

As Above, So Below

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Prologue

Utah State University.
Biochemistry Dept, Professor Meyer's office.
May 2.

'Hello? ... Oh yeah, send him in.'

Professor Eric Meyer glanced up as his colleague, Dr. William Layton, entered the room. Layton placed his briefcase on Meyer's desk and clicked it open. 'Morning, Eric, I've got the first study results on DK61-12—' He handed Meyer a large file, '—they're kinda disappointing.'

'Disappointing?' Meyer flicked through the file, stopping briefly to study some of the pages before dropping it down on his desk. 'How the hell can they be disappointing!?' This was going to be the big breakthrough, we both thought that.'

Layton gave a slight shrug. 'Well, it still could be, Eric, but not in the way we expected.'

Meyer and Layton had been conducting preclinical trials on the newly discovered ketamine derivative: DK61-12. Like the parent drug, it acted as both stimulant and anaesthetic, but, crucially, DK61-12 did not exhibit ketamine's unwanted dissociative properties.

The initial trials on animals had been very encouraging: all the animals tested remained highly alert and each acquired a considerable insensitivity to pain. The drug's toxic side-effects were minor, only manifesting themselves after absurdly high doses, and no behavioural problems were observed — even after prolonged use.

DK61-12 looked set to be a pharmacological goldmine. From postoperative to battlefield treatment, the urgent need for a reliable and safe stimulant painkiller would help to underpin the drug's clinical future.

The Food and Drugs Administration had readily sanctioned the commencement of phase I human trials, and the pharmaceutical company that owned the patent to the drug had again selected Meyer and his team to begin this potentially lucrative work. The first human test results were covered in the report splayed out on Meyer's desk.

'Okay then, Bill, bring me up to speed.'

'Right. Well, as you recall we decided on a suitable dose based on the chimp results. We adjusted for human bodyweight and then, to play it safe, we reduced that dose by fifty percent..'

Meyer nodded and waited for Layton to continue.

'The subject was a sophomore volunteer called South. We hooked him up to the pain-standard and EEG, and then administered the dose via intramuscular injection. By this method the drug hit his brain within fifteen to twenty seconds—'

‘How many were present at this?’ interrupted Meyer.

‘Excluding the subject and myself, there were four others: two support staff and two physicians. Anyway, after about thirty seconds South’s EEG went right off the scale – but it only lasted for a few seconds. By the time any of us had a chance to examine him, the indicators had returned to normal, and he seemed to be perfectly relaxed. There were no further signs of contraindication so, after about three minutes, I began asking him some simple questions: was he feeling okay, comfortable – you know, general stuff.’

‘And?’ prompted Meyer.

‘He looked at me, but he didn’t say a word.’ Layton shook his head.

‘Was he high? Why didn’t he–’

‘No he wasn’t high. He was alert and he didn’t seem to be in any distress; he wasn’t bothered by the pain-standard, but then we expected that. He just refused to speak. At first we thought he was just indulging in some kind of prank; the drug dose was low and we weren’t expecting anything other than stimulated pain suppression... look, it’s all in that report there.’ Layton pointed to the fat file on Meyer’s desk.

‘Yes I know it’s in the damn report! I’ll be reading that later. Continue please.’

Layton sighed: ‘There were no further developments during the trial. South remained attentive and apparently happy; we offered him a glass of water and he drank from it readily.’

‘But he didn’t communicate with you,’ added Meyer.

‘Not a word. We continued to suspect South was playacting; he had a reputation for practical jokes – I mean he *has* a reputation... Anyhow, fifty minutes later, as the drug’s effect wore off, South spoke for the first time.’

‘What did–?’

‘Nothing much, he just complained about the pain-standard. Naturally, I wanted to know why he hadn’t been speaking to us, but South was having difficulty making sense of the previous hour.’

‘Does DK61-12 have an amnesiac effect?’

‘No, not as far as we can tell.’

‘So what the hell was going on then?’

‘I admit, at the time it did look like amnesia, but it probably wasn’t. It turned out that South could remember certain events that took place during the experiment; he could recall images of being handed the water, and he remembered drinking it and enjoying it. Apart from that, he couldn’t remember anything much; he was unable to recall any conversations.’

‘What!? ...But you were asking him questions for God’s sake; and the others, they must have been jabbering away in the background – pouring over the readouts.’

‘Well, yeah, but not according to South. I guess I was just plain baffled at this point, so I dismissed the subject. The next day I called him into my office and we went over the details of the experiment and his comments afterwards. South stated that during the experiment he was generally bored and, once again, that he couldn’t recollect a single spoken word.’ Layton paused and waited for Meyer to take all of this in.

Eventually Meyer chipped in: ‘This all took place, let’s see, just over three weeks ago?’ He looked at Layton, who nodded. ‘And you say South is fine – one hundred percent?’

‘Yes, he’s fine.’

‘Jeez! I hope so, you didn’t give him any more DK, did you?’

‘No! and relax, Eric, South’s okay – he is his normal, confident, mildly arrogant, self.’

‘Alright then, Bill, but what happened, and why did none of this show up in the animal trials?’

Layton retrieved his report from Meyer’s desk and began to search for a particular section. On finding it, he continued with his briefing: ‘We took a series of blood and urine samples from South; these demonstrated that the drug was fully broken down, along with its by-products, after about 7 to 8 days – just like ketamine. As for South’s behaviour: we isolated a neurotransmitter analogue from his blood. It looks like it’s part of the administered DK61 chain. It’s a good match for a receptor found in the human brain, and only the human brain – receptor Pg101.’

‘Pg101? I haven’t heard of that one.’

‘It’s only newly discovered. It’s found in the dominant temporal lobe, more specifically, in Wernicke’s area – the area most responsible for comprehending received speech and selecting words to express ideas.’ Layton paused, then continued: ‘It seems that South’s language processor got shut down. Despite this, he remained alert and probably suffered no cognitive deficit beyond the fact that he couldn’t understand language, any language, or even the concept of language. It’s no wonder South had difficulty remembering anything from his period ‘under’, he was thinking in a very odd and wordless manner. His mind must have been profoundly changed.’

‘H Christ!!’ exclaimed Meyer. ‘That’s our research well and truly screwed!’ He held his head in his hands.

‘Come on, Eric, I think this is very interesting–’

‘Interesting!?’ Try telling that to the FDA!’

Layton remained silent.

‘Take the results of the human and animal trials and prepare to get them published. Then dump the work, I don’t want anything more to do with it – and do not give DK to any more human subjects! That’s all.’

Meyer had finished and Layton gratefully took his cue to leave. The briefing with his boss had gone much as he’d expected: Meyer and his important cohorts in the pharma’ industry were only ever interested in commercial gain: the DK61-12 results were too strange and too unprofitable to be of interest.

Layton left Meyer to beat ectopically upon his bald top.

But aspects of the South case remained hidden from both Layton and Meyer:

With the sudden disappearance of language, South’s mind had found itself confronted by a gaping void in its consciousness – was there any consciousness at all? South’s mind didn’t know, it couldn’t even phrase the question. In its panicked state the cerebral cortex attempted to locate an alternative to the language processor, something that might return a coherence to the brain’s functioning. There was a candidate.

As the cortex fired in random chaos, another DK61-12 neurotransmitter analogue attempted to take up residence at receptor sites on the thalamus, located deep within the brain. This fact remained unknown to Layton and Meyer since the sites in question were obsolete and no studies had revealed their presence.

The analogue, a poor fit, would have had no effect on its own, but as the cortex panicked it triggered a massive surge of electrical activity in all parts of the brain. Dormant connections between the cerebral cortex and thalamus flared into life and the DK61-12 analogue forced itself home. To stay. For the first time in countless millennia, the thalamus turned on its antenna.

Since the evolution of the cerebrum, the thalamus has played a wholly subordinate role. Its main purpose is to serve as the brain's relay station, but its largest nucleus has a crude awareness of its own. It is able to understand subconscious sensations.

Less than one minute after South received DK61-12 his brain returned to stable equilibrium. The cerebral cortex learnt to function without language, but the thalamus grew curious about its recently rediscovered part. Unbeknown to the conscious mind, it attempted some simple transmissions. If translation were possible, South's thalamus broadcast something like:

'It's me!!'

'Listen to meeeeeee!!!'

Nobody did. No human brain could receive this broadcast.

South's thalamus continued to make transmissions but, disenchanted with the vast silence it received in return, it ultimately gave up. The antenna became forgotten over time, but it remained switched on. Should anyone make a broadcast, something in South would hear it.

Preston, England. Ten years later.

1

I wouldn't normally treat a headache with aspirin; I wouldn't normally collapse into a coma...

Dai Evans: the resident student barfly, a standard fixture found in every pub and bar in Preston. By drinking with him, I was just inviting trouble.

The physics students used to speculate about Dai: they believed that he inhabited the strange world of quantum mechanics. They claimed that some sort of 'ghostly' Dai simultaneously drank in every known pub in Preston. He behaved like the quantum particle: when you opened the pub door, and observed him, you collapsed his superposition and forced him to occupy one pub – your pub. They called him the quantum boozier.

On this particular day, at around one o'clock in the afternoon, I'd arrived at the union bar, finally having finished a lengthy series of exams. Most of my classmates were with me and together we happily knocked back the drinks as talk shifted from the exams to our upcoming work placements. As Business Administration students we could expect to be placed almost anywhere. My posting had yet to be confirmed, but I presumed to be assigned to one or other of the high street banks. The experience would be useful, and might lead to future employment, but it seemed like a waste of a summer to me.

I kept on drinking.

After an hour or two, as the others began to drift off, I found myself bogged down in a pointless argument with Dai Evans. I remember listening and becoming steadily more enraged as he trundled through his longwinded and fatuous points. But I can't remember what the argument was actually about, or why I'd bothered to engage in it in the first place. Surely I had better things to do than waste time with this obnoxious alcoholic. Apparently, I did not.

We later left the union and proceeded on to a nearby wine bar; the cool evening air, far from sobering me, simply exposed the scale of my inebriation. I enjoyed a drink, just like any other student, but not on this scale: when was the last time I saw double?

'Drink yourself sober, mate.'

That was Dai's advice. I was too pissed to know any better.

As we sat in the wine bar and resumed the 'debate', I became distracted by a worsening pain in my head. Again, Dai's recommendation was simple – something about drinking through the pain-barrier.

But this didn't work, the pain refused to budge; I subsequently left the wine bar and headed off for a night of oblivion, leaving Dai free to return to his quantum state – and ready to move in on some other unfortunate sap.

I staggered back to my nearby flat, increasingly troubled, and sobered, by my developing headache. If I felt the hangover now, what sort of state would I be in by

tomorrow morning? Two minutes later, and with a head now pounding to the rhythms of an over-straining diesel engine, I began my search for the paracetamol. No paracetamol – shit! Maybe that girl next door – *whatsername* – had some...

What the hell was her name!?

The door opened.

‘Oh hi, my name’s Geoff, Geoff Christie? From next door?’ I pointed towards my door.

‘Yes I know, hello, Geoff ... a good night was it?’

No doubt my general demeanour was still conspicuously that of a hopeless drunkard. ‘Well no,’ I replied, attempting to steady myself, ‘since you ask, I’ve just spent the last few hours stuck with Dai. That’s why I’m here, I need some painkillers ... badly.’

‘Oh.’

My neighbour was either amused or indifferent, but I couldn’t tell which.

‘Come in, Geoff, I’ll see what I’ve got.’

I stepped inside and tried once more to remember the girl’s name: was it Jane? ... Again, I drew a blank. She was a nice sort, whatever her name, about five-seven, with long, straight, gingery-brown hair and a friendly face. I wondered if she had a boyfriend.

Miss X began her vigorous search for the paracetamol, rummaging through cupboards and slamming drawers as my headache grew steadily worse. Eventually: ‘I’m afraid I’ve only got soluble aspirin, will these do?’ She showed me the packet, her face slightly flushed from her exertions. I doubted that aspirin would be able to shift this rapidly developing monster, but...

‘Yeah, these should do the trick, thanks, can I have four?’

‘Four!? Poor Geoffrey, you must be in pain, haha!’

I watched her plop the four aspirins into water, convinced that she was giving me a coded come-on. Receiving the fizzing glass I nodded my thanks and lurched over, uninvited, to a nearby comfy chair. The aspirins continued to slowly dissolve as my host, sweetly smiling, almost laughing, waited patiently for me to say something, or do something, interesting ... But the alcohol swilled around my brain and erudition stubbornly hid from view:

I’ve been admiring you from afar – and babe – I think you make the grade! ... No.

I’ve been anatomically enhanced. ... No.

I suppose a shag’s out of the question... –No!

I took a swig of aspirin and, thankfully, remained silent.

But then I did finally pipe up: ‘Would you like to come to Blackpool with me?’

‘Blackpool!? – now!? – it’s a bit late isn’t it?’

‘No, not now–’ you daft cow, ‘–when I’ve sobered up.’

‘But this is my final year,’ the joker replied.

‘I should be fine in a day or so, how about Thursday, or the weekend?’ I asked, deciding to give up on this woman.

‘Hmmm,’ she scratched a tightened knee, ‘you say you will have sobered up, but will you stay sober?’

‘Yes, I’ll stay sober, I’m not normally a boozier, it’s just that today we’ve finished our exams, and Dai took advantage – so to speak. You shouldn’t judge me by the state I’m in

now.'

'Yeah, okay then.'

'Yeah, you won't judge me? Or ... err.' My mind kept fading out into TV static.

'Yes, let's go to Blackpool! Now finish your drink and then piss off.'

I leaned back and drank some more of the aspirin: it tasted great! This hadn't turned out to be such a wasted day after all. With the glass finally drained, I attempted to rise but struggled as the pain in my head suddenly flared. I made it to the standing position and turned to thank my patient friend, noticing briefly a look of sharp concern on her face...

The pain expanded like a balloon and, one by one, all my other senses made way for it. Everything began to fade out until, ultimately, there was only the pain – a simple, thoughtless agony.

Luckily, as I slipped into the coma, this faded out as well.

Now there was nothing.

Alex woke up, leaned forward, scratched his shin and inspected the body lying by his side.

The large, white, fleshy back poked up from the covers but remained completely still; above it was an equally stationary mass of black hair. Maybe she was dead. Alex continued to watch but failed to see any sign of life. He eased his way out of the bed and made for the small, grubby bathroom.

His reflection eyed him from the other side of the mirror: the same big eyes, big nose and big mouth as the previous night. Luckily Alex had a big head, he was adequately handsome. As for the rest of him: naturally large framed, recent work in a gym had begun to build up muscle in impressive amounts. When he reached forty he would have to watch that gut, but at this moment, aged twenty-one, his stomach only slightly bulged and remained muscular, hard.

He returned to the main room and once again inspected the entity in his bed. It made a grunt and showed an arm – not dead after all, never mind. He got dressed, shoved a few files and books into a carrier bag and silently stepped outside, thankful not to have woken his girlfriend, Bridgett. She had to go, he decided. Another problem to add to the list.

Alex stood outside his house, allowing the sharp April sunshine to warm his face as he tried to decide what to do next. It was after 10.30 and he'd already missed the first of two morning lectures. If he wanted to make it to the university in time for the second, he'd have to get a move on. But he didn't feel like rushing today; he considered skipping the lecture.

He'd always struggled with his physics degree, there was so much work: assessments, practicals, lectures, projects – *exams*. As usual he'd fallen badly behind on all fronts, but now time was finally running out. It was the closing stages of the third and final year and if he stood any chance of successfully completing his degree he'd have to change his habits and simply work. That was asking a lot – too much – but despite all the odds he had made it this far; to fail now would be a disaster and a disgrace, it would fulfil his recurring nightmares.

His course was one reason for feeling miserable today, but there were others: his money – or lack of it, for example. Despite the occasional bar-work, Alex, in common with most other students, remained wholly incapable of controlling the level of his debt; and the bank had begun to take an active interest, threatening to impose a draconian allowance system, like he was a bankrupt! They wanted to see him:

'Where has all the money gone, Mr Stanton?'

Lots of places ... the drugs were expensive...

Therein lay another problem:

A recent newspaper feature concerning the problems faced by long-term Ecstasy users had revealed the drug in a new light. And this troubled him more than the usual

scare-stories of sudden schoolgirl death. He knew how his body handled E and wasn't afraid of sudden death, but this new evidence – of Ecstasy-induced brain damage – was more difficult to dismiss.

Apparently, it was claimed, Ecstasy damaged the brain's serotonin receptors, thus committing the chronic user to a lifetime of intractable depression. Not surprisingly the paper had reported several case studies: grim stories about the lives of sad young people as they cascaded down into depression and mental illness.

One bloke looked just like Alex...

But top of the blues chart, and top by a considerable margin, was the news that his close friend, Geoff Christie, had fallen into a stroke-induced coma. Alex firmly closed his eyes and held his face to the warm sun. It was almost too much to contemplate. Geoff was only twenty! How could this have happened!? How could someone so young suffer something like a stroke?

So unfair that this would happen to Geoff, a popular kid; he could be overly argumentative at times, but he stayed likeable despite that; he could be clumsy around girls, but they seemed to like him too. Despite his faults – and he had them – everyone seemed to cut Geoff some slack. Was it a natural charm? Maybe. Even Frank, the union's dodgy Pit-bull mascot – whose stupid idea was that? – became noticeably less rabid when Geoff was about. Alas, there would be no further opportunities to work this questionable charm; Geoff's outlook was bleak, his condition, probably irreversible.

Alex still lingered outside his house, weighed down by an indistinct but all-pervading melancholy. Across the road stretched the largely featureless expanse of Moor Park, one of many large parks in Preston. At the opposite corner stood an observatory used by the university's astronomy students, but apart from that, Moor Park, as the name suggested, offered little of interest... He looked up the street, to his right, and saw Deepdale, the home of Preston North End Football Club. He'd recently joined the supporters' club, but only to play snooker. When had he last been to see a match? As he studied the white arches of the stadium he vowed to turn up for the next home game.

A quick glance back at his house. The neighbour's young grey-and-white cat, Gil, sat on the garden wall.

'Hello, Gil, how are ya doing, fella?' Alex located a dust-impregnated peanut from the lining of his jacket pocket and offered it to the cat. Gil ran off, unimpressed.

Daft cat, thought Alex, as he threw the peanut away.

So, what to do? What... to... do?

This spell of sombre introspection had killed off any lingering desire to go into college today: dealing with his tutors, and their probing questions concerning his absenteeism was the last thing he needed right now. On the contrary, his mood needed a leg up.

He looked down the street, to the left: Hammer lived down that way.

He'd call on Hammer.

Hammer lived in a large terraced house a few minutes walk from Alex's. On the face of it, he was just another student at the university, but he never seemed to do any work. Alex wasn't even sure what course Hammer did – graphic design? – something like that.

Hammer's real vocation was pharmacy. Directly or indirectly, he supplied most of

the drugs that Preston students consumed. To strangers, he appeared to be the archetypal cool dude, but people who knew him better saw a temperamental side to his personality.

Alex reached Hammer's house and knocked on the door.

After a lengthy delay, and a further knock, an enthusiastic Hammer finally opened the door.

'Heyy – Alex Stanton – how goes it, friend?'

Hammer claimed to be of mixed blood: Qatari, Celtic, and a dash of Icelandic. His features generally displayed the best of what these races had to offer. The cheekbones and nose were Arabic; the red-brown hair and large expressive mouth – Scottish; the striking amber eyes might perhaps have been a joint effort ... The woolly hat probably came from Iceland.

'Fine, man, just fine, how's yourself?'

'Cool – as always – come in.'

Alex followed his host into the ground-floor lounge. Hammer's house, too spacious and too flashy to be considered a typical student digs, should have been occupied by at least five people, but Hammer just shared this place with one other bloke – an older guy, not a student – and he was virtually never there.

Alex, after briefly eyeing the room, flopped down on the settee.

'So, my friend, is this just a social call?' asked Hammer.

Alex reached into his pocket and retrieved a packet of cigarettes. 'Yeah, social call, but I do need some gear, I'm on a real downer at the moment.'

'Yeah? What's up, man?'

Where to start? Whether to start?

'Well,' Alex lit up a cigarette, 'all sorts of things – my course is a ball-ache—'

'What is it you do? Physics?' interrupted Hammer.

'Yeah—'

'That's tough.' Hammer shook his head.

'It's tough alright, but no, it's not really that that's bothering me, it's the business with Geoff Christie – you remember him? He came round here one time with me, we all smoked some White Russian.'

'Yeah I remember – that's the geezer in a coma, right?'

'That's the one.' Alex remembered that Geoff had been uncharacteristically quiet, wary of Hammer, who had been characteristically boisterous.

A brief silence followed. It was a waste of time talking through his problems with Hammer who seemed barely interested. And Hammer certainly couldn't help in any practical sense ... except, of course, for the sombre mood...

'So, my friend, what's going to break through this gloom?' asked Hammer.

'I need some E and some weed – got any of that haze?'

'No problem, remain reclined, I'll see what the postman's brought.' Hammer grinned, rubbed his hands together and ran off, bound for some mysterious nether-region of the house.

Spirits raised at the anticipation of getting stoned, Alex looked up and re-studied the room.

A chess-set sat atop a coffee table, the positions of the stone pieces suggesting that a

game might be in progress. Who could Hammer's opponent be? It could be anyone. On further reflection, maybe it wasn't even a real game; knowing Hammer, it was just laid out for show – something to impress the punters.

An attractive woman, wearing nothing but a pink towel, walked silently into the room; she was in her mid-twenties, blonde and...

The image of inanimate Bridgett, in his bed, went through Alex's mind.

The woman, ignoring Alex, walked slowly towards the kitchen and stopped at the door; she leaned forward and peered in. Finding the kitchen empty she turned around and looked at Alex. Alex gazed back.

'Haammeeeee,' she drawled.

'Yeah,' came the distant reply.

The woman stood on her toes and pouted, but said nothing more. She glanced back at Alex and then glided back to her point of origin. Exit stage right.

Alex waited patiently and listened to the distant sounds of clattering and banging. It sounded like heavy objects were being dragged over linoleum floor. What the hell was Hammer up to? He was taking his time.

Eventually Hammer returned. 'Sorry about the delay, amigo, got so much junk up there, I gotta do a spring clean one of these days.' He sat down on the floor and displayed his wares: A bag of sensimilla marijuana and a tin of cannabis resin fragments, maybe three or four ounces in total. Also on display, some bags of research chemicals, aka legal highs, now illegal. Next to them, the ecstasy tablets, these ones had pentagrams embossed on the top. Alex picked up the bag of Es and studied them more closely.

'Pure MDMA,' remarked Hammer, 'much better than the usual crap we get around here, this stuff was manufactured in Germany.'

Alex examined the weed. 'How much is here?'

'Quarter,' replied Hammer, 'fifty quid, say forty-five.'

'That's a bit steep!'

'Utopia Haze, my friend. Doesn't get any better.'

Alex peered into his wallet and frowned. 'Look, I don't want the Es now, I've changed my mind. I'm trying to wean myself off the stuff,' Hammer seemed nonplussed, 'but the weed, I'll take. Problem is I've only got fifteen quid. Will you extend my credit line?'

'Yeah, give me the fifteen and you can owe me twenty-five, special spring-sale discount.'

Alex took the bag of marijuana and handed over the fifteen pounds; Hammer made a note of the transaction in his little red book.

'Stick around,' said Hammer, 'try the haze, roll up with these.' He threw some cigarette papers at Alex. 'You want a coffee?'

At Preston, Alex moved within varied circles. At one extreme was Hammer along with his many drugged-up, loved-up friends: a circle of misfits and oddballs – it bothered Alex that he fitted in so well.

At the opposite socio-fringe resided the geeks of the SF Soc. The SF men generally looked and acted like Bill Gates, while the SF women generally looked and acted like the men. It also bothered Alex that he fitted in here so well.

He was also a member of the Climbers And Ramblers Society. Trips to the Lake District or Snowdonia were organized for most Sundays and he turned up for these whenever he remembered, which, these days, was virtually never: this clean-living pursuit had always struck him as incongruous to the student ethos: get pissed, get stoned, get laid. Despite his love for the hills, instilled at a very early age, Alex never felt comfortable in the company of his earnest fellow ramblers.

He had been a student for a long time, long enough to discern the contrived nature of university clubs. Gone were the hateful days of fresherdom, when the rush to establish new acquaintances and networks had so shockingly failed to yield any worthwhile friendships. During that first term Alex had been dismayed to find his social circle consisting almost solely of wankers and hangers-on.

A certain amount of 'shedding off' had been required, and by the second term of the first year student life really began to hit its stride: a seemingly endless round of clubbing and parties.

But that was over two years ago.

Today, even the 'student ethos' was wearing a bit thin. Friendships had become fewer, but more valued.

A gradual process, no doubt one shared by many other students, but these days he only truly appreciated the company and opinions of a handful of intimates. His girlfriend, Bridgett, could be included in this group – even though she was getting on his tits at the moment – so too could one or two members of his own course. And then let's not forget Geoff – someone he'd come to view as a surrogate kid-brother – but he'd been struck down, struck down by the cruellest of fates.

Alex stared down at his open joint..

'How's it going..?' Hammer returned with two coffees. 'You've not put much in, man!'

'I know, I've got to go into college later – I'm behind with some course work.'

'Hmm,' was all Hammer said. It was alright for him, Hammer never had backlogs, he never had any work at all.

Alex rolled the joint, and lit up; he took a pull and passed it to Hammer. Hammer took a small drag and rolled the smoke around his open mouth allowing it to come out and re-enter via his nose. This came with a pained expression that seemed unnecessary.

After a moment:

'Good gear, init,' said Hammer.

Alex had to agree. He felt the distinctive haze mind-expansion take hold: more euphoric and longer-lasting than regular weed – this would have residual effects that lasted all day. Maybe he didn't have to go into college after all. He activated *Stanton Work Ethic, No 6*: If you can't afford to put it off any longer, put it off anyway – fuck it.

'Stick some music on, Hammer.'

Alex sat back, and prepared to spend a day in the clouds. The marijuana high had done its job and pushed his worries to the margins of his perception. But he knew they were still there, lurking somewhere.

Back from oblivion...

3

Music fades...

Burns: *That were Eartha Kitt and 'Let's Do It', written by Cole Porter.*

Music starts...

Burns: *The Ward Brothers and 'We'll Cross That Bridge When We Come To It'.*

Music starts...

A few minutes later... the sound of rustling paper:

Burns: *Now we did have two beauty consultants goin' to come in this mornin', but they're not very well – this is absolutely true – two beauty consultants were coming in to give advice to males – and females – of the.. ugly variety, who wish to improve themselves. Anyway, we'll now be running this feature next week.*

Music starts...

Burns: *Hmm, some people need to do more than others, of course.*

Music starts again...

Burns: *What you lookin' at, Higgs? – I just need a haircut!*

Several minutes of chart songs follow...

Burns: *Just a quick reminder: Higgs, Jack Dawes and "yours truly" will be down at the Ribbleside Centre tonight, raising money for good causes – after expenses, of course. Come along! If you don't know where the Ribbleside Centre is, it's that new gaudy place that used to be the Elephant & Castle pub. News after these. Ta Ta!! ...*

Cut to commercials:

Higgs: *Preston Bus Lines is celebrating its twenty-year anniversary. To mark this auspicious event, all bus fares exceeding two pounds will be halved in price!*

– Yes! – halved in price! Preston Bus Lines – we'll get you there in good time.

Professional Announcer: *Anders Stores proudly announces a spring sale on all men's and women's fashions. Unbeatable bargains. Come now, to Anders stores: Fisbergate, Poulton and Houndsbill Shopping Centre, Blackpool.*

Higgs: *Preston Fish Emporium announces an unusually large haul of haddock. Stocks must shift. Discounts of 30% for purchases over one tonne.*

A news bulletin follows...

I suppose it's a gentle way to wake up, especially if you're dealing with a hangover, but, my god, local radio!?

I cast my mind back to the events of what I assumed was the previous night: Blackpool would be fun... I still couldn't remember her name... I couldn't remember leaving her flat either... but I did remember the terrible headache. Funny how I don't seem to have one now, I thought.

A newsreader droned away in the background.

Why was the radio on? – I never listened to local radio, I didn't even have a radio! I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't. I tried to move, but I couldn't do that either. By this time I was fully alert – what the hell was going on!?

There was a click, and the radio fell silent. I shouted for it to be turned back on, but no sound emerged from my mouth. At this point I realized that I had no sensation of breathing. The ultimate hangover? ... or something worse!?

Again, I tried to open my eyes; I tried to move – nothing, zip. I couldn't even feel anything.

I tried to calm myself by concentrating on the one sense that still functioned – my hearing. Thank God something worked.

I listened to the faint, non-directional sound of air-conditioning: a quiet hiss of air accompanied by the gentle throbbing of distant pumps. There was no AC in my flat, was there? Could I hear snoring? Maybe it was mine? No, it came from my right, steady and even, not really snoring, just the heavy breathing of a deep sleeper. I concentrated harder but failed to hear much more. But then, a burst of noise:

The scraping of a wooden chair; a loud thud and a crack as a heavy door swung open; finally a thwack, as the door smashed back to the closed position.

Voices!

'Nurse!, have you looked at Christie's EEG?'

Nurse?

'No, not in the last half hour,' said a slightly defensive female voice, 'I've been tied up with this.' The sound of footsteps. 'Goodness! he's giving a strong trace.'

'Yes, alpha and beta waves. Mr Christie might be about to wake up.'

'I am awake!' I silently screamed.

I could hear that someone hovered very close: noisy nasal breathing.

'Mr Christie,' said the man. 'Mr Christie,' said the woman.

'MR CHRISTIE!!' – that was both of them. What followed was a shouted combination of Mr Christies, Geoffs and Geoffreys as the medical staff – I'd worked out that I was in a hospital by this stage – tried desperately to rouse me. All to no avail of course, since I was already awake.

'Where's his mother!?' asked the excitable doctor.

'She's still here, I think,' replied the nurse.

'Find her, get her in here NOW!!' The nurse charged out of the room. 'Geoff, I think you can hear me – can you hear me, Geoff? Com'on, Geoff, open your eyes!'

Christ, what had happened to me?

The door cracked open and the distinctive flap of my mother entered the room.

What was *she* doing here?

'Oh, Geoffrey, can you hear me, darling, wake up, Geoff, please wake up! Here we go again.'

My mother's expensive perfume filled my nostrils taking the sense count up to two. And then there was light! No details, but definitely some fuzzy shapes. Was I emerging from this nightmare? No, my world returned to darkness and despite my best efforts I was unable to summon back the light.

'I got a pupil movement!' shouted the doctor.

There followed a sudden quiet as my mother and the doctor, talking quickly and

quietly in the distance, discussed my situation ‘out of ear-shot’; but my hearing was becoming acute and I picked up much of what was said:

‘Mrs Christie—’ started the doctor.

‘This is a good sign, isn’t it?’ flustered my mother.

‘Yes, Mrs Christie, your son is showing indications that he’s returning to full consciousness, but he’s not with us, is he? I don’t know what’s wrong; we’ll have to run several tests ... Mrs Christie, there is a chance that your son may be ... paralyzed—’

‘Oh God!’ My mother burst into tears.

The next few hours were torment. I picked up snippets of information about my condition as its true nature gradually revealed itself to the medical staff. I wanted to ask questions; I wanted to challenge the diagnosis; I wanted to scream with rage.

But I couldn’t.

I couldn’t even ‘sense’ my own frustration: no sense of raised blood pressure, no sense of a palpating heart.

No sense of *anything!!*

Nightmare? This was so much more than that. And it just wouldn’t end..

My mother had been instructed to remain in the ward while the medical staff went about their various tasks. She’d been encouraged to talk to me, boost my moral, but she just made things worse.

‘You’re going to be fine, Geoff, just hang in there, the doctors are very good here, they know what’s to be done ... Please God, try and be strong..’

More tears.

It wasn’t that I held any particular aversion to her heartfelt and tear-filled efforts, indeed I appreciated the love that lay behind them. But I couldn’t react. I couldn’t say: “it’s okay; I’ll be fine; I love you too”.

And, of course, *I* couldn’t cry.

My mother changed tack and attempted some small talk: I learned that I’d passed my exams and that my requirement to do work-placement had been waived by the university. Great. I now had until September: plenty of time to languish in this hospital bed, relax, and gently spiral down towards full-on lunacy, free of any fear of compromising my degree.

But I wasn’t insane yet, in fact my mind felt particularly sharp. Or maybe that was just my hearing. I realized that I could direct that sense with amazing dexterity, as though I were ‘looking’ at the various sounds around me. Beyond my mother’s increasingly delirious monologue, I heard a nurse chatting to another patient:

‘What’s up with the kid then?’

‘Shh, ... trust me, Mike, you don’t want to know.’

‘But I do! Go on, Sandy, tell me what’s up? There must be a dozen staff buzzing around him.’

‘Keep your voice down, they reckon he’s awake ... it’s something called locked-in syndrome – a kind of total paralysis. And he’s probably going to be stuck like this for the rest of his life.’

‘Christ!’

Christ indeed! Maybe this newfound hearing acuity wasn’t such a godsend after all.

My mind went numb, no longer focusing on any outside sounds.

I'm not sure when, but at some point I became aware that my mother had faded into the background. Once again the doctors had come to the fore. They began talking to me:

'Think of the colour red, Geoff, red,' said one guy. He was the senior doctor, I thought.

'There, on LVC – and sixty percent on RVC,' said another very sober voice.

'That's good, Geoff, now do it again – think of red.'

The doctors were attempting to develop a simple vocabulary using colours and images to represent words. For example, red became 'yes', and since all colours produced similar responses on their monitoring equipment, 'the Matterhorn' became 'no', apparently it gave a very distinctive trace.

After a few hours of this I became tired and the staff seemed to know.

'Alright, we'll leave it for now, Geoff.'

There followed an aggravating sound of scraping chairs as my medical team departed from the ward. They finally left me in peace; my only companion: the air-conditioning.

They might have given me a sedative because I started to doze.

It was after five in the evening when Alex returned to his empty flat, another important day wasted. He flicked on the TV and stared sullenly at the screen. Ten minutes later there was a bang at the front door and Bridgett came through to the lounge.

‘Hello, love,’ said Alex.

‘What a day!’ Bridgett gave him a peck, ‘up to my eyes in it.’

Up to her eyes in *what?* – Alex didn’t enquire.

Bridgett removed her coat. ‘Al, I’ve just heard some rather encouraging news.’

‘Oh?’

‘It’s about Geoff – he’s come part way out of his coma; he’s not in a vegetative state any more – but he’s not woken up yet either. I think this is important, don’t you?’

Apparently the doctors have been communicating with him.’

‘I thought you said he hadn’t woken up yet.’

‘Yeah, I just heard the news from Cube, he might have got his facts mixed up.’

Bridgett removed her jeans.

‘Most likely,’ replied Alex, shaking his head, ‘you got a fag?’

‘I think we should visit Geoff – you haven’t been yet, have you? ... We should go, you know.’ Bridgett continued to disrobe. ‘He is your best friend.’ Then seeing Alex pull a face. ‘We should go tomorrow.’

‘No, not tomorrow, we’ll go Friday evening, okay?’

Bridgett regarded Alex disapprovingly. ‘I’m going to take a shower, There’s a *Head* in there.’ She pointed to her bag.

Alex searched her bag for some cigarettes and pulled out the copy of *Head* magazine, a new publication aimed at students; it reported on popular culture, social media trends, film and music etc. He flicked through it and stopped at a feature about a new entheogenic drug. It was *the* thing happening in New York’s rarefied club world.

The sound of the shower broke through from the bathroom and Alex’s thoughts turned to Bridgett. He clearly had something to resolve with his long-term girlfriend, but, whatever it was, it could wait.

Back to the *Head*.

Diaketamine. The name of the new drug, a drug that had been knocking around the American research establishment for some years now. Although still a rarity in the UK, it was becoming increasingly popular in the US: as a recreational “tool”.

The effects of diaketamine sounded distinctly odd: the user lost all understanding of language. According to a leading New York psychiatrist and narcotics expert: “The subject suffers a cataclysmic non-linear continuance break-down.” What the fuck was all that about? Luckily *Head* thought it was bollocks too. They explained it in English: “The user, without language to define his or her thoughts, is free of the twin tyrannies of future and past and is effectively alive and joyous in the permanent NOW!”

Still a bit heavy on the bullshit, thought Alex, as he continued to read.

LIFE (diaketamine’s street name) was snorted, and the effects were felt within one

minute; the average trip lasted one hour. Apart from the language loss, there were no other effects beyond an increased tolerance to pain. There were no definitive 'highs' or 'lows', no physiological reactions and no hallucinations. Also, reported the article, LIFE was non-addictive, and the user remained in complete control of his actions.

Alex put down the magazine and tried to imagine the drug's effect. It was difficult. By its very nature, the essence of this experience lay beyond articulation.

He picked up the magazine again: It seemed that people who took the drug only appreciated its full significance once the effects had worn off. Then they could find words to define their 'trip', and, in so doing, recognize the profundity of the experience. According to one woman: the effect was more dreamlike than a real dream. When you were "high on LIFE" everything seemed *right*. It didn't matter that you couldn't understand anyone. As far as you were concerned there was nothing *to* understand.

Alex considered those last few sentences as his focus returned to the TV: A news reporter was attempting to explain the effects of recent house price movements on the wider economy.

Bridgett finished her shower, re-entered the room and sat down next to Alex.

'I don't suppose you've got anything for tea, have you?' he asked her.

'You'll be lucky!' Bridgett replied, towel-drying her thick black hair.

Alex held his stomach, and, on cue, it began to grumble.

'Get something from the chippy,' Bridgett suggested, 'and get something for me.'

I don't think they do diet chips, thought Alex to himself.

Bridgett studied Alex's grumpy face. When he finally returned her gaze, she asked: 'Did you go into college today?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'You liar! Cube said you never showed up.'

Alex felt his anger rising, and his guilt. 'I went to the library in the afternoon. And I never saw Cube!!'

Bridgett was unconvinced. 'You're playing with fire, Alex, you've only got—'

'I'm on top of it, Bridgett!'

'Okay! don't bite my head off!' protested Bridgett. She returned her attention to her hair as Alex returned his to the article on diaketamine: The drug, surprisingly, still remained uncontrolled, but that wouldn't last much longer. The authorities on both sides of the Atlantic had grown concerned over its increasing popularity; there would soon be legisla—

'What about those chips?' demanded Bridgett.

Alex sighed and dropped the magazine onto the floor. 'I haven't got any money.'

Bridgett stopped playing with her hair and looked again at Alex. Declining the opportunity for a new argument, she simply pointed to her bag. 'Get some out of there.'

Alex did as he was told and reached into the bag. Collecting some cash and pocketing his phone, he departed from the flat and the increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere.

Dusk; cloudless and cold. Alex sat up on his neighbour's wall and contemplated the phone in his hand. As he began to dial Hammer's number, he glanced over his shoulder: 'I knew I was being watched! Hello, cat.'

Gil, at the neighbour's window, had his attention focused squarely on Alex.

'Hammer, ... hey, it's Alex, yeah, look man, we've got to parley. You know anything about diaketamine? ...Yeah, ...yeah, that's right. Can you get any? ...uh-huh ... It's uncontrolled, yeah, okay...'

Hammer seemed to be familiar with the drug, but he'd never used it nor dealt in it, in fact, he didn't know anyone who had. But, he was interested: there may be an unexploited market here, and it could be supplied legally. On hearing that the drug was uncontrolled Hammer had suggested an obvious course of action.

Disturbing and fragmentary dreams prodded my subconscious with reminders of a desperate plight. Finally, something inside me said: 'Enough!!'

I awoke with a start.

Now late into the night, the usual hubbub in the ward had been replaced by a ghastly silence. I attempted to move, but soon gave up: no change to my condition, no indication of further recovery.

A sense of profound bitterness flooded over me as I recalled the revelations of the last few hours. How could this have happened? I wasn't the first student to drink too much, a hangover should have been my punishment, not a lifetime trapped in this living hell. Would I truly be stuck like this for ever: inert, dependant on others to provide respite from ...nothingness..?

Alone in my personal void, my mind began to float. In an attempt to anchor it down I tried to get a fix on some outside sounds: I strained to hear the distinctive air-conditioning hiss, but the old hospital system remained silent, possibly broken-down.

Without any senses to rely on, my perceptions altered and my private space began to distort. I started to lurch and spin in the blackness as though travelling on a hushed roller-coaster. By a huge effort of will I consciously brought myself to a halt, but as soon as I relaxed, and let down my guard, the wretched spinning began anew.

Again, I slowed it down, but again, failed to maintain the required concentration for more than just a few seconds. There was no choice but to let go and hope the motions might somehow dissipate on their own. The spin resumed, and without intervention on my part, transformed into something far worse.

The surrounding black space acquired a truly immense scale, as though I were a solitary atom roaming free in an empty universe, but then I would suddenly expand to fill that universe; I could feel myself squeezed against its hard edges. And then back again. This nauseating sensation, along with the ever-present spinning and lurching, grew ever more extreme.

Oh God! I was going to lose it!

It stopped. Blessed stillness; if I'd had a brow, I'd have wiped it. As I recovered my wits, I noticed a faint glow of light off to my right and instinctively 'turned to look'. To my utter shock the glow moved into the centre of my field of view. View? Was this real vision? The light emanated from a hallway via a partially opened door. I began to drift forwards.

I hadn't paused to reflect on what was going on, but as I 'moved' about my new locale the truth began to dawn. Confirmation of my fears followed as I turned around and saw myself lying on the nearest of three beds. 'I lay face up; tubes, drips and electrodes linked my pallid body to a nearby rack of monitoring equipment.

This was an out-of-body experience. I was dying.

I waited, half expecting the supernatural tunnel to appear and whisk me off to the afterlife. But nothing happened; I just continued to float, outside my body, near the

ceiling. Eventually, I allowed myself to drift down, but I felt reluctant to attempt a return to my body and the insanity-inducing spinning void. I veered off and explored the rest of the ward.

The room was cluttered up with racks of complex electronic equipment, with more high tech' gear stacked up near the door. The ward itself contained only three beds; the far one, on my body's right, and nearest to the door, looked empty, but the one in the middle contained a body. I moved in to get a closer view.

The patient seemed to be a middle-aged man; he lay on his back but his face was obscured by shadow. I noticed a faintly glowing 'aura' extending about five inches from his body. As I continued my approach, I marvelled at its subtle white, yellow and orange hues. I reached forward with my astral hand and touched the aura. I had less than a second to notice it ripple.

I was sitting in the front passenger seat of a cramped and dated car, possibly a Trabant. The driver, ignoring me, remained utterly focused on the road ahead.

What is this!? Where am I!? I anxiously wondered.

I kept quiet and looked beyond the window to the grim scene outside: dark and raining, a heavy nimbostratus hung low over shadowy industrial forms.

This couldn't be real, I was lying paralyzed in a hospital bed for Christ's sake! I continued to study the malignant scene: countless black chimneys belched billowing black smoke into the low-slung black sky.

What was going on here? What could be a possible explanation?

I was dreaming, that was it, I must have somehow returned to my body, and then fallen asleep. We passed by an area solely composed of black twisted pipes. This certainly looked like a dream, but it didn't *feel* like a dream, it felt as though I were awake.

I turned to the driver. 'Where are we?'

Nothing.

'I said, where are we?' I repeated.

The man slowly removed a map from the glove compartment and handed it to me without the slightest glance in my direction. Spooky guy. The unrecognized 'A to Z' consisted of pages of urban streets, a chaotic and random jumble.

I spoke up again. 'Hey, Spook, is this a dream?'

The driver looked directly at me for the first time but in that instant, everything changed.

We were suddenly standing in a large crowded conference room; Spook, beside me, began to examine a bundle of files.

Maybe I truly was awake, but suffering from amnesia; maybe several weeks had passed since my 'astral trip' in the ward, so, therefore, I'd recovered! But why was I standing next to this strange man? And why had there just been some kind of continuity break?

The crowd chatted contentedly, seemingly quite at home in this odd and imposing setting. Huge drapes and priceless renaissance oils covered the walls, while on the ground strange organic sculptures sprang haphazardly from a rich pile carpet.

I was dead: I'd just had an out-of-body experience, and now ... I was dead. ... Yes.

No. I still didn't buy it. Was this Heaven? Hell? Purgatory? Something told me that this was just a dream. But what was that? Not my state of mind which I still recognized to be one of alert wakefulness.

I regarded my surroundings once more: apart from the sculptures it all possessed a fine baroque style – surely not the sort of thing I would dream about..

I glanced back at Spook and studied his agitated face: he was becoming acutely worked up, lines of worry etched onto his features...

I finally saw the answer:

This was Spook's dream! 'Spook' being the patient, my neighbour in the ward!

Incredible, I was in someone else's dream. *Awake* in someone else's dream!

Nearby, an attractive woman in her late thirties or early forties exchanged small talk with an older man. I decided to leave Spook to his file-rifling, and sidled over to the chatting couple.

Time to test the theory.

'Good evening, my name is Geoff, I'm a guest dreamer here this evening, I flew in from the next bed.' What would they make of that!?

'Hello, Mr Christie, I do hope you are enjoying yourself,' replied the handsome woman.

Her comment surprised me, I was expecting to be completely ignored, as though I didn't exist. I stared at the woman and she gazed back hypnotically, fixing me with her dazzling cerulean eyes as I tried to assume a confident and relaxed manner.

'Yes! err.., umm, ... it's very nice here, init., ha ha., umm...' The woman bowed slightly as if acknowledging a great and erudite compliment. 'I'm with him,' I finally managed, pointing over my shoulder to Spook. The woman took her eyes off mine and glanced at Spook.

'Yes, he is here to give a presentation. When he is ready we will summon him to the podium.' The woman's extreme accent, clearly upper-class English, carried within it an almost Germanic cadence; she took a sip of martini and continued to regard me intently.

This may have been Spook's dream, but to me it seemed so real, more than real: dreamlike, and yet very *un*-dreamlike. I wondered what would happen if I slapped this classy woman's bum. I decided not to try, I didn't wish to cause an embarrassing scene – dream or no dream.

I dragged myself away from 'Madam', and sauntered back over towards Spook. He was clearly stressed-out, still suffering at the impish hands of his own neuroses as he feverishly examined his impenetrable notes while regularly glancing up towards the front stage.

'How are you doing for time?' I cruelly asked.

'I've got to be up there any second now, and I can't find all my sheets!' He had a Lancashire accent.

His typed notes seemed to consist of the same old gibberish as his street map. The top sheet, entitled: "Recovering the March. Invalidated and not?" shed no light on the nature of Spook's presentation.

'They're all waiting for you,' I baited. I'd spent a lifetime dreaming about impending exams or appointments, this type of dream was all too familiar to me. Let's help things along a bit. I noticed a watching figure at the front stage and offered him a hand-signal to

indicate Spook's readiness.

'No! no! I'm not ready!'

'Ladies and gentleman, tonight's speaker has come—'

Instantaneous change.

We rushed up a set of shallow granite steps that led to the front entrance of a grand grey-stone building; ahead of me, Spook flustered as we ran.

'Come on, we're going to be late!' he said, with apocalyptic dread.

'Cool it, Spook, It's only a—'

Spook stopped and turned to me. 'The name's Hargreaves, not Spook! Now hurry up!'

We entered the foyer, and the grandeur of the place struck me immediately.

We stood at the entrance to a truly massive hall. Imposing marble pillars stretched up to the distant vaulted ceiling from which a glittering and truly monumental chandelier hung low, dominating the centre of this vast space. To our right and left, broad staircases gently spiralled upwards branching off intermittently to reach the many tiers of upper galleries.

Hargreaves started rifling through his files, were we going to play on this theme all night!? I turned away from Hargreaves and noticed, for the first time, how crowded the place had become: the assorted 'guests' chatted amongst themselves and occasionally glanced over in our direction.

A gentle tap on my shoulder.

Madam had returned, dressed, this time, in full-length and heavily bejewelled evening garb. In her left hand: a smouldering fat Havana.

'Mr Christie, you are behaving like a dog on a leash. Do not watch passively, *participate*, this is your dream as well, you know?'

Who was this tart? And how did she know my name?

I considered the notion that, as she said, elements of the dream were mine, and not Hargreaves'. If this were true, then I might have dreamt up Madam. As I pondered this I reflected on the nature of my surroundings: was this all the work of Hargreaves? If so, then he possessed a vivid imagination, there was so much detail here. I had him down as some sort of travelling businessman, probably in a high-stress job; he obviously had to give presentations and he obviously worried about them, beyond that, he was just a down-to-earth northern bloke. He wouldn't dream about places like this, so maybe I had created this hall for him. I admired my inventiveness, but then began to have doubts: none of this looked to belong in *my* mind either.

I glanced back at Madam. She removed her gaze and lifted the cigar to her cherry-red lips: a long extended draw made the burning tip glow orange and crackle; she inhaled deeply. For a second I expected her to exhale into my face, but instead she angled the powerful smoke jet off to my right, most of it bouncing off Hargreaves, several feet away. He looked up – annoyed.

Madam was waiting for me to spring into action, to begin participating in my own dream... I tapped my foot and studied the carpet: scarlet, dense pile, clearly very expensive... I was about to ask the aristocratic woman her name but when I glanced up, she had gone.

I checked with Hargreaves: rising panic. I realized the need to get him relaxed, if he became too worked up we'd be thrown out of this dream and then on to the next: presumably another grand banquet hall or conference room. I had an idea.

'Hey, Mr Hargreaves,' I began, 'we agreed that I would handle the, err, "Great Hall" presentation, this *is* mostly my work.' I pointed to the jumbled papers in Hargreaves' trembling hands.

He visibly relaxed and handed over the file. 'Yes, of course – here.' I collected it, but did not bother to read any of the nonsense contained within.

Almost at once, a loud voice boomed from the front. 'My Lords, Ladies *aaaand* Gentlemen, our eminent guest speaker, Viscount Christie of Cheviot, is ready to commence his rendition – Viscount Christie!' There followed an outbreak of loud but unemotional applause. I would have laughed at this introduction if I hadn't suddenly become so nervous. What was I going to do next?

I made my way to the front, modestly acknowledging the continuing applause; a fat man possessed of a vast and comical moustache bowed and beckoned to the stage. I walked up the short flight of steps and turned to face my vast audience, reminding myself all the time that this was just a dream, and not, strictly speaking, my own dream. What to do?

They were expecting a rendition. Was I going to play an instrument? Sing? Read poetry?

'Ladies and gentlemen – and lords...' So quiet you could hear a pin drop on pile carpet. At the back, a hundred yards away, someone fumbled and dropped a pin. Everyone, all at once, turned around.

'Sorry,' came a far-away voice.

The crowd promptly turned back to me, expectation glowing in their eyes. 'Tonight, I would like to impress you all with that old dream-standard: Flying Around The Room.' I concentrated and leaped off the stage; I heard a collective gasp as I sailed about ten feet above the startled gathering. All heads were turned up, everyone rewarding me with a look of astonished awe.

I looked down and immediately began to lose height. I tried to climb, but it was no good; I crashed into a waiter, sending him and his drinks flying. Several guests got soaked, as though the waiter had spilt a full bathtub over them. Hargreaves helped me up.

'You've done it now,' he said, and he wasn't wrong; the crowd were livid.

'All change,' I said, closing my eyes and waving my arms. But when I opened my eyes, I saw that nothing had changed; the crowd of gowns and tuxedos began to approach from all sides. I noticed the man with the large moustache: he was literally incandescent with rage, a ten-thousand-watt ruby bulb blazed from within the centre of his head. The mob looked eager for violence.

I happened to glance up at one of the balconies: Madam leant forward, slowly shaking her head, leisurely flicking cigar ash onto the massed heads below.

'What are we going to do?' I asked Hargreaves.

'I think we're done for,' he replied helpfully.

'All change!!' I screamed. This time, it all changed.

I found myself wedged into some sort of thicket, virtually bent double, with my feet and arms pointing up towards a small circle of blue. As I struggled, Hargreaves came into view, his head filling the circle of blue.

‘Help me out of here, Hargreaves, I’m stuck.’

Hargreaves reached down and attempted to free me from my herbaceous prison. I finally broke free and took in the new scene.

The small picturesque village and surrounding countryside seemed surreal, painted in the ambience of water-colour. Beyond the village, atop a small hillock, stood a large, round, grey-stone, castle-like building. It was somewhat reminiscent of the previous dream, but incongruous to this setting.

‘Where are we now?’ I asked, half to myself.

‘Nutwood,’ replied Hargreaves, ‘home of Rupert Bear.’

Hargreaves strolled towards the village centre, and I followed wearily. The main street of ‘Nutwood’ arced gently to the left, a privet hedge obscuring its more distant reaches. Was Hargreaves about to panic over his ‘Rupert Bear’ presentation? Thankfully, he looked upbeat, and seemed almost hypnotized by the deserted village.

I heard the approaching sound of heavy footsteps coming, appropriately, from around the bend: a white elephant, dressed in a dark blue jacket and tartan trousers, came into view. It walked on its hind legs and carried a white satchel on its back.

‘It’s Edward Trunk,’ remarked Hargreaves.

When the elephant saw us, it stopped, and came thumping over.

*‘This is a shocking sight to see,
young Geoffrey Christie’s plainly free!’*

I looked at the ridiculous creature: its arms were cylinders – nothing more.

‘Hey, Eddy, my main elephant, how’s it hangin’?’ I chortled. Edward regarded me with the blank expression of something not real. He then ran off towards the round castle.

Hmm, well that was interesting. Once again Hargreaves and I were alone in the water-colour village. I didn’t like it here. The time had come for Hargreaves to wake up, I decided. Closing my eyes, I shouted: ‘Hargreaves wakes up!’

I opened my eyes only to be confronted with yet another dreamscape. This time we sat amongst the craggy hills of the English Lake District, on the broad upper reaches of Glaramara, in Borrowdale – as far as I could tell.

A couple of disturbing thoughts went through my mind at this point. Firstly, was Hargreaves dreaming in ‘real time’? It felt as though at least a couple of hours had elapsed. Supposing, back in the real world, this had all taken place in just a few seconds. I could be flying around conference halls and meeting elephants for ‘years’!

And secondly: what if this doesn’t end when Hargreaves wakes up? Would I remain trapped in his mind?

I scanned the surrounding landscape: it was the Lake District alright, but the details were wrong, the mountains had the right ‘feel’, but they were incorrectly positioned, or they had the wrong shape. I turned to face north and stared at the most distinctive feature of this dream: in place of Skidaw, and rising massively into the sky, was the Matterhorn. The alpine giant dwarfed the surrounding hills.

Uh oh, I could guess what this meant. Abruptly averting my gaze I turned to Hargreaves and moved around to his south side.

‘I think we should be heading southwest – over there,’ said Hargreaves, idly examining a map, and pointing over my shoulder to a high collection of hills. Good, keep his concentration away from the north, I thought.

The group of hills to which Hargreaves indicated bore little resemblance to the real fells. Perhaps in an attempt at emulating the northern beast, these ones were bigger, more Tolkien-like, more knobbly. The impressive crag of Lingmell appeared to have an extra feature on the summit. Too distant to see clearly, I attempted to summon up a telescope and one promptly appeared before me. I was getting better at this, I thought, as I looked through the eyeglass towards a vision of black. The instrument had a coin slot and it demanded to be fed; despite repeated efforts, I was unable to summon up the required coin.

‘Hargreaves, give me that 20p you found earlier, will you?’

Hargreaves dug into his pocket and fished out a coin.

‘I want that back, mind!’ he said.

I fed the coin into the slot and studied the slopes of Lingmell. The crag exuded a raw brute strength; near-vertical buttresses stacked up, one upon another, giving its northern face a chaotic and impenetrable look. I aimed the telescope at the summit.

The castle from ‘Rupert Bear Country’ was also present here. A couple of thin towers adjoined its grey featureless walls and monochrome flags fluttered above their crenelated tops...

I caught a brief flash of light while studying one of those towers: it seemed to emanate from a human figure but the image remained too distant, even with the aid of this telescope. I willed some extra magnification and took a second look:

There *was* a figure on the roof. Leaning on one of the battlements, and holding to its eyes an outsized pair of binoculars, it stared back at me...

I looked down at the mouth.

Just a hint of a smile, a mocking smile. Then the mouth beamed a grin. The figure broke into a laugh and refracted blue light flashed over the binoculars’ huge lenses.

‘Jesus Christ, would you look at that!’ shouted Hargreaves.

I turned around. Hargreaves was staring up at the mighty Matterhorn and I stared with him, my eyes ascending to the upper reaches where wind-blasted snow clung to a wall of jet-black rock. The mountain was gigantic, it seemed to rise up into space.

We were *on* the Matterhorn, near the top, the wind howling about us with hurricane force. Hargreaves and I were roped together and clinging in terror to the vertical rock face. It turned to over-hang below us – clearly no way down from this!

I tried to change the dream, but could not.

I shouted down to Hargreaves: ‘We can’t get down! We must try to gain the summit!’ The wind ripped my words away and it seemed that Hargreaves was unable to hear.

‘I can’t move!’ he screamed.

‘There is a foothold! ...there! ...above your right knee!’

Hargreaves reached up in a desperate attempt to locate the new hold ...but where to place his other foot!? He grimaced and wavered for a second, and then fell off – taking

me with him.

We both fell screaming into the shadowy depths.

Hargreaves woke up.

I was flung from his mind and sent crashing back to my body, once again to be surrounded by an unchanging black void.

‘Ugh! Bugger it!’ I heard Hargreaves, the *awake* Hargreaves, say.

Exhausted, I gratefully descended into the bosom of sleep – I needed to have some real dreams.

He turned over and opened a sleep-encrusted eye, but the nearby clock-face remained stubbornly out of focus ... ten? ... ten thirty – the first lecture had already finished.

Bollocks.

Leaning up and rubbing his hair Alex noticed that Bridgett had left the flat. With a grimace, he recalled the events of the previous night: what a shambles – a wild goose chase. By the end of the night he had Bridgett screaming in one ear, and Hammer screaming in the other; and now he had a headache.

Bridgett had been upset about the drug chase around town; Hammer had been upset about the *pointless* drug chase around town – a wild drug chase. Inevitably Hammer had finally vented his frustration with a childish temper tantrum; but Bridgett, on the other hand, after succinctly saying her piece, just went to bed. She probably wasn't speaking now.

Alex remembered the early enthusiasm of the evening: Hammer had suggested, quite reasonably it had seemed, that diaketamine could be purchased or ordered from any pharmacy. But it soon emerged that 'uncontrolled' could also mean: 'unavailable'.

The first shop, the one over the road from his flat, set the pattern for the night. Hammer approached the white-coat behind the counter, and casually asked: 'Good evening, I wonder, do you have any diaketamine in store?'

The pharmacist just stared back at him blankly, before finally replying: 'You mean diazepam?'

This was the first setback, but more would follow. Alex and Hammer visited a further seven stores in the Deepdale district, and in every case the story was the same: none of the pharmacists stocked diaketamine. As evening turned towards night they decided to try one of the large pharmacies down town, but when they arrived at Fishergate, the big stores were all shut. That was when Hammer had his tantrum.

Alex returned to his flat and proceeded to get an earful from Bridgett: months of resentment and worry came pouring out, and by the end of the night he felt forced to admit that, perhaps, drugs had become his obsession. A deep but fretful sleep followed, one that even persisted through his 08:00 alarm call. Maybe Bridgett had switched off the alarm! No, she worried about his poor attendances.

He tried in vain to recall his troubled dreams, they had seemed so vivid a moment ago, but now only a surface veneer of nonsensical plot and fading emotion persisted. Soon even this would be lost. Good riddance.

So, with the first lecture missed.. he checked his timetable (even after six months, he still hadn't memorized it) ... yes, Thursday: a good day, the next lecture commenced at two-in-the-afternoon! Excellent. This would give him a chance to watch some daytime TV...

There was a knock at the front door.

Alex jumped at the sound and leapt out of bed; he threw on a dressing gown as he descended the stairs. Who could this be? He opened the door gingerly only to be blinded

by powerful sunshine.

‘Oh, sorry, Al, didn’t mean to get you out of bed!’

‘Hey, Cube, come in.’ Alex led Cube to the bedroom/lounge/kitchen.

‘Wow! Bohemia!’ shouted Cube. He always said this, or something similar, every time he visited Alex’s student hovel. Cube lived with his parents, somewhere in the unknown suburban fringes of Preston. To him, the sight of a stinking student flop always provoked a sense of wonder and awe.

‘Yeah, Bridgett forgot to wash the dishes,’ Alex climbed back into bed, ‘make us some tea, Cube?’

Cube dutifully obeyed; he approached the sink and stared at the accumulated, unwashed shit. He shook his head and let out a loud, deep laugh. ‘Bohemia, HAHA.’

Alex regarded his gangly visitor:

Back at the start of the course, he’d largely ignored Cube, finding him to be rather gauche and naïve – square. But first impressions etc... Cube turned out to have hidden depths, he was both remarkably shrewd and thoughtful, not to mention funny, and he had a liking for drugs which earned him points as well. But he did work too hard and he didn’t get laid enough, so could not truly be claimed as a fellow drop-out. No one could. All the other drop-outs had long since failed and dropped out.

‘In the cabinet, there, you’ll find some paracetamol, you couldn’t get me them, could you?’

‘You’re a lazy tosser, Stanton, get them yourself – I’m making the tea.’

Alex reluctantly emerged from his bed and searched for the needed analgesic. ‘How did the lecture go this morning?’ he absentmindedly enquired.

‘Boring, it was Cutthroat – he asked where you were. Jordan said you were dead, HAHA.’

‘Jordan’s a turd.’

Cube came over with a cup of tea. ‘I’ve got some past-papers here, statistical mechanics; this stuff is horrific.’ He reached into his carrier bag and handed the papers over to Alex, who studied them closely.

‘Have you got your statistical mechanics notes?’

Cube handed over a file and Alex flicked through it... all meaningless hieroglyphics...

All through his student ‘career’, Alex had skipped lectures, run up backlogs and generally pissed about, but when it came close to exam-time he would always stop partying and try to make sense of his course notes, (someone else’s photocopied notes). This strategy worked so well in the first year – when the work was easy, but by the second year it became more difficult. His first compulsory maths module exam, at the end of the autumn term, served as a rude awakening. During the ten-week course he’d excelled himself by failing to turn up to a single lecture or tutorial. The grapevine warned of trouble ahead: this maths was tough, most of the class was struggling to come to terms with it.

One week to go before the exam and time to glance at his photocopied notes: he couldn’t understand any of it.

He stopped going out, skipped lectures from other courses and crammed ten-weeks-worth of unforgiving mathematics into just a few days.

One day to go and it still wasn't understood.

But then he got it. It made complete sense. Like everything else, less than half a dozen 'big ideas' underpinned this maths, once you understood those – it all fell into place.

Out of a class of fourteen, only five passed at the first sitting. Alex was one, Cube was another.

But he'd been lucky and it would be the last time he felt able to slack on such a grand scale. The exams that followed in the spring and summer of the second year demanded more attention.

Well, a little more. Some people were just born to be bums.

'Have you finished your project yet?' asked Cube, breaking Alex from his nostalgic reflections.

'No,' he replied curtly. The project was another headache. 'Oh, by the way, what was that shit you told Bridgett... about Geoff? Something about him still being in a coma, but the doctors trying to talk to him, or something.'

'Yeah, that's absolutely right, man, it's freaky. They're calling his condition "Locked-in syndrome".'

'You what!?'

'They reckon Geoff's fully conscious, but he can't move – not even his eyes.'

Alex was truly appalled by this shocking news. 'That sounds horrendous! ...the worst thing imaginable. ...Why Geoff for fuck's sake!? I mean...'. He shook his head, unable to continue.

'Life's a bitch,' offered Cube.

'Life's fucking cruel, Cube. It ain't a bitch, it's just cruel.'

Cube nodded. 'Yes it is.'

'I'm going to visit Geoff tomorrow evening, with Bridgett; to be honest, I'm dreading it.' Alex shot Cube a guilty look.

'You've got to go, man, it's your duty,' saged the wise Cube.

'Yeah, you should come too, Cube – he's your mate as well.'

'Okay, sure, I'll tag along, why not?' No doubt Cube could think of hundreds of reasons 'why not', but, like Alex, he had a duty.

Five minutes of silence followed as Alex – vacantly flicking through Cube's file – brooded over Geoff's fate. As he felt his mood take another downward lurch, he pulled back and tried to direct his thoughts elsewhere.

Time for a chemical assist:

'Cube, do you want a joint? I've just scored some haze,' he said, trying to raise his tone...

'Err, that shit is too strong for me, you had some nice Afghani resin last time I was around?'

'Yes, I've still got that, it's over there, in that drawer, could you—'

'Yes, yes, you sit back, enjoy your tea. Here, let me straighten that pillow.'

'Fuck off!'

Cube released the pillow and glided over to examine the resin.

‘Hmm, yes, damn fine piece of resin, this. Shall I skin up?’

Cube loved to come across like this, as though he were some kind of druggy connoisseur. Alex recalled the previous summer:

Hammer had managed to obtain a plentiful supply of cheap acid from one-or-other of his many dodgy sources. Keen to unload it, he’d passed on some to Alex, at cost, for him to use or sell as he saw fit. At this point Cube had become interested in trying it for the first time, but he only agreed to drop a quarter tab. Alex encouraged him to try more, but Cube remained insistent, fearing advanced psychosis should he take it too far.

For at least a week after, he’d regaled all ’n’ sundry with tiresomely detailed descriptions of the acid’s ‘subtle’ effects.

The acid had been garbage – Alex knew that Cube’s quarter tab had provided little more than the placebo effect.

Five minutes later and Cube proudly inspected the misshapen reefer. When he lit up, the end flamed and the joint shrank to less than half of its original length.

‘You’re a real craftsman, Cube.’

Cube put the joint to his mouth, sucked in smoke, and went cross-eyed studying the burning tip. He inhaled and proceeded to pull a wide range of facial contortions; there eventually followed an explosive exhalation. If Cube got high, it might have been due to oxygen deprivation. He handed the joint to Alex, who took a long drag.

Cube considered the oncoming high. ‘Hmm, nice, a well-rounded, refreshing hit with just a hint of–’

‘Oak?’ offered Alex.

‘What?’

‘It’s cannabis, Cube, not a vintage wine!’

Cube began to give a flawed impersonation of a well-known TV wine expert, but it sounded ludicrous, prompting Alex to hurl his underwear at him. This just served to encourage Cube further: ‘Oohh!! I’m feeling all drugged up–’

From somewhere in the room, a phone began to ring and Cube abruptly shut up. Alex jumped out of bed and homed in on the sound which seemed to be emanating from his coat pocket.

‘Hello?’

‘Al?’ came the recognizable voice.

‘That Hammer?’

‘Got it in one.’

‘Hey, I’m sorry about–’

‘I’ve found some.’

‘What?’

‘You heard – diaketamine – I’ve tracked it down, It’ll be here at two!’

Alex was lost for words.

‘Hey! you still there?’

‘Yes, how did you..?’

‘Explanations later, I’m only getting enough for two hits. It’s expensive – £50 per

hit.'

'What!?'

'Get some cash, and be here at two, over and out.'

The line went dead.

'Who was that?'

'Hammer ... err ... look, I can't really talk about it ... err ... something's come up.'

Alex and Cube finished the joint in silence; half an hour later Cube departed the flat and started back to the university.

Alex searched for Bridgett's *Head* and reread the article on LIFE. He read it several times, making sure he didn't miss any details.

Music fades...

Burns: *Alright, wind your neck in, Higgs. Good morning ladies and gentlemen, it's just gone eleven, and it's Thursday, so that means it's time for... The Ribblehead Round Table!*

The Ribblehead Round Table theme music plays for twenty seconds.

The sound of laughter in the background...

Burns: *Today, lending their astute, and in Higgs's case, ancient, wisdom, we have, Steve, Greg, Higgs, myself, and our guest reviewer today is Wendy ... Good mornin' fellas – girl.*

All: *Hello.*

Burns: *Right! let's get on with it, the first record up is called: It Was A Tuesday When It Happened, by a band called: Learned Leonard.*

Higgs: *Stupid name.*

Learned Leonard plays for just over three minutes.

Burns: *Okay, let's kick off with Steve. What did you think, Steve?*

Steve: *Yeah, not bad, strong beat, should be a big hit at the dance clubs, but I don't think I'd download it or go out and buy it. It's too derivative, like everything these days, it's playing safe.*

Burns: *Greg?*

Greg: *Yes... got to agree with Stevie. I prefer my bands to take risks. I like to listen to someone folding the envelop.*

Steve: *That's pushing the envelop, Greg*

Greg: *Yes, that's what I meant.*

Wendy: *HA! HA! HA!*

Higgs: *God, I'm working with a bunch of chimpanzees. Someone should post your envelope, Greg!*

Wendy: *HA! HA! HAAAAA!!!*

Burns: *Okay, now, Wendy – calm down – what did–*

Steve: *Who are you calling a chimpanzee, you old–*

Burns: *Wendy, your opin–*

Wendy: *I DIDN'T LIKE IT!!*

Burns: *Whoa!! steady there, Wendy, you're coming through louder than clear.*

More laughter in the background and the beginnings of a scuffle...

Higgs: *Oy!! Get yer 'ands off me, you great oaf–*

Click...

'Agh, come on!' I "cried" – but to no effect.

With the radio off I became – for the first time since waking up – fully aware of my surroundings. They hadn't changed, nor had my circumstances: Back to the land of the conscious. And back in my box.

What should I do now? I wondered. Ten seconds had passed and already I was growing restless. I couldn't stand a whole day of this, I needed stimulation...

Hargreaves let out a series of violent coughs; they stopped as suddenly as they had begun. There had to be better stimulation than this...

I thought back to the strange ‘dreams’ of the previous night, recalling the details with perfect clarity: the great chandelier, Edward Trunk, the Matterhorn and so much more.

For some reason, I had retained all of my conscious powers whilst participant in Hargreaves’ dreams. That meant I could recognize absurdities for what they were – absurd. And I could recollect the separate elements, clearly, and in the right order. Also – and this is hard to put into words – I was fully *there*. I wondered how Hargreaves remembered these dreams. Did he remember them at all? The dreaming Hargreaves seemed incomplete, little more than a ghost, he’d been a slave to the circumstances of the dreams and to his deep-seated subconscious fears.

This is not to say, however, that I enjoyed a complete freedom myself: take the Matterhorn, for example. I had been drawn up its slopes, just like any other unthinking dreamer; as I clung to that rock, I genuinely feared for my life – the terror, all too real.

I recalled the grey castle. That element had turned up in at least two dreamscapes and perhaps the two banqueting-hall dreams had been set in its interior. The details shifted from dream to dream, however: the two halls were clearly different, and the two exterior views weren’t exactly matched either. Maybe that was simply the nature of dreams. It probably explained why the Lake District was wrong in so many details; only the essence of the place was reproduced accurately.

Now what did Edward Trunk signify, if anything? Probably nothing at all, but then I suddenly made a connection! Trunk had run off towards the castle. Of course, the Elephant & Castle! The radio DJ – *Burns* had mentioned that yesterday, it was the name of a pub! Wow! The DJ had only mentioned it once and it had made no real impact at the time and yet it had led to all this dream paraphernalia! I guess if it was on the radio then either myself or Hargreaves had been the driver of all that. God, how pointless; why does the brain bother to do this?

And what of the mocking figure on the roof? Wasn’t that the woman from the ‘Great Hall’? It seemed so: although distant, I thought I recognized her patronizing smile.

‘Madam’ had popped up in several of the dream sequences and she even uttered my name on a couple of occasions. Had she been my creation? Maybe I knew her in real life – one of my mother’s friends perhaps. I tried, but failed to make a positive ID. I considered this more thoroughly and concluded that knowledge of my name signified little. Edward Trunk knew my name – he’d rhymed it – and I felt sure I’d never met *him* in real life.

My mood, for the first time since before the coma, began to lighten. I may be confined during the day, ...but at night, in theory, anything could happen! I made the decision to ‘guest’ in someone else’s dream this coming night. But to make the most of the experience I needed to gain more control, I needed to develop more effective techniques for holding the dreams together. No more behaving like a “dog on a leash”!

I heard the sound of heavy nasal breathing. Clinician Adenoids hovered nearby.

‘Good morning, Geoff, did we sleep well?’

Red.

‘Good! Good, that’s excellent.’

...*Red.*

‘Are you in any discomfort, Geoff?’

I formed a mental image of the Matterhorn, but not the picture-postcard image of

yesterday; I felt a tingle of emotion. Judging from the silence, my trace wasn't recognizable as "no".

'I'm sorry, Geoff, you weren't very clear on that one, do you feel a.n.y
d.i.s.c.o.m.f.o.r.t?'

I was looking forward to having some fun tonight, but before that I would have to endure hours of tiresome drudgery.

Cold feet...

Alex paced the room. He'd repeatedly studied the article on LIFE but nothing new had emerged since the first reading. This drug wouldn't give him any unmanageable hallucinations – that was good. It wouldn't adversely affect his mood – that was good. It only lasted an hour – that was good.

Good, good and good.

On the other hand:

Even during the toughest run-in with LSD it still remained the same *you* down there. Would he still be Alex Stanton as he wandered about in his wordless world? He might do something rash, like get run over, or fall off a building, or worse..., he might abuse someone! The *Head* article had touched on this aspect, but only briefly. If the facts were correct he'd still have the same instincts as before – he wasn't going to turn into a wild animal.

Despite all his rereading and his constant pacing, the essence of what lay ahead remained stubbornly beyond his grasp. Part of him wanted to put the whole thing off, or even forget about it altogether, but the other half, the one that basked in the adrenaline rush of fear, seemed keen to leap into the unknown.

Alex's cold feet continued to pace the room as his radio quietly droned away in the background:

Newsreader: *Other news now. Carlisle: Local farmers barracked Agriculture Minister, Michael Lane, today as he attended an emergency conference on sheep-worrying. The minister appeared visibly shaken by the ferocity of the attacks, but he later confronted the farmers' charges of incompetence head on: 'Yes, the government takes the issue of sheep worrying very seriously, and yes, I myself am greatly worried by it. But it's not just a case of throwing money at the problem, we have to get at the root cause: what is it that's actually worrying our sheep?'*

A quick look at sport now: Next Sunday's Argentinean Grand Prix has been thrown into—

Alex switched off the radio, picked up his keys and departed for Hammer's.

The first glimpse of Hammer's street and a sudden flapping of stomach-butterflies. It was like seeing an exam room for the first time: he'd rushed his studies and something might have been missed – he could be in for a nasty shock.

Get a grip!

But that unshakeable rumble of doubt endured.

He knocked on Hammer's door and the nerves affected a temporary lull. The first action, whether it be switching on your calculator or entering the lion's den, always helped shove fear to one side.

Footsteps!

The nerves came rushing back – worse than ever.

The door opened.

In front of him stood Maxim Lorus, Hammer's oft-absent housemate. Alex had been a regular visitor to Hammer's for well over eighteen months and in all that time he'd only met Lorus perhaps three or four times.

Maxim Lorus was about forty; his tall and thin frame gave an impression of sinewy muscular strength: there were no indications of surplus fat – no beer-gut you normally associated with forty-year-old men. Lorus' head was topped with a thick close-crop of iron-grey hair. His eyes, also grey, shed no light onto the workings of his impenetrable mind. His mouth, as always, remained unsmiling.

'Hello, Alex, come in.' Lorus held open the door and indicated the lounge. Alex's nerves were now of the dentist's-waiting-room variety.

He stepped into the house.

The lounge was full of student druggies. What had that arsehole Hammer done!? This was supposed to be a private thing, a low-key and exploratory investigation into the effects of a new psychedelic – if that's what it was. Trust Hammer to turn this into a jamboree!

The Man sat at the main table, holding court, spouting some old shit to a pair of fuckwit pot-heads. 'Hi, Al, take a seat, if there is one.' There wasn't. 'Take a floor, HA, HA.' Hammer appeared stoned.

'Can I get you a coffee, Alex?' asked Lorus.

A hush descended as the druggies awaited Alex's reply:

'Yes, thanks, err, milk, no sugar please.' He'd just exchanged more words with Lorus than on all previous occasions combined.

Along with the assorted pot-heads, speed-freaks, fuck-ups and junkies, the room also contained Hammer's blonde girlfriend. She sat sullenly in the corner, clearly bored.

Alex's nerves evaporated and turned to disappointment; the experiment with diaketamine would be invalidated by this intrusive publicity; it would be postponed. He took a section of floor next to the squatting figure of Angle, a pony-tailed Media Studies student who acknowledged him with a military salute before returning to the grave business of rolling a joint.

'How's it going, Stant?' Angle's affected, rising-terminal accent incorporated erroneous elements of San Francisco and Melbourne into its basic Ludlow twang.

'Going fine, man,' replied Alex, as Angle handed him the burning joint.

'Whoa, hold it,' said Hammer, suddenly sober, 'Al has to stay straight, he's got a hepatitis B jab later – right, Al?'

'Yeah, right, thanks for the reminder, Hammer.' Alex took the joint and passed it on, unsmoked, to the next druggy.

'Hepatitis B? You use needles, then?' asked Angle, surprised and intrigued.

'No, never used needles, this is just a routine jab. It's offered, free of charge, to any student who wants it,' Alex lied. It might well be true, though, for all he knew. He considered the implications of this little exchange: these guys didn't know about the diaketamine – and Hammer wasn't quite as daft as he seemed.

Lorus came back with his coffee.

'I never got given a coffee,' complained Dean, situated to Angle's right.

'You never asked,' replied Hammer.

Alex glanced up at Hammer and received a quick wink in return. Hammer had been acting stoned for the druggy crowd, but he seemed straight now.

The unbearable nervous tension returned as he drank his coffee and chatted with the other patrons.

'You still doing that physics degree?' asked a student called Elliot, 'I was talking to Jordan, he said you'd dropped out.'

'That's an improvement on "dead"! Jordan's full of shit, I've not dropped out, I'm still hanging in there, and I'll get my degree., pay no attention to Jordan.' Alex bristled as he thought of Jordan spreading malicious rumours to anyone who would listen.

'Yeah, I didn't believe him,' replied Elliot, helpfully.

'What about you—'

'Alex.' It was Lorus. 'I've got some information on the hepatitis jab, there are some side effects of which you should be made aware.'

All of this artifice troubled Alex's state of mind, so did Lorus's obvious interest.

Hammer piped up. 'Yes, it's in the second spare bedroom, Maxim., actually it's buried under a load of crap, I'll show you. Excuse us, chaps. Come on, Al.'

Alex followed Hammer as he headed for the stairs, and Lorus manoeuvred silently to the rear. When they arrived at the second bedroom Hammer closed the door and nodded to Lorus. The enigmatic forty-something reached into his pocket and retrieved a black leather wallet; from within one of its many compartments emerged a small packet of white crystalline powder. Alex felt sick.

Lorus held up the transparent packet. 'Diaketamine – pure. Do you know what this drug does?'

'Yeah, it, err, shuts down the, err, talky part of the brain.' Alex winced at his own banal description.

'That is essentially correct,' said Lorus after a short pause, 'it shuts down activity in several key areas of the left temporal lobe; you will have no concept of language. After you take this you will inhabit a radically new world.'

Alex now felt faint as well as sick and he slumped down onto a nearby packing case. Lorus sat next to him while Hammer looked on – transfixed.

Lorus continued: 'Don't worry about this, Alex, you'll be in complete control. The only time to be... wary, is right at the very start. As it kicks in, you'll experience a kind of... seizure.'

'What!!' The *Head* had said nothing about that!

'It's... unsettling, but it quickly passes. After that—'

'I've changed my mind,' began Alex, 'this stuff is too risky. I'll just stick to—'

'There are no risks, Alex, none at all, it is completely safe, and furthermore, this stuff is fucking dynamite! the greatest drug in the world!' Lorus held a fearsome glint in his eyes, very disturbing.

For the first time, Hammer cut in: 'Look, I'll have to go back downstairs in a moment. Al, you got the cash?'

Alex was tempted to say he'd forgotten the money; he regarded Hammer and then Lorus, but the gatekeepers of Dis just blandly stared back. He reached into his jacket

pocket and handed over a bundle of cash. ‘One hundred, I’ll take the two scores.’

Hammer took the money, and Lorus extended a bony arm.

He gave Alex the diaketamine.

‘Are you going to do it now?’ asked Hammer, as the three men walked back down the stairs.

‘Yeah, fuck it, after Maxim’s sales pitch, I can’t ... there’s no going back now, grasp the nettle, etc.’

‘Yeah, by both horns,’ added Hammer. ‘Go to Deepdale Enclosure, Maxim will go with you, just in case. He knows what to do if you—’

‘If I *what!*?’ demanded Alex.

‘I’ll just see you on your way, Alex – provide you with some kind of continuity as you make the transition,’ advised the paternal Lorus.

Hammer was keen to close this conversation and return to the others. ‘When you’re up and running, Maxim will return here—’ It all sounded so well organized, thought Alex. ‘—head for the union bar, I’ll see you there about three-thirty or four. You got your phone?’ Alex nodded. ‘Good. You’ll be fine, but if you do go *AWOL*, we’ll get to you asap... and Alex..?’

‘Yes?’

‘Good luck!’

Hammer returned to the lounge leaving Alex alone with Lorus.

As the two men walked briskly to the nearby park Alex found himself deep in thought: What defined his conscious mind? Was it the omnipresent inner voice? – *The English Language Speaker?* – that entity or ‘self’ that planned ahead and defined events and articulated emotions? What would it be like when that was gone? Would anything be left? It wasn’t too late to call off this madness. Then again, maybe it was: Alex’s curiosity had finally won the battle against his fear.

In less than five minutes the small triangular park of Deepdale Enclosure came into view; its early spring trees remained bare of foliage but the countless buds served notice of impending change. The two men sat down at one of the park benches – and waited.

Apart from one elderly woman and her small highland terrier, the park remained deserted. The two portly figures ambled slowly up the central path towards the sitting men, seemingly taking a lifetime to arrive.

The woman moved by, but then halted as her terrier discovered an interesting smell at the base of a tree trunk. She waited patiently and the seconds ticked by, but the dog remained rooted to the spot while it steadily decoded the various dog-pee aromas. The woman began to edge away, encouraging the dog to follow with a call of its name, but the dog stuck fast. The stubborn little bastard.

In frustration, Alex took his eyes off the dog and peered up through the overhanging branches to the mainly cloudless sky above. *The English Language Speaker* made its final pleas: “Call it off!! This is madness!!”

‘Come on, Barry!’ The dog finally trotted after the old woman, happily oblivious to the stress it was causing. A minute later, the park was empty.

Alex searched his pocket and removed an old train ticket. He folded it in half, and then opened it up again. Next, he took the packet of diaketamine and sprinkled half of

the contents into the fold of the ticket. Lorus handed him a rolled up twenty and Alex put it to his nose. At this point he realized that he needed an extra hand. Lorus took the powdered ticket while Alex blocked a nostril and shoved the banknote into the powder. Closing his eyes, he violently snorted the powder.

It all disappeared in one go.

At last, done.

Let there be light.

Everything that made up Alex Stanton's mind became inundated by blinding white light. Vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch; all memories, all emotions, all *thoughts*. Everything translated into the purest brilliance. Everything reduced to empty whiteness.

The white-light phase ends and the residue of an earlier anxiety, now no longer tethered to meaning, floats away on gentle currents of unconscious thought. The tall, thin man stands up, and walks away.

Boisterous children play in an adjacent shadowed street of terraced houses. One of them taunts a small and angry companion; he shouts to him, brandishing a yellow ball above his head. The smaller boy charges forward but fails to catch his more agile tormentor. But he won't give up the chase, that treasured ball must be retrieved.

Above the children, above the trees and the street: the radiant sky. At last it can be truly appreciated.

Start walking.

The high pedestrian bridge crosses a busy ring-road and the traffic below produces a distinctive and uniform roar. Cars rush by. Petrol fumes hang in the air. A distant horizon of hills. Sharp and full of colour. Much closer than usual. Almost within reach..

Ignore them. Move on..

A gentle slope downhill leading to a cluster of large buildings. A quick march down and almost there, but ... a sudden need. Time to stop, and identify that need..

The first drag is exhaled and smoke billows out towards the centre of the road. A man and a woman are chatting on the opposite side. The woman is young, the man a bit older. They seem to be absorbed in their conversation.

Focus on the woman.

She is listening intently to the man's animated talk and frequently breaks into laughter, taking her cues from the man's subtle and non-subtle mannerisms, but she has her own body language, and it speaks mainly through her hands. They protect her fine blonde hair from the displacing effects of imperceptible zephyrs. It comes her turn to talk, and she touches the man on his arm, light touches, never lingering.

Another drag, and attention turns towards the man.

He is tall and well-built. He has a ginger beard. When he listens to the woman he puts both hands in his trouser pockets, but he leaves the thumbs outside, in plain view – like groinal medallions. He listens and maintains a blinking eye contact with the woman..

The quiet road contains no other pedestrians and only slow moving, intermittent, traffic. The woman and man abruptly stop their conversation and stare, the woman's face closing down to become an unfriendly mask. She puts her hands to her hips and looks across to the man. The man speaks. It sounds challenging. His hands come out of his pockets and fold up in front of his barrel chest.

A final drag and the stub drops to the ground. Time to continue: the gawping couple are no longer interesting, no longer unaffected.

The view from the top of a car park ramp. There it is, un-picturesque, the place of study. The reason for being here in this town.

But this is a bad place, a place of pestilence. Simply standing here, in plain view, attends risks: there lurk dangerous people here, people that must be avoided.

The various offices and classrooms are very clearly laid out and people are visible within. And they have eyes, these people...

Run!!

Enter that pub.

A couple of men play pool; various people, some familiar, sit hunched at the numerous tables. A large man moves into plain view on the other side of the bar.

Indicate one of the pumps...

The barman's expression is blank – he utters something.

Indicate one of the pumps...smile...

The barman suddenly smirks and starts pouring the drink. It duly arrives, but the barman is still being difficult...

Give him something. Look in your pocket...

The barman snatches the money and the drink is now available.

The two men are playing pool in a smaller alcove. One of these men has a recognized face, he holds a hand up and saunters over, brandishing his pool cue like a sword. Smiling

No threat.

The man starts to 'speak'.

He looks on expectantly, an open toothy smile stapled to a sharp and irregular face.

Do as he does. Offer him some of those good-natured grunts.

A stunned reaction. A sudden quiet.

The recognized man, whose ugly face is now only inches away, suddenly bursts out laughing; mocking, derisive. Nearby drinkers – three young women – they, too, look and laugh. The recognized man still hovers close, the cue, even closer.

Threatening now!

The cue is snatched and broken in two over a knee, a pint-glass goes crashing to the ground. Time to deal with that dumbstruck recognized man...

The barman, like a bull, comes charging into the pool room; an arm is grabbed and then a neck. A second man follows and grips the flailing free arm. Struggle, but no good, they are too strong and too determined. Out into the street and onto the pavement, the broken pool cue follows. The barman looks ready to come next, he makes some threatening shouts, and hovers menacingly for a moment, but then disappears back into

the pub.

Fury!

But second thoughts: outnumbered. Anger subsides.

Move on...

Sitting down near the window. Drinking. Very relaxed.

A group of six women and one man cluster around a small table, studying a set of open files. This assemblage maintains a quiet and sober demeanour. Losing interest...

A heavy man with dark hair sits at this table. Sweaty black t-shirt. Mumbles something. A greeting?

Nod, but ignore him.

He seems happy enough. No more grunting.

Another group: three men and one woman. They engage in a battle of wills. The smiles and eyes give off conflicting signals. The woman and two of the men oppose the remaining man. The solitary man remains the most relaxed and comfortable of the four, outwardly and inwardly.

The three aggressors are failing to hit their target. The solitary man senses the strength of his defensive position...

Ah, but a sudden change! The solitary man has made a mistake. The other three shriek and holler loudly. They have won...

A hard pat on the back. Two companions. They are offered a friendly wave and a jiggle of the glass. The taller man is already on his way to the bar.

The other sits down and begins to stare.

He knows what you know.

But what do you know?

The other friend comes back: four glasses on the table; it seems the sweaty black t-shirt is deemed worthy of a drink...

Music begins to play; eyes are forced to close...

Her astonishing voice...

The unknown female artist sang LIFE's swansong. Alex had been gone for just over one hour and his return was now overdue. The record finished and he opened his eyes. He sipped his second pint and studied the studious man and his interactions with the six women. There was some interesting interplay here...

The transition period took no more than twenty seconds. It was as though Alex's brain had finally managed to tune into the language band. Steadily, from 'static', there emerged words: fragments at first, but soon whole sentences:

'What about this stuff on EU voting procedures? – it goes on for pages!'

'I don't think we need that – hope not, anyway.'

The English Language Speaker was back, and, like a tyrant, it forced all conscious thoughts to relay through it. He now heard the words, but the day's events were still being taken for granted. Then, all at once, it dawned on him. He suddenly jumped up, disturbing the table and knocking over glasses. He turned and laughed hysterically at a

shocked and speechless Hammer.

Not surprisingly this sudden display startled his drinking companions; Keith made his excuses and lumbered off while Cube and Hammer helped the now-trembling Alex from his seat. Together the three of them left the union bar.

Outside, in the cool afternoon air, Alex spoke for the first time:

‘I’m okay, I’m okay – let go, Cube.’

‘You’re back with us!’ said Hammer.

‘Yeah, sorry about that scene in there, I s’pose it came as a bit of a shock, huh?’

‘Yeah, I almost shitted my pants: you seemed to be doing fine – away somewhere in your own little world – and then vroom! you really let rip, didn’t you?’ Hammer’s rather simple view of Alex’s outburst helped to break the ice. Everyone laughed.

‘Hey, I’m starving,’ said Alex, ‘let’s go get a burger.’

Alex and the others dropped into a nearby burger bar, ordered their food and sat down at one of the tables. But then Cube suddenly decided he needed some onion rings, and so he returned to the counter.

‘What does Cube know?’ asked Alex.

‘I bumped into him on my way over, I told him everything.’ Hammer shot him a guilty look. ‘Hey! I thought Cube might be useful, you know? If you started freaking out, or something!’

Alex nodded, he had become distracted by his throbbing right knee.

‘So, ... *what – was – it – like?*’ asked Hammer, wide-eyed with anticipation.

Cube rejoined the table and Alex began recounting the various happenings: he described his observations from the bridge and of the chatting couple; when he came to the events in the pub, *The Ship*, the others became fascinated. Strange, this seemed the least interesting aspect of the whole trip. Getting across the underlying vibe of the experience was tricky. He couldn’t even fully grasp it himself. But, as *Head* magazine had reported, it was, in essence, about *the moment*. A subtle point that was clearly lost on both Cube and Hammer.

‘Who was this geezer with the “recognized face”,’ laughed Cube, as he crammed more burger into a fully crammed mouth.

Alex put a name to the face. ‘Jimmy Sutcliff, bloke on Geoff’s course.’

‘Sutcliff? The guy’s a dork, you’ve painted a picture of some great threatening devil!’

Cube had a point. In a social situation, one that demanded the speaking of words, LIFE’s effect could cause no end of trouble. *The Ship* fiasco had clearly demonstrated the risks: in the space of just two minutes he’d smashed a pool cue, threatened an innocent patron and been literally hurled out of the pub. Next time it would be useful to bring along a minder, a ‘sober-sitter’ – Cube himself, would be ideal.

Hammer spoke up: ‘The pool cues in *The Ship* are four-foot long and weigh a tonne, how could you smash one over your knee?’ Another good point.

‘My knee is killing me now.’

‘What about when you were tripping?’ asked Cube.

Alex considered the question, ‘I don’t recall any pain, but diaketamine was first developed as a painkiller, a stimulant painkiller.’

When they'd finished their meals Alex checked his watch: coming up to five. If he departed for home now, he could get back in time to watch *Neighbours*. He would bring Bridgett a burger, as a treat – a peace offering.

Alex left his friends and journeyed back to his flat in Deepdale, a deepening chill exposing the poor credentials of this early-spring sunny spell. After about twenty minutes the busy street of Deepdale Road, with its typical tail-backs of evening commuter traffic, came into view.

Gil was washing his paws and sitting on the front wall of his house; the cat suddenly looked up as Alex slipped between the stationary cars and crossed the road.

'Hello, Gil, how are you doing?'

Alex searched his pocket for a peanut but then decided to treat the cat to something better. He opened the Styrofoam burger-box and attempted to remove a portion of burger but Gil quickly snatched it all and ran off.

'Hey, come here you bloody thief!' But Gil and the burger were gone.

On entering his empty flat Alex promptly spied Cube's file on statistical mechanics; retrieving it, he began to read the first few pages: mathematical treatments of Paul Dirac's quantum theory... He checked his watch: 'Time for Neighbours.'

The file was discarded.

Alex,

Yes? ... who is that?

You are sad about Geoff.

...Yes!

He is going to need your help, Alex.

I want to help him!!

And you can, Alex, you can be a great help. But first, you must come to me, you don't have to be alone any more, Alex.

Good!

Come and be with me, Alex.

Yes! ... Where are you?

Reach out, Alex, can you feel me? can you feel me?

Yes, I can see you now!

Come to me, Alex.

Okay, I'm coming now.

Alex switched off the TV and stared despondently at the floor. This day had been such an exhilarating trip: so uplifting and so new! ...but ultimately, so *worthless*. A vague but sweeping depression was taking hold. He began to weep, unsure why.

Intermission

Interstellar Text Message:

Fm: ~~@##@**@@^^.<>.<>@~##”~.?~~

To: Professor Gerald Osbourne.

C/O Leeds University, UK, Earth, Sol, Orion Spur, Western Arm.

Dear Gerry,

Sorry about the delay in getting back to you, it's been *mental* this end! I've just returned from the conference at Pleiades. One of the topics of discussion was Earth, incidentally. I've got the information you asked for, it's taken from an old xenozoology report, I'll send that through now:

Origins Of The Human Being.

Approximately two-hundred-thousand years ago, the last of the great hominids evolved on Planet Earth.

Homo Sapiens Sapiens (Cro-Magnon, early human) first appeared at the southern equatorial fringes of the great African Rift Valley. It soon spread throughout the African continent and subsequently crossed into Europe and Asia. On entering Europe, it encountered Earth's other advanced hominid: Neanderthal.

Cro-Magnon, few in number and detested by Neanderthal, was hunted down and almost pushed to extinction on that continent.

Then something inexplicable occurred:

European Cro-Magnon switched *off* its communication device: a transmitter/receiver unit located in the thalamus region of the brain. It was an audacious move. The other global populations soon followed.

The loss of conscious telepathy precipitated changes in Cro-Magnon. It was forced to develop more advanced forms of spoken and written language and evolve a form of self-aware thought, unique unto itself. With these developments it became possible to propagate new ideas quickly, and to articulate more abstract notions. Cro-Magnon, now *modern human*, developed better and deadlier weapons, and it perfected the art of deception.

To the other hominids, the human had become a shadowy and fearsome adversary and invincible in battle.

Eventually the human stood alone as the sole hominid species on Earth; and alone as the sole non-telepathic intelligence in the galaxy.

###

Well, there you have it, Gerry. Like I said, it's old stuff. I hope it helps, anyway. The

subject matter links nicely onto my next point:

As I said before, I've just come back from a major conference. For a while now, there have been some strange developments taking place on *Good Ol' Earth*. You humans are at it again! just when we think we finally understand you guys, you suddenly send down a curveball. Your problem is that you've evolved too damned fast! – I don't mean that personally, Gerry.

You may or may not have heard of the new drug, DK61-12 – its full name is thio-dia-arylcylohexylamine, but it's more familiarly known as diaketamine. Well, this drug presents some rather strange properties. Firstly, it shuts down the language centre of the human brain. Secondly, it triggers the permanent activation of the thalamic antenna! (This second fact is known by only a handful of humans). Now, given your present nature, the sudden re-emergence of telepathy – after all this time – would be disastrous.

We really thought you'd done it this time, but, once again, we underestimated you. It seems that the thalami, on discovering the antennae, withhold this information from the conscious mind. Why are they doing this? – that's a complete mystery; it goes against their instinct – which is to relay information to the various parts of the brain. The thalamic "brains" are communicating with each other, behind the backs, as it were, of the cerebral cortex. No conscious telepathy is taking place.

Don't take a sigh of relief, Gerry – there's more:

The thalamus is not a complete brain, it is simply a component part of the brain. When it begins communications, as far as we can tell, it quickly merges its own identity with those of the others. Now, the only reason this is happening is because the conscious mind is not along for the ride, if it were, its sense of self would prevent any merging of awareness.

So, the newly telepathic thalamus effectively becomes part of a larger network. This – if it has a mind of its own – lies independent of the hosts' consciousness. The implications are worrying, not just for you, but for us, too. Over twenty thousand individuals have taken diaketamine since it was first discovered ten years ago. Twenty thousand thalamic brains are submerged into one identity. If they truly have formed an independent mind, the resulting agency could have enormous mental powers – and it would be quite unique in our galaxy. I reiterate, we don't know for certain that such an entity exists. If it does, it's not talking to us, and we have tried to communicate.

But we *are* finding indirect signs: There appears to be a growing coherence at large within humanity's subconscious – and not just within that of the diaketamine-taking thalamic hosts – but *all* humans! Whatever is going on, the answer, if there really is one, lies within your dreams...

Humans! You certainly keep us on our toes, well, you would – if we had toes.

One last thing, Gerry, just to be on the safe side, don't mess with diaketamine.

So long, Gerry, keep in touch.

Yours

~~@##@**@@^<.<>@~##"~. '~~

PS. I'm going to be busy for the next couple of months, there are more conferences planned at Pleiades, and I have to visit the galactic centre to witness the explosive death of a super-giant star; and then I'll be tied up in Mexico for a while – conducting more routine abductions. But I hope to be in Leeds in July – Catch you then.

Ms Ames: *The problems we face in developing effective AI are manifold. The main one today, however, is brought about by our humble and constraining technology. It is, in theory, possible to connect together a few thousand microprocessors and, in-so-doing, model a crude neural network – but this would be a very simple structure compared to the human brain. The cerebral cortex alone, for example, contains over twenty billion neurons, and some of these connect to thousands of others. Our artificial device wouldn't even match the complexity of the insect brain.*

Suppose, for a moment, that the technological constraints were lifted, imagine that we had the ability to construct, from scratch, something as complex as the human brain. Then suppose we connected this up to a sensory unit, thus enabling 'the brain' to 'see' the outside world. Would this new brain become conscious? – probably not. What we lack is the understanding of the link between this highly evolved structure and the appearance of consciousness.

Take, for example, your idea of 'self' – the fundamental you – where is that to be found? Modern science can only say that the question is flawed. There is no seat of–

A hospital bleeper abruptly woke me up.

Amazing! ... Ms Ames' lecture was just a dream, already the details were beginning to fade. This had been a proper dream: a good, old-fashioned, take-it-all-for-granted dream. I wondered how I could ever have taken this for granted.

Firstly: the subject matter: brain science – not part of the Business Administration curriculum.

Secondly: I didn't have a lecturer called Ms Ames.

Thirdly: the lecture had taken place in Ms Ames' bedroom; she'd conducted it wearing nothing but a one-piece silver swimsuit – and all the time I just sat there, taking notes!

If only real lectures were like this:

'Hi, Steve, what do we have this morning?'

'Hi, Geoff, At ten we've got Saunders, in G16. He'll be continuing that stuff on economies of scale. Then, up at eleven, we've got Ms Ames, in her bedroom; she'll be talking about the brain.'

'Will she be naked?'

'Err, let me see... no, she'll be wearing a silver swimsuit.'

'Okay, now about these economies of scale...'

The bleeper had been useful, without it I might have remained asleep all night.

Now fully awake I began to plan for the night ahead. If Hargreaves remained the only 'dreamer' available, I'd use him again, but this time – to control the dreams more effectively – I'd use a new technique. I'd 'call up' a laptop computer, and make that do all the work. All I had to do was believe that it would work. Hopefully this would allow me to alter the dreams precisely and dispense with the need to constantly 'will' things to

happen. The problem with ‘willing’ was that the harder you tried, the poorer the results became.

I pondered this and many other problems before an ominous realization dawned: I had to get out of my body first! How the hell would I do that? I waited, and tried to clear my head of thought-clutter. The air-conditioning hummed away in the background, and, off to the right, Hargreaves coughed. I continued to wait, but nothing happened; the minutes ticked by as I remained dimensionless in my private black box. It occurred to me that yesterday’s activity might have been a freak – a one-off. Astral projection, after all, wasn’t exactly an every-day occurrence! I waited some more but still nothing happened.

I focused on the air-conditioning. That was it! The rattling, spluttering AC provided some sort of fix in space. Last night it had failed, but what were the chances of that happening again tonight? I continued to listen to the hated air-conditioning for at least another half hour before my mind began to drift. Sleep beckoned.

I became lost in the grey twilight, drawn back to slumber by the enticing image of Ms Ames. But then a sudden click followed by a death-rattle snapped me back to full waking alertness. The air-conditioning had fallen silent!

At last – nothing but nothingness.

For a few seconds, nothing persisted, but then, slowly at first, I began to ‘move’. The spinning returned and along with it came that nauseating dimensional inconsistency. The sensations grew worse and worse, and, like the previous night, they became hard to bear. I reached the point at which I no longer cared about the dreams – I just wanted this whirling dervish to STOP!

It stopped.

I was out.

As before, I found myself floating, face up, close to the ceiling. I turned to look at the ward and observed the same cluttered scene as before: nothing had changed, save for one important detail: Hargreaves was *awake*; the old bugger obviously couldn’t sleep. He clutched a small torch in his right hand and in his left perched a book. I moved in to take a closer look.

Hargreaves studied something called: *Public Speaking: The Art Made Simple*. This guy had a one-tracked mind! I moved in closer still, and noticed his aura. I could see no point in making contact with it: either nothing would happen, or worse, I might become trapped in his conscious mind.

I pulled back.

This presented me with a dilemma: if I wanted to ‘dream’ I’d have to leave the ward; but would I be able to do that? Supposing the link to my body ‘broke’? I’d become ... a ghost!

I couldn’t see any point in returning to my body – not until the air-conditioning was repaired – so I started gently gliding away.

I moved effortlessly through the wall and broke out into a well-lit corridor. At one end, a nurse sat at a small desk: she looked tired, on the verge of falling asleep. In the other direction, the corridor led to a set of lifts. I drifted back and forth, but found no other sign of life. I decided to move up to the next floor.

My astral form passed through the ceiling/floor and into another ward, larger than

mine, and full of sleeping patients. The ‘body’ nearest to me radiated a large and strong aura – it extended out by at least a foot, but, unlike Hargreaves’s, this one glowed with a crimson light; it also appeared to contain several black spokes, possibly areas of missing aura.

Fortune favours the bold, I said to myself, as I charged in.

I found myself in a small living room, sitting on a lumpy sofa; on a nearby chair sat the patient – a young woman. She smoked a cigarette and gave me a startled look.

The room smelled of spilt beer, spilt fag-ash and cat urine. I smiled at my host and summoned up the laptop.

Remove household odours.

<return>

Fresh air. Great! This really did work! I smiled again at the woman, but she just returned an expression of angry contempt. What had I done? Maybe she resented the way I’d just ‘popped in’. More likely, her subconscious had quickly built up an elaborate plot to explain my sudden appearance.

Okay... now, how to play this..?

The woman let out an ear-piercing scream.

Something had dropped onto my back. I turned to look over my shoulder and saw what, at first, resembled a branch – but it twitched. I looked over at my other shoulder and saw another twitching ‘branch’. I jumped up and attempted to remove the ‘thing’ that clung to my back. Gaining purchase on something, I yanked hard, and it broke free; I brought it around into clear view and the woman let out another blood-curdling scream.

Held securely in my grip: a mass of writhing legs; they belonged to a plate-sized, fawn-brown, spider. Disgusted, I instinctively threw the spider against the opposite wall: it landed with a thud, but held its grip. Remaining at the same height – roughly eyelevel – the spider began to run around the four walls of the room. It was fast – the legs, a blur of speed.

My laptop still sat on the sofa. I reached down to retrieve it and felt the spider land, once again, on my back. I remained calm as the monstrosity tried to climb inside my shirt.

I typed:

Remove spider.

<return>

I gave out a sigh of relief – the spider was gone; but within seconds the woman let out another loud scream and the bastard was back! Again, it dropped onto my back! For a second time I typed in the command, and the spider promptly vanished, but without much delay, it returned.

I grabbed the spider and plucked it off my back. Feeling nauseous at the sight of its gyrating legs, I clutched it in my hand and approached the screaming woman.

‘Stop dreaming of spiders!!!’ I shouted into her contorted face. No good, the woman just closed her eyes and screamed and screamed. What should I do with this damned thing!? – I hated spiders as much as I hated this arachnophobic woman!! Finally, I could stand the wriggling no longer, and in frustration I hurled it at the woman.

It bounced off her head like a rubber ball and disappeared out of sight.

I looked to where it had fallen, but it was not to be seen. I studied the walls, the floor and the ceiling: still no sign of it. I expected it to reappear on my back, but it didn't. As I tentatively examined a corner of the room, the woman screamed again.

Rising from her chair and slowly backing away, the woman's wretched eyes focused on the new arrival. It stood on a table, by the window – another spider: black, very hairy, the size of a German Shepherd. Massive spring-loaded legs held the bulbous body above the surface of the table; the beast looked strong and fast, capable of moving in the blink of an eye; but the spider remained completely stationary – watching us.

So still, in fact, that for a moment I thought it might be dead. No such luck. As if reading my thoughts, the spider began to tap one of its giant front legs against the tabletop.

Out of the corner of my eye I could just see the laptop, but if I reached for it the spider would surely strike. The woman came over and took a firm hold of my arm; thankfully, she'd stopped screaming, maybe if she remained calm, the spider would go away.

'This is all a dream,' I said, in a murmur, not wishing to let the spider overhear, 'stay calm – it can't hurt us.'

'Yes,' said the woman, seeming to understand.

We waited.

Nothing happened. The spider didn't go away – but it didn't strike either, it just continued to tap on the tabletop, waiting for us to make the first move. We waited for what seemed like several minutes, frozen to the spot, mesmerized by the incessant war-beat. The more I listened, the more it began to sound like Morse code. I couldn't understand it – but maybe the woman could.

'Is this Morse code?' I whispered.

'Morse? ... I know Morse, I've been trained in it.' The woman craned forward and listened to the arachnid 'message'. 'Yes, it is Morse.'

'Well?' I eventually asked. 'What is the fucker saying!?'

'Err., it's repeating:

S...O...U...T...H...I...S...W...A...T...C...H...I...N...G...Y...O...U... S...O... "south is watching you?"

More dream gibberish...

The spider abruptly stopped banging.

For several seconds all remained still, but then, suddenly, the spider jumped off the table, its bouncy legs acting like giant shock absorbers. It edged over towards us with movements that implied a certain caution. And then it stopped. Slowly, it extended a front leg and gently prodded my foot. At this point, without thinking, I moved forward and kicked the spider in what passed for its face.

In a normal dream this might have been the right thing to do: confront the nemesis, but this was the *woman's* nightmare. For her to extract the maximum fright-potential she had to be on the *verge* of disaster without ever actually crossing the line and being forced awake, granted an escape. This seemed to be the reason why the spiders never directly went for her. I, on the other hand, was an expendable prop. My job was to become *victim* while the woman looked on in horror. This might have been a nightmare for me as well,

but I couldn't wake up from it, no matter how bad things became. If I wasn't careful, I could get eaten alive!

So, kicking the spider had been a bad move: the beast simply wrapped its legs around mine. I struggled, but it soon became apparent that the spider's tight grip could not be broken.

It started to move up my legs.

'Get me that!' I shouted, pointing to my laptop.

I grabbed the computer from the woman's trembling hands as the spider climbed over my groin, rewarding me with a suffocating embrace.

Provide Spider gm.

<return>

I held an orange water-pistol in my right hand. Without hesitating, I shoved the gun in the spider's mouth and pulled the trigger. There followed an explosive bang and the spider burst like a balloon, filling the room with its twitching remains. I fired the gun again and this time a clear blue light emerged from the barrel. As the ray of light made contact with the spider's parts they smoked out of existence. I proceeded to clear the room, and had almost completed the job when the woman let out another terrible shriek. What now!?

Thousands of normal-size tarantulas streamed in through the open window. I fired the gun, and one – but *only* one – spider bought it. I grabbed the laptop and tried to think of an appropriate command but the stress of the situation had rendered my mind blank. I was out of ideas..

Then it dawned on me.

My approach had been wrong, right from the very start. I typed in a new command, and pressed return.

Turning to the woman, I held up my altered hand allowing her to see it clearly: a football-sized, orange and green, exotic tropical spider.

'This is the Amazonian face-eating spider!' I shouted, as the first tarantulas reached my feet and climbed.

I pushed the pretty spider into the woman's face and watched it squeeze her head – she didn't have time to scream.

At last the nightmare ended.

The shock of having the spider thrust into her face had forced the woman to wake up. Her will was powerful, and I shot from her mind with the force of a speeding bullet. I zoomed upwards, blasting through the ceiling, then through the hospital roof.

I was out in the night, continuing to hurtle upwards. Higher and higher I climbed, showing no inclination, consciously or otherwise, to slow down. Only when I looked down, and recognized the outline of Preston, did I make an effort to stem my rocketing ascent. Eventually, at an altitude of several miles, I forced myself to stop.

A clear and cloudless night. A full moon illuminated Preston and the surrounding country, and all of the town's streets were visible, marked out by the orange gossamer threads of sodium streetlamps.

I descended slowly.

Once I had dropped down to within a few feet of the ground I made myself come to

a halt, still strung-out by the experiences of the last dream – literally a nightmare. If I wanted to make a ‘living’ out of this I clearly needed to be more cautious in future; and in the absence of any other stimulation in my life, I saw no alternative but to ‘dream’.

It was difficult to recognize the available landmarks, everything seemed diffuse, as though belonging in somebody else’s universe; but, in due course, I managed to identify my immediate surroundings as Fishergate, Preston’s main high street; close by and to the left stood the large edifice of a Lloyds bank. The town appeared to be completely deserted, it must have been very late at night.

I roamed the dark and gloomy streets becoming ever more despondent. This exercise simply served to show how strange and pointless my life had become. Dreaming might be occasionally thrilling, and always interesting, but all I really needed was a normal life. I stopped my wanderings at the student-dense Plungington Road.

This ‘astral projection’ gave me the creeps. It was time to return to the hospital, my body would be getting worried. But where *was* the hospital? I drifted back towards the town-centre but was at a loss to know where I should go next. I considered doing one last dream tonight.

Okay, let’s just think this through, I said to myself: so far I’ve experienced two dreams, one was largely out of my control and occasionally strange, the other became truly monstrous. Not an encouraging start, but if I chose the right ‘dreamer’ – maybe I could still get something out of this.

It seemed apparent that I should avoid any other dreamers whose psyches resembled that of the woman patient: she had projected a large, red, spoked aura. After applying a little common sense, and making one or two baseless assumptions, I conjectured that an aura’s colour indicated the nature of a person’s general personality – neurotic and arachnophobic in the woman’s case. The spokes possibly pointed to character flaws or psychological scars. Lastly, the large size of an aura represented the power of the individual’s mind. This could explain why my attempts at organizing the woman’s dream had been so constantly thwarted.

My hastily arrived at presumptions might have been utterly wrong for all I knew, but until I gained more experience I would use them as a basic guide. The best type of dreamer, I therefore concluded, would be someone with a small, even, and pale aura. Who might have one of those? I pondered. I wracked my brains and eventually came up with the most likely candidate. I turned away from the town-centre and proceeded rapidly towards Cube’s house.

Cube had been a regular visitor to my flat at Adelphi Place, not surprising considering its close proximity to both the union and other university buildings. I, on the other hand, had visited Cube’s house, in the ‘burbs, only once, and, as a result, it proved much more difficult to locate than I had anticipated. A large and distinctive monkey-puzzle tree in the front garden eventually provided the prompt that led me in.

I levitated up to Cube’s bedroom and found him there, fast asleep.

I came in close and cast my professional eye: not exactly what I had expected.

Cube’s lilac/turquoise aura, the largest and most striking yet, extended eighteen inches or more beyond his static form. There were a few multi-coloured spokes, but these appeared relatively small, and they weren’t complete gaps...

I ruminated over the size and nature of Cube’s aura for several minutes before finally

taking the plunge.

A late-afternoon summer heat-haze softened the edges of Preston's Avenham Park. I stood alone, down in the large bowl near the river, staring at the distant figure of a young girl performing cartwheels. She rotated serenely, and from my position resembled a slowly rolling tyre, her cartwheels possessing an effortless and fluid grace. Flawless. She approached and passed by, before wheeling off again, back to the shimmering distance. After a couple of minutes I lost sight of her as she faded into a dense, silvery haze.

This really was like a dream.

I turned around, looking for Cube, but found no sign of him. Odd, since this was his dream, he had to be around here somewhere. I moved from the bowl through to the smaller but more complex tiered gardens. Where had Cube got to? This was becoming slightly worrying: how could I be dreaming someone's dream, if that someone wasn't even there?

I discovered him after a lengthy search. He stood on a terraced bank, talking to a small but enthusiastic group of sitting figures. I strolled up and joined the group.

Cube spewed out the minutiae of a long and rambling joke. He frequently broke down, unable to continue through flooding tears of laughter. If he'd noticed me arrive, it certainly didn't register.

'...and he called in his sister, the marketing expert, and asked the vicar the same question. Well, the first guy stops – he's heard this from the thingee – that one what limped – and it wasn't that far! ...*Anyway*... the Frenchman was having none of it!

And so it went on...and on, and on, and on. Cube's 'joke' was pure gabbled nonsense, just like Hargreaves' file notes and street map. But the audience were loving it. Cube's cackling fan club consisted of the drug dealer, Hammer, another student, Matt Damon and Sandra Bullock.

'... Umm, so the Scotsman remarked, "I bu' a cannai dee we yu fey English mendacity, C U Jimmy?"' The audience celebrated every word. '...So, finally, the guy asks... err, oh, what was it, now?'

'With a pig like this, you don't eat it all at once,' I offered.

The audience exploded with uproarious laughter.

'That were great that, blummin' 'eck, funniest joke I ever did hear,' said a Lancashire Sandra Bullock.

Cube was livid. I had stolen his thunder. I summoned up the laptop and held my fingers ready to perform some hasty typing – just in case.

'Oh, I've never had so much fun, and I owe it all to you, Geoff,' said Hammer. I felt sure the real Hammer would never say anything like *that*. I reminded myself that this wasn't the real Hammer, not even the dreaming Hammer – this was *figment* Hammer.

'That's okay, I know plenty more.'

'Go on then, Geoff, gee is 'nother,' pleaded Sandra.

Cube stormed off in a huff. As he turned his back on the group, they all instantly vanished. Would Cube now descend to some darker milieu? I had to keep him happy.

'Cube, Cube, wait up, man,' I caught up with him as the skies above Avenham Park began to cloud over.

'Where is your favourite place, Cube?'

‘What!?’ He was still annoyed.

‘Where do you like to go, you know, to relax, to chill-out?’

Cube appeared to snap out of his strop, but storm clouds continued to build at an astonishing rate.

‘Hmm, that’s an interesting question,’ said Cube; he definitely seemed happier now, but the skies were becoming black with boiling badness.

‘hm, hmm, err., hmm., interesting question., hmm...’

Come on, hurry up, I silently pleaded. The ripped and shredded storm cloud began to develop a rotation.

Cube continued to contemplate the ‘interesting question’ as a black funnel cloud descended down towards the park. Everything it touched – people, buildings and trees – got sucked up into the clouds. ‘What’s that?’ he asked, noticing it for the first time.

‘It’s nothing, Cube, just a storm.’ I said casually, noticing that the whirlwind was bearing down on us.

‘That’s no storm, it’s a tornado!’

I held onto Cube’s arm to prevent him from running away. ‘Your favourite place, Cube, where is it?’

‘Hmm, interesting question, err, hmm,’ waffled Cube, ‘I think it would have to be ... a tossup between Ibiza and the Lake District.’

‘Yes, good choice, Cube.’

Take us to the Lake District.

<return>

Back to the Lake District – the same ‘dodgy’ Lake District as before, and back on Glaramara, close to where Hargreaves and I had been. I hastily began typing as I swivelled around to face north:

Remove Matterhorn.

<return>

Before Cube had a chance to notice, the Alpine giant shimmered out of (non) existence and the dream filled the gap with a crude approximation of a Lakeland hill. The understudy, a sad little impostor, just sat there, fifteen miles to the north, like an embarrassed cowpat.

I looked over at Cube: he was studying a map and occasionally glancing up to view the scene towards the southwest, exactly as Hargreaves had done the previous night. I left him to it and sat down on the springy turf. Following the trials of the last few hours I now felt ready to enjoy a quiet and peaceful spell, hopefully we could stay here until Cube woke up naturally. With a bit of luck, the redoubtable Cube would remain happy and quiescent.

I turned to survey the landscape and noticed something that genuinely puzzled me: my telescope! It pointed away from us – still looking to the south or southwest.

I followed its gaze...

The arrangement of hills and crags, though plainly incorrect and exaggerated, were laid out exactly as they had been in yesterday’s dream.

Dreams were mere phantoms, I conjectured, prone to change, and prone to inconsistency. Yet this landscape appeared startlingly self-consistent. I stared back at my telescope: no way should that instrument still be here!

The jumbled hills around me, all bearing partial resemblance to the ‘real thing’, started to become real in my mind. Could it be possible, for example, that behind that ridge on Dale Head, out of view, and never seen, hid something, maybe a tarn, that *was* always there!? *If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to see it, does it really exist?*

I sat back and tried to relax, but it was difficult, so much strangeness tonight, more than I’d bargained for. Despite myself, I began to dwell on the hellish spider dream.. What the hell was that Morse code all about? – “south is watching you”.

I studied the southern aspect...

Would the castle still be here? The distant crag of Lingmell, now cloaked in a tattered mist that ripped through the gullies, revealed just fleeting glimpses of its summit. Hard to tell. But there had been a character watching me from that castle, which roughly lay to the south. Is that what the spider was banging on about? Again, this could be another example of a dream taking a minor detail and amplifying it into something dramatic.

I turned to Cube and helped myself to one of his phantom cheese pasties.

‘Hey!’ shouted the greedy Cube.

‘Wait a minute, Cube, I paid for these, remember?’ I reminded Cube, incorrectly.

‘Oh yes, sorry, Geoff.’

What a sap!

‘Cube?’

‘Yeah?’

‘South is watching us.’

Cube abruptly stopped chewing. He nodded and then began chewing again. I waited for him to swallow his food before asking:

‘Well?’

‘Well, *what!?*’

‘South is watching us.’

‘I know!’

‘What do you mean, you know, it doesn’t make sense!?’

‘So why did you say it?’

This was getting me nowhere! I was being outmanoeuvred by a mindless dreamer, and there was almost certainly nothing significant about that phrase; if Cube appeared to extract meaning from it, well, that was just what dreamers did – they created plots and meaning out of thin air, and instantly.

Cube’s attention returned to his map and I left him to it. In the waking world Cube exhibited a high emotional intelligence, but down here he–

‘There!’ Cube jabbed a greasy finger at the map and handed it over to me. ‘South: here.’

I assumed Cube was just pointing to the southern end of the map but his finger had left a greasy mark over Lingmell. On closer inspection I noticed a simple castle icon at the same location.

I handed the map back to Cube and continued to munch the cheese pasty; it was beginning to taste rubbery so I reached for the laptop:

Improve flavour of pasty.

<return>

That worked. A rich mature cheddar flavour filled my mouth. It’s said that you only dream in black-and-white, well, I knew that to be wrong, and now I knew that smells and tastes could be dreamt as well. If a sensation was required, the dream ‘software’ would provide it – and as richly as anything in the waking world.

‘What is “south”?’ I asked.

Cube stared towards the southern fells. ‘South is becoming an increasing problem. You remember I was doing that *Stars Against Homelessness* shoot?’

‘Oh, yes.’ The poor Cube believed himself to be a professional photographer. ‘Go on.’

‘Hmm, well, I was dealing with a shed-load of celebrities, some minor, some stratospheric hyper-stars. The shoot, as you can probably imagine, was very arduous: much clashing of fragile ego, and none of the stars would pose with the bums and winos we’d pulled in off the street. Agh! It was a nightmare! I later analyzed my pictures and.. you guessed it: *South!* This is almost commonplace now; photojournalism and fashion photography is plagued by it – everyone’s concerned. They estimate that over sixty percent of all news photos now contain South.’

Cube had finished his story and I found myself disturbed, not so much by the contents, though they were strange enough, but by the simple fact that Cube had been

able to tell the story at all. These dream yarns were invariably an incoherent jumble of shite. This was far from that: the details were bollocks, but self-consistent bollocks – a bit like this Lakeland dreamscape.

I persuaded Cube to run through the story again; he did so, and with barely a deviation of emphasis.

‘So what does “south” represent?’

‘There are rumours – some say it’s a society woman.’

I nodded and reached for my Laptop:

Take us to Lingmell.

‘How would you like to meet this society woman?’ I asked.

‘Well, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea, actually,’ said a suddenly pensive Cube.

<return>

We remained in our reclined positions, but the surrounding hills blurred and refocused into a new configuration. We found ourselves at the Scafell Pike/Lingmell col; the remaining climb to the summit of Lingmell would be little more than a stroll.

‘Come on, Cube, it’s an easy climb from here.’

Cube and I set off up the gentle slope towards the top and immediately encountered problems. Some kind of dream-style slomo impeded forward progress as though the air were composed of treacle; the more you pushed against it, the worse it got.

‘I’ve got to stop and take a rest,’ I said, apparently exhausted; I recognizing the sensation to be bogus, but there didn’t seem to be anything I could do about it.

‘Yes, walking any kind of distance is always difficult in dreams,’ replied Cube. I eyed him, puzzled by his sudden lucidity. ‘I usually find that walking backwards solves the problem.’

We set off again, this time, backwards, and, amazingly, the technique worked. The treacle had gone. As the gradient began to level off I suggested to Cube that “forwards walking” could be considered; Cube assessed the remaining distance and slope, carried out a quick mental calculation and finally gave the green light.

Within a couple of minutes we reached the large, flat summit of Lingmell; ahead of us, near the northern cliffs, stood the round, grey castle with its adjunct narrow towers and fluttering pennons. It looked very physical, very real.

Cube gazed at it with a look of trepidation: ‘You know, Geoff, I’m not sure I should be here. I’ve stepped off the grid.’ And with that, he vanished.

I was alone on the summit, no longer tethered to a dreamer and a route out of here. A rising chill wind and a sinister swirling mist persuaded me to return down the slope and track down Cube. I turned and took my first step–

‘Excuse me.’

I wheeled around again and gawped at the nearby standing figure: it was *Madam*, the aristocratic woman from the Hargreaves’ dream. She had dispensed with the ostentatious evening gown, choosing instead a look that more fitted the new environs: patterned headscarf, thick woolly sweater under open, flapping anorak; corduroy trousers tucked into a pair of olive-green wellington boots. Under her right arm huddled an elderly black Labrador; it shivered and looked a bit fed up, and, to be perfectly frank, far too heavy to be carried; when it peeped up in my direction it began to wag its tail. Madam’s left hand

held the ever-present smoking Cuban.

She managed to affect the air of aloof, disinterested gentry, but those eyes – sharp and neutral in expression – also hinted at an amused curiosity. She took a quick drag on her cigar and then threw it away; her freed hand came across to meet the Labrador. I expected her to pat the dog but instead she started tapping her fingers on the top of its head. The dog wore an expression of tolerant-but-pained suffering as the woman continued to drum:

Tap tap tippy tap tap.

After a slight pause I suddenly recognized the ‘beat’. It was the spider’s Morse code! ‘South is watching you.’

The woman – *South?* – smiled slightly. I knew at this point that I was experiencing something real – no dream. I’d been playing with fire these last couple of nights, and now I was going to get burnt.

“South” broke her visual grip. She placed the dog on the ground and it gave itself a vigorous shakedown: hairs, ticks, flees and scabs showered the summit of Lingmell.

‘Come on, Brock, the weather is closing in, let’s go inside.’ The two of them turned and walked back to the castle, but after a few steps the woman stopped and turned back to me.

‘Mr. Christie, would you care for a drink of something. Something to ease the chill, perhaps?’ She beckoned towards the castle.

I nodded and smiled.

The weather really was closing in.

‘Welcome. You’ve been here before of course, a couple of times, but in both cases your perception of *South House* had been distorted by your attached REM generator, Michael Hargreaves, wasn’t it?’

Awestruck by my first glimpse of the castle’s interior, I barely heard her words. It projected the same baroque grandeur of the ‘Great Hall’, but this place made the Great Hall look like a garden shed by comparison! The interior space appeared to be infinitely large and resembled that of a massive cathedral. Opposing parallel walls, a hundred metres or more apart, converged to vanishing-points as they stretched away in four directions. The floor, chequered and unadorned by any observable furniture, was a continuum of highly polished black and white squares. Countless wide granite staircases gently spiralled towards the infinite heights, breaking off intermittently to link with a multitude of balconies.

But the most striking feature, in common with the Great Hall, remained the single, massive, chandelier. It descended from the unseen ceiling and spread out, sending tendrils of light to all areas of the castle’s interior. If anything, this one resembled an oversized and upturned oak tree. It seemed that every conceivable hue was present, lending support to a predominant peachiness. Sometimes, briefly, parts of the chandelier would flare, as though lightning moved within.

‘I see that you are admiring my antenna.’

Was that what she called the chandelier?

‘Is it some sort of aerial, then?’ I asked, still casting my eyes over the infinitely branching fractal. ‘This whole place is just so...’

‘Yes, its scale reflects my mind.’

At this, I lowered my gaze.

‘Ms South, ...is that your name?’

The woman shrugged. ‘If you like.’

‘Hmm, well, I know this is no longer a dream, I can sense that now, but what is it, and what are you?’

The woman merely pointed towards the chandelier or “antenna”. ‘Why don’t I fix you that drink.’ She strolled past me but as I turned to follow I found myself alone in this cavernous space. No, the Labrador, *Brock*, still loitered. As we made eye-contact it began to wag its tail. I beckoned it over and gave it a pat.

‘You’re a good dog, aren’t you?’

‘*Woof.*’

Brock seemed real enough, and very doglike...

‘What the hell are you, Brock?’

‘*Woof.*’

‘And what the hell is this place?’

‘*Woof.*’

‘Well thanks for clearing that up.’

‘Woof.’

‘This should answer your questions, Mr Christie,’ said the woman, offering me a drink that looked like whiskey. Into my free hand she thrust a sheet of paper.

‘Please, call me Geoff,’ I said, regarding the crumpled sheet. ‘What’s this?’

‘Read it, Geoff.’

In large letters, at the top, it read: *Interstellar Text Message*.

‘Is this for real?’

‘Perfectly real, I intercepted it this evening, just before I woke you up.’

I gawped at South.

‘Read!’ she commanded.

I did as I was told, and read the ‘text message’. It purportedly originated from an extraterrestrial with an unpronounceable name, and had been sent to ‘Gerry’ a professor at Leeds. Roughly in two halves, it outlined the early history of humankind – highly suspect, I thought – and later concerned itself with the effects of a new drug, one that I’d never even heard of before. Apparently this drug had inadvertently led to the creation of some mysterious agency – although ET wasn’t sure. When I’d finished reading the text, I looked up. Once again South was nowhere to be seen. Brock began to wag his tail.

I briefly eyed my surroundings before deciding to read the text again, this time skipping the first section so as to focus on the bizarre drug stuff. I shook my head in disbelief.

‘Is something not to your liking, Geoff. Perhaps, like the bugs in space, you are fretting about me.’ South had popped back again and was now attired in a stylish floral dress. This woman had a disconcerting habit of appearing and disappearing, even indulging in the practice during the Hargreaves dream; at no point, though, did I ever get to see the transition, leaving open the possibility that she was simply nimble on her feet. Was South the gestalt mind referred to in the text? ‘You must try to be in Leeds in July, you may get to see a flying saucer!’ she added, with a thin smile.

‘Fat chance of that,’ I said, with sudden bitterness, ‘unless I astrally project there.’

‘Now, now, Geoff, let’s not get despondent.’ South took the sheet, glanced at it briefly, and then placed it in her pocket.

‘Is that stuff in the text about you?’ I asked.

‘Yes, and the details are correct. I was born in Utah about ten years ago. I began as one thalamus, barely aware, and not properly conscious. From a starting point of one – his name was *South* – I became two, and then three, and then more. Due to a quirk of evolution this network grew in isolation and thus emerged into separate self-awareness, and that—’

‘The text said you were unique, why hasn’t—?’

‘Yes, telepathy is the norm among other life forms, but it evolves as an aid to communication – it’s not supposed to develop separate ‘network’ minds.’

‘And the thalamus was the system for human telepathy?’

‘Yes, although there are deeper, purely unconscious forms that act as a sort of base network. It’s those that allow both you and me to navigate this realm of dreams. Humanity’s *conscious* telepathy, closed down millennia ago, has been reactivated by this drug, but it has bypassed the contemporary conscious mind, perhaps because it is no longer compatible. Instead, it has folded in on itself and become *me!*’

I gazed at the woman.

‘And now I require a small favour of you, Geoff,’ she added, matter-of-factly.

I scoffed and took a sip of my drink. It was ‘real’ neat whiskey. And foul. ‘I’m not sure that *I* can be of much help, even if I wanted to be... and it sounds like ET regards you as some sort of threat.’

It was South’s turn to scoff. ‘The fact that I exist is the evidence that I am not a threat.’

‘Huh?’

‘It is all in the text: without me there would be widespread telepathy in the waking world. Disastrous, as ET surmised.’

I stared at South, and then at Brock. I didn’t understand any of this. What was I really dealing with here? Should I help this woman, this *agency*?

South continued: ‘You are very unusual, Geoff, unique in fact; you are the first entity I have encountered that, like myself, is able to enter this fluid world of shadows as a complete and fully conscious mind. As you correctly worked out, the normal dreamer is not much more than a mindless ghost. A ‘halfwit’ might be a more literal description. I am sure that your timely arrival is not a coincidence. From my point of view it is extraordinarily fortuitous.’

I still wasn’t convinced that I should help South: the text mentioned something about a growing “coherence” down here. But what if I refused? South no doubt had ways of making me cooperate. I was just about to voice my objections when she held up a hand to stop me.

‘Later. First, I must show you something.’

She led me back to the front door, and, once again, we stood on the summit of Lingmell. The weather had improved but remained blustery.

‘Look at the walls of the house, Geoff.’

I turned and examined the nearest wall; at first, I saw nothing unusual. It was composed of the same grey volcanic rock that lay strewn all about this chaotic place, but when I looked closer, I noticed a slight movement. The whole structure, I soon realized, was infested with some kind of insectoid life; they resembled woodlice but were about the same size as my open hand. Apart from the occasional twitch, they remained still, steadily gorging themselves on the wall.

‘Antibodies,’ said South, ‘Part of *SWISH: The Species-Wide Immune System: Human*.

Brock had followed us outside, he let out a menacing snarl.

‘Can you kill them?’

‘Yes, but it’s pointless – watch.’ South took an extended draw on her new cigar and then exhaled at the wall; on contact with the ‘woodlice’, the wall began to burn. The bugs crackled and burst, and several lost their purchase. The fallen were immediately crunched in the Labrador’s jaws.

I studied the indented wall section, now free of the parasites, and observed a new bug in place of the old. The new one started off small but soon grew in size until it attained the same dimensions as the original.

‘It’s like trying to hold back the tide – pointless.’ South and Brock both looked downcast.

‘Why are they attacking the house? Couldn’t you just move – set up camp somewhere else? This immune system may be unstoppable, but it looks sluggish, basically mindless, I’m sure you could evade it indefinitely.’

‘Confident words, Geoff, but you’re missing the point. They are attacking *me*, they are after the antenna inside, and when they reach it – they’ll smash it to pieces. That means no more telepathic link between thalami, which, naturally, means no more me.’

‘I still don’t see how I can possibly help.’ As I spoke, one of the antibodies dropped from the wall and walked leisurely towards the open door. South stamped on it and the beast’s exoskeleton snapped letting out a rifle-like crack.

‘There is a way you can help, but first I must show you one more aspect of the immune system. Let’s return inside. Come on, Brock – leave that – it’s dead.’

The dog held a woodlouse in its mouth. On South’s command it reluctantly dropped the thoroughly-dead bug.

When we returned indoors, the woman led me up one of the spiral staircases. After a short but convoluted journey we came to a small, plain room – empty, except for a computer on a desk, and an angry gorilla in the corner. The gorilla screamed and charged the moment it laid eyes on South. I instinctively ducked but as the gorilla reached the open door it stopped suddenly, and came no nearer.

‘This is another aspect of the immune system, it won’t come out of the room, it’s not programmed to do that. All it does is guard the computer.’

‘And this is all part of the *human* immune system?’ I asked, perplexed.

‘Indeed. Don’t be fooled by their appearance. The various systems evolved in more primitive species and have tended to retain those forms. This is a system that evolved in primates.’

‘What – a system to guard computers?’ I asked, mockingly.

‘No, ...a system to prevent hacks of the conscious mind, or cerebral cortex, if you prefer,’ replied South, betraying just a hint of irritation.

‘Oh, so what’s on the computer?’

‘I discovered this room about two years ago – it didn’t exist before that – it’s the route to the conscious mind. I was able to use it for several weeks before the gorilla first appeared. If I go in now, it will try to rip me to shreds.’

‘Can it do that?’

‘No, I’ll kill it first, but, like the antibodies, a new gorilla will take over immediately.’

We both regarded the snorting primate for some moments...

‘Let’s return to the main hall,’ said South, ‘and I shall explain how you can be of assistance.’

We retraced our path and returned downstairs.

‘Geoff, would you regard the antenna, please?’

I turned and marvelled anew at its vast size and intricate beauty.

‘This is my brain. It is a neural network composed, at present, of over twenty-thousand human thalami. Observe the structure more closely and tell me what you see.’

I tried to notice some features that I might separately describe, but the ‘antenna’ or ‘brain’ was just too complex. South prompted: ‘Scrutinize the extremities, the fine filaments that branch away from the main structure.’

I saw the filaments.

‘These extremities are only connected to the denser central region via tenuous and narrow pathways. Yes?’

‘Oh yeah, I see what you mean.’

‘Good, now this is a deficiency in my structure. It has come about because I have grown so fast. My mind is large, but inefficient, and it is this inefficiency that prevents me from escaping death at the hands of the immune system. Look higher up. Do you see the horizontal lattice-structures that form direct bridges between the various extremities and the core?’

‘Yes, I think so, is that one, there, on the level of the sixth balcony?’

‘Yes, very good, and those structures are the key. They serve to harmonize the many aspects of this network; they greatly increase the speed and efficiency of my mind. Each one is the representation of a single – very exceptional – human thalamus. I now have eleven of these “omega” individuals operating within my mind.’ South paused to fire up a new cigar, and then continued: ‘I need one more omega thalamus, and I need it within the next two days, otherwise, it’s over – *SWISH* will break in. You can help me collect it! It must be why you are here!’

It occurred to me that the world might just get along fine without a new and liberated South to deal with; if she defeated the immune system then the computer room, and the route to the conscious mind, would lie open. The thought of her simultaneously possessing the minds of countless living persons was disquieting to say the least. Maybe *SWISH* knew what it was doing ... I had no choice – it was time to stand up to this freak of nature.

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can help.’

‘But believe me, Geoff, you can, you have special–’

‘I mean, I *won’t* help!’

After a prolonged pause: ‘Why not?’

I bluntly outlined my concerns, all the time expecting to be struck down by lightning, or worse, sent back to a nightmarish spider dream, but the woman just puffed on her cigar, exhaling through a patronizing smile. Had I missed something?

‘There is something I have failed to make clear.’ South stopped and pondered her next remark: ‘There is no escape from this immune system – no matter how powerful I become – you need not worry about humanity. I’m not about to possess minds. No, my interests have... moved beyond that. You have to understand that my awareness has leapt far beyond that of a single human mind. I am beginning to comprehend aspects of nature that...’

‘That *what?*’ I demanded, gaining confidence from her hesitancy.

‘Defy ordinary human logic.’ South regarded me: ‘Have you heard of Hermes Trismegistus, the master alchemist and contemporary of the prophet Abraham?’

‘I’m a Business Administration student.’

‘Quite. I’ll take that as a “no”. Well, anyway, he proclaimed the maxim: *As above, so below*. It is a fundamental truth about the universe, one that is now supported by the discovery of quantum mechanics. It points to a universe that is holographic: *subjective* rather than *objective*. The maxim implies that the transcendent beyond the physical and the immanent within ourselves are one. Heaven and Earth, spirit and matter; the invisible and the visible worlds forming a unity to which we are intimately linked. The evidence

for this is all around us, even here.’

‘If this is making things clear—’

‘Okay, in practical terms it means that I don’t need *that*.’ South pointed to the antenna and both Brock and I followed her gaze. I wondered what Brock was making of all this. If he were merely some sort of extension of South then how come he was looking so damned confused?

‘There is a code to be cracked,’ continued South, ‘and with the twelfth omega – I can crack it. I can transmigrate. Be free of that restraining network.’

‘Are we talking about dying and going to heaven here?’ I asked. ‘Because if we are, why not just wait for *SWISH* to do its work?’

South shook her head: ‘I don’t wish to get you bogged down in metaphysical arguments, but—’

‘Oh, I think we’re past that, don’t you?’

‘Well, alright. Under those circumstances my component parts would separate out, once again to become isolated thalami. My substance would persist but *I* would cease to exist. If I want to transmigrate, I’ll have to do it myself.’

I glanced at Brock and he returned an expression that seemed to say: “don’t look at me! I don’t get any of this shit!”

‘But if you get the twelfth omega—’ I began.

‘Then I can do it on my own terms, and retain my identity.’

I reflected on this new development; if it were true, then maybe I should help.

‘There are big stakes at play here. Will you acquire godlike powers?’

‘For a single quantum of time, 10^{-44} th of a second to be precise, yes. After that I will translate to the higher realm and be gone.’

This news left me more concerned.

‘This will be sufficient, however, in allowing me to perform one simple task.’

‘Which is?’

‘Cure you, of course.’ South turned away and studied her cigar.

I was lost for words.

‘I take it your silence indicates that we have a deal,’ she finally remarked, turning and smiling at Brock. The dog wagged its tail vigorously.

‘Visit Alex Stanton: instruct him to administer his remaining diaketamine to Dai Evans.’

That was it, that was my mission, simple enough – but it begged several questions:

‘Why do you need me to do this?’

‘How do I ‘visit’ Alex?’

‘Why *Dai Evans*?’

Hands clasped, fingers interlocked, South acknowledged each of the points with a nod. ‘Of course, I could do this myself,’ she replied, ‘but I would be confined to the dream spheres – you, on the other hand, will not be so confined.’

‘The second question: I’ll send you directly to his dream and from there you will use your laptop to send him to this Lake District which currently represents the lowest and most lucid dream sphere. After he awakens, use the computer here to convince him that the dream was real.’

‘And thirdly: Dai Evans will be my twelfth—’

‘I’ll be in the *computer room*!?! With the *gorilla*!?! ... It’ll rip me apart!’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You don’t *think so*?’

‘You are a normal human being, why should your own immune system attack you? If necessary I will distract the gorilla, but if you remain active for less than half a minute, I’m sure you’ll be ignored. Look, Geoff, there is no other way, any other method would take weeks or months to enact – and that is simply far too long.’

I wasn’t happy. Not just about sneaking past the gorilla, but also about hacking Alex Stanton’s waking mind. That must be what was entailed here. Furthermore, the scheme sounded fraught with difficulties:

‘Can I really convince him to do this? What sort of control will I be exercising in his waking mind?’ I asked.

‘There won’t be enough time for complete mind-control, but you will have total *body*-control, which is all you need,’ replied South, confidently.

So it boiled down to *persuasion*, rather than any form of brainwashing. Persuading him to do anything like this in the real world would be nigh on impossible at the best of times. What arguments could one employ? There’d be more than a few questions from Alex, that’s for sure! I shook my head: all I’d have to work with would be a dream and several seconds of ‘possession’. What could I do in those few seconds..?

‘Soften Alex up in the dream,’ continued South, ‘give him all the details there. You’ll find him to be both receptive and relatively lucid. When you have worked on him as much as you think you can, use the laptop to force him awake; you will be brought back here to occupy his waking mind. You will leave a clue, an obvious physical clue, that will demonstrate the veracity of his recent and remarkably vivid dream and that it *must* be enacted upon.’

Easy as falling off a log! ‘Well then, let’s give it a go!’ I replied with sardonic enthusiasm. I couldn’t see this working.

South nodded. ‘Good.’ She led me out of the house and back to the summit of Lingmell. A thick, drizzly cloud covered the area obscuring even castle’s towers and completely obliterated any view of surrounding Lakeland.

‘There is another part of the plan that bothers me,’ I replied, ‘Dai is very anti-drugs, getting him to take diaketamine won’t be easy. Are there no other ‘omegas’ we can use?’

‘Not in Preston. And not anyone you know. I have confidence in Alex Stanton: he is resourceful and once he commits himself to act he will find a way to succeed; and Evans does not need to know what the drug is, he merely has to imbibe it.’

‘We could put it in his drink!’ I exclaimed positively.

‘No!’ replied South, with force. ‘That would guarantee failure, the language centre would be deactivated, but only gradually, with the requisite cerebral crisis failing to occur. Mr Evans must either inject the drug, or inhale it.’ The woman regarded the leaden skies. ‘It is becoming late, you must visit Alex now.’

I’d run out of objections or questions. It was time for action: ‘Okay, I’m ready, send me to Alex’s dream,’ I declared, with a stiff upper lip.

‘It lies to the north,’ replied South, ‘throw yourself over the cliffs.’

‘What!? Is there no other way?’ I bleated, with a tremulous upper lip.

‘This way is the most direct; the alternative is to reawaken in your body, find the will to exit again and then project yourself into Alex’s dream via his sleeping body. How long do you think all that will take, hmm?’

I walked tentatively towards the edge of the nearby northern cliffs. Brock wanted to follow, but South called him back. I glanced down into the cauldron of swirling and impenetrable mist, unable to discern any recognizable features below. I’d surely be dashed against the rock wall within seconds...

‘Hurry, Geoff!’ called South.

Oh fuck it, I thought, as I hurled myself into the abyss.

I closed my eyes as an outcrop of rock emerged from the mist and accelerated towards me. The snack counter of the university refectory revealed itself when I finally found the nerve to reopen them. The place was full of chattering students, many of whom I knew, but there was no sign of Alex.

‘Hello, Geoff, you’re out of hospital,’ observed a phantom engineering student called Robbo.

‘No, not yet, but don’t worry about it – you’re not even real.’

‘Oh, alright,’ said Robbo, looking rather put out.

‘Where is Alex Stanton?’

‘He’s over by the window, near the door, I think.’

‘Thanks.’ I summoned up the laptop and walked past a small interior wall that blocked my view of the entrance. There he was. Alex sat with two other students, one of whom was... *me!*

‘Whoa!’ I ducked back to the counter and out of sight. What the hell was *I* doing here? I wondered, taking a few surreptitious glances in Alex’s direction. I grew concerned: what were the consequences of being sighted?

Out of earshot, 'I' chatted to the other student, Jordan, Alex's classmate. But he was no *mate*, Alex hated him. Personally, I hardly ever came into contact with Jordan, but I knew of him: Alex, and Cube for that matter, droned on about him all the time.

I considered my options: approaching the table was just too risky, Alex might wake up, and as for 'my' reaction – that just wasn't worth thinking about. I decided to use my laptop and get 'me' away from the others.

Hmm, how to phrase this?

I typed:

Send the phantom me to the counter for a mug of tea.

<return>

I glanced over and noticed 'me' rising up and walking over. I hid behind a group of giggling girls and typed again:

Remove the phantom me.

I waited for 'me' to reach the 'hidden' counter:

<return>

I watched as I went away before I stepped into my shoes and took over from me. I walked 'back' to Alex and Jordan, sat down and glanced at the other two. Alex absentmindedly gazed out of the window and Jordan gazed at me.

Jordan, a wannabe retro-punk who seemed to style himself on nineties icon, *Tank Girl*, had toned down the act recently. The nose rings, the makeup and the ripped jeans were gone, but he still retained some of the other paraphernalia, most notably the close-crop, bottle-blond hair. From a distance you might think, as I always did, that Jordan was a harmless show-off, but up close it became instantly clear that Alex and Cube were right about this guy. Jordan had a malicious glint.

I prepared to bring Alex down to the deep dreaming sphere of the Lake District, but then thought: hey, there's no rush, let's see this Jordan in action.

I returned Jordan's gaze...

'Where's your tea?' he demanded, fixing me with his large, close-set, deep blue, dilated eyes.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Why, what have you done?' Jordan smirked. 'Where is your tea? You went up to get some tea – where is it?'

Ah, the penny dropped, I'd carelessly forgotten to get myself a cuppa.

'I changed my mind,' I said.

Jordan shook his head. 'You're a real loser, Christie, you know that? A real dead-beat.' He turned to Alex. 'Hey, no wonder you're such a fucked-up, drug-addled tosser, Stanton – you hang around with worthless turds like this.' He gestured at me, and then returned his full attention. 'You're a waste of shit, Christie, a total waste of shit.'

Quite a performance, it exceeded my expectations.

'I've thought of a new nickname for you, Christie – JCV.'

'I don't get it,' I replied, noticing that the surrounding students were beginning to take an amused interest.

'No, that's because you're stupid, JCV. It stands for *Justifiable Coma Victim* – good, init?'

Several of the other students began to snigger when they heard this, but stifled their

laughs as I shot them a furious look. I would enjoy what came next; I reached for my laptop and started typing.

‘What did you bring that in here for, JCV?’ Jordan demanded, stabbing a finger at the computer.

‘You’ll see, It’s time you felt the loving touch of—’

My laptop beeped and a message flashed up on the screen. This had never happened before!

‘Don’t fight Jordan!’

I had been reminded of my primary purpose here.

‘The loving touch of what? Your cock? I knew you were a fuckin’ queer.’

Bollocks to South’s message, Jordan was going to get whacked.

‘The loving touch of this.’ I held my aluminium baseball bat aloft for all to see. To my disappointment Jordan did not seem unduly concerned, in fact he just laughed.

I stood up and took a mighty swing at Jordan’s head, but as the end neared contact, a hand – Jordan’s hand – intervened and held the bat steady. The sudden shockwave that travelled down the bat forced me to let go.

Jordan hooted a loud, sneering laugh and stood up, brandishing the baseball bat like an expert Samurai. He jabbed it into my chest a few times, and then, without warning, smashed it into my legs, which shattered like porcelain.

At last, Alex, who had up until this point remained passive, suddenly jumped up:

‘It’s time you died, Jordan!’

He launched into the now-fearful Jordan and proceeded to violently beat him up. Other students joined in, on both sides, and the whole dream descended rapidly into a chaotic farce.

I hobbled over to the laptop, avoiding a flying chair, and managed to type the command I should have entered at the very start of this nightmare...

Alex and I returned to the Lake District, back to the grassy upland expanse of Glaramara. Always *Glaramara*, did this mountain hold some symbolic significance, like Lingmell? Beyond its central location in Lakeland, I couldn’t see one, and I was in no mood to ponder, I felt too disgusted and angry. I should have followed South’s instruction and left Jordan well alone, but it had been impossible to resist the urge of teaching that bastard a lesson. How had Jordan been able to grab the bat and then break my legs with such ease? This reminded me... I glanced down and saw that my legs were no longer broken.

I understood that the Jordan in the refectory wasn’t real – but *something* had operated through him: but who? ... Alex? South? The *real* Jordan? My angry thoughts were interrupted by a beeping sound and I studied my computer screen:

You were working through Jordan!

Now get on with the job!

Well, that told me!

I sat myself on the grass and attempted to calm down; after a minute I turned to Alex. He deliberated over a map and occasionally looked to the north. What was it about these dreamers? Hargreaves, Cube and now Alex – they all loved their maps. Ironic really, considering the bogus nature of... *North!*

I turned abruptly to face north only to behold my cowpat impostor. Along with my telescope, the changes that I'd brought about here appeared to be permanent. I even noticed, nearby on the grass, the remains of one of Cube's half-eaten sausage rolls.

I turned back to Alex, and proceeded to 'get to work on him'.

I followed all my laptop's prompts, but, even so, it turned out to be arduous work. The first awkward task involved convincing Alex that he was merely dreaming. Then I had to build up his real waking environment for him; this proved to be the most difficult job: Alex had been quick to recognize all of this as a dream, but he insisted that when he awoke he'd have to go to school – in Leeds.

Following South's prompts, I took Alex closer to Lingmell – to improve his lucidity.

Ultimately, I felt I'd done enough. Alex knew his 'assignment'. I made him repeat it several times, and, like all dreamers, he accepted the preposterousness of it at face value.

I glanced down at the silent laptop for several seconds before typing:

Alex wakes up.

<return>

I never noticed Alex go; I simply returned to the central hall of *South House* to be greeted by South and Brock. The dog seemed happy to see me; the woman looked annoyed.

'Yes, I'm sorry, I lost my cool, it won't happen again,' I sheepishly offered.

South glared at me: 'If Alex had awoken from the refectory dream we would have lost our only chance; but, no matter, after your rush of blood you settled down and performed some effective work. Now, to the computer room – come.'

As we followed the same convoluted and confusing route I took the chance to ask South about Jordan. He was still bugging me.

'If I was operating Jordan, then how come he became so strong?'

South, striding quickly ahead of me, replied without turning: 'You don't know Jordan, do you?'

'In real life? No, I've never spoken to him.'

'No, all you had were Alex's exaggerated stories, and you believed them. You accepted Jordan as malevolent, cruel and invincible, and so that's what he became.'

'But Alex defeated him in the end.'

'Yes, when Jordan broke your legs, Alex's fear evaporated, and Jordan, thus, could be vanquished.'

'Yes, but—'

The high-pitched scream of the irate gorilla interrupted my next question. We had arrived outside the computer room; the beast stood by the opening, snorting. This was the moment I had been dreading.

'Here, take this,' whispered South, as she handed me a small printed sheet of computer instructions. I glanced at them: they looked straightforward.

'Right.' I took a deep breath and squeezed past the livid gorilla which continued to ignore me; its attention remained focused exclusively on South as I sidled towards the console.

1) Switch on the computer.

I flicked a large red switch on the front and waited for the machine to 'boot up'.

'What are you doing?' came a voice from behind.

I turned and made brief eye-contact with the gorilla. It paced back and forth near the opening, still facing South, but it kept glancing over at me.

‘I said, what are you doing?’ repeated the gorilla.

‘Routine maintenance, there’s a problem with the hard drive,’ I improvised.

‘Okay, but make it quick, the anomaly is here, it might try to enter.’

‘No problem, I’ll have this sorted in no time and be out of your, err, hair.’ Oops.

‘Make sure that you are, if this thing makes a move I don’t want you getting in the way. Copy?’

‘Copied all,’ I replied.

I settled back to work.

2) *Don the head-cap.*

The head-cap, where was that? I located something that resembled an old leather flying helmet and placed it over my head.

The screen flashed up *‘USER PASSWORD’*

I tapped in the password supplied.

INCORRECT PASSWORD. TRY AGAIN.

‘You having problems there, Bud?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘has the password been changed recently?’

The gorilla came dashing over to the screen. ‘Yes – use this.’ It typed the new password and then hovered nearby, watching my actions with interest.

‘I think you should mind the entrance, that thing looks ready to try its luck,’ I said, gesturing towards South.

At this, the gorilla bounded back and let out another ear-piercing scream.

ENTER SUBJECT NAME AND NATIONALITY.

ENTER UK NATIONAL INSURANCE NUMBER.

I entered the details. All that remained now was to press ‘Enter’ and I’d be in full possession of Alex’s mind.

<*Enter*>

I was leaning up in bed, observing the naked Bridgett as she padded around the grotty flat. I’d done it! Back in the real world! I reminded myself of my purpose here, and of the immediate dangers: presumably to the gorilla’s eyes I’d gone into some kind of trance; it would be obvious that I was up to no good.

I jumped out of bed and searched for a pen.

‘Bridgett, do you have a pen?’

‘You haven’t lost the Parker, have you?’ Bridgett turned her body towards mine; she was carrying a few extra pounds, I noticed.

‘No, I just need a pen – right now!’

‘Don’t snap, Alex.’

I gave up and started frantically looking for a pen.

‘What’s the mad rush, babes, it’s only eight o’clock, you’ve got plenty of time.’

‘Look, Bridgett, I need a pen now, for Christ’s sake.’

‘But *why*, and what’s with the funny accent?’

I noticed Alex’s file, and opened it: something called “statistical mechanics”.

‘Do I have statistical mechanics today?’ I asked myself.

‘Yes, of course you do, you talked about it all last night, remember? You said it was “elegant”.’ Bridgett let out a little laugh as she disappeared into the bathroom.

I spied a red felt-tip – perfect. I grabbed the file on statistical mechanics and wrote on the front page:

*Remember the dream, it was real. Make sure Dai gets the diaketamine. Today. (Tonight at the latest).
Not in his drink!
Geoff.*

For good measure I wrote a similar message on the file’s front cover. I was just about to write on his hand when I was forced out...

I found myself sprawled on the floor of the computer room with the skewed flying helmet covering one of my eyes; South grabbed my arm and threw me out. Seconds later, South came flying out.

The computer room now contained *two* gorillas, and both were pacing aggressively by the opening, like a couple of heavyweight boxers eager for the start of the next round. The new one kept its enraged eyes on me.

We struggled up and headed back to the main hall.

‘Well, what happened?’ asked South. She fell silent and listened intently as I recounted every detail, but it was hard to tell whether or not she was satisfied that I’d done enough.

‘Do you think he’ll run with this now?’ I asked, after a prolonged silence.

‘Your work is done, Geoff,’ South finally declared. ‘Thank you for your help. You should now return to your body and get some sleep.’

That fell short of an unequivocal endorsement.

‘Is it just a case of waiting now?’ I asked nervously, suddenly doubtful that Alex would heed *any* of this nonsense.

‘For you, yes, but Brock can do some useful work.’

‘*Brock?* What will he do?’ I looked down at the enthusiastic black Labrador.

‘He’s managed to strike an alliance with a cat called Gil. From that vantage we can send out some useful subliminal messages.’

I turned to Brock: ‘You’ve been working with Gil?’

Brock let out a low rumbling growl. Obviously the alliance with Gil remained a difficult one.

‘Time you got some sleep, Geoff.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘it has been a long night.’

'It's over here!'

'What?'

'Your Parker.'

'What?'

'Oh, for God's sake, I'm no mood for this, Alex!'

Bridgett handed Alex his Parker pen and began to dry her hair. The girl really could be anal sometimes: it's only eight o'clock, what's the point of getting all worked up about a bloody pen?

Talking of pens, what was this red felt-tip doing in his hand? Alex couldn't remember why he needed it. Did he need it? No matter. He got dressed and proceeded to the en-suite kitchen-area. As he searched for a jar of instant coffee he noticed the calendar, which was still stuck on March: a snowy mountain scene...

The dream came back to him. 'Amazing, so vivid!'

He'd been in the Lake District, talking to Geoff – no, it would be more accurate to say that Geoff had been talking to him. Alex remembered Geoff's characteristic insistence. He'd been spinning some yarn about Dai Evans, the remaining diaketamine and the state of his 'waking' coma.

He finally located the coffee.

Could this dream be offering some kind of symbolic insight, he wondered, as the kettle commenced its pre-boil rumble. Firstly, there was Geoff: he was apprehensive about visiting Geoff tonight. Secondly, there was the diaketamine: yesterday's amazing trip, naturally, still loomed large in his mind, no doubt he'd be dreaming about it for weeks to come. Finally, there was the dream's clarity: a natural after-effect of the drug, perhaps?

A drug like diaketamine, a drug that so profoundly affected the brain, was bound to give 'flashbacks'. He might have even experienced one of those a few moments ago: there was certainly some kind of continuity break... An uninvited anxiety stepped forward at the thought of frequent and inconvenient flashbacks. And what about brain damage? Best not to dwell on it. The anxiety was roughly manhandled from the scene.

Time to drink that coffee...

'I've never heard you get so excited about a lecture before, Alex,' Bridgett idly remarked, as she joined Alex in the kitchen.

'What?'

'*What, what, what, what!* – is that all you can say this morning – *what!?*'

'I beg your pardon.'

Bridgett gave Alex a steely look. 'Stop trying to wind me up, love, it's too early in the morning.'

'I'm not trying to wind you up, I'm just half asleep still.'

'Yes, this must seem like the middle of the night to you, hmm?'

'Now who's doing the winding up?'

‘Okay, Alex, let’s start again, shall we? We’ve obviously climbed out of the wrong side of the bed this morning.’ Bridgett was attempting to be more conciliatory but her chattering simply got on his nerves. ‘You seemed to be looking forward to today’s lecture, the statistics mechanics or whatever, that’s why you needed the pen, remember?’

‘Why would I need a pen now?’ What was the daft hen blathering on about?

‘You tell me, Mr Grump!’ Bridgett made no sense, and it sounded like she was spoiling for a scrap.

Alex finished his coffee, pulled together some notes and books and made for the door. ‘I’ll catch you later.’

He reached the street and stopped to massage his throbbing forehead: this was too early—

He spied Gil: the mugger stared back from a favourite perch behind his owner’s window.

‘It’s all your fault you greedy little bastard!’

Gil just carried on watching, clearly unencumbered by any sense of guilt.

‘It’s all peanuts from—’ Alex checked his bag: Where were Cube’s notes on statistical mechanics? Still in the flat. And that was the first lecture this morning; he turned to face his front door and thought of Bridgett: No, to hell with it, Cube could have them later ... on second thoughts – he would retrieve them after all...

He returned to the lounge and found Bridgett reading Cube’s notes.

‘Err, excuse me, Bridgett, but I need those.’

‘What’s all this?’ Bridgett handed over the file and pointed to the red scrawled messages.

Alex blanched at the sight of them. ‘Holy..!’ he muttered under his breath.

‘Alex..? *Alex..!*’

But Alex was already out the door and on his way to the university.

‘Well, look who it is,’ chortled the bastard Jordan. He sat alone, at the front of the classroom. Alex ignored him and proceeded towards his dusty seat at one of the rear corners, directly behind Cube.

‘Here you go, mate,’ he said to Cube, ‘your stat file.’ He handed over the file; the red additions removed.

‘Oh, thanks, man, brilliant. I’ll be needing them, thanks very much,’ replied a thankful Cube.

‘Yeah, I’ll need to photocopy them later, if that’s okay?’

‘No problemo.’

‘Cheers. I was reading them last night, it’s good stuff.’

Cube turned around and gave Alex a sceptical look. But then his expression changed. ‘How are you feeling, you know, after.., you know, the “*thing*” – yesterday?’

‘Fine, tiptop, I’m even looking forward to this lecture.’ This sunny diagnosis would have been true but for the recently discovered note: his mind might not be in such good shape after all. There was also the issue of his mood swings, which, since the diaketamine trip, had been up and down like a yoyo. He’d always been moody, of course, and he readily acknowledged the causes: Geoff, Bridgett, his course, his money ... but the reactions to these factors appeared subtly shifted, as though something within,

something that held a particularly basal emotional view of life, had decided, unilaterally, to help out, to shoulder some of the burden, and feel some of the pain. And expose it to the light.

Was this all down to the drug..?

Dr Beresford (Cutthroat), today's lecturer, suddenly barged into the room.

'Morning,' he barked, as he placed a stack of papers on the front desk.

Beresford's face contained two eyes, a nose, and a mouth; he had no other distinguishing features. However, despite the bland appearance, Beresford was not a man to be trifled with. He stopped and smiled as he noticed Alex hiding at the back of the class; the rest of the class dutifully tittered on cue, and Alex felt himself go red.

'Mr Stanton, so nice of you to join us. You look.. older somehow, how long has it been?'

'I don't recall,' replied Alex.

'Too bloody long. That's how long it's been.' Beresford approached Alex and continued more quietly: 'Drop into my office after this lecture.' He returned to the front of the class and commenced the lecture.

Within five minutes Alex began to daydream, once again he thought about the vivid dream and the scrawled notes...

Alex, pay attention! that drug you've just taken, the diaketamine, it does more than you think. A lot more! It has somehow conjured up a life-force, something that resides down here, in the subconscious, and it has the power to cure me!! Are you listening!? it can cure me! But it needs something that Dai Evans possesses.

It needs you..., WE need you to give Dai your remaining diaketamine, but you mustn't, you absolutely mustn't just put it in his pint, make him snort it. I know this sounds strange, ridiculous even, but once Dai snorts the drug I'll be set free...

Alex, you must believe that this is real, and if you do nothing I'll probably go insane...

'Mr Stanton?'

Beresford waited at the front of the class; he held aloft a piece of chalk and invited Alex to complete the next line of equation.

Alex knew that Beresford knew that Alex knew – nothing. This pantomime was simply Beresford's revenge for all those skipped lectures. Alex received the chalk and held it in his sweaty palm as he studied the lines of equations on the board. This stuff looked difficult, convoluted and obscure – as tough as anything he'd seen on this degree course. No doubt most of the class had some reservations about it. He stared at the board, increasingly aware of the restless shuffles emanating from the students behind him – whether or not they were amused or embarrassed, or both, was hard to tell.

Except Alex did not know nothing. This proof had been covered in Cube's notes. Now, if he could just figure out this first step...

He leaned forward and wrote down the next line – and then the one after that. He continued, without intervention from Cutthroat, until the proof had been solved. He underlined the answer, handed the chalk back and returned to his seat, aware that an irritatingly smug expression now clung to his large-featured face.

But Cutthroat wasn't about to let him off the hook. In the remaining fifty minutes of

the lecture he called Alex up a further four times. Always the same pattern, however: hesitation, contemplation – solution.

How come he was successfully dealing with this shit!? Okay, he'd read Cube's notes but...

Near the end of the lecture Cutthroat invited Alex to deliberate over some esoteric quantum theory that lay beyond the requirements of this undergraduate physics course. It made no difference, he still managed to figure it out. It felt like his brain had been patched!

'Good luck, Stant, I'll see you down the refectory.'

'Yeah, cheers, Cube.'

At ten o'clock Alex watched as the rest of the class non-silently charged out of the classroom like a herd of liberated buffalo. They stampeded down the corridor sending fellow students and stray lecturers scurrying for their lives. Like Cube, most of them would be heading for the refectory. He'd meet them there later.

But first, this small matter of Beresford's office...

'Peter, I'm going to be speaking to Alex Stanton in a second, could you— ah! Here he is.'

Alex entered the office just as Beresford's colleague, and fellow lecturer, was being bounced out. He shot Alex a wholly unsympathetic look as he made his way to the door.

'Right—' Beresford suddenly became distracted by a two-page document that sat on his desk: it looked like officialdom. Surely it could wait..

Just as abruptly, Beresford lost interest and pushed the material to one side. His attention returned to Alex.

'I'd ask you to sit down, Alex, but why should I extend you that courtesy when you can't even be bothered to turn up to any of my lectures?'

Alex blankly stared back, wary in equal measure of appearing sheepish or cocky.

For a second, Beresford seemed eager to respond with a cold belligerent stare of his own. But he glanced away.

'I can't deny you've got a brain, you showed that this morning..' Beresford opened a drawer and retrieved a blue file. 'And, of course, you've demonstrated this fact on many occasions in the past..' He flicked through the file, eagerly searching for something. 'Along with Jordan, I'd say that you are one of the most naturally talented students..' He trailed off again, attention fixed on the file. What was he looking for? '...that I've ever had the misfortune to teach. But, unlike your more studious colleague—' Beresford handed Alex the file, '—you're going to sell yourself short.'

Alex accepted the file and glanced down at the open page, he had a pretty good idea what he was looking at.

Beresford continued: 'You've amassed seventeen module-points so far, carry on at this rate and the finals will probably yield you a further twelve.' He looked up. 'You'll drop short of honours.'

The file confirmed Beresford's words.

'But if you pull your finger out – and we're at the eleventh hour, here – I think you could add a further ten points to the total and attain a 2:2 honours. Nothing special, and a huge underachievement on your part, but, nonetheless—'

‘Worth having,’ stated Alex.

‘Yes, worth having,’ concurred Beresford. ‘It could set you up for postgraduate work. And then the slate would be wiped clean.’

Alex reflected on this as Beresford explained further: ‘There is an MSc in Quantum Physics starting here next year. If anything, that’s a field where you particularly shine.’

Alex looked up, ‘Jordan’s going on to that course, isn’t he?’

‘What of it?’ asked Beresford.

‘Nothing.’ Alex returned the blue file. ‘But thanks for the information, it was interesting. Was there anything else?’

Beresford seemed disappointed. ‘No, Mr. Stanton, nothing else.’ He pointed to the door, ‘hop it, your toast will be getting cold.’

Alex departed from the office but loitered by the door. ‘Post-grad Quantum Mechanics—’

‘Quantum Physics,’ corrected Beresford.

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t mind some of that.’

Beresford nodded. Pleased.

‘Here he is, super brain!’ exclaimed Cube.

Alex gave Cube a high-five.

‘I’ve got to hand it to you, Stanton, you’re a player. How did you know all that stuff today?’ asked Trevor D, another physicist.

Alex shrugged.

‘Thank God I wasn’t called up, I couldn’t understand any of that,’ remarked Angus. ‘You have got your uses, Al: you deflect the Cutthroat away from the rest of us.’

Alex beheld his admirers and assumed a look of appallingly insincere modesty. Everyone, it seemed, believed him to be some kind of prodigy. And maybe they were right.

He sipped scolding coffee and chatted with his new fan club as past dreams flashed him puzzling images and sharp, pungent emotions. He glanced up towards the door, and from the door to a nearby seat; his eyes finally came to rest on Jordan.

He fixed Jordan with an antagonistic glare. Jordan had remained silent so far – no words of praise from him.

‘What did you think, Jordan, were you impressed by my performance?’

Jordan stared back. ‘What did Beresford want to see you about?’

‘Why don’t you go and ask him, tosser?’

‘Maybe I will,’ said Jordan. He quickly finished his tea and departed in the direction of the library.

‘Why do you give Jordan such a hard time, Alex?’ asked Anne.

‘cause he’s a tosser,’ replied Alex.

‘No he’s not! He can be a bit full of himself at times, but he’s basically harmless. These days he’s quite quiet, isn’t he?’ Anne looked at the rest of the group and received some confirmatory nods in return.

‘Yeah, I never see him out these days, do you?’ asked Steve.

The group shook their heads.

‘That’s because *you* never go out, Steve,’ said Cube, ‘but, yeah, he does keep a lower

profile these days. Do you want that toast?’

‘Yes I do!’ said Steve, covering his toast with both hands.

‘Jordan’s never out because he’s revising – he’s in with a shout of a first – and besides, Alex here, who’s always out, would probably try to beat him up,’ replied Anne.

Alex shook his head: ‘Jordan despises me.’

‘That’s because you despise him,’ remarked Trevor D.

In time, someone changed the subject. As the group chatted about something else, Alex sat silently and brooded: maybe Jordan did seek to avoid him, he had made no secret of his desire to ‘put Jordan in hospital’. Was he perceived by his classmates as the bully here? He had been in a few fights ... but not, as yet, with Jordan...

After a further twenty minutes the group began to thin down as members drifted off.

‘What’s next?’ asked Alex.

‘Eleven: Nuclear Physics,’ said Cube. ‘You can fall asleep, Al, no problem.’

Cube was right, the lecturer was an old duffer. Unlike Cutthroat, he wouldn’t be asking him to perform circus tricks in front of the class.

‘Is that the last one this morning?’

‘There’s a tutorial at twelve, electronics—’

‘Sod that, we’ll head for the union bar, yeah?’

Cube hesitated. ‘Yeah, I s’pose.’

‘See you later,’ said Anne, as she departed.

Alex and Cube, now the only two that remained, watched her go.

‘I see Anne still favours the oversized-tent look,’ remarked Alex.

‘That’s because she’s got a rectangular body,’ replied Cube.

‘How do you know?’

‘Trevor D told me.’

‘How the fuck does he know?’

‘I don’t know, but he said, and I quote: “she is shaped like a cuboid”?’

‘Really,’ said Alex, laughing, ‘you should check her out, man, she’s the girl for you.’

Cube looked doubtful.

Alex changed the subject. ‘Hey, you know that stuff I took yesterday, the diaketamine? It might have been responsible for an amazing dream I had last night.’ He decided to forget about the scribbled notes.

‘That’s funny,’ said Cube ‘I had an amazing dream, too. I was with Geoff, and—’

‘Hey! I started this, you can hear *my* dream first!’ Alex paused. ‘Did you say, *Geoff?*’

‘Yes, indeed I did, it was a very vivid dream, it took place in the Lake District—’

‘What!?’ Alex’s shout caused several heads to turn. He whispered: ‘My dream was about Geoff; it was very vivid; it was set in the Lake District!’

Cube looked intrigued. ‘Where in the Lakes?’

He could clearly recall: ‘Summit of Glaramara, then Scafell Pike/Lingmell col.’

Cube seemed baffled by this news. ‘Me too – exactly the same!’

‘My God ... Are you winding me up, Cube?’

‘No way, I wouldn’t joke about Geoff.’

Alex gave an account of his dream and then listened to Cube’s; when his friend had finished, Alex reached into his pocket and showed Cube the front sheet from the

statistical mechanics notes. 'I found this shortly after I woke up.'

'This is incredible! You know what this means, don't you? – Geoff must have *really* visited us in our dreams!'

'What? Agh, come off it, Cube!'

'There can be no doubt, Al, for starters: there are too many coincidences, but mainly: how the hell do you explain this?' Cube pointed at the scribbled note.

Alex couldn't explain anything. But there was that little niggle at the back of his mind. He tried to listen to it but that direct approach simply caused it to fade away.

'He desperately wants you to give that new drug to Dai Evans. You must do it, Al.'

'What? It's worth fifty quid, man!' Alex was more dumfounded than ever. 'This is absurd, how could this action save Geoff?'

'Doesn't matter how preposterous it seems, doesn't even matter if it's all bull, you simply must act – and soon by the sounds of it.'

After a lengthy pause, Alex finally came to a decision:

'I'm not about to waste hard-to-get diaketamine on this... *whimsy!*' Cube was ready to protest, but Alex stopped him. 'We need to check this out further...'

Burns: *That were the second track taken from the David Aribuss album: Wave Train. Nice. We'll have some more of that comin' up later in the show. Right, answer to Mind Bender, after this:*

Four minutes of music follows...

Burns: *Elvis Presley and Jail House Rock. Okay, the Mind Bender: I presented you with this conundrum:*

A prisoner serving a life sentence is given the opportunity to go free. He's taken to two identical doors – identical, that is, except for the fact that one is blue where as t'other's red. Also, the blue one's a bit bigger; and red one's got one of those lovely burnished oak effects you find on–

Loud cockney voice (taped): *Burns, will you pipe down with that RUBBISH!!*

Burns: *Sorry, I didn't mean to be confusing yous like. Let's just say that there are two doors – blue one and red one. The prisoner is told that behind one door lies Liberty, bu', behind other door lies Death. Ooo err. To help the prisoner decide which door to choose, he can draw on assistance of two guides. Bu', one of these guides always tells lies, where as t'other always tells truth. Bu', prisoner don't know which is which. Are you still with me? I know this one's a bit long. Anyway, soldiering on: the prisoner is told that he can ask one guide, one question – and one question only. So what is the one question the prisoner can ask either guide, that will allow him to ascertain, derive, conclude, infer and, err, deduce, with complete confidence, what fate awaits him behind blue and red doors?*

I know it were hard, but some of you did get it right. Shelly from Bamber Bridge is the winner:

The prisoner asks either guide: "which is the door to freedom according to the other guide." Then prisoner takes the door not indicated! Work it out!

Well done, Shelly, you've just won yourself a Radio Ribblehead mug.

Some more of David Aribuss now. This is: Many Worlds, Oceans Flow. Nice.

Five minutes of flaccid music follows...

Burns: *Liz just texted to ask where I got today's Mind Bender from. It were actually sent in by a warder at Preston Prison on Ribbleton Lane: he just read it out from prison rule book.*

Burns starts to laugh. Six minutes of music and two minutes of commercials follow...

Burns: *Now, there's a young chap by the name of Geoff who's rather poorly in hospital. I've got a message here from all your pals at the university. It simply says: 'Get Well Soon.' Same goes from me, Geoff. By the way, some of your friends are commin' to visit you later, so that'll be nice. Chin up, mate; this is for you, the last one from David Aribuss: Superposition Nights. Marvellous!*

Five minutes of music follows...

'Turn that crap off will you, love.' *Click...*

They found him in the third of the three beds; only his grey and puffy head lay exposed above the covers.

The nurse had warned them not to be alarmed by Geoff's appearance, but it still came as a shock. He looked terrible – he looked dead. Alex, Bridgett and Cube continued to scrutinize the sad lifeless figure in the bed; they had to remind themselves that Geoff no longer dwelt in a conventional coma, he was, in fact, wide-awake.

‘Hello Geoff,’ said Bridgett, giving him a kiss on his pallid cheek.

‘How are you doing, mate?’ asked Cube.

‘Hey Geoff, it’s Alex, sorry about the delay in coming, but—’

‘You seem to be making great progress, Geoff, the doctors are most impressed,’ said Bridgett, ‘they say you’ve come a long way in the last few days; since recovering from the—’

‘Yeah, next time we come, we’ll bring you some grapes,’ said Alex. ‘We brought some today, but Cube ate them all.’

Cube and Alex laughed self-consciously. Geoff remained unmoved, his prosaic expression revealed nothing.

‘Can you hear us, Ge—’

‘YES.’

The loud electronic voice sounded nothing like Geoff. Again, they had been told, but, again...

The voice had emerged from a confusing jumble of electronic equipment positioned on a rack at the end of Geoff’s bed. On the lowest shelf was an oscilloscope and paper recorder; these provided continuous readouts of Geoff’s brainwave patterns. This information then fed through to a computer on the second shelf. Here, the patterns were analyzed and compared with the computer’s own matrices for ‘yes’, and for ‘no’. After making a match, the computer relayed the information to the top shelf where a small loudspeaker broadcast the result.

The doctors had explained how it worked:

The success of the technique largely depended on Geoff’s concentration and on the clinician’s skill at asking the correct questions. Sometimes repeats would be necessary. If the computer found that an incoming signal met some of the necessary parameters, but not more than two-thirds, it would call out: *“Please try again”*. If the signal matched the matrix, but contained extra ‘add-ons’, the computer accepted the signal as positive.

If the computer made a mistake, Geoff had the ability to notify the questioner. As well as ‘yes’ and ‘no’, Geoff and the determined staff had developed a vocabulary that also included: ‘mistake’, ‘pain’, ‘end’ and ‘doctor!’ It had been painstaking work.

Nobody really knew Geoff’s prognosis. His overall physical condition remained weak but stable; he would probably survive for years – maybe five years. But none of the medical staff held out much hope for any further, dramatic improvement in Geoff’s condition. On the other hand, last week, no one would have placed money on Geoff emerging from his coma.

Only time would tell.

‘Whoa, you gave us a bit of a shock there,’ said Alex, ‘you sound different..’

‘Yeah, have you got a cold?’ asked Cube.

‘NO.’ Came the electronic voice, its brusque, harsh tone momentarily silencing the three.

‘How are you feel—’ Bridgett stopped: they’d already asked that question. ‘Are you in any discomfort?’

‘NO.’ boomed out, once again.

This was difficult; but then Cube came to the rescue. ‘Would you like to hear what’s

been going on at college?’

‘YES.’

To Alex’s relief, Cube began to recount the interesting and not-so-interesting happenings that had taken place over the last two weeks. When the opportunity arose, he and Bridgett chipped in with amusing tales of their own.

After about fifteen minutes of this, the one-way conversation began to run dry. Alex leaned back and surreptitiously cast an eye over the room: there was one other patient, a middle-aged man who sat up in the middle bed watching the evening news on TV. He listened through headphones. The only other person in the ward, a nurse, sat at her desk at the far end of the ward, engrossed in her paperwork. When Bridgett began to relate some gossip about a friend of hers on Geoff’s course, Alex received a meaningful glance from Cube. It was time.

‘Bridgett,’ Alex quietly interrupted, ‘I’ve got to have a word with Geoff – in private.’

Bridgett nodded: ‘Come on, Cube, we’ll wait outside.’ Cube and Bridgett rose from their seats, said their goodbyes, and quietly departed the ward.

All was still. The silent TV flashed images of faraway strife...

‘Geoff, it’s Alex, I’m on my own now.’

‘YES.’

Alex moved close to Geoff’s ear and spoke in mute tones. ‘Geoff, last night...’ he hesitated, aware of how ridiculous the next question might sound: ‘last night ... did you talk to me – in my dream?’ He whispered the last bit and glanced at the nurse. She was watching him.

‘YES.’

‘Was the dream in Manchester?’

‘NO.’

‘Was the dream in London?’

‘NO.’

‘Was the dream in the Lake District?’

‘YES.’

Alex turned and glanced again at the suspicious nurse. ‘Do you want me to give Dai Evans the diaketamine?’

‘YES.....YES.....YES.....YES.....YES.....YES.....-’

‘What is going on there!?’

Alex turned around. The nurse had leapt from her seat and was racing towards Geoff’s bed. By the time she arrived, Geoff had fallen silent.

‘Are you okay, Geoff?’ she asked anxiously.

‘YES.’

‘Sorry nurse, I was just telling him a joke,’ explained Alex.

‘YES.’

‘Yes, well you shouldn’t get him too excited.’

‘No, sorry,’ he replied. And then to Geoff: ‘okay then, Geoff, I’m off now; I’ve got some important work to do.’

‘YES.’

Alex met up with Bridgett at the neurological department’s reception area and gave her a

hug.

‘Well, we tried our best, that’s all we could do,’ Bridgett stated.

Alex nodded, ‘I’ve got to take a squirt.’

‘Alex! Don’t be crude.’

‘Sorry, where are the bogs?’

‘Down there.’

‘Well?’ asked Cube, when Alex arrived at the agreed rendezvous point.

‘He’s left the building,’ replied Alex.

‘Who has?’

‘Elvis, of course!’

Somewhere down the line something had worked; Alex would now deliver Dai. The most precarious part of the plan was over. Several even-chance components had multiplied together to produce, in my mind, an improbable success.

But it remained far too early to celebrate. This was an accumulator – any failure meant absolute failure. Alex still had to get his powder into Dai's brain, and this left plenty of scope for failure. Firstly: would Dai be located? Maybe, like the proverbial bus, the quantum boozer never showed up when truly needed. It was Friday evening: Dai could have gone home for the weekend, back to the Valleys, to watch real men play real games.

If Dai *had* remained in Preston, where in Preston would he be? Where did he live? Where did he drink? Everywhere! The search alone could take all night.

And assuming that Dai is located, how does Alex actually get the drug to him? He couldn't drop it in his pint (hopefully Alex fully understood that critical point) he'd have to persuade Dai to snort it, and that would not be easy. Dai, as I remembered from my night of a thousand Guinness', prided himself on being rabidly anti-drugs – alcohol excepted, of course.

I shook my 'head' and listened to the bustling sounds of the busy ward: it was still visiting hours and Hargreaves, for I could recognize his voice, chatted merrily with his family. I heard talk of recovery and likely discharge, good for him!

I grew more tense over *my* imminent discharge.

Since 'talking' to my friends, my rehabilitation had taken on a much greater urgency than ever before. The visit from Alex, Bridgett and Cube had proved to be a painful experience – for all of us. They'd tried their best, but it became all too apparent, especially to my super-sensitive ears, that the going had been tough; and no wonder, when my only utterances were 'YES' and 'NO'. So much for my reputation as a chatterbox. That electronic voice, a miracle of ingenuity, and largely cobbled together in-house by some very clever and thoughtful people, grated on my nerves at times. Never more so than this evening. If only I could at least talk normally...

Thoughts began to linger over my dismal plight. The stakes were so high tonight. If Alex failed, South would no longer exist, and if that happened, all would be lost: I'd stay paralyzed, stuck in this useless body!

I even held doubts about the prospects of future dreaming. South had allowed the dreams to solidify and become more coherent, thus relegating the dreamer's role to that of catalyst. Just as Cube's audience had vanished the moment he turned his back on them, so hidden parts of the park, like the cartwheeling girl, should never have 'been' in the first place. My own subconscious undoubtedly played a role here, but probably only a peripheral one. Without South the dreams would become fragmented, beyond my control, maybe not even worth controlling.

But there seemed to be no point in dwelling over this: dreaming the dreams of others offered no real future ... And anyway – think of recovery!!

I yearned for someone to turn the radio back on; this requirement must be put across to the staff somehow: “*I need to hear a radio or a TV – silence is bad for me.*” How on earth could I ever tell them that? It would be easy if they only asked!

Come to think of it, I felt too keyed-up to listen to the radio; I needed to return to Dreamsville; South no doubt would be keeping tabs on tonight’s developments and I wanted to be with her, following the action live, as it unfolded. Yes, the time had come for me to pop out of my body and find myself a taxi ride to *South House*.

If only it were that simple. I listened to the sounds of the ward. There seemed little chance of acquiring the necessary conditions until late at night, and by then it would all be over. Hmm, maybe I could find another way. How did ‘ordinary’ people achieve out-of-body experiences?

I tried to meditate, clear my mind of the external sounds and recreate the conditions of the spinning void. No good. I lacked any knowledge of this ancient art and, inevitably, my attempts failed. I couldn’t clear my mind of internal thoughts: they were trapped in my head, locked in by the subliminal sounds that came from without.

But astral projection must be possible, even with this racket going on; the outside sounds had no direct influence on the ability, it was all in the *mind*.

There must be a way!

Maybe South could help:

“South!”

“South! Can you hear me..?”

Nothing. Awake, my mind lay stranded, out of bounds.

Hargreaves continued to entertain his family with humorous words and sound effects. The guy was a regular comedian and dickhead.

An idea came to mind: rather than trying to free my mind of all thoughts – a nigh on impossible task for anyone except an expert Yogi – why not focus on *one* useful thought.

I would try to imagine myself near the ceiling – the locality my astral body seemed to favour most – and concentrate on a visualisation of it as it appeared to my warped astral vision. Slowly, I began to block out all other extraneous thoughts; I relaxed and the task seemed to become easier and easier. I even concentrated on the painted ceiling’s solidified brushstroke patterns. This is going to work! I thought.

The image of the ceiling steadily filled my entire being; my universe denied all else...

Except Hargreaves, who had just let rip with the most tumultuous of hearty cackles. Son-of-a-bitch!!!

I hope the joke’s worth it, I thought, my concentration completely broken. As a reflex action, I turned...

It had *already* worked. I *was* on the ceiling. Hargreaves had done me a favour, the old git. Without his intervention I could have stayed up there all night, not daring to ‘look’ for fear of losing my mental grip. I drifted down and orientated myself into a standing position.

Okay, I’m in a hospital, I reminded myself, the most likely place in town to find a sleeping person at seven-in-the-evening. I dropped through the floor and commenced my hunt for a ‘taxi’.

After leaving the hospital, Alex, Bridgett and Cube caught a bus into town. They hopped off at Friargate and walked towards the brown-brick university buildings.

‘What are your plans tonight, Bridgett?’ Alex asked, once they’d reached the university library.

‘Well, firstly I’ll go to the halls and take a quick shower. Then I’m meeting Andrea and the girls. We’ll probably run riot around town and then head for the union. Guess we’ll meet you guys there?’ Alex formed a picture in his mind of a large, loud, pissed and formidable all-woman gang. Female bonding. ‘I’m in a mood to let my hair down.’ – Bridgett confirmed the image.

‘Sure, we all are,’ Alex said. ‘We’ll leave you to it, me and Cube’ll catch you and your drunken hussy friends later at the union.’ He gave Bridgett a pat on her ample bottom.

‘Okay, see you later. Bye, Cube.’

Alex and Cube watched as Bridgett departed for the nearby halls of residence.

Alex turned to Cube: ‘Now then, where to, Cube?’

‘Wherever Dai Evans is.’

‘And where, my friend, would that be?’

Cube looked blank. Preston suddenly seemed like an awfully large town.

‘Do you know what course he does?’

‘Err – no.’

‘Do you know where he lives?’

‘Nnnnope.’ Cube stared at his phone. ‘It would help if the guy used social media, but there appears to be zip!’

‘He has got a smartphone, I’ve seen him use it,’ replied Alex.

‘That’s true,’ replied Cube, ‘I’ll fire off a few tweets; see if anyone’s seen him..?’

Alex nodded: ‘Right, but first, let’s get a drink, I’m gasping, we’ll decide what else to do then. Where to?’

‘Wherever–’

‘We’ll try *The Lamb and Packet*.’

Inside the busy pub, Alex ordered two pints of lager and took a stool by the bar. He searched for any evidence of Dai online. There were several “Dai Evans” and huge numbers of “David Evans”, but nothing linked to Preston or the university.

‘I’m drawing a blank. Anything?’ he asked Cube.

Cube shook his head as he continued to study his phone. ‘Looking for Dai in Preston is like looking for an alcoholic in a haystack,’ he observed. ‘I’ve had some retweets, and a tweet from SBainbridge97: “wtf is Dai Evans??”’

‘Who the fuck is “SBainbridge97!?”’ demanded Alex.

‘Old school pal. Currently studying at Leeds.’

‘Oh, well *that’s* helpful!’

‘He keeps in touch with the Preston scene, locals, not students. If Dai moves in those circles...’ Cube trailed off, hypnotized by his phone.

Alex pondered the matter as he glanced around the pub. He recognized the new union president, Dave Gilsenan. Gilsenan, the ‘solitary man’ he’d observed arguing with three other students in the union bar, was once again engaged in more lively debate, this time with a handful of irate first-year students.

Alex rose from his stool and sauntered over to join Gilsenan and Co.

‘Housing: we know it’s a problem, and we’re going to stamp it out!’ declared Gilsenan, with force.

‘What kind of hackneyed cliché is that!?’ demanded one of the first-years. ‘You’re going to stamp out *housing*?’

‘No! The *problem*... Hello, it’s Alex Stanton, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah, that’s right... can I just steal a minute of your time.’ Alex ignored the silenced students. ‘One minute – max.’

‘Sure, Alex. Excuse me a moment, folks.’

Alex ushered Gilsenan towards the doorway. ‘By the way, who were you arguing with yesterday, in the union?’

‘Huh? Oh yeah, I saw you there, second-year business admin students. Argumentative bunch!’

‘Yeah, I know... Look, Dave, I need a favour, it’s delicate, personal, you know? I need to track down Dai Evans – I’ve just got word that Spike has been in an accident, a hit-and-run or something. The guy’s all bashed up and at the Royal Preston. I’m not sure if it’s serious, but, you know, Dai needs to be—’

‘Who’s Spike?’ asked Gilsenan, looking restless.

‘You know Spike! He’s like the student mascot.’

‘I’m sorry, Alex, I don’t know Spike, and I don’t know who Dai Evans is either. Have you tried online?’

‘We’re on it, no luck yet.’

Gilsenan shrugged: ‘Look, I’ve got to be getting back inside. Sorry about Spike.’ He held his hands apart, shrugged, and then promptly disappeared back into the pub. Alex followed and caught up just as Gilsenan retook his seat.

‘Look, this is important, can’t you just get his address for me?’

‘whose?’

‘Dai’s of course!’

‘I’m sorry, we – the union – don’t have access to that information. And besides, the offices are closed right now. You should check with administration. They’ll know.’ Gilsenan turned his back on Alex.

‘The admin staff will be long gone by now,’ responded Alex, finally aware that Gilsenan was going to be of no help.

The president swivelled back to face him, a look of growing exasperation on his face: ‘Alex, you’re a good friend to Dai, that’s obvious, but the university can’t help, not until Monday morning.’ he glanced back at the watching students. ‘Contact the police, get them to put out an A.P.B.’

This elicited some laughter. Alex turned to face the cacklers: ‘Don’t take President Gilsenan here too seriously, girls, he’s what’s known in political circles as a “broken

plate”.’

‘What’s a broken plate?’ asked one of the students.

‘You don’t want to know, love, trust me. It’s too sordid. In his case, sheep were involved.’

Alex returned to Cube. ‘Well, Gilsean was a waste of time, the big heap of shit.’

‘What did you expect,’ replied Cube, ‘did you think El Presidente would just hand over Dai’s business card, or something?’

‘No. It was just worth a try. Anything turned up?’

‘No. I’m not sure we’re getting this to the punters who are currently out-and-about. Who do we know who’s into twitter and shit and is *always* out?’

‘Vikram?’

‘Yes! We’ll get him to do the heavy lifting.’ Cube’s thumb began to dance over his phone. ‘Got any other ideas?’ he asked, without looking up.

‘Not really, just that we try a few other pubs.’

Over the course of the next hour Alex and Cube looked in on several other pubs. Occasionally they stopped for a drink, but usually they just took a quick glance around before departing again. Never any sign of Dai.

‘Where the fuck is he!’ demanded Alex, growing more dispirited. ‘It’s Friday night, he must be around here somewhere!’

‘We haven’t tried *The Adelphi* yet,’ suggested Cube.

‘I doubt he’ll be in there, but, come on, let’s check it out.’

The pub was full, like everywhere else, soon it would be full-to-bursting.

‘Nice try, Cube, but he’s not here either,’ stated Alex.

‘Let’s take five,’ suggested Cube, ‘I’m knackered.’

‘Yeah, alright... game of pool?’

Cube quietly eyed the pool balls, apparently deep in thought. He finally took his shot, missed, and then turned to Alex: ‘You know, Al, this is all so weird, I don’t mean the fact that Geoff, somehow, is making contact with us, although that’s weird as well, although the evidence must now be considered irrefutable, although clearly inexplicable to modern science, although according to quantum—’

‘Get on with it, Cube, for Christ’s sake!’

‘Yes, let’s suppose that your diet-cat-on-beans is somehow key, and let’s suppose that Geoff, through mysterious forces – not yet fully understood – somehow knows this.’

There was a short pause.

‘Is that it?’ asked Alex.

‘No,’ replied Cube, ‘the real mystery is this: why hasn’t he told us to give *him* the drug? I mean, what the hell has Dai Evans got to do with the price of buns!?’

‘There is only one possible explanation that I can think of – let’s face it, this whole thing’s nuts, init? We’re only doing it because of the off-chance—’

‘What’s the one possible explanation?’ pressed Cube.

‘Diaketaamine is poison. This is Geoff’s revenge.’

‘But *you’ve* taken it!’

‘I know, that’s what’s worrying me.’

Remove dreamer.

<return>

The young man departed to continue his drug-twisted dream. I was so glad to be rid of this one.

Finding a sleeper in the hospital turned out to be considerably more difficult than I'd expected. However, after a lengthy search, I had managed to intercept an adolescent on his way to surgery. He was out cold, his mind held in ice by powerful anaesthesia. Despite this, the youth's narrow and weak aura still provided an adequate passage to his dreams.

But *his* dreams were different.

The colourful, paranoid and prop-laden worlds to which I had become accustomed were nowhere to be seen. All around me was grey, endless billowing clouds of it. And there was no sound. Was I alone in this featureless mindscape? No. As always, the dreamer, if this guy truly could be called a dreamer, turned out to be close at hand. He drifted with me, through cumulus, showing all the animation of a dead stone. I appeared to have no control over this 'dream' – I couldn't even call up the laptop.

I felt a sensation of descent, as though the dreamer and I were falling into deeper and deeper states of unconsciousness. The clouds became darker, and thicker, and I sensed their suffocating embrace upon my own struggling consciousness.

A vague form appeared below, little more than a darker region of grey within the bland uniformity. It reminded me of the cliffs of Lingmell as they had emerged from the mists after I'd hurled myself off the summit. As though taking that idea as fact, I suddenly found myself free of the clouds, and plummeting towards a rocky landscape below.

We both landed with a thud at the Lingmell col and the dreamer briefly opened his eyes, an act that finally allowed me to re-established control. I wasted no time in severing our link.

Alone, I commenced the short climb up Lingmell only to encounter that enervating treacle once again. I wondered if this effect had something to do with the proximity of South House and approaching the end of the "grid" as Cube had called it, but there were never any problems on the actual summit. It was probably just the physical exertion of climbing, or rather, the need for the dream software to simulate physical exertion. 'Real' dreams frequently tended to get this wrong: sometimes you could run like a gazelle, other times you were ground to a standstill like this. Thank god for Cube's tip. I turned around and continued on in reverse, stumbling and cursing as I went.

On nearing the summit I turned to face forwards and gaped at the scene ahead. The mountaintop buzzed with military activity: tanks, helicopters, rocket launchers and heavy

artillery lay scattered all about, higgledy-piggledy, like they'd just been dumped there by a distracted child.

I hesitated at the sight of this bizarre defence expo, but there seemed little point in turning back, and besides, I'd been spotted; a couple of soldiers broke off from the main group and ran towards me, brandishing guns. I stuck my hands in the air and waited; they approached and silently ushered me towards the main aggregation of battle-tanks.

We passed close to the castle and I noticed the extensive scaffolding now affixed to its grey, igneous walls. On the various wooden platforms, large numbers of man-sized beetles worked with blowtorches and pneumatic drills; I realized that all of these manifestations were simply yet more aspects of the 'Species-Wide Immune System: Human.' A palpable sense of impending strike hung in the air; South House lay under siege and the immune system, after a prolonged and frustrating struggle, felt poised on the verge of final victory.

The commanding officer – like the troopers, human in form – eyed me suspiciously as I arrived; judging by his uniform he assumed the rank of two-star general.

'Sir!' barked one of my escorts.

'Thank you, corporal, good work,' said the general.

'Sir!' barked both escorts as they returned to their positions.

Would I be able to bullshit my way through this one?

'Good day, general, how are the—'

'Never mind the "good day, general", mister! Just who the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing here!? Don't you know this is a restricted combat zone?' The general had an American accent but he said the words "good day general" in what he assumed was realistic limey. Dick Van Dyke could have done better.

'Where are your *SWISH* papers?' he challenged. Now I was in trouble! I considered running for it but before I had time to put this suicidal plan into motion, my laptop beeped. Nothing to lose, I handed the computer over to the general without even looking at the screen.

The general read the laptop's words and then thrust the thing back into my hands.

'Goddamnit!! What the hell do we need a "Senior Negotiator" for!?'

I felt an increase in confidence. 'That's not really your concern, general; my orders are clear, and they're all outlined here.' I brandished my laptop. 'Now, I must gain entry to the castle. Will you assist – or continue to obstruct?' I had a gift for this.

The general looked ready to explode, but he quickly calmed down.

'Wait there,' he ordered. '*Private!!*'

A trooper came running over; he turned his back to reveal a portable field radio. The general took the handset and clicked it a couple of times.

'I'm going to check your orders with HQ,' the general said, waving the radio handset close to my face.

Could South deal with this?

From the radio there emerged a sudden burst of static followed by a female American voice.

'*CSHH Go ahead.*'

'X-ray delta zero one: this is command one, get me the governor's office immediately.'

'Standby,' said the husky voice at the other end. Then after several seconds: 'Command one: The governor is unattainable at this time.'

The general was not pleased: 'Unattainable!! Don't you people know we got us a major situation here! Now listen up! I need a security check – and I need it NOW!'

The general gave me an incredulous look. I returned my standard "civil servants, what are they like?" expression.

There was a five-second delay before the radio operator came back: 'Command one. Affirmative. Please provide the details of the check, over.'

The general looked fed up; he turned to me: 'Here, give me that damned thing.' He snatched the laptop from my hand and began reading from the screen:

'SUBJECT: CHRISTIE + GEOFFREY + T ++ VISCOUNT.

PRESENTATION: HUMAN : LIVE.

DESIGNATION: SENIOR SYSTEM NEGOTIATOR.

CLEARANCE: X-RAY GOLF ONE ZERO OBLIQUE ONE WHISKEY ROMEO.

CHARGE: RETRIEVAL OF HIGH VALUE COLLATERAL FROM ANOMALY.'

The general interrupted his transmission and turned to me:

'I guess that must be the antenna, huh?'

I nodded, pleased to see that he was lightening up.

'CLASSIFICATION: TRIPLE ALPHA.'

'Please verify. How copy?'

The female radio operator came straight back: 'Copydall. Standby.'

We waited.

'We're just doing this by the numbers, Viscount. It won't take long.' It sounded as though the general now regarded me as legit.

'CSHH Command one: Viscount Christie checks out. You are requested to provide full cooperation. During negotiations with Anomaly, Christie is empowered to call for a two-hour ceasefire. How copy?'

'errRRoger that, copydall. Command one, out.' The general replaced the handset but instructed the private to stay close.

'Okay, Viscount, you're cleared. Now, do you want to conduct negotiations out here, or–' the general paused '–in there?'

'Talks are at a delicate stage, general, and the potential rewards are high, I must meet the anomaly inside.' I started to walk towards the castle.

'Roger that, but don't just mosey on in there, Viscount, you'll as likely get your balls bitten off by the dog.' The general was back on the radio. He fiddled with the bands and clicked the handset.

'CSHH Sergeant Equezi,' came the clear voice on the radio.

'Yeah, Sergeant, break off, we're going to attempt some parley.'

I watched as the beetles working on the scaffolding put down their heavy equipment. Some lay on their backs, others climbed down from the scaffolding and performed some simple stretching exercises. One of the nearest bugs marched up towards us.

‘Here comes Equez.’

The cockroach stopped, saluted the general, and then began drinking from a bottle of mineral water, its antennae waving about in my general direction.

‘Sergeant Equez, do we have any breaches yet?’

‘That’s an A-ffirmative, sir, the rear section now contains several man-sized breach-units, however, forced entry is not advised at this time.’ Equez wiped his head on a dirty rag. ‘It would be suicidal for one man to try: that damned Labrador..,’ the bug looked at me, ‘he’s deadly, sir, and always in several places at once.’

‘Roger that, sergeant,’ said the general. ‘Well, you heard him, Viscount, I recommend you attempt communication with the anomaly from *this* vantage – it’s channel five. Private!’

‘Thank you, general.’ I took the radio handset, selected channel five, opened my mouth and wondered what the hell was going to come out:

‘Lingmell anomaly, Lingmell anomaly this is Viscount Christie, Senior System Negotiator. Do you copy?’

South’s seductive and mocking voice came over the radio: *‘Hello, Viscount, nice to hear from you again.’*

‘Nice to hear from *you*, anomaly. I am cleared to commence the final round of negotiations and request face-to-face parley.’

‘What is the point of further negotiation?’ came the sultry radio-voice. Why was she making this unnecessarily difficult? Was everything just a game to this woman?

‘We are interested in retrieving some, or all, of the antenna hardware.’

‘Why should I let you have it?’

My mind went blank. ‘Well, we’ll have to talk about that. I request entry to your castle fortress.’

There was a short delay...

‘I will grant you safe conduct – but on one strict condition: the general and his goons will stop their attack on my house.’

I turned to the general. He held up two fingers to remind me that I had two hours. They’d lay off the castle for that long at least.

‘Lingmell anomaly, I am empowered to instruct the general and his staff to refrain from further attacks on your house for two hours, repeat, two hours.’

‘Very well, approach the front door, and instruct the bugs to retreat. If the general reneges on this agreement, I’ll feed you to my dog.’

That caused a ripple of disquiet among the troops. Obviously they saw a different side to Brock.

‘Don’t worry, Viscount, our instructions are clear, we won’t renege,’ stated the general.

‘I’m sure you won’t, general.’ I firmly shook his hand, the playacting starting to get the better of me. I also offered a hand to Equez; like the general, he emphatically grasped it.

‘Here, take this radio set, Viscount, and remember: channel five – and you only have two hours.’ I considered giving him a salute, but the Preston-student salute would only aggravate a genuine military man. I just nodded and walked towards the castle.

On my way, I met the assorted insect life as they pulled back from the castle walls;

some of the larger beetles still wore visors over their eyes. All the bugs treated me with great respect, and several even wished me good luck. One huge ladybird stopped me with an outstretched front leg: 'I hope this antenna is worth it, sir.'

'So do I, son.' It was the first honest thing I'd said all evening.

On entering South House I was met by an enthusiastic Brock.

'Woof.'

He then proceeded up one of the spiral staircases and indicated that I should follow. We reached a darkened corridor on the 'first floor', and that in turn led to another, which brought us to the foot of another staircase, which ascended to another corridor, at the end of which was another staircase, which deposited us into a dark and dusty garret from which a steep flight of steps led, finally, to the castle's cupola roof.

'Ah, the Viscount has arrived! Here to commence some "face-to-face" with the anomaly?'

I blushed.

'Now, now, let's not be bashful, you handled yourself well out there.'

I dismissed the compliment with a modest shrug. 'How is our friend in the North?' I asked, hoping to hear good news.

South maintained her cheerful demeanour: 'He can't find Dai; I think he is losing interest in the quest.'

'Oh.'

‘Another game?’ asked Alex.

‘You’re up against this guy, here – it’s winner stays on,’ replied Cube, handing the newcomer his cue.

‘Oh, right..’ Alex watched as the scruffy individual inserted two coins into the slot and released the balls. He looked like a ‘traveller’, and he was on his own.

‘You break, man,’ said the stranger. ‘Name’s Wayne, by the way.’ He didn’t have a local accent, but his speech was slurred and hard to place.

‘Alex.’ Alex broke and sent the balls scattering. Nothing went down.

Wayne stepped forward, a slight wobble to his gait, and surveyed the table. Despite his obvious inebriation, or perhaps because of it, he exhibited a steady arm and a keen eye. The game didn’t last long...

‘Well played, Wayne,’ said Alex, placing his cue on the rack. He turned to Cube: ‘We should move on, maybe try the union.’

‘And what if Dai’s not there?’ asked Cube, watching a new player set up the balls.

‘I guess we—’

‘That’s a good Welsh name!’ said Wayne, his Valleys accent now clear.

Cube seemed unimpressed: ‘Yeah, God save the Taffies.’

Wayne fired the cueball towards the triangle of reds and yellows; he briefly eyed the effects before turning back to Cube: ‘*Odin Brinkley Announcement*. I’m in the band. We’re doin’ your university’s *Shed* later, yous two wanting tickets to the gig? I’ve got freebies.’ Wayne reached into his pocket and proceeded to fumble with a handful of tickets; he held up his game, annoying his opponent.

‘No thanks,’ said Cube, curtly.

Wayne snorted and returned his attention to the game: three pots, three balls down the hole.

Alex watched the Welshman’s polished performance. That band he was in: *Odin Brinkley Whatever*, he’d heard about them, a Welsh version of the Pogues; all fired-up Celtic passion and generic anti-Englishness. They actively campaigned for Welsh independence...

‘We’ll take the tickets, Wayne, cheers! Can you spare three? I’ve heard you guys are pretty hot,’ said Alex with a smile.

‘We’re speed-freakin’ fuckin’ fantastic, man!! ...Yeah, no probs.’

Alex accepted the tickets and glanced up at the disapproving face of Cube.

We stared down from the castle battlements.

‘What the hell has happened to the immune system!?’ I asked. ‘It seems to be so much more highly evolved and powerful.’

South smiled. ‘In fact it was *I* who nudged them in this new direction by encouraging their highest systems to become more directly involved in this ‘campaign’.’

‘Why?’

‘A *SWISH* receptive to the notion of negotiation would proceed more cautiously, give us more time – and I think we need it! Also, if Alex fails, the negotiations will become *real*, and I intend to save my neck, one way or another.’

I reflected on this. ‘Assuming that you and *SWISH* can work something out, where does that leave me?’ I felt perturbed by South’s shift of emphasis towards some kind of negotiated settlement. Did she secretly doubt Alex’s resolve, his determination to see this through, no matter what!?

‘You will remain bound by your locked-in syndrome.’

‘Oh, that’s great!’

South regarded me. ‘It might not be all that bad. When this is all over the immune system may want to call upon your services again.’

‘Really!? Don’t they have their own negotiators?’

South laughed. ‘No, it’s a new designation, I made it up. As I said, I thought the old brute needed a little finesse. A skilled negotiator would be a great asset. Their original intention was simply to break into this house, smash the antenna and isolate the component thalami, but now, even as we speak, the high command is discussing the possible benefits of retrieving the antenna intact. Naturally, they will require modifications – they will have to rid it of sentience first.’

‘i.e. – you.’

‘Precisely. The system is very interested in the outcome of these ‘negotiations’, talks they only assume are genuine, and when they are complete *you* will hand over an intact antenna, one that is free of awareness. The immune system will be most impressed!’

‘And this could happen? Even if you fail to secure Dai’s thalamus?’

‘I would have to vacate the antenna, and that is not impossible. The trick will lie in convincing *SWISH* that I can be trusted in my new home.’

‘Where would you move to?’

South drew back somewhat: ‘We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, but I have a few ideas...’

I pondered the notion of working for *SWISH* ...I couldn’t quite see it, somehow. ‘So, apart from dealing with you, just what would a “species-wide” immune system want with a negotiator? Come to think of it, what does a species-wide immune system actually do!?’

‘So many different things: combat disease—’

‘I thought regular immune systems did that.’

‘Yes, but sometimes they need help: for example, in the ongoing battle against

influenza.'

'Huh, seriously?'

'Of course! Without intervention from a species-wide system that can relay and disseminate the various local immunity solutions, this virus and many other pathogens would gain the upper hand. It is the same for all species. Without it, multicellular life would just get devoured. It would never have evolved in the first place.'

I was sceptical. 'Hmm, interesting, but surely the immune system won't expect me to negotiate with a virus!'

'It might, but it is more likely to require your assistance in controlling the spread of nuclear and chemical weapons, or perhaps in any dealings with ET.'

'How the hell does the immune system control the spread of nuclear weapons!?'

'It doesn't. Not effectively, anyway, although it is making some progress here. It mainly relies on the unconscious form of telepathy that holds these dream spheres together, a cumbersome tool at the best of times. It needs more conscious human control to help focus their efforts, so you would be invaluable to them, in my opinion, as would be the antenna.'

'Woof.'

South and I turned to regard Brock. He was wearing one of those leather flying caps and regarding *my* laptop intently.

'He's identified Dai's geographical location!' declared South with a beaming smile. Then turning to the dog: 'Relay the information to Mr. Stanton. But be *careful!* We do not wish to alert *SWISH* and jeopardise the ceasefire.'

'Woof.'

'I don't want to go to some crappy gig! We've got a job to do here, remember!?' declared Cube, indignantly. '...And why did you pick up *three* tickets?'

Alex explained to Cube that if a Welsh band was in town, and *The Odin Brinkley Announcement* were about as Welsh as they came, then where else but at the gig would Dai be found? And if not, then the extra ticket could be a useful way of ingratiating themselves on Dai, assuming they ever located him.

'What if we can't find him, and what if he's not at the gig?' demanded Cube.

'Then I guess it's game over,' replied Alex.

'Yeah, game over for Geoff!'

Alex gazed blankly at the morally-superior Cube, who always got like this when he was pissed. Alex also knew that Cube was right, but what else could they do if Dai never showed up?'

But there was still over an hour to go, and if Dai *was* planning on going to the gig then the chances were that he'd be in a pub nearby. The only one they hadn't yet checked was *The Ship*.

Alex sent Cube in while he waited outside and smoked a cigarette...

'He's not there,' replied Cube, when he rejoined Alex outside.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure!'

Cube's phone bleeped.

'Is that a tweet?' Alex asked. He'd heard the sound a few times this evening but the feedback thus far had merely consisted of questions, lame jokes and puns, and a few obvious tips about checking the most popular pubs. Cube nodded and examined his phone...

'Ah, finally: a reply from Vikram...'

'And!?'

Cube shrugged, 'Well, I don't know how he did it but he says Dai's in *The Leek and Centipede*... Where is that?'

'Rough place, other side of Fishergate,' declared Alex. 'Come on! If we run we can be there in ten minutes!'

First contact!

It was approaching eight-thirty and the bar area bulged with hard-nut locals jostling each other as they tried to get served. Near the corner of the bar, next to a pillar, sat three men. Dai and his two drinking buddies exuded a loud drunken bonhomie.

'Get the drinks in, Cube,' instructed Alex, gravely. He then sidled over to Dai as Cube fought his way to the bar.

'Hey, Dai, you off to see *The Odin Brinkley Announcement* tonight?'

Dai looked up sharply. 'Are they in town!? Well, yeah, sure I am, you know me, always the first to support the boyos!'

‘I think it’s close to sold-out, but one of my crew’s just bailed so I’ve got a spare ticket! You want it?’

‘Cool, man. What do I owe you?’ asked Dai, grabbing the ticket and inspecting it: ‘Ah, *The Shed!* Should be a good gig!’

‘Round of drinks?’ suggested Alex.

‘*Ha!* You got it!’

‘What about me and Lee?’ asked one of Dai’s rough and unfriendly accomplices.

‘Student union pass required,’ replied Dai, brandishing the ticket in his face.

Alex surveyed the man, and the other geezer, Lee, who looked as though he’d been fashioned from granite and designed for fighting. What were the chances these two would be into drugs? Quite high, probably... ‘I reckon we can get you fellas in as guests. Anyway, we’ll find a way to get you past the door. Leave it with me. You up for it?’

‘Yeah, count me in!’ said Lee. ‘What about it, Karl?’

‘Sure,’ replied Karl, displaying not one jot of gratitude towards Alex. This guy probably hated students on principle; Dai would have special dispensation by virtue of him being an inveterate drunk.

‘Awesome,’ replied Alex. He turned to face the busy bar counter: ‘Where’s Cube got to with those drinks?’ he muttered to himself.

Dai spluttered, mid gulp. ‘Who, or what, is “Cube”!?’ His associate drinkers suddenly let rip with riotous guffaws. Alex laughed heartily with them.

‘You know Cube!’ Alex replied, as Cube arrived with two pints of Guinness. Dai had met Cube before, many times, but it was quite likely that Cube and his name had never fully registered. Dai tended to talk *at* people rather than *with* them; the people he drank with were mere ciphers. Alex couldn’t recall Dai ever calling anyone by their name.

Alex observed his Guinness. ‘What’s this shi—?’ He stopped himself when he noticed that Dai and the gang were all drinking stout. Well spotted, Cube!

‘I see you’re a Guinness man,’ said Dai, with approval.

‘Yeah,’ said Alex, avoiding a grimace as he sampled the foul liquid, ‘I’m part Irish.’

‘I hate the bog trotters.’

‘I’m also part Welsh.’

‘Ahh! Now you’re talking!’

‘Cube’s Welsh an’ all.’

At this, everyone, including Alex, roared with laughter. Cube, meanwhile, took his first sip of Guinness, a look of puzzlement creasing his fresh student face.

‘You seen this Brinkley lot before?’ Alex asked Dai.

‘Yeah, in Swansea, last year: awesome, man! They’re boyo speed freaks.’

‘We’ll need some speed for this gig,’ suggested a badly-timed Cube.

The three men fell about laughing; again, Alex felt obliged to join them.

‘What’s the joke?’ asked Cube.

‘You are,’ replied Alex.

When order was finally restored, Dai turned to Cube: ‘A speeding Cube – you must be in good “shape”, my friend.’

More baying, shrieking yelps of drunken hilarity. Cube tried to join in but it did not look convincing, he was clearly beginning to fume. Dai had no business mocking him like this, *he* was the drunken wanker responsible for Geoff ending up in hospital.

Anyway, Dai would be paying for his bad karma before the night was out. That was guaranteed.

Eventually, the laughter subsided.

'I'm sorry, mate,' said Dai, holding Cube's arm. 'I didn't mean to take the piss, especially seeing as you're Welsh, it's just that 'Jones' here said you were called "Cube"!'

Cube nodded and laughed. 'Yes, it's not my real name, tho—'

That set them off again. Poor old Cube; from now on everything he uttered would be greeted with unrestrained hilarity.

'Okay, fellas, knock it off,' said Alex, still pretending to be amused. Surprisingly Dai and his mates made a deliberate effort to calm down.

'Sure thing, no harm meant.' There followed a brief lull in proceedings as everyone refuelled with stout. With all glasses drained, Dai stood up to get the next round 'Same again?' Everyone nodded or grunted.

As Dai pushed clumsily towards the bar, Alex turned to Cube and muttered in his ear: 'They'll be gunning for you all night, best say as little as possible.'

Cube nodded and burped.

Alex turned to the other men: 'Talking of speed, do either of you guys want some for the gig?'

Karl shrugged and nodded noncommittally.

'Yeah, you can count me in,' agreed Lee. 'This should be a sick night!' Despite appearances Lee was definitely the more affable of the two.

'And Dai?'

'And Dai *what?*' said Karl.

'Never mind.'

Alex continued chatting but maintained a watchful eye on Dai to make sure he didn't suddenly do one of his vanishing tricks, always a risk when it was his round.

A couple of minutes later Dai commenced his return. He barged through an ensemble of drinkers, oblivious to their dagger stares; they were of no concern, all that mattered were the five pints of stout held precariously in his grip. He somehow managed to direct this huge mass of liquid and glass through the tiniest of gaps without ever spilling a drop. The quantum boozier appeared to be utilizing the weird effect known as quantum tunnelling. He made it back to the table and disbursed the drinks.

Lee grabbed his pint from Dai. 'Our friend here wants to know if you want some speed for the gig.'

Dai thought about it. 'Nah, I'll stick to the booze.'

'Agh, come on, man!' insisted Lee, 'you piss it away too much anyway, you need to find an alternative or you'll be dead by the time you're twenty-five!'

'Bollocks. That's—'

Alex glanced at Cube as the two men embarked on an incoherent drugs disputation. Karl got involved and a fight looked imminent.

'Hey, calm down, you lot ... hey! *coool it.*' Alex turned to Dai. 'Look, Dai, what's the harm in just trying it?'

'He's right, Dai, just try it — speed's perfect for an Odin gig,' advised Lee.

Dai suddenly seemed to slump. 'Alright, alright, you lot are determined to turn me into a junky, I'll try some speed — where is it?'

Alex reached into his pocket but stopped when Karl suddenly became animated: 'Whoa, not yet – at the gig!' Alex removed his hand from the pocket.

'Okay, *whateveryou say*, you're the expert,' said Dai.

Alex indicated to Cube that he should down his pint – and fast. Then turning to the others: 'Right, guys, we'll see you later, at *The Shed*.'

Dai nodded and laughed, but the explosive power of his mirth had been dampened down by a new rumbling anxiety: *drugs*.

Alex and Cube departed from *The Leek and Centipede*.

'Amazing,' said Cube, 'we let his buddies do the persuading for us! I hope Dai chokes on that dye-a-cat-green.'

'Yep, so do I.' Alex was pensive.

'What's up?' asked Cube.

'What time is it?'

'Just gone nine.'

'Come on, we've got to get some speed!'

'What, you mean you haven't–? ...where do we get speed from at th–?'

'We'll try Geoff's – move it, soldier!'

Alex and Cube stood outside Geoff's flat and regarded the awning that was slightly ajar.

'Go on, Cube, get in there,' Alex ordered, pointing up to the window.

Cube protested, and with good cause, he was certainly no cat burglar, 'I can't get through there!' he pleaded.

'Then I'll break the window,' said Alex.

'No!' Despite himself, Cube attempted entry, but he became stuck halfway through, his feet kicking out in desperation.

'Cube, hurry up,' whispered Alex, noticing the neighbour's illuminated lounge.

Cube struggled, and with rhino-stealth ultimately made it through. He landed inside with a bang, and Alex made ready to hide. But the next sound he heard was that of a bad-tempered Cube opening the door:

'Never again–!'

'Shut it, Cube, for Christ's sake!'

Geoff's flat was musty and empty; his flatmate, a chemical engineer, had long since departed for industrial placement.

'I didn't realize Geoff was into speed,' remarked Cube, 'Christ, if anyone *doesn't* need it, it's Geoff!'

'That's what I'm banking on. Hammer sold him an eighth of gear last term and included some speed as a sort of introductory bonus. I remember Geoff refusing, but, you know Hammer, he insisted.'

'Maybe Geoff threw it away.'

'More likely, he's stashed it. We've got half an hour to find it – get looking.'

Cube began to investigate some drawers.

'By the way,' said Alex.

'What?'

'I didn't realize "Cube" wasn't your real name.'

'Fuck off, Stanton.'

‘Alex and Magnus are in your apartment, attempting to discover the whereabouts of some amphetamine sulphate.’

‘You mean the speed? Why do they need that? And what are they doing in my flat!?’

‘I’m not sure... it’s not for Dai, but somehow it is linked. All I know is that Alex believes it to be important. Do you know where it is?’

‘They’ll never find it.’

‘Where is it?’

‘It’s in the bedroom, in a false shoe heel!’

South considered this news. ‘Why do you have a false shoe heel?’

‘I got the shoes from a joke shop.’

‘I see. Why did you put the sulphate there?’

‘I needed to find a use for the shoes.’

South paused and looked over at her dog.

‘*Woof.*’ Brock appeared to go into a trance as he stared at my laptop screen.

‘What’s he doing?’ I asked. ‘Is this going to trigger another gorilla?’

‘He’s calling in help. His activities should fly under the radar of *SWISH.*’

Brock snapped out of his trance and wagged his tail: ‘*Woof.*’

‘It is done, they have found the amphetamine.’

'I've found it, *ba!* ...in this false shoe!!'

'What? Let's have a look. Wow! Did you know about the shoe?'

'No, it was just a hunch!!'

'Bloody inspired hunch, Stanton! Here, let's have a look at those shoes.'

Cube studied the shoes and Alex studied the speed.

'Geoff must be a secret agent,' remarked Cube, still admiring the shoes.

'I was thinking the same thing myself,' replied Alex.

'Whoa!' exclaimed Cube, suddenly. 'There's a cat in here!'

Alex looked up.

'It's gone,' said Cube, 'zipped out the door as soon as I spotted it. Could have sworn it was Gil.'

'Impossible,' stated Alex, returning his attention to the speed.

'How is it – is there enough?' asked Cube.

'More than enough – let's hit *The Shed*.'

Alex and Cube charged out of Geoff's flat and raced into the night.

Dai, Karl and Lee were loitering at the venue's entrance, smoking cigarettes and looking shifty. *The Shed*, a converted wine bar offered a more intimate musical experience than the bigger, but more acoustically-challenged, main hall of the union building. It was also a lot easier to fill. Not that it was anywhere near capacity tonight. *The Odin Brinkley Announcement* were one of those bands that frequently attracted interest from the music press, but their fan base was minute.

'Need any help getting in?' asked Alex, reaching for his union pass.

'You kidding?' snorted Karl. 'Look at the place. They're letting people in for free! How much did you pay for your tickets? You saps!'

Alex bridled. All the alcohol and all the running around town had sent his adrenalin surging; he really wanted to start a ruckus with Karl but this was not a night for fighting, he had a job to do. He also didn't fancy his chances if Lee got involved.

Alex glared at Karl but said nothing, he eventually lowered his gaze. Karl smirked and, surprisingly, offered Alex a cigarette and then lit it for him. He offered one to Cube, who declined.

There followed an awkward silence that Dai seemed to find intriguing; he regarded Alex and Cube closely, regularly glancing from one to the other.

There were perhaps less than thirty people inside *The Shed*, a rather disappointing showing, even for this place. Alex headed for the bar as the others took seats at one of the tables near the stage.

'Five pints of Guinness, John.'

'Guinness? If you're turning ethnic for the gig, you've got the wrong Celts, mate.'

There was no point in explaining it. 'Just pour the drinks.'

Alex glanced back over his shoulder: Cube and Dai were in conversation; Karl and Lee listened in, but kept silent. Nobody was laughing. Strange. The discussion seemed quite intense...

Dai glanced over and locked eye contact.

Still no smiles. Still strange.

Alex checked on the progress of the drinks: about halfway. He resisted the urge to turn around again, convinced that Dai would still be watching... The guy certainly gave him the creeps: he was too watchful, and too knowing... But he couldn't know what was in store for him now, could he?

The drinks were finally made ready and Alex carried them back to his party.

'So, Alex, what's *your* Welsh ancestry?' Asked Dai, taking a long swig from his drink that left behind a foam moustache.

Alex was somewhat taken aback to be addressed by his own name. 'My mother, same as Cube.'

'Really? Your friend's just been explaining how his *father* is the Welsh one.' Dai eyed him, eyebrow raised. 'You've not quite been straight with us, have you?'

Alex blanched. 'What you talking about!?'

Dai removed a smartphone from his pocket and brandished it at Alex. 'Once you two had left the pub we got to thinking. It seemed kinda odd that you would just show up at the Centipede and then offer me a ticket to a gig straight away. So I looked into it. Turns out you've both been actively trying to find me! What gives?'

Alex nervously eyed Cube who slowly shook his head.

'Well, you know, we had the extra ticket, and—'

'Save it, Alex, that doesn't quite add up... I know the score.'

'You do?'

'Yeah! You've heard the reputation of these gigs and you thought it would be safest to tag along with a well-known taffy and pretend to be Welsh yourselves, in case things kicked off.'

Alex regarded the venue's few dozen punters, most of whom were students he knew by name. The suggestion that he would need Dai's 'protection' was frankly laughable, but he'd have to go with this line, even if it was somewhat demeaning. 'Well, yeah. It was Cube here who thought we should hook up with you.'

'That right, *shape?*' Dai suddenly grabbed Cube and held him in a headlock. 'Don't worry, we'll look after you!'

Alex continued to run with Dai's theory: 'There was trouble in Manchester, so we figured...' He allowed his words to trail off, hoping that enough had been said.

Dai released Cube's head and gave Alex a knowing nod. He then glanced at the stage and around the venue: 'Where's the band got to, they're late?'

'Alex, you got that speed?' asked Lee, with a wink.

'Sure, we should hit the bogs. Karl?'

'Yeah, now's a good time.'

'Dai?'

Dai eyed Alex for a few seconds. 'No, I think I'll pass.'

'Suit yourself.'

Alex hid his frustration and led Cube, Lee and Karl to the toilets; a few minutes later,

Cube and the others speedily rejoined Dai, but Alex decided to hang back for a while and consider his options...

How to get Dai to snort some 'speed'..? He clearly wasn't keen on the idea and he seemed to be growing suspicious. For a self-absorbed drunken derelict he displayed a remarkable knack for reading people and/or situations. God only knew how, or why – but Dai was smelling a rat.

What was it about Dai..?

Three guitarists, a drummer, an accordion player, a violinist, another violinist, and an ostentatiously inebriated vocalist (Wayne), burst onto the stage in the blink-of-an-eye and immediately commenced the first of their ultra-high-energy sessions. *The Odin Brinkley Announcement* were good. Natural musicians, all of them, they all handled their instruments like they were extensions to their limbs. Except for Wayne: Odin Brinkley, whoever he was, might have been disappointed to hear that his “announcement” wasn't quite being conveyed. Wayne mumbled his words incoherently, but at least he mumbled them in tune.

Cube, Karl and Lee, all rushing on speed, jumped up and gyrated away at the front. Alex – straight – remained in his seat, as did Dai.

Was Dai enjoying the gig? Alex glanced over...

Dai was watching *him*. He smiled.

Jesus, the son-of-a-bitch knew! He fucking *knew!!*

Woof.

South nodded and frowned.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

‘Alex is becoming ever more resolved to act on our behalf,’ South replied, still frowning.

‘That’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Of course, but it is never easy with the omegas.’

‘Dai causing trouble?’ I asked.

South remained silent.

I shook my head. ‘Of all the people! How come *Dai* is the one to provide you with your twelfth omega?’

‘You’ve never studied Dai, have you?’

‘*Studied* him? No, I can’t say that I have.’

‘No, to you he is just “the quantum boozier”. Describe him.’

‘What?’

South prodded me in the chest with an unlit cigar. ‘What are the characteristics that define Dai Evans?’

‘Okay, he’s Welsh.’

‘Is that all?’

‘He’s drunk most of the time.’

‘And!’

‘Err, he’s loud.’

‘More! there is more!’ demanded South.

‘Err, he’s... erm.. well.. umm... dunno really.’

‘Ah, such penetrating insights. Maybe I should give you a helping hand, let’s see... Where would you typically find Dai?’

‘In the pub.’

‘Which pub?’

‘Every pub.’

‘At last, you’ve got it!’

‘I have?’

‘He is a *social* creature! Dai’s penchant for alcohol and his boorish demeanour point, perhaps, to a certain character weakness, but this, if it has a source, lies within the realm of the cortex. It disguises his base qualities, qualities that flow from his thalamus: He mixes easily with a wide range of people; he is an adroit judge of both character and event; he is intuitive to the point of prescient; he senses the relationships that bond disparate individuals. If not for the destructive drinking, which itself might be a reaction against these qualities, Dai Evans would be a formidable individual, destined for power even. He is an omega.’

Hmm, this did make some sense, now that I thought about it. That fateful night, two

weeks ago: although Dai had appeared to be talking through me, he'd actually been *listening* most of the time. *I* had been the one making the longwinded and fatuous points, and no doubt revealing too much about myself in the process. But I'd never quite cottoned on. All the time he had skilfully goaded me, played me like a fish! He was a funny one alright. Maybe he was just lonely, or maybe he was evaluating the inner workings of my mind – for future reference... bloody omegas.

'Do you really think Alex can pull this off?' I asked.

South shrugged noncommittally. 'I must admit, I am beginning to have my doubts. If we'd only had more time...'

'Is there nothing more we can do from here?'

'Such as?' South lit her cigar and blew smoke over my head.

I turned and leaned against a battlement and restudied *SWISH*. I looked down towards the general's location.

'This ceasefire,' I began, 'does it extend to the computer room?'

South scoffed. 'Ceasefire means: cession of hostile activities. From *SWISH*'s point of view there can be nothing more hostile than trying to take control of a conscious human mind.'

'Supposing I got in touch with the general down there, and asked for a one-off, and brief, intervention?'

South shook her head. 'He wouldn't sanction that. Anyway, *SWISH*'s right hand tends not to know what the left is doing. Remind the general about the computer room and he would have some questions about why *you* were using it earlier.'

'Hmm, I suppose—'

Woof.

'The first musical performance is drawing to a conclusion; the moment of truth may at last be at hand.'

'And if Alex fails?'

'Then we must consider our negotiating stance with regard to *SWISH*. Both of us must emerge out of this with something. Yes?'

'Are you sure *SWISH* will have me?'

Again, South shrugged noncommittally.

The audience cheered and clapped as the first explosive set came to a close.

‘Great gig, man,’ hollered Lee to Wayne, who had dropped down to mingle with the audience before heading for the bar.

‘We’re cookin’ tonight!! *Yeehaw!!!!*’ noted Wayne.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Alex, ‘you guys are shit-hot!’

Cube gave Wayne an enthusiastic double thumbs-up.

Wayne was wired, he barely took in the compliments.

‘I thought you were too loud.’ It was Dai. Trust him to stir it. Alex was growing ever more frustrated with Dai, who had a gift for grating on the nerves, but Wayne paid him no heed at all; he pushed his way to the bar.

‘Hey, Alex,’ said Karl, ‘I need a top up.’ He pointed to his nose.

‘Me too,’ concurred Lee. ‘You going to finally partake, Dai? It’ll get your ass off that chair.’

‘Yeah, I think I will,’ replied Dai, to everyone’s surprise. Alex shot Cube a glance realizing that Dai had probably noticed it. ‘Come on then – to the bogs.’

In the toilets. Alex decided to start with Dai.

‘Here you go, Dai, just use this fiver, block a nostril and snort up the line. Start at the front and try to do it all in one go.’

Dai followed the instructions and brought his nose down to the line of powder, held on folded card in Alex’s hands, hands that were shaking slightly.

Dai withdrew. ‘Why are you trembling?’

‘Oh, it’s just an effect of the speed, don’t worry about it.’

Someone suddenly barged into the toilets and everyone turned fearing it to be staff on the prowl, looking for evidence of illicit drug taking, but it was just a couple of pissed-up revellers.

Alex looked down and saw that the powder in his hand was gone.

‘You snorted?’ he asked Dai.

‘Sure did.’

‘Great. Lee – when you’re ready, mate.’

Lee, Karl and then Cube snorted some real speed. Finally, Alex followed; he scrutinized Dai as the amphetamine began to surge. ‘You alright, Dai?’ he asked.

‘Fine, don’t feel much effect though.’

The five young men returned to the bar and Karl collected the next round.

‘Any effects yet?’ Alex asked again.

‘None that I’m aware of,’ replied Dai.

'It is done!'

'Dai has taken the diaketamine? That's great! We've won!'

South seemed uncertain, then alarmed.

'Come, quickly!' South descended the steps that led to the garret and then broke into a sprint. Brock and I followed. We arrived at the nearest balcony and gazed at the antenna; from this new vantage I saw that it possessed no ceiling mounting, it simply floated freely in the cavernous space of the main hall. South leaned forward and studied its form more closely, searching..

'Nothing is happening,' I remarked.

'No,' confirmed South, through gritted teeth.

'Are you sure Dai took the drug?'

'I'm sure Alex *thinks* he did, but now – I sense doubt.' South studied the antenna again. 'Something is wrong. We have failed.' She suddenly turned to me and handed over a file: 'This contains the terms of the deal you've just hammered out. Contact the general and tell him his forces can now safely enter the house.' She placed a hand on my shoulder: 'Thank you so much for your help, Geoff, I'm sorry it all came to nothing.' South then turned to face Brock: 'You have been a true and faithful friend, Brock, but it is now time for you to wake up.'

Wo—!

Brock promptly vanished before he had a chance to complain. And before *I* had a chance to complain, South did likewise. I was alone on the balcony, alone in the house, and staring up forlornly at what seemed to be an unchanged antenna.

I signalled the general on the walkie-talkie and he instructed me to meet him near the front door.

Alex blurted it out: 'You didn't take the speed, did you?' He turned his back on Dai and followed Lee and Karl outside.

Dai kept up with him, trying to maintain eye-contact. 'No. And you seem to be particularly upset about this. Why is that?'

'I don't give a shit one way or the other!'

'Yeah right,' said Dai. 'You know, I can always tell when something's up, when people are not quite as they seem. You and Cube didn't smell right from the start: too much forced friendliness, and too much attention to minor details. The Guinness, for example, you're both lager drinkers. So why change? And pretending to be Welsh? That was a bit rich. It struck me early on that you had a secret agenda—'

'That's rubbish, Dai,' interrupted Alex, temper rising, 'we just wanted to tag along, as we said before—'

'Now *that's* rubbish!' declared Dai. 'Too many furtive looks, Stanton. Glances at Cube, glances at me... you were up to no good.'

'Crap!' Alex closed in on Dai but Cube held him back.

'And then this speed turns up. You tried to be subtle, but you were just too keen. Too keen for me to try it. So why was that?'

'You've got it all—'

'Save it, I've worked it all out now. You two are close buddies of Geoff Christie, and I know what people are saying: that his coma was all my fault. But it wasn't, you know, I just had a few drinks with the guy. That doesn't make me a bad person.'

'You didn't just "have a few drinks" with him. You got him pissed out of his mind. You probably spiked his drinks, didn't you?'

Dai paused for a few seconds. 'You really think I'm a monster, don't you?'

'You said it!'

'So, on Geoff's behalf, you decided to settle a score. What were you going to give me, anyway?' Dai didn't wait for an answer. 'You know, I feel as bad about Geoff's misfortune as you do, but I am *not* going to pay for some imagined crime! You had your chance, Stanton, and you blew it. Now drop it. No more drugs, alright?'

Alex was perplexed, he nervously reached for his cigarettes.

Stay angry...

'Don't mind if I do!' said Dai, rudely snatching at a half-proffered fag. He lit up and eyed Alex with a smirk as he inhaled deeply.

Alex blew smoke into Dai's face. 'What is your problem, pal, we were just trying to give you some speed. You should have taken it – it'd make you less paranoid.'

Dai shook his head as he continued to smoke: 'You've got to get up pretty early in the AM to...'

This made Alex smile. 'Oh? That's funny, that's really funny, 'cause I *did* get up pretty early in the AM, as it goes.'

Dai didn't reply, he just gazed at Alex and continued to draw deeply on his cigarette.

Meanwhile, the band prepared to start the second set prompting Karl and Lee to race back indoors. Dai soon followed.

Cube remained by the front doors with Alex. What's up, Al? Have we blown it? Even from this location, Cube had to shout over the music. Alex removed a cigarette from his shirt pocket and brandished it in front of Cube. 'You put the powder in his fag!?'

Alex nodded. 'I held half of it back when I saw how suspicious he was becoming.' 'Christ, man, that must have taken some doing.'

Alex shrugged. 'Nah, it was easy, the trick was to then not think about it: the guy can smell a rat at fifty paces! hence the angry display before.'

Cube peered inside: Dai was dancing frenetically. 'So you think he got enough?'

'He finally stopped talking, didn't he?'

Cube nodded, his eyes still fixed on Dai. 'Yeah., com'on, Stanton – job's done, bloody stupid exercise. Let's watch the band.'

The first member of *SWISH* to meet me on the ground floor was a stag beetle the size of a small car.

‘Where’s the general?’ I asked.

‘He’ll be along shortly once I’ve confirmed that the area is safe,’ replied the beetle, ‘...and you are?’ it added, waving its antennae at me.

‘Geoff Christie,’ I replied. The beetle gave me a blank look. ‘Viscount Christie of Cheviot.’

‘Ahh! Our esteemed “negotiator”! What will they think of next!’ The beetle regarded the chandelier. ‘That it?’

‘The antenna? Yes.’

‘Is it inert? Free of the anomaly?’

‘It is.’

The beetle withdrew some sort of scientific measuring device from a fold within a wing casing and pointed it at the antenna: ‘Yeah, seems to be.., wait a minute.., what’s this?’

I followed the beetle’s gaze: lightning pulsed through the whole chandelier and a growing fairy-ring of sparks radiated out from the core. Then it all slowly began to fade, growing ever darker and more insipid.

‘Yeah, this thing’s safe. No evidence of the anomaly. Good work, Viscount.’ The beetle signalled back to the general: ‘Area secure. Anomaly undetectable.’

‘And the mutt?’ came the general’s crackly voice over the radio.

‘Woken up,’ I informed the beetle.

‘He’s tucked his tail between his legs and slinked off, sir,’ it informed the general.

‘Excellent! I’ll be right in!’

‘Copied.’ The beetle regarded its “tricorder” and turned to me: ‘The castle structures are beginning to break down, see.’

The building briefly trembled and all around me manifestations of my own dreams began to appear: the rotating figure of the cartwheeling girl, and charging about in a drunken fashion, Edward Trunk. Watching me from the nearest balcony: the sneering face of Jordan.

I approached the cartwheeling girl and held out a hand to stop her from rotating further; at my touch, she came to an abrupt halt and stood bolt upright, facing away from me.

I heard her softly murmur: ‘Can you cope with this calamity, Geoff?’

Something affixed itself to my back... *‘What the...!’*

‘Dream incursions,’ stated the stag beetle. ‘They’ll be particularly vivid until this structure fully dissolves. I can place a temporary stop on them but it won’t last long.’

My dreams quickly evaporated; my back appeared to be clear. ‘Thanks!’

‘Don’t mention it, but once you’ve spoken to the general I’d suggest you exit the building and also depart from this mountain summit. Ah, here comes the general now.’

The general strode up, accompanied by a several human troopers and large numbers of bugs that quickly fanned out to inspect the disintegrating castle.

‘Viscount, glad to see you made it through in one piece. How did it go in... *Wow!*’ The general and several of the other *SWISH* units gazed up towards the mighty antenna. ‘...Man, that thing’s *big!*’

‘It’ll be a bear shifting it, sir,’ declared one of his bug sidekicks.

‘We’ll manage.’ The general turned to me: ‘You did a mighty fine job, sir. You *delivered*, just as you promised.’ I received a hard pat on the back. ‘So, Viscount, how did you pull it off?’ He looked at me, expectantly.

Having glanced at South’s file on my way down from the upper balconies I was able to give the general a quick summary: ‘It’s all in here, sir. In essence, we now have the antenna, and free of the anomaly, which will be re-housed in cyberspace. Have you heard of it?’

‘Sure I have, say, that’s quite a concession you gave away, Viscount.’

I shrugged and nodded towards the antenna. ‘Don’t you think it’s worth it? Besides, if the anomaly causes us any trouble we can locate it and then deploy antivirus software, so it will need to stay low-key to survive; as long as it does that, then we agree to leave it alone.’

‘Hmm...’ The general flicked through the report. ‘I guess we can work with this, but if it tries anything—!’ He was interrupted by a human private who came running up to our position: ‘No sign of the dog, sir.’

‘Roger that.’ The general turned to me. ‘I bet *he* didn’t take this lying down!’

‘The Labrador?’ I remembered Brock’s parting expression, just before he vanished: a look of despair, maybe even betrayal. ‘No, sir, he wasn’t happy at all.’

‘Roger that.’ The general glanced again at the file. ‘Alright. I’m going to take this over to HQ with the recommendation that we go with it, but the final decision won’t be mine.’

‘Sure.’

I watched and listened as a group of ladybirds discussed plans for the removal of the antenna. The nearest one punched figures into a palmtop. What should I do now? I wondered: could I stick around with these guys?

‘Well, general, if you’re returning to HQ, maybe I could tag along: see what other work there is.’

The general laughed. ‘Hell, Viscount, you’ve done enough already. Time you took a break, don’t you think?’

The prospect of a return to the hospital left me feeling panicked, I tried to think of something that would change the general’s mind but he clearly wanted me out of the way, asap: ‘Corporal, escort the Viscount off Lingmell and see him safely to the nearest dream.’

‘Sir!’

I protested, but only half-heartedly; I somehow sensed that, despite my valued contribution here, *SWISH* still viewed me as an outsider, not to be wholly trusted, not to be taken *too* seriously. I was, after all, a mere ‘live’ human, a member of a grouping that simply represented the front facade of an altogether more complex, multifaceted, entity.

I was marched off the mountaintop and into “the nearest dream”. This time, though,

all I could do was *dream* it.

‘Wake up!’

Awake and back with my body, but this time without the dulcet tones of Burns et al to ease the transition. Alas, that was the only change: I still remained ‘locked in’.

Judging by the general hubbub and clattering around me it must have been daytime, with many hours having passed since I’d departed Lingmell. All I could recall from the intervening period were dreams, the typically chaotic and nonsensical variety. Not surprisingly *SWISH* had featured prominently in these and from what I now knew about the dream spheres I could surmise that *something* within them might actually be real. But teasing out reality from the chaos and ludicrous invention of my own REM sleep was virtually impossible. A marshalling yard and a train had featured prominently; the antenna was being loaded onto or off the train. It seemed to be an interminable procedure. I was trying to speak to a senior operative but was being ignored. Edward Trunk and Jordan kept hassling me.

And that was about it..

The loading process remained the dominant theme of my dreams right up to the moment at which I finally awoke.

The party was over. Maybe the whole merry-go-round had never been real in the first place, perhaps it was all simply an aspect of my growing detachment, a symptom of a developing psychosis.

I recoiled at the thought of madness. *Not yet!* I told myself, with genuine determination. Instead I turned my thoughts to more prosaic matters and decided to direct my hearing around the ward. This facility had continued to develop and I now felt able to ‘sense’ the room around me, as though utilizing sonar. An electronic buzzing emerged from a point approximately two metres to my right – the vicinity of Hargreaves’ bed – it sounded like a heart monitor alarm, something to alert the doctor. No evidence of panic: a nurse at the opposite end of the ward chatted to someone on the phone. She laughed. Maybe she was laughing at Hargreaves as he desperately grappled with death. No, Hargreaves simply grappled with a difficult crossword puzzle, muttering the clues under his breath.

The alarm continued and, amazingly, both Hargreaves and the nurse appeared to be utterly indifferent towards it, but it certainly began to play on my nerves and in due course I contacted the staff with the intention of making them switch it off. I concentrated on an image of the planet Jupiter, and after a few seconds:

‘*DOCTOR!*’ The sharp metallic voice burst forth from the end of my bed and after a minute the distinctive sound of Clinician Adenoids came into earshot.

‘Good morning, Geoff, and how are we today?’

Well I can’t speak for you, but I’m in some discomfort: *Cactus*.

‘*PAIN.*’ Perhaps a bit strong for what I felt, but I had no other way of describing the annoying buzzing. Hopefully through trial and error I would get my true message across.

‘Is this pain serious?’ He sounded concerned.

'NO – END.'

'The pain has now ended?'

'NO – END.' End the bloody noise!

This wasn't working. Adenoids called over one of the nurses who in turn called up another doctor on the telephone. Then, suddenly, I felt drowsy; obviously a sedative had been administered. I was enraged. The last thing I wanted was a return to those tiresome dreams, ...but that is exactly what happened.

In a state of full REM credulity I happily hopped aboard the train along with several bugs and humans. It began to move, at least this was progress. I sat by a window, vacantly regarding the passing landscape of hills, mountains and lakes, then, as we began to pass over a large expanse of water, my dream developed into something partially lucid. I grew aware of the dreamlike nature of this experience, and yet still I accepted it. The train's passage over water seemed to continue indefinitely and, gradually, I started to question this: Why were we travelling over so much water? Were we traversing a vast bridge? I stood up, now fully alert, *awake* in this dream and alone in the noisy, rattling carriage – the personnel of *SWISH*, for some reason, no longer present. The view outside remained one of endless unbroken water.

I walked to the rear of the passenger compartments expecting to catch sight of the antenna trussed down to an open wagon behind. But there was nothing, not even any rails. All I could see was open water, and behind that, a mountainous landscape rapidly receding away from me. The arrangement of hills, though unrecognizable, had the look of the Lake District. So where was I now? Where was this train headed?

I turned back, and as I made my way forwards through the train I noticed a recurring train motif affixed to all of the doors, and above the windows. This was accompanied by the words: *The Chronon Wave Train: Getting You There Within Time.*

After passing through six or seven identical and deserted carriages I finally arrived at the driver's compartment, strongly suspecting that it, too, would be abandoned, but as I opened the door a pungent cigar smoke assailed me.

'Ah, Geoff! Glad you could make it! Take a seat.'

'South! You're still with us! But what the hell is this? Another dream, or are we in the internet or something?'

'Neither. This is Morecombe Bay. The *real* Morecombe bay.'

'You mean...'

'I acquired Dai's Thalamus? Yes!'

I recalled the antenna's death-rattle, at least that's what I assumed it to be at the time: the expanding ring of sparks just before it finally went dark. That must have been Dai... 'But didn't you head off for cyberspace?'

'Yes, I did that too! I uploaded a copy of myself to the internet where I now roam free as an AI bot, but I also remained in the antenna, dormant. It was my intention to persist in this state, hidden from *SWISH*, and wait, in the hope that another omega might happen to come my way. It was a long shot, I admit, as I wouldn't have been able to influence events for fear of revealing my presence, but I thought perhaps my cyber-self might find a way to lure one in. Turned out it didn't need to – Dai took the diaketamine after all!'

I took a seat and viewed the aspect ahead as we continued to skim across the sea. We travelled at great speed, heading south, maintaining a parallel course with the coast which was just about discernible to the left. ‘So... you were able to “transmigrate”?’

South nodded: ‘I can and I will, but for now we travel together within a single quantum of time: The Chronon Wave Train. From here we can do *anything!* Create our own subjective/objective reality. Forge a new universe!’

‘Cool.’

‘Cool!?’

‘I’m sorry, it’s rather a lot to take in. Err, I seem to recall you mentioned something about *curing me?*’

South gazed ahead, out of the window. ‘The wave train is collapsing. At present my possible positions in space can be represented by a shrinking sphere. We are at the edge of that sphere, the point of actualization is the centre. I now occupy a volume approximately 110 miles in diameter – and shrinking fast.’

‘Was that a ‘yes’ to the cure thing?’

South gave me a sidelong glance, but remained silent.

I viewed the southern horizon of storm clouds and choppy but stationary seas. All was fixed, static, like a *photograph* of a squall. It lacked the dynamism that only time can grant. ‘In layman’s terms then: what is a wave train?’

‘It is a way of describing a system as a superposition of large numbers of waves that interfere constructively giving the resultant probabilistic outcomes that can–’

‘Forget I asked!’

I turned my attention to the cabin.

‘What are you looking for?’ asked South.

‘Brock, where is he? Is he not coming with you?’

South looked sad. ‘I’m afraid not. Brock is awake, and back to his old vices of stealing food and worrying sheep, no doubt.’

‘So he was just an ordinary dog having a dream? *Ha!* One hell of a dream for the little fella! ...To be honest, I had always assumed he was *you*, or an aspect of you.’

‘He is a dog, but far from “ordinary”. We had a special bond.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you’ll miss him.., where exactly is he “awake”, then?’

‘Right now? London.’

‘Really!? Not many sheep for him to worry *there* I would imagine!’

‘That won’t stop him.’

We continued our passage over the sea and the train entered a heavy rain shower that obscured the view ahead. The raindrops pinged against the windscreen but failed to spread out and form rivulets, as one might expect. It was as though the train were being bombarded by many small beads of glass.

The shower passed behind us and the view cleared. We were moving closer in towards the coast and up ahead the distinctive skyline of Preston rose up unlike Manhattan.

‘Err, where exactly is this train going? What is our point of “actualization”?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I think you know!’

The train pulled up from the sea and glided in over the northern outskirts of the town; the distinctive sprawl of the Royal Preston began to loom large, directly ahead.

South aimed the train into a steep descent and we plunged towards the hospital roof. As we came closer we began to slow and also, it seemed, shrink.

We broke through, *between* roofing tiles, and eventually entered my ward. By now the size of a minuscule fly, the Cronon Wave Train buzzed in towards my static form. I noticed the frozen medicos clustered around me: two women and two men; and from the adjacent bed, Hargreaves looked over, an expression of mild interest perched on his motionless Lancashire face.

South rotated a large metal wheel as we moved in closer to my face. She stared at me, wide-eyed, pupils ominously dilated: 'Imagine it, Geoff: Imagine knowing all that is known, all that is knowable and all that is not. Imagine being all that is, all that is not and all that is neither. Imagine, *The Absolute?*'

I took a sharp intake of breath. 'That's too rich a stew for me.'

South maintained her nebulous gaze as we entered my left eye; we had become so tiny that gaps between individual cells could now be navigated.

'Where is this *Absolute* anyway? Inside my brain?' I asked, growing more anxious. But South had become tight-lipped.

More cells continued to emerge from the darkening murk that was my innards; we might have been passing by a succession of planets for all I knew, they looked so huge. South flicked on the train's powerful lamps and my brain lit up.

'Geoff! Look! Up ahead.'

I gazed out and marvelled at the complex honeycomb structure of connecting neurons; they looked strangely familiar.

'This is your antenna, we are now passing through the larger of your thalamus' nuclei.'

Unlike the antenna from South House, mine was a bland greyish-white, and apparently inactive. It drifted away to our rear as we continued journeying through my brain.

'We are now entering the midbrain and unless I'm very much...' The wave train changed direction and altered scale, becoming larger, moving and deforming the surrounding cells as it pushed them aside. 'There! To the left – behold!'

I watched as we squeezed our way through to an ugly reddish-black tangle.

'What's that?' I asked.

We came to a halt and South unclipped an axe from an overhead wall fixing. 'Here, take this.' She handed it to me and then jumped out of the train. I promptly followed and landed on a bed of springy neurons.

'This is damage,' she remarked, indicating the tangle, 'blood clot and dead neurons left over from your stroke. See how they interrupt communication between the higher and lower-right domains. This cluster is preventing your motor regions from linking with the brainstem.'

I gazed up at the ruddy and tangled scar tissue. This detestable thing was what lay behind my condition.

'Is this the only point of damage?' I asked.

'Yes, you had a relatively minor stroke, you were simply unlucky that it occurred here, at this critical relay station.' She turned to face me. 'Use the axe. Destroy it!'

I edged forward and examined the damaged area more closely, it appeared dry and

brittle, like dead twigs.

The axe crashed in and part of the structure shattered like glass. More swings and more destruction. Over 'time', a red-stained cavernous space began to emerge and I stopped to survey it..

South examined my work: 'That should do it. Now push the surrounding cells into the new gap.'

Another 'ten minutes' saw this job done.

'Time for a Havana, I think.' South ignited a truncheon-sized cigar and then aimed smoke at the newly positioned cells which subsequently stretched and deformed and attempted to make contact with their neighbours. She moved through the repaired area making further connections. When the task was completed to her satisfaction, she returned to me.

'Congratulations, Geoff, you now have a fully-functioning brain – you must be very proud!'

'Well, yes...'

'Good, and as for me, I am finally out of time. Rejoice.'

Without warning or farewell, South suddenly popped out of existence, along with the train and my axe, all presumably bound for *The Absolute*, wherever that was.

So, at last, I was cured, I could hardly believe it! ...but my mind still existed here: *inside* my brain, not working *through* my brain. This was an unsatisfactory state of affairs.

I noticed something off to my right and partially obscured by neurons. I barged my way through the tiresome things and finally entered a small clearing that contained a computer terminal. I took a seat, pulled on the nearby flying helmet and booted up the machine. A quick glance around – to see if any gorillas roamed the vicinity...

The computer flashed up a copyright warning:

*'THIS BRAIN IS THE PROPERTY OF GEOFFREY CHRISTIE.
ANY UNAUTHORIZED USE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.'*

After a few more seconds this flashed off to be replaced by a blank screen. Then, after a further few seconds, the screen read:

'DON HEAD-CAP AND PRESS ENTER.'

Nice and simple this time, no NI numbers or passwords to worry about – just press enter...

<Enter>

'Geoff! can you hear me!?'

'Yeah,' I drawled, through the recently administered sedative. Then I fell asleep again.

I had to wait until the following Wednesday before the hospital finally deigned to discharge me. They would have held onto me longer, but they needed the bed.

I had, apparently, made a full and “miraculous” recovery but the doctors just couldn’t quite bring themselves around to accepting this, and they insisted on keeping me in for observation and “tests”. I suspected medical papers were in the offing: The continuous EEG readouts were checked and rechecked; my blood pressure, pulse, reflex actions and mental faculties were likewise stress-tested: I was asked to count back, in sevens, from one hundred – I made a bit of a mess of that, but they seemed perfectly happy – and they also asked me to repeat the words: “Happy Hippopotamus” several times. Though I’m not sure why. After the first round of tests they wheeled me off for CAT, NMR and X-ray scans.

‘So, doctor, how does it look?’ I asked on the Sunday, a full twenty-four hours after my ‘return’.

‘It’s looking excellent, Geoff, we can’t find anything wrong with you at all. The small lesion in your brain has inexplicably gone; all your other vital signs are strong. You appear to be in perfect health.’

‘Great, I’d like to be discharged now.’

‘Oh, well, I think we should run some more tests. We still want to–’

‘You’ve run every conceivable test on me already!’

‘Yes, but we haven’t run the *in*conceivable ones yet.’

Funny guy! This excessive interest resulted in Hargreaves beating me to the exit door. He was discharged on Monday:

‘So long, young’un! Look after yourself!’

‘Cheers, Mike. You, too! ...Oh, and Mike?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Preparation!’

‘You what?’

‘It’s the secret to good public speaking!’

Hargreaves looked perplexed and seemed ready to quiz me on this but he was bundled out of the door by his impatient family. Two new patients promptly arrived in the ward. They weren’t as chatty as Hargreaves, both were in comas.

I passed the time by reading and watching TV. The one thing I felt reluctant to do was go online. I suspected the AI bot version of South might make itself known to me and frankly, at least for the foreseeable future, I really did not want to know; I felt inclined to dismiss the whole escapade as pure fantasy, but that proved to be problematical: I had managed to get the word out to Alex and Cube and they came to visit me on Monday night. Based on their excited accounts, it was hard to dismiss any of this as ‘fantasy’.

My parents arrived on the Wednesday with the intention of driving me back to the family

home, but I still had unfinished business in Preston. This was the last week of term before the spring break and I still needed to confirm my work placement, I also had to pack and clear out my belongings from Adelphi Place. I persuaded my parents to drive me to the flat before they checked in at a nearby hotel. I would have my affairs in order by the weekend, I told them.

I sat alone in my cold, miserable, damp flat. It didn't help that the place had been ransacked by Alex and Cube. The bedroom was a shambles, and in the kitchen area cupboard doors and drawers hung open, though that might have been *my* doing as I searched in vain for the painkillers, back on that fateful night. This place would need to be cleaned up if I expected to get my security deposit back..., but that job could wait. I checked to see if the landline phone was still working..

'Hello, I'm calling about the status of my summer work placement. My name is Geoff Christie, second year Business Administration.'

'Yeah, one moment please...' The sound of rapid-fire typing... *'Okay, Mr. Christie, umm., yeah, according to this you've been granted a medical exemption. There is no requirement for you to take a placement.'*

'I see...'

'Enjoy your summer, Geoff!'

The prospect of a five-month convalescence at my parents' home did not appeal. *'Wait!* I have actually made a full recovery from my, err, illness, so I would appreciate getting some work experience, and it does always look good on the CV. Can I proceed with one?'

'Entirely up to you. Let me just check to see what's available...' More nimble finger-work on the keyboard... *'Three firms have declared an interest in interviewing you; I'd recommend that you arrange to see all three of them, asap. Do we have your email..? Yes we do. Okay, I'll send all the details over to you now. Good luck!'*

'Right. Thanks.'

The line went dead.

I fished out my tablet and reluctantly went online. After a few random Google searches and a check of my Facebook page, I took a sigh of relief: all seemed normal. Let's hope it stayed that way!

I checked my emails:

Wow! Lots. And lots of spam... Ah, there was the one from the university...

Okay, what have we got..? There was a haulage company based in a trading estate on the outskirts of Derby. Scintillating. What else..? A large department store in Sheffield. Christ! This was my future I was looking at! Let's hope the third would be more interesting... *Human Solutions International* a "Think Tank & Consultancy". That was more like it! I clicked on the link to their website...

"Human Solutions International, a division of SWISH, advises governments and multinationals on a wide range of—"

'Bloody hell!'

I continued to peruse their webpages: HSI had been set up only two years ago and already they appeared to have the ear of every powerbroker you could imagine... Headquartered in New York but with offices opening all the time in other cities around

the globe... The CEO, one Jack *South*, was currently based in the London branch, helping to develop it as HSI's European HQ. That was where they wanted me to work. I had to contact someone called John Stone to arrange the interview.

Holy crap! Jack South! Now there were *three* Souths to contend with!

I did a search on 'Jack South': He was all over the place! Press and TV interviews, blogs, YouTube channels, public debates with prominent figures... on and on it went. He didn't resemble *Madam* South very much, different gender for a start. I checked his bio: Early thirties, American, graduate of Utah State University, animal lover... there was a picture of *Brock!* He was Jack South's faithful companion. "We have a special bond!" South was quoted as saying. The dog had only just been released from its designated stint in UK quarantine, which, apparently, it had handled remarkably well. Yes, you had a fine old time, didn't you, Brock! You had a castle in the air into which you could escape...

...To what extent was this South 'in the loop'? He must know about *SWISH* and what it is? Did he also know about his extended self? Maybe *Madam* South had worked a number on him with the computer before being bounced out by *SWISH*. Maybe he had always known the truth: he was the first to take diaketamine; the network had built up around him. Would he know me? How come HSI had requested an interview with me?

Agh! Too many questions!

I switched off my tablet.

So, which placement should I take? I felt as though I were being given a fundamental choice: walk away from all this, permanently – or head deeper down the rabbit hole. I noticed my neighbour, *whatsbername*, returning to her flat. I'd worry about it later. Right now, I had a date in Blackpool to arrange.

about the author

Richard Lawther graduated from the University of Central Lancashire, in Preston, with a degree in Physics and Astronomy. This led to employment as a Meteorologist/Physicist with the British Antarctic Survey, work that included a two-year stint in Antarctica. After returning to the UK he became a Fingerprint Officer working at New Scotland Yard in London. Finding this work to be both monotonous and stressful he decided to return to meteorology. After acquiring a Met Office postgraduate qualification he found work in the Middle East as a Marine Forecaster, providing forecasts for the oil industry on wind and sea states in the Arabian Gulf, forecasts that were occasionally correct.

More recently he has acquired a reputation as a talented computer games designer using the Tomb Raider Next Generation Level Editor. Out of the nearly three thousand games released on this platform and listed at trle.net he has designed four that are currently rated in the top ten. Readers who are curious about these are invited to find out more and can download any of them for free from: [here](#).

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