

## THE WALK

By Greg Egan

Leaves and twigs crunch underfoot with every step; no gentle rustling, but the sharp, snapping sounds of irrevocable, unrepeatable damage — as if to hammer into my brain the fact that no one else has come this way for some time. Every footfall proclaims that there'll be no help, no interruptions, no distractions.

I've felt weak and giddy since we left the car — and part of me is still hoping that I'll simply pass out, collapse on the spot and never get up again. My body, though, shows no signs of obliging: it stubbornly acts as if each step forward is the easiest thing in the world, as if its sense of balance is unimpaired, as if all the fatigue and nausea are entirely within my head. I could fake it: I could sink to the ground and refuse to stir. Get it over with.

I don't, though.

Because I don't want it to be over.

I try again.

'Carter, you could be rich, man. I'd work for you for the rest of my life.'  
Good touch, that: my life, not your life; makes it sound like a better deal.  
'You know how much I made for Finn, in six months? Half a million! Add it up.'

He doesn't reply. I stop walking, and turn back to face him. He halts too, keeping his distance. Carter doesn't look much like an executioner. He must be close to sixty: grey-haired, with a weathered, almost kindly face. He's still solidly built, but he looks like someone's once athletic grandfather, a boxer or a football player forty years ago, now into vigorous gardening.

He calmly waves me on with the gun.

'Further. We've passed the people-taking-a-piss zone, but campers, bush walkers . . . you can't be too careful.'

I hesitate. He gives me a gently admonishing look. If I stood my ground? He'd shoot me right here, and carry the body the rest of the way. I can see him trudging along, with my corpse slung casually across his shoulders. However decent he might seem at first glance, the truth is, the man's a fucking robot: he's got some kind of neural implant, some bizarre religion; everybody knows that.

I whisper, 'Carter . . . please.'

He gestures with the gun.

I turn and start walking again.

I still don't understand how Finn caught me out. I thought I was the best hacker he had. Who could have followed my trail, from the outside? Nobody! He must have planted someone inside one of the corporations I

was screwing on his behalf — just to check up on me, the paranoid bastard. And I never kept more than ten per cent. I wish I'd taken fifty. I wish I'd made it worthwhile.

I strain my ears, but I can't pick up the faintest hint of traffic, now; just birdsong, insects, the crackling of the forest's debris underfoot. Fucking nature. I refuse to die here. I want to end my life like a human being: in Intensive Care, high on morphine, surrounded by crippling expensive doctors and brutal, relentless life-support machines. Then the corpse can go into orbit — preferably around the sun. I don't care how much it costs, just so long as I don't end up part of any fucking natural cycle: carbon, phosphorus, nitrogen. Gaia, I divorce thee. Go suck the nutrients out of someone else, you grasping bitch.

Wasted anger, wasted time. Please don't kill me, Carter: I can't bear to be absorbed back into the unthinking biosphere. That'd really move him.

What, then?

'I'm twenty-five years old, man. I haven't even lived. I've spent the last ten years farting around with computers. I don't even have any kids. How can you kill someone who hasn't even had kids?' For a second, seduced by my own rhetoric, I seriously think about claiming virginity — but that might be pushing it . . . and it sounds less selfish, less hedonistic, to assert my right to fatherhood than to whine about sex.

Carter laughs. 'You want immortality through children'? Forget it. I've got two sons, myself. They're nothing like me. They're total strangers.'

'Yeah? That's sad. But I still ought to have the chance.'

'The chance to do what? To pretend that you'll live on through your children? To fool yourself?'

I laugh knowingly — trying to make it sound like we're sharing a joke that only two like-minded cynics could appreciate.

'Of course I want a chance to fool myself. I want to lie to myself for fifty more years. Sounds pretty good to me.'

He doesn't reply.

I slow down slightly, shortening my stride, feigning trouble with the uneven terrain. Why? Do I seriously think that a few extra minutes will give me the chance to formulate some dazzlingly brilliant plan? Or am I just buying time for the sake of it? Just prolonging the agony?

I pause, and suddenly find myself retching; the convulsions run deep, but nothing comes up except a faint taste of acid. When it's over, I wipe the sweat and tears from my face, and try to stop shaking — hating more than anything the fact that I care about my dignity, the fact that I do give a shit whether or not I die in a pool of vomit, weeping like a child. As if this walk to my death is all that matters, now; as if these last few minutes of my life have superseded everything else.

They have, though, haven't they? Everything else is past, is gone.

Yes — and so will this be gone. If I am going to die, there's no need to 'make peace' with myself, no reason to 'compose myself for death. The way I face extinction is just as fleeting, just as irrelevant, as the way I faced every other moment of my life.

The one and only thing that could make this time matter would be finding a way to survive.

When I catch my breath, I try to stretch out the delay.

'Carter, how many times have you done this?'

'Thirty-three.'

Thirty-three. That's hard enough to swallow when some jilted gun fetishist squeezes the trigger of his sub-machine-gun and firehoses a crowd, but thirty-three leisurely strolls into the forest . . .

'So tell me: how do most people take it? I really want to know. Do they puke? Do they cry? Do they beg?'

He shrugs. 'Sometimes.'

'Do they try to bribe you?'

'Almost always.'

'But you can't be bought?'

He doesn't reply.

'Or — has nobody made the right offer? What do you want, if it isn't money? Sex?' His face remains impassive — there's no scowl of revulsion — so instead of making a joke of it, retracting what might have been an insult, I press on, light-headed. 'Is that it? Do you want me to suck your cock? If that's what you want, I'll do it.'

He gives me that admonishing look again. No contempt for my spineless pleading, no disgust at my misjudged offer; just the mildest irritation that I'm wasting his time.

I laugh weakly, to hide my humiliation at this absolute indifference — this refusal to find me even pitiful.

I say, 'So, people take it pretty badly. How do you take it?'

He says, matter-of-factly, 'I take it pretty well.'

I wipe my face again. 'Yeah, you do, don't you? Is that what the chip in your brain is for? To let you sleep at night after you've done this?'

He hesitates, then says, 'In a way. But it's not as simple as that.' He waves the gun. 'Get moving. We've still got further to go.'

I turn, thinking numbly: I've just told the one man who could save my life that he's a brain-damaged, subhuman killing machine.

I start walking again.

I glance up, once, at the blank idiot sky, and refuse to take delivery of the flood of memories linked in my mind to the same astonishing blue. All of that is gone, it's over. No Proustian flashbacks, no Billy Pilgrim time-tripping for me. I have no need to flee into the past: I'm going to live into the future, I'm going to survive this. How? Carter may be merciless, and incorruptible — in which case, I'm simply going to have to overpower him. I may have led a sedentary existence, but I'm less than half his age; that has to count for something. At the very least, I must be faster on my feet. Overpower him? Struggle with a loaded gun? Maybe I won't have to; maybe I'll get a chance to run.

Carter says, 'Don't waste your time trying to think up ways to bargain with me. It's not going to happen. You'd be better off thinking of ways to accept the inevitable.'

'I don't want to fucking accept it.'

'That's not true. You don't want it to happen — but it will happen. So find a way to deal with it. You must have thought about death, before now.'

This is all I need: grief counselling from my own assassin. 'If you want to know the truth: not once. One more thing I never got around to. So why don't you give me a decade or two to sort it out?'

'It won't take a decade. It won't take long at all. Look at it this way: Does it bother you that there are places outside your skin — and you're not in them? That you come to a sudden end at the top of your skull — and then there's nothing but air? Of course not. So why should it bother you that there'll be times when you won't be around — any more than you care that there are places you don't occupy? You think your life is going to be undone — cancelled out, somehow — just because it has an end? Does the space above your head cancel out your body? Everything has boundaries. Nothing stretches on forever — in any direction.'

In spite of myself, I laugh; he's gone from the sadistic to the surreal. 'You believe that shit, do you? You actually think that way?'

'No. I could have; it's on the market — and I seriously considered buying it. It's a perfectly valid point of view...but in the end, it just didn't ring true for me — and I didn't want it to ring true. I chose something else entirely. Stop here.'

'What?'

'I said stop.'

I look around, bewildered, refusing to believe that we've arrived. We're nowhere special — hemmed in, as ever, between the ugly eucalypts; calf deep in the drought-shrivelled undergrowth — but what did I expect? An artificial clearing? A picnic spot?

I turn to face him, scouring my paralysed brain for some strategy to get within reach of the gun — or get out of his range before he can fire — when

he says, with perfect sincerity, 'I can help you. I can make this easier.' I stare at him for a second, then break into long, clumsy, choking sobs.

He waits, patiently, until I finally manage to cough up the word: 'How?'

With his left hand, he reaches into his shirt pocket, takes out a small object, and holds it up for inspection on his outstretched palm. For a moment, I think it's a capsule, some kind of drug — but it's not.

Not quite.

It's a neural implant applicator. Through the transparent casing, I can just make out the grey speck of the implant itself.

I have an instant, vivid fantasy of walking forward to accept it: my chance, at last, to disarm him.

'Catch.' He tosses the device straight at my face, and I put up a hand and grab it from the air.

He says, 'It's up to you, of course. I'm not going to force you to use it.'

Flies settle on my wet face as I stare at the thing. I brush them away with my free hand. 'What'll this give me? Twenty seconds of cosmic bliss before you blow my brains out? Some hallucination so vivid it'll make me think this was all a dream? If you wanted to spare me the pain of knowing I was going to die, you should have just shot me in the back of the head five minutes ago, when I still thought I had a chance.'

He says, 'It's not a hallucination. It's a set of. . . attitudes. A philosophy, if you like.'

'What philosophy? All that crap about . . . boundaries in space and time?'

'No. I told you, I didn't buy that.'

I almost crack up. 'So this is your religion? You want to convert me, before you kill me? You want to save my fucking soul? Is that how you cope with slaughtering people? You think you're saving their souls?'

He shakes his head, unoffended. 'I wouldn't call it a religion. There is no god. There are no souls.'

'No? Well, if you're offering me all the comforts of atheism, I don't need an implant for that.'

'Are you afraid of dying?'

'What do you think?'

'If you use the implant, you won't be.'

'You want to render me terminally brave, and then kill me? Or terminally numb? I'd rather be blissed out.'

'Not brave. Or numb. Perceptive.'

He may not have found me pitiful, but I'm still human enough to do him the honour. 'Perceptive? You think swallowing some pathetic lie about death is perceptive?'

'No lies. This implant won't change your beliefs on any question of fact.'

'I don't believe in life after death, so—'

'Whose life?'

'What?'

'When you die, will other people live on?'

For a moment, I just can't speak. I'm fighting for my life — and he's treating the whole thing like some abstract philosophical debate. I almost scream: Stop playing with me! Get it over with!

But I don't want it to be over.

And as long as I can keep him talking, there's still the chance that I can rush him, the chance of a distraction, the chance of some miraculous reprieve.

I take a deep breath. 'Yes, other people will live on.'

'Billions. Perhaps hundreds of billions, in centuries to come.'

'No shit. I've never believed that the universe would vanish when I died. But if you think that's some great consolation—'

'How different can two humans be?'

'I don't know. You're pretty fucking different.'

'Out of all those hundreds of billions, don't you think there'll be people who are just like you?'

'What are you talking about now? Reincarnation?'

'No. Statistics. There can be no "reincarnation" — there are no souls to be reborn. But eventually — by pure chance — someone will come along who'll embody everything that defines you.'

I don't know why, but the crazier this gets, the more hopeful I'm beginning to feel — as if Carter's crippled powers of reasoning might make him vulnerable in other ways.

I say, 'That's just not true. How could anyone end up with my memories, my experiences—'

'Memories don't matter. Your experiences don't define you. The accidental details of your life are as superficial as your appearance. They may have shaped who you are — but they're not an intrinsic part of it. There's a core, a deep abstraction—'

'A soul by any other name.'

'No.'

I shake my head, vehemently. There's nothing to be gained by humouring him; I'm too bad an actor to make it convincing — and an argument can only buy me more time.

'You think I should feel better about dying because . . . sometime in the future, some total stranger might have a few abstract traits in common with me?'

'You said that you wished you'd had children.'

'I lied.'

'Good. Because they're not the answer.'

'And I should get more comfort from the thought of someone who's no relation at all, with no memories of mine, no sense of continuity—'

'How much do you have in common, now, with yourself when you were five years old?'

'Not much.'

'Don't you think there must be thousands of people who are infinitely more like you — as you are now — than that child ever was?'

'Maybe. In some ways, maybe.'

'What about when you were ten? Fifteen?'

'What does it matter? OK: people change. Slowly. Imperceptibly.'

He nods. 'Imperceptibly — exactly! But does that make it any less real? Who's swallowed the lie? It's seeing the life of your body as the life of one person that's the illusion. The idea that "you" are made up of all the events since your birth is nothing but a useful fiction. That's not a person: it's a composite, a mosaic.'

I shrug. 'Perhaps. It's still the closest thing to ... an identity . . . that anyone can possess.'

'But it isn't! And it distracts us from the truth!' Carter is growing impassioned, but there's no hint of fanaticism in his demeanour. I almost wish he'd start ranting — but instead he continues, more calmly, more reasonably than ever. 'I'm not saying that memories make no difference; of course they do. But there's a part of you that's independent of them — and that part will live again. One day, someone, somewhere, will think as you did, act as you did. Even if it's only for a second or two, that person will be you.'

I shake my head. I'm beginning to feel stupefied by this relentless dream-logic — and I'm dangerously close to losing touch with what's at stake.

I say flatly, 'This is bullshit. Nobody could think that way.'

'You're wrong. I do. And you can — if you want to.'

'Well, I don't want to.'

'I know it seems absurd to you, now — but I promise you, the implant would change all that.' He absent-mindedly massages his right forearm. It must be stiff from holding the gun. 'You can die afraid, or you can die reassured. It's your decision.'

I close my fist over the applicator. 'Do you offer this to all your victims?'

'Not all. A few.'

'And how many have used it?'

'None so far.'

'I'm not surprised. Who'd want to die like that? Fooling themselves?'

'You said you did.'

'Live. I said I wanted to live, fooling myself.'

I brush the flies from my face, for the hundredth time; they alight again, fearlessly. Carter is five metres away; if I take a step in his direction, he'll shoot me in the head, without the slightest hesitation. I strain my ears, and hear nothing but crickets.

Using the implant would buy me more time: the four or five minutes before it takes effect. What have I got to lose? Carter's reluctance to kill me, 'unenlightened'? In the end, that's made no difference, thirty-three times before. My will to stay alive? Maybe; maybe not. A change in my intellectual views about mortality need not render me utterly supine; even believers in a glorious afterlife have been known to struggle hard to postpone the trip.

Carter says softly, 'Make up your mind. I'm going to count to ten.'

The chance to die honestly? The chance to cling to my own fear and confusion to the end?

Fuck that. If I die, then it makes no difference how I faced it. That's my philosophy.

I say, 'Don't bother.' I push the applicator deep into my right nostril, and squeeze the trigger. There's a faint sting as the implant burrows into my nasal membranes, heading for the brain.

Carter laughs with delight. I almost join him. From out of nowhere, I have five more minutes to save my life.

I say, 'OK, I've done what you wanted. But everything I said before still stands. Let me live, and I'll make you rich. A million a year. At least.'

He shakes his head. 'You're dreaming. Where would I go? Finn would track me down in a week.'



'You wouldn't need to go anywhere. I'd skip the country — and I'd pay your money into an Orbital account.'

'Yeah? Even if you did, what use would the money be to me? I couldn't risk spending it.'

'Once you had enough, you could buy some security. Buy some independence. Start disentangling yourself from Finn.'

'No.' He laughs again. 'Why are you still looking for a way out? Don't you understand? There's no need.'

By now, the implant must have disgorged its nanomachines, to build links between my brain and the tiny optical processor whose neural net embodies Carter's bizarre beliefs. Short-circuiting my own attitudes; hard-wiring his insanity into my brain. But no matter — I can always get it removed; that's the easiest thing in the world. If it's still what I want.

I say, 'There's no need for anything. There's no need for you to kill me. We can still both walk out of here. Why do you act like you have no choice?'

He shakes his head. 'You're dreaming.'

'Fuck you! Listen to me! All Finn has is money. I can ruin him, if that's what it takes. From the other side of the world!' I don't even know whether or not I'm lying any more. Could I do that? To save my life?

Carter says softly, finally, 'No.'

I don't know what to say. I have no more arguments, no more pleas. I almost turn and run, but I can't do it. I can't believe that I'd get away — and I can't bring myself to make him pull the trigger a moment sooner.

The sunshine is dazzling; I close my eyes against the glare. I haven't given up. I'll pretend that the implant has failed — that should disconcert him, buy me a few more minutes.

And then?

A wave of giddiness sweeps over me. I stagger, but regain my balance. I stand, staring at my shadow on the ground, swaying gently, feeling impossibly light.

Then I look up, squinting. 'I—'

Carter says, 'You're going to die. I'm going to shoot you through the skull. Do you understand me?'

'Yes.'

'But it's not the end of you. Not the end of what matters. You believe that, don't you?'

I nod, begrudgingly. 'Yes.'

'You know you're going to die — but you're not afraid?'

I close my eyes again; the light still hurts them. I laugh wearily. 'You're wrong: I'm still afraid. You lied about that, didn't you? You shit. But I understand. Everything you said makes sense now.'

And it does. All my objections seem absurd, now; transparently ill-conceived. I resent the fact that Carter was right — but I can't pretend that my reluctance to believe him was the product of anything but short-sightedness and self-deception. That it took a neural implant to enable me to see the obvious only proves how confused I must have been.

I stand, eyes shut, feeling the warm sunshine on the back of my neck. Waiting.

'You don't want to die . . . but you know it's the only way out? You accept that, now?' He sounds reluctant to believe me, as if he finds my instant conversion too good to be true.

I scream at him: 'Yes, fuck you! Yes! So get it over with! Get it over with!'

He's silent for a while. Then there's a soft thud, and a crash in the undergrowth.

The flies on my arms and face desert me.

After a moment, I open my eyes and sink to my knees, shaking. For a while, I lose myself: sobbing, banging the ground with my fists, tearing up handfuls of weeds, screaming at the birds for silence.

Then I scramble to my feet and walk over to the corpse.

He believed everything he claimed to believe — but he still needed something more. More than the abstract hope of someone, sometime, somewhere on the planet, falling into alignment — becoming him — by pure chance. He needed someone else holding the very same beliefs, right before his eyes at the moment of death — someone else who 'knew' that they were going to die, someone else who was just as afraid as he was.

And what do I believe?

I look up at the sky, and the memories I fought away, before, start tumbling through my skull. From lazy childhood holidays, to the very last weekend I spent with my ex-wife and son, the same heartbreaking blue runs through them all. Unites them all.

Doesn't it?

I look down at Carter, nudge him with my foot, and whisper, 'Who died today? Tell me. Who really died?'