

The Strange Years

by Brian Lumley, 1937–

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He lay face-down on the beach at the foot of a small dune, his face turned to one side, the summer sun beating down upon him. The clump of beach-grass at the top of the dune bent its spikes in a stiff breeze, but down here all was calm, with not even a seagull's cry to break in upon the lulling hush, hush of waves from far down the beach.

It would be nice, he thought, to run down the beach and splash in the sea, and come back dripping salt water and tasting it on his lips, and for the very briefest of moments be a small boy again in a world with a future. But the sun beat down from a blue sky and his limbs were leaden, and a great drowsiness was upon him.

Then... a disturbance. Blown on the breeze to climb the far side of the dune, flapping like a bird with broken wings, a slim book—a child's exercise book, with tables of weights and measures on the back—flopped down exhausted in the sand before his eyes. Disinterested, he found strength to push it away; but as his fingers touched it so its cover blew open to reveal pages written in a neat if shaky adult longhand.

He had nothing else to do, and so began to read...

When did it begin? Where? How? Why?

The Martians we might have expected (they've been frightening us long enough with their tales of invasion from outer space) and certainly there have been enough threats from our Comrades across the water. But this?

Any ordinary sort of plague, we would survive. We always have in the past. And as for war: Christ!—when has there not been a war going on somewhere? They've irradiated us in Japan, defoliated us in Vietnam, smothered us in DDT wherever we were arable and poured poison into us where we once flowed sweet and clean—and we always bounced right back.

Fire and flood—even nuclear fire and festering effluent—have not appreciably stopped us. For

„They” read „We”, Man, and for „Us” read „the World”, this Earth which once was ours. Yes, there have been strange years, but never a one as strange as this.

A penance? The ultimate penance? Or has Old Ma Nature finally decided to give us a hand? Perhaps she's stood off, watching us try our damndest for so damned long to exterminate ourselves, and now She's sick to death of the whole damned scene. „OK,” She says, „have it your own way.” And She gives the nod to Her Brother, the Old Boy with the scythe. And He sighs and steps forward, and—

And it is a plague of sorts; and certainly it is DOOM; and a fire that rages across the world and devours all... Or will that come later? The cleansing flame from which Life's bright phoenix shall rise again? There will always be the sea. And how many ages this time before something gets left by the tide, grows lungs, jumps up on its feet and walks... and reaches for a club?

When did it begin?

I remember an Irish stoker who came into a bar dirty and drunk. His sleeves were rolled up and he scratched at hairy arms. I thought it was the heat. „Hot? Damned right, sur,” he said, „an' hotter by far down below—an' lousy!” He unrolled a newspaper on the bar and vigorously brushed at his matted forearm. Things fell on to the newsprint and moved, slowly. He popped them with a cigarette. „Crabs, sur!” he cried. „An' Christ—they suck like crazy!”

When?

There have always been strange years—plague years, drought years, war and wonder years—so it's difficult to pin it down. But the last twenty years... they have been strange. When, exactly! Who can say? But let's give it a shot. Let's start with the '70s—say, '76?—the drought.

There was so little water in the Thames that they said the river was running backwards. The militants blamed the Soviets. New laws were introduced to conserve water. People were taken to court for watering flowers. Some idiot calculated that a pound of excreta could be satisfactorily washed away with six pints of water, and people put bricks in their WC cisterns. Someone else said you could bathe comfortably in four inches of water, and if you didn't use soap the resultant mud could be thrown on the garden. The thing snowballed into a national campaign to „Save It!”—and in October the skies were still cloudless, the earth parched, and imported rainmakers danced and pounded their tom-toms at Stonehenge. Forest and heath fires were daily occurrences and reservoirs became dustbowls. Sun-worshippers drank Coke and turned very brown...

And finally it rained, and it rained, and it rained. Widespread flooding, rivers bursting their banks, gardens (deprived all summer) inundated and washed away. Millions of tons of water, and not a pound of excreta to be disposed of. A strange year, '76. And just about every year since, come to think.

'77, and stories leak out of the Ukraine of fifty thousand square miles turned brown and utterly barren in the space of a single week. Since then the spread has been very slow, but it hasn't stopped. The Russians blamed „us” and we accused „them” of testing a secret weapon.

'79 and '80, and oil tankers sinking or grounding themselves left, right and centre. Miles-long oil slicks and chemicals jettisoned at sea, and whales washed up on the beaches, and Greenpeace, and the Japanese slaughtering dolphins. Another drought, this time in Australia, and a plague of mice to boot. Some Aussie commenting that „The poor 'roos are dying in their thousands—and a few aboes, too...” And great green swarms of aphids and the skies bright with ladybirds.

Lots of plagues, in fact. We were being warned, you see?

And '84! Ah—1984! Good old George!

He was wrong, of course, for it wasn't Big Brother at all. It was Big Sister—Ma Nature Herself.

And in 1984 She really started to go off the rails. '84 was half of India eaten by locusts and all of Africa down with a mutant strain of beriberi. '84 was the year of the poisoned potatoes and sinistral periwinkles, the year it rained frogs over wide areas of France, the year the cane-pest shot sugar beet right up to the top of the crops.

And not only Ma Nature but Technology, too, came unstuck in '84. The Lake District chemically polluted—permanently; nuclear power stations at Loch Torr on one side of the Atlantic and Long Island on the other melting down almost simultaneously; the Americans bringing back a „bug” from Mars (see, even a real Martian invasion); oil discovered in the Mediterranean, and new fast-drilling techniques cracking the ocean floor and allowing it to leak and leak and leak—and even Red Adair shaking his head in dismay. How do you plug a leak two hundred fathoms deep and a mile long? And that jewel of oceans turning black, and Cyprus a great white tombstone in a lake of pitch. „*Aphrodite Rising From The High-Grade.*“

Then '85 and '86; and they were strange, too, because they were so damned quiet! The lull before the storm, so to speak. And then—

Then it was '87, '88 and '89. The American space-bug leaping to Australia and New Zealand and giving both places a monstrous malaise. No one doing any work for six months; cattle and sheep dead in their millions; entire cities and towns burning down because nobody bothered to call out the fire services, or they didn't bother to come... And all the world's beaches strewn with countless myriads of great dead octopuses, a new species (or a mutant strain) with three rows of suckers to each tentacle; and their stink utterly unbearable as they rotted. A plague of great, fat seagulls. All the major volcanoes erupting in unison. Meteoric debris making massive holes in the ionosphere. A new, killer-cancer caused by sunburn. The common cold cured!—and uncommon leprosy spreading like wildfire through the Western World.

And finally—

Well, that was „When?”. It was also, I fancy, „Where?” and „How?”. As to „Why”—I give a mental shrug. I'm tired, probably hungry. I have some sort of lethargy—the spacebug, I suppose—and I reckon it won't be long now. I had

hoped that getting this down on paper might keep me active, mentally if not physically. But...

Why?

Well, I think I've answered that one, too.

Ma Nature strikes back. Get rid of the human vermin. They're lousing up your planet! And maybe that's what gave Her the idea. If fire and flood and disease and disaster and war couldn't do the trick, well, what else could She do? They advise you to fight fire with fire, so why not vermin with vermin?

They appeared almost overnight, five times larger than their immediate progenitors and growing bigger with each successive hatching; and unlike the new octopus they didn't die; and their incubation period down to less than a week. The superlice. All Man's little body parasites, all of his tiny, personal vampires, growing in the space of a month to things as big as your fist.

Leaping things, flying things, walking sideways things. To quote a certain Irishman: „An' Christ—they suck like crazy!”

They've sucked, all right. They've sucked the world to death. New habits, new protections—new immunities and near-invulnerability—to go with their new size and strength. The meek inheriting the Earth? Stamp on them and they scurry away. Spray them with lethal chemicals and they bathe in them. Feed them DDT and they develop a taste for it. „An' Christ—they suck like crazy!”

And the whole world down with the creeping, sleeping sickness. We didn't even want to fight them!

Vampires, and they've learned new tricks. Camouflage... Clinging to walls above doors, they look like bricks or tiles. And when you go through the door... And their bite acts like a sort of LSD. Brings on mild hallucinations, a feeling of well-being, a kind of euphoria. In the cities, amongst the young, there were huge gangs of „bug-people!” My God!

They use animals, too; dogs and cats—as mounts, to get them about when they're bloated. Oh, they kill them eventually, but they know how to use them first. Dogs can dig under walls and fences; cats can climb and squeeze through tiny openings; crows and other large birds can fly down on top of things and into places...

Me, I was lucky—if you can call it that. A bachelor, two dogs, a parakeet and an outdoor aviary. My bungalow entirely netted in; fine wire netting, with trees, trellises and vines. And best of all situated on a wild stretch of the coast, away from mankind's great masses. But even so, it was only a matter of time.

They came, found me, sat outside my house, outside the wire and the walls, and they waited. They found ways in. Dogs dug holes for them, seagulls tore at the mesh overhead. Frantically, I would trap, pour petrol, burn, listen to them *pop!* But I couldn't stay awake for ever. One by one they got the birds, leaving little empty bodies and bunches of feathers. And my dogs, Bill and Ben, which I had to shoot and burn. And this morning when I woke up, Peter parakeet.

So there's at least one of them, probably two or three, here in the room with me right now.

Hiding, waiting for night. Waiting for me to go to sleep. I've looked for them, of course, but—

Chameleons, they fit perfectly into any background. When I move, they move. And they imitate perfectly. But they do make mistakes. A moment ago I had two hairbrushes, identical, and I only ever had one. Can you imagine brushing your hair with something like that? And what the hell would I want with three fluffy slippers? A left, a right—and a centre?

...I can see the beach from my window. And half a mile away, on the point, there's Carter's grocery. Not a crust in the kitchen. Dare I chance it? Do I want to? Let's see, now. Biscuits, coffee, powdered milk, canned beans, potatoes—no, strike the potatoes. A sack of carrots...

The man on the beach grinned mirthlessly, white lips drawing back from his teeth and freezing there. A year ago he would have expected to read such in a book of horror fiction. But not now.

Not when it was written in his own hand.

The breeze changed direction, blew: on him, and the sand began to drift against his side. It blew in his eyes, glazed now and lifeless. The shadows lengthened as the sun started to dip down behind the dunes. His body grew cold.

Three hairy sacks with pincer feet, big as footballs and heavy with his blood, crawled slowly away from him along the beach...

