

Falling Stones

Peter F. Hamilton

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v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's. Scanned, page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, formatted, common OCR errors have been removed and a full spell check is complete. Full read-through still required.

v1.1 Full read through completed by the N.E.R.D's

There are plenty of political SF stories, but it's rare to find anything other than masturbatory power fantasies; even rarer to find a genuinely funny political SF story. In 'Falling Stones' Peter F. Hamilton does for what Saddam Hussein has called 'The Mother of All Parliaments' what Screaming Lord Sutch and his Monster Raving Loony Party has done for by-elections, and hits more targets with greater precision than a whole flock of cruise missiles. After you've read this, neither Yesterday in Parliament nor Top of the Pops will never seem the same again.

A notorious bon viveur and gourmand, and an accomplished circumaquatic cyclist, Peter F. Hamilton has published a clutch of short stories in small press magazines such as R.E.M. and Far Point, and has also contributed to the second issue of New Worlds. His first novel, Mindstar Rising, should be out any time soon. He says of 'Falling Stones', 'I've never written anything like it before or since, nor was it written specifically for In Dreams. I tend to write hard SF, not alternate worlds and satire, but after this, I might be tempted to write another. I think it might have its origins in the superbly self-important interviews rock stars inflict on the rest of us, telling us how much better the world would be if they were running it. Combine this with the depressingly large number of seventies albums (yes, real vinyl!) in my collection, and I suppose the result was inevitable.'

Inevitable? Maybe. Predictable? Like, no way, man.

Waking up is such a drag, the frost pixies are chewing on my fingers and toes again. The numbness has grown over the last few years, dropping too many scores. But screw that. Doctors are in league with Stashburners if you ask me. Stiff-culture members wearing wax-smile masks.

Something in the air, sour, like love left bleeding. But then, this is the day, they say. The heavy duty politico journalists like Steve Wright and Simon Bates over on Radio Caroline, carping on about how *he* is going to do it today. I don't want to believe them. Wouldn't, except for the portents, they're hyper.

Today is November the twenty-second nineteen-ninety, and it's going to be a real freak of a downer. My astrological movements have fallen into a long dark eclipse; my numerology chart adds up to the height of the great pyramid cubed. It doesn't come any worse; every bad vibe in the world twanging into focus, tearing at our mother Gaia, sundering us from her love. On days like this we could drown in her tears.

Then on top of all that, there's Keith. He's out now, the clinic let him go after they'd exorcised his demon. Totally dried out, clean line sober, and lusting after what he'd been shut out from all these years. He might just do it.

He's not in tune any more, a lone groover. Ask me, and clinics make your mind ill. Straighten You Out. Who needs it? We didn't get where we are today by thinking Straight.

I'm shoving back the wrap bundle and rolling off the mattress on to the floor. Greenmaryia grunts in her sleep and pulls the wrap back in reflex. Her braided strands of tangerine and purple hair are leaking out of the gap around the pillow, the tassels getting on for a couple of yards long, dried seaweed. That chick doesn't even get up before six in the evening these days. It's odd to see her crashed the whole time, she was such a funky go-go dancer in her day. I remember when we used to hunt mushrooms in the noble sunrise, stars shining on high. The magic was always strongest if you held them up to the first spark of sunlight, she'd say.

Cold sunlight through the window says it is about midday. I gaze down on Abbey Road. Same old hallowed ground, a living, breathing shrine. Strain my neck, and I can see *the* zebra crossing. Close my eyes and *they* walk again.

Getting trampled on by bloody tourists these days. Bloody tourists, bloody everywhere, cameras snapping up the essence, stealing the essence. Abbey Road is still the centre of the Earthpeace, though, eternal; they can never take it all.

The Road used to be nothing but recording studios, the poets and artists soaking it up, weaving it into the rhythm of the tracks. You could feel the true spirit of the age coming out of the vinyl of any album cut in Abbey Road, spreading the love it held.

I played my axe back then, all day and all night, played till my fingers bled and my strings snapped. But now the studios that haven't been turned into tourist trash altars are booked solid by the bad news music groups. Steely riffless synthesiser muzak whines out of their digital speakers, anti-nature worship. Children of the children of the revolution. And they've lost the path we found. I haven't done a session for months, maybe longer. I can't tell any more, everything is the same now, dry changeless time.

My feet slap on the chilly bare wooden boards, they know the way to the front room. Our pad is hip enough, though we don't go in for furniture in a heavy way. Too many possessions oppress the soul. And the bailiffs took away quite a bit of our stuff to pay the fat cat landlord.

I wrote to Peter Frampton about that, right after he was made Lord Chancellor. Told him I was a Great Happening vet, that the Stiff-culture vultures shouldn't be allowed to invade my personal space like this. It was why we marched, to tune out the negative hostility. Life is free, turn on to what you want. Nobody has a right to take that away.

He'll write back, sort it out. We believed together, and made it happen; a bond that can't be broken, it's existential. Government cares about its love children. Government is care. Our government. He'll write. He will.

I flop down on to the beanbag while the picture fizzles on to the telly, and light the day's first hit. Pure Moroccan Gold. I exhale, and the blue smoke sparkles.

The cameras are panning Westminster's chamber, a full house, expectant. I want to turn over, exit universe left. Those far out portents, you see? I know the portents are for real.

They ought to put something watchable on the telly in the afternoons, some groove of a concert on the Old Grey Whistle channel; Planet Gong or the whole five hours of Hawkwind's space ritual, just something I can relate to. A real forlorn hope, the BBC is toxic with Stiff-culture acolytes nowadays, peddling their Responsibility and Behaviour. The government ought to do something about that. Mike Oldfield is too bloody slack if you ask me, Mick should never never have appointed him Home

Secretary.

But there's no alternative, so I stay hacked into reality. I can see the old familiar faces on the front bench, smiling at me out of the glass. All of them, the beautiful people. Mick up behind the dispatch box, wearing his purple velvet suit and yellow cravat, giving the bad news music opposition what for. Their leader, the demon spawn in black leather, Gary Numan, looks right narked at the trouncing he's getting. Patsy Kensit is sitting on his lap, soothing him down, and smiling hot at the camera at the same time. Sinitta and Rick Astley are trying to heckle; but their lips are out of sync with the ghetto blaster they're using. Mick's vocals riding 'em down.

He always gigs best at Westminster. That babe was born to lay it down.

There's this fracture of ease creeping into my mood. Mick still has some powerful backing group. Charlie Watts, Minister of Agriculture; I can see him, always a dead-cert loyal, on the Treasury bench whispering to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ronnie Wood. Even the Minister of Youth Affairs, Bill Wyman, has come out of the green room to show some support. Ray Davis and Alan Price are sharing a bottle of Jack Daniels on the back benches; Donovan asleep; Roger Waters, gaunt and worried looking. That cat should learn how to roll with the swing.

I catch sight of Keith, looking smashed and wasted, on the bench behind Mick. He's radiating ultra-bad karma, wave after wave of it, squashing me down painfully in the beanbag. I take a deep drag on the joint, but it doesn't make any difference. Keith just keeps on burning; no way is he in tune with the peace of mother Gaia any more. The clinic has blinded him to the beauty of flowers and towering rainbows.

I can hear his venom in my mind, a broken riff echoing down from the future. It hurts as bad as acid that'd been spiked by the Stashburners.

There's a wraith-haunting cold crystallising around me, winter's eldritch fingers reaching in from the grey-plastic noon outside. We should be aware of seasons, the greatest earthsong of all, but I wish the pad's radiators had hot water in them.

Mick sits down, and, oh man, Keith's on his feet. Gonna make a statement, he tells everyone, swaying about like something rotted in a hurricane. Gonna lay it down, show you where it's coming from, all this crap you've been eating these last twenty-one years.

And I'm shouting at him from the beanbag: not to do it, sit down Keith, not this, not now. We don't need no verbal Che Guevara, we don't need no dark Stiff-culture revival. We all know how it is with you and Mick. Sparks, that's what made the Stones roll. Maybe Mick shouldn't have dropped you from the cabinet, but you were Leary-ed out straight through the whole of the eighties. No big deal, live like you want to live. You couldn't help us, though, Keith. It was Mick who kept trashing the bad news music, who kept us out of the hands of the Stashburners. Not you. Our triumph lived on after the victory. And it was all Mick's doing, the longest serving prime minister this century, he held it all together, kept the torch burning, the flowers alive, white butterflies flying. The psychedelics sang on through the seventies and the eighties, to the birds and the bees and the galaxy. The whole world was kept alive with our euphonies.

It's no good. Keith ain't listening to me. He's off like a bat out of hell, jive talking, slagging Mick but good. Brutus in a kaftan.

Why can't he see? This is just the chance Bob Geldof has been waiting for ever since he bugged out of the cabinet over the MTV sponsorship deal; him and his *look outward* preaching, embrace the world we are. I don't want that. No way. Spirituality is born from within. I've spent my life harmonising my own soul; acid took me down into the depths of my id, and I beheld the wonder of clear dawn stars from Stonehenge - before the druids closed it to the general public. So my awareness encompasses the whole

cosmos now. I understand oneness, I explored it all. I had to, nobody else can do it for me. You can only ever save yourself.

The group's gonna split after this. I can feel it. There's just no band aid big enough to cover this cut. Mick is going to go down. We'll have Phil Collins and Pete Townshend jamming for the Happening movement's leadership gig next; the only cats big enough to square up to Geldof.

Mick's sitting on the bench while Keith raves on, staring right ahead like he's not hearing, doesn't care. The camera's swinging along the opposition benches; picks out David Bowie, alone, sunk to an all-time low. Gonna break out of this mouldy British politics, he'd said in eighty-one, gonna leave those dudes behind. Never got him nowhere, though. There's only two ways to go, ours and the Stiff-culture. Poor David. Perhaps this jolt will bring him back to our love. We welcome everyone.

Then there's Stock, Aitken and Waterman, laughing their heads off, thinking winter solstice has come early for them. Wrong. They shouldn't be laughing, them and Jive Bunny and Bananarama. No way can their music hold back the Stashburners. They'll bring everybody down. And they're there, okay? Waiting. Urban Maggie operating somewhere out of the capital, Dulwich they say, maybe Finchley, though no one is real sure, no one fast enough to catch her. That cat is wild. So is Neil, riding at the head of his Valley Injuns, raiding the communes in Wales, putting the squeeze on our supplies. They'll be back, the Stiff-culture: Stashburners, dreamkillers, with their rules, and order, and sameness, and war machines, and taxes, and new ways to die, and *worries*. They never give up. Never.

Shut up, Keith! But he doesn't. Economy. He's on about how bad the economy is doing. Blaming Mick.

We saved the world, Keith. Filled it with the worship of peace. What is an economy?

I light another joint. My ten-foot album piles lean over at dangerous angles for a closer look at the telly, pillars of the past and all the joy it held. They're archaeological, all my culture cut into black pizzas.

The bailiffs didn't take them. They laughed and said nobody would want them. It's compact discs now, perfect digital silver, no more fuzziness and scratches. A realm where a pin drop rings out like church bells, and there's no space for the heart. No, that lies abandoned in unquiet slumber.

I don't get it; music is music, as long as it's warm and groovy how can it matter what colour the album is?

Keith's malice keeps hitting on me. Strange words, alien from his mouth. I didn't join the march for words like that. Keith and Mick used to write poetry together, not blood pain.

I'm striking out, lost in black Shastric topography. I haven't felt anything like it since I threw Ziggy Peacestar out of the pad. I never did understand how he could do that; my own son wearing a Free Johnny and Sid T-shirt. It was the best day's work Rod Stewart ever did when he was Home Secretary, locking those satanic ghouls away. The Pistols were pure necromancers, a coven of hostility elements. Our universe fabric warped around them, a negativity star blazing darkly, sucking in concept albums and beautiful twenty-minute cloudfloating instrumental solos, they opened a stairway straight down into hell.

The Gold is making the air smell like honeysuckle, nature's living summer breeze. But it's not strong enough to zip Keith's lips.

What happened to the poetry, Keith? There was poetry in our feet when we marched into the Great Happening. Inspiration and love in the aether, a cosmic overload. We sailed back to the mainland from the Isle of Wight, and walked the ley lines right into Whitehall, the rotten heart of the Stiff-culture power structure, singing the counter-spell. And nobody stopped us. Nobody at all. It was like they were expecting it, welcomed us in their secret hearts, rolled over, lay down and let us in.

There was none of the totally negative vibes that echoed around Paris when it fell in sixty-eight.

We never suffered the souring they went through in America after the Woodstock nation marched on Washington in sixty-nine, when Elvis was appointed Director of the FBI and launched his witch-hunt against the diehard rednecks. All I remember is how bright the silver moon shone that year; the machine-men standing on it cursing in their cold dead language, never to return, not to the planet they abandoned.

My generation is hope, salvation. Our spirit didn't die before we grew jaded and disillusioned. We were the first in history to discover our karmic centre. We brought it back to our parents' war-parched garden, a cherished essence, planted it, watered it with our tears, and in the end they thanked us.

Hope has always been eternal. President Dylan said that to me when he kissed me at the Salute to Redemption concert in Hyde Park, and now it's triumphed. Together we've made it so strong it rings out in every dark corner.

The sound from the stacks of the mega-bands brought down the wall, Germany raves to the beat now. And Moscow, the ice citadel itself, thaws; Pink Floyd and Springsteen are finally going their way. There'll be dancing in Red Square before the millennium is out, you'll see. Flowers will sprout delicate rainbow colours from the black iron barrels of tanks.

Keith sits down, blissfully freaked. Man oh man. Mick just looks sad. I watch treacherous and temporary alliances being formed on the benches behind him. Pure Stiff-culture advantage-trading. Betrayal.

The bad news music opposition is leaping about, cheering. I'm tuned in, but they're the ones dropping out.

The end of the joint lies hot between my fingers, and my breath fills the air with radioactive fairy dust. Outside, the last chords of sweet sweet music are dying in the clean white frost of tomorrow.