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CRAIG SNYDER

RISE OF THE MENTARDS & FLOWER BOY

On Planet Earth chemicals are invading food and water, affecting people. Some people say Earth is dying now. Women are giving birth to Mentards, and there are more Mentards than before. Why so many Mentards? Scientists investigate this. They write a report saying chemicals in the food and water are poison. No one listens to them.

Meanwhile Flower Boy.

Business Man sits next to Flower Boy on the park bench. Flower Boy reads novels. He has a stack of novels on the bench beside him, and he is reading a novel. Business Man just sits and watches the ducks swimming in the pond. They are very small brown ducks.

“What novel are you reading, Flower Boy?” Business Man says.

“I am reading *The Razor’s Edge*,” Flower Boy says. He points to the book and smiles at Business Man. “It is a novel about a man who likes to read.” Flower Boy keeps reading. He has good concentration.

“Flower Boy, why?” Business Man says. The question mark hangs in the air. The question mark dies and falls to the ground. Business Man doesn’t ask any more questions.

Business Man takes a sandwich out of a paper bag. He eats the sandwich, which is a tuna fish sandwich. Business Man eats Mentos when the sandwich is gone. Then he goes back to his office and starts writing sales reports. He thinks about Flower Boy just sitting on the bench, reading novels. Everything about Flower Boy is very mysterious, he thinks.

Flower Boy keeps reading. He reads for 25 minutes. He lifts the book up to his nose and smells it. The book is an old paperback and has a nice smell that Flower Boy likes. Ducks are quacking in the pond. He watches the ducks swim around. He watches one duck swim in circles. It is a crazy duck. Flower Boy taught it how to read. Now the duck is crazy.

“Are you happy, being crazy like that?” Flower Boy asks.

“Quack,” the duck says.

The duck is wearing a little waterproof backpack. It is stuffed with novels and dictionaries and is made from orange Styrofoam. The other ducks are scared of it. The other ducks are scared of the future, and of the crazy duck. They are stupid ignorant ducks. Flower Boy feels sorry for them and feeds them bread sometimes.

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Flower Boy goes into the city of Seattle and walks around and looks at things, at coffee shops and book stores, at people waiting at bus stops. At delivery trucks and things. There are lots of Mentards walking around. When Flower Boy goes into the city he usually sees about 10 or 12 Mentards. Now he sees about 300 Mentards in only one hour.

Flower Boy buys a flower at a flower stall. It is white and fragile and Flower Boy stares at it for a long time. He loves the flower. He sticks the stem of the flower through a buttonhole. He wonders how flowers came to be. He gets tired and bored. He sits down on a bench and starts watching the Mentards.

Some Mentards are walking around and mumbling stupidly. Some are standing on corners holding white Styrofoam coffee cups and asking people for money. People are supposed to put money in the Styrofoam cups. But people aren't giving the Mentards much money.

Some Mentards are writing novels. Flower Boy is startled by this. He realizes he has made a serious mistake. Two years ago he met some Mentards and tried to help them. He gave them some novels but the Mentards tore them up, and some Mentards tried to eat the novels.

"That is wrong," Flower Boy told them. He was very stern with them. He told them novels are for reading but the Mentards laughed at him and ran away. Now they are writing novels on notebook computers. Flower Boy thinks this is bad. He wonders what will happen next.

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Flower Boy has to summon up willpower to not write a novel. He wants to write one, after watching the Mentards. But he knows it would be wrong to do it.

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Night has fallen. The sky is black and awesome stars are winking at Flower Boy.

He is walking home. He bought a new novel at the used bookstore and is carrying it in a plastic bag that says "Osco Drug." He is happy about owning the novel and thinks about all the words in it and how they will make him feel when he reads them.

He is at his apartment now. It is one big room. He goes inside. The walls are cracked and decorated with pressed flowers sealed in wax paper. There are stacks of novels climbing the walls. The apartment smells like old paper and flowers, and macaroni & cheese.

Flower Boy is glad to be home.

"Oooohhh, Flower Boy," a mysterious voice says. Flower Boy recognizes the voice.

"Mrs. Rooney," Flower Boy says. "Stop doing that."

"I am sorry, Flower Boy," Mrs. Rooney says. "But I am lonely." She is talking to Flower Boy through the thin wall of his apartment. She lives next door.

"That's okay, Mrs. Rooney." Flower Boy forgives her.

Flower Boy puts his new novel on the coffee table. He makes some macaroni & cheese and toast, and eats it. He washes the dishes and dries them. He hears Mrs. Rooney crying next door and turns on the radio. It is late and Flower Boy is sleepy. He gets ready for bed, and crawls under his bed. There is an old cigar box and a flashlight hidden there.

He turns on the flashlight and opens the cigar box. It has treasure in it.

He takes out a picture of Flower Girl and looks at it. Every time he does this he feels sad. But Flower Boy loves the sadness because he loves Flower Girl. He looks at the picture for a long time. He wonders if Flower Girl ever thinks about him. He doesn't know.

"Flower Girl," Flower Boy says. He puts the picture back in the box and turns off the flashlight. He goes to sleep under the bed, curled around the cigar box.

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Flower Boy is dreaming his dream again. In the dream Flower Boy is a little baby again. He is Flower Baby. Everything is beautiful. He is warm and has a tiny pink erection. He is wrapped in a soft blanket that smells like flowers. Someone is singing a song, and the song never ends, and the song is awesome.

The dream goes on and on while Flower Boy sleeps.

Flower Boy has a secret wish. It is so secret that not even Flower Boy knows about it. The secret wish is that he would like to dream the dream always, and keep it, and never wake up from it, not ever again. When Flower Boy wakes up he feels great. He doesn't remember too much about the dream. He crawls out from under the bed and makes some Folger's coffee.

He takes the new novel out of the plastic bag and looks at it.

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Media Executive sneaks up behind Flower Boy in the park.

She has green hair and bulgy green eyes. She is beautiful and strong and carries a black briefcase. Flower Boy cannot look at her. He has epilepsy. When he looks at her he goes into convulsions. He wishes he had never met Media Executive.

“Hello,” Flower Boy says. He sips his raspberry juicebox. He is nervous.

“Flower Boy,” Media Executive says. “I will get you an advance so you can write a novel.”

Media Executive has been hunting Flower Boy. He wrote an essay for *Salon* magazine.

“We will totally promote it,” Media Executive says. “You will totally be famous.”

Flower Boy runs away screaming.

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Flower Boy buys some binoculars at Army Surplus. Flower Boy buys a green canvas backpack and puts the binoculars in it. He goes into the city of Seattle. He goes into Huge Corporation Building and takes the elevator to the roof. He lies down on the roof and looks over the edge. He takes out the binoculars and looks through the binoculars at the Mentards. He is spying on the Mentards who are writing novels. About half of the Mentards are writing novels now. Flower Boy has a bad feeling about it. He feels responsible.

He decides to oppose the Mentards.

“I will need a plan,” Flower Boy thinks. He cannot think of a plan.

Flower Boy takes the elevator down to Huge Corporation bookstore. He buys one of the Mentard novels. He goes into Huge Corporation cafeteria and eats square pizza and chocolate pudding. He reads the Mentard novel. It is terrible. Flower Boy gets very upset.

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Flower Boy meets Ajax, the famous dog who is a literary critic and editor, who wears glasses and walks on his hind legs. Flower Boy tries to convince Ajax not to edit Mentards novels because bad things might happen if more Mentards novels get published.

“No,” Ajax says. “You are wrong about this thing.”

Flower Boy tries harder. He uses all his convincing powers on Ajax.

“Flower Boy,” Ajax says. “You cannot stop this thing.”

Flower Boy has failed.

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The Rain of Flowers has come. Flower Boy is walking through it laughing. Flowers are falling all around him like hushed snowflakes. The breeze plays with Flower Boy’s hair. It smells like a million flowers, and perfume. The trees sway and drop their blossoms. Flower Boy walks through clouds of swirling flowers and forgets his troubles.

He climbs a hill crowned with yellow daffodils. He sits on mint green grass and writes a novel. The novel is full of love and flowers, of innocence and children. The children are wise and achieve mighty things. Flower Boy writes and writes. He cannot stop himself.

Hour after hour he presses his thoughts onto paper. Flower Boy is intoxicated by the Rain of Flowers and does not know what he is doing. At dusk he walks slowly down the hill. The flowers are rotting and stinking, and Flower Boy chokes. All the flowers are black and dead.

Flower Boy has written a novel.

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Flower Boy takes his secret map from the cigar box full of treasure. He uses the map to find the hidden tunnel where Flower Girl lives. The tunnel is under the abandoned amusement park, which is haunted by the ghosts of freaks. Flower Boy goes there. He is not scared of ghosts. Flower Girl is not there so he waits for her. He waits two hours and then she comes in. She is barefoot and wears a pink dress and has a flower in her hair. She smiles at him nervously.

“Hello, Flower Boy,” she says.

“Flower Girl,” Flower Boy says. “You smell like flowers.”

Flower Boy gives Flower Girl the novel he wrote. She stares at it and says, “You wrote a novel?” and Flower Boy says, “Yes, but I couldn’t help it.” He explains about the Rain of Flowers. She starts to read the novel but Flower Boy stops her and says, “Never read that novel.”

"It's too late," Flower Girl says. "Your novel has affected me already."

"What happened to our love?" Flower Boy says.

"We loved too much," Flower Girl says. "Our love was destroying the world, so we had to stop loving. Love is like that sometimes. Love is always like that, Flower Boy."

"I couldn't stop loving you, Flower Girl," Flower Boy says.

"I know," Flower Girl says. She looks sad.

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Flower Boy sits on his couch drinking green tea. He listens to thunder and is blinded by lightning bolts. Hailstones are smashing into his windows. He is trying to think of a plan to stop the Mentards but he still cannot think of one. He hears Mrs. Rooney sobbing and stumbling around next door. He wishes she would stop. He hears the mailman downstairs.

Flower Boy goes and gets his mail. There is a letter from the Guild of Unicorns. They demand to know why he has written a novel. The letter says he must go on trial. Flower Boy never thought it would come to this. He gets very serious.

He goes to Unicorn Island.

Now he is on trial. Dharma Woman is the judge. She asks Flower Boy to explain his actions. Flower Boy tells about the Rain of Flowers and how he couldn't help himself.

Dharma Woman nods. "Now I understand," she says.

Business Man is called to the stand. "Flower Boy is always very polite to me," he says. "He loves to read novels and would never harm literature. But he is very mysterious."

Flower Boy is acquitted by the Guild of Unicorns.

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There is a circle of golden light. Flower Boy stands in it with his eyes closed and his arms raised to the sky. The golden light is coming from a street lamp. It is midnight and smoke-colored moths are flying around the street lamp and smacking into it, and moth dust flies off their bodies. Flower Boy is crying very quietly. He doesn't want to disturb anybody.

"I have read too many novels," Flower Boy thinks.

All the stories of all the people in all the novels he has read are hurting Flower Boy. They all have serious problems. They are all hungry or crazy or dying from rare diseases. Flower Boy can't stand to think of them anymore, and is sad because of Flower Girl.

Patrolman sneaks up behind him on cat feet. He is on night patrol.

"Man up, Flower Boy," Patrolman says.

He knows why Flower Boy is crying and is sick of always consoling Flower Boy. He thinks Flower Boy is crazy or something. Flower Boy stops crying. He is not mad at Patrolman. He has just thought

of the perfect plan to stop the Mentards, so he stops being sad. He is almost happy again.

Patrolman starts lecturing him. "This world is a horrible place," he says. "There is nothing you can do about it, Flower Boy. Just stop reading so many damned novels."

"Thank you, Patrolman," Flower Boy says. The plan is taking shape in his head. He is not really listening to what Patrolman is saying.

Patrolman nods and walks away. He casts black shadows that bounce and shatter as he walks. He is in a state of heightened alertness. He might have to shoot somebody at any time.

Flower Boy goes home and takes out some sheets of 99% recycled paper and begins writing down his plan for stopping the Mentards. He writes in cursive script. He uses three sheets of paper and writes thoughtfully. The sun comes up. Flower Boy falls asleep in his clothes.

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The crazy duck waddles down the street looking for Flower Boy. He is used to seeing Flower Boy and is comfortable around him, but Flower Boy has not been to the park for a long time. The crazy duck misses him and has run out of novels to read.

The crazy duck has duck cancer. He starts screaming.

He cannot find Flower Boy anywhere. The orange Styrofoam backpack is much heavier when it is not floating in water, and he keeps tipping over sideways. A taxi driver honks his horn. The crazy duck

flaps his wings. He doesn't see the 1986 Ford Bronco. He feels pain. He sees bright red blood leaking from his body. He closes his eyes. There are strange vibrations and sudden coldness. He hopes someone will write a novel about him when he is dead.

The crazy duck dies. No one writes a novel about him.

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Flower Boy gets on a plane and flies to New York. He reads a novel on the plane.

It is all about a man who likes balloons. It is called *The 21 Balloons*. The man goes to an island full of diamonds and rich people. No one knows about the island except for the rich people. It is a secret. The man has a lot of fun there, and makes good friends. Then the island blows up.

It is a very short novel so Flower Boy reads it over and over again.

The plane lands and Flower Boy gets off and goes to the New York Times Building. Lots of people are walking around on sidewalks. They all look irritated about something. They are all drinking specialty coffees. Nobody smells like flowers. Nobody pays any attention to Flower Boy. He asks directions from a security guard. He gets into an elevator and goes to see the editor of the New York Times. "Please hire Mentards to write for the New York Times," Flower Boy says.

"That is a strange idea," the editor says. He frowns at Flower Boy. "It may be the stupidest idea I have ever heard. I will have to check on that. Tell me more about your idea, Flower Boy."

“They could write op/ed pieces for you,” Flower Boy says. “They could write movie reviews.”

The editor frowns again. Flower Boy is very persuasive. He talks for a long time and gets a nosebleed. The editor gives him some Kleenex. He tells Flower Boy to lie down and the nosebleed stops. Flower Boy is exhausted from using so much persuasion. He is not feeling too good. The editor is quiet for a while. He is considering Flower Boy’s plan.

“It’s a deal, Flower Boy,” the editor says.

Flower Boy experiences satisfaction. He has made the world a better place.

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It is a warm day and there are huge mashed potato clouds floating around, and Flower Boy is lying on the roof of Huge Corporation Building again. He feels strangely weak. He is not himself. He has not read a novel recently.

He looks through his binoculars. On the street below, 3 or 4 Mentards are slouched against buildings, begging for money. None of the Mentards are writing novels. He sees one Mentard coming out of a coffee shop. The Mentard wears a blue suit and is drinking a specialty coffee. He looks irritated. Flower Boy puts his binoculars away and rolls over and sighs.

A shimmering copper sun burns through mashed potato clouds and stares down at him like a single deadly eye. Flower Boy stares up at

the sun. He feels floaty. He wishes he could talk to Flower Girl again. He wants it to be the Rain of Flowers again.

The light turns gray. A single flower floats down and lands on Flower Boy's cheek. It is a pink flower but looks gray to Flower Boy. He smiles and closes his eyes.

He doesn't move for a long time. He never moves again.

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Flower Girl wakes up in the middle of the night. She is covered with flowers.