

Piccadilly Circus

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Here he shows us that quite a bit more than just beauty can be in the eye of the beholder...

Clarissa Fall is heading, for central London to see the lights, bumping along the potholed roads at five miles an hour in her electric invalid car, oblivious to the honking horns, the cars queuing behind her, the angry shouts... How many times has she been warned? How many times has she been humiliated? But she must see the lights.

"When I was a little girl there were still physical lights in Piccadilly Circus," she's telling everyone she can. "I remember my father taking me. They were the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen."

She'd always been odd. There was that business when she cut holes in the wildlife fence to let the animals into the city. There were those young consensual tear-aways she used to insist on bringing home. But things really started getting bad when her husband Terence died, leaving her alone in that big old house by the perimeter, that big fake chateau with its empty fountains and those icy lights that lit it up at night like Dracula's castle. I suppose it was loneliness, though god knows when Terence was alive he and Clarissa never seemed to do anything but fight.

"I am two hundred years old, you know," she kept saying now. "I am the very last physical human being in London."

Neither of these were true, of course, but she was certainly very old and it was certainly the case that she could go for days and even weeks without seeing another physical person. There really weren't many of us left by now and most of us had congregated for mutual support in a couple of clusters in the South London suburbs. No one lived within five miles of Clarissa's phoney chateau on the northern perimeter and no one was much inclined to go and see her. She'd always been histrionic and self-obsessed, and now she was downright crazy. What's more — and most of us found this *particularly* unforgivable — she drew unwelcome attention onto us physicals, both from the consensuals, who already dislike us and call us 'outsiders' and 'spooks/' and from the hidden authorities in the Hub.

Her trouble was that she didn't really feel at home in either world, physical or consensual. The stiff arthritic dignity of the physicals repelled her. She thought us stuffy and smug and she despised our assumption that our own experience was uniquely authentic and true.

"Would you rather the world itself ended than admit the possibility that there may be other kinds of life apart from ours?" she once demanded.

But really, although she always insisted to us that it wasn't so, she was equally disgusted by the superficiality of the consensuals, their uncritical willingness to accept as real whatever the Hub chose to serve up, their lack of curiosity, their wilful ignorance of where they came from or what they really were. While she might criticise us physicals, she never seriously considered the possibility of giving up her own physical being and joining the consensuals with their constructed virtual bodies. And this meant that she

would still always be an Outsider to them.

She may have felt at home with no one but she became a nuisance to *everyone* — physical and consensual—as a result of her forays into the city. At first she went on foot. Then, when she became too frail, she got hold of that little invalid car, a vehicle which the consensuals of North London would soon come to know and hate. Bumping slowly along the crumbling physical roads she would switch off her Field implant so as not to be deceived by the smooth virtual surface, but this meant that she couldn't see or hear the consensual traffic going by either. She could see only the empty buildings and the cracked and pockmarked surface of the empty road. Consensual drivers just had to cope as best they could with her wanderings back and forth.

When she parked her car, though, she always turned her implant on again. This of course instantly transformed empty ruined physical London into the lively metropolis that was the Urban Consensual Field, a virtual city in imitation of London as it once was, superimposed by the Hub over what London had become. Clarissa could still just remember those old days: the crowds, the fumes, the lights, the noise, the hectic life of a city in which, bizarrely, it still seemed feasible for millions of physical human beings to casually consume what they wanted of the physical world's resources, and casually discard what they didn't. And she craved that bustle and that life, she craved it desperately.

We all had Field implants, of course. They were a necessity for dealing with a civilisation that had become, whether we liked it or not, primarily digital. Spliced into our nervous system, they allowed consensual constructs to be superimposed over our perceptions of the material world, so that we could see the same world that the consensuals saw, hear what they heard and, to a limited degree, touch what they touched. The rest of us invariably took the position that we didn't like having to deal with the consensual world, but it was sometimes a necessary evil. But for Clarissa it was different. When she switched on her implant it wasn't a matter of practical necessity for her, it was more like injecting heroin into an artery. All at once there were people all around her, there was life, there were shop windows and market stalls piled high with colourful merchandise, and the dizzying suddenness of it was like the hit of a powerful drug.

But this drug wasn't the Field, it was the moment of crossing over. After that first moment the experience never lived up to its initial promise, for however hard Clarissa tried, the consensual world shut her out. And she did try. She spent hours in the consensual city outside shops and in parks and on street corners making rather pathetic efforts to engage people in conversation, but most people avoided her and some made no secret of their contempt. It was true that a few kind souls suppressed their revulsion at her age and her physicality and briefly allowed her the illusion that she had made a friend, but it *was* only out of kindness. Even apart from being an Outsider she really wasn't good company. She talked too much; she didn't listen; and, what was worse, however much she might criticise her fellow Outsiders for our existential snobbery, she herself was as much of a snob as any of us and a lot less inhibited about it. She could never resist pointing out to consensuals the shallow and illusory nature of their existence: "You're so *very* nice dear. It's such a pity that you're not really here."

Usually she found herself alone in a kind of lacuna, with people moving aside to pass her by at a safe distance. And in these situations she would often become distressed and start to rant and shout: "You're not real you know! You're just bits of nervous tissue plugged into a computer! You're far away from here and the computer is sending you pictures of the real London with all this consensual nonsense superimposed on top of it!"

Terence used to talk like that a lot when he was alive, as haughty old physicals tended to do, but in those days Clarissa always used to criticise him for it: "Who's to say our world is more real than theirs?" I remember her demanding of him at one of the physical community's periodic gatherings.

The two of them on opposite sides of a large dining table laden with silver and cut glass. Terence declined to answer. Everyone in the room was willing Clarissa to shut up and let them return to their customary state of numbness. "Come on Terence, who's to say?" she insisted. "At least consensuals engage with life and with one another." She glared up and down the table. "And what do you think would be left of us if we stripped away everything that had come from outside ourselves, everything that other people had made? We'd be naked. We'd be gibbering imbeciles. Think about it. Even when we talk to ourselves inside our own heads, we use words that other people gave us."

But that was then. Now it seemed that Terence had been speaking all along on behalf of a side of Clarissa's own self.

"Don't look at me like that!" she'd scold the consensuals when they pointed and laughed at her, "You sold your true bodies for the illusion of youth and plenty, but I am real!"

Sometimes, in the middle of one of these rants, she would defiantly turn off her Field implant, making the people and the traffic disappear from her view, houses become empty shells again and all the shop windows with their cheerful displays turn back into hollow caves: "I can't even see you, you know!" she shouted, knowing that the consensuals could nevertheless still see her, for sensors across the city pick up the sights and sounds and textures of everything physical and this becomes the matrix within which the consensual city is built. They had no choice but to see her. "I'm in the real world and I can't see you at all. *That's* how unreal you are. I can turn you off with a flick of a switch."

But though she might like telling the consensuals they didn't really exist, their opinion mattered to her desperately and she couldn't resist turning the implant on again to see what impact she was having. (I've never known anyone who turned an implant on and off as often as Clarissa did.) Almost invariably they would all be carefully ignoring her.

It was in these moments, when she had thrown a tantrum and discovered that no one was impressed, that things could get out of control. Once, a month or so before her trip to Piccadilly Circus, she found she could get no one to pay attention to her in the streets outside Walthamstow underground station. Rather than admit defeat, she insisted instead on going right down the stairs, arthritic and unsteady as she was, and waiting on the Southbound platform for a train. The platform emptied around her as the consensuals crowded up to the other end.

And then when the train came in, she promptly tried to step onto it. Of course she fell straight through onto the track, it being a virtual train, part of the Field, which couldn't bear physical weight, only the notional weight of consensual projections. She broke a small bone in her ankle. It hurt a great deal and she began to hobble up and down wailing for someone to help her up. The rules under which the Field operated meant that the train could not move off with her there. Yet she herself was breaking those rules. To the consternation of the passengers she appeared to them to be wading waist deep through the solid floor of the train, looking up at their averted faces accusingly and haranguing them for their lack of compassion: "Isn't there a single soul left in London prepared to help an old woman? Have you all lost your hearts as well as your bodies?"

Broken bones—and physical injuries in general—were completely outside their experience, so they would have had some excuse for not empathising with her plight, but actually they would have *liked* to help her, if not out of pure altruism, then out of self-interest. For she was holding up the train—not to mention the other trains behind it—and distressing everyone. Consensuals, unless they are destitute, are uniformly beautiful and, although they die at last, they don't age in the way we do. Spit never flies from their mouth. Snot never runs from their noses. Their makeup doesn't run or smear. It must have been truly horrific to see this dreadful wrinkled smeary creature wading up and down among them with its head at knee-height, like some kind of goblin out of a fairy tale. But what could they do? They could no more lift

Clarissa back onto the platform with their consensual hands and arms, than the train could hold her up with its consensual floor.

So someone called the Hub, and the Hub put the word out to us in the physical community that one of our people was in difficulties and did we want to deal with it or should Agents be sent in? Phone calls went to and fro. The physicals of London are like the members of some old dysfunctional family who have seen right through each other's limited charms, know every one of each other's dreary frailties, but who are somehow chained together in misery.

"Bloody Clarissa. Have you heard?"

"Clarissa's up to her tricks again."

"Obviously we can't let Agents in. The real people have to deal with their own."

"Bloody Clarissa. How dare she put us in this position?"

In the end I was delegated to go up there with Richard Howard to sort it out. We travelled right across London and, since of course we couldn't use the virtual escalators, climbed slowly and stiffly as Clarissa had done, down the deep concrete staircase into the station. Clarissa was still stuck on the track. She had turned off her implant again, partly out of defiance, partly to avoid being overwhelmed by the agitated consensuals around her. But as a result she had lost the lights that the Field superimposed on the deserted and unlit physical station. For the last hour she had been stumbling around crying and wailing in pitch darkness with nothing for company except rats, and no sound at all except the drip, drip of water from somewhere down the southbound tunnel.

Richard and I had our implants switched on so as to be able to see what we were doing, and so had to endure the cold gaze of consensuals. They sat in the train watching as we clumsily extracted Clarissa from the floor; they stood on the platform watching as we dusted her down; they craned round on the virtual escalators to watch us half-carry her up the concrete steps.

"Look at those spooks!" someone in the street said, quite loudly, as Richard and I helped Clarissa into Richard's truck. "Look at the ugly faces on them! Haven't they got *any* self-respect?"

And there was a general hum of agreement. As a rule consensuals are scared of us Outsiders and our uncanny powers over the physical world. (Richard in particular is an object of awe, with his immense height, his great mane of white hair, and his tendency to walk contemptuously through virtual walls.) But we couldn't have looked very scary just then: two breathless old men, flushed and sweaty, helping a batty old woman with an injured foot into an ancient truck.

"Don't forget my car!" wailed Clarissa.

Somehow we manhandled her invalid car into the back of the truck. God knows why we agreed to take it. We would have been within our rights to say it was too heavy and left it behind. But Clarissa was powerful in some ways. She always had been. However much you might resent it, however much you told yourself that there is no reason at all to comply, it was hard not to do what she asked.

"Don't expect us to bale you out like this again," Richard told her as he bandaged her foot up back at her house. "Next time it'll be Agents."

None of us is sure what Agents really are, except that they are the servants of the Hub in the physical world. They have no visible faces. Their smooth heads and bodies are covered all over with a costume or skin in a special shade of blue which isn't picked up by the Field sensors, and is therefore invisible to consensuals. Some of us think they are simply robots of some kind, but others maintain that they are a

new kind of physical human being, bred and raised apart from us for the Hub's own purposes. But, whatever they are, we fear them almost as much as do the consensuals, who only know of them by rumour and can only infer their presence from secondary clues.

"I couldn't have borne that," Clarissa murmured, "not Agents coming for me down there in the dark."

"Well it's your choice," Richard told her. "You get yourself in a fix like that again, and that's all the help you'll get."

He had been married to her once, before the days of Terence. Absurd as it now seemed, they had once, briefly, been lovers, enchanted by the sheer fact of one another's presence in the world. And even now, absurdly, Clarissa attempted to defuse his anger by flirting with him.

"I know I've been a silly girl, Richard dearest, but I promise I won't do it again."

I'm thinking about what I wrote earlier:

"The rest of us took the position," I said, "that we didn't like having to deal with the consensual world, but it was sometimes a necessary evil..."

I'm imagining Clarissa reading that and snorting with derision.

"Would you prefer it then if there was just us and no consensual world at all?"

Actually that very thing is looking increasingly on the cards.

When the consensual cities were first established as a way of withdrawing human beings from an environment which they were about to destroy, it was decided that these virtual cities would be congruent with the old physical ones. There were three reasons for this. Firstly many people could only be persuaded to accept consensual status on the basis that they would still have access to what they still thought of then as the 'real world.' Secondly, it was thought important to allow consensuals to continue to be able to interact with those of us who bought an exemption from the de-physicalisation process, by paying the enormous levy and by allowing ourselves to be sterilised. (In those days, after all, physicals and consensuals might be brother and sister, father and son, schoolmates, life-long friends...) And thirdly it was because the processing capacity of the Hub, though huge, was finite and a consensual world based on the physical one was less heavy on the Hub's resources than a purely invented one.

All three of those considerations have largely ceased to apply. The Hub has grown bigger, the physicals and the consensuals have grown apart and the consensuals have long since lost any sense of the physical world as being the 'real' one. So it would now be politically and technically possible for the Hub to decouple the physical city from the consensual one. In some ways this would be much easier than maintaining the status quo with its costly network of sensors.

But I suppose, if I am honest, that when I contemplate the possibility of waking up to a London where the implants no longer work, the consensuals can no longer be encountered and we are left on our own among the ruins, then I don't welcome it. In fact what I experience is a sense of dread, abandonment, isolation. I suppose I simply rationalise this feeling by saying that we need the consensuals for practical reasons, that their presence is a necessary evil.

I think Clarissa's promise held for all of two days before she was off in her car again. Within a week she was back in Walthamstow, though she avoided the station and didn't make any scenes. Before the end of the month, she was charging up the battery for a major trip, right into the centre of London. And then she was off again in earnest, bumping and bouncing grimly along the road and stubbornly refusing to think about how far her battery would take her.

As ever she drove with her implant switched off. She saw empty houses, abandoned petrol stations, an empty road, badly damaged by years of frost. But once in a while she stopped for that hit she so constantly craved, that momentary burst of comfort and reassurance that came from switching on her implant and seeing a living city emerging from the silent ruins.

"I'm going down to Piccadilly Circus," she told the people outside a row of shops in Stoke Newington. "They used to take me there when I was a little girl, to look at the coloured lights."

The shoppers all turned away.

"I used to love those lights," she told a man outside a betting shop in Islington, "the way they rippled and flowed. All that electricity! All that lovely colour!"

"Why don't you go home, spook?" the betting man muttered as he hurried off.

"I expect they still have lights like that now, don't they?" she asked a young woman in King's Cross, "Not *real* ones obviously, but ones for you people to see?"

"Oh yes," said the young woman, whose name was Lily, "they're lovely lights in Piccadilly Circus, but they're *quite* real you know. They're not physical or nothing like that."

Lily was not very bright and was happy to be friendly with anyone. She had a simple round very low res face that was quite flat and looked like something from a cartoon strip. Consensuals could choose their own appearance and be as pretty and as interesting and as high resolution as their bank balances would allow, but some consensuals couldn't afford much in the way of looks—and Lily was very obviously poor. Her eyes were dots, her skin a completely uniform pink, her clothes mere slabs of colour and her smile a simple upward curve of the single line that was her mouth.

"I'm pretty sure they're not physical anyway," she said, in her tinny little low res voice. And then she realised she had been rude and the smile abruptly inverted itself into a downward curve of regret. "Oh dear. I didn't mean to say there was something wrong with being—you know—physical. That came out all wrong."

"Oh don't worry. I get that all the time. And you're the first friendly person I've met since I left home."

Clarissa had opened a flask of coffee and, still sitting in her little car, she poured herself a small cup. It was mid-October, a fresh autumn day getting on towards evening, and she was beginning to feel the cold.

"My father took me to see the lights in Piccadilly Circus when I was a little girl. Apparently when we got there I asked him where the clowns and tigers were. 'And where are the pretty ladies in tights?' I wanted to know. He said it wasn't that kind of circus: 'Circus just means a circle for the cars to go round.' I don't remember that conversation myself, but I do remember standing there with the beautiful electric lights all round me and realising that I didn't care about the tigers and the pretty ladies. Colours are so magical when you are a child. I looked one way and then the other, but I wanted to see it all at once, so in the end I decided to spin round and round on the spot."

She lifted the coffee cup to her lips and took a sip.

"I'm Lily," Lily said helpfully, staring wonderingly at the intricate wrinkles all over Clarissa's hands, and at the brown liver-spots on them, and the way they trembled all the time so that coffee kept sloshing out down the sides of the cup. If Lily's low res looks were short on detail. Clarissa seemed to possess detail in reckless abandon. And yet—and this was the part that puzzled Lily—it was to no apparent decorative purpose. That look must have cost a fortune, Lily thought, but why would anyone choose to look like

that?

"I'm Clarissa, my dear. I'm Clarissa Fall," said the old lady grandly, finishing her coffee and shaking the drips out of the cup before screwing it back onto the top of the flask.

"Do you know the way?" Lily ventured. "Do you know the way to Piccadilly Circus?"

"I should think so," Clarissa snorted. "I'm over two hundred years old and I've lived in London since I was born. I'm the last physical person left in London, you know." She looked at her watch. She craved company and attention and yet when she actually had it, she was always curiously impatient and off-hand.

"Oh. Two hundred," repeated Lily humbly. "That's quite old. Only otherwise I was going to suggest I could come and show you the way..."

"Yes, do come by all means," said Clarissa magnanimously.

The laws of the physical universe prevented physical people from riding on virtual vehicles, but there was nothing in the rules of the Field to prevent virtual people from riding a physical car. The only difficulty was that the invalid car was only designed for one, so Lily had to ride at the back on the little rack intended to carry bags of shopping.

"I don't mind," said Lily, who couldn't afford dignity. "It's not that far."

"I'll have to turn my implant off, I'm afraid," Clarissa told her, "so I can see the bumps on the road. You won't be able to talk to me until we're there."

"I don't mind," said Lily gamely. She had no idea what Clarissa meant, but she had long since accepted that life was largely incomprehensible.

Clarissa turned the key to start the car. As she did so she noticed the meter that showed the remaining charge in the battery. When she set out, the needle had pointed to fully charged, but now it was on the edge of the red area marked warning! very low! She allowed herself for a single moment to see the trouble she was in—and to feel fear—and then she pushed it firmly from her conscious mind.

Clarissa drove slowly down Tottenham Court Road. The shop buildings were dark and empty, their windows blank, or sometimes broken and full of dead leaves. The roads were bare and strewn with rubble. Apart from the whine of her electric car and the click of stones thrown up by its rubber wheels, there was utter silence.

But Lily saw windows full of goods for sale, cars and buses all around them, and people everywhere.

"Nearly there!" she called out cheerfully, still not fully grasping that Clarissa with her implant inactivated couldn't hear her or sense her presence in any way. Then she gave a little shriek as Clarissa nonchalantly swerved across the road directly into the path of oncoming traffic and carried on down the wrong side of the road, magnificently indifferent to honking horns and shouts of indignation.

"She's physical," Lily called out by way of explanation from her perch on the back of Clarissa's little car. "She's just physical."

Half-way along Shaftesbury Avenue, the battery gave out and the car died.

And now Clarissa *was* scared. It was getting towards evening; it was turning very cold; and she was an elderly woman with an injured foot in the middle of a ruined city. She had nowhere to stay, nothing to eat or drink, and no means of getting home.

But Clarissa was good at pushing things out of her mind.

"It's not far," she muttered, referring not to the fake chateau, her distant home, but to Piccadilly Circus which still lay ahead. Piccadilly Circus offered no warmth, no nourishment, no resolution at all of her difficulties, but all of that was beside the point. "I'll just have to walk," she said. "It's absurd to come this far and not get to see it."

She dismounted from her car and began, painfully, to limp the last couple of hundred metres, but then she remembered Lily and stopped.

"I'M GOING TO WALK THE LAST BIT!" she bellowed back, assuming correctly that Lily was trailing behind her, but erroneously that Lily's invisibility made her deaf. "I Can't SEE YOU because MY IMPLANT'S TURNED OFF and I don't want to turn it on again until I get there, or it will SPOIL THE EFFECT."

She had it all planned out. She would not turn on her implant until she was right in the middle of the Circus.

"YOU'RE VERY WELCOME TO COME ALONG THOUGH!" she shouted, as if she personally controlled access to the public streets.

She hobbled forward a few steps along the silent ruined avenue (while in the other London, cars swerved around her, pedestrians turned and stared and Lily patiently plodded behind her as if the two of them were Good King Wenceslas and his faithful page.)

"I'll tell you what though," Clarissa said, pausing again. Her face was screwed up with the pain of her injured foot, but her tone was nonchalant. "If you felt like calling the council and asking them to get hold of someone physical to come and help me out, I would be grateful... Only my dratted car has QUITE RUN OUT OF POWER you see, so it's not going to be able to get me back."

"I don't have any money," said Lily. "Is it an emergency do you think? Shall I call the emergency number?"

But of course Clarissa couldn't hear her.

It was getting dark as she limped into Piccadilly Circus. The buildings were inert slabs of masonry, all those thousands of coloured light bulbs on the old advertising signs were cold and still and the statue of Eros was more like the angel of death on a mausoleum than the god of physical love.

Some gusts of rain came blowing down Regent Street. Clarissa's lips and fingers were blue with cold and her whole body was trembling. (Lily was amazed: she had never seen such a thing, for consensuals are never cold.) Clarissa was in great pain too—the broken bone in her ankle had slipped out of place and felt like a blade being twisted in her flesh—and she was tired and hungry and thirsty. Too late she realised she had left her flask of coffee behind in her abandoned car.

"You're a fool, Clarissa Fall," she told herself. "You don't look after yourself. One of these days you'll just keel over and the rats will come and eat you up. And it will be your own stupid fault." Then she remembered her low res companion. "ARE YOU STILL THERE LILY?" she bellowed. "Did you make that CALL FOR ME? I'm just going to get across to the statue there and then I'll turn my implant on and WE CAN TALK."

She hobbled to the base of Eros and then reached up to the implant switch behind her ear. The colour, the electricity, the teeming life of a great city at night came flooding instantly into the desolate scene.

There were people everywhere, and cars with shining headlamps and glowing tail-lights, and black taxis and red double-decker buses full of passengers, lit upstairs and down with a cheery yellow glow. But above all there were *the* lights, the wonderful electric streams of colour that made shining moving pictures and glittering logos and words that flowed across fields of pure colour in purple and red and green and yellow and blue and white.

"Ah!" cried Clarissa in rapture, "almost like when I was a little girl and the lights were real!"

"I told you they were lovely," Lily said, like a pet dog that will wait an hour, two hours, three hours for its mistress to glance in its direction, and still be no less grateful when the longed-for attention finally comes.

Clarissa turned, smiling, but the sight of Lily's cartoonish moon-face had an unexpected effect on her. She felt a stab of pity for Lily and at the same time revulsion. Her smile ceased to be real. Her pleasure vanished. She felt the bitter cold of the physical world pushing through, the needle-sharp physical pain nagging at her from her foot, the physical ache in her head that came from tiredness and dehydration.

Lily sensed her change of mood and the simple line that represented her mouth was just starting to curve downwards when Clarissa switched off her implant again. Lily vanished, along with lights, taxis, buses and crowds. It was very dark and quite silent and the buildings were dim shadows.

"The thing is, Lily," Clarissa announced to the empty darkness, "that you con-sensuals are all just like these lights. Just moving pictures made out of little dots. Just pictures of buses, pictures of cars, pictures of people, pictures of shop windows."

Deliberately turning away from where Lily had been, Clarissa turned the implant on again and watched the lights come back. But there was no thrill this time, no exhilarating shock, nothing to offset the cold and the pain. It was no different really to changing channels on a TV set, she thought bitterly, and straight away reached up to flick the implant off again. But now the switch, which was designed to be turned on and off a couple of times a day, finally broke under the strain of her constant tinkering with it and refused to stay in one position or the other. Clarissa's perceptual field now flickered randomly every few seconds from the consensual to the physical world and back again —and she couldn't make it stop. She stood helplessly and ineffectually fingering the switch for a short time, then gave up and sank down to the ground at the foot of the statue. What else was there to do?

"Did you call up the council, Li — " she began, and then the consensual world disappeared. "Oh dear. LILY, ARE YOU STILL THERE?... Oh you are, good. Did you call the council only I think I ought to go home now... Lily? LILY! ARE THE COUNCIL GETTING HELP?... Tell them I don't want Agents mind. Tell them to get some physicals out. They'll be cross with me, but they'll come anyway. I don't care what Richard said."

Actually, whether she liked it or not, Agents were coming, four of them, from different directions, from different errands in different parts of London. They were still some way off but they were on their way. The Hub had sent them, having contacted Richard Howard and been told by him that we physicals wouldn't come out again.

Later Richard began to worry about what he'd done and called me. "I know it seems harsh," he said, rather defensively, "but I do feel we've got to keep out of this, don't you agree? Clarissa's got to learn that when we say something we mean it, or she'll keep doing this stuff over and over again. I mean she's in *Piccadilly Circus* for god's sake! Even Clarissa must be perfectly well aware that she couldn't go into central London and get back again in that silly little car of hers. She obviously just assumed that we would come and fetch her. She just banked on it."

I was as furious with Clarissa as he was. I had spent the afternoon raking leaves and tidying up in my

secluded little garden. I had just eaten a small meal and taken a glass of port and was looking forward to a quiet evening alone in the warm behind drawn curtains, making some preparatory notes for Chapter 62 of my book *The Decline and Fall of Reality*. (I had dealt in Chapters 60 and 61 with the advent of the Internet and the mobile telephone and was just getting to what was to be the great central set-piece of my whole account: the moment where the human race is presented for the first time with incontrovertible evidence that its own activity will destroy the planet, not in centuries or even decades but in years, unless it can reduce its physical presence to a fraction of its current levels.)

"Bloody Clarissa! *Bloody bloody* Clarissa!"

Why *should* I give up the treat of a quiet evening and a new chapter, when she herself had deliberately engineered her own difficulties? I absolutely dreaded going into the centre of London at any time, as Clarissa surely knew, and yet here she was calmly assuming that I could and should be dragged there whenever it suited her convenience. And yet I knew I had to go to her.

"I can't leave her to the Agents, though, Richard. I know she's a pain, I know we're being used, but I can't just leave her."

"Oh for goodness' sake, Tom, it'll teach her a lesson," Richard said, hardening in his resolve now he had my own flabbiness of will to kick against. "How will she *ever* learn if we don't stay firm now? It's really for her own good. And anyway, the Agents can't be called off now. You know what they're like."

"Well if they're going to be there anyway, I'd better be there too," I said. "They scare her silly. I'll drive up there now, so at least there's someone on hand that she knows."

I went out into the cold and started up my car. I resented Clarissa bitterly. I absolutely dreaded a reprise of the dark feelings that trips into London invariably churned up in me, the shame, the embarrassment, the feeling of loss, the envy, the deep, deep grief that is like the grief of facing a former lover who belongs now to another and will never be yours again. . . I was exhausted by the very thought of the effort of it all, not to mention the discomfort and the cold.

When I got to Piccadilly Circus, Agents were just arriving, one emerging from Shaftesbury Avenue, one from Piccadilly and one each from the northern and southern branches of Regent Street. But, huddled up under the statue of Eros, Clarissa couldn't see them, for when she was in purely physical mode it was too dark and when she was in consensual mode they were invisible. Beside her squatted Lily with her consensual arm round Clarissa's physical shoulder. Sometimes Clarissa could see Lily and sometimes she couldn't, but either way she could get no warmth from the embrace, however much Lily might want to give it.

As my physical headlights swept across the physical space, the first thing Clarissa saw was two of the Agents looming out of the darkness and advancing towards her. It felt like some nightmare from her childhood, and she screamed. Then her implant switched on by itself and the lights and the buses and the crowds returned to screen them out. But that was even worse because she knew that behind this glossy facade the Agents were still really there, slowly advancing, though now unseen.

She screamed again.

"Keep away from me, you hear me! Just keep away."

"Don't be scared, Clarissa," said Lily. "I'm here for you."

But Lily didn't have a clue. She had never experienced cold. She had never known physical pain. She wasn't aware of the presence of the Agents. She had no inkling of the other world of silence and shadow

that lay behind the bright lights of Piccadilly Circus.

I got out of my car. I had my own implant switched on and I picked my way gingerly over the ground between me and Clarissa, knowing only too well how easily nasty physical potholes can be concealed by the virtual road surface. I was doing my best to ignore the many consensual eyes watching me with disapproval and dislike and I was seething all the while with rage at self-obsessed Clarissa for putting me through all this yet again. How dare she drag me out here into the cold night? How dare she expose me to the illusion of the consensual city and to the disapproving gaze of the consensual people, when I all I ever wanted was to be at home behind my high hedges that I had cut into the shape of castle walls, behind my locked doors, behind my tightly drawn curtains, writing about reality.

"You know her do you?" a man asked me. "Well, you want to do something about her, mate. She's nuts. She's mental. She needs help"

I didn't respond. I had never known how to speak to these people, so manifestly unreal and yet so obviously alive. I both despised and envied them. How tawdry their constructed world was and how craven their meek acceptance of it. Yet how narrow and dull my own world was by comparison, my bleak garden, my clipped hedges, my book, my nightly glass of port, my weekly sally down the road to the Horse and Hounds, the Last Real Pub, to drink Real Beer with the diminishing band of decrepit and barren old men and woman who call themselves the Last Real People.

"She needs locking up more like," said a woman. "That's the same one that blocked the Northern Line last month with her carrying on. I saw her face in the paper."

I picked my way through the traffic.

"Alright Clarissa," I called coldly as I came up to her, "I'm here again for you. Muggins is here again as you no doubt expected he would be. I've come to fetch you home."

"Muggins? Who's that?" she quavered. She was afraid it was one of the Agents.

"It's just me, Clarissa. It's just Tom."

"It's who?" muttered Clarissa, straining to see me.

"He said Tom, dear," Lily told her.

Clarissa glanced sideways at the cartoon face with its little black dot eyes and its downward curved mouth. Then Lily vanished again, along with the whole Field, and Clarissa was back in the dark physical world. But the lights of my car were there now and, without the distraction of the Field, Clarissa could clearly see me approaching as well as the Agents around me, waiting to step in if I couldn't resolve things.

Awkwardly, wincing with pain, she rose to her feet.

"I just wanted to see the lights again, like they were when I was a child," she said stubbornly.

And then she began to spin round on the spot like children sometimes do in play, but very very slowly, shuffling round and round with her feet and grimacing all the while with pain. And as she revolved, the faulty switch on her implant continued to flicker on and off so that, for a few seconds the bright lights and the buses and the cars span around her, and then it was the turn of the darkness that was the source of her coldness and her pain, and it was the dim cold walls of the empty buildings that moved round her, lit only by the headlights of my car.

Lily appeared and disappeared. When she was there the Agents vanished. When she vanished, they

appeared. The constant was me, who like Clarissa could both feel the physical cold, and see the consensual lights.

"Come on Clarrie," I said to her gently. "Come on Clarrie."

The old lady ignored me for a while, carrying on with her strange slow-motion spinning and singing a tuneless little song under her breath. People were craning round in cars and buses to look at us. Pedestrians were standing across the road and watching us as frankly as if this really *was* a Circus and we were there expressly to put on a show. Then abruptly Clarissa stopped spinning. She tottered with dizziness, but her eyes were blazing like the eyes of a cornered animal.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Who exactly are you?"

It was odd because in that moment everything around me seemed to intensify: the sharpness of the cold night air in the physical world, the brilliance of the coloured lights in the consensual one, the strange collision of the two worlds that my Clarrie had single-handedly brought about... And I found that I didn't feel angry any more, didn't even mind that she'd brought me all this way.

I switched off the implant behind my ear, so that I could check up on what the Agents were doing. But they were still standing back and waiting for me to deal with things.

"It's me, Clarrie," I said to her. "It's Tom. Your little brother."

The Agent nearest me stiffened slightly and inclined its head towards me, as if I had half-reminded it of something.

"I reckon you've had enough adventure for one day, my dear/" I told my sister, flicking my implant on again to shut the Agents out of my sight. "Enough for one day, don't you agree? Don't mind the Agents. I've brought the car for you. I've come to take you home."

She let me lead her to the car and help her inside. She was in a very bad state, trembling, bloodless, befuddled, her injured foot swollen to nearly twice its normal size. I was glad I had thought to bring a rug for her, and a flask of hot cocoa, and a bottle of brandy.

That strange moon-faced creature, Lily, a human soul inside a cartoon, followed us over and stood anxiously watching. "Is she alright?" she asked. "She's gone so strange. What is it that's the matter with her?"

"Yes, she'll be alright. She's just old and tired," I told her, shutting the passenger door and walking round the car to get in myself.

I flipped off my implant, cutting off Lily and the sights and sounds of Piccadilly Circus. In the dark dead space, the four Agents were silhouetted in the beam of my headlights. They had moved together and were standing in a row. I had the odd idea that they wished they could come with us, that they wished that someone would come to meet *them* with rugs and brandy and hot cocoa.

I got my sister comfortable and started up the car. I was going to drive like she always did without being able to see the consensual traffic. I didn't like doing it. I knew how arrogant it must seem to the consensuals and how much they must resent it—it was things like that, I knew, that gave us Outsiders a bad name—but I just couldn't risk a broken axle on the way home on top of everything else.

"Really we're no different when you come to think of it," said Clarrie after a while. Her implant was off and she looked out at abandoned streets as lonely as canyons on some lifeless planet in space. "*That's* the physical world out there, that's physical matter. But we're not like that, are we? We're patterns.

We're just patterns rippling across the surface."

"Have a bit more brandy, Clarrie," I told her, "and then put the seat back and try to get some sleep. It's going to be some time before we get back."

She nodded and tugged the rug up around herself. Her implant switched itself on and she saw a taxi swerve to avoid us and heard the angry blast of its horn. Briefly the busy night life of the Consensual Field was all around her. Then it was gone.

"Just the same," she said sleepily. "Just like the lights in Piccadilly Circus."