The Story Portraits

Short and micro-fiction by

Rik Roots

Smashwords Edition.

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

I dedicate this books to everyone involved
in revolutionising the world of publishing –
especially the folks at lulu.com
and smashwords.com
(and amazon.com, of course)
– without which this book,
alongside all my other books and stuff,
would never exist.

Thank you all!

The Story Portraits

Welcome to this, my first collection of micro-fiction. Within these pages you will discover a range of characters looking to tell their stories – some more surreal than others – in various styles and voices. Suffer alongside Frank as he recovers in hospital from an accident; watch young Jacob discover a new form of entertainment; follow Jack as he breaks free of the confines of his bathroom.

But most importantly, enjoy these stories. After all, I wrote them for you.

Table of Contents

Maggots

'That doctor told me Frank's got maggots in his arse, Dot! What's Frank doing with maggots in his arse?'

Stella had a voice that could hammer nails at a hundred paces, and a willingness to talk at anyone who came within shouting distance. From the moment his sister had arrived in the ward everything seemed, to Frank, to have changed: the pillow cupping his head had hardened, its scent shifting from shampoo lilacs to chemical chlorines; the placid knocks and clatters of the ward routines had sharpened, too, their edges less tonal, more argumentative – like a clock with an arrhythmic tick.

Frank loved his baby sister, though he preferred her in small, measured doses. When he had heard the storm-front of her arrival he had quickly feigned sleep. The approaching slow-honey tones of his wife's voice was a temptation to open his eyes, smile and interact with the women who programmed his life – but the bed was comfortable and his abscess hurt less in his current position; he didn't want to disturb the maggots just yet.

'It's the treatment, Stella. Haven't they explained it to you?'

'You said he had boils. I laughed when I heard that one! Typical of Frankie to skive off his chores with some excuse or other, but you don't need to book into hospital to get a boil lanced. Our Mum used to make up a paste with Epsom salts: slap it on overnight and it would be popped and cured by morning! Not that I've had them, mind – a sign of not washing behind the ears, Mum said, and I've always been particular about hygiene ...'

'Is he sleeping?'

'I didn't want to wake him, hon. He looks so peaceful lying there – younger, like before all those wrinkles caught up with his eyes. Has he been dying his hair again?'

The hand that touched Frank's shoulder was Dot's: she had a special way of touching him, a methodical stroke of fingertips that lingered on his skin, as if gently searching through his back-pelt for grubs and parasites.

'So why is he here?'

'It's silly really,' said Dot. 'You know that fence at the back of our garden?'

'The one your neighbours let ivy grow over?'

'That one, yes.'

'You should have sued them for the damages!' said Stella, the litigation hound.

'Well, Frank decided to try and fix it a couple of weeks back. I told him we could get someone in to do it, but he's all for saving money since he retired. Anyway, Frank went to war with the fence, and the fence won.'

'He's always been clumsy, has Frank.'

'He ended up sat on the fence – came back indoors with a big splinter in his buttock. I fixed him up, creams and plasters, but it wouldn't heal. In the end I had to force him down to the doctor.'

'Squeamish, too. I remember how he would scream whenever he saw a syringe – like a banshee he was, as if it was out to kill him!'

'Well, that hasn't changed,' admitted his wife. The comment was almost enough to make Frank turn over and argue back; only the faint tingle in his buttock – a hint of tickling movements where once an agonizing heat had pulsed – held him back from defending his honour. He'd only screamed to scare his prim little sister, once, as a practical joke; she had been easy to frighten when they were kids.

He recalled the time he'd shown her his jar of caterpillars, let her open the lid to sniff the cabbage stench of its trapped air. When he tipped one of the mint-striped worms onto her lap she ran straight into the kitchen door, gave herself a black eye. Later that day, nursing his own bruised buttocks, he'd seen tiny grubs force their way out of the remaining caterpillars, watched the little white nubs of life yawn yellow cocoons as their old homes withered across the emerald kale.

Now it was his turn to host monsters.

'So what's wrong with him?' asked Stella.

'He's got an abscess, quite deep in fact – probably caused by an embedded splinter. The doctor gave us some antibiotics, but they didn't work. Turns out it's one of those new resistant super-bugs ...'

'You mean MRSA? I've read about that.'

'That's its name! So here's Frank in hospital. They've discovered these flies that lay eggs on wounds, but the clever thing is the maggots only eat rotting flesh – the dead puss and stuff.'

'That's amazing,' said Stella, 'in a creepy way. Is it working?'

'Oh, yes,' said Dot. 'He'll be coming home tomorrow. He's still got to fix that fence, you know!'

(Return to Table of Contents)

On the Radio

Hearing the song on the radio made her do it.

It was an old song, a doo-wah song from the sixties – some female trio, she couldn't

remember their name now.

They used to sing it together, the three of them behind the prefab classrooms during the breaks between classes. Shelly had had a good voice and knew the words; Trish had memorised the dance from watching the singers on Top of the Pops – hands go here, fingers point just like that. How they'd giggled. She'd tagged along to make up the numbers. After a few days, and a few arguments along the way, they'd worked it all out. Three new women ready to take the world in a synchronised strut, pitch almost-perfect.

What had happened to them?

She had been in the kitchen when the song had come on. She hadn't even realised it was playing until she noticed her hand scrubbing the big oven, with its six cooking rings, in time to the music. Then she'd stopped working and started listening, a small smile across her small, triangular face. Good memories.

Now she was sitting at Mrs Smith's table. Mrs Smith had a large house which needed cleaning twice a week, forty pounds cash-in-hand, no questions asked. One time, Trish had asked her: what do you want to do when you leave this dump? Well, she'd got what she wanted. The job had been routine, stacking shelves and playing checkout girl, but it gave her the pay packet at the end of the week – her passport to some good times. The husband had been more of a disappointment: he still was, she thought, but they'd worked well together, got their names on the waiting list, got into their own flat before the kids started arriving.

Trish had wanted riches; Shelly had wanted fame. A woman with a tight waist and a good voice could dream of record contracts. She'd not fitted in with those plans – she was more of a Babs Windsor than a Twiggy in those days, she mused, as she got the mop out and made a start on the kitchen flagstones.

She hadn't thought of the girls for ages. Years. Most of the time she lost herself in worries about her boys as she vacuumed, or shopped, or cooked, or dealt with the never-ending saga of her mother's illness. Suddenly there was an emptiness in her. She needed to know if her school mates – friends forever – had achieved their dreams.

Mrs Smith had a telephone in her kitchen. She picked it up as if to polish it. Maybe she could phone the radio station, tell them about how the three of them had performed that song. She'd heard others phone up and reminisce; it was one of those phone-in shows, in any case.

Mrs Smith wouldn't mind one phone call, surely.

It was strange, the way her fingers already knew the number to dial.

(Return to Table of Contents)

As the Gloaming Reached Her Street

'What did you catch?'

'Oh, Just a bird.' He smiled at her gently, letting his cheeks lift to ridge beneath his eyes. 'Do you want to see?'

'No,' she said. 'I was hoping you could take me shopping – there's plenty of the bulky stuff we need but I can't face public transport, not at this time of the day.'

He reached out his hand up towards her face, almost to take her chin in his palm. Now she smiled, though the movement of muscles was not enough to dislodge the pain in her eyes.

'You're still not well, Marcie. Give me a list and I'll drive over there later.'

'You're a good friend, Art. Are you sure you don't mind?'

'Of course not.' He kept his eyes steady on his neighbour's face, refusing to acknowledge his ears' demands to locate the starlings, their chirrups announcing their arrival in the front garden.

'You do too much for me.'

'Maybe.'

She broke their gaze, looked up to the sky. 'I can't believe it's getting dark already. It's going to be a hard winter.'

'Maybe,' he agreed. 'I'll have to make some fat-balls soon.' Seeing her eyebrow raise, he added: 'for the birds. I mix lard with seeds and put the balls in little net bags to hang from the trees. I do it every year.'

'Oh, I know what you mean. I've seen them in the pound shops. You make your own?'

'It's something to do,' he said. 'It kills an afternoon.'

She looked up then, looked over his head to the trees beyond.

'Maybe I can persuade Clive to pop over and trim your lawn, clear the leaves or something.'

'Oh, don't worry the lad with work,' he said. 'The garden is fine as it is – I like it a little wild and unkempt at this time of year.'

'Well, it's the least he can do ...'

'He's not my servant, Marcie ...'

'Of course not – I know that! I was just offering ...'

'The garden will keep fine. And thank you for the offer – I do appreciate it.' He saw her shiver then; again he smiled. 'It is getting chilly, mind. I'm going to have to go in, get some hot tea in me.'

'Okay, Art,' she said. 'I shouldn't have kept you talking.'

'Don't worry, Marcie! It's always good to keep up with the news. I'll drive over to the supermarkets around seven, yes? They should have quietened down by then ...'

'What was the bird?' She asked the question suddenly, as if unwilling to let him go.

'The bird?'

'The one you caught.'

'Oh, that – it was a robin. They're a lot easier to spot once the leaves come off the trees. I managed to snap a wonderful close-up of him.'

'Will you be posting it to the web?'

'Yes,' he agreed, his smile much broader now. 'I'll see if I can do that between the cup of tea and the drive to the shops.'

'I'll look out for it there, then,' she said. 'And thanks for going to the shops for me – shall I tell Clive to go with you ...'

He reached out from his wheelchair to grab her hand across the low fence. 'I'll be fine, Marcie. Honestly. And you don't need to keep suggesting the boy helps me. It was an accident: he has nothing to atone for!'

She had no more words. Watching her neighbour maneuver his wheelchair away from the fence and towards the new slope to his door, she could feel the sad, self-blaming arguments welling from the depths of her throat, urging her mouth to free them.

She refused them. Refused for a while to turn back into her own house, back to the petty realities of her life. Above her, clouds greyed with rain, sent a few drops downwards to test the route. Two starlings landed in her driveway, where once she had parked her car. Where they saw space to stretch wings and bicker, she saw an accusation.

She would have to move, she resolved to herself once again.

Her neighbour's forgiveness was killing her.

(Return to Table of Contents)

Jacob's New Game

'Jacob, love. Look, I'm sorry ...'

He could see her reflected in the window shop, a still body among the hurrying shapes in the street, merged into an array of violent, sophisticated computer game display boxes. He was there, too, a pint-size parka jacket, hood up, fat sleeves shoved into pockets.

'Jacob, come on, now! There's no need to behave like this. Let's go home, now ...'

The rush of words took him by surprise: 'Whose home? Your home? His?'

'Our home, love. Yours and mine.'

'Until it's his turn to have me!' How could his Mum and Dad have stood there in the street arguing about him like that? They didn't even ask him what he, Jacob, wanted to do.

'That's not my choice. You know that. The court said you have to visit him twice a month.'

'And you let them tell you what to do? I hate him! I don't ever want to see him again!'

'Jacob ...'

'No, Mum. You let him shout at you in the street. You let him order you around: 'Do this, do that. Drop him off tomorrow at eleven. Don't be late!' It's like he owns us!'

'He loves you. You know that. He's taking you to see the game tomorrow ...'

'I don't want to go and watch football with him!'

'Now stop it, Jacob!' In the window he could see his mother reach out her hand to his shoulder. When he felt the touch he scrunched his head down, turned to face her as he moved away. But he couldn't look at her. Beyond them the crowds had turned into a surge of adults heading towards the station. Some of them were staring at him and his Mum, slowing a little as they passed them – like a car crash.

'Look, love. I know it's been hard on you. But this isn't the time or place to talk about it, okay? Lets go and buy this game of yours and then we'll go home. We can pick up a McDonalds on the way home, if you like.'

Jacob said nothing. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to call the tight knot of rage and embarrassment just below his heart.

He didn't know why he punched the window.

'It must have been faulty, flawed!'

Mum was in full-on angry mode. Jacob could see by the way she kept her elbows tight to her waist that what she really wanted to do was pummel blame into the shop manager's chest. 'It shouldn't have just shattered!'

He turned away. His hand was numb and his parka sleeve bloody, but he didn't notice – all he cared to notice was the way the splinters and sparking edges had danced around his fist, a kaleidoscope halo of rush-hour crowds and startled cars.

He knew he should be crying. Tears now could be converted into presents, even cash. But he had no tears, and the strange clench of rage in his belly was missing, too: shattered like the window.

Beyond the glass remnants, boxes called for his attention: *'Play Me!'* they cried.

'Why should I?' he thought, looking at the next window.

'This game's much more fun!'

(Return to Table of Contents)

A Little Bit of Culture

John peered through the open door: in the gloom loomed another room of cabinets. 'It's boring here,' he said. 'Do we have to stay?'

Jane was already clipping towards the first display. 'It's interesting,' she murmered, her glasses mid-swing to her nose.

'It's a pile of old pot shards, that's what it is.' His stare accused a neat display of battered clay fragments of loitering with intent. Each shard came with its own tiny prisoner number pinned to the wood next to it: these offenders had form.

Around him, the room was hushed, only the slightest hint of noise venturing through the great shuttered windows high in the whitewashed walls. Ceiling fans spun slowly, whispering the lazy air through the room. Even the air was bored, thought John.

'We could be down on the beach,' he said.

Jane squinted at him, her brow forensically ruffed. 'We've spent two days on the beach with Sue and the boys. We've spent another two by the pool – or at least I have.'

He grimaced, realising that he had invited her to pin a charge-sheet to his chest.

'You spent,' she continued, 'two days perched on a stool by the pool bar. We wasted a day on that island tour with that awful Rep whose only interest was pointing out where all the nightclubs were. Oh, yes, and where to buy the best handbags and jewellery. You agreed we'd look around the town today!'

His defence rose to his lips without forethought: 'I thought it would just be an hour or so. I didn't expect to be dragged round every poxy museum we came across!'

His judge-and-jury screwed her eyes into a condemnation: 'You're here now,' she sentenced. 'Why don't you soak up some culture to go alongside the rum and cokes you've been throwing down your throat all week.'

'How can I soak up culture? They don't even tell you what your looking at?' It was a weak appeal, he knew, but he was a gambling man.

'You're looking at pots, John. Pots made three thousand years ago and buried in graves. It

makes me wonder about how people did funerals differently in those days. You don't need labels, John. You need a bit of wonder and imagination.'

'But you can't even touch things here! Why can't you do this back home, visit a museum or something?'

He watched his appeal fail in the set of her jaw. The tightening of her lips might as well have been the kiss of the noose on his neck.

'John Stewey, if you continue to make a fuss, then I promise you you'll be wearing that cabinet up your arse for the rest of the week! Every day on this holiday I've done what you've wanted to do; now it's my turn. Pretend you're enjoying yourself now, and in a couple of hours you can be back on your bar stool and we'll both be happy, okay?'

John sighed as Jane turned back to look at some arrow heads. He glanced again at the crockery lined up in their shattered ranks, as broken and bored as he felt. At least he could walk out of the door; these bits of clay were condemned for eternity.

Perhaps the ghosts of their owners turned up at night to look at them, argue about who broke them – now there was a wry thought to slip across his face.

(Return to Table of Contents)

Away with the Fairies

'Snow's melted; that's a good thing. We can't be having snow on the rocks, not this side of Christmas anyway.'

She plucks at some dead leaves marking the spot where the purple aubretia had burned – a casualty of the November firework that had fallen, spent and smoking, into the garden. An alpine aster would make a good replacement for the casualty, she had decided at the time, but a shiny nub-hook of an early snowdrop bud had stopped her buying the new plant. She had assumed it was a message to let the plants be for a while; let them consider their options before making space for a new arrival.

Not that she could have made it to the garden centre these past couple of months. She settles awkwardly to the work of checking, brushing and tidying the rockery, ignoring the bulk of her left arm in its cast and sling, its throbs accentuated by the sharp chill of damp air.

For a moment she stops, compares the tones of the liver spots spread across the back of her thin, long hand with that of the earth packed between the stones and grits: they almost match, which brings a smile to her lips – another cryptic clue.

She reaches for the diary laid by her knee and makes a quick scribble on today's page. 'So much to do,' she murmurs. 'Too much, and no time left!'

'She still seems pretty active, Mr Bland. Even with the broken wrist she's managing to get back on her feet. She's barely using her cane for support – a good demonstration of balance and coordination skills for a person of her age.'

David Bland doesn't look at the visitor, instead letting his gaze pass beyond the window above the kitchen sink. He watches the old woman carefully brush dirt and twigs from her pyjamas and tighten the belt of her thick, quilted house-gown.

'It's not her physical state we're worried about, Dr Smallworthy. It's her mind that concerns us. She's always had her little eccentricities, but since the accident she's got a lot worse.'

Now he looks his guest in the eye. 'Vacant, is how I'd describe it. Her body's here but her mind's gone wandering. Angela – that's my wife – these past couple of months have been very hard on her ...'

'Mrs Feymount is your wife's mother?'

'Yes,' David agrees. The click of the kettle switching itself off as it reaches the frazzle of boiling point distracts him. 'Do you take milk with your tea? Sugar?'

'Thank you,' says the doctor. 'Yes to both, though not too much sugar. Sweetener would be better, if you have any.' He pats his belly beneath its single-breasted waistcoat, though as far as David can make out the man carries scant fat around his waist.

He prepares the drinks automatically, three cups aligned neatly across the pitted wooden work surface, each with their allotted tea bag. Angela's peppermint has been set on the left, furthest from the heap of sugar in its chipped Clarice Cliff bowl to remind him not to let the two mix together. Behind him, he hears the tall visitor ruffling through his slim, handle-less briefcase.

Stir, catch; squeeze and dump. 'So how long have you worked for Arcadia Vale?' Once the milk is added he turns to present the cup to the doctor, his professional smile, reserved for professional men, fixed across his face.

'I've been working with the home for over five years, part-time.'

'You work for other homes as well?'

'If that were the case, Mr Bland, I'd be a rich man! Arcadia Vale is an excellent, well managed operation; they pride themselves for maintaining a good working relationship with the local doctors and social services. My role is to advise the management on medical and welfare issues, and also to meet potential residents to assess their likely needs – should they choose to move into the home, of course.'

Whatever the doctor's protestations, David doubts that he lacks money. The signs of wealth are subtle: the lack of crease in the wool-spun jacket; the choice of cuff-links over buttons on the inch of white shirt sleeve half-covering the solidly-designed watch; the even stitching across the black leather of the pointed shoe.

'You won't be my Mother-in-law's doctor then?'

'Not unless she has to be admitted to hospital for any reason – my main place of work is at the geriatric unit there.'

Again the professional, interested smile. 'So what is the purpose of this visit, then?'

'As I said, we need to assess Mrs Feymount's needs: physical, emotional and spiritual – the whole package. And we need to see that she understands the facilities and options on offer to her. Though to be honest I rarely get to visit potential clients; normally we meet when they tour the home – something Mrs Feymount has not yet done, I believe. You have discussed this with her, yes?'

'Yes,' says David, adding an extra spoon of sugar to his own tea. 'Charity – Mrs Feymount – has been talking about little else for the past month!'

The photograph is framed with a simple wooden surround – the creamy lustre and relative straightness of the grain suggests white ash to Angela. She strokes the smoothed edges as she gazes at the image it holds: Chloe sits on her grandmother's knees, her feet barely touching the grass; the pale blue sky and the paucity of leaves on the trees beyond the rockery suggest early spring – yes, she can spot the collapsing browns of the sated daffodil blooms just breaking into the corner of the picture.

'How can you two look so alike?' she whispers. Her Mother's hair is its usual mess of greying ringlets though a few still bear the russet gleam that haloes her daughter's face. Two faces, almost identical, each posed in a mirror's reflection of the other with only the aging of summers and the ghost of David's bones imposed on Chloe's cheeks to separate them.

She misses the clatter of Chloe around the house; resents the distance between them, made physical these past few months when her baby travelled north to study in Leeds. 'Why not Oxford, Chloe?' she had demanded to know. 'They've offered you a place and a scholarship!' But her little girl had her own mind now, alongside a steely determination to do as she saw fit: Oxford was probably too close to home, too near to the nest for a fledgling testing her own wings.

Her sigh is loud enough to interrupt her thoughts. Reluctantly, she lets the photo slip back to the night-stand, glances out of the bedroom window to check on her Mother's progress: the old woman is back on her feet now, brushing twigs and moss from her knees.

They had argued again this morning, mother and daughter testing their respective determinations over toast. 'You know Doctor Smallworthy's coming to see us today!'

'Why did you agree to the man coming here at nine o'clock! You know I have things to do in the mornings.'

'He's a busy man, Mother. This is the only time he's got available before Christmas.'

'Then he can meet me in my pyjamas!' And that had been the end of the conversation.

Another photograph catches her eye. Here stands her father with James; her brother's smile is wide and certain in his newfound adulthood – could it really be twenty years since he wrecked his car? She runs her fingers around the unlikely frame, a weave of willow twigs

Why willow? she wonders.

Angela shivers. Sometimes her Mother's little mysteries anger her, but not today. She should be downstairs already with David and the Doctor.

She takes a moment to check the state of her morning makeup in the oval mirror hung on the door before she leaves the room.

'This is a wonderful house, Mrs Feymount. How long have you lived here?'

'September 1940 – early September; school had just started when I arrived. I've been here ever since.'

'So you're not a local?'

'I was born in London – somewhere in the East End – but the Germans took my parents and my home during the Blitz. This was my aunt's house, and my grandmother's before that.'

'So how do you feel about the idea of moving out?'

Peter watches the woman in her dressing gown closely as she considered her answer. So much of his work involved watching people, searching the hands and the angles of the body for answers their minds and mouths were keen to conceal. This one is turning out to be surprisingly open, her posture and gestures in good synch with the words she utters.

Which is more than can be said of the daughter and her husband. The man has stayed quiet, for the most part, since the women had joined them for this interview. His smiles are cold, disconnected from the signals semaphored by his eyes; his glance flicks over to his wife a little too often, like a dog waiting for commands. She, on the other hand, has chosen to present behind a mask of faint powders and eyeliner, the lipstick a blush of pink that almost certainly matches her natural colour. She sits erect, closed, her wrists neatly folded over her knee which, in turn, crosses its twin. When she chooses to look away from him, her eyes go to her mother's face, the lids and lines caught in a crossfire of frustration and concern.

'I'll be sad to go,' the old woman says after a short pause, the slight pull of a shrug across her shoulders confirming the truth of the statement. 'There's been good times in this house, and not such good times too. But I have to say it's starting to be a bugger to keep the place clean. And Angie tells me this retirement home is only ten miles away; there's a direct bus route which means I can come and visit whenever I like.'

Perhaps she's being a little too sensible, he thinks as he continues the conversation. Questions form in his mouth by rote: recent health issues, problems with remembering things, how she gets on with her neighbours, how easy she finds it to make new friends. Charity dominates the conversation, even venturing to ask a few questions of her own.

Angela's contributions are sharper; more often a clarification, the occasional interjection to back up Charity's assertions. But always that distance in her voice. *She thinks she's betraying her Mother, forcing her to move,* he concludes. *She should be more worried about her husband's health.* The faint taint of blue across his fingernails indicated some form of cyanosis – which with his seeming ease of breathing would suggest a possible circulatory

catastrophe in the not too distant future.

'Well, that was easier than I thought it would be,' says Charity. She leans over to pat Angela's hands, feels the tightness in the sinews of her daughter's fingers still clasped across the knee. 'How about we have a nice cup of tea before you go?'

'I'll make it,' says David. She nods her thanks to the man, peppering the gesture with a smile as he pushes against the desk at his side to haul himself upright. Soon enough she hears water barrelling from tap to kettle.

'You're too quiet, Angie. Tell me what's wrong?'

'There's nothing wrong, Mum. I'm ... well I'm a bit surprised that you were so positive about it all.'

'There's no point in throwing a fit in front of a stranger, dear. Still, I haven't changed my mind.'

She sees anger pinch her daughter's lips tight, a bare moment's loss of composure. 'We've been through this, Mum, time and again.'

'You sound tired, dear.' She lets her fingers tighten around her daughter's hands. 'The solution is easy. Sell your house and move in here with me ...'

'I can't just up-sticks ...'

'Of course you can. Look at me, Angela! There's nothing to hold you in London now ...'

'It's my home! It's Chloe's home! My job is in London – my career, David's work – everything! Your plan won't work, Mum.'

'And yet it must. This is as much your home as it is mine.' Now the doors and windows are closed, the room is becoming hot; Charity lets her good hand loosen the folds of her house-gown. 'This house is our history, for generations, and I want it to stay that way. And you know I won't be a burden – I'll be dead before next Christmas ...'

'How can you say that! Don't say that! Don't talk about such things ...'

'Nevertheless ...'

'Who's told you you're going to die? Was it *them?'*

She feels the vehemence of the accusation shake her daughter's frame as she utters it. *Them!* Angie had never forgiven *them* for what had happened to James. But then James had never believed, had never been able to see the truth of the rocks – like Aunt Mabel had told her long ago, such gifts were the wrong fit for the shape of a man's mind.

Eyes locked to Angela's face, Charity nods. And smiles – a warm smile to stretch and exercise her wrinkles to their extremes.

'You never used to be scared of them, my girl, and there's no need to fear them now – even though you know what they can do. But who else can I trust to guard the village against them?'

She leans towards Angela, almost to touch noses, and whispers: 'They might be pretty little buggers, fairies, but they're also nasty little buggers. It's in our blood, girl, the power to keep them trapped in those rocks. I've done my duty; now it's your turn, yes?'

She watches her daughter sob then, after a while, nod.

(Return to Table of Contents)

Jack's Final Contemplation

The first time Jack left his body, he had a revelation.

He could see himself sprawled across the bathroom floor. One of his arms was still clutching his chest, though there was no pain now. 'So it wasn't indigestion after all,' he mused. His other hand was grasped around the end of the toilet paper; the attack had been so sudden that half the roll seemed to have unreeled across his body as he fell, as if trying to hide him in a ribbon of blushing pink.

'May's going to have a fit when she sees this!'

He could hear his wife in the kitchen, knocking plates together in the sink in an effort to remove supper scraps from china-white surfaces. She never tidied the bathroom until after he'd completed his morning routine.

'I should be scared,' thought Jack, 'I'm dead!'

He looked around the bathroom from his vantage point near the ceiling, which was not as well dusted as May claimed it was. Fine cracks crazy-paved the powdery emulsion, with tapering columns of gossamer stalactites—old spider threads, he supposed—slowly swaying in the slight summer breeze from the window. Watching the motion was calming, mesmerizing even. Jack remembered watching TV shows about divers drifting through kelp forests. He'd always wanted to go diving, but his fear of water had kept him anchored to land all his life.

Looking back down, Jack could survey the shipwreck that had been his body. He remembered being proud of his physique when he was breathing: 'a fine figure of a man', as May would tell him every so often. Now he could see it for what it was—a collection of mounds strung together by bones, held in place by too-tight skin. The fat had collected mainly around his waist and belly, but there was also a broad necklace of it supporting his chin. The skin itself was pale, greying, with a mosaic of hairs and fine, purple veins across its expanse.

'May was right; that hair looks stupid,' he thought. Every morning he'd carefully arranged his

thinning strands across the top of his head, fluffed it a little to 'make me look just a little younger'. He'd never noticed the baldness at the back of his head; he'd never seen it before. Now he could enjoy the ridiculousness of it all. He could appreciate the way hair tufted from his ears.

'Jack? What are you doing in there?'

'I'm fine, dear. I'm having a contemplation!' It was their little in-joke, the ten minute break from each other's company to attend to bodily functions.

'Jack! Talk to me. Are you okay?'

'Oh, May,' he thought. 'You're going to be so sad soon.' But not even the idea of his wife's anguish could break this peacefulness.

Outside, a bird throated a "come-hither" call. Jack went to look at the world.

(Return to Table of Contents)

The Hunter

So have I caught any? It's a bit of a strange question, if you don't mind me saying; they're not the sort of things that like to be caught. I've recorded plenty of signs – I've got quite a nice collection of tools for that, now. And, yes, I've seen a few. But I've never been tempted to put one in a jar and bring it home, if that's what you mean. That would be mucking about with the environment!

Talking of which, they turn up in the strangest places, environments you'd never expect to find one. For instance, a couple of years back I was visiting a cousin down in Kent. She lives in an ex-council house – one of those terraced jobs built between the wars; a proper house, I'd say, not one of these overnight builds you get today with cardboard walls. She'd been living in that house for nigh on 30 years and had never mentioned having one to me, even though she knows they fascinate me.

Well, after their last boy had moved out, her and her husband decided they'd do some DIY on the house – knocking through a wall to join their sitting room to their dining room, that sort of thing. It was a nice job, too; their eldest is a builder by trade, so he'd helped them out at weekends, but most of the work they'd done themselves.

Now listen, if there's one thing that's guaranteed to stir things up, its a bit of building work. They don't like it, see. Change is not what they're about, and if you go round changing their environment – their home – then that's when they're more likely to show themselves. So there was me, sitting with my china cup perched on my knees in their new room and admiring what they'd done, and there was it, perched on the end of the mantle piece over the fake fireplace they'd installed. I didn't notice it at first – I mean, I'd seen it a couple of times before on previous visits so it didn't occur to me to question its presence.

So me and my cousin, we were chatting away about this and that, as you do, and I said to her: 'Missy certainly likes the new layout. She can get a good view of both gardens from the mantle'. And do you know, my cousin gave me the strangest look. 'Oh, no', she said, 'Missy's gone now. We lost her 18 months ago. It was her kidneys, you know, and we couldn't let her suffer anymore'.

Well, blow me down! Me and that cat, we'd been eyeballing each other for a good ten minutes and it turns out the damned thing was a ghost! Of course, I couldn't say anything to my cousin; they'd doted on the flea factory for years. And typically I didn't have any of my equipment with me – not even a camera. But it just goes to show that they turn up in the most unexpected places, do ghosts.

(Return to Table of Contents)

Ice Cream in Havana

'If you're pregnant, then I'll be pregnant too!'

'Don't be silly,' she says. 'You're a bloke.'

Around them, the market swirls. It's a flea market, of sorts, though every market in Havana seems like a flea market to her. This one is by the old cathedral, not far from La Bodeguita del Medio where Hemingway used to drink, where she had told him of her new status over an over-priced, over-weak mojito.

'Do you want to keep it?' he'd asked.

'Of course I do,' she'd responded, her finger in her mouth, dragging her nail across the back of her teeth in an attempt to dislodge a flake of crushed mint. The room had become crowded at that moment as yet another group of tourists was herded into the small space. Having arrived just before the hordes, they'd managed to find themselves stools in the corner of the bar, giving her a good view of how the staff prepared 20 mojitos in one big splash. Around them, the new people gawped around the room, checking the signatures that inched their way across every patch of whitewashed wall. He was gawping, too, but not at the walls.

She'd watched emotions and scenarios rush through his mind, each signalled by his brows and the accordion creases sprouting from the sides of his eyes. She was impressed by how quickly his brows had collapsed from an arch of surprise into uneven, questioning horizontals; how the white traces of untanned skin had flooded the curve to his temples, then ebbed back into their folded obscurity. When the muscles in his jaw began to haul on the corners of his lips, threatening a smile, she pulled her finger free of her own mouth, gently knuckled his chin to push his mouth shut.

'Let's celebrate,' she said, pulling a note free from her purse without looking at it, waving it in the direction of the fat man behind the bar.

'You shouldn't be drinking.' He reached for the note – ten convertible pesos, she noticed.

'You shouldn't be telling me what to do,' she said, cocking her head to one side.

'Someone needs to look after you.' He slipped his hand from her thigh to her waist, running his fingers across her belly along the way. 'It's not just you, now.'

'That's true enough. Dos mojitos por favor, señor!'

Now he is rubbing his fingers against the back of his head, dislodging sweat and oil from the short, salt-and-pepper strands. Around them the market crowd is in full, diffident cry – the hustling for business quiet yet insistent in the mid-afternoon heat. She strolls between the stalls holding onto his arm, tugging him to a halt every few paces to look at the wares on offer: papier mache vintage cars painted in bright reds, yellows and pinks; 'ethnic' wood-carved masks for hanging on walls; oil paintings not yet imprisoned in frames, their canvases left free to sway in the wake of browsing tourists. Many of them seem to be variations on a scene, a nineteen fifties classic American car parked in front of the Bodeguita they'd so recently left, the old cathedral in the background weighed down by its grey brickwork against an intense, blue sky.

'We should buy something,' she says, 'to celebrate today.'

'Yes,' he says, though his face displays his distraction. His eyes are darting between bodies and products, seemingly unable to rest on one thing or one thought. She halts him in front of table piled high with tin aeroplanes, their recycled bodies and wings still showing the marks of their previous, disparate existences. She smiles at the stall holder, admires the white of her layered cotton dress stark against the bitter mole of her skin. The second-hand smoke of the woman's foot-long cigar leaves a spicy tang at the edge of her throat.

He picks up one of the models. 'How long?' he asks.

'How long what?' She, too, lifts a stiff origami into her palm, admires the way the whole thing has been shaped from a single can.

'How long before it's due?' She glances at him sidelong, but his attention is entirely on the toy in his hands.

'I did the test before we flew here.'

'Oh,' he says. He places the trinket back on the table, offers a weak smile to the woman as he turns away. Still attached to his arm, she barely has time to return her ornament to its place in the display.

'Are you hungry yet?'

She nods her head. 'Not yet,' she says. 'I'm bored of the noise. Let's walk somewhere else for a while.'

'Okay.'

They cross into the strip of parkland between the lines of the market and the lanes of the main highway separating the city from its sea wall. The soil is damp in places from earlier rain, though she manages to match his even stride across the uneven grass. Beyond the grass, the road, the wall, the strip of blue water, reclines El Morro fort – old in its bricks, veiled by its trees. Turning, she looks instead along the length of the road. Beyond the market, the seafront buildings are dilapidated, needing more than a coat of paint to restore them to their thirties-gangster glory. He, too, chooses to look at the city rather than the fort.

'What I'll remember most about this city,' he starts.

'The people?' she guesses. 'The hustlers and loiterers and beggars?'

'The smells,' he says. 'Everywhere you go, the smells of dampness, decay, rot.'

'It doesn't smell in the hotel,' she says, drawing his waist into the crook of her elbow.

'No,' he agrees. 'The hotel smells of grafters scrubbed up to look handsome and pretty while they extract every peso from your pocket.'

'It's not their fault. What is it that boy told us? Four and a half million people live here, but only one and a half million of them are policemen.'

'He wanted ten pesos to take us to a salsa festival on the other side of town.'

'At least he didn't want to sell us cigars.'

'True. What do you want?'

She looks up into his face; he keeps his gaze on the cars and taxis jostling for position on the road, racing who knows where.

'I want ice cream,' she answers, if only to end the brief silence. 'I want veal and beef in rich sauces. I want proper vegetables. If someone offers me rice and peas, I want to say: "no, thank you." Pizza would be nice,' she adds, 'or a big Chinese meal with plenty of chemical additives. In fact' – her hand reaches up to his chin, guides his eyes towards hers by his jaw-line – 'I would happily kill the chambermaid for a decent cup of tea.'

'They don't have tea in Cuba. They don't have kettles.' He's smiling now: not his usual, social smile, but rather something smaller, more personal and reserved.

'But that's the problem,' she says. 'The idea of people surviving without tea and kettles is just too weird for me to handle. People need kettles; it's a basic human right.'

'Families need kettles, too?'

'Yes,' she says. 'Families need kettles, too.'

He stops, turns her to face him. 'So what's the problem, then?'

'There's a world of kettles out there. So many to choose from. What if I choose the wrong

kettle?'

'Can there ever be a perfect kettle?'

She's smiling now; she can feel the muscles in her cheeks bunching the skin beneath her eyes. 'New kettles come on the market every year.'

'Maybe kettles should be treasured. Ask the hotel staff – the chambermaid would kill for an honest, reliable, working kettle.'

'Maybe you're right,' she agrees. 'But can a woman settle down with a kettle that was manufactured twenty years before her birth?'

He surprises her with a wink. 'Maybe the woman like antiques?'

'Maybe she does,' she says, returning his wink. 'There's a kind of pride in owning an old kettle that still works, and polishes up nicely too.'

He mocks up a look of horror for her, his eyes' tan-lined wrinkles snapping open like fans, his mouth purse-tight to lock away retorts. Then he laughs, and so does she, and they come together in a hug.

'I know of a shop that sells ice cream,' he says. 'You have to ask the right person, of course, and pay the tip in advance.'

'Does it come with mojitos?'

'I expect so. Shall we go and find out?'

'Yes,' she says, returning her arm to the back of his waist. 'Let's go and find out.'

(Return to Table of Contents)

Tourist Trapped

Another hot day in Havana. This morning I remember to put on a clean pair of underpants before opening the room's warped, wooden shutters.

'She's still there.'

'Who?' asks Nigel. He's in the midst of his morning routine, currently working on his teeth in the small apartment's newly restored bathroom.

'Our lady of leisure.'

I wave to the woman in the apartment opposite. After five days I've come to know every detail of her room: the matte paint on the walls that peels from the plaster in peach curls; the

massive, fabric shade of her light – a tattered velvet of blotched reds and browns – now swaying erratically as a gecko clambers onto it from the ceiling. It's a safe haven, I reckon; I've never seen her use the light: she has a huge, catholic candle to keep her company in the evenings.

She waves back to me, her big, half-tooth smile as decrepit as much of this city, though far more genuine. She's the only local I've met here who has no interest in selling me cigars, or charlie, or a girl for an hour.

Gargles and chokes alert me to my lover's bathroom extravaganza finale.

'You know, I've not seen her leave that chair since we got here?'

'Maybe she and her chair are one,' says Nigel. 'They're as stuffed as each other. They even wear the same material.'

'She's a big woman,' I agree. 'I wonder if she understands what we're saying?'

'You think she can hear us?'

'Somebody's switched off her radio.'

'Or there's another power cut. Wave goodbye to her and close the shutters: I want to get dressed.'

I ignore him. To do as he asks would derail the next part of his routine; I need to indulge in a few acts of indifference to make sure he has enough material for our morning bicker, like Laurel feeding Hardy some choice lines to set up the slap down.

The street separating us from our unmoving neighbour is narrow: washing lines criss-cross between buildings for much of its straight, cobbled length, some still decked in patriotically painted strips of old newspaper – a reminder of Fidel's 80th birthday celebrations a few weeks before. Looking to the left I can see the corner of the old cathedral, half-wrapped in a skeleton of refurbisher's scaffold. Five days into the holiday, and already I've decided that the city is dangerously schizophrenic, some streets and squares fitted out in a fetish of tourist finery while around the corner buildings threaten to collapse under their weight of rotting frames and mouldy plasters.

'What's that racket?'

'They must be teaching the kids a patriotic song,' I say. The school lies (or, more correctly, slumps) at the other end of our street, three stories of shrills and screams that seem to be beyond the control of the adults – even the ones who wear their pistols and sub-machine guns on the outside of their cotton-thin uniforms.

'They woke me up at seven o'clock, the little buggers!'

'Maybe tomorrow morning they'll scream in key,' I say. 'Can you put some clothes on, please? I'm hungry!'

Since the moment the plane ejected us onto the airport's tarmac I've been busy developing a new obsession. Food occupies my thoughts from rude-woken morning to heat-sapped evening. If I close my eyes I can see heaps of meat, some charred, sat amid platters of roasted roots and fresh-culled salads. Sometimes my visions come with added aromas: the tang of chilli and the itch of pepper to go alongside the balm mint they crush into the day-trippers' mojitos.

We ease ourselves into chairs overlooking the old cathedral's square and order the restaurant's overpriced 'Cuban' club sandwich. The ham is as processed as the cheese, and was probably rendered in the same factory where the chicken met its end. At least the bread offers a different, more organic experience for the tongue. And yet this is a feast to me, containing three of the four Cuban staples – I've avoided the fourth, seafood, since our walk along the lagoon harbour that sits behind the city and the sea. I add my own salt and pepper to the layers before I bite into them.

Nigel asks for tea; I settle for cola. We bicker for a few minutes over who is being the worse imperialist, but already it's too hot to get the maximum enjoyment out of the effort.

'How do you reckon they boil the water?' I ask.

'They probably use a saucepan on the stove.'

'We ought to check the kitchen. Maybe the customs man sold our kettle to them.'

The memory of our first encounter with Cuban officialdom is enough to make us both grimace. There's a kettle crisis in Cuba, a drought of kettles, a profitable black market in kettles brought into the country by unsuspecting visitors. Though to be fair the man had let us smuggle our teabags into the country, which was just as well as it gave the hotel staff something to liberate. Cuba is nothing if not an equal opportunities nation.

We settle and wait, agreeing a desultory bet between us on whether our brunch would be served before the sun edges the building's shade away from our table. Today the restaurant, and the re-pointed square it overlooks, is quiet – the first time we've been able to watch the local entertainers at rest. The bulk of people, our tour rep had told us, choose only to spend a couple of days in Havana; a welcome break away from their all-inclusive beaches. Most of the remainder dock for a few hours in the port: enough time to catch a bus tour around the key locations followed by some casual shopping along the old quarter's single street of well-stocked shops, where the smiling policemen with their shiny sub-machine guns keep their sister-selling neighbours away from the tourist crops.

The square's resident salsa band sits in a huddle around a box in the far corner, where the shade looks deep and cool. Freed from the need to play Guantanamera to the passing trade they quietly improvise, snaking percussive rhythms between the even chords of guitars and voices. 'Is called *son*,' the waiter tells us when we ask him. 'Old music from the plantations – and a little jazz, I think, to make it interesting. I shall call them here so you can listen better, yes?'

'No,' we both say in unison. 'Thank you, no.' The waiter wrinkles his eyes into a smile, pats Nigel on the shoulder and returns to the comforts of his shaded stool on the verandah; he is our friend and already knows we have no taste for charlie, or girls by the hour.

‘Have you decided what you want to do for your birthday yet?’

‘Fly home,’ says my lover.

‘We’re here,’ I tell him. ‘It’s an adventure. How about visiting the cemetery?’

‘That would be romantic. I do enjoy a good graveyard.’ He swats an emerald fly from the rim of my glass with one hand as the other lifts his damp t-shirt from his chest.

‘We ought to go there sometime. It’s the biggest cemetery in the western hemisphere. The Book claims it’s got some really nice mausoleums.’ I reach for my drink and take a warm sip. ‘Art deco, it says.’

‘Really? That might be worth the effort.’

Nigel’s love of art deco is almost as obsessive as my dreams of spiced food. I pull out the Book – a Rough Guide we bought cheaply back in London, due to its outdatedness – and solemnly hand it over.

As he reads the entry my eyes wander across the square. The santeira woman must have arrived while we were talking; she’s an *iyalorisha* according to our friend the waiter, a sort of voodoo priestess, though she doesn’t look voodoo to me. Her bleached linen-frilled frock, buttoned to her neck and reaching down past her knees, contrasts strongly with her wide, red belt and her deep, blue-flint skin. She sits on her usual step in front of the cathedral’s wooden doors, unconcerned by the sun’s heavy weight of heat, and puffs on a cigar as almost as thick and long as our neighbour’s candle. She scares me, that woman: I can tell she knows I’m staring at her, and when she returns my gaze I look away quickly, a sudden knot of confusion forming as if by magic in my stomach.

‘We could go on a trip somewhere,’ I suggest.

‘Where to?’

‘Out of the city. We could book something with Alberto.’

‘I suppose so,’ says Nigel, still reading. From across the square I hear the over-familiar opening bars of Guantanamera – the signal to warn the square’s workers of the imminent arrival of a tour party.

They walk in couples and huddles, immense chicks trailing their diminutive hen of a guide, her parasol-grasped hand-high above her head. Their patterned shirts and saggy rucksacks, their strawberry burned skin – their wrist bands – suggest day-trippers from the north coast resorts. The guide calls assertively in French then German, or possibly Dutch given the number of times she clears her throat. She leads them past our table – ‘Bonjour’, ‘Hallo’ – towards the cathedral where they semi-circle her, surreptitiously snapping their cameras at the santeira woman still sat on her step.

‘You want to be like them?’ asks Nigel, draining the dregs of his tea.

‘You want to stay in Havana for another ten days?’

He shakes his head, setting a drizzle of sweat to trickle down from his shorn head.

‘So we’ll go-see Alberto, see what he has to offer.’

The club sandwiches arrive just as the shadow’s edge reaches my leg.

It takes us half an hour to walk to the hotel where Alberto keeps his office; we manage the journey without a map and only a couple of wrong turns. Away from the crumbling slums, keeping to the ribbons of renovation that snake through the old quarter, Havana is gorgeous: as if Hemingway never left and Castro never landed his yacht in Oriente. Where cars are allowed, they are tourist vintage – the abandoned scraps of America’s gangster-bankrolled love affair with its pet island nation, lovingly restored and maintained as luxury taxis.

For the most part, though, these streets are the home of the tourists, the guards, the loiterers and their neighbours. At one point a man rides past us on a bicycle sporting Chinese glyphs on its frame, ringing his bell wildly as he steers with one hand; the other hand supporting an eight-inch square paving slab of cake, garish in pink and lime green icing – a birthday gift from the State to one of its screaming children, so Alberto tells us when we ask him.

The policemen, one to each junction, do a good job keeping the loiterers at bay; only twice during our journey are we offered cheap cigars. The second entrepreneur is young, almost old enough to join his crossroads comrades and carry his own weapon, and also more intelligent: he offers to rent us his brother for an hour. I'm tempted to ask if he could do us a similar deal for his father, slumped in the shade of an acacia nursing a coffee, but the lad is already slipping back into the shade as the closest guard turns his idle stare in our direction.

'This isn't the real Cuba,' explains Alberto. 'This is all honey to draw cash from your wallets. Yet the real Cuba is still here, even in these Disney streets. But you won't see it if you keep looking with English eyes.'

We've been evicted from the hotel lobby where our tour guide keeps his desk by a gang of masked fumigators. They wear silver cannisters on their backs with hoses like fire extinguishers, though the smoke they produce is as choking as any fire.

'See, these men are not really here.'

'Then what are they doing here?' asks Nigel, intrigued.

'They are not here because they are not killing mosquitoes that most definitely do not carry dengue fever.' He smiles at my partner's confusion, the wide teeth breaking his thin, close-shaven face into two halves. 'But if you really want to know, then maybe I can say these men are working hard as part of the renovation effort to maintain the evident beauty of our capital, yes?'

I consider his proposition, forcing myself to ignore the sting of smoke in my eyes. 'Should I worry that I might catch a bout of renovation?'

'It is a small risk. A careful traveller always carry plenty of mosquito spray.'

We talk as we watch the workers. Alberto knows the details of the trips our tour operator

offers by heart, and offers us a variety to choose from. As it's Nigel's birthday, he gets to make the decisions: eventually he settles on an overnight visit to Trinidad – the furthest we can reach from Havana without having to take to the air. We retreat to the cool foyer of a bank opposite the hotel to conclude the transactions; by the time we are done the fumigators are gone, though the acrid sting of their regeneration work remains.

To celebrate, we go to the hotel's bar – yes, Alberto tells us, Hemmingway most certainly drank here; he drank everywhere but his favourite hotel was a couple of streets away and he much preferred to eat in La Bodeguita Del Medio just around the corner from where we're staying.

'Is the food as good now?' I ask, remembering my quest to uncover some taste in the island's cuisine.

'Of course! The restaurant attracts many tourists: everybody signs the walls after they have eaten, it is a tradition. The rice and peas served there is very good.'

'Perhaps we should stop eating with English tongues?'

'Yes,' says Alberto. 'Look beyond the signed walls, sniff between the rubbish heaps. Taste the rice and peas with a new tongue. You will find Cuba, if you let Cuba find you.'

We make it back to our apartment before the daylight fails. As we open the door a blanket of trapped, baked air rolls over us. The room itself is in darkness, the shutters closed by the maid who cleaned our floors and twisted our towels into the shapes of swans. I know she does it because she hopes to earn a large tip from our wallets, but this evening I don't begrudge her efforts. I must accept the fact that I am a tourist, still searching for a better pair of eyes.

Nigel heads to the bathroom and his beloved toothbrush while I throw open the wooden shutters to wave at my neighbour.

'Hey, Nigel! She's moved!' The huge catholic candle is lit, but the chair has lost its occupant.

Below me I can hear Spanish voices, arguments and instructions; a whistle of tune as a man my age drags a log to the centre of the path. A liberated railway sleeper is already in place, and a great oil drum, and kindling. By a half-broken door I spot my woman: she's telling the man what to do, mostly by finger point and head nods.

'Buenos tardes,' I call down to her.

'Tardes,' she replies, her smile a golden sunset.

(Return to Table of Contents)

About the author

Rik was born in the small village of Dymchurch on the Romney Marshes in Kent, England. Dymchurch has three Martello Towers and a station on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway. This was Rik's world for the first 24 years of his life, except for those six terms away at college - the North East Surrey College of Technology, that is: Rik somehow managed to fail his final school exams and thus never made it to university.

Poetically, Rik has been writing since he was 14 or 15. He happily acknowledges that no work from that early period survives, thanks to a fortuitous kitchen fire which may or may not have been started deliberately. The kitchen was relatively unharmed, in case you were worrying.

Rik's major claim to 'proper' poetic fame is being part of the group that established Magma Magazine - he even edited Magma 6, for his sins. The magazine's subsequent success has nothing to do with Rik; he left the Management Board a few weeks before Magma 7 was published.

Rik's main publishing credentials are, strangely enough, in Magma Magazine. Nowadays he rarely submits poems to journals and has no plans to seek 'proper' venues for his chapbooks and manuscripts - Rik has a website, after all, which makes him very happy!

On a broader note, Rik is currently studying for that elusive degree with the Open University, and writing science fiction novels. Rik used to work for Her Majesty's Civil Service which is, he says, a perfect training ground for people wanting to write novels based on alternate realities and fantasy.

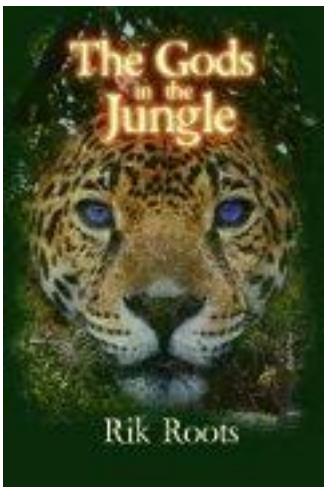
Rik currently lives in London, for his sins. His hobbies include causing trouble in various online venues and inventing languages. He also codes up websites - like this one.

Find Rik on ...
Smashwords
Twitter
Facebook
The RikWeb website
The Rik Files blog

(Return to Table of Contents)

Other books by Rik Roots at Smashwords.com

The Gods in the Jungle



The jungle city of Bassakesh holds the keys to the future of the Vreski Empire. It is the sole source of the valuable Vedegga dye; it is also home to the mysterious Servants, who harvest the dye.

Delesse, the Bassakesh Governor's daughter, is marrying Loken, heir to one of the most powerful Clans in the Empire - whose leaders, Loken's own Father and uncle, are plotting to disrupt the dye harvest as part of their wider plans to win the aged Emperor's throne.

When those hasty plans go awry a terrible plague is unleashed across Bassakesh, bringing widespread death and chaos.

Aided by a collection of survivors and Servants, Delesse and Loken must travel through the jungles to face down and defeat the people who not only threaten the Empire's stability, but also ruined their wedding.

Set on a planet far from Earth, ***The Gods in the Jungle*** is an investigation of the drives and desires, fears and beliefs of the various peoples and classes of a crumbling society, through the eyes of those immediately involved in events which threaten to bring an Empire to its knees.

(Return to Table of Contents)