

THE OPEN SECRET

by Dan Armstrong

Hear that? That faint siren in the distance. They are coming for me. Yes, certain as dawn tomorrow, they are coming for me. A hot. Inescapable. Pre-destiny.

I know too much. That's it. The whole damn thing. I just know too much.

Not such a great quantity, mind you, just a critical fact. And I can't let go of it. I've been screaming it out my window all night. My neighbors must think me drunk or mad, shouting at passersby while others try to sleep. Shouting at passing cars. Shouting at dogs in the street. Someone must have called me in. Complaining of my vulgar reverence in the middle of the night.

You see, something else, some larger conceiving thing, is dwelling in my mind—most likely in all minds. I am not certain if those of the sirens are trying to hide this or if they simply don't know. One way or another, they are after me for daring to announce it—daring to scream it out loud.

Worst of all, I can't help it.

And I am afraid. Because the thought of it is so unsettling. Even now, reality shifts about me like headlights moving through the night. I try to assess this thing within me, but it does no good. It's too big. There is nowhere to start, nowhere to end. It just pours out whenever I speak. And to anyone I might inform? I get a shaking head or sad, suspicious eyes. But I cannot deny what I feel so strongly. So I will doubt everything else until I can reconcile with this thing within me. The starry sky seems a lie; all history a cheap novel; geometry a slick magician's inverse; compared to this knowledge, this living truth that I feel. That I know.

And I'm scared and confused. Scared of what I know and confused by what to do with it—other than shout it out!

But the siren is growing louder now, and I can see the whirling blue lights reflecting off the buildings many blocks away. They are coming for me. I'm not sure what they will do with me, but I don't what to find out. But where I could go? What could I do—other than broadcast this truth...

At a hundred miles an hour, an hour before dawn, riding this traffic-less silver ribbon into the desert night, I seek to clarify something in my mind. Some kind of psycho-scopic deformation, a conceptionary virus, *a way of seeing things* that overwhelms me—except at speed, high speed. This powerful sense of motion clears my brain. Ceases my doubts. Replaces my desperate anxiety with crisp assurance.

At a hundred and twenty miles an hour, my head conjoins with the night. I squeeze more into the pedal. The wind whips at the gray threads of my hair. (*Yes, my car is a convertible. A big one. And what color? Why, bright vermilion.*) I can almost stop my thoughts entirely with this speed and exhilaration. Almost...

I've been subtly, but severely mutated—and so, very probably, have you. It's taken my entire lifetime to come to this awareness and to swallow what it means. That the damage has been done. That there's no turning back.

The first serious poisoning took place more than half a century ago. The real regret is that it's taken us so long to fathom its extent, its vast implications.

Nagasaki. Hiroshima. That was all it took genetically. Two severe burns and the global gene pool was irrevocably altered. Tack on another fifty years of experimentation in the field—Love Canal, Chernobyl—a scorch here, a sizzle there—and we have an inevitability born on the wind like radioactive confetti. Helical melt down! Musical proteins. Groping man fumbling with the dice of destiny. Seven. Eleven. Snake eyes!

But far more striking than the physical deformities are these cerebral ones. Viruses of the mind more subversive than three-eyed infants. Diseases of conception. Infected intellects filled with non-rationalities that multiply, divide, and exponentiate. Spreading like spilled white paint on a page inked with words. Minds blown like tattered sails in the sunset. Somber purple veined

with electric orange.

Imagine it. One grand cerebral virus threaded through the galaxies of the night in breeding spirals of brilliant light. An unspeakable curse of illogic upon our vast sense of reason. Our intellectual integrity corrupted by oceans of incongruity. Leaving us, me, you, with but two choices. Deny it, as those with the sirens must have, or embrace it.

As I do! Even more than that. I scream it to all who will listen. Believe me. Please. What seems nonsense is...

...is nothing, really. I should never have brought this up at all. It's just the sad, frustrated cry of a man trapped in the container of his broken logic. Raving at the warped reflection.

Thank God for this car. Unfurling my being with its gale of motion. It's speed!

And blast these inklings in my head! Rejoice in the surety of my soul. Forge into this infinite thing we share. Mutable, gracious, timeless—and alien?—consciousness! But there I go again. What is it that prompts me so? What stares out from these shifting pools in my face? No dog. No harmless spider resides in this furless catacomb. It's something grand, something eternal. Something that's taken a thousand human lifetimes to unfold! This is the truth told as fiction. Black seen as white. Not only are we are not alone, we are not separate!

Picture me. Driving as fast as my car will go. For the distraction of it. Some jittery-buggy old man, frying on a heaping helping of blind obviousness. Irresistibly, my bones shake out the last tangential steps of a deep astral boogie so strong its drags the rest of me along like a cheap suit on a hanger. You got it yet? Open, unspeakable, overwhelming, ENTHRALLMENT! That's what it is! It's just too much! Too much for me anyway. So what do I do with it? Crush it. Contain it. Package it. Put it on TV?

I shout it out until they come and get me.

At a hundred and thirty miles an hour, one hand upon the wheel, one upon the keys of a laptop, I struggle with all of this. Filtering through are these words you read now. Do you understand any of it? Any of it at all? Or am I just another snake-bitten lunatic groping for

forsaken visions beyond the pale? Or...or is all this that I fear true? Ungraspable but true.

Unfulfilled lifetimes rage in these re-coupled chromosomes, while what remains of a young boy's aging dream persists behind this steering wheel and four hundred and fifty diesel breathing horses. Years piled upon innocence. Pure light layered over and over again with ash. And now, frayed, worn, shaking, fighting bitterness, I push a single digit up through what I've been buried in, to probe out and poke indignantly at these plastic keys. Daring to illuminate something inside *your* head—like a crypto-glyph on an irradiated screen—S-O-S. To you out there, you behind the fluid orbs—THIS IS IT! I scream to the passing landscape. SEE IT! FEEL IT! BE IT! I scream through my fingers. Take hold and fathom this thing while the opportunity avails!

The darkness pales away. The blazing eye of God peeks its sultry radiance over the horizon. My friend the night dwindles in the piercing beams. I, the culminating moment of one man's term on earth, offer this lone memory of hope. There isn't much else I can offer. But this one memory. This one deep and puzzling memory...

I am alone, stumbling downward into some dark cavern, my domed Golgotha, with its two great windows to the stars overhead. But down I go, over charred books, tattered manuscripts, and bones, piles of bones, into some intruding passageway. The light is vague. My reason unsure. But some dark secret lures me into smaller and smaller congress until at last I care no longer what I find, only that I proceed (*as in this hurtling vehicle I drive*). Grisly death and age take my hands and lead this cowardly swamp fellow, this moccasin of a man that I am, down, eeling down, this dank rat hole in search of some unforgotten scribbler's wisdom.

A bleak visage phantoms in the velvet darkness. Above me it hovers, this ancient alien face, looming and grim. I cry out in fear. I cower. I roll on to my back, a helpless mongrel dog given in to the pack. The face presses into mine. The light of a thousand generations explodes within my head, searing my cerebral cortex like the surface of Mercury. And still I squint up through the glare of all prevailing truth, and dare, and dare that deep clear-seeing eye, that

solemn Adam, progenitor of consciousness, to illuminate me further. And He says, with soft temporal cymballing, age upon age, the words I have waited all my life to hear. "Consciousness is eternal." So simple, so true. So overwhelming—and so frightening!

I roll over to my knees and gather my feet beneath me, turning to reverse my dark descent. The passageway is blocked and narrow, choked with debris and ash. Burnt offerings of man. Lots of ash, ash on ash. I breath it in as I fight my way up through the trash and rubble, choking, hacking, retracing the course of my life, grimly gripping this miraculous and all-sustaining piece of knowledge, The Great and Open Truth. That I will bring back for all humankind to finally know for certain. Nothing else in life matters to me now, but this. It drives me upward, out of the darkness, through curtains and curtains of ash, until at long last, I see the faint silhouette of two moons, no, twin halos of starry mist, my up turned portals to Mammon's world. I have made it. I have made it back. And in this, what I have called a memory of hope, I entertain no hope of reaching those outside—you! Still, with what I can focus through the press of futility, I pierce one finger up through the last diaphanous shroud of mote and gently prod these keys, one by one, while driving at this insane terrestrial speed to slow my thoughts enough to type: *Yes, yes, there is mystic meaning to our being. Yes, yes, oh yes...*

The speedometer reads one thirty-five. The sky is burnt orange. Filaments of cloud trace blood red above the plain. Dark telephone poles like puppeted crucifixes vanish into the black ribbon of asphalt that lies ahead. A haunting siren wails upon the wind. In the rearview, there are the lights of another car. Blue revolving lights!

Is this all in my mind or are they really out to get me? I nudge the needle up to one forty. The tires sizzle with the speed. The engine throbs with secondary resonances. Sweat beads across my brow. I can't outrun myself, but *they* will never catch me.

Yet they do.

My tank can only hold so much fuel. And they have legions of squad cars to untrack upon me from county line to county line. And I am at last theirs...*or so it appears!*

It is a sad sight for ordinary eyes. An old man, bony legs swung to the street, barely

creasing his trousers, confronted by these swaggering bulks in uniform.

"Going a little fast, old man?"

"Just trying to clear my head," I say, turning a single sallow eye to the man who spoke, as though the impinging viruses swarming all around me were nothing.

"We clocked you at one-forty. That's far in excess of reckless driving in this state. Got a license, mister?"

I notice he's looking suspiciously at my laptop on the passenger seat. This makes me more uneasy than the question about the license. "No license, officer."

He turns mirrored lenses to his partner. The other brute nods behind the same while admiring my flashy red rig. He turns back to me. "How about a registration?"

"No registration either, officer," I say to my reflection on the toe of his gloss black boot.

"Guess we better take you in, old timer."

"Fine," I say, standing, amid the horrid press of extra-sensory perceptions. "Just drive fast, my thoughts are threatening to catch up with me."

"What's that?" he asks, disbelieving—this old man is offering a slack attitude to go with his total disregard for the speed limit. The other, sensing a quickening in the air, reaches instinctively behind his back for his handcuffs.

"What's that?" the officer asks again.

"Nothing," I mutter, presenting him with my wrists. "Nothing at all."