

Rip Van Winkle (1995)

Rip Van Winkle

This is a story of a middle-aged man who suffers from a terrible insomnia. For years this poor man (Harry) has struggled with a weak and sometimes absent sleep cycle, and it has gradually worn away at his life until now he sometimes feels as brittle as an old leather strap. Even when he does sleep, he has nightmares of being trapped somehow in a dark space between the last bell of closing time and the screaming of a factory siren at dawn. He frequents pubs, but always finds himself on the street as the doors are shut and often wanders through the night, lost or despairing, seeking the exhaustion that sometimes brings sleep.

One night, however, he gets so drunk in a pub that he falls asleep on the table, wakes up next morning in his own bed with a slight hangover and no memory of how he got home. He potters around the house for most of the day, feeling slightly unwell but refreshed nevertheless after a good night's sleep. He thinks about the pub, trying to remember what he did. He gets some mail from his wife, who he hasn't seen in years, and this puzzles and vaguely depresses him. When evening comes he returns to the pub, gets drunk, falls asleep on the table and once again next morning wakes up in his own bed, feeling rather the worse for wear this time and still with no recollection of how he got home.

He rises late, spends most of the day struggling with his stomach and puzzling with his head, but when the mail arrives he is surprised to receive another letter from his wife. Still struggling with his memory he is on the verge of opening it when a great shock of memory hits him, a brainstorm rocks him, and he stumbles out of the house and down the street. He is a wild sight on entering the pub, in slippers and dirty clothes from the night before. With a beer in front of him, seated among the early drinkers in a shaft of light speckled with drifting dust motes, he allows himself to think about what has so shocked him: The sudden recollection that his wife is, in fact, dead. His mind seems to flutter with a barely suppressed panic; he feels he must be dreaming. He spends the rest of the day too stunned to move, but once again manages to drink himself into oblivion and, incredibly, to wake up next morning in his own bed, sick as a young dog in a leaky boat.

All morning he stumbles around the house, searching through his clothes for the letters. He can't find them and hopes that he was dreaming after all, but more strongly he fears that he simply left them both at the pub, on separate nights. All morning he is conscious of waiting for the mail to arrive. At 11:00 he is outside watching for the postman, who smiles nervously as he places the letter in his trembling hand. Again, it is a letter from his wife. He stares at the letter a long time, thinking about opening it (he cannot), thinking about the letter of the day before (he never opened that one either) and of the day before that (he opened and read it but cannot remember very well: something about him coming home) and finally stuffs this latest letter unopened into his pocket and wanders off down the street in the other direction.

For the rest of the day he wanders, and though at first he sees nothing, lost in his thoughts and just wandering blindly, eventually he becomes aware of himself and his surroundings. He has no idea where he is, but it all seems both familiar and unfamiliar. He sees crowds of people in scenes of strange

ceremony, children playing, triggering half-memories which he finds painful. He feels a sense of farewell, and wanders sadly into regions of the city which he no longer recognises at all. Night falls.

Finally, exhausted, he goes into a pub in a seedy docks area and begins drinking. He gets drunker and drunker, but does not fall asleep. People talk to him in increasingly slurred and aimless conversations; the barman laughs louder each time he serves him a drink; he picks a fight, stumbles and is humiliated; finally he sinks into a torpor, unable to drink any more, and is on the verge of falling off his chair when a younger man sits down at his table and steadies him.

The young man apologises and introduces himself as Alex. They start talking and very soon are like old friends, the younger man humouring the older man for his slurred speech. Harry asks several times, do I know you? Whasyer name again? Finally Alex leans forward as though gathering courage from their familiarity, smiles apologetically and asks, May I see the letter?

Harry is naturally reluctant to even acknowledge the letter, but he gives it over and the young man looks at it, asks if he can read it. Harry makes no reply, so he opens the envelope and reads, looks up finally and says, This is from your wife. Still no reply, but Harry's face creases with emotion. So Alex says, but your wife is dead.

Harry breaks down and cries for a while. The younger man waits and then gives him the letter to read: His wife is pleading with him to come home, to the house where they once lived. Harry becomes angry and demands to know what is going on. He seems to sober up quickly. He accuses Alex of writing the letters himself, of conducting a weird torture campaign on a widowed pensioner. The younger man coolly denies it, stands up and says with authority, Come with me, now.

They go out into the night time streets of the strange end of the city and the younger man leads the older on a labyrinthine journey through winding streets, warehouses, other pubs which are still open, upstairs flats, out onto balconies and sloping rooves and the teetering chimneys of the old workers cottages, down again into a backyard with a chained dog barking, over a fence into a cemetery, and finally among the rows to stop in front of a particular grave, freshly dug. Harry looks at the inscription. As he had half expected, it is his own grave.

Alex explains to Harry that he is dead, that he died three nights ago, drunk on the way home from the pub. It really is time for Harry to come home. Harry, naturally, is in shock, then denial, then anger and grief. But finally an acceptance comes to him, and he stands up to let the younger man (now revealed as an angel) lead him out of these strange places to a place where he once lived, years ago, with a woman he still loves. And she is there waiting for him.

A Dream of New Holland (1994)

A Dream of New Holland

A story about a Dutch sailor of the sixteenth century, Jan Meerhaven, returning alone to his village after many years lost at sea. He finds that many of his family and friends have died or moved on, and that those remaining do not wish to welcome him. Late that night he goes into the village tavern and finds, amid the reek and ribaldry, a loud council meeting of the village's most important men, the bankers, guildsmen, sea captains, traders, craftsmen, moneylenders and pimps, who have gathered together as usual to scheme and argue, gossip and agitate. He introduces himself, and reluctantly they allow him to take a seat among them, casting guarded glances at him and at each other. He is, even after the long years of his absence, not quite an outsider, but when he comes to speak there is laughter and some angry comment at his failure to achieve anything while he was gone. These are the high years of the age of exploration, the great years when an ordinary man could join any expedition and win fame for himself and his people. There could be no greater failure than a failed explorer, especially one who returns alone.

The explorer stands, ignoring the sour and calculating expressions around him, and delivers a noble speech on the winning and losing of fine foreign riches. Finally he pulls from his pocket a small bag of coins and tosses them into the middle of the table, saying What then will you give me for these? The banker opens the bag and spills out the coins, a pitiful handful, no more than an ordinary twentieth century man would carry on his person on any given day; and indeed no less than that, for these are twentieth century coins, Australian 5 and 10 and 20 cent pieces, mostly tarnished and of no interest other than that they do not exist in this time. The townsmen are amazed and suspicious, but close examination of the coins shows that they are of genuine mint, of impossibly high quality and with many markings and characters unheard of in that age, in particular their dates: They range from 1976 to 1992, some four hundred years in the future.

While his kinsmen finger the coins - imagine holding them in the palm of your small, tobacco stained hand, poking them with a long and quivering finger - the explorer orates on the subject of exploring, misfortune, the years lost at sea, and of shipwreck on the shores of an as-yet undiscovered country, Australia, where he lived briefly as a vagabond too bedazzled by everything he saw to question the certainty of his own insanity, living from hand to mouth and acquiring these few coins by begging on a street corner. He seems to be in some considerable pain at telling this story, and he

does not finish or explain how he found his way home, only demands again, How much will you give me for this that most of my youth was spent in bringing home to you?

After much concentration, weighing, scratching the coins with sharp knives and drinking several tankards of wine the banker comes up with a figure half the coins' face value in royal guilders. The explorer makes a pretence at amazement and appeals to the townsmen to consider the immense value of potential trade with this country and the considerable value of the coins as tokens to the king. The faces around the table are amused, but closed. The explorer, frustrated and desperate, feels the moment slipping from him, his life's work amounting to a pittance, betrayed by his own people.

Now, an unexpected ally reveals herself to the explorer. The tavern's widowed landlady, Mevrouw Brevoort, has been listening from the crowded public galley and considering the explorer's story with disquiet and the councillors' response with disgust. She has quietly gathered support from key local townsmen, producing a list of offers which she slips into the explorer's hand. The explorer, on the verge of a disastrous rage, stops to read and is stunned to find several pages of extravagant promises, of ships and men, of the king's favour, of finance and arms, some depending on the outcomes of other ventures, some immediate and unconditional. Amazed, he turns silently to show his gratitude to the watching townsmen, then hands the paper to the banker.

From here the explorer's welcome is complete: It is simply a matter of responding to the suddenly warm overtures of the councillors, of throwing the debate open to the general public and of watching his price climb steadily upwards. He finds himself surrounded and overwhelmed with support. The landlady, Mieke, passes him another note but he does not read it, knowing instinctively what it says. He is drawn into an inner echelon of scheming and dealing. The nationality of the new country, a discovered territory of England, is sourly debated. The seductive hypocrisy of conquest emerges, in whispers like suppressed farts, until the air fairly reeks of it. The explorer drinks heavily and pledges himself to his people, and finally staggers upstairs with the landlady to celebrate their collusion in intimacy.

Early the next morning, two men who were at the tavern when this happened are walking along the sea wall with the tools of their farming trades slung over their shoulders. They are talking about the condition of the soil, concerned at the appearance of salt flats in areas where they have irrigated in recent years. Uneasy, they consider the ancient sea bed which is the underlying soil of this

country and the enormous quantities of salt which may be rising from that substratum even as they speak. With rising emotion they deplore the erosion scars caused by hooved animals, open sores in the landscape producing a choking dust in the smallest breeze. Finally they rage against the terrible drought which has forced them to irrigate and to move their sheep onto this fragile country behind the sea wall. They badger and bullshit each other about solutions to the problems, and are on the verge of blows when suddenly they hear a horse's hooves approaching along the narrow sea wall path behind them.

They turn around and are amazed to see the explorer riding in terror towards them, on a huge black horse with half the town's population pursuing him on foot along the wall. They leap out of the way, and at that moment there is the muffled crack of an old flintlock rifle. The explorer is thrown from the saddle, falls and rolls in a great cloud of dust with his black velvet cloak entirely wrapped around his body. As the dust settles the two farmers run towards him. Gently they turn him over, but he is dead.

Now the people of the village arrive, mostly out of breath, and after a few uncertain moments the banker pushes through the crowd, hands his rifle to one of the farmers and kneels by the explorer's body. After a quick examination he angrily proclaims that the man is dead, and begins insisting that they search his body. The town sherriff is reluctant, but as the villagers begin to clamour he kneels, throws open the explorer's dusty cloak and searches quickly, almost frantically through his pockets.

At that moment the landlady arrives. With a cry of anguish she shoves the sherriff away and throws herself sobbing onto the explorer's bloodied chest, but as the sherriff gets to his feet he is holding the bag in which the coins were kept. He seems undecided, but the crowd presses him. He begins to untie the bag. One of the farmers pushes close, and though jostled by the crowd and threatened by the banker he hears a strange sound, like a sigh, as the bag is turned up and shaken, and he is among the first to see that the bag is, in fact, empty.

The Story Wheel (1996)

A story about one day in the life of a poor kid, Mark, in North Queensland (or a dream parallel to North Qld). It is Mark's birthday, but his family life prevents him from enjoying it. The day is wet and cold, he has to go to school by a kind of barge/train with no shelter from the wind and rain, dozens of kids huddling together on top of a rusting iron hold, entertaining each other or being miserable. He meets an older kid, Alec, who shows a group of them a strange toy, a beautiful translucent wheel which he turns while telling a story. Mark has noticed this kid hanging around before; for some reason Alec hangs around him today and becomes the ringleader of a wild boyhood adventure in the bad country of a sad and lonely childhood. The adventure carries them through a disastrous morning in school, escape en route to the headmasters office, wagging it in town, sneaking into a strip joint or gay bar for a laugh, encounters with sexy, dangerous women and ancient, evil men, a second escape and the relief of getting back to familiar territory along the banks of the river, a boat trip home (allusions to huckleberry finn would have to be in order), parting in the afternoon, horrible to get home and find the place as it was when he feels so changed by the experiences of the day, angry relationship with his father, not understanding each other at all, the pathos of the one birthday present he got from his family, something unwanted which breaks almost immediately. A third escape out into the night, meeting up with his friend again (I was waiting for you) and a continuation of the adventure into the night, the older kid leading the younger to a place he's never been (out of fear? never got around to it?) and gives him the greatest present of all: The Wisdom of His Years, a long story concerning the loss of innocence and the getting of wisdom from the point of view of one older than him but still not able to say from experience; in other words, painting a glorious future on the bridge of a childhood's end, but not understanding it and in many ways hilarious because of the incongruity of this point of view to the (adult) reader's own. Walking home with this precious jewel of wisdom, the boy is reconciled with the horrors of his birthday, falls into a pleasant daydream of the story wheel and feels he sees his whole life before him.

School, authority, girls, games, the story wheel on the barge/train (a disk of old plastic, translucent, with something that looks like a swimmer diving and leaping as the wheel is turned and a story is told) the fields of the kid's granddad's farm at dawn, wet and miserable, the new housing developments on the places where he used to play, the game found by the train station and stuffed into a wet plastic bag, leaving for school so late that his parents have already left (the usual?). Mysteries of early puberty as disclosed by the older boy, pedophilia encounters in the strip club, making money on the street by a kind of con on people's gullibility and unrealistic expectation of "kids these days", spending it big on clothes for themselves and strutting around as though they have made the big time (leading to the strip-club, naturally). Poverty in his family is a case of self-fulfilling prophecy, they are living a dead end life even to the point that as household utensils wear out and break they are not replaced, leading to a siege mentality almost, in which their quality of life is always reducing. Self-sufficiency, guilt and envy over birthday presents and the whole issue of his family's ability to love or not to love him.

Nanologue (2009)

A 12 year old boy, Alex and his grandfather Ray, an eccentric genius, have a SETI (Search for ET Intelligence ... Oh you know, OK) experiment going on in their back yard. They detect a signal coming from inside a bird. They catch the bird and bring it gently into the lab. Some of their background is told, in the context of Pa's research and Alex's hereditary genius. They are far from ordinary hobbyists, and their lab is highly improbable.

They travel *into* the bird in a vehicle of the grandfather's invention, that works by shrinking them in a purely dimensional trick related to an aspect of cosmological string theory that Pa is exploring, but which he explains as a trick of perspective: they travel in a dimension as though moving away so as they appear smaller when they move, in fact they *are* smaller and can easily travel down in scale by just moving off in the right direction.

Entering by the bird's nostrils they explore the lungs, locating the source of the signal in a small crater-like dimple on the wall of an alveolus. Just then an accident occurs, a lever is bumped and they suddenly shrink down to near atomic dimensions, they become locked in a virtual quantum state and cannot restore to larger scale.

They have a bizarre journey on a quantum ocean of the bird's folded cellular proteins, seeking a way back up, and eventually they find the source of the signal again, the walls of the dimple like a vast landscape around a huge dark object, an alien spacecraft if they ever saw one, enormous from their perspective but registering on the grandfather's instruments as also using their dimensional perspective technique to travel.

They signal the ship and receive a strange reply, in a language completely foreign but which they understand as easily as seeing the ideas it conveys. The aliens rescue the two explorers, restore them to a more macroscopic scale and bring them into the ship via a conventional airlock system.

Aboard the ship they learn more about the aliens, strange creatures each like a clutch of earthworms, who communicate by neural signals transmitted by their powerful brains and easily able to hear the two humans' minds in reply. They use a universal translation system based on Gödel's theorem (Alex of course recognises this) to speak in self-evidently truthful sentences, which do not need you to understand their actual language in order to understand what they are saying.

These space pilots use the same dimensional trick to travel interstellar space or even intergalactic distances: they explain this as a simple matter of taking the flat perspective in the night sky, the idea that the stars appear as though on the surface of a bowl-shaped sky, apparently all the same distance away, in fact by this trick the stars and everything else *are* all the same distance. The astronauts can therefore travel any distance by simply aiming for a nearby star but actually arriving at any distance at the appropriate scale.

They were doing this but got the scale wrong for this galaxy and wound up on a strange planet and were accidentally inhaled by a bird. Normally they use the shrinking effect to avoid detection but were wrong by several orders of magnitude.

The two earthlings witness the execution of the navigator who made this mistake, a horrible dismembering of the wormlike body, and are left feeling very ambivalent about their rescuers. They try to find a way out of the ship but are trapped at the exit by their own still microscopic size.

They are captured in the engine room and taken to the hold where the grandfather's machine has been garaged. The aliens want to extract the engine and use it to couple with their ship as a starter motor that will enable them to escape through upward scale and return to their own planet.

The earthlings must come with them, even though it will involve a relativistic movement forward in time so they can never return home even if they could find a way back. They cannot be dropped off on Earth at their own normal scale as that would disrupt the launch. It involves a

complete confirmation of Einstein, and means their families will be old or dead by the time they find their way back, though they themselves will not have aged much.

The story moves to a climax when the pair escape with their own little craft from the ship and flee back into the bird. They can only go down in scale, and the grandfather believes there may be a way through past that scale, so down they go, their bodies becoming multiplied and quantized in the lower dimensions.

Here they go on an Alice-in-Wonderland adventure down the rabbit hole of the bird's quantum structure, which incredibly turns out to be a replay in this dimension of the bird's evolution on Earth, expressed as a superposition in the quantised form of the bird's DNA wave function.

They see the bird's form move from worm to fish to amphibian to dinosaur to bird, and in the last evolution Alex sees a clue to their escape: he sees the primitive bird striving upwards after insects, its primordial clawed wings pushing at the air, not in flight but striving for it, the stubby limbs growing and reaching out as wings.

The boy regards his own incredibly altered quantum body and sees the same potential. He looks upwards and sees the stars in the quantum sky above them. He reaches out his hands and strives upwards. He struggles, feeling he could swim up there if only he knew how. He sees his hands stretched across the sky, realises that they encompass the stars, that they hold the stars within them, between his fingers.

Gently, very gently, he closes his fingers, feels the softness of that vast space, its gas and dust. He pulls himself upwards, calls to his grandfather to grab hold of him and hang on. They climb enormously into the sky. They pass between the cells and organs of the bird, escaping suddenly from a pore in a feather.

The real night sky emerges as they leap out into space, the world lurching down past them from giant size flashing through normal size to microscopic and vanishing as though in the perspective of distance into space, and they are falling out into the solar system and nearby stars.

Panicked by this even worse disaster, the boy grabs hold of the Milky Way as they emerge into intergalactic space, then with great care and difficulty they climb down again through the vast reaches of interstellar space, hand over hand together, searching through dust clouds and gas, drifting stars, until finally they recognise the sun and Earth and its warm blue atmosphere.

They climb still further down the scale to the international space station, where they stop, hanging outside the observatory window. Here the story perspective switches to the crew member who finds them, the story they tell so as to be believed, and their final return home to a heroic welcome.

A boy living with his eccentric genius grandfather has a SETI project for a hobby. The boy uses a frequency splitter developed by his grandfather to try a series of new frequencies, and though at one point he gets a very strong static signal from nearby, there is nothing unexpected from any direction in the sky.

A few days later he tries that signal again, and follows it to see where it is coming from. To his surprise he finds that the signal is moving around the neighbourhood. Following it, he finds that it is coming from a bird, a finch with a nest nearby. The bird is quite normal, flitting for insects and twittering away, but inside it there is this signal.

The boy and his grandfather catch the bird and listen inside it, first with a stethoscope, then with the bird under anaesthetic they use grandfather's own x-ray machine, and lastly an ultrasound. The x-ray image shows nothing, but as they turn on the ultrasound the signal stops, then erupts into a series of wild, unmistakably *frantic* electronic whoops and chattering sounds, as though a distress code.

The boy suggests they try the radio direction finder to get a fix on the signal, see where it is coming from. They rig up a system of amplifiers and a bird-sized scope, and turn it on. With a bit of fine tuning, they see the signal is coming from somewhere in the bird's lungs.

The grandfather considers using a fiberoptic device to see inside the bird's lung, but decides not to. The lungs are an impassible maze of passageways, and judging by the size of the object it could be inside one of the bird's alveoli: there is no way you could find such a thing mechanically, even by any survivable surgery of the type he could perform at least. Killing the bird is not really an option.

The boy tries sending morse code on the same frequency, and again the signal stops, then starts again. The signal is no longer frantic, but is a very fast, clear and simple pattern which repeats with occasional pauses as though prompting and repeating a phrase, in bursts of ordered static.

The boy begins to work with the signal, trying to figure out the elements of a code, while the grandfather, astounded to realise that he has an apparent extraterrestrial intelligence inside a bird now slowly waking up in his recovery room, goes into a brainstorm trying to think what to do. Surgery? Call vet, hospital, SETI project, ASIO? CIA?

A few days pass, the signal remains locked inside the bird, the boy continues to struggle with it, and alternately with a fractal program he is writing to simulate the alveolar structure of a bird's lung. He gets his grandfather to take a few more ultrasound images to establish a geometry, then projects the image in three dimensions on his screen and explores it excitedly.

It occurs to the boy that if they could get a tiny sensor into the lung they could then track the signal with a direction finder, and the fibre-optic could follow behind it. The grandfather agrees, but points out that neither the fibre-optic nor any sensor they could build would even fit inside the alveoli, let alone ... then he stops.

We see the grandfather in his library. He realises there is only one thing to do. He swears the boy into a secret. He has developed a type of flying machine, a two-seater, that by pointing itself in the right direction actually flies into a fourth dimension, a spatial direction relative to time and at right angles to space.

The boy is confused as to how this could be possible, and also how it could help. The grandfather struggles to explain that perspective, the perception that distant objects become smaller, is strangely realised in this fourth dimension, as movement and size are relative so travellers in the fourth dimension do not recede in distance, but in actual size. They shrink.

They could then fly into the bird's nostril and go down into its lung, taking the receiver and direction finder with them. They would have a closer look at the object, see if they could get hold of it and if so, bring it out. They could do all this without leaving the ship, but if they needed to go outside they would need to take life-support suits to protect them from the altered atmospheric chemistry at that scale. Their microscopically small lungs could not breathe normal oxygen.

So, provisioning themselves with food and water, bottled oxygen and life-support suits, an inflatable raft, medicines, radio, surgical and cutting equipment, they climb into the machine. A fuel cell powers a set of ground rollers and jets whose lift/load ratio improves as the machine and all its contents shrink. The room and everything in it become large, then enormous. The machine lifts off and flies towards the bird.

They shrink through the sizes of a model, a buzzing toy, then an insect, a powered dust mote, then smaller still, bumped by shimmering waves of Brownian motion in the air all around their sealed compartment. They navigate towards the bird, whose gargantuan movements slow to the pace of clouds forming and reforming in the sky.

The grandfather explains that they will need to be smaller than the dust just to get past the bird's nasal hairs. The boy is recording bits of video and stills on his phone, forwarding them on to himself.

The nostril draws large all around them, then they are drawn in with a breath that seems as slow as a great flood of air, pulling them into darkness.

They switch on the lights. The windpipe expands all around them in a vast cavernous shape, red lined with creamy white, and they are pulled downwards. The boy gets the direction finder going, but as soon as he switches on the SETI transceiver he realises that the signal has slowed down, and gasps as he now recognises fragments of it, simple propositions such as yes and no that he had struggled with. It is still a fast signal, but he begins to grasp it.

There is no time to think about it now. Using the direction finder, the boy navigates a course through the lung map on his laptop, confirming waypoints with his grandfather who, totally at ease now he that is in front of the controls, steers the spacecraft gleefully down the winding passages of the lung. He explains that their dimensional displacement effects time as well, so as they shrink they also experience an altered rate of time flow, not so much to do with the relativity of space and time as with the quantum properties of matter, etc he explains all this with frequent glances over his shoulder and occasional near misses against the walls of the lung.

They pass through great intersections of branching passageways getting smaller and smaller, slowing down as the space around them becomes confined. The alveoli are active with vivid life, the blood vessels near the surface, the movements more visible and more regular, clockwork even, than the vast outside dynamics of the bird.

Finally they fix the signal to a particular alveolus and propel themselves gently into it, stopping with a gentle bump against the slowly pulsating far wall. The signal points to a small dark patch, like a hollow or dimple nearby. They turn slowly towards it and use a robot arm to feel around it, then inside the dimple.

They realise they are going to have to go even smaller, to get inside this dimple. The grandfather navigates them downwards in size, the alveolar dimple expanding and seeming to open as they approach it. Then, without warning, the entire scene snaps to an enormous scale, the alveoli wall expands into a sky-like dimness of red and white and the dimple opens like a canyon before them. The grandfather has misjudged the last few degrees of the dimensional movement, not realising the amplifying effect of the lower scale, and has shrunk them catastrophically to near atomic size. The nearest visible thing, the now canyon-vast dimple, seems an astronomical distance away.

The engine now seizes up, and they are sucked electrostatically towards the walls of the canyon, falling as though under gravity, the soft red darkness becoming huge and strange as they approach: a shimmering plain of electrified red liquid, the spreading patterns of chemical and electric signals like northern lights moving across and through it.

They strike the walls at a considerable speed, but the stopping is strange, as though they have been caught and held gently. Looking out, they see a wall of undulating light, rippling with surface details that can only partly be made out. There is something odd, even paradoxical about the shapes of that surface; floral ripples like rotating reflections, moving with vibrant echoing motions as though played by trumpets.

Startled and disoriented, the grandfather and boy talk to each other about the weird fun of it all, while unconsciously dealing with the vertiginous psychological shock: the wall becomes a sea, the vibrant movement of its surface no stranger than any rippling ocean. They restart the engine but cannot take off, being held to the surface by a strong electrostatic attraction. They find they can propel themselves forward, so they move off across this sea.

The boy re-orientates the direction finder and finally has a chance to listen to the signal he is getting, which has now slowed to a pace that he can easily follow. Using the simple meanings he heard when the first switched on, he begins to communicate in a rudimentary way with the signal. He tries repeating phrases as it did with him, strives to understand the responses in context.

The boy picks up more and more as the voyage goes on, and the grandfather steers them across vast plains and curved spaces, of many different colours and complex contoured surfaces. They steer carefully around the bizarre molecular structures of cell walls, potassium pumps and erupting cysts like volcanic bulges. Sometimes it is as if the surface has somehow inverted itself, so they are now travelling head downward, but this sensation flickers like a candle and reverts itself. Always around them there is that marvellously paradoxical but ultimately very beautiful light.

The signal's strength has been growing exponentially as they approach, and finally they see it: up ahead, in the hazy red distance, they see a great dark shape begin to emerge. It is anchored to the cell wall, in fact is deeply embedded in it, the shadow of its bulk showing deep in the rippling ocean of light. It towers monumentally above them, far up into a dim red distance that they can no longer call the sky, as it is vastly bigger than any sky should be.

They come to a stop at the foot of this towering shape, and now both grandfather and boy turn their mind to learning the code and developing a communication with it. They work together for hours,

finally getting to the point of signalling what they hope means "look down". There is a long pause. They send the signal again but receive an imperious interrupt.

They look up, and after a long wait, with much coded signalling beyond their understanding, they begin to see a smaller dark shape separate itself from the monolith and begin to descend slowly towards them. They realise as it approaches that it also is huge, a mountainous shape unfolding six legs like spindly skyscrapers amid jets of brilliant light, great rings of rolling darkness and phosphorescence.

The grandfather realises that he has the scale wrong, but he cannot move while this massive ship is descending on them. Finally it is down, its legs and downthrust producing great folds, ripples and bursts of light in the surface. At this moment the grandfather eases gently up the dimensional scale, and the great ship shrinks smoothly with all the surrounding terrain around them. The grandfather eases back as he begins to see scaling details such as access hatches and ladders, but at that moment the still great ship leaps into the air as though goosed from behind. A great burst of signalling traffic erupts.

The boy turns to the grandfather "I think they're saying "Whoa, like where did you come from".

The boy signals back a simple dot dot dot dot ... as regular as he can make it, just to be calm and to take the initiative, to make them listen, then repeats the distress signal he first heard from them, the one he heard after the ultrasound, as near as he can make it, then finishes with a brief series of rising notes, a question? Meaning, you are in distress, can we help?

There is a long silence. Nervously the boy sends the same question.

The signal sends back the dot dot dot that he had begun with and the same rising notes, a question: who are you?

Tell them there are two of us, suggests the grandfather.

Can I speak? the boy asks.

Would it help?

The boy switches on the microphone and speaks into it, there are two, two of us, Alex and my grandfather, Ray.

There is another long silence. Finally the dropship turns and comes down to land again, next to their flying machine, and a series of large, transparent airlocks open on one side of it. Relieved, they finally get a chance to look around themselves and get an idea of this new scale for the first time. They are inside a vast cave, so vast in fact that the mouth of the cave looks like a bulging ring of landscape, red rolling hills opening around a vast dim blue or purple chasm far off to their ship's left. As they are still oriented to the wall of the dimple, the mouth of the dimple now forms the most prominent feature of the landscape and fills the sky behind the dropship.

The grandfather now finds he can lift off the surface, their scale being beyond the range of the electrostatic force. Why didn't I think of that before? They fly gently towards the airlocks, entering the ship and landing on a wide bay lit from below through an apparently translucent floor. As soon as they touch down these lights dim. They are in darkness. The grandfather switches on the ship's lights again, but their light does not reach to the walls or ceiling of the landing bay. The translucent floor is lit from above now, revealing deep crystalline shadows.

Alex and Ray check their suits and climb out of the ship. Their torches pick out a far wall, weird but purposeful-looking details, a walkway along its edge. They follow the walkway to a square aperture, about ten feet high in their normal scale. As they go into this airlock and the doors operate, the boy goes into a brief, weird train of thought on his and his grandfather's use of normal measures for height, and their correction of it in the only way they can, by re-scaling. There is something wrong with this, but he's not sure what.

The door opens on the other side of the airlock. They step out into darkness. Shadowy figures are standing there. Alex and Ray look at each other, then approach them. The extraterrestrials are very tall, with many "heads" that are featureless except for fleshy bands or rings, their midriffs rippled with multiple vertically running bands of muscle or vitals, their "feet" also in many multiples trailing below and behind them, for all the world each one like a group of worms standing bound up together.

These extraterrestrials know a number of human languages from long observation, but have no way of speaking any of them. Quite apart from the absence of vocal chords of any kind, they want no communicative contact of any kind with the objects of their study: they are part of a long-running research program with strict guidelines of objectivity. Their scientific goals, inspired by a deeply ingrained and evolutionary curiosity, demand a secrecy reinforced by the simple need for survival on a lesser sentient planet.

As a result, the extraterrestrials are without any means of reply communication. Advanced as their technology is, they have no textual or writing equipment remotely capable of producing human scripts. They have never even thought of voice-simulation systems. They use no visual displays, being completely blind (hence the darkness of the ship). Their distress signal had been on a wavelength

known only to their technology, or so they thought. They had not intended to attract the attention, let alone the assistance, of a human boy and his grandfather.

It is only by the remotest of chances that they need this assistance at all. They have a far more advanced form of dimensional technology, that they use to travel intergalactic space, altering their scale into vast dimensions to step easily from one distant system to another. Entering a solar system they zoom down in size, entering the atmosphere at subplanetary dimensions and shrinking down to this, their operating scale before coming anywhere in range of radar, actually the only terrestrial technology capable of seeing them.

Occasionally, of course, they have been seen. Cloud-size or aircraft-size spacecraft shrinking rapidly out of sight look very much as though they are suddenly accelerating out of sight, extraordinarily fast "as though against the laws of physics". No one has yet suspected that the rapidly disappearing UFO spacecraft is still there, hovering invisibly at this small scale.

Their research is wide-ranging, covering all aspects of the earth, and not just the human. They have long been aware of the SETI projects but were surprised by the creativity and obvious low budget of the boy's work, and had come to investigate. It is of chief importance that none of the SETI projects detect their research program, so they have a strong interest in SETI advances. They were coming to investigate the boy's signal when they were accidentally inhaled by a bird.

The extraterrestrials, deep in their complex, unfathomably alien minds, are actually amused by the unprecedented inter-racial situation this now puts them in; now that they finally need to speak to the subjects of their observation, if only to thank them for this attempted rescue, they have no means of doing so.

to be continued...

This is a collection of surviving manuscripts of short stories or outlines for longer stories that I have dreamed up at various times in my strangely recursive life. There's not many of them*, so I guess the short story is not really my form. In fact these are the minor end of the scale in backlogue, and even more fragmentary than usual, but still fairly complete and interesting in their own right as stories of survival. My surrealist leanings in writing (less so in art where I tend to a kind of calligraphic abstraction) get a good workout here and there's even some science-fiction based on quantum cosmology.

Two of the short stories (I do mean short) are based directly on dreams that I transcribed as nearly as possible. I kept a dream journal for a few years when I got the idea that dreaming is a source of natural inspiration for amazing stories, some of which seem to go on for hours and would actually make great movies if you could only capture them. Robert Rodriguez made *Sharkboy and Lavagirl* with this idea. These stories follow the dreams as nearly as I could recall them, right through to what seemed like natural points of ending when I woke up and wrote them down. There are other dream manuscripts like this that I haven't included, but these are the two most coherently story-like.

In lieu of apology, a dedication:

These short stories are for my children, Alex, Lewis, and Zac, who really know how to dream.

*There are a few lost works somewhere out there, including the first (1982) which was destroyed and the latest (2009) which survived but had to be retyped. In most cases I scanned in the originals because these are the actual manuscripts and are interesting objects to look at, at least the old hand-typed ones are, in this digital age. There's one even older and more crudely typed in *The Hunting of A Snark*; possibly the best, but it doesn't belong here.