

Outgrowth of the Brain

By James Field

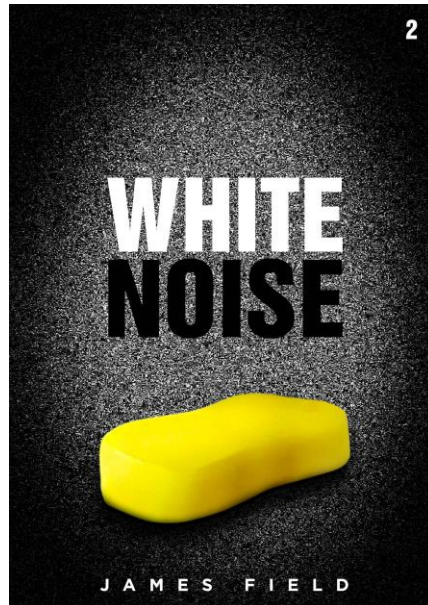
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Outgrowth of the Brain

'What is it Chums?' asked Bert, switching on his bedside lamp.

His two massive Alsatisans stood rigid with their eyes fixed on his.

'Have we got prowlers?'

The Alsatisans made a movement as good as a nod to Bert.

'We'll soon sort them out good and proper, won't we Chums.'

The black Alsatisans snarled, they were ready.

Bert climbed out of bed, stepped into his dungarees, pulled them over his boxer shorts and T-shirt, and buttoned the straps to the bib. The stairs groaned under his weight as he made his way down to the kitchen, Alsatisans close on his heels. His companion, Alf, sat at the kitchen table with his head buried under folded arms, right where he'd been when Bert went to bed last night.

'We've got prowlers,' said Bert.

Alf grunted. He tried to lift his head but apparently found the effort too painful.

'Headache still that bad?' said Bert, glancing at the clock. 'You don't need to come out tonight; me and me Chums will soon get rid of the prowlers. It's three-o'clock, why don't you get to bed while there's still some night left?'

Alf grunted.

Bert waited a moment, climbed into his size 48 army boots, and strapped his knife around his bulging belly. 'I won't be long,' he said. 'Get to bed, you'll feel better in the morning.'

Outside, the summer night embraced Bert in a warm and humid breeze. He waited while his eyes adjusted to the dark, fidgeting as moisture from dew-soaked grass penetrated his boots.

'I hope you can see better than me, Chums,' he said, impatient to start the chase. 'Let's go. Find your man.'

The Alsatisans sniffed the air and pointed the direction with their noses.

Bert set off, his dogs at heel, one on either side. As they passed the mansion, the Alsatisans slowed and turned their heads.

'What is it?' said Bert, wondering if something was amiss at the stately home. Then he noticed the Alsatisans tense as they picked up the scent again. 'Keep going, Chums, follow your man.'

They hurried past the mansion, plunged into a dense wooded area and followed a narrow path. Bert allowed his dogs to run in front, but kept them close.

He fumbled in a baggy trouser pocket, found his small but powerful torch, and illuminated the uneven path beneath his feet; he didn't fancy tripping on slippery roots or stones. A chase like this normally excited him, but not this time. Alf and him were a team and he didn't like to see his partner all huddled up and suffering. He broke into a lumbering jog, eager to get rid of the intruders and hurry back to make his friend comfortable.

'Bark,' he said, and the Alsatisans hurled their fearsome voices into the night. 'Bark louder,' he commanded. 'Bark so they shit themselves and don't stop running 'til they reach Timbuktu.'

The path rounded a lake, narrowed, and rose towards the perimeter fence. 'Go and worry them,' panted Bert. 'But don't eat them until I get there.'

The Alsatisans catapulted away and disappeared into the darkness. Bert's heart pounded as he stumbled up the last hundred meters, he turned his head and spat, he wasn't built for speed.

The Alsatisans stopped by a padlocked gate in the high wire fence and howled at two dark figures on the other side.

Bert clasped the torch in his mouth, drew a heavy bunch of keys from his pocket, and selected one. Spit whistled between his teeth as his shaking fingers tried to insert the key. It didn't fit. He

raised his eyebrows, he knew every key on his bunch and was certain beyond doubt he had the right one.

The intruders laughed and Bert shone his torch on them. Dressed in black from head to toe, one of them dangled a padlock on a gloved finger. Bert blinked twice before he realised they'd switched the padlock. Dumbfounded, he watched the man snap the padlock shut and throw it into the forest.

Both men chuckled behind their stocking masks, then turned and strolled away into the wooded parkland.

Bert's blood boiled. He dropped the torch, bunched his colossal shoulders, curled his fingers around the wire gate's metal frame, and yanked until it rattled louder than the Alsatian's savage barking.

The dark men glanced over their shoulders, turned to face Bert, and showed him a finger. When the hinges tore away, they fell silent, glanced at each other, spun on their heels, and ran.

As Bert threw the gate aside, the mansion's piercing alarm split through the night. Bert hesitated; he desperately wanted to chase the intruders. Instead, he jammed the ruined gate back into the fence and hurried to the mansion.

~*~

Bert faced his two young employers in the mansion's dark and gloomy entrance hall. He dragged his woollen hat from his head and wrung it in his hands. The eldest brother, Trevor, scowled at him; the younger brother, Russell, smiled his usual smile.

'This is a bad business,' said Trevor. 'Three men broke into the mansion. Where were you and Alf? Why didn't you detect them sneaking about the grounds long before they broke into our premises?'

'I'm right sorry I let you down, Master Trevor, it ain't never happened before. Me and me Chums chased two men right past the mansion and we never saw no other men. I ain't got eyes in the back of me head, Master Trevor. I'm right sorry.'

'Decoys,' said Trevor. 'Two men to draw you away and three men who disarmed the alarm and entered the premises. Lucky my brother and I were home or they'd have robbed us of everything we own.'

Russell patted Bert's huge arm as if it was a horse's neck. 'Don't look so despondent,' he said. 'There's no harm done. Trevor's clever little friend, Aidme, detected the burglars and reset the alarm. They ran like hell when it went off.'

'Aidme?' said Bert.

'I'm going to let you into a little secret,' said Russell, pointing to the colourless football hovering close to Trevor's shoulder. 'We picked up Aidme from a spaceship in outer space. It's a little wizard, rather like a genie in a bottle except it uses incredibly advanced technology rather than magic. Isn't that so, Trevor?'

'Roughly, yes, but this isn't the time to go into details.'

Bert grinned, he thought the young brothers were either joking or mad. Either way, he felt better, they weren't especially angry with him. 'Me and me Chum's are right sorry,' he said, 'it won't never happen again.'

The entrance hall reminded Bert of a museum. Fascinated, his gaze flitted here and there, from the faded paintings and tapestries hanging on the walls, to the suits of armour and stuffed tiger standing in the corners.

The two Alsatis, sensing their Master's improved mood, wagged their tails and panted. Bert raised his little finger and they sat.

'What happened to the men you chased?' asked Russell.

'Lucky I never told me Chums to kill them or they'd be dead and buried. Wish I had now because they got away.'

The Alsatians followed Bert's every move. He lifted the little finger on his other hand and they bounced up, thrashing their tails like over-wound metronomes.

Russell reached out to pat the dogs, hesitated, and pulled his hand back.

'Don't you Chums go growling at the young master,' said Bert, 'and don't go leaving none of your hair on the nice carpet.'

'Why isn't Alf with you?' asked Trevor.

'He ain't feeling well, so I did the best I could by meself.'

Trevor sighed and seemed to soften. 'Up until last night you've both done a wonderful job,' he said. 'You, Alf, and your dogs are magnificent, and I'm delighted my brother and I decided to employ you. But these thieves are professionals and they'll be back. They won't give up, so we'll have to see if we can arrange something better.'

'It would've been alright if Alf wasn't poorly,' said Bert.

'Is Alf seriously ill?' asked Russell.

Bert scratched his bulbous head and sniffed. 'Alf's gone blind and he's crawling around the floor on his hands and knees. I don't like it. I ain't never seen him this bad before. He just sits at the table most of the time and he don't do none of his muscle training or has any sparring fights with me. He don't eat nothing either, he don't even know I've come up to the mansion. I was sort of hoping you'd both come to the gatehouse and have a look at him?'

'Yes, of course,' said Russell without hesitation.

'Having another of his migraines, is he?' asked Trevor.

'Yeah, but I ain't never seen it this bad.'

'Have you called a doctor?'

'Not likely,' said Bert, 'we don't never go to no doctors. It was them doctors what messed him up in the first place.'

Not bothering with hats and coats, the two brothers headed out through the front door. Bert and his Alsatians followed close behind, leaving the heavy oak door gaping open on its wrought iron hinges.

'How often does he have these attacks?' asked Trevor, leading the procession along a cinder path.

'About once a month.'

'And how long do they last?'

'A couple of days is normal, but this one has lasted four days.'

They joined the main path and crunched along the gravel at a good pace. A pale haze surrounded them, damp and chilly in the morning light.

'When did he start getting these migraine attacks?' asked Trevor, keeping a wary eye on the Alsatians.

'It happened after what happened when we was pinching a boat.'

'Stealing a boat?'

'Yeah. One of those super-fancy cabin boats with the big engines that all those snobs has on the river Avon.'

'And you and Alf stole one?' said Russell.

'Yeah, we tried to. But we didn't have much of a plan. Alf said it was spontaneous like. He's the one with the brains and it was his idea.'

'I sometimes wonder if you two own a complete brain between you,' said Trevor. 'What had you planned to do with a boat? It's not the sort of thing you can sell at the local market.'

'We ain't done none of that criminal stuff since we came to work for you, Master Trevor, honest we ain't.'

'What about Alf's prize fighting?' asked Russell.

'Well, yeah, I mean, Alf's the best there is. He's the champ and he's got to defend his title, ain't he? Folk's is always challenging him.'

'I'm not surprised he suffers from migraine,' said Trevor. 'But explain about this cabin cruiser?'

'We was only having a bit of fun. Alf said we could nick stuff from the boat to sell, but we wasn't going to harm the boat, only float around in it a bit and see what it was like. It was tied up to one of those swanky cottages right next to the river. What we did was, we waited until the first light of morning, untied the boat, pushed it out, and swam out behind it. But they heard us, didn't they.'

'Who heard you,' asked Russell, 'the owners in the cottage?'

'Yeah, we didn't know there was anybody home. We ain't got eyes in the back of our heads and we can't see through walls, can we. We ain't got no Aidme from outer space like what you got, Master Trevor.'

'So what happened when they heard you?' asked Trevor.

'One of them had a handgun and fired a shot at us. But me Chums soon sorted them out. Me Chums don't like guns and I train them to attack when they see guns. Had them pinned up in a corner they did, weren't no more bullets flying at us after that.'

They rounded a long bend in the path. Alf and Bert's ivy-covered gatehouse shimmered into sight through the mist.

'The trouble was,' continued Bert, 'that the bullet what they did let fly hit Alf in his forehead. Hit him a glancing blow right across the front.' Bert pointed at his brow and drew a line from one side to the other.

'Sounds serious,' said Trevor.

'Yeah, the whole river turned red. They took him off to hospital and had him in there for a whole week until he ran away.'

'Ran away?' said Russell, 'why did he do that?'

'We don't like doctors. Some of them nurses is okay but them doctors acts like they're God or something.'

'What did the police say?' asked Trevor.

'Alf told them we was saving the boat because it was floating away by itself. Alf's always got a clever answer. And them twerps with the gun couldn't say nothing, could they, because they ain't supposed to have guns, are they.'

They reached the stone-built gatehouse, checked the perimeter iron gates were securely closed, and crowded through the gatehouse's wide-open front door.

Alf still sat at the kitchen table resting his head in his folded arms. He must have heard the men enter but didn't raise his head. Instead, he groaned. Trevor and Russell sat opposite him. Alf sat by his side.

'I brung the young masters,' said Bert, 'and I told them about your headaches and about that boat thing with the bullet.'

Alf lifted his head and blinked his bloodshot eyes.

'You look worse than after one of your prize-fights,' said Trevor, opening his sports bag and producing a pencil and notepad. He studied Alf's distorted features; flat, crooked nose, cauliflower ears, and the bullet scar across his forehead, just one disfiguration among many others.

'Sorry I ain't doing me job,' said Alf, speaking through clenched teeth. 'This damn headache is killing me. I wish Bert hadn't brought you here to see me like this.'

'Gotta do something ain't I,' said Bert, 'you're me best mate. Look what happened to Mohammed Ali, don't want you ending up all shaking and sloppy like him.'

'Let's have a look at your aura,' said Russell, leaning forward. 'Hmm, not so good, there's a strange disturbance around the forehead.' He reached across the table and cupped Alf's head in his hands. 'Do you feel the pain across the front of your head?' he asked.

'Yeah, and all I can see is flashes and sparks, and shadows and shapes, even with me eyes closed.'

'That's interesting,' said Russell, placing his hands front and back on Alf's head. 'Do you have some sort of metal in your forehead?'

Bert shot a glance at Russell and answered. 'Yeah, how'd you know that? Those doctors put a piece of titanium in his forehead to hold the bones together.'

'It's disturbing his third eye,' said Russell, 'or pressing against it, one or the other, I can't be certain.'

'Third eye?' said Bert, 'what's a third eye?'

Trevor finished scribbling a note, leaned forward and nodded. 'He means the Pineal Gland. It's an outgrowth of the brain between the eyes, and the amazing thing is that nobody really understands what it's for. All I can say for certain is that it's a photoreceptive organ, about the size of a pea, that controls our biorhythms and moods.'

'Some people say birds and animals use it to navigate,' said Russell. 'Others suggest it's why dogs know their Master is on his way home long before he arrives. Those with the knowledge use their third eye to gaze into the spirit world or other dimensions.'

'Spirit world?' said Bert. 'Oh God, he ain't dying is he?'

Trevor set his pencil neatly against the notepad and gazed at the sports bag on his lap. Inside nestled Aidme, the strange alien ball he'd found on a derelict spaceship. 'Together we make a formidable team,' he said, and in less time than it took Bert to find an answer, Trevor continued, 'That's it, I've finished analysing Alf's third eye.'

Alf dropped his hands and sat up straight. 'It's gone,' he said. 'Me headache just vanished.'

'Yes,' said Trevor. 'Your pineal gland is over-sensitive and the titanium plate in your forehead is acting like an antenna. The receptors in your third eye are all out of tune with the signal, something like when you put a microphone too close to the speaker and the whole system screams. With Aidme's help, I've tuned the titanium plate to resonate with your brainwaves.'

Bert punched Alf's arm and Alf punched him back. The Alsatians jumped up, panting excitedly, expecting a brawl.

'Thanks, Master Trevor,' said Bert. 'I'm so grateful I could punch you too. How'd you do it?'

'Keep your fists to yourself if you don't mind,' said Trevor, 'and don't punch Russell either or all three of you will start brawling again.'

Alf rubbed his brow, massaging tense muscles.

Trevor placed a hand on Alf's shoulder. 'Unfortunately, Alf, the headache cure will only last as long as Aidme and I excerpt the oscillating adjustment on your titanium plate. The moment we let go, your headache will return.'

Alf stared at Trevor across the table and shook his head. 'Are you sure? I never felt so good as what I do now.' Suddenly, as if a dentist drilled into a nerve, his eyes scrunched together in agony, then, before he had time to scream, the pain seemed to vanish.

'Sorry,' said Trevor, 'I turned my control off for a second just to see what happens. Like I said, the moment I let go, your migraine returns.'

'Don't do it again, Master Trevor, I believe you good and proper.'

Trevor nodded, snatched up his pencil, and scribbled a bunch of cryptic equations. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'll keep a hold on it as long as I can, but I can't keep it up forever. We'll have to find a more permanent solution.'

Russell had an idea. 'Surely they can take the metal plate out again?'

'Not blinking likely,' said Alf. 'I ain't having no doctors poking around in my head no more.'

'Can't say I blame you,' said Russell, 'but we have to do something. You know we're often away at short notice.'

Trevor frowned, drew a line through two equations, and wrote three more. With a smile brightening his face, he sat back. 'Would you allow me to try a little experiment?' he asked.

Russell glanced sideways, put his hands to his hips, and stared at Trevor as if he recognised his brother's devious expression.

'What?' said Alf.

Trevor sounded excited. 'I could micro etch a circuit into your titanium plate that would give you permanent relief.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said Trevor, twirling the pencil in his fingers. 'If I etch a nano-circuit into your plate, interface it with your pineal gland, and make the plate resonate at the same frequency as your brain, you'll be pain-free forever more.'

'But you ain't no doctor,' said Alf, 'I ain't letting you near me with no scalpel.'

'No, no, it won't require surgery. I can force the metal's molecules and atoms into a new pattern by applying a controlled laser-magnetic blanket. One little click and it would be done, just like taking an x-ray.'

'Will I feel anything?'

'Absolutely nothing.' Trevor folded open a clean page on his notepad and drew a crude picture of a radio. 'You've heard about transistors haven't you?'

'Yeah,' said Alf, 'when I was a boy I had a radio with six transistors.'

'I had one with eight,' said Bert, waging his head.

'Caw, that was lots,' said Alf. 'How many didoes did it have?'

'Ain't sure,' said Bert, 'but I think it was a hundred-and-eight mega-somethings.'

Trevor rapped the table with his pencil. 'A modern computer uses millions of transistors.'

Bert and Alf gazed at each other, mouths hanging open.

'How many didoes does a computer use then?' asked Bert. 'Must be jillions.'

'Diodes and transistors are much alike,' said Trevor. 'Transistors are formed by utilising a material's impurities to form a semiconductor. The titanium plate in your brain is also filled with minuscule impurities. I'll simply rearrange those impurities and stamp the map of a microprocessor circuit into them.'

Russell stared into his brother's eyes. 'I know your tricks, what else have you in mind? He's not going to have a radio playing in his head for ever after, or a built-in calculator to help with his maths?'

'No, no, nothing like that, don't be so suspicious.'

Alf and Bert had started to arm-wrestle, their elbows on the table and their hands locked together. Neither gained the advantage.

'You sure it's only like having a x-ray?' said Alf, releasing Bert's hand.

'Be as easy as taking your photo,' promised Trevor. 'But it'll take me awhile to build and set up the equipment. Go about your business, but keep to the mansion's grounds. Otherwise, I might not be able to hold your migraine under control.'

~*~

Six weeks later, the equipment was ready. Trevor had built his gadget into one of those oversized hair-drying helmets used at woman's hairdressers. His converted hairdryer had one wire plugged into the mains, one wire plugged into his computer, two miniature towers protruding from the front like a pair of horns, and a thin black cord hanging from the back like a tail.

'Sit down, Alf,' said Trevor, 'and put your head in here.'

Alf made himself comfortable and Trevor threaded the helmet over his head. He pressed a couple of keys on his computer and a fizzy blue line glowed between the horns like a neon tube.

'You sure I ain't going to feel nothing,' said Alf, between clenched teeth.

'Just relax while I make the final adjustments. Here, before we start, you'd better put on these welders goggles, and slip these industrial ear protectors over your ears, what's left of them. Just a precaution, you understand, nothing to worry about. The rest of you stand well back.'

Trevor's fingers tapped at the keyboard and the converted hairdryer exploded with an enormous bang. The top half of Alf's body disappeared in a dense cloud of treacle-black smoke.

Alf roared and leapt to his feet. Shattered helmet and tufts of hair fluttered around him like black snow. His head was as black and hairless as a bowling ball. He threw the goggles off, pulled the protectors from his ears, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, making him look like a Panda in negative. 'Gawd almighty,' he screamed. 'You nearly killed me.'

Trevor watched carefully while Alf coughed and swore in equal amounts. 'How does it feel?' he asked. 'Your migraine, I mean, how does your migraine feel?'

Alf stopped dancing and shook his head. He closed his eyes, took a moment to think, and then opened them wide. 'I ain't got no headache.'

'Good,' said Trevor, 'that means it works. I've utilised electrical impulses in the dead nerve endings of your scar tissue to power the modified titanium plate. Aidme tells me everything is working perfectly. Why don't you take a shower and clean yourself up while we clear this mess away.'

'But it blew up,' said Alf. 'It didn't work. Why ain't I got no headache, are you still holding it down?'

'Ah,' said Trevor, 'but the treatment did work. It was designed to blow up – but I couldn't tell you that, could I? The moment it blew up was when the new processor circuits were stamped into your titanium plate. I couldn't have done it without the energy surge. Go on, go take a shower, you'll feel fantastic when you've cleaned up.'

Alf swore twice more and mumbled his way to the bathroom. The others set about cleaning the soot and debris.

'Is he really better now?' asked Bert, shouting above the vacuum cleaner. 'He ain't going to have no more headaches?'

'Never again,' said Trevor, snapping his laptop closed and sliding it into his sports bag. 'And when those thieves return, he'll know exactly where they are.'

Russell groaned. 'You've done something, haven't you?'

With a towel wrapped around his waist, and his eyes screwed shut, Alf marched into the room on bare, wet feet. He stamped on the vacuum cleaner's off switch, pulled a chair from the table, and sat, all with his eyes closed.

'I can see with me eyes shut,' he said. 'I can see you all, and I heard what you was talking about while I was showering, and I can see through the walls like they wasn't there.'

Trevor raised his eyebrows at Russell and shrugged. 'I couldn't resist it,' he said.

'I knew you were up to something,' said Russell. 'What else have you done to him.'

Trevor shrugged again and turned away. 'Not much. One or two little specialities. Let's just wait and see how it turns out...'

THE END

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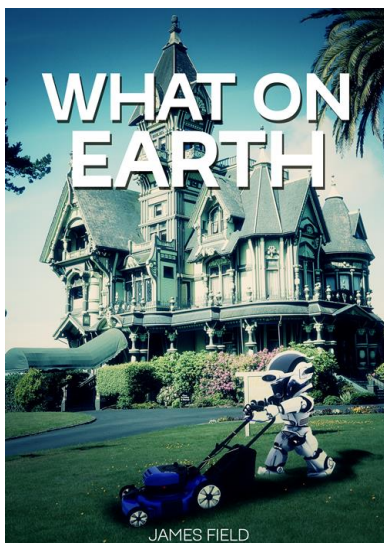
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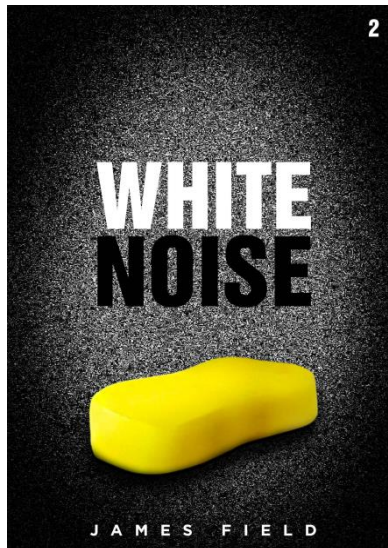
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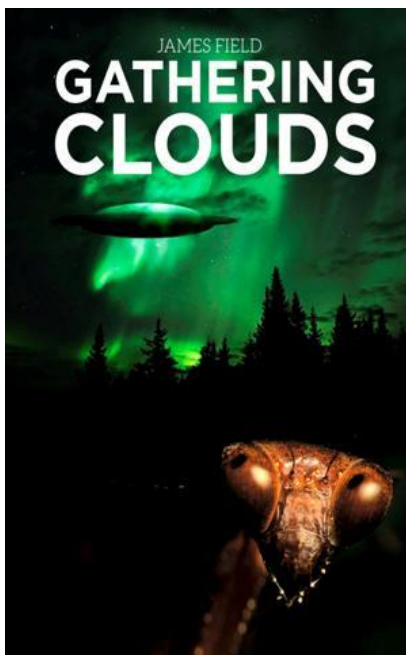
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