

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

WILD

LIFE

RPM 08, 16 October 2009

A Penny Dreadful for Nothing

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RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~ABOUT RPM~

Ruthless Peoples Magazine is a free, internet-distributed general fiction magazine. We believe storytelling is far more important than genre.

With that said, please note the **reader guidance** at the opening of each piece. RPM is a very broad church of fiction and you are quite likely to find more extreme work than you have come across elsewhere. We will specify when items are too shocking for those whose sensibilities lead them to prefer gentler work.

Submissions

Your diligent and persistent Editor-in-Chief is in a state of backlog. Subs are taking a couple of months to clear.

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~WAR ON ERROR~

In strife, we rush. In love, we miss the mark. But the subscriber who spots and submits the greatest number of typographical errors by 23:59 British Summer Time on 20 October 2009 will win US\$20 and a small electronic medal.

Send entries to editor@ruthlesspeoples.com. The Editor's decision is final. You will need a Paypal account to receive any financial prize.

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One Yorkshireman's Perfection

Poetry by J. Sudborough

Richard opens the shutter
sixty seconds
then waits in banshee winds.

Spirits he cannot see
whisper their presence
pull at his clothes.

He stalks Paxton's Tower
for quarry in the blackness:
sulfur wisps, burnished stone
woad-horizon silhouettes.

After time and light and stillness
fall prey to Richard and his lens,
he leaves Welsh folly to the hills

warms his hands around a steaming cuppa
crops, saturates, burns.
That'll do.

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<http://jsgraustein.blogspot.com/>
Associate editor: Stewart Baker

The Canoe

Joel Arnold

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution required.

Tab lives with his son in a cabin next to a cold, rusty river. The rust reminds him of blood spilled in the Mekong. His blood. His mother's and father's blood, caught in a hail of bullets as they swam toward freedom. But that was many years ago, and this rust comes from the taconite processing plant twenty miles upstream.

His cabin has two bedrooms, a small living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, a fireplace that pops and hisses through winter and the cool spring nights. Tab wishes his wife were still alive. She always talked about living in a home with a fireplace.

The Kraemer River smells like fish and rust and pine. The walleyes and northerns are sparse, and those caught are thrown back in. The DNR says the mercury levels are too high, that eating the fish is dangerous. But sometimes Carl and Tab sit on the bank and throw in their lines and struggle with the slippery fish, reel them in with whoops of joy, admire them briefly, and toss them back. It's times like these when Tab feels he's getting his son back.

Forest. Deer. Moss. Pine. The air tastes sweet and cool. The sun is a mellow orb through the trees, the rays neither harsh nor demanding. The forest can be dark, even when the sun is high in the clear sky, but the pine and birch branches provide shelter, not menace. A big change from New York City. No gangs. Carl is sixteen now.

“Are you bored here?” Tab asks.

“Sometimes.”

“What about your school friends?”

Carl shrugs.

Life is so much better here. During the year, Carl became involved in basketball, his grades improved. Good people here.

Carl says, “People in school call me a gook.”

Tab’s smile vanishes. “What? Why is this the first time I’m hearing this? Who calls you that?”

“Some of the kids.”

“Which kids?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter, anyway.”

“When did they call you this?”

“A bunch of times.” Carl looks at his father, his eyes steady and cold. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want us to move again.”

“You know why we moved.”

“I liked New York. I had friends there.”

“Thugs and hooligans. We live here now. These are good people. Maybe some are ignorant, but soon they’ll see we’re good people, too.” Tab smiles encouragingly at his son. “We’ll survive here. We will, Carl. We’ll survive.”

An aluminum canoe with fading red paint washes up on shore while Tab and Carl cast their lines to the river’s poisonous fish.

There is crude lettering on the bow. *Farbanti*. There are dents, too, but they can be pounded out with a rubber mallet.

“Help me push this out into the river,” Tab says.

“Why don’t we keep it?”

“Because. Maybe someone is waiting for it.”

They slide it over the muddy bank into the water where the current takes hold. It straightens like the needle of a compass, and disappears into the evening’s dim light.

New York. As many people as insects. Ceaseless noise.

But this is where Tab married. Where Carl was born. Where Mina died.

One sweltering night, when Carl was only fourteen, there was a knock on the apartment door. Rare to get visitors. Tab opened the door a crack, leaving the chain attached.

Carl. In handcuffs. Smelling of beer. Cigarettes. A cut on his face. An ugly bruise. Suspended between two policemen.

“This your kid?”

Tab unlatched the chain and opened the door wide. “Yes, this is my son.”

“We saw him jump out of a van, throw a punch at a college student. When we intervened, the van took off.”

“Is this true?” Tab asked.

Carl’s jaw was set. He stared at the floor, breathing sharply through his nose.

“He said it was his initiation into the Laughing Tigers. A Vietnamese gang.”

“We’re Cambodian. American, now.”

“Yeah, well. He didn’t give us much trouble, said he lived here. I told him as long as you were home, we’d turn him over to you.” The cop unfastened the handcuffs. Carl hurried past Tab

into the apartment. “Keep an eye on him,” the cop said. “I won’t be so nice next time.”

“Yes, sir,” Tab said. “Thank you.”

How do you keep hold of your son, your only son, the only family you have left, when you don’t know what he does during the day? When he doesn’t come home until two in the morning on school nights?

You move. Move someplace safe.

The river. Always moving. Giving and taking with indifference.

The canoe washes up again, its stern caught on the protruding roots of an ash tree. The bow bobs in the flowing river.

Farbanti.

Again, Carl asks, “Can we keep it?”

Tab looks up and down the river, wondering where it came from. “If no one else claims it.” He pulls it onto the shore so the tug of current won’t reclaim it. “Go inside and grab some rope. We’ll tie it to this tree for now.”

“Let me take it out on the river,” Carl says. A warped paddle lies across the canoe floor. Carl looks up at his father. “Come with me. It’ll be fun.”

“Neither of us know how to ride this.”

“I do. It’s easy.”

“I don’t think—”

Carl shoves the canoe into the water and straddles the bow. “Forget it,” he says. “I’ll go myself.” He pushes off from shore, carefully steps across the bottom to the stern, sits, picks up the paddle, and straightens the canoe.

“Be careful,” Tab calls.

Carl and the canoe slip easily around a bend in the river and disappear from view.

Tab fashions a flier on yellow paper and carries it to the roadhouse. There is no community center up here, no coffee shop, no VFW. There is only the roadhouse, and if anything needs to be said or learned, this is the place to go.

Tab sits at the bar. "Anybody missing a canoe?" he asks Jim, the bartender.

"Haven't heard anything." Jim pours a cup of coffee for Tab, and slides a container of half-and-half across the bar.

"It washed up at our home the other day." He shows Jim the flier. "May I put this up?" He staples it to a bulletin board by the door on which other fliers announce items for sale, property for rent, dogs and cats lost and found, rides offered out of town to Duluth and the Twin Cities.

Tab comes back to his cup of coffee. Sips it. Carl has already taken the canoe out on the river each of the last two days, and was gone for hours both times. This is good for a boy his age, isn't it? Out in the forest, in the branch-filtered sun? Good exercise. Fresh air. Better than sitting in his room all day playing video games and watching television. Why is it, then, that Tab feels the familiar pangs of worry in his heart?

"Something wrong?" Jim asks.

"No." Tab looks up. "Nothing is wrong."

What about drugs? Maybe that would explain Carl's melancholy. Once, Tab found marijuana in his room in New York. But here? Up here where there is clean air and warm sun and a pleasant river flowing nearby?

No. Not here, Tab decides. Carl's lonely. He's a young man. He has no girlfriend. That's all it is.

Three round, pink scars throb like fluttering moths on Tab's back and shoulder. Three round, pink scars left by bullets all those years ago while crossing the Mekong River. Maybe someday Tab will tell Carl about them. Maybe someday. It is too hard to talk about now. Too hard to think about. Maybe someday.

River. Slow and steady. Carl gone all day long. What is downriver that interests a teenage boy so much? When he comes home each evening, he is full of sweat and quiet. Goes straight to his room as if he's got a secret. Three weeks have passed since the canoe showed up. Every day, Carl has taken it out, letting the current ferry him away, only to come back in the evening, paddling hard.

Last night, Carl didn't come back until past midnight. Tab drove the Volkswagen down a service road adjacent to the river, shining a flashlight through the trees, looking for the talcum red glow of the hull in the cone of light, but saw nothing. He stopped at the roadhouse and asked if anyone had seen him. No one had. When Tab drove back to the cabin, there was Carl in bed, snoring heavily. He would wait until morning to scold him.

Come morning, Carl is gone. The rope that kept the canoe tied to the ash tree is frayed and loose, floating in the river like a dead, sun-dried snake.

Tab works a drill in Walt Emory's machine shop three miles upriver. He's worked there since arriving, just shy of a year ago, drilling holes in chunks of die-cast metal. So often as he works, his mind is back there, back on the Mekong, drifting along the current. The sweat on his brow becomes river water, splashed up onto him from the force of bullets.

The memories make Tab close his eyes. He tries to force the memories back so they can't overwhelm him—concentrate—but sometimes they are impossible to ignore.

So long ago.

Bullets. Muddy water. Pain.

In the Mekong, thrown off the raft they had paid river pirates so much to take them on.

Mother screaming. A bullet ripping through her chest, her neck, spraying blood on the boy she carries. Tab grabs the boy, his baby brother, as his mother sinks beneath the murky water. His father is gone, too, the only trace of him a brief patch of rust on the river's surface. The brother squirms in Tab's arms, screaming, crying. Bullets slap the water around them. Tab holds his breath. Holds his brother close against his chest. A bullet catches Tab in the shoulder. Another in the back. Another below that. Intense pain, like spears of ice. More bullets zip past his ear, kiss the water like hot drops of rain. He smells cooked flesh—his own—where the bullets entered. Water bites into his eyes.

His brother's forehead is warm against his chin, his brother's breath is wet against his neck.

I'm sorry, brother. I'm sorry.

Tab sinks below the surface. Holds his brother with one hand, swims with the other, as brother struggles, tries to break free of Tab's weakening grip.

Underwater, the bullets sound like grease splattering on a flame. Tab swims deeper. Swims back, to the right, forward, to the right. Impossible to see past the blood rising off his wounds in the dark water. He surfaces. Takes a breath. Plunges back in.

His brother stops squirming.

I am so sorry.

How many times has Tab wakened at night, crying, panicking, the memory so fresh and urgent? How many times has he gotten out of bed to check on Carl, to make sure he was okay, make sure he was breathing? How many times?

Night. Dark. The sounds of flowing water and chirruping frogs. Carl snores heavily in his room. Tab rises from bed and creeps barefoot through the cabin out onto the pine-needle strewn ground. He feels his way over the short path that leads to the river, finds the rope that holds the canoe, and then unties it from the tree. He tosses the loose end into the canoe and pushes until the current grabs hold. Moonlight glimmers on the water, the canoe a black void traveling slowly down the middle.

Tab walks back to the cabin, feeling guilty. Relieved.

Morning—

Carl is gone. Tab steps into the daylight, his eyes turning to the tree where the canoe was tied, and his muscles tense at the sight of the rope secure around the tree.

How can that be? He didn't release the canoe from the rope, he released the rope from the tree. Now it is there again, tight around it. Had he only dreamed last night? He sees the impressions of his feet in the soft pine needles.

Did the canoe come back?

Did Carl take the canoe out again?

Tab hurries back inside and goes straight to Carl's room. He digs through the drawers, rifling through the clothes and books and video tapes. *What am I looking for? Drugs? No. Maybe, yes, but*

Nothing. He finds nothing. He opens Carl's closet. Pushes the clothes aside. Freezes. Scrawled on the back of the closet wall is the word *Farbanti*. Curled up in the corner of the closet is

a heap of black cloth. Tab picks it up and shakes it out. A black, hooded robe. Beneath that lies a bundle of black candles, bound together with the same kind of rope that held (did it really hold?) the canoe in place.

Carl comes home late. He isn't sweating.

"Where have you been?"

Carl eyes him suspiciously. "What do you mean? I was on the river."

"Where does the river take you? What do you do on the river all day? Who do you go see?" Tab holds up the robe and candles. "What are these?"

"You went in my closet?"

"Answer me!"

"Nothing. Just stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

Carl's eyes harden. "You wouldn't understand."

Carl's neck. A red scratch disappears beneath his shirt

"Take off your shirt," Tab says.

"Father—"

"Now!"

Carl takes off his shirt. Tab gasps. His chest is covered with long, deep gouges.

"They're just scratches." Carl puts his shirt back on. "It's nothing."

"Who's doing this to you?"

"Friends."

"What friends? Who?"

"I'm going to my room. I want to be alone."

"No," Tab says. "What kind of friends do this? What would your mother say?"

"I don't care what Mom would say. She's not—"

Tab grabs Carl tightly by the throat.

Carl's eyes widen. "Stop it. You're choking me."

Tab shakes. "Don't ever talk about your mother like that again." His anger is intense, but brief. He drops his arm. Swallows. "I'm sorry."

Carl sucks in his breath, chokes back tears. He turns and flees to his room, slamming the door behind him.

Soon Tab hears the sound of Carl's television, the volume shaking the small cabin's walls.

Is it gangs all over again? Even up here? In the north woods?

What can I do? Lock him in his room? Forbid him to go out?

Move again?

No ...we'll survive this, Tab thinks, not really believing the words. *We'll survive.*

The roadhouse. Packed. Loud. Full of cigarette smoke. The reek of beer.

"Who's this?" Tab scribbles *Farbanti* on a napkin and passes it to Jim.

Jim squints. "Hell if I know. Why?"

Tab looks up at the bartender, the only man in the area with whom he's ever had a decent conversation. His voice cracks. "I think I'm losing my son. I don't know what to do."

"He's what? Sixteen? You gotta let 'em go sometime." Jim places a shot glass in front of Tab and fills it to the rim with Jack Daniels. Tab drinks. Sets the glass down. Nods at Jim, his face blank. Jim fills it and says, "It's a bitch. Don't I know it."

Gone. When Tab gets back to the cabin that night, Carl and the canoe are gone. Tab sits at the edge of the river, throwing

handfuls of sticks, pine needles and dirt into the water. The moon is a bright pearl through the trees. A female moose splashes clumsily through the water thirty yards upstream.

Tab stands and brushes debris from his pants. When he looks downriver, he sees the black silhouette of a familiar shape. The canoe. Floating upstream against the steady current. Tab squints, shields his eyes from the glare of the moon. The canoe is empty. Tab steps back, away from the shore as the canoe glides to a stop where he'd sat. It rocks gently from side to side as tiny ripples of water slap against its hull.

Is this a trick? Tab looks down the shore as far as he can. Is Carl just out of sight, laughing? But Tab sees no one, hears no movement.

“Carl!” he yells. He cups his hands around his mouth. “Carl!” His voice echoes through the forest, the cry of a wounded bird.

The canoe slowly turns in the water, its bow pointing downriver, yet maintains its place despite the pull of the current.

“Carl!”

Tab steps toward the canoe. He cautiously leans over it. There is only the paddle, yet its blade rests in a pool of dark liquid. Blood? It is hard to tell in only the moonlight, but if it's blood

“Carl!” Desperate, now. “Carl! Please answer!”

Nothing.

He steps warily into the canoe's stern. It wobbles, but Tab holds out his arms and the canoe steadies. He sits carefully. Picks up the paddle. Holds it close to his face and smells the blade. Is it blood?

The canoe slips slowly from shore and the current grabs hold. Tab sits frozen in place, barely able to breathe,

remembering the bullets, the blood of his mother and father, remembering the moment his baby brother became still in his arms

“No!” he cries.

He lifts the paddle. Sticks it hard in the water. If the canoe is to take him somewhere, than he’ll be the one to guide it, to conform it to his own pace.

Sweat. Paddle. Propelling forward through the thin, rusty river.

How much loss can a man take?

He paddles on one side, then the other, determined to find his son.

Sweat. Muscles screaming.

We’ll talk. About where I come from. What he means to me. We’ll talk, father and son, and we’ll fish and canoe together. I won’t be afraid to share my pain with him. He’ll understand. We’ll be friends. We’ll be together. We will survive.

I will not lose you.

A wooden flute. Voices through the trees. Tab feels eyes all around piercing his skin. He sees torch-light in the distance.

Murmuring. Whispers. His paddling has no effect on the canoe. It slows. Drifts.

Altar. On the river. The cold, rusty river.

The canoe turns toward shore.

Chanting. The sound of the flute close by. Figures in black robes appear and pull the canoe onto gravel. The gravel scrapes the aluminum hull like bony fingers.

“Where is my son?” Tab asks, his voice unable to conceal his fear.

Pale arms appear from beneath the black robes and lift him from the canoe. He struggles, but has little strength left. They

carry him to an altar made from rough planks of knotted pine and lay him on his back.

“Stop this,” Tab says. “I just want my son.”

They secure his wrists and ankles to the altar with copper wire. Stuff a rag in his mouth.

The chanting intensifies. Tab grows dizzy. This can’t be real. A figure leans over Tab and pulls back a deep, black hood.

Carl.

He pulls the rag out of his father’s mouth.

“Carl,” Tab whispers. “You don’t have to do this. Please. I have so much to tell you. So much you need to know.” He’ll tell him of Cambodia, of the Mekong, the family who died there. He’ll show Tab the bullet wounds on his back and shoulder. Then he’ll understand. He’ll see how much his father loves him.

“We can survive this,” Tab whispers. “You and me.” He smiles encouragement at his son. Nods. “We’ll survive.”

Carl blinks. Slowly stands. He pulls the hood back over his head, his face disappearing in shadow.

“I don’t want to *survive*, Father.” He steps back. “I want to belong.” He lifts an axe high into the air. “I want to *belong*.”

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Associate Editor: Mechele Mede

The Dance

Susan Boulton

Localisation

UK English

Reader Guidance

No caution required.

Dawn—and a thick mist blankets the ancient woodlands, its tendrils weaving between the ancient trees. A Stag stamps the cusp of autumn with its challenge: “I stand ready to dance,” and is answered by a young buck of his own line.

Tom and his grandson, Mark, exchange the morning’s greeting, as they watch the wagons roll to a stop. They share silently, in glance and smile, the thrill of the Dance’s pull. It will be their first year paired to dance the old and young stag couplet. The other dancers are already aboard; these to dance couplets of maid and young man, fool and sage, the hinds of the herd. The troop smile in greeting, hands offered in long friendship grasped and shaken, tankards of thin ale quickly drunk; a toast to both man and dance. Tom and Mark climb into their vehicle, joining the others for the journey to the dawn venue.

Eight sets of antlers are carried this day by forest worker, hill dweller, valley farmer and village man, pairs of blood brothers,

fathers and sons. Tom has danced many times, but knows well each performance is unique in time and place. The steps familiar and welcome, like the weight of the antlers—no burden, but a joy. He remembers his years dancing the hind roles, then the young man, and the sage. Now this season, as senior man, he again dances the elder stag. As the wagon nears the forest's edge, the boom of the Stag's call echoes in Tom's mind, stirring a curious concern: will his steps this year mimic the Stag's, strong and sure? Mark shows no such fear; the antlers settle easily on his shoulders. No past performance mars the younger man's memory. Tom knows his grandson's dance is a new beginning, and not a continuation of homage paid to nature, as it is to him.

The mummers, now dressed in brown and trimmed in green, stand surrounded by those that make their living beneath the shade of the dawn-draped forest. Voices are still now. Children's eyes widen as the spiral dance begins. No music, nor drummer's beat, only movement. Antlers on shoulders sway and dip. The dancers, with measured breathing and careful step, approach, touch horns, withdraw. Life is celebrated in ritual, bound to an eternal dance, the clash of generations softened to the gentle, near tender click of tines.

The dance's dawn movement finishes, and the hopes of hunters, foresters and charcoal burners are reaffirmed by the honouring of nature's gifts. The dancers and their audience drink, sealing the pact, both sides exchanging jests. Legends, horns, and the conceiving of new life all intermix when women's fingers linger on dancers' arms and chests, or surreptitiously caress antlers.

The dancers carefully stow the antlers on the wagons, then take their leave. As they mount the wagon, Tom catches his grandson's eye.

“Well?” he says.

A broad smile fills Mark's face.

From the forest depths, the challenger's call carries to Tom, unsettling his peace with the day.

The younger animal closes on the ruling Stag, moving easily between the trees, knowing exactly where the elder will make his stand. “Your day passes, mine begins.”

The wagons roll lazily from the forest's edge, dipping through the creek to climb stone-edged hill pastures. Grazing ewes are not disturbed by the wagon's passage; their focus is on their journey to spring and new birth. They do not need the dance's reminder.

The dancers' spirits rise with the sun and with another round of ale. Conversation drives the journey, rating the year, the valley, the forest womenfolk, pure male conversation, like the earth; basic, bawdy and boisterous.

The herd folk wait with tables overflowing. The dancers alight, waving greetings, then prepare. Grandfather and grandson again don antlers and pair off. Heads bow, dancers move together, tines touch, part. They circle and converge until the final pass. The skill rests in making graceful contact, producing cadenced clicks in place of the primeval thrust of a true Stag's trial.

Applause greets the finale. Antlers are quickly shed, food and drink consumed. The men grow more flirtatious as the day moves on. Tom pounds his grandson's back, a gesture of old

comrades, yet inadequate to convey his love and pride in the youth's performance.

In the forest no such bond of kinship is acknowledged, as Stag and Challenger circle within the shadows. They paw the ground and swing their heads low. Clash! The first engagement. Muscles bunch in velvet shoulders, straining, pushing, then falling back. Each eyes the other, weighing damage done, the strength still left in limb and shoulder, preparing once more to clash in nature's brutal struggle. Hooves tear the leaf-littered ground, disturbing the early afternoon air, beating birds from branches, and foxes from lairs, as again horns clash and lock.

Down now, along the valley's length, following the meandering river's bank. The wagons ramble, gaining outrider escorts as they progress. Fine hacks prance and donkeys hobble. Around them all, fields cleansed of wheat, barley, oats and rye show flamed, blackened stubble. Intermixed, orchards heavy with late summer fruits vie with hedgerows' early crop of berries. The valley is proud of its contribution to the continuing dance, barns and bowers loaded high, the work of the year given form and flesh.

Tom shades his eyes against a sun seeking to fool him with memories of the past summer's heat. No crickets call, no bees buzz. They know the time for them this year is gone. *Has mine?* Tom thinks, remembering his age, feeling the day's exertions. He shakes his head and smiles.

The wagon sways as it mounts the cobbles, then swings right into the Manor's yard. Here fine brick walls line three sides of the square, topped by tautly packed straw's gold. The squire's home and farm, and he, red faced, leads the welcome for the Dancers.

Mark leaps from the wagon, then turns to offer a hand to his grandsire. Tom frowns, then laughs, but his heart hears from the distant forest the young buck's challenge. More ale is offered, thicker and darker, with the bite of hops, it washes clean his palate, lingering for a moment there like the sweetness of this life, this dance.

Hobnails clatter on the stone, as the men space out and form up to begin anew their dip and sway. Their feet step, their backs brace, their bodies tilt. The yard is full of spectators, farming folk, ruddy-faced like their squire. Round-hipped, cherry-lipped farmwomen eye the dancing men with husbandry knowledge, gauging muscle and leg's length.

Mark, encouraged by a maiden's wink, carves his line both straight and swift, contact with his Tom's antlers a bit more vigorous and joyous. Tom notes and comments to his grandson the limits of his success with smacking lips and teasing eyes. For a girl clings for a second to Mark's arm, then is swept away—yet it is plain from her sly backward gaze whose step she considered lighter, whose form she followed in the dance. Sadly, Tom notes, with age's rue, no lips seek his, nor fingers tease the horns now resting at his side.

On the higher slopes amid the deep green, the rite of passage intensifies. It, too, draws an audience, but they stand silent as the Stag, red slashed sides heaving with effort, draws back to consider the passing of his age. He has marked the Challenger, but suffers more from his wounds. Death will not come at the hands of this youngster though it may come from a broken heart. But not yet. The Stag is not yet ready to concede, not yet ready to quit the field.

One more time, the antlers are lovingly stored. Again Tom mounts the wagon's bed, sits among friends of a lifetime, generations that grew about him. One more time he pulls on the flagon. Sweat runs from his brow and body, his sides heave with effort to regroup his strength for the next venue. He attributes his condition to the heat of the sun. His breath draws a little harder in the humid air. Neck muscles seem a little more sore this year from tossing the antlers' weight in joyous abandon. Not too many more years of this, maybe this is the last. Maybe now it is time to pass the dance to younger bodies.

No need to decide now, Tom muses, one more dance to perform. One more pass to feel the pulse of life this day, then done.

The wagons and their entourage descend upon the village, voices shouting hilarious improbabilities, children running wildly about, and villagers standing outside their doors to watch the procession, then falling in happily behind. The tables in the square are ready; the musicians gathered; the town fathers and mothers assembled.

The wagons arrive; the dancers dismount. This time, to his disgust, Tom looks for Mark's support in dismounting. Mark is there as always, smiling, loving. *And a young Stag to my old*, Tom thinks, but then dismisses the thought, gently shaking his head. He finds his antlers, dons them, and moves to his appointed place.

The air seems blurred and red. Mark taller, moving faster than he should. Old Tom keeps pace, lifting and lowering Antlers that never before weighed this much. No missed steps, but a few missed breaths. Perspiration in runnels soak his shirt and pants. Circle in time; move forward.

Why do they dance so fast? Tom asks himself. It should be a slow and stately pace. This is a celebration, not a race.

The last click of antlers, the final pass assaults his mind, holding him with a new purpose, as if he were standing in an empty barn with all the valley's children beating on the walls. The feeling drives him, like a beaten stag, to his knees. His antlered head raises, unwilling to accept this fact, his ending, but he cannot sustain the effort. He slides into Mark's loving arms, his grandson, still antlered, seated cross-legged beneath him. Others remove the antlers from Tom's now bowed head.

One last time he tells his grandson how it is with him. "It was a very good dance," he whispers.

In the forest, the Stag gathers himself, paws the dirt, raises his head but does not sound, conserving energy. He moves purposefully across the clearing, head lowering into position, eyes measuring the charge of the Challenger. The collision rocks the bones of his neck and shoulders, rips the musculature supporting head and antlers, and drives the Stag to his knees. The challenger backs away, considers the Stag, then sounds his triumphant call. The new Stag struts from the clearing, expecting and receiving the homage of others. They follow him, at first in stately procession, but then more lively parade as participants begin to feel the spirit of the new king.

The old stag regains its wobbly legs to gather its remaining strength. After a little while, the once-proud beast turns in the opposite direction to the new Stag's procession, and disappears into the evening mist.

In the village, they carry Tom to a resting place. They put him aside for the moment, while the dance plays itself out. Tom

knew this was how it would be; he had always known. The
Dancers come and go, unremarked

The dance continues.

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England, UK

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Associate Editor: Jon Shrike

In the Forest

K.C. Murdarasi

Localisation

UK English

Reader Guidance

There's just a touch of blood and guts in this one. Everyone's got to eat. Gentle readers are reminded that it is RPM's *Official Policy* that every dog shall have his day.

It has been a bad year for all of us. The winter was unusually harsh and unexpectedly long. Even now, in April, there is snow lying in the shadows of the forest. Many creatures haven't made it through the cold months, and those that have aren't able to breed as early as usual. In short, there isn't much food and we all feel the pinch of hunger.

Things aren't good for the humans either. The last of the winter stocks have been eked out for far longer than planned. The humans look thin and ill and, now the ground is finally thawing, they work the land tirelessly, readying it for planting, or stalk the forest for what little game there is. That was why the girl was alone in the forest. Well, of course it was. *They don't send a little girl alone into the forest unless they have to.* This isn't the patch of woods at the bottom of your street. This is a dark, confusing place full of sunless corners and concealed places. One of them was concealing me. But then, this was a girl who knew how to look after herself. That's how I found her.

I was attracted to the smell of her food. I followed my eager nose and found the dark-clad, hooded girl sitting in a clearing, tucking into a piece of cured sausage. My insides contracted with longing but I approached cautiously. She looked up, swept the curls out of her eyes and regarded me calmly.

“What are you doing in the forest, little girl?” I asked.

The girl swallowed her mouthful of sausage and said, “I’m taking some food to my grandmother. She’s been ill.” I looked at the remains of sausage in her hand and the grease on her lips. She must have known what I was thinking because she pouted and said, “Not that it’s any of *your* business, anyway!” An unpleasant child, but she had food so I tried to be ingratiating.

“It has been such a hard winter, my dear, and I would be grateful if you would give me a little ...?” but before I could even make my request she threw the sausage back into the basket, snapped it shut and sat on it.

“Oh no!” she said, “This food’s not for you!”

“It’s not for you, either,” I snarled, and had the satisfaction of seeing her look *scared*, but with that I loped away. I could have killed her for it, but killing humans is more trouble than it’s worth. Vengeful beasts.

I searched for more conventional nourishment, but couldn’t find anything bigger than a vole. I would have been glad of a squirrel but they are too quick and run up into trees, hurling high-pitched abuse at me. After missing my third squirrel it occurred to me to try the grandmother’s den. Possibly her family had been supplying her, and if not, at least I knew a delivery was on its way. The girl had a head-start, but I knew the direction of the path and can easily outrun a human. This was a mere juvenile with a loaded basket. I set off at a fast lope. Sure enough, when I arrived, there was no sign of the girl.

I could hear someone chopping wood nearby but the sound remained distant, so I cautiously approached the den. I used my nose on the latch, which wasn't hard, but I couldn't control the door. It flew open and banged against the wall, waking the old woman, who had been sleeping in the corner of the room. She struggled up in her bed, saw me silhouetted in the doorway, and promptly fell into a dead faint. That suited me fine; I could look for what I wanted undisturbed. I nudged the door closed and began to sniff at the cupboards, but before I could find anything I heard the child singing and her footsteps approaching the door. There was no escape—the window was shuttered—but an idea came to me in the darkness of the den. If I could fool the girl, I could have *everything*. Swiftly, I jumped into bed with the grandmother, shoved her head below the covers and shuffled down as far as I could myself. The door swung open.

“Good morning, Grandmama!” I've brought you a meal!” I croaked a thank you, which I hoped would sound like the old woman. It obviously didn't. The girl's eyes narrowed in suspicion. She put the basket down on the floor and edged towards the bed.

“What's wrong, Grandmama?” she asked, warily. I said nothing, just groaned a little. Still she edged closer. Any moment the game would be up, and I could feel the old woman beginning to stir. I tried to hold my nerve. The little girl stopped, and I thought for a second it might be all right, but then she flung open the shutters and it was over.

“Those big ears, those big teeth—you're the wolf!”

She turned and ran out, calling for help. I jumped out of bed, knocked the basket over to get the remains of the sausage, and leapt through the window. The nearby woodcutter heard the

shouts and was lumbering up with his axe. He aimed a blow at me, but I dodged it easily. I escaped into the forest.

I heard later that the woodcutter, when he had been drinking, would claim that he had cut the old woman out of my stomach with his axe. I wonder what she made of the story?

As for me, I headed off to a village at the opposite edge of the forest. The sausage was a poor reward for my efforts that day, and I had heard rumours that there were some pigpens there so poorly built that a puff of wind could blow them down.

Any opportunity is worth a try in such hard times.

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Scotland, UK

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Associate Editor: Carol Ann Lawry

Urian

Carol Allen

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

No caution needed.

Walking through a thick patch of mist hanging overhead, Cheeta has a serpentine body with wings. The eyes have wide slits that sink into the sockets. But another *pith* (soul) is nearby.

Rorqual has wild hair, narrow eyes, and a long body made of bead-like scales. They live on a planet called Urian. It has more than enough room for its inhabitants. They generally get along fine.

But a young *pith* wearing khakis has problems. Bitis suffers with schizophrenia. He started screaming. Then Cheeta came over to help.

“What’s wrong?” Cheeta asked.

“I’m sick.”

Then Bitis grabbed Cheeta’s hands to fly away.

They’re over miles of arboreals and deep clear water. Homes are scattered around. The tall wooden structures hold up well even when the weather is bad. Bitis has a medium-size body with shaggy hair. His cool mint eyes match his hair.

They’re back on land now. “Thank you very much.”

“Well, I’m here to help,” Cheeta said.

“The medicine that I take makes me worse.”

“You’re more stable now.”

“It comes and goes,” Bitis said.

“We all have limitations.”

“Oh, forget it.” Then Bitis took off, running south. Being in his state of mind, he can’t cope with much now.

After hearing someone behind, Bitis stopped and turned around. Then Rorqual said, “It’s only me.”

“I heard someone behind.”

“You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Well, be careful.” Then Rorqual decided to leave. She doesn’t want things to get worse.

Anyhow, it’s dark now. But the area has wild plants and blue girl roses. The silvery-lilac blooms are five inches long on spiny stems. Bitis found a bench nearby. Then Rorqual returned.

“I brought you something,” she said.

“Oh, good. Some food.” He accepted the vegetable dish from her.

“You’re shaking.”

“I’m a schizophreniac.”

Then Rorqual said, “What are you doing out here alone?”

“I’m trying to eat now.”

“Oh, that’s an excuse.”

But she decided to keep quiet for awhile.

Light comes from the moon and *leas* (houses) that are scattered around. The area has mesquite and chollas with spiny joints that grab on to other plants for food. They’re the only cacti around in this sandy area. Well, Bitis finished eating.

“Gosh, I was so hungry,” he said.

“Where are your shoes?”

“I left them at home.” But something else came to mind. “I keep staring at these beautiful exotic roses.”

“Ahh, they even shine,” Rorqual said.

“I’m surprised that we have true blue roses.”

“Are you from around here?”

“No, I was born on the west coast.”

“All right.”

“I’ve been sick for twelve long years.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rorqual said softly.

“That’s okay.”

“Anyhow, you’re better now.”

“But I don’t know how long it’ll last. So, tell me about you.”

“Well, my husband died five years ago. So, I travel a lot,” Rorqual explained.

“Oh, no.” The young *pith* started shaking again.

“I’ll go get help.” Then Rorqual ran as if lightning struck her.

The bead-like scales shed every week. Rorqual never had children. Her husband died suddenly. It took time to readjust.

Bitis has no brothers or sisters. Living on the west coast was lonely. Bitis grew up fighting the disease which started around age ten. Then his parents sought help from an old friend. The psychiatrist prescribed an anti-psychotic pill. Hopefully, one will work for Bitis in the future.

Some *piths* are out gazing at the sky. They see fireballs leaving long bright trails behind. It’s something that’s caused by atmospheric winds thousands of miles high.

Rorqual ran into Cheeta. She told him about Bitis. Well, the young *pith* managed to reach the doctor’s office. But it was almost closed.

“I feel great!” he shouted.

Then Cheeta said, “Well, all right.”

“This new pill called Zelig is supposed to work.”

“Oh, I’ve read about it in a medical journal.”

“Good. I don’t feel nervous or agitated.”

Then Cheeta said, “It must be a good sign.”

They’re near his home where lively palmates grow by extending branches up to ten feet long.

A brilliant *bolide* (meteor) appeared from above as well. It continued to glow, leaving trails of color behind.

Even the smallest of objects can be seen from above.

“Hey, look!” Bitis shouted. Blue girl roses suddenly appeared around them. “I want to live here forever.” When he removed the largest rose from a stem no one moved. They’re captivated by its beauty. Even the stars twinkle more. Urian continues to move on its orbit. Far into the galaxy. And the young *pith* named Bitis will spend the rest of his life here with friends.

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Ohio, USA

Associate Editor: Ben Jacobson

Dead or Dying

Devin Drover

Localisation

US English

Reader Guidance

Themes from hard agricultural life.

My Aunt came home on vacation today, leaving her home in Ontario for a week-long visit to the depths of rural Newfoundland. After a while, when she and my dear Mother got over the initial excitement of seeing each other for the first time in years, my Aunt asked politely about her old friends, and was sad to hear how most of them were dead or dying. I however, didn't find it that surprising. Those that fail to leave here seem to face either of those options. They are either dead—typically through a quick, self-inflicted shotgun blast or a long and painful fight with lung cancer caused by their oral fixation with cigarettes—or they wish to be. For them, every day is a slow game of Russian roulette.

I've learned a lot through these people, weighing the standards between those that make their habitat here, compared to those that are simply travellers. The latter live life with not just dreams and goals, but the accomplishment of the before-mentioned dreams and goals. This is something very few people have a tendency to do here and I have learned from these travellers—these aliens who find themselves in unfamiliar situations constantly—that I must follow in their footsteps.

Leave everything in the past and begin leaping out into the darkness of the world, hoping to find a new home elsewhere before it's too late, and I turn into one of the people that I once despised. That'd just be leaving myself just like them—dead or dying.

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Spaniards Bay, Newfoundland
<http://devindrover.blogspot.com/>

Bad Territory #2

Tom Sykes

Localisation

UK English

Reader Guidance

Harsh themes getting harsher. Bad Territory #1 is available in RPM07 – REVOLUTION.

Be advised that this is **not light reading** and will easily offend even robust individuals.

Episode #3 will appear in RPM09.

Ernest was discharged from hospital the next day. He'd been told he was fortunate not to have suffered a fractured skull. He headed straight to Tadburton Mall to meet Judy. Neon ciphers—musical notes, oversized sandwiches, exclamation marks—glowed from shop windows while brand names projected like searchlights onto the acid-etched glass of the ceiling. Although there were already a dozen escalators serving three floors, more were under construction, their furrows confined by yellow tape. The intention, it seemed, was to eliminate the need for any customer to walk anywhere.

Presentation boards portrayed the mall as the latest chapter in the history of leisure. Ernest imagined himself inside the vintage photos.

The great national holiday of the Victorian era: a scene of listless oiks leading unheard children on dehydrating donkeys, and moustaches, badges of virility, posing on peeled lips below tea-towels.

Next, a pre-war lido chiselled from the inner city, all splashes and plops and huge bathing costumes and oily hairpieces with tie clips and pipes, incongruous fun before a high-rise horizon.

Then a spacious arcade of people spinning themselves spastic on gyroscopes and twisting the one-armed bandits for zilch returns.

A vacant female voice narrated in Little English: “The least you can win tonight is seven thousand pounds. Mark from Salisbury is up next. His wife is expecting a baby so if he got this windfall it would really make his day.”

Men in cheap tuxedos playing Texas Hold 'Em, their wives cackling at the roulette wheel, their kids, savvy and scheming, persuading tourists to blow a fortune in the slots only for the young 'uns to win it all back afterwards.

“It’s not rude to interrupt—it’s essential. Hi Zoe, how are you tonight? Feeling lucky?”

Scale dioramas of racing grounds, dog tracks and Formula One stadia packed with well-manicured Chinamen and old biddies here for the free G&Ts and basket meals.

Grab some cash right now. We’re not concerned about class here. If you win the money no one will hold it against you.

The next picture: an orange brick 1980s estate home, except with major amendments such as medieval crenellations, arrow slits and embrasures for dumping boiling oil. Vaulted windows stained with biblical scenes. A shallow chlorine moat circling the place. An automated drawbridge with a voice-recognition system leading onto a synthetic barbican whose open doors reveal an arsenal of crossbows, swords and polearms. For every mock-archaic detail a contemporary compromise: busts of Richard the

Lionheart made from crazy paving, sprinklers housed inside marble fountains, garden friars rather than garden gnomes.

This epitome, this ultrasupermegacasino. Twenty years in the building.

On this evidence an alien might have concluded that all this world's inhabitants did was play. It was just fun fun fun by the look of these photos.

“Dad? Dad?”

Ernest snapped out of it. Slimy Formica chilled his fingers. The wilted back rest of his chair ached his spine. Pastry chunks dawdled down his oesophagus and dropped into an acid puddle of indigestion. He registered his situation with idiot torpor. Tadburton Mall. Judy. There. Lunch.

“Dad, you feeling tired again?” His daughter sat opposite him at an aisle booth in the food court where they met once a week. She had a vigorous flush to her chubby cheeks and her globular eyes were more sympathetic than ever. The outlines of crescent nipple piercings could be seen through her crop top depicting a macramé sloth. Her lustrous red hair flowed from her scalp like a fountain, splashing over her freckled back and pooling in her shoulders. “Dad? You know Dr Mistry said you could feel woozy for weeks.”

Ernest exhaled quickly. “I’m all right. You going to eat that, love?”

Judy was on a diet so he forked the majority of her three bean salad into the congealed swamp of his tom yam soup. In between mouthfuls he waxed ephemeral. Living on his own made him talk too much, over her sometimes, but she was always happy to listen. Judy admired him for not lapsing into the moral dyspepsia common in men over 65. He stayed receptive to new ideas and never grumbled about the passing of some

halcyon age when things were much better. Of course he disliked some aspects of modern life, like the fact that everyone was a stranger, businesslike, with no time for pleasantries. You were as likely to chat with your next door neighbour these days as with the Sheikh of Dubai. Except at least you saw the latter on TV from time to time.

Lorna, Judy's mum and Ernest's ex-wife, was coming up in their conversations more often since she'd contracted breast cancer. Ernest couldn't talk straight about the illness, or get drawn into the grisly details or the practicalities of care, because he still loved her too much. It was too painful for him to be prosaic, so he spun conspiracy theories about the congruence between the advent of roll-on deodorants and the rise in breast cancer figures. Judy didn't mind this. She knew her dad too well to think him distasteful. She knew he wasn't so much evading the issue as grappling with it as best he could.

Ernest had a bad habit of imagining Lorna's death, even though it was only early days and she was responding well to treatment. He was no theist but he couldn't stand the violations made against the dead. The probing of the post-mortem, the transit between the place where you died, the place where you were stored, the place where you were exhibited for your loved ones, and then to your final resting place to be munched by vermin. Where was the dignity in that? You may not be conscious but that's still you!

There had been no great dispute between Ernest and Lorna, no decisive catalyst for their divorce. Stupid little things had made them bicker and the bickering had become a drag. Simple as that. Had Ernest lived with anyone for thirty years, he fancied the same problems would have arisen. Neither he nor Lorna had respected their common need for private space.

Lunch had gone too quickly. Ernest waved away a waitress' offer of pumpkin terrine in a Belgian chocolate sauce by joking he'd get internal bleeding if he ate any more. Father and daughter turned their attention to a big screen news channel. Massive flooding in Southeast Asia had decimated food crops, causing untold human damage. Meanwhile, this country continued its plunge into crisis. A war reporter used to far-flung tyrannies had been recalled to the streets of a Northern city and required to duck paving slabs thrown in a fierce riot. In the background, army JCBs shoved burnt-out cars off the kerb and into the gore-streaked car parks of looted supermarkets. There was footage of soldiers travelling home from foreign bases to offer reinforcement.

All this excitement segued into a human interest story. The sound went mute so Ernest and Judy had to make what sense they could of crumbling tenements, 'sex for food' signs and convoys of manual workers. Abel Ramsay, the Protector of Anglo-Terra, spoke at a prayer breakfast in the House of Commons, the crucifix round his neck as big as his head. Subtitles described policies for the upcoming election, prohibition the common theme. If Ramsay's Post Party got back in they'd enact Old Testament laws, ridding the school system once and for all of evolutionary science and persecuting 'heathen faiths'. On the economic front the Party promised to block the brain drain that was seeing thousands of educated Anglo-Terrans flee East for hi-techie employment.

Dark reality gave way to light entertainment. A presenter called Jeff the Funky Terrorist grinned and waved while the camera zoomed in to a close-up of his chin and then out to show the shabby American motel room he stood in. He was well-built, pumped-up and worked-out—a contrast to his nerdy-comedy

face of snub-nose underlined by tiffany 'tache. His mouth widened and pinched as he said unheard words. For Ernest and Judy there was just the noise of consumerism all around them.

Judy pecked her father on the forehead and hurried back to work. A few minutes later, Ernest went into the covered high street to be bumped about by a stampede of shoppers. The more he looked at them, the more their forms blended into the environment, the labels round their necks and on their shoes indistinguishable from the labels in the windows, the patterns on their bags replicated on doorways and on counters. The sheer glut of stuff for sale—57,000 varieties of every imaginable product—was an aurora to his nervous system. For a moment he lost cerebral coordination, tripping on a drain cover painted with a hazard sign.

He found his way into a street spanned by an isthmus of people with ping-pong boils on their necks and flaring roll-ups in their hands and bargain bock in their stomachs and dogs worrying at their shoes and sore presences on their skins and clothes on them that were certainly not ready-ripped in a Tadburton boutique. Sad pleas were directed at a sports car as it headed down the one-way street, its driver wishing he could accelerate off. When he was asked for change he replied, "Sorry, I've only got fifty pound notes." His laughter provoked a few chucked pebbles. He joined a jam of decrepit vehicles on a potholed motorway fringed by hills of potash. Temporary homes formed a distant backdrop, their precarious brickwork like a mouthful of old man's teeth, some wobbly from rot, others missing completely. The laundry hanging from the rooftops was just bright enough to penetrate the smog.

Well-nourished charity collectors were shaking pots at the public. A porcine man of military mien stomped angrily up to

one of them. “No, I won’t give money to the Lifeboat. If morons want to get lost at sea they can bloody well bail themselves out!” The man fell to his knees, gripping his head and moaning low. Bystanders made gauche advances, unsure what to do. Someone rang 999. Someone else stupidly asked the man if he was okay while he bent double, writhed and pitched up to a cutting shriek. When a helping hand was offered, he sprang back onto his feet as fast as a mousetrap.

He appeared to have two heads, or rather a new head had sprouted from the scalp of his existing one. It was severely misshapen with a bald cranium that shrove into hundreds of deep contours, and a loose throat that sagged over the face beneath. There were swellings on the brow so huge as to engulf the eyes. From a bloody and bacilli-caked mouth, drool the texture of sperm fell first onto the man’s chest and then into the drain.

Ernest’s gut turned with pathos. He felt too sorry for the creature to be disgusted. He looked to the public. Where they should have had faces there was only the kind of untuned interference that used to appear on old TVs. Their variegated bodies and clothing were intact; frumpy tracksuits, stubby jumpers, beanpole surfwear. In his confusion, Ernest tripped over a bench memorialising a Rotarian. He blinked a dozen times and moved faster than he ever had.

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England, UK

Note: this movement of Bad Territory concludes in RPM09

RUTHLESS PEOPLES MAGAZINE

~AFTERWORD~

There is something wrong with the world!

No matter how many times I insist on the rugged, outdoorsy nature of RPM and its passion for the world of leaves and organisms, I get catcalls of derision. Mother can be so cruel.

This issue—above all else—should put paid to such unkind mockery. *Wild Life* teems with limbs of skin and fur, torrents and hills, life and death and boughs of green.

With this in mind, we have waxed our legs, oiled our chaps and mudwrestled this issue into existence. It comes certified with vibrant colours and blissful pastorals which raise, tease and punish the essential question: *what are we?* Creatures of noble reason, distant from, and set against the cold of the Universe—or are we elements of the wild: fast-flowing entities frothing through and among Creation's rapids?

Your humble Editors and Writers have their own answers. Go figure, dear reader, and think on it.

Yours, red in tooth & claw,

Dominic Hamer

Editor-in-Chief

South of the River, 2009

PS. Next issue probably 28th November, give or take.

~ TEAM RPM ~

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