

The Esteemed Library of Dust Jackets

Anon

1.

It is four o'clock in the afternoon on a too bright Wednesday. My anger is a perfect match for the sun. The new normal of mid-autumn weather means our Western sun waits until close of business before shooting its strongest hurrah of heat onto the faded city streets. My body sweats and screams for immersion in water or escape into stories with coffee, but visiting hours begin soon, and the books have all gone. There is not a café open in sight anyway. There is a rumour in town that caffeine consumed after noon results in jittery insomniacs by evening.

A layer of bleakness cushions my anger as I hear the depressing anthem of an ice cream truck in the distance. I shake my head to rattle the old memory out. Of course, it is not. It is an ambulance with a glossy rainbow exterior. Its siren is the same old dreary tune though, and much better suited for its new purpose. While in the past it lured children for ice concoctions, it now sings its approach before screeching to a halt to collect a paperback person for urgent care.

I pass the old town library en-route to the hospital, unofficially renamed The Esteemed Library of Dust Jackets. My head involuntarily turns to peer inside from a distance, wishing a memory of running through its sliding glass doors toting long overdue books becomes real.

Libraries, bookstores, and other homes of books have all closed in on themselves. If you peered through grimy windows of long abandoned book establishments you would still find dust jackets all over the floor, strewn about haphazardly. Bookends reduced to collecting dust but standing to attention as though past lives proudly holding collections together might return at any moment. Hardbacks with their insides torn out, and paperbacks all but obliterated; torn apart, shredded, and vacuumed away; their coffee stained and dog-eared covers too flimsy to keep.

2.

Our people are kept in all the usual places you would imagine humans to be kept, but we wear our stories on the outside now, like books, so as not to cause spillage and confusion. Except for the sensitive paperback people who have stories galore, flowing freely and unpredictably, but with covers too fragile. Their insides and outsides have blended, and consciousness for them is a muddy brown. They are kept mostly in our hospital corridors and wards, awaiting, or receiving treatment in Ward 4Cs. I am now headed to ours on this stifling afternoon, with the goal of convincing my sweet but stupid older sister that she is still needed in this world.

Ward 4Cs have gone viral the world over, and Label Makers have become a much sought-after piece of medical equipment in most countries, with the exceptions of happiness magnets who slammed their borders shut and bound themselves tight long ago. In the beginning stages of life post pandemics, wars, socio-political unrest, mental health crises and recessions; psychotherapists like my sister and I were in huge demand. But then the money ran out and Search History Algorithm Treatments or SHAT's were introduced to streamline mental health care. SHAT's ensure that all those who would normally 'fall through the cracks' are promptly caught and placed in appropriately focussed treatment streams.

By adhering to this system, we remove unpredictability and imaginative pursuits that muddy the waters, thus protecting ourselves and our patients. If we fail in this endeavour, we place our patients in grave danger. Glitches occur during routine health checks, and our patients' covers become too papery and permeable. When we mess with their algorithms, we risk sending their whole systems into permanent discombobulation, so that any marketing material popping up on their covers will not

match up to who they are. Regular label checks and re-labelling procedures are mandatory for all, however, require more consistent supervision for those with questionable psychological health.

3.

That is the life acceptance speech I rehearse daily to preserve my sanity. Now I arrive a sweaty mess at the hospital entrance, inhaling two pills dry to ease the pressure in my head and blur the sharp edges, but also to recount the events of last Wednesday evening before I see her.

Initially we had been playfully arguing in Gracie's kitchen as we discussed work. But when she mentioned her most recent disciplinary notice for breach of our code of professional practice, the night took a serious and non-reversible turn. Once again, Grace had been found guilty of immersing herself in patients' stories and messing with their algorithms. A female patient she had a particular fondness for took centre stage that night, as Grace began emphatically stating in a loud and insistent tone,

"She was growing and developing, becoming a person; She didn't want to be the labels anymore! She's a teenager and of course they're always changing! You know what I'm talking about!"

I reply with my best impression of responsibility by emphatically stating,

"But you had to treat those labels because that's what her SHAT manual was calculated on. You said so yourself on her progress report. Stop searching her history and use her search history. You must use the SHAT's Grace; The world has changed!"

"Who are you?" She shouted back.

"You know who I am!" I exclaim.

I was pleading with my eyes, our childhood secret code to remind the other we didn't really believe but had to keep a façade or joke alive. Then I added, slightly pathetically, "I have a mortgage to pay, and you need to think about your kids."

An old hysteria emerged, and her eyes clouded over as she then yelled,

"What kids Laur? They live in their fucking devices and don't know who they are! They're fed a diet of commodified crap and I can't even be a parent anymore. If only they could be addicted to smoking, drugs, anything but this!!!!!"

I'd heard all this before, so I said what I always say,

"Sissie they are too small, and they still need you....." I trailed off because Gracie had already gone. She scraped her chair across the kitchen tiles for maximum sound effect and left the room.

4.

I now know this was all pre-planned for a woman on the edge, so I followed her outside and watched this fierce woman carefully place several thin and shiny objects underneath the rear wheels of the family car, before gracefully sliding into the driver's seat and reversing backwards before screeching to a halt. I will never forget that crunchingly destructive and appropriately tuneless sound. It was glorious in its raw ugliness. It coincided with Gracie's new neighbour across the street - a man called Nathan who put people to sleep for a living, stepping into his Mercedes, but pausing mid leg in. He was holding a Coffee Keep Cup in one hand and just like in the movies, managed to drop it while his hand stayed frozen in 'holding cup' position.

My pyjama clad niece and nephew had woken up and were now running at top speed into Grace's open arms when she stepped out of the car, mirroring her children's expressions of horror. What

followed was much messy and noisy emotion – hugging, holding, screaming, laughing, and crying. At that time, I called it the family sandwich. Now I call it the messy middle. This is now forbidden in books and humanity, but tonight it was on display for the whole street to witness. In Gracie style, the demolition of devices was the grand finale but not what had alerted the authorities. She had already unplugged the family earlier that day, and by a quarter past eight she'd been collected by the rainbow ambulance sans ice cream.

5.

That was the night my paperback sister was remanded in custody. She is now in the final hours of her seven-day grace period before treatment begins.

I sit by her bedside as a thirsty machine sits idly behind her freshly shaved scalp, in preparation for the likelihood of transfer to somewhere I have only ever speculated on. This night, the man I know as Nathan who puts people to sleep, happens to be on night shift. I am surprised to see him, and more surprised still, when he folds himself next to Gracie on the stretcher and takes her limp hands in his own with a tenderness that seems completely alien in this hostile environment. He looks at me with kind resignation, and speaks not in the wooden, robotic tone of other medical staff I've interacted with, but with gentleness. In fact, his covers are loose, which means he is playing at being unscripted.

“My name is Dr Nathan McCormack, and tonight I oversee Ms Grace Alice Goldburn of Number 26 Ariston Way, Mount Leeuwin, date of birth May 13, 1981. Today's date is April 19, 2028.”

I say nothing but my insides begin to shake. Dr McCormack suddenly jumps up as though to make an important announcement, before saying,

“Ah Laura, I'll go and make you a coffee. Long Macchiato Topped Up with One? We've got a great machine here now.”

Then he disappears and I wonder why an Anaesthetist is the only doctor in sight. Accompanying this thought is a sick, sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I force myself to look at my sister properly for the first time. She seems heavily sedated and asleep and seemingly in no hurry to wake up. Then he reappears with my coffee order, which I take with the concentrated care and wonder of a newborn baby I have never held.

"Thank you," I say gratefully, and I mean it.

Dr McCormack swallows a mouthful of his own brew before continuing with,

“You, Ms Laura Priya Goldburn, are Ms Grace Goldburn's Next of Kin. Technically you have the authority to decide on the final course of action once transfers have reached completion. Grace has opted to remain asleep, having already electronically signed her paperwork for her Consciousness, Unconsciousness, Shadow - “Oh for God's sake,” I interrupt.

“I am so sorry Laura. I know how hard you have been working all week to convince her otherwise.”

At this he waves his hands vaguely around me to illustrate some point he is trying to make. All I can think to say is,

“Well at least you got my order just right, it's delicious.”

He nods before speaking again, with the whisper of a smile on his lips.

“But now I must contradict myself. I just talked about transfers, but I need to share some information with you, that Grace no longer has ownership of.”

I sit up straighter and look at my sister again, wondering what this new turn of events could be.

“Your sister treated my son back when he was fifteen. In fact, she was still seeing him when the world changed. My boy was lost, and your Grace, she just..... listened to him. She didn’t have much to say to my wife and I, which was fine, but she did say that our boy Soli..... that he had a big story, and just needed more room to keep it in. She helped him build his own covers. He will always hold those. I must believe in that, no matter how many rebinding’s he’s to endure in his life.”

The Anaesthetist looks at me as I ponder this and feel the hot rage from earlier in the day, ever so gently morph into something new. A feeling that seems to exist only in the space between he and I. Then he grasps both my hands and starts talking more animatedly, and with foolish excitement perhaps?

“She needs you to watch over her children because their father is too far gone. They are still fresh and new. You know exactly what to do. It is written in you. Throw them into the wildness. Silly, beautiful, crazy, pointless things you can only experience once. Unpredictable things. When you do this, you make their insides and outsides stronger. I made Grace a promise. She will go to sleep forever soon. But she won’t fall forever. She will land somewhere, and her Consciousness will not be stolen!”

His speech is over, and I realise the sick dread of my nightmares is real. The rumours *are* true, and the machine behind Gracie’s head *does* have the initials B.S.S.T. on it, which stands for Brain Stem Suction Tank for consciousness transfer. As for the little silver machine off to the side, engraved E.V.C, I would prefer to believe this is not the infamous Existential Vacuum Cleaner. Dr McCormack nods as I take it all in.

“But they told us human consciousness was finite. That we had no choice! We needed recycling for AI to keep humanity alive!” I exclaim.

Dr McCormack does not respond, but is rummaging in a shiny metal drawer sitting next to the E.V.C.

“For fucks sake! Ok Dr McCormack, I have a question for you. Why do you put people to sleep for a living?”

“Come,” he replies, after pulling a small dark object out of the drawer. “We’ll walk and talk.”

I am now speechless, so I kiss Gracie ever so gently on her forehead and transfer a tear from each of my eyes into her closed lids. Then I follow Nathan through the sliding glass door from Ward 4C into another corridor, which connects to a cavernous, temperature-controlled chamber full of medical personnel. It also contains four large Consciousness Chambers as I soon learn. I also learn this is Ward 5, where information transfer via the brain stem into chambers for further transfer into AI occurs. Patients with shaved scalps like Gracie are here. There is no final resting place, as once consciousness is removed, the rest is vacuumed into the existential void and lost forever. Those who present for mandated routine health checks and cover changes belong elsewhere. Not in this underbelly of horror.

6.

Finally, Nathan answers my question.

“Because the most wonderful and precious things in life take mere seconds and can only happen once. We only get this now when we are asleep.”

Then he presses something into my cold and shaking hands and says in an almost whisper,

“We thought we could have covers without books.”

He motions me out of the chamber via the fire escape, and straight into the cool evening air. I keep walking and don't look back, touching the outer layer of the object in my hands as I walk. A soft but firm enough front and back cover with something inside. My fingers expect air. Perhaps some kind of metaphor to represent the Anaesthetist's last words. But my fingers instead slide hungrily over pages. I do not know if the pages are blank or filled with story. I do not know what I am supposed to do now.

What I do know, is that I will do something.