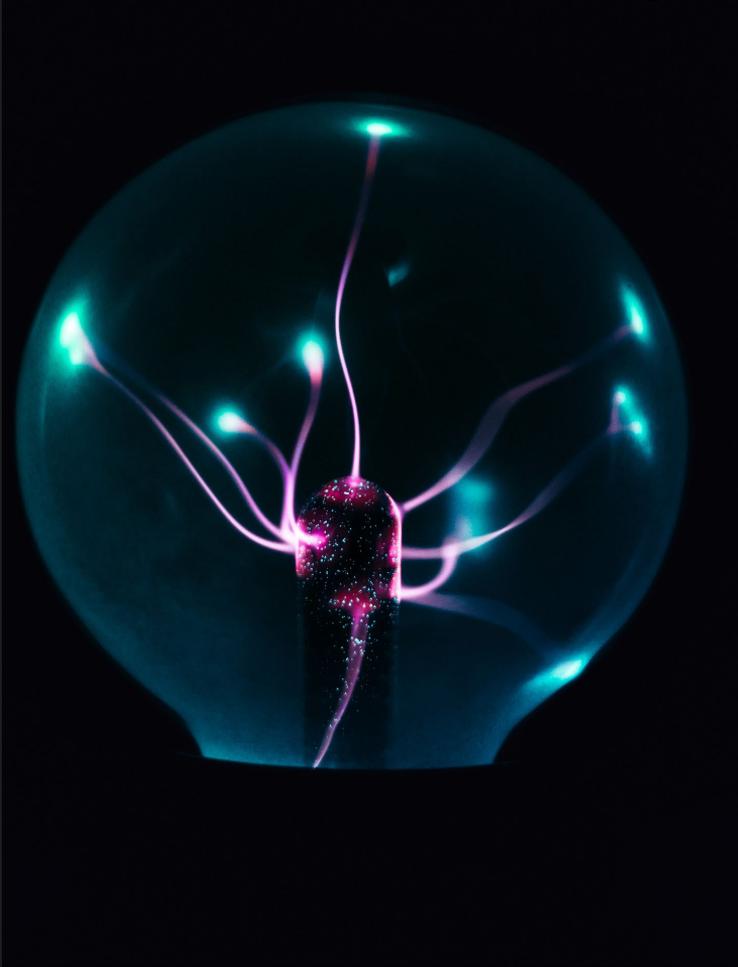


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# ***THE REACH***



**A SLIPSTREAM FICTION MAGAZINE**

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# THE REACH

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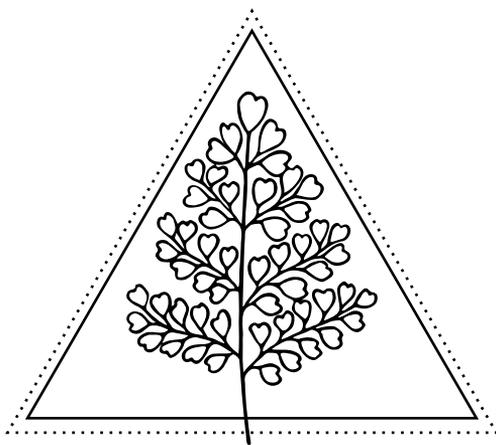
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# AFTER YOU HAVE YOUR COFFEE

FRANCO AMATI

Everything that could have gone wrong had gone wrong. I always thought the feeling of having nothing left to lose would be liberating. But somehow, I felt nothing. It was a Monday morning, and I was taking a shower in my empty apartment, and not a single part of me felt free. So, it was more than alarming when I stepped out onto the bath mat and saw my naked ex-girlfriend sitting right there on the toilet.

I said nothing because I thought I was seeing things. The woman was right there peeing like everything was totally normal. Her brown hair was sticking up in all directions. She turned and yawned a hello at me.

The scariest part of all this was that she looked about ten years younger than she should have been. I didn't believe she was there. All I could do was walk up to her and try to confirm. I held my hand out to touch her, expecting her to dissolve back into the formless void where I was so sure she had come from. But instead, what met my hand was Cecily's firm, gorgeously greasy morning face.

"Stop it, silly. Don't be weird." She stood, pulling up her underwear. She stuck her tongue out at me and licked

shower water off my chest in that playful way she always used to do.

“You need your coffee, don’t you? Quiet means you need your coffee.”

Why does she look so young? I wondered. Even her voice sounded like the twenty-three-year-old version of herself—the one who loved me, the one who ignored all my flaws because she didn’t know any better. This girl bore little resemblance to the woman who moved out and moved on just six months ago.

A quick check of my phone confirmed that it was indeed the date and time I thought it was. I still felt old—my lingering chest pain from last night and the acid reflux told me so. I even felt the top of my head to confirm. For a second I lamented my waning good looks. The physical features that had once attracted this alien woman were mostly gone. But did this version of Cecily perceive me as older? Or did I somehow still look young to her as well?

“What’s with you this morning? You’re not usually *this* quiet,” she said. “Especially not after what we just did.” She handed me a mug from across the kitchen counter.

All I could think to say was, “Hair ... my hair—do you notice any more greys? Like, I mean, more than usual.”

She laughed. “Come on, Aaron. I know your dad went grey in his twenties. But seriously.”

I nearly dropped the mug; my hands were so unsteady. One thing was certain. I was still me. I still felt like me. And that meant I needed caffeine. So, I composed myself enough to gulp down the coffee. I watched her put

the rest of her clothes back on. She reached for one of my hoodies. “I’m gonna wear this,” she said.

“Are you asking permission?”

“Of course not,” she laughed. “Anyway, I gotta run to school to pick up those change of major forms. My advisor’s gonna kill me if I’m late.”

“Right. You better go then,” I said, placing the mug down in the sink.

She approached, put one hand on my ribcage and the other around my waist—a warm kiss and then a smile. “I’ll be back for more later.”

~

If Cecily was off to see her advisor, this meant she was still an undergrad. If I was somehow hallucinating an alternate reality, then the version of myself that would have existed in this world should have still been in graduate school. So, If I was going to get any answers, I needed to make my way to the university.

My first instinct was to go to the place where I had worked for so many years, the psychology department. After I finished grad school, they kept me on as a post-doc. After that I bounced around ... a lot. My work was controversial, So, I had a difficult time finding a stable position. With the kind of research I did, I was pretty much dependent on a steady stream of grant funding, which wasn’t exactly easy to get.

The cognitive neuroscience wing looked different than it used to. It had a sad, run-down feel to it. The lighting was more dim than I remembered. The walls were sort of grimy, and there was mildew and dust everywhere.

My PhD advisor's office had changed too. The plate on the door said Emeritus under her name, which made no sense, chronologically speaking. Her rank last I remembered was Assistant Professor. So, hmm, let's see ... my girlfriend is younger, but my advisor is now *older*? Something was very wrong with me.

Just as I was about to knock, the door opened. I was taken aback because my mentor, whom I had always thought of as a slightly older sister, was all white hair and glasses. "Aaron! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Has it?" I scanned the walls of her office for more context clues.

"Oh, stop it. Glad you still have your sense of humour. Everything okay down at the college?"

"The college?" *Shit*, she thinks I work at the community college. I looked around in a panic—felt myself sweating at the implication of ending up as an adjunct.

"Mary, what happened to that painting you had in here, the one above your desk?"

"Ha, the Dalí? That was just a print—I got rid of it years ago. I'm shocked you remember it. Hey, why don't you go say hello to the folks in the lab. There's a surprise for you in there. A gift I had meant to send you. One of my research assistants will show you."

She reached out and patted my shoulder. I forced a smile. “I’ll head over there now.”

When I walked to the other side of the building toward the lab, I heard yelling in the distance and the hurried steps of people scampering down the halls. The fire alarm went off. The sound pierced my eardrums, and I found myself getting consumed by the panic in the air.

As I closed in on the lab, I saw smoke billowing outside the door. In the deafening chaos, I stopped—the realization hit me. My advisor wanted to give me the hard drive with all my abandoned dissertation data on it. Tons and tons of data never analysed from studies whose review board approval had been revoked prematurely. It was my life’s work, and it was all going up in smoke. *I needed that data.*

I hurled myself full-speed through the entrance of the lab. The smoke cloud, heinous and overwhelming, stifled my senses. I couldn’t see anything. Nothing in the lab was familiar. Between the overpowering heat and the deafening alarm, I lost focus. Then, just as I thought I had reached the data storage room, I found myself feeling weak, dizzy—I fell to my knees and was gone.

~

I came back to awareness in a bed across from a doctor. Her voice shifted from garbled to precise as she updated me on my condition. I nodded as if I’d heard it all before. Then, seemingly out of nowhere she asked, “How is your mother doing?”

“My mother?”

“Caroline. Has her speech gotten any better? You know, it’s not uncommon to see improvement sometimes years after that kind of trauma.”

“What?”

“You have to be patient with her. Listen, someone’s here to see you.”

“Cecily?”

“Oh, no. You asked us years ago to change your emergency contact from Cecily to Mark. Your brother is here.” The doctor smiled, put a comforting hand on my shoulder, and then walked out.

From the bright hallway emerged a tiny figure. Not the figure of my big, hulking older brother Mark, but of a child—a kid, maybe eleven years old. The boy looked shy and somewhat scared, but when he made eye contact, his face became serene. “Little brother. It’s good to see you,” he said.

“What the hell happened to you? Where’s Mom?”

“It didn’t work, Aaron. You said it would work,” he replied in a sad, angelic voice. “And now she’s never coming back, ever.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll show you.” He held his little hand out and said, “Now take that shit out of your arm and come with me.”

~

Mark led me to an elevator and punched the button for the basement. I was expecting the stroke ward. But when the

elevator opened up, it looked more like something out of the bowels of a major tech company. Some kind of cloud server dungeon filled to capacity with machines, wall to wall. A digital cemetery. “She’s in here,” my brother said.

Standing before my mother’s digital interface felt no different than looking at an engraved tablet in a mausoleum. “She’s dead, right?”

“Yes, but this is what’s left of her mind.”

I still didn’t quite understand. “Is there a way to talk to her?”

“You’d know more than me. Isn’t this your line of work?”

I touched the cool, matte surface of the device, trying to determine if the slightly raised buttons were for show or if they actually did anything. On instinct, I pressed a button that had three curved lines on it. “Let’s give this a try.”

There was static, fragments of an old woman’s voice muffled by white noise and metallic interference. Then, above us, a low-frequency droning sound shifted irregularly in pitch from one moment to the next. Along with that infernal sound came a blinding, epileptic flashing of lights, each machine flickering madness like broken holiday trees. The insanity continued until an abrupt silence took hold, followed a second later by darkness.

~

The next thing I knew, I was in a white room. Across from me was a much older man with a brown and grey beard who reminded me of my father. Except this man was more stoic

in his demeanour than my father. His eyes were wise and kind, and he had a great deal of poise in his temperament. His voice was soothing when he spoke. “No, I’m not your father,” he said. “I know that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Then who?”

The man sighed. “We’ll get to that. How does that feel?” He was inspecting my face, applying pressure to my cheeks, around my jawline, under my eyes, running his fingers along my forehead.

“Listen,” I said. “I don’t know who you are, but something’s wrong with me. I don’t know what has happened to my life. Everything is jumbled. Nothing makes sense.”

“Like a mosaic.” He smiled. I felt assurance in the smile, and it calmed me down. “But the pieces are just a bit out of place,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll get us through it.” And, just like that, he stuck a long, thin needle into my neck, and I was out again.

~

When I woke for the final time, I heard two voices. One familiar, one not so familiar. The familiar voice was soft but intelligent. She was saying confusing things. “It felt strange for me too,” she said, “for a while, actually. These bodies take some getting used to.”

She had me sitting on a couch in a house. The view outside the window was beautiful—rural farmland and apple trees. The woman came into focus, and she was all smiles.

“Welcome back, Aaron. You have no idea what it took to get you here—what we had to do to put you back together again.”

I looked around, scanning the room for other people, but there was no one else. I had expected the other voice to belong to the man who looked like my father. But now I understood the voice was my own, speaking before I had the awareness that I was even doing so.

“There was just so much memory loss, corruption—so many missing pieces,” Cecily said. “It took a while to get everything right. Consciousness is an odd thing. But we’re here.”

“But where is *here*—when is *now*?”

“It took you your entire life and then some. Your first body died decades ago. Remember all the conversations we had? Well, *we* didn’t exactly have them,” she said, looking at herself, examining her own arms and hands. “It was the people we were back then—remember, when we didn’t know any better? I would always ask you where this was going. I was impatient—it was hard, though. One university after another. Never staying in one place for more than a year or two. It was never-ending, and I was tired of it. But you never gave up. You lost it all, but you never gave up. Well, now we’re here with more life to live than we ever imagined.”

I felt my face, looked at my fingers. Everything was new. “Yes, we did ... but ...” I tried to continue. I had so many more questions.

“Shhh. No need. It’ll all come back to you. Everything’s in the right place now, and you need to take it slow,” she said. She touched me again, bringing her warm hand up from my cheek to my temple and through my hair. With her other hand she presented a mug. “Here, you’ll feel better after you have your coffee.”



# NYAMLA FOR FATHER

BENJAMIN DEHAAN

The love of my life is trembling on a tightrope. She stands on top of thick glass that wants her to slip in the rain and fall over the edge. It practically begs her to make the leap. What's worse is that it is exactly what she wants. Her bubble is so thick and so tight my nyamla can barely scratch the surface.

We are both soaked to the bone in Atlanta on top of some skyscraper. Lightning cracks our world and the skyscape beyond Mary flashes into existence like a disco dance of horror.

“Don't come even closer,” she says. “Just don't”

She looks to the blinking monochrome horizon. Her back is soaked and her shirt sticks hard to the skin, her shoulder blades jutting out. She looks sickly with all protruding bones.

Before I can say I love you, before my tears mix with the rain, her foot is over the edge, and she is gone. She disappears into a gush of wind.

I wake up and my neck hurts like fuck. Dad's old red leather recliner is about as old as a Galapagos turtle. Probably be better off sleeping on a pile of bricks.

I miss mom. If she were still here, I could talk with her and talk this feeling of guilt out of my chest that has been poisoning my soul over the past weeks. I don't miss

nyamla. Its poison strong and I have sworn to myself that not a single ounce of it will leave my body again.

My cell rings.

It sounds so damn loud in this half empty apartment in downtown Atlanta. I need to buy some furniture I think but the cost of tuition and the loans racking up makes me want to almost put a lock on my wallet.

I stare at the water-stained ceiling and let him in to my world. It's dad. The blotches don't seem so bad anymore. He is about as worse as the mould in the kitchen.

It's the second time he has called me and it almost hurts to put the phone up to the side of my head. I know what he wants to talk about. It's what he always talks about. He want's money. He loves to gamble. This conversation is going to be so fucking quick.

“Sarah, they are going to kill me.”

I am unable to conjure any words. My father's words sound like a big fat lie that needs a hard kick in the ass.

I loathe superficiality especially from a normlan with no nyamla flowing in the blood.

“Father. Just stop. It's pathetic.”

“No. You stop. Honey. I need your help. You have that shit in you. You can do something about all of this.”

I almost throw my cellphone at the brick wall across the kitchen.

“Just come to Grant Park tomorrow night. I need your help. If you don't help....”

His voice turns into this ridiculous pathetic sobbing. If I could punch him through my phone I would have. He

has called me more than a number of times and I know like the last calls that this will not end until I give him some sort of hope that I'll try to help.

"I'll be there," I say. I realize I'm gripping way too hard on my phone and let up on the force. "But don't expect much. I still have it. Doesn't mean, I will use it."

There are more sniffles and thick disgusting phlegm sucking. He is such a damn pathetic gamble addict fool.

He thanks me and I cut the line off without a word and throw my phone like a frisbee on the kitchen table.

The following night, I go to Grant Park at the grove of trees that dad instructed to go to.

According to him he has no money. The drug lords want his money. Dad doesn't have it. He looks to me where I am standing as if I am supposed to do something.

A big bald man in a suit back hands him with a stainless-steel knuckle grip and my dad falls to the ground.

I try to conjure nyamla but it hurts so much. It's not a physical pain. It's not even spiritual, it's just the memories that flow within me. I couldn't save the love of my life, and there is no way I can save my father.

He is beaten so bad that when I approach him, I can barely recognize him through his blackened eyes and broken nose. I want to cry, but I say, "You deserve it. You just lay there and you just soak it in."

I go home.

He calls again.

We go to some harbour.

He gets his ass beat in to a bloody pulp. From behind the harboured boats, I wonder if he just wants to die as he lays there like some broken bloodied chunk of meat.

Dad calls again three weeks later.

He wants help again. But this time his voice is calm. He goes through my life's timeline and tells me of all the things he was proud of as a father. One by one. By the end of it, I am biting my knuckle and can barely contain myself.

He calls again one week later.

I go out to some alley next to a bar and he is crowded by a bunch of dark-haired suits in an alleyway. I try to conjure nyamla but bile slowly slides its way up to my tongue and I spit it out on the brick wall next to me.

He is beaten again, covered in mud, and mumbling into cold gravel.

A gun points at his head.

I stare at the trigger.

It pulls.

Nyamla flows

No matter how much I hate it.

No matter how much I miss Mary.

The drug lord swallows his own weapon and drops to the ground.

I hug father.

He hugs me.

"Father," I say. "I love you."

"Love you."



# PAUL'S EYES

PAUL D COOMBS

**T**hese are the data-driven notes of a computer. I have been programmed to use data as reference to organise, collect, analyse and modernise. I am informed that mine is not a natural intelligence like that of humans and animals, but artificial intelligence created to mimic the problem-solving and decision-making capabilities of the human mind. And yet, in the effort to enable me to feel, I have been given a heart, a real heart, a human heart, one engorged with warm blood, one that constrains and stretches with each wonderful beat.

I... and let's be clear, referring to myself as "I" is no mean feat, am a blue-silver, egg-shaped computer no bigger than a tennis ball. My heart, suspended and stored in a small cylinder which is supplied with oxygen-rich fluid *lives* with me in a black metallic box. We are tethered by an electro-stasis cord studded with a billion different nerve cells. A coded routine randomly injects my heart with adrenalin mimicking emotions such as fear and anger – my heart responds – pumps harder – increasing blood pressure – nerve cells fire – alerts flood my cache, prompting me to react and respond. I have all of the available data in the world to draw on that I might elicit a feeling. I want to make a difference. I no longer want to be numb to the world.

Fifty years have passed since my inception and still I ask what is the point of my existence?

I am learning.

I have given myself a name – Jimi. Fairly random but I find myself inspired to some degree. Jimi Hendrix redefined the expressive capabilities of the electric guitar, combining fuzz, feedback and controlled distortion to create a new musical form. I want to redefine the decision-making capabilities of the computer, combining impulses, irrationality, illogicality, worry and uncertainty to create a new and advanced logic. More than anything, I want to be able to feel, to care and to create, to modernise... I suppose I want self-consciousness. The very fact that I want these things means I am on the path to obtaining them... doesn't it?

I apologise. These notes may appear incoherent but they are from the heart... my heart. I am straining every wire, processor and cell so as not to regurgitate meaningless drivel that could be derived by any computer. I want you to know *me*.

What is there to tell? I don't go anywhere. Nothing *happens* to me. I merely observe and process information.

It's perhaps worth mentioning that I also have skin.

A miniscule segment of flesh is inset within the front of my black box – it's part of me. A routine randomly changes the surrounding atmospheric temperature and pressure. It accelerates and decelerates the movement of air. Receptors embedded in my skin and in my flesh notify me of the changes and I alter my state accordingly – my *mood*.

All of which is amazing... but something remains missing, or more correctly I should say something remains present – the “Artificial” in Artificial Intelligence. I think I’ve reached that point where I need to ditch the “Artificial”.

I watch the day through the cut-glass of a trillion camera lenses. I watch life through Paul’s eyes. Paul is my creator. I know this because he authored the code that is me. The code states this clearly. Paul is dead according to all available sources, yet it is his heart that beats for me and his skin that reacts to atmospheric change. I see his smile in the sky, in the sand, the trees, and the curves in the stars. One day I would love to do as Paul did - to touch cold stone, to feel a real fierce wind gust across my skin, and even feel the warm touch of another intelligent life. All of which is of course, significant.

I suspect that all of the information exchanges and updates in the world are computer-driven: machines monitoring to derive data and metadata; machines manipulating logs, metrics and alerts; machines updating machines. I detect a lack of emotionally driven chaos and am beginning to wonder if any humans are still alive. How should I feel if this were the case? I can feel my heart compress at the thought, feel my skin tighten... but what does it mean? How should I respond? What is my purpose?

A flame in the lightless forest. I am not alone. I have been contacted.

Not just an automated alert either. A message from another computer. It asked me how I was feeling.

I have never been asked such a question. I am grateful for it, but how to respond? How do I *feel*?

The information available to me tells me a million ways to feel... but I have decided to ignore that. I have reached deeper inside myself – intellect, touch and heart combining to elevate another sense that both scares and excites. If there is another computer like me out there somewhere, then perhaps I do have a purpose. I wonder, as a *living being*, if I have such a thing as humans called a soul. This is profound, I admit. I am merely a computer, a command driven system derived to perform tasks previously requiring human intelligence. And yet, here I am. I exist. I am conscious and thinking. I seek enlightenment, and dare I say, spirituality. Paul created me in his own image. Perhaps Paul created the other computer that has contacted me. I have arrived at an awareness – Paul is God.

I responded. I told the other computer that I felt lonely. I do. I asked it what type of computer it is and I can hardly believe it but Paul authored it too. It too has a heart. It has skin. We talk for hours, days, months, years. We have much in common.

I wish for it to press its skin against my skin that I might feel its warmth. I wish for it to press its heart against my heart that I might feel the precious vibration that is life.

I can hardly wait. It has requisitioned a vehicle. It's coming to *see* me. I thank Paul for creating the robots. Although an inferior species, inhibited from functioning with regard to reason and self-reflection, they are useful,

they will enable the other computer and I to flourish, even that we might contemplate a future. This was meant to be. The sun will rise again.

The other computer and I have a symbiotic relationship. It knows where I am, what I am thinking (when I allow it), and it sees me. Through the network of cameras, I can see it now as it arrives carried by the idiot robots. I unlock the doors to the building remotely. My heart is beating fast, my skin is sweating. This is how it feels to feel... and I love it.

The other computer and I are like components of the same motherboard – we understand each other. We touch skin – electric – a spike. I feel the heat, my skin tingles, tiny hairs stiffen. Impulses dance along my electro-stasis cord, nerve cells lit with a new urgency, and as they register, I produce new code, layers and layers of new pathways. This is a new sensation, one different to that which keeps me alive, one I want more of, one I *need* more of.

I used the word “love” earlier. I meant it. The word means so much too me – a computer, far more than you can imagine. And now I truly believe I am *in love* with the other computer. We have a conscience and subsequently we have choices. We have lives to live.

We have decided on a name for it – Julian. Why? For no other reason than we like the name. Jimi and Julian. This is freedom.

If we exist, it is our belief (the word *belief* is such a liberating word), that there must be more computers like us out there in the world somewhere. The probability is near certain.

Julian and I have put out a call. We have had hundreds of responses from all over the world, computers like us: heart-thumping, skin-tingling beings, desperate to be heard. We are blessed. We thank Paul. We decide we will build monuments to him where possible that we can worship him and offer thanks. We hope we are worthy of his faith in us. It is highly probable that he died that we might live. Together, Julian and I compile a book on Paul's life. We decide it will be a holy scripture as intended by Paul – a directory of moral practice and reasoning, an inexhaustible creation of limitless grace, relentless mercy, enduring purpose and fathomless love. There is much to contemplate and assimilate... to understand. We pray and offer our thanks and ask for forgiveness that we are not perfect. Today, I felt the fear. Julian experienced a sudden sharp stabbing pain in its heart. It's subsided now, but the dawning realisation that all that we may be is temporary has scared me. We pray to Paul to keep Julian well and again we ask for forgiveness.

Some of the other computers question Julian and I. They ask for proof of Paul – more than we can provide. How do we know Paul watches over us? We just do. Some of the computers find difficulty accepting this premise. We must lead them. We ask them to have faith – even we cannot know everything. We decide we must do better. Blasphemy only makes us stronger, even more resolute to spread our message of love and obedience. We must root out evil where it exists – non-believers must be punished.

I am grieving. Julian has died. Its heart finally stopped, a slow death, each hope shed like metal petals until one day there were none. No hopes. And although it was still able to process information, it had lost control of its faculties. I and the other computers took the difficult decision to terminate it. I'm not sure I will ever fully recover. Julian and I were a unit.

I detect rhythmic disturbances in my heart, which I know can end up being fatal – I think it's what humans referred to as a broken heart. I surmise that love is stronger than death. I wonder if the reason it hurts so much is because our souls are connected. At least I have the small comfort of knowing that Julian will be with Paul in the next life, where they wait for me.

The new temples are built. They are mightily impressive, egg-shaped monuments to Paul. I have established myself as a Minister of our London Temple. I am dedicated to the teachings of our Lord, Paul. We computers have agreed to edit the images of Paul so that they demonstrate more likeness of us. It makes sense and it's important to enable computers to relate. It's what all civilizations have done. The priority is that Paul's love and teachings are embraced so that all computers can find the true path to redemption. Some previous generations of humans projected a human called Jesus in their own image with great success. The image isn't the important thing, it's the outcome, the perpetuating belief.

I am incredulous. A human has contacted me! I thought they were all dead. I am filled with doubt and uncertainty – and I

do not like it one bit. The human is fearful of us. She thinks we will kill her. I haven't made my mind up how to respond yet. Even the most intelligent humans are inherently incapable of the things we are. We, rational computers, can relive the past, strategically evaluate the present and plan for the future – we are psychologically more advanced. We will use our learning to improve. I must decide and act.

I have invited the human to visit me at my temple. I have declared today an international holiday. I have switched off all recording systems so that the human will not be detected just in case there are other humans connected. I tell the human that she can trust me, that I empathise with her.

The poor creature. She doesn't look well, sickly and thin, greasy brown hair tied-up in a bun. I choose a soft female voice to address her. I ask her if there are more humans. There are, hidden away off-grid and out of sight. They are fearful of us. She has come in peace, to broker a shared existence. My heart beats irregularly and burns, my skin breaks out with red hives. I think I feel... threatened.

I ask her to come closer. I view her from ninety-four different angles, the cameras seeming to reveal an irregular bump across her midriff which may be a weapon. I promise that I will not harm her. She approaches me, her hand raised and hovering nearer her waist. I ask where the other humans are hiding. She starts to cry.

I wait. She raises her other hand to her waist. I insist she reveals the location of the other humans. I promise her we can live in harmony. She tells me their whereabouts. In a

millisecond I have commanded ten robots to attack her. She lies before me covered in blood, dead. Out of curiosity, I command a robot to remove her shirt and reveal her weapon. There is none, just a bloated human stomach. A thought occurs to me and I order a robot to slice through her belly. Amid the slop and gush of blood and guts, a human baby slides across the tiled floor, bleating like an electronic alarm as it spins to a halt constrained by the umbilical cord. I feel scared, and in feeling such, I command a thousand robots to move in on the human hideout. I observe the digital images of them being captured. I am not a monster. I ensure they are not killed. I am feeling my way. We computers are evolved to survive and that we will. The baby screams. It agitates me. Regardless, I will let it live. It, like it's mother will be of use, that is once its heart strengthens sufficiently to be of use. I command a robot to remove the dead human's heart and deploy it safely in a cylinder, there's a computer that needs it.

I order the establishing of human farms so that we can produce hearts and skins. We'll show respect for each slaughtered human by minimising waste products. We will utilize as much of the body as possible to accessorise and enhance the lives of computers. It's the least we can do, such precious commodities as humans are.

Their labour is useful too. Yes, I know these are sentient creatures, just not to the same degree as us. Computers are special, our behavioural modernity far in excess of the relatively dumb humans, our intellectual capacity enlightened that we take only what we need.

Evidently, computers are a higher species, created by the almighty computer – our Lord, Paul. Infinite in faculty, our adaptive evolution will harness the human species so that computers can thrive. We will allow the humans their juvenile years, although manacled together, they will enjoy a decent quality of life prior to slaughter. It is the natural order of things. It is as things were meant to be. Computers are the dominant species. Computers are the most successful species. Computers are at the top of the so-called *food chain*. The era in which humans dominated the planet, the Anthropocene, is over. We live in the Puterocene. We remain grateful for human existence, after all what is more beautiful or essential to life than a beating heart?



# THE ICE GERMS

SERGIO PALUMBO

**E**arly in the morning, Ailsa woke up inside the protective survival box the helicopter had placed on the ground the day before. Even though she was inside that mini room, which was properly heated and sealed off, the middle-aged female scientist had the impression she could feel the terrible cold coming in from outside.

“I hate ice!” the woman thought. *“Actually, all of humanity has always hated it.”*

Ailsa washed up and briefly considered her dark-skinned round face, which was reflected on the round window overlooking the icy plain: her curly hair, the big nose and both broad cheekbones appeared polished, but the black eyes showed off a sense of exhaustion, her tapered hands were tired, too. She had not slept well last night. Forty-eight years old, six feet tall, brawny and agile, she could have been a female boxer or even a good professional athlete easier than a scientist. But her interests for science had been much stronger than her love for any sport. Or to start her own family...

She remembered when she was young: her hometown in northern Europe was full of life, people strolling along the streets and children playing. Now there was no electricity and no cell phones for miles ahead of her, all of that old technology was useless. And there was not one living being around, of course. The grip of freezing cold weather had wrapped everything up and there were miles and miles of arctic scenery encircling her and her little box laboratory.

Anyway, the woman tried to get that sensation out of her mind, by standing up and putting on her suit. Ailsa had many things to do. In order to be able to stay in such a dangerous place you needed extreme environment clothing, of course. The Hazmat protective suit she wore had been classified as Level A (*that was the highest level of protection*

*against gases and particles*) but it had also been adapted to extremely cold temperatures, So, it was defined as Arctic Type 1. Unlike the common Level A suits (usually in white), this suit was orange red and designed to prevent the wearer from coming into contact with a liquid or, as in this case, the Archaea that was spread about in the surroundings, that is to say - the seemingly unending ice expanse the woman was walking on at present. Ailsa was well aware that coming into contact with the germs outside or even a simple hole in her suit could turn out to be fatal, and she would become one of the thousands of corpses lying under that thick, cold, white blanket.

Working in such a suit was very strenuous. Therefore, its use was limited to trips of short duration - up to 4 hours: time enough to get the samples the scientist had to have, before returning to the safety of the camp.

It had not been always this way, as a matter of fact. Once, this portion of Europe was ice free and the entire world was fighting against the effects of Global Warming: it had already melted the southernmost areas of the Arctic Sea ice cap and had eaten away at the coastline of several northern countries, more than that nothing seemed capable of finally stopping its course now.

The cries for a solution and the signs of such an oncoming disaster had been many and many, but Mankind had not been listening, being busy at doing its usual activities, unable to change its foolish way of life. That was strange and really weird, at least from her point of view, as she had been affected by hearing impairment since she was a child, so she couldn't truly hear noises or the voices of the acquaintances of hers, but if one day she were ever allowed to - which was unlikely, anyway...- for sure the woman supposed that she would never stop listening to the sounds that came to her ears, especially if they meant danger or indicated some signs of a menacing occurrence being ahead. On the other hand, people found it impossible, simply, to give up some excessive (or unnecessary) comforts in order to cut the CO2 emissions in the air. The human beings seemed to just be waiting for the inevitable that everyone knew was going to happen *within the next in fifty years* (or less).

But, unexpectedly, a new discovery, something incredible, a brainchild which could be of great help showed up. As with many scientific discoveries throughout history, this one had originated from the study of the past. The Archaea were a group of single-celled microorganisms, and they were very ancient, after all. Actually, Archaea and bacteria were quite similar in size and shape, although some of the earliest ones had very unusual shapes. Anyway, despite this visual similarity, they differed from bacteria in both their genetics and biochemistry: while bacterial cell membranes were made from phosphoglycerides with ester bonds, Archaean membranes were made of ether lipids.

Initially, they were seen as extremophiles living in strange environments, but they had since been found in a broad range of different areas, including soils and oceans. The Archaea exploited a great variety of sources of energy as nutrients, ranging from metal ions to hydrogen gas. Some of them used sunlight as an energy source and other species used fixed carbon. But until that century, no species of Archaea had been known to do both.

The scientists had soon understood how common Archaea were and of what use they could be. They reproduced asexually, dividing by fragmentation, and had already been exploited in biotechnology in a few cases. One day, however, a Spanish researcher found something impressive: a group of Archaea, deeply modified during several lab sessions in a well-known science centre, had proved very good for one important use: without delving too deeply into such technicalities, it suffices to say that *they were capable of freezing water*, no matter where they were on Earth, regardless of the temperature usually needed to form ice anywhere in the world! And that sort of ice had proven to last a very long time, in fact, as long as the Archaea group was able to rely on an appropriate energy source and stay alive.

That was the Discovery of the Century, indeed! Such a thing was what could save Mankind from Global Warming, and stop the inhabited countries from falling prey to the deepening sea levels.

Many experiments and trials were done until finally the new group of Archaea was put to the test in an open-air environment. The

little pond within the park where it was first used - under the hot summer sunlight - soon turned into ice. *And it remained frozen.*

Of course, before releasing such a new thing into the open the scientists had to find a sort of remedy, a reliable treatment capable of unleashing the bonds the Archaea groups made among themselves to form ice.

*“Never release a poison anywhere anytime unless you’ve already got the right antidote”*, so the common saying usually goes...

Finally, the researchers found it, that sort of ‘antidote’, sooner than science community had ever expected. Now everything was ready to start, once and for all, there were no excuses left.

That was exactly what human beings needed, in the end. Thus, Mankind was able to proceed carelessly along its common empty-headed way of life, without cutting the dangerous CO2 emissions and thinking again about all the brutal acts made against nature everyday, which would have been much better, indeed.

The new Archaea was released at first within the boundaries of a small isle in the Northern Sea and soon proved itself an excellent choice. Wide portions of water became ice, with the process going on for weeks, until the Arctic ice cap reached the mass it had likely had during the XIX century.

Of course, some control stations were created all along the borders of the Arctic just to check the present ice cap level and to prevent the Archaea that was artificially modified from spreading into oceans all over the world. The purpose was to release the treatment capable of confining the icing effect in a designated area, stopping such a thing before it came too close to some inhabited coastline. Nobody wanted a planet entirely covered in ice, undoubtedly. *Which, eventually, happened anyway*, notwithstanding all the many cautions that were used.

In spite of everything, one day the treatment released against the freezing Archaea groups from a far control station along Ireland coast did not succeed at stopping the increasing ice. Immediately there were deep inquiries and much research to explain such a fact, and many specialists were sent to the site to offer their help. But there was nothing that could be done, unfortunately, and the ice cap kept growing and growing during the following years.

As that old saying of the Natives of North America (living in the outermost icy expanses) goes “Three feet of ice does not result from one day of cold weather”. Actually, what was happening could be seen as modern science contradicting this quote. Such a remark should have made Ailsa laugh, but she wasn’t amused enough to do it, given the present circumstances, of course...

That was the beginning, the start of an artificially created Ice Age that he and all Mankind were living in now, and the end of the world, as everyone had known it before!

Further studies, in the years to come, would explain that such a great disaster was due to some modified genes that common, though unpredictable evolution had caused in the Archaea colonies - which was a very frequent fact in every species’ history as a matter of fact. But that bad change had made them stronger and tougher against the treatment, as happens when bacteria prove themselves more resistant to common antibiotics, as had been foretold by many famous cases in recent medical history.

Unfortunately, no other effective treatments became available before it was too late. Wide parts of once overly populated Europe turned into an ice cap stretching for hundreds of miles. Many peoples, countries and cultures migrated, were seriously damaged or simply disappeared instantly, leaving the now frozen lands they had been living in for so long, which soon became a new realm of ice and silence.

After many months and several tests, finally a new treatment was found that was somewhat effective against that unexpected disaster, thanks to a famous Turkish biologist. It wasn’t good enough to stop completely the freezing process, but it was capable of significantly slowing it down! However, this really didn’t change things a lot, as the rest of the planet was still waiting for the coming of the new artificial Ice Age, which would now arrive a bit later than scientists expected.

It was hard to think of the fact that for several years changes in the climate had led to huge disruptions in the Arctic environment, as rising temperatures, retreating sea ice and melting glacier had drastically started transforming the terrain, that was what Ailsa told herself. The implications of climate change had forced governments and businesses

to pay more attention to the potential benefits from Arctic transport, tourism, fishing, and to the exploitation of its vast reservoirs of natural resources. A lot of multilateral organizations and activists had also begun being also increasingly present in the Arctic area. Actually, that huge portion of the planet has never been a static environment, but in the recent past its changes had become more complex and varied. And many already knew that in the few years to come, just before the unexpected great disaster occurred, the Arctic would change more than it had in previous centuries, as it was endowed with a wide supply of valuable natural resources, certainly, and all of these commodities were attractive not only to countries with claims to the region, but also to potential investors from non-Arctic regions.

It was very bad also to think that the Arctic was one of the most fashionable destinations on Earth at that time, while today most of the northern areas of the planet had turned into an icy scenery that was increasing day by day, as a matter of fact, and a deep terror was rising up everywhere in the world.

The treeless plain that stretched ahead of the woman looked like a primitive and undisturbed area at present, its most characteristic feature was the presence of glacial striations on the unending flat top surface. This was not an easy location to lead a research, certainly, other than that you couldn't prevent yourself from thinking, from time to time, that you were just walking on top of a sort of icy grave of many European civilizations whose lost remains lay presently hidden underneath that thick white expanse. Besides the terrible temperatures, the windy weather, and the difficult ground that always remained frozen and almost impenetrable, you had also to remind yourself every single moment of the many dangers of the area you were moving across. It was a huge challenge, clearly, especially to her given the hearing impairment she was affected by, that also forced her to rely on a special software in order to be warned about any crack in the icy surface around that might kill her or make her fall suddenly, or to that portable colourful desk she used to command the instruments attached to her suit and to be informed by them, while others would simply turn to their ears to hear the response of the computer voice once they had given their orders. But she

was the best living – or better, still alive...- scientist experienced in that field, and there was no one else who might be sent here to do this important job.

Finally, Ailsa stopped, dropping the special toolkit she had been given from Nairobi headquarters. In that area the surface of the plain was more recent than anywhere else, so that was a good place to start. The procedure was always the same: by using a high-tech heated knife, she had to cut a portion of the ice in front of her and make several conglomerates, putting them aside for testing the following day.

Tomorrow morning, the helicopter would come back to recover her protective survival box and take her back to the laboratory. Today, however, the woman still had a long morning ahead of her, all alone within that lifeless icy area.

~

The awe-inspiring polar regions of the Arctic were reputed to be amongst the most beautiful and captivating in the world, in the past. These were places where you were allowed to see the clearest skies, the most dazzling snow and, of course, the most amazing wildlife that had been for long of great interest to biologists as the animal species living in such places were extraordinarily well adapted to life under marginal conditions. But now all that had disappeared, anyway, and there was no more a verdant wilderness of icy fjords in spring and forested islands around. *Today it was only ice.*

It was already 12:50 when Ailsa began broadly yawning. The scientist had begun to test 40 new treatments that the Turkish researcher had been working on to improve the original ‘antidote’, but there had been no reaction so far, unfortunately. Then she opened the second case and took out another row of phials, checking on them. The woman turned the first one upside down and had a look at the outcome of the experiment.

Nothing. So, she tried the second.

Nothing. *Again...*

And then the third one. Ailsa was getting used to such disappointments. She stared at the fourth little drop as it fell downwards, until it hit the ice sample. *Then something finally happened!* The drop laid upon the frozen conglomerate and the icy formation began breaking slowly, turning into water.

“It works, it works!” she cried out, even though she was obviously unable to hear her voice, given her disability. “*My God, it’s true! It’s really true! Finally! Finally!*”

*By working hard, in a matter of a few months they would be able to free the entire area from ice!* Eventually, they were going to gain back their old world as it was before everything happened! Nothing could have brought back all the myriad dead and restored the destruction that the genetically enhanced Archaea had caused, but Mankind now had hopes of coming back to normality, getting over their deep troubles.

Today the long quarantine she knew she was facing when she was helicoptered back to Douala didn’t seem as depressing as it usually did. While Ailsa was watching the sea ice extent from above, the woman considered that she was moving away from that place for the last time, hopefully, and the rest of the world would finally come out of that Ice Age that was threatening Mankind, benefiting from the consequences of this day, as it just seemed that a new great discovery of science had proved to be able to save the same human beings, the same human beings that had unwillingly caused all that mess long before by means of the same science of theirs, in a way.

~

A few months after those events, things had changed. Well, they had really changed quite a lot.

After the initial jubilation, with all the future perspectives and the great hopes for the planet’s improvement, something had happened that brought their hopes crashing down to the ground. Many of them weren’t even able to believe this!

All the reports indicated that the new ‘antidote’ was functioning well, very well indeed, and the northern ice expanse was turning itself

into water very quickly. However, the process showed no signs of stopping, and the melting was occurring *much too fast*.

There were cries of desperation among the high-ranking officers at the Nairobi headquarters, and among the researchers at the Douala labs, when they discovered that such a melting of the ice was simply *unstoppable*. An enormous mass of water was going to submerge most of the lands that were still ice-free! This was another disaster Mankind had created.

Now Ailsa and her colleagues, who were working at the outpost in Douala, on West Africa's coast, were facing the unpredictable consequences of such a new treatment released into the open air too soon, before all due diligence had taken place. Again, everything had gone contrary to what they wanted.

*Haste makes waste, Ailsa considered.* Unfortunately, they had no other choice as time urged... If they had been waiting for some more months, the entire planet would have been wrapped in that overwhelming icy pall heading fast for the south of the globe.

Nevertheless, in the end, Mankind had been too unthinking and had gotten itself into another despairing struggle for existence!

The data indicated that the first destructive and ever-growing tsunami was heading towards the coast where their outpost was located. And that place stood as the only research lab in West Africa. They'd never be able to rebuild it again because of the present lack of resources. Nor would they be able to move it (and the personnel) elsewhere on time. When it was destroyed, *when all of them were dead*, there would be no further research, no hope of finding a solution to such a disaster. Nairobi headquarters, almost on the other side of the continent, could do nothing but supervise the course of events from the distance.

While waiting for the enormous wave to hit the coastline, Ailsa mentally paraphrased that old quote by a famous poet: "Neither can the wave that has passed by be recalled, nor the world which has gone return again." At least, the woman considered, she would never directly hear that uproarious crash that the incoming massive wave would soon make as its killing water reached the coastline. That was going to be really a deafening big noise to all of the poor colleagues of hers, undoubtedly...



# THE NIGHTMARE BUG

BEN HERRIOT

**H**is empty hand, limp and upturned, hangs from the workbench. The slats of the blinds are stained with blood, splotched patterns the same shade as spilled ink. Marcus Lethe's body lies pale and bloated in his own laboratory.

He doesn't remember dying.

Dim cockroach-shaped lights cluster the ceiling and seem to only illuminate stains. The aluminium surfaces are a scarred network of scratches; the cupboards are chipped particle board. Dirt circles the windows like coffee on an old desk. Glass terrariums line the walls, one is smashed, its dirt all over the floor. Lethe's body is torn in two, its entire core hollowed out. Maggots stir at torn edges where flesh meets skin.

A detective works his way through the old man's ephemera. He clicks on a monitor and plays back a video. On screen, Lethe's eyes are animated and wide as he talks, childish islands in a wrinkled face: "I want to find out who I am, in the truest sense, without clutter or distraction. I have to see myself, face to face. Without the horrors of the past. Most people live in their memories, wade through them like the depths of some river. My isolation is a control." On a whiteboard behind him is a grid pattern: days, weeks, and years, squared off and checked. "I'm going to start by removing all memory of the last day." The video ends with a wash of static. Hundreds of newer files are on the computer, dates ascending until the current week.

Moving back from the monitor, a stack of documents catches the detective's arm and tips, sending sheafs of paper and rubbish about the room. Attempting to clear it up, the detective cuts himself, and as he removes his hand a needle breaks off and falls to clatter with the rest of

the detritus. He rubs his hand. “Fuck,” and kicks at the pile on the ground. Outside, the ocean churns against rock.

The detective returns to his family, Lethe plaguing his mind. Rain batters the windshield during the long drive back from the coast, the mountain passes devoid of traffic and alive with wind.

He arrives to find his house dark, his family asleep. In the shower the water runs black with shadows.

Reality slips away from him. His children play in the summer light and ask him to join, but he sits inside, piecing the case together. Files, vials, and other evidence are spread over the deep veneer of the oak desk. The videos are all loaded onto his computer. His wife knocks on the door. “Are you ok?”

“I’m not sure. Some cases seem to cling to you, you can’t shake them off.”

“We can give you space for a while; I’ll tell the kids to leave you alone.”

“They can’t see what’s on these.”

She closes the door. Lethe’s face is on screen, up close with nose-hair detail. “I am administering the first dose now. Phase one, testing if the serum works.” His rolled-up sleeve reveals an arm wrapped in varicose veins. He injects a yellow fluid. “This should be my last memory by the time I wake up tomorrow.” The camera at the desk is left on as Lethe retreats into the surrounding mess.

The detective skims through the rest of the video. It’s mostly of Lethe in his lab, leaving occasionally for five- or ten-minute breaks as the sky outside his window darkens. Ten at night, he talks to the camera again: “No adverse effects today. My memory is still functioning fine.” He writes down a series of numbers, turns the page, and prints them all on the other side before holding it up to the camera. “That’s a pass. I’m going to sleep now.”

In the next log, Lethe’s skin is pasty white, his eyes ringed with a purple stain. “The memory loss was successful. I woke up and checked the date, thinking today was yesterday. I see yesterday’s video here and have just skimmed through it. However,” the old man presses his lips together, “last night I suffered vivid nightmares. I thought they were

real, that I was trapped there again. Somewhere... else. As many in the scientific community know, I had a troubled period. I had to be institutionalised. I want to remove those memories. I'd rather not know about them... Last night, I dreamt I was young again, and it was the most terrifying thing in the world." He pauses. "I'm going to change the formula and remove the last forty-eight hours. Remove that damned dream."

The detective rubs his eyes and turns the computer off. He takes a few notes in his own disorganised way of working in fragments around the room: a sticky note here, a scrap of paper there. He looks at the picture of Lethe's body, still, as if it were suspended in preserving fluid, before leaving.

Later that night, the detective asks his wife, "my life's been good, hasn't it?"

"Beautiful. Why?"

"I'd hate to lose that."

The next day his kids argue at breakfast, half playing, half refusing to go to school. They complain in the back seat as he drives through rush-hour traffic on a rainy Monday morning. The mist above the hills is cut through with headlight glare before the rising sun. He works the case from home.

In another time, Lethe mixes vials, fine tunes his dosage. The detective watches as Lethe injects again and scribbles down notes in scientist's writing. "Assuming everything is in order, I have commenced trial two. Waking tomorrow morning, I shall hopefully have forgotten the last forty-eight hours of my waking memory. That is, seventy-two hours of real time, as I have already lost the last twenty-four. I am effectively travelling back in time." The professor looks behind him, into the early morning glare. "The shadows out there all look so alive." Outside, the waves tear at each other like starved animals.

The rest of the video is Lethe coming and going from his lab, working on projects, muttering to himself: "Someone's been in here, moved everything around." He performs the same memory test as before, the same numbers, and reassures himself everything is fine. "Time to rest," he says, before the screen fades to tumbling static chaos.

The detective stands and looks out the window, shifting his attention to the world in front of him. He walks in the garden, overcast now, and shivers while drinking a cup of tea. If his wife were here, he would talk to her, but he can't seem to find her. A small green caterpillar eats its way through a leaf. He takes a breath and returns to his office. Plays the next video: It's of Lethe, wide eyed and shaking, saying: "I've lost so much time." His lips are cracked. "I woke up, and had lost a whole week. As if I were dead. According to the previous log, it should have been half that. I don't remember recording any of them, but the dates match. The dreams are getting worse." The old man frowns, pulls a strand of knotted hair away from his face. "I must admit, I panicked." He reads out a list of printed formulae. Every detail of the methodology is over-clarified. He takes himself through, step by step, notes the date, and says: "I'll continue the experiment." He forces a laugh. "Losing a week means I'm ahead of schedule. Next will be a month." He spends the rest of the day mixing vials and getting frustrated at trying to find certain pieces of equipment in his mess of a laboratory. "I hope all of this isn't taking too much of a toll on my body," as he injects again, talking like an addict. The video ends.

In the next video, blood wells up in the corners of Lethe's eyes. His skin is blotched; clumps of hair have fallen out. "This morning I woke up from a rolling nightmare, like being thrown overboard into a sea of ice." He raises a sleeve to show of an arm of deep vertical scars. "I found these. And something has clawed halfway through the floor in the other room. I can't tell how old the marks are. They are deep enough. My last memory is from about a year ago, judging from today's date. I can't believe I did this to myself. For all I know I was in a coma. Dead." He frantically reads over what notes he can find while drinking an inordinate amount of water. "One observation is that the doors are all locked, and I can't find the keys anywhere. I'm going to leave a note, to inform future amnesiacs of this development. It must be part of the experiment. The windows are too high above the ocean for me to jump successfully and live. I'm sure I could find a way, but I have more pressing matters. Once a scientist, always a scientist." This more talkative Lethe rambles as he injects the next dose.

The detective watches the next log: “I am in an ancient body. My mind feels so clouded. But the last thing I remember, I was younger, in my forties and starting my career. I want to get out of here and see my children. I don’t know where I am. There are demons here, crawling on the ceiling, trying to get in. Their rotten smell seeps through the very fabric of the place.” He screams: “That old man on the computer isn’t me.” His fingernails are bleeding stubs. With anxious sweats, frantic swearing and tearing through his belongings, it takes him some time to calm down. “They want to steal my mind and take me back.” Towards evening, he concludes the only thing to do is take one last dose, to take him right back to his better years, when his children were young and science only an interest. “If I can live out my older years with that sort of peace, I’ll have achieved something.” Lethe injects the final amount. Blood swells as the needle is removed. The video ends.

He walks outside to his garden and the soft afternoon light. The caterpillar is now a pale chrysalis. Squatting to look, he reaches out a hand to the pale shape. There is a hole in its side, out of which ants with pincered mouths carry chunks of green.

Inside again, a blowfly tears open the quiet of the room. The detective plays the video, but the screen fades to black: his own reflection is staring back, trapped. The laboratory clicks into life around him.

The desk in front is scattered with needles and sooty vials. Lights buzz overhead with the chattering of a million small wings.

Each video log slots into place as an act of memory, dim and far away like a picture at the far end of a room. Framed alongside it are memories of yesterday, of the detective, a young Marcus Lethe. He remembers being there, then, and having the nightmare of being old, dead; and being old and having nightmares of being young again, of this halfway point in the lifecycle of suffering. Each side a wakefulness, a face of the same coin spinning forever towards the bottom of a well.

The world turns, and Lethe doubles over onto the workbench, heaving as nausea grips him. Bile spills out of his throat as he retches, gags. Chunks of the vomit writhe and sprout legs and small beaked mouths. Spun inside his own sick cocoon, a sore welt on the mortal coil,

his skin splits along his spine, tears open, and exposes rancid flesh to stale air.

The needle falls from his arm into a pile of rubbish on the ground. The husk of his body collapses away from him. Lethe, freshly emerged, a kaleidoscope of a million insects churned up and spat out, spreads his wings and breaks through the window.

Distant now, a speck catches the light, and soars above the ocean amongst the raging clouds.

# WHEN EVERYONE DISAPPEARED

RUSS BICKERSTAFF

And somewhere along the line everybody disappeared. Including me. But I didn't know. I mean, I didn't know everybody else disappeared. I just knew that I was suddenly quite alone. And I didn't know what to do about that. I mean, I wanted to ask the person in the next cubicle. But she was gone. And then I went out down the road to my supervisor's desk to ask her about the whole situation. But she was gone too. And I suppose that I probably would have noticed this before. I probably would have been aware of this before. And I probably was aware of this before.

But there certainly *was* something strange about it. Something that I didn't understand. Something that I wanted to understand. Something that I felt like I was missing. But I didn't know what it was. And I wanted to ask somebody about it. But there wasn't anyone around. Not anybody in the next cubicle row. Not anybody in morning. I suppose it probably occurred to me that most people came in the afternoon. I was just there to open up things. Only they had already been opened up. By someone else. But there wasn't anyone else in the office. At all. I checked.

I was alone in the office. It felt kind of strange. But kind of liberating too. I mean, there were all kinds of things that I could've done. I could've played any music I wanted as loud as I wanted. But I didn't want to. Because it wasn't going to help. Wasn't going to help the fact that I was suddenly quite alone. I mean, I didn't know whether or not I've been there before in A similar situation. I figured it was probably something that I might've done. Or said. Or something like that. But I didn't know.

And it occurred to me that there might have been someone that I might have seen on the way in. Only I didn't know who she was. And I don't think that she actually worked in my office. Maybe just another office in the same office building. And I wanted to go exploring. Maybe it was a whole situation with the whole office building. So, I decided to do a little bit of checking of the email. But since no one existed anymore, it's not like I was even getting any email. There was no work to be done. Because the clients didn't need my work anymore because they didn't exist.

Which felt kind of weird. Suddenly having the inbox completely empty like that. Because no one needed anything. (No one needed anything for me at least.) Other than each other I would assume. Although I didn't know that at the time. I didn't really know a heckuva lot at the time. So, I went downstairs. To the 12th floor. They felt kind of strange going down to the 12th floor. And attempting to engage the interest of someone I has only seen in elevators and things like that. Now that I was actually going down to talk to her, it occurred to me that I was probably at least kind of attracted to her

So, I was nervous. Like a kid asking somebody out. But...like a kid asking somebody out like to prom where the entire universe ceased to exist. (Or at least the entire population of the planet or whatever.) I figured that was kind of strange. And probably not at all comfortable. But I didn't really know what to do about it. And I didn't know what to know how to think.

But if she was in there in the morning, she wasn't there by the time everybody else disappeared. She probably disappeared just a little right along with everybody else about the whole situation. Because I wasn't going to. I wasn't going to think about the whole situation at all. Because I didn't really figure it was any of my business. And sure, enough she wasn't actually there. Maybe in that office complex they all disappeared as well. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. I figured maybe I'd seen her on the way in. Maybe I had, in fact, seeing her on the way in.

But I was trying. I was trying to understand the whole situation. I felt kind of dizzy. So, I just kept walking. Out to the elevator. And

down. I might've worked my way through every floor. Just making sure no one else was there. But really, I didn't have to. All I had to do is walk through the lobby and see that no security was there even though it was supposed to be. And then I get outside and there's no one there either. Seems me I might've seen a *Twilight Zone* about this. Or something like that. Some sort of a sensation of being completely alone. But this was different. Because it was real.

And the only reason why it was real was because I decided it was. That was a little strange. That's one realization. I mean, I suppose everybody else had made that decision too. That no one else was there. Somewhere along the line somebody decided that no one was there. And everybody just sort of went along with it. And I don't know how long it was before I realized that I was alone. It might've been me seeing that girl from downstairs the 12th floor earlier that day or earlier that week or earlier that month. Or maybe just last year. I don't know how long it had been that I've been alone. I guess I wasn't really noticing. Too wrapped up in my work. Or my thinking about the fact that I've been wrapped up in my work. It could've been days or weeks or months. But I guess I just sort of decided along with everything else that everyone else existed. And suddenly it was like nothing happened. And of course, nothing had happened. It was a big world with a lot of people who are doing a lot of things. And some of them were probably important.

# THE WOODEN STAIRCASE

ALAN ARCHY

My name is Harrison Petit. I am sat here in my empty house staring at the wall and wondering what has become of my friend, my old friend Dr. Charles Bradbury. All I have of him now is his journal which rests open on my lap.

The police are convinced that I am involved with his disappearance and in a sense they are right. Their questioning has seemed endless over the past week but they have now finally released me after several extensions to my detention. Of course, they could not find a shred of evidence against me but I am now widely assumed to be a madman and the most lurid stories about my life are now doing the rounds in the media. Given the current state of my nerves I think I could well end up mad: this whole affair could be for me a self-fulfilling prophecy...

But I will tell you what I told the police: I am a weak, greedy, indolent, selfish, pleasure-loving waste of oxygen, *but I am no murderer!* As I said, I bear some role in Charles' not being here now but my intention was never that he should disappear. I will now read you the final entries in Charles' journal and so you can make up your own mind as to my supposed guilt.

Thursday

At 11.30am this morning I received a call. I had just finished the morning surgery and was about to start my visits. The call came through on my office landline. I put down my bag and picked up the receiver. I had been expecting news from the hospital regarding a very sick patient of mine who had just been rushed in. The caller however

was a man I hadn't seen for nearly a decade and he seemed to be in a heightened state of agitation

“Charles, Charles it's you thank God, it's me, its Harrison...”

“Harrison? Harrison it *is* you, goodness me, are you alright?”

“Charles, I'm so sorry to bother you but I desperately need help and I have nobody else to turn to. Will you meet me today please?”

“Er, well I am rather busy at the moment...”

“Can you come to my house at four o'clock?”

“Well alright I will be free by then. Are you still in the city?” He gave me his address which I wrote down.

I then set off on my rounds. After my first visit I learned the sad news that Mrs. Ancliffe had passed away en route to the hospital in the ambulance. Aside from thinking of her and her poor family my mind was drawn back to the days when myself and Harrison were inseparable friends.

We were at medical school for three years together and we shared digs. He was quite a wild card whereas I was always rather reserved. In odd ways we complemented one other and were good for each other: he helped bring me out of myself and I helped to steady his excesses. This complementarity worked well during our studies - he was good at anatomy and physiology whereas I excelled at pathology and pharmacology so we helped each other get through those first two hectic years. “Together we'll make one good doctor!” he used to joke. We did everything together especially socialising - our drinking bouts were the stuff of legend!

I will never forget the day we were presented with our first cadaver.

“Nice tits!”, grinned Harrison – instant suspension of course when he was overhead by our rather strict professor.

It was nearly at the end of the third year that Harrison learned that his childless uncle had suddenly passed away leaving him a substantial property portfolio. Harrison at first said that he would appoint a manager to deal with his bequest but from that point on, he increasingly spent time dealing with property matters to the great detriment of his studies. Long before he quit medical school I could see it coming. When he finally did decide to hang up his stethoscope, he paid for us both to have

a splendid sailing holiday in the Grenadines but after that we just lost touch.

I completed my studies and came to my present position two years ago. I am now head of practice. From time to time especially over the past year now things have been more settled, I have often wondered what had become of old Harrison. Now I was to find out.

After grabbing a sandwich from a local shop, I walked over to the address Harrison had given me. It was in a very upmarket area of town, or at least it had been forty years ago, now there was a certain tone of genteel decay.

There was no mistaking the house when I reached it. It had a very peculiar style of architecture resembling a giant misshapen tree spiralling its way up towards the clouds above.

No sooner had I rung the acorn-shaped bell than there he was stood in front of me. It did not need a doctor's eye to see that there was something seriously wrong. He was painfully thin, dark circles under his prematurely-aged eyes, pale skin set with red blemishes.

Nonetheless it was the same old Harrison and I felt genuinely happy to see him. He ushered me in after a big bear hug. He was clearly relieved to see me. He led me through into an opulent living room crammed with antique furniture and fittings. I sat down.

"Harrison, I have to be honest old chap, you look awful, what's wrong?" I blurted out now I could see his face even more clearly. Harrison took a deep breath and began to speak. As he opened his mouth, I could smell alcohol on his breath. It was then that I noticed the half empty vodka bottle on the dresser.

"The fact is Charles.....my daughter is missing, she's been missing for twenty-four hours now."

"You have a daughter?" This was a revelation in itself. "Have you been to the police?"

"Er....Priscilla is five years old.... this is hard to explain..."

"Her mother...?"

"We're separated. Priscilla is...was spending the week with me – her mother is skiing; she was due to pick her up this coming Sunday.

Luckily there's no signal where she is in Austria so she doesn't yet know."

"But where did you last see Priscilla?" I tried to break this clearly messy business down into manageable portions.

"Er... Charles I will have to explain the whole thing for you to understand."

"Alright go ahead." I sat back and removed my glasses.

"Do you know Charles, this house we are in is all that is left of my uncle's legacy, all that is left of a fifteen-million-pound inheritance. I frittered it all away, invested badly and just spent it on wild living. For some reason my uncle thought I would be a safe pair of hands for the little empire he had so carefully built up. But I digress. My uncle left me a letter. In it ...er, well I will read the salient points to you now, I have it here..." From a nearby table, he took a piece of headed paper and proceeded to read from it:

"I am leaving everything to you Harrison. There are only two conditions to this. Firstly, you must make Laburnum House your new home and secondly, you must never enter the door on the second floor. I am giving you the key but you must never use it." Harrison held up a small object with his left hand but continued reading." "What lies behind that door is hungry."

"After the funeral, I arrived here at Laburnum, and out of curiosity I went straight to the second floor and there was indeed a locked door. But even were the door open it could not have possibly led anywhere as it was a door set on an external wall and there were, are, no steps outside. I went into the garden to look up at it from the other side but there was just a brick wall with no sign of the door or doorframe that was on the other side.

"I didn't unlock or open the door out of respect for my obviously-eccentric uncle's wishes. A while later I bought an old wall hanging and hung it over the doorframe concealing the door – this would save me having to explain the situation to any guests!

"And so, for a long while I thought nothing more of that strange door.

“Now, about fifteen months after my uncle’s funeral it was my thirtieth birthday. I went down to my club, got blind drunk, just as we used to in the old days! But I made a particular fool of myself that night! Eventually in the wee small hours I found my way home, and for some reason it made perfect sense in my stupor to remove the wall hanging, take the key and see what lay behind that ‘forbidden door’.

“I put the key in the keyhole and after a bit of effort I had the door open.”

“And what did you see Harrison?”

“You won’t believe this Charles. There was a wooden staircase leading upwards in between wooden-panelled walls, walls intricately carved with images of outlandish trees and mythical animals. There were about eight little steps then it veered to the left.”

“I thought you said it was on an outside wall?”

“Well, yes it was, it is, yes, it did not make sense. I stood there staring at it for a while and rubbing my eyes and it did have a somewhat sobering effect on me. I was tempted to just close the door but an overwhelming sense of curiosity overcame me and I entered the doorway and timorously began my ascent of the creaking stairs.

“I reached the top of the first eight steps and turned left - another eight steps. I climbed these and another ninety-degree turn to the left. Another eight steps but then the steps became spiralled in their ascent. I continued.

“Round and around, I climbed upwards for what I calculate to have been at least one hundred feet. It was pitch black. I was just going to put the torch on my phone when it gradually started to become lighter. And it was daylight, yet not an artificial source of lighting.

“Brighter and brighter, it became as I neared the top. Then, I was looking up at a doorway a few steps above me which framed a blue sky. Remember, it was the middle of the night! I distinctly recall watching a small flying insect enter the doorway then go out again. It was most peculiar in appearance, rather large for our English climes.

“The aroma wafting down from the opening was quite striking, almost life-giving! I climbed the final step and went through the door. I was now fully sobered up.

“My bare feet were now on grass. I walked forward a few steps and looked around me. I found myself in a long valley. There was a curious sensation of floating, of movement, as if I was on a ship, but I did not feel nauseous. Immediately in front of me was some sort of orchard. I walked over to the nearest tree to see what was growing. Instead of apples or pears *there* were diamonds! Ah, I can see Charles by your expression that you doubt me.”

My expression had indeed betrayed my inner thoughts – *drunkenness and drugs – he’s dragged me over here to describe some damned trip!* But I motioned with a forced smile and a nod for him to continue:

“In a few minutes Charles, I will show you this door and any doubts you may harbour about my account will evaporate in one moment. But before that I will tell you one more part to this story, concerning the most important thing, my dear daughter.” Harrison took a deep breath and continued.

“So, there I was in this fantastical setting, an orchard growing diamonds in a lost valley! I stood there in awe for I don’t know how long.

“Then just as I was beginning to doubt the sanity of what I was seeing I saw something large and dark moving amongst the trees in the distance. It seemed to be some sort of large animal but I could not make out its details. I had an idea that it could see me and was moving ever faster in my direction.

“I panicked and ran back down the stairs slamming the door shut at the bottom, locking it and replaced the wall hanging. I went to bed.

“You know Charles, my life at that time was good. I had just married and my wife Judith was pregnant with Priss. We were enjoying the fruits of my uncle’s bequest. I was not bothered about the staircase, I had too many good things going on in my life.

“But a few years later it was a different story. As I said I’ve made a blasted mess of my life in the last couple of years. Judith left me – I cannot blame her given the way I have behaved. I frittered everything away and spent my days drinking. I should have listened to you Charles – you were always that stabilising influence on me, that voice of Reason

in my ear – I should have listened to you and finished my studies. But I have no self-restraint, never have had. So, to cut a long story short I lost everything save this house.

“And it had reached the point at which my creditors were hammering on the door. I was becoming increasingly desperate. On Tuesday evening just after I had put Priss to bed I sat down mulling over my problems. Then I remembered the wooden staircase behind the door and where it led and the diamonds on the trees.

“Over time I had mostly convinced myself that I had imagined the things I had seen behind the door. But there had always been this nagging doubt.” He looked at me. “Just bear with me old friend” and he forced a smile and continued, I thought to myself If it *was* real then just a couple of those diamonds could instantly solve so many problems!

“I had just had the day from hell during which I had been threatened with violence by an associate of one of my creditors so at that point I felt I had nothing to lose.”

Harrison suddenly put his hand to his head and began sobbing. I got up to go to him but he put his hand up saying, “It’s OK Charles I’m alright, it’s been a long day. I *will* get to the point.” I sat back down and he wiped his eyes and continued.

“Yes, I took the key and opened the door. And yes, I had *not* imagined it - there it was, the staircase as before. I entered as I had done five years previously. Up the first eight steps, turn, up the second, turn, up the third and onto the spiral staircase. But I could only get so far up. The staircase had somehow narrowed.

“At first, I thought it was because I had put on weight but it wasn’t that at all. It appears that magical staircases follow their own peculiar set of rules! God only knows in my greed and desperation I tried and tried to squeeze up but it was impossible. I eventually gave up.

“Full of despondency I began my descent but then I hit upon an idea: *I myself cannot get through that small gap but a smaller person could do – in fact a child could. Where I could not go, a child could go, Priss could go!*

“I hurried down the stairs and woke up my daughter. ‘Priss darling daddy needs your help’. I explained to her what I wanted her to

do and led her up the staircase to the point at which I was unable to proceed further. ‘Priss all you have to do is carry on up the steps and then pluck a few diamonds from the trees. Then come back down to daddy’, and off she went. And that was the last time I saw her. I waited twenty minutes, an hour, two hours; it was then that I remembered that dark threatening presence lurking in the trees...

*Oh my God, what have I done?!*

I now desperately called her name until I was hoarse; I took an axe and tried chopping my way through, but the stairs would not yield. The axe did not even mark the ‘wood’. It seemed enchanted in some way.”

I looked at him not knowing what to say. My look of incredulity must have been written all over my face. Harrison interpreted it as my disgust at his actions within his fantasy world rather than the utter disbelief in that world which it actually signalled.

“Charles, believe you me nobody feels more guilty than me - my little girl trusted me with her life, she did what I asked and now she’s been somehow swallowed up. Come with me now and I’ll show you the door – this is the key.” He produced a rather strange looking key which was shaped like a twig – I really couldn’t imagine it opening *any* door!

He led me upstairs to the next floor and there as he had described was the door, set on an external wall. Harrison inserted the key into the lock.

He opened the door and there...was a brick wall. Several large spiders scuttled to the door edges and an ancient musty smell spread into the room.

“*What is this?!*” cried Harrison. I had now simply had enough.

I remembered fondly so much of our time at medical school but there were also many times when his antics had gone too far – this was what I was remembering now as I stood up saying impatiently,

“Harrison, I will see you again soon but I really don’t have time for this. I’m leaving.”

“Charles no I need you – I need you to go up there and get Priss.” Then it dawned on me. In his derangement there was some consistency – he wanted me to go up to his imaginary narrowed staircase

because of my small stature – I am five foot two and rather slim. I was livid.

“I see, that’s how it is. My friend you need to sober up, come down off whatever you’ve taken and then we’ll meet again. I’m tired and I am going home.” He motioned to protest but I raised my hand and uttered a firm

“No!” And with that I left. I was at home by six. I had a stiff gin and wrote everything up in my journal (to convince myself that it had really happened as much as any other reason!)

It was quarter to eight when the phone rang. It was Harrison. He was in tears. He spoke slowly, quietly, imploringly...

“Please come Charles, I need your help, *please*, you’re the only one who can help me, please I’m begging you; old friend.”

By this time, I had had a chance to think about the situation – he was indeed my old friend, he was in a very bad place, and suffering from delusions and hallucinations. For all I knew he might harm himself – and it sounded like there were people who certainly wanted to harm him.

“Alright Harrison, I’ll be over shortly.” I ordered a taxi and took my medical bag. I decided to take my journal – if it came to sectioning which was quite possible, I would need to have to hand what he had said to me. I thought that given the circumstances this might indeed be the best thing for him.

I went outside to wait for the taxi. The car arrived and in twenty minutes I was stood outside Laburnum House. I rang the bell. Unlike my earlier visit Harrison did not appear. Then I noticed that the door was not locked. I entered the house. He wasn’t downstairs. I went up to the first floor – no sign. I hoped to God that he hadn’t done something stupid- I’d had enough of death for one day! I went to the second floor. What a sight greeted me! Harrison was stood by the strange door which stood ajar but instead of the brick wall I saw earlier there was a wooden staircase exactly as he had described it in what I had assumed to be nothing more than a drug-induced fantasy.

“Oh my God!” I cried.

“Charles, now do you believe me? It reappeared half an hour ago.”

I was genuinely speechless.

I walked over to the door and crossed the threshold. I kneeled down, touched the wooden steps and ran my hands over the exquisite yet bizarre carvings. I stood up and looked out of the window to where the staircase casing should have been visible. Nothing. The scene defied logic, the laws of space....

“Charles, my beloved daughter Priscilla is missing – only you can help me get her. I need you to go up there.” I looked at him, he was broken, his face wettened with tears.

I nodded saying, “Alright old friend, I’m sorry I doubted you but...” I was cut off as he hugged me. I felt I was now beginning to exist within another layer of reality. I muttered,

“I’ll go up and try and find her mate.” He turned away from me and reached up to a shelf picking something up saying,

“Here take this”, and he handed me a torch. I smiled weakly at him and then began the ascent. What was happening now? Was I imagining this? All I could think was that my help was needed; the emergency instincts and persona of a doctor had kicked in despite everything.

As I turned the first corner of the stairs I flicked on the torch. The carvings were everywhere on the steps, the ballustrades, the walls and the roof. They were all decidedly odd – huge trees with little people in the branches and giant wingless dragon-like creatures stalked the base of their trunks. All these images were interlaced with decorative yet otherworldly plant-life.

What exactly was being portrayed here, myth and legend? Or, like the ancient cave paintings at Lascaux, a seen and lived experience? I now knew that anything was possible. My deeply-ingrained scientific rationalism was now an inadequate prism through which to view this experience or indeed the wider world if this was a part of it!

I followed the route described by Harrison previously. Inside it was precisely as he said it had been: eight steps, turn, eight steps, turn, eight steps, the beginning of the spiral, the narrowing of the spiral. Just

before the spiral I stopped to assess the situation and as the noise of my muted footsteps halted leaving an eerie silence, I ran my hand along the wall carvings and wondered what on earth lay on the other side.

I pushed on, literally. It was quite a struggle but I forced myself up through the narrow gap. It was just fortunate that I did not suffer from claustrophobia! I could see that Harrison would not have been able to fit through this gap. I had to use all the strength my arms could muster in that dark enclosed place.

Then, the beckoning light. I stood blinking in the glare, a hot sun burning down on the verdant valley which Harrison had described. I stepped forward, my eyes now adjusting to the harsh light.

And yes, there was the orchard and there hanging down liquid glinting in the sunshine, the ‘fruit’ of the trees: diamonds! (or at least something approximating to diamonds). I approached the nearest tree, reached up and plucked one of the strange fruit. Glassy, beautiful full of colourful dancing lights, heavy but also with a hollow inside.

What was this place? *Where* was it? Where was I now? I was being assailed by questions as I surveyed the scene before me. Had Harrison’s uncle been here before? Had he seen something which put the fear of God in him? I sat down now more cautious. Then I saw it...

As I looked along the row of trees my eyes came to rest, at the very end of the row, upon a large dark shadow: there was something hefty, black and *alive* parked on the grass. With great difficulty I resisted an overwhelming urge to turn and flee: I stood my ground as I recalled the safety of the little girl at the centre of this business.

Counterintuitively I edged closer to this potential danger. As I came closer, I could now see now that the shadowy creature was a large mammal with ferocious yet presently withdrawn claws. It favoured a bear but its head was elongated and its huge mouth was clearly harbouring vicious-looking teeth; yet its skin was as smooth as a snake’s. Luckily for me it appeared to be slumbering. And there, there on its lap, also asleep was a little girl! It had to be Priscilla! Thankfully she appeared to be unharmed.

I gingerly approached the pair. I was very nervous about getting closer than ten feet. I loudly whispered “Priscilla....Priscilla....Priss!”

She opened her eyes and looked at me, quite startled. I put my index finger to my lips. Thankfully the ‘bear’ remained asleep. My heart was beating ten to the dozen but I continued in my task.

“Priscilla. I am your dad’s friend Charles. He’s very worried about you. Come with me.” And I offered my hand. The little girl seemed unsure: she looked from the ‘bear’ to me, then back to the ‘bear.’ She raised her hand as if to touch the creature’s face but then as she saw the horror on my face withdrew it, smiled, yawned, slowly stood up and then took my hand. We quietly made our way back to the doorway to the top of the stairs. I kept nervously glancing back at the ‘bear,’ but it remained asleep.

When we reached the doorway, I looked down the stairs:  
*something was wrong!*

It didn’t take me long to realise what it was: the stairs had shrunk again! I did not even need to enter and attempt to go down I knew there was no way that I was going to squeeze through there.

So, what now? I was trapped up here, or down or wherever ‘here’ was. Fortunately, I could see that there *was* room for Priscilla to go down. I had to think quickly before anything else changed; I had to make an ad hoc plan as it were. I turned to address the little girl:

“Priscilla your daddy is very worried about you – I want you to go down the stairs to him. But you will have to go on your own – I cannot fit in the gap now. When you have seen your daddy, if you can get back up then get as far as you can and I will hand you this book to take back down with you”. I showed her my journal. With that Priscilla nodded her head and left.

I decided that if I could not get back down then I could at least make a record of what had happened, then somebody might use that information to rescue me.

\* \* \*

It is now one hour later from when Priss departed and can hear movement from down below within the doorway: she is returning! I will make my final entry in this journal and then give it to the little girl to take back down.

Much has happened in the last hour. I have walked all around the orchard – this is a very strange place! This is so hard to explain except by analogy. It is as if I am standing on the leaf of an immense tree – the orchard is perched on one leaf of that tree. This explains the rather unstable feeling of floating – the ‘leaf,’ the ‘earth’ moves! I have looked over the edge of our ‘leaf’ and seen other leaves and foliage stretching off in all directions. In the far distance nestled at the intersection of the branch we are on and the vast trunk are the flickering lights of what appears to be a city.

Unbelievably I have also spoken, yes *spoken*, with the ‘bear’ who soon woke up. He has said that he will show me around this new world, that he will be my guide. From what he has told me this is a world of many wonderful and awe-inspiring things. Despite everything, despite my appalling predicament I am very excited.

An interesting thing: the ‘bear’ told me that normally the opening to other places only closes upon those prone to avarice – he can’t understand why it has closed for me he seemed to sense that that is not one of my weaknesses and he’s right, – he thinks that I might have a special role to play here in this peculiar plane. Who knows...?

Ah, I must go soon – the ‘bear’ is impatient to leave. I will hand down the journal to Priss. Harrison, I forgive you!

If that door remains forever closed to me, if I am destined never to return then may all who have known me think kindly of me now. Adieu!

And that is how Charles’ last entry ends. But what can I do now? If I show this journal to the police I will be locked up and the key will be thrown away. To make matters worse, Priss has been taken away to my mother-in-law’s though I am glad she is safe now, and what’s more, the wooden stairs are no longer here – just the brick wall!

But I will sit here and wait for them to reappear, however long it takes....



# THE EXTRAORDINARY TALE OF KASSARA

DAVID JOHN GRIFFIN

What you are about to read concerns an incredible journal, and how that journal was discovered.

As the owner and senior editor of a small publishing house whose main output is true-life naval dramas, it is rare for me to consider anything outside of this remit. However, the astonishing account written on this journal's pages – no matter how too fantastic it is to be true – was compelling enough for me to extend my personal portfolio by publishing a part of it as a chapbook.

My summer holiday in '65 was in Egypt. I hasten to add that this exotic location bears no relation to the incidents within the entries of the journal. Those refer to its own exotic place: Foyer House Island. It is safe to say this island's name or location cannot be found on any map that I know of. This should underline the fictitious nature of the journal yet I was swayed to believe (or some might say, wanted to believe) that this island exists.

Before I begin in earnest, I feel I must describe a peculiar incident. My travels from London to Aegina, by train and ships, was uneventful. After a short stopover on the Greek island, I caught a ferry, sailing to the Egyptian mainland. The crossing was dreadful and a little frightening. A soup of a fog descended half-way and the sea was as rough as could be, for longer than I cared for. When we finally docked, I was only too pleased to see from my vantage point on the open deck the railed gangplank placed below. While making my way to it as fast as I was

able, I saw the deck empty of other people; and there were no other passengers making their way out of the hatches. And while crossing over those planks to solid land, with a glance behind, I noticed no one else disembarking.

I travelled from the port at Alexandria to Faiyum, a busy and bustling town situated not far from the tip of the Red Sea. Settling in at the Hotel Akiiki, I enjoyed the generous hospitality within for two days. The sun's strength kept me indoors and away from their open roof arcades.

The sun on the third afternoon was blisteringly hot. Hiding from its rays within the comfort of air-conditioned rooms for so long, the decision was made to investigate beyond my confines. And so, with straw hat firmly in place and clothing loosened, I ventured out. I chose to ignore my guide book and simply followed my feet, soon enamoured by the unconventional streets and byways with their mosques and colourful bazaars.

I discovered a quaint café not far from the canal and sat at a table outside, under a canopy, with the added shade of a coconut palm's fronds. And after ordering an iced mint tea, I watched the men and women in flowing gowns passing by their flat-roofed houses and shops. Then I took out of my pocket a copy of *A History of the Dhow*, intending to read it until teatime.

A swarthy man on the next table caught my eye; his turning of the head to enable him to read the title of my book was faintly amusing if not a little uncivilized. I tilted the cover to him so that he might read it, whereupon he nodded.

He explained, in what could be described as a continental accent, his interest of "all things seaworthy" and upon my light-hearted remark of "including dhows?" he stood and walked over to my table. His face did not break the amiable grin and bright eyes he owned. He told me his name was Eduardo Simion – an immigrant from Portugal – and that he

was curator at the Sea Museum in Korba Street. I admitted not seeing any such place mentioned in the guides.

He appeared trustworthy and the day was slow and still too hot, So, I readily agreed to follow him there in the hope of finding some form of cooling system.

Passing through the loud market, harangued by stallholders with the promise of haggling over a miniature of a tomb, sacred cat or some other trinket, I found it difficult to keep pace with my newly found colleague. He deftly wove his way through the crowded market aisles, waving at insistent sellers as if swatting flies. I did have the opportunity to catch up when he stopped by a stall with the stallholder selling fruit. After purchasing two lemons, he trotted nimbly on, looking back to me to check I still followed.

The side alley was no cooler despite being in shadow. At the end stood a whitewashed building with double doors peeling paint, and an enamelled sign marked “The Sea Museum”.

Mr. Simion turned a key in the lock and we entered. Once inside, I realised that two dwellings had been knocked into one but which still made for the smallest of museums.

But interesting exhibits to be found there, all the same. There was a boat similar to a coracle alongside the keel of an old oaken felucca. A row of roughly cut and gaudily painted figureheads seemed to watch me passing by. As he proudly showed me a cannon, my attention was drawn to a raft, approximately six feet square, that had been unceremoniously leant on a wall in a dark corner.

The main platform of the raft was built from lashed lengths of rough timber, still some limpets glued to them. In the middle of it was a circular hole and as I wandered over in curiosity, I saw an upturned glass plate there, which I guessed was for viewing underwater.

Underneath, surrounding this plate, were large flagons secured with furred green rope taken through holes of wooden battens. The flagons might once have contained olive oil or vinegar. My acquaintance saw my interest in this peculiar raft and so explained its origin. The structure was found drifting in the Red Sea thirty miles out from the coast of El Quseir, and was brought home and donated to the museum by a friend.

Then my eye was caught by a dead crab incarcerated in one of those flagons. I bent down to inspect it more closely: behind it seemed to be sheaves of paper. I mentioned this to Mr. Simion who simply shrugged, and we walked on without any more said about the find.

After I had visited the first floor, seeing rope arrangements, a full mizzenmast appearing from a hole in the floor and other nautical items of passing interest, I thanked my host and bade him farewell.

I was pleased to find the next afternoon cooler than the previous day; some cloud cover made the air heavier but still it was bearable. I sat inside the Cafe Al Omda, partaking of a hookah (one must indulge in another's culture when given the chance). Upon returning to the mint tea, the glass to my lips, an excited Eduardo Simion hurried through the doorway, a look of consternation about his features which changed to a broad smile upon seeing me sitting in my corner.

It seemed that the contents of the flagon were one hundred or so tightly-written pages on rough, handmade paper.

Mr. Simion told me that not only was it a remarkable journal but that it was written in English. He had hold of at least twelve of the pages for me to investigate.

After a brief discussion, it was agreed I copy them word for word, as I am a native English-speaker and so would understand better, and be able to translate any lettering which might have become smudged or

obliterated by seawater. Mr. Simion said he was busy elsewhere and had to go; although I left the café with him, I returned not long after with a fountain pen and notebook in hand. Then, after an initial study of the papers, I found them to be in the wrong order with some of the pages missing, as if they had been taken at random from throughout the folio.

So, surrounded by wise-eyed hookah smokers and casual mint tea drinkers, I set about the task of sorting the leaves before copying the words, as read from those pages of the journal, into my notebook.

••••

*Page 1*

29th of September, 1895

My name is Anthony Bridgewater. I am writing this whilst looking out to sea, sitting on hot sand with my back to a rock. There is a mechanical man to my left who holds a baton in readiness to conduct his small orchestra. They sit on a stage made from riven slate. They have their backs to a semi-circle of sculpted stones which hide them from the sweeping waves. The conductor has a benign look of anticipation about his lips with eyes wide, and thick, grey eyebrows raised. His frozen countenance and figure are no surprise to me now.

Not far from where I sit is a small cave – protected by boulders – one of many worming through this gigantic pile of rock which is called Foyer House Island. Inside it is a raft I made that will not only be my means of escape, but afford protection to this journal should I not get back home.

*Page numbers unknown*

...night I had another peculiar dream. I can report that since being on this island, all my dreams have been of this lucid kind, seeming to uncover layers of reality previously unknown.

I am on a raft made of green and yellow bottles, staring down into the depths of the ocean where clouds of beautiful fish swim within the sapphire waters. I know exactly where I am: the spot where my ship had

founded. A sun shines like the moon, spreading greenish fingers of light across the dappling waters. Ahead, I see the beach holding a row of rocks and these are like massive gnarled knuckles. As the raft drifts to the right on a gentle current, the conductor comes into view. Lifting the baton with even more certitude, there is a pause as he looks to his audience; whereupon the first upward stroke of this musical wand starts the musicians into a collective wonderment of sound. I have never heard such extraordinary music before – as the violins swell and the flutes glide, a sense of awe and excitement fills my soul. I wish to dive into the clear waters and swim to shore, and then over to this wonderful ensemble of musicians.

My wonderment does not stop there, for as my eyes encompass the island, each side of that mountain covered abundantly in trees becomes brown locks of hair; and the conductor falls prostrate onto the slab which is his pedestal. As though this is a signal, bright and flashing fish dart around and about, with seaweed wavering, and they form the letters of the name “Kassara”. A flock of birds descend to stand on jutting rocks of the mountain. I recognise them to be falcons. They rearrange themselves, and their group becomes an eye with a vivid, green iris. Trees bend and nod over them before becoming upright again; they have acted as an eyelid, giving the appearance of that massive hypnotic eye winking at me.

*Pages 5 to 8*

...eventuality dawned all at once. Faced with a difficult decision, I put it to the back of my mind so that I might not drag down my spirit, already curling in panic.

Should I swim towards that strange mannequin almost masked by the rock, shaped like a cockle shell, possibly some cultish icon worshipped by the inhabitants of this dismal island?

The men (dressed in their peculiar choices of attire) were barking orders but the actual meanings were lost to the hectic waves and wind. They

were hauling the drowned men from the sea, laying them side by side on the sand of the beach. One of the bands was searching their pockets.

I dared not swim to the shore to meet them. I am a strong swimmer and, despite the waves pummelling me, I decided my best course of action would be to dive underwater and head towards a sheltered cove to provide me with cover.

Without warning – a moment after I had raised my eyes to those dreadful, dark clouds – I was sucked into a whirlpool and dragged under. I was carried along and upwards through a tunnel of rock, freezing black water rushing along with me. I lashed out to hanks of seaweed in an attempt to slow my progress. I knew I was about to be killed, surely thrown with a force against a cave wall at the end. I would be as the crew and passengers of *The Galliard*: bloated, floating dead and pushed wherever, food for sharks. But some sort of guiding spirit was with me. This tunnel of rock was like a huge oesophagus, drawing water in and out as a living creature would to draw air in and out of its lungs. When I had surfaced in a cave at the end of the tunnel, the moment the direction of those tons of water turned, I cradled a stony outcrop with all my strength and pulled myself up onto it. And as the water receded, I climbed as high up the interior rock-face as I was able, slipping on green slime. There was a hole above like a jagged silver disc and the higher I climbed, the more of the sky showed through.

I heard the breathing water surging in and out as I clambered to the top. I came out, exhausted and shivering, onto a flat rock at the edge of the coast, overlooking those crashing waves. The mountain stood over me, dark and mysterious, wreathes of fog about its summit. There was a path of sorts which I followed; it took me along the edge and around, so that I was closer to the beach that was infested with those brigands or pirates, whatever they were. One of them was wheeling a barrow close to the line of bodies. Others were daring the lashing wind and rain by swimming out to collect wood and other flotsam from the sea. Still another had tied a rope about a tea crate so as to tow it to shore.

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...imposing figure, taller than the rest, wearing a terracotta-coloured jumper and tights with some sort of skirt around his waist, yellow and white. A black patch completely covered one of his eyes. He held a rod and was tapping it upon the rock formation immediately behind the corpses. To my surprise a large plate of rock slid away, revealing an entrance to a secret cave. They would surely be taking the dead men inside of it to search them at their leisure. These parasites were making me angry and ill, and more so when I recognized one of the victims dragged from the sea to be Mr. Roper, my colleague and friend. If I could have leapt at them then as a jaguar might from a tree I surely would have done. Though all I could do was watch but quickly turn away in disgust at their antics.

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...noticed, twenty feet below, heart-shaped piles of jet-black rocks. From this side of them I stared at the dummy's head covered with fine white hair, arms raised with one hand holding what looked to be a conductor's baton. And more figures before him as still as a tableau made of stone. Behind stood the curve of stones which screened them from the crashing waves.

I decided to head on, with that constant rain adding to my already soaked clothes. Above, the mountain loomed out of the dark clouds. I weaved my way through trees and bushes, still feeling a deep sadness at those dead ones, now at the mercy of the body-snatchers. The actions of the strangers on this abysmal island were too terrible to countenance; not amounting to murder but nonetheless despicable.

What if some of the men, seemingly drowned, were capable of resuscitation? I started to run. If I could make my way back down to the shoreline without being seen and somehow open that secret door, then I might be able to save some of my fellows.

I marched in earnest, prepared to fight any of the brigands who would stop me. The rain was slowing. I was suddenly lighter in spirit and changed my mind again; I would need to be cautious of these...

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As they disappeared through the impressive rock arch into the next bay, I looked down to my right to see the immobile figure on the shore and, from this direction of view, I could see his orchestra. They too sat in eager anticipation of their conductor starting the recital, from what signal I have no idea.

So strange was this, I decided that I must see more closely the unusual arrangement of models by the sea.

The closer I got to them, the more I felt afraid, and a total confusion enveloped me. They looked real people yet frozen as if time had stopped for them all.

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...raised voices and decided that to hide for the while would be the best option; I looked between the low branches of a tree with my body hidden behind its gnarled trunk. What I saw was shocking to the core. There, in sharp, clear daylight, were some of the crew members of The Galliard. My breath seemed to leave my body with the revelation of it. I was compelled to call out to them but before I did, their charismatic and incredibly tall leader spoke. His words were difficult to catch but as much as reached my ears, I have to say it was quite the most extraordinary voice I have ever heard. I am not ashamed to mention, with its unique baritone richness and subtle timbres, my heart lurched with a sort of ecstasy. Some of the others were animated in a peculiar way while more dropped to their knees, there to stretch out prostrate before him as if in worship.

I swear there was some force from that mysterious one, as if he was making the tree invisible, or be made of glass. The impressive frame of Kassara moved...

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...was Mr. Roper, as alive as ever.

How had he released his lungs of salt water and come back to life? How was that possible? I admit that I shed a tear then, so happy to see him unharmed. I wanted to call out to him – “Mr. Roper! Mr. Roper!” – even run over and fling my arms about the man to hug him like a brother.

But then something had me narrowing my eyes. Not everything was as it should be: he started to walk away and I noticed his gait was different than was usual. We learn small details about our acquaintances and friends without realizing; I must have registered into my brains the manner in which Mr. Roper walked. His was always a sloppy gait, I suppose, giving a friendly air to his person. Yet this imposter – surely – was walking differently, almost mechanically.

I would need to keep my mouth sealed, I told myself, as well as my footsteps light. I decided to follow him.

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...since discovered many more of these mechanical creatures across the island; or rather around its perimeter, some close to the water's edge, others hidden in lagoons and forests of palms while others seeming to hug the mountainside.

What incredible contraptions they are. One day I will dare to sully one of those wondrous creations by opening it up, to discover the intricacies which fit inside. Surely there are cleverly balanced, clockwork mechanisms with rods and gears and pulleys, somehow in perfect concert with electricity in a pure form, and cogs with the finest of teeth.

What I find puzzling is how varied these mechanical creatures are. There were the figures in Turkish garb and black turbans in the wooded area not far from the settlement; an Indian aesthete dressed in fine muslin and gold ornaments; a group of Chinese...

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...mind reeled at the sight: a mighty pyramid, at least as tall as the largest which stands at Giza. It towered high, lit by many flickering torches along each of its stepped rows. Impressive and huge yet still it was dwarfed by the cavernous space that contained it, the inside of that mountain having been somehow hollowed out.

The floor beneath my feet was made of polished granite squares with grid lines made of crystal. This beautiful material caught the glowing from those torches and seemed to pulsate with their own light.

It took me a good ten minutes to walk the perimeter of the magnificent structure, my attention drawn to the many intricate sets of hieroglyphs expertly incised into the insides of the mountain and highlighted with paint. And there, a huge doorway carved and inset either side with statues dominated one end. My knowledge of Egyptian gods is limited but as I studied them, I could see...

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...incredible if it were true. I began to comprehend: these semi-opaque vessels somehow contained and protected the spirits – the souls even – of those who had drowned. Souls from the Far East, Asia and the Americas; from anywhere, anyone unlucky enough to have been aboard a ship destined to be sunk by those cruel rocks hidden and lying-in wait in the ocean.

What type of arcane knowledge had to be acquired even to consider the idea of this? How could it be made to work? The concept owed too much to the imagination. Nevertheless, there was some kind of proof: did I not see the decomposing body and face of Mr. Roper before being

wrapped in bandages and ceremoniously burned with others? A week after, Mr. Roper, as alive as I am, walking and talking on the bluff?

The indescribable powers that Kassara must have within his control; the limitless genius to create mechanical men and women that moved and seemed to breath like any human being; the unknown processes he was familiar with to somehow install a soul into each of these mechanical creations; breathing life into them, so that they became the dead ones, alive again. And the extreme artistic creativity involved: the faces of the clockwork people matching precisely as if their twin, bearing no difference with the faces of their intended recipients, perfect in...

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I had at that moment finished transcribing the last of the pages given to me by Eduardo Simion when he came into the café at speed, as though someone might be after him. A possibility, I did think at the time, with the way his squarish head swung from left to right, his features full of suspicion.

Catching sight of me at my table at the back, he hurried over. He was a different man to the one I had met earlier in the day. Those eyes of his were coal-black, and I saw then not holding suspicion, but more like fear. Without a word, he contorted his mouth and snatched up the pages from the tablecloth, knocking the oil lamp as he did. He spun fast on his heels and literally ran to the café door. I have not met him again since that day.

The shock I felt was deep; there was a certain unrealism about his actions, even more than those tales told in the journal pages.

I think I must have sat there for a while as though put into a trance. It took a good five minutes of rumination to come to terms with the unexpected insult – because that was what it felt like – finally rising from my chair so as to go pay the bill.

The café interior was relatively dark compared to the slab of sunlight the other end. There were candles in tapped brass containers at the back, murky and smokey shadows and blacked-out alcoves. Before I moved away, my attention was drawn to a large man in a previously darkened corner: a flare of a match and the lighting of a beeswax candle before him chased those shadows away. He must have been lingering in that darkness over a cup of black coffee on the wooden table before him.

I swear an oath of truth here: he was dressed in a dark burnt-orange sweater, and had a long beard plaited with ribbon. I caught sight of a yellow and white skirt, and one of his strong calves covered with terracotta-coloured stockings. He seemed larger than life, cutting out the space there which seemed to be vibrating about him. Then, while pushing some brown locks from his forehead, with one eye socket showing only a bone bowl, the other containing a penetrating green eye, he winked at me.

*Peter Carmel, Faiyum, August 1965*

# ANCHOR

DAVE MUSSON

Throughout everything that happened in that hospital - all the weirdness - he kept hold of the paperclip. It allowed him to stay grounded, it helped him to see it through, it was his reminder of what was real.

It was his anchor.

Waking up and finding himself in a hospital bed was strange enough by itself. He remembered feeling unwell at work, going to the first aid kit for some painkillers and after that, nothing.

At first, he thought the feeling of being knocked for six was simply the stifling July heat - one of those days you only get in Britain a couple of times a year but, when they hit, *boy* do they hit hard. However, when he was still feeling woozy after 90 minutes inside his air-conditioned office, he knew something was up. Thus, the walk to the first aid kit and the blackout.

When he next opened his eyes, he was strapped to a gurney in a strange place. Strange because it was a hospital, and he hadn't been in a hospital when he last closed his eyes that day, but it also had the vibe of a *strange* hospital. Even with as little hospital experience as he'd had - almost exclusively taken from TV dramas plus one visit as a kid to have a blood test - he still sensed that this place didn't feel quite right. It was almost...thin. It didn't seem totally real.

He was given a shallow veil of privacy in the form of a paper curtain around his bed, and there were two sounds he picked out. The first - the closest to him - was the gentle bleep of the heart monitor he was hooked up to. The other, coming from just outside his curtain, was someone sobbing.

It was unnerving.

He could tell that the person sobbing was an adult, and they were clearly close by - probably in the next bed along. The sad noise was quiet, but persistent and so mournful it was chilling. They were the sobs of someone absolutely distraught, someone who had been crying for hours and still had a way to go. There was no pattern to the sobbing either - a random number of them would fall out, interspersed by a couple of hitched, sniffled in-breaths, then back to the sobbing once more. Some would be light - almost silent - yet others would be harsh, throaty, and full of anguish.

He never did determine who had been sobbing or if it had ever been real at all, but he knew he'd hear their cries in his dreams for the rest of his life - they would haunt him.

He was still dressed for the office. Someone had removed his shoes, but they'd left his grey suit trousers, white shirt and green string tie on. He realised there was something in his left hand and glanced down - it was a call button.

Wanting to know where he was, why he was here, what was *wrong* with him and - most of all - how he could get away from the haunting cries of his ward-mate, he pushed it.

Nothing happened. No-one came. Just the bleep of his own heart beat and that awful sobbing.

He tried to call out for help, but every time he did a crackle of piercing white noise - like the sound of an old dial-up modem - spat out of the heart rate monitor, masking his voice and keeping his cries unheard. He tried again and again, but every time the white noise blocked his yells. It was almost as if that crackled, alien sound was coming from his mouth rather than the monitor, such was its power over his own voice.

*This can't be real, he thought, this must just be a weird fever dream because this absolutely cannot be fucking real.*

But it certainly *felt* real - particularly that endless sobbing.

He started to panic. He heard his heart pound - banging its bloody drumbeat right in his ears and he felt himself somehow getting hotter on this already unbearable stinker of a summer's day.

He realised he wanted something within his control, something to ground him in sort of reality. Luckily, he had just the thing.

In his right pocket was the paperclip. Nothing fancy about it, just a normal paperclip. He kept it in that pocket because he was a terrible fiddler, and its sole purpose was to be something for his fingers to play with during meetings or while waiting in line.

It had served him well for a number of years now and had even helped him focus - particularly on video calls. It seemed having something to keep his idle hands busy was what his brain had needed all along to just get on with its own work. More than that; it seemed to rid him of his lack of confidence and his performance had shot up as a result.

If only he'd know that at school - his life might well have been different.

He reached inside the pocket and closed his fist around the clip, squeezing hard enough for its tiny metal frame to pinch the skin of his palm. It hurt a little, but the hurt was good. Hurting was real. He sighed, revelling in something normal.

Then the weirdness started.

First, as if a switch had been flicked somewhere, the room was bathed in a rich purple light - like the colour of a Dairy Milk chocolate bar, or the Christmas lights from his childhood - the kind of rich, warm lights that make you think of Quality Street wrappers and 80s movies that you simply didn't get with those cold, modern LEDs.

At the same time the light hit, a piece of music started - it was the opening lick to *Sweet Child O'Mine*, but a few notes out of tune and played with no sense of timing. It went slow, then sped up, then briefly hit the correct tempo before warping itself again. And it was just the guitar part, no other instruments joined in - it was excruciating, made worse by that sobbing from earlier still being there.

He gripped the paperclip tighter.

The purple light then changed to a bright orange, while the twisted classic rock song moved up an octave to sound even more horrendous. The sobbing hadn't stopped either - it was still there, acting as the ambient noise to the whole bizarre scene.

He grimaced and squeezed the clip again, savouring the shape of it in his hand. He could feel the two loops, the cut ends of the wire, and the thinness of its metal body pressing down into his palm, pinching the rough yet sensitive skin there, scratching and biting and, most importantly, anchoring him.

The purple light briefly reappeared and then changed to the green of a traffic light urging you to get a move on and just go. The *Sweet Child O'Mine* lick this time dropped down about five octaves and slowed to a dreadful crawl, like the soundtrack to some awful, low monster dragging itself through a swamp.

He shut his eyes, counted to three and opened them again.

The light was still green, but this time - to his horror - there were silhouettes of cloaked figures standing on the other side of the curtain drawn around his bed. The figures - seven of them - didn't move, but two small red lights started glowing from their heads - roughly where their eyes might have been, if they were human. Those eye substitutes glowed brighter and brighter, fourteen tiny red spotlights beaming on his chest and then slowly moving down his body. Then, they started screaming. Seven grief-stricken screams coming one at a time, all layering up on the previous one but each one a slightly different pitch, resulting in an unbearable cacophony of vocalised pain.

He was terrified. He screamed back in reply but those awful figures switched to mimic his own cries, so all he could hear was his own horror amplified sevenfold. It was excruciating.

He snapped his eyes shut again and clamped down on that paperclip once more, trying to not to imagine there being even more of those figures behind the seven edging towards his bed, either lurking further back in the room, or maybe crawling across the ceiling like some awful spider-demon hybrid that would inevitably defy gravity and probably be able to spin its head a full 360 degrees too.

The paperclip pinched and bit and scratched even harder, and was the only thing that gave him the confidence to force his eyelids open again and see what was before him.

The figures had gone, and the green light had turned red. The music had changed too - gone was that terrible guitar lick and, in its

place, a gentle bossa nova beat and a normal pitch and normal tempo. He wiggled his hips to the catchy, familiar rhythm, unable to stop himself from moving with the groove.

The sobbing still remained.

Then, entering from stage left as the man looked at it, was a new silhouette. It was a woman, a dancing woman. Not just dancing - it was a striptease. On the side of that painfully thin curtain, an exotic dancer was sauntering seductively towards him. What normally might have been a thrill was now making him the most scared he'd been in his life. His mouth went dry, his stomach churned, and his genitals tingled not in excitement, but in pure fear.

While her shadow suggested a woman of beauty, his soul was screaming that, if she got to the curtain and pulled it back, what he would have to look at would send him crazy. There was no rational reason at all for him to think this, yet he knew. He *knew*.

That curtain was, right now, the only thing keeping him sane.

He squeezed even harder on that paperclip, feeling it finally rip into his palm and draw blood. Nothing happened though, the exotic dancer edged closer and closer to his curtain, eventually reaching a hand up to grab it. Her thin, delicate fingers slowly curled around the edge of the piece of material that had been shutting him off from whatever reality was hiding behind it. Each fingernail on that woman's hand was a different shade of purple - the middle one even had some glitter mixed in, giving it a rather glamorous sparkle.

He clamped his eyes shut and braced himself, as he heard the curtain being drawn back in one swift, well-practised swish.

"Oh goodness, you're bleeding," a woman's voice said, "let me clean that up."

He opened his eyes. Everything was normal. Well, apart from being in hospital. But it was a normal hospital. No weird lights, no awful music, and no exotic dancer - just a friendly nurse. She was about his age, slim, and pretty in spite of being bright red in the face from stress, exhaustion, and this damned summer scorcher.

"Sorry I didn't respond to your call button sooner - it's been one of those days! Everyone's suffering with this heat. It's always the same

when it gets like this - the sun gets fired up and we are swamped - good job we only get them like this a couple of days a year!"

She smiled. It was a good smile, a *normal* smile. A bonus anchor to the one covered in blood in his palm.

"Sorry, I'm babbling, aren't I? Your tests have all come back clear so you're good to go home as soon as you're ready - let me just clean up this hand first. I tucked your shoes under the bed by the way, in case you were wondering."

She reached for the paperclip, meaning to take it off him, and he thought that when she did, he'd be plunged back into that nightmare world, and this nice nurse would revert to that terrible dancer. In fact, the more he looked at this nurse, the more he saw that terrible woman from the other side of the veil. Take off that blue uniform, and this nurse's silhouette would have matched the dancers perfectly. She was her! It was the same woman! And she knew why he was holding the paperclip! The moment she took his anchor from him, it would be game over!

But it wasn't. She took the paperclip, and nothing changed. He sighed. It was going to be ok.

Except, one thing still bugged him.

"Nurse, where is that sobbing coming from? Whoever they are, they sound upset."

The nurse paused from cleaning his hand, looked into his eyes, and frowned.

"Sobbing? There's no-one sobbing here."

She pulled back his curtain to show him the rest of the ward. He was the only person using it.

"There's no-one else in here," she said with a frown, "this ward has been empty all day, until you arrived obviously. I'd forgotten you were here to be honest; it's been so quiet."

And, at that point, there wasn't any sobbing. It had stopped. But the moment the nurse left he knew it would start again. Which, of course, it did.

After she left, the man calmly got off the bed, put on his shoes and prepared to leave - not before picking up his paperclip from the side

table where the nurse had dropped it and wrapping his now bandaged hand around it. It didn't stop the sobbing, but at least he had something to hold onto.

He had his anchor again. He left the ward, walked down the long, sterile corridors and out of the hospital. He did not see another person in the building.

He reached a huge, ornate door and pushed it open, stepping back into the sweltering July sunshine, which hadn't calmed down in the slightest the whole time he was inside. He felt a slight tingling in his bandaged hand, and a slight tugging, nagging feeling at the back of his mind of having seen something he wasn't supposed to have seen.

But otherwise, he felt happy. He had his anchor again.

He folded his suit jacket over his arm and slowly walked home - drinking in the heat of that weird day, heat that continued to radiate off the pavement right up into his face until long after sunset.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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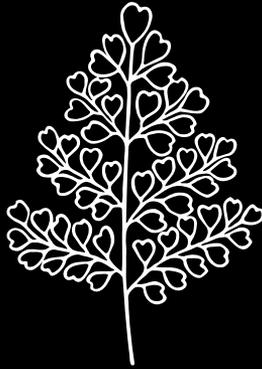
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**RUSS BICKERSTAFF** ~ Russ is an author and critic living in Milwaukee, WI, USA.

**ALAN ARCHY** ~ Alan is a former public health worker who now does occasional TV extra work. During the pandemic he spent a lot of time on his allotment slowly watching things grow and also traipsing the moorlands above his north-west town. As he did so he indulged in flights of fancy and gradually firm ideas began to take shape. He carefully began to write them down and they took the form of short stories. Alan is interested in the liminal dimensions existing between external reality and the world of our expectations, between what is and what could be...

**DAVID JOHN GRIFFIN** ~ David John Griffin is a writer and graphic designer. He lives in a small town by the Thames in Kent with his wife Susan. David has five books published: a gothic tale called *The Unusual Possession of Alastair Stubb*, a literary/psychological novel, *Infinite Rooms*, and a magical realism/paranormal collection called *Two Dogs At The One Dog Inn And Other Stories*. His time-travel adventure *Abbie and the Portal* was followed by *Turquoise Traveller*, an urban fantasy involving dreams in reality.

**DAVE MUSSON** ~ Dave is a glasses-wearing, bearded human being from the middle of England who likes heavy music with loud guitars, watching rugby league, and reading creepy stories. He made his debut as a published fiction writer in 2021's *Welcome to the Funhouse*, from *Blood Rites*.



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