

Leah. (Numquam se minus solum quam cum solus esset)

By Adair Broughton

The trees danced with autumnal breeze but his thoughts already reflected winter. He watched the odd leaf silently fall, enjoying the display of freedom before the stronger winds and the loosening bonds would come and strip the trees bare within days. He already felt as barren as the tree would soon feel naked.

Every year he would sit on the old chair enjoying the colours change with the seasons, from the hope of spring to the torment of winter. He liked the greens and the lush variety that each could offer. Comparison and contrast produced scenery. He felt at peace with the strange reds, browns, yellows and even purples that the oncoming autumn hue gave to the leaves.

The melange of colour was both distinct in its individuality and enticing with its combined patterns, as natural as a butterfly's wing, but the symmetry was hidden, too subtle for the eye to embellish. It became a mishmash of colour the more he stared at it, as if he became disconnected from the wonder that the leaves of autumn held. He had not felt this disparate from reality before, as if his mind was separate from his body and his body was distinct from thought.

Wings flapping and the rustle of leaves signified a bird flying from the tree as if his thoughts alone had disturbed it. It broke the momentary spell, brought him back to the grainy and cold wood felt by his hand resting on the chair on his porch. In his other hand was a magazine, curled up like a mediaeval scroll.

A ray of sun, the final touch of warmth for the year stretched itself through the thinning leaves and stroked him as gently as an adoring woman would her cat. It was soothing, like a last goodbye but without the inherent sadness. He could accept the disappearing season, regular as clockwork even if it always seemed to end too soon. The seasons should be doors to new times, places, worlds, ideas and thought but all they became were an entrance and an exit.

He looked again at the tree, at its thick trunk, how solidly it knew what it wanted and just remained there, content. A tree was alive and yet had no life of its own, gave beauty to so many people, gave fresh air and homes to birds, was a barometer of the seasons and the father of furniture, provided fruits and nourishment and who really valued them or considered them in their entirety? Many blossomed and died all within a year. If only he could change with the seasons with the dance of the deciduous.

If only birth and death were contained within the same year it would make things easier, hope would always have a fresh start. Each year would be a new life instead of the slow hidden ageing that inflicted itself upon everyone.

Strange that people added layers to themselves with the onset of cold weather as the trees freed themselves of cover.

The ray of sun soon disappeared, hidden behind the languid slow moving grey clouds that dominated this time of year. Winter was the dilatory encroachment even though

his thoughts were already fallow and cold. He looked at the sky, surprised that the incandescent beam had even managed to find a gap in the grey vapours that were now suffocating the blue from the sky. There were four months of the year left and already it felt like a distant friend.

This time of year always made him feel lonely but something had recently changed within him. He could not pinpoint exactly why it had occurred, what was different in his life. The same routine propelled him onto the future without him ever embracing anything of the present. He had always adored the melancholy that only a solitary existence could give. Self-pity provoked emotion and emotion gave him a value. He felt the choice was deliberate, that he was in control and governing self. So why did he feel denuded by delicate but gradually dominating thoughts that loneliness was not a feeling to be in awe of. Self-sacrifice was for saints or for those that wanted the proof of love.

It was not a beautiful and wonderful thing to prove how much you loved someone if you would destroy every hope and dream and reality of being with that same person to show it. He was glad he had never been in that position. He was sad he had never been in that position.

Would people destroy everything just to prove a point?

He thought back to the times he had been happy, could have been happier but there was always something that paralysed him to commit. Fate was his lover, no one else. He pushed those who got the closest furthest away; those who stayed far enough away to avoid his defensive attack would become strangers.

He sometimes wished he could lose himself to painting like his father, have a reason as powerful as art to seduce life but not to betray the lurching hopelessness that governed creativity. His father would bury himself to his artwork for days; commit everything to it, as if the canvass absorbed his life force.

Unlike his father, he had nothing to lose himself to, apart from the mundane. He read books as a pastime not as an integral emotional retreat to garnish his life with greater perspective. He listened to music but it never carried him away, it just reminded him of films or a period of his life he would rather forget. He had no special song like there was no special person.

This was not to say he had no redeeming qualities or walked round with the weight of despondency and depression. His dry humour made him popular in work. He taught computing at a local agricultural college, a sure sign of the times. He did not let bitterness steal away personality. He was liked. Trouble lay hidden and trouble was the silent assassin.

Without the waning suns caress he looked back down at his magazine, opened it up to the small article that had somehow become the personification of all his new feelings. Unless they were feelings that had always existed, but had been buried too deep, forming roots before the flower broke through the surface to show its allegiance to the beauty inherent in nature.

The irony was lost on him that something could flower from this in the season of winter's cold rest.

It was just an advert and only a chance glance had even made him read it. Yet, it had intrigued him, caught him unawares, on a whim or a moment of weakness, which had then grown. He had picked up the phone and hastily put it down, shook his head and forgotten about it for two days. Now he had taken it to his chair, to help him reflect and think on what it promised. It was an ideal solution; the more he thought of it the greater his feeling of need.

He was glad he lived outside of that City of Rain; that he at least had greenery and flowers, birds singing and scenery of mountains. He had fresh air, or at least it seemed fresh due to the breeze that did not struggle to make its way through the regimented, featureless buildings, lined like soldiers defending modernity, keeping the fumes of too many cars always too close.

He had the nature that flourishes rather than the concrete topologies of pity his father had once used to describe the city. The city was a giant tomb creating its own polluted demise.

He had the sounds of seasons, the different songs of birds and the distinct calls of animals that communicated in howls and screeches. Nature had the voice that few listened too and even less understood but meant so much more than the howls of car horns and the sirens of humanity.

If he ever wanted to know what it would be like to be buried alive he would move to the city.

But how did he know if he had never lived there, if his father spoke little of his time there? Maybe he blamed the city for his father's failure at communication.

His father's silence was not disconcerting because it was the norm and however unsettling for a young man to realise he may or not be loved as much as his contemporaries were, it also built character and allowed him a lot of time to think and to roam the countryside he lived in. Not being loved was freedom. There was no one to let down.

Nature's voice whispered to him but he could never translate it. He could never be a part of it and that slow realisation was as cold to him as the autumn dawn.

It was not always possible to think that clearly and to dismiss the warmth that other people could generate. Love was not an abolition of freedom, it should be what frees the soul to feeling and compassion and maybe it was this realisation that had pushed him into taking the magazine wherever he went, hoping at some point he would be able to make that call. If he could not create the confidence to call maybe the psychology of advertising would beckon instead.

He would not be able to tell his father. He would not get told off for hurting other people's feelings. If only his father could care for him like his father seemed to care

for the girls he would push away. Why did his father care for them more than his own son?

They still spoke but a distance existed between them, a hidden barrier that could not be breached, and a valley that neither could cross to embrace, like parallel train tracks running so close but the trains would always miss each other passing by in a blur, heading in polar directions.

Maybe it wasn't the city at all but the more comprehensible fact that he reminded his father of his mother, something in the eyes or the mannerisms that had matured with age and had gradually turned his father away because the pain had grown with the increasing similarities.

He wanted to be more like his mum. His father lay covered with thought, entrenched to a deep quiet that beget mystery as much as secrecy. His mum may have needed a response to feeling that never came. That response could be flight and the only sad birds were those in a cage. His birth may well have been the realisation that it would never happen. What was their history, how had they met? There were so many unknowns and impossible histories congealed to a past.

He could understand that; appreciate why she left even if it meant a look into the mirror of guilt. She had to leave before she knew her child. He knew he could forgive because need is more powerful than a moral high ground that could still flood with tears.

For now he had his own issues to worry about and come to terms with.

If he did not understand his dad it did not mean he did not care for him or conversely, try and add more meaning and importance to an issue that did not impinge to any great extent on their daily lives. It was as hard to free his mind of these thoughts, as it was to continually think of them.

There were things he enjoyed, going for walks and just losing time to abandoned memory. He was nice to be around; it was not like his thoughts impinged on the surface of happiness that was reflected to other people. The thoughts were his alone, pulled by the seasons like the moon pulled by tide, never unmasked and never baring soul. The doors opened whenever he wanted them too. A smile cost nothing so it was a price he was prepared to pay.

His relationships always started with a smile, which sparkled as brightly as the dew in a spider's web and catching women equally unawares. He shimmered with subtlety. They were paralysed to oppose but did not know that because they gave themselves freely. It was only the sudden endings that were the problem. After weeks of comfort and promise, the sudden ending would hurt both those involved and sometimes he would hate himself as much as his father appeared to hate him while he lambasted him for causing those endings.

He was both the spring lamb and the bull straining at the gate ready to charge.

His father had a right to comment, and was justified if he thought about it. His father had never met anyone else since his mother had left. Had it been a painful labour he wondered, the only gift he could give his mother was that he would be some comfort to his father, give him an identity and the need to worry about someone other than himself.

Is that why he turned women away, to be more like his dad or to end it before he could hurt them even more? Endless hours of self-torment had produced no answers. Self-pity was his only sanctity on occasion. He was an empty shell, delicately painted to hide flaw. Even if his surface were scratched the superficial flaws would cover the ingrained ones.

He was no waste of paint.

Did his father hate the fact that his son willingly drove these women away while his wife had actually left him? That was a bitter pill to swallow but what medicine could give back years?

If he could give a reason he would have but years of introspection and hope that he would change had never accumulated to anything more than hypotheses of reason. He feared losing some innate centre of self, the adverse of what love should be. People decried the fact they couldn't give enough, he punished himself for holding back on not giving enough. But it was his life and his decisions and quite often he never thought about any of this until it was much too late.

He was happy until he thought about things, until reality seemed to condense from the vapours of romance. Then he would turn inward and the smiles would show wariness, the first sign that something had gone wrong. It was not long before the fire turned to ice and tears could not melt what was already cold.

His dad had once owned a bookshop but was reluctant to talk of that part of his life. There were no bookshelves of all his favourite books he could not bare to part with. Often he wished he could read a book that his dad had read, to be able to relate to him at least in shadows cast by a common object.

When a person read a book, they were entering others worlds and minds. To know you had been in such an intimate place and someone else you knew had to, it formed a bond, as if they became two members of a secret society. He wouldn't even have to talk about the book; just know it was something both had shared.

It seemed his father liked to banish things from his life, his way of spiting himself because his wife had left him.

He had chanced the question one night.

“Father, why if you owned a bookshop, do you not have any books?”

Silence had followed but later that evening a surprise visit to his room followed a small knock on his door. There was no introduction, as if the question had only been asked seconds before.

“Son, because that is gathering knowledge from outside of self. It took me a while to realise that. I left the city when your mother...was pregnant.... and for some reason I started to withdraw and then to draw, around the time of your birth...and I realised that was a way people could live with true knowledge. Forever.”

Then his dad had left, the momentary sparkle of life in his eyes once more pushed back to the dull ambiguity that seemed to deny spirit. Yet he had seen it, knew there was a fire whose embers still burned deep within. Then he thought of the picture of his mum, knew why the paintings seemed alive. His father's life was lost to translation in normal human response but transformed on canvass. From that moment on he believed artists had hidden worlds they really lived in. Painting was just something they did to keep a contact with society, one step in the door. He was not part of that world, had been given no key of talent to enter nor any wisdom from which to pick the lock to force entry.

Only now years later, watching leaves fall and putting the jigsaw of self together could he admit where he had been failing. The self is made up from pieces of the past put together to form a consistent persona and creating the picture that other people view. Art is created to be seen. He needed someone in his life to complete his, because he had nothing else. His father's comments had been a central part of that jigsaw.

No more was said but the words haunted him for the days and weeks that followed. It hadn't stopped him reading but he felt his dad had taken something away from books after that time, which other people were entitled to and could take for granted. Was that why he read but did not become integrated into the feelings and powerful messages of the books? He would not credit his father with such incipient nastiness, a deliberate attempt at destroying his enjoyment of the written word.

Maybe the real problem was he thought too much and saw things that didn't exist.

He had hated that word 'forever' from that moment. It was too dramatic and incongruous. It was odd and he was just a kid who could only analyse things slowly during the years that followed. It was funny how small things become big things later, like words were seeds as much as acorns.

When he heard that word it always took him back to that conversation, every word and pause perfectly memorised but each time with nurtured meaning, ageing like good wine, intoxicating him with deeper layers of meaning. He could only see from his perspective not his fathers but it was clear his father had spent the hours between question and answer in thought, as if he himself had not known why he had not kept the books or had refused to admit it.

The answer although out of place, was heartfelt, a rare sign that his fathers outward stoicism was a cover for a stormy interior.

It made no sense to sacrifice words to paint. They were different, not in competition and did not entangle or encroach on each other's territory. The lack of books probably

signified a complete closure of his fathers past life in that city of rain. He could just not admit or mention that.

It was another example of hidden thought, something the magazine advert could change. It was a cry to be different from his father, a silent shout at change.

So he bought his own books from the student bookshop instead and was yet to find the book that would change his life and worldview. He had read many of the classics, could discern the intellect and genius behind them that bonded the pages and produced stories that should have pushed his feelings to their limits. Yet none had grabbed him and engrossed him to the detriment of the world outside, not enough that he could shut down and immerse into the worlds described. He knew it was something he lacked rather than the books. He was disconnecting from emotional commitment with the absorption of those words. This was about him, not his father.

He had never had the concentrated look in his eye like his father had whilst painting. Nor had he ever buried himself to new depths with creation like he had seen his father whilst painting. His father always painted people although he never knew them. He had explicitly been told to stay away from the painting shed but he went anyway, the raging brushstrokes appeared to possess his father as if he was forced to paint to even breathe. Colours swirled as they caressed the canvass. He never saw the final product, never knew where they went.

Painting had been an adult world for so long and when he too became an adult he felt it was a child's world and he had stopped finding places to hide and secretly watch his father, his bare torso, and frequent sips of wine. He used to sit in the tree for hours so even the birds did not fear him. He didn't know if he liked the peace more than seeing his father in his secret empire. As an adult he had realised it was wrong to impinge on his fathers space but he did not regret the times he spent watching him. It was time spent with his father even his father was unaware.

Even from a distance he could ascertain the whirlpool of colour that swam in his eyes. He had no knowledge of style but he knew art was a subjective thing so why was he not allowed to see something so beautiful? What happened to the pictures once they had been finished?

Maybe that banishing served a purpose, was what his father was afraid of him seeing, a lack of control?

He had never been controlled like that, or managed to lose himself to anything to that extent so he had given up watching his father, had gone to the local college and started smoking and drinking. He had become bored with that too and had begun to spend more time alone. There was a void, as grey as the clouds that had stolen the last ray of sun pointing to the magazine.

His mother had left shortly after childbirth, which had meant a life of guilt and a continual insecurity about whether his dad truly adored him or hid the fact that he hated him. He had never known the answer nor probably would. How could his mum have abandoned him like that?

This was why he needed someone close, to talk things through, to assure him of his normality, to guide him into a relationship of meaning. There were so many inconsistencies about what he felt and thought he knew. On the surface no one would see these things. Did everybody have so many worries and things kept hidden? Was it the norm for a person to deny to other people how many problems they actually had?

His main condolence stood above the stairwell, bridging the gap of the downstairs life and the upstairs sleep, guiding and protecting as he passed on his way to work, as he had passed so many times on his way to school. She had been there, every day; never once had he not paused to look.

There were no photos of his mother, just one portrait his father had made. He often stared at it, could feel his mother inside of it. He knew that was the brilliance of his father's painting rather than wishful thinking of her spirit being contained within.

How many other paintings could seduce the viewer like that, make them feel absorbed by it. He almost wanted to step into it, just be there with his mother.

He knew every detail of that picture, every line and individual hair masterly painted. Once as a child he had run to his room crying, hiding himself under the covers for hours, thinking he had heard his mum cry for help, to be freed from the painting. He had learnt then that his mind had some control over him, could torture him in either subtle or non-subtle ways.

Still, his decisions to force people away were his own, not some hidden and unnatural dualism of self that threatened to exist and encroach more and more. He could fight this now. This magazine could be more than a fly swatter.

He had closed his eyes every time he had passed that photo but a new voice beckoned him to look, explaining that he should at least look at her if he could not free her. He wanted his mother to be there, somehow. He longed for that to be her voice. He was also aware reality could not create that. Yet it showed he had ways of comforting himself also. Thinking of his mum did not have to be an abject experience.

She had left him, not just his father. He should have hated her but the anger forged love rather than bitterness.

Asking about his mother as a child produced only monosyllable answers from his father. He had tried to become close to his father in asking about his mother but it seemed to increase the divide between them. Question soon became passing comments and comments soon became silence. He could create his own image of his mother, and maybe things were better that way.

There were no conversations between them now, just passing words that drifted aimlessly. His father was as abrupt in his denunciation that he had left another girl as he was consistent in his general silence but even that momentary show of verbal attrition was a weapon rather than a bond. He was not asked to leave nor did he find he wanted to. They had each other even if it was only because of an unmentioned hope that one day his mother would return.

It didn't matter what she was only what she could be. That picture was his to keep, to look at but what did his mother have of him? If only there was one photo of his mother, taken from a camera that could not lie, rather than the eyes of a man so close to him that he was a stranger.

His father had never drawn a portrait of him. Often as a young boy he had lay on his bed wondering why his father did not want a picture of him on the wall. Was that proof enough of his fathers true feelings?

Yet he did not carry around that burden as if it was his right or a justification to act and feel as he did. If people were products of their childhood and environment he found nothing different in his life to determine why he felt comfortable with loneliness. As a single child with a single parent his life had been the same as anyone else's; a distance from parent and a feeling that although friendships could surround him, there was never anyone that really 'understood' him.

Everyone when they reached a certain age decided not to be understood.

Loneliness was often a personal tribute to self-pity. He was only lonely when he thought about it, after he had pushed another friend away, like he had once heard you stop being happy once you ask yourself if you are happy. The moment has gone; in its place, thought and thought was the beginning of melancholy or even depression.

It was for this reason that the advert had struck a chord within him, chimed a melody that might just be the answer to why he felt or acted as he did. At the very least it appealed to him, intrigued him into possibility. He liked the name so maybe that was the attraction. Somehow, the fact that it was trite, meant that none of it was too serious

The advert read; 'The Relationship. For those who can't be alone and for those that can.'

He should have laughed, felt annoyed with himself that he could take it seriously but he wanted to test the limits of it, have somebody he could talk to, and get to understand him without having to commit. What should have been a sad reflection on him became a distinct opportunity for answers.

It had made no sense until he had read it and reread, trying to find something to put him off, to make it seem as shallow as it should have been.

It was a chip embedded into the brain. It sounded impossible but if the advert was true it was a revolution and statement to the extent of humanities progress. He could allow someone close to him but still have his freedom. It was a way he could allow someone inside himself but without the fear of the unknown that constantly held him back. It was an experiment in consciousness, of technology, of what it actually meant to be human. The more he had thought about it, the fewer problems he found, and the more real it became. This was not science fiction; it was just the same as chatting on a mobile, online or to a friend. It was to get to know someone by having them in your mind, talking by thought.

He had made the phone call and arranged a meeting. Excitement grew by the day.

It was secretive. Although he thought he would pay he found out private investors were funding generation one. He agreed to it being an experiment. The advert referenced a company called 'Relationship' but that was only a cover to make it seem reputable, to attract people of genuine interest. They freely told him all this.

He agreed to take a psychological profile test and interview and also sign a form of silence.

The speed with which it all seemed to happen made his life seem a blur, a sudden detachment from the man who had sat on the chair reflecting on his choice to call. He had managed to do it, to make that change, to add a dimension to the jigsaw.

They explained the technology to him, how it would work, how he could feel he was going crazy and that it would take time to get used to. Some people could not cope with the intimacy, were too scared about what the other people might find out. They were very choosy about who could have a chip; understanding the importance of people's sanity was only just more valuable than results.

There were in fact two devices to be placed inside his skull, one residing near the homunculus the other via the ear. Surgery would be minimal due to their size. There would be no scar.

He asked how it would work and was given the watered down summary that made everything seem easier than it really was. But they did answer any question he asked. He felt comfortable, and part of something.

Thoughts were distilled and somehow mapped, brain patterns translated and sent to a satellite, which is then sent to a small chip that re-imaged them by vibrating the inner ear. It was the same as if being spoken too but directly to the mind. Whatever he thought was sent out but only when the technology was switched on. It was no different than using two mobile phones except the mode of communication was silent. How long it had taken them to translate the different brain waves? Was it an accumulation of years of research or a chance breakthrough?

It was only later that he found out that the government has funded this technology. What better way to communicate in war than with silence, a mind-to-mind link? But there had been an amalgam of issues the government was too scared to allow. People had to kill in war, they had to press buttons and pull triggers. If they saw a man be killed and thoughts could be recorded, it would be endangering the soldiers in a court of law. Having a man controlled by someone else inside their head might hinder instincts. They wanted soldiers that did not question. What if it could be proven they got enjoyment from the killing or were unsure if they had to kill to be safe and knowing any of these doubts were recorded would only hinder decision or undermine the army's integrity.

The military had commissioned the technology to use on civilians first. When it could be understood better, only then could they advance protocols and use it. This all seemed a world away from why he had been interested but he knew technology had a

surprising way of becoming more useful than the actual things it was designed for. Just like the Internet.

In the midst of all this a company had seen how important this new technology was. They had committed to do testing and research for the government but they knew their money was to be made in giving access to the public. It was this company he dealt with.

Nobody need fear being lonely again. People would pay a lot of money for that concept.

Once they agreed he was prepared and comfortable they gave him some options. They showed him a list of three names. He chose Leah, which was the dubious acronym for 'Live Evincive Auto Homunculus.' What Leah had to do with the somatosensory cortex he had no idea but he thought he should not question it, act as dumb as they expected him to be. Leah was probably someone's girlfriend, the moniker a nod to please her.

Was this three actual people he was choosing between? If that was the case, why didn't *they* get to choose?

It was a strange existence for a few days, leaving a note for his father, heading to the outskirts of the city of rain to have the implants fitted. At least he did not have to enter the city fully. Part of him was intrigued but there was so much change going on in his life right now that he knew it would not be a wise decision to even spend a day there.

That was something for the future.

He was hungry but he had been warned not to eat the night before. A small glass of water the only greeting in the white walls of the alien autopsy room. At least that was what it felt like with the starch crisp sheets unwilling to even crease while he lay down. With clinical politeness a nurse with an ashen face that seemed to blend into the walls injected him with some liquid sleep.

The last thoughts were of clouds and the portrait of his mum and a sense of 'what am I actually doing?'

Then he woke.

Nothing had changed.

He rubbed the dreamless sleep from his eyes still surrounded by the walls of purity.

There was no voice in his head but he became vaguely aware of the previous conversations that mentioned he could turn 'Leah' off when needed. Maybe the default was off until he actually turned her on.

A nurse walked passed noticed he was awake, a cold stare of recognition made him aware that he was at least alive. He rubbed his head and felt the small area where his

hair had been cut for surgery. It was nothing wearing a hat for a few days couldn't resolve.

Throughout the day he was asked if he was ok. By evening he was told he could drive and he was left alone on the highway of thoughts and music. The drive was not long and the fields that fed populations soon became woods, which in turn became the familiar forests and mountain sprawl that signified home.

He had another appointment with 'Relationship' in two days. Maybe then he would get to meet 'Leah'.

Even while he drove home he couldn't help feel he was being watched and followed yet there was nothing different about him. He could not even tell someone had been in his mind, had ripped open his skin and drilled through bone to place an alien object in his brain.

He felt nothing but he sensed something.

The scenery became a blur as he sped home. It was like he was showing off, driving a girl on a date for the first time, showing how brave he was, wanting her to beg him to stop, a sign that he was in control and command. Instead of scaring her, he was only scaring himself. He broke sharply, the tyres crying out in pain.

He put his head on his hands, which were resting on the steering column. How could I let someone inside of me when I can't even live with my own thoughts?

The only sound was his breathing. No other presence existed. Why did he feel he was going mad at the one time he needed to be sane?

He drove slowly home and from a distance could see the lights of his house. His father may still have been up, awake and painting but he would not disturb him. It felt like he had done something wrong, and had to sneak past his father's room for fear of being caught.

The chip was anonymous. The name Leah had not yet been transformed into a person. Did she have her chip fitted on the same day? What he was doing was satisfying his own needs but inadvertently fulfilling his fathers. The faceless could not be included in the absconded. Goodbye would be as easy as pressing a button and no one had to know or even get hurt.

The company had mentioned it did not matter if they never became friends. Leah was one of three who seemed compatible with him. They could always find someone else. From a different perspective, it was the most expensive dating agency ever.

Yet what would happen if one person felt more than the other? Under whose discretion would a decision be made? Nothing was as simple as an advert, he knew that but many questions began to emerge the more he thought about things. Was this why he had been chosen because they realised he would question things?

The technology dismissed any fears of embarrassment about anything else. He was special to be a part of this, to be chosen as someone with a strong enough personality and adaptive enough to disengage from the disorientation of having someone else intrude in the mind.

Could there be anything more personal than knowing another persons mind?

He didn't want to wait those two days. He kept forcing himself not to think certain things, worried that when it switched on even his greatest secrets would be known if he thought about them. The more he wanted to shut down the neural networking of his memory the more it punished him for his futility in attempting it.

It was impossible to disengage from thought, and part of him wanted to see how far he could push the boundaries of introspection. The best way of doing that was to let someone else in, but also to understand someone else, to see how another person's thoughts compared to his. It was an experiment for him as much as the company. He realised his decision to do this was more than simple loneliness.

Ironically it was about him getting to know himself more.

He had signed freely; the excitement of the present had no thought of the future. Now he was at home creeping past the shed, dim shadows of his father painting late into the night.

The two days passed quickly. He was at the meeting and had just been told that he should not keep it on full time; they recommended an hour or two a day at most. He also had to sign a form that he was not allowed to meet 'Leah' until at least a year had passed as the experiment would be used to ascertain and gauge real feelings over a significant amount of time.

What would stop him asking for her address anyway?

He agreed to this but found it strange the company were dictating a relationship. He had paid for the service and would do what he wanted but he didn't want to rush ahead with things, he could see some sense in what they said.

This time the drive home was gentler. His window was rolled down and he didn't mind the cool autumnal breeze that filtered into his lungs and gently caressed his face.

It was the evening time and he had been for a walk. His hunger had gone and he had missed tea. He had the small device in his hand that registered a green light for him and a red light for 'Leah'. Her light would not come on until he had switched it on, a basic precaution so neither would wait until the other went on first. There was no invisible hiding.

He knew talking to her would require no noise but he didn't want to hide in his bedroom and have the first conversation. Instinctively he climbed up the tree he had always rested upon when watching his father. Many of the leaves had gone but his dark clothes and still posture blended him into the shadows of the branches.

It was a while until he switched it on. The first stars had appeared welcoming the night. It was cool and cloudless, a night of owls and moonlight. He felt like he had when reading the advert. How could he become shy when nobody was there to see him? Talking at a distance, to people unseen could not be an evolutionary trait. He wanted to laugh at himself but his nerves reminded him that this was new to everyone. He was just an average man lost to the even more insignificant country but as far as he knew was involved in the research of an experiment that could have profound implications for the world.

Until he pressed that button he was a lonely man in a tree.

He pressed it. The two lights appeared but nothing happened.

He had been told that he still did a lot of his thought in pictures and observed detail, which related to experience subconsciously. To talk, he had to virtually mouth the words; something they assured him would become easier with time. The programme needed distinct brain waves, to translate that thought into proposed vocabulary.

He deliberately and slowly mouthed the words hello.

He felt a glimpse of shock, too sudden for him to grasp it, yet substantial enough that he knew it had existed. This surprised him too. Had he caught a brief flicker of reaction from someone else? It felt wrong, a more concentrated feeling than when he had spied on his father all those years before. It was also exquisite, a forbidden fruit. This had not been mentioned to him. Was it something he was not meant to experience?

“Hi, hell er too” were the words that followed. He presumed them to mean hi and hello too.

Part of him shivered, with nerves or experience or some hidden pleasure zone he was not sure. He giggled now, felt light headed and could only say ‘Hello’ back once more, so much for the revolutionary words to fit the essence of the technology.

“Hi. I am Leah.”

He laughed again. That must actually be her really name he thought. He dared to think what name they had formed from his.

“Did you laugh?” he felt her say.

This was incredible. That she could see his thoughts like that too. He tried not to think of all his previous girlfriends or every bad thing he had done. It was hard not too. It would be easier to talk than to listen, just in case his thoughts were betrayed as she spoke. Despite this he felt it was natural. After all, satellites beamed into television screens and nobody questioned the brilliance of that.

“Oh I wasn’t laughing as such. It was just that I didn’t realise they would use our real names. I was laughing because I dread to think what my name has become.”

“Well, I have to confess, your name makes me smile too.”

The conversation flowed. Odd words were often missed but somehow the feelings of the sentences were sent with the words. It was as if the brain had already been fitted with the adaptation for this technology, that the mind was able to adjust perfectly and gauge feeling as well as meaning.

If he thought about it, it was just delicate vibrations in the inner ear, vibrations sent through air like a normal conversation. That was why he could ‘hear’ her voice as she spoke even though he had never heard it in real life. It was not a rough sound, it was serene as if she was whispering closely into his ear with the words solely for him but undoubtedly a perfect replication of how she actually spoke. It was erotic even though the conversation had never become that.

Often he would become aware of some dark thought in her mind that wouldn’t stick its head through the shadows of privacy she was still able to contain. She could probably sense similar things from him. As the nights they spent together increased, as they got to know each other and felt calm in each others company, he would deliberately drop a thought in about someone else, images of him kissing another woman to see how she would react, whether she could sense it too.

She never said anything but she would become a little quieter, maybe thinking about things after seeing the image of him leaning forward to kiss another girl. He had no idea what she could ‘see’ and she never once mentioned any of these extra thoughts he provided. It should not have been possible, the implants were based on sound only but if he could sense these things he had to believe she could too.

Gradually the conversations grew longer until they spent whole evenings together. Not once had she asked to meet him even though he wanted to and had dropped subtle hints. Her accent would not give away her location. It had feeling and sustenance but it was neutral. She gave no hints about where she was from, swiftly changing the conversation without him realising until long after.

Intimacy could be obtained by distance. He began to care for ‘Leah’ in ways that he had not been able to for other people. So feelings did exist that he had not been aware of. The subtle irony that he could experience more from someone he had not met than all the previous girls he had was not lost on him. Would this thing ever be real until they met? Did these feelings exist to such an extent because it was safe, that safety meant freedom and freedom was able to open channels of emotions that had always been deliberately closed?

What was her story, her history? What did she keep from him?

He had no answers and he could not push a meeting. There was too much to risk now.

That night he did not press the button. He did something he had not been able to do before. He cried over somebody other than his mother. His tears were for what was possible and what wasn’t. His tears were for someone he now knew so well but didn’t know at all.

He felt lonely again.

He thought of all the women he had pushed away and now the one he really liked, the oscillations in his inner ear by a chip implanted as an experiment, was pushing him away, not deliberately, but he felt it personally.

He drew in a breath, knew he had to be strong. He felt giving 'Leah' time would make her realise her need. He was selfish like that, cutting off his nose to spite his face. He needed time alone again but for completely different reasons. His whole body ached to talk with her, as if he was holding his breath while the day passed slowly without her.

He had not been eating and two days had passed. His drooped shoulders hinted at solemn submission to an act that made no one happy. But still he would not switch on the chip; he would not change his stubbornness no matter how much she cared. He barely noticed his father until rather surprisingly, his father noticed him.

His father stared at him with a knowing look; a look that wanted to ask questions but the distance between father and son had become too big. They were not his questions to ask and so they just stared at each other for a few long seconds. He could not be sure but for just that brief time he saw something in his father's eyes he had not seen before. It was sadness, but mirrored for him, like they finally had something in common that was reflected in both sets of eyes.

He wanted to reach out and hold his father, but how could he cry in front of him, how could some noise in his mind justify a syzygy with his father.

The moment passed. Once more they were two strangers sharing a house bonded by a woman who wasn't there, almost reconnected by another woman who was not there.

The days became a week. 'Leah' had not found a way of contacting him. He had done it again, disconnected himself from any possible happiness he could have had. All the leaves had fallen from the trees, he had nowhere to hide and the cold and damp of the winter months would become the seasonal jail.

If she truly cared wouldn't she have found a way of contacting him? Maybe the fact that she had truly cared was the reason she did not. He wanted the chip out of his mind. He needed the freedom he already had to be official. It was strange how he could make himself so unhappy while people always thought him enjoying life.

His drive to the outskirts of the city of rain gave him time to think, postulate on why he acted like he did. He could not even think clearly about why he switched off the chip. Could love actually hurt and the intensity of it too much of a shock for him. Was it self-sacrifice, paying him back for all the other women he had hurt?

'Leah' would not do it for him so he had made that decision, knowing that he deserved to feel what he had always made others feel. He had loved 'Leah' and yet he could still make that decision. It could only prove that the self still governed even the most flourishing and beautiful of humanities emotions, love. Beautiful is often in conjunction with dangerous.

That was why people could commit suicide over other people even though it was just chance that had brought them together, even though things would have been different had they not met.

He had hurt someone else again, even though he had felt it more important to hurt himself.

He sat down and explained to them why he wanted the chip removed. He said it without emotion, as if he was bored with the experiment, nonchalant about its merits. It was only then that he was told something he could not believe.

Leah had been a computer programme all along. She was not a person. They had needed him to think she was because it was the only way the experiment could be fully tested. It was still backed by the military but they needed it to feel real, for the soldiers to be connected to the chips with a unique bond. Eventually, commercially, they could use the chips to create friends for people, because they were so real. The man was excited to be explaining all this, infused that he could tell how thoroughly the client had believed in the character.

He sat dumbfounded. The one person who had shown him love was a programme. What did that say about him? What did these people know? They must have had his thoughts too, he was as angry as he was embarrassed. He wanted to cry. It meant he really had lost 'Leah'.

Something didn't add up.

"When I first spoke to Leah and said hello, I had the feeling she was shocked, and that I had surprised her. Why would a machine have reacted like that?"

"Erm, you can't feel something like that. Maybe it was a feedback loop on your own reaction and nerves about turning it on for the first time."

He knew they would have an answer for everything. But the dark secrets, the way 'Leah' existed in shadows was something he had alone, that they had not mentioned. It meant she had existed in ways beyond experiment. He could take that away with him, ponder it and study it in the many times he would now have alone. He had met no one like her, refused to think of her in terms of algorithms.

He had agreed to the experiment, should probably have read the small print. He wanted to speak to his father, knowing that half the problem with communication was his. He had been given an insight into judging people, to learning about people. He was aggrieved but the tiniest smile appeared as he left the building of 'Relationship' to return to his car and the journey home.

This had taught him a lesson. He just needed to understand what that lesson was.

A young woman passed him as he entered. She seemed withdrawn but as she passed him she looked up and smiled. He already felt better. The doors closed behind him and he was in the street. He missed the voices at the reception desk.

“Hi Leah. We expected to see you.”

He was home. His father was sitting on the porch, sitting in the old chair that somehow survived the seasons. Not once in his lifetime could he remember his father ever spending time in that chair. In a way, it was ‘his chair’ where all this had started from.

He noticed a book in his father’s hands, too old and faded for him to establish its title.

“Aren’t you cold sitting there?”

“Oh, I hadn’t really thought of that.”

There was still an awkward silence, but somehow the day felt a little warmer, and so he stayed there looking at his father who had now gone back to reading the book. Seconds passed and still he stared, feeling as if he was watching all of this from another dimension. No pieces seemed to fit together. So much for the jigsaw and for understanding.

His father looked up.

“So. Who was she?” was all he said.

The question surprised him and he had no answer.

“What is your book?” was all he could reply.

“Have you noticed son, we only ever seem to have questions for each other. I’ve been thinking. Today, if it’s ok with you, I’d like to draw your portrait.”