

# The Filament Bulb

By  
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# I

All that exists is the ticking of the clock. Its rhythm a reminder of a life lost, and a place I can no longer grasp. In reality I lie on sterile sheets, I feel them under me jagged with over-starching. They prick me, but only momentarily, like a wave washing coldly over the tips of my toes, teasing me, tempting me to feel more. Mostly I feel nothing, the numb arm that got slept on, disobeying whilst the mind demands life.

Sometimes I feel hospital-issue rubber bellows pump stale air into my lungs, or the injecting of cold fluids into my veins. But there are instances when I cannot feel these things at all, when my mind is disconnected from my cadaver-like body, as if I have been unplugged from the living, and can float sampling the wafers of truth. It could be the numbing morphine that takes me to the Technicolor world nestled between my synapses, or could it be the up to now absent God playing with his ants? A child with a magnifying glass, focusing the rays of the sun, teasing the creatures with heat before enflaming their senses with vaporisation.

The last thing I can remember is the icy hit of metal to my side, then the giddy warmth flowing from my head, spilling into the street, a carnival rhythmically beating the drums, inciting a flood of more to join their parade of the asphalt. That was the accident, fate catching up with me for my sins. Sloth, greed, and worst of all pride, tattooed on to my frontal lobes, and though these things are at the farthest edge of my mind, they are also at the foremost. The clock ticks and I count the seconds, I don't sleep, my eyes are closed but I am awake. Sometimes I see light broken by shadow on the inside red of my eyelids, movement around me but no sense. The shades of maroon and scarlet dance like amoeba on a glass slide, beautiful in their simplicity, but meaningless. What I have seen is meaningless. Some would say it was heaven, but this is no such place, this is a high, pure and simple. Morphine. Only those who haven't tried living would take so much comfort in dying, this is what drugs do ladies and gentlemen, a sly E here, a snort there... that is heaven.

Illegality of drugs means that most people have never felt this. If I was one of them, then this place would be profound, but it is not. I have seen sights that are strange, the earth from up high as if it had been split into the segments of an orange, and as darkness fell on one, a blanket of stars light up to combat it, to make those below feel

safe. Darkness is natural, the light artificial, a smile from a shopkeeper who keeps a sharpened blade below the counter.

I've seen the vapour trails of aircraft, and the streaming wakes of liners cut zigzags into the surface below, down to the child's marble rolling in on the wet playground, a world not dissimilar. Microbes busy about their lives, their continent the child's greasy finger-prints until they are wiped out by flood, their glass planet consumed by a half-inch deep puddle. I've looked into the outer reaches of the solar system, sailed the lava waves of Io, swam the liquid methane lakes of Titan, and sat on Charon pondering, staring at the dull glow of the miniscule sun. I've taken the guise of a silver surfer, skimming the rings of Saturn with my finger tips, riding the flares of the sun that blast climatically until they lap at Neptune, the firefly sparks dampened by ocean.

I have seen these places, but I haven't been to them, because they were never real, just as life was never real in the buzz of the high. My reality is irrationality, a conjuring of images that are not my own memories. They are simply the flickering moving images of a cheap popcorn reeking theatre, playing back imagination as it would an independent French film.

I see light and dark, a white tunnel that beckons me through the void, but they are explainable, being the flashes of a doctors torch testing whether my pupils dilate and contract, the torch of life and death. The void is simply the endless night in which my eyes are closed, but I cannot sleep. Who would have thought a comatose patient could be an insomniac. Though if I ever wake up, I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to catch up on sleep, in between visits from a buck-toothed carer who steals from me to pay for her marijuana habit.

I've seen a fog-faced man, his features formed from an ethereal mist contained in a glass oval, his eyes dark black beads with a white pupil dotting the centre, stalking me. But he is not death, he is imagination, my imagination reminding me that none of this is real, telling me not to let go of everything yet. Just to hold on for a little longer. He stalks me to keep me alive, so that the fate that has befallen my body, won't seep into my mind, and poison what I am.

Perhaps the mind creates things to scare us, or even annoy us, to keep us alive, like the mountaineer who after breaking his legs, could hear only one thing in the wilderness. It wasn't the howl of the wind, or the tap of the rain upon the jagged rocks that had broken him. It was his mind playing 'Brown Girl in the Ring' a song that he

found so infuriating that it forced him to fight, because it wasn't this song that he wanted as the soundtrack to his death.

Yes, it's true, I have seen things that others would call madness, but I think this is the only thing that has ensured my sanity. An active mind has stopped me from becoming a vegetable, an inanimate object that not at first, but eventually starts to rot, its roots cut from the nourishment. The mind needs nourishment too, but not just glucose and amino acids, but stimulation, a film to ponder, a Rubik's cube to puzzle over and after hours of pointless twisting, to pull the stickers from the sides and glue them back on.

Though the things I have seen are perhaps in some way miraculous, lesser men would say they were formulated by God. It does not mean I believe it though. Sometimes I feel my heart beat, its rhythm inconsistent, perhaps wanting to burst from my chest, a tell-tale revealing a proximity to death. Maybe, they'd try to bring me back, a defibrillator jolting my soul until the seat is pulled from under me. I might fall from my high back into my body. This may happen, but, perhaps it has already. Perhaps the dream I had of white figures, wasn't death, but life, a place where the natural is fended off with scalpels and plastic tubing. Is it possible that the thirty ticks of the clock that passed were a reality; that the hazy gaze of light striking the surfaces like sparks, came from my eyes. It could have been reality. But darkness fell before I could tell.

## II

I woke in a room that seemed ambient in its temperature, as though it had been kept this way intentionally. The lights had been dimmed, but seemed bright to my eyes; how long had it been since I had even opened them? The fittings were unfamiliar yet seemed to hold a familiarity I could not at that point explain. As I blinked furiously to clarify the fuzzy picture frames, beds and a half drawn curtain that surrounded my mattress. I soon realised that these features, the smell of stale cleaning fluids that burned my nostrils in their intensity and the ominous presence of a dirty white shade meant that I lay in hospital. My lids were encrusted with a layer of sleep that must have gathered there over some time, yet it was unbeknownst to me how I had arrived in this room, let alone when. The bread crumb layer pained my tear ducts every time I blinked in order to remove a gelatinous glaze that had also settled itself over my left iris. Yet when I attempted to rub my eyes to free them from their unwelcome inhabitants, nothing happened.

I was forced me to act. 'Move' I thought to myself, as I had thought many a lazy morning when the option to get out of bed and shower had been outweighed by the comfort of a sprung mattress and goose feather pillows.

However, this thought aside, the movement, if I could create such a stirring ever again was of the utmost importance, as I could not be paralysed. 'No!' I thought 'This is desperate... I've got to move'. The fear for my future had distracted me from the fact that my arms and legs had begun to tingle with pins-and-needles, which, from what I could gather was a good sign.

My finger twitched, in a movement that pained me for the fact that it was obviously still bruised from whatever trauma had befallen my body. A nurse entered the room, and was barely under the door frame, when a look of immense shock appeared on her face, she turned, stumbled over her own feet, regained her stance and immediately called for a doctor. He entered briskly with a smile on his face. 'I thought we'd lost you there for a minute' he said cheerily.

This made me smile, though my face was unable to express such emotion at the time. It made me think of a hospital drama I had seen, with the nonchalant doctor entering and in not so many words, taking credit for the recovery of a generic patient.

He told me. 'It'll be a long road, but we'll get there in the end'. The idea that I would 'get there in the end' gave rise to a wondering of how I arrived in this predicament in the first place. Though I was still unable to talk I frowned, my wide eyes scanning the walls as if to question my place in this room. Fortunately the Doctor was moderately intuitive, his eyes reacting to mine sympathetically. 'Ah, so you want to know how you got here? It's not surprising you can't remember much, you took quite a hit to the head'. I again frowned impatiently, as if his prolonging the story would keep me on the edge of my seat, but in fact the opposite was true, it was very, very annoying.

I grunted a high pitched whine in order to quicken his pace of story telling, 'Oh I see you're getting a little impatient, well the simplest way I can put it, is that you were hit by a car and you were brought here, and have been in an induced coma for around a month to allow the swelling on your brain to subside'. This fact shocked me, a whole month had passed, but my brain was telling me that this could not be possible. 'It's all down to freewill John, you gave yours up when your body gave demands that the mind couldn't meet'. I nodded, trying to understand what he meant by this 'Pain is one thing, the body detests it, and would rather shut itself down than endure it. But when you gave up your freewill, when you lost the ability to choose, you became a creature that even God couldn't pity'. His words were ambiguous, but I knew what they meant, and so did the nurse who was redressing my wounds.

She worked roughly, as if her frustrations were being taken out on the curved clotted cut that lay on my abdomen. Perhaps she could tell what the Doctor had already gathered. My receding veins, and the dark rings that semi-circled my lower lids, meant that even though I had been hit by a car, the rest of the damage had been done for want of a better word, intentionally. You see, addicts start out as people just like you, they have jobs and responsibilities, but then they decide one night to 'intentionally' take something different, something a bit stronger than anything they've ever dared. The intention becomes obsession, at first they think about the high, and how great it felt, and then they ponder for a while 'Why not try it again?' and so they do. What they don't realise is that the first time that compound hit their bloodstream, they were already hooked, and their free will, is just delusion.

### III

A few days later, on a cold day, I had a visit from my girl. She was blonde, and leggy, and due to the fact that the hospital bed had been set so low to the ground and she had a mini skirt that was high, I was able to see the trim of her panties where they met her thigh. There was a great enjoyment in this sight, but when I looked up her eyes were full of tears it instantly ruined the moment for me. Yet, the tears, did not seem to be because of my state, they reflected what she was about to do.

‘I can’t do this anymore.’

‘What? I’m a little deaf in my left ear now.’

‘I can’t do this anymore!’

‘I heard what you said in the first place. So you’re even more heartless than I thought... you’d kick a cripple when he’s down. Your mother must have made a pact with the devil when she gave birth to you!’

‘I didn’t mean to hurt you, and I know you are hurting John.’

‘Do you know what? The Nobel Prize committee missed a real catch with you! Of course I’m in bloody pain! I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve got a fucking tube going into my head! You say the most fucking stupid things sometimes Amy.’

‘I can’t believe after all that’s happened to you, you are still the same old John, still a cold bastard. And you wonder why I don’t want to be with you anymore?’

‘Yeah! Well just fucking go then, if I wanted a whiny little bitch, I would have bought myself a Shitzu a long time ago’.

‘Well, whatever you say about me John, you’ve still brought everything upon yourself. People don’t get away with things forever, sooner or later they catch you up, and make you pay for what you’ve done. I live with Paul now, I don’t love him, but at least he doesn’t need drugs to feel something’

In that moment of contemplation, a time in which I could have responded to her in kind. I did not. I refrained, because I knew she was right. Her stay was short, and exit swift, she breezed from the room leaving a vacuum wake. I had taken so much away from her, mostly her trust, elements that I had no longer had. I looked at the ceiling at the strip light, its flicker paining the back of my eyes. Our life together was like that incandescent tube. I had shattered the fragile glass by feeling too much, by taking out my pain on her again and again without the thought that one day she would be gone

forever, and one day I would not be able to pull her back. I realised that the bulb though hardy, and lighting for thousands of hours was something that when broken, could never be repaired. I was the bulb, my casing had shattered and so I had been discarded by the only person who ever saw beyond my reputation as a user, the only person who really cared for me.



#### IV

My recovery was such that when one boned healed, another one pained me with equal vigour along the fracture lines. In a way I enjoyed the pain I felt, it nagged me in a way that was intrinsic, as if some comfort to Amy leaving me or even replacing her in other aspects, an itch to scratch or a hassle to cope with. It was punishment for letting her leave, and for me continuing being who I had been, for as long as I had been conscious of what I was. It was true that I did not deserve her though I wanted her back, but equally, she was better off without me. This wasn't just the painkillers I had taken making me feel that morose tone of grey one feels when you have misplaced twenty-notes. This was the kind I had imagined watching the most vivid of war movies, when a grunt has his leg blown off, and in a stupor tries to reattach the limb, but it no longer fitted, it no longer had cohesion. This was Amy and me, we no longer fitted together, our tendons had torn and the socket had deformed. No surgery could fix that.

My brain raced through scenarios, if I could just explain that I would change; though this made me laugh, but also feel psychotic for doing so, an echo filled the ward startling sleeping patients. Change... I couldn't ever do so, the idea was moronic, why would I suddenly stop now, I'd still have to prove something to myself, yes I was a cripple, but I was a cripple who wouldn't hesitate in taking from her, family and friends who happened to leave their phone and wallet on the coffee table. To say that I would change was naïve, I had been made in this way for some unknown reason, perhaps 'God' had made me to show others how not to treat the ones you love. Either way people don't change, and those who claim they have are goddamn liars.

When I finally left the ward, scarred though seemingly unscathed, I headed home to the flat that I had left behind. It seemed like the only refuge for a bitter man and a time in which fate's hand had trounced mine on several occasions. I expected an empty shell of what we had previously called home, Amy surely would have cleared out her things by now. This place was hers, not mine. Men don't make homes, they're just allowed to stay for a while if they're lucky. Women are the ones who buy cushions to make that oddly painful spring in the sofa feel only slight in its significance.

To go back to the flat was something that seemed painful, memories pasted the walls like a collage of nightmares, the scuffs and dents that had seemed so insignificant at the time illustrated that anger had been the driving force of our lives, or more exactly mine. This time however, I would return to a place where none of these things would be of any consequence; no matter how much I was angered, the walls were the only things that cared enough to take the brunt.

I reached the generic metal plated door that all flats have, with paint thick covered screws that edged its form, and the spy hole that had been licked with paint ever so slightly making it for all intents and purposes useless. I pushed in the key, my hand juddering as it turned, perhaps it was the let down from the morphine, doubtful. Maybe, not being out of it made me feel fear for the first time, that when I opened the door Amy wouldn't be there to open a packet of biscuits, and make me a cuppa.

The door slid open with its characteristic squeak, the bottom brushing the carpet, slowing it before it bounced off the rubber bumper. I took my first step through the door, my leg paining me from the metal rods and screws that had been grafted to the bone, Wolverine hadn't got shit on me. It had been three months since I'd smelt the over-powering pot pourri that tried to hide the musk of the thirty-year-old carpets. They had been made this way by the constant trudging of soiled boots, but more recently the boots of a dial-up dealer. It was safer to deliver, and hide the gear in a compartment cut into the soles of his shoes. Drastic measures some may think, but if pigs followed then the best way for the stash to get away was attached to Skinny. Before he hit the drug scene hard, he'd been a triathlon champ, though the drugs had taken his eye off the goal in life, and his ability as a sportsman somewhat, he could still out-run most cops. The beat were over-weight, and prison gave inmates the time to turn their bodies from play-doh into statues carved from stone. Prison was not good for the beat, it made the petty-thieves into drug-lords. This is what it had done for Skinny, and he returned the favour in kind, by distributing escapism to his customers.

I walked through the hallway, began to open the door to the lounge slowly. This was the last hurdle, the last barrier, a world that could hold a scenario of me and Amy, a universe where we were together. For every decision I had made, she had stood by me. When I took that first hit, she was there. When I decided I didn't need help, she was there. When I got fired for stealing to pay for my habit, she was there. But when the car hit my side and broke me, this was not my decision, this was fate. This was universe deciding that if I couldn't make the right choices, then I wouldn't get to

make them anymore. It has been said that for every choice we make in life, whether it be to have toast for breakfast, or cereal, there is another copy in another dimension that decided that morning to have a sugar filled bowl of E numbers. Perhaps that copy decided not to take anything at the party, perhaps one copy asked for help, and pride didn't get in the way. Maybe I was the flawed copy, the one that had everything crash in on him, and got buried in the heart. The door creaked open, my eyes teetered on the edge. She wasn't there. She was gone.

The helpful staff of the hospital made sure I had no other drugs than the painkillers prescribed, that did nothing to kill the pain, in fact trying to make pain die was pointless. The bottle of vodka I had just drunk had not helped things either, painkillers and alcohol don't mix at the best of times. But, I already knew that. TV had made sure that every kid knows painkillers and alcohol are just one of the many ways to kill yourself, along with the archetypal teenage angst leading to self mutilation gone wrong, or the convenient bunk bed hanging scenario. I didn't want to die painfully, just to go to sleep and not wake up, there wasn't much left for me. The drugs had made my body a wreck, along with my life in its entirety. I wasn't always like this, I came from a good home, and never had wanted for anything, but perhaps it's kids like this who like to risk it all, because when you have a lot to lose, it's all the more exciting. I could feel my heart slowing, a trudging thud followed by another, I began to think, what would I most like to think of. Perhaps the fields by my old house, that we used to hide in and roll the wheat down into circles. I can remember my legs being sore after the stalks with their rough cat-tongue-coating whipped me as I ran from the farmer and his dog. I can remember Amy's face, her smile, how her eyes would go all watery when she was tired. Just little things. I looked at my watch, perhaps I would smash it so that they could see the exact time I died, a favour to the dead collectors. The coroner would later see hands read 12:51, the calendar March 6th, a spring-time suicide. The room distorted, the air seemed thick with mirage, a Monet, if he had lived in a dilapidated flat. Life was all ruined, my eye lids became heavy, I tried to keep them open, but they closed like lead lined coffins, the last light ever to touch the skin of the dead.

## VI

Where was I? The room was white, not quite heaven, the same alcohol flavoured room as before... The hospital, but who had brought me here? The flat had been locked from the inside. It was strange, I was in the same corner room as before. My arm didn't move as I commanded it to, and lay still on the bed. Maybe the OD had caused brain damage. My heart froze, and a fresh cut seeped blood onto the white sheets even for the best efforts of stitching the wound. The cut was identical to the one that the jagged bonnet had left months ago, a curve on my abdomen that smiled a sadistic laugh. It was as if the wound had never healed. Perhaps I had fallen off the sofa before I passed out and cut myself on the way down.

Amy visited me again, I think she had some place inside her that still cared for me. She entered the hospital room, with a sad smile on her face, as if she was glad to see me alive, and though I had overdosed, I did it because I couldn't live without her. Amy understood me, just as I did her, though I never seemed affectionate enough during my times of soberness. I lacked the spine to tell her how I felt, even when we had been together for days that numbered over a thousand. Had I even told that I loved her? It was possible, perhaps when I was in some state of lethargy mixed with tones of wax crayon colour I had said it, but I couldn't recall. I had told friends that I loved them, but a user loves anyone who gives him a fix, a clinging hug soaked in the sweat of body counteracting foible of the mind. This is why she broke it off, why would she stay with someone who couldn't even say one word, just one thing to make her happy.

She began to speak. Her mouth opened. I could see the words form in slow motion, as if she was the star of a 50s Film Noir movie, with a ghostly exhale of smoke lingering on her lips, rising leisurely until it became one with the room.

'I can't do this anymore'

'But...'

'Please John let me finish... I can't do this anymore.'

But why was she telling me this again, was she just trying to rub salt into the wound? She was wearing the same dress as she had at her last visit, a memento, perhaps the last thing I would ever see her in.

'I know I took an overdose Amy, but I only did it because I couldn't live without you'

‘John, the doctors told me that you’ve been in a coma for a month, and that you were hit by a car. Yeah, you were high when you went out that day, but I’d hardly call it an overdose.’

‘No... I went back to the flat after about 3 months of physiotherapy, that you didn’t bother to attend, and took some painkillers with vodka. I guess you were too busy after you left me for Paul.’

‘John, how do you know about Paul?’

‘Because, you told me. You came in last time and told me all about you and Paul.’

‘This is the first time I’ve been to see you since the accident, I don’t know what you’re talking about. How do you know about Paul though? It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Because you told me. What’s going on? You’ve been here before, I remember our conversation, you hurt me Amy. Are you just trying to fuck me up some more?’

‘You’re probably confused after the trauma, but you can’t undo all the bad things that have happened John, and some of them weren’t your fault, that’s true. If you think I could go on living like this then you are mistaken. The month that you’ve been unconscious was profound, I realised that I can work better without you, and that although I love you still, I didn’t miss you or the person that you’ve become. If I hadn’t said the things I did, then maybe you wouldn’t have gone out looking for a fix...’

‘...And ended up in here... I know Amy, but I’m not confused, this has happened before, something isn’t right here.’

‘I’ll call in the doctor on the way out maybe your drip is on too high. See you John, hope you have a good life’

‘But Amy...’

She stood up and left, her eyes a-flood with tears. The sun played hide and seek in the sky making the red plastic chair that sat beside the bed changing it from energetic to apathetic. I had done it again, I had lost her.

The doctor entered the room, ‘You shouldn’t get yourself all worked up, it’s not good for the head trauma.’

‘Head trauma, what are you talking about?’

‘You had an accident John, you got hit by a car and as a result we decided to induce a coma’

‘Doctor, I don’t think you understand me, this has all happened before... all of it! Why are people playing with me? This isn’t funny. I had an overdose, and someone brought me here. The accident was months ago!’

*‘Nurse, Nurse, can you come in here please. Keep an eye on him, he’s showing some signs of being delusional’*

‘Now calm down John, I’m just going to give you a sedative, if you don’t calm down your going to rip your stitches.’

Please doctor, just listen to me...no doctor... please... just... listen... please.....’

*‘Nurse just watch him, he’s sedated but unstable. I’m just going to call the neurologist.’*

## VII

‘What would you like?’

‘Where am I?’

‘What would you like, Sir?’

‘I want to know what’s going on, I want Amy. Please just tell me what’s going on!’

‘John, John, open your eyes you daft bastard... I’m so sorry about him, I think he’s taken too many wacky pills today’.

I opened my eyes, the focus was blurred. Perhaps this was the neurologist I had heard echoed before I passed out. The room had changed from white to auburn, interlaced with orange and yellows, the colours of autumn. A yellow flame flickered in front of me, a man to the right in what looked like a black bow tie. My arms rested uncomfortably on a wooden table, but the purpose became clear when I felt my palm and fingers entwined with another, perspiring slightly as if they had been this way for some time.

It was Amy who sat opposite wearing one of her oldest dresses, a black number that hugged her in all the right places, but had long since been discarded. Her eyes shined with excitement the pupils wide and aroused, as if the malaise of the last few years had disappeared.

The surroundings didn’t make sense, where was the hospital? The aroma of the room had changed from sterility to the homely smell of Italian dishes. It was Armando’s. But Armando’s restaurant had closed years ago after claims that the boss had failed to pay protection money to the local mobsters. So how could I be here? I felt my face, the expression of bemusement was obvious for all to see.

‘You ok John? You look a bit warm’

‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘Well you can ask after we’ve ordered, the attendant has been standing here waiting for ages’

‘Excuse me waiter, can you come back in a while, I just need a private moment with my girlfriend’ the waiter left flustered, his face blushing in annoyance.



‘Girlfriend! Well I like the sound of that. I’m so glad you asked, you’ll ask me to marry you next? Kidding! You look so serious, it makes you look sexy...’

‘Amy’

‘Yes?’

‘I need to ask you something important and you’re going to think I’m going insane’

‘What is it John, is everything alright?’

‘Yes, yes, but I need to know what the date is today?’

‘You know the date silly, it’s our two week anniversary’

‘Two weeks!’

‘Yes. Why? I’m assuming you haven’t forgotten, as it was you brought me here for a meal, and it was your idea after all’

‘Amy I need the exact date!’

‘Ok. Calm down, people are looking at us! It’s March 20th, two weeks since we met.’

‘What’s the year?’

‘John, this game is getting kind of weird now, you sound like Bruce Willis in that Twelve Monkey’s film. What year is it?! Where am I?! Could my acting be any worse?!’

‘Seriously’

‘It’s 2004 silly’

It couldn’t be, if it was the date she was saying, I had some how travelled back. But how, people don’t suddenly move back in time, these things only happen in films.

This was all too real, the detail immaculate, as if someone had clambered inside my head and stolen the images of my memory, replicating them. Amy looked over at me worried, as I wondered how this could be.

‘You feeling ok?’

‘Yeah, I don’t know... this is all like déjà vu, I don’t belong here. This has already happened...’

‘John, I don’t know what you’re talking about, we met two weeks ago, I was sitting at the bar in the Utopian. It was sunny, and you kept looking over. I looked back and smiled, and then I saw you take a shot of whiskey for Dutch courage, before coming to talk to me. So how could this have happened before, this is our first proper date, a meal that you suggested we should have together.’

‘I don’t know, but I’ve already seen our future together and it isn’t good, it ends when I almost die in a car accident, and then you leave me.’

‘John, I won’t leave you silly, I know we have only been together for a couple of weeks, but there’s something between us, and nothing outside could ever get in between us. I didn’t know whether to say this yet, but I think I love you John, nothing will ever get in the way of that.’

‘I love you too Amy, more than you’ll ever know.’

## VIII

When I woke, I was still with Amy lying next to her, my mind photographing the nape of her neck, the way her earlobes fused to her neckline, and her slender pianist hands. She had never been able to play the piano, or any instrument for that matter, but I was always convinced she would have been one of the greats, she seemed to excel in everything she did, and it was true, I had brought her down.

The morning brought a fresh new hope, and the birds chirped in harmony to my thoughts, the high tones filling the room with a natural ambience, and the low hum of lawnmowers rattled the windows, even penetrating the double glaze.

Things had died in me over the past few years, but I could make them all right again, I could now see clearly what drugs had coated with filth. The search for 'truth' had ended, and the accepting of life begun. I'd had always thought in negatives, but even though I couldn't figure how I'd been misplaced in this time, I knew that it was the foolish man who questioned a miracle.

The TV was on a low volume, and a small dehumidifier clicked on and off filtering the stale morning air of the bedroom. A dim light shone through the slats of the Venetian blinds. The sky was a little overcast, but I enjoyed the feeling of warmth, and then of coolness, as if one chased the other but never caught up. Amy, sighed a sleepy whisper, and I began to doze off content about our new future together.

## IX

I was sitting upright, no longer on Amy's bed. The sound of bustle filled my ears, and pathetic laughs were followed by violent coughs. The room smelt of rotting bodies, the stench of the user fresh from a high. Whatever had compelled me to re-experience parts of my life, brought me here to do something. I had seemed to jump from place to place, first the hospital, then to dinner with Amy, but I had no recollection of the time that lay in between. This jump had taken me to a place I knew all too well.

Skinny's flat, a gathering of people dotted the room, some sitting on the beer stained carpet, some on sofa's chatting about meeting up again, and how they hadn't seen the old crew for a long time.

Skinny sat at the head of the room smiling, as if surveying all he owned, but then he did own the people in the room, Crack-head Dave, Jessica the slut who would make a move on anything with a heartbeat for a fix. Skinny was truly the king of all.

This was one of his legendary gatherings, but from a sober perspective, there was no legend, just individuals who looked malnourished, a third world country contained in one room. The TV blazed re-runs of Quantum Leap in the corner, Sam talked to Al, and Al typed statistics into Ziggy, but their speech was muffled by the even louder noise of a crack-head coming down from a high. A hand grabbed mine, it was unmistakable, it was Amy's. Her hands were always cold, she said it was because her heart was warm, but I had always argued with her, saying that she just had bad circulation.

'John, I want to go, I don't like it here'

'It's ok baby. I think I know what I have to do. I can change it.'

Amy looked at me, her eyes frowned in confusion. Skinny walked towards us, he had a twang of the North which made his dealer status even more charming to non-users, he was a salesman more than anything.

'Howz it hangin bruv?'

'Ok, I guess.'

'Sho when ama gonna get you an yer bird to try somma this, ey?'

This was it, this was the moment when everything in my life had taken a bad hit, the time when I couldn't say no, just because people would think low of me. This was the proverbial nose dive into raw sewage that had been popularised by the media's obsession with disgust and pain. If they really wanted to see pain, or suffering, they should have come to Skinny's, the living dead scattered writhing on the floor in supposed ecstasy. The dead were indeed walking the earth, because at Skinny's hell had spilled over.

'I'm sorry Skinny, we've got to go now. Come on babe.'

'Whatsa matta, I thort you sed you wa gonna partee with uz?'

Skinny blocked the door. Though no-one came to back him up, either being incapacitated or too far gone to understand the concept of doors.

'Get the fuck out of my way, you junkie bastard.'

'I'm no junka, thees aar the junkaes, thees dirty fookers on ma floor'

Skinny's guests looked up, but were too high to be offended, they laughed as if it was their duty to back him up. They were probably trying to keep him sweet, offending your dealer meant finding another one, which always had the risk of playing into the hands of undercover cops.

'Don't ever talk to me again, do you hear me? Now get out of the way before I make you move.'

'Ok, blud jus chil it yer. I jus wantd ya to trie somma this, c what us lot aar feelin.'

'Skinny, I know that you don't do it either, you just sell the stuff, you told me that a year from now. But you pretend to do it to get others hooked, and then they pay you hundreds so that they can find something they lost, but I've got everything I need right here.'

Skinny's usual motor-mouth had stalled. He spoke no more, and neither did I. I moved around him and left with Amy. I'd like to say I had changed something in Skinny that day, but I would probably be wrong. Why would he change when others were so unwilling to do so. It had taken another chance to look back on myself to see my mistakes and rectify them. I was lucky.

Three years went by in almost the blink of an eye. I almost forgot that somehow I had been given these years of my life again, a repeat to do things right. The coma and the accident seemed so far away but no one ever recalled them, saying I must have had a vivid dream one night. I knew they were real, just like I knew I had been a drug addict, but Amy shrugged it off as one of my ‘bizarre’ jokes.

The date was the 6th of March, I knew it had meaning but I couldn’t say why. Time had made me forget a lot of what I’d been through. It might have been a birthday of some cousin twice-removed, who desperate for friends invited distant relatives for jelly and ice-cream. The clock struck 12:50 in the afternoon, a lazy day that pulled me down to the floor to lie on the carpet. I looked at the clock, it ticked counting down to 12:51. The ticking made me feel tired, as if life was slipping away from me with every click of the second hand.

It was one of those lethargic days that everyone had, chilling out unable to escape the boredom. I closed my eyes as the gentle caress of the sun was magnified by the glass of the window. I turned my head away, my face becoming too warm and looked across the floor, eyes level with the skirt of the sofa. A bottle of vodka lay beside me, as did a scattered bottle of painkillers. How did they get there? They weren’t around a minute ago. I looked around, the flat was dirty all of a sudden, the fresh wall paper had begun to peel, dirtied by rising damp.

‘Amy? How long has that wallpaper been like that?’

There was no response, but she was only in the kitchen a moment ago. Why did I feel so tired all of a sudden?

‘Amy, what’s going on!’

I felt a cold hand grip mine.

‘Oh John, what have you done!’

‘What’s going on Amy? What happened to the flat?’

My eyes rolled around the room, one knocking the other like an executive desk toy.

‘John, just stay calm, I’m going to call an ambulance.’

‘I don’t understand...’

But then reality suddenly hit home. I never really left the flat, I was still on the floor after taking the overdose. I don’t know how it had happened, how I had seen a

different life for myself. I don't know why Amy was here either, perhaps she had come to collect some of her things, an odd ornament with some sentimental value.

I knew I was dying, it was too late for me now, the ambulance wouldn't arrive in time, and even if it did the lift was out of order meaning the paramedics would have to run up seven floors.

'Oh Amy, we had such a wonderful life.'

'We still can John, I'll come back to you, I don't love Paul... Please don't leave me.'

I looked at the single dusty light bulb that swung from the ceiling in the breeze, it was a lot like me. You could never tell when a bulb was going to fail, but before it did, the filament would shine the brightest it ever had, a supernova contained in glass, no longer useful but beautiful for a split-second.

This was my mind, flaring like the filament, the neuro-chemicals burning the brightest they ever had, showing me a world that could have been. Time to me had slowed and jumped and twisted around, my brain playing with memories and hopes, as the electricity of death flared in the frontal lobes and the memory centres. None of it was real, but it felt real to me, the illusion of perception.

The room began to go dark, as the last of the flares faded, the aftermath of brightness that was the final act of the filament bulb.