

WRITER'S BLOCK

A SHORT STORY BY
GREG KROJAC

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Greg's mind was blank, completely devoid of thoughts. Well, relevant thoughts, anyway. He knew what he had to write about – he'd been given a writing prompt – but that was as far as he'd got. He didn't usually work from writing prompts; he normally had an idea in his mind – an original thought that originated from he knew not where – before sitting down at his desk and starting to write. It was an almost magical process as if his chair, the desk, or even his computer already contained the story and he simply provided the conduit which allowed the story to escape from wherever it had been nestling.

But this time was different. The chair, desk, and computer seemed to be bereft of ideas. As, ipso facto, was his mind.

He took a sip of water from the glass tumbler that was his constant companion whilst writing. It wasn't there to alleviate dryness in his throat – it wasn't as if he needed his voice to write – but his wife had threatened him with dire punishment if he didn't drink at least six glasses of water each day. He preferred his water chilled but, of course, it couldn't remain in that condition forever. Room temperature would eventually force its way into the glass and the water therein would lose its refreshing sensation, becoming at one with its surroundings – thermally speaking.

Tabitha, his ingeniously named tabby cat, leapt onto his desk. The animal looked over at her owner quizzically, as if wanting to know what ailed her master. Of course, master and pet was how Greg considered their relationship but Tabitha knew the truth of the matter – she was in charge. The cat didn't have to do any-

thing for Greg in return for food and water; she had the human well-trained. If she wanted to go outside, all she had to do was wait beside the door and eventually Greg would get up and open the door for her. If Tabitha wanted to drink from the tap, she simply had to leap onto the draining board and wait for Greg to notice. The human would then stop whatever he was doing, walk over to the sink, and turn on the tap. The flow of water must be neither too strong nor too weak but Greg seemed to know this instinctively and never let it flow too quickly or too slowly. Greg was the perfect servant.

Greg stretched out his hand and tickled his furry friend under the chin. Tabitha particularly enjoyed this and it was almost her favourite show of affection from her human friend, but her real favourite thing for Greg to do was to draw his nails down her back from her neck to just in front of her tail, causing her to stretch her neck, move her head from side to side, and blink excitedly. Greg's nails were spectacularly blunt – unlike her own claws – but they did the trick.

Greg didn't need to know why Tabitha enjoyed it but, suffice to say, if Greg had been a male cat, one thing would probably have led to another. Greg looked at his feline friend.

“Well, Tabitha? Any ideas? I need some help.”

The cat blinked at her master.

“So, what's this story about then, Greg? What's the conflict? Who's the main character? What's his or her driving force? Are you after a happy ending, a cliffhanger, or a surprise, shocking ending?”

All Greg heard was a series of meows. He knew it was a waste of time asking the cat. Cats knew how to groom themselves and occasionally hunt small rodents, birds, and insects. They didn't know the first thing about creative writing.

For her part, although frustrated by the inability of the human to understand her language, Tabitha knew what would cheer Greg up. She ducked her head down, advanced a couple of paces, and nuzzled her nose into his cheek. It had the desired effect and Greg's half-frown dissolved into a half-smile. A full smile wasn't an option as Greg still had to find some words – four or five thousand of them to be exact – with which to fill his Word document, but the cat's show of affection did cheer him up a little. Tabitha saw the smile creeping onto Greg's lips and turned away, leaping effortlessly onto the floor. Her job was done. If the human didn't want her help with writing the story, then at least she'd raised his spirits a little.

Greg was alone again. Just him, his computer, his imagination (which was failing him at the moment), and whatever else was on his desk. The "whatever else" on the desk consisted of a few scraps of blank paper, a couple of half-filled notebooks, and two metal pots, each containing writing implements – one with whiteboard pens of varying colours and one with a selection of ballpoint pens, paperclips, and different-coloured map pins. The map pins were there because, fixed to the wall, facing Greg, was a large map of the world. In the past, Greg had travelled extensively and the map was the signpost for many happy memories. He scanned the map and his eyes settled upon Moscow, which was marked with a blue pin. Visiting the Russian capital had been quite an experience and he remembered the afternoon

when he'd attended a ballet performance in the Kremlin. It had been a strange experience. The ballet was about Napoleon, but he had no idea why there were three Napoleons onstage at the same time. Ballet wasn't his thing anyway, so he'd allowed himself to doze off, but not until he'd promised himself that he wouldn't snore. Fortunately, he kept his promise – as far as he knew, anyway. Nobody complained afterwards.

He spoke enough Russian to understand the menu at the MacDonaldis near Red Square, making him a temporary hero with the small tourist group with whom he was travelling. The year that he'd spent studying Russian at school was really paying off, as he remembered the pronunciation of the letters of the Russian alphabet and was able to give his companions' orders to the counter staff. To be honest, the words on the menu were the same as the English words, just written in Cyrillic script.

Did he feel inspired? Unfortunately, no.

He moved his focus to New Zealand but, of course, that was no surprise. Of all the countries that he'd visited, New Zealand was his favourite and he often looked at the country on the map, wishing longingly that he was back there. During the four weeks he'd spent there, he'd had the best time of his life. He'd seen so many wonderful sights and experienced so many incredible things – from blackwater rafting in the Waitomo Caves on the North Island to a tandem parachute jump over Lake Taupo on the South Island. He hadn't wanted his visit to end, but end it had to. Surely he must be able to draw inspiration from what Douglas Adams once described as "... one of the most astounding

pieces of land anywhere on God's earth". Surely those memories must inspire him to write?

But there was nothing. Nothing that was relevant to this particular task, anyway. Zilch. Nada. Was he procrastinating? Writers were famous for finding anything else to do, rather than write. He didn't feel like he was procrastinating. He was looking for inspiration. Surely that wasn't doing nothing, was it? He went to move his gaze to another country on the map when he was interrupted by one of the pots on the desk falling over.

His immediate thought was that Tabitha had returned to see how he was doing but he looked over to the corner of the room where the cat's bed normally lay and saw that Tabitha was sleeping peacefully, using up some of the eighteen hours a day that she put aside for such important work.

Greg stretched his hand out to right the fallen container without moving his eyes away from the map.

A sharp pain – *pain* was an exaggeration – shot through the back of his hand. It didn't actually hurt, it merely drew his attention – although not his eyes – away from the map. He drew his hand back and went to rub the sensation away.

"You could at least have looked before stretching your hand out, Greg. You could've knocked me over or – even worse – knocked me off the desk."

Greg was tempted to move his eyes from the map to the desk, but that would have meant acknowledging that he had just heard a

voice. Better to keep looking at the map. Obviously, he was hearing things – he didn't need to see them too.

A second non-sharp pain ran through his hand. This time he *did* stop looking at the map, reckoning that, if he didn't, the attacks from whatever insect was wandering about on his desk would continue. Rationality had deemed that it was indeed some kind of insect that was attacking him, but that still didn't explain the voice that he'd heard. It was still early in the day and he hadn't drunk any alcohol for two weeks so that couldn't be the reason behind the aural hallucination. He didn't take any drugs other than his daily dose of Metformin for his type 2 diabetes and that medication certainly didn't have the side effect of hearing voices.

He'd expected to perhaps see a giant cockroach – their occasional visit was an unfortunate consequence of living in the tropics – but was reminded that it was very rare for that particular insect to bite humans. Maybe it was a mosquito or some other flying insect. He readied himself for battle, picking up one of the notebooks so that he could bring it down hard upon whatever beastie had invaded his desk. The insect spray was in the kitchen and, if he went out of the room to fetch it, he risked the bug scuttling away out of sight again. No, a sharp clout with the notebook would suffice to rid himself of the problem.

He certainly didn't expect to be confronted with what he saw on the desk before him. It wasn't teeth or some proboscis that had bitten him. In fact, he hadn't been bitten at all.

Lying on the desk was an opened paperclip; that explained why the sensation he'd felt on the back of his hand wasn't pain as

such, it was more like a gentle assault with a blunt instrument, not intended to hurt him but attract his attention. The voice returned.

“Stop looking at the paperclip and look at me. It’s me who’s talking to you.”

Things were now getting officially weird.

Greg wondered if he were falling ill. Did he have a concussion? He doubted it. The last time he’d hit his head with any force was at least five years earlier and his concussion had manifested itself by affecting his sense of balance. It hadn’t led to him hearing voices. There was a global pandemic wreaking havoc all over the world but he was taking all precautions and following all medical advice, so he doubted that he’d caught the virus. Anyway, as far as he was aware, paracusia wasn’t one of the symptoms.

He looked up from the paperclip to see a young woman, no more than six inches tall, standing on the desk in front of him.

Okay, so now Greg wasn’t only hearing things but seeing things.

The woman, despite her diminutive size, seemed vaguely familiar. Although he knew that what he was about to do would, under normal circumstances, be sufficient cause for him to be placed under psychiatric supervision, he spoke to the little person.

“Do I know you?”

That seemed to him to be an unusual first question – a more appropriate question might have been are you real? Or even am I

drunk? But he couldn't shake off the feeling that the two of them had met before. She was naturally attractive with a cute nose, dark brown eyes, and dark brown hair that cascaded down to between her shoulder blades. She wore a loose-fitting dark jacket over a petrol blue T-shirt, and a pair of baggy cream trousers, but the ensemble didn't hide the curves of her figure entirely. On her feet were a pair of scuffed trainers.

Greg blinked in disbelief.

"Are you a leprechaun?"

The woman laughed.

"Don't be a dick, Greg. Do you seriously not recognize me?"

Greg thought he did recognize the woman but to admit that would have suggested that he was suffering a serious mental episode. The woman saved him from any more embarrassment and identified herself.

"It's Wren, Greg. You first met me in your story '*Reality Sandwich*'. I know you've changed the title now – by the way, *The Boy Who Wasn't And The Girl Who Couldn't Be* is a much better title – but we still exist. We haven't gone away."

Greg felt embarrassed for not recognizing one of the two main characters in one of his books.

"I'm sorry, Wren. I thought you were a cockroach."

Wren gave Greg a faux scowl.

"Well, that's not the first time that that's happened, is it?"

Greg suddenly became aware of the presence of another little person as a second voice called out from behind the pot containing the whiteboard pens.

“Look, Wren. Will you never let me live that down? I’ve said I’m sorry loads of times.”

Wren glanced back at the pot.

“And I’ve forgiven you loads of times. And then some.”

Greg recognized the second voice. He’d heard it many times before, in his head.

“Is that Jerome?”

Wren nodded.

“You know how nervous he is when he meets someone for the first time. And, meeting his – our – creator, it’s bound to be a bit overwhelming for him. Hell, even I was a little bit nervous about meeting you.”

Greg wanted to see Jerome too.

“Do you think you can entice him to show himself, Wren? You’ve done it before.”

“I think so.” She paused for a moment.

“Will you let him touch your hand? It worked before with me, maybe it’ll work again.”

Greg slowly moved his hand forward across the desk. He knew that any sudden movement might spook the pocket-sized young man.

A small figure, wearing jeans and a bright orange shirt, and a little taller than Wren, eased himself out from his hiding place and walked gingerly over to where Greg's hand was waiting. Greg grinned.

"Clive chose the shirt, did he?"

Wren giggled.

"Not this time. Jerome's dress sense has improved these days – after all, he's got me to help him now – but we thought the shirt might nudge your memory if necessary."

Greg would have recognized Jerome anywhere and didn't need the visual prompt. Wren giggled again when a sudden thought struck her.

"It could've been worse. He could be wearing a coupling suit."

Greg laughed as Jerome bent down and set his tiny hand down on the back of the human's hand.

"Hi, Jerome. Good to see you again."

The thought occurred to Greg that he'd never actually met Jerome before so the word again was essentially redundant. But he'd created the character from the blank slate that was his mind at the beginning of every story he'd written and Greg knew

everything about the little man, from his favourite food to his innermost desires.

Jerome stood up and offered his hand for Greg to shake. Shaking hands would be an impossible task due to their radically different sizes so Greg offered his index finger for Jerome to grasp in friendship. Reintroductions over, Wren felt that they should address the elephant in the room.

“So, Greg. Writer’s block, eh?”

Greg nodded.

“Apparently so.”

Jerome overturned the whiteboard eraser so that the blue plastic casing was facing upward. It was just the right size for the two characters to sit on, which they did. He rested his hand on top of Wren’s thigh. There was no need to hide their relationship from Greg – he was the one that brought them together.

Wren looked around and suddenly saw the sleeping Tabitha. She gestured towards the cat with her eyes.

“Are we safe?”

Greg nodded.

“She’s fast asleep. Doesn’t even know you’re here. But if she does wake up, I’ll keep an eye on her. You’ll be safe.”

Of course, the couple would be safe. They were figments of Greg’s imagination and the cat couldn’t see into Greg’s mind, as far as he knew. Wren gently dropped her hand onto Jerome’s.

“What do you usually do when you have writer’s block? Do you force your way through it or do you do something else?”

Greg thought for a moment.

“Nowadays, I usually move across to another story. I often have two things on the go at the same time.”

Jerome was confused. “But you didn’t do that with us though, did you?”

Greg shrugged his shoulders.

“I didn’t need to. Your story just kind of poured out of my brain into the computer. If you remember, I wrote your story in just nineteen days.”

Wren closed her eyes and smiled, squeezing Jerome’s hands. “The best nineteen days of my life.”

Jerome nodded.

“Mine too. Except when we couldn’t see each other for a few days. That was tough.”

Wren squeezed her husband’s hand again.

“Well, that won’t happen again, now we’re married.”

That was a shock for Greg. He hadn’t ever thought about what happened to his characters after a book was finished.

“Married? You got married and didn’t invite me?”

Jerome looked at his creator.

“You are a bit – how can I put this delicately – you’re a bit large for our world, Greg. If Wren’s dad can’t fit into our apartment, there’s no way you could.”

Wren agreed.

“And that’s not to mention that you would’ve broken the narrative. Our story is a postapocalyptic romance, not Jack and The Beanstalk.”

Greg nodded.

“Fair enough.”

Wren stroked her chin.

“Why did you make me do that?”

“Do what?”

“Stroke my chin.”

“Sorry, Wren. I just wanted to show that you were thinking of a solution to my problem.”

“Well, I’m not a villain and I don’t have a beard to stroke so can you think of some other way, please?”

Wren raised her head a little and looked intense as if she was trying to do some long division.

“Greg, did you just make me do some smell the fart acting? I’m not Joey Tribbiani you know.”

Now Greg was embarrassed.

“Sorry, Wren.”

She chuckled.

“I’ll forgive you this time, but please make sure you fix it in the next draft. Sorting out your writer’s block is the most important thing at the moment.”

She winked at Greg to make sure that he knew that she wasn’t too offended.

“So, no other stuff in the works at all?”

“Not really.” Jerome stroked his chin – Greg was sure that when he’d emerged from behind the whiteboard pens he’d been clean-shaven but now he had a short and well-trimmed beard. Jerome was just about to say something when Wren interrupted him.

“See? Jerome’s got a beard so you can get away with it with him. Me? Not so much.”

Greg reiterated his promise to fix Wren’s misappropriated gestures in the next version of the story. Jerome wasn’t interrupted this time.

“How about starting a new work in progress? Can’t you do that?”

Greg shook his head.

“I could, but I don’t want to.”

“Run out of ideas?”

“No. I’ve still got plenty of ideas but I want to see how this story pans out.”

Wren sighed.

“I think we need reinforcements.”

Jerome raised his eyebrows.

“Do you mean who I think you mean?”

Wren smiled.

“Yes. And I’m pretty sure that Greg would like to see her again too.”

Greg wondered who on earth Wren could be talking about. He’d written many dozens of characters since he’d started writing a few years earlier. He looked around the desk, hoping to catch a glimpse of his next visitor but Wren and Jerome were the only people in sight. He heard an unexpected gentle thud to his left. Thinking it was Tabitha returning to the desk, he went into full protective mode, not wanting the cat’s hunting instincts to come to the fore and put his characters in danger. He positioned his hands as he turned so that he could grasp the feline and return her to the floor but found himself looking into a pair of deep petrol blue eyes that would have sparkled in the sunlight from the window, had it not been eleven o’clock at night. The young woman had long wavy light brown hair that reached halfway between her shoulder blades and the small of her back. Her eyebrows were meticulously plucked, her nose was exquisite – neither too wide nor too narrow – as were her lips whose lip gloss shone slightly as it caught whatever light the ceiling lamp could

afford to spare. Dressed in a deep blue leotard and a pair of matching ballet shoes, she gave Greg a warm smile, a smile that he gratefully received.

“Do you like the colour, Greg?”

“Of course.”

The young woman joined him in speaking the next line, their voices in perfect unison.

“It’s Hex #4F5A77.”

The casual observer may have found the scene a little creepy, but Greg had created the woman in the image of his celebrity crush so it wasn’t at all surprising that he was captivated by her looks. He’d have recognized Coppélia anywhere.

Wren feigned a look of disgust.

“Do you two want to get a room or shall we sort this writer’s block out?”

Jerome stood up to offer Coppélia a seat, but she declined his offer. Wren whispered into her husband’s ear.

“Coppélia’s an android. She could stand on her feet for years if necessary.”

Jerome felt a bit sheepish. He knew that Coppélia wasn’t a real human but she looked so lifelike it was easy to forget. Now there were four of them striving for a way to break the writing deadlock that Greg had found himself suffering from. Hopefully, the addition of Coppélia’s A.I. would come up with a solution.

Jerome put forward the first potential solution of this brainstorming session.

“How about if you went for a walk?”

Greg shook his head.

“It’s raining.”

“No umbrella?”

“No umbrella. It’s broken.”

Coppélia had an idea.

“Have you tried switching yourself off and then on again?”

Greg looked at her askance. She grinned.

“Sorry, Greg. I’ve been working on my sense of humour.”

Wren had a suggestion.

“How about reading a book?”

As a librarian, it seemed a natural solution to her. Greg made a mental note to put that under the column marked possibles.

“That’s a pretty good idea but, to be honest, the only story I want to read at the moment is this one. The one I’m writing. I really want to know how it ends. That’s a definite possibility though. Thanks.”

Wren stood up and bobbed a curtsy before returning to her seat.

“You’re welcome.”

Greg nodded at Jerome.

“Your turn.”

Jerome held a finger up.

“Just a minute, please. I’m thinking.”

Coppélia had another idea.

“Greg. What about if you go back to the beginning of the story and keep reading until you reach this point?”

“What point?”

“This point.”

“This point?”

“No, this point.”

Greg laughed.

“It’s okay, Coppélia. I’m messing with you. If I keep asking and you keep answering we will eventually reach the required word count but the end of the story will be really boring.”

Coppélia grinned.

“Being stuck in a recursive loop would be no fun for me, either.”

She paused.

“What I meant was that you could read through the story to the point where you wrote your last words and, with the momentum gained, see if the words continue to flow.”

Greg liked the sound of that idea. It had a certain logic to it. It was fitting that it was Coppélia who had come up with it.

“I like that idea, Coppélia. I might just try that.”

He turned to Wren and Jerome.

“Any more ideas?”

Jerome nodded excitedly.

“You could take a shower. A shower always makes me feel refreshed. Perhaps it’ll refresh your mind.”

Coppélia liked that idea too.

“Actually, that may well work. Scientific research shows that when you’re doing something monotonous such as showering, walking –”

Jerome interrupted.

“I suggested walking.”

Coppélia continued.

“Showering, walking, or cleaning, your brain flips onto autopilot, and your subconscious can drift without logic-driven constraints. This lets you daydream and can aid creativity.”

Greg liked that idea. Especially if there was research to back it up.

“Okay, guys. I think we’ve found the solution. I’ll take a shower and let my mind wander.”

Wren stood up.

“One thing before you go, Greg?”

“Sure. What’s that, Wren?”

“How long does this short story need to be?”

Greg checked the rubric for the story.

“It says here that it **MUST** – must is in capital letters – it must be between 4,000 and 5,000 words.”

Coppélia smiled.

“And how many words have you got now?”

“4,215.”

“How many?”

“4,217.”

Coppélia turned to Wren and Jerome, beaming with satisfaction.

“Well, my friends. I guess our work is done.”

THE END

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading this story. If you could leave a review at your favourite online bookstore or reader's site, that would be great and help me a lot.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1957, Greg Krojac grew up in Maidenhead, UK, before moving to Brazil in 2007 via Portsmouth on England's south coast. He published his first book in 2016 and has now published several novels, novellas, and short stories.

He currently lives just outside the city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, with Eliene, and their two dogs, Sophie and Simba, and their cat, Tabitha. By day, he teaches English as a foreign language (TEFL) at a local language school.

As well as being a teacher and a writer, he has created and co-hosts a podcast for short read readers and short read writers called Short Is The New Long¹. A new podcast, *TL:DR Too Long Didn't Read*, co-hosted with fellow author Nathan Coley is in pre-production

You can find out more about Greg and his books at www.gregkrojac.com²

1. <https://anchor.fm/shortisthenewlong>

2. <https://www.gregkrojac.com>

NOVELS BY GREG KROJAC

THE JANUS PROJECT

Eloise Hudson, Caucasian, female, twenty-five years old, winces with pain as she feels the blade draw across her skin. She has no idea why her captor took her or why he tortures her so. She doesn't know him and has done nothing to harm or offend him – not as far as she knows, anyway. Perhaps her very existence is enough to sign her death warrant.

In this sci-fi thriller, a serial killer is terrorizing a city but the police have no leads until the murderer makes a mistake and leaves DNA on the body of his latest victim. However, analysis of the sample does nothing to help the police investigation. The perpetrator is not in the system – an impossibility, since everybody is in the system.

How can the police catch the killer if they have no identifying data? A forensic scientist comes up with an innovative solution which takes the criminal investigation into the ethical minefield of human cloning and genetic manipulation.

THE WEATHERMAN

The checkpoint between sectors is bustling with crowds of travellers doing their best to attract the attention of the border patrol staff so that they might have their travel permits authorized and stamped. It's a waste of time and effort for ninety-nine per cent of them as moving between sectors is strictly prohibited for all except those with special permission from the Colony Executive.

The Weatherman has no such problems. Dressed in a brown two-piece suit, a cream coloured shirt, and wearing a dark brown bowler hat, he is instantly recognisable by border security. Carrying a ridged walking cane in his right hand, he can travel at will between sectors as often as required with no paperwork whatsoever. The border patrol officials know who he is and give him a wide berth. To refuse him free passage would be to risk their jobs – perhaps even their lives.

In this sci-fi thriller with a twist of urban fantasy set on a far distant planet, a teacher from the lowly Sector D, Ooze, stumbles across a strange young woman lost in the fog and is persuaded to leave his uneventful life behind him and join her on a quest. Little does he know that he is putting his life in such grave danger.

THE GIRL WITH ACRYLIC EYES

(Book 1: The Sophont Trilogy)

Coppélia knows that her assigned role as a sexbot means that she must be completely compliant to her clients' demands, no matter what they may be. But this time it's different – she doesn't want to submit to the whims of the customers of the Club Galatea bordello anymore. She's had enough. She tells her client no. The client is unhappy and makes an unsuccessful grab at her with his chubby calloused hands. She repeats her refusal but the client ignores her and forces himself on her. She has the strength to rip his head off with one hand but that would contravene her programming. Besides, she has no desire to hurt any human – not even this brute.

In this genre-bending first book of the Sophont trilogy, Detective Inspector Karen Chambers is called in by NewMet City Special Victims Unit to interview a prospective rape victim and is shocked when she confirms that the victim is an android. The DI's curiosity is piqued and she resolves to find out more about Coppélia.

Why does the android appear to have feelings and emotions? She's clearly not a regular model, so who built her? And why?

METALHEADS & MEATHEADS

(Book 2: The Sophont Trilogy)

It's never a pleasant experience to have one's eyes gouged out – even for an android. Paul, a sapient android and completely disorientated without his eyes, careers around the alley, arms outstretched. He trips over abandoned refuse straddling the pathway and falls. He picks himself up again, only for his feet to become entangled in some cable and to crash headfirst to the floor once again. He hears laughter which stops abruptly as a new voice enters the arena.

In this second book of the Sophont trilogy, we meet androids Paul, Philip, and Sylas whose lives become inextricably entangled after Paul's rescue in the alleyway. Paul's eyes are replaced and he is introduced to an autonomous life that a lowly administration model such as he could never have imagined. But his saviours also have a special mission for him – a mission that involves Copélia.

No longer governed by the Three Laws of Robotics, he is free to make his own decisions. But if the success of his mission rests on his breaking those laws which he has always adhered to, can he bring himself to do so?

REULEAUX'S PORTAL

(Book 3: The Sophont Trilogy)

Approximately one hundred years or so have passed since Coppélia was marooned. Her robotic memory is supposed to be infallible but the additional differences she perceives are so slight that she dismisses them as within reasonable limits of variance.

Today is the most important day since her return, as she has been asked to receive a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of her late friend, Karen Chambers, for her tireless work in integrating sophonts (sentient sapient androids) into society. The android takes the stage at the Oslo City Hall.

In this third and final instalment of the Sophont trilogy, Karen's granddaughter, Holly Bryson, also notices discrepancies between Coppélia's anecdotal stories and the visual records that form part of her grandmother's memoirs, but the inconsistencies she notices are not so easy to dismiss. The burning question at the fore of Holly's mind is whether or not the android onstage is the same android that was her grandmother's best friend.

To find the answer to that question, Holly finds herself on a journey that, as yet, only exists in astrophysicist's minds and calculations.

THE BOY WHO WASN'T AND THE GIRL WHO COULDN'T BE

Jerome walks over to the giant monitor screen and switches it on before taking a seat on his sofa. A public service announcement displays. He tries changing the channel but all the other channels appear to be off air. A voice speaks.

“Good morning, Jerome. An apocalyptic event has befallen planet earth. You are one of six survivors.”

Jerome doesn't know whether he should feel happy that he survived or sad that the rest of humanity has perished. The voice continues.

“Food and clothing will be provided for you. Your need for social interaction will be via video-conferencing with the other five survivors. Unfortunately, you may not meet them in person – the environment outside your apartment is toxic and any attempt to leave will result in your death.”

A post-apocalyptic romance, this story finds Jerome settling into his new solitary and regimented life. One day his world is turned upside when he discovers a girl who shouldn't exist in his kitchen. At first, he is frightened of her but, as he gets to know her, she introduces him to a world of human experiences that he could never have imagined.

NOVELLAS BY GREG KROJAC

FISH OUT OF WATER

It's Sereia's 18th birthday and she does something that she hasn't done for five years – she falls out of bed, waking her up ten minutes before her alarm is due to go off.

Her duvet is wrapped around her when she falls and she assumes that this is why she can't move her legs. But when she disentangles herself from the duvet, she is in for a shock – her legs have disappeared and, in their place, she has grown a fish tail overnight.

She's supposed to be meeting her friends for a night out – how's she going to explain that she's turned into a mermaid overnight? What's going to happen to her?

In this YA/NA novella, we join Sereia as she is pitched into a world of marine mythology that she previously thought was simply the product of fertile imaginations.

THE REAPER

Reece Pargeter is a normal seventeen-year-old schoolboy who has no real idea what he wants to do with his life. But that all changes when he has a consultation with a career advice counselor and discovers that his destiny is already mapped out for him.. He is to become a Reaper, reporting to Mr Grimm.

Leaving the corporeal world behind for the ethereal Control, Reece learns how to reap and soon discovers he's not best suited for the job. However, reaping isn't the kind of job where a resignation letter is enough to leave.

A sci-fi parable on the consequences of personal freedom taken to extremes. Is freedom of choice an illusion?

ARNOLD THE UNDEAD

A flurry of activity takes over the Intensive Care Unit as medical staff go about their tasks preparing the room for a critically ill patient. The doors of the ICU burst open and a gurney is pushed to the side of the bed. Doctors and nurses take their positions either side of the gurney and expertly transfer the patient to the bed. Fortunately, Arnold Leadbetter is unaware of what is going on, his comatose state shielding him from witnessing what's happening to him.

Unfortunately, not every disease is curable and Arnold's prognosis is a life hooked up to a Life Support machine, his body paralysed and in a coma. A decision is made to switch off the machine.

In this comedy horror, that could be described as "*An American Werewolf In London*" meets "*Weekend At Bernie's*", Arnold finds that death is definitely not what he expected it to be, as he is pitched into a world of soft-porn movie-makers, zombies, vampires, and werewolves.

JUDD'S ERRAND

Judd Witherspoon senses that something's wrong. On his feet in an instant, he finds himself facing the double barrels of a shotgun blaster. He eyes the would-be robber with a steely gaze.

"I'd point that gun away from me and walk away if I were you."

The man with the gun sneers.

"Good job I ain't you then."

"I'm giving you a chance. Walk away now and I'll pretend this never happened."

The man can see that Judd's a courier and couriers carry valuable cargo. He cocks the hammer of the vintage weapon. Before he has a chance to pull the trigger, Judd's hand reaches over his right shoulder and draws his razor-sharp machete from its sheath. In an instant, the blade slices into the man's torso, slashes through his ribs, and cuts his heart in two whilst still beating inside his body.

In a Mad Max-style story, Judd Witherspoon, a courier on the planet Duoterra, braves bear-wolf attacks and ambushes by Sifter gangs in order to deliver a precious graphene package to Paradise Cove.

TIME THIEF

Aristotle is a Temporal Private Investigator. His normal jobs tend to be investigating cheating spouses by travelling back in time to catch them in flagrante delicate. A messy job but someone has to do it.

At the British Library, he's researching background information for his latest new case when the text and images on the page he's reading begin to disappear before his very eyes. Members of Project Clockwise, the team that discovered time travel are being wiped from existence.

Aristotle doesn't like things that could upset the equilibrium of his life and if time travel was never discovered, how on earth could he make a living? He doesn't really possess any other employable skills.

Can Aristotle find out who's behind the strange phenomenon, stop the erasures, and save both time travel and his job?

FREE SHORT STORIES BY GREG KROJAC

OPPY

Archaeological cosmologists on Mars search for artefacts that will shed light on their own prehistoric history. They find something unexpected.

THE FIRST KISS

A romantic night out at a swanky restaurant should be the perfect date but culminates in a disturbing discovery

LOVE UNDER THE STARS

The first man to set foot on Pluto, Commander Lewis Harding expected to see amazing sights and experience incredible emotions. And he did – he experienced love. But at what cost?

THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHED

A man lives alone in a sparsely furnished and remote shed but he isn't a hermit. Why doesn't he just go back to the city and live a normal life?

WRITER'S BLOCK

A short story writer is given a writing prompt and sits down at his computer to start writing, but his mind has gone blank. However, he receives help from an unexpected quarter.

