

**WELCOME TO THE  
ADA**

**Anya Owen**

Part of

# WRITING THE FUTURE

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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 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

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**The future is...  
powerful but  
preventable**

**A** man and three women have been arrested by police after the abduction of neurosurgeon Ria Ramdani, the seventeenth CareCo employee to go missing in the last two years. Police have cautioned that the residents of Knightsbridge remain vigilant, but reports suggest that these abductions may be targeted at high-ranking workers within the nation's largest medical research and pharmaceutical company. Here is CareCo's CEO, Nadia S. Arwell, with a statement."

*"There's obviously a limit to what I can say, as the police investigation is ongoing, however, I will say that Ria was – is – a valuable part of the CareCo team. Her work as an 'organizational cyborg' is inspirational, especially her elective bio-enhanced hands, for surgery performance. Truly revolutionary. My thoughts are with Dr. Ramdani and her family at this tragic time, and I hope that she can safely return home soon."*

With shaking hands, Venn managed to slot in her contact HoloLens. As soon as it came into focus, she saw herself in the mirror, decorated by the glowing computerised annotations that seemed to float around her. She was only half-listening to the broadcast, but her attention was overshadowed by the orange words that blazed over her SmartLoo:

*Health Status change detected*

*Analyse contents?*

Venn lazily waved her hand through the ‘yes’ hologram, as if pushing it away, still looking at her reflection. Was her makeup okay?

A knock at the door. “Venn? Breakfast’s ready!”

As she gently rested her palm on the door handle, she turned and glimpsed the flashing SmartLoo status out of the corner of her eye:

*Pregnant*

Her stomach dropped.

“Venn?”

“Coming, honey!”

Suddenly anxious, Venn swiped through the status, and pressed ‘*delete health history*’. Satisfied, Venn found her way to the kitchen. “Morning, Kouta,” said Venn, and kissed him. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to go-”

“Really?” Kouta’s eyes widened. “It’s so early!”

“I know but-” She stopped. In another few minutes, Kouta would be able to see her updated health status through his own HoloLens, but she wasn’t ready to acknowledge its significance. Not yet. What excuse could she use? “The abduction got everyone nervous. They want us there early today.”

“Oh,” said Kouta, disappointed. “Well, safe journey. Here, at least bring some toast with you.”

“Thanks. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

*“Unofficial reports speculate that the perpetrators of these abductions are the A.D.A., or Anti-Data Army, although no statements have yet been released by their ghost leader, known only as ‘Owl’-”*

Usually, Venn liked to cycle to work, but she thought about having to be by herself, and listen to her own thoughts, and she decided against it. Maybe it was time to try the sky train, or the Underground again: District line to South Kensington, change to the Piccadilly line, get off at Knightsbridge. No doubt that the whole area would be teeming with reporters. Her toast was long finished by the time she arrived, but the HoloLens’ annotations were still clear in the corner of her vision:

*ToothTracker Data Feed. Nutritional intake: 87 calories, 18.8g carbohydrate, 0.5g fat...*

She ignored the rest of the nutritional analysis as she approached the wide glass doors to her workplace, where she was immediately blinded by a barrage of flashing lights.

*“What can you tell us about the latest abduction-”*

*“- your thoughts on the anti-data-”*

“No comment,” Venn mumbled, as she pushed her way through the reporters, eyes stinging from the cameras. She scanned her CareCo employee card at the door, and the glass doors slid open, accepting her into the sterile white foyer of the research facility.

It was a relief when the doors closed and instantly muffled the reporters' heckling.

There was no reception desk in the foyer. Instead, the CareCo logo of a heart cupped by two hands was emblazoned on the back wall, along with the company's name and slogan in metallic cursive. *CareCo: Care for the Country, Care for You.* If she concentrated, she could still see the old 'NHS' graphic ghosted behind it. Only a holographic blue man appeared in the centre of the white marble floor. He smiled at Venn as she walked in.

"Good morning, Dr. Eckard. You have one appointment today."

"Thanks, Capricorn. What's the detail?"

It was a few seconds before the A.I. responded to her, and Venn briefly worried if his program had frozen. Then: "You have a meeting with Ms. Arwell at nine o'clock."

*Strange*, thought Venn. She was rarely called into a meeting with the boss. Why today? Venn quickly looked at the corner of her vision: eight-thirty. The meeting was close, but she still had some time. It was lucky that she had decided to arrive early.

Behind her, Venn heard the glass doors sliding open again, and the roar of the paparazzi. She turned to see a woman in her mid-thirties topple in on her high heels. As soon as she spotted Venn, the frost fell from

her guarded face, and she blazed a white smile. “Venn, darling! Thank *God* you’re here!”

“Ruth!” For the first time that day, Venn felt genuine relief. “Do you mean ‘thank God’ because you have someone to talk to, since you’re banned from talking to the press?”

Ruth laughed as her cheeks turned pink. “Christ, that was an *accident*. I didn’t know they were *data dogs*.”

“Data dogs?” Said Venn, quizzically, although a bad feeling tugged at her. She knew what was coming next.

“Oh, you know,” said Ruth. “Those anti-data rats, always trying to blow someone up.”

Venn raised an eyebrow. “They’ve literally never blown anyone up.”

Ruth continued talking as Venn followed her to the lab, oblivious to Venn’s bluntness. “Just abductions, then? Still, they’re all terrorists. As if we need our data to be protected! When everyone knows what your health status is, you get emergency services faster, people know what to expect from you -”

Venn grimaced, both from Ruth’s blind compliance, and the rising bile in her throat. “I think it’s... invasive. It makes me feel uncomfortable.”

“Why? Do you have something to hide?”

“No! Okay, *maybe* – but I don’t want to talk about it.”

Ruth shrugged her shoulders while shimmying into her white lab coat. “Let’s talk about something else then... Oh, I know! Ria Ramdani! Wasn’t she just -”

“Wow, Ruth. You’ve really planned out a relaxing morning...”

“- *such* a lovely person? I can’t believe she was abducted! And on her way home from work as well! Oh, that must be how they knew she worked here...”

For the first time that morning, both women fell silent. Venn guessed that Ruth was probably thinking about her own journey home, and just how easily she could be abducted on a normal route. It was a rare occurrence, and highly unlikely to happen to them – after all, CareCo had thousands of employees – but Ria Ramdani was also one among thousands.

Venn coughed. “Er... Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll be okay.” She tried to sound reassuring, but she wasn’t sure if it had worked or not. In silence, both women got to work in the lab. While Ruth plugged herself into the V.R. surgery practice programme, Venn discreetly turned to the printer, trying to block Ruth’s view of her actions. Carefully, she typed ‘*mifepristone, revision 36*’ into the printers’ holo-typeface, and waited for the abortion pill to print. The sophisticated machine barely made a sound as it assembled the synthetic molecules of the drug. As it finished printing, an alert flashed in the corner of her vision, notifying her of that

morning's meeting. She swiped the pill into her dose carrier – a stylish, silver bracelet inlaid with several tiny pill-boxes – and called a hasty “See you later!” to Ruth on her way out.

In the elevator, Venn tried to compose herself, smoothing what few creases showed on her skirt, and carefully re-fastened the silver buttons on her cuffs. Nervous, she checked that the pill she had just printed minutes before was still in her bracelet. The way that it was nestled in its tiny compartment reminded her of a sleeping baby in a cot. It made her feel sick.

The *ding* of the elevator tore her thoughts away from the pill – so light, yet weighing so heavily on her mind – and stepped out into the opulent hallway. Directly across from her was a wide metal door with the name of CareCo's CEO engraved in bold calligraphy: *Nadia S. Arwell*. Above it, a camera trained its eye on her, unblinking.

She cleared her throat. “Dr. Venn Eckard. Here to see Ms. Arwell.”

“*Voice recognition accepted*”, said the camera. The heavy door swung slowly inwards, revealing an extremely smartly-dressed woman at her desk, whom Venn immediately recognised as Nadia Arwell.

As soon as she registered on Venn's vision, the HoloLens' annotations bloomed into view, but Venn didn't need to read them to determine her health

status. It was clear to everyone that Nadia Arwell's health status was excellent. She was strong, with the lines of her muscle subtly visible beneath her smart, crisp blouse, and her tan skin was clear and youthful. Venn stood still, and waited for the CEO to finish typing into her holo-interface. Whether the work was important, or if Ms. Arwell just liked to feel powerful by making people wait, Venn did not know.

Nadia Arwell looked up at her, acknowledging Venn's presence. "Please," she said, coolly, "have a seat." She gestured to the plum armchair directly in front of her desk.

"Thank you," said Venn, as the armchair embraced her. "Er... Have I done something wrong?"

Ms. Arwell smiled. It was not the caring smile of a mother, or of a benevolent leader – but of a *boss*. The smile made her face look sharp. Venn found herself thinking of snakes.

"On the contrary," she said. "I want to congratulate you."

"Er..." said Venn, but Ms. Arwell wasn't finished.

"Your recent pharmaceutical submission was *stunning*," she began, and Venn thought she could hear every 's' sound stretch into a faint hiss. "The sales have been through the roof. Who knew it would be so easy to convince people they needed our drugs when they *forget how to breathe?*"

Venn's blood ran cold. She remembered making the submission, as a joke with Ruth. "This is so messed up," they laughed together. They weren't even in the psychopharmaceutical department – both women specialised in heart disease prevention – but Venn wanted to prove to Ruth just how pointless the market had become. "I swear, they'll sell anything," Venn had said. She couldn't believe it when the submission was accepted, and worse, distributed. She had been mentally scolding herself ever since for contributing to such a sinister cause.

"I want you to make another one."

Venn almost gagged.

"Yes, the bulk of our sales *do* come from health management and illness prevention," Ms. Arwell continued, not noticing Venn's obvious revulsion. Or if she had, she was solidly ignoring it. "But, you seem to have a talent for psychopharmacy. Find another niche for mental diseases – or even better, *make one up*."

"W-what?" Venn stammered, shocked. Luckily, she had stopped her mouth from falling open. "But... That's not what CareCo should be -"

"*I don't care* what you come up with, or how you do it." Ms. Arwell snapped, and Venn shrank back into the armchair. "Make it happen."

"But that's illeg-"

**“You may go.” Ms. Arwell waved her hand with a deceptively casual flair, dismissing Venn completely.**

**Shaking, Venn got up from the chair, and left without a word. As she neared the metal door, she heard Ms. Arwell’s voice calling to her.**

**“Congratulations on your pregnancy, by the way.”**

**Venn froze, and stared at her boss, barely concealing her horror.**

**“Only five days pregnant, amazing.” She said, staring at the space to Venn’s left. With another wave of trepidation, Venn realised that she was reading her health history through her own HoloLens. “I thought your husband was on the pill?”**

**Venn briefly considered vomiting there and then on Ms. Arwell’s elegant marble flooring. Instead, she only squeaked: “He is.”**

**“Ah. Interesting. Good luck.” She smiled again – that serpentine smile – and then the doors closed and broke their gaze.**

**Blood rushed through Venn’s ears as she staggered to the elevator door and viciously jammed her finger on the ‘ground’ button. She didn’t care that the reporters were lurking outside, or that she didn’t say goodbye to Ruth – she just had to *leave*. She barely noticed the short journey to the glass entrance doors, and she had forgotten what happened to her lab coat, but that didn’t matter anymore. Venn pushed**

against the buzzing tide of reporters, vaguely aware of their cameras as she stumbled, sweating, through the crowd. The bile that had been dormant in her throat all day finally escaped, and she retched right onto the pavement. The reporters backed away, like insects from a pesticide, afraid of possible contagion. Only one blurry person stayed behind, and Venn felt them take her arms, supporting her weight. As she hazily leaned in, she felt the slight prick of a needle in the back of her neck, and her eyes began to close.

*Tranquilliser, she thought. That's how they did it...*

And then she was asleep.

When Venn woke up, she was sitting in a steel chair, wrists cuffed to the armrests. How long had she been knocked out? With unease, she noticed that her dose carrier was gone – and with it, the printed abortion pill. Her eyes fluttered open, and she took in her surroundings: a bare metallic room, with only one light overhead. It was a perfect room for interrogation. She noticed two boys – probably in their late teens – huddled in the corner, whispering.

“D`ya think we got the right one?” said one with black hair. “I thought it’d be too soon to take another one. Two in one week’s pushing it, surely?”

“Owl’s orders were two – Ramdani, and Eckard. This must be her.”

Just then, the door opened, and a man walked in. It was a moment before Venn realised that she couldn't see any of the HoloLens' notes surrounding him, which meant that they took her lenses from her. Clever. Now, she couldn't instantly identify her captors. Absently, she used the tip of her tongue to feel for her ToothTracker. If it was still there, the authorities would be able to track her data signature – but it was gone, now a dull pain in her gums where it should have been. The boys had been thorough. She studied the man for a few seconds; even though his hair was greying, and scars marred his skin, his muscles bulged beneath his shirt, and he had textbook posture. As he entered the room, his warm blue eyes locked on hers.

She smiled at him, almost imperceptibly, but with a wicked undertone. “Hello, Matthew.”

His eyes widened. “Oh God,” he cursed, looking between her and the group of boys on the floor. “*Do you have any idea what you've done?*” He quickly pulled a key from his pocket, and began unlocking Venn's cuffs.

“Our job,” said the black-haired boy defiantly, but underneath the bravado, there was a hint of uncertainty.

“Yeah,” said the other. “Got her name from Owl last month.”

Matthew gaped at Venn, who was rubbing her wrists. “You ordered an abduction on *yourself?*”

Venn savoured the ripple of shock that spread through the room. “It was good timing.” She said. “My health status was about to plummet.” Plus, it was time for her to come out of the shadows and properly lead the movement, even if it meant sacrificing her marriage, and everything else. She turned to shake the hands of the two boys, whose faces had lost all colour.

“You’re Owl?” said the black-haired boy, gawking at her.

“Yes, and welcome to the A.D.A.,” said Venn. “You both pass. *Excellent* idea to take me while I was genuinely weak – I like your initiative.”

The boys blushed, instantly changing tone from pure ivory to deep crimson.

“But -” she began, and found herself briefly amused by their terrified faces. “I do want my dose carrier back.” The boys nodded vigorously.

Matthew cleared his throat. “Would you like to meet the others?”

“Lead the way.”

As Venn followed him through the metallic labyrinth, she let her mind drift to her abandoned lab partner, and her loving husband, both waiting for a woman that was never coming back. *Goodbye, Ruth*, she thought sadly, already missing her warm smile and enthusiastic eyes. *Goodbye, Kouta*. At least she got to say ‘*I love you*’ one last time.

In the room where Matthew led her, the collective gaze of the A.D.A.'s members fixed upon her. She couldn't count the number of bodies in the room, but she knew that they were all here for one purpose.

"*Our nation, our people, our future,*" said a voice at the front. Venn looked down to the bottom of the small flight of stairs, and saw the smiling face of Ria Ramdani looking up at her.

Then, another: "*Our nation, our people, our future.*"

More voices joined in, until the chanting was harmonious, booming. The voices washed over her, immersing her with sound and purpose. When it got loud enough, Venn raised her hand, and silence fell upon the room.

"Welcome," she said, simply. "*Let's take back our data!*"

As the room erupted with cheers, she momentarily mourned for leaving her old life, and Kouta, behind. Then, she brought the pill to her mouth, and swallowed it.

## **About the author**

Based in Glasgow, Anya Owen is a self-proclaimed Scot of mixed blood with a background in Psychology (specialising in Trauma, Addictions and Eating Disorders). In an alternate universe, Anya has already published many best-selling novels, but in this one, she spends her days in the confines of her local psychiatric hospital. When she is not working with and supporting the patients, Anya enjoys cooking, drinking copious amounts of tea, and singing to herself.

## **Inspiration**

I had several sources of inspiration for my story: my degree in Psychology and experience working in mental health, Chapter 5 from Ethan Watters' "Crazy Like Us", and my own innate fear of reproduction. I've been interested in psychology from day one, but have a pessimistic view regarding our progress.

**Writing the future**

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