



THETA HEAD

G R E G D A W E

TECHNOLOGY DOESN'T NEED A MIND OF
ITS OWN... IT CAN HAVE OURS

Theta Head



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Theta Head Synopsis

Georgia's search for her missing boyfriend, Ben, takes her from London through Asia.

On route she discovers that Ben has been using a neuroscience technology – one that offers the potential of complete liberation to anyone who uses it. It is a technology Georgia must embrace if she is to find Ben, but one that is such an intimate catalyst for change Georgia isn't sure she can handle the side of herself it uncovers.

It is only her desire to find Ben which drives her on; a force which leads her to the Theta Heads and a choice: continue using the technology to hack away at her layers of mental static and find the real reason he disappeared, or let go and face a future without him.

Theta Head – technology doesn't need a mind of its own, it can have ours.

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Dedication:

For my family

"There are no accidents there is only some purpose that we haven't yet understood." Deepak Chopra

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"Technology the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it." Max Frisch

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Escalating down into the musty warmth of the London underground's brutal machinery, shaken and ignored as she then shudders through its sooty wormholes, Georgia catches sight of her dark under-eye semicircles. They smile back at her from the opposite window in the darkness between stations and they are, she whispers to herself, 'Evidence.' Of too many late nights scanning flight and phone records, missing persons' sites, lists of router histories and addresses. All percolating like TV static in her head. All too much until subdued with an ice pack and 250 mls of vodka.

Georgia looks in her bag, but the sunglasses she needs to cover her eyes with are not there; summer isn't due for another six months. She'd never really liked them

anyway. With their cheap plastic frames and scratched lenses they were functional but unbecoming. Maybe, she thinks, she could borrow Ben's. They were there for the taking. She'd left them where he'd left them: perched on top of his music equipment, untouched for the past fifteen months. She's sure he wouldn't mind, wherever he might be, and they were so much larger than hers; the perfect disguise for under-eye darkness.

Escalating up now and Georgia is soon out into a tight scrum of black cabs and red buses. They are busy spewing office and shop workers onto a freshly scrubbed Oxford Street, a road she would have walked in its entirety if it wasn't for the clang of titanium shop shutters. Ringing in the new trading day they startle her, forcing her to take a long-cut up into thinner veins, full of fashion houses and Greek cafés, couriers blasting by on old Yamahas. And Georgia, breathing deeply as she walks, trying hard to stem the babble of inner dialogue that has crept up on her and which now hangs over her head like a swarm—the mindless questions and stray song lines, the anxieties and what ifs, nevers, maybes. It's her daily shot of irrelevance and inner chaos and it's all starting to worm in and dice together—a constant, internal head chatter that forms a barrier against clarity and which stops her in her tracks, forcing an admission: her hole has arrived. She can feel it opening up like a fresh wound somewhere on the street nearby, a dark, draining, familiar gravity.

'Give up,' it says. 'Come here.'

It's always that sudden and it always makes her think about seeing a head doctor. Maybe some drugs to try and cover it up with. Drag a steel hatch over it and fasten it in place with a chemical barrier or two.

She needs to move quickly, before this missing part of her life enters her system and starts its sickening spread from her stomach upwards into her chest, down her arms and into her fingertips.

'Distraction,' Georgia says, before the darkness takes hold. 'Treat!' Then, 'Childish woman.' And it's from this self debate that a sliver of cheer returns, enough to get her moving again, albeit around the edges of her hole in a kind of weird, avoidance-arc shuffle and then into a nearby French Confection.

'Sanctuary,' she whispers, closing the heavily polished door firmly.

Once seated Georgia orders her favourite Peruvian, which is served promptly by an immaculate Italian all black and white and pressed. Then studies the menu for something familiar. And feels safe. But stressed.

Force the stress. Expel it.

But, up or down?

Georgia tries both ways but still her nerves are like split-ends.

'Calm down,' she whispers to herself, almost viciously, sinking back into the comfort of the café's window chair.

Tries another, slower breath. Then another.

It's not working.

Trying another approach, Georgia takes out her phone and queues up her current-favourite mp3, silently willing it to coat her nerves in a protective veneer against the weight of any more swarm-like darkness or confusion that might be out there. Which works, to a degree, her stress levels downing slightly as the sound of lapping waves and soothing chords starts soaking into her system.

'Breathe deeply.' A drawn-out-almost-whisper. 'Take a very deep breath—in—and hold the breath for as long as comfort dictates. And then, gently, let it out again through slightly parted lips. And when the breath is all the way out, contract your stomach muscles and push it even further out. And further out. And then relax. But

don't try. Let your breath simply fall in. And then let your breath simply fall out. Fall in, fall out. Imagine your breath falling onto a comfy old sofa.'

Georgia's phone vibrates, an incoming call interrupting her beloved download.

Sliding it onto the spotless tablecloth she squints down at its screen and sees Pushpinder Sharma—best friend in the world, helper in times of need, and, currently, her man in the east. Georgia taps accept and sees:

A row of plastic seats at an unnatural angle. People sitting beside luggage, waiting. Large windows convexing around a thinly populated airport departure lounge. And suddenly a face, unblurring, fluctuating in resolution before finally settling on Indian, eyes focused somewhere beyond the camera's lens.

'Hello from Narita International.'

'Good what is it in Japan, Push? Afternoon?'

'Just gone four. Three hours until take off. I was just thinking, Georgia, that he could be in this very lounge. Looking at me looking for him.'

'Maybe not looking. Maybe just idly gazing? He doesn't know you, remember? You're as much a stranger to him as he is to you.'

'Thanks, Georgia. That's comforting.'

'My pleasure.'

'Just wanted to let you know everything's set. Batteries charged and whatnot.'

'Ready for seat B6.'

'Do you think the resolution will be good enough for an ID? This airline network isn't what you could happily call broadcast quality.'

'I hope so, Push. But I can clean it up later. If it's him, I'll know. I hope. And how is Japan for you?'

'No idea. I arrived five hours ago and haven't set foot outside the terminal. But it looks a bit like London: freezing and grey. And you? How are you feeling, Georgia? I mean... this is something, right?'

'Yes, it is, Push. But then again it's not, is it? It's not everything. It's not Ben. It's just a possible someone who might have possibly seen something.'

'But how do you feel? After all this time.'

'Like you wouldn't believe.'

'Me too. I bought you some ginseng tea from duty free.'

'Thanks, Push.'

'I'll call back when we're in the air. No delays so that should be in about three hours.'

'See you in three then.'

As soon as the call ends a re-fill arrives, and Georgia lets herself enjoy the sensation of the coffee as it warms her throat and flows down into her stomach, its muscular Peruvian particles fusing warmly with her own adrenalized particles. She mentally tells herself off for not thanking Push, again—for travelling half way around the world on her behalf and for never giving the slightest hint that he would abandon a search that was really not his. A friend indeed, Georgia thinks, gazing at London over the warmth of her coffee cup. She notices that the street outside is cobbled, probably recently and for tourist reasons, which reminds her of Oxford, the town in which she had started to fall for Ben... five years previously... pubbing... punting... partying at night and then red-eyeing back to London for Monday morning work. It was the place in which Ben's characteristics had slowly soaked into her core, every one of which had made her realise, for the first time in her life, that her heart was actually

smiling. Ben turning to strangers and asking them random questions was one of her favourites, and it was weird at first for Georgia to understand how he could do that. He just didn't have the walls or boundaries that most people seemed to live within. Instead, she saw that his space was open, active, curious and questioning. Alive.

'Musical notes,' Ben had once said to her, starting the conversation with his favourite topic. 'Where do they come from?'

Georgia had straightaway blurted 'Up your bum', but when she'd seen how seriously Ben was looking at her, she'd smiled up at him and said, 'Well, that's an easy one, isn't it?'

'Don't tell me to go google it. I want your ideas.'

'Only if you buy me an ice cream.'

Ben nodded thoughtfully. 'Okay. But only if it can be proven. Agreed?'

'I see. And how solid must the evidence be?'

Ben looked over her shoulder, contemplating, then re-focused. 'Solid enough for a 1st year science student.'

'Junior, senior, or post-grad?'

'Take your pick.'

'Agreed.' Georgia clapped. 'So, Ben, I think that the notes for songs are stored in a cool, dry place. Preferably,' she added, holding up a finger, 'not in direct sunlight.'

Ben had hung his head. 'That may be so,' he'd said. 'But where exactly is that?'

At that point in her life Georgia might well have said Oxford, but these days she's not so sure. About anything, in fact. All she does know—all she is certain of—is that she doesn't know a lot. That she had stopped knowing shortly after Ben had disappeared. When he'd been there—beside her, around her, making her more complete than she'd ever thought possible—she knew all the time: what clothes to wear, what movie to download, where to go on a Sunday. She knew what she wanted. Now though, tea or coffee is often a painful decision. Lager or stout a choice that can send her home in tears.

She simply—genuinely—doesn't know.

Georgia looks down at the remains of her coffee and tries to distance herself from the memory. But that's not easy because it sets off another memory which is even harder to push away: the one in which, in those first few months after his disappearance, Ben had come to her at night. In her non-space between sleeplessness and loss. Suddenly beside her. So real she could feel his warmth. But she knew better: that the illusion was so real it was dangerous and that she had to keep pushing. But Ben would always spring back to her like he was on some kind of emotional elastic, and she often didn't have the energy to deal with it.

'Not today,' Georgia tells herself, pushing harder. 'Today you must focus.'

Ten minutes later and Georgia is standing in a gusting North London side street scanning an office board for Cornish Law Consultants Ltd. Third floor, up the stairs, left, down a recently disinfected corridor and she is in reception waiting. Instant arrives, small lumps of brown powder still floating on its surface, and as usual, in contempt, it stays untouched.

'It's lovely to see you, Georgia!'

Georgia smiles up, finding as always Marion—the grandmotherly office assistant with new teeth—quietly but potently unnerving. 'Have you been waiting long? No. I see you've hardly touched your coffee. And I do know your vices!'

My kind of logic, Georgia thinks. Flawed.

'Won't be a moment, love. He's on his way up from the library as we speak. You can wait in the office.'

'Thank you,' Georgia replies, then follows Marion's shower of fuss through a door that has Adrian Cornish etched, in what she's always thought of as a rather frosty font, on its single window.

Once seated and alone Georgia is scanning, the stark differences between Ben and his brother jumping straight out at her: Adrian a collector of ornaments and old bits of junk and tat; Ben, especially in the last few months before his disappearance, an un-collector. He was pressurised by anything that contained information that had been read or dealt with yet kept for the future should it have some relevance then. Left uncategorized and unreferenced. Always hinting there might be something left inside unread. It was what had eventually crushed him and driven him out, along with Georgia, into the real world to make it on their own. She's back there now, in an unusual clarity, remembering those five perfect years they'd spent together... dreaming... making plans... enjoying the harmony their relationship had given her... until that night at the club... that night when Ben had been ripped away from her... a night she could still not recall.

Georgia looks up as Q.C. Cornish, elder brother to Ben, starch and professional, always expecting slightly more from people, walks in and nods at her over a stack of leather-bound books.

Georgia gives him time to put the books down, exhale professional obligations, and inhale her.

'How was the field trip?' Georgia asks.

'The conference? Interesting.' Nodding. 'Manageable.'

'Good.' Georgia nods back and sits up straight, placing her hands politely in her lap and feeling, as she always does in Adrian's formal presence, like a transparent interviewee who must lie to get an unwanted job.

Then Adrian, straight to the meat, 'How is the investigation proceeding?'

'We might have found something. Someone. A name match. William T Taylor.'

'You've found him?'

'Possibly. That's what I wanted to prepare you for.'

'That's the first piece of good news for a while.'

Fifteen months, Georgia corrects mentally, then says, 'It might be nothing. Just the name you gave me. Popped up on a frequent flyer award list.'

'Is that legal?' Leaning forwards.

'It's public. I want to email you a picture of him, as you're the only one who's seen him. I should have it in a couple of hours and I wanted to make sure your computer is working.' Shrugs. 'Switched on.'

Adrian thinks about this, his dry eyes settling rigidly on Georgia's, his usual fake-but-friendly smile nowhere in sight. 'And what did the police have to say about this?'

'Unhelpful but surprisingly liberal. In missing cases it seems they positively encourage anyone connected to keep going—call old friends, think about the small details.' And I can't help but do that. Every minute of every day.

'Because it's important to keep this proper, Georgia.'

Proper. By the book. On the straight and narrow. All phrases Georgia has had stencilled, thanks to Adrian, into her moral code, and all of which she has pretty much abided by. Except this one small thing. But what did Adrian expect? She couldn't possibly spend another fifteen months searching by the book. That had simply not worked. It had given her not a single lead nor clue about what had

happened to Ben. Nor about William T Taylor, the man Adrian had introduced to Ben shortly before Ben's disappearance, the man Georgia had spent the last fifteen months trying to find. So: 'What other options are there?'

'Hacker search,' Push had suggested, after trying but failing to further the investigation himself. 'Expensive. I might know someone who knows someone.'

Which he had: a big chunk of Georgia's cash wrapped around their target's name passed to a shadow in the street, and 24-hours later an email, on which were details of a flight William T Taylor had booked.

'Do you think you'll still recognise him?' Georgia asks.

'Yes,' Adrian replies. 'I think so. I only met him once, and it would have been better face-to-face. But yes, I'm sure I'll know if it's him or not. Eye contact with him was... unusual. I should have asked more questions then.'

Yes, Georgia almost says, you bloody well should have.

'I'll do my best.'

'Thank you, Adrian.'

'And what if this William Taylor is the same man I saw with Ben? Where will that get us?'

'Further than anywhere in the last fifteen months. If it's him, it's a start.'

Half an hour later, feeling free, hoping she won't have to see Adrian again for a while, thankful, Georgia is reversing across London; heading home.

Once inside her main living space—an area she's always liked: perfect for two occupants and overlooking a garden in crisis—Georgia sits in front of her PC. Nudging the mouse reveals her family snapshot wallpaper: Ben dressed in his favourite t-shirt standing next to herself. She then sets to work creating empty folders. Activates and ratchets to their highest settings all the virus, adware/spyware/firewall software—creating an island of safe space for the video Push will hopefully have for it. Then she moves to the sofa and sits back. Checks her watch.

One hour to go.

One last lead.

And then fatigue—an abrupt, intrusive wave. Possibly, she reasons, the combined result of her late night and her early morning breakfast baguette. Heavy in her stomach she can feel it sucking up energy, causing her to slide further into the sofa until she's almost foetal. Uncomfortable in her pocket, Georgia takes her phone out and places it in the centre of her curl, checking coverage and battery. Then nothing but the silence of a mid-morning house. Suburbia on pause. Neighbours at work. The only noise distant traffic. And closer, the sounds of modernised Victorian plumbing, comforting somehow, a live system to meditate on as Georgia mentally counts down the minutes... one after the other... fifteen months worth of them now suddenly gone... just as suddenly gone as Ben himself. But where? Had he gone alone? And why hadn't he invited her to go with him? Why, why, why, always the whys. They are a swarm of headache-inducing questions she knows must be pushed firmly aside and dealt with but can't. She rarely can. It's just another random memory, another unanswerable question. All of them attached with psychic Velcro to the inside of her head. Currently showing is Ben's excitement as he started his music course. The build up of equipment that was supposed to keep him at home rather than on a pill in a dance club somewhere. All of it still upstairs and all

giving nothing away. The further she sinks into this pain-memory the clearer she can see his decks and mixer, amp, his favourite pair of sunglasses perched on top where he'd left them. But not him. Not a trace and not a clue. Only an absence—a hole. But one with weight. And one she's felt growing steadily inside since the moment he disappeared, coming on now, again, like a trapped nerve in the centre of her being.

Pushpinder's call brings her back from that brink:

A claustrophobic image of moulded plastic flooded with bright off-yellow light. Push's face blurring past. Earpiece being gently screwed into ear. Microphone scraping shirt. Whispers.

'Are you there, Georgia?'

'Yes. Ready and recording.'

'Great. He's fourth seat back on the left. B6. I should be able to get a clear shot.'

'Excellent work.'

'I also managed to sneakily video something he was reading on his laptop, thank digital zoom. It's called The Spasm, written by a guy called Matthew McMullen. I'll type it up and email it to you when I get back to my seat. Seems to be some kind of report.'

'A spasm report? You never cease to amaze, Push.'

'I know. Here goes then. Nice clean shot.'

Lens obscured slightly on the left as the door opens. Into the galley-way. Curtain brushed aside. Dim lighting but the lens considers and adjusts.

Georgia's heartbeat jumps as Push's in-flight video is beamed from his phone to hers. Holding her breath she watches as the image drifts silently into business class, lens angled towards the left row of seats. Then she's counting: a glimpse of passenger one, gone before she can make out any detail. Then a woman, asleep with full passenger support—black eye shades, head resting on inflatable neck brace. Gone. Past a newspaper concealed man or woman next and there, suddenly, seat B6, maybe half a second of a man's well lit, bearded face. Shirt but no tie. Dark hair. Large sunglasses.

Georgia is up and bluetoothing, hoping her larger PC screen will give her a clearer picture. Absently half-on, half-off her chair she waits, watching the transfer bar increase, feeling as though she's in a rare, swarm-free state of suspended animation. A fulcrum? A point where her life could tip? Could be given back to her?

After dropping the file onto the media player Georgia watches, closely, pausing just after newspaper man, adjusts the speed, marks it, hits play, three frames a second, back again, play, nose inches from the screen.

She hadn't expected to be so sure, but even though she's never seen this man before it's him, she knows it. And it's not just a feeling; there's evidence. Nothing solid. It's more an exercise in pattern recognition, like looking through a fog at a crowd and trying to make out a familiar face a hundred yards away.

After saving the grab she emails it to Adrian, imagining the image appearing on his screen and his face actually forming some kind of emotion as, hopefully, familiarity hits. She then prints a copy, snatches it from the laser before it's done spooling and is up, not really sure why, her chair rolling back and crashing gently into the table behind. Then she's taking the stairs two at a time and is into his room—their room—her eyes going straight for Ben's mixing decks where, left untouched for fifteen months, thought about only that morning, they still sit.

Georgia picks them up. Slightly bulbous around the upper-eye part. Dark. Very heavy.

She looks at the printout of William 'B6' Taylor, then back to Ben's sunglasses.

'Identical.'

Nearly. Maybe.

She's left her phone downstairs so she reaches for the landline and dials Adrian. Someone picks up but says nothing and Georgia, rationality on hold, says nothing too.

'Hello?' An odd, stressed pinch of vocals.

'Adrian, it's me.'

'Jesus, you gave me a fright. My phone says Ben is calling me.'

'Sorry. I'm calling from his studio. We got the picture. It's him. I'm quite sure. Did you check your mail? Can you check your email?'

Shifting sounds from the other end—Adrian going at his usual, nauseatingly methodical speed. Then, finally, 'Yes, here it is attached jpeg.'

'That's it.' She can see him nodding.

'I think...'

'Yes? Adrian?'

'I think that's him.'

'How sure?'

'Very sure.'

'Do you recognise the sunglasses he's wearing?'

'Sunglasses? I don't think so.' Strangely hesitant, as if he should.

'They're the same as Ben's. I'm looking at them now. Look at the picture of him on your desk.'

Another drawn-out pause from Adrian, then, 'You're right, they do look similar. What do you think that means?'

'I don't know. It can't be coincidental, though.'

'Strange.'

'William T Taylor. You're sure it's him? The man you saw with Ben?'

'It's him, Georgia.'

Georgia breathes out, sharply. 'Mr B6.'

'Sorry?'

'The seat he was sitting in. On the plane.'

'Where exactly is he?'

'Just coming in to land at Bangkok International.'

Chapter 2 - Pro-blog

Twenty-two hours later, jetting two miles above an ever-enlarging Europe, Georgia sits and sifts. She was hoping for sleep but the chair doesn't accommodate a foetal curl, the only way unconsciousness has ever come.

Looking at government sites, history, maps, digital communication infrastructure, top ten temples, Georgia is staggered to learn fifteen million tourists a year visit Thailand—Americans, even more surprisingly, being the largest piece of the pie chart. Next come Brits, Germans, Swedes. Then Japanese, Chinese, Malays. Backpacking Thailand, Laos and Cambodia is still a popular gap-year activity—teens minibused in their thousands to hill tribe villages in the north, beaches in the south and as little time as possible in over-polluted Bangkok.

After downloading a Thai phrasebook, Georgia closes her phone, then her eyes, then programs the chair back and tries to put herself on standby. The light is too bright, though, still being day outside, so she reaches into her carry-on and takes out her glasses—Ben’s glasses—and puts them on, dark lenses cutting out most of the light. Too heavy to be comfortable she takes them off and puts them atop her foldout table, next to her second clue: a printout of Pushpinder’s typed up, 39,000-foot laptop rip. For the fifth time that hour, Georgia reads.

Pre-bio Report (The Spasm) - by Matthew McMullen

I wasn’t looking for the kind of superhuman wellbeing I found.

I wasn’t looking for the re-growth of vital organs; enhanced stamina; elevated mood; stronger, thicker bones; smoother, firmer skin; reduced body fat and increased muscle mass; sharper, clearer and more fluid thinking; greater creativity and productivity; improved relationships; increased insight and empathy; feelings of freedom and greater choice; happiness without boundaries.

I wasn’t looking for any of that. I was simply curious to know whether, after years of acute laziness, my body would force me into the change it needed in order to continue living, as opposed to what it had been doing, which was dying. The answer to that question was a resounding yes, its form: a spasm. I had no idea back then that my single spasm would lead me here, writing this report under this tree, more completely human than I’d ever thought possible. It was as though I’d been given the key to that untapped river of flowing life-energy we all know is there but for most of us, however hard we try and however many disciplines we force ourselves to sit through, can never actually connect with.

But that’s the result. That’s what we all end up with, here. And this report isn’t about the end product, it’s about a different kind of end—the end of my old self and life that eventually led me to this consistently heightened state of being.

Four years previously.

Until it arrived, I hadn’t really thought about what might be at my end or what form it would take. How could I? I hadn’t been there before so I couldn’t have known. I hadn’t been expecting it so therefore I hadn’t made any attempt to foresee it or imagine it in any way. It had, without any kind of prior notice, simply walked into my room and presented itself in front of me.

‘Your peak of intolerability,’ I was told later by one of my fellow trainees, this after I’d asked him what I should put in my pre-bio report under Day 1. ‘I had one myself,’ he added. ‘We all do. Most of us here.’

I wasn’t entirely sure what he was talking about at that time, so I asked, ‘And yours? What happened at your peak? Your end?’

‘I jumped off a rooftop,’ he said, ‘and fell seven stories through the air.’ He shrugged, then laughed. ‘I survived, obviously. And to be honest it felt great, at first—that initial, weightless moment of abandon. But as soon as I felt the power of gravity pulling at me, everything changed. I changed. In short, I realised it was a horrible mistake. Nothing but a dumb whim designed to wake myself up to the fact that I was actually alive and on planet earth.’

‘What had made you think you were not in the land of the living?’ I asked.

‘Because at work or on the street people looked straight through me as if I weren’t there or that I wasn’t worth looking at. I felt like I was slowly fading out of existence, which led me to the conclusion that what I needed to do was realise my solidity again. But I couldn’t. My substance had left me for greener pastures. And so I

jumped. It was only on the way down that I became solid again; by the time the fall was over I was back to being me: a pathetic, slight man, but one who now wanted to live. That was my end which eventually led me here.'

Thinking back to it, I believe my own end struck while I was watching TV, an empty pizza box on the coffee table in front of me, as per routine. I remember it being one of those pointless Monday evenings where you give up thinking that anything out there in the world can possibly ever interest you again. A truly hopeless moment. Just before my end—its catalyst?—eyeing the neglected, cooling crusts of my pizza, I noticed that the wooden top part of my coffee table had a particular grain to it. I hadn't really noticed before and as I leant down to inspect it more closely, moving my eyes over its slats and its varnished hardwood knots, I started to get the disturbing feeling that this inanimate object actually contained more life than I did—the idea, at least, that it had once been a living and breathing tree. After pressing down on it with both of my palms, trying quite ludicrously to instil myself with some of its energy—its natural life force—and failing, I searched for more signs of life. My curtains were a prime candidate: thin yellow grasses flapping in a late evening breeze. So, I concluded, glorious nature was still out there in the world somewhere—growing abundantly and quite happily without me. And it was at that moment, sitting and thinking about how little time I'd spent with nature—in it, around it, enjoying it—that the first stirrings of my end awoke.

Initially, this sensation felt like a mild resentment, a background dis-ease. But it started to grow inside me so rapidly that I could soon feel it spreading physically. It was like a balled-up piece of paper with sharp edges moving around inside my blood vessels and it was, I decided, something that needed to be ignored. Therefore, once again, I flopped back into the familiar cocoon of my armchair and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again a minute later and looked up, I noticed a strand of cobweb that had a single dusty thread to it. It seemed harmless enough at first, casting a small, innocent dance of shadow on my ceiling, but the more I gazed at it the more it seemed to be trying to tell me something. Something important. Something underlying. When I realised I couldn't even connect with the possibility of what that something might be, my background resentment came to the forefront and I started not only to resent not knowing, I started to resent everything around me. The dirty outskirts of the city. My small flat and my going-nowhere job. The hard-sell-easy-debt lifestyle I hadn't asked for but felt compelled to be a part of. It was an uncontrollable spiral of negativity and one that caused within me a relationship failure to my very own culture: the sanctioned hate and aggression that had seeped into society at large, possibly created by competition and capitalism, freedom—all we're supposed to strive for and hold dear. It also forced me to confront the ugly facts of my own existence: I was disgusted and alone, overweight, scared of going out or of letting go and opening up—all those things you need to do to be able to lead a decent life. Yet again though, instead of trying to change this situation, I tried to ignore it by switching my attention back to the TV.

I clicked mindlessly through dozens of moving images—a man swimming, a couple pouting, a woman shooting. All standard verbs in motion. I thought about that for a while, trying to find a verb within myself. Breathing was all I could come up with. And decay.

Just then, as if on cue, another verb appeared—a spasm.

That was unusual.

It was near the back of my neck. Some kind of muscle tick I couldn't remember having before.

Then suddenly another.

Lack of exercise, I decided. Not enough circulation.

And so I clicked on, through artless music videos and past beautiful people turning in slow motion.

Then another spasm. This one near the surface of my thigh.

I shook my arms and stretched out my legs. The remote dropped to the floor and when I bent to retrieve it an internal series of spasms set off near my stomach. A twitch near my elbow.

This was it, I thought, my acute laziness had exploded and now my body was exercising itself without my permission or control; I was not only losing my connection with nature, I was losing connection with myself.

It was then I understood that a decision had just been made for me: I could either stay put and spasm and pop and twitch until I burst an internal organ, or I could what? I didn't quite know what, not at that time. All I knew was that I had to find out. And that I had to start finding out very soon. And to continue until I was a different person.

I started straightaway by walking downstairs and into the pharmacy across the street. Inside, I looked at the small plastic bottles of pills, studying their labels. Vitamins with iron and ginseng seemed to offer what I was looking for and just buying them made me feel physically better. I imagined them pumping around my system nourishing my neglected insides, which at that moment felt like an old carpet, the compounded waste of dirty shoes, all mud and heavy silt clogging things up.

More ideas came over the weeks, presenting themselves as candidates for this new life I'd been forced into seeking. I had a memory of enjoying running at school, so I ran. I joined a gym and went every time I couldn't think of anything else to do. I started learning Spanish. I cooked in the evenings. I wrote a story. I cleaned out the self-help section at the local library. In a kind of exhausting frenzy I didn't stay still for a single moment, except sleep, and this I supplemented with night time mp3s with repeating positive affirmations.

It was fantastic for a few weeks—a real liberation. But it soon became an obsession; an ultimately futile exercise. Because there was always something missing. Always some ingredient that left me feeling just as empty as I had before I started my new life. And it was that doubt which made me start worrying that if I stopped doing things every second of the day I would slip back to the pizza box and TV. I was convinced of it. Luckily, it was at that time I found you and your glasses. The rest, you know.

Chapter 3 – Into the Dome

Georgia had told Push to keep track of their man B6 and so is alone at Arrivals, not something she is totally confident about, but unavoidable.

She also feels overwhelmed. Of being stuck in the same seat for twelve hours. Of the jet still rushing in her ears. Of the sudden trauma of landing and then the vast unfamiliarity of the airport, its dense cloud of iPod-clutching humanity all departing and arriving from everywhere—here and now and all looking like they knew exactly where to go and what decisions to make. And Georgia. Long haul comatose. Airline food heavy and static in her system. Following on autopilot her crowd of plane mates down bright causeways and past lines of in-sync plasma screens, traveling, eventually, to a stop in the processing zone and assuming position, swaying slightly and still swallowing to try and equalise.

An unusual, extra-thick layer of inbound security at customs, Georgia notices. Checking everyone and everything thoroughly for a reason nobody seems to know. 'Take a very deep breath. Hold the breath for as long as comfort dictates.'

After unslinging her carry-on, Georgia watches from behind her haze as it conveys through the scanner's door flaps into darkness. Her own body then moves, as if by itself, through the metal detector.

A loud beep—a stab—instantly ups her awareness.

Back again. Phone, coins and keys into a small plastic bowl and through again.

Beep.

Belt off. Checks pockets.

Beep.

An official she hadn't noticed before, with multi-coloured confetti insignia dribbling down his brown uniform and walkie-talkie at hand, steps forward, his unreadable eyes starting a methodical scan from her feet to her hair, where, Georgia can't quite believe, they narrow dramatically. Accusingly.

Ben's glasses. She'd forgotten. They'd been in her bag when she'd left London. She is surprised the machine is sensitive enough to embarrass her because of small hinges and even smaller screws. 'What?' Make a sentence. 'This?'

As Georgia smiles—crookedly?—she hands the glasses to the official, who examines them silently, turns militarily, and then takes them—marches them—to a desk she can't see behind, leaving her with a cold wash of uncertainty starting to trickle down her cortex. Only her eyes move as a second official joins the first, staring at what might be a screen, his walkie-talkie aerial flicking rudely in her direction.

After a few minutes he's back, not offering to hand the glasses over. 'I think they not work here,' he says.

Blurting in the strongest English accent Georgia has ever heard herself use, 'I'm sorry?'

'Maybe work. But Thai.' Then something in Thai.

Nothing.

'You understand Thai?'

Georgia's head shakes.

'You bring for sun? Or for TV?'

Something stops Georgia from saying that they do not belong to her. 'For my holiday.'

'I didn't know you can buy in England. I see from Singapore man. From Hong Kong. We have to check. This new thing. Technology.'

'Yes, of course.'

After the official places the glasses into Georgia's wet hands and waves her through, standing under an icy air-con vent at an exchange counter, rational thought unblocks and starts to seep back in, most of it inner repetition of the official's sentences, all cut up and pasted back-to-front, key words silently pronounced. None of it much help.

Shuffles on.

In front are Arabs and Indians. Pairs of blond Scandinavians with giant backpacks. Why don't they put them down?

After exchanging GBP for THB and heading for the exit sign, ignoring the roaming packs of predatory touts offering free rides, hotel discounts and tour packages including trekking in the north, snorkelling in the south and the reclining Buddha in between, Georgia suddenly feels like she is there—that she is somewhere. At the

beginning or at the end she's not sure, but, as the exit doors slide open and she steps out into the heavy bubble of atmosphere that domes Bangkok, she is acutely aware that she's further than she has ever been from her home before: she is in Thailand, South East Asia.

'Tropical paradise.'

Which is when the wall hits: heat-noise-pollution, masses of concrete. All asserting itself like a Texan used car salesman in front of her face and making her step back instinctively. 'No.' Flat refuses to believe that heat. Georgia looks up, expecting to see a heater mounted above the door, similar to ones they have in small shops in England with a blast of hot air to welcome customers. But no, it's real. And it needs to be dealt with.

After taking a few, final gulps of airport air-con, Georgia steps bravely outside into it all, joining the taxi queue and gazing over at concrete highways piled on top of one another, a hundred lanes of slow moving traffic catching in her throat.

Ten minutes of drinking and sweating and shuffling later, with a strange, damp cotton wool sensation expanding inside her head, she's inside a taxi handing the driver a hotel card. The driver hands the card to the taxi controller who then barks something in Thai back to the driver, waving him on, and she's out, roads suddenly above her and to her side, crossing over the ones above. Trucks thunder and noisy belching buses made of tin grate gears at her. And motorbikes—everywhere—squeezing between sleek silver/grey sedans and stacking up at traffic lights before swarming forwards again. By the side of the road she sees lines of food stalls with small plastic chairs and blackened menus in a script that looks like civilized Arabic.

'Expressway mai? Go quick quick. See-sip baht.' The driver points to the road above and shows her four fingers.

Georgia nods. 'Okay.'

'Oh-kaaay,' the driver repeats, laughing. 'Quick quick for you.'

Once above street level, balanced on top of Y-shaped, diesel-flecked concrete, the road seems to stretch directly into the centre of Bangkok, and as Georgia settles back and drinks, the taxi starts to gain kph, relentlessly – 100 – 120 – 130 – 140. Outside, enormous advertising boards flash past every few seconds, hundreds of them, giant pictures of cars and energy drinks and TVs—all welcoming her to a new, brand-heavy Asian heart. Down below she can see the outer suburbs: a million off-white buildings sitting at odd angles shadowed by large office and apartment blocks. Gold-roofed temples glint back at her from between massive shopping centres. She sees no gardens. No parks.

Twenty minutes later the taxi lurches over to a slip road and is flying down into it all, Georgia's adrenalin levels amping up to cope. She grabs hold of the seatbelt as the braking starts, then continues, the driver grinding down through the gearbox with relish and bringing them, shuddering, to a stop at a red traffic light.

Releasing a breath, Georgia looks out at a snaking and unbroken line of food stalls, young Thai woman students dressed in spotless white shirts and black skirts weaving between them, laughing and chatting. Before she can form much of an opinion though, the taxi is off again, tail-gating anything that can't be overtaken, bouncing over small canal bridges and speeding past busy roadside markets, taking her further away from the safety of the familiar and deeper into an unlit, discomforting unknown.

Ten minutes later, giddy yet thankful, Georgia is stepping out of the taxi and into the wall. She had forgotten the wall. How long would it take to acclimatise? That one she had not thought to google.

In reception she is 'waied' at by two traditionally dressed Thai women, their hands coming together in front of their faces in a show of respect and greeting, and Georgia wonders whether she should reciprocate. In soft, polite voices they ask if they can get her anything, suggest tours, smile, and wai again. 'Your friend, he give to you.' One of the girls hands her, with a small bow, a hotel-embossed envelope. 'Now he go out from hotel.'

She is shown to her room by a young Thai man, smiling, who in the room closes the curtains, turns on all the lights, plugs in the fridge, switches on the air-con at full blast and sprays air freshener into its air-intake grate. In return, Georgia hands him a purple 100 baht note, which he smiles at, wais, and bows out without a word.

And then peace—finally—alone and centring.

After standing for a moment surveying the slightly battered but international standard room, letting her body adjust to the radical temperature changes it's had to put up with, Georgia opens the curtains and turns off everything the bellboy turned on, minus pine-forest scented air-con, which she clicks down to low. Sitting on the bed, she opens the letter the receptionist gave her.

Welcome to LOS - the land of smiles. I am with our man B6. I don't think he's on holiday as he travels business-dressed. Plus it's the rainy season. I haven't had a chance to get another peek at his laptop yet. He's booked in for 3 nights. I hope you're fine and well and remembering to drink lots of water. NOT from the tap. I will return with our Mr William Taylor. Regards, Push.

P.S. This is all I could find on Matthew McMullen: 49, male, divorced, degree educated, former tax solicitor at a London firm. No criminal record. Tax payments show he is the owner of a house he rents out. All other tax records stopped 3 years ago. I have a pic on my phone, which I'll show you when I return.

After showering, drip-drying on the bed with BBC World reporting comfortingly in a corner, Georgia looks at the glasses again and picks them up, examining more carefully. She adds a magnifying glass to her shopping list and laughs out loud at the self image this produces. She had almost forgotten this sensation, she realises now, this rare, automatic spasm of her stomach muscles. She had forgotten play. 'How sad.'

Shaking her head, Georgia looks for a switch or wires. Slides her fingers along the plastic using varying degrees of pressure. Nails slot into grooves.

Nothing. Just questions.

Can't be bothered with those right now so she lets jet-lag ease her down towards the soft, Thai-silk-sheeted bed, the glasses tumbling from her fingers as she's pulled under into a clammy dream of fussing and buzzing humanity—people and taxis like cake mixture being beaten into shape. Then she's down into a deeper darkness... the glasses down here... walking on their arms amongst the concrete mass of downtown Bangkok... pounding... crushing small buildings... bang bang bang as they walk... and suddenly she's awake, one hour later, the consistent banging still there but real—closer—coming from the direction of her door.

Georgia rolls over and stumbles to her feet, then peeps through the peep hole and sees the side of Pushpinder's face. Straightens dressing gown.

'You're here.' Closing the door behind him.

'I think I'm here,' Push replies, taking a small towel from his pocket and wiping his face with it. 'That heat out there makes one wonder. Makes one sloppy. I don't know, Georgia, maybe he saw me.'

'Aren't you used to the heat?'

'No. I come from South London. Remember? Just like you. I haven't been to India in fifteen years.'

'I know, Push. And don't worry, that's why I'm here. We can work in shifts.'

'You're sure he's not dangerous?'

'You know more about him than I do,' Georgia says. 'Until you tell me what he's been doing today. Then we're even.'

'William B6 Taylor,' Push says, walking to the fridge and opening a bottle of water, speaking between sips. 'Breakfast at ten. Then a dip in the pool. Newspapers delivered to his room. Then out. It's difficult to follow someone here. The traffic is like something I've never seen before. Or like nothing I've ever seen before. That's the heat talking. Then he took the skytrain to an upmarket department store and had a look around in the electronics section. Then a lunch meeting with an Asian man in his fifties. Well dressed. Very calm and self-assured. Then back here. I paid the concierge to let me know if he goes anywhere.'

'And you've never done anything like this before? Follow someone.'

Taking a final swig of water, Push puts the empty bottle back in the fridge, then turns to face Georgia. 'I followed you once.'

'You did what?'

'I followed you. Home. Once. To make sure you got there okay.'

'You followed me? In a sneaky, stalking sense?'

'No, don't be silly. In a brotherly, concerned sense. It was your birthday and you and Ben had just argued. And you were pissed out of your head and angry. So I followed you. Just to make sure you got home. It didn't look like you were in the mood to be reasoned with.'

'I don't remember that.'

'I must be a natural.'

'I don't mean... I mean... never mind. Thanks. I think. But let me know next time.' Georgia gives him one of her defensive smiles, then frowns, realising that this is probably the most strangely discomfoting moment she's ever shared with Push. Maybe, she thinks, it's because their—hers and Bens'—best friend, is now only her best friend.

'I will.'

Georgia nods. 'What about this Matthew McMullen?'

Push, handing Georgia his phone, points to its screen. 'That's him.'

Georgia squints down. 'The spasm man,' she says, seeing nothing familiar. 'Could be anyone.' Balding, overweight, sitting slightly slumped, as if gravity was too much for his spine to handle, he had the unmistakable air of someone who had given up. On closer inspection Georgia sees dark under-eye semicircles, which, she's forced to admit, are very much like her own. Hair lying flat and uncared for, seemingly without any life left in it. A puffy, blotchy neck folding out from a worn shirt collar.

'Bit of a mess,' Push comments.

'Yes. But he writes well.'

'True. Doesn't look like he's in possession of too much superhuman wellbeing to me, though.'

'Like you'd recognise that?' Georgia's teeth bite down on her tongue as soon as the words are out.

Push, blinking, says, 'I think it would be obvious, don't you?'

'I think it would, yes.'

'I'll try and dig up some more on him later.'

'Thank you, Push.'

'My pleasure.'

Georgia walks over to the bed and picks up Ben's sunglasses, then throws them to Push. 'Remember these? The guy at the airport said something about a TV inside them.'

'Heavy,' Push says, starting to fiddle. 'You can get TV glasses. They project an LCD screen onto the lens, but out of focus so it's like you're looking at a big screen a few feet in front of you. Quite old technology. Never really caught on.'

As Georgia moves closer and looks down at the glasses, there is a click and a piece of plastic falls onto the bed, a section of one of the arms.

Push extracts a long, thin part and studies it.

'What is it?'

Push points the end towards her, where she can see two small metal terminals.

'Some kind of sensor, I think. No standards. No part numbers. Custom made.'

Chapter 4 - It Started with a Cache

After googling 'walks in Bangkok' and being advised to save her health and take a boat instead, Georgia does exactly that; finding herself dining alone among couple tourists. She's glad to find the city at night from a river cruiser is all breeze and space and lit-up temples, winking back gold, pushing her into that other zone of what ifs and maybes. Even though it's not quite as fiercely humid and claustrophobic on the river, Georgia's mind still feels blunt and sodden as she gazes across at stilted wooden homes huddling unplanned on the opposite bank. Sorting through memories now. Noticing for the first time a slight blur creeping into them. Or, she thinks, maybe it's just the heat, pushing the sharp centre of her mind out towards its undefined edges. She tries centring it more on the present, but even her most recent memories only dislodge questions she's unable to answer. Why had this fifteen month search for her missing Ben brought her here? Because here was where she was supposed to be? She used to think there was a reason for everything—for working at a particular job or going on a particular holiday. But where was the reason here? A man with electric sunglasses who might know something? But who might not. Where was the sense?

As the floating restaurant slips away from its dock and the house clusters on the opposite bank start thinning out, Georgia drifts with the river... back to Ben... to a drunken night at the local pub... a dance afterwards... then home to that room... their room... their time and their space. But even that is fading now: her most beloved possession slowly turning to dust, perhaps readying itself to blow out of her hands entirely. That must not be allowed to happen. She must try and hold on. Somehow hit the re-refresh button and bring it back into focus so she might pick up a new detail or clue. Anything that might tell her what she's doing in Thailand on a floating restaurant alone and answerless.

The strongest part of the memory Georgia finds, as always, is the end. Or rather the beginning of the end: the gradual fading away that had started with each of his photos scanned and each old album mp3'ed, physicality folding away with Ben the

last to go. He was literally doing away with himself one piece at a time and it was, Georgia sees now, a phase she should have realised was terminal. Why hadn't she seen that? She'd recognised his other phases successfully—musical, fashion, even belief phases. But this one was different.

'To travel light,' was the cause. 'To reduce drag.' He had told her that much. 'The old paradigm just doesn't fit comfortably anymore. I need to find out what is important now. Then I have to try and find some kind of structure which can accommodate that. The world, Georgia, it's got a problem I can't feel.'

'Isn't that called the human condition?'

'Maybe. But I need to find out if there's something I can do about it. And all this stuff is stopping me from doing that. It's always there, nagging at me to do something with it or make something out of it. Making me work like a slave just to buy more of it.'

And so he had started by questioning each of his possessions. Why was this important? What did that hold? Could they be done without? What, ultimately, was the point in keeping hold of all this stuff? Once they were categorised by level of importance the experiment had begun in earnest and the first object, the one with the lowest rating, was discarded: a bunch of old school books. They were done away with forever. Atomised by his own hand and then reflected upon, residual feelings noted on his web space and a conclusion drawn.

'Do you miss them?' Georgia asked.

'No,' Ben replied.

'Do you think you'll miss them in the future?'

'That doesn't matter. That's not part of the plan.'

Over the next few weeks the experiment had gained intensity and started to consume him in a way she really should have noticed and questioned more. What was the plan? Georgia had never directly asked him that one. She could see the bell-curve coming though, the experiment peaking as his room became slowly depersonalised.

Next to go were old books, each re-read, the least favourites first to go. Then the favourites, the ones with the greatest impact questioned and digested more thoughtfully. Important phrases copied and saved.

Georgia felt sad to see some of the books they had shared dissolve slowly away from their space.

'Why do I need to keep them? They're dead weight—a chain. A reason not to be free. Most of them are online anyway.'

'That's not my point,' Georgia said, starting their very first argument in a classical fashion, one previously alien to her and one she must have picked up from a TV show because it wasn't her speaking.

'What is your point?' Ben asked.

'You might miss them in the future. You don't know. And what are you going to do when you're down to nothing? Run around naked in the street?'

'I don't know what I'll do when I'm down to nothing, but we'll soon find out. And it's not about things like clothes that don't mean anything. It's about all the other stuff.'

There wasn't much other stuff left—a few standard pieces of memorabilia, birthday presents and things bought at various markets. All systematically collected and binned.

His most important possession, his music, was the last to go. This was harder; it was his heart. It was also where Georgia thought he would stop. His collection of old vinyl records, rarities, first-issues and hard-to-find 12-inch specials. They had

been sought out over a lifetime and were mp3'ed within a week. They were then saved onto an external hard drive and finally, when even that was too much, uploaded to a web-server he would never see. Not totally gone, but never again to be seen or handled in a physical fashion. All that was left in the end were speakers, an amp, mixing equipment—necessary evils, as he'd called them. Georgia had even refused to let him give her the password for his cached self. 'To make a point,' she'd told him defiantly.

How she'd like that little piece of information now, she thinks, tempting herself to take out her phone and load up the all-too-familiar blank password box at Ben's ftp site. Have yet another try at accessing his—their—lost world.

As Georgia's boat makes a lazy u-turn and starts the return journey, the temples which had dotted the east bank are replaced by hotels and office buildings, sharply functional and cost efficient; an ominous reminder of work and sterile cubicles and long days. Everything Ben had hated.

An image of Ben in shirt and tie now, trying hard to be on time and do what he was told, all with his chin up. He had been working with Adrian at the office, slowly being dragged into corporate servitude with Georgia constantly telling him that he could do it, that he needn't be broke all the time. She can see it clearly now: the system hacking away at his energy and his characteristic edges, those parts of him she'd fallen for in the first place—at a dance club, Georgia gone on tequila, Ben with a system full of compounds, a brief peak of novelty making their two worlds tie up together. They were both lost, both heading for their own separate futures but had met up there, found each other, held onto one another and danced, fused, breathed life into each other. And then five years later, after a closeness she'd only ever read about, his disappearance, that last night still impossible for Georgia to recall. Still completely, maddeningly blocked for a reason she still doesn't know. Too much tequila perhaps, or maybe trauma. Whatever it was all she can remember of that night is the club's entrance, a doorway pulsing with light and music—an electronic, ethnic vocal storm. But it's behind a locked door and the music is warped and distorted, twisted, feeding insanely back on itself like an out of control audio mudslide. Which makes Georgia step back, from that night, from Ben trapped inside. But what had his disappearance been sparked off by in the first place? Was it the office job and having to work for a difficult brother? Or was it herself? Something she might have done or might not have done enough of. Or was it after he started wearing those glasses?

Tears now, sitting dead still, aware of the people around her and aware that she must be strong, but tears flowing with a force she hasn't felt in a long time. At the same time, though, she is happy: she is smiling. And she knows this means that the connection is still there—that he is still there. Still somewhere.

Maybe, she thinks, she is on the right boat after all.

Chapter 5 - The Chinatown Sanctuary

Less than an hour after leaving the hotel they almost lost William 'B6' Taylor in Chinatown, the area's steaming maze of narrow streets, market stalls and compressed bustle making it difficult to track him as he slipped through a sea of traders and barterers.

Georgia had felt ridiculous as soon as she'd stepped into the lobby. Standing pensive behind a magazine rack she couldn't get the image of Inspector Clouseau out of her head—eyeholes cut into a newspaper, invisible ink and disguises—scenes

of bumble and general wackiness Georgia had no problem relating to. Clouseau carefully tipping a jar of fingerprint powder onto an empty museum case only for the lid to fall off and a mountain of powder to cover the object was her favourite. Followed by Clouseau telling a disguise seller he had a nose for noses.

Now, being bumped and squashed, trying to keep one eye on B6 and her other on the uneven, merchandise-clogged pavement, Georgia notes his composure and his bubble-like ability to steer undisrupted through the stalls and the wafting clouds of incense, the rough heat-noise-pollution. Nothing stuck.

‘Substance,’ Georgia comments on this, more to herself.

‘The air?’ Push, coughing and sweating behind her, trying hard not to look like he would rather be somewhere else, somewhere air-conditioned, catches her.

‘Him,’ Georgia replies. ‘A one-word description. Like this market—busy. Him—substance.’

‘He is managing. And he seems to know his way around.’

‘Do you think he’s here to shop?’

‘Possibly. It is a shopping vein down here. Gold, seafood, fakes. It’s one of Bangkok’s older hearts.’

After almost knocking into a hissing vat of frying something’s, Push steps in behind, saving some of his profile exposure and leaving Georgia’s taking-it-all-in-process to step up into overdrive. She is trying—though at the same time is trying not to—classify all the weird foods and spices and the oddly shaped ornaments. Coupled with the heat and thickness of atmosphere, this makes her headache piercing and impossible to ignore.

Ahead, after turning left into a wider main street, William Taylor stops and steps into a white-walled temple complex and Georgia, exploiting a rare lapse in traffic, crosses the street with Push and passes the entrance from the other side, trying through a strobe of buses and taxis to glance into the grounds. It’s an unhelpful angle though and Georgia’s patience, in relation to her increasing temperature, takes action. ‘I’ll go,’ she says. ‘Maybe they have air-con in there.’

‘You’re sure that’s a good move?’

‘No. But he could be meeting someone.’

‘Or praying.’

‘And I’m sure he hasn’t seen me. So I’ll go. Okay? And you, wait here and call me if he comes out. Or if I don’t come out. Or if you find a nice air-con café with Peruvian coffee. Iced Peruvian coffee. Okay?’

Leaving an expressionless Push, Georgia crosses the road. She then takes one pass to glance in through the gate, double backs, and is inside, stepping past two gaudy demons guarding the entrance, city decibels dropping to manageable levels almost instantly.

Once over the threshold, Georgia’s gaze is forced across a jigsaw of structures which all seem to obscure one another, her eyes assaulted by coloured glass and jewels, by fiery reds and gnarled, concrete serpent statues. Round-bellied Buddha’s smile serenely back at her.

Moving around the buildings, struck by the whites and yellows of the multi-tiered drooping roofs—which look trinkety somehow, as if designed by a slightly demented infant—Georgia smiles her London defensive. Should a woman do that to a monk?

After noticing a pink-faced, middle-aged tourist woman, with hat and shorts and sensible shoes, sweating and run-walking over to a tour group from a nearby building, Georgia takes a few steps and tags onto its outer rim.

'Mr Allen!' the woman shouts, holding up both hands and waving herself into the middle of the group. 'Mr Allen, I'm here.'

The man in the centre, taller by a foot than all others, bearded, commanding, dressed subtly off-centre, turns, then radiates a smile. 'Here you are indeed.' Oxford circa 1950s accent. Instantly charming. As British as tea and cricket. 'I thought we might have lost you.'

'I'm sorry,' the woman blusters, fanning herself dramatically. 'I had a strong desire to go to the bathroom.'

'Well, wait just a minute there, young lady. Maybe desire is a bit too strong, don't you think? How about need? I know I go on and on about desire, but we must remember that there is a middle way. Neither desire nor non-desire.'

The woman pauses, lifting her frown. 'But, didn't you say that to get rid of suffering we first have to get rid of desire?'

'That is very true my dear, I did indeed say that. But look, let's say that you want to get rid of desire and therefore suffering. There is a problem there. There is a key verb which is causing us a bit of a headache.'

The woman shrugs demonstratively. 'Desire? Suffering?'

'Keep going. There was another one in there.'

The woman stops fanning for a moment and looks up, scanning an invisible text. 'Want?' Unsure.

'Want. Exactly.'

Fanning resumes.

'Now tell me, would it be at all possible to replace want with another word? Let's say... a word with a similar meaning?'

'Want? Would like? Um...'

'Almost there.'

'Have to have?'

'No.'

'Desire?'

'Bingo! Now, listen. I desire to get rid of desire.'

'It's a desire! The wanting to get rid of desire is another desire! Good lord.'

'Good, indeed. The next question would logically therefore have to be, can we desire to stop desiring to desire?'

'I... I don't know.'

'I think not. I think that what we have here is a very clear example of the catch-22 situation, otherwise known as a vicious circle. Or in another language, karma.'

'So I can't get rid of desire?'

'No, my dear, you can't.'

'But I thought that's what all the monks were doing around here.'

'Among other things they are. But Buddhism doesn't show you. It has but signposts, pointing the way.'

'What way?'

'The way to enlightenment.'

'But how can I get there if I can't end desire and suffering?'

'You could start by realising that nirvana actually means to extinguish. To let go.'

'So how can I let go of desire?'

'You can't. I told you that. Your emphasis, you see, is on the wrong word. Look. See. I can't end suffering, right? I can't get rid of desire because I can't desire it and I can't not desire it. What's the key word here?'

'Desire?'

'No no. The problem is you. You can't do it. You can't not do it.'

'But... who can?'

'Not me.'

'The monks?'

'No. No. Listen. You can't do anything about it because you don't exist. You see? You are fake, my dear. You are but smoke and mirrors. If you can't do anything about a problem, about some separate, out-there entity, then you do not exist. It really is that simple. You are not the doer. You are not something outside of this thing—this problem, this world—you are not a separate being and therefore you can't push it or pull it or change it in any way. QED, you are fake. By you I mean ego, your idea of whom you think you are. It is an unnatural human construct and it has absolutely nothing to do with reality whatsoever. It is exactly what Buddhism tries to expose to you and therefore enlighten you. In fact, if we persist in taking this to its logical conclusion, Buddhism is not even interested in having a concept about not having a concept. Of you or of anything else.'

'So what happens when I do get rid of my ego? Will that end desire? Will I be enlightened?'

'You can't.'

'Pardon me?'

'You can't get rid of your ego. It didn't exist in the first place, remember?'

'So... it's already gone? I'm already enlightened? I don't feel enlightened.'

'See above. There is no...'

'...me to feel enlightened.'

'There. You see?'

'I think so. But, how does it happen?'

'You could try waiting. Softly, openly. Don't wait with yourself, your I. You could also try using other tools such as meditation or chanting or yoga. Whatever takes your fancy. But whatever you do, don't try and hold on to the means.'

I don't exist, Georgia thinks, giving the idea some air. She knew half of her didn't exist anymore, already—correction: more like 80 percent. But what about the other 20 percent? Would that too disappear if she didn't persist in looking for Ben?

'To extinguish. To let go.' Georgia had a vague grasp of the basics of Buddhism, this from extensive teenage curiosity reading, but had consciously dismissed it as being a tad impractical. Letting go of worries and anxiety suited her just fine, but it seemed almost inhuman to let go of people, love. It was, in fact, she knew perfectly well now, utterly impossible. For her, at least.

After peeling away from the group Georgia enters a shaded courtyard area, the walls of which are painted with some kind of historic Thai story. It is a scene similar to the one she's in but set sometime in a pre-mechanised past. Looking closely she can see a sprawling temple with monks, a village with raised wooden homes, woman in traditional dress, warriors atop lavishly decorated elephants. It is an image of old Siam with the temple firmly at its heart and it makes her wonder if they have all let love go, too. The picture, however, seems too beautiful to be able to give any adequate answer.

After following the story around to the last wall, Georgia hears faint voices coming from somewhere beyond a partially open door. As she walks past it she peeks, seeing a short corridor, at the end of which are descending steps. And, unmistakably, English. 'Such a long...' is all she can make out.

Mr B6?

Walking back past the doorway again, Georgia stops.

Nothing.

Maybe she needs to get closer?

Take a well-deserved rest in the shade of the door's archway.

Try not to look too suspicious.

Step, without falling, onto the raised concrete tile of the entrance.

Enjoy the breeze for a moment.

Step cautiously inside.

The air in the passage is cooler and makes Georgia realise how much she has been sweating. And how much she must smell.

After letting the breeze and shade cool her for a moment she starts to walk, unthinking—pulled—down the stairs.

Just another lost tourist. What would Clouseau do? Whistle innocently?

At the bottom, moving around to the right, Georgia sees a corridor and a row of pillars, cold against the back of her hand. And voices. Echoing along the white walls of the corridor they are both too distorted to understand.

As she walks on she hears the sound of chair legs scrapping on stone, then, 'Think of it as a tape...'

What?

Must get closer... quietly... carefully...

Counting three pillars left to go Georgia's walk turns to a creep. She could, she imagines, be heading down a long ear canal, the hypnotic, semi-intelligible voices urging her on.

As she is about to pass another pillar she steps back; the last but one concealing the entrance to a room and a flash of clothing, of movement.

Flat against the wall Georgia exhales, then ties her hair back and feeling not brave, not scared, more limboed, she inches her head forwards.

The slightest of peeks reveals a storage room shelved with dusty Buddha statues, a man—B6, she's sure—standing with his back to her looking down at an open laptop, the screen of which she can't see.

Carefully extending her sight line, Georgia slides further, her eyes following the laptop wires along the concrete floor until they come to a pair of bare feet and begin a climb up the bottom of an orange robe.

'How far in?'

A calm whisper in reply, 'Maybe... 80 percent.'

As Georgia follows the wires up the robe she sees a shaven-headed monk sitting up straight in a chair while staring at a blank wall, the wires from the laptop connected to one side arm of a pair of familiar sunglasses. Her eyes trace the wires back to the laptop, then back to the monk again, who sits perfectly still, his face relaxed, open, a serene smile just like the statues scattered around the room.

'I think that's as far as I can go.'

'Thank you very much. You are quite an expert.'

'No problem. I hope it can help the students. I hear the school is getting more and more people that come each month. A lot of foreigners, too.'

'Yes. We've got another group starting at Baan Sai the day after tomorrow. I hope you can come and give your talk to the new recruits. You are always welcome. As are any tourists you might get chatting to.'

'Thank you, William. I didn't visit Udon province for a long time and I would like to go again. It is interesting for me to see this thing... this... process. Unfortunately, I have to attend Khun Supaphong's ordination, so this time I cannot go.'

'Next time. Everyone is welcome.'

Just as she hears the movement of sandals on stone, Georgia's pocketed phone starts to vibrate. This causes her lymphatic nervous system, which knows it has only .2 of a second to react before a loud ring tone gives her away, to jerk her knee up, cover it with both hands and spin away from the door, all in one silent-comedy movement. Doubled up, half hoping, half tip-toeing, covering her phone as if it were a wound, Georgia stumbles down the corridor and up the stairs, out into a blinding bright wall of light, heat and smiling Buddha's.

Part 2α Alpha

"It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity." Albert Einstein

Chapter 6 - Ritsuko's Wong Kar-wai Womb

Ritsuko put her pen down, shook her hand and looked at her walls. Covered from floor to ceiling with homemade frame-grab posters from her favourite movies—heavy on blood-reds and shadowy interiors—they made her room feel more like a womb than a bedroom. She had purposely over saturated the colours and stuck them up on every surface, this after her father had refused to let her paint the room with her favourite dark red matte. With their rich interiors and soft-focus idols they made her feel warm, sometimes giving her the feeling that she was part of the movies themselves. It was all inspiration for Ritsuko, fuel which drove her own art and which had worked successfully for the two years she had been drawing professionally. She had downloaded the films themselves on numerous empty evenings, but in an effort to stop herself from playing them constantly—a glitch that took her away from her work all too easily—after each viewing she had promptly deleted them again. She didn't have the same problem with manga cartoons; their durability lying in the fact that she didn't feel like she had to actually watch them. Instead, she would listen, sometimes focusing on the music, other times the dialogue.

On the night her brother banished her muse, drawing quietly inside her red world with manga playing unwatched on a screen behind her, the only thing she was paying any attention to was the ebb and flow of the background track—footsteps, crowd noise and nature, power battles climaxing in sonic explosions followed by space and subtler household noise: the clink of china on glass, wooden draws sliding shut on steel rails. As she worked, she listened, letting the sounds inspire the direction of her own story, sometimes sketching the sounds themselves to give herself a starting point if she got stuck. It didn't work all the time, but if she couldn't think of a scene the sounds would often nudge her back to work, or at least give her something she could follow up with or delete at a later time.

As Ritsuko picked up her pen again and focused on a tense standoff scene between two spiky-haired high school males, both of who had recently revealed their intense affection for the same girl, she debated with herself how much tension she should draw in and how much she should leave to her readers' imagination. She quickly decided that adding more tension lines and sweat drops would be overkill, and instead gave their eyes more intensity, more concealed rage. Then the usual questions: Whose tension would break first? If they fought, what weapon would they use? Who would stop them? Would the girl of their affections be a witness?

Ritsuko looked to her walls for direction, her eyes drifting from her sketchpad up and over her posters, her gaze wandering from a dark doorway area to an obscured, emotionally twisted face. She then looked down at her pad and with absolute confidence decided that her boys should back down—for now. It was too early for them to fight. She would build towards it carefully. Next, she drew a teacher as he approached the crowd, her pen giving character to the paper furiously. It was her trademark speed: black ink curving and looping as she transferred story to pad. After finishing the scene she drew in an empty dialogue bubble and then set straight to work on the next one: her micro-skirted heroine flipping between pictures of the two boys on her phone as she sat in class. She drew in an empty text message box instead of a speech bubble to finish and then glanced up, noticing her posters were losing some of their colour and vitality.

Ritsuko looked around, surprised at how quickly it had turned to dusk while she'd been inside a new chapter. She leant over and switched her drawing lamp on, casting the room in a livelier red—deeper—the womb contracting, drawing snugly in around herself.

She then stood up and stretched. Shook her hands, wiggling and flexing each finger carefully. She switched her scanner on and let its mechanics whir into position before placing her most recent scenes onto its glass surface and lowering the cover. Once the images were captured she emailed them to her uncle, also her agent, and the man responsible for getting her comics published in the first place. She asked how business was and thanked him yet again for all his hard work, which was pretty much everything except the artwork itself—from printing to marketing, interviews and accounts, everything that needed to be taken care of to run a small business and leave her with enough space to do the actual creating. Even though it was a small line Ritsuko was always amazed at the amount of work involved, which had grown considerably since her first issue two years ago. Back then it had never occurred to her that she might be able to get her work published, because her comics, each and every one, were incomplete—they had no dialogue. Neither a single word nor sentence. They were the definition of pure Manga: random sketches with a story only she knew. And no matter how hard she tried and however many speech bubbles she tried to fill in, nothing clicked. So, in the end, in despair, she had sent them to her uncle, asking for his advice. He'd shown them around at work and had received a generally positive response from his co-workers. None of them, however, had been able to suggest a way for her to write good dialogue. Apart from handing them over to an outsider, a professional writer.

Ritsuko had said no and stopped drawing.

Two months later, as a sixteenth birthday gift designed to cheer her up, her uncle had presented her with a few dozen professionally printed copies. He shrugged, she smiled, but Ritsuko didn't quite know how to feel: pleased with what she'd produced or depressed because they were flawed and incomplete. She decided to leave them in their box under her bed until she'd stopped oscillating between the two, hoping one opinion would stick. When none did they started to become forgotten, until one weekend evening when some friends had turned up and she'd tentatively shown them. Her friends, flicking through the speechless pictures and quietly impressed with the quality of the drawings, soon started to make up ideas of their own. The ideas turned into stories and one of them, Atsuko, picked up a pencil and wrote inside the first blank bubble: 'Hello, I am Haruki. I have something important to tell you.' Ritsuko laughed, then encouraged her friends to write more, to fill up all the gaps with whatever stories they cared to invent. Which they did, writing through one

book after another until half the box was gone and her brother was knocking on the door shouting at them to keep their noise down.

When Ritsuko had gone to school the next week, her friends, and their friends, and people she didn't even know, all crowded around her asking for copies. Asking if she had any different stories. Only ones with blank speech bubbles. The students, perhaps sensing they were evolving a fad, had then filled in her blank bubbles with fantasies of their own: romances, science fiction tales, realistic depictions of their own lives, obscene and violent destruction fantasies. Finally, when Ritsuko asked her uncle to print some more copies, he sent a batch to sell alongside his own long-running comic, and so her business had begun, her one weakness, her void, had become her uniqueness, and she'd started to make money from it.

Ritsuko checked the time. Her brother was late and she was getting hungry. She glanced at her phone and debated calling to remind him that he was cooking tonight and to go to the grocery store, but decided against it. She knew he didn't like being reminded of such things and she didn't want the hassle of an irritable brother at the dinner table. Maybe after a small snack and a cup of tea she would politely text him.

After putting her slippers on and making her way downstairs the cartoon soundtrack, still audible from her room, followed her into the kitchen, where she added to it with tea-making noises of her own. Waiting for the water to boil she opened a tin of cat food and set it on the floor should Yuki decide to show up hungry. And it was at that moment, stubbornly calling the cat's name, that Ritsuko's ability to draw and sequence scenes up to become whole plotlines slipped out of her hands.

As she was looking around the room for the cat, the back door burst open and she saw the shape of her brother. When he turned and ran back to his car the door swung shut with a bang and Ritsuko, tin opener in hand and struck dumb by the suddenness of his arrival, craned her neck and peered out into the shadows of the front drive. She saw her brother bending into his car and, with some difficulty, lift something out. When the kitchen door flew open again a minute later Ritsuko watched as her brother, sweating and stumbling, backed into the kitchen carrying a body in his arms. A bloodied gaijin body.

Chapter 7 - Generic Bond

The grounds lay in a valley in a clearing surrounded by a forest alive with insects. In the evenings the insect chatter would steadily rise until all Georgia could hear was a 360-degree wall of croaking and calling and leg rubbing, closing in around her and drowning out the sound of the nearby river.

She lay calmly that first night, letting the ambient buzz soak into her head, surprised at how successfully it pushed aside her own inner swarm. It was refreshing. A living replacement for the city storm of vibration that had been with her since birth, either coming in through her windows or following her along the road to work. It also unsettled her, knocking her senses, the absence of din unnatural somehow and the stillness it created seeming to take the edge off time itself. It also provided a space to sleep in which, although woken all too early, resulted in some of the most deeply satisfying rest she could remember having in a long time.

It's 5 a.m. now and in bungalow number 23, Georgia wakes to the heavy chime of a single bell. It has a pure, self-possessed resonance that cuts cleanly through the sharp morning air, through the bamboo walls of her hut, her mosquito net, and finally into her sleep, lifting her up into wakefulness and the unexpected body state of

relaxation and clarity. She can't remember the last time she'd woken up and just lazed, coming round in her own time and breathing with nature.

Lasting all of five yawning minutes it comes, though, slowly but surely, an old, familiar friend. Starting out as a small niggle it soon gains currency, ballooning out from her stomach and circulating throughout her nervous system before finally pulling her up into a sitting position. Next the questions, logic bringing her to full anxiousness. What would she have to deal with that day? What answers would she have to give? To who? How much new data would she need to process? After googling Baan Sai, the village she'd overheard the monk mention at the Chinatown temple, she'd been quite single-minded yesterday in taking the train to Udon province in the far northeast of Thailand. She'd then caught a motorcycle taxi to the village, which she found to be some kind of resort, and, after checking in as one would at a hotel, albeit with some additional questioning a doctor might ask on a first visit—any past histories? current medication?—she was in, assured that any questions she might have would be answered at tomorrow's briefing.

'Today's the today,' Georgia says confidently to herself, trying to look into the hours ahead for a partial answer, some kind of clue as to what might be expected of her.

Nothing, though.

She simply can't get a handle on a concept of this unusual time and space and this, she is sure, is the cause of this morning's anxiety—the beginnings of all possibilities dead-end, leaving her with what she imagines the beginning of a nervous breakdown might feel like.

Shaking her head at this, Georgia stands and inhales—exhales slowly, trying to breathe out the tightening in her chest.

Into the shower with the thought that she will soon find out. Has to find out.

Go with the flow of the water.

Get straight into it.

Nothing to lose.

Only Ben to find.

She hadn't spotted him yet, but hopes were still high that at any moment there he would be, smiling, waiting for her.

After opening the flexible reed-weave door and stepping barefoot onto the porch area, Georgia sees people—strangers—some to her left, one right in front walking past now.

A defensive smile, a friendly nod.

Straight to breakfast.

Walking too stiffly?

Swing the arms, woman.

But not too much.

Bloody relax.

Walking past them, Georgia has no problem processing the simple design of the buildings. With their raised concrete platforms with wood and bamboo uprights, walled for the sleeping huts and open for the public buildings, all with tiled red-brick roofs, unassuming and functional they stood scattered apart, some constructed with help from the environment itself, as if certain trees had grown into buildings, their branches coaxed patiently over time and used as supports for drooping covered areas. The central building looked to be the main public space, with cushions scattered randomly on the wooden floor waiting for the first lesson or lecture or talk. Next door and set back from the kitchen and eating area, the bungalows. Facing

across the river they afforded a clear view of gently swaying, lush ocean-green jungle.

After kicking off her sandals at the eating area and walking over to the pots of rice, soup and vegetables, serving herself, Georgia glances across at the wooden benches and recognises a man from the previous evening's welcome dinner. He had been sitting next to her and they had exchanged a few comments on the food and mosquitoes. He was a tall man and had a vegan's physique. He had a sun-red, healthy-yet-hollow face, was quietly confident, and he held something Georgia wanted—an attraction, something she couldn't quite decode.

'What are your expectations?' the vegan had asked.

The question had interrupted her scanning process—face to face, glasses to glasses. Still no sign of Ben, though. 'I'm sorry?'

'I mean the course. What do you hope you might get from it?'

Hadn't really thought about it. Hadn't had time. 'I don't know,' she'd replied, trying to close the hole this question had opened. 'How about you?'

'The results seem to be pretty generic.'

A Panasonic dot-matrix printer filled her gap. It was the first printer she'd tried to hook up to her computer. She didn't have the correct driver for it and would have to contact the printer company who would then send one to her by mail on a disk. Are there any other options? Yes, a generic driver. One that will work with most printers of this type but will not give access to the printer's higher functions. You will be able to print, but not in a fancy font. She'd then looked the word up in a thesaurus: standard, common, non-specific, of a class. Adrian had used the word in connection with Pierce Brosnan once. 'He was a generic Bond—a factory Bond. He didn't bring anything new to the role. He just churned out the generic characteristics of his predecessors, minus charisma.' A characteristic Adrian comment.

'I mean,' the vegan had elaborated, 'people who have taken this course report a standard result.'

Georgia stopped chewing and nodded thoughtfully. 'That would make sense,' she said.

'But each person has a different way of interpreting the experience. Of using it. That's what I'm interested in. I did a bit of unguided work before I started here. Really, though, I didn't know how to work that big old machine. All clunk and hospital-looking. Sadly, I think the equipment is what puts—put—most people off.'

'Oh?' Georgia managed.

'Which, I guess, is why we all come here.'

'I see. And... why is that?'

'Refinement.'

'That's why I'm here!' Georgia grinned, and, feeling about six molecules tall, went back to her vegetables.

But the vegan's words, along with his face and manner, had revolved around in her head that first night. They had shuffled themselves into different patterns, trying to configure themselves into a happier understanding—glasses, hospital machine, clunk—but nothing had clicked and no picture had even begun to appear.

Now, as she sits a polite distance away and nods and silently good-mornings him, she knows she must mine.

He smiles back at her and looks more directly into her pupils than anyone has in as long as she can remember—a piercing. It's enough to throw open a door into her other-world brain which she gets lost in for a moment, time and sequence off to sit

on a fence somewhere. A moment of agreeable déjà vu. His eyes. Brown and clear and shining with information.

When Georgia realises that she has in fact seen these eyes before, her déjà vu deconstructs itself—unravels—leaving her unusually engaged with the moment. She watches as his mouth begins to speak.

‘Today’s the day!’

Georgia nods, but feels disjointed, like she’s in some kind of weird déjà vu wash, from which she can only manage: ‘Yes. Looking forward? To it. The day, I mean. The day that is today.’

‘Looking forward,’ he repeats, then adds, ‘always! Even though it’ll be my sixth course. I’m one of the trainers. Not that working here involves much hard labour. People tend to pick up the basics pretty quickly. Unless your wiring’s a bit off. You know, red wire connected to blue wire. But that’s not so hard to work out. They’re pretty easily conquered foes these waves.’

Was it a mania? Or a passion? ‘What time is the first... session? Lost my programme.’

‘Training this afternoon. Just a lecture this morning. Intro for the new recruits. Ten at building one. I’ll see you there.’ After the vegan gets up and smiles down at her—sympathetically she’s sure—he turns to take his tray to the self-cleaning area.

Clouseau could have done a better job, Georgia thinks.

He turns around then. ‘By the way, I’m Matthew. Matthew McMullen.’

Georgia shakes the spasm man’s hand.

END OF FREE SAMPLE

[About the Author](#)

Born in London, Greg has been writing since he was 12.

Just as the web was emerging in '93 his interest in new technologies led him to study the UK's first multimedia degree. He then worked in London for as long as he could before buying a one-way ticket to South East Asia, where the laidback lifestyle gave him the peace, space and time to write more persistently.

Drifting in and out of teaching English to sustain this writing habit, always more at home in a foreign country, Greg is still wandering in Asia, slowly learning that wherever he goes, there he is.

Theta Head is his first 'fiction on edge'.

For more info go to:

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