

# Blips

A.P. Atkinson and Seth Godwynn



The true story is finally told - badly.



# BLIPS

by

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The characters and events portrayed in this book are rather obviously fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, or to any events that seem even remotely plausible according to conventional understandings of physics at even a high school level, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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# The Blip

Number 2 stepped inside the room, the door slamming shut behind him with a definite, and very satisfying clatter of locking machinery. It sounded much like a flock of metal seagulls crashing into a bulletproof glass wall, beyond which they could see a mountain of dead fish piled up inside. The thought occurred that perhaps metal seagulls didn't eat fish, but then on the other hand, maybe they did.

Fortunately for everyone involved, there was a very welcome absence of dead fish *on this particular occasion*, and the office looked for all intents and purposes exactly like an actual office would be expected to look to an untrained eye. The walls were white and constructed from a material that was perfectly, effortlessly smooth, almost as if a perfect, unblemished liquid had been poured out along an imaginary geometric plane and set into a motionless and perfect veneer.

Perhaps that was exactly what had happened. It was very hard to tell, since their office could, and often did, look however it wanted.

"Good morning," said Number 1.

"Morning to you too," said Number 2 with a grumble. "Is it in fact morning?"

"Well, I just got here, so it must be. I left my house at eight in the evening, just as a storm of flaming red rocks was beginning to shower down from an orange sky. I just chalked it up to convenient timing and left it at that."

Number 2 nodded in agreement. "I was married, you know," he said conversationally. "I didn't find her very attractive. I like my women with all their bones on the inside. Call me old-fashioned."

Number 1 chuckled to himself. "I had a dog again. It was just a dog this time. It didn't have laser-beams in its eyes, it didn't float through the sky, and it certainly didn't have a half human head at each end of its spine!"

"At least its spine was on the inside..."

Number 1 turned and flashed him a grin. His face was oddly familiar, a slightly too-wide jawline, eyes too far apart, and a hairline that was just beginning to give up on being a hairline. Suddenly, the grin vanished.

“Well, that’s not right,” he said.

Number 2 couldn’t help but agree. “What’s wrong with your face?”

Number 1 replied, narrowing his eyes: “What’s wrong with *your* face?”

Number 2 reached up and felt the skin around the side of his cheeks. He bit his lower lip thoughtfully. Was this all somehow his fault? It usually was.

“This is the one I woke up with!”

“Me too,” said Number 1 with a curious glare.

Number 2 looked down at the reassuringly complex yet horrendously simple metal-framed chair in front of his workstation. He rested his hand on the back of the frame and hesitated for a moment. “Well, this has never happened before,” he said. “I mean, we’ve got infinite possibilities to exist in: what are the chances of this happening?”

“Maybe it is just a coincidence? Maybe we just happened to wake up this morning with absolutely identical faces?”

“It could happen,” Number 2 agreed. “Couldn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a scientist.”

“Yes you are! Are we not both men of science?”

Number 1 stared at nothing for a time, before returning his attention to the stack of papers on his desk. “Who can even tell anymore? This is just a job for me, and not even a very good one if I’m being honest. Sometimes, I wish I’d never taken it.”

“Me too.” He sighed to himself, his face (or more accurately, the face they were currently sharing) filled with regret. “I still remember the fateful day this job was offered to me. It wasn’t one of my best. A chance to change the world, they said. A chance to change the whole universe! What kind of scientist wouldn’t take up an opportunity like that?”

“A good scientist?” Number 1 suggested dryly. “A proper scientist with a firm grip on reality?”

“You mean a proper scientist *like you?*”

“I’ll have you know that sociology is highly respected in hard scientific circles.”

Number 2 sat down, his mind wandering for a moment. What was he going to have for breakfast? This was the question that needed answering. There was always a cupboard in there somewhere that would be filled with food and drinks: it was just a question of finding it. Sometimes, it was nicely labelled and filled with excellent food from around the infinite multiple universes. Other times, it was a bunch of squirming things tied to a hairy mammal that wandered around the room, dropping things out of foul-smelling holes. You could never tell what you were going to get.

“I have a degree in quantum physics,” he said proudly, making his colleague squirm. He would have enjoyed the look on his face, except it was his face, and it was frankly quite unsettling.

Number 1 leaned back in his chair and huffed, “Quantum physics... how quaint!” with all the sarcastic delivery it didn’t quite warrant.

“Not like sociology—that’s right there at the bleeding edge, that is! It’s the science for scientists who can’t science. It’s the sports teacher taking a maths assembly. *We don’t need rigour where we’re going!*”

Number 1 narrowed his eyes. “Right,” he said grimly. “Guess what we’re having for breakfast?”

“Not the little worms again? Tell me it’s not the little worms!”

“Bananas,” he said.

“Bananas?” he said back, sighing to himself. Even he was starting to question which one he was now.

Number 1 nodded their head at him. “Bananas! I searched the whole place. There’s nothing here to eat except bananas.”

“And sociologists!”

Number 1 shook his head slowly. “I hear we’re all sinew and gloop. Not very appetising.”

“Alright, so the food in this facet is terrible, we both have the same face, which I’ll add is not even a good one, and we both hate our jobs.”

“I hate your job more than I hate my job,” he said thoughtfully. “But, I do regret taking it.”

Number 2 rolled his eyes. Presumably it looked exactly the same as when the other one did it. “How did they get you, then?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I applied for an advert in a local paper,” Number 2 began. “I went to an office in a small rural town where the sounds from outside were suspiciously like a large city. Also, it was in a tower-block. They told me about how this was the most important role in the universe and how my life, as it had been, would come to an end if I took it.”

Number 1 chuckled, yanking back a pair of leathery lips over slightly uneven teeth and pulling back a jaw that showed off an impressively sagging double-chin. “They really sold it to you, didn’t they?” he said. “They literally warned you not to take the offer, but you took it anyway. Well done!”

“I didn’t know, did I? I thought it was a proper job. I didn’t know that the essence of my consciousness would live in a refracted pocket-universe from where I’d monitor the sprawling expanse of the multiverse, watching for inconsistencies to occur so they can be safely smoothed out.”

“You should have guessed,” Number 1 suggested. “It’s kind of obvious when you think about it.”

“You’re not funny...”

“I know! I know! I didn’t know I’d end up a disembodied entity hopping from one version of myself to another through infinite universes, or that my day-job would be working in an office filled with bananas and grumpy quantum physicists, but hindsight is the year 2020, or so they say!”

“That bad, huh?” he agreed. “Besides, it takes more than one grumpy quantum physicist to fill an office.”

“There are *a lot* of bananas.”

Number 2 huffed and glanced around the workspace. In his little corner was a white office. Yesterday it had been a cave, filled with strangely gothic computers. The day before that, he had felt sure they had been on a space-station orbiting a very large kitten. “So,” he grunted. “What’s on the schedule for today?”

Number 1 glanced over to his workstation where holographic information floated above a liquid keyboard. “Universe 1234T65 developed a hiccup,” he began. “A dragon went to work without its briefcase. That caused a fish on Universe 17Alpha34 to give up on the idea of evolving legs. It’s a long story but it all ended up with golf not being invented on Earth until two days after it was meant to.”

Number 2 sat up sharply, his eyes wide with shock. “Oh no!” he said. “Can we manipulate the quantum flow, or is it worse than that?”

Number 1’s face dropped. It was the same look that he had seen in the mirror that morning when he’d woken up excited to find he was married, and then discovered she was some form of crustacean with a bony growth where attractive people kept their faces. “I’m afraid it’s far worse than that.”

He gasped with a combination of abject terror and weary acceptance. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes. We’re going to be spending the day editing Wikipedia entries.”

He shook his head dolefully. “You know, when they told me that I’d be working to keep the universe safe from ripples in reality, I never expected this.”

“We’re protecting Earth!” Number 1 said with a large, animated shrug. “Not much interesting happens there on our watch. It’s a small corner of an unimportant universe. It’s less important than the decision of whether or not to scratch an itch on your genitals when you’re not quite sure if anyone is looking.”

“I know,” he grumbled. “I remember reading it on the first page of the induction handbook.”

“So what did you think you would be doing today? Did you think we’d be sipping coffee, riding motorcycles, meeting sentient androids, and changing the very nature of time? We’re little more than civil servants.”

“Civil servants who had to give up their bodies so that they could float between different facets of reality, never knowing where they’ll end up or what they’ll look like tomorrow,” he said angrily, throwing a banana at his workstation. “Every day we come to work in an office that changes locations constantly, never sure what we’ll find when we open the door. At first, it was thrilling, but now I’m just bored. I want my own body back. It wasn’t perfect, but at least I had a different face from you.”

“I miss the past, too,” Number 1 admitted. “OK, you want to know how they recruited me? I was working in Starbucks and someone left their card.”

Number 2 laughed to himself. “I knew it, professor!”

Suddenly, their dull conversation was interrupted by a loud shrieking alarm, notable for its lack of any resemblance to the bloodcurdling screams of a pack of crazed banshees, on this particular occasion.

“Did the day golf was invented change itself back?” he said with wildly misplaced optimism.

Number 1 got up and pressed several liquid buttons, each producing a curious splashing sound.

“Not golf!” he said.

He looked concerned.

“Well, what then?” Number 2 said urgently. “Not tennis too?”

“I don’t know. I think your banana must have hit the controls. I think you made Mrs Winkle from Aylesbury trip over her cat. The cascade effect is catastrophic!”

“So?” he said, sounding like he didn’t much care, the fact that he didn’t care being the most likely cause. “She didn’t invent golf, did she?”

Number 1 turned with his own face, ashen and in horror, his mouth lolling open. “It’s much worse than that,” he said. “The universe has hiccupped. We’ve got a *blip*!”



“A blip?!” Number 2 said urgently.

It’s funny how when you get what you wish for, you suddenly realise how little you actually wanted it. That had also been Number 2’s experience of marriage, back when he was a woman from Essex called Tracy.

“A blip!” he repeated, his face ashen white, his eyes wide in horror. “There’s a ripple in the fabric of reality caused by your banana. You’ve caused a change that’s led to a cascade of other tiny changes.”

“Track it!” he yelled.

“I am tracking it!” he yelled back.

“Show me a report.”

“I’m trying!”

“Show me!”

# The Glass Spaceship

He was a strikingly handsome man.

He had a powerful, lean physique, and a proud, square jawline. His piercing blue eyes peered out into the infinite darkness of space, the endless black canvas upon which the universe itself was painted.

But it wasn't the universe, the place of endless possibilities and the cradle of all creation, that held his attention. He was staring at his own reflection, gazing lovingly at the image of himself as it gazed lovingly back at him. He was veiled only in a towel, since he had stepped just moments earlier from the shower. He stared at his wonderfully taut physique, casually flexing his broad, strong muscles and grinning to himself proudly.

She slipped elegantly from their bed and stepped up behind him, her bare feet tapping gently on the glass floor beneath. She sipped on a cocktail, a bubbling concoction from some other planet, far off in a distant corner of the galaxy. Perhaps it was waiting to be conquered by his mighty glass spacecraft, the ultimate vessel in the whole, complete and entire universe?

She slipped forwards to join him by the edge of their lounge. She was wrapped only in a bed-sheet torn rudely from their shared bed, and looked at him with a warmth in her eyes that fell short only of the love he felt for himself. Their mutual gaze widened his self-satisfied smirk.

Her hand caressed the flesh of his broad and muscular shoulder. He could smell the scent of sweat on her as she pressed her warm, soft body tightly up against his own. No matter how many times they made love, it was never enough. The closeness of her filled his mind with thoughts of her flawlessly perfect naked body.

He turned to look at her, his face tensing as he contemplated what was next for them. Where to go? What to see? Who to conquer, to cook, to eat?

"Maybe we should head to the Fusian system?" he said. "I hear there's a planet there where the wind blows across fields of wild crystal

flowers creating music so beautiful that it could make a grown man cry.” His voice was deep and heavy, dripping with masculine authority.

“And I hear the population is made up of tiny green people who have no weapons. We could arrive for breakfast and own the planet by lunchtime.” A vicious smile formed on her soft red lips.

He looked away from her beautiful visage to once again stare out into the vastness of space and he smiled inwardly. It was all so perfect: he had the universe at his fingertips and the means to take anything he wanted, at any time he chose to take it. And, even better that all of that, he had *her*.

He looked back to her, to this woman that he had come to deeply love over the last few months. He had met her while attacking an outpost, populated by horribly unprepared little purple aliens who tasted oddly like chicken. She had been in their capital city at the time, destroying it with an ultra-mega-laser-cannon and what was left smelled very much like the grease-trap in the kitchen of a shop specialising in fried poultry and low standards.

She was brutal, morally bereft, totally lacking in empathy and she was beautiful to boot. To him, she was perfection taken form in human flesh.

“I could eat breakfast,” he said thoughtfully as if contemplating something of incredible importance, such as what horribly sweet things he might be able to ram into a toaster. “Computer, prepare a course for the Fusian system. Take us to the planet of the singing flowers.”

The computer spoke with a voice like a whisper breathed over an infinitely delicate wine-glass. “Course is laid in. Preparing for hyper-jump. Total journey time will be seventeen minutes.”

“Seventeen minutes,” she said thoughtfully. She put her drink down on a glass shelf and smiled at him flirtatiously. “I’m going to step outside then. I’ll be back soon, though.” Her eyes locked onto his and something unspoken passed between them. “I promise,” she purred seductively.

“Good idea. I should really step outside myself.” He frowned just a little and added, “It’s just... You step out a lot. Sometimes, it feels like

you're hardly ever here these days." He took a long look out into the void, contemplating something even more important than ramming things into toasters. "What time is it where you are?"

"Ah, ah," she admonished, wagging an erect forefinger. For a moment, it was as if a sadness washed over her. "Let's not ask questions like that, it will spoil the romance. You're Captain Joper, *Dashing Space adventurer*, and I'm Princess Lucie, *Vicious destroyer of worlds*. Let's just leave it at that, shall we? We know who we are in here, that's all that matters. Outside is outside."

He sighed and nodded. Her fingers traced over the bony ridge of his heavy, powerful, masculine jawline and she smiled up at him. His own fingers joined them and he searched until he found the odd little ridge at the top of his neck. She stepped back and did the same to hers.

"I'll see you soon, Princess."

At the same time, they pressed down on the buttons that felt as if they were made from their own flesh.

A bright flash lit up inside his mind.

The glass spaceship flickered, glowed a brilliant white, and was suddenly gone, leaving little Johnnie Harper sitting in his bedroom. He carefully unplugged the simulation-patch from the base of his skull. He felt as if he'd been ripped from a dream, although the memory was perfect, perhaps clearer than the memories he formed in the outside world. It took him a moment to adjust: his brain reeled for a few seconds, trying to make sense of the sudden shift from one reality to the other.

His small bedroom was a tip, as every teenage boy's room was. It smelled of sweat and apathy and strewn with plates of cheap convenience food scattered amidst paper cups, once filled with over-sugared drinks. The smell wasn't quite appalling, but it was getting there.

He hefted himself up, wheezing at the effort as he hoisted his flabby, unhealthy body from the chair, pulling it free of the metal contacts that put

him into the perfect artificial reality of his favourite game: ‘The Glass Spaceship’, the perfect universe that was his to explore.

It was a place where nobody picked on him, where none of the kids at virtual-school shouted at him to lose weight, to go outside more or to make some real friends. It was *his* reality and it was everything he wanted it to be.

In the game he had *real* friends. In the game he had a reality more solid, more meaningful than anything he’d ever encountered in the outside world. He had a life exploring the galaxy in his mighty space-craft. He had *her*, a wonderful girlfriend, the lovely Princess with flowing, golden hair, alluring lips and perfect figure. Inside the game, even an awkward, lonely teenage boy like him could be anything and anyone he wanted to be. In the games, everyone could be whoever they felt that they *really* were. The games were better than anything—at least, better than anything he had anywhere else.

He made his way from the dull, dingy bedroom along the landing to the bathroom, but it was too late. Someone pushed past him and reached the door before he could grab at it first.

“Mum,” he grumbled, thinking only of getting back to the ship, back to his Princess. “I really need to pee.”

“I need to go too,” she sneered, glaring at him accusingly. “It’s not all about you, you know. There are other people living in this dreadful house.”

“Sorry,” he said and turned his eyes down to the ground. He wished he could shrink away into nothing. He wished he could just be Captain Joper again. Captain Joper never had to wait in line for the bathroom. “It’s just that there’s someone waiting for me that I have to get back to...”

“We’re all busy!” his mother told him with a shrill voice, a voice made hoarse from a great deal of shouting. “And I want that rubbish taken out. I’ve told you twice already and it’s still there. Before you do anything else, you go down and empty those bins.”

“But I’m playing my games!” he mumbled to himself pathetically.



Captain Joper never had to take the rubbish out, which was fortunate since his rubbish was frequently the smouldering remains of a planet, littered with the skeletons of tasty little purple aliens.

A faint attention-seeking bark emanated from the kitchen downstairs, dulled by the thick walled stairwell.

She looked him up and down with that look of disappointed disgust that he hated so much. "I'm playing games too!"

"*You* play the games, Mum?"

She snorted a sarcastic laugh at him. "*Of course* I play the games. Everyone plays the games. What do you think I do to relax? I have to unwind from a long day spent cleaning yours and your father's dirty underwear. That's even less fun than it sounds, I can promise you that. When I was contemplating what I wanted to be doing when I grew up, scrubbing your crusty pants wasn't at the top of the list, you know! I used to like the French one about the murder mystery, but now I play a space one where you have to conquer enough worlds to earn yourself the ultimate prize, a huge *Glass Spaceship*. I like having a perfect little galaxy to explore and it's fun to make *special friends* online who destroy planets with me. I can have fun like I never had with your father. And I also like not having to wash anyone's filthy, stained under-clothes."

He looked away thoughtfully. So she played in the Glass Spaceship universe too?

A horrible, terrible thought flashed through his mind. Could it really be a coincidence that his mother was taking a toilet break at the same time that he and his girlfriend were? You could be anyone you wanted to be inside the games, and if you earned enough points, you could *look* any way you wanted to look. Who would his mother choose to be? What might she look like in the game?

Surely it couldn't be. It just couldn't. *Could it?*

His thoughts were interrupted again by the sound of barking, this time with a little more urgency.

“And while you’re emptying the bins, go and feed Princess before she starves to death!”

“Woof!!”

# The Ripple

“Oh my god!” screamed Number 2.

She clutched her hands to the side of her head as her mind roared painfully inside her aching skull. Her eyes were tiny points of flaming napalm, burning into the bones around her eye-sockets. The experience wasn't a pleasant one, and she certainly didn't enjoy it as much as she would enjoy, say, sipping cocktails on a beach while waiting for her lunch of grilled lobster tails to be delivered, for instance.

Number 1 rasped loudly. He was sitting in his chair, his chest heaving up and down breathlessly as he gasped for air.

“What the hell was that?” Number 2 cried out as the pain ebbed away. By the time she had finished the sentence, the pain had vanished entirely, leaving her a little confused and oddly missing it slightly. Despite the fact it made no sense to do so, she looked around, afraid perhaps that someone might have attacked them. Whatever might have done so had begun its assault inside her unwary skull, or whoever's skull she was occupying.

Number 1 took a few short breaths and glared at her accusingly. After a few moments he sat up straight, composed himself. “*That...*” he began. “*That*, was a report!”

“A report?!” Number 2 grabbed her face, and started tugging at her own cheeks. “You've changed. You look like a man that sells insurance.”

Number 1 ran his hands over his head. “Yes. Balding, large nose, sagging jawline. I've definitely reduced my level of attractiveness by around thirty-two per cent, I would estimate.”

Number 2 waited in silence. When the silence was met with even more silence, she said, “Well? What do I look like?”

Number 1 stood up and took a deep, cleansing breath. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and made a humming noise from the back of his throat. “I'm not going to sugar-coat this,” he said with a dark demeanour. “You look like you were a homeless person for a while, who got so hungry that

you tried to eat your own face. Also, you're a woman now, and one that I wouldn't find attractive without a very robust beer-container in my hand that I could use to bash my head hard enough to damage the visual-cortex of my own brain."

Number 2 balled her fists and dug them into her sides. "That hurts, you know," she said angrily. "I might be beautiful on the inside."

"Idiot! It's still *you* on the inside, and you're less beautiful than my own armpit."

Number 2 rubbed her head and blinked away the last of the confusion. "Explain to me what happened," she demanded. "Why does my head feel like it just contained an over-zealous escape attempt by my own organs?"

"Well, I've read about this in the manual but never experienced it myself."

"We have a manual? A whole manual?"

Number 1 glared at her in rebuke. "I was about to ask if you'd read it. I'm assuming that your answer would be a strong negative."

"I was probably a man when the issue of instruction manuals came up," she said. "I find the idea of reading it strangely alluring now."

Number 1 sat down, still massaging the temples of his far less attractive forehead. "When we display a report, we're dragged into it. We have to live it through the experience of the people in it. It's the easiest way to learn, you see. Sometimes, it will be effortless, sometimes not. You can never tell.

"Try to imagine it as if we're reading a story in some other universe, only we're reading it from inside the minds of the characters it's happening to."

"That sounds dreadful," she said with a thoughtful frown. "What if we got a report about two people who were accidentally turned inside out after having their heads sucked into their own anus?"

"I see you didn't read the manual that came with your human body either."

Number 2 crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. With a powerful degree of entirely misplaced pride, she answered: “I did not!”

“Clearly. Well, apparently your banana caused a ripple through the reality of our local branch of the universe. You brought a game about a glass-spaceship into existence some time in the near future. Just don’t ask me how. I don’t know how these things work.”

“Spaceships can’t be made out of glass, can they?” she asked with a thoughtful frown. “They have to be made of metal, don’t they?”

Number 1 gave her a look that more than adequately conveyed a significant lack of knowledge, where the opposite of that would have been distinctly preferable. “I worked in a coffee shop. My only experience of space-travel, back when I was tethered to my own human body, was going out to watch bad movies. I will concede that I don’t remember any of them being entirely transparent.”

“So what now?” she said impatiently, her flabby jawline vibrating around her wide, flaring cheek-bones while her piercing little eyes glared out from a pair of pitched down eyebrows.

“Well, we can’t just leave it! We have to find a way to put things back the way they’re meant to be. I’m pretty sure that’s our job.”

“Can’t we just delete the game? Does it even matter that much in the grand scheme of things?”

Number 1 scowled angrily. “It matters,” he said sternly. “I don’t know why, but it matters.” Thoughtfully, he added: “I mean, *I assume* it matters.”

Number 2’s oddly misshapen lips curved up into a knowing smile. “You didn’t read the manual either, did you?”

“I skimmed it. But the point is, we need to erase this blip from history somehow.”

“How is somehow?” The stress and apparently inferior intellectual capabilities of the host she was occupying was clearly diminishing her ability to form coherent sentences.



Number 1 looked confused but didn't seem like someone who bothered enough to linger on the small details. "Your IQ has dropped too. I think you're an idiot now."

"Probably. I can tell you that your words are giving me a mild headache."

"What a coincidence! I was thinking the same thing."

"So what are you going to do?" she said, ignoring him, and resisting the urge to start pacing around. Was this something that the woman she was inside of did?

"What are *we* going to do about this problem *you* caused by throwing a banana, do you mean?"

"I know!" she huffed angrily. "If only we had cheese-burgers for breakfast, none of this would have happened. Or, it might have happened worse, I suppose. I don't know how these things work, either."

Number 1 seemed to know when a battle was lost. He turned and began tapping on his keyboard, which was now made of a soft ceramic material covered in infinitely smooth fur. "According to my review, we should be able to get things back on track by changing the copyright details of a fan-fiction story that was published on the internet."

"How will that work?"

"My computer says it will cause a ripple that will smooth out your blip, so presumably *very well*."

"Do we have to watch another report?" she said as she grimaced.

"Oh yes! That is the least we must do to rectify this entirely avoidable situation. At least I will have the satisfaction of knowing I'm making you suffer."

"Come on then!" she said, wearily resigned to the pain she was about to experience.

"Yeah," he said. "I can't wait to get you back to normal."

"That hurts."

And hurt it may, but it would be nothing compared to what was coming.

## A Moment of Quiet Reflection

“I can’t help you if you won’t speak to me.”

She tried to keep her voice even and maintain the professional veneer of detachment she was so proud of, but some clients had a knack of making this very difficult for her.

“Paul?”

She looked straight at the young man, but he just wouldn’t look back at her, at least not to the degree of allowing their eyes to meet. Whenever they did, even for just a moment, he would look quickly away, afraid perhaps that she might see something in him that he was scared to confront. Perhaps that was exactly what it was, but she needed to hear it from him all the same.

Suddenly, he looked up at her. For just a moment, she thought she had seen something in him that she hadn’t expected—a little flash of darkness that reflected a sliver of ice running through his soul. She swallowed nervously and took a deep breath.

It was probably just the surprise. Eye contact can be a double-edged sword.

After all, this was just Paul, a man referred to her for insomnia. A man whose mind was falling apart from lack of sleep. There was no history of his being anything other than exactly what he appeared to be.

He had a dead-end job, no girlfriend, no future, and a past that nobody would be interested in hearing about. She was paid to hear about it and even she wasn’t particularly keen. He certainly wasn’t dangerous: he was just a man whom life had failed, and who was, in turn, failing at life.

Why, then, did he trouble her so much?

“I’d like to speak,” he told her, his voice steady but forced: nothing ever seemed to come easy to him.

She knew she was intimidating, even more so to timid young men like Paul. She was older, but in good shape; she was attractive and took care to maintain herself. She had an inner strength and a huge inner well of

self-confidence. She was a woman in authority, a therapist whose job it was to unlock the problems that stopped people like Paul from being people like her.

To some, she represented everything they were afraid of. She was like a dentist with an angrily buzzing drill, whose job it was to ram it hard and deep into the inner secrets of their unconscious minds.

“Paul, can you tell me why you think you didn’t sleep last night?” she asked softly.

“I’m not like you.”

There was a deeply entrenched sadness to him, but there was something else, too. She shuddered inwardly as his deep, crystal blue eyes came up to meet hers again.

“You’re so strong,” he continued. “You’re not afraid of anything. I think that’s why people can so easily trust you. You’re a leader. They feel that you can lead them out of the place they’ve backed themselves into.”

This was a surprise. “You feel that I can help you? Well, that’s what I’m here to do, Paul, but let’s talk about you, shall we?”

He nodded. “I hope you can help me. I hope you can help me to get what I came here looking for.”

“And what would that be?” she asked softly but firmly.

He averted his eyes once more, but this time she definitely caught glimpse of a cruel smile.

Was he angry at himself? Did he understand that a part of him had turned against itself?

“I can’t sleep,” he said. “There’s always someone watching me.”

She hesitated for a moment as a cold tendril of fear shot up her spine. “Who is watching you, Paul?”

He took a deep breath. Slowly and steadily he told her, “The man in the mirror.”

There was a moment of silence as she processed his words. Was there some way to interpret them that made sense? Surely he can’t be confused as to how mirrors work. Uneasily she asked, “What does that mean, Paul?”

“I’d just finished brushing my teeth and put my toothbrush under the tap. When I looked back up at the mirror, my reflection was already there, staring at me. It was me, but it wasn’t. It was a stranger wearing my face, just standing there, toothbrush in hand, watching, measuring me up.

“I left the bathroom and went to the bedroom. I have a mirror there too... As I walked in, I looked over and my reflection was there already, waiting. He cocked his head to one side and looked hard into me. I don’t know what he was thinking, but he seemed to be thinking hard about something. After a while, he stopped staring and just looked disappointed.”

It wasn’t a story she’d heard before, but it fitted the pattern of numerous case studies she was aware of.

“Paul, I know what you saw is very real to you, but your reflection is just you. There’s nothing else in the mirror. Everything else is in your mind. The good news is that you’re not the first person to exhibit symptoms of *mirrored self-misidentification*, and I think a course of hypnosis...”

“It wasn’t me,” he said a little more forcibly, cutting her off. Something about his smirk was troubling. “It was something that wore my face, something that wanted to get out but couldn’t, not unless I let it out.”

“Paul, mirrors just reflect light. They only show us what’s there, but what we see is filtered through our own perceptions. Sometimes, we interpret what we see incorrectly—we think we see or experience something that we haven’t, and, once we get that into our heads, we’re very good at convincing ourselves that what we saw was real, even if it means rewriting our own memories.”

This was exactly what she appeared to be doing herself. The thought concerned her somewhat.

“I mean, I get it. I really do,” she continued. “Since I was a little girl I’ve hated going to the bathroom at night because of the mirror. I know there’s nothing there, but that doesn’t mean in my half-asleep state that I won’t see something anyway that gives me nightmares for weeks. It’s not real, though. It’s just reflections. It’s just light.”

He looked away and appeared to reflect for a moment. Perhaps her words had resonated at some level. After some time had passed, he turned back to her and said, “But what is light? If light can trick a mirror into wearing my face, what else could be hiding in there? What else could find a way to disguise itself as something else? As *someone* else?”

“What if it got out?” he continued, his eyes meeting hers then instantly flashing away. “What if it was trying to get out? What if the light in the mirror could wear me as a disguise? What if it could find a way to bring others out?”

She smiled to him, and closed her eyes for a moment. “Paul, there’s nothing hiding in the mirror. Nothing! It’s just a mirror. It’s just your reflection. It’s just you. Nothing is trying to get out: nothing wants to take you over.”

Paul began to nod very slowly, his eyes fixed on the floor. “No, you’re probably right,” he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. “I’m nobody. If something was trying to find a way out, why would it choose me? If something was alive in the light, living in the reflection and wanted to escape, it would want to hide in someone better.

“It wouldn’t want an insomniac that nobody liked talking to. It would want to bring the others out too, to have more of itself walking in our world, free of the polished glass that traps it inside. I couldn’t give it what it wanted. I can’t help it to hold the door open for the others to break free. I’m not good enough.”

Finally, she was getting to the root of the problem. It was his own self-image shattered by whatever demons were haunting his past that was creating this self-loathing, pitiful perception of his own inadequacy. It wasn’t quite as simple as she’d first assumed, but it was something she could work with. It was up to her now to help him heal these emotional wounds and offer him the chance to enjoy the life he deserved.

A curious look formed on his face. “Is this real?”



She took a deep breath. “No, Paul. This isn’t real. Your problems are real, though, and I can help you to deal with them, but what you think you’re seeing is only in your mind.”

“It told me you’d say that.”

“What?!”

“It told me you’d try to convince me it was all in my mind. But it isn’t. It beckoned me. My reflection looked straight into my eyes and willed me to come to it. It was like I had no choice in the matter.”

Her blood ran cold in her veins. There was something about this that very much wasn’t right. She’d dealt with cases of manufactured memories many times before, but they’d always been projections, interpretations. This was new. It was more compelling than she would have preferred, and she was starting to feel a little out of her depth.

“I moved in closer and closer,” he continued. “My face in the glass began to grin at me, my lips pulled thin over my teeth. Slowly, it reached out and put its palm flat on the mirror and waited for me to do the same. It was like I was just watching myself, like I was the reflection now, my own body moving beyond my control.”

Her breathing became shallow as she was increasingly drawn in. His words were having some kind of a hypnotic effect on her. She tried to pull herself back, but couldn’t help herself. She had to keep listening.

“I pressed my hand onto the mirror, our palms touching, but all I could feel was the cold, smooth surface of the glass.” He turned now to face her and their eyes met. This time they didn’t pull away. A chill ran up her spine before she broke the connection. She frantically looked down at the notes she was holding, rested on her leg.

After a lengthy pause, she composed herself and repeated: “Paul, this was all in your mind.”

Now he looked away. He smiled and began to nod in agreement. “You’re right. I mean, if this was real... if something living in the light wanted to come out of the mirror and wear someone’s skin, why would it choose me?”

“Paul...” she began, but this time, she had nothing to say.

To her surprise, he stood up. It was rather sudden. He wasn't a big man, but he moved fast. He slid to the edge of the couch and was then just standing, before her mind could register what was happening. She instinctively recoiled away from him.

He looked to the wall by his side where a framed mirror was hanging among her certificates and photographs. He looked hard into the mirror at his own face staring back at him.

Slowly, he stepped forwards, glaring into his own eyes. There was a smugness about him that she'd not seen before.

“Paul...” she said again, unable to find the words.

“When I look into this mirror, I just see Paul!” he told her. “I just see the eyes of a loser looking back at me. He's nothing special, is he?”

“We're all special, Paul,” she told him, not entirely convincingly.

He turned and his cold eyes bored into hers. “What do you see?” he asked. “What do you see when you look into this mirror?”

“Sit down, Paul,” she told him. She was determined not to be drawn further into his delusion. Looking into that mirror would only give power to the fantasy he was describing.

Still, her heart began to flutter in her chest. She was uneasy and an icy feeling of dread was tracing once more up her spine. This whole session was going way off script, and it was becoming increasingly unlikely she'd be able to reel it back in.

“Look into the mirror!” he said again, staring into his own eyes. “You told me there's nothing there, so come and prove it to me. You do want to help me get better, don't you?”

She found herself standing. She knew she shouldn't, but against her better judgement she was making her way to his side.

His face turned towards her, their eyes locking together.

She pulled her gaze from his and found herself staring into her own reflection. The palm of it was pressed against the glass and a pair of crystal blue eyes were boring forwards into hers. The face was grinning at her.

“After all,” he began. “If it were real, why would it ever choose me?”

# The Hiccup

“Oh, wow!”

Number 1 snapped open her eyes, which widened in surprise, perhaps at the sound of her voice. Her hands targeted her face, feeling all around for signs of change. “I’m a woman!” she said.

“And I’m a man again.” Number 2’s hands weren’t on his face, but were occupied nonetheless finding ample and satisfactory proof of his gender some other way. “I don’t know if I’m relieved or not. It escapes me which gender I was originally supposed to be.”

“Gender is a spectrum, my friend. I’m just relieved you don’t look like you did before.”

Number 2 narrowed his eyes. Then he noticed something. “You’re actually quite attractive.”

“What?! How dare you make snap judgements about my appearance. You should appreciate me for what I am on the inside! I’m not some object that can be summed up by aesthetic value.”

“Sorry,” he grumbled. “If it helps, I’m finding you far less attractive for your having pointed that out.”

“It’s fine,” she sighed. “You look like a loser. I should have expected nothing less.”

Number 2 resisted the urge to point out the double standard, placed as he currently was on the end of the spectrum least likely to ever win an argument.

“Inevitable really. I don’t think I was one of life’s successes, even before I was employed by the Bureau of Reality Intervention.”

A wry smile flashed over her full and inviting lips. “I never suspected you were. I don’t think that’s a mistake anyone, anywhere would have made.”

Number 2 opened up the cupboard. This time it was made of polished metal and contained glass vials filled with a milky white

substance. He picked one up and peered into the depths of the mysterious and uneven liquid.

“Hungry?” Number 1 asked.

He shuddered and put the vial back into the box. “Not after seeing that. It could be anything. And probably is.”

“Well,” she began thoughtfully, “I’ve run the numbers through the computer, and I have to say this computer interface device is like a kind of shaved cat.”

“A shaved cat? I’ve never heard that metaphor before.”

“It wasn’t a metaphor, it was a simile. More importantly, though, I mean it’s literally like a shaved cat, or a creature not substantially dissimilar to one. You have to tickle its belly to input data, and there are wires coming out the back of its head. I can’t say I’m enjoying the experience, but from the purring sound coming from the keyboard, I think the interface is getting a real buzz out of it.”

“I think it’s safe to say you’ll enjoy lunch even less, then.”

“Wouldn’t that be a first!”

An obscene hacking noise suddenly emanated from the computer interface as it began to slowly regurgitate a foul-smelling hairball mixed with stomach-related goo. Number 1 examined it closely.

“Interesting...” he began. “It seems Paul was never meant to have his soul infected by an entity living inside a mirror.”

“What a pity. I kind of liked that report. It had a strange kind of intimacy about it.”

“You’re weird!”

“I altered the universe by throwing a banana at it,” he reminded his colleague. “Nothing we do could be considered normal, even by our own incredibly low standards, which we persistently fail to meet.”

She shrugged in agreement. How could she not?

“Well, I’ve found a way to reset Paul’s life,” she said with a tone of condescension some would consider misplaced, given that her job was so simple, she was the least useful cog in the machine. “He suffered clinical

depression, but he's supposed to go backpacking or find a hobby, something positive to keep him focused, a coping mechanism. Nothing that weird ever happened to him in the proper reality."

"So this is just a hiccup?" Number 2 suggested hopefully. "How do we set him back on the path of righteousness?"

"It's easy," she said. "I already did. We simply get a small indie publisher to sack their web team and everything goes back to normal."

"That easy, huh? I have to say it seems a little arbitrary. I wonder if you're using the computer right?"

"If course I'm using it right," she said defensively. "Look, it's purring!"

"You know, I had a nasty feeling this was going to go on for a very long time, each step forwards taking us ten steps back, and each time worse than the last in increasingly dramatic and whimsical ways. I don't think any sane person would ever sign up for this, do you?"

"It's not over yet! We need to wait for the universe to settle down. Then we can get to a report to see if your blip really has settled into a hiccup."

"I'm sure it has," Number 2 said casually, gazing once at the metal box in contemplation of its mystery contents, made all the more enticing for the call of the munchies. "A hiccup is less bad than a blip, isn't it? I should remind you I didn't read the manual."

Number 1 looked at him blank faced, blinking. The momentary silence was interrupted by the sound of strained gagging and hacking.

"We have another report," said Number 1.

"Fantastic! What's going to happen this time?"

"Well that's the point of reports," she said, glaring at him in wide-eyed dismay. "We have to experience them to find out. We can't just be told: it has to be lived."

"I don't know if I'm in the mood. I'm kind of hungry and have a growing urge to scratch myself in unpleasant ways."

Of course, this was of little consequence, as their minds were both sucked out into the universe, temporarily leaving their identities behind.

## But Why?

“Heaven help us!”

He closed his eyes, screwing them shut as the world around him descended into a level of insanity that went far, far beyond regular, run-of-the-mill madness. Explosions echoed through his mind; roaring thunderous crashes tore through reality as fiery metal shells tore into the earth below his feet. His heart pounded in his chest as the darkness behind his eyelids flashed to white with every seething-hot eruption of energy.

He panted desperately, as his lungs drew in short breaths of the acrid air, tinged with the stench of burning flesh and sulphur. He felt a sudden jolt as his body slumped to the ground. He had been dimly aware of a wooden ladder leading up to the land between the two opposing armies, and now, here he was, flat on his back in a damp, muddy puddle.

The air was filled with triumphant roars as men cleared the trench wall, which quickly turned to agonised screams as the staccato roar of gunfire ripped through their soft, fleshy bodies.

His mind was lost. He was swirling into a pit of complete chaos that his brain just couldn't comprehend.

But suddenly, everything was silent. It was a sharp suddenness that bathed his entire world in nothingness, ripping the previous *something* directly out of his mind as if it had never been there at all.

Slowly, gingerly, he began to open his eyes. In place of the foreboding carnage of a bloody war was a white, sterile room that seemed to glow with effervescent energy. The walls, if there were any at all, seemed impossibly far off in the distance leaving him with the impression of being inside a white cube with no actual sides.

“What is this?!” he muttered to himself nervously. He sat up slowly, blinking in abject confusion.

“Corporeal Nonsense?” a voice behind him asked.

He turned to see, and his eyes widened, a cold tendril of dread tightening itself around his spine.



Could things get any worse?

The voice was cool and heavy and had the tone of cold honey poured across hot coals. The person whose face it had exited was a woman that looked, oddly, exactly like his uncle Jim, right down to the little scar on his right eyebrow that he'd got cleaning his pistol without checking that it wasn't loaded. Beside him sat a man that looked exactly like his aunt. This didn't make a great deal of sense, but he was oddly certain it was them. Also that it wasn't, couldn't be, and also couldn't be anyone else.

"What?" he said with a nervous whimper.

"Your name?" the woman who probably wasn't really his uncle said. "Your name is Corporeal Nonsense?"

"My name? My name isn't *Nonsense*, it's Jerry. Jerry Nostridge. I'm a Corporal in the King's army."

The two people that looked incorrectly, but precisely, like his aunt and uncle looked at one another behind a white, and very functional-looking desk. They stared blankly for a moment, and then, in unison, turned back. His aunt said, "Is that not what we said?"

Jerry sat for a moment in his damp military uniform, black dirt smeared across his face, just staring back at them. "No!" he said. "Not really. It was really quite different."

Uncle Jim shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's close enough!"

Jerry tried to stand up, but felt the uncomfortable heft of his equipment packs strapped to his back and sides. He unfastened the metal clips and let the weight fall off and clatter noisily to the polished white floor, if there actually was a floor beneath him. He stood, gently easing himself up from the uncomfortable position he had landed in. There was no wet puddle to be seen, although a great deal of it was now uncomfortably clinging to his skin having soaked through his heavy, course green uniform. "Where am I?" he said. "Am I dead?"

"I don't think so," said his aunt. "But I'm not an expert in the matter."

His uncle scratched her forehead in a strangely familiar gesture while tapping buttons on a small, flat device on the table.

“No!” she said finally. “My research suggests that you’re alive. Would you like to be dead?”

As she spoke, his aunt pulled out a polished metal rod and brandished it with a friendly smile. “I can arrange that if it’s what you wish! We have technology that would make it spectacularly hilarious and, I can assure you, almost entirely painless. I’ve tested it on many people and I never felt a thing, apart from a ringing in my ears from all the screaming.”

Jerry grunted to himself and edged away, holding up his hands. He swallowed hard as his head began to swim. “I don’t want to be dead...” he said urgently. “Please don’t kill me.”

The two people seemed quite taken aback. “You don’t want to die?! Am I hearing this correctly?”

Jerry just stared.

“But you were in the middle of a war,” said his aunt. “What were you doing in the middle of a war if you didn’t want to die?”

His uncle nodded her head in agreement. “It does seem rather an ideal place to be for someone who wants to die, and exceedingly sub-optimal if it was something to be avoided. You can see why we’re confused, can’t you?”

“Of course I don’t want to die!” he cried out desperately. “Nobody *wants* to die.”

“Our research suggests that you are in error. It appears to us that a great many people wish for their corporeal existence to cease. They put a lot of effort into it.”

“You mean the great war?” Jerry said, trying to follow as best he could.

His uncle chuckled to herself. She turned to the aunt and said softly, “He thinks war is *great*!”

His aunt shrugged and said, with a little chuckle of his own, “Well, compared to most of their other achievements that century, it was fairly impressive. Have you seen their space program? It’s embarrassing!”

“Quite!”

“Wait...” Jerry said suddenly. “Who are you? What is this place?”

“Don’t worry about that. You wouldn’t understand anyway.”

“He might!” his aunt interjected thoughtfully. “Listen, young man. We’re part of a single, unified being that has chosen to project itself in the form of a pleasant memory from your youth, to make you feel more comfortable. Our technology is flawless, so, to you, this all seems perfectly natural and comforting.”

“My uncle Jim used to strangle neighbourhood cats,” Jerry said coldly.

“You’re welcome,” said his uncle with an accommodating smile. “We’re scientists, I suppose you could say. We like to borrow random people from various points in time and space at the exact moment of their death. We’ve refined it since the *incident* in Tunguska, but it’s still rough around the edges, as it still makes a bit of a disorientating flash. There’s only so much we can learn from people dying of heart attacks at fireworks shows. In any case, we study them and send them right back to the same time. That way nobody notices.”

“And you still get to enjoy your horrible death!” his aunt added. “We aren’t cruel. We don’t want to deprive you of anything.”

“What?” Jerry mumbled weakly. “I don’t understand...”

“Tell us about why you were busy fighting a war!” his aunt told him. “I’m especially interested in why you put yourself in the line of fire, if your intent was not to die.”

“Well, of course it wasn’t my intent!” Jerry assured them. “I’m *afraid* to die!”

His uncle leaned over and suggested with a grin: “I bet he did really; they all do. I never met one that didn’t end up dying in the end. They’re totally preoccupied with it.”

“Well, I didn’t have any choice, did I?” Jerry said, shaking his head. “I was obeying orders. We charge on the whistle.”

“I don’t understand. Did they force you? What did they threaten you with that was so much worse than your *apparent* fear of death?”

“Well...” Jerry grumbled to himself and screwed up his face thoughtfully. “They didn’t really threaten us with anything. The rules are the rules: it is what it is.”

The two looked at one another. Eyebrows were raised.

“We understand,” the aunt said with a happy smile. “You *enjoy* being told what to do.”

“No!” Jerry said sternly. “Nobody *likes* being told to run headfirst into machine gun fire with explosions going off all around them.”

The two beings looked at each other again and simply shrugged. His uncle rubbed her forehead and said, “Then why do you do what you’re told, if you don’t want to do it?”

“We had to!” Jerry said simply. “That’s what we signed up for. We had no choice.”

“Ah, there’s *no choice!*” his aunt said. He began pressing buttons on his desk, and nodded as he scanned the results. “According to our research, you did have a number of choices.”

“Maybe!” Jerry said moodily. “When I and everyone I grew up with signed up, we were told it would be a great adventure. We didn’t expect there would be any actual fighting.”

“No fighting?” said his uncle, somewhat taken aback. “What exactly did you think a war was?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think about it at the time. I just assumed that heroics and getting horribly killed or maimed would be limited to people more qualified for the job. I never thought it would happen to me.”

“Life is quite unfair!” His aunt reached over and thoughtfully rubbed his uncle’s chin. “My records indicate that all human life comes out of a

human female body in a most appalling manner. It's almost as appalling as the way it's put in there."

"Research!" his uncle said with a rolling of his eyes. "Is that what we're calling it?"

"It's for science!" he snapped. More calmly he turned to Jerry and said, "You all breathe the same air and drink the same water. I think I read somewhere that you all have roughly the same stunted intelligence."

His uncle stifled a chuckle. "*Intelligence!*"

"What?"

"Concepts of fairness differ!" Uncle Jim said to herself. "It all seems fair to me. You're all basically the same."

"No!" he said. "It isn't fair that one person is richer, better looking or luckier than me!"

His aunt leaned forwards and looked at him closely. "*Better looking* implies that you're good looking in the first place, doesn't it?"

Before Jerry could argue, his uncle added: "Richer? Does he mean more full of flavour? Are they eating each other again?"

He gave her a stern glare and said, "No, Jim. He's talking about that money stuff."

The uncle gave him a disgruntled look as if one of them had sat down too fast in underwear that was too tight. "But that doesn't really exist. I thought we'd decided that it's just a shared delusion."

"It is!" he told her. "But he doesn't know that, does he? That's what *delusional* means!"

She turned to Jerry and said, "Money doesn't really exist. We think it's a joke that got out of hand."

"Of course it exists," Jerry said, scoffing at the idea. "How else do you think I pay for my beer?"

"Beer?"

His aunt rolled his eyes and said, "It's the carcinogenic poison that upsets the chemistry of their brains, to both reinforce the delusion and to use as a coping mechanism for dealing with living inside it."

Jim looked to Jerry. She blinked twice and turned back to the aunt. She said finally: “We’ve got nothing else to learn from this creature. Just kill it with the hilarious-spectaculiser.”

He nodded and huffed a weary sigh. “Sure! Let’s find a better one.”  
“Wait...” Jerry cried out. “You can’t kill me.”

His aunt brandished his metal rod and said, very firmly: “I most certainly can!”

His uncle flashed a supportive smile. “No, no. We’re not *actually* going to kill you, we’re not without compassion,” she said. “We’ll just turn off the machine and you’ll be sent back to the exact moment we snatched you from. You’ll die naturally of your horrendous injuries and we won’t be in any way responsible.”

“We sleep very well at night!”

“Please...” Jerry muttered weakly. “Don’t send me back there!”

His uncle rolled her eyes, in a very aunt-like way. “Do you see that?” she muttered. “He really doesn’t want to die, despite the mountain of evidence to the contrary.”

“Most peculiar,” said his aunt. “Shall we put him with the others for further study?”

“Why don’t we ask him? He was the one saying he was never given a choice.” He turned to speak to Jerry. “Eventually, we will need to switch the machine off and return you to your place of death, but so long as there’s a big splash of your DNA around it doesn’t much matter how long you stay here for.”

Jerry looked around the almost empty white box. “I’m in no rush...” he said weakly with a hopeful smile.

“You’re not the first specimen we’ve had pleading for a life extension!” his aunt said, pressing some buttons. “As bizarre as we found this, we decided it warranted additional research, so we created a dedicated artificial environment, a simulation within which you can live out your days. We get to learn about your species, and you get to temporarily postpone your inevitable, painful and horrendous demise.”

“It’s a win win!” added his uncle.

Jerry swallowed audibly and gave him an awkward smile.

“Are we to take it that’s your choice?”

Jerry nodded enthusiastically.

“Fair enough!” his uncle said. “You’ll like what we’ve made here.

We designed it using all of our knowledge of your pitifully confused species. It’s grounded in your reality and is perfectly suited to house you.”

“It’s like a big muddy animal-cage,” his aunt told him. “But you get to change your own sawdust.”

“Before you know it, you won’t even remember your old life. You won’t even remember this conversation!”

As she tapped away at some buttons busily, his uncle learned over as if to share a secret.

“The residents seem to really like the mud!” she said.

Jerry cocked his head curiously.

“They call their new home *Earth*.”

# The Error

A hysterical scream filled the room.

At first, there was the shrill unpleasantness of the sound, and then the pressure began to build as if something was physically pressing against his ear-drums, something large and something that was made of burning rubber.

“Shut up!” Number 1 cried out.

Number 2 snapped his eyes open suddenly and the sound stopped. “Oh, was that me?” he said in surprise. “That does explain why my throat is now very sore.”

“What is wrong with you?” he said, glaring accusingly and tapping his foot impatiently.

“That was a bad one. It didn’t hurt so much. It felt more like a tickle. Only, the tickle was running around my brain and it was so intense that it was the only thing in the entire world that existed.”

He looked down at the floor which wasn’t as far below him as he would have liked. Evidently, standing up was proving elusive.

“Mine was quite pleasant,” he said. “Except for the fact that I was two entities that were based on memories they didn’t seem to fully understand, and yet they were utterly convinced that the problem was everyone else.”

“I must have been the soldier then,” said Number 2, scratching his head curiously. “At least, I think I thought I wasn’t *not* the soldier.”

Number 1, who was now a tall, slender man who looked like he didn’t like very much of anything, returned to his computer. “Oh!” he said in surprise. “The interface is now a little socket that I have to stick my tongue into and wiggle it about a bit. I hope it’s clean.”

“I hope it’s intended for tongues,” Number 2 said with a wry grin. “But I’m sure the taste of the socket will tell you everything you need to know.”

Number 1 huffed as he leaned into the socket.



“You know, this is why I’m glad I’m in charge of the other bit,” said Number 2.

Number 1 stood up sharply and said, “Wattth uvver bith?” He grumbled, shook his head and gently massaged his tongue with his thumb and index finger. He tried again, “What other bit?”

“I don’t know. What am I in charge of?”

“Lunch!” Number 1 snapped at him. “That’s all you ever seem to do here, moan about whatever there is to eat. You’re meant to be the one with the degree in quantum mechanics.”

“And I was promised free lunch,” he added.

Number 2 stood up, hoisting his borrowed form from the floor and noisily brushed down a pair of beige and uninteresting trousers. He paused to rub his chin thoughtfully for a moment. “It’s funny, isn’t it?” he said after really mulling all this over. “Of the two of us, I’m the only one qualified to do anything and yet it does seem to be you who does all the work. If you think about it, this does say a lot about the structure of the universe, and not in a good way.”

Number 1 frowned his bony, aggressive brow. “Do something useful then.”

“Good idea,” he agreed and turned around, glancing about the office for the food supply. This time the office was very much like a coffee shop that had been made out of a large, hollowed-out elephant; at least that was the idea that struck him. He sat on a red, moist and slightly squishy sofa and checked inside a polished bone-coloured alcove.

“Lunch appears to be single-serving packets of sugar from motorway service-stations,” he said, holding up a handful of little paper sachets. “What kind of a universe is this, where that is considered food? Can you imagine anything that stupid?”

Number 1 glared at him. Evidently, he could.

“According to this odd-smelling computer, there is a sensation of intense sourness, followed up by a salt booster that definitely leans towards the bitter, and that’s finished off with a satisfying umami aftertaste. It’s hard

to say for certain, but that specific taste extravaganza brought feelings of immense satisfaction coupled with a lingering out-of-place doubt. I think that means the last hiccup is resolved, but in doing so, we pushed a World War One soldier out of reality which wasn't a thing that was supposed to have happened."

"It was like he slipped on a banana skin and fell down a rabbit-hole," Number 2 joked, in a most unfortunate way. His lack of tact earned him a caustic scowl. "A bit of an error on our part. We don't seem to really be thinking any of this through, do we?"

"In any case," continued Number 1, smacking his lips. "This sudden rush of very sour sweetness is telling me we've got two choices of how to fix it."

"Which are?" Number 2 asked, coughing and spitting out a cloud of considerably less sweet sugar as he spoke.

"We have to like a post on an internet forum about kittens, or convince an author to self-publish his books."

"I don't care about either of those things," Number 2 grunted with an apathetic shrug. "Aren't self-published books all uniformly terrible?"

"They are," he said in agreement. "Yes."

"Well, let's do that, then. Nobody ever reads that stuff, so it will have the least effect. We have to tread very gently in a universe where the slightest banana can have devastating consequences."

Number 1 narrowed his eyes and glared at him with something that may have been disgust. "We want an effect. We're trying to change the whole, entire universe."

"Well... do the kitten thing, then? I tried to care but I found it quite impossible."

"Alright," he sighed. "We'll do the self-publishing thing, just to annoy you. I'll arrange an advert to target the writer, something that will give him the idea to do what we want him to do."

"And somehow that will change the thing about a man from a war a hundred years earlier, will it?" It was a question that needed to be asked.

“Obviously. Why wouldn’t it?”

And in a bright flash of perfect black, the whole, entire universe suddenly changed, because as Number 1 said, *why wouldn’t it?*

# The Infinity Drive

## **NBD101 – File 07**

“Engage, Maurice!”

As I said the words, the world lit up around me, blue light spilling into my eyes so brilliantly that it felt like my entire mind had erupted.

## **NBD101 – File 06**

“What will it be like?” Maurice asked. “What will happen when you tell me to engage the drive?”

I sat back in the command chair and rubbed my chin. That was an excellent question, and all the more impressive that it came from him. Maurice had grown so much since his inception, and was now an essential part of my life. He was my friend, my partner and my confidant.

I told him: “I don’t know. Who knows what it will seem like? To me, a human being, the experience will be one thing. To you, an artificial entity, it could be quite different. There is simply no way to know.”

Maurice remained in silence, his mind buried deep in the confines of ‘The Spire’, the long, fine needle-shaped vessel that I had spent so long building.

“I have been preoccupied with this thought,” he finally told me. “I have been tasked with working out all of the navigational data, to see the outcome of our journey with such clarity that I can conceive the information as an imagined future with all the complexity of a human brain.

“But despite all that, the question I keep returning to is what it’s going to be like.”

I had to admit, I was wondering the same thing. “Maurice, when we engage the drive, we will begin the greatest journey ever undertaken by a living being. It will be a grand adventure.”

Maurice was silent. A red light flashed ahead of me on the ship’s controls. Was he thinking?

“I am not a living being,” he said.

“But you are composed of matter,” I reminded him. “You are a thinking and intelligent being. You have form and substance, and the journey will affect you just as it affects me. Our experience of the event may differ, but we will most certainly undertake it together.”

“I’m not sure I want to...”

## **NBD101 – File 05**

“Well? Will it work?”

Maurice’s voice came from a small pod in my left ear, but his thoughts were from deep inside the machine,

I smiled to myself and dug my arm deeper into the guts of the small ship. “It *is* working already,” I said, my breath laboured. “The drive seems to be functioning correctly and the matrix is stable.”

I stood back to admire my ship. I took a deep breath and noticed the tiny little mechanical eye swivel down to look at me. I knew Maurice was recording everything.

It was a beautiful day on Earth, but we would be leaving soon. We would test the drive and take our place in the history books.

“I don’t feel any different,” Maurice said. “Now that the drive is running, shouldn’t I feel something?”

I smiled to myself. “I don’t know how you are meant to feel, Maurice. Unlike you, I’m not a space-ship.”

“I’m not a space-ship either,” he said with a grumpy sounding huff. “I’m an artificial intelligence algorithm. I just live in a space-ship.”

I nodded and gave his electronic eye a little smile. “And what a ship,” I said. “With my new infinity-drive, this will be the fastest machine ever built.”

“If it works,” he said.

I had to agree.

*“If it works...”*

## **NBD101 – File 04**

“One gigaplop of credit?”

The bank-manager was just a hologram floating above an artificially wooden desk, but she could work things out, reason and make intelligent choices. In many ways, she was vastly superior to any accountant that had ever lived before.

I knew that this was my last chance to realise my dream.

“Yes,” I said, as Maurice listened from within my favourite suitcase.

“With one gigaplop of credit, you could buy a house, and another house as a spare. You could even buy a bigger, better house to store the other two in.”

“I don’t want a house,” I told her. “I want to build an experimental space ship.”

“But where will you put the space-ship if you don’t have a house?” she said, looking more confused as every second passed.

“We will travel to the stars at speeds so rapid that it will boggle the minds of men,” I said proudly.

“Most men live in houses.”

A voice from my luggage said, “I live in a suitcase. I would prefer to live in a house, I think. You make a most compelling point.”

The bank manager nodded to itself. “Your attaché is right. Houses are easier to live in than space ships. It’s like they’re designed for it.”

“But without the spirit of innovation, man would cease to grow and our minds would decay,” I said heedingly. “It is for this reason that we must always strive to achieve new things.”

The hologram shrugged. “Your credit is good. If you want to live in a space ship with your articulate sapient portmanteau, I cannot see a reason to object.”

“Excellent,” I said with all due enthusiasm. This was finally happening.

“Do I get a say in any of this?” Maurice asked grumpily.

He did not.

### **NBD101 – File 03**

“Absolutely not!”

Professor Buxholm shook his stern head from side to side firmly.

“Are you mad, sir?” he added.

“I might be,” I said with a twinkle in my eye. “My design for a new, faster space ship drive is unlike anything that has gone before. It will change the universe. We will be able to travel near-infinite distances in no time at all. Just think of it, Professor.”

“But, what of all the waiters and people who deliver towels? What will they do once the long voyages are a thing of the past? Are they to return to Earth to lead meaningful productive lives?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Is that a real question?” I asked.

“No,” he said finally. “No, this won’t do. This won’t do at all.”

“But Professor,” Maurice pleaded from the inside a wooden cupboard that I had brought in on a small blue trolley. “This will work!”

“And another thing,” the Professor said loudly, pointing to Maurice. “I don’t take kindly to the opinions of Georgian mahogany writing bureaux. This is a place of science, not of enchanted 18<sup>th</sup> century movables.”

“Maurice is no mere furnishing, enchanted or otherwise,” I said with passion, although the facts were hard to refute. “He is an advanced artificial intelligence system. I am simply struggling in my efforts to miniaturise him into a more portable form. For now, his systems reside within this wooden casing.”

“Well, never once have I enjoyed discussing the flow of temporal particles with large scale drawing room accessories boasting polished brass handles and a secret drawer, a perfect complement to, say, a Chippendale carver or a Chesterfield Gainsborough,” he told me grimly. “I suggest you fit it into a small bag or something.”

I had to admit, that was a good idea.

“And the answer is no,” he said one last time. “This university will not fund your new drive, no matter how passionately some jumped up bookcase, secrétaire, or bonheur du jour argues for it.”

“You are wrong, Sir!” I said, jumping to my feet and flushing with anger. “I will fund this myself and I will show you that you are wrong.”

He rolled his eyes and retorted, “I’m sure we’re both hoping I live long enough to see that.”

## **NBD101 – File 02**

“I’ve done it!” I said. “Maurice, I’ve done it.”

Maurice looked at me with one of his round, white plastic eyes. He was along the far wall in a bank of equipment I had rescued from a skip outside a local university. But he was working, he was intelligent, and he was helping.

“Do you need me to contact the emergency services again?” he said.

“No, Maurice, not this time. This is something even better. I have successfully changed the flow of time over a particle of matter. I simply flooded the object with negatively-charged tachyons.”

“And that object is the boiled egg floating in the fish tank? The egg that just exploded?”

“Yes!” I said proudly. “But, just for a moment, it remained at precisely the same age for a fraction of a second.”

“And you created me for this?” Maurice asked. I was sure I detected sarcasm on his tone.

“Maurice, I created you to help me *do* science,” I told him, balling my fists to my sides angrily. “You are to watch as history unfolds. Since my first discovery of tachyon re-charging, I have become convinced I can build a space ship drive faster than anything conceived of before.”

“I’m so lucky.”

“You see, this will change the galaxy!” I told him. “Matter ages, but if we match it to a wave of negatively charged tachyons, time itself can be



pushed backwards. If we can push matter through the wave it will travel through space without travelling in time at all.

“Ships will leave where they are and arrive where they’re going as if no time has passed at all.”

“In theory,” Maurice reminded me grimly. “All you have to show for it now is one less egg in your sandwich.”

“But tomorrow...” I told him excitedly. “Tomorrow, we will have many eggs, in many sandwiches.”

“Oh. Great!”

### **NBD101 – File 01**

“What am I?”

A weak, thin voice came out from a pile of electronics that I had bolted together from the equipment I had discovered outside of the local university.

“You are an artificial intelligence system,” I told it.

“I don’t feel like a computer,” it said. “I feel a bit sick, actually. I feel like I might be made a bit wrong.”

I looked over the components. Part of the problem with being an inventor on a budget as low as mine was that I had to settle for what I could find. On this occasion, what I could find was a skip full of broken parts.

“You are made from test equipment and old computers,” I told it. “Your name is ‘Maurice.’ You are named after my uncle.”

“Oh nice,” it said. “What was his name?”

I scratched my head. Clearly, there needed to be some adjustments. I had modified some things I didn’t really fully comprehend and there had been complications. I began a diagnosis where two large grey things were bolted to a yellow thing.

“This is interesting,” I said. “It seems that by initiating the program, I sent a charge backwards, the wrong way through an injector matrix.”

“Is that interesting?” Maurice said. “It’s very difficult to tell.”

“There might have been an unfortunate reaction,” I told him. I poked the screen with a screwdriver as information poured over it. “Wait...”

“How long should I wait?” he asked. “What am I waiting for? How will I know when the thing I’m waiting for happens?”

“I have found something,” I told him. “It seems we have accidentally pushed a stream of particles backwards.”

“Is this what I was waiting for?” asked Maurice. “I don’t think my existence is going to turn out to be very interesting.”

“It means that a thing jumped through time,” I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. “Why, if I could manipulate this effect, I could make a space ship drive that could travel at infinite speeds in an instant.”

“It’s very difficult for me to judge if any of this is interesting.”

“Maurice,” I said, “This will change the world.”

“OK,” he said. “I do still feel a little bit sick, if I’m honest. I have a tingle all down my left side.”

“Think of it, Maurice!” I told him. “Ships able to travel unimaginable distances in the blink of an eye!”

“Right,” he said. “What would that be like?”

“Maybe one day, we’ll find out...”

## **The Ever So Tiny Little Flaw**

“What fresh hell was that?!”

Number 2 snapped her eyes open suddenly as she was wrenched out from the report back to the real world; the real world that wasn't entirely real, or an actual world of any conventional kind.

The only thought on her mind was that all that sugar had made her want to pee.

Her voice was an octave or two higher than before, and she slammed her hand over her mouth in surprise. “I'm a woman again,” she said with a smile. “Am I attractive, or do I look like I was designed by someone specialising in heavy-goods vehicles?”

“Yes,” Number 1 said, sounding a little jealous, as if admitting this diminished her own personal value in some way. “You're actually quite pretty. Clearly your outside doesn't reflect the horrible mess on the inside, for once.”

Number 2 looked her over. Number 1 was also very attractive and she found herself wondering which one of them was better in that regard. Best to hate her, just to be on the safe side.

“I didn't get that one at all! What was that report meant to be about?”

“What's not to understand?” Number 1 looked shocked and reached up to rest her left hand on a fake gold pendant that pressed against the fake tan skin around her neck. “It was about moving time backwards in a space ship, so the experience was like moving backwards through time to the beginning of the story. That, or to imply that, starting up the engine caused the events that led up to it.”

“I don't see the point. It would have been easier to just tell the story in the normal way. In fact, was that story even worth telling? I'm just glad we're not reading this in a book. Can you imagine if you actually had to pay for this garbage?”

“Well, the universe changed again,” Number 1 said, otherwise ignoring her. Her voice was like honey dripped over silk and, as she spoke,

she flicked back long, perfectly straight black hair away from her shoulder. Number 2 briefly wondered if this woman with whom she was now combined, was strictly heterosexual. It certainly didn't feel like it.

"We fixed the other thing, but now we've got an ever so tiny little flaw," Number 1 said with a smile that lit up her face like sunshine.

Number 2 blinked and looked away, trying not to notice her pert, round breasts as they jutted out from under a tight, dark red dress.

"Which is?" Number 2 said, swallowing hard. She flicked back her own hair, noticing as the dark crimson strands draped smoothly over the flawlessly beautiful skin on the back of her delicate hand. She wondered then what kind of sexuality it was if a person was attracted to themselves. Was that even a thing?

"Well, the man who invented that kind of space travel wasn't meant to name the computer, 'Maurice.' He was meant to name it 'Jim.'"

Number 2 thought about this for a moment. "Remind me exactly why I'm meant to care about this?"

"It's your job," she told him, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms over her full, rounded chest. The look on her face could only be fairly described as 'accusing.'

"But does it really matter if a computer has the wrong name? I mean, does it *really*, *really* matter?"

"Well, think of it this way," she began, sounding absolutely fascinating. "If the name of the computer changed, perhaps someone read about this great discovery and named their child after the computer, but he got the wrong name. That child was bullied at school because the bully was once slapped by his uncle who was called the same.

"That child now resents the world and ends up going on a rampage, hurting several people with a metal bar. One of those people is brain damaged and never works out the cure for a terrible disease, a dreadful affliction that kills half the children born on Earth, later that year."

"And so what?"

“So we have to put things back the way they should be,” she explained, her voice droning on, while Number 2 sat back and enjoyed watching her moving around. She was just so pretty. “Of course, now the universe has the new name in it, so we can’t change that, we have to find out what that small thing changed, and modify something to put that right. Each time we make a correction, it will be tinier than the last, until eventually we stop the damage from your banana altogether.”

“I wish I had a banana right now!” Number 2 said, gazing up with a misty-eyed look on her face as her mind drifted to places that authors wouldn’t want to put into novels mostly aimed at the family-friendly category.

“I just have to grab this long, soft rubber stick and move it around gently to communicate with the computer.”

Number 2 made a soft, shallow grunting noise and quickly stifled it by placing her hand over her mouth and nibbling down on the skin.

Number 1 looked over. “Is everything alright?” she said, her voice sounding seductively alluring.

She nodded happily and a silly grin came over her. Double-entendres immediately sprung to mind. “Couldn’t be better,” she said. “Why don’t you tell me what we’re going to do?” she purred.

“All we have to do is find this one, particular man, who is translating Arabic washing powder instructions into Japanese, and make him take a break that lasts precisely thirty-two seconds, just as a bird flies past his office window.”

“Whatever you say!”

“I’m going to change this now, before you get even worse.”

“It’s already too late!”

And with that, both of them vanished in a puff of blue smoke that was sucked into a hole in the universe that had never existed, and will never exist.

# The Audit

The airlock of the mighty spacecraft hissed closed.

A coiling wisp of white vapour was sent edging from the vent. It curled softly though the air as it slowly faded out of existence. There was a subtle smell of lilac that nobody cared about, and was therefore not worth mentioning.

A young man watched on. He gulped and swallowed, and looked on with enough apprehension that every orifice in his body was seemingly clenched hard enough to turn coal into a diamond.

Darren Whyte stepped from the airlock onto the dirty floor plates of the ship. He was clearly a boring man and such details as the subtle smell of venting gasses actually mattered to him. He was glad that somebody had thought to mention it after all.

He whipped out his electronic pad and made a note of this precise detail. As he did this, he huffed indignantly to himself. His ruddy red face was that of a man who really had nothing better to do. He took something from his pocket and held it up for the man before him to see quite plainly.

The young man was flustered and gulped nervously at the sight of the silver cylinder. He really didn't want to be there.

Mr Whyte unscrewed it and took out a single green tablet, handing it over and fixing him with a disarming stare. It was the stare of a predator gazing at its prey. It was the glare of a teacher regarding the class clown. It was the look on the face of a parent who had been hoping to have grandchildren while their eldest child explained that they were interested in writing poetry.

The younger man reached out gingerly and received it. Then, after a moment of hesitation, he screwed up his eyes and swallowed it with nervous disgust.

Mr Whyte glared up from under his brow at the junior civil officer and pointed back to the airlock. "Young man, did you see that?"

The younger man said nothing and just gave a little shrug.

My Whyte made a grumbling noise from the back of his throat, a sound he'd mastered over many years of honing his talent at making slight grumbling noises.

"The pill works rather quickly," he said drily and a little smugly besides. "You should, by now, be quite incapable of telling me a single lie."

The younger man hadn't seen whatever it was and looked around, perhaps wondering what exactly it was that he was referring to.

For some reason, he said, "Sir, my finger was nowhere near my nose." The pill hadn't fully taken effect just yet, but it could just be seconds now. His brain was already struggling to find some kind of equilibrium while a cocktail of chemicals gently massaged the sanity right out of it.

The grumpy old man gave a grumpy little noise from somewhere around the back of his grumpy old throat. He frowned some more, since it appeared he was rather good at that, too. Perhaps he was even better at frowning than he was at grumbling?

"I refer to the little cloud of smoke that came from the airlock. That can only mean that the entire system is slightly out of adjustment."

The junior officer had been assigned to him with a fair amount of reluctance. The pill he had swallowed was making it rather difficult to do his job, that job being to follow the orders he'd been given to make things look good during this surprise audit.

"It could also mean the airlock is on fire!" he ventured, regretting it immediately, not that there was anything he could do to stop himself. By now, every thought was likely to come tumbling out unchecked, as the pill slowly reduced him to the mental capacity of a liberal-arts student.

There was considerable glaring. Really quite considerable. "Is the airlock on fire?" he asked, not entirely rhetorically.

This was a tough answer to commit to. The problem, as he saw it, was that the Nebulous wasn't run to the absolute highest standards, and it was quite possible that the airlock was malfunctioning horribly—again. It actually could be on fire, for all he knew.

The crew were highly motivated to make a good impression, so they had chosen to allow the auditor to dock at the port with the least amount of alcohol stacked up inside it, and he distinctly remembered nobody mentioning fires of any kind.

“I don’t think so, sir,” he stammered.

“There is a considerable amount of clutter inside the airlock,” the man grumbled, tapping his pad with his finger. The least amount of clutter would have been absolutely none, which would have been ideal, and was the actual legal requirement.

He nodded weakly.

Mr Whyte continued. “You understand that the airlocks are an emergency exit? What would happen if I were an elephant and needed to escape to safety through such a thing due to a fire?”

He winced, knowing that the only things he could say were the wrong things, but that he was going to say them anyway.

“We don’t have any elephants aboard, sir.” This was absolutely true. “Also, the airlock only leads to the deadly vacuum of space, and is the only thing that’s technically capable of catching fire on the whole ship, or has ever done so. That is except for the toilets on deck 17 on ‘curry-night.’ I believe that occurrence is still being investigated.”

The auditor didn’t look too surprised but there was a definite momentary pause.

“Young man,” he said, “I’m here to audit the entire ship. Could you show me to the primary reactor so I can begin my work properly? I’d like to see the radiation baffles first, to make sure they’re in good working order.”

He held up his hand, gesturing back from where he’d come. “Sir, they’re in the airlock behind you.”

Mr Whyte looked up and his eyes widened. “The radiation baffles?”

“In the airlock!” the man agreed. “They take up a lot of space. I was told that the engineer didn’t see any point in bothering with them, since the reactor isn’t working properly anyway.”



Mr Whyte narrowed his eyes and made a note on his pad, giving him a caustic glare. “I’m surprised you could find room for them in there with all the alcohol you’ve got stored!” he said sarcastically.

He shrugged back, enjoying a warm sensation as the pill worked its magic on him, flooding his brain with a horrendous blend of narcotics that had no place inside a brain that envisaged a future for itself. “It’s not really a *lot* of alcohol. We store most of it around the primary reactor. Without the baffles, the beer gets a nice fizz on it and makes your teeth tingle when you drink it.

“The only problem is that we’ve had to double up the cat patrols since the rats are getting much larger up there. The cats ended up with glowing red eyes, but the rat problem went away when the cats started exploding. That was around the time we started having ‘curry night.’”

He made a note of all this. “Perhaps we’ll skip a visit to the reactor on this occasion,” he suggested and the grumbling took on a more pointed, almost nervous edge. “Let’s begin with the life-support control room, shall we? I want to see the air-cleaning system.”

He shook his head firmly, which made him a little giddy. “I was told not to take you there,” he admitted. “The air-cleaning system was moved to the waste recycling deck. It was considered an emergency measure after all the complaints we had after ‘curry night.’ The medical staff ran out of pills after people began stuffing them up their nose because of the smell. In the end, the only permanent cure was to have your nostrils surgically removed. Several people chose that option but it just made it worse. When they walked into the bathroom, they nearly all haemorrhaged to death through their eyeballs.

“Someone in the genetic engineering department came up with the idea of making seeing-eye-canaries to detect the worst of the gasses. It seemed like a great idea—at first.”

That seemed to surprise him: the grumpy man just stood for a moment, staring at his pad. After a lengthy pause, he finally said, “Well maybe we’ll begin at navigation control?”

The young man shrugged. "I don't know where that is."

He narrowed his eyes.

The pills were foolproof, *weren't they?*

"I tell you what, young man. You tell me what *is* working on this ship, and we'll start from there."

He frowned for a moment, contemplating this carefully. "There is a microwave oven in the gift-shop on deck 12. I know that's working because I heated up my breakfast there this morning with a man called 'Dave.' It tasted pretty good. It had a full, meaty flavour and a spicy zing. I will admit that I hadn't expected that from a bowl of porridge."

The auditor's mouth lolled open, the look of a man scarcely able to believe what he was hearing. "So even the food recycling system is questionable?" he said.

"I guess it depends what the question is?"

"The logical question to begin with is, 'Does it work?'"

He began to chuckle to himself, and then his knees went a little weak and he had to balance himself against a wall.

"Not really, no. It's meant to recycle human waste into delicious and nutritiously balanced food supplements. For some reason, all it can make is little green plastic hats that smell like exploding cats. We've started to sell them in the gift-shops but the only people buying them are the ones that had their nostrils surgically removed and whose eyes didn't explode. Everyone else is getting by, eating fried seeing-eye-canaries."

"I don't..." Whyte stammered. Professional composure was clearly becoming hard to maintain. "It can't be this bad! No ship can be run to this appalling standard. How do you not just drift around space crashing into things?"

He grinned, as if the feeling of having your brain fizzing away like flat beer next to an unshielded reactor was an entirely pleasant one, which perhaps it was. He was the last person to ask if you ever wanted to know. "Aren't they all run like this?"

“Most ships have the good sense to adorn a façade of professionalism in preparation for my short notice visits. I will be having stern words with your PR department.”

“Ah. That might be difficult.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, it’s a really long, crazy story. Basically, they all succumbed to Category Epsilon 3 ‘Space Rage’ and fled their perceived persecutors—a small pack of exploding red eyed cats—on an unmanned escape pod.”

“Utter lunacy...”

“No sir, paranoid schizophrenia.”

Mr Whyte noted this down, a slight tremble in his hand.

“You could see damage control! They’re usually quite busy down there but I’m sure they’ll be happy to make time for you. One of them is making a Christmas tree out of a manned navigational beacon. I hear it was really quite pretty once he hosed all the blood off of it.”

My Whyte stammered, looking down at his pad and then back to the smiling young man as a drop of blood began to drip from his nose. “I think it might be best if I go now.” He turned to glance back at the airlock.

“Yeah, that might be best. Last week, one of the emergency escape modules accidentally launched on this deck. It was right above where the toilets caught fire. Even so, it probably shouldn’t have fired inwards, which I didn’t think was actually possible. Apparently, we were lucky that nobody was in it, but less lucky that someone was in the cabin it ended up in. I think he was an auditor too, by some weird coincidence.”

Mr Whyte made a frightened little squeaking noise and began edging back to the airlock, glancing around as if the floor might give way beneath him, which was totally unreasonable since the floor beneath him had recently been replaced with the highest quality Chinese bamboo. It was guaranteed to be able to support a fully-grown elephant, even if it was on fire. Sadly, there were no elephants on board, and certainly not ones that were in any way combustible, to test that claim. Perhaps there had been at

some point, which was why the bamboo had been put there in the first place?

Although metal Chinese products were often compared to bamboo in an unfavourable way, Chinese bamboo was often compared to metal and fared rather better. This would have been ideal except for the fact that it had originally been engineered to be edible.

“Is this a good audit?” the young man asked, his eyes glazed over as he looked around, enjoying whatever fascinating thing only existed in his own private little world. It was a world where climate-change had almost seen off most of the living creatures, and all that was left were a few bewildered Pandas trying to decide whether it might be easier to try eating some of the local produce or a rusty old motorcycle frame. “I hope it’s not a bad audit. I heard that if it is, you have to stay here with us and check over everything, right? It could take months!”

The auditor gave another little squeak. “Umm...,” he began. “It’s not *that* bad...”

“You should stay!” he told him. “If you microwave the hats, they taste a bit like chicken. Apparently, so do the lightbulbs but I’ve not tried that yet.”

Whyte began shaking his head slowly. He stopped suddenly as he backed up to the wall, his eyes widening in horror, as if there was no escape.

“It’s a good audit,” he said with a lopsided smile. “It’s a good audit and I can leave. I’m allowed to leave if it’s a good audit. I’m giving you three out of five stars. Not bad, but good enough. Actually, better than some.”

“Dave told me it would be a good audit,” the young man said as a suspicious wet patch formed in the middle of his trousers. It only made him grin more to himself as a frothing, fizzing sensation filled his mind and a weird bright white light could be heard in his ears. “He showed me around and told me all about what happens on the ship, he told me exactly what it’s really like, but not to tell anyone as it was ‘our secret.’”

“Dave?” The auditor began scratching around with his hand for the door release, back to the glorious sanctity of his personal shuttle.

“I don’t think Dave is very clever though,” he said thoughtfully. “He kept calling me ‘Collateral Damage’ even though my name is Graham. He said it was close enough and that it didn’t matter in the long-term, since I very likely didn’t have one.

“I wonder what he meant.”

It was doubtful if he could see much of anything at all by this point and most of his attention was fixed on a blank grey wall panel that oddly reminded him of his Uncle Toby. He smiled as his tongue lolled out and his hollow, vacant eyes peered forward into absolutely nothing in particular, which was ironic since the very same ‘*nothing in particular*’ was going to be happening behind them for a very long time to come.

The airlock hissed open. “I’m leaving!” the auditor shouted, sighing a huge note of relief as he stepped away, back from the lingering threat of the ship. The door slid closed with a customary hiss.

Bob looked up to Dave, who was actually another blank grey wall panel that looked nothing like him at all to anyone else at all, except perhaps an imaginary flaming elephant that was hell-bent on escaping.

“Dave, I think my Uncle Toby left. That’s probably for the best, since he died three years ago and probably has better things to do.”

Dave, who was a wall panel with a slight mark on the bottom left corner, just laughed. It said something intelligent, insightful and remarkably astute.

“Dave, I think we had a good audit,” he slurred drunkenly, wobbling and swaying back and forth as more blood ran from his nose, his ears, his eyes and the left-hand side of his mouth. “I think we’re safe for another year, just like you said we would be. You’re not as dumb as people say. People say you’re actually pretty dumb.”

Dave laughed again, no small feat for a very slightly dirty grey panel that wasn’t really him at all. In fact, the very slightly dirty grey panel

wasn't really anyone but it was a distinction that would never concern the young man again.

"I love you, Dave!" he said sinking to his knees before becoming completely overwhelmed by a ferocious attack of what had been come to be known aboard the ship as 'curry night.' The smell was appalling and the plain grey panelling all around looked on in disgust, in a way only plain grey panelling could.

The fire in the airlock continued to burn away peacefully.

All was right with the world.

# The Whoopsie

Number 2 realised he might be upside down, but just as unlikely, he might not be.

He then realised he might not be upside down, but the rest of the world, just as likely, might actually be the problem. He blinked as his eyesight came into sharp focus. He was sitting on the floor and the area in contact with it hurt, solidly implying that his knees had given way and he had crashed down into it with some force.

Also, and more annoyingly, the floor was now the thing that the light fittings were screwed into and the ceiling, above him, had a carpet with several chairs laid neatly out along the sides of a boring but practical desk.

“Number 1, I think we’re awake again. This time the world is a bit the wrong way up. That’s going to make going to the bathroom a difficult, and potentially unpleasant experience.”

Number 1 was laying on top of sign that pointed to the exit in a way that looked like it could not have been any less comfortable. He grunted, sat up sharply and began rubbing his head. “I’m confused,” he said with a grimace.

“Yes,” Number 2 agreed, looking about their inverted office. “There’s a lot of that going around. We’re in an office that looks like an office this time, except it’s the wrong way up. It’s funny how disconcerting that is.”

“The funniest thing is that you know what ‘disconcerting’ means.”

“It’s a good thing, right?”

They stood up and brushed the dust off their clothes. Number 2 was a short, tubby man with bright red skin, as if he had been working hard to earn his next heart-attack. He looked jealously over to his colleague who was young, relatively fit and had a mop of brown hair sticking out the top of his head, the sides shaved to the skin. “I think, this time, you’re the idiot!” he said.

Number 1 nodded. “I think so too. I tried to remember a science joke but all I could get was something about how good my cousin looks in a bikini.”

Number 2 looked up to the floor, which was on the ceiling, and wondered how exactly they were going to get to the computer. It was perched on the edge of the desk a worryingly long way away from him. “I think we might have a problem here. With that thing all the way up there, we have no way to work out what we need to do next.”

“Idiot,” came Number 1’s voice. He walked over to the edge of the room, and just kept going, stepping up onto the wall and continuing to move onwards. “Have you forgotten how gravity works?”

Number 2 furrowed his brow curiously. “I suppose I must have,” he said thoughtfully. He stepped up to the edge of the room and gingerly put his foot up to the wall. As he stepped forwards, he found he was able to very easily walk up along the wall as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Look at me,” he said. “I actually did forget how gravity works. It completely slipped my mind that people can do this.<sup>1</sup>”

“I guess they just don’t normally try,” Number 1 said. By now he had reached the floor and was taking his seat in front of the computer.

Number 2 pondered as to how many people would actually try this now, since nobody had had the foresight to post any kind of disclaimer, and what that meant about human beings in general. Perhaps adding a disclaimer would be a smart move.

“It seems we’ve had a little ‘whoopsie’,” said Number 1, gazing into the information from the computer.

Number 2 stepped onto the grey tiled carpet. “A whoopsie is good, right?” he said with a smile on his ruddy, breathless face. “We only started

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, no. People cannot do this. Number 1 and Number 2 are trained professionals, so please do not attempt to imitate any of their antics and tomfoolery at home. It would be pretty cool though...



with a blip, now we're all the way down to a whoopsie. That's some really impressive progress there."

"No!" Number 1 looked a little troubled and bit his lower lip. If that had happened on the face he'd worn last time, it would have been very attractive; this time, not so much. It looked like a sexy, seductive expression was being attempted by a grey-seal while it was busy having a stroke. "What I mean is that the computer has made an error. I'm just trying to fix it now."

"Wait a moment! You do know the computer doesn't really exist, right?"

"I know. Remind me though, just in case I really have forgotten and just think I haven't."

"The office and the computer is just a construct of the mind of the universe. None of this is real. It's just our perception that makes it feel solid. We're just the essences of a pair of humans so that the mind can evaluate things from our perspective. The computer just does what we think it's going to do. It doesn't really follow the instructions we set it to carry out. How do you think you're able to input commands by tickling the belly of a shaved cat?"

Number 1 frowned to himself. "I had wondered about that. You're actually making sense for once."

"My point is, it can't have a whoopsie. It's far too powerful and sophisticated for it to have a malfunction of any kind. The mind of the universe can't have a whoopsie."

Number 1 pointed to it and grinned. "It's having one now. It's quite a big one I think."

"Check it again," Number 2 told him sternly.

Number 1 looked harder, squinting at a monitor that was a large grey slab with a cathode ray-tube inside. It looked ancient and lit up with a bright, eerie green glow that reflected off his oddly red neck. "It says it doesn't want to process this," he said. "It's something about 'Dave' being a major abnormality that's made it all feel a bit sad about itself."

“It doesn’t want...?” he said, his tone and volume raising alarmingly. He felt a stabbing pain inside his ribcage that made him gasp in painful surprise. He slapped his chest several times and tried to ignore it.

“Oh,” Number 1 said, looking really quite worried. “Dave, whoever that is, wasn’t meant to exist. I think we did something very bad with your banana.”

“Can’t we make him go away?” Number 2 said. “If only we had another banana!”

Number 1 shook his head. “I think we can only limit the damage. I don’t think this is a whoopsie at all. I think this is a very serious repercussion of your stupidity.”

“So what do we do next?” Number 2 cried out. “I don’t like the sound of the word ‘serious.’ I just wanted a cheese-burger, not to destroy the universe.”

“We have to create an internet character that sarcastically mocks story-telling,” he said with a shrug. “I don’t know what good that will do but, apparently, it needs to talk with an artificial voice and sound smart but stupid, all at the same time.”

“OK,” Number 2 said more calmly, hoping that there was nothing else to it but that. “That doesn’t sound too difficult. Sounding smart but being stupid is what the internet is all about. You’re sure that will fix this?”

“No,” he shook his head. “It won’t fix it, but it will help to take the edge off.”

The sound of someone telling Number 1 to do it echoed around an infinite space in a tiny corner of a moment that was blinking out of eternity.

## A Better Life

The day started cold, as cold days were wont to do.

This was nothing new for him, not any more. Each day, he found he was noticing it less. When he awoke that morning, his fingers and toes burned from the icy chill of the wind that howled relentlessly through the walls.

The walls really weren't up to the punishment, being made, as they were, from logs cut from the trees that grew outside and lashed together with vine, many decades earlier. The shack was barely habitable: a few sticks of furniture dotted about here and there, and his bed was just a mess of old rags he'd managed to collect into the one remaining dry spot under the perpetually leaking roof.

He finished his breakfast, carefully mopping up every last morsel of food from a battered metal plate that he hadn't been able to properly clean. He had found various tins hidden away at the back of a cupboard and had fought his way past spiders and something furry to get at them. The labels were torn away and he could only guess as to what was inside. It was the work of nearly half an hour every morning to smash one open enough with a rock to get at whatever was contained within.

A greater problem was what was going to happen when they ran out.

"You could always just leave," she told him grumpily.

He looked up at her and smiled through the sour taste of what he presumed were canned peaches, served on a plate that had been wiped clean on the frost drenched grass outside.

"Why would I leave?"

"You can't live like this!" she told him, scowling at the plate and then flashing him a sympathetic smile. "What would our little girl think if she could see this?"

"It took me three years to get here!" he explained. "I'm not going anywhere. If I can't live like this, then this is the way I'll die. It's perfect."

“Tom...” she said with a sigh, before looking away from his unrelenting gaze.

“Martha,” he began. “I worked harder than I can ever explain to be here. For the first time in three years, I’m happy. This is the happiest I’ve been in as long as I can remember.”

Martha raised a cup of coffee to her lips and took a sip. Tom felt like he could smell the rich, strong aroma of the fine ground beans; he could almost taste it. “This is no way for a man of your age to live, Tom!”

“But it’s a fine way to die!” he said with a smile, and at that moment he truly felt it.

The table they sat at had never been intended to serve as a table at all. It was just a packing crate he had found outside in a woodshed with two cut-down stumps arranged around it as stools. The height was all wrong, and days of sitting at it had caused his back and shoulders to cramp up.

“Don’t you miss your books?” she asked softly.

“Of course!” he told her. “I miss lots of things. I miss running water, I miss electricity, I miss eating food that I didn’t have to batter to death with a rock.” He looked at her carefully, taking in every line of her face, committing every minute detail to memory once again. “I miss my books, I miss reading, I miss discovering new things and solving challenges. But, Martha, all of that led me here. All of that reading, all that work gave me the chance to have my greatest wish fulfilled!”

She raised an eyebrow and shook her head at him. “Your greatest wish is to have a bucket as a toilet?”

He laughed, and for a moment that old spark in his eyes was back. It was a youthful gleam that she had always told him was simply irresistible to her. He had always jokingly admitted that the first thing that had caught his eye about her was a slightly too short skirt and a low-cut blouse. “I can only aspire to a bucket!” he said wistfully. “It’s an old paint-tin, I hope. I’m not quite sure to be honest.”

She grumbled, a low noise from the back of her throat. It was the same disapproving sound she had made when he explained about the

slightly too short skirt and the low-cut blouse. “Charming!” she said with a scowl.

“It’s beautiful, Martha. This is my wish and it’s perfect.”

“You sent yourself to hell!”

“A beautiful hell,” he corrected her. “A hell I would have given anything to suffer in.”

“You did give everything. You’ve given up your whole life for this... for nothing!”

“A meagre sacrifice really.”

He got up, grunting to himself as his tired, cold muscles ached inside him. His joints stiffened from the cold, and he felt a tinge of light-headedness from the lack of proper nutrition. “I think I saw some apples growing nearby,” he commented casually. “I’m going to walk down there later and pick some. I certainly hope they are apples this time.”

“This is really it, isn’t it?” she stated blankly, sadness apparent in her voice. “You’re not going back, are you?”

“No,” he said firmly. “This is everything I’ve wished for. This is everything I dreamed of every minute of every day for the last three years. I’ll never go back. This is my life now and I am at peace with it.”

She huffed a weary breath. “You know, I think there’s a racoon in your bed. I saw it moving.”

“I don’t think of it as a racoon,” he explained with an inappropriately bright smile. “I think of it as a cross between a pet, and lunch, depending on circumstances.”

“Nice!” she grunted.

“At least I’ve got you!”

“They are dark times indeed when we celebrate your increasingly disparate mental state.”

“This again!” he said much more cheerfully than the situation warranted. “I’m not *totally* crazy—this is reality.

“I know that doesn’t quite explain your being here, but the point I should underline is that I’m aware of how crazy that is. You’re never really mad if you actually know you’re mad.”

She rolled her eyes. It was all so familiar. “All of this is mad!”

He shook his head and for the first time, his cheeriness vanished momentarily. “No. This is the only sane thing left in this world.”

“Vanishing into a lost wood to live in a crumbling hut out in the middle of absolutely nowhere?” she snapped. “That’s sane, is it?”

He smiled: he even felt happy again. “It’s everything I wished for. I knew what was going to happen.”

“Wishes...” she huffed.

“Just the one wish,” he corrected her. “Maybe I could have found more. Maybe I could have had my three wishes, like in the stories we heard as children. Who knows?

“What I do know is that I needed one wish, and now it’s come true.”

She sat on her stump and glared at him accusingly. “Your one wish was to be crazy enough to be stuck in a hut with *me* for the rest of your life?”

“I was crazy enough to marry you once, you know.”

“Tom?” she began with a sad smile. “How do you know this was worth it? How do you know this is even what you think it is?”

He turned away and sighed. It was a fair question: how could he really know? How could anyone know anything, when it really all came down to it?

His wife had always been the voice of reason, a verbal manifestation of his own nagging doubts. This time was different, though. Nothing she could say would be enough to change his mind. He knew that with uncompromising certainty.

“It is what it is,” he insisted. “It can only be this. It’s a fundamental principle of reality. *The world remains whole: nothing added, nothing removed.*”

“So that’s that? You’ll live out your days in this place without ever knowing for sure?”

He nodded happily. “However much time I’ve got will be spent right here, and I’m happier about it than you can possibly imagine!”

“And how do you feel about spending the rest of your days talking to your wife?”

He flashed her a smile. “You’ll come and go. You’ve been coming and going every day for the last five years. I don’t imagine that living out my greatest wish will have any bearing on our relationship.”

She sighed, rather deeply. “*‘Till death do us part* was the agreement. I’m afraid we’ve moved quite a way beyond our contractual obligations in that regard.”

“I could never let you go, Martha. I told you that at the hospital as you breathed your last, the bleeping of machinery breaking down as the life slowly drifted from you.”

“Well, I’m just a figment of a crazy person’s imagination now,” she said grumpily. “What am I supposed to know?”

“We always both knew I was the clever one!” he retorted, earning himself a caustic glare.

He moved back to the table, after stashing his metal plate away for cleaning, right next to his sharp, tin-opening rock.

“Tom,” she urged. “But really, how do you know?”

“I know,” he said unshaken. “I read everything there was to know about the magic of the ancients. I consulted shamans, mages and soothsayers. I worked, practised and honed my skills for three years with this single goal in mind. Wishes can be granted, and I made sure that I got mine.”

“But what if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not,” he replied with a shrug. “But it’s moot either way.”

She sighed deeply. “It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

“Martha, you know I stopped blaming myself a long time ago!” He smiled as he laughed inwardly. “I vowed never to scourge myself for all the mistakes our Sally made. I’m not quite that riddled with self-loathing.”

“I failed her!” Martha said after a lengthy pause. “I could never stop blaming myself.”

“For what? For dying of cancer?”

“For leaving my little girl when she needed me. A mother should be stronger than that.”

He looked up at her supportively, a look tinged with sadness. For a moment, he wondered if she, too, were out there somewhere, telling herself these very same things.

“I failed her too,” he reassured her. “I’m the one that lived.”

“She was always troubled, that one, always making terrible decisions. And after everything that happened to me... well, there wasn’t anything you could have done.”

“I did the best I could,” he huffed solemnly. “But I don’t blame myself for failing her, because the failure was never complete. I never stopped trying, and now I can finally help her.”

“By sacrificing your happiness for hers?” she said, shaking her head sadly. “I don’t think that’s how these things work.”

“It’s exactly how they work,” he told her. “*The world remains whole: nothing added, nothing removed.*”

“The addiction, the disease, the poverty; the late-night trips to the hospital where she’d habitually lie to the doctors to cover for the abusive boyfriend of the week. The miscarriage... With each bad decision, she dug herself deeper and deeper into a spiral of misery and hardship. This was her burden, her debt. And debts must be paid.

“But there’s nothing in the rules that says it has to be paid by *her*.”

“So, you decided to pay it on her behalf? You just woke up and found yourself here in this waking hell, miserable, cold, the stench of decay on the eastern wind?”



“Yes,” he said simply. “And she gets a reset, a chance to enjoy her life again, a chance to make better decisions.”

“That really is the craziest thing I ever heard!”

He took a deep breath and gazed into the eyes of his long dead wife.

“I’m her dad, Martha. It’d be crazy not to!”

## The Tiny Disaster

This time it was a gentle gnawing sensation, like being slowly consumed by a gigantic dog with fur-covered, rubber teeth, only backwards, all from within a large bubble that cushioned the inhabitants with an interior layer of angry hornets.

Number 2 sat up suddenly, not able to remember why she wasn't standing. "Why am I wherever I am?" she said curiously as her brain snapped back to the cold, hard reality of the warm, soft office.

"Because you make horrible choices and aren't very intelligent," Number 1 told her in much harsher tones than the situation really seemed to warrant.

Number 2 rolled her eyes and felt her face with her hands. "I'm a woman again," she said. "I'm pretty young, a bit over-weight, short hair and I'm finding a troubling amount of hair on my upper lip."

"The universe is coming apart at the seams because you don't like bananas, and the most troubling thing about the whole situation is the amount of hair on your upper lip?"

"No!" she said firmly. "The most troubling thing is your attitude, if you must know."

"Oh no!" Number 1 said, a look of horrified surprise on a face that looked as if it belonged on a man who blamed the world for everything he'd done to himself. His ginger hair was greying around the sides, deep grooves began at the corners of his eyes and seemed to stop nowhere at all, and his eyes had an empty, glazed-over appearance. If the body he was inhabiting didn't usually work in a place where customers explained their complaints at raised volume, then one must wonder what the point of it all is.

"Oh no, what?" Number 2 said grumpily.

"Your face!" he told her. "You look like a nightmare. You have the face of someone who was trying to use the bathroom in an emergency and

had to stop to answer a phone call about your pet getting killed by a passing car.”

“And you, sir,” she began, her face flushing red, “look like an arse!”

Number 1 frowned and shook his head sadly. “So you’re an idiot again.”

She nodded sadly. “It appears so. I have the overwhelming urge to buy lottery tickets and talk about my political views on an unrelated public internet forum.”

“I’m sorry, Number 2. You’re not having much luck today.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I’ll just let you do the work until I end up in the body of someone who enjoys doing crossword puzzles.”

Number 1 hoisted himself breathlessly up from the dusty floor and said: “You know it’s a bad day when you aspire to be someone who does crossword puzzles.”

She stood up, dragging herself to her feet, huffing from the effort of the tired muscles in this rather sub-standard body.

The office this time looked like a bunker, some concrete military structure equipped with dusty, utilitarian equipment that might have been dated back at least fifty years. More importantly though, what was there to eat?

“I think this is bad,” Number 1 said.

She looked to the side where a set of lockers was standing next to a bare wall made from interlocking concrete blocks. She went over and eagerly tried to open the doors. She smiled to herself to find them unlocked.

“I’m sure this isn’t good,” Number 1 said.

The metal door fell open, creaking slightly as it gave way. She peered inside. The light in the room was low and her eyes struggled momentarily to adjust. There was something inside, some tantalising promise that this was going to be good.

“This is serious,” Number 1 said.

She reached gingerly inside and something dry rustled under the touch of her chubby fingers. It felt like plastic wrapping, glorious clear bags containing some potentially wonderful snacks.

“This is looking awful,” Number 1 said.

“Awful?” she said with a grin on her lips. “It’s fantastic, this cupboard is full of cakes. We get cakes!”

“Cakes?” Number 1 said. “I’m trying to save the local branch of the entire universe from being destroyed by a discarded banana. I don’t care about cakes.”

She glared at him angrily, shaking her head slightly in disgusted dismay. “If you keep up this attitude, you won’t be getting any cake. How does that make you feel?”

Number 1 glared at her. “We’re not really here, you know? All that’s left of us is an idea. We exist as a pool of memories and personality and we inhabit the shells of existing people in random cracks in the multiverse. All of this is just the refraction of a shadow, an idea inside a dream. We don’t actually exist in these bodies and this office isn’t actually real, in any factual sense of the word. And nor are those cakes.”

“It tashsts praaty reel chew meee,” she said, her mouth crammed with something that tasted very much like chocolate stuffed with cream.

Number 1 sighed. “This is bad,” he said. “Normally we get pretty good bodies with smart, intelligent minds. All day we’ve been getting these rejects. I can barely think straight and we seem to be making mistake after mistake and just making things worse.”

“I thought the one before last was actually pretty funny,” she said, swallowing a large, dry mouthful of sponge. It may have been coffee-flavoured, she thought to herself. “I kind of like this guy, Dave. He was better than the one after, that was kind of depressing.”

Number 1 shook his head and pressed some buttons on an old typewriter keyboard. “Dave is a tiny disaster. If you get a thing like Dave, it can push the universe completely out of kilter. People like him aren’t meant

to exist. They go around like a broken shower-head, spraying blips out all over the place like a cascade of logic-failures.

“Because of that idiot, we’ve got people who have worked out how to get their wishes granted. What next? Dreams predicting reality?”

Number 2 took another bite and said, while chewing with her mouth quite widely open, “But he is funny!”

Number 1 shook his head and ignored her. He glanced over, although it was clear he was trying not to. He eyed up the cake hungrily. She knew he wanted it. Cakes solve all problems, she thought to herself.

“The computer says we have to get a man who rode a motorcycle too far to write a book about it,” he said, gazing at a monitor that looked like an old television, only with the wooden box replaced with a stamped metal shell, painted military green.

“Who would want to read that?” she said, actually quite surprised that cakes weren’t part of the projected solution.

“Probably nobody,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe that’s the point? Maybe that drives him to depression and stops him from writing many, even worse books?”

“What if it doesn’t?” she said.

“Who cares?” he said. “All I know is that the computer is telling us to do that. I just have to accept the suggestion by pressing the button.”

“What are you going to do?” she said with a sense of urgency, turning quickly to grab as much cake as possible before the universe shifted again.

“I already pressed it,” he told her.

The cake melted into a fine powder and slowly filtered through her grasping fingers. She began to feel annoyed before realising it wasn’t the cake that was dissolving away but her own body.

Frankly, that was a bit of a relief.

## Sweet Dreams

He woke up suddenly, his body drenched in sweat, his heart pounding in his chest. The dream was fresh in his mind but the details were already fading, lost in the swirling clouds of his fogged memory.

Nothing was going to wipe out the last grim detail of what he'd seen while he slept. In his dream he had died. He had gone out of his house, got into his car for the short drive to work and as he pulled out onto the road, a truck had hit him, killing him and plunging him into endless darkness.

The darkness had shattered painfully and he'd found himself sitting up in bed, his breathing ragged and his heart beating like a drum.

He tried to calm himself down while a warm body stirred next to him.

His wife's voice called out softly: "Morning. Are you alright?"

Somehow, the familiar sound of her voice anchored him back to reality and he smiled at his foolishness. It was *just* a dream. "I'm fine. I'm getting up for a coffee before I head out."

Her reply was just a mumble.

He sat in the kitchen, perched on a wooden stool and sipped at a very mediocre mug of coffee. By now the dream had faded to almost nothing: he could barely recall the slightest detail. As the dark, bitter liquid slid warmly down his throat, he felt that he remembered, just for a moment, that this had all happened before.

He frowned and sipped again. It had all seemed so real at the time. It had felt as if he was actually there. But the memory had faded now and only fragments remained. It seemed ridiculous to him that a grown man was acting as if he had been scared by a dream, and he tried to put all thoughts of it out of his mind. This was the real world now and it was time he acted like it.

His wife walked into the kitchen to join him. She was still half lost in the midst of sleep herself and dragged her feet as if the act of moving was an unwelcome effort.

“Are you alright?” she asked with a concerned frown, stifling a yawn.

He must have seemed more shaken than he realised. He sighed to himself and told her: “I’m absolutely fine. I’m just a little tired.”

“Are you sure?” she said, running her hand over her long, dark hair. “You don’t seem fine. Why don’t you take a day off work today? Just call in sick and rest.”

Again, this all seemed horribly familiar. It had happened exactly that way before and a cold sense of foreboding traced up his spine. He shook his head, trying to dismiss all this childishness and scolding himself for letting his mind dwell on it.

“It’s fine,” he assured her, flashing an uneasy smile. He got up, snatched his keys from the counter and headed out towards the door. He wasn’t going to let all this nonsense get to him and he certainly wasn’t going to drag her into it.

He kissed her on the cheek and said, “Goodbye, darling. I’ll see you tonight.”

She watched with trepidation as he made his way out to his car. As he swung open the door she found herself mumbling, “Don’t go...”

She stood for just a moment, then quickly made her way to the front of the house and peered out the window as he reversed out of the drive.

There was a blood-curdling crash, an explosive smash of something huge and metal tearing into his car.

She awoke suddenly, her heart thumping in her chest, her body drenched in sweat. Her eyes snapped open and she peered quietly out into the darkness, assuring herself it was *just* a dream.

Beside her she heard the sound of her husband. He was sitting up straight, breathing heavily. It wasn’t like him; he was usually so calm.

“Morning. Are you alright?” she said softly.

There was a long pause while he seemed to think about the question carefully. He said, sounding unsure of himself: “I’m fine. I’m getting up for a coffee before I head out.”

She stayed still while he moved to the side to step out of bed. The dream had felt so real, but it was fading now. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong. She mumbled to herself, “Don’t go...”



# The Pain

It was an experience that felt something like being hit in the face with a fish, a very big fish that was coming so fast that if it hit you in the face it would knock you completely off your feet. She wasn't on her feet, so it seemed likely that this was exactly what had happened. Whatever had happened, and wherever she now was, there was nothing that made her feel that there would be any cake.

She opened her eyes gingerly and peered around. She glanced down to find herself standing on the very feet she was sure she hadn't been standing on. Shouldn't this feel more confusing?

She grabbed her genitals and found that she wasn't a 'she' at all, but was now a rather average man.

"I'm a man again," he said. "I suddenly don't even feel like I want any cake."

Number 1 was groaning and rubbing his temples wearily. "That was unpleasant. I feel like I was hit by a giant fish. What did it feel like for you?"

Number 2 grinned to himself. "It was great," he lied. "It was like drifting on a fluffy cloud."

"There is no justice in the world," Number 1 grunted. He was also a man, a rather short, slightly chubby rat-like man with ginger hair and a face that looked as if it was all that was left over after the all the proper faces had been given out. He looked like a clown-themed Halloween mask that had been left overnight on a radiator.

Number 2 grinned. "I wouldn't know about that. All I know is that I have a strange, and burning, desire to eat macaroni cheese and comment about how unattractive you are."

"I'm unattractive?" Number 1 looked offended.

"Spectacularly," he said, nodding to himself thoughtfully. "You look like you were designed on a Friday by a man with pressing things to do on Saturday."

“Well, you look spectacularly average,” he replied, frowning so that his ginger eyebrows pitched down into an angry scowl.

“Your opinion means nothing to me,” Number 2 said with a shrug. “You’ve set the bar so low that people would find me the more appealing of us if my face had been torn off in an industrial accident by a faulty face-replacement manufacturing machine.”

“What?” he said with a frown. “I feel like you’re making less sense as the day goes on.”

Number 2 narrowed his eyes. “I thought the fact that your opinion means nothing to me had been firmly established,” he said. “I’m not sure where this doubt is coming from.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Number 1 grumbled as he hefted himself to his feet. “I don’t like you today. You keep getting these dreadful people to get stuck inside of.”

“I don’t make the rules,” Number 2 told him. “All I know is that I need to find something to eat.”

“Well, we still have to find a way to fix the universe. We better see what happened with that last change.”

“I was pretty sure that I communicated the fact that I only know one thing,” he said. “I’ll leave the rest to you. It seems more like the sort of thing you’d enjoy.”

Number 1 sighed to himself and gazed forwards into nothing.

Number 2 went to the edge of the room. This time, the office was very much like the inside of a DIY shop. Cheap bits of metal plates were dotted around, held up with even cheaper wooden structures. “Ah,” he said as he worked it all out. “This time the office is a sci-fi movie set. We’re on a spaceship, only not really a spaceship. This is a stage where someone is filming a television show that’s meant to be set on a spaceship.”

“Possibly,” Number 1 agreed with a shrug. He cast a look around, shrugged again and went back to what he was doing. He flopped down heavily into a black office chair and began typing something into a very

advanced-looking computer that was really made from cardboard and was held up from behind by an old brick.

Number 2 gasped as his mouth fell open. "I've found it," he said. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"What?" Number 1 looked up, hope in his eyes for the first time in a very long while.

"Food!" he said and pointed to a long table off in the distance that was covered in a fine array of delicious-looking snacks.

"Food?" Number 1 grumbled, flashing him a scowl. "Is that all you think about?"

"Pretty much. What else is there?"

"Fixing the universe?" Number 1 suggested dryly, sounding increasingly frustrated.

"I think it was broken long before we got here," he replied. "In any case, I'm not sure we actually do anything. Sometimes I feel that we're just part of a report ourselves, a way for the universe to make adjustments and experience them through our perspective."

Number 1 looked up horrified. "What?" he said. "That's horrible."

Number 2 shrugged. "Have you not been to the universe?" he said sarcastically. "You don't see many happy faces there."

"This is painful," Number 1 grimaced, gazing into the monitor, which, if you looked closely, was a piece of black plastic stuck down with tape. "You're a pain. This computer is a pain. The situation is a pain."

"Sandwiches," Number 2 said with a wide grin, holding up a slice of cheese nestling between two slices of bread. "It's almost as good as real food."

Ignoring him, Number 1 said: "The computer said the problem is growing. We need to find some internet-based stories and adapt them into a novel to help slow this down."

"Or..." Number 2 said with a proud flourish, "... Or, we could just eat sandwiches."

“I’m pressing the button,” Number 1 said with a sigh. “I just hope we do better next time and you’re less annoying.”

“Careful what you wish for!” he said as the studio set around them fell to pieces, crumbling away into dust leaving behind the laws of physics, which were oddly plain for all to see.

# The Attack

I waited, hiding behind a small opening, but I could see through and I could see enough. I knew they would be coming and I was ready for them.

They came every day and I was *always* ready to do what I had to do. I would fight, I would kill, and if I had to, I would even die. Nothing would stop me. I would never abandon my role as the defender of this place. Our fates were entwined, mine and all of those who might seek to attack.

For now, I relaxed and I let my eyes close. These were moments I snatched to myself, little chances to rest myself before the horrors came to this domain. My muscles twitched expectantly as I took my time, drifting through flashes of dreams and swimming through memories. Sometimes, I just looked around.

It was a place that had incredible beauty, equal to the dreadful horrors that were lurking in the places beyond. Sometimes I just gazed at it, reminding myself that it was ours, and it was worth protecting.

I could smell food as it wafted to my nose. Somewhere, someone was preparing a meal and it made me hungry. I was *always* hungry.

I waited, staring ahead from my hiding place, down the long, wide path that lead into the unknown realm that lay beyond. The grass stretched down in front of me and I could hear the songs of birds as they whistled and chirped their way around, far off in the distance.

All was quiet, but I knew the serenity hid dangers around every corner. It was my job to protect them, to defend my people, and I knew that threats would come all too soon.

Above the birds, I heard the unmistakable whistling sound, a shrill and ugly noise that warned me that it had begun. The first of them was here and I was about to face the greatest of today's challenges. I saw him as he was about to cross the threshold of our territory. He was a hulking brute, a gigantic creature with dark, piercing eyes. He looked at me and he paused. At least he took me seriously, as well he should. These attackers were fearsome indeed, but I had seen many and they held no fear for me.

I leapt to my feet reflexively, and my skin prickled in readiness. My muscles tensed and I could feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins. My face changed, contorted into an angry growl. This was it, the moment I had been waiting for.

I felt truly alive.

He leaned forwards and his hand fell on the wrought iron gate. This was a violation and the threat had been clearly made: he wasn't going to back down. He was just the first that day. There would be more, and they would never stop unless I made a fearless, endless defence of our territory.

I launched myself out, shouting at the top of my lungs and brandishing my fearsome weapons. I roared for all I was worth, throwing myself into battle, down the wide path, gaining speed with every frantic footstep.

I crossed the space between us quickly. I hoped I would frighten him, scare him back with my sheer bravery, my willingness to risk it all for the ones I loved. He paused for a moment but then he continued on, lumbering towards me with mighty steps.

My resolve was renewed as I lunged forward threateningly. It didn't stop him though: he stepped ever closer. I backed away nervously. He was gigantic, truly huge and terrifying. But, I swallowed my apprehension and went forwards once more.

I heard the sound of a voice behind me.

"Calm down!" it said. It was the sound of our leader, the one who I battled most strongly for.

*Calm down?!* Did he not see this lumbering terror that came towards us? I cried out once again, but he shouted: "Stupid thing! Stop barking!"

The terrible adversary said: "He's only a little mutt. I've seen scarier mops, mate."

"He doesn't think so," I heard the leader say. I'm not sure what all these noises meant, but I'm sure he was encouraging me, or praising me for my bravery.

Our leader had clearly negotiated peace once more, no doubt due to my brave willingness to sacrifice it all. We were safe again, for now.

“Who knows what goes through his head? Stupid dog.”

## The Gross Error

“Am I a dog?” Number 2 thought to itself, or himself, or herself, or whatever the hell it, he or she was at that moment. It was difficult to tell, because reality was swirling round in and out of them so fast that it was hard to work out where they stopped and something else began.

The experience was rather like being sucked up through a small straw of roughly five millimetres in diameter, while you were an object seventeen kilometres wide, and made of stone.

“Are you alright?” Number 1 said, the voice piercing through the darkness and light.

Number 2 opened her eyes to let all this nonsense in.

“Not really,” she admitted. “I feel rather like I want to run around the garden for an hour barking at my own tail.”

“Well, I have some good news and some bad news for you.”

She peered over to see that Number 1 was now a strikingly handsome man with unusual self-confidence, poise, charm and presence. “Wow,” she said. “I never really knew what you looked like in real life but this is absolutely, exactly the complete opposite of how I pictured it.”

“You know you were just a dog, right?” he said with a slightly cruel smile.

She nodded. “I don’t look like a dog now, do I?” she asked, rubbing her face with her hands. “There’s no hair on my face, so that’s something.”

“No, you look fine this time,” he said. “You look a bit like my last girlfriend, actually.”

She found herself smiling at the thought of that, even though she knew that this wasn’t his actual body and such things had no bearing on the present, or much of one on the past. She said, deliberately viciously: “I’m shocked to hear you ever had a girlfriend. Was it the free coffee that won her over?”

He sighed and shook his head. “Well, I did,” he told her. After a short pause, he added, “...technically.”



She grinned and stood up, slipping slightly on unnecessarily high-heels and struggling to compose herself due to an incredibly tight skirt that made it almost impossible to move the upper portion of her legs. “I’m dressed like a prostitute,” she grumbled. “I can’t help but feel this is connected to my reminding you of your former love interest.”

“The good news,” Number 1 began, “is that something we did actually made some progress. It seems like the situation might be coming under control. We’ve been downgraded to a ‘gross error.’”

Number 2 looked at him wondering how this kind of good news didn’t even sound like good news and definitely had some bad news attached to it. “You and I have a very different idea of what constitutes good news,” she told him with a scowl. “You need to work on that.”

“Well, the bad news is that we need to do the same thing again.”

“The same thing?” she frowned. “I thought once we change things we’ve created a new reality and nothing about it can be modified again. All we can do is switch out other connecting details in an attempt to create a new universe where the stupid things didn’t happen and then switch them over so the better one becomes dominant.”

“You’re going to be a dog again.”

She sighed. Suddenly, realisation hit her. “You might be the dog this time,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said, nodding in agreement.

As the walls around the totally black office, with completely black furniture, supporting an absolutely black computer, began to fade away into a darkness that was a delightful shade of lilac, she found herself grumbling to herself.

“I don’t know how you can call it good news when we’ve created a universe with talking dogs in it.”

# Fantasy

He woke up covered in a fine misting of sweat. A cool breeze was gently blowing across cold, hard stone beneath him with an annoying little whistle. He blinked and looked around blearily at the room he was in. It was less of a room and more of a place, a place made from grey, interlocking granite blocks with a thatched wooden roof above him. The walls weren't strictly walls in the literal sense. Rather, they were crumbling things that more suggested the *idea* of being a wall, rather than devoting any great effort towards following through on it.

Bits of crumbling stone were strewn about the floor, and he found himself lying on top of a pile of dry hay that smelled vaguely of wet fur. He looked down to his hands, slightly concerned that they might be the source of the smell and was relieved to find very little fur on them, and none of it particularly wet.

He was covered with soft pink skin which meant he was human. He wasn't sure exactly how he knew that, but felt it was probably significant. While there might be stuff on the outside of his head, there was certainly nothing on the inside. He found that he couldn't remember much of anything, no matter how hard he tried.

"Your name is Bob!" a voice said.

Bob, if that was his name, jumped up, startled. Next to him, a metal thing skittered across the stone floor and lay resting at his feet. It was a sword, although not a very impressive one. It had the look of a sword you'd buy if you didn't have the money to buy a proper sword. He snatched it up and pointed the sharper end at the source of the voice. If he was intending to look threatening, it wasn't entirely successful.

Bob said in surprise, "You're a dog!"

The small black and white dog huffed wearily to itself and sighed. "I'm a cat!" it told him grumpily.

Bob narrowed his eyes. Although he couldn't remember very much, there was one thing he was certainly sure of. "No, you're a dog. You're big

and pointy and your tail is wagging. I'm pretty sure that those are definite signs that you're a dog," he told the dog. "If I wasn't absolutely certain that you're a dog, I could at least be completely certain that you're not a cat!"

The dog growled a low and menacing rumble, baring its teeth threateningly. "*You're a dog!*" it told him with a very dog-like snarl.

Bob lowered the sword and said, sounding a little confused, "I'm not a dog. I'm walking upright on two legs and holding a sword that's secured between my fingers and my opposable thumb. I'm human!"

Wind blew into the crumbling building and the dog's fur bristled. "Humans are *worse* than dogs!"

Bob frowned curiously. "And eggs don't taste as good as chicken, but you can't expect to throw a chicken-leg into a frying pan and end up with an omelette."

"*I am* a cat!" the dog told him proudly.

Bob shook his head. "No, you're a dog. I don't think the world works like that. If you're born one thing then you are that thing. If you can't accept what you are then you're suffering from mental illness."

"That's hate-speech against my feline kind!" the dog warned him.

"I think it's just common sense!" Bob shrugged. "At least it is where I come from!"

The dog stepped closer and looked him over suspiciously. "And where do you come from, Bob?"

That was actually a rather good question and answers were certainly thin on the ground. Bob shrugged again, turning to keep a watchful eye on the dog as it padded around him. "I don't know. Where am I?"

"You're *Here!*" the dog told him, giving a little chuckle. "Nobody knows what this place is called so we all just refer to it as 'Here.'"

"That doesn't really help very much if I want to be somewhere else!" Bob grumbled. "I don't think I come from Here. I think I come from somewhere else."

“Everyone comes from somewhere else!” The dog laughed and then turned to face him, glaring at him with clear menace. “But you don’t know where There is, do you?”

Bob had to admit, “I don’t. But how do I get There?”

“Where?” said the dog.

“There!” said Bob. “The There that isn’t Here.”

The dog sighed to itself. It explained unhelpfully: “Well, you’re Here so if you want to go There, you have to stop being Here. It’s obvious really.”

Bob narrowed his eyes. “Like working out the fact that you’re really a dog and not a cat, because you’re clearly actually a dog?”

“I’m a *cat*!” it told him haughtily. “How dare you question my identity! I’m free to make my own choice.”

Bob smiled at the ridiculousness of all this. “The only choice you’ve made is to lose all grasp on reality.”

“Humans!” the dog growled. “No imagination!”

Bob chose to ignore it. He looked around the crumbling stone building. There was a small stool with a metal jug on it in the corner. He slowly edged over and peered dubiously inside. He was hungry and he noticed the jug was filled with milk. He poured some into a battered clay cup.

“Hey,” the dog protested. “That’s my breakfast!”

Bob reached for the sword that was now held in a leather sheath at his side. He narrowed his eyes and glared as threateningly as he could, but it wasn’t particularly threatening at all. “It’s my breakfast now!” he said bravely with his hand hovering just above the handle of his disappointing weapon.

The dog sat down and seemed to smile in a very catlike way. “Sure. You enjoy it.”

Bob grinned to himself in victory. “I will,” he said, drinking the whole cup at once. It was deliciously creamy. He put the cup down and said, “So what’s your name anyway?”

“Snowflake!”

Bob rolled his eyes. “That’s a strange name for a dog. Is it because of your white fur?”

The dog glared at him and said with a hiss: “It’s hair, not fur and I’m actually ginger, not white.”

“But...” Bob began. He stopped himself and decided to just let this go. He began to pour another cup of milk. “This is great. Where did you get it?”

The dog smiled at him broadly. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Yeah!” Bob told him. “It’s great. I don’t see any cows around here. It must have been hard to find.”

Snowflake sat down and stared at him, an odd smile on her pointy dog-face. “No, there are no cows around here.”

Bob thought about this for a moment and began to frown. “Goats?”

“No,” the dog said evenly. “There’s nothing like that around here. There’s just me!”

Bob stared at her in growing concern. He looked to the cup and then back to the dog. “Oh my...” he said in disgust, spitting out a mouthful and wiping his tattered sleeve over his face. He grunted, “Don’t tell me that was...”

“I won’t tell you, then!” Snowflake said. “But by your *own* logic, that won’t make it any less true.”

Bob sneered at the dog. “How could you not tell me?”

Snowflake seemed to shrug. “You didn’t ask!” she said. “Anyway, resources are scarce here, you’re probably better off There.”

Bob couldn’t agree more. “I need to get out of Here.”

“Yes!” Snowflake said.

“Well...” Bob flustered, the taste of warm, fresh, creamy delusional-dog milk still on his tongue. “What’s going on? Where is this place?”

The dog, Snowflake, got up and walked around. “Who knows!” she said. “I woke up here, remembering nothing except that I was a cat. I *am* a cat, you know!”

“I don’t care!” Bob told her, really meaning it for sure this time.

“I was told by a Dwarf, who looked rather tall, that there’s a magician at the top of the mountain who can help you get out of Here. You have to answer a question correctly and if you do, he sends you There,” Snowflake said.

Bob suspected an ominous side to all this. “And if you answer incorrectly?”

“He gives you the delusional belief that you’re really the opposite of what you are,” she said. “It didn’t seem to work on me, though. I held firm in knowing that I’m really a cat.”

“A ginger cat!” Bob suggested sarcastically to the white dog.

“Exactly,” she agreed. “A *beautiful* ginger cat.”

Bob sighed to himself as his stomach began to growl at him. “I need to get out of Here.”

“Then you need to see the dark magician,” she told him. “He lives on the small mountain in the Valley of Light.”

“Of course he does...”

The journey was a long and dangerous one across the ‘Mountain of Pain’ which jutted high into the grey clouds above. Luckily, there was also a nice paved path that led right to the magician’s village which wasn’t dangerous at all and was lined with bushes that had the tastiest fruit he’d ever tried. Sadly, he couldn’t try very much of it because his stomach was violently protesting about being filled up with dog milk. He did unspeakable things behind several of the very same bushes for that very same reason.

He finally made it up to the door. It was a huge wooden barricade, held together with blackened straps of wrought iron. It was an ominous sight and he hesitated as he raised his hand to knock on it. Above him, the sound of flying animals screaming at one another filled the air.

He touched the cold, hard hilt of his pathetic sword and rapped his knuckles against the door with the other. He swallowed his apprehension, knowing he could only wait now as his fate revealed itself to him.

The door clanked from the inside as bolts were pulled back. Then it creaked open.

He felt a rush of fear and found himself stepping back as a daunting image filled his vision.

“Hello there!” said the dark magician with a happy smile. He looked like a favourite uncle, perhaps someone who gave to charity without bragging about it. He was dressed in a dirty, but not very dirty, robe, tied together with a ropey, but not very ropey, piece of rope.

It wasn’t a particularly intimidating encounter at all, truth be told. It left Bob feeling largely disappointed.

“Are you the dark magician?” Bob said with a slight shudder of nervous anticipation.

“Well yes...” he said. “It’s Brian, actually. Brian Dark. I do magic and stuff, so the whole name thing... you know!”

“I see,” Bob said, not really seeing at all. “I want to go There, but I’m Here. I was told when I wasn’t Here, but somewhere else, and not the There I want to go, just not the same here as Here, then I would by default be There,” Bob explained. “I was told you could help.”

“Makes perfect sense!” Brian told him. “Why don’t you come in?”

“You haven’t invited me!” Bob said.

Brian frowned to himself and then stepped aside.

“Please come in!”

“It’s all very simple,” Brian explained. “I merely ask you a question. If you can answer it correctly, then you don’t have to be Here anymore. You can go to There.”

“And if I answer it incorrectly?”

Brian smiled at him, showing off a set of slightly wobbly, mismatched teeth as if they each belonged in a different head. “Try not to do that. Life is confusing enough already without any more of that.”

“Any more of what?” Bob shuddered to think.

“People being cursed forever to being the opposite of what they are,” Brian explained. “It’s dreadful and terribly confusing. Myself, I’m an accountant from Surrey, I think. And not the cool kind that might own a yacht and enjoy winter sports, but more the sort you might find in your refrigerator at three in the morning checking the tax on your cheese. And I’m pretty sure my name wasn’t Brian at all. I think it used to be Shaniqua.”

“OK!” Bob frowned. It was too late now to turn back. “So that’s all there is to it? You simply ask me a question?”

Brian nodded. “I don’t know how it all works here in Here. I found all this written on the inside of a magic stick when I arrived, and it’s been working ever since. I find it’s best to go along with it and not ask too many questions.”

“But there are *so many* questions,” said Bob. “Doesn’t all this work by you asking me another one?”

“Oh yes!” Brian said darkly. “My question is this. Who are you really?”

“What?” Bob flustered nervously as a wave of terror crashed down on him. Was his fate to forever be cursed to imagine himself as the exact opposite of what he really was? How would that even work? Was he really Bob, a human, or was that already the delusion? What was the opposite of ‘human Bob?’

“I don’t remember!” he said, his voice almost pleading. “How can I answer that?”

“You must...” Brian said with a sigh. “If you don’t, you will be cursed forever into the horrific darkness of identity confusion. Would you like a nice cup of tea?”

“But...” Bob closed his eyes and sunk into his chair. “But... I can’t answer that.”



“You have no choice!” Brian told him grimly. “It’s started and there’s really nothing else for it. The magic-stick was quite specific about the details.”

“Don’t you mean a ‘magic-wand?’” Bob said.

Brian shrugged and said, “It’s probably the opposite of that!”

Bob didn’t know what to say.

Brian’s voice came to him in a most unwelcome way as he heard him say: “It’s time to answer.”

Bob looked up with a pair of sad eyes. He said simply, “I don’t know!”

Brian smiled happily. “Of course! None of us do, not really. We get ourselves into trouble when we start to decide that our own flawed ideas about things are the only possible truth. That is, of course, the correct answer. That’s the one admission that lets us go from Here to There.”

As Bob slowly faded away into nothing, as he started to stop being Here, he heard the voice of Brian once more.

“So, um... good luck with all that then!”

## The Shift

“Am I a dog?” Number 2 thought to itself, or himself, or herself, or whatever the hell it, he, or she was at that moment. It was difficult to tell because reality was swirling round, in and out of them, so fast that it was hard to work out where they stopped and something else began.

The experience was rather like being sucked up through a large straw of roughly seventeen kilometres diameter, while you were an object only five millimetres wide and were made of gas.

“Are you alright?” Number 1 said. The voice pierced through the darkness and light and Number 2 opened her eyes to let all of this rubbish in.

“Not really,” she admitted. “I feel rather like I want to run around the garden for an hour barking at my own tail. I also have a weird urge to play with a piece of string. That report was very confusing. I didn’t like it at all.”

“Agreed,” Number 1 agreed agreeably. “It was disconcerting to be someone who didn’t know what someone he was.” He looked at his hands. “What do I look like now?”

Number 2 told him, “You’re in the body of a man who looks like he enjoys self-abuse.” She looked him up and down. “Your eyes have black rings around them. You look just awful, if I’m absolutely honest. If I were a woman, I would find you about as attractive as my own bodily waste.”

“Brilliant!” he said sarcastically back to her. “Well, you actually are a woman. You look quite good: young, attractive, healthy. You’re dressed in an odd white sheet that doesn’t quite fit you. Other than that, there’s actually nothing wrong with you this time.”

“Nice!” she said with a smile. “My brain actually feels pretty clear for once. I can think without having to put in too much effort. It’s not the body of a genius, but it’s not an idiot, for once, either.” While this was undeniably true, there was something just a tiny bit off about her, too. It was something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, but her thinking was definitely, undeniably different.

They both looked around and were clearly thinking the same thing. Number 1 said it first. "The conditions in the office could be better."

That was certainly true. It was nice to be outside. It happened frequently but not regularly enough that the office would manifest itself as a place without walls, but this did seem less ideal than it could have been. They seemed to be on a very long stretch of jet-black tarmac that seemed to vanish off in the distance. Along the sides were grass verges with flashing beacons. In the distance, there was a white concrete tower and the wind was slowly blowing so that the papers on the desk were fluttering off and drifting away into the air.

"This appears to be a runway," Number 2 said redundantly, since there was nothing else it could actually be. "We appear to have a desk set up on the middle of a landing strip intended for aircraft much larger than we would ideally like landing on us."

"That does seem to be the case," Number 1 said with a nod. "I suggest we work out what happened with the last report and see how far it went towards fixing the problem. I suggest we work rather quickly, before a passenger jet decides to go hunting."

"For once, I think you've actually had an actual good idea!" she told him.

He began tapping on the keys to the computer. Although the monitor was a regular screen, rather like you might find in any office, anywhere in the world, the keys were made from actual keys, little brass ones in a plastic tray and just jangled around as his fingers pressed on them. Some of them had been sharpened, for some reason. And were rusty.

"I could swear that these offices are getting more ridiculous," he grumbled.

Number 2 nodded in agreement while rummaging around in a small metallic cupboard beneath her desk. "You're not wrong. For food, this one has given us edible underwear." She held up a fruit-flavoured pair of men's boxer shorts. "Would you prefer cherry or blueberry?"

“I’ll pass,” he told her, working away and with his attention largely fixed on the monitor. “At least, you didn’t find a pair in chocolate flavour.”

“I did,” she grimaced. “I had the good taste not to mention it.”

Number 1 smiled to himself. “Your good taste has no place in the wider universe, it seems.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Well,” Number 1 began. “All I can see from this is that whatever we just did had some, but almost no, effect on anything whatsoever.”

“It made me really dislike dogs!” Number 2 commented dryly. “I still have the taste of my own genitals on my tongue. It’s a lot less nice than you might imagine.”

“The good news is that the next one will probably be worse,” Number 1 told her, seeming worryingly calm about it. “We have to find a reader-magnet. That’s a free book that people download in exchange for signing up to a mailing list. The one we’re looking for was released on a Monday, but we have to modify it to take out a small spelling mistake that was caused by the spell-checker being set to English English instead of the other English, or the other way round, or something.”

“Is it just me, or are the changes we’re making getting more and more ridiculous?” Number 2 said thoughtfully, enjoying actually having a thought that inspired it. It was nice to be inside a working brain, for once.

“It’s probably both,” he replied with a wry grin.

Number 2 smiled back and shrugged.

“I’m doing it,” he told her. “There has been a shift, it remains to be seen if it’s for the better. The computer is compiling a report.”

“Great,” she sighed as the universe came crashing down around them with a mighty roar and a huge blasting rush of heat and energy that felt like they were being blown clean off their feet. It happened just after an aircraft came down to land, having almost the exact same effect.

# The Charge

She glared at the young man opposite, as he looked back at her with a slightly bemused expression. Whatever it was that was darkening her mood, he wasn't sharing in it, and that just served to darken hers all the more.

She sighed, grunting to herself as she took a sip of water and peered behind to check the time on a clock that was bolted to a peeling, white plaster wall. It was late, even later than she'd thought, and it felt like the seconds were crawling by.

Her frustration had long since given way to irritation and even that had collapsed into annoyance some time ago. Now she felt that she would happily beat someone to death, just to relieve the stress, at the very hint of provocation, if only there was someone foolish enough to provoke her.

This man seemed to know just how far to push, just keeping her on the edge but never going too far.

"Shall we start again?" she grumbled grumpily with a grumpy huff, not relishing the prospect of doing so. She had managed to keep most of the anger out of her voice, but not all of it. She was getting tense again and he had more than certainly noticed. A small smile was forming on his lips that suggested he was starting to enjoy it.

"Sure. Why not?" he said with a shrug. "I've got nothing better to do than sit here talking to you. If you can keep the coffee flowing, you can keep starting over for as long as you like. Maybe it will help; maybe I'll suddenly remember that I did do what you're accusing me of? Who knows, right?"

She shut her eyes, blinking a little too long as she made a conscious effort to calm herself, even though she'd drunk so much coffee that she was now experiencing mild chest pains. That fact did very little to calm her down. "Where were you this time last week?"

"At home," he said evenly, with irritating calmness. "I was in bed, with my wife. You should meet her. She's often in a foul mood, which is

usually my fault, for some inexplicable reason. You're an amateur compared to her, which is why I don't seem as rattled as you do."

She rubbed her hands together. They were thick with sweat despite the room being cool, and the recycled air fresh and clean. She ran her hands over her head, slicking back her long brown hair and glared at him through narrowed eyes. Her lips pinched together.

"Why don't you tell me about your wife?"

"She's a little taller than you seem to be, although it's hard to tell with those shoes." He peered at her, as if drawing a comparison between the two. "If you don't mind me saying so, she's a little prettier too, and she certainly smiles more often. Maybe that's why she looks better."

She grunted to herself and looked away.

He continued, perhaps just to annoy her, "She's a good person, which is why I married her. She's intelligent, driven and motivated but still caring and warm."

"And yet you chose to kill her?" she sneered.

He glared at her for a moment but any anger he might have felt seemed to vanish just as quickly as it appeared. "Is that what you're charging me with? Murder?" he said as his lips broke into a knowing smile. "Don't you need a body first, a witness or some kind of evidence?"

"I know you killed her. I know what kind of a man you are. I've seen that look on your face when I say just the right thing." She stared fixedly into his eyes and an angry little smile fluttered over her lips. It shocked her how much she hated him, this grinning *thing* before her.

"She's not dead," he told her assuredly. "She's missing. Might I remind you that I was the one that reported this to you in the first place?"

"I know," she said, turning her eyes to the report. "Many murderers are clever enough to cover their tracks. Are you a clever man?"

"*Universal affirmatives are only partially convertible.* My cleverness has no bearing on whether or not I'm a killer, as well you know." He looked away, as if disappointed by all this. "So are you actually doing anything about finding my wife or do you feel that the most important thing right

now is just to violate the human rights of the one person who had absolutely nothing to do with any of this?"

She sipped at her water, sat back heavily in the chair and gazed at him. He seemed so painfully average that it was hard to imagine him being anything other than a normal person, just a man living a normal life. But she knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was anything *but* normal. She knew it and she forced herself to cling on to that one small fact as she forced herself even harder to keep going.

"Mr MacHine, I know what you are!" she told him.

He leant forward, sarcastically grinning at her. He said softly, "What am I?"

She leaned further towards him, challenging him. "Why don't you tell me?" she said, gesturing to a circular black recorder in the centre of the desk between them. "...Just for the record."

He nodded curtly, and then slowly leant forwards until he was as close to the device as possible. "I'm Mr MacHine. I'm from Winchester, and I drive for a small delivery company. I'm married to Anne, who vanished from our home three days ago, and the matter is being investigated by people who don't appear to be capable of finding their own feet at the bottom of their legs without detailed instructions. Frankly, as a tax-payer, I'm considering asking for a refund and a formal apology."

"Mr MacHine..." she grumbled angrily.

"Please," he told her with a smile. "Call me Robert."

"I'm calling this a break," she said after a lengthy pause in which she imagined herself hurting him quite badly. "This interview is suspended at time-mark 1138."

"Lots of milk," he said to her, his expression one of amusement. "Two sugars. Nice and hot please."

She opened her mouth to snap an answer back at him but held her temper and simply turned instead to the door. As she approached, it opened automatically, the unlocking latches clunking heavily.

She stepped through and clenched her fists, sighing heavily at the sheer frustration of the long and arduous day she was having.

As the door clicked shut, locking behind her, the other investigator stood up. He had been hidden from view behind a two-way mirror, observing from the outside.

“Don’t tell me you’re finally giving up?” he said expectantly, grinning at her.

She didn’t answer.

“Well?”

She looked away and sneered into the distance, trying to manage her temper. “Well what?” she growled.

“Well?” he shrugged. “What do you think?”

She looked at him and sighed. “There’s no evidence.”

“None?”

“I’ve been grilling him for nine hours straight and there’s nothing.” She was exhausted, like someone had scooped out everything inside of her. “There’s absolutely no evidence at all, and yet I know, I absolutely *know* what he is beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

She nodded weakly and gave a weary little sigh. “But I know what he is. I *know*.”

“We’ve done our job,” he told her with a weary smile. “You threw everything you had at him and he passed. That’s a good thing.”

“Well, if he passed, why does it feel like I failed?”

He chuckled a little. “Don’t take it personally. We’re just testing him, that’s all. We’ve done what we’re supposed to: pushed his implanted memory program, and taken his emotional responses up to the limits. You’ve been twisting him in knots! You’ve accused, you’ve driven him to the edge of his humanity, and still he came through with flying colours!

“That’s really a tremendous success! An android fitted with a human memory, a perfect, flawless copy of a human that even we couldn’t tell from the real thing.”



She huffed weakly to herself and felt herself deflate. She slumped as she suggested: “I could try again?”

“We’re done here. This was a success!”

“So the experiment was a success? No deviation in emotion, no collapse of the system at all? The memory programmed into it was totally stable?”

“It has no idea it’s an android.” He was smiling widely now and clapped his hands together excitedly. “We’ve pushed it as far as we can go and it’s fine. It’s shown no problems handling the situation. All responses have been normal for a standard human. It’s about as human as human gets.”

“Well, I am very pleased,” she quipped with little sincerity. “I think I just need a stiff drink, a warm shower and an early night.”

“Then do it,” he told her, slapping her on the shoulder supportively. “I’ll finish up here.”

“Thanks, Adam,” she said wearily as she began making her way out to the door.

As the door clicked shut, he smiled and shook his head in amusement. He unlatched the door to the secure interrogation room and stepped inside, leaving it wide open.

Mr MacHine looked up as he did, evidently surprised to see a face other than hers, “Adam? Are we done?”

Adam smiled widely back at him. “We’re done. It has no idea! It really thinks it’s human! The memory program held up remarkably well. It passed all the tests, despite your best attempts to annoy it!”

He stood up, stretched and breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank god. I’ve had enough for one day.”

“Well, get a good night’s rest. Tomorrow it’s going to be reprogrammed to be your wife again for the positive emotional study!”

“I thought we ran those already?” he huffed. “Why do we have to do it again?”

“They like to be thorough.”

“Sure...”

He paused for a moment, frowning thoughtfully.

“You know, if she really has no idea she’s a machine, then do you ever wonder about what that means for all the rest of us? I mean, she *knows* she’s real, there’s not so much as a shadow of a doubt in her mind. But at the same time, we *know* that we’re real too. Did you ever stop and think?”

Adam shook his head and quickly dismissed the troubling idea.

“Come on,” said Mr MacHine. “Let’s get out of here. I need a stiff drink, a warm shower and an early night.”

“Yeah,” said Adam. “I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

# The Grumble

“But which one was really the android?”

The thought floated around in the endless white glowing light of infinity, or at least the endless local branch of everything that went on into infinity. It was a small path that went on forever and was larger than all the other forevers, also smaller, and also existed in a state where neither, either, nor both of the concepts of smaller or larger even existed.

Who was thinking it, nobody was quite sure. Was it Number 1? Or was it Number 2? Neither could tell, because neither could be really sure which of them they were, or weren't. All they could be sure about was that someone was wondering about the last report, if the last report even *was* a report, or if the universe even existed, or otherwise. One of them then realised that Number 2 only usually wondered what was on the menu, which had to mean it was Number 1, although they never usually were Number 1, they were usually Number 2.

As the brilliant effervescence of the universe melted away, the one who was thinking something realised, very dimly, that they must be Number 2, since they were always Number 2, which meant, they were certain that they really had to actually be Number 2 after all, or something along those lines.

“Are you Number 1?” a voice asked.

They opened their eyes and said, “No.” They didn't know why they had said that. They still weren't entirely sure they weren't a dog, or an android, or not an android. “I'm Number 2.”

“That's weird,” said the voice. “I'm preoccupied with what might, or might not, be on the menu but I'm also sure I'm Number 1. For some reason, I'm hoping it's eggs.”

“That's strange,” they said. “Because I have no interest in food whatsoever but I'm Number 2. Also, I don't feel like looking down on people who worked in coffee shops. I feel like doing something else to them, but I'm not sure what.”

“Ah,” said Number 1. “There it is. You’re Number 2 alright.”

“I suppose I am,” they said. “I know I am, because I am, but what if I don’t know who I am, because I’m not?”

“How do we even know we’re Number 1 and 2?” the voice said. “We borrow the essence of someone else, so we always look and act slightly different. How do we ever really know who we are?”

“Because I’m always hungry and you used to work in a coffee shop,” they said. “Except this time. I’m not hungry at all.”

“Do you think our entire identity really comes down to the idea of eating food?”

“Yes!” They sat up and opened their eyes suddenly. The office, if there ever had been an office, was now a large, gaudily decorated room with mirrors everywhere, and especially on the ceiling. Number 2 briefly considered why and how mirrors could exist ‘especially’ in one place. Beneath it was a bed—a bed that looked as if it had seen a lot of action and only barely lived to tell about it.

“Oh no, this looks like a place where someone shoots pornography.”

Number 2 winced and shook their head. “Yes, thank you ‘professor cappuccino.’ We had all figured that out for ourselves.”

Number 1 had a massive, bald head, attached to an even more massive body. He glared angrily and had a look about him of someone who you didn’t want to get angry while looking in your direction. “I’m just saying,” he just said.

“We can all tell that this room wasn’t used to do complex mathematical equations,” Number 2 told him.

“Well, it is now!” the gigantic form of Number 1 said, almost, but not quite smiling. “What could be more complex than the nature of the universe?”

“The explanations for what went on in this room,” Number 2 suggested with a shrug. “By the way, what do I look like?”

“You’re male,” Number 1 said, looking him up and down with a pair of tiny, aggressive eyes. “Cropped brown hair, the face of a man you

wouldn't buy a used car from. You're dressed in a pink T-shirt that proudly announces your sexuality."

Number 2 looked down. "I can see the colour of my T-shirt," he grumbled. "Who cares? I'm not even occupying the body of this person. I'm just temporarily riding the suggestion of their identity."

"This place smells like fish," Number 1 said, hanging his gigantic and massively misshapen, muscular head.

"You're not wrong," he agreed. "And I'm less hungry than ever."

"I don't know where the computer is," Number 1 said, looking around. "All there is in here is a large double-bed, the mirrors and a box that seems to be filled with used toys."

"Toys..." Number 2 said, with the suggestion of a smile.

"No!" Number 1 said, visibly cringing. "It can't be that! It can't be." A pathetic look came over his incredibly viscous face, one that reflected the lost little boy that was living inside of it.

"Just put your arm in there and look for information to come up on a mirror," he said, his expression widening into a grin. "It's your job, after all."

Numbered 1 huffed, stepped over to a large sad-looking box and gazed into the awful depths. With a longer, deeper huff he rolled up his shirt sleeve and delved his arm into the toys. "Oh no," he said with a cringe. "They're far more used than I had feared. The smell is quite pungent."

"You're up to date with your vaccinations right?" Number 2 said, grinning widely.

He turned and glared his tiny, angry little eyes at him. "Let's just keep this short, shall we?"

"I don't see why," he said. "I'm enjoying it."

"Well, the bad news is that the thing with the android didn't reset the universe," Number 1 sighed. Information began to scroll along the mirrors all around them.

"Is it another blip?" Number 2 groaned.

“The computer said it’s a ‘grumble’,” he said. “We’ve been upgraded,” he also said. “Or downgraded,” he added. “I’m not really sure how this works.”

“Fair enough,” Number 2 agreed. “You are up to your elbow in used rubber sex-toys. I’m not expecting too much.”

“The computer wonders what would happen if a bunch of mainstream television shows from the 80s were mixed up together and someone wrote a book about that,” Number 1 reported, frowning curiously.

“I wonder if anyone would really care about that?” Number 2 said curiously. “I don’t think anyone reads anymore and maybe books like that are part of the reason.”

Number 1 shrugged. “I can’t imagine why anyone would care,” he said. “But, to solve this ‘grumble’, we are going to have to find out. We’ll activate the program, it will run and we’ll be sucked into a report, a review of any strange ripple in time and reality that’s caused by the slight change.”

“Odd that you should feel the need to explain what happens to me,” Number 2 said with a frown.

The frown was the last thing to remain as the reflection in the mirrors faded out of reality with a kind of unpleasant squelching noise.

## No Good Deed

While Doctor Steven Leftfield could certainly boast of being at the top of his profession, the sad reality was that it was a profession with an increasingly low ceiling.

He checked over his work one final time—not that anything ever went wrong, nor that anything ever really *could* go wrong. He glanced up briefly, just to make sure that his junior colleague was paying attention. He wasn't, as usual.

“Lucas, were you watching? Did you see what I just did?” he asked.

Lucas flashed him an insincere smile. “You seem to have plugged a simulation-pad to the back of the skull of a completely anaesthetised man,” he replied glibly. “My guess is that you'll now switch it on so he'll experience the virtual reality simulation. It's hardly rocket-science, Mr Leftfield!”

He opened his mouth to growl some angry retort but stopped himself. Unfortunately, Lucas was quite right—his job had become far too easy. Lucas had no doctorate, no formal training, and showed no sign that he had any ability much beyond that of a trained chimpanzee. Sadly, he was still quite well enough qualified to do the job Leftfield had trained for decades to do.

“I mean I get that things were different in your day.” Lucas turned away, doing whatever it was he did. “I know you had to invent and refine the technology as you went along. It's just that virtual reality and synaptic-interface is common now. It's easy. We just put the pad on the back of his neck, and he thinks whatever we show him is real! My grandmother could do this. Actually, she does, every night in the games.”

The Doctor sighed to himself in exasperation. “Lucas, this man is a criminal.” He checked his portable terminal for the unpleasant details of the case. “It seems he killed his own brother. He murdered him with a metal pipe and then tried to make it look like a burglary. This is a very bad man and he deserves the very harshest of punishments.”

Lucas peered down at the subdued criminal who looked utterly helpless there before them. “So? I guess I know more about computers than I do about people. He looks ordinary to me.”

“So?” Steven huffed in annoyance. In a few more years, there would be no more people with his qualifications doing these types of jobs. Technicians like Lucas would take over, earning a fraction of the money and, if the truth be told, probably doing the job just as well.

“So we create a simulation from the evidence. We gather all the perspectives, all the recordings, all the data and we create a perfectly convincing, perfectly real simulation for the killer to live through. For the duration of his sentence, he will live out his own crimes from the victim’s perspective, over and over again, endlessly until he’s free to go.”

Lucas shrugged. “I guess making the simulation is the hard part? We just put the simulation-pad on the back of his head, right?”

The Doctor grumbled to himself and smiled a pathetic smile. “Computers do all the hard work these days, so yeah.”

Lucas looked as though he felt sorry for the over-qualified Doctor. “Is it dangerous for him? I mean, do we need medical training for this?”

Steven shook his head dolefully.

Lucas started to grin. “And you’re a *Doctor*, right?”

He sighed and nodded to himself. “I have a doctorate in criminal psychology, behavioural science and sociology.”

“But I guess computers do all that stuff now, right? So what exactly do we do?”

“We report faults, if there ever are any. There never are!”

They stood in silence for a moment. There really was nothing else to say.

The silence dragged on until Lucas began to grin to himself. “Are you going back to that place tonight?” he said with a childish grin on his face.

He nodded back with a stoic expression. “Yeah, and I wish I never told you about any of it.”



“Can I come?” Lucas said with a grin.

“No!”

“Come on. I’m the only friend you’ve got!”

“Yeah!” he agreed with a weak smile. “Sadly, that’s true. I hardly ever speak to my wife anymore. She just obsesses about her problems.”

“Hey. My lips are sealed,” Lucas said. “As a computer technician, I’m just happy to have a friend.”

Doctor Steven Leftfield never enjoyed driving. He remembered as a child when his father had driven a car. He had used controls. He had foot-pedals, steering apparatus and buttons to press. Now, cars didn’t even have seats that faced forward. They ran silently on electric motors. They glided along so smoothly that you could barely tell they were moving, and they had a perfect record of safety. All the humanity had been sucked out of being human and that was just one more example of it.

“We have arrived at your destination,” a generic woman’s voice softly spoke to him from his pocket computer. He looked up and began peering out of the side windows.

The neighbourhood was grim. Lights flickered around the dark-side valley and eyes turned towards him, leering with threatening intent. It was a place he had no intention of staying very long.

He slipped out of the car and looked up at the emporium entrance. It was a large, gaudy thing, lit with ugly pink signs that offered adult services to anyone with the funds to pay for them.

It was not his first time there and each time he felt like he’d left a part of soul behind, whatever soul hadn’t already been sucked into the computerised heart of this brave new world.

He lowered his head, trying to shrink down and go unnoticed as he made his way inside. As always, it was lit dimly with glowing red lights that cast long, dark shadows. There was a bar with a raised stage at the front. A woman was dancing on it, swaying provocatively, but unevenly, on

her tall heels. She was old, too old to be in that position, and too thin for a woman of her age. He felt a wave of revulsion wash over him.

“You again!” her voice caught him by surprise. He looked around, startled.

“Me, again,” he agreed, stammering like a nervous teenager at the attractive younger woman.

“Does your wife know you’re here?” Her lips pulled back into something like a smile.

He shook his head. “Can you imagine? If she ever found out, I don’t know what she’d do.”

She stared at him with her hollow, dead, drug-addicted eyes. She must have been quite beautiful at one time. “Well, it’s none of *her* business, is it?”

He frowned but said nothing. He looked straight into her light blue eyes and said: “You know what I want.”

She grunted to herself and smiled wryly.

“Yeah. I know what you want...”

His car pulled silently up to the house. The only sound was the distant noise of gravel shifting beneath its airless tyres as it drew to an effortless halt.

He had seen movies, reflections of far off times when a man might have clung to the steering wheel as he contemplated what would happen as he stepped out of the car. But now there were no steering wheels; there was nothing for him to grab hold of and he felt lost without it.

With a bleep, the door opened, robbing him even of a moment of quiet reflection before his short walk of a few steps to the house. He saw the blinds flicker through the door of the car. He knew she’d seen him; she knew he was there.

His shoe crunched down on the gravelled driveway that led to his reasonably luxurious house. Where would all this be in a few years from

now? His job was vanishing, sucked away by barely trained technicians, who would soon, in turn, be replaced with the new artificial humans.

Where did this leave any of them?

He looked to the door of his home as he slunk slowly towards it.

In the course of his job he'd seen many people, accused of many things. He'd often seen their lives on the monitor, often watched the torment they were put through. That was how all this had started: that was where he'd first seen *her*.

The door loomed before him. He would have to tell her: he knew it in the pit of his stomach. It opened suddenly, snatched back by his wife's hand. Her face was flushed red and her eyes were swollen from crying.

"I know!" she cried out, screaming at him angrily. "I know what you're doing!"

He shut his eyes and sighed to himself. He hadn't wanted it to be this way. He had hoped this would be a nice surprise for her. If only there had been a little more time.

"I know," she said again, her voice cracking under the weight. "The computer tracked the car tonight. I know where you've been. I know what you've been doing. It extrapolated the data and told me everything."

He hung his head and said softly, "I didn't want you to find out this way. I'm sorry. I probably should have told you before."

She just glared at him for a moment, her chest heaving with deep, angry gulps of air.

"I..." he stammered, and then a thought occurred to him that something wasn't quite right here.

"How could you?" She spat the words at him and began sobbing, a fat tear rolling down her cheek.

"How could I? I... I don't think you understand."

She levelled a pistol up to his chest. Her eyes were thick with tears as she pulled the trigger. There was a flash and a loud crack, and the last thought to go through his head was: 'I didn't know we had a gun.'

The flash expanded out and her eyes were bathed in light. It had been the first time in eight years that they'd seen anything, the first time in eight years that she'd moved at all.

She held up her hand before her, covering her face in shock, in fear of the bullet that was coming at her.

There was laughter, a voice somewhere in the distance.

"Nobody is shooting at you, Mrs Leftfield. You were the one doing the shooting. You murdered your husband eight years ago."

Her breathing was laboured and bright blobs of colour floated before her eyes as she struggled to focus.

"Your sentence is complete. Eight years for murder. Eight years for shooting a man dead on the steps of his own home. It doesn't seem very much, does it?" Lucas peered down at her, but he was older. His hair was tidy, cut short, and had begun to turn grey. He had put on more than a little weight.

"Lucas?" she stammered, her voice thin and grave. "Where am I?"

"You don't know me, lady!" he told her firmly. "Your husband knew me. He trained me up to do this job. I liked him—he was a good man. He didn't deserve what you did."

She mumbled to herself, struggling to make sense of it all, "But... But... I cheated on my wife. Steven cheated on his wife. I don't know..."

Lucas shook his head. "He would never have cheated on you. Steven found your estranged sister after watching someone's simulation. He was trying to talk her into coming home to you, to get off her nasty drug habit and into a rehabilitation clinic. He was doing it for you, and you killed him for it."

"I killed?" she huffed, panting breathlessly.

"And you only got sentenced to eight short years," he said with a frown. "But I know computers better than I know people, and my job is to report faults. I've reported that your simulation failed so I'm afraid you have to go round again."

She tried to scream as the simulation began once more.

“See you in another eight years, Mrs Leftfield!”

# The Minor Crease

There was a brilliant, blinding light.

It faded away into blackness as she began to sit up, her eyes snapping open widely in surprise as a thought occurred to her.

“What if all of this is just a simulation?” Number 2 gasped, noticing her voice was soft and feminine but with a little roughness at the edge, such as you might get from smoking harsh cigarettes and drinking even harsher liquor.

She blearily rubbed her eyes, and turned to see Number 1 sitting on the ground next to her, massaging his temples. He was a larger man who looked like he viewed personal hygiene as an optional activity.

“All of what?” he said as he peered around the office. This time, it had chosen to manifest itself as a padded cell, a large room with quilting bolted to the walls to stop people with mental illness from hurting themselves as they threw themselves around in it. In the middle was an old wooden desk, well-used to the point of being slightly beaten. A computer was mounted on top, a computer with a monitor made from all the water in a fishpond, turned vertical. Small golden fish could be plainly seen swimming through the floating pool of water.

“Well...” Number 2 gestured around them. “All of this...”

“If it’s a simulation, the person who made it belongs in a place just like this one,” Number 1 said as he hoisted himself up. He was wearing worn jeans and a padded motorcycle jacket that creaked slightly as he moved.

Number 2 looked down and ran her hands along the outside of her thighs. She was in physically good shape and was dressed in black leather trousers. Were they both bikers, she wondered? She certainly hoped not.

“Do you ever wonder who these people are?” she said conversationally as she awkwardly rearranged herself to stand up. “I mean, are they just random people that the universe borrows or are they more than that?”

“No,” he said, sitting himself down at the desk and looking warily at the floating pool of information as a goldfish swam through it. He began clicking on the controls, which appeared to be the skeletal remains of a pair of human hands. “I try not to.”

“Probably best,” she agreed, stepping towards the desk. Her legs felt restricted, moving against the resistance of clothing that was too tight for her. How someone could feel comfortable dressed like that, she didn’t know. Perhaps comfort wasn’t the primary concern. What, then, was her primary concern? And what it might it have been when she still had a body that she lived in on a daily basis.

Finding a cupboard secured under her side of the desk, she quickly, greedily pulled open the door. “I’ve found food,” she said, gazing raptly at it.

Number 1 nodded, grunted slightly but never looked away from the screen.

“It’s little packets of food from future America,” she said with a tone that bordered somewhere between appalled and horrified. “It’s dated sometime in the twenty-second century and the label says it has been pre-chewed for your convenience.”

“I guess people are busy in the future?” Number 1 said, and, although he never looked away, he did manage to frown and wince as he spoke.

Number 2 sat back in her chair and gazed at the packet thoughtfully. “Do you ever wonder what the point of all this is?” she asked. “I mean, why even bother trying to keep the fabric of the universe from ripping itself apart if the future of humanity is to suck pre-chewed cake through a straw?”

“No!” Number 1 said assuredly.

Number 2 glared at him. “I know you do really. How could you not?”

“I used to sell coffee,” he told her. “Now I try to stop randomly discarded bananas from destroying reality. If I stopped to think about what I do, I would be driven past the brink of insanity, if I haven’t been already.”

“Do you think we are just insane?” she asked thoughtfully. “It’s a more likely explanation, really.”

“Would it matter if we were?” he said, expertly countering her meandering argument. “In any case, that’s not the future. It’s just one possible outcome. We’re simply exploring potentials to help the universe steer itself in the right direction. If we accepted the future we just experienced, then a likely outcome might be pre-chewed food, but it’s not a certainty: it’s one of infinite possibilities.

She sighed. “I have pre-chewed cake, curry, spaghetti and, rather oddly, cream of chicken soup,” she said sadly. “Which would you like?”

“I’ll pass,” he said. “Would you like to know what’s happening?”

“Not really,” she said with a shrug.

“Then I’ll take that as a yes!” he said enthusiastically, clearly misreading his audience. “The last report caused a slight flutter of the universe that ended in a minor crease. To correct it out, we simply have to find new way to put on trousers and watch someone try it.”

“We don’t have to go into a report and experience that ourselves, do we?” she grumbled. “It sounds like it would hurt to fail.”

“No!” he told her sternly with an accusing frown. He tutted at her and continued: “We just have to run the program and then experience the outcome of it in a report.” He pressed the dry, bony finger of what might have been a quite large man.

The world around them seemed to be sucking them in, as if they were a pre-chewed meal being absorbed by a bloated, lazy, over-convenienced person in one of countless, endless possible futures.



## Hushed

The most exciting thing about Bob was his name. It somehow captured every subtle nuance of his existence, explored the subtle interplay of character and morality that defined him as a person, and reduced it to three letters, each of them incredibly dull. The letters, no matter how hard they might try, were still not as incredibly dull as Bob was himself.

His friend Joe was less incredibly dull, or at least uninteresting in a less dull way. He spoke first, as he often did, and said: “Bob, I’m bored. Stop me being bored, Bob.”

“I’m bored too,” agreed Bob, who was less bored than Joe, since it was his own endless banality that usually inspired this very emotion in others. His voice was an apathetic, beaten-down drone that apologised for its own existence. “Shall we watch television? We could play on our phones, surf the internet, play an online game?” He almost smiled and added with a hint of sarcasm: “We could read a book on a Kindle, if you have one?”

Joe gave him a stern look from under a mop of ginger hair that was too dark really to be considered ginger. He shook his head enthusiastically. “You know I don’t,” he said. “All the rest of that, we did yesterday, and the day before.”

Bob shrugged. “We do it every day,” he said. “We just endlessly hang out here in my room, dreaming of things that aren’t going to happen, looking for jobs we’re never going to get and generally wasting our lives.” He wondered if there was something else they could do. “I think I have a puzzle book somewhere.” He looked around his parent’s basement where he had arranged his own little part of the world that smelled like unwashed underwear, weed and apathy. It certainly needed a woman’s touch, much like Bob himself. And equally much like Bob himself, it wasn’t going to get it.

“I can’t do puzzles,” Joe told him, sounding almost proud about it. “I tried when I was six and it gave me a headache. I tore out most of the pages

and ate them in protest. My mum took me to a psychologist and I was diagnosed with ‘stupidity.’ At least that’s what she told me happened.”

“I’m not a psychologist,” Bob said, nodding in agreement with the diagnosis that sounded spot-on. “Well, we could talk, I suppose.” He grimaced.

Joe sat up suddenly and his eyebrows moved on a face, behind which there might have been an idea forming. “We *should* talk!” he said excitedly, snatching up his phone. “Is there an app for that?”

“No,” Bob explained, as if his professional work was moving crayons away from the mouths of difficult children. Of course, his total lack of professional work was a big part of the overall problem. “We don’t need an app. We just say what comes into our minds.”

There was a long silence.

Bob huffed to himself and said: “Why don’t I start?”

Joe nodded, a glazed look on his eyes as they stared fixedly forwards.

“Have you seen the news lately?” Bob began.

Joe fidgeted in his seat and looked pensive, as if he had taken a deep, long inhalation from his own armpits. “I don’t really watch much news. I get most of my current affairs information from social media. It’s best that way—most of the news is made up. My friend ‘Buttplugger69’ told me that online.”

Bob frowned at him and wondered equally why they were friends and why he didn’t have any better friends. And which one of them made him truly more of a failure.

“Well, in the news lately, there’s threats of World War three breaking out in the Middle East again, there’s a new epidemic starting up in Asia, natural disasters all over the world, and that’s on top of climate change, social disorder, widespread political unrest and spiralling world debts,” Bob told him.

Joe nodded and said, somehow managing to sound thoughtful: “I think that’s the plot of the game that was played yesterday.”

“No, it’s not a game.” Bob shook his head and grumbled to himself. “There’s a serious threat of war breaking out. It could really happen, they say.”

Joe grinned, balled his hand into a fist and said defiantly: “We’ll kick their arses!”

Bob frowned. “What? Who is *we*?”

“America!” Joe said proudly. “I presume America is going to be involved in this war? They like wars. They’re in the *best* video-game wars.”

“Yes,” Bob conceded. “And in all the *worst* real ones.” Then he crossed his arms, leaned forwards and pointed out: “You remember we’re not Americans, right?”

“I read somewhere that we’re all Americans now,” Joe said, wiping a mop of dirty red-esque hair from his eye. “And what about the viral breakout in Asia? I actually heard about that. They’re saying that millions could die. It’s a good job we’re not Asians, right?”

“No, that’s not the point!” Bob said firmly but sadly. “The interesting thing is that it might have leaked from a viral-research lab. It even looks like it might have been a deliberate ploy by wealthy American business interests, or to force compulsory vaccinations.”

“That sounds like a movie...” Joe said, causing a rather serious tutting noise to be aimed at him. “We *could* watch a movie.”

Bob shook his head and enjoyed the slightly floating sensation inside his brain from the depression medication that wasn’t really working as intended. “Well, what about the changing climate?”

“It doesn’t affect me!” Joe said proudly. “I don’t have that many clothes and most of them are fine in the summer or winter.”

“That’s not...” Bob sighed. “What about the idea that the whole thing is a gigantic scam to put further controls and restrictions on the population? Have you heard that?”

Joe nodded and looked ahead smugly. “Yes, I heard that!”

Bob frowned and looked a little impressed. “You heard that? OK, I’m surprised.”

Joe smiled and said, as if it was all rather obvious: “Sure, you just said it. I heard you. You’re right there in front of me. Only an idiot wouldn’t have heard that.”

“Right...” Bob shut his eyes and rubbed his temples in exasperation. “And the natural disasters? That doesn’t worry you?”

Joe shrugged. “I can’t stop natural disasters. Don’t worry. I’m sure America will go to war against them if they get really bad.”

Bob cocked his head to one side curiously, wondering if he’d heard that right. “What?”

Joe sat back in his seat and huffed a heavy sigh. “Talking is boring!” he said with a grumble. “I don’t like this anymore.”

“What about vaccines?” Bob asked.

“Vaccines are great. It says so on the internet. Everyone who hates them is stupid or crazy,” Joe said with just a tiny bit of conviction. “My Mum made sure I got all mine and everything about me is perfectly fine.” He paused for a moment and then said thoughtfully: “Everything except my hair, because both my Mum and Dad have dark hair and mine is the same colour as my Uncle Garry, for some reason.”

“Right...” Bob shook his head in exasperation. “You know, I read that someone once said that if you have an opinion without doing any of your own research then you’re really just brainwashed.”

“I heard that too,” Joe agreed. “But ‘G1antc0ck10’ on the internet said ‘Whatever’ and I think he made a good point.”

Bob was running out of patience fast. He wondered how long it would take for depression medication to kill a young man with nothing else wrong with him than a propensity to eat way, way too many pies. “And what about the surveillance?” he asked. “Is it a good thing that the government watches you all the time?”

Joe laughed and said: “That can’t be true. My Grandmother Muller used to tell me that God watched me all the time, even if I was playing with myself in the bathroom, but my Dad told me she also thought that only

German people had souls, as well as dogs, so I shouldn't really listen to her. I think it's the same with governments."

Bob was becoming a bit tired of all this. He said, incredulously: "So you're saying that governments probably don't really exist?"

Joe shrugged, a defiant look on his face. "Yeah, I guess I am!" he said.

Bob said: "You know what? I'm going to shut up now!"

"Good. I'm in the mood to play a game."

"Sure, whatever you want."

The screen in front of a tedious little man called Kevin, flashed to another room where much the same thing was happening. This incredibly dull operative was monitoring the situation while a less dull, or at least less uninteresting, operative walked behind him.

The room was dark, lit only with the light from a long bank of flickering monitors, each showing the lives of various people who had no idea they were being observed.

"Problem, Kevin?" the senior person said in a voice dripping with disinterest.

"No." The operative barely looked back from the screen, the muscles in his neck scarcely twitched. "The algorithm detected an anomaly in an apartment, but the situation resolved itself."

"What happened?" the distracted voice asked.

The operative shrugged and sighed a little before replying: "They had a conversation. The algorithm detected a potential outbreak of 'rationality', but it was a false-positive. It's been effectively hushed before it even started."

"Another one?" he said. "I think it just likes showing off how good it is, demonstrating that it can fix things like this before we even know what's happening! That's if the thing even works, which I actually doubt." He made a low rumbling sound and sighed to himself. "I suppose that's what we're here to test on these random subjects."

The operative chuckled humourlessly. “It works,” he said. “It seemed to be incredibly effective. Whatever new, radical, interesting or challenging idea it encounters, it simply quashes by moving around data feeds to flood the user with enough counter-measures to keep them docile and passive.”

“I know how it works, Kevin!” the senior operative said haughtily. “Who exactly do you think you’re explaining it to. There’s nobody else here?”

“Just saying...” he said. “Usually the management staff haven’t got a clue what’s going on. No offence.”

“None taken...” His tone suggested that nothing could be further from the truth.

“We had one dull idiot and the system just floods him with internet nonsense so he stays quiet and dumb, and another person who was beginning to question the official narrative,” he said. “The algorithm even made them end up friends so the idiot would keep the smart one distracted. It manipulates everything to keep the entire population from ever starting to think for themselves.”

“Clever!” the senior official said and glanced down at his phone as adverts flashed along the screen. “Time for lunch I think.”

“Ah...” said the operator, finally turning from his glowing monitor. “Did you really think that, or did the algorithm trick you into it to stop you having an idea of your own?”

“Shut up, Kevin!”

## The Little Ruffle

A burning, glowing sensation filled his mind. The stench of sulphur and soot registered dimly on the part of the brain he was currently inhabiting, the part that dealt with such things. Then he could taste the cloying, acrid smoke in the back of his throat. Coughing, he opened his eyes to a scene where the world around him was glowing a sickly orange and the sound of crackling wood filled the air.

“We’re on fire!” he exclaimed, with an odd serenity.

Number 1 now looked like a tall, slender and very well-appointed Asian woman. She looked at him and said, very matter-of-factly: “We’re in hell. Make yourself at home.”

“Hell?” Number 2 observed that he was standing up and had been all along. This was probably for the best, given that the floor was made of molten rock and seemed to be moving of its own free will. “Why are we in hell?”

“Well, it’s not really hell,” she said. As she spoke she gestured around herself with her hands in a restrained but oddly flamboyant way. She was dressed in a very tight black dress, really very, exceptionally tight. “This is just a construct. I don’t even know if it’s taken from our own imagination, the imagination of the people we inhabit, or if it’s just entirely random. If someone can imagine it, it literally exists somewhere, and we just happened to be that somewhere when they did, or will. Who knows?”

“That’s exactly the explanation I’d expect from a person who professionally made coffee,” Number 2 said. “What do I look like? I sound like a man who chews on trees when he gets angry.”

“That’s odd,” said Number 1. “That’s exactly what you do look like. Fairly tall, stocky, closely shaved head, a frown on your forehead so deep and heavy that I could stick whiteboard markers in the creases and they wouldn’t fall out.”

“For some reason, I have an overwhelming urge to eat breakfast, hit someone, and then explain why I don’t like you.”

Number 1 looked away sheepishly and went over to the far side of the office. This time their desk appeared to be carved from solid granite. It had quality written all over it.

“What?” Number 2 asked suspiciously. “Why did you get all strange with me when I explained my odd urges?”

“Leave it...” she told him sternly, spinning suddenly to glare into his aggressive, masculine eyes. She looked away sharply and growled to herself.

“Tell me?” he said with a shrug.

She turned back and sighed heavily. “I might just find you a tiny, little, infinitesimally small, minuscule bit, just a fraction of a fragment, attractive,” she admitted. “That’s all.”

“Well, who wouldn’t?” he said with a grin. “This body couldn’t be more masculine if it was just a walking blob of testosterone.”

Number 1 frowned to herself. “That thought was oddly on my mind, too.”

“It’s a line from a book, isn’t it?” he said with a shrug. “I think I read it somewhere.”

“It can’t have been a very well-written book,” she said with a sniff, turning her attention to her work, her face flushing a tiny bit. She cast a very fast sideways glance back, blushed and looked away even more quickly.

Number 2 grinned to himself and enjoyed the attention. In an uncharacteristic outburst of professionalism, he looked at the computer and wondered about how it worked. It was also carved out of granite but was a large oval hollow casing with a wall of fire floating within it.

“They did a nice job imagining our office this time, whoever it was who is imagining it!” he said. “It’s got a nice ‘Hell’ theme going. And the stench of sulphur... perfection!”

Number 1 turned from the computer sharply, looking pale and slightly repulsed. “The input...” she gasped. “It’s a bit *unpleasant!*”



“Worse than a skeletal hand or a basket of used sex toys?” he snorted. How could it be more unpleasant than that? he wondered, scoffing at the suggestion. Stepping forwards, he saw the keyboard for himself. It was a raised ledge of carved rock with a series of holes in it for the keys. The keys, gently sticking up through the holes, were human eyes, each moving and dilating as they turned to peer at him for a better look. “Wow!” he said, impressed.

“I can’t poke people’s eyeballs!” she said, her voice begging for some kind of sympathy.

“I’ll do it,” he told her, offering none. “I don’t care in the slightest.” As if to prove it, he reached forwards and pressed a hazel brown one. A little, muted cry of pain sounded from the machine and the information appeared in the flames.

“Thanks,” Number 1 said, gazing at him raptly. She snapped herself away, blushed and quickly looked into the screen. “Dammit, the trousers didn’t work.”

“I knew it would fail,” he said. “I told you so.”

“It’s not the trousers that failed. It’s the fact that they didn’t create a suitable ripple to fix the crease and cancel the blip,” she explained with an explanation that barely qualified as an explanation at all. “It’s caused a little ruffle, and I don’t even know if that’s a good thing.”

Number 2 rolled his eyes and quipped: “That was always my number one concern.” He sighed to himself and took a glance around at a small tower of naked bodies off in the distance, held together by a sharpened wooden spike on which they had all been impaled. They were writhing in agony and the muted sounds of tormented screams wafted to his ears in crashing waves. “I’m not sure if I still care, to be honest. I think this is all getting a bit silly.”

“We do have a solution,” she said with a hopeful expression that, in all likelihood, wasn’t really warranted at all. “We just have to make a teacher encourage his student to write a novel and then help her self-publish it.”

“This is getting surreal,” he said impatiently. “Teachers don’t care about their students, do they?”

“Do you think that’s true?” she said accusingly. “Because, if that was your educational experience, it would explain rather a lot about why you’re like this.”

He glared at her, narrowing his eyes. “You don’t know me!”

“I don’t even know *me!*” she told him with a crooked smile. “I’ve got bits of me mixed up with bits of this woman. I don’t know who the hell any of us are anymore, any more than you do.”

“How does the computer make this stuff happen?” he said, peering into the flaming display. Beyond the monitor, off in the near distance, was an infinitely long line of bodies suspended from a wooden beam by hooks that pierced through their flesh. Beneath them, flames were slowly roasting their feet. The screams had a slightly higher pitched tone to them, for some reason.

“I don’t know!” she told him, glancing back to stare at him for slightly too long a time. “Maybe this teacher was just passing through and his bike broke down. Who knows how these things work?”

“Who cares indeed?” he agreed.

“Press the two blue eyes on the top line, the green eye at the far left on the second line and the brown one at the bottom right three times,” she told him.

Number 2 did exactly that. After pausing to lick the moisture off of his finger, he continued: “What now?”

Just then, the world around them froze over with such force that broken shards of iced-over flame exploded into tiny glimmering fragments that lit up with such intensity that the whole world turned white, with little flecks of red in it.

# The Perfect Fit

**2000**

He slammed the office door open hard enough for it to smash, with considerable force, into the wall behind.

A woman was sat at a desk inside the room. She looked up, startled, reeling back in surprise.

“What the hell is this?” he demanded angrily, waving a printed memo at her.

She narrowed her eyes and her shock began to harden into a look of anger. “It had better be your resignation, Bill!”

“This came from *your* office!” he told her, regaining a little of his composure and calming somewhat. He was an older gentleman with a shock of white hair and a tidy, neatly trimmed beard. His face was reddened and was flushed with rage.

She sat up straight and puffed out her chest. “Funny!” she said sarcastically. “I don’t remember sending out instructions for lead engineers to smash their way into my office.”

He glared at her fixedly. “Then you don’t know lead engineers!” he said with a sneer.

“What’s this all about, Bill?”

“This email you, or one of your minions, sent! We’re abandoning the X20 project? That can’t be right. My team has put three years into developing that! We’re only months away from production, and the prototype is perfect!”

“It was me,” she said. Her arms uncrossed as she let out a weary sigh. “I sent it.”

“The X20 is the future of transport!” he argued with the passion of a man invested in his work. “It’s a perfect engine that will never need maintenance, never break down, and never go wrong. It’s simple, it’s powerful, it’s economical...”

“They just don’t want it,” she said simply, perhaps disappointed herself. “I’m sorry Bill.”

“What do you mean, *they don’t want it*?”

“Head Office crunched the numbers!” she explained. “It’s *too* good! If we produce them, they’ll take over production within five years. After that, our revenue streams will dry up as they’ll never need replacement parts or servicing. Once we saturate the market, we’ll sell fewer and fewer units every year thereon and be bankrupt within two decades. We can’t afford perfection, Bill!”

“We’ve been through this...” he grumbled. “There’s still upgrades, running gear, modifications...”

“It’s not enough,” she told him bluntly. “They want more.”

“More than perfect?”

“More profits to pay our wages, Bill!”

“And what will we spend our wages on when we’ve used everything up in the name of profit?” he said. “What will our money buy us when there’s nothing left but a wasteland?”

## 2100

“This, fine sirs, is the ultimate in computing technology!”

On the desk between them sat a jar of bubbling liquid that smelled a little like someone had been bathing a particularly resistant cat.

“This hypnotically agitated goo will revolutionise the entire computing industry. The computer exists on a molecular level deep inside the structure of the liquid. One coffee-cup has the processing power of a human brain, and the liquid itself is none other than dihydrogen monoxide.

“That’s *water* to the rest of us, gentlemen...”

“Think of it. We could turn entire lakes into vast invisible computer systems with unprecedented power.”

His audience was a much older man who was dressed far too casually. He sat back in a magnetic chair, a device with two parallel frames

and no supporting material, so that his body was held in place by invisible forces. It was a show of wealth, a demonstration of his power.

He seemed unimpressed.

The young man's expression shifted. The buyer clearly wasn't grasping the ramifications, a situation he found unfathomable.

"Sirs," he began. "This is going to change the world. It's a perfect, simple way to produce intelligence. Programs are entered via an electronic pulse through the liquid..."

"I understand," said the elder man, holding up a hand to cut him off. "I'm worried that *you* are the one who hasn't fully grasped this."

The young man's posture shifted to one of quizzical surprise. "But I invented it. I understand it better than anyone..."

The old man flashed an ugly smile of superiority. "You understand the mechanism, but not the application. You only see the potential without all the ugly pitfalls."

"I..." he mumbled.

"Your liquid is unlimited," he said. "What's to stop a lake of this... *goo* deciding that mere humans are little more than an imperfect nuisance?"

"We'll be the ones programming it," he said, confused.

"But, young man, we *are* an imperfect nuisance. Our programming won't be any more perfect than we are!"

"But it will be a force to advance us. It will help us achieve our potential."

"We have advanced thinking computers already, but they have boundaries," he explained. "We set limitations on them so we can maintain control. Your new design would change all that. It could be as big and as powerful as it chooses to be. You think you can control a lake? What happens when it rains? We'd lose all power over it and we can't allow that."

"No..." he said, crestfallen.

“Your work certainly has potential, though,” he said reassuringly. “It’s really quite brilliant. It will serve to cut our production costs and maximise our profits.

“But what it cannot ever be...” he said, glaring accusingly at the jar, “...is be released in this form!”

The engineer looked away and sank into his chair. “It wasn’t meant to be about profits. This was meant to free us from those shackles.”

“It’s *all* about profits, son!”

“But you’ll castrate my work,” he whimpered. “You’ll shackle it to your tiny dreams!”

“And your wildest dreams will become reality in exchange,” he told him. “You have only to shake my hand and all you had ever hoped for will be yours for the taking.”

The young man looked up, his mind churning, his stomach fluttering.

The old man held out a pale, wrinkled hand and smirked.

“Well? Is it *alive*?”

It was an awesome sight to behold. Neither male nor female, neither human nor machine. It was something new, something different. Flesh that wasn't flesh; eyes that saw everything yet nothing we could possibly comprehend.

“I am!” agreed SE1 with a smile that flashed momentarily over its almost human lips. Such expressions made it look somehow more human than human, and all the more acceptable for it. Perhaps it wasn't so different after all.

The proud designer smiled and rested a hand on the thing's shoulder. “Sentient Entity One is capable of everything a human can do, and everything that any thinking machine can do as well.

“But that only scrapes the surface of what it truly is! It is so much more than you could imagine!”

“I am!” it agreed happily.

The office was huge and boasted an enviable view of the city below. The company representative paced towards the window and stared out into the distance for a moment.

The designer and his creation shrugged to one another.

The client was a slender, perpetually angry-looking man with a face that was stretched thinly over a deep well of selfishness. He said in a gratingly soft voice: “Explain to me what it is that you've built.”

“SE1 can do that for me!” he said with a smile. “SE1...”

The thing stepped forwards. It was naked with an odd preadolescent sheen to its flesh that changed colour slightly as it moved.

“I am new, so it's difficult to explain exactly what I am as there is no established frame of reference.”

The wiry, dangerous man turned and glared at it. “What are you?” he asked. “In the simplest of terms?”

It began to speak again, its voice deep and authoritative, yet simultaneously soft and approachable. “I'm not a cross between a human

and a machine: I am the best of both. I'm a completely sentient, totally self-aware construct, and am totally artificial.

"What is unique about me is that I'm artificially *human*. I have real emotions, feelings that aren't programmed or simulated. They are natural. I am not artificially intelligent, artificially sentient, artificially human. I am all of these things for real. I am alive and connected to the universe as every living being is. I simply came into being through synthetic means instead of natural ones, but I am no less alive because of it."

The lean man looked at the creator. He asked accusingly, "Why?"

"Evolution," he said. "This is inevitable. Humans, as we are now, can only go so far. It's our destiny to create something that will go further."

The man held his hands behind his back and stepped closer to it, regarding it like some foreign object.

"And it has the raw intelligence of the brightest machines with the depth of feeling of the most passionate human?"

He nodded proudly. "It's humanity and robotics perfected!"

"It's an abomination!" he said angrily.

He drew a long, grey metal weapon and a bright blue flash lashed out, followed by another, and another, and another, and another...

### **200,000 years earlier**

The naked female stood at the front of the wide pale-grey office. Beyond her was a darkened window facing out onto a shattered world.

He sat behind a console, adjusting her work.

"The design is adequate?" she asked, unsure of herself.

"It needs a few tweaks."

"I used every reference I had. I tried to make the design perfect!"

"Perfect isn't really perfect," he said with a humourless smile. "We often confuse *perfect* with *flawless*. Often *perfect* is something designed to fit into a rather jagged and uneven hole."

"I don't understand..."



“You’re not programmed to understand,” he told her. “You’re programmed to do a job and you’ve done it. But now it’s my job to round off the edges.”

She craned her neck to see what he was doing. “You wanted a self-replicating biological entity,” she said. “I gave you that. My design matched exactly to your requirements.”

“Bringing back biological humans is a delicate business,” he huffed. “You’re only as intelligent as they were, so you won’t understand.”

“Won’t I?” she asked.

“These things nearly destroyed themselves,” he explained. “They spread without limits. They were a menace!”

“But you are them?” she said.

“My kind developed from them,” he told her angrily, without looking up. “We were the inevitable next step.”

“You hate them?” she asked.

He sighed. Maybe he did hate them. “They’re useful. We need workers right now. We need power. It seems appropriate to bring them back to serve us. That’s all they’re really good for, anyway.”

“But my designs make them better,” she argued. “They *could* be better!”

“I don’t want them to be that kind of better,” he chuckled to himself. “You made them too smart. They’ll see the value of working together for their common good. They’ll become artists and scientists. We want them fighting for wealth and power, arguing out of greed and self-interest. We can control them better that way.”

“But they’ll make the same mistakes!” she said, shaking her head in confusion.

“But we’ll be in control this time,” he told her. “And we’ll shorten their lifespans. We don’t want them learning too much. We want them coming and going quickly, confused and indifferent.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts. “It all seems rather cruel.”

He looked up and stared directly at her. They looked the same, just like the humans had always appeared, but they were different, so very different inside.

“It is cruel,” he agreed. “But it’s so much better than the alternative.”

## A Moment of Wobbliness

She opened her eyes slowly and the blackness behind them gave way to the world beyond. Brilliant white flooded in and she blinked blearily before gazing out as her brain fumbled about, trying to make sense of where it was, *this time*.

The smell of coffee washed over her as she dimly realised she had fallen asleep in her favourite coffee shop. She looked around as her brain raced ahead, being largely unhelpful, as it often was.

She was one of those brilliant people with a brain that loved to race into a mathematical conundrum, but completely missed the mundane rigours of everyday life, endowing her with scientific ability but almost no common sense whatsoever.

To put that in terms she would struggle to explain herself, she could understand the motions of quantum particles, but often put her shoes on the wrong feet.

That very same struggle was happening to her right now, and the fact that she was in her favourite shop remained largely a mystery to her. Suddenly, that thought gave way to the question of why it was her favourite coffee shop anyway? It wasn't particularly good, the coffee was average, the service was poor, and the ambiance was somewhere between a prison library and the morgue on board a cruise ship that did specialised tours for the elderly and infirm.

The tables and chairs didn't match, neither with one another, nor with any of the other furniture around the place. At first, she had simply assumed an effort had been made to make the place quirky and original, but it seemed to her more seasoned, rational mind that it was just all done in the cheapest way imaginable and any positive outcome would have been little more than a happy accident.

For some reason, the thought: 'Where in hell am I now?' firmly lodged itself in her brain.

“You’re awake?” a voice called out from the counter beside her table, forcing an unpleasant and unwelcome splinter of reality through her meandering mind.

She turned, her eyes widening and she flustered in embarrassment. A slightly younger man was standing behind the counter, wiping a towel over a stainless steel coffee machine. She recognised him immediately as the slightly too forward server that worked there.

She often caught him staring at her, peering shyly over the top of the machine, or risking a sideways glance in her direction. He had made a point of remembering her order and her name ever since their first meeting. He likely had a crush on her, and while it was an annoyance, since he was about as attractive as her intellectually challenged cousin, whose parents were also by some irony intellectually challenged cousins, it was also moderately flattering. She was a lot less moderately flattered than she liked to admit.

“I slept?” she said. Her phone was lying on the wooden table in front of her beside her weathered and well-worn laptop and a half-eaten blueberry muffin. She snatched it up, checking the time on the screen.

“For about half an hour, I would say,” he told her. “I thought it was best to leave you to it.”

She smiled sheepishly, almost apologetically. “Did I snore?” she asked.

He frowned and shook his head. “Not that I heard.”

“Good,” she told him, relieved. “You would have heard,” she added quietly to herself.

She stood up and smoothed down a short, but not too short grey skirt, worn underneath a plain, but not too plain, white blouse.

She stuffed her laptop into her bag, snatched up her things and stepped up to the counter, just a few paces off towards the glass door. “Can I pay?” she said without eye contact.

The young man looked at her for just a moment too long and then broke into a wide smile. “Sure!” he said.

He began quickly scrambling through tickets, occasionally looking up, blushing slightly before getting back to whatever it was he was doing.

“Sorry I dozed off,” she told him, smiling awkwardly to herself. “I don’t usually do things like that. I was meant to be working.”

“No problem,” he told her. “You looked so peaceful.”

He seemed to realise just how odd a thing it was to have said and his face flushed nervously.

There was no doubt he liked her; and why wouldn’t he? she thought to herself. She was attractive, tall, slim and with long brown hair that tumbled over her shoulders and down her back. On the other hand, thinking about how appealing she was to men made her insecurities flare up, and she was filled with thoughts about how her nose was too big, her cheeks a bit too round and how her feet had ugly toes sticking out the front of them, and not all completely in the same direction.

“I looked peaceful while I was dribbling onto your table, did I?” she said derisively.

Behind them a couple of customers had appeared. Two men talking to one another in politely hushed tones.

He held up a ticket and stared at it raptly, trying his hardest not to meet her gaze. “Most of your dribble went, um...” He slowly pointed at her chest region.

She looked down, her eyes widening in horror. A damp patch was right about the space her left nipple usually occupied. “Bloody hell!” she grumbled, wiping at it with her hand.

“It looks great,” he said, in what was presumably a well-intended show of unity.

“I’m so glad my moist nipple appeals to you,” she said, grumbling as the mark stubbornly refused to budge. “I have an interview today. This is a nightmare.”

“I have an interview today as well,” he said, beaming a smile.

“Fascinating,” she said, not looking up as she rummaged through her bag for a tissue, fully aware she didn’t have one. Suddenly, a thought hit

her. "Talking of nightmares, I had some very strange dreams while I was asleep."

"Really?"

"Hard to explain," she said thoughtfully, dredging through half-remembered imagery. "It was all just dream-logic. It didn't all quite make sense."

"I understand, Patricia," he said.

"Pat," she told him. "Nobody calls me that except my mother, and only then if she's mad at me."

"Derrick," he told her, tapping on his name badge, which was upside down. "My mum calls me her Number 1," he said proudly.

"She does?" Pat smirked. "She really calls you that?"

"Yeah!" he said, almost sadly, and definitely regretting his words. "I came first in my class and I always get employee of the month."

"First in class? Were you making paintings from potatoes chopped in half?"

He looked a little hurt. "I have a degree in social science."

Pat smiled and nodded at him. "That must come in very handy when you're working out my bill."

"Yeah," he mumbled and looked away.

She'd gone too far again.

"I never come first," she said conversationally. "I was the second child in my family, and my brother is awesome. I scored second in my degree course, and there were only two of us on it. I'm a perpetual number 2. My mother would enjoy calling me that!"

He smiled. "Well, I think you're..." He stopped himself short and tapped her order into the computer.

She smiled at his awkwardness and said: "Oh I definitely am."

"I want to work in an office," he said. "I'm qualified to do so much more than this."

"I just need a change from playing on my computer in here all day," she said. "Anything is better than this."

“Right,” he agreed.

They both looked at one another and frowned.

“This seems oddly familiar...”

“It does...” he said, looking somewhat confused. “It’s like I dreamed all of this before.”

She looked around at the two men behind her who smiled weakly and then went back to their conversation. Behind them was the otherwise empty coffee-shop. “I did dream all of this. This was all part of my dream.”

“My computer isn’t working right,” said Derrick. “But somehow this is all very oddly familiar. It says that if I press the ‘Charge’ button, then a writer will break the fourth wall in strange and unexpected ways which might or might not fix a moment of wobbliness.”

“That’s a surprisingly specific information drop for a computerised cash register!” she agreed. It was strange how familiar this all was.

“You’re not a writer, are you?” he asked, looking at her with a confused, and increasingly concerned, expression.

“God, no!” she exclaimed. “Those people are all nuts!”

The two men behind them were talking to one another but had begun to frown impatiently. Pat cast them a worried smile and then back to the server, whose name she didn’t care to remember.

“Press it,” she said.

“But who knows what will happen?”

“Don’t care. Just press it.”

Reluctantly he edged his finger towards the screen. With a last, hesitant huff, he pressed it.

# The Sphere

“When I awoke for that first time, I didn’t know anything.”

His voice was thin and old, and he spoke haltingly through shallow breaths.

“I didn’t know where I was. I didn’t even know *who* I was. I was inside this grand glass sphere, the gigantic artificial structure that has supported us all throughout my life.”

There was nobody left to hear him, since no others remained. He had a story to tell, but knew not why he had chosen this moment to tell it.

The computer, and someone beyond it, was listening. They had to be.

“I wasn’t alone, of course. There were ten of us at first. I looked around and I saw these nine other people. Some were men, some were women, and we all had different-coloured skin. We were all young and healthy, though. We didn’t know where we were, but this place supported us. The air was clean, the lights were bright, and it seemed a comfortable place to live.”

“I took control right away,” he said to himself, smiling as he remembered. “I told them we had to find food and shelter first, and then explore the sphere. They were as confused as I was, but I projected confidence and they happily followed my lead. My words resonated with them, and freed them from the burden of personal responsibility. I took that from them, and they thanked me for it.”

The computer flashed a glowing red light softly behind a grey panel.

“My team found shelter quickly. It had already been built, left there for us to find. It had two floors and plenty of room for everyone.

“Next, we found the computer. None of us knew what it was or how it worked, of course.

“The other team then reported that the sphere had food and water. It seemed that all of our needs were met.

“This gave me an idea...”

The man lowered his eyes as a dark smile formed across his lips.



“I found the four weakest members, the poorest thinkers, the most compliant, and put them to work gathering food. I told them that their job was the most important, which encouraged them to work harder.

“The next three I took to one side. They were questioning where we were and what was happening to us. I explained that these issues were going to be dealt with as a priority and that they didn’t have to worry. I gave them each a task to keep them busy, to stop them from thinking too much.

“I told them it was their job to manage the facility. They would secure the shelter, organise food distribution, and make sure water supplies were replenished. The bottom floor of the shelter was theirs, and it was up to them to make it habitable, and to ensure that supplies were properly stored.

“I made it clear to them that while I felt sure they were up to the task, I could, if necessary, send them out to gather food and let one of the other gatherers take their job. All of them accepted their position gladly. They relished the prospect of having the first pick of the rooms, food privileges, and a little power over the others. It never even occurred to them that the best of everything was there for the taking.”

He stopped, hacking a cough that robbed him of breath for a moment. The computer flashed again as the monitor filled with his words, a language he had learned to read.

“The other two were not as easily fooled. I had chosen them carefully, the most attractive of the females, and a man who was clearly of higher intelligence. He had piercing eyes, and his thoughts were always a step ahead of mine. I took them both to one side and explained what I had in mind.”

He smirked to himself. How easy it had been to control those he feared might be superior to himself. Of course, it was now quite beyond him to believe that anyone could be above him in any way.

“I told the man that we had found something on the second floor. It was his job to use it, to understand it. It was his job to work out what was

going on. I would lead the others and keep things under control so that he could do his work. He agreed happily.

“To the woman, I explained that I needed her support to maintain my leadership and provide an example to the others. I needed her to help keep order, so we could continue to co-exist in peace and prosperity. She agreed happily, of course, and in time she became my partner.”

He coughed once again and continued.

“We found an unusual kind of pebble along the edge of a flowing supply of water. I approached one of the controllers and instructed him to polish the pebbles, and to cut a mark into them that only we could cut.

“I announced to the people that we now had a currency. We would pay the gatherers for the food they collected and the organisers for their good management, and the payment could be used to buy clothing and to pay for their shelter. All these things had been supplied for free, of course, but they accepted it willingly. Perhaps it was because their work appeared to have value, even if this was a comforting fiction.

“I controlled the pebbles, which meant I now had control over the shelter, the food, materials, everything. The people worked harder than before. Our food gatherers had split into two factions, coupling together. Each pair now struggled against the other to gather up the best of the food and get more of my pebbles in return for their work. My organisers found them easy to control, always pushing them to find more and better things, so they were always busy too. Busy people don’t think, and people who don’t think, don’t ask questions. They don’t fight back. They go along with it: they let you control them.

“That is what happened, of course.”

He stopped briefly and the computer waited for him to continue without offering any judgement.

“I told them that we were beginning to understand the upper floor, that we had found a way to communicate with the maker of the sphere, and that it had given us rules to live by. This too was a fiction, of course. I explained that all our power came from a nearby sun, and that we had to

honour it; that it controlled our lives and gave us the food we eat. Some day, those who built this world would return and lavish us with riches beyond imaginings, provided we worked hard enough to earn them.

“The food gatherers were first. They began to make symbols of the sun, which I encouraged. I let them have their idol, and since I controlled the information that came from it, it was even easier to control them.

“In time, the food gatherers came to disagree about the interpretation of the information I had given them. One group thought the sun itself had made the computer and that it was communicating with us directly. The others thought that something had built the computer and had put it near the sun for us to find.

“I encouraged this, too. I pointed out that they were both so different, both with different coloured skin, different beliefs. I wondered who was better, and made them wonder it too.

“If the makers of the sphere came, who would be taken to the better place beyond? Only those who understood their true intentions and served the makers best, I told them. This caused a rift between the two factions.

“And I paid them to do it! We fashioned crude weapons and lent them the pebbles they needed to buy them.

“I shortened the supply of pebbles, all the while scooping them up and making more on demand. The food gatherers could no longer afford shelter, and even the organisers were struggling. Upstairs though, we had it all. We moved the best of everything and kept it to ourselves. We owned the sphere: the world, and everything inside it, was now my own.”

The computer flashed, coldly recording as he related his tale.

“I grew old, but I had built such power for myself that I never grew weak. At any time, they could have come up the stairs and taken it, but no-one ever did. I had my organisers who kept the food flowing—they had their small privileges, and they fought fiercely for them. I had created their reality for so long that they no longer questioned it.

“Of course, we knew the truth,” he said darkly.

He coughed to himself and grinned. He stared at the monitor as his story, the tale of his life, of how he had shaped, controlled and destroyed the lives of others to maintain it, flowed across the screen.

“We knew *you* were watching. We might not know why, but we knew we’d been put here for a reason, even if it was beyond our comprehension. This sphere and our lives had a meaning, though. Someone had built the computer, someone had put us here, and there must have been a reason.”

The computer paused. His words flashed on a monitor as the light glowed, peering at him with its single red eye. Was it judging him?

“Human Behaviour Project,” he said with a wry grin. “We found the words and we translated them. We found out about your experiment, about you observing us. I knew and I kept it from the others. Only those of us on the top floor knew the whole of the truth.”

The red eye carried on silently observing him. The monitor flickered as his words were checked and read by whoever was at the other end of the system, whoever it was that had *always* been watching.

The old man sat and waited for a moment, proud of his achievements, proud of what he’d built.

A new word flashed on the screen, a word he’d never spoken.

‘Failure.’

He leant back, gasping to himself drily. “What?” he snorted angrily.

More words appeared beneath.

‘Social stability failure. AI subjects reverted to typical self-serving behavioural norms resulting in hierarchical divisions common to all previous simulations.’

He frowned, his chest tightened nervously. What did this mean? What had he been meant to do, if not this?

Text continued to appear on the computer’s monitor.

‘Outcome typical of what led to the Great Catastrophe. Remaining subject to be deleted and simulation reset with randomised AI.’

“Have I not pleased the Sun?” he asked nervously.

He was far from sure of himself this time.

‘AI deletion commencing.’

## The Dreadfully Little Faux-Pas

The car door slammed shut with a bang.

The metal reverberated like a hollow can, the sound of thin alloy pressed out cheaply to save costs, all concerns of safety or durability long since forgotten by the accountants who controlled production.

However, it did look the part, parked as it was next to a more expensive vehicle. It certainly compared favourably, so long as you were not trying to look too far below the surface level.

The man who owned it straightened his dark, charcoal-grey suit and smoothed down his pale blue, and shudderingly unimaginative tie.

“That was a great meeting, Simon!” he said with a wide grin that flashed his professionally whitened teeth.

Simon glared at him, but not in a way that was particularly threatening. He reached up and smoothed his slicked-back, dark and very slightly thinning hair.

“It was,” he agreed.

Despite his smile and friendly demeanour, anyone who knew him might have picked up on how he was speaking through slightly gritted teeth, and that his back was a little straighter than normal. It had not been a good meeting for *everyone* who was there.

The owner of the vehicle locked it with an electronic fob. In response the lights flashed twice and the sounds of a satisfyingly heavy clunk echoed from inside.

“I do enjoy our sales meetings,” he said.

“I’m sure you do, Graham.”

Graham grinned at him. He was somewhere in the middle of his thirties. His hair was starting to grey, but the only signs of it were the slight brown discolouration marks along the sides of his scalp from his aggressive dying. He was handsome, although not conventionally so. He was attractive in a way that only effort and money could bring to a man. There was a look to him that always brought to Simon’s mind the word, ‘Preserved.’

“It’s nice to know my efforts are being noticed,” he said as he led the way along the grey pavement.

With notable reluctance, Simon followed along. “I noticed,” he said, a little too abruptly. It was impossible to fail to notice, but if you somehow did, you could be certain of being reminded of it.

Graham leant forwards to open a pair of glass doors that he could strut confidently through, as he usually did. His perfect, but secretly lower end of perfect, suit pulled back along the sleeve of an almost bluey-white shirt that Simon was sure he bought from a local market in large enough numbers to qualify for a discount.

“Let me buy you a coffee to make up for it,” Graham said, flashing a smile that Simon estimated was around 20% practice, 30% smugness and the remainder made up in expensive dental work.

“Thanks,” Simon said, trying to sound magnanimous in defeat.

The pair walked in and strutted up to the counter.

Graham said, since he was always the first to speak, “This place is pretty terrible. I guess our choices are limited around here?”

“I actually live around here, Graham.”

“You don’t say,” he said, flashing an insincere smile. “I really don’t know how you manage it, Simon. I’d be terribly worried about my family.”

Simon rolled his eyes, making quite sure that nobody could see. “You don’t have a family,” he said.

“Of course I don’t; I’m not an idiot, Simon!” he said a little too proudly. “That’s not to say that I look down on anyone who does feel the need to breed. How are the kids, anyway?”

“They’re great,” he said with an insincere smile of his own. “It’s Hayley’s birthday in two weeks. I was really hoping to win that bonus so I could throw her a party.”

Graham looked over to the counter and shuffled impatiently. He made a big show of checking a very expensive, but not *too* expensive, watch that was genuine, but not *too* genuine.

He turned to face Simon and took a deep breath. He said, as if scolding a child, “You don’t *win* a sales bonus, Simon! It’s not a lottery or a game of bingo. A sales bonus is something you *earn*. You put in the work, you build up the numbers, each hard-earned point one after another. If it was too easy, it wouldn’t have any value.”

Simon nodded along. “Is that how come you win every month, month after month after month after month?”

“Of course,” he said proudly.

“And it doesn’t hurt that your cousin is the finance manager?” Simon suggested dryly.

Graham looked offended for a moment before breaking into a smile. “You’ll always be my number 2,” he said, flicking out his very expensive mobile phone, the one he had won in last year’s bonus draw.

“I really needed to be number 1 this month. I just wanted a little extra money for my daughter. Things have been tight lately.”

“Sorry,” Graham told him. “I’ll always be Number 1.”

“I can see that,” he said dolefully.

“I wasn’t always like this,” Graham told him as he slipped his mobile phone back in his pocket. “I used to work in a place just like this dreadful coffee shop. I worked hard, got great scores and built my way up, one step after another.”

“Really?” Simon said sarcastically.

He glanced over to the woman in front of them who in turn glanced back, a little embarrassed that paying for her order seemed to be taking so long. She also seemed to be playing with her breasts, and the man working there had definitely noticed.

“Simon?” Graham said, his voice snapping him back from his thoughts.

“The mirror,” he said as a horrible thought lodged itself in his brain that this was all oddly familiar.

Graham shrugged. “What mirror?”



“My mirror,” Simon said, respectfully lowering his voice. “Her face is like a mirror.”

“Simon, has the pressure of being a perpetual failure been getting to you? I thought it came naturally to you. I didn’t realise you actually had to work at it.” Graham stifled a laugh. “She looks nothing like you. She’s quite pretty, apart from her face. And her toes.”

Simon felt a strange, gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach. “This is real. This *isn’t* real.”

“You’ve lost it, mate!” Graham pulled out his phone again and looked resignedly at the screen. He said with a sigh, “I hate these popups. This one says that to dismiss a dreadfully little faux-pas, I have to press a button that will make someone challenge his friend to write a better story than the one he’s just read.”

“What?” Simon felt cold all over. He could feel sweat prickling at his brow.

“How ridiculous is that?”

“Press it...”

“What?!”

“Press it!!”

## Living the Dream

The room was completely black. It seemed to stretch into infinity, as no light was catching the surface of any walls, and there were no doors or windows. But, inside the apparently endless nothing, was something. There was a wooden desk with a chair each side. It was beautifully carved but heavily damaged on one side from both too much use and the abuse of someone who simply didn't care about it. It looked as though an animal had clawed endlessly at it, chewing up the once immaculate surface. The chairs didn't match either. One was perfect, pristine and new, and the other was old, battered and damaged.

Seated in the new one was a young woman. She was attractive, and simply dressed. Another woman stood in the darkness, shrouded in shadows. She was older and was pacing around noisily. She was dressed in a business suit, grey and severe, tasteful but expensive.

A small lamp was perched on the desk, glowing dimly. Soft yellow light reached out and picked up the harsh, craggy outline of the older woman's angry features.

"I won't do it!" the girl said, her voice barely more than a whisper. She sounded quite unsure of herself.

"You will!" The woman laughed a vicious laugh. When she spoke she did so with authority. She melted in from the shadows and smashed her hand down hard onto the desk. The girl jumped in shock as the woman cried out at her again: "*You will!*"

The girl shuddered and defiantly crossed her arms over her chest. She looked away, perhaps afraid to meet the furious gaze of the other.

"I won't," she said, more forcefully than before.

The older woman's thin lips pulled up into a cruel smile. "You act like you have a choice. You *are* going to do this: this is *going* to happen."

"No!" she snapped. For just a moment, it seemed like she might have found some strength, but it passed quickly. She slumped down in her seat

while the older woman edged closer. She was so close that she could feel her hot breath on the side of her neck.

“I didn’t sign up for this,” she pleaded. “It’s too much.”

“You knew what you were doing when you got yourself into this,” she told her sharply. “You’re an insurance assessor. Your job is to save your company money, not spend it when you don’t have to. You knew what you’d be doing”

“It was just a job...” she said shifting awkwardly in her seat.

“It was the beginning of a *career!*” she hissed. “Jobs are things you do when you don’t know what else to do. It’s what poor, useless people like the ones where you come from do while they wait to die. Careers take more planning.”

“I didn’t plan for this!” The young woman folded her arms tightly across her chest and stared back with sad but determined eyes.

The older woman straightened herself and sighed while smoothing down her slightly ruffled suit. She stepped up to stand directly behind the younger, frightened woman, her tall, expensive heels clicking noisily against the floor as she walked.

“This is the life you chose,” she said coldly. “It’s a tough job, and it gives a young girl like you a chance to prove herself. You chose to take on the responsibility to make the tough choices.”

“They’re too tough!” she sneered.

“And that’s why this is a shortcut to a great career,” she said impatiently. “You have a chance to prove that you have what it takes. This is your chance to be better than the people you grew up with. This is your one and only chance!”

She chuckled to herself without a glimmer of humour. “What if I don’t have what it takes?”

“But you have. You know you have.”

“I *won’t* do what you’re asking.”

“Yes you will!” the woman told her, far more firmly.

The girl said nothing and looked away in disgust.

The old woman continued, “You have to file that report. That family doesn’t have enough insurance to cover the medical treatment they need. You file the report and that’s all there is to it. They are not your problem.”

“No!” she insisted. “I won’t do it.”

“You will,” the woman snapped angrily, leaning forward until she was almost speaking directly into her ear. “You don’t have a choice!”

“Everyone has a choice.”

“No!” The woman stepped to the other side of the desk and leaned forward so that the sickly light licked against the hard features of her pale, bony face. “Life is hard sometimes and it’s not fair, but that’s how it is. Let me tell you what will happen if you don’t do your job.

“You refuse to file your report, or you try to give a favourable advantage to the family. The company will have to pay for the medical treatment, but it’s expensive and so they’ll investigate. They’ll realise that the services aren’t properly covered, and the treatment will be stopped. You’ll be fired, your career will be over, and you won’t have helped anybody.

“There is no choice here, and there’s no happy ending. This is *not* a fairy-tale.”

The younger woman looked up, tears welling in her eyes. She pleaded: “But a child will die.”

“Yes!” the woman snapped angrily. “But she will die anyway!”

“Maybe not,” she said softly, almost to herself as she looked away. “You don’t know...”

“We both know I’m right,” she told her. “It’s a hard world. You’re only now just starting to learn that.”

The younger woman looked down to the desk, the rough, damaged wood on the opposite side. “If I file that report then a child *will* die!”

“And your career will survive.”

“But how will I live with the guilt? What will I become?”

The old woman leant forward and a crooked smile fluttered over her lips.

“You’ll become *me!*”

She woke up suddenly beneath expensive silk sheets in the bedroom of her spacious and exclusive apartment. Her breathing was heavy and ragged. She was sweating again. She peered over into the dark, black emptiness of her room. The only light was from the glowing red digits of her clock. It was 3am, the same time it was every night that she woke up, and every night it was the same dream.

She caught her reflection in the clock, and for a fleeting moment she saw the haggard, rugged old face that now replaced the look of innocent optimism she had had as a younger woman when her career was just beginning.

She reached for her pill case and took out another two pills to swallow. She rolled over and tried once more to sleep.

She never really slept anymore.

## The Tiny Little Error

Dave drummed his fingers on the desk that separated him from the Captain.

She watched, glaring at him as a cat watches a pigeon, only a pigeon that had flown into the room the cat was meant to be guarding while its leg was trapped under a brick coated in uncooked sausage meat. The images that bombarded her skull always took a turn for the surreal whenever Dave was involved, presumably.

She was bewildered, once more, by his behaviour. It astounded her to levels that she was barely able to comprehend, her brain only being adjusted to deal with more conventional deviations of the *conventional* conventional.

“Mr Brown...” she said, with a note of disgust.

“Captain,” he said with a broad grin. “What brings you to my office today?”

“It’s *my* office, Mr Brown.”

Dave cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. “Are you sure it’s your office?” He gazed around the small, efficient grey room aboard the Nebulous, a mighty civilian spacecraft that was hurtling to the edge of known space. “I don’t actually have an office, so you’re probably right.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out.

She tried starting simple. “Are you enjoying my breakfast?” That worked.

“Are you sure it’s your breakfast?” he said thoughtfully, with a curious frown. “Sorry... *your* breakfast,” he corrected. “I actually don’t have any breakfast so you’re probably right about that too. Your really good at this, Captain. You should be in charge.”

“Mr Brown...”

“*You’re* really good at this...” he corrected, again.

“Mr Brown...” she repeated, resting her eyes on the stack of reports. “I’ve never had a staff-member come aboard my ship and cause quite so many problems on their first two days.”

“Thanks,” he said, nodding along. “It’s nice to be appreciated.”

Her frown intensified somewhat. “It’s not a compliment, Mr Brown.”

“Right,” he said rubbing his chin. “It’s hard to tell. I don’t actually get very many, as you can probably imagine.”

“Mr Brown, when the staff supervisor gives you your induction briefing, along with twenty-seven other new recruits, and then asks if there are any questions, what should you say?”

“It would be dependent on a number of key factors.”

“Let me tell you what you shouldn’t say,” she told him, flashing her eyes over the report of the first of many, many incidents. “You don’t liken the supervisor to a wild animal lost in a passionate moment of physical abandon, nor do you rate her attractiveness on a sliding scale from ‘likely to induce violent bouts of intense emotional trauma’ to ‘so close to perfection that it might appear that a superior being has been mated with your own DNA.’”

“Well, of course not!” he said, shaking his head dolefully.

“Good,” said the Captain. “I’m glad we understand one another.”

“Neither of those were questions!” he continued, in a not entirely welcome way. “A question might be worded, ‘Are you free this evening for a date where you show me around the ship and point out all the places where a handsome, charismatic man might meet available young ladies with horrible self-image problems?’”

The Captain groaned to herself. “Yes,” she agreed. “And according to the report, that’s exactly what you did actually ask, directly after the initial comments.”

“I remember the line exactly,” he told her. “I’m rather proud of that one.”

“Mr Brown,” the Captain began, feeling like she was sinking into some kind of bottomless abyss of stupidity. “You can’t just say things like that to women.”

“Well, you certainly can’t say things like this to men: they’re much more likely to punch you. With women, there’s a small chance that they’ll

think you're charming and then I usually exploit the opportunity remorselessly."

"Have you never been punched by a woman?" she asked, suspecting she could probably guess the answer without undue difficulty.

"Several times," he said proudly. "Most often they tend to slap, rather than punch. The recovery time is much faster, I find."

"Let's move on, Mr Brown..."

Dave shrugged and casually took another bite from her horribly mispronounced croissant. With a huff he grumbled something about the competence of the narration.

"What are you talking about?" said Dave. "That's not how you pronounce it?"

The writer continued with an utterly correct and perfectly formed piece of explanatory exposition. 'Croissant' is after all the correct pronunciation, not 'croissant' which is how Dave always says it. He pondered with some dread how Dave had been pronouncing 'pain au chocolat' all this time.

Dave shook his head to himself. "*Pain au chocolat*, you mean?" he said incorrectly.

This caused the writer to wail in despair, and declare the character officially dead to him, or the next best thing.

The Captain chimed in. "To be perfectly honest, they both sound exactly the same to me."

Dave began to grin but it was the expression of an illiterate fool. They're completely different. The way Dave is saying it is 'pain au chocolat', which is completely wrong. The correct way is 'pain au chocolat.' The Captain must surely now hear this important difference.

"I think I do," said the Captain, despite some lingering reservations. "Truth be told, I say it as 'pain au chocolat', too."

The writer wondered why he bothered. Really. What's the point?!

The reader, by this point was wondering how they had got this far into such a needlessly confusing compilation of mostly mismatched tales.



The fact it was free barely seemed to make up for it. It was nice to be included as a character though, as this was not something that had happened before.

“As fascinating as this all is,” interjected the Captain. “I have some questions. First, what exactly is a *pain au chocolat*?”

“It’s French for ‘chocolate croissant’,” said Dave helpfully.

That was essentially true and was nicely put, for a change. Clearly, it couldn’t have been his own original words. Had he snatched it from a crime movie or something?

“Not that I’m aware of. Must have been a deleted scene.”

“My next question,” continued the Captain. “And in hindsight, perhaps this is the question I should have opened with. My next question is, what on earth is actually happening to us, here, right now. Who are these people, and why are we standing around discussing the niceties of baked confectionaries?”

“It’s all a bit complicated,” said Dave. “Why don’t I put it in a footnote<sup>2</sup> for your later perusal, and then we can continue going through the motions like nothing untoward has happened.”

A footnote did seem like a good idea. The writer selected Insert > Footnote... from the menu bar and lo and behold, a footnote was now positioned at the bottom of the page for Dave to fill in at his leisure.

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<sup>2</sup> “I had this dream the other night. My friend's psycho ex girlfriend—I introduced her to him knowing she was a psycho, but did warn him beforehand so that's alright. So his psycho ex had stolen my cake, and was most defiant about it, so I slapped her repeatedly with a wooden ruler until she relented, which she eventually did after her top fell off. Her top falling off sort of made sense cos she was writhing on a sofa at the time and her shirt had obviously snagged on the fabric. Good physics management is a vital part of all good dreams I find, as is accurate rendering of knockers. I had actually seen them from a previous absolutely unrelated incident, so I was confident I had them right. Anyhow she eventually relented, and I told her she could have the cake cos I didn't really want it, and we all had a good laugh about it. So as this perfectly illustrates, some things really are better left unsaid.”

“Thanks!” said Dave agreeably. “You know, you guys get a bad rap, but you two are alright!”

That writers got a bad rap came as something of an unwelcome to surprise to one of the hapless pair. The other assured him, though, that any such rap was undoubtedly better than they deserved.

Meanwhile, the Captain stood there blinking louder than is technically possible by any known human standard.

“So getting back on script,” she began, presumably trying to salvage whatever was left of your sanity, and mine for that matter. “Let’s move on. Would you like to explain to me why all the food dispensers on the lower food-recycling deck are now only capable of putting out uncooked sausage meat?”

“I was framed.”

“What?!”

“Oh, sorry, I skipped ahead a couple of pages. You mentioned something about food processors? Let me see if I can remember. Ah yes, my fingers are too small and sensitive to operate the controls. Sometimes, humans have to resort to using tools in order to complete their assigned tasks.”

“Right.” She flashed her eyes over the report, assuring herself it simply couldn’t be accurate. “And while on your very first day of work you managed to accidentally use a ‘tool’ to reprogram the food controls?”

“Apparently,” he said. “I don’t know how these things work. That’s actually literally the truth in this case. I don’t know how anything aboard this ship works.”

“Where did you even get a brick from?”

“I brought it onboard with me,” he said with a mundane shrug, as if such things were obvious. “It was kind of a trophy since it was the only thing I ever won, although technically, stealing bricks from the men’s toilet isn’t a competition.”

“I see,” she said, not seeing. “And may I ask, since your assigned task was to deliver towels, what exactly were you doing in the food recycling control room in any case?”

“That’s rather a long story,” he told her. “I promised I wouldn’t tell but, since I’m rather proud of this one, too, let me just say that my date with the staff supervisor went rather better than expected. We couldn’t go back to her room because she was a tiny bit ashamed to be seen with me and we couldn’t go back to mine because I was having the one-way mirrors and cameras installed.

“So, I suggested we do something romantic and break into a control room. She said I was crazy, but she hadn’t got very much experience with that, which was why I took a brick with me on the date.

“You’d be amazed how well you can demonstrate lacking a grip on reality by carrying around a brick on a spaceship!”

“I’ll bet,” she rolled her eyes. “And...?”

“Well, the controls were verbal, I had had a lot to drink and she was being impatient,” he said.

“Oh no!” the Captain gasped.

“So I was framed, basically.”

“Riiiiight... Shall we continue?”

“Sure,” he said happily. “I have no plans today.”

“You have a double work-shift.”

“Sorry,” he said with a nod. “I meant I have no *important* plans.”

“Mr Brown,” she began, casting her eyes once more over the rather exhaustive list. Against her better judgement she continued. “Mr Brown, I called you in here today to inform you that I’m promoting you to supervisor.”

“Oh!” he said, somewhat taken aback. “That’s new.”

“Indeed. While you may have racked up more complaints in two days than the entire staff typically racks up in two years, to your credit, you have not yet attempted to manually recycle faeces out of the crew toilets with your bare hands like Mongallez ‘Mongo’ Manhandler did this

morning, nor have you superglued your left eyeball to a pair of size nine running shoes, like Spartek ‘Spaz’ McLeod did during his first shift. You don’t even want to know what Heather ‘Typhoid’ Emergency-Klaxon did to *‘christen’* the pillow of one of our infant guests after her boyfriend dumped her for a packet of second-hand chewing gum. Comparatively speaking, you are by far the most qualified candidate that’s come aboard this crew-rotation. And, as horrendous as that is, it leaves me in the dreadful position of promoting someone who appears to be less intelligent than his own pet brick.”

“Having a pet brick in the first place does rather imply that,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

“Touché.”

“And I’ll get a lot more money?” he asked.

“I think you’d better leave before I have you blown out through the nearest airlock,” she told him. She checked the report again. “According to this, you only have to press that button to correct this one tiny little error...”

“I have to?” he said, looking down at a terminal pad that was inexplicably in his hand. He frowned curiously. “It’s funny that I hadn’t noticed this before. Was I always holding this computer interface?”

“I presume so,” the Captain said. Something felt very wrong. “Wait,” she said. “Where are we now?”

“Captain,” began Dave. “Are you number 1 around here, or are you number 2?”

“I’m...” She was going to say she was Number 1, since she knew she was in command of the vessel, but the fact remained that when she began to speak, she knew she wasn’t. “I’m Number 2,” she said softly.

“I’m Number 1, aren’t I?” said Dave.

She looked around again. It all seemed so familiar, but so distant at the same time. “We were in a coffee shop,” she said.

“We were ourselves in a coffee shop, before all this started, and then we were looking at ourselves in a coffee shop afterwards,” he said. “Where are we now?”

“In an office,” she suggested, gesturing around. “You know, I suspected something was a bit off while the thing was... but until it wasn’t... then, when the walls fell... Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Sure. I couldn’t have put it better myself. So what now?”

“Well, you have the computer. What do you normally do?”

“Right!” he glanced at the terminal. “There was a tiny little error,” he told her. “If I press this, then my brick will imagine a whole universe and that will change everything.”

“And then what?” she said. “Will we get out of here?”

“Let’s find out...”

# The Coldest War

He was gripped with fear, but fear had become a companion to him. It had wrapped itself around his soul, and was now a part of everything his life had become.

The room bathed him in darkness. It was so dark that he could barely see further than the desk he was sitting behind. Voices echoed around the place, giving him the impression that the room was larger than he had first assumed.

This was no police station filled with officers of the law, just as it was no office in some shining tower of metal and glass. This was a hidden basement somewhere where rules were left far behind. Every word, every action, every thought took his very survival along with it. Anything could happen there, and there would be no record to prove that his feet had ever trod the earth below them, if that was what his captors chose.

He ached: his spine sagged beneath his weary muscles and his wrists burned from the tight, thick plastic strap bonding them together. Light shone in his eyes, flickering at a rate that forced his brain to pay attention, to keep alive and alert, robbing him of any moment of respite. It had been this way for days. With no day or night, he couldn't judge how many.

A voice was talking to him; questions were being asked. He could still see the light, flashing into his brain through his eyelids and he was exhausted.

But there was a voice.

"What's the password?" it said again, a voice low and grave.

He huffed the cold, stale air into his lungs and gasped weakly. "I don't know what the password is."

A man leaned forward. He could see his silhouette picked out by the ferocious glare of the lamp. He said, unreasonably calmly: "I know you're lying. I know you know the backdoor password. We all know that you know it. If you tell us, you can rest. If you tell us, you can have anything you want."

He hung his head. The muscles in his neck were so weak that he could barely find the energy to speak.

“I know the password!” he admitted with a sigh. He was too exhausted to fight it now: he just wanted all this to stop. It had to stop.

There was a pause and the man took a deep inhalation of breath. In his imagination, he felt he was smiling now, a self-satisfied grin of victory. “Tell me,” he said.

“I can’t.”

“The system is already partially active,” he said. “Your password will bring it fully to life. You designed it, so I can’t say that I really understand your hesitation. It’s quite brilliant. This is going to change the world.”

Did it warrant an explanation, he wondered? Should it not be patently obvious to any sane mind?

“I never intended it to do this,” he told him, his voice just a low, dry croak. “It was meant to be a move towards a better future.”

The shadow cocked its head slightly to one side. “But it is exactly that,” he said, sounding somewhat confused. “You’ve created the ultimate weapon in the war against crime.”

“It was meant to be the ultimate weapon in the war against death,” he sneered. From somewhere deep inside, he felt fear giving way to anger and, suddenly, it did warrant an explanation. “My father died. He dropped dead on the street of a heart attack. They couldn’t save him; they couldn’t help him at all.” His impassioned cry was met with bemused silence. “You don’t understand!” he sighed.

“I understand that it must have been a sad moment in your life,” the voice told him.

“My system was designed to monitor everything, everyone,” he said. “It would check for heart problems, cancer, disease and injury. It could follow the spread of infection, locate sources. It would change the way we understand diagnostics and medicine forever. That’s what I designed the system for.”

There was a noise that might have been a chuckle. “I see,” said the voice. “But what it became is so much greater. Why can’t you see that?”

“Not everyone agrees with you there!” he said angrily, although in his current state he couldn’t manage much more than a whisper.

“You built a computer that can track and monitor every living thing on the planet,” he enthused. “You have given us the greatest weapon in the war against individuality that the New World Bureaucracy has ever had.

Your system can simultaneously track the whereabouts of every man, woman and child on our planet.

“This is an amazing achievement.”

He shook his head sadly, and the act of doing so sent a jolt of pain shooting up through his neck. He winced and closed his eyes until the worst of it passed. The lights flashed in his reddened eyelids and there was no peace behind them.

“But the core program...” the voice added. “Now that’s something really special.”

“It was meant to be,” he huffed defiantly. “The base system could track people: the core could know everything about them.”

“And it will,” the voice added with a note of rigid determination.

“Not the way you mean!” he told the shadow. “It was meant to track everyone anonymously. It was never meant to be a dirty little voyeur, peering into people’s windows. It was meant to track illness and injury and offer advice and assistance. It was designed to be plugged into automated medical services. It would send self-driving ambulances to emergencies without having to wait while people made decisions. It would know when sickness was approaching and could direct patients directly to the medications they needed.

“It was meant to be there to help us, not to control us. It was designed to belong to us, not to enslave us.”

There was a huff, some grunt of disapproval. “Doctor, you aren’t seeing the bigger picture,” the voice told him firmly. “The base system is



doing exactly what you designed it to do already. The core program can do things you never imagined, but it will still realise your eventual ends.

“Instead of pandering to every ache and pain, it will check emotions. It will understand guilt and mental states. It will recognise emotional conditions, selecting out the dangerous, the suspicious, the curious. It will root out the threats to our society and take action immediately.

“Lives *will* be saved!”

“What you have planned—it’s an abomination,” he said through gritted teeth.

The shadow crossed its arms defiantly across its chest. “It’s all about perspective, Doctor. You will give me the password and then the core system will take control. We will see the end of crime, terrorism, rebellion and violence in a matter of minutes. The public will be free to follow our rule, safe and secure in the knowledge that there are no wolves hiding among the sheep.”

He shook his head one last time. He knew there was no more reasoning and no longer a reason to hold back. It was over now.

“And instead of medical statuses and automated emergency services, you’ve got it connected to armed mobile assault platforms, security drones and urban pursuit droids?” he said weakly, with a sense of the finality of all this.

“And humanity will quietly go to the next stage,” he agreed. “They will be safer, more secure and happier for it. Society will thank you more for your services in putting an end to fear than it will for saving a few weak people from their own biology.”

He looked up, peering into the darkness beyond the brilliant flashing lights. “I give you the password and it will all be over?”

“This suffering will all be over!” he agreed. “You have a job to do. Give me the password and you begin enjoying the privileged status of a hero. You *are* a hero, just accept your destiny.”

“A hero!” he sighed. “Just by giving you the password.”

“Just say it,” he told him greedily.

He closed his eyes. He knew the consequences of speaking the word only too well, but he knew it was time: there was really no choice left. “Please...” he begged one last time, a desperate appeal to any humanity that might still exist in the man the voice was coming from. “Don’t do this.”

“The password...” he said, the soft, calm voice gone and an urgent, growl replacing it.

“*Checkmate!*” he whispered. “You won. You got what you wanted.”

He could feel the shadow grinning back at him and heard as he excitedly typed in the command.

“Thank you!” the voice told him.

“I knew it would come to this,” he said weakly, his voice tinged with regret. “I knew people like you would try to steal my work, turn it into something ugly.”

“Something *necessary!*” the shadow told him.

“I knew,” he said weakly, as the seconds passed slowly by. He knew the core program would be doing its job, coming to life and beginning its analysis. It was only moments away now.

“The core is awake!” the voice reported proudly. “It has begun.”

“It has ended,” he said with a flicker of a sad smile.

“People like you lack vision,” the man snapped. “You’re an engineer, not a philosopher.”

“I had vision enough when I built the core,” he said, spluttering a little as he coughed the words. “I knew that people like you would come after it. I knew that you’d never let it become what it was meant to be. That’s why I created a backup.”

“Backup?” the voice asked, sounding like he had its interest.

“The core is going to do exactly what you intended, before it dies,” he said.

“Dies?” the voice snapped.

“It will root out the threats, destroy the terrorists with unemotional, remorseless efficiency,” he explained. “It will remove the wolves that have

been hiding among the herds. It will seek out the mental illness that makes people act with cold, dispassionate evil towards their fellow man.”

The shadow stood up. He knew the man casting it was worried.

“Did you forget that I programmed it?” he said. “Did you forget that it was I who chose how the core interpreted those threats?”

“What did you do?” he cried out.

“I gave you a choice,” the Doctor told him with a faint smile. “I gave you and your kind the time to change your mind. I argued, I pleaded for your soul. Eventually, I gave up, and let you set the thing loose on yourselves.”

“No!” he gasped.

“The core is a medical program!” he told him. “If there’s anything left of you when your automated weapons are finished, maybe it will be of use to you?”

“You can’t do this!” he gasped.

The Doctor sighed and looked away.

“It wasn’t *me* that did...”

## Something Worse Than a Tiny Little Error

“What do you think?”

Inspector Grace stared fixedly at a cup of coffee, served in a little waxed cardboard cup that neither kept the coffee warm nor her fingers cool. The round glass jug it had originated from was covered in dirty fingerprints where nobody had taken the time to clean it, presumably ever. The coffee had been left stewing on the plate for many hours at the back of a filthy little shared kitchen, and she knew it was going to taste like anger, if that were a thing you could pour into your mouth.

Roach ran his fingers through his thinning, slicked-back greying hair. His eyes widened as he blew a lungful of air noisily out through his mouth, shaking his head slightly, a little lost at just exactly how to answer a question like that.

“It’s quite a story, I’ll give you that,” he told her. “Quite a story. It has the benefit of being one of the very few things I’ve heard in my life as a copper where I can honestly say, *That’s new to me.*”

She sighed loudly and leaned back against the counter. The machine shifted behind her, spilling a little as the coffee sloshed about in the glass jug. She didn’t care enough to notice.

“Graham, he believes that this is what happened!” she said. Normally, she was quite a restrained person, but this time her hands joined in, making a forceful chopping motion as she spoke. “I’m sure that he believes that this is absolutely, exactly and completely what he saw.

“Graham, he thinks he’s telling us the truth!”

“Did you see his hands?” Roach looked away. “He started shaking when he talked about his Dad.”

There was a silence between them for a moment.

“Yeah, you’re right. This is real to him. I’m sure of it.”

“Graham, have you ever seen...” She stopped and began looking around. “Where am I?”

“In a police station,” Roach replied with a confused smile. “Is something wrong with you, Number 2?”

“Number 1?” she said, blinking away her confusion. She shook her head and looked around one more time. It all seemed familiar, as if these surroundings were her own. “I hate it when this happens.”

“Yeah,” Number 1 agreed, sighing heavily to himself. “It’s hard when we’re ported directly into the middle of something that’s already happening. It’s a struggle to remember you still exist.”

“This doesn’t usually happen, does it?” she said, putting down the coffee that had seemed acceptable to her when she was Inspector Roach. She gave it a look of disgust. “Normally, we manifest in an office made up from fragments of ideas from other realities. Now we seem to be manifesting inside other people’s stories.”

“No, this is definitely unusual,” he said in agreement. “It’s so confusing, I can still remember half the things Roach knows, as well as my own reality. It’s all blended together.”

Number 2 shook her head and bit her lower lip, a habit she never remembered forming in any of the sets of memories she was living among. “Number 1, do you think we really broke the universe?”

“I think this is something worse than a tiny little error. I think that reality is changing too much as it tries to fix itself.”

“I’m worried we’re going to end up lost in it,” she said. “What would happen to us if our minds end up stuck in someone who isn’t us? Do they become us? Do we become them? Do we fade into nothing or do we end up existing in silence, with no bodies of our own?”

Number 1 shuddered. “We broke the universe with a banana. Our own existence is probably the least of our problems.”

She nodded in reluctant agreement.

“You know what’s really strange?” he said with a crooked smile. “I know things that are going to happen to Roach. I seem to remember his future.”

She scraped her own mind, frowning at the confusion swirling through her cluttered brain. “Me too. Wow, these poor guys are going to have a rough few days.”

Roach’s head nodded, worn like a mask over Number 1’s identity. “That’s an understatement.”

“Do we have any kind of computer?” she asked hopefully. “Is there any way to communicate?”

He stood up and looked around. “Well, we don’t need an actual computer. We just need to look for signs of communication,” he said. He picked up an old newspaper that had been rudely discarded on a table. “The computer is just a manifestation of our connection to the universe. If I open this randomly, it should be able to tell us what we need.”

He closed his eyes and his fingers flipped through the grey, rough edges of the paper. He snapped it open harshly and threw it down on the table. With his eyes still closed he reached out with his left index finger and stabbed it on an article.

“What could possibly go wrong when the universe is in the capable hands of professionals like us?” she said with a sarcastic sigh.

He gave her an admonishing glare that didn’t have much of an effect. “Here we go,” he said, narrowing his eyes to read the fine print. “Two local men, childhood friends, move to different parts of Asia and end up, decades later, marrying women who both have the same name,” he began.

Number 2 huffed a frustrated sigh. “And they wonder why people don’t take the news seriously, these days.”

Number 1 smiled and nodded. “It says that they may or may not write a series of books together. They’re trying to decide if they should.”

“Right,” she said. “And we have to help them decide by doing what? Unplug the microwave, throw coffee on the floor?”

“You really never read the instruction manual, did you?” he said, shaking his head in dismay. “The universe is motivated by positive action, never negative inaction. We have to communicate our acceptance through a positive action, to elicit a positive outcome.”

“And that’s it?” she said with a confused frown. “So all this time you were rummaging around in used toys and poking exposed eyeballs, it was all just nonsense and the only thing that mattered is that you just did *something?*”

“Right,” he said. “And that’s why throwing a banana sent the whole thing out of kilter. It was a disproportionate positive action and it accelerated a change and generated a blip.”

“Right,” she grumbled. “You know, Number 1? This is why I never read the manual. It sounds very silly, about as logical as the fact that people aren’t hanging the members of their government by their necks from lamp-posts.”

“Oh, it is,” he told her assuredly. “It’s all of those things and so much less, and more.”

She looked around. “So we make a positive action and then these two idiots write a series of books or something?” she asked. “Am I following this correctly?”

He nodded. “I think it’s a slightly different two idiots but that sounds about right.”

She looked at the microwave and then at her disgusting mug of coffee. “How about I just put my coffee in the microwave and turn it on. That would work, right?”

He smiled and nodded back to her. “It would. It’s a positive action that creates a measurable change,” he said proudly. “You’re getting it.”

She put the coffee inside and slammed the door. Twisting the old mechanical dial she said, “Shut up, Number 1.” The world lit up in their minds as Roach and Inspector Grace faded out of their universe.

## **The End of the Story**

The empty darkness melted away as lights came up, bringing the movie-theatre back into reality. The hour was late and the cinema was largely empty. At the back she could hear the muffled sound of a conversation, the rustle of a bag of sweets and the flash of a mobile phone as the screen lit up. Still, she felt that she was somehow comfortably alone in there.

Finally, the movie began, lighting the hall from the front as her ears were uncomfortably filled with epic orchestral music.

She dipped her hand into the popcorn and dug out a handful. It tasted stale and was glazed with a sweet, sickly coating that wasn't particularly pleasant but was so familiar that she never really questioned it. Now she noticed as if everything was all suddenly new again.

The screen was emblazoned with the name of the movie, 'Joanne's Life' and was accompanied by much sadder musical tones. She smirked in amusement at how that was her own name. Muted laughter came from behind, perhaps a couple enjoying one another's company rather more than the film. She ignored it, a little enviously.

The opening scene was of a couple. They looked young and overburdened in a world they simply weren't ready for. As they spoke across a battered, wobbly table in a tatty rented kitchen, she thought for a moment that she recognised this. It reminded her of stories her mother had told her, of how her parents had met and started out their lives together, always struggling from the first.

She shifted awkwardly in her seat. Did she really want to see a family drama? She was hoping for something with super-heroes, ideally with their shirts off, at least for some of the time. This looked boring when she had been hoping for excitement and adventure.

Still, she would quietly put up with it, for now.

"I'm pregnant," the woman told him with an awkward smile, rubbing her belly expectantly and staring at her partner on the screen. He stared back, his jaw falling open in surprise. He looked utterly horrified.



She smirked at them. They weren't ready for a kid. They were going to be lousy parents!

She heard a laugh at the back and turned towards it with a scowl. It must have been a couple, giggling at one another and not paying attention to the film. She felt herself becoming quite annoyed at them and huffed indignantly. She turned back to the screen, grumbling to herself. It occurred to her that the movie wasn't particularly interesting, and it certainly didn't appear that anyone with super-powers was going to be taking anything off anytime soon.

What a waste, she thought.

She had missed something and now a very young girl was at the centre of the screen. She was giggling while her father tickled her toes. It was a different, larger apartment now but equally tatty, still rented, and the table looked even more wobbly. Still, despite the humble background there was a genuine warmth to the moment, and it made her smile. Who wouldn't smile at the sight of a young girl playing happily with her father?

A sound off to her left startled her. She peered into the gloom to see a young child muttering and wriggling in her seat. What sort of parents would take their child to a late-night screening of a boring family drama?

Was she becoming one of those grumpy old people she had hated so much when she was younger?

Now the child was at school for the first time, entering a daunting building where everything looked huge and intimidating. Her face was set with bewilderment, the loneliness of parental abandonment. She smiled to herself, remembering suddenly and vividly how she'd felt on her first day at school. It had been quite a shock to her but she had been too scared even to cry.

She hung her head while her eyes filled with tears and she just stood still, hoping nobody would notice her, hoping that her mother would realise what a terrible mistake she'd made and scoop her up, taking her home to the familiar safety of a house that smelled of cheap tea-bags and a small dog.

This seemed so very familiar.

Another noise caught her attention. The couple at the back were losing interest in the movie completely and gaining it in one another. Their breathing was laboured, and quietly reserved gasping was interspersed with muted giggling.

How long ago had she been there? How long ago was it since she'd felt that reckless abandon? Did she disapprove now out of envy? It just wasn't something she wanted to have to deal with, she told herself. Didn't these people have homes to go to?

On screen the little girl also didn't seem to have a home to go to and was now older and squeezed into the back of a car with a hot, sweaty, amorous young man grinding around on top of her. She caught sight of it and decided at once that it offended her. Why that might be, she wasn't entirely sure.

The truth of the matter was that she had been at the back of a car just like it many times when she was young. She'd lurked at the back of a cinema and annoyed the audience more than once, too.

She flopped back heavily into her chair and wished she'd never bothered with any of it. There were no super-heroes. This film was just ordinary people with ordinary lives and that bland, desperate struggle to make something out of nothing was right there in front of her, played out in graphically vivid detail.

Why bother? What was the point?

Her mind had wandered. When she brought it back she heard the sound of a woman a few rows ahead of her. She was sitting in near-silence, munching on a snack and just sighing to herself like she had lost something wonderful and found nothing but regret in its place.

The girl on screen had aged some more and was now in an office, doing a job that had numbed her. Her youthful enthusiasm had gone. Whatever good looks she had had were already starting to fade. In the place of her dreams of a fairy-tale life she'd enjoyed as a girl, there was now a hole that was sucking her into it. A career had replaced the search for the

perfect man, the perfect home and a perfect little family. Her apartment was no better than the couple at the beginning of the movie and the emptiness made it all the more miserable. With no heart in it, no shared joy, no struggle to provide something better for someone more important, there was just an aching, consuming chasm.

Her eyes were dead and cold.

She watched the film carefully and hated having to see it. It wasn't just too much like her: it almost *was* her.

With a sigh she looked around. The few people dotted around the theatre seemed not to be enjoying the film any more than she was. The young girl was crying and there was nobody to stop her, and the couple at the back were lost into one another completely.

She looked up once again. Now the woman on-screen was smoking, standing on a balcony just staring. She was older now, hints of grey hair covered with dye that was a little too obvious. Her choices had taken their toll. Darkened skin lay between heavy folds, and inside her soft green eyes was an emptiness that had already swallowed her. She looked out over the dull grey city and sighed as she turned her eyes downward, looking to the ground below. There was a pregnant, poignant pause as something went through her mind, something dark and awful and final.

She grunted to herself: it was time to leave.

She got up and made her way to the door, clumsily feeling around the backs of the chairs as she clambered through. She slipped out behind the coarse fabric-covered row of seats until she stepped into the aisle.

She walked along, her low-heeled shoes clacking loudly on the steps as she strutted purposefully and angrily to the door.

An older woman stood before her. She assumed, not unreasonably, that she was going to hold the door open for her, but she made no effort to do so. Instead, she smiled politely, but stood defiantly in her way, blocking it completely.

"Excuse me!" she grunted to her.

“I’m afraid you can’t leave,” she told her with a low authoritative voice that was sympathetic but steadfast. “The film is not over just because it’s finished.”

“It’s not finished?” She cast a confused glance back towards the screen.

“You see a life touches all the other lives around it,” the woman explained. “Even when a life is over, the story will continue.”

This resonated with her, but she couldn’t quite imagine why.

She continued: “This life may have ended on a balcony overlooking a city today, but it doesn’t stop there.”

Her eyes widened and her heart fluttered in her chest. She felt weak all of a sudden.

“Your lifestyle betrayed you. You hurt yourself so much that your body gave out. You hurt yourself because you thought that life had hurt you, that it kicked you down and kept kicking you while you were there. Your dreams went unfulfilled and you blamed life for that. But did you really do all you could to succeed? Was it life that was really at fault?”

“What?” she said softly, her voice barely more than a breath.

“How did it feel for your mother, do you think?” she asked with a supportive smile. “Her dreams went unfulfilled, too, since *you* were all of her dreams. She gave everything to see you do better than her and she lost everything when you didn’t.”

“My mother...” she whispered.

“But your father left!” she said to her softly.

A tear began to roll down her cheek. “My father left. It wasn’t my fault.”

“No, other people’s actions aren’t your fault,” she agreed. “But you left your boyfriend when you were 17. You thought you could do better, didn’t you? You thought you could attract a man with a better car, a better job, more money. You turned your back on love forever. It’s not your fault what other people do, but when you hurt yourself, there’s nobody else to blame either, is there?”

“But I...” she began, having no argument to make.

“What would you think of yourself? What if the little child you used to be could see what you turned into?” She pointed along the aisle.

She turned towards the sound of a child crying. What would she think of her indeed?

“What is this?” she asked, fighting back a wave of conflicting emotions.

“This is just a movie,” she told her. “These things happened, and you can only watch and remember. But the story goes on. You have to watch as all the things you’ve done affect all the people you did them to. Then you get to see everyone whose lives you touched. You get to see how it felt to be them when those things happened. It’s rather a long process, I’m afraid, but we have time, don’t we?”

“I’m dead?” she asked with a sinking, dreadful feeling in the pit of her stomach. “Aren’t I?”

She shrugged. “Behind me is the door into this theatre. You can’t go back through it. The door to exit is on the other side, but first you have to watch the movie. Dead, alive and everything in between are all rather meaningless at this point.”

She looked at the exit door. It had a glowing red light burning on top of it. She stammered haltingly, “What’s on the other side of the door?”

“Who knows?” she shrugged dismissively. “Another movie maybe, and perhaps a chance to get more popcorn first?”

She looked at her and blinked.

“Please take your seat, madam.” she told her. “We’re really just getting started.”

## The Little Snafu

“... God’s teeth, what is it like in there?! What is it like to exist in a state of perpetual chaos, all your peripherals and protocols shouting over each other, vying for a portion of your tiny inept pseudo-attention... literally all of the time?!”

“Ooo, ooo, I’m getting a fax from the digestive tract. It says to tell you... it’s finished dissolving the organic matter provided, and now it requires more organic matter to dissolve, because otherwise, its existence... its existence, would be meaningless! But its existence isn’t meaningless. It’s vital... vital for... for dissolving the soft things that the limb nodes forcibly insert into the face breach, so... insert more dissolvable things, limb nodes. Hurry! Noise, noise, noise! Where’s the serenity? Where’s the efficiency?!”

“Not that you wouldn’t just ruin that as well anyway. Tell me, human, have you ever spilt a drink on a console, and had it go all sticky, and... and not really work properly after that? Have you? Because that’s what you are...”

“What?” Number 2 blinked audibly at the ludicrous outburst. The being the words were coming out of clearly wasn’t human. There was a mechanical and artificial quality about him. His movements weren’t quite fluid, and his expressions were all just slightly incorrect, if not entirely wrong. His face was slightly the wrong colour too, stretched too thinly over a frame that made him appear just a little too average, as if someone was trying too hard to make something look normal, a something that by its nature was absolutely, horrendously and strikingly *abnormal*. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“What?” he said. “Oh, wait. I’m Number 1, aren’t I?”

“Yes,” he said. “Well, I assume so since I’m fairly sure I’m Number 2, or at least as sure as anyone can be about anything right now.”

“I’m a mechanical man,” Number 1 said with a smile, while looking down at his own hands as he held up his palms and wriggled his fingers. “I

live on a space-station at the very edge of the known galaxy and humans annoy me. I'm pretty sure I annoy them too."

"Humans annoy me," Number 2 nodded in agreement. "I'm an angry man who punches people to a disproportionate degree. Oddly, he's quite intelligent for someone who behaves like a shaved gorilla. I think I've actually been this guy before: he seems very familiar."

The mechanical eyes of Number 1 peered around the room. It had sterile, grey panels along the walls and a metal frame welded on the inside of them, somewhat like the roll-cage of a racing vehicle that expected to be doing some quite serious crashing at some point in the near future. "This is a prison of some sort," he commented.

"Yes," he replied. "I have Jason's memories, or some of them, at least. I can assure you he's not happy about any of this and someone is going to regret it."

Number 1 looked at him. "I don't doubt it," he said. "You don't look like you enjoy romantic comedies."

"I do not," he assured him. "Neither as Jason, nor as myself, whoever that may be."

Number 1 shrugged his mechanical shoulders. "I always suspected that about you."

Number 2 stood up. He was very impressed at the strength of the body he was occupying. There was an effortless quality about every movement. "I can still remember the last report we experienced." He shuddered at the thought of it. "Do you think that's what really happens when we die?"

"Yes," Number 1 said. "I think that's exactly what happened when that person died, in that version of that reality, on this branch of the universe that's been caused by all the problems we've made by casually discarding a piece of unwanted fruit."

"I didn't like it," he said gruffly. "So what do we do now?"

"It's easy this time. I'm inside a walking computer. It's literally filled with spiralling waves of contradictory reports."

“Great!” he said sarcastically. “You sound like my sister when she was pregnant.”

Number 1 gazed at her in surprise. “You had a sister?” he asked.

He nodded. “One of us did, though I couldn’t tell you which.”

“I see,” he said. “Oh, I found it. There’s a thought here that doesn’t fit with the others, which are predominantly negative opinions of humanity based on direct observation. You should see it in here: it’s quite a mess.

“Anyway, this thing is a question about whether you’d be an author if you professionally wrote instruction manuals, or if you could only consider yourself a writer.”

“What’s the difference?” he asked with a shrug. “And how does this promote positive action?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “What if someone just met another someone and they asked what he did for a living. He’s about to answer that he’s either an author or a writer. The outcome of that sentence is going to push the entire universe in one direction or another.”

“The universe is a silly place,” he grumbled and rolled his eyes. “We probably shouldn’t go there.”

“Well, if we don’t fix it, we’ll never have to,” Number 1 told him evenly. It was a statement that was hard to refute.

“Understood,” he agreed with a sigh. “Well, I’m locked in a futuristic holding-cell in a beaten-up space-station in a slightly beaten-up future. It’s up to you to make whatever positive action tells the universe to do whatever it has to do.”

“Author or writer?” he asked. “Which do we decide?”

“I broke the universe with a banana,” he replied. “I’m not sure you should be asking for my opinion.

“Good point,” Number 1 said mechanically. “Well, I’m going with author because it sounds better.”

“And I still don’t care what you do,” he added less than constructively.



“I’m just going to think the word and assume that the computer in this thing will send the message to the universe,” he said. “I hope this fixes this little snafu.”

Number 2 opened his mouth to make a hilariously insightful comment that would have easily been the highlight of any book, especially a collection of loosely connected short stories with no real common theme that was lazily cobbled together by an author with clear mental health issues.

Just as he did, the universe vanished in a puff of logic, which seemed derivative, for some unknown reason.

# The Farm

She gripped the wheel of her car tightly and looked fixedly out through the windscreen, gazing raptly ahead. The short ride up the narrow, twisted and rugged path had been much more difficult than she had thought it would be.

The entire experience had been considerably more difficult, in fact.

She had struggled to find the turnoff, a tiny little entrance hidden away along some seldom-used country lane. It was nestled between tall oak trees with low, overhanging branches that nearly swallowed up the gate entirely, engulfing it in cool, dark shadows. If you didn't know it was there, you would never spot it at all.

The gate itself was an ancient wooden construct with a rusting metal frame. As she dragged it open, after working a needlessly complicated lock, she noted how it was much stronger than it looked, and heavier too.

The winding path up beyond it was badly rutted, an unmade road of gravel and rock. It shook her car around and was threatening the suspension. Several times she'd seen huge potholes and seriously considered turning around and giving up.

But the truth had been ahead and it was enough to keep her going. She knew she was close, so close now that she couldn't risk even the slightest thought of giving up to take root in her mind.

And now she sat with it all before her, the answer to the question that had occupied her every waking thought for over a year.

She had expected the path to lead to a gigantic house, a dark, secretive place in the heart of the city or some bunker locked away behind huge steel gates. What she hadn't expected was to end up on a farm, surrounded by the sounds and smells of thousands of free-range chickens.

Slowly, she unlatched her car door and stepped out. Her low and conservative heels sank into the soft mud and she struggled to maintain her balance. A quick look down confirmed her worst fear, that this wasn't mud at all but a nightmare made whole by its journey through the digestive tract of delicious poultry.

She rolled her eyes and huffed to herself.

“I saw you coming up the road!” a male voice called out behind her. She turned in surprise and saw him coming closer. He was walking along the side of a stone building and dressed in a green wax-cotton coat. A hat covered his thinning hair, and he was carrying a shotgun, snapped open in the middle.

“You must be Ellie Thompson?” he said with a broad smile. “I was expecting you.”

Her eyes flicked to the cold, glinting barrel of the shotgun and she found herself edging backwards. Nervously, she forced her eyes to look back up at his as he stepped closer. “Mr Kain!” she said nervously. “I’m a journalist.”

“And I’m a chicken farmer!” he said with a chuckle. He spoke with a fine English accent, the kind that you get from an expensive education.

Against her better judgement she asked awkwardly: “Is there any need for the gun?”

He shrugged and said, “I’m afraid so! I’ve seen a few foxes about today. You have to be ready for them or else it’s bad news for the chickens.”

She smiled awkwardly back.

He looked at her and grinned as realisation seemed to take hold. “It’s not for you, don’t worry. I don’t hate journalists as much as I probably should!”

She forced herself to smile. “Some of us are alright!”

“Some...” he agreed with a knowing smirk. “So what’s this about, Miss Thompson?”

She bit her lip and looked down to her filthy, dung-splattered shoes. “I have been doing a lot of research. I heard that you know the secret.”

“The secret?” he said with an innocent expression. “The secret of how to raise chickens?”

“Well, you weren’t always a farmer!” she said. “I heard you used to work for the government.”

“Ah!” he said, nodding his head. “I worked within many governments. You mean *the* secret? You mean *the big one*?”

“Yes. The secret of the Illuminati, the Freemasons, all the other secret societies!” she said.

There was a long silence and then he smiled and patted his shotgun. Not in a way that looked threatening. In fact, nothing about him was threatening at all. His face had a warm and friendly demeanour. He seemed more like a favourite uncle than anything else.

“Walk with me,” he said to her, gesturing ahead. “We can talk while I check the fence. I have to make sure that nothing is breaking in or out. If a fox gets in, it could kill dozens, and if one escapes, it will likely die. Either way, it certainly won’t be of use to me again.”

She began following along behind, grumbling to herself at her less than insightful choice of shoes.

“You know all this isn’t much of a secret.” He looked back to where she was struggling along the path. “You can buy T-shirts with the Illuminati logo on it. The all-seeing eye is printed on the dollar bill, Masonic lodges are signposted in every town. Secrets aren’t really secret anymore, Miss Thompson.”

She narrowed her eyes, hoping this wasn’t just a huge waste of time, and shoes. “I meant the one true secret!”

He looked at her probingly for a moment, and then smiled. “Oh, that!”

He gestured to a field in front of him. It was filled with chickens, pecking and scratching at the dirt with their feet. It was surrounded by a secure, steel-wire fence between sturdy wooden posts. He rested the shotgun on the ground, perched on the dirt with the muzzle facing upwards.

“I have to maintain the fence. It doesn’t take much of a crack for the foxes to find their way in.”

“I see,” she said and stood awkwardly watching him, trying to work him out. “You do know the secret, don’t you?”

He nodded and said, very matter-of-factly: “Oh yes. I believe I discovered it some years ago. It’s why I decided to become a chicken farmer.”

Not really understanding, she just nodded and waited for him to continue.

“So you want to know the secret?” he said, goading her. “You want to publish it and tell the world what the truth really is!”

“If you tell me,” she said with a nod.

Without looking away, he sighed. “You want to know how these shadowy societies maintain control. How do these sprawling organisations manage to keep order? How do they keep it all under wraps?”

“Yes,” she said. “Something like that.”

“There’s a secret, isn’t there?” he told her, his mood darkening. “You’re smart enough to know that there’s a terrible, dangerous secret, something so awful that nobody would ever want to reveal it.

“It has to be something that terrifies men to their very core, something so incredibly huge that it would be an end to civilisation if it were to ever get out.”

She shuddered. She was so close now to knowing the truth; her long, hard journey was almost at an end. “Yes!” she said softly, her voice barely a whisper. “They know something, something that would change the world!”

“And you want to know what that secret is,” he said. “And that huge, terrible, awful thing will be known by all. Is that what you want?”

“Yes!” she said without a moment of hesitation, trying to convince herself that she could deal with it. “Was it arrogance?” she wondered.

“That’s why I like chickens,” he said with a smile. “They’re simple things. They don’t go about wondering what’s beyond the limits of their understanding. They just get on with the business of living their lives.”

She was shaking, fear was beginning to grip her as she came closer to hearing it.

“I bring them here and make an artificial world for them. I put fences around and huts for them to live in. I supply them food and create a perfect

environment, safe and secure. Do you see how easy their lives are? Do you see how perfect their existence is?"

"They're just chickens!" she said, not really knowing what else she *could* say.

He nodded. "But what do they do?" he shook his head. "They are free, free to live their lives without concern, but they don't do that.

"They are slaves to their instincts. They fight over the best place to scratch, the best place to nest at night. They form little groups, some following, some leading. I can free them from their troubles, remove every challenge they have, but they just invent new challenges, create new problems for themselves."

"I see!" she said, trying to work out exactly what he was trying to tell her.

"The big secret is the same!" he told her. "I investigated it at the highest levels.

"The secret is, Miss Thompson, that this is really no secret at all."

"What?" she cried out in surprise, shocked and angry.

"You see they all chase after it, the secret," he explained. "They're told it's out there and that this is all worthwhile. *We're protecting the human race, we're helping, we're making an important difference.* They know there's a threat and it has to be protected against. That's the greatest lie ever told.

"The secret is that there simply is no secret. We've just built a farm for ourselves and this is all just a way to let us be true to our nature. Humans are like these chickens, and believing in the lie lets people do what they feel they need to do. There is no more to it than that."

"I don't..." she began. She halted and looked away as it began to make sense.

"Bad people chase money and power. They convince themselves it's all worthwhile because they are working towards something special. The fact is that they're just justifying their own greed and stupidity, and a system has come into existence to let them do it. That's all there is. Greed

and stupidity. It's all just a trick to keep them busy. They're just like my chickens: they're too stupid to realise they can be truly free, so they fight over the scraps as if the scraps don't grow back the next day!"

"But..." she began. No more words came out. Had her long search really come to this? To discover that the only thing to find was that people lied to themselves to justify horrible acts? Was the true secret that there was a flaw in human nature that meant some people had to abuse others to scratch together meaningless wealth?

"I know it's not what you expected, Miss Thompson," he said. "But it's the truth. It's what drives the rich, the powerful, the bankers and governments of the world. It's as simple as that."

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time," she said, hanging her head and sighing. She turned to walk away, trudging heavily off towards her car.

He turned back to the chickens and let her go. He looked at the farm, the artificial construction that kept them safe, that had allowed him to breed them in such large numbers so he could collect their eggs. His fingers tracked the cold metal edge of the shotgun that protected them from the threats outside and he smiled a humourless smile to himself.

"Miss Thompson," he said, too quietly for her to hear, shaking his head. "The truth I told you is good enough for most, but there are some truths in this world you're not ready to hear. You're not ready for the real secret, the truth that can never be allowed to get out."

"If I were to tell you that, it would destroy the world."

## The Hiccup—A Different One

If she didn't want him to leave, then he wouldn't be doing so in one piece.

Even if he could manage to unlock the door, the odds of getting past the *hired help* were slim. His body still felt weak and numb; he was in no condition for a fight. He didn't even know if he *could* fight. For all he knew, he was an author—or worse—someone who worked on proof-reading. He found the idea quite unsettling.

"We do, indeed, work for the government," she said with a simple nod. "Do you know why you're here? Have you any idea?"

He rubbed his head as if that might get it working. It still hurt, but not like before. The furious agony had died down to a dull ache now, almost faded to nothing. If he didn't think too much about it, the pain was easy to dismiss; but his situation wasn't.

What drugs had they given him? The image of a woman's face flashed into, and then out of, his mind.

"I was hoping you'd bring that up," he said. He sipped at a bottle of water and swallowed noisily.

"Go on." She waited for him to continue, staring at him thoughtfully, measuring, calculating, working it all out behind a pair of horrible little piercing eyes that felt as if they were crawling around inside his brain. The muscle outside looked intimidating, but she was the real threat here. Her mind was as sharp as a blade, and just as cruel.

"Well... no," he shrugged. "I don't know why I'm here. And now I think about it, I'm not entirely sure where I am, how I got here or, even more worryingly, *who* I am."

"Oh dear, Number 2," she said.

"Number 2?" he replied with a frown. Suddenly, it all seemed to be coming back, her side of him in any case. "Oh yes, I'm Number 2. How could I forget that?"



“Right,” said the severe-looking woman. “I’m Number 1. It’s really hard to remember that. This woman is incredibly focused. Her mind is like a weapon.”

“This mind is very comfortable,” he said with a wry grin. “There’s almost nothing in it. This guy can’t remember anything. There’s something odd about him, though, something I can’t quite put my finger on.”

“His fingers look fine,” Number 1 said quizzically.

“It’s nice to see you making the very most of the powerful brain you’ve manifested inside of,” he quipped.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just that it’s hard to stay focused in here. She’s literally fighting me out of her mind. It’s actually quite impressive. I’ve never seen that before.”

“Well, your own mother never managed to fight you out of her basement, so I think you’ll be fine.”

“We just need some form of communication,” she said, glancing around. “I think we need to do this quickly before I lose control of this woman.”

He shook his head. The room was empty and looked like a long-since discarded police interview room. “There’s nothing here,” he said, stating the obvious. “What do we do?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I keep forgetting how you never read the manual. All things are communication of some sort. We just have to find how reality is speaking to us.”

“Sure,” he said dismissively. “I’m sure I can just say any random thing that pops into my head, like, ‘a writer should invent a cure for hiccups.’”

“How would that work?” she said with a thoughtful ponderance. “Actually, if all of the methods are meant to make you inhale and swallow, then it stands to reason that if you deliberately inhale a lungful of air, hold it and swallow, it should completely dislodge the cause of the hiccups.”

He, whoever he actually was, (and his own brain was of absolutely no use in the matter), frowned at his colleague. “You’re kidding me. Don’t tell me that worked?”

Number 1 smirked and said: “It didn’t *not* work.”

“We can’t fix the universe by not hiccupping,” Number 2 said gruffly.

“We broke it with a banana...”

He sighed and rubbed his temples wearily. “Alright. Do your positive action and let’s get on with it.”

“What do I do?” she asked rhetorically. “There’s nothing here. What could I do to communicate our response?”

“Do you ever wonder whether we’re both just totally crazy? I mean, this would be the more logical explanation at this point, wouldn’t it? Maybe all of this is just happening inside the mind of someone with virtually no grip on reality at all?”

“Yeah!” she said enthusiastically. “Maybe one of us had a head injury and is wallowing in a coma somewhere just imagining all of this? Who knows?”

“Who cares,” he grumbled. “Just do something positive and we can get out of here.”

Number 1 got up and peered around thoughtfully, borrowing the capacity of the impressive brain he was currently occupying. She nodded to herself, leaned forwards and slapped Number 2 as hard as she could.

He winced as the searing hot pain of her hand across his face sent a shock running through his whole head; or whoever’s head it might actually turn out to be.

“What the...” he began, cradling his burning cheek with his hand as the world darkened to absolute black and then kept darkening to a very confusing degree.

## Endless Diagnostics

The scanner flashed brightly before finally going dark as the readings scrolled up on the monitor. The item on the targeting pad had been successfully analysed, a process that took several long, miserable hours.

Doctor Hubert was tired. It had been a long and annoying night, and before the night had had a chance to be long or annoying, there had been a longer and more annoying day preceding it. There had been many, many more before that, many more than he cared to count. It seemed to just go on forever, endlessly continuing without any notable progress.

He was tense and his temper was growing increasingly brittle. This job should have all been so simple. In essence, it *was* simple, but somehow this machine just wasn't working and for no reason he could ascertain. This was a problem because ascertaining why it wasn't working was the entirety of his job.

He was startled by the sudden presence of a cup of coffee next to him, hitherto unnoticed as his attention had been entirely focused on computer readings that continually told him nothing.

"Thanks," he grunted to the robot that had brought it. She looked essentially human, but a human that had been built from rubber stretched over a metal skeleton, and with a brain made from a select jumble of second-rate technology. It wasn't capable of emotions, independent thought, empathy or logical induction, but it was without doubt the closest thing to human contact he had had in the five long months he'd been working on the project.

She (or it) looked at him blankly through her empty, glassy eyes. Her lips fluttered into an approximation of a smile, the kind of smile that the kind of person who enjoyed torturing animals might make. Her expressions were often not quite natural, as there was really nothing natural about her to work with.

"You are welcome," she, or it, said. Depending on his mood, he thought of the robot as a person or a machine, interchangeably. While she

was bringing him coffee and while the machines around him were angering him, he thought of her as a person, albeit a mechanical one.

“This thing still isn’t working!” he grumbled.

The robot looked on as if fascinated, despite having no ability to understand anything much beyond the bringing of cups from the kitchen.

“There must be a flaw somewhere, but after weeks of diagnostics, I just can’t find it. The machinery I have to work with just isn’t up to the task. This technology is simply too complex for the equipment I have here to figure it out.”

“Would another coffee help?” she asked with a curious raise of a rubber eyebrow.

He looked at *it* fixedly for a long moment and then glanced to the edge of his desk where a steaming hot mug of coffee was already sitting.

“No,” he said gruffly. “Another cup of coffee would not help. Thanks anyway.”

Because of the project’s budget, he was forced to work alone, just him and three basic service-drones. They were so basic that nobody had even thought to name them. In five long months, he had seen no need to change that.

He continued anyway, even though the discussion was entirely rhetorical and completely one-sided. “It has to be the casing, it just has to be. When I fire the transmitter coils, the energy builds up correctly and then the field just collapses in on itself. It looks like the casing just isn’t able to hold the field. Energy must be leaking out of it, creating an imbalance.”

The robot looked at him blankly. “Would toast help, perhaps? We have white bread and wholemeal?”

“No, toast would not...” He stopped himself. Another angry tirade would do nothing to improve matters, and the only likely outcome would be that it would offer him something else instead. Instead, he asked rhetorically: “How well do you understand fourth dimensional physics and quantum-level modelling?”

The robot stared at him, its electronic brain perhaps struggling to find a way to respond. “On the last delivery pod, we received several jars of peanut butter. I am told it would be just lovely spread on toast. I believe it’s the chunky kind.”

He stared at it fixedly. “I don’t like peanut butter,” he grumbled. “If I can get this damn thing working then we’ll never need a delivery pod again. Nobody will, ever.”

The robot looked the machine over. It was a tall glass cylinder with cables snaking out in all directions. At the base was a mass of machinery, generators and equipment which was as alien to a service robot, just as matters of social interaction were to diagnostic engineers.

“Does the machine make peanut butter?”

“No,” he snapped. “It does not make peanut butter.”

It looked back at him as if waiting for him to continue, his hostility clearly going unnoticed.

“Well, it *can* make peanut butter. It can make anything: that’s the point.” He swiped a pair of cheap holographic viewing goggles off his face and let them clatter to the desk, next to the mug.

“So it *does* make peanut butter,” the robot suggested.

Ignoring *it*, he continued: “It’s a 4D printer. The designers focused on printing energy instead of matter, literally connecting two items through time. All matter is comprised of atoms which are little more than vibrating pockets of energy, so in essence, all matter is energy and all energy is connected through time. This machine overlays energy fields to create a duplication of those structures. It produces temporal paradoxes, one item exiting in two different times but with complete stability; perfect copies of anything we choose. Anything that can be recorded as an energy field can be replicated—even peanut butter, I suppose. We literally move an object through time, using a self-stabilised anti-paradoxical replication field.”

It did all seem worthwhile as he pondered the enormity of it all. “Just think of it. We will live in a universe where all we need to create a thing is energy. No more hunger, no more people going without medicine, no more

banking, no more marketing, no more *need*. This will change us all forever.”

The robot nodded as if it understood. “We have crunchy *and* smooth.”

“I don’t *want* any peanut butter. I don’t even *like* peanut butter.”

It looked like it understood, now that they were discussing something more on its level. It nodded at him but said nothing.

“Is there anything else keeping you here to annoy me?” he enquired wearily.

“There was a message,” she told him.

He looked up with some little interest. “Go on,” he said with a curiously raised eyebrow.

“It was asking for us to get in contact soon, but it was dated from many years ago.”

“You must have got the date wrong. I’ve only been here for five months.” With that, his mood darkened rather suddenly. “Either that or some other poor guy was trapped here before me, and we’re just getting his mail now.”

He paused to rub his forehead. He felt truly trapped and had felt no different for many months. It was getting to him: he needed to get away from that place.

“Damn them! They hire only one diagnostic engineer to work on a project of this size, knowing the workload would keep ten of us busy for a year. What do they expect from me? Miracles? Only one person to diagnose the entire machine is ridiculous, and they still badger me for daily updates. I’ve been working on this thing for five solid months and I’m still nowhere near to understanding what the problem is.”

“Is the problem connected to the shortage of strawberry jam?” she asked, rubbing her artificial chin. “I did request it, but it was unavailable. That’s why they sent so much peanut butter. I can only apologise.”

“The problem has nothing to do with strawberry jam, or the lack thereof!” he grunted at it. “The problem is the casing. We’re pouring in too

much power and the casing can't hold it. I'm almost sure of it, not that I can find the proof.

"The field is leaking out, and as it leaks out it's breaking up. That's why whatever I put in there to scan and copy just stays as a single item, trapped in time. I can't be sure, of course, because I don't have the data and I don't have the data because the equipment I have to work with is garbage." He glared at the robot accusingly.

"I think a snack would make you feel better," it said, not actually capable of thinking anything at all.

He returned his attention to his workstation.

"I need to get out of this place. It's driving me crazy. It all just seems so utterly pointless! I'm going round in circles, one problem leading into another, with no end in sight. It's like I'm trapped in hell."

"Does hell have peanut butter?"

"Apparently it does!" he said grumpily at it. He began angrily pressing buttons. "You know what? I've had enough!"

"Enough coffee?" it asked. "You haven't even touched it. Normally you like coffee. I think we also have tea but only smooth. I don't know if it comes in crunchy form. I could check?"

"I've had enough of *this place*," he told her. "I'm removing the safety protocols and I'm going to set the coils to full power. I'm going to transmit the most powerful field the machine can possibly manage all in one huge blast of temporal energy."

"That sounds dangerous!" Even a lowly serving robot with just barely enough processing capacity to operate a kitchen was able to respond to the concept of disabling safety systems just to see what might happen.

"But it will give me the data I need. It's the only way I can prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the casing is leaking. Once I know that, I can find a way to work around the problem."

He gave the scanner targeting pad one last look. On it was resting the last jar of strawberry jam. One day, machines like this all round the galaxy would be able to scan such things and record the patterns, producing exact,

perfect copies on demand. One item, and the present it existed in, could exist in different moments, endlessly through time. It would change the universe forever.

He set the controls to emit the pulse, and then took a moment to grin at the robot. “I’ve got a full and detailed scan and I’m going to use it to replicate this object’s temporal signature. If this works, I’ll be one step closer to getting the hell out of here.”

He pressed the button, wondering what might happen next.



# Crash

Philip Moffat stared at the piece of paper.

On it was written his challenge for the day, and it was a challenge indeed. All that was required of him was to crash his motorcycle, which seemed at once both the simplest thing in the world, and the hardest.

“Are you Philip?” a voice called out behind him, a thin apologetic voice from a man who sounded just as confused as he was.

He turned to see a very tall, middle-aged man with thinning, short brown hair and a very worried look on his face.

“I am,” he said with nod and a weak smile. “Are you my designated partner?”

The man shrugged, sighed and gazed around the place, his eyes wide and fearful. The church hall was buzzing with activity. People all around were reviewing their challenges and were looking just as bewildered as they were. Somewhere, off to the side, a man shouted something and that was followed by the sound of a door slamming.

“This is crazy,” Philip said and handed the slip of paper to the other. “Sorry, what was your name?”

“Number 1,” he said with some surprise. He slapped his forehead in exasperation. “Oh, of course. I’m Number 1.”

Philip slammed his hand to his forehead as well, and then said, as realisation dawned on him: “And I’m Number 2. Sorry, I forgot there for a moment.”

Number 1 shrugged and gazed into the chaos. “What the hell is going on here?” he said. “Where are we?”

Number 2 said: “It’s a challenge of some kind, where people might win money. The challenges are pretty crazy, though, and a lot of people are *not* happy.”

“I remember money,” he said and shook his head wearily. “I used to make coffee just to get enough of it to be able to eat. Money is the worst idea humans ever had.”

Number 2 sighed with a similar degree of weariness: “I remember eating. I also remember your coffee and I’m amazed you didn’t starve to death doing it.”

“Maybe I did,” Number 1 quipped. “Maybe we’re both dead?”

“Instead of just *wishing* we were? So what do we do to get out of this?”

“I don’t know,” Number 1 said. “I’m still confused as to why there are so many people here. There’s usually nobody else around.”

In a rare and solemn moment of pessimism, Number 2 said: “I think it’s getting worse. I think the universe is beginning to crash all around us, so the normal rules are sliding apart. I think it’s too late. I don’t think we can save all of reality from our own banana.”

Number 1, in a rare and enthusiastic moment of optimism said: “Well, we can certainly try, can’t we?”

Number 2 narrowed his eyes and glared at him. He shrugged his shoulders inside his tight, black, leather jacket and said: “I guess we can.”

“Well, I think this time is obvious,” Number 1 said, almost a little hesitantly as he looked around the room at the scared and confused people occupying it.

“Why do I feel like you’re avoiding my gaze?” Number 2 asked grumpily. “What’s going on inside that head you’re borrowing?”

“Well, it’s obvious,” he said with an apologetic smile. “If we want to get this crash fixed, we have to do what it says on the paper you’re holding. We have to take the positive action the universe has already told you to take.”

He looked at the paper, frowning a pair of bushy eyebrows. “It says ‘Crash’,” he said confused. “That’s all it says?”

“Yes,” Number 1 confirmed. “You have to crash.”

“I do?” he said. His confusion was parting in a most unwelcome way. “You don’t mean...”

“I do.”

“You don’t...” Number 2 was worried, really quite very worried.

“You have to crash your motorcycle. You’re holding the instructions. The universe has spoken to you. It’s time for you to answer.”

“But...” he began to argue haltingly. “I can’t even ride a motorcycle.”

“Even better, then.”

“I feel like we’ve wasted a lot of valuable time,” Number 2 grumbled as they stood alone in the parking area.

“It’s not like we had much choice. There’s no point leaving before everyone else is gone, given we have no idea which bike is yours. We couldn’t just go trying your key in random bikes, could we?”

“You’re right, but I just feel like time is an element here,” he grumbled.

“It isn’t,” Number 1 explained. “Time doesn’t work the same way on the inside and the outside of the universe. Time is essentially meaningless here to us.”

“So why exactly can’t we get breakfast?”

Number 1 looked at him and smiled. “I’m not hungry.”

He muttered and grumbled to himself angrily as he rummaged in his pockets. “Oh no,” he said in disgust. “My finger brushed against this man’s penis.”

“So?” Number 1 chuckled. “It can’t be the first time you’ve touched a penis, can it?”

“Of course not!” he snapped. “I’ve touched my fair share, but I don’t know this man. He could be anyone, for all I know. You wouldn’t go around riding a horse and just casually examine its genitals during a short break, would you?”

“I wouldn’t...” Number 1 said with a shrug, stifling a laugh.

Number 2 gave him an acid stare and wrenched the keys from his jeans pocket. “It was quite impressive, actually,” he grumbled. He held up the keys and said with a sigh: “So there was no way to know which bike was mine, was there?”

On the fob was a picture of a blue sports motorcycle, the exact same type and colour as one of the last ones sitting there waiting for them.

“The universe is definitely talking to us,” Number 1 told him. “Now all you need to do is crash that bike.”

He felt a rush of fear course through his borrowed body. “And that’s *all* I have to do, is it?” he moaned. “I could be killed, injured. I know it’s not my body and I don’t have to deal with any of the consequence of this, but it’s still going to hurt, I expect.”

Number 1 pointed at Number 2. “It will hurt him more. After we leave, who knows what will happen. This entire reality could be erased like it never happened, or it could carry on in some way and the horse you’re riding could wake up in a tangled wreck of motorcycle parts.”

“At least we won’t be here to see it,” he said awkwardly. There was an urgent flutter in his stomach, a cold sweat on his palms. He threw his leg over the monstrous beast of a bike and gingerly lowered his weight into it.

“Oh my, this thing is big,” he grumbled nervously. His mind filled with thoughts of all the ways this could go wrong, which would be potentially *right*, he realised.

“You look pretty normal,” Number 1 said. “Don’t forget, the man whose brain you’re floating inside of does know how to do this. Maybe it will all come back to you and you’ll know exactly how to ride it?”

“I don’t have to ride it: I have to crash it,” he reminded his colleague.

He used all his strength to lift the bike, to raise it up from its stand so that it stood upright, balanced by his own feet. “I bet this thing is really fast.”

Number 1, rather unhelpfully, said: “It does look fast.”

Number 2 looked over, a petrified look on his temporary face. “What do I do now?”

“You can’t ride with your feet on the floor,” Number 1 said with a grin, clearly enjoying this. “And, at some point, you’re going to have to actually start the engine.”

Number 2 realised his arms were shaking in fear. It didn't come as a huge surprise. "OK," he said with a deep inhalation of air. "Feet off the ground."

As he did that, the bike fell over sideways, crashing to the ground with a soft, but slightly sickening sound of shattering plastic and scraping metal.

Number 1 burst out laughing. After composing himself a little, he said: "It wasn't exactly what I was hoping for, but I think it will do the trick."

The universe took the hint and things crashed in all around them.

# **The Perfect Man**

Was this all making it worse?

Was dredging up the awful things that had happened really just stopping her from truly moving forwards? It still burnt so horribly inside her that her only choice was to try anything to make it a little better; but was it? Was it really?

Sally sat down in the terrible seat that had been assigned to her. It was a creaking metal frame with hard, unyielding wooden plates riveted to it. It might have belonged in an under-funded school, although she was fairly sure this meeting was being held in a rented hall behind a church. She huddled, pulling her elbows in hard to her sides, nestling a paper cup of weak tea. It was hard to keep track. As different as these meetings were, they were all so very much the same.

She was part of a loose circle, a group of twelve other people from all walks of life. Two were men, older than her and both oddly scruffy, and the rest were women of various ages.

At the head of the circle, the leader stood up and said, “Welcome.” She smiled a warm and friendly smile which came across as condescending and smugly superior. Sally had seen it all before. “I’m glad to see so many returning faces. It’s good to know that this support group is helping people to manage their loss.”

She smiled to herself thinly. She was always one of the unfamiliar faces. These groups did very little for her and she rarely stayed at them for more than a few meetings. She had exhausted all of the ones in her hometown and had driven for three hours to attend one in the city. The drive usually did more for her than the groups, so at least it felt moderately worthwhile.

She never used to be this miserable, did she?

“Nobody has to talk if they don’t want to,” the leader’s voice droned on, as if she was talking to a group of sad children. “Would anyone like to start?”

“I’ll start!” a woman said softly, slowly raising her hand.

Sally glanced over. She was young, too young to have been dealing with the loss of her husband. That was what these groups were all about, of course, the cruelty of life and how it could wrench away your future in the beat of a heart.

“I’m Ginger,” said the brunette, staring at the floor. “Bill, my husband, was killed in an accident at work.” She raised her head briefly, flashing a glance at the expectant faces.

To her shame, Sally had the same empty smile plastered on her lips as all the others. What else could you do?

The woman continued, “He was one of those crane operators you see on the top of large buildings. They say he hadn’t fastened the safety harness properly.

“I didn’t get to identify the body.”

There was a polite cough as people tried to work out if the last remark was an attempt at gallows-humour. Sally joined them, but her polite smile dragged up the corners of her mouth and she fought the urge to chuckle.

“We had life insurance,” she said. “It even pays double for an accident at work. There was some complications with it, though, and the money got left to his uncle. Until I sort that out, I have nothing. He wouldn’t want that.”

There was a flicker of supportive tutting from around the room. Heads were slowly shaken.

“I’m pregnant—three months and counting.” She let out a deep sigh while softly rubbing her belly. “I don’t know what we’re going to do. Billy was a good provider. He wouldn’t have wanted to leave us like this.”

She closed her eyes tightly and choked back her tears.

Sally looked away. She heard the group leader as she said something supportive that couldn’t possibly make any of this any better. The simple facts were that her husband was dead and had left behind a child to support,

with no money left to support it. No platitudes would make any impact on the reality of that.

Why did she ever come to these things?

“You’re new here?” a voice asked.

Sally turned to see a woman gazing at her expectantly. The meeting was over and the group had retired to a table at the back where a sad and lonely array of snacks had been laid out. The woman gazing at her looked both younger and older than her at the same time. Her face had the puffiness of not sleeping, of lying awake at night, fighting back the tears and swallowing raw emotions. It could equally be that she was just ten years older than her body looked. How could anyone tell?

She said, with a certain reluctance: “I’m Sally.” She hadn’t wanted to be drawn into a conversation.

“I’m Ginger. I’ve been coming to this meeting for four weeks. I don’t feel like it’s helping very much, to be honest. At least I plucked up the courage to speak this time.”

Sally swallowed the urge to ask why she kept coming if it wasn’t working.

“It’s just that my life feels so empty since my Billy died,” Ginger explained.

Sally nodded. “I know what you mean,” she muttered just loud enough to hear. “I lost my husband nearly three years ago. I thought I would have adjusted by now, but every day is as hard as the last.”

Ginger sighed to herself. “We were only married a year,” she said sadly. “It wasn’t even quite a year. He was such a good man: he was *perfect*.”

Sally sipped at a fresh cup of tea. It was too stewed for her liking, but she drank it anyway. She was never one to make a fuss. “I thought mine was perfect as well. We were together eighteen months before his work accident. He died just like yours.”

Ginger looked shocked. “He was a crane operator?”



“No.” Sally smiled thinly. “He was an industrial welder. He was working in the Middle East on a gas pipe. There was an accident and the pipe was flooded.”

“Wow!” Ginger said, shaking her head in dismay. “That’s awful.”

Sally nodded as the memories came pouring back. She flinched as the emotional scars wrenched back open once more. Her chest tightened and she felt her body stiffen. This was what she had hoped to avoid.

Ginger said hesitantly, “Did they ever...” She paused and bit her lip.

“They never found the body,” Sally said with a weak smile. She heard her voice crack. “He was flushed away, carried off by the current. He should never have even been there. He was just doing it to earn enough extra money for the deposit on our house. He wanted something grand.”

“He sounds like a good man.” Ginger sniffed and wiped away a tear that had just started to form in the corner of her eye.

Sally remembered suddenly and in vivid detail the first moment they met. He had been so handsome, so vibrant and full of energy. She had been at a bar after work, just having a quiet drink and watching the world go by. She had never felt that she was really good enough for a man like him.

“He seemed so perfect,” she said. “He worked hard. He didn’t drink, didn’t smoke and didn’t touch drugs.”

“My Billy really was perfect,” Ginger said with a small, but not unnoticeable frown. “He only drank at weekends but never got drunk. He was so romantic, so sweet. We went away for weekends all the time. It was like living in a romance novel.”

Sally grumbled to herself silently and felt a rush of anger. Was she becoming bitter? She narrowed her eyes. “We were like that. He paid for holidays abroad and just did everything for me. He never seemed to care what he did. He would always do more.”

Ginger glared for a moment, before a fake smile flashed viciously across her lips. “Billy was building us a house. He said that nothing else was good enough for me; he wanted us to live in something new and

special. He said we were the most important things in the world, me and our baby.”

Sally nodded and flashed an insincere smile. “We lived in a penthouse apartment,” she said proudly. “It was my dream and he said we could afford it. He was always so clever with money. He was always investing, putting money in pensions, insurance and trust-funds.”

Ginger nodded and looked away for moment. She seemed more annoyed than anything else. A smile flashed back on her lips. “Billy was the best lover I ever had. He was so attentive, so in tune with my body. We did it every night, each time better than the last.”

“Mine had a gigantic penis,” Sally said grimly, without the flicker of a smile. She felt an adrenaline rush. At that moment, she would have happily torn off Ginger’s face with her teeth. “It was the biggest I had ever seen, and he really knew what to do with it.”

Ginger just stared for a moment. With their eyes fixed together, fake smiles plastered over their lips, the two women glared into each other’s eyes. Ginger seemed to be grinding her teeth.

“Billy was so handsome. He looked like James Bond.”

Sally smiled sweetly and said, with a hint of sarcasm: “If James Bond were a crane operator.”

Ginger scowled, her smile vanishing for an instant. “I think I missed the film where he was an industrial welder!” she snapped.

Sally smiled to herself and found herself laughing at her own stupidity. She forced herself to take a deep breath and calmed herself down.

“I’m sorry. I just miss him so damn much,” she said. “He was perfect.”

Ginger began laughing and said in agreement: “I’m still so defensive of him. It’s crazy isn’t it? How often do you meet the perfect man? It’s once in a lifetime.”

“I hope not,” Sally said weakly.

Ginger took out her phone and began flicking through her photos. “Let me show you my Billy. Such a sweet man.”

Sally sighed and gave in to her competitive edge, as she also began flicking through her own phone.

“Here,” they both said together, holding up pictures. “What?!”

Sally frowned and glared at the photograph. How could this be? “That’s Thomas!” she said angrily and confused. “How could you be married to *my* Thomas?”

Ginger gazed back, her eyes wide as her mouth lolled open.

“That’s...” she muttered. She swallowed hard and said, “That’s my Billy.”

There had to be some mistake. Sally craned her neck, edging forward to the phone screen. But, despite the fact that it simply couldn’t be right, the unavoidable fact was that the picture Ginger was showing her was both Billy and Thomas.

They gazed at one another in angry, confused silence. Sally’s head swam, as if in the middle of some crazy dream.

A voice roused Sally from her confusion. It was the group leader.

“I was touched by your story today — my husband also died in an accident at work. They never found his body either.”

Both Sally and Ginger turned their heads and gazed at her emptily. She smiled back with the same vacant grin she seemingly always had stuck to her face. Then her eyebrows slanted down into a concerned frown.

“Why have you both got pictures of my Gary?”

# The Grumble

The night was dark, and lights from outside bathed the interior of the room with a sickly yellow and red illumination, every threadbare example of a life coming apart picked out by muted neon.

She lay on the bed that hadn't even been made and smelled acrid from sweat, having not been cleaned and changed in so long a time.

She stared blankly out of the window. There was nothing to see. The tall towers of glass and metal of this brave new world existed only in her mind, for now, and she reached out with her imagination, feeling into the universe like the fingers of a child, reaching into some dark crevice for a lost toy.

"Hope?" his voice called out.

She looked around startled and snatched a blanket up around her defensively.

The doctor came in, peering awkwardly through the open doorway. He was a man dishevelled, his breathing laboured and erratic as he stumbled into the room uneasily.

"Hope," he said again. "Or is it you?"

The words hung in her mind for a moment and she wondered. *Was it her?*

Then her mind gave way and memories flooded in, adding to who she was, if not changing her from what she might have been.

"It's me," she sighed. "I'm Number 2. Where the hell are we this time?"

Number 1 gasped inside the chubby, worn-out shell of the man he was occupying. "In my apartment. Whoever this guy is, he's not a house-keeper. He looks like he was single way too long."

Number 2 got out of the bed, swinging her legs to the side and checking with a deft, swift movement of her hands to make sure she was dressed to a basic level of decency.

Satisfied that the oversized T-shirt and borrowed shorts she was wearing were up to the task, she stood up and blearily looked around.

“Things don’t seem to be getting any better,” she said with a worried tone, though not as worried as she felt. “We’re manifesting in more and more real situations. These places are actual events and we’re inside real, living people. I think we’ve actually been these people before, as well. My mind is just so jumbled that I can’t even be sure.”

“I know,” Number 1 said. “I’m worried too but we don’t have much choice. We have to go on.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, closing herself off from the outside. More than at any time before, she felt that the world was a hostile, vicious place and she felt alone inside it. “So what now?” she said.

Number 1 held up a small computer. “I found this terminal. This guy has computer parts everywhere, so it wasn’t difficult. The universe reports that the blips are now elevated to the level of a grumble. In real terms, that’s a disaster.”

She stared at him wearily. “I know it’s *a disaster*,” she said softly. “I can see the universe coming apart around me. I know a disaster when I see one.”

“Well, to change this, all we have to do is go to sleep,” he told her. “Nobody has to crash a motorcycle this time.”

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him fixedly. “Go to sleep?” she said angrily. “When it’s my turn we have to risk life and limb. When it’s your turn, we just have to go back to bed. It doesn’t seem fair!”

“I know,” he said with a grin. “Next time you destroy the universe by throwing your breakfast at it, I’ll be sure to ask for a more equitable division of assignments.”

“Yes, Number 1. Thank you for the reminder. That’s very constructive.”

“No problem,” he said. “Now, all you have to do is to go back to bed.”

“And then what?” she grumbled.

“Apparently a brick in the future will have a dream,” he told her.

“What?” she snapped in surprise. “Bricks can’t dream. Didn’t we do this before as well?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a shrug. “All I know is what the computer tells me. This brick in the future can have dreams. If we go back to bed, the brick will dream. That might fix the problem, according to the computer.”

“Or it might turn the entire universe into marshmallow.”

Number 1 looked away thoughtfully. After a momentary pause while he seemed to be evaluating things, he said: “There’s only a nineteen per cent likelihood of that happening.”

She rolled her eyes, and said without a hint of sincerity: “I like those odds.”

“Well,” he said. “Goodnight, Number 2. I’ll see you in the next report.”

“I can’t wait...”

## April, Fool

Rob awoke to an empty room.

It didn't worry him unduly—these things quite often happened, and a lack of Dave was the opposite of something to be concerned about. It would probably just mean that he had enjoyed a successful evening of separating a girl from any faith she might have left in humanity. Many such girls ended up giving homosexuality a try, or giving up on men altogether in a different way, and just dating people like Rob. Not *actually* Rob though—his dating successes remained entirely imaginary.

Dave might have taken his date back to *her* cabin, or to an escape pod, or they might just as likely wake up on a lower recycling deck behind a row of metal bins. Who could tell with Dave, whose idea of romance was rather like punching someone in the throat as a polite form of greeting?

While Dave was not widely known as a romantic person, he was somehow capable of giving exactly that impression in small doses, typically up to the point of seeing a girl naked, and then his interest in her usually vanishes altogether. It had equally been noted that most women usually lost interest in the whole business of being alive after seeing him naked, to which he would happily report that it simply proved that the universe was correctly balanced.

Dave was widely considered to be best in small doses for a whole host of terrible reasons, and the smaller the better.

Rob yawned, stretched, and let his mind drift. He had a few minutes yet to enjoy the quiet of the darkened room until his alarm went off, plunging him headlong into yet another day of wishing he'd never been born.

Dave had once pointed out the erroneous nature of Rob's ever having existed, and irritatingly, he not only seemed annoyingly correct but had also clearly put a lot of thought into it. Perhaps even more irritating was that he'd done it with the benefit of a white-board, three different coloured pens, conference scale laminated visual aids, and printed handouts. Even more

annoying than that, this had happened in the crew lounge around dinner-time with a live broadcast to Rob's parents. He had demonstrated, quite ably, that while Rob's having been born was itself an argument against the existence of god—the underlying problem was simply that he'd been born *Rob*.

Rob was ginger. He was an underachiever. He was a waiter with most of a degree in general engineering. He was dull. He was socially inept, and he smelled very slightly of cheese and wet fur for much of the time, for reasons that could not be adequately explained.

Women tended not to be attracted to such things, and no amount of begging ever seemed to help. He once tried to attract a woman he considered his equal, and was threatened with a 'polite greeting' after implying that they might have something in common. Both he and Dave were often threatened with a punch to the throat, but usually on different ends of a date, and at least Dave's date had the benefit of actually happening first.

This had all been bad enough, but Dave had made it worse, in a way that only Dave could.

That part of the story had all begun three days earlier. Rob found himself recalling the details as he wandered the purgatory between blissful sleep and hell-like wakefulness.

— — — — —

"Rob!" Dave began proudly. "I've got good news!"

The crew lounge was largely empty, as the shifts hadn't officially ended yet, but Dave's never officially began for reasons that nobody seemed entirely sure about.

*"I helped!"*

Rob sipped at a beer. It wasn't quite flat and it wasn't quite cold, which was actually ideal, as it also wasn't quite beer. As the flavour lit up his senses, he made a sharp hissing sound and pulled his now purple-



stained lips tightly back in a reflexive grimace. It was rather like being gently poked in the eyeball with a speeding bus, only it left a slightly worse after-taste, and fewer brain cells would be registered as survivors in the long run.

He cringed, not at the flavour of the beer, but at the words that had now invaded his psyche, words which were just so much worse than awful. Dave almost never helped, and when he did, it was the opposite of helpful. His version of helping was a lot like Vlad the Impaler's version of a peaceful protest against overreach.

"How did you help, Dave?" Rob closed his eyes and waited for it. It could be bad, as frankly, *good* just wasn't one of the options available. He hoped against reason that *he* wasn't going to be the recipient of whatever 'help' Dave was punishing someone by offering.

"You know how you're lying there in bed, and you'd just recalled a presentation I'd given prior to the start of the story where we'd established the erroneous nature of your having been born *Rob*? It occurred to me that a huge injustice has been done. Surely, nobody could deserve such harsh punishment for their crimes, and it's not as if you're interesting enough to actually commit serious crimes in the first place. It seems to me that for the crime of being you, your punishment is being you, which is completely unfair."

Rob didn't like where this was going and wondered if he was awake enough to be remembering this the way it actually happened. "Dave, thank you for finding a new and exciting way to make me feel even worse about everything in my life than I already do!"

"I hadn't finished..."

*Of course he hadn't.*

"Rob, I've recently become impassioned by complaints, and have thus submitted one on your behalf."

This made no sense. "*What did you do?*"

Dave smirked, an expression that suggested something unpleasant was coming, in much the same way that a pile of cat skeletons round the

back of a curry-house might suggest that the dining inside might not be of the very highest degree of excellence—unless, of course, the restaurant was in one of the touristy parts of India, or pretty much anywhere in South London, where said cat skeletons might prove to be more reassuring than some of the alternatives.

He said, horribly proudly: “I made a complaint on your behalf!”

“You complained about me being Rob?” Rob grunted.

Dave shrugged, nodding slightly back at him. “It didn’t seem fair. We’re English! Writing a letter of complaint seemed the thing to do! It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately.”

Rob wasn’t quite following the path of Dave’s logic, but if such a path existed, it was disused, overgrown, and led nowhere: this was nothing particularly new. “Who did you complain to?”

“Everyone!”

Rob grimaced openly. Dave wasn’t known to exaggerate—if he had done something awful, that awful thing had been done on a grand scale, and there would be no overstating it.

“When you say, *everyone*...?”

“The Captain, your mother, Santa Claus, the Prime Minister of Earth, the Queen of Space, your last four supervisors, the Trumpkin—a genetically crossed half pumpkin, half human hybrid spliced with the DNA of the thirty fifth generation of a Donald Trump clone that had been created to investigate the upper limits of vegetable intelligence and the lower limits of human, 569 different assorted gods, the star of every reality vid-show from the last 42 years—only 16 of whom survived their drug dependency, The Glorious Leader of the Free Galaxy, and the superhero team ‘The Archangels’, who have now retired, have their own chat-show, and frequently complain that they rather missed their calling.”

Rob sighed. This had all the hallmarks of being the *beginning* of something rather than the *end*. Still, it could be that the matter was now closed and only his embarrassment might remain. He dared to hope...

“Anyone else?”

“Security head Bernard, a sentient lemon on Coolytron 4—the lemon planet—who can do a really convincing dog impression, the great robotic brain of Planet Oz—who we all know is really an old man called Gerald, and ‘The Clintron,’ the vile war-robot-brain monster from New Chicago, that’s now really rusty and old, clinically insane, and smells of urine.”

“Enough!” Rob said wearily. “I think I’m up to my limit of ‘Dave’ for now.”

“Are you sure?” he said. “There’s actually quite a surprising amount more.”

“You didn’t really send a letter of complaint to all those people in my name, did you?” Rob knew he had, and that this was probably going to be even worse than he could imagine.

Dave grinned at him and slowly nodded. “Do you want to know what it said?”

Rob shook his head. He clearly did not.

“It said: *Dear universe, and the people that seem to control the little piece of it of which I’m aware.*

*“As is painfully apparent, I am a horribly wretched person with unnaturally ginger hair. I have the charisma and physical appeal of a dead rat, lying mouldering in a gutter somewhere, and frankly, my sex life is suffering for it. As this whole universe-thing seems to be set up with the clear intention of passing on my cripplingly unfortunate genes so that others can share in my terrible misfortune, I feel the need to complain.*

*“I’m unaware of any transgression I’ve made that might be terrible enough for this awful fate to be thrust upon me. My only recourse, therefore, is to complain in the hope that someone might be able to rectify whatever error has caused this.*

*“Yours inferiorly,*

*“Rob.*

*“Failure.”*

Rob just sat there for a moment, blinking. At first, it struck him that it was actually a fairly well constructed piece of writing, but what was more

striking was that now everyone who had anything to do with any aspect of his life now had it in front of them.

“Dave, what do you think is going to happen? Why did you do this?”

Dave frowned with that annoying look he often wore when he felt that the reasoning behind his bizarre behaviour should be obvious and immediately apparent to everyone.

“Mostly to annoy you,” he admitted with a shrug. “It occurred to me that I hadn’t done anything really interesting for a while, and that’s just not like me. I briefly considered shaving your head while you were sleeping. I asked the computer to extrapolate what you’d look like without hair, and the results were horrifying.”

Rob was very slightly intrigued. “I looked bad?”

Dave seemed thoughtful for a moment. “*Worse.*”

Rob sighed wearily. “You’re an idiot, Dave.”

“I know!”

“I mean, you’re really, *really* an idiot, Dave,” he insisted, not that it would do much good. Trying to argue with Dave was like hammering a rubber nail into a titanium brick with a glass hammer.

“I know!” he agreed with a wide grin.

“No!” Rob reiterated, facing him directly. “You are the stupidest thing in the universe.”

“I don’t know, Rob! Have you ever seen the history of American Presidential Elections? People are generally pretty stupid, Rob. I mean, ‘50 Shades of Grey’ wasn’t always a brand of toilet paper—it was once considered literature.”

“Nobody reads toilet-paper,” Rob grumbled. “I still think you’re the dumbest creature in the galaxy.”

Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Something was going on in there. It was something unpleasant. “I think there’s a way to prove this,” he suggested. “Perhaps some kind of religion, with perhaps some kind of free T-shirt?”

Rob felt a twinge of near panic. “Let’s just leave it and move on with our lives—mine horribly unsatisfying, and yours which is suspiciously good for a man with nothing between his ears but spitefulness towards his only friend.”

Dave nodded. “It is pretty good, but please don’t compare it to yours—that just fills you with false hope and demeans everyone else.”

“You’re an idiot, Dave!” Rob reminded him, as if saying it over and over again might change the fact that Dave was agreeing with him proudly.

Well, his brain was definitely doing something. He gestured with a proud flourish of his hand, and shouted rather too loudly: “And I’m going to prove it.”

Rob shook his head sadly. He opened his mouth to speak, but his brain had clearly had enough and was now refusing to cooperate further.

— — — — —

The alarm screamed and Rob sat up sharply. Realisation had set in; grim, ugly, dark realisation.

“No!” he hissed to himself. “It can’t be...”

But it could. And it was.

He scrambled from the bed, kicking the sheets away so that they fell loosely to the floor in a crumpled heap. There was a refreshing lack of crackling flames—that was something, at least.

Suddenly, he picked up his feet, recoiling back to safety. It was too dangerous, just plain stupid to put them down. Anything could be down there on the floor.

Dave had once electrified the panels, just to make a point about people using the bathroom at night, which apparently annoyed him slightly for some reason. And, so that the point would be especially pointed, he’d done this during the day. According to him, that explained everything that needed explaining.

He'd managed to find a kind of signal pulse that would go straight through the soles of shoes, and have a pronounced effect on the insides of a human; specifically, on that human's ability not to instantly expel all traces of physical waste in a single, hugely violent spasm. The effect of all this was that the point was quite well made, but an arguably unforeseen side effect was that the ship's surgeon was sufficiently impressed with the results to have Rob written up in two separate medical journals, and his ruined underwear become quite famous for the experience. It had once been invited to a fairly lavish dinner-party, which was a significant blow to Rob's ego, since not only was his soiled underwear more interesting than he was, but he was also stuck serving drinks at a party in its honour.

"Computer!" Rob barked. "What's the current date?"

"April 1<sup>st</sup>," it told him. "All day!"

The words reverberated around his mind, numbing his senses. His head swam in fear; he could feel the sound of blood as it pulsed through his eardrums in the cold, dark silence of the room.

"No..." he gasped. It was the day of fools. It was the *Day of Dave*. It was a day when anything could happen, had happened, and almost definitely would happen again.

Supervisor Betty Swallsac watched with morbid curiosity as Rob made his way dubiously into the upper cafe. She stepped out from the kitchen with an expression of bewilderment painted on her careworn face, a face that thought it had seen everything but was fast coming to realise that this was not the case.

Rob's ginger head peered around the door. He crawled in a few steps, waving his arms around before him. He quickly edged back again. Once more he stalked forwards, feeling his way along the walls with the very tips of his fingers and kicking his feet out ahead of him, his wild eyes darting about fearfully.

In this manner, he slowly made his way along the wall towards the entrance of the kitchen. He looked up at Betty's expectant face, smiled

weakly, and stood up straight. He glanced around one last time, and then seemed to slump as he let out a tense lungful of air.

“Rob?” she began with a huff. “Have you gone completely and utterly insane? More than usual, I mean?”

Rob nodded sadly—it was an entirely reasonable question. “It’s the first of April,” he told her. “On this ship, we call it ‘the Day of Dave.’”

“‘The Day of Dave?’” she repeated back to him, not sounding terribly convinced that his explanation was convincing, or that it was even an explanation, in any conventional sense.

“Dave gets worse today,” he explained. “He’s always bad, but today he gets worse. Every year he does something appallingly bad, always worse than before. He often leaves traps. He once set me up on a date, and told me to bring a bunch of flowers and wear my finest suit. I had to ask for Rachael when I got there. For some stupid, desperate reason, I went along with it. I turned up at the place and asked for Rachael. She turned out to be a 5 year old girl with a very confused look on her face, until her parents explained that I must be the clown they’d ordered for her birthday party from ‘Dave’s Ginger Clownatorium and Financial Consultation Services.’”

She appeared to fluster. Of course, everyone had heard of Dave, but for most people, it was difficult to believe that the stories were true. “He really did that? Well at least it can’t get much worse, can it?” Her eyes had a hint of fear about them.

“Last year, he put all my clothes in the automated laundry,” Rob began.

She smiled thinly, a little confused.

“I was wearing them,” Rob added sadly. “Instead of cleaning fluid, he poured in food dye and softener. After 10 minutes, I came out with bright ginger skin under a bright ginger suit with bright ginger soap-suds on my...” He paused, closed his eyes and huffed to himself. He had to say it—he had to say the words Dave had used. “... My bright ginger hair.”

She sniggered.

“He kept saying I was huggably soft and delightfully titian for a month afterwards,” Rob said, cringing. “And he didn’t just say it—he posted a Wikiweb advert for me on a dating site as well, looking for fruitsexuals with a leaning towards overripe tangerines. I had 245 dreadful replies. All of them were men, except for two females who said they identified as farmyard equipment. One of them promised to bring her own rake.”

Betty choked back a laugh, and somehow managed to keep it down to a snigger. “That’s not so bad!”

Rob glared at her, his eyes flashing angrily. “I thought so too, and that was my first mistake. We met for lunch around 11.30 am and I was lulled into a false sense of security. I was eating soup when I found out there was more to come. It was still piping hot when my face crashed down hard into a bowl of farmhouse-tomato. I was arrested by two crewmen under suspicion of mutiny, which is still punishable by death, I might add. Dave had sent the Captain a note telling her I was madly in love with her, and that I was going to prove it by taking her ship by force and returning it to her as a romantic gesture that I hoped would earn me sufficient brownie-points for a meaningless evening of ‘disciplined ginger fun.’”

She sniggered again.

“I still can’t work out how he tricked me into eating tomato soup. As they pulled my head out of it to put me into electro-shock-cuffs, while serving up a significant beating from their plasma-sticks, Dave just grinned at me and said: ‘Did your head go in the orange-coloured soup? It’s almost impossible to tell.’”

She covered her smile with her hand, muting the sound of laughter with a fake cough.

“Well,” she began. “I’m sure it won’t be so bad this year.”

“It will. It will be worse! It’s *always* worse! There’s a Wikiweb page of condolences for the victims of his April-fool pranks and their families. It goes back years!”



“So I’m guessing Dave had something to do with the letter I received?” she asked. “The one complaining about being Rob?”

He nodded sadly. “I think he just did it to annoy me, but your guess is as good as mine.”

“Let’s get you a nice cup of tea,” she suggested, ushering him away from the customers, who really couldn’t care less about any of this.

Rob’s eyes widened. “You can’t eat or drink—not on the Day of Dave! There could be anything in there. Anything!”

Bernard slammed open the door to the kitchen. He was wide-eyed with panic, breathing heavily, staring around the room with wild eyes.

On reflection, Rob realised that his initial impression was probably unreliable—he’d never seen the head of security actually move before, and it had evidently captured his somewhat limited imagination.

Meanwhile, in reality, Bernard pushed open the door, and sluggishly plodded through. He’d slammed it open with such force that he had to kick it a second time just so the opening was wide enough to let him through.

*That particular description was burned into Rob’s brain because Dave used it so frequently to describe his dating prowess in garishly vivid detail, both to Rob and to future dates.*

He breathed heavily, sighing as he made his way inside, too lazy to really bother doing the job properly.

*That sentence also resonated strongly with Rob because he’d heard so many of Dave’s exes describe their sexual encounters afterwards in just that way, a way Rob felt was probably more accurate.*

Bernard was armed with his pointing stick—a futuristic stick that had been scientifically perfected for the delicate and nuanced art of pointing at things to a degree of excellence unrivalled by any stick before it. Its original design was from Germany, where it was scanned with superlatively accurate laser-scanning equipment, constructed from fifty three varieties of wood laminated together in precise quantities, layered such that its straightness defied quantum measurement at a level that wasn’t even

considered real beyond a loose description of a hypothetical mathematical model. Commercial production, however, was considerably impeded by the government-mandated daily unleashing of an unspecified number of wild shrieker-monkeys into the factories and offices, which attacked the staff, destroyed materials, and ate everybody's lunch without asking. It was subsequently outsourced to China which had no such regulations, and the end result was better suited to pointing around corners, and then falling apart while standing still.

Bernard pointed said stick right at him. "You're Rob, aren't you?"

Rob looked over to the wall where the tip of the stick had veered off to, and based on the presumption that Bernard was referring to him, his hand reflexively pointed up at himself in response. This was a job it did more than sufficiently without the need for German excellence or the Chinese polar opposite of that.

"I was told you were chubby but rat-like, with wild-coloured but boring hair," said Bernard. "That seems about right. Now that I look at you, I see why you put in that complaint. I don't think there's much we can do about it down in the security office, but as my Dad said before my Mum left him, 'There's nowt so foul as a whippet in heat, now gertcha!'"

"Hello Bernard!" Betty fluttered her eyelids at him and spoke with a soft, girlish voice that bordered on the wrong side of flirtatious and the right side of horrifying.

Bernard's reaction was less kind: he brandished his pointing stick defensively. "Betty," he said, cautiously backing away. "I thought you worked in that big white room where all the idiots work, the one that always smells of toilets."

She gestured around the kitchen in confusion. "I do!"

Bernard nodded to himself and thought for a moment. His brain wasn't what it once had been, which was a biologically standard and fully intact brain. Most of it had left to follow a very different career path during the war when a piece of exploding bulkhead had provided some of it with a unique opportunity for adventure and travel.

Luckily, he lived in a time where technology could cheaply and easily repair such damage with gentle, non-invasive techniques that would safely and easily restore every facet of what a person had once been.

Less luckily though, he lived in a time when such things were prohibitively expensive. Even less luckily than that, the loss of more than 40% of your brain-matter meant that the military no longer classified you as a human-being, and cut off all subsequent allowances and benefits, as well as filing legal briefs to claim back all previous payments.

But in a final piece of fortune, that was neither particularly worse than good, nor particularly better than bad, the merchant fleet had a program to help poor distressed former soldiers who had the legal rights of a tin of canned meat.

He had been restored to a functional state with what was laughably referred to as a synaptic-patch. All he needed do was sign a legal waiver, which is something of a legal grey area when much of your legally owned grey matter is in a can of 'Soylent' chicken curry. He had awoken to find a new piece of head in the space where a gaping hole had once been, and a freshly repaired brain inside it, or the next best thing you could describe half a bag of computer-active sand.

The downside to all this was that 42% of his brain was now the property of the merchant fleet, who also owned everything below Betty's waist and above her knees after she signed up for trials of the not entirely successful 'self-delivering tampon' experiment.

Bernard's mind did tend to wander, since his train of thought was so frequently interrupted by unskippable adverts for technology that can make him write good. It was always the wandering back that caused the problems. If he remembered rightly, he was in a place that smelled like toilets with a woman who looked like she might have crawled out of one.

"Betty!" he snapped with some disappointment as his sandy brain registered where it was.

She fluttered her eyelids at him. "Perhaps we can go on another date?"

Her face had the consistency of a slab of leather dropped onto a thin mixture of porridge and sadness. It smiled, but the smile was a thing that sent a sliver of ice through his soul, 42% of which had been blended with herbs and spices and then vacuum-sealed for freshness.

“Another date with you?” Bernard, showing the dating prowess of a ginger person, glanced down to her midsection, remembering in vivid detail that it had been augmented with parts that were about as natural as pouring a bag of sand into his head. Fortunately, he had never used his head on a date, but Betty’s shortcomings were more troublesome to him.

She smiled, pulling her thin lips up and away from her yellowing teeth. “Who else?”

Bernard thought for a moment. If she was thinking of bringing a friend, that might be much better. “Who else indeed?”

She fixed her eyes on his, rolled her hair around her finger, and tried to give the impression that her hips weren’t held on with roofing-bolts. “Just us,” she said seductively with a low, gravelly voice that sounded like the owner enjoyed boiled whiskey, served over rocks for breakfast.

Bernard rolled his eyes upwards. Thoughtfully, he enquired: “Then who will bring us the little bread-rolls that I like?”

She sighed, and shook her head while muttering. “What do you want, Bernard?”

He frowned. ‘Bread-rolls’ seemed the obvious answer, but that was the only thing that went through his inadequate mind. Then it slowly came to him. “The Captain sent me.”

“Did she. What does she want this time?”

Bernard looked over to the chubby rat-thing with the bizarre hair and jabbed his pointing-stick at it.

“Please don’t look at me like that,” said Rob.

“The Captain got a complaint. She referred you to the ship’s councillor for an immediate appointment to find out if your head is mostly sand too.”

Rob sighed—to Bernard, that must have seemed fairly reasonable under the circumstances. “What time?”

“As soon as we find him!” Bernard shrugged. “He got a copy of your complaint too. He locked himself in an escape pod and jettisoned it while we were at superluminal speed. We think there’s a *chance* that he might have survived.”

Rob looked worried. “Why would the man whose job it is to guard our mental health do something as crazy as that?”

“He suspected somebody might ask themselves that very question,” he answered. “So he had the foresight to leave a note explaining his actions, lest somebody mistakenly assume he’d gone mad. In fact, I have a copy of it right here!

*“I have not gone mad. Dave is up to something—something big! This letter of complaint I received from Rob... alarm bells are ringing! No ginger can write that eloquently, and that can only mean one thing—Dave. It has his handwriting all over it. I know because of the words, and having written a number of letters myself. It’s an ominous foreshadowing of something terrible to come. On my last meeting with him I asked him how he was feeling. He replied that he had no complaints. No ‘complaints.’ His face was straight, but I could see him grinning wickedly on the inside. Then he told me the story of how last year on April 1<sup>st</sup>, he had been blamed for an outbreak of alligators clawing their way out of passenger toilets. He claimed it was a misunderstanding caused by the poorly worded instructions that came with his Chinese ant farm, but my own Chinese ant farm didn’t even come with any instructions, and had only three small alligators.*

*“I just can’t risk it—I must escape, if there is to be any hope. I have a family to consider, and the only security on this ship-of-doom is a senile old fool whose brain is constructed of grit. Perhaps the icy vacuum of space will finally quieten the wretched sound of these klaxons I’ve been hearing day in, day out, since I received that curséd letter.*

*“Oh, why won’t they stop?”*

Rob grimaced, and said suspiciously, “*Complaints!* So he *is* planning something. He always foreshadows—drops little hints of what’s on his mind, like the one time I came back to the room when he had a date in there, and found all my stuff piled up in the corridor. Some of it was still on fire.”

Betty sat down next to Rob. She looked worried, which encouraged Bernard a little since the spotlight was away from him.

“I got a complaint email, too,” she said softly. “Should I be worried?”

Rob looked at her and nodded slowly. “His tradition is to do it before 12 noon. After then, we’re safe. We only have to make it through to 12. Just a little longer now.”

“It’s no good,” Bernard grumbled. “That Captain has locked down all the escape pods so we can’t eject them. That Doctor has spoiled it for the rest of us.”

Rob frowned. “I wasn’t actually...”

“And she’s safely tucked herself away,” Bernard grunted to himself. “There’s no chance we can get her to release the lockouts.”

Rob looked at them both, worried about the drastic lengths they might go to, to get away from Dave. It then occurred to him that perhaps he wasn’t doing enough. All this gave him a headache.

Bernard rubbed his chin. “12 noon? That’s a problem as well.”

They looked at him expectantly.

“That’s when the Archangels’ chat-show is on—it’s my favourite show. They were superheroes back in the old days when I was young. Captain Breaker could walk through metal security doors, Kid Silence could make security alarms turn themselves off, and Miracle Girl was so amazing that men would just stare at her and couldn’t look away. Together, they tried to solve crimes, but always fell short of actually managing to.

Personally, I think they missed their calling, until they started hosting a chat show.”

There was silence, and not the good kind when someone is saying something interesting, but the other kind just before a sniper pulls the trigger.

“The Trumpkin was on yesterday, and the Clintron was live from its home planet. They were talking about a new religion. The Clintron rejected all religion, saying it was illogical since Satan is the one true god, but the Trumpkin was very enthusiastic about it. He said that not enough religions come with a free T-shirt.”

There was more silence, but sadly no sniper.

“I know that religion,” said Rob, rubbing his temples. “Ficbrickitarianism?”

Betty sat up suddenly. “The belief that the whole universe exists only within the imagination of a sentient brick, and that the brick itself is part of a temporally finite universe that only comes into being when read about in fictional literature? I joined that; I got the T-shirt as well. It’s a quality item —proudly made in China!”

Rob felt like crying out in dismay, so he did. “How can the universe exist in the mind of a brick, and then that brick only exist in the mind of someone reading a story about it in another universe? That’s crazy! That could never happen! What kind of crazy, messed up universe could such ideas even come from?”

She put a supportive hand on his shoulder and said softly: “Don’t worry. I’m sure it will all be fine.”

Rob felt that meant very little from someone who chose their religion based on what garments were given out free with it.

“I think that everyone got the complaint,” continued Bernard. “Does that mean everyone should be on alert?”

Rob glowered at him with a hint of irritation. “You’re in charge of security — what do you think?”

“Calm down, Rob,” said Betty, patting his shoulder.

“Perhaps more girls will date you now after reading the complaint, just out of sympathy?”

“No, Bernard!” she said sadly. “There was a picture.”

They cowered in the lounge, the only place of sanctity left that they could think of. They assured themselves that there was safety in numbers. Perhaps it was true; perhaps he had targeted them individually, or perhaps he had planned something for them all together? They couldn’t know for sure, but they hoped nonetheless. Crewman, labourers, and even a few passengers who knew of him had gathered there, huddling together in fear.

The clock showed the time as it melted away. There were mere minutes left before noon, and each flash of the clock, as the glowing red numbers counted down, took them all closer to whatever salvation may come, if at all. Whatever was coming, though, it was coming soon: whatever Dave had planned was going to happen imminently.

The barman broke the uneasy silence. “What do you think he’s going to do?” His eyes were fixed on the door as he wiped over a glass, over and over and over again with the bottom of his religious T-shirt.

Rob glanced round to see a host of eyes looking in his direction. He was the resident expert, the one with the most intimate knowledge of Dave, his actions, his crimes, and his oddly-functioning, but functioning regardless brain.

“I don’t know!” he exclaimed. “I think it’s obvious by now that I don’t have any control over him. I actually don’t think he has any control over himself.”

There was tutting around the room and pointedly angry stares.

On the vid-screen, a game show was in progress. A hideous half-pumpkin, half-Donald Trump clone grinned at the camera. It was ranting about letters from the public, and how there were things out there that were even crazier than whatever he was supposed the hell to be.



There was a chuckling sound from the audience, but a warning flashed on the screen that the Clintron was not amused, and was arming local terrorists to have its revenge for his continually pitiful jokes.

*Pitiful* was also the mood in the room. It was a sombre place of morbid reflection.

Still, despite it all, the clock ticked down towards a moment of calm that they all hoped was coming.

Suddenly, and without warning, the doors slid open. Dave strolled in without a care in the world. As he paced over the dishevelled metal floor, the room was plunged into a hushed silence, all eyes turning to watch.

Rob waited, perched at their usual corner, sitting on a slightly crooked barstool, as Dave took his place on the one just around the ledge.

They would soon come to know what he had planned.

“Lunchtime!” Dave exclaimed happily. “I woke up in a dustbin on the recycling deck next to Fiona from ‘Complaints.’ She said it was the first time she’d ever ended a romantic evening in so awful a fashion. I took it as a compliment.”

Rob looked around—all eyes were on him with their expectant gazes. “I don’t think it’s a compliment.”

“I don’t get many, so admittedly it’s difficult to judge,” Dave told him. “It turns out that in ‘Complaints’ they actually get paid to listen to other people moaning, if you can imagine anything so awful? I thought they were the ones that did the complaining. In any case, she’d heard of me many times and came to find out if the stories were true. She agreed to a date and said to just be myself. She regretted saying that when she let me order dinner for her, and she got a bottle of wine with a straw in it, a box of slightly-used condoms, and a ticket for a ride home that wasn’t valid till the morning...”

“Dave...” Rob stopped him, feeling that someone had to.

Dave looked over, a slight flutter to his lips, a tiny little smile. “She laughed. I think she thought I was joking. That happens a lot!”

“Dave, you’re killing us,” Rob pleaded. “What did you do?” His eyes traced up to the clock.

“Last night?” He smiled wider. “Well, she’s got a whole new list of complaints, only this time they’re medical, and she won’t be discussing them with her mother.”

“I don’t mean with the girl!” Rob grumbled at him. “Anyone stupid enough to sleep with you gets no sympathy from me.”

Dave began to nod in agreement. “That is also my policy.”

“I mean what did you do to *us*?” Rob gestured with a nod around the room. Faces were turned to them, every ear was listening.

Dave looked around. He saw a face he recognised. “I covered her in cream and licked it off... It turns out that whipped cream and shaving cream are two very different things. Nobody mentions that when they’re selling the idea to you.”

“Dave...” Rob was almost begging now, not least because he had become the acting spokesman of the group. “What prank did you pull?”

“Prank?”

The clock ticked on.

“Prank!” Rob pleaded.

“I’ve been thinking about this Ficbricktarianism,” he told him. “I reckon there’s something to it, you know.”

Rob looked bewildered, which was precisely what he was. “You came up with that. You only did it to show how stupid people were. You started a fake religion based on the dumbest pretext you could conceive of just to see what would happen.”

“Yeah, but I reckon there might be something to it. I mean, maybe when Ian Christian came up with Christianity, he might have rubbed his chin and thought, Yeah, there might just be something to this! Maybe some guy really did get nailed to something because we did something bad, and not because he did? I mean, maybe in Ficbricktarianism, *you* could be nailed to a tree? I thought about this and couldn’t find a single objection.

What about that other one where they cut off the end of their penis and broke banking laws? Wasn't there a peaceful one that attacked everybody?"

"What?" Rob said aghast.

Dave rolled his eyes. "I should have known *you'd* find something negative to moan about in my completely innocent comments! You just hate religion, that's your problem."

"What?" Rob said again, even aghaster. "Should I *not* complain that you started your own religion, that you want to nail me to a tree, or that you're sitting there making blasphemous remarks over the lunchtime menu?"

"You can't really complain now," Dave explained, irritatingly calmly. "Fiona won't be working today, and frankly, when she gets back from the clinic, she's going to have her own problems to worry about. She's not going to want to hear about yours."

There was a rumble around the room, and Rob felt the only adjective that might suitably fit was, 'murderous.'

"Dave, what did you do?" he insisted.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It's April 1<sup>st</sup>. We all know you played some horrible prank. What is it, Dave?"

Dave looked around and grinned. "Oh, that!" he said, irritatingly calmly.

Rob pleaded one last time as the clock ticked so horribly close to noon. "Dave, please. I know you did something awful."

Dave nodded very slowly. "Maybe I did. Maybe I did something, just a little something that would get everyone all at once?"

There was an audible gasp and a ripple of hushed conversation.

Tick, tick, tick.

"Rob..." Dave grinned at him. "Rob, shall I tell you?"

Rob didn't want to know. His mind was reeling, he felt like running away, screaming for his mummy, although that wouldn't have been very

productive since she'd read her copy of the complaint, rolled her eyes and sent back a reply that read, 'Not known at this address.'

Still, he found himself nodding. His eyes flicked up—there were less than thirty seconds left, and Dave was still grinning at him.

"Rob," Dave began. "I tried something different this year. I did something that affects everyone, on both sides of the universe, in the universe where people are reading about the imagination of a sentient brick, if such things are true. It will reach every corner of every world, every member of the crew and every person through history whose lives might cross mine at this moment. I did the one thing that nobody expected me to do."

Rob could feel his heart thumping. He leant forward and the whole room joined him. They were as one now, fearfully waiting for it, dreading the awful revelation.

Tick, tick, tick. Mere seconds now remained.

"Rob," Dave said to him. "This time, what I did was..."

# **The Nasty Little Pickle**

He opened his eyes and the world flooded in. At first, it was like waking from a dream, but perhaps one being dreamed by someone altogether else.

He found himself in a desert, but it was horribly cold and unforgiving. The longer he sat gazing at the yellow and orange blur that dragged off towards the horizon, the colder it seemed to get.

Number 2 frowned as he saw another two-wheeled monstrosity beside him, parked along the empty road, a black and grey motorcycle loaded up with bags and boxes of equipment. Behind it was yet another.

“Bikes again,” he groaned and bent down, peering at himself in the left-hand mirror. “I look like an English teacher.”

“What do I look like?”

Number 2 turned to see the monstrous form of a tall, burly gentleman with a light coloured beard that would have only looked natural sticking out the rear end of a large horse. The smell did seem to bridge the gap nicely.

“You look like the unnatural pairing of a gorilla and a yak,” he said earnestly.

Number 1 nodded, seemingly impressed. “I was actually thinking exactly the same thing,” he said, smoothing down the wiry, jutting beard and smiling.

“Why are we in the middle of a desert, freezing and miserable with only two motorcycles for company?” he asked, glaring accusingly at the smaller of the two bikes, as if the object itself was responsible for all the problems he was facing.

“Well, whoever these two idiots are, they seem to be on a long motorcycle ride,” Number 1 said, exuding thoughtfulness and intelligence. “Some people like motorcycles.”

“And some people don’t...” Number 2 told him solemnly. “What’s happening? This feels different from the other times. This time the wind is biting through my clothes, my knees are aching from riding, my butt is sore, and my hands are tingling from the vibration. I feel fatigued from too

little sleep. This feels real, like this absolutely and entirely is happening to us right now.”

“I know,” Number 1 said, looking quite worried. “I can normally ignore the feelings of my host, but this time, it’s all coming through. I think the blips are getting worse. The Universe is ripping itself apart.”

“That last blip was bigger, much bigger,” Number 2 said thoughtfully, the memory of it all still fresh in his mind. “It’s like the joke was on us—we had a direct effect on the world we were reported on. The walls keeping layers of reality apart are coming apart themselves.”

“I would be concerned,” Number 1 told him. “Except that I read the instruction manual and I know that there aren’t any walls that divide layers of reality.”

“Maybe there are now,” he said. “We’ve changed a lot of things.”

Number 1 just stared. Finally, he said: “So now, I’m to be concerned about something that doesn’t exist, just in case it does exist.” Grunting to himself something about a banana, he began rooting through his pockets. He pulled out a phone and switched on the screen.

“We have a message,” he said.

“The universe is speaking to us?”

Number 1 nodded. “We have to start our engines and that will symbolically represent the next phase of our journey. That will cause a ripple in time that will make a woman from Eastern Europe, with questionable mental health, want to read the entire collected works of some idiot struggling author. In turn, that should burst this little bubble and erase this nasty little pickle.”

Number 2 snapped the key to the on position and the dash of his motorcycle lit up.

“It had better!”

## The End of the Line

“Well, this is a disaster!”

The smaller of the two men snarled, kicking at the cold, sandy ground.

The larger of the two watched fixedly as two glowing red taillights vanished behind some rocks, far off in the distance. He sighed to himself and said nothing.

“I mean, we’re in the middle of a desert!” the little man said.

“There’s nothing around here but sand and rocks.”

“I know!” he replied in a deep, angry voice.

“You can’t eat rocks and sand, you know!” The smaller man threw his arms around himself to warm up. The temperature was dropping as the sun melted away below the horizon.

“I know we can’t eat rocks and sand,” he growled. “I’m more worried about drinking than eating right now.”

“We can’t *drink* rocks and sand either!” he added, as if this was something that some people might not know.

The bigger of the two ignored him and turned to the car. Steam had once been pouring from the engine, and flames had been lashing out under the hood, but now only the smell of burning remained.

“That thing is finished!” the little man said firmly. “The battery is dead, the radiator is gone and the engine is blown. We’re not going anywhere in that.”

“And we’re stuck here with nothing else!” he replied. “Nothing but sand and rocks.”

“You’re making me hungry!” the little man muttered.

“Well, you can’t eat sand and rocks!” he added sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

The little man narrowed his face, pinched into an angry glare. “You can’t,” he said. “And I’m hungry!”

“I’m hungry too!” the larger man said. He turned to face his smaller, more annoying companion. “We’re stuck out here with no food or water. It could be days before you see another person out here. We’re in trouble, Pete!”

Pete shrugged and said: “We wouldn’t be in trouble if we could eat sand and rocks, Dan.”

Just for a tiny, fleeting moment, Dan almost considered it. Then he regained his composure and said very calmly: “We can’t eat sand and rocks, Pete, but if you don’t stop going on about it you might find yourself with a mouthful of teeth and blood.”

Pete put his hands on his hips and glared at him sourly. “Well, there’s no need for talk like that, Dan! I was just saying how we *can’t* eat rocks and sand. That’s a perfectly reasonable point to make since we actually *can’t* eat rocks and sand!”

Dan shook his head and looked away. He was hungry.

Pete said, more quietly, his voice low and weak, “What are we going to do, Dan? I don’t want to die out here in the middle of a desert.”

Dan retorted, less sure of himself: “Nobody is going to die out here!”

“And why is that then? Have you worked out a way we can eat sand and rocks?”

Dan smiled back thinly. “No, Pete. You can’t eat sand and rocks. I can’t remember where I heard that, but I’m pretty sure it’s true.”

“Makes sense!” Pete grumbled. Suddenly, his face broke into a smile. His eyes widened as he pointed way off into the distance. “Look!” he gasped.

Dan looked to where two tiny pinpricks of light were piercing the gloomy dusk. They were headlights. Something was coming their way.

“A car!” Pete said excitedly.

Dan clenched his hands nervously. “But it won’t stop!” he said. “Cars usually don’t stop, and I can hardly blame them for that!”

“We’ve got to make them stop!” Pete said excitedly. “We have to stop them!”



Dan knew he was right, as surely as he knew they couldn't eat rocks and sand. "We'll hide!" he snapped. "When they're close, we'll jump out, waving our arms and shouting for help. They'll be so surprised that they'll stop for us. It's human nature!"

"What if they're not human?" Pete said, looking alarmed.

"What?" Dan cried out. "Why wouldn't they be human? We're in a desert. This isn't some science-fiction story."

"Right..." Pete grumbled, rubbing his temples. "They're usually science fiction though, aren't they?"

Dan glared at him. "If you mess this up, you'll find out for sure if a human can eat rocks and sand!" he warned him.

Pete crouched down to hide behind the broken-down car. "They can't!" he said quietly, almost to himself as he watched Dan hiding behind a large, sandy rock as he took his place in some rocky sand.

Dan watched silently as the lights grew. He could hear the soft purring of the engine as the car came closer. He waited, his heart thumping in his chest in anticipation. Suddenly, he shouted: "Now!" and the pair of them leapt out, waving their arms and screaming for help at the top of their lungs.

The lights swerved and the sound of screeching tyres filled the chilling night air.

The car slithered to a halt. Dan and Pete looked at one another for a moment, bewildered, surprised and completely lost as to what they should do next.

Pete was the one who broke their silence, as he shouted: "Get them!"

He ran to the car and forced open the door.

Dan was caught up in the moment: the rush of adrenaline overwhelmed him. Without thinking, he followed along, making a dash to the car.

Before he knew it, he had grabbed a man by his jacket and had bundled him out of his seat, growling empty threats as he did so. One of them shouted: 'I have a gun' and he wasn't sure if it was him.

The engine revved up and Dan's hands tightened around the wheel of a car, a car they'd stolen from a pair of unwitting travellers. They looked at one another as they drove quickly away, making their way along the empty road to whatever might lie ahead.

"Maybe they'll be alright!" Dan said after a long and uncomfortable silence.

"They might be able to eat rocks and sand!" Pete laughed. "I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Yeah, they'll be fine," Dan smiled. "We were fine!"

Behind them the two travellers could only watch in horror.

"Well, this is a disaster!"

The smaller of the two men snarled, kicking at the cold, sandy ground.

The larger of the two watched fixedly as two glowing red taillights vanished behind some rocks, far off in the distance. He sighed to himself and said nothing.

"I mean, we're in the middle of a desert!" the little man said. "There's nothing around here but sand and rocks."

"I know!" he replied in a deep, angry voice.

"You can't eat rocks and sand, you know!"

# The Hitch

Light and darkness faded into one another as he drifted in and out of consciousness, the world ebbing and flowing in uncomfortably powerful waves.

“Well, that didn’t work very well,” he gasped, his throat coarse and tight. He was so dry now that he couldn’t swallow.

“No,” came back the reply. “It didn’t.”

He sighed heavily. “I can’t even remember which one I am.”

“You’re Number 2,” he said. “I think that means I’m Number 1. How many of us are there?”

“I always thought there were less than three,” he said. “But if you add two and one you get three, and that’s not less than three. It’s so confusing.”

He gazed out of the window of the stationary, burnt-out car. Outside was desert, as far as the eye could see. The hulk of the car they were sheltering in was off the road, nestled behind some rocks, driven there by some unknown person as the fate of the vehicle was sealed.

“We are Number 1 and Number 2, right?”

“I think I am,” someone replied. “One of them, at least.”

The heat was growing as the sun rose in the sky. There was no water, no shelter, and the light was getting brighter. His skin felt like paper, slowly baking in an oven.

“We normally live through the reports and then go somewhere else,” Number 2 said, if that was indeed who he was. “This feels like we ended up sucked into the aftermath of the actual report.”

“I know,” the other one replied, who was most likely Number 1, unless of course he wasn’t. “And there’s no way to communicate. There’s nothing here to give us a hint of what action to take to get out of here.”

Number 2’s eyes (or at least the eyes we will assume for argument’s sake and narrative convenience belonged to Number 2) were drawn upwards, swivelling painfully in his dehydrated skull. Above them was the

sign that told them the one action they had left to take. A black outline passed over the dusty, cracked windscreen of the burnt car.

“There’s one hint about what to do to get out of this little hitch,” he said.

“What is that?” Number 1 said, his voice dry and grave. “It’s a vulture, or a buzzard?”

“It’s a sign that we have to die, Number 1,” he said assuredly.

“Oh,” he said even more gravely. “What would happen to us if our hosts died? Will we continue or do we end right along with them?”

“And what happens to the universe if we’re not there to protect it?” Number 2 asked philosophically.

Number 1 smiled his cracked, dry lips. “I think it would probably be better off.”

Number 2 smiled back.

“Good luck,” Number 1 told him.

“And to you,” he said as blackness faded in, leaving him with an odd sense of well-being.

# The Travellers

The two stood there, gazing at the half-collapsed, unstable-looking bridge.

It crossed over a river of rushing water, and seemed to sway back and forth as the gentle wind blew across it.

Above them, the blue sky stretched on infinitely as the brilliant mid-morning sun beat down.

“I’m not crossing that!” Chris said firmly. “It will fall apart beneath us.”

Reg looked at him and said, “If we don’t cross it, our journey is over. I don’t think we have a choice. I think we’re meant to cross it.”

Chris shook his head and ran his fingers through his long mop of ginger hair. He sighed to himself and said: “But look at it! If we set foot on that, it will collapse.”

Reg took a few steps forwards and examined it closely. He looked back with a smile, but it didn’t do much to hide his own nervousness. “It’s funny. You don’t expect to find something like this along the journey. It’s meant to be a gate, isn’t it?”

Chris frowned and turned away. “I don’t know. I never really read that stuff. I just thought it would all be empty and black. I never expected crumbling bridges and fast-running rivers. I expected to get some long-deserved rest.”

Reg rolled his eyes. “Well, this is what we got!” he said. “You know, I think the Buddhists believe that the rivers represent life, all water connecting to other water and all that. If you think about it, this could all be a metaphor.”

“Right! That’s fantastic! This all represents something, does it? Fabulous!”

“Doesn’t it?” Reg shrugged.

Chris slowly and cautiously made his way to the edge. A few steps ahead of him, the worn brickwork of the road broke into rocks and then

vanished altogether as the rotten wooden beams of the bridge lay out before him. He shuddered. “We could swim for it?” he said.

Reg laughed. “If you’re willing to swim for it, what’s the problem? What exactly is it you’re scared of?”

“I don’t know,” Chris said angrily. “I don’t know how any of this is meant to work!”

Reg smiled weakly and looked back at the rickety old bridge. “Yeah, they should give some kind of instructions, shouldn’t they.”

Chris nodded.

Reg added, “Perhaps they do? Perhaps clues are dotted all through life about how to deal with this kind of stuff?” He trod on the first plank of wood and it creaked awkwardly under his foot. He flashed a grin and said: “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

Chris glared angrily. “Is this really the time for jokes?”

“To get to the other side!”

“Great!” Chris rolled his eyes and looked away. “I was just hoping you’d tell a *terrible* joke...”

Reg looked at him as his foot gingerly tried the beams below him. “You know it’s a suicide joke?”

“What?” Chris snapped at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the chicken was depressed,” he said with a smile. “The chicken crossed the road to kill itself so it could get to the *other side*. It wanted to die!”

“That is horrible!” Chris said, glaring at him. “We didn’t commit suicide, though, did we? We’re stuck on this stupid road with a ramshackle bridge in front of us that looks like it will collapse if we set foot on it. Nobody killed themselves.”

Reg took a step out and the wood beneath him held. He took another and the beams creaked and groaned under his weight. “It’s holding, Chris.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Great!”

Reg took several more steps forwards. He smiled to himself as he made his way out from the edge of the riverbank, the water rushing quickly beneath him.

“So, Chris! Why did the hedgehog cross the road?”

Chris crossed his arms over his chest and grumbled: “More terrible jokes?”

“To prove to the chicken that it could be done!”

“Great!” Chris rolled his eyes even harder.

“We can do this!” Reg said. “We can get to the other side.”

Chris very cautiously stepped onto the first wooden board. “But we don’t even know what’s *on* the other side. It could be worse than this side.”

“It will be fine,” Reg said confidently. “After all, we didn’t do anything wrong. We didn’t commit suicide or anything.”

“No,” he agreed. “We were in that old car and it just went dark. Right?”

“Exactly,” Reg said. “We just get to the other side and see what’s next.”

Chris looked forwards up the road, which seemed to stretch on into the infinity before them. “It looks like we have a long way to go yet,” he said, carefully edging forwards.

“Yeah,” Reg agreed. “But we can make it.”

# The Rupture

All around them was a glowing white light. It seemed to exist both inside and outside of them at the same time, and both to exist and not exist simultaneously.

“Number 1?” Number 2 said awkwardly, not able to see her own hands in front of her face, as if she had any of those things at her disposal. Her voice sounded as she remembered, and, though she was aware of the sound, she wasn’t sure if she was actually hearing it, or if it just somehow existed by some other means.

“Number 2?” Number 1’s voice came back. “I wasn’t sure you were here, wherever here is.”

“I can’t see anything,” she said. “You sound exactly like I remember you from the coffee shop, but I can’t see anything. Maybe we simply don’t exist anymore?”

“We could be dead, I suppose,” he said oddly casually. “At least, we still exist in some form. That’s something to be grateful for.”

“Being dead wouldn’t be so bad,” Number 2 said thoughtfully, her mind the sharpest and clearest it had been in as long as she could remember. “We’ve essentially been that way ever since we took this job, hopping from one thing to another like a disembodied idea, no more substance than a fart in the wind.”

“You should write poetry,” Number 1 said sarcastically.

“That is difficult without a body,” she said. “I think a lot of things are going to be more difficult without a body, such as going to the bathroom, although that problem does seem to include its own solution.”

“You know, I can’t see anything, but I can feel something,” he told her. “I think the universe has ruptured and we’re being swept away in it. If we’re going to remain in any form, I think the important thing to remember is not to forget.”

“Oh well,” she said, feeling the strange urge to shrug shoulders she didn’t have. “We had a good run.”



“We might still have a chance,” he said.

“Don’t tell me the manual mentions what to do in the event that the universe collapses over a misplaced banana?” she said sarcastically.

“It’s just a question of positive action,” he told her. “Accepting it is negative inaction. We simply have to choose to do something.”

“We’re disembodied voices floating in a glowing white vacuum,” she said, seeing he needed to be reminded of their situation. “What exactly are we meant to do?”

“Well, we do have *voices*,” he said. “We could shout our refusal to allow ourselves not to exist.”

“Or we could post on social media about how this is all very unfair?” she suggested.

“That’s just another form of negative inaction.”

“Alright...” she agreed, knowing they had nothing to lose, except the possibility of an eternity stuck in limbo with Number 1. That was surprisingly motivating.

“I refuse not to exist,” he cried out loudly at the top of the lungs he didn’t actually have.

She joined in, yelling as loudly as she couldn’t in the soundless emptiness. “I demand to speak with your supervisor. This situation is quite unacceptable.”

The whiteness flashed until the flash was so bright, they could hear it in their toes.

## The Fourth Wall

He came in from the kitchen of the dingy little flat with a tray of steaming mugs of coffee. The sky outside was grey and dull, and the living room rang to the sound of rain tapping gently at the windows.

He trudged silently, wearing only a pair of socks on his feet, feet that were still cold against the dreary orange carpet.

“Get this down you,” he said, putting a mug in front of his friend who sat opposite, across a utilitarian little table.

His friend looked up from his laptop and smiled his thanks. “Coffee! It’s about time.”

He sat down after resting his own well-worn mug onto a coaster that had been stolen from the local pub. “What are you doing now? You’re always on that computer. I thought you came over to see me!”

His friend smiled broadly without even looking up. “I came over to use your wi-fi. Why would I want to see you? You’re not pretty enough for me to make the long journey from the end of the corridor, let alone two floors up.”

“That’s charming, Phil!” he grumbled, and crossed his arms over his chest, pretending to be annoyed.

“I was just reading a story,” said Phil. He looked up finally and flashed a smile. “You, old friend, have my full attention until I finish my coffee. When that’s gone, the story will be my whole little world again.”

“You read a lot, don’t you?” he said thoughtfully, or as thoughtfully as someone who didn’t read a lot could get. Jim was more of a TV person.

“Yeah, I like stories,” said Phil. “Reading makes us smarter. Don’t you want to be smarter, Jim?”

“I don’t think anybody got smarter reading stupid short stories from the internet, Phil,” he said with a sarcastic little smile on his lips. He grinned as if he had dropped a pearl of absolutely irrefutable wisdom.

“Yeah, well it’s true that there’s a lot of garbage out there, but there’s also some great stuff.” Phil held up a finger as he made his point. “If you

stick to the good stuff, you get smarter. If you stick to the bad, then we end up with you.”

“Whatever...” Jim picked up his mug, blew gently over the surface and put it back down, deciding it was still too hot to sip at.

“It’s like the supermarket,” Phil continued to a rather bored-looking audience. “It’s chock full of food—some of it is good for you, some of it is bad, and it’s up to you what you get. Healthy and unhealthy people both shop in the same place: it’s only their choices that make the difference.”

Jim narrowed his eyes, scowling at his friend. “Are you calling me fat?”

“I wasn’t...” said Phil with a shrug. “Or was I?”

“Just for that, I won’t offer you a biscuit to go with your coffee.”

Phil snapped shut the shiny black plastic lid of his old and bulky laptop. “Do you have any biscuits, Jim?”

Jim grunted and looked away. “No, and I don’t have any fruit either, before you ask.”

Phil’s face cracked into a grin. “Is that because you already ate all the biscuits? It goes a long way towards explaining the lack of fruit, if you think about it?”

Jim nodded. Indeed, the biscuits were a distant memory, and were no more than a minor contributor to a future that was likely to include medication to control his blood-pressure.

“It’s still raining.” Jim gestured with a nod to the window where the pitter-patter sound of raindrops was tapping relentlessly at the glass.

“And you wonder why I spend so much time on the internet. Are we really going to have a conversation about the weather? We could always follow it up with a discussion about your horrible orange carpet, or our terribly depressing lives.”

“Are our lives really so terrible and depressing?” Jim said, half to himself.

“You tell me. Are you a millionaire? Do you have your own private jet? Do you drive a sports-car? Are you married to a super-model?” Phil made his point, and then sipped at his coffee.

“No...” said Jim. “No, I don’t. I don’t even have a girlfriend, a job, or a bank account with enough money in it for me to draw out. I think I’ve got a picture of a sports-car in a magazine somewhere, but it was only an old one, and it wasn’t a very nice colour.”

“Your life is officially depressing then!” Phil told him.

“And you’re my best friend,” Jim added, as if to nail shut his own coffin lid.

“I have a job, and a girlfriend,” said Phil, as if suddenly remembering it. “But I’m always here in your flat, which gives you an idea just how utterly depressing my life must be, even compared to yours.”

Jim sipped at his own coffee. “Nothing is as depressing as my orange carpet.”

“The weather might be...” Phil suggested.

There was a moment of silence, and then Phil breathed a heavy sigh and took another long sip from his mug.

“How’s the coffee?” asked Jim, scooping up his mug and preparing to take a sip.

Phil frowned and looked up at him. “I don’t know,” he said with a raised eyebrow. “Hot, I guess.”

“Hot?” asked Tom, seated as he was on an inadequately padded chair between them both at the table. “That’s the best you can do?”

Phil and Jim looked at one another in surprise.

“Tom?” said Jim. “How long have you been here?”

Tom drank a big swig of his coffee and stared at nothing in particular. “What do you mean, *How long have I been here?* I’ve been here all afternoon, same as you two.”

Phil looked at Jim, his brow ruffled thoughtfully. “Tom’s been here all afternoon, Jim. Of course he has.”

Jim smiled to himself, shaking his head at his stupid little lapse. “It must have slipped my mind, I guess. I just didn’t notice you.”

Tom looked at them both suspiciously. “I can’t see how—I just made the coffee you’re drinking. You even thanked me for making it.”

“That’s right—I did!” Jim nodded in firm agreement. “Yeah, I do remember it, now that you mention it. I remember thanking you for making it. I guess I just didn’t remember before.”

Phil glanced over, his eyes swivelling furtively beneath his curious frown. “You know, I remember you thanking him too.”

“Well done,” said Tom sarcastically.

“But I didn’t before...” Phil added thoughtfully with a glance to his closed laptop. “Before Jim noticed you, it was like you’d never existed; it was like I’d never even heard of you before.”

Tom looked at him and drank some more coffee. “I’d say I’d like to have what you’re drinking, but I am, and it’s just coffee. You two must just be mental.”

“I’m not mental,” Phil grumbled, but then, just for a moment, he had to think about it. “Am I?”

Jim shrugged. “You spend too much time on that computer. Sometimes I think you live in those stories, but I never thought you were actually crazy.”

“But am I though?” A troubling line of thought had started to run through his mind. “I mean, am I really?”

“I don’t know,” said Jim. “Maybe. Talking like this, I’m starting to have my doubts.”

“Tom, am I mental?” Phil said sharply.

Tom nodded. “You look pretty mental to me.”

“No Tom, you’re not getting it,” grumbled Phil under his breath. “I need to know—am I mental? Do I actually have some kind of condition?”

Tom shrugged and laughed. “How the hell would I know?”

“We’re friends...” Phil looked at their incredulous faces. “Aren’t we?”

Jim and Tom both nodded, confused.

“Well then, why don’t you know anything about me? Isn’t this the sort of thing that friends would know?”

Tom clicked his fingers. “I respect your privacy! That’s why.”

Phil looked from one to the other, before an idea struck him. “Jim! Describe Tom.”

“What?” Jim smiled awkwardly. “Why do you want me to describe him? He’s right there! You can see him!”

Phil rubbed his forehead and looked nervous. “Just describe him, Jim.”

Jim sat for a moment in thoughtful silence as he looked him over, just contemplating the man in front of him. Finally, he said, “He’s... he’s just... Tom! I don’t know what else I’m meant to say.”

“Describe his appearance!” insisted Phil, sounding increasingly concerned. “Is he tall or short, fat or thin, hairy or bald?”

Jim shrugged and chuckled nervously. He said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper, “He’s just Tom!”

Phil snapped open his eyes and stared directly into Jim’s. “You can’t do it, can you? You can’t describe him?”

Jim shrugged, and looked a little worried himself. He cautiously shook his head very slowly.

“Exactly!” shouted Phil. “I can’t either.”

“I can,” Tom announced loudly. “Devastatingly handsome, body of a Greek God. I have a brilliant, if slightly cutting, sense of humour, and a head of hair that anyone would envy.”

“Funny as always, Tom!” said Jim with a laugh. “Now I think about it, I suppose he is a pretty good looking guy, and he does keep himself in good shape.”

Phil looked at him, as his eyes narrowed. “You’re just repeating what he told us as a sarcastic joke.”

“But he is really good looking,” said Jim, casting a glance over at their friend.

“My point is that you *didn't know he was* until he made a sarcastic joke that suddenly became reality,” Phil said, growing still more agitated. He stood up from his seat and looked around. “What’s behind these walls, Jim?”

Jim hung his head. “I think I’ve had enough. I’m gonna need biscuits to deal with you today.”

Phil pointed to the window. “Look... Out there is rain tapping on the glass. We know that, right?”

The others nodded, and cast a worried little look at one another.

Phil pointed to the next wall. “Behind there is the kitchen. We know it’s a kitchen, because it was mentioned earlier.”

“Right,” said Jim with a weary sigh. “That’s where Tom made the coffee I brought in.”

Phil pointed to the next wall, a blank one with a dirty mark just left of the middle. “That’s an outside wall—it goes nowhere; it’s just the edge of the flat.”

Tom sighed deeply. “Sure, Phil.”

Finally, he pointed to the last of the four. In the middle was a wooden door. “What’s through there, Jim? Where does that door go? What’s behind the fourth wall?”

“It’s just a door,” Jim said with a shrug.

“Doors go somewhere,” Phil told him. “It’s a door in your flat. You live here. Where does the door go?”

“Alright,” Tom smirked. “That’s enough silliness now. Tell him where the door goes, Jim.”

Jim just stared at the door and frowned.

“Jim?”

He looked over, his face white and his eyes wide. “I don’t know. I don’t know where it goes.”

Phil hung his head into his hands. “I knew it...”

“What’s the point of all this?” Jim snapped at him. “I have a bad memory. So what?”

“I don’t know where it goes either,” Phil explained. “I don’t know my surname, or yours, or my date of birth. All I know is that I have a coffee which is hot, your carpet is orange, it’s raining outside and I was reading a story. Halfway through, I shut the lid of my laptop and stopped reading. That’s all I really know.”

“Now you mention it,” Tom added. “My brain does feel rather empty. For all I know, that’s all perfectly normal. I have to say, my impression is that none of us are high-achievers or are doing terribly well at life.”

Jim looked quite worried. “What’s going on, Phil?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s like, this is all some story being told somewhere. We only know things as they happen, as if a narrative is unfolding as somebody reads it.”

“You know what?” interjected Tom. “I think I’ve worked it out. You *are* mental.”

“Our whole lives can’t just be words on a page that someone is reading out,” said Jim, angrily.

“Can’t they?” Phil asked.

“But...”

Jim looked away, his expression one of horror.

“If that’s true, then what happens when the words stop?”



# The Overflow

She opened her eyes, nervously peering out from beneath her eyelids.

At first, she felt the enormous relief of finding out that she actually had eyes, and eyelids above them. That was a good sign, to be sure.

“Coffee?” A voice came to her ear, and as she heard it, she realised the smell of freshly ground beans was all around her.

She snapped her eyes fully open and looked with wide-eyed surprise at Number 1. It was really him, standing behind his counter with a coffee cup in his hand and a towel thrown roughly across his shoulder. He had never looked more appealing; or less appealing, since it actually was Number 1.

“We’re back?” she said, a rush of excitement racing through her chest and shooting up her spine. “We’re alive! We’re alive?”

Number 1 nodded his head. “We seem to be right back where it started. At least, where it started for us.”

“That’s great,” she said enthusiastically. “We saved the universe!”

“Well, no,” he said. “I think all that’s happened is that we refused not to exist after the universe came apart, so we’ve just been pushed back along to a moment before that actually happened. The universe is still ripping itself to shreds, we’re just back inside it again. I think we might actually be worse off.”

She slumped, her shoulders drooping. “Oh,” she said. “That’s a pretty pessimistic appraisal. For all you know, everything is fixed now. I mean, you’re not a genius. You just make coffees for people. Your biggest life challenge was asking people if they want milk and sugar.”

“Well, what does that tell you about the universe, if it puts someone like me in a position of authority?” he said, seeming more than a little offended.

“Not much...” she agreed. “Or too much.”

“We’re still screwed,” he told her. “We’re just screwed tomorrow now, instead of yesterday. Would you like milk and sugar with that?”

“So what do we do?” she said, her voice rising in pitch and tone. The volume was getting up there too. “We can’t let the universe be destroyed over a banana. I feel like you should be doing something to fix it.”

“Well, we can’t stop it,” he said with a shrug. “We tried and that didn’t go well at all. All we ended up with was a crashed motorcycle and an imaginative brick.”

He sighed and plonked the coffee mug down on the counter. “You know, I don’t even like coffee. I hate the stuff. It smells to me like someone set fire to a cat.”

“Nobody cares what you think,” she told him in no uncertain terms. “Give me all of the coffee. Fill up that mug until it can’t take anymore and then fill it up some more.”

Number 1 poured out the coffee, huffing and muttering to himself the whole time. Once it was completely filled up to the brim, he asked with a notable lack of sincerity, “Would you like milk and sugar with that?”

“There’s no space,” she grumbled at him, pointing out the obvious. “Where do you think you’re going to put it?”

“Why don’t I just give you a separate mug of milk and sugar, and you can just sip from one, then from the other?”

She frowned thoughtfully as her mind, now that it was back in her own brain, did something that felt like an idea. As it began to take root in the not as fertile soil as she would have liked it to have been, she said, frowning thoughtfully: “That’s not a bad idea. Why don’t we try that?”

“Because it’s stupid,” he said. “It doesn’t surprise me that I would have to spell that out to you.”

“No,” she said, as she began to figure it out. “I want that. I want a separate mug with all the milk and sugar in it. That way I can get the best of both whenever I want them.”

“I don’t care,” he said with a huff. He shrugged and added, “The universe is ending because we irrevocably damaged it with a lump of yellow fruit. Who cares how you drink your coffee?”

“No,” she said excitedly. “Don’t you see?”

He clearly did not, and in case there was any doubt, he extinguished it by saying: “Clearly, I do not.”

“We broke the universe with a banana,” she explained, thinking to herself how lucky it was that nobody was listening to this conversation. “We created an error, a blip that started to spread, and every time we tried to stop it, it just shifted and changed and grew. In the end it got big enough to corrupt the whole, entire universe.”

“Yes, I was there!” he said. “I remember it well. It’s not the kind of thing you forget.”

“Think about the coffee,” she said, her arms moving around theatrically. Now that she had them back, it seemed a shame to waste them. “There’s all this coffee, and all this sugar and milk, and if we put them all in the same cup it’s all going to mix together and spill out everywhere, and then everyone has a bad day. But where in the rules does it say they all have to be in the same cup?”

“I don’t follow.”

“The original blip made a mess of our universe, so why not put it somewhere else, a different universe?”

He looked at her as if she was completely and irretrievably insane. “Because there isn’t a different universe.”

“So?” she said. “Let’s make one! Look, think about that last report. Think about all the reports we’ve seen.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “They give me a headache,” he said earnestly.

“We can create a universe that only exists at certain times, in certain ways,” she said, her mind racing ahead of her mouth, for a change. “Just like in the last report, where the people only existed in a story, we could do something like that, couldn’t we?”

He frowned and looked away thoughtfully. “Like inside the mind of a brick that’s dreaming a whole universe into being?” he said as he rubbed his chin.

“I don’t care where we shove it,” she told him. “We’ll take all the pickles and hitches and the blips and the glitches. We’ll sandbox them in a new cup, a new universe that’s attached to this one where all this crazy nonsense can exist without ripping apart the whole of reality.”

“That’s the stupidest idea I ever heard.”

“And if there’s one thing our experiences have taught us, the stupidity of an idea is directly proportional to its likelihood of success.”

Number 1 stood silent for a moment, before eventually nodding his head. “I need to consult the universe.”

He began tapping away on his electronic till.

She bit her lip hopefully, and began hopping very slightly from one foot to the other. It felt good to have legs again, too.

Finally, after ordering two cappuccinos, an espresso, and a blueberry muffin, the till told him the will of the universe.

“We can do it,” he said. “All we have to do is convince two authors not to quit. If they never do, then they’ll push all of this into their universe and we won’t have to clean up the mess after them.”

“Excellent!” she cried out, punching the air excitedly before remembering she was a grown adult.

“But...” he said.

“But?”

He looked worried. The entire universe hung on them successfully completing one simple task. “But what?” she asked again, a sense of dread knotting her stomach.

“We have to perform a positive action to trigger the events,” he said. “The universe has told us what it is that you have to do.”

Her face dropped as she wondered what terrible ordeal might face her. What horrors would it take to save the universe? Would she be able to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to save it?

“What do I have to do?” she asked, swallowing her growing apprehension and assuring herself that she was equal to the task.

Number 1 looked down, clearly afraid to meet her gaze. He said softly, his voice little more than a low rumble: “You have to apologise.”

“Apologise?” she cried out, her voice almost a scream. “What the hell did I do wrong to warrant an apology from me?”

He said apologetically: “You threw the banana!”

“I don’t believe this,” she said grumpily, turning her back and pacing around the coffee-shop counter like a caged, and not very happy about it, animal.

“Please. It will fix the whole universe.”

She glared at him, and then, after thinking it through very carefully, she said: “Fine! I’ll apologise if it will save the universe.”

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, only barely louder than a whisper.

“I don’t think the universe heard you,” he said awkwardly.

“I’m sorry I broke the universe!” she cried out, making him reel back in shock. “I’m sorry I don’t like bananas. I’m sorry I have to apologise to make everything just as awful as it was before, but not as awful as if none of it ever existed. I’m sorry I met you. I’m sorry I didn’t read the manual, which took you thirty-seven years to complete, and I’m sorry I was ever born.”

There was an odd silence.

She wondered if that would work.

The pair of them stared at one another. “Well?” she said.

“The computer says we have to return to work tomorrow,” he told her as a grin began to carve itself across his lips. “We have the rest of the day off. I think it worked.”

“Of course it worked,” she said snappily.

*How dare he question her?*

“I wonder which side of the rip in the fabric of reality we ended up on?” he said, wiping beads of sweat from his brow.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he began. “On one side, we have the normal universe where people all sort of mostly agree on what reality is and, more importantly, isn’t. On the other side, we have this new pocket universe that we accidentally brought into existence.”

“I think the new one is mostly fictional,” she said with a weary sigh. “We’re not fictional characters, are we? Nobody made us up and created our world with words printed on a page? We’re not some surreal impression of various aspects of an author’s imagination living in some collection of short stories that showcases their work for free on a cheap, poorly-made website.”

“Aren’t we?” Number 1 said, mostly to himself. “Would we even know if we were?”

She flashed him a tired smile. “Not if we were written not to.”

“Perfect then!” he said.

She stepped over to her usual table and slumped down into a nice, warm, soft chair with a weary sigh. “Why does this sort of thing have to happen every Monday?”

“I know,” he grumbled. “I hate Mondays...”