

FROM THE AUTHOR OF NEVERJACK AND SMALL STATES



*green*

GEOFFREY LONG

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GREEN  
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Please forward to your friends.

*Riiing.*

The dream gave way to a blur of colors, white to green to red and finally to black, as I opened my eyes to the darkened apartment. I had fallen asleep at my desk again, and the only light came from the dim glow of the screen saver spiralling endless strands of DNA across my monitor. The windows all were dark, but this was no surprise: according to the little alarm clock perched beside my Bible on the bookshelf, it was almost three AM. Whoever was calling me was really begging for an earful.

*Riiing.*

“All right, all right,” I groaned as I straightened painfully in my chair. Shrugging my shoulders, I reached across the desk and pulled the keyboard back in front of me. I rubbed my eyes again, then tapped the space bar. Instantly the DNA strands vanished, and in their place appeared a dialog box with a telephone icon and the words, YOU HAVE A TELEPHONE CALL, DR. BLACKNAIL. Beneath the message was the phone number. I frowned as I read it.

“Computer, answer the phone,” I said, and the computer chirped in acknowledgement. There was a soft click, and then the gentle hiss of the phone whispered from the speakers flanking the monitor.

“Hello?” I mumbled.

“Jon? It’s me. Listen --”

“Roald?” I groaned. “What the hell are you doing back here? You’re supposed to be in the Himalayas for another two weeks! Did something go wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Jon. I came home early.” His voice was barely recognizable. Dr. Roald

Clarke typically was cool, calm and collected, but tonight he sounded like he was on the edge of hysterics. “Listen, there’s something over here I need to show you.”

“It’s three AM! Can’t this wait until the morning?” Suddenly, something occurred to me, and I stiffened in my chair. “Is there something wrong with the Project? Roald, what’s wrong with the Project?”

“Nothing’s wrong with the Project, Jon. Just get over here. You can be here in fifteen minutes if you take the freeway. I’ll leave the front door unlocked. Trust me. You want to see this.” Roald hung up with a click.

The message in the dialog box changed to CALL TERMINATED. “Computer, acknowledged,” I told the machine, and the dialog box disappeared. The text document I had been working on several hours ago blinked back to the front of the screen, and I stared at it without focusing as I sat there, thinking. *The failure of these latest experiments adds even more credibility to our hypothesis that replacement limbs crafted from artificial substances, in the long run, have only detrimental effects. It should be clear that other options must be researched...*

“Computer, quit application and sleep,” I said. “Don’t save.”

The monitor blinked out and I was sitting in pitch black for a second before the DNA began to spiral across the screen again. Slowly, I pushed the chair back from the desk and stood up, gingerly flexing my muscles as I did so. Stepping away from the desk, I walked across the room to the coat rack by the door, slipped on my jacket, and headed out the door.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled my Jetta into the driveway of the ancient Victorian house that served as both our private offices and the home of Dr. Roald Clarke. Roald and I had known each other for years; we had been roommates all through med school, had both managed to land internships at LA Mercy General, and had both resigned to start our own practice when we’d had a difference of opinion with the board. The whole time Roald had always been cool and collected, even cold at times. I shook my head as I climbed out of the car. What could have happened to him on his vacation that would have gotten to him so badly?

I was barely halfway up the sidewalk when the front door burst open and Roald leaned out. I did a double take when I saw him. A few strands of his long black hair, which he always kept pulled back in a perfect ponytail, dangled down in front of his eyes; his silver-rimmed glasses sat crookedly on his nose, and the front of his lab coat was smeared with what looked like black mud. At first he didn’t see me, and his head jerked back and forth as he scanned the street for any sign of cars, looking like an excited rat. When his eyes finally fell on me, his face lit up in a mad grin and he beckoned for me to hurry.

“Come on, Jon!” he urged. “I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Jesus, Roald,” I said as I made my way up the steps of his porch. “What the hell is going on?”

“You’ll see,” he said, and disappeared into the house. I frowned again as I followed him, this



time at the uneasy knot that was forming in my stomach.

Roald hadn't been home long, judging by the pile of luggage thrown carelessly into a corner of the foyer and the thin layer of dust on everything that comes with going away for a couple of weeks. This surprised me a little. Roald was normally completely fastidious, a total neat freak. Even more surprising was the web of muddy footprints that crisscrossed the floor of the foyer and ran both up the stairs and down the hall where Roald had just disappeared. I wondered briefly if he'd taken his shoes off at all, or if he'd even showered yet. I sniffed the air, and instantly wished I hadn't. There was a strange scent lingering there, and it wasn't just body odor, although that was there too. It was something I couldn't recognize, but vaguely familiar.

"Come on, Jon!" Roald called. "In the lab!"

I followed him down the hallway and into the kitchen just in time to see him throw open the door to the basement steps. The knob crashed loudly into the wall, and I winced as I saw the first tails of a crack appearing in the plaster. Roald, for his part, didn't even bother to flip on the lights in the stairway, instead taking them two at a time all the way down. This proved to be a mistake – as I stepped to the top of the stairs, a loud crash echoed up from the darkness, followed by an equally loud curse. Then the lights flipped on downstairs.

"Blast it, Jon," Roald said, "get down here already!"

My frown deepened into a scowl as I began to descend. What had he done to our lab? More importantly, what had he done to the Project?

As soon as I stepped off the bottom stair and looked around, I felt my apprehension drain away. In its place flared up first sheer horror, and then utter fury. He had been home longer than I'd thought. Before we had closed down the office to take our annual month off, we had cleaned and polished every beaker, vial and tabletop in our basement laboratory. I myself had meticulously wiped down every square inch of the massive stainless-steel refrigerators where the cadavers were kept perfectly chilled, had painstakingly scoured every supply cabinet and every last one of the finely-sharpened tools inside, had even buffed every last key on the keyboard of the workstations we used to keep all our records from the past five years' worth of simulations and experiments. When we had closed the door to the basement two weeks ago, it had shone as brightly and as happily as an ice cream parlor.

Now, the lab looked like a greenhouse that had just eaten a hand grenade. Mud was streaked across every surface in sight, the once-pristine tabletops were covered with clods of dirt and what must have been a hundred different flowerpots overflowing with soil and plants of all shapes and sizes, and the halogen lights once suspended from the ceiling had been unchained and replaced with Gro-Lites. In front of the refrigerator stood an immense pot with a six-foot pine tree. Where there once had been a rack full of instruments, there was now a shelf laden with pots of geraniums and daffodils. In the bookshelves where our logbooks had been there were now only three large terrariums. And, finally, there on the table where we had kept the hands, squatted the biggest Venus flytrap I had ever seen.

“Roald,” I choked. “What the hell did you do with all of it? All our experiments? What is all this?”

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. “The experiments aren’t important,” he said. “Not anymore. Look at these!”

“Roald,” I whispered, my voice dangerously low. “Where is the Project?”

“This *is* the Project!” Roald crowed. “This is it!”

“No, I mean the hands.” I could feel myself growing cold. “Where are the *hands*?”

He ignored me as he stepped up to one of the tables, picked up a potted petunia and cradled it lovingly in his arms. “Jon, the beauty of these plants! Each one a perfect specimen...”

Something inside of me snapped. With a snarl, I lunged forward, seized him by the shoulders and spun him around to face me. The petunia he had been holding slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor. “Damn it, Roald,” I hissed. “*Where are the goddamn hands?*”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Roald scowled. He shoved me away and started gathering up the pieces of the flowerpot. “It’s okay, little fella...”

“There’s enough dirt on this floor already for that plant to put down roots,” I said. “Roald, where are my hands?”

Roald shook his head as he continued to pick up the pieces. “The hands aren’t important! These are all we need - these *are* the Project!”

I stared at my partner. He had gone mad. It was as simple as that. Without another word, I turned on my heel and stormed back up the stairs. I didn’t even pause to look in the corner of the kitchen where we kept the outgoing trash and garbage, because who knew that I would find: the remains of one of the incubators where we had kept the toes, or maybe shards from one of the tanks where the fingers had been kept, or...? In a silent rage, I strode through his living room and out the front door, climbed into my car and drove off.

When I got back to my apartment, I headed straight for the little laboratory I kept in the kitchen. Scowling, I took the lone hand I had kept for myself from its place in the freezer, sat myself down at the table and just stroked it. It did nothing to help - neither the normally soothing chill of its clammy skin nor the placating smoothness of its glasslike fingernails, which usually set me right after anything, could calm me down. It was just us now, me and the hand, alone together on our mission.

For the next few days, I completely refused to associate with Roald. We still had two weeks remaining of our vacation, and I felt completely justified in alienating myself from my ex-partner. I was mortified. How could anyone drop the work of God to putter around over some seeds? I dove back into my work, running medical scenario after scenario through my computer, doing cell tests on samples from the hand, and giving serious consideration as to how to legally dissolve our partnership and get my half of the business back. I thought about it every night as I worked alone in my own makeshift lab, poring over the few tissue samples I had and the tables of cell counts and

temperatures.

It was Wednesday when Roald began to call me again. The first time I simply hung up on him. He tried calling me three times after that, and every time I hung up on him. The fifth time the phone rang that night I simply took it off the hook and instructed the computer to ignore it. It wasn't until I checked my email right before bed that Roald was even able to communicate a whole sentence. There between an advertisement for a new online confession service and a letter from my ex-wife (probably demanding more money that I didn't have) was a single note from rclarke@superbrite.net. Sighing, I clicked on it and opened it up.

FROM: rclarke@superbrite.net  
TO: jblacknail@trilogy.net

The plants are a part of the Project.

Roald

Scowling, I jammed my finger down on the DELETE key, and felt a little better. Not quite as much as when I was slamming the phone down on him, but a little.

The next day, I was engrossed in a pile of paperwork when the phone on my desk rang. Foolishly, my head full of numbers, I picked it up myself instead of having the computer get it. "Hello?"

"The plants grow appendages, Jon."

I sat there a second, stunned. "*What?*"

"Get over here." Then the line went dead.

I stared openmouthed at the receiver. Then I dropped it back down in its cradle, glanced at my watch, threw the chair back from the desk and bolted for the coat rack. I had my jacket on and was out the door in two minutes flat.

When I reached Roald's house ten minutes later, I leapt out of the car and nearly barreled through the front door. It had only been a week since I'd been there last, but now the house was a total shambles. When I saw this, I was instantly sorry for the way I had treated him. I was in the basement before Roald was halfway up the basement stairs.

"Roald," I gasped, "what are you talking about?"

He gave me a thin *I-told-you-so* smirk. "Down here."

I followed him down into the basement, which now looked more like a rain forest than a laboratory. Every square inch of tablespace was covered with something green, and a good third of the floor as well. The pine tree in the corner was now flanked with a small maple and what looked like a dogwood, the tops of all the cabinets were now covered with what appeared to be spider plants



and philodendrons, and instead of just the one hideous venus flytrap on the table beside the computer there were now two. My eyes lingered on those last monstrosities for a moment before Roald put a hand on my shoulder and swept an arm across the room. “See them all, Jon? All the different specimens?”

I nodded. Closer inspection showed that all the plants, except for the flytraps, were indeed different. “So?”

Roald grinned. “Jon, these were all grown from the same seeds.”

I turned and looked at him. “Come again?”

“Every last one of these plants was grown from the same batch of seeds. The only difference between them is the soil in which they were grown.” Roald pointed toward the potted pine. “That one was grown in soil saturated with composted pine needles.” He pointed to an iris on the workbench. “That one was grown in dirt samples from Mrs. Forrester’s flower garden from next door.”

I blinked. “But that’s impossible.”

Roald shook his head and grinned even more excitedly. “You know that really powerful field microscope I bought before I left?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I took it with me, because I wanted to try it out. One afternoon in the first couple of days, I didn’t have anything scheduled until an evening tour, so I started examining the molecular structures of different plants. When I examined samples from half a dozen pine trees all growing in the same grove, I noticed that the samples from one tree had a slightly different composition from the others.”

“Diseased?”

“That’s what I thought. I looked it up on the Net from the hotel. Nothing.”

“So...?”

“So I ran tests on all the other pine trees. Nothing. Only the one tree had the variation.”

“So...?”

“So I followed a hunch and checked the surrounding plants. And get this.” He grinned. “I found grasses with genetic patterns more similar to those of the freak pine than to the other grasses. I found flowers that matched the same altered pattern, bushes with the freak pattern, even a small patch of berries with the same pattern. Jon, in every kind of plant there, there was at least one foreign individual member.”

I thought about this for a second. “Some kind of ecological mutation?”

Roald shook his head. “I thought of that. That was when I took seeds from all of the ‘mutants,’ cut short my sabbatical and returned home. I was here for all but the first few days of my vacation, Jon, just growing those plants right here in my basement.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t think it was important. Besides, this was still kind of a vacation for me. I hadn’t

gotten a chance to seriously play around with my old botany books since college.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I used soil samples from numerous sites for the growth mediums of the seeds, and in every case the plant that grew from the test seed was almost identical to the plants that were previously growing in that soil sample.” Roald took a deep breath and let it out through his teeth in a long whistle. “Where the soil samples had once grown pine trees, the new seed grew into a pine tree. Where the soil samples had once held Mrs. Forrester’s petunias, the seed grew into a petunia.”

“So what you’re saying is…”

He nodded. “Jon, what I think we have here is a biological chameleon.”

“But how?”

“Got me,” he said. “But all the evidence points to it. Each of these specimens all but proves it. Most of what you’re seeing here are second-generation organisms, grown from the seeds of my first batch. And here’s another weird thing. The samples grown here tend to have an enormously accelerated growth rate, along with a rapid seed-production cycle. It’s almost as if they are desperate to reproduce.”

I tapped my knuckles on the table. “Maybe it’s a survival mechanism. The new species looks for DNA samples in the soil where it’s planted, to determine what kinds of plants had successfully grown there.”

“You might be onto something there, Jon. Here, look at this.” I followed him across the basement and into a darker corner. Shoving aside a potted palm and what appeared to be a miniature fig tree, he dragged out a huge plant that had been hidden behind them. I stared at it. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It looked like a giant pea plant, six and a half feet tall and as thick in diameter as small tree. Roald grinned as he hefted up one of its pods, a massive thing easily two feet long. “Do you have your pocketknife, Jon?”

I pulled it out of my pocket and flicked it open. Roald nodded his head toward the pod. Raising an eyebrow, I reached forward hesitantly and pressed the blade against the tough skin of the pod. There was a soft *pop* as the metal pierced it, and then a watery yellow liquid dribbled from the wound. I drew my hand back in disgust, but Roald motioned for me to keep going. I cautiously took hold of my knife again and slid it along the rest of the pod. No sooner had the blade worked its way to the other end than the pod fell open, dumping its contents onto the concrete floor of the laboratory in a rush of yellow liquid, pulp and small pale objects.

My hand flew to my mouth and I recoiled in shock when I realized what the objects were. The pod had been full of small, childlike hands.

Roald laughed out loud. “Look,” he chortled. “Look!”

I crossed myself. “Our Father, who art in Heaven,” I breathed. “Roald, what have you done?”

He dropped the pod and knelt down in a pool of the yellowish liquid. He carefully reached out and picked up one of the hands, which was still dripping. “Feel it,” he whispered. He ran a finger along the skin of the hand, which was a light green in color. “It has the texture of a pea pod.”

Cautiously, I reached out and touched it. It was the size of a four-year-old's hand, perfect in every way, even the thin nails at the end of each finger. "How?"

Roald looked up at me. "I knew you might not approve of this, Jon, but I incinerated a number of the hands we were working on. No-one major, you understand. Crowsby, Orwell, Jacobson... You know, the throwbacks. But I took the ash and mixed it with the purest soil I could find, and, well, here's the results. Jon, I – I mean, we – we've grown the first artificial biological limbs!"

I met his eyes, and I saw there the same excitement that I knew must have been shining in my own. I couldn't help it. He was right. "But what exactly are they?"

Roald smiled thinly. "I think they're seeds."

I stood up and looked at the plant, then back down at the pool of yellowish liquid Roald was still kneeling in. "And the liquid?"

Roald stood as well, stepping out of the puddle and shaking droplets of the stuff from his trousers. "Unlikely as it may seem," he admitted, "I think it's embryonic fluid."

I unwillingly took a step back from the pool, and was taken completely by surprise when Roald cried out a warning. Twisting as I moved, I felt my leg catch on something, and then I heard the faint but rough sliding hiss of metal on wood. Too late, I saw the heat lamp topple off the table, pulled off by my leg catching on its cord. Down it fell, right into the pool of fluid, and it was all I could do to throw an arm across my eyes before the Gro-Lite bulb shattered and the sparks began to fly. A bright flash filled the room as a surge of electricity tore through the pool, and as I began to blink the dots away, I saw something I'll never forget.

Both Roald and I were far enough from the stuff that we were unharmed, but the effect on the seeds lying in the pool was diabolical. As the wave of electricity struck each one, they flipped into the air and landed, twitching fingers down, in the still-electrified pool. Then, perhaps triggered by the second dose of low voltage, they began to contract and seize, effectively "walking" on their fingertips, and all of the green hands skittered out of the pool and across the floor.

I leapt back again, doubly horrified, but no sooner had the seed-hands left the pool of current than their sudden animation left them, and they fell to the floor, motionless and faintly smoking. Mouth agape, I turned to look at my partner, and there I saw that Roald, too, was taken aback by this turn of events, but he seemed more fascinated than horrified. He knelt down beside one hand, which was still twitching weakly, and prodded it with a scalpel drawn from his pocket. He looked up at me, then, with awe in his eyes, and whispered, "Jon?"

"Roald?"

Slowly, a thin smile spread across his face. "I think you're on to something."

The next month was spent almost entirely in that lab. Both of us cancelled all our appointments, telling everyone that we were going to be out of town for a death in the family or a convention or whatever else we could come up with. To be sure, our business was going to take a hit for this, but for the first time, we were really close to our goal. The air in the basement was soon filled with the smells of incinerating limbs, obtained from different universities and hospitals where we had helpful colleagues, and it wasn't long before the pine trees and daffodils and their like had all been cleared out in favor of the larger pea-like plants. The remarkably brief lives of the subjects made it possible to go through multiple generations in a near-record amount of time, and it wasn't long before we were growing foot plants, and leg plants, arm plants and finally torso plants. Fascinatingly enough, each new plant was slightly different in appearance - the foot plants tended to be more like giant tomato plants, with enormous, round, red pods that were full of pale white feet, each with the texture of tomato seeds. The arm and leg plants grew like carrots, as huge root structures in immense tanks of dirt that we had to build specifically for them. Perhaps the most amazingly of all, the torso plants grew as immense modified root structures, bearing remarkable similarities to potatoes.

We were still afraid to grow head plants, unsure of what exactly would be produced, so we instead moved on to growing more complete forms, incinerating feet and legs together, mixing ash from arms and hands, and the results were phenomenal. A decent number of the resulting tests resulted in perfectly proportioned segments of bodies – correctly assembled arms and torsos, legs and feet. We kept tissue samples from these and burned the rest, hoping to induce a form of unnatural selection, *a la* Darwin. We were more than careful to clean out the ash-pans from the

incinerator after each usage, afraid that the mixture of such ashes would result in even stranger mutations.

Finally, after two months of research, we had produced massive, tree-like plants with huge, drooping pods that each produced a man-like seed, but only from the neck down. These specimens were smooth, tough and white, feeling not unlike sunflower seeds to the touch. By this time, we were beginning to run out of disposal methods; the neighbors were beginning to become concerned with the strange smell of the smoke coming from Dr. Clarke's chimney, and our patients were beginning to wonder if we'd ever go back into business.

This was when we turned to the flytraps.

Oddly enough, one out of every hundred test specimens would inexplicably produce an immense species of flytrap, slightly reminiscent of the monster from *Little Shop of Horrors*. These flytraps often grew up to four feet tall, and their mouths were large enough to swallow basketballs. They also tended to survive longer than the others, living for almost three weeks apiece before wilting, as opposed to the mind-bogglingly brief 1-week lives of the rest. Most of the flytraps we destroyed, because the seeds they produced were black, sharp and twisted, totally unsuitable for our experiments. We did, however, keep a few of the traps around, and it was to these that we began to feed the reject seeds from the other plants. Using this form of botanical cannibalism, we managed to create a cycle of creation and disposal. We kept growing parts and trunks and almost-complete bodies, feeding the 'leftovers' to the traps, which began to grow bigger and bigger, taking up more and more of their corner of the lab. We had this down to an art form.

The only thing left to grow was the head.

"It's the final element," Roald said, sipping his tea. We were sitting in his kitchen, waiting for one of our experiments to come out of the oven. "When we have recreated the head, then produced whole specimens, perhaps we shall see if the wholly-formed plants will imitate totally different forms of life. Just imagine - what will they do? What would they *think*?" We had already dissected a number of our subjects to discover that within the seeds were perfectly reproduced botanical versions of human internal structures, with bones thick as immense taproots and a vein system to transport water and nutrients formed almost exactly like the human counterparts. These botanical objects that we had grown were so close, so *identical* to what we needed. Ironically, it was this that made me so hesitant, and I was not afraid to say so. If we *did* recreate a head, and then whole specimens, what then?

I took a long draw on my coffee and stared at the tile floor, which was just beginning to show faint signs of mildew. "Roald, the entire purpose of our mission was to make replacement prostheses from wholly natural sources. Now look at us. We've strayed so far from the original plan. Where are we to going to stop?"

"Stop? Why would we stop?" Roald smiled. "It is the charge of science to press on until we can't go any further, and then chip away at those boundaries. When we absolutely can't learn



anything more, then and only then shall we stop. And, until that happens, we keep working.”

I was going to open my mouth to object, but I was cut off by the buzzer from the oven. Smiling a thin smile, he stood and walked over and flipped off the buzzer, creaked the door open and removed a casserole dish from the oven. He checked the thermometer, smiling broadly, and then carried it lovingly down into the lab.

I could have sworn that I saw a lock of hair curling out of that dish.

Shuddering, I glanced at my watch and decided that it was time to leave. On the way home, I cranked the radio as loud as it would go and tried not to think about it. It didn't help. I did not sleep well that night.

The next evening I took a few samples from our experiments back to my own lab. That day I had changed the locks to my apartment. Roald had a key to the original locks, and I didn't want to be bothered in my work. The head was simply too much: I intended to leave him to his theories and keep going on my own. The calls from our old patients had almost completely stopped. There was nothing left now but the Project.

Over the next weeks, I began to work with combined plant and human tissue, merging the two with a combination of clumsy microsurgery and the use of different adhering fungi. Everything in this fusion had to be organic. The very goal of the Project was to create life from natural tissue sources, to replace missing limbs with God's living creations, instead of man's metal ones. We had been straying ever since the original Fall, further and further and further. Over the ages, we had learned to manipulate inanimate objects to the point where we had started to become inanimate ourselves. What was obviously needed was a complete reversal of this tactic – only by actively learning to merge ourselves with other living organisms could we ever possibly redeem ourselves in the eyes of our Lord.

I had to work alone now. Roald was clearly too far gone to understand that he was working in the wrong direction, trying to create standalone life as opposed to healing and merging existing lives. I couldn't go to anyone that I knew back at LA Mercy General, because these had been the very ideas that had gotten Roald and I kicked out. The church was also out, because my priest had reacted the same way as the medical board. The Father in confession had only sat there, dumbfounded, as I told him of my research and how furious I was at the feebleminded idiots at the hospital, and then, chuckling uneasily, he had simply suggested that I refer back to the Bible. Humiliated and desperate for proof, I left the church, and that was the last time that I had set foot into a house of God. I was on my own.

That in mind, my joy when I first began to witness the bonding of dead human flesh with the seeds should be easily understandable. It had taken me weeks of research, but finally, late one night, it happened.

“Computer! Record!” The computer chirped as I swung the digital videocamera down on its boom arm. Standing behind the camera with its cable looped around my arm, I used the real-time

display on the screen to focus in on the fat, pale forearm lying in a vat of solution on the makeshift worktable I'd set up beside the computer desk.

"This is Doctor Jonathan Blacknail, recording this development for posterity. What you are seeing is a human forearm, soaked in a vat of embryonic fluid. The 'hand' at the end of the arm, as you can see, is actually one of the seed-pods taken from the botanical specimen which my associate, Dr. Roald Clarke, and I have agreed to refer to as Species 67981, until we can come up with a better name. As you can see, the vat is wired up to the wall. At the flick of this switch on the side of the vat, a steady electrical charge exactly the same amperage as the human nervous system will flow through the embryonic fluid into both arm and pod. Observe."

Leaning forward, I flipped the switch. Instantly, the arm and seed-hand gave a little jerk and then lay there, slowly flexing and relaxing its muscles. "Now, as I vary the electrical flow in much the same manner as the electrical charges sent by the brain to the various muscles in the hand, we should see very definite results." I began to toggle the switch back and forth, adjusting the charge with another control at the side of the vat. Sure enough, the fingers of the hand began to twitch and jerk. I grinned. Now for the final test.

Reaching in, I picked up the forearm and stood it up on its end, so that only the raw nerve endings at the point that would have joined the elbow remained in solution. At the end of the arm, the hand, carefully spliced to the wrist, hung limply with solution dripping from its fingers. "As we can see, the hand itself is not in solution. The only medium by which the hand will be receiving electrical charges is via the botanical 'nerves' in the seed-pod that I have spliced into the nerves in the arm. That in mind, I suggest we watch the results of this next experiment very closely." That said, I took a deep breath and held it as I reached for the toggle switch.

I flipped it on.

Instantly, the hand jerked again. I let out my breath in a long sigh and grinned. Propping the arm up against the side of the vat, I began to toggle the switch back and forth and fiddle with the controls. The hand came to life! The fingers clenched and unclenched, creaking slightly as the green 'skin' stretched, but it was alive!

"Computer! End recording!" I cried, and then let out a long war whoop. "Praise you, Lord!" I yelled at the ceiling. "Praise you! Praise you! Praise you! Hallelujah!"

I spun myself around, eyes raised to the ceiling, and when I finally brought them back down to glance around the room, they fell on the framed picture of Roald and I that hung on my wall. I stared at it for a second, then threw my head back and laughed. Reaching over to the camera, I ejected the tape, dropped it into my pocket, and then ran for the door.

When I arrived at the house, I knew instantly that something was wrong. Stepping out of the car, I almost gagged: the air was rancid with the smells of burning flesh! Roald had to have reverted to our original methods of disposal, but why? Horrified but curious, I headed into the house.

"Roald? *Roald?*" There was no answer. Inside, the place was even more destroyed than

before. The kitchen was a complete disaster, soil strewn across the floor and pots full of forgotten yellow liquid sitting cold upon the stove. There were shards of ceramic flowerpots scattered across the floor. Steeling myself, I opened the door to the basement. All the way down to the lab were scattered seeds of all shapes and sizes, in all stages of development. Seed-hands that had not reached their full development lay on the steps like children's abandoned playthings, looking like nothing so much as parts of oversized dolls, lying alongside the slightly larger hands that might have toyed with them. At the bottom of the stairs was a seed-torso of a woman, another sign that something was dreadfully wrong – all of the subjects we had been using had been male. The floor was stained and sticky with the yellow liquid, and there, in one corner, was Roald, working almost in the dark. He was hunched over a table, working feverishly on something I couldn't see, and I felt my stomach lurch when I tried to imagine what it could be.

“Roald!”

At the sound of my voice my colleague jumped into the air, spinning around and peering blindly into the darkness of his lab. Nearly all of the bulbs in the Gro-Lites had burnt out, and the only remaining sources of light were the open door at the top of the stairs and a single bulb hanging from a thin chain over Roald's head.

“Who's there?” Roald snapped. With one hand, he reached up to take hold of the bulb, and, giving it a shove, swung the light out and away in a slow arc. I drew in a sharp breath as its pool of light swung with it, illuminating the laboratory in brief flashes. Where once the walls had been lined with the pea-plants of the hands and the carrot-trays of the arms and legs, there were now only rows and rows of the flytraps, enormous, black, ugly things that lurked along each wall like great botanical behemoths and monsters. I crossed myself and drew back in fear. Stepping backward, I began to move back to the stairs, but cried out in alarm when my heel crunched down on a hand. In the shadows, I couldn't tell if it was plant or human.

“Jon!” Roald cried when he saw me. This time, I his voice was completely unrecognizable. When he'd first come back, it was a little husky, but now it was positively ragged and tinged with wheezing. As he stepped into the still-swinging pool of light, I saw that his voice matched his appearance. Gone was the Roald I knew, replaced with a Roald that looked more like a madman than an agent of God. He had not shaved in the weeks since I had seen him last, and his long hair was now caked with thick, clotting mud. His clothes and glasses were smeared with stains from mud, embryonic fluid and what could only be blood. The thick black-rubber fireman's gloves that covered his hands and most of his arms up to his elbows were both painted with ash and soil.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” I whispered. “What happened?”

“Jon, the experiments have been going so *well*,” he rasped, and he tried to smile. When he did, I saw that one of his front teeth was gone. “Ever since the accident with the shears...”

My heart stopped. “Accident?”

“Oh, Jon, it's okay,” Roald almost purred. “It gave me the proof I needed. We were right!” He began to draw off his gloves, and my eyes widened as he did so. “We were right, Jon! We just

have to burn the limb that was lost, that's all..."

Roald's left hand was a dark, black, twisted seed.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallow'd be Thy name..." I began to recite as I backed up the stairs.

"Jon, it's okay!" Roald cried. "It works! It's just fine! But it's not the regulars that we need, Jon, oh no! We were wrong all along about that! It's the *traps!* The traps, Jon, we have to plant the seeds from the *traps!* Look!" He pointed into the shadows. As the light swayed that way, it revealed a wall lined with traps, and I saw then that all the traps were now brimming with pods of their own. "They grow, too, Jon, and they're oh, so much more *compatible...*"

I turned and bolted up the stairs.

"*Jon!*" Roald screamed, but it was too late. Roald's mission had been completely corrupted. The traps were the corrupt ones, the Cains to the Abels. And now, now Roald had merged with one. The hand, that hand from the wrong breed...!

I barreled through the house blindly, knocking things to the floor in my mad rush to get away. As I lunged through the front door, I heard him calling out behind me. "*They only want to grow! They deserve a chance to grow!*"

The Jetta's tires shrieked and squealed as I tore out the driveway and down the road. I knew where I had to go. God's agents here had failed me once already – I could not count on the priests and fathers again this time.

I needed the police.

I was laughed at again, as was to be expected, and I was almost locked up when I told my tale, but soon the chief sent two officers out with me just to get me out of the station. One of the plainclothesmen gave me his siren and I placed it in my car, right behind the windshield, and I led the procession back into the night and out onto the freeway. It was, to say the least, a new experience.

When we reached the house, I motioned for the officers to follow me up the sidewalk. Something was wrong. When I reached the door, I found it ajar. Unsure if that had been my doing or Roald's, I cautiously led them inside. When they saw the destruction in the kitchen, I saw one of them draw his gun. *Good*, I thought to myself. *Now they're at least taking this seriously.* Motioning for them to be quiet, I led them down the stairs. I was afraid they would seize me and haul me in when they saw the hands, but they stayed silent. The basement was now completely dark, except for the light from the open door at the top of the stairs. When one of the officers flicked on his flashlight, we saw why: the one remaining bulb had been torn from its chain and shattered on the cold concrete floor of the lab. When the officers saw the traps, they knew I was telling the truth, but they did not, they could not, realize what had already dawned on me with growing horror.

Roald was gone.

I bolted to one of the few still-plantless cabinets, and, praying silently, threw it open.

Mercifully, our emergency weapon was still there. I snatched it out and spun to face the cops.

“Give me your gun,” I said to the one closest to me.

“What?” he demanded, but quieted when his partner put a hand on his shoulder.

“Give it to him, Harry,” the partner said. “Do *you* want to handle this?”

Harry scowled, but drew his pistol from its holster and handed it to me.

“Is it loaded?” I asked.

The cop sneered at me.

Ignoring him, I spun and took off up the steps. Before they could react I was out the back door and running, running because I had seen the disarray on his toolbench, running because I had seen what was missing, and running because I knew just where Dr. Roald Clarke would be going.

I almost broke my neck as I ran across the field behind Roald’s house, but I locked my eyes on the crumbling old steeple that rose up over the treetops and kept running. Soon I had penetrated the thin copse of trees that hid the abandoned old church from Roald’s rear windows, and it was only another minute before I reached the other side of the woods and the chain-link fence that he and I had scaled so many times before. Now, though, there was no need to climb. A huge hole had been torn in the fence, and I knew that if I examined it, I would find yellow residue with the same strange molecular structure as Roald’s plants. Tucking gun and weapon close to me, I ducked through the hole, and soon I was in the churchyard. Just beyond that, just back of the church, was the graveyard.

I saw him almost immediately. He was illuminated in a patch of moonlight, stumbling across the lawn with an armful of the black, twisted seeds. He had a shovel in his hand, and I glanced desperately around the graveyard. I thanked God when I saw that no new holes had been dug since the last time Roald and I had paid a late-night visit for raw materials, and then, looking up, I called out to him.

“Roald!”

He turned, almost falling, and straightened as he spotted me.

“Jon!” There was joy in his voice. “You came to help!”

“Yes, Roald!” I called back, trying to hide both the weapons behind my back and the desperation in my voice.

“They’re God’s children, too,” he cried, his voice now only a choked wheeze. “They tried once before, but died off. They weren’t ready! Now they just want another chance to grow, Jon, don’t you see?”

“Yes, Roald, I see!” I cried. “I do! I want to help! Listen, why don’t you just set the seeds down and I can help you spread them across the lawn...?”

“But, Jon, they have to be planted deep enough,” he chided, like a mother reminding a child not to forget his lunch. “Deep enough to go beneath the grass, and the dying leaves... This place is perfect, Jon – old enough that the coffins were made to break down. Then they can grow...”

“Of course, Roald,” I nodded. “Why don’t you pass me the shovel?”



“That’s the spirit,” he wheezed. Suddenly, a cloud passed over Roald’s face. “Jon,” he asked, “what are you carrying behind your back?”

“Nothing, Roald! Let’s get to work!” I called back, and swore softly under my breath.

It was no good. He took a step back, instantly on the defensive. “No,” he said. “No, you’re not going to help, are you?”

I took a deep breath and raised the pistol. “Damn it, Roald,” I sighed. “Please don’t make me do this.”

“Jon?” Roald stared at the gun, a plaintive look on his face. “Jon, what are you doing? We’re on a mission together, don’t you remember?”

“No, Roald,” I said, shaking my head. “You lost the mission. You strayed from the path.”

Roald began to growl, a deep rumble that grew into a full-fledged wail. “No,” he snarled. “No, you don’t see at all! This is the path!” His voice wound up into a desperate scream. “*This is the path to God!*”

Dropping the seeds, he raised the shovel over his head and charged at me. His eyes flashed red, then green.

“Forgive us, Father!” I cried, and emptied the revolver into his chest.

Roald reeled back as the bullets tore into him, whipping him around in a bloody mist. He staggered for a moment, then lifted his head and stared at me. Trickling from his eyes were tears of yellow liquid. “Yes, Father, forgive him,” he snarled. “He knows not what he does.”

With that, Roald let loose a long, furious howl. Throwing his head back, he hefted the shovel over his head, and in the moonlight I had a clear view. The bullets had done their work with a vengeance, tearing great holes into his chest, and where they had struck blood was rapidly staining his coat. But there was something wrong even here. The thick liquid soaking through his coat was *green*.

Wordlessly, I dropped the revolver and brought up the mister from the cabinet. I wrapped my fingers around the plunger handle, and then Roald on top of me, bringing the blade of the shovel down sideways on me, slicing it through the air. I didn’t move quickly enough; the shovel head came down and buried itself in my shoulder. I screamed as I felt it cut, and I stumbled and fell to the ground. Snarling, Roald jerked the shovel out of my shoulder and back up for another blow. His eyes were solid green.

“Ave Maria,” I whispered, and with all the strength I could muster, I forced in the plunger. A thick cloud of herbicide exploded from the nozzle directly into Roald’s face. Letting out a scream, he dropped the shovel and fell to his knees as he began to choke.

“Oh, God, Roald, I’m sorry,” I moaned, and then the searing pain in my shoulder was too much, and I dropped the mister to the ground. Off in the distance, I could hear the shouts of the officers coming through the woods, drawn by the gunshots.

Roald had raised both hands - plant and otherwise - to his throat as he fought for breath. Steady streams of the yellow liquid bled down his face, but now the liquid was bubbling and

steaming away where the mist had touched it. Drawing a last ragged breath, he raised his head and stared at me. His eyes were once again as soft blue as ever, and when he spoke, his voice was almost normal again. “We’re on the path, Jon,” he whispered. “You and I - *we’re on the path.*”

“I know, buddy,” I whispered back. “I know.”

Then Roald fell backward, twisting as he went in a way that was completely wrong, and as he fell I heard something cracking, not unlike corn stalks being snapped in two. Then he struck the ground, and he was still.

Coughing, I dragged myself over to him. I had to do something. Last rites of some sort, or, at the very least, I needed to close his eyes. Wincing as I went, I crawled over and knelt over him. His eyes were staring up at the sky, totally blank. I began to recite a Hail Mary as I reached to close them.

Suddenly, the bonded arm thrust itself into the air, thrusting the green hand into my face. Before I could react, the tough green husk of its ‘skin’ exploded open and a cloud of spores sprayed into my eyes and mouth.

Suddenly, everything was green.

Retching, I clamped a hand over my mouth, dove for the ground, and grabbed the sprayer with my free hand. Rolling onto my back, I placed the pump handle against my stomach, aimed the nozzle at my head, and forced the trunk of the sprayer down onto the handle. I opened my eyes wide and inhaled as deeply as I could as the herbicide flooded the air.

Everything blurred from green to blood-red, and then to black.

When I came to, I was in the hospital with more tubes coming out of me than I knew the human body could handle. I was alone.

When a nurse came to visit me, it was one of the ones I recognized from my days at the hospital. Taking pity on me, she told me that the FBI were all over town, and that the US Biohazard force was swarming over my apartment, Roald’s basement and the graveyard. I begged her for a pen and paper, which she mercifully brought me, and when she left I began writing all this down while it was still fresh in my mind.

I’m afraid, now, to tell you the truth. It’s been five days, and I’m still in the hospital. One of the doctors told me that one of the FBI guys are going to come and talk to me this afternoon. This is why I’m getting this down now. My notes were all in my house, but I doubt they’ll still be there after Biohazard and the Feds are done. Hell, somehow I doubt even this account will still exist after the Feds are through. But that’s not what I’m really afraid of, to tell you the truth.

I’m afraid that I didn’t block all of those spores. I’m afraid that my thoughts aren’t my own anymore. I’m afraid that I’m thinking like Roald did, there before the end. I guess he had a point, you know? All of God’s children deserve a chance to grow. He was just influenced by the wrong side, I guess. Maybe. A Cain to my Abel. Maybe.

I’m not sure what I’ll do when they let me out of here. Maybe I’ll try to re-enact the

experiment, if I can somehow get to the Himalayas for materials, but it would take me years of examining plant after plant to figure out where Roald found the original seeds. I don't know. But, then again, after being so close, maybe this is only a temporary setback. We all have to keep to our paths. All of us.

Because, you know, we're all on our own paths to God.

It's only a matter of time.



## *about the author*

Geoffrey Long was born in the middle of nowhere, Ohio. He has always loved to read, write, and design, and his longstanding passion for creativity is what led him to found *Inkblots Magazine* in 1995. Oedipus Press, the company he founded to publish *Inkblots*, became Dreamsby Media Labs two years later and was rechristened The Dreamsby Company in 2000.

He has studied at the College of Wooster, the University of Exeter in England, and Kenyon College, where he received his BA in English and Philosophy in 2000. He presently resides in the Washington, DC metro area.

His personal site/portfolio, including more of his writing, is available at [geoffreylong.com](http://geoffreylong.com).





# DR. JONATHAN BLACKNAIL AND DR. ROALD CLARKE HAVE A LITTLE PROJECT.

Two brilliant doctors are on a mission to revolutionize the field of prosthetics. When one of them returns from a vacation to the Himalayas claiming to have made a radical breakthrough, will his discovery drive them both into madness?



*Green* is a light science-fiction/horror novella by Geoffrey Long, the editor of *Inkblots Magazine*. For more of his work, please visit [www.geoffreylong.com](http://www.geoffreylong.com). This story is distributed as a free PDF. Please forward it to your friends if you enjoy it.

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