

The Sublime Luminary of Um

Erik Meyer

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This book was published and printed in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Erik Meyer wrote every word, edited the text, and drew the cover art for this book.

First Edition

ISBN: 979-8-9869765-2-5

Dedicated to the 2024/2025 third grade classes of Robbins Elementary and Sherman Elementary.

This is a work of fiction, and the characters, places, and events herein are entirely imagined. Any resemblance to people, locations, or happenings in the real world is entirely coincidental.

This book draws on a rich tradition of literary portal fantasy that has inspired generations of writers to dream of worlds beyond their own.

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The Whiteout

Theodore had come to stay with his grandmother for the holidays, dropped off with presents at the A-frame house on the bluffs that overlooked the Mississippi River. His parents, employed by a startup seed company in central Wisconsin, had scheduled themselves a childless trip to Hawaii, and Theodore did not resent their need for a break, as he had recently turned 10, and, as a single child, could already spot the warning signs of burnout. His mother had bags under her eyes and often forgot to season the stew in the crock pot. His father spent increasing amounts of time in the bathroom and had stopped offering homework help.

Not that Theodore needed homework help.

But he did like being asked.

As a fifth grader, he'd signed up to be a crossing guard at school.

Twice, he'd gotten to read the morning announcements.

For the trip, he'd been told to leave his tablet at home. No electronics. No turning into a zombie; no screen time, they'd said.

So school had let out on a Friday, and his parents picked him up with the car already packed, driving past rows of pine trees until they'd turned down the winding driveway that led to a white-blanketed yard filled with bird feeders. If anything, going to see Grandma Betsy was a welcome change, even if he didn't like the strong smell of the vinegar she cleaned the litter boxes with.

"You know," she said. "You are startlingly handsome."

Theodore spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in new sweaters and pajama pants, but by the 26th, after Grandma Betsy finished her crossword, they both needed an outing and went for a drive to town. Since Grandpa Frank had passed, her cat collection had grown. Sadie, a

white Persian, was missing her tail. Bobo, a Siamese, chased his shadow.

Between the house and the diner in La Crosse, they had the companionship of Calipso, a piebald longhair who stretched along the windshield, soaking up heat from the defrost.

They stopped for hot chocolate; Theodore looked at books about chess, which he'd played at school but never gotten good at, and by the time they got back on the highway and headed for home, the sun had set with accumulation falling through the high beams.

"Blustery weather," Grandma Betsy said.

Calipso purred and the engine hummed across county road blacktop, Theodore rubbing the cat's belly as his grandmother switched on the wipers.

"Do you think they're hiking up the side of a volcano?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Mom and Dad. In Hawaii."

"Oh. Them."

Rubber blades sped across the windshield, and falling flakes turned to water against warm glass.

Already, snow was drifting into the lane from the shoulder.

"There wasn't anything on the radar," Grandma Betsy said.

"Has Calipso always liked driving?" Theodore asked.

Wind buffeted the car, and the highway vanished, momentarily, replaced by a wall of white.

"Calipso was your grandfather's favorite cat," Grandma Betsy said.

She leaned towards the steering wheel, and as she tapped the brakes, a whiteout engulfed the vehicle.

Blinding white, white like a fresh coat of paint.

Tires left the road, spinning, a smooth exit from pavement, Theodore and Grandma Betsy both frozen in place.

And they waited.

They waited to hit rocks or a guardrail before the vehicle wrapped itself around a tree.

They waited to fly through the front window of a sleepy roadside diner.

They waited for a mailbox to take off the rear-view mirror.

Theodore gripped the shoulder belt and leaned against the door.

Grandma Betsy's knuckles went white.

They waited and waited.

But strangely, the '86 Chevy Celebrity neither flipped on its side nor launched off a bridge.

It sailed through a chalky sea of white, engine idling, supported by a lightness that felt like flying, a smoothness that lasted long enough for both Theodore and his grandmother to become perplexed and wonder what was happening.

"Are we still on the road?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she said.

Engulfed in a blizzard, seconds turned to minutes.

Grandma Betsy found that her cell had no service; the radio played static.

They surged forward, floating in a haze of unchanging light.

"Are we dead?" Theodore asked.

"I don't think so," Grandma Betsy said.

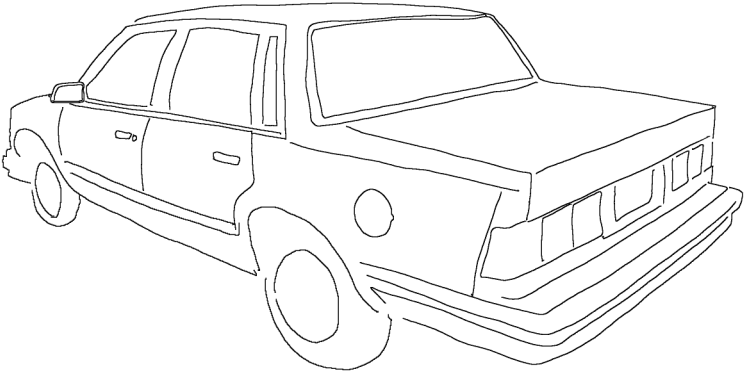
"How would we know?"

"I pinched myself, and it felt like me."

The heater kicked out warmth, and Calipso purred on the dash.

Feeling hot and sweaty, Theodore unzipped his puffy winter jacket.

Confusion, it turns out, can be quite exhausting, and after the initial shock gave way to fatigue, everyone fell asleep, snoozing as the car nosed through colorless space, snoring passengers ferried through a soft glow that carried them to parts unknown.



The Boffins

They awoke to a huge bump followed by bouncing and shuddering, windshield wipers squeaking across spotless glass as the car hurtled down a snowy hill. The vehicle bucked as pine saplings disappeared under the end of the hood, and after clipping a giant stump, smashing through a fence, and crashing through a leaning wooden shed, they limped to the bottom of the incline, grinding to a halt 50 feet from a small community of geodesic dome houses.

"I think we hit something," Grandma Betsy said.

"Just figured that out?" Theodore asked.

"Back a ways," Grandma Betsy said. "At the top of the hill."

And sure enough, through the rear-view mirror, behind the splintered remains of the shed and the fence and the stump, boots stuck up from the white drifts, boots that filled Theodore with a sinking feeling.

"I think you're going to jail," Theodore said.

Almost immediately, people poured from the dome houses, no doubt alerted by the commotion, and Grandma Betsy waved as she opened the car door.

"I have insurance," she said. "It was an accident."

Theodore got out expecting everyone to record them with cell phones and call the police and run to the boots that peeked from the snow and start screaming or at least ask what had happened, but nothing like this happened at all.

Everybody cheered.

Mothers hugged fathers and children and old men with long beards. Elderly women did jazz hands. A bald gentleman raised his arms in the air and then fell back in the powder, kicking up his legs. Gleeful bellows gave way to tears, and as the crowd approached the car, several things became clear:

Firstly, the people from the geodesic dome houses were all very short, and for some reason, they wore matching grayish bodysuits with shiny chrome wrist-bracers. Secondly, they all had blue-tinted skin and oversized ears and eyes, eyes that shimmered and ears that bounced as they approached the stationary Chevy Celebrity.

Lastly, and this stuck with Theodore in the years to come, everyone was quite skinny, worryingly so, standing with skeletal cheekbones and thin legs, their uniforms hanging off them like clothes on hangers at a box store, everyone huddled together and triumphant like the survivors of an arctic plane crash greeting a rescue convoy.

"What's going on?" Theodore asked.

He turned to Grandma Betsy, who had a confused look on her face and shook her head as a man with white hair and a bushy mustache stepped from the throng. At first, when the man opened his mouth, musical tones escaped, highs and lows with intense vibrato, but after his song went unanswered, he motioned for everyone to quiet down before saying in a high-pitched voice:

"You've done a service to my kin. Our land is stark and cold and dim. My name is Zeb; I give you thanks. What brings you to these snowy banks?"

As Zeb waved his hand in front of the car's headlights, Theodore and Grandma Betsy exchanged glances, her white eyebrows raised above the rims of her glasses, while Theodore's disbelief took the form of an open mouth framed by flushed cheeks while the wind ruffled his short, black hair.

"We've run off the road," Grandma Betsy said. "The blizzard came up so suddenly."

"Where are we?" Theodore asked.

Tapping the car's bumper with his palm, Zeb cocked his head and looked up at the visitors, speaking with giddiness.

"By happenstance," he said. "By fortune's drum,

you've landed in the land of Um. In bondage have we Boffins toiled, maintaining fringe lands long despoiled. Our despot, Governor Eyebright, has made us work both day and night, and with your metal chariot, you've felled a proper idiot."

As Zeb spoke, his people, the Boffins, were already walking up the hill, past the exploded shed and the hole in the fence, past the rotten stump, everyone following the tire tracks to the boots that stuck up from the drifts, and Theodore tagged along, curious in a way he had not been before, as his only previous exposures to crime scenes came from the dramas his parents watched after dinner when he sat on his knees and did his homework on the living room coffee table.

"People aren't usually happy when somebody gets hit by a car," he called to his grandmother.

"Theodore," Grandma Betsy said. "Get away from there."

But even as she spoke, she knew he would see for himself what had been left in their wake, and as the Boffins sang to one another, Theodore nudged the boot heel that poked from a pants leg obscured beneath chunks of compacted snow.

"Found him," he called.

Zeb and Grandma Betsy followed close behind, and as Theodore pushed the boot, it tipped over, spilling ash that caught with the wind and blew away; Boffins picked up the leather duster and the pants and shook out the soot, such that the imprint of the fallen man was quickly reduced to a shadowy impression in a blanket of white.

"Where's the body?" Grandma Betsy said. "What on earth is going on?"

Zeb nodded to the boots, and a Boffin girl picked them up; gray clouds poured out in great plumes, and the girl knocked the heels on her knees before handing them to Theodore.

Zeb turned to them and said:

"Twas ancient evil kept alive by passions only

negative. The flesh has long since turned to dust. Your fatal blow was fair and just. These footwear relics both are lined with charms beyond the normal kind. Please take the boots, I do entreat. Come join us now. We want to eat."

And with this, Zeb led everyone back to the warmth of the geodesic dome houses and the bubbling pots of soup, for although the Boffins had been forced to live for years on meager rations, they were not about to deprive their new guests of a meal.

