

Hub

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Torchwood, Season 2

For all our UK readers - don't forget that Torchwood begins its second season on BBC2 this Wednesday (14th). I'm reliably informed by a number of sources, that episode 1 is very, *very* good. So, that's beaten all of Season 1 already, then!

Not much of an editorial this week, I know, but it's late and my bed is crying out to me.
(Note to self: never again buy a piece of furniture with built-in voice synthesis – it may be SF, but it's damn annoying!)

The Date on the Tin

Hub comes out on a Saturday. Usually. Sometimes we miss by a day or two, but usually we're on time (and for a *weekly* publication that's never missed an issue, that's some achievement!). Sometimes, when we come out on a Saturday, you might not receive it until the next day (or even the Monday). This is due to the large number of subscribers we have, and delivery of the magazine is sometimes staggered. So now you know. Interesting, huh?

Please yourself...

Lee Harris

About *Hub*

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.

On The Wheel By Richard Parks

"The problem with the rat race: even if you win, you're still just a rat."

Robert Matthews knew that clichéd metaphor as well as anyone. What he did not know was who had called the metaphor down on their heads because, at precisely 9AM, everyone in the old established advertising firm of Hathcock and Dunn turned into a rat.

Specifically, a rat in some variation of a track suit, with numbers sewn on. Probably the only reason they weren't literally running a race was that the "race" element was recognized as figurative within the greater context of the metaphor. Recognized, Robert knew, by the self-aware metaphor itself. Still, this much of the metaphor had manifested literally—they were rats.



Without, it appeared, the loss of identify. Male or female as before, large or small as before, but a rat. Black rats, brown rats, white rats, piebald rats. Rats with bright eyes and a mischievous twist to the hips as they scurried, rats of dignified girth and ponderous squeaks, or rats like Robert himself: six feet from the tip of his whiskered nose to the base of his fine bald tail, which would have added another three feet to his overall length if he wasn't still walking upright. Annoyed as he was with the transformation, Robert regarded his reflection in the third floor men's room mirror and conceded that, as rats went, he was still a handsome devil.

Bud Jenkins came in. Robert knew it was Jenkins by his short stature and the thinning fur on his head.

"I guess it could have been worse," Bud said, examining his own whiskers in the mirror before heading toward the stalls. "Who's the idiot?"

"Don't know yet," Robert said. "You get the Hialeah campaign done?" Rats or no rats, there were deadlines to meet.

"Yeah, just in time." Jenkins disappeared into a cubicle and Robert heard running water followed by a flush. Jenkins emerged and paused to muss with what was left of the fur on his head. He hadn't washed his hands, but then he never washed his hands after using the john even before he was a rat.

Robert studied his own reflection in the mirror again and Jenkins shook his head. "Man, if I had your looks I'd be humping a different girl every night."

"Mary might object," Robert said.

Jenkins grunted. "Like Mary would still be around," Jenkins said. "I never should have settled for that bitch."

Robert remembered the incident. "You actually used that word to her face, as I recall. Is she still a Boston Terrier?"

"A literal bitch rather than a figurative one." Bud grinned. "Yeah. So?"

"Oh, nothing. But I think I'm going to ask for a raincheck on our golf date for Saturday," Robert said, realizing that Bud didn't have a clue as to the full implication of the change in his marital relationship. Mary was every bit as large as her husband and twice as vicious, so Robert's money was on the missus. He considered warning Bud, but the urge passed when he remembered that he was next in line for Bud's corner office.

"No problem. It's probably going to rain now anyway." Jenkins ambled out, followed soon after by Robert.

Outside, it was pretty much business as usual. Dolores Haidy was buffing her nails and, even though she was now a blondish rat, those nails looked neither less nor more like talons than they always

had. Johanssen and Lewis were arguing politics through the walls of their cubicles, their only concession to ratness was that they would pause now and then to worry at a hole they were chewing through the cubicle wall so they could talk easier. Jane Perlicue and her cute young assistant were having a quickie. The only difference was that now they didn't bother to slip into the fourth floor maintenance closet, but rather were going at it on the floor of her office. With the door open. Robert paused for the entertainment value, but left when that proved disappointing. He was feeling a growing sense of mission.

His natural inclination was to just accept the situation and move on. Since the Causality Rift of 2015, such physical manifestations of metaphor had been common. People learned to live with them in much the same way that the world back in the twentieth century had learned to live with the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. He had once watched a scientist who was involved in the quantum determination experiment indirectly responsible for the rift try to explain the nature of the phenomenon, but in the middle of his presentation the man had turned into a literal egg-head, thus demonstrating both the dangers of attracting a metaphor's attention and the consensual nature of reality as it had always existed. It was enough to know that metaphors were both parasitic and alive, and like all living things they had their own agenda and sought out suitable ecological niches to call home.

Like, currently, Hatchcock and Dunn, Inc.

Robert had no illusions about the aptness of the metaphor; he had always been cursed with an excessive degree of self-awareness, and was saved from a life of complete misery only by the counter-course of complacency. He had made peace with his demons, literal and figurative, years ago. He was in his element at Hathcock and Dunn, and had no problem with that. Still, one thing to map one to one with the rat race image, quite another to be a literal rat.

There were disadvantages. For one thing, he really wasn't attracted to rats. Dolores, for example, in her current state did nothing at all for him nor, really, had watching Jane Perlicue with her lesbian gal pal. He found that fact worrisome. Plus, there was the problem of relating to their customers, most of whom weren't literal rats. Robert was sure their current existence as rodents would cast the firm in a bad light, and whatever else he might be, Robert was a company man. He simply had to find out who had attracted the metaphor's attention.

His first suspicion had been Jenkins, but their conversation in the men's room had made Robert realize that this was nonsense. Bud was about as self-aware as a turnip. Robert also considered himself as possible culprit, but the problem with that theory was that he recognized the truth of the metaphor without attaching any special significance to it. He was what he was, and that attitude was entirely too zen to generate the emotional content necessary to invoke a metaphor.

Someone had to be both self-aware enough to recognize the appropriateness of the metaphor, and yet unhappy enough to attract it, like a bleeding fish draws in sharks. Who could that be?

As Robert surveyed his colleagues, the answer to that question was not immediately apparent. Robert saw only rats, and the usual low-level despair that had nothing to do with selfawareness and everything to do with situational awareness. People were miserable because it made perfect *sense* to be miserable, and to keep as cheerful an attitude in the manifestation of that misery as possible. Yet someone was not doing his or her part, and Robert had to find out who that was.

Robert stopped by his office long enough to pick up a folder with some papers in it so it would look as if he had an objective, no matter where in the office he wandered. When he had covered all of the main office he proceeded to the elevator and then up to Executive Territory on the eighth floor.

The elevator doors opened on a hallway, with thick carpet and polished pseudo-mahogany doors in either direction that marked Hathcock and Dunn's upper echelon. There were no sounds from any of them. Not even so much as the squeak of an executive assistant sitting down on some rich old fart's lap; Robert now recalled that a "sales conference" for most of the eighth floor and reps from the firm's larger accounts has been arranged for the week at a golf resort in Bermuda. Robert felt a pang of jealousy but quickly quelched it. Better a rat than a green-eyed monster.

He started to leave, but a sliver of light down at the corner of the hallway caught his attention—one of the doors was slightly ajar.

Dunn, Jr. He isn't supposed to be here.

Probably he wasn't, and the office was just being cleaned. Still, Robert thought he'd better make sure. He knocked on the door even as he pushed it open. "Hello? Mr. Dunn?"

No answer.

The executive assistant's office was empty. He tried the door to the inner sanctum and it opened easily on oiled hinges. The door to Dunn the Younger's private balcony was open and the draperies stirred in a slight breeze. A piece of paper on the CEO's desk did the same, held in place only by a heavy glass paperweight. Robert leaned over the desk and read what was written there.

It was a rather maudlin suicide note. Signed.

Robert stepped out onto the balcony. "Hello?"

Maxwell Dunn, Jr., a portly young rat with heavy black glasses, leaned against the railing as he looked out over the city. He didn't bother to look at Robert.

"Matthews. About time someone showed up. I could have jumped and not a damned soul would have even known. Typical."

"I read the note, sir. Why would you jump?"

"Why? Because I hate my life, Matthews. Just not enough, I guess. I couldn't go through with it. Do me a favor and tear up the note on your way out. So. What did you want?"

For a moment all Robert could do was stand there and blink. "Want...? Oh, I was looking for Mr. Hathcock, but then I remembered they were all out at the sales meeting."

The younger Dunn nodded. "Yeah. I was supposed to be there, but couldn't bear the thought. See, my father met my mother on one of those things. She was a high-priced call girl. Rather like the ones Hathcock arranged for this outing. The whole notion feels too much like incest. Granted, my mother was a fox... or rather, she is now."

Robert sighed. "With all due respect, sir, why are you telling me this?"

He shrugged. "Because it doesn't matter. You don't matter. Hell, even I don't matter. The funny thing was, for a long time I thought that I did. I thought I had a say in my life. See, I never wanted this. I was a rich layabout, and I was good at it. I was happiest when I was most useless. I hate this firm."

"Then why did you join it, if I may ask?"

"Because my old man wanted to retire, and for that he needed a replacement to keep an eye of Hathcock. He's a thief, but then so is my father. He knew I'd do it, to protect my inheritance."

"You could have chosen something else."

"And cross my father? Don't talk rubbish. I don't know how to be poor. I do know how to be miserable, so here I am. It's a nice wheel, but it's just a wheel, and I'm the rat on it. Maybe I wish things could be different. They can't."

Oh, Robert knew that "things" could very well have been different. For instance, Dunn Junior could have just then manifested a literal rodent wheel and cage to match. Probably the only thing that saved him was that the rat metaphor had already taken hold in another version and the wheel would have been redundant.

"You're wrong, sir. You have the power. You can change this."

"How?"

"You say you can't sacrifice your wealth. Maybe you can give up something else. It's what we all have to do, sir, when we don't have everything—or no longer have. We give up something we want for something else we want."

Dunn Junior frowned. "I don't understand. For instance?"

"For instance, this." Robert took one long step, placed himself squarely behind Dunn Junior and shoved. "You give up your misery. Me, on the other hand," he said to the now empty space by the railing, "I just gave up a corner office. I hope the firm appreciates my sacrifice, as I'm sure it does yours."

The police asked a few questions while the ambulance removed Dunn, Junior's body, but the questions were pretty perfunctory. After all, the suicide note was solid and unambiguous as to the younger Dunn's intent. That evening Robert walked to the metro station past a row of giant sunflowers that used to be streetlamps. A mounted patrolman riding by was a literal pig. There was too much of a suggestion of nostalgia in those manifestations; they probably wouldn't last long. Even so, Robert thought the sunflowers were pretty.

It's not, he thought, as if things are all bad.

That night Robert looked into the mirror at a human-looking face again, and was content. After a dreamless and refreshing night's sleep, he returned to the office the next morning, and as he knew in his heart, everything was different. Again.

But nothing had changed.

REVIEWS

Old Devil Moon reviewed by Marie O'Regan

Stoneheart reviewed by Ellen Phillips

Old Devil Moon by Christopher Fowler, Serpents' Tail.

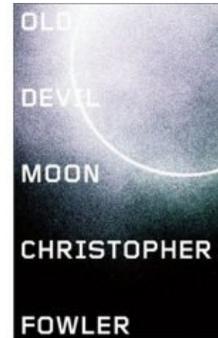
Paperback, £7.99

Old Devil Moon is Christopher Fowler's tenth short story collection, his first for five years, and the range of stories here show that he's still writing at the top of his game. Horror stories of many kinds are contained within its pages, prefaced by a long list of real life horror stories culled from newspapers – far more horrific than any work of fiction on a printed page – and, as with this list, the stories show the full range of horrors marked by human nature at its worst.

Inspiration for his stories is often drawn from such material, and this only serves to sharpen the blade of his insight, forcing us to look at ourselves – both individually and as a society, in stories that are either deeply unsettling or darkly ironic. It doesn't make for pretty viewing, or for comfortable reading.

Stories such as *The Uninvited*, a story of Hollywood in the sixties showing how close we all are to being touched by evil; *Red Torch*, in which a young boy loses his virginity to the usherette in a cinema, only to find the darkness hides more than he imagined; or the emotionally wrenching *All Packed*, a tale of what it is to let go, and fly free, contrast with the darkly funny *The Night Museum* and *That's Undertainment!*

***Old Devil Moon* is by turns scary, sad, funny, ironic...but never boring, and always good. Roll on the next collection.**



***StoneHeart* by Charlie Fletcher**

Published by Hodder Children's Books (Oct 2006) £10.99, or
Hyperion Books (May 2007) £5.99.

StoneHeart is the first children's/YA book from Charlie Fletcher, a man who cut his writing teeth on screenplays for shows like *Red Cap* and *Ultimate Force*. This turns out to have been a startlingly good background for writing *StoneHeart*. The book's hero, George, spends much of the book dashing around a strange and deadly London after breaking a dragon carving while on a school field-trip to the Natural History Museum.

Unnoticed by anyone else except a girl called Edie (a 'Glint') and a couple of mysterious, cursed individuals, statues come to life. Gargoyles and mythical figures ('Taints') attempt to kill him, while human statues such as the Gunner (a 'Spit'), a monument to the First World War, offer help. And then there are statues like the Sphinxes, part human, part animal, who are on no-one's side but their own. They answer George's question about his predicament, but their answer throws up only more questions.

At times aided by Edie, and at times hindered, George follows the Sphinxes' clues around London in a desperate attempt to make amends before time runs out and he is stuck in a London where dragons guard the City - and war between the Spits and the Taints is perilously close. It's only as George and Edie begin to discover more about themselves and their talents that they begin to find a way to survive.



For George, finding himself in Charlie Fletcher's version of London is like being dropped into the deep end of a swimming pool when he can't swim. It's a pool which is filled with sharks, crocodiles and pirhana. All of which haven't been fed for a week. The chances of survival are exceedingly slim. It wouldn't matter so much, except that in angry, lonely George, Fletcher has created a very believable character. From page 1, you care about what happens to George. He's treated unfairly, abandoned by his parents - one to go to an audition, the other to death.

Then Fletcher introduces Edie, and George finds out what it means to be truly angry and utterly alone. Edie has no home, no parents. There is a beautifully understated scene in which the horror of being alone with an abusive step-parent is played out. Slowly George and Edie start to understand each other, but trust is hard to win and easy to shatter.

One of the people cursed to walk the Earth is the Walker. A real historical figure, he is beautifully malevolent and very menacing. (I didn't realise who he was until it's spelled out in a confrontation between him and the Gunner.) As he closes in on the children, there are some heart-stopping near-misses.

Charlie Fletcher keeps up the pace, with the children never out of mortal danger for long. But he never does so at the expense of depth: there's an awful lot packed into this book, as with all the best children's books. And among the suspense, action and mystery, there's enough humour to keep it from being a down-beat book. To my mind, this is one of the best books that's come out in the last couple of years. And, fortunately, a sequel, *Iron Hand*, was published in October 2007. I can't wait to read it!

All of the statues and places mentioned in *StoneHeart* can be found in London if you care to look for them.

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.