

Three Short Stories by Jean-Marie Avril

THE SHELLS

I'm here staring at the blank sheet. I'm a writer but my muse has deserted me. I haven't come up with anything inspiring or inspired. All I had come to me is nothing. No-thing. So here am I with the blank sheet, its clinical whiteness staring back at me, mockingly as if saying: "Hey, look at you. It's empty and there is nothing else." This sheet scares me. Now written word is written silence, and silence oppresses me. If I cannot find anything to write, then I'll have to commit suicide. God damns!! I need to write something, but nothing comes; it's all blank and empty. Empty? Hang on! There's an idea here. Yes! I'm gonna write about emptiness and blankness and nothingness. So where could I start? Oh yeah! I could do something about the spaces between atoms, molecules and sub-atomic particles. Fascinating to think that there is empty space between atoms and inside atoms. Neutrons, protons, electrons, quarks... all those entities are empty. The deeper you dig, the emptier it gets. Nothing, like the immensity of space. The biggest star is made of empty atoms and hollow subatomic particles. It's like we are hollow shells with only the void inside. Even the shell skin is a ghost, like a hologram with no substance in it. OK, that's better. Writing about nothingness. What a horrible thought though! If we're all empty, then we're nothing. All our thoughts: substance-less phantoms. My feelings, my memories and even my physical body, my wife and my kids, it's nothing. The whole world is empty, a void, a gigantic abyss peopled by ghosts that are less substantial than a hologram or a mirage. It's like you dig into matter and there is no solid soil, but just a film containing the scenes, but even the film itself is a fantasy. Oh my God, where are You? Are you a phantom creating phantoms? No! I'm in the abyss. The shells! They lure me with their powers. The specters annihilating my ego. The shells invade my mind. I lose all kinds of references. My memories are fast vanishing. My feelings are evaporating. I know that my atoms are returning to the absence from which they originated. There's no 'me' being present. I'm an absence. The shells! They conquer! The void reabsorbs me...

Extract from the local newspaper: "The police are still puzzled by the disappearance of local writer Adrian Smith. The chief constable says 'it is like he has literally vanished without a trace, that he has never been there in the first place...'"

VIRTUAL NIGHTMARE

Let the tear run down your cheek baby, go on, let the tear run down that bloody cheek of yours because today I'm going to die. That's right. I'm going to die. I'm rotten inside my soul. The weight of the world is a waste of my time. I've had enough with all this useless and ugly drama. The soap opera of humanity is not better than the buzzing of flies upon the heap of garbage. So I'm going to die. It's no suicide baby. I'll come back if I want to or I'll move some place else, like a dimension made of perfect mathematical entities, or a sphere of geometrical beings counting the harmonies of inter-stellar relationships. I don't know, as long as I'm away from the narcissism of mankind, forever

engrossed in itself. Do you know what baby? I've seen the future. This mankind wants to enter the electronic realm. I'm not kidding baby. Whereas I want to explore dimensions free from the constraints of three-dimensionality, my contemporary idiots aspire to virtual reality. That's right baby, virtual reality; inside the web, inside the collective global brain that's emerging now. They're so tired of the material nightmare they have created. Cities and concrete are too much for them, my contemporary idiots. So they think virtual reality is a better option. I predict virtual sex baby. The good old shag will become obsolete, baby. And you'll have to plug in to enjoy your fantasy baby. Only the working class will be indulging in physical sex. So there's gonna be a giant, global, electronic and corporate orgy between machines and their slaves, baby. But that's only the start. Next will come the desire for electronic immortality baby. Humans will want eternity inside wires, nuts and bolts. They reckon they'll be able to transfer their consciousness into the web, baby, like some fantasy to return to the womb except that, this time, the womb is the web, the hive. And then, the virtual gurus will appear claiming the web to be the Second Coming of Christ baby. That's right. The collective global brain will be seen as Christ consciousness offered to the Four Corners of the planet on the screen of a computer. Mark my words baby: virtual cults on the Internet and, of course, they will proliferate like rats. And if the machine is turned off or there's a shortage of power, then the cultists will disappear inside the night of the electron, leaving their body as a mere shell empty of cognition and cognizance. So why should I stay in this pool of self-absorbed compost baby? So let's see that tear run down your cheek baby. At least it's real. Goodbye good old physical.

WRONG TRIP AT THE FOREST

It's 6 AM. It's time to get up as I've got to prepare for my journey. Yeah right. I'd rather stay in bed. Nice and warm blanket. OK! Let's get up! My morning crap and shower. This shower takes its time to get started. Ah! That's better. I'm going on a trip you see. I've got all the camping gear and necessities packed and ready to leave. I'm going on a camping trip to the Forest of Dean with Jack and Helen. What's the weather like outside? Pissing down... Great! I'm not gonna be put off by a bit of rain though. OK. It's 7 AM, time to go! Dear, dear. It's a rather chilly morning, not including the rain. And we're right at the end of May. I've got to meet Jack and Helen at Lidney bus station and then we're on the road to the Forest. Well... It doesn't start well. The bus to Gloucester from Cheltenham is late; traffic jam probably. I text Jack and Helen, letting them know I'm likely to be late and behind our meeting time. They text me back "No problem!" Right, I'm in Gloucester at last. The bus station is full of screaming kids going to school. And they're really noisy. I've got forty minutes to kill before embarking on the 73 to go to Lidney. Right now, I'm going to the Gloucester bus station restaurant. Nice one... there's a leak from the ceiling and the customers look derelict. Nay, they are derelict. There's a funny bloke in there afflicted by some kind of face spasm. His face doesn't stop twitching. OK, my bus has just arrived. And I'm on the road to Lidney. In the meantime, an old lady managed to get a scratch on her knee and requests the

coming of an ambulance to take her to hospital or the nearest clinic. The driver stops and calls 999—the emergency services—for the assistance of an ambulance crew. He's using his mobile. Then another old lady faints seeing bits of blood and her head hits the edge of the coach seat. I hear the driver say: "It ain't my day today!" Eventually, the ambulance turns up and takes the two ladies to the doctor. The bus is running again. There are some nasty-looking teenagers at the back of the bus, commenting noisily and mockingly on the fate of the two grannies. I don't like the look of them and make sure I remain unnoticed. Then, I hear the driver shouting: "Fucking shit!" The engine is kind of coughing and the bus slows down, with smoke emerging from parts of its bulk. The driver says: "Fuck it. I'm stopping at Lidney." We eventually reach Lidney, pretty late on the schedule as the bus wasn't going faster than a tractor. Probably slower. It's still pissing down. I've got a text from Jack and Helen: "Sorry Neil but we can't make it. Last minute interference. Will tell more about it next time we meet." Brilliant! I bet they dropped the camping trip idea due to the bad weather and couldn't confess so they made up an excuse as they went along. I'm gonna go camping on my own then. I'm not gonna be defeated by those adverse circumstances. I ask a local about the location of the nearest camping site or facilities. He replies: "Fuck off!" Then I'm directed to a taxi. Judging by what I can make of the distance and the camping site as described to me by the driver about where we're gonna travel, I reckon I'll have to pay £15 or something. Arriving at the camping site, the driver asks me forty quids. I protest vigorously against what I consider to be a blatant rip-off and he threatens to break my neck. Left with no choice at all, I pay him the overcharged fare, still complaining and he says: "Shut the fuck up!" And he drives off. Then, still under that damned rain, I realize that the camping site is closed until July. I start resembling Basil Fawlty when he's had enough with everything. A van passes by and both the driver and his mate scream loudly: "Pedophile!" laughing primitively and in a bellowing fashion. In protest, I shout: "You bastard!" which compels them to stop, get off the vehicle, walk towards me and punch me in the face. I fall off in the mud. They step back to the van and drive off, shouting a last: "Twat!," which gives me an earache. I don't remember much afterwards. Some vague tractor picks me up and takes me to the clinic in Lidney. The Forest of Dean doesn't like outsiders and that's for sure.