

T H E
P H Y S I C S
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D E A D

A
P A R A N O R M A L
M Y S T E R Y
N O V E L

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE #1 HORROR
BESTSELLER *THE STONE MAN*

LUKE SMITHERD



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The Physics Of The Dead

By

Luke Smitherd

For Angela

*“Though the days are long
Twilight sings a song
Of the happiness that used to be
Soon my eyes will close
Soon I'll find repose
And in dreams you're always near to me
—Gus Kaskas*

*“You don't have to stay anywhere forever
—Edwin Payne*

*Has anybody here seen my old friend Abraham
Can you tell me where he's gone
—Marvin Gaye*

*“Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town
We danced and sang and the music played inna de boomtown
—The Specials*

*“Monotony, boredom, death. Millions live like this (or die like this) without knowing it. They drive
car. They work in offices...They picnic with their families. They raise children
And then some shock treatment takes place, a person, a book, a song, and it awakens them and saves
them from death
—Anais Nin*

Part 1—Checking In

Chapter 1: In Which We Meet The Dead, Learn About Flyers and Blueys, and Discover How The Guests Survive Life In The Invisible

Foyer

On days when Hart looked back at it all—looked back at the days when he and Bowler were stuck together—he remembered to focus on the positives. At the very least, he would have to say that they got what they wished for. At least things *happened*.

And then he would remember what happened to Bowler, and how it ended, and would then pause whatever he was doing as he sighed and went through, once again, the list of regrets in his head.

Undoubtedly, the worst of it—the physical pain—all happened to Bowler.

2000:

Mary grunted in her sleep, and Bowler jumped in his seat reflexively. Some things were harder to unlearn than others, Hart noted. He thought he'd probably been the same when he first arrived, but he was sure he'd picked things up a lot quicker than Bowler had. He'd been older when he died than Bowler had been, to be fair, and from a far less mollycoddled world, but were he given the choice Hart certainly wouldn't change that. These days, they knew *nothing*.

Bowler glanced sheepishly over; Hart gave him a brief wave of the hand. *Don't worry about it*. The younger man ran a hand nervously through his shortish hair and tried to resettle in his seat. Hart thought it would still be some time until Bowler was completely comfortable in other people's houses. It occurred to him how very human—how very *English*—it was to have the need to know you had actually been *invited* somewhere.

Mary carried on dozing. She always tended to do this at this time of the day, and it was another reason Hart preferred to watch TV in her flat than elsewhere. Mary was a creature of habit, and therefore easy to predict. Better for Bowler and, to a lesser extent, for Hart. Plus, Mary's flat made him comfortable. The décor was definitely to his taste. That which he called classic (and Bowler called old fashioned) style was strongly in evidence. Brown, floral patterned wallpaper and dark, dirty red carpet, with iron framed, yellowing photographs adorning the mahogany effect cabinets and side tables, as chipped and faded as Mary herself. Hart liked it. Bowler wasn't a fan, but Hart knew Bowler would never complain about it. What was the phrase he'd heard? *Wouldn't be seen dead in it*. Hart sneered bitterly at the irony. And then, right on schedule—it hadn't spoken up for a good five minutes—the voice in Hart's head spoke up again. *You've got to get OUT of here. You can't last much longer. What are you DOING, why are you wasting time?* As always, Hart blocked it out and focused on routine. Monotonous. The safety net.

Mary's snoring began to drown out the tick of the large, seventies—style clock in the corner, which sat extremely awkwardly with the rest of the bric—a—brac. As the sound became harder to ignore, Hart fought extremely hard not to envy her. It was a feeling bordering on hate, made worse by the maddening drone. Once, back when he'd first arrived, he would have had to leave the room to calm down, driven to a near—uncontrollable, jealous rage. *Sleep ...* Hart closed his eyes, as if to simulate it for himself. Of course, he felt no change in his state of mind, nor would he ever. Blessed, blessed sleep ... the temporary respite—no, the *sanctuary*—of rest. The living had absolutely no idea how good they had it. To hear her snoring so heavily was like a child's taunt to Hart's ears, *nya—nya—na—nya—naaa. Look what I've got*. Nowadays he could control his emotions better, though it had taken a long time to learn how to do so. More than anything since he'd come here, Hart had learned the

importance of self control. It was the difference in this place between survival, and ... the alternative. Hart had promised himself, long ago, that he would *not* end up like the others. He would remain intact. He realised he was gritting his teeth, and relaxed his jaw.

He forced himself to look back at Bowler, who was sitting and squinting at the glowing screen, trying to keep up with the goings—on in Albert Square. Soaps were an absolute lifeline for them, and he was glad he no longer had to give running commentary to his friend. Simple vision over distance was a major problem for the new arrivals, who had to learn how to master it just as they did with so many other aspects of their new physical existence, aspects that had been effortless in their former lives.

Explaining all the on—screen action to Bowler had been annoying, and had meant that Hart wasn't able to enjoy the soaps as he'd like; now Bowler could just about get by on his own, meaning that he was making progress in at least one field. In the early days, Hart sometimes thought the younger man wouldn't even *begin* to adapt, and Hart had even wondered if Bowler might end up being more trouble than he was worth; that Hart had made a large mistake. But now Bowler seemed to be ticking away nicely. Just a late starter.

“Who's the guy in the jacket?” asked Bowler peering intently, trying to focus.

“David,” answered Hart, glancing at the screen. “He's new.”

“When did he turn up? We never miss this.”

“Last episode, must have been. Mary turned over for that film, so he must have been in the bit you didn't see. He was re—introduced at the start of this one. You missed it because you were late coming back from your ... walk.”

It was a deliberate, probing jibe, poking at Bowler over a subject they never talked about; his old, now abandoned secret. It was a childish act on Hart's part, but he was feeling annoyed and needed a vent. To his mild satisfaction, Bowler winced almost imperceptibly, and reddened, but kept a straight face. Hart knew Bowler hadn't actually done anything wrong—hadn't broken his promise to not return to his old ways—but just the mention of the subject was enough to goose Bowler, to unsettle him. There was nothing jumpier than a tempted man. They never talked about it, but Hart sometimes liked to pretend he was going to give the elephant in the room a full—scale, sit down interview.

“I wasn't—” he began, but Hart closed his eyes and held up a hand.

“Yes, yes, I didn't say anything. Anyway, he's thingy's brother. The car chap.”

Bowler nodded, and went back to squinting, eager for silence. Hart leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, trailing the shell—shaped sweeps of raised lines with his eyes. He'd long given up chastising Bowler, and besides, if Mary hadn't put him in a bad mood he wouldn't have said anything in the first place. To his surprise, Bowler piped up again.

“But wasn't he sleeping with—“

“Bowler,’ Hart theatrically sighed, “I'm quite certain that, at some point in the future of the programme's plumbing of the depths of morality, we'll be treated to the characters' *pets* having intercourse with one another behind their loved ones' backs. So I really wouldn't express any surprise at who has jumped into bed with whom,’ Hart said, finishing with a folding of his arms.

Bowler smirked, rolled his eyes, and turned back to the TV. Hart smiled despite himself.

The drums beats sounded over the old set's small speakers, signalling the end of one program as the trail over the credits signalled the next; news. *One thing after another; it never ends*, thought Hart, and smirked inwardly. Ironic thoughts seldom amused him any more, for irony was in abundance here, and mainly an irritant. But that one had tickled him.

“Why was Steve so nervous at the end?” asked Bowler, turning and adjusting his Nike t—shirt which had ridden up as he sat.

“Could you not see whatshername, the wife, in the background? She'd seen him with the barmaid.”

“Ohhhh ... right,” said Bowler, the penny dropping. “Ah well, someone's getting a bollocking then.” He paused a second, running his tongue under his lip. “So are we staying to watch the news, are we going to the Polish Guy's for something else, or ... ” When Hart didn't answer immediately Bowler raised his eyebrows and his hands. “Or what?” He finished, good naturedly.

Hart had to think about it for a second. As with every day, this was a legitimately important question. *What are we doing next* was to them, in this place, as food and water had once been. The sustenance was entertainment, and survival depended upon activity. Without it, Hart knew too well they would ... *change*. End up like the others. And that was too terrible an idea to even consider. *You've got to GO. You've got WORK to do, you've got to GO—*

“News.” Hart said, finally, and Bowler turned back to the screen.

“Spot the Blueys?” he asked, back to squinting.

“Spot the Blueys.” Hart replied, already staring at the ceiling, his mind miles away.

He's aware that he exists, and this is progress. Before, there was a brief time when he didn't exist at all. He doesn't know where he physically begins and ends, but he knows that he used to. And wait, wait ... he used to have a name. Currently everything is black, more than black, nothing ... but he doesn't know if it is his surroundings, or if he's just unable to see; he has no way of checking, no hands to check for eyes that aren't there. But he does have a sensation of moving, of surfacing, a sense of moving through and into something, and he knows there has been an incredible change, the biggest change there could possibly be. He tries to remember who he was before now, what he was, even what his shape was, but he can't, though he feels that this knowledge will come. After a time that may have been five minutes or five years, there is a sensation of touching down, landing, settling ... developing weight. A feeling of arriving somewhere. He thinks he can hear someone, and vaguely is aware of wondering how that is possible without ears ... it's a voice. A voice that is breathing hard. Desperately.

“Come on ... oh, PLEASE ... oh, for goodness' sake, please, please ... WORK ...

“One!” Shouted Bowler triumphantly, pointing, but Hart was actually more interested in the TV report about local redevelopment. You never knew; a change of the physical landscape around them, might make a difference if it came close enough ... it could maybe mean something (*escape FREEDOM*) but this thought was fleeting, as he knew it to be untrue and foolish.

Even so, he couldn't help but glance at where the smiling 29 year old pointed; he had to admit Bowler had done well to spot it with his limited vision, especially as far back in the shot as the Blue was.

It was a shot of the city centre that they knew so well, knew it like they knew the only smell whatever it was that filled all the space in their enclosure. It certainly wasn't air. The report was about the people of the city's responses to the redevelopment; Hart thought he already knew what the mass would focus on. *Modern sheep*, he sniffed to himself, the people onscreen thinking only of another two years of roadwork—induced hassle for themselves. Never mind how much good the renovation might mean for Coventry's economy and culture. As the report cut to various 'on the street' interviews, many people were indifferent about the project, but the sheer number of bleeped out words from one red-faced Coventry gentleman would suggest that Hart's opinion of the people was right; even though the exact place this man was suggesting the council could stick said redevelopment was also edited out. Hart thought that he could guess where the man meant.

Bowler's cry had come after that. On the screen, they'd been watching as a blue shirted reporter filled two thirds of the screen, with the shot over his shoulder revealing throngs of Saturday shoppers

If Bowler's sighting had been made within this group it would have been less impressive, but he managed to catch a glimpse of the Bluey as it passed through the small gap between the reporter's right shoulder and the top corner of the screen.

This particular Bluey was a middle aged black man, bearded and wearing a shell suit. He was walking slowly with the slight, awkward smile reserved for those wanting to appear on TV, but trying to appear nonchalant while simultaneously checking that they're in shot.

And, of course, covering his outline from head to toe was a pale, translucent blue glow.

Hart looked at Bowler and cracked a small smile, wagging his finger at him approvingly. He was genuinely pleased.

"That was impressive, you know. You couldn't have spotted that a month ago."

Bowler shrugged.

"Ta. First one for a while, too. What is that, three weeks?"

Hart thought, and nodded.

"About that."

Bowler's brow furrowed in response.

"So frustrating though, aren't they .." he said quietly, gently shaking his head, and Hart scowled.

"I'm not in the mood for the discussion, Bowler. Just ... it means nothing for us. Speculation is pointless. Accept it, and please stop bringing it up." Hart stared at Bowler until he looked away and fell reluctantly silent, a slight scowl on his face.

The younger man sat quietly, and again decided that Hart's way, on this at least, was best. Hart had a lot more experience in The Foyer than Bowler had, and if Hart didn't know the best way to handle things, then who was Bowler to argue? Bowler got that sense again of how lucky he was, and his anger faded; he even shuddered as he thought about the alternative. He'd seen how he could have ended up. He relaxed for the first time that evening.

Hart watched his friend and felt a twinge of guilt. He couldn't blame Bowler. Once he'd have been the same. Bowler had been here for the blink of an eye compared to Hart's time, and he hadn't been through the things that Hart had been through. Hart had to remind himself what it was that Bowler gave him, just by being present. And for all of Bowler's persistence, his *hope* ... as dangerous as it was, as unchecked as it was, he didn't deserve a dressing down all the time. Hart sighed, and again reminded himself to be patient with his companion. He needed time ... which was just as well, here Hart tried for an olive branch.

"Although ..." Hart ventured, with a theatrically arched smile, raising a finger towards the screen. "D'you think that he looked like the chap from the news?" He finished, raising his eyebrows.

Bowler brightened. Lookalikes. Their favourite game, and one of their bonds. Funnily enough, it had been Hart's invention.

"Trevor MacDonald?" he replied.

"That's the one."

Bowler thought about it, and laughed.

"Trevor MacDonald in a shellsuit. Welcome to Newsnight."

"News at Ten."

"Yeah, that."

It was all right now, and they went back to watching a report on underage drinking. The teenage ... their behaviour never ceased to fascinate and horrify Hart, while Bowler just seemed to accept it.

Getting heavier, becoming more ... solid. The voice is crackling in and out, like a badly tuned radio.

"You see, if this is actually going to work ... if I'm RIGHT ... I've got to keep talking, I think. I think if I keep talking all the time, then maybe we'll calibrate together, you see. That's what I'm trying

to do. So ... I'm just going to talk about anything. I wish I could have a book; I'd just read to you from that. I wouldn't have to think of something to say. I've got no idea how long it takes, you see ... you' the first one I've been able to find at landing point. You know, to actually follow you to where you came down ... ”

There's a pause, as if the speaker is lost in thought, gone into his own head, but when he speaks again, it's hurried, not only because he has caught his own silence, but because he's scared.

“Actually, you're only the fourth I've ever seen check in; not a Flyer, if you know what I mean. A ... of course you don't. I don't normally waffle like this. People used to say I wasn't much of a talker full stop, well, not socially anyway, but right now I have to have the, the ... what does Sarah call it verbal diarrhoea, to see if this works. I ... I doubt it will. I don't even know if you can hear me. It's complete shot in the dark ... so ... ”

The voice trails off like that of an uncomfortable dinner party guest. This is not a socialite. This is someone trying, and failing, to be chatty. This is someone uncomfortable when placed in a one on one situation with a stranger. His attempts at small talk are like torture.

“Are you a man or a woman?” the voice continues. “You'd think I'd care—I'D think I'd care—but you'll be surprised to hear that I don't, really. No one does, here. I actually hope you don't remember this. I'm not used to ... anyway. Shall I tell you a story? Well, anything to keep talking. A story, a story ... ah ... d'you know, I can't think of one. Only nursery stories, but they seem silly ... damn. There is a short, embarrassed, angry silence. Then it continues, forced, and angry that things are the way.

“I HATE being like this ... it's all probably a waste of time ... ”

And the thought comes, Please, don't stop. Don't ever stop. Don't you understand I need it?

“What about them? Can you see them, Bowler? There?”

Hart pointed at a group of young men, laughing and eating kebabs as they walked up the street. The city centre was unsurprisingly deserted tonight; a Tuesday. In other, major cities, maybe this wouldn't be the case these days (according to Bowler) but in Coventry a Tuesday night was always quiet. Hart had to take his word for it.

It was dark early, November nights (Hart hated November) coming in quick and cold. Bowler and Hart wouldn't have known about the latter, were it not for the people around them every day changing their attire over time from t-shirts and jeans to thick layers and winter jackets, shorts and sunglasses exchanged for scarves and gloves. These guys had done the same. The street lights were on, but the group were walking along the side of the street where the pavement was overhung by shop awnings. The angle made it difficult to see them as they slowly crested the rise, with their thick clothing destroying any sense of figure—and therefore making it harder to identify their sex—along with the shade created by the awnings. Hart knew that it would be quite a test for Bowler.

The younger man squinted, leaning forward; the effect was comical.

“5 guys ... wait, 6. Eating something. Am I right?”

For the second time in one evening, Hart was impressed. He'd hoped for their number and their sex but not what they'd been carrying.

“Bowler ... I had no idea you'd taken such a jump. You've gotten so much better.”

Bowler shrugged.

“I haven't been doing anything different. Maybe it's just, y'know, time.”

Hart shook his head, sadly.

“Not the case. Not everyone gets it, even after being dead for years. You know that Guest in the re

coat, the one that looks like a rag? Have you seen him? You can tell he can't see a thing. You can tell by the way he jumps sometimes when he catches sight of things by accident.”

“Well, points for me then. Result,” Bowler said with a shy smile. Compliments did not sit easily with Bowler. It wasn't in his nature to enjoy attention, even here. He did feel a slight flush of pride, however; he knew Hart didn't give compliments easily, and though Bowler wouldn't have let on to his companion, that visual effort had been extremely difficult for him. He now had a headache, but it had been worth it to hear Hart's approval.

He hated headaches. When he was alive, he would have just killed it with a Neurofen. That wasn't possible here. In the Foyer, headaches were a total fucking pain in the arse. He sighed, and said nothing.

They went back to the conversation, except it wasn't a conversation; as usual, it was a debate. Debates were better. They fired the imagination, and that was important. Plus they were the few times Hart saw Bowler get animated, and that was always pleasant for him to see. However, Bowler could be beaten down most of the time, acquiescing, which Hart found frustrating. Tonight, it was about The Polish Guy, and like always, Bowler found Hart maddeningly out of touch.

“Even if you're not BORN here, y'know, but say you like England and are proud to live here, and you like, are like ... proud of everything England is ... then, y'know, you're welcome,” Bowler reasoned, hesitating every few words. Though he was far from stupid, he didn't like to get caught saying the wrong thing, or to have his point lost by rushing it. He took his time. Plus, he'd learned the hard way that Hart would ruthlessly take advantage if he tripped over his own sentence and sounded like he was fumbling. Hart could be a bastard like that, and it was really annoying, made worse when Bowler found he had a mental block and could do nothing but literally bite his lip. It was happening now; he started a sentence, and had realised what was going to happen once he was halfway through. “It's the ones that don't, that aren't interested, that don't help ... what's the word ... ” he snapped his fingers repeatedly.

“Integration.” said Hart, firmly, “And I don't buy that. Come here, live here, be welcome here, become a citizen, by all means, and I shall shake your hand and call you my neighbour and my friend. But you can never truly be called English. You can never be called an Englishman.”

Bowler shook his head to disagree. He opened his mouth, but Hart cut him off, holding up a hand and looking away. Bowler wanted to slap him when he did it, but never would.

“That's not 'racist.' You know I'm not 'racist,’” Hart sniffed, “I'm just ... they're different. Different culture, yes? I was there when they first arrived. They're WELCOME—are you hearing me? They're more than welcome, welcome to stay here and raise a family and put down roots—are you respectable and perfectly jolly nice and everything else, and they deserve all the freedoms that everyone else has ... but don't tell me they're English.”

Bowler didn't agree—in fact, he disagreed quite strongly—and he knew the words were there, but he just couldn't do it in when he HAD to, when he NEEDED to ... there was some sort of blockage. But swallowing everything back felt bad, too. Hart had repeatedly impressed upon Bowler the importance of looking after the mind; Bowler knew it was more important than anything in the Foyer. He knew he had to stand his ground more. Even so ... he couldn't find the words.

And then all thoughts were blasted from his mind as he looked up.

“Hart ... HART ... ” Bowler's mouth went dry, and it took all he had to stay upright. His skin felt light.

Hart saw, and his eyes lit up for a brief moment—he believed for a second—and then dimmed. He shook his head.

“No,” he sighed. “Not coming for us.”

“You can't see it properly! You can't say for certain!”

“Bowler, I can. It's dark, and you've clearly improved vastly, but I can see it better than you can. It's a Flyer.”

Bowler sagged. He stared off to his right, looking at nothing for a second. *Shit ...* He'd been certain. Knowing it was fruitless, Bowler looked back at the sky. He was, of course, desperate.

“Are you sure?”

Hart shrugged.

“I've seen four Checkins during my time here—of which you were one, of course—and several Flyers. The Checkins look very different. They're bigger, for starters.”

He realised he was being rather blunt, and thought for a moment. He drummed his fingers on his thigh, sighing.

“It's an easy mistake to make, Frank. It's all right.” Hart said, quietly.

Bowler cocked his head in Hart's direction. It wasn't quite a shrug, but the gesture said *it's correct*. He continued to peer intently up at the fuzzy object in the sky, resigned to the truth now, but still fascinated. He'd been here only two years, but had still seen a few Flyers; it wasn't the first time he and Hart had had a similar conversation. Yet the disappointment was still just as strong. *What though?* whined a voice in Bowler's head. The voice was wheedling, petulant, and Bowler didn't care. He'd earned the right to think that way. Nothing changed here. They both knew it, and that's what made survival so hard.

Hart knew that too, and Bowler had seen that brief glimmer in his eyes when he first looked up. Bowler knew what it would mean for Hart if it WAS another Checkin, why he would be even more excited with that prospect than he would be with just the possibility of a new arrival. It would mean more protection. Bowler smirked, in spite of himself; he knew the way his companion thought. And Bowler wasn't daft, or at least not as daft as Hart thought he was. What Hart didn't know was the other reason *Bowler* needed a Checkin so badly. How it might mean that he was more than just protection for someone. The Flyer crackled with a warm energy as they watched.

The object in the sky was cloud shaped, but slightly transparent, ethereal. It was here one second, gone the next, then back again, flickering like an old film. It was about 9 feet long by four feet across, a glowing, white, airborne piece of elongated popcorn, lit from within. Bowler tracked its progress across the sky, still holding onto a glimmer of hope despite Hart's words and his own knowledge (*wouldn't really make any difference in the long run ... but please let Hart be wrong on this*). The glimmer that died the closer The Flyer got to the edge of The Foyer. Even though his belief was tiny, Bowler's heart sank as The Flyer began to shift trajectory, and start the all-too-familiar inexorable journey upwards. As it ascended, it made the low thrumming sound that Bowler knew painfully well. It was the one that sounded like someone despairing. It was a sound that perfectly matched the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

They stood silently for a few minutes, watching it until it ascended completely from view. Bowler continued tracking it in the sky long after Hart had stopped watching; the older man had begun an inspection of his fingernails, despite there being no dirt under them and no chance of there ever being any. Hart caught himself, and noted again that some things were harder to unlearn than others.

Hart waited until Bowler's gaze also returned downwards, and watched his companion for a few moments. When Bowler didn't move, Hart sighed, hesitated, and stepped only slightly closer to him. He knew the way Bowler was feeling all too well. It was only two years ago that had he finally stopped feeling that way himself—stopping once he'd gotten what he wanted in the form of Bowler's arrival—and the memory of that time was still strong enough to move him to a kind of pity. He was not an unkind man. He was just one who had never been given much reason, when he was alive, to learn how to discuss anything that was deeply rooted.

Close proximity to another person made him nervous even now, even here. Without realising it, he

had come a long way from his old life now that he was even this open, his old life spent in a world where men kept their distance and everything but their opinions inside. It was seeing Bowler this way—the image bringing forth a memory of pain—that now drove him to move without thinking as he saw his own remembered anguish at work in another. He wasn't even consciously aware that he was going to try and comfort his friend.

He gently put an arm around the young man's shoulders, barely touching him, and guided Bowler slowly forwards. Bowler allowed him to do so.

“Come on,” Hart muttered gently, but awkwardly. “Let's go and see what the Polish gentleman is watching tonight.”

There's a sudden snapping sound, and everything rushes in; memories, knowledge, identity, and the strongest memory of all is one of great pain. Not the greatest pain he will ever know—that will come from The Train of course—though he doesn't know this yet. That will be physical agony so great and so lasting that he will brush against madness, and he will discover why madness is to be feared above all else here.

The next thing he's aware of is the voice again, the voice that hasn't shut up, that blessedly hasn't shut up and he's more grateful than the voice's owner will ever know. The voice is breathless and desperate now, almost shouting. Its owner has seen something.

“Can you hear me? Can you hear me? I can see you! I can see you properly now! Hello? Hello? Do any kind of gesture, anything!”

And he nods in response, and with that he realises he has a head now, and with this knowledge comes the sensation that the rest of his body has also arrived. He still can't see, but he thinks that will come very soon. He stretches his hands and realises something isn't right, but he can't tell what yet—he's lighter, lighter than he should be, but it's a sensation that he can't understand. He'll later realise it's because there's no gravity. No air. No breeze.

The voice gasps, and continues tremulously.

“Have you been able to hear me ... all this time?”

He's still figuring out what's going on with his body, but he nods again, even though it makes his head feel sick. He owes the voice that.

The voice sighs, and there's silence, and then he realises the voice is laughing with relief. When she speaks again there are reluctant tears in the laughter.

“Well ... well. I didn't think ... heh ... d'you know, I didn't believe for one solitary second that that would actually ... bloody ... work.”

Wednesday morning, the shopping precinct. Hart always liked this time of day; he liked the hustle and bustle. People rushing, talking on mobile phones—Hart desperately wanted to try one of those despite himself—late for work, shopping, kids skiving, sitting on the edge of the large fountain set in the middle of the crossroads, the heart of the city centre rush.

Bowler liked it too, but for him the reason was being able to see the people more easily. It wasn't so hard in the daytime, and he didn't have to strain. Today, George had joined them.

George was the Guest—out of the three that they associated with, the three that would actually come near to them and 'talk'—that they hung around with most in The Foyer. This was because George was the one Hart tuned in with the most frequently—which was still extremely rare—and because George was so damn likable. Even Bowler had noticed something odd about the way that the five of them could keep finding each other—most of the time—when they wanted to. The Foyer covered an area

roughly one square mile, full of buildings and other visual obstacles. All the Guests obviously moved independently of each other (apart from Hart and Bowler) and so it would be expected that the 'friends' would run into each other a lot less than they did ... and yet somehow, that wasn't the case. Hart and Bowler had many discussions on the matter—Hart holding court with Bowler left trying to get a word in—and the general theory that Hart held, and Bowler agreed with, was that it was all to do with energy. Perhaps they sensed each other subconsciously, heading towards each other half the time without realising it. It was the thing that seemed to make the most sense, despite the eventual physical discomfort that would begin after spending time in each other's presence; after a short while, they would have to part until it passed and their bodies returned to normal.

They sat quietly, people watching. George, of course, was totally silent to their ears. Bowler knew very little about George, struggling more than Hart with the 'gestures only' conversation. Hart knew more of the man, partly due to his being better practiced at both miming it and reading it, but mainly due to his ability to occasionally tune in with George which Hart (of course) proudly took as proof of his theory about frequencies. In the past, whenever he tuned in, Hart had used the brief period that lasted to ask probing, experimental questions about how George felt, what he'd been thinking at the point that they suddenly could hear each other etc., in an attempt to crack the trick. Over the years he'd cycled through to personal questions out of curiosity—inescapable even for the ceremonial Hart—but he'd now exhausted those and so it was back to the science of it.

Bowler had to admit, Hart's frequency and energy theory was a good argument. Regardless, he liked George because of his easy going nature, and though he'd never say it, it was nice not being the quietest one every now and then. He also liked how George tried to speak to him, and didn't just rely on Hart. He felt like George made an *effort* with him. And George was doing so at that very moment, tapping Bowler on the shoulder and gesticulating.

Bowler looked at George, a man in his late 60s who was portly but still with a full head of grey hair. He looked jolly where Hart looked severe; round faced, whereas Hart's features were sharper and thinner. It fascinated him to see that George still had thread veins here in The Foyer, while Hart's skin was still quite healthy. Hart, visually at least, radiated robustness, hard in a wiry way. Slim but tough, corded like his suit. George seemed to suggest cuddles, based on both his nature and appearance.

In the latter element—although he was 'physically' older than Hart—George wore more modest clothes, an acrylic jumper and trousers compared to Hart's brown corduroy suit. Even Hart's hair was more old-fashioned, a slicked down side parting compared to George's crew cut, an interesting look for a man of George's age (Bowler assumed using clippers at home were a more appealing option than the barber in George's former life.) But then, George hadn't been here anywhere near as long as Hart, so it all made sense.

George began his charade, and Bowler watched intently. It was a good game with a practical purpose, and Bowler loved being on the receiving end of it. He pieced it together as George went.

Gesturing over his shoulder; Bowler knew this one. *Yesterday*. Now hands to eyes. *I saw*. Fingers to the back of the head, head thrusting downwards and forwards, growling face ... though it looked very funny, Bowler got the impression George was actually being deadly earnest. Bowler couldn't get it and threw his hands up, putting on a confused face. George looked at Hart, who had been watching and pointed at Bowler. *Explain to him*.

Hart looked at the crowds around him with a slight sigh, and answered, not taking his eyes off the people milling around.

“He says saw The Beast yesterday, Frank.”

Bowler drew in his non-existent breath dramatically, looking at George with wide-eyes even though it was a false expression put on for the older man's benefit. Bowler thought George was lying. If the old man had seen The Beast at a close enough range to be story-worthy, he very much doubted

old Georgie would be healthy enough to be sitting here telling them about it. But he knew what other people were like. ~~They made things up, didn't they?~~ His Gran had been the same. She once had claimed that she'd won five grand in the lottery and lost the ticket. He'd watched his Mum making a big show of shock and dismay, rolling her eyes at the rest of them to do the same and keep Gran amused. He'd been annoyed by it.

Mum ...

Bowler pushed the thought away. He'd gotten good at doing it. He looked at George and drew his palms close to each other. *Close?* George furrowed his brow with a smile and shook his head. *Con-*
on, of course not.

This was interesting. Maybe it *was* true then.

Bowler thought about how best to express it. He just couldn't do the charades, though he had gotten better over time. Deciding, Bowler held his hand above his head, shaking it rapidly, then slowly lowered it to his waist, reducing the shakes as it lowered, until his hand was at waist height, and still. Then he raised his eyebrows. Internally, he was pleased with himself. It was a good mime.

George got it, and shook his head, screwing up his face emphatically, then mirrored the low—hand action. The Beast hadn't been raging, he'd been calm. That made sense. If The Beast was in the maddest of his many personalities, you literally ran as far as The Foyer would allow. George must have seen him from a good distance away. The consequences if The Beast caught you in that mirror were unthinkable. He'd never seen an actual attack himself—though he had only seen the Beast raging once, by chance, before Hart had grabbed him, screaming to run, *run*—but had never seen him catch someone. He'd heard Hart's version of when he'd seen it though, and the way his face had gone pale the way his hands shook ... he knew enough.

Bowler held his hands up and cocked his head. *What was he doing?* George made a serious face and cast his hands about, looking this way and that. Bowler understood. On the occasions he'd seen The Beast himself, he'd been doing the same thing; walking around, quietly inspecting things. Again Hart had appeared, yelling, had physically thrown Bowler over his shoulder and ran him away, pale faced and shrieking.

All in all though, George wasn't telling much of a story, but Bowler appreciated the thought. George was just making conversation, and letting Bowler know that he didn't just communicate with Hart. Bowler made an impressed face and nodded. In the distance, he saw another Guest emerge through the wall of Boots. It was the one he always thought of as Horse Guy, due to his rather long face. Like all the other non—communicating Guests, he was in his normal state of undress, and Horse Guy was one of the most gone. As usual, he was talking to himself animatedly, and today, the mess on himself—inflicted welts across his chest seemed worse than usual. Bowler watched him go without mentioning it to the others. Other, long—resident Guests were no longer of any interest. They were all pointless.

Hart leaned forward as a lady shopper walked past.

“11:05” he said, sitting back. “It's starting soon.”

They stood, and George remained seated, raising his eyebrows at them. Hart tapped his wrist, and George nodded, standing. It was time to go.

He tries to speak, and can't. He wants to ask why he's naked, but the man seated on the floor opposite him seems to already know what he's thinking.

“If you're wondering about clothes, they come very soon. Mine did, anyway; maybe a couple of hours. They come by themselves, as far as I can ascertain. My theory is we form them ourselves here.”

out of our unformed energy. I think we do it without thinking, from our state of mind. They're the ones you get, and I've no idea how they're decided. It's not a case of getting the ones you wore the most, anyway. Take mine; I only wore these for special occasions, but it can't be that either as I'm the smartest—dressed Guest here. Easily the smartest, and I'm not talking about fashion, I mean in terms of neatness. I think it's just random, whatever's in your mind when clothes first pop up. But I can't say for certain. It must be something to do with your mind, regardless. How you look, I mean. Just look at The Beast ... ah, not that you would know. How do you feel? All right? Just nod if you do."

The clothes that man is talking about, the clothes the man is wearing, are an old fashioned, slightly ill-fitting brown corduroy suit. They look like something from the 1940s. He hopes he doesn't have to wear those.

He nods anyway, and starts to panic as it suddenly strikes him that he's sinking into the floor incredibly slowly, but sinking nonetheless. It takes a second to register, and he almost doesn't comprehend it, but now he realises that his body is dropping into the concrete as if he were lying on quicksand. As he lies on his side, two inches of his thigh has already sunk into the concrete of the street. It's the most terrifying thing he's ever seen, even after everything that's just happened, this is (the pun vaguely registers) concrete evidence that everything he's going through is real. He starts to thrash, but the man in the suit calmly holds up a hand.

"That's not going to help," he says. "Just imagine, just picture in your head, that you're lying on the surface, and you will. After a day or two it'll be automatic. You won't even need to think about it.

He can't hear the man properly as panic has taken hold, but the man in the suit begins to shout.

"Imagine you're lying on the surface!"

Somehow it penetrates, and the man on the floor does as he's told. Slowly he begins to raise back up; now he thinks about feeling the concrete, feeling it's textured surface, but he knows he won't, as he knows, somehow, that he will never properly feel another surface again. He panics, and gasps for air, and it dawns on him that he can't feel any in his lungs. He'd never notice it if it were there; but he can't feel it now it's gone.

There's no town smells, no street smells, no car smells, no drain smells. As he takes in his surroundings, he realises that he's in a car park, an empty car park at an unidentifiable hour of the night. There's a sign saying LEVEL ONE, and arrows on the walls telling pedestrians that aren't there which way to go, strip lights on the ceiling covered by plastic cases that are full of dead flies and moths, their bodies inexplicably on the inside. He realises the only thing he can smell pervades everything. Everything smells of one thing only; a faint, unpleasant odour, that makes him think of the word Electrical. Were he more experienced, he'd realise the smell is ozone.

The man in the brown suit stands. "That's better," he says, with satisfaction. The man on the floor knows that the man in the suit doesn't mean he's pleased that the situation is resolved, or is feeling glad that the man on the floor is feeling better. The man in the suit is pleased with the other's progress. The man in the suit is seeing exactly what he wanted to see here, and when he speaks next what he says hits deeply, harsh and hard, damning and burying.

This isn't just because of the words spoken, but because of the manner in which they are delivered. Blunt, direct, frank, just like his name (his NAME ... Frank. Frank ... BOWLER, yes!) and by this, the man in the suit lets Frank Bowler know a number of things without saying them directly; that the man in the suit will not provide what Bowler's mother gave, what Bowler's lovers have given. No comfort, no unconditional affection; there is none of this here, none in this man, and what he says makes Bowler ache uncontrollably for it and tells him that he will never have it, never again..

"All right," the man in the suit says, "I believe in straight talking; so here it is. It really is the best way, to get it out of the way now, you see." He pauses, taking a breath, not looking Bowler in the eye. He looks like he's steeling himself. And when the man in the suit looks up, it is the face of a policeman.

officer, one who comes to your house to deliver some highly unexpected and unpleasant news, the worst news, thinking This is the part of the job I hate, delivering news to these good folks, but I have to do it.

“But please remember the good news,” he continues, “The fact that—and I still can't believe that has worked—I've managed to fix it this way...that fact means you've actually got it better than everyone else that's ever arrived here. You really have. But anyway ... ” Pause. Deep, deep breath, and Bowler suddenly knows what's coming, but it's too late. And he is stunned as he actually sees the man in a brown corduroy suit smile, albeit in an embarrassed and apologetic way.

“All right. Look here...I mean...I'm sorry ... but you're dead. And as far as I've been able to tell all the time I've been here... this, well. It certainly isn't Heaven.”

And Frank Bowler begins to sink into the floor again, faster now.

Hart looked across at Bowler, and was not at all surprised to see the rapt expression on his face. The cinema still had the same effect on him, even now; it was an escape over all others, when the lights went down and the screen lit up. It was a cliché, but for a few hours, they were alive again.

George was the same, but more serious looking. George *really* got into his films. If the bad guys were being bad, George's face showed anger. If the good guys were winning, George's eyes were like a child's, enthusiastic and delighted. But Bowler ... Bowler's face showed nothing but delight all the way through. For Bowler, Hart thought, it was more than just an escape. It was a way of forgetting the pain which burned constantly at the back of his mind. Hart sometimes wondered just how hard it was for Bowler, sticking to their deal. But he'd made Bowler agree to it for his own good, hadn't he? As well as for HIS own good? The thought reminded Hart that it was good he was here for the young man. As vital as Bowler was to Hart, good lord, he knew Bowler needed him too.

On screen, Bond dispatched another villain. This Bond was good, but Hart wasn't sure he liked him. Bowler did, of course; it was Bond. That was enough for Bowler. But for Hart, it was just another example of how different things were now. He remembered Moore, and the raised eyebrow, and the puns, and thought the modern version lacked some of the fun of the past. Hart sighed. He was getting bitter. He needed to keep an eye on that. He knew where it might lead.

He leaned over to say something to Bowler, but George glared at him fiercely and made a shushing motion. Hart was taken aback. He frowned, and slumped back in his seat. He wasn't used to being told off.

“You can't hear me anyway, idiot.” he murmured, scowling.

Some habits were harder to break than others.

Bowler is clothed now. He can't remember the way his getup arrived, the same way he can't remember the movement of hands on a watch; he just suddenly realises they're there, on his body. To his surprise, his outfit is a pair of blue jeans, black shoes, and his old white Nike t-shirt. He only wore it about 5 times, and wasn't a particular fan of it, so he doesn't get why this is the top he's ended up in. He doesn't know it yet, but this outfit will change over time, and he will not notice that either any more than he will remember which outfit he started out with.

Hart isn't giving him many details; every time Bowler manages to ask a question, in stammering half formed words (he can't understand why it's so hard to speak) Hart says it's best to continue getting physically orientated first.

“Because,” as he reminds him for the tenth time, pacing up and down, “You're going to get to learn

in a few days—because you'll actually be taught—what everybody else here has to learn for themselves over several years. You're already walking, while most new arrivals, here spend several weeks wedged into the floor up to their waists, as far as I can gather. Let's get the basics down, while you get your head around your situation. Too much and you'll just overload, and that can lead to ... well ... you just don't want to do that."

Another burst of memory suddenly floods into Bowler's mind. This is the third time it's happened but Bowler feels like there's still SO much more to get. His mouth glues up as he tries to express it.

"Ah," he says, stuck. Hart sees this, and waits for him. "Ah. Ah."

"Go on," Hart urges, excited and patient. He's seeing progress.

"Mech. Mech."

" ... "

"Mechanic."

"Good."

"I. Mechanic. I like ... bikes."

"Racing?"

"Mmm."

"Good. Keep going."

George, Hart and Bowler were standing outside, Bowler's eyes still adjusting to the sunlight. They'd seen everything else that was on, and Hart made then ration their visits, at least as a threesome saving them as something to look forward to. Hart knew the importance of having something to look forward to. George was excitable, partly from movie buzz, and partly from the frustration of not being able to articulate fully what he thought of the film. Hart had told Bowler that George used to be a taxi driver when he was alive. Bowler wasn't sure if he was joking.

They watched George patiently as he moved, his current charade a complicated one; hands high and lower, flitting around his head, then thumbs up. It was difficult to understand, but for once Bowler saw it and got in there first.

"He liked it better because there were more special effects."

Hart shook his head, pulling a dramatic scowl for George. Bowler wondered if Hart wasn't really hiding annoyance; Hart's mime interpretations were rarely beaten to the punch.

George looked shocked with Hart's disagreement. His hands became flicked up. *Why on earth would you think that?*

"Yeah, are you for real man?" said Bowler, agreeing. He'd loved it too, had thought it was exciting. Hart looked sharply at him, and Bowler reddened.

"Not as good as the old style. Bond is fun escapism, but still with some element of realism." said Hart, after a moment more of staring at Bowler. *"Not close enough to the style of the books,"* he continued loudly, anticipating Bowler's response as he opened his mouth to protest, *"Bond is Fleming and once the books ran out, they shouldn't make any more."* Bowler frowned.

Hart looked at George, doing the Moore eyebrow and pointing at it, then giving a thumbs up. He then pointed at the cinema and gave the thumbs down. George laughed silently, waved Hart away, and then proceeded to act out a bit he'd liked, mainly for Bowler's benefit. George's mouth worked silently as he gave a running commentary neither Hart nor Bowler could hear. The younger man loved to watch this; a man of near—retirement age gadding about with the enthusiasm a 13 year—old. It wasn't that George was childish. It was that he was old enough to know better and not care. At times like these, Bowler thought that George looked like a shorter John Candy.

Hart scanned the street absent-mindedly, listening to Bowler laughing with George in the background. He felt restless today; this was always the downside to coming out of the movies. His usual fear was intensified during the comedown. They needed more than TV today. They needed real drama; a good couple's argument to sit in on, a parking dispute, a fight, anything. They could go and find it. A *safe* little hunt. Now they had a job for the afternoon, and, as always, the thought made him feel better. They had a task. He breathed easily as he turned back to the others, not realising he was smiling as he watched them. He loved them both, even if he was no more aware of it than they were.

He turned to Bowler to explain, just in time to hear George's voice tune onto their frequency and say "—ills the first fella, boom, and then ... what? Bowl? *Bowl*, have you got me? *Have you got me?*"

He'd seen Bowler's face change, but as usual in moments that needed action, Bowler had frozen, not speaking. He gaped dumbly at George and then quickly turned to Hart, but the older man was already there, grabbing George by the shoulders and turning him so they were face to face. They'd *both* tuned into George this time, and as Bowler's paralysis broke they both started talking hurriedly over each other; this usually happened when they tuned in with someone. Both of them had their own things to try, their own experiments, frantic, but it was George himself who got there first this time.

"Quickly, how can you both hear me together, how does Bowl get it—"

"I've told you, it's *Bowler*, and I caught him on arrival so we're tuned on the same frequency—"

"Frequency?! What the hell, how, how did you—"

"It doesn't matter, listen—"

"If you've worked it out, tell me! I can have—"

"Shut up and listen! What were you thinking just now, what was different?"

"You said that last time, there was NOTHING—"

"I want to try this, this, does it help if I touch you? Is it louder?"

"No, what were YOU thinking?"

"Nothing new—"

"Well don't move, let's, let's, I don't know—"

"Is it easier if I'm closer?"

"No, well, you're louder, but then you're closer—"

"Can you hear me? Over here?" Bowler blurted out, trying to contribute in some way. George nodded at him frantically, and went to speak, but Hart snapped his hand out, waving Bowler silent.

"Listen, listen, now this. Your mood, are you happy? Actually, wait, you were quite energetic just then—"

"Nothing new, I've been like this before and it hasn't happened—"

"Well, HELP me, think!"

George then did his usual darting-eyed, mouth-moving, gasping bit as he tried to think under pressure.

"Well ... well ... oh, look, I don't think there IS a reason!" He said, shoulders slumping. *He gives up so easily*, thought Hart. "How many times have we been here before? You always try this, that, and we've tried everything, the forehead thing, EVERYTHING. Now tell me h—" and then cut off suddenly. His mouth carried on moving, but no words were coming out, the sound gone as quickly as it had arrived. Hart flung his arms down.

"SHIT!" he yelled, and as ever, whenever he swore, he immediately straightened himself up afterwards, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath as he regained his composure. Bowler never said so, but he always observed this and found it quite cool. *Proper old school*, he thought.

George was shrugging apologetically, and Hart was fighting back his anger, despite a deep suspicion that George was probably right. He motioned for George to sit down, as he knew what was coming next, and indeed the colour had already started to drain from George's face. Hart felt a stab

guilt that he knew was irrational; he hadn't asked George to tune in, or had talked him into it—not that he could do anything about it anyway—and as ever, it had just happened. And, as ever, it was George who paid the price, and not Hart. It was like the Blueys; Hart, Bowler and George just didn't have a clue as to what it was all about.

George nodded, got two steps and started to buckle slightly at the knees. The other two were already there, catching him and guiding him gently to the floor, where he lay down and began to breathe heavily, even though there was no air to take in.

They waited there for a while in silence, Bowler not wanting to provoke Hart in his current mood. Hart frustrated and speechless. People passed by; lunchtime shoppers hurrying to get as much done before returning to work. Bowler practiced his sight as Hart observed the crowds, not saying a word. Eventually, Hart nudged George gently with his foot, who feebly looked up. Hart made walking gestures with finger on his hand, then pointed at himself and Bowler. George nodded, eyes closing, and waved them away gently with his hand. He would be there for some time, Hart knew, and today he couldn't face the wait. George would be okay.

“Come on,” he said, tapping Bowler's chest with the back of his hand. “Let's go.”

Bowler was still standing, looking at George.

“We're lucky to have the Odeon here, aren't we,” he said, without looking up. It wasn't a question.

Chapter 2: In Which More Bad News Is Relayed, Bowler Lies— Badly, Theories On Time And Punishment Are Exchanged, And We Hear Of The Many Escape Attempts Of Sarah Boss

“Do we ever sleep?” Bowler says, with a pleading edge in his voice. They are walking—Bowler shuffling awkwardly, and the other striding slowly—along Gosford Street. For the first time in several days, a question from Bowler is not met with a rebuke, or a dismissal because ‘he needs to get the basics first.’ Bowler wonders if his improved speech is taken as a sign of being ready for answers.

“No, we never sleep. You should have realised that by now. We’ve been walking and talking for three days, and I’m betting you don’t even feel slightly tired.” Bowler nods, at this, glumly. He realises that he wishes he DID feel tired. The idea of never sleeping,,,

“How do we rest, you know ... reset? How do we not go crazy?” asks Bowler. To his surprise Hart laughs, but it is dark and without humour. There is a long pause as they walk, and when Hart finally speaks it is as if the question had never been asked, his tone deliberately breezy.

“How’s your vision? Seeing the people clearly, and so on ... any better?” Bowler squints, and although there is no improvement, he can still see the thin outlines of the multitudes doing the shopping.

“No better than when ... at the start,” he answers, struggling both to find the right word and to avoid saying it, “I mean, in terms of seeing the people. The buildings and that, they were easier straightaway. But at least I can see something. You told me that at first you couldn’t—”

“Yes, I understand, Bowler.” says Hart, looking at something Bowler can’t see. Bowler thinks he’s just doing it to make some sort of point, but says nothing. He needs this man, and he’s coming to realise just how much.

“You need to keep working on that,” Hart continues. “If you can’t see them, you can’t see TV. And if you can’t see TV, then you’re in an enormous amount of trouble, as awful a thing as that is to rely upon.”

They walk in silence a moment longer, past the university theatre building. It’s Saturday night, dark already, and the drinkers are starting to emerge; young—to—middle aged men and women dressed in their finest and looking for booze, company and intimate warmth. Things forever taken from Frank Bowler. And yet he is surrounded by the potential for it and a million miles away at the same time. Something that will weaken him terribly is born inside him, and begins to grow.

Also, he could murder a pint.

The Gala bingo down the road will be packed, and this is the pair’s destination. Bowler will be able to see the tickets relatively easily; they don’t move, and he and Hart will be able to get close enough both for Bowler to make them out and to see the whole ticket at the same time. It’s the people that are still like ghosts to his eyes for some reason, people and TV screens and cinema screens and LCD readouts. They will pick a ticket each, play over the living players’ shoulders, and enjoy it far more than they would have done if they were alive. A release.

Bingo as a release. Fuck ME, thinks Bowler.

Hart had said the Gala is as far as they can go; they can’t go past it. That is their limit. He hasn’t said why. There is a heavy sigh, and Hart speaks, staring up at the stars as he walks.

“To answer your question, of course there’s some that go crazy. Look ... to be perfectly honest apart from you, I, and three others ... as far as I know, everyone ... well. There are those here that are already gone fully Loose—that’s the word I use for it—and some who almost have, who are pret

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