

Paul Jasper Richards'

Sleeping Creatures

Sleeping World

ALSCAR PUBLISHING

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For

Jane
Alasdair, Scarlett, Bella
and you.

The Beginning Of The End

A small figure on the mountainside could just be seen pulling a very old and rickety sledge through the snow. Hilda was following a well-trodden path to the top of Kander glazier.

Walter lay motionless on the sledge, covered with a stained, brown blanket. His time had come. His lifetime work was complete and he was finally able to rest in peace.

A blizzard was stirring and Hilda was weak. She unhooked a shovel and slowly began to dig a shallow snow hole. Her hands were blue and her tears were forming icicles around her tired eyes. With one last gasp of strength Hilda kissed her beloved and lowered the sledge, as if he was a Viking King being buried on his trusted long boat.

“It’s just us now Walter,” Hilda whispered, as she crouched down beside him. Snow started to land on his cheeks. Hilda gently wiped away the flakes, before placing Walter’s mask over his face.

“Don’t worry my love – I’m here to look after you,” she smiled one last time as she slipped on her own mask and snuggled up beside him.

Snow swept across the mountaintop. Within hours it was a metre deep and in days Walter and Hilda would be cocooned in ice on a millennium journey to the base of the glacier...

CHAPTER 1

The Ruby Rocks

Craig and Anna sat frozen to the doorstep. The sky was scarred with a thousand red trails. Something was wrong – they could sense it. Street lights flicked, car drivers peered motionlessly upward and birds of prey circled nervously.

“It’s a sign,” Craig decided. “Perhaps it’s the end of the world!” he joked, but Anna failed to laugh. Shimmering ruby clouds began to gather above Doldenhorn, like the mushroom shaped ash from a waking volcano!

Anna stood up and glanced across the valley. “A storm is coming. We need to take cover.”

“Yes – and before Vienna arrives,” Craig added, standing up to follow his sister inside as an unwelcome guest raced up the street.

Vienna, a spidery young lady, drove her motorbike up the kerb and parked it against the outside wall of the children’s house. Heinz, her burnt and hairless mountain dog, jumped off the back seat and hobbled up the small flight of steps to the front door. Vienna placed a letter in her helmet and stretched out her long arm to start knocking. The door was unlocked. It widened slightly and Heinz quickly squeezed through.

“Mr Adams,” Vienna called loudly, “Are you there? Could I have my dog back?” she asked, stepping nervously into the crowded hallway. Her path was blocked by a parcel shaped like a

giant turtle shell. It was leaning against other, odd shaped boxes, which Heinz had managed to scamper underneath.

“Heinz,” Vienna called as she saw him crawl through a rolled up carpet and reappear next to the basement door.

A crumpled note, in bold letters, was pinned to the handle.

ALL LESSONS CANCELLED

“Grrrrr,” Heinz growled, pushing his snout against the pine door.

“Mr Adams? Is that you? Am I late?” Vienna worried as she squeezed around the parcels.

Mr Adams, the children’s father, was lazy – unbelievably lazy – he was a piano teacher. The only thing he ever lifted were his hands and that was usually to pick the money out of his students’ pockets!

“Vienna – can’t you read? You’re not welcome here,” Anna yelled through a tiny gap under the door. That was the wrong thing to say to Vienna and Anna knew it instantly. Vienna was the village orphan who had never fully recovered from a terrible gas explosion, when she was just ten years old. It had destroyed her house, killing all her family and almost her dog! Vienna now spent her days looking after goats on the mountain pastures and living in a small cottage, built by the locals.

“I thought you were my friends?” Vienna complained as Heinz wandered away.

The basement staircase suddenly began to shake as if Craig’s father was standing angrily behind him.

“Yes – you’re our best friend,” Craig lied, because Mr Adams loved Vienna: She was the perfect piano student; Always on time, always paid promptly and most importantly; guaranteed to keep on coming, because she never made any progress! But it was a miracle any of his students improved because Mr Adams couldn’t be bothered to listen to them play and would read a book or even hang out the washing! Six months ago he decided to move the piano into the dimly lit basement because he thought the students wouldn’t notice him napping, but they did and soon most people had stopped coming.

“I thought you had left without saying goodbye,” Vienna continued to moan, as the house suddenly jerked.

“Why?” asked Anna, trying to open the door?

Vienna thought for a moment, before suddenly becoming distracted by an odd shaped box that was rocking to-and-fro. “If you’re not leaving, why is everything wrapped up?” she questioned. “Are you having a party?”

“A party!” Craig half laughed. “If only – we’re selling up to make some money.”

Everything in the house was wrapped, tagged and priced, from the children’s toys to the satellite dish – even the hamster had a price tag placed around its neck! Everything was for sale, that is, except for Father’s piano and stool.

“Your parents asked me to deliver this letter just before...” Vienna began, suddenly remembering why she was there. “But I can’t remember who to.”

“Let me see,” insisted Craig, ramming the door with his shoulder, but it had jammed shut. “Vienna – push the letter under,” he insisted, as he heard her moving away from the door to discover why Heinz was barking.

“Doldenhorn is glowing red!” Vienna gasped. “Do you think it’s the Sleeping Creatures?” she wondered, stepping outside to investigate.

“What’s she talking about?” Craig asked his sister as they descended the stairs to look at the mountain through the small, basement window.

“I don’t know, but why are you interested in that letter?” Anna questioned, after cupping her hands together to help her brother clamber onto the window ledge.

“I think it’s from Mum and Dad.”

“But why would they send us a letter?” Anna puzzled.

Craig lifted his eyebrows: His face was just visible in the shallow light of the road level window. It was even colder and damper in the basement and Craig was starting to feel they had been left behind.

“It doesn’t take a day to fetch a pint of milk,” he moaned as he tried to open the window.

“But Mum once left us with Dad for nearly a week when she nipped out for a sausage!” Anna remembered.

Craig pushed his face against the window and knocked on the glass to try and attract Vienna’s attention. “Stop being naïve,” he frowned. “When mum eventually returned she had run out of money, her face was tanned and she even had sand in her shoes!”

Anna looked down at her frayed sandals. “Do you think dad’s gone to beg our rich Aunt for more money?” she asked.

“Probably,” he agreed. It had been a year since they moved from England to Switzerland: A year in which father’s hopes of becoming a classical pianist had come to nothing. His piano teaching was barely paying the bills. In fact it was getting so bad that the family only ate when father managed to sell a piece of furniture.

“Vienna!” Craig yelled, attracting the attention of Heinz, who slavered his tongue against the glass.

“What have you found boy?” asked Vienna, kneeling down to investigate. “Craig – Anna – what are you doing in there?” she asked. “I thought you were in the basement.”

Craig was about to moan, “We are,” when he was distracted by a flash of light, screaming overhead. “Vienna – what’s happening,” Craig shouted, as Doldenhorn peak appeared to glow like a forest fire had been lit.

Vienna peered nervously over her shoulder. “The Sleeping Creatures are attacking!”

“What sleeping creatures?” Craig mouthed through the glass.

“Stop encouraging her,” Anna warned as dangerous looking, scarlet coloured clouds drifted closer.

“The creatures that steal my goats’ milk,” Vienna whispered, “but there’s no time to talk – I need to escape,” she added, putting on her helmet and turning to leave.

“Vienna – wait – have you really seen the Sleeping Creatures?” Craig yelled.

“Yes, but nobody believes me,” she moaned, suddenly crouching down to persuade her young friends that she was telling the truth. “I’ve seen them high in the mountains, when it’s dark and lonely...”

There was a pause – a long pause, before Craig eventually cried, “Carry on!”

“...I’ve often seen the little one chasing after my goats, but I don’t understand,” Vienna puzzled.

Anna banged her head against the wall in frustration: “What don’t you understand?”

“Why would they set fire to the mountain?”

“It’s a lightning strike,” Anna insisted, “and if you want people to believe you, you need to catch one!”

“Haven’t you seen what they look like?” Vienna shivered. A faded photograph of the creature was displayed in the town hall. It had been taken 70 years ago by the old Mayor of Kandersteg. He named it the Sleeping Creature because of its enormous, round eyes, but most people thought it was a brown bear, with a saggy body and large nose.

“Dad said the picture is a fake,” Craig remembered.

“A FAKE! They’re real! But they only come out at night and they don’t like being seen!” Vienna explained, “but I can’t hang around here any longer. I need to escape!” she repeated, before pushing her nose against the glass for one last look at her friends. “Hey – that’s not your basement – there’s no piano!”

Craig and Anna suddenly whipped their heads around the room. Vienna was right – sort of – there was no piano. It was the only thing left that was worth any money and if it was gone so was father!

“Vienna – come back inside – we need your help,” Anna shouted but the storm had descended and Vienna had vanished in the swirling mist. Only Heinz remained. He had circled back to the top of the basement and was scratching frantically at the door in a desperate attempt to be let in.

“Anna – look,” Craig pointed, as the sky illuminated with a million strands of cascading lightning, fired in all directions from the red clouds. The sky roared, as if a nuclear bomb had just exploded! Earthquaking thunder roared across the land, shaking the trembling children to the ground!

“Brace yourself,” he warned as a storm of red, glowing hailstones, the size of footballs, pelted onto the town.

Anna crept along the floor towards the stairs as the thunderous shockwave ricocheted through the streets, like a super tornado. The basement door suddenly blasted open, firing Heinz down the stairs! But before the children, and even the dog, could get back onto their feet, the door slammed shut again, sucking the air out of the room, like a giant vacuum!

Craig stretched up to the window and attempted to break the pane with his fist, but the glass was brick thick and the outside air was a horrifying, bright blood red! Anna started to crawl up the stairs just as the ghostly red mist began seeping under the door. Heinz, who was bruised, but still very much alive, pounced on top of Anna and spread himself out like a lion rug, as if to stop Anna going any further.

Craig staggered to the stairs to help his sister just as the red mist began to retreat as quickly as it had arrived! The basement door sprung open, flooding the room with a welcome mixture of light and fresh air.

“What was that?” Anna panted heavily as Heinz scampered over her head and dashed out of the house.

“I don’t know, but I think it’s safer if we stay here,” Craig insisted, noticing the hamster lying flat on its back in the hall cage, but Anna wasn’t listening to him; she could hear Heinz barking wildly in the street and was determined to find out what was going on.

Craig reluctantly followed her to the door. Bright sunlight blinded the children as if the storm had never happened. Anna shaded her eyes with her hand and staggered onto the road to join Heinz.

“Look!” she marvelled, drawing close enough to see what the dog was barking at.

“What is it?” murmured Craig, suspiciously.

“It looks like an enormous ruby stone,” Anna replied, as it sparkled like a cut diamond in the sunlight.

“I’ve always wanted my own jewellery and with that I could make a dress covered in rubies!”

“Keep away,” Craig warned, waving his arms, but Heinz didn’t understand, and thought Craig wanted to play a game! The dog leapt across the road, on his three good legs, to fetch the strange ball, but before he could even touch the ruby, Heinz sniffed the rock and collapsed into a sleeping heap of flesh and bones!

“IS HE DEAD!” screamed Anna.

“No, I can hear him breathing,” whispered Craig, “but whatever you do, keep well away from that rock,” he ordered in a voice shaking with shock.

“But there’re ruby rocks everywhere!” Anna panicked, as the children began to zig-zag along the deadly silent streets towards the market square, but with each step they took, the scene became worse than they could have possibly imagined!

All around lay quietly snoring people, looking lifeless, with grey, frightened expressions! Some were sprawled over the cobbled pavements, with their shopping scattered around them. Fortunately most drivers had stopped when they spotted the rocks falling from the sky. They now looked the most comfortable, slumped in foam seats, with their sleepy heads snuggled against propping headrests.

“Watch out – there’s another Sleeping Rock,” Anna forewarned, sending the children, once again, crisscrossing the road. “The rocks are everywhere,” she added, stepping over an old man, sleeping arm in arm with his little dog.

“Even the wood pigeons are asleep!” Craig gasped, noticing a fat, twitching pigeon lying in the middle of the street.

“That would make a lovely dish,” Anna decided, with a lick of her hungry lips.

“Leave it alone; you can’t kill it,” Craig warned.

“But what are we going to eat? There’s nothing left in the cupboards,” Anna groaned, her tummy now grumbling louder than a combine harvester!

Craig reluctantly picked up the bird and shook it. “We’re in luck – it’s dead! It must have died when it fell from the sky and hit the ground,” he decided, stroking its flattened head. “O.K. we’ll go home and eat it.”

The children quietly turned around and headed back up the hill.

“Where is Mum and Dad?” Anna asked, looking up at their house. “Do you think they had anything to do with this?”

Craig laughed. “No, but I didn’t see them asleep in the town,” he replied, scratching the pigeon’s head.

Anna stepped up to the front door and pushed it open, but as she entered she turned to look across the town, the mountains, and even the whole, vast planet, before asking,

“Why is the world asleep?”

“I don’t know Anna... Perhaps everyone will wake up tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 2

Survival

Anna pressed her nose against the window. Three days had passed and still nobody had woken up. The town was motionless; all except for a small figure climbing up the hill. It was Craig carrying yet another dead wood pigeon. Anna was sick of rubbery pigeon meat and she was sure they were covered in sleeping fleas!

Craig's stethoscope, from his old doctors kit, could just be seen swinging around his neck as he drew closer to the house. He had started using it to check that the birds he picked really were dead. "There are not many pigeons left to eat," Craig had told her that morning.

Anna breathed warm air onto the cold, glass pane. The window misted up and the view of her brother was temporarily blocked. She lifted her hand to wipe the glass clear, but instead found herself writing a word that she only partly understood, but what she thought fitted her feelings of the trap they were in:

'M - O - R - A - L - S' she slowly wrote.

"Anna, we're in luck again: I've found another dead wood pigeon," Craig announced excitedly, pushing the bird's head against the window. Anna hastily rubbed the glass clean and beckoned him in with the words, "We need to talk."

“What’s the matter sis?” asked Craig, after hanging up his coat.

“I’m fed up of eating raw pigeon meat. I want to taste steak, chips and chocolate mousse,” Anna began, “and I want to wear clothes which don’t have holes in; wash my hair again with shampoo and eat off a plate, not out of a box, and use a fork and spoon,” she ranted.

“Knife and fork stupid. Next you’ll be telling me you want a new tooth brush,” muttered Craig, disapprovingly.

“I do, I do and that minty stuff you get with them!”

“Pluck the pigeon – It will stop you from getting silly thoughts,” Craig grumbled.

“But they’re not silly thoughts, I really could have all those things,” she sparkled with excitement.

“How?” Craig quizzed, staring intensely.

“By going to the shops and choosing...”

“That’s not choosing – it’s stealing!” he interrupted, pounding his fist on a crate. “If you really want dishes and knives and forks, you can open some of these boxes. I’m sure our old plates and cutlery are here somewhere.”

“But the oven’s been sold! We can’t keep eating raw meat!” Anna roared, “And you don’t understand... Who says it’s stealing?”

Craig stomped across the floor in a ferocious temper, with his mind fixed on a suitable reply.

“Everybody... It’s the law,” he eventually boomed.

“But the law is made to suit those who make it. And now everyone is asleep, we are the only two living humans in the whole world,” she argued.

“So?” questioned Craig.

“So we should make our own laws!” Anna asserted, curling the tips of her blond hair with her dirty fingers, as if to form an English judge’s wig.

“What, like we have the right to steal chocolate from Nestlé’s sweet shop and perhaps a chicken from Pickle’s farm?” Craig snapped, angrily.

“No. I suggest just one rule,” she smiled, lifting one stick like finger. “The human race must never become extinct, and so while the world sleeps, we must do everything possible to survive,” Anna explained. “We need good food for a healthy diet – Soap to wipe away the germs and a toothbrush to stop tooth decay: There’re no doctors or dentists to look after us now!”

Craig stood silent for a moment, wobbling his loose tooth with his tongue, before asking, “But what is the rule?”

“The rule is simple – SURVIVAL!” thundered Anna, almost bringing the bird back to life with her pulsating vocals!

“Survival,” mumbled Craig as he thought for a moment. “Anna, you may have a point. We do need to survive,” he added, sniffing the dead bird. “This pigeon smells like it’s off,” he decided, throwing it out of the door. “Let’s fetch a prime joint of beef: We need only the best to survive – for the sake of the human race!” Craig announced, whose moral conscience suddenly melted with the thought of a fantasy feast!

CHAPTER 3

Food for Thought

The children stood outside the supermarket, peering through a slice of glass wall, not covered with sale posters. They had not been inside this food shop before - it was far too expensive, but that was not what bothered them now; neither were quite sure if this was such a good idea: Whatever they took would still be theft, survival or not!

The children reluctantly pushed each other to the entrance. The shop was still lit and full of people, but nobody was buying, not even Craig and Anna! Instantly the glass doors slid open, causing the children to shiver with a quickening pulse of fear, but neither said anything, because the food bounty inside was too irresistible to ignore.

Craig collected a shopping trolley from next to the checkout lady, who was slumped across the counter. She had been serving an unfortunate customer, who had collapsed head first into a trolley, leaving his hairy legs swaying in the air!

“Arr!” Anna suddenly screamed, as she noticed two shadowy figures prowling in the aisle on a television surveillance screen.

“Its only us,” Craig laughed, pointing to a camera at the opposite end of the store.

“But, but, but who’s operating it?” she stammered, her teeth still chattering with fear.

“Nobody, it’s been left on since the rocks landed. Now give me a hand to pull these shoppers out of the way.”

Anna silently obliged, helped by the sight of shelves piled high with mouth-watering delights.

There was so much food and such dazzling varieties that the children didn't at first know where to start. But when Craig dropped a tin of German sausages into the trolley it acted like a starting pistol, firing the children around the supermarket, as if they were in a game show competition!

The trolley was quickly crammed with tins of soup, packets of rice; fruit by the kilogram; jam by the jar; cheese of every variety, yogurt from every nation and gallons and gallons of fresh fruit juice – because only the best would help them survive.

Anna guzzled a large slice of hot pizza there and then, while a joint of beef, fit for a king, was collected from the meat counter, ready to be cooked for their dinner. But what about dessert? No matter how full their trolley, they could always find room for cakes, biscuits and anything else smothered in chocolate!

Craig returned to the trolley, with an arm full of snacks, only to notice Anna feeling her hands over the head of an enormous, rocket firework: The bottom shelf was cramped with remote launching, Stella Sky Rockets. Above, in individual racks, were smaller, ground-based fireworks that sparkled pretty colours, so the wrapper boasted. Anna's eyes and hands moved across the tempting fireworks, ready to pounce, once the choice was made.

“Leave them alone,” Craig frowned. “What do they have to do with survival?”

“They are pretty,” replied Anna, with thoughts of flowering meadows.

“Pretty dangerous, you mean,” he roared, “Now find some lemonade.”

Anna reluctantly agreed, fetching fizzy drink, containing extra caffeine, to give them more oomph, because energy was what they required to push the trolley back home up the steepest hill.

“This is ridiculous – I’ll never push it up this slope,” Craig moaned, leaning like a flying buttress against the stationary trolley. “Give me a hand,” he pleaded, as his knees began to buckle.

“Out of my way,” ordered Anna, snatching the handle with a rotating hand.

“But you’re going the wrong way. Our house is over there!” insisted Craig, pointing furiously up the street, but Anna began to push the trolley in the opposite direction, down the spiralling high street.

“Where are you going?” he breathlessly ranted.

“If we’re going to survive, we need to live in comfort, and not in a cold, sparse house,” she explained.

“But we can take more bed sheets from the shop if you wish,” Craig offered, but Anna’s mind was already made up. She eagerly steered the trolley left, along High Tour Avenue, before parking it on the drive of Mansion House. It was the biggest, the poshest and the most expensive house in all the land. It had more rooms than a bus has seats, and a swimming pool the size of a playing field!

Anna eagerly climbed through a broken, ground floor window to unlatch the front door.

“Survive, we shall,” she boasted, swinging open the oak panelled door, inside a stone, arch entrance.

“We don’t need to live in a house like this to survive,” he angrily argued, but before Anna had time to reply, Craig’s steaming, red cheeks suddenly began to freeze. His face turned whiter than an iceberg, as if he had seen a ghost! With a firm grip of his sister’s hand, he pulled her back to the main road. “Something’s wrong!” he murmured, glancing nervously between the cars. “We’ve raced all the way down the high street and didn’t cross the road once.”

“So?”

“So where have all the ruby sleeping rock gone?” he worryingly whispered.

“There’s one – next to the Ski Hire shop,” Anna playfully pointed.

“Yes, but there used to be rocks all along the high street,” he insisted.

“No, I think you’re becoming confused with the road outside our school,” Anna reassured him, as she pivoted, like a ballerina, to dance back to her fairy tale castle, but Craig’s frightened features continued to scan the street: Something strange was going on, he was convinced!