

The Death of Light

By Peter Crowther

The wind came across the bay like something living. It tore the surface so thoroughly to shreds that it was hard to tell where liquid ended and atmosphere began.

From *Mission of Gravity* by Hal Clement

I feel stormy weather / Moving in about to begin
Hear the thunder / Don't you lose your head
Rip off the roof and stay in bed

The Weather Girls, *It's Raining Men*

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

From *The Bible*, American King James version

"I guess this is where my heart is now, you know? Here with Yoko. In New York City. I love seeing the other guys – you know, the 'boys in the band', right? – I love seeing Paul and George and Ringo and this whole tour is a lot of fun, particularly for a 71-year-old, but when it's all over and we all go home, I'll be going back to New York. New York is where I'm happiest now. I'll die there."

John Lennon to Simon Conway, WHO-AM (1040), on the eve of the Beatles' appearance at the Coe College Sinclair Auditorium in Cedar Rapids, the eighteenth stop on the band's eleven-month world tour to celebrate fifty years since the release of *Love Me Do* 5 October 2012

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By Peter Crowther

One hell of a nutshell

Jay-Zee Steinwicz's only claim to fame was that he owned one of the El Caminos featured on the cover of The Black Keys' record and CD album of that name, 'El Camino'. Jay-Zee's name didn't have anything to do with Jay-Zee, it was Gerald Eric (though the Steinwicz bit was right—"Hell, who would make up a name like Steinwicz," is what Jay-Zee always said . . . and he had a point). He just liked the way the double-barrel faux-letters tripped off his tongue, working well as two words and just as well as two letters. He had picked 'J' for Jerry rather than 'G' for Gerry because sometimes, he thought, if maybe he were writing his initials, folks might think the 'G' had a hard letter instead of a soft one. Like 'G' for get, gang or grab (or, name-wise, Gordon, Graham or Gary, instead of 'G' for gesture, gyp or gentle). The way Jay-Zee figured it—and it made a kind of sense—the letter 'J' was always soft, leastways in English . . . and Jay-Zee knew diddly about other languages, even though he constantly overheard people in the hood in Jersey speaking in Mexican or Spanish or one a dem udder lan-wages, as Jay-Zee's long-time buddy, Leroy had it. So it stood to reason that anyone with a 'J' on their moniker was going to be Jason, Jeffrey or John.

So, the El Camino.

Jay-Zee's was the silver-gray one that was part rust and part brown tape and which, on the cover, was, parked out in front of a clapboard single-story in a suburb of Atlanta, which is where Mary's sister Irene lived with her fuckwit boyfriend Ahlan (and yes, that's how he spelled it, with an aitch . . . and this was the only thing that Jay-Zee felt kind of comfortable with, it being a name thing and all). At the time, Ahlan knew a guy from his bumming-around days in Kent, OH and this guy knew another guy who knew the Keys' Patrick Carey and, for just a few hundred bucks, he got the car after they'd finished with the cover photo shoot.

Mary loved it.

A product of a couple of hippie types (her father was dead and her mother had moved off to Canada—she never stayed in touch—but Mary had a photo of herself at Yasgur's farm, hanging around her naked father's neck in a kind of papoose, just a couple years old), Mary loved that car and regularly tried to persuade Jay-Zee to paint it in colorful spirals like Ken Kesey's bus. And he said he would do it, too, one day. But that was Jay-Zee: Mary always called him Captain Manana and he called her Impatient Woman. They both laughed when

they got into one of those slanging matches couples have from time to time but, deep down, it kind of hurt a little. Only a little, though.

Mary died of complications after the removal of a node from her right breast the year after the Towers fell. It was funny how so many folks used the destruction of the World Trade Center as a calendar—or life-landmark. But it did count for a lot, of course . . . “like Jesus,” Mary said to Jay-Zee one night when they were snuggled in bed together after a lovemaking session that just hadn’t worked but they’d both wanted to take a shot at it because they knew Mary’s days were numbered though neither of them said as much. She was a slip of a thing in those final few weeks, taking morphine three times a day and breathing oxygen from a cylindrical tank for which, while she was still able, Mary had made a kind of shawl fashioned out of a cushion cover and perched it on top of the tank when she wasn’t using it.

Chemo and radio therapies were wheeled out but, hell, when your name, height, and favorite color are all of them on the bullet, makes no nevermind how much you duck and dive and swerve when it’s fired off because, man oh man, that mother is gonna take you down and no denyin’.

It took Mary down on a Thursday afternoon in the dying days of October. The doc—a nice guy whose eleven-letter last name had a hell of a lot more consonants than vowels (Jay-Zee near on spat out his denture each time he tried to pronounce it)—had told Jay-Zee that he (Jay Zee) had done a remarkable job and that he had nothing to beat himself up about. But Jay-Zee couldn’t get out of his mind that they’d told him and Mary that, God willing, she would make it through Christmas and just fade away in January. Mary said that suited her just fine because she hated January and February; called them non-months . . . just the calendar making time and treading water until the year started up proper on March 1st. “And shit weather,” Mary had said. And they had laughed, laughed hard to hold back the tears.

And my, there were some tears.

But none on that Thursday afternoon, amazingly, when Jay-Zee walked out to the ambulance with the two guys carrying his Mary away from their apartment for what was surely to be the last time, Mary looking sad and lonely, looking up at her man with wise regret. Jay-Zee smiled back at her, squeezed her hand some but suddenly holding back when he saw her face crumple with pain . . . either at the cancer (which had spread itself out a whole lot) or at his almost crushing her fingers. He knew that face of hers. It was her ‘who the hell’s gonna look after you now, you cockamamie’ look.

“I’ll let you get settled in, honey,” Jay-Zee had told her as the two guys strapped the gurney into the back of the van, telling her in easy voices how they didn’t want her bouncing around back here. Jay-Zee was talking about the Hospice over in Brick . . . nice place, just off Route 70 West. They had been there, the two of them, back when Mary was still mobile, and they had put a brave face on the situation. They could still afford to do that then.

They had ignored the smell of fresh paint—“smell of fresh pain’ ain’t never kilt nobody,” Mary had whispered, with a little Alabammy from her mammy—and they had ignored the hollow sound of the whispering voices of the nearly dead, muttering to or chuckling at a blank space in the room, addressing it by name, or endearments such as ‘baby’ or ‘honey’ or ‘sweetcakes’.

They had turned a blind nose to the smell of overcooked vegetables, a blind eye to the sight of one old woman, running down the corridor one foot slippered and the other bare, and being tackled by two slim nurses who helped the woman back to her room—“Now what on Earth were you planning to do if’n you got to the door, Margie?” one of the nurses asked softly. “I’s gonna get out,” the old woman said. “Gon go hom, see my man . . . see my Alfred,” she added. “He gonna be wantin’ his supper, like as not.” She smiled when she said that, turning in Mary’s direction and winking at her (which suggested to Jay-Zee that Alfred’s supper maybe involved something extra . . . like as not). The woman didn’t seem to see Mary (Mary didn’t think she could see much of anything with those cataracted eyes) which was probably why she was running in the wrong direction, the main doors being way behind her . . . and getting more and more distant when the two nurses took her down before she reached the end zone.

But most of all, they had studiously ignored the peaty smell and the muted light and the dimmed sound of approaching death. It marched in here, drifted along the waxed-floor corridors with its black hood pulled tight around its bony cheeks and its rusted scythe grasped firm in skeletal hands. This was his domain, here in this world of wet and soiled bedclothes, juddering jittery liver-spotted hands, and half-remembered (and often totally mis-remembered) memories taking form in your room where they hid beneath the bed to shoot out their hand and grab your ankle when you needed to pee . . . so all that was left to do was just go ahead and piss and shit the bed, those smells mingling constantly with the deep-down aroma of slowly failing flesh.

Jay-Zee had remembered all this as he crossed the sidewalk and walked up the few steps to the apartment building, pushing the door open as he thought about the hospice . . . that hateful word that had built up a reputation during these ‘difficult’ times. “I know, sweetie,” Mary had said, her voice as soft as air squeezed out of a mattress when you got into bed. “I know,” she said again, like she was worried that maybe he hadn’t heard her the first time.

“Let you get settled in,” he had said, again.

“I know.”

“Hey,” Jay-Zee had said when he’d gotten the nod from one of the guys to say they were ready but, shoot, go ahead and talk to your woman cos it’s sure as shit’s brown she ain’t got long to go.

“What?” Mary had said, her eyes wide like little pools.

“They said the new year, right?” And he had raised his eyebrows in a now you listen to me, dammit and you listen to me good voice.

Mary had nodded and Jay-Zee thought he heard her whisper I love you, sweetie but it could just have been the driver guy starting up the van’s engine.

But Jay-Zee couldn't have afforded to give too much gray matter to that thought because he would just plain sit right down by the kerb and bawl like a baby, begging them not to take his woman away. So, instead, he said, "And it ain't even Thanksgiving yet."

Mary had laughed at that, spit flecking her lips.

"Am I right?"

She had nodded, slow and careful like, but she had nodded.

"Now I aks you if'n I wuz right, woman and you gots to answer me now," Jay-Zee said in the argot of the streets.

"You is allas right," Mary said. But this time, she sounded tired . . . like she was ready to be off someplace else.

In Jay-Zee's head, the days had gone by interwoven confusingly, shifting places in the sequence of his life . . . kinda like that poor guy in the movie, guy who had got some kind of disease that kept lifting him up and sending him here and there on his own lifeline. Jay-Zee wished like . . . well, like nothing on Earth, he reckoned—wished that he could get that disease and get pushed back, back before the dreaded discovery and the slow but determined disintegration of his and Mary's life together. Hell, no . . . of their entire world.

"Oh, baby," he whispered, sitting on Mary's side of the bed, running his hand along the flat center of the pillow-case where Mary always used to put her head. "Oh God, baby," he said, louder this time. "I just don't know if I can make this thing work." He lay down, turned to face the window and frowned. There was some kind of disturbance in the sky out there. It was dark, so he couldn't be sure, and a fine rain was intermittently lashing the high sash windows, but it looked for all the world like the scene outside the window was a painted backdrop on an almighty huge piece of paper . . . an almighty huge piece of paper that was somehow bellying out.

Something crashed over in the apartment's little galley kitchen and Jay-Zee sat bolt upright in bed.

Lightning flashed across the dark sky and, just for a second or two, Jay-Zee saw another cityscape imprinted on the usual one. Oh, most of the buildings were identical . . . but others were not. Sometimes the overprint featured higher buildings and sometimes lower ones. Then there was a fire, right across from his building . . . but no sooner did it appear than it vanished.

"Come lie back down, baby," Mary said from behind him on the bed but when Jay-Zee turned around not only was she not there but the bed was a single sized mattress.

I'm having a dream, Jay-Zee thought. Then, just as he was about to change that into having a nightmare, a man sitting over in the kitchen on the red-mock leather bar stool gave him a wave and said, "Here's how it works."

Jay-Zee didn't say anything. He sat on the bed hardly daring to move and watched as, outside, it was as though the whole world were being fast-framed . . . from day to night and night to day, each one of them taking the tiniest flicker of time, and buildings were torn down and constructed, the whole thing

in just one fleeting part of a second. Sometimes it was raining, sometimes it was dark like in daytime-dark or storm-dark, and others it was sunny . . . but each of them came and went. A plane went by, close enough that Jay-Zee thought maybe he could open his window and reach out to run a finger alongside the fuselage. And then it was gone. Then a colossal tidal wave of water that dwarfed the city's horizon appeared and rolled towards Jay-Zee's window, and he raised his arms to brace himself but then the window went dark again, and then light, and all the while the man on the stool in Jay-Zee's kitchen sat patiently.

"Here's how it works," the man said again.

When the man got to his feet, Jay-Zee saw that he was wearing a pair of holsters fixed onto his belt. The man hitched his trousers up some, took a couple of steps out of the kitchen and leaned against the door jamb.

Outside, colors swirled, light came and went, darkness settled and lifted, Rain lashed the windows and the AC creaked and sputtered somewhere in the bowels of the building.

Squinting, Jay-Zee turned to the window and lifted a hand to protect him. When he saw Mary watching him, just for a second before she disappeared again, he felt tears well up inside.

"Don't look outside," the man said. "Won't do you no good. Just make you sick. It'll stop in a minute."

"What'll stop?" Jay-Zee asked, thinking to himself, Who are you? And what are you doing in my apartment? but then thinking better of it.

"I'm Josh," the man said. "But you can call me Joshua."

"And that—" He pointed to the window. "—is a timenami. Just a small one. It'll be over in a couple of minutes."

"What's a time— . . ." Jay-Zee hesitated. "And who are you? And how did you get into my apartment? Am I dreaming?" He pointed at the man's holsters. "And are those for real? I mean, like, are they loaded?"

The man held up both hands. "Okay, let's take it from the top." He walked into Jay-Zee's bedroom and glanced at the bed. "Little smaller than you're used to, right?"

"My wife died," Jay-Zee said, like it answered the man's question. "Who are you? And how—"

"Did I get into your apartment? I know. You already asked that. I'm Josh. I can get to places and times that you never dreamed of." He shrugged. "The timenami—not my word, incidentally, just one someone else came up with . . . or maybe will come up with—truth to tell I get a little muddled about how this whole thing works."

"What whole thing we talking about here?" Jay Zee wanted to know.

"Why," the man called Josh said, "*the* whole thing. I mean, like *everything*. The whole enchilada." He made a big circular movement with his hands, smiled and almost immediately ran his tongue into a gap in his teeth at the right side of his mouth.

"It's a shifting of everything," the man went on. "A coalescing of all the realities . . . a blending of options." He paused again and shrugged mischievously.

"How do you know all this?" Maybe Jay Zee was just sleeping. That seemed to make the most sense.

The man jiggled his head side to side. "Well, it's not strictly true that I do know 'all this', as you put it."

Jay Zee didn't say anything.

"You see, I found out about it at a different time. You know what I'm saying?"

Jay Zee didn't. But he figured things might get clearer as he waited.

"I mean from like the future. So it hasn't happened yet. Hasn't happened in time terms, is what I mean. It's happened because I was there – maybe 'will be there' is better – and I had it explained to me . . . will hav –"

Jay-Zee was chorusing the words, and then he shook his head. When there didn't seem to be anything else forthcoming, he said, "And that's it? That's the explanation?"

"Oh," the man said with a soft smile, "there's more. But that's the essence in a nutshell."

"That's one hell of a nutshell," Jay Zee said.

Josh smiled and pushed hair back from his forehead. "It's one hell of a nut," he said. He moved over to the little dressing table (Jay-Zee was glad that hadn't disappeared like Mary's half of the bed . . . but, truth be told, he didn't really care diddly because all of this was just a crock of poop) and he pulled out the little chair where Mary used to sit. The man must have spotted something on Jay-Zee's face because he hesitated halfway into the sitting position and said, "Okay if I sit down?"

Jay-Zee didn't say anything.

"My name is Josh – first name . . . don't recall my last – and I came into your apartment through one of the rips."

"Rips?"

"Everything is unraveling and –"

"Unravelling?" This whole conversation was starting to sound like Sewing and Needlework 101.

The man looked at the window. The big paper shape had been pushed open and Jay-Zee could see blue skies beyond and water . . . lots of water. And the whole thing was moving towards his window.

The man got up from Mary's dressing table and reached out for Jay-Zee's hand. Without even thinking, Jay-Zee accepted the hand and stood up.

"We going someplace?" Jay-Zee asked. "I need to put on my pants . . ."

The man turned Jay-Zee around to face the window. "No time."

He went into a half-crouch but held onto Jay-Zee's hand. "Stand your ground – this could be a rocky ride."

Jay-Zee turned to face the window and saw that the blue skies and the

water was now just outside his window: it was like looking out onto another world but then, Jay-Zee guess, that was exactly what it was.

The window disappeared and the sky-and-water scene came into the room, advancing slowly but steadily. Suddenly, Mary's dressing table and the chair in front of it were scooped up and into the hole—Jay-Zee watched them falling down right in front of him, plummeting to the water far far below.

As he watched, something caught his eye to the right. It was a ship . . . a big boat of some kind, a regular one, with funnels and lots of decks and stuff; but it was flying in the air. "Hey, now, hold the fuck—"

"Oh, I never asked you: can you swim?"

"Can I what?"

But the man was nowhere to be seen.

And then Jay-Zee plunged forward into a bright sky alongside a flying ship, with the wind in his hair and a scream on his lips.

MORE TO FOLLOW . . . AND, PERHAPS, MORE TO PRECEED!