

DON'T EAT SUSHI WITH H.P. LOVECRAFT



A Novel by
WARREN GREENWOOD

DON'T EAT SUSHI WITH H.P. LOVECRAFT

ACT I

...the details -- which I promised never to reveal to anyone -- are painful and shocking, as the details often are.

Kurt Elling

ONE

The Lovecraftian Blimp Monster was laughing. Laughing and hurling big empyreal energy bolts at us.

He looked a bit like that swollen monster guy at the end of that superb but exhausting and finally sort of unintentionally funny, animated Japanese SF movie, Akira. A once human body, hideously distended to the size of a small dirigible. Pockets of skin expanded and swollen like giant pustules, filled with organic, lighter-than-air gas.

He also looked a bit like an unpleasant mollusk. Hideous, semi-transparent, flesh-colored cilia the size of king snakes writhed from the central body mass, there was a profusion of glowing, blue, insectoid eyes spiralling in rhythmic patterns along his equator, and he shot thru the air like a big undersea scallop.

There was still a little, swollen, semi-human face attached to his central bulk like a fungus on a rotting log. Laughing uncontrollably. A sort of "Boowahahahahahahahaha!!" like a movie vampire or the pointy-haired boss in the Dilbert comics. And all the while firing otherworldly electrical bolts all over the the place, blowing out walls, melting thru steel pillars, and electrifying the catwalks.

You can get sick of that pretty goddamn quick.

Puff and I were on the run, sprinting down a steel catwalk, carrying over-sized weaponry, and we managed to dive behind a tangled mass of shattered concrete in a gutted, former office area just before Blimpo hit the catwalk with an empyreal bolt, igniting it hotter than an electric chair, making it crackle with blue-white fire like one of those summer bug-zapper things.

It was an unthinkably hot August night and we were on the fifth and top floor of a rapidly deconstructing, art deco Albertsons warehouse off the 5 Freeway on the way to downtown LA.

The building was pinioned by the beams of LAPD helicopters thundering overhead like strobe-lit dragonflies, and a VTOL jet hovered alongside, screaming like a steel banshee, trying to get a decent shot at the Blimp monster thru the windows without offing Puff and me in the bargain.

Our idiot boss had called in the heavy artillery. Had assumed that we were losing it, getting the stuffing kicked out of us, and called in some brain-dead Hot Dog in a VTOL. All he was succeeding in doing was blowing Albertsons grocery stock everywhere and taking out the few floors and walls that The Blimp Thing hadn't already eliminated.

Indeed, the building was mostly gutted by now. Hollowed out by the Blimp Monster and the VTOL working hand-in-hand (or wing-in-tentacle or whatever).

Pinned down behind a wall of rubble, my field of vision was mostly filled with shattered concrete. Steel construction rods and ripped-out copper wiring jutted out at weird angles, occasionally giving off hot blue-and-white sparks. I was lying on a carpet of smashed computers and keyboards, loose office paper, broken wine and beer bottles, canned goods, squashed fruits and vegetables, office toys (fuzzy bunnies and ugly Todd McFarlane "Spawn" toys predominated), frozen pizzas, and about half a dozen kinds of raw meat.

There was a smell like rotting seafood in the air, occasionally cut by a blast of clean ozone from the electrical fire.

I wish that I could tell you that I was cooler than Clint Eastwood, but the truth is that I was terrified.

When you get right down to it, I'm your basic coward and I loathe this part of the job. I prefer to do the gumshoe work like Philip Marlowe or Lew Archer and leave this sort of insanity to the neighborhood SWAT team.

I looked to my right to see Puff scrambling up to the top of the barrier to see if he could get off a clean shot, when a big, fat, blue-white electrical bolt flew wildly over the top, singeing him and knocking him ass-over-teakettle, tumbling down the embankment into a pile of frozen foods. There was a smell like burning cat hair and his pink fur stood on end giving off tiny blue sparks.

I suppose that I should take a moment to describe Puff here, as the more discerning reader has probably guessed that he's not human.

Puff is about five-foot, two-inches tall. He's humanoid. Bipedal. Stocky.

And covered head-to-furry-feet in pink fur about the length and texture of a long-haired housecat.

Which is why I call him "Puff". After the immortal cat in the Dick and Jane Books, the first thing that I learned to read.

He looks sort of like a pink snowman.

The only features sticking out of all that somewhat irridescant pink fur are two hemispherical, multifaceted eyes, about the size of canned peaches. They look like the eyes of a big fly or something and they're colored a sort of opalescent green.

I don't know exactly what Puff's mouth looks like under all that fur, altho I think it's a circular, triad, mandible affair. Fortunately, you don't see much of it.

Puff's real name is Nooshim Zaarabi and he hails from a planet called Kubizek, somewhere in the Lagoon Nebula.

With all that fur, Puff seldom bothers with clothing, other than weapon belts and a canvas bandolier holding his Squawk Box on his chest. That's a digital translator device employing Galactic computer technology (which is to say quantum computers existing mostly in the coiled dimensions).

They're about the size and shape of a large roach bait and can translate most of the thirty or forty Galactic Standard languages (and several million local dialects) just like the "Vodors" in David Brin's wonderful Uplift novels or those cool chest translators in the old episodes of Rocky Jones, Space Ranger. (Puff's real voice is a high, fluting affair, most of which flies right off the upper end of the frequency range of the human ear. But the Squawk Box renders it into remarkably colloquial English.)

So. There you have it.

And now I suppose I'm stuck with explaining exactly who we are and what we were doing there.

Christ.

Puff and I work for a very off-the-shelf branch of the United States Military-Industrial Complex called the The Terrestrial Defense Agency. The TDA is chartered with protecting the planet Earth from extraterrestrial invasion.

There. I've said it.

Go ahead and laugh.

Get it out of your fucking system.

One feels sort of stupid being in this line of work ever since the X-Files and that Sony movie, Men in Black, came out. Being part of a secret government organization that protects Mother Earth from Deadly Aliens From Outer Space. I mean it all seems sort of innately comical.

Hell, it seems fucking ridiculous.

Well, let me tell you that there's nothing funny about a giant fucking Blimp Monster throwing electric bolts that could light up the San Fernando Valley at you and laughing like the goddamn Joker from the Batman comics.

Ahem. Yes.

About that Blimp Monster.

All we had to go on is that it was once a portly animation writer named Derek Wormworth who was eating lunch at an In-N-Out Burger in Glendale, when he started laughing hysterically, swelling up like the Hindenburg, and doing the lightning ball thing.

He fled to this nearby Albertsons warehouse and drove out the workers, laughing and screaming, "Get out!! Get out!! I must spawn!!"

Most of the workers twenty-three skiddooed. The remains of the ones who didn't line the bottom of the warehouse looking like overcooked weiners.

A typical day at the TDA.

The VTOL was firing in the windows again, missing the sry Blimp Thing, blowing out a few more lights and walls and exploding what appeared to be several thousand cases of pressurized soft drinks.

Bad move.

The erstwhile animation writer-cum-Blimp Monster spun in the air like a deep-sea scallop, turning its eldritch attention from us to the VTOL, and fired off ten big, crackling, purple bolts all at once.

They flew out what was left of the warehouse windows and hit the VTOL dead on.

The VTOL ignited in an iridescent flash of white-hot, sparkling silver, spun in the air like a lathe, and was blown away from the art deco warehouse, across the black, spotlit parking lot to crash on the 5 Freeway. It hit and skidded across all eight lanes (mercifully cleared by the CHP, stopping traffic in both directions on the 5), gutted itself on the center divider, headed for Glendale, and slammed thru the steel fence of a Metrolink railyard to explode with a deafening roar in a massive fireball. Huge steel blue-and-white-striped Metrolink rail cars flew thru the air like Matchbox toys thrown by a sociopathic kid in the sandbox.

It was enough to snap me out of a little daydream.

Then, with a flatulent burst of foul gas and a wet, phlegmatic "Boowahahahahahahaha!!", the creature spun in the air to turn its loathsome attention back to my pink furry colleague and myself.

And began to move in on our pathetic little barricade...

TWO

Puff and I were both carrying big guns. I had a souped up howitzer and Puff an upscale Stinger Missile Launcher. But unfortunately, these things work better in comic books and the movies than in real life.

The truth is that they are hard to carry. And if you're trying to run, it's hard to get up any speed. You're always sort of hobbling and lurching and stumbling and falling down and hurting yourself. And if you don't brace yourself just right when you fire the goddamn things, they tend to knock you flat on your back. An inordinate amount of TDA agents take early retirement from lower back injuries.

And at this moment, I couldn't even peek around the wretched concrete barrier to use the goddamn thing anyway, as it was not only a big, unwieldy, inviting target, but it was also made of steel. I might as well have been holding a fucking lightning rod.

Puff was gamely, albeit carefully, peering thru an embrasure in our embattlement, when a huge, blue-white, electrical bolt crackled thru it like a giant anaconda, igniting his fur a second time.

He cursed richly in Galactic 27 and rolled around in a pool of beer and frozen vegetables, snuffing it out. Again the smell of burning cat hair.

When at last the fire was out, he was breathing hard and looking very cross.

He crawled forward to the barrier and pulled out a pair of dark, hemispherical goggles from his utility bandolier, strapped them on, and said, "I have had enough of this shit. Do you have a Reality Bender on you, Nicky?"

"Christ on a crutch!" I said. "Are you out of your mind?!?"

"Never mind that!" Puff snapped. "Get it out and set it for a Half-Twist. About ten seconds worth. Let it rip when I pull the trigger. And protect your teeth and eardrums!"

Puff was busy loading a Jumbo, Economy-Sized, Heat-Seeking Missile from his backback into his hand-held, shoulder-mounted, Stinger Missile Launcher.

"Jesus God," I said. "You're not seriously planning on..."

"Look Nicky," Puff interrupted. "Let's have a reality check. A queer and ghastrly creature from the Blasphemous Outer Spheres is trying to grill us. There's no way out of here. The elevator is melted. The stairwells are blocked with rubble. We're trapped. We're going to die.

"May-be we could sneak out thru a gutted office and may-be we'll find a fire escape. And may-be we could get down it before Blimpo transforms it into a giant bug-zapper.

"But we're not exactly wearing urban cammo, here are we Nicky?"

He had me there. Puff was a merry, irridescent pink. My combat outfit du jour consisted of a screaming-red Hawaiian shirt with big, electric, yellow and green zappers, Banana Republic khaki trousers, and a pair of shriekingly bright, red-and-green Converse All Star basketball sneakers. All we needed to complete the effect was to paint glow-in-the-dark targets on our backs and hold up signs reading, "Shoot Me While I'm Happy!"

I dutifully put in my earplugs and covered my ears with a pair of Galactic Quality earguards. I was already wearing protective goggles over my tortoiseshell wire-rim glasses. I put a big, Jet Age Plastic denture guard in my mouth and bit down on it, making me look like Homer Simpson or something. (Puff has neither eardrums nor teeth).

Then I pulled a Reality Bender out of my pants pocket. It was disguised as a pharmaceutical company sample of the popular allergy drug, Claritin. A 2½ inch by 1½ inch, thin rectangle of metal foil embossed with a glittering benday pattern and a photo of beatific baby blue clouds. Laminated by clear plastic to the center, was what looked like a ¼ inch tablet of Claritin.

It wasn't Claritin.

It was a touchpad, and if you pressed it firmly between thumb and forefinger you'd be transported to another universe.

This is where things get weird. A Reality Bender (also known as a Reality Buffer, a Shifter, an Accidental and The Wild Mouse) employs seriously Galactic Technology.

It's based on the accepted Galactic concept of the Multiverse. That there isn't just one universe, but rather an infinitely-multiplying multitude of them, each one a slight variation on the next, encompassing all possibility.

(I know this will be hard to accept for those of you who believe in the Baby Jesus and the 4000-year-old-Earth and so on, but that's not my problem.)

A Reality Bender basically shifts reality, sends the user and some surrounding territory to a neighboring B-universe. But the big trick is to set it for a half-step. In musical terms, if you imagine each universe as a note on the big scale of the Multiverse, it would be like sharpening or flattening your universe by a half-step.

It sets up a kind of buffer that can get you thru Hard Times.

It's also a pretty extreme measure.

There's no shortage of things that can go wrong. You could end up in another universe for instance. It may be a B-universe where the variation is slight -- say the Democrats take the White House instead of the Republicans. Or it could be much more severe and you find yourself trying to breathe hydrogen cyanide.

There's also the problem of spending a little too much time in the Between the Universes State. Your quantum particles can just decide that they've taken enough abuse, stop hanging around with each other, and slip-off sideways to Magic Cookie Land and you vanish like a wisp of cigarette smoke.

And even assuming everything works the way it's supposed to, when your carefree cocoon of Half-Shifted Reality decays, a lot depends on where you end up when the event is over. If you come back to your A-universe five miles under the ocean, or eight miles in the air, or impacted in a granite cliff side, you've got a problem on your hands.

Further, Half-Twist Reality is physically hard on your body, like gymnastics or pro football.

Still, what are you gonna do? Life's a big crapshoot anyways and statistically speaking, a Reality Bender is a lot safer than your car.

I punched Puff's and my DNA codes into the system and let it ride. (Yes, Mr. Croupier, put it all on the red.)

Puff pulled a device off his utility bandolier and pulled a string on it, inflating it. It was a plastic duck, with ping-pong ball eyes like Binky, the rabbit in the Life in Hell comics. Puff pressed a stud under its tail and it started quacking and flapping its wings.

Puff tossed it with an underhand, softball pitch over the barrier of concrete separating us from the Thing That Had Been Derek Wormworth. It flew thru the air, quacking its little heart out.

And as the Blimp Thing spun in the air with a sibilant burst of fetid gas to nail the decoy with an undimensioned energy bolt, Puff scrambled to the top of barrier as quick as a housecat, and fired the heat-seeking missile from his shoulder-launcher point blank at the floating monster.

The missile streaked thru the upper reaches of the warehouse and a split second later, the Blimp Monster exploded.

Unfortunately, it also blew the roof and remaining walls clean off the building and sent what was left of five stories of inner floors straight to the sub-basement parking structure in an avalanche of steel and stone.

Fortunately, I had kept watch of Puff's paw and at the exact moment that his pink, furry finger squeezed the trigger, I hit the touchpad on the Reality Bender.

There was an impossibly bright flash and the shock wave tore thru the concrete barrier like it was made of tissue paper. Puff and I were blown skyward in a cyclone of stone and steel, copper wiring and glass, flaming meat and canned goods, instantly cooked fruits and vegetables, loose paper igniting like magnesium flares, melting office toys, computer terminals and burning pizzas.

If it had been possible for an observer to somehow view the scene and survive, he or she would have seen Puff and I gone, replaced by two large, golden amoebas, flung backwards with the cyclone. Puff and I were neither here nor there, fish nor fowl. We were somewhere between universes, sharpened or flatted notes in God's Cosmic Symphony.

From my point of view, I saw it all: the flash, the impossibly bright light of the explosion, the bursting barrier, the flying debris, the rush thru the flaming warehouse lit momentarily like a Roman candle... but at the same time I wasn't there, felt nothing, was nothing. It was like a dream.

I was blown, spinning, catherine-wheeling, thru the collapsing, shattering walls of two or three office suites in a firey vortex of office supplies, other-dimensional alien body parts, and Albertsons grocery stock.

Happily, I wasn't blown clear of the building as I came to a sudden stop, augering into a jagged stretch of remaining cinderblock wall, reinforced by big steel beams.

I took the impact on the right side of my body.

Enough reality seeped thru for it to hurt.

Indeed, within the hour, the whole right side of my body would develop into one big, purple bruise that wouldn't heal properly for the next six months.

But I was grateful for small favors. Without the Half-Twist of Reality, I would have been pulverized into chicken cacciatore.

The liquid cocoon of Half-Step Reality began to decay. As the golden luminescence of the cocoon faded away, I felt pins and needles stab thruout my whole body like the way your leg feels when it goes to sleep when you've been sitting and reading too long on the crapper.

Then, as the pins and needles faded with the golden sparkles, I rose up on my hands and knees to to discover how much my side hurt. Moreover, the joints of my arms and legs felt like I'd been tied to mentally ill horses rampaging in opposite directions. (No doubt they would have been completely torn off in Full Tilt Boogie Reality).

I was shaking like I had the flu and I felt like throwing up.

Furthermore, I seemed to a have arrived in a cloud of smoke and dust and sulferous fetor. And as I painfully raised my head, I noticed that a remarkably large part of the surrounding area appeared to be on fire.

Welcome back to reality.

I was having a hard time breathing.

Then I remembered to spit out my plastic denture guard. I inhaled smoke and dust. Coughed violently.

I tore off my ear guards and pulled out my earplugs. To hear helicopters clamoring overhead and sirens wailing in the distance.

Small chunks of loose rock were raining on me. The aftermath of the explosion.

Suddenly, a red-hot can of vegetables or beans or something landed on my head, nearly knocking me unconscious, making me yelp and curse.

It was followed by a flaming pizza which landed sticking to my scalp, the burning cheese setting my hair on fire. I screamed and rolled around for a while, putting it out.

Then I rose up angrily and unsteadily in the Pittsburgh perfume, coughing and gasping for air.

To discover that I was on what was essentially the new roof of the building. What was left of the top floor looked like a big weird gazebo made of blackened, twisted steel. Indeed the whole five story building looked like a construction site in Hell.

Fungoid Blimp Monster flesh was raining down everywhere like a horrible, fetid mist in the air.

It smelled of sulfur and rotting shellfish and flu-induced ^{DIARRHEA} ~~diarreha~~ and Blasphemous Outer Spheres.

I thought, the fun's going out of my work. It's just not as much fun as it used to be.

In the middle distance, I saw Puff rise up from the rubble with the savage grace of a housecat, the last, lambent, golden sparkles of his Reality Cocoon fading away. He slung his Stinger Missile Launcher rakishly over his shoulder and ambled thru the other-worldly miasma like a pink, furry Arnold Schwarzenegger.

I felt like something the cat dragged in.

Helicopter searchlights cut thru the gloom, pinioning us with their beams.

I turned on unsteady legs to see a strobing LAPD helicopter come WHAP-WHAP-WHAP-WHAPPING its way toward us, blinding me with its searchlight, coming to pick us up.

I waved half-heartedly at it.

Puff and I were caressed by the hot summer wind of an LA August night, beginning to blow away the fetid miasma of exploded Other-Dimensional Monster.

Assessing my wretched life, I thought, My name is Nick Doom.
I am thirty-one years old. On Halloween of this year, I will be thirty-two.
And I am getting entirely too old for this line of work.

THREE

The parking lot was obsidian and onyx, the glittering distant hills were enchanted with amethyst, but the sky was a queer and ugly noctilucous neon-pink from the reflected light of LA glowing on the smog, and the palm trees looked like crucified thieves.

It was long after midnight but it was still hotter than purgatory and the air smelled like carbon monoxide.

Authority was everywhere. The LAPD and the CHP, the LA County Sheriff's Department, the California National Guard, a contingent of the marines, and probably the IRS.

A traffic jam of flashing, yellow-green, Glendale fire trucks were dousing the fire in the remains of the unfortunate Albertsons warehouse. One of the new fire-fighting choppers, looking like a giant Heavy Metal mosquito designed by Syd Mead, hovered over the warehouse, pouring chemicals from its proboscis on the last of the flames.

There were lights everywhere. Dazzling firetrucks. Pulsing, multi-colored LAPD squad cars. Coruscating ambulances. Shifting and converging spotlights from the LAPD, Army, and network news helicopters thundering overhead like a swarm of great metal insects. Big, hot, outdoor arc lights, with light so intense and bright that you couldn't look directly at them.

People in uniforms and natty suits scurried to and fro like diligent ants, carrying arcane equipment, shouting orders, taking impromptu meetings, and giving each other pointless paperwork.

It looked like Steven Spielberg was doing a night shoot.

I had just fielded an annoying call on my cell phone from my pointy-haired boss who wanted to know why Puff and I had taken so long to "subdue the Alternative Life Form" and now I was standing in a little circle with Puff and Fletcher Kolakowski, the head of the TDA PR Department, and Cindy Sugita from the Channel 13 Eyewitness News.

Puff was Holo-Veiled up as one of the ubiquitous LAPD officers on the lot. A nice, portly, elderly cop with a white cowboy mustache and the silly, black, grey-striped jodhpurs and knee-high, polished black jackboots and the scary, white THX Robo-Helmet that the LAPD affects. LA cops always look like they just arrived from a gay costume party, like they should be singing in the Village People or something.

Cindy Sugita had just finished her stand-up for tomorrow's six o'clock Channel 13 news.

Cindy Sugita is a TDA operative. The TDA has operatives all thru the media -- all the television networks, newspapers, radio stations, and dot-com companies. Indeed, the cordoned-off parking lot was chock-full of them. All the reporters here were TDA assets obliged to do the cover-up dance.

Cindy for instance had just done a wonderful stand-up, explaining away the Other-Dimensional Blimp Monster and Puff's and my actions as the work of anarchists or Al Qaeda or the Medellin Cartel or the Crips and the Bloods or something.

Cindy, by the way, is of Japanese-American descent, in her late twenties, and heart-stoppingly beautiful. One of those television anchorwomen you wish would do the news in a wet T-shirt. (Altho, at this time she was nicely packaged in a cute, sort of shiny, TV working girl outfit.)

Fletch Kolakowski is, as I said, the head of the TDA PR Department. Fletch is tall, twenty-six years old, and probably the most handsome man I've ever met. And at the moment, he was dressed like a GQ cover model in a charcoal-grey, pin-striped suit, light blue silk shirt, wing tips and red power tie (altho his eyes looked a little glassy).

Fletch is a scion of the Kolakowski clan, a wealthy, powerful West Coast media/communications family rather like the Newhouse gang.

Fletch went thru a wild rakehell period in his impetuous youth, working as a Calvin Klein underwear model and a male exotic dancer. He did a few Penthouse spreads and got seriously into alcohol, cocaine, freebasing, ecstasy, and the Rave Scene. He even wore a backwards baseball cap and funny clown pants. I've seen pictures.

But eventually, callow youth passed and he settled down. The Prodigal Son found he could go home again and the grateful family pulled a few strings, greased a few wheels, and he ended up as the Public Relations Director of the Terrestrial Defense Agency. There's a lesson here for all of us.

He's also a great guy and everybody loves him.

So there we all were, chatting up Cindy Sugita like there was no tomorrow, getting in a little male head-butting.

As I said, Cindy is heartbreakingly beautiful. She's the kind of girl that you immediately want to mate with and replicate your happy DNA code.

And there was also that Christ-awful effect where her mere chemical-presence makes you desperate to get her attention while simultaneously transforming you into a tongue-tied, stuttering, blathering idiot.

Thanks, Mother Nature.

Not that it mattered anyway.

At this moment in time, the only thing in Cindy's universe was Fletch, who was always like catnip to any females in the neighborhood.

Besides which, the sad truth is that Field Agents rank quite near the bottom of the TDA social hierarchy.

I wish I could report that we're more glamorous than James Bond but ugly reality intrudes. We're considered the grunts of the Agency. (The TDA nickname for the Field Agents is "The Expendables" or variously, "the Saps", "the Chumps", "the Putzim" or "the Losers").

And right now, Cindy Sugita's eyes were super-glued on Fletch Kolakowski. She was entranced by his every nuance, enthralled by his every word.

And at this moment, Fletch was saying to me, "Jeez, it's too bad you and the Puffmeister couldn't have captured the Blimp Monster, Nicko..."

Cindy dutifully picked up the ball and started dribbling downcourt with it. "Yeah, we could have studied him!"

Puff, never one to pass up a bon mot, fired back without missing a beat, "Or we could have sold him to Goodyear."

We all laughed.

Probably from pent-up hysteria.

Still, it was a nice moment. Like one of those "end-of-the-adventure" laughs on Star Trek.

Except that Fletch kept on laughing. Long after it was appropriate, like John Candy in Nicholas Myer's film, Volunteers when he's been brainwashed into being an evil communist.

And we watched with some concern as he continued laughing, going into a sort of high-pitched, hysterical screeching, followed by a throttling and gagging sound.

Then it happened.

There was a dull, wet, explosive, popping sound...

As Fletch's head blew up.

It just popped right open like an exploding kernal of popcorn or a .357 Magnum slug blowing up a pumpkin.

The explosion drenched us all with hot, wet, gray brains and white bone fragments, and red gore like a scene from some revolting Brian De Palma movie and we stood there stunned and stupid.

There was a smell like that swordfish you forgot about and left somewhere in the back of the refrigerator for a couple of weeks.

But the worst was yet to come.

Fletch's body just stood there with a weird, shuddering rigor mortis...

As a horrible thing crawled out of Fletch's skull socket.

It poked its little head up just above Fletch's now empty eye sockets and looked around at us.

The head was about the size and shape of a plum and looked alarmingly like one of the Metaluna Mutants from This Island Earth. A big, bulbous, double-cleft skull pulsing like an electric blood clot, eyes like whorls of diseased pastry with a phosphorescent, cherry-red

filling, and -- God, help us all -- a big, craggy, cheerful grin like the Red Skull in the Captain America comics.

Some horrible part of my subconscious expected it to laugh like Woody Woodpecker.

Instead it chittered like a happy bird.

Then the head rose up on rapidly expanding crab legs like a daddy longlegs spider or one of the bio-mechanical Martian handling machines in H.G. Wells' The War of the Worlds.

Soaked scarlet with blood, it grinned at us with its hideous white teeth, crouched in anticipation, and leaped out of poor Fletch's shattered skull just as his body finally realized that it was time to fall over.

The creature hit the parking lot running and scurried away into the night like a Warner Bros. cartoon character zipping out of a wacky scene.

It was not our finest hour.

Operative Cindy Sugita closed her eyes, threw her head back, and began screaming hysterically, whilst highly-trained Terrestrial Defense Agency Field Agent Nicholas Doom bent over and vomited on the asphalt.

Only Puff displayed any presence of mind. He calmly unsheathed his black, squared-off, service-issue .45, took careful aim, and shot the fleeing monstrosity like a woodchuck.