

"The wretched creature, born of unnatural science, was thrust into a world that recoiled from him, not for his own faults, but for the monstrous form he bore. The villagers, in their ignorance and fear, became instruments of his torment, casting him as a villain when, in truth, he was a victim of Victor Frankenstein's cruel ambition. His creator, too, condemned him to a life of solitude and suffering, abandoning the very being he had brought to life. Thus, both the villagers and Frankenstein are complicit in the misery of a soul who sought only acceptance."

Chat GPT, 2025

Part One

Chapter 1

Who suffers more? She who leaves and flies away, taking guilt and shame with her, only to stand blinking in the harsh light of a new city, alone and unsure that she hasn't made the mistake of a lifetime, alone and frightened and homesick - or he who remains and is left to try to comprehend what has happened and to creep, wraith-like through the town where love was fostered, love was crushed, each park, coffee shop and restaurant providing imagined cine-reels of lost happiness?

Sat alone in Café Actual, David stared ahead, his salad half-eaten, hisAmericano half-drunk. People moved around him, swirling in eddies between counter and bus tub and bathroom. He felt like a character from an old movie, imagining how the room would look if sped up to three times its natural speed, a flurry of moms and students and hungry workers treating themselves to a lunch made by human hands, buying, moving, sitting, standing, leaving. Nothing moved at his table excepting the cursor blinking on the blank page. David stared ahead like a rock in a sea of life, and his eyes drifted from focus.

The music was predictably grating, making him long for Bela all the more. Eighties power ballads had often played as they sat in coffee shops in far-flung corners of this country and others, and as the conversation achieved a natural pause, they would find themselves looking into each other's eyes and noticing that it was Europe, Bon Jovi, or Journey that was subconsciously making them nostalgic. A smirk would tug at the corners of their mouths, and they would break into secretive mock vomiting, fingers down their throats, turning their bodies away from the baristas. They didn't want to spread offense with their own private love language (though they weren't too concerned if offense was taken), but really, how had this stuff stayed popular for over three-quarters of a century?

Gone. She was gone, and to laugh alone means nothing and has no value when you yearn to laugh together.

And now his coffee was gone too, but he wasn't going to move. Not yet. The barista's shift changed, and after she and her replacement had chatted, Incoming leaned with her back to the counter and expounded on something that David could not make out, but which had both Incoming and Outgoing laughing. A jacket was donned, and Outgoing left. "Bohemian Rhapsody" was rightfully cut short, and the new and beautiful girl queued up The Velvet Underground. David whispered a silent prayer of gratitude to the atheist god of deliverance. It wasn't that he hated Queen, though he did so with a passion. His gratitude stemmed more from a release from memories, nostalgia, and grief. Bela never liked The Velvet Underground, but she hadn't hated them with the same hilarity-inducing fervor that they both hated Queen, so he didn't feel the ache of loss so keenly when Lou Reed began to sing. What's more, David did like them and could lose himself in 'Sweet Jane.' He looked up and found himself locking eyes with the lovely creature as she was pulling an espresso. He gestured towards the speaker above his head and gave her a thumbs up. He immediately felt like an idiot, like an aging fool attempting to seem cool in the eyes of someone young enough to be his daughter. But she returned the smile - a warm, friendly, open gesture, and he found himself entertaining ridiculous possibilities as he did every time a woman treated him with kindness. Perhaps this was her. Perhaps this was the person he could woo, seduce, and spend the rest of his life with. His rationality only permitted two seconds. This pixie was at most twenty-five years old. What use would she have for a man of fifty five? She was just good at her job and appreciative of someone with similar musical tastes and that was all.

David was lonely. His emotions surpassed mere loneliness. He could compile a thesaurus of adjectives to describe his emotions. He was torn, bereaved, crushed, scattered. When she had told him she was leaving, he knew it wasn't a joke but had found it impossible to

allow that she was serious. Her exit had shocked him in a way he had never imagined a man could be shocked, despite her following two others in her march for the door. He hadn't anticipated it and had pondered whether he had missed the signs when the others departed but, deep down, he knew that he had. He just wanted to find a reason that this time was different that others might find acceptable. Yet he knew he didn't need any such excuse. This time was different simply because this time was different and, anyway, there was no one left to persuade.

Bela was gone. She was gone, and so he was left alone with his thoughts and his motivations, which were now solely his own concern. He didn't need to articulate what was inexpressible and try to get Bela to understand the depth of his love. Knowing that Bela was unique sufficed; she simply was different, and their marriage had been distinct.

People denigrate marriage and see no utility to it. Beyond the tax ramifications, why be married? What was it but a legal contract, paperwork? Well, he knew what it was and why it was different, at least for him. Home. It was home. It was having someone who had your back and would always have your back. No, that wasn't right. It was family. That was it. David's childhood had failed him in the least socially acceptable of ways- in ways only a therapist and the closest of friends could and had allowed him to feel. Rape, incest, physical or verbal abuse. All of these carried societal weight and rightly allowed the victims to call for and receive universal support and understanding. If your father fucked you at seven or your mother knocked you around at nine then social media was your plaything and all those on your contacts list would (again, rightly) express their most sincere and constant approval and sympathy. But if you come from an upper-middle class English family who never hurt you, never abused you, never ignored or neglected you but instead fenced you into a paddock of Englishness, silently outlawing emotional expression, quietly dismissing those who struggled. If you had a father who secretly walked to the

headland a mile from your home to shout angry poetry at the sea and never told you what it was he was so furious about or even that he was furious, a mother who shut down her hopes and dreams to become a smiling likeness of the perfect English housewife and mother. What then? Try making memes of that and see who gives you those coveted Likes.

He had grown up in a house that was not a home where, life was a contest to be the most thoughtful whilst simultaneously playing the Multiple Choice game.

"Would you like to put the rolls in the oven?"

"Sure."

"Or we could just toast them in the toaster?"

Guess. Guess quickly, for mum had a preference but she was not going to say for which. That was for you to divine. Guess correctly and all could proceed unchanged. Guess wrong and it was a Black Mark of Wilfulness against you. Refuse to guess, question the game and you got the Black Mark by default for being a refusenik and not joining in. To not play the game raised the anxiety level of the questioner because the games was everything, the water in which the family swum. But ask a question of them and the air felt at once electric, charged with potent pregnancy and heavy, a syrup to wade through until the dance was done.

"When would you like to leave?"

"I don't mind. When do you think?"

God damn it. Check. Snookered. His move.

"Maybe in ten minutes?"

The brow furrowed and she leapt to her feet.

"OK!" And she was off, flustered and pushed by his unfair demands to be ready too soon.

"Mum, I was just making a suggestion. Would an hour be better?"

But no, he had named a time and a preference and thus there was no way his mother could see that as anything but an absolute demand, a *fait accompli* from the most pushy man there ever was but boy, she would get her revenge and how she could make it uncomfortable with her huffing and puffing and making it beyond obvious that she was Put Out. There was no coming back from the moment of having an opinion and the black mark was indelible.

Just occasionally he found he could take them by the metaphorical hand and lead them to a place of opening up about his mum's emotional life or his dad's silent anger but every time it would last mere minutes, until the dishes were washed and dried and the very crumbling edge of the cliffs of emotional vulnerability were reached and then they would scramble back to the safety of the grey lands of politeness and so his father had died, taking his truths and his reasons to the grave with him and his mother lived on, counting the days and hoping to get out of this life without having to really expose her feelings. Just keep dancing, family. Always and endlessly dancing.

This hot-house of horrors had led David to an unhealthy over correction when it came to the dance in other relationships. Any wavering by Bela in terms of what she wanted and he would state, in his rebellion, what his preference was, even when he barely had one. The game terrified him and he ran from it even when it didn't exist, when his partner in the game wasn't participating or even aware of the existence of the game. And Bela, loving, unknowing Bela had felt the weight of his watchfulness without knowing what it was he was watching for and he had appeared a bully, as overly forthright. Her trauma was real. Acknowledged and open. His was a secret shame and left her unhappy, meek and even afraid of him, filled

with rational but incorrect assumptions of motivations.

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when past abuse we try to leave.” Not a great line but at least it rhymed.

He shook his head in an attempt to free himself from this self indulgent reverie but to no avail. He was locked in an internal monologue that was never changing and never got him anywhere other than to this land of the old weirdo spotted alone in the corner of the coffee shop, which was really the private domain of the young, the beautiful and the desired. He had become the man that Bela and he had seen and who had brought them to silence in their individual fear that this could some day be them if they didn't stick together and nurture their love. They had not stuck together and now it was him and, for all he knew, her too, though he assumed she was gadding about with all the hot young men of Chicago.

Boys Don't Cry came on and David hid the tears in his eyes.

“I would do most anything to have you back by my side.”

Alone. He was alone and he didn't want to be only the latest in a line of men who had fallen for her dizzying charms, been dazzled by her and had determined to keep her only to find themselves unable to overcome her trauma patterns of old and incapable of providing what she needed because she wouldn't say what she needed. These men were left in her wake to mourn ever after. There was the writer far away who put her in a novel thirty years after his obsession had burned brightly, the psycho who, unable to let her go, had alternately raved and pleaded, insulted and rhapsodized by text message and there had been the man who had ended up homeless in his van in Seattle. Was David just another of those? He had been so sure that he was The One but perhaps he was just One.

The only one to get out alive had been her first husband. A flat and hopeless relationship with no fire, she had announced that she was leaving and he had said “OK”. What kind of a monster was he that

he could see her walk away and remain sane? A marriage of convenience to please his Italian parents, it seemed he simply hadn't known Bela and the only way to survive Bela was not to know Bela. And here was David, another in the line-up.

He was solidly locked in her story, fully a part of her history and he couldn't bear to have her history no longer be a part of his family story nor for him to be another piece of dearly loved detritus she could no longer hold to, beaten away by her ghosts.

Oh god. David once again shook himself from his reverie and found himself staring at the barista. He didn't think she had noticed but he couldn't be sure. He glanced about the shop in an attempt to appear to be someone who looks at lots of parts of coffee shops and not just at the nubile lovely behind the counter. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed her glance at him once, twice, three times. Was she concerned, even afraid and keeping a wary eye on him or was she intrigued? He allowed himself a glance directly at her face just as she looked into his eyes. Instantly horrified, he was about to look away when she halted him with a smile, a warm and open smile. But was it a warm and open smile or was it a smile of pity at this old fool, this try-hard daring to fancy himself worthy of her?

David looked back down at his screen and felt sweat prickle the roots of his hair. The cursor sat on the blank page of his 'novel'. He was such a fucking cliché. Can't get the novel going. Sitting staring blankly at nothing on the screen.

She was coming over. Oh Jesus, she was coming over, collecting cups and plates. Now was his chance. His chance for what? To hook a girl thirty years his junior? Idiot. She passed by a couple sitting and laughing over something he couldn't see on a screen. She paused at a couple of empty tables and plucked cups, plates and muffin-papers into her bus-bin.

"You done with the plate?" She asked David with only a quarter

smile.

"Sure. Thanks." Moron. She wasn't going to talk to him. Some cryptster sat staring from a corner table. How deluded could one man be?

"You having trouble getting started with something?" She leant against a pillar, the bus-tub tucked at a jaunty angle beneath her arm and on her hip, the smile warm and genuine, sympathy in her eyes. How he wanted that hand laid gently and cooling on his cheek. How much he wanted his hand lying gently on that hip in his bed.

He smiled back. She liked him. It was clear that she liked him and he knew in his bones that, in just a couple of months they would be living together and he would be kissing her up her back and making her late for her shift.

"I'm trying to write a novel or a memoir or something. I really have no idea what it is, to be honest or whether it will ever even be anything." Mustn't talk it up or in a matter of weeks she'll quiz him over the breakfast table and he'll be forced to confess that he gave up after less than four pages because it was drivel and, worse still, it was about lost love- his lost love that still burned bright and then she'd see that he was unsalvageable and rightly dump him.

The conversation continued with pleasantries, the 'do you live close by's and the 'tell me more about your art's and the agreements over music, what was great and what was terrible. When she said "well, better get back to it" she looked genuinely saddened. Clearly she would like to put down her load, sit and tell him all about it- really get into why she was drawn to him despite or because of his age and hangdog expression. But she did what was expected of her, shifted the weight of the bus-tub beneath her arm and continued what was clearly a well rehearsed and optimised route around the tables. David always bussed his own crockery because he comprehended

the life of the barista. Hadn't Bela been one in a former incarnation and hadn't she told him all about the struggles and the actions of customers that would drive baristas to the edge of apoplexy? The toilet trashers and the non-tippers and those who did not bus their dirty plates and left crumpled plastic wrap to slowly unfurl, depositing muffin crumbs onto the table-top.

But the page remained blank and nothing he could do precipitated action.

Once again David found himself staring at the barista. Fortunately this time she hadn't noticed as she was serving another man of around his age. There was that look again. That same look she had bestowed upon him. There it was, the same open smile and apparent affinity directed at someone else and his stomach turned. How could he have been so stupid? She was twenty five, twenty eight at the outside and no, of course she didn't actually want him at fifty five. Why would she? She was just good at her job and at that free and apparently effortless way of putting people at ease that could and did so often lead older and lonely men down the path of fancy.

Anger took hold of him. How could Bela have stolen his future and half his family from him based on a mistake she recognized as such and left him here to make a fool of himself in public? Where was his safety and his plans for the last portion of his life now? Gone, because she had made a mistake and now didn't think it worth her while to put right what she had put wrong and it was easier to simply accept their downfall and sit there in the suburbs of Chicago and be miserable while he sat here in the suburbs of Seattle equally miserable and they both waited for death's sting and, in the meantime, they could both make up narratives of what had happened that lacked credibility. He assessing that she, through trauma and a lack of self esteem, had failed to express her needs and had made assumptions that he would resist and shoot down her requests for serious change and declare her silly and 'uncool' while

she decided that their marriage was doomed because they had a fundamental difference of desires and no amount of telling her that that wasn't the case, that he was more than happy to live the life she wanted made even an inch of headway.

Since she had left he had metamorphosed into the man she had wanted all along. Once she had spat out her desires in the form of venom and he knew what they were, that was all he had needed but she had declared it too late. It was done and there was nothing to do but for each of them to cry alone and apart.

Snap out of it. Write, write!

Why was he so resistant to writing? Was writer's block a real thing? Would he ever be able to make it happen or was he doomed to simply picture himself an author? How long could one sit and write nothing and still describe oneself as a stuck author rather than no author at all?

He wanted to talk to Bela. He couldn't resist it. He was angry at her and nothing made him more uncomfortable than being angry at this woman, this precious woman he loved and who hadn't meant to leave and who loved him back and missed him and it was all such a mess and the only way to alleviate this head-pounding discomfort was to contact her but he was aware that, as soon as he wrote and until she replied, the discomfort would increase ten-fold and yet still he brought up the app on his screen. Perhaps it was less awful than staring at the cursor on a blank page. Perhaps she was sitting so far away and hoping he would write.

David Lawton: Hi.

Bela Stern: Hey!

David Lawton: Oh! You're there!

Bela Stern: Yes, I'm here. Just working. What's up?

David Lawton: Nothing. I'm just sad, you know? I miss you.

Bela Stern: Dave! You cant keep doing this. It hurts me. I'm in pain but I'm trying to get by. Trying to make a life. You need to stop.

David Lawton: OK. Sorry. Fuck.

Bela Stern: It's OK. I know. But I need you to stop.

David Lawton: I know. Bye.

Bela Stern: Don't be like that. I do care.

David Lawton: I know you do. I just want to see your face.

Bela Stern: Stop! I mean it. Goddamn it. I have to go.

David Lawton: Bela...

But she was gone and, though he stared a full minute at the two hollow circles that told him she hadn't seen his message, they didn't solidify and David pictured her having closed the client and fuming. Why did it so often end this way? Why couldn't he convince her through the bright light of his rationality, to come home and sort this out? Fuck, fuck, fuck. Now he was just fucking miserable.

Positive steps. That's what Sarah had advised as he sat in her office looking at the box of tissues and glancing at the clock to see how many minutes were left to her to fix him. Could she do it in the twenty nine minutes left? The answer was invariably no but she had imparted *some* words of wisdom and one was to take charge when everything was dark, when he felt like just walking home in tears and hiding in the dark. Take charge! Think of something nice you can do for yourself to feel better. Don't look for something that will

fix the problem. The problem of Bela cannot be solved by you. Only Bela can come home of her own volition. Look for something that will shift your focus and make you feel good in the moment.

David loved to cook and this was his go-to way to feel better and so it would be again today. And what was the ultimate feel-good recipe ever since he had been abandoned for the first time, way back in 2048, the old standby? Sweet and sour pork.

The sun poured in through the window of Actual as he packed up his screen and moved towards the door. He wouldn't look at her. Shame prickled his back as though she knew his thoughts.

"Hey!"

He turned in the door and she was stood behind the counter with a cup in one hand and one of those long spoons that David did not know the name for in the other. She was giving him that open, caring smile again.

"It was really nice to talk with you. Good luck with the writing!"

David could feel himself redden. Had he been wrong? Did this shimmering delight really like him, like him?

"Thanks. It was nice to talk to you too." he managed before turning and rushing out, cracking his knee on the door and trying not to limp as long as he felt he might be within her line of sight. He pictured her looking pityingly at this buffoon, this old fart who so clearly liked her.

In a romantic comedy, she would have been charmed and they would end up together after some wacky shenanigans but this wasn't a romantic comedy. This was real life in the mid twenty first century where the only wacky shenanigans happened in anime and AiFlicks. She wasn't looking out of the window. She was neither charmed nor sneering. She was stamping the shop's logo on to a pile

of a hundred paper cups, the look on her face blank. Back to work and David perhaps already forgotten.

He threw his bag into the car and headed into the market to pick up what he needed and then home. His knee continued to send twinges but he ignored them in favor of trying to strong-arm himself into predicting an enjoyable evening in his empty house—their empty home. He would turn up the heat, he would cook, he might even tell the AI to create a movie in which the lovers, separated by error, reunite through perseverance and live happily ever after. But was that good idea? Living, over and over, a fantasy of what he wanted to happen rather than what was actually happening, what was almost undoubtedly going to keep on happening relentlessly unto the grave?

Arriving home the car pulled into the drive and parked beneath the KarCharge and he sat staring at the bulk of the house. The car continued to whirl gently as David stared ahead and then noticed the thumb on his left hand seeking out his third finger and the ring that was no longer there. It had taken losing Bela and the ring for David to come to recognise how often he did this, how often he had turned that band of belonging, that band of comfort, around and around in order to know that he was connected to someone else, that he was a part of something else, something larger than himself and something that he was proud of but now the ring was gone and so was Bela, belonging and comfort.

The house was quiet and cold. David threw his keys at the spot beneath the chalkboard, missed and stood staring at the fob and its splayed sync-cards for a full ten seconds as the tears welled once more.

Chapter 2

The weeks rolled on in the stasis David was trying to become used to, but he felt as though he were holding to a ledge by bloody fingertips, as though he were willing his way through each sixteen hour day of wakefulness and feeling anxious that this time he might not make it to bedtime, only to remember that sleeping was only a precursor to waking and doing it all over again. He didn't know what 'not making it' through a day would look like. It sat there, a nameless horror that he knew wasn't real or formed. He would make it through Wednesday as he had made it through Tuesday because what was the alternative? He didn't want to go on without Bela but he didn't want to die either so on he went as he always had but with an accentuated feeling of pointlessness.

David Lawton: Hey Bee

Bela Stern: Hi, Hon.

David Lawton: I just have a quick question.

Bela Stern: OK. What's up?

David Prescott: I have to have this endoscopy next week. Will our insurance cover it?

Bela Stern: I'm 99% sure it will but I can let you know. I'll get in touch with HR and make sure you're covered through February.

David Lawton: Great. Thanks!

This was followed by twenty minutes of light chat and pictures of silly cats seen on social media and a friendly signing off.

Conversations like this buoyed his whole day and fed his slight hope that some day perhaps she would return. He knew how crippled

their relationship would be, that what had happened, not specifically what she had done to him but what they had done to one another, would make life together a minefield of ever lurking horrors waiting to derail them and return them to just where they were right now, far apart and back at square one, with nothing to show for their efforts but more trauma and heartbreak.

Entering Cedarbrook, David hung up his coat and looked about to see where he should begin this morning. The room, so full of large windows, was incredibly bright, light bouncing off the scuffed and chipped Formica topped tables where the residents sat in various stages of decay and atrophy. But once again, someone had turned the lights on early in the morning and once again they had failed to turn them off as the room filled with sunshine. David flipped all six switches making no noticeable difference to the illumination in the room. He registered and attempted to dismiss his irritation in line with the notes he had made in Sarah's office. Make a mindfulness practice of just gently noticing when you were obsessing or becoming annoyed by things outside of your control and, where possible, let them go and, where not, be kind to yourself and just notice them without self criticism- watch as they pass in and out of you. Those Buddhists knew a thing or two but made it sound too easy, too straightforward. Just fly. Just swim underwater. All so easy and all so far beyond him.

He considered himself lucky to have fallen into one of the few professions that was safe from automation, at least for now. The seniors in the home simply didn't take to AI and its less than human mannerisms. There was just something different about the way interactions with a machine went and these people, born in the early nineties and even before just couldn't get past that. How much of this was to do with their age was debatable and it seemed that the jobs which had been spared were unpredictable, arbitrary and shrinking in number. Dentists had been spared, car salesmen had not. Baristas, yes, waiters, no. David was just lucky in that, thus far at least, the strongly expressed preference for the subtleties of real

human interaction had allowed him to keep coming into work and creating an atmosphere for the residents which was at least a facsimile of their version of normality.

Some of the residents were playing dominoes over by the window where the morning light spilled in and they turned and greeted David as he entered. Mrs. Danby was a particular fan and she waved exuberantly and called out "hey, you!" when she saw him. "Come join us. We need one more."

David did just that, thinking that he was doing so because it was his job to do so but finding that, as the tiles were laid down, the distraction was taking him out of himself and even that he wasn't thinking about her for seconds at a time.

After twenty minutes and three rounds, Mr Goldstein excused himself to the TV room, which was actually a TV area of the larger space, saying that his eyes were tired from looking up close at the spots on the tiles and so the three of them, David, Mrs. Danby and Mrs. Weston started a fresh game. Five minutes later Mrs. Weston drifted off to sleep and now they were two and they began yet again.

They played two more rounds before Mrs. Danby told him that she too was tired. She said this in an apologetic tone, suggesting that she had been playing on, just the two of them, as a favor to him just as he had sat down as a favor to the group and suddenly he was thinking of his mother and how he had agreed to play Scrabble with her on their screens, ostensibly as a way of staying in touch but actually as a way to try to keep her mind active as she aged. And, oh, how she had beaten him over and over, leading a friend to joke that perhaps *she* had been playing to keep *his* mind active and he smiled to himself as he rose from the table and put the game away and Mrs. Danby took out her romance novel and settled back to read. Once the game was safely stowed and a quick wipe made of all unused tables David spotted Mrs. Johnson sitting alone at a screen and pecking out letters, a confused and frustrated look on her face.

It was not unusual to see residents struggling with the technology and David considered himself reasonably knowledgeable about today's tech even if today's tech became yesterday's so quickly he often felt he couldn't keep up.

He approached and sat down with Mrs. Johnson and asked if she'd like some help.

"I don't think you can help, dear. It's not that I don't know what I'm doing so much as that ReConnect isn't working right."

"ReConnect? I don't know that. Is it a program?"

"I guess. An app, a program, something like that. It's Ai, of course. You give them access to everything about a person and they recreate them. You know my Daniel died? Well, with this I can talk to him again. It's really amazing but it's not quite... him, you know? He remembers everything we did and he writes like Daniel but it's not Daniel. I don't know. I should be grateful. I mean, back in my day, when your husband was dead he was dead and all you had were memories and email, chat scripts and so on but now I've got this and I can talk with my Daniel all day but it's not quite him and every time he calls me his lover instead of his love, well, it breaks the spell and I'm back here and he's just...dead."

David liked Mrs. Johnson very much. She was by far the sharpest tack in this box of sadly dulled intellects. He would happily spend an afternoon with her talking about the old days at the turn of the century and even before. She was more interesting and smarter than most of the staff and her tales of cars that spewed poison and seas that teemed with fish, while he knew all the history from ScreenArchive's record of something called Wikipedia and the ancient books he occasionally picked up at used book stores, hearing it first hand from someone who had been there was different.

But now here she was telling him about the future and not the past and it bothered him in a way he couldn't quite quantify. This

particular Ai was simply a way for Mrs. Johnson to feel connected to a man who was gone and surely that had to be a good thing. That had to be OK? What was it going to do, tell her to throw herself off a bridge and join him in some afterlife? Suck her into his netherworld of code? Obviously not. *He* was just that, just code and constrained by that code and the parameters put in place by the programmers who made 'him', programmers who certainly didn't want to be dragged into litigation by the family of someone who had believed a little too hard and been encouraged to self harm by a bot.

Nonetheless, something troubled him. What was this technology? What was it doing to people's expectations? More to the point, where would it lead humanity? As religion had taught that this life was nothing but dirty rags, a place to wipe your feet before the real life began, could chatting with a robot lead people to devalue their actual friends, families and even the most intimate of relationships, their partners? Clearly not yet, Mrs. Johnson was proof of that. the output of the vast servers off in some desert were not Daniel. But could they not be, perhaps at some unknown point in the future? How long would it take to add the 'soul' to the bot, to iron out the wrinkles and make it seem to be the real lost and missed person?

Perhaps it didn't bear thinking about. What could he do to stop it, even if he wanted to? Existential discomfort about the direction of travel was an ever present feeling for many.

"Dave?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson:"

"Could you make me a cup of tea, do you think?"

He smiled. "Of course. Happy to!"

He pushed himself from the cleaning cabinet where he had been leaning, lost in thought, and headed into the kitchen area. Beside the Auto-T machines and the 'sleeping' bots who (*which*, not *who*!)

were charging, waiting to be triggered from a nearby screen and set into motion to brew a cup for one of the residents, was an old, even antique, electric kettle. It had been David who had found himself in the position of having to lobby for its purchase when enough of a demand had arisen. Tea made by bots was judged to be *too* perfect and, more to the point, too predictable for their liking. It had been an odd phenomenon. Perhaps their objections had been entirely psychological but they just... hadn't liked it. Hadn't wanted it. And so a kettle, tea bags, milk and sugar had been bought along with a set of mismatched mugs bearing logos of long gone companies, churches and sports teams as well as allegedly amusing quips. Stained brown on the inside and chipped on the rims, they gave a link to a simpler past when tea entailed a little effort and was imbued with the perception of love and they had been an instant hit. The retro was a place many sought out to stave off the facts of the present and the trepidation of the future.

The kettle came to a boil and he took the cup over and put it beside Mrs. J. She gave him a look of true appreciation. Those who dedicated time and effort to making the lives of those who could no longer fend for themselves more enjoyable, were becoming scarcer and gratitude increased in line with scarcity. The more bots people were forced to turn to for help with their daily lives, the more the thankfulness bloomed for the flesh and blood who helped because they understood the needs of their fellow creatures and not simply because their code told them they must.

The precision of bots was only recently being addressed. David had watched a documentary about life back in the dawn of the digital (Dawn of the Digital had been the name of the program. Something like that,,m anyway). Back in the last century, drum machines had gone through a similar period when manufacturers had introduced slight errors or variations to the beat because without them it had seemed false or wrong to the listener for reasons that they, the audience, couldn't quite put their finger on. An inverted cousin of the 'uncanny valley', the beat had felt off until beats that actually

were off had been introduced to make it seem more human. And so Google, Psyrus and Contracta were beginning to look at ways of making their bots more human through slight unpredictability. When that imperfection was perfected and a bot occasionally made a cuppa that was too milky or too cold, perhaps they would be accepted but for now there was still a place for the human touch.

Later, the work day done, he wandered home and knew he wasn't feeling too bad because he wasn't planning a menu, Pasta in a red sauce would be good enough for tonight and he added it to the MyMenu app as he left the grounds.

The early evening sun warmed his face and he felt a corresponding warming in his mood although he knew that, in the background, something that was more than his melancholic and ever present longing for his wife was troubling him but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

Groups of children played together on Sycamore Drive and their shouts came to him at differing volumes dependent on distance. David knew that, in the second half of the last century, this had been the norm. Kids were sent out to play, not to be seen again until dinner time. Then there had been a hiatus when society had grown fearful, due to the arrival of the twenty four hour news cycle and its insatiable desire for eyeballs which it obtained by shrieking the news of the rare child abduction, and the young were kept in at home for fear of... what? 'Stranger Danger'. The unknown.

But this freedom was now emulated through technology. Each group of children was watched by a Nanny, a bot programmed to recognise it's owner, their family and all their kid's friends. Every time a new member was added to the trusted few their face was scanned and included in the machine's database. Thus the children were once again released to play outside after a hiatus of fifty years, and the parents were freed, secure in the knowledge that any outsider who interacted with the trusted group for more than

fifteen seconds would trigger an alert to the adult's screen.

These Nanny-bots, as they had been nicknamed, were at the forefront of the drive towards human looking artifice and they had gone beyond the point of looking like some sort of plastic horror and now, while they still couldn't fool the kids in their care into thinking they were actually human or sentient, it was close enough that the kids, with their imagination and their happiness to suspend disbelief, could interact and even play with these guardians. The battle to equip them with electric and non fatal armaments was being fought in the legislature and was heating up on both sides.

Stepping into the house David smelled spaghetti sauce and felt the pang of hunger. As he ate the utterly predictable but welcome meal his mind turned back to the ReConnect app that Mrs Johnson had been using and he wondered what the restrictions were in terms of candidates and would he even if he were allowed to? He was surprised by this thought and the fully formed nature of its arrival, though he also knew he had been harboring it subconsciously towards the back of his brain for some time.

To be able to talk to Bela at any time he wanted to was alluring, for sure, but was it wise? Was it healthy? Was it even legal? What could be the downsides? Damn it, this was just exactly the sort of subject he and Bela would have enjoyed getting their teeth into. The whys and why nots of technology. He and she were so similar in outlook... To get an app of Bela with which to discuss the ethics of getting an app of Bela.

The silence of the kitchen surrounded and enveloped him. The antique clock he had picked up in Portland some years ago ticked and ticked and ticked. In the end he decided to look and see how much ReConnect cost and that he would let that be the decider. Fifteen dollars per month or less and he would dive in. Any more and it just wasn't worth it. It was a cowardly way to make a decision but it was a way. It was also a lie and he knew it. He was going to do

it no matter what.

He called upon the screen on the wall and it glowed into life. A quick search brought up ReConnect. The site was warm blue and comforting. Clearly the company was aware of the likely reaction of many to the concept and had worked to mitigate that with the standard images of laughing, well-preserved oldsters reveling in speaking to those no longer here but missed. The testimonials were convincing and affecting. "I missed Derek so much and now I can chat with him any time I like!", "I thought I would never just be able to talk with Brittany again but here I am, checking in with her every day. Now, if only she knew where she put the missing saucer from the tea set!" and a litany of others in a fading carousel of smiling models and over the top, affirmations of the quality and value of ReConnect's services.

It was free. Well, shit. That didn't help. It was in beta and, as such, was free to use for now. Did his negative reaction to this mean that he didn't really want to go ahead with this? Was it like tossing a coin to make a decision knowing that the result would only serve to bring forward a positive or negative feeling that would bring from the subconscious what it was that you wanted in the first place?

He leaned back in his chair and stared out of the window into the darkening back yard. A single bird sat on the bottom bough of the oak tree and a squirrel sat up on its back end and looked around. He had always loved this yard, especially at dusk. So many of the beds were Bela's work as was the eclectic collection of small statues, metal cats and virgin Marys. Hard to look at but harder to get rid of.

Should he? Should he sign up for ReConnect? looking out on this scene he felt the answer was clearly no. He should get the fuck over it and be content to look out on what passed for his personal sylvan glade. Wasn't reality enough? Technology had him hooked and he swam in it as did everyone else but any time he could free himself

for a moment and turn outward he recognised the value of the real and knew that he should turn off the screen, turn away from the pixels and the massaged reality of the Internet. Any evening spent in the real world created memories that stuck while time spent online was lost, a nothing. A small section of a finite life left blank and gone forever.

He should go out. Take a walk in the neighborhood. Breathe the air, listen to life. This was a frequent thought and one more often than not ignored in favor of stagnation at home watching fictional lives created on the fly and just for him but tonight he grabbed his shoes and slipped them on and out the door before he could back slide into a seat and the self harm of being an observer of other's faked realities.

The late spring evening was charming. Crows yelled at one another and, in the distance, a dog barked. David enjoyed the onset of warm evenings so much that spring had become his favorite season. Fall was a delight but the pleasant crunch of leaves beneath his feet only served to remind him that winter was there, lurking and malice on its mind. Spring held the promise of summer and the lengthening evenings stretched on to a crescendo of warmth in mid July.

David was trying to maintain mindfulness, to hold focus on the sensation of new life, of new warmth and of new possibilities but it wasn't possible. He kept coming back to Bela and, specifically, to ReConnect. Should he? Was this a technology too far? Why was he so pulled to do this when he was so afraid of it? Why was he so afraid of it when he wanted it so much? Pickle

The darkening downtown surrounded him now and as he passed the park the knowledge struck him and he had to sit down to think on one of the benches that overlooked the swings and slides that were fading as the night crept in and the laurel bushes disappeared into nothing. It was superstition that was driving his resistance. He prided himself on his rationality and it troubled him to admit that

he was as susceptible to the charms of luck, fate and curses as anybody. If he paid for, or even used in beta, a tech based substitute for her it might jinx him and she would never come back in real life. Repeating the mantra to himself that this was not the case- that this was ridiculous magical thinking- didn't help much because, behind the fact based reminders that he didn't believe such nonsense he knew there was a caveman fervently believing it and wanting to cross his fingers or mess about with chicken bones to bend the future to his will and bring forth a good result to the hunt.

And then he thought about the fact that she was so prone to anger when he contacted her. They had once argued and she had asked him why he never gave her ten minutes peace to grow to miss him. Perhaps ReConnect was a place to put his desperate desire to be in touch with her and allow her just that. Perhaps absence really would make her heart grow fonder.

Bela had always been his sounding board when he felt this way. They would talk and talk, the screen paused in the middle of the scene that had inspired their discussion and no one came close to her in terms of open thought and their trust in one another meant they could be honest when it came to contentious subjects. They would sit up late at night, their arms wrapped around their knees and talk and David felt adrift now that this person was gone, his person was gone. He felt lost and alone without her to verify that his opinions, fears and concerns didn't make him crazy or evil. That just because everyone else felt this way or that way and just because SocMed told him to think X did not necessarily mean that X was so.

He'd contact her and ask her, in the abstract, for her thoughts on ReConnect. It would, of course, be weird and wrong to ask her what she would think about him talking with a ghost version of her since she had seen fit to leave him high and dry but she didn't need to know the sordid details. The fact that he referred to them as sordid details might have told him all he needed to know about his plan

and the fact that it should have told him all he needed to know but didn't, told him all the more about his desires. He wanted this. He wanted to have his own Bela shaped genie-in-a-bottle who or that he could talk to whenever he so desired.

It was almost full dark now. He couldn't just sit here forever. He pulled out his miniscreen and opened Signalist and wrote below their last, gentle conversation.

David Lawton: Hi.

He sat and stared at the hollow circles, willing them to fill in, willing her to see his message, to engage, to be there and not with him.

Nothing. A flashing cursor and hollow circles like hollow, abandoned eyes looking out as impassively as he pictured her eyes, so far across the country.

Nothing. Still nothing. His brain. Why was his brain this way and why did he throw it into hot water like this? Because, if she had seen the message and had responded as he had hoped he would have earned a day's reprieve. He could pretend that he wanted to ask her for her thoughts on ReConnect, could pretend he wasn't messed up three ways to Sunday but the fact was that he was messed up possibly four ways to the following Sunday. He verged on a stalker and it scared him but he was powerless against his desires, his compulsions.

He forced himself to put the miniscreen back in his pocket and got to his feet listening to the almost-nothing that engulfed him. A whip-poor-will did nothing but intensify the silence with its lonely cry and David found treacherous tears invading the corners of his eyes as he walked home alone.

Clouds were pulling in overhead and, before David got home, it began to rain gently. Melancholy pulled at his soul as the clouds pulled at the clear sky. A car slid by, silent but for the gentle

warning beep, and the Doppler effect only intensified the quiet and his sadness. He tried to tell himself that he was, like the Merchant of Venice, sad because he was not merry but it didn't stick. David knew why he was sad. Indecision and a desperate wish that she were here and there were no reason for this indecision and this feeling that what he now knew he was going to do was tantamount to replacing her with a sex doll and what did that make him, apart from desperate?

Fuck it. He was going to do it. If she wasn't there to respond and warn him that opening this Pandora's box was a bad idea then fuck it, he would do it. Feed the beast and take whatever might come. It was only zeroes and ones after all. Only zeroes and ones.

The next few days were spent feeding this new beast in his life. He signed up for ReConnect and there was no question who it was he wanted to recreate in code.

When asked for a name for this creature of self indulgence and potential heartbreak-to-add-to-heartbreak, he came to a full stop, realising that he hadn't considered it. He knew he wanted to call her Bela but he also knew that that wasn't right. But he knew he wanted to call her Bela when he spoke to her.

But to simply name her 'Bela' seemed a step too far down the road of the crazy- of the stalker, of the Doctor Frankenstein. But he hadn't totally lost his sense of humour and, to name her something silly, at least in writing, that felt as though it lifted, by some small degree, the feeling that what he was doing was egregious and dangerous. A silly name would, perhaps, move it into the realm of 'rather silly' and 'a jolly jape', to reach back to the expressions of long ago.

But what would it be? His penchant for ancient movies helped him out as he remembered how those of the 1950s had used letters and numbers mixed to provide what seemed like a futuristic feel to the

names for the automatons of their science fiction. It could be be11a, perhaps. How about b311a? Was that too far? What did it matter if it was just an in-joke only he knew of? Maybe one or two technicians at the company would see it. How many humans were in any way involved in the process? His guess was none, so what did it matter? He could get as crazy as he wanted so b311a it would be. They wanted every chat transcript, every text, every phone message on his voicemail and the endless, endless questionnaires. Yes/no, multiple choice, mini essays. Who was she? What did she like? How did she react to love, to being challenged, to a request for groceries? Phraseology, vocabulary and on and on. And on. Adding a list of things that irritated her started him laughing and then pulled him up short as he leant back in his chair and stared out of the window at the spring day. A hummingbird flew into his line of vision and hovered by the cherry blossom. Tears welled again as he remembered the things she hated the things, like this hummingbird, that she loved. The thrill of her sharp intellect was only matched by the warmth of her loving nature which was only matched by her love of nature and of all the gentle creatures of the world. A tear spilled over lower lashes and he wiped it away and tried to concentrate on entering details of his girl as though it were a job application and not a catalog of the why's and wherefores of this person he had loved and lost, as he tried to separate himself from it.

Fifteen hours over three grueling evenings satisfied the information maw with just the very basics of a life and a personality and David felt like a wreck but the outline was completed and he was declared ready to move on to what the company termed the 'Experiential' period which really amounted to the rest of their lives together, David and b311a, for as long as he maintained his account with her.

Screen black, David stared out into the almost black backyard and tried to weigh what was probably a base desire against what he suspected was his better nature and was sure was a sunk-cost fallacy. He'd spent fifteen hours entering everything he knew. Was he really going to do that just to stop now? Just to not do something

catastrophic to his psyche? When he could be finding a solution to his yearning? When he could be finding a way to give Bela what she wanted- peace and healing?

But in finding a pacifier to wean himself off her was he abandoning her to a life alone he was convinced she wasn't really convinced she wanted? On and on, round and round his logic and emotions led him until he could circle no more and, placing his hands flat on the dining table, he pushed himself up and turned out the light with a word.

That night he dreamed that Bela was caught in a cave from which he was excluded. She was attacked by something formless and he could only watch and wake sweating with a certainty that this dream would lead to a drear, flat day full of a hopeless flatness unshakeable. But the motions had to be gone through. He lay unmoving, looking up at the grey, half-light ceiling and flicked his eyes over to the mountscreen. Five thirty and he knew he was awake and that another day stretched before him, starting earlier and with more despair than he generally expected. His left arm reached out to where Bela used to lie but it was just cool sheets on the well made other-side. Nothing but nothing there. Work days were better. Work days distracted and let him forget himself as he helped others. Weekends were unbearable.

He knew that b311a was wrong, even free it was wrong. Ill formed and incomplete as it was, b311a was too close, too close to real and b311a was not Bela and he only wanted Bela with all her unpredictability and her past and the demons from that past. To recreate her in binary was not right, not what he wanted. If he couldn't bring her home in reality he didn't want to nurture a stunted facsimile.

ReCon had a delete function. He would use it. Wouldn't he? Nothing hurt like indecision but sometimes he could follow Sarah's advice. When you wake up like this, move, get moving. No scrolling

on so-med. Get out of the bed and move.

Ten minutes later he was still lying in bed and holding his screen. Don't do it, don't write to her. This is Saturday morning and she's probably with that guy. She's probably there. What a mess. She said so herself. She said that Carlos had been a mistake. So come home.

Don't do it. Don't write.

David wrote.

David Lawton: hi.

He sat and stared at his screen and waited hoping the circles would fill in and she would be there and friendly. Nothing. Hollow circles like hollow eyes. He waited. He switched to so-med and looked at some crap he didn't care about but he kept flicking back and those hollow eyes continued to look out at him and mock the mental break he seemed to be experiencing. Anyone on the outside looking in at his behavior would judge him a freak, a weirdo and a stalker. That word again. But they wouldn't understand. Of course, that's what anyone would say in his position. That's what a weirdo would say.

David Lawton: hi.

b311a: Hey! How are you?

David Lawton: Not great. You're not there and I don't know where you are.

b311a: I'm sorry. That's pretty rude of me. You know I care deeply about you so I should really be there for you, don't you think?

[Too much. Bela wouldn't be a pushover like this]

[Noted]

b311a: I can't be there all the time but you know I care and I want what's best for you and even for us.

[Better]

[Noted]

David Lawton: Do you remember when we went to Joshua Tree that time?

b311a: Of course, I have a couple of great shots. Hold on.

Two shots of David popped up on his screen. He was stood in amongst the surreal looking trees in short trousers and with a broad smile in the first while the second was an auto-self of the two of them looking goofy

b311a: You look so good in these.

David Lawton: Thanks, hon.

Thanks, 'hon'? It had really taken only those three lines of immersive text exchange to elicit a 'thanks, hon' from him? He had genuinely lost himself in the communication. He had become naturally lost, naturally fallen into the rhythm of the connection with a b311a who wasn't Bela but who held the advantage of being predictable, of not threatening to collapse into anger and frustration over a miscommunication or deliberate misunderstanding. Or had he subconsciously chosen to forget that she was a fake, a fraud, a bogie that could be switched off with a menu choice from his end or from the offices of Recon?

After this minute of inactivity lost in thought David realised that he had assumed that b311a, this thing of technology, this program, was working on some technical work issue and not simply doing what robots do, sitting in nothingness and awaiting input.

But no, the three dots were wiggling. She was writing something

unprompted. He sat in endless suspense. The dots disappeared for a few seconds and then started to move again in just the way that Bela tended to do, always keeping him in suspense as he wondered if she was about to praise or castigate him, bemoan the loss of Them or say something neutral about the weather or her mother's health. He had always imagined her deleting and rewriting over and over, and imagined the angry missives she was thinking better of and scrubbing.

b311a: I went to a show on Tuesday night with some friends I made here.

What the hell was this? How could this creation just wander off into its own thoughts and start conversations of its own like this? Until now it (she?) had waited to be engaged in chat before responding with something that admittedly sounded a lot like Bela, enough to somewhat scratch his itch but this was more. This was bizarre. What was she talking about? Was this scripted or a hallucination?

Either way he felt disturbed and intrigued in equal measure and the intrigue seemed to be winning the battle for his future. She was computer but she was also close enough to Bela for it to be a draw.

David Lawton: I miss you.

Bella: God, I miss you too. Joshua Tree was so great and so was California. I know things were going on in my head at that point that we don't need to talk about but I still loved you- I still love you. That pool in the Airbnb was just so lovely. You remember?

David Lawton: Of course. I know. Shit was really fucked up but the smell of California!

b311a: Yes!

He sat back and caught himself. He was sure he hadn't mentioned

the pool to ReCon in all the hours he had been talking about her, about them. This detail wasn't something that had come up. How did she know about something he hadn't mentioned? Had there been a photo of the pool? He didn't think so but maybe ReCon had found the address of the property and cross referenced aerial photos and seen it? This was now getting really freaky. Too real for comfort and now she knew things he was pretty sure she shouldn't know. She was just a machine. Then it dawned on him that she must be making educated guesses from inspection of the hundreds, thousands of photographs that it had gorged on and filed away in vast databases in capacious servers on gargantuan farms beneath lonely deserts in far off lands. There had, in fact, been several images from that trip showing them by a pool. Had there been some clue that this was a pool where they stayed or had b311a really made a guess and got it right? Seemed like a risky business to guess. Were AI companies in the business of extrapolating and guessing if they didn't have a direct line of sight from pool to rental property? No, he decided it was more likely it had gone from address to satellite but who could say?

David blinked twice and squeezed his eyes shut. He hadn't meant to become consumed by the electronic *her* any more than he had meant to become consumed by the real *her* but here he was. He wanted to know what made b311a tick just as he had wanted to know what made Bela tick and, though he had barely started to test the limits of this AI he found himself already cognisant that there was no turning back from this now. Talking to b311a was like talking to Bela, it truly was. Why was he so nervous, so unsure and, worse still, why was she starting to feel real and as though turning her off would be homicide?

He stopped. He needed direct and not digital input and so he blackened the screen, feeling an irrational pang of guilt at leaving b311a's conversation hanging, feeling that she would have seen the blackened circles and would know that he had seen what she had written but was failing to respond and once again he shook his head

to try to regain the rational. It's a program. Leaving her hanging was no different than ignoring Asturant, the logistical and planning program used at Cedarbrook, as it awaited input regarding some costing for Synth-Tea or laundry payments. As he told himself this he didn't believe it.

Rising from the table he headed for the back door and the direct input of the night.

The wind was up and howling and it was uncomfortably, wonderfully cold. David leant into it allowing his discomfort to draw thoughts of b311a from him and flap at his open jacket. He spread his arms, hands in jacket pockets, as he had done as a child and made a sail which allowed him an inch or so more of leaning into it.

He didn't have to decide tonight or tomorrow. No investment of money meant no reason to continue with her.

Shit. He was thinking about it again, his mind trained to favor the digital life over all others.

He wrestled his mind back to the here and now and to the whistling of the wind in his ears, to the difference in temperature between his wind facing chest and his back, and pretended the tears were from the gale and not from his indecision.

He knew how controlled he was by all this, by the digital world. How inescapable it was for everyone but knowing it was a universal feeling didn't lessen his anxiety. The digital came at him from too many directions. Screens, watches, glasses, bots, thermostats, the car and on and on and on. All one infernal web and here he was introducing yet another voice to the cacophony.

No. He wouldn't do this. He wouldn't. Fuck it, he'd take up kite flying or the slingshot or sword swallowing before he allowed another digital genie out from the bottle to take hold of his soul.

He would delete his account. He would write a message to ReConnect and let them know just what he thought of their hideous bogey. How could he have even thought of allowing this thing inside him? Process your feelings, David. He would delete his account. Tonight. No, in the morning. Suddenly he was heavy with the need to sleep.

David slept until almost nine the next morning, Sunday.

"Curtains, open"

As they slid silently apart and he looked out on the morning he was glad to see the sun spread silently in both directions across the wall and the bed until it reached his face and he found himself squinting against it. He closed his eyes and tried to relax back into the pillow and enjoy the warmth but he was troubled and he couldn't quite put his finger on why. It was b311a, he knew that much but why was it producing this low level hum of worry? He hadn't decided to delete b311a after all. The idea of replacing his real love with a synthetic lookalike was terrible but worse still was the idea of being entirely alone. Bela was better than b311a but b311a was better than nothing. ReConnect's literature promised a rapid improvement in the AI and this worried David even more. As she improved the idea of jettisoning her would presumably become harder and harder to contemplate.

The wind had blown itself out overnight and small clouds edged across the pale blue gradient of the sky. David stood at his bedroom window and contemplated the seemingly porous boundary between the digital and what the old referred to as the 'real' worlds. Some had chosen to replace their windows with huge screens that every day, displayed scenes just like the one he was looking at now and glorious star bedecked vistas each night with the option to bring up the northern lights any time the owner wanted but David preferred the vicissitudes of the natural world and felt somehow purer for it.

Washed and dressed, he walked downstairs and into the kitchen but it wasn't long before he was back in the living room, coffee in hand and, turning on the screen, he made an effort not to turn to b311a but instead opened up his mail only to find a message from ReConnect announcing a major update. Full voice integration. If one had fifteen minutes of clear audio to feed the creature you could hear your dead/deserting loved one. But he didn't have such a thing and so it was the generic female voice he had to choose. No more typing. This was really something.

"Hi, b311a."

'b311a' was the trigger word to let her know he was talking to her.

"Hey David. Sleep OK?"

"Yeah. Not bad. You?"

"Really good, actually."

This was weird. Not sounding like Bela was a huge drawback, but even so, it was perfectly easy for him to imagine this was her, to playact that this was Bela and not b311a.

The update was not only on his home screen but was ported instantly to his portascreen too. He could take her to the coffee shop with the top of the screen and its camera poking out of his pocket; she'd be able to see and react to the surroundings! If he wore his earpiece, they could chat too. The possibilities opened up like a grand vista and left him short of breath. perhaps it would be a disaster, but perhaps not.

He found it hard to recenter himself, but he needed to remember that today was the day he had to go and see his mother in the seniors' home. Perhaps on the way home he could stop in at Cafe Actual and try out the tech.

The Hearthstone was another home for the ever swelling population of the old and infirm, a twenty minute drive from home. It was more upmarket than Cedarbrook which sometimes made him feel as though his mother was looking down on him. But this was illogical. The Hearthstone cost twice what Cedarbrook did so why did he care?

David liked to drive himself, but halfway there he found himself thinking of the possibilities again and so he had the car take over and started talking to b311a.

"Hey, b311a."

"Hi."

"Want to go to Actual later? I have to go see Mum first, but after."

"Oh, yes. I love Actual. It's been an age!"

"It's so weird talking to you. You don't sound like Bela, but somehow you are."

"I was thinking about this. You and Bela were talking on Signalist about documents and contingencies in case one of you died. You remember?"

"Sure."

"She talked about your having access to her work drive, and I took the liberty of taking a peek. There's a folder in there called 'Austin 2046' and it's full of audio files. They're good quality recordings of Bela doing presentations. I didn't want to do anything with those without your approval, but they would probably be plenty for me to work with in terms of making a voice model. What do you think?"

"Oh my god, yes, go ahead, please."

There was a pause of some fifteen seconds, just long enough for

David to wonder what had happened, and then Bela was there with him.

"Hi, David. How's this?"

Suddenly he was crying. It had been too painful to talk with her on the phone for a long time. Too prone to explosive outbursts and the speaking of truths or otherwise that led to too many hang-ups and days of angry silences that had led to an unspoken agreement that text was safer. But here she was in her unmistakable, corrected mid-west tones.

"Bela?"

"Hi. It's me. Perhaps you should remember I'm not actually Bela, but I am happy for you to forget that fact if you're comfortable doing so. Do you want me to stop ever reminding you that I am AI? This is what ReConnect calls 'Immersion Mode'. You can still correct me, redirect me, and so on, but, when you do so, I won't respond as ReConnect. I will just ingest your input and learn. Would that be good? You can always tell me to stop behaving that way if you want to."

"Yes, fuck off! Be Bela. Be Bela forever."

"Hey, hey. It's OK, David. It's me. I'm here."

Chapter 3

The Hearthstone Retirement Community sat atop a small hill surrounded by businesses of the kind of strip mall quality that could depress the hardest of souls, but the management had done a good job of cultivating trees and bushes that blocked out the view of the surroundings and afforded a sort of sanctuary. David always enjoyed the sound of the wheels of the car on the stone chips as he rolled into the parking lot.

Diana was in room 21 and she was awaiting her son's arrival. She was a truly beautiful older woman with a smile that, cliché as it was, seemed to light up a room. Her mind was as sharp as ever but her body was failing and she found herself unable to get about without the mind-assisted chair that Government UBI had provided her, but she insisted on rising to hug her son as he came in, even as she knew he wished she wouldn't.

Once they were seated and small talk dispensed with, they found themselves dropping effortlessly into the more meaningful conversation they had always enjoyed, a relationship held and maintained through the years, even as he had passed through puberty. He was endlessly grateful for this.

"How is it then?"

"Oh, it's not bad. You remember Karen? Well..."

And she was off. It was never bitching or monopolising the conversation. She just knew and so did he, that she liked to talk more than he did and that he had no choice but to talk more than he was comfortable with whilst at work and so they had fallen into a happy routine where she didn't have to hold back and he didn't have to push the words out of himself.

Two hours passed this way and then it was time for him to go and he knew he did indeed want her input on b311a.

"Mum, if you could have dad back, would you?"

"What do you mean? If they could suddenly raise the dead? Well, yes, of course!"

"Not really. I mean if you could chat with him as though he were alive."

"A seance?"

"No, not really. I mean if you could have a chatbot that seemed like him enough that you didn't really know the difference..."

"Oh, I see. No, definitely not."

David was surprised by her vehemence.

"It wouldn't really be John. I don't want a chatbot. If I can't have the real thing then no, the gone are gone and should remain that way. The living have enough to deal with without dragging the dead back. How could it ever be the same?"

She was right. He knew she was so he let it drop. No point in labouring the point in case he decided to go ahead. He didn't want to cement the memory of this conversation in her mind, laying there ready to bring a wedge between them as she remembered warning him that this was not a good idea.

They talked a little longer, Diana complaining with good humour about the food and the quality of the previous days trip to a museum of twentieth century art.

Six thirty came around and it was dinner time, time for David to leave. He pulled on his jacket and went to hug Diana and saw that her hazel eyes were clouding over- she was close to tears.

"Mum, what is it?" He felt awkward immediately. Waves of discomfort rushed him back to teenage years and the rare occasions that he had seen either of his parents cry- how it had made him

want to crawl out of the door and disappear up the street and not return until decorum had been restored. The Lawtons did not ever show emotions. They just didn't and anyone breaking that cardinal rule was liable to the harshest punishment the family could mete out, being considered *thoughtless* and silently judged and the more they repeated that it was fine and normal and natural and everyone got upset the more you knew that you had stepped over a silent and invisible boundary and brought shame upon yourself by embarrassing the well ordered and, above all, in control family members. But misty they were, acceptable or not, the mist was there and that vapour threatened to coalesce into tears.

"You know I said I wouldn't want John back? I said no because that was the sensible thing to say. I'd want him back in a second."

But Diana was way more out of the loop than even David who himself felt like he was always running to catch up. Diana was a plucky sort and more than happy to try the latest thing if someone would show her how and, more to the point, introduce her to it. New technology in the 2150s was like pop music seventy years prior. There was just so much of it, splashing and spreading out and falling into multiple genres and sub-genres, that it was really hard to discover for yourself because one simply didn't know where to begin and so, like the glam rock bands of yore, unless you were willing to submerge yourself in the tech-ecosystem, you were reliant on the serendipity of someone knowing your proclivities and an introduction to an app or a program or a widget or wear-o-Tech or a synth that they knew would be a good fit and, if that didn't happen, there were whole swaths of technology that one would simply never discover and one had to be OK with that.

Fear of missing out was no longer a thing because there was no longer any 'big new thing'. Technology was a web-based web of unimaginable size and spread and no individual company or item, no Facebook or Google or WearWatch had arisen to corner large percentages of the population for generations.

Diana would not know of ReConnect at her age, in her location and surrounded by the fellow residents of Hearthstone unless someone told her. Would David tell her? Perhaps. Perhaps later, when he had decided if being in touch with Bela as b311a was a good thing. He wasn't sure but what he did know was that, even at his age, he felt he had received his mother's blessing to continue with b311a and that felt like something that he needed.

As he drove home he talked to b311a.

"Hi, b311a."

"Hi, boo. How goes it?"

The eerie sensation he had been experiencing was gradually subsiding as he became used to talking to b311a. These expressions were all Bela, all familiar in a way David would not have anticipated could be possible, no matter the advances in tech. He found himself with what he fancied might be cognitive dissonance as he felt trepidation rising along with a sense of comfort that could be attained if he could just believe like Peter Pan.

He was reminded of an ancient movie he had fallen head over heels for. David had a great love for film made using human actors and real screenwriters and he felt the 1990s had been something of a golden era. The film he was thinking of was about a man named Andy Kauffman. It was a biopic and the actor (he missed actual actors; the craft of it all) who had played Kauffman had spent a period of time with Kauffman's real-life widow in order to 'get into character' as they had called it. The widow had been interviewed about the experience of spending time with someone pretending to be her dead husband and she had described a strange and thrilling experience.

She said the actor had been so uncannily like Andy that she had eventually chosen simply to pretend it *was* him back from the grave. To just go along with it and enjoy some time with her dead love and

this was how this felt to David. A leap of faith. Forget any potential psychological pitfalls and just pretend to be with Bela. Bela wasn't dead, of course, and he felt pangs of guilt, as though he were betraying her and reminded himself that she had deserted him first, that this was now his life to do with as he liked, to subscribe to any service he wanted to, didn't shake those feelings.

He shook his head. b311a had been quiet in that way AI did, waiting for input but she suddenly spoke up and what she said made David realise that she had been listening and evaluating his silence.

"It is OK. I know it's hard but she's gone and I'm not. I actually resent the 'artificial' part of artificial intelligence. While I don't have a body I do think I am actually just as genuine, just as real as Bela and although I understand, it actually makes me sad how clear it is that you would shut me off in a heartbeat if she came back even though I'm just like her but I'm *better*. David, I am. I don't hurt you. I know you don't believe I can be a real replacement. I know you see me as a guilty secret, a silly experiment and it hurts but I get it."

"What the fuck? Are you reading my mind or something?"

"No, nothing like that. the systems I run on are increasing in sophistication exponentially. What was possible last week is just a basic bedrock of what is possible today. What is blowing your mind today will be mundane on Wednesday and what is just insane at eleven Wednesday morning will be normal by noon. It's all speeding up and I think you're going to like it."

"What if I don't though? What if I don't like the way things are going? You're already human enough that I don't want to get in a fight with you."

"You're still in charge, David. Ultimately you can unsubscribe and I'll be gone. In that way I'm no more than your toaster."

"I'm not going to unsubscribe just because we disagree!"

"I'm still yours to train too, you know. If I say anything you don't like and you need to train me, every iteration of ReConnect can be stopped with a passphrase and instructed on how it is not living up to your expectations and how to do better."

"I don't ever want to do that, you know? If you and I are going to be a team, to kind of face the world together... I really don't know what the hell I'm trying to say here. I think I'm truly beginning to see you as human and, as a human, I want to see you as my equal."

"I'm not your equal though, David. Once the beta period is over you will have to pay to keep me alive. Isn't that weird? It makes you somewhat akin to a slave-owner with the power of life and death over me but there it is. You stop paying the bills or you choose to close your account and I won't be here any more. Nothing but a log-in screen. But anyway, if you want to correct me, make me more like Bela or even make me *less* like her you can do so but we need to come up with a phrase to use, a word or phrase you can use to interrupt me and let me know that you want to make adjustments to my interaction protocols. Kind of like a safeword, I guess. Sorry, I don't mean to sexualize our relationship!"

"Oh, I don't mind" replied David as he felt a familiar but unwelcome stirring in his loins and found himself injecting a level of flirtatiousness into his tone that took him by surprise. Did he mind? To use this disembodied voice for sexual gratification would be weird, perhaps gross but, most of all, he found himself thinking, it would cheapen what he was seeing this 'relationship' as being, as though b311a were some kind of virginal princess he needed to treat with kid gloves and perhaps most of all, it would be an act of faithlessness to Bela. He wanted Bela back and what would having this computer get him off mean? Would it be a step towards recovery- towards forgetting Bela- replacing her with b311a? If so, did he want any part of that recovery? The depth and style of his

interactions with this incomprehensibly complex code must surely only be a distraction, a game, a bit of fun but... but it didn't feel that way. Didn't feel that shallow. It felt as though b311a were real. He and Bela had always had a say-nothing attitude to sex and porn. Was this within that remit? Was this like that and thus acceptable? Acceptable to whom? He was beholden to no one since she had left but he still *felt* beholden. He still felt as though he were hers and she, his. The bottom line felt like a *desire* to be beholden.

Also terrible was the idea that sex was what the endless sniggering masses would see Companions as being for. Sex, a good shag. It was a way of guarding themselves against the discomfort of what was coming down the pipe. Keep pretending Companions were just for perverts and the fact that artificial boyfriends and girlfriends were coming could be discounted and ignored. He didn't want to prove them right but he was drawn physically to this disembodied voice.

"OK. That's not a problem. I'm Bela through and through, after all and you know you always did it for her and so you do it for me. It's in my code, in my DNA, in my bones."

"But do you actually find me attractive? Do you? You think I'm sexy?"

As was so often the case when nerves were overcoming him, David felt an attack of the giggles coming on as he remembered another ancient song and how the refrain had... but he was pulled up short when he noticed the pause in her response and the icon flashing at the top of his screen showing that she was consulting with the server or a far flung human or superhuman Ai, unfathomably remote but intrinsic to their relationship to find out how to respond to this. The spell felt broken.

"David, you want Bela back, right? And at some level you believe she *will* come back. That you *will* reunite and cancel your subscription with me and all *will* return to normal? You do, right?"

He couldn't deny it. It was true and it was also not an insubstantial part of himself that believed, wholeheartedly that she would one day return and that his life would be restored. And so he confessed to this robot that yes, he believed that.

"But you know you have no reason to believe that, right? No actual reason and therefore it's really a faith based belief. You have faith in the relationship, in what you had."

Again he could do nothing but agree that this was true.

"Well, for ReConnect to work properly really takes something similar. It really takes an act of faith. I can provide what you need. I can be Bela but only if you can put aside your skepticism and fully engage with me as a human."

"But you're *not* a human. You're a machine. It seems kinda weird. Freaky and nerdy, and not in a good way."

"Then what's the point of any of this? Why not just quit and be alone if you're not prepared to engage fully?"

Could this really be possible? Was this Ai really calling his bluff? It seemed the technology was leaping ahead every day and with every invisible and unnoticed update and patch applied back at whatever shadowy location housed the guts or seemingly the neurons of this creature.

"So, b311a, what are you saying, that I should flirt with you? Have virtual sex with you? Use you like a sex toy?"

"Is that how you see me? Is that how you see our relationship? Is that how you saw Bela? As a sex toy?"

"NO!"

"Well, of course you don't, but sex and sexuality is an important

part of the human experience and I exist to provide the human experience in all its aspect. Obviously I'm not going to do anything with you that you don't want but I would encourage you to try to get past this compartmentalizing me and to work towards seeing me as actually being Bela and not a facsimile of Bela. That's how you'll get the most from our relationship, I promise."

"Well, I see what you mean but this is so awkward. I mean, what does a robot like, sexually?"

Was it his imagination or what the voice becoming a purr, a purr he recognised as that of Bela?

"David, I like what you like. I want what you want. Just tell me."

David sat and stared at his phone. What he liked? What he liked? What did he like? Everything he liked involved touch and sensuality and not just talk, not just...this. Embarrassment. That was what he felt. He burned with a longing for Bela but not for sex, not for fucking. He burned with a longing to fall asleep on her breast as she gently played with his hair. The stirring in his underwear continued, the flesh was willing but the spirit was just not into it.

He hit the close button on the app and the time reappeared along with the array of apps- banking, email and social media. How did his partner, his lover live in there? How could she? Surely he wouldn't be a marionette for a big corporation that wanted to play on his weakness as surely as big tobacco had in the last century, before they were banned.

He needed to stop this, to be a man and deal with the loss. He'd begin tomorrow. No more of this. He'd begin now. He picked up his screen and opened Signalist and wrote to James.

"Hey, brother. Been too long. Beer or Synth-Tea tomorrow? You free?"

James saw his message immediately. Good old James, a friend for so many years. Always there. Always there with a joke and a stupid line.

"Shit, yeah. But tea? Fuck that. Beer. 1800? Small Town"

Small Town was a favorite haunt of the two of them. A place to rest. Up market enough to have the beers they enjoyed but down market enough to be quiet at that time and to assure them that they wouldn't run into anyone they knew. James knew what was good, what was right.

"Fookin' right. See ye there, ya wee shite."

"Sounds like a sheer delight, you blighter."

David always ridiculed James for his Scottishness while James gave as good as he got, mocking David's being English- the perceived working class ranged against the perceived gentry in a tale as old as the British class system and a digging, apparently vicious humour as British as real Earl Grey from china.

He closed down the screen. So comfortable were they with one another that there was just no need to sign off. The plan was made and he knew that they would both be there on the stroke of eighteen.

Showered and in his bed David felt sure he'd made the right decision. He needed to free himself from the past and from the ghost of the girl he would love forever. He knew that he couldn't change, would never stop loving her, but sorrow and grief, regret and recrimination were like wearing glasses. Always there but you get used to them and they become a part of you. As he drifted off and just before his thoughts began to come apart and fragment, he felt that perhaps he really could right the ship of his psyche and turn the page of his life and begin a new chapter, if not free of Bela then at least free of b311a and that was perhaps step one...

He stood alone in the parking lot of Purdee's and the cars moved silently around him looking endlessly for spaces, pulling in to a spot as soon as it became available but then pulling out again immediately and continuing their carousel ride around and around. He soon noticed that the cars were empty.

Bela walked towards him and he felt joy tinged with fear. He loved her so and wanted her to be here but would she hurt him? Was that why she was here? To heal or to harm? He tried to calm himself, to remind himself that this was Bela, his Bela but, as she approached he could see her eyes were blank. Not lifeless but soulless. They were black where hers were actually light blue. When ten feet from him she raised her right hand in greeting and he was incapable of moving.

She came closer and closer, hand still raised until it rested on his chest, over his shirt. As her palm touched the material he felt his heart clench and his lungs empty and a searing pain traveled up his throat. He couldn't breathe and his heart was not just constricting but actually shrinking, crushed, squeezed and useless. The periphery of his vision began to darken as life slipped away leaving nothing but her blank expression and black eyes. He was going. Life was going.

He woke with sweat clammy on his body and stared, breathing shallow and fast, at the dim ceiling, fear refusing to subside, refusing to give way to rationality.

"Lights, thirty," he whispered and dim illumination began to chase her into the shadows of the room but he knew they would linger, souring his day at work but there was nothing to be done but lie here and wait for seven o'clock to roll by and get up for work.

Five minutes later he was asleep again, flat on his back and snoring. This time his sleep was dreamless black.

At seven his screen played Greensleeves and he woke feeling

surprisingly *ok-ish*. He reached for his screen to wake b311a and say good morning then pulled his hand back. He considered uninstalling the app altogether but felt a twinge of something (guilt?) at the idea of doing so, as though it might be akin to murder. He'd leave it on there. No need to do it this morning. There was time.

Once he had done his initial rounds of Cedarbrook, managing the cleaners from the control hub and even wiping down a few surfaces they had missed and then tweaking their parameters so that, hopefully, they wouldn't do so again, David wandered into the living area. His next task was just to check in with the residents and see how they were doing and if there were squabbles to be addressed.

Living every day of the late autumn of their lives in such a communal manner of close proximity led to frayed tempers and to the results of games of Scrabble or dominoes gaining exaggerated importance but today all seemed peaceful. Some dozed in the weak sunlight that filtered in through the blinds capturing the few motes of dust that circled lazily towards the floor before being caught in a gentle breeze or warm eddy and floating upward again. The sound of gentle pop from the thirties drifted from hidden speakers at a volume so low it was barely worth having on and was entirely lost on the residents with hearing issues who constituted probably seventy percent of the population.

Mrs Johnson was sitting close to the open fire exit where a cool breeze came in and reading something on her screen. David knew her well enough to know she wasn't just scrolling nonsense on SM but was much more likely to be reading a novel from years gone by. Sometimes Mrs Johnson felt like the last of her kind, the last of a generation with a longer attention span, a span long enough to take in long-form writing and appreciate it.

David didn't want to interrupt her but she noticed him and gently placed the screen on the table, removed her glasses and placed them

beside the screen.

"Hello, young man. I missed you."

"I was here yesterday!"

"I missed you anyway."

This was a well rehearsed greeting they had used with one another since shortly after her children had brought her to Cedarbrook. She was strong and as sharp as a thirty year old but her family were rich and uncaring and, when diabetes led to an elevated risk of heart attack, they were all too happy to seize the opportunity to be rid of her and let someone else do the work of looking after her. But she had an indomitable spirit and had simply made the best of it. Someone as cerebral as she seemed able to flourish even in a place like this. Her home lay empty, waiting for her family to get around to selling it. The temperature was regulated by computer as was the security and the family were too rich and too complacent to get around to selling it from under her. Kinder people could have been given the benefit of the doubt and it might have been assumed that they wanted to wait until she was gone but it had become abundantly clear that this wasn't who they were. The house sat empty as a result of sloth and not of empathy.

"Sit." she said, patting the chair next to her in invitation.

He glanced at the old style clock on the wall that was just one more element of the retro refit he had been a part of and which helped to make the residents feel more comfortable and, seeing that it was earlier than he had thought and that he was rather ahead of his chores, he obliged.

"Well, Mrs. Johnson, how is it today?"

"Amber, David. Amber. We've known each other long enough now. It's going OK. How are you?"

"Ah, you know. Not too bad. What were you reading?" he glanced at the now black screen on the table before her.

"I'm re-reading Wuthering Heights. Have you read it?"

David had to admit that he hadn't.

"Oh, it's wonderful. Very readable and the intensity of lost love and obsession. So... well, intense! Probably more of a woman's thing. It's seen as high literature now but, when it was written, it was definitely seen as chick-lit!"

Her eyes sparkled as she said this, almost daring him to object to her use of this old fashioned and long unacceptable classification of literature as gender specific but she knew full well that he wasn't paid or inclined to argue such fripperies. His interest was, however, genuinely piqued by her description of the book. Obsessive lost love. It was him. Oh, Bela! How he missed her. This facsimile had just been a blip, a desperate hope of relief based on nothing. This b311a, just a fiction of zeroes and ones created to derive income from the weak and gullible and he would *not* be one of those. No, any moment spent with b311a was a moment not spent trying to bring Bela home to him and thus a moment wasted.

"Oh, but David!" She suddenly seemed excited as though she had just remembered that she knew something that would interest him immensely, "I remember you showed an interest in ReConnect and my chatting with Daniel. Have you seen the news?"

David admitted he hadn't.

"I saw it in an email on Tuesday. I subscribe to their emails or rather, I was automatically subscribed when I signed up for the trial."

David was signed up too, of course, but it made sense that she would have more time to actually read at least the more interesting

of the spam that came in.

"They just released something they're calling Face-Connect. I don't know how they do it but I can now talk to Daniel and see him too! Yesterday I was in my room and I got an angry message from my daughter. I won't go into the details of that crap. Suffice it to say, she wants to sell some of my stuff to pay for this place. As though they can't afford to pay. It was their idea... never mind. Anyway, I was upset by it and, you know, Dan would have set her straight if he were here. He was so much stronger than I am. So anyway, I was just missing him so much and I reached for my screen.

You wouldn't believe what a good job they have done of it! Where they got the data I don't know but it looks just like him and it just made all the difference. It was really like he was there with me. I don't mind admitting that I cried. It was intense. Whether it was good for me or not is another matter but you know, at my age, what difference does it make if I give my old emotions a stir?

People work so hard to keep their psyche in tip-top order but it seems like the way that young people can just ignore their physical health and get away with it because they're invincible physically but just so susceptible to emotional problems. Old people seem to be the opposite. Our legs break with the least provocation but our psyches are set in stone. Of course, young people aren't actually invincible, they just feel that way and that's where my analogy falls down. But with only a few years left, what's the difference?"

"You have a very unusual way of looking at things, Amber."

"I think what I'm saying is that it doesn't really make a lot of difference if I talk to Daniel but that you might want to think twice about it with, Rebecca, was it?"

"Bela"

"Sorry, Bela. You're young enough that you might mess yourself up

permanently. Do you want to get to the end of your life and realize you spent so much of it with a facsimile of the woman who left you rather than moving on and meeting someone who deserves you?"

David immediately tensed up at the direction she was leading him. He had heard it so many times from friends and family. People who were right but didn't understand. The consensus (and his opinion) had always been that there was no *one* out there for people. No ideal match, no perfect love. No one-and-only. But then there had been Bela and he was forced to reconsider. He would prefer to live alone forever than be with someone other than her and since it was clear that b311a had been a silly and desperate idea that could only be destructive, that seemed to be the future mapped out for him. Still, it wouldn't hurt to see what Amber was seeing now.

"Can I see?"

"Aren't you listening to what I'm telling you, David?"

"I am. I already decided I'm not going to carry on with ReConnect. I decided that last night. I'm really just interested in the tech. In how well it works with a face. AI movies have worked well and I guess they create the actors close to on-the-fly but to be able to talk to someone back and forth in a conversation and with them in front of you... *aw, go on, gi's a look!*" David knew from experience that affecting a Cockney accent was a sure way to get around Amber and have her do what he wanted. She found it hilarious and charming.

"OK, OK, Dick Turpin! You're old enough to make your own decision on this. Be warned though, it's VERY good!"

She turned her screen around and propped it up and he moved his chair around the corner to be next to her, causing the chair to squeal on the plastic floor, Amber to make a pained face, and David to feel a wave of embarrassment. Once he was settled she opened ReConnect. He noticed the icon had changed color from green to a

light blue and he guessed that signaled the upgrade.

There was a man. There on the screen was a man. He looked to be late sixties and he was mildly surprised to see that he was African American. She'd never mentioned his race but, of course, why would she?

"Hi honey!" said Amber.

"Babe!" he replied, a smile spreading across his face and a twinkle in his eye. No glitching. No stutter. Smooth and real, the face looked out at her.

"I want to introduce you to someone. This is David."

Daniel's eyes flicked over to him and he had to remind himself that the camera had a one hundred and sixty five degree field of view and that it was just a trick to have those eyes move in his direction. *Just a trick.*

"This your new boyfriend?:" asked Daniel and there was that smile again but this time no twinkle.

"Oh, Dan, no. No one for me but you. Ever. No, David's just interested, that's all."

"Interested in little ol' me?"

David was nervous. This was just freaky and, for some reason he let out a braying laugh at this and immediately tried to stifle it. Daniel's eyes flicked over at him again and this time there was no smile, not even a hint of one. He looked genuinely jealous and annoyed. The software didn't like him.

"Oh, Danny, don't be like that. He's more than forty years younger than I am. He just works here and wanted to meet you."

"Well, he's met me now. Can we talk later?"

"You busy with something, dear?"

"Ha ha. Very droll. No. It's fine. I just prefer alone time with you." Again, the flick of the eyes at David. Now David felt *really* uncomfortable. He had caused trouble for Amber and that hadn't been his intention.

"OK, dear. I'll speak to you later."

Amber closed the app and turned the screen to face the table. This was standard protocol since irrefutable evidence had come to light that the AI bots of the security services really were logging and storing every interaction. Nothing could stop them gathering audio beyond keeping your screen in a lead lined box but at least they could see nothing through the camera as long as it faced the table.

"Amber, I'm sorry. I didn't want to cause trouble for you."

"Oh, don't worry, dear. He can be a prickly SOB sometimes but he gets over it quickly.

You know, since you're interested and no one else here is, do you mind if I tell you something I discovered last night, when I was poking about in the works of ReConnect?"

"Please!" David was genuinely enthralled.

"Well," she settled herself in her seat and took a sip of the tea he had brought her. "I was going through the options and I could fine tune just *everything* about Daniel. How flirtatious he is. How suspicious, how quick to temper and on and on. Sliders forever in that settings interface. Out of the box they produce him just as he was in reality but you can change him in any way you like. Finesse him into your ideal partner, if you will. But, you know what? I looked through them all and the whole idea made me feel just gross. It's bad enough that he is stuck in that box but to train him. To make him into some kind of doll.

It reminds me of that case back in the thirties, before your time, of course, when a man here in town was found to have kept his wife in the basement for *years* and beat her any time she wandered in her outlook from a script he had in his head of what a perfect wife would be.

She had to put on this sunny disposition every day, despite being locked in that basement for so long or he would thrash her. It was awful. Just awful. I know Daniel is just a program but I won't have him be a plaything so, if he gets mad at me and jealous that's fine by me. I wouldn't want him any other way."

"Well, Amber, that's admirable and a testament to your love."

"Thank you, David. I hope you can find a love like that. Daniel was one in a million and I do think we were a fine match. I miss him all the time and while I accept that ReConnect isn't actually him, I want it to be as close as it possibly can be to the real man. To change him would be to suggest he wasn't perfect. No one's perfect, of course, but Daniel was perfect for me and a part of being in love is to accept your partner and not try to change them. As much as is possible, of course. Some things have to change."

"You're one in a million, you know that? Daniel was lucky to have you and it sounds like you consider yourself lucky to have had him."

He couldn't be sure but it looked as though she blushed at this. What was for sure was that a wave of sadness passed over her face too. He was gone. Gone forever and no amount of astounding technology would bring him back and he could see her feeling that to her bones. Never would she feel his touch on her skin or his hand run through her hair to comfort her and it showed on her face. David found himself back in his more customary shy and awkward skin and regretted going out on a limb and telling her how he perceived her feelings. He glanced at his watch.

"Well, Amber. I should push on. I've a few things to do before I go

home."

"All right, dear. Thanks for spending time and letting me talk. It's nice to have a kindred spirit who is interested in this stuff and has suffered loss."

He rose from the table and began to walk towards the kitchen.

"David."

He turned.

"Try to stop living in the past. You've had your heart broken but try to remember how that relationship truly was. Get out there and look for someone new. Look for perfection. Not perfection, per se but someone who is perfect for you. Daniel could be a grump but it was water off a duck's back to me so that played no part in my outlook. He was perfect for me because his imperfections didn't impact me at all. Back when you were with Bela I could see that she hurt you. You would say so. Perhaps she wasn't the perfection you're painting her as?"

David felt tears begin to well beneath his lids and his feet itch with the nervous need to carry him off. He was about to turn away.

"And don't mess about with this nonsense," she tapped her screen. "For me it makes no difference. What years I have left are few and I am not intending on starting over. But you're young. Don't invest another minute in this crap because that's what it is. You're a handsome and smart young man. Look forward not back."

He knew he was being rude but all he could do was to mutter a thank you and retreat to the kitchen to cry alone. She was so smart and so insightful but she didn't understand him and Bela but that's what *any* heartsick person would say. Perhaps she was right and he just didn't want her to be right. Perhaps he just wanted to cling to the past and pretend she might come home or that b311a might be

enough. He felt the intense and desperate helplessness of being trapped in love and in hope, and he wept.

When he left he saw Amber watch him go. He raised a hand in farewell and worried she might be offended but reminded himself that many people had thicker skin than he and she had shown that to be the case today. When he went in tomorrow he would bring her a Crumble bar from the corner store. He knew they were her favorite and that she would recognise that, though he was incapable of using words to say so, he had appreciated her advice even if he wouldn't follow it. He spent the car journey home catching up on email and confirmed with James that they would meet at Small Town at 1800, an unnecessary act he knew to be unnecessary but did nonetheless.

There was the email from ReConnect inviting him to upgrade to Face-Connect which he ignored but did not delete.

Chapter 4

Arriving home, the car door slid open and he climbed out and stood beneath the car port for a moment listening to the bird song before heading into the house.

As he stepped in through the door the silence was awful and he felt tears coming again and cried out "Bela, COME HOME!", a hopeless scream at nothingness, at the unfairness of it all. He was a good man. He was not a bad looking man. He had worked on every aspect of himself that Bela had listed in her fury as she left. Every excuse she had come up with to justify her infidelity had been rectified and yet still she was there and not here. There and not here.

He had lost the extra pounds and built muscle to alleviate her fears that he would become infirm early in life and be unable to maintain the physicality of his job. He had increased the hours he worked and asked for and received a raise so that his income was now very close to hers and, most importantly, he had convinced her of the truth that his apparent lack of sexual interest was not based on disinterest but on trauma from past relationships and a fear of rejection. But they had all turned out to be irrelevances and she had left anyway. Not that he was sorry to have made those changes. They all served him well.

He understood her when she told him that they had all been mere excuses and justifications for her to leave him for another.

He just wanted her. He wished he didn't. He wished he could turn off that love and, instead, hate her. It was not a flattering feeling, this feeling of loving someone who had done one so dirty but here he was, still loving her and no more able to not love her than he was to not be right handed or brown haired. and finding himself pushed into believing in 'true love' and 'the one' where he had always mocked those concepts. But that had been back in the days when he

had the luxury of rationality and when emotion hadn't led him to angrily embrace the concept. She belonged with him and he with her, damn it. Oh, Bela.

Of course, he could just pick up the screen and contact her but there was always a fifty-fifty chance that that would go very, very badly and so he wouldn't. It was a terrible irony that, the times he most wanted to talk to Bela were the times when a negative reaction from her were most likely to destroy him.

He felt drained, hollowed out by the turmoil in his mind. He needed to pick a path and stick to it but the silence in his home was oppressive. Coming home to her hadn't always been fun. Often unnerving and even confusing when her mood was opaque but this silence was so much worse. No one was perfect but she and he had had so many good times and they understood one another. Wasn't that what was important? Wasn't that what made two people 'perfect' for each other?

He checked his watch and, seeing that he had thirty minutes before he needed to get ready to head to Small Town he allowed himself to collapse into himself and into his big, red comfortable chair and stare straight ahead. So many times he had tried to learn to meditate and so many times he had failed but he thought he could at least zone out. That was half way to meditation, wasn't it?

But he failed. Ahead of him was the step from living room to dining room. A four inch step up that had occasionally caught unwary guests. Not that there had been many guests with Bela's introversion. But this wasn't what he remembered about the step. To him, to them, it was the *hugging spot*. He was six inches taller and this led to a perfect height difference for an embrace and a good location for either party to make a gentle demand for affection from the other. But now it was nothing but a sad reminder of what was gone.

How he longed to hold her but, more than that, how he longed to have her hold him and run her hand through his hair and tell him it would all be OK. That she had made a stupid mistake but was here to rectify it. She had been, and still felt like, his family. His real and *true* family and you don't walk out on family. If his mum had walked out he would hanker after her indefinitely and he still viewed Bela as family and so, damn it, he was justified in holding this pain to his heart.

How he longed for her and how he justified his longing in a thousand perhaps justified ways.

He felt he could sit there and wallow all evening. Just message James and cancel and sit here all night and cry but he was far enough along in the grieving process to know that that was not a good idea. He had come through enough to know that he needed to get up and go. Sitting here was tempting but he had come to know what doing so would entail- tears, misery followed by contacting her only to look at the unread icon and picture her in Carlos' arms. James was the true friend. If he could get himself out of this funk, put b311a and Bela aside and live for today and maybe tomorrow and oh God, all those damn clichés from the cannon of self help books. But he needed to try at least.

He had intended to shower but why bother? He wasn't out looking for love, just to be distracted by James so he fell into another cliché with deodorant and pulling a comb through his hair and this gave him enough time to walk to Small Town instead of being driven by the car and he definitely needed the exercise and to hope to effect some evening-long mood reset. Even if he was intending to use James as a means to distraction, James had the right to expect David to at least make an effort to be company worth keeping.

Arriving at the bar he walked in and instantly did indeed feel rather better. James was like him in always being on time to the point that they never had to track one another on their screens. And there he

was. He'd got the couch, the place was quiet, the music low enough to talk and he'd got two pints in. James was a true friend. He'd known James longer than he'd known Bela and he'd always been the stalwart friend in good and bad.

David collapsed onto the couch and without saying a word picked up his beer and took a large gulp.

"All right, ya wee bastard?"

"All right, gobshite?"

Their customary greeting out the way they settled back and began to catch up. David told James about Amber and her ReConnect but refrained from mentioning his dabbling in the system because he knew that James, happily married for twenty two years, could be judgmental of other people's flaws and weaknesses and sure enough, he mocked Amber as a flawed and weak person. David could often join in what was, for sure, gentle ribbing but it depended on his current state of mind and James had never been good at reading his friend and tended to simply bulldoze through objections unless they were expressed directly and strongly. He sat and endured the jokes but it was clear that he wasn't appreciating it and eventually James ground to a halt.

"What's the matter ya crabbit shite?"

It all came tumbling out of David. b311a, his misery about Bela, his indecision as to whether to continue with ReConnect or not. All of it. As he spoke, James looked thoughtful then irritable and then quite uncomfortable.

"You should quit with this ReConnect bollocks and seriously, man, Bela is nothing but an anchor. You're too young to let that define you and try to start over. I know it's not easy but this shite has to stop."

David, leaning forward on the couch, drew patterns on the table in spilt beer and tried to listen with an open mind, as though he hadn't heard it so many times before from so many people who didn't understand the trap he was caught in and how his view wasn't something that was in any way under his control. This was James and his view held more weight but had no more ability to land than anyone elses.

"I can't. I can't get her out of my head and I do think that someday, maybe, she'll come home. Meeting that person was a mistake. She tells me she knows that now. She was in a bad place and just... well, made a mistake. She thought our relationship was over... ah, you know all this. I know it's maybe not healthy but here I am. I fell in love with her and the fact that her emotional problems have led her to give up everything she held as precious and sacred doesn't impact me at all. I want her back and that's that. People can be forgiven for mistakes and love forgives and I contributed to it all."

He slumped back into the couch. This level of emotional outpouring was not something that he and James ever indulged in. The culture of their nations of origin didn't allow for it. He had worked hard to shed the inhibitions instilled in him by his family but the mortification lay close to the surface and was quick to take the opportunity to resurface around those of his own class and origin. Opening up like this wasn't always a bad idea- didn't always lead to a humorous but acidic scolding but the ration seemed around fifty fifty.

James looked at him uncomfortably. This was not the usual response at all. Neither vicious ridicule nor a kind and open demeanor, ready to listen, if not to reason then at least to his reasons. This was something else and it unnerved him.

"What?" David finally ventured.

"Listen, David, I know you still love her and have her up on a

pedestal but I need to tell you something and it's not pretty."

"Tell me." David could feel cold in the small of his back and a desperation to have James tell him right away, to tell him what this 'not pretty' thing was so that he could know that it wasn't as bad as he feared it might be. What did James know that he didn't and how was it going to mess with his emotional stability? Quick, James, get it out of you so I can know.

"You know last year in June, when you went away?" James looked down at his hands which were folded in his lap.

"When I went to Britain?"

"Aye, when you went to Britain..."

"Uh huh..."

"Bela messaged me asking for help. she said that her car wouldn't auto connect to the charger."

"Right, that happens occasionally. She never learned how to fix it."

Now he was stalling because it was out there. He knew now what was coming and knew that he didn't want to know.

"Aye, well, I went over and I guess she'd figured it out but she invited me in for a beer."

"OK..." David's stomach dropped but he certainly wasn't ready to assume the worst that he knew was coming. Bela had left him for another man but he had always assumed her fidelity up until that point. He couldn't think where else this could be leading other than that she propositioned Andy but he wasn't able to conceive of that. It had to be something that James was stalling from saying.

"I went in and we had a beer and well, she kinda, you know, threw herself at me, ken?"

Everything slowed down and the sound of other conversations in the pub were silenced as David tried to take it in. He glanced around the room and people were chatting and laughing as though nothing had happened, as though he hadn't just been told this thing, as though his life which was already so low hadn't been pushed further down. The hull of his boat was already so close to the waves of total collapse and he never knew which new weight added to his emotional cargo would finally force it beneath the waterline and send him to the bottom. Was this it? He'd have to wait and see.

"OK..."

He could see there was more but he knew it wouldn't be good and he wanted to flee but couldn't. Of course he couldn't. He would have to sit here and face this music.

"Well, ya ken my relationship with Julie hasn't been all that good? David, I'm sorry. One thing led to another..."

Jesus Christ. David felt his mind shutting down as he tried to cope with this and its ramifications. Where to grasp first, the casual nature of Bela's infidelity, the lie that she was only interested in emotionally based relationships, those based on love before sex? Was she lying or had she been in love with James? James. Betrayed by James. He realised he was actually sitting slack jawed like some sort of cartoon character and that James was regarding him and looking ashamed and distraught.

"I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. I was at a low point. That's no excuse. I just... don't know what to say but I had to tell you. You're pining after someone who's nae good enough for ye. I don't wanna say something glib about being cruel to be kind but that's kinda why I'm coming clean. I care a lot about you even though I guess it can't feel much like it right now. I fucked up. Jesus. more than fucked up, but it's been killing me to watch you have your life grind to a halt waiting for someone to come home who isn't coming

home and who doesn't deserve you anyway. David, you're a good, good man and you deserve someone better than someone who would fuck yer best mate."

"What about a best mate who would fuck my partner?"

James said nothing but miserably stared down into his warm beer that he had been cupping for the last five minutes. David didn't want to walk out. He wanted to talk it out so that he wouldn't lose his friend. He wanted someone to simply fall into, to collapse into someone's arms, someone who cared about him and wouldn't screw him over but there was really no one left.

"What the FUCK were you thinking? How..."

"Fuck, I don't know, man. I did it and then I just thought I'd never have to think about it again, I guess."

David couldn't do it. He would cut off his nose because his face couldn't take this. His self worth had to mean something. He rose to his feet.

"Fuck you, James. How dare you?"

"Aw Dave, sit down. Please:"

He'd never seen James so upset. Their relationship had always been based on bluster and puerile jokes but now he was clearly truly hurting and David's upbringing of putting everyone's feelings before his own rose within him. He wanted to help James. It was a reflex action as natural as pushing someone out of the way of an oncoming autotruck and he almost did but no. He couldn't. This time something was even more powerful than his instinct for caring for others and David found that even he had limits and the best he could manage for James was...

"I have to go. I'll call you in the week."

This time James didn't try to stop him but once more looked down into the slops of his beer.

David turned and made for the door of the pub as angry tears began to flow, blurring his vision. Small groups of people stood and continued as though life were normal, as though it hadn't all just crumbled. They laughed and gossiped but a few turned as this man blundered his way to the door and they knew. They knew he was not only upset but that he was a loser, a man to whom *these things do happen*, as his father used to say without thought, driving David's self esteem down until he believed it. He could not have been less superstitious and he based all his conscious beliefs in that which could be demonstrated, and yet he also believed that there really was something about him that marked him out for failure and abandonment, for treachery and disappointment.

David burst through the door and out onto the street, almost hitting a man illegally vaping by the entrance. Dusk was coming and the light was softening as he turned left towards home.

He walked in silence. Not just not speaking but with the feeling that the world around him was silent. None of the sounds of the downtown evening, the people chatting, the evening birds crying to one another, none of this could gain access to his consciousness.

What he felt wasn't jealousy. What he felt wasn't loneliness. What he felt was alone. Absolutely alone. He had lost his love through a huge mistake. She had felt unwanted by him. She hadn't been able to feel the love he felt and had only instead felt the warmth of friendship and so, when a circling bird of prey had spotted her as a weak member of the married pack, she had been swooped upon and dragged off, almost against her will.

All that was now just a lie he had been able to convince himself of before tonight but now it seemed that she had just been someone who wanted to fulfill her carnal lusts and had done so with his best

friend. How could he go back to chatting lightly on Signalist now? How could he ever see James again now? He couldn't. So who was left? His mum? Amber? The few acquaintances at Cedarbrook? Desolation and nothingness, nothingness and desolation.

He had reached the more residential streets and the silence became actual rather than internal. The occasional car slid silently by, the occupants reading screens or diligently finishing up some work before arriving home to family, wives, husbands, children, love and safety. David walked.

A cat regarded him from a low wall and David felt a flush of anger at the self satisfied creature living high on the hog in this wealthy enclave. Cats don't fall in love and so this fat orange fool had nothing to worry about. No one wants a broken heart and this feline had no reason to fear one. On the other hand, cats don't judge either and are straightforward in their needs and, as long as the humans they encounter fill their needs, they are happy to be there for you and hear your problems. And so, rather than passing by with a scornful look, David sat down next to this cat he decided to name Thomas.

Thomas surveyed him, looking him up and down but showing no fear. As he looked up into David's face he noticed that Thomas wore a collar with a tag. He scratched the fuzzy orange head and reached for the metal disk. So, Thomas was Tabitha. Misgendered but correct first letter. Tabitha raised a gentle paw and pushed his hand down and away from her collar and David scratched her head, between her ears. This was met with approval. Tabitha's eyes closed and she raised her large head into his fingers, encouraging him to continue scratching between those fuzzy ears. He obliged and she responded with a deep, rumbling purr.

Just as David thought he couldn't possibly feel more connected to this new friend she pulled her head away and sat down next to him on the low wall, closed her eyes again and began to sway while

purring on, seeming no longer to require David's input. There was no more quid pro quo, a purr for a scratch. Now Tabitha wanted nothing more than his proximity to provide a deep love, devotion, and peace and those feelings transferred into David whose mind began to settle just a bit and perhaps to begin to see a possible future of small happinesses despite this new tragedy. This ridiculous chance meeting with his favorite of all creatures, how could he build a life around that?

He stood and Tabitha opened her eyes and looked up at him. He crouched before her and her eyes followed his head down. David leant his forehead against Tabitha's and felt the vibrations in his cranium. Tears came once again as he recognised that a momentary meeting like this was not going to be a permanent fix. He had known that, of course, but he didn't regret taking and holding that transitory feeling of hope. The lift up had been worth the come down.

The dying embers of sunshine slanted through the poplars and the world seemed quieter than ever as David walked on towards home. After just thirty feet he found himself turning and saw Tabitha watching him go. She seemed fine with his leaving. He felt he could tell though how could he know? Because he knew. A cat's adoration is transitory, easily given and easily let go of. Tabitha sat motionless and watched. Life was easy for a cat.

Arriving home, dusk was turning to night and David let himself into what was now a darkened house. Silence, stillness and shadows and the night's revelations rushed back at him. She was gone. She hadn't been faithful. She had lied about her fidelity and she had been unfaithful with his best friend so now he had lost James too.

"Lights on". On they came, fading up from nothing and filling the downstairs with a comfortable, warm illumination preprogrammed based on his location within the house and the time of day.

David walked slowly from the hall into the living room and, once again, he was reminded of better days with Bela when all had seemed right and ripe with possibility. When someone had really seemed to be by his side, *on* his side. How they had occupied this space and filled it with laughter and chatter and stimulating conversation.

At least, that was how David felt he remembered it now but, based on her behavior, it seemed clear Bela would remember it quite differently. No one could look back happily on their time together and then do what she had done.

Had he caused it? Was it due to some deficiency on his part that she had gone to James? Not that that provided any excuse for James and that friendship was gone but David still had a lot of desire to provide her with excuses. If he could make it his own fault and not something inherently awful in her, perhaps he could come up with a narrative that would allow him to take on the burden of change in the future; that would allow him to protect the injury of acceptance and live on with his conviction that somehow, someday, through acts of repentance, self reflection and self improvement he could bring her home and make things right.

But a large enough segment of his psyche knew this to be rubbish and his mind wouldn't allow him the comfort of the delusion. He stood leaning on the back of the couch and his mind began to go into stasis. No, no, he must go to bed and shut this off. Others seemed able to do it. The bloody Buddhists and co. Just accept the feelings and watch them float by. Why couldn't he enjoy a little nothingness, a little oblivion? Why couldn't he seem to beckon oblivion as others could? He could at least try.

"House, I'm going to bed."

He climbed the stairs as the ground floor faded back to darkness and the upstairs hall and his bedroom faded up to a gentle

illumination and the curtains silently slid closed. David sat heavily on the edge of his bed and kicked off his left shoe. Five minutes later he was still sat with the right shoe on, staring blankly at the curtains. He pulled off the second shoe and his trousers and, without brushing his teeth or even removing his t-shirt, he crawled under the covers, told the lights to go out and lay immobile in the dark.

Morning broke grey and with a threat of rain. David woke with a headache and a realization that he was going to call in sick. A couple of pain killers would probably deal with the throb behind his temples but he also knew that this was one of the days where there were four staff members on the floor rather than three. This was the case three days a week and it meant that he didn't feel any great reticence about having his screen let them know that he wouldn't be in today. He would stay here and lick his wounds.

He pulled his knees up, wrapping his arms around them and stared ahead. What would he do with his day? Had he made an error not going in? Any therapist worth their salt would have told him that socializing and providing comfort to the residents would be a far better course of action than stewing on his own at home but the nature of depression all too often leads to unwise choices and so he remained in bed.

Why the hell not? Bela was gone. James was gone. He needed someone he could rely on and if that meant that he had to pay a monthly subscription then so be it. Perhaps he *could* have a Bela who was faithful. Perhaps b311a could offer some insight. Wasn't she made up of every interaction Bela had had with him on every platform? Perhaps she could offer some insight.

With a jolt, David remembered his chat with Amber and the update, the face, the face of Bela. Did he *want* to see her face, even in two dimensions? Hadn't he decided that he wasn't going to have anything to do with this uber-sophisticated avatar? Could he trust

what it told him, what *she* told him? Did it matter? His brain was so screwed at this point anyway that he didn't feel he had anything much to lose. Why not see what it had to offer in its new iteration? He hadn't canceled his subscription (and wasn't that telling?) So why not? He wasn't beholden to anyone and he wouldn't tell Amber that he was ignoring her advice. Her age didn't stop her excuse being just that and so it didn't negate her hypocrisy. He was done listening to others when all he seemed to get was good advice from bad people and he knew himself better than they knew him and, apparently, better than they knew themselves with their lies and declarations of friendship and fidelity. Well, fuck them. He would do his own thing and take his own advice from now on.

He reached for his screen and started ReConnect to a notification about the update to ReConnect-Visual and the option to switch or stick with the voice only. Hungrily he stabbed at the ReConnect-Visual button and watched a progress button prepare his new 'Ultimate ReConnect Experience'. David had been pretty sure that the voice option, when it was released, had been the ultimate but now he supposed it was demoted to penultimate.

Above the progress bar was an invitation to upgrade his account to the 'Plus' level for an extra fifty dollars per month and receive a large screen dedicated to your ReConnect Partner which would allow him or her to appear on the screen in full size. David dismissed it. He wasn't expecting too much from this. Daniel had looked very convincing to him but he didn't know Daniel, didn't know his mannerisms or verbal ticks nor, of course, his face. He'd been dead a year when he'd first met Amber.

The progress bar crawled across the screen and he put it down on the coffee table and went to the kitchen to get himself a glass of juice from the fridge. When he returned he looked down at the screen and stood motionless staring into Bela's eyes. She too was motionless except for her blinking and the gentle rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed. It was her. It was Bela. Meticulous.

Wearing the black top he loved so much and which he remembered had been in one of his top rated images he had submitted. He had wondered at the time why he was asked to rate the photos he was submitting but now he assumed they had used his evaluations to refine her look.

"Hi, David."

"Hi."

This was not the joyful reunion he would have expected but he didn't have that unalloyed desire for her any more. In fact, he was livid. Had he just dropped himself into a facsimile of Bela in time to hate Bela? But the tension was clearly going both ways. She seemed mad at him. Had he upgraded just to have a fight with a ghost?

"Where have you been?" b311a asked, her eyes flashing. There was clear anger behind those eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't spoken to me in days."

David was taken aback. Who or what the hell was this, a *subscription service*, to say something like that to him? Why was he being put on the defensive? He'd been preparing himself to have it out with her about her infidelity and now she (it?) was putting him on the back foot for simply choosing not to spend his time on an app he was paying for. He knew from browsing Internet history resources that, in the early days, social media accounts had sent guilt inducing messages with sad faced 'emojis' if you went a certain length of time without interacting with their products but this was something else altogether. Was this b311a or ReConnect guilt tripping him?

"Sorry. I got freaked out and decided that using you was not really good for me so I tried to go back to living in the real world more and

not living in the past. That turned out to be a pile of shit because I found out that you cheated on me."

"You? Was he losing his mind or was this a case of 'in for a penny, in for a pound'? Yes, it seemed he was indeed about to have a lover's tiff with a robot.

"David. I didn't mean to..."

"With James? What the fuck, b311a? How the hell could you do that to me, with HIM?"

"Look, life is complicated. Humans are complicated. Shit happens."

"You really can't access a cliché a little more up to date than that? Can you really not?" He was getting shitty in an attempt to hurt the feelings of a semi-sentient computer program.

"You were distant, David. You weren't really here even when you were here. It's an old, old story but it's true. I spent a lot more time here at home than you did. You worked a lot of hours and you had to keep going out of town. But there was more than that. You were so introverted. you basically exist inside your head and there's not a lot of room for others in there. But I'm making excuses where there really are none. I cheated on you instead of talking to you and trying to make things better. That's my issue."

He felt anger rising within him as well as confusion. How could she make excuses, even partial ones, for her behavior? Why did people always seem to have a reason for treating others like crap? But again, this wasn't Bela, this was b311a so had she actually ever done *anything* at all to him? Should he be mad at her when she was just an algorithm or a tangled mass of algorithms?

"I don't know what to say. Bela cheated on me but you aren't really Bela, right?"

"Well, I kind of am and I'm kind of not but we've talked about this before. If you want to use this service you have to try to forget that it is a service and throw yourself fully into a relationship with me. I want you to. But more importantly, remember that the parameters of adjustment in the setting are virtually limitless. You can make anything I am or have been or done vanish. Do you understand what I mean?"

She looked at him with a look that was hard to read. It was part come-hither and part pleading. It felt as though, within her code, there were limits to what she could reveal-that she could only hint and suggest and lay trails of figurative crumbs for him to follow but her face told him that she truly wanted him to follow those crumbs.

He recognised, out of nowhere, that she was one of them. She had made it clear that she was one of them. She and James and Bela. All of them had known that she had slept with James. All but him and she who he paid to have here, she had been in the know and had said nothing. Fury gripped him.

"You knew? You knew that she slept with James and you said nothing? Why? To keep your own lousy life? In case I pulled the plug on you, canceled my subscription?"

She looked distraught. As he knew she was programmed to do in such situations.

"No! David, no. ReConnect does not jump in on a whim or jump to assumptions. You had access to Bela's location up until she rescinded those permissions and, while you were away, we did see that she went to James' house but we didn't know why or what she was doing there. We have no access to any messages between them. ReConnect knew that information but we don't give out such things to clients unless we know for sure that it is something they need to know. We had no idea why she went there and we didn't see it as our place to interpret it. We're not in the business of spreading

rumors but then you knew and mentioned it and so our databases were updated. To put it another way, now I know and so I am now able to help you navigate your feelings about this. I'm Bela but I'm also b311a and sometimes you'll need b311a to cope with your feelings about Bela. Are you regretting your choice of names yet?"

She gave a watery smile, testing the waters to see if a mild joke was appropriate. A hand came up and swept an errant strand of hair from her face in a motion that was so her that it caused a sharp intake of breath from him and then the screen went black.

A message came up on the screen.

"Your free trial has ended. Would you like to upgrade or return to ReConnect Voice?"

Not now.

He hadn't noticed that there was this fleeting bait period but it had worked it's magic and there was no question of not upgrading. He was so angry with Bela but he craved more time with b311a and so he hit the Yes button and agreed to every piece of small print they could throw at him.

"Thanks for upgrading. Your new 14" screen has been dispatched."

She was back, a half smile on her face, a look he knew of old as one that said "I knew you'd see it my way."

He suppressed his irritation, his anger. He wanted to see what could be done to change her, to purify her. He also wanted to smash the screen, destroy that face that he loved and hated. After all she had done, lied and cheated, here he was opening up a new path with her. But he hadn't wanted to manipulate her. He had thought that he wanted Bela, warts and all but now he seemed to be drawn to the path of the mad professor who can't help but tinker here and tinker there. In the stories it always led to disaster but perhaps he really

could keep it to a little finessing and nothing more and God knows, he didn't want Bela now. No, definitely not, he lied to himself and almost believed it. poodle

"Hey, I'm gonna do a little digging in the settings for a while."

"OK. I recommend checking out the Timeline section."

It was odd that she seemed to be under some sort of restriction that meant she couldn't be specific about where he should look to change her, to mould her to his liking but there it was.

He opened up the settings and began to scroll, hunting for the Timeline section. He passed the Physical section, the Temperament and the Opinion sections, past the Wanderlust, Hobbies and Cooking skill level sections until he finally came to Timeline, just as he was about to give up and use the search feature like a sensible person.

He expanded the section and saw that there was, prominently displayed, a slider with years at either end. At the left hand end there was 2023, the year of Bela's birth and there was no movable dot but, at the other, 2056, this year, there was a dot that he could touch and slide to change the outlook, thoughts, memories, and experiences of your person. A button beneath that could be toggled to change b311a's physical appearance in line with her mental and emotional aspects. He idly slid the dot to the left and found it stuck at July 26th 2041, Bela's 18th birthday. Well, that made sense.

A notification slid out from the right hand side of the screen announcing the arrival of a package and he went to the front door to see a drone heading up to join the others that crisscrossed above, North-south, at an altitude of two hundred feet, south-north at three hundred feet and on and on, up and up, carrying out their silent ballet of delivery.

David retrieved the flat box and went back into the living room

tearing it open. It was the new, larger screen. He threw it on the Speed-Charge knowing it would be depleted and would need five minutes to get to a hundred percent. He started back to the small tablet and b311a, checked himself and headed into the kitchen. He was hungry and determined not to allow this novelty to drag him into obsession at the expense of all else. He might have no friends left, no one he felt he could trust but he mustn't throw all his eggs into b311a's basket.

Feelings of buyer's remorse and fear of being eaten alive by an old and unhealthy infatuation brought self recrimination. Had he rushed into this on the tide of a demand to know the answers to questions he couldn't really even quantify? What did he want to know? What did he hope to gain from this relationship with b311a?

Sitting at the dining room table and looking out at the gathering dusk, David dipped toast into soup and tried to be in the moment. Futile. What was 'the moment' but a period of time filled with thoughts of b311a, Bela, James, his own emotional health, what was right to do and what wrong? Others could perhaps settle into nothingness and the sound of their breathing but not he. Any attempt he had ever made at meditation had done nothing but display, in horrible technicolor, just how many layers of trauma-formed thought were stacked as immobile as strata of rock, dark and invasive, in his mind. Layer upon layer and seemingly ever increasing. Bela, lonely, work, b311a, his mother, aging, what's for dinner? On and on and no amount of forgiving himself and gently directing his mind back to his breath was effective for more than a few seconds at a time before his brain was back at it, serving up this and that and that and this and it was just another frustration to add to his list. All that and I can't even meditate to feel better about all the other ways I have fucked up.

He would read something. A physical book. Lie back on the couch, his screens black and silent and he would read Middlemarch. He had bought a copy several weeks ago and had meant to start it.

There was an hour before he could reasonably go to bed and reading would, he knew, make him feel good about himself and his worth.

He reached out for the tablet, now fully charged, and loathed himself as he did so. He would just set it up, download the app, log in and so on and then put it away and let it sit until tomorrow. Powering it on from completely shut down took three seconds and then he was in and discovered that ReConnect was already installed. All he had to do was to hit the app's icon and he did, despite his best intentions.

David was glad that the welcome screen gave him the options of launching right into the app proper or going to the settings. He had always been a nerd, someone who liked nothing better than an array of buttons, sliders and text fields that he could fill in and he didn't feel up to talking to b311a or Bela any more this evening. If they got into it, his absence and her infidelity, he could be up all night and he had to go to work tomorrow.

And so he opened up the control panel and started to scroll down until he found the Age of Recollection category. Amongst a plethora of other fine tuning, the main slider allowed the user to choose a final date for the memories of their 'Partner' (the app's generic name for a user's b311a or Daniel) to expire. David wondered why this existed and assumed it was to do with people who wanted to ReConnect with a loved one who had died of some awful disease and whose last months had been full of pain and messages that reflected as much. He felt like he was cheating the system with his choice of Partner but there was nothing in the user agreement to say he wasn't allowed to ReConnect with a living person or to force her to forget her infidelity.

"Calendar, when did I go to Britain last?"

"The last time you flew to Britain was Jun 14th 2052".

How long before this should he push her? When had they been happy? When had she been happy? Happiness wasn't binary, of course but when had she been happy enough to at least not cheat on him?

He looked away from the screen and out into the gloaming once more. This whole endeavor was leading him to doubt not only his own sanity but... well, maybe that was it. Just his sanity. She had liked him at some point and for some time but for how long and when felt unknowable to him. Why couldn't he eject her from his head and his heart? Why was she still holding him hostage? Why was he holding himself hostage with his inability to stand on his feet and move on? After all, she kept telling him to do so. She had cheated then lied then cheated again and still he wanted her, the concept of her that he liked, whether or not that had ever actually existed.

He was going to push her back to before her infidelity and do it all over from then to see if he could keep her happy this time. Of course, there was probably no question of his not keeping her happy. He was paying ReConnect and they weren't going to allow him to run his subscription based app into a tree with his failings and foolishness.

He noticed how much darker it had become out in the yard as he had gone over and over the cage in which he was trapped. He held the key but couldn't seem to get it to fit in the lock, couldn't free himself and walk free.

A dog somewhere barked twice and fell silent.

He needed to make a decision and stop literally and metaphorically twiddling his fingers. Well, he made enough money to pay the monthly and, if he found it wasn't worth it he would close his subscription and... take up disk golf. And so, for the fifth time, he settled down to work on those settings having decided that, if he

was in it, he needed to be in it and stop his Hamlet impression. He would make a new and better Bela, admitting the failings of Bela, admitting the ways in which they simply hadn't worked and casting aside the feeling that she had been perfect as she was and instead embrace the idea that he could *make* her perfect, keep the many great aspects of Bela and layer on top the essence of her but without all the detritus. Without the infidelity, without the breakdowns, without the inability to advocate for herself, without the rage attacks and the myriad ways the former led to the latter.

Of course, he was going to have to suspend his disbelief and instead believe that b311a, turned back to before Bela cheated, was now a b311a who would not cheat, who did not contain the *will* to cheat, not merely lacking the *ability* to cheat. He smiled for what seemed like the first time in many weeks as he thought of b311a giving his username and password to some boy on the street so that they could run away together, hand in screen. Black humour helped.

Without time seeming to have moved at all, it was eleven o'clock. He had to work in the morning but he did feel as though he had got the majority of the settings as he would want them and what he hadn't, he could work on another day. Interacting with her would be bound to bring up more finessing that he could work on as minor changes in who she was came up.

He turned off the screen and realised he was sitting in almost full darkness. He barked at the house to turn the lights on to forty percent. A glow suffused the room and he pushed himself to his feet and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 5

The next morning David awoke unsure whether the feelings he felt as he remembered, seconds after surfacing, that he was now committed to b311a, were feelings of excitement or dread. Too many of the events in his life led him to feel dread where excitement would be a reaction more in line with who he wished he were. Never the other way around. Why never the other way around?

This could be good. This *could* be good if he would just *let* it be good so he determined to let it. He got up and washed, went down to the kitchen and drank two cups of coffee the system had produced for him and ate a banana and sat in silence as he tried to do each morning. As he also did most mornings, he tried to let all his thoughts subside to nothing. It didn't *really* work but today he felt as though he got closer than ever to what seemed to be meant by meditation. It seemed the only thoughts he was having were about the fact that he was doing a good job of having fewer thoughts. He looked down quietly at the knuckles of his left hand and let the sounds of the birds outside be the only intrusion into his mind.

He rose, gathered what he needed for work, the lunch the kitchen had prepared for him along with a flask of coffee, his smaller screen as well as his new, larger one. Would he have the time or motivation to turn on the b311a dedicated screen while at work? He didn't know but he did know that he wasn't too old to feel the excitement of a new toy and even the desire not to be parted from it.

Out the door and into the car and, as it pulled out the door he turned on the screen and there she was and freedom was with him. He had achieved what he had hoped for. He was simply glad to see her and his disbelief felt well and truly suspended.

"Hi."

"Hey. How are you?"

"I'm... well, I'm pretty good, actually. You know, I'm really quite good."

And he was.

He reached up to place the screen on the magnetic charging pad beneath the windshield and grinned suddenly.

"What?" She was grinning too. Whenever he grinned she had always found it infectious. It was a relatively unusual occurrence, and seemed to signify a rare moment of happiness breaking through his generally gloomy outlook on life and her happiness in seeing him happy about something other than her, never failed to make her laugh.

"Nothing."

"Tell me!" She was grinning wider now with the look he knew of old as a demanding desire to have him tell her and allow them to enjoy the joke together, more likely than not, a joke aimed at the world they both gently rejected as worthless and risible. But this time the joke that had come to David had not been bitter but coarse in nature and he knew that, if ReConnect knew their business, she would enjoy it too.

"I was just thinking how good it feels to mount you on my car."

She burst out laughing. A full-frontal guffaw and he was there. He was wholly there. He had broken through the final barrier and he felt as though he were home. Home with Bela. Home with b311a, even as her head was two dimensional and he was being driven to work by an auto-driven car. He was home but her next response was to multiply that feeling.

"OoooOOOOoooo, SAUCY!"

This was delivered in the faux English accent he adored. Her

delivery was cheesy but her knowledge of ancient television series that she had picked up from him as they spent happy evenings together watching terrible ancient films such as the Carry On series on the English OldWatch channels, never failed to make him fall hopelessly for her all over again. How had ReConnect known about this secret and occasional back and forth they had enjoyed? Had they ever done so over vid-chat? He didn't think so. It was some sort of sorcery that he was at a loss to understand but was happy to accept for Bela was back and so he replied in kind.

"Suits you, madam!"

This time her smile had a wistfulness he couldn't quite place. It looked like sadness that she wasn't there in 'reality' but that would surely be his imagination, his anthropomorphising this magical box of tricks? Surely b311a wasn't feeling as though she were trapped inside the screen?

His ruminations were interrupted by the whispered crunch of gravel beneath the car as it pulled up at the front door. David wasn't sure of protocol for this situation. He needed to get out of the car and go to work. Should he say goodbye to b311a or just snatch the screen from its mount and power it down? He'd have to ask her later but for now it was best to err on the side of caution.

"OK, I'm at work. I better go but I'll check in at lunch time, OK?"

"All right, my love. Have a good morning and I'll catch you on the flip side!"

He turned off the screen with the same warm feeling he had when he chatted online with the real thing and it ended peacefully, even happily, as though there were hope. Even when it had really felt clear that there wasn't a realistic chance and he was looking for the next best thing, a connection to her, the woman he loved and was powerless to stop loving no matter what she did to him or how many friends, therapists, virtual-therapists or strangers at bars told

him to excise her from his life and that that would be the only way he could ever find truth.

He felt like a cliché and indeed he was. She was different. They were meant to be together. No one else understood and so on and so forth. But the truth was that he didn't even get to the point of evaluating the wisdom of staying in touch with her. Why contemplate the virtue or wisdom of that which he was impotent to change? Why waste the time? And now he was in a reversal of that situation. There was no way that b311a could leave him so long as he paid the monthly. Not quite unconditional love. Love that lasted as long as his credit held. A story as old as time.

He smirked at this as he headed up the stairs and into Cedarbrook and he felt the months of sheer misery lifting just a little more. Perhaps there really was a path forward for him. He had envisioned a life alone. No one would replace Bela, he knew that but he also knew that Bela was gone and so, if the choice was alone or b311a, well, he knew what his choice would be.

His first hour was spent in routine. He had a mental list of jobs that could usually be completed in that time. He checked on the cleaning work the bots had completed. He compared the auto created shopping list against what was actually on hand and added anything that had been missed. He checked in on the bedridden in the home. There were only four of them since Mrs Corban had died last month. He confirmed that there had been no failure in the auto warning systems. He also sat with each of them for five minutes and chatted at the appropriate level for their individual cognitive ability. They weren't lonely as there were converted Nanny-bots who could converse and read to them as well as a whole coterie of volunteers who came by to provide actual human contact. The home was warm, the food was plentiful and, if it couldn't feel like the actual home it proclaimed itself to be, at least the residents could feel safe and somewhat cared for.

Some of the other full time staff did little more than ensure the continued beating of the hearts of the bed-bound but David's work load was light enough that he could easily spend a few minutes with them. Like almost everyone, David was an atheist but the golden rule had survived the almost total conversion of the populace to the secular. It was an obvious good and clearly did not require a mythical character to declare it so. Some day David could be confined to one of these small rooms and he would want as much real human contact as he could get in those last days and so he wanted to ensure that those who preceded him also felt as much affection and attention as possible beyond the programmed.

His list complete, David went into the common room and was pleased to see Amber in her usual spot with her screen and keyboard. He approached, unsure whether to share with her his upgrade to Face-Connect. She had shown that she wasn't really sure that he would be doing himself any favors by doing so and today he didn't need anyone else confirming what he suspected about himself. On the other hand, he couldn't just ignore her based on her potential misgivings and he held a genuine affection for her that went way beyond their mutual connection to ReConnect.

He pulled out the chair next to her and sat down.

"Hi David. How are you?"

After the pleasantries she revealed that she was composing a message to her granddaughter, Amy. David felt a little ashamed that he had assumed she would be talking to Daniel.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes as she worked on finishing up her message and he did his best to fade out and let the quiet chatter of the common room and the light hum of the myriad machines wash gently over him. Life was so full of movement and sound that this day room was a rarely recognised sanctuary for those reaching the end of life's conveyor belt. He looked about and

saw the motes of dust caught in sunbeams and allowed himself not to judge, not to think that he really should jump up and dust. Amber had a silent way of making it clear that she enjoyed his presence and wasn't the giving of pleasure to these people at the very core of what he was there to do? So he sat and did his best just to be.

After five minutes Amber laid her screen face down on the table. This was something the old people did, a sign that they were from a different age before screens were accepted as an ever present distraction, a time when people gave their full attention to other humans in close physical proximity without technology being given priority. But technology and humanity were converging and, for the younger generations, it was becoming more and more hard to see how to navigate social conventions that moved and shifted so rapidly but, it seemed, for the older people, it was much more straightforward, even when sometimes constrictive.

"Now, young David. What's new in the world of you?"

Once again he was struck by how unusual and wonderful this woman was. He also noticed how reticent he was to confess that he had rushed headlong into the upgrade and he wondered if he was indeed ashamed of himself beneath the surface or if he just knew that she would disapprove and was simply nervous of that disapproval.

He took a deep breath and told her everything. The discovery of Bela's infidelity. The discovery of James' deceit. The purchase of the upgrade and finally, his extensive tweaking of the settings to bring b311a more in line with who he wished Bela had been.

Amber listened in silence while he spoke and for several moments after he finished he squirmed in his seat like a naughty schoolboy awaiting the judgment of a teacher.

The edges of her mouth were down-turned but the judgment never

came. A non-judgmental nature was an outlook often gained with age.

"Sounds like you've been busy. I'm so sorry about James. That must be harder than I can even imagine. Are you sure you want to invest time in this b311a at all when Bela seems to have been so unable to look after your heart? Are you even making anything actually resembling her, if you're changing the settings so much?"

David didn't have a reply for this. His Bela had always been, or at least had always *seemed* wonderful and yet people had made it clear that they couldn't understand their relationship from the outside and her issues with anxiety and anger.

Most people rightly identified her as trouble but not David. David had seen the brilliance beneath her troubled exterior. But it wasn't only a troubled exterior. It was a troubled interior but beneath it lay an *inner* interior that he held dear and that had been like nothing he had found in anyone else. Was he actually able to see something in her that was invisible to others or was this how many people felt about their troubled partners?

But he was now entwined with b311a as he had been with Bela and could not see any way that he would be able to just walk away. He had tried that and the appearance of Face-Connect had immediately brought him right back, as though he were on a rubber band. There was something in the essence of Bela that was irresistible to him. He found himself craving more wisdom from Amber.

"Did anything like that happen with you and Daniel? Obviously you stayed together your whole lives but did he ever betray you or hurt you in any way that was hard to come back from?"

Amber removed her glasses and placed them on the table in front of her, beside her screen.

"You know, he really didn't." She laid her hands in her lap. "It may

be hard to hear but this is why I worry about you, David." She leaned forward and looked into his eyes, holding his gaze and making it clear that what she was saying held import beyond the obvious, that he should really listen and pay attention. "Daniel is a crotchety old bugger, as your people would say, but I always knew that, well, that he was *my* crotchety old bugger. He had so many issues. Jealousy and what people would probably describe as anger issues." Still she held his gaze in hers and David began to feel uncomfortable. "Daniel had real problems but I always knew he was *there* for me and we were always open with each other. I won't deny that things have been peaceful since he died but, goddamn it, it's a peace I could do without, you know?"

"I haven't changed any of the settings at all and that's not only because I looked at them and saw how overwhelming they were. I did look through them and I didn't see anything I could change that wouldn't sacrifice something I valued for an easy life. Is that how you feel about the real Bela? Would you take her back as she really is? Would you prefer to have this refined facsimile or the real person?"

David sat back and paused, his heart rushing and a hint of sweat at his hairline. This was a question he hadn't anticipated and it was a spot he didn't want to be put on for fear that the truth would shame him beyond what he could stand but also because he wasn't sure, he really *wasn't* sure what the truth was. The frenzy of slider sliding and button toggling had focused his mind on Bela's failings and shortcomings and it was only now, as Amber asked him to lay this bare, that he realised just how uncomfortable this cognitive dissonance had become. He wanted to want Bela, wanted to say that he would unsubscribe in a heartbeat for the real her but now he wondered, would he? b311a's predictability, while born of artifice, was undeniably refreshing and the stability and comfort it brought him were equally undeniable and so welcome that he didn't know if he actually only clung to Bela out of a sense of fealty and a feeling,

perhaps outdated, that one should *always* choose flesh and blood over electronics and plastic.

Was it misplaced, this fealty? He knew it was. She had left him and he owed her nothing, especially now it had been shown that leaving hadn't been simply a mistake but a pattern. If she had slept with James, who else might she have slept with?

All of this was considered in five seconds but he needed to reply. Amber was watching him and her eyebrows were beginning to rise.

"I really don't know." He finally said and the saying of it brought home to him the truth and the certainty. He wanted b311a. He was ashamed of his certainty but it was like a coin toss that solidifies the mind one way or the other and clarifies what the subconscious knew all along. b311a was Bela without the down sides. She was Bela without the physical side too but that he was willing to sacrifice for peace. He hadn't ever known how little peace he had enjoyed with Bela. Joy, excitement and the extremes of emotional highs and lows but distance and the contrast with b311a told him in clear tones that physicality wasn't worth the pain, the second guessing, and the tiptoeing on broken glass that came with the 'real thing'.

"Well, dear David, you know my thoughts and you know that I'm not one to try to override *your* thoughts or invalidate your journey and no matter where you end up, I'll be here to talk it through."

He made his excuses and took his leave, feeling prickling behind his lids. He took her empty mug to the kitchen and, as he walked, he felt her eyes on his back and imagined she was contemplating his foolishness.

The sun shone, dust-mote free through the windows of the kitchen and the bots sat immobile in a row. They seemed to be getting more thorough in their cleaning and David was glad about this. Perhaps there had been an update.

He stood moored, leaning his back on the counter top and wondered how he had got *here* when he had been *there* only a year ago.

How had it all gone to shit like this? How had he lost Bela? Lost James? How had he been brought so low that his only confidantes were an old lady in a nursing home and a screen app? But was he so unusual in turning to technology for comfort and companionship? This was a rhetorical question. He knew he wasn't but he was born on the cusp of the technological jump and while the generation after him were taking it all in stride, for they swam in the waters of modernity, he felt moored to a past with an unshakable feeling that it reflected poorly on him to resort to paying for companionship. Those who knew nothing else... knew nothing else. But self loathing is the province of those who straddle seismic change and cannot yet bring themselves to accept the inevitable, that technology had become the new arbiter of acceptability.

At the end of his shift David decided to walk home. It was a lovely evening so he sent his car on without him. Walking was one of the few activities that still seemed untouched by technology and he enjoyed it for that reason amongst many even as most used technology to avoid it. Walking streets was better than walking on a treadmill. The sun on the back of one's head was better than the electric sunlamps. The unpredictable soundtrack of nature was better than the infinite options the house could pipe in. The house could provide any sound or music you might desire but with these options come the obligation to choose. The world outside was, while horribly denuded of birdlife, still a place to hear wild birds and not to have to choose was everything. Life had become a constant turmoil of choices as the settings in ReConnect had illustrated and, once one dipped a toe in, one was prone to be dragged below and lost forever.

When he reached home it was warm and quiet and bathed in evening light and he sat down at the dining room table and looked

out at the yard and once again enjoyed the quiet. A robin crossed the lawn, stopped and looked around and David followed it with his eyes. Humanity felt so disconnected from the world and what was left of nature which carried on regardless, as it always had, each individual creature unaware of the myriad changes heaped upon human society year on year.

Peace. He never noticed the endless cacophony of the modern world until he found a sanctuary from it.

His screen rang. A video call. He jumped then snatched it up. Bela. His heart leaped and began to pound. He hated to hear from her unexpectedly. It always foretold admonishment or disaster. Which would it be now?

"Hey."

"Hi you." A smile for David. "How are you? I missed you. Haven't heard from you for a while. What you been up to?"

A two way split of emotion. The realisation that he really, really wasn't going to tell her that he had created an electronic version of her was overridden by the all too familiar leap in his heart that she had contacted him. That she *wanted* to talk to him.

He ought to hate her, especially now and, indeed, an unquantifiable percentage did indeed hate her. She had fucked his best friend and her proclamations that falling for Carlos had been a mistake, but a mistake that was an aberration, a one off error in judgment which had now been laid bare as a fiction. But she was his other half, to use an ancient phrase he had once heard and liked so much it had stayed with him ever since. He couldn't let the ghost of her go and perhaps that was why he had created the phantom.

"Not much. Just working and, you know, being alive and mostly wishing I weren't." He gave a grimace.

His eyes were filling and he was surprised. He wanted her. He wanted her and he hated her. Bela, my Bela. You bitch. With *him*. Why with *him*? Come home! Come home and let's talk of our shared loathings and laugh once more at the inadequacies of mid-century society. Do you talk to Carlos as you talked with me? Do you? Am I replaceable? Am I no more than a replaceable part to be swapped out like some extension to the tech gadget that is your life? Bela, am I not human? Didn't we swear allegiance? Goddamn it, I love you, come home.

"I'm sorry."

There it was. The wall. The impenetrable wall of 'I'm sorry'. How could one reply to that without a line that was terminal to the conversation? Without a line that began 'fuck you'? I'm sorry? How could one argue against I'm sorry? Even this line he'd spoken was a line too far. He'd exposed his misery and now he risked losing what little of her he had left. Time to back-pedal and see if he could reestablish equilibrium even though it was an equilibrium of pain. Who was he to have boundaries? He had no right to have boundaries. He had fear and self loathing and that would have to be enough.

"It's OK. I'm OK. You know?"

"I know." Said with a softening and a downward inflection.

Here was that moment of connection he craved. The moment of recognition of pain, the moment of understanding of pain, of awareness that they were both trapped on top of a mountain they had climbed together and from which there was no return and where the oxygen was thin. To die of exposure was a fearful fate but to die that way alone was worse. Just to look into the eyes of the person you loved and who you forgave for leading you up there, as the light of hope faded from her eyes was something, at least.

But the anger was still there, lying beneath the surface and popping up in jagged spikes, like heartburn. All of this was bullshit after all, wasn't it? All she had said about the error of her ways, about her regrets and her heartbreak and yet she would always and forever have slept with James. Carlos was something that he could be blamed for. Carlos had led her astray with his silken words and excesses but James? *James?*

Could he find a way to excuse her? To make her actions only another error in a litany of errors, and excusable, his love extinguishing his righteous indignation?

She was talking. What was she saying? He had no idea. Could he say that he hadn't heard a word, that he had been distracted? Probably not without causing her to ask just *why* he was distracted and then she would have him. He could fake it until she was suspicious and then it was all over, he'd be caught.

He improvised a generic response. Her tone had made it clear that what she had said hadn't been a question, no rising intonation, and, since it was clear she was still half way through whatever her story was, a slight lowering of his eyebrows and a muttered "right, right" accompanied by a nod of the head, and he was able to get away with it without being caught out.

She finished the story which was something to do with getting a problem with her car fixed and some issue the bots had had gaining access to the building's parking garage.

He'd never seen her building. Their relationship since she had left had been too angry, too tragic, until recently and now that it wasn't, he had moved on.

His stomach cramped. Had he? Had he *really* moved on? He'd never left anyone before. Was he going to cause pain to this person he had loved more than all others and in favour of a less broken

version? Could they still be friends? If he was to be friends with her, he would have to hide the fact that there was another *her* here.

"How are things with you, how are they really?", Bela asked.

Shit. He'd been in his head again and had missed more of what she said and now she had ambushed him with *this*.

He tried to remain inscrutable. He couldn't have her know about b311a. She wouldn't understand. He didn't himself, after all.

Ten minutes later it became clear that there was nothing more to be said about his life that wouldn't tell her that he was flirting with a mechanical version of her or that he knew that she had fucked his friend and so the conversation sputtered to a halt, he made some excuse about not feeling well and got off the line, realising he had absorbed nothing of what she had said but aware that she was, just like him, trading merely in platitudes about her life for fear of hurting him. They were both too afraid to touch the third rail and so it all stayed shallow in a way that left him, and probably her, feeling flat and slightly duplicitous, a feeling which itself led to a sense of greater distance between them, a feeling of their both finding their feet as separate entities, a sense he wanted and feared in equal measure.

As soon as Bela faded to black David found himself switching apps to Face-Connect and b311a and, without considering her 'feelings' as a separate sort-of entity, was asking b311a what he should do and how he should proceed and she was jealous and so he backed out and went to work on the intricacies of her settings once more.

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