THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHED

A SHORT STORY BY

GREG KROJAC

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Charles looked around him as he removed the hammock from its support hooks and rolled it up into the shape of a stubby cylinder before placing it in one corner of the shed. It looked to him like a maroon Swiss roll and, for a moment, he felt nostalgic for the sponge cake he used to enjoy when he was younger. The cake wasn't a jam-filled one, but a chocolate roll filled with buttercream. If a person could be addicted to one particular type of cake, the buttercream-filled Marks and Spencer chocolate Swiss roll was his irresistible vice in his younger days.

As a young man, he'd followed the same ritual every Saturday morning. He'd get up at around 9.30 am – it was a Saturday, after all, and he didn't have to work – and then he'd take a refreshing shower. He'd eat a quick breakfast before watching Saturday morning TV and whatever children's light entertainment programme the BBC had chosen to throw into his front room that day. It didn't bother him that he was watching programmes designed for adolescents and younger; he just wanted something that didn't tax his brain too much. Weekends were for winding down and on Friday nights, before leaving the office, he locked any stress that he might have felt during the week in his desk drawer. There it would stay until he returned to his desk on Monday morning when he would turn the small insignificant key in its lock and release the demons that lived within the drawer. On Saturdays, he could forget about work.

At 11:45 he'd leave the house and walk the two miles to his local pub, passing two other hostelries on the way. The Windsor Castle was where he knew he'd be able to meet up with his friends for a couple of pints and a chat. After the beers, most of the group went back to their homes, to do whatever they did until the time came to go back to the pub for the evening session. None of them considered themselves alcoholics but the pub was the place where they knew they could go and were bound to see at least a few of their friends. However, Charles was sure that if he asked them today they'd probably admit – as would he – that they drank more than was healthy for them.

But Charles couldn't ask them.

Anyway, instead of going straight home after their lunchtime beers, Charles and his best friend, Steve, would head to the food department of Marks and Spencer's

department store to buy the delicious Swiss roll that would satisfy their cravings. Usually, they'd each buy a pack of six smaller cakes – they weren't greedy – but, on the few occasions that these smaller rolls were sold out, they'd buy a whole Swiss roll each. They knew the civilized way to eat the sponges would be to slice the cake and eat the cake one piece at a time, but they wanted their fix then and there, so they'd peel back the plastic packaging and eat the cake whole. They knew that it probably didn't look too dignified to passersby but they were both still in their early twenties and didn't care that much what other people thought of them. Not yet, anyway.

He wished he could eat one of those Swiss rolls now, instead of the bland fare that he was forced to consume on a daily basis.

The 28 litre dark grey Samsung microwave oven in the corner of the shed was top of the range and sparkling clean as if it had never been used. The touch-sensitive keys on the pad – offering such delights as the possibility to slim fry, power defrost, hot blast, *and* auto reheat cook, had never been called upon to perform their promised functions and the twenty-four-hour digital clock, offering only the faintest outline of four square-edged number eights, had never been allowed to demonstrate the full extent of its numerical repertoire. His old microwave had been on its last legs and had struggled on like a wheezing nonagenarian who was determined to reach his hundredth birthday and, for a long time, had been unwilling to cede its position in the kitchen to a newer more playful model. But Old Father Time eventually catches up with everything and everybody and the inevitable day had arrived when the technician had finally pronounced it irreparable. The appliance had been repaired one time too many and all the technician could do was call the time of death as 12:04, ironically the same time that the appliance had displayed in the photo on the website that Charles had bought it from. For a moment, Charles thought he saw the digital timer burst into life in a last attempt to hang on to life, but he knew deep down that he was imagining it.

And so, he bought a brand new microwave oven. But hadn't even had a chance to use it.

The new microwave made a great safe though. Okay, it wasn't lockable – which was surely a prerequisite for a place in which to keep valuables – but it did have

an airtight seal which would help preserve the few things that he held dear. Anybody else would have thought his small collection of treasures inconsequential but, to Charles, they represented the best times of his life.

The ticket to his first-ever rock concert, Pink Floyd at the Empire Pool, Wembley, was one of those items. He'd been seventeen years old and had decided to save the ticket for posterity, by giving it a protective transparent cover. He was amazed that it had survived so long. Nowadays, he knew better and, if the concert had been more recent, would have got it coated in a transparent plastic covering but he wasn't even sure if such a process existed back in 1974. Instead, he'd placed the back of the ticket onto a piece of cardboard the same size and wrapped the ticket and its backing in clear adhesive tape. How the ticket was still in reasonably good condition – although the sticky translucent film had yellowed a little with age – was beyond him. Even more so, the fact that it had survived several house moves – one of them international – amazed him. Forty-six years had passed since the night of the concert and both he and the ticket had survived, each showing signs of the years that had passed, but neither looking to have aged beyond their actual ages. His wife would have said that it was a testament to how good God was but, as an atheist, Charles put it down to luck – well, the survival of the ticket anyway. He didn't consider his own continued existence down to a lottery, whether celestial or not. He didn't take any untoward risks.

His cell phone, following the example of its cousin, the microwave oven, was failing rapidly. The battery charge indicator showed that it had approximately 63% energy left but Charles knew that recharging the phone wasn't an option and thus rationed himself to one glimpse of the photo gallery every three days. He estimated that the battery should hopefully last about eight hours more with light use. There was no phone signal and he didn't feel an urge to open any of the other apps on his Samsung A10, so his power rationing strategy might work. He knew that the phone would undoubtedly die one day but he was determined to push that day as far into the future as possible. It was three days since he had last looked at the photo, so he pressed the power button halfway down the right-hand side of the phone's casing and held it depressed for a couple of seconds. The darkened screen fired into life, showing the words *Samsung Galaxy A10* and *Powered by Android* before they were replaced by the Samsung logo. Another

couple of seconds and the logo disappeared to be substituted with the current time and date and an instruction to *swipe to unlock*. There was neither a Wi-Fi signal nor a phone service provider to connect to so Charles swiped the screen upwards and the grid showing installed apps appeared. He swiped the screen to the left and was rewarded with the icon for the Gallery. Tapping on the icon, he navigated to the Downloads folder and selected his favourite photo of him and his wife, Victoria. He allowed himself thirty seconds to take in the image before pressing the phone's on/off button and sending his phone back to its comatose state until another three days had passed. He was clean-shaven in the photo but, not having had the opportunity to shave for weeks, he now sported an unkempt beard and moustache. His hair had grown too and, although he tried his best to keep it tidy, he did really need a brush or comb to keep it under control; his fingers alone just weren't up to the task. The Victoria in the photo hadn't changed but why should she? She was a photo and had no cause to change.

Looking at his wife made him simultaneously happy and sad. Happy that she wasn't with him but also sad that she *wasn't* with him. It was tough but he preferred things as they were now. He wouldn't have wanted her to go through what he was going through.

The image on his cellphone was flat and two-dimensional, a snapshot in time. He had videos of the two of them stored on the phone but was loath to play them as they'd use up too much of the battery. He preferred to spread his trips down memory lane apart and save the battery. The other trinkets in the microwave were trivial in comparison to the phone. Even the Pink Floyd ticket seemed a frivolous extravagance when ranked alongside the ability to see Victoria's face again.

Charles looked out of the shed window. The morning glow of a new day was creeping over the horizon, along with the sun. The park would soon be opening to customers, and he'd be expected to show his face. He wished that he was able to communicate with his hosts but they seemed to converse using a system of clicks and whistles – so he had no idea what they were saying. Oh, what he'd give to have someone to talk to, just a regular conversation, about anything, just to hear someone else speaking his language. But then he remembered that he'd be condemning another human being to share his fate and he couldn't wish that on anyone. He'd suffer in silence.

A piercing siren broke the quiet and Charles moved towards the door of the shed. Like one of Pavlov's dogs, he'd quickly learned to equate going outside the shed upon hearing the siren with receiving food. Perhaps one day he might give up and stay inside the shed, preferring not to feed and letting nature and starvation take their course, but he hadn't reached that point of despair yet. His wife would have reported him missing and he was sure that people would be looking for him. The trouble was, they'd be looking in the wrong place. Yet he still didn't give up hope of being rescued.

He pushed the shed door open and took a few tentative steps outside. The warmth of the strong breeze always caught him unprepared. He looked directly ahead trying his best to see the visitors but he knew it was a waste of time. Whoever had taken him was either invisible or non-corporeal, he didn't know which, which made him feel even more alone. At least, if he could see his captors he'd feel the sense of some other living creature being on the planet.

He stopped walking about ten yards in front of the shed and waited. The procedure was the same every morning. He'd stand there, motionless, and a bowl of leaves would materialize next to him. Sure enough, a container of what Charles could only describe as spinach appeared as if by magic. He bent down and picked it up, scooping the contents out with his hand and shovelling the food into his mouth.

One day, he wouldn't eat.

One day, he'd allow himself to die.

But, today wasn't that day.

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading this story. If you could leave a review at your favourite online bookstore or reader's site, that would be great and help me a lot.

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 two dogs, Sophie and Simba, and their cat, Tabitha. By day, he teaches English as a foreign language (TEFL) 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[1]. A new podcast, *TL:DR Too Long Didn't Read*, co-hosted with fellow author Nathan Coley is in pre-production

You can find out more about Greg and his books at www.gregkrojac.com[2]

1. https://anchor.fm/shortisthenewlong

2. https://www.gregkrojac.com

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. 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?

FREE 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.