

## 2 Two months and three days earlier

It all began with a bonbon, just out of reach.

I admit it wasn't the *most* sensible thing I've ever done, stretching for this sugar-coated toffee while gunning the car at its whining maximum.

On the opposite carriageway a stream of cars and lorries flowed to Cambridge. A lone black Mini was steering towards me, flitting in and out of the line of traffic, angry as a bluebottle.

I don't borrow my sister Lizzie's car often. Partly for the environment. Mostly because it's an eggshell, powered by a lawnmower engine, with sunflowers painted on the side. Not good for the corporate image of the *Cambridge Gentleman's Website and Copywriting Agency*.

Lizzie had presumably snaffled all but one of the bonbons, which was what she usually did. Fingers scrabbling, I tried to manoeuvre the bag.

The oncoming Mini tucked itself safely behind a Polish container truck, *Zlotcwicvic Enngerrgrunden Transportowicz, Krakow*, I didn't catch the spelling.

The sun came out, low and directly behind me, lighting up the January slush.

I looked down quickly at the bag. The car clock, I noticed, just flipped over to 9:46.

Lizzie's flower-painted car whined.

A single bonbon.

I glanced up— to see a white-faced girl, in the black Mini, filling all the windscreen.

My fingers touched icing sugar.

By the time 9:46 ended, the bang from the collision had travelled nearly thirteen miles. Our two cars had spun to a halt, horribly splayed across the carriageway. The Mini was upside down. My car was a twisted bale of metal in a muddy field, soon to start dripping with my blood. *Zlotcwicvic Enngerrgrunden Transportowicz, Krakow* was a mile away, rushing for the container port at Felixstowe and anonymity.

My spirit, calm as a balloon, was rising quietly above the crash site. Below and to the right of me I could glimpse the straight black hair and the scrawny figure of the Mini driver, her spirit also rising. Far below us, cars had stopped, traffic was backed up, people had emerged and were circling the wreckage.

I had no sense of anything.

It was silent up here. Minutes passed. As I watched, the traffic started tentatively to rearrange itself. An ambulance arrived. A cloud rolled over, blocking my view.

Above me in the greyness I glimpsed godlike beings in white Arran pullovers. Behind them in the sky was a tunnel.

For a brief second I felt a spasm of complete fear — the first thing I'd felt since the crash.

They grabbed me—they had many arms, as well as sucky things like sink plungers—and threw me up the tunnel.

Things happened in that tunnel that I don't have words for. I was bumped about. I thought I heard some arguing, possibly a punch thrown. I was left on my own in the dark, for what seemed like hours. Then some more bumping and cursing, and finally, a soft blue light.

It didn't stay that way for more than a second, because that was how long it took to start thinking.

My first thought must have been *bacon sandwich* (I had entered the afterlife without breakfast) because one appeared in front of me.

It looked perfect: freshly sliced white bread, bacon grilled until it was not quite crisp. The bread looked like it had been swabbed in the fat and blood that had dripped out of the bacon. The sandwich was hanging in the air in front of me, oozing with contentment at being itself.

I examined this wondrous sandwich from all angles, and then sniffed it. Still perfect. I took a bite, and it was exactly as I expected, every note of taste in place.

I thought I'd try imagining some coffee—Costa Rican, freshly ground, steaming. It too winked into existence in front of me.

*Not too shabby so far*, I thought.

For my next course I created a quarter-pound of toffee bonbons in a white paper bag. These were, like the single one left far behind in Lizzie's mashed car, toffees boiled just enough to be soft, then dragged through a dust-bath of icing sugar. You can still buy bonbons like that in internet sweetshops—sometimes I included fun links in my client websites.

You need to put four bonbons in your mouth to get the full blessing, and I did, and after that I thought I might like another coffee.

*OK, I concluded after several more experiments, I am on my own in a faintly blue world. I have access to all my memories. And I can build with them. Perhaps this is what you do when you are dead.*

Three days later I was playing a cricket match—just about to bowl England to victory, with several former Prime Ministers calling out encouragement from the stands—when a black Mini drove onto the pitch.

Black Minis had appeared fleetingly already, horrible phantoms that seemed to conjure themselves up just as I was falling asleep, but they were usually easy to erase.

This Mini, however, had an attitude all of its own, and it was driving across the pitch with a pointed disregard for the hallowed turf, the legendary players and the state of the match.

Behind the wheel was the pale-faced girl with dark hair. The Mini stopped in front of me with a little lurch.

The girl climbed out of the Mini and walked over to me. She was just below my height. She didn't have a friendly face and was wearing too much eyeliner.

'Is this cricket or something?' she asked.

'Yes,' I replied.

'What a waste of time,' said the girl.

'I was just about to bowl England to victory.'

'So you can reset it.'

'It took me all morning to get it to this point.'

'Stupid.' She stretched out her hand. 'I'm Keziah.'

'Hello Keziah.'

'I'm real.'

I took her to Osama's, which I had created the day before on a tropical beach at the foot of a white cliff, just outside Lord's Cricket Ground, not far from the lighthouse where I made my home.

I decided to have Male Film Stars from the Golden Age of Movies as the hospitality team. (I thought I'd give the Brazilian Ladies' Olympic Beach Volleyball Squad the afternoon off.)

Gregory Peck took the order and Jimmy Stewart served it. I only wanted a snack so I had my usual two lamb murtabaks, washed down with coffee made with sweetened condensed milk. She had date and banana muffin, fresh fruit and coffee.

(The real Osama's, when it existed in an insalubrious but life-affirming corner of Cambridge, didn't do date and banana muffin. Imagine asking the Giant Surly Bread Chef for date and banana muffin. But this was my dream-world and Osama smoothed things over. Perhaps he sent Jimmy Stewart out to a bakery.)

Louis Armstrong and his Hot Fives were the band.

Keziah was dressed in black jeans, a black top and a leather jacket. We ate in silence. Sneaking a glance from my murtabak I couldn't decide whether she was sad or angry. She had full lips and a mouth that naturally curved slightly downward. Dolphins seem to be smiling all the time: Keziah's normal expression, I decided, was sulky disapproval. She looked hard and aggressive and unfeminine and worn down. Skin wasn't great either. Nothing sparkled.

'Why didn't you swerve?' she asked abruptly.

‘What?’

‘You could’ve swerved off the road. I can’t believe you didn’t take evasive action.’

‘Funnily enough I wasn’t expecting somebody to jump out suicidally from behind a truck.’

‘You should be ready for anything on the road.’

‘How thoughtless of me.’

‘You could have thought, *the sun’s just come out, that driver can’t see me.*’

‘And *you* could’ve thought, perhaps I shouldn’t drive at high speed on the wrong side of the road into oncoming traffic.’

‘It takes two to crash.’

‘Technically.’

‘It was so stupid, you dying. You didn’t need to.’

I put the murtabak down. ‘Do you know, funnily enough, when we were sitting here, not talking, I thought to myself, *she might be wanting to say sorry.*’

‘I just can’t believe you were so *lax.*’

‘She might be wanting to apologize. Just when my life was getting nicely warmed up, she kills me. She might have the decency to put her hand up and say, *oops.*’

‘That’s what I *am* trying to do.’

‘You’re not doing it very well.’

‘I didn’t expect you to be so difficult.’

I tore off a large piece of murtabak, swabbed it around in the curry sauce, and folded it into my mouth.

‘I am sorry you find me difficult,’ I said.

‘And I am sorry for the crash.’

‘So am I.’

We ate in silence for some time.

‘So this is what you’ve been doing since we died?’ Keziah asked, looking round at the formica tables and red-tiled floor, with Osama himself smiling in the background and, behind the stainless steel counter, the Giant Surly Bread Chef cracking eggs with one hand and slopping and twirling the flat Afghan bread with the other.

‘Any fool can be uncomfortable,’ I replied. ‘We might be here a long time. It’s amazing what you can build out of your memories, don’t you think?’

Keziah seemingly didn’t think. ‘Obviously I’ve mashed them up,’ I continued. ‘There isn’t really an Osama’s Afghan restaurant at the foot of a white cliff near Lord’s Cricket Ground. There was an Osama’s on Mill Road near where I live, but it’s been taken over by ayurvedic Vegans.’

‘I don’t remember it.’

‘Very bad Korma.’

‘You haven’t thought at all about what’s happened to us? Or where we are?’

‘No,’ I said.

Green eyes surveyed my face like a building inspector weighing up a condemned bus-shelter.

‘Pathetic.’

‘My choice. What do you do by the way?’

‘Before I was dead, I was a lawyer.’

‘So things are on the up, then.’

She sighed. We then had that little interchange that’s like two computers finding a shared comms protocol or perhaps like two dogs sniffing bottoms in

the park. We both had a home in Cambridge. I'm a web designer, running my own business, clearly a more bohemian character than a *lawyer*.

As lawyers went she was interesting, however. She defended people in magistrates' courts, specializing in the hopeless.

We explored all that and then the conversation fell away.

'Do you want to see my beach gadgets?' I asked.

'What?'

'Now you're here, you might as well see some of the stuff I've built.'

'No, I don't want to see your beach gadgets.'

I picked up the murtabak and then put it down again. 'My sister Lizzie says, and my ex-girlfriend Caroline confirms, that when guys want to talk they go and play with their toys. If they ever do talk, they find it easier in a garage somewhere when there's an engine spread all over the floor. For example. So that they always have something to change the subject to.'

'I see.'

'The quad bikes are out here.' We nodded to Osama and walked out onto the beach.

I'd spent half an hour engineering fine detail on this bike. I copied it with a moment's mental effort so we both had one, and we set off across the beach. I quietened the engines.

'So what have you been doing,' I asked. 'Since the crash?' Keziah looked across at me, as if deciding momentarily whether to be honest or sarcastic.

'Trying not to drown in a sea of regret and rage.'

'I recommend fantasizing.'

'I'm not asking for advice. Don't offer it.'

'OK.'

'Have you found the HELP system?' Keziah asked.

'There's a HELP system? How does that work?

'It's a set of questions and answers that you can personalize however you like.'

'I gotta try this.' I stopped the bike and copied a palm-roofed bar from one I'd built ten miles further down the beach. I considered. 'I think I'll have my HELP system as a bartender.' With a few deft thoughts I fashioned a small, bald, Spanish-looking barman with a white apron and a stunning moustache, put him behind the bar, and went up to him.

'Red wine OK?' I asked Keziah.

'I've stopped.'

'Hm,' I said. 'Don't you think because you're dead and a million miles from home you might start again? It's not going to kill you, is it?'

'I'll have water with a hint of something. *Sin gaz.*'

'One glass of red wine, please Pablo, and one glass of non-fizzy water with a hint of ... I dunno, lime, passionfruit and mango. Go steady with the passionfruit.'

I passed her the glass.

'Thank you,' I said to Pablo. 'So you know everything?'

'You are too kind, *Señor.*'

'OK.' I took a deep breath. 'Let me start with a few simple ones: Where am I, Why am I here, and when will I leave?'

'OK Jamie.' (He pronounced it, *Hymie*, doing the Spanish throat-clearing thing in a naff attempt at a Spanish accent.) 'After the crash your spirits ejected from your bodies. You were seized by collectors, haggled over, bought, packaged up again and transported to where you are now—'

'Which is?'

'You and the *Señorita* are in a kind of —'

'Cage,' said Keziah.

'Paradise,' corrected Pablo. 'The truth is, in here you have complete access to every thought or memory you have experienced. All the universe you ever knew is yours. You're freer than you ever were on earth, free to roam through a universe built from your memories.'

'But we can't leave,' Keziah pressed on.

Pablo the HELP system shrugged. 'What is leave? Where would you go? Outside this habitat the universe is hostile, washed with dangerous radiation. It burns. You would not last. In here is the whole world of your minds—which was your whole universe before you left the earth—and you can go anywhere.'

'One thing,' I said. 'Why are our memories so much more vivid than they were on earth?'

'Because here is where they are stored,' said Pablo. 'Here, in the heavenlies.'

'They weren't in my head, then?'

'Of course not, *Señor*. There was no room. No room! Your brain was just the machinery for translating true memories into chemical and electrical signals. Your memories built up here, in the heavenlies. Now that you have left your body, your spirit can experience them directly.'

'Without having to port them onto a different platform,' I said, understanding it now I could use a computing metaphor. 'So where are they, these memories?'

'They cruise through the heavenlies, *Señor*,' said Pablo, 'like clumps of seaweed, pulled and pushed by many influences. It doesn't matter where they

are. Your spirit has perfect access to them because they are your memories, bound to you by Life.'

'Wild,' I said. 'And how did we get here? Does this happen to everyone?'

'Certainly not! It is a privilege. You and the *Señorita* now belong to two spirit beings who care for you and have a wonderful plan for your ongoing death. If you listen to them and obey, all will be well. If not ...' He shrugged a Latin shrug.

'And what do these spirit beings get out of this?' asked Keziah.

Pablo put the glass down on the bar and raised himself to his full height, which wasn't very high.

'There are still parts of the universe, *Señorita*, where some beings find fulfilment from caring for other beings. You should be glad that you have arrived in such a place.'

'I see.'

'Why can't we see them?' I asked. 'These spirits?'

'All in good time, *Señor*. They are busy and important spirits. They want you to make yourselves comfortable first. Before the training starts.'

'The training?'

'It's mild and pleasurable.'

'So how long do we stay here' I asked. 'In all?'

'How long?' asked Pablo. 'Given the alternative, *Señor*, I would stay as long as possible.'

I digested this. 'So correct me if I'm wrong. Keziah and I are trapped in this cage forever, with only our memories and each other for the rest of time? We are then due for — training — by the spirits who have captured us.'

‘That’s an unfortunate way of putting it, *Señor*. All you need for happiness is here.’

‘In that case I’d like a large bowl of salted cashew nuts.’

‘Why cashew nuts?’ asked Keziah.

‘Because I like cashew nuts. Would you like one?’

‘Nuts from a bar?’ said Keziah. ‘Are you kidding?’

‘Come on, let’s go.’

I snatched the glass bowl of nuts.

‘In the last few days,’ I asked, placing a cashew on my tongue and sucking off the salt, ‘have you ever stopped and thought about what’s happened to you, and then felt a great blanket of gloom descending on you?’

‘Durr, Jamie.’

‘Well I don’t do blankets of gloom.’ We walked away, back to our quads.

‘Goodbye, Pablo!’ I called. Then I whistled to the sky, and called, ‘Come on then!’

‘I built this yesterday,’ I told Keziah.

Seconds later, a B-2 Stealth Bomber appeared low over the horizon. Its shadow flicked over our heads. The bomber released a precision-guided weapon which dropped deep into the thatched roof of Pablo’s bar.

It exploded with a blast that warmed our faces and bent some distant palm trees.

We watched the rubble and palm-thatch fall.

‘Happiness,’ I said.

‘I’ll see you around, then,’ replied Keziah, revving up the quad.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked.

‘Home.’

‘How do you do that?’

‘I drive to the edge of the world you’ve created, fly across the intervening ether, and park on my world.’ She twisted the throttle and buzzed away.

I reclined in my male-ish white leather armchair, the one with the footrest, the inbuilt magazine rack and the drinks holder. The log fire, spitting and crackling, lit up the white-painted walls of my lighthouse.

Tucked onto the nearby sofa, reading a novel, was Caroline. It had only been a matter of time.

‘That armchair is totally gross,’ she said.

‘You don’t think it goes with the lighthouse?’

‘It doesn’t go with anything.’

It’s true, at the time of the crash I was not Caroline’s current official boyfriend due to some inexplicable girl thing she had been going through. I hadn’t seen much of her for some weeks before the accident. But in memory of eighteen happy months of dating, I’d created her from my memories, along with the armchair that both she and my sister Lizzie had prohibited me from buying, my 1970s-retro lava lamp, and my collection of Laptops I Have Loved.

Next to the door was a nacho-and-dips dispenser that I’d lashed together from recollections of vending machines.

‘Caroline,’ I said. ‘Could you help me make some notes?’ She was taller than me (which doesn’t say a lot), thin, glasses, curly yellow hair. Long flowery skirt today— she was given to drastic changes of clothes and image. She was, however, consistently earnest and strict and clumsy and entirely lovely.

‘I’m not your personal slave you know,’ she sniffed.

'I know, I know. I just thought, *possibly*, here am I, dead ... all alone ...  
needing a helping hand ... and I thought, who better—'

Caroline sighed. 'Just get on with it.'

'Is that enough grovelling?'

'For the time being.'

'OK. Stardate 03 01 01—no, don't tut, Caroline, tutting is a bad habit—I  
need some way of keeping track of the passing days, and the Star Trek system  
is out there. I think I've been here about three days. Which makes it Stardate  
03 01 01. Who knows how long I've been here really or what time it is on  
Earth.

'Positive things:

'1. Despite being killed in a crash, I am well.

'2. It has been fun creating a new world—including you Caroline—and I  
can look forward to more of this.

'Negative things:

'1. I am sharing a cage with just one other living soul, and she has issues.

'2. I haven't met our mystery owners and I have absolutely no idea what  
they plan to do with us.

'3. Gloom and depression threaten to fall on me at any moment.'

'Do you want a view on that?' Caroline looked up from her notebook. She  
had a bookish primness and I'd long thought she needed to be unprimmed or  
de-primmed. I had, however, never quite managed the needful ravishing.

'No I do not,' I said.

'You should go see Keziah again,' she said.

'Why?'

'Because there's only two of you and you need each other.'

'But I've got you, Caroline.'

'For one thing, you haven't *got* me, and for another, the *me* that you've cut-and-pasted together is an anemic hotch-potch of your memories and fantasies.'

'You are?'

'Believe me.'

'You can still be pretty withering.'

'Nothing like the real thing.'

I considered this.

'You couldn't by any chance wash up the mugs?'

'Jamie, even if I'm a figment of your imagination, I'm not putting up with you being chauvinistic, self-absorbed and bone idle.'

*Perhaps I've recreated you too well*, I thought.

'I heard that,' said Caroline.

'All right, I'll do the mugs,' I said. 'Perhaps you could add a note to the log. "Even in the privacy of my own private head, figments of my imagination are getting at me." That's another one under negatives.'

'The point is—' said Caroline.

'Sorry.' I said. 'Sorry sorry sorry.'

You could, I found, hold yourself together pretty well through the days. But my spirit was somehow still locked in a sleep-and-wake cycle, and the evenings were tricky. At any moment a recreated Mini might appear from the depths of my memory, heading for my head. This wasn't Keziah paying a visit; it was just the bad memories rolling around.

Even when Slumber finally did his stuff, sleep was tricky too. I wasn't in control. My unconscious spirit seemed to kick around among mental debris for

a while, like a bored teenager. Then—also like a bored teenager—I always seemed to end up hanging around the same place, a holiday resort covered by a large Dome. It was pleasant enough—it seemed to hold all my happiest memories—but puzzling.

The following day—I'd spent the morning gliding the Space Shuttle into Edwards Airforce Base, one-handed, while eating a Thai Red Curry—I thought I'd visit Keziah. The Space Shuttle seemed overkill for crossing the small gap between our worlds, so I built a small biplane and buzzed off from Edwards.

Soon after leaving my landscape, Keziah's cloud-covered world came into view against the soft blue. I slowed the plane, enjoying the cloud-surfing.

I emerged from the clouds into a storm and a battlefield. Water was sluicing from the sky. But even through the curtains of rain I could see this wasn't a coherent landscape. Everything was the wrong size. Bits of cities. Giant syringes and razor blades. Big greyish blobs like fish eggs, that contained huge people-shapes haranguing each other. Several gallows. Lizzie's car. Everything was swaying up and down and jostling against everything else, as if were part of an ocean.

Bonfires burned. As I flew I noticed each bonfire had a person on it: sometimes an old man, sometimes a middle-aged woman, sometimes a version of Keziah herself.

I did fly over a couple of parks—in one I saw a very young version of Keziah being carried giggling on someone's shoulders, perhaps her dad—but they just seemed to make the jumble look lonelier than ever.

It didn't take long to decide that not only was I not going to land and declare myself willing to be served a drink and a little snack (which had been Plan A), I was going to get out as fast as possible and hope Keziah never noticed.

I swung the plane around to head for home and caught a glimpse of a building like a temporary office alone in a parking lot. It was defended by high fencing, floodlights, dogs and barbed wire.

My quad bike was parked next to the building. As I flew by, I thought I glimpsed Keziah at the main window, working at a desk. I saw her get up, perhaps disturbed by the clatter of the plane, and she looked out of the door.

It seemed best to circle the plane, smile and wave.

The plane was quite noisy, so I didn't catch all the swearwords, but I got the general impression.

Some hours later, I was part way through writing Keziah a letter—going through many drafts, because I didn't know what to say—when I heard a banging on the door. Since my lighthouse is a few hundred metres offshore, built on rocks, accessible only by rowing boat in calm seas, this was a surprise.

'Who is it?' I asked.

'Funny.'

I turned the wrought iron latch in the wooden door, got a brief glimpse of rocks, tossing foam and seagulls pitching and yawing in a fierce gale, and ushered Keziah in. She was windswept and wearing an oilskin.

We looked at each other for a moment.

‘You look like you need some chocolate.’ I magicked her a large blue-and-white striped mug of hot cocoa. ‘Marshmallows and whipped cream?’ She accepted this silently. ‘I’ll just leave a bar of chocolate here as well, if you need it,’ I said, placing a 400g bar of the darkest stuff on the wooden table.

Rain was dripping off Keziah and her furious expression had not moved. ‘My sisters always liked chocolate,’ I said lamely.

‘House rules,’ she said icily, sitting down. ‘Never come to my place uninvited.’

‘OK’

‘It’s private.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘And personal.’

‘Fine.’

‘And I haven’t got round to sorting—’

‘Fine. Sorry. *Sorry*. But *you* of course come to my place—’

‘Yours is clearly a fantasy playground. And anyway we needed to make contact.’ She snapped off one row of chocolate, broke it into three, and put one piece in. Not that it seemed to be lightening her mood.

Neither did the next two rows. Keziah, I thought parenthetically, must be one of those skinny people who can mainline on sugar and fat and never change shape. Me, I only have to look at three onion bhajis, a meat biriani, a chicken dhansak, a portion of rice and some naan bread and I put on weight. ‘My thoughts are still a bit ... jumbled,’ she went on.

‘It’s interesting the way you were in an office,’ I said.

‘I had some paperwork to finish.’

‘I see. And the people burning to death outside—’

Keziah snapped off another row of chocolate and looked at me, green eyes defiant.

‘The paperwork was the cases I was working on before I died. I just wanted to put my mind to rest about them.’

‘Fine,’ I said, hastily. ‘Good idea. Look, all I wanted was maybe set up some system so that we could communicate without intruding on each other.’

‘That’s what I came over to say,’ said Keziah.

‘I had this idea,’ I said, ‘I made some mobile phones. I’m not sure how they work, but they do work.’ I passed one over to her across the table. ‘I don’t think they need charging. We can fix up times and places to talk.’

‘All right,’ said Keziah, picking up the phone.

‘Also, I’ve been recreating a library of all my books and CDs. I’ve created my friend Caroline, who’s a librarian. She’s putting them in order. If you want to borrow any of them.’

‘Thank you,’ rising to go.

‘It might take your mind off things.’

‘It won’t.’

‘I’ll contact you. We’ll have a meal or something. Take the chocolate. How are you going to get home?’

‘I’ll walk.’

‘Across the water?’

‘And across the ether. If you want, you can hover a few inches off the ground.’

‘Hmm.’ I thought for a moment, then checked my ship's brass chronometer. ‘Not so easy. I’ve booked a force 9 hurricane in fifteen minutes.’

‘Can’t you delay it?’

'Not without reprogramming. Anyway I've got a better idea.' I went over and opened the door, a world of tossing sea and screaming wuffs of wind. 'Oh Dumbo...'

A giant wave crashed against the rocks at the base of the lighthouse, spotting the air with salt and dampness.

Dumbo the elephant flapped into view, wafting his big ear wings, steady as a rock despite the growing gale. He stretched down his trunk, hugged her with it, and lifted her gently onto his back.

'Bit more fun,' I said.

Keziah appeared to be bearing this wearily.

'Jamie,' she called down as Dumbo rose into the sky and the wind gusted.

'Have you talked to the HELP recently?'

'Isn't he a bit damaged?' I called up.

'Mine isn't,' she called down.

'No, I haven't.'

'Tomorrow.' Keziah's voice was now indistinct across the moan and splash of the oncoming storm.

'What about tomorrow?'

'Induction Day.'