

Lee Dixon

Strings



Strings

By Lee Dixon

1.

Was it the man sitting on the other side of the café?

Was he the person Amelia was meant to meet?

He didn't look much older than she was – eighteen years old perhaps – twenty at the most. He was wearing a hoodie and jeans he'd evidently worn regularly over many years, judging from their tattered appearance, the once deep burgundy colour of his hoodie now lost to the turbulent soapy waters of many washing machine spins. All his clothes were awash with cement dust, some of it still also clinging to the knuckles of his hands, one bringing a rapidly disappearing sausage roll back and forth from his lips and the other flicking the pages of a newspaper on the table in front of him.

He had to be a builder or plasterer – someone who worked, or was connected to a construction site.

He'd definitely looked at her when she'd slinked into the café and took a seat in the booth closest to the entrance, making her suspicious that he was the person she'd come to meet. However, she was certain that he hadn't glanced in her direction since, the content of the newspaper engrossing him.

And what about the other man sitting in the adjacent booth.

He was older, in his early to mid-forties, dressed in a smart beige sweater and black blazer – a man who had just popped into the café for a latte, or similar beverage, before the day ahead.

The person she was meeting had simply identified themselves as “Edgar” when they'd established contact on WhatsApp. Presumably, he was male, judging from his name, but he didn't have a profile picture to help with identification.

This man did seem to be distracted by his phone, writing a message to someone, his thumbs moving frantically across the screen, almost as though they were competing with one another to reach the intended letter of the alphabet first.

Amelia was certain that the man hadn't been using his phone when she'd entered the café.

It was only when she'd tentatively sat in the booth that the man had started to write the message.

Amelia felt her stomach twisting.

She needed to stay calm – she needed to relax, but it was impossible. She could feel the blood rushing around the vessels in her head, the accompanying sweat accumulating within her wavy blonde hair and percolating down the strands that grew past her shoulders. Some of the sweat had also spread onto her face, antagonising the ache that resided there for most of her teenaged years, her skin feeling red and raised, despite the layer of makeup she had applied earlier that morning. Furthermore, the sweat that had made its way onto her nose had lubricated the skin, causing her glasses to keep sliding away from the bridge of her nose, prompting her to keep pushing them back. Her fingers were arguably worse, however. They seemed to be out of control, tap-dancing across the table in front as though they were on amphetamines – if she didn't control them, they would attract unwanted attention.

The man seemed to have finished his message now – he was looking up from his phone – not at Amelia, but in the direction of the counter. It made sense that the man wouldn't make eye contact – that he wouldn't do anything that revealed that they were meeting in secret with one another on this particular morning.

Amelia pulled her own phone from her pocket, waiting anxiously for the man's message to come through.

She waited for seconds...minutes...but nothing arrived on her phone.

She checked the open conversation with Edgar on WhatsApp.

The green banner at the top of the screen indicated that he had not been active since the previous evening, not since he'd sent his last message to her, his instructions simple and concise:

“Marshall's Coffee Shop. Willow Cross town centre. Tomorrow. 09:00am. Come alone.”

The man was back on his phone again now, this time engaging in conversation with someone on the other end. After a few minutes of seemingly exchanging anecdotes with whoever he was talking to, he stood from the booth and made his way towards the café entrance before leaving without giving Amelia a single glance.

Not Edgar.

Amelia exhaled.

She couldn't believe she was doing this.

She was only fourteen, but she knew what she was doing was incredibly dangerous – she knew she was placing herself in tremendous peril just by sitting in this café.

Over the past few days, she'd strayed into areas of the internet where she'd never thought she'd dare venture. She'd trespassed into chasmic recesses where the most perverted, deranged, and sadistic individuals were able to flourish and propagate completely concealed.

She hadn't wanted to enter these abhorrent places.

Once she had, the only thing she'd wanted to do was escape.

Yet, sheer desperation had pushed her forward, giving her no choice.

Jack was the reason.

Jack was why she was here in this café at this precise moment.

The person who she cherished the most.

Her little brother.

They were half-siblings; they had different fathers, but it had never mattered – she'd loved him from the moment she'd laid eyes on him when he was born six years ago, from when they had both looked into one another's eyes at the hospital when she'd been given the opportunity to hold him for the very first time.

In his first years, despite her own young age, she'd immediately taken position as his primary carer, alongside her mother, helping to prepare his bottled milk once he was old enough, holding his hands tightly while he learned to walk and heaving him back onto his feet when he inevitably kept toppling over at first. Showing him how to pronounce words correctly when he was learning to speak.

As he got older, her affection towards him only intensified and, when she wasn't at school, she'd try to spend as much time with him as possible. This included frequently dressing up as super heroes and chasing one another in the garden – Jack always choosing his Spiderman costume, while she was afforded the choice of Batman, Superman, or the Hulk! Of course, she spent time with her friends, going shopping and to the cinema at weekends and during the holidays, but she'd never allowed it to encroach on the time she devoted to spending with her brother.

But Jack had fallen ill in the last few months – severely ill.

It had started spontaneously and traumatically one weekend earlier in the year and Amelia had been there to witness it first hand – the images of that horrific day still burnt into the back of her eyes.

They'd been playing chase in the garden. It had been a freezing January day, but Jack had insisted. Jack was chasing her – she'd purposely run at a slow pace, so that he'd manage to catch her eventually.

They had completed several laps of the garden when Jack had suddenly collapsed in front of her, crashing onto his stomach, his legs becoming stiff. Amelia had instantly dived onto her knees beside him and rolled him onto his back. She immediately found him gasping for breath, his mouth gaping at an impossible angle, as though something was burgeoning inside, blocking his airways and bending his jaw out of shape. She'd screamed for her stepdad at once, who had rushed out of the house and dived onto his knees beside her, trying to help his son. After he'd failed to find the obstruction blocking Jack's airways, her stepdad had scooped him into his arms and raced him to the hospital.

The doctors had rushed him into the emergency room and had undertaken procedures that Amelia had never heard of before.

All the while, her mother and stepdad had waited anxiously with her in the waiting room, switching between pacing back and forth and sitting in the chairs with their heads in their hands.

Amelia would never forget the way her mother and stepdad looked on that day.

After what seemed like a lifetime, one of the doctors had come to them and had explained that Jack had been stabilised, suffering from a severe lung obstruction. They had been told that the size of the obstruction had been reduced for now, but there had already been evidence that it had started to regrow, Jack only been able to breathe with a ventilator. When Amelia's stepdad had questioned what the obstruction could be – and whether it was a cancer, or something similar, the doctor had candidly replied that he didn't know and that he'd never experienced anything like this in his entire career. With these words, Amelia had known that her little brother's condition was dire and intoxicating despair had engulfed her, preventing her from computing anything else that the doctor said. However, she had managed to discern him describing the obstruction as a fibrous ball, amassing inside his windpipe.

Since then, Jack had remained in the intensive care unit attached to a ventilator. The doctors had consistently tried to clear the obstruction from his throat – an invasive procedure, but the ball continued to propagate with every opportunity, it's growth more aggressive and exponential each time, the fibres working their way into his lungs and towards other organs. Specialists had been consulted in different parts of the UK and in different countries, but none could afford any further insight or assistance. In the meantime, Jack continued to deteriorate, the obstruction rendering him into a catatonic-like state, his young body growing weaker and weaker each day.

The doctors hadn't spoken the words yet, but Amelia, together with her mother and stepdad, knew that Jack didn't have long left.

She couldn't bear losing him – not when they'd only spent six years together.

She refused to let him die!

Amelia had endlessly searched the internet for weeks – searching for any medications, any treatments that could help her little brother – anything that the doctors hadn't considered. It was at this time that she'd entered the Dark Web and eventually found Edgar in cyberspace. He claimed to have expansive medical knowledge and unlimited access to medications and treatments – both those which had been approved legally and ethically and those which had not. Numerous examples of all the diseases and conditions he'd help treat and cure were listed on his website – cancers, acute and chronic liver disease, HIV...severe lung obstructions. Edgar didn't specify a price in return for their service, all she needed to do to set everything in motion was provide her name, home address, and phone number, and then wait to be contacted.

Amelia had hesitated for days after finding the website. Two weeks after Jack had been taken to the hospital, her mother and stepdad had persuaded her to return to school – an environment that would hopefully be able to distract her and help her to cope with what was happening to her brother. However, her mind had continuously replayed the words written on Edgar's website throughout the school day – a promise that Jack could be saved and that he could continue to live a normal and happy life with her.

All she needed to do was establish contact.

A little voice inside her mind kept telling her that she was on the verge of making a catastrophic mistake, but she couldn't stop thinking about Jack in his hospital bed struggling to breathe and fighting for his life.

Then, last night, in the early hours of the morning and after biting her fingernails down to the skin, she'd eventually conceded, submitting her contact details to the website.

Edgar's response on WhatsApp had been instantaneous, demanding the full details of Jack's condition.

Amelia had tried to recite as much detail from the doctors as she could remember, her fingers trembling incessantly, making it incredibly difficult to type the message. She'd misspelt words in her haste, missed others out, but she crafted a response somehow.

Once again, Edgar's reply had come almost before she'd sent the message, notifying her that the café in Willow Cross was the meeting location. Amelia had also interpreted the message as confirmation that Edgar would be able to treat Jack – that he would be able to give him medicine...therapy...a new set of lungs anything he needed....

She had initially questioned why this particular location had been selected for the meeting. Willow Cross was a large town located on the western edge of the Peak District National Park twenty miles south of where she lived in Chorlton-cum-Hardy in Manchester. It was unfamiliar to her – she'd only visited once before, but she remembered it as unremarkable, just a typical town in the northern part of England. Nevertheless, when she thought about it, it made more sense: there was a larger police presence in Manchester and it was too heavily surveyed by CCTV cameras – it would be more difficult for Edgar to remain unseen if that was selected as their meeting place. Amelia understood that the police service in Willow Cross, on the other hand, was stretched between other nearby towns and settlements, and the number of CCTV cameras was kept to a minimum.

Getting to Willow Cross had caused problems for Amelia.

She was too young to drive and she had, of course, kept her meeting with Edgar secret from her mother and stepdad, ruling out the possibility of asking one of them to drive her. This was exacerbated by the fact that it was a weekday and she was meant to be attending school. Consequently, this also meant that she couldn't get a taxi unless she wanted to risk getting asked endless questions regarding why she wasn't in school. In the end, she'd opted for the train, leaving the house as if to walk to school as normal but returning as soon as her mother and stepdad had left to travel back to the hospital to be with Jack. Once she was back inside the house, she'd quickly changed out of her school uniform and donned casual clothes – a pair of jeans and plain t-shirt, together with a maroon jacket and accompanying turquoise coloured scarf, leaving swiftly before catching a bus to Manchester Piccadilly Train Station. From there, she'd caught a direct train to Willow Cross, keeping herself out of sight of the other passengers, the journey only taking thirty minutes. She'd purchased her train ticket online beforehand. Once she'd arrived in Willow Cross, it had only taken a few minutes to navigate to the café using Google Maps on her phone.

It was 8:58am – two minutes before her meeting with Edgar was due to start.

The anticipation was overwhelming – the perspiration covering her body continuing to get worse, her entire body trembling incessantly.

She felt nauseous, but, surprisingly, the overpowering smell of coffee circulating throughout the café wasn't responsible. Instead, the accompanying smell of baked pastry and sugar – the Danish pastries, lemon buns, and croissants displayed on the counter and sitting on the other customers' plates – were causing the problem, making her want to vomit.

Was Edgar already here inside the café?

Was he currently looking at her now, assessing her?

The builder was still sat on the opposite side, still engrossed in his newspaper. He was the only person sitting alone. Some of the other booths were occupied by small groups of three to five – people in their twenties, thirties – middle-aged men and women. There was a blindman with a cane.

None of them looked like people who lurked on the Dark Web.

Perhaps Edgar was waiting outside – the town hall was directly opposite the café, on the other side of a plaza – perhaps he was sitting on one of the benches she'd seen nearby?

Maybe she should take a quick look?

She quickly stood and made her way towards the café's entrance. Pushing the door open gingerly and peering outside, too nervous, for the moment, to fully exit the building.

The plaza was busier than before – numerous people hurrying towards the main shopping street to the right and left, rushing to get to work, pigeons and crows scurrying across the concrete in between them, searching for any leftover scraps of on-the-way-to-work breakfasts that might have fallen onto the ground. None of them paid Amelia any notice and the benches in front of the town hall were vacant.

She made the decision to retreat back into the café, re-taking her seat back in the same booth from before, noticing simultaneously that some of the staff members behind the counter were now looking in her direction.

She didn't think that any of them were Edgar – it was more likely that her erratic behaviour was making them suspicious. Although she tried to make herself look older with her makeup, she still looked too young to be an A-level or college student – someone who didn't need to be in school at this precise moment. Any minute now and they would start asking questions about what she was doing here by herself and why she wasn't in school.

She needed to stop drawing attention to herself.

She decided to pretend to be preoccupied with her phone – hopefully that would then send out the message that she shouldn't be disturbed under any circumstance.

08:59am.

One minute to go before the meeting.

Edgar had to be moments away from entering the café now, if indeed he intended to come/arrive at all.

Amelia had to admit that it was a pertinent concern – perhaps this entire meeting was a wind-up and Edgar didn't have any intention of coming – *what would happen to Jack if that happened?*

And if Edgar did arrive, what payment would she need to make...a hundred pounds...a thousand pounds...more than that – she didn't have the money!

*...was it even money that he wanted...did he want something else from her...*she couldn't think about it; she just needed to think about Jack – he was the only thing that mattered.

Her phone buzzed.

A new WhatsApp message – from Edgar – the moment it turned 09:00am!

“The corner of Highgate and Tribute Road. 3mins.”

This was it.

It was happening.

Edgar must have changed the venue because the café was too public – this new location must be more isolated – more secluded.

She didn't know where it was – she would have to check Google Maps enroute, but she needed to get there in three minutes.

She needed to move.

She exited the building at once, undoubtedly drawing the attention of the café staff again with her haste to leave.

Once outside, she immediately accessed the Google Maps app on her phone and punched in her new destination. It told her to head directly north and that it would only take a few minutes to walk there – that was good – if the new meeting place was any further then it would have been impossible to get there in time.

Now that she was in the open, the morning air struck Amelia, easily penetrating the thin fabric of her jacket and finding its way onto her skin. It was mid-April and spring had quickly arrived since the start of the month, bringing long spells of uninterrupted sunshine and unseasonable warmth – conditions that had greatly favoured the plants and trees, fresh blooms adorning their stems and branches, sending volumes of hay fever-inducing pollen high into the sky. However, everything seemed to have changed this morning. The Sun had risen a few hours ago, but it had been instantly marginalised

behind multiple layers of cloud, stifling its glow and former vibrancy. Moreover, much of its warmth had been taken away by an icy wind, ravaging the tiny grains of pollen that still remained in the air.

Amelia snuggled as well as she could manage into her coat and followed the directions she had been given, heading briskly across the plaza towards an adjoining road, which would eventually become Highgate. As she moved, she ignored everyone else who passed by and didn't pay attention to any of the buildings on either side – a parish church sitting beside the town hall – a building that probably predated everything else surrounding it, the black stonework now dirty and degenerated from years of traffic fumes, a bank with impressively large glass windows, countless mobile phone shops and restaurants, a library on the right.

After leaving the plaza, Highgate dipped, taking her in the direction of a busy-looking perpendicular road. Google Maps indicated that this was Tribute Road, which meant that the meeting place was either the corner on the left beside the entrance to a multi-storey carpark, or across the road on the right, in front of a solicitor's firm. She was still fifty metres away, but she could see that no one was waiting for her at either at the moment.

It was only 09:02.

Edgar still had time to arrive at either one in the next minute.

Amelia made the decision to wait on the corner by the multi-storey car park on the left.

Tribute Road carried six-lanes of traffic and ran down a steep slope towards a large roundabout where it looked like several further busy roads converged. The Pennine hills could be seen in the distance, low-lying cloud obscuring their peaks, swathes of residential buildings in the intervening space. Further up the slope, in the opposite direction, a footbridge worked its way across the road, connecting an adjoining residential area with the town centre.

As she waited, Amelia shivered and felt her nerves mounting, a great feeling of vulnerability descending on her shoulders. Hundreds of vehicles were passing by, all the drivers and passengers able to see her standing there on the corner, exposed and alone. Pedestrians also walked by on either pavement, most ignoring her completely, but a few casting a curious eye in her direction, probably wondering what she was doing. At one stage, a toddler also walked over the bridge overhead, peering momentarily through the railings towards her before continuing.

Amelia was certain that none of them were Edgar.

She checked the time.

It was now 09:07, several minutes after the meeting was meant to start.

She questioned if she was standing on the correct corner, checking on Google Maps to see if there was another Highgate and Tribute Road in Willow Cross, but it insisted that this was the right place.

She crossed over the road and stood in front of the solicitor's firm to see if that would help and then returned to her original position when still nothing happened, all the time keeping a keen eye on the vehicles that drove by, in case one of them pulled over.

By the time 09:22 arrived, Amelia had become crippled with indecision. On the one hand, there were many different reasons why Edgar seemingly hadn't arrived yet – he was delayed in traffic, he had been spooked by something and had decided not to show, but on the other, it felt like she was being tested, as though forcing her to wait here was testing her commitment and worth.

She contemplated phoning him and making contact herself. However, their communication up until this point had emphasised that Edgar was the one running everything and that reversing the power relations was prohibited and would jeopardise receiving treatment for Jack.

It was only when she had finally decided that she would wait until 10:00am before abandoning the entire assignment that her phone vibrated, notifying her that she had a new message.

"I'm here. Marshall's Coffee Shop. Willow Cross town centre."

Amelia reeled, darting back up Highgate back towards the plaza, her stomach lurching, the muscles in her thighs and calves cramping with anticipation.

Edgar was here – he was physically waiting for her in the original meeting place. She didn't know why she'd been sent to the corner, but there had to be some logic behind it – it didn't matter now; she just needed to get back to the café.

Amelia arrived in a few minutes, panting with the exertion.

She'd been nervous waiting on the corner, but now her anxiety had multiplied to such an extent that she suddenly felt unable to push open the door and re-enter the café. Once she did, and she met with this person, there was no turning back – she didn't know what was going to happen.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, picturing Jack inside her mind.

He was why she was here.

He was the reason she was doing this.

There was no other way to save him.

She opened the door and stepped inside.

The café was no busier than it had been thirty minutes earlier. No one was sitting in the booth she had previously occupied and the same customers were sat in the others – the builder, the blind person.

The only exception was a man sitting in one of the central booths. He was a business man from the look of it, donned in an expensive pin-striped suit; a man possibly in his late thirties, with slicked back hair which had turned prematurely grey. He looked animated – impatient, talking heatedly into his mobile phone, an open laptop on the table in front of him, a steaming cup of coffee sitting nearby.

Edgar.

It had to be.

He was waiting for her – why else would he be angry and annoyed – he was talking to one of his Dark Web colleagues on his phone.

Amelia swallowed.

She didn't know how to approach.

He hadn't made eye contact with her – he hadn't even looked in her direction – *should she go over, or should she wait in her booth until he was ready to make contact himself?*

Something told her to walk over.

Her nerves were unbearable.

It felt like her feet were infused with the floor tiles.

The members of staff behind the counter were looking at her again suspiciously – she had to show that she was meeting with someone to avert their suspicion.

She forced herself forward...one step...two steps, her anxiety reaching a pinnacle now.

She felt like she was approaching the headteacher's office at school – fearful of their retribution after a long period of misbehaving.

The man still chose not to look at her as she pulled up alongside his booth, his attention switching quickly between whoever he was talking to on the other end of the phone and his laptop.

Now that she was closer, Amelia could hear that he was talking about relocating a shipment of some kind before it was discovered by someone else – the conversation sounded covert – illicit – this had to be the person she was meeting – he had to be Edgar.

She needed to interrupt.

She needed to say something to him.

"Excuse me?" was the only dialogue she could manage, the words tentative and meek, wanting nothing more than to retreat back into her mouth and seek refuge.

The man ignored her, typing a few keys on his laptop – it was possible that he'd failed to hear her.

“Excuse me?” she repeated more loudly.

Her words drew his eyes towards her this time...but only for a second, his gaze quickly returning back to his screen.

Amelia didn't know what to do – was there a special word she had to use – a password – if there was, she didn't know it.

Perhaps if she just told him her name....

“I'm Amelia...Amelia Bennett...”

The man was looking at her now, a bemused frown on his face, “Just one minute, Jez,” he told the person on the phone before pressing it against his shoulder and peering quizzically at her, “Sorry, can I help you?”

There was a hint of irritability in his voice from the interruption, but it seemed mostly suppressed by confusion for the moment.

Amelia peered about herself before slipping into the booth opposite him – her intention to give them both greater privacy, something that she felt he'd appreciate.

Her nerves were making it difficult to speak, “I'm Amelia Bennett; you arranged to meet me here about helping my brother.”

The man's brow furrowed even further, his eyes examining her from head to toe, searching for any degree of recognition, “I'm sorry?”

“You said that you could help my brother...on WhatsApp...you sent me a message to meet you here.”

The man looked truly puzzled now. He shook his head quickly, “Sorry, I think you're mistaking me for someone else.”

Again, Amelia didn't know if this was part of a test and whether she had to continue to prove her worth by persisting.

She decided to continue.

“I got in touch with you on your website last night, you said that you could help my brother, Jack.”

“Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.”

Initially, Amelia hadn't wanted to mention his username – codename – whatever it was, or where she had found his website, in case she wasn't meant to mention it in public, but now it was perhaps necessary to pass this test.

She leant closer, so that her chin was almost touching the top of his laptop, keeping her trembling voice at a mere whisper so that no one else could hear, “I contacted you on your website on the Dark Web last night, Edgar, you told me to meet you here so that you could help my brother.”

The man leant away from her as though she was mad, or carried some form of life-threatening disease he was at severe risk of catching. He looked about himself as though he suspected he'd been set-up and a film crew would spring up from other parts of the café, announcing that he'd be caught up in a prank which would shortly be broadcast on national TV.

When nothing happened, he peered back at her again quizzically, “Listen, I don't know what you're going on about, love,” he gesticulated back towards his phone, “I'm trying to have a private conversation with a colleague of mine, okay.”

Amelia felt herself becoming more desperate – she didn't know what was going on here, or what she was meant to say or do, “Please, my brother's very sick, please, you have to help him!”

The man snapped, the irritability dominating over the confusion now, “Listen, sweetheart, I'm trying to have a private conversation here, okay!” he retorted, signalling with his hand that she needed to back off, “I don't know what you're talking about – you've mistaken me for someone else, so please leave me alone, okay!”

Amelia recoiled from him as though she'd been scalded with boiling water.

She'd been so sure this man was Edgar, but she'd evidently got it severely wrong!

She immediately sprung back onto her feet and leapt back from the man's booth, simultaneously stealing glances at the other customers inside the café. Many of them were looking in her direction now, including the staff members behind the counter, their collective attention drawn by the man's outburst.

Amelia retreated back towards her original booth, collapsing onto the seat – throwing her face into her hands, resisting the temptation to simply flee from the café and not look back. Even from here, she could hear the man recommencing his conversation with his colleague on his phone, "Hey Jez, you're never going to guess what's just happened, some teenaged girl just came up to me and..."

Amelia chastised herself for getting it so wrong – she felt so foolish. Would Edgar even establish contact with her now that she'd exposed herself to everyone in the café – was he even still in here – had her idiotic actions driven him away. She didn't feel she could approach anyone else in case she was got it wrong again.

Was there even a 'Edgar' in the first place – was it someone just playing a game with her, cruelly capitalising on her desperation?

After a few minutes, she dared herself to look around the café again, to see if any of the other customers were still staring at her.

Thankfully, they had all seemingly forgotten about her now, returning to their conversations, phones, or newspapers. Only the toddler standing on the far side of the café was looking at her with intense curiosity, his head tilting from side to side to get a better view of her.

He looked around 3 years old, his face cherub-like, the cheeks pronounced and oversized like two plush, spongy cushions, almost swallowing the neighbouring nose and mouth, making them both look diminutive in comparison. Nevertheless, sufficient space had been left for his eyes, both large and inquisitive, beaming like two silvery coins in the ambient light. His hair was typical of a child his age, soft and curly – a thatch that wouldn't behave despite how many times it had been combed. He wore an emerald-coloured knitted jumper with trousers, miniature shoes encasing his tiny feet, the laces spanning the colours of the rainbow.

Amelia couldn't remember seeing him inside the café before she'd left to wait on the corner, or when she had re-entered moments earlier. However, something seemed familiar about him – there was something about the way he was looking at her that suggested that she'd met him before....

That was it! – he had been staring at her through a set of railings – the railings on the bridge – he had been crossing the bridge when she was waiting on the corner below.

It was the same little boy.

He didn't seem to be with anyone. His parents were nowhere to be seen. All the other customers didn't seem aware of him.

The little boy realised that Amelia had noticed him and he smiled in return – a sweet and excited smile that seemed to illuminate his entire face.

Amelia felt obligated to smile back – the first time she'd smiled in a long time, the gesture consequently feeling alien on her face.

The little boy started waving, chuckling slightly now that they had seemingly established some form of rapport.

Again, Amelia felt obligated to wave back, starting slowly at first and then accelerating, matching the speed of the infant's wave on the other side of the café.

He started trotting towards her, still with the smile plastered on his face, his feet moving adroitly across the tiled floor, but his body careening at times to the right and then to the left before being adjusted centrally once again.

Amelia couldn't understand what she was witnessing – she didn't think it was possible for someone to move in this manner, especially not a toddler – did this child have a mobility problem that caused him to move in this way – something related to his nervous system? She snatched glances at the other customers to see if they were watching too, but none of them seemed to have noticed.

It was only when the little boy had pulled alongside her booth that he stopped abruptly, his body momentarily rocking backwards, one of his legs beginning to rise, the foot held aloft similar to the stance a ballerina would take just before they were about to spring forward into another position. He subsequently started to rotate, his elevated foot now facing the empty seat opposite her in the booth. Now that he had adjusted his position, Amelia could see that his eyes had rolled back into his head with the gravity, a small pink tongue doing the same inside his mouth, curling over on top of itself. He then hopped carefully onto the spare seat, his whole body temporarily slumping forward as he twisted round to face her before lurching backwards so that he was now sitting upright, his small legs dangling over the edge, his eyes and tongue returning to their original position.

Amelia couldn't speak – her body incapacitated. Her eyes wouldn't shut – they were transfixed on the little boy sitting across from her – truly horrified.

He took a moment to analyse her, tilting his head from side to side again, but maintaining the playful smile on his face.

Amelia wanted to bolt – to escape through the door, but she still couldn't move her body. All she could do was stare back and watch.

He looked real – like a natural child – she could see the pores on his unblemished skin, moisture in his bright eyes, saliva on his lips and the edges of his mouth, but his movements were so...so...unnatural...as though his body was devoid of bone and muscle, allowing him to be pulled and manipulated into any position.

He continued to observe her, his lips and cheeks slowly shedding the sweet smile and moulding into an expression of utmost concern.

"Don't be afraid, Amelia, don't be afraid...", the voice came simultaneously, softly spoken and child-like, in keeping with the little boy's age. However, the voice was far from normal – far from what Amelia had expected to hear. The several words that he'd spoken so far were too advanced and incongruous for an infant...and how he spoke was too measured, intimating calculation and intelligence – something which was again severely out of place in a child of this age.

It was chilling and disturbing.

Amelia didn't know what was happening here – she must have been drugged with a powerful narcotic at some stage in the last hour – one that was making her hallucinate.

"I'm so glad to meet your acquaintance, Ameila; I've been waiting to meet you for so long."

The words were spoken articulately and eloquently, once again confirming intelligence and full mastery of the English language and all its nuances. How he pronounced her name, in particular, suggested that he'd been playing with it on his tongue for many weeks, coiling his tongue around each syllable like they were strands of sugary liquorice.

When she made no response, he held his head to the side and kept it there, "Don't be frightened, Amelia; I'm only here to help – there's no need to be afraid of me, I assure you."

Amelia's couldn't move – couldn't speak; she couldn't do anything.

To the little boy, she must have looked confused and he quickly adjusted the position of his head so that it was once again held to the side, but this time on the opposite side of his body, "Am I not the one you've been looking for; am I not the one you asked to help your younger brother?"

Amelia's mind couldn't compute what she was hearing.

"Edgar?" she mouthed, the name only partially emerging from her lips. She needed confirmation – to hear that this little boy was who she'd been communicating with last night and this morning. However, at the same time, she didn't want to hear his response.

The little boy reacted immediately, moving his head upright again, the smile on his face returning, "Yes, I've had many names in the past, but Edgar is what I call myself now."

2.

Amelia's mind had abandoned her, rendering her body impotent and bereft of thought and simple comprehension.

She desperately looked around the café for anyone who could help her – the builder, the staff behind the counter, the business man who she'd mistakenly thought she was meeting. However, all of them seemed unaware of her plight – for some reason they couldn't see or hear what was happening to her.

Edgar was looking concerned for her once again, his expressions flitting from one to the other and then back as though they'd already been prepared for the meeting – cotton facias that could be draped over his face and then peeled away as required, “Am I not what you expected when you initiated contact with me – is my appearance troubling for you?”

Even if Ameila could have answered, he didn't give her the chance, “You mustn't be ashamed to be disconcerted by my appearance, it is most understandable – all those I have met and helped previously have felt equal distress and were perhaps repulsed by my appearance, but it can only be expected...”

A pained expression had been fitted onto Edgar's face now, “Perhaps it would reassure you to know that a terrible condition is to blame for my present appearance – a tragic affliction that caused my mind and body to diverge and age differently – a sage-like mind imprisoned inside a child's body.”

Amelia didn't know if such a condition existed – it could have...but his voice, the seemingly premediated facial expressions, his clothes...it wasn't right...it wasn't right...

Beneath the table, her fingers had gone crazy once again, twitching and spasming as though she'd been electrocuted. She tried to control them, clasping them together so they could no longer move, but they kept finding a way to break free.

Edgar continued regardless, the beaming smile reappearing on his face, “Thankfully, my misfortune transpired to be both a curse and a gift,” he leant closer, “my debilitating condition allowed me to see my true path – my true calling.”

He was standing on his chair now, his eyes momentarily peering beyond Amelia, his diminutive arms held aloft as though he was speaking to a larger unseen audience. He remained silent for a few seconds, perhaps relishing the reaction of the phantom crowd before sitting back down cross legged and moving his eyes back onto her, “You see, Amelia, from that point, I realised that my own purpose on this planet is to help people...people in need...people like yourself, Amelia. I've helped so many people in your position, so many people who have loved ones who were gravely sick...I'm a healer you see; I make sickness and illness go away.”

Something seemed to happen to his voice as he began to speak about disease.

It seemed to peel away – tear away, another voice pushing through – the raspy hiss of a chronic smoker – someone stricken with emphysema, their lungs blackened with tar and nicotine. The change seemed to be unintended – accidental – the voice had escaped and it needed to be constrained once more.

He placed his two tiny hands on the table and used them to lean forward, “Jack is terribly ill right now, isn't he, Amelia, and you worry that he'll never get better – that death is his only path...well I can help him; I can take his pain and suffering away.”

He tilted his head again to the side, almost looking at her upside down, “Would you like me to do that, Amelia – would you like me to help him?”

She willed her body to move – to get away from this café and from the little boy that sat before her, but the paralysis remained.

“I see that you don’t trust me, Amelia; you don’t trust that I have this great power – that I have this mighty gift.”

He adjusted his gaze, peering towards one of the groups of people in the booth on the opposite side of the café, “perhaps a demonstration might allow you to trust me, Amelia – perhaps if you witness my great gift, you’ll change your mind.”

Amelia didn’t know what was going to happen – she didn’t want to watch but she couldn’t take her eyes away.

“I assure you this won’t take long; it won’t take long to witness this incredible power I was given,” Edgar continued to speak, not shifting his gaze from the people nearby.

A yelp suddenly came from that side of the building, followed by a scream.

There was the clatter of something falling to the floor.

Amelia recognised the blind man she’d seen before now standing on his feet, his cane now lying at his feet where it had fallen. His face was aghast, his fingers moving towards his eyes, touching his lower eyelids first and then his upper eyelids – testing, probing, testing, probing. As he did this, one of his friends asked him if he was okay. He didn’t answer immediately, instead he seemed to stagger backwards and then forwards as though he was inebriated. The friend stood and placed a concerned hand on his shoulder. The blindman pushed him away momentarily – he took a few steps forward, pulled his hands away from his face, moved his eyes over the other customers who were now all peering back at him in confusion. He looked back towards his friends.

“My eyes!” he said, his voice both bewildered and euphoric, “I can see again – my vision’s come back!”

“What?” one of his friends asked.

“I don’t know – I was just sitting there and then I could suddenly see again – my eyes just fucking started working again!”

He smiled at his friends – he had tears in his eyes. They all stood from their seats and starting hugging him, all of them as incredulous as he was.

Amelia couldn’t believe what she’d just witnessed. She couldn’t believe that it was true – she questioned whether it was a hoax – whether the man had actually been blind in the first place – but his reaction – the reactions of his friends – they all looked genuine – they didn’t look like they’d been faked.

Edgar was looking at her again, unmoved by the scene behind him, “Do I not have your trust now, Amelia? As I’ve said, I’m a healer; I only try to help people.”

Amelia remained stunned – she just continued to watch the blindman and his friends enraptured and overjoyed by the event that had just taken place – the miracle they had all just witnessed. Some of the staff members had raced to join them, questioning whether it had actually occurred or not.

Amelia tried to find her voice, forcing it from her lips, the words frail and vulnerable “How...how did you do that?”

Edgar shook his head dismissively, “It doesn’t matter how I heal people, Amelia. The most important thing to remember is that I can.”

He leant closer once more, bracing himself with his knuckles on the tabletop, “I can do the same for Jack, Amelia – I can help your brother and take his terrible illness away.”

How was all this possible? How had he restored the blind man’s sight? – she couldn’t believe it!

But she’d seen it herself, along with everyone else inside the café – it couldn’t be denied.

Was it possible that he could cure Jack too, and allow him to breathe again?

“Time is of the utmost essence, Amelia. If I’m to help your brother then we must act swiftly – we cannot delay even by a minute,” a third voice blared from within his small mouth. This one was deep – threatening – a growl made within the cavernous depths of the bowels of a bovine beast, belligerent and

deafening. It rose up from within him – not just accidental this time, but impulsive, incited by frustration and impatience, immediately obliterating both the child's and the infirmed voice.

Amelia flinched – her instinct to bolt too powerful.

“Perhaps I should help someone else then...perhaps I should help someone else's treasured loved one,” Edgar remarked, turning in his seat to suggest that he was moments from leaving, the bestial voice flaring.

Amelia was crippled with indecision.

She didn't trust him – his new voice terrified her.

But Jack needed help...desperate help...

Edgar started shuffling to the end of his seat, intimating he was moments from leaving.

“No, wait, please!” Amelia blurted, halting Edgar as he started to shuffle towards the end of his seat. She felt tears brimming in her eyes; desperation to save Jack driving her actions, overriding her apprehension, “help him – please help him!”

Edgar seemed to regain his composure, managing to swallow the hostile voice and regurgitate the child's

A smile slowly flickered onto his face, his cheeks elevated towards his forehead, his eyes almost reduced to slits in between, “Of course I'll help him, Amelia, of course I'll help your brother, alas...” he peered about himself suspiciously, “We cannot stay here – it isn't safe.”

The smile on his face drooped into an expression of profound deliberation, “we must go from here and travel elsewhere...and we must go with haste...great haste – we must travel to a place with water...lots of water...and tranquillity...complete tranquillity.”

Amelia wanted to insist that they needed to immediately head to the Manchester Royal Infirmary, but her voice faltered.

“I know a place not far from here,” Edgar continued, “there's water...lots of water...and complete tranquillity...it's a sacred place, known by only a few. Yes, we must go there...we must go there at once...we must go to the sacred place” the last few words rung with ebullience, “Yes, let's us depart!”

He suddenly leapt from the booth and scudded towards the entrance. His movement was chaotic once again, his upper body constantly teetering forward and backwards at oblique angles to his lower half. Nevertheless, now that he had a new assignment, it failed to hamper his newfound purpose and determination. Once there, he pulled the door open with a small arm, uninhibited by his lack of height and muscle development.

Amelia was startled by his abrupt movement, unable to look away or speak.

Edgar had stopped in the doorway and was peering back at her expectantly, “Come, Amelia, if I am to heal Jack, we must fly with great haste!”

He vanished from view, the door closing softly behind him.

3.

Amelia didn't know how to respond. She threw her eyes over the surrounding café, somehow persuading her neck muscles to work once more. Upheaval still came from the booth where Edgar had restored the blind man's sight, customers from every corner converging, trying to determine if indeed they had all witnessed a miracle. The blindman himself was still ecstatic, unable to stop probing his eye sockets with his fingers, searching for an explanation.

She wanted to shake herself awake – put an end to everything that had taken place within the last fifty minutes – take herself back to some form of normalcy. However, the surrounding sounds and smells stimulating her senses – the excited chatter of the other customers, the steam escaping the coffee machine behind the counter – told her that all the events had been real.

Edgar had to be telling the truth.

Despite his apparent debilitation, he could heal people – he could heal Jack – she didn't know how, he just could. All she had to do was to follow him.

She immediately propelled herself from the seat, almost faceplanting the floor, only regaining the sensation in her legs at the last moment.

She reached the entrance within a couple of seconds, throwing herself through the door.

Where had he gone?

The plaza had swelled with people – those rushing to work now joined by others simply heading into the town centre for leisure and recreation, the hour of the day no longer deterring them from getting out of bed. Even the avifauna had multiplied, Magpies, Crows and Jackdaws joining the pigeons.

She couldn't see Edgar anywhere.

Had he gone left back towards Highgate, one of the initial meeting points, or had he gone right along what looked like the town's main shopping street – the colourful displays in the store windows enticing the townsfolk, like flowerheads attracting bees and other pollinators. She tried to peer amongst the swards of moving bodies, trying to pick-out an infant amongst them. Some were pushing prams or were guiding toddlers beside them, but Edgar was nowhere to be found.

She moved forward from the café entrance further into the plaza to get a better view, frantically spinning on her heels, casting her eyes in every direction – back towards Highgate and onto the parish church directly opposite, searching the entrance and the grounds, anywhere Edgar could have gone. She didn't leave it there – she threw her eyes towards the spire, refusing to overlook that the infant could have somehow elevated himself up there. She examined every sullied brick piece, every weathered gargoyle, their monstrous faces frozen and encased with pigeon faeces – every crevice the unsettling infant could have squeezed.

When it didn't return results either, Amelia started to despair, the chilling air trying to terrorise her further, eating through her jacket.

Someone was waving at her from the main shopping street – she could see them in the corner of her eye. She turned quickly, raising herself on her tiptoes, trying to see above the hundreds of heads before her.

It was Edgar – waiting for her beside one of the shops, grinning widely, possibly amused by her distress. Once he saw that she'd spotted him, he gesticulated for her to follow, hopping back into the crowd and rushing away.

Amelia galvanised, launching herself into the throng, determined to catch-up with him and not lose sight of him again.

It was more difficult that she'd imagined.

Edgar's movement – his flight – was remarkable. Amelia was dumbfounded how he could move so quickly when his legs were so small and his gait so cumbersome. The pedestrians bustling in the road didn't seem to impede him. From the glimpses Amelia could catch, through the many arms, legs and torsos obscuring her sight, it almost appeared as though he was passing straight through them, unravelling his body on one side and reassembling it on the other. Maybe this was why, just like the customers in the café, they all seemed unaware of him too. Perhaps he knew how to find tiny holes in the fabric of space – imperfections he could coerce and manipulate into widening, concealing him from view once he disappeared inside.

For Amelia, however, it felt like she'd thrown herself into a ferocious river, her presence irritating the water, causing it to churn and bloat, undercurrents and riptides pulling her beneath the surface. Initially, she tried to negotiate the crowd courteously and with regard for those around her. Nevertheless, as Edgar pulled further and further away, she had no choice but to become rude and forceful, stumbling over shoes and boots and using her shoulder to barge her way through those blocking her way. She consequently fell victim to an endless barrage of curses and profanities. In normal circumstances she would have been appalled with herself for inciting such vicious and searing responses, but her mind had become solely focused on keeping up with Edgar.

He led her down the main shopping street, passing banks, hairdressers and fast-food outlets. Buskers were performing to the crowd: a violinist, playing the first verse of a classical song, his instrument case open on the pavement before him, ready to catch any donations that came his way. Further along, a man jammed on his acoustic guitar, his baritone voice singing a Johnny Cash song, a small elderly dog sitting by his side, watching the surrounding shoppers enthusiastically. The road then started to dip, leading Amelia towards clubs and bars, evidently the centre of the town's nightlife.

Edgar didn't seem interested in waiting for her.

On occasions, he would stop and turn, quickly assessing her progress before racing away. Each time, his pace seemed to hasten, perhaps amplified by ever mounting eagerness and excitement to reach their final destination and perform his work. He weaved from one side of the road to the other and then back again, sometimes lingering on the left or right before adjusting himself centrally.

Amelia tried her utmost to keep up, demanding her heart and lungs to work harder and urging her legs to move faster. However, she was tiring quickly and the gap between them was continuing to expand, Edgar's form rapidly diminishing with every step he took. She called after him to stop and wait, fearful that she would soon lose him completely, but he paid no attention.

The bars and clubs were soon behind them, a road heavy with traffic fast approaching. Edgar was on the other side within the blink of an eye, again pausing momentarily to see if she was still following before continuing forward.

"No, wait!" she cried after him, her voice immediately torn in two with the strain in her throat and the harsh traffic noise.

She reached the road breathless and gasping for oxygen. Unlike Edgar, who had seemingly crossed without any heed to the traffic, she had no choice but to wait at the pelican crossing for the flow of vehicles to ebb. She grew impatient, slapping at the button frustratedly as she tried to regain her breath.

She couldn't wait for the lights to change, she sprung forward, trying to manoeuvre between three lanes of cars, vans and trunks. One of the drivers had to screech to a halt to avoid hitting her, an expletive thrown after her as she finally made it to the other side.

The next road disappeared kilometres into the distance. It was free from bends and corners, enhancing Edgar's pace.

Amelia pleaded with him to slow down and to give her a chance to catch-up. Her body was deteriorating rapidly, her lungs aching and becoming stiff, refusing to expand for much longer, the joints in her legs bursting, disintegrating with every footfall.

Where was this sacred place he was taking her?

She'd nearly been hit by a car – she was endangering her life. Her body was on the brink of succumbing to exhaustion – wherever it was, it had to be close – any further and she would collapse on to the ground and never be able to move again!

They passed small residential housing this time, road dust and pollution heavily staining and soiling their facades and windows. On occasions, a corner shop, garage or factory took their place, the dirt and grime from the road continuing to persist.

Eventually the buildings started to recede, marking the outskirts of the town. The change was subtle at first, small groups of trees, bundles of hedge and patches of grass appearing randomly beside the road – interlopers in an urban landscape. Then it became more brazen, with fields, sometimes occupied by cows and other livestock, becoming commonplace, accompanied by larger rural trees and endless lines of hedgerows. Only a few isolated housing estates and a satellite retail park suggested that a town lurked nearby somewhere.

Edgar had blended with the horizon now, a mere pinprick far ahead of her. From this distance, he looked like a grain of coarse sand lodged on the surface of an eye, rubbing, aggravating and tearing, causing it to weep and bleed. Indeed, the landscape that now spilt from the horizon seemed spoilt and malformed, as though he was corrupting it at the point of its origin. The growth of the trees, for instance, appeared retarded, their canopies unable to attain a satisfactory height, their branches trussed against their trunks, seemingly bound with unseen restraints. The fields in which they stood were expansive, but seemed covered by an inconspicuous wire gauze, tight and suffocating, choking the nourishment from the constituent grass, depriving the hungry cows and sheep of sustenance. Even the Sun had been ensnared with a net, one that was heavy and burdensome, directing its trajectory towards the ground rather than the high sky, suppressing its warmth.

Edgar was changing course.

He wasn't heading forward anymore.

He was doubling back on himself – not back towards Amelia, but along a side-path or track into the surrounding countryside. He looked obscene from this distance, like a bipedal insect skipping haphazardly across the baron backdrop, its wings not fully formed but continuously trying to lift it from the ground, nevertheless.

Amelia half-paused, deliberating whether to hop the adjacent hedge which would take her into the same field. If she was quick enough, she could maybe intersect the infant and close the distance between them.

She made the decision, scrambling half over, half through the hedge, crashing onto the other side, taking leaves and twigs with her attached to her clothes.

Somehow, she managed to increase her pace, the opportunity to close the distance injecting newfound vigour into her legs and thighs.

Now that she was closer, Amelia could see that Edgar was leading her along a small stream that twisted and meandered, trying to carve its way through the surrounding landscape.

She dashed across the field.

Her lungs were ablaze and she was aching all over, but she was catching-up – she was gaining on him bit by bit.

She joined the same path, trying not to lose any pace.

Edgar seemed aware that Amelia had joined the path behind. He remained moving, but appeared to be slowing, turning sideways and hopping down the track so that he could see where he was going and keep an eye on her at the same time. After a few more moments, he drew to a halt, jumping up and down on the spot and clapping excitedly.

“Amelia! Amelia! We're here, we're here!” he announced, waiting for her to reach the same spot

She did a few seconds later, immediately dropping on her knees, trying desperately to channel oxygen back into her deprived lungs.

Edgar didn't seem to care about her dire state and instead started to dance around her, rising and falling without any effort from his legs or ankles, his body twisting in the air as though he was attached to a winch or pulley.

Amelia tried to keep watch of him as he moved around her, but he was too quick and she soon became preoccupied trying to stop herself from throwing up – the adrenaline coursing through her arteries threatening to send whatever still lurked in her stomach cascading onto the ground.

“Yes, yes!” Edgar cried, clenching his small fist victoriously, “this is the place – the place that I told you about, Amelia, do you remember?”

He seemed to be trying to calm himself down now, his euphoria dissipating, an awe and reverence for their surroundings taking precedence. He stepped forward away from Amelia, his eyes sweeping from the water nearby to the adjacent bank where thick vegetation grew. The overhanging branches of a White Willow tree then drew his attention and then the sky beyond, “yes, this is the place...it feels exactly the same as it did when I first came here such a long time ago.”

His voice was almost breathless, electrified by his apparent return to the location. She tried to find her own voice somewhere inside her chest, ravaged by the lack of air entering her lungs, “Jack...my brother...please!”

Edgar wasn't listening. He reached out to the trunk of the willow, tracing one of its many grooves with his tiny fingertip, “Can you feel it, Amelia, emanating from these magnificent surroundings, such a great power and sanctity, waiting to be harnessed by the ones who can wield it,” he picked a discarded leaf from the floor and ran it quickly between his fingers, mesmerised by the feel of it against his skin “I've been to this place so many times, Amelia, yearning to return here each time I leave. It is an ageless place transcending the boundary between space and time,” he broke his gaze from the leaf and peered back at her, a serious expression falling over his face, “only I know how to find it and how to come back here – you should feel greatly honoured that I've brought you here.”

Amelia couldn't comprehend what he was saying, it was incoherent, failing to make sense. She just needed him to help Jack, “Please, my brother, he needs help desperately!”

Edgar turned away again, becoming pensive, “I've transgressed bringing you here; I've broken sacred vows that I thought I'd never disregard – the consequences could be severe – dire, but I felt I had to.”

He flung a finger towards her, making her jump, “It somehow felt like destiny to bring you here, to this serene place, and to disavow all those things that I hold dear.”

He came up to her placing his hands on her shoulders lightly, his face creasing into an admiring smile, a few inches from her own, “you see, we share something profound now, don't we? A bond that cannot be undone or resisted – a union invulnerable to the passage of time and the decay of everything we love.”

He moved past her, shuttling towards the water's edge, “The air is so pure here, the water so clear, our souls would be cleansed if we remained here for any period of time, our desires and dishonest motivations dispelled, wouldn't you agree, Amelia?”

No, she didn't agree.

The air wasn't pure – it was thick and saturated, as though contaminated by billions of torn and rejected string threads, all of which had been shed by a giant, industrious loom, forever spinning and churning. It drowned her lungs.

The stream water also appeared unnaturally still, as though it was clogged with bales of twine, stopping the water flow. Even the wintery breeze, which rattled and displaced leaves strewn across the pathway found it impossible to disturb its surface. The sky the water reflected was morose, as though it

had witnessed a terrible tragedy and had entered an endless cycle of mourning. Perhaps the constraints placed on the Sun was accountable, bereaving the sky of a beloved and much-missed companion.

Amelia didn't know what had happened to this place – what Edgar had done to it, but she didn't care – she'd travelled from Manchester without telling her parents, skipped school, waited beside the road in the town centre to meet him only to find that he'd changed the meeting point at the last minute, she had followed him all the way here like he'd instructed and now listened to the gibberish which spooled from his mouth. She could feel her impatience mounting, frustration deluging her body

“Please, you said you would help my brother if I followed you here – he's very sick and doesn't have much time – I need you to help him now!”

Edgar sighed tiredly and slowly crouched, dipping his fingers into the water before retrieving them, watching the drops gradually detaching from his skin, “Your impatience is palpable, Amelia, along with your intense desire to help your brother. However, it is not welcome within the confines of this sacred place. Might it not be advisable to humour the one with this mighty gift as he shares with you tidings which he has not shared with another for a long time. It would be easy to interpret such ill-feelings as an insult to myself and everything I hold dear.”

Amelia felt unsettled – fearful. Even though Edgar was unlike anybody she had met before and he possessed abilities which couldn't be explained rationally and scientifically, she had not felt physically threatened by him until now. Now that she had apparently offended him, his demeanour, and even his appearance, had changed.

His face had suddenly become longer, his once plump cheeks, angular and obtrusive. Even his skin had lost its youthful exuberance and had become almost pallid. He was no longer looking at her with the eyes of a toddler, instead glaring at her with cold, dark eyes. He suddenly resembled a creature that lurked in the depths of the sea – a creature that had spent its entire life concealed in darkness and had only just now been revealed in the lights of a deep-sea research vessel. It was something carnivorous and predatory, with no use for eyes hunting in the unending darkness, all pigment lost from its glutinous skin and scales.

The beastlike layer of his voice had also moulded the last few words that left his lips. During the previous occasions when this layer of his voice had bled emerged, it had been impulsive and effort had immediately got underway to patch the mistake. However, this time it had been intentional and a clear warning to Amelia that she shouldn't displease or upset him from this point forward.

4.

The little voice was ringing inside Amelia's head again.

It had rung like a klaxon the previous night when she'd ventured onto the Dark Web and when she was moments away from meeting Edgar after she'd travelled here from her home. It told her that she'd placed herself in grave danger following him here to this secluded location, where anything could happen to her with no one to help. It implored her to run – to dash back to the main road and flee back to the train station, back home where she was safe. By her sides, her hands were playing hop-scotch, her fingers knotting together sending tiny fractures deep into the bone.

But what about Jack – how was he going to get better unless she stayed?

She felt her voice floundering, stuck once more inside her throat, "I'm...sorry...it's just that you said you'd help him if I followed you here, that's all. He doesn't have much time left."

Edgar seemed to consider her words, not speaking for several moments. It was almost as though he had placed each inside a sugary sweet and inserted them into his mouth all at once, probing them with his tongue, trying to decide whether they were a flavour he enjoyed and desired. As he mulled what she'd spoken, his face appeared to return to normal, the glare disappearing as quickly as it had arrived, "Yes, I did say I would heal your young brother, didn't I. Yes, I remember my words – the promise I gave to you."

Amelia nodded eagerly, relieved that she had persuaded him to refocus on Jack.

He made a prism with his fingers and placed them beneath his lips clearly considering something that had just entered his mind, "but tell me, Amelia, what would you do in order to save Jack's life?"

Amelia fidgeted on her feet. After the prospect of Jack recovering had been fuelled by witnessing Edgar's ability to heal first hand, she'd forgotten that he would in all likelihood desire something in return from her.

He answered for her before she had chance, "You'd do anything wouldn't you, Amelia, to help Jack. You'd do anything to help your little brother?"

She felt anxiety building in her abdomen.

What would "anything" entail?

Nevertheless, she nodded quickly in response.

"Good, Amelia, good!" Edgar replied, smiling widely, evidently the answer he wanted to hear.

"In that case, would I be able to see your fingers?"

The request caught her off-guard, immediately unsettling her. In response, she slowly withdrew her hands back into sleeves removing them from sight.

"I just need to look at them, that's all...that's not too much to ask, is it?"

Amelia didn't know what to do. On the face of it, his request seemed innocuous...he just wanted to look at her fingers for some reason, and then he would help her in return – he would go to Jack at the hospital and heal him like he'd done with the blind man. However, the request was making her feel vulnerable...if she submitted, what would he ask her to do next?

Still, she didn't feel she had any other choice.

Tentatively, she pulled her hands from her jacket and slowly held them aloft, spreading her fingers.

Edgar exhaled excitedly at the sight of them, instantly scurrying over to her. He appeared mesmerized, scrutinising her fingers from every angle, sometimes moving his head unbearably close so that the tip of his small nose was only a few centimetres from the surface of her skin. Amelia could feel his breath caressing her, leaving his nostrils in short rapid bursts, making her flinch.

“There’s something about human fingers, isn’t there, Amelia, something unique and incredible that can’t be replicated,” he said slowly, his voice almost at a gasp, “the way the skin stretches across the bone, how the blood flows through the vessels beneath...I can’t tell you how much it intrigues me...”

He seized them suddenly, the temptation to resist seemingly too strong to thwart, his chubby fingers beginning to trace every contour of her skin, disturbing the minute hairs that protruded from the surface.

Amelia felt nauseated by his touch, but, somehow, she persuaded herself to not react and to allow him to continue.

“...and you have such incredible fingers, Amelia...so slender and petite...so pretty.”

He ran a finger over each of her knuckles in turn, “and you have double-jointed fingers, am I correct?”

Amelia was confused – how did he know that...for as long as she could remember, she’d had double-jointed fingers, but why was it relevant?

“You can tie knots with them, can’t you, perfectly formed knots – many at the same time!”

He didn’t wait for her to answer again, he was almost salivating, drooling on top of her hands, “Magnificent! Magnificent! Yes, I knew it was you! I knew you were the one – the one I’ve been searching endlessly for over such a long never-ending time. It is why I did it – it’s why I did it! I knew, I just knew!”

The sight of her fingers and the fact she was double-jointed was triggering some form of reaction in him, exciting him, stimulating him. It was precipitating behaviour which he had managed to constrain until now. Behaviour which was too disturbing to be exposed and witnessed others. Now that it was underway, and gaining momentum, he made no attempt to suppress it, the anticipated reward too overpowering to resist.

He was hyperventilating – his breathing had gone haywire.

Unintelligible words discharged from his mouth covering the ground like diarrhoea.

He was losing composure – losing control.

He was changing physically too. In the café, when he’d sat across from her in the booth, his skin had seemed so natural, so perfect – she’d been able to see the pores that lined his face. However, now, his skin was rupturing, the pores gaping and perforating to such an extent she could see through them to the other side. Such deterioration implied that previously he had successfully maintained and sustained his skin, with any imperfections quickly dealt with and repaired. Nevertheless, now he was fascinated and distracted by her fingers, he’d neglected it, leaving it to unravel and tear.

The same was happening to his head and his body – they were loosening and rapidly becoming unstuck. His eyes had become lopsided, one of the sockets drooping, nearly sending an eyeball rolling down his chest. His skull was pulsating, bloating in one instance and then shrinking in the next. Beneath him, one of his legs had quadrupled in length, sliding across the ground, now more akin to a vestigial tail.

There were strings – thousands of delicate strings – Amelia could see them attached to his body. They were connected to every part, his arms and legs, his head, even his nostrils and eyelids. They’d been secured to his body from the beginning, she just hadn’t been able to see them until now. They’d been responsible for his obscene movements, all his facial expressions, which had always seemed so contrived and premeditated. They’d been responsible for his voice – his trio of voices, the strings placed inside his throat serving as vocal cords.

The infant Amelia had conversed with all this time was a mere puppet, an avatar – a device to win her trust and lure her here.

All the strings were being reeled back in, ripping the small child apart.

The main bulk was directly in front of her, a tangle of threads moving in all directions, mimicking the messy web constructed by a House Spider in the corner of a cupboard or beneath floorboards. Edgar's carcass was part of it, his head taken into the air now, attached only by an entail to what remained of his body – his skin and clothing turned tar coloured, as though it had suddenly necrotised and become gangrenous – another reminder that the puppet was no longer needed.

More strings were moving across the ground, serpentine and intelligent, many of them lapping at her ankles as though she had waded into the stream nearby. Some imitated a conveyor belt, evidently used for transportation – a means of transporting Edgar to this location. All of the strings were coming from the same direction – from the left and above. She tried looking for the source, but it seemed to be hidden behind the canopy of the willow tree.

Amelia was horror-struck.

She tried to retract her hands, but what was left of Edgar continued to hold them in place, a heavy mass of strings looping around her wrists like restraints keeping her firmly bound to the main ball of strings.

"Let go, let go of me!" she started to cry, panic immersing her body, sending her into a frenzy. Her movements only served to stimulate the strings, all of them constricting more tightly, the immense pressure threatening to snap her wrists.

Edgar's voice was back, but only the guttural and barbaric voice, the other two severed and cast away. It came from far above, from where Edgar's mouth was now found. It was still intact, a pair of child's lips curling and stretching to articulate words, the rest of the head no longer extant. A set of strings draped from them, entwined and reinforced with others, each matching the girth of the willow tree trunk nearby. They were being plucked and manipulated like harp strings, each independently providing a different note and then, collectively, supplying the voice that exploded from the lips overhead. It was monstrous and brutal – so much deeper than the harsh voice that had accidentally penetrated at times when Edgar was speaking to her in the café. It resonated through the ground like an earthquake, suggesting that the orator themselves – the one controlling the strings – was colossal in size. The strings were still emanating from behind the willow and Amelia sensed something dark and decrepit perched on the embankment behind – something which had concealed *Itself* for now but would otherwise be apocalyptic for her eyes to observe if it chose to reveal *Itself*.

"I thank you, Amelia," the voice continued, "I knew you were ONE, but I couldn't take you while you remained in the light. You had to come here by your own volition – to this sacred place – that was how it was prophesised."

Amelia fought against her bounds, trying to use her legs to pull back, but the strings were unbreakable, they'd hardened like cement.

"...it's why I gave your brother his devastating illness – it's why I've made him suffer. I knew that you would do anything to save him, I knew you would bring yourself to me."

The malignant words tore into Amelia like razorblades, her ribcage shattering instantly, her heart slicing in two, blood and tissue spilling onto the ground at her feet. She screwed up her eyes and shook her head to try and shield herself, tears flying in every direction.

This abomination – this thing had targeted her beautiful little brother – the one she loved most – infested his small lungs with its threads, starving him of air, bringing him closer and closer to death each day.

The cruelty...the malice...the evil.

It had manipulated her – tricked her. *It* had infested the internet, sown its seeds in the subterranean bog of the Dark Web, like an insidious weed. *It* had laid its trap there, knowing that she would wander straight into it – that her love for Jack would make her turn a blind eye to everything that could endanger her life. *It* had fashioned its puppet, Edgar, to entice her. Constraints had been placed on *Its* creativity – *It* could only craft Edgar as a child, *It* wasn't allowed to shape him in any other way.

To explain his disconcerting appearance, *It* had to contrive a story about an unfortunate affliction, which countered the natural aging process.

“I must take you now, Amelia, and I must say that it’s unlikely that your brother will survive.”

She clenched her eyes shut, picturing Jack lying in his hospital bed, the ventilator struggling to keep him alive.

“And, even if he does, I can’t say that he’ll see you again.”

The strings were pulling her upward, her feet were starting to leave the ground.

“Help! Help!” she cried, begging for her voice to be heard by someone nearby. She kicked and thrashed her legs, sent her body into convulsions.

Her body rose into the sky.

Her words fell to the ground.