

Beyond
A short story
collection

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

All of these stories have in some way been inspired by the concept of ‘beyond.’ Some, like *Nightly Visitor*, explore the notion of existence beyond death. Others were inspired by the question of what lies beyond our earth, for example *Just a Dream*. This collection of stories includes flash fiction, short fiction, and reverse stories. The final entry is the first chapter of my novel *Eve of Eridu*, to be published in August 2018.

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JOHN DOE

‘What you in ‘ere for?’

Toby leant against the bars separating his cell from the next, peering through at the strange man on the other side.

The man sitting in the corner with his head in his hands didn’t answer.

‘Oi, you!’ Toby banged his hands against the bars to try to gain the man’s attention. A dull clanging sound echoed around the area, but the man in the cell next to him just sat there as though in a trance. Perhaps he was asleep, thought Toby. Well, that wouldn’t do. If Toby was going to be stuck in this cell until he’d sobered up he sure as hell wanted some form of entertainment.

‘Yoo-hoo! Old man? I’m talkin’ to you.’

Finally, the man in the grey blanket raised his head and stared through the bars at Toby. His eyes were a wispy, pale blue and his skin looked like he hadn’t seen the sun in about three years. Toby shivered – he looked like a ghost. Or a vampire. A vampire-ghost. Toby felt light-headed from too much bourbon and coke so he started to giggle. The man just stared at him, clearly having no interest in what was so amusing to Toby.

‘So what’s your story then, old man?’

Now that Toby could make out his face, he realised that the man probably wasn’t as old as he had first assumed. His crumpled hair and thin shoulders jutting out from under the blanket had simply made him appear older than he was. He was probably really only in his thirties – not much older than Toby himself.

‘Indecent exposure,’ said the man at last, and his voice was as faint as his eyes. ‘Nudity in a public place.’

‘Ahh,’ said Toby, knowingly. ‘Drunk a bit much and got dared to streak didya? I did the same a few years back myself. Not worth it mate, not worth it.’

The man didn’t answer, but Toby was desperate to keep him talking. Four hours in a cell with only himself as company didn’t sound like a fun way to pass the time.

‘So what’s your name?’

The older man’s eyes widened, and for a moment he seemed at a loss. He licked his lips as though lubricating them would help to squeeze the words out.

‘I dunno,’ he said at last. ‘Can’t remember.’

‘Whatdya mean?’ laughed Toby. Even he had never been drunk enough to forget his own name.

The man shrugged. ‘I woke up in an alley surrounded by rubbish and vomit.’ He coughed and Toby hoped like hell that he wasn’t going to vomit now. ‘They found me naked, with no idea where I was or even who I was.’

Toby whistled. ‘You must’ve been drinking some potent shit man.’ But the strange thing was that as odd as the man was, he didn’t really come across as being drunk at all. ‘So you’re like a John Doe then, but alive?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘And you can’t remember anything?’

The man stared off into the distance and for a long moment Toby thought he might not answer at all. Then the man just sighed. ‘Nothing that makes sense.’

Something in the way he said it piqued Toby’s curiosity. ‘So ya do remember somethin’ then?’ Toby sat down on the floor of the cell and rested his forehead against the cool bars. The bourbon and coke was still swirling around in his mind and he was starting to feel a bit sick. Nevertheless, he liked mysteries and he thought that maybe he could be a bit like Sherlock

Holmes. If the mystery man described a place or a building that Toby knew of then maybe he could help figure out his identity.

But the man just frowned and shook his head.

‘I remember flames. A burning, searing heat that consumed everything.’

‘Maybe there was a house fire?’ suggested Toby. ‘We could ask the cops if there were any fires last night. The shock coulda made you, ya know,’ he pointed to his head with one long index finger, drawing circles in the air. ‘Go a bit funny.’

But the strange man’s eyes locked onto Toby’s. ‘You don’t understand. The fire in my memory didn’t just burn one house. It burned everything.’

The way he said ‘everything’ made Toby feel even more sick. He almost didn’t want the man to continue his tale.

‘I remember the howl of the siren. I remember the city stretched out before me.’

‘What city?’

But the man just ignored him. ‘The fire came and then the city was gone. All the cities were gone. And the people were gone too. I told you - it consumed everything.’

Toby shivered. ‘That’s some dream man, maybe you were on acid and not just drinkin’. I took acid once and I swear I saw dragons.’

‘There’s something else I remember,’ said the man urgently, his voice growing louder. Toby wasn’t sure how much of the crazy man’s visions he could take. He felt decidedly sober now and considered calling out to the cops to see if they’d let him go. But he felt like some unknown force was pinning him to this place, forcing him to listen to the man’s bizarre tale.

‘I remember a clock.’

Toby almost laughed. ‘A clock,’ he repeated. ‘Gee that’s terrifying.’

‘A clock without a second hand. A silent clock. A clock that

didn't tick.'

'Well that sounds like a pretty useless sort of clock,' said Toby, trying to be funny although he was feeling more and more uncomfortable.

'It was showing one minute to midnight,' insisted the man, although Toby really didn't want to hear it. 'And then it hit midnight. Boom.'

Toby laughed dryly. 'Boom, huh? That's something.' Maybe the man wasn't drunk after all, just crazy. He wondered what would happen to the man if the cops couldn't figure out who he was. Off to the loony bin perhaps.

'Gee, man, well that really sucks,' said Toby at last. 'Maybe your fingerprints or somethin' will help the cops figure it out.'

'Maybe,' agreed the man, but he didn't sound convinced.

'Didya get hit in the head or something? That can make ya forget things.'

But the man just put his head in his hands again and didn't answer. Toby briefly considered trying to spark up the conversation again but then thought better of it. He decided that he didn't really want to talk to the strange man after all.

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A woman in an oxygen mask heaved the large, metal door closed behind her. She pulled off the mask and gazed fearfully at the other two.

'Nothing has changed,' said the woman. 'Project Reboot has failed.'

A heavy sob escaped from one of the scientists. 'But he was our last hope.'

In despair, they glare at the faulty time machine.

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

She told me she was named after a cluster of stars.

This was probably stretching the truth, although by the time we met we were both pushing sixty and there was no-one left to verify her claims. One thing was certain, though - she was endlessly fascinated with space and all that existed there. Planets, moons, stars, asteroids... even man-made objects like rockets and space stations. So if she wasn't named after a constellation, she may as well have been.

We were so different, Carina and I. When we first started dating, I was much more interested in the situation right here on Earth. Politics, economics, healthcare and so forth. Things that mattered. Things that affected our lives here and now.

Not Carina. She would pretend to snore loudly if I tried to discuss the political climate or suggested that we re-evaluate our choice in superannuation provider. Her complete lack of interest in the goings-on in the world around us exasperated me to no end. But I loved her, all the same.

Our story begins in October, 1997. I was contemplating retirement from a fairly successful banking career, but nervous at the prospect. And that's when we met, at some ridiculous Bingo night or charity function – I forget which. I only remember Carina - her long, red hair streaked with silver and glowing like fire in the restaurant lights.

We were nothing alike. She had travelled the world and now

had her sights set on the stars. I had travelled nowhere except within the pages of a book. And yet somehow, we worked. I often regret that we didn't know each other sooner. I imagine what it might have been like, meeting at twenty, or thirty, or even forty years of age. Would we have married and had children? But Carina just laughed, recounting her years backpacking through Indonesia or volunteering at a school in Africa.

'I wouldn't have settled down for anyone,' she declared. 'No, not even for you!'

We came from different worlds, and yet we settled into an easy companionship.

Our first date started off as a disaster, however. I had booked us into a fancy restaurant named Leopold's - I look back now and cringe. She was very polite, but I could tell that she was uncomfortable, and the conversation seemed forced, despite our easy chatter at the fundraising event just a few days earlier.

We had just finished our main course when she turned to me and asked, 'Do you want to go on an adventure?'

The simple question threw me.

'Don't you want dessert first?' I had responded feebly. I had already decided that after dinner, we would have dessert – the tasting platter of exotic ice-creams - and then I would take her for a drive along the waterfront. It was already sorted, planned meticulously. I wasn't the adventurous type.

She had laughed her musical laugh. 'We can get ice-cream afterwards, I want to show you something.'

I nodded, of course – who could argue with Carina - and tried to look eager while my insides clenched uncomfortably.

For half an hour, she directed me up one road and then down another, snaking gradually towards the western suburbs. I snapped at her after she sent me the wrong way and told me to perform a U-turn on a busy suburban street.

‘If you just tell me where we are going, this’ll be a lot easier.’

But she either didn’t hear the edge in my voice or chose to ignore it. She was good at that.

‘It’s not as fun if you know where we are going.’

It’s not as fun if we crash while doing an illegal U-turn, I thought to myself, biting my tongue.

But all of a sudden she figured out where we were, and directed me up the winding, narrow street called Mountain Road. There was a restaurant about halfway up, but she just waved me on, telling me to go all the way to the top. The night seemed to consume the beam of my headlights and I could barely see the turns ahead. Carina chattered happily all the way up, seemingly oblivious to my concern.

Right at the top there was a little car park, a patch of grass, and nothing else. I looked at her, aghast. But she was already out and halfway across the small field. I unclipped my seatbelt and followed, muttering under my breath. Just as I reached her, she flopped down onto the grass and lay back with her head cradled in her hands. I just stood, staring at her. She looked ridiculous, a grown woman in an evening dress, lying prostrate on the ground. She looked gorgeous, and wild, and unpredictable.

She patted the grass beside her, but I just folded my arms.

‘I’ll stand, thanks,’ I said coolly, hoping that this whole ridiculous date would end sooner rather than later. I was wearing a good suit and didn’t plan on getting grass stains.

‘Suit yourself,’ she replied, gazing up into the night sky.

I had stalked back to the car, planning to sit there in comfort until she was finished staring at the stars. But then I noticed the blanket which lay across the back seat, and changed my mind. I returned to the spot where she was lying, blanket in hand, and laid it out on the ground next to her. I was rewarded with a radiant smile. And then we lay down next to each other – I felt ridiculous – and she introduced me to

space.

‘See that star there,’ she said, pointing. ‘The brightest star in the sky? That’s Sirius. And that one,’ she had pointed elsewhere, ‘the second-brightest star? See it? That’s Canopus, in the constellation of Carina. That’s how I got my name.’

And then she rolled towards me, onto her side, and I felt the warmth emanating from her supple body.

‘Do you know what’s happening, right now, somewhere up there?’

I had forced back all of the sarcastic remarks that floated into my mind and waited for her revelation.

‘A probe was launched a couple of hours ago, and it’s heading off to explore Saturn for the first time.’

Her eyes were so close to mine, and in the moonlight I could see them glinting with excitement. But I couldn’t help myself.

‘And how much did that cost?’ I asked pointedly.

She had rolled onto her back, away from me, sighing and saying something about material costs versus the unparalleled reward of knowledge.

I had pushed her. ‘Twenty million? A billion? More? Imagine how much food that could buy these kids living in poverty. What about houses for the homeless? Or researching the cure for cancer?’

‘What if the cure for cancer is out there,’ she had countered, gesturing upwards. ‘What if we find a new habitable world, just like Earth? What if one of Saturn’s moons could sustain life?’

It was all idealistic, theoretical nonsense – and I told her so. Even if one of Saturn’s moons could sustain life - not that I thought it could - it would take decades, and even more money to set up the type of infrastructure which already existed right here on earth.

‘But doesn’t it fascinate you?’ she had asked, dreamily.

‘No, not really.’

I was lying, though. Somehow she had agreed to a second date, and a third, and I began to enjoy our midnight outings. We saw the silver rain of a meteor shower dancing above us. We tracked a glowing satellite on its lonely journey in Earth's orbit. Even just observing the full moon on a cloudless evening felt magical when I was with her. I was fervently against funnelling money into space exploration, but I figured I wasn't fundamentally opposed to a bit of amateur stargazing.

For thirteen years we explored earth, space and each other. Those thirteen years were the best years of my life.

And then she had a bad fall, and I had to put a stop to it. We were getting too old to traipse around the countryside, huddled together on hilltops in the early hours of the morning. I can only imagine what the paramedics thought, getting a 3am call-out to the middle of no-where and finding two seventy-year-olds and a picnic blanket! Carina laughed it off, as she always did, but three operations later, her hip still hadn't healed. After that, I stopped looking at the stars. And so did she.

'I'm sorry for interrupting your story, Mr. Brown. But she's asking for you.'

I looked up at the nurse with weary eyes.

'I'm sorry, I had quite forgotten that you were standing there.'

She led me down the familiar corridor and I found Carina lying in the bed as usual. But this time they had set up a laptop and her eyes were fixed on whatever was on the screen.

'She asked us to set it up. The Cassini mission.' The nurse shrugged and I smiled in thanks.

Cassini. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

Every time I saw her, she seemed more fragile than the last. Her skin was so thin, like the little paper lanterns the Japanese send off into the sky.

There was no red left in her hair now. Even the fire in her eyes rarely sparked anymore.

I eased myself into the seat beside her bed and peered into the screen. It wasn't showing space, as I had imagined, but a group of scientists or engineers perhaps. I placed my hand over hers and marvelled at the way her skin had become almost translucent – I could see the blue veins pulsing within.

She was trying to say something, so I leaned in towards her, straining to hear.

'It's Cassini,' she whispered. 'Her final plunge.'

I settled back into my seat and stared at the screen, trying to clear away the fog in my mind. I had spent seven years deftly ignoring anything that lay outside this world. The nurse sensed my struggle.

'Cassini, Mr Brown. The spacecraft that was sent to explore Saturn all those years ago? They are flying her into Saturn. She's going to burn up in the atmosphere.'

Cassini. The shuttle that Carina had told me about on our first date.

I leaned forward. The screen showed a close-up view of the probe plunging towards Saturn against a backdrop of gigantic rings the planet is renowned for.

'Amazing,' I muttered, breathlessly.

'It's just a simulation, Mr Brown,' explained the nurse. 'We won't be able to see her final moments, so that's just an example of what it might look like.'

I nodded, feeling foolish, and she left us. The simulation was now showing Cassini breaking apart, slowly, and then finally disintegrating altogether as it plummeted through Saturn's atmosphere.

I heard a little sniffle beside me and noticed the rivulets of tears flowing down Carina's face. I reached for a tissue from the bedside table and dabbed softly at her pale cheeks.

'Honey, it's just a shuttle.' But the tears didn't stop flowing

and I abandoned my attempts to mop them up.

Her lips moved and I leaned in closer to hear.

‘Four billion,’ she said softly.

I raised my eyebrows. ‘Would’ve fed a lot of kids,’ I laughed, and she smiled good-naturedly. We settled into an easy silence, watching rows of people in blue uniforms radioing information about Cassini’s final descent. I must have dozed off, because when I opened my eyes again there were images of lime green radio bands projected on the screen, and the mission controller was saying that they had crossed zero time. I turned towards Carina, but her eyes were closed.

‘Honey, you’re going to miss it.’

She didn’t move.

‘We have loss of signal,’ announced the flight director.

I squeezed her hand, but it felt colder than usual.

‘This has been an incredible mission.’

‘Carina.’ I shook her lightly.

My vision blurred and I kissed her on the cheek as the NASA workers clapped and cheered. Then they hugged and cried. Interspersed with the feed from mission control were images taken by Cassini over her thirteen years orbiting Saturn. Incredible close-ups of glowing rings. A massive storm the size of Earth. An ice volcano on one of Saturn’s moons.

‘Okay, you got me,’ I admitted. ‘It’s pretty fascinating.’

That night I shuffled outside to look up at the stars for the first time in years. It took a while to find her, but I remembered what she told me. First, I found the brightest star in the sky. Sirius. Then I looked for the second brightest star. Canopus, in the constellation of Carina.

I thought of her, and all of our adventures together. Actually, I thought of both of them – Carina and Cassini, their twin fates oddly intertwined. And I smiled, remembering the final exchange I had heard before turning off the laptop screen. It was between two NASA employees discussing the

mission, but I liked to imagine it was really Carina, talking directly to me.

‘This was a moment of transition, it was not the end,’ she said, bravely. ‘And so let’s go forth and explore the solar system together.’

‘Okay,’ I said aloud.

Was I imagining it, or did one of the stars glow a little brighter, just for a moment?

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NIGHTLY VISIT

Each night she comes to our bedroom, crying. My husband doesn't wake. Beside me, his chest rises and falls in blissful ignorance of the little sniffling sounds.

It reminds me of when Anabelle was just a baby and she would wake two or three times in the night for her bottle. Dereck didn't wake then, either. He would yawn and stretch in the morning and comment on what a good baby she was, sleeping through. I would hide a smile and agree that yes, she *was* perfect. They had such a good bond when Annie was little.

She is still crying - little whimpering noises coming from beside the bed.

'Mummy?' Her voice is thin and pleading, and I fight the pull of sleep.

'What's wrong, Annie?' My voice is muffled against the pillow and I resist the urge to send her back to her room.

'I had a bad dream.'

Without opening my eyes, I lift the covers and feel her scramble awkwardly across the bed to slip in between me and Dereck.

'I love you, Mummy.' Her breath slows as her little body

relaxes against me. I think briefly that I wish she had the same relationship with Dereck as she did with me. I could see how hurt he was every time she wanted to spend time with me and not with him. He always said I cared more about Annie than I did about him.

To be honest, it was probably true.

‘Do you want to talk about your dream?’ I murmur quietly. She begins to cry again, and I immediately regret asking.

‘I dreamed I died.’ Her breath comes in panicked sobs and I reach out to comfort her.

My hands grasp empty air.

I scream and sit bolt upright in the bed. This time, Dereck wakes immediately.

‘Hun, what’s wrong?’

Scalding tears course down my cheeks as I rock back and forth. Dereck slips an arm around me, clearly hoping to comfort me but it just makes me feel trapped. I leap out of bed and stumble along the corridor to the kitchen.

Dereck follows. ‘Honey, it was just a dream.’ I shake my head, splashing cool water from the sink onto my face.

‘It was Anabelle. Dereck, she visited me again.’

My husband reaches out to hold my hand, pity and concern lining his face.

‘Honey... Like the counsellor said...’

I snatch my hand away, my eyes burning with anger. I’m not upset anymore. I’m furious. I know she isn’t simply a figment of my imagination.

On my way back to our room, I stop outside her bedroom, leaning heavily against the door. A moment later Dereck joins me, his warm arms encircling my waist.

‘I’m sorry, hun. We can get through this. You know we can, right?’ I sigh and lean my head against his chest, willing the anger to subside. After all, since the accident Dereck has been my rock. He has made all the meals and forced me to eat even

when I didn't want to. He organised all of the funeral arrangements too, when I could barely get out of bed. I had felt us drifting apart over the last few years, but I suppose sometimes it takes a tragedy to realise what you have.

He's right. We can get through this.

On the other side of the door a young girl giggles as a toy train chugs lazily around the track.

His body stiffens so I know he has heard it too. Such innocent sounds, and yet...

He draws away and his thoughts are clearly etched on his face – is it possible to catch crazy from your wife? One nervous hand reaches for the doorknob. An icy fear shudders through my soul.

'Don't...'

Mid-giggle, he soundlessly opens the door.

There is nothing to be seen.

No train tracks.

No little girl.

He sighs deeply and walks away. He doesn't see the toy train lying awkwardly on its side, half hidden beneath the bed - its lonely wheels still chugging along in some desperate, hopeless journey.

Ignoring the train, I close the door quietly and follow Dereck back to our bedroom. The glowing lights on the alarm clock tell me it is 3am. I take a sleeping pill and close my eyes, willing my heart to stop pounding so furiously.

The medication starts to kick in and my body becomes heavier, my mind clouding with fog. Ever so slowly, the darkness begins to consume my fears.

She's back again. The clock shows that it is now 4.11am. Far out. Her little sniffling noises draw me out of the depths of some dark dream, and I reach across to shake Dereck awake.

She stops me with one word - 'Don't!'

I freeze – the panic in her voice frightens me. I withdraw my hand and feel her climb onto the end of the bed. Perched near my feet, she hums a tune that sounds vaguely familiar. My eyes strain futilely against the inky blackness.

For a long time, she says nothing. I can almost pretend she's not there.

And then she speaks. Six terrifying words.

'He's going to kill you too.'

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