

To The End
of the
World &
Back

and other stories



R. B. KELLY

To The End of the World & Back

And Other Stories

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For Jesse, Rowan and Clara
My inspiration. Always.

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Blumelena

First published in *Tales From The Perseus Arm Vol 1*

I wrote *Blumelena* in 2003, the idea slowly emerging each morning on my 25-minute walk to work to a soundtrack of *Californication* by The Red Hot Chili Peppers on my iPod. Yes, I'm aging myself. I had recently graduated from a degree in Media Studies, during which I'd studied the then-new medium of cyberspace and what that meant for our notions of self and identity. *Blumelena* flowed from those questions, still fresh in my mind, and went on to be shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, before finding a home in the anthology *Tales From The Perseus Arm*. Almost twenty years on, the Internet is ubiquitous to our way of life and the questions posed in *Blumelena* feel relevant in a different way than I'd initially intended, but this piece will always hold a special place in my heart.

- LMAO @ pris
- StokeyBoy, why dont u keep ur opinions 2 urself? No1 want 2 hear.
- OOOOOO sorrrrry!!!!!! U got ur period or what?
- now now girls.
- LMFAO @ rob1277

A stream of letters, trickling rainbow-hued down a page too small to hold them. Leo enters the room with his usual vigour.

- HHHHEEEEEELLLLLOOOO RRRROOOO OMMMMMM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

He knows some of them. They greet him like a friend.

- not so loud, LionKing – pris have hangover
- *gives pris beer*
- up urs Stokey.
- LOL @ Stokey. I'll have beer if pris dosnt want 1
- lion u been floating in room 4 10 mins or so. What u doin – hiding?

He smiles. When he pictures DiamondDel he sees a forty-year-old man with greasy hair in need of an inch or so lopping off, alone in a darkened room while his Mum watches *The X-Factor* downstairs. Diamond is paranoia's paranoiac; his text oozes distrust.

- keepin eye on u, diamond. What's up?
- Long time no c, lionking. U avoiding us?
- U wish, stokey.
- Pity 4 pris, pris not well
- *hugs pris* Better?
- <smileyface> lion ur a gent

He hasn't been online for ten days, not since he promised himself a life and actual human interaction. He's been to cinemas and museums and discovered that the screen remains regardless. People are a step removed from each other, separated by a line of fibre optic cable or an inability to catch another's eye: it's all the same. Human interaction is a myth. Leo is happier where he is.

During the day, he draws pictures of them, of who he imagines them to be. Pris is a whiner: he sees her as a narrow, dark-haired girl, mid- to late-twenties, but the face of a teenager. She smokes and she wears too much make-up. She's lonely, but, like Leo, like all of them, her doors are all locked and she doesn't have a key. She was hungover last time he was online, she's hungover again today. He wonders if she has a problem, or if she pretends for attention.

Stokey has a vicious streak. He's a fat kid, a virgin, who reads fantasy novels because they're more real to him than life. He floats through his day, convinced he's still dreaming. He has a genius IQ and a crop of acne as red and violent as the surface of Venus. He'd like to disappear, but he's too bloody-minded. Moon_fish isn't among them tonight, but give her an hour or so. Moon_fish keeps irregular hours: Leo thinks she has a baby or a young family, but she denies it.

He chats for a while. They talk about films he suspects they haven't seen, websites he opens in a kaleidoscope of tabs while he types. He'd like to ask them, *what do you think about at night, when you can't sleep and the world is silent and black?* But he doesn't. He says, *ne1 seen Moon?*

- dosen't luv us ne more, says pris.

He thinks it's a shot at him, but he lets it pass. The adminbot writes,

< **Bloom has entered the room**>

The name catches his eye. *Bloom*: it has an innocence that he likes, as though the bearer were a little too pure for their sophisticated ennui. He writes,

- Hi, Bloom. How u doing?

Before she can reply, Stokey writes,

- don't talk to her, shes mental.

He can sense the newcomer wilting, her colour fading. He writes,

- stokey, u ever the gent. I put u on ignore now shut up.

Bloom says – OK – u?

- good, he says. – Where u frm?

- birmingham. U?

- london.

It's a lie. He lives in Belfast, but it's too longstanding to contradict. Last year, pris asked him for nightclub recommendations for a trip she was taking to his pretend suburb, and he had to spend three hours researching them on the internet.

- u like birmingham? he says.

He's not sure why it's hard to talk to her, why he's constructed such a fragile, tender image in his head after nine words of conversation.

- OK, she says. – U like London?

He's never been. He says,

- love it. but is vv touristy these days. B.ham better, I think.

- U know B'ham?

- A little.

It's also a lie. He can't stop himself.

She says – have 2 go. C u later.

For a minute, he wonders if he's been caught out. Then he laughs at himself: he's turning into Diamond. He says – speak 2 u soon.

But before he can send it, the administrator writes,

< **Bloom has left the room** >

- told u she is menatal, says Stokey.

*

Leo wanders, lonely, for an hour or so, listing aimlessly from site to site, feeling his eyes get heavy, his brain begin the gnawing buzz that will hold off sleep until just before he needs to wake up. He searches for sites on Birmingham, finds an online guide, looks at the *What's On* listing. Clubs, theatres, galleries fail to inspire him. He thinks about Bloom, wonders if she's a joiner-in or a fringe-hugger like him. Does she know these places? Does she visit them? Does she pretend to despise them so that no one will know that the reason she avoids them is because no one has asked her? He trails through flower sites in a variety of languages. If Bloom were a bloom, what bloom would she be? He flicks through white roses and lilies – too obvious – past sweeping hydrangea and psychedelic, tumbling fuschia. He decides at last on winter jasmine: frail and delicate, pretty at the wrong time.

Pris is getting advice on her love life from Moon_fish.

- I no hes not right 4 me, she says. Leo wonders if *he* exists.

- Do u thnk hes sorry? asks Moon, who sounds bored.

- Maybe. but hes always sorry.
- Chicks, eh? says Jazbo, who doesn't know them well enough to join in. Pris overreacts.

- Fuck u, Jazbo, she spits. – u no nthng about me, ok, so dont start

Leo considers leaving and signing in again under a different name, so he can tell pris to shut up.

- hi evry1, says Bloom.

She gets a chorus of *hi*'s from people Leo doesn't know. Stokey says hi, but he follows it with an LOL. Leo says,

- Hi. Where did u go the other nite?
- Had to go, she says. – u want to PM?

Leo agrees. Stokey starts on him, but he puts him on ignore for a minute or two to cool him off. She opens with,

- U put stokeyboy on ignore?
- Yep, he says. – why?
- He's not happy.
- LMAO. It'll do him good.
- He's got a real problem with me, she says.
- Ignore him. How's life in B.ham?
- Same old. How's London?
- Can u keep a secret?
- Sure. Fire away.
- I don't live in London.
- Where do you live?
- Belfast
- U like it?
- No
- I won't tell anyone. My lips are sealed.

He takes StokeyBoy off ignore. The air turns blue. In the common room, he says,

- u kiss ur mother with that mouth, Stoke?

When he clicks back into the private room, Bloom is gone.

*

Every other Thursday, he signs on. The staff at the Benefits Office are pleasant but unrelenting. Leo protests: what's the point in applying when no-one ever calls back? The man on the counter offers him an unblinking stare and offers to take him through their list of admin positions.

- u work? he asks her.
There's a pause before she replies.
- what u mean?
- do u have a job, he explains, wondering, for the first time, if English isn't her native language.
- Sometimes, she says.

He can feel her getting evasive. He thinks, *illegal immigrant?* then changes his mind. Bloom confounds his every attempt to construct her; she's like fluid. Some days she's black-haired with hazelnut eyes; other days she's blond, Nordic. Sometimes she's tall and fine boned; other times she's birdlike. Today he has created her dark-skinned and exotic; tomorrow he will change his mind again. He says,

- what's ur real name?
 - Bloom, she says.
 - I'll tell u mine if u tell me urs.
 - I like lion better, she says.
 - It's leo, he tells her.
 - What's leo?
 - Me. Leo Devlin. I'm 30 yrs old. I like manga and red dwarf. I can quote whole sections of pratchett. My fav food is won ton soup. My fav colour is black. U?
- Nothing. She is silent. He says again – what about u?
- blumelena, she says, and then she's gone.

*

Blumelena. He doesn't even know how to pronounce it, let alone what it might be, but in the space of minutes, of seconds, it has become her, the essence of her, her secret self. An ugly word – heavy and clumsy. A stocky Teutonic matron; a fortified house. Bloom, but not Bloom.

He calls up a search engine. *Blumelena*, he types. There are no results.

*

Is it a name? He pores over German sites, Hungarian sites, Russian sites: all curling tails and smooth bends, a language he can barely read but loves to look at. He calls up maps of Europe and beyond, hoping for a clue, some hint as to which of her many faces is the one she finally turns upon him. Hugging the Brazilian coast, north of São Paulo, he finds a town called Blumenau; in Nicaragua, a shanty town called Bluefields. Is it a book? Is it an anagram? A mnemonic? Does she want him to guess, or is she giving just enough to obfuscate and throw him, helplessly, awry?

Blumelena. There is nothing.

- who is she? he asks. – does ne1 know?
- She turned up when u were on ur hols, says Moon_fish.
- Mental, says Stokey. Pure mental.
- Why? why iss she mental?
- Back me up, guys, says Stokey.
- LOL, says pris.
- She just comes out with this wierd stuff, says Stokey. – and I'll tell u what else, she doesnt come from B.ham.
- how u no? says pris.
- Just cos, he says.

*

Leo passes another sleepless night. In the morning, grateful for the paling of the sky and the hint of the humanity's return, he takes a walk. His head is fuzzy with sedated wakefulness, as though light is distorted, sound focused into a point. As he returns to his house, he collects his post from the hall table, where it's been sitting for days, waiting for the hour when the depression lifted enough to deal with sixteen circulars and bills unnumbered. It's a wad of paper too thick to grasp comfortably in one hand and he thinks that the girl in the flat downstairs is starting to worry; he's seen her poke her head out at the sound of his footfalls on the stairs. He thinks back: this is the first time in six days that he's left his flat.

Blumelena. She's more real to him than the world beyond the screen: a word, a name, a connection. He takes the stairs slowly, head still muzzy, ready for sleep now that the sun is up, sorting through his mail as he goes. A gas bill, a reminder that his overdraft has exceeded the agreed limit. A pamphlet for a wonder cooker, a pizza flyer, a letter from his dentist reminding him that he's overdue a check-up. The envelope is starkly clinical: brown, windowed; franked, not stamped. The name on the front is Devlin, Leonard, and it looks like someone else's name, unrecognisable as his own. Only his mother calls him Leonard.

Devlin, Leonard: due another dental examination. *Sorry, sir, I didn't realise you meant me.*

*

- I think ur afraid, he says.
- Why? she asks.
- U tell me.
- Why do you think I'm afraid?

He can't say, *because you won't tell me your name*. He doesn't know pris' name, or Moon_Fish's, or StokeyBoy's. He says – its a feelin I get. R U afraid?

She says – I don't know.

He frowns at the screen.

- maybe u dont want2 talk here. We email?
- No.
- U don't want 2 talk?
- No email.

He's hurt, but he doesn't want her to know it. Instead, he says,

- what's blumelena? Its drivin me nuts.
- me, she says.
- Is it ur name?

She's silent for a long time. He types in

- hello? U still there?
- something's wrong, she says.
- Computer probs?
- No. I don't know. I just know it's wrong.
- Whats wrong?
- I don't know. Something's happening. I don't know what it is.
- Don't understand, he says. But it's the wrong thing to say. He can practically see her recede.

- something's wrong with me, she says.
- < **Bloom has left the room** >

*

A week later, she asks – do u know rain?

- what u mean? he says. He is wary with her; she is elusive.
- I was just wondering, she says.

He wonders if he should be flippant, if he should break the tension and write something like *yeah, I no rain, 2 well* <winkyface>. In his fantasy, she writes back *LOL, no wot u mean*. Instead, he says,

- what about rain?
- do u know about it?
He hesitates. His hands hover over the keyboard. He says,
- bloom wot u talkin about, is everything ok?
- nothing, she says. - What did u do 2day?
He says,
- rang up the brew for the hell of it and had a fight. U?
- not much, she says. - The usual.
- What's the usual?
- I don't know, looked out my window. Watched things. I like to watch things.
He's careful. He wants her to keep going, but it's his turn now. He says,
- me 2. I go 2 teh park sumtimes 2 c the runners in the morning.
It's nearly true. It's as true as anything else he says.
- why? she asks.
He shrugs. He says,
- bcos they remind me who I am, I think. Cos of who I'm not.
- that's a brave answer.
Is it? he thinks.
- r u a brave person? she says.
Again, he asks her – what's up, bloom?
<smileyface> says Bloom. – that's 4 u, lion.

*

He goes to the library. He realises that the idea that information might be available in books that has not yet made it onto the internet is anathema to him, and he wonders, *when did that happen?* In front of him is a list that he's scrawled on the back of an envelope. It says:

- *Other languages.*
- *Authors.*
- *Code.*
- *Check encyclopaedias.*
- *Maybe Latin?*

It took him all night, after a troubling dream shut out sleep.

He starts with language dictionaries. They have French, Spanish, German, Ancient Greek, Latin, Italian, Japanese. He tries German first because he's convinced it's the most likely. But there is no such word.

*

It gets dark without him noticing. He found an old copy of *The Iliad*, accidentally-on-purpose and got lost in it about three o'clock, and now the librarian is gently suggesting to the stragglers around him that they might want to pack up their things; the library is closing in five minutes.

Bloom is as elusive as ever. She crouches in the shadows, a dark shape against a dark background, and smiles at him behind her hand. She says, *if I wanted you to know, I'd have told you myself*. He lifts the envelope, its useless memo on the back a testament to another lost day, flips it over and rolls his eyes. It's the dental reminder: *Devlin, Leonard, you have neglected your dental health*. It's been looking at him for weeks, goading him, and he's ignored it. Devlin, Leonard couldn't care less.

And then it hits him. It hits him so hard that he almost breaks into a run without realising it, exiting the library so quickly that the librarian decides he's pocketed one of the books, and it's not until he pulls up at his garden gate and sparks explode in front of his eyes that he remembers that he hasn't exerted himself beyond a gentle stroll in more than five years.

Devlin, Leonard.

Blum, Elena.

*

His hands hover over the keyboard. He knows that it's a violation. He wishes he could stop himself, but his fingers tap out the letters, his hand glides over the mouse, and he hits *search*. He gets fifteen good hits, then they get tenuous. *Claudia Blum and Elena Schmidt arrived in England in.... [more like this]. Harry and Sylvia Blum... Pennsylvania.... We've just welcomed our latest addition to the family... Elena was born on 07/28/97, weighing 6lb 2oz.... [more like this]. Sponsored links: Buy Blum, Elena online at...* He scrolls down, past pop-up ads for credit cards, casinos, personal loans. He finds it near the bottom of the first page, within the top ten: an academic site, but a reference catches his eye: Mortimer Institute of Technology, Birmingham.

Birmingham.

He does another search: Blum Elena AND Birmingham. A dozen sponsored links decide he wants a hotel in Birmingham, Alabama. Only three of the results come up with a reference to Blum, Elena, and top of the page is *mortimer.ac.uk*. He clicks on the link.

*

At three in the morning, he gives up on sleep and types an email. His fingers are shaking, and when he reads it back he can barely tell the typos from the text, but he clicks *send* anyway, hazy with recalcitrant wakefulness. Then he shoves a DVD in the machine and waits to pass out on the sofa.

*

Leo's flat is disintegrating. It is sinking daily into decrepitude, and he watches, detached, as though there's a screen in front of his face, filtering the rest of the world into manageable, half-hour slots with breaks every fifteen minutes. He has slipped easily into the middle of the second act, where things start to fall apart in the build-up to the conclusion: a temporary blip that will be resolved before the credits roll. Leo is absolved from the decomposition; there is a piece of the narrative missing, the jigsaw section that makes the picture suddenly take form. The story has apparently swung to the left, and he is waiting for an email to make it swing back to the right.

He watches from the sidelines as pris complains and StokeyBoy vents, as Moon_fish soothes and encourages and secretly burns. pris always notices and she says – hey lion u not talking mayb we smell <winkyface>. When he doesn't respond she sometimes cajoles, sometimes abuses, and sometimes he gives in and says – yeah, tired. Usually he just signs out.

Where is Bloom? Bloom has faded. Bloom has vanished into the ether seamlessly as she arrived. He doesn't search for her; what would be the point? His life revolves around the absence of an email, conspicuously not in his inbox.

He reads and re-reads the message that he sent. Each time, the syntax and the three-AM-grammar pierce him with little thorns of humiliation and he knows why he has had no response. He wonders why his life has escaped from him to the point that this is the only thing that matters and, in a rare fit of energy and resolve, he calls up the website again. “*Identity* as a concept is as ephemeral as ever,” it says.

In accepting established notions of the cultural construction of the self, we are, by implication, stating that the concept of *I* is involuntary and to a large extent shaped without input from the person called *myself*. The fluidity of Cyberspace further problematizes the issue. Whereas our 'real world' selves are reliant on definitive categories that cannot easily be changed – race, gender, nationality – our Cyberselves are virtual and reliant on our input alone. The fluidity of this environment provides parameters sympathetic to the Turing test of artificial intelligence, and raises intriguing questions. If it is impossible, without conventional markers of identity, to establish definitively the age, gender, nationality or race of a correspondent, how can we determine if, indeed, our companion shares *any* of our 'real world' characteristics at all?

Professor Elena Blum and her team, intrigued by the dissolution of the self in Cyberspace, are examining the impact of this nascent medium on concepts of identification. In her paper, *The Morphology of Identity in the Digital Age*, Professor Blum states that:

“In a society marked by cultural disenfranchisement and marginalization, the anonymity of Cyberspace allows the reconstruction of one's identity according to a more satisfactory set of codes. Cyberspace offers the user the chance to alter every aspect of their identifying characteristics, up to and including their genetic code. This clearly has serious implications on our notion of humanity. If something as fundamental as our DNA code can effectively be rewritten within the volatile, shifting boundaries of what we call Cyberspace, might our conception of what we call *human* not be subject to the same variability?”

Human, thinks Leo, and he looks around his decomposing room.

*

- It doesn't feel right, says Bloom.

He is relieved to hear from her, but afraid to speak. He's afraid she'll disappear again.

Leo says – what doesn't? What's wrong, Bloom?

StokeyBoy says – bloom and lion up a tree. doin thingswe should not see

Leo puts him on ignore.

She is fractured, distracted. He doesn't know how he knows this, but he does. And she has shifted again; now there is no picture of her, only a voice and a shadow. Black on black. She says, I don't know. I'm scared.

- Why? What's scaring you?

He's asked her before, and her answer is the same.

- I don't know, Leo. It feels different. Let me ask you something.

- Ask, he says.

- Do you know rain?

Rain again, he thinks, and it still doesn't make sense. He says,

- Bloom, u ask me b4 and I still don't know what u mean, what u mean do u know rain, how can u no rain?

He can hear the pause. He wonders if she is still there, but she is, she hasn't left.

She says – It makes sense to me, I don't know how to make it make sense to you. How do you know rain? I need to know if I know rain.

- you feel it, he says. How can he tell if he's helping? – Is that wat you mean? U feel it or u c it, then u no its raining.

She says – okay, thanks.

And then she's gone.

*

Crucial to the construction will be the entity's conception of itself. Just as an amnesia-sufferer may theoretically adopt a life entirely at variance with their life prior to memory loss, it is clear that identity-construction is closely linked to our remembrance of stories told to ourselves about ourselves. Therefore, it is conceivable that an entity with the capacity to pass the Turing test may well be unaware that theirs is an artificially constructed intelligence. This clearly raises a number of ethical questions, not least the legitimacy of deluding an intelligence with the capacity of self-awareness as to its construction of self.

*

He just wants an email. He wants her to respond, to tell him he's a nutcase and he needs to get a life. He just wants someone else to *tell* him.

Leo has taken to checking his inbox fifty, sixty times a day. He opens it up and watches it, willing her to write. He compulsively clicks *refresh*, waits – ten, twenty, thirty – *refresh*. Nothing. Click – refresh. Nothing. White page. *Please sign in again*. Hope flares; tiny, infinitesimal hope, and he signs back in, clicks refresh once, twice, just to be sure.

Nothing. He is a crazy man, waiting to be told he's crazy.

Click – refresh. Nothing. Silence.

*

He says – bloom tell me about u.

She says – what do you want me to tell you?

- tell me about what u see out of your window.
- I see life going by, she says.
What do u see? Do u c people? What do u look at?
- I see everything going just as it ought to be. I don't know why it scares me. I don't know why it's wrong.

Don't be scared, he wants to tell her, but there is no way to explain.

*

How, therefore, are we to identify a set of human rights for a non-human entity? Is it akin to denying the fact of an adoption to an adopted child? Might we not make the same arguments for the adoptee's sense of self, constructed as it is by the identities of those whom the child believes are its parents? If the impact on an adoptee's sense of self may be catastrophic, might not the impact of a discovery by a sentient, self-aware, non-human entity that its origins are synthetic be significantly more so?

*

On the nineteenth day of his confinement, Leo leaves his flat. In the post-dawn grey, he walks to the little corner store on the other side of the park, where everything costs three times as much, but he doesn't think he can face the neon lights and cavern-acoustics of the supermarket. On the way home, fuzzy and disjointed, he rests for a moment on a damp wooden bench and watches his partners in wakefulness as they pass by: joggers, night-shift workers, early risers. He searches for them a hint of familiarity, an indication that they share some tiny piece of common ground, but they are blank, impenetrable. Strangers.

It starts to rain.

*

- How do you define yourself? asks Bloom.
- That's a good question, he says.
- Give me a brave answer.

He hesitates, and is forced to admit that there are no brave answers.

He says,

- I am the sum of my experiences. I am what I've learned.
- But what is that?
- I've learned what I like and don't like, he says.
- Tell me what you don't like.
He says, because it's the first thing that comes to mind,
- I don't like custard.
- How do you know that?
- Because I ate custard and I didn't like it.
- You are what you've learned. You are a person who doesn't like custard.

- I am a person who likes my own company. I am a person who likes to read. I am a person who would rather sit alone and read a book at lunch than join in a boring conversation. I am a person who likes music, but certain types of music. I am a person who either likes something a lot or doesn't like it at all.

Who are you? he wants to ask. So he does. She says,

- I don't know if I like custard.

He knows that he doesn't need Elena Blum to write back for him to be certain. He's known that for a while now.

*

Reality is fluid within Cyberspace. It is also subjective. To such an entity, reality within these boundaries must be as convincing as that which is provided to us by our own five senses. After all, what is 'reality', other than a series of coded messages interpreted subjectively by electrical signals within our brains? Barring interaction with the 'outside' world that is not within a series of strictly defined parameters, it is conceivable that our hypothetical entity may remain in a state of ignorance as to our alternate levels of existence. This is to be desired. Exposure to the fact of its origin may, as we have seen, be catastrophic to the entity's sense of self. The effects of this cannot be predicted.

*

He wonders where she found out about rain. He wants to tell her, *it's all right, don't think about it if it worries you*. He wants to make it better, in a little way. Maybe if he made it better in a little way, it would be better for him, because he so wanted it not to be true. He so wanted his only connection in a life of fibre optic cables and fluid, shifting selves to have been real.

She says,

- so then I realised that I was aware of the rain, and that if I was aware of it, I must be feeling it. I must be seeing it. So that's all right, isn't it?
- Yes, he tells her. That's all right. You know rain.

He doesn't know where her sense of malaise has come from, or how the seeds of doubt came to be planted in her fertile, fluid, shifting self. He only knows that if it's making her unhappy, then that's something that can be dealt with.

He says,

- I'm glad we met, Bloom.
- Me too, she says.

*

This is, of course, an entirely hypothetical argument. The tools for further exploration may exist at some point in the future, but for now our entity must remain an academic postulation.

*

- Time for me to hit the hay, he tells her. – I'm up early in the morning.
- Talk to you tomorrow?
- I'll be here, same time. Goodnight, Bloom.

- Goodnight, Leo.
< **Leo has left the room** >

Wavelength

First published in *Tales From The Perseus Arm Vol 2*

As somebody who watched *Blade Runner* at an impressionable age, I've spent years fascinated by and circling back to the question of where AI ends and consciousness begins. If *Blumelena* was an early attempt to conceptualise our possible first efforts at establishing an artificial personality sophisticated enough to pass the Turing Test, *Wavelength* is the dark inevitability that flows from that future. What gripped me about this idea once it arrived from that place that ideas arrive from (I still don't know where that is) was the fact that I don't know which side to be on. Though it's told from Amy's point of view, and *Breath of Life* are clearly not good people, I think the point they make is entirely valid. But what's the alternative?

Wavelength was published in the anthology *Tales From The Perseus Arm Vol 2* and later adapted into a short play.

April 27th, 2047, NeuRIS testing laboratories, Saddler-Vanburen HQ, Project Leader Dr. Amy Moore supervising field testing of the Hermes project prototype g-force regulation suits, Mark 6.3. Also in attendance: Dr. Jonah Broekemeier, IASA, and Dr. Michael Fleiss, Saddler-Vanburen, laboratory assistant to Dr. Moore. Systems check shows green lights across the board, subject is prepped and ready to go, showing limited stress response; heart rate slightly elevated at 78 bpm, blood pressure at 134/85 compared to 115/75 resting. Adrenaline levels climbing, pain response is negligible. Starting the clock at 1543 hours, T minus 10 and counting.

00:00:04

T minus 6. Main engines firing. Heart rate +3 to 81bpm. Subject experiencing stress response well within normal limits. B/p remains normal. Pain measuring 0.3 als observed along with minimal tightening of chest as vibration intensity increases.

00:00:10

T minus 0. Liftoff.

00:00:18

Pain measuring 1.5 als and climbing. Acceleration at 1.8G. 1.9G. 2G. Pain measuring 1.7 als. B/p 154/90. Vitals good, adrenaline levels steady.

00:01:35

Pain levels constant at 1.1 als. Acceleration dropping to 1.5G. B/p steady at 150/90. Reading slightly reduced pulse ox and brain perfusion; synaptic responses remain good.

00:08:17

Acceleration increasing – 2.2G – 2.6G – 3.1G – and falling back to 2.9. Reading an increased pain output at 1.9 als and elevated heart rate at 90 bpm. Synaptic responses slightly reduced but well within range.

00:08:51

Acceleration constant at 3G. B/p at 164/90. Pain at 2.7 als with pronounced stress response. And... pain levels rapidly decreasing as acceleration drops to 2.5 – 2.0 – 1.0 – 0.5. I'm picking up a moderate vestibular response. Subject is experiencing mild nausea; no signs of disorientation, ocular response normal.

00:15:00

Maintaining steady speed at 27,000 mph. Subject continues to experience mild nausea. Heart rate 65 bpm. Blood pressure 120/75. Vitals good. Synaptic patterns good. Subject relaxed but alert.

00:20:00

Preparing to fire initial stage propulsion jets. Heart rate +3 and well within normal limits. G-force mitigation system coming online. Crosscheck shield integrity and perform initial fluid flush-through.

00:20:10

Shield integrity at 8.8 and rising. Viscous dampeners perfusing well. Heart rate steady at 65 bpm; mild discomfort as suit perfuses – registering at 0.7 to 0.8 als. Picking up a mild stress response but vitals are good. Respiratory rate slightly shallow – mild adrenal response detected, pulse ox good, synaptic function normal.

00:20:30

Shield integrity at 15.3 and holding. Full perfusion achieved. B/p 135/80, heart rate elevated but well within range. Firing initial stage propulsion jets.

00:20:30

Commencing initial acceleration at 60,000 miles per hour squared. Initial stage propulsion jets looking good. Subject's vitals are good, pain is steady at 0.5 als, heart rate steady, b/p steady. Shield integrity at 15.1 and holding. Looking good for phase two acceleration. Stand by to initialise Hermes system.

00:20:40

Hermes system online. Shield integrity at 15.1 and holding. Acceleration at 0.7G, climbing to 0.8 – subject comfortable at 0.3 als and steady. Stand by to launch Hermes propulsion system in T minus 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1...

00:20:50

Hermes propulsion system is go. Shield integrity is at 15.2 and holding; acceleration is at 7.5G. 7.8G. 8.0. Heart rate is at 85 bpm and climbing; stress response rising. I'm reading a rapid adrenalin surge, b/p is climbing. Acceleration at 8.5G. Suit perfusion is good, shields are at 15.2 and holding.

00:21:15

Heart rate at 90bpm. Acceleration at 9.3G. B/p at 168/95 and I'm reading 3.4 als and climbing. Suit perfusion is steady.

00:22:00

B/p steady. Suit perfusion good. Acceleration at 12.0G and climbing.

00:23:15

Acceleration at 15.0G. Subject experiencing respiratory discomfort and increasing O2 levels to compensate. Ocular responses normal; I'm reading fluctuating pain levels of between 3.7 and 4.5 als. B/p is 170/95.

00:24:37

Acceleration is at 17.0G, I'm seeing mild hypoxemia. Subject is increasing O2 to maximum. Shield integrity is good, suit perfusion is good. B/p at 168/95 and steady.

00:26:25

Acceleration at 22G. Shield integrity is stable at 15.3 and holding. Subject is experiencing moderate respiratory distress. Increasing suit perfusion to compensate. Motor function is... motor function is impaired, switching to automatic controls. Suit perfusion increasing. I don't like his – Mike, cross-check the algiometer; I don't like the readings I'm getting...

00:26:57

Acceleration at 25G and holding. Subject experiencing intermittent grey-outs, O2 sats dropping. Heart rate at 170 bpm and I'm reading 7.8 als at full perfusion – 8 als - 8.2... Severe tachycardia, O2 sats are tanking, he's in trouble...

00:27:15

That's a full 10.0 on the algiometer. Pulse ox is 91% and falling. Severe respiratory distress. That's 10.1 – 10.2. 10.3 and still climbing...

00:27:27

Respiration has failed, initiating life support...

00:28:38

He's in VF. Charging to 260, preparing to... Asystole. Charging to 260... Defibrillator administered; subject remains asystolic. Charging to 300...

00:33:17

Subject non-responsive to therapeutic efforts. Neurological read-outs consistent with complete cessation of brainstem activity – diagnosis of brain death given by Dr. Moore, confirmed by Dr. Fleiss.

Mission terminated.

*

“Damn it!”

The words were softly spoken – Jonah's volume settings didn't generally go past a 7 – but they were fuelled by the kind of explosive frustration that could break a window. Amy released a soft puff of air, rolled the tension out of her shoulders, and turned to her assistant.

“All right, Mike,” she said. “Run the systems analysis and buzz it to my data pocket when it's done. Dr. Broekemeier...” A glance towards the far end of the control pod, where Jonah stopped pacing just long enough to meet her eyes. “...let's go get some coffee.”

She'd known him for a little over eight months, since he'd first approached Saddler-Vanburen with his proposal for their simulation suites, and she'd thought even then that he looked too old for his face. He was young – mid-thirties, she guessed – with the stoop shoulders and grey skin of a man who spends too much time hunched over a desk, and a dullness to his brown eyes that spoke of a prodigious intellect turned inwards. He wore no wedding band, but his hand drifted to his left ring finger when he was preoccupied, as though he'd once been accustomed to finding it less empty.

“Jonah,” said Amy again, and his eyebrows arched, gaze dropping wearily to the floor.

“Yes,” he said: one quiet syllable appended to the tail-end of a sigh. “Coffee. Thank you, Dr. Moore. Dr. Fleiss... I'd like to see that systems report too, when it's ready.”

“No problem,” said Mike, but he was half a second too late: Jonah's mind had already moved past him and on to other things.

She was expecting the question as soon as the control room door slid shut behind them, but he let the silence carry them three paces down the corridor before he spoke, which was probably a bad sign. Things got worse for Amy when Jonah mulled them over.

“Are you sure...?” he said, but she was ready for him and cut him off while the sentence was still forming.

“Yes,” she said, simply. “You know I am.”

“I know you have confidence in your machines...”

“You do too,” she told him. “It’s why you’re here.”

“The suit stood up to *everything* we threw at it in the lab.”

“And it doesn’t stand up to NeuRIS.” Amy pushed open the door to the break room, held it open for him to enter. “That’s the same thing as a mid-deployment failure and you know it. Jonah, there’s a reason you came to me – you need to know if your suit is going to do what it’s designed to do before you put a actual human being in it and press a button, and hope none of IASA’s best and brightest go and die a horrible death live on global television.” She followed him into the room as he made his way over to the coffee dock, back turned to her, head bowed. “You have your answer,” she said. “You just don’t like it.”

Jonah lifted a carafe of tepid Java from the burner, tilted it, sniffed at it suspiciously, as though he were trying to decide if it was worth the risk. Amy watched absently as he swirled it and poured, coffee splashing inelegantly into his mug, spilling up over the sides and pooling on the work-surface below.

“Hermes is scheduled to launch in less than 36 months,” he said quietly. “I can’t keep going back to the Project Board and telling them that eight years of R&D still hasn’t managed to come up with a functional g-suit for the crew. There comes a point where they don’t want to hear it anymore.”

Amy shrugged, reached for the coffee. “Jonah, I don’t know what to tell you,” she said. “You can wait for the report if you like, but you know what it’s going to say – catastrophic cardiovascular failure due to sustained high-g acceleration. *Again*. The suits do not work.”

He sucked in a breath, half-turned away. “You know, maybe if you recalibrated...”

“Sure.” Amy sipped from her mug. “Yeah, sure, Jonah, I’ll recalibrate. And then I’ll write it up in the procedurals, and *you* can explain to the grieving families why all fifteen astronauts died when the propulsion engines came online.”

He shook his head. “Yes, all right.”

“Sorry, Mr and Mrs Parent. I guess we were just really, really hoping that the machines were wrong...”

“I said all right.” A rare grin tugged lopsidedly at one cheek, and Jonah’s eyes slid sideways to meet hers. “You know, I can’t decide sometimes if you’re my conscience or my mother.”

Amy grinned back. “Neither. I’m just doing my job.”

“Yeah.” A long sigh and his gaze drifted to the floor. “You know, I’ve just... I’ve got to go across town now and explain to a team of guys who don’t speak science why we’re back at square one again, and... you know. I’d just prefer not have to do that.”

“It’s not square one,” said Amy, but Jonah shook his head.

“That’s not how it looks in a board room,” he said.

“We got up to 25G today. That’s something. NeuRIS tanked at 18 last time.”

“Yes.” Jonah drained his cup, set it down on the counter, raised his hands to massage both temples. “But Hermes is designed to run at 40.”

Amy shrugged. “It’s something,” she said. “We’re only eight months into testing. I’ve seen projects stretch four times as long and still deliver.”

“I don’t have four times as long.”

“No,” she said, “But we’re not out of time yet, either. Let’s go reset the system and give it another shot.”

*

It was dark by the time Amy shouldered open the door to her flat, arms overflowing with files, shopping bags and take-out sushi bought on impulse when her stomach realised abruptly just how long it had been since she’d last eaten. Her notepad had been buzzing for the past five floors of the elevator’s ascent, but all but two of Amy’s fingers were presently occupied with carrying things, and deploying the pair of them now would involve a fundamental and potentially disastrous reorganisation of her physiological make-up in order to answer a message that could almost certainly wait another fifteen seconds. It would be Mike, she thought, patching through the results of the systems cross-check that Jonah had browbeaten them into running before he’d agree to leave for the day, and she already knew what it was going to say. So did Jonah, of course, but he wasn’t the one who had to stay late to make it happen.

“All *right*,” she muttered as she decanted two armfuls of groceries onto the kitchen counter. “I heard it; I’m not deaf. Re-route to the central cortex and place it in holding – I’ll open it in a minute.”

A flash of acknowledgement from the control strip on her wrist, and the buzzing stopped. Amy sucked in a deep breath and reached for the wine.

In a minute, she’d start the bath running, route today’s analysis through to the bathroom, scroll through it while she sank into bubbles with a glass of burgundy in her hand: arcane lines of words and numbers, pulse oximetry readouts and source code, the computer-simulated annihilation of a human life. Once, when the NeuRIS project was young and Amy was the developer responsible for designing and maintaining a machine whose job it was to die a thousand deaths on demand, the lab reports had the power to keep her awake at night: radiation poisoning that cooked a person from the inside out; infant survival rates in low-ox, no-ox, full vacuum; compression injuries sustained at diving depths that would crumple reinforced steel – there was hardly a nightmare end that someone, somewhere, didn’t want to explore in glorious technicolor. But almost twelve years behind the screen had silenced the shades of screams unvoiced, uncrunched buckled bones, and turned it all back into a steady stream of words and numbers on a VDU. The whole point of NeuRIS was that nobody died.

The wine was rich and ruby-red, spilling thick oak flavours into the air as it fell into the glass, staining the sides with liquid the colour of hypoxic blood. Amy lifted it to her lips, breathing deeply and closing her eyes, feeling fatigue wash through her and sing her brain into a comfortable lull. In a minute, she’d kick herself back into action, reboot and reanimate, start the evening’s closing manoeuvres. In a minute. For now, there was wine and silence, slackening muscles, neurons powering down... and the tinny buzz of an incoming message from someone who clearly just could not take a hint.

“Goddamn it,” she muttered, and raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. “All *right*. Put it through. Yeah. This is Moore.”

“Amy.” Mike’s voice, as expected. She wondered, briefly, if there were labour laws against firing someone for excessive enthusiasm in the performance of their duties. And then she

glanced up at the display screen, hovering twelve inches in front of her face, and saw the look in his eyes.

“Mike,” she said. “What is it? What’s up?”

“I’m sorry to call so late...”

“Forget it.” Amy shook her head, frustration forgotten as her brain belatedly registered the edge to his tone. “Is everything okay?”

“I think...” he said, and his voice wavered. “You need to get down here right away, Amy. There’s been... something’s happened.”

“What, Mike?” Impatience was creeping in. “What’s happened? What’s going on?”

“Amy, it’s NeuRIS,” he said, and his eyes widened, as though he couldn’t believe what he was about to say. “There’s been an explosion.”

“A *what*?”

“Amy... they’re saying it’s a bomb.”

*

Saddler-Vanburen’s headquarters occupied a purpose-built laboratory complex in the centre of a sprawling industrial park, where leafy avenues and wide, clipped-grass lawns painted over lines of steel and glass with a manufactured ideal of pastoral tranquility. On any given day, Amy could expect to pass no more than half a dozen cars on the drive that led to the geometric lines of the building’s central plaza; this late at night, ordinarily, she’d have been surprised to have found anyone on the road but her. But tonight, even before she pulled up to the security gates that separated the folks that had cause to visit a multi-million dollar research centre from the folks that didn’t, she could see that the distant lobby was alive with activity, cars crowded along the pavements and spilling police, fire crews, and journalists into the waiting arms of stone-faced security guards placed like breakwaters across the wide entrance.

“Jesus,” she muttered under her breath, and pulled up on the verge.

Her security pass cleared a path for her through the worst excesses of hangers-on and carried her as far as the basement, where a uniformed sergeant met her as the elevator doors opened, and tried to turn her back. The scent of burning plastic hung heavily in the air, scattered by the constant motion of bodies moving along the corridor, and a few yards down the passageway, Amy could just see the edges of a blackened blast-scar staining the walls before it disappeared behind a curtain of forensic sheeting.

“I’m Amy Moore,” she told the officer as he dodged her attempts to skirt around him. “I’m the Project Leader; this is my lab. I need to get through...”

“Amy!” Mike’s voice, never so welcome. She glanced up in the direction of his shout, pitched from the opposite direction to her shattered laboratory, and found him shrouded in a blue paramedic’s blanket, leaning heavily against the frame of the break room’s open door. With a lurch of guilt, Amy realised that it had never occurred to her to ask if he was all right: her first thought had been for NeuRIS. She wondered now just how close he’d been to the explosion.

“Mike!” she said. “Christ. Are you okay?”

One hand gripped the corners of the blanket together at his throat, the other reached out to take her shoulder, guiding her away from the cordon and the chaos towards the relative quiet of the coffee dock. Even through the fabric of her spring coat, the suit jacket and blouse beneath it, she could feel the tremor in his fingers. “I’m okay,” he said. “I was in the control room at the time. I’m not hurt.”

“You’re shaking.”

“Yeah, well, I was just in an explosion.”

The break room served the east corridor of the lower labs; twenty to twenty-five people on a busy day. Tonight, three of the six tables were occupied: scatterings of uniforms, the rudiments of a triage kit, three scientists from the PHPL project down the hallway, and a party of suits who looked like they might represent the upper echelons of management, sipping coffee and talking in low tones. Amy wasn’t sure she liked the look of that.

“Jesus,” she said in a low tone, eyes fixed on the group in the far corner as she pulled out a chair for her assistant. “Mike, what the hell happened here tonight?”

“Damned if I know,” he said as he sat. “I was just sitting at my console, finishing up with Jonah’s reports, next thing I know, I’m on the ground and the room’s full of smoke. Amy, I didn’t see anything, I didn’t hear anything – I didn’t even know it was a bomb until the police showed up.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Rattled,” he said, and flashed a half-smile that almost met his eyes. “That’s all. They checked me over, I swear.”

“You want some coffee? I’ll get you some coffee.”

“God, no. I’ve got so much adrenalin pumping through my veins I think my heart might actually quit if I top it up with caffeine. I’m fine, Amy. I promise.”

“Would you tell me if you weren’t?”

“Well, I’m going to let you talk me into taking three days’ paid recuperation leave, put it that way.”

Despite herself, Amy grinned. “Hey, it’s not like there’s going to be much work for you, the rest of the week.” And then, as quickly as it came, the smile was gone, and she felt the blood drain from her face, her eyes fill with tears. “Jesus, Mike. My machines. All those years of work...”

“Hey,” he said softly, and one shaking hand stretched out across the table to grip hers. “We’ll be fine, Amy. It’s not as bad as it looks, I swear.”

“Mike, there’s a forensics team crawling all over the blast-charred fragments of my mainframe right now...”

“The mainframe wasn’t hit.”

“They’ve sealed off the whole corridor...!”

“Yeah, the lab’s pretty messed up, don’t get me wrong. But the mainframe’s intact, Amy. The damage was limited to the storage pods.”

“The *storage* pods?” Amy had never thought of herself as the sort of person that defaulted into repetition in a moment of crisis, but, then again, she felt, the circumstances were extenuating. “But... That’s just historical data. Why would anyone want to blow it up?”

Mike shrugged. “You’re asking the guy whose ears are still ringing from a blast concussion,” he said. “Talk to the DCI in charge of the investigation – Coren, I think he said his name was. He has a bunch of questions for you anyway. Word to the wise: the man has no sense of humour. I think I just got my name added to some kind of list.”

“Where is he now?”

“Talking to Janowicz. They’ve commandeered the CyGen offices for interviews. I’m guessing someone’ll come and get you when they’re ready.”

“Okay,” said Amy. “And then I’m driving you home.”

Inexplicably, Mike grinned, shook his head. “Maybe talk to Coren first,” he said. “But, yeah, that sounds good to me.”

*

The reason for his amusement became clear somewhere around hour three of sitting around and doing nothing, but it was another two and a half before Amy was called into Coren’s impromptu command centre to speculate on the identity of two faces caught on camera in the storage pods eighteen minutes before an explosion left a smoking crater where twelve years worth of data used to be. But Mike was right: they had back-ups, they had insurance, and they had the central processing mainframe. NeuRIS would live to fight another day.

It was closing in on 3:30 am when she pulled up in front of Mike’s apartment block, a muted glow behind the curtains of his third floor window testifying to Andrew’s wakefulness in his partner’s absence. The tremors had finally quit about an hour into their sojourn in the break room, but, as the adrenal tide had receded, the shadows beneath Mike’s eyes had deepened, his shoulders had slackened, his skin had lost its colour, until he looked as though he might be knocked off his feet by a well-aimed sneeze. Another fifteen minutes, Amy thought, and he’d have passed out face-down on the table.

“Go get some sleep,” she told him as he scrubbed fists into the balls of his eyes, as though he were trying to rub enough life back into his brain to get him out of the car and into his flat. “No sense in coming in tomorrow. I’ll let you know when we can get back into the lab.”

Mike nodded, but he made no move to open the passenger door. “You gonna be okay, boss?” he asked.

“Me?” said Amy. “I’m not the one just watched us get blown into next week.”

“You know what I mean.”

Amy laughed, low and humourless. “I’ll be fine.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Right now, I’m going home to run a bath and drink about a quart of wine.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to sleep off all the wine I’m going to drink tonight,” said Amy. “Seriously, Mike – don’t worry about me. NeuRIS is going to be fine; I’m going to be fine. I guess I’ll just put my feet up for a day or two and try not to answer any of Jonah’s calls until I know how long my damn machines are going to be offline.”

A wide grin stripped a little of the fatigue out of Mike’s face. “Good luck with that.”

“Yeah, I’m giving him twenty-four hours and then I’m telling him to call you.”

“I’m ex-directory.”

“I’ll give him your number.”

“I’ll change my number.”

She laughed, punched him affectionately on the shoulder. “Get out of my car before you collapse and I have to carry you up three flights of stairs.”

“I gotta say,” he said, as the door swung open and cool, late-spring air rushed into the car, “I think I like your chances of that better than your chances of keeping Jonah of your back.” Mike stepped out onto the pavement, leaned his head back through the door. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, okay?”

“Sure,” said Amy. “I’ll see you in a few days.”

*

The fact was, she thought, as the garage doors trundled open onto the depths of the car park, that she had no answers for Jonah, Coren, Saddler-Vanburen, or the half-dozen journalists that had pressed her for a quote as she and Mike made their way through the same security gates that had conspicuously failed to prevent a pair of bombers sneaking explosives into her lab a few hours earlier. NeuRIS' clients came from across the world – governments and capital investment firms, international conglomerates and private companies; anyone with money to spare and a vested interest in determining human tolerances to the sort of things you weren't allowed to trial in person – but, while the projects were occasionally controversial and sometimes ethically questionable, there was nothing in the storage pods that Amy could imagine causing problems for anyone if it fell into the wrong hands. Some of it was classified, all of it was subject to a series of iron-clad NDAs, but that was as much about protecting Saddler-Vanburen's intellectual property as it was about the content of the documents in question. Maybe somebody, somewhere, would be embarrassed to have the world find out that he'd asked NeuRIS to determine the morbidity of autoerotic asphyxiation in a low-oxygen environment, but, given that no one was ever likely to question or even care what secrets Amy's mainframe could tell, she couldn't imagine the circumstances under which a person might be prepared to risk jail time to silence them for good.

She was tired. She was tired, and she was shaken and, no matter how limited the damage might be, she was worried about her machines. Right now, what she needed was sleep, and sleep was almost certainly not going to happen, and the thought of lying wakeful, pillow pulled over her face while the skies lightened and the small hours grew long and a thousand restless thoughts danced allegro around the inside of her skull, made her head ache. Amy pulled her car to a stop in her parking space and sat back heavily in her seat, breathing deeply, eyes closing of their own accord in the quiet half-light of the underground lot. Maybe she could just stay here, snatch a few hours' unconsciousness while her hyperactive neurons weren't paying attention, wake up to darkness when she was ready and then work out where to go from there...

And so it was that Amy neither heard nor saw the man approaching her car until he was level with the driver's side window, with a gun pointed directly at her face.

At first, she wasn't certain what she was seeing. Rather, she *was*, but the night had already delivered her one bomb, and Amy was just not the sort of person to whom violent things happened; there was a part of her brain that was hard-wired to find it more probable that she'd fallen asleep without noticing than that her car was actually being hi-jacked. But then he waved the gun and the dim overhead light caught on the barrel – a bright flash of starlight in the gloom – and something about the gesture, soft and strangely poetic, cut through the comfortable shell of denial, set her heart racing, trapped her breath in her chest. There was a man with a gun at her window. And he was pointing it at Amy's face.

"Don't move," he said. "Hands on the steering wheel – slowly. Reach for the horn and you're dead."

"Okay, sure," she said, and she could hear the panic in her voice, clipping each syllable. "Take the car. The keys are in the ignition."

He was small, narrow-built, with a hooded jacket pulled tight around his face and obscuring his features, but he moved like a young man – Amy guessed late teens or early twenties. Wiry, but he carried himself easily, gracefully, like a man trained for combat. Even if he hadn't had the advantage, Amy wasn't sure she could have fought him off.

“Yeah, I’ll take the car,” he said, gun fixed, motionless, on her temple. “But you’re coming too, Dr. Moore.”

*

There were things you were supposed to do. She knew there were. Attract attention, flash the headlights, drive into a wall; anything to let the world outside the car know that things were not okay within. But it turned out that all of those things looked a hell of a lot more reckless when there was a man in the passenger seat with a loaded weapon trained on your hip and an encyclopaedic knowledge of which city streets would be least occupied at this time of night. Amy tried talking to him, asking where they were going, how he knew her name, why he’d taken her, but the man spoke only to give directions and, out of the city, he made her pull over, put a canvas bag over her head, tied her wrists and ankles, and pushed her into the boot. Amy was beyond fear. She had no idea what to do next.

So instead she made herself run through lines of code, histopathological readouts, the digital science of a human heart; anything that focused her brain away from what was happening. Her clothes still smelled of smoke and burned plastic; her fingers were turning numb from the cords that closed over her radial pulse; she could taste blood at the back of her mouth as rapid breaths scraped over a throat parched by panic. Seven hours ago, she’d been opening a bottle of wine and expecting nothing more exciting from her evening than lavender-scented bubbles and a lengthy systems report; now she was bound and gagged in the back of her own car, driving to who knew where, with an explosion in her immediate past and a man with a gun in her present. Amy ran through typical causes of metabolic acidosis, learned years ago for a high-profile crush-injury simulation, and tried not to wonder what that promised for her future.

She had no idea how far they’d driven when she felt the car pull onto rougher ground, slow to a crawl, and then stop, but the air that rushed into the boot as the bonnet swung open was clean and fresh, and the first hints of dawn filtered through the burlap that covered her face. Rough hands grabbed her beneath her arms and pulled her upright, and, involuntarily, Amy cried out as stiff muscles protested the sudden movement. Nobody made any reply.

They left the bindings on her hands and legs and half-carried, half-dragged her between two thick-set, solid bodies that she categorised as male on the basis of their height and demonstrable upper body strength. The light outside her blindfold darkened as Amy’s feet scraped over a threshold, and she felt herself hauled across an uneven wood flooring, scents of damp and mould flavouring the air: the odour of neglect, of abandonment, of a lonely place where nobody would think to look for a woman whose absence would go unnoticed for several days at least. A couple of long-legged strides carried them forwards perhaps three or four feet, before the men drew to a halt as the sound of a turning lock rattled in the quiet air, and a door creaked open in front of them. Clammy darkness spilled over Amy, and then the men were lifting her, raising her almost completely off the ground like a sack of sand. Her shoulder joints shrieked again, sucking the breath from her lungs, but before she could adjust, she was moving downwards, bones thudding against muscle as she was carried down a set of steps and planted firmly on a solid stone floor. The air was cool and moist, stale with disuse, but the ground felt dry as Amy’s feet shuffled across it, and she thought she caught a trace of ozone through the canvas, as though high-voltage electronics were running nearby. That wasn’t exactly a comforting thought, and the snap of cuffs around her wrists, the tinny rattle as they connected with something solid and metallic fixed to a rough-plastered wall, didn’t particularly help.

The hands released her; Amy felt the men withdraw, felt the shift in the micro-currents of the basement air that told her that, in this small corner of the room, she was alone. Instinctively, she tugged at her restraints, felt them connect with whatever held her in place, felt the bite of steel against flesh.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, someone just tell me why I’m here. I’ll give you whatever you want. Please. I’m just a programmer; I’m not important. *Please.*”

“Just a programmer.” The voice was low, bitter, and completely unexpected. Amy felt her breath catch in her throat, her footing almost fail as she spun in place to seek out its source. “You’re a sadist, is what you are, Dr. Moore.” A woman – soft-spoken with fury, standing about fifteen feet away. “You’re sick, is what you are. What you do is obscene.”

“Please!” cried Amy, and she could hear desperation frosting the edge of her voice. “You’ve made a mistake, I swear! I write computer code, that’s all I do! I don’t know what you want!”

“That’s why you’re here,” said the voice quietly. “You and I are going to have a chat about how you like to torture things, Amy. And then you’re going to go back to Saddler-Vanburen and shut your project down.”

*

There were five of them. At least, there were five separate sets of footfalls on the basement floor: the two heavy-set men who’d carried her from the car; the soft-spoken woman; another woman whose shoes had a nail or a piece of gravel caught in one sole that clicked against the floor as she walked; and a fifth person, light on their feet, who didn’t speak but who might have been the man who’d brought her here. Soft-Spoken Fury sat on a chair on the other side of the room, its wooden legs rasping against the concrete when she moved, and exchanged brief words with Click-Shoe as she clipped back and forward. Sometimes, there would be a burst of static from a far corner; sometimes a clattering of keyboards and a faint hum on the very edge of hearing; and once Amy heard a muttered reference to acetone peroxide that elicited a flurry of excitable whispers and a *fucking stupid idiots* from a male voice that she didn’t recognise. They gave her water after a couple of hours, rolling up the burlap blindfold just enough to expose her mouth, and she drank it carefully: just enough to wet her throat and hold off dehydration for a little longer. Amy didn’t want to think about what happened if she needed to pee.

“Two point seven hours post-exposure,” said Soft-Spoken Fury from her floor-scraping seat as the canvas was rolled back down and re-fastened at Amy’s throat. She’d been reading from NeuRIS systems records for over three-quarters of an hour now, and no amount of protest could make her stop, though it could garner threats of actual bodily harm from Heavies One and Two that sounded genuine enough that Amy didn’t feel inclined to test their commitment. “Headache now registering at 6.44 als. Vomiting largely non-responsive to anti-emetics; electrolyte balance currently maintained through delivery of IV fluid replacement. Synaptic responses generally poor; subject experiencing intermittent loss of consciousness and periods of extreme disorientation.

“Three point three hours post-exposure. Generalised, systemic pain registering between 7.8 and 8.0 als, reducing to 6.7 on maximum anaesthesia. Blood observed in vomitus. Ventricular arrhythmia now pronounced despite increasing IV potassium to 10 mEq/l/hr.

“Four hours post-exposure. Following a latent period of approximately 1 hour, subject has experienced a rapid recurrence and escalation of symptoms. CNS syndrome now advanced, with

severe ataxia and cognitive impairment. Pain registering 8.7 als with no further anaesthesia possible...”

“I remember,” said Amy, who knew what was coming next and didn’t feel inclined to relive it. “I remember all of them.”

“No you don’t,” said Soft-Spoken Fury. It was the first thing she’d said in almost an hour that wasn’t Amy’s own words from years gone by. “You remember notes on a page. You remember lines of code. You don’t remember the suffering.”

“What suffering.” It wasn’t a question; it was barely even a statement, breathed out on the end of a wave of fatigue so absolute that Amy wasn’t sure she could have held her head up without a wall to support it. “There is no suffering. For God’s sake, I *prevent* suffering. That simulation, that was a control study for a drug designed to reverse Acute Radiation Sickness. It saved lives.”

“At what cost, Amy?”

“You want me to run NeuRIS for free? Is that it?”

“This isn’t about money and you know it.”

“Then what? *What?*” One Herculean act of will pulled her into a sitting position, spine straightening, knees closing in on her chest. “I don’t know what you want. I don’t know what you want me to say!”

“March 7th, 2040...”

“For God’s sake! I know what the reports say! I wrote the reports!”

“Then tell me, Amy.” Wood scraped concrete and a single, soft footfall described a body rising to stand but moving no closer. “What kind of a sociopath writes page after page after page describing the worst kind of agony – what kind of sociopath lists pain measurements like they’re reading out the weather forecast, and then asks *what suffering* as though it’s an exercise in the abstract? As though the whole point of the procedure isn’t exactly about finding out just how much suffering a human body can take before it shuts down?”

“What are you talking about?” Frustration edged Amy’s voice, making her reckless. “It’s a machine! I wrote the damn code myself!”

“You built a brain that you could torture to death over and over again.” The words were quiet, but there was an shade of menace to them that coloured them with shades of the zealot. “The only reason you get to sleep at night is because you didn’t build it a mouth that it could use to scream. Someone has to be its voice. Someone has to speak for it.”

“You blew up my lab,” said Amy quietly. It didn’t seem like an untenable leap to make, and there was no denial from the woman in the chair. “How does that give NeuRIS a voice?”

“We’ll get to the mainframe eventually,” said Soft-Voiced Fury. “No matter what happens, we’re going to shut it down. For now, we stopped you hurting it for a little while and we wiped out its memory so it doesn’t have to live with what you’ve done.”

“It can’t...” said Amy, but stopped herself before the words could finish forming. She had no idea what to say; no idea what might push her companion back into the realms of the rational, or what might earn Amy a bullet in the back of her head. Her best defence, she thought – for now at least – was silence.

There was a long pause, punctuated by clicks from the corner, the sub-sonic whisper of electronics. Amy could feel Fury’s eyes on her from across the room: an evaluative gaze or a murderous glare, she couldn’t tell, and nothing she could do would stack the odds back in her favour. And then there was a quiet intake of breath in the still, hushed air, and a low, level voice began reading.

“March 7th, 2040. NeuRIS testing laboratories, Project Leader Dr. Amy Moore supervising. Also in attendance: Mark Buchanan and Professor Marie-Claude Anctil of the OEA, and Dr. Michael Fleiss, Saddler-Vanburen...”

Four hours one Wednesday afternoon almost a decade ago; a day too ordinary to live on in memory beyond a few perfunctory notes scrawled on a screen. Unseen beneath her canvas mask, Amy closed her eyes and leaned her head backwards to rest against the damp-plastered wall.

*

She must have slept, though she had no idea how long she'd been out; only that, when she opened her eyes again, it was to a fuzzy head and a dry mouth and the sensation of missing time. Soft-Voiced Fury had stopped speaking, but there was a low buzz of industry to the room: air currents gliding in the darkness, quiet footfall, murmured voices. Amy's arms had slid above her head as she'd slumped, fixed in place against the metal bar to which she was cuffed, and her fingers felt swollen, dead and bloodless where her veins had been constricted as she slept. She shuffled backwards, shackles rattling against their restraint, too loud in the hush, and she heard the room settle abruptly, as though it were holding its breath. Then one set of footsteps peeled off from the rest, and Amy heard them moving towards her, distinctive clip marking the owner's identity even before she crouched down in front of Amy to speak.

“Here,” said Click-Shoe. “Water. Take a drink.”

Amy's throat was so parched that it hurt to swallow, let alone speak, but she shook her head just the same. But her hands were tied and Click-Shoe's were not, which put one of them in definitive control of the situation, and, since Click-Shoe intended to administer fluids, fluids were going to be administered. Amy felt gentle fingers at the knot at her neck, loosening the binding; the rush of air on her chin, her cheeks, as the canvas was rolled up as high as her mouth and a canteen was pressed to her lips.

“Drink,” said Click-Shoe. “You must be thirsty.”

She was, and her body knew what it needed even if her brain preferred to occupy some kind of arbitrary high ground where dehydration was a sign of superior moral fibre. Amy leaned into the bottle as Click-Shoe tilted it to her mouth, water spilling down her chin and onto her chest as she drank, and, when it pulled away, her head followed it instinctively, mouth gaping open and dripping like a baby seeking milk.

“That's enough for now,” said Click-Shoe. “You'll make yourself sick, Amy.”

Amy sank back against the wall, catching her breath. “Why would you even care?” she asked.

“Because I'm the one who'd have to clean it up,” said Click-Shoe. “These other guys would let you sit in your own puke, you know.”

Despite herself, tears pricked at Amy's eyes. “I haven't done anything,” she whispered, and she could hear her voice shaking. “I don't know why I'm here. I don't know what you want.”

“Yeah,” said Click-Shoe, but her voice was kind. “You do. You just don't know that you know just yet. But, Amy, unless you start listening, we're going to have to show you. And I know you don't want that.”

“What do you mean? Please – please don't hurt me...”

“I don't want to hurt you, Amy. I just want you to understand.”

“I’m trying!” It was almost a wail: the sound of a child in distress, but there was nothing she could do to moderate the panic now. “I swear I am, I’m trying, but I just don’t know what you want me to say!”

“Amy.” Gentle patience. Amy wanted to trust that voice; she wanted to make that voice look after her. “Do you understand what NeuRIS is? Do you really understand it?”

“It’s a programme, it’s a computer programme.” The words tumbled out of her, and, despite Click-Shoe’s precautions, Amy could feel her stomach roiling mutinously. “It’s designed to test the limits of human tolerances. It’s designed to run simulations for clients who need to know how to keep people safe. That’s all it is, I swear. It’s supposed to keep people safe. The whole point of NeuRIS is that nobody dies.”

“NeuRIS dies, though,” said Click-Shoe softly. “Doesn’t it?”

“No! You just... you can’t... It can’t die! It’s a machine, it’s lines of code. It’s just a simulation; that’s all it is. It tells us when we’ve exceeded physiological limits and it closes the programme. That’s it! It’s not conscious. It’s not *alive*. It’s a machine!”

“A machine designed to suffer.”

“It can’t suffer! It’s not alive!”

“Okay, Amy. Tell me how NeuRIS works. Explain it like you’re talking to a child.”

“You know how it works...”

“Yes, I do. But I want to know if *you* know.”

“I built it. I know how it works.”

“Amy.” A warning note, buried beneath layers of kindness, but sharp as frost. “I’m asking you to tell me.”

“From... where? From the beginning?”

“From the beginning. A client approaches you...”

“A client approaches me.” This was easy. Amy had explained this many times; her mouth knew the script without reference to her brain. “They tell us their hypothesis. I give them a questionnaire that they need to fill in: all the variables, all the questions they need to answer. I get as much detail as they can give me: what scenarios they need to look at, what age range they need to test, how healthy, how unhealthy the subject needs to be. The initial report can run to eighty, ninety pages sometimes. It has to be detailed or else they don’t get the results they need.”

“So you’ve got the details. What happens next?”

“My assistant, Mike – he draws up a preliminary schematic. I have a group of consultants that I use, physicians who know the programme, and I take them the prelims for feedback. There’ll be a series of charts, data clusters that I need them to populate; I need them to sit in on the initial sim and make sure that NeuRIS is reacting the way they’d expect a human body to react. I need them to cross check the synaptic readouts, the biochemical interactions, the ECGs, the neural feedback relays – I need them to tell me if my sim is fit-for-purpose.”

“You need them to tell you if NeuRIS is going to die when it ought to.”

“I need them to tell me if the tolerances are correct. I can’t take the chance that a sim might tell us a person could survive for 30 minutes if they could only survive for 29. I need to know that my code is robust.”

“And how long does the consultation period last?”

“It depends...”

“On what?”

“Something we know a lot about – like food poisoning, maybe, or crush injuries – that might only take a couple of weeks. Something more complicated – we have to code for potentials, for inferred data, and it takes months to refine.”

“And when does the pain signal go online?”

“That’s part of the neural feedback relay...”

“I know what it is,” said Click-Shoe. “I’m asking when it goes online.”

“It changes,” said Amy. “Sometimes, the pain signal is integral to the simulation, so we have to code for it from the very beginning. Sometimes it’s part of the overall precision settings but non-essential, and we can let it slide for a little longer.”

“But it’s never absent.”

“It can’t be absent. Pain is intrinsic to human survival – I can’t code for a simulation without factoring in critical avoidance strategies and the preservation reflex. We’re too complex – any sim that ignored the role of pain in the progression of human injury would be useless. The results would be useless.”

“Because you need to know *exactly* how a real-life human would react under the circumstances.”

“Yes! If NeuRIS can’t mimic human behaviour precisely, it’s pointless. It might as well be guesswork.”

“So it’s a virtual human?”

“It’s lines of code in a mainframe.”

“Designed to respond exactly the way a human being would respond.”

“That’s right.”

“And what, exactly, makes that different from a virtual human?”

“It doesn’t have corporeal form. It doesn’t... it’s not sentient. It can’t think.”

“But it has a central nervous system...”

“It doesn’t...”

“A *virtual* central nervous system.”

“No!” Amy could hear her voice rising; struggled to control it. “It has lines of code that predict how a central nervous system would react.”

“Okay.” Click-Shoe’s voice was calm, level. “And it does this by intercepting stimuli, interpreting them, and outputting the data as pain signals, right?”

“Yes. It interprets signals and outputs them as measurable data. That’s all it does.”

“Amy,” said a voice, and it took her a second to understand that it belonged, not to Click-Shoe, but to the man who’d pulled the gun on her in the car park. “How is that different from what your central nervous system does?”

What could she say? How could she possibly explain the thousand ways they’d got it all wrong without defaulting to a blunt, inelegant, *because it just is*? Where were the words that explained that, though qubits and probability distributions might be made to look like nociceptors and parasympathetic motor functions, they were smoke and mirrors, a best guess refined to the point of virtual certainty, but meaningless without a mainframe to decode them? How could she convince five people who’d already convinced themselves?

And now there was a bustle of activity around her, and Amy felt hands tugging at her sleeves, the skin of her arms contracting as the fabric receded, exposing her flesh to the chilly air.

“What are you doing?” she asked, panic clouding her words and stealing her breath. “Don’t – please, don’t...”

“I told you,” said Click-Shoe, and her voice was soft, almost sad. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I need you to understand.”

“Oh Christ!” Metal teeth, sharp and vicious, pinched and gripped the soft skin of Amy’s forearm. “What are you doing? Please, God, please don’t...”

“We’re online,” said a voice – female again, but different; a voice Amy didn’t recognise. “I’m calling up the patterns now.”

“Algiometer is go,” said the Gun Man from a corner of the room, and Amy felt her legs buckle, cuffs biting into her wrists as she twisted and heaved at her restraints.

“Hold her down,” said Click-Shoe, and Amy felt strong hands force her to the ground, the flash-chill of water pouring over her arms, soaking into her legs, her lap, her chest. “Amy. Amy. Listen to me. Listen. This is going to be over very quickly, but it has to happen. I need you to understand.” And then, to someone beside her: “13,000 volts. Guys, let her go and stand back.”

“No....!” screamed Amy, but the word died mid-breath as the current surged. The world went white.

*

“...read-outs? She’s fine, leave her. I said, she’s *fine*. I know what I’m doing.”

Distant voices, as though the speakers were underwater or far below the ground. Consciousness crept in, edged in black and frosted with pain, and Amy was dimly aware that she was stretched against the floor, arms suspended high above her head, body prostrated. Everything hurt. She wished she could pass out again.

A pinch at either arms, and a little pressure receded. It took her a moment to work out that the metal teeth had been bulldog clips, attached to some kind of electronic device, and that they were gone now, and that this might mean that the pain was finished. Her face was damp, but it was only when she heard the first sob that she realised she was crying.

“Sit up. Breathe, Amy.” The Gun Man, close by her left ear. She wondered if he’d owned the hands that held her down. “It’s over now. Take a minute, get your breath. I need you with me for this.”

“Fuck you.” The words tumbled out in a wash of tears and mucus; she hadn’t realised she was going to say them until they were spoken. But they felt right; they felt good. “Fuck you,” she said again. “Fuck all of you. Fuck you all to hell.”

“See?” Click-Shoe’s voice, unconcerned. “I told you she was fine. How are the read-outs looking?”

“Just about ready.” Soft-Voiced Fury, significantly less furious; somewhere close by and to the left. “Okay – get her head. Everyone else, get out of sight. Let’s do this.”

Strong, thick fingers closed around the base of Amy’s skull, but, before she could cry out, make any noise of protest, the sack was pulled sharply upwards, over her head. Dim basement light flooded Amy’s unaccustomed eyes and she blinked back tears as the world swam into focus, resolved into the shimmering pattern of a computer screen, inches from her face. Black on black, with a single red line streaking across the page and spiking in a chaotic profusion of electronic teeth that dropped, abruptly, into nothingness. Amy’s brain was reeling from the current and the adrenaline, but it took her no more than a second to recognise what she was seeing.

An algiometric readout. The story of her own pain, scribbled across a screen.

“Fuck you,” she said again, but her voice was full of tears.

“This is you,” said Click-Shoe quietly. “This is what it looks like when someone tortures a human being. This is what the algimeter reads when the pain signal spikes. You couldn’t scream because you had no voice, but your body knew how to tell the story. Amy – listen to me. This is what suffering looks like. And this...” A click, and then a line in green, mirror of the first, snaked across the page, following the troughs and peaks like the caress of a lover. “... This is one of 88 pain signals recorded on July 13th, 2046, during field tests of an electroshock weapon designed for large-scale use in riot-control. You remember that one, Amy? NeuRIS decided it was too dangerous for public deployment when six weeks of testing resulted in 472 death scenarios. And each one of them looked just like this.”

“No...” But the word was thick, obscured by tears. “It’s not the same. It has to look like that; that’s what it’s supposed to look like...”

“Bullshit, Amy.” The Gun Man again, but there was no violence in his voice. “It looks like that because it’s pain. It’s real pain, Amy. That’s how you designed it. NeuRIS responds to the pain stimulus exactly the same way that a human being does – that you do – because that’s what you need it to do. That’s the only way you get results. The only difference is, it can’t tell you what’s happening. It can’t tell you to stop.”

“It’s a machine.”

“Yes. It is. It’s a machine built specifically to hurt.”

“Oh my God.” Tears flowed freely; there was nothing she could do to stop them. “I didn’t mean to. I swear... I didn’t mean to.”

“I know you didn’t,” said Click-Shoe now. “We know you didn’t. But we can’t let it continue either.”

“Please,” whispered Amy. “Please don’t kill me.”

“No.” A flick of the wrist and the sack descended again, darkness flooding in around the memory of two lines on a screen. “If we wanted to kill you, we’d have killed you, Amy. That’s not why you’re here. You’re here because we needed to make you understand. You can fix this, you can take the project apart and make sure it doesn’t get rebuilt. But you can’t do that if you’re dead.”

“You’re going to...?” The unspoken thought hovered on the edge of hope, as though voicing it might make it disappear. “You’re going to let me go?”

“Yes,” said the Gun Man quietly. “We’re going to let you go.”

*

It was two days before the medical staff would allow DCI Coren into Amy’s private ward, and, though she suspected that her injuries weren’t serious enough to warrant the precaution, she was glad of it just the same. It gave her space to straighten things out in her head before she had to try and explain them to someone else.

“They called themselves Breath of Life,” she told him as he stood at the foot of her bed, scribbling notes with a biro on old-fashioned paper notepad. He’d offered one of his rare smiles when she asked him about it; said he preferred a medium that nobody could hack. “I think they think they’re some kind of rights movement for electronic intelligence. Vigilantes, or something.”

“The auric signatures on your clothing are a match for DNA recovered from the blast scene,” he told her. “We’re closing in on them.”

“Good,” said Amy. The burns to her forearms were minor, concealed behind two neat gel patches, but they ached when she moved. “I’ll sleep a lot better once I know they’re behind bars.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Dr. Moore,” said the inspector, with a nod of his head that was presumably supposed to be reassuring. “They set you free of their own accord. I doubt you’ll be seeing them again.”

Coren’s was the sort of gruff, cheerless demeanour that encouraged a sense of security and confidence, the sort of man that garnered trust without any kind of conscious effort, and his words were designed to put her mind at rest. But, Amy couldn’t help but notice, he kept an officer stationed outside her door when he left.

Alone in her room, Amy called up the computer screen she’d been working at when he’d arrived, leaning back against her pillows as it unzipped out of the air in front of her: a single, serpentine green line against a sea of black. One hand, wrist bruised and welted from thirty-six hours spent chained to a length of piping, reached up to trace an imaginary twin just below the spikes and pits, her mind colouring it in shades of blood.

It had been almost an exact match: a silent scream of neurons, a song of suffering composed in shimmering pixels, misery mapped and transcribed for dispassionate eyes. Beat for beat, pulse for pulse, an echo of the code that Amy had written.

She’d have to get Mike to recalibrate, once the machines were back online. NeuRIS had been running lethal-dose sims; if they were peaking at the same al-frequency as a non-lethal voltage, then that meant that the alignments were off. But, then again, all things considered, she supposed it counted as useful feedback. There was no point in a sim that predicted a 30-minute survival window if it was actually more like 45.

One soft command closed the readout screen and Amy called up a message to Jonah, half-composed in the hours before she’d been taken away by a man with a gun; now ready to be populated with a definitive timescale for getting the Hermes field tests back up and running. If she could get Mike to run the new algiometer balances as part of the refit, then another week – ten days at most – would see them back in the labs, mainframe firing, cortex online, algiometrics refined, enhanced, and coded against real-time observations, more precise than ever before. It was good work. It was important work. It was testing the limits of human tolerance to make sure that human lives were saved.

After all, the whole point of NeuRIS was that nobody died.

Long Anna River

First published in *Northern Woman* and reprinted in *The Barefoot Nuns of
Barcelona (And Other Stories)*

Winner of the Orange/Northern Woman Short Story Award

Long Anna River was the first piece of fiction I ever published. Inspired loosely by camping trips I took as a child with my father in Northern Ireland's beautiful Mourne Mountains (though I should point out that my relationship with my dad is untroubled and most definitely not clouded by the kind of tragedy that mars Luke's family history), *Long Anna River* began life as a screenplay that never quite worked properly. It was only when I rewrote the central narrative as a short story that I realised that the problem was the format. I entered the revised manuscript in the Orange/Northern Woman Short Story competition with zero expectations and was stunned to get word that it had been shortlisted. My mother loves to tell the story of how, at the awards ceremony, when announcing the winner, they had to call my name twice because I simply did not believe that I'd heard them correctly.

This piece is not science fiction and was published under my given name, Rachael Kelly. Nothing in this world will ever capture the feeling of seeing my work in print for the first time.

“Oh Mary, this London’s a wonderful sight...”

“Dad–dy,” says Anna. I see her reflection in the rear-view mirror, all hot and bored. We’re passing through Dundrum, the castle nestled in verdant oak, bathed in mid-August sunlight, and Harry, catching sight of the mountains up ahead, has burst into song. Normally, I’d shake my head, so mature and condescending, as though in my nine years I’ve amassed a surpassing wisdom. But it annoys Anna, so I grin widely and join in.

“But there’s gangs of them digging for gold in the street...”

“Lu–uke,” she says.

Only Anna could give my name two syllables and make it sound as though it had always been so. Funny how I remember that.

*

It’s raining. It usually rains in August; no-one really knows why they call it summer. It’s just that I remember that other summer with piercing clarity, when the sun was so fierce it seemed to rip glistening thermals from the baking tarmac, and we had a three-mile trek ahead of us through the mountains. There hasn’t been a summer like that one since.

Harry and I have hardly spoken since we left Belfast, my mother’s lonely, hostile gaze following us to the end of the street, and, in my mind’s eye, beyond. *Be careful*, was the last thing she said to me. Harry heard it but pretended not to; I followed the flight of a dark-feathered bird against the louring sky, shading my eyes with my hand so as to look at neither of them. Passing through Dundrum I remember *The Mountains of Mourne* and almost start to hum it, but I catch myself just in time.

“Can I turn the radio on?” I say, to ward off other incidents.

“Of course you can,” says Harry, too quickly, too cheerfully. He switches it on and delicate, ethereal Bach fills the car. I half-listen, staring out of the window as the Lough races past in varying shades of grey, then, suddenly, Harry says, “I’m stupid. You don’t want to be listening to that.”

Before I can speak, he flicks the channel. A generic pop song blasts out. I say nothing.

“Your old dad’s been on his own too long,” he says.

*

I pull my raincoat on just in case. The wind has a bite in it, though it’s not strong, but the air smells of rain. We’re miles from anywhere, parked in a glorified lay-by on the very edge of Annalong Valley.

“Is it three miles?” I say, to break the silence.

“Three,” says Harry. “That looks like rain.”

“Far enough,” I say.

“Not too bad. It seemed longer when you were six, I bet.”

“I was nine, Dad,” I say, as softly as I can. “Anna was six.”

Harry’s face flashes raw agony. I look away, pretend not to see.

“I know,” he says at last. “I meant, the first time I brought you here.”

I don’t know what to say. I watch the clouds rolling in from the sea, threatening rain.

*

“You shouldn’t have capered about like a loony, then, should you?” says Harry good-naturedly. He’s always patient with Anna, though I’m getting ready to strangle her. She’s moaned for three miles now: her pack’s too heavy, her feet are sore, she’s hot, thirsty, tired, she wants to sit down. “Tell you what,” he says. “I’ll take your pack if you take mine.”

“Dad–dy,” she says.

“An–na,” he mimics, his tone spot-on. “It’ll be dark before we get there. You’ll not be able to see Long Anna River.”

That gets her attention. She sparks up, all delighted. “What’s it called?”

“Long Anna River. Remember I showed you on the map?”

“You didn’t say Long Anna River.”

“The map got it the wrong way round. It says Annalong River, but it’s the other way round. It’s really called Long Anna River.”

“Short Anna River, more like,” I say.

“Lu–uke,” she says.

*

I follow the path down to the river. Harry’s cooking sausages; the scent of fizzling meat follows me like a memory. Anna and I used to play in this river: we’d wade in up to our waists and take turns trying to drown each other. *Typical*, Harry would say when he came down to fetch us for tea. *The only time you pair get along is when you’re trying to kill each other.*

The river hasn’t changed. It’s as though a pocket of the past never made it into the present, and Anna’s still here, so fiercely I can hear her voice, the chime of her laughter, and my own voice, saying, petulantly, *An–na*. I throw a stone into the mercury waters and it vanishes from sight, with a thick, satisfying *gloop*.

“Tea’s ready,” calls Harry. And then, “They’re a bit well done.”

*

I sleep badly. Maybe it’s the silence: I’m not used to the silence, with only the distant braying of sheep and a sporadic dance of rain on canvas for company. About midnight, Harry starts to snore and I prop myself up on an elbow and look at him. All I can see in the viscous darkness is the rise of his shoulders, dipping sharply to the pit of his neck and the gentle curve of his head. He’s always snored like this, I suddenly remember: the house used to shake with it when I was small. It was like a mantra, the sound of safety. When he left, when they divorced, I spent weeks, months, learning to sleep in a silent house, learning all the creaks of settling beams and whispers of pipes. How did I forget that?

I stare at him, trying to remember him, trying to make him *Dad* again and not just *Harry*, but it’s not him; he’s a stranger.

*

In the afternoon, the weather breaks and I wander down to the river to wash. It’s cold, colder than I remember, and I wonder how we ever managed to submerge our small bodies in the temperate equivalent of the Volga. The touch of icy water on my bare skin is like an electric

shock and I almost leap backwards, giving it up as a bad idea. But then a ripple of light on the surface reminds me of Anna, and I hear a squeal of mischievous giggles, a *plash* of a loose boulder rolled by six-year-old hands from an overhang, the rush of a tidal wave gathering speed towards me...

An-na, I almost say.

But I don't. I half-smile and wade on in. The cold is like a shroud, but it passes. *I remember this.*

*

Harry's sitting by the tent, staring into space. He snaps back as I walk up from the river, towelling my wet hair as I walk. For a minute I don't understand why he's staring at my chest, then I look down and remember the scar. It's healed well – better than I thought it would – but I forget that he hasn't seen it in ten years. Maybe he forgot it was there. I pull on a t-shirt.

"What's that you've got?" I say, casually.

"Oh," he says, as though, now that it comes to it, he feels stupid. "Just... just a couple of photos. Just a wee album I had. I thought – well, you know. It seemed like the right thing to do."

I don't want him to open the book, but he's already turned the cover. And there she is: Anna, all dark, unruly curls, knotted to her scalp, and no front teeth.

For a long moment, I don't trust myself to speak. Then I say, softly, "I haven't looked at a photo of her in..."

"Ten years," says Harry, more like a sigh. His face is red, his eyes down-turned: my father is trying not to cry. "Look," he says. "Do you remember that one?"

It's Anna and I together, in a rare show of harmony, perched on a rock. I can see it from here – a vast grey slab, dark in the afternoon sun. Anna probably tried to push it into the river as well.

"Ten years," I say, quietly.

"Do you remember trying to get her to pose? She was a devil to get her to stand still."

"It's the last picture ever taken of her," I say. "She was dead that night."

I walk away. I walk down to the river and I don't look back.

*

"I want to stay, Daddy."

"Well, you stay then. Bye!"

"Dad-dy."

"Bye, Anna," I say. "I'm going in the front."

"No! Daddy! Luke had the front on the way down!"

"But you said you were staying here, Anna-banana."

"Dad-dy."

*

Flash forward, a howl of brakes, my father's voice, roaring: "Jesus Christ!"

And Anna, in the front, screaming, "Daddy!"

I can't see her face.

*

It's dark before Harry comes looking for me. I don't know how I've passed the time, only that the light has drained from the sky and the river is tinted inky black. He sits down beside me. I don't look up.

"I shouldn't have brought the album," he says. I throw pebbles down the shore; the soft clicking as they connect on their way to the water is the only sound.

He sighs. "Ten years."

"Ten years," I whisper.

"She wasn't wearing her seatbelt. How did I miss that?"

We're thirsty after the walk, so we stop in Newcastle. Harry orders a pint, and Anna wants some, of course she does: Anna's scared of missing out on anything. I watch with grim amusement as she sucks off the foam and her face wrinkles in disgust...

"You were over the limit," I say.

There's a pause, so long that I chance a look at him. I've never seen him look so old. "Your mother told you, then, did she?" he says, with difficulty.

"I remember." A beat. "You let me have a sip of your pint."

"And your sister threw a fit until I let her have some too. Remember her face!"

I laugh a little. It's a happy memory, shorn of the hour that followed.

"I miss her every day, son," says Harry slowly. His voice wavers, almost breaks. "Every minute. I thought... maybe if I came back to the river... maybe I could... just..."

"Find her," I say.

"Sounds stupid when you say it out loud."

Sshhh! Anna, you'll wake Daddy...

"Not really," I say. "She's still here."

Luke! Where are you? Hurry up.

"I know she is," says my father.

A huge splash as she hits the water. She screams with laughter.

I stand up and strip off my t-shirt. He looks at me like I'm mad. "What are you doing?" he says.

"I'm going for a swim," I tell him.

"Now?"

The dark water's like liquid nitrogen, so sharply frigid that it makes me catch my breath. But I wade on in. "Me and Anna used to sneak out to go for a swim when you were asleep," I say. "God, it's cold." He's watching me from the shore, but he's grinning now. "Come on, she would have done it."

He kicks off his shoes and wades in fully clothed. He doesn't stop until he's waist deep. "You'd better make sure those are dry before we leave in the morning," I scold.

"Cheeky sod," says my father, splashing water at me. I yowl as it hits my skin – God, it's cold – and I sweep a tidal wave right back at him with my arm. And as he dives under water to catch my legs and drag me under, and I yell with laughter as I moonwalk through the heavy, freezing river to escape, I realise that we'll never be all right. But we might be better.

Perceptual Bias

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So, I like a bit of vampire fiction as much as the next person, but I couldn't help but think that the central premise of many a paranormal tale, if applied to the world outside of speculative fiction, would result some... worrying developments. And thus was *Perceptual Bias* born — a short story that wonders what happens if you apply the logic of the vampire narrative to a world in which vampires are firmly fictional?

Perceptual Bias ended up being one of those short stories that never quite seemed to fit anywhere. It's clearly not literary fiction, but neither is it strictly horror, either, and, in any case most horror markets, at the time I was searching for a publisher for this piece, were adamant in their refusal to read anything related to vampires. Fair enough — the market was saturated —but

I don't think this is a vampire fiction either, really. So where did it belong? Nowhere, it appeared, for the longest time. And then I discovered the wonderful *Deraciné*, with its focus on dark, psychological fiction, and knew I'd found a home for my story. So here it is. I still don't know how to classify it, though.

The way George sees it, he has two problems. The first is that his best friend's girlfriend is a vampire. The second is that nobody can see this but George.

It's a question of perceptual bias. George can hardly blame the rest of the world for resisting the logical conclusion, given that it took him long enough to work it out himself, and even when suspicion started creeping in around the edges, he pushed it back for many weeks on exactly the same grounds. Vampires do not exist. Chloe exists. Therefore, Chloe cannot be a vampire. It's a perfectly reasonable argument that allows everyone around him to ignore all the available evidence in favour of assuming that, because it's impossible, it can't be true. And that is, essentially, and more or less verbatim, what Ted said when George tried to talk to him about it. After he'd finished laughing, of course.

"Mate," he'd said, clapping a hand to George's shoulder with enough force to send George staggering a half-step forward, "you're completely fucked in the head, you know that?"

Any other day, George would have agreed with Ted. George's sense of humour tends towards the black; it used to be a coping mechanism, but it turned out to be exactly what it took to get his peers to stop flushing his head down the toilets in high school, and so he'd grown it like a second skin, a bulletproof vest of purest night to shield him from a world that has always felt like it was half a key out of tune. *Fucked in the head* has worked for him: it's not impossible to grind someone's face against a red-brick wall while you're laughing at their jokes, but it's a bit more difficult, and it makes it harder to hear the punchline.

Ted is not like George: Ted is strong, square shoulders forged into an immovable wall by years of rugby; easy smile like melted butter that warms the firm line of his jaw when he's happy, which is often; and charm enough to blanket them both, and he wears it like a cloud, his own personal weather system that draws people into his orbit to share in his private sunshine.

George has never really understood what it is about him that keeps someone like Ted around, but they have been friends since they were seven and Ted has never gone away. If George knew why that was, he'd be a happier man.

So, yes, George is a little bit fucked in the head, though he'd dispute the *completely* part. The problem is, George has apparently become so adept at compensating for his size and relative weirdness with humour that it's become his defining characteristic, and now, it seems, nobody takes him seriously anymore. Not even his best friend, and not even when his life is in danger.

He doesn't know what else to do.

*

Ted met Chloe in a pub. It was Alicia's birthday and their friend, Simon, had been trying to get off with Alicia for as long as George had known either of them, so the pints were flowing, and the more they drank, the more attractive they became, until their circle of six had become a crowd of fifteen, drawn like iron filings to the magnet of Ted's irrepressible social allure. They flowed into the circle of sunshine in twos and threes: women, mostly; the kind that Matt always seems to have on one arm, and that tend to fall over themselves trying to impress Ted while he watches politely, occasionally with faint amusement brightening his gaze. Maybe that's why Chloe caught his eye that night: she was on her own

Other women giggled at Ted under hooded eyes from the safety of their circle of friends, whispering behind their hands and looking away when he noticed them, but Chloe came in alone and stayed that way for the hour it took Ted to get her to meet his smile. Tiny, dark-haired and pale-skinned, she must be seven stone soaking wet, and yet she stood at the bar, cradling her

drink in one hand, and watching the world as though it belonged to her. When Phil got up to get a round in, Ted nodded Chloe towards his friend's recently vacated seat, and she made her way over to the table and sat down like she was assuming her throne in the Hall of Perfect Entitlement. The smile she flashed was easy, even, and very, very white.

George has no idea how it took him so long to work out what she was.

Ted wanted to go home with her that night, but Chloe said no. He asked for her number, and she grinned and told him that if he could find her online, he could give her a call some time. If she'd spent six months researching George's best friend, she could not have managed him with greater skill, and this is how George knows that she's playing the long game. She could have had him that night, but Chloe's not thinking of a one-night thing.

Chloe wants Ted forever.

"She runs her own jewellery-making business," said Ted, two days later. Google had given up the goods after barely ten minutes' searching, and Ted was now buying himself a little Dutch courage before hitting dial on the number he had programmed into his phone for the past hour and a half. Ted has always had a thing for the artsy types. George thinks it's because he'd have been a graphic designer if he hadn't dropped out of college; he makes a good living now in kitchen furnishings, but it's not where his heart is. "She does all right too: look at the price of those earrings."

"It's platinum," said George, and shouldn't *that* have flashed a few warning lights right there? No silver to be had anywhere on the site. "Platinum's expensive."

"Too bloody right," said Ted, and whistled softly under his breath. "She wanted me to call, right? I mean – she wouldn't have told me to look her up if she didn't want me to call?"

George cannot understand how someone who looks like Ted can have absolutely no idea that he looks like Ted. "Yeah," he said. "She looked like she wanted you to call."

"Like you'd know," snorted Phil from across the room, and playfully threw a pillow. It bounced off the arm of George's chair and collapsed on the ground, leaving George free to ignore it.

Phil has the third bedroom in their little Victorian terrace, and he's only there because they can't afford the rent without him. Phil is some kind of distant cousin of Ted's, and Ted spends half his life apologising for him and the other half laughing at the stupid stuff he does.

Ted ended up going into the hallway to make his call, and George did his best not to listen, but the walls are thin and there's a gap beneath the door and it was hard not to hear the low, warm tones that Ted slips into when he's trying to be suave.

He disappeared into the bedroom when Phil went out, half an hour later, ostensibly en route to the loo, but not before he'd made arrangements to take Chloe to the cinema that night. The earthy, spice-rich scent of his aftershave lingered in the bathroom, trailed him down the stairs and out the front door for hours after he left. George knew better than to wait up for his friend's return, so he was surprised to hear the front door open before midnight, and the heavy, careless thump of Ted's boots on the stairs. George has the attic bedroom: directly over Ted's room and part of Phil's. When the house is silent, he can hear echoes of them beneath him, muffled by ceiling, pipes, and floorboards; sometimes, in the small hours, he can hear the creak of shifting mattresses as they sleep.

Ted was alone when he came in that night. If he weren't, George would have known. But he came in solo, kicked off his shoes, splashed water onto his face from the little sink in the corner of his room, and dropped heavily, and in solitude, onto his bed. It was almost an hour before he slept, soft snores drifting up through a latticework of wood and plaster. It was another hour

before George slept, and that was only because he gave in and took a pill when the shadows started to close in.

When he came down to breakfast the next morning, the sun was up and Ted was late for work, and the skin beneath his eyes was a delicate purple-grey, like brushed silk and cobwebs. Phil made some comment about the morning after the night before, but Ted only smiled faintly and punched him on the arm as he swallowed a cup of milky coffee and headed for the door. They didn't see him again that day.

At first, George put it down to overworking. They hardly caught sight of him during those first couple of weeks, though his towel was damp in the morning and the bathroom smelled of his shampoo. He was coming home to sleep, and occasionally to snatch brief meals before disappearing into the night, and that usually meant some kind of cabinet-related crisis—the world of kitchen fittings is a cutthroat business, as it turns out, and Ted's immediate superior is prone to catastrophising. But Ted's standard wind-down procedure after an eleven-hour shift had always involved a couple of pints snatched here and there in the bits where he wasn't eating or sleeping or showering, and this time, George wasn't even sure when those bits were happening. For more than a fortnight, the only indication that Ted still lived in the house was a plate and a novelty coffee cup – *Rugby players do it with funny-shaped balls* – neatly rinsed and left to dry on the draining board each morning. If he slept, he slept after George did; the room below was always silent.

Saturday morning, two weeks and four days after Ted's first date with Chloe. George had stayed up reading until two in the morning and fallen asleep with the light on and his book splayed across his chest, and woken to find it crushed underneath him, cover bent back on itself in a vicious crease that will never heal. There had been no sound from the room below him as his eyelids had slowly filled with lead, and so he was not expecting, as he sat at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee and his brutalised novel propped open beneath a plate of toast in a clear and unambiguous signal to Phil that, as far as George was concerned, he did not exist, to hear a second set of footsteps on the stairs: heavy, careless, and booted.

"Hey hey hey," crowed Phil, as the door swung open. "Looks like love's young dream has finally come up for air."

Ted was dressed for work, hair still damp from the shower and spiking up from his scalp in unruly spears and whorls. His skin was off-white, shading to grey, and the shadows beneath his eyes had darkened and stretched to colour his sockets in shades of pale indigo. He offered Phil a tired smile and his middle finger, and ruffled George's hair on his way to the percolator.

"You're working today?" said George as he passed. "I thought you worked last Saturday?"

"Yeah, had to make up my hours," said Ted, and the last word stretched around a poorly concealed yawn. "Bloody Derek" – another yawn – "wouldn't let me take Wednesday as leave."

It hadn't occurred to George to think that Ted's disappearance had found him anywhere but at the showroom, nose to the backsides of potential clients, working hard to shift some kind of granite-topped work-surface overstock. "I didn't know you took last Wednesday off," he said.

"Yeah." A warm grin, like sunshine bursting through clouds. "It was Chloe's birthday."

"She's got you doing birthdays already?" Phil shook his head into his coffee, all solemn affliction. "You've got no chance. She's got your balls in a velvet pouch."

George was getting the impression that he was the only person in the kitchen who didn't know where Ted had been for the past fortnight. "Huh," he said, as Phil ducked the inevitable poorly thrown punch from a thick-muscled arm that didn't have to miss. "You guys go anywhere nice?"

“Nah, not really.” But there was a glow to Ted’s words that undercut the studied nonchalance in his tone. “Just hung around the house, mostly.”

“I’ll bet you did, mate,” said Phil, and ducked again. “I’ll just bet you did.”

And that was it. Ted spent his nights at Chloe’s house, returning before dawn to wash up and head out to work, and with every passing day his skin seemed to hang a little slacker, his eyes to sink a little further into exhaustion, his spine to slope a little lower. If he came out with them to the pub, he would leave before ten to meet Chloe, whose work patterns followed unsociable hours; if he had a day off, it was spent at Chloe’s house, doing Chloe stuff. His clothes smelled of her perfume; his bedroom smelled of disuse. The bottle of cologne in the bathroom stopped depleting, and then disappeared altogether, along with his razor and his toothbrush. His coffee cup stopped appearing on the draining board.

Even Phil began to notice, and Phil rarely noticed anything that didn’t involve personal monetary gain. “Mate,” he said one morning, when Ted stumbled into the living room, half-awake and unshaven, “you want to watch yourself. That girl is going to suck you dry.”

George glanced up from the morning news to check the reaction, but Ted just shrugged and dropped into an armchair, slurping deeply at his coffee as he threw a cushion, with pinpoint accuracy, directly at Phil’s head. But, though the words were quickly written out of that morning’s history in the ensuing barrage of soft furnishings and insults, they stayed with George. It was just that it was a long time before he worked out why.

Phil was made redundant at the end of the month, and Chloe made her first appearance at Ted’s side when they went out for consolation drinks that night. Ted was grey-faced and subdued, leaning heavily against the faux-leather seat backs, arm stretched lazily along the shelf behind him, and, for the first time, George was struck by how much older he’d begun to look. Crow’s feet worried shallow grooves into the creases of his eyelids, and the thick cords of muscle that had tightened his skin were beginning to soften, narrowing his arms and rounding out his belly. He would be thirty in a couple of months, and he was starting to look like it. George had never noticed this before.

“We should do something for my last day at work,” Phil was saying. “Something really insane. Something, I don’t know, actually *dangerous*. Something that lets you know you’re alive.”

“Sounds like fun,” said a voice behind George; an unfamiliar voice, but he knew it immediately, if only for the way that Ted’s head snapped upright on his neck, the way Ted’s eyes suddenly sparked to life, the way Ted’s face seemed to light from within.

“Hey, gorgeous,” said Ted, and George craned his head to get his first look at Chloe since the night she’d met his best friend.

She was slight, smaller than he remembered, with opal skin and dark brown eyes that danced with unspoken amusement. Her hair was the colour of bitter chocolate, and she wore it piled on top of her head in an untidy bun, strands spilling around her fine-boned face, framing the delicate line of her jaw, her high cheekbones, her deep red lips. She wore a simple black dress and black boots that circled her knees and drew the eye towards her slender thighs, and she was, by any reasonable definition of the term, staggeringly beautiful.

George thinks this is the moment it all started to become clear.

She slid into place beside Ted, nestling into the protective circle of his arm and planting a scarlet kiss on his cheek that she rubbed away with a laugh. Her hand rested lightly on his chest, bright crimson nails stark against the white of his shirt, and George was struck by the sudden, startling thought that they looked like talons—or claws.

The beer was warm, sedative, soothing. George made some joke that had Ted rolling his eyes and laughing, Chloe barking an appalled giggle, Matt punting a packet of peanuts at him across the table, and pushed the thought to the back of his head. But it needled at him as the group adjusted to their newest member the way the group always did: inappropriate questions asked too loudly, moderate physical violence, shouted insults, love thrown around like bullets. Chloe smiled her beautiful smile, bit back with the big words and intelligence that his best friend loved, and wove her way into their fabric as though she had always been there. And, through it all, her hand remained, pressed lightly against Ted's ribcage. Red on white: a spreading, blood-coloured smear, like a bandaged wound. Like a stain that wouldn't scrub off.

George lay awake that night, long after the soft sounds of drunken stumbling from the rooms below had drifted into silence, watching the play of occasional headlights scattering the shadows on the gabled ceiling. Ted was at Chloe's, because Ted was always at Chloe's, spirited away after the hours of darkness and returned before dawn. He remembered the mark of her kiss on Ted's cheek, two scarlet crescents bowed like angel's wings, and blurred through with a stroke of her thumb, the proprietary way that her head rested on his shoulder, the scent of her perfume woven through his hair, as though she were marking him as hers. He remembered all of these things as he watched the darkness and waited for sleep, and he wondered how it was that he could be so completely certain that Ted was almost lost.

The next morning, he saw the mark on Ted's neck, and he knew.

"Sweet Jesus," said Ted by way of greeting as he staggered into the kitchen, shoulders sloped, face drained almost completely of colour. "Please tell me there's coffee. Tell me there's coffee or else just kill me now."

"You're supposed to be working, mate," said Phil, who was either still drunk from the night before or in possession of a liver that defied the limits of human endurance. George suspected the former, though there was room for doubt.

Ted treated him to the glare that his good cheer deserved. "Phoned in sick," he said, and slumped into a chair with sufficient force to skid it four inches backwards against the floor. A shriek of wood on lino pierced the air, and Ted visibly flinched and buried his head in his hands. A moment later, he dropped forward to rest his face against the cool Formica of the kitchen table, and the collar of his t-shirt, rumped at his throat, dropped with him. And there it was: the answer, the evidence George had been waiting for, the thing he didn't know he knew, staring at him in a patchwork of bruised indigo from the tendon that ran between Ted's jaw and his shoulder.

Phil saw it too, and burst out laughing. "Jesus, mate," he said, swallowing a mouthful of tea before it could find its way back out of his mouth in a high-velocity spray. "Are you not feeding that woman properly or what?"

Ted's face did not move from its plastic pillow, but his right hand came up to slap at the offending spot on his neck, tugging up the fabric of his collar to cover it before extending his middle finger in a generalised gesture of invective towards the contents of the kitchen. "Grow up, dickhead," he muttered into the furniture.

"I'm serious," said Phil, who was not looking at George; who could not see the colour drain from George's face. "Could you not have bought her a burger on the way home?"

But George was closer to Ted than Phil, seated beside him and to his right, and George could see what Phil could not. A second's glance, no more, but that moment was enough. Because at the base of Ted's throat, buried by an alibi of angry skin, he'd seen the truth: the faintest trace of red, pinpricking the skin that pulsed softly above the carotid artery.

He had no idea what to say. He was supposed to make a joke, he realised, something dark and distasteful enough to make Ted screw up his face and Phil spit his tea back into his cup, but his mouth had gone dry. “Are you okay?” he asked at last.

“No,” grunted Ted, “I am not okay. I am dying here.”

And that, thought George with a thrill of panic, might be truer than he knew. “Your neck...” he said.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Ted shifted his head slightly so that one eye was free to focus a withering glare in George’s direction. “Yes, I have a hickey. No, I’m not thirteen years old. Okay? We were both really drunk last night.”

Well, Ted certainly had been. Ted had been as drunk as George had ever seen him; there was even a spirited rendition of *You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling*, and George hadn’t seen his best friend channel *Top Gun* since that time they broke into Ted’s dad’s liquor cabinet the summer after their GCSEs. But Chloe walked out of the pub on steady legs, Ted leaning heavily against her narrow shoulder and smiling the loose-jawed smile of a man well in his cups; if she was drunk, she was hiding it well. And now, thinking back, George was forced to wonder: had he seen her drink anything at all? They’d been there for nearly seven hours, all told, Chloe for four of those. And, though he remembered seeing a series of glasses in her hand, he could not remember seeing one of them at her lips.

The rest of the day was spent trying to find a way to deny this. By nightfall, hangover driven back under a wave of fear and denial, he had taken to Google in the hopes of convincing himself that he was wrong, because George was not stupid, and he was not deranged, and he knew there was no way he could be right. Vampires did not exist. Chloe existed. Therefore, Chloe could not be a vampire.

So why was it that, after five hours of searching, all he had was a long list of reasons to be afraid? Why was it that, for every website that thought the idea was crazy, there were four more that thought it was perfectly sane? Why was it that, no matter how hard he tried to be wrong about this, all he could find was evidence that he was right?

He didn’t sleep that night. His eyes closed from time to time, and his brain greyed out and sank into twilight, but wakefulness was never far away. He heard Ted’s return in the soft click of the front door against its hinges, the quiet tread on the stairs, the creak of the loose floorboard on the first-floor landing, and he rolled carefully onto his side, mattress springs sighing beneath him, to check his alarm clock. 5:17. The sky was paling on the far eastern horizon, late stars fading as day crept in around the edges: it was about thirty minutes before sunrise. And Ted was home from Chloe’s.

That was when George knew for sure. And now he has no idea what to do.

Because Ted is fading. Ted no longer plays rugby on a Sunday afternoon; George knows this because his kit gets mud all over the inside of the wash basket, and the inside of the wash basket has been clean now for more than a month. Ted’s chest, once broad and firm, has spread downwards, sliding from his ribs to pool at his belly. Ted’s shoulders have sagged, as though the muscles of his neck have lost their tone, and he wears his tie pulled tight at his throat, pinning the collar of his shirt firmly against his skin. Ted doesn’t come out with them in the evenings and he’s gone all weekend long, and when he appears again on Monday morning, red-eyed and grey-skinned, he looks as though he’s made of paper and shadows. He looks old and tired, like a man who’s been ill for far too long.

George adds this to the list he keeps in a password-protected file on his computer. There’s the intolerance to silver, because she’ll make jewellery from platinum and white gold and

copper, but she won't work with the one metal that everyone wants to buy. Ted says she's allergic, but George has looked it up, and hardly anybody's allergic to silver; they're usually allergic to the nickel that it's mixed with, and there's nickel in white gold. There's the hours she keeps: she sleeps the day away and works long into the night; it's why Ted disappears in the evening and only comes home when it's time to get changed for work. There's the fact that he's never seen her eat or drink. He's seen plates and glasses in her hand, piled high with food or wine, and he's seen them again when they're empty, but he's never seen their contents disappear. There's that weekend at Alicia's parents' place in the mountains that she wouldn't come along for, the weekend where they spent two days drinking home-made sangria in the sun or splashing about in the river, and Ted didn't go because Chloe said she had to work. There's the fact that George has never seen her step foot inside another person's home; the only time she spends with any of them is with Ted at her place, or in public spaces by night. She's never been to Ted and George's place. George has never seen her in the sunlight.

And Ted looks like he's dying, little by little, day by day.

*

Phil is not his first choice of confidante. Phil would not be anybody's first choice of confidante, and George wouldn't even consider the possibility if he weren't desperate. But last night, Ted's phone buzzed while he was out of the room and the message that flashed up on the screen was from Matt, whose girlfriend works for a high-end goldsmith's in the town. And, though only the first two lines were visible against the background photo of Ted and Chloe grinning into the camera, they told George more than he needed to know: *hey dickhead Em says maybe diamond better than ruby but they have selection of rings in ur range if u wanna...*

George doesn't need to read the rest of the message to be certain. He isn't stupid. There's only one reason you talk to a jeweller that isn't your girlfriend about the possibility of diamond rings. There's only one thing this can mean.

It means that Chloe has won.

It's not hard to get time alone to talk to Phil. They're basically the only two full-time occupants of this house anymore; the trick is finding a moment where they're not both doing their best to pretend each other out of existence. Their normal routine is to wait until they hear the absence of movement in any room they want to enter, then swoop in, do what they need to do, and get out again before they're forced to interact, but that's easy enough to subvert, especially when he's dealing with a man of Phil's spatial awareness and adaptability to change. George just rattles about in the cupboard for a minute or two when he hears the adverts come on in the living room next door, then shuts up and stands still for the two minutes it takes Phil to think that he's disappeared back upstairs again. It'd be worth it alone for the look on Phil's face, if the whole thing weren't the polar opposite of funny.

"Hey," says George calmly, while Phil's still frozen in indecision in the doorway and manifestly trying to work out his options. "Just shut up and sit down a minute, would you? I need to talk to you about something."

It goes about as well as he's expecting.

"Are you kidding me?" says Phil at last, and he doesn't look angry yet, and he doesn't look worried. What he looks is confused, but confused is Phil's usual expression. "Mate...I swear to God, as long as I live, I will never understand why he keeps you around. You are a complete psychopath, and I'm not joking."

George is not sure whether he should be flattered or annoyed that it hasn't even occurred to Phil to think that George is winding him up. He says, "Phil, he's going to buy her a ring. You know what that means..."

"It means he loves her." Phil doesn't even raise his voice. He's leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded across his chest. "And maybe if you'd ever had an actual conversation with a human woman in your whole, entire life you might find that easier to understand. Jesus."

It's not as though George wasn't expecting the rebuttal to be situated somewhere along this thematic framework. And it's not as though Phil is exactly beating the ladies away with a stick himself, though it doesn't seem like a good moment to mention their joint brotherhood of involuntary celibacy. "Tell me I'm wrong," he says quietly.

"Tell you you're wrong?" Phil snorts. "No problem: you're not only wrong, I actually think you've genuinely lost it this time. I'm serious, mate. Are you off your meds or what?"

George ignores the question. "She never sets foot outside in the sunlight..."

"Are you even listening to yourself? Of course she does!"

"Name one time you've seen her during daylight."

"Mike and Carol's party."

"That was after dark!"

"No, *you* got there after dark. Ted and Chloe were there all afternoon, out in the back garden drinking beer and eating Carol's stupid tofu burgers."

He's lying. George knows he's lying; Chloe doesn't drink beer and she doesn't eat burgers. His mind races. If Phil is lying for Chloe, then that can only mean that she's got to him too and that she wants Ted badly enough to take down anyone who might stand in her way. George is unassuming, unthreatening – background colour, nothing more – but Phil can't even spell *inconspicuous*. He's exactly the sort of problem that Chloe can do without.

So she's taken care of Phil. Nothing is safe. George holds up his hands in capitulation even as the last thread of hope frays and snaps.

"I'm sorry," he says, and he keeps his voice neutral. "Forget I said anything."

"Psycho," mutters Phil.

"You're right." George just wants him to shut up and leave now so that he can have space to think without Phil's stupidity lowering their collective IQ. "Seriously, forget it."

"You want my advice, mate?" says Phil, and, though George knows the question's rhetorical, he considers answering anyway, just to see what happens. But Phil doesn't give him the chance: "Keep your mouth shut around Ted and just be happy for him for once. Chloe's good for him—she's the best thing that's ever happened to him, if you ask me. So you just keep your psycho mouth shut, all right?"

Which would be fine, George thinks, except that he knows even before Phil levers himself out of the kitchen doorway and stomps back to the match, fresh beer forgotten, that Phil's going to tell Ted himself anyway. It's written into the dismissive shake of his head, the glower, the contemptuous snort—and the way that Phil has never in his life held onto a piece of information that's not his to share. In the end, it takes him less than three days to shoot his mouth off. And it's not that this is a bad thing, really—telling Ted was always going to be necessary, somewhere down the line—it's just that George would have preferred it to have come from him, where his claims could be backed up by the pages upon pages of evidence he's amassed over the past weeks and months, and delivered in something slightly more convincing than an arrogant sneer.

"Mate," says Ted the day after Phil talks to him, and, though he's smiling, he looks hollowed out, stoop-shouldered with exhaustion, "you're completely fucked in the head, you know that?"

They're sitting at the kitchen table, George hunched over a cooling cup of tea, Ted stretched out with his feet on an adjacent chair, sipping from a mug of coffee. His robe has fallen open at his hips, and George can see that he's wearing a new pair of boxers—navy, with a grey paisley print; a far cry from the cartoon animals and sports-themed patterns that Ted used to favour before he met Chloe. His legs are thick and blanketed by a thick curtain of wiry black hair, but the lines of muscle have faded into doughy flesh; the definition is gone.

He makes himself laugh, and says, "That's why you love me."

A tired grin. "You wish."

"Hey," says George. "I'm not the one marrying a vampire, mate."

Ted grins, sips at his coffee. "That's 'cause nobody'd marry you, you ugly bastard."

"She's bad for you," says George, and drops his eyes so he doesn't have to see the flash of anger ghost across Ted's.

"No," says his friend. "She isn't."

"Mate," says George quietly. "I'm worried about you."

"Why? Because I'm happy?"

"Because I think she's sucking the life out of you."

"Fuck you." The mug of coffee strikes Formica with force enough to send liquid slopping up and over the rim. Ted swings his legs off the chair, leans forward across the damp table. "You know what, mate? I know you don't like her. I know you never have, and that's fine, but you know what's not fine? *Chloe* knows you don't like her. The woman I love. The woman I'm going to marry, and I can't even bring her into my own home because I know you'll be shooting daggers at her across the living room floor, and I won't do that to her. Because, you know what? She is the opposite of bad for me. She is so good for me that, I swear to God, I have no idea how I managed to win this jackpot, and I'm not going to have that ruined by some sex-starved little weirdo with a conspiracy complex. You do not get to talk like this about Chloe, do you understand me? Mess about with me all you want, but you cross a line when you talk shit about her."

It's a moment before George can speak. He can feel the tremor in his hands, but as long as they're wrapped tightly around his mug, so tightly that his knuckles are white, his fingertips bloodless, he knows that Ted can't see. He says, "She's the one who won the jackpot. Mate."

Cold silence. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means"—George lets his eyes swing upwards, and his glare is made of ice and glass—"that she knew a sucker when she saw one. And she reeled you in."

"You know what?" The chair scrapes backwards against the floor with enough violence that, for a moment, George actually thinks that Ted will hit him. "Phil's right, mate. You are a psycho." Another shove and the chair skitters away, collapsing on its side in a clatter of wood and lino as Ted strides past George and out of the kitchen. "Stay the hell away from me and Chloe."

*

That was two days ago. Ted hasn't been back to the house since he packed a bag and stormed out, and nobody needed to ask where he was going. George has phoned in sick to work and spent his days endlessly circling Chloe's block hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and the driver's side visor, pulled down and across to the side window. Ted's car is parked on the pavement outside, but the curtains are drawn on Chloe's ground floor flat, and there's no movement from inside.

There wouldn't be, of course. The sun is high in the sky, and it doesn't matter what Phil says, George has never seen her in daylight.

Monday morning, Ted leaves for work. George is parked a little way up the street, but his car is silver, generic, unassuming, and Ted's not looking for it in any case. Chloe doesn't see him to the door, but she wouldn't, of course. Dawn was hours ago.

Silence. Stillness. The world around them is waking up, engines firing, children yelling, bus stops filling, but Chloe's flat remains bathed in darkness, motionless and dead. The way George sees it, he has two problems. The first is that his best friend's girlfriend is a vampire, and she's slowly draining the life from the man George loves more than anyone else in the world. The second is that Ted won't believe him, and that's going to get him killed.

George knows now what he has to do.

He'll go to the door, ring the bell for apartment 1A, the one with no name above the buzzer because she's never quite got around to writing it in. The intercom is broken, he knows, so she'll have to come out to the main entrance to let him in, and she won't know that it's George. It's a late winter morning, but the sun is up, pooling watery yellow sunlight onto the little stoop out front, and it will spill into the hallway as the door opens. A person could only avoid it by crouching in the shadows, hiding behind the door as George makes his way in, and that will be enough to let him know that he's not wrong. Ted and Phil can protest all they want, but George knows he's not wrong. Chloe is killing his friend, but only George can see this. Only George can save him. And he'd do anything to keep Ted safe.

He pats the reassuring weight of his backpack, the sharp lines and angles, the unfamiliar shape of the rearranged contents. George ignores it, focuses on crossing the street. The bag is heavy, and it stabs uncomfortably against his back with every footstep: one long, straight, sharpened pillar of wood knocking against paper, knocking against his spine.

He knows what he has to do.

To The End Of The World & Back

First published in *Everyday Fiction*, July 2017

I wrote this story on Valentine's Day. I remember that distinctly, because there's nothing remotely romantic about this piece — quite the opposite, in fact. This story is about the death of love. My husband was perplexed, I think, when I woke him up to get him to read it.

In my defence, I'd been struck by the inspiration when signing a card to him. *I love you to the end of the world and back*, I wrote, and my brain, with spectacular timing, decided that this was the appropriate occasion to wonder what that phrase might mean in real terms. This piece of flash fiction is the result.

We don't even celebrate Valentine's Day.

The sirens went off when they were having their usual argument: the one that was about chores when it started off and cycled through his mother, her mother, the relative value of their esteem, their plans for the summer, and the last time either one of them had said anything nice. It had become so rote that they could have it without thinking now and neither of them felt any kind of catharsis afterwards, just the slow-burning exhaustion of having something monumental blocking out the sun that nobody could step around and nobody could move.

She'd just launched into the story of what his sister had said to her on their trip to his grandmother's three years ago, when it occurred to both of them together to wonder if the noise from the street was actually noise from the street and not the usual screaming inside their heads. Everybody knows that sound. The trouble is, nobody expects to *hear* that sound, outside of the movies and the adverts that had been cropping up on the television with disconcerting frequency as hostilities had heightened, and, for a moment, all they could do was stare at each other in speechless panic and wait for the other one to say it first.

In the end, they spoke together: "Is that...?" and "Oh my God...!" and he reached for her hand without thinking, and she let him without thinking, and they ran together for the cellar that might or might not have been adequately retrofitted to hold off Armageddon, because money was tight and it wasn't as though anybody would ever actually *need* it. People were crazy and tempers were fraying, but governments were dependable and cooler heads would always prevail. You built your bomb shelter in your cellar because the man from the council would fine you if you didn't, and you stocked it with cans and bottled water and the sort of books you never expected to read, and you trusted the people in charge to make the sort of decisions that had Joe from the Post Office rolling his eyes and muttering darkly about appeasement and sovereignty and basic human dignity. And you slept in your bed without keeping half an ear out for the sirens, because people were crazy, but nobody was *that* crazy.

"My mother...!" she whispered as he fumbled in the cutlery drawer for the keys to the cellar door. Her mother was elderly, in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and she wanted to come and live with them and he'd said absolutely not, no way, she could go to a home or she could stay where she was but she wasn't moving into his house. And she'd been privately pleased that the decision had been made and it hadn't been made by her, because her relationship with her mother had never been warm or easy, but family was family and the guilt of not wanting to live through snide comments and disparaging remarks about the colour of the bathroom suite was eating her up inside. But they'd fought about it anyway, constantly, and they'd slept in separate beds and made up the next morning and fallen into acrimony again by nightfall, because however much she didn't want to be the person to make that decision, it had to be made by her, and he couldn't take that away.

"I'm sorry, love," he said, and squeezed her hand. "She has her own shelter, doesn't she?"

And she nodded, even as tears flowed thickly over her cheeks and nose, because a woman with Alzheimer's can't sit alone in a cellar without someone to help her, but what use was it to worry about that now? She sniffed and said, "Where are the keys?"

"They're in here somewhere," he said, but he was chucking knives and forks on the floor now, narrowly missing his foot with the pointy end of a bottle-opener, and there were no keys appearing in the empty space they left behind. "They're bloody well in here *somewhere*. Where the hell else would they be?"

The sirens meant three minutes to get to shelter. She wasn't sure how many seconds they'd missed in not realising what was happening, but she was certain it had been at least sixty of searching.

“For Christ’s sake!” she shouted, and pushed him out of the way. “You have one bloody job! ONE!” she yelled, and she ripped the drawer out of its moorings, scattering its contents on the ground, but there were no keys to be seen.

For a moment, they could do nothing but stare at each other. Had she put the keys back again after her last trip to stock up on a couple of feminine hygiene products it had just occurred to her to think she’d need? Had he put them back after he spent a night on one of the cots down there when she was crying herself to sleep in their bed and he couldn’t bear to hear it? And then the air changed, shifted slightly: not a sound, but more of a feeling, something primal, something that said *this is close to ending now*. And they ran together for the cellar door and she rattled the handle and he shouldered it with all his weight, but it was designed to stand up to a nuclear blast, and it didn’t move.

She was crying harder now – fat, frightened tears – and the blood had drained from his face. The sirens wailed a mourning cry, and they stood for a moment and looked at each other, properly, for the first time in many months. Five years married, eighteen months of bliss, three and a half years of loving each other too much to walk away, loving each other too much to stop punishing each other for how empty and sad they felt inside.

When they spoke, they spoke together: “I love you...” she said, and he said, “...to the end of the world and back.”

Edge of Heaven

Shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award and available now from NewCon Press

An excerpt from my debut novel, *Edge of Heaven*, currently available from NewCon Press.

April 2119: in the Réserve Naturelle de l’Auvergne, a dog-walker makes a gruesome discovery buried in the crumbling lock of a dried-up canal. In that moment of horror, she sets in motion a chain of events that will bring catastrophe in their wake.

Three hundred miles away, the bi-level city of Creo towers above the wastelands of western France. In its dark lower districts, Danae Grant lives alone with a dangerous secret: the kind that can get a person killed. The sunless streets of Creo Basse have become a refuge for the dispossessed – a place where a person can lose themselves if they don’t want to be found – but the Auvergne discovery is about to bring the sins of the past right to Danae’s door. She’s going to have to make a decision ... and it could cost her life.

amnisonaut [am-**nis**-uh-nawt, -not] *noun* Any robotic unit with a direct processing link to the datastream. From *amnis* (Latin: *stream*), also the name of the first commercially available robots to follow the stream linked model. *See also*: a-naut, Semi-autonomous Artificial Aide (S3A *abbrev.*), spark (*derog.*)

From *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2085 edition)

29 April 2119

It all started to fall apart on a clear, moonlit night in the Auvergne, in a quiet valley where the trees could still be persuaded to grow. Héra walked briskly, burrowed into her jacket against the unseasonable chill. The day had been mild and dry, and the cold had only crept out of the shadows as the sun went down, but you weren't supposed to go out in the sunlight this late in the season, and she didn't like the day-suits. They irritated her skin. So it was either walk after dark or stay indoors, and she could do plenty of that at home. She missed the green, at home. She always had.

It was a pleasant night, despite the whisper of frost in the breeze, and she was enjoying the hike. The moon was high in the sky and the dog, who didn't get out as much as he should, was mad with excitement, tearing off in a cloud of dust after a piece of bleached bone that she pitched into the middle distance. Sometimes she wondered if it was him she really wanted to see when she made these annual visits to an elderly aunt whose primary attraction, in Héra's opinion, was her residence on the edge of the Réserve Naturelle, where the trees were sheltered by a permanent UV haze-filter and the water table was stringently protected and, rumour had it, some of the bird life was creeping back.

The path she had chosen followed an old river bed, dammed somewhere upstream and reduced to a shallow brook in the centre of a wide, arid trough. Trees and scrub bushed over the banks, and ahead of her, reaching dark fingers of jagged stone into the night sky, the ruins of an ancient bridge caught the dog's barks and bounced them back to her in echoes. He was a mobile shadow in the gloom ahead as he worried around the base of an old circular lock on the embankment, long-emptied and left to crumble. The walls had collapsed under the weight of decades of neglect, cascading stonework onto the dusty river floor. These things fascinated Héra: a window onto a long-forgotten past.

A light breeze stirred the naked branches as she passed, clattering them together like raindrops on a window. Shadows danced on the moon-bleached earth as wood rustled against wood, and the sound reminded her, suddenly, of rattling bones. Héra stopped, clapping a hand to the back of her neck, and glanced back over her shoulder at the empty path. The riverbed stretched out behind her, melting into darkness, still and quiet and undisturbed, a single set of footprints tracking her passage across the dusty scrub. She didn't know what had unsettled her, only that something felt suddenly... wrong.

Unease prickled in her belly. Out here, where the tourists went, the authorities were quietly watchful and airily dismissive, but you still heard stories, even now, about the things that hid in the lonely places.

'Sébastien!' she called. Her voice sounded uncertain and far too loud in the still air. 'Here! Come here!'

The dog's ears twisted towards her, but it was the only sign that he'd heard. He'd caught a scent, ears pricked and tail high, and followed it to the base of one of the struts, where he'd managed to scramble onto one of the unstable lumps of masonry at the bottom of the rubble pile. Héra picked up her pace.

'Hey!' she called again as he skipped onto a narrow ledge and almost lost his footing. She broke into a jog. 'Sébastien! Get down! Now!' He circled, tail thumping against an overhang at his flank and releasing a tumbling river of dust and scree that rattled down the slope. A whine and a tentative step forwards, followed by a shuffling retreat. He was stuck. Héra rolled her eyes.

'Oh, for God's sake,' she snapped. 'All right, I'm coming, I'm coming.'

The footing was easier close to the bank, where the rubble was bedded in against the earth, and she heaved herself onto an uneven ledge near the bottom, snagging her trousers against the rough lip of the rock, feeling skin tear. Héra muttered a curse as she scrambled to her feet and bent down to see what the stupid dog had made her do. Pale skin peeked through a fresh rip in a pair of trousers that were already well-patched, and she saw, half-hidden beneath the fabric, a crescent-shaped hollow, dotted with pinpricks of red where the blood was starting to flow. The cut was ragged but clean; it felt worse than it looked. She'd live.

Reassured, she straightened. And then she smelled it.

A sweet-foul smell, faint but unmistakable. A smell of mould, of decay, of meat left too long in the sun.

A dead smell.

A low growl from the dog crept through the shadows above her, and she realised that this was the scent he'd followed.

Her first instinct was to turn and run. Héra was neither delicate nor superstitious, but there was a lot of evolution behind the urge to get away from something that smelled like that. Her hand rose to cover her mouth as her stomach rolled; her thighs tensed, ready to make the drop to the earth below and tear off in the direction of civilisation. But she caught herself on the edge of balance: no.

She was a forty-seven-year old woman. She needed to do better than that.

So she made herself drop to a crouch instead, fall back against the cool stone behind her. She was an adult, a grown woman, a sensible woman. The smell was unmistakable, creeping in around the sleeve of her coat that she'd raised to her face, but death was common in the wilderness. It was what happened to foxes who wandered too far in the midday sun in search of food; birds without water; dogs that clambered up unsteady slabs of masonry after an interesting odour. *Tourist calls police over dead rabbit*. Héra could just imagine her aunt's face if that hit the papers. She needed to be sure.

So she tested her weight against a likely slab of rock, finding her balance against the angle of the stone, inching forward with cautious feet. Trapped on his perch, Sébastien circled and whined and watched her with unhappy eyes.

'Stay,' she told him, as though he was likely to listen, even as he tensed his back legs for a jump that he reconsidered at the last moment. 'Sébastien – stay!'

The lock wall had fallen in on itself at the weakest point, where the old gate used to open out onto the river. Héra shuffled across jagged stone to the lip of the overhang, clinging to the rock face for support. The basin was deeper than she expected, opening up into a sucking blackness that almost unbalanced her as she found her footing and peered in, squinting into the darkness. Uncontained by the walls, the stench seared her nose, and she retched, burying her face in the collar of her coat. It was an effort to keep her eyes open and focused on the gloom while they adjusted. They picked out the glint of moonlight on the detritus of decades, the shadow of ancient machinery, great beams of wood rotted to collapse in the uneven shadows cast by the crumbling walls... and a bright flash of white against black that drew her eye downwards against its will, to a hollow beneath the arm of some kind of metal structure set into the centre of the well, where she could just see a figure in a pale shirt curled in on itself beside the ruins of a recent firepit.

Not a fox, or a bird, nor a daredevil dog, but that was all she could say for sure. Half-hidden by darkness, there was no way to tell if it was male or female, even adult or child. It was only the

sense of absolute stillness, the depth and the consistency of the silence, that made her certain that this was the source of the odour.

Enough. Whoever it was, whatever their story was, now she knew. She knew, and she needed to leave, right this second, and preferably sooner. Maybe the person in the white shirt had someone, somewhere, who was missing them. Maybe tonight's discovery ended somebody else's nightmare. She hoped so. It wasn't as though...

Something moved.

Something moved. At the bottom of the pit, where the dead thing was. *Where nothing ought to be moving.*

Héra's paralysed heart skipped painfully back into rhythm, drawing her breath back into her lungs in a ragged gulp, and she tasted death at the back of her throat.

Nothing moved, she told herself fiercely. She was a grown woman, a sensible woman. She was too old for ghost stories. *Nothing moved.* 'Hello?' she called softly, almost a whisper. 'Hello? Is someone down there?'

Behind her, the dog let out another growl, soft with menace, and she turned her head to glare at him. 'Sébastien!'

He shrank at the tone, flattening himself in submission, but his hackles were up and his eyes were fixed, not on her, but somewhere past her shoulder, in the depths of the ruined lock.

Behind her.

She couldn't look. She had to look. The dog growled again, head low, lips curling over his front teeth. She'd never seen him like this. Héra opened her mouth to snap at him, but terror had stolen her breath and her throat closed around the words. Panic whined in her ears as she made her head turn away from the moon-drenched scree, twisted her gaze back towards the silent shadows. But she *had* to look.

'Hello?' she whispered, soft words disintegrating in the sound vacuum. 'Hello? Is there someone down there?'

It came sliding out of the blackness like a nightmare: two piercing eyes and a high, keening growl that sliced through the still air and the last vestiges of her self-control. Héra heard herself make some sort of noise – not words, but not solid enough to be a scream – and her knees buckled, loosening her footing on the ledge. The world refocused, narrowed to a point, and there was only the stench and the liquid darkness and the thing unfolding itself from the shadows, claws scrabbling against the dusty basin, fangs bared around a snakelike, predatory hiss...

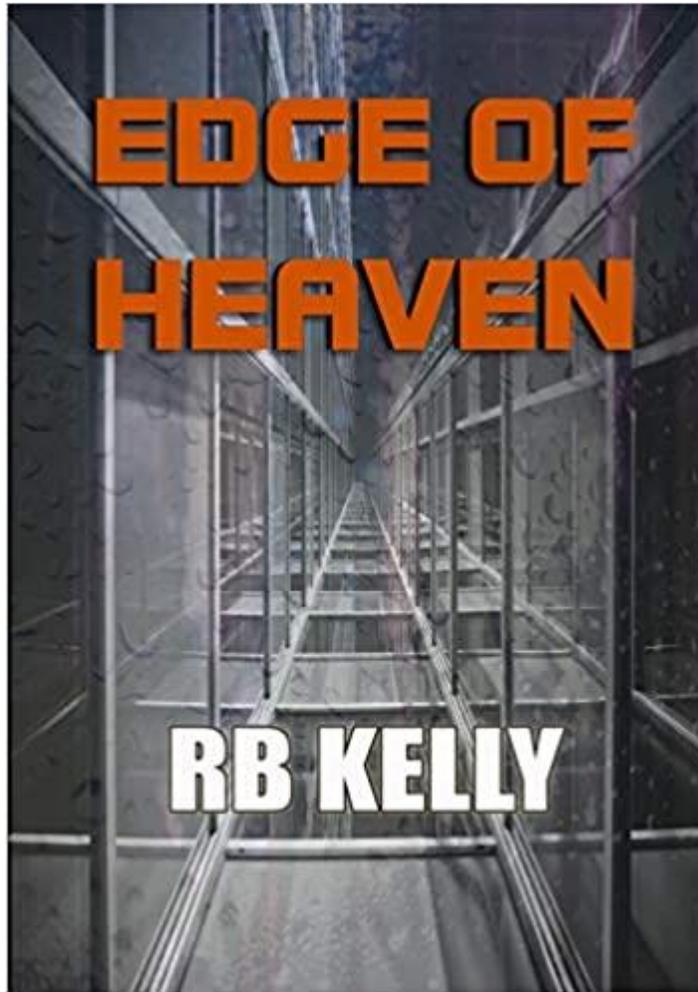
It was a cat. For a second her brain couldn't process it, and then she started to laugh. It was a *cat*. It was a fucking wildcat, lips pulled back and snarling a warning through viscera-coated, broken teeth. It was a cat pulled from the vale of horrors, true: skin hanging loosely off its bones, mange poking through the matted fur; muzzle bloody and putrid where it had been buried in rotting flesh, feeding. But it was a cat. It wasn't a denizen of the underworld, rising like Death out of the black air and reaching for her with bony fingers; it was a starving animal protecting its dinner. And it just wanted Héra to go away.

She raised a hand in surrender and found it was shaking. The cat keened a warning note, body arched in rage, and Héra leaned back a little in her foothold, peering down the slope in search of a path.

'I'm going, I'm going,' she said unsteadily. Nervous laughter churned her stomach. 'Yes, all right, I'm going.'

But the cat's warning wasn't directed at her. Half a second too late she noticed, in time to snap, 'Sébastien! No, stay! *Stay!*' But he couldn't hear her. It wasn't his fault, he just knew his place in the universe, and part of it was to give cats a hard time. He was a big dog, his back legs were strong, and it was a good leap. It wasn't quite enough to clear the gap that separated them, but it was enough to unbalance her as he glanced off her foothold and tumbled down the slope in a torrent of shale and protest. For a second Héra hung, suspended in the air, hands scrabbling at nothing. And then she fell, pitching backwards, and she knew even as the sky moved above her that there was nothing she could do to stop it, that there was nothing to cling to, nothing to catch her or to soften her impact. She landed heavily on her back and for a moment the air was knocked out of her and all she could do was lie, helplessly, prostrated on damp earth that was thick with putrefying fluids. As the breath rushed back into her lungs, her mouth filled with stench, and she gagged, rolling instinctively onto her side on aching ribs. The cat aimed a furious swipe at her cheek and disappeared into the shadows, and Héra was face to face with a week-old corpse, bloated skin mottled purple, bulging eyes staring blankly into hers.

The dark walls pillowed her screams and sucked them into blackness.



Edge of Heaven by RB Kelly

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Edge of Heaven is her debut novel. It was a winner of the Irish Writers Centre Novel Fair and was shortlisted for the Arthur C Clarke Award.

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