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Just when you think you've reached  
the bottom of the underworld,  
somebody hands you a shovel  
and says, **"Keep digging!"**

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Protect the communities who are sustained by creativity.



# UNDER WORLD

**FANIE VILJOEN**



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But did you, in your three-piece psychology  
and 1950s' technobrain, ever take a look  
behind the eyes of the hacker? Did you  
ever wonder what made him tick, what  
forces shaped him, what may have  
moulded him?

I am a hacker, enter my world ...

Mine is a world that begins with school ...  
I'm smarter than most of the other kids,  
this crap they teach us bores me ...

- **The Mentor**

(From *The Hacker's Manifesto*)

The adage is true that the security systems have to win every time, the attacker only has to win once.

- **Dustin Dykes**

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<html>  
<body>
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<h><b>Log in</b></h>
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<p>The combined entry of a user's identification  
and password to gain access to a computer, program  
or network</p>
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</body>  
</html>
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*This is what fear feels like: Fire blazes through your body, every single nerve ending roused, adrenaline propels your thoughts, accelerates them, your breathing stops, compressing your chest. And you'll hear it – your own heart. **Pounding. Pounding. Pounding.***

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A strange sound woke the boy. Or perhaps it was a dream urging him on. “Get up. You have to stop him!”

That’s where the fear began.

Down, down the darkened hallway he moved. His throat tightening with every step.

The pounding fist of his heartbeat accelerated. He longed to return to the safety of his bed, but he was nearly there, the room at the end of the hallway. The place where the light was shining. Where his eyes were about to open to the horrors of the world.

He could barely hear his own footsteps on the tightly woven carpet. His breathing was shallow, but every breath felt deeper, more urgent than the previous one. Finally, he reached the door to his dad’s study, standing ajar.

*You have to stop him!*

Stop him from doing *what?*

The dark-haired boy with the ever-questioning eyes lingered at the door. There was something special about him. It was more than being smart for his age or almost princely. Perhaps it was the way in which he paid attention to the world around him. Always watching, listening, silently absorbing everything, and storing it away inside himself for safekeeping.

Listening now, he heard the crickets outside the house. A car passing in the street. From the study came the rustling of papers.

The strip of light below the door fell across the tips of his toes.

He inhaled. The smell of wood oil from the door brought momentary comfort, a familiar aroma that lingered throughout the home. His fingers touched the door handle and the cold sent a shock through his eleven-year-old body.

Then a sudden sound emerged from the study. Like a frightened animal, maybe. No, it was human. It is his dad.

The boy pushed the door open completely.

What he saw chilled him to the marrow and became the first tearing scream that would echo throughout his childhood and thereafter: His broad-shouldered father whom he loved for all his caring, kindness and compassion, bent over the desk as if writing. But there was no pen in his hand. It was a 9-mm pistol clamped in his fist. A finger curled around the trigger.

Time stopped for the boy as he froze in the doorway. Watching his dad, he noticed the fine hairs on the back of his fingers, shimmering in the glow of the desk light, his knuckles pale with tension. His dad's eyes seemed lost, fixed on the black metal, no longer aware of his surroundings: The



boy at the door, the chair he was sitting on behind his huge desk, or the light grazing his face, making him look like the monsters the boy had dreamed of when he was younger.

One side of his face was brightly lit, the other side fell away in shadow.

*Was* this his dad? the boy wondered. Or was it perhaps *really* a monster? Maybe it was all a bad dream. His dad – his *real* dad who could laugh and sing and celebrate life for all its treasured little moments – was sure to wake him up shortly, telling him everything was okay, and hand him a drink of water to calm him down.

But it was no distant nightmare. *This* was all too real.

*Calm down.*

That's what he needed to do now. But then again, it's not *that* easy. Not if your heart comes crashing through your ribs. When you feel something slipping away from you and you don't know exactly what.

"Dad!" he said. Finally.

The word fell between them. An echo.

Only then did his dad raise his head. There was a hint of recognition in his tired eyes. Slowly he returned from the dark underworld. As tension ebbed from his shoulders, they sagged slightly. His grip around the firearm relaxed. The weight of the pistol made it slide out of his hand. It dropped onto the square piece of cloth spread out on the desk.

The boy opened his mouth to speak. "What are you doing, Dad?" he tried to say. But the words stuck in his dry throat.

His dad gazed at him, a tiny muscle tugging at the skin above his eye. The unblinking eyelids flickered suddenly.

His dad wasn't going to cry, was he?

In time, his father wrapped the gun in the cloth, his hands shaking.

“Go ... go to bed now, my boy,” he stammered as he opened a desk drawer. Carefully he slipped the gun inside. There was a dull thud. Then he extended his hand to a yellow envelope lying on the far corner of desk. But before taking it, he looked up again. His face shiny with tears.

The boy remained standing there on the threshold, his one hand on the door handle. Still, he couldn't understand. And it scared him.

“It's okay, I promise,” his dad said weakly. “I ... I won't ...” The silence became a sponge soaking up the words. “Don't tell your mom, okay? This is our secret.” The corner of his mouth twitched as he tried to smile. “Go to bed now.”

The boy's hand slipped from the door handle and dropped to his side. He still didn't say a word, but his dad's voice echoed inside him, in those places where he kept the memories of his father.

As he turned to make his way back to his room, his dad spoke again. “Good night. Sleep well ...” His dad said his name, but he couldn't hear it. The name dissolved in the dark. Disappeared.

But it was probably for the best, for, years later, he would choose another name for himself. A name to drive away the fear. A name to express what it feels like waiting helplessly for answers, but finding only echoes from the underworld.

He would call himself **Ekk-0**.

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<html>
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<body>
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<h><b>Ping</b></h>
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```
<p>A computer query sending a packet of information from one computer to another. The targeted computer should echo the information to confirm that it is reachable and active.</p>
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</body>
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</html>
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## **<h1>Sleeping grey cells, crack filler and ringtones</h1>**

You never really know the exact moment your life changes. For some, it happens gradually. For others, it could happen in an instant. A car crash. A word spoken. A door closing.

For me, Greg Owen?

I truly can't say. Perhaps it was that day I met Ekk-0. Or perhaps it was the day he disappeared.

[><]

The sharp ringtone echoing in my high school dorm room is like a dagger in my skull. If my mom Rina were here, her eyes would light up for a moment. "What do you know, Greg? The circus is back in town!" she would joke. But all too soon her mood would change, the smile replaced by instant guilt for allowing herself a light-hearted moment.

I pull the pillow over my head. It barely muffles the sound of the cell phone. I want to sleep, dammit. I should've switched the phone to silent last night. Too late now.

With my eyes still shut, I reach out to the bedside table. Grab the phone.

"Piss off, will you?"

One eye opens slightly. It is torture. Everything around me swims in the sleepy haze. The cluttered room. The desk

with my super expensive laptop and a stack of school textbooks. Built-in cupboard, doors open with clothes spilling out. Sports gear strewn across the floor. The rugby ball.

Still, the phone rings. I groan. My thumb steers towards the reject call button. As I'm about to press it, I spot the name on the screen: Nicole.

The name slips through the sleepy grey cells in my brain – then it hits me. Nicole! My girlfriend. If I don't answer, she'll give me hell. I quickly hit the answer button.

"Hey, sexy! What took you so long?" Her voice matches her looks on the video call. Cascading blonde hair with a touch of gold, tucked behind her ear. Dainty nose. Crazy kissable lips and dreamy blue eyes.

"Nicksy ... Sorry, I ..."

"Are you still in bed?"

"Of course." I check my look in the small in-screen video image. Run my fingers through my messy hair. Scratch the stubble on my chin. Eyes blinking against the morning light filling my dorm room, crying out for some coffee. "I always sleep till Ekk-0 ... uh, I mean Eckardt comes around to wake me up. He's probably still out jogging. Might be back any time now."

"Eckardt? How's he doing?"

The question makes me sit up in bed. I fall silent. An edginess creeps up inside me. I hate it when she asks about him. Okay, perhaps I'm oversensitive, but every time she does it, an uneasy feeling crops up in my stomach. Weird, I know, but it's all because of a fight we had. And that one night in Jeffreys Bay.

One damn night.

"Greg?"

“Forget about Eckardt,” I cut her short. “How are things in Joburg?” I fall back against the pillows, pull the duvet up over my stomach.

“I miss you, Greg,” Nicole says, in that soft, mellow tone of voice she sometimes uses. Oh boy! Again, her words stir something inside me. It is different this time. Pleasant. I pull my legs up to my chest, turn on my side and think of all the things we’ve been through. The fun times we’ve had kissing in nightclubs. Hanging out on rooftops in the city. Whispering secrets to one another in the dark.

Not all secrets. *Some.*

“Last night – I dreamed of you,” she says now.

“Oh yeah? Tell me everything.”

“Wouldn’t you want to know?” she teases. Her laugh would rack up a million Instagram likes.

“Come on, was it something wicked?” I say, hoping that it might be.

“Mmm,” she whispers.

“I knew it. Tell me!”

Another chuckle, naughtier this time. “I dreamed my mom and dad were throwing this fab party at our estate house. Your parents were also invited. It was quite an event. Party planners, caterers, the works. You and I were flirting with each other the whole night. Of course, you couldn’t keep your hands off me, and when things became a little heated, we slipped away. The swimming pool. All alone. Lights off.”

I close my eyes and try to picture the scene. Oh, the things she does to me. Damn, girl! “Yeah, and then?”

“We slipped out of our clothes. Slowly. I took off yours. You took off mine. We dived into the pool. The water as cool

as the ocean. You kissed me. French. Long and hard. You pressed your body against mine ...”

I groan.

“Then, suddenly, somebody switched on the pool lights. And all the guests were there on the pool deck, hanging around, watching us!”

“No ways!” I cry, burying my head under the pillow. “Are you serious?”

“My mom and dad were white as sheets. But some of the other people at the party applauded, saying ‘It’s beautiful when two youngsters are in love.’”

We crack up laughing, treasuring the moment. But silence falls unexpectedly. Somewhere in the background I hear a door opening. Her mom calls out to her. “I’m coming!” Nicole shouts. “Get out of my room, Mom!” She waits for the door to close before returning to our video call. A worried look on her face. Her soft voice tinged with concern. “Greg, this thing between us ... do you think we’re a good fit for each other?”

The unease creeps up on me. Nicole and I get along well. But she’s not the only one with a burning question. I’ve got one too. I try not to think about it, but Jeffreys Bay makes it hard to forget.

How would I know for sure that she is faithful to me?

Yeah sure, we’ve shared some good times.

And I like being with her.

But she is way off there in Johannesburg, and I’m here in Lawson College, this godforsaken school in the Drakensberg mountains of South Africa. After what happened in Jeffreys Bay ... how would I know what she is up to in Joburg? What if there’s something she keeps from me? *Other*

guys kissing her in clubs or taking her to rooftops overlooking the city.

I'm not a fool. I know how things unravel: One guy, one girl, hundreds of miles apart, months on end without seeing each other. Text messages and voice notes can't fill the void.

"Greg?" Nicole says after a while, still awaiting my answer.

"Of course, Nicole, you know we belong together." I try to sound convincing, but there's a slight hesitation in my voice. "Why do you ask? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No! Greg, are you mad?"

"Do *you* still reckon we're a good fit for one another?"

"We barely see each other." Another unexpected silence falls between us. I watch her watching me. Needing more from me. Something emotional I can't give her at this time.

Out of her view, my fingers curl into a fist around the bed sheet, crumpling it into a tight ball.

"Love you, Greg. Always," Nicole says after a while. Gently. Distantly.

"Same," I reply. A word devoid of significant meaning, but sufficient enough to fill the silence. Emotional crack filler.

As the bright early morning light flood my room further, my eyes dart to the time on my phone. "Shit! It's past seven! Nicole, I've got to get going. Sorry, we'll chat again soon. Bye!"

I end the call in a hurry. Jumping out of bed sends the duvet flying. Almost blindly, I grab my toiletry bag and a fresh towel. Throw open my room door. Rush out to the dorm hallway and nearly crash into somebody. Thomas-Jean. TJ for short.

"Running late, bru," he says, slapping me on the back.



“I know. That damn Eckardt, the wanker – he didn’t wake me up like he usually does.”

“You should set an alarm.”

“Whatever. Later, TJ!”

Everybody I meet in the hallway are already dressed: black pants and blazers. Crisp white shirts, yellow ties. The school badge with the torch on the blazer’s top pocket. Above the coat of armour, the school’s name: Lawson College, and below it, the motto: *Lux hominum vita*.

I push my way through the pack of boys on their way to the mess hall.

“Hey, buddy, what’s up? Overslept this morning?” one of them hollers.

“You look like the dog’s dinner, head boy,” another one jokes.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on duty with the Grade eights?” a school leader asks.

Damn! I totally forgot. I hope they’re all out of bed, dressed and ready for the day without murdering someone or tearing the place down.

A few other guys I run into on my way to the bathroom mock me further. Some of them just want to say hi, others try to strike up a conversation or chat about rugby or something. I mumble barely audible excuses and push on through.

That damn Eckardt, I again curse softly.

After a quick shower, shave and tending to the pearly whites, I storm back to my room to get dressed. Tailored school uniform, of course. Then I head back out to the hallway, sidestepping a cleaner with a puzzled look on his face.

Eckardt’s room is only a short distance away from mine. A brief knock, then I yank open the door. “Eckardt!” I enter

before he can even answer. “What the hell, dude –” I jerk to a standstill. Shocked. Breath freezing on my lips. Silently I gaze around the room. The bed is made. There are some creases near the foot end, as if somebody had been sitting on it. Sunlight through the open window. One of the curtains has blown up and is now hanging across the desk where Eckardt’s laptop is plugged in. The screen closed.

Where the hell is he? Gone to the mess hall? I’d better call and find out. I pull my phone from my blazer’s inner pocket, unlock the screen and scroll through the contacts. Eckardt. Call.

Moments later I hear the familiar ringtone in the room itself. It’s an old song by Stereo MC’s. *Connected*. My body turns cold instantly. I tilt my head. The sound is muted, as if emanating from *inside* something. Somewhere near me.

The bed? The desk drawer?

I stand quietly and listen.

Eckardt’s cupboard? Could that be?

Puzzled, I step closer slowly. The handle is cold beneath my fingers when I grab it. The door will probably be locked if his phone is in there.

No, it isn’t.

Strange.

The cupboard door swings open.

Eckardt’s cell phone rests on the neatly folded clothes in front of me. The name flashing across the screen: G-4ce.