

Dust To Dust

by Colin P. Davies

Richard's phosphorescence had returned, like a seasonal dust cloud, lemon sharp and angry edged. He stroked a finger down his forearm and dry skin fell like powder to the smooth tiled floor. He had thought that the disease had abated, that whatever rare and distressing variant of eczema had afflicted him this last week had been only a temporary reaction to the stress of being hunted. That hope had now faded, and it made him angry.

He sucked in a slow, deep breath. No value now in anger. Survival would depend on calm planning and cool execution, and a low profile.

He dropped the towel, lowered himself into the warm bathwater and allowed his rage to seep away.

A scum of yellow skin settled upon the surface of the bubbles. Wash clean, scrub thoroughly... That would buy him another two hours, enough time to slip in through the police cordon around the Halcyon Quarter of the city and reach the house of his friend Doctor Philby. No-one else could be trusted. Not the media, not the hotel staff, not even the police. Only the Doctor could help him.

When he had finished, he lay back.

Midday sunlight burned through the window, dazzling him. He gasped as pain lanced through his eyeballs. He'd been having trouble with his eyes for days — fuzzy vision and irritation — but had veered his thoughts around its significance. He didn't trust himself not to panic.

The light intensified. The white circle of the sun swelled larger, as though falling towards him. He saw a mark on the glass... first a small hole, then wider. The leaf-patterned glass was melting. With a thump like a stinging slap in the face, the rolled-up blind ignited.

He slid down into the water until his face went under. The visions were coming more frequently now and still frightened him. Yet he knew there was no heat, no fire. He understood that it was an illusion... if he tried hard enough, if he could divert his mind.

The water felt odd on his shaved scalp — his golden hair now lay in the wash basin. At one time he would have been devastated, but things change, and none more so than priorities. The new appearance should throw the Cartel off his trail.

Even now, he did not understand why they had held him captive. He'd agreed to work for them voluntarily and could see no purpose in his incarceration. Perhaps they had demanded money for his return. He couldn't know. His time in captivity remained a vague and confusing dream. Most likely he'd been drugged. However, they had provided food and he had no memory of violence. In fact, he had very little memory at all.

He sat up sharply, rubbing water from his eyes. The vision had gone. The window was undamaged. No time for relaxation and reflection; he knew the visions would come again, as if to deny him any chance of resting... any chance to think. He had to get to Doctor Philby. The Doctor would be able to hide him, and also might have knowledge of the disease. He could be Richard's only chance of ever seeing Jill again.

Richard could not bear to be on the run much longer. Since his abduction from the back street lab and his subsequent lucky escape a week ago, he'd slept in abandoned houses and fed on scraps from restaurants and takeaways. He had been forced to make many compromises — not least his decision to forgo a reunion with Jill, for her own safety. His imagination played over images of his wife. They used to share baths — in the interests of water economy. They used to share everything.

Well... almost everything.

* * *

“Richard... remember they won't offer you the post if you appear half-hearted. Smile!” Jill had hurried him out of the front door into a morning of low cloud and warm drizzle. She gave him his fat leather bag and a kiss on the cheek. “These are important people. Money-people.”

“Don't worry. I'm fine.” Money people — yes, no doubt — but if she knew precisely which fields of research they worked in.... Moving illegal drugs had become more hazardous than ever. New methods had to be found. Not exactly ethical, he knew. Still, they wanted him, and he needed the job. “I'm fine.”

“You don't get an opportunity like this every day... but, in the end, it's your choice. I'm not pushing.” She shoved him down the path.

“I can see that.” He laughed. In truth, he needed the money or the house would go. And if he lost that, maybe she would go too.

“I can still come with you, if you want,” she said to his back.

“No, no... I'll be fine.” He turned and surveyed his wife. So slim, so beautiful, and with her long hair as golden as sunshine on this dull day. How had he ever managed to net such a beauty? The woman of his dreams — of any man's dreams.

Jill tapped the face of her wristwatch. “Go!”

He checked his own watch. He couldn't quite focus on the hands. “What time have...?”

“Go!”

* * *

In the bedroom the telephone rang.

He leapt from the bath, splattering water across the blue tiles, and marched naked and dripping into the bedroom. He knelt in front of the console. The screen jumped to life.

“Hello?”

No reply, only a flickering blue screen and the steady ticking of a clock.

“Who is this?”

Still the clock.

He cancelled the call and stood a moment, his head dizzy with possibilities. He went for the towel.

While getting dressed, he glanced at the fuzzy red display of the alarm clock-radio on the bedside cabinet. Time seemed so important now. He felt himself tied to the motion of the clock. He had to get

moving soon.

This concern with time came as a culture change for Richard. He'd always considered lethargy a career target. He used to quip: "I'd rather be laid back than laid out." This approach had, more than once, landed him in trouble with the university authorities. Perhaps, then, he should not have been surprised when they told him they had one more chemist than they required.

And Jill... she loved it about him, and she hated it about him.

Time....

He checked his herringbone tie and pale blue suit in the mirror. Just another denizen of the faceless city — his jaundiced complexion now buried under a layer of foundation — he would draw little attention. But still he could not see clearly. He knew that the problem must be linked to the disease. He gulped away a rising swell of loneliness.

Time to go.

* * *

In the hotel lobby he hesitated a moment to check out the other guests. Two businessmen chatted at the desk while an elderly woman fed her loose change into the coffee machine. No-one had noticed him. He started towards the street.

Just as he allowed himself to believe he'd made it to the exit, he felt a movement in the floor. He kept walking. The floor juddered... then, creaking and shrieking, the centre of the lobby slowly fell away, sucked down into a dark pit. The old lady slid, screaming, into the hole.

Richard clamped his eyelids to shut out the fakery and, back to the wall, edged towards the street door. Moments later, he pushed through and the summer air met him like a memory of younger days. The scent of hot-dogs from the kiosk across the road, the finger-light stroke of warm air on his cheeks.

He recalled a time when he was a boy of maybe eight, kneeling in the warm sun, gazing tearfully at his injured dog, Boomer. He blamed himself for charging carelessly across the traffic. Grown-ups gathered around, but no-one helped. Not until one man knelt down and gently took Boomer in his arms and told Richard not to worry. The man was a doctor.

Enough! He had to get moving. The clock over the reception desk had said.... He didn't know what it had said, but he knew he had to hurry.

At the junction of Park Drive and Alderley Street he joined the long queue to the roadblock. He hoped he would not sweat — but, no doubt, they would fail to see beyond his face paint anyway and simply take him for a tart on a trick. They had no problem with that. The blockade aimed to keep out drugs.

Security had been stepped up since the news that the Cartel planned to move into the Halcyon Quarter, home of the wealthy, where celebrities detoxed, where empty-souled rich kids cried out for purpose — Prime Target.

Two police officers controlled the gate in the tall mesh fence. The male cop wore his hair shoulder length and had a tattoo of a third eye in the middle of his forehead. The female cop hid her face behind a mask of the President. Bags and clothes were being searched and scanned.

While the girl cop examined a father's ID, his child began to cry. Richard peered around the people ahead of him in the queue to see her colleague struggling to get a toy rabbit from the child. The cop

wrenched it from the boy's grip, then produced a knife and gutted the toy, tearing out the stuffing, emptying it carelessly onto the ground.

"Okay, it's clean," the cop announced. He handed the limp rabbit back to the child.

The father protested. "You can't do that. Who's going to pay for it?" The child's weeping persisted.

"I've done you a favor. Anything could have been in there... phetamines, crack, scentless rapture.... Like it or not, you could have been a carrier." The officer then stood aside. "You can go through now. Have a nice day."

* * *

Richard finally passed through the checkpoint with no more problems than a slap on his backside from the female cop and her curious comment, "I hope you catch up with your friend." Now he had to orient himself — it had been some time since he'd been to the party at the Doctor's house.

He moved through crowded streets, past shops busy with the August tourist trade, and found himself in front of the rococo façade of House of Fraser. He turned full circle. There! The great hexagonal clock on the tower of St Michael's, and the stone arch leading to the churchyard walk. He knew which way to go.

As he hurried from street to street, increasingly experiencing the comfort of *déjà vu*, he noticed the phosphorescence returning, his skin again dry and yellow, the surface flaking. He tried not to worry. Safety drew closer with every step — of that he was certain. More than safety.... Salvation! He had a faith in the Doctor that he found difficult to explain.

As he hurried past the door of a jeweler's, trying to recall when he had first met the Doctor, a young woman stepped into his path. "Oh... sorry," she said. "I should look where I'm going."

Jill! She'd cut her golden hair short, but he knew his own wife. "Jill... what are you doing here?"

"Sorry, sir... you must be confused."

Yes, confused. He looked at her again.

She wore jeans and a yellow T-shirt which carried the caption *Ashes to Ashes*. Pretty, like Jill, but somehow different. She smiled at him. "You have to hurry." She held up a bottle of clear liquid and poured it over herself, then tossed it aside. The stench of petrol made him cough.

He tried to get past her. "Out of my way!"

She grabbed his sleeve and showed him a cigarette lighter. "Only moments to live...."

Richard jerked his arm free and ran.

He felt the flare of heat on his back.

He chose streets by instinct, turned corners by hunch. Soon fatigue began to nag at his thighs. Respite had to be close. It would be easy to give up now, but he knew he had to survive. He desperately wanted to live... to have another chance.

And, more than anything, he missed Jill.

He recognised Doctor Philby's house immediately — a half-timbered, two-storey building, set back from

the street in a garden of mature oaks. In the days of the Church this had been a vicarage. Beautiful and secure. With difficulty he managed to pick out the guard in the tree-house — the glaring sky made ghosts of the branches.

Richard crunched up the gravel path and hammered on the door. Only moments later, the door opened and a man wearing a tennis shirt and shorts appeared. “Ah... I’ve been expecting you.” He checked his watch.

“I’m sorry to involve you, Doctor...” Richard tried to slow his harsh breathing. “But I need your help. Some people are looking for me.”

“Come in right away.”

Richard followed him through to the huge hallway. Dim, fuzzy, but familiar: the portrait of Lady Philby, the subdued lighting, the antler coat stand. He could almost hear the noise of that party, the laughter, the thudding music, almost smell the smoked salmon. He could not, however, recall the reason for that celebration. Some memories, he had found, returned vivid and fresh, while others... well, others were just not there.

“You’re the second visitor I’ve had this morning,” the Doctor said. “In fact, he’s still here.”

“Oh, then I... I can’t stay.”

“Don’t worry. This is a friend. You can trust him. He’s completely harmless.”

Richard had no choices left, nowhere else to go. And, besides, weariness had won. He’d been running too long.

Doctor Philby opened the door to the lounge and directed his guest inside. Richard winced in the glare from the window. A man sat on the white sofa, his back to the doorway.

“Sit down and try to relax. Introduce yourself. You’ll have to excuse me — I’ve just had a consignment arrive. It’s time to close the deal.” Doctor Philby hurried out and slammed the door behind him.

Richard squinted around the room: the walls lined with medical books, the globe which doubled as a drinks cabinet, the glow of the fake coal fire — all so familiar and reassuring. Then he walked around the sofa, onto the white rug, and slumped into an armchair. He examined his own yellow hands, fearing that if he looked up, that man sitting opposite would be smiling at him, would start laughing at him... would turn out to be from the Cartel.

Then the man whispered in a voice as pained as the lament of an abandoned child, “More than anything... I miss Jill.”

Richard lifted his gaze. His fingertips dug deep into the arms of the chair — he glared at the man’s bald scalp, his pale blue suit, his yellow, phosphorescent skin....

The man gazed sullenly at Richard, then tugged at the upholstery of the sofa. The material lifted in his hand. Richard saw that the white sofa had been an illusion. Dust sheets lay over the suite and over the floor.

“Dust to dust,” said the man. “Whether any of us are flesh or dust is only a matter of time.”

Richard lurched forward, preparing to run for the door, but already he knew there was no point. His companion had told him so.

Below the knee, the man's trousers hung limp and empty.

His shoes were buried in two mounds of priceless yellow dust.

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