



OUTSIDE
THE

LINES

THE TERRIFYING NEW NOVELLA
BY

CRUSSELL C.
CONNOR

7.

THE RITUAL

Andrew stayed where he landed, staring at the smooth metal of the school's fire door. His brain felt sluggish, confused and disbelieving. Seconds became soupy. He could still feel Ronnie's hands in his, just before he'd let go and the kid had been pulled into the mass of those...*things*.

Manners backed away quickly and then spouted a string of gibberish. The world rotated around Andrew with the precision of a clock gear, and then he was no longer sitting on the walkway outside the school. He was on the concrete in the middle of the street, staring at his and Ronnie's ruined vehicles. The change of scenery only added to his mental disarray.

"I still have a few tricks up my sleeve," the professor muttered.

"What were those things?" Andrew gasped.

"I told you, they are called Elohaman. I've rarely seen them in the flesh. They're mostly used to play mental tricks on enemies of the Filament, distractions, that sort of thing. The Incarnates had them looking for you the whole time, trying to keep you off balance long enough for you to

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be captured.”

“Then...they’re not really children?”

“Oh no, they certainly are. Or *were*, once. Children tend to be the only ones that survive the...process.” He turned and hurried toward the cars. “Come, Mr. Horner. It won’t take the Incarnates long to get organized and come after us again.”

Andrew got up. He was so exhausted, in every sense of the word. And he couldn’t tear his thoughts away from that awful look on Ronnie’s face as he’d been dragged back into the darkness of that terrible school. He ran after Manners. “But they have Ronnie!”

“I know. That’s unfortunate.”

Andrew reached out and grabbed the man’s shoulder, forcing him to turn. “We have to go back!” Even as he said it, a more primitive part of him recoiled. The thought of seeing those pale creatures again curdled his blood.

Especially the one wearing Joey’s face.

Manner spun and pushed his hand roughly away. “Unhand me, sir! I regret ever laying eyes on either of you! I hoarded what little power He gave me for close to a *millennia* just to hide you two cretins from His all-seeing eye, and look what it brought me!” He clutched great handfuls of his hair and pulled at them. “Good Lord, even though I failed here, I could have tried again another time! I could have worked from the inside to save even an infinitesimal number of universes! But now that He knows what I’ve done, I’m no better off than you! You’re a selfish ingrate!”

Andrew slapped the man across one bearded cheek. His head rocked to the side and then swiveled back with a look of shock. “To be honest, I don’t really care anymore about your problems, Professor Manners. Just tell me what they want with him. What they wanted with me.”

Manners gently touched the place where Andrew’s hand struck flesh, but when he spoke, his voice was still full of disdain. “I thought you might figure that out yourself by now. You’re the keys.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that armies of the Dark Filament need *permission* to enter your world, acquiescence from a representative. The cosmos is in great

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upheaval, but it still holds to some rules. An effort to keep balance, I suppose.”

“So they need us...to tell them...it’s okay to wipe out our planet?”

“Correct. They only need it from one of you, and now that they have Mr. Pearson...I imagine they’ll start trying to get it.”

“Oh my God.” Finally it all made sense, an order in this chaos. “What will they do to him? That Incarnate mentioned something about a ritual.”

“Ritual. Ha!” Manners shook his head. “No need to pretty it up. It’s nothing but a glorified torture session. They’ll take him apart piece-by-piece to get what they want and then put him back together to start all over again if necessary.”

Manners sighed heavily and let his gaze fall to the ground. “Make no mistake. That young man is going to be in unimaginable torment in the very near future.”

All was darkness.

Ronnie could feel their small hands on him, carrying him above their heads like a champion quarterback after a winning game, but he could see nothing. The corridors of the school (if that’s even where he was anymore, and he wasn’t entirely sure) had become choked with blackness.

He struggled and squirmed, but their grip was absolute. He couldn’t hear their impish giggles anymore, could hear nothing at all but the sound of his own panicked breaths. They moved along for an undetermined length of time before he felt a different surface under his back, cool and flat. Those hands pulled his arms above his head and held his legs down while they bound him to whatever he now lay on.

And then, all at once, the darkness was gone. Whisked away from his eyes, like a veil thrown aside. He raised his head and looked around.

He was in a room that brought to mind medieval dungeons. The walls were dark, stained brick with shackles bolted into them. Ronnie was bound tight to a table made of white stone or marble by more of the steel bracelets by wrists and ankles. No windows; the only light came from a roaring fire in a round pit beyond the foot of the table. The flames produced no smoke; so there wasn’t even a chimney to break the solid façade

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of the walls. The place was long and rectangular; to his left was a flat wall with a door, but on the right it stretched beyond the limits of the flickering firelight into a cauldron of darkness.

Except it really didn't feel like his right, not in the spatial sense of the word. What he actually thought, looking into it, was that it lead *down* somehow, deep into the bowels of the earth, either on a steep slant or by some quirk of physics that twisted direction.

The creatures that brought him here—Manner's Aloha Men, or whatever they were called—were gone. Disappeared along with the darkness. Instead, one of the guys that Andrew had been calling 'Incarnates' leaned casually against the far wall on the other side of the fire pit with one leg up. Part of his face was crushed in, bone poking through the black, flaky skin. His eyes glittered even brighter than the flames illuminating him.

"Welcome," he said, and started around the fire.

"What's up?" Ronnie replied. He coughed. The noise echoed away from him for what sounded like miles. "Did Andrew and the Professor get away?"

"For now. We'll find them. Manners will pay for his deceit. His rebellion amounted to nothing, considering one of you is still strapped to that table."

"What about your little friends?" Ronnie asked. "What happened to them?"

The Incarnate reached his side and raised a gangrenous eyebrow. The dent in his face was sickening. He wore no shirt, and the skin along his narrow chest was riddled with black boils. "Little friends?"

"Yeah, the bald kids with the bad teeth."

He shone a smirking grin down on Ronnie. "The Elohaman are back in their confinements. Their minds reach far, but their physical forms are exhausted so quickly."

"Well, whatever, dude. Where I come from, running around with a pack of naked kids'll get you lynched."

Now the Incarnate was really beaming, both through his smile and his eyes. "I'm so glad it's you. I think you'll turn out to be so much more fun than the other mortal, in the end."

Before Ronnie could inquire or quip, the man's spidery hand flashed

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out. It latched onto his calf, where the bite mark from Marglo still pulsed below the torn hem of his jeans leg. Fingers found the puffy, infected holes and squeezed.

The pain was indescribable. An acid that shot through his nervous system. It wracked his body, arched his spine so hard his butt lifted off the table. And just when he didn't think it could get any worse, the fucker's fingers slid *into* the holes, digging at warm underflesh. White tracers shot through the blackness behind his eyelids.

He thought he blacked out, but if so, it was only for seconds. When he came around, the Incarnate still leered down at him, and the heat in his leg was dying down.

"That hurt, yes?"

"No, it was better than a handjob." Ronnie heard tears in the hoarse retort and hated himself for it. "What the fuck do you think it felt like, asshole?"

"There will be more of that," the Incarnate told him matter-of-factly. "So much more. Unless..."

Ronnie refused to give him the satisfaction of asking for the rest of the sentence.

"Unless you say one word. Just one."

"And then you'll let me go?"

"Of course."

"That was said waaaay too fast to be anything but a lie."

The Incarnate shrugged. "Why wouldn't we? Once you say this word, you're of no further concern to us. Do you want to know what it is?"

"I hope it's not your boss's name, cause that shit gives me diarrhea."

The Incarnate reached for his leg.

"Okay, yes, yes, I wanna know!"

"There!" He clapped his hands together. A flake of blackened skin landed on Ronnie's cheek. "You just said it! The word is 'yes!' See how simple that was?"

"All right then, I said it, now lemme the fuck outta here!"

"You have to wait for the question."

"Then ask me if you're an uncircumcised cock, and I'll be glad to give

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you your yes!”

The Incarnate’s eyes flashed. Literally; the red centers pulsed angrily. He leaned in until his crumbling nose was almost touching Ronnie’s. The stench that hung around him was a torture all its own. “Little sin cow...” he whispered. “May we enter your realm of existence?”

Ronnie swallowed. He had no doubt his days of cruising in the Mustang and living off his wiles were over no matter what this talking corpse said, so he’d been prepared to give an affirmative to just about anything as long as it meant going out painlessly.

But this question stopped him cold.

He wasn’t even sure he heard it correctly, but he understood it was important. More important than anything he’d ever been asked in his whole miserable life. The image of his mother came to him for some reason, and Mark, and even his father.

The Incarnate waited.

“No.” The word was more a quivering sigh than anything. He suddenly didn’t have the strength for anything else.

“I knew you wouldn’t disappoint me.” The Incarnate turned and looked into the dark hole to Ronnie’s left. Ronnie did the same. He could discern nothing in that nest of shadows, but he could *feel*. It pulsed with energy that made him want to tear at his flesh, like an alcoholic with DT-induced bugs on their skin. The Incarnate seemed to get what the answer he sought. He walked to the fire, bent, and picked up a sharp metal rod that had been roasting in the embers. The tip glowed the same hideous red as his eyes.

“Feel free to stop me at any time,” he said.

Ronnie laid his head back against the table and tried not to cry.

Andrew heard glass break behind him. He jumped and wheeled around, ready for whatever nightmare this place wanted to throw at him next.

No one was there. It looked like the front window of the house right behind them—the first one Andrew tried knocking at when they woke up here, where he’d imagined another life—had fallen right out of its frame,

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hit the lawn and shattered.

“It’s unraveling,” Manners told him. “This universe is unstable. They weren’t meant to last forever. The Incarnates wasted a lot of time looking for the two of you after my little trick.”

Andrew peered closer in the gloom. He could actually see the house frame sagging under its own weight, like a giant, invisible hand was pressing down on it. The walls looked even more worn and thin, almost fading out of reality. “What will happen to it?”

“It will keep falling apart until it collapses in on itself. The pressures outside are massive.”

Andrew faced him again and jumped back into their previous conversation. “Why didn’t the Incarnates just grab one of those deformed people and get them to agree?”

Manners waved a hand impatiently. “Because they don’t represent your dimension. As I said before, those are just twisted duplicates of the people that actually lived here. The only beings currently within the boundaries of this staging dock that are from your world are you and Mr. Pearson.”

“And once Ronnie gives them permission, that’s it, they can just waltz right in like they own the place?”

“There’s a bit more to it than that, but yes. Once the path is open, your dimension *will* fall.”

“And if he doesn’t give them the okay?”

One of Manner’s bushy silver eyebrows took a hike up his forehead. “Do you really think someone of his social standing would give the slightest hesitation?”

Andrew grimaced. For some reason, the aspersion on Ronnie aggravated him, especially coming from Manners, whom he now equated on a level with Nazi officers in charge of concentration camps. “But if he doesn’t?”

“He will. I’ve seen it happen more times than you can count. They’ll torture him until there’s hardly enough brain function left to resist.”

“Yeah, I guess you would know,” Andrew snapped. “You’re their Facilitator after all, right? You were in charge of the torturing.”

Manner said nothing. A dark ghost of truth and memory flitted

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through his eyes.

“What if this place collapses before then?”

“First of all, don’t hang your hopes on that. They have more than enough time to coerce him. But...*if* he could hold out...then that would be that. Your universe remains safe. They move on to the next one.”

“Couldn’t they just build another one of these things, these ‘staging docks?’”

“Absolutely not. That’s another balancing measure the cosmos enforces. The same way they need permission from a representative, they can also only try each link on the dimension-axial chain one time.”

Andrew brought his arms up and let them drop back to his sides. “Jesus Christ. One time. Why us, huh? Why did this responsibility fall to us?”

Manners clenched his jaw. “Because God determined it should. Or Buddha. Or Fate. Bad luck. Take your choice, Mr. Horner.”

The curb was a few feet away. Andrew barely made it over before his legs gave way. He sat and stared at Ronnie’s overturned Mustang in front of him and then at the rest of this godforsaken world. Without stars, the night was more of a smothering blanket than a natural occurrence. The streetlamp illumination looked more sickly yellow than the last time he’d been here, the houses more broken and dilapidated by the second. But there were more noises now. From all over. The sound of the buildings crunching and cracking was almost a constant mutter. It reminded him of a documentary about Antarctica in summer he’d watched: the brittle sound of melting ice rubbing together.

It all made him feel numb, and unimaginably far from home.

Manners softened. “Listen, the building of these docks is by no means an exact science. Or science at all, really. They are just a net that is cast, and we see what we reel in. Sometimes it’s a movie star. Sometimes it’s an entire religious congregation. Sometimes it’s no one, and in that case, the builders are punished severely. This time, it just happened to be the two of you. I tried to help you escape before the Incarnates got a hold on you, and I failed.” He took a few paces across the street and squatted in front of Andrew, plucking at the hems of his tweed pants to keep them from touching the concrete. “But we can *still* escape, my friend. Back into your

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world. I know how to do that much.”

“What good will that do? If what you say is true, won’t they be coming in right behind us, after Ronnie gives them the okay?”

“Yes,” Manners agreed. “But we can run. We’ll have plenty of time for me to gather the necessary elements for another jump. For you to find your son, if you want. Then we can all flee to the next dimension. And keep fleeing, if need be. But we must...go...*now*.”

Andrew considered that. At first, the urge to get back to Joey—to see the boy with his own two eyes and make sure he was all right—was so strong he wanted to demand Manners do it immediately. But what then? A life full of running across worlds that weren’t even his sounded more like hell than this place. He just couldn’t reconcile himself to the fact that this morning he had a future—maybe not a great one without Michelle, but there was still Joey, and his job, and hope—but now, no matter what he decided, that future—*everyone’s* future—was gone.

“So just leave Ronnie to the Incarnates? Not to mention the rest of my world?”

Manners nodded slowly.

“No. I can’t do that.”

“Be reasonable and save yourself. There’s nothing you can do.”

“We can get Ronnie back.”

Manners sprang up, guffawing all the way. Andrew did the same. The professor jabbed a finger into his chest. “You listen to me, Mr. Horner, and you listen good! Here’s another natural law: two beings entered this staging dock, and only two can leave it. At the moment, that’s you and myself. Even if you were to somehow reach Mr. Pearson and safely extricate him from their clutches, I would be unable to transport all three of us across the barrier.”

“Then send both of us, like you were going to anyway!”

“That was *before* you revealed my rebellion and made me a hunted man! If I send the two of you back, your world is safe, but what about the rest of the cosmos? I’m one of the few beings in all existence that knows of the invasion being perpetrated, and that makes my life far more important in the long scope than either of yours! I can still do a lot of good by spreading a warning to the right people! Look beyond your own petty

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concerns and realize that!”

“Okay, fine! But there must be some other way!”

Manners didn’t speak. He squinted at Andrew, and then cupped his chin in that scholarly way of his. Andrew wondered if being a professor was half about imparting knowledge and half about theatrics.

“What?”

“Suppose...” he began, holding it out with the pomp and poise of a gifted lecturer, “You *were* to reach Mr. Pearson. I could get you as close as possible, and then the rest would be up to you.”

“That’s pretty much my plan so far.”

“Yes, but let me finish. Suppose you were to reach Mr. Pearson and then...well...the Incarnates couldn’t very well coerce him if he were dead, could they?”

The words made the pit of Andrew’s stomach feel even heavier than it already was. “You mean...kill him? Me?”

“One life to save many; it’s a concept as old as time. We leave him here, and your world dies. Mr. Pearson can’t have given them anything yet or I would know it, so there’s still time. If you can get within striking distance...”

Andrew didn’t answer. He stepped around Manners and walked across the street to the driver’s side door. As he opened it, a familiar moaning came from somewhere up the street, but he ignored it. On the driver’s seat was his makeshift Spider-man evidence bag, filled with cash, Ronnie’s gigantic revolver and a box full of ammunition. He snapped open the cylinder, loaded it, and held the gun sideways in his hands.

Manners came up behind him. “I could shift you back there. I can’t guarantee what kind of resistance you’ll meet, but I can get you as close as possible. They’ll have him—”

“In the Furnace room,” Andrew finished for him. “I know.”

“You understand, of course, that you can’t allow yourself to be captured either.”

Andrew turned around with the gun still clutched tightly in his fist. “One of those vampire things...it looked just like Joey. That was another version of him from some other universe...wasn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly.”

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“If they take my world, will that happen to the children?”

“Only to the most unfortunate.”

Andrew nodded. “Then take me to Ronnie.”

A whole chorus of pathetic moans drifted up the street this time. The Xerox people were back.

“We’d better move fast,” Manners told him, drawing away.

“Wait a minute.” Andrew looked over the truck bed at the crowd of mutated fiends in bathrobes and housedresses headed their way once more. “How many things can you *shift* at one time?”

“NO! OW, FUCK OWWW! OH GOD, PLEASE, STOOOOOOP!”

Ronnie’s screams felt loud enough to pierce his own eardrums. He was stripped down to nothing more than his underwear, his clothes shredded in a game with razors that left his torso a bloody mess.

The Incarnate removed the superheated clamps away from the pinky toe he’d been so loving reducing to a burnt stump. His eyes blazed. “May we enter your dimension?”

Ronnie screamed with laughter. Or wept. He was having a hard time discerning what was coming out of his mouth anymore. “*Mother may I take three baby steps forward?*” he screeched. “*No, you may not! May I take eight giant leaps forward and tear this maggoty, shiteater’s head off? Yes, you can fuckin well d-do thaaaaaaat!*”

The Incarnate took down a new device from the wall, something with a narrow scoop on one end and a spike on the other.

“Bring it on, bitch! I’ve done a lot of shitty things in my life, but I don’t want ‘Ended the World’ on my resumé!”

But he would. He knew it. His mind felt like squashed Play-Do. He couldn’t take this forever, and he thought the Incarnate probably knew it too. Fact is, he didn’t know why he hadn’t already given in before now. It’s not like he owed the world anything. It certainly hadn’t done any favors for him.

So why not just give them what they wanted?

Because you believe Officer Andrew is coming for you...don’t you?

He is. I came for him, and he’s gonna remember that.

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Then that makes you the stupidest high school dropout that ever lived. Why would Andrew risk his ass coming back for you? He and Manners are probably halfway to Hawaii by now, sipping coconut drinks and laughing at you for taking the fall.

Ronnie knew he probably should believe that—past experience had given him no reason to trust in others, that was for damn sure—but he didn't. Not even a little bit.

He just hoped the Jappy son of a bitch got here fast.

His torturer cranked some kind of wench below the table. The chains on Ronnie's ankles pulled, opening his legs an inch at a time.

The Incarnate pointed the scoop end of the device at the exposed crevice. "I'm told this one is especially uncomfortable."

Ronnie giggled, and he thought something in the darkness to his right laughed along with him.

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