

# The Vicar of R'lyeh

by Marc Laidlaw

*Story Copyright (C) 2007, Marc Laidlaw.  
Images Copyright (C) 2007, Rudy Rucker.  
6,200 Words.*

“Let anything be held as blessed, so that that be well cursed.”  
– Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*

Glorious afternoon, warm and breezy among green hills dotted with sheep. Looking down from his sylvan lounging spot upon the village with its twin spires, Geoffrey heard a mournful bell coming from the towers of Barchester Cathedral, and almost immediately thereafter noted a small dark shape making its way across the dewy grass from the open doors of the church. A faint distortion followed the pedestrian, as if air and earth were curdling in its wake. He blinked away the illusion, but the feeling of oppression grew until he clearly saw that yes, 'twas the vicar coming toward him with some message he suddenly felt he did not wish to hear. Meanwhile, the tolling of the bell had grown appalling. As the little man struggled up the hillside, he seemed to expand until his shadow encompassed the town itself. Abruptly the vicar stood before him, the pale features of the meek country parson tearing into soft and writhing strands like the points of a wormy beard. The vicar scowled, revealing five segmented ridges of bone, teeth akin to the beak of a sea urchin. Geoffrey did not wish to hear the vicar speak, but there was no stopping his ears.

“You up, Geoff?” The voice, its accent inappropriate, was first wheedling, then insistent. “R’lyeh’s rising!”

He forced his eyes open. Somehow the phone had lodged itself between his cheek and pillow. The voice of his boss went on.

“Geoff, are you there? Did I wake you? I know you were here late, but we’ve got an emergency.”

“Mm. Hi, Warren. No. I was...I was getting up.”

(7:43 by the clock.)

“Calculations were off. Fucking astrologers, right? Anyway, we’ve got to throw ourselves into it. Marketing’s in a tizzy, but let them be the bottleneck. I think if we dig in---”

“Give me ...” Shower, skip breakfast, grab coffee at a drive-through, traffic. This was bad. “...forty-five minutes?” Very bad.

“You’re a pro, Geoff.”

Very bad. Cancel all plans. Forget about rest until this thing was done. Already resigning himself to it. Exactly how off were the calculations? He’d soon find out.

Forty-eight minutes later, panicking over his growing lateness, Geoff spiraled down through increasingly

lower levels of the parking lot. He was late, but he was worrying more about the dream. What did it mean? That he was becoming polluted? That his pure visions had become contaminated by the foul effluents in which he labored daily? It seemed more urgent that he get away. Finish this job and get back to what he loved. Put all this crap behind him. If he could just get through it.

As he descended, the fluorescent lights grew dingier and more infrequent; fresh white paint gave way to bare, sooty concrete; the level markers were eroded runes. Even at this hour, he found not a single free parking space until he reached the lowest level. At the end of the farthest row, he found a retractable metal gate raised just over halfway. Beyond it, a promising emptiness, dark.

His car scraped under the gate with half an inch of clearance. He found himself in a cavernous lot he had never seen before, darkness stretching beyond the reach of his headlights. This lot was anything but crowded. A mere dozen or so cars parked companionably in the nearest row of spaces. He pulled in beside them and shut off his engine though not yet his lights. Stairs? Elevators? He saw no sign of either. The safest course would be to walk back under the gate to the main level.

Slamming the door killed the light from his car, but enough flowed from the gateway to show a layer of dust on the adjacent Volkswagen. Geoff peered through the passenger window, shuddering when he saw a row of tiny plastic figures perched on the dashboard, winged and faceless except for tentacles and the keyhole eyes of superintelligent cuttlefish. The toys were self-illuminated, in the manner of their kind, and pulsed with faint colors that signaled their intentions to those who could read them. Scattered over the seats were piles of sticks and matted weeds. Also a fallen stack of books, and a spiral notebook open to a page covered with scribbles he took for treasure maps. What kind of treasure seeker plundered the recesses of a not very ancient parking garage?

Fearing he might be mistaken for a prowler, he straightened up, tugging his backpack over his shoulders. On his way toward the gate, he glanced back and saw that the car bore an all too popular bumper sticker: HE IS RISEN.

The sudden grinding of the metal gate called up terrors of confinement, though in fact the gate was opening the rest of the way. Blue-tinged headlights came down the ramp, blinding him. He threw up a hand to shade his eyes, and saw a long black limo cruising through the entryway. It came to a stop, fixing him in its headlights, the engine thrumming so deeply that he felt the throbbing through his shoes.

“Come forward!” piped a voice, thin and irresistible.

Geoff walked around the side of the limo. One of the doors was open. Inside, a luxurious compartment of oxblood leather and recessed lights comfortably contained Warren and another man unknown to him.

“Geoff? What are you doing down here?”

“Who is this?” came the reedy voice that had bid him approach.

“Uh...this is Geoffrey Abbott, our lead designer.”

“Really? Come in, young man.”

Warren gave an uncomfortable smile, then waved him in. Geoff sat, balancing his backpack on his knees. As the car purred forward, Warren nodded toward the other man, a small fine-boned figure in a grey suit, dark of complexion, with curly black hair cropped close.

“Geoff, I’d like you to meet Emil Calamaro.”

Geoff held back his hand a moment. He had never heard Warren say the name in anything but scorn; yet

he was obviously awed by the actual presence of the owner of Aeon Entertainment.

“So,” piped the small man, “you are tasked with R’lyeh’s rising, is that not so?”

“Only in the Commemorative Simulator,” Warren said.

There was a chitter of laughter. “As if it could be otherwise!” said Calamaro.

It was several seconds before Geoff realized what Calamaro was talking about. Everyone on the team had a slightly different pronunciation of “R’lyeh”—from Warren’s “It’s really, really, *Real-yeah*,” to the broad “*Ruh-lay*” to the completely lazy and obnoxious “*Riley*.” But Calamaro’s take on the name was especially odd: It seemed to come bubbling up from his gullet through a column of thick liquid, less a word than a digestive sound.

“Geoff’s got the job for now,” Warren said quickly, covering Geoff’s confusion.

“And you think him more suitable than the previous designer?”

“We’ve got a lot of faith in Geoff,” Warren said. “He created the *Jane Austen Mysteries*.”

Calamaro sank back in his seat, making a faint hissing sound and baring his teeth at Austen’s name. Out of Egypt, Geoff thought, and now owner of an extensive media empire. Not always a hands-on sort of owner, Calamaro took an active role in producing only a select few of the titles in the endless run of Cthulhuvian flicks and tie-in games that Aeon cranked out on a seasonal basis. Calamaro’s dark, slender fingers clenched the head of a walking stick that was somehow both leopard and crocodile. On the seat beside him sat a cylindrical box, tall and golden, fastened with a clasp.

“I know it’s a bit of a stretch, but the authenticity of those levels, and Geoff’s ability to make them lively and action-packed without sacrificing the integrity of the source material...well, we think it’s a great fit. No one originally thought you could set Jane Austen to work solving crimes in the world of her own books, but Geoff’s team did a fantastic job.”

“I designed the *Bloody Trail of Lord Darcy*,” Geoff said, compelled to rise to his own defense, knowing that Warren had not actually played any of the Austen thrillers. “I was looking forward to starting in on *Pride and Extreme Prejudice* when this came along. Eventually I think Thomas Hardy will be a fertile source of ---”

“I would like to see the work so far.”

“Absolutely!” Warren said.

“Sure.” Geoff hoped none of his terror showed in his face.

The limo stopped. The driver opened the passenger door. Calamaro indicated that Geoff should go first.

He could no longer see the gated entrance. Ahead of the car, held in its headlights, was a doorway. Calamaro stepped into the beams, his shadow staggering out across the hard-packed floor and then the wall. He supported himself on his walking stick, hugging the golden cylinder close to his chest with the other arm. Warren hurried to open the door. Beyond was an elevator and a flight of stairs. The elevator waited, but when Geoff tried to enter, Warren held him back. “Why don’t you take the stairs, Geoff? We’ve got some business to discuss. We’ll catch up with you upstairs. Give you time to get the demo ready.”

“Uh...sure.” Geoff held back and watched the doors shut. Calamaro’s eyes glittered like obsidian lenses in the mask of a sarcophagus, refracting the overhead lights into a vision of endless night full of fractured stars.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d stood there before he remembered to look for stairs.

#

By the time Geoff reached the office, everyone was buzzing determinedly through the halls as if they had some other purpose than to catch a glimpse of the man who had set them all in motion. Lars Magnusson, one of the programmers, intercepted Geoff en route to his cubby: “Guess who’s making the rounds this morning?”

“I know,” Geoff said. “Calamaro. I rode in his limo with Warren.”

“Calamaro?” said Lars. “Really? No, I’m talking about Petey Sandersen!”

If this news was meant to lift his spirits, it barely raised an eyebrow. More evidence (as if any were needed) that he did not fit in on the Simulator project; that in fact his loyalty to the whole Aeon Entertainment enterprise was suspect.

Petey Sandersen was a legendary figure – an idol to those who had grown up suckling on the thousand media paps of the Black Goat of the Woods. He had formulated (or packaged) the original rules and invocations, the diagrams and tokens that everyone had once taken for the arcane paraphernalia of an elaborate role playing game. But while Petey had become revered as the Opener of the Way, the Wedge by Which They Widened the Weft, Geoff had spent his adolescence trying to put as much distance as he possibly could between himself and the massively overhyped eldritch invaders.

With Sandersen and Calamaro on the premises, this was shaping up to be a day for high-powered executive reviews. Careers were made or casually ended on days like this. Nice of them to warn the peons in advance.

Geoff slung his backpack under his desk and fired up ABDUL, their proprietary level editor. It was hard not to panic, considering that Warren had volunteered him to show off work that was by no means ready for a demo. About all he had time to do now was check for obvious errors and send the map for a full compile. That, and pray that during the night no one had checked in changes that would break the work he’d done the previous day. Reviewing the morning’s round of check-in notices, he didn’t spot any midnight code changes that would affect his map, but that didn’t mean he was in the clear. Artists were notorious for quietly making an ill-advised change to one inconspicuous model, thereby wreaking havoc on the entire world. Most of them were contractors, prone to exceedingly short lifespans at Aeon, rarely in place long enough to be trained in the brutal realities of their resource management software, dubbed ALHAZMAT. Anyway, there was no way around it. He started his compile and prayed for deliverance.

There was certainly no shortage of divinities in attendance on his prayers. His cubicle was lined with figurines: a mottled green plastic Cthulhu hunched upon a pedestal with leathery wings peaked above its tentacled face; a translucent vinyl Faceless Idiot God containing a congeries of odd shapes that sparked and swarmed like luminous sealife when you squeezed it; a pewter Shub-Niggurath, a goodly number of whose thousand young had fallen behind the desk to be sucked up by the night janitor’s vacuum. The eldritch figures seemed to leap, leer and caper at the corner of his eyes while Geoff bent close to the monitor. On the long late nights when his tired eyes were burning, he thought they did worse things than that. These were not *his* Cthulhu-Kaiju figures, not *his* maddeningly cute Li’l Old Ones. They were a constant reminder of the indignity of his situation. They belonged to the previous occupant of the cubicle—a designer who could return at any moment, depending on the whims of upper management.

Aeon shuffled and recombined its design teams as if they were packs of Pokemon cards—and not particularly rare ones at that.

Geoff bore no love of Elder Gods, but as much as he would have liked to, he couldn't get rid of the vinyl monstrosities. He didn't dare dump them in a drawer and set out his own beloved, hand-painted, resin-cast garage-kit models of Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey. As long as he sat here and accepted the paycheck that came with the keyboard, he must pretend a devotion to the Cthulhuvian pantheon in all its manifestations. Including Warren, who sprang up on the far side of his partition, wagging fingers for him to follow.

Entering the conference room on Warren's heels, Geoff found the other managers enthralled by the spectacle of a portly cherubic man holding forth at the end of the monolithic onyx slab that was their conference table. He was in the midst of an anecdote that ended, "--so I said, I don't think of Petey as a Ted Klein reference. I think of Ted Klein as a *Petey* reference!"

Warren waited for a hitch in the laughter and beckoned Geoff forward. "Petey, this is Geoffrey Abbot, our lead designer."

Petey leaned forward and put out a hand. He was loud, aggressively jovial, with a gleam in his eyes that was pure evangelist: "Have you heard the good news?" The hand was chubby, somewhat clammy, but the grip was firm enough to take his measure. "He is risen!"

"Well...rising," Warren said defensively. "We still have a little time, I hope."

"Not little enough, if you ask me! What do you think, Geoff? I've heard splendid things about you. Are you ready for the rapture?"

"I...build maps," Geoff replied.

"I've done a bit of that. A little bit of everything as needed. You look like a dreamer, Geoff, and that's what we need right now. Good strong dreamers. How're your dreams of R'lyeh lately? Have the Deep Ones been welcoming?"

"Well, I--"

"It's kind of vague, isn't it?" Petey said. "You could use a bit more focus, to be honest. We've been looking at your map, and frankly...well..."

"What? My map?"

He hadn't noticed at first because the huge wall-mounted monitor at the far end of the room was trained on darkness. Suddenly the image lurched and they were looking out over a blue-grey sea, far from land, an ocean cold and desolate and surging with the promise of nightmares. It was his ocean, beneath his bleak sky. They were running *R'lyeh Rising – A Commemorative Simulator*.

Warren put a hand on his shoulder and with a forced smile said, "We pulled them off your share, Geoff. We were just running through them and--"

"Those are yesterday's, they're not even--"

"But they're fabulous, Geoff!" Petey was in his face again. "The only problem we've seen, really, is something we can easily take care of. We don't bring this out for everyone, you understand, but you've already shown you're worth the extra investment. Emil, will you do the honors?"

Emil Calamaro rose from the end of the conference table with the cylindrical golden box in his hands. He set it in front of Geoff and threw the clasp. Petey Sandersen reached inside and lifted a glittering nightmare over Geoff's head. Geoff ducked clear to get a better look.

It was something like a cross between a crown and a diving helmet, a rigid cap that rounded off like the narrow end of a squid. Pale, beaten gold, chased with obscene motifs, set with green stones that rippled like dark aquatic eyes.

"Am I supposed to wear that thing?"

"The Miter of Y'ha-nthlei is an honor and a privilege," said Petey eagerly.

"And a grave responsibility," said Emil Calamaro.

"Geoff will take good care of it, we'll see to that," Warren assured them, pushing Geoff forward to receive the miter.

It fastened to his head with a distinct sensation of suction. Petey stepped back, beaming. "Voila!"

He felt ridiculous.

And something else...

A cold, drawn-out tingling like needles probing his scalp. An intense pressure building within, as if he were developing a sinus infection. His head filled with phlegm.

"Let us study the map again," said Emil Calamaro.

As the Egyptian spoke, Geoff found himself drifting forward to take control of the scene. He sat down and pulled a keyboard toward him. He began to type commands. He knew what they needed to see.

Out on the sea of pale beaten gold, the waves began to roil for no apparent reason.

Petey said, "I've been out there, Geoff, and it's remarkable how well you've captured it."

"I don't know," said Calamaro. "I'm not convinced."

"Have you been to the spot?"

"You know I don't care for open water."

"Well, how can you criticize?"

"It's not what I pictured."

"Don't listen to him," said Petey, leaning closer. "So far it's perfect, it's fine. There's no problem at all until...well, you have to bring it closer to the surface. I mean, a melding of minds. You need to let yourself be dreamed. Let it come through you. That's why we're lending you the miter."

Geoff brought them in over the area of greatest activity. He accelerated the Simulator, putting it through its paces well ahead of schedule.

The ocean appeared to be boiling. Even through the turbulence you could sense a massive darkness about to break through.

He typed “entity\_trigger rlyeh\_rise\_01.”

R’lyeh breached the waters.

The dripping rocks were encrusted with monstrous tubeworms, their guts bursting out after the pressure shock of the tremendous ascent. Slick scaly bodies writhed in raw sunlight, suffocating in air, caught by the rising of the monolithic city and perishing now before their eyes. Up it rose, a place of eldritch angles, tilted towers, evil... wrong...

So utterly, terribly wrong.

Geoff took his hands from the keyboard and covered his eyes, trying to contain his despair. It was wrong and he knew it. Everything was fine until the full hideous glory of R’lyeh rose into view, and then the illusion collapsed. There was nothing majestic about it, nothing that conjured up the horror of its arrival. It was only tilted rocks and a few cheap, generic effects. His heart wasn’t in it, and it showed.

“It still needs work,” he said, aware that he had better show a pretense of caring for something more than his paycheck.

Without speaking or moving, Calamaro radiated near-lethal levels of distaste and disappointment. Warren had gone pale, afraid to speak either in defense or reproach of Geoff’s work. Only Petey Sandersen appeared untroubled. He slapped a hand on Geoff’s shoulder.

“It’s only to be expected,” he said. “It’s partly our fault. We’ve been remiss. In our defense, we wanted to make sure we had the right guy. I think, this time, we’ve got him.”

Petey gave a nod and a wink to Warren, who visibly relaxed. Color flooded his cheeks. Geoff suddenly remembered the unnamed designer he’d replaced. “...*this time*...”

“We’re going to leave you with the miter, Geoff. I think you’ll find you can remedy all deficiencies. You’ll get R’lyeh right this time. You’ll get on the Dreamer’s dark side, and all will be well.”

“We haven’t much time,” said Calamaro.

“With a dedicated designer like Geoff here, I’m not worried in the least. Are you worried, Warren?”

“Wha...no! Not at all. Geoff’ll burn both ends till we’re done with this guy. That’s why he makes the big bucks.”

The miter had begun to feel heavier. He must get back to his desk and plunge into his work. He hardly heard what the others were saying. Ideas were coming, strong and vivid. They must be captured. He must surrender to them, bring them to life.

The others must have sensed that he was no longer following the conversation. Warren stood up, signaling that it was Geoff’s turn to do the same. Petey squeezed his hand. Emil Calamaro merely bent slightly at the waist, gripping his cane.

Geoff found himself in the lobby.

Lulu, the receptionist, regarded the glittering headpiece in awe. “Wow...”

She must have seen something in his eyes that silenced her.

Geoff strode toward his cubby, the prickling sensation still strong, but turning to something cold and liquescent, an icy tendril that held his will and gave him marching orders.

*What am I doing?*

He dragged to a stop in the elevator lobby, determined not to surrender. This was a job, only a job. He shouldn't have to compromise his inmost thoughts, his imagination, his dreams. He would finish the damn map because it was the only way to get back to his own project, but that was all. Beyond that, he would resist.

Elevator doors rumbled open and a small group of programmers, returning with coffee, stumbled off and stared at Geoff with a mixture of amazement and respect. He pushed past them, into the small car, just as the doors closed, and stabbed the button for the ground floor. At that moment, the watery tendrils turned to knives of ice. He put his hands on either side of the wretched miter and tried to twist it off, but it clung tight. The car plummeted past his chosen floor. The car slowed but did not stop. It had entered realms for which there were no markers. The miter had some power over the elevator, even as it fought for power over him. He half expected to step off into a cavern of watery light where Byakhee waited to wing him away to dismal festivities.

Instead, the doors opened on a concrete cell, familiar from that morning. There was the stairwell where Warren had dismissed him, and a door into the vast dark garage.

The miter tightened like a fist, as if sending a final warning, and then it relaxed its grip. He was free.

It took five minutes, at a limping run, to reach the huddled cars, his own seeming vulnerable at the edge of the row. He dug into his pocket for keys. Once he was clear of the building, he would find a way to shed the miter, using a crowbar if necessary. After that, his greatest fear was that Petey and Calamaro would find a way to blackball his career. All he wanted was to get free of this cursed project and back to something he cared about.

As he turned his key in the lock, he heard a sound that stopped him. He waited for it to repeat. It must have been an engine coughing to life on some floor far above. Nothing on this level stirred. The other cars were empty, as he proved to himself by peering through the window of the adjacent Volkswagen. The same clutter of papers on the seat; the same collection of tiny dashboard idols; the same pile of sod and sticks thrown about like yard waste interrupted on its way to the dump.

The sound, as if aware of his attention, played again.

He bent closer. Crumpled sketches littered the seat. Waves of tingling swept across his scalp. His pupils felt impossibly huge. Among the sketches he could make out a fragment of coastline, an ocean expanse, an X in the midst of the sea.

R'lyeh.

The other drawings suddenly made more sense. The tilting oblongs...a poor draftsman's attempt at non-Euclidean geometry...a massive door...a model ship...

The miter caressed him warningly, as if an octopus could purr.

They were maps. Levels. Attempts to sketch out the very same areas he was building for the Simulator. Very poor designs, he had to admit, by a less than skilled designer.

Whose car was this?

Reluctantly, he recognized the kinship between the collection of dashboard dolls and the vinyl creatures



that lined his desk.

And an even less welcome connection: The broken brown twigs were tangled with black rags that bore the Aeon Entertainment logo.

The sound came again. This time, unmistakably, it came from inside some car in this row. It sounded less like an engine noise and more like something clearing its throat.

He eased his door shut, slipped the keys into his pocket, and began to back slowly toward the distant elevator.

The miter, satisfied that he understood, regained its grip.

You haven't won, he told it. I'll get through this and move on.

It's only a job.

#

He fought from the first, in his own way.

He fought from his desk, in front of his monitor, keyboarding until his eyelids trembled and the urge to sleep became all but impossible to resist. But all his other sleepless nights on the Austen project had given him the resources he needed to stay upright and conscious through the deathmarches of crunchmode. The Dreamer worked through him, but he fought back. Subverting the Dark Advent would not have been possible had he not already finely honed the ability to resist sleep; for a game designer it was second nature, a matter of instinct, ingrained.

The first line of defense was a visible act of defiance. Out came every last one of his vinyl Jane Austen figures. He set them to run lines of interference between the figures of eldritch power. The population of Casterbridge mingled incongruously among Whateleys and Peaslees and the entire Arkham establishment.

These small personal touches, injecting something of himself, were minor sorties in the main battle. But they brought a very real satisfaction and sense of resistance.

To resist outright was a doomed proposition. His sanity was at stake, after all. There were limits to how much he was willing to sacrifice just to make a point. Direct opposition would only lead to failure, madness, and the unemployment office. If he could just get through this, there would be other opportunities in store for him. With all the glory attendant on the Second Rising, he would be free again to pick his assignments. He could push his Trollope project. Or finally develop *The Bronte Sisters Massacre*.

Such thoughts did not sit well with the miter, which struck back by clenching down so hard that his brain felt like a raisin. Even through stifling pain, he clung hopelessly to his passion.

Warren dragged a cot into an empty office, dedicating it to Geoff for the duration. Yet to lie there, to sleep, would have been to surrender himself completely.

Beneath the waves, in the lightless depths of his map, the city took shape. Geoff modeled shapes in ABDUL, shapes unlike any he had created before. They were direct projections from the Dreamer; they prefigured the Dark Advent. Even as he built them, he knew they were true. Before this, he had merely imagined R'lyeh; he had improvised, glibly making shit up. This was utterly different. These creations were not of him; he was simply a conduit for the Dreamer's own excretions. What that made of him, he

felt all too keenly.

Yet, while his hands hewed R'lyeh from deformed terrain, his heart took shelter in a green imagined England. It was not mountains of madness that filled his mind, but hillocks of happiness. While fluorescent light throbbed down upon his mitered head, he imagined it was the sunlight of a hot August afternoon; he sought respite from the fields of baled hay, finding Tess the dairymaid (loosely of the D'Urbervilles) waiting for him in the sultry shade, her breasts white as the cream she churned to butter. This was a vision of loveliness no Elder God could threaten. It was not unknown Kadath that shimmered in the distance like a phantasmagoric tapestry, but a stolid grey manor house holding dominion above a manicured lawn. It was not distant witless piping in a cosmic void that filled his ears, but the silver peal of church bells ever ringing through a lilac-scented evening. The pastor walked out among his flock. Roses grew on old white lattices and nodded their heavy heads at the coming night, willing him to sleep...sleep...all would be well if only he would...sleep. Not surrender, merely...merely...

“Geoff? Geoff! Wake up, man, it’s coming! It’s time!”

Groggily aware that something was wrong, Geoff lurched into consciousness. When had he lapsed? What had he lost?

In sleep he had laid himself wide open to the Dreamer. He’d given up everything he valued. He had been party to atrocities. He must delete his work! It was the only way to keep the monster from leaking into the world.

Warren stopped his hand. “You’re done. Come on, we’re in the conference room.”

“Done? But---”

“Don’t worry. The map’s compiled, it’s built, it’s beautiful. Petey and Calamaro couldn’t be happier. Timing’s perfect. We’re not the bottleneck, Geoffrey. Retail can sweat the rest of it. We did our part and we’re done. Now come watch the Rising.”

Stepping into the conference room, he experienced double vision and disorientation. Twin monitors showed the same scene. It took him a moment to realize that one was the simulator and the other was a live broadcast from ships and news helicopters far out at sea. The similarity between the two scenes was uncanny.

Heads swiveled toward him; he tried to smile. Emil Calamaro and Petey Sandersen were plainly delighted to see him. Petey took his hands off the keyboard, where he had been tinkering with the R'lyeh simulation, and, supporting himself on the edge of the table, leaned toward Geoff with his hand out, shouting “He is Risen!” with evangelical fury.

Geoff mumbled his reply.

“We want to thank you and honor you. What you’ve done is beyond amazing!”

Calamaro was rising, his dark sneer full of satisfaction. He too pressed in close to Geoff. “Indeed, it is completely astonishing. You have greatly eased the Rising. We have watched the ascent again and again, and it is most pleasing. Those who did not witness this day firsthand will be able to witness it over and over again for ages to come. It will be as it was.”

On the live screen, the tossing sea had only just begun to tremble; but in the simulator that commemorated the occasion, the ocean had become a frothing stew of green slime belched from the depths. Dark angular towers began to thrust from the waters, black windows gaping, doors opening like

the mouths of the abyss. To gaze upon the exhumed city was madness—even he, its author, could hardly bear to look. Then again, he felt he was no more its author than author of what the networks were transmitting.

Petey pulled over a keyboard and paused the simulation. It began to tick backward, then ran forward again at greater speed. R'lyeh was swallowed by the waves, vomited out, swallowed up again. Warren shook his shoulder. "Good work, Geoff. I mean it. Outstanding. You've really outdone yourself."

Meanwhile, the actual rising would not be rushed; it could not be paused or reversed. If only!

The news cameras drifted over the open sea. Its gentleness filled him with dread.

"All right," Petey said. "Plenty of time for this later."

As he spoke, the simulated R'lyeh had just crested the false waters. The great stage door to the false dreamer's lair, the tilted slab, had begun to gape. The shape within, waking, was caught by the stroke of a key. Paralyzed. Not dead. Not even sleeping. On hold.

Petey pushed the keyboard aside and picked up a remote. He pointed it at the live monitor and turned up the volume.

First you heard the thrum of helicopter blades. After a moment, seeping through, a deeper sound like the tolling of drowned bells vibrated out of the television and filled the listeners in the conference room with the solemnity of the moment. Geoff sank into a chair. He had seen all this before. He had dreamed it, lived it, fought it. Failed. His sense of defeat was complete.

Water slithered and eddied from the dark complexities beneath. Huge mounded shapes. Cruise ships and luxury liners had come close for the occasion, while keeping a respectful distance from the turbulence. The cameras showed their decks and rails thronged with wealthy golden worshippers. Several aircraft carriers waited on the horizon in case of international incidents. But only one incident mattered now, and it transcended all merely "international" concerns.

The bells tolled louder, and at a slowly rising pitch. Something in Geoff thrilled at the sound in spite of himself. He had dreamed this. He had been down there in the depths. He had met the Dreamer mind to mind and been utterly defeated, and yet...and yet...

The waters surged. The chopper pulled closer. From far down in the foul foam came something shining and angular, all points and slopes and corners, upthrusting towers and turrets, and still those bells, so wrong, so infinitely wrong.

Petey and Emil turned to one another, worried looks flitting.

Something gleaming, something of brilliant shining ivory whiteness, suddenly breached the surface. A gasp went through the room.

The helicopter lurched as if the pilot had lost control, caught by a vicious gust from below.

As the chopper recovered, the view stabilized. The distant television crew was shouting about the near disaster, distracted from the inevitable one. They were closer to the water now, closer to the immensity that continued rising into light and air. Gargantuan bluffs of black dripping stone, chiseled shapes covered with slime and ancient marine encrustations. And atop all this, the greatest monstrosity, the holiest of holies...

A church.

Exactly that. A small old-fashioned English country church with a single perfect spire. Sparkling white and dripping wet, it perched atop the squalid rocks as if it had been lifted whole from Geoff's reveries and transplanted in this unlikeliest of spots.

Geoff himself could only stare as seawater flowed from the bell tower, as the pealing bells grew louder, clearer, cheerier.

They filled the room until Petey and Calamaro had to clamp their hands over their ears. The two men whirled on Geoff with their eyes bulging, mouths flapping but unable to speak.

Geoff backed away with both hands on the miter, trying desperately to pry it off, to throw it down and run, even though he knew they could not harm him now. He had given birth to this thing. He and it were one and the same. Minds had mingled in the depths, and now...

Onscreen, the TV screen, the doors of the church swung wide. The timbre of the bells deepened abruptly, sounding a sour and dismal note. Petey and Calamaro, pierced by sudden rapture, whirled to take in the sight.

The church was not empty—hardly that. The white outer shell, the churchlike carapace, had transfigured the softer thing inside, and decidedly not for the better.

It lashed out, and the helicopter went down in an instant. Green water closed over the lens. For a moment that monitor showed the bubbling surface of the sea from underneath. Sunlight flared across the screen, but shadows were spreading. Somewhere, the cruise ships were being pulled under one by one. You could hardly hear the screams above the bells, which tolled and tolled. They would stop for nothing and nothing could block out the sound.

Not even Warren: "You've done it, Geoff!"

Not even Emil Calamaro: "Big, big congrats!"

Not even Petey Sandersen, conveying the last words he heard or wanted to hear: "Don't take the miter off! The job is yours! Forever!"

## **About the Author**

In his spare time, [Marc Laidlaw](#) programs screensavers to pre-emptively commemorate the imminent coming of Cthulhu. This work inspired "The Vicar of R'lyeh," which appears on loan from [The Cthulhuian Singularity](#), a forthcoming collection edited by John Pelan, containing original stories and classic reprints by such authors as Michael Shea, Ramsey Campbell, Charles Stross, Ken MacLeod and Eddy C. Bertin.

