

GENE DOUCETTE

IMMORTAL

IMMORTAL SERIES



IMMORTAL is a first person confessional, penned by a man who is immortal but not invincible. In an artful blending of sci-fi, adventure, fantasy and humor, Immortal introduces us to a world with vampires, demons and other “magical” creatures, yet a world without actual magic. It is a contemporary fantasy for non-fantasy readers and enthusiasts alike.

GENE DOUCETTE is a novelist, a screenwriter, a playwright, a humorist, an essayist, and a few other things. He is, in other words, a writer, and thank goodness for that because the other options were alcoholic (still possible) and axe murderer (less likely).

In creating the ageless Adam, Gene Doucette has conjured up a character as witty as he is old, and as charming as he is depraved. IMMORTAL is by turns thrilling, moving, and deeply, darkly funny.

--Eric Garcia, author of Repo Men, Matchstick Men, and the Anonymous Rex series

Forget the genre. Here's a description I like: Immortal is like Men in Black meets The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy meets Odd Thomas. Yes, really.

--Spencer Seidel, author Dead of Wynter

Immortal

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About the Author

In addition to ghost writing for an immortal man, Gene Doucette has been published as a humorist with *Beating Up Daddy: A Year in the Life of an Amateur Father* and *The Other Worst Case Scenario Survival Handbook: A Parody*. He is also a screenwriter and a playwright. This is his first novel. Gene lives in Cambridge, MA with his wife and two children.

Prologue

The dream is always the same.

It starts on the hunt—running hard through the tall grasses in the heat of a blazing, midday sun. My tool is a stick with a sharpened stone tied to the end of it. The second crudest weapon imaginable, barely one technological step up from a heavy rock. It resembles a spear but that’s misleading because throwing one of these would be a stupid thing to do. Rather, one is advised to hang onto it until close enough to stab something. Even then you’d better hit the thing you’re stabbing in just the right place or the point can bounce off bone and you’ll have succeeded only in pissing off something much bigger than you.

There are four of us in this chase, and we’re tired. We’ve been after the beast for two solid days without food or water. We want to stop, all of us, but we won’t because this is our job.

The youngest one keeps lagging behind. It’s his first time on the hunt, and he’s only just discovered it’s not a lot of fun. We call him the Kaa, which is what we call all the young ones. He won’t get his name until he’s made his first kill. Which will be soon, provided he doesn’t quit on us.

The thing we are hunting—our name for it is a somewhat un-spellable guttural noise—is wounded. We hurt it the first time we tried to bring it down. As the leader I remain many paces ahead of the others, stopping periodically to check for tracks, and for blood. I’m a very good tracker.

The dream leaps ahead to the moment we finally come upon our prey. It is, in the modern parlance, a giant cat of some kind—a lion, or a cheetah.

Only it’s not exactly, as this dream is taking place tens of thousands of years ago. It is perhaps an evolutionary offshoot of a lion or a cheetah. There were few of them then and none of them now.

We find it lying in the grasses, no longer able to run, its breathing halting and uneven. I summon the Kaa as this is his moment, the moment when he becomes a man.

With great pride he strides forward and raises his spear, meaning to strike the creature's soft underbelly, which lies exposed. But I've made a mistake. The cat-thing isn't quite ready to die yet, and just moments before the killing blow is struck it lashes out with its sharp claws and catches the Kaa in the stomach.

In shock and pain, the Kaa lurches backward and unfortunately drops his spear. Never drop your spear. The cat is upon him before the three of us can do much of anything about it.

I jump onto the animal's back and wrap my arm around its neck, rolling him on top of me and then throwing him away from the Kaa. (The Kaa is mortally wounded already and will die without reaching his manhood. This I know without looking at him.) Then the three of us surround the cat as it decides which of us is the greatest threat. It settles on me. With a mighty lunge, it pounces.

The creature bites into my shoulder with its sharp, jagged teeth—not a mortal wound, but painful—but I get the better of him, sliding my sharpened stone spear between his ribs. We land on the ground together. I feel its jaw slacken and the teeth slide loose from my flesh as it dies.

Pushing the dead thing off me, I rise. I am bleeding from my own wounds and also covered in the creature's viscera. And I am happy. I howl in triumph.

It's at that moment she appears. She walks out from the tall grasses, a pale white woman with long red hair, devastating blue eyes, and a regal carriage that speaks to me of royalty not yet even imagined in this time and place.

Her clothing varies from dream to dream: a Victorian dress, a sari, simple peasant rags, or a smart business suit. And sometimes she's wearing nothing at all. She looks down at the dead thing, and then at me. She speaks. Her voice is an ice-cold splash of water and seems impossibly loud.

“Urrr,” she says, tears streaming down her face, “how could you?” And that’s when I wake up.

Part One

Echoes of a Bygone Time

Chapter One

I have no idea how long I’ve been here.

The problem is they took my watch before making me change out of my clothes. And one of the reasons I’d gotten that particular watch was because of the calendar feature on the bottom of the face. Most people can keep decent track of what day and month—and year—it is without checking, whereas I’ve been known to lose entire decades. Which, I guess, is normal for someone like me.

Can’t complain too much about the cell. Not that I am all that familiar with cells in general. Let’s say it looks better than the ones on television. It has a comfortable cot and a real pillow, a clean toilet, and a functional sink. No mirror. Probably figured I’d break it and use the pieces as a weapon. Or use the pieces to hurt myself. Which I wouldn’t do, but I can understand why they wouldn’t appreciate it, at least before they’re done with me.

Without the mirror I have no idea what I look like any more. My face, which I’d kept clean-shaven for the better part of the past century, is now sprouting the first stages of a beard, and the hair on my head is starting to grow back. I bet with a good enough look at my reflection I could use that to determine the length of my captivity.

How had I ended up in this state? There’s the real question. I’d have to go back to the day I woke up behind the futon.

My first thought, upon waking up, was that sometime the previous evening I'd become paralyzed in a tragic accident of some kind. I was almost entirely unable to move, largely because all four of my major limbs had fallen asleep and were not nearly as interested in awakening as the rest of me.

It took a little work and a lot of wriggling to ascertain that I wasn't paralyzed. I was simply pinned behind a futon. The smell of stale beer, tipped ashtrays, and vomit triggered vague memories of a party of some kind, one that I may even have been invited to. There was also the outside chance that the futon belonged to someone I actually knew, but that was, statistically speaking, a long shot.

I'm actually something of an aficionado in the "waking up stuck in strange places" department. I've woken up in hay lofts, under a butter churn, on roofs, in a choir loft (twice), under tables, on tables, in trees, in ditches, and half-pinned under a sleeping ox. One time in Bombay, I woke up to find myself lashed to a yak. This was my fourth futon. So, you'd think I'd have been used to it by now.

I could hear an American-style football game playing on the television, meaning first, someone else was in the room watching the game, and second, I was still in the United States. If I was exceptionally lucky, I was still in Boston, the last place I could recall being in.

My guess was whoever was in the room was also sitting on the futon, because the futon was rather heavy, and past experience suggested most unoccupied futons are easy to dislodge with minimal effort.

"Hello?" I said.

There was a lengthy delay, long enough for me to think I hadn't been heard. Then, "D'you hear that?" someone said. Man's voice, unaccented English. Okay, still in the United States, possibly not in Massachusetts any more.

"Yeah," his friend said. They were both on the futon.

One of them peeled back the top and looked at me through the back support. "Hey, dude," he greeted.

College student. Had to be.

He and his buddy stood up and pulled the futon away from the wall, affording me the opportunity to crawl to the center of the room. They pushed the futon back, sat down again, and continued to take in the game while I lay there and waited for the tingling sensation in my arms and legs to subside. That accomplished, I made a half-hearted attempt to get to my feet, but discovered that was far too difficult, due to a screaming hangover, which almost never goes well with bipedal movement.

“How’s it goin’?” one of my new friends asked, without taking his eyes off the game. “You need any help?”

“I’m fine right here, thanks,” I said.

“Kay.”

If you’re thinking they were acting terribly nonchalant about discovering a stranger behind the living room couch, you’ve never been to a collegiate keg party.

“Beer?” he offered. “We’re still draining the keg.”

After two cups of beer from my prone position on the floor I managed to gain my feet, struggle into the only other non-floor-position seating in the place, and watch a goodly portion of the football game.

I don’t understand American football. If you’re going to line a bunch of behemoths up in front of a bunch of other behemoths and ask them to hit each other as hard as they can, why tell them they can only hit one another a certain way? Too many rules, that’s the problem.

The Romans did it right. Plus, back then the combatants were slaves and didn’t command massive signing bonuses. So, that’s two points in favor of the Romans.

My bleary-eyed cohabitants shuttled between active interest and practical catatonia. Once in a while one of them would muster up a “good play” or “run, dude,” but that was pretty much it. We did work out basic introductions. The one on the left—blond, gap-toothed, wearing nothing but shorts and sneakers with no socks—was named Gary. On the right— jeans and T-shirt,

barefoot, black hair, black skin—was Nate. A more detailed review of their character and standing would have to wait.

By the time the game ended I was on my fourth beer and had probably overstayed my welcome, but I've never been one to much care about that sort of thing, so I sat where I was.

“So, you live around here?” Nate asked.

“I guess,” I said. “Is this still Boston?”

He looked at Gary. Gary looked like the kind of person who enjoyed holding people's heads under water.

“Yeah, still Boston,” Gary said. “You know, you don't look much like a student, Adam.” I'd given them my current American name, chosen more or less at random. Lately, I've taken to picking appellations alphabetically, the same way the weather bureau picks hurricane names. Zigmund was my last name but I dropped that after only a couple of months. Hard to travel around the U.S. with a name like Zigmund, I have to say. I've gone by hundreds of different names, including, of course, the one I was born with, which was really more of a grunt.

“Grad student?” Nate inquired. They were both sobering up enough to feel a little uncomfortable about me. And I was a bit too tipsy to lie.

“Nope. I just saw there was a party and dropped in,” I admitted. This might not have been true. I might have come with somebody. I couldn't remember.

“But you do have a place of your own, right?”

“Not so much, no.”

“You're a homeless guy?” Gary asked, mustering up some incredulity.

“Well, in the sense that I don't currently have a place to live, yes. But I have had a lot of homes.”

“Geez,” he said profoundly.

“C'mon,” Nate said, “you can't be more than, what, thirty?” The reasoning being, aren't homeless people all a lot older?

I took a sip of my beer and decided, what the hell. “I don’t really know how old I am.”

“What, you were adopted or something?” Gary offered. “No,” I said, “I just lost count. I’m immortal.”

You have to be a little careful about dropping that bit of information in the wrong place. I’ve been called a witch, a blasphemer, a devil, and a few other unpleasant things depending on the where and the when. But college students—and bar drunks for some reason—tend to be okay with it. Which may explain why I spend so much time with college students and bar drunks.

“Cool,” Gary said after an adequate pause. “You wanna crash here for a while?”

A couple of things about being immortal:

First of all, I’m not a vampire. I get that a lot, even during the day when I should be in a coffin or a crypt or something. (Very few vampires bother to sleep in a coffin, if you must know. Lugging one around everywhere you go is inconvenient, and it almost always attracts the wrong kind of attention. I did know a vampire who had one, but it was mostly a kinky sex thing for her.)

I’m not invincible. Also, no super-strength, X-ray vision, power of flight or any of that. I eat, drink, sleep, and shit just like everyone else. I just stopped getting any older at around age thirty-two. Why thirty-two? No idea. I have all my hair in all the proper places, and a relatively slight build that doesn’t seem to get any larger whether I lift weights or binge. To put it in a way a twenty-first century person might understand, it’s like someone hit pause on my existence.

I’m pretty sure I can be killed. I can certainly be hurt, and have on several occasions been very close to death due to one near-mortal wound or another. If I wanted to—I think—I could take my own life, although obviously this hasn’t been tested. Now maybe you’re not the type who ever considered suicide, but—and you’ll just have to trust me on this—when you live this long, it comes up. I was suicidal for two solid centuries once. That was during the early part of what they now call the Dark Ages, in medieval

Europe. Suicidal tendencies were de rigueur at the time, and I'm nothing if not trendy.

I don't know how old I am. My earliest memory is something along the lines of "fire good, ice bad," so I think I predate written history, but I

don't know by how much. I like to brag that I've been there "from the beginning" and while this may very well be true, I generally just say it to pick up girls. But it has been a very long time, and considering I'm not invincible or super-strong, that's nothing short of miraculous.

Oh, I do have one other thing going for me. I can't get sick. Universal immunity. That's a fairly big plus. Not as much of a big deal now as it was back when the average life span was in the low thirties and we measured the seasons by what plague was in vogue at the time but still, it's the gift that keeps on giving.

I'm currently white-skinned, but I wasn't always. I pretty much blend in with whatever culture I'm hanging out in, which is a very useful trait when you think about it. Of course I never fit in anywhere for the long haul, not after people around me all start getting old while I don't. So I move around a lot. You know, before locals start getting out the pitchforks and torches and what have you.

I try to keep up with the rapid advancement of modern culture, something I liken to sprinting in wet sand. I owe a lot of what I understand about the world today to television and movies, which are a true godsend to a guy in my situation. Likewise, I keep up with language pretty well, that being a survival skill I took to heart just around the time language was first invented.

I've been rich a couple of times. I still am, I think. I just don't live the life. That whole material wealth thing got old fast. I mean, creature comforts are nice, but immortality does funny things to the whole making- something-of-yourself imperative that people who expect to die someday go through. I hang onto enough money to get by because it's the easiest way to acquire alcohol, which I'm much in favor of.

Speaking of which, if you want to know what I've learned in my extended time on Earth it is this: beer is good.

I've never been much of a deep thinker.

We finished tapping out the keg that evening, and I immediately earned my stay by providing funds for more alcohol. After that we got along fine.

Turned out Nate was a history major. You'd think with me being immortal I'd be able to help him with that.

"No, no, this isn't right," I said, skimming Nate's copy of *The French Revolution: a cartoon history*. We were sitting at the table—a cheap folding card table—in their dining room. Books and papers were strewn across the surface, leaving precious little room for one to put one's beer.

"C'mon, I got a test on it tomorrow," Nate said, staring unappreciatively at me. "What's wrong with it?"

I tossed the offending tome onto the floor. "The French Revolution was a street brawl that got a little out of hand. Everything that came after that was a massive rationalization."

"Pretty sure I can't say that tomorrow."

"I can tell your professor myself. You want me to? I was there. He'd probably appreciate my input."

"Cut that out, man," he urged, picking up the textbook. "Sorry. Maybe you should drink some more. I find it helps." "No, I gotta study. Seriously." Nate wasn't much fun sober.

Gary was the more laid-back of the two. He didn't know what his major was, but he'd shown a great talent for keg-tapping with a minor in drooling. From the kitchen he said, "That's so cool," as regards my immortality. He said this every twenty minutes or so, usually unprompted. In the kitchen, he was fighting a losing battle with a team of roaches that reportedly held a box of Cocoa Crispies hostage this morning and were unwilling to end the siege twelve hours later.

"It's not cool if it gets me an F on this," Nate barked.

"So, you'd rather just regurgitate what these books tell you than know what really happened?"

“Exactly.”

“No quest for truth? Where’s your spirit of exploration?”

“You never went to college, did you?” Nate asked.

He had me there. So, I let him be and joined Gary, which was just as well. When you’re immortal you find there are only so many faces in the world, and to me Nate looked exactly like a Bantu tribal prince I used to hang out with. I kept having to remind myself not to speak to him in Xhosa.

In the kitchen, Gary was standing on the counter with a can of Raid and firing indiscriminately into the cupboard, undoubtedly rendering everything in there inedible, including the compromised Cocoa Crispies.

“Any luck?” I asked.

“It’s only a matter of time, my friend. They can’t hide behind the macaroni forever.”

My money was on the roaches, and I was about to say something to that effect when something under the kitchen sink made a loud bump.

“The hell was that?” Gary asked.

I shrugged. “Really big roach?”

Granting the bugs a temporary reprieve, Gary hopped off the counter and pulled open the door leading to the sink.

“Aahhh!” he shouted. He scampered back like he’d just seen a human head.

“That’s who you remind me of!” I exclaimed.

He looked at me like I was insane. (Not an unreasonable assumption. I was insane for about eighty years in Macedonia. Long story.) “What??”

“Roman soldier named Cassius. He was afraid of anything with hair.”

Gary pointed to the sink cabinet mutely, bringing me back to the present. Nate popped his head in. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Tell me you see that too,” Gary said.

I leaned down and pushed the door open. He was hiding behind the garbage disposal.

“Oh, hey, Jerry,” I said. “What are you doing down there?”