

dreamscape

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There Was Dark

‘Do you think he’s hurt?’

‘Why would you think that?’ replied an as yet to be revealed voice.

‘Look. I don’t particularly care if he is actually hurt - we need to get out of here soon.’

‘Fine...’ replied the same voice in a more agitated manner than last time.

The voices seemed to trail off into the distance, echoed mutterings about maps and caves filled the dark, damp air.

Oscar got up from his uncomfortable position off the already uncomfortable floor, and shouted towards the two people he had heard just a second ago.

‘Hey! I’m not dead, you know!’

He heard a faint reply, ‘Yes, you are.’

Thinking this was some kind of joke, but also being nervous at the same time, Oscar ran up to the two others and briskly walked behind them, trying to keep pace with them as they gazed around at the dots and dashes of light that made the cave look as if there was a disco ball hanging from the ceiling, glowing softly and shimmering every now and then.

Oscar was now walking beside them. ‘What do you mean by ‘I’m dead’’?’

‘You are dead.’ ‘Dead to you? For what?’ Oscar said, becoming more and more startled at the voices sharply blunt responses.

‘There is nothing you can do about it. Get used to it, and then speak to us.’

Strolling along in a dark cave was not the best place for strange revelation, but it had to do now. The gloomy stalagmites of the cave grew larger as they went along, with the occasional gemstone peeking out from underneath rocks. Nothing alive, however, nothing but an endless void in front of them, stretching into infinity, it seemed.

After a while, there was a large patch of light on the ground which the two, now illuminated figures, ascended slowly upwards from. Oscar could see them clearly now, two girls, both of which wearing

seemingly striped t-shirts and wielding large paper rolls, taped together with a thin rubber band. Both of their trousers looked like they had been through some hard wear, or they has simply bought them like it. Either way, they looked old.

‘What’s up there? How do you get up there?’ said Oscar, with his neck stretched, trying to spy what could be above the hole. As the noise of what sounded like an industrial vacuum cleaner loudened, the girls rose up ever so slightly faster, accelerating towards the ceiling of the cold cave, and a warmish breeze of stale air wafted downwards as they passed through the hole.

He looked at the patch of light and stepped into it, revealing to himself what he looked like. He was wearing a plain t-shirt, bar a few patches of red.

‘Wait - If that’s red stain, then-’ he looked underneath his t-shirt and stared for quite a long time, not moving, besides his slow movement upwards towards the hole.

‘So I am actually dead. Looks like I was stabbed - wait... No. That isn’t that bad of a cut, but I am still dead. Great. I’m so pathetic I died from that cut.

He put his hands on his back and stretched, feeling more cuts on his back.

‘Oh great, more cuts. Just what I need. Scars.’ Even after thinking he was dead, he was still disappointed in the way he died.

Attempting to ‘swim’ up this current of air, Oscar rose above the exit and noticed there was a tube over him, possibly made of glass. The surroundings were fairly barren and pale tan, nothing spectacular. The sides of the glass started to open, and the hole below his feet closed up. Suddenly, the noise of the vacuum stopped suddenly, and he was dropped a foot onto the floor, stumbling and falling over in the process. The girls were in the process of unrolling their rolls of paper when the door had fully opened and Oscar had walked out.

‘Oh. Hello there again.’ said one of the girls, rather calmly compared to her earlier tone.

Oscar walked up to them and looked at the rolls of paper that they were holding.

‘What are these?’ he asked, not in the most polite way he could muster. He regretted this shortly after.

‘These are maps to the island.’ one of them responded. ‘Oh, and by the way, have you come to terms with your death yet?’

Oscar replied rather sheepishly, ‘Er... Sort of?’

One of the girls sniggered. Then they started laughing out loud.
'That always gets 'em! Telling them they're - dead!'

Oscar felt rather stupid.

'Oh, wow...' the girl remarked, 'It's just like that movie except not that movie!'

'What movie?' Oscar asked, attempting to get a scrap of information off of these two.

The other girl replied, 'You know, the one made by that Midnight Shama-whatever guy. Anyway, we have to go back to our house now. You coming?'

Oscar had no choice but to accept. The girls led him across the rather acrid desert, and along the way Oscar spotted many things that seemed out of place to him, like a picnic table on a near-vertical cliff-face, or an perfectly untouched bike miles away from anything else notable. Nothing seemed to move, the wind perfectly still, creating an air of complete silence. Which was occasionally broken by the girls laughing up ahead.

Some more objects passed by. Tall table mountains with structures built on them, at almost vertical inclines, covered in sand and rust. A plant which did not change its size in Oscar's perspective. It looked like a towering building from a long way away, but up close it just sat there, about his height.

There was no path to be followed, clearly these girls had an understanding of the area already. They must have lived here a while in order to be able to cope with such harsh environments. Well, not really harsh... But he supposed walking on sand must be quite tiring? He thought the temperature, humidity and wind were all perfect, nice and warm - but not quite warm enough to be hot. He was also surprised there was no housing market here, as it would be a very good place to live.

Some time later, Oscar found a box containing lots of advertising for houses in the area, which was mostly buried under the sand. Maybe there was something here before the desert took over? But why would have these adverts still have survived? Besides, there was also an old phone in the box, next to some tape. Oscar pressed the 'on' button, hoping for it to work so he could find out something about this mysterious world!

It didn't work.

Still, at least he knew something about this place now. They had the technology to build phones. Maybe they didn't. Maybe they were all

faulty. Maybe they were savages after some kind of nuclear blast that turned the whole place into desert. Maybe he was about to get sick from radiation poisoning and die.

And so, after a short moment of existential pondering, he picked up the phone and ran to the others, just so he didn't lose them before the sunset. And he was right, running on sand is very hard. So he quickly went back to the box, and used some of the tape to stick the sides of the box to his shoes, and ran. It didn't make it that much easier, but it was still a start. This was Oscar being resourceful though. Something which he didn't know he had the capability to do.

As they finally reached their house, the light grew dim.

Dwelling

The house was not exactly the most unique of houses, as it was painted in a single, drab colour which instilled a feeling of severe averageness in anyone that came near it, and the contrast with the striking colours of the sunset amplified its mediocrity.

‘It may not look like much, but it’s ours and it’s secure.’ mentioned one of the girls in a very matter-of-fact tone. ‘Oh, and by the way, we forgot to introduce ourselves. I’m Emily. She’s Caroline. We may not look that much different, but she will always be the quieter one. And her striped t-shirt is white on green, mine is green on white. Make sure you know the difference.’

Oscar tried to examine their t-shirts for any differences. There didn’t seem to be any to his untrained eye, but over time he was sure that he would become accustomed to the minute differences over time. He entered the house to be greeted with the smell of hot paper freshly ejected from a printer.

Oscar tapped Emily’s shoulder, thinking it was Caroline.

‘Caroline-’

‘I’m Emily. It’s a common mistake, but still, carry on.’

Oscar looked sort of embarrassed again, but he realised that they looked virtually identical in every way.

‘So what is this place? Where did I come from? Why have I got these cuts?’ asked Oscar frantically, as he had been denied answers for almost an hour now.

‘Alright. This is the island. Almost everyone lives here and the ones that don’t, well... Let’s just skip that one. It’s boring, trust me. What was the next question?’

‘Where I came from.’

‘Ah. You came from the pit. I have no idea what- wait, no, WHY things come from the pit. Also you have these cuts because you fell down the pit.’

Oscar wanted more information.

‘Do you have *any* idea what the pit is and how come I don’t remember coming down here!’ he half-shouted.

Emily just shrugged. ‘Do you want to see your room?’ she said.

‘Yes.’ replied Oscar.

Just like the stairs leading up to the room, the room itself was sort of dingy and decorated with seemingly random junk, like a museum of miscellanea, coated with a fine layer of dust and sand.

‘We get lots of sandstorms here during the heat.’ said Caroline, who was walking down the stairs to get the food ready. ‘Luckily we don’t have to worry about them right now.’

The smell of hot paper came back again.

‘Why do I smell hot paper?’ Oscar asked, walking down the stairs and peeking through the gaps in the banister inquisitively.

He heard a bit of an argument going on in the kitchen - mentioning words such as ‘map’, ‘fire’ and ‘why would you almost let this happen?!’

The kitchen door burst open.

‘You’re so lucky that didn’t catch on fire.’ said Emily - or was it Caroline? Oscar couldn’t tell.

‘I still hate you. We could have lost the map because of you! Then we would have nothing to enter into the competition. At all.’

‘Hey - at least the food is cooked!’

‘Have you got any for our guest here?’

‘Yes. Well, sort of.’

Oscar walked into the room slowly, and the girl (presumably Emily) turned round sharply and greeted him with a face that looked like she knew he knew what she had just said.

Caroline had walked off by this point, and by the sounds of clattering dishes in the kitchen Oscar assumed she was getting food for the trio. There was a period of awkward silence where Emily and Oscar just stood there, not saying anything.

‘Grub’s up! Or whatever Emily usually says...’ said Caroline, probably in distress of having to carry three food-laden plates to the small wooden table. Oscar turned to inspect the table, and soon discovered his chair was likely to be a bar stool that was far too high for the table.

Caroline looked downwards as she put the plates on the table, and placed forks next to them too. She asked, ‘Emily, have you got a chair for Oscar?’

Emily responded with a quiet ‘Mmm-hmm’ and slowly, Caroline looked upwards, only to see Oscar struggling to lower the stool down to its original height. She sighed deeply and went over to the stool. ‘Wait a sec - I’ve got this.’

She raised her arms well above her head and clenched her hands into fists, and then brought them down upon the stool very sharply. The stool collapsed downwards, and sank so it was well below the level of the table. Caroline tried to raise it back up, but the seat just collapsed every time she tried.

'Well, at least we have food.' she said nonchalantly, walking back to her place at the table.

The meal was quite enjoyable, and Oscar forgot to question the contents of his dish as he was so hungry. Everything tasted like chicken to an extent, even the vegetables. Although one of the 'carrots' refused to be eaten and repeatedly rolled off the plate without any of his input, the rest of the meal seemed to know its place, on his blue ceramic dish.

Neither of them seemed to do much after the meal was finished, Emily hardly moving from her spot on the sofa, watching some kind of documentary. The main event was not particularly interesting, pretty pictures of multi-coloured birds accompanied by the droning noises of the jungle, and the even more annoying noises of the dull and uninspired garbage the voiceover was blaring out. The sharp contrast between the beautiful, if not a bit pixelated images shown on the television and the abysmal audio was what made it so awful. In fact, Oscar was more interested in this book which he only knew existed because he had sat on it - 'Rick Hester - How To Survive Anywhere With Just Your Wits And A Bag Of Sandwiches'.

When Oscar had picked it up, he first thought the book would be a sort of self-help guide, but he didn't think that either of the two girls would have bought it.

It was enticing. It was well written. It actually told you how to survive anywhere with just your wits and a bag of sandwiches. And it mentioned a specific type of sandwich - one which took quite a lot of preparation to craft.

Apparently the first thing you did was sharpen an HB pencil, and put the shavings in a bowl. Then, get a live turkey and feed it the shavings, wait three hours and then kill the turkey - but only by throwing it off something. You had to make sure there was a slice of bread for the turkey to land on, and place the top slice on top after it lands, and simply place this recently deceased turkey-bread combination into an oven with a pile of dried out grass, and then take it out after it shrinks down to a regular sandwich size. Then, place sauce (from concentrate) on and you are done! Also, it stated that *real* connoisseurs showed the turkey a bottle of vermouth before killing it,

and the true gods of sandwich-making place pieces of soggy cold biscuit to heighten the intensity of the flavour. Many people, the book dictates, die every year from eating too much at once, as the secret to these sandwiches is that the turkey and grass re-expand in your stomach, instantly filling you up and letting you consume lots of calories quickly. The whole thing surrounding the turkey having to be dropped off a roof was peculiar to Oscar, but the real reason why they did this was to give the turkey some adrenaline in its blood just before its death, creating more energy for the consumer.

There was nothing wrong with this sandwich, and Oscar thought he should probably make one to sample the flavours, to get a taste of this new world, however odd it may have seemed. A 'Hesterian' sandwich was the pinnacle of years of research, and lots of trial and error, with human casualties too.

Emily looked at Oscar, awoken from her slumber by a sudden loud lion roar from the television.

'Oh. So you're reading that book?' Emily asked inquisitively

'Am I supposed to leave it alone?' replied Oscar, mildly.

'No, no, you can read that book all you want. It's just that Caroline tried to make it once and almost killed herself, and the book serves as a constant reminder to never do anything stupid. I leave it on the seat as an unnerving reminder, and it's funny sometimes to just watch her shudder as she remembers the event.'

'Um... Okay then, I'm probably going to go to sleep now...' replied Oscar, half thinking it was funny that she did these things to Caroline, but also thinking that it was cruel.

On the way up the creaky stairs once more, Oscar's internal debate on whether or not Emily using strategically placed books to invoke mild PTSD in Caroline to keep her in check was ethical or not had finally come to a close. It was funny, there was no doubt about it. As long as it didn't do her any mental or physical -

'I told you never to put the book there ever again! You know what happened!' screamed Caroline, still incredibly loud, even from across several rooms and a flight of stairs.

Emily was laughing loudly, and helplessly snorting a little, in addition.

Caroline stormed through the rooms, scarlet red with rage, deliberating to make every single one of her movements as loud as possible. She even slammed a door twice to emphasise her point, and

judging by the look on the look on her face, she did not want to be messed with any further, and as a result, Oscar rushed into his room.

There were a few flies on the carpet, and the thin layer of dust that covered everything like grey snow proved to him that this room hadn't been used in a while. A section of the floor had been bleached a lighter colour from the sunlight coming through over the years. Clearly, the room had also not been cleaned for a while either, due to the fine strands of what he could only assume was a spiders web. There were even some dusty jars up there too. He picked one off the top of the shelf, and tilted it sideways to shake the dust out.

'That's quite a lot of dust.' thought Oscar 'How long have they left this room for then?'

And then, to his horror and fascination, Oscar spotted a bird's nest up in the corner.

How long had this place been left alone for? If he slept in here, he'd probably inhale at least a kilo of dust overnight. But being tired and really needing somewhere to rest soon, he hatched a plan which was to tactically get into bed while simultaneously kicking up as little dust as possible. Slowly but surely, he picked up one of the corners of the bed and pulled it until he could slide in without getting dust everywhere. Maybe this was a little pointless. Perhaps he could just shake the dust out of the window.

Oscar got back up out of the bed and slowly bundled up the blanket to try and keep all the dust inside. He placed the bundle on the floor and opened the window, which only agreed to open after a hearty knock. One of the birds in the nest chirped as some wind blew into the room, making the blanket unfurl and release the dust all over the room.

He guessed he would have to just sleep like this.

Journey Forth

The morning greeted him with a sense of relief, which stemmed from the fact he hadn't choked to death overnight. Maybe when he coughed he'd spit out dust. After trying to cough enough, he decided it was time to stop being paranoid. Everything had gone well so far, nothing too interesting had happened.

Maybe the phone thing had left him with a sense of something about this world. Clearly, the two girls would have had some sort of phone, one that they could use to get somewhere. Actually, maybe they had to build a radio that lets them communicate with the outside world themselves, carefully putting every single component together. Perhaps they used nothing more than maps on paper. Or on stone. Actually, not on stone.

As he sat up in bed, there was still dust all over the room. It was at that point he had realised he had left the window open for the entire night. As it was still warm outside and likely had been since he went to sleep. Sticking his hand out of the window, he felt no change since last night. A stagnant, warm air that wasn't unpleasant, nor created any moisture. He once again pondered living here in the future.

Caroline called from downstairs, 'Come on. We're going soon, and you don't want to miss what we are going looking for today!'

Or was it Emily? Was there a noticeable difference in their voices?

'Oscar, hurry up or we're not going to make it!' said a considerably more aggravated voice.

Yes, that was Emily alright. Considerably more aggravated than ever. But right now, it didn't really matter as whatever they were doing would require Oscar to leave right now. This wasn't really that much of a problem, his hair was reasonably unkempt anyway and he was already wearing the clothes in which he went to sleep in, which was a bonus and a problem at the same time.

He hurried down the stairs, no longer caring about the creaking noises which made him think these stairs were one day away from just collapsing, which they probably were. Some of the pictures shuffled as he walked down, sliding on their poorly nailed in frames and strings. Most of the picture frames were empty and cracked to some extent, but the ones that had pictures in them were filled with sticky notes, reminding people of things. Just things, nothing too specific. Some

were vaguely styled in the shapes of shopping lists, others were doodled on with pictures of angels or small, angular objects. The sunlight coming in through the window had bleached most of the notes a dull yellow-white colour, reminiscent of a bad painter's handiwork.

When the stairs had almost given up, Oscar reached the bottom of the stairs and saw that the door had been left open, and Emily had walked out with a rucksack full of what he assumed to be important equipment. Some other items had been left on the table, as well as what he assumed was food. Looking inside the bag, there was a small amount of brown, cracker-like substance at the bottom of it, which tasted quite good. Thinking back a few moments, Oscar realised it probably wasn't the best idea to eat these, as he didn't even know what they were at first. Well, there was nothing on the packet saying it was unsafe for human consumption, or anything about-

Oscar looked at the packet again and saw an image of an animal on the front. It could have been a mascot, but no. Upon further inspection, this was bird food. Good tasting bird food, albeit, but bird food. Never mind, thought Oscar, walking outside to feel the non-existent breeze and the bright sunlight, which was definitely not as warm as it should have been. After all, it had been shining down all morning and nothing seemed to have heated up accordingly.

Oscar quickly caught up with Emily and Caroline, and asked them what they were doing.

'Well, there's a big mapping contest based in Kota, and we're doing this section of the desert for our project. Apparently, there's a big prize up for grabs if you win. So we've decided to actually live here for a while to try and get used to it, and so we can get places easier. It turns out, it's not actually that much harder to get here from Kota, but we're having... fun? It's not that great out here. Besides, we're heading back there tomorrow.'

'No, the day after.' said Caroline.

Caroline then decided to give Emily a look of mild disdain, as she didn't even know something as simple as that. As simple as the one date in their entire project which actually mattered. Well, at least if they had followed Emily they would have been early.

A long silence followed, only left there because no one wanted to start a conversation for fear of saying something obvious. Some more strange objects passed by, pieces of ice sticking out of the sand in odd places and oddly enough, actual winds. Oscar licked his finger and

attempted to figure out which way it was blowing. Some of the moisture flew straight up into the sky. He then took one of the pieces of cardboard on his shoes off and let it float up into the sky, watching the wind carry it upwards. He leant over to try and see where it was emanating from, but found nothing. Perhaps there was a fan underneath the sand. Too obvious.

He walked along, pausing to take the cardboard on his other foot off when suddenly a large clear pipe, similar to the one near the pit yesterday, seemed to shoot down from the sky. It sucked up a little bit of sand before some people with buckets poured a grey liquid into the hole it had sucked up. The liquid seemed to solidify instantly, giving the floor a metallic sheen, which reflected the sun into his eyes. After the people went back up, nothing else happened. The noise stopped and Oscar heard a shout behind him, presumably from Caroline. Without considering what she had even said, he knew the right thing to do would be to follow them. And follow them he would. Just after checking out what this thing did.

Oscar stepped inside the tube, expecting to be taken up by the pipe just like earlier. Nothing happened. And a little bit more nothing happened. No sound emanated. Oscar heard a slight noise of wind rushing. Some sand was whipped up from the ground around him. And then the ground was a hundred metres below him, and he was racing off over the grey sky far out of view of Emily and Caroline. He could make out two dots on the right of the pipe, and they appeared to be waving and running towards the base of the pipe.

At this moment, he realised that he probably got the duo very worried about his existence, as he felt like a liability to them after the sandwich incident. And the ground was getting closer again, but this time it was rocky, solid, brick red ground. He was flipped round and slowed down by the air currents inside the tube, and he was then not-so-gently lowered to the ground. He walked around for a while and looked up, to see the same two dots racing through the pipe, the same way he did. And now, it was their turn to come down. Emily landed gently down, and Caroline crashed down on top of her, knocking both of them over. Such grace.

Emily looked visibly annoyed at both of them.

‘You could have got lost.’ said Emily ‘But, now that we’re here, we might as well survey the area. Actually, it’s cool we have a pipe stop right near our house though, Carol.’

‘Yeah, but we’re only going to use it for a day.’ said Caroline.

‘But it’s cool! No one else we know had ever had that! Why do you think the transit people decided to put a stop where only two people would regularly use it?’

‘Sometimes they put in temporary stops if there is a lot of demand to go to one area. It might even be a visit by the Secret Council.’

‘What would they want here? Wait, no, they want privacy. I get it.’

‘Maybe they added in a stop for property developers? People who wanted to build an estate here?’ said Oscar.

‘Why would anyone want to build here?’ said Emily.

‘There were folders of info and leaflets about it on the walk from the pit to your place...’ replied Oscar.

At this point, a cardboard panel came flying through the tube and hit the ground in the middle of them.

‘You see! There’s a plan of the area on one side! Bam! You get it now?’ said Oscar.

‘Huh. I guess I was wrong.’ said Emily, thoroughly defeated by cardboard-ex-machina.

They walked along for what seemed like a very long time, no measure of distance or perspective in sight at all. The sound was only punctuated by the occasional sigh of despair by one of the trio. The nothingness, however, gave them a lot to think about. Their existence. The futility of it all. Or maybe, you could try to guess how far the horizon is from you. Or shout without echo. There’s not a lot of things to do when the only things you can see are two halves, one of orange, one of blue.

Thinking about that last phrase made Oscar consider the fact it rhymed and almost had lyrical flow to it.

In turn thinking about what he was thinking about made Oscar feel rather bored that this was what life had become. Nothing but a series of metacognitive thoughts drifting through his head.

Drifting. Hmm. That conjured up some more thoughts of sand dunes drifting. Trouble was, there were none. Not even the tiniest lump. Perhaps they kept it raked and clean, like a xeriscape. All these big words made Oscar feel smart. And all those bijou phrases made Oscar quite sorrowful.

Maybe the sand was driving him insane. Maybe they had gone insane too.

Oscar glanced over his shoulder, looking at the two talking to one another.

‘It’s probably just me.’ he thought.

Either way, something had appeared out of the light haze that made the horizon look like it had been coloured in by a toddler who doesn't know how to stay inside the lines. A black figure that stood out like a drop of ink on top of the aforementioned toddler modern art. Perhaps a house? Perhaps a tall one? Why was it so far out? I mean, there must be a certain point where you must start to think that it will take you a day long trek across the desert *just* to get to the nearest physical landmark.

Emily and Caroline kept on talking, as if they had endless things to talk about despite the thoroughly uninspiring events of today.

'Is there anything else to do here?' Oscar asked them, not knowing of the very fragile and repetitive conversation the other two were having.

'Oh no, not really. Not here, at least. We'll talk about it when we get to Kota.' said Emily. Yes, definitely Emily this time.

'Why are you always holding back on the questions Carol? It's not as if there's anything to be gained from making him wait.'

There was a pause, and this gave Oscar ample time to realise he'd got the names wrong again.

'It's not as if you enjoy watching him talk like some kind of overly animated five year old asking so many basic questions we could easily answer at any point.'

'You mean you could answer my questions?' said Oscar.

'Well, yes.' said *Emily*. 'But then you would just ask more questions, and we really don't want to answer everything you can ask. We don't know everything yet. You know, we haven't been here very long.'

'How long?' said Oscar.

A mild laugh from both girls faded into a sigh. Oscar guessed they were right about his inquisitiveness.

'But shouldn't I have a right to know what's going on?' thought Oscar, almost wishing he could say it out loud and then not have to endure another hour of silence. Actually, had it really been an hour since they left the house? Well, time flies when you're having fun. Except they weren't having fun.

'Are you sure you can't tell me anything?' asked Oscar.

'Yes, we can. Kota is like, a large-ish city on this island. And we're going there soon. You know why. So there's some other places on this island, some of which are really, really messed up. Some say the secret council runs a base in the dodgy bits.' said Emily. That was now firmly cemented in Oscar's head. That voice was the voice of Emily.

‘Apparently, there’s a mountain somewhere, which is really good for skiing on. And there’s some other place with a lot of hills. And we’ve even heard rumours of an island of just birds and cats!’

‘That last place doesn’t sound too good for either animal.’

‘It’s a rumour. We don’t know, okay?’

‘So why are you telling me the things you don’t know for sure?’

‘Because we don’t know a whole lot. Here’s another thing I know. We took you in only because we need to find out what is going on. And an extra pair of eyes would be useful.’ said Emily.

‘Oh okay then. So what about-‘

‘I said an extra pair of eyes.’ said Emily.

‘That’s a bit harsh. I mean, you can talk to us, but don’t ask any questions about the place.’ said Caroline.

‘Okay then, what’s your definition of small talk then?’ said Oscar ‘The weather’s always the same here and there’s nothing noteworthy to look at.’

‘What about the house? Was there anything wrong with the guest room? We haven’t been in it much since we rented the place. Apparently the house belonged to this weird kleptomaniac. He liked jars. Did you see a lot of jars?’

‘Yeah, this green one on the top shelf. Really, really dusty. All grey and almost hardened. Do you know anything about the guy who had this place before?’

‘Yeah.’ said Emily ‘He had a wife who died just a few weeks before we got the place. Said he wanted to move to the coast. He’s giving us the place for a week while he goes somewhere. Anyway, he wasn’t very interesting, and liked collecting things in jars.’

‘Huh. Okay then.’

Small talk was no small feat.

Even though the lack of conversational topics hindered their drawn out dialogue, they pulled through just about long enough to gain a new topic; what was this black building?

And the supposed salvation to their small talk ended with a bang and a flash. Very literally. A few flashes of light and a loud siren noise, quickly followed by an explosion akin to setting off a large box of fireworks indoors. Some other things ran out of one of the exits, and Emily ran to see if she could see any more. Another bang. Emily ran back for fear that the bangs were a warning. Caroline quickly jotted down some co-ordinates of the area on the back of her hand, and then the trio headed back, all the way to the pipe.

No words were spoken, but that was enough to carry the massive letdown that this whole trip was. Nothing more than an excuse for the universe to laugh at three incompetent souls trying to make the best of a very boring situation. The universe thought to itself, was it using the word 'soul' in the archaic sense of the term, as in, they physically had souls, or maybe it was using it in the same sense that someone might refer to someone as an 'old soul'. The universe decided it would take the rest of the afternoon off to think about this sort of thing, and give it a proper going over. After all, those philosophers and physicists had toiled for centuries and had gotten no closer to actually finding out what was there.

Regardless of the machinations of the world, something interesting might have actually come out of this. Something for Oscar to grasp in this world, which seemed oddly out of touch and reach. Something was bound to happen soon.

A few minutes later, the realisation sank in that nothing was going to happen. Emily and Caroline were going to continue making their maps and Oscar wouldn't get anything out of it.

"Oscar!" said Emily. 'We've, uh, really got to go to Kota right now. Turns the competition deadline was tonight. So, you're going to have to come back to the house, pack your... You don't actually have any belongings, do you? Okay, just follow me.'

Oscar was taken aback by this statement, feeling glad they were going to finally be doing something that didn't require trudging through sand, which hurt his ankles. The others were probably sick of the sand, as well.

Oscar followed Emily over the sand dune, catching his foot on a buried branch and recoiling in pain. But there it was, the house. Their house. But why had they had to walk so far to find the other house? Surely it was just over-

Oscar looked back and saw nothing.

'Nothing in this world makes any sense!' Oscar said.

'You'll get used to it.' said Emily, sounding confident but concerned.

At this point, Caroline had slid all the way down the dune to the house, and was trying to force the door open as it was blocked by a pile of sand. Emily began to run, then fell and gracefully slid the final few metres. Oscar slowly made his way down the dune, leap by leap. He could hear the others inside, running around, collecting things to take with them.

‘What could they possibly need to take with them other than the maps?’ Oscar thought, not knowing they were going to stay in Kota for a few days, perhaps longer if they won their prize.

‘Well, it’s not like their little trip is going to make any more sense than this place.’ Oscar thought, still not knowing. They walked out, laden with a backpack each, full of various bits and overflowing with scrolls of paper. Before the door was swung open, a visible gap between the frame and the door edge created a film of visible dust, a wide laser of dead skin and other particulate matter. Oscar wondered if holding his breath would be of any use when it came to filtering out the dust - but, of course, he decided that passing out over inhaling some dust might be a bit of an overreaction.

Emily and Caroline walked out and locked the door, arguing over whether or not they needed to spend an extra few seconds and walk round to the back of the house and lock the back door.

“There’s nothing worth stealing.” said Caroline. “Even if someone broke in, it’s not like they’d have anything to use. We have nothing here.”

“Nothing except plumbing and a gas main!” said Emily, walking round to the back door. “I don’t want anyone racking up our bill.”

“We don’t pay for the bill.” said Caroline, walking round the corner to make sure she was heard. Oscar followed for fear of getting lost, or bored. “We don’t have to pay for anything in this place. You do remember we just found it like this, right?”

“Finders keepers.” said Emily.

“Right, right. You think that, but you’ve wasted more on shoddy locks than we ever would have spent on all this.”

“Oh, sure, you’re only saying that because you don’t know how much any of this costs. Perhaps there’s someone out there who keeps getting charged money for this house. Perhaps it’s someone’s holiday home?”

“Serves them right for having a holiday home and then never coming here.”

Emily looked indignant and locked the door. “There.” she said. “No point unlocking it now, is there?”

“I suppose not.” said Caroline, acutely aware of the time they had wasted. “We’d better get a move on if we want to be there on time.”

“Where’s there again?” said Oscar.

“Kota, I’ve said it before...” said Emily, picking her backpack up. “And I’ll say it again.”

“It’s Kota.” said Caroline.

“I didn’t mean literally say it again.”

“I know.”

“You knew, but you still said it.”

The two began walking, Oscar followed yet again, drifting from directly behind them to either side of the duo.

“That’s exactly why I did it.” said Caroline, wondering when this conversation was going to end. At around this point, the universe decided it was probably best if the secret to the soul, and thus, the meaning of the earlier phrase ‘incompetent souls’, remained hidden. Precisely nothing changed in the area surrounding the trio, and thus, the conversation carried on until they walked back to the pipe. Walking to and fro between these pipes seemed to make up the majority of Emily and Caroline’s days. What plagued Oscar more was the structural integrity of these glass tubes. Well, he assumed they were glass, he hadn’t felt the sides yet.