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R. W. Miller

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*Tropic of Dystopia*

# Tropic of Dystopia

by

R.W. Miller

Larson K. Sideman took his debit card out of his pocket and stuck it into the Chinese fortune telling machine. It had been a satisfying Chinese meal and he was interested in a fortune for kicks. The screen lit up and a beautiful Asian woman came on the screen. She had red lips, dark eyes and well groomed straight black hair.

“What type of fortune do you desire tonight? Should it be about business, family or romance?” she said seductively.

When am I going to meet a woman like you, Sideman thought. He was alone tonight, as he had been every night since he moved to this city by the Estuary five years ago.

“Romance,” he said nervously and impatiently.

“We will need to know more about you. Do you mind if we perform a physical and mood test?” asked the lady on the screen with a smile.

“Go ahead,” said Sideman, but he didn’t know what to expect because this was the first time he had used one of the new fortune machines. Fortune cookies had gone out of style since all the new interactive machines had been put into circulation.

A soft gong went off and Sideman felt a warm breeze flow over him. He felt adored and his genitals tingled. The warmth floated away and the woman came back on screen.

“You are going to have a successful erotic encounter tonight with a woman of the opposite sex. The time it will occur is printed on the bill,” said the lady with a sly grin. “Have a good night and a good time sexy! Visit again soon.”

The image faded and a receipt rolled out of the machine.

This is too expensive thought Sideman, but he was smiling because he may be doing the wild thing in a few hours. Eleven thirty the receipt said. He was sad that he did not have the chance to meet her. He had seen her image on other Fortune Telling machines. He had idolized her, but she was only an image. He enjoyed looking at her, and she was programmed to charm, but things would be different if he met her. Sideman knew that he was hardly ideal and she would have noticed. There may be a whole self improvement regime. He had grown used to being alone, but being alone was not always enough. Tonight something special was going to happen, but that made Sideman worry. He knew how to live alone. It was still legal, also recommended, that individuals lived alone. But tonight there was prophecy. He was surprised by what shape it had taken. Reproduction was necessary, but for some reason it was no longer encouraged. Maybe it had to do with the extraterrestrial “invasion” which had been played down recently. The government had liked the extraterrestrial Healers. They were wise and all knowing, but they did not have a lot of time to stay on the planet. Their few suggestions were absorbed by the powers that be.

Sideman mulled over the bad luck he had been having in the romance department in this City by the Estuary. It was originally called San Francisco but a lot of people were afraid to say that they lived there, so they changed the name every couple of years. It also served as a means to hide the city from people who weren’t welcome. For many years he had been alone and unable to find the right person. His

heterosexual orientation was not accepted in the city. Actually it was against local municipal laws. The rest of the country didn't approve of the city, and the local laws were usually ignored, but the dominant local culture took them to heart. If you had heterosexual sex there had to be a guilty party, usually a third party involved to take the blame or "responsibility." They had built a prison for the incorrigibles who would not obey the laws. This was the latest chapter for Alcatraz Island out in the Estuary. For a while it was a tourist destination which highlighted the history of the famous Federal Penitentiary. But then for a while it served a dual purpose as a historic sight and a nature site where you could see populations of ocean and seashore birds. But now it was a prison again for irresponsible and indiscreet heterosexual fornicators. In other parts of the country the laws were reversed, i.e. it was against the law to be a homosexual. The City by the Estuary honored the invaders, but many of the citizens were resentful of the new laws that made it difficult to reproduce.

The news that he was going to have sex tonight may not have been good news at all. There was a really good chance that other people would say that they were having sex with his equipment, i.e. he wouldn't really be having the sex, but people would say he was. It was somewhat comforting to think that he was having more sex than he noticed. To some people he could brag that he was a "Stud" and someday he could say that he has to be "very experienced" and maybe even have to be "very skilled." But for the meantime he had the whole night to worry about the risk. Later in the evening he would probably be having illegal sex and not be able to notice with whom. Things could be worse. There were worse cities. Places where people were stupid and there were outlaws who were violent. In other parts of the country there were natural disasters and an uncontrolled code of violence. Testosterone was banned from the City by the Estuary. Every male had to undergo an operation so that they

would not produce testosterone. There was also a female equivalent, a medical procedure which disabled women from seeking revenge and working out their rage on innocent people. Sidemen would realize later in life that they were just teaching lessons, trying to let the other know what they were going through, but some did not understand and felt compelled to complain. They may be kicking a gift horse in the mouth in some way, but that may not be clear. It was no longer needed to hen peck the males to keep them all in check. There were testosterone sensors on the buses, at night clubs, and places of work, to make sure there weren't dangerous amounts of testosterone in any members of the populace. This was the law over most of the world since the benign aliens had convinced the leaders of the planet by force of argument fifty years ago. Sideman wondered if it was all for the better.

The mysterious aliens decreed that there would be no more war and forced the governments of the world to take steps to stamp out violence. The weapons were collected, the armies abolished, and the testosterone was made illegal. Most men had to take shots to reduce their testosterone. It usually turned out that woman would end up having more of something, it may not be testosterone, then the men. There were a few rebels and by and large the plan worked. Once the aliens achieved their objectives they left, leaving questions. They translated their efforts into the word "humanitarian" and said they had other worlds to help heal. They weren't going to share their technology with us until we were "older" or more in control. Sideman thought the alien humanoids were pricks because they didn't tell us much about themselves. The government did not tell the people everything they knew about them, but they did go along with their ideas for planetary improvement. But a lot of people missed testosterone. Athletics suffered and there was an increase in artificial insemination. Their effect on the world was not overt. It was not easy to know what they had done, but

interactions between men and women had become a lot more stressful since they arrived. They also left some of their Artificial Intelligence machines.

Sideman went to the phone to call his friend and former co-worker Jason. They hadn't talked for a long time because Jason had come into some money and he wasn't as friendly as he had once been. But Sideman was hoping to borrow his Action Recorder. It was a new device that recorded all of your actions while the batteries lasted, and you could replace the batteries. But they were very expensive and only the wealthy could afford them. With the Action Recorder he could prove that he was not having an encounter with the opposite sex that evening. He could prove that he was not breaking the new municipal code laws.

Sideman went to the phone and put in his debit card. The phone rang and then Jason came to the phone.

"Hello."

"Hey Jason, it's me Sideman. Can you lend me an Action Recorder tonight?"

"Hey Sideman, how have you been? Actually I can't, but do you want to meet? I am going out for Red Herrings tonight. Do you want to meet for a drink?" said Jason reacting quickly.

Red Herrings was a code word for a bar and Sideman knew what place Jason would be going to, but he couldn't commit over the phone in case anybody was listening.

"Not sure what I am doing tonight, but let's meet soon," said Sideman.

"You know the place," said Jack.

"Let's talk then," said Sideman.

Sideman was bummed because an Action Recorder would give him the proof. It was going to be an interesting night. Here was an opportunity to get his hands on a woman, something he had wanted to do for a long time, but was not legally allowed to do so anymore. But maybe the woman he was going to get his hands on was going to be with another woman

and they would say that he was involved and he had no proof to argue otherwise? Or maybe someone was going to have hetero sex and blame it on him? Or maybe two guys would say that he was intimately involved? What if he had to move somewhere where people wouldn't understand or approve? But eleven thirty was coming soon and he would like to have a witness. Maybe Jason would serve as one? He would have proof on his Action Recorder.

This had to all change, but Sideman did not know who could change it. Sideman did not know if prophecy and myth could exist in this mechanized and controlled future. The computers kept everybody accounted for. Everybody needed a code to work, pay rent, communicate, and shop. Since the "invasion" it sure seemed as if there were a lot more machines around keeping tabs on things. There sure seemed as if there was a lot less freedom and a lot more surveillance. Sideman had decided to take things on a day by day basis, but the days were more worrisome, especially if you did not have a lot of contact with others who knew you. It would take a hero to change or rectify these things. Sideman was not sure if he even understood the goals of the galactic visitors, and he did not trust all the new machines.

Sideman decided to take the bus to the bar: The Cattlyst. Jason would probably be there pretty soon. He hadn't had a Red Herring in a while and this was a nice place where you could find a great loose woman who was willing and often wanted to do some hetero under the right conditions. They were more flexible with the rules down there. That is anyway what he had heard. But it never seemed to work out that way for Sideman. He would go to these lively bars and have nothing to say.

The modern dating devices were all programmed for the majority sexuality and sometimes would even help incarcerate people with the minority sexuality. The Matchmaker Machine would help you pick out the best person who was also hooked up, but it didn't

respect “undesirable preferences.” The Learning Chapter Machine treated heteros as an infantile stage that had to be grown out of. Heterosexuality was only for the physically needy was the argument. This had always seemed strange to Sideman, but he did not know how to disagree.

But Sideman dreamed of a woman who would break the rules and do the wild thing with him. A woman who didn't care about what the machines told them to do. But he didn't know how to apprise this dream woman, this woman who no woman could possibly be, of what he was going through tonight. He wanted a woman who would ignore the machines, but the fortune said at what time things would start happening. He wondered if dating scene was different elsewhere.

Sideman waited by the bus stop sweating and perplexed. The Bus Stop Companion Television Machine was broadcasting the Mayors new plans for the city. The city was trying to seek alliances with other cities which also had the “correct” sexual patterning.

“You are not alone out there. We understand and we want to form friendships,” the Mayor was saying.

The bus came quickly and Sideman rode it to the neighborhood where the bar was. The bus also had a video screen which broadcasted The Bus Stop Television Companion.

The Mayor was saying, “Let's be friends. Let's join forces together. Let's hold hands across this country.”

Sideman was not happy with the thought that things could possibly be the same elsewhere, but he was also afraid that they may be worse. Dating may be more risky elsewhere. Things may just be abnormal now all over, and he had learned how to live in the City by the Estuary. He would not move until something better presented itself elsewhere. For now he decided to count his blessings if he could. The City by the Estuary had nice weather, less violence, and its share of surrounding territory.

Sideman stopped paying attention, but the

television documentary ended and some music came on. But soon Sideman was off the bus and on the way to the bar. It was a quiet night for the Cattlyst, but there were still all types of folks there. There were still some hippie types from the 1960's, but of course the neo hippies from the 2030's: those who embraced the alien invading Healers. There were X'ers and Punks and Y'ers, Z'ers and X-cubed-ers. Some people were nude and others wore their Sexual Protocol Announcers which listed the steps you should take with them if you were interested in a sexual encounter with them. One thing that was great about the Cattlyst was that they had booths, saunas and private rooms for rental. It was eleven and he was in the mood for a drink. Sideman ordered a Red Herring at the bar and turned around in his chair so he could look at the crowd.

“Do you want any of these,” a man said letting him know that he had testosterone pills for sale. Sideman chose to refuse even though they would improve his sexual performance if he had a chance to perform that evening as prophesized by the Fortune Telling Machines.

The Red Herring was juicy but salty. They were a popular drink to talk about at work at the City by the Estuary Tourism Company where he used to work with Jason. There was a high turnover rate there, and efforts were always made to weed away the new employees. They liked Jason and he had moved upward in the company.

And speaking of the devil there was Boughta, a coworker from the company. He didn't see Boughta anymore because she transferred to a different department. And there walking behind her through the crowd was Jason. Jason had a noirish suit on and Boughta wore a neo hippie dress with a flap that could be opened to expose her belly.

“Hey Larson, how are you doing,” said Jason.

“Lucky man tonight,” said Boughta.

“Would you like to join me for a drink?” asked Sideman.

“We would but we already had a few,” said Boughta.

“How are you two doing in the big office?” asked Sideman.

“You know, knowing the city, sharing the city,” said Jason.

“It is a grand city. I am afraid to move anywhere else,” said Sideman.

“Yes it is a beautiful city,” said Boughta.

“It brings out the emotions in people,” said Jason.

They stood there without anything to say for a moment. Sideman drank taking a sip from the Red Herring.

“Hey you should check the job listings. There is a new opening upstairs for an executive sales trainee. I can put in a good word for you,” said Jason.

“I would like to give it a try,” said Sideman.

“We will hook you up,” said Boughta.

“We have plans upstairs with a third party if you know what I mean, but let me get you another drink. What are you having?” said Jason.

Sideman looked at his watch and it was eleven fifteen.

“How about another Red Herring?” said Jason.

“Sounds good to me,” said Sideman.

“Another Red Herring it will be,” said Jason to the bartender and he put down the money.

“We have to run,” said Boughta as she playfully tugged on Jason’s coat.

“Thanks for the drink,” said Sideman.

The bartender asked if he wanted mood enhancers with the drink, but Sideman indicated that he just wanted the regular.

Jason waved and Boughta followed him upstairs to where they had the private booths. Boughta waved and smiled.

Sideman was happy to get the extra drink

because he needed to save some money. With the new job he would probably be better off. He looked around the bar and most people were in couples or groups. He didn’t see an opening or an opportunity to talk with anybody, but he was enjoying the drink. He ordered an appetizer and went to a table to watch the video display on the ceiling.

Sideman looked at his watch and it was eleven thirty. He had to work the next day so he couldn’t stay too much later. He was sad that he couldn’t talk to Jason at that moment. Boughta was lovely as usual. He was willing to bet the Action Recorder was turned off. At least it wasn’t a mystery to Sideman tonight.

But Sideman realized that things had to change. There was something wrong with this future. Things had not worked out the way they should have. Maybe in the new position he would have the power or opportunity to change things. There was something wrong with all these machines controlling things. There were machines at home, at work, and on the bus. They were the gifts of the mysterious Healers, but Sideman worried about them. One could usually escape some of them at nightclubs, but they were also there if necessary or desired. Sideman realized that he was probably up there tonight with Jason and Boughta in “some way,” but things needed to change. Things probably would not get too bad because they were co-workers; this was a risk that people had to take to have sex now. Someday it may be his turn.

Maybe he was the one to change things, but he did not yet know how. Maybe someday Jason would return the favor or help. Sideman finished his Red Herring and made his way sadly towards the bus. The Healers may have changed things, but not necessarily better for everyone. Tomorrow there may be another prophecy about someone making life better for everyone.