

WHEN EARTHLINGS WEEP



MICHAEL BARNETT

When Earthlings Weep

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A Free Sample

Part I: Arrival at Saturna Luna

Thank you for joining my reader list.

These pages are the opening of
When Earthlings Weep, Chapters 1 through 6.

I hope you enjoy meeting Mickey, Sergio, and Kelly.

Michael Barnett

PART I: ARRIVAL AT SATURNA LUNA

Chapter 1: Meeting an Old Friend

Mickey Thorn stands on a wide ledge, several hundred meters above a clear pool of liquid methane. The lake is massive. It stretches to the horizon, where volcanoes of varying sizes erupt. Clear liquid and steam shoot from the peaks instead of lava or smoke. The sight always surprises him. Mickey's perspective feels off. Without a frame of reference, judging distance is impossible. He knows he has been here before, but the details remain fuzzy.

Just offshore, round rocks of varying sizes rest beneath the surface. The methane is so perfectly clear that it defies depth perception. Falling precipitation ripples across the surface—the only sign that the liquid is even there. Above, the sky casts an orange pallor over everything. A hazy Saturn, its tilted rings prominent, dominates the center of the sky. The planet is so close that Mickey can make out individual rocks and debris in the rings. Viscous smog and dense clouds choke the atmosphere. Showers fall in the distance, raining liquid ethane and methane instead of water. To his left, a small ravine fills with fresh methane, rushing toward the lake below. Mickey scans the ground. Familiar ice crystals scatter everywhere like sleet.

An extraordinary, breathtaking silence grips the landscape—a stillness common to deep-freeze worlds. It makes the falling sleet sound tinny and crisp, like tiny cymbals echoing in a large, empty room. The same round rocks from the lake scatter across this ledge. They stretch in every direction.

Movement snaps to his right. Mickey's old friend faces him. No sound accompanies the arrival. No visual display. He is just there. How he always

knows Mickey's arrival time is a mystery. His friend stares at Mickey. As always, Mickey struggles to look back. The alien's head matches human proportions, but the similarities end there. No eyes. No ears. No nose or mouth. Deep, oversized depressions pit the flesh where those features should be. The eye cavities are perfectly round, creating a look of constant surprise. A vertically elongated hole replaces the mouth, mimicking a frozen scream. Random patterns of dark gray and turquoise cover the skin of his head and neck, splattered with white and yellow. Inside the eye recesses, colors constantly shift. Mickey averts his gaze. Eye contact is impossible with a shifting spectrum. The full effect is deeply unnerving.

As Mickey watches, the colors on his companion's neck and face coalesce. They form a distinctly human flesh color. It holds for a few seconds, then disassembles back into the original alien scheme. Mickey notes the feeble attempt at becoming human but dismisses the concern. He wonders what kind of world gives birth to such a creature. The alien wears a candy-apple red suit. It flexes, bends, and reforms like a living organism. Thousands of tiny, firefly-like sparks race across the material in random patterns. Mickey cannot determine their function. He doesn't care to know. He just wishes the fuzziness in his head would clear. A sudden sense of danger intrudes on his mind. He shakes his head and looks back toward the horizon.

On an earlier visit, Mickey asked for a name. The companion responded that names are unimportant when only two are present to speak. Mickey persisted. His friend revealed his designation: Jengu-3. Mickey calls him Jen. Jen stands six and a half feet tall. By Earth standards, he looks to weigh 200 pounds—or 20 pounds in this low gravity. Mickey doesn't know how he knows this fact. A clear helmet tops Jen's suit. Hard material or a force field? Mickey can't tell; it reflects no light. The same strange fireflies swarm its surface. Mickey recalls their first meeting, remembering the headache that spiked when he stared too long at Jen's face. The creature punishes curiosity.

Jen extends an object toward Mickey. The device is remarkably modest, identical to previous visits. It matches the size and shape of a chalkboard eraser, crafted from pinkish brushed steel. No antennas. No dials. No screens. It looks like a simple tool, but Jen reads the output with no trouble. Jen previously explained that these scanners do no harm, though they might cause a strange tingling sensation. Mickey feels nothing this time. He has no objection to the scan. He doesn't care why Jen collects the data. Long ago, Mickey asked why

the tests were necessary. Jen replied that he wished to know how Mickey “makes the travel.” Mickey smiles inwardly at the memory of the phrase, even though its meaning escapes him.

“Here again. We are,” Jen’s voice sounds clearly inside Mickey’s head.

“Yes, we are,” Mickey thinks back. He knows his friend hears the thought.

The communication hurts. Mickey keeps to small talk. Visits ago, he tried to learn where Jen came from. The deep telepathic connection felt like his friend was climbing inside his skull. The pain was excruciating. Mickey also remembers Jen’s strict warning. Mickey spoke aloud once—just once—and the Drogos came immediately. Jen used a cunning light weapon to turn them back. The Drogos hide in plain sight. Their shells mimic the texture and color of the round rocks scattered everywhere. Mickey cannot tell rock from predator.

Jen once explained that a Drogo’s methane-and-silicon physiology, combined with the weak, distant sun, should make rapid movement impossible. Yet they move fast. Every living thing here violates the fundamental principles of low temperature and low gravity. Jen is here to study the anomaly. Mickey doubts the story. He thinks Jen already knows everything. He struggles to remember what Drogos eat. A fleeting memory of jewel-encrusted crab creatures scrambling between rocks flashes and vanishes. In this desolate place, movement attracts predators. Mickey remains silent and perfectly still.

Sometimes the Valshavi come. Both of them are willing to endure any danger for just one more look at them. Somehow, Jen knows the names of everything here. The Valshavi never arrive suddenly. They gradually build, and their appearance is all the more powerful for it. Nothing in Mickey’s memories can explain the Valshavi, except that the experience maximizes his entire existence.

Chapter 2: The Crossroad

Staff Sergeant Sergio Torres drives from his home by the lake to the base. He is scheduled for an 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM disaster preparedness exercise. It is one of the first chilly nights of the fall, especially evident as he navigates through this part of the hill country. He keeps his window down, enjoying the brisk breeze on his left arm and face. Breathing deeply, he smiles at the scent of cedar—something he always misses when driving with the air conditioning on. As he crests each hill, the bright lights of San Antonio pierce the distance. Driving toward those lights out of the darkness always reminds him of bugs swarming a porch light. He doesn't mind these all-night exercises; he gets tomorrow off. Tonight means hanging out with his friends, which is never a bad deal. At least he got to kiss his three boys goodnight before leaving. By the time he gets home tomorrow morning, they won't even realize he was gone. The family has annual passes to nearby SeaWorld, and he is excited to take them tomorrow—right after he gets some shut-eye, of course.

Sergio is a 25-year-old Latino male from the valley. He sports a brown buzz cut, even though regulations don't require it this short. His sparkling brown eyes pair perfectly with a mischievous smile—the exact combination that first caught the attention of his wife, Elaina, eight years ago. Standing six feet tall and weighing just under 180 pounds, he prides himself on his muscles and fitness. Tonight, he wears camouflaged fatigues, starched and ironed with perfect creases. His combat boots sparkle from an hour of spit-shining. He has driven this road so many times that he drifts into thought and fails to register the bumps in the asphalt right away.

When he finally notices, he immediately slows down, fearing a flat tire. Then his headlights hit the road ahead. Hundreds of dead birds cover the roadway. The expansive carnage stretches into the darkness, all the way up to the rise in the distance.

“What the hell,” he whispers.

Sergio stops in his lane and steps out of his primer-white Chevy truck. He leaves the engine idling behind him. The headlights illuminate the slaughter as he walks to his front bumper to take a closer look. He uses the toe of his right

boot to nudge one of the carcasses. Most of the birds show no visible injuries, but some have singed feathers. A sickening stench hangs in the still air, mingling with the crisp smell of cedar to create a new, repulsive stink. Some smells just don't belong together. This is one of them. He looks up, searching for power lines running alongside the road, but the sky is empty.

Movement fifty feet in front of his truck snaps his attention forward. He walks slowly toward it. A single grackle—or a crow, he can never remember the difference—spins violently in the middle of the road. Its wings pin tight to its sides. Its head anchors to a single spot on the asphalt, as if glued to the ground. Yet its feet are at a full sprint, forcing the bird to run sideways in a frantic circle. Sergeant Torres tries desperately to remember why this bizarre action looks so familiar.

“Oh my God, it looks like Curly from the Three Stooges,” he mutters to himself, more in shock than amusement.

The sight mesmerizes Sergeant Torres so completely that he forgets where he is. Finally, a strange noise behind him cuts through the trance. Before he turns, he reaches out with his booted foot and mercifully puts the bird out of its misery.

He stands up straight, turns around, and confronts the strangest sight he has ever seen.

A house in the distance pulsates with a faint purple glow, looking exactly like a giant, luminescent purple jellyfish engulfing the structure. Merged directly into the roof of the house is a sphere-shaped, neon-blue light. It hums with raw energy. Sergio tries to look at it, but his head instantly hurts. Periodically, jagged lines shoot from the sphere in all directions, tracing random patterns. Whenever he catches sight of these lines, he sees something beyond them. It is like peering between the shattered pieces of a broken mirror—not quite put back together edge to edge, but left with gaping spaces between. Before these spaces close, Sergio sees glimpses of other places, other realities, other worlds. He sees strange, colored lakes, dense jungles, and impossibly high mountains.

In one of these fractured visions, a black cloud becomes aware of him. It turns. It surges directly toward him. The closer it gets, the more malevolence he feels radiating from it. It has no face and no features indicating life, yet its purposeful movement and the overwhelming feeling that it is studying him prove it is sentient. Not a moment too soon, the crack snaps closed. In all of

these scenes, strange, impossible creatures lurk. Creatures with too many or too few legs. Too many or too few eyes. Creatures with no mouths or multiple mouths crammed with too many teeth. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he understands exactly what he is looking at.

Sudden knowledge of all these alien places and creatures floods his mind. Strange sounds fill the air, echoing not from the sphere but from all around Sergio. He tilts his head sideways like a dog, trying to decode the noises. It sounds like a few notes of classical music played backward, ending in a flat cymbal crash, followed by silence. Then, another set of different notes plays backward from somewhere else. He figures these solo performances are random—he is wrong—and estimates that three or four play at once. Just as his mind floods with the knowledge of other universes, he suddenly understands the meaning of the music. The notes are coordinates. They are the addresses of other places.

A sudden breeze picks up. The sharp, metallic smell of ozone assaults his nostrils, making him wince. He remembers that smell from past storms, right when lightning is about to strike.

These other worlds capture Sergio's mind. He forgets the dead birds. He forgets his duty on the base. He begins walking slowly toward the house with the pretty lights.

One of the fissures between worlds opens and moves directly toward him. Before he can react, his mind vanishes into the "in-between" space. A wide smile spreads across his face as a powerful energy engulfs him, separating his consciousness from all reality.

To a passerby, Sergio—now frozen in place with that pleasant smile—looks like a snapshot from a Norman Rockwell painting, a man smiling up at his wife as she serves him a generous slice of hot apple pie. Or he looks like the village idiot. Perception is always about context.

The dead grackle that was just doing its Curly impersonation stands up. It stares at Sergeant Torres with a decidedly un-birdlike intensity. It shows no sign of injury; the head trauma is gone. It hops twice and disappears. It doesn't fly into the bushes or weeds; it is simply there one second and gone the next.

A mile down the road toward town, the grackle instantly reappears atop a telephone pole. It stares down the highway, waiting, until it spots a car speeding through the dark.

Chapter 3: The Wrong Place, the Wrong Time

Twenty-three-year-old Kelly Peterson drives to her home in Medina Lake. She has just finished a grueling overtime shift waitressing at a coffee shop on the loop. She stands just over five feet tall and weighs a hundred pounds. A brunette with piercing green eyes, she thinks of herself as a cute little bundle—or even a firecracker. She comes from an abusive household, and to survive, she learned to stand up for herself at a very young age. Her coworkers know to be careful around her; she flips from nice to “not so nice” very quickly.

Unlike Sergeant Torres, Kelly is oblivious to the beautiful night just beyond her windows. As she navigates the familiar road, her thoughts are incredibly dark. Her anger centers mostly on working extra hours to cover for Stella, who got to leave early tonight. Of course, everyone knows Stella has an in with the manager. She is probably sleeping with him too!

Now, most of whatever extra money Kelly makes tonight will go straight to her babysitter. The shift wasn’t even worth it, especially since her tips were lousy. Her son, Eric, will probably be asleep, meaning she can’t even get any quality time with him. Her anger level ratchets higher when she recalls she has to work the early shift tomorrow. She is now doing what she always does when she is upset—which is a lot lately. She is speeding. Speeding soothes her like nothing else.... Except maybe booze, and she forgot to stop and get some beer.

Kelly’s foot pushes the pedal of her old blue Buick closer to the floor as this new problem piles on top of the others. She reaches over to the passenger seat, pulls her pack of cigarettes from her purse, and expertly hits the lighter with the back of her hand while shaking a cigarette loose. She swerves into the other lane, then onto the shoulder, without noticing. With the single cigarette extracted and pinned between her lips, she impatiently drums the top of her steering wheel, waiting for that lighter to pop out. The lighter pops. With the practiced hand of an artist, she pulls it out and lights up. She returns the lighter and takes two unusually heavy drags, waiting for the calming effect of nicotine to float over her. It doesn’t come. Her mood only darkens.

She starts thinking about her ex-husband, which always happens when she gets upset. That horrible man, Joaquin, never pays his child support on time,

and she is tired of taking him to court to get what is hers. Lost in thought, Kelly doesn't notice the Buick continuing to accelerate. She thinks of Eric again and how much she loves him. A smile spreads across her face. Her foot relaxes on the pedal, and the car slows. She thinks that whatever nonsense she has to put up with is worth it if Eric has a better life. She looks forward to Sunday, when she and Eric will go watch that Disney cartoon he wants to see. Maybe a burger at McDonald's afterward will top off the day and put this miserable week behind her. With all these happy thoughts, she begins to unwind and slows to the speed limit.

The grackle leaves the top of the telephone pole and reappears on the seat beside Kelly's headrest in an instant. The grackle begins to whisper into her right ear—at least, it seems like whispering to her. Strangely, Kelly is not startled that a large black bird appears out of nowhere, perches on her seat, and whispers into her head. A mental link takes place. The grackle reminds her that Stella and her boss, Roberto, both hate her. They are jealous of her superior abilities, but she will never get a raise. All of the raises will go to Stella.... Promotions too. They don't care that Kelly has a son who will go hungry without those raises. The bird tells her that Stella, Roberto, and all the other servers hate her son too. They hate her and Eric so badly that they will do whatever they can to hold her down.

The grackle instantly melts into a mass of black flesh, which struggles to regain its former shape. After a few seconds, it gives up and goes still; the effort has cost it too much power. Hypnotized and more enraged than she has ever been, with all previous warm thoughts of Eric far from her mind now, Kelly pushes the accelerator to the floor as she comes up to her favorite rise. If she goes fast enough—the posted speed limit is 45, and she is now doing 75—she can become airborne. She truly wants to fly tonight. Her new friend, now a lump of something, agrees with her that she will surely fly tonight.

Chapter 4: Birds, Everywhere

Sergio snaps out of his trance, standing in the middle of the road just as a heavy engine roars behind him.... But he hears it for only a second. He hears the hum of tires on the pavement behind him.... But only for a second. He sees the surrounding brush illuminated by a bright light from the hill behind him... but only for a second. It turns out that when a car travels at 75 mph, it covers 110 feet per second, or roughly the length of a football field every three seconds.

Unfortunately, Sergio is 50 feet from the rise. In that one second, he has just enough time to bend his knees slightly in an attempt to fall away and to slightly raise his arms to protect his face as he twists to try to face the approaching danger. The car moves much faster than any person can react, and as it comes into view, all Sergio can see are the bright headlights racing toward him.

If he could see past the lights, he would see an unusually happy Kelly getting some of the best air she has ever caught. That one second happens so fast Sergio barely registers the Buick's headlights. He doesn't even have a chance to be afraid, or surprised, or think of his cute kids and beautiful wife before all 3,500 pounds of the speeding car slam into his upper body. He dies in an instant.

Chapter 5: An Unfortunate Meeting

Kelly flies up and over the rise, sees Sergio, then hears the violent thud as she strikes him. Everything moves too fast for her to react or make sense of it. The Buick lands twisted to the left, and both left tires blow. Her mind tries to catch up with the action unrolling before her eyes, but it is all happening much too fast. She is on the last ride of her life and doesn't yet realize it. The blown tires drag the Buick sharply left, putting it on a direct course for the parked Chevy truck. Kelly has just started to scream—she has hit a man—when she slams into the truck.

Kelly lives for three seconds after she hits the truck, which is three times longer than Sergio has to live. She survives the initial crash, but not the massive explosion and fire that follow. Her son would be proud that, for once, she is wearing her seat belt, but it doesn't matter. The light show that so fascinated Sergio blinks off four minutes after the collision.

It takes fifteen minutes for the fire trucks to reach the accident. By then, burning gasoline has spread across the road, and all that remains are the still-burning, barely recognizable hulks of a car and a truck, and a charred body behind the wheel of the car—hands still firmly grasping the melted steering wheel. There is no body behind the wheel of the truck, but they find part of one under the car, with pieces of the corpse scattered toward the top of the hill. The firemen quickly put out the fires, not daring to say the things they want to—about how they hate car accidents where a fire is involved, how they hate finding people who cannot be saved, and how senseless it all is.

Chapter 6: Mickey Returns

Mickey Thorn jolts awake on a hard table, screaming. An eerie orange glow spills through a ragged hole in the ceiling above him. As strange as this scene is, something about it feels terribly familiar. Mickey looks around for more details, but in the gloom the best he can determine is that he is in a dungeon, or a prison of some kind. Rapid movement in front of him startles him so badly he almost starts screaming again. A girl of nine or ten stands at the end of the table by his feet, looking down at him. She wears a bright blue bodysuit and has long blond hair, unusually pale skin, and bright blue eyes.

She seems to be in a hurry. “Don’t say anything, and just listen,” she says. “There are two of you, and one must die. All will be lost, unless you survive against your next adversary.”

As suddenly as she appeared, she blinks out, as if she were never there. Mickey tries to figure out what the girl told him, but a chattering sound from the floor interrupts his thoughts. It sounds like old novelty gift dentures wound up so the teeth chatter together. That sound terrifies him like never before, triggering some buried memory or glimpse of a nightmare. Some part of his mind knows exactly what his adversary is, and that confuses him even more. Adding to this unwelcome sound is a smell he is sure he has never encountered—something fishy mixed with roasted peanuts. His mind races to understand this smell, but he can’t. This used to happen to him when he traveled to different countries in the military. He loved to walk around the tourist and marketplaces on the weekends, often picking up new smells that weren’t good or repulsive—just different. This smell is like that.

The chattering moves closer, and once again he screams in fright. Mickey bolts upright. He struggles to remember who he is and where he is. Movement from above catches his attention. He looks up just in time to glimpse two gray-and-black bodies before they pull out of view. A nightmare, that’s what this is! Whoever he is, wherever he is from, this is a nightmare, and all he has to do is make himself wake up. In a dream, all he has to do is imagine a change to his situation, and it will happen. The thought that he will soon wake up and escape

gives him hope. With all his strength, he wishes to wake up, but nothing happens. He pinches his arm, and it hurts, which isn't a positive sign.

Mickey screams again, triggering two things: The two gray creatures above extend their heads out over the hole to look at him, and the chattering on the floor intensifies. Mickey assumes whatever is on the floor is just like those things in the hole above. One thing he does know: his screams excite them. No matter what, he has to remain calm. His survival depends on it.

Still perched on the table, Mickey scans the room for a weapon. He is too much of a target here in the light from the hole above; he must get up so he can move quickly. The creature on the floor anticipates the move and springs onto the table just as Mickey leaps off into the darkness. Mickey feels the air on his arm as the creature passes by. From the darkness, he spins back to look at the table. The eerie orange glow from the hole illuminates the surface. The creature on the table moves in perfect, quick turns like a tank, its six back legs positioning it so it still faces him. The two frontmost legs do not end in points like the others; they are a hybrid cross between human hands and claws. Two short, fat finger-like appendages sit at the end of each claw, with an equally short, fat thumb on the opposite side. He knows by instinct that it uses these claws to deliver food into its yawning mouth. Its chattering teeth begin to set his nerves on fire.

"Oh my God," Mickey whispers as he gets his first real look at his attacker.

The mouth is full of hundreds of silver, very sharp teeth, placed in several rows like a shark. The chattering sound comes from the creature bringing its teeth close together and grinding them back and forth sideways. The creature knows Mickey is studying it, so it decides to give him a little demonstration by opening its mouth as wide as it can, effectively lowering the bottom jaw until it almost hits the table. As if that weren't enough, Mickey can now see many more teeth running into the mouth and down the throat. Besides the black legs, the rest of the body and the outer shell are the same gray color. The skin has the texture and look of sharkskin.

Mickey is at a loss as to what this thing will look like when it pulls its shell in tight around itself—though another part of his mind yells out, "A rock!" The creature has one single, large black eye above the mouth, surrounded by eight smaller black eyes. Suddenly, a giant gasp comes from the creature as it draws air into its lungs. Mickey senses this creature may be having trouble breathing air. He sure hopes so.

Mickey moves to his right, and the beast's legs piston up and down several times as the thing turns to face him. This thing is no larger than a medium-sized dog—maybe thirty or forty pounds—but the teeth and quickness make it tremendously formidable. It occurs to Mickey that this thing is now studying him just as he studied it and that he is as much an alien to it as it is to him. As he continues to watch, fascinated, the thing hops in place three times, resembling a crab ballerina from hell. On the third bounce, it launches straight at Mickey.

Despite the danger, he's not about to let it kill him without a fight. As it flies toward him, he swings his fist to connect with the side of its head. As soon as it is even with him, his fist already in motion for a heavy roundhouse thrown with all his strength, the creature does a particularly fascinating thing. While sailing through the air, its head swivels like a turret until it faces him with its mouth open wide. Mickey watches in horror as his hand and arm disappear into the wide-open maw. Before he can pull his arm out, the beast snaps its mouth shut, easily and cleanly snipping off his right arm at the elbow.

Mickey's forward momentum continues on its course as he stumbles across the room, trying desperately to keep from falling. He knows if he falls, he dies. Somehow, he maintains his balance. As soon as the creature hits the floor, Mickey seizes his chance and runs at the thing. Blood pumps rhythmically from the stump where his arm used to be, but he barely notices as he moves in for a mighty kick. Perhaps he learned his lesson from losing his arm, or maybe it is just instinct, because at the last second Mickey changes direction as the thing lunges at him, barely missing his leg.

Distractedly, he looks around for his missing arm, not realizing it is already safely in the creature's gut. Mickey looks back at the table and sees a blanket lying there that he previously missed. How the hell did that get there? As he reaches for it, the beast nimbly leaps back onto the table, executing its three-tap hop while its teeth chatter. A part of Mickey's pajama top is stuck between two of the creature's teeth, dancing merrily to the chatter, chatter, and chattering. Mickey stares on, mesmerized.

When it jumps for Mickey this time, he ducks down as it flies over his head, giving him enough time to collect the blanket from the table. He approaches the creature with the blanket held out in front of him with his one remaining hand. The creature stops chattering its teeth and clicks in a way that sounds like Morse code. Immediately, the creatures above click back a response. Mickey freezes for a few seconds, waiting to see if those things up in the hole have

decided to join the party. Evidently, they are quite happy on their side of the hole, because they stay put.

Mickey turns his attention back to his monster at hand, and it seems to be studying him again. It has become acutely still. He advances slowly, then just as he is about to throw the blanket on it with his left hand, it takes a few fast hops toward the table but detours just enough to strike Mickey's exposed leg—as if teasing him.

Holy crap.... This thing is playing with me now? Mickey thinks.

Two can play this game. He pretends to overreact to the bump and runs toward the head of the table. The creature disappears around the foot of the table. Mickey switches directions and runs after it, hoping to catch it off guard. As soon as the creature jumps up on the head of the table, Mickey takes advantage of its momentary confusion by throwing the blanket on top of it and pulling it onto the floor so that he can jump up and down on it. He jumps high into the air and comes down on a spot where, a moment before, there was only blanket—and now there are teeth. There is a single click, and his right foot is gone. Mickey hops on his left foot as the creature chews its way out of the blanket, swallows his foot, and prepares to resume its attack. Mickey hopes this creature will get blood or meat poisoning from his arm and leg, and he is still trying to come up with a way to survive this encounter.

Light explodes from everywhere, blinding and confusing Mickey simultaneously. Voices yell from every direction, and he can barely make out the frantic movement through his squinted eyes.

“On the floor! Guard the portal! Don't stare into the rift!” a man's voice commands.

“On the floor!” yell two other voices around him. Mickey is still struggling to see in this sudden light, and his loss of blood isn't helping him think too clearly. He tries to figure out how he is going to drop to the floor with only one arm and one leg and laughs aloud at the thought. His lively humor is fleeting, however, as two people knock him down and push him onto his stomach.

One of the men pushes Mickey's face into the carpet as he yells into his ear, “What the hell was that thing that jumped up through the hole when we turned on the lights?”

“My date,” Mickey says. “Now you scared her off.”

“Shut up, you wise-ass!” the man yells, hitting him on the side of his head with the butt of his .38 pistol. Mickey’s head turns as blood trickles down the side of his face.

Mickey tries again, “You assholes are about to piss off your superiors by letting me bleed to death.”

The leader leans forward and whispers harshly into Mickey’s ear, “If you don’t shut the fuck up, I’ll kill you myself and take my chances with my superiors!”

The leader turns to one of his men. “Pete, what are you doing? Quit looking at the damn hole, you idiot! I told you it can make you go crazy! Bring me the hypo before he decides to teleport again.... Hurry!”

“Sorry, Ricky,” Pete says. “I told you to give the hypo to Jimmy. I get distracted too easily.”

Ricky yells, “Damn it, Pete, I told you to call me Sergeant!”

The exchange confuses Mickey, but he no longer feels any pain. He has almost bled out and is tiring fast. Some kidnappers they are! You would think they’d try to keep him alive, but they make no effort at all. Mickey feels something change in his head. It feels like a cold hand settling over the back of his mind, the way a driver’s hand settles on a steering wheel—someone else’s hand, and yet it fits him perfectly. He sees things more clearly. He likes this new clarity because he realizes he wants to stay alive and knows exactly how to do it. Mickey twists his head just a little to figure out where his attackers are. The leader, Ricky, is still pushing down on the back of his head, and a second man, Jimmy, is sitting on his lower back. Pete has a hypodermic needle and is now squirting the air out of the needle as he quickly walks toward him. Mickey waits until Pete touches the needle to his skin, making sure all three men are in contact with him.

Mickey smiles at Ricky, then winks, eliciting a shriek from Ricky as he becomes aware of what is about to happen: “Nooooo!”

Another switch flips in Mickey’s head.

That was the travel switch, Mickey thinks to himself.

Mickey likes that he is back in control again, that he can now fix things. He and his three fellow travelers arise from the floor, through the portal, and into the tunnel. The view through the portal is of the orange world (which just happens to be one of the channels on this crazy TV), but Mickey can go wherever he likes.

Mickey is remarkably adept at traveling in this strange “in-between” world, and it amazes him again that he feels like he and his fellow travelers aren’t moving at all but are just floating while everything they see and hear moves past them. Mickey wishes for his arm and leg to be whole, and they are. He feels just a slight burning, then a numb sensation, and that is all. The “ether,” as he calls it, also replaces his lost blood. Somehow, Mickey can draw from the matter and energy in this place to heal himself.

Mickey becomes aware of his surroundings and focuses on just one thing at a time. He has learned during his previous travels that there are so many things happening in so many dimensions, places, and times that to try to take it all in will only make you lose your sanity. Mickey believes that parts of your mind can go to different realities and times and never reassemble if you are not particularly careful. It would be better to keep your eyes shut, but then you would miss the visual and aural cues. As happens every time he travels, all of the hair on his body stands on end. He can feel thousands of small shocks, which seem like static shocks from walking on carpet and touching a doorknob. Mickey smells the sickeningly sweet scent of ozone.... This is the one smell he has never been able to get used to.

All of Mickey’s companions have their eyes open. All three are screaming at the unreality of this place; he knows from experience that it can be a little overwhelming the first time. More than the unreality, though, they scream at the absolute loneliness of this place, and at the sudden realization of how things actually fit together. This knowledge would make many people on Earth go crazy. Mickey hears Pete starting to laugh hysterically now, which is a sure sign he is losing.... Or has already lost his mind.

Too bad, he thinks. I would have liked to have all three.

Mickey mentally releases his insane passenger, Pete. The laughter fades quickly. Mickey does not feel sorry for his former traveler and doesn’t care what happens to him. These men knew the risks in trying to capture him, and Pete lost. For the last few seconds, or hours, or days (who knows how long they have been in this place), Mickey has been listening to the same tones that Sergeant Torres heard at Medina Lake. He has been listening for just the right set of tones that tell him where their exit is.

No sooner does he have this thought than he hears the tones and says in his mind, “Now.”

The story continues...

Mickey has only begun to learn what lies between worlds. Find out what happens next in the complete novel.

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