

# Vrolyck

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and Other Weird Tales*

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Vrolyck © Mark Samuels  
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## *Vrolyck*

I had been living in a cramped apartment out in the suburbs to the south of the city. The apartment overlooked a dingy street, invariably strewn with rubbish due to the preponderance of fast food outlets. Amongst these was a café that remained open for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The café was useful to me. After 1 a.m. it was usually deserted, and I often spent time there, sipping a greasy coffee and reading. My insomnia made sleep impossible most nights and the owners were uncommunicative foreigners who took no interest in their customers. The décor (moulded plastic seats and Formica tables) seemed not to have changed since the 1970s. Overhead, neon strip lighting gave the place a gleaming white sanitary air, like a hospital canteen.

One night, as I sat in the café drinking a lukewarm coffee in my usual corner, a woman in her early thirties, wearing a fur-trimmed black coat, came over to my table.

‘May I join you?’ she asked. ‘It’s okay if you’d prefer to be alone.’

My first reaction was one of alarm; I was surprised that she should take it upon herself to invade my privacy. But her manner was apologetic and inoffensive and I had no wish to cause a scene by being rude.

She bought me another coffee. I had been sipping at the dregs of the last one for the past half hour. The woman told me that her name was Emily Curtis.

## *The White Hands*

‘Excuse my curiosity,’ she said, ‘but you look very tired. Do you suffer from insomnia too?’

We had a conversation about sleepless nights and the various forms of medication prescribed to alleviate the condition. She had tried many of the same drugs as I, and had similarly found that the side effects had led her to abandon their use:

‘Did you try the latest,’ she asked, ‘the supposedly extremely powerful one that’s just come on the market?’

‘Triaxopol?’ I asked. ‘It worked for the first few weeks with me. But the stomach cramps became unbearable. The only way I could fend off the pain was with stimulants, which defeated the purpose of the soporific! In the end I found that I preferred to live with the exhaustion.’

‘I think my condition is hereditary,’ she said, ‘my mother suffers from the same problem. One or other of us is awake during the small hours. Still, we keep each other company.’

‘I live alone. I don’t find I have much in common with other people,’ I replied.

I learned that she and her mother lived on the north side of the city and that she had been visiting some friends in this quarter. She had come into the café in order to while away the hours until dawn. I suppose that I envied her ability to approach a stranger without betraying any self-consciousness, for my own temperament is acutely solitary.

After half an hour or so, she asked me about the ‘white make-up’ that entirely covered my face and hands. I suppose that the question was inevitable and I was surprised that it had taken her so long to broach the subject.

‘Please excuse my saying so,’ she said, ‘but it gives you a ghoulish appearance. I thought that you might wear the make-up deliberately, like some Goths do, to appear morbid.’

‘Hardly,’ I replied. ‘I don’t have a choice. It masks the worst signs of chronic psoriasis. It’s one of the crosses I bear along with insomnia. I’m told that it’s psychosomatic and was brought on by the stress of an accident I suffered recently.’

‘You’re really in a pretty bad way, aren’t you?’

‘Isn’t everyone?’

Although our conversation flowed naturally and I found her more congenial than anyone with whom I had spoken in many weeks, I soon began to resent the intrusion and was longing to return to my apartment.

The woman noticed the book that I had set aside in order to talk with her. It was a battered old copy of *The Noctuary of Time*, and she picked it up, turning the pages with curiosity.

‘I love this stuff,’ she said, ‘I have done for as long as I can remember. When I was, oh, around four years old I found a copy of *Struwwelpeter* amongst the books in the local library. The pictures started off my obsession with weird horror.’

‘And now that you’re older?’ I asked.

‘I read the European writers, the ones whose work deals with cruelty and pain: the likes of Hanns Heinz Ewers, Stefan Grabinski, and Leonid Andreyev. Are you familiar with their fiction?’

‘I am indeed.’

She laughed: ‘I think my reading habits have contributed to my insomnia, you know. When I do sleep, some of the dreams I have are quite awful!’

‘Mine too. But at least I can use them; I write.’

‘Really? Have you had anything published?’

‘Just a couple of slim books of weird tales. They weren’t very successful, but they did bring me some little recognition amongst those who read such works. Just lately I haven’t written a great deal. I’ve been trying to finish something that I began just after my accident.’

‘What is it called?’

## *The White Hands*

‘The working title is ‘The Dybbuk Pyramid’.

‘I’d love to read it,’ she offered.

‘I don’t know. It needs more work, though I can’t quite see what to do with it at the moment.’

‘Perhaps I could make a few suggestions?’

I thought for a moment, then nodded my assent:

By now it was past four in the morning and I could no longer resist the urge to be alone. As I stood up and pulled on my black overcoat she thanked me for the conversation and told me that she would be back in the café in forty-eight hours time and hoped that we might talk again. I promised to bring along the manuscript of ‘The Dybbuk Pyramid’.

The fact that she’d admitted suffering from literary-inspired nightmares fascinated me, and I resolved to keep the appointment.



Our next meeting was rather perfunctory. We only spoke for a short time, since she was somewhat inebriated, but I gave her the manuscript of my story and called for a taxi to take her home. We did, however, arrange another appointment at the café, and she insisted on giving me her telephone number. Before I put her in the taxi she squeezed my hand in an affectionate manner. I noticed with embarrassment that traces of my masking lotion were left behind on her fingers.



Our third meeting proved to be the most interesting to date as it revealed the degree to which my influence on her had grown.

## *Vrolyk*

She was in the café before I arrived, nursing a coffee and smoking the same brand of cigarettes that I myself bought. I noticed a certain change in her features; the naïve quality seemed to have been repressed and, in its place was an unusual expression, almost of dislocation, which I knew very well indeed. She had the copy of 'The Dybbuk Pyramid' laid out on the plastic-coated table before her.

I sat down and accepted the cigarette she offered. Without preamble, she uttered the following:

'This story is without doubt the strangest thing I've ever read. It is as if the text is a reflection of my own thoughts. No—that's wrong. It is as if my thoughts are only a reflection of the story. While I read I couldn't tear my eyes away from the page and I forgot all about the outside world. It seemed as if my mind was becoming a part of the text. It was horrible and irresistible at the same time. And the really bizarre thing is that, on the surface, it appeared only to be a confused jumble of disconnected words!'

'It's an experiment,' I told her, 'a new technique I'm trying to perfect.'

'It's kind of like Joyce's stream of consciousness or Burroughs' cut-ups?'

'Kind of,' I agreed warily. I suppose that the majority of writers would be pleased and flattered by such remarks. It was after all a sign that the story had had precisely the desired effect. However, personal satisfaction as a writer was no longer any use to me.

'What inspired you to write it?' she asked.

'I have some notes here that I made in an attempt to sort things out in my own mind, when it all began. They're very short. You're welcome to read them.'

I passed her a sheet of paper I had torn from my notebook:

## *The White Hands*

*'The Dybbuk Pyramid' is an attempt to delineate an utterly alien consciousness that comes into contact with this world and interacts with it. It is not the case that the creature is evil—such an interpretation is solely of the human paradigm—but that its very existence is inimical to mankind.*

*The first draft attempted to present the tale from the viewpoint of the alien creature itself: its thought processes were to be markedly different from those of humans and naturally it would not do to utilise vocabulary common to the experience of mankind.*

*I soon realised that the first draft could not possibly succeed. It read as total gibberish. Ninety-nine percent of the experiences of an alien entity would have no meaning for us. Even had the tale been confined to a simple encounter with the human race, the tremendous distortion in narrative technique meant that it would most resemble the aimless scrawling produced by some schizophrenics.*

*Then I realised that it might be possible to write such a tale in a first person narrative, were the alien consciousness fused with that of a man or woman, perhaps as a prelude to an invasion by outside forces. Thereby the alien aspect might be filtered through human perception, giving the narrative a cohesion and familiarity that would enable it to be communicable to its human readership.*

Curtis had finished reading and seemed to be considering what I'd written. During her silence I lit one of my own cigarettes, offered her one, and watched the smoke curling up towards the neon light strips on the ceiling.

'You succeeded,' she said finally. 'The story's like an incantation. There's some mysterious power in it that words can't explain. Perhaps the closest analogy I can

## *Vrolyk*

make is that one feels as if everything human is a sham: a façade for something else entirely. And what lies behind the façade cannot be understood.'

I nodded and flicked ash into the saucer of my coffee cup.

'You're as close as anyone can get to the truth,' I said.

The word 'contamination' rose unbidden in my mind. I stubbed out my cigarette in the saucer, drank the last dregs of my coffee, and told her that it was late and I really must go. 'I am a person,' I said, 'who requires separation from other people.' I had found that too much contact with them invariably disturbed the state of withdrawal that allowed me to function. Also, I knew that my work here was practically done.

She smiled, as if she understood my dilemma, and then put one of her gloved hands over my own, stroking it with her fingertips.

'One thing I've not mentioned,' she said, 'is the sense of isolation that comes across in the story. It's as if the author is utterly at a loss in this world, utterly alone. Perhaps it's a cry for help?'

I removed my hand from beneath hers, stood up with finality and thanked her. Wrapping myself in my heavy winter overcoat, I made my way toward the door. There was no need for us to meet again, unless further personal intervention was required to accelerate the process.



The walk back to my apartment was only a matter of minutes. I invariably found pleasure in the sight of the deserted streets at this time of night. During the day the

## *The White Hands*

main thoroughfare was busy with traffic and pedestrians, but after midnight it had an air of pleasing desolation.

I let myself into the nondescript block and made my way up the stairs towards my rooms. As far as I knew there were only three other tenants, and this suited me very well, for at night the whole place was deathly quiet.

Once inside, I sat down in the armchair adjacent to the window. The familiarity of my surroundings allowed me to relax after the encounter with Emily Curtis. I looked across the room at the low bookcase filled with the three-dozen or so battered books that I had read and re-read. I knew the volumes by heart, from the blemishes and tears on the dust-wrappers through to the dark horror of their contents. I had used them as exemplars in perfecting my method.

From the armchair I reached across to the window and opened the curtains so that I could gaze up at the stars. As usual, I felt the delicious sensation of falling upwards in a rush of cosmic vertigo, as if the sky were below me rather than above. I opened the window and leant out for a clearer view. For some time I allowed the pleasurable nausea to overwhelm me, but finally I had to return my gaze to the street. I was afraid that I might overbalance and plummet to the pavement below, as had happened to me once before.

There, beneath a streetlamp, I saw the pale face of Emily Curtis, watching me with a concentrated stare. I drew the curtains against the sight, and when I opened them again half an hour later she had gone.



I managed to sleep for a few hours. Later that morning, after I'd bathed and applied the masking lotion to my skin, the phone rang. It was Emily. I cradled the receiver

## *Vrolyk*

between my shoulder and ear and listened, lighting a cigarette, as she apologised for her intrusion.

‘Vrolyk, I can’t shake off the effects of that story,’ she explained. ‘It keeps racing through my mind, day and night. The thing’s become a part of me. Whatever I do I can’t stop thinking of it. Even as I’m speaking to you now I see the words on the pages.’

‘Ah,’ I said, between puffs on my cigarette.

‘I have to see you. We have to talk about this. It’s not right. I’m worried that I’m losing my . . .’

‘I would prefer not to discuss the story any further,’ I cut in. ‘Just now I require total isolation.’

‘For how long?’ she asked desperately.

‘For an indefinite period.’

As I put the receiver down, I recalled that she not only knew my telephone number but where I lived. I hoped that she would heed my request to stay away. It was imperative that I discover whether or not my own physical presence was a factor in any developments.



Weeks passed and I settled back into my nightly routine of haunting the café opposite and watching the stars whirl above me from the window. What had happened to Emily Curtis had been, I feared, merely an isolated incident, a consequence of brief exposure that would fade without any permanent effects. Such incidents had occurred before and had been a grave disappointment to me. All my previous contacts had been with subjects of little imagination, and although a few had suffered weird and horrible dreams after reading ‘The Dybbuk Pyramid’, the effects were not long-lasting. I wondered whether, if I rendered it into plainer English, permanent contamination would be achievable.

## *The White Hands*

I had no great interest in the fate of Emily Curtis at this point, despite the fact that one of my correspondents, who also lived in the city, wrote to tell me that he had encountered her on the streets. This was possibly on the same night that I had spotted her looking up at my window. Apparently, she had been wandering as if in a daze, and when he approached her she had fled in terror. She seemed not to have recognised him although they had met on several occasions since our meeting to discuss my published short story collections.

Two weeks later, I received a manuscript posted to me by Emily Curtis. It appeared that she had written a tale of her own, which she had called 'The Communication'. There was an accompanying letter. One glance was enough to confirm that the contamination was a progressive rather than temporary condition. It was a very short letter and the salient portion ran as follows:

*I am in a confused state of mind. I quite forget my own name, or even where I am for much of the time. I watch the shadows from the window during the day as they creep towards me. And I watch the men who work by night. The enclosed story, which I began a week ago, belongs to you. I may not have time to finish it. Before what I have been is lost for good, best that you should see it.*

It was as I expected: the manuscript appeared incomprehensible. Written on foolscap, it consisted of seemingly random words. These were not written in horizontal lines, but at varying angles to one another, in spirals and around the edges of the paper. Some of the words were in English, others in various other languages and a number were *outré* characters that would have been mere gibberish to anyone but myself. Those portions that were in English I have quoted below, having first arranged them in a linear fashion and incorporated

## Vrolyk

translation where required. They mirror almost exactly my own story 'The Dybbuk Pyramid'.

*In the dream she had found herself in a strange and unknown city. Her body was unfamiliar to her and appeared to be that of an almost hairless biped covered by dark fabrics. This body was a source of repulsion; being an upright mass of tissue filled with water, faeces and mucus. Its senses were overwhelming; disparate but consecutive images of vivid colour and puzzling airborne perceptions seemed to enter through holes in its head, vibrations that made no sense entered through other holes on each side and pressures that varied with a maddening intensity rippled across the biped's outer layer. As this creature stumbled across the deserted and dark city of monoliths and past black vertical columns that fanned out into rustling limbs, it sucked air into itself repeatedly, with a horrible sense of uneven rhythm. The dream did not seem to last very long and was terminated when the creature came across another of its kind. Seeing this other and knowing that this was the form in which she also was trapped, Curtis found the horror too much to bear. The creature staggered towards her, clad in similar fabrics, but these did not hide the monstrosity of its awful face, like that of some deranged white ape. When it made an expression that was utterly alien, she fled, to be awoken by her own screams, fully clothed on the bed in the apartment she shared with her elderly mother. Whether it was the dream itself that had awakened her, or the memory of the dream whilst in a state of semi-consciousness, she could not tell.*

I realised that what had been set in motion now required my own intervention: it was time that Emily met with an accident of her own. Doubtless she would

*The White Hands*

do so anyway, in due course, but such had been the corruption of my own physical form in the interim that in order for me to gauge the success of my plan my timetable had to be brought forward. My psoriasis had worsened into something more akin to leprosy, and I was unsure how long my health would hold out.



The journey on the bus to Curtis's part of the city took just under an hour. Apart from the driver and myself the bus was empty. One of the small windows that provided ventilation was jammed open and freezing air blew into the deck. I had telephoned ahead and Curtis' mother had answered.

'Hello?' she had sounded strained and tense.

'Mrs Curtis? This is Trefusis Vrolyck. I'm a friend of your daughter. Excuse my calling, but I understand she's ill and I'm concerned about her.'

'Oh Mr Vrolyck, thank you for calling. Emily's mentioned you to me several times.'

'How is she?'

'The doctor thinks it's a nervous breakdown. She's not left her bed for days. She doesn't speak or eat, only lies there, staring.'

'Perhaps I could see her? It might help.'

'Oh yes please. I'm at my wit's end. She often told me how much she admired you and unless her condition changes the doctor says she'll have to be taken into some horrible psychiatric unit. I couldn't bear that to happen.'

'I can be there in an hour or so. Would that be convenient?'

'Oh yes, it'd be wonderful. Thank you so much Mr Vrolyck.'

'I'll see you shortly, then.'

## *Vrolyk*

And so I alighted onto the pavement next to a very busy dual carriageway flanked by 1950s council estates. The buildings were blocks seven floors high, each of identical plain grey concrete with flat roofs and exterior walkways. The Curtis apartment was situated in one of the blocks on the eastern edge.

All of the walls were covered with graffiti, most of it simply the names of those who had turned their spray cans upon them, but there were some symbols indicating an origin that was familiar to me. These were the symbols that I had attempted to communicate in English via ‘The Dybbuk Pyramid’.

I had to climb a vandalised stairway to reach the second floor. On the way up I passed a vagrant who seemed to be lost in some private ritual of his own. He was muttering to himself and arranging the rubbish strewn on the stairs into a little pile. He eyed me curiously as I passed and there was something in his expression that made me hesitate. On closer inspection, he seemed unused to the flesh and muscles that covered his skull and continually screwed his face up in a contorted manner as if unsure of the appropriate impression it should convey to others. I had myself experienced such a dilemma after my accident.

When I reached the Curtis apartment I had to ring the bell several times before I heard shuffling footsteps. The door was opened a few inches, though held by a safety chain. An old woman peered out at me.

‘Mr Vrolyck?’ she asked.

Initially I thought that she was perturbed by my appearance, for in truth, the masking lotion I employed no longer disguised the ravages time had wrought upon my skin. However, it was obvious that her eyesight was not keen and she was simply squinting at me myopically, too vain or stupid to wear spectacles.

‘That’s right. You must be Emily’s mother.’

*The White Hands*

‘Yes. Oh please come inside, won’t you?’ the woman said.

She unchained the door and beckoned me to follow her as she shuffled back down the hallway in her carpet slippers. She said:

‘I’ve just had a telephone call from Dr Phelps telling me that he felt I really should sign the papers. You know, the ones authorising him to arrange for Emily to be taken into care? It’s all so distressing.’

‘I can imagine that it must be terrible for you. But I think you’re wise to try every option before agreeing to that course of action,’ I replied.

‘Do you know what I think caused all this?’ she asked.

‘Please tell me.’

‘It’s the vandals on this estate. They’re all into drugs, you know. For some reason she took an interest in their graffiti and they took advantage of her.’

‘Really?’

‘Some of the neighbours told me that she’d paid them to spray-paint her own designs on the walls. But why should she do that? I don’t believe them. They’re gossips. Nasty people. And since those vandals were found dead; you’ll have read about it in the papers; they’ve been spreading the rumour that my Emily was somehow to blame!’

‘How so?’

‘I’ve no idea. Everyone knows they killed themselves. It was probably the drugs, and my daughter’s never taken drugs. Can you believe what they’re saying? My daughter! Can you believe it Mr Vrolyck?’

‘It’s ridiculous, of course . . .’

‘Of course it is. And anyway, I saw a gang of them just the other night spraying the walls again, the same ones that Emily used to meet. So how do they explain that, eh? I think newspapers make these stories up.’

‘That’s probably the answer.’

*Vrolyk*

‘It’s an absolute disgrace . . .’

‘I understand how you feel.’

We stood outside Emily’s room. Her mother opened the door and, although it was dark within and the curtains were drawn, I could just make out a figure in the bed propped up with several pillows.

As I drew closer I could see that Emily Curtis’s face was blank and her eyes stared straight ahead without blinking. But I thought I detected a flicker of movement as I came into her view.

‘Do you think that I could be alone with her for a short while?’ I asked her mother.

‘Oh yes. I’ll make us some tea and bring it in. You sit down next to her.’

Left alone with Emily I sat down on the edge of the bed. I softly spoke her name and her eyes rotated in the direction of my voice and a vague, unnatural smile distorted her previously placid features. There were two forces at war within her brain, and the pressure upon it could only be relieved when one of them gained control.

The sound of her mother making tea filtered along the hallway. I heard cups clinking and a kettle being filled. I would not have long. Removing one of the pillows from beneath Emily’s head, I gripped it tightly in both hands and pressed it down over her face as hard as I could. There was a gurgling, and then her body thrashed around for what seemed a long time. Finally she slumped back and I took the pillow away from her face. Her mouth was open and her eyes wide with death. Gently, I closed them and turned her head to one side. I replaced the pillow in its original position, making it look as if she were asleep.

A few seconds later the mother entered bearing a tray. Before she could find anywhere to set it down I motioned that we should leave the room.

‘Was there any response?’ she asked in a hushed voice as we walked back down the hall.

*The White Hands*

‘I think so, yes. She seemed to recognise my voice before she drifted off to sleep. She even smiled.’

The mother poured out the tea in the kitchen and I sat and sipped the weak liquid, explaining that it would be wise if we let Emily rest. I suggested that perhaps the response I had witnessed might be the first sign of a pleasing amelioration in her condition.

When I left there were tears of gratitude in the eyes of the old woman.

‘Perhaps you could come again soon?’

But I pretended not to hear.



As I made my way back down the vandalised stairway the vagrant was still there. He had been busy in my absence and had completed the arrangement he was fashioning from crumpled wrappers, ash and cigarette butts. It looked like a rubbish heap, but on examining it more closely I could see that it had been fashioned into a crudely-shaped pyramid. His face was still struggling with its expressions, and from time to time one of his grimy hands traced a path along the graffiti upon the walls. But it was when he spoke that I knew the contamination had not been confined to my own contacts. For the tramp, with his pale dead face, mouthed the words:

‘It is the time of the black radiance from the stars.’

Although the words were English, it was in my own language that I received his telepathic transmissions.

It was brilliant. The city was covered with such graffiti, the symbols reproducing like bacteria. How much more effective than my own attempts to disseminate them under the guise of my writing! As you may have guessed, the symbols were a sign, a sort of cosmic homing-beacon, calling down others of my kind to enter

## *Vrolyk*

the bodies of human beings. And I thought how ironic it was that, after all my efforts, it was vandals, those self-styled popular artists contaminated by Curtis, who had proved the more effective communicators.



My last sight of Emily Curtis was in the café where we first met.

Some days after the incident I have just described, I was out on the streets, seeking further signs of the contamination. There was indeed ample evidence of its unchecked spread. The symbols had been plastered on bridges, railway carriages, buses and any wall that would show them clearly. I am not sure that the people were particularly aware, except for Curtis, the unknown vagrant, the vandals and, of course, myself. I had been one of the very first, the pathfinder, so to speak. There were twelve billion of us waiting out there, so only around half our number would be able to find shelter in the human race on this planet. In order for a successful transfer to take place, all human thoughts had to be extinguished from the individual for a long enough period to allow our own to take hold, so the prior death of the brain was entirely necessary.

Emily Curtis was sitting in the window, gazing out through the misty, condensation-soaked glass of the café at nothing in particular. Her skin was even paler than it had been in life and was caked in the same white foundation that I wore. As I passed by, her eyes met mine for a brief moment. There lurked within them a black radiance, filtered from the stars.

She knew now, as did I, that we are here only temporarily, until these physical shells rotted away. Then we would have to move on again, fleeing the death that

*The White Hands*

pursued us. But for now, like me, she was trapped within the human carcass, suffering the horrifying existence of the biped simian, the maddening trace-memories lingering within the fabric of their brains: a dead person's memories, names drawn in the sand just beyond the reach of the waves breaking from the black ocean before it.