

THE STORE OF THE WORLDS

by

Robert Sheckley

Mr. Wayne came to the end of the long, shoulder-high mound of grey rubble, and there was the Store of the Worlds. It was exactly as his friends had described: a small shack constructed of bits of lumber, parts of cars, a piece of galvanised iron and a few rows of crumbling bricks, all daubed over with a watery blue paint.

Mr. Wayne glanced back down the long lane of rubble to make sure he hadn't been followed. He tucked his parcel more firmly under his arm; then, with a little shiver at his own audacity, he opened the door and slipped inside.

"Good morning," the proprietor said.

He, too, was exactly as described: a tall, crafty-looking old fellow with narrow eyes and a downcast mouth. His name was Tompkins. He sat in an old rocking chair, and perched on the back of it was a blue and green parrot. There was one other chair in the store, and a table. One the table was a rusted hypodermic.

"I've heard about your store from friends," Mr. Wayne said.

"Then you know my price," Tompkins said. "Have you brought it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne, holding up his parcel. "But I want to ask first –"

"They always want to ask," Tompkins said to the parrot, who blinked. "Go ahead, ask."

"I want to know what really happens."

Tompkins sighed. "What happens is this. You pay me my fee. I give you an injection which knocks you out. Then, with the aid of certain gadgets which I have in the back of the store, I liberate your mind."

Tompkins smiled as he said that, and his silent parrot seemed to smile, too.

"What happens then?" Mr. Wayne asked.

"Your mind, liberated from its body, is able to choose from the countless probability-worlds which the Earth casts off in every second of its existence."

Grinning now, Tompkins sat up in his rocking chair and began to show signs of enthusiasm.

"Yes, my friend, though you might not have suspected it, from the moment this battered Earth was born out of the sun's fiery womb, it cast off its alternate-probability worlds. Worlds without end, emanating from events large and small; every Alexander and every amoeba creating worlds, just as ripples will spread in a pond no matter how big or how small the stone you throw. Doesn't every object cast a shadow? Well, my friend, the Earth itself is four-dimensional; therefore it casts three-dimensional shadows, solid reflections of itself through every moment of its being. Millions, billions of Earths! An infinity of Earths! And your mind, liberated by me, will be able to select any of these worlds, and to live upon it for a while."

Mr. Wayne was uncomfortably aware that Tompkins sounded like a circus barker, proclaiming marvels that simply couldn't exist. But, Mr. Wayne reminded himself, things had happened within his own lifetime which he would never have believed possible. Never! So perhaps the wonders that Tompkins spoke of were possible, too.

Mr. Wayne said, "My friends also told me –"

"That I was an out-and-out fraud?" Tompkins asked.

"Some of them *implied* that," Mr. Wayne said cautiously. "But I try to keep an open mind. They also said –"

"I know what your dirty-minded friends said. They told you about the fulfilment of desire. Is that what you want to hear about?"

"Yes," said Mr. Wayne. "They told me that whatever I wished for – whatever I wanted –"

"Exactly," Tompkins said. "The thing could work in no other way. There are the infinite worlds to choose among. Your mind chooses, and is guided only by desire. Your deepest desire is the only thing that counts. If you have been harbouring a secret dream of murder –"

"Oh hardly, hardly!" cried Mr. Wayne.

"– then you will go to a world where you *can* murder, where you can roll in blood, where you can outdo de Sade or Caesar, or whoever your idol may be. Suppose it's power you want? Then you'll choose a world where you are a god, literally and actually. A bloodthirsty Juggernaut, perhaps, or an all-wise Buddha."

"I doubt very much if I –"

"There are other desires, too," Tompkins said. "All heavens and all hells. Unbridled sexuality. Gluttony, drunkenness, love, fame – anything you want."

"Amazing!" said Mr. Wayne.

"Yes," Tompkins agreed. "Of course, my little list doesn't exhaust all the possibilities, all the combinations and permutations of desire. For all I know you might want a simple, placid, pastoral existence on a South Sea island among idealised natives."

"That sounds more like me," Mr. Wayne said, with a shy laugh.

"But who knows?" Tompkins asked. "Even you might not know what your true desires are. They might involve your own death."

“Does that happen often?” Mr. Wayne asked anxiously.

“Occasionally.”

“I wouldn’t want to die,” Mr. Wayne said.

“It hardly ever happens,” Tompkins said, looking at the parcel in Mr. Wayne’s hands.

“If you say so . . . But how do I know all this is real? Your fee is extremely high, it’ll take everything I own. And for all I know, you’ll give me a drug and I’ll just *dream!* Everything I own just for a – a shot of heroin and a lot of fancy words!”

Tompkins smiled reassuringly. “The experience has no drug-like quality about it. And no sensation of a dream, either.”

“If it’s *true*,” Mr. Wayne said, a little petulantly, “why can’t I stay in the world of my desire for good?”

“I’m working on that,” Tompkins said. “That’s why I charge so high a fee; to get materials, to experiment. I’m trying to find a way of making the transition permanent. So far I haven’t been able to loosen the cord that binds a man to his own Earth – and pulls him back to it. Not even the great mystics could cut that cord, except with death. But I still have my hopes.”

“It would be a great thing if you succeeded,” Mr. Wayne said politely.

“Yes it would!” Tompkins cried, with a surprising burst of passion. “For then I’d turn my wretched shop into an escape hatch! My process would be free then, free for everyone! Everyone would go to the Earth of their desires, the Earth that really suited them, and leave *this* damned place to the rats and worms –”

Tompkins cut himself off in mid-sentence, and became icy calm. “But I fear my prejudices are showing. I can’t offer a permanent escape from the Earth yet; not one that doesn’t involve death. Perhaps I never will be able to. For now, all I can offer you is a vacation, a change, a taste of another world, and a look at your own desires. You know my fee. I’ll refund it if the experience isn’t satisfactory.”

“That’s good of you,” Mr. Wayne said, quite earnestly. “But there’s that other matter my friends told me about. The ten years off my life.”

“That can’t be helped,” Tompkins said, “and can’t be refunded. My process is a tremendous strain on the nervous system, and life-expectancy is shortened accordingly. That’s one of the reasons why our so-called government has declared my process illegal.”

“But they don’t enforce the ban very firmly,” Mr. Wayne said.

“No. Officially the process is banned as a harmful fraud. But officials are men, too. They’d like to leave this Earth, just like everyone else.”

“The cost,” Mr. Wayne mused, gripping his parcel tightly. “And ten years off my life! For the fulfilment of my secret desires . . . Really, I must give this some thought.”

“Think away,” Tompkins said indifferently.

All the way home Mr. Wayne thought about it. When his train reached Port Washington, Long Island, he was still thinking. And driving his car from the station to his home he was still thinking about Tompkins’s crafty old face, and worlds of probability, and the fulfilment of desire.

But when he stepped inside his house, those thoughts had to stop. Janet, his wife, wanted him to speak sharply to the maid, who had been drinking again. His son Tommy wanted to help with the sloop, which was to be launched tomorrow. And his baby daughter wanted to tell him about her day in kindergarten.

Mr. Wayne spoke pleasantly but firmly to the maid. He helped Tommy put the final coat of copper paint on the sloop’s bottom and he listened to Peggy tell about her adventures in the playground.

Later, when the children were in bed and he and Janet were alone in their living room, she asked him if something were wrong.

“Wrong?”

“You seem to be worried about something,” Janet said. “Did you have a bad day at the office?”

“Oh, just the usual sort of thing . . .”

He certainly was not going to tell Janet, or anyone else, that he had taken the day off and gone to see Tompkins in his crazy old Store of the Worlds. Now was he going to speak about the right every man should have, once in his life-time, to fulfil his most secret desires. Janet, with her good common sense, would never understand that.

The next days at the office were extremely hectic. All of Wall Street was in a mild panic over events in the Middle East and in Asia, and stocks were reacting accordingly. Mr. Wayne settled down to work. He tried not to think of the fulfilment of desire at the cost of everything he possessed, with ten years of his life thrown in for good measure. It was crazy! Old Tompkins must be insane!

On weekends he went sailing with Tommy. The old sloop was behaving very well, making practically no water through her bottom seams. Tommy wanted a new set of racing sails, but Mr. Wayne sternly rejected that. Perhaps next year, if the market looked better. For now, the old sails would have to do.

Sometimes at night, after the children were asleep, he and Janet would go sailing. Long Island Sound was quiet then, and cool. Their boat glided past the blinking buoys, sailing toward the swollen yellow moon.

“I *know* something’s on your mind,” Janet said.

“Darling, please!”

“Is there something you’re keeping from me?”

“Nothing!”

“Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Absolutely sure.”

“Then put your arms around me. That’s right ...”

And the sloop sailed itself for a while.

Desire and fulfilment ... But autumn came, and the sloop had to be hauled. The stock market regained some stability, but Peggy caught the measles. Tommy wanted to know the differences between ordinary bombs, atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, cobalt bombs, and all the other kinds of bombs that were in the news. Mr. Wayne explained to the best of his ability. And the maid quit unexpectedly.

Secret desires were all very well. Perhaps he *did* want to kill someone, or live on a South Sea island. But there were responsibilities to consider. He had two growing children, and a better wife than he deserved.

Perhaps around Christmas time ...

But in mid-winter there was a fire in the unoccupied guest bedroom due to defective wiring. The firemen put out the blaze without much damage, and no one was hurt. But it put any thought of Tompkins out of his mind for a while. First the bedroom had to be repaired, for Mr. Wayne was very proud of his gracious old house.

Business was still frantic and uncertain due to the international situation. Those Russians, those Arabs, those Greeks, those Chinese. The intercontinental missiles, the atom bombs, the sputniks ... Mr. Wayne spent long days at the office, and sometimes evenings, too. Tommy caught the mumps. A part of the roof had to be re-shingled. And then already it was time to consider the spring launching of the sloop.

A year had passed, and he’d had very little time to think of secret desires. But perhaps next year. In the meantime

“Well?” said Tompkins. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, quite all right,” Mr. Wayne said. He got up from the chair and rubbed his forehead.

“Do you want a refund?” Tompkins asked.

“No. The experience was quite satisfactory.”

“They always are,” Tompkins said, winking lewdly at the parrot. “Well, what was yours?”

“A world of the recent past,” Mr. Wayne said.

“A lot of them are. Did you find out about your secret desire? Was it murder? Or a South Sea island?”

“I’d rather not discuss it,” Mr. Wayne said, pleasantly but firmly.

“A lot of people won’t discuss it with me,” Tompkins said sulkily. “I’ll be damned if I know why.”

“Because – well, I think the world of one’s secret desires feels sacred, somehow. No offence ... Do you think you’ll ever be able to make it permanent? The world of one’s choice, I mean?”

The old man shrugged his shoulders. “I’m trying. If I succeed, you’ll hear about it. Everyone will.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Mr. Wayne undid his parcel and laid its contents on the table. The parcel contained a pair of army boots, a knife, two coils of copper wire and three small cans of corned beef.

Tompkins’s eyes glittered for a moment. “Quite satisfactory,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Goodbye,” said Mr. Wayne. “And thank *you*.”

Mr. Wayne left the shop and hurried down to the end of the lane of grey rubble. Beyond it, as far as he could see, lay flat fields of rubble, brown and grey and black. Those fields, stretching to every horizon, were made of the twisted corpses of cities, the shattered remnants of trees and the fine white ash that once was human flesh and bone.

“Well,” Mr. Wayne said to himself, “at least we gave as good as we got.”

That year in the past had cost him everything he owned, and ten years of life thrown in for good measure. Had it been a dream? It was still worth it! But now he had to put away all thought of Janet and the children. That was finished, unless Tompkins perfected his process. Now he had to think about his own survival.

With the aid of his wrist geiger he found a deactivated lane through the rubble. He’d better get back to the shelter before dark, before the rats came out. If he didn’t hurry he’d miss the evening potato ration.