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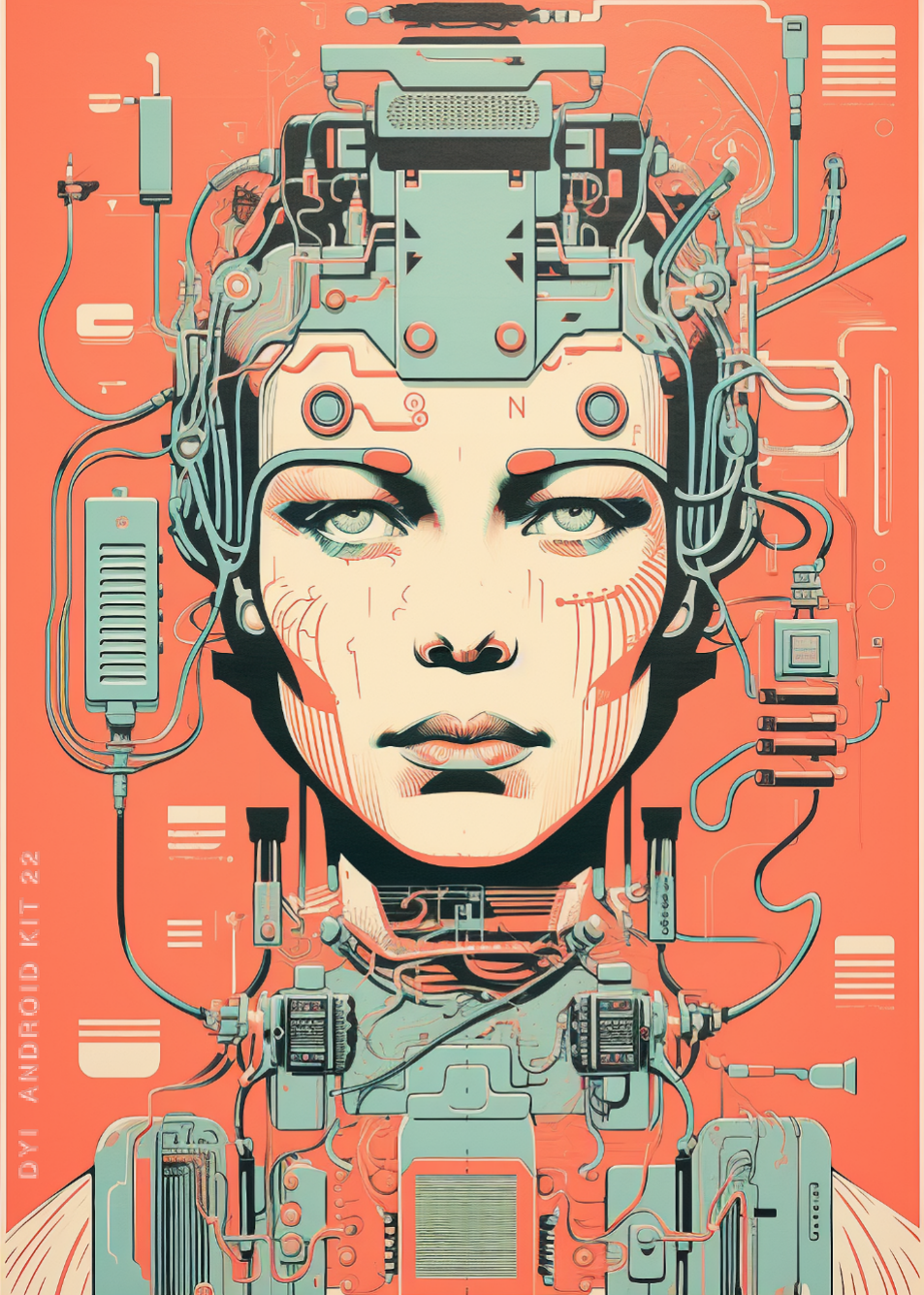
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FIXATION



SPEC~FICTION | INTERVIEWS | ART | FEATURES

DYI ANDROID KIT 22



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A Welcome to the first issue of Spec Fixation!

I am thrilled to introduce myself as the editor of this particular labour of love. *Spec Fixation* is a showcase of the talents of the members of a writing group called **Spec Fix** from the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales, Australia. It is both a privilege and a great responsibility to aid in bringing this publication to life.

Just as speculative fiction itself covers a variety of genres and formats, within these pages you will find a diverse range of stories, poems, pictures and other media from all areas of spec fic. As well as sharing our own creative works, *Spec Fixation* will bring you thoughts on writing craft, discussions of current issues impacting the writing and fiction community, and reviews of existing media.

It is my hope that you will follow along with us as we grow, exploring our passion for speculative fiction together. Thank you for taking this first step with us, and enjoy Issue 1 of *Spec Fixation*.

Erin



SPEC FIX is a Speculative Fiction writers group created and supported by the Hunter Writers Centre (HWC Inc.).

We are based in the Hunter Region of NSW, Australia. The group is open to all members of HWC Inc. interested in speculative fiction - that is, Sci Fi, Fantasy, Horror and everything in between.

JOIN US in our monthly meetings in-person and online

<https://hunterwriterscentre.org>

Spec Fixation

MAX ZEBRA-THYONE

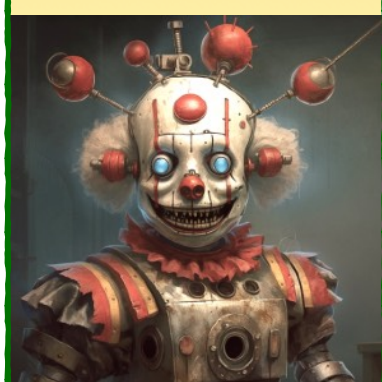


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Don't hesitate
To speculate
The fixation of your
Fascination
Death and horror
Ghoulish fiends
Of ghastly venues
And their means

Sci-fantasy and fiction
Realisation
Of worlds
Created by thoughts of
Creatures and things
Beyond reality
Born in
The realm of dreams
Made of fixations
Of speculations
Of world's yet to be formed
Into words
That spread through
The minds of creator
And readers alike

The two shall meet
And greet
Speculating
Fixing
Speculating
Fixating
Spec Fixation

| INTERVIEW |

David-Jack Fletcher is an Australian author, specialising in LGBTQI+ horror fiction. He dabbles in comedy-horror and dark fiction, but his true love is body horror.

His debut novella, *The Haunting of Harry Peck*, is a 2022 Amazon international best-seller across several lists including Gay Fiction, Horror, and Two-Hour Literature. When not writing and editing, David-Jack can be found on the couch with a book, cuddling his dogs and his husband.



□ DO YOU HAVE A LEAST FAVOURITE SUB-GENRE OF HORROR?

Not really. I try to appreciate what authors do, so even if I don't like a story, I'll still most likely enjoy the book as a whole. There's always some kind of symbolism, or some kind of me.

□ WHAT STEERED YOU TOWARDS WRITING HORROR? HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN A FAN?

Until recently, I'd thought horror was a new thing for me. However, I was looking over some of my really early short stories, and discovered they were always horror. Supernatural or creature features seemed to be my thing. That hasn't changed much. There's something about horror that I find comforting, in a weird way. There is a lot of beauty in horror, and this genre grapples with social and cultural commentary in really interesting ways. I think if I had to pinpoint a reason for my interest, that would be it.

□ IS THERE ANYONE YOU SEE AS YOUR 'HORROR INFLUENCE(S)'?

Most people will say Stephen King to this question. I'm on the Dean Koontz side of the coin, though. I resonate more with his style of writing and storytelling than with King. Ramsey Campbell is also an influence, and Jack Ketchum, though I discovered them more recently.

Q I KNOW YOU'RE A FAN OF BODY HORROR - WHAT ABOUT THAT PARTICULAR SUB-GENRE REALLY APPEALS TO YOU?

The limits of the body is something that appeals to me. Like with Saw, it's not just about chopping and slicing, it's about the limits of the body and how the physicality of our flesh can speak for us. How it carries our stories, the scars that can shape us. Plus, I do love gore.

'Writing was always my life goal, so when work became my literal nightmare, I knew it was time to pursue that, and do something I'm passionate about'

Q ARE THERE THINGS THAT YOU'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF IN HORROR?

More representation of minority groups and disenfranchised groups. I think it's important to see a range of characters (and their backstories), rather than the same tired characters we see everywhere else.

Q WAS THERE A MOMENT WHERE YOU THOUGHT, 'THAT'S IT, I'M GONNA GO FOR IT?' WHEN IT CAME TO WRITING?

This is a pretty personal one for me, because I was working in this horrible job with an absolutely awful manager. My mental health struggled a lot, and it got to the point where something had to give. Writing was always my life goal, so when work became my literal nightmare, I knew it was time to pursue that, and do something I'm passionate about.

Q IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WISH YOU'D KNOWN BEFORE YOU PUBLISHED YOUR FIRST NOVEL?

Probably how to do it myself. I had some great advice in that first process, but I've also learned a lot about the industry since taking the publishing on myself.

Q WHAT'S THE ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU HAVE FOR ASPIRING AUTHORS?

Everyone gets asked this, and I think the answer is usually the same: don't give up. It's so true, though. Even if you don't land an agent or get picked up by a traditional publisher, it doesn't mean you give up. Indie publishing and self-publishing are respectable, and both are growing. So, don't give up, and if you want to publish, find a way to make it happen.

Q IS THERE A PIECE OF COMMON WISDOM OR ADVICE OUT THERE THAT YOU DISAGREE WITH?

I've read a few books on the craft of writing, and I usually find the authors chosen for those books are people who've come from a position of privilege.

They are already full-time writers, and they seem to forget what it's like to have one (maybe two) jobs etc., just to make ends meet. So the wisdom of things like taking long walks in the middle of the day, or taking a week's holiday to clear your head...no. Not everyone can do that.

📄 WHAT NEXT - WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW AND/OR WHAT DO YOU SEE FOR YOURSELF IN THE FUTURE?

I've drafted my next novel, and my short story collection. So the next thing I have to do is edit those. I have a backlog of books I started and then put away due to work commitments. So I'm starting to get round to those now. For my future, I'm picturing my publishing company growing, and maybe a few Bram Stoker awards.

📄 DO YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER WRITE IN ANOTHER GENRE?

I do like thrillers and crime, so I can imagine myself in those genres, too. Also comedy.

📄 LAST BUT NOT LEAST, WHICH CHARACTERS FROM SEPARATE WORKS BOOK OR FILM - WOULD YOU LIKE TO PIT AGAINST EACH OTHER, FREDDY VS JASON STYLE?

Even though they're both heroes, I'd like to see Ripley vs. Connor, tbh. They are both so badass and fearless, I'd love to see which of them would win in a battle!



OUR NEXT ISSUE JAN 2024

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PRINT + PDF VERSIONS

The Glass Orca

EPISODE 1 : GIRL ADRIFT

BY MADI CROUCH



The ship's day-night cycle put them in the third hour of the morning, but Mags knew that, up above, it was nearing noon. She never could sleep while the sun was out - not that she'd ever seen it. Levi's crew were shouting, thumping through the halls in urgent search of this or that. Mags shrank into an alcove in the dingy metal hall, trying to disappear into the shadows behind a large exposed pipe. Praying to the stars unseen that they would all forget she was here.

*

'Orca,' Jonmarco called, boots clacking on a deck like frosted glass, 'what do you see?'

'Mmmm...' the ship hummed, 'my sensors have detected an unidentified vessel approaching our location, not two clips to the north-east and closing.'

'Friendly?' Jonmarco asked, reaching the control room.

'The vessel is unidentified. Do you need me to reiterate my earlier assessment?'

Jonmarco sighed. 'Is it too late to go dark?'

'It is,' Orca said, 'analysis of their movement patterns indicates they intend to engage.'

'Not friendly, then,' Jonmarco said, examining the blotch on Orca's display, 'why didn't you say that before?'

'My range at the moment was insufficient.'

Jonmarco cursed. 'We're coming up that fast?'

'We are.'

'Can we run?'

'Not for long, I'm afraid. Not without a recharge.'

Jonmarco nodded to himself. 'Rouse the crew. We'll see what they want.'



Mags' prayers went unanswered, or perhaps were cruelly denied.

'Can't hide, witch-girl,' Tars said, closing his thick fingers around her upper arm and wrenching her from her hiding place.

She stumbled, trying to keep her feet, as the larger man towed her down the hall.

'Let me go!'

'The cold was a shock even in the thermals, but Mags knew what came next would be worse'

She pried at his fingers, which were wrapped all the way around her humerus to overlap, his forefinger meeting the thumb at its joint. There was barely enough meat on her to move, let alone fight him off. She called to the magic in his body, but it resisted. It wanted to protect its host. She could only wish her own magic were so charitable. Except, magic never was. Tars' magic protected him because that was the course of action that most benefited itself. Followers of

the Flow preached that magic was a benevolent force that moved through all things. Mags thought of it more as a parasite that infested everything it could. Sometimes Mags dreamt of drifting, just drifting out in the deepest, darkest waters in which magic had no interest. She imagined peace in the silence and the dark. Then she would wake and remember that, in that place of peace, there was no way to breathe.

'Cap'n wants ya,' Tars said, dragging her along.

Mags had been afraid of that. The door to the control room slid aside as Tars put his hand to it, his magical signature recognised by the magic in the door - a fresh innovation lifted from the Academy of Clefah a few months back.

The man himself stood with his back to the door as Tars yanked Mags into the room.

From behind, Levi was the picture of the masculine ideal. Slender and powerful, he had a lean but muscular swimmer's build.

'I won't do it,' Mags declared.

'Won't do what?' Levi asked, turning. Hook-nosed and in his forty-first year, Levi's black beard was scraggly and tangled, the wiry strands patchy. A man with sense would recognise that he was not meant to wear a beard, but Levi's senses were not particular to aesthetics. He let out a hiss as he saw her

and squinted his left eye shut, but not before Mags could note its defect. It was coated silver, magic that never left the surface. Permanent silversight. As Levi hurried to fish an eyepatch from his pocket, Mags felt some small satisfaction. In silversight, she glowed like a beacon.

'Don't play with me,' Mags said. 'We went too far in Clefah. You can't make me send those sailors floorside. It's not what I'm here for.'

Levi sneered. He flicked a quick sign to Tars, who released her with a glare and left.

'What are you here for, Magdelene?' he asked finally.

Mags swallowed. She didn't trust the Surfer – Mags' and Levi's mutual hirer – but he was protection from the whalers, and that was the important thing. Levi was supposed to deliver her to and from Aldicia. She was not allowed to tell him her business there. Mags wasn't sure she understood it herself. The eddies had calmed and raged twice over since setting out on this mission, but after realising how useful Mags could be, Levi had lost all urgency.

Mags remained silent, so Levi spoke again.

'You waited too long to show us what you did in Clefah. What else are you holding back?'

'Nothing.'

Levi strode towards her and it was all Mags could do not to back away.

'You lie. There's more you're hiding.'

Mags held his eye. 'There's nothing else.'

Mags flinched as the blow came but did nothing to avoid it. The backhand was nearly enough to send her spindly body to the ground. She clutched at her face, but said nothing. He would delight, she knew, at the colours that would bloom on her cheek. Anyone else would heal from such an injury in a day. Not Mags. Mags' body was brimming with magic, but not of the kind she needed most.

'You'll do this for me,' Levi said. 'How long, do you think, would it take you to heal from a broken bone? I'm sure Tars would love to find out. Boiling hells, I'd do it myself. I'm not asking. Our equipment alone may not be enough to breach this one. I've never seen a sub burn this bright.'

Mags glanced at the control panels, but of course they were blank to the naked eye. Levi and his gimmicks. She engaged silversight, summoning her magic to her eyes and activating it, like flexing a muscle. The room lit up in a

thousand thousand pinpricks of light, the way she imagined stars must look. She looked at the display and found herself staring into a burning light.

'Acht!' She blinked and released silversight.

Levi laughed.

'How?' she said. 'Is it really that...?'

'It really is that strong,' he said, 'this ship has magic. *All* the magic. We're not letting it get away.'

*

'Bonnie, any luck? They're almost on us.' Jonmarco asked, standing at the older woman's shoulder.

Bonnie sighed. 'I know. I've tried seven different codes, visual signals, even a Clefan audio broadcast... no response.'

At that moment, there was a thud as something collided with the Orca's hull just beside Bonnie's head. She jumped, but recovered quickly. Three more thuds sounded in quick succession as more objects collided with the Orca's port side and held.

'What was that?' Jonmarco demanded.

Bonnie stared at the display with wide eyes. 'Chains. Fired from the other ship. They've attached to the Orca.'

'I've never seen anything stick to her like that,' Jonmarco said, more in awe than concerned.

'Orca, can you drop them?' Bonnie asked.

'Of course,' Orca said.

'No!' Jonmarco said. 'Leave them. So long as they're not doing more than just sticking, it will make it easier for us to reach them.'

'I believe the point is that it will make it easier for *them* to reach *us*,' Bonnie said, raising a grey eyebrow.

Jonmarco shrugged. 'Does it matter? Nothing can breach the Glass Orca.'

*

She couldn't do this. Wouldn't. Nonetheless, Mags found herself in the diving bay zipping herself into the smallest darkwear thermals they had. The suit would regulate her body temperature and dampen the glow of her magical signature. It wasn't invisibility, but it provided camouflage with the loose points of magic in the water.

She was not alone. Mags recognised the other two divers as Harris and Petra. Harris handed her a brevnut. She grimaced at the seed pod in her

hand. It was a wrinkled, elliptical ball with a raised ridge running from one narrow end to the other. That was where the brev would break out, with explosive force, something Mags was not looking forward to. Resigned, she put it between her teeth, half sticking out of her mouth, with the ridge facing the back of her throat. Harris and Petra put their own pods in their mouths.

Harris unscrewed the hatch in the floor and lifted it away, revealing the silver glow of the liquid magic that kept the ocean from breaching the hatch. Petra wasted no time lowering herself through the gleaming substance and into the water. Mags waited for Harris to follow, but he just stared at her. Resigned, Mags directed her magic to constrict her lungs, bracing for the change in pressure. The feeling of tightness was something she would never be used to. She took one last strained breath in through her nose. She closed her eyes, engaged silversight and leapt into the void.

The cold was a shock even in the thermals, but Mags knew what came next would be worse. She bit into the brevnut. The plant burst from its shell and rushed towards the carbon dioxide it needed to survive - a slimy mass pressing into her throat and rushing over her face to fill her nostrils. It didn't go deep, but it completely occupied her mouth and nose. Against instinct, Mags forced her lungs to exhale. The brev consumed the air, then released oxygen in exchange. It would keep her alive, but the suffocation was excruciating.

She opened her eyes to find herself drifting in the water, and panicked, thrashing. Then Petra grabbed Mags' wrist and towed her away. Mags kicked her feet to swim alongside her. She'd never been a strong swimmer. Mags felt movement in the water as Harris followed. They swam alongside the hull, headed sunside. As they reached the chain, Petra took hold and pulled Mags up to it. The woman pushed Mags' hand closed around a cold link. Then, the two divers left her, pulling themselves hand over hand along the chain. Mags' part was to come later.

*

'You can't defend this point all by yourself, Jon,' Bonnie said. 'You should let Orca drop the lines. At least a couple of them.'

'It's fine,' Jonmarco said, lining himself up to stand beside where the offending chain had fused itself to the hull. He turned from the wall and made three careful strides towards starboard. 'Terese and the twins can each hold their own, and so can I. Orca, is everyone in position?'

'They are.'

Jonmarco braced his lungs for the dive, closed his eyes and set them to silversight. He dashed forward blind and leapt, diving hands before him at the wall. He felt a tug of resistance as Orca allowed him to pass through her strange, ancient silico. A thin, transparent membrane clung to him as Jonmarco detached from her. It would coat his entire body, maintain his body temperature, and produce air for him to breathe. The membrane couldn't pressurise the air to the extent the ship did, but Jonmarco had always felt that it helped. He'd mentioned it to Terese once, but she'd complained she felt no difference. Regardless, Orca's membrane was a step far above a brevnut, not in any way uncomfortable, and it left space around his mouth so he could speak. It would carry his voice back to Orca, and to his crew. It had two downsides. The membrane was very visible in silversight, and it would come apart if he strayed too far from the ship.

He opened his eyes and took hold of the chain. In his right hand he took a small knife from his belt and flicked it open. He began pulling himself along the chain one-handed.

He could see the other ship ahead. A modern ship? Its magic moved strangely. As though it were a hodgepodge of parts of different origins that had somehow been made to work together. Distracted, he almost missed the two enemy divers coming his way. Jonmarco hooked his ankle around the chain and signalled 'friendly' in an exaggerated Aldician war sign, hoping they were Westerners. The divers ignored the sign and continued to advance.

Their darkwear meant little up close – Jonmarco could now see pinpricks of light outlining their bodies. One was thicker through the shoulders and narrower through the hips than the other. A man and a woman?

Jonmarco signed again, gesturing with his knife. No meaning was lost this time, and the woman signed back, accepting his challenge.

Jonmarco kicked his legs and shot towards the woman, knife leading. She caught his wrist, and allowed his momentum to carry them both towards the enemy ship. This sent him drifting past the man, who caught Jonmarco's ankle and yanked him from his trajectory. The enemy man slashed at Jonmarco's leg with a small knife, but Orca's membrane thickened and deflected the blade. Jonmarco twisted his arm to break the woman's grip and kicked the man hard in the face. Hopefully he hit the man's brev, but for the moment he kept his eyes on the woman. As they slashed at each other, no attack came from the man. Out of the fight? The woman was the better

fighter, and made contact more than once, but each time the Orca's membrane protected him. He could see her frustration building in the way she moved. He scored a few slashes to her thermals, but only to disguise his intentions.

Jonmarco wasn't reckless enough to go for blood. He needed to hit the brev. Then the woman shocked him. She sheathed her knife. The woman pulled from a pocket a small disk bright with concentrated magic. Before he could react, she slammed it into his left arm. The disk *consumed* the membrane, and suddenly his arm was cold and wet. He pulled away, and the membrane sealed at his shoulder but left the limb exposed. The effect caused both to hesitate, but Jonmarco recovered first. Jonmarco lunged, slashing the brev. The woman clutched at the constricting plant on her face and throat and signed a quick surrender with her other hand. Jonmarco allowed her to take her drifting comrade - unconscious? - and retreat.

'Jon,' said Bonnie's urgent voice in his ear. 'You need to get back. Now. Terese has been cut.'

'Is she alright?'

'She's fine, but...'

'Blood in the water.'

'Blood in the water.'

Jonmarco swore. 'I'm coming. Tell Orca to drop the lines.'

'Done.'

Jonmarco made a circular motion with his ankle and the membrane on his legs extended to form flippers beyond his toes. With a few powerful kicks he was pushing his way back through the Orca's hull. Pivoting as he passed through the hull to land on his feet was an art.

*

Mags felt the chain go limp in her hand. As the heavy links dropped, a surprised Petra and drifting Harris went with it. Mags needed to go now, or she would lose her chance. Mags dulled her signature to the brightness of an average human. She was almost certain nobody knew she could do that. Mags let go of the chain and swam. She stopped a few times as she went to sign to the retreating divers, 'need' and 'friendly' and 'surrender'. *Notice me! Please!*

*

Jonmarco blinked, releasing silversight and turning towards the wall. 'Orca,' he said, 'show me what's going on.'

The hull was transparent, but there was little light at this depth. Orca's silico lit up in small lights to imitate silversight. The enemy was retreating too. They knew. All except one. Why were they still out there? And swimming towards them. Slowly. Did they have a death wish?

'Bon,' he said, 'any demons?'

'One,' she said. 'Coming up fast. Looks like a large feli.'

Feli. Jonmarco *hated* Feli.

'Get Carnell on the guns. We're taking this thing out.'

*

Mags felt movement in the water, and turned. *No. No!*

The demon was bright in silversight. Too bright. Mags relaxed her eyes from silversight to mundane sight by reflex. She met the gaze of a fast-approaching creature, glowing green eyes with slits as pupils. Blue bioluminescence lit the tips of its strange coat, the brightest at the tufts of its triangular ears. Bubbles escaped its mouth as it snarled, displaying needle-like teeth. The vertebrae down its back and through its tail shone green through its skin. Its four limbs ended in claws as long as Mags' arms. She wanted to scream, would have screamed, if not for the water, if not for the plant crammed into her airways.

It was almost upon her when something collided with its back. Something that had come, very fast, from the strange ship. On impact, the thing *exploded*. The Feli burst apart in chunks of flesh, and the water took on an unbearable heat. Dazed, Mags drifted.

*

'They're not moving,' Jonmarco said, 'Orca, are they alive?'

'I detect a heartbeat, yes,' Orca said.

'Jon, that's an enemy diver,' Bonnie said. 'Leave them for the carrion demons.'

'No one deserves that,' Jonmarco said. 'I'm bringing them in.'

'Jon-'

'I know what I'm doing, Bonnie.'

Jonmarco dived into the ocean. It did not take him long to retrieve them. He pulled the enemy diver through the water and tried to push through the hull. Orca resisted.

'No,' the ship's voice said through the membrane. 'I will not, she is too-'

The stranger placed a hand on the hull and the two of them dropped abruptly into the control room, falling to the floor. He landed on top, and hurriedly rolled away.

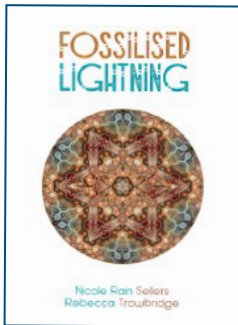
'Orca?!' Bonnie cried, frantically hitting keys on the console. 'Orca! Please respond!'



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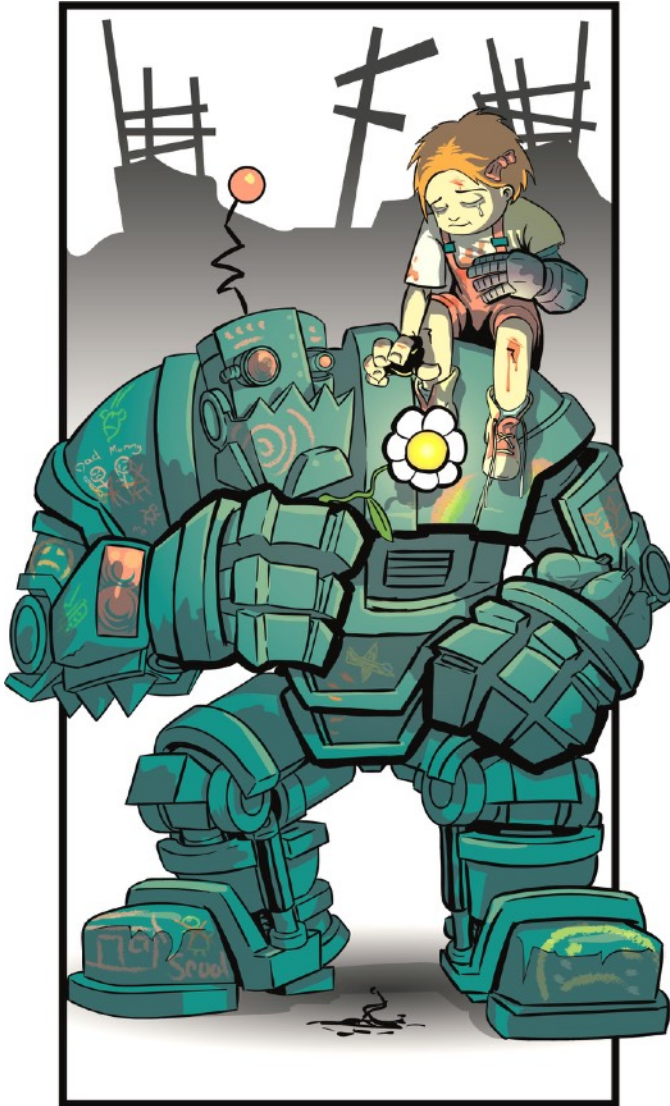
THE STORY HUNTERS ANTHOLOGIES

From traditional science fiction to horror, dystopian, and high fantasy, each of the authors brings their own unique voice to the diverse banner of speculative fiction, in these two Australian anthologies.

Both books feature writers drawn from our Spec Fix group, originally named 'Story Hunters'.



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SPECULATIVE FICTION ISN'T JUST ABOUT WRITING

Just as authors explore the possibilities of the world around them through their poetry and prose, artists working in other mediums - such as sculpture, glassblowing, or illustration - will also use speculative genres to engage with their fears, imagine the possibility of a better future, or explore concepts such as found family.



One such artist is
CRAIG from **Carbonkid.art**

Using illustration as his preferred medium, Craig enjoys creating both memorable characters and vibrant worlds. With a particular fondness for drawing inspiration from both science fiction and horror in his work, Craig aspires to move into making cover art for novels and anthologies, as well as providing illustrations to accompany short stories.



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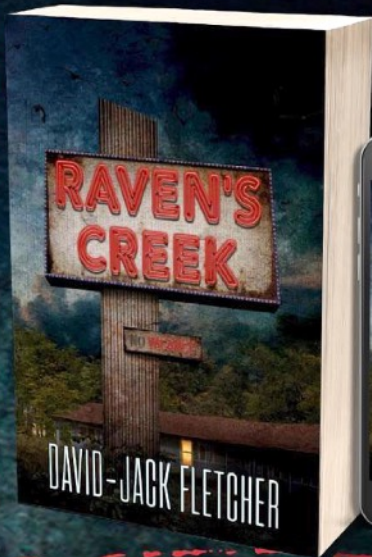
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Whatever it Takes

ERIN MUNZENBERGER



I sit enveloped in darkness; the handle of the knife worn rough in my hand. Cold fear prickles my skin, every hair on my body stiffening. A low growl vibrates the air. The wall beside me quivers, just a few mere inches of wood between me and the creature prowling back and forth outside. I hear the huff of its breath as it searches out my warm, animal scent - the scent of meat and bone and blood. Dust and splinters rain down as it brushes against the outside of the wall. Claws scrape, wood cracks, and fetid carrion breath floods the small room. Ammonia, too, as I lose control of my bladder. The wet heat between my legs turns disgustingly cold and slippery within seconds. I can feel tears sliding down my cheeks, but I don't dare sob out loud.

*

I remember the first reports, but only dimly. It was all so far away. Russia, the exclusion zone around Chernobyl. More giant animals, like the wild boar I read an article on once. They were destructive, but couldn't be culled, because their bodies were so contaminated that they needed to be treated like nuclear waste. There had been deaths. I remember feeling a quick pang of sympathy. There was a hot, bitter spike of coffee on my tongue. The report moved on to something else, and I ceased to pay attention.

Jason was at the computer again. He's always at the computer, the light from the screen throwing harsh shadows on his face. Or maybe it's his face that has turned harsh. He hasn't slept again, and the skin beneath his eyes is bruised with it. The eyes themselves are bloodshot, glassy. Forums and

games, games and forums, a constant cycling between the two in the seven months since he was laid off. He hasn't put in an application in weeks. His skin is sallow from lack of sun and too much alcohol - beer, at first, but now moved on to the harder stuff.

He reeks when I tip-toe up mouse-quiet to leave a mug of coffee and a plate of eggs and toast beside him. The sour smell of sweat - he probably hasn't washed for days - mixes with the booze and something else. Something dirty. I think he's started smoking again. I don't lean down to kiss him or tell him that I'm leaving for work. Last week he became enraged. He said I was rubbing it in that I had a job and he didn't and hurled a mug against the wall. I wept as I picked up the pieces, mopped up the stain. That only made him madder. I retreat before he has a chance to look down, to see that we've run out of bacon. I step out the front door in silence, make sure to close it behind me without so much as a click.

I've caked my face in make-up, but I still feel like the people I pass on the street as I walk to my car are staring at me, judging me in Jason's voice. The women: *why doesn't she leave? Part of her must want it. The men: I bet she deserved it. She should know not to bitch so much, to keep the house cleaner, be a better cook. To put out more.*

I never knew there were so many men out there who hated women so much. Not until Jason found the forums. So much seething, writhing hate. Jason chuckles at the slogans, like: *Equal rights and equal lefts*. There's that Marilyn Monroe quote too: *If you can't handle me at my worst, you don't deserve me at my best*. That they like that one so much always puzzles me.

I get in the car, turn the key in the ignition. I remember our first date, how Jason opened the door for me. No one had ever done that before. I remembered how I thought that he was such a gentleman.

★

The creature pushes itself against the wall, rubbing, like a cat against the leg of a chair. The cabin - well, it's more of a shed, really - cracks and groans. It isn't going to hold. The growl comes again, low, throbbing. I bite my lip to hold in a scream. Jason moans from the tangle of dirty blankets on the floor.

I feel for him in the darkness and put my hand over his mouth to muffle the sound, but it's no good. The monster knows we're in here. It knows it has us trapped. Jason's skin is fever-hot against my own, slick with sweat. Even

without pulling back the filthy rag that was the best I could do for a bandage I can smell that his wounds are going septic. The deep claws that raked his guts have punctured something, leaking filth into his body.

The creature knows we're in here because it was the one that chased us in. I don't know why it's toying with us like this - I guess it isn't hungry yet? It's been nearly three days, and I know Jason cannot last much longer.

I knew the moment I looked at his wounds that he was done for. I tried to keep it off my face. But he looked at me, and he knew too.

'Fucking bitch,' he wheezed, wasting precious breath. 'I told you not to make so much fucking noise.'

'I'm sorry,' I whispered, because it's true, it's my fault the monster came. I shouldn't have screamed. It's just that it hurts so much when he hits me. If I was tougher, stronger, better, smarter then he wouldn't have to hit me so much.

It's all my fault.

I'm sorry, I think again to him now. There's no point in saying it. I can see the whites of his eyes gleaming in the darkness. His eyes rolled back in his head last night and haven't come back down. He grunts and shudders and shakes, but when I tried to wake him to offer him the last of our water, I couldn't get him to rouse. He's not there anymore, not really.

A paw drags slowly along the bottom of the barricaded door. My 'barricade' is just a few spindly old chairs I found at the back of the shed. They creak as an immense weight leans against the old, rotting timber. When the monster decides it wants to really try to get in, they won't hold it back for more than a moment.

I try so hard not to think about what is going to happen. About the teeth and the claws and the unfathomable pain of being eaten alive. My whole body starts shaking. I remember the screams ...



I was jerked awake by a frantic pounding on the door. Beside me, Jason was already throwing back the covers, swearing.

'What the bloody fuck, it's six in the fucking morning!' he snarled, slamming the bedroom door into the wall on his way past. The pounding from downstairs continued. I snagged my dressing gown from the post at the foot of the bed, and pulled it on as I followed Jason cautiously, hobbling a little on the cold floor.

'Jason!' A man's voice screams from outside. I recognise it as my brother-in-law, Nicko, though I've never heard him sound like this. 'Jason, Richelle, let me in! *Oh God, let me in!*'

I'm standing at the top of the stairs, looking down into the hallway. Jason in his t-shirt and boxer shorts is almost at the door. I can see Nicko's silhouette at the frosted glass pane, one hand pressed up against the glass. The doorknob is jiggling frantically. I hear, for the very first time, the low, throbbing snarl outside in the street, and every atom in my body freezes, terrified. Time seems to stop as Nicko's body is slammed against the glass, hard. The pane cracks. Nicko's agonised wail cuts through me like a knife, and Jason is screaming too as he bounds the last steps forwards, fumbling in a panic to get the door open.

Another slam, rocking the door in its frame. Wood splinters. The pane breaks, showering chunks of glass, and Nicko flops through the hole like a bloodied rag doll. I see his face, chalk-pale, his black hair slicked with blood that's dripping down his face. For a moment our eyes meet, and the image is burned forever in my brain. Nicko's red, bloodied mouth opens, his torn hand reaching for his brother as he coughs one last, pleading:

'Jason ...'

A paw larger than a dinner plate - larger than a tiger, a bear, larger than anything I can think of - reaches through the hole in the door. Claws like gleaming jet latch into the top of Nicko's head. I can hear the bone crunch from all the way up the top of the stairs, and I cannot hold in my scream. I clap my hands over my mouth, and my back hits the wall behind me as Nicko's eyes blank, red dribbling from around the claws, his hand spasming, clenching and unclenching on the sleeve of Jason's t-shirt. A sound is coming out of Nicko's mouth, a horrible, rattling groan -

- And then the claw yanks him backwards and out of view. There is more snarling, and then a tearing, crunching sound. Something huge and dark passes the hole in the door and then a vast, yellow eye peers in at Jason where he stands, rooted to the spot. The low, throbbing growl that I will come to loathe and fear fills the air, making my ears pop.

Something huge slams against the door, rocking it on its hinges. The wood of the frame begins to splinter. I scream again. Jason whirls on his heel, bounds up the stairs and snatches my hand, yanking me after him. The bedroom walls blur past. Jason thrusts the balcony sliding door open so

forcefully it jumps the track. Behind us I hear the crash from downstairs as the front door gives in.

'Fucking hurry!' Jason barks, breathless, tears streaking his cheeks. When I hesitate, he grabs me roughly, his hands bruising my skin, and tosses me over the balcony railing. Sky and grass reel by in an instant, nauseous blur. I slam into the ground on my back, all the air crushing out of me. I've literally been flipped head over heels. Jason lands clumsy and hard on the lawn beside me, stumbling to his knees.

'Run!' he snarls, dragging me up by a fistful of hair and dressing gown. 'Do you want to get eaten too?'

He keeps a hard grip on the back of my neck, forcing me to move. I cry silently as we scurry across the lawn and out the back gate. I can hear screaming coming from next door, from the Cochrain's house. I think: *They have small children*. A dog barks somewhere close by. Distant gunshots echo over the sounds of brutal dying. Of monsters feeding. I can't see through my tears. The carport, the SUV. Jason yanks open the door and shoves me into the passenger seat. There's a spare key in the centre console.

'How many times did you tell me not to leave this here, huh?' Jason demands. Usually, his voice would be a snarl, but it's different this time. Like he's saying nasty things out of habit, but the anger isn't there. He sounds like he's going to cry - not just leak from his eyes but break right down and howl.

The tyres squeal as he reverses out of the driveway at speed, throws the car jerkily into drive. A bloodied lump of flesh lies in a pool of blood on the footpath behind our back fence.

I don't ask Jason where he's going. It won't take us long to find out that it doesn't matter anymore. Nowhere is safe.



I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die. It's a mantra that plays over and over in my head. Outside, the creature pushes its nose against the gap at the bottom of the door, whuffs out a breath that smells like the time a possum got stuck behind the water heater.

I look down at the knife in my hand. There's no way I can hope to use it to fight off the creature. Jason's breath gurgles. I know he's close to the end. Maybe ... maybe I should end it now. He's suffering. I look at him, laying there, helpless and shaking.

I wish he was here - here *properly*, awake and aware. I want him to tell me what to do. He'd think of something. He always does. Jason's smart like that, capable. Everything I'm not. It's why he must hit me so much, to make me *better*. It's for my own good.

If he was here, Jason would find a way to save me. 'Do whatever it takes,' he told me - God, it must have been a million times that I'd heard him say that since the horrific morning when the world as we knew it ended in blood and tears and screams.

'Do whatever it takes.'

I look back down at the knife in my hand.

★



I weep as I wield the knife. Cutting, carving, slashing. Jason grunts and groans and squirms at first, and then goes still. The creature is growling, pushing harder and harder against the door, scenting the blood in the air.

I need lots of blood. Lots and lots and lots. Enough to keep it distracted, drawn to the kill, to feed. Heaving, I drag Jason along the ground, as far towards the back of the shed as I can. He's so heavy, and my hands are slippery and wet. The

smell of tin is so thick in the air that I can taste it. The creature pushes its head against the door, leans, and the wood bows in. I drop the knife, press one last kiss to Jason's damp forehead, then flatten myself against the wall. I make myself as small as possible. I close my eyes and turn my head away just in time.

The door collapses in.

A deep, throbbing rumble comes from inside the creature as it passes. Almost like it's purring. It's so close I can feel the brush of its bristly fur against my cheek. Weak, barely audible, I hear Jason moan...

Almost clear.

A whimper of pain. I try to pretend I didn't hear it, dig my nails into my palms so hard they cut the skin. I pray the tiny drops of my blood will be lost

in the sea of Jason's that spreads across the floor. The beast is snuffling, guzzling, lapping, worrying at the feebly twitching body.

Come on, come on, come on!

My eye slits open, just a crack.

The beast is through. The door is clear.

It's shaggy form nearly fills the shed. Its body is long and leggy, like a big dog or a wolf, but bulkier, more solid. Big, hunched shoulders and a heavy, round-eared head. Its spine arches up in a bristling ruff like a razorback boar's. It scrapes its claws across the ground, and I see actual sparks fly up from the concrete. My lungs ache from holding in my breath.

Finally, the beast flops down to its belly, lowers its head to begin feeding in earnest.

Black spots dance in front of my eyes as I inch my way towards the door. My heart is beating so hard I don't understand why the monster doesn't hear it, doesn't turn and fix me in that awful yellow gaze. I hear chewing. Jason makes a choking sound.

My fingers tremble on the splintered door frame.

Whatever it takes.

The night air hits me like a slap, cold and hard. I can't see through the tears blurring my eyes. I can't help the breath that tears from my chest, the gasping sob that follows. I clutch my hand to my mouth and move as quickly and as quietly around the side of the shed as I can.

I hope Jason would be proud of me. I toughened up, like he was always telling me I had to do.

I did whatever it took.

I have only a moment to register the scrape of claws on the roof of the shed overhead. Half a second to glance up, see the stars blocked out by something large and dark and furry. Feel the hot pain as claws bite into the soft flesh of my neck, slicing in until they split the bones.

I don't even get the chance to scream.



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IS PHYSICAL MEDIA RELEVANT?



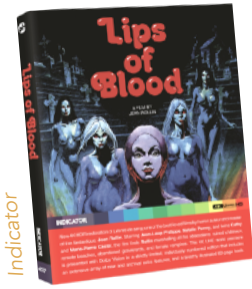
As a die-hard physical media collector, I lived through the VHS era, shoving fat rectangles of plastic into shelving and drawers. My complete *Star Trek: The Next Generation* sets took up an entire bookcase. When DVDs first arrived it was a space-saving godsend, replacing my clunky tapes, since relegated to op shops.

I dutifully upgraded favourite parts of my DVD collection to Blu-ray, including the lesser known titles from my library of UK retro television, such as Gerry Anderson's *UFO* and *Space 1999*, the spy-fi *Department S*, and the surreal and influential, *The Prisoner* of 1960s fame. By now, money and shelf space had become sparse. Then, wouldn't you know it, 4K Blu-rays came along.

No one I know watches DVDs anymore, let alone buys them, or wants them as a gift. Is physical media dead, then? Does it have a place in our future? With this in mind, I trawled the internet and to my relief, discovered a small but thriving online community of physical media enthusiasts of all ages.

As with vinyl records before it, entertainment on disc (Blu-ray, 4K) has silently been making a comeback in the form of niche, premium collectables. A clutch of boutique publishers are re-releasing classic cinema of all genres to an educated and eager market. With creativity put into artistic covers, premium packaging, booklets and art cards, and a host of content extras, these expensive collector's editions are flourishing and sell out fast.

Although 4K Blu-ray media forms a small portion of mainstream studio releases, amongst the specialist publishers there is a surging popularity in the format. And a large part is thanks to the genre of horror, closely followed by science fiction, and Golden-age Hollywood. Astoundingly popular amongst many physical media collectors, 4K horror releases are fuelling the boutique market, helping to keep disc-based entertainment alive and well within its own dedicated community.



Encouraged by my research, I gaze adoringly at my shelves, satisfied that certain titles are now worth a lot of money, thanks to becoming rare or out of print. My room full of DVDs and blu-rays no longer feels like an antiquated liability, but a potential goldmine. Yet, more importantly, my collection helps to preserve a growing list of films and TV shows no longer available to view.

Many subscribers experience the perils of streaming content, when favourite films or shows disappear after licensing deals expire and are not renewed by providers. Or when movie collections are pulled off the internet for tax purposes or the avoidance of residual payments. Alarming, in the case of several studios, the censorship and re-editing of older movies to better match contemporary sensibilities, is also taking place.

Disney recently announced it will no longer release physical media for the Australian and New Zealand markets, having already cut off parts of Asia, and Latin America. This forces viewers to adopt a streaming subscription if they wish to see favourite Disney owned content and access future releases. Or pay a high cost to import overseas disc editions. Given that Australia currently ranks a deplorable 55th world place for Internet speed, many Aussies are screwed when it comes to quality streaming.

As big studios 'retire' older or unprofitable titles from availability in *any form*, the enthusiast's library becomes crucial to the continued existence of a diverse, sometimes challenging, and often non-studio driven, art form. Physical media serves to archive many genres of disappearing cinema, saving them from distribution limbo. These include; art-house, cult, early 20th century, LGBTQi and World, to name a few.

In 2022, a consortium of film artists and professionals created the *Missing Movies* organisation, to empower filmmakers, distributors, archivists, and others to clear rights, locate lost materials, and advocate for policies and laws to make the full range of cinema history available to all.

Is physical media still relevant? Absolutely.

Popular boutique publishers :

UK : *Second Sight, Arrow Video, Indicator*

US : *Criterion, Vinegar Syndrome*

Australia : *Imprint, Umbrella Entertainment*



BY JASPER STEVENSON

The Top Drawer

H. ROBERT BARLAND



The young pixie stood on the dresser, a sock in one hand and shame upon his cheeks. His father snatched the garment and held it up.

'What have I told you about this?' the Tofter said to his son. 'Do you want to expose us?'

Young Markett shook his head and traced a pattern on the dresser top with one pointed shoe. His father sighed and sat on the edge, feet not quite reaching the bottom of the open drawer. He patted the spot next to him and Markett took his father's side to look across the room. The setting sun flooded the human's bedroom with amber light. They inspected the room. It was neat, laid out with almost military precision.

'Humans cannot suspect we are here,' Tofter said. 'That we even exist.' He pulled on his forelock and then smoothed the point of his grey beard. 'When we take from them, it must always be something small. Something they believe they must have simply misplaced.' He held up the sock. 'It cannot be part of a pair.'

'But it would make such a good sweater.' Near tears, Markett's voice was tight and choked. 'Or a winter dress for mother.'

'Aye, it would, at that.' His father raised his eyes up. 'And she would look fine in it, too.'

'Eww, dad.'

The young pixie received a cuff on the back of the head. 'Your mother was, and is, the finest pixie-woman I ever did see.'

This time there was no comment. Tofter nodded and held out the item of hosiery. He examined the pattern of interwoven rectangles.

'Houndstooth,' the father said. 'Nice.' He allowed a sigh to slip from his chest. 'You aren't the first to have such thoughts.' He gave a sage nod. 'This endangers us all. Many have been tempted—' the elder pixie leaned in and elbowed the younger, '—even I.'

Markett's eyes widened. 'You?'

'Yes,' his father said. 'The allure of a sock isn't lost on me.' He stroked the sock.

Tofter arched a single grey eyebrow. 'Do you remember the clan over on South Street? When we said they had to leave?'

The boy's rapid nodding was slowed by the steady shake of the elder's head.

'They never left. They'll never go anywhere again.'

The young pixie's mouth gaped.

'And it all started with a sock' Tofter bowed his head and his face fell into shadow. 'The South Street clan tried to cover up their thefts, but they'd been too greedy. They'd not followed the rules. Humans are a suspicious lot and once they're riled up, they must go off. Your uncle lost his hand that night.'

'He said a rat bite did it.' Markett's hand flew to his mouth. 'A human bit it off?'

His father's eyebrows knitted. 'What? No. The human blamed the thefts on rats. Gassed the whole clan, it did. All of them. Gone.' The older pixie pulled on his beard again. 'It didn't end there, though. After the gas, the human started to systematically pull open the walls.'

'So, we needed rat carcasses to convince the human that something other than pixies was responsible. He leant back against a can of deodorant. 'It was quite the battle. We had to use our bare hands to strangle the rodents.'

The younger pixie looked confused.

'Leaves no visible wounds, you see.' The elder leant back. 'It still wasn't enough. The human kept looking and would soon find the pixie homes.' His head dropped and he looked at his son from under his heavy brows, his eyes smouldering shadows. 'So that night we set a fire.'

'I remember that night,' the young one said. 'You looked... defeated.'

The elder pixie nodded. 'A clan lost their lives,' he turned back to the setting sun, his jaw tight, 'because of a sock.'

He held the pilfered item out to his son. 'Still want it?'

The younger gave a shake of his head, the elder a nod.

'Good lad.'

The sock flopped into the top drawer of the dresser. They both stood, but the young pixie stopped and shuffled his feet.

'Dad? There's something else.' He sucked in a deep breath then reached into his pack. The older pixie sighed as he saw the lurid pink mesh of a pair of human panties.

'What, exactly, did you think you were going to do with this?' he said.

'I thought we might... maybe... a net?' A final shrug slipped from his young shoulders.

The older pixie paused for a moment. 'Well, I'm glad you fessed up.'

Their pointed ears twisted as they heard the jingling of keys. The lock to the front door clacked.

'These humans are back!' The older hissed shouldering his pack. 'Put that back in the drawer. Time to go.'

'They're not from here. I took them from...'

'I said, 'put them in there'.' His tone brooked no argument. The younger pixie let the garment unfold and dropped them into the neatly organised drawer.

'Another rule you should always follow,' Tofter said, as the garment flopped open and exposed in the top drawer, 'is to avoid soiled items.'

They dropped over the side of the dresser onto a chair then to the floor. They waited until the humans — one male and one female — passed into the room then scooted out behind them.

There was a screech from the bedroom. The pixies dove behind a potted plant. The humans were arguing. The female human held the pink panties in her hand, brandishing them like a talisman. The male leaned back with his arms out to the sides shaking his head. The elder pixie pointed to a gap in the floorboards and the safety beyond.

The human woman's voice rose to a shriek and the pixies looked back to see her throw the pink lingerie at the man and follow it up with a series of open-handed slaps.

Markett watched agog. He turned to his father, who shrugged.

'Humans are suspicious creatures.'



Alternative Appliance co.

BY JASPER STEVENSON



Opening the dusty crate her grandmother bequeathed to her, Hayley pulled out a pile of yellowing catalogues and scattered them on the table. She leafed through the nearest to her, intrigued by what she saw. With pen and paper in hand she scratched out notes, keen to apply her archivist skills. That was 10 years ago. Now finished, she is ready to share her diaries.

DAY 1 : I've compiled a list of the catalogues, booklets and ephemera, dating back to 100 years. Published by the *Alternative Appliance Company*, they feature an array of unusual products. I can find no city records of the manufacturer nor have I come across their appliances in the real world.

Being a complete set, I shall begin with the eccentric 'party favourites' catalogue of 1923. At first glance, these vintage radios appear mouth-wateringly attractive, and anyone would assume them to be solid confection. Further reading indicates these are actual working radios with all the necessary internal electrics being surrounded by an outer layer of chocolate. Astonishingly, a patent had been granted.

According to their self-published two volume history (part of the archive), although hugely popular amongst consumers, many customers sued the company for both extensive dental work, and poor station reception, causing the ill advised idea to be permanently shelved until the mid-seventies when a nostalgic revival took hold and they sold like hot cakes again.

Tomorrow, I shall explore their honeycomb radio, supplied with live bees.



WHY SPECULATIVE FICTION?

BY ERIN MUNZENBERGER

For many of us who are passionate about speculative fiction, sooner or later we will have someone demand we justify our interest.

There is sometimes an attitude that a love of science fiction or fantasy is something childish, to be put away when adulthood is reached. Or that there must be something suspect about your character if you're a fan of horror.

For me, though, I've never understood this attitude. The same themes explored in more literary works are absolutely present in speculative fiction, albeit sometimes in more metaphorical ways. *Pet Sematary* is one of the best known explorations of the grief of a parent deprived of their child. In spite of its sweet title, *A Wizard's Guide to Defensive Baking* is an intense study of what it feels like to be othered by society (and a fantastic middle grade read). The science fiction setting in no way detracts from a daughter's reflections on her poor relationship with her mother in *The Luminous Dead*. Themes such as bigotry, othering and the joys of found family are visited over and over again within speculative fiction. Perhaps that is the attraction of these genres - that those who are branded as different feel championed by these works.

In any case, one can also set the need to 'justify' their love of speculative fiction aside entirely, and simply state:

'I read it because I like it.'



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