

FICTION

STILL A KID AT HEART

By CHRIS BELL

"I, Doug Crammell, being of sound mind and rapidly decaying body..."

"Doug!" Viv snapped. Doug slid down in the bed, the white hospital sheets tucked neatly up to his armpits.

"You have no sympathy," he grumbled.

Viv, who had been standing near the window, flopped down in the chair beside the bed.

"For God's sake, Doug," she implored.

Doug's head rolled feebly over on the pillow to face Viv.

"I could be dying..." Doug said meekly.

Viv thudded her elbow onto the chair's arm and held her head in her hand.

"Doug," she said, "They're only going to re-set your toe."

Doug wriggled under the sheets. Viv didn't seem to understand the implications.

"My big toe," he grumbled assertively.

"God," Viv pleaded. They were quiet for a moment as Doug fell into a sulk.

Slowly the door to the room opened. A child stuck his beaming face in through the crack. His eyes flicked around the room, then spotting Doug, he entered and walked slowly up to the bed. The boy stepped cautiously, one hand hidden behind his back. At last he arrived at the foot of the bed.

Doug raised his head to look down the bed at the boy.

Suddenly, a malicious grin grew on the child's face. The hand he held behind his back whipped out, producing an ominous looking water gun. The child steadied himself, held the gun with both hands, squeezed one eye shut, and aimed.

"Bang!" the child shouted. He tugged the trigger and shot water spurting across the bed. "You're dead!"

Doug's torso lurched forward off the bed.

"Get out of here, kid!" he shouted back.

The child turned and ran out of the room, a fierce grin on his face as he brandished the gun. He burst through the door and into the hallway, glancing up and down the hall for another likely suspect.

Doug fell back on the bed, his face red with anger. Viv covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed. Doug's head flicked around to turn his glaring eyes on her. Viv dropped her hand and looked away, holding her breath as she tried to force back her laughter.

Doug looked down the wet bed again.

"You have no sympathy," he growled.

Viv drew a heavy breath and sighed.

"Seriously, Doug," she said in a bored tone, "I really don't see why you're making such a big thing out of this."

"You know how I feel about hospitals," Doug replied sternly. Viv shut her eyes. Her lips moved silently along with Doug's as she went through the sermon with him. "Hospitals," Doug continued in a dry tone, "Are places to go only when you're going to die.

Otherwise, you're just a piece of meat that they shove through their grinder. They don't know who you are, and it doesn't really make a difference, either. You're classified by number and illness, that's all. The rooms all reek with antiseptic, as if the person before you had just died and they don't want you to find out about it. You're just a statistic in their average of survivals and failures. And the food..."

Doug's head rolled over, a look of disgust on his face. He stopped talking and his face went bland when he saw Viv had been following him silently. Viv, not

"They're to calm you down," the nurse replied.

"Thank God," Viv said, slumping in her chair. Doug kept eyeing the pills tentatively. "Take them, Doug," Viv said crisply.

Doug glanced at Viv, frowned, and popped the pills in his mouth. He swallowed them with exaggerated discomfort. The nurse took the empty cups and left the room, smiling and nodding to Viv.

Doug lay back in the bed, sullen and quiet. Viv sighed, lit another cigarette, and waited.

About half an hour later, Doug's eyelids started getting very heavy. Too weak to speak, he fought the drowsiness by forcing his eyelids constantly open. At last the battle was too much for him. His head rolled over and Doug gazed imploringly to Viv, as if for the last time, then his eyes slid shut.

Viv smiled, stubbed her second cigarette and walked over to the side of the bed. She leaned over

The demons' heads contracted and their fangs bloated, dripping foam on his face. Giant talons appeared

waving on blue-dead hands before his face. The talons drew back, revealing the wafting faces. Jeering smiles grew on the faces, their breath came faster, spitting foam off their fangs into Doug's face.

The talons clicked purposely above the visions' heads. The images drew back, collected themselves into a tight circle above Doug's head, then dived, talons first, straight at Doug's face.

"Mr. Crammell?" a voice called softly.

The voice crashed into the images, sending them flying in all directions.

"What?" Doug shrieked, scrambling up the bed and against the headboard.

At first, Doug was hesitant about getting into the wheelchair, but when the orderly handed him the cane, he grabbed it with relish, a reassurance against any possible mishap. Doug planted the cane firmly on one of the footholds and wrapped his hands around its grip.

The orderly wheeled him down the hall and past the floor's front desk to the elevator. A group of hospital employees had gathered around the desk to see the now infamous Doug Crammell off. They chuckled quietly and waved to him. Doug growled at them and tightened his grip on the cane. The orderly smiled condescendingly to them and pushed Doug into the elevator car.

Once sealed off from the hospital in the elevator, Doug managed to loosen up a bit. He stared up to the lights above the door and watched the symbolic floors pass by.



noticing Doug's pause, was carrying on, her head nodding back and forth, her eyes shut and her lips moving. A second later she realized that Doug was not talking along with her. She stopped and stooped her head.

"Sorry," she said with a smile. Doug stirred beneath the sheets. "I could be..." he repeated profoundly.

"Doug, please," Viv said in an exasperated voice. She waved her open palm at him and turned her head away. "God," she said, making testimony of Doug. Doug lay firmly back in the bed and drew a long, meaningful breath through his nose. The door to his room opened and a nurse stepped in. Doug, who thought it was the child return for a second killing, shot forward in bed and roared. The nurse stepped back in surprise, Doug, realizing his mistake, settled back in the bed, grumbling to himself. The nurse collected herself and walked toward him. Viv buried her head in her hand.

"Here," the nurse said firmly. "Take this." The nurse handed him two Dixie cups, one holding two pills, the other, water.

Doug took the cups, one in each hand, and eyed them deliberately, turning them around in his hands. "What is it?" he asked suspiciously.

and kissed Doug's head lightly. Viv shook her head as she smiled down at him and brushed his hair back.

The room's door opened silently and the nurse peeked in. Viv raised a finger to her lips and stepped up to the door, taking a last look at Doug as she left the room.

"Thanks for putting him to sleep," Viv whispered as she gently shut the door behind her. "I don't think he could make it if he were awake."

"I don't think we could make it if he were awake," she said, eyeing the door cautiously.

Viv smiled, nodded to the nurse, and left.

Doug's eyes opened meekly, just a crack to let the light in. He lay on his back, sprawled out on the bed, his mouth wide open. Images appeared above his head, vague and wispy but definitely there. The images floated around the bed, circling his head. Slowly they drifted into focus. Giant drooling monsters glided around

his body, floating like black-cloaked wraiths. Dripping fangs grew out of their stretched heads.

The orderly, seeing the look of terror on Doug's face, rushed backward and hit the wall. His hands had clutched the wheelchair he had been pushing, so that it flew back and smashed into him against the wall. The orderly maneuvered the wheelchair in front of him as a shield against Doug. His bulging eyes shot to the chart that dangled from the foot of Doug's bed. Suddenly the orderly's expression changed, his eyes relaxing as they went over the chart.

"Ahh, Mr. Crammell," the orderly said, nodding knowledgeably. The orderly chuckled to himself and shook his head. He'd get them back for this, he thought.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Doug snapped.

"Oh nothing, sir," the orderly replied, trying quite unsuccessfully to hide his mirth. "It's time to check out. If you'd just get ready..."

"It's about time, too," Doug grumbled. He threw off the sheets and limped over to get dressed.

The orderly stepped carefully up to help him.

When Doug had dressed, the orderly helped him into the wheelchair, handed him a cane for use once he left the hospital, and pushed him off out the door.

The elevator door opened on the ground floor and the orderly pushed Doug out to the exit. Viv was waiting there, a smile on her face when she saw him. She stepped over and helped him out of the chair into the car. She walked

around the side and opened the door to the driver's seat. The orderly was still standing in the exit. He shook his head, turned and pushed the wheelchair back into the hospital. Viv smiled and hopped into the car.

"Well," Viv said as she pulled out, "You're still alive, aren't you?" Viv smiled to herself.

Doug shifted uneasily in his seat. Viv slowed the car down to a stop at a red light. Her hands slid up to the top of the wheel.

"I hope you realize that I'm going to be in a great pain for the next little while," Doug warned.

The smile fell from Viv's face. Her head fell forward and thudded on the wheel.

"Doug..." she pleaded.