

Relic

by David Martin

No-one saw him fall from the sky the night of the strange lights. The lights themselves were only seen by the sleepless, the drunk, the late shift workers raising gritty eyes from their screens for a moment's break. And they caused only a flurry of filler in the local news, and a brief effusion of conspiracy theories gibbering to themselves in the digital dark. But he lay undiscovered for days, weeks, embedded in the soft ground by the shattering impact of his fall, in the heart of the wood in a bare and clodded field on the edge of town.

No-one was watching at the frozen hour when the lights streaked low overhead, or in their wake heard the crashing of branches and the outraged eruption of birds.

Close up you could see the marks of his descent through the canopy of trees, their broken limbs charting his passage, letting new shafts of light fall into the shadowed space where he lay, close by a silent pond. From outside the wood was undisturbed, keeping its secret. But secrets find their way out, too good to keep, but good enough to keep close.

We never saw what was inside the suit, it was still intact, but burned and battered, its identifying markings lost, the visor black and impenetrable. We liked to scare ourselves daft by imagining the broken and rotting form within. Because it was definitely occupied. You could tell by the heft and shape of it, even before one of us dared to poke it with a stick and then ran like hell after feeling something's inert bulk shift within, a sound and movement we never forgot.

Someone said he'd probably been dead for decades, a remnant from the black and white days of moonwalks and spacewalks and Sputniks, some failed long-denied Cold War mission. Maybe there was only ever a dried-out skeleton inside, empty eye sockets still haunted by the years of staring into a greater void, while the Earth in all its blue-white beauty revolved forever out of reach.

No-one was quite sure who found it first, and it was a story that seemed to choose its own initiates. Somehow each of us knew the kind of person we should confide in. We weren't all friends, came from all over town, had little else in common, yet somehow we knew to keep it secret from everyone else, even siblings, even our obvious best friends. Looking back, it was as though it could see something in each of us that we couldn't. But soon a few of us were coming down regularly, clandestinely but never alone, always with increasingly elaborate cover stories. We would cling to the grassy path at the margin of the field, scouring the horizons for any sign of the farmer, or any bigger, older, harder kids, before half-running, half-hobbling across the cold, sucking, trainer-ruining clods to the wood, to the gap in the barbed wire fencing and the path to the stagnant central pond.

Kids before us had been coming here for generations to smoke, drink, snog, screw and scare the shit out of each other with tales of the ghosts and serial killers who had of course haunted this place. They'd recorded their visits for posterity with carved and penned initials on tree trunks and fenceposts, some already fading with age. But it looked as though this spot had fallen out of favour for a good few years, ever since the new barbed wire fence went up, the gaping hole in it had been made fairly recently.

I can't remember what we did or talked about for the most part. All I can really recall is the quiet of that hidden space, the giant helmeted and booted figure prostrate in the gloom, holding all the gazes of all those people whose faces I've long forgotten. There was talk of telling, of fame and rewards, but the longer we delayed, the less convincing it became that we ever would. Soon we were talking instead about ways of keeping the secret, whether anyone suspected, and what we'd do to anyone who told. Soon it became clear that we were missing the point anyway. However secret the dead presence at the heart of the wood was, it was quietly changing us, and the world around us.

Gradually moss began to grow in the joints of the suit and cover the visor, the Earth beginning to reclaim the astronaut. And at night

our dreams became filled first with the image of that inscrutable faceplate, but then the blackness behind it drew us in, opening out on to great abysses of stars. Utter silences, which once you learned to listen to them filled with the hissing of radiation from impossibly distant suns, the shiver of strange particles, the loneliness of the void.

It soon began to spill into the waking hours. Sometimes an ordinary street would seem transfigured, warped by a glimpse of some other geometry that lay beyond it, planes and spaces that defied human description. The sunlight that fell on it revealed to us its own origins in prominences like a billion nuclear wars finally unleashed, and at the same time how on this monstrous scale it was nothing, a few flecks of frozen light. A single moment of time would open up into an infinite present, becoming a pool you could plunge into and be lost, sinking through the fine grain of the universe towards whatever final truth might lie at the heart of things.

While space and time opened up for us, the ground accelerated its attempts to devour the astronaut. Grasses grew up around his edges. Seeds propagated in the folds of his suit, tendrils found their way into the mysterious holes for the missing hoses that once kept him alive. More than once we saw a worm emerge from a boot or gauntlet. The ditches and streams that radiated out from the wood became his nervous system, spreading whatever he'd brought back from the cosmos into the ground, the water, the air. And at the same time feeding something back to him.

It wasn't just us. We started noticing people lost in reverie, and houses with open doors, drawn curtains and abandoned cars, where the everyday routine of work and family had been replaced by far deeper, stranger rhythms. Some people never came home. We heard a rumour the minister at the Congregationalist church had started speaking in hexadecimal numbers in the middle of his lesson.

Our classes began dwindling but none of the teachers seemed that concerned, their own ranks were becoming increasingly chaotic. I don't know now if I witnessed it myself or if it was just another story, but one became stuck in a loop, intoning a stream of

seeming nonsense before heading for the doorway, only to flicker instantly back to the spot she'd started from, to repeat it all over and over.

We noticed the planes gradually stopped their regular groaning overhead, diverting their flightpaths away almost unconsciously from the airspace above our town. TVs began interjecting bursts of white noise and shifting fractal patterns in between the gameshows and weather bulletins, and nobody really commented on it.

Our dreams became darker, our visits to the wood uneasy.

We began to share a dream where we saw the astronaut not lying prostrate and dead but standing upright and waiting for us with silent command. We only saw him in silhouette, a figure cut from utter blackness. In these new dreams there was something profoundly wrong about that shape, that form, it seemed an absence, not a presence, a hole punched through reality.

Every time we visited the wood now, we knew that one day we would find him standing there for real, ready to issue some unimaginable instruction.

But as we headed to the field one morning we knew it was over. Something had changed. A passenger jet droned overhead.

As we crossed the clods we saw figures moving between the trees; bigger, older, harder kids. We heard a motorbike engine and a burst of laughter as we skulked on the periphery of bushes and barbed wire, shut out from our no longer secret kingdom. Moving like shadows, worming through the trees towards the centre, we got a glimpse of someone's much-feared older brother bent over the suit, levering the faceplate off with a stick. A girl was calling out to him, half egging him on, half horrified. A twig broke. We scattered in all directions before anyone saw us, working our way back to our separate homes by our separate routes, dodging any imaginable pursuit through the town's hidden arteries of tracks and alleys.

It was hushed up what was actually found in the wood, the papers said it was a fragment of a decommissioned satellite, there were hints about classified military hardware, and that was it. Who the astronaut was and what became of him I still don't know. Decades on

I couldn't tell you what became of everyone else. Like I said, we didn't have a lot else in common. And I struggle to remember anything of those glimpses into the unimaginable that the astronaut brought back.

Sometimes on a clear, quiet night, I still watch the stars. But all that's up there is a belt of dead junk, babbling satellites dumbly bouncing our own distorted reflections back at us, with entropy gnawing at every image.

It's past midnight and everyone is sleeping. A meteor slides down through Orion. Something snuffles in the field hidden behind hedges, but otherwise the night is still. I think about the darkness lying heavy across half the world, pressed up against the flimsy slats of my back fence, seeping through its gaps and cracks.

