

Alone

Prologue

Mag. X1. The large, friendly, blue-uniformed nurse asks the young woman to “hop on to the table” and smiles at her reassuringly. The woman moves slowly, cautiously, wincing with pain as her injured leg bumps into the cold stainless steel table. She lies on her back, stares at the green-painted ceiling, and tries not to notice the low menacing drone of hospital machinery whose vibrations she can feel in the small of her back. More pain sears through her thigh when the nurse lifts her leg to slide the metal-sheaved photographic plate under her.

The woman bites her full, cherry-red lip and curses the clumsiness that caused her trip on the staircase and fall awkwardly to the bottom. Her husband of a year and a day – last night they celebrated their first anniversary – waits impatiently outside the radiography room. He is torn between concern for his attractive, vulnerable wife, and the worry of being away from the branch. Absences like this, even for such a good reason, won't help his chances of promotion. He lights another Player's cigarette and puffs nervously.

The nurse unbuttons the young woman's hospital gown to expose the injured upper thigh, and walks behind the lead the screen. After a brief hiatus, a deafening electro-mechanical clunk fills the woman's head.

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Mag. X1000. The ovum adheres to the rough wall of the womb's lining. Around it are dead and dying sperm cells, their brief life's journey having ended in failure to perform the only task ever required of them. Eight hours earlier, though, one of their number was successful. Blindly swimming through the mucus-coated cervix, into the uterus, guided by minute quantities of chemical markers secreted by the egg, the sperm cell found the pore that allowed it to combine with the ripe ovum and fertilise it. Its 23 chromosomes performed a complex microscopic dance with those of the egg to form a perfect prototypical cell. The first subdivision of the cell is almost complete. Soon there will be an amorphous clump of cells. Later this clump will become an embryo and start to exhibit the first primitive likeness to the human form.

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Mag. X1000000. Invisible radiation floods into the woman's womb, leakage from the rays directed at her femur. Quantum physicists tell us we can imagine electromagnetic radiation – radio waves, heat, light, and x-rays – in two ways. We can view them either as waves of energy, or as tiny particles of matter called photons, which move at great speeds. X-rays have a very short wavelength, which means they are highly energetic. Most of the x-ray particles shooting through the young woman's body pass harmlessly through tissue and bone. They collide with the photographic plate creating dark areas when the plate is developed. Others are absorbed by the bone, leading to less darkening of the plate, which allows a picture of the bone to be built up on the plate. Any crack or fracture in the woman's femur will show as a thin line on the x-ray photograph.

Inside the x-ray machine, a mechanical timer determines how long the woman will be exposed to the rays before the thick lead shield is moved back into position to protect her from over exposure and the x-ray source is cut off. The timer is poorly calibrated and x-rays are emitted for half a second longer than the one second for which they're supposed to. The radiation bombards the women. Most of it passes through harmlessly, like bullets being shot at a chain-link fence. Deep inside the nucleus of one half of the divided embryo cell, an untypically powerful x-ray passes through a section of one the 23 chromosome pairs. This section is part of the gene that will later control many vital regulatory functions in the developing foetus. The x-ray particle smashes into the gene and imparts its energy to an adenine molecule that is bound to a molecule of thymine. This molecular union forms one of the billions of instructions in the cell's DNA- its genetic programming. The x-ray destroys the molecular bond and corrupts the instruction.

One and a half seconds after it began, the x-ray bombardment ceases. The binary division of the cell takes a rare path and separates completely. The two cells will continue to divide and develop in parallel, identical in almost all respects.

The miniature wiener sausage paused briefly to smile and wink before diving off the end of the fork that it was using as a make-shift diving board. It arced gracefully into the bowl full of steaming baked beans below. Further sausages followed, and soon there was a torrent of them, cascading lemming-like into the rich, red tomato sauce.

Michael sighed and pushed his swivel chair away from the traditional mahogany-effect desk that supported his traditional off-white computer workstation. It wasn't easy anthropomorphizing wiener sausages, even with today's computer technology. That would have to do for tonight, though. His eyes were having problems focussing as they tried to concentrate on the millions of tiny pixels that formed the sausage 'n' beans scene.

He turned his head and gazed down at the dark scintillating waters of the river many storeys below. The computer-controlled office lighting had switched itself off hours ago, at 7 PM, and he'd been working by the light of the computer screen and the office's dim night-lights. Outside it was black and wintry. He couldn't hear the wind crying mournfully outside the 45th storey office but he could see the droplets of rain that it hurled against the tinted glass of the window. Each droplet created a tiny inverted image of the streetlights and the headlights of cars that roamed through the Docklands district of London. Michael's eyes followed one drop of rain as it cut its crazy path down the thick pane, gaining strength and momentum as it enlisted the help of the splashes it encountered on the way down. Eventually it reached the window ledge and became part of the trickle that drained off the end, once more falling freely to be carried by the high, gusting winds.

The clock on the computer screen showed 10.37 PM. It was time to go home: no use hanging around here any longer. He pulled himself back to the desk and clicked the `Quit` option on the `File` menu. The computer told him:

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File "Heinz Beanz Promo" has not been saved.  
Save now?
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Of course he wanted to save it now. What would be the point of working solidly on a project for four hours, only to quit without saving it? Irritated, he clicked the `Yes` button, and finally the animation program let him exit. The machine seemed to sigh with relief when he disconnected the power, as though it felt as fatigued as he did.

Sitting in the dark, Michael noticed the red glow of the outside line indicators on his 'executive' telephone. One or two of them occasionally blinked green. There must be other people still working, making late night calls to the States or South America. Maybe he should call his parents. He picked up the streamlined, beige handset and pressed `Recall- 2`. The hand-written tag next to the button read "Mum", not "Mum and Dad".

And it was his mother who answered, sounding surprised to be getting a call at this hour.

"Hi Mum."

"Oh hello dear. I wondered who on earth it could be at this time. I was just making up a hot chocolate for your father. He's out walking the dog. How are you?"

"Fine. I've got some news, actually. I meant to phone you earlier but I got stuck into this

bit of storyboarding, hopefully the last one for a long time.” He paused.

“Well, what is it? Do tell.”

“Actually there are two things. The good news and the bad news, you could say. I’ll give you the good news first. The sign downstairs in reception won’t say ‘Murchison Sanders and Levett’ anymore. It’ll say ‘Murchison Sanders Levett and Merritt’”

“What, you mean...”

“Yes, they made me full partner. I think it was winning the Heinz account that did it, though I expect the Lee’s jeans ads didn’t hurt.”

“Oh darling, I am pleased. Your father’s just walked in; I’ll tell him.”

His parents’ voices were muffled as though his mother had placed her hand over the mouthpiece, although she presumably had no reason to keep the exchange confidential. His mother came back on the line.

“He says he’s thrilled. Why don’t you come for lunch on Sunday, with Rebecca.”

“Ah. That’s the other piece of news. The sign on the flat’s bell push won’t say ‘Michael and Rebecca’ any more. Just ‘Michael’. Rebecca’s moved out.”

“Oh dear. Was it the...”

“Probably. That and work. I’ve been very distracted, getting all these new accounts in order and we’ve barely been seeing each other. It was very amicable. We haven’t split up, as such. We’re just having some time apart. But I remember what happened to John and Liz. And Carol and Mark.”

His mother was genuinely upset. She liked Rebecca.

“Well I hope it does work out, dear. Tell her she’s still quite welcome to come over whenever she wants to. It seems such a pity. Makes you wonder what the point of getting a promotion is if you end up losing your loved ones into the bargain. I’m sure it will work out though. Have you seen anyone, about the... dreams and things.”

Michael sighed.

“Not yet, no. That’s another thing I’ve been too busy to get round to. But now the partnership’s finalised and can stop working myself into the ground and concentrate on me for a bit. I *will* call someone, next week. It’s getting worse, if anything. I’d better let you get off to bed. I just wanted you to have the news. I’ll see you on Sunday, about one?”

“That’ll be fine, dear. I’ll do lamb; you like that.”

“OK, love to dad. See you Sunday”

“Bye-bye dear. Don’t worry, things will work out.”

So, that was his last pretext for delaying going home used up. It would be strange, letting himself in to the empty flat, no Rebecca there to greet him. She was usually home before him, even on nights when he didn't allow himself to be drawn into the time-distorted world of computer graphics animation. Publishing editors, it seemed, could leave the office at 5.30 without being regarded as part-time employees. Her clothes would still be there too. She didn't take much, just a small case that she packed after they'd talked about it the previous evening. There'd be plenty of time to pick up the rest of her stuff, if they decided it was for the best. She didn't want to clutter Jo's flat unnecessarily.

Michael sighed again. I was becoming his standard way of exhaling, and that worried him. He put on his suit jacket and glanced down one more time at the sight of a large proportion of the metropolis strewn out before him. The agency had moved to the towering Canary Wharf building six months previously, and the thrill of overlooking London from the penultimate floor of the country's tallest building hadn't begun to wane yet. He took the fast lift down to the underground car park. As ever, the grey, dank cavern was spotted with puddles spreading from the ominous leaks that dripped down the massive cement columns. The building had been opened less than a year ago, and the floor was already disfigured by patches of oil and even paint, though Michael had no idea how that got there.

The sleek black BMW 735i chirped at him in response to the infrared commands from his key ring. Michael liked the car. Part of the promotion to full partner would enable him to drive an even more luxurious and expensive company car, but he would probably stick with the Beemer. It was like a great black cat. The engine purred seductively, but with a tap on the gas pedal the car would pounce ahead, a useful feature to have in the busy London traffic, where avoiding the path of maniacal taxi drivers was always desirable.

The drive to his flat in The Barbican was relaxing. The lush violins of Tchaikovsky's 6th symphony washed over Michael. The roads were quiet, so the journey only took thirty five minutes in spite of the rain. That wasn't quiet long enough for the symphony to reach the climax of the last movement. Michael was relieved, really. The *Pathétique* made him lachrymose at the best of times; this was the last thing that he should be listening to in his current frame of mind. Even so, he had to make a determined effort to turn off the stereo after he'd parked the car at the bottom of the block of luxury flats that contained his apartment, instead of sitting eyes-closed in the gloomy car and wallowing in violin-induced emotion. He and Rebecca had seen the LSO perform the symphony in the summer concert season, just on their doorstep at the Barbican Theatre. His doorstep. Just on *his* doorstep.

The flat seemed as empty and tomb-like as he'd feared: no light showed through the crack beneath the door to remind him of Rebecca's presence; no TV or radio sound filtered into the hallway outside the apartment, and, when he opened the door and stepped into the still living room, there was no waft of *Opium* or *Poison* to tell him that she was home. It was only through its absence that Michael now noticed how her perfume pervaded the apartment's atmosphere.

The flat was small and comfortable. The walls were white, furniture black leather. Colour

was provided by four paintings hung in pairs on the side walls. Two were stark, geometric abstracts: overlapping triangles, rectangles and lines in reds, orange and green disfiguring an expanse of white canvas. Rebecca had chosen these. Facing them, either side of the coal-effect gas fire, were Michael's choices, a pair of photo-realistic oil paintings. One was a street scene at night outside a movie theatre and the other showed a collection of glass marbles reflected in mirrors. Michael enjoyed visitors glancing at them and saying "Nice photographs," so that he could invite them to look more closely and detect the minute brush strokes that the artist had painstakingly employed to create the lifelike images. Rebecca said his enjoyment of the paintings was symptomatic of his precise, literal nature. He countered that the crazy abstracts she had chosen proved she had scrambled eggs for brains, but it was a friendly disagreement.

He placed his monogrammed Samsonite briefcase gently beside the comfortable leather sofa, took off his jacket and hung it on the back of a chair in front of the small dining table, loosened his dark blue tie, and sank down into the sofa, which wheezed gently as it moulded to his shape. He placed his hands on his knees and stared at the blank Sony TV screen.

Now what? He was hungry, but couldn't be bothered to cook, or even call out for a pizza. What would he normally be doing on a Friday night? Out with Rebecca at a movie or a play or a concert. Perhaps having dinner with friends, having relaxed, secure conversations about advertising or publishing or the God-awful state of business, dimly aware of the fact that having a six-figure salary might be construed as being far from God-awful by the people living in cardboard boxes not two miles away, under the Embankment Arches. Or maybe he'd just be curled up on the sofa, his body pressed agreeably into Rebecca's, hand resting comfortably on her warm breast, watching a rented video or late-night movie with her.

Should he call her? Just to straighten things out. Just to reassure himself that they hadn't broken up, but were just having some time apart to get things into perspective. Well, so that *he* could sort himself out; their problem was really his problem. For about four weeks now he'd been gripped by dark, sporadic depressions. Often they would descend upon him in the evening, a feeling of hopelessness, anxiety, even fear. Nothing Rebecca said could relieve the feeling, and he would eventually become irritable and snap at her, as though resenting her attempts at understanding his problem. More than once she'd started to cry, and his heart had reached out to her, but the oppression he felt prevented him from saying anything conciliatory, and the result was a terrible wounded silence. They would go to bed, undressing in the dark, taking turns in the bathroom instead of sharing it haphazardly as normal. Sometimes on these evenings, he'd have *the dream* too. He couldn't remember the dream, but he would wake moaning incoherently. Or he'd be wakened by Rebecca if his restlessness had disturbed her. He would lie sweating, eyes wide, gasping for breath, his world black as a tar pit, a residue malevolence flitting from his mind as consciousness fought to take control.

Rebecca had been patient, sympathetic, understanding, tolerant, displaying all of the qualities for which he loved her. It was starting to affect her too though. She was losing sleep, becoming irritable, making mistakes at work. She even said she felt inadequate because there was nothing she could do to help, which was ludicrous. Although it was

Rebecca who had admitted it was affecting the way she felt about him the previous night, Michael was the one who suggested they should spend some time apart. He could see the toll it was taking, and knew that if they stayed in the flat together for much longer, the distance caused by the brooding silences could turn into a dangerous gulf between them. He felt a propensity to say hurtful, wounding things to her when his mood began to descend in an endless downward arc. He wanted to use her as the target against which all the hatred and resentment he suddenly felt for life could be aimed. So she'd agreed. If there was really nothing she could do to help, if he really thought her staying in the flat would make things worse, then she'd go back to Jo's. Jo still had the small guestroom, though Rebecca's old room had been taken just after she moved in with Michael six months previously. A short phone call to Jo was all it had taken. Michael felt for Rebecca as she tried to ward off Jo's questions on the phone. Had it not worked out, then? Was there someone else? Rebecca would have to tell her something, to sate her curiosity. Why not the truth? Michael is having profound mood swings and nightmares, but other than that, things are fine.

No, he wouldn't call her tonight. It would be unfair; she needed time on her own as much as he did. He would just have to assume that she wasn't going to forget him overnight, just because she no longer shared a bed with him.

Bed. There was nothing else to do, so he might as well go to bed. As he took a shower, the scalding water washing the accumulation of a day's office smoke and car fumes and general London griminess out of his black hair, he tried to assess his mood. He was feeling apprehensive, but that was only to be expected, but there wasn't the fear, the edginess he felt on his 'mood nights'. Indeed, Friday nights were usually pretty good, which lent credence to the theory that it was work-related. If the feelings he'd been experiencing were a response to the pressure and expectations at work – which he'd always imagined he thrived on – then the end of the work week presumably would bring some amount of relief.

He dried himself and got into bed, his conscious attempt not to notice the empty coldness of Rebecca's side making him all the more aware of it. He drifted quickly into a Morphean slumber, his mind filled with little wiener sausages grinning inanely as they plummeted headlong into thick sauce, the colour of blood.

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The face that smirked down at him was a young man's. The acne and greasy hair gave him a teenage appearance, but he may have been in his early twenties. The smirk turned into a snarl, revealing yellowing, uneven teeth. The face was pressed fearfully close, making it look distorted, as though viewed through the wide-angle lens of a peephole. As the mouth opened and closed, there were distant, echoey sounds, like someone shouting in a cavernous empty warehouse. Michael strained to understand them, but the harder he tried, the less comprehensible they became. The youth pulled his head away, revealing above a white-painted peeling ceiling, illuminated by a flickering fluorescent tube. The man was wearing a white coat under which the neck of a black tee-shirt was visible. His long arm reached down, the giant hand held with flat palm. Michael felt fearful and

anxious. The boy slowly drew his hand back, then brought it down with a stinging blow on to Michael's face.

Michael heard his own cry as he sat upright in bed, his hand instinctively moving to his cheek where the boy had struck him. There was no pain there, though, no physical sensation at all. What remained was an anxiety that created a sensation of nausea. He felt as though he'd been confronted with malice that bordered on evil. Michael's breath came quickly, as though he'd been holding it through the ordeal, and his heart pounded a panicky rhythm against his chest. Perspiration covered his body, causing the damp bedclothes to adhere to him. He pushed the covers back and lay back on the bed, waiting for his breathing to return to normal.

As Michael's heart rate slowed and the queasy feeling subsided, he made a decision. He would call the psychiatrist that his doctor had recommended. The GP himself hadn't been a great deal of help. Michael described the symptoms: the moods, the feelings of hopelessness and the hidden dreams. The doctor responded by asking a lot of seemingly irrelevant questions about Michael's personal life, work, relationships, parents, drinking and drug habits. They only seemed irrelevant because there was nothing in those areas to cause concern; Michael appreciated that. Work was challenging but well rewarded and he enjoyed it. His relationship with Rebecca had been fine until this had all started. Their sex-life was apparently normal, the doctor had said, "to the extent that the adjective can be used to describe such a widely variable interaction between two people." He got on fine with his parents. They were very close, possibly because he was an only child. He tended to talk to his mother more than his father, but then his father hadn't been around as much when Michael was growing up, working hard at his career at the bank. He drank moderately with meals and at parties, but hadn't been really drunk for as long as he could remember. He didn't use any drugs, or even smoke.

The doctor prescribed some mild tranquillisers and recommended rest and an abstinence from high pressure situations. He also advised Michael to avoid alcohol altogether, calling it "depression in a bottle", but Michael knew there was no link between his moods and when he'd been drinking. If the moods persisted, the doctor thought it would be advisable for Michael to talk to someone with more psychiatric emphasis and gave him the number of a doctor in Holborn who might be able to help. Michael thanked the doctor politely, knowing that he wouldn't be calling the psychiatrist's number. He did take a few of the tranquillisers, but they made him feel so mellow that he couldn't concentrate on the details of the Heinz proposal, so he flushed the rest down the toilet.

Having made the decision to call the psychiatrist, Michael started to feel better. The doctor had told him several times there was no stigma attached to seeing a shrink. In today's society there were many factors that could lead to people developing minor psychological problems. He even proffered the opinion that if patients were as willing to go to see a psychiatrist about their minor neuroses as they were to see him about their (basically untreatable) cold symptoms, then society might be a great deal happier.

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Feeling unburdened and keen to tell the person most important to him, Michael washed and dressed quickly and dialled Jo's number. The phone was answered on the first ring.

“Hello, this is Jo.”

“Hi, Jo. It’s Michael here. Could I speak to Rebecca.”

“Oh hi, Michael. I’ll just get her for you.”

Unlike Michael’s mother, Jo didn’t make any effort to cover the mouthpiece and when she hollered “Becky! It’s Michael!” he had to quickly remove the phone from his ear to avoid being deafened.

He heard Rebecca say “Thanks,” quietly to Jo then a half cheerful, half wary “Hi!” into the mouthpiece.

“Hi. How are you?”

“Fine. I’ve just been sorting out the box room so I can sleep in it. I slept on the couch last night, and it was a bit uncomfortable.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Maybe we should have waited till the weekend instead of you rushing off like that.”

“No, it was best that way. How are you, Michael?”

“OK. I had a dream this morning. I felt sick when I woke up, but I still couldn’t remember what the dream was about. I decided I will give that psychologist chap a ring. That’s why I phoned you really, to let you know that I’m finally doing something about it.”

“Well that’s good. I’m sure it’s the right thing. I know you’ll be all right. I just wish there was something I could do.”

“You’ve done all you can, I know that. It’s up to me now. Oh, I told mum that you’d moved out, temporarily. She said she was sorry. She invited me round for lunch tomorrow, and said you’re quite welcome to come too. Do you want to?”

“Oh. I’d love to, but I won’t be here. Jo’s going up to Oxford to see some old college friends and she insisted I go too. She said it would do me good to get out of town for a bit, and I think she’s probably right. We’re leaving just after lunch.”

“Oh.” Michael felt the familiar squeeze of anxiety tighten around his throat, but this time the cause was no mystery. “Who’s going, just you and Jo?”

“And a couple of her friends from work, Chris and Malcolm.”

“Uh huh. That’s a couple is it?”

“Er, no, they’re both guys actually. Oh Michael! It’s nothing like that. Do you think I’d be telling you if it *was* like that?” She laughed. “Anyway, they’d already arranged the trip. I’m just tagging along. It’ll give me time to think, to be alone.”

“Alone with Jo and Chris and Malcom... I’m sorry. I just couldn’t stand the thought of losing you. You know I love you, don’t you?”

“Of course. I love you too. Nothing’s changed. It’s just as we agreed; we’re having a breather to give you, us, a chance to sort things out. I’m not going anywhere; I’ll still be here for you. Just not this weekend.”

There was an echoey buzzing sound in the background.

“Oh, I think Chris and Malcolm have arrived. I’d better start getting ready. I’m glad you called, Michael. Give me a ring in the week when you’ve seen the psychiatrist bloke. And love to your mum and dad.”

“OK. Have a good time in Oxford. I love you.”

“I love you too. Bye”

“Bye.”

After he hung up, he remembered he hadn’t told her about the promotion. Oh well, she knew it was pretty imminent. He’d tell her the next time they spoke.

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He spent the rest of the day doing the kinds of things they’d do together if Rebecca had been at home. He vacuumed the flat, scrubbed the bathroom, did the week’s food shopping at Sainsbury’s. As the hidden sun began its rapid descent to the West, and the overcast sky began to darken, Michael began to fear spending the evening alone in the flat. He looked down onto the teeming city below. His apartment was only on the seventh floor of the 20-storey tower, and the view was nowhere near as spectacular as that from his office window, but the relative closeness to the ground provided a more intimate, human perspective. He could see individuals struggling along the glistening London streets, stooped with the weight of their shopping. Some children were playing down below, kicking a soccer ball aimlessly against the concrete wall, chasing after it before it rolled into the road when one of them mis-timed his kick. Black London taxis took anonymous passengers to unknown destinations, where there waited friends or family, or possibly a dark empty flat like this one. Michael marvelled at his propensity to feel alone and lonely in city of nearly eleven million souls.

Determined not to wade any deeper into the icy waters of self-pity, Michael picked up the phone. He paused before dialling. It was short notice to start inviting himself round to friends’ houses, or even them around to his. He’d try a couple, and if they were busy, he would think of something else. First he tried Graeme and Alison. Graeme was a friend from university. Michael didn’t see as much of them as he used to, especially since they’d moved to Barnet, but he still regarded Graeme as one of his “tell anything” friends. Alison answered. Graeme was out at the garden centre, and Alison told him they were going out to dinner at Graeme’s headmaster’s house. Did Michael want Graeme to phone him when he got back? No, it wasn’t anything urgent. Anne and Toby’s answer machine said they couldn’t come to the phone right now, and invited Michael to leave a message, which he didn’t. Russell and Julia had Russell’s parents staying for the weekend.

Michael gave up on the friends. If he was prone to paranoia he might have suspected that the word had got round that he was temporarily de-coupled, and his partnered friends

were deliberately treating him like a pariah, but he knew that wasn't true. Indeed if he'd admitted to any of the people he spoke to that he was on his own and would rather not be, they would have been much more likely to have sympathy on him and change their plans to include him. He wasn't very good at receiving sympathy though, so all he said was that Rebecca had gone to visit old friends and he was at a bit of a loose end.

He scanned the Barbican Centre programme taped to the front of the refrigerator. There were no concerts tonight, just a showing of "Night Is My Future", part of an Ingmar Bergman retrospective at the cinema. That didn't sound like much of a tonic. The last traces of day were disappearing from the western sky outside. A white necklace of light rimmed the horizon, and far in the distance Michael could see slow-moving specks descending gently until they were hidden finally by far-off tower blocks. They were planes approaching Heathrow airport, bringing passengers from distant lands to this lonely capital. Michael started to fantasise about being somewhere exotic, anywhere other than this bleak, drizzly city, alone on a Saturday afternoon in October, as if feelings of loss and grief could suddenly be wiped out by a mere change of geography. He shook his head, trying to shake the morose mood from his mind. He would see a movie, preferably an American one with no plot and a trite, happy ending. He grabbed his coat in a display of jauntiness that caused him to wonder who he was trying to fool, and left the flat, closing the door firmly shut on the dolefulness he felt there.

He headed west on the Tube – he couldn't face the prospect of Saturday evening London traffic – and ended up in Leicester Square. The Empire was showing *Sleepless in Seattle*. He liked Tom Hanks. People said that Michael resembled him slightly, though Hanks' characters always seemed to possess the lightness and good humour that Michael thought he lacked himself. Oh, Michael could laugh at a joke and make wisecracks when he was in the right mood and around the right people, but underneath his life seemed to have a more serious side, a kind of *gravitas* that he could never quite shake off. This business with the moods and the dreams had exacerbated the feeling, and sometimes he felt as though something dreadful lay in store for him, a kind of confrontation that the first 35 years of his admittedly untroubled life had so far conspired to spare him.

After the film he felt dissatisfied. At first he could identify with the Hanks character: bereft and lonely. But the facile way in which he found true love with Meg Ryan, notwithstanding the bagatelles placed along their inexorably converging paths by the veneer of a plot, left him feeling cheated. Life wasn't like that, but then that was what escapism was all about. He dined alone at the Pizza Hut on Charing Cross Road, and ruminated on the fact that if he were in a Hollywood movie, a well dressed, attractive man like himself could expect someone of at least the calibre of Julia Roberts to be his waitress and end up going home with him. Not that he wanted Julia Roberts. He wanted Rebecca, who at this very moment, as far as he knew, could be in the arms of someone called Chris or Malcolm, someone who didn't treat her to sudden inexplicable silences and wake her with feverish screams in the dead of night. He petulantly threw his napkin on to the half-eaten Deep Pan Veggie Lovers', and strode towards the cashier.

Michael recognised the early symptoms of one of his anxiety attacks. He forced himself

to smile politely when the cashier (called K.C. according to her badge) asked him if he'd enjoyed his pizza. He stopped himself from lashing verbally at the three young boys who crashed into him as he stepped into the bitter October night. When he felt like this, Michael became convinced that he was being victimised, that people who bumped into him on the street did so deliberately, that the driver of the tube train he just missed had waited at the platform until he saw Michael skipping down the steps, then had closed the doors and sped off before he could reach the train. He kept his head down and walked from the tube station to the apartment block with his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He slammed the door of the flat closed and locked and bolted it. In darkness he leaned against the door, breathing anxiously, strange after-images playing on the backs of his unaccustomed eyes.

"I'm gonna fuck yer, you ugly bastard!"

The voice came from nowhere, and from everywhere. It was inside his head. No! I'm not going mad; I'm *not* going mad! He slid down the door, tears stinging his eyes, all thoughts of leading the life of a Tom Hanks character buried under a mountain of despair.

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In the pretty, white-stone-walled, thatched cottage just outside Oxford, Rebecca finished a chapter of *The Noonday Devil*, which coincidentally was set in Oxford. Her magnificent long, light brown hair splayed out on to the pillow around her. She tutted as she realised that there was no light switch within easy reach, and she would have to walk to the bedroom door to turn off the light, and grope her way back through the unfamiliar darkness to the bed. She got up quickly, bracing herself against the chill air of the small unheated guest room and strode to the door. Just as she was about to flick the switch, a gentle tap sounded from behind the door, and it opened before she could respond. Standing in the gloomy hallway, wearing stripy red pyjamas, was Malcolm, the slightly fat but more amusing of Jo's two friends. His eye's flitted over her old pink tee shirt that she used for a nighty, down to the V of the small, white laced-trimmed panties that the tee shirt didn't quite cover.

"I wondered if I could have a goodnight kiss," Malcolm said, playing on his boyish charm for all it was worth.

Rebecca frowned. Then she smiled.

* * *

Michael was surprised and relieved when he woke up normally, having some kind of dream, but not a nightmare. The dream had been about Rebecca, and the first time they'd met at the opening party for the Canary Wharf building. The Technical Books subsidiary of the publishers she worked for was taking a suite in the tower, and a few people from head office had come along, drawn by the prospect of free food and drink. Rebecca's divisional head had insisted that she go too, purportedly because he had some upcoming books to discuss, but in reality because he'd had his eye on her for some time and was hoping to get her alone after the party. If he played his cards right, he could take her to a hotel, do the deed, and get back home to his wife and kids before it got suspiciously late.

Unfortunately for him, Rebecca found his shirt-stretching beer belly and leering looks an odious turn off, but she could do with a break from the office, so she went along anyway. She escaped fairly quickly from the unwanted attentions of her manager and went for a wander amongst the blue-suited throng. She saw Michael in earnest conversation with the chief architect of the building, decided he looked as though he wasn't in publishing and introduced herself. The architect tactfully retreated, and Michael and Rebecca spent the rest of the evening avoiding her boss, once she'd told Michael what she suspected of his lascivious intentions.

This being real life and not a novel, they didn't go back to Michael's that night and make love in various unlikely locations around the house. Rather, they spent the next three months performing an intricate version of the ritual dance of human courtship, strewn with missed dates and tardy phone calls, some accidental, some deliberate, until they finally realised that they'd woven such a rich web of common experiences and shared emotions that they had little choice but to admit their mutual love.

It frightened Michael to think about it now. The number of ways in which they might never have come together was too staggering to think about. If Rebecca had been one day nearer to a deadline, she might not have come to the opening party. There were a lot of people there. If Michael had spoken to the architect for thirty seconds less, he may have disappeared into the crush of bodies around the *vol-au-vents* and never met her. Having accepted that it had happened, he worried now that if the edifice of their love was built on such a chaotic foundation, what seemingly insignificant sequence of events might it take to rupture those underpinnings and send the whole structure crashing to the ground?

The drive to his parents' house in suburban Brentwood was pleasant. The relentless rain had finally abated during the night, and a feeble but well-intentioned sun was gently evaporating all but the deepest puddles. He took an indirect motorway route out from London to Essex – the M11 north to the M25, the clockwise round the M25. It wasn't necessary; he could have stuck to the fast main roads that fan out of London to the outlying counties, but taking the M25 gave him a chance to open up the throttle of the BMW and enjoy the thrill of reaching 110 MPH and overtaking most of the other cars. It was his adrenaline fix. The stakes at work could be high, putting together the best tender for a contract, impressing clients with professional presentations, but that was a cerebral high, when it paid off, and getting there could be sheer tedium. Cruising along the M25, though, eyes alert for sudden brake lights ahead, always on the lookout for police, testing the taut responsiveness of the steering, that was a rush. Rebecca hated it and he deferred to her when they visited his parents together and stuck to a safe 80, but right now it was what he needed, to feel in control again, master of his destiny.

Despite police force's accident-while-speeding statistics, Michael arrived at his parents' safely. He parked beside his father's dark grey Jaguar. His mother's Mazda was in the garage. The large white bungalow looked pristine. They'd had it painted in the summer and replaced a lot of the woodwork around the windows. The garden was immaculate, if a little sparse. His father was meticulous at pruning, and sometimes it seemed as though he lopped off bits of bushes or shrubs because a branch was at an aesthetically displeasing

angle rather than because it was dead or dying. Still, it kept him busy and out of his mother's way when she was busy making jams and cakes for the Women's Institute. In the winter when there wasn't much to do in the garden, his father made home-brew beer, which usually turned out to be quite agreeable.

He pushed the ostentatiously decorated button by the front door, and let himself in at the same time. He'd always had a front-door key, and it seemed silly to stand and wait when he could open the door himself.

"Only me!" he called. His mother emerged from the kitchen wearing an apron and oven gloves. A delicious smell of roast lamb followed her into the hallway.

"Hello darling!" she said, hugging him with her forearms, as though the gloves were covered with a noxious substance. She didn't try to hide the concern in her eyes. He bent down to kiss her.

"Hi mum."

She was five foot four with dark permed hair. In her younger days she'd been slim and about as attractive as any son can acknowledge his mother to be without having subconscious oedipal worries, but her fifties had seen her put on a few pounds and her face become more lined. Not that Michael noticed; for as long as he'd known her she'd been "mum", there to protect him from ills of the world and turn to in times of crisis. Her placidity had always been a refuge for him, and barring a brief period of family feuding when was in his teens, he had never seen her lose her temper with him or his father.

"How are you Michael?"

"I'm fine. Really." He wouldn't say anything more, not yet.

"I hope so. Dad's in the shed, seeing to his beer."

"I'll go and say hi."

It was different with his father. He was a bank manager, having worked his way up through the ranks with the same bank over thirty years. To Michael, bank managers were people who wouldn't give you a loan for a car even though you had £3,000 in your account, and sent you a surly letter the second your balance dipped into the red. He knew that nowadays it was the computer that sent out such letters, and even signed them in an unlikely shade of blue pseudo-handwriting, but he still couldn't see his pipe-smoking, cardigan and corduroy trouser-wearing father as a hard-nosed money merchant. He walked the 60-foot length of the manicured green lawn and knocked, unnecessarily, on the door of the large garden shed. His father was crouched over a large glass demijohn, from which a dark-brown liquid was dribbling through a syphon into a half-pint glass.

"Hello, old chap," his father said, glancing up. "Be right with you. I think we may have something drinkable here."

He finished syphoning, straightened up and handed the glass to his son. The contents looked like liquid coal. "See what you think."

Michael took a tentative sip.

“Mmm. Bit like Guinness. What is it, home made stout?”

“Got it in one. I’ll decant a bottle and we can have a pint or two before lunch.”

“OK. I brought some wine too, so I won’t have too much. Garden’s looking fine.”

“Yes. Managed to give a trim this morning once the blasted rain stopped. That should do it for the winter now.”

Neither of his parents had mentioned Rebecca, so Michael assumed it was being left for him, if he wanted to talk about it. Sometimes he appreciated his parents’ tact; other times he wished they’d take a bit more of an active interest.

They walked back to the house together, Michael carrying the two-litre plastic beer bottle that his father had filled with the dark heavy brew. The conversation was safe, uncontroversial: the weather, the economy (they agreed that it was a mess, if not on whom to blame), classical music. It was the sort of conversation you might have with someone at a bus-stop.

Lunch was well up to his mother’s usual standards. The lamb was tender and juicy, the potatoes crisp and the vegetables well done but not over-cooked. She’d made a huge trifle for dessert, which had been Michael’s favourite since he was a child. She was spoiling him; it was how she showed her concern.

After the meal they all helped with the dishes and it was done in no time. Michael remembered the huge fuss he used to make about being asked to help when he was at school, citing interference with his homework as his excuse. He hoped they didn’t hold it against him. They probably didn’t even remember.

“Very nice, mum,” his father said, when they were all sitting down in front of the (real!) log fire that dominated the oak-beamed living room, their stomachs stretched but not to bursting point.

“Yes, thanks mum, that was lovely.”

He paused. His parents had an expectant air, which he felt obliged to respond to.

“I had the dream again yesterday morning. And a panic attack last night. I think I actually I heard voices in my head last night. I’m going to call that shrink first thing in the morning.” He looked down at the brown and orange carpet, avoiding their eyes.

“Oh dear,” his mother said. Her words sounded like a platitude, but Michael could hear the concern in her voice. “I wonder what it can be. Are you sure you’re not working too hard?”

“No, I think I’d know if it was that. I think about work when I get home of an evening, but I always have; it’s part of the job. No-one’s forced me to go for this partnership. I did

it because I knew I was up to the job and deserved the recognition, and apparently the others agree with me. I thrive on *that* sort of pressure. No, this is something else. Actually, I was wondering, just in case this psychiatrist asks me, because these things can be congenital, I don't suppose there's been any history of this, you know, in the family?"

His parents exchanged glances.

"Well, no dear," his mother said. "I mean, your father's as mad as a March hare, but apart from that there's nothing that I know of."

Michael managed a smile. His mother was always accusing her husband of insanity, because he talked to himself, and indeed to his plants, but he knew she didn't mean anything more sinister by it.

"Well, the GP said that this guy is very good. Maybe he can uncover something hidden in my past that I'm repressing, you know, a bully at school who used to hang me upside down in the toilets or something."

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing like that dear. He'll probably put it down to overwork and send you away on a long holiday. You and Rebecca haven't been away together for a proper holiday, have you?" She noticed Michael's face darken. "Oh I'm sorry, love. I thought you said you hadn't broken up. You were just having a break."

"That's what I thought too."

He told them about the phone call the previous day, and Rebecca's trip to Oxford.

"Oh, I think she's just being sensible and taking some time to think about things. After all, from what you say, she's been bearing the brunt of it as well. Rebecca's a nice girl; don't worry about it love."

"No, I suppose you're right. It's not as though she would have any reason to lie to me."

Soon it was time to drive back to Town. His mother wrapped some slices of lamb for him to have in a sandwich when he got home. He gave her a hug and shook his father's hand, and promised to call them during the week.

Michael's father looked at his wife. The depth of concern she felt for her son was etched in the lines on her face. She put on brave act when Michael was there, for his sake, but couldn't hide it from her husband.

"He'll be fine," he said, taking her hand.

"I do hope so. I sometimes wonder if we should have told him a long time ago. I mean, what he said about it being congenital. You don't think it can have anything to do with..."

"Now don't go upsetting yourself, love. He's 35; it can't have any connection. You remember what the doctors said: he was totally unaffected. We've always done what's right by him, and that's all we can carry on doing. If it looks as though we absolutely have

to tell him, then we will. But let's see what this psychiatrist-chappy has to say. Michael is a strong boy. He'll be all right."

"I hope so. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to him."

* * *

Michael's promotion to the rarefied heights of partnership was announced to the company on Monday. He'd been told unofficially on Friday, and there had been rumours for a while, so no one was surprised. He deserved it. He'd joined the firm as a copywriter eleven years previously, and moved up through the ranks of copy editor, account manager, account director and senior account director. He was popular and well regarded by his team. There was a jeroboam of Champagne, enough for the whole company to have a glass.

Michael rose to the occasion as best he could, but his mind was really otherwise engaged. He'd meant to call the psychiatrist, a Dr. Luckhurst, first thing, but there was a memo from Murchison waiting on his desk, asking for preview of the Heinz work, so he didn't get a chance to make the call till after the festivities, which stretched through lunch. Dr. Luckhurst didn't ask for any details of Michael's problem; he simply made an appointment for Wednesday morning at eleven o'clock. Michael felt slightly guilty about taking time off during the week in which he should be tying up the loose ends of his previous work and handing over to his successor, but he reasoned that he wouldn't be much use to the agency as a partner if he didn't get this problem sorted out.

Wednesday morning came soon enough. Michael felt a background anxiety about it, but managed to put it far enough to the back of his mind to prevent it from interfering with his work. The evenings and nighttimes had been uneventful, so there was nothing fresh in his mind to tell Dr. Luckhurst. On the other hand, the previous experiences were vivid enough for him to describe the symptoms in as much detail as the doctor could possibly require. Michael was surprised that Rebecca hadn't called. He'd assumed she would phone him, but then decided that they must have left it with him calling her. If he didn't hear from her by Wednesday, he would call her in the evening, after he'd seen Dr Luckhurst.

A middle-aged woman greeted Michael in the deeply carpeted reception area. She greeted him as Mr. Merritt as though there was no other possibility of who he might be, and told him that Dr Luckhurst would be with him shortly. Michael sat down on the thickly padded leather armchair; it was a rather more comfortable waiting-room than the National Health GP's clinic that he was use to. Even the reading material was a cut above the average: Horse and Hound, Country Life, American Vogue. He flicked through a copy of Vogue, not looking at the articles but appraising the advertising with a professional eye. The firm didn't have any perfumiers in their portfolio, and Michael thought it would be a good area to get into.

His planning was interrupted by the appearance of Dr Luckhurst through the oak door that separated his consulting room from the reception area. He was older than Michael had

pictured from his telephone voice, probably in his late fifties, with a striking full head of white hair contrasting with his tanned but lined face. It appeared he holidayed well.

“Ah! Mr Merritt, Mr Merritt. Good to see you. Do come in.” So saying, Dr. Luckhurst took Michael’s hand in a firm, fleshy grasp, and almost pulled him through into the consulting room.

“Sit yourself down there,” the doctor said, indicating a chair similar to the one in the waiting room. There was a black leather couch too, and Michael was half disappointed, half relieved that he hadn’t been asked to lie on it.

Initially Dr. Luckhurst engaged Michael in small talk: where he lived, who’d referred him, where he worked. Michael was aware that even these minutiae could be used to form an initial opinion, and tried hard to appear unguarded and open with his answers.

“So,” the psychiatrist said at last, “tell me what brings you here.”

Michael described it. How, a little over four weeks previously, he came home from work, greeted Rebecca as usual, had dinner with her in the flat, then, just as they were settling down to watch a TV programme about how the whole Oxford English Dictionary had been transferred to computer disk the size of a CD, he’d suddenly felt depressed, and at the same time inexplicably anxious. It was as though some unseen burden had been laid on his shoulders, and he couldn’t shrug it off. He couldn’t concentrate on the TV program and when Rebecca had picked up on his mood and tried to find out what was wrong, he’d become irritable and uncommunicative with her.

That night was also the first during which he’d been awoken by the unremembered nightmare. Just the odd fragments had ever remained: another person, probably a man, a feeling of malevolence, and a white room. He was aware when he woke that the dream had been extremely vivid while he was having it, but it faded quickly, even quicker than normal dreams, which he often remembered clearly.

Throughout Michael’s description Dr. Luckhurst made notes. He didn’t ask for details or clarification, but just let Michael speak uninterrupted. Michael didn’t describe the other occasions in detail as they’d been more or less the same. Sometimes he’d have the anxiety without the dream, more rarely it was the other way round, the dream occurring with no precursor of depression. There had been a total of about sixteen episodes, at least four a week since it had started.

The doctor’s line of questioning moved immediately to Michael’s childhood, and thence to his family, as Michael expected it would. Not that there was much to tell. He was born in North London the spring of 1958 to Betty and Frank Merritt. He was an only child. His parents were in their early twenties when he’d been born and he wondered sometimes why they never had any more children, but had never asked them the reason. Frank had been a junior clerk in the Highbury branch of Lloyds Bank when Michael was born, and Betty worked as a dentist’s receptionist, but gave it up and never went back to work once Michael came along.

When Michael was ten, Frank had the chance to transfer to the Brentwood Branch as a

deputy manager. It was a good promotion, out of the grime of London to the comparative genteelness of the Essex countryside. Michael remembered it being a bit of an upheaval, having to change schools and make new friends. That happened slowly because his new classmates mocked his North London accent and called him “thicky”, but within a year he’d settled in and was a popular pupil at the school. All in all, he wouldn’t have said it was a traumatic transition, and he certainly appreciated that the lifestyle they had in Brentwood was much better than he could have expected in North London.

The rest of his childhood was fairly straightforward. He went to an all-boys’ grammar school, but met girls at the girls’ school next door. He was a fairly bright student. He had trouble with some of the sciences, so veered towards the arts subjects in his final years at the school, taking English, French, Art and Art History. He continued with Art History for his degree at Birmingham University, where he got a first. After graduating he Inter-railed round Europe with a girlfriend for three months, having worked hard at part-time jobs during his three college vacations, and then he joined a small advertising agency in Birmingham. One Sunday Two years later when he was visiting his parents, he saw an advertisement for a copy-writing job with Murchison Sanders and Levett in *The Observer*. He applied for and got the job.

“So, no major upsets that you can remember during that whole period?”

“Not really, no.”

“No problems between your parents? Family rows?”

Michael hesitated before answering. But he answered truthfully eventually.

“Well, there was a period when I was about 15. My parents were arguing a lot. I think it was caused by my maternal grandmother. She still lived in Highbury, and I think she resented my parents moving away. She caused trouble between them, playing on my mother’s guilt about leaving her on her own. My mother’s brother, my uncle George, lives in South Africa, so mother was the only close relation she had after my granddad died. I think grandma wanted to move in with us; the house was big enough, but father didn’t want it. She wasn’t ill or anything, and had plenty of friends there. She would phone mother during the day. I knew because I’d be home from school, pretending to do my homework but listening to one half of the conversation. Then when father came home from work, she’d talk to him about it and he’d get angry and say the old witch was just working on her, couldn’t she see that, and they’d argue.”

“Any violence?”

“No. Not that I can remember. My dad would get very loud, screaming almost, but nothing physical. Mum just got upset, tearful. Eventually my father drove to London on his own and talked to grandma. I don’t know what he said to her, but she never caused problems again. I think she could be a bit of a stirrer. I remember once I answered the phone to her, and mother was in the garden. I talked to her for a while and she said something like ‘If I came to live with you, I could tell you a thing or two, young Michael.’ Then she laughed in a horrible, conspiratorial way. You don’t like to think of your grandmother as anything but a sweet old lady, but I don’t think she was a very nice

person.”

“And how is she now?”

“Oh, she died about five years ago. Mother was very upset, but I think they’d made up over the years.”

“Well,” said Dr Luckhurst, looking at the clock over Michael’s head, “that’s two hours.”

Michael was astonished. He’d done most of the talking and had been unaware of the time passing. He looked at the doctor expectantly, as though waiting for a diagnosis.

“I think that was an excellent first session. Nothing to explain your present problems, perhaps, but plenty to think about. We’ll talk a little more about your work next time. I think a weekly session should suffice to begin with. Would this time suit you?”

Michael was disappointed. The doctor seemed to be taking a long-term view, and he wasn’t sure he could go for several more weeks, or even months, before any possible reasons for the episodes emerged. He wasn’t used to having to wait for things.

“Doctor, I appreciate these things can take time and that you have to get to know a patient before you can start to make any informed diagnoses, but time isn’t something I feel I have a great deal of at the moment. I need to be able to perform well at my job; I’d like to have a proper relationship with my partner. Isn’t there some way we can zero in on the problem? Some tests I can take?”

Dr. Luckhurst pressed the palms of his hands together and placed his forefingers on his chin. His dark brown eyes stared at Michael speculatively.

“There is something. I wouldn’t usually even think of suggesting it at this early stage, but since you’re so keen to expedite matters.... Have you ever been hypnotised, Mr. Merritt?”

Michael was shocked. He hadn’t realised hypnosis was something professional psychologists practised. He’d assumed it was party trick used by certain types of entertainers to make audiences perform stupid acts, and even then he wasn’t sure how genuine the victims’ participation was.

“Oh, don’t be surprised, old chap. It’s not just a gimmick, you know. Hypnosis can be a valuable tool in unlocking the hidden recesses of the psyche. It has to be used with care, of course, but I’ve had good results with several patients over the years, and it certainly can help to, erm, ‘zero in’, as you put it, on, for example, a repressed trauma that any number of conscious sessions would fail to uncover. There are risks involved of course, which is why the technique can be dangerous when used by unskilled practitioners, but I wouldn’t envisage any problems as far as you’re concerned.”

“When can we begin?”

Doctor Luckhurst agreed to see Michael the following Saturday. This enabled Michael to avoid having to miss time at work and the doctor only increased his fees by 20% for the

Saturday consultation. At home that evening Michael phoned Rebecca at Jo's.

"Hi," he said. He didn't know how to sound: enthusiastic, concerned, apologetic?

"Hi. How are you?"

"Oh fine. Oh, before I forget again, I got the partnership; they told me last Friday, but I forgot to mention it on Saturday." He knew he was avoiding issues.

"Oh, that's wonderful. So, no more copy writing and story boarding and conceptualising, just making lofty decisions about the firm's future direction and approving campaign designs. How does it feel?"

"Exciting and scary at the same time. I don't want to lose touch with the sharp end, the creativity. They know that, though. I think I'll be allowed to get my hands dirty from time to time. So. How was the weekend?"

"Just wonderful. We went for long walks amongst the dreaming spires and found some good pubs. I read a lot too, in the car and at night. It was good to read something I didn't have to correct."

"How were Chris and Malcolm?"

"Oh they were great fun, especially Malcom. You'd like him. But what about *you*? Did you see the psychiatrist?"

"Yes, this morning. I talked to him for two hours. He seemed to imply it was the first of a long series of sessions, so I told him I was hoping for rather quicker answers. So he suggested hypnosis."

"Really? Hypnosis?"

"Yes. I'm going back on Saturday for the first session. It's a bit frightening but it seems to be the quickest way to get to the bottom of this thing.' He paused. "Rebecca, I'm really missing you. Maybe we were a bit hasty. Maybe you didn't have to move out."

Rebecca was silent, as though she was formulating her reply.

"Michael, we agreed. You know what it was like. Suppose I came back tonight and you had, you know, a turn. You'd end up resenting my presence like you always do at those times; I'd end up hating myself for not be able to help, and hating you for shutting me out; and you'd end up hating yourself for being like that. We know what happens. If I thought I could help the tiniest bit I'd be there with you, but it makes me feel so terrible when I can't. I don't think you realise how hurtful it is for me when you close up like that and reject me. I'm not saying you do it deliberately but, well, you know..."

"Yes, I know. Sorry, I shouldn't put pressure on you. I'd like to see you though. What about lunch tomorrow?"

"I can't tomorrow. How about Friday?"

“Well I was supposed to be... no, I can change that. OK, Friday. The usual place at one?”

“Fine.”

“OK, I’ll see you then.”

“Take care!” She sounded as though she really meant it.

“You too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

As soon as he hung up, he wondered why she couldn’t come to lunch on Thursday. He was glad he hadn’t asked her though. He didn’t want to make her think he was feeling insecure about her, even though he was.

* * *

Rebecca approached the street-level door of the cellar wine-bar nervously. A chalk board propped up against the wall outside told her that today’s lunch specials were vegetarian lasagne and lemon cheese cake. Valpolicella was nine pounds a bottle. She paused, hands pushed into her long grey-blue raincoat’s pockets, and pretended to read the sign. Really she was deciding whether to walk down the steep, sawdust-coated steps to the smoky cellar below, where Malcolm was almost certainly waiting with an open bottle of wine and an expectant smile, or to carry on along the street, crossing at the lights ahead and doubling back on the other side of the road to the safety of the office.

What was she so afraid of? She’d seen other men for lunch while she was seeing Michael, even while she’d been living with him. This was different though, and she knew it. Those others had never presented her with a choice: she knew there would be nothing between them as she accepted the invitation, even if *they* didn’t. And she’d always told Michael about them immediately. She’d made a mistake with Malcolm on Saturday, and compounded it by not telling Michael about it. If she walked down those steps, that would be a third deceit.

Rebecca placed an elegant foot on the first step, and having crossed that boundary, tip-toed quickly to the bottom. Malcolm was sitting at a small wrought iron table, watching the entrance. He raised a glass filled with something rather more expensive than the Valpolicella at her, and smiled.

* * *

Saturday found Michael invigorated. Although the Wednesday and Thursday night had been depressing and dream-filled, lunch with Rebecca on Friday had revived his spirits. She looked beautiful, even more so than he remembered. Her hair was tied back in a long ponytail and hid none of her cherubically round face, which glowed white as marble. The lipstick she wore was a deeper, more wanton red than usual and made Michael want to instantly kiss her on the lips. The only other make-up was subtle eyeliner, emphasising the roundness of her big, dark eyes. They talked about Michael’s treatment and Rebecca had seemed in a very positive frame of mind, as though she expected things to improve

soon. They parted with a gentle hug and chaste kiss, which was less than Michael was expecting, but he still felt encouraged.

* * *

Dr Luckhurst's receptionist didn't work Saturdays, so the psychologist himself greeted Michael at the door. They went immediately into the consulting room.

"Now, Michael. Can I call you Michael?"

"Of course."

"Good, good. It helps to keep things informal. You must call me Edward then."

Michael nodded, but didn't call him Edward.

"Now, I gather from your reaction on, Wednesday, was it? Yes, Wednesday, that you haven't been hypnotised before."

"No. I went to a show once where a magician claimed to have hypnotised some people from the audience, but I can't say I was totally convinced."

"Well, they may or may not have been hypnotised. People can be very susceptible to suggestion in those situations, and after all, that's all hypnosis is: an extreme susceptibility to others' suggestions. And *my* suggestion is that you lean back in the chair, that's it, and concentrate on the thumbtack you see in the wall above my shoulder behind me. Good. Now breathe slowly and steadily and relax into the sound of my voice. Slowly and steadily. Let your shoulders relax, that's it, empty your mind of thought, and listen to my voice."

After a couple more minutes of the doctor's deep, slowly enveloping voice, Michael entered a moderately deep hypnotic state. In such a state, the mind splits. There is a conscious part, which hears the hypnotist's voice and can act on commands. For example, if the doctor told Michael that he was deaf, the conscious part of Michael's mind would stop hearing the doctor speak. The other part of the mind is referred to as the "hidden observer". It covertly monitors what is happening to the subject, and would still be aware of the doctor's voice. So if the doctor told Michael he could hear again, the hidden observer would act on the instruction, even though Michael's consciousness would not have heard the command.

"Michael, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now we want to find out what it is that's been troubling you. That means you have to be open and honest with me, and not hide anything. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Now, is there anything in your life at present that is disturbing you, which might be causing your anxiety attacks?"

“No.”

“You’re quite sure?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Let’s go back a bit then, shall we? I want you to think back, starting from just before the dreams started. You will be looking at yourself as an outside observer. So you can see yourself and those around you. Do you understand?”

Michael nodded.

“And as you work your way back through this year, last year, the year before that, I want you to stop if you see something that upsets you or worries you. When I stop talking, you will see yourself four weeks ago sitting at home on a Saturday evening. Work back from there.”

Michael was silent. His eyes moved from side to side, as though he was watching a film and the screen was close to his eyes. After two minutes he said, “Finals.”

“Finals?”

“I’m taking my finals. I’m worried that I haven’t revised enough. I went out drinking with some friends last night. They’d finished their exams. I should have been reading up on the Pointilists’ influence on post-impressionism, but I went out drinking instead. I don’t think I can answer this question.”

“Go forward a bit Michael. You’re getting your results. What did you get?”

“A first.”

“Fine. Now move back to before your finals. It’s the Easter vacation. Move back from there.”

Michael stopped several more times: his “A”-levels (he seemed to suffer from exam phobia); a time when he thought he’d got his first girlfriend pregnant (she was just late); a fight at school that he thought would have him expelled; the arguments between his parents when he was 15 years old; his tenth birthday party, his last in London, knowing he’d be leaving all his friends. He became less coherent as he regressed, but was still remarkably lucid compared to many of the patients Edward Luckhurst had hypnotised. Eventually he regressed to the meta-trauma that we all experience: birth.

“It’s dark. We feel squeezed. There are noises. We’re crushed together. My head hurts. Hands or something pressing into it. I’m sliding away. He’s not coming with me. Light now. And sounds. I’m frightened. I’m alone. Where’s he gone? What’s happening to me? Help me!”

“It’s OK Michael. You’re fine. People are there to help you. Soon you’ll feel your mother hold you.”

Dr Luckhurst’s mind was racing, in spite of his tranquil tone. He’d only had two patients

who could regress this far. But there was more: the talk of “we”. He was convinced Michael must be referring to a twin, but he had never mentioned a brother or sister. In fact he’d clearly stated he was an only child. Could it be the twin had died in childbirth? How to find out?

“Michael, are you together now? You’ve been together for nine months. Are you still together?”

“He’s here. But they’re taking him away. Where are they taking him? Why are they taking him away?”

Michael’s voice was rising in pitch, and the doctor feared he would lose his suggestibility if he stayed hypnotised for much longer.

“Michael, you are back in the present. You are sitting on a seat in a doctor’s consulting room. I will count up to three. On the last count, you will become conscious. You will remember everything that has occurred.” They had discussed that. Michael wanted it.

“One... Two... Three.”

Michael’s head dropped then immediately snapped up again. He blinked rapidly and took some deep breaths. He looked at the doctor.

“Good grief.”

“Indeed. Can you remember what you saw, at your birth.

“Yes, though it wasn’t really seeing. I was aware of the light and sounds and there being people around me. And him.”

“Your twin brother?”

“Yes. He was there, almost as a part of me, until the end, until I emerged from the womb. Then he faded out, as though he was whisked off somewhere. How extraordinary.”

“Have your parents ever said anything to you about having a twin brother, one that died in childbirth?”

“No, nothing. Why would they keep it a secret? You would think there’d be a grave to visit, some kind of memorial. If it really was a brother in the womb with me, they seem to have erased him from their lives. I can’t believe it.”

He looked ashen, and his hands were starting to tremble as the magnitude of what he had discovered sank in. 35 years ago he was born with an identical sibling, one whose presence he had been aware of in the womb. Then the twin was wrenched away, and his existence had been hidden all this time.

“Would you like a drink, old man? Something to calm the nerves?”

“Yes, thanks. A whisky would help, I think.”

Edward poured two whiskies from a crystal decanter that rested on a table behind his chair.

Michael took a sip and felt the smooth liquid slip warmly down his throat and into his tightened chest.

Eventually the doctor said, “Well, I think we’ve made extraordinary progress today. In fact, I don’t think we need take things further until you’ve had a jolly good chat with your mother and father. If I can offer a word of advice though, Michael? What happened 35 years ago must have been very traumatic for them. They made a deliberate decision to keep it from you. You should respect that and think of their feelings too. Obviously now that we’ve made this discovery you want to know what, if any, bearing it has on what you’re going through today. It might be totally unrelated, though I must say you had a remarkably undisturbed childhood and youth otherwise. It’s very possible that after all these years your pre-natal memories of your twin brother have started to permeate into you adult consciousness, and the sense of loss that you feel is causing this anxiety that you’re experiencing. But my advice would be: be tactful.”

“Yes, of course. I still can’t believe the depth of the deceit though. I’m sure they have their reasons. I’ll go and see them tomorrow.” He sighed and was silent for a moment. “Well, thank you, Edward. I’m sure this is very significant. I’m very grateful. Should I make another appointment?”

“Why don’t you ring in the week, after you’ve had a chance to discuss things with your parents?”

“Yes. Yes, I will. Thank you again.”

Michael took his leave, his nerves steadier but his mind still awl with questions.

He couldn’t wait until Sunday. As soon as he arrived back at the flat, he called his parents. He told them he was coming over and would like to talk to them. He tried not to sound accusatory, but his mother knew that something was afoot, and tried to find out what, but he just told her that he would explain when he saw them.

After she hung up, Betty Merritt said to her husband “I think he knows.”

“Knows?”

“About David.”

“Good God. How?”

“I don’t know. He would only say that he’d seen that psychiatrist chap again today, and something had come up that only we could tell him about. What are we going to tell him, if he does know?”

Frank Merritt had been dreading this day all of Michael’s life. After his mother-in-law had died, he’d convinced himself that it would never happen. She was the only one who

would ever tell him, the conniving bitch using it as a weapon to get what she wanted. Maybe she had told him, before she went, and something else had caused Michael to bring it up now. No. If he'd known, he couldn't have kept it from them for five years, not as they'd had to live with the pain of knowing the truth and keeping it from Michael for *thirty* five years.

He reached out and pulled his wife to him, taking comfort in her familiar softness.

"We'll have to tell him love. If he knows he was born with a twin brother, he might know the other things. We've got to be totally honest with him now. Lord knows how he'll cope with it, but he deserves the truth."

She looked unsure, but then said, "It will be a relief in a way. I hope... I hope he doesn't decide to do anything about it now. After all this time."

"It's up to him. He's a grown man. We'll have to respect his decision."

They held each other, linked together by a 35-year old conspiracy of silence that was born out of the love for their son. One of their sons.

Michael faced his parents. He sat on the comfortable armchair and they sat together on the sofa, having to turn their heads to the left to face him.

"I had a twin."

He told them matter-of-factly, as though he was imparting information that they didn't already know. There was no room for denial in his statement.

"Yes, dear," his mother said. An unfamiliar waver modulated her voice. She was very upset, and Michael hadn't seen her so since he was a child.

His father took over.

"David. Your twin brother was called David."

"Why did you never tell me? You could have told me when I was old enough to understand that my twin had died in childbirth."

"It wasn't as simple as that, Michael. David wasn't a... a normal child. He was born... deformed. Something had gone wrong during the early stages of the pregnancy. They never discovered what. David wasn't a normal baby. He was terribly disfigured. We couldn't tell you that. It was awful."

Michael didn't reply immediately. He was remembering what Dr. Luckhurst had said about tact and being sympathetic.

"I understand. But you didn't have to tell me about that, until I was older maybe. You could have told me my poor twin brother had died though."

“We couldn’t son. It would have been a lie. He didn’t die. He was disfigured, but quite healthy, really. If he’d been fighting for survival, they would have let him die, a mercy killing if you like. But they couldn’t kill a healthy baby. It would be murder.”

“My God. So... What? You’re saying he’s still alive? I’ve got a twin brother, living somewhere and I didn’t know about him?”

His father was becoming upset. “He’s not your twin! He doesn’t look anything like you. He doesn’t look like anyone human, God have mercy on him. But yes, he has a life of sorts. He’s in a mental hospital. Not because he’s mental, but because it’s the only place they can keep him. Poor souls like him have to be locked away from the public.”

“Where? Where is he?”

“In Runwell.”

“My God.”

Runwell was a psychiatric hospital fifteen miles to the east of Brentwood, near Southend. When Michael was at school, it figured in many of the taunts the boys would make to each other: “You spaz; you should be in Runwell.”

“So all this time, he’s been so close, and I haven’t known. How long has he been there?”

“Nearly all his life. They kept him in a special children’s home till he was 14, then they moved him to Runwell. He grew up there, and please God he’ll die there.”

Michael bombarded his parents with questions. He learnt that David’s deformities had remained undetected by the primitive foetal scanning techniques that were used in the late fifties. The doctors had been at a loss to explain how the genetic defect he suffered had been present only in one of the siblings; identical twins are generally thought to be genetically identical. Frank and Betty were asked if they wanted to take care of David, but after agonising over the decision, they decided they couldn’t. He would need constant attention, and would never be able to leave the house. At that stage the doctors couldn’t even say how his mental faculties might be affected. They gave him into the care of the State, and devoted their lives to Michael, the healthy son.

“Don’t blame us, Michael.” His father was speaking. He looked old and tired, as though the sudden release from thirty-five years of secrecy had sapped him of his strength. His shoulders were slightly slumped. He seemed to fear Michael’s judgement of them.

“I don’t. How can I? You did what you thought was right. What anyone would have done. I’m just a bit overwhelmed, that’s all. The shock at the Doctor’s office today of learning that I had a brother who had died left me feeling confused. But this...”

He lapsed into silence. His mother took his father’s hand and squeezed it and she smiled encouragingly. She didn’t seem as concerned about Michael’s reaction. She had confidence in the bond between them and knew it would withstand the emotional battering that the opening of this old wound would inflict on him. His father didn’t share that certainty.

“I want to meet him.”

The statement was inevitable, of course. What man, on discovering that there was part of him that had been locked away from the world for 35 years, would not feel the need to confront that alter ego? Michael's desire, his curiosity, was sharpened by a keen sense that David's existence *did* somehow hold the key to his own recent experiences. There was a door to Michael's mind that had been opened, a door to a foul, foetid place, a door that only David could help him to close forever. His longing to be joined with the brother who had been torn away at their birth was of course attenuated by what his parents had said about David's physical abnormalities. Michael hadn't pressed them on it, deciding he would deal with it when he met his brother. Not “if”, but “when”. He had decided, and would not be deterred. Nevertheless, his father tried.

“Do you think that will do any good, Michael? Can't you just accept it now that you know what happened? That's what your mother and I had to do. We couldn't have any contact with David once we'd made the decision. It would have been too heart-breaking. Surely it's not wise in your present... condition to start upsetting yourself over this.”

“But that's the point, dad. I think David's involved with what's been happening in some way. I can't explain, but as soon as I knew he existed, something clicked in my mind. Maybe it was just a subconscious memory of David in the womb that was affecting me somehow as it tried to surface, and now that I know about him consciously the dreams and the feelings will subside. But whether they do or don't, I can't abandon him. I want to know him.”

In the end there was nothing his parents could say to dissuade Michael. His mother didn't even try very hard. She knew his stubbornness well enough. Even when Michael was growing up, his mother would sometimes let him have his way even though she knew it wasn't for the best. She did it not because she was spoiling him, but because she knew it was part of the way he learned things. And it was easier than fighting his tantrums. She remembered an occasion when he was five and wanted to play on the proper swings with the older boys instead of the safely caged baby swings. So she let him, pushing him gently at first, then a bit higher, not dangerously so, but enough to scare him slightly and his tiny hands gripped tightly on to the rusty iron chains that supported the wobbling wooden seat. He soon asked her to stop, having learned that maybe he wasn't quite ready for the big children's playground yet.

This would be the same. Parental warnings or advice wouldn't suffice, nor even rational argument. There was a small chance that officialdom might curtail Michael's plans, but Betty doubted that the hospital could prevent a blood-relation from visiting a patient. No, Michael would take the course he'd already charted for himself, and live with the consequences if he foundered on the jagged rocks of emotional trauma.

The talking done, there was nothing left but to go to bed. Michael decided to stay the night in his old room rather than drive back to the Barbican. He didn't tell his parents that he planned to phone the hospital in the morning to try to set up an immediate visit. He couldn't explain the sense of urgency he felt, which he realised was more than just his

own habitual impatience. Seeing David was a compulsion, as though he wanted to squeeze 35 years of missed experiences through the pinhole of this revelatory weekend.

Lying in the bed Michael had had since age 15, and which was rather too short now, he looked around the room. They hadn't changed or redecorated it. There was another bedroom they could use for the infrequent visitors they had. Even his pop posters still clung tenaciously to the wall: Wings, Queen, Dylan, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Jam. The pictures charted a course through the musical melée of his school and college years. He smiled as he recalled the argument with his mother about the *Never Mind the Bollocks* album cover he'd pinned above the bed. It stayed up there though. He switched off the bedside lamp and pulled his knees in a semi-foetal position, so his feet didn't stick out the end of the bed.

* * *

The face that glowered down at him, eyes wide, nostrils flaring, was the one from the previous dream. The same acne-ridden complexion, the same glint of menace filled Michael's field of view. Fear burned him like a cigarette stubbed out on his chest. The face pulled back and the white-coated figure ripped the protection of the bedclothes from Michael's naked body. He whimpered like a child lost on a cold deserted beach, no protective parent in sight. The chill paralysed his limbs, his body hunched and foetal, powerless against the assault that must come. The young man disappeared. For a brief moment Michael saw nothing but the white-tiled ceiling. Then a searing pain pierced his testicles, blinding him with its intensity as its full magnitude scorched a trail up his spinal column to the brain.

He was sure he must have screamed as the agony kicked him into consciousness. He was doubled up in the bed with the bedclothes barely covering the middle of his torso. Heart hammering inside his chest, Michael slowly straightened his body. The fear remained, clutching him to its rancid breast as his eyes looked unseeing into the blackness of the still bedroom. He gingerly moved his hand down to his testicles. A shadow of the agony he'd experienced in the dream passed through him, a distant echo of a sensation that already was neither real nor imagined. Like a child scared of the bogey man, he couldn't leave the relative safety of the bed, even though he was desperate for a drink to moisten his parched throat, and simultaneously needed to relieve the pressure on his bladder. He closed his eyes and waited fearfully for sleep to take him back into its unreliable arms.

* * *

The orange ball of late-autumn sun rose tentatively over the elm trees that bordered the fields behind the Merritts' house. Its diffused light reflected weakly off the powdery white coating of frost that had settled on the Essex countryside during the cold clear night. Nothing in the house stirred. Birds started to twitter outside, but Michael slept, dreamless at last. His parents, too, had finally found slumber after a night of restlessness.

Thirty miles to the west, the sun would have risen just a few minutes later, had the horizon not been obscured by the tall Victorian houses that lined the quiet Chelsea streets. In one of those houses, now converted to flats, Rebecca lay quite still on her side, her back to Malcolm's sleeping form. She stared at the gradually brightening glow that

illuminated the white translucent curtain material that afforded the ground floor flat its privacy.

Rebecca wondered what she had done. What started off as a game, an entertaining relief from the pressures of the last few weeks, had turned into... what? An affair? Hardly: she knew that this wouldn't happen again. She couldn't stand to think of it as a one-night stand though. Her mind traced the path that led her here, a path that seemed inevitable now that it had reached its destination, but which she could have diverted to a less dangerous course at any time.

When Malcolm had appeared at her bedroom door in the cottage in Oxford, she had been amused and flattered. While not the fittest or slimmest of suitors, Malcolm possessed a boyish charm, his cheeky grin enabling him to get away with the kind of outrageous flirtatiousness that would have earned other men a kick in the shin, or higher. Beneath the charm was a smooth confidence that belied the boyishness. Rebecca put this down to his wealth, his father's wealth, really. He was used to getting what he wanted and the assumption that life would continue in that vein lent his manner an aspect of placid, controlled power.

Malcolm got the goodnight kiss he asked for that night in Oxford, but nothing else. Granted, Rebecca slipped her tongue gently between his slightly parted lips, but that was more through force of habit than any sense of lust. It made her feel like a slightly naughty teenager again. He'd grabbed her, of course, pulling her against his pyjama-clad body so the excitement he felt was obvious to her, but when she'd whispered "No. I'm sorry," he'd acquiesced with the good breeding that presumably came from his expensive private school education. The next day he'd been as charming and witty as day, and giving him her work number seemed like a natural, friendly thing to do.

Lunch at the wine-bar had been much less of an ordeal than Rebecca had been expecting. Again Malcolm charmed her and made her laugh. He even had some anecdotes about Jo that Rebecca hadn't heard before. There was a lightness of spirit to him that Rebecca enjoyed being encompassed by. Nothing seemed to weigh heavily on him, and life was good. As she felt herself being drawn in, Rebecca realised it was the contrast to Michael that was attracting her. Even before the dreams had started, Michael had displayed a seriousness that sometimes made her want to tickle him, just to see him collapse for once in unguarded, uncontrollable laughter. If Malcolm was at ease with his life and was confident that it would continue on its unharried course, Michael almost behaved as though he mistrusted the lifestyle he'd worked hard to achieve, and expected it evaporate before his eyes.

The dinner invitation had been a natural progression from the pleasantness of lunch. Another dinner followed, and Rebecca accepted the offer of a post-prandial night-cap at Malcolm's *pied-a-terre* in Chelsea, knowing that it was her last chance to avoid waking up next to him the following morning. Michael never came up in their conversations, but to Rebecca at least he might as well have been there, a silent witness to the betrayal she felt inexorably drawn to commit.

Lying there now, she replayed the last minutes of the night before. Malcolm decisively draining his whisky glass, placing firmly on the glass-topped table. Looking at Rebecca, a

desirous glint in his eye, a smile, expectant but not presumptuous playing on his fleshy lips. The smell of whisky, then the taste, as their lips and tongues commingled. The pawing, impatient hand, straight to her breast, pushing against it through the soft silk of her blouse. The silent walk to the bedroom, led by the hand, Malcolm's playfulness replaced with purposefulness. Undressing, not each other. Slipping under the covers, electric blanket magically turned on already. Malcolm's weight on top of her, his movements accompanied by quiet grunting noises. Then inside her, painful because of her unreadiness. Thrust, thrust, thrust, fleshy man-machine, pumping his crude oil into her. Faster, harder, Malcolm's noisy climax, duetted by Rebecca's skilful faking, produced by an incomprehensible desire to please, to connect. Then tears as her love for Michael finally breached the protective barrier of this game, which turned out to be not such a game after all. Malcolm mistaking them for tears of joy, withdrawing, flopping sweatily onto his back, sated: the story of a fuck.

Rebecca wondered what the earliest time she could decently leave was. She would at least stay for breakfast. Even now, with the clear knowledge that her love for Michael was the only thing that mattered, she couldn't bring herself to desert Malcolm. She wouldn't say anything yet. It would be easier on the phone the next time he called. She hoped he wouldn't take it too hard. He seemed quite besotted with her, his selfish passion of the previous evening notwithstanding.

Emerging from a deep, dreamless sleep, Malcolm became pleasantly aware of the tender stiffness between his legs. He smiled and considered pressing his horny loins against the shapely backside of the woman sleeping next to him. He decided against it; not all women like to be woken up that way. Instead he replayed the previous evening's seduction scene in his mind. It had all gone according to plan. He'd charmed Rebecca over the meal, charmed her back to his flat, then charmed her into bed. The sex had been a bit disappointing, from what he could remember. She'd lain there, passive. He preferred his women a little more aggressive, not out and out dominatrices, but at least willing to show a little passion and grab his cock.

He sighed, inwardly. The feelings of post-coital dissatisfaction were too familiar. He'd been here before, having set his sights on a desirable woman, attained her, and finally been left with the feeling that she wasn't right in some way. He liked Rebecca a lot. She was good conversationalist (i.e. a good listener), laughed at all of his jokes, and didn't seem avariciously interested in his wealth. Deep down though he knew she wasn't right for him. She had a slightly too bookish way about her (she'd spent most of the weekend they'd met on the Oxford trip reading), and sometimes her attentiveness seemed to wander. He liked his women to stay focussed on him. That's one thing you could say about the little scrubbers he usually took out: when they draped themselves over him, you knew their attention was devoted entirely to him. Or his wallet.

He imagined himself saying to Rebecca, after they'd showered and had a civilised breakfast of smoked salmon and scrambled eggs washed down with Bucks' Fizz, "Rebecca, I really like you. But I think our relationship would work better if we were just friends." Sheer fantasy, of course. He would let her leave the house, watch her drive away in her Ford Escort from behind the screen of his expensive lace curtains, and never call her again. If she phoned him, he would keep making excuses about not being able to meet

until she got the idea. And if they ever met again through Jo or by coincidence at the rain-soaked entrance of a tube station, they would talk with sophisticated civility, perhaps even share an umbrella, and behave as though this had never happened.

* * *

“Thank you again for allowing me to come at such short notice, doctor.”

Michael sat facing Dr Simpson in his ground floor office. Behind the psychiatrist a sash window looked over the lush green of the grounds that surrounded the hospital. Michael could see a middle-aged couple walking slowly along the path that circumnavigated a bare, oval flower bed. The man pushed a wheelchair in which sat a small, bent figure of indeterminate sex, a plaid blanket across its lap. Behind them the horse-chestnut trees that lined the grounds had dropped their leaves in rust-coloured piles that the October winds had started to sweep away. The bare branches added to the stark atmosphere of this place.

“Well, we try to be as accommodating as we can for patients’ families, but I feel I must repeat what I told you on the telephone. Your brother, David, is a very unfortunate person. I gather your parents elected to leave him in our care and intended that you never know about him. I understand your... curiosity, but... well, you should ask yourself what you hope to achieve by meeting him.”

“Believe me, doctor, I have very good personal reasons for wanting to meet David. When can I see him?”

Simpson looked at Michael thoughtfully. The doctor was younger than Michael had expected, only a few years older than he was. Michael had expected a white coated professorial type, but Dr Simpson wore a dark blue suit as though he could have worked in the City money markets.

“Do you know the nature of David’s illness, Mr Merritt?”

“No, my parents weren’t very specific. They said he was ‘deformed’, but mentally normal.”

“Well, although David’s problems are more physical than mental, it isn’t strictly true to say he has developed normally mentally. Owing to the environment he must live in, and his limited ability to communicate using speech, we estimate that his mental age is closer to that of a fifteen-year old than a man in his thirties.

“As for his physical abnormalities, I assume you’ve heard of elephantiasis?”

“You mean like The Elephant Man? Good God.”

“Quite. David’s condition resembles that. A defect in his pituitary gland during the early stages of foetal development led to abnormal secretions of growth hormones. The accelerated growth was asymmetric, leading to abnormal head and limb growth on his left-hand side. Unusually, his lower limbs were unaffected, but his, ah, genitals suffered the malformations sometimes associated with endocrinal disorders. I’d urge you to look at the pictures from his file and then reappraise your wish to meet him.”

“No!” It emerged more vehement than Michael had intended, but he was unapologetic. He didn’t want his first perception of David to be reduced to a dehumanised clinical photograph. David was his flesh, his blood, no matter how diluted by their separation at birth. It was this tie that Michael sought to re-establish, and he would confront the issue of David’s physical appearance when they were together again for the first time in 35 years, not before.

“No,” he repeated more gently. “I’d like to just see him now please.”

“Very well.”

To Michael’s surprise they took the lift not to one of the two upper floors of the hospital, but down to the subterranean basement level. Dr Simpson explained that some of the patients had to be isolated for their own protection and also for the benefit of other patients and their visitors. Runwell dealt with all sorts of mental illness, from suicidal teenagers and school teachers who admitted themselves voluntarily as a way of avoiding a nervous breakdown at the hands of their uncontrollable charges, to extreme Downs cases where the family couldn’t provide the care required. These patients occupied the ground- and upper floors of the building. The severe cases, patients who had to be restrained to avoid hurting themselves or others, patients whose very physical appearance would cause distress, were sequestered underground.

The elevator door opened onto a narrow corridor, which was painted light green and illuminated by stark fluorescent tubes. The electricity mains hummed ominously; a light at the end of the corridor flickered erratically. On either side were riveted steel doors, with barred hatches at head height. They were painted the same uniform green as the walls. As he followed the doctor away from the lift past the heavy doors, Michael saw that some of them were slightly ajar and others appeared to be shut tight. Michael tried not to peek into the narrow gaps of the unlocked doors.

As they reached the halfway point of the corridor, the door on their right swung open suddenly. Michael was startled and had to catch his breath. A white-coated man emerged. He was young and had a lean, bony face with an acne problem. He seemed familiar to Michael, but couldn’t possibly be.

“Good morning, Herbert,” said Dr Simpson.

The young man’s dark brown eyes flitted nervously between the two men. “Mornin’,” he replied eventually, and turned to walk towards the lift.

“He’s one of our recent arrivals,” Dr Simpson explained when Frank had disappeared behind the elevator door.

“He seemed normal enough. A bit edgy maybe”

“What? Oh, I see what you mean. No, I mean he’s a recent nursing recruit, not a patient! He’s a part-time auxilliary nurse. Not ideal for the special needs we have here, but the best we can do with the cut-backs, and the trained staff appreciate the help.”

They had reached the last door on the left of the corridor. It was one of the unlocked ones. Dr Simpson gently pulled it open. Michael followed him into the room. It was a small and starkly furnished. A steel-framed bed on the left faced a door, which was open enough to gloomily reveal a washbasin and toilet. There was a chair next to the bed, and a small dresser on the far wall. There were, of course, no windows, but the ubiquitous strip lighting flickered and hummed at the boundaries of perception.

Michael's gaze fell immediately on the hunched figure sitting reading a book on the armless metal chair. He wore a white gown, as though he was waiting for surgery. Michael was confused; there was nothing apparently abnormal about his appearance. The doctor coughed discreetly and said quietly "David."

The reading figure's head turned around to face them. Michael stared transfixed.

Under his breath he said, "Oh my God."

The face that revealed itself to Michael was like some grotesque Janus, but instead of two halves looking backwards and forwards, the two sides of this head were of normal and cruelly bloated proportions. One side of David's face could be discerned as being quite normal. An irregular line divided this from where the abnormal bone and tissue growth began. His left eye was displaced above the right one, gazing out from the ballooning cranium into space. The skin was stretched tight over the beach ball-sized hemisphere and hair grew sporadically as though the hair follicles had been squeezed out. The skin had a blue tinge from the many blood vessels that could be seen just below the surface. A vision of the Mutant creatures from *This Island Earth* flashed unbidden into Michael's head. The nose was on the damaged side of the facial divide and was a flattened dome the size of a boy's fist; the nostrils were normal sized but appeared diminished in comparison. Nature's cruellest trick was his mouth: half well-formed, half a pair of pink sack-like lips, turned up with the curve of the deformed jaw line in a travesty of a grin, and at the same time drooping under their own swollen weight.

Michael blinked a tear that started to form in his eye and lowered his gaze. David had a massively hunched back and his left arm and shoulder were bloated, swollen. The sleeve of the dressing gown had been cut open to allow the enlarged circumference of the arm through and hung ragged and limp next to his hand, which was twice the size of a normal man's with round, fleshy fingers. Finally, Michael saw the bulge of obscenely swollen testicles resting on David's lap, stretching the material of his nylon pyjamas into two shiny domes.

A wave of nausea assailed Michael, which he tried to fight. He stepped back slightly and leaned against the door frame, breathing slowly, trying to remember that this.... man before him was the brother he so desperately wanted to meet. Dr Simpson sensed his reaction and turned to face him.

"Are you all right? We don't have to go through with this."

"No. No, I want to. I'll be fine."

“Very well.” He turned back to David. His right eye was looking straight at Michael. It was difficult to read an expression on his disfigured face, but Michael almost had the impression it was one of expectancy, or recognition.

“David,” the doctor continued, “this man has come to visit you. He’s... he’s your brother David.”

David rose slowly from the chair, seeming to struggle against the weight of his overgrown upper body. A series of noises came from his lips, but they weren’t recognisably human. To Michael’s surprise, Simpson said “His name’s Michael, David. And he’s more than your brother. He’s your twin.”

Michael stepped forward slowly, his eyes directed at the normal side of David’s face. He could almost see the likeness, if he narrowed his vision sufficiently. David shuffled towards him and held out his right hand. This time his utterance was just comprehensible: “Hello, Michael.”

The hand was strong, firm. As it closed around Michael’s, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief, as though the fears and anxieties of the last few weeks were being shed like so many layers of claustrophobic armour. At the same time, a feeling that he didn’t even realise he’d felt, one of being alone, aloneness without loneliness, began to seep away too. The sudden affection he felt for this man before him transcended his reaction to the physical form, and Michael flung his arms around David and hugged him as close as he could.

“I’m glad you came at last.” David hadn’t spoken, but the thought appeared in Michael’s mind as though he had. The communication wasn’t verbal; it was emotional. Michael *sensed* that David was feeling pleased, excited, possibly relieved to finally be re-united with his brother. Michael pulled away and looked at his brother’s face. Malformed as they were, his lips appeared to quiver in a tentative smile.

Michael closed his eyes and bathed in the warm pool of psychic love that emanated from David. No, not from David, but from their togetherness. For the first time, Michael felt complete in his mind. Here was the other half of his being. They had been created from the same fertilised egg and shared the dark, muffled comfort of their mother’s womb for nearly ten months. Michael saw his life’s journey as a great wandering and now he had closed the circle. He was home.

“I think you can leave us, Doctor,” Michael told him. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

Dr. Simpson seemed surprised, but acquiesced to Michael’s wishes.

When he had left, David sat in the utilitarian hospital chair that had outbreaks of rust developing on its galvanised metal limbs. He rested his hands gently on the bulge of his testicles, as though trying to hide their shameful growth. Michael sat on the side of his

bed and looked at David's left eye. It was the same blue tint as Michael's, and revealed an alertness that Michael recognised.

Michael did most of the talking. He told the story of his being there in reverse chronological order, starting with the confrontation with their parents the previous day, and working back through the visit to the psychiatrist and the dreams and moods that precipitated it. He told David of his work, his love for Rebecca, his university and school days. His life. David's verbal responses were muted and often incomprehensible, and Michael could quite understand Dr. Simpson's appraisal of his mental age. Sound wasn't the way in which Michael gleaned David's responses, though. He quickly found he could "tune in" to what David was feeling and thinking. It was a completely unanticipated medium, as novel as holding a conversation by using different coloured pieces of paper to impart varying thoughts and emotions.

David, for his part, had long suspected Michael's existence. He had flashbacks, waking dreams of their embryonic time in the womb, and throughout his life there had been a feeling of something missing. He'd rationalised that into the loneliness he felt. He understood by an early age – six or seven – that his life wasn't a normal one. He was taught to read in the children's hospital, and the books revealed to him that other children had lives outside of the ward, with parents and brothers and sisters and friends and pets, and not just doctors and nurses and the other sick children. It took slightly longer to realise *why* he was different, to relate the odd shape of his head and body to his isolation. He withdrew into his mind. His world became one of fantasy, peopled by characters from the books he devoured voraciously, and later from TV shows. Television, for David, was literally the window on world that it is often purported to be.

Speaking was always physically difficult for David, and caring and compassionate though the hospital nurses were, they didn't seem much interested in discovering if David had a personality, so his withdrawal continued. Puberty brought new frustrations as he learned about sexual and emotional relationships, and he knew they would never play a part in his life. When Michael talked about Rebecca, he felt the David's anguish very keenly, and quickly started to tell him about life in advertising instead.

David wanted to know about their parents. Michael was torn between describing them in the loving way he felt for them, and being sensitive to David's feeling of abandonment. David exhibited no resentment towards them though, and Michael felt able to describe them as good, loving people. He stopped short of suggesting he might try to persuade them to visit. That could come later.

Exhilarated as he was, Michael found the conversation quite fatiguing. Detecting and interpreting David's feelings was akin to trying to listen to someone who only talks in the softest of whispers, his voice drowned out even by the rushing of blood through the ears. He had the idea of letting David type his questions and answers on the tiny keyboard of his pocket electronic organiser. The QWERTY layout confused him at first, but he picked it up surprisingly quickly. Michael felt sure that the doctors had greatly underestimated his brother's mental ability.

Glancing at his watch, Michael was astonished to see that it was nearly 5PM. The windowless room provided no clues to passing of time - it would be almost dark out by

now – and the uniqueness of the encounter had made him oblivious to the passage of nearly four hours. His mind needed rest and some time to take all this in.

Michael stood and placed his hand gently on David's shoulder.

"I've got to go. This has been the most thrilling day of my life, David. I'll come back tomorrow night after work. We'll talk some more. God, I'm parched. I'll just grab a glass of water before I go."

David looked up at him. Michael thought he detected some apprehension from his brother, as though there was something he wanted to say, but then it passed. He went into the small bathroom and filled a glass from the washbasin tap. The plumbing was old and dirty-looking, but he assumed the water in hospital would be drinkable.

He heard the latch on the door leading to the corridor open. Immediately he sensed an outflowing of anguish from David, and some instinct made him step quickly back into the gloom of the bathroom. Through the crack between the door and its frame he could see the youth he and Dr Simpson had almost bumped into outside the elevator. Michael's realisation was belated but profound.

Now he understood. This was the figure from his nightmares, the face he could never recall, perpetrating deeds his mind refused to reveal while he was awake. And now he knew what he was to David: tormentor. Was this what David had wanted to tell him moments earlier? Michael snapped back to the present. The youth was saying something.

"...tells me you've had a visitor. Someone from the Death Squad, was it? Offering to put you out of your misery? Or the surgeon come to tell you they're gonna cut those big balls of yours off at last?"

David's hands moved protectively to his bulbous groin.

"In fact, why don't I do it for you? I promised you won't feel a thing."

The man put his hand in his pocket and pulled out what looked like the wooden handle of a knife. With a click and a swish, a gleaming six-inch blade appeared.

David was shaking with panic, and the intensity of the fear that Michael picked-up from him was almost paralysing. Love for David and loathing for his nemesis mobilised him, and he moved out of the shadows into bedroom's light.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The male nurse swung around. His face blushed in fear, surprise, or anger, darkening the scarlet tumescences of his acne even further.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Just... just put the knife away. I don't know what you're playing at, and I don't want to. Just get out and there won't be any trouble."

The man looked at Michael with dawning recognition.

“God, you’re the freak’s br...”

Before he could finish, David stood up suddenly, a wounded, guttural sound emerging from his throat. The man heard him, turned round and raised the knife threateningly. Michael seized the chance to rush forward and grab the nurse’s arm. His timing was bad and he only succeeded in grabbing the sleeve of his white hospital coat. The youth, wild animal eyes glaring at him, brought his arm down quickly to free it. Michael felt the knife pierce his chest with an electric jolt. He inhaled sharply. Time dilated.

The youth looked at his bloody hand and said “Oh Christ.” He let go of the knife, which stayed embedded, wedged between two ribs. He ran towards the door, pulled it open and was confronted by an anxious-looking young woman standing next to Dr Simpson. He shoved the woman into the doctor and sprinted down the corridor towards the lift.

Michael tasted iron in his mouth and knew that blood was filling his lungs. Breathing was difficult, each breath producing less oxygen as the alveoli became soaked in blood. He slumped on to the bed and David looked at him like a helpless child. Michael saw the assailant run from the room, and then hallucinated that Rebecca was there next to Dr Simpson. He felt faint. Love and hurt was washing over him from David’s mute form. He held out his hand and touched David’s giant palm. Consciousness was fading.

Rebecca’s scream tugged him into reluctant alertness. She rushed to Michael’s prone form, screaming his name. Sweat formed on his forehead from the effort of breathing. He smiled up at her, feeling intoxicated from oxygen starvation.

“Hello, dear. I... I seem to have had a bit of an accident. This is David, my brother. He’s a really nice guy.”

Rebecca looked briefly at David, and turned quickly back to Michael. Then Dr Simpson was there, moving her gently aside, uttering doctorly platitudes.

“Let’s see what we can do... I’ve called for help... doesn’t look too bad... try to breathe, gently now.”

The sound of his oxygen-starved blood pumping madly through his arteries filled Michael’s head. His last fading sight was of Rebecca’s face, eyes reddened, cheeks shiny wet, confused torment contorting her normally attractive features. Hidden behind her, David turned away from his brother, head bowed under the weight of the loneliness which bore down and embraced him again like an old friend.

Epilogue

Michael stopped breathing before the medics arrived. They removed his blood-soaked body but the dark brown stains on the bed marked the spot where he had lain. Dr Simpson took the distraught woman away and once again I was on my own.

They caught the nurse, of course. He just went home and the police picked him up there. He will be charged with manslaughter. There was talk of my being a witness, but I don't think anything will come of it. He's going to plead guilty, and Rebecca and the doctor can testify to what they saw.

I miss Michael. Even before that day we finally met he had been with me in some way all my life. When he touched my hand and held me so tight, I knew that my wait was over. For 35 years I had been denied the basic need for human contact because of a genetic mishap that rendered me unfit for inclusion in society. Then as quick as he appeared, Michael was stolen away from me. I can forgive the nurse for what he used to do to me: the torments, the mocking, the pain he inflicted. I can understand that they were born of his fear of what he saw in me, and his need to have power over what he regarded as a monster, the bogeyman. I'll never forgive him for taking my brother though.

I was surprised when Rebecca came to visit me. She was very wary of me, but seemed to need to talk about Michael, as though I could understand, which of course, I could. She didn't look at me very often, not at first. She looked at her hands in her lap and talked about how she'd realised what Michael meant to her and how she'd called my parents and pleaded with them to tell her where he was. They told her some of the story, that he was visiting a very sick relative, and she drove straight here.

She didn't seem to expect me to try to talk, and we lacked the empathy that I shared with Michael. On the second visit, though, she started to ask questions. My handwriting is nearly illegible, so I used Michael's little electronic device, which was left in my room when he died. I tapped out messages one-fingeredly to her. We get on quite well now. She comes once every two weeks. On her last visit she hugged me when she left, and said something about my parents talking about seeing me. Not definitely, but maybe, and only if I want them to. I couldn't tell her whether I did or not. My life suddenly seems to be changing very fast. I think I'll just wait and see what the future brings.