

Helpdesk

Personal service.

rpg

It's the smells I find most evocative. They take me places, short-circuit the other senses. A hint of rose; elderflower in the garden. The river and its white-sanded estuary; the crashing of surf. Smoke from the soldering iron; the high-school physics lab. The softness of her belly and a warm summer's evening.

Soldering iron?

I blink my eyes, trying to focus on the swimming greenness around me. I am on a forest floor, dappled sunlight picking out — no, that's not right. On a river bed perhaps, light refracting oddly and glinting off dust motes — that doesn't work, either. Besides, I can breathe. The air, and it is definitely air, I think I would know if my lungs were full of water, is clean and sweet, but with a definite odour of electronics. Dead electronics.

My nose itches. I move my hand to — I *try* to move my hand to scratch it, but something isn't quite right. My arm won't move. I try to sit up, see what's happening: but my body is just as stuck. I wonder if I'm drunk. That might explain why I can't remember what happened just before I ended up ... wherever here is.

But here, here something appears. I want to say 'swims into vision', but that's not quite right, either. Nothing is quite right. There are two somethings, now. At least I think there are two. I can't focus properly. Maybe I can focus, and they are meant to be that fuzzy?

They are dark. I want to say they are the size of dinner plates, but I can't tell how far away they are. And now they shrink. Are they shrinking, or are they —

Ah. They are moving farther away. And they are framed by something that's shaped almost like a — and they're gone, and now they're back. Is that a nose, do you think? A slit in the greenness appears, a dark slit that seems to oscillate (and there again is the memory of the electronics bench swimming just out of my depth) and some strange noise in my ears.

And understanding in my head.

It is awake.

The words make themselves understood, even though I don't remember hearing them. I am surprised that I am lucid enough to realize this. But I've seen this apparition before: my heart suddenly racing, I open my mouth to scream but before I can it fills with something

— something that feels like candy floss, squeaky like a balloon; dry like the taste of chalk. I try to sit up, buttocks clenching, chest straining against the straps holding me down, pin pricks of sweat on my brow: one drops into my right eye and I can't wipe it away.

There will be a moment of readjustment.

I fall back, breathing heavily. I remember getting out of a ski lift somewhere in the Swiss Alps, fighting to draw oxygen into my lungs. But there was the hush of freshly fallen snow; here this strange, pervasive, persistent borborygmus.

It is all right. Everything will be okay.

It's not a voice, it's a certainty in your mind. Force yourself to look at the creature (naming it tames the terror even as it engenders it) and focus on it. Take in its round eyes; the holes for nostrils; the lipless, quivering mouth. Force yourself to stay still as three long, thin stalks that you suddenly know to be fingers brush lightly (oh so lightly, like the touch of a hesitant lover — but that is not the source of the smell of the solder; this is the scent of evening) over your face and remove the gag.

We crashed. There is a problem.

There is a noise, a real, honest-to-God, human noise, like the release of pressure from a train's brakes. Light (and can this be real sunlight fording this turbid air like a frontiersman?) breaks in, and the creature seems smaller somehow; no less inhuman but not, somehow, as alien.

"I'm still on Earth?" I manage to force out.

Yes. There is no structural damage. We need your help.

A certainty. But why me? I'm a programmer, not an engineer.

"Show me."

The glaucous light changes then, flickers, moves. I am on a gurney and they are transporting me ... where? I am being raised: my feet come into view, and suddenly my arms are free. Straps yet restrain my legs, but the tightness across my chest is gone. In front of me, it looks like nothing so much as a TV screen, or computer monitor. Blue screen, with white, alien characters. But some, I realize as my blood suddenly pounds in my ears, some I recognize:

0x0001000B 0x5043 ...

From the endless depths of space they came: technology to conquer distances that can only be measured in terms of photons; a civilization I can't imagine. And yet ...

I look at the blue screen again. Over my coughing, the pain in my chest, the tears that are suddenly streaming down my cheek, I hear them say, trembling, almost apologetic:

It just stopped. We didn't do anything different. ■

rpg: poet, scientist, gadfly. Currently rocking the world of information architecture after an enforced sojourn in the Antipodes. Nowhere is safe. Join the discussion of Futures in Nature at go.nature.com/QMAM2a



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