

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 boozer, 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 freshmanhood, 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 Daves 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 palpitating 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.

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