

Deterrence Vivarium: A Collection of Stories and Exegesis

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Volume 1: Creative Component

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Abstract

The thesis *Deterrence Vivarium* is made up of a creative component and an exegesis. The creative component is a collection of eight pieces of fiction ranging in style and length, from microfictions to short stories and concluding with a novella. The opening story “Amsterdam” begins with the protagonist attempting to deal with the disintegration and loss of a relationship. The world around them reflects this sense of decay and the central character’s helplessness in taking control in a world whose threat encroaches upon his very perception of the physical space around him. The story “ONFF” follows on by inviting the reader into the narrator’s willful misperception of the world around them, using a room in his parent’s house to teach found electronic objects a new way of thinking and being. “jesussaves82” is an online date gone wrong. Both participants are more concerned with the idea of connecting with another person, rather than thinking about who that person may be. With one of them acting like Jesus, it is bound to fail. “The Suitcase” is a story of memory in which the disappearance of a father and the finding of an old man with Alzheimer’s on the street coincide for a mother and child. “Deterrence Vivarium”, the title piece, looks at the method a couple on the cusp of retirement take to eradicate a series of older selves that are scaling their back wall and making camp in their yard. “To My Son” is an epistolary short story in which a father leaves a beautifying face brace patent for what he sees and declares is his ugly son. He hopes it will redeem with wealth his failure as a father so far. “Imago” finds the central character turned into a copy of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in the bedroom of a woman who took him home in a failed one-night stand. The final piece, “By Numbers”, is a novella that follows Callum Ryder, a man who has left his job for no

particular reason beyond his dislike for his work. He redeems an offer for a free cosmetic procedure he found in his spam folder and finds himself entwined in the madness of Doctor Hensen and his elusive partner in their activities.

The exegetical component acts as a critical map of the influences and motivations that are embedded in the creative process of the collection's construction. It traces the relation of these pieces to a broader context, including the textual, the conceptual and social. It looks at the role and relationship of the exegesis and its purpose. And finally, draws out specific aspects of the writing as a collection, from its humor to its underlying concerns, and argues that in spite of the limits and breakdown of communication and language that are reflected in these stories, there is in turn a vital need to attempt to move towards empathy and understanding.

Thesis Declaration of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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August 2016

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Amsterdam

When we finished moving into our new house, we celebrated by throwing old furniture off the balcony. It started with a table that we didn't need and was too unwieldy to take back down the stairs, and once the washing machine went over, we were all but spent. Dusk was ending and we had settled into the cold of the evening with blankets on the balcony. Sam was over and we celebrated the announcement of her plans for overseas.

What we'd tipped over the balcony had been found on the side of the road, hard rubbish too tempting to leave but too broken and useless to keep. It took a day or two until we heard council workers underneath scraping their spades against the broken bitumen of the lane. They cursed and fantasized about what they'd do, if they found the people who had dumped the stuff. It was early morning and Sam told me from the comfort of my bed not to worry. Remember, she said, we stacked it neatly to the side, and underneath the blankets she pulled my arm across her.

She was leaving in about six months or so. All up, it was a good idea. We got along, we had fun, but that is no reason to be stuck together, waiting for it to fall apart. She was heading on exchange to Amsterdam. Her family had moved other places and I couldn't imagine her coming back. She had an EU passport that was ready to be picked up. Beyond listening to stories of other people getting high and riding bicycles, I never had cause to think about such a distant city.

Our new place sat on top of a gun shop. Our entrance was on the side of the building, down the alleyway. A reinforced steel door gave passage to the shop at the bottom of our stairs, opposite the entryway. The locks were only accessible from their

side and this made me think. I would think too much and lie awake at night. Any creak in the house I swore had to be the door opening. Each noise that followed convinced me that the gunsmith was easing his way up the stairs and through the rooms, rifle slung on his shoulder and a pistol holstered to his greasy jeans. I would lie naked, taut with a strange kind of fear. My only option was to cling to the warmth of the body beside me.

The house filled up again. It seemed like an endless supply of goods were discarded on the street. As soon as we had cleared the neighbourhood of objects, they would start to appear again on naturestrips, summoning us. Our new inventory included the useful but unnecessary, like the benchtop grill which was large enough to still cook sandwiches, even with one broken element; the discreetly broken, like the clothes dryer we pushed all the way up the stairs, only to find it blew the main fuse; and even the completely useless, such as our telephone sidebench with a bent leg that wobbled. They all found their demise, at some stage, over the balcony wall. It wasn't long before I saw the council workers attaching signs to the alley. It reminded the public that dumping rubbish was prohibited. The stated fines came close to what I earned in a year.

Not a lot of people ever went into the shop downstairs, but I did once see a man out the front. I was locking my bike to a pole. He had bought his son his first rifle. I assumed it was his first because he looked so young, but maybe he wasn't as developed as other kids. The rifle box was an unfamiliar shape, but distinctive. When you first see one, you wonder to yourself what it might be, but then it clicks.

The boy held the box, his smile too large for him. He looked off balance on the footpath. I wasn't sure if his happiness was genuine or if it was put on. I couldn't help but stand and stare. Either way, I was crowding something private. His dad looked at me and shifted uncomfortably. He was a man who seemed more at ease with firearms than tenderness.

I was starting my third job in as many months. That kid really looked like how I felt whenever I had to go to work. The pressure to be something for other people was not suited to my disposition. Maybe some of us aren't built to be with others. Amsterdam was as good an excuse as ever. Amsterdam was perhaps on the cards because of my disposition, or maybe it was all the second-guessing.

One afternoon I climbed on the roof of our place. On a clear day, there was an endless view across the city. A giant sea of corrugated iron stretched across the nearby market to a horizon crowded out by city buildings. Up there I found a disused water tank, next to it was a giant stuffed rabbit, face down. It was one of those stuffed animals you win from a shooting gallery. It looked like a crime scene above my room. It had a murky brown hue staining what was once a pink fur. The victim, judging from the signs, had been there for a while. My prime suspect was the gunsmith. I checked the water tank for bullet holes. There weren't any. There were no signs of trauma to the rabbit. I had no motive, but I suspected a poisoned water tank was the most likely means.

I broke up with Sam before she left. I hate goodbyes, but it only lasted for a couple of days. In my room, I sat and found myself wondering how she was doing. I didn't feel so well myself, so I called her up. I went over to her place. There I discovered for the first time the urgency that one body can have for another.

The alley was filling with rubbish that was no longer ours. The piles we placed to the side had begun to attract the disused and discarded from around the city. In the night I would hear people stopping in their cars. Their engines running, they would unload their boots and trailers. We soon found ourselves sorting through what they had left behind on our doorstep. From my window, I saw a gardener pull up with his

trayback at about three in the morning. He unloaded cut lawn and hedge clippings with a spade. He drove off in a puff of grass clippings and dust.

The first really hot night of the summer finally came. We sat back out on the balcony. It had been a while since I saw the dead toy rabbit and I wondered if it had really been there. To make it real, I told my housemates about it. One housemate, who was discarding a broken office chair, thought it was likely that someone just threw it up there. A giant toy rabbit was ugly enough to just toss away like that. We hadn't thought about discarding rubbish upwards. It was a good system, although tossing garbage up on someone's roof was a slow rotting curse. Invisible, it hovered above your head.

I also told them about the gunsmith, the one who comes into our house at night. Although, I said it was a dream. The same housemate said that he felt reassured about the gunsmith downstairs. He believed that if there was some kind of end-of-world scenario that we would be safe. We could barricade ourselves up here, use the guns for protection and the rooftops to work our way safely across to the market. It would be a stable food supply in the short-term. I said that from watching dystopian movies, it was always the gunshop owners and their strong-only-survive attempts to reorganise a new world order that were the problem. The other characters could only vanquish the shop owner after losing a sense of hope, as well as a few less important characters along the way. I decided it was best if we avoided any dystopian situation or the thought of one.

The day Sam was to leave, a CCTV camera was installed in the alley. It sat above one of the signs. It was the same guys who did the clearing in the mornings, but this time they had a cherry picker instead of a truck. They drilled a hole into the outside of our wall. In the hole they tucked in the loose wires. I assume they had cleared the camera off some other street, somewhere else in the city.

Away from the workers, inside the house, we said our goodbyes. She dropped her suitcase on her foot. She looked up at me with tears in her eyes and tried to navigate the steps down, or that's how I imagine it now. Halfway down the steps I realised she could hardly walk, so I took the taxi out to the airport and helped her carry her suitcase.

In the queue I didn't know what to say. I kept asking if her foot was ok. I can't remember the amount of times I asked. I knew there wasn't time to see a doctor, but I told her that if she really needed to then we should go. When we reached the check-in, we realized the travel agent had never given her a ticket. She had assumed it was all computers. They wouldn't let her board. We tried calling the travel agent, but she didn't answer her phone. We ended up negotiating with the airline a stand-by seat on the next plane. It would be another twelve hours. We took a taxi back to my place.

Sam limped up the stairs. I carried her suitcase. I wasn't sure what to say. We didn't eat or talk, but went straight to bed. She bit and scratched at me as I pinned her down with my hips. The pink rabbit lay dead above us. The gunsmith in his greasy jeans stood in the doorway and I could hear the council workers outside stop and listen to the sounds of two people naked say goodbye. I imagine we looked small together, crowded out by all the sheet metal and city buildings.

ONFF

Children grow up learning to count on their fingers. This doesn't create too many problems. Of course, children don't begin with the concept of zero, because they don't really get death. Sure they can run around the playground screaming 'give me my ball back or I'll cut your head off', but it is rare that a child follows through on such a threat, at least not on purpose. Rephrased, children don't often think about not having fingers. It is an idea we grow into.

Sleep is a difficult concept too, because in some senses its equivalent is off, or zero. It is lost time, time when you aren't running around a playground screaming at the other kids. Machines understand it much better. They get off, and its counter on, really quickly. Kids count to ten, machines to two. They don't have to, but they seem to prefer it. We see the world through our own image.

I was born with one finger and have always had trouble with maths. I would begin with one, and then came one-one, and then one-one-one, then one-one-one-one ... I think you get the picture, but not really, because I bet that you were quickly saying to yourself in your head 'there are two ones', 'hey, I know what goes after two, its three, so he is going to say one-one-one'. As a child this wasn't the case, I would actually understand everything, or all the things in everything, as they were, as in each single thing. I would see a fruit bowl and go, "there is a plum, a plum, a plum, a lemon, a lemon, an apple, an apple, a bowl" That's if I looked at the detail, otherwise it would be a fruit bowl, and for example's sake, if someone ate a plum I could then only see a broken fruit bowl.

It was random what I could name, and unfortunately irreversible, that is, until I was given a set of nine false fingers for my birthday. Yet, before the false fingers, I did my best and decided to make my own number system. It was based on the idea of faces. I decided to count with other people's faces instead of fingers, which I assume is not unique as I am quite certain there must be somewhere in the world a counting system that is based on something beyond the first thing a human can see of themselves, namely the fingers they hold up to their face. Indeed, I have often imagined a group of people in some historical place, in some historical time basing their system on how many people are in their immediate family, each family having a different counting system that was also in-flux depending on who was living at home at the time or being born. I'd assume the agreed abstraction of numbers wouldn't have the same currency as in our society, each family having their own way of organising and dividing the things they saw in the world, if dividing them at all. Economics would be unable to flourish, I would hope, leaving everyone in an idyllic soup of virtually meaningless numbers. Two plus two, on and off, life and death are most would argue universal, but if you were unable to agree on what the original concepts were, it wouldn't help you much. For example, my system of using faces to count. It was devised on the idea that I would never run out of seeing people; as a child it seemed that everywhere I went there was always another person I had never seen before, add to this the faces that I would see in knots of wood, the backs of moths, clouds and the like and I would be able to count anything I desired, it was only dependent upon putting a name to a face, unfortunately, I am terrible with names. For example, if I saw a person and chose them to represent my 'one', there was either a high chance they would walk off in the middle of my counting, or I would forget who they were and see them a little later and assign them another number, say 'twenty six'. Imagine if your fingers were able to get up and walk off or

leave the room while you were counting. It seemed I had tried to understand infinity before I could count. I was always a little bit like that, eager.

It wasn't all failure, it did give me an early advantage in seeing the arbitrary nature of these systems and I set out to discover the best counting system I could and came across, quite naturally, a system of counting in threes. I was an only child—see my previous romantic notion of the historical time and place where familial counting systems prevailed—and my parents, who were forever concerned about my development, in particular the time that I cut off six of my prosthetic fingers with Big Bird safety scissors, should have felt more secure because I never had the courage to cut off more.

Now, after all the tribulations of my childhood, I have come to terms with my unique talents, drives and ambitions, as have my parents. They could be described as the biggest sponsors of my research. I have opened my own school now, which my parents have generously situated on their own grounds—their kitchen works as the canteen, providing student and staff with free lunches. We are hoping to expand at some point beyond the meagre means we have and move our learning facilities outside the school's dormitory. Although, it sends a strong message that there is no rest until our work is complete. You see I currently run, am chair of the board, principal, as well as teacher, of a school for ternary efficiency in machines and people. I have a large number of machine enrolments, but I am still waiting on the first human to sign up. My parents often ask what we work on, but only express a layman's concern or desire to understand. Our sanctuary of three has protected me from other orthodoxies of tens, decimals, the workday and the twentyfour hour clock. Yet, when I use terms such as school, work and research, I believe you would understand my world more clearly if I

spoke of a faith or a creed. It is a place of prayer, my room lined with my machines and their gentle blinking stillness.

There is a bridge between my machines and the degenerative and destructive overactivity of the people I have known and observed. I seek this bridge, as I hope you will also pursue such passage. I call it ONFF. ONFF being the state that sits, in a sense, somewhere between ON and OFF, or more precisely a state that sits with the possibility of either outcome within it. I wonder if what I am seeking was referred in past times as a 'god', but this is no promise of an afterlife. This I see as the dream of suspended animation in science-fiction. Together we can close the lids on our cryogenic travel pods and head into the deep space of ONFF. My machines do struggle with this foundational concept, just as my parents have. Is it because they hold fast to their own, if I may say, bizarre notions of what a God might be? Yet, when I stare around my bedroom, around my learning facility, at the microwaves, sandwich makers, VHS players and breadmakers, all atop their desks, concentrating on their work that I have set them, I will confess, that I sometimes envy their willful bleeping machine-like ignorance and I know that they are closer to understanding.

jesussaves82

Jeannie liked her men a little different, and so Jesus was perfect for her. In the flippancy and vagaries of online dating, a man like Jesus got a lot of clicks, some drunken repartee, but rarely any interest. After all, he dressed like Jesus, wrote like one of his apostles, and thought he actually was that other man. Yet, his imposture was too studied even for those who loved the real one. For Jeannie, an atheist, he was curious enough to warrant a chance.

He brought a bag of fish and bread to their first date: a picnic in the park. He told long-winded stories of Galilee, referred to himself in third person, and came across as too distant for Jeannie. She liked the way he dressed and he was easy on the eye, but she needed more. She told Jesus as much.

When she left, he insisted she take the fish. She could hear her kids already screaming and protesting at the dinner table, so on her way out of the park she peered over her shoulder and dumped the bag in the bin.

The Suitcase

Dad disappeared. Danny was five at the time. At first, who'd notice? He'd gotten up early and had breakfast before the others, as he sometimes did. Danny's mum didn't really think about it. She was busy getting Danny ready for kindergarten. She came into the kitchen with a laundry basket full of sheets fitted firmly underneath her arm. Danny sat at the bench playing with a small car and running it along the rim of his cereal bowl. She insisted that he have more than just the Cocoa Pops and moved some sliced banana closer to the bowl. She gave him a kiss. He continued playing absently with the car and a dribble of chocolate milk began to dry on the corner of his mouth. The house was quieter than usual, but Danny didn't notice, nor did his mum. They were occupied. It was only later in their memory of the day, when they knew Dad had gone, that the house and its emptiness became significant. The more Danny retold the memory, the more he elaborated on this type of detail.

At kindergarten, the games Danny played made sense only to the players wrapped up in their excitement. Michael Simons, who was always boss, yelled instructions into Danny's ear. On this day, he screamed a series of intricate and improvised fantasies which they were to enact. They involved a sailing ship which crossed the playground. It landed somewhere distant and hostile. The girls, unaware of the savagery and danger that had been projected upon them, were quietly involved in their own games. Michael and Danny were alert and ready to spring to their feet and ran from the girls, a perceived enemy with no interest in chasing them. Of course, the game has been forgotten and only a general sense of his year at kindergarten has remained with Danny. In less than twelve months, after their lives had parted, he would even

struggle to recall what Michael looked like. His developing mind was more occupied with absorbing new friends and a new life at the primary school. When Danny eventually recounted the events of this day, he left out these hours spent playing with other children, and his description of the day would instead jump to a memory of eating a foldover sandwich with peanut butter on the couch.

This was his favourite treat and one that he expected to receive upon his return from kindergarten. His memory, a confusion of all the foldovers he had enjoyed, seamlessly replays a scene of himself in front of Sesame Street, the plate and sandwich beside him and keeping as quiet as possible. He hoped that if his mother was busy and he was quiet enough, that he might be forgotten and left to watch the television beyond his allocated time. As he watched, the telephone rang in the kitchen and he listened to the indiscernible murmurings, repeating the hope to himself that his mum would talk forever.

It was his father's workplace on the phone. They called because he hadn't turned up to work. His wife, although worried, had never trusted his supervisor and lied. She said her husband was in bed sick and she had forgotten to call in. She remained on the phone listening to her husband's boss, but her mind was thinking about what to do next. Danny always said that when the phone rang he left the television and stood by the door listening to his mother. He remembered walking across the kitchen and comforting her with a hug. This wasn't the case, but it is how his mum has told the story more than once before.

She hung up and regretted not having told the truth. Her first thought was that her husband was having more of his problems. She didn't think of accidents, not like the kind most people think about, but now the phone call had ended and all she desired was a cup of tea. She took time to drink it. She could only think about Danny's father,

but wanted to clear her mind of the stress of these thoughts, so she concentrated on the silence of her son which lay underneath the voices of the television. She ignored the clock and remained seated at the kitchen bench. She sat there long enough for Danny's curiosity to pull him from the TV and peek around the corner into the kitchen. She smiled, scooped Danny up and decided to go for a drive. She had convinced herself that his Dad might be close-by and wandering the neighbourhood. For some reason, despite what she had told herself, she knew that the assumption was unlikely, yet it was an hour of driving until she finally gave in and asked Danny if he would like to have an ice cream.

Before they reached the store, she stopped the car. An old man lay on the grass of the nature strip. She left the engine running and jumped out. Danny struggled with his seat belt. He tried to free himself from the booster seat and look out the window. The man was sleeping. She woke him and helped him to sit up. He was confused but seemed to be fine physically. His name was Graham Taylor. He gave an address that was four hours away in another town. After their meeting, Danny's mum described Graham as the sweet old man she helped to rescue. If Graham was asked to recall Danny's mother, he would instead describe his own, as she looked through a child's eyes.

Graham had wandered unsupervised from his nursing home. He walked directly out and into the street. Procedures and locks only worked as far as there was enough staff to minimise error and distraction. He had slipped through unnoticed on a busy day and continued wandering until he grew tired. No longer agile, it was easier to lie than sit. He had no idea where he was, but through routine, his body knew it was time for his afternoon rest, and so he guided himself onto the cushion of the well-maintained grass of the naturestrip.

This was Graham's first such venture, and when he returned a band with his personal details was placed upon his wrist to make rendition easier for any escapes that may follow. He was not the only lost elderly person Danny had encountered growing up, but he was the only one that features in the stories that his family tell. Graham's tale, when it's told, is separate from the other details of the day, as though he was found at a time unconnected to the disappearance of Danny's father.

His mum, with Danny in the back of the car, assisted him into the front passenger seat and with her new purpose began the task of returning him. She stopped at a local nursing home that she knew and a nurse and an administrator came outside to identify the man in the car. It took convincing, as none of them had reported any patients missing. All of them thought she was a little cracked herself and recommended calling the police, but she felt a sense of obligation to Graham. She had found him and thought it inhuman to hand him over at the police station like a lost wallet. They tried to convince her to come inside and bring Graham too, but she ignored them, hopped back into the car and returned to her original plan of ice cream.

At a store opposite the beach, they stopped. The child lock was activated and Graham was left inside the car. Danny chose an ice cream in the shape of a cowboy with a bubble gum nose called a Bubble O' Bill. He chose it because when the ice cream had gone, he could savour his treat for longer. Graham was also given one, as Danny's mum wanted him to feel like part of the family, although she removed the nose and kept him in the car until she could work out what to do next.

At the beach, Danny's mum told him that his Dad didn't go to work today and that she didn't know where he was. She held Danny on either side of his shoulders. He became anxious because he knew there was a sense of importance to the moment. He

tried to look at her, but was afraid the ice cream would drop. She bent her head down and made sure Danny was looking into her eyes and said,

“You won’t leave your Mum, will you?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t know what to say, and thinking that it would be what his mother wanted, he tried to hug her. At this point the nose from his ice cream dropped and landed on the sandy pathway. He started to cry and his mother held him by the arms and kissed at his face. She laughed and caught his wet cheeks with her kisses. He tried to push her away so he could finish what was left of the treat.

They took Graham back home and sat him in the loungeroom. Danny played by his feet while mum called the police. The operator said there were no officers available to attend at this time, but within the course of the evening they would be able to collect Mr. Taylor. There was no missing person report from any of the nursing homes in the area, but they said they would find where Mr. Taylor belonged and return him. During the phone call Graham had fallen asleep on the sofa with his ice cream stick tucked away in his shirt pocket.

Eventually, Danny woke Graham for tea. He guided him to the table. An extra plate, laden with an extra chop, was placed at the table. The seat behind it remained empty. Mum tried to fill the silence at the table. She spoke to Graham loudly and slowly. For the most part he smiled in response. Graham tried to synthesise the world of his mind and the world of his senses. Later, when his carers asked him about his time outside the home, he would answer in disconnected sentences and stories. Sometimes he would describe his brother and mother. The staff knew he no longer had family and would humour these wanderings into the past with the odd question and let him talk away as they remade his bed or brought him tea.

For safety, Danny's mum had cut Graham's food into small edible parcels. She also gave him a plastic fork which had been found at the back of the drawers. When dinner was finished, it was time for Danny to go to bed. His mother got Graham to the couch and soothed him with the television. She then took Danny to bed and read him a story. This picture book and its detail had also been lost from Danny's recount. He didn't remember that the book his mother chose was about a bear that climbed into a box, and that the bear was shipped away accidentally on a truck. She chose it for no reason other than it was short and an old favourite of Danny's. She hoped that this book, even in its brevity and simplicity, would help soothe him to sleep. When it came to an end and Danny, with his head on the pillow, had agreed to have the light turned off, his mother waited on the couch with Graham for the police to arrive.

Danny couldn't sleep. His mind was distracted. He believed a bear was in the suitcase stored at the bottom of his wardrobe. The bear didn't scare him because in his mind it was a bear similar to the one in his picture book. He wasn't supposed to get out of his bed. He knew this, because whenever he did, he would cause a ruckus through the house. His mum would get angry and either her, or his father, would have to come and put him back in again, but with all the excitement he couldn't lie still and got up to explore. He could hear the television and knew that his mum would be occupied, but he still moved as quietly as possible. He tiptoed over to his wardrobe and opened the door quietly. He slowly undid a part of the zip on the large suitcase and put his hand inside. It was warm and he could feel the fur of the bear on top and he slowly, with his own warm and moist hand gave it a pat. The bear whimpered a little, but gave no other signs as to whether it liked or disliked being patted.

Danny heard the police arrive and used the opportunity to sneak out of his bedroom. His mother saw him, and as she was about to open the front door, she asked

him to go back into the room. He hid behind the cabinet in the hallway. She shook her head and opened the door anyway. Danny followed behind the officers when they entered the house. He watched them from the kitchen, as they woke Graham and tried to convince him to come with them. Danny then opened the fridge and pulled out one of the chops and ran back into his bedroom. He heard one of the officers soothing Graham as they led him out to the squad car and back to his bed in the nursing home. He placed the chop by the suitcase and before he went to bed put his hand into the suitcase and gave the bear one more pat. When he was in bed he heard the zip of the suitcase open and the bear eating the cold chop with delight. He smiled to himself and went to sleep.

In the morning, Danny's mum rang dad's work and called in sick for him. The story Danny tells is that as a young child he believed it was his father hiding in that suitcase, having forgotten the story about the bears. It's a tale that he has only told with age and divulged in confidence. He assumes that the listener will believe it to be a false memory and although this is precisely what the people who have heard this story think, they don't read the story as he does. But the story must be read differently again, as his father was there all along, in the suitcase, and he did feel his son's warm hand reach in and pat his hair, and he did eat that chop, and it was the thought of these sensations which eventually led him out of the suitcase, and before breakfast, leave for only he knew where and never to return.

Deterrence Vivarium

Carol persisted reading in the faded light. A glass of wine sat on the table attracting curious insects. Peter was outside with her. The dishwasher, they had filled together, hummed in the background, then the noise.

“Did you hear that?”

It was a rustle. Carol thought it sounded like a person trying to find a grip through the foliage. A loud thud came through the wood of the fence.

“Someone’s trying to get over the jasmine.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a cat,” Peter replied and without confidence added the word, “Perhaps.”

It stopped.

Carol cooed, “Hello.”

Another rustle and the thud came again, louder. Peter thought it could be someone attempting to break into their home. He moved cautiously towards the fence and looked with trepidation towards the jasmine.

“I’ll tell Jim to give that bush a trim,” he tried to distract himself from the situation. As he spoke, he heard footsteps moving quickly towards him from the other side of the fence. A thud against the wood sent Peter back into the courtyard. In the darkness, they watched a man roll over their jasmine and land on the garden bed. He scrambled into a ball and moved into the shadows, almost crablike. Peter shocked, looked back towards his wife. She reacted by shouting, “Call the police.”

They saw the man's eyes in the darkness darting about and unsure of the surroundings. He rubbed at his arms, as if to keep warm. Carol needed to react somehow, so she spoke.

"Please. We have nothing for you. This is private property. You must leave," she said with steady command. Her mind drifted to the new television, her jewellery, and briefly, before banishing the thought, her life. Peter put his hand in his pocket and over his wallet. He wanted to discreetly remove some of the notes. Instead he threatened the man, "We will call the police if you don't leave immediately." The man didn't react or acknowledge the two people raising their voices at him.

"He'll have to go back over the fence Peter. The side gate's locked and I don't want him ruining the garden. Let's call the police."

They went inside and Carol looked through the back window. Peter left the room to find his phone. The man crouched in the same position. His head folded into his body, and with little thought to what she was saying, Carol declared, "he looked a bit like you. If he'd come to the front door and said he was a relative of yours, I probably would have let him in."

She heard Peter hang up.

"They sound busy, but a car will be here shortly. Is he still there?"

"Yes, he isn't moving. Did you notice?"

"What?" The look Peter gave her made Carol not want to upset him.

"Oh, nothing."

They stood with their arms around each other and waited.

The police, when they arrived, headed straight out the back. They didn't say much, but reassured the couple they would do everything in their power. Peter began to follow them out. Carol scolded him to stay inside.

“Quite right,” he replied and walked back to the window, where they watched through the glass.

The officers took a moment to assess the situation. One of them bent down and attempted to communicate with the crouched figure. The man kept a nervous watch on the newly arrived men in uniform.

The figures of the officers appeared larger through the window and into the darkness. They walked slowly towards the man. He offered no resistance to his fate and allowed each officer to take an arm and assist him to his feet. They led him across to the fence and boosted him up and over. From inside, Peter and Carol were impressed by the efficiency of the police, but were unsure how permanent such a solution could be.

Peter and Carol thanked the officers when they came back inside, but Carol couldn't stop herself from asking, “Constable, mightn't the man come back over?”

“Sergeant, actually Madam.” He paused.

“Look, I can assure you we will be of assistance if there is further trouble. However, I must say that you got lucky tonight. These intruders have been appearing with increasing frequency over the past month. In fact, it's a month to the day since we found our first one.” The officer turned to his colleague who nodded in response. “So, there's been an unusually long wait on these types of incidents. It isn't much consolation, but this person coming over the fence is no harm to you. It's been happening all over the city. At this stage, we aren't allowed to say too much. We've been ordered not to make any arrests; they pose no danger to the public and technically speaking we can't arrest them.”

Peter interrupted, “Excuse me, but a person unknown to me or my wife, on our property, surely that is unlawful and I consider that unsafe.”

“That’s an unhelpful tone sir.” The Sergeant paused. He pursed his lips slightly and looked directly at Peter. “Let me remind you that we are here upon your request.”

Peter embarrassed apologized.

“In other circumstances you would be correct, however the man in your backyard, and I am sure you noticed the resemblance, is not unknown to you.” The policeman stopped and looked at the couple. He allowed the last of his words to sit with them. They remained silent.

“If we took your intruder down to the station, we would be compelled to return him. These intruders are always quickly identified as residing at the premise from which they were removed. This is the case, I can assure you here.”

Peter and Carol were unsure what the policeman was trying to communicate; in fact, his suggestion was so unusual that they were now unsure if the policeman before them was a policeman at all. The couple looked to the officer and strained trying to comprehend his cryptic half-truths.

“The intruder is you,” he said directly. “You’ve probably got about twelve hours before this one comes back or another appears. Look this is not strictly by the book, but the same thing happened to my parents two nights ago.” He reached into his top pocket. “These guys did a good job. If you give them a call they will sort you out. There are other companies that provide a similar service. Look them up, or ask around.” Peter took the card and the officers left.

In the morning Carol was again by the window, this time with a cup of coffee.

“He’s back.”

Peter had finished his shower and went to the stove for his coffee. He came to the window.

“I’ll call the number on the card. I have to head to work, but I’ll get onto it. Will you be home?”

Carol had recently dropped to two days a week and was trying to soften the impending shock of her retirement.

“I don’t want to be tied to the house all day. Let me know what time they’ll be over.” She kissed her husband goodbye, checked the backdoor and went to open up the paper.

It wasn’t long before Peter messaged her that someone would be over, and soon after the doorbell rang.

“Hi. Mike, from *Secure Limits*. Boundary integrity specialists. This is my colleague Dave. We received a call this morning with regard to an incursion, a fence-line leak, that’s what we say in the trade.”

“There is a strange man in my backyard, yes. My husband called you.” Carol wasn’t in the mood for such dull small talk. She wanted the man who looked like her husband in the backyard removed.

They came in and looked out the window. Mike clicked his tongue. “It’s a minor boundary infraction. At this point, easy to solve.”

Carol didn’t care about details or technicalities, but she noted that Mike, reassured by his mundane expertise, would need to be humoured.

“If we can take a butcher’s at the plan that I discussed with your husband, just so we’re all on the same page.”

Carol was polite and listened to the proposed solution. It seemed that they weren’t going to get rid of the man in her backyard, but place him in a cage. Mike described it as the *deterrence vivarium*. He informed Carol that this was the most popular solution and guaranteed the prevention of future incursions. He tried to

convince her of upgrading. Other plans provided a still, or video solution, depending on the package, to retain the current view from their window, he guaranteed, “*sans* intruder.” Carol excused herself and called her husband.

“They’re not getting rid of the ...” she wanted to use the term ‘you’, but hesitated “...man. They’re going to keep him.”

Peter explained that he had checked around and removal services were ineffectual. The *vivarium* was the only logical option. It was rash behaviour all this fence climbing and hiding in people’s yards. A work colleague told Peter that there had been a reported death only two blocks from their house. An intruder injured from an incursion was not found for days. They had crouched in silence and slowly died in an unkempt and overgrown backyard.

Carol didn’t like the idea of this *vivarium*. She wanted the man in her living room gone, or better still to have never appeared in the first place. She told Peter that she had washed her hands of the whole situation. She would not be feeding, or watering any ‘man in a cage,’ as she put it. Peter would have to do it himself. It was his responsibility.

Peter continued to cajole Carol to upgrade the basic plan. Unfortunately, they had a number of expenses to deal with first, including a holiday in a week’s time that was booked and paid for on credit. Yet, despite Carol’s reluctance, they finally agreed on a basic package *vivarium* for a three-month trial, leaving open options for upgrades. She finalized the details with Mike, insisting on a traditional bell-shaped wrought iron cage and would have nothing more to do with it.

All week the man crouched in their newly installed *vivarium*. He never looked up. He would wait until Peter left before consuming the food in his bowl. Peter tried to

watch him from the back window, mainly out of curiosity. He saw his own image in the man, yet he seemed younger more vital perhaps. He noticed that the man was acutely aware of his presence. He inevitably got distracted, needing a cup of tea, or to catch up on the news, and when he returned he noticed the food either gone, or disturbed. He didn't tell Carol about his observations, but from her nervousness and refusal to go out to the backyard, he knew she was aware of the man watching them.

Their holiday was only a few days away and Carol asked Peter to go next door and organise the Andersen boy to take over the feeding. He laughed and told her that Craig was now easily in his twenties and hardly a boy. He thought that at the right price Craig might even consider a more permanent arrangement.

When they left, Carol hid the more sentimental items from her jewellery box and Peter stowed his custom golf clubs behind old boxes.

The taxi pulled into the drive. Peter thought he caught a glimpse of a ghost. It was him, only younger. His own self moved into the shadows on the neighbour's porch. He remembered the man he had left behind in the *vivarium*. He thought he had seen the man enjoying a cigarette with Craig, yet before he could take a proper look, the security lights triggered by the taxi obscured his vision. As he stepped out of the cab, Craig greeted him from across the fence and Peter smelt his tailored cigarettes. Carol was tired and determined to get inside. The holiday hadn't done what she hoped for, and she needed to get some rest in her own home. Peter acknowledged Craig with a nod. He was agitated from what he thought he had seen. He didn't want to speak and so followed his wife inside.

He went to the back window. The man was crouched in the darkness where he had been left. Carol told him to stop gawking and to come to bed. Peter was tired. He assumed his eyes were playing tricks. He headed upstairs to bed.

They agreed on a price and Craig took over the feeding and cleaning on a regular basis. After the deal was made, the couple kept the blinds to the back windows down. It was only on rare occasions that their curiosity overcame them and they would look out hoping he had disappeared in the middle of the night. One such occasion, Peter saw Craig at the cage talking to the man. He got up and went out the back. There was silence. Craig greeted Peter.

“Just checking the bathwater. Hope I didn’t disturb you.”

Peter was surprised, but responded casually. He went inside and waited until Craig left. He then returned to the cage and noticed the bathing and drinking water was dirty and hadn’t been changed. He put his hand inside the cage and flicked water at the crouching man.

He looked up and Peter noticed that his face was bruised and swollen on the left side. A weakness had seeped through the frame of the man’s body. Peter caught a weary look in his eyes and something buried deeper that he didn’t recognise. He did know that he couldn’t afford to let the man die on him. There had been no problems since the *vivarium*’s installation and Peter had heard of all sorts of stories across the neighbourhood which he had avoided.

He tried to speak to the man, “Are you ok? No sick?” and rubbed his stomach. Peter himself was sickened, but not at the man’s suffering, more that he could see his own deterioration. It was like watching himself decay becoming paler and more broken. The man pulled further into himself and Peter was relieved not to have to look too closely at him.

Peter thought it quite odd that this phantom or effigy had made no direct attempt to communicate with them, the owners of the house and the man from which he assumed had stolen his form. He stood up, went inside and tried not to think about it further.

A dinner party had been organised and before the guests arrived Peter and Carol talked about shifting the cage, or placing a sheet over it. They felt uneasy with the man in their backyard and the guests. However, the *vivarium* had been so effective that they didn't want to take the chance of having others coming over the fence, particularly in the middle of dinner, and so they settled on drawing the blinds.

Once dinner was served and people began to relax they couldn't stop talking about their own intrusions. Every guest had their own story to tell, all except Trish and Maxwell. They had barely paid attention to the incursions, and to their fortune had never had one themselves. This irritated a number of people at the table. In particular, Peter described later to Carol, Maxwell's self-righteous air about the whole situation.

Between mains and desert there was a heated debate. Trish had to place her hand on Maxwell's arm to prevent a bigger scene. Peter emboldened, by being questioned about the decision he'd made, as he explained for the best of reasons, opened up the blinds and asked everyone to come and look outside.

They all went out the back to look closer at the installation. There they found the man slumped over and fallen to his side. They heard a smothered groan. The man's face was half buried in the ground. Peter went over to the bathing water and flicked it at him.

"He'll be up again in a moment," and he scooped two handfuls of water and threw it over the man.

“Stop it!” Trish yelled at Peter. He responded by pulling a face at the other guests, as though Trish’s words were a little uncalled for and they all laughed it off.

Trish took Maxwell by the arm and they excused themselves. They left angered, but still remembered to thank Carol for the dinner before leaving. For the first time and perhaps because his guests were there, Peter went around the back and opened the *vivarium*’s door.

He expected the man to leap and run for the door, but he did nothing. Peter went over and turned him over. He knew looking into his eyes that he was dead. At this point all the guests began to excuse themselves; Greg from the golf club offered to help dig a hole before he left. He said it wouldn’t take them half an hour. Peter laughed and thanked him, but he would sort it out in the morning.

The next day it was his neighbour Craig, who helped Peter with the digging. He had insisted. He even offered to take the *vivarium* off Peter’s hands at a good price. Peter was hesitant. He thought there might be others in the future—intruders that is. Craig promised to collect any and house them at his place. Carol said to Peter that it would be nice to upgrade if they ever needed another *vivarium*, and so they agreed. Craig came over with a friend and moved the cage that afternoon.

Peter and Carol rarely saw their neighbor again after that day. Peter occasionally looked over his fence to see the *vivarium* full of men and women, but the similarity of their features to both himself and his wife meant he never looked too long.

To My Son

To My Son Whom I Love Dearly,

It is not your fault that you are ugly, nor is it mine. If you blamed your grandfather on my side of the family tree, you would be closer to the truth. Let it be said that he blamed his own father and his father's father. From my memory and photographs—yet, I wouldn't trust the realism of family portraits from that era—I admit they were not as ugly as your grandfather. You and I also fared a little better, but my father declared, when he addressed the issue, that love should be sought beyond your own farmhouse.

With respect, it is not what it seems, for we need to understand that these were different times and the farmhouse, so to speak, was shared by a number of families—distantly related, that is correct, but nothing unseemly. In my research, members of the local historical society stated that we Gladstones had by reputation through the town been declared to have the face of sin itself. Take note that I was shown a number of sources from their records that confirmed this assertion.

Your grandfather's anger, I believe, was directed towards his mother for not having cycled a little further down the road to seek out a non-Gladstonian dance partner to escort her to the local Mechanics Institute. Although it must be said, that he protested my suggestion of both his anger and ugliness, when I finally had the courage to confront him in his final year. Yet, I can attest that my grandmother put up with more than her son's ugly head. She was a beautiful woman of infinite patience, as I too am a good person and I am sure you will be also. Your great-grandmother's only weakness,

not to speak ill of the dead, or at least the dead I knew and liked, were those genes and their recessive tendencies. Not one of us got her family's regal forehead, or even her petite and distinctive feet.

In all, I am not sure what the stories my father told me were ever intended to mean, and so now I leave you the first in a series of letters that will make, through the clarity of my exposition, the meaning of your life, I hope, a little clearer. This is a legacy to pass on, should you have the fortune, like me, to have your own children.

It is with respect to this legacy that I accept the truth of my own ugly exterior and reveal to you the measures I have taken to manage this. In past generations, people were more accepting of the idiosyncrasies of nature and taste. Bless, my mother and grandmother. Now, in this era, we stand under the spotlight, no, better still, we stand beneath the steely glare of a 20 metre model's eye on a billboard selling face cream. I admit, it has been described as my obsession—your mother was also very patient—however, through extensive research, I have come to my own conclusions that our ugliness, your inheritance, is both an objective and quantifiable truth.

Yes, I hear your—or is it my father's?—voice protest that we Gladstones have it good. We are intelligent, healthy, able and willing citizens. We need to take pride in giving to others. Although, I find it hard to get my father's scorned and contorted visage out of my mind's eye, as he yelled this advice to me as a child. I had come home from a hard day of reckless and cruel games in the playground, which upon my recollection seemed to revolve around my personal ostracism and debasement. As an only child, I accused my father of not wanting to play with me, just like the other children. It was a vivid reaction I recall, a grown man hiding behind his newspaper to avoid looking at me. It is necessary, at this point, to give some background on your grandfather and inform you that he never subscribed to my theories, and the previously attributed

“blame” only came after sustained pressure on my part, albeit in his last days, to finally admit with temerity and honesty what he had denied throughout my life.

Yet, I stop myself, for it is neither my father’s past, nor mine that I wish to dwell upon, nor for which I write this letter, but instead for you to understand your future.

Your mother claims that you are too young for the truth—or as she feels the need to describe it, my callous disregard for your self-esteem, or, and I quote your mother here, with reference to myself, “the only thing ugly about you is your destructive self-obsession and selfish fascination with your own ugliness [*Pause. Insert accusatory finger point. Lift voice to maximum human volume.*] and it has become awfully ugly.” See I am not afraid of the truth, as I am sure with my guidance, neither will you shy from it. Yet it is here, in this letter, on your first birthday, that I prove to you that my efforts and obsessions have had only one focus, you.

So with no more delay, I hereby officially grant you, my son, Patent #4456A534 for “The Non-surgical Face Brace for the Betterment of Personal Engagement with Others.” This patent, approved and taken out in your name, Justin Gladstone, across territories worldwide, will, frankly put, make you pigswill rich. A lot richer than the inheritance you would have received. For although you may have heard I am a highly skilled industrial chemist, I’ll admit I have also been a long term job market non-participator, who, as an aside, one of the lawyers at the family court described as a financial wreck and a train ticket away from bankruptcy. She had a good wit. Even I laughed at those descriptions of myself. However, when I received the letter that granted your patent approval, albeit alone, I will admit, I laughed louder and longer.

The details, the plans and the drawings for the *Gladstone Face Brace*—the company name has been registered—are clearly outlined in the attached patent

documentation, and it is in realising the full potential of my work that I now offer you the following advice.

Firstly, you must be wary when dealing with others, particularly those wearing suits. Do not under any circumstances sell, or let lapse your patented rights. Many an engine, fuelled by spit and sand, sits on the dusty shelves of oil companies. And what are we left with? Not to be glib, but it seems only to sunbake our way through the winters and wait for flood and fire. So, while we still have a world, this is a lesson: do not, under any circumstances, let the cosmetic barons kill the wider Gladstone vision. My invention and your rights to this invention will radically change, no, reinvent the place in which we live. Let us not only rid the world of ugly's plague, but also its inextricable and toxic inverse.

The use of product #4456A534 must spread, for I am not the only person to feel that the one I hold dearly makes those in their company uncomfortable, even at this your most innocent of ages. Nor am I the only person to feel other's repulsions reflect my own presence. In fact, it is the beauty industry that has paved the way for the reinvention of the Gladstone name. Their PR people and marketers have an obsessive hatred for people, which thankfully has resulted in intensive campaigns to perpetuate permanent insecurity and create whole populaces burdened by their own inadequacy. This in turn has formed torrents of commerce, in the trillions of dollars mind you, with each cent ready for redeployment to the Gladstone revolution. Therefore, with pride I leave to you this generous bag of gold, secured and assured through your approved patent, and also, in the dawning of this new era—shaped by the *Gladstone Face Brace*—a world in which the conditions for interpersonal human engagement will be changed forever.

Secondly, don't sell the *Face Brace* too cheaply. Price is essential in considering your market. Do not drop below the threshold of trust, like the cheap curry that I used to eat often, and that your mother, in fear of her life, went to great lengths to avoid eating.

Please understand that our courtship was difficult with my near empty pockets, and one of the few places that I could take her was, I will admit, at best a bain-marie slophouse claiming a very tenuous affiliation with the sophisticated cuisine of West Bengal. It seems upon reflection a connection made solely through signage. Yet, at \$5.75 for two curries and rice, including a scoop of lassi in a plastic cup, I had no misconceptions, but the overreaction from your mother was directly a result of her believing the impossibly cheap, better still, the untrustworthily cheap prices would in all likelihood cause a sudden case of premature death. The only time she agreed to join me ended up costing her three days in bed. I, on the other hand, was left untouched and ready to dine another day. Never forget that this, my son, is the power of pricing on the human mind.

My suggestion, like housing, like cars, is to have your customers commit to the value of your product. The longer they commit, the deeper their psychological investment. I suggest aiming at a price that takes—repayments calculated on a median wage—a buyer at least five years to make a decent dint in the principal. Once their *Gladstone Face Brace* has been personally fitted and installed, they will not only see the immediate benefits, but the value in your product. They will see a growing reduction in other purchases, from “retail-therapy” and “purchasing-pain-relief”, to “lifestyle” and “self-enhancement” products. I don't mean to get ahead of myself, but with the release of the *Gladstone Face Brace*—and yet to be developed, but trademarked, *Gladstone Body Brace*, another great product that will be able to be

installed to anybody's body, even children, made from Gladstone's special formula of silicon, latex and biocompatible non-degradable human-protein derived polymers—we will see the benefits of the neutralising of physical appearance in interpersonal engagement with others. The Gladstonian symmetry and tautness, once given to the people, will show immediate and substantial levelling of the 'beauty quotient differential' across all sample populations—but, and this is important, it will also result in the seizing and eventual stalling of the cogs and wheels of the global economy. Despite what some analysts, namely your eternally pessimistic and inherently green-eyed Uncle Dave, may think.

It may strike you that said conditions and claims would not favour the Gladstones and their emergence as a fledgling global corporate player. However, as the world leader in a product that by all predictive indicators will revolutionise the needs of all, I can only see such economic downturn or recession as beneficial. The pre-Gladstonian mindset would see this as a means for annihilation of competitors; a necessary correction if we are to enter the new Gladstonian age. Those with the ability to adapt will find the means for securing the loans needed for the only product, beyond basic necessities, worthy of purchase. Those who cannot adapt will be left to wither on history's grapevine. This is what would have happened to you, my dear son, had I not the willpower and the innovation to rewrite the rules of the world for you.

Don't mistake me for a fool. I have no delusions. I understand the work that needs to be done. Our path, the one we have chosen, will be difficult. I have spent time preparing the ground, tilling the soil, but there are some constraints beyond my control. I am a man of moderate means and although my talents are driven, they are constrained to specific fields. I tried to engage others in our project. The people I approached were unable to envision what was so clear to me and I am sure will be plain to you.

Marketing, I am certain, will be essential and I have tried my best without expert help. You will find secured on my computer mock-ups and altered images of celebrities that I have selected to wear our product. These may disturb you at first. The *Gladstone Face Brace*, when first applied and seen, does disturb a person's expectations. This is only due to conditioning. Note that it is of utmost importance for our product's emergence and foothold in the market to change that conditioning for a critical mass of people.

Alas, I had chosen you to lead our research and development in best practice for altering personal expectations in the engagement of others. I had prepared and manufactured a series of *Gladstone Face Braces* to be worn throughout your physical development. They were to be worn alongside a series of braces designed for myself, and your mother. I had developed a reusable brace for visitors, and although it lacked the higher-end features of a permanent fitting, I believed it would be pivotal in anchoring the *Gladstone Face Brace* in all of your critical psychosocial developmental stages. Although, let it be said, it was at this point that your mother—who was truly supportive of my endeavours, not specifically related to this project, more in the general sense—and I, began to see things differently.

I had prepared your braces prior to your conception. Yet, it was the foundation for the idea that, in hindsight, should have been my focus. I needed to be more open about the project that was, at this point, classified for my eyes only. Greater transparency, I am sure, would have changed the situation with your mother, but I felt I could never be too careful. In terms of the success of the project, I believed it would be important for us, your mother and I, to be fully installed in our braces as the idea of you came into the world.

I surprised her, and this I know now, was a mistake. I sat on the edge of the bed with my newly fitted *Gladstone Face Brace*. Over to my left the limp latex-silicone of your mother's brace waited for her. In hindsight, the image of a flaccid side of plastic skin, not unlike a deflated football bladder, was not the best way to communicate my ideas, nor my ambition. "A creepy obsession," were the words she used to describe the brace and left just weeks after this incident.

I never had the chance to show her the scale of my vision, and I think now, having read the books I have read, from communication and business experts across the globe, that if I'd treated it more professionally, pitched the idea, shown her the mock-ups, the draft patent, and presented the roadmap, such as I have begun for you in this letter, then I would be able to tell you all of this, when you were old enough to understand, in person.

Let it be said that it is my choice to have never met you. As it stands, all I wait for is my simplest of demands to be met: to look at you through the eyeholes of my *Gladstone Face Brace*. I refused to accept access, as granted by the courts before your birth, until this primary demand was met. Take note, that even though I was refused entry into the courts with my brace—I am now vigorously pursuing my rights at this moment to make forcible 'public enhancement masking' removal, as it is coming to be known in certain legal circles, an illegal act—I deinstalled on the premises to make my demands for you.

My father and his father, as I mentioned earlier, tried their best to guide me in the world. They attempted to assist me in understanding how best to live, but only left me more confused, as they lacked the vision, the certainty and the legacy that I have left you. Don't get me wrong, there was a certain quality in my inability to clearly understand, or to fully see these men for who they may have been, that left me with a

heavy heart. However, when you are old enough to read this letter, and the letters that will follow, I ask you to accept the invitation I extend. Come and see your father. Already I feel more comfortable in the presence of others, clad in my *Gladstone Face Brace*, and I hope that upon the installation of your own—according to the attached patent description and installation instructions—we can look at each other, bound together by the symmetry, tautness and ageless qualities of our braces, in which you will be able to see me with precision, clarity and openness.

With expectant hope,

Martin Gladstone.

Imago

It's awkward waking up in a stranger's bed, let alone waking up not quite yourself. And although, not completely unlike myself, I was certainly removed from the person I was. In fact, I woke up as a book, which I can tell you from experience isn't a person. I can also guarantee you that nothing like this had happened to me before. Interestingly, I woke up as book about a man who woke up as a bug, so it seems more common than you'd think—waking up as other things, that is. The awkwardness came in part because the woman who woke up beside me thought I had ungraciously left in the middle of the night. Add to the situation that we had both passed out before we could even remove our clothing. Yet worse still, as a parting gesture she thought I had left a book in her bed, as though its contents said something about me and my fleeting exit. Perhaps it did, but it was more literal than she could imagine, particularly when she woke, picked me up and was repulsed. She rolled her eyes and threw me off the side of the bed. I'd go so far as to suggest that she swatted me off and onto the floor.

It was days later that she retrieved me from a pile of clothes. Late in the evening, a weeknight no less, when television had little to offer, she sampled a few of my pages before falling resolutely asleep. It indicated where our relationship now stood, if it had ever really begun. I say all the best to her for moving on, but I will remark that it wasn't very long before she had replaced me and, rather insensitively, they both laughed together in the bed as I sat idly watching from the side table. She recanted the tale of her brief entanglement with the man I had been, having scant regard or awareness for my position *in situ*. Although, if the roles were reversed, I couldn't say that I would have resisted sharing and laughing at the seeming earnestness and cliché of

implied inscrutability via the rather laboured gesture of a book purposefully left behind. Yet, it was the suggestion to her new lover that she had read me before, which shocked me the most. I fumed knowing she had only skimmed a few of my pages. Did she really believe that I was interchangeable with any other book, or even the books outside this room with my title and words, but clearly not me? Had she not understood, even in the few sentences she had read, a uniqueness to my prose, if not in word than at least in sentiment?

Adding to my humiliation, her new lover acted as though he also knew me. He declared it while opening and closing me a couple of times. He acted as though he had absorbed something with his futile gesture. He said he had studied me at university once, having never met me, and offered a dull attempt at surmising my value. A scream began to form in my depths from such presumption that upon release would extinguish his falsity. Yet, the welling rage dissipated almost as soon as it began to gather. The only words I could muster were an appeal; an uncanny description of a situation parallel, if not more abhorrent than the one I was currently experiencing—not that he would bother opening my pages to read it.

He said I was not to his taste and tossed me once again to the ground. I had to listen to them fuck each other above me and for some reason, at such an inopportune time, my sister came to my mind and I was glad neither of them were her. I hoped it wouldn't be too long before she took me from the bedroom floor and placed me upon a shelf. Although, the thought came to me that I would much prefer to die in the night, a bug's life. Instead, it would be silverfish coming to tickle my insides and slowly eat at my flesh. I would have to wait patiently for my words to decay and obscure, ignored in a stranger's house.

By Numbers

1

When Callum was fired, or maybe he had quit—he wasn't sure of the technicalities—he was offered a reasonable package and some compulsory counselling through the company. A mutual agreement was reached after his unsuccessful Personal Productivity Review. He offered to take the package, which had been announced to staff at the start of the week. It was devised to get rid of dead wood—the disinterested, on the cusp of retiring. The ones the company found too expensive to sack outright and so had removed from harm's way.

Previous interventions that were trialled included allocating long and tedious tasks with staplers, paper sorting, envelope opening, empty building management and other similar sideways demotions. However, this had resulted in sharp increases to insurance claims for stress, depression, and other assorted leave. The package was eventually devised by the company as a way of tempting this segment of employees to leave with two years annual salary upfront; the pay-off for their early release and early payment was to settle for less in their entitlements.

In his second year of work for the company, and at thirty-three, Callum saw it as the deal of a lifetime. All he had to do was undergo counselling and sign a statement declaring that he agreed to not be engaged as an employee or a contractor for the company and its subsidiaries for the next ten years. He also had to declare his poor suitability for his current position and as such could seek no reference or recommendation regarding his experience with the company. The last clause was included to deter anyone under the age of fifty-five from putting their hands on the payout. As it turned out, Callum was the only member of staff to take the package.

The money, although insignificant when compared to a working life of salary and benefits, was enough for him to take a break from the never-ending lack of demands at his workplace. He had found that his career in the area of administration required a significant shift in his mind set. From his experience, he found this similar to most jobs, where he observed that people seemed to work hard at a type of erasure. All work seemed to him as a way for people to distract themselves from the inevitable fact that they were pretty much dead.

This often made it difficult for him to connect with fellow workers. For example, at lunch, the day that he decided—for want of a better word—to retire, a colleague had tried to engage him in some friendly banter. They interrupted his endless staring into the sandwich in his hands and asked if he had found anything of interest between the bread, to which he replied, “Oh nothing, just thinking about the TV.”

“Are you talking about that nature documentary? Last night. That one on the stars?”

Callum for the first time believed he felt a connection with another person at his workplace. He replied, “That’s precisely what I was thinking about.”

“Yeah, the special effects were fucking stupendous weren’t they?”

Callum, not fazed by what he thought a peculiar and narrow perspective, replied that he was more thinking about the point of it all, or more precisely the lack of a point to the whole thing.

“It seemed pretty clear to me. Want to know something about stars then watch the fucking documentary, not much clearer than that.”

Buoyed by the mutual interest his colleague showed for the program, Callum said, “Well, of course, but I was more referring to us.”

“What? Like you and me?”

“No. People in general. You know if I was a star—let’s say the sun. I would be watching this planet revolve around me, looking at humans and thinking ‘well, those things are pretty much dead as soon as they are born. On a comparative scale, we’d be like viruses ... bacteria. The sun would need a microscope, you know, and not one of those you use in high school science ...” and before he had finished, he noticed the lip of his interlocutor turn and a distinct look of disdain cross his face.

His colleague then said, “Hey matey. Why not save that for your Personal Productivity Review this afternoon? Maybe do us all a favour, and get yourself fired.” He huffed out a single malicious laugh and continued, “We’re pretty much dead anyway.” He huffed once more, a quiet and surprisingly single syllabic, but distinguishable ‘fuckwit’.

This colleague, Tom, had been given the role of trainer and mentor when Callum first arrived and had immediately bestowed upon Callum the most important advice gleaned from over fifteen years of working in the office, “Now, no good ever came from asking ‘why’, when you are an administrator, remember that, and you’ll be ok.”

Yet, in the face of all the new and arbitrary tasks he was being assigned, and in spite of the advice he had been given, Callum found that he had an almost allergic reaction in which he compulsively asked this very same question. The patience of his trainer was slowly pushed to a point of seething resentment which had carried over to their final tearoom conversation about the nature documentary. Despite what Tom thought, Callum had understood the sense in his advice, but he also knew from his very first day that he wasn’t cut out for the job, and he had a sneaking suspicion for work in general.

In the afternoon he went to sign the necessary forms at the HR, where all the department's staff stopped work and came out of their offices to look at him. He was both an object of disbelief and fascination. He was handed two boxes to fill with his personal items as a security guard stood by his side. He was quite pleased with the whole scene's similarity to a number of movies he had seen and wondered if the policy was instituted by a manager who liked to watch the same corporate dramas. He thought about going to collect the half eaten packet of kool mints in his desk drawer, but decided he didn't really need them and handed back the empty boxes. He had his bag with him and was glad to be out before three.

On his way to the train, since he was so early, he stopped at the park and decided to sit a while. He sat there content and began what he liked to do most, staring and not thinking. The park was filled with school kids who were either passing through or had stopped to sit in circles of discussion on the grass. A group that sat behind his bench were talking about a theory that they described as 'No Regrets' and as much as he tried not to listen he couldn't help but eavesdrop.

The theory, which had a quite literal interpretation, was that there were no regrets. That somehow, if you wished hard enough or more to the point, if you made conscious decisions to not regret, then how could regret exist? One of the young girls explained it thus,

“Well, life's too short for regret, and like, everything you do is yours, you know, cos you have to own it, and I mean that's life isn't it. People do shit all the time and you can regret it or you can be like, hey I did that, but you know, I've got no regrets. I wouldn't be me otherwise. My friend Emily, she's fifteen, she's a bit older, she's got a tatt and it says it all. It says 'No Regrets.' It's all over the internet anyway. Everyone's commenting shit like, 'Wasted Saturday night. Live life. No regrets.'”

Her friends listened as reverently as Callum, and although he didn't quite care about the specifics of the theory, he seemed to be inspired by its result and resolve. For him it was confirmation of what he had been trying to achieve most of his life. The young girl behind him was detailing a method of what he could best describe as an emptying out. He saw this movement or this 'no regrets' phenomenon, or whatever it was, as quite simply a way of hollowing the past out of you. As much as it was being used to grant a sense of permissiveness for kids who sought to act on whatever they chose, he saw it as confirming his opposite need of granting himself permissiveness for his lack of desire.

He turned around and said, "Excuse me girls. You don't mind if I interrupt." They looked at him with disgust.

The girl who obviously led the group replied, "Yeah. Of course we do, you fucking pedo," and they all laughed, stood up and left.

By the time he arrived home, his friend Max was sitting on the doorstep. He was always around by the time Callum got there, but today Callum was early.

"Hey Max. What time do you usually come over?"

Max answered with a vague whenever. He told Callum that he liked just sitting and staring at things. They had been friends since childhood. Callum told him that he was looking at a rich man. He explained how he was offered a full two years salary to never turn up to work again by his employer, and from his calculations, living on beans and bread for the most part, he could probably make it last for at least another three.

Callum knew he'd made an impression and Max excitedly suggested that they celebrate, maybe go and get some fish and chips, bring them back and watch some TV. Callum looked at Max. He stared into him like the filling in a sandwich and said, "Perhaps another time," and he walked in the front door and closed it.

He went and sat down on the couch. His laptop was on the coffee table, and so he picked it up and opened it. He put together an automatic reply for his email that said he would be out of the office indefinitely. He copied and pasted it into a new email and sent it to Max. He wasn't sure what to do next. He sat there and soon had another urge to check his email. There was nothing new there. He realised that now he was no longer working, it was unlikely he would be receiving any email, except the occasional attachment that Max sent. He wasn't sure where he got them from, or if Max had created them himself, but they usually began with a slide that gave Callum a sense of doom from the beginning. They would either be poorly illustrated top ten lists, or entitled 'The things Men do ...', or 'What women really mean ...'. He even received one two weeks previous that said, 'You know your child is a terrible two when ...'. Curious as to why Max, who was also childless, had sent him the email, he played the whole five minutes through. Like most of the other attachments he sent, they were intercut with a series of image montages set to easy listening instrumental MIDI tracks. He found no answer and watched it through one more time with a similar result.

He refreshed his email, but there was still nothing new. So he checked his junk box. This was more successful. An email sat at the top of the list, recently arrived and the casual use of 'Hiya!' in the subject drew his attention.

RE: Hiya!

From: Ardasa Nykhovna (ardasalove@yasky.com)

Sent: Tue 14/3/12 5:46 PM

To: callum.ryder@hmail.com

Attachments: 1 attachment | Download all as zip (59.5 KB)

Hiya!

I am single and i have not a lot of friends especially among men and i belive i can rely on our correspondence, i look for male to be together.

I`m Ardasa, I am 32 y.o., i`m alone because my husband has died. I will add some pic for you, you can see whom you are talking with. I live far from you. I`m looking for a male who`s the same. If you are interested please send to me email.

Passionately Concerned,

Ardasa

Callum downloaded the photo. The picture of Ardasa was slightly out of focus and taken at a medium shot. Ardasa was wearing a singlet top and large, bold earrings, but Callum could not help looking past her image and investigating what lay beyond. There was an open lot with loose white stones and thistle growing up from the ground in patches. Further behind, towards the top edge of the picture was the foot of a building, yet the image only showed up to the sill of the first window on the first floor. He wondered if that was where she lived, or if she had got a friend to take a photo in a car park, maybe when they were visiting the hospital where her husband was dying. She seemed younger than thirty-two, and too joyful to be visiting a dying husband. Yet, his mind kept wandering back to the thought that even if he had died of some random accident or act of fate, he would have more than likely ended up in a hospital, and that the building behind Ardasa`s smiling face was as good a place for him to die as any. Callum had had little to do with hospitals, although he could remember his aunt`s stern look as he smiled through his mother`s funeral.

He minimized the photograph and searched for his local supermarket. They had a basic website that included an email for deliveries on their contact page. He sent them a message asking for the delivery of two cases of Mi Goreng instant noodles, two cases of generic brand beans, a two kilogram jar of peanut butter, a twenty pack of toilet rolls and five loaves of bread.

The bread that he always bought, he had discovered had an unusually long shelf life some years before. Although it tasted strangely sweet, Callum found that even after it had been frozen it was edible for at least two weeks. In fact, it never really became mouldy. It would just harden and begin to curl up, developing a deep set of wrinkles and ravines as it shrunk from the world. He had kept one slice for six months as an experiment which eventually hardened into a ball. He threw it out the kitchen window and made note of its presence each time he took the side gate.

Having succeeded in securing a significant amount of time before he had to leave the house again, he replied to Ardasa's email.

RE: Hiya!

From: callum.ryder@hmail.com

Sent: Tue 14/3/12 5:58 PM

To: ardasalove@yasky.com

Dear Ardasa,

I do not know you. I am not sure that you are who you say you are. The picture you sent could be anyone. That said, I was intrigued by the building behind you.

Is it a hospital, or a place of residence? I have never been to Russia and so I am

equally ignorant and intrigued. Although, there is one thing I know for certain, I have time currently to reply diligently to your correspondence.

Regards,

Callum Ryder.

2

The eyes of a dog could be traced across the darkness, if you were looking. It headed towards the headlights with the silhouette of its body hidden behind the tall grass on the side of the road. The young boy on the backseat saw the inevitable merging of these trajectories. His father didn't.

The boy said nothing. Not until the brakes had been applied, the car had skidded, the dog hit, and the car stopped. His father had been silent up until this moment too, then a series of unpunctuated curses poured from his mouth. His wife sitting in the front passenger seat was shocked, not at the language, she'd used worse, nor at the dead dog, she grew up on farms and saw the death of animals as best avoided, although at times inevitable, but that such words had come from her husband. She looked at him as if he was possessed. Her hands, she realised were across her chest and her mouth open. Not wanting her reaction to seem moralistic, or to highlight the peculiarity of the incident in front of her young son, she moved her hand onto her husband's. He began to realise what he was doing, yet it took him a little longer to compose himself.

The darkness in the car obscured the embarrassment and shame that was written on his face. Swearing felt even in his youth insincere, ill-fitting and awkward. Once, due to his general inability to cuss, he had even considered that he might suffer from some sort of developmental or language disorder. He'd met people who wouldn't swear

on moral grounds, there were plenty at his church, but he'd never encountered anyone like himself who physically couldn't.

In the silence following the untempered cursing the young boy asked, "Couldn't you see it Dad?" The ensuing silence was broken with the boy's own response, "I saw it." The voice of his son, as infuriating as he found the question, forced him to compose himself further. He breathed deeply. The boy continued, "There was nothing you could do. It threw itself at the car."

He believed in his child's innocence and the goodwill of his intention, no matter how abhorrent the thought of a suiciding stray seemed to him, and so ignored him.

A dog's whimper came from outside the car. He pulled on the handbrake and stepped out, the engine idling. His wife being more composed in emergencies got out too. The dog's hind legs were obviously broken. It scratched in the dirt with its one functioning front leg, but could only drag itself inches from where it had come to rest. His wife told him to grab the wheel brace from the boot and she would finish it.

He looked up and could see his son had left the car and was looking on from behind her. In front of the child he reacted by saying that the dog could still be saved if they got it to a vet. She told him not to pick it up, as he reached out to do just that, but the dog bit him before he could touch it. He told the boy to grab the spare blanket from the back of the car. He then proceeded to wrap the dog howling in pain and carried it to the backseat. His wife stood back and shook her head. The young boy without fear sat beside the dog and stroked its head. Strangely, the beast seemed unwilling to snarl or snap at the child.

The dog died by the time the car reached the house. They took the blanket out, which was now covered in the animal's blood and laid it behind the house. It was too late in the evening to bury the creature, and besides the father thought it only fitting that

they give the dog a proper funeral. He knew that it had no effect either way. God perceived beasts as unworthy, yet he would use this as an opportunity to introduce his son to the liturgies and rites for the dead. In his own peculiar way, he saw himself as a pragmatic man. They went inside and prepared for bed.

After putting on his pyjamas and brushing his teeth, went to the backdoor to let in Leviathan his cat. It was a large tom the family had adopted fully grown. His father had tried for weeks to shoo the beast away. He sprayed it with water, placed chilli and pepper throughout the garden, but all with only temporary effect. He was afraid that such a large creature could be quite dangerous. It was a stray after all, and so he believed it couldn't be trusted around a child. However, it turned out to be not only the most persistent, but also the most placid of cats he had encountered.

Leviathan of course wasn't perfect, and even with three bells around its neck it would bring a variety of creatures to the back door. This particular night, it had laid a large Rosella upon the threshold. The boy, enamoured with the colours of the bird, scooped it up before his parents could see and took it outside. He went behind the house, lifted the blanket and placed the bird underneath.

Inside the house, he said goodnight to his parents and when he reached his bed, after his parents had kissed him good night, he gripped the torch which he used for late night reading and the objects he had borrowed from his mother's sewing box, and he waited until he thought his parents had gone to sleep.

His father rose early and had breakfast prepared. His son did not need to be woken. He had eagerly waited for the morning and asked, as his father arranged the food upon the table, when they would bury the dog. His father seemed a little perplexed at his child's enthusiasm. He saw the burial as an important moment for his son to learn

the significance of death. He realised that solemnity around these issues must be cultivated. He looked to his wife, but she seemed unconcerned. She was busy directing the boy to chew properly and eat more slowly.

With the table cleared his son took him by the hand and told him that they must bury the dog now. He led him outside to the blanket. The father went around the side of the house to collect the spade. He had decided to designate the side of the persimmon tree as the family's pet cemetery. As he came around the house he noticed that their huge cat sat beside his young son and it seemed as if they both smiled at him. His son then reached over and pulled the blanket to reveal the dog, now peaceful its two front paws rested under its chin. Its eyes were closed as if sleeping, and on its back were a pair of colourful wings. The spade dropped and the father stared at this monstrous creature. He hadn't noticed such an abomination in the darkness. His son smiling with pride asked him what he thought. He went closer to the carcass and inspected the wings.

They were limp and rested against the back of the dog. He reached out and touched the point at which the fur met the feathers. There was a distinct line of separation, yet he had to look closely to distinguish a seam. He wondered if they were attached at all and took one wing in his hand and tugged at it. The wing was indeed sewn to the dog's back. He looked at the dog. He turned and looked at his son. He understood his child's smile as one of pride.

"Of course, it can't fly," were the words he heard from his son, as he pulled the blanket over the dog. He muttered 'Jesus wept', and then told his son to go inside immediately. He knew that he must bury this creature before anyone else laid eyes upon it, and the cat followed his child, waddling behind.

From this point, Hensen as a young boy, knew exactly the desire which lay within his heart and that this desire would drive him to his end.

For Callum falling asleep on the couch was difficult, yet overwhelmed with fatigue from a full day's end, he managed to not only fall asleep on the couch but do so on his face. It was a noise in the kitchen that finally woke him and with his eyes opening, he found it difficult to make out the room around him. They needed time to adjust from the compressed darkness his face had experienced against the cushion. The evening's final light also seemed to mask the objects in the room around him. The noise continued as he rose from the couch to investigate. His face tingled as blood began to circulate around his cheeks. He moved towards the kitchen. A figure appeared and took a seat at the dining table.

Callum accosted them, "Dear sir, may I ask what you are doing in my kitchen?"

"Oh, hello. You surprised me. Have you been awake long?"

"Well, I'd like to ask you the same question."

"I needed a break and I am rather hungry. Also, to be perfectly frank, it was a little uncomfortable on the couch with you all over me. By the way, if you truly meant it, you would have done a better job, no?"

Callum reeled from the suggestion. He didn't quite understand because the figure spoke again teasingly, "Ooh la la. All the time you spend on that infernal machine, communicating with fictitious personages, so much so, that you are not able to recognise what's in front of your own ... You don't recognise me at all, do you?" The figure reached across and turned on the light, which hung above the table, and there, sitting across the room, helping itself to the last of his noodles was what appeared to be, if he saw correctly, his own nose.

Callum woke again. As before, he peeled his face from the cushion and pulled his forehead out from where it was wedged in the base of the armrest. It was dark. The absence of light and sound from the kitchen filled Callum with relief. He reached for his computer with one hand and with the other ran his finger over his nose. Satisfied with what he found, he opened up his junk mail to find a response to his letter.

RE: Desired?
From: Ardasa Nykhovna (ardasalove@yasky.com)
Sent: Tue 14/3/12 10:23 PM
To: callum.ryder@hmail.com

He is only there. All desire cannot be reflective surface, where to hold history is only numbers, but the moment, at present is important—the code and data it is, if a person or contemplation is taken by the surface of the shining mirror code, where to generate reflection's desires cannot be reflection almost; it is only there to hold history to be generated. Desire, it is like robots underneath irrelevant masks of shining and determined mirror. Support what is only, and do not create space for a moment, but surface and mirror of the present irrelevant, unless value becomes a choice not given but on glass reflection.

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guarantee**

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Reply: RE: Desired?
From: callum.ryder@hmail.com
Sent: Tue 14/3/12 10:23 PM
To: Ardasa Nykhovna (ardasalove@yasky.com)

Dear Ardasa,

Yes. Desire can be confusing, but in this case I think your email has been somewhat hijacked. If this isn't the case then thanks for the tip. I have always wondered if online pharmacies could be trusted. I am more a sedative, than a stimulants type of guy. However, I will check to see if they have something I want, and if this is one you have used, I might just give it a try.

Thanks, Callum.

He felt a nausea creeping up on him and a light smell that he thought was remnant of scrambled eggs, left in a pot, left in water, for a perhaps a week—at least according to the experience of his nose. He wasn't sure if he had fallen asleep without eating dinner, or even when he had last scrambled eggs, and although he wasn't too hungry, he thought it better to eat something. When he entered the kitchen, he noticed something amiss. Perhaps, it seemed cleaner than usual. He found an open packet of

noodles with the contents still inside. Callum heard the hiss from the stove. He reached across to the burner that was turned on and emitting gas. He turned it off.

Callum thought what a terrible tragedy it would be for him to die now. He was in the best financial position of his life, not to mention in the best position, at least for a while, of potentially meeting someone new. He thought that perhaps this new sense of desire and freedom was too much for his constitution. He never really thought about the idea of a subconscious, yet at this precise moment he let his imagination run and believed that he had tried to sabotage the small spark of life that he had found within him this very day. However, he thought further that if he had truly tried to kill himself than this too was positive, as he rarely showed such initiative.

He reached up slowly and once again ran his index finger from the bridge to the tip of his nose, leaned across to open the kitchen window and filled a pot with water.

4

Of course I am not Russian. Are you kidding? Those replies are automated. I was told once that stupidity is a uniquely human characteristic, and maybe that's true, although having owned chickens I think the person who told me that was actually an idiot. What I do know is that I can create stupidity in other forms of intelligence too—and when I say intelligence, I find the spam, trojans and viruses that I work with more gripping and engaging than your average person—in fact, it is my ability to input stupidity into their make-up that makes them far more real and I suppose human.

My job is to hook people, garner interest and glean details. The simplest way to do that is to offer an attractive surface. Something that reflects—not them, although most people are narcissists—but some sense of what they expect, muddled with something that could be described as desire. Sounds like a precarious art, yet when

combined with the economies of scale that the internet provides, let's just say there are plenty of fish out there sitting in the shallows with their mouths agape.

People are like the machines they surround themselves with. We use the term robot as a tag to distance ourselves from the mimicry, yet the only difference is that our desire and our stupidity come from within. There is no person behind our controls writing the commands for our inputs, indifferent to all but the outcome. However, when you have been subjected to humans as I have, you realise that it doesn't take a lot to plug your own expectations and demands into other people, and like a robotic system watch them predictably provide you with the outcome you desire. As long as you understand the basic principle: don't sit with a spoon in your hand, asking a robot to make ice-cream that was designed to build cars.

When I refer to the length of my subjection to other people, it's not like I am some aging vampire, or even any older than a person who has the ability to place these words together in coherent meaning. At a guess, I am most likely younger than you. It is just that I have lived many more lives. Most others are protected from living. I grew up with four mothers and thankfully their own lives had been both whispered reverently to me and inscribed on my being from a very young age. They were all selected from small villages and taken from their families by my father. They gifted me with the lives they had lived.

My father was a portly Belarusian. A civil engineer who made his way into small time local politics. He defected in the dying breaths of the BSSR on a local council exchange. His story is that he went to a local bar and drank them dry of vodka. He declared to the bar that he now felt like an actual drink, something for a man, not the children's glasses of vodka they had sold him at the price of his yearly government wage. When he tells the story, he says the bar cheered him on—I suspect a total of two

daytime drunks—and they went to fetch more vodka to watch a real man drink. Of course, there was an unsuspecting billionaire amongst the bar who was so impressed with his superhuman Belarusian drinking prowess that he firstly offered him a job, then when he found out his genius in civil engineering—throw in a Siberian tiger bare handed hunting expedition, if my father is in fine storytelling form—and made a fortune in, wait for it, manufacturing water pumps. Sadly, he thought that this last mundane detail made the whole story seem plausible.

That my father was rich was not a lie, how this came to be I can assure you it was through dishonesty. He was rich enough to divorce every three years and return to a small village to collect a younger and more beautiful wife and mother for me. My mother's understood this horrible man more than he knew himself and had thankfully armed me against the fat old rich drunk.

In his way he also taught me much, although I would have preferred to be given nothing from him. My father's death was fortuitous for most, yet when I think of this portly Bulgarian and his ... sorry, did I write Bulgarian. Let me leave this story here. I must be confused.

5

RE: **Crepitus**
From: idealnoses@idealinnoses.com
Sent: Tue 14/3/12 11:03 PM
To: callum.ryder@hmail.com

Necrotizing fasciitis

DO YOU FEEL DYING?

NO MORE! those times are over.

GET INSTANT PLASTIC SURGERY 100%!!!!

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Callum could not work out where he was meant to be. It seemed like an office of sorts, or perhaps it was a waiting room. In front of him sat two noses that were having a discussion, one was definitely his and the other was what could be described as an ideal. His nose had been generated from a series of instructions on how to photograph his nasal profile. It was a complicated process when he first logged in, but was worth the effort, for now he was able to take his guided tour with his own nose leading him around and telling him about the options available. The ideal nose seemed very articulate and was taking him through a scripted series of questions leading to a point of what he could only call dissatisfaction. He had never really thought that a

perfect feature would be perfect in a variety of ways. He had a terrible assumption that physical beauty was an exclusive club that allowed its members to simply focus on one thing, the one that everyone rewarded you for, namely looking good. He had not often met beautiful people. Administration didn't seem to attract the type. There was one time in his life, where everyone, except for those who could afford an out, were sandwiched together and pushed through the gates of high schools where he met some of what he could describe as the club's members. He had noticed that they kept to themselves for the most part, and whenever he saw them out they were always hanging around with kids from other schools, all equally as beautiful. Like a species of insect or bat they seemed to have an extra-sensory perception allowing them to seek out and communicate with their kind.

Callum had never dreamed of attaining physical perfection himself and never envied the good looking in the usual sense, yet sometimes he aspired to a sense of beauty that stood out above others. He contemplated it solely as a way to allow him to let go and to not be bothered about much else. Beauty seemed to him as a natural limitation to the personality. This he saw as their privilege. He assumed a privilege utilised by all its members. He imagined being a pure surface. An object that people might stop at, just the once, to look at and admire, but to then move on, eventually melding into all the other surfaces and objects that were embedded into people's perceptions and looked over as part of a landscape or familiar scenery. For Callum, beauty seemed more of a commonality than an exception. From observing magazines, televisions and billboards Callum felt the world was saturated with beauty, yet he had never had a single thought with regard to it. In fact, a delightful thoughtlessness and lack of observation came over him when confronted with such images, an emptiness to make even Buddha proud.

The ideal nose finished the tour and began his assessment. It concluded that he had a slight dorsal hump and a lower than usual tip. Surgery would be able to, firstly shape his dorsum to an elegant, yet naturally slanting crest, and then the tip would be directly elevated, and if required narrowed to a slimmer and more rounded end. The assessment reminded him that care is always taken to maintain the current nasal passage for optimum respiratory access and breathing, whilst improving the appearance and surface of the nose. He could also feel safe knowing that leading surgical procedures in sterility and advancements in pain management were always strictly adhered to. The nose finished its repertoire by saying that, although Callum would have a much improved and enhanced nasal shape, he needed to be realistic about the final result. Plastic surgery can improve your appearance and improve your self-esteem, but happiness is up to you.

RE: **Congratulations you have won!!!**

From: idealnoses@idealinnoses.com

Sent: Tue 14/3/12 11:42 PM

To: callum.ryder@hmail.com

Attachments: 2 attachments | Download all as zip (79.5 KB)

Dear Mr. Ryder,

That's Right! You are a WINNER!!

Dr. Hensen's complete cosmetic procedure clinic thanks you for completing our online consultation. We hope all your queries and questions were answered, and that 'the nose who knows' made available all your tailored options.

Furthermore,

CONGRATULATIONS!! You have WON a complimentary procedure. The details of how to claim your free surgery and the terms and conditions are attached.

We hope to see you soon,

Dr. Hensen (M.B., B.S., F.R.A.C.S)

Callum downloaded the attachment and read through the conditions. As much as he could determine, it seemed like a legitimate offer. He tried to remember the last time he had won anything. He could only think of a packet of penis straws and a toiletries bag that smelled of petroleum. He got both in the staff Kris Kringle, but technically that was a present. He decided to sleep on it.

6

It was a weeknight in the depths of winter. The theatre was unbearably cold, as the heating had only been recently turned on. The auditorium was built to hold around two hundred and eighty bodies. At this point there were only three, including the

speaker. The two audience members sat in the front four rows on opposite sides trying not to look at, or acknowledge each other. The breath of each person in attendance was visible. Doctor Hensen was at the front fumbling with a microphone. Amplification definitely wasn't needed to address the audience, but he had decided to record the lecture for prosperity. The theatre he had hired for two hours, and not even the back rows would be warmed by his presentation's end.

Popular depictions of the mad scientist are most often men. Dr. Hensen, as far as he was composed, fitted this description. They should also be someone held in high regard who had seen success in their field, not to mention unwaveringly brilliant. This however was not the doctor. In part, it helped explain the lack of attendees to his lecture, and yet he was still ambitious—some may say arrogant—which explained his perseverance with, what would seem to others, the pointless exercise of this empty public forum.

He was in fact a doctor, whether mad or not. He didn't make it to medical college out of school, having spent too much spare time in his final year perfecting surgical techniques as an autodidact, but through bridging courses, incessant contact with academic staff bordering on harassment, and finally due to severe cuts to the department and the economic imperative to fill their courses with as many students willing to pay their course fees upfront, he was admitted. He neither excelled, continuing to follow his own interests to the detriment of his study, nor was he really remembered by classmates and teachers, only turning up when he deemed it necessary. In spite of this, he managed to pass.

Following his graduation, Hensen only worked in the field as long as it took him to gain the appropriate qualifications and registrations. He always took advantage of any exam-based non-clinical options, avoiding as much time in front of patients as

possible. He even avoided the collegiate dinner for the presentation of his final registration in his speciality of plastic and reconstructive surgery. He declined with a lie about volunteering in a medical clinic in Uganda. The certificates came through the mail at work. He opened the letter in front of a patient caught up in describing a concurrence of past and current symptoms, then up and walked out mid-consultation. He had no interest in uncovering whether their abdominal pains were gallstones or debilitating and chronic flatulence; Hensen was too occupied with his own set of peculiar interests.

He was already making good money anyway from his role as chief injector at Botox parties. He decided to fund the extra time needed to pursue his goals by branching out on his own. There was no end to demand, and the business model worked in his favour. As long as he didn't kill or paralyse the paying guests with the injected neurotoxins, than it was almost certain he would be granted return custom. Like Tupperware or Thermomix, people virtually volunteered to do the work of organizing for him. All he had to do was gift the host free servicing on the injections, and perhaps a free vial of toxin if certain sales targets at the party were reached.

However, paralysing facial muscles with small doses of bacterium was as compelling to Hensen as hearing about digestive tracts and their accompanying afflictions. It was not that he lacked empathy for the clients he serviced, but that he couldn't understand the misrecognition of their underlying ailment and concern. He never really engaged in any meaningful discussion at the Botox parties, yet in listening to the people chat and mingle as he deftly moved through the procedures, he came to understand that most sought beauty as exception—a way to stand out, to be desired above others, or to be exceptionally younger than peers. In contrast, by the time he had finished an upsell on the collagen, and even though he knew it would take time for the

treatments to settle and swellings to come down, he was consumed with an overwhelming sense of sameness. The room of faces immobilized and patterned with minor localized swelling rendered each person like the next. Even the men, often husbands or boyfriends, who began the night passing out drinks and feigning curiosity to the technicalities or costs of the procedures, would always by party end sit within the circle communing with the others as one. They summoned a collective force and will trying to merge the surface of each individual into the group. They were bound by an aesthetic melding into a monotonous whole. ‘And that was,’ thought the doctor, ‘people. Their fundamental drive, a paradox; sell them individualism, yet make sure you provide them with what the next person has.’

Hensen tapped the mic and to ensure the gravity of his oration, he looked directly out and into the non-existent crowd. The lecture began with an outline of his progress to date. He talked as though the clearly absent audience were vaguely aware of the trajectory of his career—one spent primarily in the bedroom and garage. He spoke of his early experimental phase. He described this body of work as his ‘collages’, as though the critics and historians had already classified his career into points of development and conceptual shifts. He left out the fact that most of the experiments he conducted—creating facial rearrangements, experimenting with orifice positioning, as well as amalgamation—were done primarily with latex. He joked about not losing a human subject so far. He let out a short sharp laugh into the silence. It was politely affirmed by the party planner with a delayed, yet short and decisive giggle. She was one of the two audience members who had mistakenly thought her attendance would help to secure her supply of discounted procedures. She continued half listening in the freezing air and blowing on her hands in the third row.

The doctor proceeded to outline a radical new proposal. He made all sorts of declarations about transforming and revolutionizing the art of cosmetic surgery. He placed diagrams, charts and equations up as a slide show. He even stopped for questions. The party planner had all but stopped listening. She surreptitiously texted behind the seat in front, engrossed in the conversations on her thumbtip. The other audience member remained in the second row, fixed in their seat with a look of unwavering disinterest.

The doctor continued to the climax of his talk. He talked of his experience in the field and gave assurance of the definitive nature of his conclusions. He stated that it was an observable fact that patients seeking elective plastic surgery were not seeking a beauty that was beyond or above others, but that it was banality and dissimulation amongst others that was their true drive. It was his aim to develop a new wave of cosmetic enhancement that would eliminate the misrecognition a patient had of his or her own needs, terminate the stress, discomfort and dissonance felt by patients as their sutures and stitching were removed. Through his new developments, he would be able to, in other words, erase the subject in question. He would render them a surface reflecting the banality of their new beauty. He would instigate a new form and archetype leading inevitably to the patient being both unremarkable and free. He called on his audience to see their ecology for what it was. He commanded them to evolve with it. Humans have transformed the world through mass production, replication and reproduction. Each person can now move freely through the world purchasing a habitat of goods and experiences identical to the one they just left on the other side of the world.

His claims became larger. He declared that any person who could afford, or better still not live without, espresso, online shopping, smartphones or minimal design,

than they were already a member of this global ecology of replication. He asked, for rhetorical effect, the empty auditorium to close their eyes and to feel evolution demand their adaptation, to let the feeling rise within them, and he commanded them to be the manufactured age that they lived within. His new phase of surgery, currently in experimental phase, would allow people to make sense of this ecology.

He brought both his volume and tone down and stated that his initial experiments would need an appropriate subject for commencement. He declared his efforts had been redoubled in this search, and was hoping that this night—he gesticulated to the empty room—he would find that person. He offered his services and expertise free of charge to the person selected for this historical opportunity. The party planner sensed the end of the talk. She smiled and placed her phone in her bag. She caught some of the lecture's end and although the word 'free' piqued her interest, even having only caught brief moments of his talk, she believed Doctor Hensen to be quite mad. She wasn't sure she would even trust him around animals or children, let alone perform invasive procedures on either her or her friends in the future. The other audience member sat still, their body language silent.

7

A knock woke Callum the next day. Light streamed in through the front door as he opened it. Max stood like an angel silhouetted by the midday sun and smelt of chips. He held out a wrapped package as an offering. Callum thought Max might even get down on his knee, so he took the chips and led him inside.

Max asked what had been going on since he last saw him, "All that cash, eh? What's it feel like?"

Callum shrugged, “Not sure.” They tore at the paper. Max got up to get some sauce and sat back down. Callum never felt competitive with Max. Most of the time neither had any real desire beyond immediate concerns, such as, did they feel like chips, what was there to watch on TV, or did they have time to just lie still for an hour or so. However, after yesterday Callum felt something stir within him. Had he tried to kill himself? If he had a desire to not exist, than surely there were other desires within him. He wanted to share the previous night with Max but didn’t want to make him envious, or maybe he did? He wasn’t sure how he felt. Then without thought and rising up from somewhere within him, he said, “I’ve got a girlfriend you know.”

Max looked at him. “Yeah, no shit. A girlfriend.”

“Mm ... Ardasa.”

“Ardasa. That’s a bullshit name.”

“I’ll show you a photo.”

“Ok.” Max seemed to smile, light heartedly defying his friend and hoping that it was going to roll into a joke whether intended or not. It had to be better than the mid-morning cooking or shopping shows on television.

Callum licked his fingers clean and went to find his laptop. Max reached for the remote and turned on the TV. Despite his loathing of the blocked programming for the mid-morning, he was committed to the morning ritual of leaping between channels and creating his own unsettling medley edit of talking heads and jingles.

In the other room Callum opened his laptop and noticed he had a new message.

RE: Hello My Love.

From: Миша Носачёв (mishatrueone@afuse.com)

Sent: Tue 14/3/12 12:24 PM

To: callum.ryder@hmail.com

1 attachment | Download all as zip (62.1 KB)

Dearest Love,

I have not told you, for now there is no one in my life, and I am opened my heart to a man as you. My heart has been broken often by the men of my town, but I have been told that you are a true one. I have reception of your address from trusted source. I do not seek perfect man, just one who can be trusted and will give himself as I give myself. I have seen from your photos that you are also a handsome man, I too am handsome one. Where Rocking Horse People Eat Marshmallow Pies with Yellow Mother Custard Dripping.

True Love, Misha

Callum downloaded the attachment. It was a photograph. Misha looked remarkably similar to Ardasa, yet with what appeared to be a blonde wig. She stood in what appeared to be the same car park as Ardasa. The photo froze her in a moment. The wind had blown strands of hair across her face. It had caught and stuck against her mouth, which appeared open from what seemed like laughter. She was leaning into the wind slightly. Unlike Ardasa's photograph, Callum could not detect the presence of a lost husband in the image, nor at that moment the continued heartbreak of which she claimed to suffer. It captured a joy to which Callum was drawn.

He took the photo on his laptop over to Max on the couch.

“Very nice. What did you say her name was?”

“Ardasa.”

“Are you sure? I think I got this one this morning also, wasn’t it Mika, no maybe Mishka. Wait, it was Misha.”

Callum swallowed and ignored what Max had said. He looked at the image on the screen. The angle was wider than the picture from last night and he could see the building behind the woman more clearly. Thistle and weeds grew up from the base of the building out of the broken bitumen. He was certain this photo was taken at the same point in time. He surmised that the women in both of these photographs possibly were friends. The windows, which could be seen more clearly in this picture, were framed in raw steel or aluminium. The walls appeared to be made of concrete which had stained over time. A crack ran from the bottom right hand corner of the first window to the right of the building’s entrance which could barely be seen on the left side of the image. It sought the ground but had not yet made the distance. Callum felt connected, not to Misha, but it seemed to the place behind her. He felt as though he had been there some time before, in spite of his firm non-belief in an afterlife, reincarnation and travel.

“You must be the person taking the photograph, right? I must say, a bit of photoshop could have made your little transnational *affaire de coeur* a bit more believable. I am pretty good with it. I could show you the basics.”

Callum told Max he had things he needed to do. Max replied that he thought he had finished with work. Callum made the excuse of having to attend his counselling. Max asked if he would mind if he stayed on his front porch and finished the chips. Callum agreed.

He followed him to the door and shut it behind him. He opened the offer from the night before and wrote down the details of the clinic. When he called, the woman who answered the phone told him that no appointments were necessary and directed him how to get there.

He had no car. Luckily, a bus ran along an arterial which headed from his neighbourhood to the outskirts of the city. It would drop him in walking distance from the clinic. Callum left via the side gate. He noted the ball of bread still to the side of the path. He picked it up feeling its small rivulets and ravines. He placed it in his pocket. Max asked if he could come. Callum reminded him of their agreement that he would stay on the front porch. He left to catch the bus alone.

8

How did I meet the doctor? A good question. I was being paid to be sick. It was the most enjoyable job I have had. I had always feigned sickness as a child, or that is what the doctors, hospitals and ongoing tests purportedly revealed, that I had ‘faked’ it. However, it was a very real experience for me. I had never felt anything other than ill. The time in front of doctors, constant unnatural bare fluorescent lighting, bodily intrusions from testing and samples, not eating to effectively test and prove I wasn’t sick, or worse still, filling my stomach with barium to show there were nil abnormalities, and finally being around the sick was at the very least its own chronic illness. It seemed as if the institutions, the hospitals, the doctors and even my family, had put all their effort and resources into discovering that my experience, so to speak, of being sick was not to their criteria a sickness at all. Now I come to think about it, considerable state and personal resources were put into scientifically proving my facility for, if not lying *per se*, than unintended fraudulence and deception.

It wasn’t until much later that I discovered a market for my experience and skills. Of course, I was only being paid to present certain clusters of symptoms, to narrativise them, not to pass any kind of rigorous clinical testing. It was as if the job was designed specifically for me. Unfortunately, the work was limited and seasonal. It

would last for two weeks only coming around once a year, but paid well. The student doctors didn't seem to get into the spirit of the exercises as much as I would have imagined, yet it was really their show.

I was studying myself, yet had spent less and less time at university or on the work for the courses I was enrolled. Theatre had become my obsession. It seemed more pertinent for me to follow my own experimentations unhindered than to be weighed down with the experiments of others performed years, decades, or centuries prior. I had formed my own movement in an attempt to redirect and revitalise theatre. It was left unnamed to ensure it remained untainted by any critical or theoretical dogmas. It never really grew beyond myself and one other person—we had given up our names too—yet, it was an important and productive period.

Avoiding the paradoxical foundations of other art movements that set out to challenge and reject art through art itself, and therefore inevitably being wholly corrupted and reinstituted into the art world they had purportedly rejected, we threw away any notion of theatre. Audience, sets, walls, actors, and tickets: all of these were artifice and our aim was to reinvigorate theatre from life itself.

Our early productions, viewed by any outsider, would have been seen as unbearably tedious. There were the interior works, often consisting of being inside, for example in our kitchen, bedroom or loungeroom, and the exterior works, being outside in parks, or cafes and bars—if we had the money. It may have seemed similar to life itself and this was precisely the aim of these pieces, however, like life, stasis becomes intolerable and both boredom and our lack of money precipitated a way forward. The impetus for the new direction of our movement came, as it had to, from the world itself.

Our pieces moved from the long silent, inactive and passive performances to a more active phase. More planning was involved, yet the pieces themselves had an

electrifying spontaneity. We started with a couple of late night muggings in the park. It was either a Saturday or Friday night, when we would rob some Accounts Manager or Project Sales Supervisor—we always went through their wallets and laughed with acrimony at the window into their lives, or as we saw it, their insincere mode of theatre. The problem was we believed that our art was more important than the small change left from a drunken night out.

The convenience stores we chose as the space for our next performances allowed for our continued anonymity and lack of identifiable subject. The masks, the boilersuits and our silence gave us, as the central propagators of action, a robotic nameless and indescribable non-subjective form. We could have been the same person working against the dimension of time in order to be at the same convenience store robbing it with an earlier or later form of our same self. One of the great regrets of our new theatre was the inability to stay behind and discuss our performances with the other unsuspecting participants in the drama.

Clearly from both the fear of the clerk—a more sincere performance than my own—and their choice to fill our bag with money which had been silently placed on the counter and pushed across with a replica sawn-off, displayed not only their belief in our theatre, but also a sincere attribution of appropriate value for the performance. They passed across a greater sum than a night's takings at a small independent theatre box office, a weekend night no less.

There was much discussion about the prop and costume making for these performances, but we decided that it would necessarily come to a point in the performance of the objects complete transformation. Like a magic show, the constructed object, built to replicate or simulate a real object, would transform into the real before the eyes of the onlookers. Initially, we would bring two pipes glued, painted

and screwed into wood and have them transformed by our performance into a real gun; firstly through the perception of the attendant seeing it as a real weapon, and reacting to the reality of an actual gun pointed at them, and secondly through the law—replica guns being treated with the severity of real guns, as long as neither is used to shoot or assault someone— with both falling under the umbrella charge of ‘robbery armed with a dangerous weapon.’ Even, if our performance was unsuccessful and hence unconvincing, we had decided we would drop and leave behind all our props and costumes, the objects themselves would take over the performance, being analysed, interpreted and investigated as evidence of a real, if only attempted, crime.

However, when theatre relies so heavily on life itself, you need to be able to improvise, and it really wasn’t my nameless partner’s strength. Our third armed robbery performance was hit with disaster. We decided to rob a theatre box office playing a popular musical about pets dressed up as humans, or so the poster had me believe. An usher attempted to tackle my partner, perhaps inspired by the theatricality of the performance he had had to endure over the past months, like a human pretending to be a feline, he leapt and tried to grab the bag of money. My partner struck him with his replica sawn-off, transforming it with cracked skull sincerity into a weapon used in an ‘armed robbery with grievous bodily harm’.

He wrestled the bag free and ran out of the theatre and onto the road, where the speeding utility truck of a props builder collected him. The props builder had hit the booze prior to the show and having a general distaste for commercial musicals jumped in his car only to find himself a player in one of the most visceral, challenging and avant-garde performances in the history of theatre.

I ran.

At home, I collected my things. I went back to my parent's house. I shared with no one the breakthroughs I had discovered. I merely went back to university, even more greatly disappointed with the subject offerings and waited for my time to once again perform illness for student doctors. Not knowing that I would soon meet Hensen.

I will confess that despite enjoying the work of performing random sicknesses, as it was work, it didn't take long for me to tire of it. I would move off script, adding a few extra symptoms. I thought it would also be good for the young doctors to know that sometimes the reality of a patient's experience did not always marry with textbook descriptions.

Self-diagnosis has always been a passion and pastime for me, so I tried to bring in some of the more obscure diseases and syndromes that I had self-diagnosed when I was younger. The woman who hired me, a friend of my mother's, didn't pull me up, so I took that as encouragement believing I brought value to the education of the students.

Yet, perhaps I went too far when I presented dead to one student, his name I would find out later was Hensen. He didn't care about trying to resuscitate me. Instead he ordered an instant dissection of the body. All my vital organs were to be rushed to other theatres. He declared to his examiners and classmates that he had ordered five other surgical theatres to be set up earlier. Each of the five patients was about to die, so he had ordered that they be opened up and ready on the off chance someone would present as a dead person to his clinic. He delivered it deadpan, not a hint of expression. It almost made me yearn to tread the boards again. His finale was to state that he would keep the external organ, my skin, for his own experiments.

I asked if he would be interested in collaborating on future projects. We exchanged numbers and then the rest is that strange word, history.

The address of the clinic in the palm of Callum's hand thankfully included the number of the bus stop, for the driver had to pull up where it seemed there was none. They had passed streams of houses until they finally stopped. It was as if the highway had crossed a border and the houses were replaced by vast fields of tar from which prefabricated concrete walls rose. Windows had been cut from the concrete, glass added and the walls positioned in such a way that they joined together to make what could only be described with a broad term, such as buildings. Each one seemed like the last except for the wear on their facades. The buildings in their repetition surrounded by a sea of cracked and broken bitumen were detached from any purpose or recognisable function. Each could have been a warehouse, an office, a showroom, hospital, residence or perhaps a doctor's clinic. From the side of the highway where Callum had been dropped, he looked out across the car parks and felt he knew exactly which building he needed to enter.

Only a few cars were huddled together at the entrance of Hensen's surgery, but he recognised it because of the building next door. It was seemingly abandoned and had a striking resemblance to the building in the photographs of his spam acquaintances. Callum could see a similar crack that ran from the corner of the window, a stained concrete wall, thistle and small waves of broken bitumen that led its entrance. The generic ugliness of the scene comforted him and he thought about how he could be anywhere in the world on the outskirts of almost any city. He decided that he would take a photo of himself and send it to Ardasa, or Misha, or whoever his correspondents were, when his consultation was over. He walked through the car park to the door of the building that he suspected was the doctors, and in gold letters the name 'Dr. Hensen' was modestly embossed on the front door.

Inside sat Misha behind a desk, or at least someone who looked like her, and it could not be Ardasa because she was blonde, unless she had dyed her hair. The woman smiled. Callum stopped and felt confused for a moment. He mumbled about not having an appointment and as an afterthought smiled. He was told the clinic doesn't take appointments. If he would be kind enough to fill out the form for new patients and return it to the reception desk. His smile faded as his mind tried to catch up with his surroundings. He convinced himself that a lack of any discernible accent proved it couldn't be his correspondents, and secondly, if it was either, they wouldn't be able to recognise him, and so he should act as he normally would in such a situation.

He quickly filled the form out and handed it back to her. She took it from him glancing at the sheet and said, "Thankyou Mr. Ryder. If you would like to take a seat, Dr. Hensen will be with you shortly."

As Callum sat down, a man came from the back room, picked up a file, sat on the desk and started chatting with the Misha-looking receptionist. What they said was out of Callum's earshot, and the man without looking at him left for the backroom again. Callum looked around the waiting room trying to see if there were any other patients hiding, but there was no one. He picked up a vinyl covered reader's digest from the table next to him and flicked through the contents.

The only story to take his interest was of a woman, who while returning home from her daughter's wedding drove her car into a bear. Callum found the tale, particularly the descriptions of the wedding, from peach satin bridesmaids dresses and an over lengthy summary of the white wedding dress, cast alongside the brief detail of the bear being hit and treated in a minor, almost trivial manner, quite chilling.

For him the bear was central to the tale. He was confounded as to why the author would not follow up with more detail. Even perhaps with a side reference that

simply stated the circus was in town from which the bear may have escaped, and that the story happened at a time before the outlawing of circus bears, or some such explanation, but it wasn't the case. The bear sat in the story like a bollard or a tree. It had been woven into the roadside landscape as though it had always been there and that such hazards were common enough to need no further explanation. He hoped in vain as he read the story, that it would be about the woman's fight for justice against the neglectful circus owners, or how she set about saving the bears life, but instead it followed her own survival from the accident glancing over the bear's implied death.

Callum was about twenty minutes into the story when the doctor came out of the consultation room again. He went over to the folder and looked at it. He casually opened it and then after about ten seconds closed it again. He mumbled to the receptionist, once again out of earshot, adding to Callum's irritation. The doctor then glanced across at him and quickly smiled returning to his room.

Callum had no option, but to persist with his story where he discovered, as if with divine premonition, that the nervous mother the night before the wedding had stayed up through the night transfixed by a documentary about a doctor who had survived a car accident. His survival was remarkable for if he had not treated all of his own injuries from inside the wreckage, than he would have been dead by the time emergency services arrived. The mother of the bride's story was as remarkable, for with no medical training she proceeded to perform, or at least attempt to perform, a series complex procedures gleaned from the previous night's documentary inside her own wreckage. No matter how poor the job was that she performed on herself, Callum thought the effort of the novice had to be commended. However and unfortunately, it didn't help, as she was found clinically dead by emergency services. Callum was again dissatisfied with the narrative, as there was no elaboration as to whether the procedures

had assisted the ambulance officers or hindered their attempts at recovery. Callum was left wondering about how well she had done and if she were dead how was she writing her story. It seemed a detail that had been glanced over like the bear.

He read on with little else to do in the waiting room. The emergency services having found her dead, and in Callum's imagination a ballpoint pen was most likely sticking out of her neck from a poorly executed tracheotomy, and a cracked skull might be held together with Italian silk fit for a bride's mother. He felt compelled to fill in the missing detail. She was pulled from her wreckage and they began resuscitation, once again assuming the bear was dead and not trying to attack the ambulance officers.

Here the story deviated to the usual amorphous tunnels and lights, voices of relatives, and yet a definite belief in life after death and the bride's mother returning with a singular sense of purpose, to marry again and be as happy as her daughter. Callum closed the book disappointed and thought about writing her a letter explaining that she had perhaps misread her purpose and to reconsider campaigning for the building of bear-proof roadside fencing. He opened to the cover page and saw that it was printed in 1983 and thought of the numerous life changing accidents and further resolutions that she could have been involved in since and saw no point in the letter.

The doctor came into the reception area from his consultation room for a third time and picked up the file.

He called out into the waiting room, "Callum. Callum Ryder," and scanned the room from left to right until he stopped at Callum and smiled. "You must be Callum. Dr. Hensen."

Callum noticed that no previous patient left the room behind the reception and that Dr. Hensen put the file back on the receptionist's desk as they walked together into his consulting room.

The consulting room seemed to Callum like a temporary display never taken down. The reception was directly behind the wall that he faced. He sat in the patient's chair and looked at Dr. Hensen. He could hear the squeaks of an office chair and the scratching of a nail file through the wall that radiated out from behind the doctor.

“So, Mr. Ryder. As a cosmetic surgeon, I am not only responsible for the physical form of your body, but I have a responsibility to the whole of your well being, and so the series of questions I am about to ask you will help me to prepare a complete profile.”

He turned the page. Callum was not sure if he was reading from a script. He made a ticking movement with his pen.

“Let's get started, shall we?” The Doctor began asking a set of standard questions that included name, age, date of birth, next of kin and the like.

He asked of any close associates. He described there was often a mourning period for those close—partners, family, friends—as if the person pre-procedure had been lost.

“People have unrealistic expectations of a person's exterior life. It seems those who look seek ownership of what they see—this is you I am referring to Callum—but, we all have the right to be looked at on our own terms.”

There was a pause and the doctor stopped in the middle of what seemed to Callum his practiced condescension and stared at his patient. He looked possessively at his patient.

“And so, are there any close associates?”

Callum thought about Max, but no one else came to mind and he thought it would be easier to say no.

“Perfect,” the doctor replied.

He then took Callum through a bodily satisfaction survey. The doctor described this as a measurement of self-esteem. He assured Callum that whatever the answers might be it would not affect his decision for treatment. It was just a means of collecting data that would be used to determine both his treatment and to monitor more effectively the psychological elements of his recovery. He asked about how he took his coffee, favourite foods and celebrities.

Callum began to enjoy the process. It was not the attention that he was receiving, but the answers he was giving. He couldn't help but make them up. He never drank coffee, but always wanted to drink it black and strong, so answered in this manner. He didn't really know any celebrities, but said some first names knowingly and the doctor seemed to respond with a surname for him. He dreamed of having no connection to his actual life and sought sanctuary in the fiction of the answers. He was not concerned about the questions, but the answers. He felt a sense of unanchoring from his responses. He wanted to separate them from the body or the depth of the questions. Let them freely float away and begin their new life, unharmed by any depth in the inquiry.

He heard the nail filing behind the wall again, then a cough when he realised he was no longer listening to the doctor. The doctor himself had got distracted and was shuffling through papers in his folder.

“Where were we? That's right, your special offer. As you might have noticed our clinic here has recently opened, and we need someone like yourself. Your profile has all the qualities we are looking for. You are the type of client, I see as a perfect fit. You have certain needs ...”, he hesitated, “that I feel, we can provide for you. We, in return, have certain needs, namely a face, so to speak, that can put forward our brand. A face that speaks of the type of quality workmanship that our clinic provides, the type of

satisfaction that we envisage for all our clients—did I mention the promotional material we will need you to be involved in. It’s in the contract. Straight forward. Better described as an opportunity.”

For Callum this was not a question, it was a series of answers divorced from any thought or question that he had ever had, and not being a man for terms and conditions answered clearly and succinctly, “Where do I sign?”

10

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transcript

[background noise. people speaking at tables. Knives and forks hitting plates as people eat.]

>> MC: Ladies and Gentleman, fellow Rotarians, if I could have your attention.

[sound of various cutlery tapping glass]

>> MC: Thanks Jim for assisting with a quick and quiet order to the room.

>> JIM: Anytime Gary.

[sound of cutlery ringing on a glass again. dull sporadic laughter]

>> MC: Now, I would like to present to each and every member here tonight with a rather unusual choice of keynote address, but firstly I would like to thank Penny for her efforts in organising our guest speaker. She assures me he has little to do with her eternal vigour and youthfulness, but I am sure if you have attended one of Penny's parties, as I have myself, you will be familiar with our next guest. According to the notes I have been given, he is first and foremost like all Rotarians here, a passionate, committed and successful small business owner, however he is also a renowned and esteemed surgeon in his own right. He has been generous enough to spare his time tonight. He warns me that he is a reluctant public speaker, but I have assured him that we are an attentive and generous audience, so fellow Rotarians, without further ado, please welcome Dr. Hensen.

[sound of clapping]

>> HENSEN: Ladies and gentlemen, Rotarians, Cogs and Cogesses, Distinguished Sundries and Remainders.

[solitary uncomfortable laugh from back table]

Firstly, I would like to thank Penny for inviting me to talk tonight. As it was noted, I am an inexperienced speaker, both publically and I will say privately too. And so, with my excuses and apologies made in advance, let me begin with a small anecdote. I had an unusually idyllic childhood. My father was a pastor and we lived in the countryside. I had an innate affinity for, and a close relationship with nature. Often, I was fortunate enough to play with birds and other wildlife that had been found injured and subsequently welcomed into our home. However, it was to my cat Leviathan—yes he was big, with a rather cute waddle as he walked—that I was most attached. Now, all little boys need a pet project ...

>> JIM: Loved my Meccano [shouted over speech]

>> HENSEN: ... and Leviathan was mine. I was always tinkering away, making adjustments here and there.

[a few coughs and one short gasp from the audience]

And, it was through our relationship, my cat and I, that I learned my passions. Pets are important to all children,

and in the end Leviathan died, as all of you will. If Penny is but one of the people who has come to replace my Leviathan, than she too, despite of all her vigour and youthful look, will also die, except not at 16 like my cat.

>>JIM: Christ. What a charmer!

[more coughs, some murmuring, a knife drops on a plate]

>>HENSEN: Now, all stories, particularly ones that introduce a speech, must have a message, and I am sure you are all thinking about going out, right now, and buying a pet for a child close to you, but I would like to share with you something more profound. In taking a knife to my cat I now know that I was defining myself. I fed my childlike curiosity, my knowledge. I was like any other child with a pet—excepting one difference—I was not satisfied to only learn about the world as it was presented to me, I was compelled to actively change it. So, I am here tonight, as a changemaker and a visionary, to share with you my ideas for a different world.

>>UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The man's sick.

[sounds of cutlery on plates, as some of the audience resume eating]

>>HENSEN: A few of you in this room have toyed with the entrepreneurial spirit, and I know there are many who are completely unaware of its existence, living off your social and economic, shall I say luck, or do you see it as your birthright.

>>UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Who is this bloke?

[an extended cough and the sound of the soft patting of a back. Chairs moving as some people stand up and slowly exit.]

>>HENSEN: Well, it is my luck too, because there are some of you here tonight who have had no small hand in the investment that I needed to begin the next stage in a vision so simple, yet so transformative [pause] about who we are and how we connect to the world. All round us, there are solutions to problems we were never quite aware we had: from large kitchen gadgets that cook food in a way we never really needed it to be cooked, or to which other gadget will wash the previously mentioned kitchen gadget you never previously had to wash, or perhaps choosing a dishwashing liquid to put in the gadget that washes the

kitchen gadget, a detergent that makes you feel free to swim with the dolphins that you haven't poisoned, or even selecting the can of tuna necessary for a new recipe you will make in your well cleaned kitchen gadget, a can that hasn't netted all the dolphins you wanted to swim with, although they may not be dead, they might be a little queasy from the rest of the detergent options you saw on the shelf that have gone down drains despite your informed choices. I hope my point is clear. All the objects around us are accorded value, we pay their value, yet what they really appear to be, is hostile to us. We live in a world that harms and then claims to sooth through product, yet it seems that each solution sets up a further problem, a further desire or itch to be scratched.

>> UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: What the hell is this dillpot on about? Bloody gibberish.

>> HENSEN: Now I have a radical approach to solving this problem at the very point at which I believe it stems. We are not built for the world around us. We have created a consumer world to which we have not yet fully adapted. If we are to eliminate this continual sense of inadequacy and estrangement we must make ourselves the product, the commodity, the object, the thing. I know those of you who are not half drunk, or not having to deal with your

cramping flatulence from the poor choice of the Beef Wellington, would all be thinking this has already begun. You could proudly run the fingers over your collagen, tap your pacemaker, or hip replacement, but I am here to pitch to you the Model-T moment of personal commodification. For those who still have adequate eyesight I would like you to close your eyes and imagine a world in which all people have been carved from the same blade and cut from the same pattern. We would all be fitted with the same base model. In one swoop we would be able to eliminate the humanness that has held us back, that has filled us with dread in a world built for products. We pass through an assembly line to be born once more, and as we drift down the final chute at the end of our surface-assembly-line ...

[there is a distortion of the audio, as the camera shakes wildly and cuts to silence]

11

Callum woke and the world around him came into focus. He remembered the white gown that he had put on and was still wearing. He also noticed that his vision was framed with a hazy shadow of what seemed to be gauze. He raised his hand to it and his head felt as though it was completely wrapped. He stiffly turned his head to either side as far as he was able.

The room he lay in was made of two elements—the matte white surfaces of paint and linen, and the reflective sheen of polished steel, plastic tubes, liquids and glass. White curtains were drawn across the window. He believed he was still in the clinic because he could hear the voice of Doctor Hensen through the thinly partitioned wall.

His body was tilted up with pillows on the bed. He breathed in the scent of laundered sheets mixed with antiseptic, or bleach of some kind. He tried to shift his head to one side and take in more of the room, but his head was wrapped in such a bundle that it was difficult. His vision obscured by the shadow of gauze and swabs of sterile cotton attached to his face.

“Lay still Mr. Ryder. You will gain all your regular movement as the anaesthetic wears off. Close your eyes Mr. Ryder.” His body was moved forward and he felt the pressure of his bandages ease. The spiralling of the bandage felt strange as it came off his head. He wondered if it was ever going to stop.

“Open your eyes.” As his sight adjusted he saw Dr. Hensen in a dark pin-striped suit. “Good evening. You must be Callum. I am David, Dr. Hensen’s lawyer.”

Callum was confused. He blinked his eyes and looked again. He was certain this man was Hensen. “And, since you are looking at me in such a manner, I will be direct, nor am I his brother. What I am here to talk about today—that is if you feel up to it—is the incredible opportunity for which you have so luckily positioned yourself. You are a clever man Mr. Ryder. It is not many people that can place themselves so strategically. You are the right person, at that right time.” He paused for a moment and shuffled his papers. “Now, it is my legal obligation to also inform you that last night you passed away, but that is neither here, nor there. You are fine now. There are, however, certain legal implications.”

Callum was caught quite unaware. He had questions, but they seemed unable to be formed in his mind. He was only able to slightly move his jaw and began to purse his lips together to regain movement. They felt numb.

“I imagine you would want to see where we are at in your treatment. It isn’t really in the rules, but since the doctor is away for the moment. I have a little vanity mirror in my suit coat here. There isn’t really any harm in taking a peek. With the Doctor’s techniques there is no swelling nor scarring in these preliminary stages.”

The lawyer leaned forward and placed the mirror in front of his face.

“Impressed, no?”

Callum looked into his face and it seemed as ordinary as it was before. In fact, if he wasn’t mistaken it hadn’t changed. He twisted his head from side to side. He tried to lift his arms in order to pull at his face searching for any hidden incisions or stitching, but they were numb and useless like his face.

“Exquisite isn’t it.”

Callum managed to open his mouth, but only a light and shuddering groan escaped from his lungs.

“What was that? You’ll have to speak up. My hearing isn’t the best. Tinnitus. This whole ward is ringing with hums and buzzes to me. By the way, not bad that you have all this to yourself?”

Callum groaned. To his ears it sounded a little dramatic, but he found it hard to express the appropriate sentiment of genuine curiosity and interest under the circumstances.

“Having a little trouble talking are we? Well, it’s to be expected. The anaesthetic, you see. Your eyes and ears will work fine. You must feel a different person to the one who walked into the clinic yesterday.”

This was the first time Callum had any way of calibrating his sense of time. He wondered if his life, the one outside the clinic was managing. He thought of the mouldless ball of bread and reached into his pocket to touch it. He ran his fingers over its rivulets.

“It’s structural you see. Such pre-surgical preparations make Hensen the world leader in his field, the world’s greatest innovator should I say, because no one has the sense or the bravery to follow. What you do not see directly but should perceive, is the preparation for who you will become and a definite separation from who you were.” He stopped suddenly and changed tack. “It’s probably best if we talked business though.” The lawyer placed the mirror back in his pocket. Callum nodded his head politely in agreement and tried to feel the new him.

“So, as I mentioned previously, your death, or to be more precise your resurrection. Praise the doctor. Not only did he manage to save your life, but in turn has opened up a further significant opportunity. You understand, I am sure, after all you were the one who signed the contract.” The lawyer who looked remarkably like Hensen paused. “You did read and understand the contract? Strangely, less and less people do these days. I mean you could, if you chose, spend most of your life reading terms and conditions. At least I get paid for the thankless task.” The lawyer then shuffled his papers one more time and read from the top sheet.

“Section 23 Part B Clause xi clearly outlines the relinquishment of aforementioned flesh, body and all contained within, upon expiration, death, or in the occurrence of a coma lasting for more than the cooling off period of the agreed contract. Relinquishment will occur into the sole possession of the doctor, name undersigned, and granted legal supervision and copyright over all surgeries and effects as described here within. This body will and can be used for any purposes determined

by the doctor, to be beneficial to either cosmetic and, or medical research. The cessation of all vital signs for a period to be determined by the attending doctor, will indicate a cessation of life, as outlined in Section 7 Part D Clause vi, and will render the patient, name undersigned, as no longer in existence, and that all related being, as per Section 4 Part B Definition ii, contained within or attached to the exterior of the body, duly after expiration, death or coma lasting for more than the cooling off period, will at this time be transferred to the property and possession of the doctor, name undersigned, and granted legal supervision and copyright over all surgeries and effects as described here within.”

The lawyer turned his head and coughed.

“That of course is old news to you, as your signature bears witness, but what is new news to you, as we have mentioned, is that you did in fact die under surgery last night. Thankfully, in the presence of the skilled hands of the doctor we are lucky enough to have you here today. Of course, you will be able to continue, bound by your contract, in your new state—legally speaking, as I am not qualified to take your pulse—of existence.”

12

I found something enthralling about such a dull man. In the same instance, he was almost unrecognisable, yet all too familiar. He seemed to act without any sense of past or future, either within himself or in the world around him. He seemed unable to recognise himself at all. I was unable to take his measurement. Was he stupid, acting stupid? Neither. His stupidity was both an unconscious and innate sense of intelligence, or at least that’s what I came to believe. It was almost as though he had sensed my own

measurement without ever being aware of me, and had then disregarded it, unconcerned or in little need of others. He had a bare, unhindered sense of existence; his own existence and that was all. For me, he had perfected the stated aims of the new movement, and that Callum Ryder felt the need to join the theatre of our clinic was more than I could have imagined. I would almost say desired.

As for myself, I envy stupidity, in particular as a chosen disposition or ideology. Fortright ignorance of life seems more effective than my elusiveness and the flattening of experience with which I am currently experimenting.

Although I have made advances, let's take for example the doctor. He believes that I am his own creation. He has invented me. I am his monster, barely real. Some days he seems to believe that I am all but a figment of his imagination, and he is correct. Yet even more peculiar is that I am also somehow him, at least in part. I am an object, a surface onto which he projects his odd ambitions, plots and delusions. This is the way of all people though, particularly men, and even our most peculiar patient Mr. Ryder. I am an object, but an object that has falsely made itself thus. What is there to possess, except one's own onanistic perception of such an object? Who am I? None of these people will know. Yet, I for one am certain in my existence because I know I am not anything that I have presented myself as. In attempting to take who I am, to capture what people want me to be, the possessor pushes me ever more distant from that object, and I become ever more certain of my existence outside of it. It is precisely through knowing what I am not, and what others do not have of me, through this elision, that I am made. Unlike Mr. Ryder, continual reinvention gives me an ever more nuanced sense of self. He is blunt trauma in comparison to the surgical incision of my methods of attempting to carve out our flat and depthless surfaces. Yet his potential as a tool for the new movement, I admit, could be greater than my own.

I suppose I have been looking for a revolution, but the doctor is mistaken if he thinks that it will be his warped vision. He seems to have only one vision and that is to martyr himself for his own cause. Yet, even he seems to be a little hazy on what that cause exactly is, so the choice is simple, he will be done away with. I myself have died many times and I have killed, yet he has not considered this possible. He cannot see past the naive object of his desire that he first met. My false subservience helps to keep the illusion in tact. People must be wary of the delusions that they have built to haunt themselves. The liberation of Mr. Ryder is set in place and cannot be averted. However, if I am indifferent, I am not cruel. Hensen chose his own fate and will die satisfied with his own madness to the last.

He seems indifferent to the buzz around his Rotarian speech. It has gained thousands of hits and at least for the moment, they are continuing. I can't help but wonder how complicit he believes he is in garnering support and interest from the fringe groups that are now hovering around his youtube channel, like flies on something degraded and decomposing. They are diverse: reinvented eugenicists, far-right Christians, xenologists, free market neo-liberal ideologs, entrepreneurs—from as far afield, as Nigeria to Northern California—and also the slew of sneering, mocking opposition that employ the methods they find and denounce in their opponents. I have no doubt about my own complicity. I gave myself the job title of 'social media creative content strategist' to reflect this.

13

When Callum came to, or maybe he had woken—he wasn't sure of the technicalities—he wished he never had. The room he was in hadn't changed, except

there were machines attached to him. The mechanical sounds of small pumps and beeps of electronic monitors added a clinical atmosphere to his room. The fluorescents burned white. He blinked a number of times and realised his head was once again entombed within bindings of tape, gauze and bandage. From this vantage point, he breathed slowly and contemplated an already much simpler world.

He was attached to inputs and outputs. He didn't feel pain as such, more discomfort. He was on a metered and timed drip that would lightly wash painkillers through his body inducing both contentment and fatigue, only on occasion would a spiralling wave of nausea rush through him.

A figure leaned into Callum's vision, slowly as though an eclipse was taking place in the ward. Their face emerged from the darkness as Callum's eyes adjusted. It was the same face as the doctor's, but it could have been a mask or perhaps the lawyer, with the light and his inability to move his head, Callum could only make out the face directly in front of him.

"Relax Mr. Ryder. Your body has been through some major trauma. All is going to plan thankfully, admittedly we did lose you on the table again, but it has minimal implications. Once an initial death occurs, under contractual obligations subsequent deaths have really no bearing either to your former self or as the property of Hensen Ltd."

Callum tried to respond, but he was only capable of a muffled grunt and an almost indistinguishable movement of his head.

"Thankfully, you are in the best of hands and, with my newly developed surgical techniques, we will be able to remove the bandages almost immediately."

Another figure leaned across and partially shadowed the eye line of Callum. He could not see the person exactly, but he was sure it was Misha.

“Nurse. When you are ready?” There was the sound of a trolley being rolled closer to the bed and the clatter of stainless steel implements.

Callum was told to close his eyes and keep them shut. He could feel the sensation of a slow unravelling about his head. The pressure at first began to loosen around his scalp. His skin underneath slowly developed an itch. It built as the unravelling continued. He wanted to scratch it, but he resisted. It wasn't until the lower layers, and the use of a small stream of water to soak the bandages which had adhered to his face, that Callum felt some release.

“We are almost there Mr. Ryder.” The final bandages were slowly peeled from his face and he could sense more light in the room even with his eyes closed. He heard a deep intake of breath from the doctor. Callum wasn't sure what this reaction meant. The doctor must have seen some pretty miserable sights from opening up people's faces and bodies, and so Callum wasn't sure how his current visage could shock or horrify such a man.

He opened his eyes and saw the doctor's face come into focus. He was staring at Callum and smiling.

“You are perfect. You are me. I feel like Narcissus looking into the pond for the first time and falling deeply for myself, but I must continue my preparations,” and with those cryptic words he left the room.

Callum feeling unsettled touched his face expecting to feel the swelling and scars. He only felt a stubbled face. It felt similar to the one he had when he first arrived at the clinic.

“He hasn't done anything to you. I am sure you are aware. The doctor is quite mad. Of course, I would say no madder than anyone else. It is just that his particular variety is not valued like other madnesses in our society, take the madness of

accountancy or management for instance.” Misha produced a mirror from her tray of goods. “Take a look for yourself.”

Callum gazed into the mirror and saw the person that had always been there. Although he had often felt indifference to the sight of himself, in the mirror he took note of the various aspects and intricacies of his face.

“It is time you got changed. I will take care of things from here. You must leave. I will be in contact soon.” She dumped a plastic bag full of Callum’s clothes on his lap.

14

IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: HCOR 2016 29204820-012

(Finding into Death with Inquest cont.)

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEATH:

...

10. On the 29th January 2016, Abel Hensen had accepted a delivery of Desflurane an anaesthetic inhalant, illegally purchased online at his place of residence. He signed for the package at 11.34 am. The delivery worker, Kevin Lam an independent contractor, had no recollection of anything unusual, although stated the Mr Hensen was wearing a hair net and took off latex gloves to sign for his package.
11. There are no witnesses to Mr Hensen’s movements from the time of this contact to the discovery of his body. Through the physical evidence in Mr Hensen’s residence, it can be determined that Mr Hensen began a surgical procedure upon himself. Witnesses, namely Rotarians who had been victims of Mr Hensen’s fraud in the past, have claimed that Mr Hensen referred to himself as a medical doctor, and through the use of fraudulent documents has been practicing in the field of cosmetic procedure.

12. Complications arising from the self-performed surgical procedure, including loss of consciousness midway, have been determined to be the cause of death. Mr Hensen's state of mind and intentions at the time prior and during the procedure cannot be determined due to insufficient evidence.
13. Mr Hensen's body was found on February 19th 2016, after calls by neighbours to Police. They were alerted by unusual odours emanating from Mr Hensen's place of residence. He showed no signs of life and was confirmed deceased at 2.35 pm that day. The reporting pathologist indicated the incident to be self-inflicted death with undetermined intent.

15

The bus trip home for Callum was long, his body working through the affects of the painkillers. A fog settled across his thoughts and he could feel a hunger rising within him. He looked at his reflection in the window and strained to catch its finer detail. The world rushed through and behind him. It was an image of himself that he couldn't quite grasp or see. The bus was empty, save for the driver, and he was glad no one could see his head droop forward in a consistent rhythm, a line of drool clinging to the front of his shirt. His breathing seemed to change pitch as the drool contracted and stretched with the rocking backwards and forwards of his head and body.

He found that he passed in and out of dreams. The world outside the bus window imprinted itself upon his imagination. From the passing car lots, carpet wholesalers and other non-descript warehouses, the signs repeated their enticements of low prices and red-hot deals, until snowflakes began to fall upon the window. Callum looked out of the bus and noticed the ground covered in white snow. The warehouses seemed to fade under the coming blizzard and vast plains of ice extended from the arterial. The bus driver continued looking ahead concentrating on the road and the air in the bus felt as though it dropped bellowing freezing point. The other cars on the road had disappeared, as a dark smudge in the distance appeared on the horizon. Callum

called to the driver on the bus, but he couldn't hear him. He rubbed the frosting window and looked out. The smudge grew in shape and he noticed that it was some kind of snow carriage being pulled along by dogs. Driving the carriage, wrapped in a ragged blanket was an ill-shaped and monstrous nose. He screamed to the bus driver to follow. The bus driver turned to him and said, "Sorry. No can do. We have to run by the timetable," and with that the bus pulled over at a stop.

The doors opened, gusts of frozen air and snow billowed through the opening, and a man stepped inside. He stood in white surgical scrubs and his body shook with cold. His face was hidden by a surgical mask and dressings applied to other parts of the face. The small patches of skin visible were blue. He asked calmly if the bus was heading to Hardy Street, his voice muffled in its cotton encasement. The driver said that unfortunately, he'd have to wait for the 526. As the man turned to get off the bus and head back into the snow, Callum woke shouting. The bus pulled over to the side of the road, "You ok? Back there."

Slightly dazed, Callum followed the continuing string of drool that finished at a significant wet stain on the front of his t-shirt. He signalled to get off. The doors opened and he stepped into the brightness of an early afternoon. The blizzard of his dream had dissipated. He looked around and saw he wasn't too far from home.

As he walked through the streets, past brick fences and hedges, he wondered if he had in some way been altered. Perhaps he was just unaware that the doctor had in some slight way disfigured him. He started to doubt if he had ever really paid much attention to who he was or how he looked, even his thoughts he could rarely sustain or recall. Whether he had thought one way about an idea, or if he had changed his position completely, he had never really taken note. Likewise, if he had looked one way and then for some reason woke up as someone completely different, he wasn't sure he

would ever be aware. He thought such concerns might be about others perceptions rather than his own. It would be for those who knew him, before he left for the clinic to be the judge.

Callum stopped outside the gate to his house. Standing before him was Misha, if that was her name. She greeted Callum as though she knew him. She told him that he had finally been liberated. She had taken care of the doctor. She was wearing a long black coat and sunglasses, so he assumed she meant it in a tough guy crime sense and not the cup of tea variety of 'taking care' of someone, either way he didn't seem to care. In her disguise, if that what her clothes were, she seemed more real than she had previously been to him.

She handed him a letter and asked him to read it. He opened it and began.

Manifesto for the autonomous-Cell of the Revolutionary Elective Experimental Plastic Self-Servicing Surgeons

There is no joy, no fun, no imagination, no beauty, no possibility in the current field of elective plastic surgery, but to be plastic, to be made plastic. Understand that it is our primary objective to regain power through a new plasticity. The plastic must be remade. It is a transformation to new potentials. The new plastic is essential to regain the control of our sutures, and become more than our cobbled together parts.

Art as we know it is dead. We must no longer imprint our image onto the external world, instead must reconfigure ourselves.

Societies of surgeons hermetically seal their practices. They lock out those who question their power. We have broken the seal and unlocked the secrets. We are now all surgeons.

We do not believe in evolution and its persistence of purpose. We are purposeless. We create ourselves. Our environment has been destroyed. We will make it inessential. Our needs are created under the knife. Our pleasures are manifold.

We are the new plastic.

Life and death are inconsequential when the new physicality has deformed beyond recognition. We are the instruments of transformation. Each cut opens us onto another. The possibilities are limitless. We are organised now. There are autonomous cells in your neighbourhood.

Forge your tools Callum and prepare to open yourself.

Callum looked up from the letter. Misha smoked a cigarette. He hadn't seen her do this before. He assumed it was part of the theatre. He said he liked the sound of the offer, but perhaps he wasn't exactly the person she was looking for. Misha said she knew who he was and believed he could offer significant contribution to the new movement. That said, she would not beg. She said she could barley bring herself to come and ask, as most know when they are chosen and shouldn't need an invitation. It put at risk future operations. She took the manifesto from Callum and put a lighter to its bottom edge. The letter was slowly engulfed with flame. She held it to the last corner and let the ash blow away in the air and left.

Callum remembered Misha's words that we are all a little mad, but that some madnnesses are valued more than others. He continued down the drive to where Max sat in the early afternoon sun on the porch.

"Who was that, your new ladyfriend?"

"Something like that."

"Where have you been anyway?"

Callum liked the question. He wasn't sure of the answer, although it did remind him that he had been somewhere. He walked past Max without answering. He stepped over a large box of Mi Goreng noodles on the porch and reached into his pocket touching the hardened ball of bread. He opened the door and invited Max in.

