

Hospital

from

Above the Void

by

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Chapter 2

“Can you smell that funny smell?” It’s my mum’s voice. “Smells like burning rubber.” I’m surrounded by smoke, and there’s shouting. “Get out! Get out now! No, don’t get your dolly. Get out Melissa... Melissa... Melissa...” The desperate voices change gradually into someone calling me gently just by my ear.

Slowly a ceiling comes into focus – white, stark with painfully bright lights set into it. Mechanical and cold, it bears down on me till it seems like my head will burst. That’s it, my head’s going to explode. Somewhere there is deep, deep pain trying to get out. I try to turn my head to see who’s been calling my name, but I can’t. Something’s holding my head firmly in place. I try to say, “What am I doing here?” But the effort involved in moving my mouth is too great.

“Melissa? Nurse, she’s come round.” It’s a man’s voice.

I can hear movement: footsteps, a clattering, and suddenly a disembodied face appears looking down at me, then another. Male, female, I can’t tell. Just pink shadows against the light.

They’re all talking at once.

“Check...”

“Get the...”

“Call Doctor...”

More footsteps. More clattering. There’s a piercing light in my eyes. I close them.

“Melissa? Can you hear me?” It’s another man’s voice – too loud.

I want them to go away. I want to be back in my old home, safe with my family. Was that a dream? Is this a dream? There’s something horribly sharp and clinical here that tells me that this is reality. This is what I’ve come back to.

“She’s conscious, but she can’t move or speak... injury to the back of ... head cerebellum.” Loud voice.

‘Hello, I’m here,’ I try to say. You wish you weren’t. And what’s a... a... cerebublium?

I’m so frustrated, I don’t know why... I move something. Not sure what it is.

“Doctor, she moved her hand.”

My hand.

“Hello, Melissa. Can you hear me?” That loud voice nagging at me again. “Move your hand if you can.”

I try doing the same thing again, but the effort makes the ceiling start to descend again. They are all saying something – I can’t make out what it is because they’re getting quieter and everything’s fading... out.

In.

It feels like I’m in the middle of a snowstorm, inside a tiny glass dome. I can’t make sense of anything. I feel numb but inside me there’s a deep, deep pain... somewhere.

Won’t go away, go away, go away...

Out.

In.

“Tell June I’ve got a…”

“If you’ll just listen. He’s got to go to…”

I catch conversations from somewhere. Not for me, but I can’t block them out. I panic: will I be stuck with these conversations for ever…for ever…for ever..?

Out.

In.

More pain. More numbness. I’ve got this storm going on in my head. I must get to the centre. I must find…something. There’re beeps too – outside me. Beep, beep… Can I control these beeps? Are they part of me? Then the clatter… then…

Out.

In.

I’m awake again.

No-one is here.

I feel something. Something familiar. Something I shouldn’t do. I’m peeing in my bed. I mustn’t pee in my bed, but I can’t stop myself. But there’s no warm wet feeling. Pee just gone…

gone…

Out.

In.

Beep, beep, beep…

Is this part of me?

I start to panic: the beeps get faster. Oh no, it is me. Can I do anything?

“Doctor. I think she needs more se…da…tive…”

The numbness increases.

The beeps get slower… fade

out…

In.

The storm’s not so bad now. I think I’m upside down, but at least things are stiller. White light in my eyes. “Leave me alone,” I say. “Don’t you understand? I CAN’T stand… you. Go away, go away…”

Out.

In.

I’m lying on a bed of warm seaweed.

Everything’s calmed down.

The snowstorm, was it a snowstorm? It’s gone.

Still, still light.

I’m looking up.

A face appears.
I want that face.
I love that face.
It goes away.
No!
Beep, beep, beep. Speeds up – slows down – fades
out.

Chapter 3

I am running down a smoke-filled hall. There are cries all around me. Children screaming, "Mummy, Daddy!" Parents calling – their voices full of panic. Everybody's running. The ceiling above me groans and shrieks – it is coming down. I look up and it starts to glow white. It must be the heat.

But as I look it stops and stays just where it is hovering above me - caught in suspended animation.

"I'm so sorry." The voice is gentle. "You ran out straight in front of me." He is talking quietly by my left ear, at least I think it's left. "Why did you do it? Why did you run out like that?" I love this man's voice – it takes my mind away from the nightmare.

"I asked in the pub later, but no-one knew why you'd run out like that. Apparently you'd been talking to an old drunk in the corner, but when I asked him, he didn't say anything. Just stared at me as if I was mad."

He's just talking to himself – he doesn't know I'm awake. Maybe he's mad, but he doesn't sound mad. I'm not mad either – I'm making sense of this. This is about me. What I did. Once.

"The landlord was great. He stayed with me while we waited for the ambulance. He said you'd just split up with your husband. He said he'd arranged for your things to be taken to the station. I wonder where you were going."

I wonder that too. Husband? Can't remember. Hurts to try. Too far away.

"You are a complete mystery. You don't seem to have anyone. The hospital tried contacting your family, and finally found your mother. She came to visit you. Brought some cheap flowers. They're dead already. But she didn't seem to care. Not really. Just talked about herself. She says she'll come back."

My mother? Who is she? Do I want her?

He pauses. Then I feel something. It's my hand - he's taken hold of my hand. I feel something rush through me: fear, love, desire.

"I'm here though. I come when I'm not working. I like talking to you. You remind me of someone." There's something moving about the way he says that, and I want to give his hand a squeeze. He lets go and his face appears above me. I see him clearly for the first time. Gentle boyish face, a bit like a choirboy.

I saw him before. I'm sure I saw him before. I remember the love I felt. I want to reach up and touch his cheek, but there's no chance of that. I can't fucking move my fucking arm.

He looks into my eyes. I blink.

“Nurse, she’s come round again.”

“I’ll call Doctor Sharma. Doctor Napier’s off today.”

His face goes away again, but I hear him by me. Close to my head.

“I’m James.” His voice sounds urgent. “I... Alice... She died in a car accident.”

Go away Malice, I want to say.

“It was a couple of years ago now. But it’s so strange that I should have... that this should have happened now. That’s what I wanted to tell you, so you didn’t think I was some kind of weirdo.”

Deirdre weirdo, malice Alice? Who’s she?

“Mr Penhaligon, we need to see Melissa now.” A gentle female Indian voice interrupts us, and I hear him get up.

“See you in a bit.” Says Mister Pen-a-lot-again.

No, no, come back.

I hear the sound of curtains being pulled. Curtains – my shroud. There’s some bustling about and something rattling by my bed.

A woman leans over me and looks into my eyes. She must be quite short as her face is much closer to mine than that lovely man’s was. Her dark brown complexion and curved nose, pierced with a tiny diamond, make me feel like I’m in Indi...Indi...I can’t remember the name.

She smiles. “Hello. I’m going to shine a light into your eyes. Please try to keep them open for me.”

The light is blinding. Painful. I want to close my eyes, but keep them open as best I can. I like her. I want to please her.

“Good, good. Thank you. Can you talk?”

I could try. I send the message ‘yes’ to my mouth. I feel it move – it takes a massive effort, I’m sure I said yes. But the woman goes away. There’s a murmur of voices, but nothing distinct. Except one word.

“Cerebellum.”

Cerebublium? Did I hear that word earlier? I’m not sure. Have I got one? Is that the problem?

There’s the sound of those curtains again. Some shuffling, and then whispered, “You can have ten minutes, and then we must give her her medication.” A female voice I don’t recognise. Sharp. Bossy. Ugh.

A scraping sound, and then I feel warm breath on my cheek.

“Hello. It’s James again. I guess you can’t talk, but you’re awake. That’s such good news. I’ve come every day, waiting for you to wake up.”

I want to turn my head and look at him. I try to move, but suddenly, the deep pain that’s been hovering round the edge of my consciousness, comes into focus, and I get a message that says ‘DON’T DO THAT.’

“I have been able to come and see you every day because of my work. I work mainly at home but partly in this hospital. At home I work as a psychotherapist, and then I run a cancer counselling clinic here in the hospital.”

Cancer? I don't have cancer do I? I remember that cancer was something horrible and I feel a cold shiver go down my body. Is the cere-wotsit-um something to do with that?

"That finishes at five, so I can come and see you then. Sometimes earlier if something changes. I suspect they'll cut the clinic soon. Everything's being cut. But I'm fortunate enough to have my own private work."

He pauses, and I wonder why he's telling me all this. Does he love me?

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You're not my patient, but I do know that company is healing when you're recovering from a serious injury. When I knocked you down..."

His voice goes a bit gravelly.

I love him. I love him so much. Oh no. I want to pee.

"When I knocked you down, you hit the back of your head on the road." He clears his throat. "The blow damaged the nerve routes to your cerebellum."

I can't stop myself. I'll wet my bed. Someone will tell me off. But I can't feel the wet, and what's this thing that keeps coming up? Cere... cere...

"The part of your brain that controls movement and speech. This is why it's so hard for you to talk. You can't move anyway. They've put your head and shoulders in a brace to protect things while they mend."

So things are going to mend? How long will I be stuck here like this? How long have I been stuck like this? My mind whizzes backwards and forwards. I'm losing my grip.

"There'll be therapies to help you get things working again, but for now they say you must rest. And here I am, helping you rest... I hope."

He really doesn't sound like a, like a... wots-ellor. He's so eager to please me. He loves me, that's it he loves me, and I love him. I love him so.

"I can see Matron coming. She'll be giving you your medication."

I hear an edge to his voice. Doesn't he like Megatron?

"Mr Penhaligon. I'll have to..."

"It's alright, I'm off now." He puts his hand on mine, and for a moment as he leans forward, I catch a glimpse of his expression, and I see a vulnerability. He is not god-like at that moment – he's a boy. Don't go lovely boy. Don't go and leave me with this harsh, edgy-voiced Megatron. As I start to cry, I feel a surge of something cool going into my system, and I don't want to be in this any more.

So I'm out.

Chapter 4

I am so cold. It's so dark. I'm caught in a snowdrift and can't get out because there's somebody holding onto my leg. I pull and pull and at last I am free. But too late – I haven't the energy to carry on. I just lie back in the snow and look up at the sun. It's so bright that I want to look away but I can't. I can't move my head. I can't move anything. The bright light bears down on me, but it's not the sun. I'm in that house with the smoke and fire, and the ceiling's coming down.

“Sorry love. My hands are cold. They're always cold.”

A woman talking to herself.

“There.”

The ceiling comes into focus. It's not going to crush me. It's that hospital ceiling again and I'm back in hospital. How long has it been? How long will it go on – this to and fro from dreaming to waking? It occurs to me that she doesn't know I'm awake.

“Hello,” I say in my head, but what I hear is scarcely audible.

I try again. “Hello.” That was louder, it took all my strength. Anyway, she's heard me. Her face appears – the gentle lines of a woman in her fifties. She smiles.

“Hello love. Are you awake? Did you say something?”

I blink.

“Good. I'll call Doctor Ford. She said to let her know if you came round.”

Doctor Ward on her ward round. I wonder if it will be called Ward's ward. Perhaps she'll get an award for warding off disease on her Ward ward. Hello, my mind's pattering on again. But at least it's working. I'm warm now under my sheets and blankets. I luxuriate in this feeling of bed-ness. I wriggle my toes. I WRIGGLE MY TOES!

Nurse is coming back with Doctor Ward. I hear the clatter of their sensible shoes on the ward floor.

Doctor Ward's broad pleasant face appears above me.

Doctor Ward wears makeup. I'm surprised she has time to put it on, what with all the work she must do on her ward. She looks into my eyes.

“Hello, I'm Doctor Ford,” says a fruity friendly voice. “How are we?”

I don't know how well you are Doctor, but I feel much better thank you. AND I can wriggle my toes!

“Very well,” I say, but it sounds like ‘eh-i-eh’, and it's so quiet.

“Hello, can you hear me?” She looks closer into my eyes.

I blink.

Doctor Ward-ward goes off-camera. “I think we should get Doctor Park the neurologist. Can you find him, Nurse? He'll be in his consulting room. Fourth floor.”

Clatter of nurse's feet off into the distance. I follow the sound and hear voices: “No June, I don't want you to do that. He's...”

“Now, let's take a look at you.” Doctor Ward-ward grunts as she bends down. I feel her breath on my ear. Another grunt as she straightens up and clatters round the end of my bed. I wriggle my toes as she goes past, but she can't see them under the sheets of course.

I guess she's looking at instruments and things that must be attached to me by wires and tubes.

Wires and tubes, wires and tubes.

"All looking tickety-boo."

Her face appears again. "We'll have to find a way of communicating with you. Mark will know. Still, you're mending well."

But I did just try and communicate. She just didn't hear me.

There's the sound of footsteps – soft shoes this time.

"Ah, James. Do you want to keep her company while we try and find Doctor Park? I've got some more visits to do. She's looking better."

And I can wriggle my toes.

A handsome boyish face looks down at me. He's the one I love, isn't he?

"Hello," I say.

"Doctor, she said something." He disappears for a moment.

"Oh too late. Pat's always on the move." His face reappears, and he smiles.

"I'm really pleased to see you looking so much better today."

Today? So I've been out since yesterday. What happened in-between?

"When Mark comes we'll find a way to communicate with you. We don't know quite how you've been affected by the... by the accident. I think you're doing fine, but..." His voice trails off, and his face disappears. There's the scrape of a chair being pulled up.

"I hope you don't mind me talking to you like this. It's supposed to do you good, and it's good for me too. I might be a therapist and a counsellor, but right now I'm the man who knocked you down, and I want you to get better." His voice has gone all gravelly – that's because he loves me, of course.

"I've been doing some cancer counselling today. There're some brave people there..." He's cheering up now. "Tonight I'll go home to my house and light a fire in the sitting room. I like my house – it has good memories, and I enjoy a good glass of red wine in front of the fire."

Do I drink wine? No I don't drink wine. I don't drink anything. Bad for me.

"It's a little Victorian coal fire. The house was built in the twenties, but I got the fireplace from a junkyard and fitted it. It makes it all seem much older, which I like. I only have one glass. Margaret River. I was there a few years ago with..." He gets stuck for a moment.

Margaret River, Margaret River, wasn't I there too? Was I with him?

"I was there with Alice. Before... before the accident."

Is that my accident? Something stirs in my memory. Oh yes, someone died... For some reason it makes me feel uneasy. I dismiss it. I have other worries now. For instance, how can I get James to look at me wriggling my toes? How can I talk to him at all?

"Ah ooh er...er?" That was meant to be 'are you alright?' and it comes out as a whisper. Not even sure it is audible against the hum and clatter of Ward's ward.

"I thought of you last night." His voice brightens up again. "I imagined you as a child, in this big old rambling house, playing with your dolly. Silly I know... every girl must have a dolly at some stage... but the image of your house seemed so real as I looked into the fire."

Oh-my-God. The fire. There was a fire.

“There’s so little I actually know about you. All the lines have dried up. Your mother...” His voice becomes harsh.

“But you will be able to tell me about yourself... soon.” He pauses. I want to reach out to him – I love him so much. Hold his hand. I feel a movement. Was that my hand that moved?

His face appears above me. He looks puzzled. “You moved your hand. Are you trying to tell me something?” He smiles. “You are, aren’t you!”

His hand touches mine. The hand I moved. I can feel the connection with him now. It goes up my arm, my shoulder, and spreads inside me, as though the warmth of his hand pulls the disconnected parts of my body together.

We stay like that for a long time. Then he sighs, and I hear the edgy voice of Megatron and I roll out of this world and into sleep.

Chapter 5

“Leave your dolly. We can’t get that now.” Mummy’s shouting now. “James, James where are you?” There are shrieks and groans all around me, as the ceiling descends. I’m screaming. Daddy’s lost in the fire. The smoke is choking me. There are voices everywhere, shouting, calling. I run in the confusion and the ceiling starts coming down on me. It’s so bright.

Too bright. These lights are too bright. And everyone’s talking at once.

“She shouldn’t...”

“...a week since...”

“We must get things moving...”

“Needs rest...”

I try to shout, “Hello, I’m here.” But it comes out as a moan: ‘a-oh-ee-ere’.

Still, it has the desired effect. The voices stop, and a new face appears in my field of vision. Dark, thinning hair. A face that somehow reminds me of a lion.

“Hello. How are you feeling?” He has a deep voice like a lion. Makes me think of Sean... Sean... can’t remember his other name.

How am I feeling? Er... headache’s much better. But otherwise the same. Can’t move. Can’t talk. Actually, not quite true. I can move, yes, I can move both hands and my toes. It’s not like I’m paralysed, it just takes a huge effort. And speaking’s the same. If I shout it comes out as a whisper – a parody of what I am trying to say.

“Frustrated!” I shout. Too much effort – the headache’s getting worse, and it just sounds like I’m wheezing.

“We want to do some tests...” he says – his voice rumbles in a gentle way.

“Too early...”

“Mark, she’s too tired...”

I hear Megatron’s voice, and the-man-I-love. That’s James isn’t it? But not James Bond.

“But she can move her hand, you said.” Mister Rumble’s voice remains low and gentle, despite the negative sounds coming from the other two.

I move my hand obligingly. I wave and point towards my toes, but it feels hard to do the pointing – like all my fingers move together. Everything’s so stiff and uncooperative.

But Mister Rumble’s picked up my movement.

“You’re right, she can move her hand.” He hums to himself as he moves down the bed and lifts the sheets off my feet. I obligingly wriggle my toes.

“Ah yes... Well done, that’s good, very good. There’s movement right down her body, see? This is good news.”

My body. MY body. Hello. It’s me you’re talking about.

“We could do another scan, but it’s a bit early yet. I’m not sure we’d see much change.” He growls gently to himself.

“Mark, she’s listening to all this.” The-man-I-love’s voice intercedes on my behalf.

“Sorry.” Mister Rumble’s face appears again. “Sorry, I was getting carried away...”

Yes, you forgot I was here.

“... it all looks very good. You are able to move some muscles now, which is good news. The pathways to your cerebellum have been damaged in the accident, but they can repair themselves. At the moment you must feel that it’s very hard to move anything at all. But you’re not paralysed. It’s simply that the messages from your brain to your body are very weak because of the damage.”

He moves out of frame, and I hear a murmured discussion between him and James. The odd word sticks out: ‘cognitive’, ‘function’, ‘future’, ‘hope’.

They are talking about me. Is there hope? I haven’t thought about that yet. Am I going to be stuck here for ever? Am I dying? But Mister Rumble sounds so positive. He said ‘repair’. My body’s mending itself. They don’t know how much I know, and there’s no way of telling them. I want to cry. Can I cry? Well, there’s a sort of moaning sound coming from somewhere, and my vision is blurring.

“It’s alright.” I feel a hand on mine, and I manage to clasp it.

“You’re upset,” says the-voice-I-love. “I’m not surprised. They’re behaving as though you’re not there. Mark is very, very good, but sometimes... well they all do it: they forget.”

I am here, I want to say. But I know it will come out as a groan.

“I wish I could help you feel better,” he says.

But he has.

I have stopped crying. I don’t feel so alone now.

“You are making loads of progress. I don’t think Mark expected to see your toes moving. He’ll want to do some tests soon. As soon as you’re ready.”

He lapses into silence. I’m still holding his hand.

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” he murmurs to himself, and he tries to pull his hand away. I hold on for my life – my grip is stronger than he expected.

“Oh well.” He sighs, and we stay like that till I hear the clip-clop of Megatron’s sensible shoes.

Chapter 6

I'm running down the hall. Smoke everywhere. I must escape, but I can hear the sound of a lorry backing. It's going to crash right into the front of my house. Is it a fire engine coming to rescue me? The sound goes on and on, getting louder. My eyes are closed in expectation of the front wall of the house crashing down on me. I can hear others running up the hall behind me.

I open my eyes. There is an insistent beep coming from somewhere near me. I can hear people running. Doors being pushed open. Hard wheels on hard floors. A curtain is pulled. Low voices – indistinct. More running footsteps come close. Then silence.

There's another patient in my room. It never occurred to me that there would be someone else – I heard those voices, but they didn't make sense – I thought they were inside my head. All I have seen so far is the ceiling and people's faces when they deign to look down on me. I suppose I might be in one of those long wards I used to see in hospital dramas, but it feels like less. Probably a room with four beds in it. So there could be four people – all lying here silent. Unable to move. I find this thought unsettling, ghoulish.

Inside my head has changed, I realise. My rattled snowstorm dome has settled down, together with my see-saw emotions. The man-I-love is called James. He talks to me. Do I love him? I don't want to let go of that feeling of loving him, but I don't know how it happened. Does he love me? Another question.

The sound of people talking quietly. No words, but urgent tones. Receding footsteps. Then the unmistakable clip-clop of Megatron's shoes.

"We'd better move her into her own room if Doctor Park wants to do tests and therapies." I hear the disapproval in her voice. "We don't want it disturbing the other patients. Especially not now."

There's the clatter of something at the end of my bed. More footsteps in my direction. Then a pretty face appears above me. "We're going to move you, hon. Have your own room." Her face is very white, and her eyes are dark brown. There's a hardness about her expression, as though she's become too used to people's pain.

I can hear more people around my bed. Shuffles and rattles of tubes and wires. And I'm off. My first journey in this new life. Lights give way to plain white ceiling. I see the doorway as I leave the room that I have been in for so long. The corridor is darker and I move faster. I stop and I hear the ding of a lift. Scrape of doors opening. I move into this enclosed space. Doors scrape closed. Trapped. I hate lifts. Don't know whether I'm going up or down, but that swirling feeling of body displacement is very acute in my helpless position. Ding. Doors scrape open. I'm out, and going down a lighter corridor, through a doorway, and I stop.

The white face appears above me. "Alright hon?" She moves out of sight. "We'll get you sorted out."

There's rustlings and clickings as they connect me up in my new home. The ceiling looks very similar except the lights don't seem so piercing, as though they don't want to look so deep inside me now.

It's funny. I am connected and yet I feel disconnected. It keeps happening - I want to pee, and something warm happens somewhere, and I don't want to any more. Am I stranded between life and death?

Things are quiet now, and I realise that I miss a noise that I didn't even notice before – the murmur of voices, clank of trolleys, footsteps in the distance. In here now, I become deeply aware of a hum. It must be the airconditioning, but it seems to get louder and louder. I am in a huge jet plane. Taking off. Taking off...

"...because you're special. A special case. There's so much that can be done. So much to hope for." James's voice takes on a husky note, and he stops. I can hear him breathing, and it sounds odd. Is he weeping? Is that what silent weeping sounds like?

I want to comfort him. I reach out and touch cloth.

I feel his arm jerk away. "You're awake." There's silence. He doesn't know what to say. He thought I was asleep, and doesn't know how much I heard.

"How... how are you?" His face appears looking slightly red and blotchy – maybe it's just the light and the fact he's bending over me. He manages a smile. "I'm glad you've got a new room. There's a lovely view out of the window. It's so much fresher up here."

I'd love to see the view, but the ceiling will have to do.

"They're talking of moving you into a different position so that you can see and do more. The healing has gone really well."

How do they know all this? I must have been asleep, or unconscious. I imagine being suspended from the ceiling while white-coated surgeons peer up at me, a bit like garage mechanics inspecting the underside of a car. It makes me laugh.

"Are you alright?" James's face looks down on me with a puzzled frown.

"I'm fine – just laughing," I want to say. And now I can't stop – the convulsions shake my whole body.

"I'd better get someone."

Oh James, you are so serious. Please stay. I flail about with my unseen hand and find his and hold it hard.

"Nurse," he calls. "I think you'd better check her. I think she might have had some kind of convulsion."

The sound of footsteps. A face peering down at me. She moves away to read the instruments. "Mmmh, can't see anything. I don't think it's a seizure. I'll get Doctor Park to check when he comes." She leans over me again. "Are you alright? You look OK."

I smile up at her. A baby's first achievement, and here I am doing just that.

"Well, you look happy enough."

"Sorry, I thought..."

What did you think, James?

The nurse goes away, and James sits down – out of sight, out of reach.

"I had an early start today. Six o'clock." He yawns. "There's one client." He stops himself. "Sorry, I shouldn't talk about my clients. I was forgetting. Only one person turned up to my cancer clinic today. I wonder where they all were. It will definitely get cut if no-one makes use of it." He's hurt. I can hear it in his voice.

“Anyway, Mark’s coming soon, and they’ll see if you’re ready to be shifted into a more upright position. I’ll stay with you till then. I’ve got nothing... on.”

He stays, but he keeps his distance. What have I done? I want to hold his hand again – to feel that contact with a human being. Particularly this one.

“I cycle in at the moment. You made quite a mess of my car.”

Excuse me, your car made quite a mess of me. I imagine his car on a bed with surgeons all around, probing, lifting flaps of battered plastic bumper, and I start to laugh again.

James stands up quickly and looks down on my face. I grin back up at him.

“You’re laughing, so that’s it, you’re laughing.” He smiles at last. “That was a terrible thing I just said – about the mess you made. I can’t believe I said that.” He starts laughing too. This is so good, this moment. Two souls in humour.

Chapter 7

Slowly, but surely, my angle tilts, and I can see sky.

“We’ve got your bed into a more useable position for doing the tests,” I hear the gentle growl of Mister Rumble’s voice. “We can see you’re healing well, but we need to know how you’re progressing inside.”

Inside my head, you mean. But how am I to communicate if I can’t speak. But just now I’m taken up with my new perspective: they have angled the top part of my bed up so that I can see out of my window. I can see the walls of the room – a plain sort-of-white colour. Clean and clinical. And now Mister Rumble comes into vision, his creased leonine face concentrating on something behind my head. He is wearing a check shirt, and I bet he’s got fashionable faded jeans and moccasin type shoes on, but I’m not angled up enough to see.

There’s a whirring sound and I find myself looking into a dark cavern. “Press the button when you see a little flashing light.”

Button? Oh this thing in my hand. I experimentally press it, and it makes a beep. I drop it in surprise. A hand puts it back into my grasp and I hear:

“Now, when you’re ready.”

A flashing light appears and I press the button, but another one has already been and gone before I can press it again. I’m so slow. I’m way behind with my beeps. I’ve lost count of the lights that I’ve missed.

There is a whirr, and I can see again.

“We’re going to make some sounds and I want you to press the button each time you hear one.”

Somebody clicks their fingers behind my left ear. I press the button, but I’m already too late. There’s another sound behind my head, and another. I keep missing them, they’re too fast.

He pulls a TV screen attached to the wall so that I can just see it in the corner of my eye.

“No good,” he mutters as he goes round the back of my bed.

“Can we turn her round so she’s facing the screen?” This to someone I can’t see. My bed turns slowly away from the window, away from the sky, until I’m facing the screen square on.

He hums to himself as he walks over to the right side of my bed, and I feel a cold flat object being slid under my hand. He lifts my hand and puts something that feels like a pencil into it, helping me to get a grip on it. But it all feels very unfamiliar – like I’ve never held a pencil before.

“This is a stylus and pad, and when you move the stylus it should show on the screen.”

Sure enough, I can see something on the screen that looks like a wiggly line, and it moves as I move my hand. There’s a clunk as I drop the stylus. He gently puts it back into my hand.

“I’m going to put up some shapes on the screen and I’ll ask you to touch them with your stylus.”

A square, a circle, and a triangle all appear on the screen. Large black outlines – one next to another.

I experiment with the stylus. There's a squiggle down the bottom right-hand corner of the screen.

“Right. Can you go to the circle?”

Another squiggle down on the left this time.

“Hmm, try the circle again.”

I push hard and the stylus draws a jagged diagonal right across the screen, missing the circle entirely.

The screen goes blank, and then up come the shapes again. Cleaned of my attempts.

“Can you touch the triangle?”

I muster all my strength and concentration. Move carefully... and touch the square.

Exhausted, I drop the stylus and close my eyes. I just want to be left alone to look at the sky.

I hear soft footsteps, and Mister Rumble moves away from my bed to talk to someone.

“Very slow...processing...no control... responds to requests but I'm not sure how much she understands...” His hushed growl is all too audible.

“Let me try.” It's the voice I want to hear. “I have an idea.”

James's face appears in front of me – I want to reach out and hug him and kiss him.

“I want to try ‘yes and no’ with you.” He looks very serious. “Can you raise your hand for yes, then don't move it for no? Let's try.”

“Yes.” I raise my hand just from the wrist. Hope that's enough.

“No.” I do nothing.

“No.” Nothing.

“Yes.” Raise hand.

I see him look over at Mister Rumble, who has appeared in my vision. “Carry on,” he growls.

“Does Tuesday come after Monday?” Raise hand.

“Does Friday come after Saturday?” Don't move.

James carries on with questions that become increasingly demanding, while I answer, hoping he'll stop and turn me round to look at the sky again.

“Have you read books?” Raise hand.

“Have you read Dickens?” A big favourite of mine. Raise hand.

“Is *Oliver Twist* a romantic novel?” What? No movement.

“Is *Our Mutual Friend* a romantic novel?” Why did you ask me that? I raise my hand. I suddenly feel very tired. Each time it takes a lot of effort to move my hand, and I'm realizing how many muscles are involved in that single movement.

James asks some more questions, but I simply can't respond. I close my eyes.

“I think we should stop now,” says Mister Rumble from behind my bed.

They walk away.

“Cognitively, I can see that her mind is working, but her processing and motor skills... a long time...”

As I doze off I reflect that James's motor skills ran me down. If I had the energy, I'd laugh.

Chapter 8

Someone's crying.

Through the sobs I hear a disjointed monologue.

"...I can't get rid of your clothes... I can't... and here I am... what am I doing? Oh Alice if only you hadn't... and now I've done it... I've got to carry it through... don't you see? I can't leave her like this... she's got no-one... no family... nothing... I've got to... please... please..."

There's the sound of a door opening, and the monologue stops abruptly. There's the rustle of a paper tissue and the sound of a nose blowing.

Clip, clop, it's Megatron's shoes. "Are you still here Mr Penhaligon?" Her voice is full of disapproval.

"Yes I..." James croaks.

"Well I think you should go now." She pauses. "Mr Penhaligon, are you alright?"

"Yes, yes fine. Just a touch of hay fever."

At this point I pretend to wake up. I don't want James to know what I heard. God knows what he's been telling me while I've been asleep.

I make an inarticulate sound – about all I can manage at the moment.

"Hello." James is all red-eyed with his so-called hay fever. "Have a good sleep?"

I move my hand in response.

"That's great. Matron's here, I think she needs to do stuff. I'd better get off. See you tomorrow." His face disappears.

It's my turn to cry now. The one person I can communicate with is going. And I slept through all that stuff he was talking about. It's like I'm his only friend – his confessor.

Megatron moves me about like so much meat. She manages not to hurt me, but it's uncomfortable, cold, unemotional. "Bloody staffing levels," she mutters under her breath. "And now I've got this drip of a therapist hanging around. I suppose he thinks he's going to help you. Cure you. Heal you. It'll take more than a bit of talking to sort you out my girl. Running in front of his car like that. If we had fewer people like you to take care of, we'd be able to spend more time looking after the ones who really deserve it."

She plumps my leg down. Yanks the sheet over me, and leaves the room.

I miss him. I miss James. He may be obsessed with his dead Alice, but he is warm, gentle and kind. I love the feel of his hand in mine. I love his boyish face. The thought of it sends tingles down my spine. AND he's the only person who has really communicated with me for a long time. Please come back James, please come back.

Chapter 9

And he does.

Day after day he returns. And we hone our skills in communication - it's amazing what you can do with 'yes' and 'no'. I find out a lot about him. I think he forgets, sometimes, that I'm actually listening.

He talks about his clients.

I learn about the lad who always turns up late. Rebelling against overpowering parents. The lad is probably jealous of me. He knows there's someone, he's always trying to pry into James's private life.

Then there's the anxious mum of three, who comes at six thirty in the morning, and who always turns up early. I think she's in love with him – doesn't want to miss a second of her session. One time James overslept and had to answer the door in his dressing gown. She was so hurt, apparently, that it took him a lot of sessions to convince her that she was important and did have her special space in his mind.

There are more, plenty of them. But I try to forget them. I want James to myself. I want his hand, his smile, just for me.

One thing – he's never talked about Alice again. Maybe he realised that I could have been awake when he cried to her. Maybe it was just a moment, and he's got over it. Whatever, he doesn't mention her.

We sit and look out of the window, and I'm gradually being lifted into an upright position. My head is healing, and I'm beginning to be able to move it from side to side.

I can look at him now, when I choose, and I can use my facial expressions and semi-comprehensible grunts to communicate at a deeper level.

Then comes the day when I can see far enough out of the window to see the ground – far below me in my fifth-storey room. It comes as a shock that just past the car park is a graveyard. James is sitting by my bed and I reach out and give his hand a squeeze. We sit looking out at it together in silence for a long time. Then James sighs, lets go of my hand and gets up and walks to the window. I wonder if she's buried there. As I look at his back I can feel his loneliness.

Chapter 10

Far from just wriggling my toes, I can move my legs now. They are stiff and reluctant, and every time I start in the morning it feels like I've never done it before. But each time I get them moving just that bit quicker.

My arms are moving freely, if a bit feebly, but my grip is very uncontrolled, and eating is a long messy work in progress.

I long to get out of bed, but my core strength is too weak at the moment. I'd just flop over like a rag doll. And there's the ataxia – that horrible uncertainty that my muscles might suddenly fail completely without any warning.

Most of my tubes have come out – just the odd thing gets attached from time to time, but now I can feed myself...

Learning to swallow again was scary and uncomfortable. I kept feeling I was going to choke. Something I always took for granted became a horrible convulsive experience for a time.

"Sausage, beans and mash." James has a smile on his face as he helps me get the spoon to my mouth.

"I had almost the same at home yesterday."

I wonder if he feeds himself properly. He is so thin.

"A bit of mustard really helps with the sausages." He bends down and picks up a pot of Colman's. "Would you like?"

I manage a nod. The hospital food tends to be a bit bland. No exotic flavours here, but mustard! As I fork in a lump of sausage primed with mustard, I wonder how he knew. Does he always walk around with a pot of mustard in his pocket, on the off-chance that there'll be a sausage? The heat and strength of flavour make me choke a little, and James looks concerned, but I get it down and there's a warm feeling inside that comes from the mustard. Or does it?

"Ow deed ooh oh?" I ask, hoping he might pick my meaning.

"I checked the menu yesterday, but it's always sausages on a Thursday."

Work out the week by the food, I think. Also I'm working out the rhythm of James's visiting times, which fluctuate each day according to what he's doing, both in and out of the hospital.

This morning they washed my hair, which has grown quite a bit since I came into hospital. I know it is nice hair – dare I say beautiful? James reaches out and touches it. Then strokes it, and I feel an awakening down in my body. I want to hold him, and him to hold me. He strokes the side of my face with the back of his hand, and I reach out and hold it there.

"I miss you when I'm at home." So close, so warm. "I'd like to see you more, but..." He shrugs his shoulders, letting go of my hand. He gets up and walks to the window. That forlorn, thin back. If only I could get out of bed and go to him. Hug him.

He turns, his face smiling. "Next week we're going to try and get you out of bed." He walks over to me. "I've got to go now. See you tomorrow."

I want to cry. I want to stop him from coming in and out of my life. The gaps between seeing him are long and painful. Bed sores, constipation, injections, and the awful Megatron.

“Goodbye.”

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