

APOCALYPSE NOW, VOYAGER

JAY RUSSELL

Special Preview: Chapters 1-3

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EARTHLING PUBLICATIONS
P.O. Box 413
Northborough, MA 01532
USA

Email: earthlingpub@yahoo.com

WEBSITES OF INTEREST:

Earthling Publications: <http://www.earthlingpub.com>

Jay Russell: <http://www.sff.net/people/JRussell>

Paul McAuley: <http://www.omegacom.demon.co.uk>

J. K. Potter: <http://www.jkpotter.com>

ONE

She seemed pretty cheerful for a woman who'd just burned off most of her pubic hair. Plunking herself down on the next barstool, she offered up a smile.

She still wasn't wearing pants.

Or anything else for that matter.

"Buy a gal a drink?" she asked.

What the hell, I figured. How could I continue to think of myself as a stand-up guy if I didn't buy a naked lady a drink, particularly given her display of fortitude in the face of conflagration and extremis.

Besides, I've always been a sucker for women who call themselves "gals."

I wagged a finger at the bartender, who rolled his eyes heavenward, but knew her drink without having to ask. He poured three fingers of Bacardi into a highball glass then dropped in a lime wedge. She winked at him. He walked away.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Right as rain," she said. She fished out the lime and squeezed it into her rum, then tossed the rind on the bar. She delicately sipped the drink and made a yummy noise in the back of her throat.

I didn't mean to do it — even more than stand-up, I strive for sensitive — but it's tough not to let your eye wander down the fleshy curves of a naked lady when she's sitting right next to you. For all my best efforts, my gaze lingered in the vicinity of her nether regions.

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She caught me ogling and another thin smile played at the corners of her mouth, as if I'd confirmed everything she ever suspected of me. I pulled a scrap of that vaunted sensitivity out of my back pocket and looked her full in the eye.

"Sorry," I said.

"Occupational hazard," she said with a shrug.

It made her tits jiggle. I failed to not look at them, too.

"Hell of an occupation," I said.

"Oooh, aren't we the judgmental one. You don't approve, I take it?"

"I didn't say that. No offense meant. Really. It's just doing that routine with the fire and the ping pong ball and all. It's impressive as all get out. But your insurance premiums must be hell."

"You kidding? I'm female, over 25 and I drive a Saab. Allstate loves me. It's my tuition bill that's the killer."

"Tuition?"

"You think I do this shtick 'cause I like the smell of burning bush? U.S.C. charges like money's going out of style. I'm working on a Master's in Communications."

"I never went to college," I said.

"*Quelle* surprise," she said, and finished off her rum.

"Who's judgmental now," I muttered.

She half turned to face me, leaning an elbow on the dirty bar. She rested her head in her palm and looked me up and down. I felt like *I* was the one sitting there naked. I folded my arms over my chest and crossed one leg over the other. She laughed.

"So what do *you* do then?"

"Oh, little bit of this, little bit of that," I said.

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“Hmmmph. Like every other jack-off here,” she mumbled.

I looked around the bar — Haw Haws, it was called — at the drunk and doped celebrants. Bikers, mostly, in full leather regalia. Drug dealers, mules, muscle, second-story men, pimps, punks and petty thieves. A few hookers and female hangers-on liberally sprinkled among them in various states of (un)consciousness and (un)dress. A veritable convention of social deviants, moral miscreants and all-around reprobates of the worst order as far as the eye could see.

And me, of course.

“Not quite like everyone else,” I said. I glanced around again and added: “Please be to god.”

A wrecking ball swept across the room and hit me square between the shoulder blades. A hand big as Pittsburgh and tougher than an old bull grabbed me by the neck before I could tumble off my stool.

“The dead do walk!” the voice of doom bellowed. “Nice to see you, Marty, you good for nothing piece of shit. Where you been keeping yourself? Why don’t you ever call?”

“Hi, Danny,” I said. “Happy birthday.”

Daniel Gabowitz, the guest of honor at this sleazy soiree, offered up a big smile. Gabbo, as he was more commonly known, was fifty-five years old that very day. In this land of the morally blind, Gabbo was truly the one-eyed king. He was three hundred plus pounds of undiluted nastiness, with a criminal record as long as his belly button-scraping grey beard. He was dressed to the nines for this most special of occasions, with shiny new leathers hugging his massive frame, stretched tight over a beer barrel belly. He caught me admiring his duds and unzipped the jacket. He revealed a black T-shirt embroi-

dered with gold thread reading: MY MOM WENT TO LONG BEACH AND ALL I GOT WAS SLOPPY SECONDS.

“Classy,” I said.

“I’ll get one sent to you,” he said with a wink. Gabbo knows how much I hate Long Beach.

“Hell of a wing-ding,” I said, gesturing around.

“Nine inches and still growing,” he roared.

I managed a chuckle in return. Hell, why not be gracious on a guy’s birthday.

“And how’s my little Annie?” Gabbo said. He wrapped his arms around my naked friend and mashed her breasts. “I love these big titties!”

Annie winced. I did, too. Gabbo caught my reaction, and for just a fraction of a second I saw the shame in his eyes. In *Danny’s* eyes. Lord of the reprobates though he was, I knew that much of Gabbo’s act was just that: an act. Gabbo was the alpha male of this particular pride of beasts, and eternal arrogance and indulgence was the price of his exalted position. But buried beneath the leather and the beer belly was a man of no small intelligence and wit. He had once been a writer and a film director of some note. Not that you’ll find Gabbo doing director’s commentary on any DVDs. When Hollywood turned its scabby back on him for sins real or imagined, he hacked himself a path through another jungle. I’d gotten to know both sides of the man — Gabbo and Danny — and to my surprise (and perhaps against my better judgement), I’d come to like them both.

Not much else could have dragged me down to the depths of Long Beach, a city that can only dream of someday achieving armpit-of-the-universe status.

His nanosecond of shame having passed, Gabbo bent over

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and buried his face between Annie's big tits and yelled "WUGGA-WUGGA-WUGGA" as he bounced his head between them. A cheer went up around us and Gabbo took a bow. Or as much of one as his massive frame allowed for.

"Catch you later, dude," he said.

"Sure thing, Danny."

And off he went.

The girl — Annie — was staring down at the bar. I could see the goose bumps that had risen down the length of her arm. I took off my jacket and slipped it over her shoulders. She looked up and offered another bright smile.

"Thanks," she said. "You're sweet."

"Gabbo's okay, really," I said. "He doesn't mean shit like that. Not entirely."

"I know," she said. "I work for him. I ... you know. He is okay. For the business and all."

She stared back down at the bar, pulling my jacket more tightly around her. Neither of us said anything for a bit. I was about to offer to buy her another drink when she turned to me and said:

"Are you by any chance ... Marty Burns?"

"Yeah," I said and sighed. "Only it's not by chance."

"I think you're just the man I've been looking for."

The hooker, heavily singed at the pubes, slightly long in the tooth and naked as the day she was born — except for what *had* been my freshly dry-cleaned blazer — looked up at me with an all-too-familiar mix of faint hope and tired desperation in her bloodshot eyes. Her mascara had run, too.

Welcome to my life.

TWO

Her name was, indeed, Annie. Annie De Beauvoir. She spelled it for me.

“But it’s pronounced ‘da beaver,’” she said. “As in —”

“— leave it to?” I said.

“Among other things.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding,” I said.

She wasn’t.

“Hell, what’s in a name, anyway” I said.

She shuddered in reply. Imagine what life was like for her in high school.

We were walking down 17th Street, both fully clothed now. Annie didn’t think Gabbo would appreciate her leaving the bar in the middle of his party, but I told her it would be fine. The forced hilarity of the celebration spilled out of the door behind us and echoed around the otherwise silent street. A pair of leathered up tyrannosaurs on hogs big as baby Hummers gave us the hairy eyeball as they growled past. They pulled up in front of Haw Haws and threw themselves inside to join Gabbo’s birthday bash. It was going to be one hell of a game of pin the tail on the donkey. I knew that because I’d seen the real donkey they’d hauled up from Tijuana out in back. More than that, I didn’t *want* to know.

“You called him Danny,” she said.

“Beg pardon?”

“Gabbo. You called him Danny in the bar. You said it like

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you'd say anyone's name. Bob. Elvis. Osama."

"It is his name."

She snorted. "I've only ever once heard anyone call him that. It was in Haw Haws a while back and one of the Palos Verdes Scorpions was drunk as a roast skunk. Everyone was having a real good time and all because ... oh, I can't even remember. Some big score or something had played out. This mountain of a Scorpion picked up a keg and hoisted it over his head. 'To Dan the man,' he yelled, like he was making a toast with the keg. The whole room froze. I've never seen anything like it."

I waited for her to finish, but she didn't.

"So what happened?" I prodded.

"Gabbo shot him."

"Dead?"

Annie just shrugged. "You ever read the little sign over the front door of Haw Haws?"

"I'm waiting for the movie," I said.

She shot me a look.

"What does it say?" I asked her.

"'Don't ask, don't tell.' It's written over a picture of Bill Clinton getting a blow job."

"Good advice."

"I heard Gabbo talk about you once."

"My ears are always burning."

"He likes you. I didn't think Gabbo liked hardly anyone, but he definitely likes you."

"What's not to like?" I said.

"He said there's something funny about you, too. Something special, he said."

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“I was born under a wandering star. Or should that be *wanderin’?*”

“Gabbo’s real superstitious, you know. He’s funny that way.”

“I didn’t actually know that. But we aren’t all that close, to be honest.”

“What? You came to his birthday. You walked into Haw Haws dressed ... like that. I mean, sorry Marty, but *come on!* I don’t know anyone else could do that and leave with teeth in their head.”

“Gabbo ... Danny and I have an understanding. It’s a long story and the third act sucks so I won’t bore you.”

We’d been walking aimlessly — or so I assumed — and found ourselves at a dead end. We’d run smack dab into the concrete barrier forming the wall above the dry culvert that was laughingly known as the Los Angeles River. Annie walked up to the wall and hoisted herself on top. She stared down at the expanse of dirty concrete below. The L.A. River generally runs deeper with film crews than it does with water. Though when the water comes, look out! Seems like every year three or four people — homeless, drunks, kids messing around — get washed away because they don’t realize that when the rains do come, the river actually gets wet and the water moves fast. L.A. River floods flash faster than a sitcom star’s career.

Believe me, I know.

“The thing is,” Annie started to say. Then she looked up over my shoulder and her eyes went wide. “Shit,” she said.

“What thing is shit?” I asked.

I saw her raise up a hand.

I heard a creepy cackle behind me.

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I felt a ten-ton safe drop on top of my head.

THREE

I'm a total sucker for medical dramas. I think it maybe goes back to my appearance on *Marcus Welby, M.D.* I had a guest shot on it when I was a child star still riding high off the back of *Salt & Pepper*, my main and ancient claim to fame in this life. James Brolin got me sick-drunk on the last day of the week's shoot. Robert Young told us both off in no uncertain terms. We were so very ashamed.

Anyway, I can still sit and watch hospital shows all day long. And some days, I do. *St. Elsewhere*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER* — you name it. I'm a sucker for having my tears jerked, you see. Possibly because of a lack of the satisfying jerking of other vital organs.

But let's not go there.

For years I've been dying to land a spot on *ER*, which is my all-time favorite doctor show. I've had my agent, Kendall, try and try to get me even a cameo role, but the producers won't bite. I think it's because Michael Crichton has it in for me; see, I had a bit part in *Looker*. I don't think Big Mike likes to be reminded of that one. (And if you want to hear me talk about Susan Dey, you'll have to get me drunk first.)

The thing about medical dramas is that if you watch enough of them — and the amount I watch is clearly more than enough — you start to think you actually know stuff about medicine. Babinski! Chem-7! Type and cross-match, stat! My mother so much wanted for me to be a doctor. I so wanted to

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play one on TV. Regrets, I have a few ...

The point here is that after all that medical training I feel pretty confident about making basic diagnoses. Which is how I knew I was paralyzed from the waist down.

My hands were pressed up against my legs, so I knew they were still attached. But I couldn't feel a damn thing in them. I couldn't see, either, though I didn't immediately diagnose blindness. But only because I could feel the sack that had been pulled over my head. It was burlap and itchy and smelled of poultry.

I was moving, too. Or being moved. My first thought was a wheelchair, but as some semblance of clarity overtook me once more, I realized I wouldn't likely be wedged ass-over-bagged-head backwards into one. It was a rough ride, too — literally tooth-jarring as whatever-it-was I'd been jammed into rattled along a bumpy, hard surface. I could hear the echo of the wheels bouncing around above a metallic clatter. I tried to wiggle my torso and pull my arms free, but I felt something tighten around my wrists. Whatever I was in, I'd been tied to it. I was lying atop something reasonably soft, but I was still in considerable discomfort. The back of my head throbbed where I'd taken the blow that had knocked me out, but I also began to feel a twinge in my right calf, and despite the pain I was reassured by my initial misdiagnosis of paralysis. Clearly, I would have to break down and spring for those season box sets of *ER*.

"Hey," I tried yelling through the burlap. "Hey out there!"

The movement of what I was in slowed and we came to a stop. I tried to raise up my head and took another blow to the side of the noggin for the effort. I let out a squeal and collapsed

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back down. It was only the cushioning of the thick sack that kept it from being another knock-out shot. I felt sick to my stomach and had to work hard to fight off the nausea. If I vomited with the sack on, I was certain I would do a Jimi Hendrix. After a minute the queasiness passed.

There was a sudden lurch to the right, which threw me over to the side, pinning my arm in a painful new way. My whole body shifted and I fell off the soft bit I'd been resting on and landed on something hard that poked me in the ribs. I tried to jerk myself around, but couldn't get any purchase.

Things then came to a stop.

The burlap sack was forcefully yanked off of my head.

I panted for a lungful of the L.A. night air. I looked around.

I was in a Ralph's shopping cart, my wrists tied to the metal frame of the trolley with twisted segments of coat hanger. The thin wire had cut into my flesh and blood trailed down my arms. My legs were underneath me, the numbness a result of nothing more than painfully reduced blood flow from the awkward position and tight space.

There was indeed something soft, with hard bits, wedged under me.

It was Annie. It was the point of her bony elbow that was caught in my rib cage. Her eyes were wide open and looked up into mine.

She was unmistakably and entirely dead.

I twisted my neck around to see who was pushing the cart.

Her white hair was wild, as if charged with electricity; her eyes even wilder. She was garbed in black from neck to toes, with silver rings on every finger and a little one dangling from her nose. They caught the light from the full moon and danced

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in front of me like fireflies as she waved her hands wildly about. Her entire body shook with tiny convulsions.

We were down in the culvert, I realized. I was hogtied in a shopping cart, straddling a dead woman I barely knew but had seen naked, and being wheeled up the dry, concrete bed of the Los Angeles River.

The wild woman started to cackle, then looked down at me. Her lips — painted in electric pink; Ralph's must have sold out of black lipstick — curled up, exposing crooked teeth.

"Long ways to go, Medicine Man," she said. "*Long* ways to go."

"Aww, crap," I declared.

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