

Life's Edge

The weather had not looked promising as the sun went down. Dark, angry looking clouds gathered on the horizon. The storm seemed to be waiting for the sun to set.

When it did the storm let fly with all its fury.

Strong and gusty winds tugged and then pulled at the trees and hedgerows lining the small country lane. The precipitation came in all forms a little snow, hail and then rain, lots and lots of it.

The once small stream that ran along side the road was now a raging torrent that threatened to break its banks.

The road it's self was, in places submerged.

And yet through all of this Martin Mansfield's red, BMW sports car zoomed at high speed. He knew is was reckless to drive at this speed in these conditions, but it had been nearly two weeks since he'd seen Debbie, and anyway he was a good driver and knew his limits.

So he thought.

He'd just finished talking to Debbie on the phone, saying that he'd be home in about half an hour, when he saw the car up ahead. Dam more traffic, he thought. He slowed down gently and started a smooth over-taking manoeuvre.

"Wears the fire?" Mike Appleby asked him self as the set of headlights behind him, approached at high speed.

The red car (he didn't have time to see what make it was) overtook him quickly.

"Bloody fool". Mike cursed.

Then suddenly the car swerved, clipped Mike's car and disappeared in to the fast flowing stream.

Mike brought his car to a halt, reached for his mobile and dialled 999.

Martin never knew what happened, one moment he was driving down the road, then the next thing he knew he was being thrown about inside the car.

The first jolt almost shook the steering wheel out of his grip. Everything seemed to go quite for a brief moment. Strangely the steering wheel now felt very light in his hands.

Then a fraction of a second later the car shook again, but this time much, much harder. Martin was thrown against the driver's side door, hard. The car's windscreen suddenly became opaque with 1000's of tiny cracks. Outside the window by his side a vertical wall of grass seemed to be rubbing by the car.

Before Martin could even lift his head the car shook again. The cracked windscreen exploded inward and the car was suddenly filled with icy cold water.

The cold water rushed in and hit Martin in the face, he took an involuntary breath in, and got a mouth full of the water.

Spurred on by his panic made him try and get out of the car. He tried to stand up. He got half way and was suddenly pulled back.

Submerged again with another mouthful of water Martin's panic subsided for a moment.

Seatbelt, he thought.

The fast flowing, icy cold waters where already robbing Martin's body of it's heat. His fingers where numb and clumsy and the seatbelt release small and awkward.

Martin's lungs began to ache for air.

Mike stood by the broken fence where Martin's car had left the road. The storm was fading rapidly now, but the bank was slick with mud. He knew that there was some one trapped in the car, but there was nothing more he could do.

He felt totally useless.

Then suddenly the red car slid a little further in to the waters.

Martin's head broke the surface of the water just as the car slipped. He didn't have a chance to take a breath. Now fully submerged in the inky black, ice cold water, panic set in with vengeance.

He thrashed around, trying to break his way out of the car. But the glass remained intact.

His chest was now filled with burning pain as his lungs called out for air and his limbs where rapidly losing all feeling. The darkness inside the car began to fade to grey.

The rain had now stopped. Mike looked at the muddy and wet riverbank. No, he told himself. There was no way he could make it down there safely, and he would only make an extra job for the rescuers. I'm doing the right thing. He told himself over and over again, but still was not convinced.

Then from a distance the rising and falling wail of a siren could be heard.

Mike looked at his watch. It had been less than five minutes since he called; it had seemed much, much longer.

Martin's frenzied attempts to break out were beginning to wane. The pain in his chest was fading, as was the cold numbness of his body, it was beginning replaced by a warm, comfortable feeling. It was too much effort to break out, it was much easier to stay here.

So this is death? He said to himself. It occurred to him that he should be worried, he was after all dying. But he didn't seem to care any more, he was just so calm and comfortable, he just didn't ever want to leave here.

Martin's struggles had now completely stopped, he just floated in the water.

The sirens seemed to be closing at a terribly slow speed to Mike.

The world was slowly losing its colours and shapes. The darkness around Martin was fading; its colours being leached away by a dull grey. The hard shapes of the car were breaking down into colourless and shapeless clouds.

Martin floated in a mist. A warm, golden light surrounded him. It seemed its golden glow filled every part of his body with a warm feeling of total security and comfort.

He was totally happy. He did not ever want to leave here.

The mists swirled around him.

At last the flashing blue light of the fire engine appeared around the corner. Mike waved his arms frantically as the vehicle rolled to a stop.

Mike ran up to the cab and started to explain what had happened. "Okay. It's all right sir, theirs someone in there, we know". The officer said to Mike as the others set to work. But they seemed to be working too slowly to Mike.

The random swirling of the mist around Martin's body began to take on some sort of pattern. They were moving forward. And slowly the light changed. It had been all around him but now it was concentrated in to a point ahead of him. Both he and the mist where moving toward it, or was it moving toward them?

Martin didn't know, nor did he care, he was happy and contented. He couldn't remember ever feeling like this before, in fact he couldn't remember any thing. But it didn't worry him at all, nothing bad could happen here. He was safe.

Martin had almost reached the golden glow now. It filled his view and cast shadows of his feet along his naked body. He was almost there, he would never have to worry about anything ever again.

But then suddenly some thing changed. With an almost audible click the glow dimmed. Dark shapes could just be seen moving through the mist. And memories began to surface in Martins mind.

Martin sped down the narrow country lane. It was nearly dark, but he wanted to be home on time. It had been nearly two weeks since he'd seen Debbie and he didn't want to spoil the evening.

It's getting dark very quickly, Martin noted, looking at the grey sky. He looked at the dashboard clock and then looked again. It read 0:04. Martin frowned, the car had only just been serviced.

Oh well I should be on time.

The light was still fading and Martin had to put the powerful headlights on. He looked at the clock again. It now read 0:03. He glanced a look at his watch. That too, read 0:03. "What is going on?" He whispered to himself.

It was getting still darker. The outside world was in deep twilight now. Yet only minutes ago it had been broad daylight.

Martin slowed the car right down, more than a little worried about this. The clock now showed 0:02.

Martin pulled up. It was almost pitch black outside now. It was an eerie, unnatural sort of darkness. The car's headlights even on full beam did not seem to lift the gloom.

The clock now showed 0:01.

Now really scared, Martin picked up his mobile. No Service, the display flashed at him.

"Dam". He looked around him. The darkness was now total, the headlights didn't make any difference at all. He looked at the clock.

The clock ticked over to 0:00.

Suddenly everything faded to black.

Martin was floating in a featureless white void. There was nothing to break up the emptiness, not even his body. Yet he could see the void.

Time passed. Then vague shapes appeared in the void, it could have been seconds later or years later, he could not tell.

The void was a white mist that he drifted through. It was patchy and through the thin patches he could see beyond a total and utter blackness. Strange, vague shadows darted around in the mists. Some were massive and rounded while others were small sharp and angular.

Am I dead? Martin asked him self. If I am I'll never see Debbie again?

Martin slowly became aware to a quite, distant ticking sound.

Suddenly he felt a chill, and for the first time he started to worry. What was happening?

The ticking sound became louder. It was a deep resonant sound.

Suddenly the mists ahead of him cleared and he see could see a vast space free of mist. At the centre of this hollow in the mists was a huge white sphere, which burnt with a fierce light. Around this sphere strange shapes danced. They were multi-faceted, crystalline shapes. But with every tick he heard they changed shape. Squares, pyramids, decahedrons, dodecahedrons and other irregular shapes flashed before him, their facets reflecting the light in to weird patterns on the mists. On their glassy surface's Martin saw flashes of images, everyday scenes mixed with the strange and surreal, the terrible and horrific.

And all the time that slow steady, ticking.

Martin suddenly felt very cold, alone and scared.

For a moment he could not think of anything but the terrifying spectacle that transfixed him. Then he became aware of a new sound, a deep, horrible laughter. Something was laughing at him.

He wanted to run away and hide, but he had no body to run away with.

The laughter stopped and the mists swirled once again. They started dissipating and with them went the burning globe and its ring of shapes.

Martin once again travelled through the golden mists. In such a place direction was meaningless, yet Martin got the impression that he was travelling backwards, away from the horrible laughter and the strange shapes.

Away from all that, but toward where?

The mists had darkened, the all pervading golden glow was fading rapidly. As it did shapes became visible in the mist, they were faint and indistinct at first but as the mists dimmed they seemed to gain solidity.

Martin couldn't make out what the shapes were but they seemed to be familiar to him.

The grey mists were clearing now. Martin caught glimpses of the world around him. To his left he could hear the distant sound of running water. He was lying down on something cold and hard.

The sensations were distant at the moment but were getting ever more intense.

As if the mist were lifting from his brain. Martin suddenly became aware of a strange sensation.

He was freezing cold and soaked to the skin. Martin looked down at himself. But found he couldn't, something was covering him.

He tried to push it away, but his arm was heavy, he could hardly lift it.

Suddenly he started coughing. At first he could only feel that he was coughing but as he coughed great deep coughs he began to hear them. His chest hurt with a deep burning pain.

As he coughed Martin became aware of great quantities of fluid coming from his mouth. It wasn't vomit, it didn't taste like that.

"Bloody hell, he's alive". A voice came from behind him.

"That's it, clear those lungs". Another voice said.

Martin tried to get up, but his legs didn't move. Panicking he tried again, this time forcing his self up with his arms.

"Steady on there". The voice said again.

Martin managed to stand up, but before he could do any thing he became very, very dizzy and the world around him faded to blackness.

The next time Martin regained consciousness, he was bathed in a warm pool of golden light. He was wrapped in something warm and dry. For a few moments he just lay, trying to make sense of the memories in his head. The bad weather and driving through it he could remember clearly, but after that he could only remember bits. And those bits didn't make sense.

He turned over and his eyes focused on a ceiling.

"Ah back with us again". A voice came from his left side. He turned around to see a tall, thin man dressed in a white coat.

A doctor. Other memories surfaced.

The cold water, the mist, the shapes

"How are you feeling now?" The Doctor asked.

Martin eased him self up, he felt a little dizzy and his chest was very sore. "Not so good".

"Well that's an improvement over yesterday, anyway".

Martin looked at him, not understanding. "Why what happened yesterday?"

"You can't remember. Hmm. That's not totally unexpected. What is the last thing that you do remember?"

"A car crash". The Doctor nodded. "A bad one?"

"Well let's just say we were more than a bit worried for you".

"Oh". Martin looked around him. He was in hospital, that much was clear. "How badly hurt was I?"

"Not too badly really. Minor concussion. We're really just keeping you in for observation for a day or two. You see you went through quite a lot yesterday".

"Oh". Martin said prompting. Some thing in the doctor's voice worried him. What had happened?

"Well..." The doctor paused again. "Well what!"

Martin said running out of patience with his evasiveness. "Well you were clinically dead for a short while".

"Dead!" Martin said still reeling in shock. "Yes. When the paramedics arrived on the scene they declared you dead, but as they were filling out the paper work, you just started breathing again".

Martin lay back. Dead. He ran through what he could remember of yesterday, which was not much, but it could explain some of the weirder things that he could remember.

"...If that's okay". Martin realised the doctor had been talking to him. "Yes that's fine". He said distractedly

"Are you feeling Okay?" He asked.

"As well as can be expected considering you've just told me I died yesterday".

"Humm...I'm sorry I'd told you that way but you did ask". Martin nodded, his mind still reeling from the shock. "Well if you're feeling up to it you've got a visitor".

Images flashed up from the depths of martin's mind. The awful laughter, the strange shapes, the images reflected in their crystal facets. Martin slumped back in the bed, his eyes glazed and skin pale.

"Are you sure you're up to having visitors?" The doctor said with concern. "Oh yes. I'll be fine". Martin said sitting back up. "Just felt a little dizzy there".

"Okay if you're sure". Martin nodded. "I'll show her in".

Martin shook his head. What happened to me yesterday? He asked him self. Dead, no they must have been wrong, people don't just die and come back to life, do they? Yes they do, a distant part of his mind told him.

"Martin Mansfield, you stupid, reckless sod". Debbie's normally gentle Scottish brogue was transformed to strained and angry sounding voice.

She hugged him. "You and your bloody fast cars. I nearly lost you".

"Okay, okay". Martin kissed her gently on the head. "But you got me back". He said with a grin.

Debbie's face was red and tear stained. "I'm sorry, but I was in a hurry to get back to see you, my love".

Debbie smiled a little. "Just promise me you'll get an ordinary car to replace that...that speed machine of yours".

"You want me to drive around in a Skoada!"

"If that's what it takes". She said her grin breaking in to a full smile. Martin couldn't help but smile too. He was alive and Debbie was with him. What else did he need?

They just sat there for a few moments in silence hugging each other.

"Oh by the way what happened to the car?" He asked with a grin. "Total write off. And good riddance to it".

Martin's smile faded. He remembered how he'd felt when he'd picked up that car. He remembered the thrill of the power of it. Power that he controlled.

Martin's battered car lay in a ditch somewhere, blood pouring from its broken bodywork. Thick, inky black tentacles oozed from the ground and pulled the dying car apart. It screamed in agony.

Martin's hands fell away from Debbie's waist.

Martin lay back in his bed, he was restless and couldn't get comfortable. He also desperately wanted to get out of hospital and home to Debbie. 'Just overnight for observation' the Doctor had told him. That had only been a few hours back but it seemed a long time ago. It was going to be a long night.

Back from the dead. Martin still couldn't believe it, but that was what the Doctor had said.

He tried to remember what had happened the day before. Bits of it were coming back to him, but most of it was a blur. He could remember talking to Debbie on the phone, but then...nothing. Well nothing that made any sense, just a bright, burning sphere. No it was useless, Martin decided. Being dead does not do anything for your memory.

He closed his eyes.

But then opened them almost immediately. He sat upright in bed. Something had just changed. He didn't feel comfortable. Martin felt like...

He didn't know what he felt like but he knew he didn't like the feeling. There was something not quite right here.

For a few moments he sat in bed just looking around the room, trying to spot what it was that had happened, what had changed.

Nothing had changed physically, but there was something different. A shiver went down his spine. This is silly, he told him self, there's nothing wrong here apart from a grown man sitting in bed when he should be sleeping. But Martin still felt odd.

He lay back down in bed. But the feeling still nagged at him.

He turned over to look at the clock. For a brief second, Martin was sure it showed 0:04. He blinked in shock, the red digits now showed 11:23.

The unease he'd felt before now formed in to a cold, hard panic that he felt in the pit of his stomach.

He'd seen this happening before, it happened just before every thing went black. A jumble of strange and frightening memories filed Martins mind. The golden glow, the vortex, the dancing crystal shapes. But over all of this was the awful ticking, every, deep resonant tick, shaking Martin to his very soul.

Martin curled up in to the fetal position and clamped his eyes shut.

His heart now pounding he looked back at the clock. It read 11:24. The ticking faded away. Slowly Martin uncurled him self.

See everything is normal, he told him self.

He turned on to his back and looked at the ceiling, watching the lights from the traffic outside shine on the plaster. The distant rumble was soothing and reassuringly normal. Martin's panic faded quickly and he felt a quiet peacefulness slowly cover him like a warm blanket.

Slowly his eyelids grew heavy and he slipped in to deep sleep.

Martin woke up the next morning, not feeling any better for the nights sleep he'd just had. But, today is the day you get to go home and see Debbie again he told him self.

He looked out of the window, the golden yellow sun rose over the waking city. And he was going to see Debbie again for the first time in three weeks. It promised to be a great day.

For all Martins new-found optimism, the events of last night still bothered him. He was sure the clock had shown 0:04 and he was almost certain he'd heard that ticking again.

Martin tried not to worry about it. He just sat back and waited.

But time seemed to drag so much for martin. Breakfast wasn't till eight and then it would at least an hour until the doctors did their rounds. Ten o'clock seemed so far away.

But it did eventually arrive.

Martin had phoned Debbie and she was able to make it to the hospital to pick him up. The day was beginning to look just great.

Like a child on Christmas morning, Martin couldn't wait. He hadn't been feeling exactly one hundred percent yesterday when Debbie had visited, but he was now. But the formalities seemed to take forever. Eventually he was signed out and ready to go.

Martin rushed down to the reception to meet Debbie.

But she wasn't there. A quick look around confirmed it, she wasn't there yet. The clock on the wall showed 10:48. Probably caught in the traffic. Martin thought as he settled down to wait.

Martin suddenly felt very uneasy for some reason. Then suddenly Martin had an unpleasant thought. No she can't of had an accident. He comforted himself. She's a careful driver, unlike me. He added silently.

All the same he still felt uncomfortable.

So he got up, looking at the clock. 00:04 it read. Martin blinked in surprise. And just for a second he thought he heard that ticking sound again.

He froze. The sound chilled him to the bone.

The sound faded. The clock showed 10:52

Martin blinked again.

He looked around. Still no sign of Debbie.

Then just as he was sitting down again he caught sight of someone outside, looking...no staring at him from across the hospital forecourt. He beckoned to Martin. Martin felt he should know him, yet he didn't recognise him at all.

Martin got up. The man started to walk towards the glass doors. The doors slid open automatically as Martin approached. A van passed in front of the man, it was only there for a second or two, but by the time it had passed the man was gone.

Martin stopped, standing in the doorway. He couldn't have walked that fast, Martin thought as he looked around for the figure. But now he wasn't even sure what he looked like.

Maybe he got in to the van. Who was he? What did he want with me? Martin's head filled with questions.

"Ah there you are". Debbie said from right beside him. "Going somewhere?" She asked. Martin was still slightly thrown by the figure's disappearance.

"What's the matter. Not pleased to see me". Martin shook his head "Yes er...sorry no. I was miles away". Martin smiled. "I'm always glad to see you".

"Good. Lets go then".

"I couldn't get the day off, so I'll just drop you at my place". Debbie said as they got in to her car.

"What would it take for you to get the day off?" Martin said with a grin. "Oh the end of the world at least".

Debbie's little red car pulled out in to the busy traffic. "Still at least this way I can get you to do the cooking tonight".

"Dam. No way out of that is there?" Debbie shook her head. "I can cheat death but I can't escape doing the cooking, oh well, can't have every thing I suppose".

They drove on in silence for a while. "So what's it like then? Being dead that is"

"I wish I knew, I can't remember much about it at all. Just calling you, crashing the car and then bits of stuff which don't make any sense at all".

"Did your life flash before your eyes, any corridors of light or gardens of heavenly peace?"

"No nothing li...".

Debbie glanced over to Martin. He looked distant and pale. "What is it? You are okay talking about this are you?"

"Yes there was some thing like that..." The mists, the golden glow. Suddenly the memories where clear and vivid. Incredibly clear and vivid. The memories filled Martin's awareness. There was something behind the glow, some thing beyond it. Something wonderful. It filled him with a deep calm and sense of peace. He'd almost got there.

"Something like what?"

Martin shook his head. "Sorry, what was that you said?"

"You said something like that, something like what?"

"The corridor of light, it was some thing like that. A golden glow, I was heading toward it through some kind of warm mist". The memories that had been so clear a few seconds ago where already fading. "I almost got there".

"But you didn't".

"No". Martin shook his head. "Something happened". The calm Martin had felt, quickly evaporated, to be replaced by a feeling of dread. "Yes you came back". Debbie said with a smile.

Martin looked over to her. Her long, thick dark hair fell over her pale skin. Her deep brown eyes sparkled with life. God, she is beautiful, Martin thought.

Martin smiled back. "Yes I came back for you".

"Or maybe you weren't supposed to be going there. Maybe you where heading for some where else". Debbie said with a grin. Martin was distracted for a moment.

"Humm". Over the sound of the engine he was sure he could hear something. He wasn't sure what, but he had a sick feeling deep in his stomach that he could guess what it was.

"Perhaps you were headed for the other place".

This time Martin smiled. "Oh yes I'm sure I'll go there. But when I'm ready".

Don't listen for it. Martin told himself. It'll go away, it's not there, it's not real.

The journey to Ann's house didn't take long, even in the heavy traffic. Martin was glad to get out of the car. Despite trying not to listen for the sound he was sure it was there in the background. He'd tried not to worry about it but he was sure Debbie had noticed his unease.

He waved Debbie good-bye as she pulled out of the drive. Martin relaxed. It was a warm morning, the sun was shining, there was a gentle breeze in the trees. All was quite and calm. Martin just stood there, enjoying the feeling.

This was how it felt when he was heading towards the light. The memories once again filled his mind.

It's great to be alive, Martin thought.

The memories faded once again. Right dinner tonight. Lets make it special, it will be a night to remember.

In order to make the night special, it needed to be just right, which meant starting it right with the perfect meal.

A quick search of Ann's kitchen revealed that the right ingredients where not there, so a quick shopping trip was called for.

Mike made a quick list of what was needed and then started to look for his car keys. "Oh no I don't", he said to him self quietly. It's not that far to the shops anyway, and it's a great day for a walk.

It was indeed a great day. The sun was bright and warm and the breeze was just right to keep you comfortable.

Martin walked down the quite suburban road that led down to the local shops. The sunlight shone through the green leafy canopy of the trees that lined the road. The birds were chirping in the trees, people were out and about washing cars and doing shopping.

Every thing was...well normal. The world hadn't gone mad.

Then perhaps I have, Martin suddenly thought.

He stopped, now why did I have to think that.

No, the world was fine and so was he. Martin walked on.

Then, just audible over the background sound of the traffic, Martin heard something. He wasn't sure what, but he felt a cold fear grip his heart. Could it be that ticking again?

Once again strange memories filled his mind. The burning orb, the dancing shapes around it and that awful ticking.

The sound got louder, it was the ticking. Martin's heart raced, it was happening again.

Martin stopped. It's not happening, he told himself.

This can not be happening. But the ticking continued unabated.

He closed his eyes and shook his head to try and clear it. This didn't work either, with nothing to see, the images from his memories filled his consciousness with frightening detail. Suddenly Martin was there again, floating in the clouds, the shapes dancing around him, there hard crystalline edges changing with every tick of ...

Martin's eyes opened. But the horror didn't end.

The leafy green suburb was still there, but it now had a blood red sky. High up in the sky where the sun should be the burning globe with it's ring of shapes now hung. It's fiery glow throwing deep, sullen shadows. And the people around Martin, became monsters, twisted parodies of the human form. Tentacles and claws replaced arms or legs, some had hideously swollen heads and tiny stick-like bodies. They walked on by the now stationary Martin, paying him no attention.

Petrified by this awful transformation of the world around him, Martin could do nothing, but stand and stare.

A particularly loathsome pair of figures approached Martin, their translucent skin revealing in gruesome detail their internal organs. Their bloated, lizard eyes looked straight at Martin, before they averted their gaze.

Martin cowered away from these approaching horrors. Which only caused them to look at him again. Their green slit eyes, cutting...

Suddenly everything changed again.

The sky was once again a normal blue and the people around him were normal people going about their everyday business. The monsters before Martin had become a young couple and they quickly looked away from Martin as they avoided him.

This is not happening, Martin told himself.

He started walking again, but more slowly this time. This is silly, the speed I walk is not going to affect what I see.

Martin walked at his normal, quick, pace and to his relief the world stayed 'normal'. He began to enjoy the walk again. In his head Martin planned out the evening. First there would be the

dinner, which of course would be great, Martin was a dab hand with pasta. And of course it would be candle lit. And then after dinner...

Yes it was going to be great. Everything had to be just perfect. The food, the wine, the lighting, everything.

Martin started to make a detailed shopping list as he walked in to the supermarket.

Cold fear once again gripped him, he could hear that ticking again. Just like before it started very quietly, but was getting louder and louder.

Martin tried not to hear the sound by thinking about this evening in tiny detail.

The wine, yes I'll need a good one, a white, not too sweet. And candles, yes got to get some of those, maybe those scented ones from the candle shop. Now which ones did Debbie like the best, was it the hint of the rose. Oh yes and the sweet, what will I do for the sweet? Maybe a nice...

But the sound grew ever louder and Martin found him self listening to it.

No, no its not real, Martin told him self. Again he forced him self to concentrate on arrangements for tonight.

With the ticking ringing his ears Martin, he quickly gathered the things he needed. He received several strange looks as he muttered under his breath. All the time the ticking filled his ears, each tick, falling like a hammer blow.

As he approached the drinks section, suddenly the lighting darkened.

Oh no! Martin knew what was coming next.

The people around him transformed in the blink of an eye, into the monsters he'd seem before.

The shelves of the supermarket were now filled with masses of wriggling, snakes and severed body parts.

The blank eye's of a severed head looked out at Martin, from the wine racks. Martin recoiled in shock, letting out an involuntary scream as he did.

The monsters around him, turned to look at him. Insect like compound eye's as well as reptilian and totally black eye's looked briefly at Martin, before looking away again.

Now in a panic Martin looked for a way out. But the check-outs had now become, huge gaping mouths surrounded by black ropy tentacles. The mouths consumed all that was thrown in to them by the monsters standing in front of them.

Martin turned away. It's then that Martin saw the figure again.

It was the figure he'd seen before at the hospital. He was standing there at the end of the aisle. But he was normal looking, not the twisted monstrosities that everyone else had become.

The figure beckoned to Martin. Martin just stood there looking at the man.

The shelves around the man seemed to twist and distort, as if they were being pulled in towards him by some unseen force. But it was not just the shelves, it was the whole place. The ceiling and floor seemed to be pulled towards him as well. It was as if the man stood at the end of a tunnel and the supermarket was just a painting on the wall of that tunnel.

He beckoned again. Martin took a step towards the figure.

The ticking sound faded.

The world around Martin slowed and stopped.

Martin knew it was the right thing to do, this man was the way out of this nightmare. He walked forward toward him. The supermarket around him began to fade in to a golden mist.

I've seen this before, Martin told him self. The tunnel of light before the burning sphere. But this was right, it was good, Martin knew this. He also knew that the sphere was wrong, it was...just plain wrong.

What about Debbie?

With this single thought, the world changed. The golden mists where gone, replaced by the supermarket shelves stacked with there goods.

Stunned by this sudden change, Martin could only stair blankly around. Coming back to his senses, he caught a glimpse of the strange figure that seemed to have started all these strange changes. The man had turned around and walked away, he was now disappearing around the end of the isle.

Martin didn't have any idea what was happening to him, he was sure of one thing, this man knew something. And he was going to tell him.

Martin walked quickly to the end of the isle

By the time he'd made it there the figure was heading down the central isle towards the exit.

Martin broke in to a run.

The figure stopped and looked back at Martin, it was a man. Martin realised this was the first time he'd noticed this. He was dressed 'normally', in a light grey trench coat. Again this was the first time that Martin had noticed this fact, and yet he'd recognised him twice now. What was going on?

The man turned away from Martin and headed for the exit.

Martin burst through the supermarkets doors.

He stopped and took a look around him. There was no sign of the strange man. Where can he have got to in such a short time?

He had to be somewhere close.

Martin spotted him, walking slowly towards the exit on the far side of the car park. How did he get that far, walking at that speed? Martin asked himself as he broke in to a run. The man disappeared around the corner.

Martin ignored the blasts on horns that he received as he sprinted across the car park. He was gaining ground on this man now, and he was not about to let him get away now. He had all the answers, Martin knew this.

Martin rounded the corner and saw the man just a hundred or so meters ahead of him, in the green, leafy walk way from the car park to the high street.

It seemed, to Martin that he'd slowed down even more now. Could it be that he wanted Martin to catch up with him? Why was he slowing down now? Martin thought. He could have out run Martin, but he hadn't. Why? To draw me out to some less crowded place. Martin wished he hadn't just had that thought.

For the first time Martin felt doubt as to whether this man had the answers. Martin slowed his run and stopped.

Martin looked on as the man continued his slow steady walk.

Suddenly from behind him, Martin heard something. He turned around. There was nobody there, just the empty path way that Martin had just run along. All the same Martin felt suddenly uneasy. The pleasant light woodlands that surrounded the path way suddenly seemed dark and foreboding.

Martin felt panic begin to rise in him. Oh no not again.

Martin made a final sprint for the strange man.

By the time Martin had made it to the man, he was breathing very heavily, but the man didn't turn around to see why this man was chasing him. He made no reaction at all to Martin's breathless arrival.

For the first time Martin got a good look at his face. It was an utterly ordinary and forgettable face, apart from the eyes. They were an intense blue and seemed to stare right through to Martin's soul.

The man stopped.

Martin had planned to demand answers from this man, what had happened to his life in the last day? Who was he? Why was all of this happening to him?

But now he had finally caught up with this man, his mouth had suddenly gone dry, the questions seemed to stick in his throat. He could not speak.

For a few moments the two stood there, the only sound was that of Martin's heavy breathing.

The man finally spoke. "You must come with me".

This was not what Martin had expected to hear. "What?" Was all he could manage to say in reply.

"You must come with me". The man repeated.

"Why must I?". Martin asked.

"You must".

Martin suddenly found himself getting angry, this man had answers and he would give them to him.

"That's not an answer" Martin spluttered. "Tell me why do I have to go with you and where do I have to go to?"

The man remained calm in the face of Martin's anger.

"I am your only way out. Your exit..."

"My way out!" Martin shouted, "My way out of where?"

"This place". The man looked around.

"Oh I can leave here any time I want, I don't need your help. I can just turn around and walk away".

"Yes you can leave this place, but without me you can't get to where you want to be".

"This place I want to be, I suppose is where you can take me".

"Yes".

"So where is this place I want to be so badly that I don't know it". Martin asked sarcastically.

"You know the place".

For the briefest of moments Martin knew exactly what he was talking about. But then like the memory of a dream, it evaporated, leaving only the memory of a memory.

Martin's anger flared again.

For a brief moment the man seemed uncomfortable. "You must know the place. Until you do you can't leave. And I will only be able to help you for a short time".

"Well I don't know it so I guess I'm stuck here. Perhaps if I must go you should take me against my will".

"No, that can not be done, you must want to leave. Your anger is clouding your mind, you must calm down, only then will you know the way, only then will you see the way out. It is then that I will be able to take you". The man pleaded. "But you must do this soon. In less than a day I will no longer be able to help, and you will then be..." The man stopped.

"I'll be what?" Martin shouted.

"Stuck here...Forever".

"So"

"Take a look around you". The man held out his arms and looked around. Martin also looked around. The light in the woods seemed to have taken on a different quality, it was not darker, but it was gloomier. Perhaps a bit redder.

Oh no! Martin glanced up to the sky. For a moment, the sun was that awful burning globe again, complete with it's ring of dancing shapes.

"No". Martin whispered. "What are..." Martins question died in his throat was he saw the man had gone.

So had the burning globe, the sky was a bright, normal blue. Everything was normal again.

Martin dumped the bags of shopping on the table and, with a deep sigh, flopped down on to the sofa. What is going on? There was no explanation that Martin could find for these strange hallucinations. Apart from that he was going around the twist.

I'm not going mad. He told him self. But even to him self he didn't sound all that convinced.

This is all probably perfectly normal for some one who has been through what's happened to you.

I died. He reminded him self, there is no ' perfectly normal'.

For a moment he sat there thinking about his life and death, and then decided he needed something to keep his mind off these big subjects. And preparing the perfect evening would be just the thing. And it was going to be perfect.

The first task was to get the place looking just so. And that meant a quick tidy up. Martin took a quick look at the clock on the video. The glowing green numbers reassuringly showed the time was 2:54.

I've got plenty of time.

So martin set about tidying the room. Not much to do really, Martin thought, well hardly surprising with Debbie being a lady!

Martin smiled, I must be getting better if my sense of humour has returned.

Yes the evening was going to be great. A perfect romantic meal and then after...

Martin stopped. He could hear ticking again. He stood motionless for a few seconds, the feelings of dread and fear returning.

Then Martin realised Debbie had a clock on the table, the ticking was coming from that. It just seemed louder than normal. Your just listening for it, Martin told him self. He chanced a quick look at the video clock. The glowing figures clicked over to 3:00 just as he turned to look at it.

A little unnerved by this Martin continued. Nothing was going to get in the way of tonight. Every thing was going to be just fine.

The room tidied and set up Martin decided to hit the kitchen, it was still a bit too early to start the cooking, but Martin didn't want to have nothing to do. He needed to keep his mind occupied, right now he didn't want to dwell on anything.

So he slowly started the preparations. He started to think how the evening would go, planning it out in his head.

The ticking started again, and this time Martin knew it wasn't the clock on the table. The solid, resonant sound was like a tomb stone falling. Each tick another second gone, each tick another second away from the reality as Martin knew it. Each tick bringing him closer...

Closer to what? Martin didn't know, he didn't even know why he was thinking like this. With a cold, hard ball of pure terror forming in his stomach, Martin looked at the clock on the microwave. The blue glowing digits showed 0:04. Martin froze, it was happening again.

"No, no, no. Not now". Think good, positive thoughts. He told himself. Tonight, think about tonight.

The meal, the low romantic lighting, the candles, after the meal. It was going to be great.
tick, Tick, TICK, **TICK**.

The sound grew ever louder. Each one another slice of his life gone. Martin's hand lashed out at the radio, he tried to turn it on, but he couldn't find the switch. He fumbled with the controls.

tick, Tick, TICK, **TICK**.

At last he found the switch. He turned up the volume to full. The kitchen was filled with the sound of the latest sugar coated hit from some non-descript teen band. But Martins ears where filled with another sound.

tick, Tick, TICK, **TICK.**

Each tick now came like a hammer blow to Martin, driving him down to his knees. The sound had driven all other thoughts from his mind, it filled his world with it's terrible rhythm.

tick, Tick, TICK, **TICK.**

Martin clasped his hands to his ears, but it did no good, the sound was not coming from outside, it was coming from within him. It was the beat of his soul slowly dying.

tick, Tick, TICK, **TI...**

Suddenly the sound was gone.

It took a few moments for Martin to realise it, but the kitchen had fallen in to total silence. Martin slowly stood up. After the ticking the silence was almost worse. His ears where totally alert for the slightest sound, the merest hint of a tick, but there was none. All he could hear was his own gasping breathing and racing heart.

Suddenly the light changed. It was much darker now. "Oh no". Martin whispered. He looked around him. All was normal, so what had happened to the light. He looked at the microwave. It's display was totally blank.

He looked outside. The garden had gone. It had been replaced by a featureless grey void. Martin rushed up to the kitchen window and looked out.

The garden had not gone, it was still there, but it was shrouded in a thick grey fog. The end of the garden was completely obscured. Martin could see no more than 4 or 5 meters in to the

thick fog. And what he could see of the garden was grey and colourless. As if it were covered in a thick frost.

As he looked in to the fog, it stirred and Martin was sure he could see some thing moving through it, towards him.

Martin stared at the fog in fascinated terror. As he did a shape emerged from the mists, it was a figure. Martin knew it was the man he'd seen before, the man who's face he'd seemed to forget was soon as he'd gone.

He'd talked to Martin, about...about leaving.

For the briefest fraction of a second Martin knew. He knew what was going on and he knew he had to...

He had to...In the time he'd taken to think that, the thought was gone.

The man stood in the mists. Martin looked at him. The mists were slowly wafting round him. No it wasn't that, he was fading in to the mists.

Martin shut his eyes. When he opened them, the mists had gone, the garden was back to it's colourful self. Martin slowly became aware of the badly distorted voice of a DJ filling the kitchen. Martin switched off the radio.

It took Martin fully ten minutes to recover his composure after this latest bout of strangeness. For a long while he just stood leaning on the kitchen work top, just staring at it. He wasn't really aware of the passage of time. He wasn't aware of much at all. It was the chill that awoke him from this trance like state. He was soaked with sweat and it wasn't that hot.

Slowly coming back to his senses he realised he'd been standing there for some time. This isn't going to get things ready for tonight. He thought as he looked around the kitchen, getting his bearings again.

As he started to prepare the meal again, his thoughts were not on the strangeness that he'd just witnessed, but on the preparing of the meal. He'd given up trying to work out just what was going on to him. Or at least the part of him that was trying to work it all out was far, far removed from his conscious thoughts, perhaps frightened there by the events of just a few minutes before.

He looked up at the kitchen clock. It was nearly five thirty, time to start cooking. Debbie would be home in about half an hour.

Martin's mind jumped to the thought of seeing Debbie again and almost at once his ears tensed. Was that ticking he could hear again. He stopped and listened, yes it was and it wasn't the clock on the fireplace.

For a moment Martin's legs felt as if they were going to give way. But then anger flared in him, whatever it was, it was not going to get in the way of this perfect evening that he'd planned.

Martin busied himself with the cooking, but all the time the ticking lurked in the background. It was not filling his head the way it did before, but it was just there not getting any louder, but not going away either.

It was making Martin very jumpy. He kept looking around, feeling that someone was right behind him, looking over his shoulder.

Thankfully nothing else had happened, yet. The sky stayed its normal blue, but there was maybe just a hint of red, Martin thought. And none of the other weirdness that he'd seen before had happened, yet, either.

Martin had almost forgotten the ticking, it had gone in to the back ground and was almost totally screened out by his brain. Without the constant reminder of the strangeness that had faced him in the last day, Martins thoughts turned to the normal everyday, mundane thoughts that fill peoples heads for 99% of there lives. And with these thoughts came thoughts of Debbie.

Martin looked up at the clock, almost time now.

And with this single thought the normality around Martin dissolved away. The ticking once again filled his ears, the burning globe and it's dancing shapes once again filled the deep, dark red sky.

The pasta the Martin was cooking on the stove suddenly became ropey worms boiling in a black slime. Martin screamed involuntarily as he stepped back from the stove. All round him the kitchen had become a chamber of horrors. Strange mutated creatures looked at him from spice jars, weird bugs crawled across the work surfaces.

Martin stood, frozen to the spot in the middle of the kitchen.

He moved very slowly and carefully towards the living room, avoiding any contact with any of the horrors that surrounded him.

The living room was no different, here the horrors continued. Martin looked out of the window. Once again no change from the horror. The people walking in the street had become monsters, the cars had become awful slimy carriages that walked on insectile legs or slithered on masses of black ropey tentacles.

Nothing he saw had been unaffected by these changes. The world had become an unending horror.

And all the time the awful ticking continued. Each tick filling Martins head, reverberating through his very soul. Each tick another tomb stone falling, another life ended, another dream broken.

Martin was shaking with terror.

What about Debbie, Martin Suddenly thought. The Overwhelming fear that this thought caused whited every thing out in his mind, even for a brief moment the ticking was gone. Martins legs gave way and he slumped to the floor.

Martin was not sure for how long he lay there on the living room floor. He could feel nothing but terror. Then another feeling, some thing else, something that gave contrast to the terror.

Suddenly something had changed and shakily Martin stood up. Around him the room was still teaming with horrors. But something was different.

He looked around him. Standing in the back garden was the strange man he's seen before. He was a normal man. Nothing unusual or horrific about him. Martin rushed for the back door.

The back garden was no better than the house, the horrors still lurked and watched Martin, But he did not notice them, his gaze was fixed on the figure before him. The normal man.

The figure turned away from Martin and slowly walked away from him. Martin ran after him, but it seemed that he was moving very slowly. The figure passed through the archway that divided the garden in two.

It seemed to take for ever for Martin to reach it.

Through the archway the world changed again

The Horrors had gone, in fact so had the garden. It had been replaced by a swirling golden mist. The mist was thick and obscured almost everything, even the ground looked as if it had despaired. The figure was standing before him, facing him, with an almost satisfied look on his face. Behind him a strong light shone out.

Martin at once knew what it was. He'd been here before. The mists, the light. He must go forward, in to the light.

Martin stepped forward...

"Martin, martin"

He turned around, it was Debbie. She was normal, around her the world was still twisted and distorted, but Debbie was her normal self. "What's for dinner then?" She asked with a smile. Martin glanced behind himself. The mists and the figure had gone, the horrific world had taken their place.

"Are you okay?" She asked. "You look a little pale".

It took a few seconds for Martin to speak, his mind was spinning. Debbie was here now and she was normal. She was the only thing that was not effected by his hallucinations. This meant there was hope. All the strangeness that Martin had witnessed today was some passing thing, something his mind had conjured up to deal with his brush with death.

Martin told himself this, but some where in the back of his mind some doubts lingered.

"Y...yes, I'm fine". Martin glanced behind himself again. The garden was still a slithering, seething mass of horrors, but it seemed there was just the slightest hint of a figure in it all. Martin blinked and it was gone. He turned back to Debbie, who has a quizzical look on her face. "I just

needed to get some air, it was getting stuffy in the kitchen". He explained, not sounding at all convincing.

Debbie smiled, "I like what you've done for dinner".

Martin hugged her. "God it's good to see you again". He whispered to her. She smiled and returned the hug. "A candle lit dinner and now this. If this accident has knocked some sense in to you, then all I can say is, I'm glad it happened". She released her grip on him and pulled away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that".

Martin smiled again. "I know, its okay".

"Well you finish dinner, I'd better get changed. Tonight looks like it's going to be something special". Debbie said with a little grin.

Martin focused once more on preparing the perfect meal. He now could cut off all of the horrors that surrounded him, they where only temporary. Debbie was unaffected, every thing was going to okay.

He laid the table out the best he could, but it was difficult when the knives and forks seemed to have serpents and worms wrapped around them. Martin could feel them brush against his skin. He told him self they weren't real. This almost seemed to work, the sensation was some how distant, not connected to him.

Debbie cleared her throat, as she walked down the stairs. She was wearing a dark green satin evening dress, with a low cut neck line that did a more than adequate job of emphasising Debbie's, slight build. The long skirt was slit on the left side up to her thigh, which gave quick flashes of her slender leg, as she walked down the stairs.

"Like it?" She asked with a smile. "Wow", was all Martin could say. For a few moments he wasn't aware of anything odd, or unusual in the room at all.

"Your just saying that". Debbie said with a sly grin.

"I didn't get chance to do my hair right". She run her hand through her long, thick red hair. She was playing with him, Martin knew. It was her red hair that had first attracted Martin to her.

They hugged and kissed again. Martins hands dropped below her waist line. "Now then, Martin Mansfield". Debbie said with a wicked grin. She kissed him again and whispered to him. "Later, you've cooked me dinner. I don't want to miss that".

Martin looked down at his meal. He knew it was pasta, but his eyes where telling him some thing different altogether. He felt very, very sick. He looked up at Debbie. She was still untouched, normal. She was the one thing that he could trust this new world of ever changing horrors.

"Mmmm. Looks good". She said. Martin just smiled.

Debbie tucked him to her meal. It was likewise untouched by the hallucinations around him. He looked back down at his own. "What's the matter?" Debbie asked, her fork midway to her mouth. "It's not poisoned, is it?" She asked with a grin.

"I hope not". Martin answered weakly. Avoiding looking at the food he sunk his fork in and took a mouthful. He chewed slowly. It tasted normal.

Focus on the normal, he told him self.

"So how have things been this week at the office?"† He asked. "Give me all the gossip and rumours".

Debbie looked more than a little surprised. "You really have changed. But I do like this new you".

For the next hour Debbie told Martin all the office gossip, you was allegedly sleeping with who, who was cheating on who. And Martin hung on every word, asking for all the details. He focused totally on the soap opera that Debbie's words described. He did not let her pause for more than a few moments. When that subject dried up he turned to the office politics and power struggles of his own office. Talking almost non-stop. Pausing only to take a bite of the 'normal' tasting food.

And it worked the horrors around him began to recede, leaving only the normal world, behind them. The ticking that had filled his head grew ever so slowly quieter. A band of normal blue evening sky grew slowly up from the horizon. It was working.

"Well that was really great". Debbie said sitting down on the sofa. "You must do the cooking more often".

Martin flopped down beside her. He was exhausted and his throat sore, but he was happy, he'd done it. The world was normal again, well almost. Unspeakable things still lurked out of the corner of his eye. But the ticking was gone, the weight lifted from his shoulders.

"Wow your hot". Debbie said from beside him. She put her hand on his forehead. "Are you sure that your feeling okay. Your sweating like a pig".

"Yes I'm fine now. I really am".

"Good". Debbie smiled. "That's good, because all that rich foods not going to do my diet any good. I need to work off all those extra calories I've eaten tonight". She stretched, reaching

for the ceiling with one hand while the other hand slowly worked it's way up her body, lingering on her breasts.

"Yes, how can we work off all those calories, I wonder". Martin said with a grin. "I'll go up and get ready then".

Debbie got up very slowly and deliberately and slowly walked up the stairs. Martin watched her go and then smiled.

He got up from the sofa...

And the world once again changed. All of the horrors that had been held at bay on the edge of his vision came racing back.

Before his eyes, the curtains became writhing masses of black ropy tentacles. The sofa became a hideously bloated slimily blob. Strange insects scuttled across the floor.

Martin let out a tiny strangled scream.

Not moving from the spot he looked around him. There was nothing, not one object in the whole room, untouched by these awful transformations.

And they seemed to be getting worse. The walls, which before had been unchanged, were now taking on a pallid, green, grey colour.

Martin turned around and for the second time, let out an involuntary scream. Standing behind him was the man he'd seen earlier in the day. Standing here in Debbie's house.

For a moment Martin could say nothing, he was totally stunned. "W..w..what the hell are you doing here?" Martin finally managed ask.

"You know what I'm here for". The man answered in calm even tones. Behind him the world seemed to bend inwards and fade to some distant grey mist.

"No, no, no. I don't know. I don't know who you are or why you're here and I don't care. I just want you out of my life. All this is your fault". Martin shouted at him.

"No I did not cause what you see. You know that. I'm the way forward. The way out".

"No don't give me this crap. I do not know any thing about any of this".

The man seemed troubled. "The way will only be open for you for a short while longer. You must decide soon. Very soon".

"What are you talking about?" Martins anger was beginning to fade and was being replaced by nagging doubts. Out of the corner of his eye, Martin could see the walls of the room beginning to crumble away.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about". And then he added in an almost desperate tone "You must know".

For a moment the full knowledge of what the strange man was talking about flowered in Martins mind. The enormity of it numbed Martins already battered mind. Then having stunned him, the knowledge vanished, leaving only fragments, isolated facts, meaningless trivia.

The man seemed relieved. "See you do know".

"I...I. What was...how did" Martin mumbled.

Behind the man the far side of the room was now gone, it was replaced by a vortex of slowly swirling mist, lit by a distant golden light. Martin knew he'd seen this before. It was after the crash, when he'd...

"You know". The man said again. "You now know what you need to do. The way must take".

...when he'd drowned after the crash.

What had happened to him finally hit Martin and that scared him more than anything else he'd seen or heard since the crash.

"Yes you know. Now you must decide. Now". The man's voice carried a great deal of power, the words penetrating all of the confusion that surrounded Martins mind. It penetrated the horror and revulsion at what surrounded him, it penetrated the shock of all that Martin had just discovered, it penetrated even the awful ticking sound.

At last Martin knew. He knew the truth. He knew what he must do.

The man smiled as Martin looked around himself at what was left of the house. Almost nothing was left showing of the original house, it had all been replaced by the horrors, the blackness. He looked down at him self. The rot seemed to have reached even him now, his legs had merged with the black tentacles that made up the floor. But this did not worry Martin now, for he knew what was holding him back now. He knew the way forward.

Martin stepped forward...

"Charging...Clear".

"No. No pulse". The paramedic looked at his watch. It was to long. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes.

"Charging". He called again as the defibrillator charged up again. "Clear". He applied the pads to Martins chest and hit the discharge button. Martins, blue tinged body convulsed as the massive shock passed through it.

"No pulse". The second paramedic called. The two paramedics looked at each other. The first shook his head. "It's been to long. Lets call it".

The second looked at his watch. "Time of death 9:12".

The two paramedics stood up and placed Martins coat over is still, life-less torso.

From a short way up the muddy bank a man in a long black coat with white hair watched the scene with satisfaction.

His work here was done.