

# DEAD WORLDS

Jack Skillingstead

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**A** week after my retrieval, I went for a drive in the country. I turned the music up loud, Aaron Copland. The two lane blacktop wound into late summer woods. Sun and shadow slipped over my Mitsubishi. I felt okay, but how long could it last? The point, I guess, was to find out.

I was driving too fast, but that's not why I hit the dog. Even at a reduced speed, I wouldn't have been able to stop in time. I had shifted into a slightly banked corner overhung with maple—and the dog was just there. A big shepherd, standing in the middle of the road with his tongue hanging out, as if he'd been running. Brakes, clutch, panicked wrenching of the wheel, a tight skid. The heavy thud of impact felt through the car's frame.

I turned off the digital music stream and sat a few moments in silence except for the nearly subaudible ripple of the engine. In the rearview mirror, the dog lay in the road.

I swallowed, took a couple of deep breaths, then let the clutch out, slowly rolled onto the shoulder, and killed the engine.

The door swung smoothly up and away. A warm breeze scooped into the car, carrying birdsong and the muted purl of running water—a creek or stream.

I walked back to the dog. He wasn't dead. At the sound of my footsteps approaching, he twisted his head around and snapped at me. I halted a few yards away. The dog whined. Bloody foam flecked his lips. His hind legs twitched brokenly.

"Easy," I said.

The dog whimpered, working his jaws. He didn't snap again, not even when I hunkered close and laid my hand between his ears. The short hairs bristled against my palm.

His chest heaved. He made a grunting, coughing sound. Blood spattered the road. I looked on, dispassionate. Already, I was losing my sense of emotional connection. I had deliberately neglected to take my pill that morning.

Then the woman showed up.

I heard her trampling through the underbrush. She called out, "Buddy! Buddy!"

"Here," I said.

She came out of the woods, holding a red nylon leash, a woman maybe thirty-five years old, with short blond hair, wearing a sleeveless blouse, khaki shorts, and ankle boots. She hesitated. Shock crossed her face. Then she ran to us.

"Buddy, oh Buddy!"

She knelt by the dog, tears spilling from her blue eyes. My chest tightened. I wanted to cherish the emotion. But was it genuine, or a residual effect of the drug?

"I'm sorry," I said. "He was in the road."

"I took him off the leash," she said. "It's my fault."

She kept stroking the dog's side, saying his name. Buddy laid his head in her lap as if he was going to sleep. He coughed again, choking up blood. She stroked him and cried.

"Is there a vet?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

Buddy shuddered violently and ceased breathing; that was the end. "We'd better move him out of the road," I said.

She looked at me and there was something fierce in her eyes. "I'm taking him home," she said.

She struggled to pick the big shepherd up in her arms. The dog was almost as long as she was tall.

"Let me help you. We can put him in the car."

"I can manage."

She staggered with Buddy, feet scuffing, the dog's hind legs limp, like weird dance partners. She found her balance, back swayed, and carried the dead dog into the woods.

I went to the car, grabbed the keys. My hand reached for the glove box, but I drew it back. I was gradually becoming an Eye again, a thing of the Tank. But no matter what, I was through with the pills. I wanted to know if there was anything real left in me.

I locked the car and followed the woman into the woods.

She hadn't gotten far. I found her sitting on the ground crying, hugging the dog. She looked up.

"Help me," she said. "Please."

I carried the dog to her house, about a hundred yards. The body seemed to get heavier in direct relation to the number of steps I took.

It was a modern house, octagonal, lots of glass, standing on a green expanse of recently cut lawn. We approached it from the back. She opened a gate in the wooden fence, and I stepped through with the dog. That was about as far as I could go. I was feeling it in my arms, my back. The woman touched my shoulder.

June 2003

“Please,” she said. “Just a little farther.”

I nodded, clenched my teeth, and hefted the dead weight. She led me to a tool shed. Finally, I laid the dog down. She covered it with a green tarp and then pulled the door shut.

“I’ll call somebody to come out. I didn’t want Buddy to lie by the road or in the woods where the other animals might get at him.”

“I understand,” I said, but I was drifting, beginning to detach from human sensibilities.

“You better come inside and wash,” she said.

I looked at my hands. “Yeah.”

I washed in her bathroom. There was blood on my shirt and she insisted I allow her to launder it. When I came out of the bathroom in my T-shirt, she had already thrown my outer shirt, along with her own soiled clothes, into the washer, and called the animal control people, too. Now wearing a blue shift, she offered me iced tea, and we sat together in the big, sunny kitchen, drinking from tall glasses. I noted the flavor of lemon, the feel of the icy liquid sluicing over my tongue. Sensation without complication.

“Did you have the dog a long time?”

“About eight years,” she said. “He was my husband’s, actually.”

“Where is your husband?”

“He passed away two years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

She was looking at me in a strange way, and it suddenly struck me that she knew what I was. Somehow, people can tell. I started to stand up.

“Don’t go yet,” she said. “Wait until they come for Buddy. Please?”

“You’ll be all right by yourself.”

“Will I?” she said. “I haven’t been all right by myself for a long, long time. You haven’t even told me your name.”

“It’s Robert.”

She reached across the table for my hand and we shook. “I’m Kim Pham,” she said. I was aware of the soft coolness of her flesh, the way her eyes swiveled in their wet orbits, the lemon exhalation of her breath.

“You’re an Eye,” she said.

I took my hand back.

“And you’re not on your medication, are you?”

“It isn’t medication, strictly speaking.”

“What is it, then?”

A *lie*, I thought, but said, “It restores function. Viagra for the emotionally limp, is the joke.”

She didn’t smile.

“I know all the jokes,” she said. “My husband was a data analyst on the Tau Boo Project. The jokes aren’t funny.”

The name Pham didn’t ring any bells, but a lot of people flogged data at the Project.

“Why don’t you take your Viagra or whatever you want to call it?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m allergic.”

“Or you don’t trust that the emotional and cognitive reality is the same one you possessed before the Tank.”

I stared at her. She picked up her iced tea and sipped.

"I've read about you," she said.

"Really?"

"Not you in particular. I've read about Eyes, the psychological phenomenon."

"Don't forget the sexual mystique."

She looked away. I noted the way the musculature of her neck worked, the slight flushing near her hairline. I was concentrating, but knew I was close to slipping away.

"Being an Eye is not what the public generally thinks," I said.

"How is it different?"

"It's more terrible."

"Tell me."

"The Tank is really a perfect isolation chamber. Negative gravity, total sensory deprivation. Your body is covered with transdermal patches. The cranium is cored to allow for the direct insertion of the conductor. You probably knew that much. Here's what they don't say: The process kills you. To become an Eye, you must literally surrender your life."

I kept talking because it helped root me in my present consciousness. But it wouldn't last.

"They keep you functioning in the Tank, but it's more than your consciousness that rides the tachyon stream. It's your *being*, it's who you are. And somehow, between Earth and the robot receiver fifty light-years away, it sloughs off, all of it except your raw perceptions. You become a thing of the senses, not just an Eye but a hand, a tongue, an ear. You inhabit a machine that was launched before you were born, transmit data back along a tachyon stream, mingled with your own thought impulses for analysts like your husband to dissect endlessly. Then they retrieve you, and all they're really retrieving is a thing of raw perception. They tell you the drugs restore chemical balances in your brain, vitalize cognitive ability. But really, it's a lie. You're dead, and that's all there is to it."

The animal control truck showed up, and I seized the opportunity to leave. The world was breaking up into all its parts now. People separate from the earth upon which they walked. A tree, a door knob, a blue eye swiveling. Separate parts constituting a chaotic and meaningless whole.

At the fence, I paused and looked back, saw Kim Pham watching me. She was like the glass of iced tea, the dead weight of the dog, the cold pool on the fourth planet that quivered like mercury as I probed it with a sensor.

Back in the car, I sat. I had found the automobile, but I wasn't sure I could operate it. All I could see or understand were the thousand individual parts, the alloys and plastics, the wires and servos and treated leather, and the aggregate smell.

A rapping sounded next to my left ear. Thick glass, blue eyes, bone structure beneath stretched skin. I comprehended everything, but understood nothing. The eyes went away. Then: "You better take this." Syllables, modulated air. A bitter taste.

Retrieval.

I blinked at the world, temporarily restored to coherence.

June 2003

“Are you all right?” Kim was sitting beside me in the Mitsubishi.  
“Yes, I’m all right.”  
“You looked catatonic.”  
“What time is it?”  
“What time do you *think* it is?”  
“I asked first.”  
“Almost seven o’clock.”  
“Shit.”  
“I was driving to town. I couldn’t believe you were still sitting here.”  
I rubbed my eyes. “God, I’m tired.”  
“Where are you staying?”  
“I have a charming little apartment at the Project.”  
“Do you feel well enough to drive there?”  
“Yeah, but I don’t want to.”  
“Why not?”  
“They might not let me out again.”  
“Are you serious?”  
“Not really.”  
“It’s hard to tell with you.”  
“Did they take care of Buddy okay?”  
“Yes.”

I looked at her, and saw an attractive woman of thirty-five or so with light blue eyes.

“You better follow me back to my house. Besides, you forgot your shirt.”

“That’s right,” I said.

I parked my car in the detached garage and stowed the keys under the visor. The Project had given me the car, but it was strictly for publicity purposes and day trips. We Eyes were supposed to have the right stuff.

There was a guest room with a twin bed and a window that admitted a refreshing breeze. I removed my shoes and lay on the bed and listened to hear if she picked up the phone, listened for the sound of her voice calling the Project. She would know people there, have numbers. Former associates of her husband. I closed my eyes, assuming that the next face I saw would be that of a Project security type.

It wasn’t.

When I opened my eyes, the room was suffused with soft lamplight. Kim stood in the doorway.

“I have your pills,” she said, showing me the little silver case.

“It’s okay. I won’t need another one until tomorrow.”

She studied me.

“Really,” I said. “Just one a day.”

“What would have happened if I hadn’t found you?”

“I would have sat there until somebody else saw me, and if no one else happened by, I would have gone on sitting there until doomsday. Mine, at any rate.”

“Did you mean it when you said the Project people wouldn’t let you leave again?”

I thought about my answer. “It’s not an overt threat. They’d like to get another session out of me. I think they’re a little desperate for results.”

"Results equal funding, my husband used to say."

"Right."

"My husband was depressed about the lack of life out there."

I sat up on the bed, rubbing my arms, which felt goosebumpy in spite of the warmth.

"How did he die?" I asked.

"A tumor in his brain. It was awful. Toward the end, he was in constant pain. They medicated him heavily. He didn't even know me anymore." She looked away. "I'm afraid I got a little desperate myself after he died. But I'm stronger now."

"Why do you live out here all by yourself?"

"It's my home. If I want a change, there's a cottage up in Oregon, Cannon Beach. But I'm used to being left on my own."

"Used to it?"

"It seems to be a theme in my life."

It was also a statement that begged questions, and I asked them over coffee in the front room. Her parents were killed in a car accident when she was fourteen. Her aunt had raised her, but it was an awkward relationship.

"I felt more like an imposition than a niece."

And then, of course, there was Mr. Pham and the brain tumor. When she finished, something inside me whimpered to get out, but I wouldn't let it.

"Sometimes, I think I'd prefer to be an Eye," Kim said.

"Trust me, you wouldn't."

"Why not?" She was turned to the side, facing me on the couch we shared, one leg drawn up and tucked under, her face alive, eyes questing.

"I already told you: Because you'd have to die."

"I thought that was you being metaphorical."

I shook my head, patted the case of pills now replaced in the cargo pocket of my pants.

"I'm in these pills," I said. "The 'me' you're now talking to. But it isn't the 'me' I left behind when I climbed into the Tank." I sipped my coffee. "There's no official line on that, by the way. It's just my personal theory."

"It's kind of neurotic."

"Kind of."

"I don't even think you really believe it."

I shrugged. "That's your prerogative."

For a while, we didn't talk.

"It does get lonely out here sometimes," Kim said.

"Yes."

Her bedroom was nicer than the guest room. With the lights out, she dialed to transparency three of the walls and the ceiling, and it was like lying out in the open with a billion stars overhead and the trees waving at us. I touched her naked belly and kissed her. Time unwound deliciously, but eventually wound back up tight as a watch-spring and resumed ticking.

We lay on our backs, staring up, limbs entwined. The stars wheeled imperceptibly. I couldn't see Tau Boo, and that was fine with me.

"Why did you do it, then?" she asked.

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“Because it felt good. Plus, you seemed to be enjoying yourself as well.”

“Not that. Why did you want to be an Eye?”

“Oh. I wanted to see things that no one else could see, ever. I wanted to travel farther than it was possible for a man physically to travel. Pure ego. Which is slightly ironic.”

“Worth it?”

I thought of things, the weird aquamarine sky of the fourth planet, the texture of nitrogen-heavy atmosphere. Those quicksilver pools. But I also recalled the ripping away of my personality, and how all those wonders in my mind’s eye were like something I’d read about or seen pictures of—unless I went off the pill and allowed myself to become pregnant with chaos. Then it was all real and all indistinguishable, without meaning.

“No,” I said, “it wasn’t worth it.”

“When I think about it,” Kim said, “it feels like escape.”

“There’s that too, yes.”

In the morning, I kissed her bare shoulder while she slept. I traced my fingers lightly down her arm, pausing at the white scars on her wrist. She woke up and pulled her arm away. I kissed her neck, and we made love again.

Later, I felt disinclined to return to the Project compound and equally disinclined to check in, which I was required to do.

“Why don’t you stay here?” Kim said.

It sounded good. I swallowed my daily dose of personality with my first cup of coffee. In fact, I made a habit of it every morning that I woke up lying next to Kim. Some nights, we fell asleep having neglected to dial the walls back to opacity, and I awakened with the vulnerable illusion that we were outdoors. Once, I felt as if I was being watched, and when I opened my eyes, I saw a doe observing us from the lawn.

I began to discover my health and some measure of happiness that I hadn’t previously known. Before, always, I’d been a loner. Kim’s story was essentially my story, with variations. It was partly what had driven me to the Tau Boo Project. But for those two weeks, living with Kim Pham, I wasn’t alone, not in the usual sense. This was something new in my world. It was good. But it could also give me that feeling I’d had when I woke up in the open with something wild watching me.

One morning, the *last* morning, I woke up in our indoor-outdoor bedroom and found Kim weeping. Her back was to me, her face buried in her pillow. Her shoulders made little hitching movements with her sobs. I touched her hair.

“What’s wrong?”

Her voice muffled by the pillow, she said, “I can’t stand any more *leaving*.”

“Hey—”

She turned into me, her eyes red from crying. “I *mean* it,” she said. “I couldn’t stand any more.”

I held her tightly while the sun came up.

At the breakfast table, I opened the little silver pill case. There were only three pills left. I took one with my first cup of dark French roast. Kim stared at the open case before I snapped it shut.

"You're almost out," she said.

"Yeah."

"Robert, it's not like what you said. Those pills aren't you. They allow you to feel, that's all. You can't always be afraid."

I contemplated my coffee.

"Listen," she said. "I used to be envious of Eyes. No more pain, no more loneliness, no more fear. Life with none of the messiness of living. But I was wrong. That isn't life at all. *This* is. What we have."

"So I'll get more pills." I smiled.

Only it wasn't like a trip to the local pharmacy. There was only one place to obtain the magic personality drug: The Project. I decided that I should go that day, that there was no point in waiting for my meager supply to run out.

Kim held onto me like somebody clinging to a pole in a hurricane.

"I'll come with you," she said.

"They won't let you past the gate."

"I don't care. I'll wait outside, then."

We took her car. She parked across the street. We embraced awkwardly in the front seat. I was aware of the guard watching us.

"You've hardly told me anything personal about yourself," she said. "And here I've told you all my secret pain."

"Maybe I don't have any secret pain."

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't."

"I'll spill my guts when I come out. Promise."

She didn't want to let go, but I was ready to leave. I showed the guard my credentials and he passed me through. I turned and waved to Kim.

"She's a pretty one," the guard said.

I sat in a room. They relieved me of my pill case. I was "debriefed" by a young man who behaved like an automaton, asking questions, checking off my answers on his memopad. Where had I spent the last two weeks? Why had I failed to communicate with the Project? Did I feel depressed, anxious? Some questions I answered, some I ignored.

"I just want more pills," I said. "I'll check in next time, cross my heart."

A man escorted me to the medical wing, where I underwent a thorough and pointless physical examination. When it was over, Orley Campbell, assistant director of the Tau Boo Project, sat down to chat while we awaited the results of various tests.

"So our stray lamb has returned to the fold," he said. Orley was a tall man with a soft face and the beginnings of a pot belly. I didn't like him.

"Baaa," I said.

"Same old Bobbie."

"Yep, same old me. When do I get out of here?"

"This isn't a jail. You're free to leave any time you wish."

"What about my pills?"

"You'll get them, don't worry about that. You owe us one more session, you know."

"I know."

"Are you having misgivings? I've looked over your evaluation. You appear somewhat depressed."

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"I'm not in the least bit depressed."

"Aren't you? I wish I could say the same."

"What time is it? How long have I been here, Orley?"

"Oh, not long. Bobbie, why not jump right back on the horse? If you'd like to relax for a couple of weeks more, that's absolutely not a problem. You just have to remember to check in. I mean, that's part of the drill, right? You knew that when you signed on."

I thought about Kim, waiting outside the gate. Would she still be there? Did I even want her to be? I could feel my consciousness spreading thin. Orley kept smiling at me. "I guess I'm ready," I said.

A month is a long time to exist in the Tank. Of course, as an Eye, you are unaware of passing hours. You inhabit a sensory world at the far end of a tachyon tether. I've looked at romanticized illustrations of this. The peaceful dreamer at one end, the industrious robot on the other. In between, the data flows along an ethereal cord of light. Blah. They keep you alive intravenously, maintain hydration, perform body waste removal. A device sucks out the data. It's fairly brutal.

I recouped in the medical wing for several days. I had my pills and a guarantee of more, all I would require. I had put in the maximum Tank time and could not return without suffering serious and permanent brain damage.

My marathon Tank session had yielded zip in terms of the Project's primary goal. The fourth planet was dead.

Now I would have money and freedom and a future, *if* I wanted one. I spent my hours reading, thinking about warm climates. Kim Pham rapped on my memory, but I wouldn't open the door.

A week after my retrieval, I insisted on being released from the medical wing, and nobody put up an argument. I'd served my purpose. Orley caught up to me as I was leaving the building. I was hobbling on my weak legs, carrying my belongings in a shoulder bag. Orley picked up my hand and shook it.

"Good luck to you," he said. "What's first on the agenda, a little 'Eye candy?'"

I wasn't strong enough to belt him. He looked morose and tired, which is approximately the way I felt myself. When I didn't reply, he went on:

"Cruising a little close to home last time, weren't you? That Pham woman was persistent. She came around every day for two weeks straight. Nice-looking, but older than the others. I guess you would get tired of the young ones after a while."

The smirk is what did it. I found some ambition and threw a decent punch that bloodied his nose.

A cab picked me up at the gate. On impulse, I switched intended destinations. Instead of the airport, I provided sketchy directions, and we managed to find Kim's house without too much difficulty.

The house had an abandoned look, or at least I thought so. A mood can color things, though, and my mood was gloomy. The desperation of the Tau Boo Project had rubbed off on me. There was no life on the fourth planet, no life on any of the planets that had thus far been explored by our human Eyes. When the receiver craft were launched decades previ-

ously, it was with a sense of great purpose and hope. But so far, the known universe had not proved too lively, which only made our own earth feel isolated, lonely—doomed, even.

The windows of Kim's house were all black. I knocked, waited, knocked again. I knew where she hid the spare key, on a hook under the back porch.

The house was silent. Every surface was filmed with dust. I drifted through the hollow rooms like a ghost.

Gone.

I pictured all the ways, all the ugly ways, she might have departed this world. Of course, there was no evidence that she had done anything of the sort. An empty house did not necessarily add up to a terminated life. Probably I was giving myself too much credit. But the gloom was upon me. And I could see the white scars on her wrists.

I sat on the carpeted floor of the master bedroom, still weak from the Tank. Hunger gnawed at me, but I didn't care. I let time unravel around the tightening in my chest, and, as darkness fell, I dialed the walls and ceiling clear, and lay on my back, and let exhausted sleep take me.

Lack of nourishment inhibits the efficacy of the pill. In the morning, I opened my eyes to dark pre-dawn and a point of reference that was rapidly growing muddy. The pills were in my bag, but my interest in digging them out was not very great. Why not let it all go? Become the fiber in the rug, the glass, the pulse of blood in my own veins. Why not?

I lay still and began to lose myself. I watched the dark blue sky pale toward dawn. At some point, the blue attained a familiar shade. Kim cradling her dead dog, the fierceness of her eyes. *I can manage.*

A sharp bubble of emotion formed in my throat, and I couldn't swallow it down. So I rolled over. Because maybe I could manage it, too. Maybe. I reached for my bag, my mind growing rapidly diffuse. The interesting articulation of my finger joints distracted me: Bone sleeved within soft flesh, blood circulating, finger pads palpating the tight fibers of the rug. Time passed. I shook myself, groped forward, touched the bag, forgot why it was so important, flickeringly remembered, got my hand on the case, fingered a pill loose onto the rug, belly-crawled, absently scanning details, little yellow pill nestled in fibers, extend probe (tongue), and swallow.

One personality pill with lint chaser.

I came around slowly, coalescing back into the mundane world, an empty stomach retarding the absorption process. Eventually, I stood up. First order of business: food. I found some stale crackers in a kitchen cabinet. Ambrosia. Standing at the sink, gazing out the window, I saw the garage. I stopped chewing, the crackers like crumbled cardboard in my mouth. I'd thought of ropes and drugs and razors. But what about exhaust?

I walked toward the garage, my breathing strangely out of sync. I stopped to gather my courage, or whatever it was I'd need to proceed.

Then I opened the door.

There was one car in the double space. My Mitsubishi, still parked as I'd left it. I climbed into the unlocked car and checked for the keys under the visor. They fell into my lap, note attached. From Kim.

It wasn't a suicide note. ○