

Killing the Morrow

by Robert Reed

You know, I've heard my share of disembodied voices. I'm accustomed to their fickle, sometimes bizarre demands. But tonight's voice is different, clear as gin and utterly compelling. I must listen. Sitting inside my old packing crate, my worldly possessions at arm's length, I am fed instructions that erase everything familiar and prosaic. Yet I cannot resist, can't offer even a token resistance, now crawling out of my little house and rising, my heart pounding as the last shreds of sanity are lost to me.

I've lived in this alleyway for eight months, yet I don't look back. I'm in poor physical condition and my shoes are worn through, but I walk several miles without rest, without complaint. And there are others, too: the streets are full of silent walkers. They exhibit a calmness, a liquid orderliness, that would disturb the healthy observer. Yet I barely notice the others. I want a specific street, which I find, turning right and following it for another mile. The tall buildings fall away into trim working-class houses. Another street beckons. I start to read the numbers on mailboxes. The house I want is on a corner, lit up and its front door left open. I step inside without ringing the bell, thinking that the place looks familiar ... as if I've been here before, or maybe seen it in dreams...

My new life begins.

More than most people, I have experience with radical change, with the vagaries of existence. Tonight's change is simply more sudden and more tightly orchestrated than those of the past. I'm here for a reason, no doubt about it. There's some grand cause that will be explained in due time. And meanwhile, there's pleasure: for the first time in years, existence has a palatable purpose, authority, and as astonishing as it seems, a genuine beauty.

An opened can of warming beer is set on the coffee table. I pick it up and sniff, then set it down again, which is uncharacteristic for me. An enormous television is in the corner, the all-sports channel still broadcasting, nothing to see but an empty court and arena. The game was canceled without fuss. Somehow I know that nobody will ever again play that particular sport, that it was rendered extinct in an instant. Yet any sense of loss is cushioned by the Voice. It makes me crumble onto a lumpy sofa, listening and nodding, eyes fixed on nothing.

Tools are in the garage, I'm told. I carry them into the living room, arranging them according to their use. Then armed with a short rusty crowbar I head upstairs, finding the bathroom and a big steel bathtub, and with the crowbar I start to batter the mildewed tile and plaster, startled cockroaches fleeing the light.

After a little while the front door opens, closes.

I go downstairs, part of me curious. A handsome woman is waiting for me, offering a thin smile. She's dressed in quality clothes, and she's my age but with much less mileage. That smile of hers is hopeful, even enthusiastic, but beneath it is a much-hidden sense of terror.

What's her name? I wonder. But I won't ask.

Nor does she ask about me.

With two backs available, we start to clear the living room of furniture and the dusty old carpeting. By now the television has gone blank. I unplug it, and together we carry it to the curb. Electronics are an important resource. Our neighbors -- mismatched couples like ourselves -- are doing the same job, stereos and microwave ovens and televisions stacked and covered carefully with plastic. Firearms make smaller, secondary piles. Then around midnight a large truck arrives. I'm dragging out the last of the

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stereos and microwave ovens and televisions stacked and covered carefully with plastic. Firearms make smaller, secondary piles. Then around midnight a large truck arrives. I'm dragging out the last of the carpeting, pausing long enough to watch a crew of burly men loading everything into the long trailer. One of them seems familiar. He was a police officer, wasn't he? I remember him. He bullied me on several occasions, for the fun of it. And now we are equals, animosity nothing but a luxury. I manage to wave at him. No response. Then I return to the house, never hurrying. Rain begins to fall, fat cold drops striking the back of my neck, and with them comes a fatigue, sudden

and profound, that leaves my legs shaking and my breath coming in little wet gulps.

The Voice has already told us to sleep when it's needed. The woman and I move upstairs, climbing into the same bed without undressing. Nudity is permitted. Many things are permitted, we've been told. But I can't help thinking of the woman's terror as I lie beside her, looking as I do, unshaved and filthy, wearing sores and months of grime. It's better to do nothing, I decide. Just to sleep.

"Good night," I whisper.

She isn't crying, but when she says, "Sleep well," I hear her working not to cry, the words tight and slow. Was she

married in her former life? She doesn't wear any rings, yet she seems like a person who would enjoy, even demand marriage. She's awake for more than an hour, lying as motionless as possible, her ordinary old parts struggling to find some reason for the bizarre things that are happening now. I feel pity.

Yet for the most part, I like these changes. The bed is soft, the sheets almost clean. I lie awake out of contentment, listening to the rain on the roof and thinking about my packing crate in the alleyway -feeling no fondness at all for that dead past.

* * * *

I dream of grass, astonishing as that seems.

Of an apeman.

No, that's a lousy term. Hominid is more appropriate. The creature walks under a bright tropical sky, minding its own narrow business. A male, I realize. I'm sitting in the future, watching it from ground level and feeling waves of excitement. Here is an ancestor of the human species, naked and lovely, and it doesn't even notice me, strolling past and out of sight. I have seen through time, changing nothing. Aren't I a clever ape? I ask myself.

Not clever enough, a voice warns me.

A quiet, almost whispered voice.

* * * *

We divide our jobs according to ability. Being somewhat stronger than

the woman, I work to dislodge the bathtub from the wall, then lever it into the hallway and shove it down the splintering wooden stairs. And meanwhile the woman has cleaned the living room a dozen times, at least, the windows covered with foil and the air heavy with chlorine.

Vans and small trucks begin to deliver equipment. Thermostats and filters have been adapted from local stocks, I suppose. More sophisticated machinery arrives later. Jugs of thick clear fluid are stacked in the darkest corner. Perfect cleanliness isn't mandatory, yet the woman struggles to keep the room surgically clean, hoping that the Voice will applaud her efforts.

She's first to say, "The Voice comes from the future." Obviously, yes.

"From the distant future," she adds.

I can't guess dates, but it seems likely.

"And this is a womb," she remarks, pointing at the old bathtub. "Here is where the future will be born." The Voice speaks differently to different people, it seems. I assumed that the tub was an elaborate growth chamber, but how exactly does one grow the future?

Taking me by the waist, she says, "It'll be like our own child." I make affirmative sounds, but something feels wrong.

"I love you," she assures me.

"I love you," I lie. Nothing is as vital to her as her illusions of the loving

family. Does the Voice know that?

In the night, between work and sleep, she invites me to her side of the bed. It's been a long time. My performance is less than sterling, but at least the experience is pleasant, building new bonds. Then afterward we cuddle under the sheets, whisper in secret tones, then drift off into a fine deep sleep, dreams coming from the darkness.

* * * *

Rain falls in my dreams.

Motion, I learn, is matter shaped by the hand of Chaos. Tiny variations in wind and moisture will conspire to ignite or extinguish entire storms. And no conceivable machine or mind can know every fluctuation, every

inspiration. It's not even possible to predict which minuscule event will produce the perfect day, leaving millions of lives changed, the fundamental shape of everything warped ever so slightly... Suppose you can reach back in time, says my dream voice. Suppose you're aware of the dangers in changing what was, but you have ego enough to accept the risks. Channeling vast energies, you create our windows entirely from local materials. It is thermally identical to the surrounding ground. You limit your study to a few useful moments. All you allow yourself is a camera and transmitter, intricate but indistinguishable from the local sand and grit. The hominid can stare at the window. He can stomp on it.

He can fling it, eat it, or simply ignore it. But nothing, nothing, nothing he can do will make it behave as anything but the perfect grain of dirty quartz.

And yet, says the dream voice.

Despite your hard work and cleverness, there is some telling impact. Perhaps heat leaked from the mechanism, atoms jostled by their touch. Or perhaps its optical energies were imperfectly balanced, excess photons added to or taken away from the local environment. There would be no way to know what went wrong. But the consequences will spread, becoming apparent, growing from nothing until they encompass everything.

The universe, I'm learning, is

incomprehensibly fragile.

How can any person, any intelligence, hope to put everything back where it belongs?

* * * *

A young man delivers foodstuffs and other general supplies, coming twice a week, and sometimes he lingers on the porch, telling me what he has seen around town. Factories and warehouses have been refurbished, he says. Old people and eerily patient children work and live inside them. Some of the factories make the machines that fill my living room/nursery. But the majority of the products are stranger. He grins, describing brilliant lights and tiny power plants, robots and more robots. Isn't it

all amazing?

Wondrous? And fun?

I nod. Astonishment does seem like the day's most abundant product. The woman dislikes my chatting with the young man. She feels that he's a poor worker, obviously not paying ample attention to the Voice. For the first time, for just an instant, I wonder if the Voice doesn't touch people with equal force. For instance, the woman claims to hear it all of the time, her initial terror replaced with energy and commitment, or at least the nervous desire to please it. But for me there are long periods of silence, of relative peace. It's the woman who wakes first in the morning. It's the woman who loses track of time and

hunger, scrubbing the floor until her hands bleed. And she's the one who snaps at the delivery boy, telling him:

"You're not helping us at all!"

To which he says, "Except I am." At once, without hesitation, he says, "Part of my job is to tell others what I see, to keep them aware of what's being done. How else can you know? You can't go anywhere. Your job is to stay put, and you're doing that perfectly."

The logic has its impact. She retreats with a growl, her anger helping her to polish the bathtub for the umpteenth time.

I wonder, in secret, if the delivery boy is telling the truth.

Or is he a clever liar?

And how can I wonder about such

things? Just considering the possibility of subterfuge is a kind of subterfuge. Particularly when I find myself admiring the boy's courage. In secret.

* * * *

The past has been changed, I learn in my sleep.

Small events have evolved into mammoth ones.

Perhaps an excess heat caused an instability that altered the precise pattern of raindrops in a summer shower. Hominids made love in the rain. It's not that they wouldn't have had rain, but it's the delicate impact of thousands of raindrops that matter. Eggs and sperm are extraordinarily sensitive, I'm learning. Change any parameter --the

instant of ejaculation; the angle of thrust; the simplest groan of thanks --and a different sperm will find its target. Even the drumming of raindrops will jostle the testicles enough, now and again, and produce different offspring. Which in turn means a different human evolution. The species isn't altered appreciably. People remain people, good and not. Nor is the character of history changed. Humankind will master the same tools, then warfare and the intricacies of nation-states. What matters is that the specific faces will change, and the names, every historical figure erased along with every anonymous one, an enormous wavelike disruption racing out through time. In order to kill myself, I

don't have to kill my grandpa.

I just have to tickle his hairy balls.

* * * *

They bring the embryo in, of all things, an old florist's van.

Each house on our street gets its own embryo, and the Voice fills everyone with a sense of Honor and duty. We've sealed the bathtub's drain, then filled it with the heavy fluids. Tubes pump in oxygen. The workers connect the embryo to a plastic umbilical, then I help the woman check every dial and sensor, making certain that the tiny smear of living tissue is healthy.

It doubles in size, that day and every day, hands and feet showing before the end of the week. It's not growing like any

human, but maybe that's a consequence of the fluids. Or synthetic genes. Or maybe all the generations of evolution between him and me.

The woman shivers, weeps. Holding herself, she announces, "At least one of us has to stay with it now. Always."

In case of some unlikely, unforeseen problem, yes. We can pick up the telephone, emergency services waiting to troubleshoot.

"Night and day," she says, with a thrill.

I'll give her the night shift, I decide.

"This is our child," she claims, repeating what the Voice tells her. Her own voice is stiff and dry. Unabashedly fanatical. "Don't you think he's lovely,

darling?" But he's not my child, or my grandchild, either. For an instant, I consider mentioning my dreams of Africa and the vagaries of time ... but then I think again, some piece of me guessing that this woman has had no such dreams.

"Isn't he lovely?" she asks again.

I say, "Lovely," without feeling.

Yet the word itself is enough for her. She nods and smiles, her face lit up with the injected joy.

* * * *

The past is a sea, I dream. A great flat mirror of a sea. Standing on the present, on a low shoreline, I carelessly throw a grain of sand over my shoulder. Its impact is tiny, too tiny to observe, but

the resulting wave is growing, a small ripple becoming a mountainous wall rushing straight at me. What can I do? Flee into the future? But with each step the future becomes the present, and I can never run so far that the wave won't catch me, utterly and forever dissolving my existence. But there is one answer. Pack a bag, bend at the knees, and wait. Wait, then leap. With care and a certain desperate fearlessness, I can launch myself over the wave, evading it entirely. Then I'll fall again, tumbling onto the calm past, creating a second obliterating wave but my own life saved regardless. Fuck the costs.

* * * *

Our "child" is less childlike with each

passing day.

Even the woman is having difficulty sounding like the proud parent. Curled in a fetal position, this citizen from the future resembles a middle-aged man, comfortably plump and shockingly hairy, lost in sleep while his memories are placed inside his newly minted mind. I cant help but notice, his brain is huge.

I sit alone with him in the morning and again in the early evening, nothing to do but watch his slumber as well as the humming and clicking machines. It's ironic that this creature, having his existence threatened by the most trivial event, is now employing the coarsest tomfoolery to save his ass. The entire Earth must be involved. Every human

and every resource is being marshaled to meet some rigorous schedule. Thus is an invasion; and like any invasion, success hinges on the beachhead. The future is attempting to leap over its extinction, very little room for error. And I'm beginning to notice how the Voice, busy speaking to this superman's mind, speaks less and less to me.

The Voice has its limits, of course.

Yet at night my dreams persist, that different voice showing me wonders as fascinating as anything in my waking life.

* * * *

The delivery boy begins to arrive at irregular intervals, but never as often as before.

"To save gas," he claims, always smiling. But that smile has a satirical bite to it. "And from now on, sorry. There's no more meat or eggs."

For health reasons, perhaps. Or the invaders could be vegetarians.

"Let me look at yours," says the boy, stepping indoors for the first time. He doesn't wait for approval, walking up to the bathtub and staring at the sleeping shape. "I wonder what he's like. When he's finished, I mean."

I have no idea. And that bothers me.

"Of course he'll be grateful for your help. I'm sure of that." I'm nervous. It's against every rule to have visitors. What if the woman wakes early and finds the boy here? What if a neighbor reports

me? Touching a shoulder, I try easing him toward the door, asking in a whisper, "What have you seen lately?"

He mentions giant machines that have rolled to the north. Bright lights show at night, and there's rumbling that might mean construction. A new city is being built, he hears. From others. I ask about the people who built those rolling machines. Where have they gone?

"They've been reassigned, of course. There's always work to be done somewhere. Always, always." He smiled at me, the message in his eyes.

Then we reach the door, and again he stands on the porch, telling me, "Once a week, and I don't know which day. No meat, no eggs. And that's a lovely boy

you've got there. A real darling.

* * * *

I wash myself daily, using a shower in the basement. Rationing my soap, I've managed to stay clean for six months in a row. My loose-fitting clothes come from the closets and drawers. When they're gone, I put the soiled ones in the sun, cleaning them with light and heat. I wanted to seem more attractive to the woman, and for a little while she was responding. But now she has doubts about sex, always distracted, needing to be in some position that leaves her able to monitor the dials. More and more she complains about being tired or disinterested. The man-child's presence makes her edgy. I wish she'd become

pregnant, except of course a pregnancy would be a problem. A division of allegiances. But then I realize that if the Voice can speak to a mind, interfacing with its network of interlocking neurons, then shouldn't it be able to speak to glands as well? Couldn't it put all of our bothersome sperm and eggs to sleep?

One night, waking alone in bed, I feel a powerful desire to make love to a woman. I come downstairs and ask permission, and the woman's response is a sharp "Not here, no!" Which leads me to suggest that she abandon her post for a few minutes. I promise to hurry, and where's the harm?

She gasps, moans, and nearly collapses. "I can't do that." We'll never

couple again. I know it, and it both saddens and relieves me. Alone, I feel free. An old reflex lets me wonder where I could find someone else. A lady more amiable, someone that I've selected for myself.

Beginning tomorrow morning, the woman sleeps in the living room, on sheets and pillows spread over the clean hard floor.

She won't leave me alone at my post.

She has a bucket next to the door where she pisses and shits. And when she looks at me, in those rare moments, nothing can hide her total scorn.

* * * *

This is my last lucid dream.

I'm standing on the beach, sand

without color and a wall of radiant ocean water roaring toward me. And a woman appears. Like the man in my bathtub, she has an elongated skull and a superior intellect, but her face is completely human, showing a mixture of fear and empathy, as well as a sturdy strength born of convictions.

"We think they are wrong," she begins. "Please remember this. Not all of us are like them." I nod, trying to describe my appreciation.

But she interrupts, telling me, "This is all we can do for you." I can't recognize her language, yet I understand every word.

"Best wishes," she says.

Then she begins to cry.

I try to embrace her. I step forward and open my arms ... but then the water is on me, the beach and her dissolving into atoms ... and my hands struggle to reassemble her from memory, the task impossible for every good reason...

* * * *

A new delivery boy arrives.

Perhaps ten years old, he needs to make two trips from his station wagon, carrying the minimal groceries to the porch and no farther. I'm standing on my porch waiting for the second load. Fresh air feels pleasant. The lawn has grown shaggy and seedy, the old furniture and carpeting rotting without complaint amidst the greenness. A quick calculation tells me that this is late

autumn, early winter. The trees should have changed and lost their leaves by now. Yet the world smells and tastes like spring, both climate and vegetation under some kind of powerful control.

The boy struggles with a numbered sack. Not only is he small, he looks malnourished. But he brings my food with a fanatical sense of purpose and when I ask about the other boy, the older boy, he merely replies:

"He's done."

What does that mean?

"Done," he repeats, angry not to be understood.

Hearing our voices, the woman wakes and comes to the door. "Get back in here," she snaps. "I'm warning you!"

One last look at the improved world, then I retreat, taking both sacks with me. Meanwhile the boy fires up the station wagon, black smoke dispersing in all directions. He looks silly, that fierce little head peering through the steering wheel. He pulls into the next driveway, and I wonder who lives in that house. And what do they dream about?

The woman is complaining about my attitudes, my carelessness. Everything. I'm a safer subject than the lousy quality of today's barley and rice.

"Come here," she tells me.

Perhaps I will, perhaps I won't.

"Or I'll pick up the phone and complain," she threatens. She won't. First of all, I terrify her. What if I

extracted some kind of vengeance in response? And secondly, the thought of being entirely alone must disturb her. I know it whenever I stare at her, making her shrink away. As much as she hates me, without my presence she might forget that she's genuinely alive.

* * * *

The future doomed itself.

Then it packed its bags, intending to save itself.

But like a weather system, the future is too large and chaotic to be of one mind, holding to a single outcome. Some of its citizens argued that they didn't have the right to intrude on the past. "Why should we supplant these primitive people?" they asked. "We

screwed up, and if we were any sort of hominids, we would accept our fate and be done with it."

But most of their species felt otherwise. And by concentrating the energies of two earths, present and past, they felt there was a better than good chance of success.

Unaware of the secret movement in their midst.

Never guessing that there was a second surreptitious Voice.

* * * *

Alarms wake me, and I rush downstairs just as the man-child is born. With a slow majesty, he sits up in the bathtub, the thick fluids sliding off his slick and hairy body. The beep-beep of

the alarms quit, replaced with a scream from the woman. "Look at you," she says. "Oh, look at you!" The man couldn't look more pissed, coughing until his lungs clear, then screwing up his face, saying something in that future language. A nearby machine activates itself, translating his words. "I want water. Cold water. Get me water."

"I'll get it," I say.

The woman is too busy grinning and applauding herself. "You're a darling lovely man, sir. And I took care of you. Almost entirely by myself, I did."

The man-child speaks again.

"I'm still thirsty," the machine reports, both voices impatient. In the kitchen, propped next to the back door, is the

same crowbar that I used on the bathtub. That's what I bring him. A useful sense of rage has been building, probably from the beginning; this stranger and his ilk have destroyed my world. It's only fair, only just, to take the steel bar in my hands and swing, striking him before he has the strength or coordination to fight me. The woman wails and moans, too stunned to move.

That elongated skull is paper-thin, demolished with the first blow and its jellylike contents scattered around the room.

Too late, she grabs at me, trying to wrestle the crowbar from my hands. I throw her to the floor, considering a double homicide. But that wouldn't be

right. Even when she picks up the phone and begs for help, I can't bring myself to kill her. Instead I demolish the wall above her head, startling her, and when she crawls away I lift the receiver, grinning as I calmly tell whoever is listening, "You're next, friend. Your time is just about done."

* * * *

Outdoors is the smell of sweet chemicals and smoke. Strange robotic craft streak overhead, probably heading for crisis points. They ignore me. Maybe too much is happening; maybe their mechanisms were sabotaged at the factory. Either way, I'm left to move up the street, entering each house and killing the just-born invaders where I

find them. It's messy, violent work, but in one living room I find the "parents" slain, presumably by their thankless "child." The ceiling creaks above their bodies. I climb the stairs on my toes, catching the murderer as she tries on spare clothes, pants around her knees and no chance for her to grab her bloody softball bat.

From then on I'm a demon, focused and confident and very nearly tireless. Finishing my block, I start for the next one. Rounding the corner of a house, I come face to face with a stout woman wielding a fire axe. The two of us pause, then smile knowingly. Then we join forces. Toward dawn, taking a break from our gruesome work, I think to ask:

"What's your name?"

"Laverne," she replies, with a lifelong embarrassment. "And yours?"

"Harold," I confess, pleased that I can remember it after so long. "Good to meet you, and Laverne is a lovely name."

Later that day, she and I and twenty other new friends find the invaders barricaded inside a once-gorgeous mansion. Once it's burned to the ground, the city is liberated. Where now?

Laverne suggests, "How about north? I once heard that they were building something in that direction." I hug her, no words needed just now.

* * * *

We name our daughter Unique.

The three of us are living in a city

meant for the extinct future, in a shelter made from scraps and set between empty buildings. The buildings themselves are tall and clean, yet somehow very lonely edifices. They won't admit us, but they won't fight us either. And the climate remains ideal. Gardens thrive wherever the earth shows, and our neighbors are scarce and uniformly pleasant. One night I speak to my infant daughter, telling her that perhaps someday she'll learn how to enter the buildings. Or better, tear them down and use their best parts.

She acts agreeable, babbling something in her baby language.

Laverne stretches out before me, naked and agreeable in a different sense. With a sly grin, she asks:

"Care to ride the chaos, darling?"

Always and gladly, thank you. And together, with every little motion we change the universe in ways we happily cannot predict.