

Mr. Brightman,

24/11/2416

I'm sorry for writing to you out of the blue. I wasn't really surprised to see that you're still at St. John's. How's the place holding up? You still in Libertaria? Don't feel obliged to reply to these questions, I'm just making pleasantries.

Look, you asked me about seven years ago to explain what happened to my sister, Hannah, and I told you, if I remember correctly, that it was none of your bloody business. I was wrong; it was your business; I was 15.

What follows is a double-whammy. It's a short story, to make up for all the essays and creative writing assignments I didn't hand in. Wham. But it isn't fictional, it's about Hannah. I haven't even bothered changing the names. Wham.

And I'm not saying that what happened to her was your fault.

(Some day I'm sure one of our Great Nations will set up a whole department called something like The Blame Office, whose only remit is to pick apart our every act and omission, to disentangle the many causal pathways of harm and neglect, to analyse our individual culpability, and to serve us up a humiliating verdict printed on a piece of paper that looks just like a restaurant bill.)

- Benard

Émigré

It is the year 2416. Politics has been solved. Nobody lives under a government they haven't consented to, everybody is free to move across the surface of the globe, and war has long been out of fashion. The closest thing to World Government we have is a small organisation called Admin. They don't do anything totalitarian, they just do the admin. And they do it pretty well.

Human beings still have human problems. We still get lonely, depressed, sick, dead. A million or so people die every year simply because they can't find enough food to eat. But nobody can blame politics anymore. That'd be like you blaming a calculator for getting your figures wrong, or like blaming *mathematics* itself. You might hate politics, or find it very yawnsome – as most folk do – but it can no longer be blamed. It is human beings that are blamed now, for human beings' problems.

I have always found politics yawnsome, I have often hated it, and trust me I have tried harder than anyone else to blame it.

Let me tell you about my sister, Hannah. In another century, Hannah would've been a revolutionary. But the rise of civilization has set the benchmark so high. What revolutions are there left? It's like in our science and mathematics, where even the geniuses of our age can't find any new formulae or theorems, because they've all gone. There is just a barrel to be scraped.

We are grateful, of course, for the rise of civilization. And it is still possible, I am told, to stand on the shoulders of our giants, to peek that little further, to do something

significant. But the giants are now very tall, taller than ever, and it makes the rest of us feel oh so short.

Hannah had just turned 18. She was 5'8" but still in most respects very short. Picture a small child in a big crowd, jumping up and down, caring for the first time about what all the fuss was about, yanking on her parents' sleeve as if to say 'I wanna see! I am ready now!' You are picturing Hannah.

Hannah was sitting at the big glass kitchen table, chewing on the flesh around her fingernails. She did this when she was anxious; I still do it, all the time. Mum was to her left and Dad was to her right. It's funny, I always remember it being silent, but it can't have been, because I, aged 15, was sitting there, playing some loud computer game – or at least pretending to – while the three of them just hung there. They all had empty plates in front of them, remnants of a wordless meal. I could hear the *click* of Hannah's teeth picking away at her flesh.

Her fingernail implants were blue, as they had been since her birth.

She had her laptop in front of her, was logged into Admin, was only a few clicks away.

My dad was the worst. Like Hannah, he was a serious person. Both of them only really seemed to tell jokes and chat nonsense when they thought it was expected of them. They were both natural frowners. Concerned. When my dad was at his most serious, he did not speak. Now, mum spoke for him.

"You know we just want the best for you? Hmm?" That *hmmm* was set precisely to the resonant frequency of me and Hannah. She knew it tore us up.

They knew that this was Hannah's choice. 18 was Maturity, in our country.

"We'll still love you-" my mum said, only to qualify this with, "-but this is a mistake."

Now, my dad liked to argue. He said he didn't like to *argue*, as in row and scream, but I don't think he ever realised how much the line got blurred. I have inherited my mum's talent for telepathically hearing his shouting through his shiny bald skull, and this is what he was thinking: we worked all our lives to give you the opportunities you've had. If it wasn't for Libertaria, we wouldn't have this flat, you wouldn't be at St. John's, *you wouldn't even have the intelligence to be able to make this decision.*

Most of this was true. We were a blue fingernail family, in a blue fingernail neighbourhood. This meant that we were all citizens of Libertaria.

One of the reasons why people can't blame politics is because if you want to grumble about your government, you can just change it. Technically you can even start up your own government. Most plausible government variants are already available. For a long time now, people have had the choice to be a citizen of whichever nation they want. Nations are all mixed up now, tossed together like the ingredients in a salad. Libertaria is just one of these nations, tossed up with a handful of others. After they have reached Maturity, everybody is free to choose their nation. That's not to say they do.

Take my parents. My parents were proud Libertarians. The illogicality of their daughter choosing to be anything other than a Libertarian made them ill. It really did.

"Do you really think," mum asked, "you'll ever be more free than you are now?" She had a point. No country had fewer rules or lower taxes than Libertaria. My parents

were practical people and sensible thinkers. They reasoned like this: politics is solved, politics is dull, so let politics be. Whatever you want to *do*, you can do in Libertaria.

“Don’t you remember Jasper Grange, from Number 24?” Common wisdom was full of cautionary tales, like Jasper Grange. The short of it: Jasper Grange turned his back on Libertaria, and nobody saw Jasper Grange anymore. Foolish man.

And then, with a big frown on her face, Hannah did it. She clicked the mouse and we all jumped at the sound of a big electronic *ping*. Within moments her fingernails turned dark green. She was now a citizen of Solidaria. She had emigrated. It’s strange to think that in the olden days, in the time of borders, they did this so romantically. Like in the films. Love struck adolescents eloping from their parents houses; persecuted families fleeing their oppressors in the dead of night; the forsaken and the alone stealing themselves away in the cargo hold of a ship sailing across the oceans. But now, well, if you can change your nationality without getting up from the dining room table, why the hell not?

“It’s for some *boy*, isn’t it?” mum asked. Hannah wasn’t going to tell. But yeah it was. I guess it was.

And then my dad spoke, finally. It must’ve been so hard for him. They weren’t even compatriots anymore. He said:

“Happy birthday, angel.”

We lived in a very decent apartment block in Glinfield District. Everything was made of glass. -

[Mr. Brightman, I have to confess that I used to lie to you almost ritualistically. I remember telling you I didn’t understand the novels we covered in class, which was a lie. And I told you I couldn’t do the homework because I had problems at home, which was a lie. My parents had almost zero marital problems, they took pains to instil in me only the finest work ethic, and our apartment was an idyllic work environment. I honestly do not know why I lied so much. My childhood was unproblematic; the problem must’ve been the child.]

- And if you wanted quiet, you had quiet. The block was mainly Libertarian, with a few Faithists and Neo-Athenians. No Solidarians. It was the evening and as me and Hannah exited the apartment building we passed the Osinaike family, who lived one floor under us. Simi Osinaike was a doctor, Peter Osinaike was a lawyer, both proud Libertarians, providing well for little Bella. Simi Osinaike must’ve glanced down to see Hannah’s dark green fingernails, and quickly pulled her gaze away, realising what it meant. It was in our nature to be wary of Solids. Everybody knew the crime statistics, the correlations – ‘just’ correlations were enough to make you ‘just’ check your door was locked one more time.

It’s difficult to say if Hannah knew what she was getting herself into. She knew that in Solidaria she would have to pay higher taxes, that she’d have to do her community hours, her political hours, her jury hours, her elderly hours, and so on. And she knew that going to the doctor’s would no longer be a trip to see avuncular Dr. Thompson, but instead going to The Medical Unit, waiting an hour or two, surrounded by the sick.

You can't really blame Simi Osinaike for how she looked at Hannah. Hannah had wilfully distanced herself from this place, and become an inhabitant of the land of sponges and dreamers. She was breathing the air of a neighbourhood that she would soon no longer afford. Every breath meant ingratitude and disrespect.

Ever since I was young, this is how I've looked at Solids. Still do, probably.

We met Sîan [*Sîan Gruber? Hannah's year?*] just outside the park. Sîan was the reason we'd been allowed out for the night, on account of her being a citizen of the Faith Republic (Jewish State). Faithists are *very moral*, and very trustworthy, and so we were going to have a safe, innocent birthday sleepover at hers, according to our parents.

Sîan said it was OK for her to lie to her parents, because she was only Jewish, and Jews don't have hell. And she was thinking of becoming a Buddhist anyhow (as if *that* was ever going to happen!).

I'd been in love with Sîan since my balls had dropped [*sorry, sir*]. Probably before, come to think of it – when the love had been all the purer. Even though I was now 15, she still acted around me as if I was 10 – the little weird brother, whose hair she could ruffle up. Every now and again I'd catch her discussing something of a grown-up nature with Hannah (boys, parents, the prices of drinks) but as soon as she saw me she'd revert to being a 13-year-old angel, full of smiling and tenderness. Hannah would become more serious to compensate.

Our plan was to go to the rave at the Naked squat in the forest by the Surrey Quays Reclaimed Zone. Sîan said that you should always have your birthday party at someone else's house, preferably somewhere Naked. My personal plan was to keep in the proximity of Sîan, although I was also pretty interested to find out who this boy was who Hannah had emigrated for. I thought that maybe that night I'd meet him.

The architect of the night out had been Hannah. She liked to organize everything. She'd organized my 14th and 15th birthday parties. I'd been proud of her. Looking back, I remember that Hannah's happiest moments were when I was proud of her.

We had to run to catch the 182 bus. Hannah made a scene when, out of habit, she tried to pay at the point-of-use. Solids don't pay for the bus. Me and Sîan paid up just as normal. By habit we stayed towards the front of the bus, where the fingernails were mostly blue (like mine) or yellow (like Sîan's). The dark green fingernails generally stay near the back of the bus.

There are no *laws* on how the nations must look at each other but, as with the patterns on the bus, you pick these things up. I had learnt over the years, for example, that: the Libertarians respected the Faithists, the Faithists avoided the Solids, the Solids despised the Conservatives, the Conservatives avoided the smug Neo-Athenians, and the Neo-Athenians actively protested against the Libertarians. Then there were The Naked, nationless by choice, who came in all flavours, and the Anarchists. The Anarchists liked nobody, and nobody liked them back.

Hannah had transformed us into an unnatural trio. I remember thinking: how long will it take, for Hannah to gradually slide over there, to the back of the bus? Months? Years?

Hannah had once told me how her favourite teacher, Mr. Brightman, had taught a Deliberation lesson on emigration -

[Sorry about this, Sir, I didn't mean to make you cringe. I can change your name if you want.]

- and he himself had been one of the few people we knew to do so (from Conservative to Libertarian). He'd told her that if children assumed that emigration was just something that other people did, that we were back to square one. The children became the parents. I remember Hannah telling me about this when she came home once, maybe a year before her emigration. It'd really affected her; she'd said it was one of those rare moments, where you realised something was of *paramount importance* (I can hear her saying it), but you knew your concerns for it would only evaporate over time. It hurt her, this evaporation. And she kept saying: 'you know what I mean'? And if it was a stranger, I would've said, 'Yeah, totally', but this was my sister, and I remember saying: 'No, I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't care about all that stuff.' And that hurt her as well. She took things so seriously.

I was being honest. I really didn't care. I cared about my friends, and my videogames, and about what bra size Sian probably had, and whether or not Sian was plateauing with respect to her bra size. I did my Democracy on the computer, along with the rest of my homework, but I didn't *think* about it. 'Nobody changes', I'd told Hannah, 'except for the weirdos.'

Out of the bus windows, I could see the screens outside advertising the papers. As usual there was one event, seven different stories. It was something about legal agreements between a few of the nations on charitable donations to those at risk of dying from poverty. The headlines: 'Solidarians Let Their Own Suffer', 'Free to Die', 'Libertaria refuses to help these people (*insert emotive image*)' – that sort of thing. I remembered a younger Hannah, 14ish, confidently declaring, "Well they all have a *choice*". My parent, like many Libertarians, voluntarily donated to causes like this, and it was a well-known annoyance that the money had to go through the Solids, since most of the poor were Solid, or – even more awkwardly – Naked. This put a lot of donators off. "They should take responsibility for themselves," Hannah had said back then.

We passed the Bermondsey Bypass on our right. In the shadowy, cavernous arches underneath the bypass was roughly the same ramshackle collection of mattresses, cardboard boxes and lost souls that hadn't really changed for over a decade. Two homeless men were playing ping-pong on a table with no net, using lurid green discarded bathroom tiles as bats. A huge broken model of a discontinued line of point-of-use stations was in the middle of what was a dozen men's bedroom, with its plug dangling free at the back. These people were Solids, Naked, and perhaps a few Faithists trying to refind their faith.

But soon the bus had passed, and such places were – like the headlines – easy to forget.

It was a long walk from the bus-stop to the squat, on a small road through the forest. None of us had been to the Surrey Quays Relciamed Zone before, the moon was slender, and we found it hard to stick to the road. Every fifteen minutes or so a car would drive by and the streetlights would flicker on for a brief period, blinding us for a few seconds before plunging us again into darkness. Our parents would have killed us. Fortunately, the streetlights always turned on. If they don't, then this means the driver hasn't signed up to the international agreement on road use. It means they're a Naked, or worse. It means trouble.

We teased Hannah a lot about who this boy was that she'd emigrated for. She

tried to laugh it off but she looked very awkward doing this. She wouldn't say. We asked a lot of closed questions about him. We asked if he'd be at the party, and she said yes, and that was that.

At the Naked party, practically nobody was actually Naked. Few people living anywhere near us were Naked; you really had to look hard to find somebody stubborn enough to eschew government altogether. It was just a place where you could try to relax, free from any cameras, and try to break some of your own rules.

We felt damn cool entering as a blend. On account of me being 15, the vast majority of the night was in fact spent either trying to look cool, or trying to look not-15. One of my strategies was to stay as close as possible to the people drinking too much and smoking dope. "No *more*," I'd say, if they offered me anything, "no *more*!" As if I'd had a single bit.

Two hours or so in, we heard sirens. We panicked. "*Which? Which?*" everyone muttered. The music was shut off. Everyone tried to work out just how much they were individually meant to panic.

How much an individual should fear a police siren depends on three factors:

One: the colour of the police car. Every person answers to, and is protected by, their own national police. And most nations' police forces have access to the exact location of every one of their citizens (it's amazing what you can achieve with full explicit consent).

Two: what you have done (including trespassing).

Three: where you are and whether the police need a warrant. Nobody needed a warrant for a Naked squat.

I had done nothing illegal in my nation, Libertaria (despite what I'd claimed throughout the night).

Hannah had drunk a small amount, well within the legal limits in Solidaria.

Sîan had smoked some dope. She was still 17. In the Jewish State this was a very serious crime. I can vividly picture the terror on Sîan's face, as she threw what she was smoking on the ground and tried to stamp it out. She still looked so angelic. But she knew that it wasn't any good, since they'd easily be able to scan her.

We could hear footsteps by the door. Everyone kept silent. It was like we were playing the most futile game of hide-and-seek in the world. Then the door flung open and three policemen marched in. We must've seemed like we were pretending to be invisible. Everyone waited, staring. One of the policemen cleared his throat emphatically.

But their hats were lined with blue – they were Libertarian – and soon everyone had noticed. All of a sudden, before the policeman could say a single word, a raucous cheer filled the room. If you weren't attacking anyone, or stealing anything, it was pretty hard for the Libertarian police to arrest you for anything. The lead policeman requested that the music stay off for a few minutes and they wandered around. Many people hated the Libertarian police. Their law book was slim, but they were notoriously brutal. In the name of protecting their own they'd often cause damage, resulting in serious 'jostling' with other nations' police forces, or even international criminal proceedings. Many of the Solids, and a couple of Marxists in the corner, got the spit ready on the tip of their tongue, but didn't dare release it.

We could hear some shouts in the back-garden, and so could the police. They

went out and everybody followed them. Outside were two bare-chested men, clearly high off their skulls, slugging away at each other. Nobody seemed to know them. The police glanced down at their fingernails, noticed that they were purple (Neo-Athenian), shrugged, and walked on. They would've let those men beat each other to a pulp before invading their moral space.

It was said that the Solid police would cross borders to intervene in harmful behavior like that, but if they did it was only in extreme circumstances. Everybody had their own rules.

The police walked back towards their car. Everybody was about to breathe a sigh of relief. But one of the policemen stopped, checked his monitor, and turned around.

"There is a Libertarian here who is 15." It would have been futile to hide; he saw me straightaway and looked right at me. "Your parents will probably want you home." That was the most that he could do.

We tried to settle back into the spirit of the party but it was no use. Sîan was the worst; she was entirely freaking out because she was paranoid that her police force would come and her parents would find out what a good young Jewish girl she really was. The dope in her system didn't help. At moments like this she regressed to about 11-years-old and this made it very difficult for me to sustain my usual fantasies about her.

We rang a taxi and went to wait outside. We all decided that it'd be a Great Idea if we distanced ourselves from the Naked party, and with it all the worry that it would've brought our parents. We stood 100m down the way. Conversation returned to Hannah's boy.

"So was he there?" Sîan asked.

"Who?" Hannah replied.

"Your boyfriend! The great converter!"

"Oh. You wouldn't understand. Can we just forget about all that."

"My god, Hannah, you left your home country! Girl, you're so crazy and-"

"Not now," Hannah, said, putting a definite end to Sîan's slurred interrogation.

Then we saw some lights ahead of us.

"It's here! Taxi! Taxi!" Sîan screamed, hobbling out into the road.

"Careful!" I remember Hannah saying.

The car was approaching fast. Very fast. It was impossible to see the driver. I saw that suddenly something dawned on Hannah.

"The lights aren't turning on," she muttered.

"Taxi! Here honey!" Sîan screamed.

"The lights aren't turning on." Hannah was absolutely right. The streetlights weren't turning on, which could mean only one thing: that the car heading towards us was registered to no country. Its driver was probably a Naked or an Anarchist or some other complete foreigner –

[To this day we still do not know anything more, Mr. Brightman]

- and he certainly wasn't a taxi. Everything then happened so fast, but I have the curse of being able to replay it in slow-motion, frame-by-frame, as vivid as that which I see before me now. Sîan hobbled out further into the road, waving her arms. Hannah

and I rushed out to stop her. The car was wobbling from side to side. We got to Sîan. We yanked her back to the pavement. We thought we were safe. But the car was completely out of control. It skidded in an attempt to avoid us. The back of the car swung out. It collided with my body and with the body of my sister. We were both out on the ground. I passed out before feeling any pain.

I woke to sirens and screaming. Sîan was doing most of the screaming. At this point she seemed like an 8-year-old wailing and freaking out. There was an ambulance there and the paramedics were pushing her out of the way so they could get to us. Or so I thought.

I looked down and my abdomen was covered in blood. I was trying not to hyperventilate. Hannah looked far worse. It makes me ashamed to say it, but I could hardly stand to look at her. Mangled. Blood everywhere. Yet she was conscious.

"They'll look after us," I promised her. But I soon realized that this was false. They would look after *me*. Never have I been so pleased by the colour of my own fingernails, nor so horrified by the colour of another's.

"You've got to help her!" Sîan shrieked at the Libertarian paramedics. She shook one of them by his collar; but she knew it was all futile. The same paramedic knelt by my side and asked me my name. I'm not sure if I remembered. He said I was going to be OK and that I was going to hospital. I refused and said that I wouldn't leave my sister. But then I passed out again, which, I suppose could be construed as being a good thing.

Hannah passed away about five minutes before her Solid ambulance came. I was first told by Sîan in St. Thomas' Hospital the next evening. She was still in hysterics and was hardly comprehensible through the crying. She said the ambulance people were very nice, but it'd been too late.

In her last moments, Hannah had told Sîan that there was something she absolutely must tell her. I could, and still can, absolutely picture Hannah looking serious and sincere, that look on her face: that what she had to say was of *paramount importance*.

"I didn't do it for a boyfriend," she'd said, "There is no boyfriend." Then she'd said her final words: "I wanted to show what a difference you can make."

That line. I have gone over it a hundred times. Now, let me tell you what the official interpretation of my family was for the next few months, as they mourned and tried to come to terms with the event. They blamed Mr. Brightman, Hannah's favourite teacher, for corrupting her with foreign thoughts, and for taking advantage of her impressionable youth –

[Mr. Brightman, I'm not sure if it's best to tell you this, but they almost made an official complaint about you at school. In the end I convinced them not to.]

- but that didn't really make sense. What made more sense was far harder for them to accept. See, Mr. Brightman had already *shown* Hannah that it was possible to switch. Hannah was trying to send a message to somebody cynical and unconvinced. Somebody who thought that 'Nobody changes'. Somebody who would be proud of her.

Of course, I was the boy. She did it all for me.

I wanted to show what a difference you can make. I'm convinced she was

referring to the events that never came next. She wanted to continue to make me proud of what she was going to do, and who she was going to be. She was going to be a giant.

Mr. Brightman, I'm sorry about the corny ending. I wish it could've ended with something grander or more upbeat.

But sir, I kept out what happened next. My parents didn't really recover from what happened to Hannah, and things became untenable at home. I moved out, I wandered around, drifting between cities and then, when I was older, between nations. To whoever would have me, if I'm honest. All that, and I've ended up so close to home.

How I'd love to say I went on to do something Hannah could be proud of. I could've founded my own Great Nation, or run my own company, or perhaps become a kind-hearted and inspirational teacher. But I'd rather not go into what I did, what I do, and how I am.

I'd like to meet up for a chat if you'd be happy with that, Mr. Brightman. Let me know if that's OK. I'm currently residing somewhere under the Bermondsey Bypass. They all know me here; ask for 'B'.

- Benard