

Darkchrome:- could it include parallel universe(s), poison, paranoia and one other thing, beginning with 'p', of your own choosing. Urban/Dark Fantasy, or Steampunk

## Peekuliar

Yes, It was I who was driving at the time, responsible for everything - the others were as close to innocent bysitters as anyone can be and survive as a traveller. As the house juddered to stability in its new reality I released my deathgrip on the useless joystick – I had done all the stabilising on the touchscreen – and stretched. Not quite parallel, this alternative universe; at least five degrees of divergence in three dimensions, but that's pretty close for a Victorian mansion. I high fived Anna and Herb, and we ran through the atmosphere checks - I know, it's Earth, must be right, yes? Well, no. A house like this has foundations over a century deep, which leaves the possibility not only of smog, but several war gasses, delivered by aerostat or rocket, nerve gasses or simply killers. One day I'm going to get a mediaeval castle or Elizabethan residence; from a pivot point like that you can reach way out into strange - Dervan's bought himself a three-hundred-year old farmhouse, but it's way out in the countryside, so he always has to drive for an hour before reaching anyone who might have ideas to trade, but those ideas will be wider and weirder, so it balances out. Pity the poor Americans and, even more, Australians - a couple of centuries is the maximum they can even hope for, and the government's put dibs on almost all of those. If the fighting ever dies down in the middle east we might well get some serious competition from there, but they're determinedly hammering all their architecture into rubble, leaving the market to Europeans and the Subcontinent. As

freelancers, that is; most governments have big, sluggish departments based round military, university or corporation organisation, with far too many safety regulations to get ahead.

The electronic signatures being clear, time for the more primitive but wider test - a canary, Patrick by name, is fed, caged and all, through the airlock, out into the sunshine. His cheerful song even penetrates the sealed double glazing, so we shouldn't need the biohazard suits. Adam will insist on them, though, as 'You can never be sure about bacteria', which, looking at the weather, predicts a sweaty, water through straw couple of days.

But not yet. First we check local conditions. We're all survivors, while a lot of the 'gung ho, charge into the unknown with a loaded gun and a belief in your own indestructibility' types are no longer posting on websites. If it takes us a day to check out local conditions, then a day it gets.

Lower Beelington is not exactly a metropolis, but we hadn't so far seen a human being or dog - or, apart from Patrick, a bird. This could indicate a plague, a zombie invasion, or just the fact that a Thursday afternoon in an English hamlet is not the most exciting period on Earth. More worrying was the silence on the airwaves - no radio, television, satellite broadcasts, unless they're too low level to decode.

"Fibre optic to all houses?"

"But they'd still want some kind of mobile contact, boats

and planes if not cars and individuals. Taxis, fire engines and police got communications before the general run of mortals." A tiny smudge on the readout was probably a distant thunderstorm. "We don't go back far enough to completely miss the technology, do we? Most likely is a plague world."

Which existed, as Adam had pointed out to us frequently, even if we hadn't visited one before. And had the advantage that you could adopt - steal, except that there wasn't anybody you were stealing from - physical objects, jewellery, artworks. They weren't as valuable, guinea per gram, as ideas you could patent, or medications, or theories of physics, or seeds of plants unknown to gardeners, but you didn't need to establish communications, took what you wanted and told the forces of law, order and apple pie where you'd been, what you'd found, when you got back. And posted it on a dozen websites, coordinates and situation, which was as good as it got for staking a claim.

Three parties of government, over a decade, had debated shifting excess population into vacant worlds - a shuttle building, customs and excise, lots of run-down housing needing renovating, all the services - water, electricity, sewage, communications, transport - to be overhauled or created, full employment, a very good way of getting all this wealth the freelancers have been importing or creating, depending on your point of view, into circulation. For a hundred thousand tiny inventions, each no great thing in itself, create millions of guineas of useable wealth that needs to be stirred, to move around, so that administrations can tax off, prune off, lumps at every transaction, which is what administrations exist for. But the arguments seemed no further advanced than when shifting had been

discovered, back in my schooldays, as the other immutable administrative function is to form committees, and discuss, while work to sustain them is done by others.

Low tech? I've never visited a true pre-industrial world - the house wasn't up to it, but the footage always shows dung from draught beasts, horses or oxen, in the streets, none of which was visible from here. Would it be possible for a society that had gone through the industrial revolution to regress, the luddites gain the upper hand, to reject the railways and anaesthetics and return to the simple life? Of course it would - if one action existed too stupid for humanity to embrace, particularly with religious faiths ready to back it, it had not yet been carried back to Earth Zero. But there were always those, influential or rich, who secretly maintained their luxuries - total plague seemed more likely than an entire planet living without their light program.

My turn to be first to plant a foot on this soil. The sun was going down (in the west, confirming that I'd hit planetary synchronicity pretty well) as the others brought Patrick - and a cage full of local air back indoors, and helped me into my ridiculous-looking suit, strapping on belt and harness, helping with the rucksack. As an extra level of isolation I exited through the garage, giving an encouraging pat to Betsy, our Land Cruiser, who stood with twin spare tyres, jerry-cans of diesel and water, ready to carry us anywhere we might decide to go, should we decide anything at all. I felt the tremble as the generator upstairs was put into service, ready to leave me behind should I awake zombies or Big Brother. A risk - it was using up some of the air reserve in the house, but we'd already breached the seal to recuperate Patrick.

Why do noses start itching the instant they are behind a transparent face plate? The first thing that sprang to mind as

I opened the garage people door was that the garden was not need and flower bedecked, but was only slightly overgrown not sleeping beauty thorn barricade. Which means something was looking after it, as the stable state for most of Great Britain is forest. I stabbed a collector probe into the next-door garden bed (so far this hasn't even produced a new organism, let alone a new antibiotic, but it's minimal effort and, who knows, some day it might strike rich) and walked out onto the road. Which was a road, just as it had appeared from upstairs. No visible telephone wires, moss round paving stones suggested no recent digging up of pavement for access, but that would be true in the vast majority of English villages and small towns. Drain gratings are not clogged. How much can you tell from a road? The evening-streaked sky showed no crossing bars of smoke, which meant? Somehow clean-air regulations and electric ovens didn't fit into the jigsaw. Neither, however healthy, did everybody in England opting for salads as an evening meal. I spoke my observations out loud, knowing they'd be recorded in base camp Olive walk, and was answered in my earpiece, Anna, assuring me my message passed.

Dusk was falling mistily and I was beginning to think I was far enough from the house to do my trademark attention getter, I detected a darker shadow in the gloom. A machine, probably, as it would seem unlikely that an animal would deadhead roses, or trim round the porch, which was what it seemed to be doing. Nevertheless, it moved silently, with just an occasional 'snick' of secateurs, or sharp teeth. Once I had noticed the first one I could make them out in most of the gardens around, ghost-like, and put the possibility of trying to communicate with them on very low priority (with the intention of trying to find out what they were, and if I could get schematics for them, somewhat

higher, as I walked further along the road. Still, I put off turning on my suit lights, and when I radioed back to base whispered; unknown equals potential threat.

It was full dark, and I'd been forced by lack of street lamps or moon to turn on just a glimmer on my local illumination, when I reached an open square with a largish plinth sporting an engraved plaque - a war memorial? The size was about right to have a lifesize statue on horseback, but I wasn't going to brighten up enough to look. Time for the attention getter - the firework I had brought with me. A cardboard tube thicker than my thigh which would pyrotechnise a full minute, producing noise and brilliance for a full minute before dying.

'Light blue touch paper' - fizz, sizzle - 'and retire to the shelter of my plinth'. Loong fuse, and then 'let there be sound'.

WOW! Cascades, jets, gerbs of colour, teeth shaken every time a new aerial bomb is projected. There is a guy on a horse, waving something in the spectral light, and all the windows are intact, reflecting, so either this whole situation's recent, or something does repairs. Sounds shatter back off house walls, what could be church front or town hall - or a sport hall or school, I suppose. Big, fairly modern structure.

As the ringing in my ears fades I recognise the scratchy noise in my earpiece as someone applauding. Success in letting off a firework, sure, but no immediate reaction, no sirens of fire engines, approaching helicopters, not even any windows springing open on startled faces. This is less encouraging; I've survived aggressive mobs before, but

never until now been totally ignored.

No need for secrecy now. The echoes died away, and I waited, listening to the silence, the lack of insect noises, distant traffic, owls or foxes then, as stiffening began, stretched and turned my suit lights up to full. On my way back I stopped to investigate a rose bush - as anticipated, buds and open flowers but no wilted or browning blooms. It would take a very sophisticated pattern recognition scheme to recognise when flowers were going over, or the difference between a weed and a cultivar. I had no doubt that we could capture one of the gardener things, be it machine or beast, but... But we are traders, not thieves. And, without better instructions, would it not probably die? How was it powered, or what did it eat, and was its intelligence in the mobile body I'd seen wandering around, or deeper in the house? It might be worth moving one to trigger an alarm,

My musings had brought me back to base. It had seemed further than that on the way out. A room, now tiled, had been an outside lavatory when the building was new; I entered, sealed the door behind me, and Anna was there, having left her post at the communications board. She hoses me down with chlorine bleach, then I do the same for her. then we help each other pack discarded outer suits into sterilisation seals and go indoors, greeting no-one else, upstairs to where a bath steams from water heated by an antique coke boiler, fed by outside air.

Remaining clothing removed I let myself sink into the heat, feeling muscles uncramp, skin stop twitching at its load of dried-on sweat. She feeds me like a baby, like an invalid, something pasta, bland, and tea. That finished, she

helps to rinse my hair, and scrub the last, unreachable itches from my skin.

It isn't love. Neither of us is essential to the other's pleasure, unless it is that each is another individual. It's mutual masturbation, purest fornication, in the relief that the other exists. It was bodies celebrating survival in a malevolent universe. At times we had made love but here we copulate, rejoicing in warmth and closeness, and I undo most of the work the bath had done.

Tomorrow, we will take Betsy out, and explore more widely. Carefully, as we have no maps, no native guide, and certainly no satnav; getting lost is a real possibility. No, they will, I decide; I have felt the emptiness, know viscerally there will be nothing to trade with here, but every scrap of knowledge should be collected, and handed over to the government prospectors; gain us some brownie points with officialdom, if no cash. I'll man the communications, and be ready to take the bike if there should be that sort of an emergency - we have spares for everything in the house, and can't carry them all on missions.

We won't be broke if this run brings back nothing at all - and if we were, we could 'sublet' to some optimist who would cover expenses - we'd got so many useful things that we could charge top dollar, even government spooks would make an offer. It isn't a disaster, but as I finally drop into sleep it feels like something much more significant - we've never found a total lack of communication on a living planet, and nobody else has recorded one, to my knowledge. If there isn't some subtle effect that is already killing us we could be 'persuaded' into long term investigations of this

place on a government salary. But there is no way my worrying now can change this, so I let my thoughts go, and join Anna in oblivion.