

**ON
ROSEWICK
LANE**

Mark Sadler

Part of

WRITING THE FUTURE

Writing the Future, the world's largest health short story prize, is brought to you by Kaleidoscope Health & Care.

Inspired by science fiction, entries considered how health and healthcare in the UK will look in the year 2100.

The prize was won by Elizabeth Ingram-Wallace with her story 'Opsnizing Dad', and was published along with the five other shortlisted stories in October 2017.

At a time of reflecting on where healthcare has been, a further set of longlisted stories was published in the summer of 2018 to coincide with the NHS's 70th birthday.

All of the published stories are available on the Kaleidoscope website, along with the option to buy a limited edition hard copy of the six shortlisted stories.

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**The future is...
the ownership
and regulation
of our bodies
by corporate
entities**

Zara stared peevishly into her bowl of stewed pears. The pale, glistening fruit yielded beneath the probing lip of her spoon. She held it indifferently, watching the antique stainless steel as it divided the soft flesh into smaller and smaller pieces. The curled-over fingers of her other hand lightly rubbed at an imagined irritation on a field of pristine bare skin, circumferenced by the low rounded neckline of her black top.

“I think my Ki-Li needs a full recalibration.”

Sitting across the table, her husband, Gavin, had been reading eye floaters on his ocular sheen. He blinked it off as he lifted his head.

“Why do think that? You look fine.”

After a moment’s consideration, he added:

“As you always do.”

“It’s not managing my weight properly. I’ve been walking around in a scale field all morning and I’m up by almost five grams.”

“Call down a medical drone if you’re worried. It’s the first thing they’ll do if you go to Seville.”

“I already did that, while you were out running.”

“Well, what did it say?”

“Nothing really. It told me that the risk to my well-being was negligible and advised me to wait for the bio-update this afternoon.”

The bio-updates to synthetic abdominopelvic management (AM) systems were usually issued a fortnight after a major software upgrade. This grace period was intentional. It allowed the algorithmic code, which was partially-sentient, time to settle itself and make any individual tweaks that it deemed necessary, ahead of the introduction of novel pseudo-organic material.

Nobody thought very much about the process, except on those occasions when there was a postponement. These had become more and more frequent in recent years; a phenomenon that was explained away by the increasing complexity of the systems involved. The most recent delay had stretched-out over a torturous six week period. Two previously scheduled dates within this window of time had come and gone. A third date had been hastily announced. By then an agitated global population were nervously recalling the scare stories they had heard about software mismatches with bio-components. Some began to fret about minute blemishes that they suddenly perceived on their bodies, or worried over aches and pains that had lingered for slightly longer than was normal.

At six sites across the globe, the chimney vents of the immense Jaivik biotic reactors remained in the standby position, continually tracking the favourable weather systems that would allow for an optimum

dissemination of their bio-spores. Potential gaps in the atmospheric coverage were identified and armadas of drones made ready to deliver the upgrade to these areas via aerosol, or through one-to-one oral administration.

The bio-upgrades for Contempo-England were managed by the Ki-Li facility in Luxembourg, which was usually able to cover most of Europe, with a degree of overlap in Fringe Asia and the Federated States of Northern Africa. The distribution process took four to six hours and had a 98% rate of absorption.

On dissemination days, the four big bio-medicine corporations would jointly release statements, fan-faring the collective step forward towards immortality that was about to be undertaken by the human race.

Of course, not everyone was moving ahead at the same pace. There were some stragglers.

In the nation states where organ replacement was rejected on cultural or religious ideals, or on purely economic grounds, the populations swallowed their antidotes to the approaching bio-clouds. The military forces in some of these countries defiantly aimed artillery and tank barrels skyward, seeding the low cloud with cocktails of sporacides.

Scattered across the world, individuals operating pirated AM units nervously patched-in the software updates that they hoped would help them to avoid detection. Earlier in the day, some white-hat hackers

had taken down illegal roving mesh servers as they passed through Hamburg and Next-Venice, eliciting panic on the migrant virtual networks where bootleg medical tech was discussed, traded and modified.

Gavin had a long-standing appointment with a couple named Yvonne and Frederick Hedgler, and saw no reason to cancel it. He left Zara reclining morosely on the chaise-longue in their bedroom, silently obsessing over her unaccounted five grams in added mass.

In the travel pod he pulled down a non-custom eye floater, which had been labelled as urgent, onto the back coating of his eye sheen. It was from the World Health Federation, advising anyone without WHF-approved AM systems to remain indoors for the duration of the upgrade, while assuring no specific danger. He double-blinked it away and began to cycle through the other floaters that were jostling fluidly around the edge of his field of vision.

A message from Habche Bio Systems Inc, required him to read it from beginning to end, before it could be dismissed:

‘During the update, designated body part [right thumbnail] will bio-luminesce orange. When the update is complete, designated body part [right thumbnail] will gently emit a low vibration and will pulse green for three minutes. If you wish to change your designated body part, please do so now...’

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The Hedglers lived in a natural-organic enclave in the Westcliff-on-Sea eco-connurb. The residential buildings in the area were made from wood and brick and dated from the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Sensing a change in the environment, Gavin's internal systems increased his body's immune defences.

He knocked on the dark blue wooden door. When there was no response, he depressed a small raised button in the centre of a golden rectangle of metal, that was mounted on the wall. Inside the house a dual-chime sounded. His finely-tuned ears registered approaching movement. The door opened halfway and the face of a small, stoop-over elderly woman, with jowly, sun-damaged skin, appeared in the gap.

"Gavin, come in, come in."

She hurriedly ushered him inside.

"You look well. We'll be going into lock-down in a few hours. Do you have a place to go?"

"I'm a full conversion. It's safe for me to be out."

The sudden change in her expression caught him off guard. It was a jarring shift behind the eyes, from welcome invitation to lingering mistrust, coloured with distaste; completely at odds with the seamless choreographed mood shifts that he was used to in his peers.

When the woman spoke again she sounded put out. Again he was struck by the rawness in her tone.

“Oh. Well come in then.”

She shuffled on blotchy, swollen calves along a gloomy hallway. The atmosphere in the house was stuffy and tainted with the smell of boiled seaweed and human body odour.

“We’re in the parlour.”

The front room was crowded with dimly-varnished antique wooden furniture, displaying crystal glassware and tacky china ornaments. A pair of worn settees flanked opposing walls. As they entered, an elderly man, who was seated in a reclining armchair, struggled to get to his feet.

“Don’t mind getting yourself up,” said the woman. “He’s a full con. He won’t want to shake your hand without upping his immunity first.”

She turned her attention to Gavin.

“I’m Yvonne. This is my long-suffering husband, Fred. These are my daughters Gloria and Amy.”

She indicated the only other occupant of the room - a dumpy, grey-haired woman loitering beside the net curtains that screened off the diamond lattice of a bay window. Gavin stared at her.

“You’re a gestalt?”

The woman smiled graciously.

“No, I’m post-Alzheimer’s. I’m Amy. Gloria was in this body before me, but she’s almost gone now.”

“She started displaying symptoms in her fifties,” said Yvonne. “We struggled to get funding for her treatment. All that time the tau protein was slowly hollowing her out from the inside; cutting off all her connections to us. By the time the LHA had agreed on a treatment plan, she was gone. We spent almost our entire pension on re-seeding her neuron bed. We did it ourselves, me and Fred. We built her back up from next to nothing. Sometimes I catch tiny glimpses of Gloria. But it’s like when you raise a new building on old foundations... We get on though, don’t we love?”

“We do, most of the time,” said Amy.

“It must be strange, being born into the body of a middle-aged woman; not having a proper childhood.”

“Nobody has a proper childhood any more,” scoffed Frederick. “I assume that you’re a Ki-Li.”

“Actually, I have a navel vine. I prefer the interplay between the organics and the synthetics.”

“That’s Korean isn’t it? Habche Inc, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s the one. If you don’t mind I will be recording our interview.”

“Will the recording form a part of your dissertation?”

“It will be transcribed into neuro-line format for subconscious study.”

“We will want to assert our legal claim over our likenesses.”

“Yes, that’s fine. Could we begin by establishing the site that was occupied by Southend Hospital?”

“We’re on the road that used to run along the north side of the campus,” said Yvonne. “It was founded in, what... 1921. It closed in 2076. Before they built the hospital there was a farm on a part of the site. There was a bungalow there called Rose Cottage that they turned into a morgue. Even decades later, after it was long gone, the nurses still used to say of dead patients ‘they’ve gone to Rose Cottage.’”

While his wife was talking, Frederick removed his spectacles and studiously cleaned the round lenses with the cable-knit sleeve of his cardigan. He returned them to his face as raised his head and addressed Gavin:

“Because we occupy the fringes of a site where secondary healthcare was carried out, we benefit from the legacy of old legislation. That’s what enables us to perform our surgical work here without being shut down and inviting criminal charges.”

His swollen fingers flicked through the dog-eared page-corners of a large soft-bound book on the occasional table next to him.

“Now, in your case, if your AM system is faulty, a sterilised health unit will arrive at your habitat. We, on

the other hand, have our little operating theatre in the extension around the back. We have our tissue-culture beds in the cellar. I set the latter up after organic livers and kidneys were discontinued in this country back in 2073. We can still produce a complete set of abdominopelvic organs –what are disparagingly referred to as cake-tin organs, on account of the dishes that we use to grow them. Our most popular product is the white tail liver, which is a modification of a human liver, but still true to the original.”

“Everyone in my family worked in the healthcare system, mostly at the hospital,” said Yvonne. “We were part of the parade of nurses when they were winding down the NHS. Fred used to be a transplant surgeon. I was an assisting theatre nurse. We got laid off when AM systems became the norm. I used to be in a knitting circle. Now those same people help us to make livers. This sub-community is 96% enhanced natural-organic.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but does anyone want tea?” inquired Amy.

“I’d love a cup,” said Yvonne.

“Me too. Thank you dear.”

“I’m okay,” said Gavin. “I usually fast on update days.”

He leaned forward on the settee and looked Frederick in the eye.

“Would it be fair to say that your dislike of AM systems is, in part, motivated by you losing your way of life and your professional identity?”

“Not at all. When they developed the London Lung I thought that it was a great thing. It’s not the technology itself that concerns me, so much as who owns it and what they do with it. I became increasingly alarmed by the piecemeal dissection of human biology by corporate interests who are, in essence, unaccountable to anyone.”

“I think that’s a bit melodramatic.”

“Look at the terms and conditions for your system, and systems like it. They runs for hundreds of pages and they change practically every time there is an update. The main bullet point is that you have very few legal rights. You, along with the majority of people in this country, neither own, nor have full control, over the parts of your body that are necessary to keep you alive.

“Your system manages your hormone levels and so on; things that can exert an influence over your personality and your behaviour. Therefore anyone with an AM system can be controlled by a corporate entity. If they want you to sit down, then you can be made to think that you want to sit down.

“An example: The criminal population in this country, which I think currently amounts to around 800,000 individuals, all have AM systems that have

been placed on limited-state settings; effectively dialled-down so that they can't get up to any further mischief. Now, you might think that's a good thing, but look at the case of Vernon Levet: Whatever your opinion of the man, he is not a criminal. Yet he has claimed for years that his AM system has been placed in a limited-state as a way of silencing him. Recently he has made his system data public, after it was leaked to him by someone in the company, and it seems to corroborate what he has been saying.

“All of the squishy pink muck that used to make up your insides might be technologically inferior to what you have now, but at least you owned it. When you threw out your old organs you also tossed away your freedom. In my opinion.”

Gavin drew back. He pressed the tips of his fingers together, forming a bowed pyramid with his hands.

“Well, it's not like anything was wasted. My old organs were sent to parts of the developing world where they still perform transplants.”

“Your hand-me-downs. The percentage of those surplus organs that find their way into human bodies is very low. They are generally used for other purposes, some of which are rather unsavoury.”

From the kitchen, the shrill whistle of an old-fashioned kettle rose to a crescendo and then rapidly died-down as it was removed from the heat.

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“So, how old are you?”

Frederick Hedgler closed his eyes as he took a long, trembling sip of tea. Gavin felt a momentary twinge of envy for the simple pleasure that it seemed to give him.

“I will be 131 in June.”

“You’re doing okay on your squishy pink innards.”

“We don’t advance so much as we tread water. I can manage my encroaching arthritis but I can’t get rid of it. And I am mortal. You augmented types will keep on going. A new part will arrive, along with the drone that will install it. I expect you will carry on in that vein until either something goes terribly wrong with the upgrade process and your entire sub-species goes extinct, or you are basically robots. My concern lies in what happens in the future.”

Yvonne rose unsteadily to her feet. She shuffled around the room, huffing and puffing as she gathered-up plates strewn with crumbs and gnawed pieces of cheese rind. Her empty teacup rattled in its saucer.

“Look at our representation in government,” she grumbled. “Only 11 natural-organic MPs, and five of those are lunatics. Sorry, no offence, but I don’t think that our nation’s health policy should be determined exclusively by people who have never known want,

or illness, in their lives, and who have lifespans that will continue to increase. Did you know that some natural-organic health issues are now tabled by the Department of Culture and Heritage?”

She was distracted from her sermon by the muffled, repetitive double-bleep of an electronic alarm which was sounding quietly from somewhere in the room. The beeping grew louder as Frederick rolled up the left sleeve of his cardigan, revealing an antique digital watch. He depressed a button on the side of the shiny silver casing, silencing it.

“Well, there’s the 30 minute warning, which is our cue to get this place locked down. I’m afraid that I will have to unceremoniously dump you outside. Yvonne, would you mind giving me a pull up...”

Gavin stepped forward to assist. To his surprise his out-stretched arm was brusquely swatted away by the old man.

“No, not you.”

Yvonne placed a supportive arm around her husband’s rounded back. Her other hand gripped him firmly by the upper arm, easing him upright where he wobbled momentarily, shifting his balance on the floor rug.

“Thank you dear,”

~

Gavin lingered for a while on the archaic flagstone paving outside the Hedgler's home, watching as hands, knotted with arthritis, appeared from behind the net curtains and manually set screens in place against the interior window panes. An elderly man, who was standing behind the low brick wall of a neighbouring property, called out to him:

“Better get yourself under some cover, young man. The dry rain is coming.”

He walked to the end of the road where a large expanse of grass and flower beds was separated from the footpath by a row of corroded, spear-tipped iron railings. A sign mounted on tall rusting poles, next to a swing gate, read: *Hospital Park*. He passed through it and onto the deserted green space, walking to a spot that he judged to be roughly at the centre. He stood there, in the silence, staring upward with his perfect eyes, which scanned the heavens for tiny signs of life.

About the author

Mark Sadler lives in Southend-on-Sea. His writing has appeared on The London Magazine website, in Flash Fiction Magazine, and has been performed by Liars' League in London. He previously worked for Southend Hospital in a variety of clerical roles, and for a local Healthwatch. He suffers from PSC - an incurable disease affecting the bile ducts and the liver.

Why I wrote this story

Artificial organs, managed remotely, might extend human life. They might also shackle us to corporate owners and arbitrary terms and conditions of use. What happens when a company shirks its responsibilities, or quietly dials-down the efficiency of its product for users who they consider undesirable? What are the alternatives?

Writing the future

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