

A Memoir Of Madness by Lee Wilson

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<https://leewilson.uk/>

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First Edition

Also by Lee Wilson.

Novellas.

Outcasts.

Collections.

The Satanic Curses.

Praise for The Satanic Curses:

Great collection of stories! Some are lyrical, others brutal, all are creative and thought-provoking, and each one earns its place.

This collection of Short stories explores a vast range of human emotions, thoughts and feelings. I was completely sucked into the world the author created from the very first paragraph.

I didn't know what to expect but fell in love with these horror shorts. Each one leaves you wanting more as you stumble into the dark fables, for ultimately they speak of truth, be it uncomfortable at times.

Praise For Outcasts:

Wilson's dynamic writing style is so absorbing, I t's almost impossible to put this down. I honestly felt the hairs on my arms going up several times, even as I laughed out loud at some of the darkly humorous cynicism sprinkled throughout the prose.

Lee Wilson writes with an ease of someone who writes because they love to write. As such, Outcasts is a book that reflects a writer doing what they love and inviting the reader to be part of it. And that's what makes it such a good book.

Lee plays with your head with a subtle mix of astute observation of the human condition black humour and dark settings and themes. A must read

A

of

Memoir

Madness.

With thanks to Paul Swallow.

<https://hirundorustica.co.uk/>

For My Girls.

The Devil Made Me Do It.

- The Patient And The Therapist.
- The Psychopath.
- The Witch And The Vampire.
- All Hallows Eve.
- The Angelic Assassin.
- The Politicians Demise.

The Nameless Voyage.

The Chill Of Nobody.

It Is Depression.

Vetra Machine.

The Tormented Mind.

- PT1. Strings And Things.
- PT2. The Cracking Of Lies.
- PT3. The Party.
- PT4. Pulling The Strings.
- PT5. I Don't Not Believe You.
- PT6. The End.

The Devil Made Me Do It.

Part 1.

Intro.

Why hello there humans. How the devil are you? Ignore that mess over there, he once told a joke that offended some, so I have exploded him. It sounds extreme, I know, but there is no place for mistakes in your world. Behold the new rules on earth; make a mistake and be damned forever! Just excuse the sticky bits as you sit down; I am not sure they will wash out; blood and human can be quite tricky to clean. You can trust me on that, I know. I literally have a T-shirt that says, 'Blood is a shit to clean; don't anger me.'

So, you are no doubt wondering why I have collected you. Why have I asked you all to gather here? What could be so important as to take a little time from your daily lives? What's the deal, old Beelzebub? Well, *cough, cough*, I want to play a game! That was my best Jigsaw puppet voice! Did you like it? Well, *fuck it*, I thought it was great. Do not fear though! Your life is in no danger, yet. This will be purely for fun. So are you sitting comfortably, my human friends? If you are, then we shall begin.

I get the blame for many things. Did the kettle run out of water? Damn you Satan! No loo roll in the bog? For fucks sake, Lucifer! A country gets bombed to dust? Oh, they must have worshipped Ol' Nick. It is all bollocks. You know it is complete codswallop as well as I do. Yet still, you all do it. You pin all your problems on me. So we are here, and I am before you on this stage, and I will tell you some stories. A collection of musings, a torrent of tales, all for your amusement. See, I am good like that, and I shall amuse, entertain, and teach. Hopefully... The stage is set, and I, your host, am almost ready.

I shall be telling you many anecdotes, accounts, and tales. And within these stories, I shall introduce you to some humans who have blamed me for their misdeeds in the past. At the end of my presentation, everyone will be on this stage, and I shall reveal to you who I made commit the awful deeds. I shall reveal who I have controlled for all this time. Oh, the Devil made me do it, they screamed.
Mwuhahhahhhah.

The Patient and the Therapist.

The therapist, Ferguson, sat alone at her desk and shuffled through her paperwork. She pushed her feet forward under the desk and stretched out her legs. The papers fluttered in the light breeze that came through the open window, and she sighed as she placed a paperweight upon them. A new client, this new patient, had been quite insistent upon seeing her. She would have refused, but the money was good, and who doesn't need a little extra cash? She took him on at the last minute; what harm could it do anyway? She needed the money for her side project.

Ferguson jumped as a series of bangs suddenly boomed outside the office door. They were quickly over; almost as soon as they had started, she scrambled from her desk and sharply to her feet. She heard something falling, something that flumped to the ground good and hard. She was startled; she knew some building work was due, but she had not expected it today. *It had to have been that.* She tentatively stepped forwards and away from the desk and made her way to the door, heel after heel, getting more fearless as she progressed. She shook her head as she walked and tried to shake the idea that she had been spooked by a little commotion. The bangs were brief and had now, *thankfully*, stopped. She approached the door and reached for the handle; she then jumped backwards at the quick bangbangbangbang. Her heels slipped momentarily, and she almost fell before managing to rebalance herself at the last moment.

Why am I so twitchy!

The second series of bangs had been someone knocking at her door, *albeit loudly* and with more force than was needed. The subsequent knocks were quieter and more like what she usually expected. She stepped forward, grasped the handle and pulled the door open, determined not to be startled by knocking again. A man stood outside the door with his hand in the air, clenched into a fist; he was just getting ready to knock again. "Hello?" she asked.

"Hi, I am your one-o-clock," the man answered politely.

The man stood before her at just over six and a half feet. He towered over her short frame, even with her wearing medium-high heels. She steadied herself mentally for a moment and took the opportunity to pluck his name from her memory. It took just a microsecond; it was something she was good at, and then she had it. "Mr Davies?" she queried. The man held his hand forward to shake hers. She took his hand and gave it a firm but friendly jiggle; she smiled as she did so. "Yes, Dr Ferguson, your receptionist told me to come straight up. Something about the buzzer not working?" he said. She stood for a moment, *confused*. It was the first she had heard of it, then she thought, what the hell, and gestured for Davies to come inside.

Mr Davies took a step forwards but not before calling down the hallway, "I'll be back soon, brother," he hollered. His accent was one she could not place; *brother* sounded more like 'brudda'. "So, Doctor, How do we do this?" Davies asked.

"Well, you take a seat, and then we talk."

Ferguson offered the chair closest to the door, and she took the one opposite. They both sat; Davies kept his coat on, fidgeted a little, and settled. She had invested in good armchairs, as she believed if someone was comfortable, they would open up. She liked to let them talk, just wander and let the thoughts out themselves. "Tea?" she asked. Davies just shook his head. She did not offer coffee. Caffeine could heighten anxiety, and she sensed that this man was tense enough already. She was glad he had declined, as it would have meant walking to her receptionist as she now had been told the buzzer was broken.

"So, Mr Davies, what can I do for you?" Ferguson liked to think of the question as a bit of a tap with a mental hammer. It was pitter-pattering that tightened bolt of anxiety, just enough to nudge it into... "Do you believe in good and evil, Doc?" And there it was, knocked slightly, and the bolt loosens and unscrews. "I work with science. I believe people are ill. Good and evil? That's more religions department." Davies laughed at this, and she felt like a partygoer left out of the joke. Was the joke on her? *No, it couldn't be.* "So, what about killing for the greater good?" Davies followed up. His chuckle had subsided, and he sat again, concentrating on her. "Death penalty? Capital punishment and the like? No, I don't. Killing people because of an illness? Because of something we do not understand? It's abhorrent."

"No, I meant if you could kill Hitler. Travel back in time and kill the Führer before he began. Would you do it?" She thought this over, not because it was a question that deserved a lot of thought, as the idea was absurd. She sat and gave it due consideration because she was worried that this man was using her to validate something he wanted to do; or something he had already done.

Is he planning to kill someone and claim it was for the greater good?

"It seems irrelevant, as you can't travel in time," was how she chose to reply. She watched Davies, and she looked for any hint or action that would cause her to end this. He smiled and then asked, "Sure, so what if you could kill the next Hitler? What if you could stop a genocide before it started?"

"There is no precognition, no way to know if someone is good or bad. History tells us that by the time we know, *by the time we can really know*, it is already too late."

Davies smiled at her reply. His smile was disarming and friendly. It was the type of smile a member of the bar staff might give an old regular. "Yes, I am sure you are right," he said. Ferguson smiled back and sighed inside herself as she seemed to have dodged a bullet. He had visibly relaxed in the chair, and tenseness in his eyes had departed. "Murder is murder, and you can never be sure. What if you, for example, killed the next Einstein? What if you murdered Van Gogh? Slaughtered Mozart?" she said.

“You can never know,” Davies said with a force she had not expected. It was almost like a role reversal, and he tried to convince her! “How about this?” he said, and his voice had returned to its original calmer tone. She glanced briefly at the clock on the wall and groaned, in her head, when she realised it had only been ten minutes. Davies was a random talker, and how she hated the aimless, wandering, rambling talkers. It meant that she had to concentrate and pay attention. She liked it when they talked but didn’t hide their feelings in knots of deception.

Just say you want to fuck your neighbour, sodomise the pool boy, run away with the maid and start anew; I can deal with that.

“So, two people walk into a building. Let’s say father and son, but it could be anyone. Any two people,” Davies said.

“You don’t want to talk about greater goods?” Ferguson asked, hoping she had steered him from the subject. “I’m getting there,” he answered.

Please, please, oh please, get there quickly. I knew this was a bad idea, and I need to be ready for the experiment in ninety minutes.

“They walk in and bang; they start shooting everything up. Pew pew left and right, plant pots explode, plasterboard pops, and lights shatter. Then there is the blood.” Davies paused.

“So this is the evil?” Ferguson asked. “This is the evil to *your good*?” She stressed the final two words. She was trying to implant the idea of Davies being good. Driving at him to be good and having the power to do so. Attempting to force the idea, to make him doubt himself. “No,” Davies said, “you misunderstand. He is good.” Like slipping on her heels, *this* blindsided her for just a moment. She had not expected that answer. “But, then why?” she asked without her usual confidence and was honestly curious.

“Well, he is on a mission,” Davies answered, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Ferguson took a moment. “But he will be caught.” No could be, no maybe, he would be caught. She was trying to push an idea again. He would be caught. There was no doubt that he would be captured. “So?” Davies said. “He is there to complete his mission. Once that is done, then so be it. He will be happy. His job is complete, and he has done what was asked of him.” The therapist took a breath as she wanted to gather her thoughts into one collective before replying. “Asked of him? Who asked it of him?” she enquired.

“Why an angel, of course!” Davies said this as if the answer was as simple as the one times table or as evident as the masked serial killer in an eighties slasher. He almost scoffed as he said it, as if the answer was so apparent that the question was nonsense. An angel, this was a new one for her. She had thought she had heard it all, but this was something different. “Why would an angel ask you to do that?” she asked. “Aren’t angels the good ones?” Davies paused for a moment. She wondered if his confidence and thoughts were drifting slightly.

"I think," he stopped again before continuing, "God was always a violent bastard. Smiting, floods, countless deaths. Maybe this is how he works now?" The 'maybe' was good, Ferguson thought; the 'maybe' was something. Was he starting to question himself? Ferguson hoped she had made him question himself with just a little prodding and a dabble of pulling. It was not much, but it was a progress of sorts. Like many steps through the ages, progress is quickly followed by a slap in the face, and you find yourself back where you started. Or worse, sitting on your arse looking at the starting line. "Who are you, or I, to question the word of an angel?" Davies snapped back; his confidence had returned with a vengeance.

"I'd have thought that helping the person see the error of their ways would have been the more Christian thing to do," Ferguson stated. It was a statement rather than a question because she did not want to give him the room to wiggle free. She was unsure if he was actually dangerous, but why, she supposed, take the risk? "God is an arsehole," Davies replied with newfound certainty. "Sometimes the hammer is more effective than a carrot."

"So you believe with no questions asked? You are just following orders?" Ferguson said. "No questions? How do you question the word of an angel?" Davies sat up in the chair after declaring, "Remember the blood our guy has seen? So what does he do?" Ferguson pondered the question. She lets her mind wander back to where they were when blood was mentioned. "Ah, shooting, and then blood," she said, "so he does not care about getting caught? Then I presume he finishes the job and shoots the person dead, or just ignores them. He does not care."

Davies closed his eyes and let his eyes roll under the lids for a moment. "What? Shit no, why would he do that?" he asked, shocked.

"Well, you said he does not care about getting caught." Ferguson answered. "But the victim was innocent. They were not the target." Davies said, horrified at the thought. "It was an accident. He gets down on the floor, puts pressure on the wound, and then finds something to tie around it." Davies stopped for a moment and then looked at Ferguson with disgust. "*Jesus*. He is the good guy, and you think it is okay to kill innocents? Fucking hell."

Urgh, enough.

"I think, Mr Davies, that we are done here," Ferguson said as she started to stand. She had other things to worry about and to be frank, Davies was boring her. "Sit down," Davies said with an authoritative tone and volume to rival the earlier knocks at her door. She looked at him, and he pulled a gun from his coat, pointed the barrel in her direction and then tipped it to the chair. "Sit, please," he said with a calmer tone. He had her attention now and did not need to raise his voice.

"Mr Davies, I really..." Davies fired the gun. The bullet flew from the barrel and into her leg. It ripped the skin and flesh from bone as it exploded from the other side and into the chair. "Sit down," Davies said with a calmness of voice.

"Nicky!" Ferguson screamed out. She called for her receptionist. The pain rocketed, but self-preservation took over. The pain could be controlled, the man in her office, of that she was now not so sure. "Nicky..." She yelled again.

“She is fine. My brudda has her,” Davies said calmly. “It was an accident. She’ll be okay,” he continued with calm but forcefulness in his voice. He spoke as a man who knew he was right and could win an argument because he had facts on his side. “She’ll be okay?” Ferguson spat out. The disgust and horror mixed together and gave her words a fight and snap that she usually kept private. This was her inner voice coming out to play. She pushed her hands down on the wound in her leg. It was painful but not as bad as she would have imagined. She put this down to shock and adrenaline flowing through her body as one. “Two people enter a building....” She paused. “You were telling me what will happen? You think you’ve been sent by an angel?”

Davies continued in the same vein as before; he ignored her questions and stayed on mission. “Doctor Jane Ferguson. You will, in three weeks, crack the emersion paradox. This will cause the worlds to collide.”

“What the fuck are you on about?” Ferguson protested, but she knew. Oh yes, she knew. The conviction had long departed her voice, and the protest was just going by the numbers. She was doing what she thought was needed, even though it was a lie.

But how can he possibly know?

“You destroy the worlds through your actions. I can’t allow that to happen. I have been tasked to stop you.”

Ferguson had one final thought, and she voiced it. “Have you ever considered that...” The bullet tore through her face and ripped the back of her head clean off; her death was instantaneous, the bullet, brain, and bone shattering into one as her body fell back into the chair. Davies walked from her and to the office door, “All clear, brudda?” he called out.

“All clear,” came the reply.

Part 2.

Intro.

So there we begin with Colin Davies. Davies the completely batshit insane! Did I make him do it? That is what Ferguson was just about to get to. She was just about to say that I was once an angel. She was correct; I don't like it, but why lie? It was not my greatest of moments! Halos? Harps? 71 different versions of the missionary position? Yeah, fuck that, it is not for me.

The strangest thing about Colin is that he was also correct. Ferguson was about to break what should never be broken. Would it have led to the end of the worlds? I really do not know. It may have done, but would I have wanted to stop it? That is for you to decide! That, my human friends, is the game. His legal team argued that he was crazy and that the angel he thought he was hearing was me! So, Colin, via his team, claimed I made him do it. Don't they know that I have better things to do?

So, onwards and upwards. Portside ready! You can ignore Colin in the corner of the stage; he is just sticking around, so you do not forget his crimes. A mental reminder of things. When we get to the end, I shall list them all! All the suspects shall be here before you, and then you can decide.

Let's hop, skip, and jump backwards in time and meet Jonathan. Jonathan is a simple soul with nothing more complex than a thirst for murder and love.

The Psychopath.

He watched with a keen eye as the man left the pub. This was his next target, and he could already feel the excitement building deep within. Jonathan was not complicated; he liked to kill, so he would kill. It was that simple. But this one was different. It was personal. The voice inside his head often encouraged him.

No, I don't

And, that voice he called his devil, his shadow, or maybe, had he read, or seen, Dexter, his dark passenger. He was aware that he might just be crazy and could have been entirely insane, but what if the voice was really there? What if the voice was something else?

Am I any less real than you?

As he watched the man stumble from the pub. He ignored the voice's question and let it guide him and plan his next move.

We could burn him!

"No, we've done that," Jonathan answered with a mutter. He could feel the excitement in the pit of his stomach. Like a car going over a hill, the butterflies started to whirl.

A drowning?

"It's cold! I'd freeze as well."

You make the mistake of thinking that I care.

And, so it continued as Johnathan watched the man stagger from lamppost to lamppost. Jonathan argued with his inner mind. He would often argue with the voice. If he wanted a tea, the voice would want a coffee. If he wanted toast, the voice wanted a sandwich. It was a daily argument, but it kept him sane in a manner of speaking. Jonathan saw nobody else; he would interact with very few people. So the voice kept him company and stopped him from going any crazier. More crazed would not have really changed Jonathan much, but it may have gotten him caught. Being caught was not something he contemplated because he trusted the voice to keep him safe. He and the voice bickered and argued like an old married couple, but they needed one another.

The word flashed with a bright light, not lightning; this was the briefest flicker of strip light illuminating the world. It was just a flash of brilliance on an otherwise black night. Jonathon approached the man with the grace of a ballet dancer. Not a squeak or pop could be heard as he walked at pace towards his target. He wanted this man. More than anything, he wanted him.

Go, go, go. He is ours now!

This time Jonathan ignored the voice. Had he spoken aloud, the man could have heard him; they were much closer now, which would have spoiled his hunt. The hunt was half the thrill, and he did not want to end it early. He wanted this one for himself; this one was everything to him. He enjoyed the game, and he loved the chase. The thrill of the kill was incredible; couple it with a good stalking beforehand, and it was...

Better than sex?

No, well, yes, maybe. Jonathan didn't know, as he was still a virgin. He could not even begin to imagine how sex could ever have been better!

Well, you could change that at any time!

He could, he supposed, but the twisted morality of a murderer took control. The strange chastity of criminality. He could justify the murders; he enjoyed them, but rape? The thought itself disgusted him, and the idea repulsed him.

But still, you think it.

No, you think it, Jonathan thought to both himself, and the voice.

You could tie him up and fuck him in the arse! He could be yours! We could sodomise him together!

“Stop!” Jonathan exclaimed, and the man he had been stalking turned around quick as a flash. The man could see two Jonathans standing and wobbling before him. This was not because of Jonathan’s inner voice or some magical insight; it was simply because of the alcohol. Had he been sober, he may have lived; the man had no chance as he was drunk. The Jonathans lurched forwards and, holding a knuckle duster in his right hand, brought it towards the man’s face. The metal of the duster connected with the face of the man. Metal meets skin and flesh and says hello to the bone. The man’s teeth fractured with the connection, and shards of white teardrops fell from his mouth and rained down onto the ground with the red liquid that followed. Jonathan had a moment of regret. He felt that moment of wanting and pain that may have accompanied awful news. He quickly pushed it to one side. Discarding it as rubbish. It was a thought and emotion that he did not, at that moment, need.

Holy fuck, that was awesome!

“But it was not what we planned,” Jonathan said as he planted another fist onto the keeled over man’s head. His emotions returned to normal as the man fell to the floor. Jonathan was powerful; a lack of human interaction had led to him working out; he worked out a lot! The man’s face crumpled into the ground like a slice of toast falling butter side up.

No, like a sandwich.

No, toast. Hitting the ground butter side up. *Splomp*. The man lay on the floor, alcohol or the violence having knocked him out, and he started to snort blood bubbles. Bubbles of his blood formed from the exposed nostril. Blood mixing with snot, forming a bubble and then popping in the cool night air. The voice was a little more panicked now. Rushing the moment. Jonathan would have argued, but they both wanted the same thing in the end, and he had learned to trust in the voice.

Quick! Get it into the car. We need to move.

“I know, I know,” Jonathan said as he picked the body up and threw it over his shoulder. He did it with the same ease a greengrocer may throw a bag of potatoes or a butcher the corpse of a pig. He crossed the street and kept one eye out for any other people. The silence of the late evening night protected him. The shadows of the moonlight held him close and surrounded him as he made his way to the car. The street was empty save for him, his voice, and his victim.

Jonathan opened the boot of the car, and the light clicked on. When the light glittered, the world around him filled with a bright whiteness. Just for the slightest of moments, the world changed. It was a stolen kiss of a view, but he saw rows of lights and beds. Like that, it was gone, but now he was in the car. Driving the car, not a blackout, he had experienced a whiteout.

Where does he go?

“Who the fuck was that?” Jonathan fumbled the wheel as he asked; this was a new voice. The car swerved to the side, but he steadied it. He regained control of both himself, and the car. He had grown used to the first voice, but this one was different, and it was not asking or speaking to him; it seemed to be talking to itself.

Or to someone else?

Back to the known, the voice he had grown to both love and hate, “How many of you are in there?” Jonathan asked. Like many questions asked over the years, it was something that he really did not want to hear the answer to. But still, like many, he could not help but ask.

I don't think we will ever know.

“Will you fucking stop that!” Jonathan screamed, not at the voice but at nothing but the car interior. It was yet another new voice. Where one had become two, two had become four.

It wasn't fucking me!

The original voice shouted back; it startled Jonathan. “Then who?” he screamed and smashed his head forward and into the steering wheel. “The fuck!” he continued and rammed the wheel some more with his head. The wheel's rubber bounced his head back like a ball from a bat. It would hurt in the morning, but it was doing no visible damage for now, “Is it?” he concluded with one final smash.

I don't know, but it worries me.

“It, it fucking worries you?” Jonathan barked back in surprise. “It fucking worries you. Jesus cocking Christ, how do you think it makes me feel?” With that, he jammed his head into the wheel one last time. The black rubber cushioned the blow, and he felt nothing as his head ricocheted back and into the seat. Just a painless nothing.

When did you learn to drive anyway?

“That is a good question,” Jonathan said, suddenly lost in his own world, and then rammed his foot down upon the brake pedal. The car jolted to a halt, and with it, the whole world stopped as well. He leant his head to one side as he thought. Forehead scrunching as ideas flashed like the lights of the world had done. The movement from outside the window had ground to a halt. Birds floated motionlessly, trees stood without swaying, and the grass only pointed skywards.

You know the truth, don't you?

"I couldn't drive. I walked, no I ran," Jonathan said. I ran with him on my shoulders. A tear started to form in the corner of his eye as he processed the thoughts that ran, or drove, through his mind. "I took him from outside the pub; that part was true."

That part was genuine. You hungered after him for a long time.

"Why?"

You were in love. Or, I suppose, you thought you were.

"Was it love?"

Only you can know, my friend.

Jonathan pushed the back of his hand to his eyes and rubbed the tears away. As he pushed and brushed them away, the world outside the car fell away like old wallpaper falling from a wall, and it was replaced with a barn in a field. Jonathan stood outside the barn; he looked without thinking of the car. "This is where it happened, isn't it?"

This is where it happened.

"I don't want to go in there."

Oh, but I think you must.

The world shifted again without warning, and Jonathan found himself standing inside the barn. The man he had attacked and captured lay on the floor, bloodied and beaten. Jonathan fell to the floor beside the body. Tears flowed freely down his face, and he sobbed as he spoke. "Why did I do it?" The tears fell from his cheeks onto the body; they mixed with the blood.

He turned you down. He mocked you for being in love. He called you a fucking faggot.

"I'd have forgiven him," Jonathan sobbed. He held the body's hand as the tears built into a teardrop powered rainfall. The sky above him filled with water, and rain dropped in sync with the tears. A storm of the imagination brewed as Jonathan's sorrow escaped him. The tears of rain and the winds of regret gathered in this world. "I'd killed before, or was that just fantasy?"

Many times.

"So why him?" Jonathan pleaded as he held the hand of the man close to his chest and heart. He pulled the body forwards and towards him and cradled it. The barn ripped apart in the storm that had arrived from nowhere. Wood splintered from the walls and shattered into the falling roof. It all fell away, but none of it touched Jonathan as he sat crying.

Because you loved him. I think it is time to go now, my friend.

“I’m not leaving him. Leave me alone.” Jonathan grabbed the body ever tighter. Lifting the torso, the dead man’s head lay below his jaw. Jonathan leant forward and kissed the man on the forehead.

Okay, my friend, we will stay.

The hospital ward was closed, and the nurse and doctor looked at Jonathan in the bed. They know what he is and has done, but he looks peaceful and harmless. “Where does he go?” the nurse asked as she checked the restraints. “I don’t think we will ever know,” the doctor replied.

Part 3.

Intro.

Well now, whoever saw that coming? It was kind of touching in a way. Jonathan killed his lover and remained with him. It would have been - if I *had them* - really rather emotional. It could almost be enough to roust a cold, dead, and unbeating heart from its slumber. But it can't, and it won't. I am not that sappy. *Ha!*

So, Jonathan joins Colin on our stage of shame. You can see him over there; I have given him a rather large shadow; that is his inner voice. It is all rather fun this, isn't it! Do you have any clue as to who I made kill? The hints are all there, I think. Tucked away, Peeking from under the duvet of storytelling.

Forwards we march, onwards my demonic brethren! Hup-two-three-four! Hup-two! We must move, or we shall forever stay still. This next one was a request! A request? I hear you say! But Satan, how can that be so? Aren't you telling us about humans who may have been doing your deeds? Maybe I am lying? Maybe this is a request from someone who knows the truth? Maybe I am just full of shite? This is for you to decide!

The Witch and the Vampire.

Sariella was a vampire, so she would sleep during the day and hunt and play at night. And, Sariella liked to play. Oh, she so loved to play. It can take many decades to mature as a vampire. You wake - *as it were* - when you have been changed with a hunger, a wanting need unlike anything you would have ever felt before. This is not just starvation; this is as if you had lived twenty years of your life and never had eaten before. This hunger would make the rugby team on Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 look like they just had a mild case of the munchies. Neo in *The Matrix* didn't know hunger like this when he was first reborn. Many vampires get caught in the early decades, some get killed in the first years, and the very unlucky only last weeks. Everyone in these modern times was a Van Helsing or a Buffy. Other Vampires, like Sariella, can live for centuries. Sariella was bright and would not be caught and killed until she decided the time was right. It is a choice that many vampires will make in the end. Life, *unlife*, becomes unbearable. You can be around for too long. You can be dead for an overbearing age.

Dotty, the spite witch, was never one for originality. Many people and creatures of the underworld have vivid and magical imaginations. Dotty was not one of them. She stirred her cauldron and looked inside at the milky black liquid that bubbled and steamed. She watched a flying monkey in the brew - *as I've said, no originality* - as the monkey swooped in and descended upon its target.

Sariella had a feeling that was biting at her brain. It was not unusual for vampires to develop a sixth sense, *of sorts*, as the brain evolves much like the body. The mind learns to do tricks and unlocks things that many humans would deem impossible. This thought that Sariella had was of approaching, specifically for her. The feeling was nibbling at the neurons, and it crept around her cerebrum, slamming mental doors and stamping its feet.

The monkey flew and surveyed the area. It knew what it was looking for was here; it just had to look a little harder... And, there it was. The monkey spied an old brick shack and then knew it was where it needed to be. The aged grey stonework bricks twinkled in the falling autumn sunlight. The ageing straw thatching on the roof rippled with the slight breeze in the air. It was late afternoon, and this had to be done now. Nobody, not Dotty, or the monkey, would be stupid enough to attack Sariella after dark. Nobody should attack any vampire after dark, especially not a vampire who has lived for as long as she.

The monkey landed upon the roof, and with its hands and claws, it started to shred the thinning thatch. It was like a thick comb over above the shack's head, which needed replacing, so that was to the monkey's advantage. The thin straw was brushed and pulled aside, and soon the monkey had the room to squeeze through the bald spot and into the shack. It tucked in its wings and dived through the hole. The inside of the shack was sparse, the lighting equally so. It scuffled in its harness as it looked for the stake it had been given. The stake that would be used to kill the vamp for its mistress.

Sariella's eyes flicked open. Like a brain fart that parps into your mind at three in the morning, she now had the most powerful and intense sense that things were wrong. She looked around as best she could in the velvet cushioned coffin and saw nothing to explain the feeling. She felt down her body, clothes check, legs check, arms, *duh*, check. Everything was fine, but she still could not shake the sensation. She shifted her head slightly to the left, and her body twisted along with it. There was no reason for this. It just felt right; *it was wilp*, maybe. A fate, a push of destiny, to shove you into harm's way, or maybe, out of harm's way.

Sariella held her hands up and slightly pushed on the dark red velvet lid. She was feeling for something, *anything*, that could be wrong. Something that was out of place. The lid felt as tight as it ever was. It was then that it happened. The tiny point of the stake that the monkey held, pierced the lid at speed. She knew she should have got a metal coffin, but she was a traditionalist and liked the old ways. The tip of the wooden triangle had fractured the coffin top and descended towards where her heart should have been. By moving to one side, *just slightly*, she had been saved. As a bonus, her hands were also up in front of her chest. *Wilp* had stepped forward and stopped her from being killed.

Wilp also has a way of making you pay for the favours it grants, and this would be something Sariella would consider later. Because, at that moment, the stake was being pushed down and through her hand. The wood of the stake forced the bones to one side as it plummeted through the skin. "Fucking bastard cocking fucker!" Sariella screamed in the most unladylike manner. She pushed her hands upwards, which drove the stake downwards, but she needed to get out of the coffin. She blanked the pain from her mind as she pushed.

The coffin lid flew from the box as Sariella rammed her hands forward. It flipped from the coffin like the lid of a super-wound-up jack-in-the-box, turning in the air and taking the monkey and stake with it. It pinged and popped from the box, and the lid crashed into the far wall. The monkey was crushed and squished between the wall and the lid. The coffin lid fell to the floor, the stake just behind it, and the monkey flopped on the wall before falling like a child's sticky jelly toy flapping down a window. Sariella roused herself from her befuddled, half awake, half asleep and all confuddled state. Confused by what had happened, she lifted herself from the coffin and looked around the small room. Her gaze moved from the lid, then to the stake, and finally to the mushed mess that once was a flying monkey that now lay on the floor.

"Dotty," Sariella cursed as she walked toward the monkey. "Screw you Dotty," she continued as she lifted the monkey from the floor by one of its legs. Her hand beat and throbbed with the dullness of pain, blood dripped and leaked from the hole the stake had made, and she lifted the monkey to her mouth and fed. She'd had worse over the years. The still warm blood flowed through her mouth, her veins, and her dead heart. When she looked down and saw the bloodstain on her long dark skirt, she swore revenge.

Dotty had also sworn revenge many years before. Watching her monkey die as the lid smashed into the wall, that vengeance intensified. Marvin had been the last of her monkeys, and although she would not mourn him, who now would bring her morning coffee? She stamped across the room in a rage. It was not unusual for her to be angry, but this had pushed her from mildly angry into 'who left the toilet seat up and pissed on the floor' anger. What had caused this thirst for revenge, this voyage of vengeance? Sariella had stolen Dotty's shoes.

Sariella emerged from the shack as dusk fell across the field. She had changed and was now wearing a different black skirt - *she always wore black* - and her wounded hand was wrapped with black bandages. They were not, *of course*, bandages - where would you get black ones? - they were the old skirt ripped into strips and wrapped around her now healing hand. She cursed at the wrapped straps, cussed the moon, and as the ruby red heels that she wore marched forwards and twinkled in the freshly risen moonlight, she swore at Dotty once again.

Dotty's old grey, sagging skin wobbled like a jelly on a washing machine as she waddled through the woods. She would have to seek out the creatures of the other, the trolls, the dark fey, and the jokers. It was not something that she would do lightly. Dotty looked like the remnants of a once human being, but she was younger than her haggard age suggested. In the five decades she had wandered the earth, she had made enemies of almost everyone. Dotty was not well-liked; in fact, she was despised by most creatures, either living or dead.

The door crashed open and hit the opposing wall with a thud. Sariella stood in the doorway. "Dotty, you old mad witch bitch, I know you are in here," she called out to the empty rooms. She raced from room to room, hunting with her teeth exposed, but found nothing. Dotty was nowhere to be seen. The house was as empty as Sariella's heart. It was nothing but a dusty, old shell. She looked around the front room, and as an idea formed, so did a smile. She walked to the bookcase that held tomes of old magicks, and then she pushed it over. She grabbed the candle from the table and lit it with the old lighter she carried. She threw the candle into the piles of books that had fallen when she had pushed the shelf and walked from the house.

The fire had started to rage when Sariella pulled the front door closed. The door squealed as it was pulled, but it held firm on its hinges. She reached up with her right hand's index and middle finger and drew a circle on the door. Many over the years used dust to see what they were drawing, but Sariella did not need the visual aid. She fingered from the circle's centre to the right edge and then from the centre to the top, moving outside the circle. Once she had quartered the top right of the circle, she said, "Shankar Ankrag," and reopened the door.

Sariella stepped through the door, and the door now opened elsewhere. The sigil she had drawn, and her words, opened the way to the nowhere. The nowhere was just what it sounded like. It was a place between worlds and could be dangerous. This particular nowhere, *though*, was fine. There were trees and a rather large brick wall in this particular nowhere. A door was in the centre of the wall, and next to the door was a discoloured brick. A discoloured brick with a face crudely drawn upon it. She walked through the door and into the nothing. She then turned around and looked at the now closed door and brick. A minute passed, and then she sighed, and finally, she poked the brick with a finger.

"I am not interested in what you want," the brick said. Sariella knew this would happen. Bricky was known throughout the worlds as being the grumpiest being imaginable. "Do you know where Dotty went or not?" Sariella asked in a huff.

"I knew you would come. And then you are going to nag at me. Dotty told me not to tell you. Honestly, I don't see why I should be a part of your argument," the brick moaned.

"Was she the last person to come through here?" Sariella asked.

"I know exactly what you are trying to do, and I won't tell you," the brick replied stubbornly. Sariella knew that she had a choice. Bricky was the most ancient known being in all the worlds, and she could stand and argue with it all day long. If it did not want to tell, then she would get nowhere. The bastardly brick was well known for being an arsehole. She could either go back and find another way, with a limited chance of success or just open the door and step through. The door would open a portal to the last place it was opened. It could have been anywhere. "Okay, open up," Sariella said, finally and firmly.

"You won't like it," the brick replied.

"Oh, will you just open up please."

The door opened, and Sariella stepped through. The brick was right; *he usually was*; she did not like it. "Oh, fucking fey," she said as she saw the world. She hated the fey, detested the trolls and the jokers? Well, they could just fuck right off; she despised them. There was one good side to all of this: she knew she was in the right place. If there was one group that would help Dotty, it would be the bastard fey. She trudged forwards and away from the door that had opened for her and into the trees. The door closed itself as she walked away and opened as a female troll walked out from their shack. The troll was totally oblivious to what their door had been used for. They looked and saw the woman being swallowed by the lush woodland and wildflowers.

"Stop," a harsh rocky voice said. Sariella rolled her eyes. She knew what was coming, bloody things, she thought. "You won't stop me," she said with defiance. "Oh, but we must," a second voice said. Sariella squinted and squeezed her eyes shut as the tree to her right slipped and shifted. Like a watercolour that has got wet and started running, the colours and textures of the tree altered. A shape started to form from the running colours. The skin and bones figure stepped from the sliding image. A face was long and distorted like Munch's *The Scream* or *Scream's* Ghostface mask. A hollow black for a mouth had uttered the second message. "Oh for fucks sake," Sariella groaned, "not you jokers as well."

"Us jokers as well," the stick-like scream figure replied. Its joints snapped into and out of place as it moved. It sounded like twigs snapping. "Oh, will you stop that? You will not scare or intimidate me," Sariella said, and stamped her red shoe to the ground. The joker moved forward, this time without a sound. The troll followed behind it, scraping its feet like a schoolchild on the way to school. It scuffed and huffed as it moved. Its heavy grey frame with tight skin gripping the bones and muscle. "And you?" Sariella asked, "what do you plan to do?"

"We have to stop you," the troll said in a grumbling mumble. "She asked us to stop you."

Sariella looked at them as if she had swallowed a particularly sour fly. Her face contorted and bent into shapes that she had only performed when once trying the blood of a man undergoing cancer treatment. "Urgh," she grimaced through her tightly closed lips. "I can't believe I will say this." She shrivelled her nose and threw her head backwards. Her top lip raised, and her teeth were exposed as she rolled her eyes so far back she could have seen the inside back of her skull. She groaned before saying, "Take me to your leader."

"Why?" The joker asked.

"Why? Why?" Sariella moaned, "I want this shit to be over. I need to sleep during the day, and I want to feed without looking over one shoulder. I want to shag without worrying that something will come in through the window. And, frankly, I want to get out of this damned place." Breathless, Sariella finished, her arms slumped to her side. "We'll have to tie you up, and no funny business," the joker said.

"Yeah, nothing funny," the troll added. Sariella was tied and bound, and the troll then carried her to the village. The joker followed behind, sometimes snapping

his limbs and other times not. Sariella enjoyed the ride, often smiling at the trees as they passed.

The village buzzed, and not just with the fey. The trees swayed the dance of the fairies, the grass seemed to groove to the tempo of the trolls, and the flowers jived to the beat of the jokers. The village was rocking, and because of this, it was the perfect place for each of its inhabitants. Except for Dotty, the daisies drooped like a swing dress with a flat petticoat because of her. Dotty had a way of draining even the most enthusiastic event. She would suck the sex from the sexiest of succubus, and she could have absorbed the energy of the most empathic empaths. She was poison, and they all knew it. The only reason they would even allow her there was that they hated Sariella more.

They hated Sariella because of a betrayal. The fey, who controlled the forest, had once been betrayed by her. Fey, *as we all know*, can hold a grudge. In fact, the only thing keeping Sariella alive was Dotty. The fey folk believed in the yin and yang of the world. Good and evil, dark and light. They would like nothing more for Sariella and Dotty to have a good old fight and finish each other off. They would have enjoyed that. Sariella knew it, but that was not why she smiled as she was carried to the village.

The wind picked up in the village as Dotty spoke; she barked her orders at the jokers and trolls. "Bring her here." Dotty beckoned as they came closer. "Here, my pretties, here." The troll carried Sariella over to Dotty and placed her on the ground. Dotty pounced onto Sariella and kneeled as she mounted her. "Hahaha, I've got you now. Why, my dear Sariella, my little party's just beginning!" she cackled as she pulled the stake from her bag. Sariella started to laugh along with her. The wind picked up, and the trees started to lean rather than sway. Sariella's laughter soon was louder than that of the witch. The fairy folk, jokers, and trolls watched as the scene unravelled. She bowed her back and lifted her chest toward the pointed wood as the laughter spewed from her mouth. Dotty raised the stake but then hesitated as a clap of thunder filled the air. "What is wrong? Why are you laughing?" she asked, confused.

Sariella stopped laughing in an instant. A flash of lightning smashed down some distance away, followed by another clap of thunder as the storm drew closer. She turned her head to look straight at the witch, closed her eyes and whispered something inaudible. The witch leaned in closer; she held the neck of the vampire down with her left hand, stake in her right, as she moved in. Flash, bang, the storm had moved at incredible speed, and now the gap between light and bang was just milliseconds. She turned her head to the side, careful to not release any pressure upon the vampire's neck as she listened. Sariella did two things at once and did them both quickly. She clipped her heels together three times and said the words, "There is no place like home."

The spiral of wind took them in the blink of a second. The storm surfaced from nothing and then vanished into nothing. The witch and vampire were gone along with it. The fey and fairy folk just shrugged it off; they had seen many things over the years. The vampire and witch were no longer their concern. It took the witch a second to realise what was going on, but as she did, she muttered the words, "Curses, curses." They were both thrown into the air. The stake ripped from the

witch's hand, and the two were blown away from each other. Taken by the tornado, taken and thrown into the chaotic vortex. The witch deposited along with a bike, rocking chair, and trees that had been swept up over time. Items that had been grabbed and held like the house nearly a century ago. Sariella just lay back and let the twister carry her home.

Her eyes opened, and she woke. She prised herself from the coffin, and the only evidence of the previous night's adventures was the monkey she had left lying on the floor. She would have to move, but what fun she'd had. She really must, she thought, do it again sometimes. She stepped over the monkey, opened the door and made her way into the local town. She needed to feed, and she wanted to buy herself a 'No place like home' plaque.

Part 4.

Intro.

Wasn't that something! So who was it? Who in the end claimed that I, the great Satan, made them do it! It was Dotty, of course, as you can see, she is standing with Colin and Jonathan on the stage. Oh, she blamed me for all her problems in the end. 'Oh, why'd you make me do it! I only wanted to please you, Dark Lord.' Yadda, yadda, fucking, yadda.

I do not need to be pleased. I do not need some human to do my bidding! I am lazy at times, but I am not that lazy! I am not my father, so I do not need or demand your worship. I am happy just the way that I am. Who would not be happy with perfection? Why would I need wiggly tiny humans to feed my ego? Ha! I have enough without your help.

Or, I could be lying.

All Hallows Eve.

The rubber suiting was pulled over their body and then wrenched the hood up and over their head. They tucked in the remaining hair and then put on the goggles covering their eyes and brows. It was not elegant, not particularly clever, but what it was, was safe. Aldi, four pints of milk, some ham, a loaf of bread, and a wet suit with goggles. Aldi never change, they thought, as they tied the bags around their shoes and then slipped on the leather gloves. Now they were ready.

They looked at the screen with the eyes of a hawk. The only light in the room was the glare from the monitor, and it fell flat on the black wetsuit and reflected back from the goggles. They stood in silence as the prey they had captured struggled on the display. They knew that the victim was secure, but they always liked to watch them struggle on the table first, like an appetiser before the main course.

There was nothing from the viewings, no satisfaction. Lord knows they wished that they had. The only thing that gave them anything was the final act. They had tried everything, but this was the only thing that worked. Was it because it was the ultimate taboo to take another's life? Were they just wired differently? They only

knew the emptiness that flowed throughout them when they went without. They needed to feel something. Without feeling, what was the point of life? It was an addiction.

They pulled the doors open to the kill room. The room was covered from floor to ceiling in thick black bags, and they were taped together and then hung from wall to wall to cover every spot. Not a glimpse of light-coloured paint could be seen, nor could it peek through and watch. A builder's lamp was the only source of light. They walked to the far corner and disconnected the camera they had placed there. What happens in the blackened room stays in the blackened room. There would only be two witnesses, and only one would leave the room alive.

Their eyes looked over the selection of knives on the black bagged covered table. They then eenie-meenie-miney-mo'd between each blade. They knew where they would end up; this was theatrics playing to their audience of one. After all, young children figure out rigging eenie-meenie before their tenth birthday. They sang aloud as the finger jumped cheerfully from blade to blade. Bouncing their little pinky from silver to silver. The victim could see what they were doing and hear what they were singing, but they could not reply. With the knife selected, they grabbed it and swung round to face the victim. An upside-down crucifix was painted white on the top of the rubber hood that they wore. They leant forward and removed the rags from the prey's mouth.

"Who are you!" the small-framed man asked without panic. "What do you want with me?" he said next as he watched the black goggled face. "Do you know who I am?" he asked. The face just nodded back without making a sound. "I am a man of God!" the man stressed, "did you know that?" The face nodded once again and did not say a word. The man, *the man of God*, was composed throughout. "Why me?" he asked. The rubber figure just stared back at him and still said nothing. They jumped the knife from hand to hand, throwing it like a juggler with a ball from left to right.

They drove the knife forward and into the man of God's neck. The pin-sharp tip sank into the neck as easily as a needle through a thin fabric. They pulled the blade from the skin, and blood vomited from the wound. It was then, the moment that the blood splashed into the goggles, that they felt it. They looked at the room in the blood-red shade as energy, life, excitement, love, and desire flooded through them. The orgasm of emotions filled every millimetre of their whole, held against them by the wetsuit and tingling with excitement as they shuddered. They felt recharged, and they felt human once more. The action of taking life to feel alive.

The body twitched its final spasm as the last of the blood trickled from the wound and to the floor. The deed was over. The moment gone. The elation and feeling of life did not last as long these days. The fix quick, the high quicker. They were running on a full tank for now. They leant over and picked up the bone saw from under the table. They held the bone saw by the trigger handle in one hand and the knife in the other. They walked back to the table, wiped the knife clean on the man of God, and then restored it to the case. They then returned to the deceased body.

They slid the bone saw - *also Aldi* - along the skin on the lower calf. They placed a hand on the top side of the blade and applied pressure. The teeth of the

saw zigzagged with each movement over the skin, and soon, it was down to the bone. The bone crunched like cracking ice as each tooth cut, and the blade was moved faster. The blade lifted and dropped with each tiny staircase step of fangs as it devoured the bone, skin, and flesh. They could feel every bump. With the one leg complete, they moved on to the next.

Finally the body was chopped into parts and lay on the table. They stacked the pieces, first the torso and then the arms and legs piled above and beside it. The head was placed on the top, and it was as compact as they could manage. They then put the bone saw next to the head and walked to the corner of the room. Grabbing and pulling from the corner, the black bags fell away in their hands. It was as designed, and they dragged the corner over the body parts and covered them. They then moved to the other three corners and completed the ritual.

They then stood on a small stool and plucked the bags from the roofing, pulling the plastic down in one go, folding it, and placing it with the body. Finally, they pulled the bags from the floor and let the blood flow onto the hard stone. They wrapped the bags and body up and then strapped duct tape around the package. In the corner of the room was a hosepipe veiled from the kill by the black bags. They walked to the hose and washed the blood down the small drainage hole in the middle of the stonework. It would be drained into the water system and forever forgotten. They grabbed the ajax and bleach from the side and covered the floor. With the room cleaned, they would return to scrub the floor; they left.

The body sat alone for a few minutes before they returned, pushing a small wheelbarrow. Wheeling it to the table and then pushing the packaged body into it. The body fell with a thump; it fit perfectly, *just as they knew it would*, as it always did. They placed the knife set on the body and pushed the barrow from the room. Once through the door, they closed it and then locked it. Slipping the locking padlock together with a satisfying click. They manoeuvred the barrow to the car, opened the boot, and tipped the body into the rear. They had bought a Citroën just for this purpose. With the body in the boot, they stripped from the wetsuit, removed the gloves and bags and then placed them all into a second black bag and dropped it into alongside the packed body.

Tomorrow's business would be to dispose of the body, finish the cleaning, and wash the wetsuit, goggles, and gloves. For now, they had one more thing to do. The engine hummed as the car started; they checked every light before setting off. They drove at just under the legal limit. They used indicators at every needed point and watched every other car. Getting caught now would be unacceptable. They turned the final corner, still driving like a conservative Sunday driver, and pulled into the drive. They left the car and locked all the doors before heading toward the house.

They slipped the key they had cut into the lock and turned it slowly. The key turned, and they pushed the door open without making a noise. They slipped inside and closed the door and then slid the security chain over, looping it around the catch. With the door secured, they walked to the stairs and placed a foot on the bottom step. They stood still and recreated what had happened in their mind. They were checking the ins and outs of the whole night. Ticking mental boxes to make sure everything was done correctly. Once they were satisfied, they crept up the stairs.

On the landing, they strolled straight to one room. They knew exactly where to go. They opened the door and walked into the room that housed two children. They snuck between the beds positioned against opposite walls and looked down at both children as they slept. "Good night," they whispered and left the room, pulling the door closed as they did so. They then headed to the room at the head of the landing and opened the door. They closed the door, walked into the blackness of the room and sat on the bed. They removed their clothes and slipped into the bed. They threw their arm over their partner in the bed. "You're late," the partner said with a sleepy voice. "Just busy at work, you know how it is," they replied as they closed their eyes.

Sleep well humans. You can never be sure who you are cuddling in with.
Happy All Hallows' Eve.

Part 5.

Intro.

Hello humans! It has been a while. Dotty, Johnathan, and Colin are still here on stage with me, and they have been waiting, just as you have been for this next tale. Anon from our previous nightmare has joined them.

Do I speak to humans? *Maybe*, I am speaking to you, after all!

This tale is about another anonymous soul, a tortured being who wrote this letter and posted it to all the media sources he could think of. I could name them for you, but what would be the point? It adds nothing to the story. It is a confession, a last meaningful thing that he did. Something he thought might shake up the country and make it a better place. I doubt it will change anything; maybe I am cynical. But was it madness, or was it me? I shall let you decide.

The Angelic Assassin.

I can't say I remember when it first started; I remember the anger, oh shit, yes, I remember the rage.

I saw it as a murder of a sort. Social cleansing of the poor and needy. I lived through it; it turned me from calm and collected into a bubbling ball of fire and fury. They had started out by tormenting the disabled. That was how I saw it; *no, I am being honest*, that is how I see it. It was an ocean of shite and propaganda. Wave upon wave of stories of how people were cheating the system. The right-wing shit rags lapped it all up; they would, wouldn't they? You expect them too. It is like putting a nappy on a newborn and expecting it not to shit. It is just what they do; they can't help themselves. To be fair, the baby shite is probably of more value to society. No, it was when the BBC and others got involved; that was when my inferno bubbled.

Angels and arseholes, or whatever it was called. Watch everyone, as we find another struggling family for you to point at and feel better. A struggling family for you to turn your nose up at. Coming up next, we join another buy to let landlord as they purchase a shithole and then rent it out for the majority of the average wage. Who is the real baddie here? Sure, people need homes to live in, but they don't need

to get fucked simultaneously. Hey new tenant, let me have seventy-five per cent of your wage; now bend over and take it like a man. Oops, sorry, I forgot the lube. The door to my burning inferno had been opened. It was hanging from the hinges, never again to be closed.

The thing about a door is, that once it is opened, you can get in, but anything can get out. That was when he got me, *I think*. That was when the thoughts and ideas started to manifest. That was when the devil took me hold. You think it is an excuse; maybe you are right. I know what I feel; I know what I am. I made peace with that side of my being long ago. I embraced the devil inside of me. He may have arrived unexpectedly, but I welcomed him. I was willing, and he had me, mind, body, and soul.

Then the letters and phone calls started. Writing this down, I wonder if that was his doing. I do not think it was, but can you ever be sure with the devil? The phone rang time and again. *Bring-bring, bring-bring*. The digital recreation of the old analogue ring bounced around my head, filling my mind with ideas. *Bring-bring*, kill yourself. *Bring-bring*, kill them all. *Bring-bring*, can you work? *Bring-bring*, why can't you? Constant, non-stop, bringing and ringing of harassment. WHY CAN'T YOU JUST STOP!

But that is the point.

The voice whispered in my head. It, he, whatever, was right! That was the point. They wanted to cause this torture; they wanted to open the door into the mouths of madness. Work, death, ending your claim; they do not care what you do as long as they can remove you from the system. You are just a number on a spreadsheet. I am not a number; I am a free man. Oh, but you are. You are, also, neither free nor are you a name. You are just a series of letters and numbers. National Insurance number they call it. I call it a virtual tattoo that is just there to keep you part of the system. A system you can't break free from.

But you could, my head said.

Oh, but I could. I won't lie and say that I pushed the voice to one side; and that I treated it much like an annoying itch and tried to pretend it was not there. To think, I thought I was going mad! Ha! Blimey, to look back now. I was in control, wasn't I? I could ignore it when I wanted, and I could listen at my time of choosing. You say madness; I say possession. Potato tomato, tomata potata.

It helped; it helped a lot. There were times when the voice calmed me. *Deep breaths*, it would whisper. Occasions when I needed its anger. *Let me free*; it would charm my cortex. At times, I just needed the company. A voice that could listen and comment. It was also a charming and friendly companion for a creature said to be the demonic king. I enjoyed the time we spent together. Then, the pandemic happened. The motherload of complete and utter fuck ups.

People have claimed that the demonisation of the poor and needy over the decade has caused hundreds of thousands of excess deaths. You always get some fuckwad popping up to argue it if you post this figure. But, the figure in itself does not matter. A hundred thousand? Fifty thousand? Twelve thousand? Twelve hundred?

How many are too many? How many people have to die from government policies before someone just says enough!

One hundred and eleven thousand. That is how many. That is when the voice spoke to me and gave me the idea.

Why not... It planted the thought.

It said, and then titillated my tortured brain with a plan. The laughing and joking in the houses of commons; the lacklustre and carefree approach to things. These all annoyed me, and they annoyed the devil inside of me. Suppose you take the needless deaths caused by the psychological torture and the pointless deaths caused by the pandemics' shambolic response. In that case, I think you are well into a quarter of a million souls. How could people laugh and joke after a quarter of a million unnecessary deaths? My life, your life, any life but their own was a game to them.

Then, Who is the real evil here? Me in your head or those laughing and joking about death?

Exactly! The voice posed the question, and I had no good answer. The voice had done nothing wrong! It had helped me at times; it had been my only company. A saintly voice in my moments of need. A lone friend in my moments of insanity. And, I had been crazy; I was crazy. Oh, not bouncing off the walls and licking a snail crazy, but mad, nonetheless. But, now... Now I was seeing things clearly. People always talk in the past tense about the devil. He was an angel. I think they are wrong; he is an angel. Where were the other angels in all this? Where were the heaven-sent fuckers? Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel, etcetera etcetera. Why did they not help me? Why did they not visit these parasitic tapeworms that claimed to worship God but didn't give a shite about the number of deaths they caused and continued to cause? Come on, angels, speak up! Let your voices be heard!

Nothing.

That's right, nothing. Fuck all, the sum total of zero plus zero. In humanity's time of need, they were quiet. Their worshippers were silent, no doubt taking their cue from those they worship. There were a quarter of a million deaths, and they were busy turning a blind eye. Fuck, they even admitted the repeat divorcee into their clan. *Speak up, you fuckers.* Where are your morals? The only one who cared was the devil inside my head! *Ha!* The only fucking angel who cared was the one you booted out. Who the fuck is the good guy here? Call yourself angels? I've fucking shit things that are better than you!

Buying the gun was easy. You would have thought it would have been challenging in today's world, but it was not. I downloaded the Tor browser, jumped onto the dark web and found a marketplace. Then I bought myself a gun. Honestly, the service was superb. Far better than many experiences I have had with legitimate online sales. It seems the criminals in the world are working with more honesty than the governors. It arrived tracked the next day, as promised. And, as promised, it was well packaged and contained a complete set of bullets. I wouldn't need them all. It was too easy, far too easy. They spend all this time trying to shut down minor things

– *in the grand scheme of things* – and yet, I could buy a gun and have it within twenty-four hours. Priorities people!

Yes, you, Mr / Mrs / Miss / Ms Press person. This is where you come in. I am sending this as a confession and to tell people why. I need one bullet for my target; the next one will be for me. When my work is complete and I am dead, you shall be reading this, and I hope you understand the why. Was it worth taking sides politically? Letting others die in their thousands, ignoring it or marginalising it because you agreed with the politics? Ignoring the pleading cries of the poor and needy just because your political party was in power? You are supposed to be the voice of the people! You are supposed to tell the truth to power and shame them into doing the right thing! Instead, you punched down. You saw the people struggling, and you fucking slapped them. You shat from your sky-high building on the people you are meant to protect! The people you should represent.

They are lucky you can't get to them as well.

True, my friend, they are, but we can buy other things online. Things that can be posted.

Part 6.

Intro.

Ohh. Like the old movies or records, our final tale is the a-side to the previous b-movie. It is the opposite side of the coin; our final tale is a doozy. The tales so far are nothing on this bad boy. I shall tell this myself; my words shall guide you. I do this not because I want to misguide you, though it may be! I am doing it this way because I cannot stand the subject in question. In the annals of shitary, this one takes the top prize. Sure, there are worse, but this one is a particular gripe. He hurt a friend, a human friend, and I cannot stand the fucker for that.

We have Colin, Jonathan, Dotty, Anon, and let's call our next actor Saintly Steve, on the stage. Who will join them? Our final tale awaits.

The Politicians Demise.

We go back a decade or so, travelling back on the train of time. Our political shitstain was lumbering around on the backbenches like the dingleberry he was. Bald, a little hairy, smelly, and fucking useless. His political rise had happened some years before. His colleagues then realised, *along with the electorate*, what a waste of atoms he was and ditched him. He bobbed about like a buoy in a particularly shitty sea, dipping up and down collecting shite and delivering nothing. The world would have been better if he sank below the sealine and disappeared forever. However, *obviously*, he did not.

His party won the election with its new, *electable* leader, and he was again thrust into the public eye. The turd that refuses to flush. The black mould that you can't paint over. The bloodstain that keeps reappearing; Poe's tell-tale heart, boom-boom. All those would have been infinitely more desirable; alas, that was not how it unfurled. He sat on the benches with the green leather gripping his sweaty arse as the party leader approached, "Brian, I have a job for you," he said. Brian sat and scratched his backside before sniffing his finger; meaty and musty, he thought.

“Yeah? What is it?” he asked with all the interest of a young child being asked what they had done that day at school.

For all Brian’s faults, and they were many, his worse was that he was useless. Now, being useless in itself is not an issue. He could have been the DIY fanatic who fits a kitchen that would have suited the crooked man. He could have been that person on the Sunday league team who was hopeless. The last person to be picked during PE in school, he was the fucker that nobody wanted on their side. “I want you to run the DWP,” the leader said. Brian’s lips raised at either end, and his brown yellow nicotine-stained tooth entered our tale. The tooth’s colour stood out like the one dead match in a complete box or the upturned – *lucky* – ciggy in his packet. No, Brian’s problem was that he cared *in his own way*. He was useless, but, and the but is essential, he had never, until now, been in a position of power. It would not have mattered if it had been wonky DIY, shit sportsmanship, or numerous other things. Putting him in control of the DWP; giving him the power over the most vulnerable in the country was an explosion of shit that would cover many.

“We need to get these scroungers of the system,” the leader said. The party leader was a fuckwit himself, but he had the good sense to get others to do the dirty work. Like a Mafia don – *without the charm, smarts, or intelligence* - he would delegate the worst tasks to the party’s underlings. He would shield himself from the worse of the shit that hits fans, and others got the blame. It was a sly cunning and, *in a way*, bright, though not admirable. He knew the reforms would lead to problems; he knew that the blame, in time, would have to land somewhere. He was smart enough to keep out of the way. The buck stops here? Not for him. I’d call him a weasel, but that feels unfair on the furry mammals. This tale is about Brian, so I shall spend no more time on him. His time will come.

Brian set about his task with relish. He reformed the system; pushed and pulled people to do his bidding. He spent billions on a new computer setup. Designed the system to allow harsher sanctions and ensure everyone was assessed and given what the department deemed they deserved. The project overran; the budget expanded; the staff came and went like a double ended dildo in a lesbian porn flick. As we have discussed, the problem was that Brian was as useless as said dildo in a nunnery. *Well*, in the stereotypical nunnery anyway; the tales I could tell! The disabled were persecuted; they were found fit when doctors and health professionals knew they could not work. The needy were hassled about finding work; badgered all the time. Week by week, their online activity was checked; they had to look for work as a full-time job. The sick were scheduled for reassessments regularly, some as often as six months apart. Claim two things, as many sickness social security claimants do, then that’ll be two assessments. People were driven to the edge and then pushed over. Terminal cancer patients were told they were fit to work. The depressed hassled until they lost any will to live. No legs and arms? You can be a doorstep! Mental illness? Just pull yourself together, old chap(chappess), get over it! It is only a wheelchair; you can crawl up those stairs! Have some can-do spirit. That is the problem with you skivers; you are always looking for an excuse to take it easy!

Thousands, tens of thousands, some estimate that it was the hundreds of thousands that perished. Did Brian care? Nope. He cared not one jot. He had a job to do, and by God, he would do it! (*Red herring?*) He was not a bad person; he did

care; he was just hopeless at any given task. He wanted his reforms to work; he wanted to help the most vulnerable. He just saw everyone as less than him; he saw other human beings below him. He had no reason to think that; he was the skidmark on the edge of the toilet bowl of life, so think that he did.

So we come to the tail end of our tale. We come to the epilogue. What happened to Brian? Was he hung, drawn, and quartered outside of parliament? Did his death total of between ten and a hundred and fifty thousand finally get him stood before a court? Did the twelve jury members finally get justice on this piece of squidgy brown discharge? No, he got away scot-free! But, we know there is more to death and life than that. Brian stood and waited to be weighed after his death. A devout Christian, he stood before the weight master and expected to be handed the keys to the pearly gates. The weight master smiled a grin almost as large as Brian's had been after being offered the job of reforming the DWP. He looked, and his black eyes showed no emotion as he pointed downwards. The irony is that the weight master was just doing his job and doing it to the best of his ability. He had compassion; he cared about the souls. Brian did the job to the best of his ability, but he should never have been in the position to fuck it up.

The floor cracked below Brian's feet, and he could feel the heat before seeing it. The weight master lived in the realm between worlds and made the choice. He decided if you go up or down, and for Brian, he was going down. Destined to live in my company for the rest of time; I can assure you a pleasure that will be all mine. "You were involved in the deaths of thousands," the weight master said. "You turned a blind eye because you thought it was right."

"I, I..." Brian stuttered, "was only doing my job," he finished. The weight master chuckled. "You are not the first to claim that," he said. "In life, you have to be the best you can be. You have to live, but also you knew what you were doing would have dire consequences, and yet you still continued." Brian thought for a moment, it was possibly the most work his brain had done in forty years. He wanted to find an excuse; he needed to find a reason for what he had done. "The devil made me do it."

The weight master's smile vanished, and he looked down upon Brian. "Then you can go and speak to the Devil and ask him why." The floor below Brian fell away, and he dropped from view. He would not be falling for long; the trip to Hell is shorter than you'd expect. The time you spend there is infinitely longer.

Part 7: The Conclusion.

So humans, have you guessed? Brian joins the rest of us upon this stage. One has done what I willed. I made only one do what they did. They are all bastards in their own way, but only one member of this group was made to commit crimes because of me. Was it Colin, sent by an angel no less! Jonathan, the psycho in love? Dotty the spite witch; she was a creature of the supernatural; it had to be me, didn't it? The anonymous partner driven by a need to kill? Or maybe it was Saintly Steve who rallied against the injustices he saw? Finally, we have the shitbag Brian. The incompetent whose uselessness killed so many. I hate him; I could be bluffing, of course.

Roll up, roll on up! Money where your soul is time, humans. Who did I make kill? Who is innocent, so to speak, in this whole charade. I promised you an answer, and here it is. The answer is... dum dum dum, me! See that blob of wet sticky goo on the floor over there. You remember, we opened with it – 'Ignore that mess over there, he once told a joke that offended some, so I have exploded him.' That one was all me. The rest, they did it of their own free will. As many have over the millennia, they blamed me, but I do not make you do things. Own your shit humans. Your problems? Shit governance and anything else is all on you.

Until next time, be well my human friends.

Yours lovingly.

Satan.

The Nameless Voyage.

The darkness wrapped around them like a warm blanket as the salty water splashed over the boat's edge; they had started their journey. The cool air and building breeze failed to sap the excitement among the passengers as the boat felt its way through the waves. The blackness of the midnight sea rippled like a moving oil below them; it held them on the surface. "Blood appears black in the moonlight," one of the passengers said as they stared almost hypnotically at the water.

"Will you cut that out," another called back, "you are frightening the children!" The boat rocked steadily with the waves. The man, the strongest among them, grabbed the oars and started to paddle. He held his knees up tight to save room, but his upper body strength was enough to do the job. He lifted, pushed, and then pulled. Soon they were building up some speed as he worked in a steady rhythm.

The boat see-sawed up and down on a few waves, and they could catch brief glimpses of the light on the far horizon. The boat soon tilted back down, and they were left with only the void of black that was the open sea. The saltiness of the air flooded their nostrils, and suddenly there was a splash. "Shit, shit, she has gone overboard!" a voice shouted from the darkness. Tens of hands reached over and started to wrestle with the black tar. Grabbing and grasping for anything but coming back with only water, the boat drifted forward with the current. The screaming of the suffering eclipsed into the darkness and eventually fell silent.

The man continued to row, pushing the water with each hefty pull. He knew they could not go back. You can only go forwards both in life and on this boat. "Hold on!" he shouted as the waves got rougher. They battered the boat from both sides, and it rocked violently. Two more were lost in the violence of the sea. The screams eking out to nothing as the splashing water replaced the noise of their yelps. The man could now use his legs to give him more pulling power. There were only the three of them now.

Turning back would not have been an option, even if he were the only one left. They had to be closer to the opposite shoreline now. They just had to be. They had nothing to return to. Go back to the camp? Fuck that! Back home? Fuck that even harder. The war had taken their lives, taken all they had. What was left for them was rubble and memories. The rubble was bearable; the memories of what they had seen would never leave them. It would travel with them like a shadow or the smell of a mass grave in the afternoon sun. A smell that would forever be a part of them. The rotten sweet smell and the buzzing of the flies.

Another had fallen, and he had not even taken the time to notice. He was lost in his thoughts of those he had once had and those he had once loved. What could he have done? The boat was being beaten on both sides, and he could not have stopped. The rowing was becoming futile; the current was taking them where it wanted to go. "I am sorry," he said to the final passenger as he lay the oars down.

The sea grabbed the oars and pulled them from the boat like a spoilt child grabbing at sweets. It pulled the oars, and soon they were gone along with the other travellers. Left to drift in the open sea until discovered. The man prayed to his God as a tear ran down his cheek. He had tried; lord knows he had tried. He knew it would be hard, and it would be difficult, but he had done what he thought was right. He threw himself overboard, and the young woman, no more than a girl really, was left on her own. She screamed into the darkness.

The girl sat on the boat alone. This was meant to be her new life. This was supposed to have been a fresh start. This was intended to end a sad story and start a new happier one. She looked up at the moon, and the moon looked down at her as the boat drifted. It drifted in the darkness until neither it nor the girl could be seen.

The Chill Of Nobody.

It starts in my fingers. I can feel numbness, just a slight tingling in the very tips. The cold clings to me like the bobbles of grass on a woollen jumper. Its tangling fingertips caress my own and stick to them like a tongue on an ice-cold steel pipe. It creeps like a mouse in the shadows up and along my arm. I feel its little feet tipper tapping up and around the hairs.

I have a t-shirt, shirt, jumper, and cardigan, yet I still cannot get warm. The tentacles of iciness tighten around my feet. The double bagged toes are not enough to keep it away. It gnaws at my skin as it penetrates and tangles around my nerves, gripping hold and refusing to let go. When something is numb, I'd usually think of a lack of pain, but in this case, the slow, tentative nipping sting of bitterness is an aching pain that moves up along my legs and arms.

My nose and the tips of my ears were the other first warning signs. Teeny tiny little nips of coldness have made their homes there. I imagine that I'd look like a fence that has had a frosting and is glistening in the morning sun in the right light. My ears and nose sparkling like glitter thrown into the air on a hot summer's day. Sparkles of icy cold stardust decorate my face.

I know why I am cold. It was maybe my own fault; I am dead, you see. I died in this long cold winter. No need to worry about me; I am sure someone will find me soon. I am a nobody, an irrelevance. I am, in the words of the fuff rags, a scrounger. I am disabled; I was disabled, well I suppose I still am. Is death a disability? Tenses, I am going to have to get used to these. I am dead; I was alive, but now I am cold, dead, and still alone.

Why was it, *maybe*, my own fault, I hear you ask? I had a choice between heating and eating. I picked eating. What would you choose, had you to? Have you ever had to? Can you imagine having to make that choice? What if you also cook with gas? What then? Come on, chip chop, what'll it be? Food or fuel. Maybe gas is also your source of hot water. Food, fuel, cooking, or washing... It is make your mind up time. I picked food, and now I am dead. I do have a full stomach, small mercies, and all that.

I wonder if Hell is as warm as they say. What if there is not a Heaven or Hell? Is that why I am still here? Am I destined to haunt this place forever in death as I did in life? I was nothing in life; am I set to be the same in death? Just wallowing in my coldness in this place, stuck with nowhere else to go?

I am nobody. I am that weird bloke who lives on the corner. I am the homeless guy that you avoid making eye contact with. I am under that mass of blankets

outside a store or takeaway. I am the one you ignore and don't think about. I am the one who sits dead and alone in my house.

I do not matter. Look out for the ones that do. Check on the family that may be struggling. Look out for the weird one. Buy a copy of *The Big Issue*; make sure the homeless person is okay. I do not matter; I am long gone, but they are not.

But that is me; I am a nobody. I am Mr Nobody, the ghost, or at the very least, the talking corpse. I shall remain deanimated until I am found. I suppose my landlord will wonder why he has no rent cheque at some point. Maybe I smell? Someone might notice; I had not thought about that. No hot water see? I'd been using the kettle and sink to wash. But still, my freezer has some food left in it. I hope it goes to a good cause.

I am nothing. I am nobody. Cold, alone, and dead.

It is depression.

It is a dark shadow that stands atop some of us. Come rain or shine, light or dark, day or night, it is always there. It is a haunting reminder of the clouds that can suffocate our minds. I wonder if that is why my subconscious picked a dark cloud, or mist, for my first novella. A misty haze of badness that can't be stopped; that can only be lived with. It was, *of course*, defeated in the end. In real life, though, no magic can dispel this darkness. Like those in cartoons, the cloud that follows forever raining down misery upon its victim. *We can, and do*, treat it with an umbrella of sorts. Popping the pills, one after the other, into our mouths, they lift that broly above our heads. The cloud is still there, *but for a time*, we don't notice the miserydrops.

It is hard to imagine the drops of misery for those who have not felt it. This is not just a, oh boo hoo hoo, pull yourself together, sadness. This is waking in the morning, and your first thought is, why. This is crawling into bed mid-afternoon, rolling yourself up in a foetal position and just wanting the day to be over. It's a vampiric illness that sucks the enjoyment and fun from anything you have ever taken pleasure in. It continuously grinds away at your very being until all that is left is a core of despair. You pull and push it to one side, hoping to escape its grasp, but you know it is futile in the end. You know that there is no escape from the black dog.

It is called the black dog; only it is not that. It is a battalion of the bastards, each its own emotion or feeling, running you down at any moment. They claw and rip at your mental wellbeing. They are chasing you night and day. They can sense the weakness; they smell the feebleness of our existence. This is no hellhound style deal; you are infected forever once these have tasted your blood. Ten years it ain't. There isn't a way out of this deal; you are not going back once signed. This is the crazy train, baby, and we are all aboard.

It is the tappety tap of a train moving along the tracks. This-is-your-life. I-hate-this-life. Why-can't-it-end. The endless rattling of thoughts inside an already overflowing mind. Your journey on the train of craziness, and you want to forget the bad, but you only forget the mundane. You lean from the carriage doorway and feel the winds of forgetfulness. You urge them to blow the nasty away, but they take the shopping list. They snatch the person you said you'd call. They wrestle the email you need to send from your mind. You beg and plead, take the bad feelings and leave

the rest, but as the wind goes, you slump to the floor and realise it is just you, the carriage, and your thoughts. Your thoughts and your life.

It is life. That fleeting moment of mortality that exists between birth and death. Those moments that we are supposed to treasure. The times that we hold on to and keep close. You are not alone; remember that. Reach out, do it anonymously if needed. Speak to someone, talk with someone, listen to someone.

It is understanding.

It is listening.

It is talking.

It is Life.

Vetra Machine.

Welcome To The Machine.

Vetra Machine looked down at the ground as the rain fell. The dome above kept the worse of the acid rain out, but she could still remember the hissing noise it had once made. That was when she had just been Vetra and not *The Machine*, all those years ago; how times had changed for her. For the world, the more it ticked on, the more it stayed the same. She took a long drag on her cigarette, *long banned*, but she didn't give a shit, and blew the smoke out in small circles. The smoke popped from her black lipsticked lips. You could get anything, banned or not, if you knew the right people. Her long spindling mechanical fingers crushed the butt of the smoke, and then she threw it to the ground. The replacement augmented right arm slipped back out of view as she leaned against the brick wall. She kept it hidden at times, not through shame or embarrassment; it was because it made her easily identifiable. Her short dress barely hid the stocking tops; this was by design. She was undercover. The long four-inch heel of her boot joined with the ladder in her right stocking. This was no stairway to heaven; it was a rope bridge directly to hell.

Wall leaning outside a club like Shorties was about forty-nine steps down from curb crawling in cardboard city. You curb crawled if you were decent; you wall leant if you had nothing to offer. It was for the degenerates and truly hard up. She knew it was safe; nobody wanted a woman like her; she was lower than the lowest and could handle herself. Still, she smiled, buck teeth on display for all, she'd have given them one hell of a ride, and lord help them if they stiffed her. Machine had her ways, and even at her petite five-foot-nothing, she could, *and often would*, give anyone a fight. She tapped a metal finger on the wall and scraped it along the mortar; bits of piss, puke, and blood-soaked cement crumbled away. The rank smell escaped from the crumbling brickwork and penetrated her sinuses. She shook her head and tried to shake the memory of parties and abuse that joined with the odour. It was no use; once the flood of memories started, no dam could stop them.

Filling in time.

Machine grabbed her long black hair and slipped the scrunchie from the back of her head. This was a habit and something she often did when trying to pass the time and distract herself. Some (*still*) smoked; she'd already done that. Many drank; that was for later. For her, she would remove the scrunchie and then put her hair back up into a tight ponytail. She had formed the habit when she was young; it had stuck even now, even after all this time. Machine pushed the scrunchie tight against the back of her head and then forced her hands to her sides and waited; she - once again - slipped the mechanical arm out of sight. Vetra Machine was just about to rework the ponytail again when the door to the club opened. Finally, she thought.

Machine stiffened against the wall. Her heart rate dropped, and her breathing steadied. She looked ahead and tried not to call any attention to herself. She let her head remain looking forwards while using her eyes to look to the side. She looked at the three people who had left the club, and there he was, Dave the Dentist.

Dave was known as 'the Dentist' because he had a nasty habit of pulling his victim's teeth before death. She gave absolutely zero fucks to what he had done to deserve the price upon his head. Crime, and the police, were a joke; Machine was here because of the bounty, nothing more, and nothing less. Many thought this made her someone who could be paid off, but she stuck to it once she accepted a job. Dave's bedraggled greying hair flopped forwards over his face as he wobbled from the doorway and said something to the other two. The door slammed shut behind him, and Vetra smiled; that was perfect. The scar that tore from just below his left eye and down to his upper lip was the final proof that this was her target. Machine didn't need the hair, nor the scar, to tell her this was who she had been looking for. She felt it down in her gut, a tightness of feeling that told her to play it quick and safe. She smiled at the thought of playing it safe. "First time for everything," she muttered quietly enough so that nobody heard.

Vetra stepped forwards and sideways like the knight on a chessboard. She wobbled as she did so; this was part of the act. She wanted to seem like a drunk, drugged up, broken whore. Nobody looked twice at the downtrodden, well, not unless they had business with them or thought they could take advantage. Machine faked another stumble and used her normal arm against the wall as if steadying herself. She kept the metal arm well hidden, for now. She did not want to give the game away. She mimicked a sidestep, and then it appeared she would lose her balance. Machine adjusted her weight, and, when happy, she pounced. The mark, Dave, came first; the mark always comes first. Die on the job, sure, but get your target first. She leaped into the air and brought her left fist down on Dave's head. He staggered slightly, not much, but just a little. Before he had time to register, Machine had moved once more.

Machine's right mechanical arm was next. She had positioned her metal fingers into one long triangle-shaped mass and then drove it up and into the Dentist's lower jaw. Jumping, punching, landing and then striking with all her might; Dave didn't know what had hit him, and it was all over for him before it started. Driving the steel fingers up and through the soft tissue of the low jaw was quick and easy. The fingers slipped through the skin like a chainsaw through a jam doughnut. Blood dripped down Machine's arm like oil down a dipstick; then she added the finale. Vetra extended her four penetrated fingers, and the Dentist's lower jaw exploded. Bone, blood, gristle, and teeth flew out in directions as Vetra withdrew her hand. By the time Dave's companions were aware of what was happening, they were picking bits of Dave from their faces. From start to finish, the whole attack was completed in under forty seconds. Step one in the three-step dance was done.

Dave fell to his knees, almost in a position of prayer. Praying to god? To the devil? Or, maybe, to Machine? Vetra had already turned her attention to the second of the three. She moved quickly and grabbed the man with her left arm. She pulled her arm up tight around his neck and moved behind. She clasped as tightly as she could, pulling her arm tight around his neck. He struggled and elbowed her in the ribs; she could feel every blow of his long bony arms as they connected. That would

bruise in the morning; she pushed the thought to one side. She reached to her back with her right hand and lifted the dress. The breezy fabric lifted evenly and with ease to reveal her black underwear and tucked inside the back of the knickers a gun. She pulled the gun and fired off three shots in quick succession. The bullets ripped straight through her captive; blood trickled from the three holes in his back and gushed from the three new craters in his front. She released the now dead weight of his body, and it fell to the floor in a flump. Dave, still kneeling but now praying over his friend's body. Machine raised a foot and kicked Dave to the ground, buddies and bodies together as one. She then turned her attention to the final comrade.

One minute and fifty-three seconds, she had to be quick as the gunshots could have alerted anyone. Vetra walked forwards toward the final man. He stood unsure of what to do; she'd soon take any choice from him. Why didn't you just run? She thought, but it didn't matter; what was done was done, and he would be dealt with. He held his hands up in front of his body; what did he think that she was the police? Ha! Not bloody likely in these parts. Machine split her metal fingers, folding the middle one and leaving the index and wedding to poke forwards. She then rammed them deep into the man's eyes. The creamy goo of eye juice and blood trickled down his cheeks. It made a reddy-clear, large teardrop tattoo of misery under the black holes that had once been inhabited by eyeballs. His last vision was a pair of metal fingers approaching fast. The fingers scrambled his brain as they had pushed through; even had he lived, he would have been just another of the braindead living in the slums. Maybe death was too good for him, but it was too late now.

She loved to drive in her Jaguar.

Machine grabbed Dave the Dentist by his hair and started to drag him along the ground. A gurgling groan escaped the mess that had once been the lower part of his face. The skin and tissue hung and flopped freely with the tongue and dripped its moan along the path. "Shut it," was all Machine said as she struggled with his weight. Vetra dug her feet into the ground and heaved with her well-muscled legs. The stockings stretched around the calves as they tightened. She moved the body slowly but with purpose, inch by inch at first, then foot by foot, and finally, she was at the car. Two minutes and thirty-one seconds was how long it had taken to capture her mark; it had taken over three minutes for her to get him to the car. The 2020 Jaguar F-Type was parked at the end of the passageway. Its red paint job was unblemished, spotless, and glistened in the moonlight. It was the type of car you'd expect to have been stolen, but it was also the sort of thing that a thief might look at and then consider who owned it. Steal it, and you might be laughing for a few days, but the type of person who drives a car like that in the slums would ensure your gains were short-lived. If you were lucky, they'd kill you quickly. The roof was down, and Machine caught her reflection in the chrome trim around the windscreen as she popped the boot.

The boot was empty, and Machine grabbed the Dentist under his arms and bundled him in. He was almost twice her weight, but he was finally deposited with a push, a shove, a roll, and elbow grease. "Urgh, mrgh, spurg," he groaned and moaned. Machine took no notice as she slammed the lid. She felt his head hit the boot as she smashed it down, fuck it, don't care. She made her way to the car's driver's side and got in; she threw the gun into the passenger seat before turning the

key and revving the engine. The car roared down the street, and Machine made her call. She tapped the side of her head, and the implanted communicator did the rest. She could have upgraded it, and it wouldn't have even needed the tap, but what if it called someone at the wrong time? She liked control of these things; she could have been screwing and thought of calling a previous partner; it would have been inconvenient and maybe even embarrassing. "I've got him," she said as the call was answered.

"Vetra? Got him? Who?" the voice on the other end replied. Machine rolled her eyes; she had a lot of jobs, but the boss should have known who she meant. "The damned Dentist," she said with a tone that threatened to kill if she was asked another stupid question. Like clockwork, the next question followed, and it was, in her opinion, equally stupid. "Alive?" the boss asked. Machine turned the wheel, and the car took the corner at speed; the body in the boot thumped against the car's side. "Well, he was. I doubt he will be for much longer," she answered.

"You know when it says dead or alive that you get paid more if they are alive," the boss said.

"Yeah. Yeah," Machine replied; she then stopped and paused for just a moment. "I've gotta go; I'll be there asap," she said and tapped the side of her head before the boss could reply.

It was just a glimpse, a fleeting flash of colour in the chrome surrounding the windshield that caught her eye. It took a microsecond for her brain to register and react; it was too quick for her to realise consciously what was happening. Her brain had seen, thought, and reacted before she could comprehend. Her body ducked to one side; a flash, she thought and realised what she had seen was the muzzle flash; she had finally caught up with her subconscious. The bullet ripped through the windscreen in the area where her head had been a second earlier. The bullet hole splintered with a spiderweb of cracks, and Machine looked back over her shoulder. A car was gaining on her, a black-boxed hunk of shite car, but it was gaining. Clutch, gear down and turning the wheel, the car screeched around the corner. It sounded like a banshee at a pissup as the tyres held the road. Her foot jumped from accelerator to brake as she clutched and shifted back up through the gears, expertly managed even in the heels.

Machine slowed the car as she straightened from another corner. She watched closely in the rearview mirror. She reached into the passenger seat and grabbed the gun; she was an old-fashioned gal and used a six-shooter. Three shots were fired and left her with only three remaining. She cursed at not reloading; she knew Dave would have had friends, but she had hoped to be out of Dodge before they came looking. The big black hunk of crap car flew around the corner with all the grace and subtlety of a blind elephant running down an alleyway in a rush. Vetra held the wheel firmly and moved in and out of traffic as she watched it gaining ground. "All part of the plan," she said to herself as she watched in the mirror. Machine guided the car around others, and then when she was on the wrong side of the road, she slammed on the brakes. Dave rolled forwards with a thud. "Sorry Dave," she said with a grin. Her foot was already on the clutch, and she jammed it into the carpet and shifted into reverse. With her other foot jumping from brake to accelerator, she hit the bite point like a pro as she lifted the clutch. The car grunted

as it was forced from going forwards, then into a stop, and finally reverse in one quick movement. The car started smoothly and rolled backwards.

The two goons in the black shit-mobile had seen what was happening but were powerless to stop it. They tried, of course; the brakes were pushed hard, and the car had started to slow, but it was no match for Machines tuned Jag. The red Jag hit the black box, and they joined in a crumpled mess. Machine had braced herself for impact but was still thrown forwards and backwards. Dave was crushed, and the goons were battered and bruised; things were about to worsen. Machine jumped from her seat and, in one motion, was standing on the seat and facing the black car. She winked at the goons as she pointed the gun. A sly smile formed upon her lips. She aimed calmly, took a deep breath and held it, this all took seconds, but to both the goons, it seemed a lifetime. She then squeezed off a shot. Goon number two watched as goon one's head exploded. The bullet cut through the windscreen and landed slap bang in the middle of his forehead. His head ruptured and decorated the inside of the car with goon brains. Vetra then turned to goon number two, the driver, and shot twice, once in the chest and once in the head. With goon goo decorating the black car Machine sat back down into her Jag's driver's seat. She threw the spent gun into the seat beside her and shifted into first. The car purred as it set off, even with the damage to its rear.

The boss sat and waited; he saw the battered red Jag pull up outside and groaned inwardly. This was going to cost him, again. "More expenses?" he asked as Machine pushed the door open. The blood and eye goo on her metal arm dripped to the floor; the boss just looked and thanked Christ that he had lino flooring. "You shouldn't offer if you ain't gonna pay," Machine said.

"You are good Vetra," the boss replied, "but don't take the piss." The boss leant over and opened the drawer on his desk; he wrote a note and signed it. The world had changed, but what he had written was a cheque. Vetra would take it to another place and cash it in; sometimes, the old ways are the best. Vetra threw the keys to the boss, and he caught them without a blink. "He's in the boot," Machine said as she took the slip of paper and turned to the door. "How the fuck am I meant to get him out?" the boss asked. Vetra just shrugged and walked away into the night; her work was done, and she was going for a drink.

The Tormented Mind.

PT1. Strings & Things.

I never wanted to do therapy. We should be clear on that point before we begin. I tell you this not because I am sane, fuck, I am anything but. I mention it only because I have no problem with my madness overall. It held me tight like an old sweater, and I loved it for that. It can be annoying at times, this much is true, but the good outweighs the bad. So, you may ask yourself, why am I doing therapy? Well, the bad is threatening to engulf the good. Like a blanket thrown over a fire, the good crazy was losing ground to the bad; the good threatened to be extinguished.

Once called, I opened the door and walked into the room. The shrink's office was a troika of things. In many ways, it was much like my madness, where I have the good, the bad, and the normal; the room seemed conflicted with itself and its purpose. The walls were painted an off shade of white, just what I expected from a medical office. I would also have expected, being the type of man who looks for stereotypes, a metronome on the desk or maybe one of those physics ball thingies. You know the clacky-clacky fucking things where you release one ball, and it smacks and clacks as it knocks against the others. Well, they were thankfully missing. The desk had only a flatscreen monitor, a phone, and an old ink blotting pad. The pad was now used for scribbling notes, as ink blotting was now a thing of the long past. A memory that was starting to fade into history. It is a shame; I liked the old fountain pens with runny ink pots, but I suppose practicality takes over. Those were the first two observations I made. The medical and the professional, mixing as one. The good was the lack of the ticking, clacking, and clicking balls and a metronome, the normal being the whiteness and brightness of the room.

Then we come to the madness, and this was something I adored. Pictures! *The Scream* was on one wall, prints of *Inferno* on another, van Gogh with his bandaged ear, and *The Desperate Man*. There were others that I could not name; I stood and stared at them. I was engrossed by the craziness of the images. Should a shrink have these paintings that all, in my eyes, echo forms of madness? This was not a complaint; I loved them! All of them. I never have been one for art, but I know what I likes, as the saying goes. "Do you like them?" the therapist asked, as I stood transfixed and absorbed in the artwork.

"Like them?" I replied, "I adore them." I made my way to the desk and sat down in the chair. "They just seem unusual to have in a psychiatrist's office."

"Oh?" she asked with a tinge of curiosity. She had an accent, maybe Spanish; without asking, I had no way to know for sure. She was about twenty years older than I am, maybe in her mid-fifties. I hope I am not doing her a disservice, or maybe I

am flattering her. Does it matter? Maybe not. Do I care? No, I was not here on the pull, looking to sow my seed, and this text won't be flattering. "You thought it would be all medical and clinical?" she asked. Was she testing me? This, this is the reason I do not like shrinks. I don't know how to answer. Yes, I am here to get help with my anxiety and depression, but I do not want her to know about all my illnesses. I have hidden ones that are mine and mine alone, a crazy I do not want to be known to her. Who knows what the future will hold? In time, it may not matter, but for now, it does. "It is not a trick question," she said, "I am not testing you." Ha! My mind does that helpful thing; it's not helpful; that was sarcasm. It starts to think, well, that is what a person testing me would say. I don't think I am paranoid, but I also thought I was an average person until I went mad.

I lied a little with that previous sentence. I was never average or ordinary. I have been broken for a long time. I promised I would not lie in this journal. What would be the point? It is just for my eyes. I suppose it may be read when I am dead, but it will not really matter by that time, will it? So I will continue to ask questions and carry on using both we and I. It won't matter if it is read once I am dead; I will be worm food or ash in an oversized pot. I have no idea how I will go; I don't much care. I don't believe in Heaven or Hell. I am dead and returned to the earth, so fuck it. Like my life, it does not matter. What will be, will be, my dear reader, send me to NASA with no return address; maybe they will send me to space!

I went mad ten years ago. It started with a crawl, like a rock falling down a slope, but as it gathered speed, it quickly got worse. I could not tell you the trigger point; I have no idea what it is or if it even exists. Maybe something started the fires of crazy all over my mind, and there is not one point but many. I only know that it truly started with the voices.

"It is not uncommon," she said when I explained the voices. "You would probably be surprised how many people hear voices in random noise. It is called pareidolia when you see faces in objects; it is a similar phenomenon."

"Okay," I said, because what else is there to say? Sensing my trepidation, she continued ever onwards herself. TV shows, movies, and books made me think I needed to watch out for the uncomfortable silences. The art of sitting in silence and leaving the room filled with nothing. I was prepared for this; I had given myself ample rehearsal. It may be how I am programmed, but I found practising incredibly difficult. If I sit with someone during a conversation, and they clam up, I suddenly feel the need to speak. The silence sits on my shoulder like a whispering demon – a figurative voice this time – speaking into my ear, poking and prodding me to do or say something. What I say or do does not matter; I just feel the need to break the silence. "There was a Doctor once who said that depression is actually a person seeing the world as it really is." She paused for a moment, and I found myself thinking, here it comes. Here comes the silence galloping in and ready to empty itself into the room, but she continued. "He said that a depressive really has just lost the mask that clouds our view of things and keeps us sane. In actual fact, the depressive saw the world as it truly was."

I've no idea if this was true; I'd be lying if I said it did not appeal. I am a complete layman just living a nightmare; her job is to know the facts. It is a fantastic idea, isn't it? Being told that you are not climbing up the walls batshit insane, you just

see things before the special effects of sanity are overlaid. You see the actors holding the green condom balloon that will, one day, look like an alien! I see things differently, but I do not think - in my case - that her line meant quite what she thought it did.

Maybe I am wrong, but this seemed like a light in a dark room. The quote helped. One minute I saw nothing of the actual world; the next, it was illuminated. I think I preferred the darkness, but that is because I have become quite used to it being light. I have become numb to the horrors of trueness and reality, or, perhaps, I have become so used to my insanity that it now feels like the truth. Can we ever know the truth and stay sane? I can only guess what reality is, but I suspect that the horrors are the real world. The fluffy niceness of illusion that we sell to ourselves feels fake at the best of times; when the curtain is pulled back, well, you just know it is a mirage of the mind. It has been said that the eyes are the window to the soul; they are also the doorways to Hell.

It was, at first, a thin veil of tar that I saw over other people's eyes. I thought it was a weird shiner initially. How often do you get close enough to another person to really be able to tell? I would steal a glimpse as I walked past others, and their eyes would catch my eye for want of another phrase. The more I observed, and with time, the worse the infection would get. The tar seemed to coat the eyeball, and vision should have been all but impossible, but they managed just the same. A layer of black goo dripped from the bottom of the socket and hung down and around the cheek. It looked like a demonic clown's makeup. Watching for longer, I noticed it was actually eating away at the eye and surrounding area. The empty socket seemed to drop back into the skull. This was not just a film of tar; it was parasitic and devouring the tissue until only black craters were left. It did not seem to cause the victims any pain; they seemed utterly oblivious to it, but still, I saw what was happening. It did not happen instantly, but I feel that saying it was a slow process would have been wrong. It seemed to eat away at the face between blinks. I would watch, and nothing would happen; then, I blinked, and that tiny moment was enough to accelerate a change.

It feels fitting that they are suffering from a kind of blindness. I know they can see as they are not bumping into things all the time, but don't we all see things and choose to ignore them. We are often willingly blind to the sufferings of others; we choose to look at the darkness of ignorance rather than the clearness of reality when it comes to specific issues. The filth that infects so much of our system was manifesting on others' faces and eating them alive. It was hard not to think that they did not deserve it. The film said that the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist. That was wrong; we willingly persuaded ourselves; the Devil had to do no convincing. Party with the Devil in darkness for long enough, and you will soon forget with whom you are dancing. Look around and see the world the way it really is, and then ask yourself why you have been ignoring the problems? The vileness has risen to the top, and we all seem indifferent toward it. Worse! Many seem to wallow in it and enjoy how it feels.

The strings of life started to reveal themselves to me shortly afterwards. I call them this not through some fit of creative genius; I am neither that creative nor vain; I call them it because it is the literal truth. People have strings attached to different limbs. Arms, legs, and head all have tiny translucent strings attached, and those

strings drift upwards. I thought they drifted to heaven at one time, but then I should have seen some that went downwards, and yet, I never have. Maybe we live in a Godless world, but why do we have so much evil without a God? Is this really all humanity is? Is this all we amount to? Just a stain on a godless world, the pebbledash on the edge of the toilet bowl of life. I include myself in that assessment. I am in no way better than those people I despise. Maybe I am even worse, for I see the world as it is, yet I am powerless to change.

My first encounter with murder happened soon after the strings. I could not say if the two were connected, but I feel that they must have been. I call this a Godless world, maybe there are only demons left, and they wanted me to see this. I watched a homeless man on the other side of the park. He must have known I was there as I made no secret of my presence; I just sat and watched him, and occasionally he would glance in my direction. I watched him with just the climbing frame, swings, and grass between us. Just two souls sat in this park, wondering about the direction of life. Okay, that one was me being a little self-indulgent and pretentious, so sue me. I have no idea what he was thinking, nor, in truth, did I much care. What did interest me were the strings. I watched as he worked and tied his meagre possessions. The stings pulled and lifted as his arms and legs moved. The twitching of the string seemed to precede his movements and held my attention. The short jerking of the strings came first, and then his limbs followed mere microseconds afterwards.

Was this how they did it, I wondered. Could certain people manipulate the strings and make others do what they want? I had known many reasonable people in my time who seemed to be swayed by arguments that made no sense to me. Were they being tweaked and tugged by these strings? I could only see physical actions, but if they existed, who is to say that others could not see mental ones? Or do the ones I see affect both the physical and the mental? A tug here, a flick of the string there, and suddenly you have someone good voting for the unreasonable. I think of the truly evil people who have won elections and been voted into power. Was this the secret to it all? Could they control others? If I walked to the other side of the park and twanged one of the strings, would the homeless man fall over and find his leg under my control? If I just pushed, could I bend him to my will? I did not dare to test my theory, but it felt right.

I watched the lads making their way across the park. They pushed the swings as they passed them, and one of them swung on the climbing frame like an unevolved ape. I had a feeling deep in my lower abdomen about how this situation was going to play out. It was a tickle of trepidation and a tingle of excitement. Like travelling in a car over a hill, I felt the sensation in my gut; everything told me to help, but a sadistic side held me back. The three lads walked like they owned the place. Grown from the slime of despair and destruction, they knew they were safe from consequences. Who was going to stop them? Who would punish them? Me? Ha! No chance. The police? Shit, there was even less chance of that. A decade of cuts, the forced austerity. People look out for themselves, and the police couldn't give a damn. If they caught you in the act, all was good, but investigating? Bollocks to that, they have neither the time nor resources. Besides, what's not to like from the politician's point of view? One less homeless person equals one less problem?

I'd often wondered what type of hero I would be. Would I be good or evil? Chaotic or neutral, light or dark, are you good or evil? I am sure we have all considered what would we do in a situation that called for heroics. I know what I did, nothing. I thought I would have been better, but I only looked and watched as the lads waved a note in the homeless guy's face. I hate what the country has become; I am just as bad as anyone. Have I been infected with the virus of vileness and filth? Have I become that which I loathe? I suppose it is an easy trap to fall into, but I do not think I have yet fallen. My plans started to form as I watched the youths beat upon the homeless chap.

As soon as they had started, the strings seemed to sag. It is impossible, I know, but the strings that seemed to hold and control a human seemed to sag even though the homeless guy tried to stand his ground. The man stood as the three yobs shouted at him, and they each waved a note mocking him and his situation. I know there will be many contradictions in this text. I can only write and describe what I see. I have no control over this side of my life; it is not something I wanted. I did not wake one morning and decided to see the world as it was. How much easier would life be if we could decide these things? Not today, depression; I am washing my hair. Anxiety, get ye tae fuck. I am not in the mood. Oh, hi there, stress. It is lovely to see you, but I have other things to do. I have no more control over these things than I would the weather or the direction a bird flies.

I watched the string attached to the homeless chap's head twang backwards as the yob punched him. It vibrated backwards and forwards as the punch landed, slackened though it was. His head rocked backwards and forwards like a rocking chair in a maternity room, with the string following like the line at the end of a fishing rod. The scum had obviously got bored with waving the note in his face and had moved to the main event. I sat transfixed, the thought of helping never really crossing my mind. Really think about it. Would you intervene? Could you? What about your family if it all goes wrong? It is not something I had to think about, but what about you?

Humour me, and just consider it for a moment. Forget the homeless dude; what is done can't be undone, and think about what you would do. Really think about it and toss up the pros and cons like coins into the air. Let those considerations and thoughts land upon the floor and then look down upon them. What do you see? It is only us, so you can be honest with yourself. Do you see yourself as a hero? So you stand up, walk over and twat one of the fuckers, and then what? What if his mate has a knife, or worse, a gun? Good job, you've gone and killed yourself, and all for what? It may not be that bad. When you are lying in a hospital with a body resembling a blueberry marshmallow, I am sure your family will be grateful. But what about doing the right thing? You can trust me on this; it is easy to say you'd do it. Words are far cheaper than actions. Life is far more brutal than fiction.

One of the youths, possibly trying to act like Billy big balls in front of his mates, ran in and used his right foot to kick out at the homeless guy's leg. I would be willing to bet that he'd have run a mile if the fight were one-on-one. Fucking twat with all the balls of a castrated hamster. I am sure we all know the type, all mouth and dickless unless with their mates. I did not need to see the kick's result. I did not need to hear the leg break. I knew it had happened when the string snapped. I should have been concerned; at the very least, I should have called for help, but I did

nothing. The police would take six and a half hours to arrive and then complain that witnesses could not be found as I'd be long gone.

I observed what happened as the homeless guy fell to the floor; any spunk and will to fight left him as he hit the deck. I am not some stone energy seeing psychic; I don't see an aura around others, but I did notice the strings get a little fainter as he sagged and fell. Is this what these so-called sensitives see? I suppose it is possible, but why not say what you see if that is the case? Why not just say that you see strings? They dress it up with all this funny coloured aura nonsense. Why not tell the truth? The truth is so important; we forget that. It is why this journal is going to be completely open and honest. When the shrink suggested writing my thoughts, I recoiled a little. Do I really want my inner thoughts written down? When she said it was for my eyes only, I thought, why not! Fuck it; by the time this is over, who cares if others read it?

The homeless guy lay on the floor as the thugs laid the boots in, cowards the lot of them, fucking wretched arseholes who will deserve it when the world burns. When the strings finally snapped, and the homeless dude had lost his life, I decided I would be the spark. That was when I decided that I'd had enough. I had done nothing to save the homeless man, but I will, in time, ignite a fire of rage that would be remembered forever.

PT2. The Cracking Of Lies.

Okay, so what weirdo pulled the global pandemic from the hat of shitshows? I mean, for Christ's sake, of all the things I see, I did not see this coming. Blackened goo eyes, strings controlling people, and cracks in the sky – I shall get to them later – but pandemic? Nah, didn't see it. I had seen snippets in the news about what was happening in China, but I was distracted by other things, so I did not pay much attention. I have never looked at a bat and thought, yummy, but apparently, someone in China did just that. Or another animal ate the bat, and some dopey twonk ate that animal, and now we are all stuck at home. This causes me problems.

I had a thought about something as the homeless dude's string snapped. I had hoped to be able to reveal my thinking and an answer to my question this month. The enforced lockdown has pissed all over my chips in regards to that. I sometimes hope the lurgy will get me before I do something stupid, but then, I think, where is the fun in that? Why should I let them all off so easily? So, my thought. What had wandered from the mind in the moments before the homeless dude's death? I wanted to know what happens to the limbs and strings when healed.

I had planned to visit the local hospital and watch what happened in the A&E department. I wanted to watch and observe the strings as others came and went. Did the strings grow and reattach? Maybe they tangled and knotted themselves back together? I have no clue; I have many ideas and countless feelings on the matter but no real answers. Curiosity may have killed the cat; in this case, the lack of answers threatened to make me madder. Ignorance and cluelessness were my kryptonite; once I had an idea in my mind, I wanted to know the answers. No, I needed to have the answers. Would you need to know as well, my dear reader? Does the ignorance not itch inside your head? The idea of the unknown always bothers me.

I shall make the following observations about this pandemic. Firstly, I think they want me dead. Sounds extreme, doesn't it, but that is how I see this. I will clarify a little. I do not mean me specifically. I am not that narcissistic. I am utterly unimportant in the grand scheme of things. No, I am sure they want people who are like me dead. You see, we are a drain upon the system. We are unwanted and unneeded. We are the scraps of humanity, the disabled and downtrodden. The poor and the ones they pass over and pay no mind to. I have felt this way before, but the pandemic has brought it home and invited it in for a nice cuppa.

The putrid poison that has infected and continues to eat away and kill the cells of our politics means that people like myself are worthless. It is always the same, the parties give themselves names that sound reasonable, but then they enact the exact opposite. They call themselves the Federation Of Unity (FoU); they are anything but. The Party for the workers (L2U) distances itself from the unions. The one that claims to protect and preserve (NTC) only wrecks and destroys. I learnt long ago to watch what they did and not listen to what they said. It is such an important thing, and dare

I say it, obvious, yet so many don't do it. Words are cheap; words are easy. Watch what they do! Do not listen to what they say!.

Their hand was forced; many will claim that The Party are doing what is best for the population, but they are not. They do not care about the vulnerable. They simply had no other choice. The poor, the needy, the ill and the infirm may be protected by the lockdowns and new laws, but that is just a side effect. They were spooked by high-profile friends of The Party falling ill and therefore bought in the measures. They did not bring them in to protect the common pleb, like myself. Masking, social distancing, and lockdowns may protect you and me, but make no mistake, it is not being done for you and me. We are just collateral savings. A lucky by-product of the laws and restrictions they have implemented.

One of the many voices of The Party appeared on TV and lied. They are known as Number Four and as nasty as the rest. The lying is in no way a surprise. Politics has long gone from being the art of the possible. Now, it is the dance of the deceivers, and don't they reveal in it. "We have to worry about the mental wellbeing of the general population," the automaton female voice of Number Four said. Listening to these lies was not doing my mental health any good, but what else was there to do when confined to your home? It was then that I heard the noise.

I did not think much of it at first. It sounded like a tree branch snapping. I am lucky to have some trees surrounding my home, and as such, the sound of vandals breaking branches was not typical but also not unheard (ha) of. "We care deeply about the population's mental health," the unmanned ventriloquist dummy said. Craaaaaaack, again. I then turned and looked out of the window.

"What did you see?" the shrink asked over the video conferencing software.

"Nothing." For better or worse, I lied. I did not lie because I was afraid of the consequence of telling the truth. I have a clarity of thought and a perfect twenty-twenty vision of the world as it really is. I see the world as it truly is; I have pulled back the curtain and exposed the wizard; no, I lied because I do not want anything to hinder my plans. I am a blind man who walked away from an eye test with perfect vision. I am deaf, but now I hear. I feel I am turning into something more; I am becoming. "So, what caused the cracking noise?" she asked.

"No idea," I answered, with a shrug of my shoulders. Why should I explain my becoming to this shrink? Why should I explain what I see? She is part of the system and a cog in the setup destroying this world. Why would she care? How did she vote? Did she vote for the vermin that infest the system? Did she vote for The Party? Is that her role in the game of life, to reapply the blindfold upon those who have seen the truth?

When I first looked out of the window, I saw nothing, that much was true. The world was just as it should have been. The trees swayed with the wind, bobbing to the tune of mother nature. The bushes grew greener once more. The winter was somewhat forgotten, and an early spring approached. I could see nothing unfamiliar; it was quiet and tranquil. The world, at first, appeared as it should. "Public safety is our number one priority," droned the emotionless empathy free clone speaking for

The Party. I heard the next crack and realised they were coming from above. They were coming from the sky.

“Something wrong?” the shrink asked. I hesitated for just a moment, as something did not feel right. That tiny itch that tells you something is off, and you should be wary. An internal warning system tells you not to walk that way or not to believe something you are told. When the shrink next spoke, my somethingwrongy senses started to tingle. “You know you can trust me.” When she spoke, two things happened. Firstly, I felt a nigggle in that sense of something being wrong, and secondly, I heard a quiet crack from outside. “I’m fine,” I replied and once again, I had lied.

I lied to her because she had lied to me. I will not lie in this text. I would only be lying to myself, and by proxy to you, it would be a waste of time. When the crack had happened outside, I had known she was insincere. If she was being untruthful, I could no longer trust her. How can I trust anyone who lied to me? It could be a lover, a politician, or a colleague; how can I trust them if they lie? Trust is straightforward to break and yet hard to make, and she had just broken what little trust we had. I think trust would have formed, but now it had no chance.

I value trust above all else, which is why I felt strongly about this betrayal. I had spoken to this woman and told her everything necessary to my health, and now she had stabbed me in the back. I detest this world of lies, this sewer of sophism that The Party has bought upon us. Only sophism is not the right word. These are not clever lies and falsehoods; they are clear to anyone who wants to look and quite apparent. They are the spoken simplicities of a child who had been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. The child vehemently denies all knowledge of the cookie and jar, yet you know they are lying. You punish and scold the child and hope that they learn their lesson. But, they continue with the lie. They repeat the fib so often that it becomes the recognised truth. The cookie jar was raided by someone else, an enemy perhaps, or a political rival, and that is the truth.

People repeat the lie as a fact, not because they believe it, but because it aligns with what they want to believe. Their friends then repeat the lie, and they amplify the deception. The lie becomes the known truth, and the absolute truth witters away and dies. The seed is planted with ease, and now the people spreading the lie have no idea. The seed has blossomed into the Japanese Knotweed of deception and now has its clutch on everything. The rate and growth are exponential; it grips and rips at the very foundation of the country and politics it infects. The truth is buried by the weeds of dishonesty; the truth becomes ancient history.

So what is the truth?

I am mad. That is the truth.

I see a blackness eating around the eyes of others. That is the truth.

Strings are attached to people’s limbs. That is the truth.

Cracks are appearing in the sky.

I am changing. I am becoming. And that, that is the truth.

Whenever someone lies and I hear, a crack appears in the sky. Eggshell-like cracks that join together to become something more. It was a clear day when I heard the first crack, and as I looked up toward the sky, I thought my eyes were deceiving me. I wondered if it were something in the vitreous body of my eye. Had those tiny black specs that appear with age morphed into cracks for my eyes only. I blinked and rolled my eyes, just to be sure, but the cracks didn't budge. I turned the TV off and gawked out the window at the fractures in the sky. The light blue sky was the perfect palette for the strange black cracks. The smile-like shape they formed looked down upon me, a smile in my mind of misery. They were grinning at me alone as they hung like a limp washing line in the sky. They appeared benign, but I could feel a disaster emanating from them. I could sense the dread seeping from the cracks and contaminating the world.

Did they know? Did the filth that lied and caused the fracturing of the world know? As I looked from the window, the people who walked past seemed oblivious to the cracks. The blindness of the black tar, the strings pulling their directions. Were they unaware of it all or wilfully ignored it? The slime that covered and ate away at their eyes was the blindness to what was happening in the world. Ignoring the plight of others, as I had done, turning a blind eye to things that did not affect them. They trot off to the voting booth every five years and cross the box for The Party. Never once looking at what is happening to their fellow man and woman. They allow the distraction to take hold; like the lie, the truth withdraws, and they are blind to it.

The strings are the distraction; they pull a person in the direction of travel that is good for... for whom? The Party? Number One? That is what I need to figure out. It must be connected; I have been given this gift of sight and must use it. I must discover the puppet master or mistress and what they are planning. There must be a reason, right? Things like this just don't happen; everything has a catalyst; there is always a spark. I was changing; the world is changing; there must be a reason! This is not chance. It is not a roll of the die, a card flick or a coin flipping and landing; there is no random element of chance here. There has to be a reason! I need there to be a reason!

I ran my finger along the dusty window and looked at the sky. I didn't realise it at first, but I was drawing the exact shape of the crack I was looking at. I lifted my finger from the window and took a look at the tip. The black build-up of dirt and grime I had wiped with my finger clung to the tip. I had not noticed how dirty the window was, and now with the shape of one crack smeared into the dirt and dust, I would have to clean it. It does not matter; nothing matters, nothing apart from my visions. Those are all that matter.

Lockdown is a drag. I know, my dear reader, that this may not surprise you, but it did me. I would not describe myself as an extrovert, nor am I an introvert. I am pretty comfortable in my own company, so I had thought lockdown would be a breeze; it isn't. I have found that I can read but not listen to or watch the news. I can watch with no sound, but if I hear a lie, new cracks either appear, or older ones become larger and more prominent. Do they realise that their lies are destroying the world? Do they care? I doubt it.

The cracks are a symptom, and they will get worse. I feel that as much as I have ever felt anything. The doom and destruction I feel deep in the base of my stomach that emanates from the cracks mean the end for us all. I understand that these cracks, if not stopped, will end us all. I know this; I know it in the same way that a prophet will understand the word of a god. I am no prophet; if anything, I am an oncoming storm. I am the rage and violence of the world, and through my actions, I will stop this.

PT3. The Party.

I have to write something different. Lockdowns are an affront to my needs and desires. I have many things that I want to do but am limited by the current restrictions.

The Party is famed for its unity. They have some disagreements, but I suspect these are just for public consumption. Political theatre and nothing more than that. The moment they need to be united, they all group together. Like a magnet being dropped into the pot of metal shavings, they all join around a joint force. Unity is strength, after all. Cracks, though, appear both inside The Party and in the world.

Some in The Party are calling for an end to all restrictions. They are masking this behind a forest of lies and half-truths, but they are going against The Party line. They hide the lies, claiming it is about the mental wellbeing of others when really they just want things back to normal. The shops and office spaces they own or have stakes are standing empty. The stores and cafes are haemorrhaging money as they cannot open. The population is kept at home; I think this is their real problem with the lockdown. This is what drives them forward in their attempt to get restrictions lifted. They resent the common man and woman being allowed to sit and do nothing at home. It is all bollocks, many are far from doing nothing, but I think that is the driver.

The nation's mental health is one of the priorities they shout about; they never cared before. They allege teachers are not working, yet the schools are open for those in need. The teachers not in schools are taking classes over video conferencing software. This is well known, but they go on TV and moan about slacking teachers. Bob the Bigot and Dennis the Dosser sit in the pub – when they could – and moan about lazy teachers. They know it is bullshit! They must do... mustn't they? The blindness of the tar eats away at what I now think is both their physical self and mental. They only have themselves to blame.

The above is a hypothetical rant about Dennis and Bob, but I have seen this happen. I have seen one thing being reported, and then the gaslighting starts. "What is happening is not really happening. What is happening is exactly what we wanted." Then, like starving animals who have just found food, the public munch and swallow it whole. A mental brain freeze washes over them, and they only remember what they have been told. What they have been programmed to believe. The gaslighting is complete, the task accomplished, and the job finalised. Bob's your dentist, and Dennis is ya uncle; jobs a goodun. They are the cowboy builders of lies, the Bodgeit and Leggit that pave your patio and run away before it starts to sink. They turn up a week later, and you hire them to build an extension.

The Party was formed in 1921 and finally rose to power in '49. It has had the same leader – Number One – for thirty years now! Nobody seems to want, or are able, to unsettle him. It is hard now to believe that it was initially quite a liberal and even left-leaning group. It supported the right to be gay when it was illegal. They pushed hard for criminals to be rehabilitated and not just locked up for life. Rights for minorities were pursued by them; they really did seem like a change to the status

quo. It is about now that I suspect you are thinking, but that was before they got into power. They did what they promised. Hard to believe now, but they did. It had taken them thirty years, but they cracked the system and became the largest party. The NTC was decimated; it was not even close; they crushed the others, and they have been kept buried under that landslide victory ever since.

People did not notice, or perhaps did not care about the long-term effects. But they did do what they promised. That is important and part of their appeal and longevity. Equal rights and criminal rehabilitation were all good; other things were only good until you scratched the surface. It started small, but once you roll it, it soon gathers. Press regulation was next on the agenda. This is where things began to tumble from a snowball into an avalanche. It was almost universally accepted that at the time, the press were a law unto themselves, and they were.

It is challenging to find out anything that you can trust. To gauge the validity of information is next to impossible. I read something and think, ah, that makes sense, but the next thing I read contradicts it. I would read something that said the media were lapse in holding politicians to account. The next thing I read claimed they went after them like starving bloodhounds. The Party wrapped their tendrils of lies around the truths, and they became so intermixed it was impossible to tell the truth from the fiction. If it were not for the lockdowns, I would try speaking to some older people. Not that I know any, but I thought I may be able to bring it up over a pint. I supposed that maybe alcohol would loosen some lips, but it was an option taken from me with all the restrictions. I felt much like a prisoner, only one confined to my own home.

Even with the foreign media, I encountered similar problems. I fired up TOR, and later my VPN, and started to browse sites that would otherwise have been unavailable. It is like swimming in a haystack of shite and trying to find one strand of hay, blindfolded. Is our press, is The Party, really this powerful? Do other countries have the same problems? I found it hard to believe, but the evidence stared back at me. Were we a social experiment? Do the kid's come home from school and say, "Hey can we watch the UK for a while and see what those loons are up to?" But surely I'd have found references to that online. I found nothing.

It all happened long before I was born, so I can only speculate. I know that in the world today, all the press are on the side of The Party. Yes, we have other political groups, even elections, but The Party controls the media. Every five years, I witness the other parties being savaged by the press. You would think the press would have laid off in the intervening period, but they don't. If one of the other parties comes up with an idea and the press feels it is gaining traction, they will shoot it down. I've seen other media outlets start up and then fail. People have tried, and they still do! I notice the scum, but it is essential to remember that there is good! I forget, I remember the bad, but it is only in writing this that I have remembered some people's goodness. Was that the point in this exercise of writing my thoughts down? It is not important, but it is a clever technique if that was the thinking.

The annoyance is that it has worked. It has started me thinking about the others out there that are decent, and they do exist. I forget about them. I forget about the politicians who are trying to overturn The Party. These people come and then vanish. I have seen them fall from sight over my lifetime. With our press, I have no idea what has happened to them. Maybe they just gave up; anything is possible, I

suppose, though I doubt it. I suspect they have been vanished or maybe re-educated. I have no way of knowing, so I can only speculate. Are they in prison somewhere? Lying dead in an unmarked grave? Turned to ash and then scattered across a field and just forgotten? In the desperation of despair and depression, it is easy to forget that there is good in the world.

I brought a gun, and it should be with me any day now. I purchased it at the same time I was researching the press. I was on the dark web, and I thought, why not. I have no clue how to actually use a gun, point and click; I have no idea if it will even work. But I have it coming. I don't need it now! That is the frustrating thing. I brought it intending to shoot The Party Leader, but my thinking has changed.

PT4. Pulling The Strings.

And finally, in week two of April, we are back to some kind of normality. I wrote about good things being in the shadow of evil; the vaccine has been a great success. In such a short space of time, scientists have managed to create an inoculation that keeps people alive. It is not a magic bullet in that it will keep you alive rather than free from infection, but damn, what wonders they have worked. The advances they are said to have made! Utterly wonderful. That's the good; I could not have started with the good and not mentioned the bad.

It is The Party, duh. Good and evil are often bedfellows. Joined at the hip, both the same painting that is usually viewed from different angles. The Party could not resist jumping on the bandwagon. The vaccine was shipped in boxes covered in The Party logo; the packet with the drugs themselves had been given The Party tagline, 'Together We're Strong'. It is all propaganda, something good they will cling to like a limpet; the bad is all a global issue or opponents of The Party's fault. The good is all by design, or precisely as they had planned. It is all bullshit.

I experimented with something today, and it was a success! I was shopping and had just enough money to buy a pouch of rolling tobacco. I stood in the queue and watched the monotonous drones as they all held copies of the daily hate rags. I could see the headlines and the propaganda on the front pages. They were – as per usual – attacking others. This time it was travellers, but I have seen similar with the disabled and other minority groups. The headlines set the tone for the TV news; if the shit rags are raging about foreigners, the disabled, travellers, benefit claimants, or whatever, the visual and audio media will follow. Like black mould in the corner of a room, it spreads until it has infected everything.

I finally arrived at the checkout, and the lady behind the counter looked at me with her black tarred eyes. I asked for tobacco, and she grunted acceptance and turned to grab the packet. I knew that I had the exact amount in cash for the tobacco, I had not a penny more, but I also asked for a packet of papers. The lady grabbed the items and then beeped them through the till. With the beeps done, I started to count out my cash. I did this slowly; I knew I did not have the correct amount, but I still counted. I apologised profusely whilst counting. I looked up at her, from time to time, as I counted and used my hands to just nudge her strings.

I must have looked quite mad as I stood there trying to move something that only I could see. I moved my hands as I spoke and tried to push a breeze into the strings. I thought this would be difficult, but it was really pretty easy. I moved my hands, and I suppose I looked like someone trying to swat away a fly, albeit slowly, and as I did so, the strings vibrated. It was really relatively simple. I could feel the strings vibrate, and the sensations seemed to ricochet back at me. I could feel the slight sensation in my fingertips, like pins and needles but mild and not an annoyance.

What did surprise me and came as a complete shock was the tarred eyes. I counted, apologised for the time, and worked my hands and her strings. I watched the tar sucked up and into her head as I worked. It seemed to be pulled up and through the eye socket. She must have sensed what was happening as she rubbed her eyes several times. I am sure she would not have been able to understand, but the withdrawal of the black goo must have been causing an itch. "Shit, I am sorry," I said as I finished counting, "I seem to be a few pence short." I knew this would be the case; I wanted to know if I could manipulate her into letting me off. I didn't have to.

I could see her spirits lift as I moved my hands. She must have been stooped a little before and now was standing upright. It was as if she had grown an inch or two. "Don't worry about it," she said with a smile, looking brighter and more attentive. The black goo had almost wholly withdrawn; specs of it remained, but her bright blue eyes were now visible to me. Her smile was charming, and I could feel the warmth emanating from her. "Thank you," I said as I turned to leave.

"No, thank you," she said, still smiling, as I left. Did she understand what I had done? She couldn't have, but I think she realised that something had changed. I have no way to know for sure, but it did make me feel good about myself. It felt great; I had forgotten what a wonderful feeling it was to be liked. Having written that, I now wonder if I have ever been liked. I am not sure that I have. This is a new feeling then, and it feels great. This has made me realise that I may have never truly been happy. That is a strange thing, but maybe many of us must live our lives like this. Maybe it was my becoming showing me a better way; was it guiding me? I had no way to know, but I liked this feeling. I could be happy in life with this feeling all the time.

Of course, no good thing lasts forever, and the comedowns are never fun. I have done various drugs in the past, but nothing could have prepared me for a happiness comedown. I felt like life had been ripped from me, and everything I ever took even the slightest joy in doing was now blackness and mundane. Books that I enjoyed seemed lifeless and bland. A TV show on a streaming network felt as funny and fresh as a mouldy banana. Even music, something I usually find calming, sounded like an old car engine with its timing off. The beats of the drums and bass in the classic rock seemed to be a second out. In the end, I slept, but that was not without problems.

I dreamt of a world, a world, unlike this one. It had been devastated by climate change but was now coming out of the other side. Humans seemed to be non-existent, and animals and greenery had taken back what was once theirs. I do not know how I knew this was a world recovering from humans, but I just did. I suppose that is the power of dreams; they can give you the gift of perception. The ability to understand without knowing what you are seeing.

I watched as small robots joined the animals in foraging through the undergrowth. They climbed over and through the metal frames of human structures that were derelict. The robots seemed to be intended to be animal-like; there were many different varieties, but I could see how each design was based upon the animal kingdom. Mother nature is the world's best engineer, but these robots were not designed to hide their motorised nature. Each looked silver and mechanical, but

the animals and robots seemed happy living together. They ignored one another and continued with their own business. Was this what humanity has become, I wondered? “No, they are Wilp and Cutie’s tools,” a female voice replied to my thoughts. Dreams, my dreams anyway, are a little like interactive fiction. Poorly written interactive fiction, you have the illusion of choice. Still, in reality, you end up in the same place no matter what path you take. I write this now, and I am kicking myself. Shouldn’t I have asked something more important? Who was the voice? Who was Cutie? Instead, I just said, “What are they doing?”

“Looking for food,” the voice replied. Oh, I thought to myself. Then I did ask a question that may have been pertinent. “Is this our future?” I asked.

“It is both your past and your future,” the voice replied.

“I don’t understand,” I said, confused. The voice said nothing, and I was left with just the noises of the animals and robots for company. The world without humans is such a noisy but quiet place. I noticed this phenomenon during the lockdown, but it hit home in this dream. The rustling of the woodlands, the chirping of the birds, and even the slight hum of the robots all seemed amplified. The noises of humans and man’s creations were yet another thing blocked by our brain’s blind-spot mechanism. The wilful blindness to what we do not want to see or hear. “That message was not for you,” the voice returned. Had that happened in my waking life, I’d no doubt of jumped, but the soothing female voice came as naturally as a gentle breeze. “But this next one is.”

The world turned black, and I felt like I was falling into a pitch-black swimming pool. I floated in calmness, I could feel the pressure of something keeping me afloat, but I was perfectly dry. “They are coming for you,” the voice said. It had followed me from the world to this place of darkness. “Who?” I asked.

“The Party,” the voice replied.

I felt myself being dragged backwards and ripped from the place of dreams. Invisible hands that I could not feel dragged me downwards and deeper into the nothing. I felt no fear, though I did not know that I was dreaming at the time; I just felt a sense of tranquillity and soothing. I blinked, and that was when I awoke.

I blinked awake, but the warning was still fresh in my mind. I felt an urgency and wanted to get out of my home. I did not know if this was misplaced, had the dream spooked me? I only knew that I had a feeling that all was not well. I had the sudden desire to run and escape. I grabbed my things, shoved them into a rucksack, and headed for the door. “They are coming for you,” was still ringing in my mind as I snatched the rucksack up and threw it around my shoulder. I ran from the door and let it slam behind me without looking back.

I ran to the park where I had seen the homeless guy beaten and murdered. The real world was filled with noises that drowned out the wildlife. Cars and motorbikes farted away behind me as I sat on my bench. I tried to not look at the cars; I felt open and vulnerable and did not want to turn around and find that I had been spotted or being watched. I felt watched momentarily; it passed quickly like the

birds in the sky, but it kept me on edge. It is not paranoia if they are really out to get you.

“They are coming for you.”

“Who?”

“The Party.”

I sat and waited. My nerves were jangling like a wind chime in a storm, and I jumped at every noise. Frayed would have been a chronic understatement. My whole mind was like a wire about to snap on a windy suspension bridge. I sat, and my foot inadvertently started to tippy tap on the floor. I slammed my right hand down on my knee to try and stop it and placed my left on the rucksack. I felt the plastic of my old laptop and the softness of the few clothes I had jammed in there. Finally, my hand rested on the cool metal of the gun. I let my finger run down the barrel and caressed the trigger guard through the bag. Was this time? Should I kill myself? Maybe that was the answer; maybe it was the escape. The comedowns... damn, the comedowns.

No, I could not do it. I took my hand from the gun and placed it on the other knee to try and make the thoughts withdraw. I am crazy, but I am sure I am right! I will not let them win! I will not let The Party destroy the world. There is too much at stake to let my insecurities and paranoia win. I lifted myself from the bench and grabbed the rucksack; I threw it back over my shoulder and turned to head home. I was being silly; I had let a bloody dream spook me.

I had almost convinced myself that I was just worrying about nothing when I rounded the corner to my home. I stood shocked and stunned as I watched the police smashing down my door. Some were armed, some wore suits, but all wore protective vests. How had my dream known? Was it my dream, or was it that protective blind spot in my brain relaying a message to my subconscious? Maybe I had seen something but not acknowledged it. I turned, and I ran once again. I ran aimlessly and blindly.

I do not know if it was my brain, fate, or maybe even God! Not that I believe, but I ended up back where I had started and stood in the park. The circular nature of my existence didn't bother me; had I thought about it too much, I would probably go crazier. I sat down under a tree and bought out my laptop to write this month's entry. Once I had finished, I put my head back and cried.

PT5. I don't not believe you...

"Hello," a voice said. The voice belonged to the woman I had spoken to and helped at the store. Why, indeed how, we had ended up in the park simultaneously, I have no idea. I do not believe in fate or destiny, so I am only left to thank the hands of chance. She looked down at me as I sat slumped in sadness and wallowed in self-pity. I had been crying and must have looked quite a sight. "Are you okay?" she asked with what seemed a genuine concern in her voice. "No," I replied, more gruffly than I had meant. "Oh," she said, disappointed, "is there anything I can do to help?" I was, once more, far ruder than I meant to be. "Help," I said, "ha! I am far beyond help." She turned to leave; I suspect she was slightly unnerved by my attitude and the manner of my answers to her questions. She then stopped and turned back to me. "There is something about you," she said, "ever since I saw you, I feel different." My brain and mouth then joined forces against me, we were not arguing, but it was like that. I spat something out without thinking of the consequences first. "You feel different because I manipulated you," I said. I threw it out there like a teenager scowling 'I hate you' at their parent. She said nothing for a moment, and I waited to be scolded. "How?" she asked.

It was not the reaction I had been expecting. I had just admitted to manipulating her; there can be few greater betrayals. I had expected shouting, accusations, or maybe just a defiant walking away, but instead, I had this question. "I am not quite sure how to explain it," I said. I could explain it, but how to do so without sounding crazy eluded me. Ultimately, I gave up deliberating and said, "I've written about it."

"May I read it?" she asked and sat herself down next to me. I hesitated momentarily, then pulled the laptop from my bag and switched it on. I opened the document and handed it to her. I was careful to ensure that the gun remained concealed in my bag. After handing her the laptop, I remembered writing the bloody thing so she would find out anyhow. I may have just made a strange situation worse. She sat and read, and I sat in silence. My imagination does me no favours at the best of times. It was now going through all the worse-case scenarios, was spending the rest of my days in a padded room really that bad? It could be worse! She let her eyes wander the pages and finally spoke. "I don't know about strings and tar, but I know how they knew about you."

My mind had worked out every possible scenario and outcome of this strange meeting. The one that it had obviously disregarded and thrown to one side after finding it too ridiculous was that she would believe me. "You believe me?" I asked. Picking her words carefully, she replied, "I don't not believe you. Much of what you have written about The Party rings true. If that is true, who am I to discount the rest?" It seemed a strange logic. I'd always thought you mix in the truth to make a lie believable. You add a little spice of deception to the cake and hope that people are too busy enjoying the rest to notice it. I was not lying, but she had no way to confirm that. She had no way to know for sure. She handed the laptop back to me and stood

up; offering her hand, she said, “Anne.” I got to my feet, not using the offered hand, and said, “Winston.”

“I know,” she replied, “it said so in the corner on the word processing software.” I had considered lying about my name, but as she, as Anne, had trusted me, I too felt that I could trust her. “You will need somewhere to think,” Anne said, “come with me; you can crash at my place.”

We walked without talking. I let Anne lead me as I followed in silence. My mind sprinted with thousands of thoughts, very few of them helpful. I had to trust someone that I knew next to nothing about. I could see no other choice. Anne opened her front door and invited me in; her place was small but homely. The well-worn but tidy sofa was pushed up and under the front room window. A large computer monitor flickered with life on the opposite side of the room. The lines of code – I think, I am no computer expert – scrolled the screen as Anne offered me a seat. “What do you know about the internet?” she asked.

Here I was, having been invited into Anne’s home, and the last thing I had expected was a question on technology. “Well, the basics, I suppose,” I replied awkwardly. “Look,” she said, and grabbed a pen and paper from the computer’s desk. “Remember when they brought all the infrastructure in-house. They claimed it was so they could invest, and the country could have super-fast broadband?” Anne stopped, and looked up at the ceiling. “It is all so clear. I had my reasons for hating The Party, but I never cared. I detested them, but my mind turned off when I thought about it. I started saying things like, they are all the same, I knew they were not, but I still said it.” She held up the paper and showed it to me.

The page contained three boxes. The first had ‘PC’ written inside, and a line connected the first and second. The next box had the word ‘cab’ and was connected to the final box, ‘exc’. “First box, pretty self-explanatory,” Anne said, and pointed to the word PC. “The next is the cabinet; you know those green and grey boxes at the end of your street. Then the cabinet connects to the exchange.” I listened; Anne had a voice that would have been suited to teaching. I knew some of this already, but her passion for the subject was infectious and flowed with every word. “At any point in this chain, you are vulnerable to interference, heck at points afterwards,” she said. “When they took control of the system for upgrades, this is what they seized. This is where they took control.”

“Sure,” I said, “but I don’t see the point. I knew they controlled that side of things.”

“So you knew, but you thought a VPN or Onion could get you out of their grasp?” The second Anne said this, I felt pretty foolish. It was evident that if they controlled the infrastructure, they would control the information route. “You should have run a traceroute,” Anne said. “You would have seen the traffic double back into their network. It is a closed system, and they pick what you see! They can see anything you buy on the dark or normal web. That is how they knew about you.”

“God, I feel so stupid,” Anne said as she crumpled and threw the page to the floor. I knew how she felt; I too felt like a moron. “How the fuck have I been so apathetic all this time!”

"I don't think it was your fault," I said.

"But it is!" Anne replied. "We all know what is right and wrong, and we all put these parasites into power. Sure, I can blame the goo, but I knew, I knew." Anne made her way to the mantelpiece and grabbed a photo housed there. She handed it to me and asked, "Recognise him?" I looked at the photo of the man. The photo was old and in black and white. The man sat with his bowler hat on and held an umbrella. He was familiar, but I could not quite place him. "I feel I do, but I can't put a name to him," I answered honestly.

"Your namesake, Winston Price, my grandfather," Anne said. It was then that I remembered. He was instrumental in fighting The Party before it grew and came to power. He was one that inadvertently gave them validity. You can't, after all, be considered a danger if you are participating in a legal and fair election. Fair is a manner of speaking; is it fair if you can manipulate the public in a way that others can't? Is it fair to manipulate the public? Does the public get what they want? "He was my grandfather, and I should have known of the dangers," Anne said forlornly.

"You really can't blame yourself," I said, but I knew how she felt.

"Oh, I can," Anne snapped back. "I wonder if he saw the world as you do? I should have known better." I had no doubt that he saw the world as it was. That he saw the truth that others are blinded from. "The strings. It is, suggestion, isn't it?" Anne said, "I know a little about the power of suggestion. You can't make someone do something that they are vehemently opposed to. You can tell someone to murder, but they won't do it. You can't force someone to go against their will."

"But why do it at all? Is it just about power?" I asked.

"I don't know. Power is quite an addiction," Anne replied and then asked, "how're the cracks?"

I looked out of the window and up towards the sky, "They actually look better," I said, and it was true, they did. The black edging of the cracking smiles just looked a little feinter and less prominent. "What do you think is causing the difference?" I asked. Anne waited a moment and replied, "Maybe it is you accepting your fate?" I am not sure I was, but maybe it was just fate; am I in control of my own destiny? Are any of us?

PT6. The End.

I once read a story; in that story, there was a man who wrote a message on some toilet paper. This tale was set in the seventies, so you'd presume shit roll is of a better quality today. I can only assume it was that awful lzal stuff because writing on modern loo roll is a pain in the arse (pun intended). I am not sure how lzal would have been easier, but it is all I have. I am currently sitting in a rubber room, awaiting my execution. I am writing my final notes here, and Anne has promised to release them once I am dead. We are smuggling them out as and when she visits. If I am caught, what are they going to do? Sentence me to death? It was something Anne wanted to do; it was her idea. I never intended for them to be read during my life; I only hope that people can understand once I am gone.

A dink of the shoulder and a flicking of my wrist, and I have no doubt I could walk free from my confinement. But I won't. I have my reasons for that; I hope they become apparent and you can understand them my dear reader.

We needed a plan; I needed a plan. Anne wanted to help; she felt that she needed to help, but I was worried about the risk. I had considered twinking her strings, but I had promised her and myself I would never do that again. "Let me make my own choices," she had said. "I will help in any way that I can, but it must be my own decision." Anne knew what I knew, and what we were up against, yet she willingly came along. I had to respect that. She also has to trust that I will keep my word, and by trusting in me, she makes it much easier for me to trust her. "I can't run," I said. I wanted to run, but where would I have gone? I had no money, no passport, and no ideas. Even if I could escape the country, who is to say I would be safe elsewhere. "Oh, I am not suggesting running," Anne said, "I suggest we fight back."

The rain dropped from the sky as I stood outside of the pub. I took a breath of the cool night air before stepping inside. Anne placed a hand on my shoulder, "It'll be fine." I felt the opposite; could I convince a group of people when I did not feel confident in myself? I placed my hand on the cold, wet door and pushed it open. My hands shook beside me as I walked into the bar; I could feel nerves and excitement in the air. I had decided to waste no time making my pitch, but I felt pretty timid and small when I stood in the bar. I could feel Anne behind me urging me on, I don't know if this was a feeling or a sense, but I had to act. "Listen up!" I shouted, and then for all intents and purposes, shit myself.

Standing and drawing attention to yourself is harrowing. I stood and did not know what to say or do as thirty faces with blackened eyes stared and gawked at me. "We need to change," I said, and moved my arms outwards. "The world, our world is breaking." I moved the strings slightly with my fingers, but I could see the clearing in a couple of eyes. "We all have to do better," I continued with my push, physically and mentally. It does not take long for the effects to start showing, clearing

the eyes and the buzz I get! “Yeah, but what can we do about it?” a younger chap said.

“We have the power to fight back; we can be better! We must do better,” I replied. I was working my hands and moving the strings of the crowd as I spoke. I could feel the static of excitement building inside me. “We can change things, overtake The Party, take over and make it better for us all!”

“It doesn’t sound very patriotic to go against The Party,” one of the older chaps said. I saw that the blackness was not clearing as quickly; it had started to fade and was starting to get sucked back inside, but it was a slower process. I moved forward towards the crowd of pub-goers. Moving forward assertively knocked the strings and tar; I watched as it faded and was sucked back. I was learning, and I was learning quickly. “Everyone thinks they are a fucking patriot, man!” I said, “but what is more patriotic, holding and waving a flag or helping those in need?” I could feel the buzz of a fever of emotions running through me. I felt bolder and more confident as the tingle of confidence flowed through me; I discovered that I could push ideas without using my hands. It was just me using a force of will. “We tell everyone how great we are; why not actually do something to make us great!” I roared out and into the crowd. I watched as the strings wobbled and jittered with just the power of my voice. The goo and tar that covered many of their eyes melted and sucked itself back into their heads. “We can do better!” I said. “We must do better.”

I was buzzing when we left the pub. Thoughts and ideas rushed through me; I started thinking of a future without the Party and what I could do when in charge. The evening had gone better than I could have ever expected. I ran with the following, and things I could never have imagined came quickly and naturally to me. I would hone my skills as events and gatherings got more widespread over the coming weeks. Time seemed to move faster as I gained popularity. Anne’s plan was working to perfection. I had something that many of my political predecessors did not have; I had the power to sway others’ minds. The press would hound me, but then I would just counter it with my truth, and for a time, they were on my side. Members of The Party who approached me were dealt with quickly; a shake of the wrist and an idea planted is all it took. If you are open to suggestions, then it is easy; it does not matter who is doing the suggesting. I found that I did not even need to talk in many cases. A hand on the shoulder, a warm palm on the upper arm and the goo just dissolved, and they joined me. That must have annoyed The Party leadership... And that thought filled me with joy.

And so, I found myself outside of this ballroom. I am uninvited; that is not unusual, though this will be the largest event I have crashed. I walked to the door, and the security immediately knew who I was. Anne was behind me as they rushed towards me. Like moths to a flame or flies to shit, they came forward. I calmly explained why I was there; I can change the minds of the easily gullible with just words. Sometimes it takes a little more, but these guards were a pushover. I placed my hands on their shoulders and spoke like a Jedi master, “You can let me in; you don’t need to search me.” Cake from a baby, candy from a toddler. Sex in a brothel or pissup in a brewery; it was easy. Too easy. I should have known.

I walked in and felt all the blackened hollowed-out eyes watching me. Four hundred or more Victorian doll-like eyes stared and watched me as I entered the

auditorium. They followed me and watched in the same way a sunflower observes the sun. Number One was standing on the stage, and he grinned as I looked up at him. I did not look at the stage initially; perhaps I should have. I may have backed away had I done so; maybe it was better that I did not. I think if Anne had not been there, I would have bolted. I could feel her tense up behind me, making me feel I needed to continue. I could not let her down. I would not let her down.

“Hello, Winston,” Number One said with a snarl. He dragged out the N and S in my name like a stretching snake. “Winnnnnnsssston.” I felt he was mocking me; this had the reverse effect too what he probably wanted. It made me feel tougher; it gave me a strength. I had faulted, and I had slumped; I realised the latter as I stood upright, stretching myself to my full height. “Numero Uno,” I said, and then realised how fucking stupid it sounded. Of all the things, and although my physical slump kept itself hidden, I did feel a mental sagging. I whipped my arms backwards and heard a crack as the audience’s strings tensed up; they sprang back and shook the black goo from many eyes. I felt the rush of power enter through my fingers and swim to the centre of my being. The fortitude that had started to escape me returned with full force, and I stamped my foot down. “You have been lying to us all,” I said. I noticed the shifting of Number One’s eyes as I did this. He seemed to take in the whole crowd at once. He watched as they changed from being hostile towards me and became more placid and manageable.

The blood was pumping through my veins at a billion miles per hour, and I felt lightheaded as I stepped forward and toward the stage. I could feel the power of assurance coursing through me. I had expected one of The Party underlings at this event, they had set a trap, but it was they who would fall into it. “What about the truth? Will you tell these people the truth?” As I stepped up and onto the stage, I demanded, “Can you at least be honest with them?” As I spoke, I felt the crowd getting restless. The goo was receding; I did not have to see it; I could feel the change in the room. It held me in a calmness like the dry swimming pool in my dream. I felt I was floating on a wave of optimism and hope from the gathered audience. “Truth? Truth, Mr Scope, we only deal in the truth here,” Number One replied.

“Ha!” I exaggerated my laugh.

“Mr Scope, I doubt there is anyone here who believes that politics has never had any falsehoods. It is all part of the political game,” he said. I watched as Anne took a seat in the front row. Her look of optimism and faith in me was touching. I needed all that I could get; the effects of my first high were already fading. “Mr One,” I said, “you and I both know that politics is what it is. Yes, there have always been political lies and misinterpretations. You may, for example,” I continued, “use one in four instead of twenty-five per cent.” I used my mind and hands to push this point; I wanted this one to hit home. Number One stood with his mic and amplified voice; I was hoping his overconfidence could bring him down. I had only my words to beat him with. “Those things are fine. I am fair; I can accept that,” I said. “I am not an unfair man.” I was working the strings like a madman on a double-necked guitar. I was talking, but what I was really doing was buying time; I needed to remove the indoctrination that had taken hold of the crowd. Like a vampire, I needed to feed on their eye clearing mojo. Other considerations came second; I just wanted the high.

“We’ve given you jobs. You have security. Don’t we keep you safe?” Number One fired back at both the crowd and myself. A flick of the knuckles and skimming of the wrist and everything I had done had been reversed. I felt the energy sapped from me as the blackened eyes returned, and heads started nodding in agreement with Number One. I looked over at Anne, and while I knew she could not see the changes in the room, I felt she could sense them. Her hopeful look had been replaced by concern; she smiled at me as I looked. I think the smile was meant as encouragement for me than her true feelings.

I did, however, have hope; had my becoming made me more than an equal to Number One, was I now his better? Had my powers of suggestion surpassed his? He still used his hands; I could also use my brain; in many cases, I did not even need to manipulate the strings. “You talk about lies, but what do you offer?” Number One said, and blasted another wave of his energy across the ballroom. “We have been keeping you safe, stopping terrorists, and standing up for you. Removing powers that mean to harm and bring in those meant to protect. Look at the vaccine work we have done! The lockdowns, masking, and laws to protect you all,” Number One snarled. “And what of you, Mr Scope, what have you done? I shall tell you, you’ve done nothing with your life as far as I can see! You’ve just bummed around and helped nobody.”

“Nobody?” I shot back. I had no idea where I was going; something had caught my attention, but with the razzmatazz of my surrounding, the on and off of the black goo, I had to buy time and try to think. I found myself repeatedly repeating and re-treading ground I had moaned about. “You control the press; you scapegoat minorities. Oh, it is not our fault; it is them over there! You lie, cheat and force others to vote how you want!”

“Forced, you want to talk forced?” Number One said and threw his arms backwards and then forward. The swell of the shockwave of control almost knocked me from my feet. I watched as the audience strings were thrown backwards; the ripple of force, though unseen, affected everyone. “We give the people what they want! What do you offer them?” Number One said “what does the great Winston Scope offer the people?” I listened to the cracking of the sky. I could not see but could hear the tearing and cracks forming. The splitting and fracturing filled my head; the tinnitus of a world that was failing flooded through my brain. I looked again at Anne, and she still held her smile. The blackness of the goo still had not returned to her eyes. I had no idea why; had I opened them entirely to the world? Was it because she was happy to be swayed? I do not know; I only know that looking at her gave me an idea.

“The truth,” I said, and straightened myself. “Nothing but the truth.” I needed my full size and presence to sell my words. “I don’t offer simple solutions to complex problems. I offer only myself and the truth.” I turned to face the gathering; Number One could go and fuck himself. I was not here to see him. I was here to see the people, to see my people. I didn’t use my arms or hands to jiggle the strings as I turned. I wanted this to be on them. They had the power to change and defeat The Party, but they had to want to do it. I needed to clear the goo, but I did not want to eradicate it. I hoped that just my words would do that. They had to force a change on their own. “I don’t offer you simple solutions. It will be hard at times; I offer no other way. But, together, we can make things better!” I said. A few nodded, not many, but

it was a start. "These people tell you that others," I said the final word, and quoted with my fingers, "have caused your problems. Can't get to see a Doctor? Well, that is all that immigration, isn't it." I walked the stage a little as I talked. Watching and making eye contact with as many as possible. "People on benefits, that is why we can't afford to help. We are spending too much on social security. Taxes? We are all paying more than ever! Where is that money going? Does Number One look like he has had to cut back?"

"I object," Number One said. "Any rise for us is confirmed and suggested by an independent body."

"Excuse me? I believe I have the stage, and I am talking. Don't be so rude," I said. I had expected him to hit back at this, but he did not. If anything, he looked worn out. He looked like a man who knew it was over, a magician who had just had his masterpiece exposed and the inner workings revealed. "It won't be cheap, and it won't be easy. But we can do better. We can leave a better world for our children." It flowed from me and into the audience; I was talking to them and not worrying about Number One. "I could use the tricks he uses," I said, "sure I could, but I want you to be yourselves. You are better than what they think," I turned and looked at Anne, "Anne, ask him," I said. Anne stood up slowly; she looked terrified, the courage it must have taken her to get to her feet. I was in awe of her strength. I did not want to push the question I had in mind; I think I could have done. I felt powerful and able to do anything. It had to be honest, and it had to come from her. Had I pushed, it may not have worked. "Winston Price, my grandfather, The Party disappeared him, didn't it?"

"That's absurd," Number One said. He answered, but there was no conviction in his reply. "What about John Evans?" someone called from the audience.

"Michael Smithson," another called out. As more and more names were called from the crowd, I realised why he had sounded so unconvincing. I felt the rush as a vampiric wave of goodness flooded my veins. The Party and Number One, maybe more specifically, must have fed on the prejudices of others. Pushing the worst of them into the open with the strings and then suckling on it. Whereas I fed on the good. I nourished on the opening of others' eyes. I was better than them; wasn't I? "Edward Johnson," someone else called out, and with each new name, Number One seemed to weaken. The public was taking back the power they had always had. They were now feeding upon him.

"Patricia Andrews?"

"Phillip Summers?"

"David Johnson?"

"Jane Prichard?"

"Samantha Stephens?"

The names continued to come from the crowd. I hated The Party, but even I was surprised by the numbers. It seemed that everyone had someone vanished,

disappeared, or otherwise affected by The Party. Each audience member had a grievance about how things developed over the years. Once the goo loosened, it took only themselves to open their eyes to what they had ignored. I suspect many would look back with regret and anger; they are also partly to blame. You cannot be controlled by suggestions if you are unwilling. I could feel the anger already bubbling as others got to their feet and started shouting out names and complaints. Number One had gone from being a solid figure to looking like a frail old man. His strength had been drained because the people had stood up and taken control. They, we, always had the power; we just had to wield it.

Number One jumped at me. I had not seen this coming; it was the last available option to a desperate man. I had expected the mental attacks, but not physical violence. I don't know if he was stronger than he looked, or if it was the surprise of the attack, but I fell quickly. His weight fell on me, and I crumpled to the floor. The attack was savage and quick as he pummelled my face with his fists. My nose fractured with the same vicious snapping noise of the cracks of the world. I tried to call out, but as my mouth opened, a fist made contact and forced the noise back inwards. I had no idea what was happening; the attack had sprung from nowhere and caught me unaware. I am not a fighter, but I could have held my own. I was basking at the moment and enjoying seeing Number One fall; it was my fault. Then he was dragged from me.

The security that I had nurtured found itself overwhelmed by the crowd. The members of the audience had invaded the stage. The security was as useless as a condom with a hole. Number One was dragged and then descended upon by the mob. They kicked out at him, some spat, and many swore as they unleashed their vengeance. I watched as they took what they thought was right. Number One was going to die, and he would die at the hands of the public that he and his party had abused. It would have been the easiest thing to let them continue, but I couldn't. I pulled from the back of my trousers the gun. I had no idea if it would work, but I could not let the crowd have its justice. Sometimes you have to take one for the team, as it were. I fired the gun into the air, and a roar screamed from its barrel.

I could feel the frenzy of a mob that had drawn blood. I could feel the bloodlust in the air; it fizzed like a static around the group. I could have walked away and let the crowd have its justice, but what then? I decided then and there to put the needs of the many before the wants of a few. The mob would be tried and found guilty, which would all have been for nothing. Number One would be remembered as being killed by the pack, which would enhance the free and fair side of The Party's claims. But, if he were killed by a madman? I pointed the gun and squeezed. Number One's head exploded, and the crowd's fury died at the same time. Shock and disbelief overtook it like a speeding train, and they all backed away from the body as one. The security finally sprang to life in this lull and rushed the stage. I expected to be shot, but I dropped the gun, and they arrested me. My hands were pulled behind my back, and I was cuffed. I used my powers one final time when the crowd looked like they would rush forward and save me. I said, "No, let me be," and pushed the idea as hard as possible. I heard the cracking as I did so, and I realised something.

I may have done it for what I saw as the right reasons, but I had become that which I despised. I had ignored a homeless man who was murdered; it had all

started there and ended by my murdering of a political opponent. I had manipulated the public into listening and doing what I wanted. Was I any better than The Party? I thought I was, but after all, it is easier to blame the actions of a madman on insanity.