

# Polar

by

David Vickery

I wasn't there, but I could see everything. The heavy boots, solid through the lashing wind and rain, coming down the gangway, leaving a bright and somehow sickly contamination, although at first no one on board noticed anything. Then, later, the pools of limpid sickness smoking into form, the fetid stench, and a sudden deafening roar. There on deck, half masked by the tearing spume, the enormous white bear. Bigger than any bear could be, yet a bear: utter and undeniable *bearness*, nevertheless. Panic on deck, then the officer firing, his coat slicked black by the rain, his shoulder jerking from the recoil of his high-powered rifle. Still shooting as the steel-coated talons ripped him away, blending him with the sea and the sky.

That was how I awoke, with that memory, or vision; that, and the driving endless iteration of the guitar break from a song called *Whiskey in the Jar*. I looked around me. The streets were curiously grey and dull, and empty. I remembered nothing and felt no sense of loss, but perhaps the jukebox sound guided my feet. I headed for a pub. The thought triggered a sense of thirst: passive, but present.

I pushed open the door and walked in. Several people sat at tables, not speaking. I could feel a cold line of sweat appear just where my hair pushed out from my forehead when I saw their eyes. Cold and dead, like rag-doll buttons. All of them. The barman looked up, the same blankness in his own cloth face. But there was no doubt that he could see me. Interrogative wrinkles met over his black brows.

"Whisky," I said. My voice sounded ridiculous: high and shrill, like something out of a child's cartoon. I expected laughter, or some reaction, but the barman said nothing. He had nothing to say about anything, just turned to the optics and pressed a glass up against one. The whisky looked dull and torpid. I pulled a couple of coins from my pocket and put them on the bar but my desire had leached away.

I walked through to the back, pushed open the door to the men's room. There in the fly-specked mirror, the same mad lifeless eyes, the same featureless face. My scream was like a whistle stuffed with wadding.

Wearing white overalls and carrying short ladders, two figures walked up the road. They looked like distended versions of those old comedians, Ronnie Barker and David Jason. Just a coincidence: of expression, of relative size, of tone of voice. Nevertheless, despite the fact that they were out in the open, short gusts of laughter accompanied everything they did.

"Soon get this ice off the house," said the fat one. Raucous laughter surged briefly.

His companion took hold of a hood of ice in both hands and broke it with a snap. At that moment, everything became intensely still.

"I don't like it," he said. "Why is everything so quiet?" (Gales of laughter, dying as quickly as they came.)

“It’s just the morning lull,” said his fat friend. He seemed to wink at an unseen audience. Judging by the increased volume of laughter, that was certainly their impression. He broke more ice off the front of the house. Something began to move in the trees across the way.

“Stop,” said the other one, grabbing his arm. “What’s happening?”

The fat workman stopped and looked across to the trees. He began to swear, no hint of humour in his bitter and mean words, but his voice was all but lost in the chorus of sniggers, guffaws and belly-laughes. Something had been set in motion.

“It’ll be the polar bear, you see if it isn’t,” said the short one with fatalistic gloom. The unseen audience found humour in the droop of his shoulders, the cadence of his voice; but most of them were obviously drawn elsewhere.

Out of the bushes came something huge and white, but certainly not a bear. If anything, it resembled a massive, badly stuffed rabbit. Its unmatched features gave it the look of an old child’s toy.

“We’ve woken it,” said the fat one. “There’ll be hell to pay.” The flat eyes of the toy turned on the workmen. Fixed them. Then the cloth mouth opened in a roar, razored canines glinting. The audience reached fever pitch. It was the best production ever. They were still laughing when the comical pair started running for their lives.

When I came to I was walking in the street again. Half of me was still back with that stuffed toy. I couldn’t forget the overpowering animal stench and the tongue dripping saliva when it opened its mouth. Its mouth that was cloth on the outside, below a velvet-triangle snout and what looked like buttons for eyes. Something that couldn’t be, but was.

I don’t know how long I walked after that, or how much time passed when I wasn’t walking but asleep, perhaps, in some quiet alleyway. Sometimes I would pass other rag-dolls in the street, and always I’d be looking for something in their eyes. I was searching for some meaning, meaning in them that would in turn contribute meaning to this senseless world. But I never found it.

Until this morning. He looked just like the rest, the silly marionette features, the stiff walk; I suppose I looked the same way to him. But some hint of expression, mainly around the eyes and mouth, seemed to suggest at least the beginnings of sentience. I stopped. He stopped too and clutched at my arm, strangely excited in an impassive world.

“You feel it, too?” he asked, his voice coming as though from inside wool. “You’re alive, aren’t you!”

Immediately, button-eyes turned towards us. Was there hostility in their blank gaze? We turned and walked quickly away.

Looking back, I sensed rather than saw something happening: like water coming to the boil, or a crystal growing in solution. Wordlessly, which somehow made it worse, the crowd was staring in our direction. Then, stiffly, they began to walk after us.

We ducked into a street. It was an ordinary suburban row of houses, poplars in the garden, well-kept plants and bushes, well-brushed paths. I’d seen it all hundreds of times before, in what seemed like another lifetime.

“Let’s try and get some help,” I said, the Mickey Mouse words sounding like an outrage in the silent street. My companion nodded. We ran up and down the paths, ringing doorbells, knocking knockers. Usually there was silence; occasionally, a muffled bellow which sounded like a curse. But finally, while my friend was trying

the other side of the street I rang my last bell and the door opened almost at once. Inside, the owner had the same cloth features and dull gaze, but something about this one looked different.

“They’re after us,” I gasped out. “You’ve got to help me. Hide me. Do something.” He pulled me inside, into the front room. It was decorated with taste. Just an ordinary room.

“Let me shut the front door,” I said in my shrill and laughable voice, moving to go past him; but he barred my way. I pushed him, and then his mitten hands were reaching for my throat. Panic flared inside me and I lashed out. I was punching the face, which felt both soft and hard at the same time, and the creature was roaring with pain. But he never stopped, never let up.

My blows seemed to cause pain but brought no respite. I brought my knee up into the thing’s crotch and the cloth-wrapped bellow intensified, but still he came on. Now he had me backed up into the corner and his grip on my throat tightened like a noose.

In my mind’s eye I could see a wooden block containing six knives in two rows of three. Hard composite handles, dagger-sharp steel below. I was wondering at the vision as my sight began to rim with red. But then one of the knives, the longest, was held in a hand. A rag-doll hand, but a hand moved by purpose. A couple of steps from kitchen to lounge, and then the knife was jerked in and up with abrupt ferocious force, razoring through anus, gluteus maximus and on into the intestines.

The grip of my attacker relaxed at last and he rolling on the floor, flapping his arms, flailing like an expiring fish. I looked from him to my companion, the knife still in his hand smeared with something. It looked more like butter than blood. Then the noises began. Crack. CRACK. Parts of the marionette seemed to puncture, others to sag, and the whole thing contracted. Now it was impossible that it had ever been alive, that it had ever stood without support.

As we looked down we heard sudden splintering noises coming from below. It must be from a basement or cellar.

“More of them?” I said. My companion just looked at me and gripped the knife tighter. Even at that moment I noticed the blade seemed corroded at its fine edge.

Now the noises were getting closer. It sounded like someone climbing, or staggering, up wooden steps. The door was flung open.

It was a man. Naked, apart from something that looked like a heavy white film of glue. It covered his torso, patched across his upper arms and clung like dry rot to his hair. He stood gasping for a moment, tearing at his throat and his face as he drew in air. Part of his nose and eyes were still heavily gummed; but what I could see was blessedly human, his left eye as blue and bright as my own was. Or had been.

I made a move towards him. He looked up, startled into immobility but rage and fear already showing on his mask-like face. But then he saw the dead thing on the floor in front of us, noticed the dull edge of the knife in my companion’s hand. He took a step forward.

Mob noises were coming from the end of the street. He darted a look of terror at us and stumbled past us into the hall. He shut the door quickly and quietly, double-locked it and shot home a bolt. I suddenly knew that this was his house. His home. He motioned us away from the windows and crouched low himself as the mob flowed angrily past, still seeking.

As the last stragglers went past, the man finally relaxed. Relief racked him almost like pain. Then, as if remembering, he limped quickly into the kitchen. We followed him. He wrenched open the fridge door and a cool, dull light that seemed

completely wrong poured out. Inside, it was full of packages of different sizes, but all white and all without labels.

He grabbed one about the right size and shape for a carton of milk and tore at the top. He was already raising it to his lips when the package lost all structural integrity and his fingers crushed it like damp paper. Milky water flooded over his feet and onto the floor.

He grabbed another package, squat and oblong. It was full of a matt grey paste the consistency of make-up cleanser. It smelt of nothing. He tried some of it on the tip of a finger and then looked at me, almost in accusation.

His eyes. His human eyes. Bright with understanding, self-awareness and, now, indignation. But at least he could indicate his emotions, with the least flexion of his muscles. And his face was scarred and sticky with clinging stuff but it was the face of a human being. I looked at it. I could see the tiny pits on its surface, the stiff stubble poking through the vestiges of gum around the chin. I touched my own. It felt smooth and artificial, but then my hands were these toy's paws. I looked at my companion, at his stupid rag-doll features and cloth limbs, and knew that I was just like him.

Suddenly I felt as though I was drowning in a sea of rags. I wanted to rip that cloth face away, expose my own to the air; but I knew that it *was* my own face. It would be like trying to pull off my head. But I couldn't stand the claustrophobic sense of suffocation. I held out my mitten hand for the knife.

My companion handed it over, a mute sadness and understanding in his toybox look. I stood there, we stood there, an uneasy tableau in the wan, flat light that still streamed from the fridge. Then I took the knife in both hands and drove it into my neck to spurt thick yellow blood, shearing through major and minor blood vessels, severing the vocal chords, on and down, down, down into the heart.

And died.

"He was talking about Clark Gable," said Helen. The others giggled.

"Who the pshau is Clark Gable?" asked Tom, giggling.

"*Blark* Gable," said Sue-Ann, adding to the laughter.

"Clark *Blark*," said Helen, completing it. She let the laughter take its uncontrollable childish course. "Some flattie identity."

"That Greatgrand," said Tom, childhood suddenly sorry for a bygone age.

"Imagine having only flatties to look at."

"But he's worse," said Helen. "He won't even *try* PIV. He won't even have it in the house. He says people like Blark Gable –"

"Clark! Clark!" sang out Sue-Ann with infectious enthusiasm.

"– *Clark* Gable were the real stars."

"But you can't *do* anything with them," protested Tom. He adopted a sense of superiority: in fact, neither he nor his playmates knew the first thing about flattie vids and what you could or couldn't do with them, their total experience consisting of a bored ten minutes or so in the homes of recidivist relatives. All he knew was, they were out of date.

"He must be a blark," said Sue-Ann. "He won't even watch the threedee versions."

"Blark, blark, blark," said Tom. "But let's carry on. We've got ten minutes before tea."

"Take out the sentience circuit," said Helen. She was the eldest and knew about such technicalities.

“Take out the SuperSmart circuit,” said Sue-Ann. She was the youngest and believed in cutting out anything that gave too much of an advantage.

“All right. But the sentience stays in,” said Tom. He was the cruellest and the real wiz on Programmable Interactive Video. He turned back to the console, input *POLAR: Restart* and settled back in smug satisfaction.

And lived again.

For a split second, the bliss of identity returning. Then, a closed-in panic. First sensation: I’m standing up in a coffin. Second sensation: I can’t open my eyes. Third sensation: I can’t breathe.

I don’t know much about the next couple of seconds, but when I turn around there’s a smashed box behind me, strands of glue hanging everywhere from me – and euphoric delight. I touch my face, real fingers, real stubble, real eyes: not buttons. Not a rag-doll face. I can feel every single eyelash. And I’m breathing again. I don’t remember when I stopped, but starting again’s like nothing on earth.

I’m in some sort of cellar. There’s a rustling sound, a tiny scampering movement. Wait a minute, this is my cellar, in my home. Although the last time I was down here there certainly weren’t any rats. But it doesn’t matter. I’m alive, more alive than I’ve ever been, and just feeling my heart beat’s a pleasure.

I head upstairs gingerly, my hand on the iron rail. First thought: get a weapon of some kind from the kitchen, like my companion had done. Seems like a lifetime ago.

I’m in the kitchen and rummaging through the top drawer for a knife big enough to do it in one easy movement when I realise: *I’m* the rag-doll in this house. Or I was. I, that thing, died in that other house when we were hiding from the mob. So there’s no one else here.

I breathe a sigh of relief and turn to the fridge. Suddenly I’m desert-thirsty. But my shoulders haven’t quite got to the end of the sigh when I hear something from an upstairs room. Such a soft sound.

I’m creeping up the stairs, knife in hand. There it is again, from the front bedroom. I open the door. It’s another of those damned rag-dolls, sitting on the bed. I see its stupid reflection, Idiocy in Toyland, in the dresser mirror.

Don’t waste time. I leap across the room and have it up against the wall in a moment. Its button eyes register fear but there’s no physical protest. A cartoon voice squeaks through my hand, squashing against the larynx, but even that morsel of sound tells me its Sarah.

My wife. There must have been two boxes downstairs. Well, this is all right after all. I don’t understand anything and I don’t remember it either, but if the two of us are still alive, together, in our own home, we’ll make out somehow. We can liberate our neighbours, start our own holy war. Gently, reassuringly, I stroke the wool strands masquerading as hair and plunge the breadknife in up to the handle.

There’s a strangled sigh and the body goes limp in my hands. But there’s no sound like ice cracking in a newly defrosted and reactivated freezer. And that woven wool isn’t wool at all but that familiar lovely gold. Sarah’s looking up at me, a strange look almost of peace in her hazel eyes. All around me, in the air, I can hear childish voices giggling. And now I finally know what their laughter’s all about.

I’m stepping back, away from the body, when it starts to change its form once more. Not to fool me again, since I’ve already been fooled good and proper, so it must be the real thing this time. That bright red stain is fading to white, the whiteness of blown tundra snow, and the shape is becoming recognisable. It’s the same

impossible polar bear I saw on the ship so long ago, utterly savage in its snarl and its huge maw.

The knife in my hand feels like a child's toy and it slips to the floor as I back against the wall. But now the polar bear's stopped. Still as a logo. Everything's stopped, even the laughter. The lights are fading and I'm fighting for my identity, fighting to stay *me*.

Vertiginous terror. Sweat slicks me all over, all at once. It's the worst horror of all: not only that I might cease to exist, but that I never existed at all. Just something that *someone made up*. Any more and I'd lose myself in madness. But something saves me, throws me a lifeline. My love for Sarah, that wrenching remorse when I killed her: they were real, undeniably real. If I wasn't real before, I am now.

"We'd better go," said Sue-Ann. The parental calls had finally reached that level of hardness where another reply of "Coming..." wouldn't wash.

Tom was reluctant to leave the screen, seeming to relish the blue wash of the too-sharp light bathing his face. Nothing was happening and there was no time to start another game before tea. Yet he couldn't tear himself away, vicarious bloodlust still washing around inside him.

"Come on," said Helen. "The sooner we go, the sooner we can get back."

"I know!" said Tom suddenly. He input *POLAR: Restart* and paused the sequence on the first frame. "That way we can say we've got a game going. And we won't have to stay talking to them."

Childlike laughter carolled approval as the three of them left the room. Anything that curtailed their stay in the boring world of adult reality was worth doing.

The lights are still dull and it's hard to move. Enormous weariness. But something inside me gives comfort. The sweat has dried and I feel renewed, as though I can make a fresh start. The bear still stands in the room, still motionless. I heave myself up and over to it. I touch it. It's hard and cold as cement and then it fades away.

Alone in the room, things suddenly seem freer, easier. And it's like it was before, ages ago; or maybe many – countless – times before. I can see with my mind without leaving the bedroom. There's the bear again, on the ship. There's the officer, no choice but to go through that same routine time and time again. And every time, the same terror, the same searing agony. Then the bear prowls the rest of the ship, hunting out the crew and the passengers, stalking them through the pelting rain. They've got a chance to survive if they can stay hidden, but it's terribly difficult.

There are those two comedians, still running from the bear's second cousin. Again, they've got a chance to survive. But not to fight back. Suddenly, that's the sort of chance I'm looking for.

And there are the places where *I'm* supposed to go. The pub. The market square. The street. The houses. Even as I see the pub, part of me wants to go up to the bar, walking to the beat of the music playing all around me, and order a whisky. My hand's in my pocket, reaching for the two coins I know are there, that are always there even after I spend them. And then I rebel. And it's great. The barman looks up blankly, uncomprehendingly, and I'm back in the bedroom.

Out in the street, I head unerringly for one particular house. It's a long way to walk, and sometimes the streets peter out into blackness. But I know which way to go. No one's out yet, and the sky is filled with that unearthly colour all the time, but I don't worry about it. Everything's under control.

I ring the bell and hammer the door, and finally he opens it, moving as slow as a dream but moving. Something's changed with him too, even though strands of glue still cling to his face. He recognises me at once, and already he's speeding up to something more like reality. I think for a moment and my mind's everywhere at once. Then I know the cellar's the place to go.

We head on down. A box, splintered by terror-powered hands. I continue the break-up. Then I'm pulling it from the wall. My friend catches on and lends a hand. Behind the box, its panels still gummy, there's that blankness again. And behind the blankness, circuitry, the movement of electrons, intelligence like our own. I even know the changes to make. My friend helps me because he knows too, and we're suddenly laughing. Like excited naughty children.

I don't know how long it takes, but time no longer matters. All I know is that there's a click like a soft thunderclap and everything starts up again. I can see all the toys moving on their despicable electronic clockwork. I can even see the bear filling the blue-lit room, three terrified children rattling the door handle which won't turn, the wild, animal odours filling the room like heat, and the leaded claw falling and falling, the children drowning in blood. Something that can't be, but is.

And then the bear's gone again. It was never really there, of course. But that doesn't make any difference to the children. There isn't a mark on them, but they're finished. Ended. With no chance of a restart.

Me, I head back to my house. There's Sarah, her hair more golden than ever, her eyes a softer hazel. She lets me in and slams the door behind me, we kiss like waterfalls against it, unsteady passion consuming us yet leaving us whole. We've found ourselves. And no one will ever come between us again.

It's a month since the funeral. A tragic, triple affair. Young lives with such potential cruelly terminated, the anguish of the relatives made worse by the unknown cause of death.

Of course, the parents didn't have much to do, just made the arrangements on screen. They didn't even have to attend, just watch in silent sorrow through the link-up. But I was there. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

And now the mother, dulled by pain, is sorting through her children's playthings. No use keeping them, but some child somewhere might benefit from them. She might offer them round on the community vid link.

As for me, there's a lot to do. A whole city to liberate, but that's just for starters. What I really hope is that some other nice little boy or girl will buy POLAR. Because I'm more than ready to play another game.