



Martin Higgins

HUMAN+

**It is predicted that science will engineer man's next evolutionary leap.
Some get there naturally ...**

[Human+] presents in fictional format the experiences of many individuals around the world. Higgins creates from these experiences a rip-roaring page-turner ... I am reminded of a Philip K. Dick plot-line updated to reflect the science of the 21st century (nano-technology, bio-engineering and neurology) placed within a hectic, fast-moving plot that at times is breathless in its intensity. But, for me the importance of this book is how it asks the most profound questions known to philosophy; what is the true nature of reality and is the world presented to us by our senses all there is? A fantastic read and a stunning debut novel from a new writer of whom, I believe, we will be hearing a great deal of in the future.

—Anthony Peake, consciousness theorist and author of *The Out of Body Experience - the Science and History of Astral Travel*, and *The Daemon - A Guide to Your Extraordinary Secret Self*.

The Singularity meets Eastern mysticism in Human+ ... Would you prefer becoming more than human by means of nanotechnology or meditation? Should we develop technological immortality, or wait and wake up in an afterlife? Or both? Can transhumanist human enhancement and the new-age human potential movement co-exist peacefully? Or are they on an inescapable collision course? The answers come in bits and pieces as the story unfolds. The novel captures well the tension between human psychic potential and its bioengineered version, and the different mindsets of those who promote them.

—Giulio Prisco, futurist and transhumanist writer (KurzweilAI.net, TheTuringChurch.com).

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Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.

Carl Sagan

PART ONE

DREAMS

Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.

Carl Gustav Jung

ONE

The stars. His favourite thing in all creation.

These are some strangely beautiful constellations, he thought. Beautifully strange. Intricate. Alive.

A star brightened. He focused on it. It swelled slowly and then – pop! It opened, like a flower blooming in time-lapse, into – my god! – a flying saucer. Then, another and another. A fourth, a fifth. One after the other, jumping into the atmosphere.

A roar of engines pulled his attention back to Earth, street level, and a convoy of gun-turreted armoured cars heading this way. He noticed curious markings on the side – police?

A panicking crowd fell upon him, as if it had just broken a dam. It swept past him in the opposite direction, down a darkening city street. The engines weren't far behind, accompanied by a terrifying, unintelligible loud-hailer, a booming voice of terrible authority. Irresistible fear filled the air.

Following the crowd, he ran frantically into an alleyway, desperately hoping it would be too narrow for the pursuing vehicles. At the end of the alleyway, the crowd flowed into the subway, a river of people.

He was sure this wasn't the way. It could only be a dead-end.

He pulled back, bodies buffeting him. "Wait!" he shouted. The terrified horde only babbled around him mindlessly. Back at the entrance to the alleyway he saw an armoured car appear. "Who are they?"

The last of the crowd, a haggard, haunted man, disappeared down the steps of the subway after a last horrified glance behind. From the end of the alleyway, four bulky riot officers in gas masks and black coveralls were pounding towards them, loosed barking dogs sprinting ahead. The steps into the subway and safety were now too far to reach. A broken door into a derelict building was his only chance. He sprinted through, finding himself in a dank stairwell. Looking up, the stairway kaleidoscoped into an unsteady spiral infested with descending riot police in lock-step.

A black shape was quickly upon him from behind but before he could react he was instantly slammed against a wall, pinned several feet in the air by an arcing white beam of crackling, twisting energy, erupting from his assailant's futuristic assault rifle. A pack of barking dogs were suddenly all round him, jumping and snapping at his lower body. Through the officer's visor, the man also snarled. He came closer, the rifle beam shortening without lessening its hold. Around the officer's dissecting eyes his face grew eerily calm. His free arm jerked upwards, a large hand clamping brutally to crotch.

"You can't do that!"

The officer leaned in. "We can do anything, David."

He thrashed and resisted, every ounce of his being trying to escape this horrible fate.

He kicked his legs and swung his arms but found himself restrained even tighter. He opened his clenched eyes. He was in bed. At home, alone. His room. Wrapped in twisted sheets. Pulse racing. The hand still squeezed. He pulled back the sheet to reveal his own left hand. He released it sharply, staring at it.

He propped himself up amidst his shabby bedclothes and shook his head, drawing a deep breath. Yet another fucking lunatic dream. He stared blankly around his cluttered, studio apartment, milky daylight and traffic sounds leaking in, thinking back through the dream. What did it mean? It seemed so very, very real. Like, another reality. Or a herald of the future – which is what he was increasingly thinking of these night-time episodes, roughly two or three per week now.

He moved to the edge of his bed, about to stand, and looked at the huge canvas that was squeezed snugly between two walls, an incomplete apocalyptic scene of war and urban decay. In the foreground, bottom-centre, a melancholic self-

portrait, long lank hair, soulful eyes sinking in a gaunt, pale face, looking the wrong side of thirty, all sadly too close to the truth. He picked up a brush and began adding detail to shadowy figures emerging from a phalanx of armoured cars – just like the one in his dream – a gas mask, an assault rifle, attack dogs.

But he couldn't skulk in here all day. His landlady was demanding payment and if she came knocking she was apt to use her key if he didn't respond – "Just to make sure you didn't O.D." – so there was no hiding from her. If he ever did succumb to such a fate, it was comforting to know she was there to save him, at least so long as he was in arrears, anyway.

He had a welfare check to collect today and needed to venture onto the streets. He hoped there'd be no demons today.

He pulled on the same clothes as yesterday and exited his apartment, peering down into the hall to check for his landlady. Her door was open – damn! – he'd have to speak to her, rather than risk getting caught trying to sneak by. He descended and looked inside. She was standing in the middle of the room, a long stick-figure of nervous energy, talking to her teenage daughter who sat slumped in a chair playing a computer game. Her husband, a plump, balding man – today attired in a white vest and slacks – shuffled about, searching for something, which he failed to find, before seating himself in the glare of a large TV when the commercials ended.

David knocked at the metal grille security door.

"It's open," said the landlady, her expression dropping upon seeing who it was.

"Hello." He entered. No response. "I just wanted to tell you, I can pay you some money today."

"Yeah? That's good. All of it?"

All of it? David noticed a part of him had been thinking of scoring some heroin. The landlady looked away, disgusted. She could read his mind better than he himself. He was pathetic.

"About half." He was negotiating. Always negotiating. "Well, I could maybe cover most of it ..."

She nodded to herself expressionlessly, avoiding his assurance seeking gaze. He turned to follow the noise of the girl playing a game on her computer. On her screen, three animated human figures – a man, woman and girl – wandered about an apartment, speaking gibberish to each other.

Get me the fuck out of here, he thought.

It had been months since he'd seen a morning out on the streets, at least a post-dawn morning, anyway. He found himself caught up with the coffee-clutching commuter crowd, marvelling at how withdrawn they all seemed, from each other, from themselves – private, rented out for the day. Consoled by gadgets. He watched them march along the sidewalk, efficiently self-sorting between subway and towering office block, oblivious to the unfortunates who had spent the cold February night outside them.

He surveyed the scene for a moment. Where is the joy – he thought – the gladness to be alive? Inside those chests are hearts. But they don't beat in public. They don't beat enough. Otherwise this division and regimentation wouldn't work. We wouldn't step over the homeless. We'd take them home – *every day* – until there were none left. This was the underclass. Surplus people. But still performing a function – a reminder to everyone else.

He wasn't so far away from that fate, he realised. What a strange machine the city is.

TWO

The welfare office said he had his appointment wrong and sent him away until the afternoon. Which meant he had to look at the horror of the city even longer.

Which meant he was definitely going to score today.

At least, he definitely *wanted* to score, but his contact wasn't picking up. After forty-five minutes of calling, pacing, drinking coffee, he got through.

"I don't know, man," said his guy, "I may not be around this afternoon. You can try me ..."

Shit.

Soon he was back standing in line with all the other unfortunates in the welfare office. Once again, the tortured, tortuous commentary ran in his head.

What a crime, he thought. What an absolute waste of time! And human potential. Humans twitching in line – dehumanised. It's not human to wait in line, just to live. Who's running this whole show? Something's feeding on us somewhere, siphoning off our spirit. Stealing our feeling. Who's withholding the good drugs? The real juice –

Shut the fuck up, the lady's waiting!

"Sir," prompted the welfare officer.

He advanced towards her. There was something about the way she said "sir". This word, which was supposed to denote respect, in her mouth came across as the very opposite. Her whole manner, he picked it up in an instant. It infected him. He felt himself slip away somewhere deep inside, watching the interaction like an observer.

Her appearance morphed before his eyes – this had happened before with some people. It was as if her real appearance – her essence – was coming to the surface. Colour drained until she reached a cardboard greyness. An electrical hum from somewhere was growing disturbingly loud. She

seemed to lose a dimension, a flattened version of what she should be, yet her eyes bulged grotesquely. His heart raced. He was caught in some kind of dead simulacrum of a human interaction. Yet, on the desk beside this grey automaton, a plant raged with mystic life.

By massaging his knotted stomach he found he could squeeze out his words in response to her questions. It worked – he was surprised that in such a state his responses could still correspond with reality – and she handed over his check. He'd held himself together, survived. He knew the scene wasn't what everyone else was seeing, that he was going crazy. But, while he knew that, he still had a chance.

He exited to the street in a daze. A few lungfuls of cold air brought some focus. Everything had been getting weird lately. Yet, he felt he was seeing life more clearly, much more clearly than those caught up in it all. He was sure of it.

He walked on, ignoring the urge to look at a strange, twitching bird-like vendor and his newsstand of glossy diversions. The cruel-faced office workers. The dead-eyed shoppers.

After all this time – these millennia! – we're still scrabbling about in the dirt, he thought. The whole world: a plantation – and the owners aren't even here. They've withdrawn. Absentee landlords, jacking up the rent, keeping us running. Do we really do this to ourselves? Or some vampiric alien race?

He looked up at the thin, grey strip of sky and gathering storm clouds. Demons surely circling around here.

"Where's it all going to end?"

The question seemed to come to him from somewhere else, like so many of his intuitions of late. Another voice inside his head, leading him somewhere – goading, like he was responsible for the whole world.

Shut up! Don't want to know. Stop asking. Stop looking! Get home. Get home or get heroin. Heroin or home. Home or heroin. He rolled the words around his mind, a barrier against *the other*, his "higher self", or whatever it was that was always trying to make him see. Heroin or home. Home or heroin. Heroin is home.

Home. How he'd love to go home again. To his adopted parents, plucked from him in a car accident in fragile teenage years. Assassinated by life.

"Home. Home." He chanted the word aloud as he traipsed along the sidewalk. Grey, metallic weather was leaching into everything and everyone. "Home. Home." He noticed the sound. "Home. Home. Om. Om. Om." He began chanting, like the new-agers with their *fundamental sound that began the universe* or something. "Om. Om. Om." It was comforting. But, so was smack. He hurried on.

People were getting in his way. Sluggish, zombied pedestrians with expressions of ashen weariness. They seemed to be slowing down, running out of power, mechanical. He turned on his heel and noticed them all quickly crank up to normal speed. One of them began dogging his shoulder. Speeding up, slowing down. He risked a glance – and it disappeared! Gone. What the fuck!

Shit. *An episode.*

Something like this had happened before. He'd started to see through it all, through reality. Worryingly, this time, he was far from the haven of his apartment.

A second pedestrian winked out on his left, at the edge of his peripheral vision.

Get-the-fuck-out-of-here.

Homeless people rotted in almost every doorway. Vehicles roared by honking horns, metal beasts independent of human control. Sirens wailed in the middle distance advertising evil taking place nearby. The man on his left winked back into existence and suspiciously refused to meet his gaze as he passed.

Head down, David hurried on. Eyes on the sidewalk. But, his mind's eye now began to torment him. It created an image of a huge school bus, bearing down on him. Like he was in the middle of the road. A false alarm, but his nervous system still scrambled. More panic. Goddam it!

He looked back up to see a disturbed homeless man. "...when ya die, you'll burn alright," he babbled.

The man seemed strangely familiar – the same eyes as the riot cop from his dream. He leered towards him, an other-worldly, knowing look in his eyes. "Wha'd'ya think's in all them drugs ya take!"

The words, the knowingness, sparked an explosion of sensation at the back of his neck, an electric shock which rolled down his spine in tingly chills and back up again, as if a channel

directly from the twilight consciousness of the homeless man. A message from the fabric of the universe. He reeled in fright – right into the street.

A school bus was suddenly bearing down on him, and it was accelerating! Just as he'd seen in his mind a moment before. He'd have to sprint to the other side. His legs pumped and took him to the sidewalk in a manic burst. He twisted his head, trying to see a driver. The windows showed only reflections of the grey clouds above. Pedestrians walked on without casting a glance. No one seemed interested. The whole city was out to get him. Reality was over.

Reality had never begun.

He walked on, close to the buildings, clear of the street with its incessant, production line traffic. He was lost in an automated urban nightmare. Streets telescoped to unsteady vanishing points, distance and proportion distorted. He'd lived in the city for five years and suddenly nothing was familiar. He tried another street – just a randomized amalgamation of all the others.

He was, he realised, literally getting nowhere.

Another street. The same. Advertising billboards everywhere, alluring women hawking frivolous items – cruel, shallow, demonically seductive. Signs looming everywhere. Coffee. Donuts. Beer. Cigarettes.

The “word virus”, he thought to himself, an idea he'd once read about. The idea that language was a parasite that had infected mankind and was now having its way. Here it was, writ large. The reality matrix finally opening to him, revealing its building blocks – not blank matter at all, but signs and screaming imperatives.

How can I ever have free will? Do the signs know which ones I'll follow and which I'll oppose? I have no chance. It always gets what it wants. It runs us on tracks.

Engines, sirens and distant pained voices melded in a nightmare cacophony. He was giving in, surrendering, resigned to walk his treadmill in a virtual reality hell, a New York City grid of infinitely reproducing fractal reality.

At that point, he noticed a supermarket sign. *Safeway*. Safe way? A moment later, several *turn left* signs. As he reached a junction – Seventh Avenue? – he noticed a row of traffic lights lining up into the distance, and all of them turn red.

He stopped obediently, a slave to external signs, he realised. A zombie like the rest. What did he have to lose? He turned left.

So what if something was guiding him? Go with it. Stop resisting. Resisting brought fear and confusion.

A cloud burst above. A sudden deluge. Suddenly everyone was running for cover, *a river of people*, pouring into the subway. He could stay, get cold and soaked or ... go with the flow. He was by Central Park, he realised, West 57th Street. His mental maps flickered online. He finally knew where he was.

He could head back to his apartment, he realised. Safety. Or he could be at Union Square in about twenty minutes, maybe score within another fifteen if his guy was around.

THREE

He trained his eyes on the floor, feeling the corrosive gaze of others upon him, judging, boring into him. After a time, he risked a glance. There was nothing obviously out of place. Maybe things would be normal for a while. He relaxed a little. A stream of thoughts began about his fellow passengers.

Every one seemed a victim – each individual, so distant from the other, he thought. Only he could see the evil that had brought them all to this point, the invisible energies that shaped the physical world. If something happened now, like a train crash, and we had to talk together, it would be like distant stars lost in space suddenly trying to form one system. Toss a suitcase of money in, we would lie and cheat for it, tear each other apart. In the city, money is the only gravity holding people together.

He looked about the car, the dispirited faces. People slumped with cheeks on hands – looking like they had toothache, he thought. Aching souls, with no idea of resistance, no way out. We're useless to each other. Thousand yard-stares gazing right by. We've been captured and colonized, and have no idea. Is there no-one to oppose all this? No secret underground? No watchful aliens out there who can come save us from ourselves?

What the hell! Pull yourself together.

His eyes fell upon a beautiful young woman, opposite and a few seats to the side. She was one of the rare ones. Still spirited. Looking somehow immune. He now felt shamed by his inner dialogue, as if she might hear it. She'd noticed him and given him a kind look. Of course, he'd instantly looked away. You look so long for such reflections back that, when they come, you're unprepared, palsied from lack. God knows what he must look like to her. Was it kindness he'd seen, or pity?

He looked back at her when she looked elsewhere. He took his moment, examining every inch he could see. She

possessed an unearthly vitality and manner. She was like the mystical, shining plant of the welfare office, springing through the cracks of a dead city.

He had just wished for an alien, after all, he realised. Perhaps she was it. He had read once of some UFO nut, in fact an esteemed writer on the subject – as esteemed as you can be in such a field, anyway – who said he sent out the same wish while once sitting in a hotel lobby in the city. He claimed to have met one within the hour.

Just as he thought this, she turned and looked directly at him. He found himself frowning defensively then looked in the opposite direction. Something caught his attention. He swished his view about to determine if it was a floater on his eyeball, which he was prone to, or actually in the subway car. It was a visual distortion, but it wasn't on his eye. It centred on the watch of a man seated opposite, a bulge which refused to move, despite where he looked or if he rubbed his eyes.

It looked like someone was poking a finger through the screen of reality.

He watched as the “finger” moved in a slow spiral, clockwise. It was calming. Very calming. It was a message, he sensed, and he was relaxed enough to listen.

Watch, he said in his mind. The finger then moved from the man's watch to another passenger, the bulge moving slowly between the two points, stopping behind a copy of Time magazine.

Time.

Then, it was off again, bubbling behind the man's raincoat, then the window behind him, and up to a poster in the wall of the car. Everything responded to the finger in the same way, as if all matter were the same – only an image.

The finger stopped behind a picture of a clock where it halted

Clock, thought David. The finger remained in place. David looked closer and saw the bulge was specifically on the “two” numeral.

Two?

The finger instantly began moving once more, distorting the chests of a bank of passengers one after the other. One of them, a young man, noticed David's strange head movements.

David noticed and the young man instantly averted his gaze, clearly nervous of David's eccentric behaviour.

The finger had now settled on the face of an old man who was straining to listen to his younger, female companion. From this distance, the distortion made the old man's whole head swell up. David was transfixed.

Time. Two. Listen? – he pondered. Time to listen!

He became excited at this and looked at the attractive young woman. He started to wonder if she was communicating this to him. He noticed her face begin to shape-shift, subtly changing into a similar, equally beautiful face. It wavered between the two – one face suggesting playfulness and mischief, the other, a divine compassion. It was too much.

He looked away, panic fluttering in his solar plexus. The finger was prodding again, just behind the old man who was again holding his ear up to his companion. The finger spiralled once more, but it no longer calmed him.

Listen, I know, listen!

The finger moved down the man's body then slowly under the floor in his direction. His heart pounded as it drew nearer, eyes darting to see if anyone was noticing anything. The finger then swerved back up to the clock in the ad and resumed its spiralling behind the number two.

To listen to. Time to listen to. Okay, I'm listening, he thought in a panic. Come on, finish this thing. What are you trying to say?

He risked a glance back to the young woman whose face was now morphing vigorously between mischief and kindness. Was he supposed to watch this? He attempted to hold his gaze on her and control his fear. The train slowed, about to stop at Herald Square, the one before his. With a sudden knowing glance at David, the woman stood and left the train.

That's it? She's gone?

He quickly looked to see if there was anything he'd missed, if the message was over, then in the direction the woman had left. On the station wall he saw a large poster-ad and the words "he art" – part of a longer slogan featuring the words, "the artist" – but it hit him like the homeless man's message of earlier, and he felt the same explosion and chills.

The heart.

He had almost missed the final word.

Time to listen to the heart.

Wow. Got it!

Yes, he quickly thought, adrenaline rushing through him. Stop listening to the head and its fears. Feel. What is my heart saying?

Follow her! It may be basic and raw, but that was his heart's desire.

Energy surged and he exploded out of his seat and through the doors just before they closed. Emerging from the subway he somehow instantly picked her out of the crowds crossing the intersection with Broadway, heading north up Sixth Avenue. The excitement subsided a little and he began wondering what was next.

So, now I'm a stalker, he thought to himself. Is this how serial killers begin? Start following voices in the head, thinking you're heading somewhere good. Everything points to her having something for me, though. Go with it, for once, maybe it'll build to something. What else am I going to do? Go home? Score more smack and continue my dark little tortured artist path of pain?

The woman entered a coffee shop. He watched from the street as she ordered and headed upstairs. He entered, bought a coffee, and followed. She sat looking out at the street, a solitary chair by her side, almost an invitation. He was never going to just saunter up and invite himself into her life. Not these days. He took a table in a crowded far corner and simply watched instead. She looked around a few times, almost as if she were looking for him. Perhaps she was waiting for someone, he realised. No way was he going to go over in that case. So what was he going to do?

He was going to watch her leaf through some papers from her bag – a student? He was going to watch her talk on her phone, check her messages. Then, after forty minutes, follow her back onto the street. It was almost six now and the pavements were crowded with commuters heading home – plenty of cover. The urge to follow was still strong, but he was growing more desperate. He had massively missed his chance to talk to her – “Hi, I noticed you on the subway an hour ago” of course wouldn't sound right – but he couldn't let it go, either. He'd know when to approach. There'd be a sign. Until then, he was doing the right thing.

She kept heading north until she was all the way back up to West 40th where she entered one of the buildings overlooking Bryant Park close to Grand Central. He loitered, watching her walk past a guard on the front desk and into an elevator. He quietly pushed the revolving door, eyes on the guard, who fumbled with something below his desk, allowing him to cross the lobby to the elevator unnoticed. The elevator was in an alcove, hidden from view. He pressed the call button and watched the indicator reach “11” before beginning its descent.

By the time it reached “7” he had come to his senses. He turned back to the building’s entrance and saw it was now raining again quite heavily. He’d have to go back out into that, he realised. Suddenly, there was a bang from the direction of the guard. Footsteps. David edged further into the alcove, delaying discovery. He heard a click behind him, the wind blowing ajar a door to the stairs and exited through it, quickly and quietly climbing. Once again, he felt he was being guided. He would follow this through to the end now, he vowed.

He tried the door into the eleventh floor and found it open. He advanced down the corridor towards one of the few offices that seemed still open. Through the glass he saw a plush reception, his quarry talking to a receptionist. His eyes drifted to the name of the company, affixed above them on the wall in large, tasteful lettering, “Future Proof”. Once again, it felt like another message. He fixated on it, wondering what it might mean. He thought of his dreams, of last night’s in particular, how it seemed to have resonances with what had happened today and helped guide him here.

The woman from the subway was about to turn, he knew it. He quickly retreated to the stairs and watched through the slim crack between the double doors as she approached. She passed the elevator and continued towards the stairs. Which way? Up or down. Rationally, he expected her to go back down. Then why didn’t she use the elevator? He looked up and saw the stairs kaleidoscoping unsteadily. He decided to go down. He could always keep ahead of her if she also headed that way. She headed up. He waited. Her footsteps stopped soon after and he heard her enter the twelfth floor.

He followed and found it darkened – offices derelict – except for a pool of light spilling from a door at the very end

of the corridor. He tentatively advanced towards the light, hearing a man's voice, apparently addressing a room, "... of the previous weeks. Tonight we'll also tell you how you can get involved with running things."

Just outside, a chair held a whiteboard sign that read, "This is what you're looking for". An arrow pointed inside to a low-lit reception and an open door into a brightly lit conference room. A reflection in a glass door showed a small audience seated in rows.

"In two weeks, our first teachers' course begins," said the voice, "and you're all welcome to come along. The more we have, obviously the more chapters we can open around the city, or even further afield."

David edged up to the door to take a look at the speaker, a fresh-faced, vibrant and kindly-looking man in his late twenties. Before him, an attentive audience of around fifteen people of differing description – smart middle class to alternative and ethnic. All of them, extremely attentive, engaged.

"This movement is cellular. Once you've passed the teachers' course you can go anywhere and set up a class – *and pass it on*. And that's what we want – a great dispersal of real, effective, psycho-spiritual knowledge getting out there. Or, at least, the techniques to go and find that knowledge for yourself – and then, hopefully, turn on as many people as you can, as quickly as possible."

David thought he was out of sight, but he noticed a subtle flick of the eyes from the speaker, signalling his presence to someone. He quickly retreated back to the corridor and headed for the elevator.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

God-damn. It was her. She made up the ground between them.

He turned, already crumbling, "No. No, I –" Long seconds passed. She seemed amused.

"I can't help you?" The question sounded playfully literal. Her eyes dissected while her words went to work.

"Sorry. I'm just –" Yes, apologise. Sorry for living.

"This is the final week of a 12-week course. But we start again next week." She had an accent, German maybe.

"Uh, a course?" She must think you're fucking ridiculous.

A course? You effeminate loser.

"We train the development of certain faculties. Intuition ... astral travel, remote viewing ..."

This is too weird. What the hell? What am I doing here?

You were guided here.

He edged towards the elevator.

"It's free, in case you're wondering. We run on donations."

Yes, run away from the nice lady. Wouldn't want anything good or exciting happening there.

He attempted to hold still, to hold everything still, to fight back, and just be there, look at her. He was a hollow wretch, echoing with only demons –

"You want to get away, huh?"

– and she was an angel. Perhaps literally.

"... So, why did you come?" Her face shifted about again, perhaps a trick of the low light, by turns kind, calculating, mischievous. "You're here for a reason, no?"

"For a reason?"

"Don't you think? Everything happens for a reason."

Jesus Christ. That crap. He allowed the sharp, dissenting voice to carry him, softening its tone for external use, "Well, that's debatable."

She gave a gentle nod, blinking softly several times, then said, "No. Ultimately ... it's not."

He had never met with such confidence. It was like she knew it – had experienced it – for a fact. And, suddenly, he found himself alone with her, without the voices. In the moment. He attempted to lean casually against the wall and inadvertently pressed the button for the elevator. An accident that had served his unconscious need for escape, and proved her point. Graciously, though, only a flicker of her eyebrows registered this validation.

He straightened, the spell broken, and offered sharply, "I prefer common sense, thank you."

"Do you? I definitely prefer the less common."

"Look, it's just not what I'm looking for." Whatever this was, the guidance, all of it – he didn't want it.

Then, he began to discern a faint voice in his head. Female. It was saying repeatedly, softly: "This could be everything you've been dreaming of everything you've ever dreamed of ...". On it went.

He stood rooted, staring at her. The hallucination was back, her face unmistakably morphing, and rapidly now – playful, sexy, sinister, playful, sexy, sinister ...

“What are you looking for, then?”

She took a step closer and placed a hand on his shoulder. He instantly stepped backwards, crumbling again. The elevator arrived behind him. He took a last look at her rapidly cycling faces, retreating from view. “Some ... h-help. I think I need ... help.”

Discretely, yet repeatedly, he pressed the buttons to close the elevator door and go down. As the door closed he crumpled against the wall, breathing heavily. With some small relief, the elevator began to drop.

Back on the darkening streets, with an effort of will, his sense of direction returned. The subway was a relief, though he nervously scanned the car, fearing someone may follow. Reality had opened up like a black hole and sucked him inexorably across the event horizon. It had run him on tracks – a Satanic subway cross town and straight into that secret little room he couldn’t otherwise have ever discovered. It was proof of “the other”, this “higher force”, but he’d had more than enough proof in the last few months. He had been okay, dealing with it in his room. This was why he’d all but stopped going outside. The outside world was a mind-bending drug he could no longer deal with.

He was soon back in his apartment, foetal and clutching blankets. Cannabis would ease this. Shakily he prepared his water pipe and took some gargantuan hits. He finally began to relax. Soon, with a little music on his stereo, and a lot of cannabinoids in his synapses, everything was fine. He should at least paint. Art was his vocation. It was a way to handle everything and have any hope of bringing order. Perhaps today is what happens when I don’t channel this right, he thought.

Painting was like negotiating with the other consciousness waiting in the wings. Editing it in any way would be a kind of blasphemy. Painting was like paying rent, piecemeal and regular, rather than all in one go, as he’d been tempted with today’s escapade with the subway girl. Who knows where that would have led? We’ve all got to find our level, not go too fast. It felt as if enlightenment was calling to him, from just behind

the next door, if he wanted to go through. And, he realised, he didn't.

Yet, this particular painting, a dark apocalyptic scene, with him at the centre, or at least, the forefront, was certainly coming from a place beyond the contents of his own life and his own head. He was midwifing it from some other dimension, pieced together from inspiration, intuition, imagination, and, lately, from dreams and visions. Tonight, the impulse was irresistible, he was painting by numbers at manic speed, seeing exactly what he should paint a few seconds ahead of doing it. And the result was far better than he could achieve with his own two eyes alone – a third was needed for this kind of genius.

He really didn't want his landlady seeing what the painting had become. It disturbed even him, too. Sometimes it was an ecstatic process, at other times, merely compulsive. Tonight there was no pleasure. He felt himself an observer. He believed he could probably stop, tear himself away. But, he didn't want to just yet. The work was like a sacrificial ritual, he believed. Acknowledging this reality that was presenting itself from another dimension, he hoped, would be enough, both to quieten the demands it put upon his mind, and, more importantly, to prevent it manifesting as a reality here. While he had it captured on canvas, and it lived through him – despite the stresses and challenges – he believed he could transmute it, and prevent it from coming to pass.

A new element flashed suddenly across the canvas, a web of ethereal tendrils connecting up to the already depicted nightmarish scenes – of murders and rapes, of the powerful preying upon the weak, demons devouring the souls of the living – each one now mainlined by the network of tendrils into the flesh of his own tortured figure at the front. He slowed for a moment, briefly wondering about the meaning of this new vision, before speeding up once again and obediently adding the strokes.

FOUR

He awoke atop his bed in paint smeared clothes, with no idea when he had finally collapsed exhausted. No memory of dreams either. He stood unsteadily and picked up his jacket from where he had tossed it. Something fluttered to the floor, a piece of paper. He leant to pick it up from where it had landed, close to his exterior door, and noticed two items – a business card and a receipt. He crumpled the receipt and examined the card. “Dr Philip Wharton M.D. – Psychotherapist ... St. Mark’s Private Psychiatric Hospital”. On the back was a handwritten message, “Here’s help. This is free too – Astrid (from the Psi group).”

How the hell did that get here? Had she palmed it into his jacket pocket? Or did someone follow him home and slip it under the door? Free psychiatric help. Might be good to at least get a professional opinion. Yesterday had been pretty crazy. It was strange how help would always turn up in his life just at the right time, he reflected. Never enough to lift him up to a normal existence. Just enough to maintain him endlessly skirting some final plunge.

If he was going to call the number on the card, he’d need to fortify himself with a little breakfast beforehand. The cupboards were bare but, thankfully, the landlady wasn’t at her sentry and he was able to escape to the corner coffee shop. He ate pancakes and drank a coffee while looking over a newspaper. His eyes skipped across the pages, something inside him too sick to focus and decipher linear meaning. This way, though, he was able to take in the whole in a few glances, keywords jumping into his eyes. Threat. Terrorism. Killed. Outrage. Fears. Surveillance.

Repulsed, he pushed it away and turned to the business card, turning it over and over in his hand. He began considering what calling might mean. Sharp metal-winged butterflies began fluttering in his stomach. He’d at least call, then decide

what to do. He paid his check and exited to the street, searching for a quiet spot to make the call.

Nowhere seemed suitable – noise and prying eyes everywhere. Going home wasn't an option. Only here, on the street, could he work up enough spirit to follow through. He walked on, fastening his thin coat high against the biting air, searching for the right spot to call and the nerve to do it. He found a quiet alcove by the local church and dialled.

"Dr Wharton," answered a voice.

"Hi, uh, somebody gave me your card."

"Who is this, please?"

"Oh, my name's David. Uh ... somebody called Astrid gave me your card, from the Psi group. Said you might be able to give me some help."

"Some help? Uh-huh. I'm a little busy, but ... that's possible. How urgent would you say this is?"

"Um, yeah, it's not so urgent. ... You don't charge, right? She told me you can do it for free. Because I can't –"

David glanced around and noticed the church's billboard. On it was a Bible quote: "In the last days, God says 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.' - Acts 2:17." He stared at it, shocked, reading and re-reading it. His consciousness rocked as if someone had sent several hundred volts through his brain. It seemed like yet another message to him.

"I do some work for free, on my assistant's recommendations."

David's eyes skipped backwards and forwards over the quote.

"You're sure it's not urgent?" continued the doctor.

David glanced to the street – things were awry. Around the shoulders of a ravaged homeless man in a doorway opposite, an infant-sized, translucent demon, sat casually, its busy hands lost inside the man's head.

"No," said David transfixed. A confident, suited alpha male strode by, cell phone to ear, smoking a cigarette. Fast grey wisps of energy, like orbiting electrons, licked about him in ordered formations.

"No? No, it's not urgent or, no, you're not sure?" asked the doctor.

David was silent for a few long seconds. Everybody walking by now seemed to carry some manner of passenger – gremlins hanging from shoulders, parasitic amoebic blobs stuck like limpets across foreheads, chests and stomachs, octopus-like creatures attached to their hosts by suckered tentacle, dark energy fields haunting heads like personal rainclouds.

“No, I’m pretty sure. It’s kind of urgent.”

FIVE

By mid-afternoon David was fidgeting in a waiting room on the sixth floor of St. Mark's, an attractive seven storey, red-brick building in Lenox Hill. He noticed an elderly couple watching him and found himself compulsively returning to them, checking for more demonic little passengers. A loud, overwrought voice carried in from the corridor – some disturbed individual. David's mind whirled.

What happens if I'm not crazy and they tricked me here to drug me up, stop me seeing the truth? That amazing girl, Astrid – the bait to reel me in. And the group ... what were they doing? Maybe they were screening for people like me. A totally free course? Run on donations? And she somehow slipped me that card. How could she have written on it? Someone fucking followed me home. Unless she knew I needed help. Why want to help, anyway? What am I doing here? Can I leave? Am I already a patient?

A sharply dressed, well-groomed doctor appeared in the doorway with a kindly-looking, attractive young female nurse.

"David?" he asked. "I'm Dr Wharton. Philip."

David stood and shook his hand, noticing a firm, confident grip. He estimated the doctor must be twenty years older than himself, maybe thirty, but youthful, and certainly more vital.

"Nice to meet you," said the doctor. "I've got about an hour, so ... shall we?"

They walked to a comfortable, expansive office that was festooned with the effects of a successful professional life – a well-stocked bookcase, certificates on the wall, a bust of some venerable male. The doctor closed the door, sat behind his desk and stared penetratingly at David.

"I'm told you're looking for a little help."

David shifted in his seat.

The doctor added, "It's amazing what can happen when you ask for help – and make a little effort to find it."

"Well, it's just ... I'm seeing things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Stuff that shouldn't be there." He looked up to see the doctor's face morphing slightly, eyes different, cheekbones pulsating, a milky cloud suffusing the whole. "Your face is moving around right now."

"Moving? In what way?"

David controlled his fear and held his stare to deliver the requested commentary. "Changing shape, into a different face. Similar but ... Then back to your own. Back and forth." He finally broke away to look at the floor. That disturbing connection was opening again, as it had with Astrid, he could feel it. It felt as if the doctor was not human but some all-knowing other entity, and he felt ridiculous – humiliated, even – continuing to talk to him as if he were only the doctor.

"And this has happened before?"

"Lately, yeah. A few times," he said casually, though probably fooling no-one.

"Okay. And what else?"

"Ah, having some weird dreams," said David, wondering how much he should disclose to this being. "More than dreams," he went on. "Like another life I'm leading, or the future or something."

"Why do you think it's the future?"

"It feels like the future. A fascist America. No freedom." Perhaps he really was just a doctor and he was only hallucinating. Perhaps he could help get the message out, about what might be coming if people didn't act. "A police state. Total control. People hunted in the streets. More than a dream."

"Well, that could be the future," said the doctor.

What the fuck? What does that mean? "What?"

"What else is happening?"

David thought for a moment. This was no normal doctor, but he felt him a force for good. "Reality is just ... breaking down, becoming less real. Two-dimensional cardboard people. Office workers suddenly like machines – like nobody's home. Robots."

"Office workers? Just office workers?"

"You know, people working in the city. Nine-to-fivers." He had the strange fleeting thought that the doctor was his

superior and that he was a field agent giving a report of his time in this alien world.

"You see these things a lot? How frequently, would you say?"

"They come and go. Sometimes I'm normal." David snorted on hearing himself say this. "There's other stuff. Waking up at night from these dreams, my mind goes into these whirlpools of associations. Readymade networks of meaning, y'know, from nowhere. Making me know too much, see things people shouldn't see."

"Like what, for example?"

"That we're all fucked. Completely and forever."

"Uh-huh, so ... what are you most concerned about?"

"Most ...? Seeing these ... beings. I don't know ... like –" he paused for a moment, unsure whether to continue his admission, "– spirits. Demons ... feeding on us."

"Feeding?"

"Stealing energy or ... spirit. Or, I dunno ... maybe more like a symbiosis." He laughed nervously. If this doctor could actually help, he'd have his work cut out.

"And you say they're not really there?"

"Of course they're not there. There's something wrong with my brain. That's why I'm here! I'm not going crazy - I am fucking crazy!"

"Let's get out of here. This place isn't for you."

David glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"You're not crazy."

"What? That's it? You ask me a few questions and tell me I'm fine?"

The doctor was now on his feet and coming round the desk. "I didn't say you're fine. You've got some issues, and I can help you, probably solve them relatively quickly. Maybe – maybe – even turn them into assets."

The doctor began donning his coat. David twisted in his seat and gaped at him. The doctor added, "But if you don't get on top of this now – well ..."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Something that I don't talk about in here." He opened the door and David finally stood and followed the doctor into the hall. They walked silently to the elevator, joined there by the old couple from the waiting room, and kept their silence

until the street. It felt as if they were sharing some secret. Or perhaps, he then thought, he was merely being escorted from the premises. The sun had emerged and the weather was now surprisingly mild. He felt like he hadn't seen the sun in years.

They crossed the street to the forecourt of a large modernist office building. "We can get a coffee in here," said the doctor.

They entered a glistening marble lobby with over-sized sculptures and took an escalator up to a restaurant on the large, open-plan mezzanine. The art impressed David, but it also troubled him – the wrong setting, he thought. Here these creations had become merely the spoils of economic war, crafted by a sensibility unguessable to the barbaric venality that had merely wrenched them here with the brute force of money. The sculpture work was as incongruous as the monolith in the film 2001: A Space Odyssey, David reflected. But, these corporate apes would scuttle about them for years without evolving another way of being.

They ordered their drinks – David an Americano, the doctor, a ginger tea. While they waited, David studied a group of well-groomed men and women on an adjacent table.

"Nice place, huh?" said the doctor, breaking his reverie.

"Why do you want to help me?" asked David suddenly.

"Helping people is my job," he noticed David was unconvinced. "But, helping you would be a pleasure."

"Why? Why would it be a pleasure?"

An attractive waitress arrived and delivered their drinks. David realised he was tensed and relaxed for a moment.

"Thank you," said the doctor, smiling at the waitress until out of earshot. "It would be a pleasure, David, because solving your problems will be, I expect, relatively easy. Your *problems* are rather a gift, I believe – potential in a different guise."

David stared at him warily. "My problems are a gift?"

The doctor casually glanced from side to side. He leant forward and said in a businesslike fashion, "I'm part of a network that's working to trigger the development of higher human faculties across a broad cross-section of the public." He added conspiratorially, "To psychically switch people on, in other words." Another gear change, suddenly jaunty, "The greatest self-help program in history – no child left behind! It'll make the sixties look like ... well, the fifties."

David wasn't used to speaking to intelligent people any more – he wasn't used to speaking to people, if truth be told – and his head was spinning.

The doctor went on, "But you – you're switched on already. Totally switched on. That's abundantly clear. You just don't know how to use it. You haven't found the off switch."

"Is this what you do to all your patients – tell them crazy shit and push them over the edge? 'You're psychic ... I'm part of a special network ...'?"

"Come on! You're better than that," chided the doctor. "Stop giving in to that dark silly little voice. You've got reservations about what I'm saying, who I am, this whole situation. Right? Understandable. But, you also hope I have some answers. That's why you're still sitting here. Why not inhabit that positivity a little longer? Inflate that reality, if that is indeed the one you prefer."

David's irritability was beginning to peak. He bounced his right leg like a piston below the table.

The doctor took a sip of tea and softened, "You're not crazy. You're not inventing what you're seeing. Filtering it, yes. Giving meaning to it, certainly. Inventing? No. You're seeing more of reality."

"More?" sputtered David. "What I'm seeing is more of reality? I'm hallucinating my ass off!"

"Hallucination ..." said the doctor, his eyes wandering for a moment in thought, "from *alucinari*, to *wander in the mind*. What if all is mind, as the mystics say? You've simply strayed off-piste, my friend, that's all. You're skiing a 'black run'." He took a sip of tea, holding David in his stare. "On the visual spectrum alone, humans see less than a half a per cent of all known pulsations. Humans other than you, sir. Less than half a per cent! You've blown the bandwidth wide open. Now you have to learn to decode it. Or keep drugging it away."

Drugging it away? David checked to see if his track marks were showing, and found them concealed beneath his winter layers. "You've known me for five minutes and you've got me all worked out."

"Maybe so. What's time to do with it, anyway? Some people know their spouse or their kids their whole lives, without actually *knowing* them. Oh, the wasted opportunities!"

David felt defensive. The alternative was to stay open and risk spinning out again. The guy knew too much, whoever he was. David crossed his arms and pulled his most sceptical face.

"Just before I met you, in the waiting room, you were pondering: 'Did I come here today under my own steam? ... Or am I already a patient?' – I know that about you."

A cold chill washed through David.

The doctor said, "You have mental health issues only because ... you're exceptionally psychic. I know that, too. Weird dreams, waking nightmares," he flapped at imaginary demons, "plagued by entities—"

Is this guy part of some weird government program? CIA or something?

Philip cocked his head, "– and, what's that? Is this 'shrink guy' part of some evil government program? ..."

He looked at David's astonished face. "... Oh, a dash of paranoia, too."

David shuffled in his seat, both legs now juddering beneath the table, on a knife edge of nervous excitement. "And, so, what do you want, after you've 'fixed me'?"

"Maybe we want nothing, David. Not everybody is still stuck in that old, self-centred ego-survival program. Thank goddess!"

David shook his head sharply. Everyone wanted something. That was the world.

"Intuition! Good, good," said the doctor, slapping the table. "Okay, our 'self-interest', if you like, is: the more we've got aboard like you, the quicker we can wake up the rest of them ... The masses ... All those caught up in wage slavery and glittery shiny things, television, booze, all the junk. All the incessant needless misery. New souls endlessly banging heads on the same old walls. ... Sure, I'm hoping you'll stick around and help us after we get you running your brain right. But, if not, well, you'll be one more switched-on dude out there."

He was striking home. He seemed to share the same critical view of the world with David, and yet, he was an insider, someone with status and power. Such views sat very differently in his mouth. David contemplated this, looking around at the unsuspecting everyday scene of dining workers around them.

"So, you're gonna change the world?" asked David.

"Maybe. First, though, we're gonna show people what it really is."

"And what's that?"

"You don't get that on a first date," he checked his watch. "You have to come a little further on the ride. ... Time's nearly up. My good works aren't over for the day." He glanced at a still sceptical David. "How about a demonstration?"

"A demonstration?"

"Yeah. How about you try and attract the waitress?"

"You mean, with my mind?"

"Let's walk before we run. Just use your hand."

"Oh, okay." He unconfidently raised his hand and attempted to catch the eye of the attractive waitress. "It's too busy."

"Too busy ..." The doctor unhurriedly turned towards the waitress who instantly looked up from the other side of the dining area. He raised his hand a few inches and she began to make her way over.

This both impressed and affronted David. "Nice trick."

The waitress asked, "Hey, how you doing? What can I get you?"

"You're pretty busy today. Just the check, thanks. Pretty hard to catch your eye." The doctor held strong eye contact.

The exchange seemed odd. David wondered about the doctor's repetition of the word "pretty".

"We're always busy at this time," she said, writing up their check. "You should check out Max's if you're looking for somewhere quieter."

"Max's, huh? Not sure I know it."

"Oh, you should check it out. A friend just re-opened it. Catch me another time, I can take you over there," she handed over the check. David felt invisible.

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that."

She beamed at the doctor before leaving the table. David noticed him look at the back of the check and raise his eyebrows, as if she had written something *extra* on it for him.

"So, did you use your powers on her?" asked David facetiously.

"Every full-blooded flirt enlists resources of which most people are only dimly aware, if at all," said the doctor. "You, on the other hand, have for some reason switched your polarities

to repel. Money, joy, women, peace of mind – opportunity, David. You send all these things away.” He stood, dropped a twenty on the table and offered a handshake. “So, I’ll be on my way. I wish you good luck.” He shook David’s hand and said, “There’s always luck.”

With that, the doctor turned and strode away. David’s jaw dropped. What the hell was this? I thought I was supposed to be the vulnerable charity-case, he thought. And you just get up and leave at the slightest bit of attitude!

Thoughts cascaded, most of them attempting to justify how he had just crashed and burned in the face of a glorious opportunity. Part of him was, of course, relieved. Who could blame him for being suspicious? He had been fucked over too many times in the last couple of years, living in his junkie demi-monde. Wharton was from a different world – the straight world – a superman compared to where he was at. And the middle-class – professionals – they were best in the business at the fuck over.

Even if Wharton was to be believed, the power differential meant it felt like the wrong choice to get involved. Better to make your own mistakes than hitch your wagon to another and make theirs. Such a fast track to growth was a kind of suicide, anyway. He might not have much of a life, but it was one he didn’t want to just abandon like that. It was that door to enlightenment again, in a different guise. It can be eternally postponed, he told himself. I want to walk through it myself, not get dragged, and at the right time.

He paid the check with the twenty and kept the change. He needed the money. It felt like a derisory pay-off, anyway. He headed to the subway while considering his narrowing options. Apparently, he wasn’t crazy, after all. He was gifted. Some kind of psychic. And now, with a little work, he supposed, he could become part of some spiritual revolution, and help change the world. He flushed on realising that he had mused on the existence of just such a secret underground the previous day – just before the episode in the subway car and Astrid. And he had now sent it away. Too weird, too weird. Be careful what you wish for.

So, if he wasn’t crazy, that added a sudden new weight to what he was seeing, his dreams and visions. He was seeing some kind of deeper reality. He’d often thought it, but had

been too scared to run all the way with it. The heroin had helped keep everything at bay, sent him on a pleasant detour to regroup a while. His welfare check was still intact, he realised. He'd usually crack it open with a visit to his guy at Union Square. And, as he was already out and about, he may as well score now.

He called his guy and arranged the meet before ducking into the subway. Up at Union Square and over to the statue of George Washington on horseback – buying horse at the horse. Then, back into the subway, and home. *Om*. The little death of heroin bliss. *La petit mort* – the French expression for orgasm. Strange, the connection between sleep, sex and death, he thought.

The landlady was back and waiting in her room as he crossed the hallway. "Hey, just a minute!"

David stopped in his tracks, yearning for privacy with the sweetheart he fondled in his pocket.

"You owe me over two hundred dollars, and I want it tomorrow or you're out. I've been more than fair to you. You would have been out long ago, any other place."

David nodded and climbed the stairs. He'd deal with tomorrow tomorrow.

She shouted, "I mean it. That's it."

Safe in his apartment, he quickly prepared a hit. Tourniquet tight. Veins swollen. Syringe poised. Maybe this would be his last. Maybe the purity had suddenly gone up and he'd O.D. A shaft of light squeezed into his room through a gap in the curtain, falling across his arm. A part of his awareness instantly leapt above his body, looking down at his junkie pose.

"... learn to decode it or keep drugging it away," a voice said clearly.

Then he was back in his body, looking at the syringe, frozen still. He had felt alone now for half his life, that nobody really cared. He felt a sudden shame at his predicament – living there, like this. Someone was watching over him, even if it was only a part of himself, and it had his attention.

Learn to decode it?

Tomorrow, he told himself, and slid in the syringe.