

## Being Dead

My name is John, and I've been dead for some time now. How long, I don't know. No clocks, and I don't know if time works as it did when I was alive. What's it like? It's grey. That's the first thing that I noticed. Well, when I say noticed, I mean that when I think back the first thing that I remember is the greyness. Some time later, I became aware of differences in the greyness, shades of greyness.

Time passes and some memories return. My name is John. I have a family. More correctly, I remember that I had a family, but I can't remember anything about them, and this causes me distress. I experience emotions for the first time. Well, for the first time since I died. How do I know I died? It seems that I've always known it. I've known it since I died, it seems.

My memory goes back to when I noticed the grey, yet it also goes back to when I was alive, when I was young. Two sets of memories, one still growing. My old memories, before I died, I know that they are there, but I can't bring them to mind. Sometimes something from my life surfaces, like my new car. That's all I can remember – I had a new car and it was blue.

All at once I am able to focus. I do something, I don't know what, and the shades of greyness sharpen into grey lines, curves and areas. Then I relax, and they go fuzzy again. I find it hard to keep things in focus at first, but with practise it becomes easier. But at first my brain can't interpret what it is that I see. I don't know what I am looking at.

Suddenly the grey anonymous shapes and edges become structures, as my mind learns to interpret what I see. I am gazing down a long corridor or hallway. It has an arched top, and buttresses are spaced equally along the walls, much like the nave of a church. Perspective shrinks the buttressed walls as they disappear into the distance, into a vanishing point at infinity. The buttresses stand out because the areas between them, where the church might have windows, are lit by a grey light.

I notice that the lights between the buttresses change. Over time the lights move, much like sunlight through church windows would move. Is there a grey sun out there? Will it set? But no. The lights merely move through a cycle, a never ending repeating pattern.

I hear a noise. A sort fuzzy rumbling, like someone talking through a wall, or a layer of muffling material. It has the rhythm of someone talking, but it is so fuzzy that I can't understand the words.

\*\*\*

Time passes. I know it is passing, because the lights move through many cycles. I realize that my vision is fixed, and I can only see straight in front of me and I can't turn my head. I wonder if I still have a head.

Then a figure appears in my line of sight. Starting well off to my left, it walks unsteadily forward for a few paces, then stops and turns round, looking first left and right and then back towards me. The fuzzy noise increases, as if the figure is saying something loudly, but I can't understand it.

My memory of before I died informs me that it is a man, but he seems to be an incomplete man, unfinished. He has fat bulbous arms and legs, which do not seem to be articulated properly, as if he is from a cartoon. His head is as round as a ball, with a round mouth, round eyes, and he has big elephant-like ears on his head. He doesn't seem to be wearing clothes, and has only a small featureless lump in his groin area.

The cartoon man turns away from me, and I see that there is a stump in the middle of his back, where the base of his spine should be. He stands still for maybe a minute, if time is the same as before I died, and then starts to walk away. I think that the stump is shrinking, but I'm not sure. His

movements become more natural as he walks, and his figure seems to become more like a normal human. Or what I remember a human looked like from before I died.

He walks away for a long time, through many cycles of the lights, until he is a small object a long way away. An object the apparent size of a flea. I don't see him disappear, but one moment he is there, and the next he isn't. He may have moved to one side or the other, behind a buttress.

\*\*\*

Time passes, my senses improve. The fuzziness of the sound reduces to the point where I can almost make out words. I can tell that there are two or three voices each talking intermittently. It shocks me when I realize that one is mine. This particular voice stops and starts when I want it to, so it is at least partially under my control. I relax, and it continues by itself. What am I saying? I don't know.

I see more cartoon people. They appear on both sides of my line of sight, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs. I never see more than two at one time. The women are as cartoon-like as the men, with mere bumps of breasts and smooth loins. The cartoon people often wander around in front of me or to one side of me for a while, then they head off down the corridor, until, at some distance from me, they disappear. I see one or two of them turn into one of the gaps between the buttresses and disappear. I can't be sure that others don't turn sideways too.

I find that I can turn my eyes. Wait, I have eyes? Well, I have things which see and can be directed to look in different directions. I now have a slightly wider field of view, and it reveals that there are other corridors, to the left and to the right. I surmise that I am at the hub of a system of corridors that radiate out to who knows where. Or maybe there are just three tunnels. On each side of me, right at the limit of my sight, in the corners of my vision, I can see grey things moving slightly.

Suddenly an object appears in front of me. It is close and just as grey as everything else. At first I think it is a paddle or blade, but as I watch it changes. Grooves appear on it, four of them, and the object splits along the grooves. It is a cartoon hand with fingers like featureless sausages. I think of it spreading, as I would spread my hand, and it does! It is my hand and I must be one of the cartoon men. But why can't I move about, like them?

The sound is still getting clearer and I can hear sentences, just random sentences, unrelated to anything in this place. I can hear one voice to the left of me, one to the right and my own voice. I feel the urge to say something, so I say "I am John", and my own voice clearly says the words, then reverts to speaking the random sentences.

As the lights cycle on and on, the voice to my left stops talking. It says a few things like "Hullo, are you there?", "Where's Brian?", and "Get some bread while you are out." Then it mostly falls silent. I miss it. More cycles pass, and my voice blurts similar sentences without my volition.

\*\*\*

I find that I can turn my head left and right and a little up and down. I can see my cartoon body, my unfinished arms and legs. I do indeed look like the other cartoon people that I had seen.

Attached to the wall to my left is a cartoon man. He turns his head and looks at me, his round black eyes giving no indication of his emotion, his round grey face blandly looking at me. "The one you have chosen is the best value for money," he says. "Whoa, here we go!"

To his left is a blank wall, with a line of stumps that diminishes in size as they disappear around the curve of the wall. The cartoon man next to me is connected to the wall by a thick cord that is about two hundred millimetres long, assuming sizes are like they were before I was dead. His legs are flexing and he is marching on the spot. His arms are moving in what seemed to be a random manner.

Colour starts to seep into whatever place I am in, as my vision improves. The arches are a pale eggshell blue, and the lights between the buttresses cycle in colour as well as position. The cartoon man next to me is a pale pastel pink, the sort of shade that is called a “flesh tone”.

I look towards the right. The cartoon men and women on that side are all connected by shorter cords, and the furthest one I can see must be touching the wall with his back. They are moving, but slowly and jerkily. They stare straight ahead, unable to move their heads, but I can see the closest one moving his or her eyes.

More time passes. The lights cycle, and my senses become sharper. I smell something, something sweet, a scent that bears no resemblance to any scent that I remember from before I died. My mind labels it the scent of the place.

I look at the man on my left, and he is gone. Only a stump is left on the wall, oozing a little yellow ichor. It rapidly dries and crusts over. It seems that I will be the next to be free of the wall. I wonder if it will be painful. But he hadn't called out.

\*\*\*

The lights cycle a dozen or so times more. I'm not sure, but I think that I can detect a sparkling in some of the lights, but it is hard to tell. My legs start marching on the spot and my arms wave about, sometimes in front of me, sometimes at my sides. I can stop them if I concentrate, but if my attention wavers, they start up again.

There is a pulling, tugging sensation in my back, and I fall forward onto hands and knees. Although I land heavily, there is no pain, just total confusion. I feel ichor dripping down my back, and the scent is almost overpowering. I slowly pull myself to my feet, which are still mere sketches of feet, and turn to face the wall.

The oozing stump to which I had been attached is rippling and contracting. Then the stump shudders and stops moving, and the oozing slows.

I step back a couple of clumsy paces. The wall curves away on both sides and I had guessed right that it is circular. It seems to be divided into sections most of which hold a cartoon man.

To my left, which was my right when I was attached, the cartoon men seem to be successively less defined, more cartoonish. They are also more closely attached to the wall, to the point where they appear to be emerging from it.

To the right of my stump, there are only stumps and no cartoon men, at least for the first few sections, and the stumps are less prominent the farther away from my position. I start walking along the wall in that direction and the stumps fade away completely, and for maybe four sections the wall is blank. Then new bumps start to appear, but these are different. They are shaped like gingerbread men.

As I walk, the bulges increase in size until they are half round, and then the boundary with the wall starts to contract. It does look as if the gingerbread men are emerging from the wall. As I walk along the wall, the gingerbread men are gaining definition. Feet appear, the ends of the arms become hands, but the feet and hands are lacking in detail. In short, the gingerbread men are morphing into my 'cartoon men'.

When their bodies are completely free of the wall, they are still attached to the wall by a thick cord, just as I had been. I estimate that I am about half-way round the hub. Two or three sections further on, there is an oozing stump on the wall. In front of it is a figure on hands and knees.

\*\*\*

I hurry forwards and help the figure to stand up. It is a woman, well, female. She has mounds on her chest, and a smooth groin. Her features are sketches only, as I guess mine are.

“Hullo, I'm John. What is your name?” I ask.

"I'm Mary. Are you dead too?"

"Yeah. If we are dead, though. This is odd. Emerging out of a wall."

"What?"

I gesture at the wall.

"If you go round the wall, we start as bumps, morph into gingerbread men, then change again into cartoon men."

I gesture at myself. She looks down at herself.

"I look like you? I thought it was a dream!"

"Well, there are differences!"

"Oh, yes! What do we do now? I've seen people walking off up the corridors. There's not much else we can do, is there?"

"Yes, I agree. This one?"

We set off up the nearest corridor. I estimate that the first buttress is about one hundred metres away.

"Do you remember your death?" she asks.

I search my memories.

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"No. But I know that I am dead."

"That leaves open the possibility that this is all a big illusion."

"Yes. I agree."

\*\*\*

We round the first buttress and see the source of the light. A window opens onto the blackness of space and floating in full view of the window is a planet, green and inviting. I know that Earth is blue, but this green planet looks much like Earth except for the hue. Strands of white wreath the planet, probably clouds of water vapour. The opposite window holds a similar view.

"A jungle world?" wonders my companion.

"It certainly looks like it." Something occurs to me. "Was your planet blue?"

"Yes. The Earth. Was yours?"

"Yes. We might come from the same place, then."

We walk on. Walking becomes easier, as my joints and limbs become more human and lose their cartoonish nature. I realize that my companion is now fully clothed and, sure enough, so am I. Our clothing still has a hint of cartoon, but is becoming more real by the minute.

The next buttress reveals a planet that is a delicate pink. The space it is in is full of speckles of light. I wonder if these were the sparkles that I thought that I saw.

"A desert planet, do you think?" I ask.

"No, there are clouds. I've a feeling that all of these planets have people. What do you think?"

Surprised, I look at her. "Yes, you're right, I don't know how I know, but I think that you are right."

\*\*\*

We continue on. She is wearing a skirt that finishes just above her knees. She has a white blouse, and a bag on a strap over her shoulder. She has brown hair and brown eyes, white skin. I am in blue denim jeans and a t-shirt with an abstract design on it. I have curly black hair and a brown skin. I don't know how I know about the hair. Perhaps it's a memory from before I died.

We walk past uncounted windows, and view uncounted planets and spaces.

"Are we supposed to pick one?" I wonder.

"I don't know. I suppose so."

“What happens when we pick one? Oh, I know that you don’t know. I’m just thinking aloud.”

“I wonder, do we enter a womb somewhere down on that planet? Is it a reincarnation? Or do we just appear down there, in a park or open space? Do we become someone who already exists? A mother, a father, a child?”

We are looking at a planet which is yellow, a bilious hue which causes her to shudder.

I shake my head, indicating my ignorance.

“Let’s move on.”

I silently agree.

\*\*\*

We come across a red planet. Not the red of war, but the blush of a maiden.

“This is mine. Is it yours?”

“No.” I feel a slight dissonance as I look at the planet.

“Goodbye, John.”

“Goodbye, Mary.”

She kisses my cheek and walks off towards the window and the planet, and her image shimmers and is gone. I sigh and carry on, looking for the planet that resonates with me. I know that I will find it, or that I will continue on, literally for ever. Either way, it doesn’t matter.

\*\*\*