

Truth

Eloise was already downtown at *Curry Original*, their favourite Indian restaurant, listening to Sitar music, inhaling the blended cooking aroma of kormas and vindaloes, and waiting for Tom. She'd ordered a glass of wine, eagerly anticipating their conversation. Things, she thought, were finally starting to align in her life. Now in her second year as a post-doctoral fellow and developing what she considered to be an important area of research – Mindfulness as Business Strategy – her goal was to obtain a tenure track position at a prestigious university. It didn't matter where in the world this was, Eloise was one hundred percent committed to her research. Life, she decided, would simply sort itself out around her career.

And she had Tom. And they had a great time together. And it was going so well for her in the Life Research Group that there had already been discussions about a possible tenure track position at King's University. She was well-liked, the students enjoyed her classes, and Professor Wainright had already told her he would be a vocal advocate for her being offered a tenure track position. Tom was helping make her dream of an academic career come true. Not that she needed a man for that. As her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother would always tell her, a woman should never need a man to make her dreams come true.

Eloise had worked hard to get where she was. She had a rocky upbringing as an only child; her mother left her husband and took Eloise to start a new life at the age of four. Eloise still saw her father often, but it was clear that her parents were simply not good for one another. As she got older, Eloise was continually uprooted as her mother sought new opportunities as a writer and an artist and dove in and out of relationships with numerous men, and occasionally, it seemed, women. Eloise loved her mother and her father, but all she really wanted was the stability that had evaded her for what seemed forever. She didn't understand how much she wanted stability, in fact, needed it, until she got much older. Now, she thought, she finally had the stability that would provide the foundation for her to follow her dreams, as cliched as it sounded, and be the best she could be. And she loved the life of an academic.

Tom walked in and saw Eloise at *their* table in the corner. It was where they had sat on their first official 'date' a year ago. Now, as then, he mentally pinched himself when he saw her; she was very easy on the eyes, and bright and funny. She could be strikingly beautiful, model-like if she wanted, if she dressed in the

latest fashion and wore make-up. But that wasn't Eloise. Instead, she let her dark hair fall naturally to her shoulders and wore very plain clothes that always seemed to be a size or two too big for her body. It didn't matter what she wore, she always looked good to Tom. What she couldn't hide, however, were her blue eyes, eyes so blue that she was often asked if she wore coloured contacts. She was perfect, thought Tom. Well, alright, sometimes she was way too preoccupied with her research work, but he thought he could help her change that over time. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He had long ago decided that he would do anything for Eloise and her career.

Eloise smiled and waved to Tom as he walked over to the table. He had a unique swagger that sometimes looked like a slight limp, as if one leg was longer than the other. He had a boyish grin; the kind you'd expect he'd still have in his nineties. That's what had attracted Eloise to him in the first place, his instantly contagious smile. He never thought about it much himself but occasionally Eloise would point it out to him. And like Eloise, his deep blue eyes caught the attention of the women, and the men. Coupled with his full head of black hair, nowadays slightly peppered grey, he was on his way to looking more distinguished as he aged. In short, he had a lot of sex appeal, which was only enhanced further by his British accent.

His looks, however, couldn't distract from his clumsiness, which he had had for as long as he could remember. It was cute, thought Eloise. She watched him trip over his own feet as he got closer. It was never dull going places with Tom; he gave her comic relief that took some of the stuffiness out of her own seriousness.

There was no time for dinner tonight, just drinks and a quick catch-up; Eloise had term papers to mark. The waiter brought over a Sauvignon Blanc for Tom, just as Eloise had requested.

'Cheers,' said Tom, as he grinned broadly. They tilted their glasses to one another, smiled and had a sip.

'Soooooo,' Eloise asked, still smiling as she leaned forward, 'how did it go with the President?'

'Well, it didn't exactly go the way I thought it would, but I've got a pretty clear understanding of the future – well the near future anyways, for us – well ... us and the Group.'

'That's great,' replied Eloise, thinking naturally that everything was on track and it was business as usual.

Tom had gone through a hundred different ways of saying the next sentence when he was in the bath, but it never sounded right. Shit, he thought. Oh well, it is what it is.

‘But here’s the thing, El,’ he paused and took a big sip of his wine.

‘Uh-oh, there’s a thing?’ she said as she took a sip of wine and chuckled.

‘Ah, well ... yes, there’s a thing. Actually, a tricky sort of awkward thing, really.’

‘Tricky? I didn’t know things could be tricky.’

‘Well it’s probably only tricky because it’s a thing that just happened and we haven’t put our minds to it,’ replied Tom, smiling.

El laughed.

‘Do you think you’ll be telling me before I retire, Tom, or will I have to beat it out of you?’

Tom’s smile widened as he nodded. He looked over to the bar, put his hand up and ordered two more wines. His smile faded as he stared down at the table and sighed.

‘Wainright’s a bastard.’

‘What? Tom! He’s dead, you shouldn’t speak badly of him. Why would you say that? And in any case, why is him being a bastard tricky?’

‘Well El ... hmmm ... you see, well ... the tricky thing is he’s left us with no money in the LRG. Seems he’s been stealing from all the accounts for the past year or two according to the President and Financial Services. So now we’ve got to find new funding, and quickly, like in the next four months, or the Life Research Group no longer exists, and we don’t have jobs.’

It was a blunt delivery of the hard facts.

Eloise stared at Tom for a few seconds.

'What? Are you kidding me? You are, aren't you? What do you mean? That's crazy, that's got to be a mistake. He would never do that to us. ... No, I don't believe it.' She leaned back and stared at Tom.

'Oh, I get it, you're having me on, aren't you? Good one. I almost fell for it. Well played, Tom Carrott.' She leaned forward again, sipped some more wine and smiled, looking somewhat relieved.

'It's crazy El, I know, but it's not a mistake. I'm not kidding. I saw the numbers myself. All those trips he's been on this past year have been to Africa. Africa! What the frig's in Africa?'

El's eyes widened as she saw Tom's face and heard the seriousness of the tone in his voice.

'Oh my god. You're not kidding, are you?'

Tom shook his head slowly. There was a long silence. He could see Eloise starting to mentally unravel.

'Oh shit. What about my research, Tom? My career? What will my Mum and Dad say? I've got to start applying for positions at other universities. I can get started on that tonight. ... Oh shit.'

'Whoa, whoa ... slow down ... slow down there, El ... let's not panic, we'll sort something out, there's still lots of time. We just have to think it through.'

'You think?! Four months to find enough money for all of us full-time staff, even for just a one-year period. Do the math, Tom, that's a lot of money. And let's face it, we're not exactly lighting up the world with boundless new knowledge that's making society better. Don't see the funders queuing at our door. Would you fund us? I mean, seriously, would you? Jesus!'

Eloise was beginning the mental journey in her own maze of angst. Tom had seen it before. He knew he'd only add fuel to the fire if he tried to console her, or say it was all going to work out. At this moment, despite two quick wines, he didn't have a good feeling about it all either. But he wasn't going to hop on the angry bus and head to the pity-party like Eloise. She needed time to digest the news. Fair enough. So without making things worse he suggested instead that they get going and mark some term papers for the courses they were teaching. His preference would have been a few more drinks with Eloise, have some laughs and make a

plan, but that was not going to happen with the *other* Eloise now at the table. He called the waiter over, paid the bill, and then they walked back to campus.

It was a quiet walk. Tom knew Eloise was already busy thinking about her future. He wondered if he was in her future in some way. He wanted to ask what she was thinking but was afraid of what the answer might be. He could feel his own life beginning to unravel.

The one thing that he knew he wanted in his life was Eloise. Love is blind and Tom had been blind for a year now; he'd lost the way with his own life ever since he'd met her. Not that he knew that. Which is why he resolved, on this brisk September evening walk back to campus, that he'd continue to do anything to keep Eloise in his life. He needed her, it was that simple, and the easiest way he could think of being in her life was to keep the Life Research Group afloat.

But how could he do that?

An uncomfortable silence walked with them until they reached campus. Tom walked Eloise to her office and they kissed goodnight. They had said very little except that they would talk about things some more over the next few days.

Tom told Eloise he was headed home to mark his papers, but he wasn't. Instead he was planning to hit the problem head on, the sooner the better.

Think

He needed a plan. Tomorrow afternoon he was meeting with the staff of the LRG to tell them the bad news and present his strategy for the future, which, at the current moment, was MIA. And so, with necessity being the mother of invention, at 9:30pm he sat at the desk in his home office looking for inspiration. He looked first at Fred, who insisted the most important thing right now was to receive a cookie. Maybe two if he could really turn on that cute Labrador smile of his.

It wasn't necessarily inspiring to be looking at Fred, but it was a useful reminder to Tom to never forget the simple things in life, the free things that serve to keep him grounded. It would be a recurring thought over the next while.

With Fred now happy and sitting on his cushion in the office, Tom looked at his laptop screen then wrote the opening line of his *Survival Project*. "*The first painful fact is simple. A large amount of money is needed to fund the LRG, on research*

that I know is not fashionable in the typical funding circles like government funding agencies.” And even if there was some money, there were no funding cycles out there that could turn successful proposals around in time to give them the funding they needed. Desperate times.

The second painful fact was Eloise. He didn't have to write this down. He stared out the window into the darkness. As much as he knew she was committed to him, he knew she was more committed to her research. She would leave King's and go anywhere to continue her work.

Leaving. Without him. Good-bye, Eloise. The thought was unbearable.

The third painful fact was Wainright. Yes, he was a Bastard of the highest order to be putting him in this predicament.

For fifteen minutes these three pain points spun around Tom's head while he stared into the darkness outside and at the LRG's website. There were no sudden flashes of inspiration hitting him, except for one, at minute Fifteen, when he remembered the graduation gift he received from Wainright when Tom was awarded his doctoral degree – a thirty-seven year old bottle of Lagavulin Single Malt Scotch Whisky. Tom didn't drink Scotch, but he was saving the bottle for when he got a tenured position at a university. But shit, this moment was deserving of Scotch, if ever there was a deserving moment. His creative drive needed some *swirling inspirational malt*, as Wainright often called his Lagavulin, to boost the firing of his brain's neurons.

Tom reached around in his bare kitchen cupboards, eventually finding the bottle tucked away in the dark reaches of the farthest corner of the highest top shelf. He also needed the right atmosphere. He put some inspirational music on – tonight it was hard hitting music from his Texas Blues compilation – he sliced some chunks of cheese, grabbed the Scotch and a glass, and a big bag of New York bagel crackers.

He returned to his home office determined, and with some essential - albeit desperate - tools for creativity. He was ready.

To officially begin what he was now dubbing his new life, his re-birth, he stood up, raised his glass of Scotch in the air and exclaimed, 'To Wainright, you sick bastard, I thought I knew you, but it seems I never did. I am where I am today because of you, and I will be where I will be in four months because of you too.' The scotch malt whisky raced down Tom's throat.

The scotch quickly took effect. Tom started seeing things in a different light. Unsurprisingly, it all seemed much less of a problem. Three glasses of straight Scotch and some pounding blues tunes later, there barely seemed to be a problem. He was surfing the Internet trolling for ideas, looking at conference paper titles, scanning research at other organizations, government websites, blogs, blogs and more blogs, chat groups, Reddit posts, anything and everything – freewheeling – looking for ideas that had stickability – and convertibility – ideas that could be transformed into hard and quick cash for the Life Research Group.

As the scotch blurred Tom's coherent thought processes, but stimulated others, his Internet search became increasingly random and obscure. He stumbled upon a website dedicated to the *Turritopsis dohrnii*, the immortal jellyfish. Life forever, in other words. He started reading.

The jellyfish is immortal, the website explained, because it alters its cells through a development process known as transdifferentiation, transforming them into new types of cells. This, in theory, can go on indefinitely, which effectively makes the jellyfish biologically immortal.

By now, the Texas blues had been replaced by Canada's *Dead South*, and then *U2*. Bono was singing *I still haven't found what I'm looking for*, and Tom and his whisky thought this meant something. The interconnectedness of it all – beyond coincidence surely. But what? How do the pieces fit together? He looked at other websites he'd found but kept coming back to the jellyfish.

How unscientific he thought. Everything he aspired not to be. Scientific rigour, evidence, hard data, facts ... that was his research life. That was who he was, dammit. Not beliefs, faith, religious order, spirits, coincidence, or any woo-woo mumbo-jumbo. He was a fully-fledged, card-carrying skeptic.

But wow. What if we could be immortal? Couldn't we, the Life Research Group, justifiably look at the implications of this? Has anyone considered this? Are there scientists out there trying to make people immortal? He knocked back some more scotch. *How totally, super awesome friggin' cool.*

He was drunk, of course.

And so, into the early hours of the new day he surfed and thought, and sang and thought, and drank and thought, and danced and thought. Some thoughts collided with one another while others fit like a glove. He scribbled notes when he thought things made sense and let other thoughts simply hover around at 120,000 feet

altitude, knowing that at some point some of these might also land and make some kind of sense.

And he raised his glass to Wainright once more, this time to congratulate him on his fine taste of Scotch, which was tasting pretty damn good at 2am. What had been a shitty day was turning into a celebration of life. For the first time in ages, Tom admitted to himself he was actually having some good ideas – some real ideas. And the bonus, he was enjoying it. He really wanted to call Eloise but knew that would end badly. Like the Phoenix rising from the ashes, he was ‘seeing’ – experiencing and feeling – the rebirth of his own existence. He didn’t know where it would all lead, but he was certain it would be better than the mental space he was currently living in. All this from reading about a bell-shaped jellyfish about the size of a person’s pinky nail and wondering about immortality.

Just down the hallway quietly sat the ancient Egyptian chest. In the chest sat three boxes. The lids of the boxes were inscribed in gold, real gold, with the words *Ankh* – the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol for Life, *Kephri* – a god of creation, the movement of the sun, and rebirth, and *Osiris* – the judge of the dead and the underworld that granted all life.

So there it was. Immortal jellyfish swimming around in Tom’s mind while an ancient Egyptian chest sat just a few feet away with messages on immortality waiting to be seen. Sometimes in life you cannot explain with scientific reasoning why certain things happen, the interconnectedness of it all.

And then, out of nowhere, Tom had an idea. A massively brilliant idea. At least *he* thought so.

On this re-birthing night, as Tom put it, the pinball neurosynapsing of his mind, a surprisingly tasty thirty-seven year old scotch, a website for a jellyfish, some brilliant lyrics, and a UPS delivered parcel lying lonely in a hall closet all felt like more than just a coincidence.

Which, as it turns out, is why the Central Intelligence Agency would soon be involved.