

**HEALTH,
WEALTH,
HAPPINES.**

James Otsa

Part of

WRITING THE FUTURE

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**The future is...
caring for one
another**

It is strange, how you come to look at the world, when you are immobile. Lying here on the cold surface, my neck craned towards the window and the muscles aching from my endless gazing, I realise that everything has been sideways for such a very long time that I frequently no longer know what life looks like when it is right-side up. No more can I bring myself to look at the other side of the room, the side where the shadows grow longer and deeper by the hour, and so all of my time is spent with my face tilted towards the rising and setting sun. It is the only thing I have come to be able to count upon.

Tuesdays are my favourite day now, the day on which I know Sarah will come, the day on which it seems worth the long years alone. Except I am not alone, or so they kept telling me, for my small apartment is now so full with prying eyes and sensors that I often recall with curiosity how devoted I once was to privacy. It is an alien concept to the elderly.

One thing I am thankful for is that I have managed to entirely miss the ghastly days of surgery, and being shunted between hospital departments as each separate part of my mind, body and spirit slowly shut down in sequence. I remember my mother, and how—towards the end of her life—she lifted to her mouth the endless rows of small plastic cups from which she used to trickle a rainbow of different pills and capsules into her gullet. Back then they were always trying to

treat one problem at a time with no view of how each system might feed into the next. Curious, how such simple things can seem so barbaric in retrospect.

There are some days where I find the strength to move about in the apartment, mostly when I feel centred enough to speak with Andrew. I had struggled, at first, when we came home from the funeral, to understand how I would manage to cope alone. He had done so much for me during the years we were together. I was so angry that they could not save him. Surely now, I thought, with all this technology, there must be something they could do, but in the end we are still flesh and blood.

I keep the file with his consciousness encoded in it right on the home menu of my interfaces. It is hard sometimes, hearing his voice again and knowing that it is him, but also not. He still worries about Sarah, asks me if she is seeing anybody. I blame myself that she has never had her own children. For those with hidden problems in their genome, the screening can be the cruellest blow. I am not sure what I would have done, if I had have had the choice when we were young. I think sometimes these things are best left to chance. I hope that she is happy, still.

Laura, the woman in the apartment next to mine, has been struggling to find antibiotics which the bacteria causing her infection are not immune

to. She is a few years older than me and we joke sometimes that she is half woman half washing-machine, the amount of spare bionic parts she has now. The children these days would not know what a washing machine was, I suppose. I still like to wash my synthetics the old way, just for the nostalgia, even though it is completely unnecessary. If only they could invent some self-cleaning dishes. We can dream. I detest the housework. That was something Andrew was always good at.

Both of Laura's legs, now, are artificial, since her knees and hips wore out, and she recently had one of the new artificial optic nerve pathways fitted to fix her eyesight. She is still deaf as a post, but the waiting list is so long that she often complains she might never 'complete the full set' in time.

When I look in the mirror, on the rare occasion I make it that far, I am shocked by just how old I look. My DNA repairing treatments have finally stopped having an effect, like the doctors said they would. I always felt it was unnatural to see a somewhat youthful looking sixty-year-old staring back into the eyes of someone with one hundred years of life behind them. Even the young ones now regularly live until their centenary. I imagine the King has had to stop sending letters. Either that, or he has an army of staff set to the task at hand.

The doorbell rings, and I know it is Sarah. Nobody else comes now. I see all my visitors through the interfaces. It is easier that way. Easier but more lonely.

‘Hello Mum, Happy Birthday!’ she says, as I open the door. She looks tired.

‘Are you alright love? Come in.’

‘Oh I’m fine, just been a bit run down lately, started coming down with a cold. I got a nanomachine boost this morning from the clinic, should be cleared up by tomorrow.’

‘You’d think they’d have found a cure for that by now.’

‘Rest, I imagine, which is what you should be doing.’

‘I know, I know. Only got up to speak to your father.’

We sit in the front room, like always. I do not come in here anymore other than on her visits. It brings my moods down, too many memories. Sometimes I wish the dementia would set in, often I wonder why it has not. It affects almost everyone now, but the preventative measures are excellent for those lucky enough to catch it early. It would be awful for Sarah, of course, but I find something about the ideal of the gradual release from reality of it quite calming - that slow surrender to your own delusions. I can feel my depression coming today. I check my Health

Companion and it shows my serotonin levels are very low. Probably the time of year, I always get like this in winter.

‘Still feeling a bit low?’

‘Oh you know me, battling on.’

‘Well you shouldn’t have to battle on. They should be putting more money into the mental health budget. I saw the Health Secretary was talking about a policy of austerity again.’

‘They’ll change it soon enough once they realise the added premiums they’ll be able to put on healthcare bills.’

‘How do they expect the average person to pay for these things?’

‘I doubt they care love, is the honest answer. I saw three poor souls just the other day in the corridor with the old artificial limbs, limping about. It’s not right.’

Sarah sighs a lot these days. I know she is not coping well with my illness. She gets a lot of flak for her articles from the public too, and it weighs her down. I wish I could still manage to make her a meal. A hot meal goes a long way, especially from a parent.

I cannot get used to the synthetic proteins and dairy products, but it does not seem to bother most people. It is impossible to tell the difference, but I just cannot get past the fact that it has been grown in a lab. It reminds me of my own days as a researcher poring over

samples. Of course, I am not sure what is worse - this stuff, or eating the dead body of another living creature. The nurse tells me they are much better for you anyway, when she eventually visits. She has not come for many months now. They are terribly overstretched.

I still remember the days where people were fat from the amount of rubbish they stuffed inside themselves. Unbelievable that everything got so out of hand. All those cancers, people having parts of themselves sucked out, chopped off, made bigger and smaller. Now they just pick what they want off a menu in the gene labs, all to-order, like a restaurant. Remember those? Gosh it has been a long while since I went to a restaurant. Good health used to be about eating your vegetables and going for a jog, and now it is a hundred different interactions with medications, nutrients, the microbiome, therapeutic devices, and your environment.

We flip the news onto the projection surface. I used to use the retinal displays until recently, but I find it information overload these days. More and more people are starting to reject them. They are very intrusive. The newsreader is halfway through a story.

'It's already being called the biggest data breach of the century...millions of data sets lost... characterizations of the whole population... reproducible patterns and relationships...'

Someone has hacked into the government servers and is ransoming the patient files again. It seems impossible to stop these criminals from getting what they want. Every few months there is some big security scare about how the treatment algorithms' formulas will be corrupted and we will all be prescribed the wrong dosage automatically.

'Did I tell you I ran into Dr. Chakrabahti at the pool?'

'Oh! No you didn't. What are the team up to these days?'

'Still working on getting the organic silicon chips past the trial phase. He said everyone was asking after you.'

I miss my work. I loved it, to use my brain, working towards something so important. The chips were just coming into the research stage when I began my career. Simulated blood and oxygen flow allows them to sustain living cells and mirror the actions of real organs. We reduced the need for animal testing and sped up drug development exponentially, but it sounds like they have still not managed to push it to public release – the big pharmaceutical companies have been lobbying against it for years. We could have prevented so many of the pandemics in the developing world over the past few decades, but that does not tally with their profit margins. Combine that with rapid inter-continental travel and new diseases were bursting into life just as fast as we could stop them a lot of the time.

‘I wonder how his son is doing. Terrible business.’

Dr. Chakrabahti was hard on his son, even by the standards of the time, and the drug-taking always seemed to me like a knee jerk reaction to his stern hand.

‘They can do wonderful things with the addiction antibodies now. The numbers speak for themselves. I wrote a column recently about the drastic reduction in drug problems amongst the homeless. Didn’t you see it?’

‘I think I missed that one sorry love,’ I lie, casually.

The truth is that reading gives me no pleasure now, even when it is Sarah’s work.

I miss paper.

She crosses the room to check on my vitals chart, and I wonder if she will notice that my stomach chip has not recorded anything for the past few days. She worries about me a lot but I do not like to bother her. I feel something inevitable coming and I do not want it to play on her mind. When it is time, I will let it be time.

After the accident in ’58 they said I would never walk again, but Sarah would not let it lie. She was relentless in pushing for the spinal cord implants and the stem cells. I was one of the first wave of patients to be lucky enough to recover. I would never have guessed that 42 years later I could still stand, walk across the room and hug my daughter. For years,

the best therapy that incapacitated people had were the virtual reality avatars. It was better than nothing, I suppose, but it must have been maddening to be wasting away in the real world, knowing you were trapped somewhere else. Although, I must admit, it is entirely possible to feel that way in your own body.

‘Read anything good since you last came?’

‘Actually I read one of Michio Kaku’s old books in my sleep last night.’

‘These brain augmentations take all the fun out of reading. I don’t know what you young people get from it.’

‘It made me laugh, he was talking about how in the future we’d have silicon chips encoded with DNA that could be placed in your bathroom mirror, so when you blew on the bathroom mirror it analysed your saliva droplets.’

‘Ha. Imagine if he could see all this. He’d have a field day.’

My heart is aching slightly today, but I will not mention it to Sarah. It is just the creaks of old age. When I had the transplant a few years back they scanned mine and then fabricated a brand new one from the 3D printers in the hospital. I remember seeing the nozzle moving backwards and forwards over the surface of the petri dish, a tiny and precise god dragging a new part of me into existence on the

counter, before it would be dropped into my chest like a car engine. Simple as that.

Sarah goes to the kitchen to speak to Andrew. I can hear them chatting and I long for him to still be here. It is not the same. Nobody can live forever, but maybe that is for the best. We make enough mistakes in our lifetimes, it is only fair we give others a chance to fix them after we are gone.

‘Will you bring me a glass of water love?’

Sarah fills the glass from the filter tap. We have to be careful now, with the water sources so contaminated. I can feel the air pollution heavy today with the windows open, too. It seems to only be getting worse. I have to reach for my ventilator as my I feel my lungs straining. It is usually only outside in the city that it gets this bad. It must be the weather. I look out of the window of the apartment. So many people, more than I ever thought possible, all teeming over the surface of the world.

Sarah returns with my water.

‘Have you had your scan today?’

She knows I have not been keeping up with them. She helps me out of the chair and into the ultrasound unit. The data on my body joins with that from all the other scans which I and the rest of the population have had, compared and contrasted in the ether, looking to detect any anomalies or new developments. It once

found a pre-cancerous region, but all it took was a short burst of high intensity, focused ultrasound to kill the tissue. I had to wonder at how remarkably accurate and specific it was; bloodless, sterile and painless surgery in the comfort of your own home.

We sit for a while longer and reminisce about the old days. Sarah remembers my own mother's false teeth with amusement, and I remind her that the dentist's drill was not such a laughing matter. She is lucky to be spared it. They have biological treatment now, substitutes for tooth structures without the need for drilling, and entire replacement teeth are grown in the jaw.

When it is time for her to leave I walk uneasily to the door and hold her tightly, kissing her on both cheeks. I will miss her greatly, and I hope that the long years stretching out ahead are kinder to her than they have been to me. It is not easy to watch those you love dying around you, whilst you blunder on, being reassembled like some battle-worn suit of armour that is re-forged and hammered back into shape. I have so few friends now, but those of us that remain just keep on going, each in our own apartments.

I wish we had all seen each other more.

After she has gone, in the quiet, empty room that feels so torturously over-familiar to me now, I sit and stare absentmindedly at the old paintings that I

still have hung on the walls, trying to remember what birthday I am celebrating.

‘Andrew, how old am I this year?’

‘143 I think, but you don’t look a day over 100.’

‘Oh shut up.’

I wonder, sometimes, if these extra years have been worth it. I have lived another half a life, but most of it has been spent being patched back together. I have seen so much change, and so many incredible leaps in ingenuity, and yet the same problems remain. We have learnt so much and so little. For every two steps forward, we take one back. We still put off until tomorrow what we could be doing today. We are always curing the symptoms, and never preventing the cause. It is the same in all things, and I am coming to the conclusion that there is something in human nature which will not allow us to see beyond our own immediate problems. Perhaps with the years available to us now, we will start to see that our actions cause ripples that used to extend beyond our own lifetimes, but are now very much rocking our own boats. Perhaps it will force us to be more prescient.

I take myself back to the treatment table and lie down again. I am weary from Sarah’s visit, and truth be told, it feels like the best I can manage is that one golden afternoon a week. Any more than that and I think I should collapse from exhaustion.

The sun is slowly setting behind the outdoor gardens on the roof of the apartments opposite mine, and the long branches and climbers are trailing down the sides of the building, trying their best to mesh with the hard structure, despite their fragility and supple limbs. I can hear the birds roosting for the night and I think how wonderful it would be to fall asleep in this moment, at peace, and know that I would not wake again to the looming six days that lay ahead of me without Sarah's sunlight shining on me.

One's existence is a curious thing, and I find it strange that after all these years, all this time, I still cannot choose to end it on my own terms, even though life has long since passed me by.

About the author

James Otsa is a writer and music publicist who lives in Liverpool. His first short story, *The Coachman*, was published by 3am Press as part of the *Par Avion* anthology in 2013, and he has since written for the *Metro* newspaper, *The Skinny Magazine*, *Pop Matters*, *Drowned in Sound*, *The 405*, *PASTE Magazine* and many more. He has just completed his first novel, *I Too Was In Arcadia*, and is currently working on a second.

Inspiration

I chose to write *Health, Wealth, Happiness* from the perspective of the elderly because they are so often marginalised and written out of both popular culture and society at large. We often forget, I think, that we will all one day be old. Kindness and compassion cost nothing.

Writing the future

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