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TRUTH



Andy West

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Truth

Now: in hospital.

I recall vividly the few years before it happened. When recession and riots blazed from the headlines, when white winter returned to remind us that her cruel breath still counted. I thought I knew something way back then, as the cherry tree in my front garden blossomed like never before, with it the vociferous Arab Spring, both pledging rich fruit. I amassed fashionable truths for my album of knowledge, my bible of behaviour, eagerly seeking the missing sets, the latest editions. Until completion, whispered my frustration, I would not perceive social reality, I could not take full control. Noble cause would illuminate my title page, to which end I pawned headlines and frosts for a place at a foreign game, pitching war against terror.

The scents and spirits of those remembered times wreathed around me, but couldn't erase sharp disinfectant and the sharper pains in my chest.

A nurse appeared, bending over me. Doughy features and tea-stained skin above exotic bone structure. Eyes extra dark beneath a glistening sheen, reminding me of soft life-forms in a rock-pool. Heavy breasts plumping downward. Her name-badge displayed 'Dora'. She beamed sympathetically, revealing beautiful teeth. In what part of long-past empire had her line originated? I tried to reflect her smile, but she was already turning away.

I drifted back, back. Out there where I served, the climate seared. Out there, the memory of winter scourge was the dream of a soothing goddess. And dreaming was dangerous when padding through hours of uneventful patrol.

Recall: abroad.

The staccato punching of shots had us suddenly leaping for cover. Despite peril a bizarre notion flashed through my head, of puppets jerked by a huge and petulant child.

Two o'clock, from the tumbled remains of walls. But was there a line of crossfire? Would be strange if not. I signalled Lewis and Lissaman to flank right, Fitzgerald and Boden to probe left, swiftly adding over the encrypted headset that the latter be very cautious until we established patterning and enemy dispositions. I wriggled forward to the grudging cover of a sizeable block of stone. Carved, I noted. Once part of an impressive portal, most likely. Greatness had been housed here, centuries ago at least, maybe further back still.

I peeked over fallen grandeur and first noticed the woman, hunched up behind a thin veil of bleached dead stalks. Why hadn't I seen her before? Dun rags partly covered a soiled dress of dark burgundy. Wisps of lead-grey hair escaped a frayed ochre headscarf. Clear turquoise eyes gazed out from nests of nut-brown wrinkles. I beckoned to her. She was only metres away though might as well be on the moon.

A row of tiny eruptions leapt from the hard-baked mud near her sandaled feet and ended at my position. The block sang as though struck by a chisel. A burning line stung my cheek. Probably a sliver of stone. A drop of my blood stained the ancient handiwork.

The old woman seemed oblivious to the battle around her. An expression of permanent surprise was painted across her weather-worn features, but not, apparently, because of the gunfire. She didn't flinch at the shots or take evasive action, she didn't look directly at me or the enemy. Perhaps a simpleton. Those eyes though. Those eyes were startling.

"Tamin, get up here." An affirmative came back over the headset. Blinding lights flickered from the enemy position; they were reflecting sunlight from mirrors, trying to confuse our vision and targeting devices, a technique I'd come across before.

An overwhelming thunderclap was followed by a shower of dirt and small stones. Rocket-propelled grenade. Close.

"We'll 'ave im next time, Cap," reported Boden. "It's always bravado with these tribals. He'll pose with the launcher when he breaks cover to fire again."

No casualties reported. And we knew the cross-pattern now. I called in the engagement to Camp Delta and brought up the local terrain on my thigh terminal. Shots opened up from our own side: efficient, probing.

Tamin came out of an energetic roll to fetch up right next to me. His eager brown face popped above the protective block and swiftly assessed the situation. The strange woman hadn't moved, though now she was covered by a thin patina of blasted earth.

"She's a madwoman!"

"Talk to her. Get her to crawl back here, into cover."

Delta were unhelpful. No meaningful intelligence for the area. And they'd lost track of the local warlord, One Eye. I requested air support; they needed to check for nearby available assets.

A knot tightened in my stomach. Not uncommon in battle, yet I felt something abnormal hanging in the air. Perhaps it was the woman's bizarre behaviour; maybe an unidentified threat. I opened myself to every possible signal.

Tamin was having no luck.

“She is saying crazy things,” he reported. “*Will the grinding ever cease? And such terrible grandeur!* Other phrases like that. She won’t listen.”

“Ask her if One Eye is in the area,” I shouted back. A very long shot, but worth a try.

Then an astounding thing happened. In a wavering reedy voice I could just pick out, the woman replied directly to me. Not only in English, but in my own accent.

“One Eye has been here for centuries. So have you.”

Confusion swamped me.

The aged female pressed her palms together and loosely interlinked her fingers as though to pray, raising her arms directly into the intense golden glare from multiple mirrors. A cruel deity soon answered; her hands sprayed crimson.

A fountain of life; sunlight and blood; a ruddy dazzle. I was transfixed. Tamin yelled at me. *Still* the woman seemed intent on something outside this battle, perhaps outside this world. Her hands parted. Must be heavy calibre fire; bright rays streamed right through holes in her palms, red ribbons rippled down skinny arms. Another mechanical coughing; a spent shell knocked hard against my helmet. Then those turquoise eyes stared straight at me, so intent her gaze seemed to enter me, or maybe I entered the woman. For a split second I thought I saw myself as she saw me, a strip of pale brow and hint of eyes beneath the shadow of outsized headgear; this through rubicund light and fiery flecks, as though a rift full of molten lava lay spitting in-between us. The connection snapped. The woman shrieked. I fought a sudden wave of shock; what had happened?

“Cap, Cap! They got reinforcements coming in. We gotta get out!”

“No! This is no ambush, it’s accidental contact. One Eye’s flinging a makeshift screen at us while he slips away. Air support is coming; only nine minutes south. We can grab one of the bastards, a high-up, squeeze some intel out of him. Keep low and snipe back; they aren’t going to advance.”

It suddenly occurred to me that I’d no idea how I knew all those things.

The real world was blotched by patterns of something else; the bright gold and red must have dazzled me.

Now: in hospital.

Red haze became stark white as I opened my eyes; the lights above bed 4 of the ICU.

The radiance was what I always remembered most vividly about that odd event. Intense light could overwhelm or confuse the sensors of our laser targeting, but at that range who needed lasers anyhow? The fighters' tactic had been more symbolic than practical, scouring the land of pale foreign foes using the territory's naturally fierce sun, and a talisman too after a chance victory a few months earlier. They'd used plastic mirrors made for Western suburban gardens.

The nurse had returned, accompanied by a pale sylph of a girl in a junior's outfit.

"Just checking you over. One of your wires is playing up." This as the junior swept the curtains around. Dora pulled my blanket aside and swiftly peeled one of the pads from my chest. The assistant checked my feet, which on account of poor circulation were looking distinctly unhealthy. I peered down at the pale wrinkled bag I'd become, ending at blue and black toes. The excess skin was an unkind reminder of past bulk and strength. I'd looked impressive back in the day, back when I courted Joanna.

The new pad was plugged in. "All finished!"

I tried to recall when I'd first met Joanna. An even earlier era of my life. The carefree mood from a line of hot summers wafted through my thought. Richly lit evenings in scented pub gardens. My tongue remembered malty dark ales. My love and my libido, the latter even now not quite dead, remembered a jet bob and alabaster complexion; a simple shift that barely concealed outlines. Back when – interrupted my never silenced and well-armed cynicism – back when finance ministers played medieval quaestores, when presidents and false philosophers feared that there was nothing left to fear. Before great monsters of debt slipped harness and turned around to rip chunks out of nations, revealing cabalistic veins of corruption that would eat the West down to autumn husks. Before thaws in Arab domains, yet chrysalis China already rent open. In truth, back then I was blind to all this, blind to almost all the workings of reality, intent on outlines below a simple shift. Intent on 'truths', but all, it turned out, just fleeting rainbow reflections from the surface tension of *real* narrative beneath; platitude scarves and political hats in the uninformed uniform of normality.

Joanna's family were army too. She fancied the life of an officer's wife; an important officer. Her sister, Evelyn, was sustainable this, low-energy that, morally above us all. I didn't mind; I thought it was noble, saving the planet. I slavishly scribed Evelyn's truths into my bible. She was sharp-tongued though, as well as green.

We sometimes slept over at her house, part of an Edwardian terrace undergoing constant rejuvenation. The inside always smelled of woodworm eradicator and varnish, vegetable curry

and wool, the latter from damp garments that were constantly hung over the banister. After a while, Evelyn and that combined aggressive tang became one.

I was popular with the women in our eco-circle and grudgingly admired by the males. Albeit not overtly, it seemed that bravery in the field still trumped the faux courage of campaigning hard for windmills or ridiculing climate change deniers. My rank even outbid the terrific thighs and moral highs of men who cycled everywhere. Though Joanna and I were not considered core, due to our relationship with Evelyn we had a free pass to anything that was going on; we *were* considered trustworthy.

One evening during my officer training, that trust was tested.

Recall: OT Corps.

I met one of those deniers at the bar: Sid, a newbie like me with no field experience yet. After several beers, I fell into the temptation of teasing him.

“Do you know how that term *denier* first came to be applied to sceptics?” he challenged.

Odd question. Though I suppose I didn’t really. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He smiled and handed me a tattered photocopy, apparently from a page of the Boston Globe newspaper. I read the underlined passage.

I would like to say we’re at a point where global warming is impossible to deny. Let’s just say that global warming deniers are now on a par with Holocaust deniers, though one denies the past and the other denies the present and future. The piece was dated a couple of years earlier; the writer was one Ellen Goodman.

“Soon we’ll be shipped out to fight a regime that is deriding and dehumanising a section of its own people. If the science of ‘the consensus’ is so overwhelmingly robust, why do they and their support base feel a need to deride and dehumanise those who would like to see the sums or who simply have questions?”

Sid finished his beer, donned his cap, and left.

Even through a buffer of alcohol, I felt uncomfortable.

Now: in hospital.

Dora returned, to administer another shot of morphine.

“Is that more comfortable?”

She shone a strong light into my pupils. Purple and red blotches remained with me as vivid recall pushed the real world away.

Recall: abroad.

I thought the milling colours must be confusing my eyes; strange visions winked in and out of existence, each lasting only a split second. I had to stay sharp out here! Perhaps I'd drunk too much at the officers' bar the previous evening.

The rich palette was a vain attempt to disguise poverty. Hats and hijabs, T-shirts and flowing skirts, burqas and robes and baggy slacks, whether plain or patterned, together presented a dynamic artwork in scarlet and sky-blue, gold and turquoise, electric pink and royal purple, simple white and religious black and everything in-between. The visual assault was matched by cacophony; everyone in this market seemed to be haggling if not outright yelling, and this above dozens of radios pumping out wailing vocals and raucous strings, not to mention a heavy pulse of percussive sounds emanating from somewhere deeper within the sprawl of rickety stalls.

Most of the squad were strung out in pairs and not everyone was fully armed and armoured; our stance was geared to look casual, though in truth was anything but. I was off to one side, keeping the ragged chain in strict control via constant headset contact as we passed through the skirts of the market. Wafts of incense partially masked more disagreeable smells beneath. Helen Clarke from artillery, a key member of our outreach team, was hunkered down fifteen metres away from me, grinning like a clown and handing out chocolate to children.

Then a huge snakelike head rose up above the crowd, grey and scaly with golden orbs of eyes. I gave a start and glanced nervously around. Was this some local entertainment; maybe a giant paper puppet? No, I could partially see through the thing. A monstrous balloon? It looked far too real. No-one else reacted. Had someone slipped a pill into my drink earlier?

A flush of panic stressed my already overheated veins. I called for a status check; all troops. Perhaps some clever diversion was being staged, a presage to attack. A girl in a blue-grey burqa approached Helen with purpose; by her size older than the other kids but no doubt just as keen for chocolate. Everyone A OK except Tamin, garbled static came back on his channel ID. I couldn't see him. No one mentioned the alarming creature, which I now saw was more like a wormish dragon than a snake. Dark tendrils from its body fanned out into the jostling throng.

The girl pushed through a dense knot of punters pawing at butchers' offerings: ragged lumps of meat lying on bloodied wooden tables in the burning heat. Something about her determination triggered my concern; I reached up to my helmet mount and slid the video monocular into place, then focussed her up. A thin strip of immaculate beauty floating on a

fabric sea. Flawless dusky skin and amber eyes; how rare, yet disconcertingly similar to the giant worm, and... was that fear? I backed out a little. Petite frame but, through fleeting windows in the crowd and the veil of loose blue burqa, excess bulk and sharp angles at her stomach.

“Clarke! Blue-grey girl, your 2 o’clock. Loaded!”

As though in slow motion, Helen rose and started to draw her pistol. Maybe she was phased. Maybe it was my racing perception.

“Team. Imminent explosion meat stalls. Leave market – run!”

The worm’s fierce gaze swept the area. I instinctively dropped down, even as I simultaneously cursed myself for not ignoring theatricals or drug-induced visions. But right then I suddenly knew the calibre of the round that missed my head, the exact line of its passage, the inevitability of an unintended victim, where he would be hit. I glanced around. A thin guy with a straggle of beard, surprise etched on his face as crimson blossomed over the egg-shell blue of his robe. How could I know those things? The enemy probably knew I was the link man.

No time for the sniper. I flipped my monocular out of the way and got a bead on the girl. Not clutching a dead man’s button. Good. People sensed trouble. Heads turned, bodies shifted. A decent gap... but innocence flowed out of those amber eyes and right into me, turning my trigger finger to jelly. I swore. I’d lost it; this was grossly unprofessional! Helen would be blown to bits, and Franks too, her partner who’d ignored the order to run. Probably me as well, not to mention a bunch of civilians, many of them children. Helen’s pistol waved in front of her, she couldn’t get a shot. Older children scattered; the younger ones thought she was playing. A peculiar silver glow occupied Helen’s midriff. The fact that she was pregnant pushed bizarrely into my mind; I knew this as absolute truth. A split second of recall: a drunken night of shared comfort after we lost a colleague and friend. *I had to prevent this slaughter.* Franks, a few strides away, started into motion.

The girl was innocent, coerced. *I knew it.* So the trigger must be elsewhere! I rose slightly and gazed through my gun-sight to follow the line of the sniper’s shot. Women in bright yellow vests below limp Scandinavian flags, dishing out soup to the poor, which was nearly everyone. A shaven-headed guy on a raised platform behind the makeshift kitchen. One of the fatter dark strands from the worm ended where he stood. Nearby, a silencer protruded from high up in a load of food sacks on the back of a big flat-bed truck; not UN, the colours of a local business. The guy gazed at a cell-phone, his finger poised. I lined up and shot. No jelly this time. The

target launched backwards into piles of grimy cardboard boxes and a stack of luridly labelled cans. I followed up with a good few rounds into the sacks. Dates and broken biscuits streamed out, imports no doubt liberated from food-aid supplies.

I turned around. Franks must have rugby-tackled Clarke to the ground; his arms were still wrapped around her legs. He froggied further along and sprawled his body over her. Incredibly brave, and suicidal. The blue-gray burqa girl reached them.

Nothing happened.

I rushed over to strip the explosives off the poor girl. Amber eyes spilled surprise at seeing the world still, yet despair was already leaking in. Maybe a close one would suffer for this failure.

Franks and Clarke disentangled themselves. The worm had disappeared.

“You’re pregnant,” I said stupidly.

“It’s Tamin’s,” Helen confessed. “I thought... I thought we were dead.” Shock cut in and she started shaking.

My stomach churned with relief and concern and confusion. Yet again impossibly, I *knew* that Tamin was a traitor.

Now: in hospital.

The worry pushed me into the present again, except that a different worry entirely was racing around my head. I’d be in a terrible state if she didn’t come. Awful, unimaginable. I wouldn’t be strong enough on my own. I needed her. Fear slipped around my veins. There wasn’t much time left; please *please* let her come.

To fend off panic, I continued thinking about the past.

Recall.

The dilemma about Tamin and Helen was the first of many, and the first time too that I realised I could see truths. I didn’t visit the M.O. He’d think I was crazy and I didn’t want to get booted out of the service. My personal theory was that the strange old woman had gifted me something, a kind of ancient wisdom maybe, or it came from the lost civilization there. Or I was mad, but if so a very powerful kind of madness. Not that this aspect helped me at first. I was immediately put on a charge for shooting an unarmed civilian.

When it was proved that I’d saved the day, they had to release me. It was hard though convincing them how I’d known who to shoot. With a single silent bullet bloodily marking a

twisting and falling body, I'd never have determined an accurate source location without special knowledge. And only premonition prompted by the weird worm prevented *me* from being the victim!

Everything lined up about Tamin. Our company was called 'lucky'. Not surprising; to save himself Tamin made sure we didn't get jumped. Our comrades in other companies took the hits. The entanglement with One Eye had been accidental; intelligence was screwed up on our side and they must have gotten their wires crossed too. In the market Tamin had slipped away, knowing more or less what would happen.

I could barely conceal an enormous anger. Brotherhood betrayed is a terrible thing to a young warrior. My gift soon granted me the means to obtain hard evidence and confront him.

Avoiding authority left open the path of noble demise, which he took. At least that outcome was a little bit easier on Helen. As local attachment he'd have been executed by his own people anyhow, with his family shamed and without the dubious privilege of a long wait.

Though unexpectedly attired in a thorny cap of guilt, in secret I'd saved men and inside me hot ego celebrated. I vowed to conceal this awesome ability in the vault of my mind. No psychologists would dismantle my thoughts and paw over all that was precious to me! Little did I know the lethal spell that had latched on to my life.

My immediate problem was comprehension. Complex truths would typically appear as visual metaphors, often lurid, presumably something my primitive brain should grasp, except that I couldn't always do so, or not fully. Different types of metaphor depicted different aspects of the revealed truth, yet there were some generic rules. 'Good' things tended to shine or at least have pure, bright colours; 'bad' things tended to be dark or muddy. Usefully, objects I touched would often spill out their histories or greater detail.

Disconcertingly, the multi-hued fungi of hidden truths blossomed wherever I looked. All of society seemed riddled by myriad roots, soaked in spores, almost defined by perplexing parasols. Those intricate veins of bureaucracy, lace-moulds of religion, enormous fans of celebrity and mushrooms of sporting achievement, those incredibly complex corporate cells; were they ugly or attractive, nurturing or consuming, part of us or playing, out of normal sight, their own evolutionary game?

It was scarier still when the more dynamic aspects of the social engines were portrayed, often as great worms like the religious manifestation in the market. Eventually, I realised that these beasts *really did* have a kind of true existence of their own, fuelled on the borrowed

brain-power of many, and indeed I could see that most individuals donated their support to several such higher forms, subconsciously or otherwise.

Confusingly, few entities appeared purely good or bad. Pretty white fungi like magnified snowflakes hid dark cankers beneath. Great black-scaled beasts reflected beautiful blue sheens. And it was obvious that the beasts bred. The one that disturbed me the most, the tricky worm I thought of as *good perverted* or *nobility corrupted*, was the strange child of *inspiration* bred with *fear*. I hoped never to be near the business end of that powerful and unpredictable worm, the end with a hypnotic gaze and horribly poisonous fangs. Its dripping drool was the slaver of psychologizers declaring its enemies crazy.

Thankfully, revelation did not come all at once. I began to realise I'd explode if it did. I might anyway. Even by the time of my first leave after Tamin's death, I was getting regular migraines; the merciless cramming of knowledge into my brain and the constant strain of not revealing what I knew, were both taking a toll. And my guard began to slip; that's how I first earned Evelyn's distrust.

Recall: home.

I gazed at the eco-shrine that occupied a corner of the front room in Evelyn's house. Pictures, awards, keepsakes and such. A pale square revealed where one picture had recently been removed. I couldn't recall for sure but thought it had been a photo of the scientist James Lovelock, the creator of the Gaia hypothesis. Nearby on a nail, a gold medal hung from a green ribbon. Peering closely, I read: 'UN award for services to sustainability – Energy (female first class)'. Curious, I reached out and picked up the cold disk, giving my voracious perception something to bite on. All the heads and hands that had contributed to the concept of that award passed through my mind.

The 'UN Senior Advisor on Sustainability', the 'Senior Advisor on Sustainable Development', the 'Technical Advisor, Population & Sustainable Development', the 'Advisor on Sustainable Water Development and Management', the 'Second Committee Advisor on Sustainable Development', the 'Consultant: Gender, Climate Change and Sustainable Development', the 'Environmental Management Coordinator and Climate Neutrality Advisor', some country-specific 'UN coordinators for Sustainable Development', then fanning out to a formidable array of sub-committees and a veritable army of assistants before making it to the Non-Governmental Organisations and a network of volunteer bodies.

A hint of scepticism probably rested on my forehead as I set that weighty medal back down. Gilt for guilt, gold and sold.

Evelyn must have approached while I was absorbed.

“I’ll bet you have no idea what it’s really for, what behaviour it’s meant to encourage,” she jabbed beneath her cloak of moral affectation. Spurred into defence, I instinctively parried with all those names and more, then thrust with all their declared goals too. Evelyn’s jaw dropped. I charitably omitted the subconscious goals.

She stomped off.

I hadn’t meant to upset her, but she was so damn aggressively righteous!

Maybe I could make amends. Evelyn was always going on about Gaia, how we were giving the Earth-mother a fever with our CO₂ emissions. Sometimes she spoke in hushed tones, as though discussing a real matriarch who was sick, a revered great-grandmother perhaps. Whether good news or bad my abilities ought to give me some genuine insight into that great lady’s health, which Evelyn would likely appreciate.

Later that same day Joanna drove us over to her mum’s place nearby. I was still alarmed by weird manifestations on home turf, the sight of the great social beasts roaming familiar streets. Up to then I’d associated them with the sweaty climes where I did my soldiering; within the ravaged domain of a semi-permanent war-zone they seemed not that much crazier than all the other brutal and crazy sights.

We passed by the wind-farm that Evelyn and her allies had fought so hard to establish. I was alarmed by what seemed to be streams of smoke pouring from hubs and blade tips, twirling around to form a great cloud downwind. Thinking the turbines must be on fire I opened my mouth to call out, then snapped it shut again. Clearly Joanna saw nothing; it must be another metaphor. I gazed at the misty ribbons in varying shades of grey, many quite dark, which usually implied some kind of hidden problem. But what could possibly be dubious about windmills?

Base-load, my perception supplied for one stream, *cold calms* for another. *Feed-in tariff*, *conventional cover*, *smart-grid challenges* and *pylon proliferation*, *nameplate capacity*, (what? Why not have the real capacity?) *real capacity*, (oh. Good grief was it really THAT low?) *high maintenance*, *hydro-pumping*, *Norway*, (what??), *strong winds mitigation*, *dumping*, *back-up response times* and *relative emissions*, *grid-glitches*, *slack-time payments*, *shaft-levelling*, *third power law*, *rare-earth metals*, *forecast resolutions*... and so on, even a thin black cotton-like thread for *raptor and bat kills*, plus one pure white streamer: *free wind*.

I knew from our friends that the government planned many such farms. Scaled up to match, that downwind thunderhead seemed to me quite some storm that would break upon our energy infra-structure.

Perhaps complications and consequent costs simply had to be borne, *to save the planet* as Evelyn constantly put it. Oh, *relative emissions*, I recalled. Joanna turned north and the blade array slid out of sight. How much carbon footprint gain would we get for our pain anyhow?

As Joanna put her foot down and we sped away, an after-spasm of my perception pricked regarding potential unintended consequences: in the current regime heavy price rises would mean more fuel poverty and excess cold deaths. I hadn't thought of that. I didn't need special skills to tell me Evelyn would condemn such an outcome. A lot worse than a few mangled bats.

"Why are they called wind-farms?" I mused aloud. "Nothing is grown there."

"Dunno. The wave-power thingies at sea are usually called *generator arrays*."

Were these 'farms' more about architectural symbolism than practicality? Like Victorian railway stations only more so? Either way, my damn perception had screwed any symbolism for me. I used to see a certain satisfying nobility in the slim white towers and the sweep of the blades; I never thought to ask grey questions.

Now: in hospital.

Only one question burned in me now. When would she come? *When?* I wanted her hand around mine. I needed her belief. Perhaps something had gone awry, maybe the birth...

I was hot. I called the nurse but no one came. The blanket seemed to press down heavily on me. Why couldn't I slough the weight off? Was I dreaming?

Recall: abroad.

Main heat bore down on me, an extra burden adding to that of full battle kit. I gave the final orders. There was nothing to do now but wait, maintaining radio silence, probably for several hours. The hostiles couldn't decipher our communications but even with frequency hopping they could sometimes detect chatter, so knew we were nearby. If the intel was good and One Eye passed through this valley, we'd have him in a noose at last.

I wondered whether I could use the lull productively, then recalled the favour I was going to do for Evelyn.

I stared hard into veils of leaves and the green shadowed ways beneath, opened my ears to the calls of unfamiliar creatures, sank my fingers into loam and root fibres and let sizeable

ants circle up my arms, all as I strained to call forth my peculiar perception, to focus it on finding what I sought, *who* I sought: Gaia. Vision blurred, power stirred. I had in mind some crazy plan to ask direct what really was happening to our world. Excitement surged; maybe my new dimension *really could* dial me a hotline to deity. Shapes writhed silently in space, then suddenly she was there.

Gaia was indeed a goddess! Features inherited from the ancient Greeks, a cloak of leaves borrowed from north European fairy tales, skin tint a moral flag for modern politics, yet not serene, more... supreme, almost haughty.

I supposed a goddess must implement cultural translation when manifesting to mortals. Her only piece of jewellery was a shining gold medallion. Her image was tenuous; could it be that Evelyn and the eco-set had it right? Were humans incrementally erasing her? For a few moments I was breathless, over-awed, concerned. But what were those images behind her, fainter still? I strained hugely to focus them in...

Now: in hospital.

Incarcerated in this clinical cell, betrayed by infirmity, umbilicaled to blinking technology, several decades after naiveté hand in hand with my youth wandered irretrievably away, still I well recall what was then revealed: suburban semis, clipped gardens, lampposts, tarmac, supermarkets, and flowing between all these the evil multi-hued streams of gleaming motor-cars!

Recall: abroad.

Anger swiftly followed awe. This was not the Gaia I sought! Her image did not rise up from the soil but came down from the sky, from the West, from home. She was not born of this forest at all, or of any other, nor marsh nor reef nor sea nor steppe; but was suckled by *suburbia*. This Gaia was a social construct, an effective and infectious hybrid meme, religiosity sanctioned by science, rooted in ancient dread fears of the capricious climate, the real and wildly dynamic system that always has, and still does, claim a tithe of us. This Gaia was an irresistible need made manifest, our hard-wired compulsion to anthropomorphise our environment and then placate it. Although cloaked in verdant beauty she was just another social worm, flushed on the plentiful nectar of Western guilt. The medal at her bosom was the same UN issue as Evelyn's. She could afford to be haughty.

I yanked my hands from the ground. Her image strengthened. *This* Gaia had appeared because she loomed the largest in public consciousness.

“Contact, boss.”

I dismissed her like a dog, though that whore would eat me whole if ever I bared her tricks.

“Boss! Hey Cap, contact!”

“Where?”

“North north-west. Giving the old trading post a wide berth, to our right of it.”

We weren’t advertising ourselves with a UAV. Line of sight only.

I carefully dabbed sweat from my eyes with a tissue – eye infections were a devil out here – then turned away from the trees and used the crosshairs on my gun to trawl the head of the valley. Men on horses. Best transport for the heights where they’d come from. Apparently a leader inside a tight escort. Looked right, but felt... I cheated and stretched out my perception.

“Stay hid. Let them pass.”

“Are you crazy?” came back Lewis.

“Twenty minutes more, and we could ’ave ’em,” chimed in Sergeant Boden.

“It’s a stick to spring any traps. One Eye’s the best. Not going to put his bare hand in a narrow pass like this.”

“*How do you know?*” asked Lewis.

“Radio silence. That’s an order.”

My level of alertness soon drifted downwards. Not professional; I hadn’t been myself lately. I wondered whether there was a real Gaia, a living process that had nothing to do with social expectations. I touched the earth again.

Mathematics cascaded before my eyes, then a procession of ugly cell-like structures, then briefly a beautiful coral island seen from above, the ring around it teeming with life. I realised that some approximate representation was being sought which I might grasp, each time a little cruder. Nothing worked. Perhaps I was just dim.

Then a vision of a manic trading floor appeared; guys in stripy blazers signalling and yelling, massive nests of computer screens, bright financial headlines tracking around the walls. I began to see. Here was urgent competition of every possible kind: derivatives, futures, bonds, shares, options, etc. all inter-linked yet all fighting for a share of capital, just like species and representing every kind of survival mode, even the esoteric modes like symbiosis and multi-stage parasitism. Huge co-operation too: the infra-structure, the rules and regulatory bodies, the negative feedback of national banks steering for stability, ultimately the medium

upon which all this rested, human society, which itself was progressively altered by the financial environment's cycles.

This was co-evolution, optimised co-opetition. Albeit via the peep-hole of my limited understanding, I saw Gaia as a mass of intimate interlinks progressively altering underlying infra-structure: oceans and atmosphere and ice etc. From the 'outside', natural internal cycles and rich complexity looked like a coherent life entity, but was no more so than the financial system. How fitting that a thriving parasitic mode in that system sacrificed huge sums to a goddess who was, in essence, a world-sized trading floor.

Recall: abroad.

We nearly missed them, hours later. The growing dusk was still too light for night-vision, yet long shadows aided concealment. Not enough to escape Fitzgerald's sharp eyes though.

They were on foot, strung out, lightly armed, watchful but not really expecting trouble. My extra dimension revealed their number and spread. We took them with only one casualty on our side, not fatal. They lost three.

These wary men with sun-lined faces were soldiers, just like us. Having separated the survivors from their weapons and herded them to the edge of a small ravine, we invited One Eye to step away from the group and have his hands bound first. Boden approached him cautiously, pistol at the ready. Compliantly, the patch-eyed leader put his hands behind his back.

A grim smile escaped me. At last we would leash this old dog of war.

Too late I *saw*. I shouted even as I dropped to the ground.

"Get back Boden!"

The explosion was modest, as these things are reckoned. But it still killed Boden and the nearest of One Eye's men. Some of the latter made a run for it after recovering their wits. Two were shot, one got away, one stopped and put his hands up, clearly surprised to discover a biro protruding from his wrist. Boden's biro. The red rain of friend and foe united, dripped from my helmet.

Boden's loss was a piercing stab. And there'd be no deep intelligence and no bargaining with a valuable chip. Even though I was armed with truth, One Eye had beaten me.

Now: in hospital.

"Mr Jackson. Mr Jackson!"

I struggled out of a doze into anxiety and resurfacing pain. The nurse seemed relieved to see me react. Was I that far gone?

“We’ve had a phone call from the airport. She’s on her way.”

A surge of comfort warmed and eased me. Not long now. I had to hang on.

Recall: home.

I had to hang on! I clung to a cold metal rail as the pod accelerated dramatically down a preposterously steep decline. Icy wind rushed past. Only seconds before I’d been plucked up and raised swiftly into the frigid heights of the heavens, to be dumped unceremoniously into this primitive metal car perched upon a thin arc of shining track that dizzyingly spanned the sky. As the pod jerked into motion I’d searched frantically for a seat belt. There wasn’t one.

Glancing desperately left and right for any possible escape, I saw a vast array of other tracks, all carrying pods and drawing towards me from hazy horizons on both sides. I was in some kind of gargantuan race; or perhaps a bizarre fairground ride of planetary proportions. With heavy deceleration and jars that wracked my bones, my pod bottomed out and started up a gentle incline. As fear marginally diminished, I finally figured out what must be going on.

After my failure to squeeze much that was useful out of Gaia, I’d been gazing up at thin clouds and thinking about the climate system, how it all worked. My perception must be graphically demonstrating. Yet this ride seemed so real! My knuckles were still white on the rail and I didn’t dare let go.

There was a line of purple spaceships representing planetary influences, a whole flotilla of grey pods for different cloud effects and feedbacks, some of which seemed to contribute to warming and some, like their reflection of sunlight, to cooling. Likewise there were beautiful glacier-blue pods for ice and off-white sledges for snow, an array of green buds and brown bugs for biota, huge submarines in dark turquoise for the various oceans basins, slices of sun seated in several brands of bright orange sports cars (several? Oh, different fluxes, frequencies and magnetic effects), and many many more. My own pod was racing red, for temperature.

As the collection of crazy craft careered forward, I tried to put aside panic and make out how this immense machine operated. Straightaway my vision improved and a wickedly complex web of springs became evident, connecting the pods to each other in various different ways. I recognised that my own pod must be both effect and cause, as were lots of others, meaning their corresponding tracks were also functions of the whole bouncy push-pull system. As a row of ice pods bottomed in a steep valley and launched speedily up the other side, I

realised that the huge inertia of the ocean basins worked to keep the terrestrial pods stable. Without these vast volumes of water, would some players simply fly hither and thither right out of the contraption altogether?

Millions of years raced by. I couldn't keep my eyes on everything at once. As ice continued to shoot upwards I plunged down towards a landscape upon which life was adopting a defensive position as irresistible glaciers advanced. An Ice Age. Terror gripped me; I was sure to hit the ground! I looked frantically around for the CO₂ pod and spotted it *behind* me, trailing my course. How could a supposedly dominant forcing of temperature, *lag* my pod? Didn't I see that enigmatic gas ahead a while ago?

Life clung on; yet I perceived that if CO₂ fell to about 40% of the modern concentration, already close now, all vegetation would suffocate and die, followed swiftly thereafter by all higher life. Ground-rush from a whitening world dazed me. I closed my eyes and prepared for the crash.

It never came. My stomach dropped behind as I was suddenly propelled upward again, the straining springs from planetary pods and clouds startling me as they cracked and groaned, throwing off accumulated frost as the entire machine executed a stunning status change. Now elevating fast, my bones warmed somewhat. I was surprised to see that the CO₂ pod, the size of which was determined by its greenhouse strength, was utterly dwarfed by the looming grey pod representing water vapour's analogous power, which I guessed was not far below thirty times bigger. In a fiendishly complex clockwork that seemed derived by the devil himself, pod sizes were also varying in subtle ways; how did the far weightier greenhouse effect of water play out?

Action on terra firma beneath me distracted my attention. I noticed regular environmental patterns that corresponded to bumps on the ride; *the pseudo-cyclic swells of natural variability*, my perception supplied, *such as the Pacific Decadal Oscillation and other ocean turnovers*. I'd heard of the PDO before, with its troublesome children El Nino and La Nina. We were pulling out of deep history towards the modern era and the ride was less scary, though I happened to be over the Americas and saw that on the ground those cruel children were nevertheless wreaking havoc upon societies, smashing the Lambeyeque people with a wall of water, wiping out agricultural civilisations of North American Indians with mega-droughts, the like of which we haven't seen in modern times, challenging the Maya and many others in all those lands before the challenge of the Spanish came.

My vehicle glided smoothly to a halt. Hang on a second, *too smoothly?*

I noticed the CO₂ pod had grown a little mascot, like the leaping jaguar on cars of that name and representing the three percent or so of annual anthropogenic contribution. Then I was bathed by early spring sunshine back in our garden, my forgotten rake still clutched tightly in both hands.

Quite aside from being scary, the ride had been intellectually challenging too. How come CO₂ had for much of geological time ridden so high? Four, five, six times and more above the modern concentration of 0.04%, yet life had prospered and the planet hadn't fried. How come I hadn't spotted *anything* unprecedented about current times? Neither the absolute positions of pods *or* their speeds, neither weather extremes or climate trends. Had the kaleidoscopic swirl of the whole machine confused my eye?

Twentieth century warming was significantly less than one Celsius; much less than vast numbers of similar bumps on the ride through geological time, similar or less even than a few during historical time. Less than the typical difference between two rooms in a house. A lot less if it was Evelyn's house! Surprising. What fraction of that rise might we have caused?

On a grand scale nothing at all threatening seemed to be happening now, or looked likely to happen. And how come my ride was *dead flat* for the last dozen years or more, implying *no* global temperature change? Given such grave warnings, this last was hard indeed to believe. Yet Helen *had* been pregnant; Tamin *had* admitted his treachery. So surely my perception was pure? Could these climate revelations still be consistent with imminent catastrophe?

I doubted my ability, seriously, determining to check what I could about the science via much more conventional means.

Recall: home.

Sergeant Boden's funeral was the lowest point in my life to date. Everything I'd relied upon seemed to be changing, slipping away from me, and his steady presence was just one more loss. And I felt responsible for his death. My merciless vision revealed the ghosts of the children his widow would never have, being forcibly ripped away from her spirit arms by the irresistible winches of fate; a deeply wounding sight that left me haemorrhaging remorse and tears.

Recall: home.

The summer brought Noah's joy and fear: biblical rain. I'd never seen so much vivid greenery in August, when not dimmed by incessant sheets of grey precipitation, that is. Wind and

constant drenching lowered the temperature. Those many exquisite warm evenings before I'd completed my army training, delicately chorused by birdsong, were a dream drowned out by the familiar surf-like roar of frequent downpours.

Weather isn't climate. Yet annoyingly the former seemed to have robbed the latter of my nice summer. After much soldiering in hot places, my bones chilled easily.

To my great relief the revelations from my sky-ride checked out, inasmuch as could be determined regarding the ancient events. In particular, just ten minutes on the Net confirmed a flat global temperature average over the last dozen years at least, up to fifteen on some metrics. It seemed this was a sensitive subject, yet acknowledged by the consensus and named 'the hiatus'. So my perception wasn't lying, thank goodness; the strain and headaches of dealing with truth were getting worse and it was harder to suppress revelations, but *deceptive* visions would be an outright nightmare!

Further research on the topic deeply unsettled me though. After time to accommodate the notion, the *presence* of a hiatus wasn't the real challenge to my pre-conceptions, but the fact that leading voices within the consensus proposed very *different* explanations. *Some natural variability is to be expected, but we'll soon enough be stifled by the ever-thickening blanket of greenhouse gases.* I didn't recall anyone saying this was 'expected' a few years back. *Negative aerosol forcing.* I presumed this to be from industrial fumes; the right sort reflect sunlight back into space. *The Faustian aerosol bargain is probably more of a problem than had been assumed.* Hmm, objective scientific language then. *Climate models have failed to reflect the sun's cyclical influence on the climate.* Hadn't sceptics suggested that for years? *The extra heat is being diverted into the deep oceans. It'll come back to bite us later.*

What was one to think of all this? If new proposals veered too much towards natural variability or *the sun did it* then, just as for Icarus, the wings supporting the hypothesis that 'CO₂ dominates everything' would simply melt.

Fifteen years seemed like nothing, but this hiatus confusion was puzzling. Hadn't more and more calamity been trumpeted during those years too? Yet *all* of the bad things were predicated on the temperature rising.

This voracious gift of veracity was consuming all my comfort zone. Hard to believe I'd once valued the strange ability, which now every day I wished to be gone from me. I decided that the truth and the message must meet somewhere in the middle; I just wasn't smart enough to figure out the knitting in-between yet.

Unhelpfully, the pattern of knits and purls was stored as many pages within different obscure filing cabinets. My poor Internet skills eventually uncovered the consensus position that CO₂ alone simply wasn't strong enough for catastrophic warming. *High climate sensitivity amplifies the effect*, they said. *System amplification is modest or very modest*, said the sceptics, *conceivably minus (damping)*. How come I hadn't known of this before? Only the sight of that diminutive CO₂ pod on the fairground ride had prompted me to find out.

Recall: home.

Though I could smell the threat of another soaking, for once rain held off as Joanne and I walked under leaden skies from the Tube station to the big gathering of Evelyn's organisation in London. We had a little time to spare and Joanne led us on a slight detour. Just past the Duke of York Memorial people were spilling out of a white Georgian portico. Some clutched booklets labelled 'Climate Conference'.

Though I tried desperately to suppress it, the sudden fever of my perception flared.

On many of the conference attendees, a ghostly extra arm was revealed. Some held their third hand over their mouth; for others it was over the eyes instead. Ribbons streamed into the sky from each of these limbs, holding them in place. Blue for a boy and pink for a girl; mint for money and blush for peers, silver for a spouse and salmon for fat-cats; gold for grants and green for the cause; blood for bureaucracy and fawny for the high moral ground. No doubt above obscuring clouds to end tangled in the claws of the big social beasts. A small minority were without an anomalous limb; light streamed from these individuals, though personal columns of grey spirit-rain falling from on high made them appear soggy and unkempt.

To try to shake this weird image I turned my gaze onto the building. Its roof was straddled by the huge figure of Punch, who was threatening all and sundry with an outsized hockey-stick and yelling *that's the way to do it!* Tangled around his boot was a dirty banner, on which I could just about discern some words, perhaps: *take no-one's word for it*. Rather than the traditional hat, Punch wore an American baseball cap upon which different acronyms appeared in turn: AMS, APS, GSA, AGU...

"Our guest speaker is from the conference. Proper scientist."

"Oh, right. Which kind? Blind or mute or bright but dank?"

"Are you feeling okay? Please, please... pull yourself together."

I tried hard. Very hard. In fact during the main talk I screwed my eyes tight shut and tried to recall the name and details of every man I'd commanded, by which means I hoped to block

the merciless imagery of raw truth. I wasn't disinterested in the subject, quite the opposite in fact; I was just afraid my perceptions would push me where I didn't want to go, tempt me into challenges. Causing a fuss and upsetting Joanna would be disaster; this event *had* to be smooth and successful!

Uncomfortable with my closed eyes, Joanna prodded me, but I persevered. Those guys I'd lost were easy, still stinging, as always. After that the list soon became more difficult. Eventually I stumbled; the plan didn't entirely work.

The speaker's voice degenerated, becoming a lop-sided rhythm like the teletype chatter from those mainframe computers in old movies, repeating only: *mod-el run mod-el run mod-el ruin mod-el run mod-el run mod-el ruin mod-el run...*

I switched tactics and concentrated on a favourite song to blank out the litany, an atmospheric rock classic, but still my phenomenal perception leaked through, mutating the lyrics: *They try to trumpet, theories they cannot defend, just what the world will be, we will see in the end.*

I gave up blocking and opened my eyes. Fortunately the scientist had just finished his spiel. I spotted three parrot-headed people in the front row. These visions were still a shock sometimes.

"Who are those par... persons?"

Joanna glanced over. "Mainstream media, environment journalists."

A woman at the rear asked a couple of mildly challenging questions. As one, the parrots turned their heads and eyed her beadily. The feathers of the nearest creature swiftly darkened and its beak morphed: long and curved. 'My dear', he crowed, 'let me be your guide.'

"Shouldn't the journos be *asking* questions like hers?" I whispered.

Joanna shrugged.

The last slide of the talk, titled 'climate model projections', was still displayed on the large screen before us. Prompted by the woman's curiosity, I glared at the slide until it yielded detail: tiny coloured cars lined up on rails, like the fairground ride that had so gripped me. But cars were missing and others seemed very poorly tracked, especially those representing cloud effects. Many elastic-band connections were missing too. In fact the whole thing was a Noddy toy, cute but highly questionable. On such unreal playthings hung sums that could cripple the budgets of nations. Then, apparently from behind the slide's content, a huge eye appeared, baleful and yellow, the pupil scanning this way and that, its owner trapped unacknowledged

within the text and figures, *for now*. I knew this to be *the uncertainty monster*, the beast of which so few would speak.

On that extraordinary sky-ride I remembered glimpsing some civilisations suffering from nature's catastrophes. Poor climate models had previous, supplied my rampant perception. For failing to anticipate El Nino, the Lambeyeque lords on their man-made mountains were burned. Modern societies are thankfully far less brutal, though otherwise surprisingly little had changed. We still worship. Pyramids would still crack once the intellectual fires of realisation raged; official cults will still crumble in the heat.

I was so tired. Each lurid metaphor lashed, another ravage of my notions. A victim of truth, I was masquerading, just going through the motions. My head ached; only sleep granted remission.

The main lights were switched off for the meet-and-greet, emphasising rows of candles on a shelf that ran around the walls. A teenager in hippy gear was still lighting the last few. The atmosphere veered to religious. I bumped into the woman who'd asked the questions. As soon as the thought formed in my mind that she'd been brave to speak up, my powerful curse of a gift delivered a curious means to help her.

"Avoid black," I whispered. "Go see the bishop and then St. Mac. To glimpse *the monster*, consume curry. For the children, read *important or impotent*. Ask what's up." She nodded, and left. I felt like a spy in a movie; I wondered what on Earth this all meant.

A large glass of wine later, I was feeling a little more relaxed and my pitiless apparitions had almost faded away. The first two or three leavers were drifting to the door. I'd survived the event without upsetting anyone.

I fetched up by a table where Joanna was rattling on non-stop to the scientist speaker. I noticed the temperature chart on one of the hand-outs was rather out of date; stopped about five years back. Joanna paused to top up her Pino Grigio from a strategically placed bottle.

"What's your view on *the hiatus*?" I asked airily, trying to appear cool by displaying my awareness of a leading-edge topic.

The scientist simultaneously smiled and frowned and drew a deep breath, but between these conflicting signals seemed temporarily unable to gather his words.

Oh damn. Even as Evelyn turned back to face us, I saw the eruption coming.

"Denier!" she shrieked. Her blaze of red hair and shining hazel eyes suddenly held power, something far beyond her own strength and wit, something she had long ago submitted to. Pale circles of faces aligned against me, alerted by the code-word, their defensive

expressions deeply etched by candlelight. The shadowy source of Evelyn's power bulked up behind her, feeding on the eager ire of the crowd, flickering tongue measuring threat. I'd seen this unholy, treacherous beast before, glittering orbs from its mother, inspiration, dark heart from its father, fear. But now it saw *me*. In the outraged whispers of the faithful I heard its hiss of interdiction and knew I was marked out. Via the running flame of unfounded rumour it would know me elsewhere now, would exclude me, malign me, taint all words from my tongue so that the tongues of others would taste only bile and ashes whether I spoke truth or logic or just mere opinion.

I was strangely unmoved; their angry fire didn't heat me. The sheeple followed the pied viper's tune, I countered calmly with dilemma.

"So, stabbing with a dagger you purchased by stealing the currency of six million brutal deaths vitally enshrined, somehow enhances your moral position?" One *very* expensive dagger.

Evelyn and the worm flinched. Unexpected response. Recovering swiftly, they spat back. "Garbage!"

My beautiful wife stared at me as though I'd gone mad. I'd let her down after all.

I sighed. "Bile and ashes," quietly. "Bile and ashes," louder.

Recall: home.

Later, on the Tube, Joanna asked if I was still drinking; secretly, she meant.

"I gave that up, it only works for a few hours." After that the merciless truths marched back, and I was in a much worse state for meeting the assault.

"I realise that last tour was hard on you, losing Boddy." Sergeant Alan Boden. Truth was damning me, but I could have saved him.

I brushed my hand across the folder she'd brought from the talk. Out from good science oozed slick confirmation bias and the sting of noble cause corruption; one corner was sticky with something still more ignoble. Leaving my hand in place, I wondered, chicken or egg? A delivery came back to my mind akin to that from a stand-up comedian, minus any actual jokes.

You see attacks require noble defence, questions only commonplace answers. So the worm grabs himself a can of devil sauce and the smiling assistant, well, she labels it dirty, then the dons dish it out in the broth. Now most of the faithful see demons! Daily there's a dance to deride them and deal them a fatal blow, yet one can't fell a foe that is fable. Result: many decorations for trying.

A deluge of detail followed, but I snatched my hand away, feeling sullied. Maybe it was a joke, after all. My fingers smelled of climate-gate, like schoolchildren and ammonia.

“It isn’t all a conspiracy, you know. The global warming thing.”

My vision revealed the squirming intrigues of corrupt interest groups as merely maggoty infestations; sometimes handy feed for the great worms, sometimes squashed by their passage, never aspiring to such massive strength, not too hard to erase with a targeted spray of truth. A measly conspiracy cannot co-opt millions of honest souls spanning generations.

“Unfortunately, you’re dead right.” I recalled the slaver of the psychologizers. “Yet that’s what many consensus advocates want you to believe all contrarians think.”

Joanna glanced my way and in a mere split second I not only perceived pity, I also saw beyond doubt that my wife was not truly in love with me. I guess I’d always known, really. She was a naturally loyal and caring person, and the fairy tale of my life; I was immensely grateful that she was sticking this out, yet for how long would her aura still bless me?

Recall: home.

A short interlude of welcome sun finally dried out our lawn, though summer was already tilting into autumn and the evenings were chill. Wettest summer for a century, apparently.

I’d promised to run errands, though it was damn difficult to drive with striking signatures and creatures of cultural reality obscuring my perception of the merely physical. Cars burned lurid red, reflecting the huge energy and resource profile of their construction. The ugly black mould of corporate greed and mismanagement stained the fronts of banks, despite obvious recent attempts to scrub it off. A huge benign face hovered above the door of a church, threads from his long beard disappearing into the departing congregation. His kindly smile morphed to a snarl as two guys walked by, hand in hand. Youngsters on drugs dragged ghosts of their short future behind them, bowed and wrinkled and coughing.

Task one was to return Joanna’s library books. While parking I saw that the library building gleamed.

I stumbled through the glass doors against a kaleidoscopic blizzard of light. It was hard not to raise my hand to shield my eyes. The female assistant at the front desk frowned, maybe thinking I was drunk. Her gothic mask could not hide from me that she was desperately insecure and clung to a boyfriend who abused her. I managed to pull a stiff smile and fished Joanna’s softly glowing books from my bag, handing them over before continuing inwards. The shelves were drenched with radiance of every hue that spilled from the stored works. How

to know what the colours meant? A few books *sucked in* light, and I guessed this was bad. I was drawn to a pure white that was the brightest point within the section I stood. The author was one James Thomson. I flicked through pages to a place where two verses within a poem were so painfully incandescent as to be unreadable. I held the volume towards the wall and slowly translated the blurred mirror image.

*The world rolls round for ever like a mill;
It grinds out death and life and good and ill;
It has no purpose, heart or mind or will.*

*While air of Space and Time's full river flow
The mill must blindly whirl unresting so:
It may be wearing out, but who can know?*

Was this depressing insight truth? No love or loyalty, courage or comfort, not even foe or fear? *No purpose*? It occurred to me that I wouldn't survive exposure to truth much longer; it was relentlessly breaking me down. On the way out I gifted brief words to the young gothic girl: 'Leave him. Someone will love you.' Really, this was more for my sake than for hers.

On my return Joanna was out. Overwhelmed by a kind of desperation to know, I gazed in a mirror while willing my perception to well up. I shouldn't have done that. The top of my skull was missing. Three or four fearsome worms had their jaws sunk deep into the juicy meal of my brain. Several others snapped at each other and took occasional bites of me, fighting for a permanent place at the feast. My face peeled away and showed a mass of raw nerves beneath, my bulging eyes... I woke up on the floor, having fainted, perhaps a safety mechanism.

I was achingly insignificant and lonely. Just a tiny droplet in the vast flow of the universe, a tiny lump of grist for the universal mill. I'd so earnestly wanted to know truths; now these appalled me. Nothing I'd known was real. I wasn't really even me; so what was I? A servile cell within the spiral of a dance within dreams, of monstrous social entities that are intertwining machines.

That night I made love to Joanna until she was way beyond pleasure and into hurt, although still she tried to comfort me. Desperately, I sought identity and proof of being in passion and the prolonged act of union.

I rose very early, to cast my bible into the fire of dawn and my badge into the hungry dark sea. Delusions flared, then evaporated, liberating. I would never again war abroad. How do heart and mind survive the grinding mill? How does purposeless en-masse make purposed will?

Joanna followed me out. She hunkered down on the edge of the sea wall above me. I sat cross-legged on the gravelly beach. She made her Popeye expression, a habitual means of blowing smoke out of the side of her mouth and hence not into the face of whoever she was talking to, though completely redundant here. The soft white of her legs led to enticing shadow beneath a short purple skirt. Her jet hair was hooked behind her ears. These days she only smoked if drunk or stressed out. There was not another soul in sight.

“My dad was... troubled, after one of his campaigns. He went to see someone.”

“I guess I should.” But who could diagnose *this*? And other than doping me up to the eyeballs, what could be done?

I tried to see into her but my hyped perception wouldn't focus down enough. I saw only the generic, the *caring feminine*, a kind of enfolding mother persona hovering around her; ancient and gentle and still more beautiful than Joanna herself.

“Our friends will shun us. My own sister...”

I no longer cared about truths, fashionable or otherwise. I cared about Joanna. I was desperate not to lose her. I'd loved her almost from that first day at the pub. If the act obliterated grotesque veracity, I'd cut out my eyes for her, but something told me that this wouldn't work.

“I know, I know.”

“I couldn't bear that.”

So this was it. *The deal*. To stay together or not.

Then revelation came. One of the truths was actually useful. Joanna was teetering on true love, *because of* the caring feminine. Her instinctive need to mend me was deeply engaged. If I could avoid the status of *hopeless cause*, yet stay enigmatically broken for just long enough, she'd be tipped over the edge. What then though? All would be lost if her strenuous input was not seen to *work*, if I was not eventually cured, if I could not one day ditch the overwhelming baggage of heavy truths.

I'd worry about that later.

“I have to get through this one day at a time. Please, stay with me. *Help me.*”

The spiritual fingers of caring feminine reached out to touch my arm.

“Evelyn means well, you know.”

“That’s what makes it so sad. Endless Evelyns and their billion followers, betrayed. The NGOs play Oliver; the goddess in green dances Nancy. Fagin knows where all that earnest investment goes, pretty precious little for *genuine* woes.”

“Her Gaia stuff is going a bit far, I’ll admit.” My love smiled. We were past danger, for now. “Anyway, Nancy’s dress was red.”

I smiled back.

Joanna’s love might hang in the balance, but her loyalty was unquestionable. Like her parents, she was the right stuff. I saw the stiff upper lip assert, even as the life of a colonel’s wife slipped away from her. Oh how I wanted that cutely proud lip to protect me forever!

I kept backing away from the tipping point.

“Well Gaia might be bumped off Evelyn’s agenda anyhow. James Lovelock said, and I quote: ‘It just so happens that the green religion is now taking over from the Christian religion. I don’t think people have noticed that, but it’s got all the sort of terms that religions use. The greens use guilt. You can’t win people round by saying they are guilty for putting...’”

“Okay, I get the gist. No need for a full news bulletin.”

“He also said that ‘sustainable development’ was ‘meaningless drivel’.”

“*Sustainable* is Evelyn’s favourite word. No wonder she took his picture down.”

“Like *noble war*, maybe.”

“The phrase means so many things. Only *some* will be wrong, I suppose.”

“Or hijacked. I have a feeling evolution’s agenda is not twenty-one.”

The seventh wave crashed upon the shore. Joanna smirked.

“Lucky Darwin never read it. Bored me to tears.” She shifted position slightly. Her skirt rode up to reveal snowy knickers.

“Is there any happy news?”

Her diversion worked. *That* agenda kept me safely inside my old bottle, though a different genie began to rise. Flesh hotly recalled a few hours previously.

“We’re not doomed, stop. I love you, stop.”

I stood up and approached her. My head was level with her thighs. She glanced swiftly to left and right.

“Don’t stop, stop.”

Now: hospital

Oh the precious memory of that passion! Yet now making eyes was sweet exchange that once only making love achieved. *Let her be here!* My time was running out. I didn't want to go uncomforted and unarmed into the void.

I recalled the time I'd nearly lost her. We made the decision to part for a while until I 'recovered'. Or rather, she insisted. Except that I had no idea how to recover from *truth*. I went back to one of the countries I'd soldiered in, this time as a voluntary aid worker. I think I had some kind of kill or cure plan in mind. Yet even in the taxi to the airport I couldn't resist exercising truth, though more often than not doing so would deconstruct yet another of the assumptions that glued my psyche together.

Recall: home.

The radio droned out an audio documentary. Unusual. The driver flipped stations as we paused at the first set of lights and Motown took over, but not before I realised there'd been something in that programme I ought to have paid attention to. I concentrated hard on recall, hoping my perception would do the rest and regurgitate the nub, the truth of what had passed me by. Worked much better than I hoped; an exact replication.

"Stated briefly," announced Professor Lindzen, atmospheric physicist from MIT, in his seminar at the House of Commons, "I will simply try to clarify what the debate over climate change is really about. It most certainly is not about whether climate is changing: it always is. It is not about whether CO₂ is increasing: it clearly is. It is not about whether the increase in CO₂, by itself, will lead to some warming: it should. The debate is simply over the matter of how much warming the increase in CO₂ can lead to, and the connection of such warming to the innumerable claimed catastrophes. The evidence is that the increase in CO₂ will lead to very little warming, and that the connection of this minimal warming (or even significant warming) to the purported catastrophes is also minimal. The arguments on which the catastrophic claims are made are extremely weak – and commonly acknowledged as such. They are sometimes overtly dishonest."

Reframing such scepticism regarding sensitivity and effects into 'denial' of century-scale atmospheric warming or greenhouse gas physics was outrageous at best, and at worst exactly what my fellow trainee Sid had once pointed out. Especially since no one had yet slammed sensitivity behind robustly short error bars, and most thermal mass was in the sea not the air anyhow. Yet the hissing of *that* social worm drowned out reason, and its spit of overstated

urgency corroded post *normal-science* into *negatively post-normal* science. Reason would be the beast's death, which maudlin hacks helped avoid by portraying CO₂ immorality with la muerte de los nietos, a profitable product-line for seers of old ironically inconvenienced by El Nino and La Nina.

Recall: abroad.

The boy slipped in and out of consciousness. A sore-throated helicopter flogged past beneath the heavy cloud ceiling, trailing a dirty shroud as it gradually lost height. The gentle drizzle wasn't sufficient to wash sticky blood from my fingers. The loud crump of mortars rolled past my ears, way too close; even the soft cough of the last two being launched was audible, albeit I was downwind. Machine guns stuttered near and far. My arms ached from holding the boy's weight for so long.

It was much more frightening to be a civilian in a combat zone. As a soldier I'd always been aware of the tactical situation, the disposition of forces, usually, the objectives, where the shots would come from. Minus battle kit and information, traversing this ridge was akin to crossing a busy road with a blindfold on. I hoped my erratic perception would actually fire up if immediate danger loomed.

I made it. A ravaged village lay before me, part veiled by spindly trees, the pale and pock-marked medical building rising above dilapidated houses. The sun was low and roofs glowed orange as though already afire.

Recall: abroad.

The ward was overcrowded, chaotic, dim. The only resident doctor seemed to move at twice normal speed. A manic mood blazed in his eyes, sweat ran down unshaven jowls. His coat was blue, not white, darkly stained upon the arms and chest. He probably hadn't slept for days and was running on adrenalin, or something stronger. Nurses treated him like a god.

He declared my young victim would live, if the boy didn't succumb to infection; supplies were running low.

As natural light finally faded a single inconstant bulb etched stoic patients in deceptive shadow. I noticed three stacks of medical equipment, all turned off. After four hours helping out I persuaded the doctor to join me for a break, in the small canteen that was doubling as a triage station. There was real coffee.

"Why is there no proper power? Has the government cut you off for treating rebels?"

As caffeine took hold the doctor's eyes bulged still more. His voice strained and his hands flapped against sticky air.

"The government? No. Nor the rebels. Electricity is life, electricity is freedom, electricity is cleanliness, electricity is learning. *They* don't want us to have it!"

"They?"

"*You!* The West. Charities each with half-billion dollar budgets opposed our power station. War intervened, but maybe it'd never have been built anyway."

I struggled with this. "Charities? Which ones? Why?"

"Environmental, of course. Here, it'd burn coal. The crap can be economically filtered out, but not CO₂..."

He spilled into a wild rant, spitting words and stabbing out with a dangerous digit. Unfortunately I couldn't understand the diatribe because he'd unconsciously reverted to his native tongue. However my perception soon switched in, not translating word-for-word (clearly there were more of those than I was getting), but providing what I assumed was a philosophical distillation.

"Where are the million-dollar muscles to oppose poaching, to save our rare species? Where is the big budget bonanza to stop habitats fragmenting below sustainable thresholds? Where is the lake of cash for clean water infra-structure across our region? Why has the strength leaked out of our fight against disease and the *genuine* environmental problems?"

"Next year the rebel war will be over. Or the year after. But all the other wars will still rage. The main strength of our once allies is poured into the useless black hole of opposing CO₂ emissions, into opposing our electricity. To add insult to injury food is poured into the throats of cars *apparently* for the same reason, though the benefit escapes me. Higher global prices: more starvation. And now rain-forest is being sacrificed for bio-fuel too!"

He paused and I asked something mundane about the light-bulbs, mainly to try and calm him a little. His answer was back in my own language.

"We have the *generous* donation of three solar panels; but it's rained for four days straight and the batteries ran down. So it's just the genny now, which incidentally spews smoke; black carbon, never mind carbon dioxide. We can power the bulbs or the equipment, but not both.

"We're not worthy to have what *you* have. It's eco-colonialism."

I wondered about back home, that grey cloud around the windmills. Would our lights go out one day too?

The doctor crushed his cup and flung it against the wall.

“Sorry, I’m exhausted, angry, hitting out. But there are some uncomfortable truths.”

I put my hand over his. His skin was slick.

“Friend, you’re talking to the one man who knows that more than anyone. Get some sleep. They won’t miss you for a couple of hours.”

He returned to the ward.

I thought of all I’d learned about the great social worms. Had the unleashing of one such fearsome dragon, in the name of a supporting actor from the climate cast, served or sabotaged overall planetary conservation? Hordes of breathless PhDs and bright-eyed Evelyns spurred on their bolting brute, whose dinosaur brain mistook *logical* for *nomie*, ingesting a sugar-rush of trillions.

Oh no! I’d asked a very thorny question; one that might require the injection of many fundamentals to answer. Pins-and-needles erupted over my scalp, probably a precursor...

Pain repeatedly stabbed my head, intense white flashes interrupted my sight. I thought I must be having a stroke. I couldn’t get enough air. I stumbled outside. It ought to be dark but everything was brilliantly illuminated in false colours that betrayed the inner workings of every leaf and blade of grass, every insect, all I could see in fact, in-between fleeting super-novas that blinded. I slid down the outer wall of the medi-centre, wailing my agony and dismay.

Then the novas started to deliver massive shocks of revelation: the dizzying balance of co-opetition in multi-dimensions and massive scale, the dramatic full landscape in which the social beasts battled and bred, their *necessity* to hold together huge agglomerations of poorly co-operative humans, despite parasitism and feral frenzies that could misdirect the efforts of millions.

My head would surely burst. It was too much to take, a torture of knowledge. I wouldn’t survive. I screamed and begged the sky for mercy, though who I was asking? Not the hard-wired ogres of religion, certainly. I recalled the old woman. Who had she asked? The memory prompted another massive stab, and suddenly I knew *everything* about every kind of war: the brother wars, the wars of renewal, tectonic wars – ah *this* was the rift I’d glimpsed between me and her! The rift she saw too; a centuries old civilisational fault-line ignited yet again.

The next nova had me shrieking uncontrollably and writhing on the floor as it delivered still more: the monstrous constructal waterfall of life, the eons-old evolutionary modes of energy capture, the great grinding mill of James Thomson as blunt mathematics that bashed my skull like a baseball bat.

No longer able to see the real world, I crawled through a teeming mass of shining equations and fumbled my desperate way to the little guard-hut at the gate of the modest compound. No guns were allowed inside the medical building itself, so a few were usually lodged in here by visitors. The guy who was supposed to watch them, and the gate too, must have run off in fear of the rebels. By feel I found my way to a pistol – the cupboard was unlocked, typical rather than fortunate I guessed – checked the cartridge, then slid back the safety. I put the barrel into my mouth.

The pain fell away, leaving only a throbbing echo that by comparison was kind. Flaking paint and a picture of the president appeared as the dazzling radiance of truth ebbed. Slowly, disbelieving my reprieve, I pulled the pistol away again.

Then someone, something, spoke to me, I think. At least concepts appeared in my head, feeling as though they were spoken.

You will survive this; you could become the nexus of the most significant social change ever.

Belatedly I realised it was not a gift or a special skill I'd acquired, but *an entity*. Perhaps one involved in its own search for truth: the effect of revelation on humans maybe, the likelihood of us incorporating deeper realities into our social constructs.

There is grandeur in this view of truth, the magnetism of myths that align humans like iron filings to focus power, the endless mythic forms most beautiful and wonderful that are constantly evolving. The challenge to promote this evolution into consciousness and thereby minimise the feral behaviour of frightened worms.

Think not of the grinding mill, but of the roaring millrace.

I recognised part as a Darwin quote heavily adapted. I didn't give a stuff about power and beauty. And it wasn't the physical pain. If I knew for sure that was only short, I could probably find the courage to endure a while longer. It was losing Joanna, as inevitably I would, and the other sorts of pain; those wounding expressions of hate and scorn whenever I couldn't stop myself from countering prejudice and misinformation and the hypnotic grip of the social worms. The shunning as though of one with some appalling disease. The endless derision that no amount of truth could counter.

I didn't want the lonely and terrible existence of truth. I wanted to be happy again, in blissful ignorance and the enfolding arms of society; in Joanna's arms.

I put the gun back in my mouth.

No!

I was instructed to go back into the building and find a child. A specific child of about five who apparently never spoke; a child with all her limbs missing. She opened innocent eyes, into which I steadily stared. Those eyes widened as the immense pressure inside my skull was at last relieved, as though a mental bladder sealed for far too long was finally opened.

Now: hospital.

I tried to keep my eyes open; I had to resist a slip into the cold dark. I reflected upon my life.

Knowledge is an evolving portrait under the blazing sun of ignorance, soon fading if not constantly touched up and improved, if not shielded from the aggressive erasure of untrue simplicities. Sometimes, such fading is kind.

The social worms became blessedly invisible and even knowledge of their habits and hates slowly sank to the deepest cellar of memory, beyond normal recall. I slid gratefully and easily back into the soft glove of normal life. Even Evelyn forgave me, eventually. Joanna explained to everyone that I'd been suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Once more I joined my peers and got raving drunk with the four draymen of the apocoholics: Diseases, Poisons, Resources, Reckless populations, the latter with a young apprentice, man-made climate catastrophe. Once more I got quick gratifications from the climate porn pouring out of every orifice of the media. However, though a trivial loss I no longer fought dragons or demons in computer games; too ironic when I knew that behind veils in the-here-and-now, people daily risked everything they were to struggle against the *real* monsters.

More importantly than all that, I shared long life and warming love with Joanna, despite declining health in later years. Happy home and light heart; children, grandchildren. Only with old age did memories of truth inconveniently resurface, accompanied by the bitter flavour of cynicism.

Now: hospital.

At last, she was here! The balm of relief washed over me. Pain subsided. My limping heart crossed the line and the anthem played. Everything would be alright now.

She was stout and grey-haired, yet her skin was still smooth and her upper lip still protected me. She was my love and my strength and appeared to me in essence as she always had. She smiled her melting smile and clasped my hand. I wasn't afraid anymore.

"I left the moment I heard, my darling. You have a new granddaughter."

I noticed the nurse discreetly backing away. As she did so her hand slid across the bank of technology to which I was connected. All the lights went out. Oh.

“A difficult birth? What about Tasha?”

“Yes, as we expected. Touch and go for a while but she’s fine, and the little one too.”

I felt life leaking out of me.

“They wanted to name her for her great aunt, Evelyn, but I insisted your mother’s name was far prettier. I think they’ll go with it”.

Hope.

“Thank you, my dearest”. It was done for me, not for them.

“You were right.”

“About what?”

“Everything. But the truth is so...”

“Hard?”

“Impossible.”

Tears filled the wrinkles around her cheeks with diamonds.

“I’ll see you on the other side,” she whispered.

The sweet dream of love filled me from her eyes, headier than morphine.

One final vision. A last echo of astounding perception I’d once possessed. Not a worm this time; a heavenly angel to salve away ultimate fear.

I wasn’t going to fall at the very last fence for my lifetime love.

For her, in untruth true forever.

“Yes.”

I submitted to the angel.

Andy West

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