

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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The Everlaster

'Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and rebellion.'

- Oscar Wilde

Part I

**“Destroy All Dreamers
With Debt And Depression”**

Chapter 1

Where in the World is Tiverton Preedy?

*Of Tiverton Preedy and its inhabitants,
most especially two adventurers. Of the
coming of a herald, and a distressing
message for an old lady.*

Out of the school gates burst children, like champagne uncorked, yelling and cheering, faces raised to the Sun. And the Sun beamed back; it's golden rays glinting off rooftops, off car bonnets, dropped cans and the eyes of dogs, and off the hair of ten year old Meredith O'Connell.

For Meredith was blessed, or cursed as she saw it, with hair the colour of polished copper. There were as many freckles on her skin as stars in the night sky when seen far away from any town or city, and, as always, she was wearing at least one item of blue clothing; in order to match her eyes.

She strolled amidst the mass of delirious children with her hands in her pockets. When she saw someone fall over her laugh joined the shrieks of joy, the squeaks of pushchairs and the chirrup of swifts that were crisscrossing the air above like jet planes at an air show. Meredith was in no rush to get home because none of her favourite cartoons were on today.

"See you next year, carrot head," shouted a girl called Emily Ayers, displaying typical originality.

Not only was Meredith red-haired but she also happened to be poor at sport, liked to read a lot, and always got the teacher's questions right. Separately these four characteristics are harmless, but together they made her a prime target for fun poking. Meredith was, however, quite capable of looking after herself. "See you next year, excrement scalp," she replied to her brown haired taunter. Laughter rang out from the blondes and black-haired people nearby, and Emily ran off in defeat.

The last day of school had ended. Now summer could truly begin. The possibilities of the next six weeks raced around Meredith's mind, just as her less laidback peers raced around her body. She smelt the salt and vinegar from the chip shop mingle with the fumes of cars.

A hand slapped her hard on the back and a voice said, "ayup Merry."

Merry was what her friends called her. This particular friend was Percy Lillycrop: the tallest and strongest boy in her year, and

therefore a very useful friend to have. Nobody made fun of him for hanging around with Merry because he would smack them one if they did. He liked Meredith because he thought she was funny, and she liked him because she never knew what he would get up to next.

“Ayup Percy,” she replied without looking round at him.

He walked along side her and started talking in a fake posh tones, gesturing wildly with his hands: “because tomorrow is the beginning of the summer holidays I’m going to celebrate it by going on a quest. I, Percy The Brave, shall be going to Cradleford Forest to find the forgotten treasure of the Vampire Prince... erm... Steve.”

“Steve!” laughed Merry. “Good name. Anyway, if this treasure’s forgotten, how comes you know abart it?”

“I’m an Adventurer. Stop spoiling ‘mood.”

“Thar spoilt it first wi’ a name like Steve.”

“It’s hard coming up wi’ names, yer know.”

“You’re not going all the way to Cradleford Forest on your own, are yer?” asked Merry.

“Course not, Trent’s coming and so are you.”

“I don’t wanner go, it’s too far away.”

“Look, we can spend most o’ day there. We can buy some food from ‘sarnie shop to take wi’ us. It’ll be a right laugh, and tha can bring a friend. I’m sick of hanging around here all ‘time. Every summer we do same things. I want to see more o’ world. Just tell thi father tha spending day at yer friend’s house and everything’ll be right.”

Merry was very excited at the thought of exploring Cradleford Forest but she still wasn’t sure. “What if someone sees us on ‘way?”

“No one’ll see us if we walk through ‘farmer’s fields and stay away from ‘roads.”

“OK, I’ll go.”

“Great,” said Percy, grinning. “Meet us in ‘park tomorrow morning at half-ten, all right. I’ll see yer.” He ran off down a different street, head bowed and screeching like a speeding star-fighter.

‘That boy’s crazy,’ thought Merry, smiling.

The streets had now calmed as she walked to her own home at number 1 Tambur Lane. Merry lived in a terraced house on the edge of Tiverton Preedy: a little town in South Yorkshire. It sat right where the countryside and the town met. From her bedroom you could see a vast patchwork of fields, and beyond them, Cradleford Forest.

While Merry walked home, a few miles away, in the middle of Cradleford Forest, something appeared. Something that had not been seen on this world for a very long time.

It began with a tiny point of light floating about two metres above the fern-covered ground. Slowly the light expanded till it became a sphere one foot wide. All the colours of the rainbow swirled about its surface like oil on water.

The timid animals of the forest ran or flew away to hide, while the brave and curious watched with gleaming eyes.

After a moment the colours began to unravel from the sphere in long thin strands, like streamers. They floated away in all directions, dissolving slowly. As the colours swept away, the sphere shrank and shrank until eventually the shape of a tiny humanoid form emerged. The final strands of colour left the figure like bandages unwrapped from an Egyptian mummy. The figure floated in mid-air a few seconds after the last colour had vanished, then fell into the undergrowth.

The creature lay face down on the ground. Large silk-like wings the colour of a sunrise sprouted from its shoulder blades, covering its body limply. Apart from the wings the only thing that could be seen was its long hair, which took the form of thick dreadlocks and was the colour of a bright summer sky, complete with cloud white wisps. Around some of these dreadlocks tiny green vines wound, from which there sprouted minute flowers of various metallic colours.

For a few moments the creature lay completely still, as if dead. Suddenly it rolled over and gasped. It took in huge gulps of air, like a person saved from drowning.

For the first time in over five hundred years a Fairy breathed Earth's air.

Merry returned home to an empty house. Usually when she got home from school her Dad would still be in bed; for he worked during the night as a security guard.

Each weekday evening, at half-past-nine, he drives to work. He gets home in the mornings at half-past-seven, when he wakes up Merry. He makes himself some supper while Merry has breakfast, and after seeing her off to school he goes to bed. When Merry gets in from school she wakes him up, though she usually lets him sleep a bit longer before she does.

Today, however, and for the past two weeks, he had been getting up and going to bed at the same time as everybody else, because now there was a strike on where he worked. He was, at this moment, with other strikers picketing outside their workplace.

Merry sat in the kitchen enjoying some orange juice and daydreaming. It was silent but for the ticking of a solar driven clock on the wall. Above the fireplace were photos, many of which featured her Mum. Her Mother had died five years ago after getting drunk and crashing the car. Merry didn't cry at her Mother's funeral because she didn't love her very much. All she can remember of her is her shouting and hitting her Dad. Merry's Dad was a strong man but he would never hurt anyone and when her Mother got drunk and started hurting him he would just take it. He did cry at the funeral and was very upset for many weeks. To see her Dad suffer; this is what hurt Merry more than anything. She rarely thought about her Mother now.

The most prominent photo on the wall, and Merry's favourite, was an old black and white one. It showed a group of 40 men standing in front of a coal pit, all dressed in their Sunday clothes and

cloth caps. One of them was Merry's great, great grandfather who'd come over from Ireland looking for work and had found the mines. She often wondered what life must have been like for those men. She did not know why, but the pride on their faces made her feel proud too.

Merry heard the back door open and voices. Her Dad entered with his sister, Aunty Rosemary. She had just finished her job of driving the buses for the day.

Aunty Rosemary was a tall woman, strong of heart and body. She was beautiful and funny, always able to reduce Merry to tears with her stories. She lived on her own and, since Merry's Mother died, showed her niece a lot of attention.

"Go on then, you can make me some dinner an' all," Rosemary told her brother, with a cheeky smile on her face.

"Merry," said her Dad, "run across to 'farm and get some horse feed for yer Aunt."

"That would probably be tastier than your cooking," replied Rosemary.

"Oh, in that case you can cook instead."

"No, that's OK. I shall endure your cooking this once," and she winked at Merry. "It's Friday night. Corned beef hash night. In't that right, our Merry."

"Yep," answered Merry, mouth wet with anticipation.

Contrary to Aunty Rosemary's teasing, Merry's Dad was a good cook.

"You've got scrambled eggs too," he told them both.

The smell of her Dad's cooking tantalised Merry. Her stomach shouted and screamed in its own language and rattled her skin like a prisoner wanting out. Eventually her Dad dished up. The first few swallows stopped her belly's grumbling. The scrambled egg was on a slice of toast and there were lots of tomato sauce and salt. Always her Dad tells Merry not to put so much salt on because it's not healthy, but she never listens.

“I’m going to a meeting this evening, Meredith”, he told her, while she ate chocolate ice cream for afters. “The union’s holding one about the strike and I need to go to it.”

“I hope the strike keeps going,” said Merry, “I get to see you more.”

“I know that, love, but the strike’s serious; it’s no fun. I’m not getting paid. We can only survive thanks to the support money from the union, and Aunty Rosemary’s helping out.”

“Why are you doing it?” asked Merry. Her Dad had explained the reason for the strike before, but it was complicated and she’d forgotten.

“The firm I work for told us it wants to lay a lot of people off and cut everybody else’s wages. We all think that’s wrong so our union’s organised a strike in order to make the firm change their mind.”

Merry’s Dad worked for a firm called SkweezumGrabaal&Runne. They were a very big company with factories, laboratories and offices in countries all around the world and they made all sorts, from light-bulbs and stationery to computers and medicine. Each year they told their workers around the world to work harder and so they did. No matter how many billions of pounds the firm made its owners always wanted more. To repay the workers’ hard work, every so often the firm would cut their wages or lay some off, as they were doing now at Tiverton Preedy.

“You know,” interrupted Aunty Rosemary, “if they’d been bad workers and lazed about they’d probably have kept their jobs.”

The workers at the factory that Merry’s Dad guards made some of SGR’s most high-tech range of products: hardware for both space exploration and the military.

“Do yer know what the scientists are doing yet?” asked Merry.

“No,” said her Dad, “I’m not in a high enough security grade to ever get close to the labs. They get guards from outside for guarding those. They don’t use local people. These other guards are like super loyal to the company, so they’ll never strike. I just guard the

factory. The company must be right paranoid over their trade secrets. They don't want their competitors stealing their technology."

Merry suddenly remembered tomorrow's trip to the forest.

"Dad, I'll be going to a friend's house tomorrow morning and she sez I can stay for lunch."

"Which friend's this?"

"Esme."

"All right, but you'll be back for teatime won't tha?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Nar wash up and yer Aunty can dry. I have to get going."

Aunty Rosemary kept Merry company that evening. They played trading card games before watching some comedies on TV.

At a time that was not too early for the weekend but not too late to threaten decency, Meredith went to bed.

Crammed into the parish hall, Merry's Dad and over 300 of his fellow workers sweated with the warm evening, waiting to hear the words of their union representative. His name was Ernest Steer and he stood before them now. Percy's Mum was in the crowd too and with them she heard him speak with great passion.

"It gladdens me to feel the confidence I have felt among you today. You have not let their threats or the propaganda of the press blind you to the truth: that not only can you win this dispute but it is your God given right to.

"For too long have SGR, the government, and the rest of the rich walked hand in hand over your rights and your conditions. They have sold your children's schools to greedy business men and religious fanatics; they have torn up your parents' pensions."

The air came hotter still with the anger of the workers and they nodded and called out in agreement.

“Just when SGR have published the biggest profits in history they dare to slash your wages. You! Who have created the wealth they wallow in.” The crowd erupted with angry cheers.

“Your factory is an important part of their business. Every day that you remain on strike costs them millions. They need you more than you need them. So your wages should reflect your importance. Their UK chief executive, Mr Chandler Dahl, earns 40 million pounds a year. But do you think we would even notice if he went on strike?” There was much chuckling and shaking of heads. “No. Things would still get made and sold without him. But not without you. Now you deserve your fair share.”

The crowd applauded.

Others spoke that evening and their words gave them all courage, and when a vote was taken everyone agreed to continue with the strike.

It was very early in the morning, shortly after the Sun had risen, when the Fairy finally stirred. She was exhausted by her journey and had slept longer than she would have liked.

Fern leaves towered over her like a circus big top. She stood up, brushed the dirt from herself and stretched her wings: revealing colours that dazzled like a bursting star. The large wings could not be more different from the insect wings of popular imagination. They seemed more like sheet metal than anything organic, yet flexed like no metal could. Their pattern consisted of many straight lines radiating outwards, and contained every shade of red, yellow and gold that can be imagined.

Her outfit was of purple and blue. The two colours seemed to roam randomly around her body, twisting like the necks of courting swans in places while spreading out in flat patches in others. Tied to her back, between her wings, was a weapon almost as long as herself. It was a halberd: a long pole with a thick blade at the top. It's shaft was made of platinum and gold and wrought with ornate patterns. It's

blade was a crystal, in which all the colours of the rainbow could be seen to shimmer.

The Fairy's face was long, and her skin, taut over her prominent cheekbones, was darkest brown. Her eyes were indigo, though to notice that you might need the aid of a magnifying lens. Those eyes explored the forest around her.

As she had been promised by those who had sent her here, the Fairy had arrived in a place hidden from human eyes. She opened a pouch that hung from her waist and out of it flew four tiny shining orbs. With an obvious intelligence they flew around the Fairy, darting off sometimes to inspect the nearby grass and trees, but never straying far. Though they appeared to be alive, these shining spheres were actually robotic devices known as sprites.

The purpose of the sprites was to help the Fairy collect and record information during her time on Earth. The Fairies suspected that Earth would have changed a lot since they were last here five hundred years ago; so it was vital to collect as much information as possible.

The sprites could see, listen and scan objects with great speed and efficiency. Each one could hold up to ninety-nine terabytes of information and could communicate directly with the Fairy's brain, allowing her to see and hear what they did. She could also access the information that they stored as if they were her own memories.

Thanks to her sprites the Fairy knew she was alone and safe. Her mind turned to her mission; but she did not know quite where to begin. She needed the guidance of a person very old and very wise. In fact a person simply would not do: something more was needed.

She knelt down and, in an ancient language lost amongst humans, she began to sing. The wildlife listened, puzzled at this new voice in the forest. All the while the sprites ran patterns around her bowed form.

A few minutes passed before her song was silenced by a faint tremor. A tremor which grew in strength until the trees shook and the birds took to the sky in fright.

The Earth beneath the Fairy began to rise slowly, across an area the size of two houses. The ground rose evenly to begin with, then hills and valleys formed. Stones tumbled and trees fell left and right, while the Fairy clutched the stalk of a shaking fern. As the trees fell, the birds circling overhead saw a recognisable shape forming in the clearing created. When the movement stopped not a sound could be heard from the forest or from the sky.

The Earth beneath the Fairy had taken the shape of a face twenty metres long, and she was stood on the centre of its forehead.

The trees that circled this face of soil and stone bowed and shook their branches in the wind like worshippers in the presence of their god.

A tremor erupted once again as the mouth of the face burst open, sending dust and small stones into the air. A deep but feminine voice pounded the atmosphere with three simple words:

“HOW... DARE... YOU?”

The anger of the colossal voice frightened the Fairy, but she overcame her fear and with quivering lips spoke:

“Earth, Mother of All, I beg you listen.

Fearing death come I, on my grave mission.

On my success the fates of three worlds lie

And your guidance I seek on where to fly.”

The Fairy was silenced as the Earth trembled once again and the stony lips spoke. "YOU FAIRIES DARE TO ASK ME FOR AID? CENTURIES AGO YOU ABANDONED ME TO THE MERCY OF THAT WICKED RACE, HUMANITY. YOU SHOULD BEG FOR FORGIVENESS, NOT DIRECTIONS".

The Fairy had not expected such hostility from the Mother Earth; she could not understand it. She tried to plead:

“With good reason my kind left long ago,

But our absence should not have caused you woe.

We saw the humans beginning to learn

And for more and more knowledge they did yearn.
The world around them they learnt how to shape,
So, avoiding conflict we did escape.
Back home we returned to leave them alone
For they had to develop on their own.”

“THEIR DEVELOPMENT IS TAKING TOO LONG.
THEY DIMINISH AND DEFORM ME. MY LUSCIOUS GREEN
FORESTS SHRINK SMALLER. THE LIFE IS DRAINED FROM
MY OCEANS. THEY CUT DOWN MOUNTAINS AND FILL IN
RIVERS. AND SURELY KNOWING THAT THEY DOOM
THEMSELVES THEY ONLY QUICKEN THEIR VIOLENCE.

Then the Earth’s voice took on a softer tone. “I FEAR
THAT I AM DYING.”

This greatly troubled the Fairy but she could offer the Earth
no comfort, only more worries. She explained to Earth what had
happened on Aeval, her Fairy homeworld.

“There is a threat to Aeval, your sister,
And all the life that lives rich upon her,
For wicked creatures came some years ago;
More destructive than the humans you know.
They kill, enslave every species they meet,
Mean to conquer, have us kneel at their feet.
They have damaged their world beyond repair,
Laid waste to its seas, its forests and air.
They have come to steal our world for their own;
Devour all life that upon it has grown.
If we lose this war our world shall be doomed,
As all life upon her will be consumed.
A gluttonous century they might last,
Then at you their lustful gaze shall be cast.”

“IT HAS BEEN SO LONG SINCE I HEARD WORD
FROM AEVAL AND THIS NEWS SADDENS ME. BUT WHAT
DO YOU EXPECT TO ACHIEVE BY COMING HERE?”

“There is one human who knows of our world;

Human history he has seen unfurled.
Great knowledge and power are his to wield,
And to us his help I hope he will yield.”

The Earth thought for a moment and said, “YOU SPEAK OF
THE EVERLASTER?”

“Yes”, said the Fairy.

“I TOOK PITY ON HIM MANY CENTURIES AGO.
AND NOW I TAKE PITY ON YOU. LET ME LOOK.”

The face was silent a moment. All that could be heard was the
rustling of leaves on the breeze.

“I SEE HIM SITTING BY A WINDOW, STARING OUT.
THE BUILDING IS LARGE AND FILLED WITH MANY
PEOPLE. SOME SIT AROUND HIM IN AUDIENCE: HIS
STUDENTS OR DISCIPLES MAYBE. MEN AND WOMEN IN
WHITE ROBES WALK THE CORRIDORS. I SEE A SIGN:
POPPY FIELD HOUSE, LOPSIDE.

The Earth stopped what it was saying and the voice took on a
new, worried tone. “I MUST STOP NOW. SOMETHING IS
AWARE OF ME.”

The Earth beneath the Fairy began to sink to its original level.

“Wait! What is the Everlaster’s true name?” shouted the Fairy,
over the din of the collapsing Earth.

“HE WAS BORN UTNAPISHTIM”, uttered the mouth of
soil, just before it dissolved into the ground. The nose was last to
vanish, and when it was gone all was silent. The ground was once
again flat and inanimate.

The Fairy sat pondering in the new clearing while the birds
returned to the trees around her.