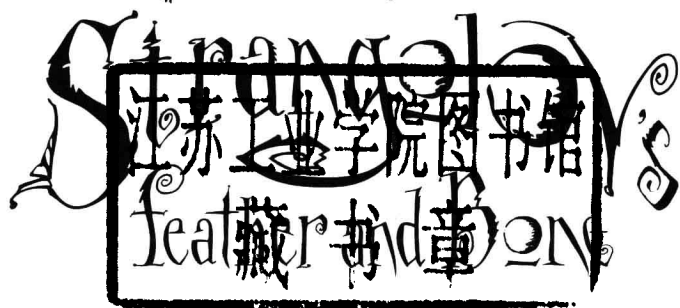


Lazlo
Strangolov
feather and Bone



ghost writing from
the underground

Lazlo



ghost writing from the underground



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This novel is dedicated
to the chickens

*And the third angel sounded, and there fell
a great star from heaven, burning as it were
a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the
rivers, and upon the fountains of waters.*

Book of Revelation 8:10

Foreword by Matt Whyman

The book in your hands is a curious discovery. It has been penned by an author with a life story as odd and compelling as the tale to follow. That he has entrusted me to introduce it is a great pleasure and a crying shame. Why? Because I know for sure that he will never emerge from his world to present it himself.

Lazlo Strangolov isn't just a recluse. This is an individual who has gone to earth in every way. All I can say is that he has yet to see daylight this century. The man is free to leave his underground bunker, and at times I have wondered whether embarrassment keeps him down there as much as his fears. For on closing the hatch, on 31 December 1999,

Strangolov was convinced that the dawn of the new millennium would mark the end of the world.

I knew Lazlo briefly as a boy. We grew up on the same street, only to lose contact when his father moved the family back to his native village on the Romanian-Hungarian border (a region better known as Transylvania). At the time, in the eighties, the threat of nuclear war was very real. Mister Strangolov, a God-fearing and domineering individual at the end of a long-term posting as a translator at the Romanian Embassy, grew more unsettled than most by the issue. According to neighbours, the poor man eventually suffered some kind of psychological breakdown. One night, he loaded his wife and son into a taxi for the station, telling the driver they would be travelling by rail, ferry, coach and then horse-drawn carriage to reach their destination.

As for Lazlo, I remember him to be a pale and superstitious lad prone to headaches, particular about the shine of his shoes and picky about his food. Despite this, he possessed a rich imagination and an accent that led to bigger kids making Dracula jokes at his expense. Looking back, he did little to dispel the rumours about why the street lamp outside his family home always flickered through each night.

On the rare occasion that he stole outside, Lazlo would suggest that we hang out at the church

cemetery. There, we'd conjure up yarns from reading ancient gravestone inscriptions and he would spook me with claims that he could see malevolent spirits. Three decades ago, this opened my eyes to the power and impact of a good story. It might even have steered me towards becoming a writer in my own right.

In fact, it is my work as a novelist that prompted Lazlo to contact me. Last year, out of nowhere, I received an email in which he politely enquired whether I might read a literary effort of his own. Lazlo made no mention of his whereabouts or what he had done with his life in all the years since we lost touch. Intrigued, I invited him to send me something. Lazlo responded by suggesting that he would prefer it if I travelled to him, and provided a deeply unconventional address. It was, quite simply, co-ordinates on a map. I have been sworn not to disclose the precise details, but it persuaded me to print out the e-ticket he supplied and catch a budget flight to a rural location in Eastern Europe, deep within the Carpathian Mountains. There, quite literally, I came to drop into the self-contained world of my old friend.

The apocalypse may not have taken place, yet Lazlo remains convinced that it *will* occur. He has inherited a paranoid, visionary spirit from his

father, and fuelled it through extensive research. His bunker is wired up to the Web, protected by custom-built firewalls, and powered like his heat and lighting by an ^{internal} ^{generator}. Lazlo also has an unidentified "watcher" on the outside who ensures that he remains safe, fed and well. Life underground has clearly taken its toll, however. He is ^{stayed} ^{stayed} stooped and gaunt, with shadow pools for cheeks, pale eyes and bone-white skin to match his hair. We may have been born in the same year, but time appears to have ticked faster for one of us.

Then again, if Lazlo is correct in his recalculations, none of us have long left on this earth. At least not those who choose to ignore his warnings. He would not tell me how or when the unprepared would meet their doom. When I pressed him, he produced a handwritten manuscript, thick with scribbles in the margins, and said the answers were hidden within. All that any reader required, so he assured me, was a sharp eye, an open mind and an ability to read between the lines. Those who worked it out, he said, would learn the nature of the catastrophe we face, as well as the exact date this coming summer on which it would occur. Those smart enough to get it right, he disclosed, would at least have a chance to protect themselves and survive.

With no wish to appear rude by dismissing such claims out of hand, I asked if I might read the

opening chapters of the manuscript. Lazlo invited me to make myself comfortable in his subterranean library while he brewed a pot of nettle leaf tea. I didn't notice when he set the cup beside me. The truth is I became so spellbound by the story that some hours later, on reaching the final page, I had to remind myself to blink.

I can confirm that a date is buried in the text. Watch out for two clues, as well as a reference to the cataclysmic event from the Bible's Book of Revelation that is said to mark the beginning of the End Times. It is not my place to tell you whether we should believe Lazlo and take steps to prepare for the worst. All I can say is that the author regards it as being of the utmost importance. Indeed, his decision to write the manuscript by hand, rather than computer, was driven by a fear that hackers might uncover his prophecies before he felt ready to go public. At worst, as he told me, they might sell the information to sinister forces determined to suppress it.

After much persuasion, Lazlo allowed me to leave with the manuscript. He made me swear not to let it out of my sight, and to seek a publisher who would also undertake to protect his whereabouts. I've done everything I can to keep his ongoing anxieties at bay. On occasion, I've had to remind myself that I'm

dealing with a man who has lived a very sheltered life indeed.

Understandably, for someone sold on the idea that bad times are ahead, Lazlo is extremely concerned that his message is not lost in translation from manuscript to final book. This means that every morning I switch on my computer to find a string of emails have come in from him overnight. He has queried every step of the publishing process, and insisted that even his scribblings are reproduced in the finished pages.

I am sure he won't mind me telling you, this is one high-maintenance author.

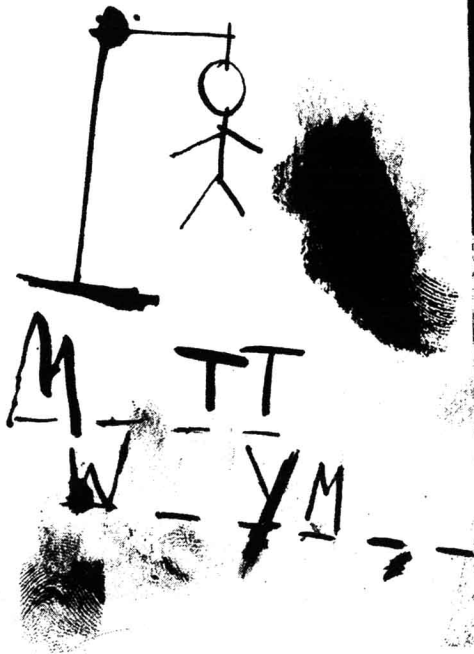
Once, under pressure from Lazlo to promise not to move a single comma, I lost the plot and told him his secret code was "the kind of thing crackpots shout at bins in back alleys". I saw sense straight away, apologizing profusely and stressing how much I just wanted the story itself to reach an audience. After a fortnight's silence, Lazlo saw fit to forgive me. The episode made me realize how easily I could have caused him to withdraw the book from publication. Since then, I have taped a note to my computer monitor that simply reads, *Stay calm.*

And so, having learned the value of patience, no matter how badly tested, I can at last place you

in the trust of a true ghost writer from the underground. All I ask is that you take a deep breath and prepare for...

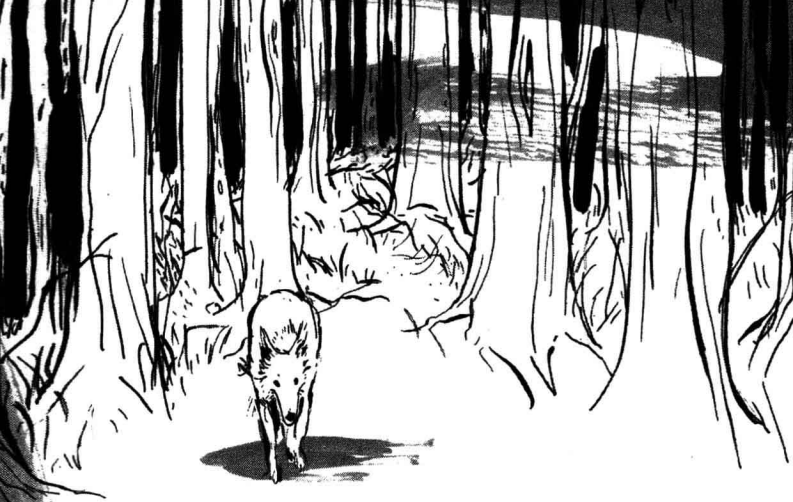
feather and Bone

Matt Whyman,
with permission from the author.



Lazlo
Strangolov
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1

My father once walked our dog into these woods, and never came home again. A little later than normal, she appeared at the garden gate without him. I cannot tell you any more. This is because every time my mother recounts the tale, her words fall away just as soon as she begins. Then the tears take over.

"He was a good man," she will struggle to finish. "A good man who chose the wrong path."

Now, it is my duty to walk the dog. Solace is white as a snowdrop, with a long muzzle, arching ears, and eyes that are impossible to fathom. There is some wolf in her, from the tips of her teeth to her loping stride, but I feel safe with such a presence at

my side. For the woods fan out from where I live, in a small community nestled in the cleft of a steep mountain slope. This means I have no choice but to head for the trees to exercise her, and it isn't always a tranquil place to be.

In springtime, when the violets emerge under the canopy, I could spend all day there. Walking the old deer tracks, I can see dragonflies flitting through sunbeams and hear woodpeckers hard at work. I wish the flowers would last all year round. For as soon as they begin to wither and fade, I can't help thinking that eventually the same thing happens to us all.

Towards late autumn, when all the leaves lie rotting on the ground, the woods spend more time in darkness than light. Solace still has to be walked, however. First thing in the morning and again before bed. It means throughout the winter months I leave our cottage with a lurch in my heart, and pray my head torch won't burn out before I am safely back.

The torch belonged to my father. It is an invention of his, in fact, and one of many he cobbled together in his workshop. Instead of being powered by batteries, which are so hard to come by out here, I simply slot the device onto two prongs mounted on top of a tin box. By winding a handle at the side for a minute or so, the element inside the torch flickers into life and then builds to a steady glow. As soon as I remove it from the prongs, I can count on thirty



minutes of light at most before the charge within expires. Once I've strapped it tight around my ears, and wrapped up against the cold outside, I try to leave the house without disturbing my mother. I am not always successful.

On the way out this time, she floats down the staircase, as pale as ever, and offers me a grateful smile for taking care of Solace. Even so, nothing can disguise the fact that she's looking at me as if we might never see each other again.

"I'll be OK," I tell her. "Remember what he used to say?"

My mother knows the answer very well. Whenever I awoke with nightmares as a little boy, she used to hover at the bedroom door while my father assured me that all would be well.

"He would ask you to guess what he feared the most."

"It wasn't vampire bats, werewolves or grave robbers," I say. "He'd simply go on shaking his head until I ran out of things that frightened me."

"And then," my mother reminds me with absolute conviction, "he would tell you he was scared of *nothing*."

As a pack animal, Solace looks to me for guidance and authority. This isn't so easy when you're as slight in build as I am. My name is Kamil, which means