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# A World Apart

by Tommy Dakar

*"We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet."*

Stephen Hawkings.

Gene typed:

We are alone. We are born alone, and we will die alone. Even after we make love we gradually disentangle, gently pulling away from each other: an arm, a leg, one last caress. Our final contact before we drift into sleep, alone.

He saved it and then sent it out into cyberspace where maybe one day it would be found by another lost soul, like the capsules Humanity launches into space from time to time. He used one of his pseudonyms, for anonymity. He had no desire to be found and identified by like-minded people; people full of doubts, of ugly thoughts, of inexpressible fears, people trapped between a ferocious survival instinct and the absurdity of living. People like himself.

It was his twenty-fifth birthday and so far he had received a text message from Kora, half a dozen emails, computer generated congratulations from the office, and a digital greeting card from his mother. She said she had tried to send a video, but had not been able to follow the instructions correctly. She would try again next time. In the meantime a photo of her smiling in a straw hat with her new husband, Heinrich, hanging off her shoulder. Lots of love from the other side of the world, and hope you have a great day.

Kora wished him luck, and suggested a meeting, if he wanted, no obligation, whenever he liked. He understood her stunted text. She wanted to give the impression of desire, but not harassment, of attraction, but only if mutual. It would mean contact again, but it was worth considering.

Gene worked from home, and on this special day the first thing he did was erase the felicitations sent via the office software. He had helped design the message and it embarrassed him now to receive it himself. Somehow the fact that he had been part of its creation made it seem even less sincere, even more impersonal. If he remembered he would take himself off the mailing list for next year. Or re-word it, perhaps. Then he opened up his instructions for the day and set to work.

Lunch arrived punctually as always. The door bell rang, and a young man in an orange uniform handed over the tray. There was no need for a signature or payment, it had all been processed through his account. Two seconds, not a word uttered, and he was back inside.

It was how he preferred it, nearly all of the day to day administration of his life was managed in the same way. If he shopped it was at the hypermarket where he could mingle with the hordes unnoticed, like a pixel in a photo. On the rare occasions he had to visit the office he was fortunately no more than an identity pass, a number, and he could float through the installations like a ghost. Personal contact was thankfully kept to a minimum, and although he had read stories about shopkeepers and bar staff, had seen films and television programmes with friendly postmen and nosy neighbours, he felt grateful that they did not form part of his modern world. To him they were things of the past, like picnics in the country or extended families. His life was different, individual, invisible almost, a

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single cell in the multi-organ city.

Over lunch he browsed through his personal emails. They were from his chat contacts around the globe - Happy Birthday Genie! Stefan and Melinda had photos to add to their names, photos you could trust as actually belonging to the person behind the name despite the mandatory digital enhancement. The others used spoof photos, like Big Boy, whose picture was of an enormous bearded man in a checked shirt sitting at the wheel of an articulated lorry. Or Watchthisspace, who was a small blonde girl holding a dandelion clock and gazing up at the clouds. The others used constantly changing symbols or photos they had downloaded from the web. Gene used a photo of himself, but heavily made up and disguised by creative lighting effects. The Genie of the Shadows - it was unlikely that he would be recognised.

He prepared a thank you message and sent it to all of them, except Kora. Today was a special day, so to her he sent a place and a time. All she had to do was return the message to agree. If he received nothing, some other time, then. But today was his birthday, and fifteen minutes later a tiny ping pong sound told him her reply had arrived.

That afternoon he tried to concentrate on his work, but found that he was less efficient than usual. He was not good at analysing his emotions, but had he possessed this ability he might have realised that he was excited, excited about seeing Kora again, excited about celebrating his birthday in company, but also nervous, nervous about the contact, about what she might be thinking or feeling, unsure what it all meant, or if it may lead to something else, something less controllable. Or to nothing at all. As it was he just thought he felt uneasy, cause unspecified.

He had arranged to meet her at the Power House. It wasn't his favourite haunt, but after last month's drama at the Blue Chip he had no desire to return. That night he had bought twelve pills, a whole dozen! when one was enough to send you into another dimension for hours at a time. What had pushed him to do something crazy like that? He had ended up outside, kneeling against the wire fencing, trying to count the small, off white pills still left in the palm of his hand, but was unable to get past three. There were more, surely, but try as he might he could not get beyond that figure, the rest of the numbers dancing round each other and refusing to stay still long enough to be counted. His memory of that night ended there. The hospital staff had been efficient but distant, the police official routinely rude. They had filled out the required forms and left him to get back home on his own the following afternoon.

There, it had happened. He did not have the ability to comprehend it. But now, like everything, it was in the past, which is our common destiny. Best not dwell on it.

The Power House was a mesh of swirling lights: blue, white, amber, purple. A huge sound system blasted conversation to pieces with rhythms in keeping with the off white pills. They were easy enough to get once you had learnt the ritual – who to look for, how to approach, how to stand, to wait, to pay, to disappear. Swift, well-practised manoeuvres camouflaged under a display of lighting and twisting torsos. He made his way to the bar and struck a pose – Kora might have already arrived and be watching him from behind her heavy make up.

She appeared suddenly by his side. They said nothing. For a while they nodded and swayed to the insistent beat, drinking. Eventually they turned to each other. Hi. Happy birthday. He slipped her a pill, and they took one together. Dialogue was impossible under that barrage of sound, so they danced, separately, staring at the floor where they could eye each other from the waist down. After some hazy footwork they both stumbled outside.

Under the overhead motorway there were a number of arches offering a little

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intimacy. Under each arch a couple or a group. You didn't look, or stop, or make a comment of any sort, you just kept walking until you found a free arch of your own. Gene and Kora leant against opposite sides of the narrow archway. She hitched up her skirt, licked a finger, and slid it into her pants. He unzipped his trousers and pulled it out. They began to masturbate. Kora opened her jacket and showed him her left breast. He made a move towards her, and this time she did not pull away, not abruptly, not immediately. He inched towards her until he cupped her breast in his hand. A few precious moments. Then she shifted, and he understood, slinking back to his own side of the arch. They finished in a muted mutual orgasm. It was time to go back and dance till dawn, or until the effect of the pill wore off. She vanished sometime around four in the morning, so he went back to his apartment on his own.

He did not check his mail before he fell onto his bed, but if he had he would have read this:

Akira.

We are not alone. We shall be reunited. Join us.

The following morning he awoke with an empty feeling that was all too familiar. After the drugs, reality appeared drab and lifeless, drained of colour, of interest. After Kora Gene felt that way too. It was difficult to put into words, and that meant it was difficult to understand, he knew, and therefore to combat. After various incidents as a child his psychologists had explained to him that it is essential to name the problem, to isolate the emotion, and to comprehend the interconnectivity of human relationships. He had never managed to grasp those lessons, and now his failure to express himself could only help worsen the situation. Empty was the only word that sprung to mind.

Through the afternoon he entertained himself with music and videos, the curtains drawn, the computer turned off. He wanted to be entirely alone so that his emotions could rest undisturbed, untarnished by contact. Perhaps if he lost himself in idle activity he would not think that Kora was a drug, or that sex was painful, or love impossible.

It was late in the evening when he eventually saw the message. He read the text over and over again. We are not alone, it said, a bold statement. We shall be reunited, it promised. But above all join us, it pleaded. Join us. There was a link to follow at the bottom like a door begging to be opened.

He felt uncertain, like the first time he had undressed before Constantine, her flesh so white, with dark hairs running up to her navel. (One day she had sent him an sms, it is over, and he had seen her no more). Or like the time he had taken his first pill, expectant but reluctant, unsure what lay ahead but determined to find out. If he just clicked on the link, one tiny movement.....

The site was a black screen with these words - Access by invitation only. He clicked once more, and was led to a short questionnaire. They required a user name, a password, and acceptance of their internal rules, which he agreed to without bothering to read. He was then allowed to pass into the forum, where a conversation of sorts was slowly being developed.

At first he was unable to grasp the meaning of the interchanges, they seemed disjointed and full of strange references to events of which he had no knowledge. It felt like he had walked into a room where a heated debate was taking place, but

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in slow motion, full of pauses, such as when passionate politicians try to communicate through interpreters.

He scrolled down, trying to follow the thread, and little by little it dawned on him. This was a suicide group. He double checked. Yes, it all added up. As far as he could see there were five members. He would be the sixth, a reasonable number for what they had in mind. Their plans were quite advanced by this stage, and it appeared that all they needed was to decide where and when – the method had already been discussed and agreed upon.

Gene stood up. His mouth had become suddenly dry and he needed to drink something, water preferably. A suicide group. He had heard of these before, but had assumed they were an urban legend, possibly based on an element of truth but embellished as passed from mouth to mouth. Except that now he had been invited into their midst.

He had seen their names, or at least their aliases. Lucy, Akira, Goran, Doris and Wesley. Who were these people? Why did he imagine that these were indeed their real names? Why had they decided to invite him along? Was it really that obvious?

That indecision again, that insecurity. He stared at the computer as he drank, as if by scrutinising it he would be able to unravel its mysteries. It would be simple enough to click out of there and never return. He was anonymous still, having used no more than HalfEmpty as his user name. Or he could become a voyeur, and observe from a safe distance as the group finalised details and carried out its sombre plan. But it was the third route that unsettled him most, for he knew how easy it was to go from one small pill to a whole dozen. The screensaver kicked into action and the forum was hidden behind the dark immensity of the universe.

Two weeks later Gene typed.

Gene.

- I believe it is our natural state. It is our destiny. We are always, in the last instance, terribly alone.

He was not sure why he signed this entry under his real name.

There was no immediate reply, which was frustrating. He watched the screen for what seemed like an age until at last these words appeared.

Akira.

- Yet you send out your messages, because you hope to proven wrong.

He had read some of Akira's messages before and for some reason imagined he was the ring leader. There was always an air of mystery about his posts that reminded Gene of himself. An hour or so later her read.

Lucy.

- Don't fight it, Gene. There is nothing to fear. Be at peace with yourself.

The spiritual one? It was hard to say. He had a picture of her in his mind. She was pale, fussy, nervous, yet also strangely calm, as if the idea of her suicide had

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given her some kind of peace at last.

Goran came on line.

- You must be sure. There must be no pressure. The decision is yours only to make.

Goran spoke clearly, even tactlessly. He wanted it all dealt with as soon as possible. He had no time for philosophy or emotions.

Lucy.

- Is that for me?

Goran.

- It must be made clear.

Much later.

Doris.

- Gene, is that your real name? I trust you, and I am sure you know what you are doing. If you decide to join us, welcome!

Welcome to our suicide group! He was tempted to reply, but held his hand.

Eventually Wesley chipped in. He did not participate much, but when he did it was usually to make light of it all, as if in reality what they had in mind was of absolutely no transcendence in the slightest.

Wesley.

- Don't listen to them, Gene, they are all mad, we are all mad! Is Wesley my real name? Ha, ha. I don't even know myself!.

Gene signed out.

As their staccato conversations stumbled on over the next few weeks, Gene learnt how to interpret his new colleagues. Akira was not the leader, they had no need for such a figure, but he took it on himself to personally address Gene's soul searching. In response to Gene's comments he would ask – are we naturally alone, or do we contrive to be alone? Or – alone, or unique? Or worse still – alone, or in hiding? However he never attempted to answer these questions, nor gave away anything about himself, as if his existence were no more than a response, a reaction. Each of the others in their own way lay open their hearts, expressing their innermost thoughts and beliefs, albeit in the succinct, curt vocabulary of internet chats. So he learnt how Lucy was at last at peace after so much suffering, or how Goran in his no nonsense manner was keen to drive ahead and be done with this vacuous life for once and for all. He thought he could understand Doris's reluctance to go into detail, to explain her situation. She requested respect for her intimacy and it was granted. Wesley the joker hid his anguish under a mask of humour and acid wit, though every so often he would unveil himself and admit it was all façade. Here, thought Gene, was naked Humanity, where there was no need for pseudonyms or misleading images, where emotions could be expressed without ulterior motives. It was bare-chested Humanity devoid of the vanity and stratagems of the future.

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Gene had accepted their invitation, had accepted the rules, and he now accepted that he belonged to the group, formed part of their plan. His capsule had been intercepted and contact had been made. Perhaps after all he had been wrong, and we are not alone.

He would have preferred to have left no loose ends, to have bid farewell to his mother, his email contacts, Kora, but he could not compromise the confidentiality of the group. If they were discovered now they would all face internment. Suicide is never a socially acceptable option and must be carried out secretly, with subterfuge, but above all in private. The city had been designed to avoid such rebellious attitudes. Motorway bridges had been fenced in, the stairwells of office blocks swathed in fine meshing, security windows sealed, access to roofs denied. To succeed they would need to be cautious and meticulous.

It was four thirty in the morning, dark and threatening rain when Gene arrived at Central Station. Lucy had hired a camper van, and would be parked at the rear. According to the plan she would already have picked up Goran and Wesley, but Akira, Doris and himself would arrive on foot. The place was all but deserted, so it was not difficult to imagine that the plump blonde girl in a plastic raincoat was Doris. He watched as she scoured the car park for the van, reluctant to approach her.

- Gene?

Asked a male voice, and he turned to see a short man, with jet black hair – Akira.

Gene nodded and followed him to the camper.

They greeted each other with serious smiles, but there was no conversation. It was strange how much they knew about each other whilst at the same time being perfect strangers. Each member took up a position then fell into silence. Lucy, a middle aged woman in a dull brown headscarf, started the engine and headed up towards the wooded heights above the city as it started to rain steadily. Gene, seated between Doris and Goran in the second row, stared out at the wet tarmac, unable to let himself catch furtive glimpses of his companions. He had not imagined this cold reality, had expected some camaraderie, some introductions, a handshake at least, some real contact. As it was they travelled on in silence and fearful respect, like the passengers on an underground train.

The streets and highways were empty and it was not long before they pulled up and parked under some willows in a secluded area well away from the picnic areas and playgrounds. That had been Doris's idea, she did not want children to stumble across the van later in the day. They waited quietly for a while until Wesley got out and attached the tube to the exhaust whilst Lucy protected him from the rain with her umbrella. The tube was pulled back into the van through a small side window, then sealed off with plastic bags and masking tape. They were ready.

There were no speeches, no mutual farewells. Each member of the group sat immersed in their own thoughts, patiently waiting for the engine to start up once more.

Just before Lucy turned the ignition key Gene leant across Doris and opened the sliding side door.

- I'm sorry. I, I... I'm sorry.

He closed the door gently behind him. They watched him walk away, but nobody spoke. There would be no recrimination, they had all signed that.

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Gene stood under the trees in the rain and watched the scene through the zoom lens of his pocket camera. The windows of the camper van were by now covered in condensation, but he could just make out Akira's jet black hair, and Lucy was still partially visible in the driver's seat. All of the passengers were gradually fading, dissolving into grey, until he could see them no longer. He turned and began to walk back along the deserted streets towards the city.

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**Tommy Dakar** was born and educated in the UK, but has lived and worked in Granada, Spain, since 1982, where he has worked as a language teacher and translator. His work has been published in a number of online magazines including *Write From Wrong (News of the World)*, *Language and Culture* (Bellavista), and, in Spanish, *Palabras Diversas* (La Noche mas Larga, about the poet Lorca). All of his work can be seen and downloaded at [www.wix.com/tommydakad/tommydakad](http://www.wix.com/tommydakad/tommydakad).

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