

Third Dimension

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Perhaps I should be less heroically independent. The taxi driver offered to help me to the door but I waved him away, ashamed of my need for assistance. Now I tic tac my way up to what he said was an impressive façade of shining glass.

A slight breeze from the revolving door lets me know I am near the entrance. I put up a hand to catch the speed, insert myself into its spin, and let the metronomic click of its passage tell me when to step out.

A vastness opens up around me so I opt for the direct approach and start straight ahead. The leather soles of my shoes squeak across the hard floor, and my stick keeps a syncopated rhythm until it hits the front of the reception desk.

‘Good morning, sir. Can I help you?’ A young female voice, flattened vowels trying to mask a possibly northern accent.

‘I have an appointment with Doctor Eric Meadows at Third Dimension. Eleven o’clock. My name’s Roy Collins.’ A page flicks forward then back.

‘Very good, Mr. Collins. You just take a seat and I’ll let Doctor Meadows know you’ve arrived. Here, let me help you.’ Her chair scrapes back and a gentle hand takes me by the elbow to a firm vinyl chair. It makes a similar sound to the floor as I sink into it. The receptionist leaves a trail of violets and vanilla in her wake as she returns to her desk, and I fold up my stick and lay it across my lap.

My GP put me in touch with this place. Doctor Calder is a good sort, one of the ones who actually care about the patients, not just dashing off a prescription and propelling you back out the door. She'd read about it in some science journal or other and thought it might be worth me giving it a shot. 'What do I have to lose?' I told her and she put her hand over mine and gave it a squeeze.

Now I sit and listen. A lift pings intermittently and voices drift past. Footsteps echo back and forth confirming my original impression of a great open space. Eventually I become aware that one of those passing has closed in and stopped before me.

'Mr. Collins?' The rustle of a sleeve around an extended hand. I stretch out my own hand and it is firmly grasped and shaken.

'That's me. Doctor Meadows I take it?' We release hands.

'Call me Eric.'

'Eric. In that case, call me Roy.'

'Okay Roy. Let's get you up to the lab.' He also takes my elbow and guides me towards the pinging lift. 'We're very grateful for your participation in our trial. You've brought a photograph with you as requested? One you know well?'

I pat the rough tweed of my jacket breast pocket and offer a smile.

'It was always my favourite.' I feel my eyes dampening already and remind myself of the vow I made this morning. No tears. Control to be maintained at all times.

'Good stuff. That sounds ideal.' The lift doors shush open, we take a step and they close behind us. He taps a button and the lift shunts into action. It is hard to tell if we are going up or down.

'My colleagues have already gone through the process with you, haven't they?'

I nod.

'I'd a very long phone call with them the other day. I'm pretty sure we must have covered everything.'

'Ah, that'll be Doctor Stewart. He's a devil for the detail.'

The lift jolts to a stop and Eric leads me out. A silence now hangs over us as we walk and walk. Finally, he opens a door and escorts me to a high backed sofa.

'If you'd just like to have a seat, I'll go and check everything's ready. In the meantime, is there anything we can get you? Tea, coffee, water?'

'A coffee would be lovely thanks. Just black.'

'No problem.' The door closes. There is a low hum, I suspect from the air conditioning, and the second hand of a clock ticks loudly, but otherwise there is silence. I take the photo from my pocket and with my fingers lightly trace the scene as best as I can recall. It sat on the mantelpiece for years, watching as its occupants in the real world grew bigger and bolder or smaller and greyer; morphed from flat black and white to the colour of the three dimensional world. The frame surrounding it changed reflecting passing tastes and trends, but the picture remained a constant. When Gemma married and moved overseas, it was a visual reminder of those early

carefree days. A few years later, I would look at it to see Linda, the woman I married, as she gradually left us. When I could no longer cope and she was moved to the care facility, the photograph was still there. My sight went not long after that.

They say the one thing they can never take from you is your memories but that's a lie. I watched Linda be stripped of hers. Then as I grew used to the darkness I realised that the images in my brain were also beginning to fade. One night as I was feeling my way to bed I knocked the photo to the floor. I picked it back up and tried to remember the scene. My chest chilled as I recalled the form, the beach and the chairs, but couldn't visualise the faces or what they were wearing. I couldn't see them anymore.

The door opens again.

'Hello Mr. Collins.' A different, younger male voice.

I feel his clothes brush my knees. 'I'll just put your coffee on the table here.' He pauses as I don't react. 'It's just to the left hand side of the sofa.' He passes back in front of me and the door closes once more. I track the surface of the table with my left hand until I locate the paper cup. The steam blasts my face as I lift it to my lips but the coffee is low on taste and I set it back down. The clock counts the seconds aloud until Eric returns.

'All ready for you now, Roy.' He leads me out the waiting room and into the lab. There is a buzzing noise and a smell like electricity. It reminds me of the strange odour given off by the little engine of my childhood trainset, as I laid my head at the side of the tracks trying to make it look life-size.

‘Could we have your photo now, please, Roy?’ I pass him the small four by six facsimile of my previous life and listen as he inserts it into the machine. Fingers rap out a tattoo on a keyboard and another voice murmurs ‘set’. Eric ushers me on a few paces.

‘Sounds please Jez.’ The room fills with the staccato shriek of seagulls over the velvet rolling of waves to shore. Children laugh and chatter in the background. I don’t know where the soundtrack comes from but today it will be my North Berwick.

‘You’re there now, Roy. Just reach out.’ Eric lets go my arm and I stretch out my hands. A small gasp escapes my lips as I touch the soft wool and floral embroidery of Linda’s favourite cardigan. Now I remember. It was a constant in the early years of our marriage and one of the reasons she loved this picture so much.

I trace the shape of her arm up to her shoulder then bring my hands up in front of her face. There is the gentle heart shape of her chin, the tilt of the corners of her mouth and the upward sweep of her perfectly permed hair. A pair of large round sunglasses, so trendy at the time, perches on her small snub nose. Her face reforms in my mind, an image stolen by ill health and time. In the photograph she is sitting in a folding chair and I follow the cold steel of its tubular frame down to where I know Gemma kneels, frozen as a five-year-old. My hand skims her pigtailed hair, the cool cotton of her tee shirt with the three pearl buttons on one shoulder, and the frilled skirt of her bathing suit. She is carefully constructing a small empire of sand with her bucket and spade. Over the sound vista conjured by the lab, I recall her unaffected child’s voice explaining to the inhabitants of her castles how their sand city was evolving. In my head, Linda starts to talk too, divulging the gossip she gleaned at breakfast about the other residents of our B and B.

I take up the position I was in immediately prior to capturing this moment. Squatting beside Gemma, I once again rest my back against Linda's legs. I am engrossed, not by the B and B tittle tattle, but by Gemma's great construction project. I run my hand around the contours of the castles and, as the details regenerate, I will them to stay in my memory this time. The pressure of Linda's knees against my spine reawakens the sensation of her stroking the shorn hair at the base of my short back and sides. I can smell the mix of sunscreen, brine and ice cream that was Gemma after a day running around in the sun. Everything I used to see when I looked at the photograph, I now sense as I sit inside it.

'One more minute, Roy.'

His voice sounds quieter and a little less confident than before.

'Yes, Eric.' I give Gemma a kiss on the top of her salt straggled hair then haul myself up. The temporal distance, oddness and presence of an audience make me feel almost shy as I lean down to hug my wife a last time. She feels firm and alive, not the frail echo that sits in the hospice hiding sandwiches in her dressing gown and screaming because she doesn't recognise me.

A touch on my arm and I jump.

'Sorry.' Eric steers me back across the room. The seagulls and waves cease and, after a click, he hands me back my photograph.

'Thanks again Roy. Karen will be in shortly to look after you.' I nod. I don't trust myself to speak just yet.

The next steps have already been explained to me. They'll take me through to a clinic where all my vitals will be monitored and a psychologist will debrief me. They

want to assess the medium term impacts as well as the immediate, so in a fortnight I'll go through a second batch of tests, then a third lot after six months.

All that can wait. For now I see everything clearly again, so I remain sitting on the beach with my young wife in her favourite cardie and my beautiful little girl building castles made of sand.