

Fantasy Land

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We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion.
The great task in life is to find reality.

- *Iris Murdoch (1919-1999),*
Irish-born British novelist

To George and Alexandra

PART ONE: ILLUSION

1: GHOST

He couldn't hide it from me.

If I didn't know him, I may have believed anything he told me. But he wasn't just my doctor. He was also my best friend. And through the years I had seen his face contour all his possible emotions.

So when he looked up from my blood test results, even though he said nothing, I knew that it wasn't just my cholesterol.

"Bad news," I said.

He tried to smile, but all he managed to do was curve his lips. It just made him look silly.

"Michael, you can't fool me," I said. "I know it's serious. So just come out with it."

He covered his face with his hands.

"It's called the Omega syndrome."

"Sounds like a B movie. Where did it come from?"

"It's not contagious. And it's extremely rare."

"What exactly is it?"

"I don't know much about it."

"You've recognised it!"

"That's part of my job."

"What can it do to me?"

"It has already begun to attack your vital organs, through the bloodstream."

"Already?"

"It's pretty quick."

“There is a way out of this. I mean we’ll stop it eventually.”

“I don’t know how to treat it. That’s why you should see a specialist, tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“It seems at an advanced stage.”

He put his hand on my shoulder.

“Burt, I’ll find the best man for you.”

“I am sure of that,” I said, “but hold your horses here. What do you mean advanced? We’re not too late, are we?”

He didn’t say anything.

“I mean we’ll stop it. It’s not terminal, is it?”

He looked away for an open door. Then he looked back at me in pain.

There was a lump in my throat.

“How long have I got?”

He still didn’t say anything.

“You’ve got to tell me that much.”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I told you I am not an expert.”

“Can’t you even guess?”

He buried his face in the blood test results.

“Don’t know exactly. Three months? Maybe even six.”

“Three months?”

He fell silent.

The lump in my throat burned its way down, as if I had swallowed the small cactus on his desk. Good God, this was no joke. This was for real. I was dying. I was truly dying. My very best friend was saying so. But there must be something wrong here. I mean, he had only seen my checkup results last week, and had then asked for this special blood test. And that was it. How about an MRI? Or even an old fashioned X-ray. One just couldn’t pass a death sentence from a blood test! And I felt no pain. In fact, just before coming here, I had felt really good.

“This just can’t be right,” I said. “I mean if it’s so advanced how come I don’t feel anything? Shouldn’t I be in pain?”

“You are not?”

“No, I feel just fine.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Michael, you are sure about this?”

"I'd shut up if I wasn't! Of course here, we've just got a single blood test on our hands. Now, normally, I would have just hinted about this and asked you to repeat the blood test. Only then, could I be sure enough to tell you. But you've read right through me."

"I've proved my own worst enemy."

"You've put your hand in a box of snakes."

"You think it's possible the results are wrong?"

"It's possible. But it's not probable."

I looked down.

"Burt, I know it's not easy to accept this, but start trying. You see, if it's true, this syndrome is eating away at you in each and every second. So treat your time with respect. Don't waste it with stupid illusions. Not if you want to fight."

He scribbled something on his notepad.

"Walk over to General Hospital, and to the private test centre across the street, and repeat the blood test in both places."

"They'll take a week?"

"Can't go any faster."

"I think I'll die."

"You are not going to die. You are going to fight. I'll find you the top specialist, and you'll go there."

"It's a hell of a dark room you are leaving me in."

"No it's not. It's a curved tunnel. Just keep going until the last curve. It might lead you out into the open."

"Or bury me in a dead end."

"Yeah. But you've got to keep going. That's why I warned you about illusions. If you sit around and dream, you'll just bury yourself."

I got up.

"Burt you've got to fight!"

I went out.

Of course I'd put up a fight. When I was a boy, I'd thought I'd hide a machine-gun under my shirt and blast my way out of the grave. But death wasn't some guy you could fight with. It was just a shadow that followed you around. In your teens you run ahead and merely suspected it. Then, as you got older, the distance diminished. You grew tired, and slowed down, while it speeded up. It drew in and got larger. You could cut a corner while it went the long way around. You could even get a breather while it followed someone

else. But that's all you could do. You couldn't fight it. The shadow had an iron fist you couldn't touch. Fortunately, it was slow. It took its time. It took it a whole lifetime to get you, a lifetime in which you had your children and your grandchildren. It gave you almost a century to enjoy life and get accustomed to its fist.

I had three months.

And if I run like hell, maybe six!

Christ, I was already a ghost. I was invisible to everyone on the road. No one even bothered to glance at me. I could almost feel the evening breeze blow inside my stomach. Even the raindrops traversed my body, and plopped on the sidewalk. Cars would just pass through me, and go their way. Why wait on red traffic lights? They weren't meant for ghosts. I started to cross the street. But tires screeched, and an angry driver rolled down his window and yelled at me. I was no ghost. I was real.

I was real enough to make him stop.

When I got to the hospital, I gave them the note. They said I had to make a hospital identity card for future use. I needed a picture. Of course I didn't have a picture. They pointed to a machine. I walked over, sat down, inserted a coin and the thing flashed. A minute later a strip came out. A blank strip! But this wasn't possible. I had a face. I flipped the strip over. Yes, there I was, in four copies. I was still real. But just you wait for a while. Just you wait for three months. Or even six. At first there'd be small functional problems and the magic numbers would waiver. Thirty-seven degrees Celsius would become thirty-six. Seventy-two pulses per minute would drop down to sixty. There'd be panic. They'd give me a bit of this to drink and that to swallow. But still, the great engine would stagger and its numbers would plummet down to zero. My chest would stop moving. My heart would cease pumping. And a day later they'd put a heavy oak suit on me and dig a hole.

Dust to dust.

Then there would only be the picture – just a damn picture on a hospital card and a distant memory in a few heads. Better get used to the idea right now. I was like a jug of milk in the fridge. I had an expiry date. Normal people were more like cups of yogurt. If they were properly sealed they could stay on the shelf for years. They had no guarantees of course. Anybody could reach out and grab

them in three months as well. In fact, anybody could reach out and grab them tomorrow. But the fact remained. Their 'best before' date wasn't marked.

And God, what a difference that made!

And there was no way to stop it. No sir! In three months the fridge door would open, and they'd call me.

But they called me right then.

They called me for the blood sample. They led me to a room, I sat on a chair, and they asked for my hospital card. I wasn't real enough for them. They needed to see the card to verify. You'd think that it was the damn card that made me real, that if I didn't have one, they'd show me out. So I showed them the card. And they relaxed. They produced a needle. Then I relaxed. The needle sucked some of my vital juice. Maybe it was a little muddy, or of bad quality, but still, it worked their instruments and it was something they could use. They spent all their time looking at the identity card. They copied numbers from it. They practically smudged it with their eyeballs. Take it easy, you guys. You can take the identity card if you want to. You can damn well have it – keep it for good. But just you wait for a while. Just you wait for three months, and try and draw juice out of that.

They put a Band-Aid over the needle mark and sent me out.

But I wasn't done. I had to give some of my precious blood to the guys across the street as well. And they wouldn't settle just with my picture on a hospital card. They'd want pictures of dead politicians on green paper.

There was an ATM right next to the door, and I tried to get three hundred dollars out of it.

It said it couldn't give me three hundred. I tried for one hundred. It couldn't give me that either. The bloody thing was probably empty. I pushed some buttons. Hell, it wasn't the machine that was empty. It was my account. What the hell was going on? What had happened to my money? What had happened to our money? I hadn't transferred it or taken it, so she must have. Damn the girl. What was she up to now? But whatever it was, there was nothing I could do about it. It was a common account. She could have taken every penny I had and there was nothing I could do to get it back.

I had promised myself that I'd never call her again, but I had to, now.

She wasn't at the office, and she didn't answer her mobile phone.

There was still my personal savings account of course, but I couldn't get to that from an ATM. I'd have to wait for the banks to open in the morning. Still I needed money for the blood test tonight.

I went back to Michael's office.

He was busy with someone. His secretary called him and we met in the hallway.

I told him about my empty account.

"You are joking," he said.

"I wish I were."

"Jesus, this can't be really happening to you."

"They've marked me down, haven't they?"

"Don't think of it that way. Things will change."

He reached in his pocket.

"Two hundred's all right?"

"Fine."

"I've already found the top two specialists in this side of the world. My secretary will set you up. Just call her in a couple of hours."

"Call her?"

"Yeah. I've got to take Shirley to this damn dinner party. It's her boss."

But I needed someone.

"When can I see you?"

"I don't know. I've got to fly off to Paris at six a.m. tomorrow."

"France?"

He nodded. "It's a pharmaceutical convention, that's on for three days. I am really sorry I can't see you. But I'll be here for you."

We shook hands on the hallway.

In his own way, Michael had always been there for me. And because I knew him so well, I could vouch for him. He'd always be there for me. He'd be there with medical advice. And he'd be there with money. But that's as far as he would go. He couldn't reach down and talk to my soul. He never had.

I ground my teeth, and got the second blood test done.

Now I really needed someone close. I got in my car and drove over to my parents.

I had the key but I knocked. I didn't want to scare them.

Mom opened the door.

“Hi Mom.”

She turned away. “Bob, there’s a young man here.”

I reached over and kissed her cheek.

She blushed.

“Please sir,” she said. “BOB!”

I heard Dad’s footsteps come down the corridor.

“Burt, my boy.” He put his arms out and gave me a big hug.
“Everything all right?”

I wanted to say something different. I wanted to say that everything was not all right. That I was dying. But I couldn’t get myself to say it. So I just led the way to the sitting room.

“Bob, what does the young man want?”

“He’s your son, for Christ’s sake. Don’t you recognise your own son?”

Mom didn’t recognise me after her stroke.

“It’s Arthur,” she said and smiled.

“It’s Burt. Arthur’s doing voluntary work in Nepal.”

“My son Arthur is in Nepal doing voluntary work.”

“Yeah,” Dad said.

He went to the fridge and brought two beer cans.

“Your bright son Arthur has set his priorities right. It’s the many that matter over the few.”

He swore under his breath.

“Did he call you, Dad? Did he give you a phone number like he promised?”

“Call us? Come on now Burt. How would he find the time with all the needy thousands around him? We’re just family.”

“Take it easy,” I said.

“Look who’s telling me to take it easy. You’re the one who’s stopped talking to him after he’d said he’d leave.”

“I feel bad about it now.”

“Don’t. Son I tell you, you didn’t do anything. You should have blistered him in the corner, make old Sean proud of you.”

This was Sean Averie of the Toronto Maple Leafs ice hockey team.

He sipped his beer. “Boy, oh boy. The Maple Leafs are on tonight, but I just can’t wait for the playoffs.”

“The playoffs?”

“The Stanley Cup.”

“Good God, Dad. The playoffs start in April. We’ve still got leaves on the trees.”

“Sorry, Son, but I just can’t wait for spring.” His eyes glistened. “You’ve come over for the hockey game?”

No, dear Dad, I’ve come over to tell you that I am dying. But I don’t want to make you miserable. You’ve got enough on your hands.

“You are going to stay?” he said.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve just dropped in to see you.”

“We’re fine son. Just take care of number one for us.”

He led me to the door. Mom brought up the rear.

“Come again, young man,” she said.

I kissed her cheek.

“Bye Mom.”

Dad hugged me.

“I don’t care much for Christmas,” he said smiling. “Just be sure you are here for the playoffs.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

October to April spanned six months. Now where would I be in six months? Would I fill in a chair to watch the hockey game? Or would I fill in a hole, a little further up, in Prospect cemetery?

I took a last look at them and wiped my eyes dry.

If I was a jug of milk, those two were two cups of moulded Jell-O that someone had forgotten on the shelf. I knew I couldn’t bear to tell them. But I had hoped to call Arthur, and maybe get to see him. Of course, as things stood, by the time he found out, I’d be six feet under.

Still, I wanted to get this lump off my throat. I wanted to talk to someone.

I called Andy.

He was in the bowling alley and I could hear him rasp. I told him about my blood test results in three short sentences. Then, I just heard the balls roll and the pins get knocked down.

“You still there, Andy?”

“Listen buddy, I am shooting with Jerry here, at the Tenpins. So why don’t you drop by for a beer?”

“You’re done playing?”

“In two minutes.”

I drove over. Jerry and Andy waved to me from a corner table.

They were halfway through their beer when I joined them.

“We’ve been talking about you,” Andy said. “What exactly happened?”

I told them.

Jerry blew on his beer.

“The lab guys screwed up.”

“I went to the best lab in town,” I said.

“Even the best make mistakes.”

“But...”

“It doesn’t take much. A lab technician argues with his wife on the telephone. A secretary daydreams before a weekend. A digit forgotten here, a wrong number there, and the thing’s done.”

“But all the figures? All the digits?”

“Christ Burt, do you want to die?”

“Does anyone?”

“So stop making life hard for yourself. Don’t let some stupid lab guy make you feel bad.”

The waitress came over and I ordered a Molson draft. Jerry emptied his beer, and paid for the round.

“Listen buddy, I’ve got to go now,” he said when the waitress left. “But you just hang in there, like I told you. When I see you again next week, you’d have forgotten the whole thing. Believe me, I know.”

He picked up his coat, said his goodnight, and walked out the door.

What did he know? He wasn’t a yogurt past its ‘best before’ date.

“He’s not such a bad guy,” Andy said. “Just never faces up to anything, does he?”

“Guys like him get to be a hundred.”

“He’s got it in him. But it wouldn’t hurt you to get a page off his book. You’re so goddamn sensitive.”

“I know. I guess it’s good for writing poetry but this Omega syndrome is driving me crazy.”

My beer came and I took a large gulp.

“Burt, you can’t just sit around like this.”

“And what should I do? Go on a trip and take photographs?”

“You’ve got to talk to someone to ease the pain. Someone close. You’ve told Honey Bee?”

“I can’t.”

“You’ve got to tell her. She’ll look after you.”

“I told you I can’t. Even if I wanted to.”

I took a large gulp.

“She’s left me!”

“She’s what?”

“She didn’t come home from work. All last week.”

“Where did she go?”

I shrugged.

“What did she tell you afterwards?”

“You just don’t get it, do you? There was no afterwards. She’s taken all her stuff. And I mean all her stuff, not just her laundry. Everything, right down to the sofa pillows she’s bought last month.”

“But she’s left the sofa?”

“Yeah. She’s left all the furniture. And the appliances. Everything she couldn’t carry away. But she said she’d charge me for what she paid. I suppose that’s why she’s emptied our common account.”

“I thought you said she hasn’t talked to you?”

“She hasn’t. She’s left me a letter that said she couldn’t take me anymore. So she had to go.”

“She couldn’t take you? If she couldn’t take *you*, where does that leave the rest of us?”

“Maybe we were not made for each other.”

“Maybe. But you’ve been with her for... how long now?”

“For five years.”

“Well she owed you a word or two after five years. Not some goddamn note.”

“I don’t know, Andy. Maybe she’s right. Maybe it’s easier this way.”

“You called her?”

I nodded.

“What happened?”

“She doesn’t answer when she sees my number.”

“You’ve tried a phone booth?”

“She hangs up when she hears my voice.”

“You can always wait outside her office.”

“What ever for? So I can get down on my knees and beg her to

come back? Forget it!”

“I can’t believe any of this. Christ Burt, why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t easy to tell. And I thought that maybe she’d come back.”

“Why did she leave you? I don’t believe the stuff in her note.”

He smiled.

“What did you do to her Burt?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve been fooling around?”

“You know me better than that.”

“You’ve been seeing someone?”

“Can you stop the nonsense?”

“What then?”

I gulped down a large mouthful of beer.

“I really don’t know. For a couple of years now, she just didn’t care for me. She saw right through me, as if I was a ghost. It was quite obvious. I tried to get things going again, but it just didn’t work out. We just shared the house. I guess now she’s rectified that.”

“Well, she’s chosen a hell of a time to... rectify it. Just when you needed her the most.”

“I am one hell of a lucky guy, aren’t I?”

“You still love her, don’t you?”

“Fuck her!”

“Bummer,” he said and clinked my jug. “Fuck all women. Just drink this and hang in there. Things will change.”

He put on his coat and left.

Now I wanted to say ‘bummer’ and grab my coat and leave as well. But I couldn’t.

The damn syndrome was inside me.

So I just sat there and had another round, all by myself.

All right, my parents were too old, my only brother was unreachable and my girl had left me. But I still had my friends, didn’t I? I had people who’d sit there all night and listen to me and advise me and cry with me, if need be. Or had I? I mean where were they? Number one had passed the problem to his secretary and was off to Paris. Number two said he’d see me in a week, and number three stayed for a round and disappeared. Some friends! They had given me their advice and left me all alone. And what advice! Michael

wanted me to run around from one specialist to the next and fight the thing until it ran me over. Jerry said to forget about it for a week and I'd be OK. And Andy, well I am not sure what Andy wanted me to do. Stay eternally drunk and pretend that I wasn't sick? Or set me up with my former? What did it matter? They were all nuts. Still I had to do something. I couldn't lie in bed with a bottle of tranquilizers, feeling endlessly sorry for my self. I wasn't a goddamned jug of milk.

I paid for the beer and left. Outside, traffic, people and rain had all disappeared. It was kind of cold, and on the way home I noticed that I had been mistaken. The maples were naked, and their leaves had been neatly raked and carted away from the lawns. God I was out of touch!

So what was I to do with the bloody syndrome? Fight it? Try to forget it? Ignore it? Or simply, if such things were simple, accept my own death and roam around the globe until someone turned out the light?

It was a hell of a week.

I couldn't settle down to a single course of action. I jumped from one thing to the next. I forgot, I fought, I ignored and I accepted. And I waited for the phone to ring. I waited the whole week. Well give or take a couple of days I had to go and visit a specialist in Connecticut and another one in Florida. I tried all I could. I even leaked news of my disease to Honey Bee's best friend, and waited for her to call me. But she didn't call. And to be fair to her, nobody else called, either. I was a goddamn ghost. I knew that if nobody called me, the bloody nights would never end. They'd go on forever. There'd be seven of them for a start and then, if I were lucky, just a hundred more.

But maybe I had another choice.

I could trim my days. I could shorten them up. Maybe I could jump off a building, or have Michael fix me with some injection. There was even this carbon monoxide 'appliance', which could do the job quickly and painlessly. I wouldn't lose much. What's a hundred more days compared to the thirty-five years I'd lived? Practically nothing! And it wouldn't be so bad to go out at thirty-five. I mean, I'd miss a nagging wife, shrieking children, and old age. What's the point in living, when you know you'll just suffer?

And yet, there was a point, and there was something inside you that just pushed you on. And even if my friends had picked up their coats and left me alone, still, they had told me something I hadn't quite grasped.

"Things will change," they had said.

And they were right.

Life is unpredictable. But how was I to know that even if you'd opened up Pandora's box, and every evil had escaped, there was always the chance that they'd go back in?

How was I to know that you can make illusion and reality interconnect?

At the end, it was only the first seven nights that were unbearable. After I got the second set of results I sort of relaxed about my disease and became uptight about something else.

In fact, eight months later I took a charter flight to Greece, to play the final act.

2: IOS

The island of Ios seems no different from the rest of the islands that encircle it. It's just a rock, surrounded by turbulent seas in the middle of the Aegean. You'd be pressed to spot a single tree, and if you did, then you can be sure that it's been planted and watered with care by its patron.

I was left on its wind-swept jetty with a handful of jeans-clad travellers. They were all young people, loaded down with backpacks. I carried a suitcase. We walked towards a group of people waiting for us at the end of the quayside clearing. They were holding placards, and I could hear their shouts as I got closer:

“Rooms.”

“*Chambres.*”

“Rooms on a private beach.”

“*Zimmer frei.*”

Their placards were adorned with pictures of their vacant rooms.

A laminated picture of a porch view of the village of Ios made me stop. It was the first time I saw the Village. Its white cubic houses dressed an inland hill, save for the rocky summit where four small churches stood. But there was more to the view. There was a swimming pool in the foreground, a shaded bar to the right and a bougainvillea to the left. They flanked the panorama and rendered it depth. It was a superb scene, and if it was real, then probably cost a small fortune to those who relished it.

“Nice view,” I said.

“Place’s called Bona Vista,” said the man holding the picture. “And all our rooms have this view.”

“You have a swimming pool?”

Maybe the one in the picture belonged to a neighbour!

He frowned.

“It’s the one you see in the photograph with the bar. We also have a restaurant and a lounge.”

His voice was hoarse and he spoke with a natural British accent.

“Decent place. How much does a single go for?”

“Fifteen euros.”

Fifteen euros? Now why was a luxurious room priced like a cheap meal? And why was a young Brit renting me a room, in the midst of the Greek archipelago? But maybe the wind had played havoc with his number.

“You did say fifteen?”

“Yes,” the man said. “Fifteen euros, ten and five.”

“This would be for a single room, not a berth?”

“Yes sir.”

“And the room will have a bed with clean sheets, a porch and a private bath or shower?”

“Yes sir. It also has air conditioning, a small refrigerator and a safe for your valuables.”

I looked at him.

“You are putting me on.”

“No sir. It’s a darn good room.”

“What’s the catch, then?”

“There is no catch.”

“Oh, there’s always a catch. Little forgotten things like... like the village cemetery that lies right next to it.”

He smiled.

“I don’t know where the village cemetery is. Listen,” he said and looked me straight in the eye, “the place’s quite good actually. And the price is a bargain. So why don’t you come right up and have a look for yourself?”

Normally, when I reach a destination, I rent a car, put my things in it and look around for a place to stay. But here I was being handed everything on a platter. I mean, where could I find a better view or a cheaper price? If I was being hoaxed, I had nothing to lose.