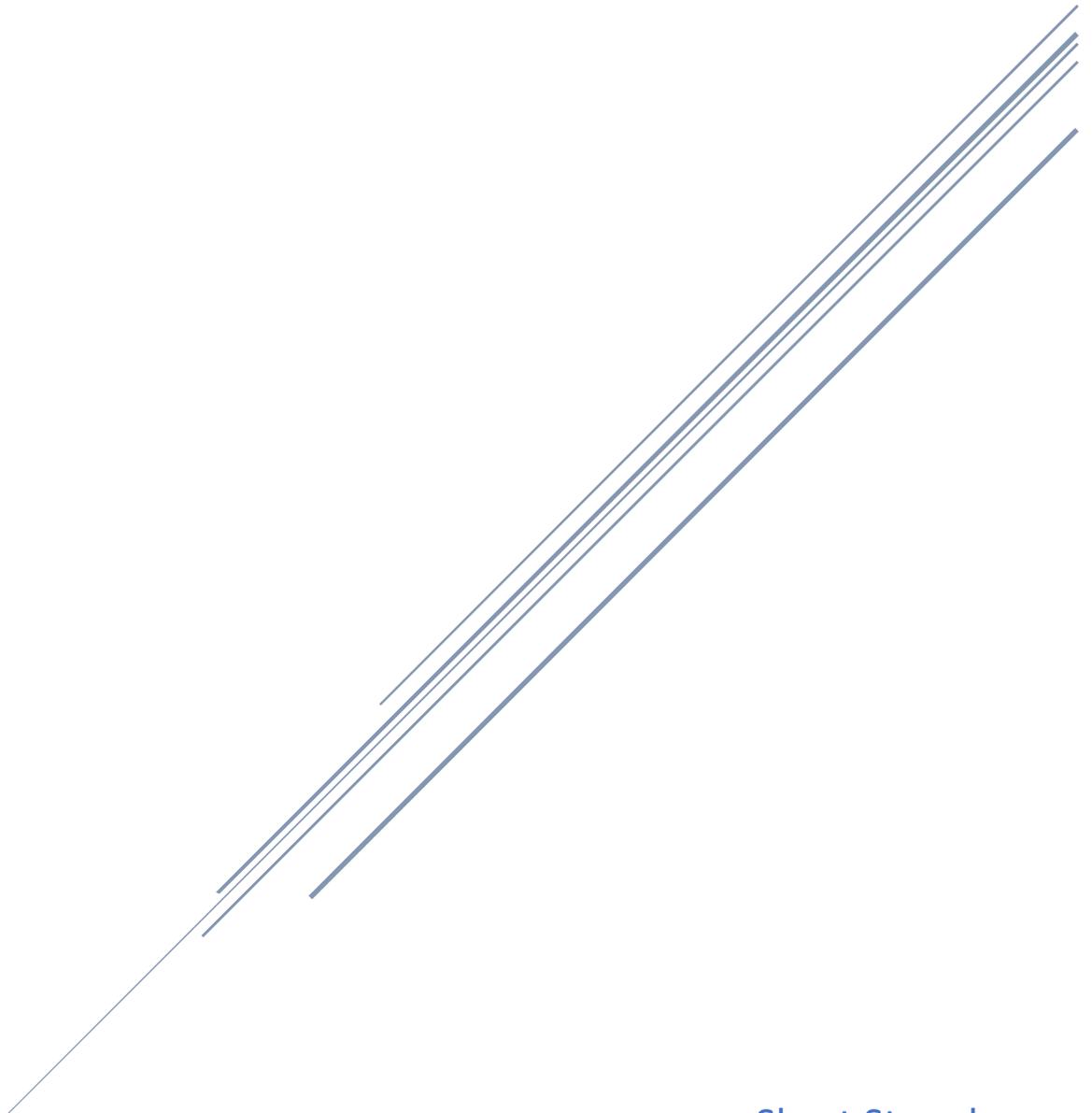


THE QUIET END

R. J. Davies



Short Story by



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Staring out the window he couldn't believe his luck. Years of desperately working on this machine he managed to alienate his co-workers, friends and family. Driving them all away one by one, even Marissa who he thought would be by his side until the end of time, even she had her fill of him and left.

"Well here you are! You lucky bastard ... at the end of the universe ... the end of time and space ... alone ...," looking out at the empty space he felt a little empty. No one to celebrate his accomplishments with, no one to witness it.

The gravity of his accomplishment hit him. Dancing on the spot he grinned from ear to ear. "You did it!" his words bounced around the room. "You did it! ... I actually did it."

He began to take readings of the atmosphere outside his ship. Hours soon bled into each other as he kept checking his data. Wait until the people back home saw this!

Outside the window a storm danced in front of him, stars were bursting, and a soft green cloud seem to dampen the blows of each explosion. Little balls of fire seemed to zip around on their own. The little balls of fire caught his attention. They did not appear to be random movements. Was this a new form of alien life? How much luckier could a guy get?

Steve stared with wide eyes and wonder. Who or what were they? Did it constitute as intelligent life? A ball came to a halt in front of his window ... watching him as he watched it in return. Another one came and joined his friend. They didn't touch but

they were about a couple inches apart. Steve wondered how safe it would be if he reached the control panel to try and run readings on the little balls. Would the balls outside his window be offended? Would they care?

Just then another ball stopped and joined his friends. They seemed harmless. Yet the little hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Steve took a couple steps to the shield's panel. The balls moved with him. His fingers tapped a couple of buttons, a loud clunk and then the solar shield slowly slid down. The balls of fire started spinning around and bumping into the glass frantically. His new friends were not fond of Steve putting another barrier between them. Steve breathed a sigh of relief when the shield was in place.

The window switched over to the view screen. The balls were gathering together outside. Steve decided that maybe he should move to a less populated area.

He went over to his navigation panel and began entering in co-ordinates. He powered his ship into action. Moments later his eyes bugled as he noticed the current co-ordinates ... he had not moved, not one single millimetre.

Checking the screens again he noticed he had gained the attention of a small army of the fireballs, they were not being very friendly, not inviting. Beating against his haul.

A warning alert activated. "Haul breach emanate," the computer warned.

"Computer identify the perpetrators of the breach."

"Unknown," the computer replied.

"Computer raise all shields."

"Shields raised." The computer informed him.

"Computer is there something wrong with the engines?"

"Performing self diagnostic ... please wait ..."

"I don't know if I can wait for long."

"Engine is working."

"Okay, then why did we not move?"

"Negative, our co-ordinates have changed."

"He quickly entered in a new destination and engaged the action. Watching the view screen, he noticed the background had changed yet what was in the foreground was pretty much the same view."

"Haul has been breached," the computer announced.

"Shit!"

Suddenly he was at home. "Steve, what are you doing standing there like that honey, come help me unload the car."

He blinked and followed Nancy outside.

"It was crazy down at the store. Every time I turned around, I had someone asking about you."

"Really?" that didn't sound right. No one ever cared what he did before. Why now? He was really happy to see Nancy smiling, the last two months they lived together, she smiled only once. As she pulled out of the driveway, waving at him, she had a smile on her face, "so long idiot. I hope you and your stupid machine rot to death." Those were her last words. No Now she was standing in front of him. Maybe that was just a bad dream.

She handed him a couple grocery bags and he watched as she grabbed a couple more then headed inside. Following her to the kitchen he didn't know what to say.

"Well don't just stand there silly go and get the other two bags.

"He turned and did as he was told. Coming back, she had most of the purchases put away. He began unpacking the bags he brought in.

The rest of the evening he waited and wondered if he should say anything. Deciding to wait he began to forget what it was he was waiting for. Nancy came in the living room and sat down on the sofa beside him.

"You're a little quiet tonight Steve, is there something on your mind?"

"No ... I can't think of anything."

She leaned into him and laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"Okay."

"Well I got a secret," she smiled at him.

"Are you going to tell me?"

She bit her lip as if contemplating whether or not to let him on the joke. Then she sat on the sofa leaned into him with her lips close to his ear. Her soft warm breath tickled as she whispered, "I'm not really here ... what you're seeing isn't real. You're laying on the floor of your idiotic machine and you are dying. You're dying Steve because one of those glowing aliens broke in and they are sucking the chemicals out of your body."

His eyes went wide, "but I would ...," he started.

She shook her head no, "no Steve you are not feeling it. You taste better the longer you are alive, you are running out of time. And there is nothing you can do about it."

His mind raced frantically, there had to be something he could do ... but what?

"Hey, do you wanna watch a movie?" Nancy asked.

"A movie?" How could ... he hmmm, "what's on?"

"Some old kung fu movie, you like those don't you?"

"Umm", he couldn't remember what he was thinking about two seconds ago.

"Sure, you know I like those."

"Just don't start snoring," she teased. But it was too late sleep and darkness won over before the opening credits.