

A Short Story

GLOW WORM

HARLAN ELLISON



48

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TINY WINDOWS

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When the sun sank behind the blasted horizon, its glare blotted out by the twisted wreckage rising obscenely against the hills, Seligman continued to glow.

He shone with a steady off-green aura that surrounded his body, radiated from the tips of his hair, crawled from his skin, and lit his way in the darkest night. It had been with him for two years now.

Though Seligman had never been a melodramatic man, he had more than once rolled the phrase through his mind, letting it fall from his lips: "I'm a freak."

Which was not entirely true. There was no longer anyone he might have termed "normal" for his comparison. Not only were there no more men, there was no more life of any kind. The silence was broken only by the searching wind, picking its way cautiously between the slow-rusting girders of a dead past.

Even as he said, "Freak!" his mind washed the word with two waves, almost as one: vindictiveness and a resignation inextricably bound in self-pity, hopelessness and hatred.

"They were at fault!" he screamed at the tortured piles of masonry in his path.

Across the viewer of his mind, thoughts twisted nimbly, knowing the route, having traversed it often before.

Man had reached for the stars, finding them within his reach were he willing to give up his ancestral home.

Those who had wanted space more than one planet had gone, out past the Edge, into the wilderness of no return. It would take years to get There, and the Journey Back was an unthinkable one. Time had set its seal upon them: Go, if you must, but don't look behind you.

So they had gone. They had left the steam of Venus, the grit-wind of Mars, the ice of Pluto, the sun-bake of Mercury. There had been no

Earthmen left in the system of Sol. Except, of course, on Earth—which had been left to madmen.

And they had been too busy throwing things at each other to worry about the stars.

The men who knew no other answer stayed and fought. They were the ones who fathered the Attilas, the Genghis Khans, the Hitlers. They were the ones who pushed the buttons and launched the missiles that chased each other across the skies, fell like downed birds, exploded, blasted, cratered, chewed-out and carved-out the face of the planet. They were also the little men who had failed to resist, even as they had failed to look up at the night sky.

They were the ones who had destroyed the Earth.

Now no one was left. No man. Just Seligman. And he glowed.

"They were at fault!" he screamed again, and the sound was a lost thing in the night.

His mind carried him back through the years to the days near the end of what had to be the Last War, because there would be no one left to fight another. He was carried back again to the sterile white rooms where the searching instruments, the prying needles, the clucking scientists, all labored over him and his group.

They were to be a last-ditch throwaway. They were the indestructible men: a new breed of soldier, able to live through the searing heat of the bombs; to walk unaffected through the purgatory hail of radiation, to assault where ordinary men would have collapsed long before.

Seligman picked his way over the rubble, his aura casting the faintest phosphorescence over the ruptured metal and plastic shreds. He paused momentarily, eyeing the blasted remnants of a fence, to which clung a sign, held to the twined metal by one rusting bolt:

NEWARK SPACEPORT
ENTRANCE BY
AUTHORIZATION ONLY

Shards of metal scrap moved under his bare feet, their razored edges rasping against the flesh, yet causing no break in the skin. Another product of the sterile white rooms and the strangely-hued fluids injected into his body?

Twenty-three young men, routine volunteers, as fit as the era of war could produce, had been moved to the solitary block building in Salt Lake City. It was a cubed structure with no windows and only one door, guarded night and day. If nothing else, they had security. No one knew the intensive experimentation going on inside those steel-enforced concrete walls, even the men upon whose bodies the experiments were being performed.

It was because of those experiments performed on him that Seligman was here now, alone. Because of the myopic little men with their foreign accents and their clippings of skin from his buttocks and shoulders, the bacteriologists and the endocrine specialists, the epidermis men and the blood-stream inspectors—because of all of them—he was here now, when no one else had lived.

Seligman rubbed his forehead at the base of the hairline. Why had he lived? Was it some strain of rare origin running through his body that had allowed him to stand the effects of the bombs? Was it a combination of the experiments performed on him—and only in a certain way on him, for none of the other twenty-two had lived—and the radiation? He gave up, for the millionth time. Had he been a student of the ills of man he might have ventured a guess, but it was too far afield for a common foot-soldier.

All that counted was that when he had awakened, pinned thighs, chest and arms under the masonry of a building in Salt Lake City, he was alive and could see. He could see, that is, till the tears clouded the vision of his own sick green glow.

It was life. But at times like this, with the flickering light of his passage marked on the ash-littered remains of his culture, he wondered if it was worth the agony.

He never really approached madness, for the shock of realizing he was totally and finally alone, without a voice or a face or a touch in all the world, overrode the smaller shock of his transformation.

He lived. He was that fabled, joked-about Last Man On Earth. But it wasn't a joke now.

Nor had the months after the final dust of extinction settled across the planet been a joke. Those months had labored past as he searched the country, taking what little food was still sealed from radiation—though why radiation should bother him he could not imagine; habit more than anything—and disease, racing from one end of the continent in search of but one other human to share his torment.

But of course there had been no one. He was cut off like a withered arm from the body that was his race.

Not only was he alone, and with the double terror of an aura that never dimmed, sending the word, "Freak!" pounding through his mind, but there were other changes, equally terrifying. It had been in Philadelphia, while grubbing inside a broken store window that he had discovered another symptom of his change.

The jagged glass pane had ripped the shirt through to his skin—but had not damaged him. The flesh showed white momentarily, and then even that faded. Seligman experimented cautiously, then recklessly, and found that the radiations, or his treatments, or both, had indeed changed him. He was completely impervious to harm of a minor sort: fire in small amounts did not bother him, sharp edges could no more rip his flesh than they could a piece of treated steel, work produced no callouses; he was, in a limited sense of the word, invulnerable.

The indestructible man had been created too late. Too late to bring satisfaction to the myopic butchers who had pattered unceasingly about his body. Perhaps had they managed to survive they might still not comprehend what had occurred. It was too much like the product of a wild coincidence.

But that had not lessened his agony. Loneliness can be a powerful thing, more consuming than hatred, more demanding than mother love, more driving than ambition. It could, in fact, drive a man to the stars.

Perhaps it had been a communal yearning within his glowing breast; perhaps a sense of the dramatic or a last vestige of that unconscious debt all men owe to their kind; perhaps it was simply an urge to talk to someone. Seligman summed it up without soul-searching in the philosophy, "I can't be any worse off than I am now, so why not?"

It didn't matter really. Whatever the reason, he knew by the time his search was over that he must seek men out, wherever in the stars they might be, and tell them. He must be a messenger of death to his kin beyond the Earth. They would mourn little, he knew, but still he had to tell them.

He would have to go after them and say, "Your fathers are gone. Your home is no more. They played the last hand of that most dangerous of games, and lost. The Earth is dead."

He smiled a tight, grim smile as he thought: At least I won't have to carry a lantern to them; they'll see me coming by my own glow. Glow little glow worm, glimmer, glimmer....

Seligman threaded his way through the tortured wreckage and crumpled metalwork of what had been a towering structure of shining-planed glass and steel and plastic. Even though he knew he was alone, Seligman turned and looked back over his shoulder, sensing he was being watched. He had had that feeling many times, and he knew it for what it was. It was Death, standing straddle-legged over the face of the land, casting shadow and eternal silence upon it. The only light came from the lone man stalking toward the rocket standing sentry like a pillar of January ice in the center of the blast area.

His fingers twitched as he thought of the two years' work that had gone into erecting that shaft of beryllium. Innumerable painstaking trips to and from the junk heaps of that field, pirating pieces from other ships, liberating cases of parts from bombed-out storage sheds, relentlessly forcing himself on, even when exhaustion cried its claim.

Seligman had not been a scientist or a mechanic. But determination, texts on rocket motors, and the original miracle of finding an only partially-destroyed ship with its drive still intact had provided him with a means to leave this place of death.

It was one of the latest model ships; a Smith class cruiser with conning bubble set far back on the tapered nose, and the ugly black depressions behind which the Bergsil cannons rested on movable tracks.

He climbed the hull-ladder into the open inspection hatch, finding his way easily, even without a torch. His fingers began running over the complicated leads of the drive-components, checking and re-checking

what he already knew was sound and foolproof—or as foolproof as an amateur could make them.

Now that it was ready, and all that remained were these routine check-tests and loading the food for the journey, he found himself more terrified of leaving than of remaining alone till he died—and when that might be with his stamina he had no idea.

How would they receive a man as transformed as he? Would they not instinctively fear, mistrust, despise him? Am I stalling? The question suddenly formed in his mind, causing his sure inspection to falter. Had he been purposely putting the takeoff date further and further ahead? Using the checks and other tasks as further attempts to stall? His head began to ache with the turmoil of his thoughts.

Then he shook himself in disgust. The tests were necessary, it was stressed repeatedly in all of the texts lying about the floor of the drive chamber.

His hands shook, but that same impetus which had carried him for two years forced him to complete the checkups. Just as dawn oozed up over the outline of the tatters that had been New York, he finished his work on the ship.

Without pause, sensing he must race, not with time, but with the doubts raging inside him, he climbed back down the ladder and began loading food boxes. They were stacked neatly to one side of a hand-powered lift he had restored. The hard rubber containers of concentrates and the bulbs of carefully-sought-out liquids made an imposing and somewhat perplexing sight.

Food is the main problem, he told himself. If I should get past a point of no return and find my food giving out, my chances would be nil. I'll have to wait till I can find more stores of food. He estimated the time needed for the search and realized it might be months, perhaps even another year till he had accrued enough from the wasted stores within any conceivable distance.

In fact, finding a meal in the city, after he had carted box after box of edibles out to the rocket, had become an increasingly more difficult job. Further, he suddenly realized he had not eaten since the day before.

The day before?

He had been so engrossed in the final touches of the ship he had completely neglected to eat. Well, it had happened before, even before the blast. With an effort he began to grope back, trying to remember the last time he had eaten. Then it became quite clear to him. It leaped out and dissolved away all the delays he had been contriving. He had not eaten in three weeks.

Seligman had known it, of course. But it had been buried so deeply that he only half-feared it. He had tried to deny the truth, for when that last seemingly insurmountable problem was removed, there was nothing but his own inadequacies to prevent his leaving.

Now it came out, full-bloom. The treatments and radiation had done more than make him merely impervious to mild perils. He no longer needed to eat! He boggled at the concept for a moment, shaken by the realization that he had not recognized the fact before.

He had heard of anaerobic bacteria or yeasts that could derive their energy from other sources, without the normal oxidation of foods. Bringing the impossible to relatively homely terms made it easier for him to accept. Maybe it was even possible to absorb energy directly. At least he felt no slightest twinge of hunger, even after three weeks of back-breaking work without eating.

Probably he would have to take along a certain amount of proteins to replenish the body tissue he expended. But as for the bulky boxes of edibles dotting the space around the ship, most were no longer a necessity.

Now that he had faced up to the idea that he had been delaying through fear of the trip itself, and that there was nothing left to stop his leaving almost immediately, Seligman again found himself caught up in the old drive.

He was suddenly intent on getting the ship into the air and beyond.

Dusk mingled with the blotching of the sun before Seligman was ready. It had not been stalling this time, however. The sorting and packing of needed proteins took time. But now he was ready. There was nothing to keep him on Earth.

He took one last look around. It seemed the thing to do. Sentimentalism was not one of Seligman's more outstanding traits, but he did it in preparation for anyone who might ask him, "What did it look like—at the end?" It was with a twinge of regret that he brought the fact to mind; he had never really looked at his sterile world in the two years he had been preparing to leave it. One became accustomed to living in a pile of rubble, and after a bit it no longer offered even the feel of an environment.

He climbed the ladder into the ship, carefully closing and dogging the port behind him. The chair was ready, webbing flattened back against the deep rubber pile of its seat and backrest. He slid into it and swung the control box down on its ball-swivel to a position before his face.

He drew the top webbing across himself and snapped its triple-lock clamps into place. Seligman sat in the ship he had not even bothered to name, fingers groping for the actuator button on the arm of the chair, glowing all the while, weirdly, in the half-light of the cabin.

So this was to be the last picture he might carry with him to the heavens: a bitter epitaph to a race misspent. No warning; it was too late for such puny action. All was dead and haunted on the face of the Earth. No blade of grass dared rise; no small life murmured in its burrows and caves, in the oddly dusty skies, or for all he knew, to the very bottom of the Cayman Trench. There was only silence. The silence of a graveyard.

He pushed the button.

The ship began to rise, waveringly. There was a total lack of the grandeur he remembered when the others had left. The ship sputtered and coughed brokenly as it climbed on its imperfect drive. Tremors shook the cabin and Seligman could feel something wrong, vibrating through the chair and floor into his body.

Its flames were not so bright or steady as those other take-offs, but it continued to rise and gather speed. The hull began to glow as the rocket lifted higher into the dust-filled sky.

Acceleration pressed down on Seligman, though not as much as he had expected. It was merely uncomfortable, not punishing. Then he remembered that he was not of the same stamp as those who had preceded him.

His ship continued to pull itself up out of the Earth's atmosphere. The hull orangeed, then turned cherry, then straw-yellow, as the coolers within its skin fought to counteract the blasting fury.

Again and again Seligman could feel the wrongness of the climb. Something was going to give!

As the bulkheads to his right began to strain and buckle, he knew what it was. The ship had not been built or re-welded by trained experts, working in teams with the latest equipment. He had been one lone determined man, with only book experience to back him. Now his errors were about to tell.

The ship passed beyond the atmosphere, and Seligman stared in horror as the plates cracked and shattered outwards. He tried to scream as the air shrieked outwards, but it was already impossible.

Then he fainted.

When the ship passed the moon, Seligman still sat, his body held in place by the now-constricted webbing, facing the gaping squares and sundered metal that had been the cabin wall.

Abruptly, the engines cut off. As though it were a signal, Seligman's eyes fluttered and opened wide.

He stared at the wall, his reviving brain grasping the final truth. The last vestige of humanity had been clawed from him. He no longer needed air to live.

His throat constricted, his belly knotted, and the blood that should theoretically be boiling pounded thickly in his throat. His last kinship with those he was searching was gone. If he had been a freak before, what was he now?

The turmoil fought itself out in him as the ship sped onward and he faced what he had become, what he must do.

He was more than a messenger, now. He was a shining symbol of the end of all humanity on Earth, a symbol of the evil their kind had done. The men out there would never treasure him, welcome him, or build proud

legends around him. But they could never deny him. He was a messenger from the grave.

They would see him in the airless cabin, even before he landed. They would never be able to live with him, but they would have to listen to him, and to believe.

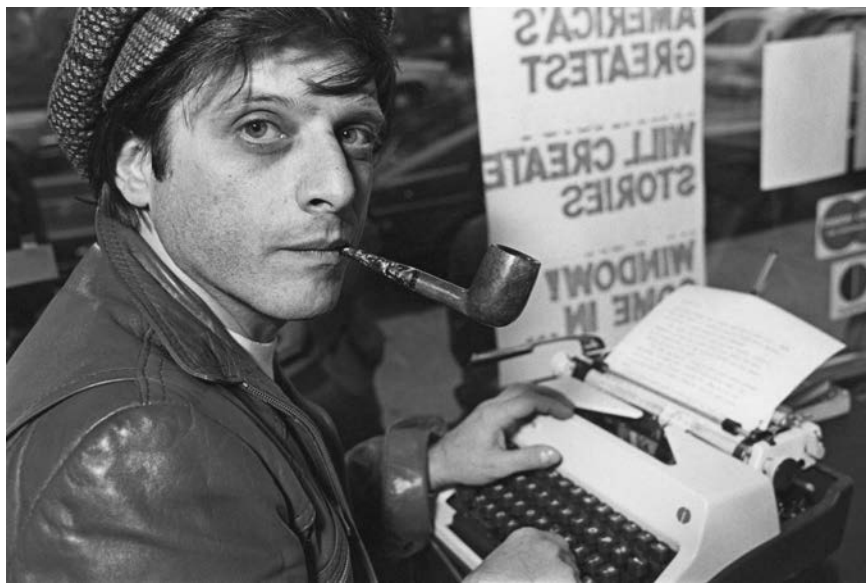
Seligman sat in the crash-chair in the cabin that was dark except for the eerie glow that was part of him. He sat there, lonely and eternally alone. And slowly, a grim smile grew on his lips.

The bitter purpose that had been forced on him was finally clear. For two years, he had fought to find an escape from the death and loneliness of ruined Earth. Now that was impossible. One Seligman was enough.

Alone? He hadn't known the meaning of the word before! It would be his job to make sure that he was alone—alone among his people, until the end of time.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Harlan Jay Ellison (May 27, 1934 – June 28, 2018) was an American writer, known for his prolific and influential work in New Wave speculative fiction and for his outspoken, combative personality. Robert Bloch, the author of *Psycho*, described Ellison as "the only living organism I know whose natural habitat is hot water."

His published works include more than 1,700 short stories, novellas, screenplays, comic book scripts, teleplays, essays, and a wide range of criticism covering literature, film, television, and print media. Some of his best-known works include the 1967 *Star Trek* episode "The City on the Edge of Forever" (he subsequently wrote a book about the experience that includes his original screenplay), his *A Boy and His Dog* cycle, and his short stories "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" and "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman". He was also editor and anthologist for *Dangerous Visions* (1967) and *Again, Dangerous Visions* (1972). Ellison won numerous awards, including multiple Hugos, Nebulas, and Edgars.



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