

If in death we find peace Why must we fight to survive? Lift up your eyes
Still your trembling heart And walk softly
Into the light.

The pale, slightly blue alabaster skin of the child makes it seem almost angelic to the mother. Great pus-filled blisters decorate the little body, but the face, the face is untouched. Clutching the child to her breast, far more forcefully that she would have ever dared in life, with head thrown back, she screams to the sky, a rasping scream of anger and despair.

Now, finally, she is ready to kill. To tear down the stars, rip up the world, to spit into the filthy face of God, but she soon runs out of air and her throat burns, so she crouches down to sob hot tears on to the angelic face, rocking the child, speaking its name over and over as if she could somehow love it back to life.

Drawn by the commotion a man watches. He looks like a tramp or a drunk, but really he is an accountant, or was, and is particularly content. You can see the source of his contentment through the holes in his five hundred dollar jacket. A tin of sardines. Anyway, he justifies, she's in a different building, so what could I do anyway? Slowly a terrifying and wonderful idea forms in her mind. Reverently she places the child on the bed and gives it one long, last gentle kiss. Now she stands up straight and proud. Looking around she surveys the place that she had called home for so many years. Through the pain, now and then, a smile briefly appears, happy memories come like ghosts. Memories of foolish laughter and hope. Memories of a past time and a lost family.

She steps backwards towards the place where there had once, long ago, been a window and whilst imagining herself a nameless child falling onto a soft feather bed, she drops, silently, from the eighty-fifth floor of the Empire State Building and down into the chaos below.

But then, the falling had seemed to stop and this was surprising enough, but also surprising was the fact that she had found that she could no longer form words within her mind, just emotions, images and strange representations of vectors and forces. A great panorama of green fields seemed to be slowly rolling above her until she realised that she was actually looking down at where the concrete should be.

She was still dimly aware of her fall from the building, but now much more intensely aware of a great beast in the sky. She was exhausted, her mind in turmoil, the tightly packed neurons of her brain firing in a desperate struggle to calculate a way to avoid the death that hung imperiously above her. Operating many times faster than a human could ever manage, her mind, nonetheless, always produced the same result. No escape.

The coppice where her nest was, where she could be safe amongst the tangled twigs and leaves, she could see in the distance, but it was too far away. The eagle had height and could swoop down, with all the extra speed that that would give it, at any time. If she managed to evade the eagle, it would overshoot, putting it between her and safety and she would have to jink. The problem being that she was too low. With her chest burning, she knew her tired wings would not carry her much further.

Briefly, the image of scimitar claws, forward staring eyes and a huge, hideously curved beak appeared in her mind and that spurred her on, but then instead of picturing the branches and foliage of the coppice that could save her, something else came to her. It was the image of her babies, their trusting faces, beaks upturned and gaping as they begged for food. She wasn't capable of understanding that her death would mean starvation for them or that if it couldn't get her there, then neither could it get them. What she did know was unconditional love and that she was no longer going to lead the monster there.

Bouncing a little, she flopped down onto a grass verge next to a ploughed field, she spread her wings and snuck every part of her body as low to the ground as she possibly could, the flesh of her neck and back crawling with the most terrible anticipation. It was her last instinctive act. She decided not to look.

But the talons didn't come. Her eyes popped back open to see the hands of a contented old woman working carefully at crushing seeds between two stones, stones now worn smooth. The woman was remembering the distant time when, as a young woman, she had first used the stones. How she had made her great discovery. How, having chewed the crushed seeds, she had spat them into her palms, formed them into a ball that she had then placed next to the meat on the flat stones that surrounded the cave entrance fire. How it had warmed her heart to see the joy on her brutish father's face, his hair all bedecked with twigs and random leaves, as he

first tasted the new delicacy. Even after all this time, it still made her laugh.

She remembered, so tall and so strong, how she had once run with the men and hunted the great beasts of the forest with her brothers. Now seated with her stones, those heroic days seemed a very distant memory. Her frail presence was now barely tolerated on occasion. At least she made herself useful, where she could, by looking after the little ones, whilst foraging and hunting were going on. Then there were, of course, the seed cakes, but now all the women made those and nobody was left to remember a time before them or where they had come from.

She was alone with the children, making herself useful when 'Hungry Child' suddenly appeared. He was covered in sweat and was obviously very upset. To make a joke she greeted him as Angry Child, the two words sounding almost exactly the same. She had meant no offence, but he didn't seem to understand that and he stood and met her stare, a serious insult. Not daring to meet his eyes for too long, she was forced to look down but then the humiliation became too much and she spat a mouthful of seeds onto his feet. She regretted it as soon as she did it, but it was too late, it was done.

Howling with rage, he grabbed the top stone she was holding and smashed it down onto the bottom stone, which split in two.

Walking away, back out of the cave, he realised that he still had the top stone in his hand. Turning, he saw the old woman sitting amongst her scattered seeds and ruined cakes, holding the two halves of the broken stone with a look of utter despair and disbelief on her tear-stained face. Some of the small children had started crying too. That all made him feel something; something he didn't like, so he slung the top stone towards her and walked off, but the stone struck her hard and squarely on the side of her face and soon the scattered seeds were mixed with blood.

Consciousness returned to the sound of a crying baby. The women were returning, having gathered the children from outside, their skin pouches full with berries and roots. The old woman opened her eyes and found that she was now lying on the ground near the back of the cave with her head on a pile of animal skins. She groaned loudly with pain and tried to clear something black that had gotten between her right eye and the rest of the world. To her

surprise, nobody looked her way. The women were mostly busying themselves with the fire that had become dangerously low.

Whatever it was that was between her eye and the rest of the world was a strange thing indeed as she found she could pass her fingers straight through it as if it wasn't there and managed to poke her finger, painfully, into her eye several times. After a while, she decided that perhaps there really was nothing there although, annoyingly, her hand still instinctively kept trying to brush it away. Perhaps, she wondered, half of me is now seeing the night, or perhaps it is the pain that is in the way. After all, some pain cannot be touched.

Propping herself up, she looked down with her other eye and saw that she was filthy, all covered in dirt, seeds, and congealed blood. She was ashamed. No wonder they wouldn't look at her and they were probably angry too. She couldn't remember letting the children go outside or when she lay down to sleep at the back and that made her angry and ashamed of herself as well. The pain in her head was getting worse and she realised that she was thirsty, but the berries were with the women by the fire and she felt so tired that it was hard to move.

If only she had had a child, she thought, maybe she would help me now. Old thoughts that had haunted her back in the days when the sky was brighter and the forest louder, came again to her now. What did the other women know that she didn't? Why did her stomach stay flat? No baby and no blood had ever appeared there. The only things that ever came out of there were those things that went in. Was that what she got wrong? Were you supposed to keep it all in or were there special thoughts or words that she didn't know? She remembered the hunting trips. She had done a lot more than just run with the boys in the woods. She smiled at that memory. It's a wonder we didn't all starve. She nearly laughed but thought better of it lest the women knew why. Do they still hunt, she wondered, gone for such a long time they must be bored without her. Would she ever be back with them again, her boys? Would things be like they were before? But how to join them. She didn't know how to do that either.

By evening time, she was sitting up but still isolated near the back. The men were back and the fire was raging, but she was too far away and she was feeling cold. Shamefully she had called out to beg for help a couple of times, but none of the adults had even

looked her way, not even 'Hungry Child'. At least, she thought, it must be him, but it was hard to tell in the flickering light with only half a world to see. Can they see me at all? she wondered. This is my punishment for not watching the children.

Night came slowly. Even though she shook with cold, sweat poured from her, making her skin itch, keeping her awake. For the first time, she felt truly valueless and completely alone. Huddled in the skins that had been her pillow, she began, also for the first time, to wonder at the nature of her existence.

All, except her, were asleep, when she thought she heard movement in the smelly, very back of the cave. (Only she and the men ever dared to venture outside in the middle of the night.) Instantly she turned ready and alert but saw only darkness. She sat still for a second and listened: was there something moving in her night world?

It was then that giant jaws clamped down on her stomach and her hip. She screamed out and, with all her strength, pushed against a huge furry head, but it was futile, the cave bear was four times her size. Screaming as loud as she could, she tried to get a finger into one of the eyes, but the bear just responded by shaking her around like a rag doll. This turned her aching bones into red-hot coals of agony in her back and that made her freeze in silence as the bear dragged her into the mess at the very back of the cave.

Where are the men, her thoughts screamed, they should be stabbing the bear with their spears and clubbing it? She could hear some of the children crying and some young voices shouting, but from the adults, nothing. Were they leaving? She had known them all as children and would have fought all the trees of the forest were they bears, to save just one of them, so why?

Bitterly she realised they wanted to be rid of her. Whilst being dragged she had clutched at a rock to use as a weapon but, knowing the response she would get, she let it go and then was immediately angry with herself, it's going to eat you anyway, idiot. For a time the bear was busying itself by, with upward jerking motions, ripping up her dear skin tunic whilst crushing her against the ground with a mighty paw on her chest. Remembering the hours spent stitching the garment together she once again regretted letting go of the rock, but then another thought occurred to her. Maybe the bear doesn't realise that that's not me. Maybe if I can get my arms out I can roll away from the bear and then run

towards the others. They would then be forced to fight the bear and save me. The bear was now actually eating part of the tunic and she was able to get an arm out of one of the sleeves.

Preoccupied, the bear had reduced some of the pressure on her chest and she was able to examine, with her hand, a wound on her stomach. There were two painful puncture wounds and a lot of blood, but it was not as bad as she had feared.

She prepared herself for one great effort, but then the bear leant forward again and ignoring the tattered remains of the garment, ripped a large panel of skin and muscle away from her abdomen. Numbed, briefly by shock, she was able to think something like, what? I come apart that easily?

The bear, however, just pushed aside the still partially attached flap and having buried its huge snuffling snout into the new cavity was, with an upward jerking motion, trying to remove its contents. Part of her mind remembered the many animals she had gutted in her life and started to think something like, so now it's my turn, but the new, different, pain then made her panic uncontrollably, and her legs twitched and kicked and her hands tore at the great head, all to no avail. She tried to cry out with all her might but just produced a strange high-pitched gurgling sound. Like a baby? She tried again, but this time nothing happened. Horrified she realised that she could no longer breathe in.

When you burn your hand on a hot rock, cut yourself or some idiot hits you on the head with a stone, it takes a long time for the pain to subside. It goes away slowly, but her great mountain of pain seemed to disappear to nothing in an instant, it was as if it had never really been there at all.

Slowly she became aware she was now looking down at someone, herself. There was her tunic all ripped open and spattered with blood and god knows what else. There was the enormous bear tugging out her intestines, grunting with satisfaction as it consumed them and their contents. The face, her face, strangely calm. The place that now seemed like an old home, the place whence, for so many long years, she had looked out upon the world, now seemed strangely beautiful to her.

Save for the odd jerking movement, courtesy of the bear's attentions, the old wrinkled skin and the staring bloodshot eyes, nothing seemed to disturb the serene indifference of that blood-stained countenance. So this is death.

When her mother was alive she had once said that we come out from darkness into the light, but in the end, it is back into darkness that we must return. Later she told of a special dream. In the dream, she said she had walked in a mysterious dark forest where there was a beautiful light that led to a wonderful place, but she was afraid and did not dare follow it, in case she could not get back.

Years later, when her mother lay dying in her arms, she had quietly whispered into her ear, so that nobody else could hear, "Just go, mother, go, go into the light." She had hoped that her mother might re-experience the dream and that it would ease her passing. It had seemed to work because, moments later, the unconscious woman had sighed gently and then died.

Now that she was dead as well, she remembered her mother's dream and wondered if she would see the light herself, but all she could see was the grisly scene slowly falling away beneath her. She had lived in the caves all her life and so knew the height of the roof there and wanted to duck and cover her head, but she had no arms, not even eyelids to blink and she was still not breathing, but now it didn't matter, it didn't matter at all. All that constant movement and struggle, what was it all for, she wondered. She wondered if she might see her mother again or her beloved boys but didn't really seem to care much about that either. She didn't really seem to care if she just faded to nothing and was gone! Drifting slowly up into that great vaulted ceiling in her mind, the events below slowly faded and disappeared from view. Without need nor desire, fear no longer serves a purpose and so it was that when she found herself in total darkness, she, for a few moments, knew for the very first time, true silence and complete peace. Then there was a light. It felt like waking from a dream to see the light, but she could do nothing about it. Could this be the light from my mother's dream, she wondered. Between her and the light, there seemed to be something like horizontal twigs or strands of something moving around, so that looking at the light was like looking at it through a flickering grid or when you're a child and you run through the forest whilst looking up at the sun. That's before you fall over, of course. So was this the forest? Then there was a voice.

"Come on baby come to mummy, come on, come on, you can do it, come on, come on," it said, and she could feel hands stroking her hair and tapping her cheek.

Then the voice said "Take that damn torch out of her – her eye, me think she awake," as a hand pushed all of her hair back out of the way.

Aware now, that she was lying on her side with her head resting on two little legs, she pushed herself upright and then came a disorienting realisation, a realisation beyond all comprehension that swept into her consciousness with such force, with such irresistible, overwhelming power that it demanded to be spoken.

"I'm Adriana!"

Dis continuities

Empires that rise from ashes to conquer a world, fail without reason and kings fall to their fools. Cities burn and rise again or just disappear without trace. Rainbows appear without rain and lightning is heard from cloudless skies in a world where hydrogen people leave footprints on the moon, duck quacks echo and the children of dinosaurs dance and sing, in their millions, in the trees; every day.

Only one creature in the great dominion of life gives so much as a tinker's cuss about all that of course. Just the one animal species. The clever mammal. Not the Giraffe, specialised to reach high food, or the elephant, to bring it down to the ground. Not the cheater to be fast nor the snake to poison or crush. The human, of course, with its exaggerated cerebral cortex, so large that women die in childbirth and people are forced to look out on to the world through eyes set only halfway up their faces. [Doesn't look strange to us but ...!] Programmed from birth to try and understand; to understand the world, language, each other. Although not necessarily the first word a baby might say, the first thing all babies, always think, is always "why?" And so the stories begin. It is as if the stories are your anchor to reality. They can be quite simple, but you still need to keep them safe, to keep you safe. To join the dots you have been given. To keep things making sense

even if, in and of themselves, they do not. Does the truth matter? No, what is important is what is believed to be true.

"Being a footballer is all I ever wanted to be. So that's why I am happy now. That's why I play!"

"Really? Are you sure you didn't once want to be a spaceman?"

We all have our stories. How we got here. Where we are going.

What we want, need, desire, would do, could do, if only. What he did, she did, said, had, didn't have, could have, couldn't have, shouldn't have. Stories about what's good and bad, right and wrong, important and not. It is these stories that tell us not just who, but what we are!

Of course, some stories can be long and complex and fill books like this one, or sit entombed in the venerable pages of history, waiting for the next believer to enter the library, or to go online. But the thing is they change! I have seen them change! Like living things, forced through the turbid evolution of Chinese whispers they adapt. Adapt to the listener. The exciting or interesting or just downright strange bits will often be enhanced, get bigger or stronger, more dominant and who knows, might even, well might just mutate at some point. Weak parts might tend to wither and end up like... like the appendix or in one, or maybe eventually just get forgotten altogether. Sometimes entire stories might just go extinct, but who is there to worry about them? Who would even notice? There are places where you can meet people with whom you can discuss these matters. Just a bit of advice though. Before you go there, get yourself a little card with your name on it and get it laminated. Clip it to a white coat and get a clipboard. After all; you wouldn't want to get stuck in there!

Empires rise from ashes to conquer a world, then fail without reason, and kings fall to their fools. Cities burn and rise again as rainbows appear without rain and lightning is heard from cloudless skies in a world where hydrogen people leave footprints on the moon, duck quacks echo and the children of dinosaurs still dance and sing, in their millions, in the trees; every day.

Grandmaster456 awoke with his mind in a state of turmoil. That wasn't his real name, of course. Gabriel could have been overjoyed. It was a girl and he had found her. It had taken a long time, but at long, long last he finally knew, he was sure, but there

was a problem that left him sitting on the edge of his sun bed with his head in his hands, deep in thought.

It wasn't the sort of sunbed that would give you a nice bronzing suntan, oh no, quite the reverse. No way would you ever get a tan in one of those crazy things. The name was just someone's idea of a joke, but it stuck, the name, the euphemism.

It did look rather like a sun bed, but what Gabriel now sat on, was his main link. His way to go online, to meet up with the kids, the ex, to enjoy the good things in life. Five hours earlier he had laid himself down, as he had countless times before, and asked for one of his favourite sleep programs. This one had been swimming with dolphins, with just a gentle amount of current to induce a good, deep sleep. Sometimes he had difficulty in telling where his dreams began and the program ended, so he had asked for gentle reminders until full lucid dreaming brain waves appeared.

This time something wonderful and, at the same time, disturbing had happened. He had approached his target as she stood by a pond, in a park, in a dream, but found that he was somehow unable to look at her. Worse still, he had found he had been immediately incorporated into the dream and completely trapped into thinking and speaking only his part, in her dream. Far from being able to destroy her or alter her in any way, he found himself strung into her unconscious like a puppet.

Later, amazed, he was sure she didn't even know she was doing it. But that, shocking as it was, had left little doubt. She was so unique. Surely she had to be the one he had been looking for, for such a very long time, and, by interpreting the dream, he would be able to find others and eventually identify her and track her down. Funny how I always thought it would be a man, he thought. The problem was, how he was going to have to carry out this task and what he would then, finally, have to do. It was not going to be possible to scramble her brains in her sleep, that much was apparent, so she was going to have to be dealt with in the corporeal realm. Somebody was going to have to, basically, walk up to her and kill her, but that someone was going to have to be someone he could trust and the only 'someone' he absolutely knew he could absolutely trust, was himself! The version of himself that could actually just go and get her. Gabriel the younger, the man he was over a hundred years ago. He would have to get him

to find this Shiva, this Uoke, this destroyer and destroy her before it was too late.

Doing that, however, would create paradoxes that would ping and ring reality like a bell. Would it crack or change its tune, he wondered? So few now cared to try and understand anymore. Just a few of the Elites like him were ever even interested, let alone capable of understanding what he now considered and what he understood.

That all of the reality, in which he and all other things are embedded, is underpinned not by energy or mass, not by space-time or the chaos of quantum uncertainty, but by information. Dimensionless, massless and yet as real as any reality that could ever spring forth from its supreme indifference.

That below the bottom rung of the ladder, from the great galaxy down below the hermetic quark and the enigmatic lepton, lays the final and most fundamental layer of all existence. The information layer.

Strange, he had often thought, that it had taken humanity so long, and even then only a tiny fraction of it, to realise something so obvious. Wherein did they think the information detailing the behaviour of truly fundamental particles resided? Within their structure? Difficult, given that they can have none! In every step, time, like the frames of a movie, contains the products of the actions represented by its predecessors. Wherein did they think that information lay, the information about motion for example? The information, without which there could be no motion, no logical sequence of events, no causality and therefore none that could ever wonder at it and see that things could be no other way.

Not that the vast illiterate mass of humanity ever did wonder about very much. Trapped like film actors in the frames that emerge from this realm, it was easy to see how everyone, in fact, all things, would experience causality as immutable, after all, they couldn't see the edits. But he could see them. Discontinuities he called them. In theory, quite a few dreamers could, if they knew where to look and how to interpret what they saw. Influencing his younger self, however, would cause a string of them, discontinuities, and he feared messing with causality in this way could bring about the very thing he feared most.

Small discontinuities were sort of okay. Causality would break down and briefly things would make no sense, but only if you could

see the discontinuity which, of course, normally you couldn't. Bits of history would re-write themselves, but as in most of nature, the line of least resistance would always be followed and even if some bits didn't really make sense, somehow it didn't seem important and nothing and nobody seemed to even notice, no matter how strange the result. It was as if their minds weren't allowed to. As if the information representing them was also altered to match the new reality. But was the discontinuity he was considering too much, he wondered.

If it was, then there might be a sort of phase transition within that strange, timeless zone. A phase transition that would bring about an entirely new and different history, in which case a new version of reality might come into being, of course, at the expense of the existing one. The one containing himself, and that could mean he and his children might simply cease to exist. Might never have existed. He knew it could happen. It had happened before. In fact, in a very real sense, he owed his very existence to the simple fact, that it had! And now, if he did not act, the possibility existed that, that change and therefore he, might be undone. Undone in a past that had never existed, yet at the same time, just might.

Still tired, he decided to lay back down in the 'sunbed', except this time he decided not to press the big, round, turquoise button marked 'ARPAnet'. Naked and with the lid down, in the total darkness, it was almost like floating in a sensory deprivation tank. This, to some extent, was a necessary part of the machine's design. It turned out that the human brain is mostly sensitive to change. Match the contours of the body perfectly and it will rarely want to move, match the air and surface temperatures perfectly and the skin temperature will not change. Eliminate all light, sounds and even smells and there's no change there either. In so doing it was possible to get the brain to start ignoring the unchanging and focus only on the entertainment provided, thus greatly reducing any tendency toward sensorial conflict, although the vestibular problem still remained unsolved. But still, unless you were very unlucky, you could loop the loop in a world war one biplane all day long and still have your dinner continuing its journey in the correct direction. A preferred alternative to having the ingenious product of millions of years of evolution determine that the only possible reason for your sensory dissonance must be that you ate something bad that needs to be gotten rid of.

With his eyes closed, he let his mind wander. It wandered over dim memories of faces from long ago. Faces of lost friends, young lovers and of his precious children when they were still small. For part of him, that was how he would always see them. Sometimes, when he met them online, he would, secretly, change their appearance and their voices, just so he could re-experience how they used to make him feel. His children.

For a while he pondered the strange things he had just seen in the dream, but then his mind wandered again, further into the past. He thought back to when he had first started on his journey from being just rich to joining the super rich. A smile flickered briefly as he recalled the day he officially joined the trillionaire club. I saw it coming, he thought to himself as he gave himself a self-congratulatory nod in the darkness.

Nobody wanted to spend half their life sat in traffic jams, or to be squeezed like sardines into poorly ventilated tins on rails. Nobody wanted to spend a lifetime paying off a mortgage on a massively overpriced little property, just to be close to a job.

They did it because they had no choice and the pressure had been building for decades. Companies could continue to spend millions on obtaining and maintaining their prestigious city office blocks and many did. That was until a new breed of company fully took over and then the whole office paradigm was dead. The new companies had no centre and existed, it could be said, in ARPA space. A very cost effective place to have your office. You see, it turned out that you almost never needed to be in the same room as another person if you had a good enough link. So when everybody did, they started to work from home. A very cost effective and convenient place to travel to, to work.

What had surprised Gabriel was the speed with which it had all happened. In the space of just two short years, across virtually the entire world, city property prices dropped to almost nothing. The great exodus had begun. The faster city prices fell, the more desperate to sell, people became. Multi-million pound central London offices, for example, were now destined to spend their remaining years as council accommodation, whilst at the same time, those properties that were connected, but far away from the cities, the further the better, became the most desirable. Country villages and sea views became all the rage and guess who had

already sold all of his Manhattan and London properties and bought dozens of little country idylls. He had seen it coming. Flying cars finally did arrive, except they were now called drones. They had started small but soon got bigger and in some cases a lot smaller. It was the smaller ones that had put an end to terrorism and, for a while, any assured privacy. The little ones actually looked like bugs, talk about well named! And the big ones? It wasn't long before thousands of the great monsters, emblazoned with advertising and partially buoyed by African or Chinese helium, could be seen hovering over the now virtually deserted highways and motorways of the world. Serenely guided by GPS, TCAS and simple AI, they charged up their swarms, ready to deliver so much more than just pizza to your door. New properties started to be built with drone chutes, just to improve efficiency of course, and the dumbwaiter made a reappearance, although now it tended to bring dinner down to you. Then the very nature of what it meant to live as a human being, began to change.