

WOR



NORTHWOOD SANITARIUM
FOR THE MENTAL AFFLICTED
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NEIL EDWARD RODRIGUES

VOR

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I remember the story well.

It was not a murder or a slaughter. A man simply disintegrated into a red mist and ceased.

The only identifier left was residual genetic material. Because he had never submitted DNA to any database, no one ever established his name. The case was closed for lack of information.

Dr. Elias Kincaid was the one who looked closer. He had no professional mandate—only curiosity. People do not become a blood spray without cause. The absence of any explanation bothered him. Institutions give up on such things for ease of effort. Elias did not.

The single incident was not enough to hold him. He began finding other eccentricities in the record. Then he found the older texts—Sumerian and Babylonian fragments describing the same event: the air warping, a human body exploding into a cloud of blood. Normally he would never have entertained the idea. But the instances kept multiplying. Once he saw the vector, he could not let it go.

Every account was the same. The air itself distorted. Then a person ceased. Hard to miss. Harder to dismiss. The internet was useless; coincidence and noise buried everything. He spent more than a month in older libraries. The pattern never changed.

And then he found the witness. The man was kept in a local sanitarium—dark, damp, and in disrepair. Elias presented his credentials at the front desk. The staff barely blinked. They only squinted when they realized which patient he wanted: the one with no verified name, known only by the fragments he repeated. They called him John Smith. Typical.

The patient was obsessive and monodimensional. His eyes told Elias nothing except that he had latched onto a single moment in time and abandoned the rest. Those eyes were permanently wide, crazed and fixed.

John Smith smiled when Elias entered. The smile vanished the instant the event he was fixed on was mentioned. His expression locked, as if Elias had asked him how the world ended and what he planned to do in the post-apocalypse. The wide eyes met his and held.

"You want to know my story?" the man asked. Elias met his eyes and responded, "Absolutely." "Your funeral.", the answer came.

Elias frowned. "What are you saying?" "What you are demanding from me is not something anyone should know." "I don't understand." "What killed the man I watched die was not a natural event. It was the work of an entity."

Elias narrowed his eyes, already turning the data over in his mind. "I'm not sure what you mean." "What killed him was not a phenomenon. It was a conscious being." "What are you talking about?" "I mean whatever did it was aware of what it was

doing—and did not care. It was bigger than any of us. It entered this universe, claimed what it wanted, and left.”

Elias stared for a bit. “You’re saying the thing that turned that man into a cloud of blood mist was conscious of its action?” “Yes.” “I have no real-world data to compare this to.” John gave a cocked smile and said, “Of course you don’t. The entity is not from this world. Not even from this universe.” “What are you saying?” “I know how this is going to sound, but the entity is not a being from another dimension. It is another dimension. A universe in itself.”

Elias dropped his gaze and shook his head. “You know how that sounds, right?” “Totally. It’s the reason I’m in this place. Hell most people are not smart enough to even understand what I am saying. Humans tend to stay within their own understanding. They never mentally color outside of the lines.”

Elias reached out and rested his hand near John’s. “I want to believe you.”

There was a silence and then John looked up and responded, “You would be the first.”

Elias looked back, “We know so little about anything. I am willing to entertain the idea.”

John’s wide eyes softened for the first time. “Thank you. Nice to know that someone does not think I am making this up. And you are right, humanity knows almost nothing about what exists around it.”

Elias answered, “I always try to remain open-minded. With all of the new scientific data, how could I just ignore the eccentric? It would be stupid.”

John studied him. “What you would mentally touch is endless and alien. Like you would not believe. I have been trying to find words for most of it, unsuccessfully, for years.” “You’re welcome to try the translation on me if you want.” “There is no translation. I have been demanding dictionaries, thesauruses, and encyclopedias from the sanitarium and nothing covers it. Whatever it was did not share our language, geometry or even the same physical laws. It was completely alien.”

“Well,” Elias said quietly, “if it is as alien as you say, that makes sense.”

John smiled for a second and gripped Elias’s shoulder in a sudden link of familiarity. Elias continued, “I should tell you that you are not the first to experience this. I have found accounts from some of the earliest civilizations on this planet that say almost exactly what you are describing. That is why I am here. I am curious to figure this out.”

Another silence and then John locked eyes with Dr. Kincaid again.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be.”

Elias’s head tilted; his eyes fixed on the other man.

John’s voice flattened. “This thing is beyond all of us and it does not care. We are only methods for energy for it to use.”

"Energy?" "Yes. It can harvest the hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen from our pathetic forms. And not always one at a time. Ever hear of the Roanoke Colony?" "Vaguely." "Well," John said, "that was one of its movements as well."

"How did you figure that out?", Elias asked

"In the vision forced into my mind. I knew it was based on this planet but not where and when. Then the vision stumbled on a wooden sign. I remembered the name and looked it up. They do let me go online occasionally in this place."

Elias's jaw loosened. A solid historical reference had just been placed on the table. He mulled it over, aware that Roanoke was far from the only large-scale disappearance in the last few centuries. Hardly. But he had seen the name in his research and remembered it.

He looked at John and smiled, vaguely. "This is a trend. Just one whose timeframe is massive."

"Yeah," John said. "And I am not long for this planet. It will come for me soon."

Elias's eyebrows rose. "You're serious?"

"As a heart attack." John's voice stayed flat. "It does not leave people who touch its mind. Those people who wrote those testimonies from what I have seen all disappeared."

"That is unfortunate."

"I am just glad I could tell you before the memory faded. But now you have to watch your back as well. Sorry about that."

"Really? I never touched the mind of the creature."

"Yes. I am sorry.", John added, "but you did ask about all of this. And I suspect it knows that."

He looked at Elias for a long moment. "You should probably go home, have a decent meal, and enjoy a good day before all of this comes at you."

Elias tried to smile and pulled John into a brief, awkward hug.

"Try to stay alive.", Elias added, "I might be back."

John met his eyes and gave him a fist bump. Elias walked out of the ward, already hoping he would be able to speak with the man again. In the corridor, ordinary staff and visitors glanced at him with the mild distaste reserved for anyone who had spent too long with the more damaged patients. He stopped at the front desk, asked for paper and a pen, and wrote down his number.

"Please call me if anything happens to him," he said. The woman looked at him as though he were another of the unwell, but she nodded and took the slip.

Outside, the afternoon felt ordinary. Elias walked a short distance into town and found a Hunan restaurant, an unexpected piece of actual seasoning in a place that should have offered only the usual rural Cantonese buffet. He ordered, carried the

food to a wooden bench at the edge of a small forested lot, and sat down to eat. He adjusted his glasses, forced a few bites, then muttered through a mouthful: "Damn. Forgot a drink."

His car was a quarter-mile away. He could get something on the way back. His mind, however, refused to leave the conversation. What John Smith had described was not a deviation from known physics. If the man was right, the phenomenon was a sentient dimension that occasionally intersected with this one. Not hostile. Not purposeful in any human sense. Simply indifferent—an accounting system that registered organized matter as usable energy and moved on. Hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen. Sometimes one body. Sometimes an entire colony. Roanoke was only one entry in a very long ledger. The word Lovecraftian surfaced, then felt insufficient. This was colder and more absolute than the usual pantheon. At the edge of his thoughts sat the final warning: the thing did not leave those who had touched its mind. John expected to be gone soon. And if the contact could transfer—if simply hearing the account was enough—then Elias had already stepped into the same column of the ledger. He shook his head, forced another bite, and tried to finish the meal. He would think about it later.

As Elias took a bite from one of the wontons, something to his left seized his attention completely. It was not something he could fully describe. The world appeared as if it had been painted onto stretched balloon rubber, and something had pinched and pulled it from behind. In the same instant the air vanished, replaced by vacuum. His mind blanked, as though someone had tuned his brain to a dead broadcast frequency. He felt himself on the edge of passing out, but the sensation ended as abruptly as it began. He sat back hard against the bench, bag of take-out beside him, and shook his head. Recovery took longer than he expected. When his senses fully returned he realized the disturbance had come from the direction of the sanitarium.

The implications arrived in a cold rush. His chest tightened. Adrenaline and cortisol flooded his system. His heart rate climbed, his eyes widened, and a cold sweat broke across his skin as the connections locked into place. After a few controlled breaths he pulled out his phone and began looking up the sanitarium's number. Before he could dial, the phone rang. The same number. He recoiled for a second and then he answered. A small, frightened female voice spoke. "Hello?"

"Mr. Kincaid? We spoke earlier at the center."

He answered almost stunned by the circumstance, "You're the nurse I left my number with?"

"Yes. And I'm afraid. It was like you knew what was going to happen. Like you were waiting for something to happen."

"No. Your patient told me. I wasn't convinced, but I was concerned for him. He noted that he might be gone soon and really who was I to ignore that?"

“He’s gone.”

Elias went still. “What?”

“He’s just gone. The walls of his room are covered in blood, but he is gone. Just gone. There is no way he could have left but he disappeared.”

Elias tried to keep his breathing steady. He looked at the ground while he talked and for a minute barely heard what she was saying but the nurse continued, voice tight.

“I called you because I thought you might know what happened. Almost everyone who works here passed out at the same time. When we came to, John Smith was gone. None of us have a clue as to what happened”

“Ma’am, I’m not sure what happened either. John told me what he believed it was, but I’m a man of science and this is well beyond me. He said he would probably be gone or dead soon. I took him seriously because doing otherwise would have been irresponsible. Trust me — you don’t want to know what he said. Hell, I don’t want to know.”

The voice on the other end nearly screamed, “What did he say?!”

Elias ended the call before the conversation could go any further. Continuing would only make things worse. He picked up the bag of food and walked quickly toward his car. He had no intention of describing his talk with John to the police. It would accomplish nothing. They would file it under delusion and close the matter. Elias wanted the opposite: time to examine what he had found, both to understand it and to determine whether there was any way to avoid the same end.

He reached the BMW M3, unlocked it, and slid in. The engine came alive with the precision of a finely tuned instrument. The rear tires chirped as he accelerated north. His office was only a few hours away. In the trunk and on the passenger seat were the materials he had pulled from the older library basements before coming to this place. He needed to go through them again under the new light of what he had just experienced.

The drive was long and demanding. Narrow mountain roads with little concern for comfort and, in places, no guardrails at all. He took them hard, driving as if the route were a rally stage. His nerves were frayed and the adrenaline had not fully receded. The scenery was striking. He barely registered it. His mind stayed fixed on information no one should possess. He blamed his own curiosity, yet the knowledge had arrived anyway. He felt a sharp pity for John. He could not imagine carrying that account inside a human head, usable or not.

By the time the miles accumulated Dr. Kincaid was now on the edge of real terror. A conventional monster was one kind of problem. A living dimension that treated human beings as raw material was another. There was no obvious response. He did not want to believe it. Disbelief would have been more comfortable. But the ancient texts, John’s testimony, and the physical phenomenon he had just witnessed refused

to remain separate. The connections were no longer optional. He stopped once to finish the rest of the food. When he finally pulled up in front of the building he thought of as home, his body still felt overclocked.

He climbed the steps, half-convinced a heart attack was possible, and reminded himself there was a bottle of mid level brandy inside. He unlocked the door, switched on the light, and closed it behind him. In the kitchen he opened the cabinet above the stove, took down the bottle he kept for serious occasions, and set it hard on the table. He did not bother with a glass. He drank directly from the bottle. Each swallow was deliberate. He registered the burn, waited for the effect, and let out a controlled breath before taking the next.

Elias had carried every document from the car and stacked it on the same table where the brandy stood. He had no intention of making further connections until he was thoroughly drunk. He was getting close. He thumbed through the pages. Nothing contradicted the pattern he now held. He wished the truth were otherwise. If a sentient dimension existed that periodically fed on other realities, he was no longer certain he wanted the knowledge. Still he read.

Names of vanished population centers surfaced again and again—Roanoke, Anjikuni, Hoer Verde, each without satisfactory explanation. Alongside the primary references, almost as marginalia, appeared a recurring designation that shifted only slightly with language and century: Vor, Vohr, Vaor, and near-variants. Every instance described the same phenomenon he had witnessed. When he lined the fragments against John's account and allowed for the drift of time and translation, the statements were effectively identical. The process had been occurring for aeons.

Elias pressed both hands to his head and stared at the table. There was no rational reason to continue, yet he did. He felt his grip on ordinary science dissolving; everything he had trusted now lay pinned and opened like a dissected frog. That night he drank until he lost consciousness. He found himself on the floor the next morning laying in a pool of his own saliva. How he slept like that he had no idea but alcohol had a way of doing that.

A week passed. He refused further research, afraid he would become non-functional. Besides that there was no reason to keep assaulting his senses since the pattern was so constant of what he had seen. In that interval he spent freely on things he normally denied himself: real food instead of packaged substitutes, top-shelf alcohol, entertainment he had always skipped. He even brought a woman home with the simple promise of high-end pleasure. Her name was Sheila. She stayed. He was glad of the company.

It was literally a way to keep his mind off of the horror of the connections he had made. If he had illegal drug connections he would have probably spent the entire week jacked up on Heroin but he had no such contacts.

One night he woke before her and stared at the wall while she slept. He kept his mind from returning to the material he feared. After roughly half an hour his gaze remained fixed on the blank white stucco, as if the surface owed him money. Probably his mind was simply refusing to access anything that might trigger another panic.

Then the wall began to move.

At first he blinked rapidly, willing it to be a trick of the light. The real movement followed at once. The surface went concave. The air left the room. Voices that were not voices pressed into his head. His vision detached from the bedroom and opened onto a landscape that could not belong to Earth. No stable horizon, surfaces that twisted, merged, and split as though glass had become liquid and alive. The colors had no equivalents in the human spectrum; ultraviolet, iridescent, and neon seemed to combine into hues the eye was never meant to register. His brain struggled to impose order and failed. The place was not a passive deviation from reality. It was motivated and active.

He released the last of his resistance and accepted that he would be gone in the next moment, however long that moment might last inside the other continuum. Subjectively it felt like a month of sustained trauma. In this world it lasted less than a second.

A minute later a penetrating female scream—someone covered in someone else's blood—cut the air outside the building. Neighbors heard it. The police heard it. When they arrived, the woman could not form a coherent sentence.

The cycle continued.

They hauled her away on a gurney. She did not speak in any useful way. She only screamed that the world was melting. The police obtained nothing from her. Blood residue was noted on the walls. The missing-person report and the incident report remained on file. Over time the case stopped mattering to anyone who handled it.

Sheila however was gone the next week.