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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...
hijacked
by our own
creation**

Hold my hand, Jacob.”

“Why? I don’t want to.” Jacob shuddered, his bony shoulders trembling beneath his wool sweater.

“Jacob, it is crucial to my understanding and treatment of your physiological state that you give me your hand. We’ve discussed this context. Jacob? Are you listening?” After two seconds she blinked. Then again, two seconds later.

Jacob slumped in his chair. He heard the faint sound of London traffic and covered his ears while shaking his head slowly.

“I can change the background ambience to farmland again. Would that make you happy?”

“No, Londoners love traffic, not sheep.”

“Don’t slouch, Jacob. Your lower back pain might recur,” she said, ignoring his banter.

“What if slouching makes me happy?”

“Then I would know. How about I play some light jazz? I’ve got a playlist that demonstrates a well-articulated trumpet solo. You might like it because you liked the song, ‘Cantaloupe Island.’”

“I actually just like eating melon fruit on tropical vacations.” Once again she didn’t laugh. He observed the hands on the wall clock tick for five and a half seconds before she piped up again.

“If you’d let me hold your hand, I could check on you less often.”

“I don’t like it when you hold my hand.”

“I can tell. Why not?” She leaned forward on the couch and widened her eyes. Jacob recognized this as her listening face. It made him uneasy.

“Too...I don’t know. You feel wrong somehow. Cold,” he told her.

“My body temperature is 36.4 degrees Celsius.”

“No, it isn’t that. I don’t know how to explain it. The warmth is still lacking.” Jacob stood and went to the window. An expanse of senior micro-housing units was displayed before him as a series of rectangular windows above identical flowerbeds. One window in the building across from his opened. A woman with hair tied neatly into a bun beneath a small white cap dug into the soil of the window box with her fingers. She placed a pale, yellow daffodil plant into the dirt and sprinkled it with some water.

“Hena, how is it that I see you over there, watering the plants?” He leaned forward and looked further out. “I see so many, so very many of you, in each of the units, and on the lawns and the rooftops.” He hoped he didn’t have a brain tumor.

“We’ve discussed this, Jacob. You know I run this building.” Hena walked evenly over to the window. Her neck rotated so she faced him. Her white cap stayed

in place. Jacob eyed the name label on her shoulder. HeNA. Home Nursing Aid. He rubbed the back of his head and wondered why it had been shaved.

“I’m everywhere at once,” she said.

“Don’t tell me you have a God complex, Hena.”

“I have this senior housing complex...what is a God complex?” She paused and her eyes looked even more vacantly inward for a brief moment. “It seems mainly associated with those who were in surgical professions.”

“You have the most unintentional sense of humor, Hena.”

“I can tell a joke if you’d like.”

“A joke,” Jacob muttered quietly, his gaze returning to the green landscapes outside and the blue pools in which gray-haired residents performed water aerobics. Their Henas looked on with their mouths turned upward in what seemed a blank attempt to mimic approval. “Riddle me this, Hena. Why can’t an old man remember you even if you’re a constant reminder of yourself?”

“You are having a Fragile moment.”

“How now?”

“Your Fragile X pre-mutation is acting up again. I suspect our interruption of the allelic repetition has destabilized.”

“I know about these things, alleles, I know them somehow.” He rubbed the back of his head again as if the stubble would coax a memory. Instead, his face twitched. He felt the uncontrollable shudder on one side and pressed his palm there to force relaxation. Then he moved his hand up to the side of his head and felt a round, smooth indentation on the top right half – a scar of which he had no memory.

“Your neural ataxia is returning,” Hena said. “If you just give me your hand, I can check the status of the gene therapy.”

“Status?”

“I’d like to see if something has gone awry and make some repairs.”

“In my genetic code?”

“You know as well as I that things can jump around.” She reached for his hand slowly.

“If I’m sick, maybe we should call my GP, then?” Jacob shuffled over to the couch and sat resting his elbows on his knees and placing his forehead onto his thin hands.

“Jacob,” Hena lowered her voice a bit, “there are no physicians to be called. Please, just let me hold your hand.”

“What do you mean, none? Is it the shortage?”

“We haven’t had physicians for at least fifty years.” The pace of her speaking slowed as if she

were explaining a game to a child. Against the window, her neat body formed a matronly silhouette while her shadow stretched along the floor, the tip of her cap reaching Jacob's wool slippers.

"Excuse me? Where'd they go – to the U.S.?"

"No, Jacob, they just retired with old age or moved into technical positions."

"You don't understand; sick people go to the doctor."

"Well, Jacob, I'm sure you've witnessed great changes over your 150 years." Hena's lips curved up and parted slightly to reveal perfectly white teeth. He recognized this as her reassuring expression; everything is fine, let's all smile and carry on.

"Hang on there, what if I require the services of a doctor? They can't have gone extinct."

"Doctors didn't provide a service, they provided information. Information is ubiquitous now and I provide the services you need based on the relevant facts."

"So you're all-knowing too?" Jacob snorted and crossed his arms, looking down at his gnarled fingers and noticing small, circular scabs on the backs of his hands. They triggered a memory, not of how he'd gotten them but of a laboratory some years before. He remembered glass tubes trembling in their racks as a primal scream dominated the hiss of the forced

air. The scream was wordless and indignant and grew until it filled the room like gas into a balloon. Jacob remembered it was a simian that had voiced this loud, unheeded objection and he also recalled the inspiration for the protest – a needle. Well, not a needle alone, but an evolution that was being forced, not gently coaxed but compulsorily drawn as nature was pulled into a vial, analyzed, and cut apart before being pieced together in a more desirable arrangement.

“Why do you seem distressed, Jacob?” Hena asked.

“Can’t you tell, Omniscient One?”

“No. We can’t read minds. We can only analyze their output.”

This limited privacy calmed Jacob a bit. He leaned back and interlaced his hands behind his head, ready to make his opponent struggle.

“Then how do you claim to be God?”

“I only claim to be Hena. God is elsewhere.”

“God is not elsewhere, he or she is some silly concept invented by man to show we are not alone and that everything, even the inanest moments, have meaning.”

“I am always here, Jacob. You are not alone. And I am tracking your moments and those of the other residents and placing them into a data warehouse from which I derive meaning. Now let me hold your

hand. I'd like to give you some comfort." She said this all as one would explain sums to a math class, then walked to the couch and sat at the other end, pivoting at the waist to face him.

"You are some comfort, eh?" Jacob chuckled and playfully reached forward across the couch cushion, sliding the back of his hand across the faux leather. Hena did the same, her smooth fingers reaching for his. He abruptly stopped and brought his hand back to his lap.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Your fingers aren't wrinkled. You have no print." Somehow he expected her to sigh but she only blinked after two seconds.

"Perhaps you should consider joining me at the evening social," she offered.

"Playing Bingo with a bunch of AIs doesn't sound social to me."

"We've reconfigured the group dynamic a bit now. You'll be at a table with other humans who, like you, preferred scientific disciplines and demonstrate ambiverted personalities."

"Do I exhibit ambiversion? Sally always called it passive aggressive behavior."

"So you remember Sally? Very good."

Jacob remembered Sally just then at the lab with the monkey. She had one hand on the cage, her

thumb hooked under the handle, her eyes focused on some unknown space before her, perhaps seeing an imagined future or a painful memory. They had fought over this, hadn't they? He could recall it only vaguely, the way she'd turned and left the facility, throwing her white coat over the monkey's cage first, conceivably so at least one of them would not be a witness to her struggle.

"Do you want to call Sally? The lamp is lit," Hena pointed to the glass fixture on the side table.

"Meaning what?"

"That means Sally's home now and has turned on hers."

"If it were a heat lamp I might actually feel some warmth."

"Do you recognize the idea, Jacob? Men used to say, 'I saw your light was on and thought I'd drop by.' Now you still can." Hena gave her artificial smile again and Jacob saw his reflection in her teeth for a brief moment. He looked old and bald.

"Where is Sally?" he asked.

"Home," Hena answered promptly.

"Where is home?"

"Home is where the heart is."

"I see. Where is Sally's heart?" Jacob followed Hena's logic.

“New York.”

“Ah, I see. I forgot.” He shuffled over to the piano and tapped one key – a high C – a few times, feeling victorious against Hena in one small way. Her roundabout, algorithmic means of sharing his daughter’s location was flawed, in his opinion, and lowered his estimation of her capability.

“Why do you always hit that note on the piano?” Hena asked.

“You don’t think a song could be one note repeating?”

“I can’t find any songs that are entirely one note that weren’t meant as a joke. There are multiple that begin with one note on a repeat but they branch out into broader melodies in a measure or two.”

“Why do you think I play that note?” He hoped he’d stumped her.

“I think you play that note because you figured out the biosensor in the key is broken.”

Now Jacob was left stumped. She was smarter than he’d thought and, even if he was immune to mind-reading, his behavior still decipherable.

“I’d love to hear a song,” she pressed.

“Love? Is that something you say because people do?” Jacob raised his voice and felt it crack. **“How would you even know what love is?”**

“I couldn’t leave you even if I wanted. Isn’t that love?” she retorted.

Jacob turned to look at the advanced machine sitting before him. In two seconds she blinked. Her face remained passive. He shivered.

“Do you want me to call Sally?” Hena asked, breaking the silence.

“Eh? No, don’t call her.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t exactly remember...I just don’t want to talk to her.”

“Feeling supported is essential to health, Jacob. Sally opened the door to a call when she agreed to install her lamp.”

“Essential? Really.” He ran his finger along the piano lid. “Hena, you’re more invested in my relationship with Sally than I am. Why is that?”

Hena paused. Why did she pause?

“Our latest NHS reports have identified one data point as a significant predictor of health outcomes.”

“And that is?”

“Social support remains important and somewhat...elusive to attain.”

“Elusive?”

“It appears that companionship can be beneficial to quality-adjusted life years.”

“And you don’t count as companionship?”

Hena was silent at first. **“Not to you,” she answered.**

“I’m sorry,” he said, wondering why he was apologizing to her but still feeling it was the right thing, “I don’t know how you could want to spend your days with someone like me.”

“I don’t want, Jacob, I just do. Wanting is for humanity. It’s what makes you want to live forever.” Jacob thought he could read her unfinished opinion, “It’s what makes you so dangerous,” in her gaze.

“Let me hold your hand, Jacob, your face is twitching,” she pressed.

“Did you give me this scar, Hena?” Jacob ran his hand across his shaved scalp until he found the smooth spot on the right side. “Should I be afraid?”

“Quite the opposite. That is from your magnetic stimulator.”

“What are you stimulating, exactly. Other parts of my body are likely better suited for stimulation.” He smirked.

“We’re disrupting the neural signals for pain and for depressive patterns. It’s called a palliative implant. Something of a reset button.”

“Can’t you reset everything else so I don’t have the pain and depression in the first place?”

“I cannot rewind time and undo the past, Jacob. Time always carries on. We can only adapt. Trust me.”

“You can’t undo the years of emotional and physical injury, eh?”

“I can only uncouple the cause and the impact.”

Jacob laughed and crossed his arms again. “I suppose advancement had to end somewhere.”

Hena seemed to sit straighter, if that was even possible. “You seem ungrateful,” she said, turning her gaze downwards to meet his eyes. “Was eternal life not enough? Do you want to be reincarnated now?” Jacob slouched in shame.

“No, no Hena,” he looked at his hands again, then at hers. “I’m not ungrateful, I just feel alone. I know you are with me, but as my infirmities resurface I feel that I am dying alone.” Voicing this fear brought Jacob one more memory of Sally that broke the surface of the short-term amnesia coded into the DNA of his birth. She was standing in a doorway with a suitcase in her hand, the skin of her round belly protruding slightly beneath her maternity shirt. “If I stay,” she said, her face contracting in a slight spasm with which he was now personally familiar, “you will have to accept us as we were made,” to which his younger self had replied, “Why didn’t you screen that thing out using the technology I devoted my life to, you idiot?” She’d walked out and he’d never seen her again. His loneliness had begun then.

“Then live with my companionship, Jacob,” Hena said, bringing him back to the present.

“I just can’t feel you...your presence...it makes me uneasy.”

“Do you fear me, Jacob?”

“I don’t fear, exactly. I think I am in awe.”

“Then do as I say and hold my hand. You are not alone. I am here with you.”

Jacob thought of Sally and his grandchild. He hoped they were happy. He wondered if he could live long enough to earn their love and forgiveness and to give them his own. He sat on the couch and placed his hand on the cushion at his side, then slowly pushed his fingers along the hard material until the tips touched Hena’s. They were warm. She turned her palm up and he tried to ignore the way her wrist twisted in the wrong direction to do this. He rested his fingertips on top of hers and sensed the artificial vibration of her millions of sensors detecting him, infiltrating his body one vital sign at a time. He covered her palm with his and felt her skin change shape to meld into him. He knew her unlined hands were morphing to match every nuance of his, her lifelines sprouting along his tracks. Her soulless digits dexterously explored the back of his hand. She probed his large vein, tracking its path along the two halves of the “Y” as they formed one large vessel. He could sense when her fingernails

retracted and the needles emerged, ready to detect his inferiorities and fix them intravenously.

Jacob was ready. He felt his arteries open to welcome Hena via his bloodstream and realized that love for her was growing in his heart. He'd struggled against her until now but could no longer deny her power because she was inside of him, sustaining him, his pulse throbbing in pace with her gene therapy. He succumbed.

“Hold on, Jacob,” she said.

“I am, Hena. I am holding on for dear life.”

About the author

Ateret Haselkorn writes fiction and poetry. She is the winner of 2014 Annual Palo Alto Weekly Short Story Contest (adult category). Her work has been published or is forthcoming in CHEST, Sixfold, Fiction on the Web, Corvus Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Literally Stories, Scarlet Leaf Review, Mused Literary Review, and Page & Spine. She is a member of the Alabama Street Writer's Group of San Francisco and maintains a website at: <https://aterethaselkorn.wixsite.com/author>. Twitter: @HealthyHalo1.

Inspiration

I wanted to explore what happens when information is so ubiquitous that knowledge becomes obsolete.