

It is the biggest experiment in history...



The
Eidolon
LIBBY MCGUGAN

...and it must be destroyed



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EIDOLON**

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*To John, George,
Richard and Catherine,
for believing.
And to Tom,
for questioning.*

I DON'T REMEMBER the beginning. Only a vague dawning of being, fragmented lakes of feelings and thoughts. Somehow, over eons, they coalesced like the primordial ooze that gathers in the murky pond, gradually finding form. The sound of the orchestra tuning up, slowly, over huge swathes of time, discordant notes sliding into one until from them a single, clear tone is born. And in perfect synchrony, it vibrates as one being. I am. Purity, born of the minds of men. They gave me life, and for that I am indebted.

With that life came a hunger that has nothing to do with the stomach. It became a need, a voracity, that for an age nothing would satisfy, until I found the answer lay in my creators. There, in the darkest recesses of the mind, that place where men are afraid to go, is where it germinates. A seed that takes root in thought and sends its tendrils out into experience to blossom. They are the incubators, I am the harvester. It is the perfect symbiosis.

IT'S FUNNY HOW everything changes when a couple of bricks fall out of your wall; those things that shored you up without you realising it. You only notice when they go and the rest of your life starts crumbling away.

Six weeks ago I had a job, I had a partner; I had a life. Now I have a headache from the altitude. I also have one of the best views you could ask for. Below, sheep on the slopes blend with the grey earth and the muffled tinkling of yak bells comes and goes on the breeze as the beasts lumber across the pastures. Ahead, the sun glints on the lakes, one round, one crescent shaped. Above, white purity shrouds the mountains, becoming the sky. Unspoiled wilderness. Barren beauty. I still have a headache.

The soft snow makes walking tricky. You don't walk in this; you trudge. *Look on the bright side – it's not Middlesbrough*, that's what she would say. Cora. Always positive, always the optimist. Always with her head in the clouds. And then she'd say something like, *Look at where you are – the Tibetan Plateau, the rooftop of the planet, where you can look down on the madness of the world and wonder what it's all about. See how lucky you are?* She'd be right, I suppose. Up here, nothing really matters just that your steps are small enough to let your lungs catch up with the rest of you, and that you keep drinking through the rubber straw from your CamelBak. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Something to take my mind off redundancy and our dissolving relationship. Something to help me get my head straight. You know what, Cora? So far, it's not working. Christ, Robert, if you can't clear your mind in nine hundred thousand square miles of nothing, there's no hope for you. It still hurts to think of her.

Danny pauses ahead of me and I almost bump into him. His cheeks crinkle as he scans the skies. Blue-eyed, wiry, unconventional, Danny Mitchell has been a trekking buddy since we were students at Cambridge. He was doing politics, I was doing physics and computer science, and we met in the bar after an evening talk by the climber Joe Simpson. So would you cut the rope? Save yourself and drop your friend to certain death, when not cutting it means you both die? It made for an interesting opening to conversation. Danny knocked back a whisky. He would have done it, he said, and he meant it. Always so black and white. His philosophy is simple: work to live, and then only until you have enough to fund your next trip. Over the years we've climbed in the Andes, the Pyrenees, the mountains of Sarawak, the Cuillins of Skye; and when we do, the differences between us don't matter.

"I think we should pitch here for the night," he says, still studying the clouds. "It's getting dark."

"Good idea." Whatever you say, Danny. I'm struggling to make decisions, however trivial they might be.

We drop the packs and raise the tent. The wind's beginning to strengthen but we work silently, familiar with the routine. For some reason, erecting a tent was like lighting the blue touch paper with Cora. Every time. It could be sunny, on the shores of a glassy loch, warm grass, no midges, a case of wine, and still we'd find ourselves bickering about the best way to anchor the guy ropes. It never lasted, though. Once we sat down and opened the first bottle, and felt the breeze on our skin, we'd remember why we were there. I'm going to miss that.

Danny crawls inside and hangs the torch from the hook in the roof, and the orange fabric lights up. A small glowing refuge in a wild, unforgiving place. We get the stove going at the entrance to the tent, take off the waterproofs, unpack the sleeping bags, and soon we're spooning mouthfuls of steaming rehydrated food into our mouths. Chilli con carne tonight, followed by plum duff. Stodge fit for a

king. I didn't know how cold my insides were.

"Do you reckon we'll make the summit tomorrow?"

"The wind's picked up a bit, but I think we'll make it," says Danny, the food still steaming on his tongue, as he tips the boiled water into two mugs of powdered chocolate. The sweet smell competes with the odour of damp socks. "If we get another clear day like today, we'll be fine, but the weather's due to turn after tomorrow." He passes me a mug.

I take a sip. "Everything tastes better when you're camping."

"Yeah. You forget, don't you? By the end of the trip you won't want to go back."

"Not a whole lot to go back to, now."

He stares at his mug and stirs it slowly. After a moment he says, "It might not look like it yet, but maybe it's an opportunity."

"An opportunity." Why is it that when you're in a bad place people who've never been there feel compelled to offer you advice on how to get out?

"Yeah, you know, a blank slate. Start again."

"I loved the job."

"And what about Cora?"

I don't answer.

He glances up from his stirring.

"We were too different."

"So what's with the ring, then?"

He nods towards my left hand, which is absentmindedly rolling the small silver ring looped through a black leather thread. My fingers close round it and I return it to my pocket.

He stares at me expectantly.

"I gave it to her for her birthday a couple of years ago. She gave it back to me before I left. It's nothing."

"Uh-huh." He takes a sip then heaps another spoonful of chocolate into his mug. "You really loved the job? Cramped down some mineshaft looking for... what was it again?"

"Dark matter."

"Dark matter, whatever that is. That's not a job; that's a sentence. I couldn't do it."

"No, you couldn't. You're not bright enough."

He snorts. "Really? You spend your time studying life. I spend my time living it. Who's the smart one? You tell me."

He has a point, but I'm not going to concede. I stab the air with my spoon. "It's people like me who make it possible for layabouts like you to bum around for your whole life, with your storm-proof tent and your gas stoves and your torches."

He grins and unscrews the cap of a hipflask, toasting me. "Well, here's to you and all the other specky scientists who keep the rest of us in good times." He takes a swig and hands me the flask. The wind keens and rumbles against the sides of the tent, bowing them inwards. Everything tastes better when you're camping, especially the whisky.

Danny wriggles into his sleeping bag, stuffing a pile of unwashed clothes underneath the top end to make a lumpy pillow. I lie back, my hands behind my head. The wind drops until it's only a breath on the tent. Beyond its breathing is the silence of the mountain.

"Listen to that," says Danny.

I stare at the roof, listening. "No traffic."

"Bet you're glad you came along."

"Yeah. I'll be even more glad if the weather holds for tomorrow."

"We'll be fine." He turns his gaze back to the space above him, one corner of his mouth smiling.

“Picture it – looking down at the planet from up there. Nothing else comes close.”

“If people knew what it was like...”

He snorts again, reaching behind his head to plump up his pillow. “Just as well they don’t. They can stick to their mortgages and their pension funds and all that shit and stay out of the way, as far as I’m concerned.”

The wind carries a howl from a distant place.

“I tell you,” he says, “that mountain will sort your head out for you. You’ll be a changed man.”

WE SET OFF at a good pace, leaving the tent where it stands. The sky is clear and it looks like the weather might hold, but it’s not long before we’re trudging again. The air’s thinner here, a lot thinner. My lungs are sucking it in, in the hope that it contains a passing oxygen molecule. Our breaths rise in icy puffs, and underfoot the snow groans and rasps as our boots sink into it. We don’t talk much; there’s not enough air. I thought I’d use this time to work things out in my head, or just to forget, but it’s not like that. There’s not enough air to walk and think – it’s one or the other – so my brain elects to concentrate on breathing and trudging, leaving me with a vague awareness that I’ll still have a shitload of baggage to offload when I get home. Not what I had planned.

Danny stops and drops his pack, breathless. We take a break, panting like we’ve run uphill, and sip hot sweet coffee from the flask. White peaks stretch out in all directions, like crested waves on a frozen sea, and the water in the lakes below glistens in the sunlight. Above, a buzzard calls, circling between tatters of inky cloud.

“This is what it’s all about,” says Danny. He draws a slow, deep breath and closes his eyes, savouring the freedom. “This is real.”

I nod, but say nothing as the wind slinks round us. My head’s thumping.

“To life.” Danny gulps from the flask and hands it to me.

“To life.” I down the remnants, then wipe my lips with the back of my glove. The wind has picked up, drawing in a mist that shrouds the distant peaks. “The weather’s turning,” I say, eyeing the changing sky. Wisps of snow billow in the icy air.

“Yeah. We’d better get moving.” He stuffs the flask into his pack. “It’s not far now.”

I frown at the sky, where fragmented clouds are coalescing, churning out from a grisly horizon. “Maybe we should head down and try again tomorrow.”

Danny slings his pack over his shoulder. “It’s not too bad. Where’s your sense of adventure?” He grins and sets off again, in the lead.

THE WIND’S PICKING up in bursts, moaning, whipping, splintering the snowdrifts into puffs of white mist that rise into the air and settle on our footprints, concealing them. When I turn to look back, it’s like we were never there. A fierce gust whips up from the lower slopes, and I stagger against it. It’s making me uneasy, this wind. I glance down the slope, but it’s all veiled in white. There’s no sign of the lakes. Turning into the wind, through the flurry of snowflakes, I peer up at the faceless ascent and it stares back at me – cold, unmerciful. The fear grips me for a moment. The kind of fear I’ve read about, when men who undertake this pilgrimage – anticipated it, planned for it, made friends with it – realise that they’re nobody to the mountain; that it doesn’t care if they live or die. It would be so easy to give in to it, but there’s no way back from that. *Get a grip, Robert. Just keep your mind on your feet.* Danny toils ahead, his head bent.

Those clouds are moving in too fast. The sky blackens, pressing down on the white, squeezing the brightness from it. Snow gusts about in thick, fat flakes and dark clouds weigh heavily on the horizon.

obscuring the peak. The wind is wailing like a tortured cat and it won't let up, not for a moment. You could go mad with this wind. It's almost as if it's become personal, buffeting our steps into staggers. Mountain weather, like its mood, changes swiftly and with little warning. I know what she'd say. *Can't you read the signs? The mountain doesn't want you here.*

Another blast knocks me sideways, shaking my balance and my confidence. Alright. Enough. There's a point when pride needs to step aside for instinct, and it's right here. "Danny! We won't make it in this! We need to turn back!"

He stops and turns towards me, from his place further up the slope, then looks up to the summit, or where it should be somewhere behind the thick, grey mist. "But we're nearly there!" The wind keens and wheezes and he stumbles back a few steps. It's making a point.

"No, Danny, we won't make it. We need to get down!"

He stares through the cloud towards the peak, then turns his face to the sky. He drops his head and stands looking at his feet as the snow whips around him. I know how much this means to him. Eighteen months in a kitchen with an arsehole of a chef and a daily barrage of verbal abuse just to raise the cash for the flights. He held down the job because he knew it was a means to an end. The weather reports said it's due to get worse, so it may be that we don't get the break tomorrow or the next day, or at all. But it's all relative. *Let it go, Danny. Don't be a fool.* When he lifts his head again he nods. He turns and tramps down the mountainside, passing me without meeting my eye.

The descent is clumsy against the rising wind, and our footing uncertain; the snow has devoured the tracks and there's nothing left. I catch glimpses of the plain below between the shifting white curtain but there's still no sign of the lakes. There should be lakes, below. This isn't the way we came up.

"Wait, Danny, we're off track!"

I catch his voice in a break between gusts. "No, this'll take us down!" He ploughs on down the slope, head bent, undeterred. He's so bloody pigheaded.

I stop dead. Ahead, just beyond Danny, the cliff face disappears into a crevasse, white emptiness. He hasn't seen it. "Stop! Danny, Stop!"

He looks back up at me from under his thick, fur hood, then turns, glancing down the slope. The mountain mist closes the door on its secret, but not before he sees the drop. He stumbles onto his back. "Shit!" His voice is muffled through the scissoring snow as he scrambles to his feet and back up the slope, ungainly like a toddler wrapped in too many puffy winter clothes. I wade towards him and catch his arm, steadying him.

"We'll not make it down in this!" I yell, hoping he can hear over the din. It's getting dark, beyond the clouds. Nightfall in the wings. "We'll have to shelter till it blows over!"

He nods and casts around, then points higher up the face to a place where the edge of the mountain rises steeply beside a level bank of snow. It might offer some shelter from the wind. Crouching into the storm, we tramp towards the bank, take the snow shovel from my pack, sink to our knees and begin to dig.

I can't feel my hands. I glance up at Danny. His lips are cracked, the colour of slate, and his cheeks are scorched red beneath his hood. He screws up his eyes inside his goggles. This fucking wind, it won't stop. It just blows harder. "Keep digging," he shouts.

Slowly, he disappears inside the snow hole, his boots still visible between the sprays of snow he flicks out. We take turns. When it's done, I sit back on my heels, dizzy, hot in my core, cold in my limbs, as Danny wriggles inside. I glance up at the sky. The clouds have leaked away with the light. I've never seen the sky like this. Millions of tiny, distant suns riddling the black in great trailing swathes. Tibet must be higher than I thought; closer to the heavens.

Inside the cramped, dark hole, the sound of the wind dies a little. Thank God for small mercies. We loosen our laces, letting the blood back into our feet. A ski pole pokes through a small hole in the rock.

enough to let some air inside. I struggle to light the small candle, my fingers frozen and clumsy, but finally it catches. ~~Such a small thing – a tiny, yellow, flickering flame, a symbol of hope.~~

Danny fumbles with his wrist and pulls off his watch. “We’ll take turns to sleep. Keep an eye on the candle.” If it starts to sputter, we’re running out of air.

I’m dying for a drink, but we’ve nothing left, so I stuff some snow into my mouth.

“No,” says Danny, catching my arm. “It’ll just make you colder. Get some sleep. I’ll wake you in an hour. God willing.”

I’ve never heard him say anything like that before. He’s not religious. Like me, he’s an unabashed atheist. Damn right he’ll wake me in an hour. I’m not dying in some snow pit in the middle of nowhere. “Make sure you do.” I reach for Cora’s ring, still in my pocket. I wish I hadn’t been such an asshole.

MY INSIDES ARE cold now that I’m lying still. It feels like my limbs are only vaguely attached to the rest of me, like they’ve all been to the dentist for a jag then left in the deep freeze. Even my guts feel cold, and my lungs when I breathe in, and my headache’s changed from thumping to that feeling you get when you bite into ice-cream. Brainfreeze. Maybe there’s a neural pathway connecting ice-cream to the lining of the brain. An ice-cream-neuron, waiting to be discovered. The shivering hurts, but at least it’s a sign that I’m still here.

Sometime after that, I don’t know how long, I give in to sleep.

I WAKE TO a sound. I hush my breathing, as much as I can in the thin air. The candle’s still yellow, it’s not sputtering, so we must be alive. So much for waking me in an hour. Danny’s lying, eyes closed, shivering. From the candlelight I can see his lips flubbing in a soft snore. What was that sound? The wind? Through the vent in the roof I can see it’s still dark.

I check my watch. It takes a while to focus on the numbers and even longer to work out what they mean. 3.14.

There it is again. Am I imagining it? It sounds like a voice. If the wind had a voice, it would sound like this, resonant and commanding. No, I was wrong; it’s not a voice, because there aren’t any words. So why do I know what it means?

GET UP.

God, Robert. You must be hypothermic. Voices in the head can’t be a good sign. A voice with no words. Like a thought, but coming from somewhere outside of me.

GET UP NOW.

I need to get up. Irrational or not, there’s no disputing it. I don’t know why but every fibre in me knows it’s right. From some reserve I didn’t know I had, I find the will. It takes over, becoming an urgency, an edge. I kick the wall of snow at my feet, toppling the candle and snuffing it out, then wriggle from the hole. It’s snowing again, the clouds inking out the stars.

Something makes me turn, something over my right shoulder. A little higher up the mountain there’s something in the darkness, just visible through the blizzard. It’s insubstantial, like the shadow of steam on a wall, but something else is there. I rub my eyes, and when I look again, there’s nothing. But it feels like...

Sudden certainty seizes me. I’ve got to get Danny out. I reach into the remains of the hole and grasp his ankles, tugging, dragging him into the open. “Wake up, Danny! Get up!”

He mumbles, eyes still closed, and turns his face from the driving snow. “Danny!” I kneel over him and slap him hard across the cheek. “Come on, come on! Get up, dammit!”

A low groaning sound issues from the mountain, as though something that lies beneath is awakening. Something enormous. We sink, suddenly a few inches lower, jolting downwards as though...

“Move!” I’m on my feet, grasping Danny by the hood. His feet flail under him as I try to pull him away, but he’s fighting me, trying to free himself from my grip. “What the hell are you...”

The ground creaks and groans and shifts. The shelter breaks apart and disappears, leaving nothing but frozen gusts of air as we scramble back from the collapsing edge, kicking furiously, the ground crumbling and falling away in great chunks that tumble into emptiness. It gains on us, ripping at more of the mountain until it reaches the snow under Danny’s feet.

He slides away from me, his arms flapping wildly, groping for a hold. I catch his hood again with one hand and with the other, grasp his wrist. The groaning stops and the ground steadies as he hangs there, suspended, the wind gusting up from below, teasing. A block of ice breaks away and bounces into the darkness and Danny’s gaze follows it as he sways from the precipice. He looks up at me and for a moment our eyes meet.

“You know what I’d do,” he says.

Should I? My arms are beginning to quiver. I can hold on for a bit, but then... I’m not sure how long until... what am I thinking? “No. Hold on!” I dig my heels into the snow, jerking with his weight beneath me, and lean back. Nothing happens; he’s still dangling from the end of my arms, a dead weight. My legs are shaking now. I don’t know if it’s the shivering or the strain they’re under.

“Robert...” Danny holds my eye. “You can’t... Just let go!”

He slips a little, only a few inches, but each of them closing the gap to death. My limbs are on fire. It would be so easy to let go, just relax, release the grip and the pain will stop...

And then what? From somewhere, I don’t know where, the certainty grips me again. It’s like when you look through the lens of a camera and adjust the focus until everything comes into sharp relief. A clarity, or absence of doubt. Something so obvious you wonder why you didn’t see it before. “No!” I clench my teeth, my eyes squeezed shut, my arms trembling with the effort, and with one last painful heave I haul Danny onto the ledge.

He’s face down in the snow, gasping, quivering, hugging the mountain. A shard of moonlight slices through the snowflakes, the mountain quietens and the snow is still. We lie there, panting, staring through the blizzard at the abyss.

“Thanks,” begins Danny. “I don’t know how you...”

“Come on,” I get to my feet, facing into the wind. “We need to get down.” It still has me, that unwavering certainty.

“Wait, Robert!” He sways to his knees. “There’s not enough light. We can’t walk in this!”

“We can’t stay here.” I grasp his arm, hauling him upright.

“Look what just happened! We could go over the edge!”

“We won’t. We have to go down.”

Danny flaps his arms like a toddler having a tantrum. “What makes you so sure?”

I glance over my right shoulder, towards the place where I saw... I don’t hear anything and I don’t see anything, but I don’t have to. It’s a feeling, more than a sound or an image, the memory of a shadow. Something else announces it, something undefined. It is like walking into a dark room and knowing, in that inexplicable visceral sense, that someone else is there with you, before you see them. I’m not frightened, I’m calm. Calmer than I’ve ever been. It’s watching.

But there’s no point in telling Danny, he won’t get it. I turn back to him. “I just know.” I lead the way down the mountain, surefooted and confident in the descent, Danny stumbling behind, and something else, almost beyond sight, but not beyond perception. It follows us into the white noise.

AS THE STEEP slopes surrender to a gentler gradient, the wind begins to die away and my steps slow. I turn back to Danny, ~~waiting for him to wade closer, watching him sink into the powdery snow, bluish~~ now in the fading night. Each step is laboured, like his boots are filled with lead. As he draws level, his harsh breaths score the air with steamy puffs and blend with the thick mist. I point ahead. The mountains and moonlight glimmers on the shores of a vast lake. I put a hand on Danny's shoulder, my lips cracking as I try to smile. I turn back, over my shoulder, eyes narrowing as I peer into the nothingness.

And then, as a candle flame snuffs out with a breath, it's gone, and with it the sense of stillness. The moonlight reflects on the snowy shores, but the lake itself is a deep black – not a ripple of light on its surface. A black hole in the tundra. A cloud consumes the moon, darkening the land again. I collapse face-down in the snow.

THIRSTY. THERE'S A forest fire in your throat. Feel that by your left cheek? It's wet. Turn your head, that's it. Slurp it up. Cold, burning your lips, hot ice. Look around – white space everywhere, endless stellar brightness, fierce wind. A place to hunt yourself. Don't eat snow. Remember? *It'll just make you colder.* Danny told you, before. Where is he? Rest your head down, just sleep, it's alright.

No! No sleeping! Fuck! You want to die here? Then focus! The lake, remember? See that, ahead? Liquid water, mirror-smooth, black beneath the mist...

Nectar. Dark, cold, nectar, trickling down inside. You're colder now, the shivering hurts. And dizzy. You hate dizzy. You've never seen water like this. The sun's glare hurts your eyes but there's not a glimmer of light on its surface. The mist is parting, and there's something behind it. Something dark. Why are you uneasy? You want to get away from it but you don't have the strength or the will to move.

Then rest your head, just for a moment. That's it. Just for a moment.

WHAT HAPPENED AGAIN? There was a storm, wasn't there? Digging in the snow, the blizzard eating my face, a dark hole, a voice with no words. Danny dangling from a cliff edge – oh, God did he drop? Did I let him drop? What the hell will I tell his parents?

No, no, he didn't drop. We had to go down, even in the dark. No question. Great feeling, certainty. Besides, the other man agreed with me.

Who did? It was just me and Danny. Wasn't it?

Cold's made me crazy, that's all. Best lie still, a bit longer. Think of home.

Not much left there for me, not now. When did it all change, again?

IT WAS RAINING and cold, a typical February in England. I was late for work – my bike was still at the garage getting repaired, so I hitched a ride in a truck. Thank God for truckers. This trucker's belly was an appendage on which to rest the steering wheel, and the cabin reeked of smoke.

"You work at the mine?" he asked after I told him where I was going.

"Yeah."

His eyes narrowed as he glanced from my face to my hands. "You don't look like a miner."

"No. I'm not a miner."

"You some kind of manager, then?"

Maybe I should have walked. A stroll through Middle England in the pissing rain might have been easier. "No, I work in the Dark Matter Research Lab."

He frowned.

"It's down a mineshaft." I hoped this might help, but it didn't. If anything, judging by the way his face folded in on itself, it only made things worse. "So where are you headed?"

"Whitby, then have to be in Scarborough by ten."

"Right." I watched the fields and woods whip past and yawned. My head felt thick, and it ached.

"So, what's dark matter, then?"

I knew it was coming, and I didn't have it in me to explain. "It's the missing piece of the universe."

He snorted, "Missing piece? Haven't we got enough problems already? Sounds like a wild goose

chase, if you ask me.”

Well, I didn't.

He shook his head, like people do when they think it's all a colossal waste of taxpayers' money. "This do you?" he said, pulling into the lay-by. He peered at the sign that read: *Middlesbrough 12 miles* and, underneath, *Potash Mine ½ mile*, with an arrow pointing to the left.

"Thanks a lot – I appreciate it."

I jumped down from the truck and waved as he pulled away, then ran the half-mile down the road that led to nowhere but the mine.

Tall, grey chimneys puffing out smoke struck into the sky, a collage of drab buildings huddled low around them. The hum of machinery quivered on the air and the smell of diesel was thick that day. It used to make me feel queasy, but you get used to it. The changing rooms were empty – I was really late – and after donning the orange suit and helmet – *safety first* – I headed for the entrance to the lab. It's not a very grand entrance, given what goes on down there. It's nothing short of a disappointment. If it weren't for the sign above it which reads:

DARK MATTER RESEARCH LABORATORY
RESTRICTED ACCESS
AUTHORISED PERSONEL ONLY

you'd walk right past it. It's always dim in the entranceway. I used to think of all the people who work in the finance sector in somewhere like London or New York whenever I pulled back the caged door to the lift-shaft. They'd be wearing suits as they walked up those broad, smooth steps and disappeared through revolving doors into a building made of glass. And inside there would be an escalator to take them to the main foyer. Here, you had to grapple with the cage door just to get it to open. No lift attendant to tip his hat at you. Why did I choose this job again?

I clanged the door shut and pushed the green button on the control box that dangled from a thick wire in the corner. *I swear, one of these days it would drop off and I'd be stuck a kilometre under the plane in a bloody lift shaft.* The cage shuddered and began its descent, and the earth exhaled its hot breath on me, its morning salute. I adjusted my helmet, fumbling with the headlamp, and a pool of tepid light spilled onto my palm. I tapped the torch, and the light stuttered and went out. Bollocks.

The descent took several minutes, and the air grew stuffier with each of them. Lights set into the rock face swept from my feet to my head in slow, regular pulses.

I ran my hand over my stubbled jaw, and yawned again. Glancing at my watch, I winced. Zimmer was going to be pissed off. He wanted an early start – today of all days. Given all the hours I'd put in he couldn't really pull me up on it, especially since they didn't pay overtime. Ever since we got the scent that we were on to something, about a year ago, I'd spent most of my time at the mine, probably more than Zimmer himself. Not when things were really bad for Cora, though. Then I would take some time off to be with her, even though it didn't seem to help. I think she found it easier when I wasn't around. She needed her own space, she'd said. I didn't want to think too much then about what that meant, so I threw myself back into work. Before long, if I got home before nine on a week night was doing well. And the weekends were almost as bad. It was like a drug, like gambling: the thought that it's there, that we almost have it, and if we put one more coin into the slot, the next run might be the one that pays off. We were close. We knew that from the preliminary results, all we needed was to verify them. And if we found the nature of dark matter? If we solved the mystery of what's all around us? That's what kept me going. Zimmer and I had already been invited to speak at the Annual Conference on Astroparticle and Underground Physics the following week to present our findings and I'd had provisional acceptance of a paper I'd submitted to the *Journal of Physics*. I had a call last

month from the physics lead at the University of Manchester, offering me a temporary lecturer's post covering for a computer scientist on long term sick. "Between you and me," he'd said, "we need some fresh input, someone who's on the cutting edge. It could lead to a full time post." There was growing interest in the scientific community. Ears were pricking up, and it fuelled the drive to reach the finish line. It would change everything.

THE CAGE BUMPED to a halt and I dragged the whining doors open, this time in the bowels of the salt mine where the air smelled of scorched rock. I pushed the doors closed behind me and walked down the corridor, my boots echoing on the concrete floor. A man shuffled towards me from the other end of the corridor, pulling a large trolley. He wore a safety suit and helmet like everyone down here, but his were blue and I didn't recognise him.

The man glanced up then lowered his eyes without smiling as he passed. I glanced back. Piles of cardboard boxes overburdened the trolley, full of books and paper files and bits of electrical kit. Maybe Zimmer had decided to clear out some of his mess, I thought. About time.

Ahead of me, a door. Someone had amended the sign reading:

**RESEARCH LABORATORY CONTROL ROOM
ACCESS RESTRICTED**

with the word 'MOTHERSHIP'.

I suppose that the bottom of a pit is an odd place to study anything.

I pushed open the door and froze. It was all wrong. Five men I didn't know were dismantling computers and packing them into cardboard boxes. They picked files from shelves and thumbed through their clipboard lists and none of them would meet my eye.

"What the hell's going on?" I strode towards Chris, lounging back on a swivel-chair, his feet perched on an empty desk as he watched the men pack. Nothing winds him up, I've always thought, and this confirmed my suspicions. He twirled a pen between the fingers of his right hand and observed the scene as though he was watching a TV show. His short dark hair was just visible beneath his helmet and he ran his left thumb over a carefully sculpted beard. Two men moved to either side of his table and began to pull it out from under him. He lifted his legs free, but in his own time. When he planted his feet on the floor, he looked up at me.

"Nice of you to show up. But you shouldn't have bothered."

"Why? What's happening?"

"They pulled the funding."

"What? You're kidding me."

"Does he look like he's kidding?" Chris glanced at a man standing in the shadows. He was lean, in his late thirties and dressed in a suit that would cost me several months' wages and then some. He stood with his back straight and his hands clasped in front of him, watching with a detached air. His eyes briefly settled on me.

"What do you mean, they pulled it? Who pulled it?"

"It came from the top."

"They can't just take all this stuff! All of our data..." I snatched a file from the top of a nearby box and glared at the man carrying it. The business man took four long strides towards me.

"Mr Strong, that file is no longer your property."

"And who the hell are you?"

From behind me, three other men in suits closed in. Not slim, like the first, but bulked out and

standing several inches above the rest of us. They didn't speak – they didn't have to. Chris's pen stopped twirling.

The lean man's eyes were still on me. "I'm Steven Ryan from Organol Security. I realise this is unexpected, but we've been tasked with taking possession of the contents of this laboratory."

"Tasked by whom?"

"Her Majesty's Government."

"What?" I glanced at Chris, who nodded.

Ryan continued. "It's my duty to remind you that we require any files you may have on these premises. We appreciate your cooperation." He spoke with the reassurance of a priest but there was doubt he was comfortable with violence. "Do you have any other files?"

I caught Chris's eye. "No. I have backups, but they're all here."

Ryan watched me for a moment, without speaking. I wanted to punch him hard in the face.

"Leave it, Robert," breathed Chris.

All those months we spent at the edge, fine tuning it, pushing through disappointment after disappointment, and just when we can see the finish line, some little shit in a suit says it's over? My fists clenched and the muscle man nearest me inched closer.

Chris gripped my arm. "Let it go."

I tossed the file back into the box. The lean man smiled thinly and nodded to the others.

I turned back to Chris, my insides burning. "Where's Zimmer?"

The door at the other end of the room crashed open and Zimmer stormed in, right on cue. His face matched the scarlet of his helmet and he barked at the phone held to his ear. The veins on his neck stood out like purple ropes.

"Well interrupt his call! This is an urgent... you tell him that it's Geoff Zimmer... YOU!" He covered the mouthpiece with his free hand as he bellowed at one of the intruders lifting a sheaf of paper from a shelf at the other side of the room. "PUT THAT BACK! ...No, no, I'm sorry, not you... wait... no, wait... Ah, *shit!*" He hurled the phone to the concrete floor and it smashed into pieces.

"Don't worry about it, boss," says Chris. "We won't be needing it anymore."

Geoff Zimmer took off his helmet and spectacles and pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb.

"What the hell happened here, Geoff?"

Zimmer sighed and slumped into an empty chair next to Chris. When he lifted his eyes, he looked beaten. "They didn't even phone me. The first I knew about it was when I got here this morning. They're closing the whole project down. They have it in writing."

"For fuck's sake! When we're this close? How can they stop it this far down the line?"

"I don't know..."

"What about Norris? Have you spoken to the Science Minister?"

"He signed the letter, Robert."

"But he endorsed the project!"

"He seems to have changed his mind. I'm sorry, boys, there's nothing I can do. This is way above our heads now. The others have already gone. They're taking everything – I mean *everything*: programmes, discs, scrap paper, anything relating to the research." He sat back. "They're giving us one more month's pay. If anything else comes up, you'll be the first to know."

I turned to Chris. "Let's get out of here."

CHRIS DROVE ME home in his dented red Mini. I stared out of the window at the grey buildings and sodden streets, frowning, and chewing my left thumbnail. I turned to Chris. "You've got back-up,

right?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Uh-huh."

We drove on in silence.

"So, what will you do?" I said eventually.

Chris shrugged. "Dunno. See what else is out there, I suppose. If they can't finance this project, the chances aren't good of something else coming up. Not in this line of work. I know times are hard, but I'd didn't think they'd pull the plug."

My teeth ground together as I thought about it. "You don't buy that it's just about the funding?"

Chris shook his head. "No, I don't. Maybe it's better we don't know." He snorted. "Kay keeps on at me to take a break, so maybe this is the right time. What about you? What'll you do?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll try to get into Romfield Labs again, go back to doing some work on the Grid. Or maybe do some lecturing work. There's a temporary post going in Manchester." I shrugged. "And I can always do some web design to tide things over." It was how I got by as a student.

"You won't have any trouble. Not with your track record."

Of the two of us, I was in a far stronger position than Chris, and we both knew it. And of the two of us, he would be under more pressure to sort things out, with an eighteen-month-old child to consider. I don't know how he stayed so level about the whole thing. I felt like I was on the edge. The slightest trigger and I'd detonate.

The grey streets flashed past: glum mothers pushing prams, youths in baseball caps leaning against the walls of seedy pubs, puffing out smoke and waiting for life to happen, shuffling old men with nowhere left to go. Disillusionment festered where optimism once might have been.

"How's Cora?" Chris asked. "Is she, you know... okay?"

"She still cries some nights, and she's still not sleeping much. She's back teaching yoga, at least, and she's getting out a bit more." I glanced at my watch. She'd be home from her lunchtime class soon. What the hell was I going to tell her?

"How long's it been now?"

"Seven months." God, had it really been that long? I couldn't believe that Sarah had been dead for seven months.

"They must have been pretty close. If Kay lost her sister, she'd cry for half an hour and then go shopping."

I snorted as the car pulled to a stop beside the tenement building. Fresh graffiti decorated the metal shutters of the shop beneath our flat; I stared at the frustration vented on them, feeling a mix of anger and empathy towards whoever had left their mark. I got out and leaned my forearm on the roof of the car. "Thanks for the lift. Let me know if you hear anything."

"No problem. See you... whenever."

I swung the door shut. The Mini chugged off and splashed a puddle of muddy water onto my legs. I stepped back, then stood for a moment looking up at the sky. The rain washed down in sheets.

I CLIMBED THE stairwell, passing the door of Jenny and Arthur Randle, who were bawling at each other again. Why the hell don't they just give it up? Put it down to experience, move on, go their own separate ways and give the rest of us a break. On the second floor, a small pot of violet pansies sat by the red doorway – Cora's idea; she'd painted it herself. I entered the flat, took off my coat and tossed it onto the chair next to the table with the lamp and the photograph of Cora and me on some Munro. We'd set the camera on a rock and rushed back to pose in time for the shot, giving us a slightly manic look, with Cora's dark red hair whipping across her face and me with a crazed, half-fixed smile that

made me look like the Joker. The almond-shaped face and messy, slightly spiky sandy coloured hair haven't changed much, but my eyes have. Laughter lines, they call them, but the laughter seeped away without me noticing.

I made myself an extra strong mug of black coffee and walked into the living room where Cora had concealed the tear in the brown couch with a blue rug. White candles of different sizes stood in the unused fireplace. Cora would light them every night when she came home. The place reeked of incense. She'd taken to burning it when she meditated, and even my clothes were beginning to stink of the stuff, to the point where Chris accused me of being a dopehead. Reminders of her time in India decorated the room: a large wall tapestry, faded rugs on the bare floorboards, a Buddha on the bookcase, squeezed between my books on climbing and her books on philosophy, Taoism and other weird stuff. My contribution to our home was the laptop on the wooden desk in front of the long, thin window – which rattled whenever the wind picked up – and the stack of journals on the floor; last night's empty beer can sat on top of it. I sat down at the desk and checked for phone messages while the laptop booted up.

Two messages. The first, the man from the garage. "Hi Robert, it's Alf Barlow here. 'Fraid it's not good news with the bike – the frame's cracked the whole way through. If I could weld it together, I would, but it wouldn't hold. It's a death trap. It'd be cheaper to buy a new bike. Anyway, eh, give me a call when you get this."

Great.

The second, Danny's voice. "Robert, can you take your snow shovel? I can't find mine. Think we'll be okay with one between us. Only four weeks to go!"

Four weeks till Tibet and he's already packing. Only four weeks.

I opened my inbox. The first message didn't help. It was a knock-back from the *Journal of Physics* about my recent submission.

Unfortunately, we feel that your research needs to be further forward before it justifies publication in this journal. However we would welcome a resubmission when you have validated your results.

Well, that's not happening now, is it? What a fucking day.

Things got worse. The next email was from the lab, untitled. Maybe some kind of explanation. All the text said was 'Update'. I clicked open the attachment as the phone rang.

"Robert, is that you?" It was Chris.

"Yeah, I'm just logging..."

"Don't open it!"

"What?"

"The email from the lab – don't open it!"

Too late. The screen flashed and flickered as fleeting programs and documents and files haemorrhaged down some invisible plughole. I dropped the phone. "No..." I punched into the settings and found the remote access enabled, and not listening to commands to turn it off.

"Shit!" The chair toppled over behind me as I shot to my feet. I pressed and held the power key, but not before the cursor blinked, having completed its task. I picked up the phone.

"Robert?"

"This happen to you?"

"Yeah."

"Could you trace it?"

"No, it's fixed the boot sector and overwritten the files. They got my backup, too."

"What?"

"I had them on File-Safe."

"The commercial server?"

“Yeah, but they got into it. My guess is they keylogged my login.” Do you have anything else?”

“I’ll call you back.” I hung up.

I BOLTED DOWN the stairwell and pushed through the door leading to the small strip of garden which was shared with the Randles. At the far end was a small shed. It’s well built and full of rusty tools left by the old man who was here before us. I unlocked the heavy padlock and the door creaked as I swung it open. A few years ago I had fixed a metal lock-box against the wall, and I kept my backup discs and keys in there. It’s cheaper than storage on a remote electronic server, and although it’s old fashioned, it feels like I have more control. I opened the box and took out the contents, then knocked on Jenny Randle’s door and asked if I could use her computer.

All of the discs were blank.

“WIPED?” SAID CHRIS when I called him back. “And you’re sure the box was locked?”

“It must have been an electromagnet on the outside wall.”

I heard Chris blow out a long breath.

“No one knew about that locker, Chris. No one. Who the hell’s doing this?”

“I called Zimmer. He says we need to let it go. No police, he said. It wouldn’t get us anywhere.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “Oh, come on. We can’t just let this go! This isn’t just shutting down a project – it’s wiping out any evidence that it ever happened!”

“Let it go, Robert. Whatever it is, it sounds like you don’t want it in your life. Look, call Zimmer yourself if you like. But you won’t get anywhere.”

I did, and Chris was right. Zimmer was a wall. I don’t think he really knew what was going on, but I sounded scared. “It’s above our heads, Robert,” he said. “This is right from the top. It’s not worth it.”

“It’s not worth it? It’s not worth everything we did for that project, for all those years? Come on, Zimmer! What happened to you?”

“Leave it, Robert. Please. You won’t win this one. Let it go.”

He said he’d do what he could to get me a place at Cavendish, but he couldn’t promise.

I hung up in disgust, but I was shaken, more than I wanted to admit. I knew he was right.

I HEARD THE front door open. Cora walked in, pulling a scarf laced with sparkly strands from around her neck.

“What are you doing home so early?” she asked.

She was dressed in jeans and a purple top that was too big for her and her hair was swept up on her head in the way that it usually was. Her jewellery was unchanged – plain leather bands around her slender wrist, a single, broad, silver ring on her thumb and the silver ring I bought her which she wore on a cord round her neck. She used to wear it on her index finger until she stopped eating well and it became too big for her. For all of her shiny accessories, her face still had a haunted look that had been there since her sister died.

“What’s wrong?” She regarded me through narrowed green eyes beneath dark lashes.

“I... eh. I got some bad news today.”

“What’s happened?”

“They’ve closed down the lab.”

“What?”

“No warning – even Zimmer didn’t know till this morning.”

“Why, was it dangerous?”

“No, nothing like that. ~~We don't know what's going on. All we know is that we get a month's pay,~~ but the project's finished.”

“But can they do that? I mean, after everything you've done?”

“They just did, Cora.”

“Oh, Robert, I'm sorry...” Being bitter about it all was easy, but when she put arms around me, and held me tight, I felt like a child. For a moment, I was anchorless, like I couldn't remember who I was any more. “After all your work,” she whispered. She stroked my hair. The fury melted into despair and threatened to spill onto my cheeks; I pulled away from her before it did.

She held onto my hand, squeezing it gently. Her palm was cool and delicate in mine. “We'll work it out, Robert. I'll get some shifts in a café or something. There's a waiting list for my class, so I'm sure I could run another one.”

“It's not going to be enough, though.”

“Well, maybe you could go back to web design for a while, just until something else comes up.”

I nodded and turned to the window where grey rain pattered on the glass.

“Listen, let me make a phone call. I was going to go out tonight with Jacqui and Liz – I'll let them know I won't make it.”

“Who?”

“From my class.”

“Oh. I didn't know you socialised with them.”

She shrugged, stooped to light a few candles. “You're always late home.” Then she flushed and said “Sorry.”

“It's okay.”

She sat on the sofa, watching me, and I turned to look out of the window to the sodden street below. Jenny Randle's Fiat Punto was parked below, like it always was. The car hadn't moved since I saw it this morning, but my whole life had. And I had no say in any of it.

“Maybe we should go away for a while,” said Cora.

“I need to get some work, Cora. I've no income now, remember?”

“We've got some savings.”

“Yeah, as a last resort. I need to get another job.”

“Well,” she said, patiently, “you might be in a better place to deal with things if you take a break.”

“I've already paid for the trip to Tibet. That'll be enough of a break.”

“I meant with me. We could go back to the cottage.”

A few weeks after Sarah died, I had taken Cora to a cottage on the coast. I thought the change of scene would help, and it did, a little. We had some walks on the beach, drank a lot of wine and I held her each night as she cried herself to sleep. Watching her suffer was almost unbearable. I kept wishing I could take it all for her, but there's nothing you can do with invisible wounds. We were closer then than we had been in a while, but when we got home, we fell back into our separate lives.

“Or we could go up to the pottery,” she continued. “It won't cost us anything, apart from the travel. My parents won't be back till next month.”

Cora's parents, Evelyn and Frank, had bought the old pottery along the glen from where I grew up, on the west coast of Scotland. He was an engineer and she was a social worker who had taken a pottery evening class one autumn at the local polytechnic. They saw the light, as they said, and packed it all in, in exchange for the simple life. Grow your own veg, brew your own cider, summer solstice parties. You get the picture. One harsh winter without running water made them realise that cities aren't so bad and now they spend most of their time on city breaks. The longest they've been home since Sarah died is four weeks. Probably too quiet up there; nowhere to hide from their thoughts. I met Cora there

seven years ago when I was up visiting my mum and she was helping set up the pottery. There was something about her that I couldn't put my finger on, but we just clicked. We laughed a lot. She had a vibrancy about her that was infectious, mixed in with an intoxicating sense of calm. She had me hooked. It seemed like a long time ago.

"Where are they off to this time?"

"Barcelona. You know, we could go walking again, like we used to."

It was the first sign that she was in a better place, something I'd been hoping for, for seven months. Just in time for me to pass her on the way down.

"That sounds good."

GRADUALLY WE SEEMED to switch roles. Now it was me who would wake up in the small hours, and she'd get up and sit with me, or make me a drink. She still carried her grief around with her, and sometimes her eyes would glisten whenever something triggered it, like a reference to family on the TV or a piece of music on the radio. But she seemed to box it away, in the way that a parent who's hurting might box away their pain from their child, and smile as if everything is okay, and those tears on their cheeks don't mean anything. I knew she was trying – she did get some extra shifts and took on another class, but I began to find it easier when I was on my own.

"I don't have a solution to all this, Robert," she said once, "but I know there is one. You'll find a job."

"And what if I don't?"

"You will. Just trust that it'll work out."

I took her hand and tried to smile. I didn't know you could feel lonely in your own home.

The lecturer post had been filled and nothing came up with Zimmer's plan for Cavendish, not that I expected it to. Zimmer cancelled our presentation at the conference, and I was copied into the reply.

From: sjpickard@aup.ac.uk

Sent: 21st February 11:27

To: geoff.zimmer@sightlabs.ac

cc: robert.strong@sightlabs.ac

Re: Presentation at Annual Conference on Astroparticle and Underground Physics

Priority: High

Dear Professor Zimmer,

Thank you for your correspondence updating me on the situation with SightLabs. I understand your reluctance to proceed with your presentation at the upcoming conference, given that your results are preliminary and the ability to validate them has been taken from you. I am deeply dismayed at the decision to close SightLabs and I suggest we raise it at the AGM. I am certain that you will find a body of physicists to back your appeal. You certainly have my support.

Sincerely,

Prof Simon Pickard

At least Zimmer was showing some spine in tackling this. I went to the conference with him and sat in on the AGM. The Chief Executive of the Institute of Physics was chairing and drafted a document to the Minister of Science, outlining the objections to the closure of SightLabs and the cack-handed way it was handled. Everyone at the meeting signed their support and it made me feel better for a bit.

But I still didn't have a job. I advertised to do web design and got some interest – from a furniture

removal business called Packit Up and a health food shop in Surrey. It wasn't much, but it brought in some cash.

I didn't realise how much time Cora spent meditating. The flat was beginning to feel like a prison, and I'd go out to the library with my laptop to work when the smell of incense got to me. I was becoming more and more irritable, easily affected by small things, like finding a flier on the hall table for a music festival; the book on transcendental meditation that she was half way through reading, lying open on the couch; the calendar on the kitchen table, the one I couldn't help reading, that gave me a new quote every day, with some namby-pamby non-advice like, 'Whatever has happened is the perfect reason to keep going. Keep going and create the life you have chosen to live.' *You know what? I didn't choose any of this. And I don't need some airhead to tell me I need to be happy about it.*

But what was worse than the anger was the indifference. That feeling of nothingness. Like I'd been cored out and I was existing in a pointless shell, going through the motions for the sake of it. Cora's attempts to help just frustrated me, and I'd snap at her whenever she asked questions, like if I'd had any word from Cavendish or if I'd thought of going out for a beer with Chris. "I'm only trying to help," she'd say. "I know how difficult this is for you."

No you don't. You've no idea how this feels. And your treating me like a victim is just making things worse. But I didn't say any of it. I'd make an excuse to go back to my laptop.

A couple of weeks later when I came back from the library she looked different. Not what she was wearing, but her expression, her demeanour had changed. She was sitting at the kitchen table writing something in a notebook.

"Hi." She smiled fully, for the first time in ages.

"Hi." I put my laptop down on the chair.

"How did it go?"

"Same as usual."

She got up. "You want a coffee?"

"Yeah, okay. How are things with you?"

She closed the cupboard door and spooned the coffee into the mugs. She glanced at me, as though trying to read my mood. "Well, actually... something happened to me today."

"What?"

She leaned on the worktop and looked down at the mugs while the kettle chugged steam onto the green tiled wall.

"I saw Sarah."

"Sarah who?"

"My sister."

"What do you mean – you had a dream about her?"

"No, I was awake."

"Well, what do you mean you saw her?"

She bit her lower lip, but the smile crept out on either side. "Robert, you're not going to believe this. Just after you left, I felt really low – I mean worse than I've felt in a long time. I just wanted to know she was okay, you know? And then... then she was there, standing at the window. Smiling at me." *Sweet Jesus, was I hearing this?* "She looked like she used to look. No bright lights, not like a ghost or anything. Just like you look, right now... and when she left, I felt this really strong sense of peace, right here." She pointed to the left of her breastbone then shrugged. "I just know she's okay now." She stared at nothing for a moment then found her focus on me. "Isn't that amazing?"

What do you say to something like that? Pass it off as casual conversation? "That's... well... that's great you feel better, Cora."

She stepped closer to me. "But don't you see how incredible it is? She was right here, Robert, as real

as you are.”

“That’s great.” ~~God, she really means it.~~ I smiled a forced smile. ~~Do something. Something normal.~~ turned to fill the mugs with boiling water.

“That’s it? It’s ‘great’? Robert, don’t you see what this means?”

“It means you’re happy, that’s all that matters.” I tried to make it sound light-hearted, but it didn’t come out like that. She took a step back, her eyes searching my face.

“You don’t believe me.”

I let out a sigh. “I believe that you believe it.”

“That’s not the same. I need you to believe this. What do you think I saw?”

“Cora, you’re exhausted... after what we’ve both been through... you hardly sleep, you’re not eating. Your mind can do all kinds of things to you when you’re stressed.”

“You think I imagined it?”

“A lot of people who’ve been through what you have must see things that...”

“That what? Aren’t there?”

“Cora, Sarah is dead.” I put my hands on her shoulders and said it again, gently. “She’s dead.”

“I know that – I watched her die, remember? But I’m telling you I saw her.”

“Oh come on, Cora.” This was getting stupid. “Maybe it was just...”

“No. It was her.” She shook her head. “Why do you always react like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you think that this life is all there is, but why can’t you just admit that maybe you’re wrong. What are you afraid of?”

Oh, please. “I’m not afraid. Come on, let’s leave it, Cora.” I picked up my laptop and walked out of the kitchen. I could feel the bubble of irritation swelling and I didn’t want it to burst.

She followed me into the living room. “No, let’s not leave it. Why can’t you just open your mind?”

I couldn’t help it. Something snapped in me. “Open my mind? *Open* mymind? My mind is wide open! No, I don’t lap up whatever the latest beardie-weirdie bastard is telling me – I don’t buy it – but don’t tell me my mind isn’t open! I spend my life looking for something that no-one can see, but I deal in facts, Cora, not wild assumptions.”

“Just because you haven’t found a name for it doesn’t mean it isn’t there!”

“If someone could give me a shred of evidence, just a shred” – I picked up the Buddha statue from the bookcase and slammed it down again – “that any of this woo-woo shite is right, I’d believe it. I really would. But there’s nothing! There never has been. All this...” – I waved my hand around at the room – “...this new-age crap is just filling a hole. It’s blind faith, Cora – if you choose it, go ahead, but not me. I need proof, not fantasy.”

“You can’t prove everything.”

“Yes, you can, Cora.”

“Really?” She reached for the silver ring that hung from the black leather cord around her neck.

“What about love?”

She held my stare for a moment, waiting for me to answer, and when I couldn’t, she lowered her eyes and left the room.

A leaden silence rang out between us that night. I hated it, the edge that hung in the air after we argued. It flaunts the side of me I don’t want to know. It leaves me feeling deflated and irritated. I wish I could have let go of it, but I didn’t know how. I scowled for most of the evening and banged things when I put them down, frustrated with Cora and bitter with myself. Why couldn’t she just accept that I see things differently? She passed the evening reading a book by the window, although she seemed to spend more time staring at the rain on the glass than at the pages on her lap.

That night when I lay next to her, I couldn’t sleep. The anger dissolved into guilt and it clawed at me

insides. Still, in the darkness, our exchanges played over in my mind. I turned to watch her, as she lay sleeping, her skin pale and smooth against the pillow, and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. *Couldn't you just have let it go, let her think you believed her? Would that have been so difficult?* The truth was something I didn't want to face, and there, in the silence of the darkened room, it was surfacing. When did we become so different? It wasn't always this way, was it? Or did I just dismiss before; think it didn't really matter? A part of me, somewhere deep and unsettled within, wondered who she was, and how we ever ended up together. I rolled away from her and closed my eyes. It would be alright in the morning.

BUT IT WASN'T alright. We barely spoke for the next few days. She stayed out more and more, and Tibet became the escape route I was aiming for. Until then, I was marking time. I hated myself for it. Sometimes I'd catch her crying, then she'd brush the tears away in angry shame and push past me, and I knew it wasn't about Sarah. We slept in different rooms, each making the excuse that we didn't want to keep the other awake. If it weren't for that picture on the hall table, I'd have said we were flatmates who barely knew each other. I couldn't think of anything we had in common anymore. Not a single thing. Is that what happens to people?

But the day I left for Tibet, I got a glimpse of something that was there before. She kissed me on the cheek, and that kiss, soft and simple, had more tenderness than all the others we'd shared before. She took the ring on the leather cord from around her neck and handed it to me. She was letting me go. I needed to go, and she knew it; that kiss was her permission. She wouldn't be there when I got back.

SOMETHING SHARP IS needling my face. A taste of copper in my mouth, a throbbing upper lip. Ignore it, it'll go away.

Nope, it's still there, pushing against my cheek. Is it pushing me or is it the other way round? Either way it feels like I'm bouncing. How odd. *Open your eyes.*

What the...

The whole earth is bouncing nearer and further away, nearer and further away. What way is up? Below, something black and furry, the smell of musty leather. A thudding sound – hooves beneath me. What the hell? A man's lined, weathered face, dark pebbles for eyes peering in; grey rocks and shingles on the hard ground below. If I lift my head a little. Shit, it hurts – a nail in the skull with each bounce. Sunlight floods in, sets my eyes streaming again, as I squint up. Is that a lake? Why so black in all this light? Not even a glimmer on it. I remember it, black water with no light. Uneasiness crawls under my skin as the thick grey mist parts for a moment, and behind it... what is that? A dark sphere where the sun should be, not yellow but black, a seething dark orb. I don't want to, but I can't help but look, it's drawing my eyes back to it, draining me, sapping me from the inside. There's a sound. A soft whispering, a breathing of indiscernible words, and something else is behind the whisper, like the sound of an out-of-tune bagpipe. It hurts – I'm feeling actual pain in my head with it. *God, make it stop. Please...*

Blackness falls.

Quiet, the absence of wind and snow, a cup of warm liquid held to my lips, the smell of incense, and blackness once more.

WHAT DID I dream? It was a ramble, a rant in the caverns of my dizzy mind. I dreamt that Cora was wiping the blood from my face, soothing me. She stared down at me, unsmiling, and dropped a stick

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