

Freefall.

By Sean F Stevens.

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FREEFALL

I turn and look back the way I came for the last time, in the middle distance the smoke rises up to the red evening sky, pointing to where my life ended; to where the warehouse that contained all my sins is even now burning and being reduced to ashes and vapour in a conflagration of once-pure intentions and ultimately impure actions.

Seven years...

Seven years I've watched as if I was a spectator, watched as my life at first entered a protracted nerveless limbo and then a rapid downward spiral. My life in free fall ends today; no longer shall I be an audience at my own damnation.

The spasms hit me again but they will pass. The needles of red hot iron in my gut are merely a first stage alert, a warning from my over burdened nervous system to never come this way again, not knowing in their instinct driven reflex that I am on a one way street. I look up at the moon and the emotions overwhelm me, I cry for perhaps the first time in my adult life, or perhaps the first time since yesterday, I can no longer be sure of my recollections.

Who could have thought (for I certainly had not) that something so coldly beautiful could possess such a curse?

I shake my head to try to clear it of the chaos inside, to try to expurgate the demons that have paralysed my brain for so many years. I haven't got time for even the briefest of pauses. I must act now, before I let my doubts and uncertainties mount into a wall of negative probabilities and halt my actions in an impasse of logic versus emotion. Whether I live beyond this day is not an issue but I must free myself of my dark karma.

I have a man to kill, a man I know well. Seven years ago we'd stood side by side on the lip of the moons south polar crater, as one entity we had smiled for the cameras and set to work on our research.

Together we talked of the great possibilities of the frozen water that had hidden in its depths for a time beyond count. We took our samples, guessed our guesses, posed for the cameras once more and then retreated to our lunar laboratory again, unknowing that our damnation was at hand.

We found the impurity almost immediately. It was so easy to see the stain in the ice we had excavated, which floated like a dark cloud in the water as we liquefied it for the first time in a geological age. Yet it seemed to be innocuous, and easy to extract from the ice, leaving us with water pure enough for the colonies projected future needs.

The question remained though, once the water was purified, what to do with the waste? Could it be utilised in some way?

I lose my balance for a moment; I support myself on a nearby light pole. I feel nauseous but I am sure that if there were anything left in my stomach I would have vomited it out by now. I am being stared at but that does not

concern me, I haven't time to be self-conscious, I haven't time to wallow here like the pathetic flotsam of humanity that I know I have become.

I have to live! To live long enough to kill, after that fate can do what it likes with me. If only the planet would stop shifting beneath me! I know it is just the withdrawal from the drug, I should know after all; I was the first human to try it.

The waste from the purification was a compound that we could analyse but not understand; it contained elements combined in ways that we had not considered possible. How it could it have naturally formed, if it had naturally formed, we could not discern.

The days passed: we posed for the cameras; we studied the molecule; we talked to the reporters via satellite, our faces smiling, and our souls still pure.

Slowly, we deducted the properties of the molecules matrix, even as we played up to our audience on Earth, unknowingly rushing towards our damnation even as we waved to the viewers back home.

Our tests remained inconclusive, but we had noticed that the molecule had a superficial (though uncomfortable) resemblance to some narcotics. We tested small amounts of the substance on our ubiquitous white lab rats. When left with no technical methods to study the compound we fell back on the biological. We weren't good enough to test it; we weren't worthy enough to test it. Perhaps no one was. But I am certain now that it should not have been us.

The rats reacted almost immediately, acting as if in a swoon; as we had suspected, the compound seemed to be a narcotic, at least in effect if not in composition.

I am nearly there, I am in the bulk of the city now, it could be the arcologies of Shinjuku that surround me or perhaps the spires of New York, I am no longer sure. The drug induced heightened perception has deserted me, the world is now a dark place, I am confused, I am not sure if I know where this city is, or what it's name might be.

But this street, I am certain that I have been here many times, so many times in fact that even with my perceptions so warped in upon themselves and scrambled I can still recognise this avenue and navigate through the slow moving throngs of humanity. His nightclub is here, not more than a city block away and I walk towards it as best I can.

The Moon is high in the sky now but it is behind me, I can no longer directly see its pale accusatory gaze except of course in my twisted and shattered minds eye, I don't dare to turn and face it, my shame is too great.

There were no more interviews via satellite, no more witty conversations with talk show hosts; we no longer smiled for the cameras. We had closed our research room to the public's view and had told the powers that were over all, that the compound we had found in the ice was inert and of no commercial use. And we were believed, it was our job to make such educated guesses after all and they trusted us to do so.

We had to test the compound on a human and I volunteered, it was only at this moment that I realised how truly little I valued my own life, that I would risk it for the least altruistic of purposes, I realise now that the seeds of my later collapse into a complete and all encompassing mire of self loathing were not a product of the drug, they had been within me all the time and the drug had merely brought my inner darkness to the surface.

The drug ...

The drug was the experience of my life and in more than a few respects the end of it also, it opened my soul and showed to me the contents of it's most darkened corner, but at first it's view was filtered as if by the most diaphanous of perfumed veils, what I would later see to be the most disgusting and depraved of demons at first came to me with countenances so heavenly that I wept for joy at the visions the moon drug had given me, and would have willingly done anything that was asked of me as long as I was once again given the chance to visit my chemical induced Nirvana.

What a joke! What a pathetic false prophet!

We were easily seduced, that is true, our position held moderate fame, but little money, and there we were, in a situation where - at least to our perceptions at that time - we could finally have both.

We were the designers of the ice purification plant and the supervisors during the construction, only we knew the complete function of it's apparatus and what would truly happen to the ice's "waste" that was supposedly being launched into the sun from the purification factories own specially built mass driver.

No one had checked our findings and much to our relief no one checked where the disposed of containers of "waste" were actually aimed, which was a nearby station where a friend of ours was in command of a regular freight route, where a few extra containers travelling down with the daily shipment was hardly likely to be noticed. And once on Earth, was then easily redirected to wherever we wished, it was all too easy, obscenely so.

Even after the refinery was complete and we had left the project, no one checked our apparatus, and the automated supply lines we had set up continued to flow smoothly, our stockpiles continued to grow.

On Earth we wasted no time in setting up marketing lines through third parties to distribute the drug, the world was stained with cynical cosmopolitan pretenders, bored with life, afraid of death and desperate for new highs when all the old drugs and perversions had been experimented with, abused and ultimately, become passé, they were the perfect market for what we now had to offer and our sales grew exponentially, the drug was sold as fast as we could get it out of our warehouse and onto the street.

I enter the club, the bouncer doesn't try to stop me, I am a life member here, but my visits to this neon illuminated Gomorrah are seldom, especially in recent years as my dependence on the drug had rendered me a virtual recluse, wallowing in my stuporous excesses.

For that was the price of the heaven that the drug gave you, that beautiful fleeting glance of the ultimate land of ecstasy, that moments taste of ambrosia, were all the product of what was shaping up to be the most addictive drug in narcotics history, the most insidious substance ever to be inserted into the bloodstream, to ravage the users unsuspecting and unprotected cells.

On the Moon base our tests had been minimal, our only concern at that time had been how large a profit we could make from our pathetic, though rich, clientele. And make money we did, even when other entrepreneurs of the drug scene finally cottoned on to where the drug was coming from and began to import their own. This new development didn't concern us at that time, the market was so huge and the available supply so constant that there was plenty for everyone, and we had by now already decided that we would retire

eventually.

We were by this time rich beyond all our initial expectations and our fame had protected us from the scrutiny of the police who could as yet find no direct link between the drug and us, not even from the supply line, for we had already redirected the mass driver at the purification plant by remote control. It was now firing the drug containers at the sun as they had always supposed to have been, but through our third party contacts we had hired a ship to cross the containers trajectory and to collect them, thus for a slightly higher overhead we protected our reputation and kept our supply lines open.

We lived our life of excess to the full, bought property by the city block, bought cars, aeroplanes, ships, people. There was nothing we could not do; all we required was the inclination and the minimum of effort.

Then the police acted, but in an unexpected and circuitous manner: the polar crater was closed to all access, and the refinery shut down.

But they were too late, for we had been stockpiling the drug for years now, so much of it remained hidden in our secret warehouse that we knew our business would last for some time yet, and in truth we were not overly concerned by this turn of events as we had been slowly transferring our assets and cash into legal operations - like the night club - for some time, in preparation for the day when we retired from the business that had made us what we now were.

We laughed at the police at that time, secure in our clean reputations and their lack of evidence. Never once pausing to look long enough into the mirror to see what such a short space of years had done to us; our souls had turned black.

But the closing of the refinery was not the end of the quest: for though we hadn't tried and no one else had as yet succeeded in synthesising the drug, the attempts still continued. Perhaps they never would succeed, but I considered that an unlikely scenario, for when there is a dollar to be made the dark energy of humanity will often go to extreme lengths and sacrifice anything, no matter how sacred, to make it.

Time passed quickly, my memories of the last few years are a painful blur: I had become an addict to my co-discovery without realising it, and only slowly did I notice just how much of the drug I was consuming.

In my more and more seldom moments of withdrawal wracked sobriety, I began to comprehend that my unconscious feelings of self loathing and guilt (that I had never even previously admitted to myself to have existed) had become the one overbearing driving force in my life.

Even as we finally left our "business" behind us to pursue our new and once again legal (if still not completely honest) careers, the knowledge of all the lives I had ruined through my complicity in the drugs introduction to the unsuspecting world was developing into a crushing weight on what was left of my darkly tainted soul, a weight that only the drug itself could alleviate.

I thread my way through the peacocks of society, dancing under the shifting coloured lights of the discotheque, I see in them what I see in myself, the dark eyed ravages of the drug that I now know can lead to only one thing, death.

Once you're an addict there is no reprise, no relief, this is a drug that has

side effects that our extremely inadequate testing had not even hinted at. If you should stop taking the drug, your chemically imbalanced system releases a series of complex poisonous compounds into the blood stream - by-products of the drugs reaction with its human host, that collect within the body over time, remaining dormant while the drug is present in the blood - that cannot be removed from the system or counteracted by any known medication.

Continued drug usage is not a solution, either, though it is the more protracted of the deaths, as eventually, the poisonous by-products reach saturation point in the body and are released into the system anyway, this is their future, and all too soon it will be mine.

No more time, I have no more time, invisible breezes tear at me, the room is spinning, relieved of their no-longer drug soaked organic prisons, the poisons are seeping into my blood supply.

My time is almost up but I still have work to do, this is my last chance to even the scales, if only by a little.

I know my partner in crime, my collaborator, my once friend and long time comrade has tired already of the honest life, I know he is planning to set up the largest lab yet to try and synthesise the source of our mutual damnation, my last act before burning our old drug warehouse and its remaining stockpile to the ground was to phone the message service of a man I have on occasions had dealings with in the police force, an honest man, a better man than I ever was, my legacy to him is the story of my sins and the location of the new lab that will try to synthesise the Moons last curse upon the Earth, it's captor.

I see my old accomplice now, and he sees me, he is seated at a table on the edge of the dance floor, with some mountain of flesh that had once been human, before it's body and soul had been corrupted to the verge of obliteration by it's excesses, who the person may be is none of my concern, it no longer matters.

My once comrade smiles, but it is only a veneer, his contempt for me is so obvious that in my current state it is almost a physical force. I cannot believe now, that we were once such idealistic youths, and that we were so weak as to let the unvarying routine of our job and the indifference of our superiors so utterly destroy our hope for the future.

What is worse is that we then let ourselves in our selfishness and arrogance destroy the lives of others, becoming in the process far worse than the cynical and brutal society that made us, becoming part of what makes the civilisation worse, rather than fighting to try and make it better. We are totally damned, and we are deserving of the fate that is waiting for us.

I do not hate him for his contempt for me, I could not disgust him anywhere near as much as I disgust myself, and in this at least our feeling is mutual, in intent if not in intensity.

My pain is galactic in size now, but my guilt is a universe and pushes me forward, we have lived for seven years on blood and flesh and souls and we pay for our feast this day. My redemption is no longer an issue and is merely a mirage, I have not come here today for that, but if I can halt the dark stain that I helped unleash on this planet if even for a short time, then my life will not have been completely wasted, at the very least I will not blacken my soul further through inaction.

I do not carry a gun, for I know the drug as intimately as I would know a lover, whether I had come drugged or in withdrawal I would have been in no fit

state to use a firearm - even now I cannot see straight - I would have more than likely shot myself or an innocent bystander by mistake, rather than the suave apparition in front of me.

I see multiple images of him now but the colours are fading, my vision is darkening, he stands before me in all his multi-cloned shades of grey magnificence, for a moment I wonder if I am still human, I grasp at my face half expecting to feel insect-like compound eyes, rather than the ones I was born with, I see a dozen false smiles below thickly oiled coiffures and between them four rows of cat-like sneering eyes, this is a nightmare, perhaps, but it will be my last, my condition must be irreversible by now, I can barely stand.

I make a grab for him, somewhere in the nebula of faces I connect with the real one, my hand slides down to his shoulder to support myself and I draw myself closer to him, my action has caught him by surprise but he feels no threat, he laughs out loud, no longer making even the slightest attempt at hiding his derision at the pathetic human trash before him.

His laugh is raucous in my ears, and his head is thrown back in his mirth, in my own way I am glad for him, at least his last moment will be a happy one, even if it is at the expense of someone else. At any rate my job is a simple one now, I remove the monofilament knife from my pocket, it's molecule-thin blade invisible in the changing lights from the dance floor, I do not hesitate, lest my body gives up on me before I can finish my penitence, it is over within moments, the flesh of his neck gives no resistance to the blade, even with only my weak musculature to drive it, my old comrade dies without even the chance to realise what has killed him.

Silence surrounds me, I wonder momentarily if I have lost my hearing, in my shattered vision I see a wall of eyes staring, I see red, everything that was grey is now in shades of red, but I am confused as to the source of my now-coloured vision, is it the blood from my old partner or just the product of the continued breakdown of my brains visual centres? My introspection - and the silence - shatters, there are screams, I see motion all around me but I can no longer discern exactly what is happening.

I ignore the chaos, it is of no matter to me now, I have done what I came to do, indeed I have done all that I can do, I can no longer stand, only the crowd that is now surrounding me is holding me upright, I am not worried, my will brought me this far, now I can rest.

The crowd pushes forward even further, the knife is prised from my unresisting fingers, they shove me to the ground and hold me there, though in truth I have neither the strength nor the inclination to fight them, my mind drifts, I feel a lightness that I have not felt in my entire life and I know that my end is at hand, the poisons have finally reached every extremity in my body, my blood, my organs, my bones and my brain.

My consciousness is swamped in a comforting darkness, at last I feel the bliss of absolute silence, the silence of guilt as well as sound, a pleasant coolness surrounds me and permeates every fibre of my being, if this is death, it is far better than I could have expected or deserved.

Though I feel nothing, instinctively I can tell that I am somehow once again standing upright, my eyes acclimatise and I realise that there is a texture to the darkness that encompasses me, I look around at my dark grey, indistinct surroundings and then, sensing something, I look up.

I am encircled by the high walls of a lunar crater, one that I know better

than my own home town, beyond it's jagged rim I can see a beauty that I had for many years forgotten, the endless realm of the stars, light years distant, yet impossibly bright and sharp, seemingly close enough to touch, if I should so dare as to let the suppressed poetry in my heart out to spice my imagination.

I exhale for the last time, my body will never need oxygen again, I let the peace of my location spread through me and I dare to smile and feel contentment.

I am home.

THE END.

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