

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

DAVID A. WIMSETT

A collection of speculative fiction tales



Extraordinary Worlds

Filled with promise and dread

Internationally award-winning author David A. Wimsett examines the consequences of human actions in this collection of four speculative fiction stories.

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Children of a space colony question the home their chose for them before they were born.

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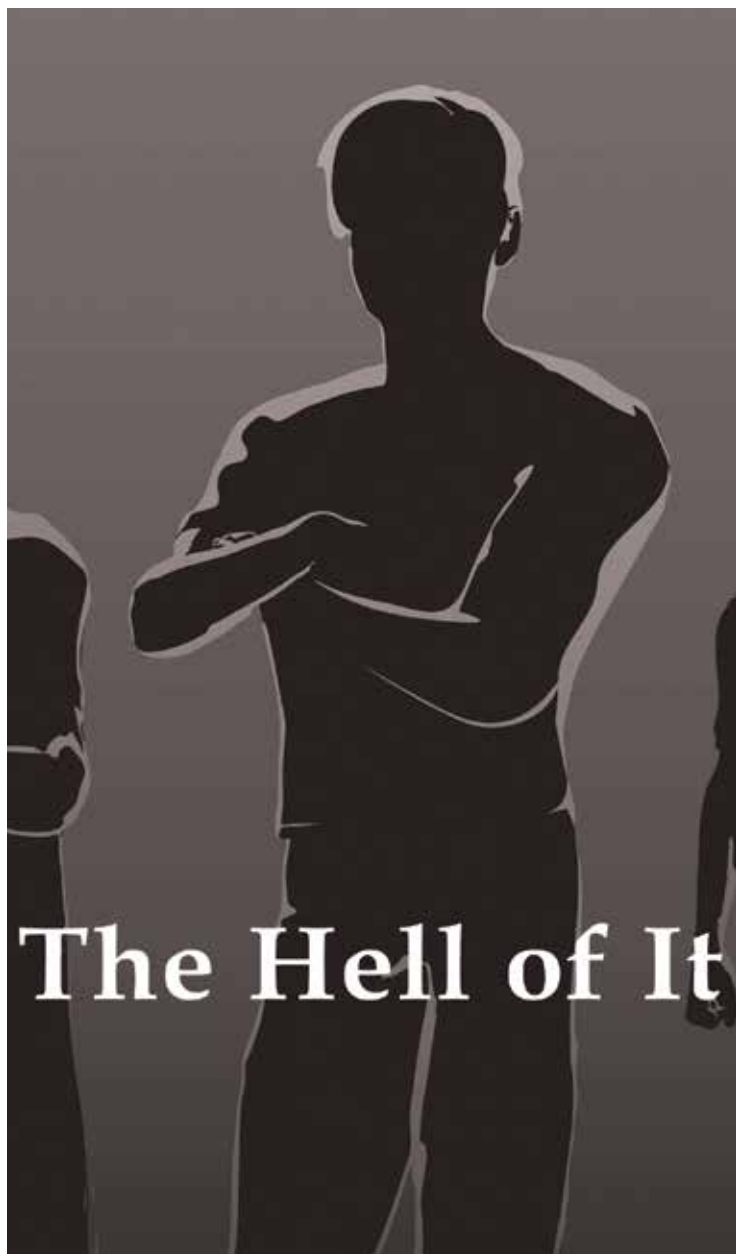
To the memory of Ernest Dust
English teacher extraordinaire

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David A. Wimsett

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The Hell of It

The single lamp in the small office was lowered to the desk so it only illuminated the ledger Mary Jones altered. She heard the door open and looked up to see a man standing at the threshold silhouetted against the glare of the hallway light.

She quickly covered the paper with her hand. “Oh, Mr. Ferguson. I thought you were finished with the audit.”

Ferguson walked into the office. “I have just one more thing to clear up.”

“What is that?”

He walked up to the desk and moved Mary’s hand away from the ledger. “The money you’ve embezzled from the firm over the last eight months.”

Mary pulled her hand away. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“The entries were well done. I might not have caught your crime if I hadn’t found one receipt dropped behind a filing cabinet.”

“You don’t understand. It’s just a loan. Mr. Wells approved the transfers.”

“He never mentioned it in any interviews.” He took out his phone. “I’ll give him a call.”

Mary pulled a side drawer of the desk open, grabbed a pistol and stood. “Hang up.”

“Would you add murder to embezzlement?”

“You don’t understand. I just need a little money to start my own advertising company. I’ll pay it back, every cent. I just can’t get a bank loan right now.”

“You could have asked Mr. Wells.”

Mary gave a short snort. “Ask for a loan to go into competition?” She panted as sweat rolled down her face. “Look. I’ve got more than I need. Forget you ever found that receipt and I’ll make it worth your while.”

Ferguson advanced on her. “I don’t take bribes. Hand me that gun.”

Mary’s hand shook violently. Her finger jerked in a spasm. The gun fired. She closed her eyes and recoiled from the shock of the blast. When she looked again, Ferguson lay face down on floor.

She dropped the gun. “Oh God. No.” She bent down. “I didn’t mean to fire. I’ll call an ambulance.” She turned him on his side and stared into his lifeless eyes, then dropped his body and covered her face with her hands.

Her mind raced. She removed his wallet and watch, then turned the auditor’s body on its back and dragged it by the heels to the alley behind the office. She was certain it would appear to be just another unsolved robbery. No one would suspect her. There was a moment of regret and guilt. These passed quickly as she realized her dream of opening her own advertising agency was secure.

She used the stolen money to start that agency and hired bright, young minds to staff it. Still, she held the reins of power tightly as she controlled everyone and placed her mark on each deal.

After decades of lying, bullying and cheating, a stroke felled her. When she returned to the office, it was evident some of her power had slipped away. A purge of dissident subordinates returned her to full control, but a second stroke put her in intensive care.

As she woke in a hospital bed, her eyesight blurry, muffled noises came quivering through a haze. She tried to speak. No words came out. Someone started to laugh in a deep and unpleasant tone. She closed her eyes and drifted into darkness.

When Mary opened her eyes, she sat in an office chair.

Plush carpet covered the floor.

A potted tree occupied one corner.

To her left, a wide window showed fluffy clouds against a bright blue sky.

The air was a pleasant temperature with the dry sense of central air conditioning.

In front of her, a tall, clean-shaven man in a tailored suit sat at a desk.

The man stood and extended his hand as he walked forward. "Welcome Ms. Jones. Welcome to Hell."

She returned his firm handshake. "I beg your pardon."

He smiled pleasantly. "You're probably a little disoriented at the moment. Now, what I'm about to say may distress you, but please be assured everything is just fine.

"A moment ago, you were lying in a hospital bed suffering from a stroke. You died as a result. At that exact instant, your soul materialized here in the afterlife."

Mary looked at her hands and realized her eyesight, blurry only moments ago, was now clear and sharp. The age spots and wrinkles on her skin were gone, as was the hospital gown. Instead, she was dressed in the same red business suit she wore on the day she opened her own advertising agency. She got to her feet and examined herself in a mirror on the wall. Her grey hair was dark auburn again.

She saw the face of the tall man reflected behind her. He was still smiling. "As fine a figure as ever you were at thirty-four. I believe that was your favorite age."

Mary ran her hands across the fabric. "I threw this out years ago. How is this possible, mister..."? She paused for a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name."

"Satan. Beelzebub Satan. But please, call be Beel."

The skin on the back of her neck prickled. “It’s the drugs, that’s it. What did that doctor give me?” The prickling feeling continued. She took in ragged, short breaths. All the sermons of hellfire and torment she heard as a child flooded her mind. “I didn’t mean to kill him. It was an accident. You have to believe me.”

Satan raised his hand. “Calm yourself, Mary. All that fire and brimstone nonsense has nothing to do with Hell. We know about the money you stole, the people you cheated, the careers you ruined, even the man you killed. That doesn’t matter. Good deeds. Bad deeds. They all wash in the end. Hell wasn’t created to punish those who sin.” He chuckled. “If it were, everyone would wind up here. No, Hell is just a place where certain kinds of souls come, those with the drive to make it. For some there is heaven, for others Hell. Or to put it another way, the sheep have their pasture and the wolves their forest.”

Mary took a step away from Satan. “Then, what happens to me here?”

Satan spread his arms wide. “What would you like to happen? It’s a whole new world waiting to be conquered, waiting for people who know how to make their mark and keep it there. Name your game; banking, shipping, media. It’s all here, and more. Oh, it won’t be easy. But I can assure you it will never be dull. Wouldn’t that be the worst? To be bored through eternity.”

Mary walked to the window. Outside, she saw a modern city with a meandering river running through it. In the distance tree lined mountains were topped with snow. She turned back to Satan. “But what do you get out of it? What’s your cut, Beel?”

“Let’s just say I’m the CEO of a multidimensional conglomerate. You make a profit and I make a profit, but

not in dollars and cents. There are other things to strive for.”

“So, it’s like a contest between you and...” She looked up at the ceiling, “God?”

“Something like that, only I wouldn’t gaze in that direction. Heaven is off there to the west. Very pastoral, but a little too sedate for my taste.”

“Harps and halos?”

“No, but new arrivals do wear the most awful white robes and they’re set to the same age as when they died. God says it helps them acclimatize. I think you’ll agree setting people to their favorite age is much better, especially since you can change whenever you want.”

“Do you mean I can trade this body in for a new one?”

“Not exactly. The body you have now is the one you will keep for as long as you are in Hell. We can alter it if you like or repair it if it gets hurt, but we can’t replace it if it’s destroyed. When you die here, Mary, your soul has nowhere to go. It just vanishes into oblivion.”

He opened a drawer and brought out a metal box. “But, don’t let that worry you. For now, just have a look around, get used to the place.” He took out a set of keys and a small handbag. “Here’s some cash and a few credit cards. They’ll get you going. The square key is to your apartment, the address is in the wallet, and the round one is for...”

“My Matla Turbo. Is it really my car?”

Satan smiled broadly. “Red with wire rim wheels, sun roof and leather seats.”

She took the keys and handbag. “I can’t believe it. It’s everything I loved best.”

“We’ve opened a small advertising agency for you downtown. It’s not much, a couple of accounts, a little

working capital, some employees, but then, you started with less, didn't you?"

"I certainly did."

Satan guided her to his outer office. "If you have any problems just call. My secretary will give you the number. We'll talk again in a few weeks. Good luck."

The apartment was a modern set of rooms built into the shell of a Victorian building. Her favorite clothes hung neatly in a closet. The kitchen cabinets were full of food. Her grandmother's chinaware shone from a lighted display case. Everything was right.

The drive downtown took a quarter of an hour. Her office occupied a two-story brick building. The staff consisted of three advertising agents, a receptionist and a janitor who also filled in as a handyman. Mary sat through a staff meeting to get acquainted with the accounts. She was in control again. The excitement was still there, and this time it would never end.

Business grew over the next year. One night, Mary closed a deal for the largest account her agency had ever landed. The final negotiations lasted well past midnight. She took the staff out for drinks.

One of her employees said, "Congratulations, boss. That was brilliant."

Another one raised a glass in a toast. "You made them squirm all right."

Mary smiled. "It was just good business negotiation, even if it was shooting fish in a barrel."

Everyone laughed.

When she got home, she stumbled into the bedroom, still fully clothed, flopped across the covers, and immediately fell

asleep.

She had a dream about a tree-lined avenue. At first, she saw only misty forms. The mist vanished as her senses snapped clearly into focus with shocking reality.

Mary stood in her grandmother's kitchen and stared at the cookie jar just out of reach on top of the refrigerator. She was nine years old.

Grandmother went upstairs for a nap. Mary pushed one of the kitchen chairs over to the refrigerator and reached up for the lid of the cookie jar. She told herself no one would notice if a few were missing. The lid was higher than she thought. She placed her hands around the jar to take it down when it slipped and fell to the floor with a crash.

Grandmother called down, "What's wrong?"

Mary stared at the broken shards of pottery. She opened the back door that led to the driveway between grandmother's house and the next-door neighbors.

Grandmother came downstairs. "What was that noise?"

Mary pointed to the open door, "Jimmy Watson came in and tried to steal some cookies. He dropped the jar when he saw me". She remembered how grandmother always complained Jimmy and how he made too much noise and cut across her lawn and stomped through her flower beds.

Grandmother got a strange look on her face. "Well, this is the last straw."

Mary knew grandmother would be angry, but she thought she would just complain like she always did and that would be the end of it. Instead, grandmother went over and knocked on the neighbor's door.

The man next door appeared. "Hello Thelma. What

can I do for you?"

"That boy of yours came into my kitchen and broke my cookie jar."

"Did you see him?"

"My granddaughter did and she wouldn't lie."

The man looked back into the house. "Jimmy. get out here."

Jimmy Watson appeared at the door. "Yes?"

"Why did you go into Mrs. Jones' kitchen and break her cookie jar?"

"I didn't."

The man grabbed Jimmy by the arm and dragged him inside. "Don't you lie to me."

She heard Jimmy shouting, "No. I didn't do it. Ow. No. Ow."

Later that day, she went outside. Jimmy Watson walked up and stood still as he stared at Mary. She was afraid he was about to hit her and wanted to run, but was too scared to move.

He just lowered his head and said, "Why?"

The single word hurt more than if he had punched her in the stomach.

The nightmare ended as the wail of a siren woke Mary. She sat up with a start, caught for a moment between the dreaming world and the waking. Her clothes were soaked with sweat. She got up and made some instant coffee. Her hands shook as she tried to sip the hot liquid. It had been ages since she thought about the incident of the cookie jar, yet she couldn't stop shaking as she realized a part of her mind waited for Jimmy Watson to come through the door.