



# SECRET ORBIT

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# Day I

YOU WAKE IN what seems to be an abandoned factory. The pipework and ductwork is of an extraordinary beauty. There is no way out. This is the Holding Pen, whence no-one in reality, despite the stated protocols and procedures and mission statements established by the Management, ever escapes. But hang on a minute. You must have escaped, it's vivid in your memory; except it isn't, that's an illusion, because of course there is no longer any discernible electrochemical activity in that skull of yours, because, frankly, you have the condition known as brain death. That is to say, your brain stem is no longer in meaningful connection with your spinal cord. That trumps everything. So to say "you wake" or that "you remember you awoke" is fanciful. But there you are.

The good news is that this is no abandoned factory after all; actually, it looks uncommonly like your own bed in your own bedroom in your own flat. Congratulations. You made it. What do you think of that?

Sorry, your response is inaudible.

No blood flow, no oxygen, that's bad. You can't think how bad. But to get out of the Holding Pen, that's a result. If indeed you did. The only thing is – can you turn off that damn TV, or even just turn the volume down? it goes on and on, at a level of banality that beggars belief, plumbing new depths just when you thought you'd got to the bottom – the only thing is – no, of course you can't, you are immobilised by this condition of yours, that is to say death, or more

properly brain stem death, and it's no longer at all possible for that bony finger of yours, not a few hours ago so mobile, so expressive, as were all ten fingers-and-thumbs, to press the off button. A pity you didn't have it tuned to a more interesting channel to begin with, BBC4, for instance, all those fascinating documentaries, and the added blessing of off-air silence during most of the daylight hours. Well, it can't be helped now. The only thing is: how did it happen?

There is no answer.

A dog is having hysterics in the street below, and its owner is shouting at it. No, you can't hear that either. Nor even the hum of traffic. But you seem fresh. Quite cool. Well, on this first day of your death your body will be rapidly cooling to room temperature. The inexorable dance of entropy kicks in, now that the vital metabolic processes and enzymatic functions needed to maintain body temperature are no longer in operation. You're not looking too bad, tucked up in your duvet. Appearances can, however, be deceptive. The bacteria that before death were feeding happily on the contents of your intestine, as they have been throughout the eight decades and more of your life, are now just beginning the enormous task of digesting the intestine itself. You won't notice that yet. The streams in your blood vessels are becoming irregular and lumpy as red blood cells clump together. Once circulation of the blood has completely ceased, gravity will predominate; that is, your blood will tend to flow downward, accumulating in capillaries and small veins in the lower parts of your body. Soon your skin will take on a different hue, with a patchy mottling, as you lie there peacefully. Relax, this is quite natural.

Looking back on your life, do you have any unfulfilled goals?

What's that? You don't know? No, of course you don't. You were a young man first, and then you became middle-

aged and then you became an old man. That's about it. That's the story, in a nutshell. Of course, it's understandable, you are no longer in a position to say anything meaningful about it. Whatever happened happened. There's no going back. Thank god, it may be said. The very last time you saw yourself was probably last night, in the bathroom mirror. There you were, your reflection anyway, with a delay of approximately six nanoseconds, in your cracked and foxed bathroom mirror. All you saw was an old man you didn't recognise, who used to come in every morning looking worse than before; but he was you, a representation of you anyway, this is all you know: you remembered you'd come in, you'd lather and scrape at your face, you'd comb the few strands left of your hair, you'd strain to shit.

You had a medical condition, several medical conditions, described by one of the doctors as "complex", but now it doesn't matter any more, so that's the good side. Also your worldly possessions, it doesn't matter about them, the burglar can take them now, you don't care, do you? If he's still plying his trade. Or BJ can take them, if he ever returns. The key is still under the mat, he knows that. Do you follow? You're not listening, of course. Because all that's left to you is the final darkness, and you welcome it – it's a relief, it's easeful, as the poet said. Comfy. No need to worry about the Management either, they do not have dominion over your estate, not any more. You used to always be aware of the Management watching you, didn't you, that's a fact, how they would see you come, see you go. How there's nothing they didn't notice. You came to realise that. How you had to keep vigilant. Even when you went to post a letter, or something like that, via the short cut through the park, which is merely a dog toilet now. Through the gate in the arrowhead railings, then on to the diagonal path. You remember when it was all daffodils in spring, lovely it was, the way the council

kept it. A lovely aspect, this flat has, looking over the park in spring. A typical London park. That was when you had your people, when they were truly alive. The park: a dog toilet now. You had a medical condition, which is to say you couldn't walk very far, inasmuch as you got tired and all that, so you just used to go out to post a letter and come straight back. Or get the paper. What's in the paper? Nothing. Rubbish. But no need to worry about all that now.

The burglar – he paid you another visit the other night. When was that? Ooh, maybe months ago. It's hard to keep track. This time he's taken your medical records, just took them out of the file, can you believe that? Well there's nothing much left to take by now. It's unbelievable. You're an old man, what have you got? Nothing. Your people are all gone now, long gone. Though sometimes you see them when you wake up, right here in the flat, at two in the morning. But this burglar, oh, he's been in a dozen times if he's been once. First, the radio: that's gone. Then you had these tins, which you won in the raffle at the day centre, tins of food, you stored them around the flat. You had one here behind the sofa, and one on that shelf, just hidden from sight, and another, you forget where (this is speculation, of course). All gone! you wake up in the morning, they've all disappeared. The chap, he's been again and taken them, every single one. It doesn't bear thinking about. Well, never mind him. He's welcome to anything else if he wants to come back now. He'll get a shock too, when he sees you. That'll be funny. Remember what happened? There you were in bed, you woke up in the night because you heard someone bugging about within the flat, you threw your mug, which happened to be by your bedside, at him, but he was too quick for you, and the mug banged on the floor but didn't break. He ran into the spare room, you toddled after, and you were banging on the door shouting, but he'd locked

himself in the room. It was two o'clock in the morning, something like that. Are you going to come out? you were shouting. Finally the door opened, but it wasn't him, it was not the burglar, he must have left when you weren't attending, or climbed out via the window. And instead there was your mother, right there in the doorway, who's been dead these sixty years, so it was very confusing, and she said, There there, it's all right, just like you remember her doing way back when you were very little. There there, don't be afraid, and all that. A sort of glow about her. You began weeping, but when you opened your eyes she wasn't there any more, of course.

You used to go down the High Street, but it's all changed. That department store, which we all remember, gone now, and the draper's too. An old-fashioned draper's shop like the one your mother used to work in, back on the island, which is where you were born. The butcher's used to have this effigy on the pavement in front of it in those days: fat smiling butcher in a straw hat with a blue ribbon round it and a blue tie and red and white striped apron, and he's grinning and has a ginger moustache and sideburns. As tall as you are and twice as wide. Was there for years. Now it says on the sign "Halal Butcher". And the chaps behind the counter, they don't look anything like him. Fair enough, it all changes. Now it's all shops selling strange vegetables, and artificial hair. And cheap stuff, electronic gizmos of all kinds. Everything for a pound. It used to be class. That's what you always said, didn't you? You talked to your mirror about it all the time, which is to say your image, which is to say your self. Antique furniture shops all in a row across the street, on the other side of the park, smelling of French polish, beautiful; not any more. And it changes too fast, and the street's just full of youngsters, all jabbering. That's what they do, the youngsters, they jabber at their electronic giz-

mos. It's not human speech, you can't understand it. It goes too fast. They're laughing but their eyes have no mirth for you. There's this young white woman with scraped-back hair enters the post office with a baby in a pushchair, as you're coming out with your pension; you hold open the heavy glass door for her, but she doesn't even look at you, it's like you're not there, like you don't exist. She has tattoos all up her arm.

Crossing the park in the mist in winter, coming home, it's hard to see anything, the cold grass just fades into bluish nothing on every side. The mist swirls up and the darkness comes up on all sides and just engulfs the whole thing. You're in the middle of the crossroads, in the part, I mean, where the paths cross, quite frosty. And you're hearing this call from somewhere, at first far off then coming closer, this man's voice calling, "Itler! 'Itler!" There he is ahead of you, looming up out of the mist. And then again, "Itler! 'Itler!" And now you realise he's calling his *dog*; well, your blood's boiling about it. Now you can just manage to make him out in the fog, he's a man of some bulk. He's going, "Itler! 'Itler!" and the great brutish dog just leaping out of the distance and making a fuss. You want to say to him, You don't know what you're on about! You know what *he* did? You don't know anything about it! But of course, you never say anything. Not wise. That's the kind of world we're in now. Everybody's forgotten. That's what BJ used to say. Whatever happened to BJ?

Time for a rest from all that, anyway. Best out of it. But is there any way to turn off that great bright gaudy-colour TV, or at least turn the damn sound down? No, of course not.