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WORLD OF THE DRONE

By Robert
Abernathy



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THE HAND

by

Jerry Sohl

Alice knew that Dobie was a good dog, even if he did have an alarming habit of hunting down rabbits and gophers. But one day he brought her—

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lice McNearby was washing breakfast dishes and looking out the kitchen window at the November sky when she first spied Dobie. The way he was sneaking up to the house she knew he had killed something.

She dried her hands on her apron and tried to put down the suspicion that gnawed at the edge of her mind as she went to the door. During the past month Dobie had killed a cat, a pheasant, two rabbits and a field mouse and it seemed it would be only a question of time until he got one of the chickens or even one of the suckling pigs. That would be all Mac would need to throw one of his wild spells and he'd probably take a gun to Dobie as he had threatened to do. To make it worse, Dobie seemed to know how Mac felt and often growled at him. Mac didn't growl back but the look in her husband's eyes was enough to convince her Dobie's continued existence was in doubt.

It was a wonder to Alice that Mac hadn't done away with him already, judging from the comfort she derived from the dog. Dobie never fretted, never whined and seemed so appreciative of everything she did for him. She had scolded him for his killing but found herself unable to put her heart in it because he seemed to love it so. Instead, she always managed to clear any bones away before Mac returned from town or came up from the barn and she was thankful he seemed as yet unaware of the brown dog's hunting nature.

Now it appeared she'd have to cover up for the dog once again and she opened the door. Dobie was under a bush half way across the barn yard, his kill still in his mouth. He was circling around, and she knew he'd soon be on his stomach

enjoying his feast.

"Dobie!" she called in a low voice, hoping it would not carry to the barn.

Dobie's ears came up. He looked her way.

"Dobie!... Come here, Dobie!"

The dog was undecided, looking at her, unmoving for a moment. Then his tail started flicking, he lowered his head and came up to her.

Then she saw what he had in his mouth and her blood stopped and only a great effort on the part of her heart started it going again.

It was a human hand, blood still oozing from the severed wrist.

"Dobie!"

The way she said it, the way she looked—something made the dog drop the hand. It fell to the ground, limp, palm down.

Dobie, head hung, tail down, ventured forward, nuzzled her hand. But Alice could not tear her eyes from the thing on the cold ground. She had cared for Dobie like a baby ever since someone dropped him off out in the country and she had adopted the name Dobie because a passing child had called him that and it seemed like a good name ... and she loved him.

But this, this hand. That was too much.

She looked around, saw a milk pail, put it open end down over the hand and carried two large rocks from the garden border to put on top to secure it. She didn't want it to be gone when she brought Mac back to see it.

She heard her ring on the telephone—rather early for Mrs. Swearingen or Mrs. Abbey wasn't it?—but ignored it. There was something else she had to do and do quickly. For the first time in months she felt thankful for Mac's presence. Surely he would know what to do. Though it was cold, she was unmindful of the fact that she did not wear a coat as she hurried to the barn; she was thinking instead that perhaps she should have answered the phone in case it might have been someone other than her women friends, possibly something in connection with the severed hand. She shuddered as she remembered how it had looked.

Alice found Mac in the loft. He had a forkful of hay over the opening when he

saw her below. He stopped, narrowed his eyes before he slowly brought the hay back to the loft floor and leaned on the pitchfork.

"Dobie's found something," she said and wished her voice hadn't quavered so.

Mac spat a blob of tobacco on the floor above her. "He's a no-good dog," he said. "Scares the pigs. Always sneakin' around. Ought to be rid of him. Should have got 'round to it before this. What did he find?"

"A hand." She swallowed ... and shivered.

"A what?"

"A hand. A human hand." She suddenly took pride in the fact that she was telling him something he didn't know and that he was interested. "I don't know where he got it."

Mac put down the fork and lowered his burly frame over the edge of the opening and came down the ladder without a word. He followed her up to the house and she was thankful Dobie was nowhere around. When he kicked over the pail she was gratified to hear his sharp intake of breath.

"By God!" he said, staring down at it. Then he flicked it over with his boot. "By God!" he said again. Alice had never seen him so agitated.

He turned to her, his eyes narrower than she had ever seen them. "You take a good look at it?"

She nodded, looked down at the way the fingers were bent upward as if the hand were holding an invisible ball. She heard Mac spit, looked at him running his fingers along his stubbled jaw.

"It ain't human," he said. "Anybody with any sense could see that. It's got six fingers."



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ust then the phone rang again. It seemed to come from a long way off and Alice hadn't consciously noticed it until her husband said. "Ain't you goin' to answer the phone?" And then she went to the door, dazed and wondering. She turned

before she went in.

"What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

"You just go in and gab with those women folks," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Shouldn't we call the sheriff?"

His eyes came up level with hers. "We ain't goin' to call nobody. I don't want no trouble. And don't you go talkin' about it with *them* either."

The phone was Mrs. Swearingen who told her that she had been trying to get her for the last half hour ever since she heard about that ship that crashed and wasn't it awful and that a person wasn't safe in his bed asleep any more with these planes flying around and crashing—and so far from an airport, too. Mrs. Swearingen was surprised that Alice had noticed no smoke and didn't she know the wreck was closer to the McNearby place than it was to the Swearingens?

"It's right south of your lower forty on the old Carnahan land, Alice. I'd figure it at about a mile from your place. Lots of people down there."

And then there was the call from Mrs. Abbey who told her she'd come from the crash site and wasn't it a peculiar plane with those funny windows and that once-broken-one somebody had patched up from the inside.

"The sheriff won't let anybody go near it," Mrs. Abbey said. "He says it's a space ship and the army ought to have a look at it first. But I saw him trying to find where to get in. Except for that broken window and that crumpled nose it don't look too bad off. Big clouds of smoke were shooting out the tail when I first got there but it's not smoking any more. Really, you ought to go down and see it, Alice."

Alice told her husband about it. He had gone back to the barn and she didn't see the severed hand anywhere on the way there.

"So that's where it come from," he said. "Good thing it didn't land on my place." He spat and wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his overalls. It always bothered Alice when he did this because the stain was so difficult to get out but she had long ceased trying to change him. "If it'd landed here I'd of blown it up like a stump."

"Shouldn't we go down and see it?" Alice asked, knowing too late she had

phrased the question the wrong way.

"Curiosity killed the cat," he said, and there was the faintest glimmer of a smile on his face but it was only fleeting. "Let everybody else go down and I'll get my work done while they're standin' around with their mouths hangin' open. I'm runnin' a farm and I aim to run it right."

"I think I'll go down." She tried to make it have resolve but didn't quite succeed.

He glared at her and spat again. "Then git," he said. He threw down a large forkful of hay and she had to jump out of the way. She went right after dinner.

She saw a silver cylinder that looked ever so much like pictures of guided missiles she had seen in the newspapers except that this one was bigger than any of them. Its nose was dug she could not tell how far into the earth and some of the metal on the sides was battered and bent and the tail was she guessed about a hundred and fifty feet in the air. It was about twenty-five feet across.

There were clusters of people about and she recognized many of them she hadn't seen for a long time and she was glad she had come because it gave her a rare chance to visit; Mac seldom cared for just visiting. She talked to the Blaines, the Purveses, to the Gordon children whose parents had let them remain at the wreck site even after they had gone home for chores, to the Barfords and Hocholters and many others. They asked about Mac and she offered her usual excuses for him.

While she was there she saw an army car driven up. She watched while some men got out and went through the roped-off area and pounded and scraped on the cylinder and then stood off looking at the tail of it, scratching their heads.

W

hen she went home she was surprised to see how far the sun had moved across the sky and hoped Mac wouldn't be upset by her prolonged absence. She was gratified to see that he wasn't in the house. She petted Dobie for a while before she went in to stir up the stove and prepare supper.

During the meal Alice tried to tell her husband something of what she had seen at the wreck site but if he paid any attention to her he didn't reveal it. He had

propped up a farm equipment catalogue against the sugar bowl and studied the pages without saying a word. She resigned herself to eating in silence with this great hulk of a man before her and reflected that this night was no different from most of the others. She wondered what it was that made him the way he was, so intent on his farm to the exclusion of everything else, including humanity. It was a fetish, an obsession that didn't pay off because she couldn't see that they were better off than the Swearingens or the Abbeys or any of the others in the neighborhood.

When he was through he simply got up, put on his overcoat and went outside. In a few minutes she could hear the car start and knew it would be another lonely evening. Mac would be home when he felt like it, reeking of liquor but handling it well. She did not begrudge him these absences because the man obviously needed something to take his mind off his work. But she wished she had some comparable escape.

She had got out her writing board, had settled herself comfortably with pen in hand in Mac's big chair and had even put the date on the letter to her mother who lived in Canada when she heard Dobie's excited bark.

She picked up a shawl on the way to the kitchen, turned on the big light on the windmill and looked out the window. Dobie was in the middle of the yard barking at something she couldn't see. She went out.

"Dobie," she called. "What is it?"

The dog whined and moved about nervously, looking first at her and then at the darkness between the big barn and the machine shed. As she sought to pierce the blackness there, a shape moved out from between the buildings and the sudden move caused her to step back. Dobie at once set up loud and ferocious barking.

"Quiet, Dobie," she managed to say, laying a hand aside the dog's head and viewing the figure before her. It was a man—at least a man *shape*—with hands (she thanked God the creature had both its hands), a head, neck, shoulders and legs. But the head was a lot larger than a man's, there was no hair on it and the eyes were smaller, the nose longer and the mouth a narrow slash across the face. The neck was short, the shoulders thin and the legs and arms were spindling. She saw that each hand had six fingers. Across the narrow shoulders had been flung what looked like a carpet and from beneath this fell a skirt that went to the knees, held to the body with a metal rope belt just under his ribs. The shoes were enormous things for such pipestem legs—until she saw they were soft and furry

and that this gave them their size. For a moment she almost laughed because he presented such a grotesque figure, but she did not dare. The creature spoke.

"Good evening, Mrs. McNearby," it said in a not unpleasant, whistling voice and Alice wondered how it could talk so well to her.

"I come from the crashed ship. You know of it, of course. You were there this afternoon."

Alice was on the point of asking how he knew she had been at the wreck site when he started in again.

"We have traced the severed hand of one of our crew to your place here. We came down at considerable velocity when our ship went out of control. We were lucky to escape with our lives. But one of us was thrown from the ship with such force that his hand was cut off by an obstruction on the ship. Your dog happened on the scene before we could find the hand."

The chill of the November night air was beginning to penetrate her shawl and Alice could feel a stirring of air on her legs. Dobie moved restlessly at her side but she did not let go of his neck hair for fear of what he might do.

"We need that hand, Mrs. McNearby. Without it the man who lost it will be at a tragic disadvantage among us. That is why we were looking so hard for it this morning after the crash. If we can return the hand to him in time it can, through proper treatment, be made as good as new. Would you be so good as to return it to me, now, please?"

The eyes, though tiny, seemed not unkind, and the alien stood silent. She was moved by his pleas.

"Mac—that's my husband—has it," Alice said. "I saw Dobie here with it and put it under a milk pail and when Mac saw it he said he'd take care of it." She hoped she was making sense.

"Do you know where it is?"

"I don't know where Mac put it."

"Would you find it for me, please? I'll wait."



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lice agreed and, wondering what Mac would say if he came home and found the hand gone, started looking for it. But surely Mac would understand about the hand, she thought. I'll explain to him the urgency of it, that one of the aliens needs it to live and be useful.

She looked in the obvious places, in the storeroom just off the kitchen, in the cellar, then in the house itself, in Mac's room and through his things, and even in the attic, though she knew it couldn't be there. She became frantic then, paced by the alien's necessity for his hand, and did not bother to straighten things up after she looked. It simply couldn't be in the house. But where else? She went out and told the alien she could not find it but that she would look in the barn.

In the end she could find it nowhere and when she told the alien he seemed as disappointed as she.

"I have seen you searching," he said. "I want to thank you for your trouble."

"I'm awfully sorry," she said. "I don't know where Mac could have hid it. When he comes home I'll ask him."

"I'll wait for him," the alien said. "It's imperative we have the hand. It is the only thing standing in the way of our leaving your planet. Your husband will know where it is and return it to us."

"I'm sure he will," she said, hoping she was right but knowing how stubborn Mac could be. Then she got to worrying about what would happen if he would refuse and as she went back to the house with Dobie at her side she was overcome with the shakes.

She did not get her composure back until she had drunk a cup of steaming hot coffee. Then she looked at the clock, saw it was eleven and that she had spent nearly two hours looking for the hand. She saw, too, that the figure was still in the yard, standing there motionless, like something carved out of stone.

Her husband drove in at mid-night and it seemed an eternity between the time the engine stopped and he entered the house.

From the way he looked at her he was surprised to find her still in the kitchen.

"You still up?" His face was flushed, his tongue thick.

"Mac," she said, not knowing how to begin. "Where is that hand?"

"You still worried about that?" He took off his coat and threw it on the table.

"But Mac! They've come after it."

He looked at her dully. "Who's come after it?"

"The aliens—from the ship. There's one of them in the yard. Look out the window."

He turned around and saw the stationary figure in the yard. He took a deep breath. "So that's one of 'em, eh?" He laughed in a way that chilled her, then went to the cupboard and reached for his shotgun on the wall next to it.

Alice put her hand on his shoulders and he stopped before he touched the gun.

"Listen, Mac. They need that hand. It belongs to one of their men and they need it because they're going to put it back on and it will be as good as new. Then they're going to leave."

He looked down at her with bloodshot, narrow eyes and she could see where tobacco had run out of the corner of his mouth and the only thing she could think of was what it would look like on the overalls when she'd wash them.

"That thing out there," Mac said, "ain't got no business 'round here scarin' the pigs and chickens. And I aim to get it."

"I wish you had told me where the hand is," Alice said, her eyes scalded with tears. "I tried to find it. I looked everywhere. If I had found it I would have given it to him and now they'd be gone."

He shoved her from him rudely. "Jest like a woman to do a thing like that. And without even askin' me." He was breathing hard and he moved to the window to look at the alien again. "You, out there. You want that hand, eh?" He laughed again, then turned to her. "You looked for it. That's what you said. Well, you jest looked in the wrong place. I hid it good." He went over to his coat and withdrew a newspaper-wrapped package from one of the pockets. He unfolded it on the table. It was the hand.

"Please take it out to him, Mac," Alice said. "He's waiting for it."

His face was sour and his lips a sneer. "Give it to him, hell," he said. "Dobie

brought it here, didn't he? I've a mind to let Dobie have it."

"No, No!"

Mac put his hands on the table, stared down at the hand and shook his head. "But Dobie don't deserve it."

He picked up the hand and a queasiness prevented Alice from looking directly at it.

"It's a matter of time," she pleaded. "Please take it to them. They've got to have it right away or they can't use it. She heard the clink of one of the stove lids and watched in horror as Mac dropped the hand through the hole into the fire beneath. She was suddenly sick. During it all she could hear was Mac's laughter.

"Git on upstairs," he said a few minutes later. "Git on up to bed."



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lice looked at him, knowing her face was pale and her eyes wet and hating him for what he had done to her and what he had done to the aliens. But she felt fear, too, because she had never seen him quite like this.

"What are you going to do?"

He went over, took down a box of shells from the cupboard. "What d'you suppose? I'm goin' to run that thing off my place."

"You can't do that!"

"You wait and see."

"But he's done nothing to you!"

"He's on my property, ain't he? Now you get on upstairs like I told you. Git!"

Alice went up the stairs engulfed by a feeling of sorrow for the aliens, particularly for the one that would never get his hand back, and filled with fury for her husband.

From her bedroom window she could see the alien still standing in the yard and

she wondered what he would think of them for burning the hand and for what Mac was about to do.

She stood there a long time before the alien moved. She heard the downstairs door open and close and she knew Mac was outside and that the two were approaching each other. The alien finally moved from her field of vision.

Listening, she heard the alien's calm, whistling voice but she could not make out what he said. She could only hear the raving of her husband and this she did not want to hear.

When the shotgun blast came she jumped as if she herself had been hit and once again she was flooded with compassion for the creature from another world somewhere who had come in friendship and who had been given something hateful in return.

She went to the window but she could see nothing. She did not dare go downstairs again with Mac in the mood he was in. She sat in an armchair at the window looking out into the barn lot illuminated by the lone electric light high in the windmill. And eventually, she did not know when, she fell asleep.

When she woke up the day was just dawning and with a rush she remembered everything that had happened the night before and she found she had slept through the night in the chair without removing her clothes. When she stood up, her muscles screamed protestingly. She looked out into the yard and saw that the light in the windmill was still burning.

She went to Mac's bedroom, expecting to find him sprawled out across his bed. But his bed had not been slept in. Downstairs she expected to find him, head in hands, asleep at the kitchen table. But he was not there and the shotgun was not in its place on the wall.

She found the gun on the doorstep. But Mac wasn't in sight. Dobie came up to her and nuzzled her hands.

"Where is he Dobie?" she asked. "Where's Mac?"

Dobie turned and trotted before her, looking back at her as if to say, "This is the way."

She found Mac behind the barn.

He was alive, but in a state of shock, moaning in pain and fear.

His right hand was missing. Severed neatly at the wrist.

THE END.

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