

## Cream Tea

There were only a few people in Greggs at that moment, so Jared took his pick of the tables near, but not too near, to where everyone else was congregated. As he sat, he glanced at the nearest couple – two black girls, both with the corkscrew hairstyles of a texture he secretly thought of as “designer Brillo pad”, one long, Whoopie Goldberg-style, the other shorter. Both early twenties, he guessed, though one of the two had a pushchair, back to him, that indicated the presence of a child. They were chatting animatedly, and he caught the phrases, “you gotta tell him you need more maintenance” and “he reckon he’s workin’ all he can”. Domestic dispute, Jared supposed. Absentee father, needy child. Greedy mother? He guessed not – it was her friend who was doing the urging, the one with the pushchair defending. He turned his attention to the table beyond them.

This held a single person, a middle-aged man, much like himself, thinning hair, casually dressed in cords and rugby shirt – he was unsure of the team, not being much of a fan himself, but it had an attractive brick-red colour with flashes of goldie-fawn. The man was studying a newspaper, the *Independent*, and Jared nodded approval at the choice. A half-consumed Cappuccino sat on the table in front of the man, and as Jared watched he reached around the paper for it, lifted it to his lips and took a sip. Satisfied, Jared looked further over, near to the entrance.

Here was a young married couple, sharing a baguette and a large slice of what looked like carrot cake, even though lunchtime was a few hours ago. Two children, a girl of five and a boy of about seven, sat with them, happily tucking into Fruit Shoots and currenty scones. Beyond this happy family scenario the bustle of Telford shopping centre carried on as normal – bag-laden men, women and children striding past on their way from one shop to another, singles, couples, triples and groups as on any other Saturday morning.

A cough to the other side of him attracted his attention, and he swung his head round to take in the waitress, neatly dressed in Victorian-style stiff white blouse, long black skirt and small white pinny. He nodded approval again. Much better than the awful miniskirts or skin-tight leggings and cropped tops he’d had to endure in version one of the program. “Would you care to order now, sir?” the waitress asked, her voice mellifluous and without accent.

He glanced at the menu in front of him. Strictly speaking, Greggs was one of those establishments where waitress-service didn’t exist. Principally a baker’s store with an added-on café, one would normally have to queue to purchase one’s food and drinks, paying at the till at the left-hand end before picking up cutlery, paper napkins and milk sachets and sugar from the separate counter off to one side. But Jared had always liked his slice of luxury, and when he’d written version two of the program had built in the waitress as part of that comfort. He looked up again at her. “A cream tea, please,” he decided, the children’s scones having touched the right nerve.

The waitress appeared puzzled. "A cream tea, sir?"

He frowned. "That's right. Fruit scones, tea in a pot – china, and loose-leaf not tea-bags – and plentiful scoops of strawberry jam and fresh Cornish cream. A cream tea."

The waitress froze. Literally. Around him, the others in the café, and outside in the shopping mall beyond, froze too. A small symbol appeared in the air, a circle, rotating. After a few seconds a "kerching" sounded. "Error," a sign appeared in place of the circle. "Memory error #00AB0F. Ending."

With a growl, Jared dropped out of the program and back into the real world of his laboratory-cum-workshop-cum-office. Ripping off the virtual reality headset, he pushed his wheelchair joystick to the forwards position and rolled over to the desk containing a phalanx of laptops. Leaning towards them, he began to manipulate the keys to alter the crashed software.

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"There's still brain activity, but to all intents and purposes he's a cabbage," Doctor Trevelyan said, staring at the results of the MRI scan.

His colleague reached over and traced an area of the brain shown on the computer screen. "This area's astonishing. See the way it's being stimulated to an unprecedented level even though it should strictly speaking be dead as the proverbial?"

Trevelyan peered closer. "Hmm," he agreed. "I did wonder what you'd make of that. Any ideas why?"

The other doctor shook his head. "Not a clue." He traced it again, wonderingly. "I'd love to know what's going on inside that head at the moment."

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He'd chosen Telford Shopping Centre partly because, even though it was over 200 miles from his native Cornwall, it was so contained. Although vast – the complex covered 25 acres and contained over 175 stores – it was easy to map out with the help of the small pamphlets available at the information desk, one of which he'd picked up and kept the last time he'd visited. Being indoors, he could keep the parameters small enough in the time he had to work in – open spaces would take far more coding, and he sensed he didn't have that long. And even though the open spaces, fields and woodlands would be cut off from him forever, there would still be enough there to make life enjoyable. As long as he had—.

He blinked. And, most importantly, it was also the place in which he'd bought Alice's engagement and wedding rings, two years after its opening in 1973. Although in his virtual reality model he'd altered some of the shops to ones he knew he would use (he didn't think he'd be visiting the Ann Summer's store that lived inside the real Telford a great many times, for example), the F Hinds in which he'd bought the rings was a locked feature. As was the Greggs in which, regardless of the mundanity of the surroundings, he'd slipped down onto

one knee and proposed to Alice when they'd met up again after his trip to the jeweller's. The memory brought the sting of tears to his eyes. Alice – killed in that bloody accident that had left his lower half a useless hulk. And Stacey, their precious daughter. Angrily, he wiped away the tears. At least this way he could bring them back. They could live on – and himself, whole again. He set to work on more coding.

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He dropped back in to the town centre at precisely the same place and time as he'd left it. As he glanced around, he saw that the randomisation factors he'd built in had changed his eating companions – in place of the two black girls was a family of Asians, mother resplendent in a topaz sari, father suited, three small children tucking into their cakes and biscuits with relish; further on, there was another small family, white this time, a couple of young women at the table next to them, three other single diners scattered around the other tables near the entrance, more on the other side of him. He nodded again, satisfied. Once here permanently, there'd be enough variety to keep him, Alice and Stacey happy for all time.

The waitress came to stand beside him. "Would you care to order now, sir?" she repeated her question of his previous visit.

"A cream tea, please," he gave his reply, and waited.

The waitress smiled. "A cream tea. Certainly, sir." She turned and left. He stared after her. Hmm. A bit mechanical, perhaps. He'd have to boost her personality profile, throw in some random pleasantries. And get her to give a few options regarding jam flavours, tea or coffee required, that sort of thing. All fine tuning.

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Doctor Trevelyan knocked at the door of the private room even though, strictly speaking, he was perfectly entitled to walk straight in. He even waited for the nod of permission before opening the door and entering, though he would have entered anyway without it. Unlike many others in his profession he was good at the patient liaison side of his job, and doubly so when it came to grieving relatives. And although the man lying in the hospital bed was not yet dead, at least not technically, the wife and daughter sitting either side of it were doing just that – grieving. The time would soon be coming for them to grieve for the actually-dead, he was certain. Meanwhile, his job was to give them as much hope without stretching the bounds of real expectation as he could. It was a tricky balance.

"And how does Mr Hammett seem today?" He put on his brisk-but-hearty voice for the question – it always seemed to reassure these two that he had his professional head on.

The wife and daughter smiled up at him. Pale, wan smiles, but in the older woman with a marked trace of humour he found very attractive. "Fine as ever, Doctor Trevelyan," Mrs Hammett murmured. "He's just eaten a big cream tea and now he's having a nap."

Trevelyan smiled in turn. "A cream tea, eh?"

"Mmm. It's his favourite." Mrs Hammett looked over at her daughter, whose face, a younger version of her own, looked to be barely under its owner's control. The mother reached across and grasped the daughter's hand. "He'd go anywhere for a cream tea." She glanced back up at the doctor.

He pretended to study the chart at the bottom of the bed, even though it could tell him nothing he hadn't seen on the MRI. He'd reached a decision, and the next few minutes were going to be amongst the most painful he'd ever witnessed. He wanted time to prepare himself as well as the two women in front of him. Clearing his throat, he said, "There's something I need to talk to you about, Mrs Hammett, Miss Hammett. Could I ask you to come to my office for a few moments...?"

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It was finished. Ready. It had taken him all this time, and he sometimes wondered where he'd had the inspiration. Certainly it was something he never would have attempted in his previous existence. But since the accident he'd been suffused, it seemed, with a creativity he'd never experienced before. And it had culminated in this – the recreation in virtual reality of somewhere he, Alice and Stacey could live on, free of pain, free of death. He shook himself. No matter where it had come from, he blessed the explosion of inspired thought that had come to him. And now – all the parameters were tested, and proven unbreakable. Jared was overcome with a fierce exultation, and couldn't wait to wheel himself back to the virtual reality equipment. But there was one more thing to do first...

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the photograph. A family group, taken literally hours before the accident. From it, Alice and Stacey beamed at him, radiant happiness in their faces, his own mirroring their expressions. "Together again, darlings," he whispered. "Together again forever." Then he began to type in the final segments of code.

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Dr Trevelyan closed the door on the two sobbing women. They'd agreed, but it had taken a lot of persuasion on his part, and only after several hours had they finally come back with their consent. He'd already had the forms drafted up for several days, but he was leaving them to come to terms with the decision for a while longer before he asked for the signatures. Then would come the dreadful moment of switching off the life-support, and even worse pain and sorrow for Hammett's wife and daughter. He sighed. Even the good parts of his job, the successes, somehow couldn't make up for these times.

His colleague, again stationed over the monitors showing the bedridden man's status, glanced up. "Going for a final MRI on him, just in case?"

"Already done," Trevelyan remarked wryly. "Had him wheeled in while I took his wife and daughter off. Can't be too careful."

"And?" the other man asked, without too much hope.

Trevelyan shook his head. "Nothing. Even those parts which were functioning are now dead as doornails. Except –" He paused, and his colleague raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"That part you were so intrigued about." Trevelyan reached across and tapped a few keys on the computer. A similar picture to the one that had been there earlier sprang onto the monitor, and he indicated to it with a wave of his hand. "See? It's the only part that shows any sign of life now. Useless with regard to motor and major cognitive functions – but am I right in thinking that that's the main centre of creative activity?"

The man looked closely. "That's right," he confirmed. "It's like, even though he's effectively dead, he's still managing to write a novel, or paint a Rembrandt, or record an album or something. What was it you said he did for a living?"

"Computer programmer," Trevelyan grunted.

"Hmm, the logical lobes are completely shot," his colleague returned in surprise. "So why has that bit survived. Did he ever do anything creative at all? Painting, music, writing?"

"Wife says not," Trevelyan answered. "I've got to know her well over the months he's been here. She's spoken quite openly about him. Way she describes him he's almost like a processing machine when it comes to work. Loving husband, still, but would rather read a computing textbook for relaxation than a Dan Brown or Jeffrey Archer."

His colleague snorted. "Wouldn't we all?"

Trevelyan smiled. "How did this accident he was in happen?" his colleague asked.

"Hit-and-run. Some drunk, weaved onto the pavement and straight at the three of them. Hammett pushed the women out of the way but got it full in the midriff himself. Didn't stand a chance – it's a wonder he wasn't killed outright. Really killed, rather than these months of living death."

"Perhaps that's what kicked that area of brain into life," the other doctor mused. "Never know how trauma's going to affect somebody – one of the great unsolved mysteries."

"Hmm," Trevelyan agreed. He turned to go. "Well, whatever is happening in there is not enough to sustain life, even if he is writing the next million-seller." He straightened himself. "I'll get Mrs Hammett to sign the consent form and then we can throw the switch. Poor bugger," he added as he walked away.

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They were gathered round the bed, Hammett's daughter weeping uncontrollably, his wife barely able to see for the tears streaming down her face. "You know," Mrs Hammett whispered, "I sometimes wonder if, somehow, he still knows we're still here. That we didn't die in the accident, like he– he–." She broke off, unable to finish.

"Like he did," her daughter finished for her, almost inaudibly.

The hospital chaplain leaned across to take her hand. "It's no comfort at this time, I know, Stacey," he murmured, "but I'm confident that your father lives on, just as you do. And he does, in a very real way, know that you are beside him now."

"And eating cream teas," Mrs Hammett whispered. "He's got to be eating cream teas. Do you know," she looked up at Trevelyan, pain mixed with pleasurable remembrance in the glance, "he even asked for a cream tea in Telford Shopping Centre, the day he proposed to me." She gave a small laugh. "The woman behind the counter didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He had to tell her what a cream tea was."

She looked down at her recumbent husband. "Jared would go anywhere for a cream tea," she repeated her statement of a few hours before. "Anywhere."

Trevelyan coughed gently. "I think it's time now, Mrs Hammett--"

"Alice," she whispered.

"Alice," he corrected. He glanced over at her daughter. "Stacey."

He saw the two glance at each other and nod, almost imperceptibly. Taking a deep breath, he leaned towards the life-support and, with a hand that suddenly, unaccountably shook, began to flip the switches to turn it off.

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Jared was just donning the headset again when the lights began to go out in his tiny room. "Thought so," he muttered to himself. "Just in time." Settling the goggles over his eyes, he threw the switch to plunge himself out of the real world he'd known for the last several months and back into his created one for good.

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He landed back in Greggs and gazed around in satisfaction. Everything was exactly as he wanted. There was a variety of serving staff, male and female, a proliferation of customers of all shapes, sizes and colours – sounds of excited chatter reached him from the tables around him, smells of new-baked bread, cakes and coffee drifted through the air and into his nostrils, groups of shoppers strolled past threading their way from store to store. And – yes! His heart leapt. There they were, right by the entrance, just coming in. Greeting him with the smiles that had so delighted him for so many years.

Leaping up, he bounded towards them, kissing them lovingly. "Alice, Stacey," he murmured, leading them back towards his table. "My darlings, I'm so, so glad you've arrived."

A waitress caught his eye as the three of them sat, and came tripping over. "Yes, sir, madam, miss, what can I get for you?" she asked, a trace, but not too much, of West Midlands in her accent.

He beamed up at her, and saw his wife and daughter do so also. "Oh, it's got to be cream teas all round," he said.