

# CURSELANDS

by Greg Stolze

I'm not supposed to go into the curselands, but the border is something like five hundred miles on a side, so they can't keep people out with anything but horror stories and laws nobody wants to enforce. It's illegal to go in but no cop wants to follow you. Half of them are scared by the tales and half of them just can't be bothered. So I walk Bondo there. If nothing else, I think it's well out of the jurisdiction of those pooper-scooper statutes.

There's always that breeze in your face as you walk in, smelling like nothing on this Earth. Or maybe it's the way this Earth smelled before we all got busy with cars and trucks and coal plants.

The curselands are close enough to Earth, they say. A parallel reality that took some different choices. Specifically, a world that never bothered with animals, just plants and fungi and lichen. Gobs and gobs of oxygen, but cooler than this world. Not *too* much cooler—can you imagine suddenly putting a ten degree temperature drop into the world, seven miles up and seven miles under the ground? Guy on the Weather Channel said it would make Hurricane Katrina look like a rat's burp.

So it's just a few degrees cooler. Enough that all our too-hot sour air full of toxins blows in up high, and its cooler oxygenated air whooshes out at ground level.

If we'd found the technology to go to alternate universes sooner, we might have gone hunting for other people, but it was a situation where we really, *really* needed carbon sequestration and temperature control. Maybe in another decade. Apparently though, they have to use the entire Earth's magnetic field to tune the shift, so only one other world is available anywhere at any time, and they picked what they called "Plantopia" and everyone else calls the curselands. I think some preacher coined the phrase and it stuck, though half the time people say it sarcastic.

Finding mostly uninhabited places big enough to meaningfully vent hot, cruddy air over into another universe was, of course, a challenge. Plenty of unoccupied ocean space, but the gadgets that anchor the ends of the shift-wedge are pretty big. They're talking about building portable ones on a pair of aircraft carriers, but the UN is pitching a fit, headed by China and the remains of Russia that somehow managed to keep their Security Council chair. I guess I can see where they're coming from. You get two big ships that can create portals to Plant Narnia that stretch far enough to cross the horizon, there's a potential for

mischief, for sure. Nobody wants the US able to edit most of Cuba off the planet. I mean, everyone there would come back when they shut the machinery off, unless they came back early by crossing the field boundary. Still, I wouldn't put it past us to do it just to flex. Ever since that Citizens United foolishness, we've had some wild folks in politics.

Anyhow, two landlocked temperature vents are currently in Nevada and Arizona, carving through big stretches of desert, wavering walls of science revealing the curselands where there are slightly more plants and slightly less heat. Montana passed a law against trans-dimensional incursions and the Supreme Court upheld it. Florida though, we were down for it. Hell, after the beating we took from eight years of record setting hurricanes, we were more than ready. So each side of the state has a huge swath of interdimensional real estate. On the west, it's mostly over the ocean, but on my side, a lot of land is covered. So that's where I like to walk my dog and let him drop some dirties.

The scientists on the Weather Channel and NPR mostly think there aren't any new super-virus diseases waiting for us in Plantopia—nothing there has any evolutionary gain from hosting in animals, because the whole planet over there ain't never seen one. The stuff flowing in from us? Well, they just kinda shrug. The environmentalists insist that the animals escaping into the curselands—fish especially, for some reason—are going to completely throw the ecosystem there out of whack but... I mean, is that so bad? I'm sure I sound like the world's worst colonizer saying this, but there aren't any people or critters there to feel any pain, and on this side we have a bumper crop. Is it really damaging a place when there's nothing there with a brain to understand "damage"? I guess I'm OK with it, as long as it works and relieves the harm on this side.

I park the truck right outside the zone, get Bondo's leash on him and walk in. Look up at skies that never saw a contrail. Look down at plants that never existed in my world though, if I'm honest, I can't tell a curseland plant from an Earth one just by looking. I never paid much attention to greenery.

I reckon the poindexters from FSU's biology department are going wild pulling new species out of the curselands, naming them after themselves, after their boyfriends and girlfriends, after their landlord as an apology for late rent. Talking about how there could be better treatments for Alzheimers or male pattern baldness lurking in plants that never had to develop bad tastes and frighten off rabbits.

They swear the samples are safe, but also, they keep it in high security labs like anthrax, and then they swear those labs are safe. I dunno. I heard experts saying NFTs were safe but I put my money in T-bills. I remember experts saying the Texas power grid crash was a fluke one-off. I'm sure Putin had a roomful of experts

promising him Ukraine would fold like a New York pizza slice and they'd be home by Orthodox Christmas. But I don't want to ponder expert failures too much. They're the ones saying no pathogen is going to blow out in all that cool air, making monkeypox look like a toejam foot rash. Blowing out not twenty miles from my house, such that I can smell that smell on nights when the wind's particularly frisky.

"C'mon Bondo, there you go. Let's give this dimension a little gift. Good boy. Something you made your ownself, good job."

People post selfies taken in the curselands, can you imagine? Mostly the Arizona patch, there are some wiggly rock formations on the other side, mountains that formed different and got furred over by these plants that use something other than chlorophyll, something orange, like a fall leaf or a rusty old car. None of the plants in the biome next world to Florida have that gunk, so the Arizona State botany department is the one getting all the headlines. But I saw a video of a guy standing next to this gray wall, with his truck for scale, and the camera must have been on a drone because it shot away from him and you could see the wall was the stalk of a mushroom, all blue-gray and sea-teal. Must have reached fifteen stories tall. They hashtagged it #NextDoorida, which is what they use for pictures from inside our curselands. People say it's fake. I dunno. Lots of things are.

Bondo strains at his leash and barks at a fluttering white moth or maybe a butterfly. Do moths only come out at night? Can't remember. He wants to chase it, so I let him for a little bit. That butterfly must have come from our end. In the curselands, I guess it's either completely screwed or else going to have an easier life than anyone could ever imagine.

When he's tired of chasing the butterfly, Bondo suddenly stops, then puts his nose down and sniffs.

"What? What is it?"

He barks and runs off.

"Bondo! Heel! Dammit, come here!"

He stops, looks, then runs a few more steps and looks back at me again. I tromp after him—the plants are all at least calf high, so it's a hard slog sometimes.

"Stay! Bad dog!"

He drops his ears at that and looks mortified until I get the leash on him. Then he barks again and gives a hopeful pull at it.

“Is someone over there?” The voice isn’t very loud, but the curselands are usually very quiet.

“What?” I shout back.

“Can I get a little help, please?” It’s a woman’s voice.

“You’re not a cop, are you?”

“No!”

“If you’re a cop, you gotta tell me!” I know this isn’t true, but what the hell.

“I’m not a fucking cop! Also, the police can lie to you all the time!”

Well, that doesn’t sound like anything a cop would say, so I follow Bondo around a stand of tall trees with droopy creepers and some kind of trumpet shaped flowers—or if not flowers, organs. I guess curseland plants have different strategies for blasting their reproductive goodies across the landscape, because there are no bees to be lured to flowers, and no animals to eat fruit and crap seeds. Whatever those trumpet doodads do, they’re big, like the size of my thigh, and they smell a little like sour milk.

I hear water, and feel the ground get soft, and then I see a little pond or swamp. There isn’t much open water here, it’s all got plants arcing up out of it, shaped like St. Louis arches from the water to the shore, mostly on one side. In the water, maybe waist deep, is a woman. Black, lots of hair in a giant pony puff, not anybody’s Instagram model.

“What seems to be the problem?” I ask.

“The mud out here is a little more clingy than I realized. I could just step out of my boots, but... then I’d lose the boots. If you could maybe help pull me in?”

“Lemme get some of those vines,” I say, pointing. “We’ll use those as rope maybe?”

“No! Have you touched those before? Burn your fuckin’ fingers.”

“Really?”

“Why would I make that up?” she demands.

“No, I just... I heard these plants were, like, safe. With no animals, they never had to make thorns or toxins or, y’know, defend themselves.”

"Mercury in the ground didn't evolve to defend itself, but I wouldn't go drinking it. Those vines are the same thing. Some blister agent chemical is pretty common in this flora."

"I've never gotten blisters," I tell her. She shrugs.

"Maybe it only affects some people. Like, I'm immune to poison ivy, but those ropes mess me up."

"Dog leash OK?"

"I'll allow it."

I have to get about calf-deep before I can successfully toss the end of the leash to her. I lean back as she goes hand over hand and eventually gets over to me.

"What's your name, then?" I ask.

"What's yours?"

There's a pregnant little pause.

"You can call me Jed," I say at last.

"Then I guess you can call me... Sheena."

"Pleasure to meetcha."

As she gets out, I can see what she means about the boots. They're bright yellow gumboots, knee-high, and even after she washes them in the pond, it's clear they were muddied up to the very top. She sits her ass down on a rock, empties them out and washes off her feet a little before squelching them back into the galoshes with a grimace.

"So, what'chu doing out in the water? Getting samples or something?"

"Good guess." Now that she's out I can see a backpack and, hung on it with carabiners, plastic bottles with labels in the center.

"Looking for new plants or something?"

"I'm going to test and see how potable the water is."

"How whatable?"

"Whether you can drink it," she clarifies. "If you can't, how much work is it to get it where it's OK. I mean, some water, you run it through a pair of clean pantyhose and you're mainly good to go. Others you need a charcoal filter, or some iodine. But some stuff..." she shakes her head. "Most of the real dag-nasties are manmade though."

"Or they're like mercury in the ground."

She gives me a look like I'm being a smartass, but then shrugs, giving me the point. "Yeah, that close to the burn-vines... could be they're leaching into the water, though I didn't feel anything. Or maybe they just pull something up out of the ground, like a normal contaminated plant."

"Oh, speaking of... good boy, Bondo!"

She stares as my dog drops a load.

"You just let him shit all over here?"

"It's probably good for the dimension! Give some exciting new microbes a home."

"Jesus, we never learn a damn thing, do we?" she says, turning her back and stomping away. Her dramatic exit is somewhat spoiled when her soggy boot comes off her soggy foot and she flops sideways with a yelp.

"Whoa, you OK there?"

"Yeah, yeah. Dammit. Did I spill anything?"

I get her pack while she messes with the boot. "Your bottles look intact."

"Good. Great. Hate to have to go get all those again."

"So why do you care if the water here is potatable?"

"Potable."

"What did I say?"

She opens her mouth and shuts it without saying anything, giving me that smartass look again. "Why's your dog named 'Bondo'?"

"Look at him."

She does.

“OK, yeah, the color, I see it,” she says.

“You put him next to an unpainted car with enough of that shit on it, he disappears like a chameleon.”

She gets out a compass, looks at that, then consults her watch.

“So lemme guess,” I say. “Since the temperature venting is going so well, people are curious if there’s untainted water here, and want to see if it’s enough to make a pipeline back to Earth-with-people.”

The ‘water wars’ everyone was predicting never really did materialize, thanks to capitalism’s sudden and eleventh hour interest in desalinization and the commodification of hydration. But there are still, every six or eight months, what you might call ‘extremely tense water negotiations’.

She snorts. “You’re way off, old-timer.”

“‘Old-timer’? I’m forty-two.”

“They must have been forty-two hard ones.”

“Ma’am, you know they were.”

She nods.

“So if not a pipeline, then what?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about it.”

We’re heading back towards the verge. You can see it in the sky—a little wemble, like the air shaking over hot pavement. That breeze that smells like nothing else is at our back now.

“You’re planning on squatting here, aint’ cha?” I say.

“Squatting? Can you squat on land nobody owns? The law’s real clear, nobody can ‘own’ land on Plantopia. It’s held as commons,” she says. “Just waiting for the tragedy.”

“‘Scuse me?” I say.

“Tragedy of the commons?”

“Never saw that one.”

She side-eyes me, like she's trying to figure out if I'm on the level. Either she decides I am, or wants an opportunity to hear herself talk, because she says, "OK, so whenever everyone owns something together? Like all the world's air, or a plot of land in a town, anything shared and ungoverned... there's a tendency for people to extract resources, value... *whatever* from it, without taking care of it. Like, commons in England were where anyone could graze their sheep, and because so many shepherds said 'Hey, free grass, great!' it got overgrazed and dropped below its reproductive sustainability threshold. The grass dies, the sheep go hungry, and everyone blames those *other* greedy shepherds when they were doing the exact same thing."

"Like the take-a-penny-leave-a-penny tray at a convenience store?" I ask.

"Those can work though, *if* the neighborhood has enough economic variance," she says. "In poor neighborhoods, the value of taking some spare change—or the perceived value—is high, so no one leaves anything. If anyone does drop something in, it's emptied fast and stays that way."

"Lemme guess, in rich neighborhoods they just pay with credit?"

"Sure, rich people ain't rich because they give money away," she says. "But in the middle zones... you know, disappearing middle class kinda places... you get people for whom a few dimes and nickels are no big deal, they'd rather drop them than weigh down their pockets, and other people pick them up, maybe just to make exact payments. There it works, because no one's so hard up they have to act greedy over thirty-five motherfucking cents."

"Got it. Now just explain how the curselands are the thirty-five cents."

We're right on the verge. She folds her arms.

"No animals, no people, a real silent planet setup, right? That preacher, with no irony, said it was cursed. It had never known the touch of man and, therefore, never felt the salvation of *Christ*," she said, with that last word absolutely dripping scorn. "But what land is left in our world, huh? It's either polluted, flooding, burning shitholes, or golf courses behind security fences, patrolled by ex-military goons happy to get crumbs from the billionaires as long as the other ninety percent starve." She shrugs. "We know they're never going to shift over a big population center, like Houston or Jacksonville or anyplace where business depends on boats or planes or trucks. So if we're in Plantopia when the gate shuts off, we just move to one of those locations."

"We?"

"You know. Us."



“Ah. People who can make water portable.”

“You did that one on purpose.”

She smirks at me, and I smirk back.

“Some economists, agronomists, engineers... It'll take a lot to make a stable community, but some researchers say it can be done with just under a hundred. If you can get the resources of a sperm bank, well, that changes the requirements considerably. Anyhow, trust me when I say there are more than a hundred people in Florida ready to take a mulligan.”

“So it's like a malfunctioning computer, you're going to just... switch society off and then back on again?”

“Pretty much.”

“Huh. How do you get back?”

She looks at me like I'm a numbskull.

“We don't. Why would we want to? To see what this year's apologetics for racism and oppression look like? Check back every decade to see if this world beat the odds and isn't all flames and guillotines? Face it. The real curselands are the ones where we were born.” She shakes her head. “The restart is going to be hard, but good. And if we fuck it up, we'll have only ourselves to blame, not our ancestors.”

“Good luck, Sheena,” I say.

She looks me up and down as Bondo and I start to walk towards my truck.

“What is it you do, anyhow?” she asks. That hard, suspicious look that's been on her face the whole time slips just a little, and I feel like she's hoping I'll say I'm a doctor, or a vet, or a civil engineer.

“Internet cable installer,” I say, and her face falls.

“Good luck, Jed,” she tells me.

THE END