!” I exclaimed. That much I did know.

“Not physically, of course, lad. The atmospheric pressure is so strong I’d be crushed. But, how shall I word it? Mentally, spiritually... The sort of things I’d always thought of as mumbo jumbo. Half-cocked nonsense better suited to you youngsters rather than an old ‘un like me.

“It seems as if I’m there in body but I’m not. So I can withstand the atmospheric pressure and the burning heat. I’m not poisoned by breathing all the carbon dioxide in the air.”

Never mind the stroke, my father had obviously suffered some sort of breakdown. I was sure he would soon start telling me about the little green men he met on his travels.

“I must get someone,” I said, backing towards the door.

“Hang on, Danny! Let me finish...”

But I was out of the small room and rushing to find a nurse. The one I found was surprised at what I told her and hurried with me to see for herself. Dad, eyes closed again, was as unresponsive as he had been since his initial collapse. She checked the machines and studied whatever information they could impart. Then checked Dad himself. There were no indications he had even been awake let alone speaking.

“You must have been mistaken,” she decided. “There can be wheezing noises from the throat area. Even the machines make odd sounds at times.”

“I can assure you...” I started to say, but I could see the disbelief in her face and when coupled with Dad’s return to a silent coma-like sleep, I felt a sense of doubt myself. Maybe I had nodded off momentarily. Maybe it had been a dream. “It seemed so real,” I finished lamely.

“Mr Jacob is quite stable at the moment,” said the nurse, “and you are under a lot of stress. Why don’t you go and get some rest. We’ll call you if there is any change.”

It seemed like a good idea.

Poking around, back at his house, I soon found the Venus folder. Scientific papers, photographs, tabloid pieces on various crank connections. All symptomatic of someone with an interest in the subject, but offering no explanation as to why. But at least it confirmed what Mr Hemmings had told me and I now knew where dad got his odd bits of information. I could not have made even a guess at anything about the planet. So maybe I had not dreamt it. Maybe my father really had opened his eyes and spoken to me.

I rang Bernie after putting the folder to one side. Bernie Lipton, head guy and owner at Triple D Records. Deep Down and Dirty, and you'd better believe it! I was a producer, songwriter and general dogsbody with the company and had been due to oversee a session with a visiting veteran American bluesman. Bernie would either have to postpone the recording or get another producer to take my place. His choice.

"Okay, kiddo, leave it with me," boomed Bernie.

"Sorry to drop you in it like this."

"Not your fault, Dan. I'll let you know what we decide, and you keep me up to date about your old man. Okay, Amigo?"

"Okay, Bernie. Thanks for that."

The next day, back at the King George, I sat with my unconscious father. The doctor's round had already taken place and I had stretched my legs while the bed linen was being changed. Back in his room I stood to one side while the regular BP and

temperature checks were carried out, sitting back down when the nurse wheeled her apparatus trolley away.

“Right, lad,” said my father, “with any luck we should be free from interruptions for a bit.”

I knew I hadn’t been dreaming before!

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded.

“Language, Danny!”

“Sorry, Dad,” I felt twelve years old again. “But what is going on?”

“I was contacted, son, a couple of months back, by Venusian entities. Not in person, of course. They didn’t knock at the door. It’s a telepathic sort of thing. Look, I quite understand you are finding it difficult to take in.”

Difficult? Impossible would have been a better word! “Dad...” I started to say, but drifted into silence as I struggled to find the right words.

“I found it hard to accept myself, at first,” he continued, filling the gap.

“There have been others before me, making similar claims. Some were charlatans; false prophets. Others were earlier contacts, individuals who collapsed under the weight of incoming knowledge.

“The Venusians have learnt a little each time so that when it was my turn there was no mental meltdown. Instead, sadly, my physical frailty was such that I couldn’t withstand the shock of it all, resulting in my stroke.”

“Dad!” I shouted, interrupting him. None of this gibberish mattered. There was only one thing I wanted to know. “Does this mean you are going to recover?”

It was as I spoke that the realisation was driven home: his eyes were open and staring directly into mine, but nothing else about him showed signs of life. His

mouth remained shut, lips not moving. The words I heard were echoing around my head, not being verbalised in spoken language.

“I see it’s striking home now, Danny. Good! But as to your question, no, I’m not going to recover. As a matter of fact I should already be dead. The Venusians are keeping me alive for a little longer, for purposes of their own, but their powers are not godlike and their control will soon fail.”

“But dad!” I gasped. I felt agitated, mentally and physically, finding it hard to draw air into my lungs. “But dad,” I said again, spluttering, “this is madness!”

“Everything alright?” asked a nurse, coming into the room.

My father’s eyes were closed and he had withdrawn from my mind. He was just another stroke victim again, waiting to drift into the arms of death. “Yes, thanks,” I replied bleakly, “as much as it can be.”

The pattern was repeated over the following few days. Dad would open his eyes and link minds with me when we were alone but lapse straight back into unconsciousness as soon as we were interrupted. In this way I learned something of his predecessors.

George Adamski had got one thing right, that Venusians lived underground on the planet, but had cracked under the strain. Orthon, the blond and tanned humanoid, had been a figment of his imagination; dreamt up when he couldn’t accept the true nature of the beings who had contacted him.

Howard Menger, on the other hand, was merely a trickster looking for an angle. His ‘space brothers’ were pure fabrication.

“But what is the purpose of it all?” I asked. “What reason lies behind these contacts?”

“I don’t really know, lad. I think that they are reaching out to Earth, through me. I assume I am some sort of channel, but I don’t know why.”

Then there were the Venusians themselves. Existing under such extreme conditions, they had to be very different from us, but Dad was no help there.

“They enter my brain the way I enter yours,” he told me, “but I’ve never seen one. They’ve let me see the surface of Venus through their eyes, but not underground where they actually live.”

How my father was able to communicate with me was another mystery. It was through no effort on his part, so I could only assume it was under the control of his extra-terrestrial friends. Yet, strange as it most definitely was, it had given rise to an extended timeline between us, and I was grateful for that.

The hospital staff were, however, quite frankly bemused. Happily so, since their patient was surviving beyond expectations, but bemused just the same. I had rushed down because Dad was only thought to have hours left, and days later he was still alive. The doctors were mentally scratching their heads, but I could hardly tell them it was all down to interplanetary intervention. He wasn’t improving, but he wasn’t deteriorating either.

A situation that was about to change.

I was sat in the small room, looking at my father, waiting for his eyes to open and for him to connect with me again. I was convinced, by then, that all he told me was true.

Where it was leading, and what the Venusian's intentions were, I had no idea.

Neither did Dad, but for now that didn't matter. This extra period of communication between us was sufficient in itself.

Come on, Dad, I thought impatiently, eager to hear from him.

"No...NOOOO!"

His voice screamed through my brain; full of hurt, pain, fear, panic. I slipped from the chair onto my knees, gripping my head in my hands, trying to blot out the terrible anguish that splashed so vividly across my mind.

"NOOOOOOO!"

With horrified amazement I looked up and saw that my father's whole countenance was changing. His eyes open, bulging...seeing... god knew what, while the rest of him started to shimmer, becoming more and more blurred. And then...

It was no longer my father on that hospital bed!

My first impression was that dad had been replaced by a tree trunk; glistening and bark-like, oozing greasily from a multitude of cracks that covered its exterior. Fleshy looking tendrils waved from the top and bottom. A harsh sounding squeal filled the room.

I knocked over the chair I had been sitting on as I clambered to my feet, trying to scramble away from the monstrosity. As I did so a nurse, summoned by the noise, came running in, halting when she saw the thing.

"What the fuck!" she managed to gasp before the tendrils snaked out; twisting, grappling, capturing. Too horror-stricken to move I watched as she was lifted, screaming, onto the trunk-like body and was dissolved into those hundreds of cracks.

That was when I fainted.

By the time other members of the staff entered the room, I discovered later, Dad's body was back on the bed. Just his body because, yes, he was dead, and it was assumed that the shock of that had been why I fainted.

Nobody else had seen the Venusian, if that had been what it was. Nor had anybody seen the nurse enter the room and it wasn't until later that her absence was noted. By the time the totality of her disappearance was realised and investigated, I knew better than to volunteer any information. The police did speak to me as I had been on the ward when she had last been seen, but they didn't expect me to know anything and I didn't disappoint them.

I put Dad's Venus folder in the coffin with him, consigning both to the crematorium flames. I put his little terraced house in the hands of a local estate agent and said my goodbyes to Mr Hemmings. I returned to work at Triple D Records and tried to convince myself that none of the Venus stuff had really happened.

Trouble is though, I've started having these dreams. I walk alone through a dry desert-like terrain, passing large slabs of rock. Opaque clouds are overhead and everything shimmers with a heat I cannot feel. I wake, sweating, my mind in a panic.

I wake in terror, and know real fear. These dreams are becoming more often, more vivid, and I dread going to sleep. I know that sooner or later, the messages will start...

Bryn Fortey appeared in 1970 anthologies published by Sphere, Corgi, Sidgwick & Jackson and Fontana. Later, having been seduced by poetry, he was an award winning writer and editor, appearing widely in small press magazines. Since returning to fiction his stories have appeared in Shadow Publishing ('Horror! Under the Tombstone'), Gray Friar Press ('Terror Tales of Wales') and various titles from The Alchemy Press, who also published his debut collection 'Merry-Go-Round & Other Words'. Due later this year is a story in 'Kneeling in the Silver Light' edited by Dean M Drinkel, and one in the online 'Tigershark Magazine

Other People's Babies

By Jonathan Anderson

*Other people's babies –
That's my life!
Mother to dozens
And nobody's wife*

Sir Alan Patrick Herbert – 'Other People's Babies'. 1930

*The infant breaks its rattle, bites its nurse's nipple and strangles a bird well before
reaching the age of reason*

Marquis De Sade – 'Philosophy of the Bedroom'. 1795

How beautiful they sleep. So peaceful and innocent, their minds free of any corruption.

They know nothing of love - of hatred or prejudice. Care nothing for sex, race or creed. Life's pressures are light years away. All they crave are food and sleep. Their survival instincts do not exist; their reactions not yet considered. All they ask is for the opportunity to nurture and grow. To develop and learn. Emotions do not dictate their actions – there is no comprehension of anything so complicated. They have yet to be bullied or to bully; have yet to adapt as a means to survive. They cry when they're disturbed, uncomfortable or hungry. Nothing more. They're plucked from the warm womb, placed against the nurturing breast with no knowledge of what awaits them and feed. When pulled from the teat, they find solace in incubators and cribs, resting their full stomachs till their pangs demand more. They offer so much.

So much to their parents.

They cannot see but they already know family and friends.

Hospital cots. A dozen of them, all full. Boys and girls sleeping together as babies before childish compulsions drive apart. A desire to be separate will drive them throughout their infant years but their hormones will dictate their future. A yearning to be together again will soon bestow itself upon them. For some, it will be all too soon. For others, it will bide its time, waiting until it is almost too late. And there will those whose needs will never change; to stay with their own sex will always be their way. No reason to join with their opposite; to take a taste of something they know is not theirs. There will be lonesome periods for all; times filled with confusion and dread. Their bodies will develop and change as memories of the womb's nourishment is absorbed for ever. Lost in blood and DNA.

Lifetimes given breath without their knowing. A lifetime fostered and forged.

My children.

All of them. My children.

A rainbow of skin. Black, white, yellow, brown. All stained with the fading remnant of a pink womb encompass red muscle and white bone. All identities hidden by the clothes handed over by doting parents. The softest fabrics. The cutest designs. Tiny cotton uniforms homogenizing them before they even have chance to mumble a single word.

Up till now a slapped scream has been their only utterance to the world and already they are succumbing to society's regime. It hardly seems fair. All virtue lost before their first day is out. Why must they be forced to comply? Why can't they remain naked? Remain free? Remain as pure out of the womb as they were when in it. Feeding. Sleeping. Breathing.

The Lord gives and society hath taken away.

It feels cruel to regulate them before they've tasted anything beyond their mother's milk. Today's parents cannot understand how lucky they are. They stand beneath a corridor's garish lights, peering in through the ward's window, often with their own parents in tow. They wave and they wave at the poor creature as though it will recognise them. But who are they? Surely these people are those who robbed them of salvation and forced them to face humanity's militia. Some of them point at me, demanding I disturb their particular cherub's slumber. They want me to lift the offspring up as though it were an award, parading it towards those who missed the birth. Too many feel they are witnessing a glimpse of innocence before it is tarred over by a learned existence. But they're too late. Don't they see the clothes?

I approach their chosen one. The family cry. The child cries. They all cry. I watch them and hear their screams and my anger is pure. Rage born when I was their age. Aimed towards those forcing their own distress upon their young. They care for nothing beyond the satisfaction of their own desires. Satiated whims. They insist I become their servant; the child becomes their toy. A status symbol. A prize exhibit in a medical fair. They care not for the child's need to sleep – for the others and their needs. They just want to flaunt their achievement. They have that burn to boast: 'look what I can do'.

They are all the same. Not one offers anything different. Not one asks to wait. They lean against the glass and tap and knock and bang thinking that only their child will hear. They forget how sound transmits. They forget that if one can hear, they all can hear. And do they feel sorrow for the disruption? Do they apologise for making them cry? For their desperation? No.

No.

They smile and giggle and think the whole scenario is adorable; a piece of entertainment acted out on a sterile stage solely for their pleasure. Their movements, their faces, their smiles. All of them blur into a stream of white as my hatred burns red. They become rainbows without definition. Not one maintains form.

They affix their unity on their children and I see a line of faces combust as they succumb to my wrath.

I will not let me own girl suffer such indignity. My own child will not follow their rules. My own child will not submit to such hypocrisy. My baby will sleep in her cot; free; unfettered. As naked in the ward's artificial womb as she had been in her mother's. I fought too hard to conceive to ruin the child's life before it has started. To smother her in conformity would be equivalent to smothering her face with a pillow. All air would be removed, taken by vile pollutants. My girl will be rewarded for the journey she has made, not imprisoned. Not forced to endure just because I am her mother. What right do I have to intern? Does my bringing her into this world mean I am free to dictate the direction she must take or the clothes she must wear? If she feels the need to be naked, then naked she shall be. I do not understand these parents who demand their child owe them something, just for being born. The child did not ask to make an appearance. It did not ask to be conceived. It has asked for nothing and already it is being punished; forced to comply with spiteful parents. Coerced and constrained like previous generations.

Science has robbed history of our souls. There was a time when people were born and allowed to run. No longer. Society, civilisation, culture, philosophy; call it

what you will. They're different headings for the same meaning - different names for the keys that lock the cells.

My child will be born outside, not in a box.

And her conception is getting close.

Tradition failed me. I had a man, once. A man I believed. A man I loved and whom I thought loved me. Nature failed us. Our urges failed us. Our bodies failed us.

And as the years past, science failed us.

We suffered the regimes devised by strangers with other agendas. Cruel timetables concocted by computers. Performance reviews. And still nothing.

As the time passed and desperation became something more than a need that could be lived with, lovers were taken to ease the pressure on him. Hours spent in alleyways and cars. Underwear in puddles; plugs inserted to keep the spilt seed in place. But try as I might I could not find my daughter's grip. I did everything possible. My looks and body, my overt-eagerness: they all made the approaches easy. They provided me with whichever man I thought preferable but none were the right choice. I cared nothing for disease. Cared nothing for potential dangers. Consent or rape, it didn't matter. All that mattered was her. The father's identity meant nothing. The man who loved me at home or the man who fucked me behind his wife's back, it didn't matter. All that mattered was her. I had to find her by any means possible!

Yet it kept going wrong. Every month my abdomen betrayed me. Every month my vagina cried bloody tears.

Watching the sanitary towels vanish in a flushed toilet's red waters, the pain of failure wrapped itself around my midriff; squeezed the air out of me. My pains had nothing to do with my period. They were confirmation. Weeks, months and

years had been wasted. Connoisseurs of cycles had abused me. I had nothing to show for their expertise beyond my bleeding uterus and broken heart.

They covered their walls in certificates of no meaning and passed me along their chain as if I were a buck that could talk.

Experiments in abbreviations: IVF. AI. ICSI. Hormones; injections; appointments and lies. Pots filled in private rooms; needle marks scarring my arms and belly; cold apparatus and luminous dyes inserted and sprayed at my cervix. But none of it worked! None of it worked so they came up with more plans; more ideas and tests not thought of before that might provide answers they could not find.

They wasted my time with their games until nurses and smartly dressed consultants revealed my funding had been cut.

Governments and banks had built a brick wall between my daughter and I, using my failing body for that wall's foundations. They talked of adoption but how could I take the child of another? A baby forced to choke on another woman's poison? Purging the child of all toxins fed into her through the umbilical cord would have been impossible. All that corruption. All that venom. How could I raise such a child as my own?

He and I went our separate ways.

He is now the father of three. All girls.

More one-night stands followed. I went out and I fucked. Became a vessel: holding onto the seed of so many. And as soon as each one withdrew, I repeated my ritual: pressed my clothes tight against my opening; inserted whatever I could to stop her from slipping away but it was all futile. Her grip was too weak; mine too elusive. Each month it would be the same. I would wake and there she would be: a

bloodied stain on the mattress, crying out for a hand to hold her through the loneliness.

Tears, emptiness, longing, desire. I had all of these and more. Anger towards the men who failed me. Hatred towards my own body. Why did it refuse me in this way? Why would it not accept just one? A singular token, giving me my child. The daughter I desire. One who would live as she wanted, not as society and its totalitarianism insisted. A free child. A liberated spirit. She would know the life I had longed for. She would know the truth from the moment of her entry into this cruel world. Before the cord between us was cut by an unknown entity. Why was I not being given this chance?

Science had proven my body had the capability to hold her within, but something deep inside, something lost to my conscience was demanding more. Demanding something different to just conception. Copulation wasn't enough. Whatever means of its obtaining, sex wasn't enough to give me a fertilized embryo.

More was required.

So I searched. Books, people, internet. I read and I researched until it felt like my tears had turned to blood. I stopped the unrewarding attempts: the violent sessions with faceless strangers. I took in a casual lover; a man who thought I was on the pill. A man happy to fuck me as long as I lied about contraception. He didn't need to know the truth behind the lie. And while he pumped his manhood into me, dripping sweat and calling out his joy, I concentrated my efforts on the missing piece. Pagan fertility rites, erotic dances, herbs, particular foods. All and more recommended by uneducated writers. I tried them. Each and every one of them. I gave them all a chance. But it was all a waste of time.

My body was aging. The more I seemed to starve it of her, the more degenerate it became. Each month was a torture. The pain was intense. My body punished me with excruciating cramps and terrible bleeds for not giving it the one element we longed for.

I discovered the answer by accident. Ironic the answer was so casually found after so many years of searching. I could have felt angry but what would be the point? I had already suffered too much frustration, why replace that with hot anger as opposed to cool relief? As long as I had my answer and it worked, what difference did time and effort make? After all, there was always that hope of one of the earlier lessons working - yet I would never have known if I had not tried. As it was, I stumbled on something at the right moment. So there was no need for anger. To miss that moment, now there would be a reason for anger.

It was a programme between programmes. A documentary about witchfinders: men who wandered across the land throughout the centuries in search of heretics. It claimed the English countryside was smothered in their kind from the 1500s onwards and they were vicious. They tortured and punished women - and men - different to themselves: the intelligent and the rich; the filthy and extreme poor. Matthew Hopkins was the most famous member of their clan, but there were others. Martin Del Rio and Pierre De Lancre. European names dictating the way British governors went about their business; teaching them how to murder. And while they searched, they made fun with women. The fairer sex. The Bible's lesser creature. These fools lived their lives by its pages. Any indication of female astuteness was stamped out. Executions were fewer than some have claimed but too many died at their murderous hands. Men persecuting because they were afraid.

The innocent murdered because ignoramuses could not understand why crops failed or the young were born deformed. They searched for blame. In need of answers they looked to the heavenly clouds and the one residing above them. They searched and they found the words in their precious books and so they tortured and they raped and they disfigured.

For fun. For fear. For nothing.

Some tormentors kept records, relishing in their visceral pleasures. Smiling back at me from the television screen, these records were part of the documentary.

These records were the answer. My salvation.

In a small village deep within the Peak District, there was a woman who helped those who could not. She herself had fourteen children, all of whom had survived beyond the age of five, something unheard of in 1586. Women who had failed to fill their bellies, who had been 'ignored by the Lord' flocked to her, all wanting this incredible Sage to pass on the secret of her abilities. Such action was performed in secret as those who were able to bear children were fearful of the woman. It was thought throughout the village's superstitious habitants that she anointed the women in a herbal ointment. That she spoke with and agreed a deal with Beelzebub. The women's souls in exchange for a child.

It was this loose talk that saw the woman hung.

Yet before the rope was secured around her neck, she revealed her secret. Gave it freely so that others might continue her legacy. She screamed with the noose resting on her collarbone, tied to the branch, the secret for guaranteed nurturing of the seed. They listened to her tell those women abandoned by God they needed to

take a piece from a newborn and consume it. Hair, nails, skin, - did not matter. All that was needed was that one piece to certify conception.

Despite her helping so many, they allowed her to hang.

Now I practice her gift; keep her legacy alive. My work is important. It involves caring for these twelve children and ensuring the conception of my own. A small token. Nothing so big as it cannot be absorbed.

I carry my own scissors.

The babies sleep and I stroke them all. I could take a piece off each one but to do so may spoil the spell. Follow the woman's words and I shall be a mother. And so this child, this sleeping little beauty with her blonde hair and pink skin will be the conceiver of my baby. My little girl.

With my tool, specially sharpened for the task, I am able to snip off the little toe of her right foot. The bone is soft and supple – jelly-like – and breaks easily. It is like cutting through cold chewing gum. As she screams and her fresh blood pumps out of the stump, mimicking my lover's seed, I swallow the fleshy digit.

Tonight I will take the man and tomorrow my baby will grow and at last I shall be a mother.

Despite having written stories since he was in his first year at high school, this is the first story Jonathan has had published in all of his forty-two years on this earth. Done as a favour for a friend, he has no idea if history will ever repeat itself.