

Rwanda by Robert Reed

Robert Reed's newest collection of short stories, *The Cuckoo's Boys*, recently came out from Golden Gryphon Press. Stories in the book that were originally published in *Asimov's* include "Savior" (August 1998), "She Sees My Monsters Now" (June 2002), and "On the Brink of that Bright New World" (January 1993). Of his latest tale he says, "I had this half-idea for a story, but I didn't know how to start it. Then under a pine tree, my three-year-old found a freshly emerged cicada..."

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Beneath a mangled pine tree, you find the empty shell of a cicada, crystalline and robotic and very lovely. And beside that shell lies something even better--a bug, fat and pale and large enough to halfway fill the palm of your tiny hand. Is the bug alive? Apparently so. It doesn't breathe as you breathe, nor can those dark buggy eyes blink or wink or convey any sense of emotion. But the creature is soft and wet, and its limbs seem to move slowly in response to your little prods. A pair of wings extends from the long back, but they are shriveled and plainly useless, and your first inclination is to guess that the creature you are holding has been poisoned or burned in some horrific, wondrous fashion.

Your father sits on the patio drinking beer. Many elements go into your calculations. What time of day is it? How many cans are stacked near his bare feet? By his posture, can you read his mood, and if so, does it look as if he can endure one of your questions, and after that, maybe twenty more?

The day is still early, not even noon yet, and only three spent cans are set on the concrete slab. After you stare at him for a few moments, he notices, and something that might be a smile surfaces, followed by a clear voice asking, "What is it?"

You go to him, showing him your treasure.

He seems puzzled, but only for a moment. Then he asks, "Did you find its exoskeleton?"

That is an enormous word, but you hear a word inside it that you know. Nodding, you tell him about the cicada shell. Does he want to see that too?

"No need."

You offer the creature to him.

He acts tempted. But then some controlling urge causes him to shake his head, and he surprises you. He doesn't say, "Take it back where you found it." He doesn't say, "You should never have disturbed it." Instead, he smiles again, more warmly this time, and climbing up from the iron chair, he says, "Let's both take this fellow back. Where were you? Under the tree over there?"

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The world is vast and jammed full of mysteries and things that aren't mysterious to anyone but you. If there is a smarter man than your father, you have not met him. He has books enough to cover walls and other books that come to him on the computer screen, during those hours when there is power. If he doesn't read much, it is because long ago he consumed and digested the contents of his library. And if he doesn't remember everything that he has read, at least he can go to the proper shelf and open one or two or ten books, finding an answer that will satisfy him, if not quite you.

"Nice," he says, sitting under the tree with you. Then he pops open another beer. You smell it and you can smell him. This is Friday, and there will be hot water tomorrow, at least for a few hours. Then both of you will wash up, the smell of soap defeating the other stinks for a while.

The ground is bare beneath the pine tree, except for the dead needles and some little marks made by your various sticks. In the soft tan earth, you recently drew the outline of a very simple house. Your father examines your drawing for a long moment. He sips his warm beer. He watches the big bug resting on the ground beside the tree trunk, and he stares off at nothing for a long while, finishing the can and nodding at nothing. Then without quite looking at you, he asks, "How old are you?"

He knows your age. Of course he does. But adults like to ask little questions where the answer is common knowledge. It is not so much a test as it is a means of pointing something out to children.

You recite your age.

And he nods in response, saying what he meant to say at the beginning. "You are old enough."

Old enough for what? You have no clue what he means.

"Look at that house," he tells you.

He doesn't mean the house you drew. He points across the long yard. Only recently you came to realize that this particular tree doesn't stand on your property. Father cuts both of the yards when the grass grows shaggy. But somewhere in the green middle is a line that divides what is yours from what belongs to that other house.

The house is empty. Along your street are several more just as empty, and on the street behind yours are more houses like this one. Everywhere you go in the city, vacant homes sit in shaggy lawns, weeds growing up from the cracks in their sidewalks and driveways.

"Are you looking at it?"

It is very much like your house, except bigger. The shades are down and a thick layer of grime shows on the glass. It has been your impression that no one wants you to look in those windows. But you have done it often enough to have a clear image about what is inside. Dusty furniture and darkness are inside, at least on the ground floor. And silence. And, at least for you, mysteries.

"Think of this exoskeleton," your father tells you.

Surprised, you blink and stare at the delicate empty and exceptionally fragile shell of the cicada.

"The skeleton is something like that house. It used to be a home, but now it has been left behind."

The idea sounds familiar, and then it doesn't. You aren't certain what you are hearing in these words, but more than puzzled, you are worried--your heart quickening and a tightness building in the back of your throat.

"And this pupa," your father says. "Look at it now."

The bug's wings seem to have grown larger in the last minutes. But the body is still soft and colorless, and, by all measures, exceptionally helpless.

"Biology," he says.

That single word sounds ominous and very sad.

"Genetics," he says.

Again, you want to shiver, though you can't decide why.

"What if people were the same as this insect?" he asks. Then before you can make a sound, much less offer a weak answer, he adds, "What if they lived as one thing for a very long time, and then they passed through a sudden transformation, coming out the other side to discover that they weren't people anymore?"

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All you can do is nod, your stomach pulling itself into a stubborn knot.

"What we believe happened ... our best guess derived from hard evidence and quite a lot of informed conjecture ... is that somebody wanted to colonize the Earth." Your father shakes his head and grins, as if astonished by his own words. "Aliens, I mean. Extraterrestrials. Creatures that must have been similar to humans, both in body and in their ecological niche. They must have sent out robotic probes, probably in the remote past, and sometime after they discovered our world, the aliens mounted a second expedition that brought their colonists here."

You think of the proud rockets in his books and the flashy, muscular starships in the old comics that you read.

But he doesn't let you think about starships for long. "Space is huge," he warns. "The distances are too great to imagine, and even a tiny payload is very difficult to move from sun to sun. And every voyage, even with the best engines, will take centuries, if not many, many thousands of years."

He asks, "How can you colonize a distant world for a cheap, reasonable price?"

Then he shakes his head, answering his own question. "There is no reasonable price, of course. That's the point I'm making here."

You try hard, but you cannot follow his logic.

"No reasonable price," he repeats, "yet there is a relatively cheap method to conquer a new world. Imagine that you can shrink each of your brave colonists down to where they are smaller than ants. Shriveled them down to the size of dust mites, say. All the information necessary to replicate each of them is contained inside one of these tiny storage devices, and for the sake of argument, let's say there are millions of them onboard the colony ship. How big would that starship have to be, do you think?"

No guess is correct.

Your father grins, warning you, "You know, your bed has millions of dust mites. They live on it and inside it, on the sheets and blankets and pillow cases."

He says, "Hundreds of millions of colonists could ride inside a vessel no bigger than this."

The empty beer can, he means.

"When you read history, you'll see. You'll see. The successful colonists are those who travel light and make what they need when they arrive." He crushes his can and sets it beside the half-born cicada. "The invaders came with the tools necessary to build new homes for themselves. And by homes, I mean bodies. Familiar, workable bodies holding brains large enough to contain all of their memories and thoughts and desires. That's what their robot probes had found in the first expedition, we think. I think. Not just a living world, but they found a world offering a common species that could be claimed for their own important selves.

"Human beings, I mean.

"Of course."

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Your father pauses for a long, long while.

Then softly, sadly, he describes how the tiny starship would strike the Earth and rip apart, scattering its dusty contents across the high dry stratosphere. The colonists could drift undetected, perhaps for many years, riding the cold winds until they were everywhere. Then they would dive into the lower atmosphere, latching rides on raindrops and downdrafts, descending onto the innocent humans who were going about their own little lives.

A mite-sized colonist would enter its host through the lungs or stomach, and in short order, ride the bloodstream up to the brain.

The only symptoms were a mild fever and odd aches, and sometimes, a harmless red rash. And then after a few days, the sick human would drift into a deep sleep that would last until his mind had been rewritten and reborn.

But the new colony had one considerable weakness. When the first expedition examined the Earth, there were barely one hundred million humans. The aliens assumed that the population would grow, but no more than five-fold, which was why only half a billion colonists made the long journey.

"The invaders had no choice but to be less than 10 percent of the population," your father explains. "Instead of dominating their new world, they were a minority, and not a well-received minority, as it happened...."

The cicada's wings are even larger now.

He says, "The natural first conclusion was that some horrible new disease was running wild. The disease would leave its victims confused and possibly brain damaged. Which explained why those poor people spoke nonsense after they woke. And why they were clumsy at first, walking with the same slow, careful shuffle. And that also gave a reason why they didn't seem to recognize friends and family. They had suffered a profound neurological shock. As a precaution, the first couple million victims were quarantined inside hospitals and public buildings, and doctors worked for days to find the virus or bacteria responsible. But there was nothing to find, since of course this was no simple disease. And then teams of specialists, in Atlanta and in Switzerland, noticed that their patients were speaking the same precise gibberish, and the patients seemed to understand what was being said."

He shakes his head for a moment. "More people were falling ill every day," he explains. "Two million victims quickly became twenty million, and there weren't enough hospital beds for everyone. People tried to cope with shuffling, muttering spouses. Or babbling children. And then after a few days of rest and practice, the supposedly sick people would suddenly leave their homes, meeting at predetermined places where they could discuss their circumstances and make plans.

"For a while, nothing made sense.

"For two weeks, the public was terrified but ignorant. The rate of infection continued to rise, and rise. No one was sure how many people would eventually catch the soul-robbing disease. And then suddenly, on the fifteenth day, the truth was learned."

Your father takes a deep breath and holds it, and then he exhales, admitting, "Everybody knew somebody who had died. Everybody had a neighbor or loved one who had been replaced by some kind

of creature that was nothing like the dead soul. Linguists had deciphered the new language, and with the help of military interrogators, they held their first and only interviews with the aliens.

" 'We just wanted a place to live,' the invaders said. 'Please, give us a chance to make up for this,' they begged. 'We can live with you and be good neighbors. We can offer you technological wonders, for free, and within a few years, your world will be wealthy beyond your most optimistic dreams.'

"That's what they claimed, speaking to the specialists with their new mouths. Residing inside the bodies they had stolen from their rightful owners.

"Which leads to the obvious question: how can you trust a creature that has so willingly and easily killed the mind of a helpless host?"

Again, your father needs a deep breath.

"The decision was inevitable," he says. "And by necessity, the work had to be completed quickly, with whatever tools were on hand."

You say nothing, finding yourself staring off at the empty house.

"The call for action came from everywhere," your father tells you with a hard sorry voice. "It came from the government, and it came from important individuals in the media. And every neighborhood had some loud demanding voice that explained what was necessary now. A cleansing. A purge. And since the disease rate was still accelerating, and since anybody with a mild fever or a slight red rash could be infected, thus dangerous ... well, it was impossible to be generous or patient, and very quickly, kindness was forgotten entirely."

He lowers his face.

"Suppose," he says. "Suppose somebody in your family was sick, but you couldn't accept her fate. Because people got the flu all the time, and you had to let the disease run its course, if you were going to be sure one way or the other. But then, what if your neighbors heard that she was sick and came to deliver the cure? You told the others to leave or you would fight with them. Because she was your wife and your only true love. You weren't ready to give up hope yet. You promised that you would watch over her for now, and you told them that you had a gun, even when you didn't. But then they broke down the front door and pushed their way upstairs to the bedroom. Your neighbors, they were. Friends for years, in some cases. And you were reduced to screaming insults and promising revenge for what they were doing with their shotguns and garden shovels...!"

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You aren't looking at the empty house now.

Instead you stare at your own home, and in particular, the upstairs window that always has its shade pulled closed. A room that you have never been inside, not even once.

"Ten percent," says your father.

Then he almost seems to laugh with a bitter, acidic tone. "The world can surrender 10 percent of its population and not miss a beat. Or nearly so. But nothing that swift or large can ever be that simple and clean. I mean, what happens when rumors start? When one authority figure stands before a news camera, mentioning in passing, 'We're worried about aliens hiding, drifting inside unsuspecting hosts.' Not that there was evidence of that happening. There has never been. The mite-sized bodies had drifted to the ground together, and those that hadn't found hosts were soon destroyed by free oxygen and simple

erosion. But if you have already invested the last week of your life killing these invaders, then it is natural to be cautious. It is perfectly understandable if you want to take care of those who might be a problem at some later date."

You stare at the maturing cicada.

"And of course, the aliens fought back. Not in an organized fashion or with much effect ... but they did manage to kill three or four humans for every ten of them who perished ... which means millions more were dead, and the people who lived felt even angrier and more desperate...."

The cicada kicks its jointed legs, and the swelling wings begin to tremble, as if eager to fly away.

"And then," your father says. His mouth is open but he pauses for a moment before asking again, "What if you were a person for a very long time, and then suddenly you passed through some enormous event, and on the other side you discovered that you weren't really human anymore?"

What does he mean by that?

"In history," he says, "this metamorphosis happens with numbing regularity. The Holocaust. Cambodia. And Rwanda, to name three."

Three what?

"There are many good reasons to murder," he assures you.

Then he looks toward the empty house, explaining, "She had a light fever and a bit of a sunburn, and that's all she had. But they killed her anyway. Hacked her body to pieces and left the pieces in our bed. And then a couple weeks later, when the death rate was approaching 50 percent, some despairing soul pried open the back door of that house over there and knifed two people to death." Then he looks at you, and with the mildest voice, he says, "Don't believe what you hear. Revenge really can help heal the deepest hurts."

You say nothing.

With a finger and thumb, your father picks up the almost-born cicada, and he stands, placing it on the highest branch that he can reach.

Then he looks down at you. "And even the angriest inhuman soul can be kind," he says. "Even splattered with blood, he can do something that is right and good. Do you know what I mean? Two people are dead in their own bed, and between them lies a baby ... and for all the evils walking free in the world, one good impulse can save that child's very little life...."