

# Worms and More

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Select Science Fiction & Fantasy Shorts by: Rm Harrington



*The 6-Foot Earthworm That Sounds Like a  
Draining Bathtub*

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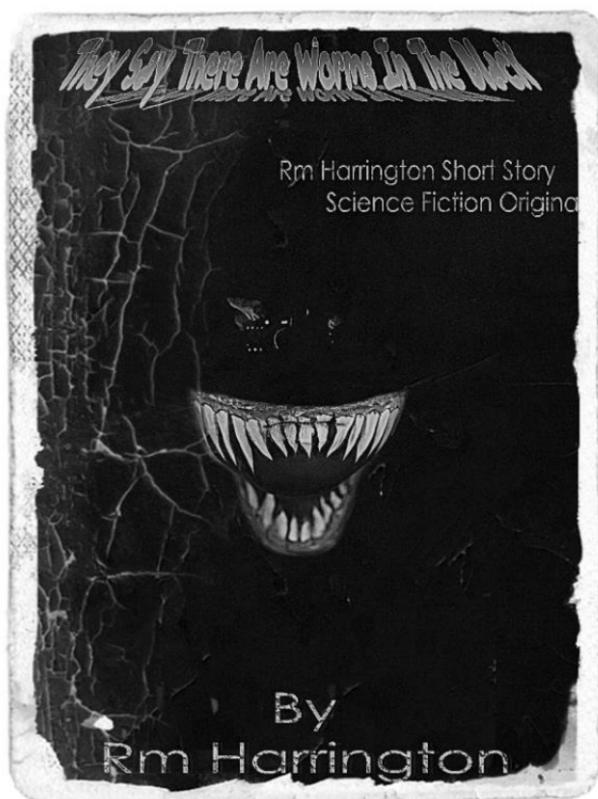
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## **Some Say There Are Worms in The Black**

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*Worms in The Black offers a different vision of a worldwide catastrophe.*

*Such things may not come via the hand of men or aliens. Neither may it happen because of politics or a play for power.*

*The story first appeared as a free-to-read offering by author Rm Harrington on the [Rm Harrington Short Stories](#) web site.*

*At last count, online views of this story had surpassed 4000.*

## **Into the Light**

They say there are worms in the Black. Drake had never seen a single such creature, but he did not want to go back out there.

He walked one of the deserted streets near the north end of the dome. Save for Doug, a blackish-brown curly-haired Airedale terrier that was always ready for a trek near the outer reaches, Drake traveled alone.

It had been ten years since anyone had ventured outside of the dome. Even if they were right about the worms in the Black, perhaps the creatures were now gone. Either way, Drake was the only one who knew how to repair generators. But that last earth tremor had caused a cave-in at the inside entrance to the dam. Not good. Not good at all.

Drake wore an Osprey Atmos AG 65 backpack loaded with compressed lunch packages, a collection of choice emergency medical supplies, hydration fluids, fire starters and the lot. He also carried a handy Gränsfors Bruks Wildlife Hatchet for

cutting, hammering, and defense.

Included as a special tool, he packed a Bersa Thunder 380 in a right-hand shoulder holster beneath his jacket. The blow-back-operated double-action/single-action semi-automatic remained a reserve piece, unrevealed to everyone including Chief Copper the dome's primary security leader.

For a long time now, a fading had been upon the people. No new human life came to the dome, either from the outside or the inside. Of the original builders, only Copper and two of the planners remained. Most of the other inhabitants were aging away, maybe too old to fade. Who can say? Even before Drake's arrival, many of the homes had gone haunted.

Back in the day, his high school teachers had always told him to reach for the sky. After graduation, his parents had told him to focus on a paycheck and a wife. After the apocalypse, Drake had settled for working with whatever he could grasp.

In the years that had accumulated since the curse, his life had changed from that of a pleurably-married electrical service engineer at Morris Aerotek in Charlotte, North Carolina to that of a widower street junkie in the near-empty

alleyways of northern Florida – one of the last continental zones not fully overtaken by the spreading perpetual darkness.

Vines, grasses, weeds and untrimmed trees consumed the neighboring houses, sidewalks, and even the blacktop streets. *Amazing how quickly it grows*, Drake thought. Crisp vegetation should cheer the air, but in its place came forth an unpleasant stench of invasion. Not from the current lack of recycling associated with the conked-out generators, but rather from something that smelled like the Black. Each day without generators enabled the shadows inside the dome to grow longer and darker.

*How hard could it be*, he had thought, back when it all started. But in no short time, his viewpoint had changed. Dumpster-diving, although similar in theory to searching the Internet for ideas, was not even remotely the same in practice. That was all long-ago in a far-distant memory. The Drake of today was not the same Drake that had married Lea.

After she had faded, he had remained alone, even when among other survivors. It was a self-punishment loneliness, the kind

that reshapes a man's mind by cutting out trenches of social isolation, making it even more difficult to penetrate the self-imposed walls. If not for coming upon Doug, he might have given up. But he had survived, endured the Black, the murmurings and the odors until time passed and he once more began to miss conversation, laughter and even cigarette smokers.

Then about twelve years ago, he had stumbled upon the dome, a man-made barrier against the Black that was inhabited by a colony of survivors. They had met him at the gate, a ragged junkie with no more access to drugs, chewed up nails on nervous hands, faulty memories and a near-forgotten but still usable skill set in electrical equipment repairs. Without fanfare or knowledge of his experience with generators, they had embraced him as a new resident for the dome. For Drake, the choice amounted to a no-brainer: life in the light versus a shadowed existence in the humid heat that continued to accumulate in this cloud-cloaked blackness called earth.

These days he felt acceptable or at least established within the current environment. He was gaining confidence

among other people, becoming a respected member of the dome society. Sometimes, after a Sunday dinner with Naomi and Copper, he could go days without recalling the lost comfort of drifting to sleep with Lea's left leg across his thigh and her breath softly touching the back of his neck.

#

## **An Empty House**

Over the last twelve years, Drake had grown bulky, not fat, but rather nourished and muscular. Nonetheless, today he walked hunched down like an ape expecting a threat, much in the manner that he had appeared before finding sanctuary in the dome. In that near yet distant past, his brownish-black hair and matching beard had grown long, tangled and dirty. He had lived under the concept that evolution was in the process of correcting this failure called mankind and that all things were returning to the primal essence of life. He had dreaded the day when he would run dry on charged batteries, bulbs for the lanterns, fuel for generators, or any of the other necessities

that permitted some minor release from the insanity that lingered in the Black.

“It has a voice, you know,” he said, speaking to Doug. The Black sounded like silence with a tinge of beckoning. It caressed the mind with a subtlety that was much akin to the kiss of a slightly nervous lover. Smiling, he stretched down to stroke the Airedale behind the ears. “Don’t guess you understand that, though.”

At times during the pre-dome loneliness, Drake had been tempted to kill the fire, turn off the lanterns and let eternity swallow his emptiness. But after coming upon the lights of the dome and the people therein, he had taken once more to the comforts of a clean shave and a short cadet haircut. Now he looked like and felt like a new but still purposefully reclusive city dweller. *Perhaps, he thought, humanity is human only when in tune with work, neighborhoods, resorts, and colonies – and perchance people are exclusively altogether complete only when enhanced by family.*

He searched for electrical loot, mostly any components that might be fitted to make repairs to the main generators at the dam, but also for parts useful towards restoring dead gens back at

the barracks and the main gathering hall. Some in the group rumored that a few of the locals had hoarded personal household gens. "Just in case," they said.

So, Drake searched and rummaged. There was always a chance that he might pick up a working voltage regulator, some size-adjustable cooling components, jumper cables or even a functional variable-sizing fuel system. Gifted engineers learn how to make one thing fit into another, how to work with whatever he or she can reach. Tomorrow he would go to the turbines along the dam, via the outside entrance. *A trip not to be endured but once*, he thought while experiencing a sudden harsh quivering in his hands and shoulders.

Drugs burn the spirit as well as the mind and the nerves. Although over twelve years since he last snorted, Drake still endured the occasional flash-vision, and that troubled him much more than the shakes in his muscles. Escape had not come without a long-term price. *Not the time*, he thought. *Keep the calm.*

Switching focus, he began to watch Doug running and playing in the street. The

dog ran around sniffing things, digging, waving his tail and jumping sticks until suddenly coming to a full stop at the curb before a dilapidated mini-mansion. He backed away, growling a bit from deep in his throat while moving closer to Drake. Even the Airedale knew that certain types of abandoned houses presented elevated risk factors.

Drake slowed to a stop and let his eyes scrutiny settle on the old house, first the door and then the windows, one by one. He knew this kind of building. Like history without a place to park, they came in multiple sizes with peeling paint, broken-windows and screen doors that always banged in a mysterious wind that no one ever feels. They reflect the ambiance of television vampire houses, haunted by the pale light of a full moon and purposed only for use in grade-B horror films. Nowadays they thrive in the shadows that accumulate beneath the fading illuminations of the dome. Long ago, Drake had learned that such hollow reflections of life should be sprinted past, or at least ignored with purpose.

Not that he feared empty houses. They were far safer than sleeping alone in

the outside while surrounded by the voice of the Black. Closed rooms offer the mind a place of quiet, even though some vacant houses retain physical evidence of things that neither man nor woman can ever unsee. Walls restrain the power of darkness; even dampen the sound of static, at least in part. Controlled inside fires burn brighter than open flames. Contained lanterns better kill the shadows. Still, some houses are more haunted than others.

Drake was tired of being a scavenger. Living in the dome came easy. What better way to wait out the fadings. But now the generators were down. There was no electricity to power the fences around the outside of the dome. And that was not the worst of it.

Even as Drake worked to gather tools, parts and courage, the backup batteries that powered the dome's emergency lights were bleeding out. By mid-time tomorrow, the Black would overtake the inside of the dome. Once again, his nerves quivered.

Sensing his master's despair, Doug drew closer and leaned against Drake's left leg, a gentle and unintentional reminder of

a woman and the comfort of her body heat against his thigh.

“It’s a mess, boy,” Drake said. “The moment Naomi’s eyes prompted me to raise my hand and identify as an engineer, I knew this day would come.”

Then he paused, head cocked and listening. Something about this house alarmed him even without the dog’s visible fretfulness. Covered in dingy gray vines and over-shaded by nearby tree limbs, this damaged structure was the precise description of things to be avoided. Nevertheless, there existed within the house a curiosity that pulled Drake’s steps towards the creak-hinged front door. Pack-bound to follow his master into the shadows, Doug hesitated but a moment.

#

## **Tools and More**

Stopping barely inside the front room, Drake looked around the moss and fungi covered walls and floors. Puddles of water accumulated nearly everywhere. Topped with an odd twist of vegetation that had small, smelly white flowers, a reddish-gold slime coated the walls. With

the dome being self-contained, rain misted rather than fell, but the accumulated total could still produce relentless water damage in structures with gutted roofs, especially when the river flooded, and condensation increased.

But the pungent scent of mold and mildew did not explain the odor behind the odor, that certain black-clay reek that reminded Drake of South Carolina's Murrells Inlet marsh walk. He stood very still, his breath coming slow and soft as if time could derail the electrical buzzing in his temples. Herein abided change and a sensation of impending consumption that he had only felt once before when in the Black with a single dimly lighted lamp – on the night Lea faded.

“Some house we come across, huh, Doug?”

The Airedale stared with a look of expectation, understanding the inflections if not the words.

“Let's find something we can use,” Drake said while pausing to crank up his trusted Red Cross Clipray flashlight. “Be on guard.”

People always looted the big houses first, so Drake had no expectations of finding food, weapons or any other essential survival items. But few people understood the importance of tools necessary for wiring starter components, generators and such.

Grayish moisture covered broad sections of the flooring. Fog accumulated in some of the rooms. A gaping crack ran up one wall and across part of the lower ceiling. This house had endured extensive quake-related damage. Even if Drake stumbled across something worthwhile, rust might render it unusable. Perhaps there was a basement or an outbuilding. Some of the older houses this large had full-home backup gens out by the circuit box.

For a time, the search seemed fruitless. Then Drake got lucky. While probing the depths of a broom closet, he found boxes full of tools, of which one had electrical items including a roll of black tape, a pack of slip rings and a small stator assembly, all good signs of an existing home generator. Partially hidden beneath a pile of dirty rags, a large metal box with big rusty hinges and a fastened Schlage six pin padlock sat in a back corner.

Pulling a Southord jackknife pick-set from his shirt pocket, Drake popped the lock in less than two minutes. A newer lock would have given way much quicker, but why grumble. The latch system could have been a Mul-T-Lock Classic with the internal driver pin interlocks counter-bored to the outer pin. Then, instead of a quiet two minutes with the pick-set, Drake would still be whacking with the heel of the hatchet.

Opening the box took longer than picking the lock. The rust on the hinges did not give way without a struggle. But when the lid finally lifted, Drake delighted in seeing in the box that thing he wanted most. Well, at least one of the things he wanted most. No need to miss the point. Living in the Black taints the acceptable definition of value. Drake also wanted sunshine on his face, a comfy bed that did not smell of accumulated dead body cells, and Lea by his side, *or maybe Naomi*.

*Shut it down, Drake, he thought. The past is gone. The present is not yours to have.*

For Drake, re-learning gratitude had not come easy. Sometimes he slipped. After all, the treasure in the box came without rust and moisture via the efficiency of a

watertight seal. Nevertheless, the find in the box was not comparable to the needs in his mind.

As Drake stored the practical treasure in his backpack, Doug started barking – slowly at first and then more impatiently. Something was not right in the hallway, but the small pack of expandable stator retainer mag-rings were such a great find that Drake was willing to press a bit more time into searching for other treasures. Although worthless toward repairing the main turbines, the mag-rings would expand to fit any of the smaller gens back at the meeting lodge. At least now, he had a way to charge the core batteries and keep a few lights burning.

But time was short. Doug ran near to the door of the storage room and then turned outward, barking into the hallway. Drake closed the lid and then stood upright, but not before resetting the lock on the box. *At a minimum keep others out*, he thought. Drawing the Gränsfors, he stepped to the door, knelt and scratched Doug behind the ear. “Show me,” he said.

Encouraged, Doug crept down the hall and stopped before an open door on the

left. He growled but made no effort to go through the doorway.

Moving nearer, Drake aimed his Clipray into the opening and saw stairs leading down into darkness. The air from the doorway stank of black clay, swamp marsh, blooming corpse flowers and something else: a stench of sulfur, a warning hell-stink that always accompanied breakouts of the invisible flames. Behind it all, or perhaps within it all, lingered an angry buzzing accompanied by an elusive sense of whispering.

“What you think, Doug,” he said. “Do we go down?”

#

## **Cocoons and Flames**

Crafted from grayish-brown silk and clinging by strands to the rafters like fresh-chewed bubblegum, a drooping cocoon occupied over half of the basement ceiling. Bees nested in the gauzier threads around the edges. Flies and some other black insects swarmed nearby. And it was hot down here, smoldering hot as though

invisible methanol flames danced in the cocoon.

Inside the silk wrappings, things moved, dozens of them, thick tube-like larva barely visible, but nearly a foot each in length. Doug ran to and fro, splashing in an inch or more of warm blackish water but avoiding getting too near the heat, barking, barking, and barking.

*A worm cocoon*, Drake knew at first sight, though he had never actually encountered one.

*In here? In the dome?*

Although sweating from the endless heat, he had the simple thought of tearing the accursed thing down. The invisible flames burned with the fierceness of super-heated scalding water, but they never physically harmed the flesh. Drake had endured before, for a short span. If need be, he could do so now.

But when he lifted the Gränsfors to make the first strike, the buzzing of the bees and the insects turned violent. It felt like a warning. Rather than attacking the nest, Drake backed away and toward the stairs. Following suit, Doug passed Drake and then waited on the lower runs.

“Can’t leave yet, boy. I need to know how they got in.”

Moving the beam of his flashlight around the basement, he saw no signs of forced entry. Stories about the worms claimed they could not abide light. Since the larva seemed significantly agitated by the Clipray, Drake figured for an underground passageway.

*Perhaps an opening into the crawlspace from under here, he thought. Maybe beneath the stairs.* And sure enough, there it was at the rear underside of the stairs, a midget wooden door hanging open on broken hinges, and then a ragged rectangular gap leading into the very heart of the Black.

“So, this is how you got here,” Drake said. “Underground, making your way this deep into the dome.” He aimed the light into the Black but saw no movement, no glint of eyes or anything else besides grayed images of cinder block support columns.

Stories had it that adult worms grew to reach seven feet long and two feet in diameter. Those who claimed knowledge defined the creatures as faster than dogs and smarter than humans. Drake had also heard tales about the creepy-sliders moving

through dirt quicker, better and more aggressively than their namesake.

“How long?” He said, speaking mostly to himself. “Why now?”

Something in the Black was watching. He felt it in the twitching of his nerves. *Cut the light*, he thought and was surprised to hear it in Lea’s voice. *Why endure the emptiness? Embrace eternity.*

“It’s the drug burns,” Drake grunted. “There is nothing here to embrace.” He fled up the stairs, nearly tripping over Doug as the dog struggled to be first out. But once outside the house, back in the street and away from the immediate fears, he could not step further.

*Run you, idiot*, he told himself, *you cannot fight worms, a messed-up memory and a mind burned out on drugs. Besides. It’s not your job. Pass the info to Copper.*

He did not leave. There was work to do here. He removed an SE-FS374 Magnesium and Ferro Rod Combo out of his backpack and then commanded Doug to stay behind before heading back inside the infested house. Using the Gränsfors to break and shred a length of white pine base molding, he readied a fire. Start with a pile of shavings from the magnesium. Top it off

with slivers of wood. Ignite it with the Ferro Rod.

The flames spread quickly, catching to anything dry enough to burn. In the distance, the intensity of the buzzing elevated. The insects had already picked up on the threat. Drake ran outside, tapped Doug to follow, and did not stop until all his stamina was finally out of breath. From on top of a hill just short of the main gathering hall, he looked back across the moss-infested neighborhood. Flames and smoke boiled high and then curled back against the roof of the dome.

Grinning, Drake made his way towards the colony center. Perhaps there remained enough battery power to drive the smoke filters.

#

## **Sounding the Alarm**

As Drake reached the outer fringes of the assembly center, he saw Roger Ingle chopping wood for the community oven. A wiry man with blue eyes, ash blond hair, and diminished cheek muscles, Roger had

the passive-aggressive nature common to people of Swedish descent.

While Doug nosed a renewed friendship, Drake told Roger about his discovery. When he had finished talking, Roger was convinced that worms were real.

“We have to warn the others.”

“No,” Drake responded. “We do not need panic on top of broken turbines, seeping darkness and an increase in earth tremors.” The quake that took out the underground shaft to the dam had been the latest of several rapid-fire activities. But at least none of it had damaged the dome.

“What, then?” Roger asked. He hefted his ax in readiness. “With a bit of help, we can strike while we still have the upper hand.”

“Do we?” Drake said, “Have the upper hand, that is? If the worms are in the south too, we may have already lost. So far as we know, they could be underfoot right this moment, held at bay only by the shine of the dome lights.”

The scent of smoke drifted just above ground level, thicker by the moment. Breathing came heated and tight. Drake cursed the people that failed to gear the air filters to the emergency batteries?.

“So, we do nothing?” Said, Roger. He slammed the edge on his ax into the chopping stump.

“I am not saying that,” said Drake. “I will talk to Copper, work out a few details before bringing folks on board.”

“Good,” Roger said. “What about the generators? Did you find the stuff you need to fix them?”

“I cannot know until I get out there,” Drake said. “Reasons for the stall can be complicated in many ways. I gathered a few items to boost the stock already stored at the dam. I need to hold this down to one trip.” Overhead, on the underside of the dome, the accumulating smoke cloud increased the shadows over the earth.

“How?” Roger asked. “Think it might be the turbines?”

“We will talk later,” said Drake. “I have to go talk to Copper. And then repair the gens at the dam. Fail that, and we all go down anyway.”

“Best of luck convincing that guy to take action,” said Roger. “He has been sitting on his butt doing nothing for so long that even the thought of doing something makes him tired.”

Drake smiled, "Take care of Doug," he said, and then snapped a leash to the Airedale's body-harness before handing the grip to Roger. "And be careful. I've encountered several breakouts of invisible flames today. I won't take long."

He headed towards the barrack houses. Roger was right. Chief Copper was more busy farming than policing. The head of dome security had enjoyed extended years of comfortable living. If not for the tremors, he would have retired. For years now, no newcomers had entered the dome. Nothing but minor internal arguments troubled the residents. Copper might not even believe that worms were more than fantasy.

Third barrack house on the left belonged to the Chief. Other than location and order of position, it was just one more faded-plank barrack house. Another sign that Copper was just as lazy as Roger suggested.

Drake knocked on the door.

"Coming," said a female voice. It was Naomi, Chief Copper's wife.

Moments later she opened the door. Drake looked at her and was speechless for a moment. She was older than Drake,

perhaps by eight or ten years. Some said Copper was fifty-plus and that Naomi was several years younger. But age made no concerns for Drake. Her long wavy red hair, brown eyes, and light faultless complexion reminded him of Lea every time he saw her, so much so that it sometimes hurt.

“Come in,” Naomi said, opening the door and greeting him with a smile. She had full but alleviated lips, white teeth and a thin sexy scar that ran half the length of her left cheek. Beautiful. No other word for her. But she always dressed modestly, a look that made her appear even more perfect. After having learned how much she reminded Drake of his wife, she had worked hard to be a friend without coming across too friendly. Drake liked that too. Such thoughtful concern for others also reminded him of Lea – so much so that more and more of his dreams involved Naomi rather than Lea. And in that, he felt shame as well as guilt.

As he stepped through the doorway, Drake caught a whiff of scented shampoo. In this age of fear and confusion, he rarely encountered someone with functional attention to cleanliness. But Naomi had

determined to hold fast to hygiene and decency. In fact, unlike the external appearance of the house, the orderly polish in Naomi's inside domain reflected that very concept. As with every time he encountered this woman, Drake felt unaffected by the apocalypse.

"Would you like water or wine?" She asked. Water and a bit of milk served as the principal drinks available in the colony. Fruit juices and beverages were a thing of the past. But there was still a bit of wine to be found.

"Nothing, thank you," he replied. "Is Copper home?"

"You look awful, and you smell like smoke and sulfur," she said. "You should have some wine," She poured from a bottle into two glasses. "Copper left early this morning. He has been gone a long time, almost long enough to cause concern." Her eyes tightened. A slight crease formed directly center above her nose.

"Patrol?" Drake asked in kindness. He took the offered glass of wine, tingling a bit as their fingers touched along the way. They both knew that Copper was now wholly devoted to farming.

“Actually,” she said, “he is. With the electricity to the fences down, he thought a patrol sensible.”

*Again, with that smoldering smile.*

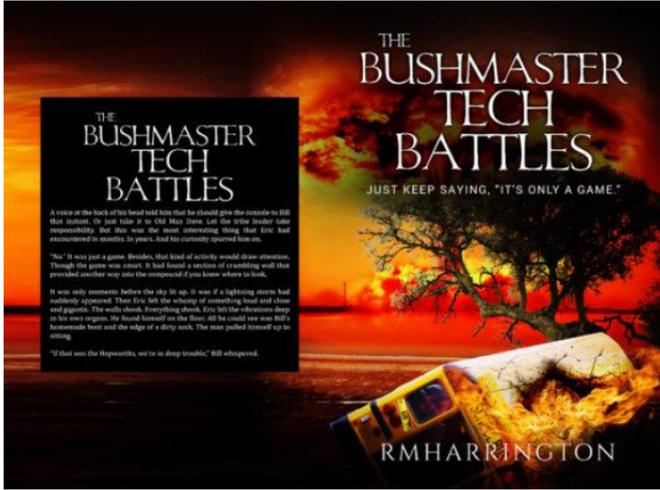
“Although I do not personally see the point. There has been no one new here since you arrived.”

“About that,” Drake said and then took a large sip of the wine. “That’s what I came to tell him. I was searching up north this morning. Came across a mini-mansion, an empty three story with a basement full of worm cocoons.”

“You mean,” said Naomi, “you saw worms?” She knew about the generators and Drake’s mission. But like most people, she claimed no personal sightings of creatures in the Black.

## Other Books by Rm Harrington

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