

THE FIRST KISS

A SHORT STORY BY
GREG KROJAC

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THE FIRST KISS

Daniel looked across the table at the person sitting opposite him. He'd never seen a woman as beautiful as Melody. There was something about her eyes, something that he couldn't quite put into words.

Then it hit him.

It was the sparkle – *that* was the special thing that separated her from the other women he'd dated. It wasn't that those other women's eyes looked dead and lifeless – far from it (their eyes were lovely in their own way) – but Melody's eyes had something extra, a *je ne sais quoi* that made it so difficult to draw his own eyes away from them.

His fascination hadn't gone unnoticed by his dinner date. Melody knew she had striking eyes – her mother, Katia, had told her since the day she was born that she had beautiful eyes – but it wasn't until she was in her teens that she started to believe what her mother had said.

The beginnings of her epiphany had fallen on the day of her thirteenth birthday. She still had to go to school – a birthday wasn't enough of a reason to miss a day's schooling – but she didn't mind. She enjoyed school. But, at the lunch station, she was acutely aware of two boys continually glancing her way.

At first, she thought maybe she'd got something stuck on her face, something that shouldn't be there, but a brief brushing of her face with her hand dispelled that theory. Melody's bestie,

Colleen, rested her chin on her best friend's shoulder and whispered into her ear.

"It's your eyes. I heard them talking in the classroom. They really like your eyes."

As soon as she arrived home, Melody rushed upstairs, closed her bedroom door behind her, and stared hard into the mirror of her dressing-table. She addressed the eyes whose reflection looked back at her from the mirror.

"There's nothing special about you. You're nice, I'll admit that, but you're nothing to write home about."

She had naturally long lashes and her eyes were certainly a little larger than those of her school friends, so perhaps that's what made her stand out from the crowd. But she didn't think her eyes were any more attractive than anyone else's. No, there was nothing extraordinary about them. And, anyway, she wasn't even wearing makeup.

Actually, her mum didn't allow her to wear makeup. Katia said *we spend enough time being adults; we shouldn't be in such a hurry to leave our childhood behind*. But Melody was just like any other kid of her age, in a hurry to grow up and do what the grown-ups do. She'd been a child long enough. Her body had recently told her that she was turning into a woman and if her body thought that, then surely she could wear makeup now and again. It's not as if she expected to wear makeup every day – certainly not to school – but an hour or so in the evenings couldn't do any harm. She tried telling her mother that all her friends wore makeup but that just drew the response that Melody wasn't *all*

her friends. That seemed to Melody to be a particularly silly thing to say. She'd have to be a clone to be all her friends and even then they'd all have different personalities. Mums say the dumbest things sometimes.

As it happens, she didn't have to wait long for her mother to relent. On her fourteenth birthday, Katia booked the two of them into the local spa where they were both pampered with massages, mud baths, and something her mum said was a makeover. That seemed a very strange word to Melody. Surely something had to have been already made to be made over, but she accepted her mum's explanation that it was just a word and that she shouldn't bother herself about it. There were far more important things in the world to worry about.

That spa day changed Melody's life. Katia accepted that her daughter was blossoming into a young woman and took it upon herself to help ease Melody through the mental and physical transition, guiding her along the emotional rollercoaster that she was about to face. She gave her daughter lessons in how to choose the best cosmetics to use for her darker complexion and to enhance the best features of her face – especially those eyes. Best of all, Melody was allowed to wear makeup at the weekend – all weekend.

Katia was a good teacher. Although she was old – well, old to Melody – she always looked stunning. The teenager always felt proud when she and her mother walked down the road together, laughing at the men trying to be discreet as they stole furtive glimpses of her mum. One time, Melody thought one young guy – he could only have been seventeen or eighteen years old

– was going to dislocate his neck as he contorted his body to hold his gaze on her mother for as long as possible. Melody had asked Katia if she ever felt uncomfortable about men looking at her but her mum was pragmatic about the attention, saying that they could look but they couldn't touch. Melody knew what her mother meant. She was a strongminded woman and anyone who looked like they were about to cross a line was met with Katia's *don't even think about it* look. It was the same look that Melody had known all her life, the one that was so stern, so piercing, that she knew she had to stop whatever she was doing wrong immediately. Anyone on the wrong end of that look immediately knew that they were in trouble. Melody spent endless evenings practising in the mirror, trying to cultivate an equally devastating glare.

Her mum was the coolest. The two of them were more like sisters than mother and daughter.

And then, when Melody had just turned seventeen, her mother was stolen from her when a self-driving car accelerated through a red light as she and her mother were crossing the road. That wasn't supposed to be possible. There were fail-safes to stop that kind of thing happening. But it did happen. Katia took the brunt of the collision, pushing her daughter out of the way at the very last minute, leaving Melody with a few cuts and bruises as she tumbled to the ground out of harm's way.

Katia died instantly.

Melody received a substantial amount of financial compensation from the car's AI manufacturers but what's money when a daughter can no longer laugh and joke with her mother, a daugh-

ter can no longer hold her mother in her arms and tell her that she loves her. Money can't take the place of that.

And now it was Melody's twenty-third birthday and she was sitting in a swanky restaurant, with a delicious-looking young man sitting opposite her. They were getting on great – Daniel was genuinely funny and Melody hadn't had to feign laughter at even just one of his many jokes and wisecracks. He honestly did make her laugh.

And she knew a secret that he didn't.

Looking at Melody, Daniel was reminded of the times that he'd watched his father, Patrick, steal sly glances of the woman who walked past his front window every weekday morning. His dad didn't try too hard to hide it from his son but he didn't flaunt his behaviour either. Daniel chuckled as he recalled the murmurings of his father, thinking that his son couldn't hear him, as the woman and her daughter disappeared out of sight. *Damned fine looking woman*, he would say. *Damned fine*.

When Daniel was a teenager, he asked his father why he used to wait at the window for the woman and her daughter to pass by. He was curious. His mother had died in childbirth and Patrick had brought him up alone. Daniel often wished that his father had found a new love – he had mourned long enough – but his dad just said that nobody could ever take the place of his wife and that he was happy and content with it being just the two of them. Daniel tried to remind his father that he was growing up fast and, hopefully, would one day meet the love of his own life and want to settle down. He tried to explain that he wouldn't al-

ways be around and that his dad should find a woman to love and who would love him. But Patrick shook his head and said that until such a time arrived, and Daniel was ready to leave home, he had the most important job in the world – looking after his son – and he didn't need anyone else to make him feel whole.

A sudden brain aneurysm killed Patrick at the age of thirty-six. It hit Daniel hard. Thirty-six was no age to die. His father should have had at least that many years of life ahead of him too, probably more. Patrick was young, way too young to die. But Death is no respecter of age, it comes anytime and to any place it wishes. It didn't care that its victim was the father of a fifteen-year-old boy who had never known a mother's love but also had never wanted for the affection of his dad, a man who had enough love inside him to ensure that his son never felt too cheated by the circumstances of his birth.

Daniel smiled at Melody.

“You know, you look familiar somehow.”

Melody licked her lips as the tangy orange sauce of her duck à l'orange kicked in and caressed her taste buds, a gesture unseen by Daniel.

“Maybe you've seen me in town. I'm not a hermit, you know.”

She smiled at Daniel.

“Unless you've injured yourself recently. I *am* an ER nurse, remember.”

Daniel nodded.

“Yes. That’s it. I broke my ankle playing football about six months ago. You were the nurse who patched me up.”

Melody smiled again. In fact, she could hardly stop smiling all night. If Daniel could have seen her smile, he’d have surely thought that she was demented or something.

Daniel leaned across the table, his voice lowered.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

Melody nodded expectantly.

“Of course.”

“I fancied you back then. Like, *really* fancied you. Fancied you like mad. But you had other patients to see to.”

He paused.

“It’s your eyes. They’re absolutely stunning.”

Melody tried not to blush but she couldn’t help herself. She wasn’t embarrassed per se; it was more that she thought the same about Daniel’s eyes. And she knew something he didn’t know – she was going to sleep with him that night. But she wasn’t going to spoil the surprise by telling him beforehand. He’d find out soon enough.

A polite cough took their attention away from each other and they both turned to the waiter who’d arrived to offer the next course. He handed menus to each of them. The couple studied their menus while he deftly removed the feeding tubes that had supplied the couple’s main course directly to their stomachs, and

temporarily resealed each of their food recipient portals, their FRPs, before spraying each capped opening with a sterile agent from a rather charming glass bottle adorned with the restaurant's crest.

Melody's eyes flashed a smile at Daniel.

"You know, Dan. I think I'm going to spoil myself tonight. I'm going to order strawberries and ice cream."

Daniel grinned. That sounded like an excellent choice. He hadn't "eaten" a strawberry in a long time. He nodded to the waiter.

"Make that two, please."

The waiter nodded his head in return and scuttled off to the kitchen, pushing the shiny metal main course dispenser – also adorned with the restaurant's crest – ahead of him.

Melody rested her elbows on the table, clasped her hands in front of her face, and smiled an unseen smile.

"You know, Dan, I can't remember the last time I went out for a meal. It's so nice not to have to eat out of a packet for once."

Daniel thought for a mument.

"I think the last time I ate out was with a group of friends, celebrating winning the County Cup. They paid for my meal too, to thank me for scoring the winning goal."

There was another secret that Melody was hiding from Daniel. She'd already pre-paid for the meal. The compensation from her mother's death had left her very comfortably off. She'd been ad-

vised by her lawyers to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement to protect the AI manufacturer from bad publicity – such accidents were unheard of, thanks to NDAs – and, as a seventeen-year-old with no job and no savings to fall back on, she needed financial security. Truth be known, Melody didn't have to work for a living but did so simply because she loved the work, and she donated her monthly salary to medical research. She'd always wanted to be a nurse and didn't see why she shouldn't follow her dream.

Two minutes later, the waiter was back at the table with the dessert dispenser.

Melody raised the material flap of her designer dress that inconspicuously covered the entrance valve of her FRP, just enough for the waiter to connect the feeding tube. The tube itself was a little chilly and sent a rather pleasant shiver down her spine. Indeed, that's why she'd ordered ice cream – she knew that there'd be that added delightful sensation as the tube was inserted.

The waiter was about to switch on the pump when Melody raised a finger.

“Could we start together, please?”

The waiter bowed his head slightly.

“Of course.”

He then hooked Daniel up to the machine before tapping two touch screens simultaneously, and essence of strawberries and ice cream eased its way out of the dispenser and into the diners' bodies.

Daniel glanced over at the stainless steel dispenser and then turned to Melody again.

“Do you ever wonder what it must have been like to eat, you know, really eat? Using our mouths, I mean, and our teeth. To actually chew food and swallow it?”

Melody nodded.

“Sometimes, I do. Of course. I think everybody does now and again. But it’s impossible now. That’s why taste bud grafting was created. At least we still get to taste what we consume, now we have taste buds in our stomachs. It’d be horrible not to taste anything at all.”

Daniel sighed.

“Yeah. I know it’s never going to happen but to physically put something into my mouth and eat it – that’d be so cool.”

Before they knew it, the waiter was back at their table ready to disconnect and disinfect them.

“Can I get you anything else, Madam? Sir?”

Daniel nodded.

“Yes, please. The bill, if you’d be so kind.”

The waiter shook his head.

“The bill has been taken care of, sir. You are our twenty-five thousandth customer – therefore, your meal is on the house.”

For a moment, Daniel thought he saw the waiter wink at Melody but dismissed it as his mind playing tricks. He knew that the restaurant had celebrated their ten thousandth customer in such a way, so it wasn't entirely beyond belief that he and Melody had simply chosen the right night to go out for a meal together.

As the couple stepped outside, it was starting to rain but it was just a short dash from the restaurant to the self-driving taxi so neither of them got very wet. Secure in the cab, Melody snuggled up to Daniel for the ten-minute journey, happy in the knowledge that she'd had a great night. And it was only going to get better.

The electric taxi silently pulled up outside the apartment block and Melody got out of the car. The vehicle's door was just about to slide shut when Melody put her arm in the way, causing the car door's motion sensor to keep the door open. Her eyes flashed another smile at Daniel.

"You coming in, then?"

Daniel's heart began to quicken.

"Are you sure?"

There was a wicked glint in Melody's eyes.

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't."

Daniel didn't need to be asked twice and hastily transferred the fare to the taxi company's account through his smartphone.

Melody's apartment was very tastefully decorated. The design was mainly open-plan, with a kitchen area overlooking the ample

living room space from which two more doors led to two more rooms. On the wall of the living room, between two paintings of city landscapes at night, hung a 104 inch 8K flat-screen Smart TV. Daniel knew the specifications as a small label announcing those facts was still nestled in the bottom right corner of the screen's frame.

Melody gestured at the sofa.

"Sit down. Make yourself at home."

Daniel eased himself into the sofa, which seemed to embrace him as he sat down. He called out to Melody.

"This is a strange sofa. Comfortable, but strange."

Melody's voice called back from the kitchen.

"It's one of those newfangled Hugga-Sofas. I'm normally here on my own so, with that sofa, I can get a cuddle whenever I want one."

She giggled.

"But I don't need it tonight. I have you."

Daniel laughed.

"You're nuts. But you're cute with it."

Melody opened the fridge door.

"Would you like some wine?"

"Sure."

“Red or white?”

“White please.”

She took two sachets of wine out of the fridge, grabbed two disposable feeding tubes from the kitchen drawer and joined Daniel on the sofa. She handed him one of the sachets and he went to take one of the feeding tubes from her. She raised a hand.

“Uh, uh, uh. I’ll insert it. I am a nurse, you know.”

Daniel lifted up his shirt and let her connect the tube. She grinned at him and opened the courtesy flap of her dress.

“Now, you be the doctor and put mine in.”

Daniel wasn’t used to hooking up feeding tubes to other people – he was more of a do-it-yourself kind of guy – but he didn’t do too bad a job of it. At least he assumed so, as Melody didn’t even flinch. She laughed.

“You’ll make a great waiter someday, Dan.”

They sat there chatting for a while, sipping their wine, finding out more about each other. Daniel told her about his dad and how he used to watch a beautiful woman pass by their window every weekday morning but never said hello to her. Melody took a final sip of her wine.

“What road did you live on?”

“Newlands Avenue. Why?”

“Me and my mum used to walk along that road every morning, Monday to Friday.”

She laughed.

“I reckon that was my mum he was looking at. He should’ve said something.”

Daniel’s eyes looked sad for a moment.

“Yes, he should’ve.”

Melody sighed.

“My mum was a *damned fine looking woman*.”

They looked at each other for a few seconds before Melody broke the silence.

“Do you want to watch a movie on Netflix or go to bed? And, I must say, I’m not in the mood for a movie.”

Daniel was a little taken aback but he’d have been lying if he’d said that he hadn’t hoped the night would end this way. He grinned.

“You know what? I hate movies.”

Melody took him by the hand and led him into her bedroom. A double-bed decked with crisp white Egyptian cotton sheets was flanked by a pale purple dressing-table with three small mirrors on one side of the room and a matching chair on the other. A long four-door fitted wardrobe with mirrored doors took up the whole area of the wall opposite the bedroom door. Three

framed prints of the same semi-naked woman reclining on different chaise longues hung on the walls.

Melody dimmed the light, not enough to plunge the room into entire darkness but enough to add an air of shadowy mystery to the room. She looked into Daniel's eyes, inviting him to look into hers but he needed no such invitation – her eyes were like twinkling stars that he couldn't turn away from. The couple stood there in silence, just looking at one another until Melody guided Daniel's hand behind her back and rested it upon her dress zipper. The room was silent but for the gentle buzz of the zipper making its way down her dress. She shook her hips and the dress fell to the floor before she unbuckled Daniel's belt, unfastened his flies, and tugged on his trousers until they too fell to the floor.

Ripping off each other's clothes on the way, they made their way to the bed and spent an hour exploring each other's bodies, teasing each other, writhing in perfect ecstasy, their bodies as one, until they collapsed into each other's arms, exhausted, their energy almost spent.

Daniel leaned over and gazed into Melody's beautiful dark glistening eyes.

"If you could have anything for your birthday, what would you like?"

She closed her eyes for a second or two and sighed.

"I can't tell you."

Daniel grinned.

“Of course you can. Maybe I can get it for your next birthday.”

Melody shook her head.

“No. Really. I can’t tell you.”

A teardrop trickled down her cheek. Daniel brushed it away gently with his finger.

“Please tell me.”

She bit her lip but Daniel didn’t notice. She shook her head. Now a single teardrop swelled in Daniel’s eye. Seeing Melody so suddenly sad was making him sad.

“Melody. Tell me, please. What would be the best birthday present ever?”

She looked into his eyes and whispered.

“A kiss.”

It was just after 11 o’clock the next morning that two police officers broke Melody’s apartment door down. She hadn’t arrived for her shift at the hospital and she was *never* late, so her shift-manager had asked the police to confirm that she was okay.

A young police officer looked at the two naked bodies on the bed, entwined in a deathly embrace. He felt an urge to retch but had no desire to pay a visit to the ER and have his mouth cleaned out under general anaesthetic. He’d heard stories from other people about how uncomfortable the experience was and had no wish to find out for himself.

He hoped the anti-vomit solution that everybody ingested first thing in the morning would do its magic and do it quickly.

His more experienced colleague moved over to the bed. She put on her sterile gloves and turned the bodies over. She'd seen something like this a couple of times before.

She turned to her colleague whose colour was returning to his cheeks.

“You okay, constable?”

The anti-vomit solution had kicked in.

“I'll be fine, sarge.”

The police sergeant pointed to the bed.

“Two bloody scalpels, incisions around the mouth and lower part of the nose, and two – what I can only describe as large blood-soaked flaps of skin – alongside them. What does that say to you?”

The young police officer was still visibly shocked by the scene.

“Someone cut their masks off?”

He took a gulp of filtered air.

“Who would do such a thing to them? I mean, that's just depraved, cutting somebody's mask off.”

The policewoman shook her head.

“Somebody else didn't.”

“What?”

“They did it to themselves. They cut their own masks off.”

Her colleague was confused.

“But they must have known that they’d die. They must have known they’d catch RIPF-70. Everybody knows how important masks are after the COVID-19 global tragedy fifty years ago.”

“The young lady certainly knew. She was a nurse so she’d have known all about Rapid Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis. And, looking at the quality of his suit on the floor over there, I’d say he had a good job too. I’m sure he knew what he was doing.”

“So why cut their masks off if they knew it was certain suicide?”

The police sergeant sighed.

“My guess? A kiss.”

The officer had an incredulous look on his face.

“A kiss? They killed themselves for a kiss?”

The policewoman’s face softened.

“My mum told me what it was like to kiss my dad. Of course, that was before RIPF cut through the world’s population like a knife through hot butter. But she said it was electrifying, something so wonderful that mere words couldn’t do it justice.”

The young officer, now recovered from his sense of nausea, took a deep breath through the filters of his own mask.

“Well, I hope it was worth it.”

The police sergeant beamed behind her mask.

“From the smiles on their lips, I’d say it was.”

She’d seen lips before but it was a new experience for the young policeman. He couldn’t stop staring at them.

The sergeant tapped her comms badge.

“Echo Fourteen to Echo Base?”

“Echo Base to Echo 14.”

“Echo 14. Please dispatch a coroner’s vehicle to Apartment 304, Diamond Villas. We have two bodies to pick up. One male, IC 1, and one female, IC 3. Both early twenties, I’d say. No foul play suspected.”

“Echo Base. Received. Coroner’s vehicle will be with you in five.”

The policewoman checked the time on her smartwatch and sat down on the light purple chair.

“Wow. Almost midday. Nearly time for lunch. Where shall we go today? MacDonald’s or Burger King?”

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.

