

Ferryman

By Eric Brown.

Richard Lincoln sat in the darkened living room and half-listened to the radio news. More unrest in the East; riots and protests against the implantation process in India and Malaysia. The President of France had taken his life, another suicide statistic to add to the growing list... The news finished and was followed by a weather report: more snow was forecast for that night and the following day. Lincoln was hoping for quiet shift when the bracelet around his wrist began to warm. He pushed himself from his armchair, crossed to the computer on the desk, and touched the bracelet to the screen.

The name and address of the deceased glowed in the darkness.

Despite the weather and the inconvenience of the late hour, as ever he felt the visceral thrill of embarkation, the anticipation of what was to come.

He memorised the address as he stepped into the hall and found his coat, already planning the route twenty miles over the moors to the dead man's town.

He was checking his pocket for the Range Rover's keys when he heard the muffled grumble, amplified by the snow, of a car's engine. His cottage was a mile from the nearest road, serviced by a pot-holed cart track. No-one ever turned down the track by mistake, and he'd had no visitors in years.

He waited, as if half-expecting the noise to go away - but the vehicle's irritable whine increased as it fought through the snow and ice towards the cottage. Lincoln switched on the outside light and returned to the living room, pulling aside the curtain and peering out.

A white Fiat Panda lurched from pot-hole to pot-hole, headlights bouncing. It came to a stop outside the cottage, the sudden silence profound, and a second later someone climbed out.

Lincoln watched his daughter slam the door and pick her way carefully through the snow.

The door-bell chimed.

For a second he envisaged the tense confrontation that would follow, but the warm glow at his wrist gave him an excuse to reduce his contact with Susanne to a minimum.

He pulled open the door. She stood tall in an expensive white mackintosh, collar turned up around her long, dark, snow-specked hair.

Her implant showed as a slight bulge at her temple.

She could hardly bring herself to look him in the eye. Which, he thought, was hardly surprising.

She gave a timid half-smile. "It's cold out here, Richard."

"Ah... Come in. This is a surprise. Why didn't you ring?"

"I couldn't talk over the phone. I needed to see you in person."

To explain herself, he thought; to excuse her recent conduct.

She swept past him, shaking the melted snow from her hair. She hung her coat in the hall and walked into the living room.

Lincoln paused behind her, his throat constricted with an emotion he found hard to identify. He knew he should have felt angry, but all he did feel was the desire for Susanne to leave.

"I'm sorry. I should have come sooner. I've been busy."

She was thirty, tall and good-looking and - damn them - treacherous genes had bequeathed her the unsettling appearance of her mother.

As he stared at her, Lincoln realised that he no longer knew the woman who was his daughter.

"But I'm here now," she said. "I've come about-"

He interrupted, his pulse racing. "I don't want to talk about your mother."

"Well I do," Susanne said. "This is important."

He recalled his excuse. "As a matter of fact it's impossible right now..." He held up his right hand, showing Susanne the band around his wrist.

"You've been called."

"It's quite a way - over the Pennines. Hebden Bridge. I should really be setting off. Look... make yourself at home. You know where the spare room is. We can... we'll talk in the morning, okay?"

He caught the flash of impatience on her face, soon doused by the realisation that nothing came between him and his calling.

She sighed. "Fine. See you in the morning."

Relief lifting from his shoulders like a weight, Lincoln nodded and hurried outside. Seconds later he was revving the Range Rover up the uneven track, into the darkness.

The road through the Pennines had been gritted earlier that night, and the snow that had fallen since had turned into a thin grey mush. Lincoln drove cautiously, his the only vehicle out this late. Insulated from the cold outside, he tried to forget about the presence of Susanne back at the cottage. He half-listened to a discussion programme on Radio Four. He imagined half a dozen dusty academics huddled in a tiny studio in Bush House. Cockburn, the Cambridge philosopher, had the microphone: "It is indeed possible that individuals will experience a certain disaffection, even apathy, which is the result of knowing that there is more to existence than this life..."

Lincoln wondered if this might explain the alienation he had felt for a year, since accepting his present position. But then he'd always had difficulty in showing his emotions, and consequently accepting that anyone else had emotions to show.

This life is a prelude, he thought, a farce I've endured for fifty-five years - the end of which I look forward to with anticipation.

It took him almost two and a half hours to reach Hebden Bridge. The small town, occupying the depths of a steep valley, was dank and quiet in the continuing snowfall. Streetlights sparkled through the darkness.

He drove through the town and up a steep hill, then turned right up an even steeper minor road. Hillcrest Farm occupied a bluff overlooking the acute incision of the valley. Coachlights burned orange around the front porch. A police car was parked outside.

Lincoln climbed from the Range Rover and hurried across to the porch. He stood for a second before pressing the door-bell, composing himself. He always found it best to adopt a neutral attitude until he could assess the mood of the bereaved family: more often than not the mood in the homes of the dead was one of excitement and anticipation.

Infrequently, especially if the bereaved were religious, a more formal grief prevailed.

He pressed the bell and seconds later a ruddy-faced local constable opened the door. "There you are. We've been wondering if you'd make it, weather like it is."

"Nice night for it," Lincoln said, stepping into the hall.

The constable gestured up a narrow flight of stairs. "The dead man's a farmer - silly bugger went out looking for a lost ewe. Heart attack. His daughter was out with him - but he was dead by the time she fetched help. He's in the front bedroom."

Lincoln followed the constable up the stairs and along a corridor. The entrance to the bedroom was impossibly low; both men had to stoop as if entering a cave.

He saw the bereaved family first, half a dozen men and women in their twenties and thirties, seated around the bed on dining chairs. An old woman, presumably the farmer's widow, sat on the bed itself, her husband's lifeless blue hand clutched in hers.

Lincoln registered the looks he received as he entered the room: the light of hope and gratitude burned in the eyes of the family, as if he, Lincoln himself, was responsible for what would happen over the course of the next six months. The farmer lay fully-dressed on the bed, rugged and grey like the carving of a knight on a sarcophagus.

An actor assuming a role, Lincoln nodded with suitable gravity to each of the family in turn.

"If anyone has any questions, anything at all, I'll be glad to answer them." It was a line he came out with every time to break the ice, but he was rarely questioned these days.

He stepped forward and touched his bracelet to the dead man's temple, where his implant raised a veined, weather-worn rectangle beneath the skin. The nanomeks would now begin the next stage of the process, the preparation of the body for its onward journey.

"I'll fetch the container," he said - he never called it a coffin - and nodded to the constable.

Together they carried the polycarbon container from the back of the Range Rover, easing it around the bends in the stairs. The family formed a silent huddle outside the bedroom door. Lincoln and the constable passed inside and closed the door behind them.

They lifted the corpse into the container and Lincoln sealed the sliding lid. The job of carrying the container down the stairs - attempting to maintain dignity in the face of impossible angles and improbable bends - was made all the more difficult by the presence of the family, watching from the stair landing.

Five minutes of gentle coaxing and patient lifting and turning, and the container was in the back of the Range Rover.

The constable handed over a sheaf of papers, which Lincoln duly signed and passed back. "I'll be on my way, Mr Lincoln," the constable said. "See you later." He waved and climbed into his squad car.

One of the farmer's daughters hurried from the house. "You'll stay for a cup of tea?"

Lincoln was about to refuse, then realised how cold he was. "Yes, that'd be nice. Thanks."

He followed her into a big, stone-flagged kitchen, an Aga stove filling the room with warmth.

He could tell that she had been crying. She was a plain woman in her mid-thirties, with the stolid, resigned appearance of the unfortunate sibling left at home to help with the farm work.

He saw the crucifix on a gold chain around her neck, and then noticed that her temple was without an implant. He began to regret accepting the offer of tea.

He sat at the big wooden table and wrapped his hands around the steaming mug. The woman sat down across from him, nervously meeting his eyes.

"It happened so quickly. I can hardly believe it. He had a weak heart - we knew that. We told him to slow down. But he didn't listen."

Lincoln gestured. "He was implanted," he said gently.

She nodded, eyes regarding her mug. "They all are, my mother, brothers and sisters." She glanced up at him, something like mute appeal in her eyes. "It seems that all the country is, these days."

When she looked away, Lincoln found his fingers straying to the outline of his own implant.

"But..." she whispered, "I'm sure things were... I don't know - better before. I mean, look at all the suicides - thousands of people every month take their lives..." She shook her head, confused. "Don't you think that people are less... less concerned now, less caring?"

"I've heard Cockburn's speeches. He says something along the same lines."

"I agree with him. To so many people this life is no longer so important. It's something to be got through, before what follows."

How could he tell her that he felt this himself?

He said, "But wasn't that what religious people thought about life, before the change?"

She stared at him as if he were an ignoramus. "No! Of course not. That might have been what atheists thought religious people felt... But we love life, Mr Lincoln. We give thanks for the miracle of God's gift."

She turned her mug self-consciously between flattened palms. "I don't like what's happened to the world. I don't think it's right. I loved my father. We were close. I've never loved anyone quite so much." She looked up at him, her eyes silver with tears. "He was such a wonderful man. We attended church together. And then they came," she said with venom, "and everything changed. My father, he..." she could not stop the tears now, "he believed what they said. He left the Church. He had the implant, like all the rest of you."

He reached out and touched her hand. "Look, this might sound strange, coming from me, but I understand what you're saying. I might not agree, but I know what you're experiencing."

She looked at him, something like hope in her eyes. "You do? You really do? Then..." She fell silent, regarding the scrubbed pine table-top. "Mr Lincoln," she said at last, in a whispered entreaty, "do you really have to take him away?"

He sighed, pained. "Of course I do. It was his choice. He chose to be implanted. Don't you realise that to violate his trust, his choice..." He paused. "You said you loved him. In that case respect his wishes."

She was slowly shaking her head. "But I love God even more," she said. "And I think that what is happening is wrong."

He drained his tea with a gesture of finality. "There'll be a religious service of your choice at the Station in two days' time," he said.

"And then... what then, Mr Lincoln?"

"Then he'll be taken, healed. In six months the process will be complete."

"Then he'll come back?"

"He'll be in contact before then, by recorded message, in around three months. Of course, he won't be able to travel until the six month period has elapsed. Then he'll return."

"And after that?"

"It's his choice. Some choose to come back here and take up where they left off, resume their old lives. But sooner or later..." Lincoln shrugged. "In time he'll realise that there's more to life than what's here. Others prefer to make a clean break and work away from the start."

She said in a whisper, "What do they want with our dead, Mr Lincoln? Why are they doing this to us?"

He sighed. "You must have read the literature, seen the documentaries. It's all in there."

"But you... as a ferryman... surely you can tell me what they really want?"

"They want what they say - nothing more and nothing less."

A silence came between them. She was nodding, staring into her empty mug. He stood and touched her shoulder as he left the kitchen. He said good-bye to the family in the living room - gathered like the survivors of some natural catastrophe, unsure quite how to proceed - and let himself out through the front door.

He climbed into the Range Rover, turned and accelerated south towards the Onward Station.

He drove for the next hour through the darkness, high over the West Yorkshire moors, cocooned in the warmth of the vehicle with a symphony by Haydn playing counterpoint to the grumble of the engine.

Neither the music nor the concentration required to keep the vehicle on the road fully occupied his thoughts. The events at the farmhouse, and his conversation with the dead man's daughter, stirred memories and emotions he would rather not have recalled.

It was more than the woman's professed love for her dead father that troubled him, reminding him of his failed relationship with his Susanne. The fact that the farmer's daughter had foregone the implant stirred a deep anger within him. He had said nothing at the time, but now he wanted to return and plead with her to think again about undergoing the simple process that would grant her another life.

In the July of last year, at the height of summer, Lincoln's wife had finally left him. After thirty-five years of marriage she had walked out, moved to London to stay with Susanne until she found a place of her own.

In retrospect he was not surprised at her decision to leave; it was the inevitable culmination of years of neglect on his part. At the time, however, it had come as a shock - verification that the increasing disaffection he felt had at last destroyed their relationship.

He recalled their confrontation on that final morning as clearly as if it were yesterday.

Behind a barricade of suitcases piled in the hall, Barbara had stared at him with an expression little short of hatred. They had rehearsed the dialogue many times before.

"You've changed, Rich," she said accusingly. "Over the past few months, since taking the job."

He shook his head, tired of the same old argument. "I'm still the same person I always was."

She gave a bitter smile. "Oh, you've always been a cold and emotionless bastard, but since taking the job..."

He wondered if he had applied for the position because of who and what he was, a natural progression from the solitary profession of freelance editor of scholastic text books. Ferryman were looked upon by the general public with a certain degree of wariness, much as undertakers had been in the past. They were seen as a profession apart.

Or, he wondered, did he become a ferryman to spite his wife?

There had been mixed reactions to the news of the implants and their consequences: many people were euphoric at the prospect of renewed life; others had been cautiously wary, not to say suspicious. Barbara had placed herself among the latter.

"There's no hurry," she had told Lincoln when he mentioned that he'd decided to have the operation. "I have no intention of dying, just yet."

At first he had taken her reluctance as no more than an affectation, a desire to be different from the herd. Most people they knew had had the implant: Barbara's abstention was a talking point.

Then it occurred to Lincoln that she had decided against having the implantation specifically to annoy him; she had adopted these frustrating affectations during the years of their marriage: silly things like refusing to holiday on the coast because of her dislike of the sea - or rather because Lincoln loved the sea; deciding to become a vegetarian, and doing her damndest to turn him into one, too.

Then, drunk one evening after a long session at the local, she had confessed that the reason she had refused the implant option was because she was petrified of what might happen to her after she died. She did not trust their motives.

"How... how do we know that they're telling the truth? How do we know what - what'll happen to us once they have us in their grasp?"

"You're making them sound like B-movie monsters," Lincoln said.

"Aren't they?"

He had gone through the government pamphlets with her, reiterated the arguments both for and against. He had tried to persuade her that the implants were the greatest advance in the history of humankind.

"But not everyone's going along with it," she had countered. "Look at all the protest groups. Look at what's happening around the world. The riots, political assassinations--"

"That's because they cling to their bloody superstitious religions," Lincoln had said. "Let's go over it again..."

But she had steadfastly refused to be convinced, and after a while he had given up trying to change her mind.

Then he'd applied to become a ferryman, and was accepted.

"I hope you feel pleased with yourself," Barbara said one day, gin-drunk and vindictive.

He had lowered his newspaper. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, why the hell do you want to work for them, do their dirty work?" Then she had smiled. "Because, Mr Bloody Ferryman, you'd rather side with them than with me. I'm only your bloody wife, after all."

And Lincoln had returned to the paper, wondering whether what she had said was true.

Over the next few weeks their relationship, never steady, had deteriorated rapidly. They lived separate lives, meeting for meals when, depending on how much she had drunk, Barbara could be sullenly uncommunicative or hysterically spiteful.

Complacent, Lincoln had assumed the rift would heal in time.

Her decision to leave had initially shocked him. Then, as her decision turned from threat to reality, he saw the logic of their separation - it was, after all, the last step in the process of isolation he had been moving towards for a long, long time.

He had pleaded with her, before she left, to think again about having the implant operation.

"The first resurrectees will be returning soon," he told her. "Then you'll find that you've nothing to fear."

But Barbara had merely shaken her head and walked out of his life.

He wrote to her at Susanne's address over the next couple of months, self-conscious letters expressing his hopes that Barbara was doing okay, would think again about having an implant. Reading the letters back to himself, he had realised how little he had said - how little there was to say - about himself and his own life.

Then last autumn, Lincoln had received a phone call from Susanne. The sound of her voice - the novelty of her call - told Lincoln that something was wrong.

"It's your mother-" he began.

"Dad... I'm sorry. She didn't want you to know. She was ill for a month - she wasn't in pain."

All he could say was, "What?" as a cold hollow expanded inside his chest.

"Cancer. It was inoperable."

Silence - then, against his better judgement, he asked, "Did - did she have the implant, Susanne?"

An even longer silence greeted the question, and Lincoln knew full well the answer.

"She didn't want a funeral," Susanne said. "I scattered her ashes on the pond at Rochester."

A week later he had travelled down to London. He called at his daughter's flat, but she was either

out or ignoring him. He drove on to Rochester, his wife's birthplace, not really knowing why he was going but aware that, somehow, the pilgrimage was necessary.

He had stood beside the pond, staring into the water and weeping quietly to himself. Christ, he had hated the bitch at times - but, again, at certain times with Barbara he had also experienced all the love he had ever known.

As if to mock the fact of his wife's death, her immutable non-existence, the rearing crystal obelisk of this sector's Onward Station towered over the town like a monument to humankind's new-found immortality, or an epitaph to the legion of dead and gone.

He had returned home and resumed his work, and over the months the pain had become bearable. His daughter's return, last night, had reopened the old wound. A silver dawn was breaking over the horizon, revealing a landscape redesigned, seemingly inflated, by the night's snowfall. The Onward Station appeared on the skyline, a fabulous tower of spun glass scintillating in the light of the rising sun. He visited the Station perhaps four or five times a week, and never failed to stare in awe - struck not only by the structure's ethereal architecture, but by what it meant for the future of humankind.

He braked in the car park alongside the vehicles of the dozen other ferrymen on duty today. He climbed out and pulled the polycarbon container from the back of the Range Rover, the collapsible chromium trolley taking its weight. His breath pluming before him in the ice-cold air, he hurried towards the entrance set into the sloping glass walls.

The interior design of the Station was Arctic in its antiseptic inhospitality, the corridors shining with sourceless, polar light. At these times, as he manoeuvred the trolley down the seemingly endless corridors, he felt that he was, truly, trespassing on territory forever alien.

He arrived at the preparation room and eased the container onto the circular reception table, opening the lid. The farmer lay unmoving in death, maintained by the host of alien nanomeks that later, augmented by others more powerful, would begin the resurrection process. They would not only restore him to life, strip away the years, but make him fit and strong again: the man who returned to Earth in six months would be physically in his thirties, but effectively immortal.

In this room, Lincoln never ceased to be overcome by the wonder, as might a believer at the altar of some mighty cathedral.

He backed out, pulling the trolley after him, and retraced his steps. To either side of the foyer, cleaners vacuumed carpets and arranged sprays of flowers in the Greeting rooms, ready to receive the day's returnees, their relatives and loved ones.

He emerged into the ice-cold dawn and hurried across to the Range Rover. On the road that climbed the hill behind the Station, he braked and sat for ten minutes staring down at the diaphanous structure.

Every day a dozen bodies were beamed from this Station to the lightship in geo-sync orbit, pulses of energy invisible during the daylight hours. At night the pulses were blinding columns of blue lightning, illuminating the land for miles around.

From Earth orbit, the ships phased into trans-c mode and reached the aliens' homeplanet in days. There the dead were revived, brought back to life and gradual consciousness by techniques of medical science that experts on Earth were still trying to comprehend. After six months of rehabilitation and instruction, the resurrected had the choice of returning to Earth, or beginning their missions immediately. Children and youths under the age of twenty were returned, to live their lives until adulthood and such time as they decided to progress onwards.

Lincoln looked up, into the rapidly fading darkness. A few bright stars still glimmered, stars that for so long had been mysterious and unattainable - and now, hard though it was sometimes to believe, had been thrown open to humankind by the beneficence of beings still mistrusted by many, but accepted by others as saviours.

And why had the aliens made their offer to humankind?

There were millions upon millions of galaxies out there, the aliens said, billions of solar systems, and countless, literally countless, planets that sustained life of various kinds.

Explorers were needed, envoys and ambassadors, to discover new life, and make contact, and spread the greetings of the civilised universe far and wide.

Lincoln stared up at the fading stars and thought what a wondrous fact, what a miracle; he considered the new worlds out there, waiting to be discovered, strange planets and civilisations, and it was almost too much to comprehend that, when he died and was reborn, he too would venture out on that greatest diaspora of all.

He drove home slowly, tired after the exertions of the night. Only when he turned down the cart track, and saw the white Fiat parked outside the cottage, was he reminded of his daughter.

He told himself that he would make an effort today: he would not reprimand her for saying nothing about Barbara's illness, wouldn't even question her. God knows, he had never done anything to earn her trust and affection: it was perfectly understandable that she had complied with her mother's last wishes.

Still, despite his resolve, he felt a slow fuse of anger burning within him as he climbed from the Range Rover and let himself into the house.

He moved to the kitchen to make himself a coffee, and as he was crossing the hall he noticed that Susanne's coat was missing from the stand, and likewise her boots from beneath it.

From the kitchen window he looked up at the broad sweep of the moorland, fleeced in brilliant snow, to the gold and silver laminated sunrise.

He made out Susanne's slim figure silhouetted against the brightness. She looked small and vulnerable, set against such vastness, and Lincoln felt something move within him, an emotion like sadness and regret, the realisation of squandered opportunity.

On impulse he fetched his coat, left the cottage and followed the trail of her deep footprints up the hillside to the crest of the rise.

She heard the crunch of his approach, turned and gave a wan half-smile. "Admiring the view," she whispered.

He stood beside her, staring down at the limitless expanse of the land, comprehensively white save for the lee sides of the dry-stone walls, the occasional distant farmhouse.

Years ago he had taken long walks with Susanne, enjoyed summer afternoons together on the wild and undulating moorland. Then she had grown, metamorphosed into a teenager he had no hope of comprehending, a unique individual - no longer a malleable child - over whom he had no control. He had found himself, as she came more and more to resemble her mother and take Barbara's side in every argument, in a minority of one.

He had become increasingly embittered, over the years. Now he wanted to reach out to Susanne, make some gesture to show her that he cared, but found himself unable to even contemplate the overture of reconciliation.

In the distance, miles away on the far horizon, was the faerie structure of the Station, its tower flashing sunlight.

At last she said, "I'm sorry," so softly that he hardly heard.

His voice seemed too loud by comparison. "I understand," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't think you do." She paused. Tears filled her eyes, and he wondered why she was crying like this.

"Susanne..."

"But you don't understand."

"I do," he said gently. "Your mother didn't want me to know about her illness - she didn't want me around. Christ, I was a pain enough to her when she was perfectly well."

"It wasn't that," Susanne said in a small voice. "You see, she didn't want you to know that she'd



been wrong."

"Wrong?" He stared at her, not comprehending. "Wrong about what?"

She took a breath, said, "Wrong about the implant," and tears escaped her eyes and tracked down her cheeks.

Lincoln felt something tighten within his chest, constrict his throat, making words difficult.

"What do you mean?" he asked at last.

"Faced with death, in the last weeks... it was too much. I... I persuaded her to think again. At last she realised she'd been wrong. A week before she died, she had the implant." Susanne looked away, not wanting, or not daring, to look upon his reaction to her duplicity.

He found it impossible to speak, much less order his thoughts, as the realisation coursed through him.

Good God. Barbara...

He felt then love and hate, desire and a flare of anger.

Susanne said: "She made me swear not to tell you. She hated you, towards the end."

"It was my fault," he said. "I was a bastard. I deserved everything. It's complex, Susanne, so bloody damned complex - loving someone and hating them at the same time, needing to be alone and yet needing what they can give."

A wind sprang up, lifting a tress of his daughter's hair. She fingered it back into place behind her ear. "I heard from her three months ago - a kind of CD thing delivered from my local Station. She told me that she'd been terribly cruel in not telling you. I... I meant to come up and tell you earlier, but I had no idea how you'd react. I kept putting it off. I came up yesterday because it was the last chance before she returns."

"When?" Lincoln asked, suddenly aware of the steady pounding of his heart.

"Today," Susanne said. She glanced at her watch. "At noon today - at this Station."

"This Station?" Lincoln said. "Of all the hundreds in Britain?" He shook his head, some unnameable emotion making words difficult. "What... what does she want?"

"To see you, of course. She wants to apologise. She told me she's learned a great many things up there, and one of them was compassion."

Oh, Christ, he thought.

"Susanne," he said, "I don't think I could face your mother right now."

She turned to him. "Please," she said, "please, this time, can't you make the effort - for me?"

What do you think it's been like, watching you two fight over the years?"

Lincoln baulked at the idea of meeting this resurrected Barbara, this reconstructed, compassionate creature. He wanted nothing of her pity.

"Look," Susanne said at last, "she's leaving soon, going to some star I can't even pronounce. She wants to say goodbye."

Lincoln looked towards the horizon, at the coruscating tower of the Station.

"We used to walk a lot round here when I was young," Susanne said. There was a note of desperation in her voice, a final appeal.

Lincoln looked at his watch. It was almost nine. They could just make it to the Station by midday, if they set off now.

He wondered if he would have been able to face Barbara, had she intended to stay on Earth.

At last, Lincoln reached out and took his daughter's hand.

They walked down the hill, through the snow, towards the achingly beautiful tower of the Onward Station.