FERAL

A SHORT STORY

GREG KROJAC

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Language: UK English

The male sits on his haunches, his eyes alert, his gaze darting anxiously from left to right and back again. There are always threats in the forest. Nobody can be trusted.

His long matted jet black hair falls haphazardly into rats' tails, his wild eyes blink, and his naked body itches from scratches inflicted by thorns as a result of scampering through the undergrowth. He looks both pitiful and terrifying, with no redeeming vestiges of civilisation, no remnants of etiquette or good manners. Manners don't exist in this world, just actions and reactions.

A noise from the copse to his right startles him, but not enough to cause him to flee. His curiosity has been piqued and he feels an urgency to investigate the source of the sound.

He scuttles on all fours through the undergrowth and is suddenly halted by a pungent aroma assaulting his nostrils. He stops and puts his nose to the ground, seeking the origin of the scent. He backs up and the smell becomes more powerful. A couple of steps to the side and he feels the sickly sweet odour creeping into his pores. He shuffles over to a dead tree stump, chooses a point where he can gain the most traction and raises a leg. Teetering precariously on three limbs, a stream of steaming yellow urine gushes from his body and sinks into the rotting bark.

Drawn by a primeval force he is compelled to discover the source of the sound that originally distracted him. He increases his pace.

Galloping through the undergrowth, ignoring the twigs and thorns that reach out and claw at his body, he hurtles into the copse. He stops suddenly and crouches even further down, his stare firmly fixed on the creature before him.

A female pounds her fists on the naked chest of a crumpled young child, begging it to breathe, but to no avail. The infant is motionless. The male intrudes upon her grief but is unconcerned. He watches her rail against the sky, an unintelligible shriek interspersed with banshee howls.

The child doesn't move and will never move again. The female is vulnerable, aware of nothing but her loss.

He moves forward slowly, not wishing to alert her of his presence. A twig cracks but she is so wrapped up in her pain that she doesn't notice.

He is almost upon her.

He reaches out and tries to grab her but only manages to tug on the sleeve of her already ripped blouse, causing her to spin round and face her would-be attacker.

Her lip curls and a snarl fights its way up to her mouth seemingly from the pit of her stomach. He lunges at her again but she is too quick for him and he tumbles onto the carpet of fallen leaves.

She appears to be neither particularly impressed nor threatened by his nakedness. Unabashed by her own near nakedness, she tries to shake off the remnants of her blouse but a nasty cut to the middle of her back has claimed the material for its own and stubbornly refuses to release it, fusing the cloth to the inside of the gash. Tugging on the shirt causes excruciating pain and she grudgingly accepts the inevitability that she and the blouse will not be separated any time soon.

The male grasps her arms tightly and pulls her back towards his body, determined that she will be his.

Suddenly, he is hurled into the trunk of a nearby tree. Momentarily dazed, he recovers in time to dodge out of the way of a second male, physically stronger than him and with similarly straggly hair, albeit blond. The blond male wants the female for himself.

The black-haired male curls his hand into a fist and swings it hard at the intruder's head, but the newcomer is too quick for him and the fist lands harmlessly on thin air.

The stronger blond male grabs his opponent's hair and hauls him backwards. The dark-haired male has no choice but to go where he is dragged. As soon as the two are far enough away from the female, the black-haired male wriggles free, bites down hard on his adversary's right shoulder and simultaneously clasps his rival's scrotum in a vice-like grip. He squeezes for a few seconds and then releases his foe who scurries away, squealing with pain.

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Sitting at home, with a cup of hot chocolate and a plateful of shortbread biscuits, a man switches on his TV. He has showered, combed his long blond hair and tied it into a ponytail. He looks human again, the epitome of a successful Wall Street equity trader. The numerous scratches on his body are irritating but they'll heal

soon enough. He's not so sure about the bite on his right shoulder. And he has no idea why his balls are so sore.

His Siamese cat jumps onto his lap and snuggles into him, glad that her master has returned home from his afternoon out. He takes a sip of his drink whilst stroking the animal with his other hand.

"Right then. Let's see what I got up to today."

His wife joins him in the living room. Her dark hair has been washed and blow-dried. She looks beautiful once again, but her face betrays angst and fury.

"How can you be so calm when we don't know where our son is? He's not a bunch of keys or a passport. He's our boy."

The man flicks a strand of long blond hair away from his eyes.

"What did the police say? That we should stay here in case he turns up. That's what I'm doing."

The woman sighs.

"What do you remember about this afternoon?"

"Nothing. I remember us smoking blow. But after that, I don't remember a thing."

He takes a pen drive from his pocket and reads the text that adorns both sides of the memory stick – *Basic Instincts: Discover The Real You*.

"Do you think this might tell us something?"

The woman shrugs her shoulders.

"I don't know. To be honest, I'm too scared to watch it."

The man puts his hand on his wife's shoulder.

"So am I. A little; But we should. Maybe it'll give us a clue as to where Luke is."

The woman snatches the pen drive from the man's hand.

"You're right. We have to watch it."

She goes to insert the storage device into its slot on the TV but changes her mind at the last minute.

"I can't do it."

The man takes the memory stick from his wife and pushes it home into its socket.

"We have to watch it. We have four hours we can't account for. We need to know what happened."

Tears fill the woman's eyes.

"Please God, please don't let us have taken Luke with us."

The man turns on the TV and changes the source to read the video file from the pen drive.

A video image flashes onto the screen.

Three figures – a man, a woman, and a child – come onscreen. But they don't look human, not modern humans anyway. They crouch down whilst they take in their new surroundings. They are naked as the day they were born, except for the woman who – for some reason – still wears her white starched blouse, despite being naked from the waist down. They don't speak, communicating through rudimentary grunts and gestures.

On all fours, they venture further into their new world. The sound of a tree branch falling somewhere in the forest startles them for a moment and forces them to scurry for cover. The female grips the youngster's arm tightly preventing him from being left behind.

The woodland falls quiet again.

Sniffing at the ground, searching for any evidence of a source of food nearby, the woman squats and leaves a stream of urine circling a tree stump.

They find a bush full of berries. The male picks one and places it gingerly into his mouth, unsure if it is poisonous or not. He swallows the fruit. The female waits a few minutes before trusting that her mate isn't suffering any ill effects. She claws at the bush, tearing berries from the shrub and shovels them into her mouth. A tug on the sleeve of her blouse reminds her that her child also needs to be fed. She collects more berries and hands them to the child, who presses the fruits into his mouth until it can take no more and juice trickles down his chin.

The man pauses the recording.

The woman sinks her head into her hands.

"We took Luke with us. What the fuck were we thinking?'

The man flicks his hair out of his eyes again.

"It was the cocaine. We didn't know what we were doing."

"And you think that makes it okay, then? That it absolves us of all responsibility?"

"No, of course, I don't. But if we hadn't been high, we probably wouldn't even have gone there in the first place – let alone, taken our son with us."

The woman is distraught.

"So why isn't he here with us now? Why isn't Luke here?"

The man shakes his head.

"I don't know."

The woman's face crumples into tear-stained confusion, demolishing her beauty. Her freshly applied mascara runs down her cheeks.

"I don't know isn't good enough. We need to know where he is. I want my boy back."

The man looks at the TV.

"There's only one way to find out. We have to watch the rest of the video."

He releases the pause button on the remote control.

The trio appears to be wandering aimlessly, with no specific destination in mind, acquainting themselves with their surroundings.

The woman is impatient.

"For Christ's sake, fast forward the thing. We don't have time to waste watching hours of nothing."

The man presses the fast-forward button on the remote and watches as the three explore the terrain at exaggerated speed.

The woman points at the screen.

"Stop. Stop. Go back a bit. There. What's that in the bushes?"

She watches as a dishevelled creature who looks like he hasn't taken a bath in years, emerges from the foliage. She watches in disbelief as her husband wanders off in search of more food.

"Where the hell are you going? What the fuck are you doing, leaving your family unprotected?"

The man looks ashamed.

"I don't know, do I? *Basic Instincts* removes any norms of civilised behaviour. When clients are in the *Experience*, they have no memory of events that occurred in the arena. For fuck's sake, I don't know!"

The woman fidgets with her wedding ring. It's her turn to feel ashamed. Of course, he doesn't know. That's the whole point of the experience, that you're dehumanised and only learn what happened by watching the video recording back in the comfort of your own home.

The man restarts the video.

"We need to know why Luke's not here, and the only way we're going to find out is by watching the rest of the video. You don't have to if you don't want to, but one of us has to."

The woman nods.

"I'll stay."

The female and child are on their own now. Suddenly the wild-looking black-haired male that arrived as her mate left, pounces on her.

She lets go of the child.

The intruder slashes at her with a thin branch naturally sharpened into a point.

The weapon hits home, and opens a painful-looking gash in her back, sucking material from her now tattered blouse into the wound.

She runs into the undergrowth.

She turns and looks towards where her child should be.

He didn't follow her.

She sees her attacker hold the child up by the neck and squeeze hard, cutting off the boy's air supply.

She hears bones in the child's neck cracking.

His body falls limp.

The killer drops the boy to the ground and scurries away from the scene.

She rushes over to her son and cradles his corpse in her arms. She looks around, spots a small clump of trees, and drags her dead son away from where he was killed. She places him carefully on the ground and begins to wail.

The man turns the video off.

"I can't watch anymore. We know what happened to our son. What now?"

The woman feels a sudden sharp burst of pain from the recently dressed gash in her back. She winces as she speaks.

"What now? We sue the arse off Basic Instincts."

The man looks unconvinced.

"There's no way the company will accept liability for what happened."

"Didn't you read the fine print? Surely they shouldn't have let us in with a kid."

"Read the fine print? I was as high as a kite. Why would I read the fine print? Nobody reads the fine print."

He glares at his wife.

"Did you read it?"

She shakes her head.

"Of course not. That's the man's job."

"Says who?"

"It just is. Everybody knows that."

The man punches the wall, grazing his knuckles badly. He feels nothing directly from the wound - his pain comes from the loss of his son. Tears stream from his eyes.

"I'm not taking the whole blame. It's your fault too."

He wipes the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"They should never have let us take part in the *Experience*. They must have seen that we were high."

The woman takes her cell phone from her jeans pocket and dials a number.

The man slumps back into his armchair.

"Who are you calling?"

The woman looks up, fire in her eyes.

"Our lawyers. Someone's going to fucking pay for this."

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it. I would love it if you could leave a review at your favourite online bookstore or reader's site – reviews are very important to authors and help keep us motivated to keep writing.

Check out my back catalogue and see what's in the pipeline at www.gregkrojac.com[1]

1. https://www.gregkrojac.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1957, Greg Krojac grew up in Maidenhead, UK, before moving to Brazil in 2007 via Portsmouth on England's south coast. He published his first book in 2016 and has now published several novels, novellas, and short stories.

He currently lives just outside the city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, with Eliene, and their three dogs, Sophie, Simba, and Patch. They also have a cat, Tabitha, who is self-appointed queen of the house.. By day, he teaches English as a foreign language at a local language school.

As well as being a teacher and a writer, he has created and co-hosts a podcast for short read readers and short read writers called Short Is The New Long[2]. A new podcast, **TL:DR Too Long Didn't Read**, co-hosted with fellow author Nathan Coley is in pre-production.

2. https://anchor.fm/shortisthenewlong

NOVELS BY GREG KROJAC

THE JANUS PROJECT

Eloise Hudson, Caucasian, female, twenty-five years old, winces with pain as she feels the blade draw across her skin. She has no idea why her captor took her or why he tortures her so. She doesn't know him and has done nothing to harm or offend him – not as far as she knows, anyway. Perhaps her very existence is enough to sign her death warrant.

In this sci-fi thriller, a serial killer is terrorizing a city but the police have no leads until the murderer makes a mistake and leaves DNA on the body of his latest victim. However, analysis of the sample does nothing to help the police investigation. The perpetrator is not in the system – an impossibility, since everybody is in the system.

How can the police catch the killer if they have no identifying data? A forensic scientist comes up with an innovative solution which takes the criminal investigation into the ethical minefield of human cloning and genetic manipulation.

THE WEATHERMAN

The checkpoint between sectors is bustling with crowds of travellers doing their best to attract the attention of the border patrol staff so that they might have their travel permits authorized and stamped. It's a waste of time and effort for ninety-nine per cent of them as moving between sectors is strictly prohibited for all except those with special permission from the Colony Executive.

The Weatherman has no such problems. Dressed in a brown two-piece suit, a cream coloured shirt, and wearing a dark brown bowler hat, he is instantly recognisable by border security. Carrying a ridged walking cane in his right hand, he can travel at will between sectors as often as required with no paperwork whatsoever. The border patrol officials know who he is and give him a wide berth. To refuse him free passage would be to risk their jobs – perhaps even their lives.

In this sci-fi thriller with a twist of urban fantasy set on a far distant planet, a teacher from the lowly Sector D, Ooze, stumbles across a strange young woman lost in the fog and is persuaded to leave his uneventful life behind him and join her on a quest. Little does he know that he is putting his life in such grave danger.

THE GIRL WITH ACRYLIC EYES

(Book 1: The Sophont Trilogy)

Coppélia knows that her assigned role as a sexbot means that she must be completely compliant to her clients' demands, no matter what they may be. But this time it's different – she doesn't want to submit to the whims of the customers of the Club Galatea bordello anymore. She's had enough. She tells her client no. The client is unhappy and makes an unsuccessful grab at her with his chubby calloused hands. She repeats her refusal but the client ignores her and forces himself on her. She has the strength to rip his head off with one hand but that would contravene her programming. Besides, she has no desire to hurt any human – not even this brute.

In this genre-bending first book of the Sophont trilogy, Detective Inspector Karen Chambers is called in by NewMet City Special Victims Unit to interview a prospective rape victim and is shocked when she confirms that the victim is an android. The DI's curiosity is piqued and she resolves to find out more about Coppélia.

Why does the android appear to have feelings and emotions? She's clearly not a regular model, so who built her? And why?

METALHEADS & MEATHEADS

(Book 2: The Sophont Trilogy)

It's never a pleasant experience to have one's eyes gouged out – even for an android. Paul, a sapient android and completely disorientated without his eyes, careers around the alley, arms outstretched. He trips over abandoned refuse straddling the pathway and falls. He picks himself up again, only for his feet to become entangled in some cable and to crash headfirst to the floor once again. He hears laughter which stops abruptly as a new voice enters the arena.

In this second book of the Sophont trilogy, we meet androids Paul, Philip, and Sylas whose lives become inextricably entangled after Paul's rescue in the alleyway. Paul's eyes are replaced and he is introduced to an autonomous life that a lowly administration model such as he could never have imagined. But his saviours also have a special mission for him – a mission that involves Coppélia.

No longer governed by the Three Laws of Robotics, he is free to make his own decisions. But if the success of his mission rests on his breaking those laws which he has always adhered to, can he bring himself to do so?

REULEAUX'S PORTAL

(Book 3: The Sophont Trilogy)

Approximately one hundred years or so have passed since Coppélia was marooned on Proxima b. Her robotic memory is supposed to be infallible but the additional differences she perceives are so slight that she dismisses them as within reasonable limits of variance.

Today is the most important day since her return, as she has been asked to receive a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of her late friend, Karen Chambers, for her tireless work in integrating sophonts (sentient sapient androids) into society. The android takes the stage at the Oslo City Hall.

In this third and final instalment of the Sophont trilogy, Karen's granddaughter, Holly Bryson, also notices discrepancies between Coppélia's anecdotal stories and the visual records that form part of her grandmother's memoirs, but the inconsistencies she notices are not so easy to dismiss. The burning question at the fore of Holly's mind is whether or not the android onstage is the same android that was her grandmother's best friend.

To find the answer to that question, Holly finds herself on a journey that, as yet, only exists in astrophysicist's minds and calculations.

THE BOY WHO WASN'T AND THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T BE

Jerome walks over to the giant monitor screen and switches it on before taking a seat on his sofa. A public service announcement displays. He tries changing the channel but all the other channels appear to be off air. A voice speaks.

"Good morning, Jerome. An apocalyptic event has befallen planet earth. You are one of six survivors."

Jerome doesn't know whether he should feel happy that he survived or sad that the rest of humanity has perished. The voice continues.

"Food and clothing will be provided for you. Your need for social interaction will be via video-conferencing with the other five survivors. Unfortunately, you may not meet them in person – the environment outside your apartment is toxic and any attempt to leave will result in your death."

A post-apocalyptic romance, this story finds Jerome settling into his new solitary and regimented life. One day his world is turned upside when he discovers a girl who shouldn't exist in his kitchen. At first, he is frightened of her but, as he gets to know her, she introduces him to a world of human experiences that he could never have imagined.

NOVELLAS BY GREG KROJAC

FISH OUT OF WATER

It's Sereia's 18th birthday and she does something that she hasn't done for five years – she falls out of bed, waking her up ten minutes before her alarm is due to go off.

Her duvet is wrapped around her when she falls and she assumes that this is why she can't move her legs. But when she disentangles herself from the duvet, she is in for a shock – her legs have disappeared and, in their place, she has grown a fish tail overnight.

She's supposed to be meeting her friends for a night out – how's she going to explain that she's turned into a mermaid overnight? What's going to happen to her?

In this YA/NA novella, we join Sereia as she is pitched into a world of marine mythology that she previously thought was simply the product of fertile imaginations.

THE REAPER

Reece Pargeter is a normal seventeen-year-old schoolboy who has no real idea what he wants to do with his life. But that all changes when he has a consultation with a career advice counsellor and discovers that his destiny is already mapped out for him.. He is to become a Reaper, reporting to Mr Grimm.

Leaving the corporeal world behind for the ethereal Control, Reece learns how to reap and soon discovers he's not best suited for the job. However, reaping isn't the kind of job where a resignation letter is enough to leave.

A sci-fi parable on the consequences of personal freedom taken to extremes. Is freedom of choice an illusion?

ARNOLD THE UNDEAD

A flurry of activity takes over the Intensive Care Unit as medical staff go about their tasks preparing the room for a critically ill patient. The doors of the ICU burst open and a gurney is pushed to the side of the bed. Doctors and nurses take their positions either side of the gurney and expertly transfer the patient to the bed. Fortunately, Arnold Leadbetter is unaware of what is going on, his comatose state shielding him from witnessing what's happening to him.

Unfortunately, not every disease is curable and Arnold's prognosis is a life hooked up to a Life Support machine, his body paralysed and in a coma. A decision is made to switch off the machine.

In this comedy horror, that could be described as "*An American Werewolf In London*" meets "*Weekend At Bernie's*", Arnold finds that death is definitely not what he expected it to be, as he is pitched into a world of soft-porn movie-makers, zombies, vampires, and werewolves.

JUDD'S ERRAND

Judd Witherspoon senses that something's wrong. On his feet in an instant, he finds himself facing the double barrels of a shotgun blaster. He eyes the would-be robber with a steely gaze.

"I'd point that gun away from me and walk away if I were you."

The man with the gun sneers.

"Good job I ain't you then."

"I'm giving you a chance. Walk away now and I'll pretend this never happened."

The man can see that Judd's a courier and couriers carry valuable cargo. He cocks the hammer of the vintage weapon. Before he has a chance to pull the trigger, Judd's hand reaches over his right shoulder and draws his razor-sharp machete from its sheath. In an instant, the blade slices into the man's torso, slashes through his ribs, and cuts his heart in two whilst still beating inside his body.

In a Mad Max-style story, Judd Witherspoon, a courier on the planet Duoterra, braves bear-wolf attacks and ambushes by Sifter gangs in order to deliver a precious graphene package to Paradise Cove.

TIME THIEF

Aristotle is a Temporal Private Investigator. His normal jobs tend to be investigating cheating spouses by travelling back in time to catch them in flagrante delicate. A messy job but someone has to do it.

At the British Library, he's researching background information for his latest new case when the text and images on the page he's reading begin to disappear before his very eyes. Members of Project Clockwise, the team that discovered time travel are being wiped from existence.

Aristotle doesn't like things that could upset the equilibrium of his life and if time travel was never discovered, how on earth could he make a living? He doesn't really possess any other employable skills.

Can Aristotle find out who's behind the strange phenomenon, stop the erasures, and save both time travel and his job?

SHORT STORIES BY GREG KROJAC

OPPY

Archaeological cosmologists on Mars search for artefacts that will shed light on their own prehistoric history. They find something unexpected.

THE FIRST KISS

A romantic night out at a swanky restaurant should be the perfect date but culminates in a disturbing discovery

LOVE UNDER THE STARS

The first man to set foot on Pluto, Commander Lewis Harding expected to see amazing sights and experience incredible emotions. And he did – he experienced love. But at what cost?

THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHED

A man lives alone in a sparsely furnished and remote shed but he isn't a hermit. Why doesn't he just go back to the city and live a normal life?

WRITER'S BLOCK

A short story writer is given a writing prompt and sits down at his computer to start writing, but his mind has gone blank. However, he receives help from an unexpected quarter.

SIMON SAYS

Just like any other ten-year-old, Simon likes playing inside with his train set, playing outside with his friends, and watching his favourite show on TV.

But Simon has a secret. He's a Recarn, one of the 5% of humans who remember their past lives. And he bears a grudge that needs paying for.

'Simon Says' is the first chapter of a forthcoming novel 'The Boy Who Killed The World' (due for release Spring 2022 or earlier). If the short story has whetted your appetite to discover what the future has in store for Simon, look out for updates to this description to find out when the novel is available to pre-order.

WHITE LIGHT

The sirens wail, heralding an impending nuclear attack. Duggan and his family know they don't have long to get away to safety.

'White Light' is the first chapter of a post-apocalyptic novel 'Twilight At Noon', If the short story has whetted your appetite to discover what happens to survivors as a nuclear winter settles over the UK, you can find the answer here[1].

1. *https://books2read.com/u/bMwevk*