

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 20

Genesis

*In which there undergoes an
attraction of bodies, and certain
forces are set in motion.*

Despite all the trauma of the day Percy fell asleep almost as soon as he'd got into bed. Or perhaps it was because of it.

What happens when our minds turn off? Hours pass, the Earth revolves and we wake to face the Sun again, knowing nothing of the time that passed. During that time, in the spaces between the dreams, are our minds frozen like some game on pause? Or do we experience things too fantastic and terrible for dreams and waking days?

In the name of science there have been men who have gone for days without sleep in order to see what would happen. And on every single occasion they went mad. As if the visions that occupy the sleeping mind had spilled out into their waking thoughts and taken over.

Percy had already experienced such an episode, induced by the dread gun, and so now his sleep was empty; his store of nightmares spent. No dreams came near him as his mind drifted in the black abyss like a dead planet floating far from any star.

But a star appeared: a pinprick in the night. It hovered at his open window for one brief moment before entering his room. It shone its tiny white light on his face as if studying his features. Then it flew right up against the skin of his neck and... a flash. Percy shot upright in bed, his eyes wide open.

"Ow," he gasped in confusion, putting a hand to his neck. His attention was quickly caught by the glowing sprite dancing in the air above his legs. He recognised the glowing spot as one of Ayina's sprites and immediately he became alert.

The sprite emitted a light that shone on the wall by his bed. Percy realised it was projecting an image.

To his intense delight Merry's face appeared, wearing an expression of amusement. Her mouth moved as though she spoke, but there was no sound. Then written words appeared beneath her:

"Having a nice dream, sleepy chops?"

"Is that you now, Merry?" he asked quietly.

“Of course,” said the writing. Merry gave a smug grin. Then she turned serious. “Listen, Ayina’s been caught by Woe and they’re keeping her where my Dad works in Tiverton Preedy.”

“What?” It was all Percy could do to keep his voice down.

“Exactly,” said Merry.

“Ayina’s where my Mum works? Right now?”

“Yes, in the science labs. I’m with the Everlaster and two other people and we’re driving up to Tiverton Preedy to rescue her.”

“Won’t she be tightly guarded?”

“Yes, but I think the Everlaster has a plan and Gladice Gulchenrouz says she’s good at getting into places.”

“Gladice Gulchenrouz? Isn’t she that writer?”

“Yes. Its pretty complicated. But I wanted you to know I was safe and what’s going on.”

“You’re going to need help, especially if Woe’s there. I’m going to help you.”

“I’d like you to be with me.”

“What time will you get here?”

Merry could be seen talking with someone outside the image.

“The Everlaster says we’ll reach Tiverton Preedy at 3am.”

“I’ll see you near the gate’s of my Mum’s works then, OK.”

“Good,” said Merry. She smiled and then she was gone.

It was 1am now. Very quietly Percy got out of bed and began to dress.

As Peter drove them up a dual carriageway, the Everlaster saw some lorries parked up in a lay by and had an idea. “Stop somewhere near here.”

“What’s wrong, Immanuel?” asked Glad, as Peter slowed the car and parked in the roadside.

“Nothing. But I’m going to need your assistance, Gladabayu.”

*

Inside the cabin of an articulated lorry, its driver sat resting and drinking tea from a flask. He suddenly noticed on the road a little girl, standing in the light cast from the cabin windows. He strained to see into the darkness beyond, but he saw no one else around. He opened his door and climbed out.

“What you doing here, little girl?”

She didn’t reply, so he walked up to her. “Are you alright? Where’s your Mummy and Daddy?”

“They’re dead,” came the child’s small voice.

“What?” he knelt before her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Tell me what’s happened?”

The girl looked up at him with large eyes, whose irises were red like blood.

“They were murdered 200 years ago by people from these lands.”

There was no decent response to that. Which was just as well, as now the man was transfixed by the raging patterns of her irises.

“You’ve got an idea,” said Gladabayu smoothly.

“I’ve got an idea,” said the man.

“You’re sick of the lorry and want to go to sleep behind those bushes.”

“I’m sick of the lorry and want to go to sleep behind those bushes.”

He walked where she had pointed, stood for a second and then slumped to the ground.

Moments later the Everlaster appeared beside Glad. “Follow me in the car,” he told her. “But Glad.”

“What?”

“Take care. If you see Woe in there, run. She’s too strong for you.”

“Okay, Immanuel.”

The Everlaster climbed into the cabin. The keys were in the ignition. He drank the tea resting on the dashboard and without further ado took control of the lorry and pulled away.

*

Esme woke up and put a hand to her forehead, feeling as though she'd been stung. She opened her eyes and saw a sprite spiralling over her. It zoomed towards the window, which was open due to the heat, and danced about there.

By its movements Esme realised the sprite wanted her to go to the window, which was fine except she lay in a double bed between her two younger sisters: Chadna and Daya. And near them was a bunk bed in which slept two of her brothers. So she gently wriggled her way beneath the sheet, down to the bottom of the bed and climbed out.

She leaned out the window and saw Percy down below. He whispered up to her, "I... know... what's... happened... to Merry... and... Ayina. We... need... to... talk," and he gestured to her back door. "Get... dressed... and come... down."

"Ok," nodded Esme.

She turned away from the window to see her twelve year old brother Mark stood looking at her. "Who you talking to?"

"Erm... none of your business."

"I think it is," insisted Mark. "What you getting dressed for. If you don't tell me I'll wake up Mum and Dad."

By now everyone else in the room was awake or stirring.

"I'm just going to talk to Percy Lillycrop, downstairs."

"Percy Lillycrop? At this time o' night? You don't go out wi' him do yer?"

"Have you got a boyfriend, Esme?" asked Daya.

"Ssshhh!" said Esme. "He's not my boyfriend." She thought fast about how best to quickly calm her curious siblings and talk to Percy. "You can come downstairs with me if you're super quiet and please, please, please don't wake Mum and Dad."

So very quietly Esme, two of her brothers and two of her sisters got dressed and crept slowly downstairs.

Carefully Esme unlocked the back door and let Percy in.

“We’re meant to be secret?” he whispered to her, in wide-eyed alarm at the sight of her siblings. “Merry’s coming back to Tiverton Preedy with the Everlaster cos SGR are holding Ayina prisoner. They’re going to arrive at about 3am and they’ll need our help.”

“What yer whispering about,” asked Mark.

“You wouldn’t believe us,” said Percy.

“But if they did believe us, they could help too,” said Esme. And before Percy could object Esme was talking to her sisters and brothers: “do you know how Mum and Dad and Meena have been acting all grumpy lately?”

They nodded. “They’ve been horrible,” said Chadna, the youngest. “They wun’t read me a bed time story.”

“Well, we know why, don’t we, Percy?”

“Yes,” he said. “My parents are like it too, and all ‘other adults in Tiverton Preedy.”

“I’ve heard friends say stuff about their parents,” said Mark.

“Well,” said Percy, “somebody did something to ‘em that’s made ‘em this way.”

“Who?”

“Look at this,” said Percy, opening his hand to reveal the sprite, which shone in the darkness and floated above his palm.

“What’s that??” asked Daya.

“It belongs to a Fairy,” whispered Percy.

“!!A Fai...” Esme clasped a hand over Chadna’s mouth before she woke the street up.

“We can prove it,” said Percy. “Show us Ayina.” Onto the wall the sprite projected the image of Ayina captured. As briefly as possible Percy explained how they found, and lost, the Fairy. “Can you show a picture of Woe?”

The sprite projected a still image of Woe, as they had seen her in Cradleford Forest, dressed in white. “She’s Woe. She caught Ayina and she’s made all the adults unhappy. Meredith O’Connell and this man we met are on their way to free the Fairy.”

“And will there be a cure for our Mum and Dads?”

“We hope so. Either way, me and Esme’s gonna help in the rescue.”

“We want to help too.” They all looked at Percy and Esme with hope and determination.

“I have a feeling there might be fighting,” said Percy, with a grim expression. He’d had enough of being roughed about by adults and was no longer going to be pushed about so easily.

“We can fight,” said the boys.

“We want to help, but won’t it be dangerous?” asked Daya.

“We’ll take care,” Esme assured her.

“I bet John and Graham Whyke will help us,” said Mark.

“They’re in year 10 and hard as nails the pair of ‘em. They only live five doors up.”

“I don’t know,” said Percy, rubbing his chin. But then he had an idea, his eyes rolled round like when he was thinking up fantasies. He told them his idea.

Using Mark’s mobile phone they called John and Graham. And then they phoned every other friend they knew the number of, told each one a very special and very secret thing was happening and that to be a part of it they had to meet at 2:30am at a meeting point. Some were made curious by talk of a Fairy; and others by talk of the strangeness of the adults; which until now they thought they had only imagined; and others were attracted by the secrecy and naughtiness.

Some of the friends Percy and Mark contacted, in turn contacted their friends. Some children were recruited by text message and phone calls and others by brave boys and girls willing to climb drain pipes and sneak into windows. And all the time the importance of not letting any adults aware of what was happening remained paramount in every mind. But luckily all adult minds, being miserable, found comfort in sleep, and so were reluctant to wake even if a sudden sound disturbed the quiet of night.

*

Percy had arranged a meeting point about half a mile from the SGR site; beneath a railway bridge spanning the canal. There were no lights here and the nearest houses were beyond earshot. While they waited, hoping for the others to turn up, Percy showed Esme the jar of yellow goo he and Merry had stolen from Manutius Fluke's house. "This stuff healed Ayina's wing," he told her. "I tested it on myself earlier. I made a little cut on my arm then put a little bit of this on. It healed it pretty quick. So you take it now in case someone gets hurt."

"Okay, Percy," she said, taking the jar off him.

"Someone's coming," said Mark.

The first of the recruits appeared and Percy could hardly believe it, less so when more kept arriving.

All these brave children should have their names remembered for the deeds they did that night. For who will remember them if not us.

First came John and Graham Whyke, sons of Peter Whyke, the fitter; and with them Phil Cross, whose parents owned the chip shop.

Next came Sally Jeffels; Paul and Jackie Chambers; and Colin Swift, from the land where the coal mine once lay; now a crowded maze of houses.

After them came Harry Glover: player of the trumpet; Tom Yates: doer of Jigsaws and logic solver; and Patrick Owen: trading-card champion.

Now stood the twins, Alice and Eve Robledo, clad in their purple and black, only girls yet almost women. And their friends Gemma Beaumont: poet; Matthew Turner: painter of watercolours; and Eric McCarthy, who enjoyed science so much.

Then the sons of Mr Winstanley, the geography teacher, whose names were Charlie, Roger and Terrence: ready for a fight and armed with rake and hoe and spade.

And the girls from above the charity shop: yellow haired Kristy Scattergood and her sisters, Megan and Rachel. With them Jack and Bonnie Harston, who helped out at the weekends.

Tony Cunningham followed: the son of a refugee, and Todd Blanchflower, and Tracy Hudson, who all three lived by the woods to the south, with its carpet of bluebells.

Then came Richard and Anne Otulakowski armed now with cricket bats, whose parents too worked for SGR. And Janet Murphy, who loved to skateboard; Sarah Lunn who cared for animals; and Sally and Lucy, the daughters of Will Normanton: cleaner of windows.

And last, Melody Salt and her young brother Georgie, born of Katherine Salt, the dinner lady, and both renowned in the fields of sport.

“So what’s going on?” called Eric McCarthy, a sceptical look on his face.

With the help of the sprite and its projections on the underside of the bridge, Percy summed up why they were here as best he could. And as he spoke he gestured and strode about like a Shakespearean actor:

“That is Woe and she works for SkweezumGrabaal&Runne and she’s made all our parents go funny. It was her who put Trent Tufnell in hospital, and I’ll tell thi, she made Todd Blanchflower’s cousin commit suicide.”

A ripple of shock and murmur travelled along the audience.

“Those SGR people made our Mums and Dads upset and afraid so they’d do as they were told. That’s how they work. By bullying. They tried it wi’ me.

“My Mum wouldn’t go back to work unless they paid more, so they put a spell on her and she went straight back to work with everyone else. She was so miserable Saturday morning, for no reason.

“But me and Esme met this Fairy from another world. Look! And she said Woe had done this to people. So me, Esme and Merry tried to help the Fairy and find a cure for *all* the adults.

“But now SGR have caught the Fairy. And that’s why we’re all here now, cos we gonna free her.

“And if I have to fight ‘em, I’ll fight em, adult’s or not. I don’t care if I get hurt. It’s better than staying at home and letting our parents be cursed and working for those people forever, and then when we grow up we’d have to work for ‘em, even though we know they do evil things.

“So we’ve got to go in their now, this minute, and get that Fairy out. Cos if we dun’t then that means we *are* working for ‘em, and wi’ out getting paid *owt*.

“So are you all coming wi’ me?”

And there were cheers and calls of “Yeah!”, “Come on!”, “Let’s kick some ass!” and “We’re gonna see a Fairy from another world, woohooo!”

At 2:50am they marched up the road that led to SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, Tiverton Preedy. The road was dark and straight. Fields of wilderness rolled out to their left and right and a field of stars hung over their heads.

Before they were halfway there Esme saw eight figures in a field, silhouetted against the sky. “Look,” she said to Percy, as the figures approached.

Percy and Esme stopped walking and the procession behind them stopped too, to watch these strangers with apprehension. As the strangers neared, the children saw they were five young men, a young woman, an old man and a boy.

“Trent!” said Esme.

“Where have you been?” Percy asked him. “We heard you ran away from hospital.”

“It’s too hard to explain. But I’ve come to help yer rescue the Fairy.”

“Who are they?” asked Percy, gesturing towards Trent’s companions.

“They’ve been looking after me.” Percy noticed they carried bars and knives, and the old man even had a sickle.

“I thought we couldn’t trust adults?” said Mark Glendenning.

“They’re loyal to me,” said Trent.

“And who are *you* meant to be, Trent Tufnell, running away when tha meant to be ill?” said Mark, who’d got into a fight with Trent at school a long time ago.

“He’s a mate o’ mine,” Percy interjected, “and he’s already met the woman who stole the Fairy. She’s what made him ill. So if he sez we can trust these people, we’ll trust ‘em. Nar come on. Merry’ll be turning up any minute nar.”

They walked onwards. Moments later there came into view the road’s end and the high, chain-link gates of SGR, and beyond them the factory and other buildings that made up the site.

As the children gathered at the gates they were watched by three bemused security guards standing on the other side. “What you lot doing here?” shouted one.

“What now?” Esme asked Percy.

“We have to wait for Merry and the Everlaster,” he replied.

“Tha’d better be reight about this, Percy,” came a voice from amongst the gathering.

And then they heard a car coming up the road and everyone turned around to look, hearts frozen with anticipation as two bright lights approached.

The car pulled up on the grass to the side and out came Merry.

“Yes!” went Percy and the crowd buzzed with excitement once again.

Merry ran to Percy and Esme and looked in wonder at all the kids amassed, some of whom were her friends at school.

“They’ve all come to help get Ayina out,” Esme answered her quizzical expression.

“The Everlaster’s coming behind us,” Merry informed them.

Pete got out of the car, as did a yellow dog with red eyes, though few noticed, and it scurried away alongside the fence. In fact, it wasn’t just a dog, it was a dingo. Unseen in the darkness it squeezed beneath the fence and ran across the grounds towards the science labs.

The dingo was following a dimly glowing sprite. As it neared the building the sprite flew upwards and the dingo jumped after it. In mid air the dingo shrank. Its yellow fur turned dark brown and its forelegs became wings as the dingo became a bat.

The bat chased the sprite over the roof and down a silver chimney.

Beneath the science labs, inside a dark basement, was a boiler, cold and unused in the summer. A shuffling sound came from within it. Suddenly the boiler’s hatch flew open, having been kicked by two, size six girls’ shoes: red.

Never hesitating in her movements Gladice Gulchenrouz dropped out of the boiler and onto the floor, silent as a cat. With the sprite guiding the way she opened a door and climbed concrete steps before entering a bright corridor.

She entered a door a few metres down then closed it behind her. It was almost pitch black inside but Glad didn’t have to wait for her eyes to adjust like we do. She could see quite clearly that this was a small computer room with everything turned off for the night.

Never stopping to think or catch her breath, she leapt onto a desk then ran up the wall, as naturally as a spider, till she reached the grill of an air vent. She crouched down (or rather sideways, stood as she was horizontal on the wall) and pulled the grill away, before crawling into the ventilation shaft.

The vent space was tight even for someone with the body of a five year old and she could barely move. So immediately her body

collapsed into a swarm of young rats, and in that form she scurried along the ventilation shafts, in pursuit of the sprite.

Moments later her many rat faces were pushing against another metal grill. The grill gave way under the weight of the swarm.

As she fell into a brightly lit room she could hear two human hearts beating, and a third heart, far smaller and beating far quicker.

The human hearts accelerated and there were shouts: “Urgh, rats! What the hell?!”

When Gladice landed on the ground it was with two human feet. Immediately she pounced at the nearest of the two scientists, twisting in the air like a spit-fire. Her fist landed between the man’s eyes and he fell backwards, unconscious.

She landed on the workbench behind him. Items on the bench rattled as she ran along it towards the other scientist. This one had quick enough wits to arm himself with a scalpel. He swung it at the little vampire but she dodged aside into the path of his forearm and grabbed his wrist. His momentum pushed Gladice off the bench, but as she fell she pulled his hand down with her, guiding the scalpel into his thigh. She then kicked his legs from under him and punched him unconscious too.

Everything was still. The heartbeats of the human’s had slowed back down, and their breathing has slowed too.

“Hello Gladabayu,” came Ayina’s voice from the middle of the room.

“How’d you know my name?” asked Glad.

“I know everything my sprites do.”