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Opening extract from

# Fear

Written by

## Michael Grant

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EGMONT

EGMONT
*We bring stories to life*

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

*O LORD, my God, I call for help by day;*
*I cry out in the night before thee . . .*
*Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,*
*in the regions dark and deep.*
*Thy wrath lies heavy upon me, and thou dost overwhelm*
*me with all thy waves.*
*Thou hast caused my companions to shun me;*
*thou hast made me a thing of horror to them.*
*I am shut in so that I cannot escape;*
*my eye grows dim through sorrow . . .*
*Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,*
*I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless.*
*Thy wrath has swept over me; thy dread assaults destroy me . . .*
*Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me;*
*my companions are in darkness.*

– Psalm 88: 1, 6–9, 15–16, 18
(Revised Standard Version)

# OUTSIDE

**ONE** MINUTE NURSE Connie Temple had been updating her journal on her little laptop. And the next minute she was gone.

There.

Gone.

No 'poof'. No flash of light. No explosion.

Connie Temple had found herself on the beach. On her back. In the sand. She'd been sitting when it happened and so she had sat down suddenly on the sand and had fallen on to her back, with her knees drawn up.

All around her lay others. People she didn't know. Some she recognised as faces in town.

Some were standing, some were sitting, some sat as though they were still holding on to a steering wheel. Some were in workout clothing and seemed to have arrived on the beach, on the highway, still running.

A man Connie recognised as a teacher at Sam's school stood

blinking, hand raised, like he'd been writing something on a chalkboard.

Connie had stood slowly, dazed, not believing any of it was real. Wondering if she'd had a stroke. Wondering if this was some hallucination. Wondering if this was the end of the world. Or the end of her life.

And then she had seen it: a blank, grey, featureless wall. It was incredibly tall and seemed to curve away.

It extended out into the ocean. It cut the highway. It cut Clifftop, a posh hotel, in half. It extended inland, far out of sight, cutting through everything in its way.

Only later would they learn that it was a sphere twenty miles across. Aerial shots soon popped up all over the internet.

Only later, after days of disbelief and denial, did the world accept that none of the children had been transported. Every single person under the age of fifteen was gone.

Of the population of Perdido Beach, California, and some of the surrounding area, not a single adult had been killed, though some were injured when they found themselves suddenly in the desert, suddenly in the water, suddenly tumbling down a hillside. One woman found herself suddenly in another person's home. One man had appeared wet, wearing a bathing suit and standing in the middle of the highway with cars swerving like crazy to avoid him.

But in the end there had been only one death: a salesman

from San Luis Obispo on his way down to talk about insurance with a couple in Perdido Beach. He hadn't seen the barrier across the road up in the Stefano Rey National Park and his Hyundai hit it going seventy miles an hour.

Connie couldn't remember his name now.

A lot of names had come and gone in her life since then.

With an effort she pulled herself out of the memory of that day. Something important was being said.

'The energy signature has changed.'

'The what?' Connie Temple glanced at Abana Baidoo. They had become good friends over these long, terrible months. Abana usually had a better grasp of the scientific details than Connie. But now she just shrugged.

George Zellicoe, the third of the family spokespersons, had checked out mentally a long time ago. He still came to the briefings, but he'd fallen silent. Connie and Abana had both tried to reach out to him, but he was lost now. Depression had claimed him and now there wasn't much left of the once energetic, opinionated man.

'The energy signature,' Colonel Matteu said. 'What we've started calling the J wave.'

'What does that mean, exactly?' Connie asked.

The colonel didn't look much like a colonel. He had the flawlessly pressed army uniform, of course, and the neatly trimmed hair, but he tended to slouch inside that uniform,

leaving the impression that either it was a size too big or he had shrunk since buying it.

He was the third officer to be assigned to command the forces at the Bowl. The Bowl. The Perdido Beach Blister. He was the first to be able to answer a simple question honestly.

'We don't know. All we know is that right from the start we got this energy signature and it was one-way. And now it's shifting.'

'But you don't know what that means,' Abana said. She had a way of talking that turned every question into an incredulous challenge.

'No, ma'am. We don't know.'

Connie heard the slight overemphasis on the word 'know'.

'What is it they suspect?' Connie asked.

The colonel sighed. 'I preface this by reminding all of us that we've been through a dozen – a hundred – different theories. Nothing has been right so far. We had one set of theories when the twins appeared safe and sound. And then, when Francis . . .'

No one needed to be reminded of Francis. What had emerged of Francis had been a horror caught on camera, live, and rebroadcast again and again to a sickened world. Seventy million plays on YouTube.

Soon after that, there had been Mary. That, mercifully, had not been filmed. They'd found her and removed what was

left of the girl to a facility where she was kept alive. If you could call it life.

The air-conditioning suddenly came alive. The trailers tended to be hot, even on cool days like this one, with the ocean breeze blowing.

'We know by now not to believe everything we hear,' Abana said mordantly.

The colonel nodded. 'They think there may be a . . . a softening, they're calling it.' He held up a hand, cutting off the quick reaction. 'No, they still can't penetrate the barrier. But in the past when they've tried bombarding portions of the barrier with X-rays or gamma rays the barrier has acted as a perfect mirror, bouncing back a hundred per cent of the energy that struck it.'

'That's changed?'

'The last test showed ninety-eight-point-four per cent refraction. It doesn't sound like much. And it may not mean anything. But it's been a hundred per cent since day one. And a hundred per cent every day since. And now it's not a hundred per cent.'

'It's weakening,' Abana said.

'Maybe.'

The three of them, Connie, Abana, and George (the parents of Sam, Dahra, and E.Z.) left the trailer. The California National Guard's grandly named Camp Camino Real stood on the

landward side of the highway, in a vacant stretch of land just a quarter mile from the southern boundary of the Bowl. It was an array of two dozen trailers and sheds laid out with military precision. More permanent buildings – a barracks, a motor pool, a maintenance building – were under construction.

When Camp Camino Real had first gone up it was all alone on the lovely, windswept heights above the beach. But since then the Courtyard by Marriott had been completed, as had the Carl's Jr. The Del Taco had just sold its first burrito a few days ago, and the Holiday Inn Express had opened one wing while construction continued on the rest.

There were only two media satellite trucks left, parked by the side of the highway. But they rarely got any on-air time any more: the country and the world had largely lost interest, although about two thousand tourists a day still made the trip up the highway to the viewing area, parking all along the highway for a mile or more.

A handful of souvenir vendors still made a living from canvas-awninged stalls.

George climbed into his car and drove off without a word. Connie and Abana lived here now, sharing a Winnebago with a privileged parking spot overlooking the Pacific. They had a nice gas barbecue donated by Home Depot, and every Friday evening she and Abana would have a cookout – burgers or ribs – with the media people and whatever Guardsmen or soldiers

or highway patrolmen happened to be around and off duty.

The two women walked across the highway from Camp Camino Real and sat in lawn chairs turned towards the ocean. Connie made coffee and brought a cup to Abana.

'Do we hold a conference call on this?' Abana asked.

Connie sighed. 'The families will want to know.'

*The families.* That was the term settled on by the media. At first they had referred to them as 'the survivors'. But that had implied the others, the children, had died. Even at the start, the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, had rejected that idea.

Out at sea a coastguard cutter rode on gentle waves, guarding the watery perimeter of the anomaly. A grief-crazed family member had driven a boatload of explosives into the side of the dome months earlier. The resulting explosion had had no effect on the Bowl, of course.

'I was just getting to the point . . .' Connie began.

Abana waited and sipped her coffee.

'I was getting to the point where I was starting to think I needed to get back to something else. You know? Like maybe it was time to move on.'

Her friend nodded. 'And now this. This weakening. This one-point-six per cent change.'

'And now, and now, and now,' Connie said wearily. 'Hope is cruel.'

'Some guy, some physicist at Stanford, says if the barrier ever does come down it could be catastrophic.'

'He's not the first to say that.'

'Yeah, well, maybe not. But he's the first to have a Nobel Prize. He thinks the barrier is some form of protective coating over an antimatter sphere. He's worried it could set off an explosion big enough to annihilate the western half of the United States.'

Connie made a dismissive snort. 'Theory number eight thousand, seven hundred, and forty-two.'

'Yeah,' Abana agreed. But she looked worried.

'That's not going to happen,' Connie said firmly. 'Because what's going to happen is that the barrier is going to come down. And my son Sam and your daughter, Dahra, are going to come walking down that road.'

Abana smiled. She finished their long-worn joke. 'And walk right past us to get a burger at Carl's.'

Connie reached for her hand. 'That's right. That's what's going to happen. It'll be, "Hey, Mom, see you later: I'm going to go grab a burger."'

They were quiet for a while. Both women closed their eyes and lifted their faces to the sun.

'If only there had been some warning,' Abana said.

She'd said it before: she regretted having argued with her daughter the morning before the event.

And as usual the response was on the tip of Connie's tongue: *I did have warning.*

*I had a warning.*

But this time, as every time, Connie Temple said nothing.

# ONE

65 HOURS 11 MINUTES

**SHE** WORE A pair of jeans and a plaid flannel shirt over a black T-shirt several sizes too big.

A leather belt made two turns around her waist. It was a man's belt, and a big man at that. But it was sturdy and bore the weight of the .38 revolver, the machete, and her water bottle.

Her backpack was dirty and the seams were all frayed, but it sat comfortably on her thin shoulders. In the pack she had three precious vacuum packs of dehydrated macaroni liberated from distant campsites. Just add water. She also had most of a cooked pigeon in a Tupperware container, a dozen wild green onions, a bottle of vitamins – she allowed herself one every three days – as well as pencil and paper, three books, a small bag of pot and a little pipe, needle and thread, two Bic lighters, and a spare water bottle. There was also a medicine pouch: a few Band-Aids, a mostly used tube of Neosporin and a dozen precious Tylenol, and infinitely more precious tampons.

Astrid Ellison had changed.

Her blonde hair was short, hacked off crudely with a knife and without benefit of a mirror. Her face was deeply tanned. Her hands were calloused and scarred from the innumerable small cuts she'd got from prying open mussels. One fingernail had been torn completely off when she slipped down an abrupt hill and ended up saving herself only by clawing madly at rocks and shrubs.

Astrid swung the pack off her shoulders, loosened the drawstring, and extracted a pair of heavy gloves sized for a grown man.

She surveyed the blackberry bramble for ripe berries. They didn't all ripen at once, and she never allowed herself to take any before they were fully developed. This was her blackberry patch, the only one she'd located, and she was determined not to be greedy.

Astrid's stomach rumbled as she dealt with the incredibly sharp thorns – so sharp they sometimes went right through the gloves – and pried berries loose. She took two dozen: dessert for later.

She was at the northern edge of the FAYZ, up where the barrier cut through the Stefano Rey National Park. Here the trees – redwoods, black oak, quaking aspen, ash – grew tall. Some were cut through by the barrier. In places branches went into the barrier. She wondered if they came out the other side.

She wasn't far inland, just a quarter mile or maybe a little more from the shore, where she often searched for oysters, clams, mussels, and crabs no bigger than large roaches.

Astrid was usually hungry. But she wasn't starving.

Water was a bigger concern. She'd found a water tank at the ranger station, and she'd found a tiny stream of what seemed like clean, fresh water fed from some underground aquifer, but neither was close to her camp. And since water weighed a lot to carry, she had to watch every drop and –

A sound.

Astrid crouched, swung her shotgun off her shoulder, raised it, sighted along the barrels, all in one fluid, long-practised move.

She listened. Listened hard. She heard her heart pounding and willed it to slow, slow, quiet so she could listen.

Her breath was ragged but she calmed it a little, at least.

She scanned slowly, turning her upper body left to right, then back, covering the trees where she thought the sound had come from. She listened hard in all directions.

Nothing.

Sound!

Dry leaves and damp earth. Not heavy, whatever it was. It wasn't a heavy sound. Not a Drake sound. Not even a coyote.

Astrid relaxed a little. Her shoulders were tight. She rolled them, hoping to avoid a cramp.

Something small scuttled away. Probably a possum or a skunk.

Not Drake.

Not the monster with the tentacle for an arm. Not the sadist. The psychopath.

The murderer, Whip Hand.

Astrid stood all the way up and slipped the shotgun back into place.

How many times each day did she endure this same fear? How many hundreds of times had she peered into the trees or bushes or rocks searching for that narrow, dead-eyed face? Day and night. As she dressed. As she cooked. As she used the slit trench. When she slept. How many times? And how many times had she imagined firing both barrels of the shotgun straight into his face, obliterating his features, blood spraying . . . and knowing that he would still come after her?

She would pump round after round into him and still she would be the one running and gasping for air, tripping through the forest, crying, and knowing that nothing she could do would stop him.

The evil that could not be killed.

The evil that sooner or later would take her.

With her berries safely tucked away in her backpack Astrid headed back towards her camp.

Camp was two tents: one – buff coloured – she slept in, and one – green with tan lining – she used for storage of non-food items scavenged from the various campgrounds, ranger offices, and trash heaps in the Stefano Rey.

Once home Astrid unloaded her berries and the rest of the food she'd brought with her into a red-and-white plastic cooler. She'd dug a hole right up against the barrier, and the cooler fit perfectly into that hole.

She'd learned many things in the four months since she had left everyone and everything behind and gone off into the woods. One thing she had learned was that animals avoided the barrier. Even the insects stayed a few feet back. So storing her food right up against that eye-tricking, pearly grey wall kept it safe.

It also helped to keep her safe. Camping here, this close to the barrier, and right at the cliff's edge, meant there were fewer ways a predator could come at her.

She had strung a wire in a perimeter around the camp. The wire was hung with bottles containing marbles, and rusty cans. Anything that hit the wire would make a racket.

She couldn't say she felt safe. A world where Drake was presumably still alive would never be safe. But she felt as safe here as anywhere in the FAYZ.

Astrid flopped into her nylon sling chair, propped her weary feet up on a second chair, and opened a book. Life now was an

almost constant search for food, and without any lamp she had only an hour of light at sunset to read.

It was a beautiful location atop a sheer bluff by the ocean. But she turned her back to the setting sun to catch the red rays on the page of her book.

The book was *Heart of Darkness.*

*I tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations.*

Astrid looked up at the trees. Her camp was in a small clearing, but the trees pressed close on two sides. They weren't as towering here close to the shore as they were farther inland. These seemed friendlier trees than the ones deeper into the forest.

'"The heavy, mute spell of the wilderness,"' Astrid read aloud.

For her the spell was about forgetfulness. The harsh life she now lived was less harsh than the reality she had left behind in Perdido Beach. That was the true wilderness. But there she had awakened forgotten and brutal instincts.

Here it was only nature trying to starve her, break her bones,

cut and poison her. Nature was relentless but it was free of malice. Nature did not hate her.

It was not nature that had driven her to sacrifice her brother's life.

Astrid closed her eyes and then the book, and tried to calm the rush of emotion inside her. Guilt was a fascinating thing: it seemed not to weaken over time. If anything it grew stronger as the circumstances faded from memory, as the fear and the necessity became abstract. And only her own actions stood out with crystal clarity.

She had hurled her sick, strange little brother to the huge, appalling creatures that threatened her and threatened every human in the FAYZ.

Her brother had disappeared.

So had the creatures.

The sacrifice had worked.

*Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'*

Only no loving God, seeing her faith, had intervened to stop the killing.

For the excellent reason that there was no loving God.

That it had taken her so long to realise this was an embarrassment to her. She was Astrid the Genius, after all. The name she had carried for years. And yet Sam, with his

shoulder-shrugging indifference to all matters religious, had been so much closer to the truth.

What kind of a fool looked at the world as it was – and this terrible world of the FAYZ especially – and believed in God? A God actually paying attention, let alone caring about his creations?

She had murdered Little Pete.

Murdered. She didn't want to dress it up with any nice word. She wanted it harsh. She wanted the word to be sandpaper dragged across her raw conscience. She wanted to use that awful word to obliterate whatever was left of Astrid the Genius.

It was a good thing to have decided there was no God, because if there were then she would be damned to eternal hell.

Astrid's hands shook. She laid the book flat on her lap. From her backpack she retrieved the bag of pot. She rationalized the drug on the grounds that it was the only way she could fall asleep. If this were the normal world, she might have a prescription for a sleeping pill. And that wouldn't be wrong, would it?

Well, she needed to sleep. Hunting and fishing were early morning activities and she needed to sleep.

She flicked the lighter and brought it to the bowl of the pipe. Two hits: that was her rule. Just two.

Then she hesitated. A memory twinge. Something nagging at her consciousness, warning her that she had seen something important and missed it.

Astrid frowned, tracing back her actions. She set aside the pot and the book and walked back to her buried pantry. She hauled up the cooler. It was too dark to see into the hole, so she made the decision to use a few precious seconds of battery life and flicked on a small flashlight.

She knelt down and yes, there it was. Three sides of the hole were dirt; the fourth was the barrier. Nothing ever stuck to the barrier – nothing. And yet, a few small clumps of dirt now did exactly that.

Astrid drew her knife and poked at the dirt, which fell away.

Was it her imagination? The barrier down in the hole looked different. It no longer seemed to glow softly. It was darker. The illusion of translucency was gone. Now it seemed opaque. Black.

She drew the sharp point of her knife along the barrier, from above the hole down.

It was subtle, almost imperceptible. But the knifepoint glided with no resistance whatsoever until it reached the darker colour and then the point dragged. Not much. Not much at all. Just as if it had gone from polished glass to burnished steel.

She flicked off the light and took a deep, shaky breath.

The barrier was changing.

Astrid closed her eyes and stood there for a long moment, swaying slightly.

She put the cooler back into the hole. She would have to await sunrise to see more. But she already knew what she had seen. The beginning of the endgame. And she still didn't know what the game was.

Astrid lit the pipe, took a deep lungful, then, after a few minutes, another. She felt her emotions go fuzzy and indistinct. The guilt faded. And within half an hour sleep drew her to her tent, where she crawled into her sleeping bag and lay with her arms curled around the shotgun.

Astrid giggled. So, she thought: she wouldn't have to go to hell. Hell was coming to her.

When that final night came, the demon Drake would find her.

She would run. But never fast enough.