

The next Big Thing.

A short story by

Richard Dee



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Richard Dee is a native of Brixham in Devon. He left Devon when he was in his teens and settled in Kent. Leaving school at 16 he briefly worked in a supermarket, then went to sea and travelled the world in the Merchant Navy, qualifying as a Master Mariner in 1986.

Coming ashore to be with his growing family, he used his sea-going knowledge in several jobs, including Marine Insurance Surveyor and Dockmaster at Tilbury, before becoming a Port Control Officer in Sheerness and then at the Thames Barrier in Woolwich.

In 1994 he was head-hunted and offered a job as a Thames Estuary Pilot. In 1999 he transferred to the Thames River Pilots, where he regularly took vessels of all sizes through the Thames Barrier and upriver as far as HMS *Belfast* and through Tower Bridge. In all, he piloted over 3,500 vessels in a 22-year career with the Port of London Authority.

Richard is married with three adult children and two grandchildren.

His first science-fiction novel *Freefall* was published in 2013, followed by *Ribbonworld* in 2015. September 2016 saw the publication of his Steampunk adventure, *The Rocks of Aserol* and of *Flash Fiction*, a collection of Short Stories. *Myra*, the prequel to *Freefall* was published in 2017, along with *Andorra Pett and the Oort Cloud Café*, a murder mystery set in space and the start of a series featuring Andorra Pett, an amateur detective. He contributed a story to the *1066 Turned Upside Down* collection and is currently working on prequels, sequels, and new projects.

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The next Big Thing.

Every bar has one or the other, the drunk in the corner with the big mouth, or the poor fool. This bar, despite being at the edge of civilisation, had Rory.

It was a worker's bar, the miners and builders in this new world all came in at the end of the shift to wet their throats. And since the work was hard, the bar was always full.

I'm a welder, experienced in all sorts of specialised techniques. Because of my skill, I was able to work freelance and there was so much work that I could have welded things together every 28-hour day under this particular sun. But I didn't, I made enough to save a bit, pay my bills and made sure that I enjoyed a day off every now and again.

And this being a frontier world, the best place to do that was in Albert's bar. Albert, one of the first to arrive had rather cleverly seen a gap in the market. He had got permission from the Company that ran this particular world to set up the bar.

No-one liked the Company, but they paid good wages and in return allowed us to let off steam in Albert's. There was a shipment of beer on every weekly shuttle, nothing stronger though. The Company tolerated the facility as long as it only sold beer and I daresay that they were pleased that there was a place for the workers to gather.

The fees they charged Albert for the privilege of opening meant that they got a lot of the wages they paid straight back. And they could keep an unofficial eye on the mood of the workers. Albert had competition, criminal gangs that brewed spirit in old oil drums from potato peelings. They sold it in the shanties but they were all less honest than Albert. There was always the chance of getting poisoned or mugged; only the desperate went to them. If you got caught by the Company police you were out of a

job. Albert had been the first; he had principles, he didn't rip you off and that meant something.

And then there was Rory; like I said, he was a bit of an enigma, he seemed to be permanently at least half drunk and what in former times would have been called 'simple'. He had a child's mind in an adult's body and a fixed blank expression. He just couldn't function in an adult world; he would wander around every now and again and pick up glasses or give the tables a wipe. It was almost as if he was a machine, programmed to perform those modest tasks.

The rest of the time he sat on a stool at the corner of the bar. His sole topic of conversation was to tell everyone that he used to be the future or how he could have been famous. There was never any bitterness in his tone, just resignation, as if it had all been his for the taking but it had somehow passed him by. His glass was kept full and yet he never paid a cent. I never really knew if his condition was lifelong or if he had suffered some sort of injury that had left him like this.

Occasionally he was teased by stupid youths or strangers. He would get upset and flail about and Albert or one of the Company staff would step in and protect him. I had never had much to do with him; I listened politely, smiled and nodded but left him in his own world. I felt sorry for his condition but that was about it.

One lunchtime, I was in Albert's celebrating a job completed. The paycheck had been large, which meant that I could afford to have a few days break. I was contemplating going off world. Another benefit of not being a Company employee was that I could pick and choose when I worked, as long as I did enough the Company would ever employ another welder.

After the last few weeks crawling around in the dark, welding pipes, I thought that a change of scenery would be nice. I planned on getting a lift on the shuttle and

spending a couple of weeks visiting the places it called at. It was a common thing; other people had done it. All I had to do was ask.

As usual, Rory was in his place, glass within easy reach. He looked up at me as I sat at the bar. "You know, I was going to be famous," he muttered.

"Hi, Rory," I answered, and he smiled at hearing his name. "Hey," I continued, "you never tell us the whole story; I'd really like to hear it sometime."

In reply, he shook his head, shrank into his seat and turned away. "I could have been big," he whispered as Albert came over to me.

"Hey, Bonz," Albert greeted me, putting a glass of beer down. "How're things?" Under his breath, he said, "Rory's having a bad day, Bonz, don't upset him."

I took a mouthful of beer and swallowed. "No sweat, Al," I said. "I was just trying to be friendly."

"I know," he said. "But it doesn't take much. Haven't seen you for a while, Bonz, what you been up to?" I told him about the pipes, how I hadn't seen daylight for three weeks.

He gave me a sympathetic look. "Bet you're glad of a day off then, at least it's not raining."

I laughed, that was a joke, the planetary engineers on Modeno could manipulate our weather. They arranged it so it only rained at night. Nobody knew how they did it; rain was all I had seen when I had emerged from the pipes at the end of my shift.

"Very funny. Al, I wondered if there were any spare cabins on the shuttle this time around. I feel like a couple of weeks off before I sign another deal."

"I can ask tomorrow when I get the ETA, are you ready to go?"

“I’m all set; can I ask you another question?”

“OK,” he answered. “What is it?”

I glanced sideways at Rory, who had found a table full of off-duty drivers and was telling them that he was almost famous once.

“Rory?” he said. “Alright, I’ll tell you a bit about it.”

We moved down the bar, away from Rory, and Albert leant in close. “Rory was in an accident, about a year before you arrived. He hit his head pretty hard and it scrambled his brains. The Company hushed it all up cos it was partly their fault and now Las pays me to keep him busy, fill his glass whenever it’s empty and look out for him.”

That was awful, both the accident and the cover-up. It didn’t surprise me at all, the Company were like that. Las Stryle was the local manager, a big, pleasant man. I had thought that he was not like the usual Company boss; it looked like he was though. They always saw money and silence as the solution. “Why does he say that, all the time?”

“I don’t know that bit,” Albert replied. “And there’s no way to find out. The accident wasn’t here. If you ask Rory too many questions he just goes crazy. Las won’t let on. I just get people to smile and say yeah to him, it’s easier.”

There wasn’t much more to say after that. I drank up my beer and left.

Back at my place, I sorted out a bag, ready to travel.

Next day I got a call from Albert, I was good to go. As soon as the shuttle arrived I went down to the dock with my bag and wandered on board, dodging the cargo operations. I’d seen it in the distance before, a big ugly looking ship. It was one of

several on a circular route around the sector, dropping supplies and picking up production at various planets.

The duty officer showed me to a cabin, it was better than my living quarters and coupled with the fact that I wouldn't have to cook, a home from home. There was no beer though; mind you, a few dry days wouldn't do me any harm.

We took off mid-afternoon and by the evening mealtime, I was settled in and bored. I followed directions to the passengers' mess and found that there were only two other takers for the trip. An old man, silver-haired and immaculately dressed, he was accompanied by a woman about my age. She was petite and gorgeous, clad in what was probably the latest and most expensive of high fashion. My immediate thoughts were not charitable; maybe I was jealous of him.

"Pleased to meet you," said the old man, shaking my hand in a firm grip. "I'm Danson Collis." The name was familiar to me, he had been a high-up Company manager, back in the day when they were a reputable outfit, "and this is my granddaughter Amile." He gestured to the girl who smiled, making her even more beautiful.

"Pleased to meet you both," I replied. "Boon Zamaran, but everyone calls me Bonz."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're the welder?" He turned to Amile. "He's the one I was telling you about; he was the best-paid welder on Franzic."

How did he know that piece of my past? Of course, I had been working for the Company then, so he had been my boss. I tried to make a joke out of it. "That was only because there was no other welder on Franzic."

"You're far too modest," he replied. "From what I remember you invented several new techniques for vacuum arc-welding in zero-G."

OK so that was my claim to fame, but it was a long while ago, I had grown more cautious since and preferred to spend my working time on solid ground. And away from a permanent contract with the new version of the Company, if I had been their employee now they would have taken all my new work as their own. I don't think Danson would have approved of the Company as they were.

"Amile is a welder," he continued. "I'm sure she would love to ask you a few things."

"Grandfather," she said in a loving but exasperated tone. "I can speak you know." She turned to me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I expect you want a bit of peace on your trip."

"That's fine," I said. "Yes, I'm here for a break but there was no chance to talk shop on Modena, I was far too busy."

We sat and ate, Danson was very good company and Amile was easy to talk to. Before I realised; we had been chatting for two hours. Amile, for all her glamour, knew enough about welding to show that she was capable and experienced. Time had flown, and I was pleased to hear that they would be on board for a few more days.

Next morning, I saw them at breakfast. "Tell me," Danson asked, "why did you leave the Company and go freelance?"

"They refused to renew my contract," I told him; it had left a sour taste. "Strangely it had happened just before they would have been obliged to pay me a service bonus. I wasn't the only one they had done that to either."

Danson nodded. "I know all about that practice," he said. "It was started just after they disposed of my services."

"You mean it was one of the reasons you were booted out, you had always opposed it," said Amile. He smiled and touched her shoulder.

“Oh, there was a lot more than that,” he sighed. “But it was one of the things, yes.”

“I thought that you resigned,” I said, that was certainly the story we had heard. “We were all sad to see you go; you were the last honest one there.”

He smiled. “I know and I couldn’t hang on any longer, I had no backing. Thank you for your kind words.” He sounded truly sad, I knew the Company had been his life’s work and felt for him.

Amile spoke up. “That was the lie, the last one,” she shouted, her face red and anguished. “He was forced out, after the incident, because he wanted to be honest and accept the blame.”

“What incident?” This was all news to me.

“Hush, dear,” said Danson. “It will do no good now.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I need to speak out; the truth has been hidden for so long and when we’re gone the lie will live on. And Mr Zamaran is not a Company man, he can’t hurt you.”

What did she mean? “Have the Company threatened you?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I run a competing enterprise. If my father speaks out, I’m liable to have... problems.”

This was another example of the Company’s new way of doing things. “It doesn’t surprise me,” I said. “To be honest, I’m better off working for myself.”

“You’re doing alright on Modeno then?”

“It’s fine. OK, it’s true that I’m still working for the Company but I’m not under their control, they need me so I get a reasonable deal. And the Company man on Modeno, Las, is OK, at least with me.”

“Not Las Stryle?” she asked.

“That’s him; he’s fair although I get the idea he’s not perfect.”

She shuddered. “I could tell you some things about him.”

This could be juicy gossip; I was just working out how to ask her for the details; you never knew when something like that could come in useful. We were interrupted by the ship’s captain, “good morning all,” he said. “Mr Zamaran, could I ask you to come down to the engine room please?”

It turned out that the engineers were having trouble with a piece of equipment and needed some of my expertise in repairs. The chief engineer was embarrassed to ask but relieved that I could do what he couldn’t. I tried not to let him feel too bad. After all, I reminded him, I do this sort of work all the time, he might only see this sort of job once in a career.

I didn’t see Collis and Amile until the evening meal; we would be landing on Denova in the morning. Despite enjoying their company, I had decided to leave and have a look at the place, it was on my list. But I wanted to get the lowdown on Las before then.

“I’ll give you a story about Las,” I said, as dinner was served, “in return for one of yours. He pays to keep an injured man drunk on Modeno.”

“You mean Rory?” Clearly, this was not news to either of them.

I was shocked. “How did you know about Rory?”

“Rory, bless him, he’s the reason that I was retired,” he said. “He was the incident, I wanted to admit it all, but I didn’t get the chance. I was discredited, sacked. And then the threats started, I was afraid for Amile, so I learned to be silent.”

“I’ll tell it,” Amile said. “Settle down, Grandfather.”

She ate a few mouthfuls of her dinner, marshalling her thoughts. “Rory Gilisp was a graduate,” she began. “Top of his class, a genius in his field. He was a bit like you, but his field wasn’t welding; it was planetary engineering.”

I tried to equate the Rory that I knew, shambling one-track Rory, with the planetary engineers I had met. It was difficult; they were the advance guard of civilisation, preparing planets for life, adjusting atmospheres and environments. They could control the weather, so it only rained at night. The Company owned them and their technology.

“Did Rory have his accident on Company service?”

“There’s the thing, and the crucial part, the Company wanted results, but Rory wouldn’t play, he did things his way. He had developed all sorts of new methods; he called it the future, the next big thing. Naturally, they needed testing. My grandfather was in charge, he said ‘OK, go off and play for a while. Take a couple of guys with you.’”

Danson nodded at the memory. “I was ready to let them have a couple of years to test their theories, but I got overruled,” he said. “Money reared its head. Either Rory was ready or he was out. And the Company owned all his research, so it was win-win for them. Trouble was Rory was in no mood to give it all up and walk away. And I backed him, we needed his type, if he wanted a year or two, it would be worth it.”

Amile broke in. "But the other managers wouldn't give him time. One of them decided to send a crew out to get him back. But Rory was stubborn and wouldn't leave. There was a bit of an argument and one of them got over zealous. He sneaked up behind Rory and hit him over the head with a metal bar. Then things really kicked off, Rory's mates weren't having any of that and there was a bloodbath. By the time a rescue party turned up Rory was the only one left alive, and he was in a coma."

Danson took up the story. "We later found that Rory had suffered brain damage and had forgotten everything, the blow on the head had scrambled his brain. The video footage showed what had happened, how he had been injured and because the Company had no control over the rescuers they were frightened of it going public. The manager was shipped away to the edge of the universe, they pulled a few strings, a big donation to the rescue services and because I wanted to admit it, they got rid of me."

What a story. "Let me guess, the manager who sent the crew was Las."

"That's right," said Amile. "And he was told, 'you broke him, you look after him.'"

This was past amazing, Las seemed such a quiet, calm man, I'd never have thought that he had a secret like that.

"The hope was that Rory would regain his memory," Amile continued. "He left no notes, the station's computers were all destroyed in the fight, the Company knew that he had discovered a lot of stuff. Las was demoted and dumped with Rory on Modeno. He was meant to keep him safe in case he recovered. They wanted to be able to get his knowledge."

It all sounded a bit strange, if Las had injured him, how would Rory react when he saw him again? Surely it would have been better to keep them well apart? But then, that was the Company for you, perhaps they had never met.

The next morning, we arrived at Denova; I was getting off for a look at the sights. I would catch the next shuttle, planet hop my way back to Modeno.

I saw Amile and Danson before I departed and Amile offered me a job. "Come and work for me," she said. "I'll pay you more and we'd look after you better."

I told her that I'd think about it. Knowing what I did now, I didn't fancy life around Las and the Company anymore.

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I spent a bit more time away, relaxing and thinking; before I returned to Modeno. I had been to some fascinating places and as well as doing the tourist thing, I had spoken to people about jobs. Because of my name and reputation, I had found a couple that looked interesting.

Away from Company control, there was a new kid on the block, so to speak. They were crying out for experienced workers. They had a good reputation. Then I found out that the outfit they were all talking about was run by Amile Collis, she had mentioned it on the ship but I hadn't realised how big they were. Stuck on Modeno I'd been out of the loop. To be honest, I quite fancied the idea of working for her.

First, I had to collect all my gear, as I walked from the port up the hill towards my room, I passed Albert's. I had no time for a swift beer, I had to see Las and tell him I was leaving.

I should have gone into Albert's, Las wasn't in his office, I had gone past him. Great, I trudged back in the gloom; it was starting to rain as night fell.

I found Las sitting in the corner, Albert was pleased to see me, Rory was wandering around picking up glasses and wiping tables. He was still telling his story. Now that I knew the whole thing, I saw him differently, he really had been about to be famous.

And I was furious with Las and the Company in general, I was off just as soon as I could go.

“Sorry to hear that, Bonz,” said Las, when I broke the news. “I’ll miss you, where am I going to get a decent welder? Who are you working with, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“A new company I found when I was sightseeing,” I told him, just as Rory walked past.

“I was the next big thing,” he said.

“Not now, Rory,” said Las impatiently. “I’m talking to Bonz.”

Rory said nothing, just stood there watching us, his eyes blank.

“You were saying,” Las prompted, he couldn’t take his eyes off Rory.

“Oh yeah; it’s run by someone called Amile Collis. I was talking to her, she offered me the job.”

Behind me Rory spoke, his voice had changed, it was the voice of a confident young man, full of expression and authority, it echoed around the room. “Collis, Danson Collis, he’s a good man, I liked him.”

This was totally unexpected; the whole place fell silent. Las went pale and looked worried. Albert came over. “Come on, Rory,” he said. “Glasses to collect.” He put his hand on Rory’s shoulder.

Rory spun. “No!” he shouted. “You can’t have it, go back and tell that bastard Stryle he can go to hell.”

“Shut him up,” Las said to Albert. He looked at me, panic on his face. “Do you know what he’s on about? Did Collis tell you?”

I nodded.

Rory was still shouting. "Mr Collis told me I had time, I'm going nowhere till he says so, you can tell Stryle that. Danson Collis is my boss, not him."

Albert tried again. "Leave Mr Stryle alone, Rory; you're getting worked up."

"Stryle's here? Where is he? Let me get at him."

Las got up.

"What's going on, Las?" Albert asked.

Rory turned. "Is that him?" He picked up a chair.

It all happened in slow motion. Las put up a hand to protect himself. Rory slammed the chair into him. There were three distinct sounds.

The first was the 'crack' of the chair breaking. The second was the 'snap' as Las's arm broke and an instant later, the third was his high-pitched scream of pain. Rory was still holding the remains of the chair. As Las staggered, he swung again, the metal frame hit the back of Las's head with a sickening thud. Blood spurted, Las collapsed to the floor.

"What the hell was that all about?" Albert said, dazed by the turn of events, people started to gather around us. Someone shouted, 'call a medic.'

"Rory, what did you just do?" said Albert.

Rory's face was blank; once more his voice was an emotionless monotone. "I was going to be famous once," he said.

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