

Remote Access

Philip paced the narrow confines of his bedroom, breathing deeper and deeper. There was nobody else in the room, but he still felt ashamed. Why couldn't he keep up? And when he couldn't keep up, why did he always let it get to him like this?

All the work he had to do for school – the tests he had to mark, the lessons he had to plan, the reports he had to write – and the messages on his phone – 7 different groups, dozens of messages prodding him for attention – and the looming stack of opened but undealt with envelopes – letters, bills, the final notices from Mellow Meadows – and those to do lists overflowing from one scrap of paper to another on his desk – errands issued mockingly by a former self – and the pile of books by his bedside table – worthy works of literature and distilled scientific knowledge that he wanted so desperately to read but never could – and the never-ending emails spread over 3 different accounts, and the incessant recommendations from friends and colleagues of shows he *had* to see and restaurants he had to eat at – which he *did* because they were *right*. And the birthdays. They were the most imminent, the most suffocating. Nothing stopped the march of the birthdays. His old friend from primary school, his faultless younger sister, his friends' 2-year-old child who he hadn't been able to find the time to see growing up. Presents. Cards. What to buy to make it clear he cared, but that wasn't so generic as to betray his utter incapability to keep up with the mundane stream of normal goings-on?

The worst thing about it all was that although he experienced a visceral sensation of all of these things racing past him, fleeing from his grasp, he knew that from an objective point of view, he *could* keep up. If he lined up all of his tasks for the day in order, then all of the essential items would fit together quite snugly.

It was not the things; it was him. Hence the shame. He dreaded this vicious, tortuous cycle: the feeling of not keeping up, the dreadful sense of shame and incompetence, the futility of the pacing and heavy sigh-laden breathing, the resulting paralysis, the feeling – now corroborated and reinforced – of not keeping up...

He knew where his bottles were. He knew the release they gave. But he'd been so much better. It'd been weeks.

He did what he knew was the right thing. He opened the app on his watch and pressed the warm red button for remote psych access.

A little muzak, which was intended to calm him but did quite the opposite. *Come on, come on*. Philip paced the room and gripped his right hand firmly in his left, crushing his flesh against the bones of his fingers.

He heard the *click* which meant they'd picked up the call. It was only seconds now. He made a conscious effort to remember how awful he felt – at this moment he was always gripped by a strange fear that he would forget what it was like, and this would make it more likely he would drown like this again.

And then all of a sudden he was merely observing. His hands gently detached and dropped down by his side. His legs started moving. His hand reached out to open his bedroom door. His breathing reset back to being slow, regular, barely audible. He found himself walking to the kitchen window in front of the sink. It gave a good view of a small patch of grass illuminated by the street lamp – not much, but a pleasant green. Philip felt his worries lifting.

He knew that there was someone out there, in a large open plan office in a technical support centre, somewhere like Basingstoke, who was calmly taking control, pressing the neat 'X's in the top right of his negative thought processes one by one.

“Philip,” he heard a calm voice speaking to him, “Would you like me to read from your prepared messages to yourself in the time of an episode?”

He consented non-linguistically.

“Message 1. You are a kind and caring person. Your friends love you very much. You have always been there for them. You have been a good teacher for twelve years, here are some messages from your students...”

As the voice continued to recite the messages, he found his hands pouring a glass of water and the glass being brought to his lips. The water was refreshing and soothing. It did not matter that he *knew* the remote psych access technician was flushing his system with the right cocktail of neurotransmitters; it still worked.

“Philip, would you now like to hear the messages left to you by your mother?”

Philip rejected this offer. He was already in the process of being repaired. No matter how much positivity they’d injected him with, it was still so hard to hear her voice.

After a minute of blissful serenity, the voice came back, “Philip, is there anything else you require?”

He issued his thanks and took back control.

A message popped up on his watch: would he like to review his technician? He laughed a little and ignored it. He felt relaxed but exhausted so he took himself to bed. He knew soon he would be asleep and all his worries would stay at rest.

Philip rushed into the school gates twenty minutes late – and yes, they did keep a record. He’d had a good sleep, but his thoughts were already cycling through things he had to do. He caught judgemental glances from his colleagues as he rushed to his classroom. He’d found it difficult to make eye contact with them since his demotion five months ago. They’d called it a ‘performance management responsibility and remuneration adjustment’. They’d judged him to be no longer working at the level he was being paid at and slashed his salary. They hadn’t even tried a support program – they didn’t judge him to be capable.

Capable – he just wanted to be capable. His mum used to tell him that he was capable of anything, but that’s what mums are for. His ex used to reassure him that he was capable; for four long years he made her suffer through giving him that same old speech. Then she’d decided what was best for him was for them to just be friends - a ‘performance management adjustment’ by another name.

This was why he could no longer afford the hefty monthly subscription to the service he had used last night, Mellow Meadows’ Remote Access Psychological Support. He was two payments behind and they would pull the plug any day now.

He thought the readjustment was possibly worse than just being sacked. Now he still had the same amount to do at work – the same amount of lessons to prepare for, the same array of doom-inducing deadlines to meet, the same stultifying meetings and training sessions to attend – but with far less pay and significantly more humiliation. He felt demeaned.

Nearly at his classroom, Philip passed the Executive Headteacher, Alexander, sauntering into his big office with an easy-breezy smile over his face. Alexander did not have a subscription with Mellow Meadows, no, no, no. He had a premium Stanton-Gage account. Fast, fluid, unlimited usage, cutting edge tech. Not that he had much need of it. The lewd chat around the staffroom microwaves had it that his wife had an account too. Whenever Alexander wanted sex she switched to remote access and didn’t have to endure it while he did whatever he wanted. Philip suspected this was apocryphal; he probably

satisfied her 100% and the lowly drones just spread this nasty lie to make themselves feel better.

Mellow Meadows had served Philip well. But now that he could no longer afford it he would drop down to the notorious National Psych Service. Just thinking about it made him more anxious. It was such an overstretched service, plagued by long waiting lists and inept technicians. Philip feared that the next time it was going to happen – and he would try so hard to stop it happening – he would call the ‘emergency’ line only to get a call back 2 weeks later when everything was fine, when he was in the middle of a meal. Or when it was too late.

He resolved to start work. His first class would descend on him in ten minutes and he was not prepared. He hadn’t done anything yet. He checked his watch. *Jesus Christ*, he muttered to himself, *9:28 and I’ve done nothing*.

It was two weeks later, a Friday night. Philip was out at a Thai restaurant with friends. Now that he no longer had decent psych support, and there was nobody at home to go back to, he tried to get out as much as possible. He liked to be around people, even if it fed his nagging anxiety that he was falling behind in other areas. He simply didn’t trust himself to be alone.

The bill came and he gnawed at one of his used chicken satay skewers. People made their way out onto the street and Philip found himself as the last person there after everyone had said their goodbyes. He scrolled through the contacts on his phone for someone he could try to meet up with but came up with nothing. He gravitated towards the newsagent’s, where he knew he would buy a bottle of cheap whiskey even though it would not help.

But then he stopped. He made a decisive movement in the other direction. And he felt proud of himself for all of the short walk home.

Another week later. Philip was sitting on the bench outside his flat with his sister, Phoebe. She was ‘just catching up with him’ aka checking up on him. She meant well. Being with her was always so bittersweet. She reminded him of a time when he was strong – he was her confident, experienced, funny older brother. He used to teach her things like how to swing a backhand and the meaning of forbidden words. And she reminded him of mum. Now Phoebe had a husband and a daughter, with another daughter on the way. Philip knew all too well that he was the subject of family message groups – something to be concerned about, like an elderly relative with dementia or a will that was stuck in probate.

“How are you finding the NPS?” she asked sheepishly after a long silence.

“I actually haven’t used them,” Philip replied. “On the night that I realised my old account was dead I considered trying them but I sorted it out myself.”

“That’s great,” she said, clearly trying to smile as encouragingly as possible. “Do you want to talk about anything?” she asked.

“Not really. Can you just tell me about how things are going for you? As much detail, the more mundane the better.” He slouched on the bench and appreciated the breeze on his cheek.

A few days later, a Tuesday night of a busy week, and Philip was right in the middle of a session of washing up. He resented having to do it. His dishwasher had broken down, he didn't have any money to replace it, and most of his friends would never have *actually* washed up in this predicament. Most of them could afford to carve it out as 'vacant time', in other words pay a remote access grunt in a Chinese or Bangladeshi chore centre to take care of it while they ceded control and kicked back. If in this country and in this day and age you were still actually doing chores, you were doing something wrong.

And Philip was not a man who needed reminding that he was doing things wrong.

He realised he was rushing the washing up and inspected the plates and glasses he'd put on the draining rack. They were still dirty and he'd have to do them again. Great. He was having another one of those times, when he couldn't bear to think of all the things he had to do and how little time he had to do them.

And what was the point of it all? He'd been getting so little satisfaction from work recently and his friends were all progressing while he was stagnating.

What's more, what a fucking self-indulgent *downer* he'd become.

He sighed the same old sigh, his palpable heartbeat getting harder and faster, his anxious thoughts clawing over each other for attention. Tomorrow he had to go to his annual performance management meeting and he kept picturing all of the boxes he hadn't ticked. He feared that this could be it, when they finally told him he was completely incapable of doing his job and he had to leave. And then how could he pay for it all? The rent, the food, the endless bills.

Then for a second he just stopped still, as if he'd broken down. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to scream and violently cough out all of the things he had to do that were choking him.

But instead he found himself drawn to that small patch of grass illuminated by the street lamp. He rested his hands by his side and took long, measured breaths. His heart stopped pounding so hard in his chest and his worries gradually evaporated. When he was ready, he returned to the washing up. He even did a good job of it.

He went about the rest of what he had to do and completed the tasks fairly efficiently, after each one savouring the act of decisively crossing out some scribbled words on his to do list. He adapted a decent immersive VR lesson for his Year 8s, he caught up with some overdue marking, and he even sent a birthday card to his friend in Germany.

He was brushing his teeth – feeling cheerful that it wasn't too late, for once – when the suspicion seized him. He spat out his toothpaste and just froze, an uncanny feeling taking a grip of him.

It had been too easy. He'd broken his cycle of negative thoughts too quickly earlier in the kitchen. For a brief moment he felt completely terrified, spinning around because he felt like there was somebody there in the room with him.

He soon composed himself. Probably nothing, he thought. Probably nothing.

He walked back into his bedroom and got into pyjamas. But it returned – that slight, sneaking suspicion that something was not quite right, a dark kind of *déjà vu*.

How had he been able to calm himself so easily at the kitchen sink?

What had happened to his panic when he'd frozen in the bathroom?

That night, after the Thai, why hadn't he bought the whiskey like he always did?

Why hadn't he had to use remote psych access for over three weeks?

Unless he had. Unless he had, and he just didn't know it.

He stormed over to his computer, booted it up, and swore at it until it was ready. He'd heard rumours about something like this before. Soon he was frantically searching: 'involuntary remote access', 'psych mind control' and so on, jumping from one blogpost to the next.

Scared and confused, he tried to phone Phoebe but she didn't pick up.

What a ludicrous notion! He laughed scornfully at himself, shaking his head in contempt. He left the computer and sat on his bed. Why on earth would they care enough about someone like him to put in all that effort? Surely a more plausible explanation for why he'd felt their presence was just because they'd accidentally logged in and left the connection open – those NPS technicians were as over-worked as him. Some technical error or admin issue after he'd switched over to them three weeks ago.

He turned his monitor off. *There's nothing to worry about*, he told himself, picturing the words in a huge font in front of him. He turned off the light and got into bed, tucking himself in nicely. It still wasn't too late to get a good night's sleep. He tried to rest peacefully.

There's nothing to worry about.

He lay there in the darkness, as if he were asleep.

But it was an act. He needed to make them think he was calm to throw them off so that they would look away. If they'd been accidentally or harmlessly logged in, then *why had they intervened at exactly those critical points?* He pounced out of bed, desperately hoping he had a few moments before they caught him. He went back to the blogposts and tried to absorb information as rapidly as possible.

It made so much sense. It cost the government on average X amount per alcoholic, Y amount per depressive, Z amount per suicide clear-up. *Why wouldn't they monitor everyone?* Why wouldn't they just keep an eye on those most at risk and intervene at their moments of weakness, wresting control just for a few milliseconds to put them back on track? And anything they really didn't like – anything that threatened the system itself, which kept the drones in their jobs and money in their pockets – they'd step in and stop it.

There were even posts by anonymous scientists explaining how the technology was there to augment the neurotransmitters being released to suppress the memory formation as well so that *people wouldn't even realise it had happened.*

That's exactly what they were doing to him.

Philip printed off page after page of information. He needed to keep the evidence. He was on edge, not anxious like usual, but angry and driven. What right did they have to lurk inside him?

He found his gaze drifting away from what he was trying to read and he had to snap it back. Then it happened again, in a slightly different manner. Almost imperceptibly his focus darted off to another corner of the room. It was like he was working on a screen and his mouse pointer had jumped away, guided by phantom fingers. It was them, back again, peering into him and hovering over their computer keys.

He needed to release himself. But what could he do?

He tried calling Phoebe again. *Would they let him?*

Come on, come on, how infuriatingly slow was this dial tone? But eventually she picked up and he barked at her straightaway that he needed her over here *now*, it was an emergency. She said she'd come. He hung up before he found himself forced by their distant hands to cancel it. Was he faster than them? Or were they still one step ahead?

He went over all of his behaviour since his Mellow Meadows account had been closed. How many times had the NPS technicians intervened? He questioned every major

decision he'd made, every significant action he'd taken, and all those fleeting moments where things just hadn't quite felt right. And then an idea struck him.

"Are you listening to this?" he said aloud. But then he remembered that the communication was non-linguistic, so he just thought the words. *Are you monitoring these thoughts? Give me some indication. Just let me know I'm right, even if you take back control, even if you wipe these memories. Have some compassion.*

Nothing came back. Were they letting him stew? Or were the technicians who oversaw the involuntary remote access just as overstretched as the standard ones?

And then Philip's angst became mixed with a weird sort of gratitude. He'd been so much better these last few weeks. He'd been protected. They hadn't let him drink. Silently they had watched over him and kept him safe, after he had proved that he was not capable.

He pictured being young again. Wrapped in a blanket when he had been ill and home from school. His mother making soup in the kitchen. She'd left some grapes. The sweet Calpol that soothed his throat and made him feel better. No matter how ill he'd been, he always had such fond memories of those rare days. He missed her so much.

A knock came at the backdoor and Philip jumped. He tentatively approached the door and saw through the window that it was Phoebe. Before she was even through the door, he unleashed his suspicions in a torrent. He showed her the websites and the printouts. She nodded patiently and seemed to be absorbing it all. He warned her that if he started denying it, it might be because they'd seized control and were making him more compliant. Turning the key in his back to wind him up again.

How many people do you watch over?

(How many tragedies have you saved us from?)

Philip told Phoebe it was the NPS – it must've been, because this change happened when he lost the other service. Phoebe carefully looked through the teetering pile of letters on his desk. She found a few from the NPS and read them carefully. She took his phone and checked his apps and emails. Philip was so grateful to have her there, on his side against this despicable regime.

But then she held his shoulders said something that hit him so hard.

"You never activated your NPS account," she said. "They sent you the letter, but you didn't complete the registration. You never installed the software."

Philip darted over to where she was standing and frantically checked through all of his letters. She must've missed something. This was some kind of mistake. With trembling hands he snatched his phone and desperately searched for evidence.

"I have an NPS account myself, Phil, I would be able to see it if you had one."

Philip saw on his phone some records of the remote access episodes from before, from Mellow Meadows, but nothing at all from the last three weeks.

"There's nobody there, Phil," Phoebe said softly.

He sank onto the bed. His brow furrowed and he hung his head as he tried to comprehend this. Could she be right? Part of him couldn't believe her. A fear crept over him: was she lying in an attempt to protect him from the truth?

Acting instinctively he said to her in a steely tone, without looking up, "Please leave."

"Phil, I—"

"Please just get out of my flat. I need some time."

Phoebe left the room.

He sat alone and in silence, his thoughts racing. Had he become so incapable that his own sister was working with the state to look after him for his own good?

He found himself asking them: *Just tell me if she's lying to me.*

No reply. Only hollow thoughts.

All of a sudden he felt utterly ashamed. What was he thinking? How could he have talked to her like that?

"I'm sorry!" he called out to her, worried she'd already left, "Phoebe, wait!" He bolted out of the room, planning to chase her down the path before she got to her car.

But there she was, waiting patiently in the kitchen for him.

When he looked in Phoebe's eyes and saw her so frightened and concerned, he knew she was on his side. She was his sister and she loved him.

"I promise, there's nobody there," she repeated, and he believed her, trusting her judgement so much more than his own.

He wandered over to the kitchen window in front of the sink. He gazed down at the small patch of grass illuminated by the street light. It gave him some peace.

So this is it, he thought to himself, *I am free*. But with that freedom came a certain terror. A dreadful sensation of vertigo, like he was peering over a cliff edge and realising there was nothing standing between him and oblivion.

He turned to his little sister and whispered to her, "Please look after me."