



Prelude, but a different one.

I think this is going to be somewhat interesting. I've started writing this Prelude (as all my books have, now) without having started to write the story. "Now", I hear absolutely none of you say, "you started writing *Dreamscape* in 2015? How can you claim that you haven't started writing it?" Well, that's because I've reimagined it. No longer is it an upfront tale about someone who is thrown into a colourful world full of regurgitated not-so-pop-culture references and cool n' wacky creatures, it is (or is at least intended to be) a meta analysis of that. I wrote the first bit of *Dreamscape* in 2015, when my life was very different to what it is now. But, in a way, it's not all that different. I'm sitting here, listening to the UNDERTALE soundtrack, as I did in 2015. But not entirely because I think it's good. It's like a signifier for something for me. The music itself doesn't evoke all that much in a vacuum, but the memory of listening to the music in the past is the main attractor for me.

Regardless of the music I listened to back then, this is the sixth book I have started, (seven if you count the immeasurably ill-fated *Diary Of A Roman Soldier...*) and this will hopefully be the fifth book I finish. Well, I have no idea how long this thing is going to take, or whether another, more easily achievable idea will overtake it at some point. I'd say I am very unreliable at gauging when projects are going to come out. A while ago, in late 2017, I decided that attempting to string all of my projects together into a cohesive whole would be the best thing to do. I got excited planning for it, and as all of these plans do, they topple over under their own huge scope. Three books *leading up to Dreamscape*, each with their own set of adventures and plots? Maybe I could do it all in a year if I did very little else, or just wrote more consistently. But I have to say I believe that is very, very unlikely. Plus, the ideas seem less alluring now.

On the back of one of a series of notes reminding me to do various projects, I wrote "stuck in project purgatory". It was, surprisingly, on the back of the *La Vita Eterna* one. I didn't think I was going to be

able to write that. I thought it was going to sit on my hard drive, the way that so many other of these projects have done. I'd like to give a moment of silence for all the ideas which never quite got off the ground, and their subsidiaries, and all the things that I could have done with them.

This is not the time for memorial, though. This is a book about re-evaluation. Rethinking. Reimagining. In late 2017, I made a list of projects that I was working on in a feeble attempt to collate all of my disparate strands of thought. Of course, very few of them got anywhere, but the tentative addition of 'Ducc' at the end hints at a willingness to stop trying to categorise everything and just work on them instead.

I don't know precisely how many projects I have started, but there have only been a few that I've finished. I had a suspicion that there was a "Valley Of Project Death" at around 5,000 to 7,000 words. After scouring my hard drive and estimating word counts off some written records, it is safe me to say that (for typed things, at least) that at approximately 6,000 words, projects tend to get held up. Right now, as of March 2021, Ducc II is in that range, alongside the original Dreamscape, as well as Kind Stranger, Setism, Playground Games, and What Is A Sandwich?, so I believe that this theory is valid. Regardless, enough with the number-chewing (it's hardly crunching, there's no real substance to it) and onto the novel.

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Fog

Vague patterns of cloud shifted round an unconscious mind, ready to strike, it seems, with the intent to grab and throw the viewer right into the wrong. There isn't much else, occasional yellow strikes permeate the violet sky and they will make everyone think that the world is coming to an end. It isn't, it's just a mind. But for the observer, it's there, it's all there in there, and their screaming... "help, please, help", reflects off nothing in the distance. The scene is lit interminably, with any light source needing to be so far away as to not cast any shadow. It seems as if this is all there is now, and all they're going to be in the future. We hate this. Hate works as a word when you have something to reflect it against, something that is harming you might be worthy of hate, but in here, nothing hurts, nothing seeks to hurt either, and the bolts that strike down between the harmless clouds arc away with grace and agility, they seem to never veer near for fear of hurting you. They can move, they can dart all over anyone's imagined screen, the retinas stimulated by nothing but static patterns from the back of the eyelid, and perhaps the gradual sunrise from beyond thick morning fog in the city.

Oscar wakes, it's seven. Time to get to work, after a nice breakfast. The clouds take on a life of their own as he sits up, not really paying attention to anything else. The window is covered in a thin layer of frost around the edges but right now, he can attribute that to gunk accumulating around the edge of his very own eyes. Green flecks come off on his finger in the mirror as he pokes around for a while, attempting to dislodge any flakes that might earn him a wry look from someone on the train. The toast is alright, somewhere along the burnt end of the bell curve of all possible outcomes of toast. He thinks that the spring in the timer dial has been getting weaker over the years, so he's been turning it up more and more to compensate. Is this making the spring become weaker and weaker faster? Is it worth worrying about or fixing, especially when he could just order one off the

internet or go down to his local shop and buy one for less than twenty pounds? The train also follows the same bell curve pattern, most of the time it never strays outside of the 45-55 minute zone, but on this day, the driver is somehow pissed off, but this helps everyone along. He calls people out for leaving their bags in the doors, he singles them out with his panopticon of cameras, and once, reduces a woman to tears for saying she dressed poorly on a day like this. The fog fills the trains with a new breath of coldness every time he gets on. The transfer is boring, as usual, and his day at work begins fifteen minutes earlier than he would have liked. There were fifteen brief minutes, perhaps, to go over to the coffee shop just outside the building, but there was a queue outside, and the weather was getting worse. He clocks in, the machine lights up green, green as usual. Some people greet him as he walks to his desk and sits down, and his boss walks over and says a few kind words, too. Something along the lines of being on time constantly, and something about not having to try too hard for a raise. He smiles back, but something about the window keeps making him turn his head. The skyscrapers are now islands in a sea of grey, poking out from under a strata of dense fog. It's quite an interesting scene, things like this don't happen a lot any more, so he takes his phone out of his pocket and walks over to the window, readying himself to capture the sight on camera. The faux-camera snap goes off, and a few of his co-workers look over at him from near the kitchenette. Who still has the camera noise on? Flat design is the trend now, not skeuomorphism. Not that any of them are really that into design, most of them just find it irritating.

He walks back over to his desk and works for a little while, his eyes straining against the blue tint of the computer screen. He wonders if things would be any better if he fiddled with his brightness settings, but any attempt to lower it just makes him have to squint and rely on his glasses more. After a while, he takes a precautionary aspirin because he feels the beginning of a headache coming on. Some other people share a laugh a few metres away, and he wants to know what they are up to. He rolls his chair back and sees them disappointedly chuckling at a spilt glass of water, some of which has found its way

onto some rather unfitting chinos. The splash is right over the crotch, the dark beige contrasting with the light beige to almost form a kind of cloud shape. It quickly fluctuates as the water permeates more of the trouser leg, and he turns back to his desk, wanting to get on with what he was doing before he forgets it. Does the aspirin make him forget things more readily? He understands some vague notion of aspirin thinning the blood, so perhaps... no, that has nothing to do with the brain. He isn't that interested, anyway. He just wants his headache to be gone in the future.

Typing away for a while, he takes a quick break and walks over to the window again, and the sun has more fully risen, the winter months are receding into the background as the fog has largely lifted. A quaint morning with a lovely ending. Perhaps he might ask if he can go out for a longer lunch today, he might be able to meet one of his friends who works in the same area. An old friend from university, who he happened across one day in the queue for the coffee shop. It was a moment like that in a movie, social norms like queueing and quietness in public spaces were transcended with one cry of "Oh, hello!" He'd been meaning to see more of his friends, but a lot of the time he had was spent doing something that he was meant to do while he was at work. His home and work blended together slightly, the boundary of acceptable calling time had crept up and up until he had sometimes been disturbed from his sleep with an incessant buzzing. Once, he had woken up to the sound of his phone going off, and had mistaken it for his alarm. He got dressed and had got to the point where his top button was done up, before looking out of the window and realising it was still dark. But then, instead of hurrying back to sleep, he looked out of the window once more onto the fringes of the city below. His flat offered mediocre views, but views nonetheless, of people training on football pitches past midnight, of cars racing round roads not intended for such use, of the occasional police siren and reflected blue flash against the side of another tower block. The next night, he had stayed up a little later, and watched the world for a while again. It got quite interesting after a while.

Oscar gets back on the train to go home. His boss let him go out for his longer lunch, but his friend needed to stay in and he couldn't get into his building without a pass, so he waited outside on a bench, attempting to sit in the sun and out of the wind. But everywhere he walked, the wind was funnelled behind him, nearly ripping his briefcase out of his hands. "Who even uses a briefcase anymore?" he thought. "It's like I'm from the fifties."

The train is as usual, but he thinks of the time that, cheap internet-purchased binoculars in hand, he saw someone depart the train at his station, and as it pulled away, it revealed what appeared to be a pile of vomit. He laughed, and tried to spot the offender, but he was too late. The frilled awnings of the suburban station had hidden them. A few days after they had been delivered, one of the lenses of the binoculars detached. Soon, going to sleep was no longer the end to an evening spent people-watching, but instead he was waiting for a new episode of a recently-released TV show to come out. He wondered if the time slot would allow him to view it before he passed out on his sofa. A man pushes past him, ruining his train of thought, moments before ruining the actual, physical train he is on by throwing up at the nearest bin. Notice the use of at, as 'in' would imply that any of it actually went in there. He gags a little, to himself, not wanting to make a show of feeling disgusted. Some others try and shuffle down the carriage, but the train is so full that people can't move down any more. He gets off a stop early, and he thinks to walk home, to do something he's only done a few times before. The next train arrives in three minutes. He waits, and the rain begins to pick up into a drizzle. If the train were going to be any longer, he would walk down to the sheltered end of the platform, but instead, he values his time spent walking down the platform at the end of his journey, he wants to be first out of the ticket gate. So he stands there, in the rain, and the rain gets harder and harder. It's been around six minutes by the time he puts his coat over his head to shelter himself from the rain. At around eight minutes, he hears some sort of tinny announcement from the other end of the station. But no train arrives. He begins to try and calculate if he would have made it home by this point if he had just

walked from the station. Probably not. But then he thinks about whether he would have run in the rain, and whether if he ran he could make it from here to his house in ten minutes. It is now twelve minutes since he was deposited on the platform. Fourteen minutes. Fifteen minutes. He walks back to the sheltered end, and dries off his bag. The station attendant says that there's a red signal due to a train taking the wrong turning and not being able to back up. The platform is empty. He begins walking back to his house. It takes him thirty minutes or so, he isn't counting anymore. He hears the train pass his house. Would it have been quicker to wait for a train? He kicks himself when he opens his case and everything inside is wet. If only he had stayed on the train!

If Only

He's falling and calling out in his mind, trying to find something to grab onto amidst the mist. But there's nothing except a gradual realisation of a gradual sensation of slowing down to terminal velocity. No more acceleration as the clouds become denser and denser, and allow the back to curve as your legs and arms fold inwards, it's like being enveloped, and slowly... slowly... Oscar is lowered down into a bed. Not his own, mind you, but one quite like the one he had many years ago, when he lived with his parents. It was a frail one, with weak legs which nearly buckled under the stress of having to support both him and a mattress. The white paint was always slightly bubbling, and he used to think there was rust underneath. Here, in this mind-bed, the frame is scarcely more than a rusty wire, its worst attributes exemplified with every sharp prong of rust poking up through his paper mattress. He gets up, and the room is shaky, it feels like home, but falls into the uncanny valley of building design. Where was that lintel before? Did the clock go on the other wall? What about the light coming in through the windows? He could have sworn that every time he woke up, the sun came in between the thin slivers between the ageing shades and landed right on his face. That meant that his room faced east. But here, it felt like noon. No shadows were cast here, every object seemed to hang as if in a space independent to one another, like a preliminary sketch of his field of view. Of course, things change and blur and go missing every time he looks around, but he doesn't know or realise. He spins his way out of his bedroom door, and into a tangled mess of hallway where the carpets shine with the midday sun coming in through a great glass skylight in a modern but still grimy building, like a sports centre, the moss grows over the corners of the skylight and is visible in green-brown clumps, like dense clouds all in a single layer, like looking up from an airplane on a day with strange pressure fronts. He walks downstairs to make breakfast, and it's a scene from a thing he once

imagined. A toaster, some cheap American breakfast cereal, and perhaps even some fresh fruit for him to dig through, though they're not quite real either. If he looked, he would have seen spherical bananas and a pineapple with needle-sharp spines. But his vision only catches it in the periphery, this brain-created image misinterpreting itself as a regular bowl of fruit. After all, why assume it's anything else? All this detail going to waste on simulated blurry central-focus vision.

He walks down the stairs, but he thinks that he might have walked down the stairs before. The room is different, but he doesn't remember, a regular breakfast, no one else around to speak to him, he can leave by himself. He opens the front door, and it takes a while for his brain to figure out what to place behind it. A monolithic wave, towered over a city, far off in the distance, suspended like a sort of jelly. It hasn't fallen yet, but he looks at it with the same abject horror as him seeing the footage of any disaster in the distance, the heart-wrenching 'not this, again' of a plane flying into a distant building or a far-away nuclear bomb where all you get to see is the glowing red shadow your outstretched arm casts on a bleached-white wall, seconds before you're hit by a pressure wave. Things that go catastrophically wrong usually never happen this slowly. He wonders if he can go over to have a closer look at it, he gets in his car, he drives, and as he drives, a million memories which he has all meld and combine to make a medley of the things which he remembers most about car journeys, turns, roundabouts, those road signs and their distinctive colours. None of the place names are visible, not that he's looking, he knows where he's going. He knows always, he knows the road despite never having been down it before, he knows the city and everyone there. All he has to do to see them is go there. But he can't. He wakes up, and slams on his alarm. Seconds after he's gotten out of bed, his dreams have faded, the city-engulfing tsunami has failed to put even the slightest sear on his brain. But unfortunately, what he had for breakfast this morning and what he thought during his journey to work will be more ready for recall when he gets to the office today. Today, his friend answers his calls, and they get to meet

up over lunch, and they recount some stories, something along the lines of repeatedly stealing traffic cones from around construction sites and stockpiling all of them in another, separate construction site. After a while, one of the construction companies attempted to sue the other one, they heard, but then they just took all the cones back and placed them in a big pile in the middle of town. Neither of them know exactly what happened, but both have already subscribed to the popular theory that they were fought over. Oscar suspects that they were just taken away by the council.

They begin another story, this time, something about the place near them which used to give them ridiculous student discount cards. Filled baguettes with the freshest of ingredients for a fifth of the inflation-adjusted price of what they are now. He looks down at his sandwich which he's bought from a chain coffee shop, worrying that forking over fivers for thin tuna between paltry slices of white bread isn't going to get him or his finances anywhere. He's most of the way through describing what he had to eat, and what his favourite combinations were, when his friend gets a call. He gets up, and begins walking, and gestures to Oscar to walk with him. He's still got more than an hour until he's needed back, so it's worth taking a little walk through the air. It's sunny, and quite warm if you're not moving, sitting in a white stone plaza next to a doughnut stand (or Go-Nuts as they are here so tactfully branded) you get to feel the warmth of the sun without the wind cutting through you, the engineers have taken into account the predominant wind flow and have placed large windbreaks down in the form of sweeping blocks of public art to stop patrons from getting cold in the otherwise harsh wind. They get up, and walk out of this climate-controlled zone, and the wind picks up again. Eventually, after a long phone call, they're back at his building, and he says that he needs to go inside. He speaks to him for a moment, but only to say goodbye, and sorry for being so busy. You walk back on the wind, almost leaning backward to propel yourself between buildings, each step infused with a slight uncontrollable power, building up momentum in the legs until they are swinging at an ungainly rate, far beyond his comfortable walking speed, like they

were made for someone else. Were they made for someone else? Possibly, maybe someone more top-heavy than he was. Or someone who had longer arms to match. Every shake of the hand, every swing of an arm in a company game of cricket in the summer, all seemed to be coming from somewhere else. Of course, everyone else saw it as just part of who he was, slightly clumsy, slightly docile. But he promised himself he wasn't, at least, not when he was thinking about it.

Windows greeted him when he got back to his desk, it needed an update. So he set it off, wanting to while away time and pretend it was one of those ones that you have to do. Some of the others looked as if they were doing the same, but they couldn't collectively acknowledge it, otherwise something would look suspicious. Working in his planner seemed like the best thing to do for now. Black leather, and some high-quality paper that his pen always wrote well on. He couldn't remember what GSM it was, as the stickers on the inside cover had come off long ago. He wanted to see if he could find another one like it, but he had had this one for so long that he thinks they had discontinued it. Maybe he should have bought five when he first got them, that way, he'd have a consistent notebook his whole life. But was that really the way he wanted to live? To be unchallenged by change? To spend his life planning for the future so often that he forgot the-

"Hello, Oscar." said his supervisor. "Hard at work, are we?"

"Yes. I'm just finishing off the-"

"Don't worry about that, just have a bit of a relax right now. Computer system's down for now. I figure that we might be able to have a meeting about who's contributing what to the office food fund."

"Sure." said Oscar, who was thoroughly satisfied with the current food arrangement. He didn't bring in any money, nor did he take any out. Some other people bartered for things like samosas or muffins, but he wasn't interested in that. He was, however, interested in watching it all unfold. Who would win what, every day. He imagined what it would be like coming into work every day and not knowing

what you were going to get for lunch. Midway through the previous thought, he interrupted himself and thought about the sandwich he held earlier. No good. The samosas seemed like the better option, even if you specifically weren't told what was in them - although their distributor would happily give out half-remembered allergen information. Maybe he could fake being allergic to a load of different things in order to find out what they were, and act as an informant for the others. Maybe he could even be paid in samosas. He now found himself in the boardroom, watching the office slowly fall apart over less than twenty pounds' worth of homemade food. Of course, the contributors all felt like they were the ones putting the most food on the table, but didn't really resent each other for it. Most of them would probably still do it even if they knew that no one else was going to reciprocate. Somehow, this office had a high density of amateur chefs. Most of them were in the same age bracket and had a similar amount of disposable income, so this was somewhat expected.

After the computers collectively updated, they went back to work for a few lazy, broken-up hours, clicking the occasional spreadsheet sort function and making the occasional scatter chart, before heading to the train, going back home. He sees the city from afar, up on his slight hill, but is occasionally blocked by the sides of the valley that the train carves out through the land, and the arched bridges that he thinks might be redeveloped into housing or shops at some point. Like those places somewhere south of him, he remembers going to a restaurant with a girlfriend of his, and it was under a rail bridge, but they never heard the trains going over. Maybe it might be worth going to live there, might be quite cheap, might be very cheap in fact. I suppose he might have to deal with being nicknamed a 'troll', since he would, in fact, live under a bridge. Plus, there would only be two places for windows, and the views would be very bad. But it wouldn't matter because of the arched ceilings - ah, but then that brings into question how he would find cupboards that would fit snugly against the walls, and how he might get more floorspace out of the place. The train pulls out of the station, he is on the platform, unconsciously, and then he is home, without thinking. The lifts carry him up a few floors,

even though he said he needed the exercise. He sits and takes his planner out, flipping past pages of extremely dense handwriting, getting denser and more frenzied towards the end of the book. He has less than a dozen pages to fill at this point. The words are becoming smaller, two lines fill one space, sometimes three, changing his handwriting to make sure that he doesn't run out. What he's trying to find is his meeting with his friend, which he says he is going to organise for tomorrow, yet again. Hopefully, this time, he'll actually have a lunch break, and they might actually be able to spend some time together.

He has a thought. Somewhere in one of the neatly contoured cupboards in his room, there is a box with all of the stuff he thought to keep from when he was younger. Some notebooks with memorable pieces of work, a planner or two. Perhaps he could have a quick go on one of the ones he used to have, just to see if anything else was worth writing on. After a few seconds of digging, he spots another notebook, just like his current one, and the first few pages or so are filled with notes and drawings about what he wants to be, project ideas, part of a comic he had drawn. Flipping through the pages, there were characters that he remembers, some of which he shared with his friends. These characters were not quite imaginary friends, but real enough to have shared values of what they were, each new piece of media they watched or listened to found its way into their DNA, influencing the things they made, even retroactively. He remembers all of his characters going through an angsty, self-critical phase at about the time when he did himself. His friend that he is going to meet tomorrow knows nothing of this, Oscar always thought that this friend was always somehow above that, that he would try and distance himself from him if he knew that he had all these childish ideas. Of course, when they got to university, almost all of those ideas had faded away on their own. Reading through this notebook was a veritable time capsule of wonder, he thought and thought about his old ideas and how stupid a lot of them were. Talking dogs, animation, petty squabbles about designs. He always wondered how hard it would be to animate, so he tried to do so on the family computer.

After three weeks of mouse strain, he gave up, having produced five seconds of work. Of course, the quality of the work was sufficiently terrible as to be attributed to a 'first go', but since there was no further work to compare it to, he was unsure of whether or not any talent would have developed, had he just picked up the mouse again. Perhaps he would be able to buy himself a stylus and return it if it wasn't good enough. No, if *he* wasn't good enough. It would probably work fine. But maybe it would work just well enough to let him draw, but have the occasional obvious flaw which would prevent him from animating to his fullest potential. Not that he had the time to do any of that, not with all of the people-watching, TV-watching and scroll-watching he had to do. He occasionally found himself wanting to be able to switch out of situations and tune in to something else, to be able to disconnect once in a while and blame an internet problem for missing out on some office politics. As he watches the streaming service he is using buffer, the hollow blue three-quarter UI-perfected smooth-quadratic-spinning circle forces him to tune out, just for a second, to look out his window again and notice the city, much like it stood in his dream, though smaller and less clear, and without the looming wave. The circle is spinning less and less frequently, perhaps a sign of sure success and getting back on track to finish this episode before he goes to sleep, perhaps it spins less and less because his internet is getting slower and slower. Perhaps this would be a good time to go and brush his teeth. He lays down on the sofa for a few seconds, preparing him for the journey, and then gets up, briskly walking over to his bathroom and brushing his teeth. Every so often, he steps out into the hallway to see whether the circle has stopped spinning. It has, he walks out to the TV to stop the show from automatically resuming, but in leaning over to pick up the remote, some foamy spit drips out the corner of his mouth and onto the grey carpet. He drops the remote and covers his mouth to avoid any further mess and returns to the bathroom, puts his toothbrush down, making sure it doesn't slide off of his impractically contoured sink, and then returns to the carpet with a towel that has been wet at the corner. After some frantic cleaning, he turns off the TV and gets into bed.

He's not that tired, most of the time when he falls asleep is because he's passed out in front of the TV, mid-way into an episode, clinging onto consciousness, watching a pinhole version of Seinfeld projected on the back of his retinas through his barely-opened eyes. He sees through his eyelashes like looking through a dense forest at a blinding wall of light in the distance. This time, his eyes want to prise themselves open and stare at the blank, light-studded ceiling, perhaps wanting to imagine those ghostly, soothing shapes once more, seen only on the brink of sleep. How he managed to remember so much of the shows he loved despite hearing many 'classic' episodes while in the throes of R.E.M sleep was a testament to how far the consumption of content had evolved from the printing press. Now, as the TV failed to wake with the press of a button on the suspiciously flimsy plastic controller, he slept with it.

Things About I

He was back in the car, possibly a different car to last time, he didn't consider it. There was little to consider, with the trees and signposts rushing pasts, grey poles with green faces forming neat hedgerows, duplicated in static rows like managed forest, ready to be chopped down and harvested whenever things are getting a little too overgrown. Of course, not that it came that irregularly, the council usually plans these things years in advance. Great swathes of undulating countryside laid bare as the unchecked stubble of morning, to sit amongst their bare-knuckle brethren who line the countless suburb roads. Can't have branches falling on pedestrians or pesky crows crapping on parked cars. But he doesn't notice this. Right now, he might as well be a passenger, he doesn't realise that none of these things make sense, veering between all haphazardly placed lampposts with roots that bulge out of the earth. It is his mind taking what it feels to be most appropriate for the scenario and... he's in a sort of building now. The car ride is over, perhaps when he wakes up this will be remembered as a vignette, something to remember - minus the liminal time of getting out of the car and into the building. He walks up to the front desk, and then to a gate, and then to an elevator, which is not unlike his own. In fact, he has closely modelled it on his own, right down to the angry co-worker in the corner slapping samosas out of picking hands, stretching and twisting themselves around the intricate compartments of the office fridge. He also sees a large man off to the side, but every time he moves his vision, he moves with it, always staying in the periphery, never getting in the way of any work. A meeting is called, and then forgot, and he's now outside. On the roof of the building, he has only been here once but the memory sticks in his mind, seeing some of the more adventurous smokers out there, instead of the plastic shelter down below. He is reminded of the time he first saw people smoking, standing near a set of drainpipes, waiting for the wind to calm down

to that some of them could reliably light up. He is back on the road again, travelling somewhere else. Somewhere equally pass-out-able, somewhere that could easily be blinked through and he would be none the wiser. Acres of field stretched out in front of him, enclosed, or perhaps shielded from the wide road which he drives on. It's like a runway that matches the contour of the land, jumping up and down unrealistically, his car smoothing out the ribbon-road, folding out the creases so that it's level, maintaining a constant view of the world as everything around him distorts to fit. The road is free of other cars, of obstacles, of any challenge. He doesn't know how fast he is going. The dials spin and spasm about, his brain attempting to invent figures, to simulate RPM - all for more perpetually peripheral visual noise to ignore. But the fact that his brain is putting hard-earned energy into rendering such sights might be proof that, perhaps subconsciously, he thinks that these things are deeply important. His actual car is unused, it remains in the grit-walled, flat-roofed garages below, it's gathering small amounts of ceiling paint on its bonnet, the chips fall off in disorderly flakes, painting the faded black front like some sort of horrid inverse Dalmatian. This one is sleek and black, not the sort of matte black his current one is, it looks like it's been driven through a car wash that uses ink as soap, and the way the front of the car (or what he can see of it) keeps shifting in his vision proves this point, it's like ink that ripples on the surface, tiny waves that lap in the wind, occasionally superimposed onto larger ones and forming white crests, no matter how small. More waves, more reminders that the world around him is not as it seems. The ink from the car, which his brain now assumes would behave like ink would in this situation, begins to cover the windscreen, and in a panic, he presses the wiper button, which just makes everything worse, the ink smearing over the screen, thin curves of light make their way through, but nothing can be seen. The curves open up into vague mouths, and then to something else he can recall only in his head, if you asked him right now, he'd probably stumble over his words trying to find a description. The wiper blades are still moving, shifting the lines up and down, but gradually revealing the road that lies behind. It's no longer road, he's out of his

car and walking into another building, one that looks very out of place. An orange cube with windows that move around like a drop of oil sandwiched between two plates. A door opens and he walks inside. It's a lot smaller on the inside, there's only a reasonable amount of space, and as he looks around, he gets a glimpse of the outside, too, an orange desert cliff edge looking over more orange desert. In the distance, he thinks he can see the smouldering remains of a house, and further still, an indiscernible moving speck.

Someone gets up to greet him. He doesn't know who they are, not because of a lack of form or another dream-related issue, it's just that he has literally never seen a face like this before. But, still, it's not entirely alien.

"Hi, I'm Daniel."

"Daniel?"

"Daniel. You know, Daniel Redhill."

"...what?"

"I don't have another name."

"Do people call you anything else? That name isn't getting anywhere."

"I suppose they don't. I don't get called anything by anyone because I don't see an awful lot of people."

"So, what do you do?"

"I used to be a racing car driver." said Daniel. "Now I tend to the orange cube house. It's pretty nice, you get views of all of the rest of the place, and access to those underground caves we have, but things could be better."

"A racing driver? What series?"

"You never gave it a name."

"What do you mean I didn't give it a name?"

"Oh, I just think you enjoyed making it so much you never gave it a name."

"What?"

"The racing series. You just never named it."

"No, what series?"

Daniel takes a step back.

“You’re Oscar, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, you made the series I raced in. Not even that long ago.”

“How long ago, then?”

“Oh, you don’t even remember when it was?” said Daniel. “Oh, this is just great. I get a seat at one of the best teams after years of slaving away and this is how I am remembered. Just great.”

Oscar looks concerned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m sorry, I just have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t remember a single thing? Not even my number? Number seventeen?”

Oscar reacts. Something rings a bell. “Seventeen?”

“Yes.”

“I... I remember something about that now. But you’re just called... seventeen, right? I never thought you were given names.”

“Oh, right, you go to the effort of making them up and writing them down, but you don’t even remember them. Honestly, some of the time I wonder why any of us bother. We’ve all retired now, right, it’s been over thirty years since I joined the sport. Why not just remain in obscurity. I literally asked to see you a dozen times over the last decade.” said Daniel, getting increasingly annoyed, walking over to a small counter. “I’m sorry for not remembering your name. I didn’t think you had names, that’s all. The numbers were easier to remember, and besides, I was just a kid-”

“Just a kid? Are you serious? Why would you try and dethrone- no, umm... defame our creator like that?”

“He’s me, you know. I’m him, but older.”

“Yeah, but you’re definitely not the same. Oscar would have remembered my name.”

“I’m... I’m Oscar! I remembered who you were after a while, doesn’t that say anything?”

“No. I don’t think it does.”

The alarm goes off. Another morning with the fog hanging low, but higher and clearer than the other day. It’s almost like rain is going to

fall, but there are none of the tell-tale droplets hanging from the top of his poorly-insulated kitchen windows. No condensation yet, the lingering heat of summer is still faintly hanging on. Considering opening the small vents to stop the flat from getting musty when he leaves, he forgets about what he was just doing and leaves the milk on the countertop, ready to spoil. A quick glance round to look for keys he has in his small trouser pocket lets him fix this mistake, maybe he will not be so lucky in the future. Perhaps, he thinks, checking everything twice is paying off.

The commute is on the slow side of the bell curve, but not by much. 53 minutes is acceptable, not fantastic, but not awful either. Time for a coffee, but he has to think about the queue a little bit more. He checks his watch every so often, enriched by the prospect of being able to shave off ten seconds from his commute by taking a shortcut over a small patch of grass in front of his building. There is a small sign at the corner of this patch which has since been removed, leaving a small hole. All of his co-workers are in, and he realises that in his slight rush to leave this morning, he has forgotten to pick up lunch. "Oh well", he thinks, "I guess it's another trip down the elevators for that."

The day passes smoothly and without disturbance. Over the course of several hours, he begins to feel his mood worsen. At first, he chalks it up to the heating which feels like it has been turned up to uncomfortable levels - a theory which is validated when someone sitting a few rows over from his takes off their jumper with a long stretch, as if they were waiting for someone to pull it off them for them. He looks back at his computer, and decides to loosen his tie little, and undo his top button. Reminds him of his school days, trying to evade the heat with small things like that. Now, he has a desk fan which he could use at any time.

Lunch time approaches, and before his allocated slot is within an hour of him, he reverts to his old schoolboy ways and drops out of work to grab a bite to eat. Perhaps, he thinks, pulling out his phone, his friend will be available today. He calls him, and a split second after

the voicemail kicks in, he is interrupted by a man who sounds quite out of breath.

“Hey, Oscar, really nice for you to call. I’ll be in the plaza in five minutes. Just sorting some stuff out. Sorry for dropping out the other day.”

“Oh, no worries, don’t-”

“Ok, gotta go now, got some stuff to sort out.”

Oscar waits alone for over half an hour before going back inside. The weather turns, just a little, and he realises that in his obedience to the man over the phone, he has neglected to get lunch. Not wanting to take a hike all the way out of the front of the building again, he opts for the devious option of the communal fridge, he sneaks through the door which has been left ajar. Not letting it close heavily behind him, he looks around for any potential hidden cameras. In the middle of liberating a tray of samosas from their icy drawer, somebody else walks in.

“Hi.” she says, not noticing the awkward angle at which Oscar is holding the tray to try and disguise it from her view.

“Hi.” he says back, attempting to put it back. The tray scrapes against the door, and he thinks it is best to just give up and take the things out. After all, what are the chances that-

“I made those samosas.” she says. “What did you make?”

“Nothing.” says Oscar.

“You know the company rules about this sort of thing.”

“Yes.”

“So you know that you can’t take something out unless you donate something to match.”

“Yes.” says Oscar, building up the courage to defend himself.

“Barely anyone has these things, though. Don’t know why I make them, half of them go to the pigeons in my local park. Well-fed bastards, you know what.” she says. “They can’t tell the difference between frozen mouldy bread and these lovingly crafted things.” she continues, picking up a handful of samosa. “They can’t tell anything apart. You might be able to.”

“So, can I have them?” says Oscar, gently laughing.

“Yes. Good, go on. I don’t mind.”

Oscar returns to his desk with a nod, and a shared smile. They don’t taste particularly nice, but he’s glad that he’s not getting one of those tuna and cucumber sandwiches again, or worse, something he might have made. Later on in the day, he runs into the woman on the way out, and offers to repay the favour by taking her out for dinner. In return, he gets a particularly unsure ‘sure’ if he’s ever seen one, but a ‘yes’ nonetheless. He doesn’t have any method of contacting her, though, so as they part ways out of the revolving door, that’s it. The commute home is standard, but not a second is spent thinking about the potential ‘date’ he has off of the back of today. It’s focused on thinking about the resolution of the show he’s been following for a few years now. A man is sick on the train again.

Wave On Oncoming Nothing

He's somewhere else this time, in a plane above the wave - could you really call it a wave? From up here, everything looks fine, blue, a thin white strip, and then the grey of the city roads weaving between tall buildings, their parallax not mattering, orthographically flattened against the land by his immense height. Maybe he's on a tall pair of still, or a hot air balloon. He glances up at the maroon fabric and then looks down again, and he's outside the orange cube again. He walks inside, expecting to see Daniel again.

"Ah, hello, Daniel!"

"Oscar! You remembered my name!"

"Well yes, it's only been a day since I saw you."

"It's been more than a day," says Daniel. "What, are you joking? It's been a decade since my racing series closed."

"I never did give it a name, did I?"

"No. I guess you didn't. I'm long past that now. But there is something you can do for me to help me... no, to help us all right now."

"What's that?"

"Stop whatever this is."

"What?"

"The wave that's looming over this place. Has been for quite some time, I suppose you could say we've learnt to live with it. But, since you're the... 'boss' around here, it might be good if I could get you to go and have a look at that."

"How would... do I have to speak to anyone? Can I just will it away?"

"What, I don't know what you have to do. I'll drive you there. Still have my old car, the ol' reliable number 17."

"Isn't that a single-seater though?"

It does not matter how many seats this car has, all that Oscar knows is that he's weaving through impossibly tight rows of traffic, not warping to accommodate the gaps, he's nearly clipping through

the walls of van and lorry that line the blurry periphery of his sight once more, never slowing down for corners. The vehicle seems to flatten out the corners, its grip changing the world to fit around it. Moving in and out of rows of traffic, he thinks about taking his eyes off the transfixing white lines which rattle past him like morse code, but gets nowhere close to turning his head. He doesn't know where to turn to, this car is only supposed to have one seat. A underground car park is now here, the ceiling hanging low with assorted coloured pipes like one of the more trendy cafes in his area, the ventilation laid bare for all to not marvel at. It is like he is travelling down the side of a thin canyon adorned with spikes and features all created by humans. A parking space, a specific one amongst this swathe of empty corridors. A number is visible on the post, he wonders if he should remember where they are. They are somewhere else now, disconnected from the ever-shortening ceiling of the concrete sandwich car park.

They walk into another room, a different one from the previous "somewhere else". A hall, a grand one, with a water feature indoors, a stream of water trickles out of a hole meant for considerably more. He is placed down in front of some people, he is sitting at work at a board meeting. Someone standing at the edge of the room waves at him, but he is maintaining his composure.

"Come, come Oscar. Sit down." A comically overdrawn voice echoes around the hall, reverberating more than the curtain-stuffed windows and carpeted floor should physically allow. He sits down.

"Why have we brought you here?" the voice asks, clearly not expecting a response as it jumps into the answer - "Because we have a great problem on our hands, and only you..."

The voice pauses and lets the echo die down. Everyone else stops shuffling about and quietly chatting to one another.

"Only you can help us."

Oscar gets up. He tries to say something, but the words just aren't there. He sees over the table's edge now, a wisened old figure that looks somewhat like his father. He is wearing a white wig with curly parts on the edge, like a bad sketch of a judge.

“Do you know what you have to undertake now?”

Oscar shakes his head.

“Do you know what this place is?”

He shakes his head again, and then begins to vaguely nod when he sees Daniel waving at him from the benches beside him. The room is taller than it was a few moments ago.

“Children, we sit around here and look upon as this man is to be looked upon.” says the judge, prompting Daniel to stop looking around. He looks different now, like the product of two or three people he couldn’t quite remember. The judge whacks his gavel onto the table, and it produces an ear-shattering thud. The gavel is comically oversized, with a thick brass strip around the head. As Daniel is observing the finer details of the sledgehammer, he looks up and sees the rows of seemingly disembodied heads lurching out from their seats to look at him. All of them are people who he hasn’t seen before. Mixed in there are a few colourful characters, some metaphorically, some literally, with scars, extraterrestrial skin colours, and liberal use of varying quantities of hats and headgear.

“Do you think that there’s anything for you to say?” says what could have been the judge.

Oscar gets to look around him one last time before being transported out of the room, his skeletal chair digs into his back as it accelerates out of the front door, onto a row of washed-over buildings in the sunset. The buildings look like they have been blown back, or perhaps are leaning away in terror of the wave, which to him, right now, looks like just a small one, nothing that couldn’t be batted away with proper coastal engineering. He thought of those concrete jack-like things which he had seen when he was younger. Dredging machines churning rocks through and spitting them out again, somewhere else. Somewhere hopefully far away. Perhaps digging out the shore was the reason why waves could get this big. But why were they digging away at the shore, eating away at the ever increasingly fortified walls of the city. But then again, every part of this

the plot is basically a critical re-appraisal of Dreamscape, blended together with a lot of other characters. a man, who is now in his thirties, falls asleep after not having dreams for the longest time, and sees the characters he saw when he was a child. in doing so, it's a metaphor for the discrepancy between how he sees the world now and how he saw it back then. he's slightly taken aback by the barely-masked pop culture references, but eventually realises that he sort of made them their own. he buys into his own personal myths, choosing to forgo his time working to sleep and dream more often, almost to the point of obsession. his real life world becomes worse and he focuses more on the dream world until he's nearly dead from not eating, or doing anything except sleeping. he then nearly dies, and gets put in a coma and he's stuck there, and that world begins to fall as well, and he wants to get out - it's nearly the plot from dreamscape. he wakes up a few months later, and he's alive. he wakes up, and falls back asleep again, and has no dream. he is saddened but relieved.

the dream time is the same as regular time, so when he starts, he's only there at night, and things are surreal and blurred, but after a while, things get more "real". also, when he starts sleeping during the day, he sees the dream characters during the day, as well.

the 'moral' if there is one is that super-reality is just as liable to the same issues that reality has. if you think you're living, then is it even a bad thing if you spend all of your time in the dream world.

this is not going to be a massively long story: part 1

goes to work, his job is pretty good

his dreams come back, and they tempt him with stories of what could have been. gold medal rower. judge. billionaire.

his work gets worse as his dreams become more engaging

he comes in late to work, and gets worried about his dreams collapsing.

but his figurative dreams start collapsing, and he becomes embroiled in a fight to such a degree that he wakes up in the middle of the day after waking up and falling back asleep again and again.

he eventually goes to work and then tries to not sleep to avoid his problems in the dream world

he eventually falls asleep and everything is utterly fucked, and so he tries to stay awake again and refuses to seek help

the ending is that he tries to kill himself and ends up in a coma, and the dream burns around him, eventually fading to nothing. he wakes up and he's lost everything. that night, he falls asleep and

v2:

goes to work, his job is pretty good

his dreams come back, and they tempt him with stories of what could have been. gold medal rower. judge. cryptocurrency billionaire. chef.

his work gets worse as his dreams become more engaging

he comes in late to work, and gets worried about his dreams collapsing.

but his figurative dreams start collapsing, and he becomes embroiled in a fight to such a degree that he wakes up in the middle of the day after waking up and falling back asleep again and again.

he eventually goes to work and then tries to not sleep to avoid his problems in the dream world

he admits that he doesn't care about the dream people at the desert plateau place, just before everything goes.

he wakes up, the world is okay, and his life is back to normal, his boss is nice to him and says 'if you need me, i'll be here.'

after a good day, he goes back to sleep with the intent of making it up to the dream people.

he has no dream.

he tries again the next night, no dream.

he sits at his computer and screams to end the book.

chapter summaries:

3: his dreams starts to reveal things about him, he visits his friend and the friend goes away again, but not for a work related thing.

4: his dreams say that they're being destroyed, not by a wave, not by a tornado, but just by changing. he is in the middle of speaking to a beloved, grit-ified character of his when it just disappears. he gets up a little late and makes it into work a few minutes late. he doesn't have lunch to make up for it, and gets hungry. the later day at work is spent catching up with a colleague who catches him eating food.

5: his dreams are more and more interesting and he learns about his friend and what his dreams think of his friend, but the dream begins collapsing, he's worried. the other person moves office. his friend doesn't want to meet up.

6: his dreams are so engaging he sleeps through his alarm, which is described in the dream, and he wakes up so late that he gets in to work at lunch, running past his friend who is having lunch outside. his supervisor worries about him. he tries not to sleep again. he pulls an all-nighter. he gets up and nearly passes out on the train. he orders a coffee and looks visibly shaken at work. eventually, on the train back home, he falls asleep.

7: the dream is tumultuous, but he has to admit that he doesn't care about them enough to not get reprimanded for coming in late again, but the dream says 'we know how to help you'. when he wakes up at the end of the line, he has to walk back, since the trains stop working. it's 15 miles, but he does it, stopping at a chicken shop at night on the way there and talking to a delivery driver about dreams as they wait. he gets home safe. he sleeps.

8: dream is almost over. he gets up, and life is alright. no dream, though. his day is normal, he finds the colleague and speaks to them, and invites them out for lunch. they say yes, and brings food for them to share, and then they go out again in the evening and back to his flat. *uses old notebook as some sort of diary to remember things his partner says. continues through ch. 9*

9: dream is very almost over, very vague like the first one. the day is spent wondrously, though. he's having a good time.

10: he has a dream where the characters from his childhood and figures of who he could have been beat him up, his new partner leaves because of the noise, and he wakes up very, very late in the day. doesn't come into work, his boss says that this is the final straw, and he is fired. he meets his partner for dinner and lies about the firing.

11: he stays awake in bed, trying not to disturb his partner. wakes up the next morning trying to stay awake. fakes going to work.

12: tries to stay awake for two days, and he's becoming more and more unstable trying to avoid his dreams. fakes going to work and hides in the cupboard with his notebooks to pass the time.

13: three days straight. partner suspects something is up. guy thinks that a random stranger is one of the "figures who he could have been" and almost shouts at him. immediate dump.

14: falls asleep sad, his dream is abstract maliciousness. self-hating thoughts. he wakes up early and is still very, very tired. buys energy drinks. attempts to stave off the sleep. he gets angrier and angrier, and destroys his old notebook, and cries at the ideas. eventually he collapses in his own apartment, and the dream is destroyed. he has no dream, he wants to see his characters, but how *he* wants to see them.

3 Things About I

4 Wave On Oncoming Nothing

5 Replacing The More Real World

6 So Engaging You Sleep Through It

7 The Outer Perimeter, The Lonely Chicken Shop

8 Things Can Only Get Better Walking This Path

9 A Great Time Is To Be Had By All

10 Final Straw Breaking The Camel's Back Pack And His Things

11 Morning Routine Is Broken By The Non-Existence Of Morning Time

12 A Quite Nice Clear Clean Empty Place You Can Sit In Until...

13 They Invade Real Life, They Invade All Of The Plazas In The World

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The Outer Perimeter,
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**They Invade Real Life, They Invade
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Insatisfaction**