

# **Outgrowth of the Brain**

By James Field

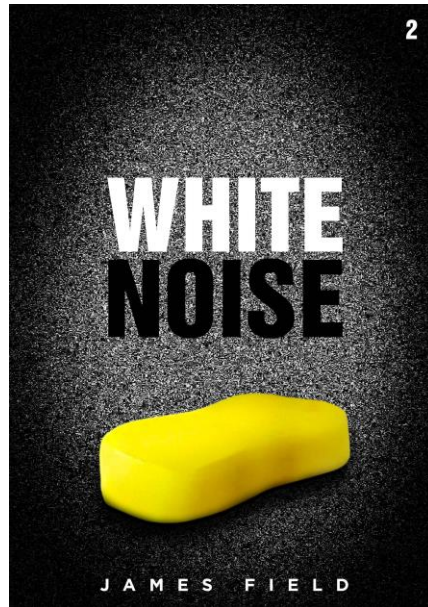
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## Outgrowth of the Brain

'What is it Chums?' asked Bert, switching on his bedside lamp. His two massive Alsatians stood rigid with their eyes fixed on his.

'Have we got prowlers?'

The Alsatians made a movement as good as a nod to Bert.

'We'll soon sort them out good and proper, won't we Chums.'

The black Alsatians snarled, they were ready.

Bert climbed out of bed, stepped into his dungarees, pulled them over his boxer shorts and T-shirt, and buttoned the straps to the bib. The stairs groaned under his weight as he made his way down to the kitchen, Alsatians close on his heels. His companion, Alf, sat at the kitchen table with his head buried under folded arms, right where he'd been when Bert went to bed last night.

'We've got prowlers,' said Bert.

Alf grunted. He tried to lift his head but apparently found the effort too painful.

'Headache still that bad?' said Bert, glancing at the clock. 'You don't need to come out tonight; me and me Chums will soon get rid of the prowlers. It's three-o'clock, why don't you get to bed while there's still some night left?'

Alf grunted.

Bert waited a moment, climbed into his size 48 army boots, and strapped his knife around his bulging belly. 'I won't be long,' he said. 'Get to bed, you'll feel better in the morning.'

Outside, the summer night embraced Bert in a warm and humid breeze. He waited while his eyes adjusted to the dark, fidgeting as moisture from dew-soaked grass penetrated his boots.

'I hope you can see better than me, Chums,' he said, impatient to start the chase. 'Let's go. Find your man.'

The Alsatians sniffed the air and pointed the direction with their noses.

Bert set off, his dogs at heel, one on either side. As they passed the mansion, the Alsatians slowed and turned their heads.

'What is it?' said Bert, wondering if something was amiss at the stately home. Then he noticed the Alsatians tense as they picked up the scent again. 'Keep going, Chums, follow your man.'

They hurried past the mansion, plunged into a dense wooded area and followed a narrow path. Bert allowed his dogs to run in front, but kept them close.

He fumbled in a baggy trouser pocket, found his small but powerful torch, and illuminated the uneven path beneath his feet; he didn't fancy tripping on slippery roots or stones. A chase like this normally excited him, but not this time. Alf and him were a team and he didn't like to see his partner all huddled up and suffering. He broke into a lumbering jog, eager to get rid of the intruders and hurry back to make his friend comfortable.

'Bark,' he said, and the Alsatians hurled their fearsome voices into the night. 'Bark louder,' he commanded. 'Bark so they shit themselves and don't stop running 'til they reach Timbuktu.'

The path rounded a lake, narrowed, and rose towards the perimeter fence. 'Go and worry them,' panted Bert. 'But don't eat them until I get there.'

The Alsatians catapulted away and disappeared into the darkness. Bert's heart pounded as he stumbled up the last hundred meters, he turned his head and spat, he wasn't built for speed.

The Alsatians stopped by a padlocked gate in the high wire fence and howled at two dark figures on the other side.

Bert clasped the torch in his mouth, drew a heavy bunch of keys from his pocket, and selected one. Spit whistled between his teeth as his shaking fingers tried to insert the key. It didn't fit. He

raised his eyebrows, he knew every key on his bunch and was certain beyond doubt he had the right one.

The intruders laughed and Bert shone his torch on them. Dressed in black from head to toe, one of them dangled a padlock on a gloved finger. Bert blinked twice before he realised they'd switched the padlock. Dumbfounded, he watched the man snap the padlock shut and throw it into the forest.

Both men chuckled behind their stocking masks, then turned and strolled away into the wooded parkland.

Bert's blood boiled. He dropped the torch, bunched his colossal shoulders, curled his fingers around the wire gate's metal frame, and yanked until it rattled louder than the Alsatian's savage barking.

The dark men glanced over their shoulders, turned to face Bert, and showed him a finger. When the hinges tore away, they fell silent, glanced at each other, spun on their heels, and ran.

As Bert threw the gate aside, the mansion's piercing alarm split through the night. Bert hesitated; he desperately wanted to chase the intruders. Instead, he jammed the ruined gate back into the fence and hurried to the mansion.

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Bert faced his two young employers in the mansion's dark and gloomy entrance hall. He dragged his woollen hat from his head and wrung it in his hands. The eldest brother, Trevor, scowled at him; the younger brother, Russell, smiled his usual smile.

'This is a bad business,' said Trevor. 'Three men broke into the mansion. Where were you and Alf? Why didn't you detect them sneaking about the grounds long before they broke into our premises?'

'I'm right sorry I let you down, Master Trevor, it ain't never happened before. Me and me Chums chased two men right past the mansion and we never saw no other men. I ain't got eyes in the back of me head, Master Trevor. I'm right sorry.'

'Decoys,' said Trevor. 'Two men to draw you away and three men who disarmed the alarm and entered the premises. Lucky my brother and I were home or they'd have robbed us of everything we own.'

Russell patted Bert's huge arm as if it was a horse's neck. 'Don't look so despondent,' he said. 'There's no harm done. Trevor's clever little friend, Aidme, detected the burglars and reset the alarm. They ran like hell when it went off.'

'Aidme?' said Bert.

'I'm going to let you into a little secret,' said Russell, pointing to the colourless football hovering close to Trevor's shoulder. 'We picked up Aidme from a spaceship in outer space. It's a little wizard, rather like a genie in a bottle except it uses incredibly advanced technology rather than magic. Isn't that so, Trevor?'

'Roughly, yes, but this isn't the time to go into details.'

Bert grinned, he thought the young brothers were either joking or mad. Either way, he felt better, they weren't especially angry with him. 'Me and me Chum's are right sorry,' he said, 'it won't never happen again.'

The entrance hall reminded Bert of a museum. Fascinated, his gaze flitted here and there, from the faded paintings and tapestries hanging on the walls, to the suits of armour and stuffed tiger standing in the corners.

The two Alsatis, sensing their Master's improved mood, wagged their tails and panted. Bert raised his little finger and they sat.

'What happened to the men you chased?' asked Russell.

'Lucky I never told me Chums to kill them or they'd be dead and buried. Wish I had now because they got away.'

The Alsatians followed Bert's every move. He lifted the little finger on his other hand and they bounced up, thrashing their tails like over-wound metronomes.

Russell reached out to pat the dogs, hesitated, and pulled his hand back.

'Don't you Chums go growling at the young master,' said Bert, 'and don't go leaving none of your hair on the nice carpet.'

'Why isn't Alf with you?' asked Trevor.

'He ain't feeling well, so I did the best I could by meself.'

Trevor sighed and seemed to soften. 'Up until last night you've both done a wonderful job,' he said. 'You, Alf, and your dogs are magnificent, and I'm delighted my brother and I decided to employ you. But these thieves are professionals and they'll be back. They won't give up, so we'll have to see if we can arrange something better.'

'It would've been alright if Alf wasn't poorly,' said Bert.

'Is Alf seriously ill?' asked Russell.

Bert scratched his bulbous head and sniffed. 'Alf's gone blind and he's crawling around the floor on his hands and knees. I don't like it. I ain't never seen him this bad before. He just sits at the table most of the time and he don't do none of his muscle training or has any sparring fights with me. He don't eat nothing either, he don't even know I've come up to the mansion. I was sort of hoping you'd both come to the gatehouse and have a look at him?'

'Yes, of course,' said Russell without hesitation.

'Having another of his migraines, is he?' asked Trevor.

'Yeah, but I ain't never seen it this bad.'

'Have you called a doctor?'

'Not likely,' said Bert, 'we don't never go to no doctors. It was them doctors what messed him up in the first place.'

Not bothering with hats and coats, the two brothers headed out through the front door. Bert and his Alsatians followed close behind, leaving the heavy oak door gaping open on its wrought iron hinges.

'How often does he have these attacks?' asked Trevor, leading the procession along a cinder path.

'About once a month.'

'And how long do they last?'

'A couple of days is normal, but this one has lasted four days.'

They joined the main path and crunched along the gravel at a good pace. A pale haze surrounded them, damp and chilly in the morning light.

'When did he start getting these migraine attacks?' asked Trevor, keeping a wary eye on the Alsatians.

'It happened after what happened when we was pinching a boat.'

'Stealing a boat?'

'Yeah. One of those super-fancy cabin boats with the big engines that all those snobs has on the river Avon.'

'And you and Alf stole one?' said Russell.

'Yeah, we tried to. But we didn't have much of a plan. Alf said it was spontaneous like. He's the one with the brains and it was his idea.'

'I sometimes wonder if you two own a complete brain between you,' said Trevor. 'What had you planned to do with a boat? It's not the sort of thing you can sell at the local market.'

'We ain't done none of that criminal stuff since we came to work for you, Master Trevor, honest we ain't.'

'What about Alf's prize fighting?' asked Russell.

'Well, yeah, I mean, Alf's the best there is. He's the champ and he's got to defend his title, ain't he? Folk's is always challenging him.'

'I'm not surprised he suffers from migraine,' said Trevor. 'But explain about this cabin cruiser?'

'We was only having a bit of fun. Alf said we could nick stuff from the boat to sell, but we wasn't going to harm the boat, only float around in it a bit and see what it was like. It was tied up to one of those swanky cottages right next to the river. What we did was, we waited until the first light of morning, untied the boat, pushed it out, and swam out behind it. But they heard us, didn't they.'

'Who heard you,' asked Russell, 'the owners in the cottage?'

'Yeah, we didn't know there was anybody home. We ain't got eyes in the back of our heads and we can't see through walls, can we. We ain't got no Aidme from outer space like what you got, Master Trevor.'

'So what happened when they heard you?' asked Trevor.

'One of them had a handgun and fired a shot at us. But me Chums soon sorted them out. Me Chums don't like guns and I train them to attack when they see guns. Had them pinned up in a corner they did, weren't no more bullets flying at us after that.'

They rounded a long bend in the path. Alf and Bert's ivy-covered gatehouse shimmered into sight through the mist.

'The trouble was,' continued Bert, 'that the bullet what they did let fly hit Alf in his forehead. Hit him a glancing blow right across the front.' Bert pointed at his brow and drew a line from one side to the other.

'Sounds serious,' said Trevor.

'Yeah, the whole river turned red. They took him off to hospital and had him in there for a whole week until he ran away.'

'Ran away?' said Russell, 'why did he do that?'

'We don't like doctors. Some of them nurses is okay but them doctors acts like they're God or something.'

'What did the police say?' asked Trevor.

'Alf told them we was saving the boat because it was floating away by itself. Alf's always got a clever answer. And them twerps with the gun couldn't say nothing, could they, because they ain't supposed to have guns, are they.'

They reached the stone-built gatehouse, checked the perimeter iron gates were securely closed, and crowded through the gatehouse's wide-open front door.

Alf still sat at the kitchen table resting his head in his folded arms. He must have heard the men enter but didn't raise his head. Instead, he groaned. Trevor and Russell sat opposite him. Alf sat by his side.

'I brung the young masters,' said Bert, 'and I told them about your headaches and about that boat thing with the bullet.'

Alf lifted his head and blinked his bloodshot eyes.

'You look worse than after one of your prize-fights,' said Trevor, opening his sports bag and producing a pencil and notepad. He studied Alf's distorted features; flat, crooked nose, cauliflower ears, and the bullet scar across his forehead, just one disfiguration among many others.

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