

THE BIRTHDAY

Marc did not know what awoke him. It could have been a bird pecking at the window, or the narrow shaft of sunlight that slyly cut through the chink in the curtains and struck the pillow beside his face. Whatever it was, the sound of a distant siren gripped his attention. It was a daily, even hourly, occurrence. This particular morning, however, it filled Marc with dread and mortification. Somewhere, somehow, someone had been killed and the omnipresent Invigilation Squad was on its way to the scene in the familiar black, armoured, truck, ready to dispatch justice, to arbitrate on life itself.

The ray of sunlight struck the side of his face and his heart missed a beat. He had forgotten to close the shutters last night! That was extraordinary and foolish. Spurred by a subconscious force he automatically sought the reassuring green light on the adjacent console. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it burned, at night filling the room with an emerald luminescence. It had burned in his room since his birth. He could recall its comforting light when, driven by nightmares, he might awake terrified. It would remain lit throughout his life.

He laid still and tried to calm himself. Downstairs he could hear sounds of movement. Mother was preparing breakfast - his breakfast. She was singing a song from the days of her youth, he thought. That was unusual, but it was a special day. He raised himself on one elbow and reached with his free hand to press a key on the PRIB. Satisfied, he settled back on the pillow and watched the video image stabilise. One day, he promised himself, he would have a three-dimensional projector; one day when he could afford such a purchase. He would have one in his flat. Flats were hard to come by. They seemed to be filled as soon as they became vacant. On had to be in the know, but one day he would have both - if he lived that long.

The intoxicating image of Marilyn Monroe appeared on the screen. She had been his choice - he was allowed a choice. She smiled and Marc depressed the speech key. "Good morning, Marc," she said, seductively.

"Good morning," thought Marc, and depressed the replay key.

"Good morning, Marc," Miss Monroe recommenced. "Today is your eighteenth birthday and you have chosen me to be the one to greet you on your Personal Record and Information Bank, and inaugurate your transformation from the caste category of Minor to a Premat. You will have learned from your Current Affairs curriculum of the grave problems of World over-population. The crisis was debated at the meeting of the World Council in 2011 when the concept of Prematurity was agreed and Resolution 9146 was endorsed. Faced with a need to effect a substantial and lasting reduction in population, the Council sought the most humane method. It was held that it would be unacceptable for any State or Government Authority to decree death in any specific cases. That was held to contravene human rights and would have legalised murder, although the contradictory issues of the right to die and the right to live were considered carefully. Nor should the very young die as they would be defensive in exercising their right to live. Nor would it have been right to make the heads of families vulnerable as this might result in the creation of institutional orphans. But the World Council decided that if the human race was to be culled, it had to be carried out before reproduction had commenced, otherwise units of the population would replace themselves and no reduction in numbers would be achieved.

"The World Council therefore decided that the most humane method of reducing population was to determine a period of three years in an individual's life when those of this age has the right to kill another of that age or, equally, the right to die at an equal's hands. This is the age of Prematurity and those who are within this period are known as Premats whilst they have neither killed, nor been killed by, another Premat.. It commences with your eighteenth birthday

and the sole route to full maturity is to kill another Premat, or be killed yourself. While you are a Premat you face this risk. Please remember at all times that Minors and Matures are protected and the killing of one of these castes is punishable by death by gradual particle disintegration, the worse and, generally held to be the most painful, form of execution known to mankind.

“In this morning's post you will receive your Life Monitoring Recorder, popularly known as the LMR. This is a micro-processor which can record and transmit, and the Premat cell has a three year capacity. It also tells the time and will replace your wristwatch. You must wear it at all times. It is sensitive to your natural bio-rhythms and if you are unfortunate to be killed it will record the time of death and transmit a constant signal which can be cancelled only by a member of the Invigilation Squad. If you are fortunate and you succeed in cancelling a Premat, your LMR will record this fact and you need only to press the green button to log your claim which will be validated by a member of the Squad.

“You will see a red button. If you press this you will release the manual over-ride. The LMR then acts as a combined detector and transmitter which will both indicate the presence of other Premats who are in the vicinity, and broadcast an audible warning signal of your presence. You may choose to remain anonymous and attempt to detect alternative Premats by other means. If you do, you must not forget that after your twenty-first birthday the protection of the over-ride ceases and the signal is automatically energised, providing of course that you have not already qualified for Maturity. If you remove or fail to wear your LMR you will be recorded as technically dead and you may be killed and claimed by any Premat without having the dispensation to kill, and protect, yourself. So please wear it, day and night.

“Life is dangerous, so take the greatest of care. I am glad that you chose me to speak to you today. I hope you succeed and survive.”

Miss Monroe faded from view and was replaced by the Emblem of the World Council which was suspended above a scroll bearing the words “Through Death Into Life”. This picture faded too and Marc pondered on the wonders of modern electronics. A melodic sound filled the room as the screen and the amber “call” light indicated that Evola was waiting to talk to him. He pressed the receive key, and there she was, looking beautiful and not unlike Marilyn. “Happy birthday,” she said brightly. “Shall I show you your present?” Her hands were drawing down the shoulder straps of her night-dress when Marc replied.

“No, not now,” he said hastily. “Not over the screen.”

“Tonight then,” she purred. “You can now. It's permitted. How are you, anyway? Safe and taking care?”

“Oh yes, I am safe until later this evening. I wasn't born until a quarter past ten in the evening.” Evola nodded and pursed her lips to offer a kiss.

“Take care then, darling,” she breathed. “Until this evening!”

“I love you,” whispered Marc.

“I love you too,” she replied. “See you tonight.”

There had been a notable legal case. It had been taken to the Supreme Council where it had been ruled that although the LMR was issued on the calendar day on which the eighteenth birthday fell, prematurity did not commence until one was fully of age, to the second. LMR's were thenceforth set to commence at the exact time of birth. Marc could at least enjoy his birthday fully and not worry about the many tales of unfortunates who had been murdered in their beds by elder brothers or sisters. It had been recognised that Resolution 9146 was unjust to second children, but Marc's sister was fully mature and he had nothing to fear, from her at least.

Evola was, however, still a Premat, but her love was such that she had confided the fact, fully knowing the risks involved. He warmed when he thought of her. He had nothing to fear from her. She had such a kind nature that she would never hurt a fly, leave alone kill anyone. Perhaps her beauty had, so far, saved her, but the time would come when she would be twenty-

one, and death might then be inevitable. It was Marc's dilemma - how he was to achieve his maturity and guide her to hers as well.

He hummed while he washed and dressed. Breakfast and his father's greeting awaited him. "Has the post come?" Marc asked.

"There's a parcel for you," called his mother from the kitchen. "It's probably a birthday present."

"She doesn't really understand," his father said as their eyes met.

"Is it something nice?" she called.

"She doesn't understand," his father repeated. "It must be your LMR. You had better open it."

"I received my Inauguration Address before I got up," said Marc. A serious look spread across his father's face.

"There's not much advice I can give you, Marc," he said. Marc nodded and a lump formed in his throat. "You are obviously going to be in mortal danger until you qualify for Maturity. You should keep your LMR immobilised just to preserve your life. The great majority of Premats do this. The main trouble is the authorities do not publicise the names of those who have qualified. They claim that if they did the identification would give direct legal support to the killing. That's a load on nonsense. They just want more people killed unnecessarily in addition to the ones who do it in error and are executed as a result. So you must be on your guard at all times. Watch everyone closely and trust absolutely no-one. Be ready to defend yourself all the time - even ready to kill. We can only hope that someone, perhaps your assassin, gives themselves away as they did with your sister. And remember, while no-one may want to kill, less still do they want to die. When the time comes, be strong, stronger than your adversary. Above all, take great care of yourself and Evola. We love you both."

A tear crept into Marc's eye and he swallowed deeply. "I will," he said. "I will." His mother swept in with a jug of coffee.

"Such serious faces!" she said brightly. "We are not at a funeral, are we? Father! It's nearly time for your workhour. And, Marc - what are you going to do today?"

"It's a leisure day for the boy," said his father.

"He should stay home with his mother," she said sharply.

"I will be quite safe until tonight," said Marc, watching his father as he stood.

"No-one is safe," said his father reaching the door. "Certainly not anyone young. Take care!"

His mother sat down opposite and studied him carefully. "You are not like your sister," she said with deliberation. "You're not so hard. You will find it difficult when the time comes, but you must be strong, my son."

"I will, mother. I will," said Marc, sipping the coffee. He was conscious of her eyes searching his face, studying his features. Then she looked away.

"I am several years younger than your father," she whispered. I had a brother; he looked like you. Be strong, Marc." Her voice tailed off as a distant, glazed, vacancy filled her eyes. Suddenly her attitude changed and she brightened. "What then are you planning to do today?"

"I'm going out with Rillek. Then I'll be going around to see Evola this evening."

"Good!" exclaimed his mother. "Rillek is a Mat!"

Half an hour later, wearing his LMR, Marc descended from his room, ready to go out. Through the slightly ajar living room door he caught sight of his mother. She was still sat at the table and was sobbing. She made no attempt to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Instead they were allowed to fall freely, drop by drop, into the centre of an ever-spreading damp patch on the chequered table cloth. Confused, Marc quietly opened the front door and slipped out, closing it behind him.

Rillek lived in the house next door. He was a couple of years older than Marc but they had virtually grown up together. To Marc he had been a brother substitute and he could not remember a time before Rillek. He had been there, sometimes teasing him, more often joining him in some juvenile scrape, but always protecting him. "Hello Marc," said his friend warmly as he opened the door. "Happy Birthday!"

"I hope that it will be," said Marc. "What are we going to do today?"

"Look after you, for a start," said Rillek brightly. "I thought we'd go down to the Odeon. There's a super holoscope on. Then perhaps we could have a bite to eat - catch an underground up Town, maybe. Oh, yes! I've a real surprise for you. Come on! I can tell you about it on the way!"

They had to queue at the Odeon. The theatre was ill-suited for the showing of holoscopes. It retained the original stalls which meant that the audience sat there had to crane their necks to look upwards at the action which could, at times, be directly above them. This could be highly disconcerting, especially during scenes of aerial bombardment in war films. To increase capacity, the former orchestra pit and stage had been bridged over and a make-shift structure erected to house several hundred viewers on seven levels. Marc and Rillek found themselves on the second tier, which was too low to be comfortable, but tolerable.

Holoscopes had been a sensation. They had encompassed all the features of three dimensional parametric viewing and quadrasonic sound with none of the constraints or side effects of virtual reality. In the early days, before the true effects of scale and range had been fully appreciated, audiences had found themselves overwhelmed by giant spiders or monsters, or run down by trucks or trains. There had been a catastrophe in the West End when holographic flames engulfed a panic stricken crowd, unable to distinguish the image from reality, and over two hundred had been trampled to death in the stampede to escape. Now the action has reduced, by law, to the core of the theatre, although the projection filled the auditorium. The audience sat as Gods on Olympus, distant observers, yet fully involved.

Even with precautions, trouble often broke out, and it occurred there and then, somewhere several levels above them. Marc was suddenly aware of real, large, objects falling. As they leaned forward to look up there was a series of sharp, acrid, noises, like those of a machine gun, and someone gripped him from behind, catapulting him forward, out into space. He landed, straddled, across two girls in the stall. Breaking his fall they formed a soft, squirming, wriggling, cushion below him. He struggled to free himself as one started screaming "Rape" and the other produced a pair of scissors from her handbag. Marc saw them gleaming in the dim light. Then Rillek was beside him, pulling him away. "For God's sake, hurry!" he screamed. "Let's get out of here before we're killed!"

Marc needed no second bidding. The tiers where they had been sitting a few seconds before appeared to be collapsing like playing cards. In the poor light of the periphery he could see dark masses moving as other members of the audience attempted to extricate themselves. If the management did not stop the projection, it might be an hour or more before the audience on the opposite side of the theatre became aware of the disaster. "Come on!" cried Rillek. Marc tore himself free of groping, girlish, hands and struggled towards the exit.

After the Leicester Square disaster, the law regarding exit capacities had been changed and implemented by most licensing authorities. Once clear of the stall seating, Marc and Rillek were soon out in the relative safety of the street. "Come on! Keep up!" yelled Rillek, as the sound of the Invigilation Squad sirens filled the air. "Keep moving!" He broke into a jogging run, leaving Marc, head down, to chase after him, finding it difficult as they weave in and out of the densely packed pedestrians. Suddenly Rillek stopped. Marc would have raced past him had his friend not thrown out his arm and caught hold of him. As they gyrated in the gutter, the screech of brakes made Marc cringe and freeze. The bus brushed by them, leaving Marc shaking as they regained the pavement. Several passers-by stopped and stared at them, nodded their heads, then passed on.

“That was close,” said Rillek, a little breathless. “You must be more careful. It's easy enough to get killed without trying.”

“Sorry,” stammered Marc. “My fault!” They made their way to the nearest Underground station, but it was temporarily closed. A newspaper seller told them there had been a multiple killing, but later they learned that someone had been pushed in front of a train. From the window of a sandwich bar they watched two dark-clad members of the Invigilation Squad drag a man, screaming and shouting, towards their vehicle. Suddenly he stopped struggling and was still.

“They've tranquillised him,” said Rillek. “Many escape by committing suicide rather than face disintegration.” Half an hour later the station was open again. “Let's go to Lords,” declared Rillek.

“You said you had a surprise,” said Marc after the fourth pint at the Gower Bar.

“I did and I have,” said his friend, pausing to allow the applause to die down.

“That's his fifty,” said someone nearby.

“I've got a flat!” said Rillek, excitedly.

“A flat?”

“Yes! A small one, you know, but it's got two rooms and a kitchen! It's super. I thought we might end up there later.”

“Right!” exclaimed Marc. “I can't stay too late. I am going to Evola's tonight - I promised.”

“Evola?” said his friend with deliberation. “That's all right! You are going around to Evola's flat? She doesn't live all that far from my flat. Should be quite easy.”

“She's going to give me my birthday present, tonight!” He winked at Rillek but his friend did not appear to notice and stared out at the pitch. Conversation ceased for a while.

“Ha! Here we are!” Rillek turned the key in the lock and threw open the door. “Come on, come on in.” A breath-snatching chill made Marc pause. What was it? Fear? Foreboding? Or just the damp, mildewy, smell that greeted him. “Come on, Marc! It does need some things doing to it, but I was ever so lucky to get it.”

With trepidation he went in and the door smoothly clicked shut behind him. “I can't stay long,” he said.

“I know. You said - come on, take a seat. I've got some beer in the fridge if the cockroaches have not taken it.”

Marc sat and looked around him. An object on a shelf in an alcove caught his attention and excited him. Apprehension was totally forgotten. “You've got one!” he cried. “You didn't tell me!”

Rillek looked smug and handed Marc the can. “It's second hand, but it gives a good image. I'll turn it on. Which would you prefer, Dutch or Swedish?” Nursing more than a small feeling of envy, Marc settled back to watch some of the evening's entertainment.

He could not remember fully what happened during the ensuing hours. He vaguely recalled drinking, talking, laughing, but the first thing he was aware of with any clarity was waking up suddenly, feeling cold and nervous. The light of the flat had been dimmed but there was enough illumination for him to see that the hand of the LMR was rotating. The three year countdown had commenced.

A rustle from behind him made him turn his head. Rillek stood, swaying, his eye lids half closed, with one arm outstretched, finger pointing accusingly. “I must go,” said Marc, rising slowly.

“Go?” slurred Rillek with a voice as thick as treacle. “Go? To Evola's? She won't want to see you. You - you are not going anywhere! Not out, not to pretty little Evola's - nowhere!”

“You're drunk,” said Marc, uncertain.

The outstretched palm flapped loosely. "You are not going to see my Evola ever again."

Marc was struck rigid. Rillek produced a gun from behind his back and was now pointing it unsteadily in his general direction. Marc recognised it as an old service revolver from the era of the Cold War. "I am going to kill you!" hissed Rillek, staggering forward and gripping the gun with both hands. "I needed a reason, and now I've got one!"

Marc was suddenly sober. Every sense in his body was alerted and heightened. He moved slowly in a semi-circular arc towards the door. "It'll be murder," he warned.

"Huh!" He saw Rillek's finger tense and tighten, and he dived towards his friend's legs. The bullet passed over his head and drilled a large untidy hole in the door. Rillek stumbled backwards and fell over a chair. A second bullet struck the ceiling and plaster showered down around them. Marc threw himself on top of the prostrate body. The struggle was short. Marc did not see where the third bullet went, but as he struggled to his feet, clutching the revolver, with hope sapping with every desperate heartbeat, the slow trickle of blood from his friend's mouth told him all he needed to know.

Soon the Invigilation Squad would arrive. They would be on their way even now, alerted by Rillek's LMR, the hand of which was at a standstill. Escape! He dashed down the stairs in gigantic leaps and ran out into the rain-swept streets. Behind him he heard the siren and he started to run. As his feet hit the pavement and the water splashed over his ankles and into his shoes, he tried to think. First they would go to Rillek's flat and confirm the unlawful death. And then they would track him down and take him, like the wretch at the Underground Station. The LMR would lead them to him. He could remove it, but then he would be at even greater risk. He had heard talk of a so-called "Resistance", but how could he contact them, if they existed at all. It was no use. He was as good as dead. He might as well surrender.

He stopped and looked down. He was still holding the revolver. The sound of the sirens filled the air as a new idea galvanised in his mind, prompting Marc to turn and set off, purposely, in a new direction.

Evola was wearing the night-dress when he opened the door. "I was just about to go to bed, Marc," she said in amazement. "I'd given you up! And you are all wet!"

"Quick!" he said, pushing past her.

"What's happened, for goodness sake?"

"I've killed Rillek," he blurted. "With this gun!"

"Oh, dear God!" cried Evola. "He's a Mat! That's murder. What are we going to do?"

"What are we going to do? There's one thing," gasped Marc. "Quick! The Squad will be here any minute now. Take the gun!"

"Take it?" said Evola, recoiling.

"Yes, take it! You've got to kill me!"

"Kill you? Christ, no!"

"You must, Evola, you must! Listen to me!"

"No!" she screamed, backing away towards the bedroom. "No, no!"

"Listen to me - will you listen to me? We are both premats, but I am dead. No matter what I now do, I am dead. Don't you see? I've killed a Mat and there's no help for me."

"There's the Resistance," she cried.

"How would I find them in the time that's left. Listen! You can hear the sirens. You have to kill me. If you kill me you will qualify. You will live - be safe!"

"Marc, I can't," she said softly. "I cannot kill you. I love you. That means more to me than living."

He drew her close to him, feeling the softness and warmth of her body. "This is the last time," he whispered as he kissed her. "Listen." Still some distance away, but growing louder, the sirens signalled the approach of the Invigilation Squad. There was no doubt as to their

destination. "I love you, Evola," he said, holding her away from him so that he could see her clearly and looking deep into her eyes. "I want to die looking at you," he added. "Please."

"I can't Marc," she pleaded. "Please don't ask me, Marc, I....."

Without removing his eyes from her face, Marc opened her hand and closed it over the revolver, turning it towards his stomach. "I love you," he repeated.

"We're all finished in there, Sarge."

"All cleared up?"

"Yes, all done. Rum affair, though."

"Aye, a rum affair. You certainly see life and death in this business." They went slowly down the wall paper peeling stairway and across the threshold into the street.

"Did you get a good look at her?"

"I did. What a cracker, and what a pair of - what will happen to her?" The sergeant opened the door of the armoured van and paused.

"No doubt about it. Her looks won't save her. She'll go to the disintegrator."

"What a waste. She could have made a fortune in show-business. Rum affair, though."

"A nasty bit of work, if you ask me," said the sergeant, starting the engine.

"Happens all the time."

"I know, but fancy lying in wait for and killing your boyfriend on his birthday in order to qualify."

"And doing all that not knowing that he had matured by killing his friend fifteen minutes before!"

"Yep! There's irony there," said the sergeant. At the end of the road the van paused. "It just goes to show. You can't trust no-one nowadays."

"No."

"Anyway, we can stop at the Accommodation Bureau on the way. There's a couple of flats come vacant in this neighbourhood." The vehicle started moving again and was soon swallowed by the night.

Not far away, Marc's mother suddenly woke from her troubled sleep. In the green luminescence of her bedroom she could just detect the open doorway onto the boarded landing and, beyond, the door to Marc's bedroom. It was shut. Beyond lay nothing but shuttered, total, perpetual, darkness.

THE END

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