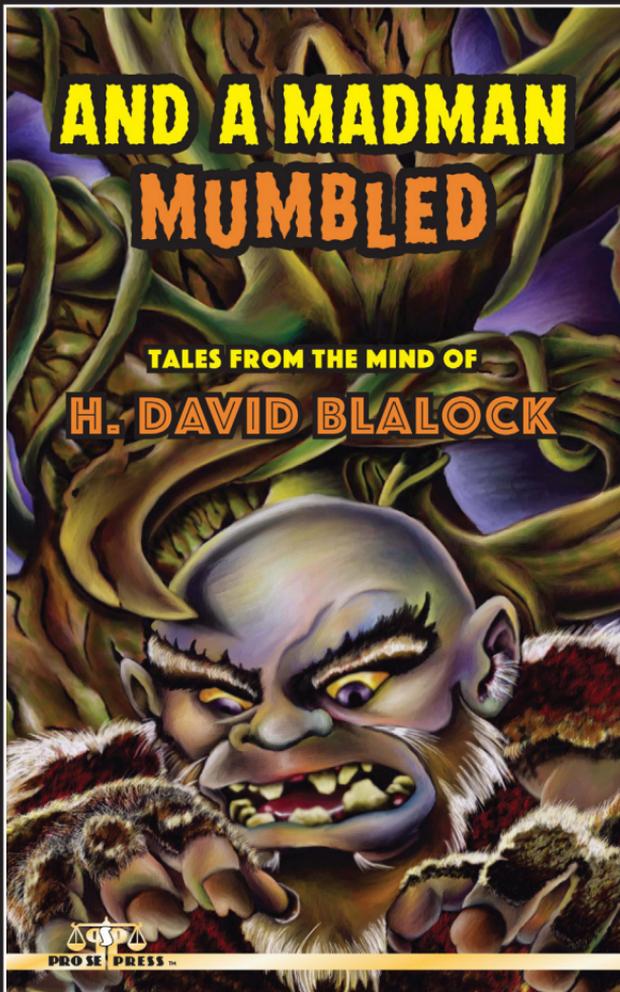


H. DAVID BLALOCK

— THE MOMENT FROZEN —



THE MOMENT FROZEN

**A TALE FROM THE MIND OF
H. DAVID BLALOCK**

FROM THE COLLECTION

**AND A MADMAN
MUMBLED**

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THE CAR stopped. It didn't decelerate or crash. It didn't do anything. And it did it all of a sudden.

It was as if the world had stopped in midstride. After recovering from the initial shock, Dan wondered why he wasn't flying through the windshield. Normally, inertia would have sent him hurtling against the steering wheel and dashboard. In fact, all the other drivers should have been experiencing the same, their passengers even worse, but there wasn't the slightest pressure against his seatbelt. He might just as easily have been sitting at an intersection waiting for the light to change.

He looked around. All the other vehicles were completely still, but that did not bother him as much as the fact that all the drivers, passengers, and even a fox tail attached to the antenna of a coupe ahead of him were just as deadly still. He was the only animate thing in a huge, motionless, silent tableau. It was so unreal that he just sat there for a full minute before he could begin to react.

His first impulse was to hit the brake and hold it down as hard as he could. Why this should make a difference, Dan

really couldn't have said. It simply seemed to be the thing to do. To his confusion, the brake pedal would not depress at all. It was jammed in position. He shot a few glances down to see if something had rolled between it and the floor, but there was nothing. He tried stepping on it with both feet, using the back of his seat to brace against, but to no avail. The pedal might as well have been made of concrete. A little further experimentation showed him the same immobility had overcome the accelerator pedal, the steering wheel, the parking brake lever, indeed everything around him.

He was trapped in the car.

Panic rose in him and he reached behind his seat to try the back door. No luck. He tried the windows. Nothing. Suddenly, the air in the car was close and stuffy. He loosened his collar and dabbed at the sweat starting on his upper lip with his shirt cuff.

With a monumental effort, he took his hand from the wheel, ready at a second's notice to grab it again just in case this was all a dream and things went suddenly back to normal. His heart pounded as he held both hands within inches of the wheel, his eyes darting between the speedometer reading of 73 miles per hour and the stillness around.

A slight motion caught his attention. Like a drowning man, Dan strained to see what it was, yearning for a bit of reality in this nightmare.

It looked like a small animal, but its shape was all wrong. It was a metallic color with an iridescent sheen that reminded him of light on an oily surface. It was composed of a mind-boggling series of angles and planes with no curves at all on it. It made its way from vehicle to vehicle with no apparent wheels, yet it gave the impression it rolled. It had no eyes or nose, yet it seemed to be searching for something. The hair on the back of Dan's neck rose as it approached his

car. At first it was just a suspicion, but as the seconds went on and the animal continued its search, he became certain it was looking for him.

A wild fear overtook him and he clawed mindlessly at the door handles, seeking escape. They refused to budge. His heartbeat thundered in his ears as the animal turned at last and made for his car. He screamed—alarmed and terrified—and beat on the windows of the car with his bare fists.

The animal disappeared from view.

Dan choked back his next scream and sat very still. Sweat dripped into his eyes, but he dared not rub them for fear the creature might sense the movement. He held his breath, gritting his teeth against their chattering, trying in vain to control the shuddering that ran through him.

A soft scratching noise sounded against the driver's side door. He wanted to shrink toward the passenger's side, but the seatbelt held him fast. The scratching transformed into a tapping that traveled back until it stopped near the rear of the car.

His fear dissolved as quickly as it had come. He slumped forward over the wheel as a wave of relief hit him.

Road noise returned like a thunderclap. He sat bolt upright, hands clenching the wheel. The car swerved right, then left, and, with his heart in his throat, he managed to recover control just before slamming into the median wall. At the next off ramp he left the interstate and found a convenience store, where he pulled the car off the road and parked it.

His hands were shaking and his heart was still pounding, but the fear had retreated until it was just a sickening memory. Slowly, he pulled on the door handle, terrified it would not move, then stepped out of the car to walk deliberately away from it. After a few steps, he turned to look.

A series of scratches marred the paint down low on the left front panel. They became gouges in the driver's door, nearly penetrating the metal. On the rear passenger door they looked like dashed lines, six or seven of them in parallel. He had no trouble imagining how those marks might match with the angles and planes on the bizarre animal he'd seen. Hesitantly, he approached the car and knelt to examine the scratches more closely. Each of them was in the deepest part of a long dent, as if the car had hit something sharp and solid. He looked at the tires, expecting to see at least a scarring of the sidewalls, but they were untouched. Whatever had hit the car had damaged only the metal.

The evidence left him with mixed feelings. In spite of what he might think, it was indisputable that the car had hit something on the road. These marks could not have been made by debris or gravel thrown by a car ahead of him. But how was it possible the tires should not be cut or damaged when the entire side panel was gouged so deeply?

"Hit somethin'?"

Dan started around to find an unshaven man in dirty clothes and a worn jacket looking at the car.

"I'm not sure," he admitted.

The man grunted. "Looks like gremlins to me."

"Gremlins?"

"Yeah. Gremlins."

He stared blankly at the man. Why he was listening, he couldn't say. Maybe it was a delayed reaction from the shock. Maybe it was the way the man said the word, like he knew what he was talking about.

"You know, gremlins," the man went on.

Dan looked back at the scratches and tried to grasp what the man was saying, but nothing fit and he found himself thinking about the animal made of angles and planes.

“They get inta things, ya know,” the man was saying. “They can’t stand curves, ’cause they ain’t got none.”

A chill struck him at that. “What did you say?”

“They’s made o’ angles ’n’ flats. They live in the times in between.”

“Times in between?”

“Yeah, ‘tween now and then, ya know.”

“Hey!”

He turned to see a portly black man come out of the store. The newcomer waved his hands at the dirty man.

“Didn’t I tell you not to hang around my place? Get the hell outta here!”

The unkempt man wilted under the black man’s gaze and slunk back toward the road. Dan watched as the man walked a little ways down the road, turned, shot the store owner the finger, grinned through crooked teeth, and sauntered away.

“Sorry, mister,” the store owner told him, then pulled up short when he saw the car. “He didn’t scratch your car, did he?”

“No, no, I hit something out on the interstate.”

“Wow, must’ve been big. Looks like it’ll cost a mint to fix. Hope you got insurance.”

“Yes, I have, thanks.”

“Okay. You need to use a phone?”

“No, thanks, I’m headed home.”

The black man nodded, smiled, and waved at him before going back into the office. Dan looked at the scratches again, then down the road where the dirty man was disappearing. He had known about the angles and planes, about the oddness of time. What other answers might he have?

Quickly climbing back into the car, Dan swung it into the road after the unkempt man. He caught a glimpse of him as he ducked into an alleyway between buildings. Chafing

at the delay, Dan had to wait for crossing traffic to pass before he could pull into the alley. He idled the car down the narrow way, navigating the dumpsters and crates that sometimes nearly filled the width of it.

He'd never noticed them before, but there they were. The alley had looked deserted at first, but the farther he went the more people he saw. Most merely moved out of the way and hid themselves best they could. Those that did not watched him with sullen, suspicious eyes.

Finally, he pulled up alongside his target. The man had settled onto a large crate and was busily winding cloth around one of his legs. He looked up as the car slid to a stop and the window hummed down.

"How do you know about gremlins?" was the obvious question, though it sounded less than sane to Dan even now.

The man tilted his head and smirked through those bad teeth. "Seen one, didn't ya?"

"I, uh, well, I don't know."

"You seen one," the man said, nodding and going on with his task. "They ain't as many as they used to be."

"What?"

The man tied off the cloth and wrapped his hands around his knee. "Cars done 'em in, ya know. Machines done 'em."

"I don't follow."

"Didja ever notice there ain't no angles in nature?"

The comment seemed totally unrelated and threw Dan for a loop. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but the man had gone on without listening for an answer.

"Ain't no angles anywhere in nature. Just curves and circles and bends. Oh, there's angles in crystals, but they's tiny, too small to count."

"What are you—"

“Ceptin’ that they draw from that place and channel it, or so they say. That’s why they’s got power to begin with, I suppose.”

The man was obviously rambling incoherently. Dan tried to think of a way to get him to come back to the point. “What’s that got to do with gremlins?”

“Gremlins is angles, ain’t they? They shoulda stayed where they were, but we came along an’ put angles on things an’ they fall through.”

“Fall through what?”

“The angles,” the man said, a little exasperated. “Ain’t you listenin’?”

“Look, I want to know how you know about gremlins and why you think it was a gremlin that hit my car.”

“Maybe they ain’t gremlins, but what else would ya call ’em? I guess ya could call ’em fairies er trolls er somethin’ like that.”

Stifling his impatience, Dan gripped the wheel of the car tightly. “Are you saying that gremlins are the same as fairies and trolls?”

“Are they?”

“I’m asking you!”

“What fer? I don’t know.”

Dan chewed on his lip for a moment. The man couldn’t be this simple. He was playing some peculiar game. The thought that he was being delayed while the other homeless descended on him in ambush brought him around in his seat. There was no one else in sight. When he looked back, the man was picking his nose.

“What’s your name?” Dan asked, determined to get some kind of answers.

“Greer.”

“All right, Mr. Greer, can you answer a question for me?”

Greer considered the end of the finger that had been exploring his nostril. Dan ignored it.

“What is a gremlin?”

The man wiped his finger on his pants and scratched under his thigh. “Gremlins is little animals.”

“Okay, and why did you say they were being killed by cars and machines?”

“Cause they’s tryin’ to get home through the angles, but they gets chopped up more often than not.” Greer leaned forward on the crate. “Say, you got any change? Just a couple bucks, eh?”

Dan flipped open the console compartment and pulled out two singles. He handed the money to Greer, who snatched it away gleefully.

“Thanks, bud, you’re okay,” Greer pronounced.

“Do you see gremlins a lot, Greer?”

“Nah, not since a while back. They ain’t as many as they used to be. You wouldn’t have a smoke on ya, would ya?”

“Sorry, I don’t smoke.”

“Shit.”

“Why would a gremlin want to get into a car, do you think?”

“Not the car, the engine. For the angles.”

“The angles?”

“Yeah, to get home.”

Dan thought about that. The parts in engines were finely machined to precise angles. If gremlins needed those angles for whatever reason, engines were the most common source. Thousands of automobiles were manufactured each day.

Very well, assuming Greer wasn’t insane—which was a very large assumption—he had seen a gremlin. But what had happened to him to place him in the “time in between” so that he could see the gremlin?

“Greer.”

“Yeah?”

“How could you see the gremlins, if they live in the time between?”

The man grinned his rotted smile and tapped his temple with a dirty forefinger. “When ya want to see things, ya can, but ya gotta know where to look.”

This certainly had the earmarks of a game now, and he had little choice but to play. “Where would I look to see a gremlin?”

“When yer goin’ to sleep, just then. When ya breathe, between in and out.”

Dan wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. This was getting him nowhere. If Greer had made any sense before, he made none now.

“Can ya give a guy a lift downtown?” Greer asked, scooting along the edge of the crate toward the car.

Dan dropped the vehicle into gear and rolled it backward. Greer slid down on to the pavement and started after him.

“Hey, bud, wait up!”

It took some fancy maneuvering, but he got the car out of the alleyway and back on to the main road. The last he saw of Greer, the man was standing at the entrance to the side street, giving him the finger.

As he pulled back out on to the interstate, Dan tried to put the events of the last hour in focus. He had experienced something; a time slip, maybe. Or had it been just a relative thing only he had experienced? If so, where did the “gremlin” come into it and how could Greer have known so much about them? The man didn’t seem too stable, and that worried Dan. Could he be losing it too, becoming like Greer? Maybe he should look into therapy. Stress could be giving him hallucinations. He’d read somewhere that

everyone shared subconscious cultural symbols that surfaced in dreams and hallucinations. That would explain the “gremlin” and Greer’s insight.

Or it might just have been a dream. He’d nodded off at the wheel and hit some road trash, startling himself awake and shaking him so badly he’d let Greer convince him that what he’d seen in his confusion was a “gremlin.”

Now that made sense. It explained everything. That must have been what happened.

The engine shuddered and the car shook from the backfire. A horrid banging noise came from up front as the car lost power. Smoke billowed from under the hood as he struggled against the stiffening steering to get the car to the shoulder. It sputtered once, twice, then died altogether and rolled to a stop just short of an off-ramp.

“What now?” he mumbled to himself as pulled the hood latch and climbed out of the car. The hood came up, releasing a cloud of whitish smoke that stank of oil and fuel. He fanned it until most of it was gone and leaned in to look. Confronting him was a bewildering assortment of tubes and boxes and wires and pipes. Somewhere in all that there must be an engine, he knew, but where was anybody’s guess.

He straightened up and looked around. In the gathering dusk, he could see the lights of a service station at the end of the ramp. He locked up the car and set off to summon help.

Walking by the front tire, something under the car caught his eye as it moved in the wake of a passing tractor-trailer. It looked like a bit of metal, identical to the thousands of other bits of discarded and broken technology that litter the highways. He tried to tell himself that was all it was but its iridescence was too intriguing. Cautiously, he picked it up and examined it. He held it for only a moment,

then dropped it and ran down the ramp toward the familiar safety of the service station.

The interstate lights flickered to life as the sun set. Headlights flashed across the stalled car and flickered against the shard of metal that moved ever so slightly whenever touched by the wake of the passing traffic.

Its tiny square scales glittered occasionally.



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