

Clip Notes

By Marty Young

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The box was waiting on his doorstep when he got home from work: a plain brown package taped shut with masking tape, his address scrawled across the top in black marker like an afterthought. Had he known better, one look would have told him not to open it, but Kevin Sanders had been waiting for this all week. He glanced around, then picked the package up and went inside.

Nestled safely amongst polystyrene beads and wrapped in plastic bubbles were the glasses, exactly as they'd looked on the small rectangular card that had fluttered loose from the latest issue of *Alleyway Shadows* magazine. It was an old way of advertising, one he'd not seen for some time. But it was obviously effective.

The glasses looked like normal specs, with black plastic rims and lenses no thicker than those on sunglasses. Clark Kent specials; old-fashioned, but nothing extraordinary.

A hairline fracture cut through the middle of the right lens.

"Aw, that's just typical," Kevin growled, studying the crack. He grumbled again when he didn't see any USB ports or switches of any kind on the frames. Searching the box revealed no cables, no batteries—not even an instruction booklet.

"Brilliant."

Duped again, just as he'd been with the Sea-Monkeys all those years ago. They'd cost all of twenty-five cents--those things that looked human but had fish tails and wore crowns and smiled as they swam about their underwater castle. Yeah, right. Gotcha there. And he'd committed the same impulsive act again; he should have known better.

He put on the glasses, wondering if they had magnified lenses or if they would distort the world in some other way. He expected *something* for his money. The glasses fitted well, but the world looked the same. The crack didn't even splice his view.

"So much for clip notes."

A small blank square appeared with a flashing cursor in its top left.

He ducked and tore off the glasses. The square vanished.

"Holy shit."

He turned the glasses around to study them front on, prepared to throw them across his cluttered lounge should they start ticking or glowing. The digital display wasn't visible. He turned them back and peeked through them the right way again. The display wasn't there either. He slipped them back on. Everything looked normal.

"Clip notes," he said, hesitantly.

The square reappeared.

"Hah! Brilliant!"

The words *Hah! Brilliant* appeared in the digital display window.

He whooped with delight, leapt into the air, and then jiggled around his dining room, clapping his hands like a schoolboy.

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He wore them to work the next day.

Only one person showed a genuine interest, but then Kevin had expected that. Two years ago he'd sprained his wrist, and the same person had quizzed him then, too.

"New specs, huh?" Steven Adams said. When he grinned, the creases at the edges of his eyes became crevices, deep enough to fall into if you got too close.

"I've needed them for a while," Kevin said, making sure he kept his distance. He wondered if anyone else had gone missing down those chasms.

"Well, they look good. They suit you."

Kevin mumbled "Thanks," and hurried to his cubicle.

Adams was a quiet man, but every morning he said hello, and occasionally included a how-are-you, too. Kevin didn't know why the guy insisted on chatting to him.

Once he was seated at his desk, he started taking inventory.

"Clip notes," he said under his breath, going through the process he'd learned the previous night. The virtual screen appeared with its flashing cursor in the top left. He grinned. It still amazed him that they worked.

He whispered, still grinning, "Steven Adams. He's really tall. Thin, too. Probably doesn't have many friends. Save."

The screen vanished.

Kevin stifled a giggle. He looked away from Adams. It was a few minutes after nine, and across the open-plan office, phones were already starting to ring, and faxes were coming through

with their urgent messages. His palms were sweaty, and he wiped them on his jeans. Holding his breath, he turned back to Adams.

The transparent square reappeared, and there, superimposed upon his view, were the words as he'd just spoken them.

He had to stare at his shoes and bite down on his forefinger to keep from howling in excitement. The glasses had worked on everything he'd tried them on in his apartment last night, and even on Steinbeck, his apartment super, this morning, but Kevin had still been reluctant to accept them as the real thing. If the Sea-Monkeys hadn't taught him to be cautious with his money, they had at least taught him about deceit. He'd been dying to get to work so he could give the glasses a proper tryout and see if they were legit.

And now there really could be no doubt.

He had no idea how they worked; there was nowhere for batteries to go, no USB port or solar panels anywhere. The things looked like a normal pair of spectacles. Not even Google, in its infinite wisdom, had been able to help. And as his knowledge of computers didn't extend beyond an internet search, he was at a loss as to what to do next, other than enjoy whatever the glasses did.

He spent the day whispering and storing notes. Each time he saw someone after that, the notes would appear to one side of their face. They weren't intrusive either; the displays were bright enough to read but never got in the way of reality. And for a day they worked fine—better than fine. For a day they were wonderful. But at five o'clock, as he headed for the lift to take him down the four floors to the carpark, Kevin bumped into Sharon Reynolds from four cubicles away.

"Home time, huh?" said Reynolds, smiling.

He grimaced a smile back. *Wonderful*, he thought as the lift doors pinged open. They entered. The doors closed behind them. He pressed the basement button and realised his glasses hadn't registered her this time. Nothing at all.

"Got anything planned tonight?" Reynolds wore sleeveless tops to work, and the thing that stood out most about her, even more than the amount of perfume she wore and the bright colours she painted her lips and nails, was the wobble of flesh on her triceps. It was all he could do not to stare whenever she moved an arm.

"No, not really."

"I've got to pick up Tom on the way home, and then we're going to that new restaurant in the city. You know the one?" She could rattle on for hours, unattended. "It's called Porsche, like the

car. Apparently they have—”

On she went, but Kevin had stopped listening.

Sharon “slut” Reynolds, the digital notes were saying. *She likes cock—any she can get.*

He started. “Oh.”

“Yes,” said Reynolds, “I’m looking forward to it. There’s nothing like indulging yourself every so often, is there?”

More text popped up: *Except yours. Your oily face makes her think of a sweaty clown.*

She prattled on, her triceps dancing. “I’d love to indulge every night if I could—”

He didn’t want to listen, didn’t want to see, but he couldn’t look away.

“Tom would never let me, though.” She laughed self-importantly.

Her husband will find out in six months’ time, and that night he will slice open her throat.

The words made him gasp, and when the lift doors pinged open, he staggered out. He tried to speak, to say something, but the clip notes remained in his view, and those words burned into him, searing their message into his consciousness every second he stood there.

“Everything okay, Kevin?”

The lift doors made to close, but discovered Sharon in the way and retracted again.

“Sorry,” he said, turning and hurrying for his car. “I—I just . . . my head hurts. It’s these new glasses. I have to go.”

He fumbled in his pocket for his keys as the display finally began to dim. He wiped a hand over his brow and his skin *was* greasy, just as those notes had said. As he pressed the car door opener on his key, he looked back to see Sharon heading from the lift, still watching him. Even from this distance he could see her confused look. Then he was in his car with the door closed and locked.

In his shiny Mazda, with perspiration rolling down his brow, Kevin covered his face with his hands, but the feel of the glasses made him pull them away again.

“I didn’t write any of that,” he said, forcing himself to be calm.

They’d said such horrible things; was any of it true? It couldn’t be. Notes can’t just appear by themselves; they can’t make themselves up. No, that crack, that hairline fracture, that suggestion of deficiency--it had to be causing the data to become corrupted.

A more disconcerting thought flickered across his mind and made his cheeks prickle with shame. With a disgusted shake of his head, he took the glasses off and tossed them onto the

passenger seat.

“Bloody useless things,” he said as he looked back at the lift.

Only the lift wouldn’t focus. The world was blurry.

He rubbed his eyes. Squinting didn’t help either; the fuzziness remained. Outlines but no details, shapes shading into one another, colours melting together, shadows and stains spreading everywhere—

“No,” he whispered in horror as he put the glasses back on. His feeling of dread swelled further when the world beyond those lenses refocused.

A car drove past him. It was her--Reynolds. His glasses activated, but the text from before was gone. In its place was *Sharon Reynolds. Her triceps wobble when she moves her arms. She really should wear different tops.*

He stared after her. When her car disappeared down an exit ramp, the clip notes vanished.

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Gary Steinbeck. Hopeless loser and the worst building manager ever. Took him three weeks to fix my leaking tap, met him at the front door.

“Hiya, Kev,” he said, grinning just as wide as the open door. “Get much shit from your workmates today?”

Kevin shook his head as he hurried inside. He held his breath, waiting for the clip notes to become corrupt.

“See, mate? I told you no one would hassle you, didn’t I? They suit you, they do.”

No further text appeared.

“Thanks,” Kevin said with relief. He turned away and headed for the stairs, the display fading from sight.

“Oh, Kev, wait; there’s mail for you.”

For some reason, the words made him stop. He felt as though a hand had gently touched the back of his scalp, and the sensation caused him to shiver. He rubbed the back of his head as he turned back to Steinbeck. The notes exploded into being.

Gary Steinbeck. He has masturbated to each of the women living here, they now said.

Kevin’s cheeks went red, but he didn’t look away.

Steinbeck strutted over to the row of mailboxes on the wall, searching the huge bundle of keys chained to his belt. “I saw the guy drop it off an hour or so ago. I thought it was a bit late, but

who knows what goes on in the city, am I right?” He shot a grin back Kevin’s way, then slid in the key, turned it, opened the flap, reached in, and pulled out a plain white envelope. “The fella was a bit . . . well, a bit *faded*, if that makes sense.”

A new line of text appeared as Steinbeck came towards him: *He was thinking of your mum three weeks ago—*

Kevin jerked away from Steinbeck’s outstretched hand as if it still dripped.

“Don’t you want it?”

Can’t blame him though; your mum is pretty tasty for someone in her fifties.

“What—?”

Oh, the things he has imagined doing to her--

“The letter, mate. Don’t you want it?”

“No, no—” Kevin turned and hurried upstairs.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Expecting bad news, eh?”

“Please, just leave me alone. I’m not feeling well.” Kevin fumbled with his keys, found the one he needed, and thrust his way inside.

“Well, I’ll slip it back into your box then, all right? All right, Kev?”

Without responding, Kevin shut and locked the door and leaned against it. He tore off the glasses and let the world smudge. He didn’t care. He didn’t want to know anymore. The corrupted notes were vulgar. Being forced to read such things about his mother—

Only that wasn’t true, and that knowledge made him more ashamed than before. It had been hard to turn away; no matter the terrible things they said, he had to read the notes to see what they might come up with next.

There was a tap on his door and he flinched.

“Sorry, Kev, it’s just me again. I thought I’d slip the letter under your door instead. No point in putting it back in the mailbox, is there?” There was a swish, and the letter slid into view between his legs.

“Right, then. I’ll chat to you later. Hope you feel better soon, mate.” Footsteps drifted off down the hall.

The envelope was barely discernible against the out-of-focus tiles. White against white,

framed with dull grey grouting. Linked to a faded man.

It was from *them*. It had to be.

If it were, opening that envelope would only send him further into this world of chaos with its clip note revelations. Inside would be a backstage pass to the carnival, sure to confirm that the glasses weren't faulty. And no matter how fantastical that idea was, he wasn't sure he was ready for those revelations. It was why he worked where he did. He dealt with phone calls, incorporeal beings, disembodied identities. Click, hang up, and they were gone, existing no more. Sure, he knew their tales of woe, but it didn't matter because he didn't know *them*. He'd only seen the customers in paper or digital form, never in the flesh. Their secrets, while personal, didn't seem real. *They* weren't real.

Blissful ignorance--that was heaven.

This though . . . this was hell.

Pressure began building behind his eyes. The light in the room pressed upon his blurred view, causing him to blink and squint. It felt like someone was moving closer to him with a spotlight, shining it into his eyes. A pulse now at his temple. A pounding in his head.

Horrified, Kevin put the glasses back on. The pain disappeared and the world refocused.

“This *can't* be happening!”

He went to cover his face with his hands, but as soon as he touched the plastic rims of the glasses, he pulled his hands away.

He looked down at the envelope again. There'd been no paperwork in the box when it had turned up, no consignment note, no sender's address or tax receipt. Only the damn glasses.

From Guinea Electronics.

As in the pig.

He didn't smile now, not like he had the first time. It wasn't so funny once you discovered that you were the subject.

With any luck, the envelope before him would contain contact details, a number to phone, an email address, something--*anything!* All he had right now was the PO box number where he'd sent his cheque, and he wanted something far more direct than that. He hadn't even managed to find a Web site.

Taking a breath, pursing his lips, Kevin picked up the envelope. He turned it over. No sender's details there either. A tickling chill caught him. Knowing that they'd sent someone to his

building to drop it off made him nervous. Of course they knew where he lived, but turning up in person somehow felt like an intrusion. When he told them he wanted to return the glasses, would someone knock at his door and ask why? Demand that he justify his decision?

Or worse, ensure that he couldn't tell anyone about them?

He felt like he was in freefall.

The envelope was light, as if all it contained was a single sheet of paper. He traced the outline of the flap before tearing it open. He drew out the page. It was sharply folded into three. Carefully, he unfolded it and read what was there.

Dear Mr Sanders, it began in a flowery script, Thank you for purchasing our all-new Notebook Glasses! Should you for any reason not be completely satisfied with your purchase, please contact us at the following e-mail address (Guineaelectronics@guinea.com) and we will arrange for a refund.

The letter was signed by a Dr Aperio.

Notebook Glasses; they should have made the news well before becoming a consumer product. Being advertised in a small press magazine—and in such an old-fashioned way—only made him feel more like a guinea pig.

It was amazing how quickly his ordered, mundane world had tilted off-balance. Chaos lurked so close, so near to the surface. And all it took was a hairline fracture to let it through.

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Kevin checked his email first thing in the morning, praying that the reply from the mysterious Dr Aperio would be there, ready to provide the solution to his problem so he could be done by ten, back to reality by half past with only a sour aftertaste of madness to endure. A taste that would fade as the day went on until this whole episode could be put down as a bad dream.

Simple.

He stared at his screen reflection as his computer booted up. His face was a ghost upon a graphical world and he was content to leave it as such. He didn't know what the notes might say about him should he look any closer. Everyone had secrets--that was part of life--but secrets weren't meant to be revealed.

When he'd looked into the mirror last night on his way to bed, the display had appeared with his name written clearly, a flashing cursor next to the last s in Sanders. It had been poised for revelation, flashing in time with his heartbeat, and as his pulse quickened, so too had the cursor's

flashing.

He'd looked away then, terrified of what might appear if he continued to stare, and he had avoided his reflection ever since.

Outlook had loaded, but his inbox was empty.

“Fuck!” He slammed his palm down on the desk, and the monitor shook its big head.

With a growl and a shake of his own head, he pushed the glasses back up his nose—*And stop sliding down, would you!*—then stood up. The chair squeaked. He bumped his knee on the desk, and that made him curse again.

Kevin stood for a moment in the doorway of his study and closed his eyes. He drew a deep breath and then exhaled. His hands were wrecking balls at his sides and he forced them open.

“C’mon, keep it together,” he told himself. “You just gotta have patience.”

Last night, after sending an email to Guinea Electronics, he'd searched the Internet for some mention of this Dr Aperio, but had found only a translation for that word. In Latin, *aperio* meant to uncover or reveal.

How typical.

He had gone to bed wearing the glasses. He hadn't wanted to, and had tried taking them off once more, but the resulting headache had been unbearable. Not even four double Jameson whiskeys had muted that pounding. And taking the glasses off this morning to see if the situation had changed sent a hammer blow across his brow and set him staggering. Gasping, trembling, barely able to remain standing, Kevin had fumbled them back on, and the pain had vanished.

But it had been worse than anything before. Far worse than last night.

And now, as if all that weren't enough, the bloody things no longer fitted. Tight on his ears, the arms too long, heavy against his nose. He slid a finger up behind one ear, under the curling plastic, and massaged the raw skin. He wanted to take them off and rub his nose, but he daren't go further. As it was, a low threatening pulse started in his temples. He quickly took his finger away.

From beneath his frustration, he heard the relentless tick-tocking of the clock in the dining room. With a sigh, he trudged over to it and watched the uncaring second hand go about its business.

Work in fifty minutes, and how much fun was that going to be? Especially after what had happened yesterday. He would have to apologise to Sharon for the way he'd acted; otherwise, things would be uncomfortable, no matter how much he tried to ignore them. Would she have told

anyone? Possibly. Maybe that man had been by again. Slipped another letter into his mailbox—

He flinched.

It was possible, he thought, snagging hold of the passing idea before it was gone. Guinea had hand-delivered him a letter yesterday; maybe they'd done so again in reply to his email. It was an odd way to conduct business, but he didn't care right now; so long as there was a letter waiting, they could have sent it via penguin and he wouldn't care.

He went to the door and pressed an ear against it. There were ten apartments in the two-storey complex, and most of those who lived here worked regular hours. They were often gone before he was; before his world had gone a vibrant shade of madness, he would sit drinking his morning tea, listening to those who lived on his floor leave, counting off the closing doors and passing footsteps one by one. The only two he'd encountered on a day off were Miss Taylor, the ground floor witch, and Clive Bingham, on his floor, who kept all sorts of odd hours.

But he had done no counting this morning and was going to have to risk it. He was running out of time to do otherwise.

He snuck open the door and looked up and down the dim, tiled hallway. To his left, the only potted plant was thin and frail, badly in need of a dose of sun. But even with the blinds fully open, the sun would never reach it.

His heart was thrumming loudly as he crept out and quietly closed his door. He headed down the hallway and paused at the top of the stairs to peer down.

The glasses framed his world in black, like a border for his madness, but no one was in this silent picture. He dried his sweaty hands on his legs and took a deep breath. That letter *had* to be there.

He started down—

—as Steinbeck and the blue-haired old witch from Number Two entered through the front doors of the foyer.

“Ah, morning, Kev,” Steinbeck said with a tight smile. His black hair was tied into a ponytail. He held a polystyrene coffee. “How're you going today? Any better?”

The notes flashed up before Kevin could look away.

Gary Steinbeck. He has masturbated to each of the women living here.

He was thinking of your mum three weeks ago. Can't blame him, though; your mum is pretty tasty for someone in her fifties. Oh, the things he has imagined doing to her--

Kevin grabbed the handrail as a second virtual box appeared in his view, hovering to the right of the old lady's face:

Jean Taylor. The old bitch from the ground floor, Apartment Two—

He hadn't entered anything about her yet; these notes shouldn't exist! But still more text appeared.

She's sleeping with Steinbeck.

Sex for rent, it's a good deal. Been going on for three years next Thursday—

"Guess not, huh?" Steinbeck said. He glanced at Miss Taylor, who raised her eyebrows knowingly. She wore glasses too, old-style horn-rims. Did she see the world the way he was seeing it? Could she read his hidden secrets every time she looked at him?

"No," Kevin croaked, feeling dizzy. Vile images of wrinkled skin and thrusting hardness spilled across his mind.

"You need anything, then? Want me to call you a doctor?"

"No, I-I think I need to go back to bed."

"Sure you're okay, Kev?"

A new line flashed up in both displays simultaneously: *The things the old witch can do with her false teeth....*

Kevin groaned, unable to stop his mind from creating images to go with those words.

"Kev, mate, you don't look so good."

Kevin turned and lumbered back towards his apartment before the two downstairs could get any closer. He slammed the door behind him, bolted it, and then ripped off the glasses. He flung them across the room and wiped his hands on his shirt.

Pain blasted him.

He cried out and fell to his knees, clutching his head as the claw hammer fell across his skull, ripping it open and mutilating what was inside. He crawled blindly after the glasses, his fingers searching, finding, and then fumbling them back on—

In a heartbeat, the pain was gone.

Kevin fell onto his side and curled up into a ball. He covered his face with his hands, sickened by the feel of cold plastic, but needing to block out the world and all its black-rimmed secrets, be they truth or lies, secrets or damnations. The warm plastic of the glasses felt alive under his fingers; he could feel a pulse—faint, but regular--throbbing through them.

He lay there as those uncaring seconds built up into disinterested minutes, staring into darkness, trying to ignore the brightness of hell, but the damnable flames were relentless.

Trapped by a pair of glasses. He thought he should've been laughing at the absurdity of it all, but he couldn't. It didn't seem funny at all.

With a forlorn groan, Kevin struggled to his feet and phoned his boss, Tony Morris. There was no way he could make it in to work today. Be it corrupted data or mystical truth from futuristic glasses, he couldn't handle a day filled with such things. He'd go blind from the obscene insights before the day was done.

"Okay," said Morris, "but no excuses tomorrow. We've got two guys heading off on leave, and I can't cover you. So bad gut or not, I need you here."

"I'll be in."

"Good. See you then."

Click. Hang up. Next, please.

Simple, when it worked as it should. Just a voice on the other end, no real person at all. And that way, you could make up whatever you wanted about those phone people, about their lives and trials, their tribulations. One could be a merchant banker wanting to insure his million-dollar house or a hobby farmer claiming flood damage--it didn't matter. They were only voices, conversations held between invisible people. People that didn't exist beyond the phone.

Click, hang up, and they were dead. Like they'd never even existed.

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Lunchtime. Kevin checked his email, but there was still nothing from Guinea.

He went back to bed and spent the minutes he wasn't dozing staring at the ceiling.

There were many such minutes.

*

Three o'clock. No phone call.

He checked his email again, hoping Guinea had contacted him.

They hadn't.

*

Seven o'clock. Nothing.

Kevin glared at the ceiling. Shadows crept across it as the sun went down. It would be dark

soon. Then morning would come, and he would have to go to work.

Wearing the glasses.

And wouldn't that be peachy?

*

Midnight. He'd barely slept, tossing and turning, throwing off his sheets, gathering them again when he began to tremble. He drank a bottle of water and then had to pee four times, and each time he'd visited the bathroom, he avoided his reflection in the mirror. It called to him, and he wanted to acknowledge it, but fear kept him from doing so. He wasn't ready to see what it would show him.

But it was more difficult to ignore each time.

At some point after his final visit, he tumbled into a restless sleep, only to wake when the sun's first light touched the day, dreams and all memory of sleep forgotten. He didn't sleep again after that.

*

Kevin waited until 8:23 a.m. before going to his door. He was going to be late for work, but he hadn't dared leave any earlier.

His prayers were becoming frayed, tattered. Regardless, he prayed to the God he wasn't sure heard him, and even now, heading to the door, he held his breath, praying one last time for that electronic ping to signal new mail.

But it never came.

"So much for God," he growled.

He'd not believed in God since he was twelve, when the Almighty had killed his younger brother by drowning him in Ballentine's Creek. What type of "loving father" would do that to a family? It was a question never answered, and it left him wondering if the old coot was in charge or whether dementia had set in to leave him rocking in the sun. Nothing had happened in the intervening years to change his mind. If anything, his ideas had only been strengthened.

But that didn't stop him from praying when the situation called for it; maybe in a moment of lucidity, the old bearded one would pick a prayer at random and listen to it. That prayer might be his.

A bead of sweat rolled down from his underarm. His shirt on both sides was already soaked and he'd only had it on for half an hour. He could feel perspiration down his back and between his

legs, too. He was going to stink by the time he made it to work.

Work.

The word and what it entailed made him go cold again. His skin prickled with new sweat.

But what other option was there? He couldn't afford to lose his job, and he couldn't take another day off. Couldn't remove the bloody glasses, either.

Kevin opened his apartment door and listened; all was quiet. He'd counted off the doors this morning, but not everyone who lived behind them had gone by. There were still people about, tenants he could encounter and see into the shadows of their souls.

He stepped out. He had no other choice.

Then someone downstairs started whistling, someone who was coming upstairs.

Kevin held his breath and listened, but it didn't take him long to recognize that tone.

"Ah, morning, Kev!" *Gary Steinbeck. Hopeless loser and the worst building manager ever. Took him three weeks to fix my leaking tap,* called from the stairwell. As the man ascended, Kevin noticed the envelope in one of his hands. White, unstamped. No address on the front.

A new line of text appeared in his view: *He used to think about killing himself.*

Kevin went cold.

Steinbeck stepped onto the first floor, black boots shining. He wore grey overalls, rolled up at the sleeves.

But lately he's thought about smothering the old ground-floor witch with a pillow while he fucks her—

The manager let go of the railing. He offered up the envelope as he approached. "I met that friend of yours downstairs again," he said, coming on like danger. "Been timing it well lately, eh? He's a strange one; don't really seem to have much about him. I've never met anyone so fuckin' grey."

It's boredom talking, but boredom is dangerous in some people—

"He was about to slip this into—are you okay?" Steinbeck stopped, five feet away, his arm extended, the white envelope like a gun.

But Kevin didn't know what to say because more text was appearing:

And Steinbeck, he's bored senseless.

A deep frown that went right into Steinbeck's eyes spread over his forehead. "I reckon it's time you saw a doctor, mate."

Once he kills the old bat from the ground floor Steinbeck will find a reason to live—

“Kev?”

Kevin lunged for the envelope, turning his shoulder into Steinbeck as he ripped the envelope from his hand. Steinbeck staggered backwards.

“Fucking hell, mate! What’re you doing? What the fuck is wrong with you these days?”

Kevin backed towards his apartment. He glanced behind him. His door was so close.

Another door up the hall opened and a grey head poked out. “What’s going on out here?” It was George Malouf, *Cries himself to sleep most nights. He is lonely--* “Is everything all right?”

George was in his late fifties--everything about him was. Like he’d opened his door into the new millennium right then. —*and has no self-confidence. The world is too much for poor old George.*

“Stay back, Mr Malouf,” said Steinbeck. “I reckon we’ve got ourselves a mad snake here.”

“No, no, no,” Kevin mumbled, shaking his head, bumping into his doorframe, trying not to read the notes but captivated by their sordid tales. He gripped the door and backed inside, unable to turn away from those virtual displays.

Another door along the hallway opened. *Clive Bingham, cheated at university to get his degree. Wouldn’t know a rock from a fossil,* stepped out with a curious look on his pale face. His red hair was ruffled, his cheeks stubbled.

Not that he cares; he’d much prefer to spend the day in bed with a shapely bottle of scotch and a joint, watching the porn he’s downloaded.

The displays merged together, and the text melted into a single sentence: *They’ll all be dead in two years’ time, and not a single death will be from natural causes.*

“No—” Kevin tumbled into his apartment, swinging the door shut and fumbling to lock it.

“No more, please—”

He pulled off the glasses, but before he could throw them across the room, pain ripped open his head. He screamed at the hands tearing his skull open and gouging out his brains, and as his vision exploded into whiteness, he managed to get the glasses back on.

The pain vanished. His head was back together, his vision in focus once more.

Slowly, painfully, the ghosts of display windows started to fade, taking their soiled words with them. They were taking longer to fade now, too.

The final sentence was the last to go:

They'll all be dead in two years' time, and not a single death will be from natural causes.

A loose thought twitched across his consciousness: the glasses hadn't activated on anything in his apartment. The kitchen, lounge, TV, sofa—nothing registered, and it hadn't for some time.

He looked down at the creased envelope in his hand. It would contain only a single sheet of paper, originally sharply folded in three, but now as deformed as the envelope. He also knew that the letter within would be written in a flowery script.

He smoothed the envelope as best he could and tore it open with hands that trembled.

Dear Mr Sanders, the letter inside began, We are sorry you believe your Notebook Glasses to be faulty. One of our sales consultants will arrive at 10 o'clock this morning to collect them from you and offer a refund.

Thank you again for trying Notebook Glasses.

As before, it was signed by Dr Aperio.

"Believe them to be faulty?"

Someone thumped against the door. "Kevin! What the hell's going on in there? You and I need to talk, pal. Do you hear me?"

"Please! Just leave me alone!"

"If you're on drugs, that shit's gonna stop, got it? Or else you're outta here!"

"I'm not! Please, just—"

"I'm fucking serious here, pal."

"Please, go away. Give me today; I'll explain everything tomorrow. Please."

There was silence from the other side of the door; then, "I should fucking have you done for assault."

Kevin laughed at that, and it was a horrible sound.

Steinbeck didn't say anything more.

Kevin could hear the manager telling other tenants that yes, he was okay, and no, he didn't need an ambulance. The fussing moved away towards the stairs, but it never faded completely. Every now and then he could hear a raised word: his name, "the police," "crazy" more often than any other.

Was he? Had he gone that way? Taken there by the glasses?

"I don't care," he said, too quietly to be heard by anyone. "I just don't care." He touched the glasses and his fingers flinched away. "Please just take these things away. I don't want them

anymore. I don't want to know—”

But that wasn't the truth, and he knew it. Knowing was okay; it was like reading the case files of his clients. More personal, but the basics were the same. There was the same sense of power over them, too.

No, it was the premonitions of death that he couldn't handle.

He closed his eyes. To hell with work, to hell with Steinbeck the fucking manager, to hell with the cops—if they turned up. He was going to wait here until that mysterious fellow arrived to take away the glasses and make his world normal again. To seal the crack. Because it was growing into a crevice with every passing second, and soon he would disappear down it into God-alone-knew-where. Maybe he'd come out on Adams' face.

He laughed again, then shut up. The laugh sounded even more frightening than it had before.

It was the sound of a lunatic.

*

Precisely at ten, there was a knock at his door. It was a hollow, oddly echoing sound, and it made his heart lurch even though he'd been expecting it.

He hurried to answer, but as he clasped the door handle in sweaty fingers, he paused. What if it was Steinbeck again, come seeking his explanation early? Or worse, the police?

They wouldn't understand. They sure wouldn't let him wait for the Guinea man to take away his madness.

He closed his eyes, pressed his forehead against the door for a second, and then, the decision made, stepped back and opened it. He was all out of choices.

A man stood on the other side, of medium build and dressed in a dull red-brown suit. He wore a pale grey tie. It was nearly the same colour as his skin. He wore black-rimmed glasses.

“Kevin Sanders,” he said, and it wasn't a question. His voice was as dull as he looked. On one breast, a flash of light bounced off the metallic logo of his company.

The logo looked exactly as Kevin had imagined it would look. He nearly laughed, but the memory of that sound the last time prevented him from doing so again.

The man's hair was sandy-brown and short--flat to his scalp. His eyes behind the lenses were the same listless brown as his hair. He looked as if he'd just tumbled out of an old sepia photo.

Nothing registered in Kevin's glasses when he made eye contact. He felt his heart skip again. The man on his doorstep appeared less real than the notes he'd been tormented by for the past two

days. Everything about him, from the way he looked to the sound of his voice brought Steinbeck's words back to him then *He's a strange one. Don't really seem to have much about him.*

"You want to return your glasses."

Kevin nodded, unable to speak.

"You don't like what they show you. You don't like to know."

"They--they're not working properly. There's a crack in one of the lenses. They don't show the notes I make."

The man smiled a beige smile, and all the answers of the world were contained in that expression. Kevin thought he shrugged too, but the movement was so slight that he couldn't be sure.

Without saying anything further, the man entered the apartment, forcing Kevin to retreat before him. He closed the door with a gently swinging backhand. It latched shut.

"The fracture is a standard part of the design. It is necessary for them to work." The man reached out a hand. "I will take the glasses from you."

"I, I can't take them off."

"If you give them up freely, the pain will cease."

"What do you mean?"

"You have to want to surrender them--not through fear or loathing, but because you do not want to know."

Kevin felt his legs tremble. He gripped the back of the sofa to stop himself from collapsing. To know the deep, dark secrets of the soul. The truth to being human. He looked at the man before him and suddenly blushed. This man in dull colours could see his soul, could hear how it cried; he knew the truth buried deep beneath this façade he presented to the world—even presented to himself. Kevin stood naked before him.

And more, the man knew when he would die.

"What's it like, knowing all the time?"

The man cocked his head, and that tortured smile continued to pull at his lips.

To know people's thoughts and desires, the sins and secrets of the world—how much weight would that be to bear? How much power would that knowledge bring?

"It is your choice," said the brown man. "But sometimes not knowing is better."

"And other times?"

“Other times,” the man’s horrid smile made Kevin step back, “it is like being God.”

A dangerous thrill rippled through him. If ever a word symbolized power, it was that one. Power was one of the fundamentals of existence, what everyone strived for in one way or another. Even love and responsibility--weren’t they just control over another?

“But first you have to accept who you are. Look into the mirror and listen to your soul. Read its death.”

Kevin wiped his brow; he was sweating profusely.

“But be forewarned: once you do, there will be no returning them. No taking them off. They will mould to your head as if they were built for you and you alone. They will become a part of you.”

Kevin stared at him. All those secrets. All that power. Could he handle something like that? Or would it wear him down too, like it had this bowed man before him? Was that why God no longer answered?

“You will know the world, and its souls will cry out to you. You will hear them always. They will never be silent, and you will never escape their pitiful wails. You will know how everyone dies.”

Kevin thought of Gary Steinbeck and Jean Taylor, of the knowing looks they shared in front of him. He thought of Sharon Reynolds and Tony Morris, of the people in his apartment. He thought of those who’d crossed him, and the ones who ignored him and treated him like a fool. Those who’d been promoted ahead of him, and those who had found love in his place. He thought of the world passing him by as he hid in his apartment amongst various horror and sci-fi magazines.

“There will be no going back. It is both a curse and a blessing. But it is your choice.”

Kevin stood there. He didn’t know what to do.

The man before him smiled.