



Fog

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Fog

A Tale of the Annihilatio Zodiac

By S.C. Eston

Thank you for reading my story.

- Steve

FOG

Version 1.18.1

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Preamble

On the third floor of the Fredericton City Hall exists a space tenanted by an obscure organization known as FT.O.R.S. The area is located in the western back corner overlooking the St. John River and is divided into four square rooms of equal size.

One of these is secured by three heavy locks. Inside the windowless room, four metallic shelving units stand side by side, from one wall to the other. On the top rack of the second unit rests a forgotten and unsealed padded yellow envelope wrapped in a black plastic bag.

Inside rests a cellular device.

At first glance, the Samsung Galaxy S5 looks ordinary. Smears of gritty soils suggest that it spent a significant amount of time out in the elements, most likely lying in the dirt where it was possibly found. When powered, it starts by showing the manufacturer's logo, loads its operating system and software, and presents its main screen without requesting a password.

Here, five icons, each in the shape of a square recorder, form a vertical line on a plain grey background. They are titled "Recording 1," "Recording 2," "Recording 3," "Recording 4," and "Recording 5."

Nothing else appears on the screen – no link to random applications, no shortcut to a camera or a telephone pad, and no access to the device's settings.

Only five icons on a grey background.

The transcript of these recordings is included below.

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Recording 1

April 10, 2015, 7:05 AM (3 minutes 11 seconds)

Here I am again; alone, walking along the river.

Another early morning. Another night without sleep. I'm doing what my shrink told me to do: talking to myself, venting, letting everything out.

"A digital diary," she told me. "Because you like technology."

Yeah, whatever.

Yesterday, I copied the old recordings onto my computer, where they'll rot. I can't imagine that I'll ever listen to that stuff again. Eventually, it'll all end up where unused computers go to decompose. Somewhere in Africa, I've heard. Forty or so million tonnes of electronic waste last year. One of those random facts I can't seem to forget.

Information that came from Alyssa.

I'm being good about the recordings. Done it almost every day. I don't get the point though. The talking doesn't change a thing, that's for sure.

Alyssa is still in Moncton, an hour and a half away. I don't even have her address. What kind of father doesn't know where his daughter lives?

Damn you, Claire.

(silence)

I shouldn't talk like this . . . on the off chance the recordings end up with Alyssa. It could happen. Let's say I die and the cell ends up with her. Could happen.

Alyssa, if you're listening, your mother is a good woman. A good mother, at least. Don't mind me. I miss you, and it makes for hard times, and words I don't mean.

(silence)

(heavy sigh)

Weather's mild. Foggy again. Heavy fog, all packed on the river, like a cloud that lost its will to float, keeping its arms and legs close, afraid to touch land.

Shit, I'm miserable.

Anyhow, the water is high and almost reaches the path where I walk. I passed a bench that was half under water. Snow melting in the north, I guess, making its way south, vacationing or something. Like migrating birds, going south, going back to the ocean, or the bay. The same every spring.

I can't see the south bank. Not even the lighthouse. I can make out the Westmorland Bridge ahead, floating above the fog. Nothing spectacular, as far as bridges go. A concrete slab on pegs. No arch or poles with suspended cables. A wasted opportunity. At least the old train bridge has style.

City hall's clock pops above the mist. I can also see the hospital at the top of the hill, above the tree line, and one of the blue water towers. It always surprises me how much of the city the trees cover.

I am . . . doing good.

I guess.

Better. Trying to stay positive.

Thoughts of Alyssa keep me going. She's visiting this weekend, tomorrow – if Claire lets her. The drive from Moncton takes an hour and a half; longer if you don't speed. That's not far. No reason not to come.

But it happened before. If only . . .

(silence)

Wait...

(silence)

There's something . . . on the river.

Something moving in the mist.

Some boat. A canoe, like one of the Mi'kmaq's. Long and narrow. Boats rarely go on the water this early in the year, with the level this high.

I can't see it anymore.

(silence)

I can't hear anything either.

I must be imagining things.

(beeping sound)

The damn battery is low again. You always need to charge the thing.

I'll stop talking for now. Another lonely day starting. At least, it's Friday.

Tomorrow, Alyssa should be here.

One reason to look forward to the weekend.

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Recording 2

April 11, 2015, 6:45 AM (1 minute 5 seconds)

Couldn't sleep again. I guess I'm nervous. It's a good nervous though.

Alyssa should be here around one. I'm looking forward to seeing her. I think it has been four weeks since she came. Maybe less. I'm not good with dates, or remembering anything.

During her last visit, Alyssa talked about a shooting somewhere in Tunisia. It happened March 18 or 19. Barbo, or Bardo? A museum. Bad stuff. Like a movie. Hostages, twenty-one killed. Something like fifty injured.

It's like Alyssa to know what most of us don't. This stuff and where computer wastes go.

Just one more reason I'm so proud of her.

If only Claire would allow me to visit more often. I would go to Moncton, as often as I need to, as often as Alyssa wants me to. I don't have a car, but I could take the bus and stay at Gus'. He wouldn't mind me crashing for a night or two.

I guess his wife might disagree.

Anyway, I could make it work.

I would.

(silence)

The fog's here again this morning. Thicker, if that's possible. Almost on the path. Braver than yesterday, stepping inland.

I thought about the boat during the night.

I don't think I made it up.

Strangest thing – the image that kept returning was not the boat, but a silhouette, tall and slim, standing at the front of the canoe. There was no one there last night though. Not that I remember.

I had no intention of ever listening to these monologues again, but last night, that is exactly what I did. I listened to yesterday's recording. Needed to make certain I had not mentioned the figure.

I hadn't.

Anyway, sleep didn't come, so I got out of bed and took my walk earlier than usual.

(silence)

I can't see a thing today. The mist is thick and endless. I don't know why, but I wish the boat was here. If only to confirm I didn't imagine it. Or to prove I'm not insane, like Claire keeps saying I am.

Usually, I turn around at about this spot, but I'll walk farther, make my way up on the Westmorland Bridge to get a better view of the river.

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Recording 3

April 11, 2015, 7:01 AM (25 seconds)

There it is.

The boat.

The fog makes it hard to see, but it's coming my way, with the current. It will pass under the bridge, under where I am standing.

(silence)

It's getting closer . . . and . . .

And . . .

I'm shaking. Why am I shaking?

Someone *is* standing in the canoe!

Just like I imagined last night.

(silence)

Where did he go? He was . . .

He's back. I almost can't see him, if I look straight at him. Sideways, though . . . This is weird. The man is weird; I think it's a man. He's tall, thin, awkward. Wears black, standing with his back arched.

I can't believe what I am seeing. It's cold, even for a spring day. Colder on the water. I can't imagine what he's doing out on the river. Where is he going?

I'm nervous. Still shaking. Obviously, the man is sneaking around, hiding something. He doesn't want to be seen.

Shit!

He turned his head this way.

(muffled noise, followed by brief laughter)

I'm crouching. Couldn't help laughing, but this is not funny. Can't say if he saw me. He must have; me standing like a king on his balcony, right above him.

Shit, the shakes won't go away.

(muffled laughter)

I'm out of here.

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Recording 4

April 11, 2015, 9:15 AM (33 seconds)

I don't know what to do with myself.

Alyssa is coming later, by bus. That's one piece of good news. Alyssa will get to the station around two, and she will have to catch a taxi to come here. It doesn't feel good, not being able to pick up your own daughter. I hope Alyssa doesn't think less of me because I don't own a car. I'll pay the fare once she gets here.

I can do that, at least.

I started a new job. Nothing fancy, but decent pay. Costco bankrupted a bunch of small businesses when it settled here — turned the downtown almost into a ghost town. I'm exaggerating, a little. But it was frustrating, seeing all the small shops closing their doors. I boycotted Costco myself for a while – and now I'm working for the bad guys. Feel like a traitor, but I'm saving some cash, so . . .

I'm hoping to give some to Alyssa, later, for her studies. A gift when she graduates.
(laughter)

I watched another one of those *Money Moron* episodes on the TV this morning. Alyssa recommended the show. Says she watches it all the time.

"You'll love Gail," she promised.

Ah, that I do. The woman says things the way they are. One has to like such honesty. Way too rare. The show helped me straighten up my finances. Some. I needed straightening.

I'm rambling.

The apartment is clean. I finished putting the dishes away, hiding the mess and how lazy I've become. Unmotivated is a better way of putting it. At least Alyssa's visits force me to behave.

All these sleepless nights are counterproductive and make me tired. I want to be sharp when Alyssa gets here. No drink for the past few nights. I'll lie down for a while and hope it'll help.

(fumbling noises)

Just set the alarm. For one thirty. Enough time for me to get out, sit on the patio, and look for Alyssa. Can't wait for her to get here.

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Recording 5

January 1, 2000, 00:00 AM (30 minutes and 42 seconds)

(muffled noises)

(silence)

(muffled noises)

I . . . don't know what the fuck is happening.

I'm on the boat.

He's ignoring me.

He stands tall at the head of the canoe. Seven feet, at least. Me seated down like this, he looks like twenty feet tall. Freakishly slim too, just bones. The rocking of the boat doesn't seem to bother him in the least. He stands bent in a strange way, yet solid as a statue. He wears a suit. His pants are way too short. Socks cover his bony ankles. No tie, all black. He only stands and fixates on something in the fog.

Something ahead.

Something I can't see.

How the hell did I end up here? I can't remember anything after falling asleep while waiting for Alyssa.

He's wrong, this man. Wrong, like, weird. Like shitty scary, out of a Stephen King novel. Or worse. When I look straight at him, he blurs. Freakish thing.

I am shaking again. Scared. Never been this scared in my life.

There's nothing to see. The fog is a grey wall. Morning or night? I can't even guess. Is Alyssa already here? It can't be afternoon, can it? The fog usually leaves in the afternoon.

Did I miss her? Did she go back?

No way to know.

I guess I'm on the St. John River, only because I saw the boat there before. I should not have gone on the Westmorland Bridge. That was when the man noticed me. Has to be. He thought I was spying on him.

I assume we're close to Fredericton. I hope.

Where is he taking me?

This is not good. I'm bound by a rope to the plank I'm sitting on. The rope is thinner than a lace, but it is as strong as a metal wire. Makes no sense.

There is no escape. I kicked and screamed and flapped hard when I first woke. Not a proud moment, but I can't say I care. The man ignored me, like he's doing now. It's like I'm not important.

The damn rope is painful. Cuts through my pants and into the skin.

I'm alone with the freak. The canoe is empty except for a bundle on the floor in front of me. Burlap. Tied with the same type of rope. No idea what could be in the thing. It's smaller than a hockey bag, larger than a small suitcase.

Can't believe he didn't take my phone. Stupid of him. Sure, there is no signal. It'd make too much sense if there was. Still stupid of him.

I care so much about Alyssa. I do. Can't think of anything else right now. I should have cared more before. Late to wake up, but never too late, right?

So here I am, whispering and recording. I'm thanking the shrink now, I can tell you that. At the very least, it's a distraction. If I'm lucky, it's something I can leave behind. A breadcrumb trail, like in the fairy tale, the one with the kids and the candy house. Although it's only one phone, so not much of a trail.

(silence)

Something is ahead.

(long silence)

A wall...

Not a wall.

It is the box, the thing floating by the train bridge, the one that looks like a pier. No one knows what it is. Maybe it had a purpose back when the train still rode on the bridge. Maybe not.

But it means I'm still in Fredericton. Can make out the underside of the train bridge.

Small comfort. I can't see the city, and . . .

We're slowing down, getting close to the pier thing. The man hasn't moved, but the canoe just stopped.

It's opening! There's a door on the side of the pier. Makes no sense. Where would that go?

The man moved and bent forward, and it is one of the most disturbing things I've ever seen.

This is not a man. It can't be. Not moving like that.

The shaking is getting worse. Almost dropped the phone.

If he's not a man, then what is he anyway?

(gasping sound)

Almost jumped out of my pants. Something moved in the opening, in the pier.

Shit, is the freak going to take me in there?

I need to get rid of the phone before he notices. Before . . . he remembers I'm here.

The bank is too far, the train bridge's too high.

Shit.

The pier? I can throw it on top, but who will find it there? What are the chances?

Holy shit!

Holy crazy shit!

The bundle moved!

Just touched it with my foot, and I swear it moved.

What the hell is in there? It can't be a person, can it? The bag is too small for that.

Shit, could it be a kid? A young girl or something?

I . . .

(silence, followed by heavy breathing)

Fuck . . . he's coming.

Alyssa, I love you.

(loud shuffling sounds)

Let me go!

No, no . . . NO –

(screams, loud and quickly fading away)

(thud)

(extended silence)

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Postscript

The package containing the cellular phone was delivered to the Fredericton City Hall on the second day of July 2015. It was addressed to FT.O.R.S. and mailed from a nearby post office.

It bore no return address.

Of the four security agents working that day, only one knew about the organization renting a modest space on the third floor. To her knowledge, this was the first time the organization had received a piece of correspondence. She personally delivered the envelope, dropping it in an old-fashioned mailbox hung on the society's main door.

The next day, a member of FT.O.R.S. opened the package and listened to the recordings. On the fourth day of July, FT.O.R.S. assembled a group of three investigators to look into the matter. On the fifth, they successfully extracted the name of the owner of the telephone from files stored in its memory.

Tom Black.

Following this lead, they identified five individuals going by the names Tom or Thomas Black living in the province of New Brunswick. Only one of the men owned a house in or near the city of Fredericton. During the period when the messages were recorded, he had been travelling overseas. No connection was found between the other individuals and the device or the city.

The Frederick's Town Occult Research Society then turned its attention to the daughter. Their search lead to three women in the Moncton area matching the name and age of the young woman mentioned in the messages.

None of them had a father named Tom Black. None of them had a father who lived or once lived in the city of Fredericton or its vicinity.

The investigators then contacted the service provider associated with the cellular device. After some negotiation, the company agreed to cooperate. It confirmed the owner

as Tom Black – not Thomas – and shared what information it had on the customer, including an address: 96 Hayes Street.

On July 12, 2015, two members of FT.O.R.S visited the tiny house on Hayes Street and found it abandoned. Several neighbours confirmed that the place had been empty for over ten years. The last owners – an elderly couple – passed away in 2004; the wife of natural causes and the husband, a few months later, of a broken heart. The city repossessed the house and seemingly forgot about it thereafter.

Over the next two weeks, the investigation branched in several directions but was unable to clarify the origins of the phone or the existence of Tom Black. On July 31, the envelope was slid into a plastic bag and stored on a shelf.

Then, inexplicably, it was forgotten.

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Acknowledgements

I'd like to take a moment and pay tribute to H.P. Lovecraft, a master storyteller and one of the main sources of inspiration for this series. If you have not yet read some of his material, and you enjoy horror of the unknown, I encourage you to take a moment to do so; you won't be disappointed.

I'd also like to mention the *X-Com* video game series. The original game, released in 1994, was a masterpiece on which I spent countless hours, and it was probably my first encounter with aliens. Those were good days. The new series released in 2012 was well done, and the tall man in this book is based on one of the creatures of this game.

About the Author



STEVE C. ESTON grew up in the province of New Brunswick, Canada. He is a manager in technology services and currently lives in Fredericton with his wife, Leigh, and their two children. For behind-the-scenes info, excerpts, and free short stories, you can visit him at:

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