

I was in the back garden with my father one night, holding his star map for him while his binoculars licked the cold sky, when he explained to me how it all worked: the fusion of hydrogen atoms, releasing so much energy that for a brief moment the fireball was like a piece of the sun brought down to earth. He was an engineer by trade, and the universe he described to me was one of machinelike intricacy and perfection. A hoarder of spare parts encountered in his work, he had filled a cupboard in our house with knurled cogs, bits of clocks, greasy gears and tangled wires terminating in sandwiches of plastic and solder that smelled of unknown factories as romantic to my mind as Ursa Major or Canes Venatici hanging far above our heads. He was a hoarder of useless knowledge too, and the workings of bombs and stars lay heaped in the reckless jumble he shared so eagerly with me.

We are all made of atoms, he told me, whose centres are like little jack-in-the-boxes. The lids are held down by nuclear force; the electrical repulsion of protons inside the atoms pushes against this restraint like a pent-up spring. To close a jack-in-the-box, you need to push down hard on the spring until the box shuts with a click. Squeeze lots of hydrogen atoms together and the force makes a trillion clicks: fusion's thunderous roar.

It was enough to knock my father to the ground, this energy from mating particles carried through seared air into his youthful body. Yet only a single click – on a Geiger counter as he emerged from the shower afterwards – was enough to decide my future and his. For me, it was the blessing of being who I am. For him, it was the cancer that killed him three years ago.

I didn't tell any of this to Jagoda; she'd come to offer domestic help, not hear my life story. But she wanted to know what I do for a living, so I explained how one thing had followed another, like particles communicating their quantity of motion, or like the harmonious interlocking of a succession of toothed wheels. I was born from a hydrogen bomb and so is everyone, since the sun or any other star is a bottomless ocean of hydrogen whose atoms, compressed by their own sheer weight, fuse unavoidably, sending parcels of light burrowing haphazardly through the thick and perilous mantle, out into

space, across distances of unimaginable emptiness, traversing the cosmos without incident until at last a few of them might fall, like unexpected snowflakes, upon the innocent lens a human aims towards the place where they were born.

Those nights in the garden when I stood with Dad and gave him the loyal audience he elsewhere lacked were the means by which that feeble starlight entered my life, keeping me company during visits to the hospital and prompting the first stirrings of livacy that stayed with me as native wonder turned to scientific curiosity. How fortunate I was, I realized, to be able to experience something no sighted person can truly imagine: a universe in which neither light nor dark exists, though this was how everything began, in a condition lacking even space and time which we only fully recover when we come to be deprived of every sense, like my father now. If the stars hadn't taken him to Christmas Island he would probably still be alive, and I wouldn't have wasted an hour telling Jagoda his story. She starts next week; there'll be plenty for her to do, and before she left she asked me one more thing. Since you're a cosmologist, she said, can you explain to me what started it all in the first place? Why is there something rather than nothing? That's the oldest question of all, I replied. I wish I knew the answer.

LITRO

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L I V A C Y  
A N D R E W C R U M E Y

When my father was around twenty years old, doing compulsory national service with the British Army, he found himself posted to Christmas Island in the South Pacific. While his former schoolmates back home were square-bashing in the rain, he was spearfishing in the Blue Lagoon or watching land-crabs scuttle across burning sands. He was an avid stargazer, and at night he trained his binoculars on treasures of the southern sky – the Magellanic Clouds, the Jewel Box – which he described to me years afterwards, instilling in me a fascination that was to form the basis of my adult career.

Along with his fellow conscripts, my father was one day ordered to stand on the beach, close his eyes as tightly as he could and hold his clenched fists over them. He knew what was about to happen. As a safety measure, the men had all been instructed to wear long trousers that morning, rather than shorts. It was a beautiful, calm day, my father told me. They all stood there, heard the countdown, and thirty miles behind them, a hydrogen bomb exploded.

My father said that even with his back turned to the fireball, and with his eyes closed, he could see the bones of his own hands. A few seconds later he turned and saw the rising mushroom cloud; a ball of incinerated air convected so swiftly into the upper atmosphere that sparks of lightning flashed around its rolling flanks.

Then the sound arrived: a shockwave that knocked the young soldiers to the ground. As the spectacle continued to unfold, the disrupted air above them curdled into black rain clouds,

drenching them with viscous bullets of water. When it was all over, they showered and changed, got on with their daily duties and later enjoyed a laugh and a pint at the regimental club's tombola night.

As soon as my father was released from the army he married the girl in Glasgow he'd been writing to every week since he was called up. A year later they had a plump and healthy son, my brother Ken, who now works as a civil engineer. After another two years, I came into the world; but at first the midwife wouldn't hand me to my mother. Instead she called for a male doctor, who had a look at the little bundle he was presented with, took it away for closer inspection, then came back to report his findings to my anxious and exhausted mother.

'It's a little boy,' the doctor told her. 'Unfortunately he's blind.' My mother asked how he could possibly be so sure, and he told her that since I had no eyes there really couldn't be much doubt about it, could there?

That's how my life began: I told the new girl about it today. She's called Jagoda and says the hours and money are fine; she'll clean and iron, do a bit of cooking if need be, read the mail. She comes from what used to be the other side of the geopolitical divide, now vanished like a dream, that caused my father to be soaked in fallout. The bomb he witnessed was meant to damage people such as her, but instead made me.

'Do you regret what happened?' she asked in accented but perfect English, and I laughed, for how could I ever regret being born? I was a love-child, after all. Had my father not been so

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passionate about the stars, he would never have applied for a posting where clear nights and southern constellations attracted him more than puffer fish or gooney birds. Had a high-energy photon from the nuclear blast not severed a chemical bond inside his body, sending a free radical on its hungry, damaging course, then I might have been born sighted, and perhaps I would have been unmoved by the stories he told me about the mythical beasts and heroes which wheel above our heads each night and go unnoticed by people for whom the flicker of a television screen is more compelling than the glimmer of distant worlds. I might never have become a cosmologist – and Jagoda would have needed a different employer.

‘Let me show you around,’ I offered, then took her on a tour of the flat, which didn’t take long. ‘The only rule,’ I said, ‘is that you don’t move things, otherwise I never know where to find them. So no tidying. Other than that, treat it like any other place.’

‘What about the lights?’ she asked. I didn’t know what she meant. ‘They’re switched on, though it’s the middle of the day. Do you leave them on constantly?’

I realized there must be something wrong with the timer; the lights are meant to come on at night to reassure callers and deter burglars, but perhaps my young nephew had fiddled with the control at the weekend when my sister came to visit. I showed Jagoda how to make the necessary adjustment. ‘You see how much trouble I have to go to for the benefit of the sighted?’ I explained. ‘It costs me money to keep you folk from being in the dark.’

‘Perhaps we should try living in darkness like you,’ she suggested.

‘Oh no,’ I said, taking her back to the living room so we could finish our tea. ‘There’s no darkness in my life.’ She thought I was being metaphorical, but such things don’t come naturally to a scientist like me; I was merely stating a fact. ‘What’s behind you right now?’ I asked once we were seated.

I heard her turn to look. ‘A door, some bookshelves.’ Her voice echoed against the far wall.

‘Now face me again. How does the bookcase look to you?’

‘It doesn’t look like anything – I can’t see it.’

‘Exactly, and that’s how everything looks to me: neither dark nor light, but invisible. I’m

sure you’ve never felt you were missing out by not having eyes in the back of your head; I feel that way about eyes in front. I’ve never needed them and I don’t want them. I only wear these artificial things so that I won’t frighten people.’

Throughout my childhood I had to go to hospital regularly to have new eyes fitted. They prevented my sockets from closing up, but couldn’t keep pace with my growth; so on countless unpleasant occasions I sat stoically while gel was squirted into each empty orbit and left to set, providing a cast for my next set of custom-made eyes. In a medical school drawer somewhere, I expect my youth is still mapped out by a forgotten array of ancient discarded blobs staring blankly in every direction.

In the old days, I told Jagoda, the world’s false eyes were crafted by German glass-blowers renowned for their unmatched skill. The one-eyed Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, maimed in a shooting accident, had a different eye made for every occasion: proud, lascivious, sleepy, hung-over. A man’s soul, it is said, is written in his eyes, so I share with Prince Christian the opportunity for self-creation; but my eyes are not glass, because the Second World War cut the supply line, and when Spitfire pilots fell from burning, shattered cockpits into the safety of military hospitals, there was nothing to plug their ruined faces. It was the Perspex shards embedded in their flesh that saved them. Found to be biologically inert, the plastic proved a perfect substitute for glass, and henceforth the nation’s artificial eyes were moulded in a workshop in Blackpool, which is where mine came from, made to simulate real eyes, with matching irises and pupils, so that I can look relatively ‘normal’.

‘They’re very realistic,’ Jagoda told me. ‘When you came to the door to let me in, I thought at first that you were someone else, because you’d told me on the phone that you were blind. It took a few moments to see there was something different about your eyes.’

‘They don’t move or blink – you can only do so much with two lumps of plastic.’

‘I think they make you look very distinguished,’ she said tactfully. Perhaps mine came from the same design catalogue as Prince Christian’s. Posing as a child for successive generations of these impostors meant sitting patiently in a leather chair,

holding my mother’s hand while the gel went firm in my sockets. When the casts were ready, the cheerful whiskery doctor would extract them delicately, but never without some of the gel adhering to my own tissue – like stripping an elastoplast from under the tongue. There were consolations of the usual hospital kind: a chair I could swing in as much as I liked; a stethoscope with which to probe my beating heart; inscrutable gadgets of cold, smooth steel, drawn randomly, it seemed, from the doctor’s menagerie of disposable spares. None of these, however, could counterbalance the ominous sense of dread I felt whenever we walked down the echoing hospital corridor with its sickly smell of undefined despair; its heavy swing doors; its stock of conversational snippets, momentarily caught from passers-by as Mother and I marched to the eye clinic. Those fragments of unknown lives, falling into my ears like fluttering relics, seemed all the more poignant by virtue of their sheer triviality. This was a place where absolutely no one wanted to be – even the doctors would doubtless rather have been in the pub. And this was the place where I had to come and have false eyes pushed into my head so that to sighted people I would not appear too monstrous. And like any child, I accepted it.

My escape, I told Jagoda, was to think. In the doctor’s leather chair I would avoid the discomfort by fixing my mind on an idea, a memory, a hope. I would hold it with the same tenacious grip that kept my comforting mother close beside me.

‘Did you ever wonder what it would be like to see?’ Jagoda asked.

‘Of course, just as I’ve wondered what it must be like to be a goldfish or Napoleon – or a woman, though I’d never undergo surgery to find out. I don’t suppose you’d want to go round wearing Perspex testicles, would you?’

‘What a horrible idea!’

‘False eyes are about as much use to me, and real ones appeal even less. Certainly I’m curious about sight, but only if I could have the experience for a very short time, and be sure it was reversible. More tea?’ She’d drained her cup with a slurp, and accepted a top-up.

What’s it like to see? No poet has ever described it, though accounts abound of what things look like, for the benefit of those who know already. There was even a congenitally blind poet, Thomas Blacklock, who impressed

eighteenth-century sighted contemporaries with striking visual evocations of a natural world he never saw. Aristotle offered something more useful in his theory of how the eye works. Rays fly out of it, he claimed, strike distant objects, and in this way give the sensation of vision, so that sight is really a form of touch: a beautiful confirmation of what any blind person suspects. Uncontaminated by the later knowledge that light is a wave flowing into people’s eyes, Aristotle constructed a theory based only on what he genuinely felt.

‘What else did you think about during those hospital visits?’ Jagoda asked.

All sorts of things, I told her; but most of all I wondered why any of it was happening: the leather chair, the gel, my entire life occurring in just the way it was; and why the unfolding narrative, like one of the Braille story books I was then learning to read, should have reached the point it had, precisely then. Was all of time a moving finger, pointing at the tiny dots that make up our lives? Is the rest already written? This was a feeling for which our language has no word; the sensation of being alive, here and now, and of being surprised by it, as one often is in childhood, though the wonder fades with the habits and distractions of age. I made my own word for it, ‘livacy’, so that whenever the rush of fearful joy overcame me, a sense of death as well as life, I had a name I could hold on to, as reassuring as my mother’s hand.

Perhaps Dad felt it when the bomb exploded behind his back, its invisible light strong enough to crowd straight through his head. He could see the bones of his own hands, he told me, even with his eyes shut; and as a child this didn’t strike me as extraordinary because the bones of my own small hands made an equally clear impression when I held them to my face. But I noticed the strange pleasure he took in recounting the scene of beauty and destruction he attended. We know life only through its juxtaposition with death.

My life is without light yet knows no darkness. Jagoda found this strange; all sighted people do, which is why I enjoy explaining it to them as much as my father liked recounting the scorching flash; the momentary, all-embracing burst of creation; the rising pillar of involuting cloud that was a brain, a tree, or a thousand other resemblances to the awed onlookers watching from many miles away