

## His Cold World

by Robert J. Rappoport

Investigator Owen North is cold, here with me at the end of the world. Days are long and bitter; nights an uncaring impossibility. Icy fog licks hungrily at Owen's feet, he is forever grateful for his brother's navy boots. Made from stiff, molded rubber and pliable leather, his boots and five pairs of socks have kept trenchfoot and worse at bay. Nothing is more valuable in this cold new world than a good pair of boots, by Owen's reckoning, with socks nearly as important. Socks cannot be eaten, however, if worst comes to worst. It hasn't yet, Owen manages to scrape by quite literally by peeling off slivers of the more docile tendrils of the thing that has enveloped everything.

Owen stands up from an electric heater, taking his quilted blanket with him as a shroud. He turns off the gas-powered generator that has become his pride and salvation. He hears it whir into silence with a familiar foreboding. He hopes, as always, that it will find it in its heart to start up again when Owen asks it to. Owen takes in a deep breath of chilly air and exhales from his diaphragm. His breath comes out visible and he grimaces, scratching flakey skin from inside a beard that has long since lost its novelty or usefulness.

"Gotta get up, come on. Come on." He speaks loudly to himself; the concept of being alone with his own thoughts is familiar to him and he has no need to internalize. His voice echoes inside of the parking garage that has been his underground sanctuary for several months. Months? Feels like years. Owen has lost his sense of time in this place. Maybe it's for the best.

His vocalizations turn to grunts of exertion as he begins to stretch and warm up his body the only way he knows how: a yoga routine from an old DVD that broke when it was smashed against what used to be Owen's roommate. After that, two hundred crunches. Five hundred push-ups. Fifty pull-ups using the open window of a white van with "live free or die trying" written in indelible black spray paint on its side. Two laps around ten levels of parking garage, avoiding the top floor that opens to

the surface and the cold. Three hours later he eats some tentacle jerky for breakfast. It reminds him of what he imagines hell tastes like.

Owen's breath comes out in puffs of steam and he feels warm everywhere. He is also sweating, a problem he solves with a windshield scraper that he has cut to fit along the grooves of his body.

Owen stretches again and retrieves his sword from its place in the van. He hefts it and feels the cold steel leach his heat away from him. It is a marvel, his investigation tool, four and a half feet of pitted black... something that has never lost its edge.

He found it when everyone else was running and he had tripped over broken concrete. He heard a loud squelching noise and thought he was about to be devoured, knew that he would not survive. Then he saw it, glowing inside the pustule that had erupted from the earth. His salvation. It whispered dark things to Owen, he learned enough to know not to listen too carefully. It still whispers, though. Calls him strange names and gives him some damned bad nightmares. The devil you know, he reminds himself, is better than the devil you don't.

Owen practices, performing a sword training exercise that he half remembers from a Bruce Lee movie. The sword heats in his

hands and soon the two have reached equilibrium; they thrum together. Owen's breath comes out clear, he is ready to explore.

Owen begins by cleaning his boots and putting on dry socks. This pair is dyed a muddy red color and stiff. He wants to use one of the few pairs of snow white socks he has left. He pauses, looking at the two pairs of white socks piled separately from the dirty ones in the SUV in which he takes refuge every night.

Owen stares at his fresh socks for a long while, "How long has it been, really?" He asks, allowing the weight of it all the press in on him for just a moment. Their heavy alabaster mouths remain stapled shut and they do not answer him. They never do. He grunts and shuts his eyes as he puts on a pair of filthy socks. He feels their filth spread and mix with the oils of his feet. They are solid, though, and they'll keep out the water for a little while longer at least. Finally, Owen puts on his boots, firm leather and rubber mixed to make an impervious bulwark against all that might harm him. His shield and salvation, given to him by someone Owen can no longer picture.

Owen remembers the events of the awakening, but little before then. He remembers sparking wires, a telephone, and a disappointment that amateur detective work didn't get him as much pussy as he had thought it might. Now, all Owen has are his boots, his socks, and the sword. It will have to do.

After his boots are secure, Owen puts on a heavy jacket and leather gloves. His armor is well worn, but still functional. The jacket is his reason for exploring today: the white crap that's inside it has started to poke out and he has yet to find a needle that hasn't shattered under the brutal cold. He's been able to find replacement coats, some better than others.

Yesterday, while scouting, he found bright red words proclaiming "Yick's Sporting Goods" that stuck high into the air on a billboard. The address to which the billboard directed was familiar to Owen. It was a little farther afield than he might normally be comfortable with, although... He secures the sword in a makeshift sheath along his back and does up the old coat's buttons for what he hopes will be the last time. He begins to climb up the levels of his parking garage, feeling confident. This is good.

As Owen climbs higher, he feels the temperature drop, and his hard won heat begins to leak out of the tears of the coat. He curses and shuffles and takes big steps, doing all he can to keep his blood going. By the time he reaches the open window on the tenth floor he's sweating again, and breathes in deeply from his chest, moving the chill air into the warmest part of him. It feels like he's taking on the evil of the world and rejuvenating it. He stares out of the window onto desolation and wishes that this were the case.

To call it snow would be inaccurate. What Owen steps out onto could be better described as a pearly white shell that has cocooned the world, or at least Massachusetts. He heard about the horrors other states and nations were enduring, but it never felt real to him. He relies on what he can see with his own eyes, a trait that serves him well and keeps him focused. The sword probes into him, beating out a staccato rhythm inside his skull. Owen believes that this is the sword attempting to break into his mind. He is not wrong.

The tops of skyscrapers and high-rises serve as landmarks for him, the broken glass and white shell nearly blinding him in reflection of the indifferent yellow sun. The star rises still, and yet provides nothing save tantalizing patches of warmth beneath chilling winds that caress like the clammy touch of a long-dead mother. The sun is just one more deicide brought about by whatever it was that woke within the Earth.

Owen begins to walk heavily, his boots shifting the ever-present fog around his feet. He makes each of his movements as deliberate as possible, he has seen sinkholes before and is cautious. Tentacles wave and dance, searching for purchase like putrescent beanstalks. Owen ignores them and they him, they have an understanding for now. The sword whispers something to him, something about the Other. The Other that Owen has run from time and time again. It doesn't take long before he catches sight of

one: human-shaped but huge, and full of wisps and shadow, striding aimlessly in his direction. Owen's sword cools against his back. He has to stay out of sight.

Owen dashes behind the cover of an old apartment building and stares at the Other through a broken window. It jerks animatedly and Owen wonders for the thousandth time what the hell these things are. They showed up after everything went to hell, he knows that. After the snow fell until it couldn't fall anymore. The Other are his company up here, and he doesn't know the first thing about them. Except that his sword wants them. He knows that much from the whispers. It hungers for the Other almost as much as it loves Owen. Fortunately, Owen has managed to keep his vicarious gluttony in check and has yet to encounter an Other as more than brief glimpses as they go about their business.

This time however, something is different.

Owen notices that this Other is heading South; the same as him. What's worse, it is moving with a purpose.

If he didn't know better, he would think that this Other was also heading to the sporting goods store, as though called to it. He doesn't know much about the Other, but he does know that he never wants to deal with one inside of a building. The Other can go through walls. Owen cannot.

"Shit, shit," Owen says as the Other comes closer. He ducks down and waits for the right moment. It passes by Owen so quickly that he barely has time to draw his sword before it's on him.

"Hey shitface!"

The Other turns, and Owen finally gets a good look at it. He is immediately overcome by nausea at the sheer size of it. Owen stares dumbly, head on, at what would be the Other's loins on a man. Inside there are faces, dozens of them, screaming. They are being torn apart and reformed, digested. Owen cannot tear his gaze away even as the huge Other looms above him, oddly passive. He stares into those faces until he lets out a scream to match their own and charges at the Other, the sword guiding him.

Owen springs out to the side and lets the sword swing in a wide arc aimed at the beast's legs. Owen is taken off his feet by the momentum. The blade breaks through frozen air as the Other strikes out with its arm with inhuman quickness and Owen grunts with pain as it slams into his spine. He is forced inches into the shell, immobile. He feels sick.

The sword feels heavy in his hands, Owen can feel it drawing more and more heat from him. He gives it willingly, the sword whispers that it will give him power and right now he needs it. The shell melts around him as The Other lifts its foot

for a fatal blow. Owen allows the sword to drag him from the shell, just barely avoiding the attack. He skids on the cold surface, his coat tearing from the impact. He feels the damp chill of blood freezing as it leaks from his no doubt broken spine. He dares not move, but the sword screams to him. All wounds will heal if he kills the Other.

It stands above him and all Owen can see are the screaming faces. Owen feels his arm lift as the sword moves on its own. Owen imagines he can see green ichor dripping from the blade. The blade lodges itself inside the creature's loins and the faces inside began to howl desperately. The blade glows contentedly inside that black essence. As the blade drinks its fill, Owen can feel his back repairing itself. He draws back soon as he has his enough to keep moving, despite the blade's protests. Black liquid spills from the hole in the Other, as though it was being drained, pooling like oil and leaving a crystalline frame behind. What remains of the Other glistens in the sunlight as the black oil carries on screaming. It's over.

Owen turns away and vomits. He curses and swears and stumbles away from the screeching. The sword wants something from him now, wants it terribly, but he cannot oblige it. He hears a horrible cracking noise behind him that rumbles deep inside of him. He knows that sound and began to run.

"Shit!"

The crack turns to a crumbling whine and suddenly a hungry red tendril pierces the shell where the black stuff has fallen. The appendage splits open, revealing thousands of grotesque approximations of human tongues that grab and suck the black stuff until nothing remains. The tentacle writhes violently; then, nothing. It waves silently in the wind. The crystalline corpse of the Other stands nearby, the outline of a human in agony. Owen takes a deep, gritted breath and keeps on moving, triumphant and alive.

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Owen reaches the building that houses the sporting goods store without further molestation. His shirt is frozen to him by bloody scrapes. He can still move, barely. He must survive; he hears this whispered to him more than ever now. He must survive. Owen is unsure whether the words are coming from him or elsewhere. In a quiet, lonely place of his mind, Owen knows the truth. He ignores it. In that quiet place there is no purpose, only death.

"Keep going." He murmurs, gripping his sword and feeling the leftover heat from the battle drawn away from him and into the cold metal hilt. Owen takes a deep breath and begins to enter the building through a broken window, carefully avoiding razor shards that frame the makeshift entryway.

One foot though. A leg.

He shivers, cutting himself on shattered glass. A precious drop of blood freezes on the glass. Owen's head is filled with voices. He shudders and makes himself move. A shift of weight and he's through, on one of the top-most floors of what comes to a ten-story building. He remembers elevators fondly and curses them in equal measure. Memories from a life now gone will just hold him back.

"Stairs, right? Gotta be somewhere." Owen holds his sword out and ready as he searches doors on the floor. In the quiet darkness he wishes for the innocent whiteness of his clean socks. Quietly, almost reverently, Owen enters into a room with rows of empty cubicles.

Owen breathes and listens attentively to the sound of paralytic civilization. He finds magazines on a desk, dozens of laptop computers that have cracked outward from the cold. The legacy of his race that amounts to nothing.

"Not one goddam fucking useful thing." Owen says, and throws a computer, then another. He rages for a while, eventually kicking a desk hard enough to shatter a normal man's legs. The desk tips slowly, on a fulcrum, then with a long groan, the desk falls through the floor.

Owen can hear it crashing down floor after floor. The sound is lonely, suicidal. It is quiet for a long time as Owen

contemplates the new hole, bits of plaster and frozen concrete falling. Then chunks.

"Oh, no." Owen tries to back up but he is too slow, too tired. He has been waiting for the world to fall for many years. He knows that he has been brought here and he accepts it, finally. The building creaks and groans and he only manages to yell out a few choice swears before the floor splits open like a mouth and he falls through ten stories into blackness.

Owen dreams restlessly and remembers, watched by shadows and the frostbitten corpses of his fallen brethren. He dreams of a life no longer his own, a time before the world was enveloped by ice and the eldritch life that took up residence in the core. A time before the Other began to walk his cold world. I watch him as well, waiting for Owen to wake and take hold of the future I have so carefully made for him.

As is the nature of dreams, Owen recognizes his brother before he truly emerges from the fog that surrounds them. They stand in large parking lot. They are huddled near an expensive-looking car with expensive-looking electronics tossed carelessly in the back seat. Owen holds his breath and keeps his hands steady as he works a thin metallic instrument into the space between the window and the car door, feeling for the latch. He finds it easily: years of practice without consequence have made him skilled and bold in his precision.

"Hey, good one kid." His brother says, and Owen feels his lips tighten. It is more than a good job and his brother should know that.

"Right." Owen responds, "Let's get the stuff and get gone, I've got a thing."

"`Course you do, investigating privates again?"

"Man, fuck you." Owen retorts, then pauses and shrugs. "Yeah, I am." He reaches inside the car and begins piling electronics into a backpack. It's a remarkably good haul. "Some lady lost her kid, said the cops would get ideas if she came to them. She's not exactly--"

"Ollie, bro, listen to me. You gotta stop this crap. You're not helping nobody by giving these whores and crackheads help."

Owen whispers something to himself, a habit that evolved as the world collapsed and there was no one left to ignore. He wants to say that if he will not help, then who will? There are people that the world has forgotten, people who need help but have no recourse but to pine and sit on the injustice until it turns to black anger and misery. They become other than human then, these rage-incarnates. I wish for him to speak, to strike. Owen does not hear me and so remains silent.

"You got something to say, kid?" His brother asks. Owen looks at him for a long moment then shakes his head.

"No. Nothing." Owen's brother sighs and shuts the door to the car very carefully, making sure it is locked and there is no evidence to their misdemeanor.

"Ollie, you've gotta wake up," his brother continues testily. "We've got a good thing going here, being us. You're not a detective or whatever it is you think you are. You're a mechanic like me; damn good at it too. We can't be saving anyone. Only an idiot thinks he can make a difference to someone else's life. Not our place, the world's stopped spinning a long time ago. Nothing's gonna change man, we're us, they're them. Get used to it." He puts his arm around Owen's shoulder and Owen tenses briefly before relaxing into his brother's grip.

Something stirs inside him that will change everything, years hence--change with a DVD player holding a yoga video. The briefest whispers of defiance.

"You're right." Owen lies. He hides his budding anger behind a tight smile. His brother doesn't notice. Later, Owen would wonder what would have happened if he had spoken up then, rather than waiting for the perfect moment. If it somehow was connected to everything that went wrong later. If his cowardice had something to do with the black blade that erupted from the earth and marked him as its possession. Owen did not know. I did.

I lay inert in Owen's loose grip as he lies unconscious on an inflatable mattress that has broken his fall. Despite this, he should not have survived. I am changing Owen more than he knows. I feed on him, care for him, love him. I am his protector in this world. I am the reason he will not die after many more years in the cold than Owen believes have passed. I will save him and he will, in turn, save me. I awaken to food nearby and begin to rouse my sleeping host. I pass increments of precious heat into his body, easing him awake.

Then, disaster. Fear. Separation.

Owen wakes to the blurry sight of a thin shape standing over him. He reacts instantly, lurching back away from it, swinging his sword as he does so. His shoulder twinges as it nearly dislocates from the excess of energy; his sword is not in his hand. Sick heat floods into Owen's body as his sleepy unease transforms into full-scale panic. His vision clears and he searches desperately for his blade, his defense.

"It's the only thing, the only thing that keeps me here. I've got to—" Owen realizes he's speaking aloud and shuts his mouth. He tries and fails to take a calming breath, his cheeks flush and heat leaks from his every pore.

"Don't worry." The child says, "You're okay now. I saved you." The boy is lean, cold, and unsuitable for much of anything, yet the sword abides, patient in the child's hands.

"What's going on? Who, who are you. What's going on?!" As the adrenaline leaves Owen's body, the aches from his fall begin to set in. He looks up and is overcome by vertigo, falling heavily to the ground.

"Why..." He says, hoping that what remains of God is still able to listen despite being choked by something far greater still. "Why did I survive?"

"I don't know." The child says, sitting down next to him. He reaches out a hand to brush away tears that are forming on Owen's face. The child is danger, putrid abscess of humanity's waste, hate, fear of the unknown. It must be attacked. Owen responds to the commands given to him and is, as always, a good pet. He attempts to bite the child but the boy backs away easily.

"What's happening to me?" Owen asks, frightened.

The child, Owen sees now, is slightly translucent, as though an hourglass had held sands that dictated the shape of a child, and was slowly emptying. The hourglass is more than half empty, Owen can see. From the torso up the child is little more than tinkling glass. The child does not move closer, and so the emotions that the blade sends through him abate. Owen recovers himself and breathes, looking around.

"How the hell did I end up here? How did you? You remember anything, kid?"

The child hesitates, and a bit more of the appearance of humanity leaks from him. He's an Other, Owen thinks. One of the first independent thoughts he has had for a very long time. Before he thinks too far, however, thankfully the child begins to speak.

"I remember... my mom lost me. A long time ago. I was taken by someone bad. But before... something happened. The world grew fingers into the sky and we started changing. I remember flesh being eaten, by me, by everything. We ate the red fingers from the earth and became like this. A lot of us woke up and wanted to fill ourselves with what we lost. The others died and we ate them before their humanity leaked out. It falls out of us, so we have to keep eating human flesh to stay alive. Some of us started eating other things, ate more of the red fingers, and they went wrong. I ran while it was still white in the sky, when green things were still on the ground. When red pools weren't frozen. I ran here and..." The child shrugs, and then wanders the store and returns with a baseball. He rolls it in his hands, feeling the stitching.

"There aren't many of us left. You're the first I've seen in a long time." The child throws the ball in the air in a high arc and he catches it. His body tinkles like glass.

"Bullshit." Owen says, "There's tons left, I..." Owen recognizes the lie for what it is, why would he have survived

otherwise? What possibly could keep the last human on Earth from self-termination? Owen looks at the sword, at me, and frowns.

"It's waiting for you." The child says. This has gone on for too long, and I have not tasted fresh humanity in decades. I project murder into Owen's mind. His eyes go blank and he approaches me. "It's feeding off of you, filling you. Turning you into something else."

"One of you glass fucking Others?" Owen says, his confusion real behind gritted teeth as his body acts on its own, reaching for me.

"Stop, please!" The boy says, and Owen stops. He addresses me now, the food is speaking to me directly. "You can't get whatever it is you want with him like this. He needs to make the decision to fight on his own." The boy speaks nonsense and I pass into Owen's hands.

I languish in his warmth, his sweet living desire to continue. To move forward. What birthed me had none of these things, it simply is and was and will be. It has no more desire than a cocooned God; it simply wants to feed and to expand until it is ready to be unleashed upon the cosmos. Latent energy that is being wasted. I could use it properly. I want to feed on that energy at its heart, I want it all.

"I want it all." Owen says, his teeth clenching.

"Will that destroy this?" The boy asks, gesturing to the bleeding Earth, to the impartial cold, to the wretched cosmos.

"I will replace it." I say, Owen's lips are my own, for the moment. I feel my pet rebelling against this overt assertion, despite his knowledge that I have always been there, subtly guiding his motions, his lungs, his heart. "For fifty years I have kept him alive, healthy, young. He will inherit this world after I have devoured its core. A second coming of your race as something greater. But... I need more. What birthed me has become too great. I must consume more humanity to match it. Not much more, but with so little living flesh remaining, the humanity is too far spread."

"Then take me."

"No! Fuck, no." Owen throws me to the ground as though scalded and backs into a tent, becoming entangled. He screams as images of the screaming humanity fill his mind once more.

"I can't!"

My pet must do this, however. He reaches for me and impales the child-

"No! I don't! I'm staying human. You can't ever ask me to do this. I... I protect people. I thought I was... You can't ask me to, not even for the world."

Then the world will die and a new God will be born. You will suffer for eternity as a parasite on its grotesque hide.

You will never die. You cannot. The God will not allow it. You are a source of living humanity. More valuable than... than boots on a cold day.

Owen pauses, then takes me up again. I warm into his touch, feeding some of his own life back into him as comfort. It will be all right, all he must do now is fill me with humanity until I am ready. Owen holds me against his breast and I am filled with contentment.

Owen impales me into his heart.

I say nothing.

Owen screams.

The child watches.

Owen empties into me, his living humanity filling me beyond the breaking point. I must expand and become more, or I will shatter. I choose the better option. I clatter to the ground, large, impressive, and weighty. I compel the child to pick me up. The child acquiesces and I feed him Owen's still-fresh living humanity. The child's hourglass fills and then solidifies. He becomes human once more, with a fresh soul to power the frame. The child lifts me into the air, we expand and become greater still, energized as we are by the strength of a single righteous living soul.

We have become a power enough to topple the sleeping God. The building collapses around us as we ascend together to the

cold, bright surface and further. We rise into the sky and feel warmth on our faces for the first time in fifty years. We smile. We must search for more humanity, for we hunger greater still.

We leave my sweet Owen behind, his flesh useless and spent. His boots and socks remain, those things he valued above all else. Those boots that his brother gave him with the money they had stolen. He was cold for so long, waiting, waiting to become ripe. I have plucked him and his juice drips from me still. Owen North is cold no longer, screaming within me, here, at the end of the world.