

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE GREAT PLAGUE
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[published in Omni Online December 1997]

It didn't help that the doctor's waiting-room was plastered with posters exhorting all and sundry to CHECK YOUR MEMORIES REGULARLY. Others paraded dozens of mug-shots beneath the accusing legend: DO YOU "REMEMBER" ANY OF THESE PEOPLE? Marilyn was there, of course, third from the left on the second bottom row. I've always thought of myself as a hard-headed sort of person, but I couldn't help feeling that they were trying to steal her away from me. Nor could I help hoping, even though I knew full well that the hope was absurd, that in this one instance -- and only this one instance -- they were quite mistaken about the fact of her non-existence.

It could be worse, I told myself, sternly, as my name was called. It would be worse if they actually did exist -- especially for them. The problems that arise for all the people who remember Marilyn are trivial compared with the problems a real Marilyn would face as a result of being remembered.

Dr. Vernon took one look at me and said, in world-weary fashion: "What's the trouble, Mr. Hayling? FMS?"

I blushed. I knew that the tabloids had taken to calling the FMS plague a pandemic, but he surely had to play host to the usual crop of throat infections, arthritic joints and suspicious lumps as well. I gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed that I must look too robustly healthy for it to be anything else.

"Which one?" he asked, in response to the tiniest of nods. I'd been hoping to lead up to it a little more gently than that. I couldn't produce her name in the blunt and businesslike fashion which seemed to be required of me; even though I knew full well what she was, it would have been a kind of betrayal. False or not, the memories were good. We'd been so happy together, and it really hadn't been her fault that we'd broken up. To dismiss her, utterly without ceremony, as the product of a mysterious rogue infection might be necessary, but it still seemed rather a shabby thing to do.

"It's all right," he said, impatiently. "I'm a doctor. I'm not going to tell anyone else, and I'm certainly not going to attack you in a fit of unreasoning jealousy. Believe me, Mr. Hayling, I've had a lot of experience dealing with FMS. By now, every doctor in the developed world is an old hand."

I managed to stutter an M sound three or four times.

"Marilyn," he said. I didn't dare ask whether it was a fifty-fifty guess, or whether Marilyn was significantly more common in the Thames Valley than Melanie, or whether there was some particular quirk that marked me as a Marilyn type. The tabloids were quick to pounce on the least rumor about patterns in the data, but they'd cried wolf so often that the man in the street wouldn't stand a chance of identifying an authentic discovery in the chaos of speculation. There had to be some real patterns in the data -- if there weren't, what was the point in people reporting the details to their doctors? -- although there hadn't been the slightest whisper about any effective treatment or possible cure.

Dr. Vernon called up a data-sheet that was already marked up with questions and boxes, so that he could map my condition with a few deft clicks of his mouse. He was able to fill in a lot of the boxes at one fell swoop, simply by transferring information from my file. "To what time-period do the memories relate?" he asked, wincing at his own clumsy phraseology.

"Thirteen to fifteen years ago," I said. "I might never have figured out that they weren't the real thing if her face hadn't kept coming up on the TV and posters like the one in your waiting-room. I met her . . . that is, I remember meeting her . . . shortly after starting work with VirtIconics in July 1993. She moved in with me after three months, and moved out again a year after that. I heard from her . . . I remember hearing from her . . . half a dozen times more, although I only saw her in the flesh once." Oh, the delicious pain of that meeting! The regrets, the tears, the sense of tragedy! I coughed to cover my sudden discomfiture and hastened on. "There's nothing at all after I first met Jill in '96 . . . that's my wife. She's real enough. She has to be -- she works for a solicitor."

He didn't bother to contrive a polite grin to acknowledge the attempted witticism.

"Do you have any objective record of your movements between 1993 and 1996?" he asked.

"No. Who does? Who knew we were going to need them, way back then?"

"Not even a business diary with a record of appointments? A Sasco -- something like that?"

I shook my head. I'd kept my appointments on a Stone Age personal organizer with no hard disc and I'd thrown my Sascos in the bin every new year, like any sane person.

"Are there any evident anomalies in the Marilyn memory-pattern, or is it entirely consistent with your other memories of the period?"

"Sometimes I can get flashes of living alone during '94, but I can't seem to get a grip on them; the false memories seem to have overlain and obliterated the true ones very efficiently. There is one thing, though . . ." I hesitated. No sooner had I managed to slip into clinical/objective mode than I'd been jerked right out of it again by a rush of resentment at the thought that all this was private, too intimately personal to be discussed with some quack who'd never understand in a million years what Marilyn and I had meant to one another.

"Please go on," he said. "Information about anomalies is vital to our attempt to comprehend the FMS phenomenon."

"It may not mean anything. It's just that . . . well, everybody calls me Jack these days, but that's because I'm married to Jill. Before we became an item I was always John to everyone . . . but Marilyn called me Jack. It's not inconsistent, as such . . . I guess people who get close to one another often use names that are different, their special prerogative . . . but Jack came from Jill, you see . . . it's probably nothing."

"I wouldn't say so," said Dr. Vernon, showing a flicker of real interest for the first time. "It's actually rather interesting. Even if it's simply evidence of incompetence on the part of the agent, that kind of detail might help to tell us something about the way the agent plunders your real memories in order to construct the false ones. It's also possible that it's something your own mind did, subconsciously -- planting a booby-trap, as it were, to tip off the conscious mind that something is amiss with the memory-pattern. If people are able to draw on the resources of some kind of psychological immune-system to cancel out the agent's effects there might be hope of recovery even while we haven't yet identified the agent or devised any kind of biochemical treatment."

He accompanied the final statement with what was presumably intended to be a morale-boosting smile. Doctors and biotechnologists always referred to the agent, even though there wasn't the faintest trace, so far, of any physical cause for the false memories that were springing up here, there and everywhere. It wasn't just a matter of needing a label -- it was a bid for property rights, an insistence that the syndrome was their problem, not something that could be left to therapists and other assorted charlatans.

"Can you make a reliable estimate of the time of origin of the false memories?" Dr. Vernon asked, in a carefully elliptical fashion.

"They can't have been in place very long," I said, "or I'd have recognized the face in the TV ads when they first began broadcasting it. I guess the memories crept up on me, so I can't be absolutely sure, but it was about last Tuesday when I began thinking that the Marilyn they kept showing with the FMS updates was uncannily like my Marilyn, and how awful it would be if she turned out to be . . . well, I guess you know how it goes. I'd say the infection is about ten days to a fortnight old."

"That's good. The sooner these things are spotted, the sooner you can start to work against them. Have you made a preliminary record of the memory-complex yet?"

"It's not finished," I lied. I knew I had to use it, but I wasn't about to go public with it, no matter how useful it might be as a research tool. He didn't seem surprised by my answer and he didn't press the point.

"Just make sure it's as full as you can make it," he said. "Unless you record everything you can presently remember, you won't be able to track the extension of the pattern. Not that it's certain to grow, mind -- at the moment it looks like a relatively low-level invasion, not too ambitious and conveniently distant, and it might well stay that way." He didn't sound optimistic. The smile looked as if it might fall off at any moment and the fingers of his left hand were fidgeting with the mouse in a fashion that seemed almost feverish.

"I'll get on to it," I assured him. "If I find any more anomalies, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Have you told your wife what's happening?"

"Not yet."

His expression was more sorrowful than disapproving. "In my experience," he said, "it's better to do it sooner than later. She'll catch on soon enough -- the time you put into record-keeping will give you away eventually, even if there are no other signs. It's probable that she'll be unable to avoid some feeling of jealousy, even if she accepts on a conscious and rational level that you can't help what's happening to you. Some women, paradoxical as it may seem, think that their partners starting to remember non-existent women is even worse than their actually being

unfaithful."

"Jill's not like that," I told him, wishing that I could be certain. "She'll understand." I was sure that she'd try. Unfortunately, nobody understood why the FMS plague was happening at all, let alone why the false memories suffered by men were almost invariably memories of hot love affairs with beautiful women, while the false memories suffered by women were usually memories of children they'd never actually borne. So far, Jill had shown no sign of any of those, despite the fact that she and I were childless . . . or if she had, she'd kept them entirely to herself.

"I'll need to take a blood sample," the doctor said, reaching into a desk-drawer for a hypodermic. "Part of it will be inspected; the rest will be frozen, so that it can be screened retrospectively for any candidate agents thrown up by future research."

"The only problem with that," I pointed out, to show that I was a scientifically-sophisticated person who was on the ball, "will be finding a reliable control group so you can check for the candidate-agent's absence." Anyone with a grain of common sense could see that for every person who managed to figure out that they were playing host to false memories there could easily be two or three who couldn't, and two or three more who wouldn't admit it even if they could. I, being ever skeptical of the competence and motives of my fellow human beings, had a sneaking suspicion that by the time some hero identified a virus or a psychotropic molecule which might be responsible for the plague, they might not be able to find a single unexposed person this side of the arctic circle.

Dr. Vernon, who was presumably a realist himself, contented himself with a somber nod as he carefully fitted the needle to the plastic syringe. I reflected on the painful irony of the fact that although there were a dozen different ways of getting things into the body nowadays, there was still only one effective method of taking blood out.

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I wasn't particularly late getting to the office, and I was well into flexitime credit, but I couldn't help feeling a paranoid suspicion that people were looking at me -- that they'd somehow guessed where I'd been and what I'd confessed to the doctor. It was silly, but I was all too well aware of the ways in which FMS sufferers could accidentally give themselves away, and of the awful rapacity of office gossip. Nobody bothered speculating any more about people's real affairs -- in fact, I sometimes wonder whether, in these troubled times, people actually bother having real affairs any more.

There was nothing in the least unusual in the fact that as soon as five of us had gathered around a table in the Turk's Head at lunchtime -- variously clutching our BLT toasties, pizza wedges, baked potatoes and pints -- the conversation should instantly turn to FMS. Even so, I couldn't help feeling horribly uncomfortable about it. I couldn't help wondering which of the others might be feeling the same, and whether any of them might secretly be harboring fond memories of passionate frolics with my Marilyn -- and I couldn't help suspecting that every single word that was spoken was aimed directly at me, was really about me.

"If you see FMS in its proper historical perspective," Mike Gilbert said, as his bushy black beard gradually filled up with crumbs, "it's bloody obvious what it is. It's psychological warfare, that's what. I mean, where did it start? All those bloody therapists uncovering repressed memories of sexual abuse suffered in childhood, setting generation against generation, sibling against sibling. The purpose had to be disruption and destabilization of the entire social structure -- and when people figured out that the memories were false the psychowarriors promptly moved on to something more insidious. Every day you hear reports of men killing one another in jealous rages over women who never even existed, but that's just the tip of the iceberg . . . the real disruption is inside, in the way people look at one another suspiciously, saying nothing, just wondering. The entire fabric of Western society is coming apart, stitch by stitch."

Ouch! I thought.

"Who's doing it, then?" Hal Mellor scoffed, after taking another gluttonous swig from a glass that was already almost empty. "The ex-communists? The Pacific Rimmers? The green zealots?"

"Mike's right," Aileen McMurdo put in, in that deadly earnest tone she only ever used when she was taking the piss. "You have to see it in its true historical context. It actually started before the child abuse revelations, with all those stories about people being kidnapped aboard UFOs and subjected to intensive examination by aliens. That's the key to the mystery."

"That didn't destabilize anything," Hal pointed out. "Who'd start a war in a crazy way like

that?"

"The aliens would," Aileen came back, springing the trap. "It was all double bluff, see. They planted lots of false memories of abduction to make sure that the people who'd really been abducted wouldn't be believed -- and what they found out from all those tests was how to screw up our minds utterly and completely. They found out how to refine their weapons for maximum effect on human beings, and now they're using the second-generation stuff. By the time the invasion fleet gets here we'll all be psychological wrecks, every vestige of our real pasts consumed by obsessive nostalgia for lost lovers and dead babies. We won't offer a whimper of resistance -- in fact, we'll probably be queuing up to be first into the gas chambers."

"Did you make that one up all by yourself?" Mike asked, in a mock-admiring tone which was something of a double bluff itself.

"No, she didn't," said Helen Chambers, who spent far too much time exchanging intricate jokes with Aileen for her own good. "She's being paid to put it about. She's an agent provocateur for the real masterminds."

"Who are?" I put in. I had to play my part, lest my silence should become suspicious.

"Don't pretend you don't know, Jack," she said, with a broad and exceedingly discomfiting wink. "We're all friends here. We all know who it really is, even though we've all been sworn to secrecy."

"No harm in telling us, then, is there?" I countered.

"Well, it's us, isn't it?" she said. "VirtIconics, traders in synthetic reality. It's the market research department testing the water, trying to figure out what kinds of virtual reality will sell best . . . and maybe breaking down consumer resistance a little. After all, what's the ideal consumer profile for buyers of high-powered virtual reality hardware? People whose grip on reality is so weak that they can't even trust their own memories. We humble designers of machine-generated dreams are merely cogs in a much vaster system, whose ambition to extend the limits of human experience is literally unlimited."

"You want to be careful, Helen," Aileen said. "At least one of these guys must be a spy for the suits upstairs. They'll be down on you like a ton of bricks if they find out you've been giving away the company's darkest secrets. Anyway, it can't be the marketing department -- they wouldn't bother with trivia like sexual passion and mother love if they could get down to the real nitty-gritty of product placement. If they really had FMS down to fine art and crude technology those warning broadcasts would be full of pictures of canned beers and drain-cleaners and laser-discs that aren't available in any video-stores. What kind of a world do you think we're living in, for God's sake?"

"This is getting silly," Mike observed, affably. He was probably feeling pleased because he'd kicked the whole thing off, or maybe because Hal's patience had run out and he was bringing back a second round of drinks before anyone else had finished their first.

"Except, of course," Hal said, as he plonked the glasses down on the crowded tabletop, "that if they ever do find the cause, it could stop being a plague and start being a technology. If it isn't us, it could end up being the competition which will wipe us out. We could end up taking our VR products into a marketplace where we'd have to compete with people selling designer memories. Can you see the ads? ALL THE HOLIDAYS OF A LIFETIME . . . THE PAST IS A THOUSAND FOREIGN COUNTRIES . . . WHATEVER YOU WANT, YOU CAN REMEMBER . . . MEMORIES ARE MADE OF . . . hell, this really isn't very funny, is it? We could be left high and dry, showing off our Sopwith Camels the day after someone else invented the supersonic jet."

"And it wouldn't just be one lifetime," I said, judiciously striking the same note of fake anxiety just in case any real anxiety happened to show through. "Like Mike and Aileen said, we have to remember the historical context. Before the child abuse there were the aliens, and before the aliens there were the past lives, when everybody was finding out that they'd been Napoleon or Cleopatra in a former incarnation. That can't have been our marketing department, unless all our memories are false. IBM maybe, or AT&T, but definitely not us."

"Forget marketing," Aileen said. "The bozos up there don't have the imagination. It's definitely aliens. That reincarnation stuff was just more of their disinformation. Of course, they might not be planning to invade at all. They might actually be benign, intent on helping us to fulfill our true evolutionary potential. Maybe the whole FMS saga is just a series of psychological adaptations, which will culminate when we've finally been pressured into becoming true masters of memory, able to take mature responsibility for the reconstruction of our personalities, fit for membership of the galactic community."

"Oh, sure," said Helen, who was never particularly squeamish about hitting below the belt when she was lashing out at random. "The way these guys keep inventing women that never existed to compensate for their failures with real women, and then get into fights about who the imaginary

women really liked best, is a giant leap forward for mankind. We're well on the way to true maturity now, aren't we?"

It was a step too far. I bit my lip, but Hal -- who'd put away his second pint in double-quick time -- didn't. "Exactly what made you so sour about men, Helen?" he asked, before he could stop himself. "Some guy leave you holding a baby boy that died, or what?"

That killed the conversation stone dead -- and made me wonder exactly what, and exactly who, was accelerating Hal's drinking problem.

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By the time I got home I'd decided to make a clean breast of things, but I had to wait for the right moment -- you can't just blurt these things out as you cross the threshold when you know perfectly well that you've both had an absolutely bloody day at the office. Jill was as whacked as I was. If it hadn't been for a strong desire to keep things as normal as possible I'd have volunteered to cook, even though it was her turn.

By the time we were fed and suitably relaxed the weary temptation stole upon me to leave it for another day, but I knew it wasn't a good idea. The bullet had to be bitten, and if she hadn't noticed already that something was amiss she soon would.

"I had to pop in to see the doctor on my way to work this morning," I told her, tentatively, while we'd both collapsed on the couch in front of the TV. It was showing a soap opera, one of whose chief characters was just beginning to get to grips with the legacy of his intense imaginary involvement with an entirely fictitious Veronica. I steeled myself against the anticipated look of alarm.

She did turn her gray-green eyes full on me, but there was more reproach in the gaze than alarm.

"I thought something was up," she murmured, sadly. "I suppose it had to come."

"It's not serious," I hastened to tell her. "Dr. Vernon confirmed that. Distant past, short duration. Hardly anything, really."

"But it could get worse, couldn't it?" she said. "There's no knowing how far it will go. You hear stories about people reconstructing their entire pasts from day one, losing themselves entirely."

"That's very rare," I told her. "The tabloids exaggerate. One in ten Britons are suffering from the syndrome, but life goes on. The country hasn't ground to a halt. Personally, I think the epidemic's losing its force. They do, you know. Even the most devastating diseases weaken over time. We may not have an effective treatment yet but the simple fact that we know about it and are on our guard makes a big difference. It's much harder for the false memories to take hold and spread now we can recognize them for what they are. I'm keeping proper records, and I'll do the checks every day. I'm fighting it, Jill, and if determination is enough to win, I'll beat it."

I had begun to babble, and would have rambled on, but she cut me short. "It's a girl, isn't it," she said. She was trying to keep her voice level, but I could hear the sense of injury, the dark fear that she was being crowded out of my past by someone younger and more beautiful.

"It's just the form the disease usually takes," I told her, taking her hand in mine and caressing it with all the reassurance I could muster. "It doesn't mean anything."

She didn't pull her hand away but I could feel the tension in the muscles. "That's what they all say," she said. "It doesn't mean anything. I can't help it. It's just a stray virus. It could happen to anyone. All very convenient, isn't it? You don't have to do anything, except lie back and enjoy it. You don't have to take responsibility for the fact that your innermost soul is being colonized by some little whore who's doing the same for ten per cent of the fucking population."

She wasn't babbling, and she wasn't angry. Indeed, she was frighteningly articulate. Actually, less than five per cent of the population had the form of FMS involving female lovers and less than five per cent of that five per cent had the form involving Marilyn, but it was no time to be pedantic.

"It is a disease," I said, feebly. "It really is." There were, of course, some people who argued that it wasn't, that the spread of the syndrome was due to the power of auto-suggestion aided and abetted by the media -- the modern day equivalent of absent-mindedly scanning a few pages of a medical encyclopedia and convincing yourself that you have everything from asthma to bilharzia. They even had a jargon for it, borrowed from the sociobiologists. According to them, Marilyn and all her sisters were just memes: infectious ideas designed by natural selection to

survive and thrive. If they were right, the soap opera whose signature tune was filling the living-room was taking a big risk. The fictitious Veronica might suddenly start cropping up in the memories of millions of couch potatoes. Maybe the plot-line was an experiment, designed to discover whether such a thing could happen. Wouldn't that add some spice to the tired old debates about the psychological effects of media sex and violence?

"I know," Jill said, trying hard to make it sound sincere, although her fist was still half-clenched. "I know it's just a disease really. I'm sorry."

"It hasn't affected you, love," I told her. "The fake memories have only colonized the time before I met you. They won't displace you. They can't. You're far too important to me." The promises were reckless -- no matter how much confidence I had in my own hard-headedness and self-possession I really wasn't in a position to offer any guarantees -- but I had to make them anyway.

"Why not?" she countered, dispiritedly. "You and I live in the real world, and always have done. We always had to cope with the bloody-mindedness of chance and change. The narrative of our relationship couldn't skip the boring bits and all our conversations had to be ad libbed. Your new old relationship doesn't labor under those handicaps, does it? It has all the advantages of unreality."

It would hardly have been diplomatic to assure her that it really didn't seem that way -- that my memories of Marilyn were just as full of awkwardness and mischance as any real relationship could and would have been -- so I cast about for a safer line of thought.

"I'm afraid you'll have to show a little extra vigilance from now on," I said, stroking her wrist and forearm with assiduous gentleness. "If this thing is contagious you're bound to be in danger of picking it up from me."

"I suppose you'd like that," she said, bitterly. "It would let you off the hook, wouldn't it? And it wouldn't bother you the way it bothers me, because I probably wouldn't be remembering some muscular super-stud hung like a horse -- it's odds-on that I'd just be remembering a baby I never had. Well, that wouldn't be so bad for me, either, given that I never did have any babies because of your green conscience. Unfortunately, like everything else in life, the syndrome seems by all accounts to be utterly perverse. It's mostly slags who've already had two or three kids in defiance of all the propaganda who are remembering extra ones, while the barren heroines like me are stubbornly immune."

That wasn't fair. The issue of children had been fully discussed. It had been a mutual decision. Anyway, rumor had it that the female version of FMS could be just as discomfiting as the male version often was, if not more so. Some of the remembered death scenes were said to be harrowing enough to drive their victims into deep melancholia. At least the phantom women mostly contented themselves with Dear John faxes or phone calls. No one knew how many lives the plague had so far claimed, but female suicides encouraged by ersatz grief probably outnumbered male murders instigated by unreasoning jealous rages.

While I was still contemplating the unfairness of her latest argumentative move, Jill seized the conversational initiative. "Which one is she?" she asked.

I wanted to say that it didn't matter -- because, of course, it really didn't -- but I daren't. She would have been deeply suspicious of my motives; it would only have increased her anxiety.

"Marilyn," I said, baldly.

"The stringy blonde with the snub nose? Christ, Jack, I didn't know you liked the gamine type."

"I didn't choose her, Jill."

"No, but you're collaborating with it, aren't you? Subconsciously if not consciously. You have to be. What else could determine the multiple forms the syndrome takes?"

"There's no way out of that, is there?" I said, miserably. "My subconscious has to carry the can for whatever my consciousness denies. It's Catch-22 all over again. Nobody knows, love. Nobody knows why the syndrome takes the forms it does -- and nobody really knows how many forms it can take. The girls are easy enough to identify, and the extra babies, but how can we tell how many fakes there are that just slip unobtrusively into the patterns of people's pasts, creating no anomalies and arousing no suspicions? There might be millions of people who think they're clear purely and simply because they haven't any way of identifying the lies that have crept into their lives."

I didn't intend that the remarks should be taken personally -- but that, inevitably, was the way she took them.

"I suppose you think I don't even have the imagination to dream up a dead baby," she said. "After all, you're the big shot software engineer working at the cutting edge of masturbation technology at good old VirtIconics, and I'm just a common-or-garden office hack working for a bunch of shysters. You breathe, eat and dream virtual realities while I itemize grounds for divorce and type up wills. I've never once been sexually abused by my father or taken aboard a

flying saucer for a smear test. All I can remember is school and college and you. Maybe you're the fake. Maybe you always have been. How could I tell?"

She didn't mean any of it, and in the end it got on top of her. By the time she was half way through the speech she was punctuating the sentences with choked sobs, and by the time she reached the last full stop she was weeping. I let go of her wrist and put my arms around her, nestling her head on my shoulder and hugging her tight.

Actions speak louder than words, and she took far more comfort from my silence than she'd been able to wring out of my awkward, stumbling words. I took comfort from it too; she was warm and damp and vulnerable, and I felt that I wanted to hold her forever . . . but I couldn't help remembering that once upon a time I'd felt exactly the same about poor, frail Marilyn when I'd hugged her in just that tender and loving way.

Nothing lasts, I thought. Nothing endures. It isn't just our names that are writ in water, Mr. Keats.

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I couldn't stay with Jill for more than an hour, even though I felt she needed me. I had work to do. I had to check the hard copy of my affair with Marilyn, which I'd made surreptitiously over the weekend, to make sure that no new details were piling up in the storeroom of my memory. I also had to file an account of my movements on the hard disc of my organizer -- the disc which I must now be careful never to reformat or over-write. From now on, I had to keep proper track of myself, lest I lose my true past and my authentic being to the ravages of the disease.

What will the historians of the far future make of all these documents? I wondered. Will they be grateful for the sudden glut of resources, or will they think it insane that we should devote so much painstaking attention to the recording and analysis of events which never happened?

It was good to have the opportunity to indulge in such idle speculations. This was the first quiet moment I'd had all day: the first chance I'd had to assess my new situation calmly and without distraction. For a little while I was able to congratulate myself on how well I was doing, and how much in control I was, but I couldn't maintain a wholly positive frame of mind. I'd been shaken up by Jill's reaction, which had been worse than I'd expected. I was slowly overtaken by a sense of the enormity of it all.

Where, I wondered, would it end -- not just for me but for the whole human world?

I knew that there was a real possibility that I and everyone else alive might lose everything, in spite of all our methodical recording and all our careful vigilance. If the biologists could identify the agent and devise an effective treatment, the plague could still be stopped in its tracks, but if they couldn't it might well keep on expanding its range and its scope. It was all too horribly plausible that the girls and the babies were just a passing phase, like the aliens and the child abusers before them, and that the next wave of fantasies might be altogether less comfortable.

At the moment, I thought, I'm still the same person I've always been. Knowing Marilyn has hardly changed me at all -- but even Marilyn could make a different man of me, if she plays an increasingly important part in my remembrance of things past. What are we, after all, but the sum of our memories? I could be embarked on a process of metamorphosis as profound, its own way, as that which makes a caterpillar into a butterfly.

Even that, I realized as soon as I'd formulated the words, was a prettification: an attempt to make what was happening seem harmless, natural and progressive. There were a few enthusiasts on the lunatic fringe who were very fond of the butterfly analogy, proclaiming -- as Aileen had briefly suggested in the pub -- that the plague was no plague at all, but simply the next step in the evolution of Homo superior and the dawning of a new era of self-reconstruction. According to these particular lunatics, courage and cunning would give the bravest of us the ability to take control of the whole process, and thus remake ourselves and the whole world. They rejected the whole philosophy underlying the kind of record-keeping in which I was patiently engaged. CAST OFF THE CHAINS OF YESTERDAY was their slogan; ERASE THE FAULTS OF HISTORY AND WRITE THE WORLD ANEW! Admirable, in its way -- except that neither courage nor cunning had yet contrived to make the slightest dent in the capacity which the plague had to defy and deny the consciousness of its victims.

I remembered a day I'd spent in London with Marilyn -- a day that never was, when we'd gone to see The Comedy of Errors at the Barbican and then to eat in an Italian restaurant in a paved

alleyway off Charing Cross Road. I knew it wasn't in the record I'd made at the weekend, but I felt sure that it was just something that had slipped my mind, something that had been there all along, quietly unexamined, waiting to resurface in response to the right cue. It wasn't a sharp memory, but there was something so extremely lucid about it that it would have been ridiculous to doubt it if I hadn't been so sharply aware of the hazards of FMS.

There's no way I can be absolutely certain, of course, I told myself, teasingly, that today's memories aren't false from beginning to end. In the final analysis, there's no way I can ever be certain of anything any more. Perhaps my memories of Marilyn are the only real memories I have left, and all that presently surrounds me is just the plague's way of breaking down that last stubborn residue of lost reality. Anyhow, given that the demons of delusion are free to ravage the world, hasn't the empire of reality already fallen? What profit is there in trying to sift the actual from the illusory? Wouldn't it be saner and wiser to make commitments on aesthetic grounds, preferring those memories -- true or false -- which are the most edifying? What possible reason is there for trying to cast Marilyn out of my past when her presence there is such a rich source of bittersweet satisfaction? Why should I try to contain and confine her, when she only ever wanted to make me happy? It was me who blew it, after all. If only I'd handled things better, we might still be together today . . .

Jill put her head around the door, tentatively.

"Are you done yet? Can I come in?" she asked.

I finished the edit and closed the lid of my handbook. "It's okay," I said. "I'm up to date."

She came to stand behind me, and put her hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently. "I'm sorry about downstairs," she said. "I don't know why I reacted like that. I suppose I'd been sort of expecting it, subconsciously, and all this stuff had built up, just waiting to explode when you hit the trigger. None of it's your fault -- I know that. It's just a disease. It's not as if you can choose whether to get infected or not. I'm truly sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "I understand. It's difficult. But we're sensible, mature adults. If anyone can cope, it's us. It's just a matter of coming to terms with it and seeing it through -- together."

"That's right," she said. "And when all's said and done, the past is dead and gone. It doesn't matter what happens to the past, as long as the present and the future are secure. Marilyn might be able to steal your memories -- even your memories of me -- but she can't steal you. I'll always have the flesh and blood, won't I? No matter how many yesterdays she swallows up, I'll still have all the tomorrows."

I knew she must have been rehearsing that speech while she sat on her own downstairs, staring unheedingly at the TV screen.

"That's right," I told her. "That's absolutely right. It's you I really love. It always will be." Was there ever a time when people didn't make such reckless promises? Was there ever a time when people didn't mean them?

"I'll help you," she said, fervently kneading my shoulder muscles with her slender, insistent fingers. "I'll make sure you can't forget what we have. I'll keep on and on reminding you of the way it really was, and the way it really is. I'll never let you go."

"I know," I said. "I'm glad I'm not alone. In a fight like this, the weight of numbers is vital. The power of consensus is what counts in the end. Consensus, and true love." I knew, though, even as I stressed the word with such scrupulous care, that "true love" doesn't mean "real love" at all; it means faithful love, true in the sense of being true to one's promises.

Marilyn had made promises to me just as I had to her: promises we'd never broken, in spite of everything -- including their unreality. Even phantom promises mean something, unless and until they're broken. If they can't be forgotten, they shouldn't be.

"Are you coming to bed now?" Jill asked.

"Yes," I said. I was very tired; it had been a bad day, memorable for all the wrong reasons.

"Good," she said. "I'll fix my face and see you there."

"Okay," I answered, patting her hand as she withdrew it from my shoulder.

I continued sitting where I was for a few minutes longer after she'd left.

Perhaps we should have had a child, I thought. Children are always there, always clamorous, never giving you a moment's peace for self-absorbed reflection. In the end, of course, they leave you -- one way or another -- but while they're around you really don't have the time to be ill.

The I got up and went to the bedroom, wondering what my dreams would make of me, and who I might be when they finally released me to the cold bright light of morning.

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