

Hub

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As I'm currently typing this from the comfort of my sick bed (altogether now: awwwwwww...) this week's *Hub* is a relatively short one. Luckily, as ever, we have an excellent piece of short fiction to keep you warm.

Genre fiction in all its forms seems to be everywhere we look these days. We're used to seeing Doctor Who, Heroes, Battlestar Galactica, Torchwood and Primeval on our screens, and there's so much more on the way: Bionic Woman, Reaper, Pushing Daisies, Heroes Season 2, Journeyman, Charlie Jade, Sarah Conner Chronicles – you may have read about some or all of these in the genre press, or online, and we'll have a roundup (and reviews) of these, shortly. As well as TV, film continues to mine the deep genre veins of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and the bookworld has rarely been as busy with genre releases.

This is a good time to be a fan.

About Hub

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at **Orbit**, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk.



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Nightmare Man

by Jeremy C. Shipp

They call it postdormital paralysis with hypnopompic hallucinations.

I call it hell.

You open your eyes, and you think you're awake. But the room wheezes.

A chthonic force seizes you, squeezing your chest, while a stark sonorous voice says, "You are doomed."

You are doomed.

Fear splatters against your skin and wiggles deep inside your gaping pores. Go ahead, toss and turn. Scream all you want. Until the presence absconds from your room, you're helpless. No one's going to save you.

The clock on the wall may say only 30 seconds have passed, but you know better.

Some moments last an eternity.

When this one ends, I'm free again. Free of the presence at least. I feel so much better than I did only seconds before, I should be celebrating. Dancing for joy.

Instead, I pop another pill. And another. This is my pathetic attempt at revenge.

"Take that," I think.

But deep down, I know he's laughing at me. He's saying, "You think you can harrow hell? I'll be back tomorrow."

He will.

Years ago, he only came once every few months. Then every few weeks. Days. Now, a night doesn't go by without an assault.

Yeah, I hate it. I hate him. But don't get me wrong. If the medication actually worked, I'd stopped taking it.

There are so many ways.

Sex, drugs, food.

Work, relationships, TV.

Talking, bathing, drawing the curtains and looking out the window.

When people say, "Get a life," what they usually mean is, "Drown out the screaming of your heart like I do, then we can be friends."

I refuse.

So I'm in my room, lying on my cot with my arms at my sides. Shapes coalesce in the popcorn ceiling. The trick isn't to stop seeing them. It's to ignore them without looking away.



My phone rings. For the first time in a very long while.

Sure, I could have disconnected the line years ago, but knowing that I'm not receiving any calls is just as important as the silence itself.

"Hello?" I say, barely.

"Tomas," he says. "It's Nabelung."

"Nabe," I say, and a hunk of slime leaps out of my throat onto my bare leg. It oozes toward my sheets.

"I'm sorry we haven't kept in touch, Tomas. You were always a good friend."

"No I wasn't."

He laughs a little, though I'm sure he knows I'm not joking. Then his voice gets serious.

"Richard gave me your number. He told me what happened. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," I say, and barely mean it.

He's silent for a while. "This is going to sound strange. Well...it is strange. I know that. Especially coming from me. I was always such a sceptic."

"I never thought of you that way." My deep-seated spittle gently touches the fabric. "You believe in God."

"Yes, but in a regimented sort of way. That's not the point here, Tomas. I have a message for you. From a woman named Jade. She's been trying to contact you, but she can't get through."

The thought of a mysterious woman thinking about me makes me want to vomit. And her name, it almost brings me to tears. "I don't know anyone named Jade."

"You don't know her. She knows you. She says she wants you as her...well...she uses the word servant. I don't like the connotations of that word."

"What?"

"She told me if I didn't act as your invitation, she'd never stop bothering me. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize."

"She says in order to see her, you need to eat a peanut."

"Salted or unsalted?" This is more of a knee-jerk reaction than anything. I used to joke around about everything, before I had nothing.

"She didn't specify that," he says. "But it has to look like a human face. Someone you know. She says you'll know it when you see it."

We're both silent for a while, he and I. It's very loud.

"That's about all I know," he says. "You can do with this what you want. I've done my part, so it's over for me now. Thank you for listening."

"Yeah."

"It was good speaking with you again, Tomas. I hope everything works out for the best. Goodbye."

He hangs up before I have the chance to speak. Before I can say something that I'll regret. He does this out of courtesy to me.

"Goodbye," I say.

They call them peanuts.

I call them indehiscent legumes that can fix atmospheric nitrogen and reduce the risk of heart disease.

Vitamin E, fiber, protein.

Monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat.

Zinc, niacin, thiamin, manganese, folic acid, copper, phosphorous.

It used to be my job to know all this.

Now, the information buzzes in my mind and I swat it away. Unsalted peanuts are a part of my daily dinner plan. This one looks a little like standup comic Jim Gaffigan. He was one of my favorites back when I watched television and went to comedy clubs and combed my hair.

Years ago, I would have laughed. I would have shown it around like a trophy or a scar.

Now, I eat it. I crunch the miracle a few times, then swallow. Not because I want to see Jade. But because I refuse to believe in the power of a single peanut.

The old me would have believed. Or at least he would've wanted to. The old me believed that flax seed could cure cancer and that AIDS wasn't caused by a virus. He slid pamphlets under the doorways of unsuspecting strangers. He even hosted parties where he helped people to bend spoons with the power of their mind.

This was me.

Now he's gone.

The smiling peanut face is nothing but an acid-drenched memory.

Marshmallow peeps squirm in a massive cocoon-shaped heap on the tile floor. They move like desperate fingers, and I may be wrong about this, but I think some of them are. Little fingers. At first I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. Then I see the cats.

Oh, they're beyond hungry. They're dead, and they're out for blood. Piebald patches of black and white fur cling to their decaying flesh. I know they used to be good, sweet kittens who only tortured insects because they had no awareness of the bug's pain. But now, now they're in the know. They're pissed off at humanity because they would've loved us forever if we just hadn't thrown them away.

They charge not at me, but at the marshmallow cocoon. They know what it means to me even before I do.

"Stay away from them!" I say.

I kick the cats, one after another after another. They tumble on the floor and leave a trail of blood and fur and flesh in their wake. There are too many of them, and I'm not hindering the ones I'm punting away.

Soon, they're everywhere. They scratch and bite at the cocoon. Geysers of green blood spray out of the marshmallow chickens. I attempt to plug the holes with my fingers and toes, like some cartoon character trying to save a sinking ship. The cats, meanwhile, are purring like crazy. But whatever makes them purr is broken now. Now the purring sounds like a bean in a tin can being shaken by someone without any rhythm. There are a thousand beans and a thousand cans. I can taste the green blood in my mouth. More than that, I can taste the peanut.

The chickens and cats and carnage disappear to wherever they came from, and I'm alone.

I'm dreaming and I'm alone in a plain white room. More alone than I've ever been.

Oh, I'm beyond terrified.

I wish for the nightmare to return.

I even wish for the presence.

Instead, flecks of green light flutter in through cracks in the wall that I didn't notice before, and rally together into a blurry woman. She lacks details, but I can see that her hair is green and she's wearing a red dress. I think of Christmas for a moment. Then I don't.

“Tomas,” she says.

After my name is spoken, I’m no longer looking down on the scene. I’m looking at the woman like I’m seeing with eyes. She’s not only detailed, but exceedingly so. Every strand of her hair blares at me, the same as the cracks on the wall, and the intricate flower designs on the tile floor. I see these things like I’m staring inches from each of them, studying them with all my might. But I’m not.

“I’m Jade,” she says. “But you already knew that.”

She’s right.

After sitting cross-legged, she pats the floor in front of her.

I take a step forward, though I don’t sit down.

“You’re afraid of me,” she says. “Good. I’m glad you’re not stupid.”

“Yes I am,” I say, almost rebelliously. Now I know I’m in trouble. The only time I talk back like this is when I’m feeling threatened beyond my ability to cope.

She waves away the thought. “You have no idea how hard it was to get in here. I was even considering contacting you in the waking time, but that never works. And when I say never, I mean it. No one’s ever been open-minded enough to really hear me in the daylight. It’s good that we can speak here. I’ll have to thank Nabelung with some wonderful nightmares. The peanut worked.”

“You’re telling me this is happening because of some magical peanut?”

“In a sense. I know that human beings see human faces in anything and everything. All I had to do was get the idea planted in your mind by someone you respect. You did the rest. A very small part of you believed that the peanut might be magic and might allow me to speak with you. I squeezed myself through that crack.”

Her explanation makes so much sense to me that it scares me. I want to wake up.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” she says. “If you awoke, I’d be at your mercy, and we can’t have that. I’m much too important.”

“What do you want from me?”

She grins. “I’m sure Nabelung already told you. That was part of the deal.”

“You want me to be your servant.”

“I want you to be and I need you to be. In the waking, I’m 93 years old. I don’t remember who I am most of the time.”

“You want me to take care of you?”

“Basically.”

“I used to be a nutritionist, not a nurse. I wouldn’t know how to—”

“No, here. I want you to take care of me here.”

“Oh.”

“You’re a very unique man, Tomas. Most people hide from their pain. But you. You bathe in it like it’s a hot spring. Not that you enjoy it like you would a hot spring. Sorry, I’m not very good at metaphors.”

“It’s okay.”

“What I’m trying to say is that your nightmares are beautiful, and I need your suffering much more than you do.”

“No,” I say. I’m still scared of her alright, but I’m more frightened of the prospect of giving away my pain.

It’s who I am.

“The problem for you, Tomas, is that while I’m here I can control...well, next to everything. And, I know what you’re afraid of.”

I laugh so hard the room shakes. “I’m living my fears every day of my life. You couldn’t make it any worse.”

She shakes her head, and light dances on her gliding hair. “I can see how you’d think that. I used to be a lot like you before my brain gave out and I lost the connection with my past. But you’re wrong.”

“I find that very hard to believe.”

“You’re not the first.” She disappears.

It was, of course, all just a dream. Now I’m back home in the wild where I belong.

That’s right. I live in the jungle and forage for berries and nuts and hunt wild boar with my trusty spear named Sir Stabs-a-lot. The smells and the waterfalls of these parts are to die for. The caves are just deadly.

If you saw me praying over this bloody bunny rabbit I just bludgeoned to death with a river stone, you might assume I was an eccentric before abandoning my old life. You might guess it was my life-long dream to live this kind of life.

You’d be wrong.

Some desires are beyond simple dreaming. Sometimes you don’t know what you really want until you have it.

Sometimes you survive a plane crash and before the rescuers show up, you realize the thunderbird that flew into the engine was actually a blessing in a feathery disguise.

So you stay.

I’m chomping on raw bunny organs when a photograph falls from the sky and hits the ground in front of me with a bellowing thud. I see them there, in that frozen smidgen of time. She’s wearing a t-shirt that says “I LOVE MY BABY” and his says “I LOVE MY MOMMY.” I made those shirts on some strange whim the night before Mother’s Day. I burned my thumb on the iron and sucked it like a baby. This made me laugh amidst the pain.

The memory flashes in my mind for an instant, like I flipped on a light bulb that reveals so much and then burns out.

A horrible feeling attacks me. It’s a feeling with claws and teeth and a sharp tail and breath of fire. I imagine the beast in the cave that I know is there but’ve never seen.

Here I am, living this life, and they’re not. BABY and MOMMY.

If I sucked my thumb now, I wouldn’t laugh or smile. I’d curl up in a fetal position on the jungle floor and cry myself to sleep.

The photograph catches fire.

And me with it.

It was, of course, all just a dream. Now I’m back home in the wild where I belong.

I may be wrong about this, but I think I dreamt of the cave. I think I wandered too close to the darkness and the beast dragged me inside by my right foot. He towed me through tunnels. He showed me glowing petroglyphs on the walls created a long time ago.

Created by me.

I look down at my feet, and a green stem snakes up from the forest floor. A red flower explodes into bloom. I feel like shielding my eyes, but I can’t move.

Shapes begin to form in the petals. A woman and a boy.

The trick isn't to stop seeing them. It's to ignore them without looking away.

But I can't.

I remember.

It was, of course, all just a dream. Now I'm back home in the wild where I belong.

An almost orgasmic sense of relief gushes inside me. I release the horrible feeling that ravaged me, because whatever I was dreaming about, whatever happened inside the cave, it wasn't real.

Then I remember.

I remember everything.

"Jade," I say.

She steps out from behind a tree.

"I'll be your slave," I say.

"Servant," she says.

Sure I'm saddling her chest, holding down her arms as she writhes and kicks, but don't get the wrong idea. She's the one in control.

Green goop spurts from my eyes, nose, mouth in a constant stream onto Jade's agonizing face. The liquid burrows into her orifices. It dives into her mouth with every sputtering scream.

I think the word toxin. Then I don't.

After a while, she stops struggling. She trembles.

When I can't excrete anymore, I release her, lie on the floor, and attempt to cry. I'm too empty though. I'm numb.

A moment later, I'm standing in a hallway with Jade at my side. As far as I can tell, the corridor stretches on forever in both directions. Suddenly I feel very small.

"This is much better," Jade says. "Thank you." Her eyes shower me with a gentle radiance.

"You're welcome," I say, almost meaning it.

She takes my hand and we walk. Candles interspersed evenly on the walls light our way. The flames lean toward us as we pass.

"Her name is Aalia," Jade says.

"I don't want to do this," I say, and mean it.

"This isn't about you, Tomas. She needs us."

The door beside me swings open and Jade shoves me inside. I go for the door, but they're curtains now.

"Stay away from me," someone says, behind me. Aalia, I'm guessing.

I turn around and find her sitting on a bed, hugging her legs.

The old me wouldn't have crept toward her with a dark energy buzzing on his skin. The old me believed that the human body was a sanctuary, and a mystical one at that. He hugged his wife and son even when they weren't around.

This was me.

Now he's gone.

Aalia screams and runs out the bedroom window into the night.

I chase after her.

I chase her through a field of corn, which always points me in the right direction. I chase her through ancient ruins, and the symbols on the stones transform into arrows. She's betrayed at every turn.

There is no escape.

I corner her in a room without any windows or doors.

"Please don't hurt me," she says, crying.

"I won't," I want to say, but I don't believe that. I've done much worse.

The cloud of dark power around me seizes her as I approach. It grips and strangles and squeezes her mind.

I tower over her, not myself, but her husband. Her father. Whoever I am, I'm going to destroy her.

I touch her.

She screams and punches me in the gut. Hard.

I fly backwards, crashing and tumbling through wall after wall. Artifacts and corn whirl around me. They nip at my skin. When this world stops spinning, I'm back in the hallway and I have one hell of a stomachache.

I think of probiotics and chamomile tea. Then I don't.

"Sorry," Jade says. "I didn't know Aalia had that in her. No, that's not true. I knew it was there, I just didn't know she'd let it out yet. Anyway. Good job. She may leave him now in the waking."

I lift my shirt. My stomach expands and contorts into the shape of a hairbrush.

"What is this?" I say.

Jade kneels and pats my stomach. I yelp with pain. "It's sort of a difficult thing to put into words," she says. "At least for me. But what I can tell you is that the gap between you and Aalia, between your feelings and hers, is just an illusion. I create these illusions, so I know what I'm talking about."

I try vomiting, but I can't. "Are you going to take it out?"

"What's inside you is real, Tomas. It's yours to deal with. But I can help you."

A door opens.

I glance at my son through the rearview mirror. He chomps the head off a marshmallow chicken.

"Marshmallows used to be a medicine, you know," I say. "This was back when they added an extraction of the marsh mallow plant to the ingredients. Marsh mallow juice is great at healing wounds, boosting the immune system, and suppressing coughs."

"It tastes good," my son says.

I smile and look at my wife, like I often do when I smile. But she's asleep. Her hands rest on her lap, gripping a hairbrush. I smile again and turn my attention to the road.

A lost kitten poster flutters on a streetlight up ahead. I stare.

Suddenly, a chthonic force seizes me and squeezes my chest.

The voice says, "You are doomed."

I am doomed.

Fear closes in on me from all angles.

The light is red, but I can't move. My right foot remains pressed against the pedal.

It may look like I'm in control, but I'm not. I'm helpless.

“Stop doing this to me, Jade,” I say.

“Don’t blame me,” Jade says, sitting in the back seat with my son.

This is how it happens. These are the moments before the truck hits. These are the moments that last an eternity.

“Why did I go through the light?” I say, crying, frozen. “Why didn’t I stop?”

“Because you weren’t paying attention,” Jade says. “You were looking at that poster, thinking about your childhood cat, Snappy.”

“Should they die for such a little mistake?”

“No. But they did. They will again if you keep this up.”

“I don’t know how to stop!”

“You can’t stop.”

There is no escape.

I see the presence in the approaching truck. He’s the shadow of a man. A void that I created because I didn’t know how to stop.

Now I do.

I slam on the breaks, and the truck comes to a screeching stop, just in time to avoid hitting my car, my family, and me.

I’m back in my car now, driving, safe.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ve been away for so long.”

My wife laughs. “We’ve seen you every night, Tomas.”

Jade touches the back of my head. I remember. My wife is right. I’ve dreamt of them hundreds of times since they left the world.

I want to say, “I love you,” but for now I vomit out the window, and leave a trail of green behind us. A green that eats away at the asphalt and seeps deep into the ground.

That was me.

Now he’s gone.

About the Author

Jeremy C. Shipp is an author whose written creations inhabit various magazines, anthologies, and drawers. These publications include the likes of *Flesh and Blood*, *Deep Outside SFFH*, *ChiZine*, *Until Somebody Loses an Eye*, and *Darkness Rising*. While preparing for the forthcoming collapse of civilization, Jeremy enjoys living in Southern California in a moderately haunted Victorian farmhouse. He’s currently working on many stories and novels and is losing his hair, though not because of the ghosts. Vacation, his first published novel, was released earlier this year from Raw Dog Screaming Press. You can visit his online home at <http://www.hauntedhousedressing.com>.

REVIEWS

Dalek Empire: The Fearless, part 1

Written and Directed by Nicholas Briggs

Starring: Noel Clarke, Maureen O’Brien

Big Finish Productions, £10.99, Oct ‘07

The Big Finish productions are among the best that genre audio has to offer. Their *Doctor Who* license



allows them, not only to produce some superb Doctor Who audio, but to produce audio adventures set in the Who universe, but without the presence of our favourite Timelord.

Dalek Empire is one such production. *The Fearless, part 1* is a single-disc audio drama lasting approximately one hour. The production values – as ever – are excellent, and the storyline, while not being particularly adventurous or original, is handled competently. The Press Release for this production states:

“The Daleks are conquering our galaxy. Nothing can stop them. But Commander Agnes Landen has an idea.

On the outer planet Talis Minor, Salus Kade is struggling to keep his colony alive. The last thing he needs is a war to fight”.

That pretty much sums up the episode, and nothing much actually happens. As the first disc of a multi-disc release, this would have been a decent introduction to the story, but as a single-disc release, it's a struggle to justify its £11 price-tag. It's not a bad production (there are surprisingly few of those at Big Finish) – it's just too lacking in plot to recommend it.

If you have enjoyed this week's issue, please consider making a small donation at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and your support is appreciated.