The Love Letter

He'd suspected nothing wrong at first; just a few pins-and-needles from sleeping on his arm. But the sensation didn't go away, and after several minutes, when the numbness spread to his arm and jaw and his vision began to blur, Paul reversed his initial conviction. Having long believed himself to be a likely candidate for a stroke, he knew enough about them to be pretty sure that he was having one.

He tried to stay calm. It was bad timing, early on a Sunday morning; not just any Sunday morning, but Boxing Day. When he dialed 000 the operator told him to stay calm. This was a serious mistake.

"Stay calm. Fuck me! Is that what they pay you for, to give useless advice? For Christ's sake, I need a fucking ambulance, not a First Aid book!"

There was a brief silence on the line before she asked for his personal details: his name, location and contact number. He offered them impatiently, but when she asked for some conditional information - when the sense of anesthesia began, which parts of the body had been affected, how and to what extent the sensation had progressed – he lost control again. "Look, I need an ambulance – now!"

Her voice was pleasant, the style of someone used to dealing with crises. "Take it easy, sir; getting upset is the last thing you want to be doing right now."

She was good. Seduced by the logic of her argument, Paul became aware of the pounding of his heart, the sweaty blush of rage dampening his forehead. He exhaled deeply, a sigh that clearly communicated his exasperation. "Okay."

"We'll get an ambulance to you as soon as possible. Just sit tight."

"How long?"

He heard the brief, rapid clicking of a keyboard. "From where you are, about two hours."

"Jesus Christ! It's only a half-hour drive!"

"I'm sorry, but we're stretched right now. It's the same every year around this time: parties, injuries, more traffic on the road. There's a major delay on the highway, a multi-car head-on near Woolgoolga; traffic backed up for thirty kilometres, a number of fatalities."

Paul pulse began thudding again. "It's an ambulance, for god's sake! It should be able to get through, shouldn't it?"

A note of irritation crept into the operator's voice. "It's not that, sir; all available units are tied up at the scene of the accident, including the choppers. The traffic's not affected so much from the north. Just hang on; I'll put in a call to your local GP. That would be… Doctor Dixon."

"Forget it!" Paul snapped. He and Dixon hadn't been on speaking terms for years, ever since she'd fucked up a job on his piles and he'd tried to sue her.

The operator sighed audibly. "Do you have anyone - a neighbour, a friend or family member - who could drive you in? It'd get you here quicker."

The second two of these propositions Paul discounted out-of-hand. He had few enough friends, and none anywhere close by; and he'd been estranged from his family for years. But neighbours? Most, he knew, were away; and the few who were left along the lane that housed the permanent residents were people who, somewhere along the way, he'd managed to seriously piss off. But there was Mack; maybe Mack would be home. When Paul pulled back the beaded curtain shading the window. Beyond the jumble of pipes and piles of dirt verging the roadway, a result of the interminable roadworks going on along the lane, he could see his neighbour's battered yellow Datsun parked in the carport beside his caravan. Mack was home. Mack could drive him in.

Paul hung up quickly, went to the door of his caravan and called out to his neighbour. There was no reply. After a couple more unsuccessful attempts, Paul, surprised to find his right leg and foot oddly disobedient, stepped gingerly down from his van,. The same problem impeded him as he crossed the lane, so that he assumed a slightly shuffling, sidling gait. He traversed, with appropriate caution, the narrow plank bridge across the builders' trenchwork and called through the dusty screen door. When there was still no response he opened the door and went inside. Mack was on the bed. The empty Bundy bottles were on the floor alongside. Mack didn't drink often – a couple of benders a year, maybe - but when he did, he went all out. Mack wasn't going anywhere.

In rising panic, Paul snatched Mack's keys off the dresser and drove himself into town. Strangely, the drive seemed to normalize him: the anesthesia abated, and by the time he got to the hospital he felt dull-headed but relatively normal. The emergency department was crowded, and he had to force his way past an angry, insistent mother with a sick child before he was seen. And then it was only got an initial consultation; he had to wait another thirty minutes before they'd called his name, and another thirty before the doctor arrived.

There were several tests, then another period of waiting. The young doctor who examined him was sufficiently concerned to contact the hospital's duty specialist, who agreed to see Paul straight away. He was older than his predecessor, more deliberative in his approach. He conducted his investigation of the scans and charts without comment, until Paul could tolerate the silence no longer.

"It's a stroke, isn't it?"

The doctor continued to study the notes in front of him. "Something like that," he said, a little evasively. "We can't be absolutely certain until all the results are in, but …"

Paul's temper flared. His passionate intolerance for any who sought to disempower him, his lifelong impatience with lies, deception and half-truths, his frustration with stupidity; they boiled up within him and spilled out. "Look, mate, I'm asking you a direct question! And since it's *my* fucking body we're talking about, I think I've got a right to a direct answer! Is it a stroke or not?"

The doctor assessed Paul quickly, noting the colour spreading up Paul's face. "Alright," he said hurriedly. "Yes, you've had a stroke; could still be having one, in fact. Your signs are down, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's over. Depends what's causing the problem."

"What're you saying? You don't know what's wrong with me? So what am I supposed to do with that? Fucking hell!"

"We're still waiting on a couple of scans, should be here in a few minutes," the specialist assured him hurriedly. His voice took on a sharp edge: "In the meantime, I *can* tell you your blood pressure's still very high, dangerously high in fact; so unless you want to risk dropping dead right now, you'd better start taking it easy."

Paul had a momentary inclination to scream at the man; he felt the fury rising, the quick fluttering rhythm in his chest. But he reined it in, and sank back deflated onto the examination table. On his way in to the hospital, he'd re-affirmed his determination to resist every act of institutionalization the medical industry threw at him, vowing that he wouldn't submit to disempowerment. But this resolution seemed somehow to have dissolved in the face of a real threat to his life, the possible finality of it. He'd submitted to the humiliations without complaint – had his head and chest partly shaved; objects attached and inserted, fed a chemical meal, thrown into their radioactive canister – because there was no way he could logically argue against their requirements. He tolerated the systematic stripping away of his uniqueness and humanity, his transformation into a commodity, because when it came down to it he wanted to live.

An intern came to the door and gave the specialist an envelope. The specialist opened it and studied the contents at some length. When he looked up his face was grave. The news, he said, wasn't good.

"'Stroke' covers a multitude of sins, anything that interferes with the blood supply to the brain can cause it. In your case it's a blockage, an embolism. It's been a bit hard to determine exactly where it's occurred, because the blockage itself has literally disappeared, dissolved back into the bloodstream."

"The blockage has dissolved?" Paul repeated laconically. He considered the proposition, then laughed. "So there's no immediate problem, then, is there? I 'm not in any immediate danger?"

The specialist tapped on his clipboard. "I'm afraid that's not the case," he said finally. "The tests've thrown up the source of the problem: there's a growth – a contusion, we call it - in the wall of the aortic artery near your heart. We're pretty sure the embolism came from there. The contusion's probably been there for some time, but in light of events it clearly needs urgent attention - a by-pass, as soon as it can be arranged. If it's not done, you could well be dead in a matter of months – any time, in fact."

Paul snorted, genuinely confused. "So what am I supposed to do now?"

"The best thing we can do is minimize the risk."

It was another irritation, the 'we'. What Paul was going through was not a collective experience, and the supposition that it was, implicit in the reference, annoyed him as it always had with members of the medical profession, dentists and others in the so called 'helping' professions.

Still, he listened to the specialist's advice without reaction, playing out the role of patient, asking all the critical, cliqued questions. The doctor responded, systematically delivering his suggestions, exploring different strategies for managing his patient's condition. There was an aura of performance, Paul felt, in the specialist's proficiency.

There would need to be more tests, the doctor told him. It could be a month, perhaps longer, before the surgery could be undertaken. The waiting period was a time of high risk, he said: the wait itself could become a source of stress, even panic. If Paul allowed himself to succumb to such reactions, it could increase the risk of another stroke substantially. He could improve his chances by doing the obvious – taking active steps to reduce his blood pressure, taking a break from known stressors, giving up any bad habits.

Paul felt oddly detached from the conversation, as if they were talking about somebody else. But at some point during the discussion he began to think seriously – more seriously than he'd ever done – about his own persona. For as long as he could remember, he'd been an angry man, the fierce champion of personal and social causes, living by the principle that each individual must fight for and vigilantly protect their personal freedoms. Now it occurred to him that the image of belligerent indignation he presented to the world, and which he'd come to see as a dominant, immutable attribute of his character – might no longer be sustainable or immutable.

He was sure there'd been a time (he couldn't clearly recall it) when he'd tried to accomplish his social agenda with calm and reason. But bitter experience had shown him that the forces ranged against him – bureaucratic, political, cultural – did not respond to progressive thought, only to the strident voice of protest. He'd learned that most people were followers and not leaders, their consciences too sated and their judgment too stultified to achieve anything positive for the human race or the world on which it lived.

Someone had to get them to listen, to get them excited, and Paul had more or less willingly taken that role upon himself. In the scale of things his success hadn't been earth-shattering - one or two changes to Council regulations, a couple of submissions tabled at Commissions of Enquiry; a few indignant walk-outs, a number of letters to the *Herald*; but he'd always continued to struggle against the odds, draining energy, as he saw it, from the gigantic pariah he was confronting. Now he realized he was going to have to manage that commitment.

But making the change wasn't easy. After the consultation, the specialist kept him in hospital for a couple of nights, then prescribed a battery of medication, arranged an ambulance and sent him home. He got there early in the morning. There, everything was as it had been - exactly as it had been: the dishes in the sink, the TV burbling, the unread newspapers still on the table. It struck him with particular clarity that he was alone.

The mess outside his front door was still there too: the piles of oozing, muddy rubble; the disorderly jumble of pipes scattered upon them, the faint but pervasive stench of sewage. The workmen had been at it for over a month. He hated the intrusion, the din of their machinery and loud, banal conversation an incessant reminder of life's urbanity. He couldn't tolerate their half-hour tea breaks, their stupidity, their indolence, their slovenliness; their manifest ignorance of the most fundamental engineering principles. A week or so before the stroke he'd lost his cool and abused them, but it hadn't made any difference; they'd ignored everything he said, and if anything the mess had become worse. Paul felt his jaw tighten as

he recalled the humiliation of it, but he focused instead on taking a series of deep breaths, listening to the steady slowing of his heartbeat. The work, he realized, would go on regardless of his protests, regardless even of his death, performed by the same mindless individuals.

Reflecting on the incident, he realized that, in the course of his many crusades against sloth and personal injustice, he'd cut himself off from many people. The passion his commitment required was too much for most, even his family; he'd had no contact with them since he'd had what they'd called his 'nervous episode' years earlier. It had been a mutually agreed separation; they hadn't liked his politics, and he hadn't liked theirs. His sister – his only sibling - was in the States somewhere, married to a multi-millionaire; all he'd ever got from her had been a couple of Christmas cards and some stuff on the e-mail about how to achieve nirvana the American way. As far as friends went, a few ex-colleagues from the university, members of the cadre, passing libertines, had called in from time to time to talk of the latest political scandal or partake in long, intoxicated reveries, but their conversations had a certain jaded quality about them. Over time they'd drawn away, retreating in defeat from the unassailable arguments for affirmative action that Paul presented. Others of his erstwhile compatriots had become respectable, moving into mainstream careers of one kind or another, becoming covert ambassadors of the Right.

He sat heavily at the small wooden dining table, staring blankly at the newspapers scattered there. The small house filled with a thick silence; the company and conversation of others which had so vexed him at the hospital - the prattle of nurses and patients, the interviews with doctors, even the secretive conferences held in his proximity – now seemed to have left a void, a vacuum that he could not fill. And with this emptiness –could he call it 'loneliness? - came another fear: the prospect that he might die alone, perhaps even rendered comatose, doomed to lie helpless and mute on the floor until he starved to death or succumbed to dehydration. Once when he'd been a kid he trailed into one of the neighbour's places with his parents after the old lady who'd lived there hadn't been seen for a week. In the closed-up house in the summer heat the stench had been overpowering; but it was the sight, the stretched skin over the bones, the dry tightness of the skull and hands that had horrified him most.

He didn't want to die like that. What if he couldn't cry out? Who would save him? .

The need to connect with someone – anyone who could be relied on to come to his aid if he needed it – suddenly became urgent. There had to be someone he could prevail upon to phone or call in from time to time, to keep a bit of an eye on him. He grabbed his old

address book and started going through it. The more intensely he delved into the book, the more apparent the blunt fact of his loneliness became: he had no associates of such selfless character, no friend who'd oblige him because they liked him. There were names, plenty of names, but all were people who either wouldn't now know him or wouldn't want to.

He began to panic again, powerless to quell the rapid fluttering of his heart as he thumbed through the few remaining entries. His condition was exacerbated by the arrival of the work crew outside, who immediately engaged a bobcat and began to extend the trench they'd been digging. The noise drowned out thought, disrupting his attempts to concentrate.

Amanda's name came up on the last page of the book, under the surname 'Zeigler'. He'd met her the same way he'd met most of the others, through some kind of social action they were involved in at the time. Their relationship had been short but intense, a true meeting of minds and bodies. He felt with her, for the first and only time in his life, that he'd found a true soul mate. Then, quite abruptly, she'd turned her back on the whole idea of radical politics and gone into welfare work. After that, they didn't last long. She cared for him immensely, she said, but she couldn't cope with his anger. The day she walked out, Paul had felt like screaming at her and crying at the same time. It was the last meaningful relationship of any kind he'd had, as close to what he supposed was love as he'd ever got.

He wondered, as he scanned her details, what she'd be doing now; wondered how she might react if he just picked up the phone and rang her. It'd been ten years, maybe more. Even if she still had any kind of residual feelings for him, there'd be a husband, kids. Still, he had nobody else to turn to.

There were two numbers listed next to her name, and when he rang the first, shouting to be heard over the din outside, the person who answered said he'd never heard of her. The second time he had better luck: the number turned out to be Amanda's parents' place. Her brother answered. Their parents had died years ago, he said. They'd willed the house to to him and Amanda, but she'd moved on, somewhere 'up country'. The only contact he had for her was a Post box.

Paul took the details shakily, trying to subdue the insistent hammering inside his chest. It was improbable, he knew, that anything would come of contacting her, but the possibility took on fantastical proportions, the prospect of a conciliatory reunion. He went to the drawer of his desk, grabbed a pen and notepad, and sat at the table to write. He wrote '*Dear Amanda*' then stopped, uncertain what to say next.

He was still at this point when the blow took him through the chest, a shard of pain piercing his body and lifting him bodily from his chair. He reached for the edge of the desk, but although he could see his fingers extending they failed to reach it and he fell heavily, the pen and notepad falling with him. The pad, with its brief salutation, landed a short distance from his blurring gaze. A simultaneous sense of both affinity and detachment from his body swept over him: on one hand, he could see it as an organic entity; on the other, he experienced a deep insight into its workings, an acute awareness of what was happening within it.

The sound of the machines seemed to swell and grow louder, blocking out all other perception. He tried to cry out for help, his mouth shaping into a guttural moan; but the noise outside made it impossible for him to determine whether any sound had been uttered. He attempted to call again, a protest against fading consciousness, but the machinery…

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