

**The Book of**

**5  
Uncredible Short Stories**



from the distorted mind of  
**William M. Dean**

# 1

## Cupidity

Valentine's Day was approaching which brought to mind love, of course, and cupids, and with that, the disparity of babies bearing weaponry: A bit creepy, even if in the name of love.

I thought, too, about the core elements of modern, first-world love. While our behavior is no longer bestial, it's not quite as unconditional as we might like to think. For most, practical matters are still considered. However, what constitutes a practical matter varies from person to person. If you are rich, then whether your spouse can earn a living may no longer be relevant. But for the rest of us, financial stability can be a key attribute and condition of our ability to admire and love. We can't afford to ignore it.

Who you love is still a matter of who you can afford to love.

The bald corollary of that is: Love is for sale.♥

The smartest man in the world parked his car at the far end of the compound, stripped off most of his clothes and strode purposefully for more than a mile to the bunker that housed his latest project. Frank's security clearance was so high that his very existence was known only to a small cadre of highly placed individuals, few of whom knew his name. Fewer still knew what he looked like. But

those few had all seen him in his underwear.

The bunker itself was three stories below ground, but the elevator door stuck out above like a concrete wart on the sun-cracked desert skin. Two hulking military guards stood at the doorway. This close to ground zero, no conductive metal of any kind could be permitted. Consequently, and due to the intensity of the desert sun, these two wore only t-shirts and khaki shorts and were armed with plastic guns that shot rubber bullets. This situation was unique. There was no standard issue for this kind of deployment. The right-most guard's shirt said "I'm with stupid," and had an arrow pointing left; the other's had "The Who's Absolutely Final, Final Farewell Tour - 2025. Really!" scrawled across it. One guard wore a purple beret, the other a wet bandanna. They both wore dark glasses with neon-brilliant yellow plastic frames. Their expression and demeanor was professionally grim. They looked like hit men on vacation.

A guard stepped forward and scrutinized Frank and his security pass, barking his observations to the other who verified each verification.

"Regulation ID tag number 13425-X-GSS"

"13425-X-GSS. Check!"

"Height, 5 foot 10 inches. Weight 185 pounds."

"Five-ten, 185. Check!"

"Blue eyes, no contacts."

"Blue eyes, check!"

"Prescription glasses."

"Prescription glasses, check!"

"Third quadrant, right cheek, circular mole."

"Circular mole, check!"

...and so on, until they came to the final detail...

"Left cheek, right buttock, v-shaped birthmark."

"Birthmark, check!"

The procedure used to take a lot longer, but now they were on a first-name basis.

"Have a good one, Frank." said the first guard.

"You too, Larry," Frank replied simultaneously slipping his ID tag into the wall slot and pushing an eye against the ocular verifier; an awkward choreography that only years of practice could make

smooth; in itself proof that you belonged.

The machine scanned him and his tag and, for the 1273rd time, determined him to be himself. The three-foot thick ceramic door grumbled open.

Johanna looked up from her console as Frank entered the lab. Frank glanced her way, nodded curtly and without a word got down to business. He was wearing a flannel grey t-shirt and grey boxers, pressed and starched, as always. Like her, he always showered and changed on the way down to the lab. The military grunts never did. Their clothes were damp and stained and they all smelled to her like pepperoni pizza soaked in cheap cologne.

The guards were happy just to see her arrive in baggy pajamas and fuzzy slippers. Johanna wondered if Frank was even dimly aware of the curve-hugging frilly bustier she wore today. Probably not. Until she met him, she had never encountered a man whose brilliance rivaled her own, let alone dwarfed hers. Frank's mind gushed sublime mathematical poetry, each verse a revelation. That kind of focus did not allow for such distraction. The idea that a man could take her body and her brilliance in stride both intrigued and galled her. She was not particularly attracted to Frank, but she was not used to being condescended to and ignored.

At the far end of the room, beyond the Hyperhole, Frank tapped away at his console. He was over 40 and had never had a meaningful relationship, and recently, it had almost occurred to him many times that he might be missing something of value. And right now, much in the same way that sea creatures suspect the existence of sushi—at a primitive, instinctual level—Frank was aware that the pleasing aesthetic of Johanna's physical parameters went beyond mathematics. But, no matter how beguiling the woman, Science was ever the more alluring siren.

He was deeply focused, idle thoughts buried beneath the sea of calculations that continually floated across his cerebral cortex. Efficiently, he processed data wasting no brainpower contemplating why the military funded his research or the possible uses of the technology he was developing. With only twenty minutes to go, Frank made the last of the computer-aided calibrations, shut down the wireless connections and called for an attendant. A pimply-faced young man in skivvies arrived with a dolly and quickly ushered the

equipment out of the room and to the far end of the compound. During the test, not only would computer equipment fail to work, but their conductive components could become lethal.

The only objects left in the room were a clock, a single plastic knob affixed to a concrete pedestal and the Hyperhole generator, itself, which lined a three-foot circle bored through a monolithic concrete slab that rose from floor to ceiling. In a few minutes, a magnetic field 120 billion times that of the Earth's would be generated within that circle, the lines of force interwoven like the strings on a tennis racket in such a fashion as to dampen the effect beyond the perimeter of the loop. Still, under the best of circumstances, the field would tug at their hemoglobin. A laser beam shot through at any angle was mangled in the magnetic turbulence that surrounded the loop and only rarely came out the other side. If anything went wrong, the uncontained field would be powerful enough to drag a tank from a half-mile away, or yank a paper clip through earth and concrete and everything in between.

Frank glanced at the wooden cuckoo clock, his hand hovering lightly over the control knob. The Pentagon had authorized a two-minute window. Even under containment, the Hyperhole's field was powerful enough to effect guidance systems across the country and that made the experiment a national security risk. In the hills surrounding the compound army personnel and thirty surface-to-surface missiles stood primed and ready to obliterate the cuckoo clock and everything within 100 meters of it at the first hint of trouble.

Frank heard the mechanism whirr, gathering momentum, then suddenly, the tiny wooden blue bird burst from its nest and began flapping its wings and beak. Cuckoo! Cuckoo!

Frank turned the knob and immediately the air within the Hyperhole began to fluoresce, the scene beyond wavering like a mirage. In the periphery of his awareness he noted that Johanna was standing to one side of the loop taking notes with a short, eraser-less pencil. Frank continued to coax the dial toward the red, staring into the shimmering disk of air, hoping that he would somehow feel it before he crept beyond the threshold; the point where all matter inside of a mile might be ripped apart, atom by atom.

The wooden bird withdrew, as if in fear, tiny doors slamming shut behind him. The room was quiet; the only sounds were the soft hum of the Hyperhole and the metronomic ticking of the clock.

Frank heard a strange, hollow, tapping sound. His hand froze and his heart leapt into his throat. When he realized that it was Johanna's pencil bouncing on the concrete floor, he was momentarily angered, but as she stooped to retrieve it, his eyes drifted from the pulsating space within the loop, tracking the descent of Johanna's chest and the flare of anger was quickly extinguished by other sensations. Her low-cut, up-pushing lingerie afforded Frank a perfect view as she bent and stretched to reach the stubby pencil which then clicked off a long, red fingernail and skittered behind her. She sighed and draped herself backward over the lawn chair, extending her reach and giving Frank the exact opposite, but no less impressive, view. He felt heat rise to his face and his heart began to race.

Frank's lapse was no more than a few seconds, but in that time he had inadvertently twisted the dial and suddenly the disk of air within the loop seemed to boil as if something were thrashing against it from the other side. His eyes and attention snapped back and his heart suddenly thundered from the starting post. A ghostly sausage shaped object pushed against the surface, then receded. A second later a large bulge nudged the shimmering membrane. It reminded him of an unborn baby rolling against the skin of its mother's belly. And then, suddenly, it was a baby!

He could see the feet and torso. It twisted and became whole. Frank feared that he had somehow fallen into the loop, that his mind was being bent by the powerful magnetic forces. Beyond being nonsensical, the image was disparate. Though it had the physical build of an infant, the grizzly grimace on its face, the fury in its eyes and the fact that it was brandishing a weapon made Frank shake his head. And when he saw the wings, he knew that he had to have lost his mind.

The cherub's wings flapped furiously in an attempt to stabilize its erratic flight, its body twisting and jerking against the turbulent oscillations of the Hyperhole's magnetic field. At the same time it seemed intent on loading its bow with a golden arrow held in its chubby left hand. Flopping about as it did, this was no easy task but with a skill disproportionate to its apparent age, it managed and

suddenly leveled the weapon at Frank's heart. Illusion or not, he gasped, though he was otherwise paralyzed by the illogic of the whole situation. The arrow shot from the bow and the little cherub tumbled backward and out of sight. Startled, Frank fell from his stool. The concrete floor was unforgiving. Johanna was at his side before the pain and disorientation had faded enough for him to try to stand. She heaved his arm across her shoulder and hauled him unsteadily to his feet.

They both stood and stared into the Hyperhole.

Suspended in the exact center was a shimmering golden arrow. Inches below that a small white feather bobbed on magnetic currents.

And from the look on Johanna's face, Frank knew that she saw it too.

\* \* \*

Two G-Q types in black, special-ops boxers entered the lab, did a tour of the space, regarding everything in it with the intense suspicion due inanimate objects, then exited without uttering a word. Johanna and Frank had time to exchange a glance before the two men re-entered, ushering in a small throng of others; among them, the president of the United States of America in t-shirt and star-spangled boxers. The crowd oozed into the room and crept toward Frank, but abruptly staggered to a halt when The Commander in briefs stopped to chat with Johanna who wore a sheer pink teddy with strategically placed flamingo-feathers. Ten minutes later, the president kissed her on the cheek, slipped her his card and the barely-clad procession of dignitaries continued forward.

The president had been given the eyes-only dossier, which provided a detailed briefing and had taken the time to memorize Frank's full first name and the fact that magnets were involved. He greeted Frank in a way that said, "Hello, potential vote," enfolding Frank's hand in both of his and firmly pumping while staring over Frank's shoulder at the suspended treasure. When Frank got his hand back, he regarded it closely for a moment then wiped the palm grease away on his Fruit Of The Looms.

The president stepped around Frank and moved toward the arrow.

A large, dark arm descended like a railway crossing gate, blocking his path. The security man named Rico was built like a wide receiver. His forearm was as thick as an elephant's shank and bore a skull and crossbones tattoo with the words "Satin Rules!" which he claimed was a typo. No one alive had ever argued the point. Three stories below ground he still wore dark glasses; the doorways to his soul, a dark secret, his lips never forming anything but a mouth. In a rich, deep voice Rico said, "Careful Mr. President, they say that thing is radioactive."

The president looked confused. How could an active radio hurt anyone? he thought, but twenty years in politics had taught him to hesitate before saying the first thing that popped into his head. Another aide stepped close, whispered, "According to the report, anyone who stands too close experiences strange feelings."

"Feelings?"

"Yes. Strange, empathetic emotions like... affection."

Reflexively, the president took a step backward. Like infection! he thought. "I...I don't feel anything."

"The initial effect depends upon the thickness of your skin, but it is cumulative."

"What exactly does this mean?" he asked in a serious manner which completely masked the fact that he was mainly confused by the word cumulative and wondered what this all had to do with clouds.

"The president is asking for an explanation, Frank," prompted Dennis Updike, the on-site presidential liaison who had done little more, in the seven years up until now, than harass secretaries at the coffee machine and photocopy his butt to make Valentines and Christmas cards for those secretaries who did not drink coffee.

Frank turned toward Dennis, read his ID tag, blinked twice into his face—it was the first time they'd ever met—then turned back to the president. "We theorize this arrow to be the three-dimensional translation of a multi-dimensional object whose physical properties may include an emotional component."

*Component! Weapons have components, don't they?* worried the president. "How powerful might that be?"

Frank hesitated, paused to calculate but found nothing to calculate, hesitated again. There were no empirical data, no quantifiable measurements. When you approached the arrow, you... felt things.

When you backed away, those feelings receded. What would happen if you got too close? How close was too close? What was the effect of intense emotion on the human psyche? Frank was not even qualified to venture a guess.

A tall, well-dressed, middle-aged blonde man with a handlebar mustache interrupted. "We've already lost one man," He had a resonant voice and a sober presence about him that caused every head to turn. A startled murmur swept the crowd which peeled a path as he strode forward, reading from a manila folder. "At zero-two hundred hours base command received an urgent phone call from one Angelina Chillini, wife to Lieutenant Lawrence Bartholomew Chillini... one of our boys."

Frank had known the doorway guard long enough to recognized Larry's first name.

The blonde man handed over the folder and the president flipped the pages looking for photos of the wife. The blonde man continued from memory, "He was working graveyard, last night. According to coworkers, he claimed to have broken into the lab and actually touched the arrow with his unprotected hand! Coworkers reported that he became distracted, ambivalent and giddy—perhaps delusional. Later that night he phoned his mistress and broke it off, went home, told his kids he loved them, made hot chocolate and read them bedtime stories until they fell asleep in his arms. Then, from eleven-hundred hours to zero-one hundred hours he made passionate love to his wife."

The crowd was suddenly silent.

A single, anonymous voice piped, "I really don't see the problem..."

The mustached man turned a grave look upon the president. "Sir..." he said somberly, "they've been married for more than fifteen years."

The crowd gasped as one.

The president's expression grew sour. "Where is he now, this Lieutenant...Bellini?"

"We have three agents keeping him under close observation. Last report he was..." the blonde man's throat suddenly constricted and he had to swallow several times to clear it. "...he was...shopping for sandals."

A single tear almost formed in the president's eye. "Linguini was one of our boys." His voice was soft and low, like distant thunder. "Lets we

forget.” He slapped the manila folder closed and gazed with grim determination at the golden arrow. “Where in hell did this unholy abomination come from?”

“We believe that it may have been constructed by pan-dimensional beings,” offered Frank.

“Gawd-dammed Pan-dimes!” barked a four-starred general with a limp soldier.

“For the sake of national security, we must contain this dark force,” said the president, head bowed in prayer that the line was quotable and might one day become famous.

The general was a short, rotund man with a grizzled beard and matching toupee, all of which he accessorized with an abrasive attitude. He elbowed his way forward, which annoyed the others, as there was already a clear path. “Respectfully, sir, you’re gawd-dammed right. We don’t want no gawd-dammed Pan-dime’s threatening the security of this great nation. We should take their gawd-dammed Pan-dimey weapon and stuff it down their gawd-dammed Pan-dime throats,” he remarked loud enough to address a platoon. For an instant, Frank imagined a platoon of machine-gunning warriors and a division of tanks charging over the hill toward an army of nasty, bow-toting babies.

A starchy looking twig of a man tilted slightly toward the president’s ear, “Sir, this object has a much greater potential as a weapon against the enemies of democracy here on Earth.”

The blonde man countered, his voice thick with emotion, “We’ve just had a graphic demonstration of this weapon’s potential. Would we ever dare to unleash such a weapon, even against the dark forces of alternate points of view?”

The starchy man said, “Though we may be too benevolent and civilized for that kind of terrorism, we must consider the consequences should it ever be used against us.”

The president shuddered. “We have to dismantle it, find out what makes it tick. Then we have to make enough copies that we can arm ourselves against those who might one day discover it and use it against us.”

All at once, an ad hoc discussion broke out amongst the group. Over the ensuing commotion, Frank heard one man say, “Perhaps we could make smaller versions.” Another added, “Every American citizen

should have one so that he can protect his wife and children from his neighbor who might use it against him.”

To which an anonymous female voice added, “I think the children should have access as well.”

At that point, the president waved his hands, palms wide open, coaxing a quiet. When all was silent, he turned and pointed a finger at Frank. “Wrap it up, Tank, we’re taking it with us!”

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