

The Origin of Truth
by Tim Lebbon

They were stuck in a traffic queue. There was nowhere they could go. They couldn't help but see the melting man.

Doug wanted to turn around, cover his daughter's eyes and hide the sight from her innocent mind. But she had seen stuff just as bad over the last couple of days, and she would probably see a lot worse in the future. He could no longer shield her from the truth. In a normal world, it was only right that his concern translated into action, but the world today was so different from last week. Normal was a word that had lost its meaning.

Besides, she was fascinated.

There were nine television screens in the shop window, and all of them showed the same picture: the man sitting propped outside a baker's, a split bag by his side, crusty rolls and ice slices scattered across the hot pavement. His legs had disappeared from the knees down. He was watching the process, his face stretched in surprise—eyebrows raised, jaw lowered, brow furrowed—as his limbs turned to gas. The view was being captured by a telescopic lens mounted in a helicopter. The picture was hazy and shaky. The ultimate in victim TV, thought Doug. Somewhere in the north of France this man was dying. And here, now, in London, they were watching him.

"Nobody touch the windows," Doug said, even though he had locked them using his own master control. "And keep the cylinder open." There were three compressed air cylinders on the back seat next to Gemma. One had already run out, the second had been opened for several minutes.

"What about when they run out, Dad?" Gemma said sensibly. Damn her, she was so sensible. "What then? Will the air come in from outside?"

"It already is," Lucy-Anne muttered from the passenger seat.

Doug glared at his wife but she did not turn, did not register his attention.

"It won't, honey," he said instead. "The pressure inside will keep it out."

"But what if those things can crawl?"

There was no answer to that, so Doug did not attempt one. Instead he glanced at the man on the screens, saw that his stomach was already possessed of a sick, fluid motion. He leant on the horn. "Get a bloody move on." He wanted Gemma to see as little of this as possible.

"If they were here, honey, we'd know it by now." Lucy-Anne sighed. "They'd have started on the car."

"Don't talk like that!" Doug said.

"It's true!"

"Yes," he replied weakly, "but not ... in front of Gemma."

"Why is nobody helping him?" his daughter asked without conviction. She was only ten, but she had learned a lot over the past few days. Like sometimes you just can't help people. If they can't help themselves ... and against this, no one could ... then it's best to leave them and forget about them, pretend that

they never were.

In minutes, this man they were watching from afar would no longer exist, and hours later the same thing would be happening right where they were.

As the traffic moved off Doug heard his daughter turn up the air release valve on the second cylinder. He took one last glance at the TV screens and saw why.

The picture was flickering and spinning as the nanos started work on the helicopter.

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Half an hour later they edged out of the city, along with what seemed like a million other people. Doug was unsure as to why the countryside seemed to offer any better protection from what was soon to come. It was survival instinct, he supposed, an urge to flee that was perhaps a racial hangover from all the wars and ethnic conflicts there had been down through the centuries. As children his grandparents had been evacuated to families they did not know to live lives they could not understand, and now he was subjecting his wife and daughter to the same thing. Leaving what they knew for what they did not. Except in this case, there was no escaping the reason for their flight. No running from what could—and would—be everywhere. May as well try to leave gravity behind.

But he had to do something. There was no argument. There was always a chance.

He kept in the fast lane of the motorway doing little more than twenty miles per hour. His right ankle was aching where he had it tensed on the gas pedal, yearning to press it down and lay out more miles between them and the city. Other cars tried to dart in and out when spaces became available, and there were more than a few fender benders. Normally motorists would stop and help. Now they simply slowed down, joined forces temporarily to shove the bumped cars aside with their own, and went on their way.

It was a scorching summer day. Everyone had their windows up. Doug caught the eye of a few drivers and there was always mistrust there, an animal fear of the unknown—even unknown people—in these times of peril. It made him realize how little it had all really changed, how far humanity had not come, even though it liked to think itself way and above the rest of nature. There were those scientists who had claimed to be a few years away from the Theory of Everything. Now those selfsame egotistical bastards were clouds of gas radiating outward from the hub of humankind's doom.

Where that center was, few people knew any more. Those who did were dead, mixing themselves with the scientists who had killed them, the laboratories they had been working in, the clothes they were wearing, the test tubes and the microscopes and the particle accelerators and the cultures and the notebooks full of folly. ...

"Dad, I want a pee," Gemma whined.

"Oh honey, you'll have to hold it for a while," Lucy-Anne said.

Doug glanced across at his wife. He'd been ignoring her. He saw her afresh for the briefest instant and realized how much he loved her. He held back a

startled sob.

"But Mum—"

"Your mum's right, Gemma. Hold on tight and you can go soon."

"When?"

"Soon."

"But—"

"Gemma," Doug said, his voice low, "did you see the man on the TV?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "He was all ... going."

"He had a nasty ... it was a bug, Gemma. It's in the air where he was, and it's spreading. We don't want to catch it, and if we stop—"

"And I don't want you to catch it!" she sputtered out, bursting into tears and gasping great hitched sobs into the car. "I don't want you and Mummy to catch it!"

Doug felt his temper rising and hated himself for it. She was terrified, she'd seen people dying on TV, dying, for Christ's sake. At her age the worst he'd ever seen was a squashed cat by the side of the road. He'd put flowers there, tied to a lamppost. The cat had gone the next day. His child's mind had seen death as a temporary state. Lucy-Anne had turned fully in her seat and was hugging Gemma, soothing her with gentle Mum-words that Doug could not hear. He reached out and patted his wife's behind, giving her a quick squeeze: all going to be all right, he tried to impart. He knew she'd know he was lying, but comfort was important. Civilization was important. Without routine and hope, civilization would crumble.

He remembered the pictures from Rome, beamed in seconds before the cameras were swamped and stripped and dismantled to their component atoms by the nanos: a great cloud looming in the distance; a soup of all things organic, metallic, plastic, historic, rock and water and air. The nanos took it all, dismantled everything and sputtered it across the land, reality's white noise.

Oh my God, Lucy-Anne had gasped, squeezing his hand, spilling a tear of red wine from her glass. Surely they can do something about it?

They? Well, the scientists. The ... But she had trailed off as the view jumped further north, showing the whole horizon as an indistinct blur, the land and air merged. Armageddon moved with the wind, the nanos flowing with the air and crawling through the ground itself, so it was said.

"Doug, she really needs to pee."

He looked in the rearview mirror and saw Gemma rocking in his wife's grip. A horn tooted, tires squealed, he glanced forward and slammed on his brakes just as he heard the doom-laden crunch of metal and glass impacting. The accident was several cars in front of them in the slow lane, a Mondeo twisted under the tailgate of a big wagon. The wagon was still moving. Even as a terrible flame licked from beneath the Mondeo's bonnet, and as the driver struggled to open a door distorted shut, the wagon was still moving. Its driver knew that to stop was to die, eventually.

"Oh Jesus," Lucy-Anne whispered, and Doug put his foot down on the gas. At

least something had changed—rubberneckers had altered their priorities, and they now wanted to leave the scene as soon as possible. Maybe it was the danger from fire, but more likely it was the heat of guilt.

"You can go on the floor in the back," Doug said. "You hear me, honey?"

"I can't pee on the floor," Gemma said in disgust. "It's horrible!"

"Do as Daddy says if you're really desperate. If not, hold on, and you can go when we stop."

"When do we stop?" Doug asked, and wished he hadn't. He saw Lucy-Anne staring at him but he kept facing forward.

"I don't know. What's the plan? Do we have one, other than leaving our home like ... like rats from ... ?"

"Hey, come on, it was you as much as me! When they reported the first case in Paris—"

"I'm sorry, Doug," she said quickly, and she squeezed his leg. He liked that, he always had. A touch could speak volumes.

In the back, Gemma worked her way down between the seats. Soon the acrid smell of urine filled the car.

Doug wanted to close his eyes, cry refreshing tears. There was a hot knot in his stomach: fear for his family; love for his daughter; a hopeless embarrassment at what she had been forced to do.

"Urine is sometimes used to treat the effects of jellyfish stings," Gemma said suddenly, "especially in the tropics. Sometimes they can't get normal medicines quickly enough, so they pee on the victims."

He glanced over his shoulder at his daughter, crushed between the seats, knickers around her knees. What a strange thing to say. ...

She stared back at him, wide-eyed.

He looked at Lucy-Anne, who appeared not to have heard, then decided to say nothing. There had been something in Gemma's young eyes—an uncomfortable sense of loss in a day full of terror—and he did not want to scare her any more.

An hour later they left the motorway. Doug turned north, and Lucy-Anne did not object. Her silent acquiescence depressed him more than he could have imagined.

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Within half an hour of leaving the M4 the traffic had thinned out considerably. People could leave the city, but it was not so easy for most of them to relinquish the motorways, as if the main roads could lead them somewhere safer.

It was almost midday.

Doug turned on the radio and scanned the channels. Mindless pop, classical

tunes linked end to end without a presenter, a conversation on football which he recognized as being about a match played a year ago. A semblance of normality, but underpinned with the terrible hidden truth: that things had gone bad, and might never be good again. He slipped a tape into the player and REM started to piss him off.

Lucy-Anne twiddled her thumbs and only occasionally looked through the windscreen. Doug touched her leg now and then to reassure her, and also to comfort himself. He wished she would do the same back, but he had always been the more tactile one, the one who needed a touch as well as a smile to make him feel good. He glanced at her every now and then, wanting to do more but knowing that there was nothing he could do. She knew as well as he that they were not escaping, but merely prolonging the inevitable.

He thought about death, and tried to divert his mind elsewhere. "You okay, honey?"

Gemma whispered that yes, she was okay, but she did not look up.

"So where are we going?" Lucy-Anne said to her hands.

Doug did not answer for a while. A recent signpost had pointed north to Birmingham and Coventry, but their direction so far had been dictated by chance as much as design. "North," he said, because away from France was the best idea.

Lucy-Anne looked up. "Scotland," she whispered.

"Well, we could try, but it depends on fuel and--"

"No, we must go to Scotland! Uncle Peter lives near Inverness, we can go there, he'll have us, he'll look after us." She was looking at him now, and her face had come alight. He hated the false hope he saw there.

"Who's Uncle Peter?" Gemma said from the back seat.

Doug snorted. "Precisely."

"Doug, he's not a bad sort."

"You haven't seen him in over ten years. Hell, I think the last time was our bloody wedding!"

"He's a bit eccentric, that's all."

"Does that mean he does odd things?" Gemma asked. "Only, I don't mind that. I quite like people who do odd things."

"We'll go to see him, then," Lucy-Anne said. "Won't we, Dad?"

Doug nodded slowly, already beaten. They would go to see him, sure they would, but what then? That's what was truly bothering him: What then? He had no answer, and seeking it would make him give in, curl into a ball and die.

"Edgar Allan Poe's dying words were, 'Lord help my soul,' " Gemma muttered under her breath.

"What?" Doug asked.

"Huh?"

"What did you say, honey?" Some cars passed the other way, one of them flashing its lights, but he ignored them. As far as he knew Gemma had never read any Poe, let alone read about the man.

"Nothing, Dad."

"She's tired and scared, Doug," Lucy-Anne said quietly, so that the sound of the engine would cover her words. "Let's just aim north and leave it at that. When we get there ..." She trailed off without substituting the word if for when.

Doug mentally did it for her.

Another car passed with flashing lights, its driver waving frantically as he sped by.

"Now what?" Doug slowed the car and eased it around a bend in the A-road. When he saw what faced them his foot slipped from the accelerator, and the car drifted onto the grass verge and came to a halt. He forgot to use the brakes. For a while, he forgot even to breathe.

Lucy-Anne was a good mother. She twisted in her seat and motioned Gemma to her, holding her yet again and shielding the girl's eyes with the back of her seat.

"Get us out of here," she said. "Doug, get us out of here. Doug, wake up ..."

As the men looked up and saw him staring at them, Doug shoved the car into reverse. He slammed his foot on the gas and glanced in the rearview mirror. If there was another car coming they would meet, crash and burn. At least he hoped they would burn; he did not want to be left alive for these men to be able to get him, and to Lucy-Anne and Gemma, and do to them what they were doing to the family on the road ahead.

It was the dog that shocked Doug more than anything. Why the dog?

The engine screamed as the car slewed across the road. He glanced back at the scene receding in front of them and saw that the men had gone back to their business. It did not matter. He did not let up on the gas until he had clumsily steered back around the bend and spun into a farm gate to turn around. He smelled an acidic burning, the car crunched against a stone wall, Gemma finally struggled from Lucy-Anne's grip and screamed.

Doug felt like screaming as well. Yesterday, normality, tainted with disquiet over what was apparently happening in the Mediterranean, and a subdued fear that it may come closer.

Today, this.

He shook his head and flicked tears across the dashboard. "We'll try another road."

Lucy-Anne did not answer. She was still trying to hug Gemma, protect her, hide her away from whatever had gone wrong with the world today. If only it were so easy.

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That afternoon there was a government announcement over the radio. The Prime Minister gave "grave news" about the southern suburbs of London—they were gone—but he assured people that everything was being done that could be done to find a solution to this crisis. Doug wondered just how far away the bastard actually was. The Arctic Circle, perhaps?

Gemma laughed childishly and said: "Tibia, fibula, tarsus, metatarsals, phalanges."

Early that evening they saw the first signs for Edinburgh. The radio had said no more.

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Uncle Peter was more than eccentric, he was plain insane ... and he wanted people to recognize his insanity. His whole estate was floodlit against the night, revealing all of what he had done. Some of it, Doug thought, should have stayed well hidden.

As they cruised along his long, winding driveway, the first signs of this madness presented themselves. Every tree bordering the road had had its lower branches lopped off, the wounds daubed with black tar to seal them, the dead timber disposed of out of sight. Nailed to the naked trunks were animal corpses, a species for each tree: a squirrel on a sycamore, a sparrow on an elm, a deer on an oak. It was as if Uncle Peter were a game hunter, but he had run out of room for trophies inside his house.

And the house ... this was fairly unusual as well.

"Holy shit," Doug muttered under his breath as they rounded the final bend in the drive. It was a huge old monolith, stonework sills crumbling with age, windows distorted out of shape by the deadly subsidence plaguing the property and promising to drag it, eventually, back into the stony ground. From plinth to eaves the house looked quite normal, if dishevelled.

Above that, the gargoyles took over.

They were all huge, fashioned from plastic and fibreglass instead of stone, and more gruesome because of that. Garish colors and unsettling designs shouted across at them as they coasted to a halt. Bloody teeth, split throats, dragon-eyes, sabre-toothed monstrosities that would surely be more than able to fulfil their duties ... if, indeed, these things had the same employ as their more traditional greystone cousins. Stark artificial light gave them an added sense of the grotesque. They looked like a kid's book made real.

"Mad as a hatter," Doug said. "Uncle Peter has gone AWOL I think, Lucy."

"He always was a bit offbeat," she whispered, aghast.

"Wow," was all Gemma could say. "Wow."

The car stank. All three of them had urinated—Doug had refused to stop, even when Lucy-Anne had begged him and cried and cursed as she tried to miss her seat as she pissed—and they had not opened the windows for eleven hours. The fuel gauge had been kissing red for fifty miles, and for the last twenty Doug

had been silently blessing Volkswagen's caution. The food they had managed to bring with them had gone bad in the heat, a pint of milk had spilled, the oxygen cylinders had run out hundreds of miles back ... the engine was making a sickly grinding noise ... basically, they were on their last legs.

The car rattled and sighed as he turned off the ignition. He was certain it would never start again, not without a great deal of pampering and cajoling. He was equally certain that he would never need to do either.

They sat staring at the house. Doug was expecting mad Uncle Peter to come running out at any moment, a shotgun in one hand and a bottle of Scotch in the other, pumping a hail of lead at the car as he toasted his own questionable health. But the door remained closed, all was calm. Several crows flitted to and fro across the roof, confused by the light, avoiding the gargoyles wherever they could.

"Crows," Gemma said. "Family Corvidae. For instance, *Corvus corax*, *Corvus corcone*, *Corvus frugilegus*, *Corvus splendens*, and the magpie, *Pica pica*. Chiefly insectivorous, in winter it will become omnivorous. Earthworms and grubs. And seeds. It eats ... it eats grubs and seeds ..." She drifted off, leaning between the front seats, staring through the windscreen at the frolicking birds on the roof of the house.

"Where ... ?" Doug said. "Honey? Where did you learn stuff like that? They teach you that at school?"

Gemma turned to him, glaring blankly. Her mouth hung slightly open and a string of drool was threatening to spill out. "Huh?"

"Honey, what's wrong?" Not now, he thought. Don't let her be ill now, not with so little time left ...

"Dad, I'm so thirsty," she said. Her voice was weak, diluted. Not as strong as it had been moments before. Not as definite.

"Gemma, how do you know all that about crows-?"

"Leave her, Doug," Lucy-Anne said. "Let's just get her in, can we? For God's sake? We need a rest."

Doug nodded, smoothed Gemma's hair behind her ears, tried to stretch his legs. He could hear the concern in Lucy-Anne's voice, and the doubt, and the fact that she was as unsettled as he. Gemma had never been very good at school ... had never taken much of an interest in anything ... had been on the verge of being sent to a special school for slow learners.

Corvus corax, *Corvus corcone*, *Corvus frugilegus* ... Christ, where the hell did she get that from?

"Ahhhh," a voice boomed, and Doug's door was snatched open. He jerked back, gasping in relief at the fresh air gushing in, wondering at the same instant what he was inhaling, whether the nanos were here already, inside him now, starting work on his lungs so that the next breath he drew and let out would mist red in front of him.

"Uncle Peter?" Lucy-Anne said.

"Thought I might see some of my folk over the next day or two," the voice said. Then a man leaned down next to the car to give the voice a face. A wild face indeed, with unruly tufts of hair and cheeks veined with evidence of

years of alcohol abuse. His eyes, though, they were different. Mad, yes, but intelligent too.

"Sorry to say," Uncle Peter said, "there's nothing I can do for any of us. But still. It will be nice to have company when the time comes."

Doug, his wife, and his daughter heaved themselves from the car, all of them patiently helped by Lucy-Anne's Uncle Peter. He held them when their legs bowed, their muscles cramped, and he wiped tears from Gemma's face when she cried. When Lucy-Anne went to him he hugged her close and closed his eyes. Doug felt a brief but intense moment of jealousy, unreasonable yet unavoidable, and he gathered Gemma into his arms as if to ward off his uncertainty.

"Amazing house," he said, staring up at the grotesque decoration three stories up.

"Made them myself," Peter said. "I must be a fucking fruitcake!"

Laughing, they left the mad night behind and went inside.

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"London went hours ago," Peter said. "So it said on the TV." He was peeling potatoes while Doug diced some vegetables. Lucy-Anne and Gemma were washing and changing in one of the upstairs bedrooms. None of them felt like sleeping. "Haven't been there in a decade. Now all I want to do is to go to Trafalgar Square and feed the pigeons."

"My father lives in London," Doug said. He took his time with each carrot he slit, relishing the hard, crunchy sound. It was a solid sound. Firm. Not too far south of here, solid and firm were words that no longer held meaning.

"Well," said Peter, but he did not continue.

They worked in silence for a while, Doug thinking around the subject of death, Peter perhaps doing the same. Everything Doug did now was tainted with the promise of their own demise: this food would not be fully digested when the time came; he may never sleep again, it was a waste of time ... so no more dreams. Gemma would not grow up to go to university, marry, bear her own children. ...

"It's just so unfair!" he shouted, throwing the knife at the flagstone floor. He regretted it instantly, felt a cool hand of shame tickle at his scalp. He had not seen this man for ten years, and here he was trying his best to destroy his kitchen.

And there's another irony, he thought. In days ... hours ... this kitchen won't be here.

Peter glanced at him but said nothing. He continued peeling potatoes.

Doug wondered whether the old nutcase was as far gone as he led to believe. "Why all the lights? And the animals on the trees? And the gargoyles?"

Peter shook his hands dry and transferred the vegetables into a huge pan of boiling water. "In reverse order: the gargoyles to keep people away from the

house; the animals on the trees to keep trespassers from my land; the lights so that people can see what I've done. It took a long time. Why have it all hidden half the time?"

Doug smiled at the simple logic of it. "But why keep people from the house?"

The old man shrugged. "Don't like people, mostly."

There was a clatter of feet from the hallway and Gemma and Lucy-Anne hurried in. They both had wet hair, loose-fitting clothes that Peter had found in some mysteriously well-appointed wardrobe and rosy complexions that made Doug's heart ache.

"Your turn," Peter said.

"Huh?"

"Shower. Change. Forgive my bluntness, but you smell."

"Daddy smells, Daddy smells!"

He relented, and after giving his wife and daughter a kiss—a hard hug for Gemma, a long, lingering kiss for Lucy-Anne—he made his way up the curving staircase to their bedrooms.

There were towels on the bed, a basket of fruit on the dressing table, a bottle of red wine uncorked and breathing beside the bed, two glasses, and a door between their and Gemma's bedrooms. Thought I might see some of my folk over the next day or two, the mad old fool had said. And though he had claimed to hate people, Doug could see that this was what Peter had wanted more than anything else.

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After a hearty meal of steak, fried potatoes, vegetables and great, thick chunks of garlic butter-soaked bread, the four of them made their way into Peter's living room and sat down with a drink. Gemma went to sleep almost immediately, nestled against Peter's arm, and the three adults—though tired—sat talking until the sun set fire to the day outside. There was a strange atmosphere between them, a feeling that they had known each other forever and that there was not a chasm of ten years between this and their last meeting. Lucy-Anne and Peter seemed especially comfortable, finding it unnecessary to resort to reliving old times or talking about absent—or dead—family members to get by. Instead their talk was of Gemma, what she had done in her short life to date, what she wanted to do. Her prospects.

And for a while, Doug was happy to let this go. He half-closed his eyes, enjoying the sense of the brandy sweeping through his veins and setting his stiff muscles afire, listening to Peter and Lucy-Anne's tempered voices. He found solace in their tone if not their words. He soon tried to tune out what they were saying—because none of it held true meaning any more—and enjoy instead the peace their voices conveyed, the sheer pleasantness of this unreal scene of family conviviality.

But then Gemma stirred and began to mutter in her sleep.

"Never done that before ..." Lucy-Anne said idly. And she said no more.

None of them did. There was nothing to do but listen to what the little girl was saying.

"First birds were in the Jurassic period, two hundred and thirteen million years ago," she mumbled into Peter's side.

The old man stared down at her wide-eyed, but he did not move. Moving may have disturbed her.

"First mammals and dinosaurs in the Triassic two hundred and forty-eight million years ago, but the dinosaurs reached their peak in the Cretaceous, one hundred and forty-four million years back. First land plants in Silurian times, four hundred and thirty-eight million years ago." She struggled slightly then, frowning, as if searching for something hidden behind whatever she had been saying. "First humans. Couple of million years ago. Pleistocene epoch."

She sat up and opened her eyes. "Blink of an eye."

"Gemma?" Doug whispered, but then she began to cry.

"Bright girl you've got here, folks."

"Gemma? Honey?"

Gemma's face crumpled as sleep left her behind. Tears formed in her eyes, her nose wrinkled. "Dad," she said. "Mum ..." Then the tears came in earnest and Doug darted across the room, lifted his daughter from Peter's side, hugged her close to him.

"Gemma, what's wrong babe?" Lucy-Anne said. Her voice betrayed none of Doug's concern or confusion. Hadn't she heard what Gemma was saying? Hadn't it registered?

"Got a headache," she sniffled into Doug's shoulder. "And I need to pee."

"Here." Lucy-Anne took Gemma and carried her from the room, and seconds later the two men heard her footsteps on the bare timber risers.

Doug was breathing heavily. Something about the last minute had scared him badly, some facet of Gemma's sleep-talking sat all wrong with what was happening, what they were going through.

"Well, I bought her a dinosaur book," he said. "All kids like dinosaurs, but I'm sure ... well, that was pretty detailed."

"Like I said, bright girl."

"We're all going to die, aren't we?" Doug said. "You, me, Lucy-Anne ... Gemma."

"Of course," Peter nodded. "Nothing we can do about it. But we have some time, don't know how much but there's some. How about we make it the best we can?" He smiled and poured Doug another drink. "Here. Been saving this for a special day."

"End of the world?"

The old man surprised him by laughing out loud. "The end of the world. Hell

yes, why not? Might as well enjoy it before those damn little robots get their grubby mitts on it."

The two men drank to that.

"Sun's coming up," Doug said after a couple of minutes. "Today will be the day, I reckon."

"We'll go for a walk," Peter said suddenly. "I have a large estate, you know. A herd of deer, a lake, and a walk up into the mountains that you'd kill for. It'll be wondrous. I'll do a lunch for us. I bake my own bread, you'll faint with delight when you taste it, it's simply heavenly. And I'll even take a few bottles of wine I've been—"

"Saving for a suitable occasion?"

Peter nodded. "Absolutely. A suitable occasion. You'll see, we'll have a fine day. We'll watch the sunset from the mountains. And if it's not the sunset we get to see ... well, we'll watch the other from up there. I imagine from what I've heard about it, it will be quite a sight."

"Reality being unmade before our eyes. All matter unstitched. Quite a sight, yes."

"Ah, yes." Peter sat back in his huge chair and steeped his fingers, peering between the arches.

Doug wondered what he saw. "You're enjoying this."

"I suppose I am. Not the circumstances, mind. Just ... well, having you here."

"I thought you didn't like people."

Peter looked surprised for a moment, then lowered his eyes slightly. It was the only time Doug ever saw a hint of humility or shame in the old man. "Well, generally maybe ... but it's different. You're my folk. And as I said, I knew some of my folk would turn up here sooner or later."

He raised his glass, and the new sunlight streaming through the windows set the liquid aflame.

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Before they left the house Peter found Doug in the downstairs bathroom, trying to contact someone on his mobile phone. They'd already tried the TV that morning ... a blank screen and an endless repetition of God Save the Queen. "Selling your shares?" The old man smiled.

Doug could only stare at him for a few seconds, trying to see whatever was behind the joke. "Well actually, I have a couple of friends living in Newcastle. I thought I'd ... try them. See if they're still there."

"Any reply?"

"No. No, none. Line must be down, or maybe they're working on it. Or something."

Peter stared back, chewing his bottom lip for a few seconds, obviously turning something over in his mind before he said it. Then he put his hands on Doug's shoulders and drew him close, so close that their noses were almost touching. When he spoke, Doug smelled brandy and tobacco. It was a sweet smell, lively, not at all unpleasant. It inspired a surprising nostalgia for his long-dead grandfather.

"Doug," the old man said, "let it go. We'll likely be dead before sunset, all of us, and there's absolutely nothing you, me, or anyone can do about it. And the crazy thing is ... it doesn't matter."

"How do you figure that?" Doug said, anger rising like the sun in his chest. "Why doesn't it matter that my wife and my daughter are about to die?"

"Everyone is going to die. Everything is being ruined. Within a day or two, there will be nothing left of the surface of this planet, just a sea of mindless, voracious mini-robots. Nothing animal, mineral, metal. And when there's nothing left for them to destroy, I guess they start to take each other apart, reconstruct, take apart again. Everything will be pointless, forgotten, and the only physical thing left of humanity will be a few space probes wandering the stars and a century's worth of radio and TV transmissions winging their way into deep space. Nobody to grieve, nobody to remember, nobody to miss us. It will be like we've never even existed. Nothing ... will ... matter."

He squeezed Doug's shoulders as if trying to knead the truth into his unwilling muscles.

Doug stepped to the window, pulled the net curtain aside and stared out at the rising sun. It seemed bigger than usual, redder, and as he glanced away he retained its image on his retinas. Looking at the hillsides, the forests and the sloping moorland leading up into the mountains, he saw the sun's red afterimage touch them all.

It was a beautiful sunrise, maybe because it was one of the first that Doug had ever truly taken note of. It could be that dust in the air further south—dust, or those things—was catching the sunlight and spreading it across the sky, breaking up its colors and splashing an artist's palette of light over the lowlands. But if this were the case, then it was a gift from the end of the world. There was no way he could refuse it.

He thought about what Peter had said. He didn't agree with him—he thought that everything mattered now more than ever, because love was still here even when hope was not—and then he turned back to the old man.

"Well we can't let it beat us, I suppose."

Peter nodded.

Doug smiled back, pleased at the compromise he had made.

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They circled around the back of the house and headed toward the forest smothering the lower hills. Peter carried a rucksack bulging with fresh bread and choice cuts from his fridge. Lucy-Anne shouldered another bag, which

clinked as she walked.

Doug carried Gemma. He sang softly, enjoying the look of contentment and happiness on her face, loving the way the corners of her mouth turned up whenever he spoke, as he had always loved it. There was nothing more wonderful in the world than seeing his daughter smile when she saw him. It told him that he was doing all the right things.

"Alright sweetie?" he asked quietly.

She planted a kiss on his cheek, leaned back and smiled at him. "Yes thanks, Daddy. You can let me down now, I'd like to walk."

"It's a long way."

She shrugged, looked up into the blue sky. "I don't care. It's a nice day for a walk. It's good for you, anyway."

He stopped and lowered Gemma to the ground. She hurried away and his vision blurred, the tears came, but he fought them back. If she saw him crying, her final day would be an unhappy one. He could never do that to her, no matter what Peter said, however sure he was that nothing mattered any more. He could never hurt his baby.

Soon they were in the woods. Peter pointed out dozens of species of flower and heather to Gemma, who nodded attentively and smelled the blooms and pricked her fingers on the heather, laughing. Lucy-Anne fell into step with Doug and held his hand, saying nothing. Their touch was communication enough, every slight squeeze of fingers or palm sending messages of love, companionship, and comfort back and forth. It made him happy.

Squirrels leapt from branch to branch, flashes of wondrous red. Birds sang from high in the trees, and occasionally fluttered around below the cover, snatching morsels from the ground or simply singing their unknowable songs.

Twenty minutes after leaving the house Doug shuffled the mobile phone from his pocket and dropped it as he walked. He did not worry about littering. And he felt no parting pangs.

Newcastle was only two hundred miles away.

"There used to be gold in these here hills," Peter called out from where he had walked on ahead. "Even did a bit of prospecting myself. Swilled sediment around in a pan for weeks on end, anyway."

"Did you find anything?" Lucy-Anne asked.

"Not a sliver, a filing, or a nugget. But it was a nice few weeks, I'd take lunch with me and a good book, spend the whole day out in the wild and get back just before it was dark enough to get lost." He had stopped, and stood staring through the last of the trees at the hillside looming above them, hands on his hips, shoulders rising and falling as he struggled for breath.

He was an old man, Doug kept having to remind himself. They were walking too fast, rushing to get from here to there, wherever here and there were, because of what would take them soon. "We should slow down," he said. "There's no hurry."

Lucy-Anne glanced at him and smiled, her eyes glittering with tears she would never cry.

"Strange how some metals are so valuable," Peter continued, in a world of his own. "Strange how we're so ignorant, we think we can classify the importance of all the things that go to make the world. Rock, now. Rock. That should be the most valuable. Holds it all together, after all."

"I thought gravity did that," Doug mumbled.

"Lithium is the lightest metal there is," Gemma said. She had been skipping along in front of them, pausing occasionally to bend down and stare at a flower or a rock or some crawling thing. Now she became still, and as she looked up into the sky—there was nothing there to see, nothing but blue—she continued. Her voice was the voice Doug had always known, but her words, her tone, her knowledge was pure mystery.

"It floats on water, has a specific gravity of nought-point-five-seven. Relative atomic mass six-point-nine-four-one. It's used in batteries, and its compounds can be employed to treat manic depression. It was named in eighteen-eighteen by Jons Berzelius." She sat down heavily and leaned forward, her head resting between her knees, talking at the ground. "But of course, it was his student Arfwedson who actually discovered it."

Then she was sick.

"What the hell was that?" Doug called. "Eh? Peter? What was that?" He ran to his little girl as he shouted, barely wondering why he expected the old man to know what Gemma was talking about.

Lucy-Anne reached her first and scooped her up, ignoring the spatter of sick that fell across her front. "Honey?" she said. "You okay? You feel okay?"

"Headache," Gemma said weakly, her face buried in her mother's neck.

Doug reached them and stood behind Lucy-Anne, smoothing damp hair from Gemma's pale face. She was sweating, drips of it ran down and pooled darkly on Lucy-Anne's shirt, and she stank of vomit.

Yesterday dinosaurs, today lithium, Doug thought. Hell, I know nothing about lithium. Is this what they teach kids in primary school nowadays?

Peter strolled back to them, concern creasing his brow. "What was that she said?" he asked.

"Does it matter? She's ill." Lucy-Anne was angry, Doug could tell that the moment she spoke, but she did not wish to reveal it to her old uncle.

Peter, however, was wise behind that crazy beard. "Sorry Lucy-Anne. Thoughtless of me. It's just ... well, you've a very bright girl there."

"Research into nanotechnology began in the early '80s," Gemma mumbled. "And there were lots of scientists convinced—"

"Gemma," Doug said, confused and afraid and upset. It was not his daughter saying these things, not the Gemma he knew, the little girl who loved the Teletubbies and Winnie the Pooh and riding her tricycle and helping him dig the garden, so long as he moved all the worms out of the way because they were icky.

This was not her.

"Wait, leave her, listen," Peter said.

"—that it would be the new engineering. The Japanese created the first robots small enough to travel through veins, shredding fatty deposits or cancerous cells. The AT&T Bell laboratories in New Jersey constructed gears smaller in diameter than a human hair, and an electric motor a tenth of a millimeter across was built ... and then it went top secret, and the various bodies involved started turning the positive research to more warlike ends." There was a pause, just long enough to mark a change of tone. "As always, Man is distinguished only by his foolishness, and nothing good can come of him."

"Gemma, please honey ..." Lucy-Anne said, and there was such a note of helplessness in her voice that it froze them all, for just a second or two.

Then Gemma whined, cried for a few seconds more and fell asleep.

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They could not wake her.

Doug and Lucy-Anne refused to leave her side, so Peter hurried away and soaked his shirt in a nearby stream. He squeezed it over Gemma's face as Doug held her in his arms. The water splashed on her skin, ran across her closed eyelids—they were twitching as her eyes rolled behind them—and they even forced some of it between her lips.

But Gemma would not wake up.

"We have to go back," Lucy-Anne said. "Get her to bed, make her warm." Her voice cracked as she spoke, and Doug could see the truth of their situation in her eyes even as her mouth tried to deny it.

"You know there's no point, honey," he said carefully. "By the time we get back to the house it'll be lunchtime, and I doubt we'll set out again before ... the end of the day. And ..." He looked up at Peter where he stood a little distance away, giving the family the space he assumed they needed. "Well, Gemma will be as comfortable up in the hills as she will in some bed hidden away indoors."

Lucy-Anne's mouth pursed tightly as she held back tears. "I wanted her to be awake when we died," she said quietly. "Is that selfish of me?"

Doug felt his face burning and his nose tingling as tears came. He had been thinking the same thing. "We'll be together," he said, "whether she's awake or asleep."

"What was she saying?" Peter asked quietly. "About the nanos? She was talking about the nanos, wasn't she? Have there been programs on television, documentaries, news items? Never watch it myself, but it seems to me that was all pretty technical for a pretty little girl like Gemma."

"It wasn't her talking," Doug said, and he hugged her tight to his chest. She was warm and twitching slightly in his arms. Her eyelids flexed as her eyes rolled. He looked up at Peter. "Can we go now?"

Peter frowned and wanted to say more, Doug could see that. But the old man nodded and smiled, and waved them onward. "You carry her for now," he said to

Doug. "I'll take her from you when you get tired."

"And then I'll have her," Lucy-Anne said. She stayed close to Doug, reaching out every few steps to stroke her daughter's hair or touch her husband's face.

The going was more difficult, the hillside becoming steeper as they emerged from the forest, but the views did much to alleviate the pain Doug was already feeling in his back and legs. His daughter may only be small, but asleep like this she was a dead weight. Dead people are heavier, he seemed to remember reading somewhere, and the thought chilled him. But then he almost smiled. When they died, they would weigh nothing at all.

"Lovely view of the house and gardens from about here," Peter said, letting them pause and look back down the way they had come.

Doug lowered his daughter to the ground. She groaned slightly, mumbled something, but he didn't try too hard to hear what it was. He was afraid it would be something he did not wish to know.

Peter was right. The forest coated the hillside way down into the valley, and at its edge sat his house, its grounds and the winding driveway leading down to the road. Thankfully the animals and gargoyles were well hidden from this distance, so the scene took on a sense of magnificence and innocence, untainted by an old man's paranoid foibles. It was also possible too to see just how isolated this place was. Roads crisscrossed the countryside here and there, but the patchwork of fields which Doug was used to in the more farm-oriented lands to the south was all but absent here. The land was retained entirely by nature.

"I'll take a turn now," Peter said, stooping to scoop Gemma into his arms.

"Peter, come on, you're not the young man you used to be." Doug reached out and tried to take Gemma from his arms, but the old man's expression was one of such hurt that he stepped back and raised his hands in supplication. "Just don't overdo it," Doug said. "I can't see me and Lucy-Anne carrying the both of you."

They continued uphill, Doug and Lucy-Anne walking on either side of Peter so that they could constantly touch their daughter, hold her hand, chatter away in an attempt to wake her up.

"How much further?" Lucy-Anne asked after another few minutes.

"We've no destination," Peter said. "Tell me when you're happy to stop, and we'll stop."

She nodded. "I want to walk forever. If another footstep will give us another second, I want to keep walking."

Doug knew what she meant, but he was also aware that she was not serious. They could fight for another few seconds, or they could sit and talk and eat a final meal, drink a last glass of wine.

He would never make love to his wife again; never feel her sigh on his cheek as she came; never have a play-fight with her while Gemma attacked them both with her array of teddy bears; never eat a TV dinner; never swim from a sun-drenched beach out to a yacht; never appreciate a good painting, a thrilling book, an evocative piece of music ... he would never hear music again.

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Doug lived for music.

"Here," he said. "We stop here. We'll live what we can here, there's no point going any higher or any further." He gave Lucy-Anne a hug and kissed her neck.

Peter eased Gemma to the ground, stood and flexed his back, groaning and cursing. "Bright girl, maybe, but she's a heavy one too."

As if on cue, Gemma woke up and began to talk once more.

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She told them about viroids, nucleic acid strands with no protein coating, and how they cause stunting in plants. She divulged the basics of chaos theory, especially relating to weather patterns and spread of infectious disease. Then after a pause she was back onto nanotechnology, and how the silicone-based had transmuted into a biology-based technology over the past few years. And how self-replicating nano-machines had been created, man-made viruses which had one major advantage over their natural counterparts: they could function perfectly well on their own. They consumed organic and inorganic materials alike, breaking them down, rearranging their constituent parts, creating more of themselves. They did not need a host to replicate. And they were unstoppable.

Peter opened a bottle of wine and poured three glasses, but only he drank. Doug and Lucy-Anne tried to quieten their daughter, but Gemma only waved them away, told them she was fine and then continued her bizarre monologue.

And the strangest thing was, her eyes were sparkling as she spoke, her hands formed shapes in the air as she illustrated her thoughts and ideas, and she smiled as she revealed another complex truth. It was her talking, Doug realized. It was Gemma saying these weird, wondrous things, his daughter, his little girl. It was not long before all three adults knew for sure what Doug had suspected all day: that Gemma had not known any of this before now.

She was learning and imparting at the same time.

"Gemma," Doug tried again, "how do you know all this? Who's telling you? Gemma, you're making Mummy and Daddy sad."

She stopped. Instantaneously, halfway through a series of equations that had lost the adults the moment she had begun reciting them. She looked at Doug, and behind her enthusiastic face he saw his tired, scared daughter. "I don't want to make you sad, Daddy. I really don't. But some things have to be said."

She looked away again, facing south, as if challenging their approaching doom with examples of what humanity had achieved and learned in its too-brief time on the planet. The fact that the doom was a fruit of humanity's misdirected labors did not matter, any more than the cause of wind or the sound of clouds mattered. "There's nobody else to say them," she whispered. And then she started again.

The association of reflex points on the feet and remote organic functions ...

Fractionation, and how liquid air can be divided into its component parts at minus one hundred and ninety-six degrees centigrade ...

Brownian movement, and from there Einstein, and from there the unified field theory, and then superstrings and the theory of everything ...

"Make her stop!" Lucy-Anne shouted, standing up and walking away. Her glass spilled red wine into the earth. "Please, Doug," she said, without turning around, "just bring our daughter back for a while."

Doug remembered a time a couple of years before when Gemma went through a short stage of waking in the night, screaming. It was only a week or so, but the sound of her scream was terrifying, and after the first night neither of them slept at all until it ended as suddenly as it had begun. And when they asked her what was wrong she could only say, The moon, Daddy, the moon was in my room and it was laughing at me. He had never really understood what she was afraid of, not then, because the moon was a familiar thing, and the man in the moon was something she loved.

Now, he thought he could see what had disturbed her during those few frantic nights. The man in the moon was something she had known from her storybooks, but that same man laughing at her was something new entirely, something threatening and unpleasant and secret, a bastardization of what she had once known.

And that was why Doug felt like he did now. With death approaching, his daughter scared him because she was acting as she never had before. She was still Gemma, but she was a strange Gemma.

He would not have time to come to terms with this new strangeness. He would have to live with it, and die with it.

"She's trying to tell us something," Peter said.

"Huh?" Doug could not look away from his daughter. If he did, something might happen.

"Gemma is trying to tell us something. She's imparting information ... ideas, theories, histories ... she's throwing a jigsaw at us and asking us to complete it." He was becoming more animated now, standing up, pacing as he drank and thought. His expression was wide and frank, not narrow and sardonic as usual.

Doug shook his head. "Peter, she's terrified. She's seen people dying on TV in the last couple of days, she saw ... she saw a bunch of men raping women in the road. I don't think Lucy-Anne covered her eyes quickly enough ..." He trailed off. Lucy-Anne was coming back, wringing her hands, sitting next to Gemma and trying to soothe her out of whatever hyperactive trance she was in.

Peter glugged another glassful of wine and gave himself a refill. "It's like she's reliving the life of humanity in the face of its end. Flashing our collective memories in front of us before we drown."

"She's just rehashing stuff she's heard."

"You know that's wrong, Doug. Don't you?" Peter held out his hand as if offering some invisible truth. "It may be incredible, but what's more incredible than the here and now?"

Doug looked away from Gemma and felt something lift from his shoulders, some

strange weight of responsibility, as if the old man's words had convinced him that none of this was his fault. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, smelling the wine Lucy-Anne had spilled.

"So what is she trying to say?" He thought to humor Peter, but as he spoke he realized he was curious. And, perhaps, there was a spark of truth in the old man's mad words.

Peter shrugged, but he was twitchy now, more animated than before. "I don't know. That there's hope, perhaps? A way to stop all this?"

Doug barked a short, bitter laugh. "And we'll be able to do it, will we?"

Peter frowned, then shook his head. He stared down the valley to the south, where somewhere over the horizon past, present, and future were being nulled. "Of course not. But it would be one bitter irony, wouldn't it?"

That made them go quiet, all except for Gemma. One bitter irony, Doug thought. Oh yes indeed.

He looked at Gemma, listened to what she was saying and tried so hard not to find sense in any of it.

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It did not work. He found sense. They all did.

Gemma fell back into an uneasy trance, but she never stopped talking. Even as she slouched down into Lucy-Anne's arms and her head drooped to one side, the endless monologue continued, spewed out like good breath fleeing bad flesh. A few birds landed in a nearby tree and twittered and cocked their heads, perhaps listening, perhaps not. And what would they hear, Doug thought? Unknowable banter, or unbearable truths? Because wherever Gemma was recalling all this from ... or reciting it ... it was beginning to hurt.

She knew what was happening, that is what became apparent soon after she lost consciousness again. Most of what she had been saying over the last hour or so—the superstring theories, freezing air, viroids—all formed some small part of a larger plan that was coalescing, slowly, in the air around her. If the hillsides could echo all her words at once, perhaps it would form something that he and Peter and Lucy-Anne could understand, but as it was there was truly nothing they could do. They all heard the desperate intent in Gemma's voice ... a painful thing to hear in a girl so young, so innocent ... but none of them could move upon it.

They felt more powerless than they ever had before.

"There must be something," Peter said to no one in particular, opening a second bottle of wine and seeking truth and solace in the grape. "There just must be something we can do."

"Dare we hope?" Lucy-Anne said. "Really, Doug? Dare we hope?"

He hated himself for thinking her foolish, and he hated all of them for being so ineffectual. He hated, most of all, the pointless information they were being subjected to. Why them, here and now? Why not someone who could do something with it?

"Because there's no one else left," he said quietly.

"Hmm?" Peter raised an eyebrow past another glass of wine.

"I said there's no one else left," Doug said. "Gemma's telling us all there is to know because there's no one else to tell. What did you say, Peter? We're living all humanity's knowledge in one go, like a drowning man?"

Peter kicked at the loamy ground as he replied. "Well, I only meant it ... you know, metaphorically. There must be someone else, someone who can do something with this...."

"No, you meant it. You did. You believed it when you said it."

"How does this help us?" Lucy-Anne said, staring down at Gemma where she twitched and mumbled in her lap. "How does this give us hope?"

Doug stood and walked to his wife and child, sitting behind them so that he could hug them both close to him. "It doesn't."

In the distance, way down the valley, a heavy mist seemed to be forming out of the daylight.

"It doesn't help us, honey. We're beyond help. We've given evolution a helping hand and nudged ourselves away."

Lucy-Anne shook her head, twisting from beneath his arm so that she could look at him. "No, Doug. Peter? He's wrong, isn't he?"

Peter came to them as well, but he did not reach out to touch them. He sat calmly to one side, content at last. "Maybe the truth is, knowledge can never be its own undoing. We're not being teased, we're being taught, right up to the last. Our questing mind goes on, even when nothing matters anymore. That's good enough." He smiled, drank another glass of wine. "Ahh. A fine year. Whatever year it was, a fine year."

The mist had moved quickly up the valley, and now Doug could see that it was actually dark and thick, like a brown soup churning through the air, consuming everything it touched. Nearer, as close to them as Peter's house, birds dropped from the sky, flowers shed petals, leaves fell from trees as the nanos commenced their senseless, programmed task of deconstruction. And every leaf that fell, every bird that was taken apart, soon gave up its component parts to make more of them.

Gemma woke again and sat upright, turning to look at her parents and her great-uncle. "It would have been so easy," she said sadly. "The answers were all there, if we'd only had the will to help ourselves."

"Come here," Doug said, and she hunched herself into his hug, wrapping her arms around her mother's waist at the same time.

Light began to fade and a strange hissing sound drowned out the breeze and the startled cries of the birds, like a trillion grains of sand dancing in the air.

Doug's sight faded, his skin itched, his insides turned warm. He wanted to tell his family he loved them, but he could no longer speak. His muscles still worked, though, for the moment, and so he hugged them.

They hugged him back.

The End