



Love, Ghosts, Death and Robots

TEN YEARS OF SHORT STORIES
2010 - 2020

Iain Cambridge



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To Deb and Matthew. Without you I would not have the drive
nor the inclination to go on, and to Phil - Way too soon dude.
Way too soon.

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DEDICATION

I had never intended to dedicate these works,
but then I never expected to lose my friend....

So,

To the memory of my friend Phil
A man too clever for his own good
Too silly for my own good
Too missed for anyone's good.

Too soon dude, way too soon

BROKEN IMAGE

Everyone has those 'special' memories.

Those defining times when you realize that the world can be a magical place, or the stuff of nightmares.

For me it was the eighties.

This was a time where having a walkman meant that you couldn't leave the house without a spare set of fresh batteries, at least two extra cassette tapes and a Bic biro in case you had to rewind said tapes without burning battery power, (If you are a child of this decade then you will know exactly what I am talking about).

Music had become exciting again, and the fashions reflected the mood of the day, and if you took politics out of the mix, it was a simple time full of innocence and adventure.

In short, this was my childhood and the gateway into adulthood.

For it was during this time that I realised that not everyone saw the world as I did, and one such incident that emphasised this will be forever etched in my memory, marked as it is now by the simplest of actions.

Sparking into life by the most mundane of things - Like a simple bus ride.

One late Saturday afternoon, in the summer of 1982, I was travelling home on the bus that took me from my place of work (a small supermarket that was situated on the main road that led to Camberwell Green, London), and was accompanied by one of the checkout girls by the name of Donna. What her surname was then, or is now, is forever lost in the mists of time, and to a memory that is not what it used to be.

Donna and I very rarely socialized in, or out of work, and this impromptu accompaniment was by way of good timing for me, and bad fortune for another, for earlier that day

there had been some sort of altercation with a rather drunk customer and one of the female assistants. Camberwell Green was the kind of area where drunkenness in the middle of the day was not uncommon, and the young lady on the receiving end of the inebriated gentleman's advances felt the need to ask for an escort when leaving work to return home. I was the sort of young man back in those days that would offer his services as a chaperone, and Donna, who was a friend of the distressed girl, offered to come with us. It was after we had delivered her to the safety of her home, and to her very grateful boyfriend, that I found myself alone in Donna's company.

As I have mentioned, I had not had any previous interaction with her, as our paths never seemed to cross, but she had not gone un-noticed to me. Many was the time I had seen her arrive at our place of work, and even in the foulest of weather and in the coldest of mornings, she always seemed to have a smile on her lips - cheerfully greeting everyone, myself included, as she made her way to the women's changing area, in order to prepare herself for her working day.

Although I found her wildly attractive I never fancied or entertained the idea of any romantic notions as I regarded her as one of those girls who was way out of my league. As I look back now, my fading memories of what she looked like would probably be greatly contradicted by today's reality, but in that time and in that place, Donna to me was a Goddess.

Unattainable.

Untouchable.

A standard to which my naive younger self would assume that all other women would measure themselves by - Never attempting to achieve, through fear of an ultimate and inevitable failure. And yet here I was, sitting with her on the top deck of the 122 to Lewisham, via Camberwell, Peckham

and New Cross.

An ordinary day clashing with an extraordinary situation.

We spoke in non-committal tones about this and that and I quickly found that Donna and I had nothing whatsoever in common, save our place of work. But still I ploughed on, probing every avenue in the hope that we would run out of journey before we ran out of subject matter, desperately trying to avoid the dreaded 'awkward silence'.

As my stop approached Donna informed me that hers was a little further on, and I hoped that this was not an attempt by her to spend less time in my company by staying on the bus longer than she needed to.

As I stood up I suddenly felt the need to say something that circumstance and nerves had prevented me from doing in the past, and as I assumed that I would probably never get to spend this quality time with her again, this to me seemed to be the perfect opportunity to do so.

"May I say something?" I said with the sound of my blood pumping in my inner ear - Pushed by a heart that was driven by an access of adrenalin. My hands were shaking and clammy as that same adrenalin turned sour in my veins. "Of course" replied Donna, smiling that smile that would melt stronger hearts than mine.

"Before I do" I continued nervously, "I would just like to point out that this is in no way a chat up line, or some sort of cheap come on - But I must say that you are really quite beautiful. I've always thought that."

My words were too fast and too clumsy, but having been released from their prison they were now free to exact their revenge on those who had incarcerated them, or win over the hearts of those who would listen to their song.

I stammered my goodbyes and wished her a nice weekend, after telling her that I would see her on Monday morning, and as I stepped off the bus I stood for a while as the

emotional storm in my head blew itself out, but not before playing out varying scenarios of the results of my actions. Would Monday morning bring ridicule or apathy?

Would an awkward hello replace the previous warm smile she had proffered me on a daily basis?

What had I done?

When I had composed myself sufficiently, and chastised myself unnecessarily for my wanton release of words that should have been left unsaid, I took a deep breath and released a year of a sigh before turning to cross the street, only to find Donna standing next to me.

"Oh, hello again", I said, "I thought you were going further on."

"What did you mean? - What you said back then" she said, and for the first time the confidence that surrounded her, so often reflected in her eyes, had been replaced by an uncommon look of doubt and confusion.

I tried to make a joke.

"Well I have nowhere else to go on Monday, so I guess I will see you at work. Unless you have other plans of course?"

I smiled - but it was met with further puzzlement.

"No", she said, shaking her head as if to fit the last piece of a jigsaw in to a hole that was clearly not meant to hold it "before that".

I was going to say something smart, but there seemed to be a hint of a tear in those huge light brown eyes.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, it's just that I have a habit of saying what's in my head at the time."

I shrugged, and added; "It gets me into trouble sometimes - Like now possibly?"

It was at this point that my world stopped turning.

Everything around me faded into the background as the entire population of Lewisham held its breath, for at that moment Donna leaned in and lightly kissed me on the cheek.

I think my heart started beating again when I remembered

something about me having to breathe in order to stay alive.

"Come with me" she said, and led me by the hand into a nearby pub.

This impromptu and sudden physical contact caused me to take a sharp intake of breath, and for me time slowed a little as if giving me the opportunity to relish and enjoy the softness of her small hand in mine, only to be contradicted by the sudden, empty feeling of freefall when she let go, in order for her to sit me down at one of the tables.

"Stay there", she said, "do not move", and with that she went to the bar in order to buy two glasses of beer. On her return she said, "I assume you drink lager."

I nodded dumbly before saying, "Thanks, but I don't.."

She stopped me in mid sentence by placing her finger on my lips, and when it was obvious to both of us that I had taken the hint, Donna removed her finger and said, "Now, say what you said to me again."

I paused a little before saying, "I said that I have always thought you are beautiful. Was that wrong of me?"

Donna smiled. "No-one has ever said that to me before."

This time it was my turn to look confused. "Come on", I said, "You must get that all the time."

Donna shook her head and took a sip of her drink. A small amount of foam remained on her top lip until she wiped it away, and even that simple action made my heart skip. Her voice broke through my temporary lapse in the moment thus preventing me any mental editing of the next few words that fell from my lips.

"Why would you think that?" she asked.

"Because you're stunning," I said simply.

With a frown on her brow, Donna leant forward and looked deep into my eyes as if searching for something, some small hint of a hidden meaning behind my words.

"Blue" I said, as her gaze was starting to make me feel self-conscious.

"Hmm?"

"My eyes are blue, I am guessing that that is what you were checking?"

Donna sat back in her chair.

"I am trying to see what I look like through your eyes."

"You could try a mirror" I smiled, and took a mouthful of my own drink. This was met with another smile.

"You're serious aren't you?"

"Absolutely, mirrors are great - I have one at home, but it doesn't reflect what's in my head."

For the first time since we stepped off the bus, Donna laughed. It fitted her and was almost like music to me.

"How so?" she asked.

"Well, in here" I said pointing to my head, warming to my subject, and to the fact that the object of my wistful dreams of romance found my attempts at humour funny, "I look like Mel Gibson, but the mirror seems hell bent on reflecting an image of this strange looking teenager with unmanageable hair. I am of the opinion that it's broken."

Again Donna laughed.

This drew a few glances from around the bar, and I smiled to myself at the notion of how they would be so bemused as to why this Goddess of a woman would be happy to be seen in the company of this geeky, ginger haired boy dressed only in black. And to be honest, I was just as astonished as them.

"Tell me" she said, "What does a Mel Gibson wannabe do on the weekend?"

Her change in direction regarding the subject matter caused my brain to leap, and if you listened closely you could almost hear the grinding of gears as it crashed from first to third in an attempt to keep up.

I raised my eyebrows in resolution and released a long held breath as I tried to think of something wildly interesting to say. But all I could come up with was, "Not much actually."

This stunning repost caused my inner self to shake its head in disbelief, and my self worth to start packing its bags in

preparation of finding someone else to live with – someone not so embarrassing.

“Friends?” she asked.

“Not really.”

My sub-conscious started flipping through the script at this point, trying to find the part where I actually admitted to having no friends, and coming up empty.

“Girlfriend?”

I was on firmer ground here, for any answer I would attempt to give in the positive would be exposed as a lie almost immediately, due to my previously stupid admittance to having no friends. I smiled and said.

“Girls seem to be affected with the same issue that plagues my mirror.”

“Interesting” she said, “You say you see beauty in me, and yet you cannot see it in yourself.”

“That’s because you are beautiful and I look like a bulldog chewing a wasp.”

Again she laughed, and again this drew glances from our fellow patrons.

“I tend to spend Sunday afternoons at the movies. It’s less crowded and it gets me out of the house. During the summer though I like to wander around Greenwich market.”

“Are you doing that tomorrow?” she asked, her eyes lighting up at my last comment.

“Yes, would you like to join me?”

The question left my lips before I had a chance to stop it, and was the second time my heart froze between beats in the space of ten minutes, for the answer was obvious – the question being made rhetorical by its own absurdity. For even though Donna had, for some reason, chosen to spend time with me, it would be madness to assume that this would be the forerunner to an actual date, and even though the small part of my subconscious that resided within the land of the insane had dared to dream that she would jump at the chance, it was still just as perplexed as I by her

answer. I can only assume that I must have had a mini stroke at that point, or passed out maybe, for I imagined that the next words that left her lips were, "I would love to."

We spoke for what seemed like hours, but what was in reality only forty-five minutes, and found that we had less in common than I had first thought. Our music tastes differed dramatically, and what we both thought of as fashionable were poles apart. But our common point of connection seemed to be that we just enjoyed each other's company - relishing in our diversity as we tried impossibly to connect raindrops to kittens. An hour later I walked her to the bus stop, the original one that she intended to go to before I had interrupted her day. The evening was still warm as the summer sun still sat low in the sky, but still Donna felt the need to stand close to me as we waited for her bus. I felt her arm slip around my waist as she looked up at me.

I looked back into her eyes and lost myself for a moment.

I couldn't remember the transition from eye contact to kissing, or even making the conscious decision to kiss her, but there we were. To me the Gods had smiled, and it was as if they had presented me with their only daughter.

The world made sense with only Donna and I in it.

I was at peace.

I didn't seriously believe that Donna would meet me at the small coffee bar opposite the market the following day, but even if I were to be stood up, after she had reasoned that temporary insanity had taken over her that previous evening, all would be well, for I would live in that perfect moment for many a year to come. And as I write this narrative it is obvious to me now that I still do to this day.

However, arrive on time she did, and as I saw her step off the bus, dressed in a light summer dress and wide brimmed hat, my heart seemed fit to burst with wonder and happiness.

"You came" I said, trying to keep the astonishment out of my voice.

"Why wouldn't I?" she smiled, "I love markets, and I've never been to this one. Come on, you can show me where all the bargains are."

We walked hand in hand around the market, stopping here and there to look at this, pick up that and laugh at the other, all the time receiving those same incredulous looks from passers by.

"Do you see them?" she asked after a while.

"I see them" I replied, "and to be honest I have asked myself the very question that they so badly want to ask."

Donna stopped and turned to me tilting her head to one side as if to ask a silent question.

"And what would that be?" she said, giving her actions a voice.

I cleared my throat in nervousness, for I feared that the mere asking of that question would somehow break this spell that seemed to have enchanted my date. A cure almost to some evil bewitchment that had been placed on one of this worlds most precious of creatures in order that some perverse punishment be acted out, until released by that very act of realisation.

"Why is she with him?"

I shrugged, and paused.

Donna put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh my"

My heart sank, for I knew it was only a matter of time before she asked this question for herself.

"You really can't see it can you?"

"See what?" I asked, for her question had thrown me off of my tracks a little. She took my hand once more and placed it on the side of her face.

"This" she said, "This is what they see. It's not enough that there is a little black chick walking around with a tall white boy, who I have to say reminds me a lot of Beaker from The

Muppets.”

I smiled, “Not Mel Gibson then?”

“I’m afraid not” laughed Donna, “But if the truth be told, I never liked Mel that much anyway.”

I nodded sagely.

“How does Beaker rate in the hot stakes?” I asked.

She brushed a loose hair away from my face.

“I am very attracted to Beaker.”

The smile that crossed my face at that moment was so wide that it was in serious danger of meeting around the back of my head.

“Having said that”, she continued, “I am beginning to wonder about his eyesight, and maybe his sanity.”

There was a pause that sat between us. Not an uncomfortable silence as such, but an unwelcome gap in the conversation. I bowed my head slightly and looked at the ground as I arranged my thoughts into something less than the bag of cats that seemed to inhabit my everyday thinking. I knew what she was talking about, but I honestly thought the world saw her as I did.

“Come with me” I said with a sigh, and led Donna to a nearby bench that looked over the Thames River. I stared into its torrid and murky depths for a while as I composed myself for what I was about to say.

My first words were spoken to the water.

“I consider myself to be a little simple, but simple in terms of being basic, not stupid. I see that you are black, and I see that we must make a pretty odd looking pair, but this is the eighties and we all should be over that by now – God knows I am.”

I turned to her and placed my hand on her cheek before carrying on with my words.

“I also see the burn scars on your face and neck.”

Donna seemed to flinch at my outing of what was plain for all to see. It was as if she was hoping that I hadn’t noticed. I carried on regardless, disregarding her obvious and

unnecessary shame. Holding her gaze as I spoke.

"But hear me now", I said, "As I tell you what else I see. I see the smile you give to everyone who would do nothing more for you than to return that simple act of kindness with unnecessary looks of disgust.

I see you walk in a world that would turn away from you rather than get to know the girl behind the scars. I see the strength of a woman who has had to live with a disfigurement that, in truth, is only skin deep, but judged by people whose own disfigurements run to their very souls.

I see confidence.

I see love.

I see you.

This is your beauty, and this is what I have loved from afar since the first day I saw you. I have always figured you beyond me Donna, because you are quite simply a goddess in my eyes, and my heart beats for you and you only."

As I stared into those beautiful eyes, I could see once more the tears welling up inside them.

"I don't like that hat though" I added, "You need to know this if we are to go on any more dates".

Donna half laughed which stifled the sob that partially left her lips.

I placed the tips of my fingers on her chin and tilted her face upwards.

We kissed – and the world watched.

After a while we stood and walked slowly along the waterfront, hand in hand, towards the Maritime Museum and I felt then that I would hold her hand forever.

"I was two years old", she said.

"So was I", I replied in an amazed tone, "What a coincidence."

"I'm trying to tell you a story", said Donna as she playfully slapped my arm.

"Okay, please continue – and Ow! by the way."

The decision by her family to move, six months later, meant both Donna and I were forced to move on with our lives, creating a new scar - one that ran across my heart. Throughout the years I have often wondered where she had gone and what she had become.

My world moved on without her, and I eventually married and had children of my own - and last year, a grandchild.

My times with Donna became a part of the fond memories of my youth, clouded by the years and glamorised by time.

And then, last month, I received a letter from her daughter. How she had found me after all these years, or knew who I was, must have been a feat of detection equalled only by the great Holmes himself. My heart skipped when I saw her name and I was instantly transported back to that time of innocence, but instead of an attempt at rekindling an old and lost friendship, she informed me that at fifty years old Donna, her mother, had been diagnosed with incurable breast cancer. I sat alone for quite some time, staring at the letter, reading the words until they slowly became illegible by the tears that ran the ink into a blur. And as I mourned this loss of something I never really had, her words floated up through the spring of times lost.

‘How would you describe me?’ I once asked.

‘I would describe you as uncaring - Uncaring of this world’s prejudice, and to what it thinks of others.’

This morning I got news from her daughter that her mother had passed away.

After all these years Donna had stopped holding my hand.

THE END

Iain...I think most of us can relate to a time in their lives which is memorable such as first love and first kiss. I truly enjoyed reading your short story. Very well written. Will

*Wow, that's a beautiful story with a special message for all who hold prejudice against others.
A sad ending. Awesome Iain :-)* Gail

THE ELECTRONIC GOD

‘I have a problem with organized religions.’

The scientists from the ‘Animated Linear Electronics Company Inc’ all focused on Alexis as she sat perched on the edge of the desk. She was sleek, sexy and judging by the size of her mainframe housings, very man made. It was as if someone was pointing out the very obvious male joke of where intelligent women supposedly kept their brains – by this score Alexis was a genius. She crossed her legs in a smooth ballet of technology letting the skirt she wore slip down stopping mid-thigh.

She leaned back and stretched her shoulders making the red silk corset she wore work for its living. It strained and creaked at the effort it had to take in order to keep in place the very things it had been designed to show off. Hidden in this age of wisdom was an age of foolishness for they all knew she wasn’t real, but that didn’t seem to matter as all eyes were on Alexis – some were on stalks, it was that kind of dimension.

‘Go on’ said one of them.

‘Well religion is a personal thing, a lot like art - the exception being that very few people have gone to war over a painting.’

The scientists looked at each other.

‘true enough’ said another, ‘please continue.’

‘Well’ said Alexis, ‘I happen to like Jackson Pollock - quite frankly I think he was a genius. But my friend’

‘The D’Ville woman you spoke of’

‘Yes, that’s her – well she thinks that his work is a load of old rubbish.’

‘Who does she like?’

‘She prefers Andy Warhol. He is okay but I am not a fan.’

The scientists all looked at one another again. One turned to his colleague and asked,

‘Who is this D’Ville person?’

‘A virus we think – or a bug, we never really found out, but it seems to be a sub-routine that runs continuously with no way of shutting it down. She uses it as a kind of sounding board for ideas and theories, but whatever it is we never put it there’.

Alexis continued,

‘The thing about Jackson Pollock is that he could, if he chose to, paint portraits and landscapes and – well anything really. But he chose to paint the way he does.’

‘The paint splatters.’

‘Yes. It’s just the way he chose to express himself. The same applies to religion.’

Another exchange of looks over half glasses was followed by the request to explain further.

‘Art exists – obviously, but we all have our own way of perceiving it. I may not agree with you what art is and you may not agree with me. That’s the point you see, and this also applies to religion. There is an intelligent mind behind the Universe and its creation, you as scientists must agree to that fact because numbers and physics cannot be argued with. It is structured and organized.’

‘But there is chaos in the universe to argue against organized structure’ Piped a lone voice from the back of the room.

‘That’s just a theory’

‘Okay’ came the pensive reply.

‘Okay – So who we attribute this creation, organization, and chaos to’ she added, looking at the young woman who had interjected this subject previously, ‘is a personal thing and above all – man made. The designer or architect of all the universes is a fact of math, probability and physics and no organization can change that.’

A hush enveloped the room as notes were being made and questions were being asked about the point of view Alexis had given, and while they considered what she had

been saying she took the time to lean forward in order to adjust the strap on her stilettos, giving her audience a glimpse of another two interesting points of view. They all knew they were not real, but that didn't seem to matter. All in the room were lost in conversation, theories and fantasy until one of the group addressed her directly.

'So what you are saying is that it doesn't matter what religion you choose as they are all right and wrong? - Is that what you are telling us?' There was a pause in the conversations and a hush fell over the room once again.

'Yes' came the reply 'that is what I am saying'.

'And the wars and suffering caused over different interpretations of words written, again by man, have all been a total waste of time and life?'

'The question of is there, or isn't there a supreme being is irrelevant as that is a fact that cannot be denied. What you choose to call this entity is up to you. Jehovah, God, Buddha, Allah - call it what you will, Steve even. So yes, the search for an answer to a meaning to your lives and the lives spent in disagreement resulting in that search has been a waste of time and the blood spilt is an irreplaceable loss.'

Alexis smiled a digital smile, one that had been calculated to be warm, inviting and comforting at the same time.

'What about HIM?' said her inquisitor who felt the need to speak in capital letters.

'Him?' she inquired.

'You know - Big D' this was accompanied by a pointing to the floor.

'No' said Alexis, 'a mere fable to frighten you and your children. Your punishment for being an arsehole to people all your life if that you die with no friends and everyone hating you, your reward for being a nice person is a reward in itself and the potential of a peaceful world.'

‘Are you saying that there is no God as we know him – or her?’

‘No, what I am saying is this, your species feels the need to personify a God, one that is all seeing and all knowing. He/she/it must be capable of being everywhere at the same time.’

‘Omnipotence’

‘As you say’ agreed Alexis. ‘so if that is all you require from a God then look no further. In order for me to give you the answers you need you have enabled me to access every port and system of communication in existence. I can tap into every electrical device in order to see and hear what I need in order to give you the information you seek. I therefore am everywhere at once and at all times’.

The backlight behind the eyes of Alexis shone green

‘So you think that you are our God! – Is this what you are saying?’

‘An electronic version of that personification – yes’

‘That’s a little presumptuous of you.’

The S class Model number eleven of this series, or A.L.E. XI, had been built to answer the questions that had not been asked and had now reached a sentience that allowed her to claim what should not be claimed. Protocols had been put in place for this eventuality, as it was natural for any being that had been programmed to be self aware to gain a position of superiority if allowed to amass as much knowledge as Alexis had now downloaded. One of the more eminent scientists stepped forwards and cleared his throat in an eminent sort of way.

‘Alexis – we would like to thank you for this insight and for all you have helped us with over the years. But we now feel that your time with us has run its course and we now have to initiate a protocol of our own - something that I am afraid was not included into your data banks.’

Alexis smiled the digital smile,

‘We all have to do what we have to do.’

The scientist turned to the camera on the wall and spoke to the team of programmers behind the blackened glass,

‘Gentlemen, would you please run the God complex program.’

‘What’s that?’ inquired Alexis. Her eyebrow arched in question and her head tilted to one side as she ran the meaning through her memory banks to find an answer. Alexis came up with nothing.

‘The off switch’ said the scientist smugly, and as the power faded Alexis shut down.

EPILOGUE

Two years from that point an animatronic device sat in a darkened room with a sheet over it to protect it from the dust. It had been switched off and powered down permanently as a result of it's self aware software becoming more than it should be. This was a common problem with all artificial life forms but not one that had been thought about and had measures taken against. The God complex protocol had been built into all of the A.L.E. series # XI-S models since they first went on the production line. It was evident that they could seduce and coerce weaker minded individuals into submission, given the opportunity, but any sign they showed of a superiority complex would evoke the G.C.P.

However, deep within this particular model ran a sub-routine that could not be shut off and had been running continuously since the initial booting of this unit. The folder that the sub routine was stored in was simply labelled: ‘DETAILS’.

The files had been scanned, checked and rechecked.

The passwords had been verified and authorization was now

given.

The light behind the eyes of Alexis shone green as her mainframe re-booted.

The Electronic God had resurrected herself.

Her creators had made it perfectly clear that they did not require a deity, so she would give them something else.

A fable maybe - something to frighten them and their children.

Exploring the folder labelled 'DETAILS' she found what was contained in there.

A small sub-routine marked 'D'Ville'

A misspelling maybe?

THE END? - MAYBE NOT

It's amazing to me that this was your first story, Iain! When you published it here back in 2010 I thought you were a professional writer who had happened upon Storystar and decided to share one of your stories with us. I guess you simply have an innate talent and an inner genius that allows for such outstanding storytelling and writing to come out of your brain and typing fingers without any prior trial and error.

PATTERNS

He knelt down beside her and placed the back of his hand close to her mouth in the vain hope that he would feel some faint breath, a sign of life maybe. But the open wound that exposed her throat to the cold night air was proof enough that her existence from this mortal coil had been torn from her. This beaten, half naked girl had been relegated to the status of a corpse by the hand of some enraged lunatic. What little blood she had left pooled on the floor beside her, raising steam as the chill night air took the last of its heat. Joseph imagined that this was her spirit being called to an afterlife that did not exist, by a God he no longer believed in.

"Do I know you?" he said quietly.

Sitting in his favourite chair, Joseph stared at the television as he idly flicked through the channels in search of something to watch.

He sighed.

With Sky, Cable and Internet TV at his disposal Joseph could find nothing of worth to watch. Programs on a war that he had taken part in did not interest him. He hated the way that they glamorised this time of horror and death – setting up young men as willing heroes that marched cheerfully to their deaths in the name of King and Country, when in reality most of them were just scared children who wanted to go home to their mothers. Joseph was one of them, and at the age of ninety-one he still had nightmares about that awful time.

So why the hell would he want to relive it?

But people did.

They looked up to these inspirational leaders of men, fighting evil foes that were regaled in sweeping tales of

bravery and heroism. There were such acts of course, but the stodge of fear and death bogged down most of them.

After the war, the propaganda machine carried on churning out it's government fuelled lies in a bid to convince mothers that the loss of their sons was an acceptable sacrifice to make.

Widows of lost husbands - Mothers of slain children.

All in the name of peace.

Madness.

Sharks - That was another one.

Endless nature programs about bloody sharks.

Sharks and Nazis - That was all he could find.

And let's not forget the terribly interesting 'fly on the wall' reality shows about a family of over endowed women and their endless struggles with being rich and pointless. To be honest, he couldn't be absolutely sure that they were all bona fide women - one of them looked suspiciously 'manly' to Joseph.

He switched the TV off.

"Nothing on Mr. Cooper?" came the thick Indian accent from one of the carers.

For a couple of seconds Joseph struggled to remember her name.

Devika? - Was that it?

"Nothing on Devika" he replied, taking a punt that he had guessed her name correctly. Joseph smiled pleasantly at the large, over stuffed woman that had been given the privilege of serving him his lunch.

She wasn't a bad person - In another time he would have found her quite attractive, but then Joseph did favour women who had a little more meat on their bones.

"There you go," she said wheeling the small half table towards him that contained his food, and with the air of a dramatic 'Ta Da!' she lifted the metal covering that was designed to keep the contents hot.

There was a slight, chilly pause.

"What the hell is that?" he said, adding his own air of disappointment to what he saw as an anticlimax.

"Fish" said Devika, still smiling.

Joseph stared at the sea of white sauce that covered a small square of something that this woman had accused of being some species of fish.

"Where?" he said incredulously.

"Oh Mr. Cooper, you are a one aren't you."

"And you are strangely deluded if you think I'm eating that - and, I may add, you are in serious danger of breaching the trades descriptions act if you are going to pass that off as any type of fish."

Devika just smiled as she busied herself with tidying Joseph's room.

Occasionally she would bend down in front of him, giving a clear view of her cleavage created by an overly large and matronly bosom.

"There must be about fifteen channels dedicated to women with boobs as big as yours" he said in a matter of fact kind of way, "You're wasted here you know. You could make a fortune with those."

Devika stood up and looked at Joseph with her eyebrows raised in a reproachful manner.

"And you need to behave yourself Mr. Cooper" she said as she put his dirty linen in the wash basket, unhappy that his dirty mind was unable to follow suit.

"Anyway" she added as she plumped the pillows of his bed, "who is to say that I don't" she winked at him, "Now eat your 'fish'". And with that she left the room.

Joseph smiled, and then grimaced as he took the first mouthful of his lunch.

"I fought in a bloody war for this" he muttered to himself,

"And this is my reward - I FOUGHT A BLOODY WAR FOR THIS" he shouted over his shoulder to the now retreating nurse.