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Imagine walking up a street and having
the sky literally burst open over your head;
imagine invaders pouring down and you have —

Harwood's Vortex

by

Robert Silverberg

THE VORTEX BUBBLED up out of nowhere, hung shimmering in the air in front of me, glistened and gleamed brightly. There was a whirlpool of twisting currents in the air, and I wavered dizzily for a second or two while the Invaders poured through the newly-created gulf.

Then someone had me by the hand, someone was pulling me away. Leading me inside the house, behind a screen, safe from danger.

I didn't understand what had happened. I was numb with shock, half-blinded by the brightness. I felt Laura near me, and that was all I cared to think about.

After a couple of minutes, I opened my eyes. "What was that?" I asked weakly. "What happened?"

Two minutes before, I had been approaching the Harwood house, impatient to see Laura, untroubled by the world around me. And sud-

denly --

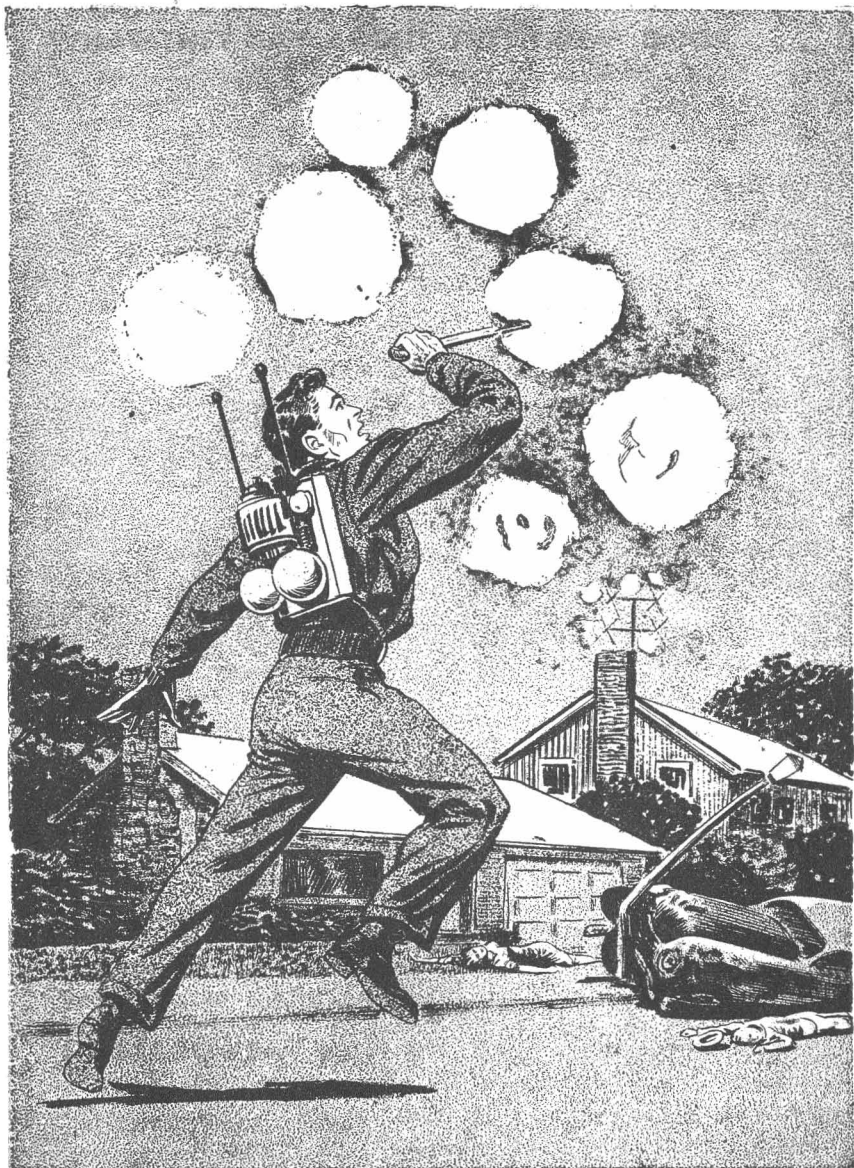
"It was Daddy's experiment," Laura half-sobbed. "It -- it worked!"

"The old crackpot," I said. "The dimensional gulf -- at last? I wouldn't believe it, if I hadn't nearly fallen into it!"

She nodded. "I saw you staggering around out there. I got out from just in time to -- to --"

I held her tight against me, while she unloaded some of her anxiety. She sobbed for a minute or two, not trying to say anything. I looked uneasily out the window. Yes, it was still going on.

Right in front of Abel Harwood's house, the vortex was open -- and coming up through it were what we later knew as the Invaders. Globes of light, radiant and intangible, floating up out of nowhere and ringing themselves in the air like so many loathsome jellyfish.



"Why doesn't he close it?" I asked. "Those things are still coming through! Laura, where's your father?"

"I'm right here," said a cold, business-like voice from behind me. I turned and saw Abel Harwood's husky frame in the door. "What do you want of me?" Harwood asked.

"Do you see what's going on out there?"

He nodded. "So?"

"Those *things* out there -- what are they? What are you letting into the world, Harwood?"

"It's an experiment, young man." He crossed his arms over his dressing-gown. "Would you mind leaving my house, now?"

"Daddy!"

"You keep out of this, Laura." He turned to me. "I've asked you to leave my house. I don't want you meddling in my experiments any more."

I repressed an urge to aim a kick at his well-stuffed belly. Abel Harwood was a crackpot, a crazy amateur scientist who had been riding this other-dimension kick for years. Now, he'd let loose Lord knew what upon the world -- the things were still funnelling through the gateway -- and he was determined to see it continue.

"Harwood, you're playing with something too big for you! You're foolish and blind, and you -- "

"*You're* a trespasser," he interrupted. "I've ordered you out of my home twice, already. Will you go now -- or do I have to get my gun?"

"I'll go," I said. I broke loose from Laura and, with an uneasy look at the gateway outside, headed for the door.

"Wait, Dad -- you can't make him go outside in *that!*"

"Quiet, Laura."

She started to say something else, but I put my hand on her arm. "Never mind, Laura."

I opened the front door and stepped outside.

IT WAS HELLISH out there. The things had formed a circle around the vortex in the air and hung there, humming and crackling. The air was dry and strange-smelling.

I paused on the porch of the Harwood house for just a moment, tucked my head under my arm and ran -- ran as fast as my legs would go. I charged through the garden, carefully averting the vortex that had opened right in front of me, circled the nest of things buzzing in the air, and dashed down the street.

One of the creatures followed me a short distance, hovering a foot or two above my head. I watched it uneasily, dodged and ducked as it took swipes at me. It caught

me once, a grazing blow on the side of my scalp. I smelled burned hair, and felt as if I'd stuck my head up an electric socket. It drove low for another swipe.

And just then it began to rain.

The heavens opened and the water came pouring down and the sky was bright with lightning. And the globes went up to meet it. The one that had been tormenting me forgot me in an instant and went to join its fellows.

I stood there and watched them. They rose in a straight line - - there must have been a hundred of them by now - - climbing upwards, toward the black clouds overhead. The sky was split by a giant bolt of lightning, and I saw all hundred of them limned grotesquely against it, enlarged and given color by the lightning, *drinking* it. Then I started running again.

I kept on running until I was home, in my two-room flat near the University. I dove in, locked and bolted the door, threw off my soaking clothing. I grabbed for the phone and dialed the Harwood number.

"Hello?"

It was Laura's voice. I sighed in relief. It could have been old Abel, after all.

"Laura? This is Chuck."

Her voice dropped. "Daddy's right here. I can't talk very much."

"Tell me - - what the devil has

he done? You should have seen those things drinking up the lightning!"

"I did," she said. "I know what you mean."

"Is the gateway still open?"

"Yes. They're still coming through. Chuck, I - - I don't know what's going to happen. I - - *no*, Daddy!"

There was a sound of a little scuffle, and then the phone went dead. I stared at the silent receiver for a second, then let it thunk back on the cradle. I sat down on the edge of my bed and stared at my soggy socks for a long while.

Abel Harwood fit the classic description of a crackpot perfectly. My status as an authentic scientist - - if only an underpaid engineer - - gave me every right to make that statement.

I had been doing some experimental force-field work, and when I met Laura she told me her father would be interested in talking to me about my work. So I had dinner at their home one night, and started talking about my project - - and then old Harwood started talking about his.

It was some hodge-podge. Dimensional tubes, and force vortices, and subspace converters. A network of gadgetry in the basement that had taken twenty years and as many thousand dollars to build. A fantastic theory of bordering

dimensions and alien races. I listened as long as I could, then made the mistake of expressing my honest opinion.

Harwood looked at me a long time after I finished. Then he said, "Just like all the others. Very well, Mr. Matthews. Kindly don't pay us a second visit."

"If that's the way you want it," I told him. "But I *still* think it's cockeyed!"

And a month later, I still did. Only now there was this vortex in the street, spewing forth alien entities that drank radiation. Crackpot or not, Harwood had turned something on that might take some doing to turn off.

Outside, the storm was continuing. I snapped on my radio, listened to the crackling of static that was the only sound it produced. Were Harwood's pets blanketing the radio frequencies, I wondered, as I twiddled the dials? Were they drinking *them* too?

I'd know soon enough, I thought.

THAT WAS JUST the beginning, that night when the Invaders came storming out of Harwood's vortex. The next few days told of terror and panic, of retreat and the swift crumbling of civilization.

The Invaders, they were called. Thousands of them, wandering

around New York and the metropolitan area, devouring electricity, attacking people, bringing a reign of terror to the city.

The newspapers the second day said, in screaming two-inch headlines,

ALIEN BEINGS LOOSE HERE

The third day, there were no more newspapers. No one dared leave his home -- not with the Invaders at large. No newspapers, no radio, no television -- the channels of communication began to break down.

On the fourth day, armed forces from the rest of the country began to arrive. They combed the city, searching for the creatures. Bullets had no effect, though. They passed right through the bodies of the Invaders, splattered off buildings and lampposts as though there had been nothing in the way.

DAMN HARWOOD, I thought, as I stood at my window and watched the fruitless attempts to drive away the Invaders. All the time, I knew, that damnable vortex was still open, and more and more of them were pouring through every second.

It was funny, in a way, that the world should end this way. It *was* the end of the world, of course; we had no defense against them, and they burned and killed unstoppably. The streets were blockaded; we could go nowhere, see no one.

Communication was impossible; telephones were no longer working, ever since the Invaders had discovered what a juicy supply of radiation the coaxial cables provided. We were walled up with ourselves, waiting for the end.

As I paced my room impatiently, I thought of Laura, there with her father - - her father who had, unwittingly or otherwise, brought this destruction into the world. Then I looked around at my equipment, my partially-designed force-field generators. An idea struck me.

We were completely defenseless against the Invaders now. But maybe, if - -

I worked through the night and on into the morning, soldering and reconnecting. I had only the barest shred of a plan, and that a mostly wishful one, but I had nothing else at all to do but work.

Finally morning came. Again there was the booming of guns from outside, as the army continued its attempts to drive out the Invaders. I glanced out the window and saw three of the translucent globes hovering over the charred body of a man in military uniform, and shuddered. I went back to my generator, and worked until hunger reminded me that there was no food left in the house.

This was the end, then. I was nowhere near the solution of my problem, and I knew I wouldn't be

able to work for long without food. I glanced outside again. The air was thick with the things; I didn't dare risk a break.

So I turned back to my generator and forced myself to keep working. I did. I worked far on into the afternoon, getting more and more tired - - until, sometime near nightfall, I fell asleep.

I slept. Suddenly, I was awakened by the simultaneous touch of a hand on my shoulder and clap of thunder outside. I looked up.

"Laura! What are you doing here?"

"I had to get away," she said. She was soaked to the skin, cold and shivering. She was wearing only a flimsy housecoat over some sort of pajamas. "Daddy wasn't looking, and I ran out of the house. I ran all the way."

"But how'd you get past the - - the - - ?"

"The Invaders?" She pointed outside. "There's a storm going on. They're all in the sky, drinking up the lightning again. They didn't bother me at all on the way over. Much better food available, I guess." She shivered again.

"Look, you've got to get out of that wet stuff." I told her. I threw her a towel and my bathrobe. "Here, get into this, and then we can talk."

"Okay."

She disappeared into my other

room, and returned a few minutes later, looking drier but just as pale and frightened. She peered inquisitively at the machine I had been building, then turned to me.

"Chuck -- Dad's out of his mind!"

"I've known that a long time," I said.

"No -- I don't mean *that* way. He's really insane, Chuck. You know that he's been in contact with these Invaders? That he deliberately brought them here!"

"No!"

She nodded. "He reached them through some short-wave transmitter of his, and made mental contact with them. They showed him how to build the Gateway -- and he let them through! They promised to give him the world, when they get through with it!"

I clenched my fists and stared angrily at the cloud-swept sky. "The madman! He was getting his revenge for the years people laughed at him, I guess. But -- what's to happen to us?"

"I don't know. The creatures won't harm him, and they're under orders not to touch me unless I leave his protection -- which I have. But as for you and the rest of the world, I don't think Daddy cares at all. Chuck, he's out of his head!"

"We've got to stop him," I said grimly. "We've got to close that

gateway and drive off the things he's let through. But how?"

"The generator's in his basement," Laura said. "If we could get in there and smash it, somehow, and --"

"How would we kill the Invaders that have already come through? There must be thousands of them!"

"We'll find some way, Chuck. There *must* be a way." I looked out the window. The rain was letting up, and there were only occasional flashes of lightning in the dark tormented-looking sky. "The Invaders will be coming back soon," I said. "Do you want to risk a dash over to your place to try to get at the generator?"

She nodded. "If we wait any longer, we won't be able to make it. But --"

She gasped and pointed to the rear window. I turned, saw what she was trying to show me. Abel Harwood, hovering twenty feet off the ground, riding on a cloud of Invaders.

"**C**OME OUT of there, Laura!"

His voice was somehow amplified and it seemed to shake my little room. Horror-stricken, we watched as the buzzing horrors bore Harwood closer and closer to my window. Laura shrank back against the wall and tried to flatten herself into invisibility. With a sudden nervous gesture I pushed

the table containing my unfinished generator into the closet, and turned to face Harwood.

He was right outside the window now. I saw the old man's staring eyes blazing at me, as he stood there astride two of the Invaders. They droned like defective neon signs, a horrifying slow buzz.

I picked up a heavy soldering iron and waited as they reached the window. Then Harwood reached out and contemptuously smashed the glass and stepped through - - stepped right off the backs of his hideous mounts and into my room. One of the Invaders entered also, squeezing its bulk through the window. There was a pungent odor of ozone in the air.

"Get back, Harwood. You can't have her," I said.

He laughed. "Who are you to give me orders? Come here, Laura."

Laura shrank back even further. I gripped the hot soldering iron tightly and sprang forward, plunging it into the Invader that hovered between me and Harwood. I stabbed again and again - - and it was like stabbing air. Finally Harwood made an impatient gesture, and the Invader glowed a brilliant red for an instant.

I dropped the soldering iron and clutched at my burned hand.

"For the last time, Laura - - will you come with me?"

"No! I hate you!" she shrieked.

Harwood frowned and started toward her. As he came past me, I grabbed him with my one good hand and tried to pull him back. I had thirty years on him, but my right hand was badly seared and he was no weakling even at his age. He shoved me away and sent me sprawling against the wall. I saw him grab Laura roughly. The alien hummed ominously above my head.

I made a mad dash for Harwood, caught him by the throat, started to squeeze. The humming sound grew louder, and then suddenly there was a blinding wave of heat sweeping through the apartment, and I fell back, clawing at the floor.

When I was able to open my eyes, a few minutes later, I dashed to the window just in time to see Harwood holding the struggling form of Laura and riding off into the night on the backs of his extra-dimensional Invaders.

I SAT DOWN heavily on the bed and stayed there for what might have been hours, recovering my strength. The Invader had given me just a glancing shock, just enough to stun me and singe my eyebrows - - and Harwood had grabbed Laura.

Now I *had* to find the answer. I had to close the gateway and

find some way of killing the Invaders -- and get Laura out of her father's clutches.

It was nearly morning by the time I shook off the last effects of my stunning and was able to think clearly again. I pulled my generator out of the closet and looked at it, wondering what needed to be done.

The gateway, first of all. It was a doorway to some alien dimension, Harwood had said. All right. I'd accept that at face value.

The Invaders -- what were they? Pure radiation? Energy-eaters? They were intangible, immaterial, but yet very much present. Perhaps, I thought wildly, their corporeal bodies were still in whatever dimension of infraspace they came from, and merely their essences, their *elans*, had come through?

Could be, I thought. And if it were true, I might have the answer.

Ignoring the fierce pangs of hunger shooting through me, I got back to work and concentrated steadily. The thought of Laura was with me always -- the image of her riding off in the sky with her father's arms locked tightly around her. Riding off as if kidnapped by a witch on a broomstick.

I don't know how long it took, but finally my generator was finished. Finished, and portable. I

strapped it to my back and picked up my longest and sharpest kitchen knife. I didn't have a gun, but it didn't matter. If my theory was correct, a knife would be just as good -- and if I were wrong, a gun wouldn't help anyway.

Then, without stopping to ponder, I ran downstairs and out into the street for the test.

Fresh air smelled good after days of being cooped up in my little apartment. I stood in the middle of the street and surveyed the wreckage.

Bodies lay everywhere, charred and lifeless. Overturned automobiles lay piled here and there, stalled trucks, artillery batteries and tanks. The defensive maneuver had failed, and what few people remained were in hiding. I stood alone in the middle of the street, the heavy generator on my back, and waved my kitchen-knife as triumphantly as if it were Excalibur.

"Come and get me," I yelled. "Come on Invaders. Let's see what you can do!"

I looked up. There were a few clusters of them, browsing idly around some television antennas atop a neighboring building. They ignored me for a few minutes; maybe they were so surprised to see a living human in the streets that they were unable to move. I shook my fists at them.

"Come down here where I can get at you!" I shouted.

They hovered uncertainly - - and then they came.

SIX OF THEM swooped down, humming and buzzing, glowing faintly and billowing in and out as they dropped toward me. I waited, waited until they were no more than three or four feet above my head, waited until I was dizzy with the strain and suspense and could wait no more.

Then I snapped on the generator.

It was like catching flies in molasses. The six aliens stopped dead in their tracks as my force-field spread out around them, engulfed them, imprisoned them. Suddenly they were forced to contend with more radiation than they could possibly swallow. It pinned them there, nine feet above the ground.

I listened to their frenzied buzzing as they stretched themselves, elongated fantastically in an attempt to free themselves from the unexpected thing that had grabbed them. And then I stretched up on tiptoes and began to stab.

My knife flashed once, twice - - and the buzzing became an unbearable shriek. My heart surged as I struck home again and again. Now we had them! Now they were vulnerable!

Snared in the force-field, they no longer were able to flicker out of phase with our dimension every time a weapon approached. They were anchored now, mired in our continuum, helpless before my savage attack.

I kept stabbing until all six of them were torn and wounded, and then I snapped off the force-field. And they were gone. Instantly, without lapse, they popped out of existence like so many snuffed flames.

Six down, I thought grimly. Six down, and untold thousands to go. But now we have a weapon.

I thumbed my power-pack and the field spread out around me. I began to cut my way through the streets to the Harwood house.

The aliens took notice of me, now. No more hovering around tv antennae; they clustered in the air, just outside range of my force-field, and chattered and buzzed for all they were worth. Every once in a while, one would blunder into my field, and a swift upward cut with the knife would take care of him. One cut. They were like balloons, and the first puncture did it. I didn't dare shut off the force-field to see if they'd pop out of existence, for fear the clouds of them in the air would swoop in on me before I could turn it on again - - but as I moved on, through the dead and

deserted streets, I could see the string of dead Invaders hanging in the air vanishing one by one as I moved out of range.

And then I was standing in front of Laura's home, right in front of the vortex itself. It was still there, and the aliens came thundering through at a rate of ten or twenty a minute.

I stepped past the vortex, ignoring the aliens that clustered around me, as helpless against me as humanity had been against them only a few hours before. There was no point in dealing with the Invaders yet -- not until the source was cut off.

I STRODE UP to the porch and peered in the window. I saw Laura huddled in a far corner of the sitting-room, and behind her Abel Harwood marching up and down, probably delivering a fiery parental harangue. It was a nightmare scene, with a dead city outside, hordes of alien invaders swarming in the air -- and the man responsible for it busy delivering a lecture to his unruly daughter!

I banged on the door.

"Come on out of there, Harwood!"

He looked up, astonished. I saw Laura's pale face brighten as she recognized me, then grow downcast as Harwood started to come

toward me.

I walked off the porch into the garden and waited there for him. He emerged, eyes blazing, and said, "How did you get here? How did you get past my guards?"

"Your guards don't worry me any more, Harwood. I'm going to put a stop to all this now!"

He chuckled. "You're a very troublesome young man, Mr. Matthews. I spared you once, for my daughter's sake -- but I'll have no such scruples this time." He gestured imperiously to the thick swarm of Invaders billowing out of the vortex.

"You don't scare me, Harwood." I drew a deep breath, reached around back, and cut off the force-field for the barest fraction of a second, then restored it. It was just enough time to trap twenty or so aliens in a glowing ring right above my head.

Smiling, I drew my trusty kitchen knife and began to lay about. I heard Harwood's flustered exclamations as, one by one, the imprisoned Invaders winked out, darkened, and died.

I finished off the twenty and folded my arms. "Care to send some more, Harwood? It's easier than swatting gnats!"

He sputtered a few unintelligible words, then rushed from the porch toward me.

He was a big man -- big, and

heavy. I was under the handicap of the heavy force-field generator, which I knew I had to keep from his grasp or else I was finished. All he had to do was to smash the generator, and I'd be roasted the next second.

Harwood barrelled into me, sweeping away the kitchen knife while I was still debating whether or not to use it. It went clattering into a pile of rocks in one corner of the garden, and then his fists hit me.

I backed away, making sure I kept the generator out of his reach, and flicked out a few defensive gestures. His face was contorted with rage. He was almost blind with fury, and I could hardly blame him. Here I stood, threatening to wreck whatever monument of villainy it was that he had been erecting for twenty years.

We closed in a tight clinch, and his fists pummelled my stomach. I drove upward and felt teeth splinter as I connected. He spat out a mouthful of blood and backed off.

"Why did you have to do it?" he muttered. "Why did you ruin everything?"

"You pitiful madman," I said. "For the sake of silly revenge on a world that rightfully regarded you as a crackpot, you - -"

His eyes blazed and he came

driving in at me again. In the background, I heard the continuing buzzing of the Invaders, who hovered out of reach of my force-field, unable to help their master. And overriding the dull droning of the aliens was a steady pattern of sobbing coming from the porch.

Laura. Watching her father and the man she loved fighting to the death in her front yard.

Harwood grasped me in a tight bear-hug, his thick fingers reaching for the power-pack on my back. I danced away and landed a solid punch in the midsection, and he countered with a wild roundhouse that staggered me and knocked me within a few inches of the garden fence.

He came lumbering after me, obviously determined to flatten me against the fence and crush the generator that way. I didn't have any way of escaping to the right or the left; I could only wait there and hope to withstand his assault.

As he drew near, I tensed my legs and crouched. Then he hit me, and I pushed upward with all my strength. The fate of a whole world - - and Laura and me - - depended on my strength at that instant.

It worked. His heavy body lifted, and he grunted in pain as I rammed upward. He went up, up, over the garden fence - -

And then, to my horror, he cleared the garden fence and, with a soul-splitting cry, fell into the gaping mouth of his own vortex!

I leaned against the fence, gaping - - and before I could think of what to do, the vortex was gone, winked out as if it had never been!

Then Laura was on the porch, white-faced, terrified.

"What happened? Where's Daddy?"

I ran to her side. "He's gone," I said. "Tripped and fell into the vortex, and then - - "

"Oh!" She gave a little cry and I thought she was going to faint, but she caught herself with an effort and straightened up. Speaking carefully, syllable by syllable, she said, "I - - just - - smashed - - Daddy's - - machinery."

"You *what?*"

"While you were fighting - - I ran down to the basement and wrecked everything. Everything!"

I shivered. No wonder the vortex had vanished. At the very instant Abel Harwood was tumbling into it, his daughter was

busily destroying the generator that operated it.

Her control broke. She burst into sobs and huddled in my arms. Finally she said, "I - - hated him. He was out of his mind."

"Try not to think about it," I told her. "Try to forget him. It's all over. There's just *us* now."

"I know," she said.

I looked up at the sky, which was dark with the Invaders. It was a frightening sight - - but I no longer feared them. The Gateway was closed, and Abel Harwood dead, so far as we were concerned. I didn't want to think of what might be happening to him in whatever universe he was in.

There would be a lot of work to do. I would have to find the authorities, if any were left, and show them how to build my generator. Then would begin the long, slow war of eradication against the remaining Invaders.

Laura was still sobbing. "Don't worry," I said soothingly. "It's all over now."

We had won.

THE END