

HEAVEN ON EARTH

AN UNPUBLISHED STORY

Imagine if there were places in the world where there was just enough rainfall to keep the grass sweet and the animals watered, but where otherwise it was blissfully sunny. Not too hot, nothing dry or near desert drought conditions. Warm enough for people to live comfortably without fear of hurricane, or typhoon, with no danger of nature sneaking up and providing a surprise by way of earthquake, volcano or tsunami. Perfect living conditions.

All the bad weather, the dangers of physical harm, the monsoons and the freezing cold were confined to designated other places.

Imagine if there were places in the world where there was no crime. People could leave their doors unlocked without worrying about intruders. There were no muggers, no violence, no drug problems. People weren't angry or impatient, there was respect and time for helping others. Murder was non-existent, rape didn't exist, children were cared for not harmed, and no one got too greedy. Hate was an alien emotion.

Human nature would still exist of course, so all the crime, all the people who did the crime would have to be kept in other places.

Imagine if there were places in the world where disease was under control. Where poverty had been eradicated, where religion wasn't a barrier, where the colour of your skin didn't define your status in society. Where people were judged by how they behaved rather than what they possessed. War was a thing of the past, famine was unheard of, political corruption was only found in the history books. Love wasn't just a marketing tool to be used in advertisements for big business products.

Sin would have to have an outlet, an escape valve, somewhere should exist so that all the negativity didn't sit and fester. Cruelty and wickedness would have to be allocated to other places.

Other places. What would they be like? The opposite of good, the antithesis of pleasure, the reverse of peace.

Welcome to Night City.

A city where night merges with day in a perpetual twilight of grey half tones. Dirty rain falls most of the time, staining everything it touches with a grimy black sheen that leaves an oil slick pattern on the flat surfaces of buildings.

A city of seething chaos where death holds sway in a mindless dance of soulless fusion. Life is cheap because everyone knows this is one of the designated places. This is a place where all the dregs of the earth gather for a final tilt at the windmill, a last drink in the saloon before the sentence is passed.

It wasn't that these people were atoning for the sins of anyone else. The people who lived in the golden parts of the world wouldn't thank the citizens of Night for keeping all the badness at bay. They wouldn't offer up a single prayer for having all the evil contained within defined borders. They wouldn't give it a thought, not even a finger hold of conscience effort to consider what it was like to live in the other places. Night City and the others areas in other countries were the forgotten wastelands of the world. Only talked about on the few occasions when one of their own ventured into the forbidden cities.

Welcome to Night City. The sign didn't give a population count like some signs in other parts of the country did. Ethan wasn't surprised. He'd been here before.

He knew that even in the short drive from the restricted entry airport thirteen people or thereabouts would have been murdered. That was the current rate. He knew that about three hundred people would have been infected with a disease that would eventually prove fatal. HIV was rife, as was venereal disease, malaria, cholera. In fact every known communicable disease had been identified there, and at least two new strains had been discovered in the past three years.

Ethan was a bounty hunter, with a difference. The difference was that he found lost people who hadn't committed any crime. Runaways mainly, people who had left paradise and made their way to the Nights of the world. Sometimes there was a reason, but not one Ethan could understand. He had seen too much of the sort of life Night City offered to be able to comprehend why people would want to see the dark side.

Usually they were young people, still naïve enough to believe there was more to life than the evidence of their own eyes. More often than not Ethan got to them before it was too late. As a rule their experiences warned them off trying rebellion ever again. Usually they were glad to get out unscathed. Usually but not always, because with all rules there is an exception. Macy had been the exception before and she was the problem now.

Macy had been sixteen the first time she had run away. Night had hidden her for a week before Ethan found her and took her back to grateful parents. Macy seemed grateful enough herself, and considering where she had been found that was understandable.

The different races crammed into the few square miles of Night formed themselves into gangs and operated alongside one another in a respectful if uneasy state of truce. Each group operated brothels, sometimes fronted by a bar or club. Often exotic dancing groomed the girls for the more lucrative work carried out in tiny rooms behind and upstairs. It was in one of these rooms that Ethan found Macy last time. She seemed genuinely relieved to be rescued from the three east European men who had been readying her.

Obviously not relieved enough because now, two years later, she had run away again.

It was a warm friendly day when he took the call. His office was a beachfront apartment, ground floor, with a back room he often used as a bedroom. Macy's parents, Tom and Miranda Powers, were in the diplomatic service and stationed as they were in the Pacific there was plenty of time for relaxation. That meant they got to spend time with their daughter, and on the surface there didn't seem to be any problems in the family. It was Mr Powers who rang.

'Connolly?'

'Ethan Connolly.'

'This is...'

'I recognise the voice. How are you, Mr Powers?'

There was a snort of annoyance before an answer snapped back. 'Lousy. That thoughtless daughter of mine has run away again. Two good years and we're back to square one. I don't know...'

Ethan cut him off before the tirade familiar from countless other fathers over the years began in earnest. 'When did she leave?'

The slight hesitation was the first hint of guilt. 'I'm not entirely sure. My wife and I have been busy, it's a fine life but one has to work to pay for it. It must definitely have been during the past three days.'

Ethan shook his head. A lot of miles could have been covered in three days.

Powers said aloud what Ethan had already decided. 'I think she may have gone back to Night City.'

It had been apparent from the airplane window but the closer to the city he got the darker it was becoming. From the air there appeared to be a black cloud hovering over Night, like smoke rising from the ground. Ethan knew this was a combination of the smog from the city and the rain clouds that perpetually drenched the whole area.

Once past the outskirts, with the ironic welcome sign behind him, the rain hit the windscreen with a dreary persistence. The wipers did little except smear the grease across the glass. It was probably the best way to view the city, blurred and indistinct.

Night City had changed little in the two preceding years. The buildings were slightly more grimy, the roads more pitted with potholes and minor debris. In abandoned lots between apartment blocks burned out cars added a Daliesque display of shapes, like Stonehenge on speed.

Ethan knew where he was headed, he just hoped the Dull Man was still in business.

The hired car was welcomingly anonymous, not that he expected anyone to recognise him. Two years was a long time in Hell, and he hadn't left any witnesses. The rock music channel the stereo was tuned to seemed to play the same song over and over. Without melody, without charm, but it suited his mood.

With no children of his own he had long pondered the trials and troubles parents endured on behalf of young people who, if they were older or strangers, would be condemned and criminalized. Perhaps if things between him and Monica had worked out differently he might be a father now, he might understand. If things had worked out differently he might not be caught in this life, in this city, chasing this girl.

He pulled the car to a stop alongside a row of gaudy shop fronts in the east side of the city. Here the racial mix was diverse. The overwhelming philosophy was usually get them first before they can get you.

Ethan released the strapping from the cut down shotgun he'd stored earlier and fitted it into the ankle holster he wore. The knife he slipped up his sleeve.

He locked the car though he wouldn't be surprised to find it broken into when he got back. He wouldn't be long, he hoped, and there was nothing of any worth inside anyway.

The Dull Man ran a club called Visceral. Ethan pushed open the silver flecked door and stepped inside. The throbbing music felt like a solid mass. Coloured lights played over a few weary dancers, discreetly naked, rainbows draping every flat surface. It took a few moments to let his eyes get adjusted to the general darkness. In that time he picked out the bar, and the rows of booths around the walls where the entertainment took place.

'You looking for company, honey?'

Ethan smiled at the blonde haired woman, ignoring the raw red scar across her cheek and shook his head. 'Is he in tonight?'

'Who?'

Ethan pulled a fifty from the wad of notes in his palm and held it in front of her nose. 'You can answer me honestly and earn this, or take another hour, another three blow jobs in the booths to earn less.'

She gave him a tired look of despair and gestured her head towards the bar. 'Round the back.'

She moved the note across her body and it disappeared somewhere Ethan didn't want to dwell on for long. He made his way to the bar and beckoned the barman over. 'Beer.'

He positioned himself on a stool, his back to the crowds but his eyes on the mirror above the bottles of drink.

'I don't want any trouble,' the barman said, as he put the bottle of beer down next to an almost clean glass.

'Dull Man in?'

'Who?'

Ethan drank a long swallow of beer as the barman ambled away to the other end of his empire. Last time the Dull Man had been helpful. They weren't exactly friends but they seemed to share a mutual affection for trying to help innocent people stay that way. Why that affection included running a dump like Visceral Ethan couldn't explain.

He drained the bottle, stood away from the bar, and moved round to an almost hidden door. The barman watched warily but made no attempt to stop him. He had probably already alerted whoever was behind the door.

It had been proved several times that even when dealing with what Ethan considered to be scum that politeness really did pay off. He knocked on the door and waited for a reply. Only when there was no reaction to his knocking did he turn the handle and slowly push the door open.

It led to a narrow corridor but without doors, or windows or rooms. He walked carefully along until he got to the end where a single door was slightly open. The room beyond was brightly lit. Ethan stood inside the doorway and surveyed the inside of the room.

People were dancing, no they were jerking around, on a wide piece of wooden flooring. There was music playing but it wasn't dance music, it was soft, relaxing classical music. The people were reacting as if a loud band were reaching a crescendo. Bodies were twisting and moving, arms thrown in the air, legs furiously pumping, like drowning without water.

In a corner a fat man sat smiling. Surrounded by several others of various shapes colours and sizes they were an enraptured audience watching the performance. Ethan walked around the perimeter of the room, anxious not to disrupt the dancers' concentration. He had looked into the eyes of a couple of them, and they were not inside this world at present.

The Dull Man was dressed in his habitual black and grey, without a hint of any colour to lighten the effect. His voice when he spoke was a dull monotone, one level, one pitch, as if he had wearied of speaking some years ago and was reciting words from memory.

'Ethan.' A large hand grasped Ethan's and squeezed it.

Ethan winced and nodded to the dance floor. 'What are they on?'

'Soul Shakers.'

'Never heard of it.'

'It's new. Just flown in from Haiti. They still got their voodoo shit together down there.'

They were silent for a few seconds. 'Is it a derivative of Meth?'

The Dull Man laughed but the flat sounds were more a rumble. 'It's not a drug. It's a procedure. Yes, unpleasant to have administered but very effective. So I'm told.'

'How does it work?'

On the floor one of the people had fallen over but hardly seemed to notice as they writhed about, a blissful look on their face.

‘You won’t believe me. But it’s true. The device removes their soul, shakes it around, and re-inserts it. The result is a soul in torment, literally displaced. Once back inside the body it rushes around looking for familiar surroundings. I’m told the feeling is the best drug any of them have ever experienced.’ He laughed. ‘Once in a while we put the souls into different bodies, just to liven things up.’

‘I don’t know why they call you the Dull Man.’

A fat hand grabbed Ethan’s wrist with surprising speed and effective strength. ‘They don’t say it to my face.’

‘I’m after the girl. The Powers heiress.’

The fat hand trailed back to the fat lap. Ethan thought he could detect a trail of sweat across the arm of the couch, like a snail at night. ‘I heard word Radsky has her. Planning a wedding.’

‘Wedding?’

‘You know how old fashioned Radsky can be.’

Back on the street Ethan was surprised to find his car unscathed. He put it into gear and drove across town. The rain had eased and in the distance, at the edge of the city, a chemically enhanced sunset was sinking like a donkey in quicksand.

Radsky was rumoured to be three hundred and thirty years old. Never seen during the day, rarely seen at all in recent years, he had been in Night City since its inception. He and his extended family lived in a walled estate in the centre of the city. They ventured out at night, capturing anyone they encountered and dragging them back to the mansion. Occasionally bodies would be washed up on the banks of the river, their skin waxy white, the blood long since drained out of them.

On regular occasions Radsky, whose wife had died centuries ago, took on the fancy that he needed to be married again. Few were willing, though his wealth was legendary, and so he ordered girls of various ages to be brought to him for selection. Ethan could only presume he had been made aware of Macy during her last runaway trip, or else he had found out about her existence through her father’s business dealings. Either way, even accounting for her wild streak, Ethan doubted she was quite ready to become Mrs Radsky.

The dirt-smearred windscreen elongated all the people he saw as he drove past. They looked long, stretched, like Lowry figures. The centre of town, on the approach to the Radsky estate, was crumbling, as if all the life had been leached out of it. The ground was bleached, the grass dry and dusty despite the effects of the rain. The grey buildings were speckled with dark stains, bleeding outwards like an open wound.

Ethan pulled the car to a halt two blocks from the estate walls. Surveillance cameras would pick out any intruders two streets around either side. It was dark now, but that would give no cover from the preying eyes of Radsky and his followers.

The stories were legion about what went on behind the closed gates. Strange lights were reported, hideous noises. In a city of evil this place was the heart of the beast.

Ethan backed against the brick wall and breathed slowly outwards. He had spider walked across the street and so far no alarm bells had gone off in the night, no dogs were barking, everything was quiet; too quiet.

Using an upturned dustbin as a step up he jumped and caught hold of the top of the wall. Using his upper body strength he hauled himself until he was lying prone along the length of the wall. Back in the city death and destruction were warming up for the evening. Behind the walls the estate seemed peaceful.

Immediately beneath the wall was a patch of lush grass, obviously regularly watered, and beyond that a copse of trees, mixed conifer and beech. There would be movement detectors he was sure, possibly infrared as well.

He dropped soundlessly to the ground but even that slight motion was sufficient to alarm a colony of bats, which peeled out of the trees and flew soundlessly into the air. Tensing, he waited for some noise from the direction of the mansion to signal a search for him. Nothing came.

Treading as carefully as he could he moved quietly through the trees, glancing about and behind him constantly. Soon he was in sight of the house. It was large, with pristine portico to the front, latticed windows set evenly throughout both the sides that he could see. An impudent vine climbed one wall, an unshaven beard on a blank eyed face. Most of the windows were dark, no lights in the rooms behind them. Except for one, a French doored room on the ground floor.

Between the stand of trees and the house was about two hundred yards, open lawn. He covered the distance in seconds, pressing closely to the wall of the house to one side of the French doors.

From inside the room he could hear voices, low and calm expect for one. It was the voice of a young woman and he knew it could only be Macy. She sounded indignant, and the tone she used was the one she had habitually used with him the last time.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion. Instinctively Ethan ducked, but realised the noise had come from Night. Somewhere in the city something had exploded. Another scar on the already pitted landscape.

The disturbance drew attention from the house. The French doors were flung open, the curtains pulled aside and about three or four people nervously ventured a few feet outside the room to see what was going on. In the distance there was a pall of smoke rising into the air. Whatever had exploded was now on fire.

A tall Chinese man was the bravest, standing on the grass. 'City,' he gestured with his wine glass. 'No danger to us.'

Laughter of approval followed his announcement and the small group drifted back into the house. The doors were left open; the rain was falling gently like an afterthought. Ethan was able to move closer, lean against the doorframe, and glance inside the room.

It was baroque in style, as if Radsky were still in the first flush of youth, and the room was original. The group of the Chinaman and his friends were crowded around a huge open fire that raged in a fireplace of stripped brickwork. The walls of the room were filled with bookcases, here and there an oil painting, the subjects dark and shrouded. Rugs of russets and browns covered the floor, all but obliterating the red patterned carpet.

Two more people were seated at a small drinks table quite central to the room. On a sofa, her back to the French doors was Macy. She wasn't tied up, she didn't seem to be in distress, but from what he could hear of what she was saying she seemed scared. She was being far too polite.

The person she was speaking to was Radsky. Ethan had never seen him before but he would know him again instantly. He was skeleton thin, shiny black trousers pinching toothpick legs. A mane of pale hair hung down the scrawny back, clipped neatly into a ruby red clasp. A white shroud of a shirt devoured his body, wrinkles in the cloth running like rivers over wasted arms, chest and back. His hands were folded one over the other behind his back and he was listening intently to what Macy was saying.

She seemed calm, but as he had suspected, Ethan could tell she was scared out of her usual aggressive attitude.

‘Look,’ she was saying, and her voice was insincerely sweet. ‘It’s not that I’d object to marrying you, lovely house by the way. But my father...’

Radsky nodded as if he was actually taking account of what she was saying, as if her opinion counted for anything with him. Without taking his eyes from Macy he gestured to one of the two people at the drinks table to come to him. ‘Bite her.’

Macy shifted on the sofa, as if trying to burrow into it. ‘Excuse me?’

The woman who approached the sofa might have been Macy twenty years ago. She hadn’t aged well. Her skin was mottled, red veins like deltas spreading across her nose. Her hair was possibly once dark brown but now looked like raw sewage. Her fingernails were long and twisted, and she entwined them into Macy’s hair as she dragged the girl’s head and neck towards her lips. Macy screamed.

One shotgun blast took care of the woman. The noise of the shot, and the bloodied mess of the body, were enough of a diversion to allow Ethan the time to reach the back of the sofa. He could tell from the look Macy gave him that her instinctive ‘Shit, not you again’, was tinged with more than a little gratitude. She quickly stood up and moved behind the sofa with him.

Ethan viewed the room. For the moment no one was taking much notice of him or Macy. Radsky was on his knees on the floor, lapping at the blood and fluids of the damaged woman. The others were watching him with envy, waiting their turn, which wouldn’t come until Radsky gave them permission to feast.

‘It can’t be this easy,’ Ethan murmured, and pulled Macy with him towards the open doors to the garden.

Outside the rain was falling hard, black and oily. A moon struggled to be heard above the intensity of the rainfall. In the distance the city seemed suddenly still, as if poised to see the outcome of events behind the secret walls.

Radsky stood. His lips were swollen, like a bad collagen injection, blood dripping from the corners. His body swelled as Ethan stared. The thin legs became thick, the arms grew muscles, the chest filled out like a balloon being pumped. The blood he’d drunk had restored him. He reached behind him, unclipped his hair and a thick mane of black hair cascaded over his shoulders.

‘You have my bride I think, Mr Connolly.’

‘Run,’ Ethan shouted at Macy, and they both ran for the trees.

For a moment Ethan thought no one would chase them but he was wrong. Above their heads, scraping the tops of the trees, the people from the house were flying, swooping and rising to get to them.

At the edge of the copse Ethan stopped. Macy was panting beside him. The grass between them and the wall gradually filled with the people from the house. Seemingly from nowhere Radsky appeared in their midst.

‘I think you’ve forfeited your wedding invitation, Connolly.’

Ethan took Macy’s hand. She gave it to him willingly. Ethan could feel she was trembling. They moved away from the shelter of the trees and out into the open.

Suddenly the wall behind Radsky’s group exploded. Bricks rained down on their heads as a huge vehicle smashed through the wall from the outside. Screams told Ethan that some of them had been hurt.

He pulled at Macy’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s miss the wedding reception.’

‘White was never my colour.’

They ran to the wide hole in the wall. As they passed the bulldozing vehicle they could see the Dull Man grinning in the cockpit.

Retrieving the car took minutes, and as Ethan negotiated the winding side roads out of the city the slick rain smeared his view, which was a good thing. Macy slumped in the seat next to him, eyes closed. He could tell by her breathing that she was awake, but he left her to whatever thoughts were tormenting her.

The airport meant a two-hour wait, when Macy fell asleep against his shoulder. She was so slight he began to realise how young she was. Perhaps Night would seem exciting at that age. He could only hope she had learned enough this time to appreciate what she had at home.

When they reached home the reception from Mr and Mrs Powers was far more passionate than he had expected. They had been truly frightened. Macy was hugged and kissed, and although he suspected she found it a little embarrassing there was genuine relief in her face.

Ethan avoided their direct questions about where he had found her, what she was doing, who with. Ignorance was the best way to heal the damage done. He took his payment and left without looking back.

On the journey to his next assignment Ethan let his mind wander into the darkness of Night. One of several other places; the opposite of good, the antithesis of pleasure, the reverse of peace.

Welcome to Night City.