

## Lethargus

*I dream, therefore I am.*

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### *At a Japanese hospital*

“Do you think she can hear us, Doctor?”, her mother asked, swollen eyes still brimming with tears.

Peering over his spectacles, the clinician offered a small, but warm smile. A shrug of the shoulders told the mother “probably not, but it can’t hurt to hope”.

“She looks so peaceful, lying there. Even with all those tubes sticking out of her... Say that she’ll wake up, Kaito? Tell me that she’ll open her eyes again...”

No words came out from her husband’s parted lips. Unlike his wife, his tired eyes never drifted from the face of his daughter. But as he stood in the intensely-lit hospital ward, cradling his wailing wife, unsure whether he could keep his legs from buckling beneath him, he would have been at a loss to remember whether he had slept that day, that week or that year.

From the doorway behind them, a nurse entered the private room.

“Motorcycle accident”, the doctor muttered, shepherding the nurse over to one side out of earshot.

She glanced over to the girl on the gurney and took in the devastated man and woman holding each other, though it was the grave air of the doctor which told her everything she needed to know. That it didn’t come much worse than this.

“Rear cranial depression fracture, main concern. Several ribs shattered, no signs currently of pneumothorax, need scan to confirm. Minimal blood loss through various abrasions – shoulders, back, hips. Right ankle could be broken but again the scan will tell us that.”

The doctor looked up from his clipboard once more. “She wasn’t wearing a helmet,” pre-empting the nurse who had just opened her mouth to ask how she had suffered such a head trauma.

“Can you, in this order, find out when she is due in theatre; chase up the scans on her chest and ankle, call down and get more fluids in here. Thank you, nurse.” A curt nod and she was off out of the room once more.

The ward was again silent as the doctor strode over to the young girl. Examining the equipment hooked up to her, he once more studied his clipboard, marking a note here and there where he deemed appropriate.

Finally, he arrived at the young girl’s head.

Eyes still attached to the clipboard, he laid a palm briefly over her forehead. “Not clammy,” he noted. He laid his palm on once again, for longer this time. “No signs of fever,” another note. Unclipping a miniature spotlight from his jacket pocket, he peeled back one of her eyelids, flooding the pupil with light.

A puzzled expression washed over the doctor. He checked the other eye.

“Hmm, I thought they...”

He thumbed through the sheets of paper on his clipboard, one by one. “Well that doesn’t add up,” he eventually muttered, absent-mindedly pulling his tangled beard.

The mother lifted her face out of her husband’s chest, despair turning to panic in a flash.

“What’s the matter doctor? What’s going on with our daughter?”

“In all honesty, I...”, again glancing up from the papers, “What I cannot tell you, Madam, Sir, is why your daughter, in a deep medical coma, is showing signs of brain activity. Not even just that...”, completely baffled he turned his back on the girl’s family to stare at her face, “It’s as though she’s in some sort of intense dream...”

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*At a London Doctor’s Surgery*

Julian sat expressionless in the high-backed waiting room chair, his hands very comfortably interlaced and gently perched in his lap. He'd been staring at the overcrowded noticeboard on the wall opposite him for some time now, and as the edges of the papers blurred, and the colours of the pages started to mesh into a warm haze, his heavy eyelids drooped unchecked for a moment.

Julian shuddered, drawing open his eyes just in time to catch himself from falling into a deeper reverie.

His wife, sitting next to him, was not daydreaming. Not in the same fashion, at least. Nineteen to the dozen, her fingers danced across the glowing touch screen of her phone, a comforting "pitter-patter" quietly audible. It did not seem all that long ago when Marilyn had declared that she would never be devoted to one of these contraptions; a time-plundering nuisance only serving to render minds addled and devoid of self-stimulation.

Nowadays, social media, video calls and selfies were all part of Marilyn's digital vocabulary.

As Julian stretched his eyelids as wide as he could to stave off his doziness, his wife's soft tapping drew his attention:

"Texting your girlfriends again, dear?"

"Yep. Fall asleep again, *dear*?"

*Well, she's got you there.*

Marilyn puffed an irritated stream of air through her pursed lips, stray wisps of her faux-golden fringe floating towards the ceiling as she took a moment's pause from texting to glance at the time.

"We've been here, what, 15 minutes? What am I waiting for? The place is empty! Has the doctor even showed up?"

"Maybe they're on their phones..."

The TV in the corner bleeped.

*Marilyn Short*

*Doctor Guptill*

## Room 5

Marilyn sighed, as though it was an unspeakable effort to now stand after being made to wait for so long. Tucking her phone away into her emerald leather handbag, she touched her husband lightly on his arm, gave him a look to say “*here we go again*”, before slowly hauling herself out of the waiting room seat and shuffling away along the corridor and out of sight.

Now alone in the waiting room, Julian became all too aware of the lack of fingers tapping on phone, of heavy sighing as his wife grew further impatient at her doctor’s tardiness.

The golden wallpaper reminded him somehow of a child’s nursery. Sure enough, over in the corner a heap of toys lay strewn at all angles. Several thick, colourful books sat relatively neatly on a play-top nearby; the kind where you could read through the words in a matter of minutes, but the pictures would enthral a young one for an age. Above the desk, scribed with a touch too much dexterity to have come from the hand of a child, a glossy poster with bright yellow smiling faces dotted across, and in rainbow lettering the highly apposite description:

### **Kid’s Corner**

Julian felt a smile spreading across his face as their little girl flashed across his mind. Not so little now, of course. A doctor and a mother herself these days. But as he saw her now, in the twinkling of his imaginations, it was his little girl at an age he could now not recall, fixed forever at least only in his mind.

A shrill noise pulsed through the waiting room.

“Eh?” Julian muttered, his expression instantly snapping from one of a dazed gleam to a perplexed squint.

*Was this still a dream? Are you sleeping Julian?* He rubbed his eyes thoroughly and gave his forehead a stiff squeeze. Not sleeping.

He re-focussed his gaze back to the screen.

The screen had only gone blank for a few seconds before blaring to life once more, a second beep coursing across the room.

*Well, I'm not imagining things then.*

*Julian Short*

*Room 8*

“...what the blazers? Well that can't be right.”

Slowly, he levered his frame out of the hardwood chair and stepped timidly to the edge of the waiting room where it met the corridor of consultation suites.

“Well this is the damnedest thing...” he uttered upon finding no one down the corridor either.

Glancing back at the empty waiting room, Julian half-considered walking back to his chair, folding his arms and shutting his eyes firmly until his wife came back to sort this mess out. He wasn't even meant to have an appointment today for goodness sakes!

The TV once again sparked to life, though now the solitary, respectable beep of before had multiplied, as if the TV were possessed!

*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep...*

Julian stood open mouthed as with each beep the screen flashed to life, bright yellow rays ricocheting off the sunflower wallpaper around the room.

“Flippin' heck! I'm coming, I'm coming! There's no need for the discotheque,” he called down the corridor.

The door of Number 8 Consultation Suite offered Julian nothing of particular interest, and as he rapped three times on a section of the wooden coating that had faded away through many repetitions of this very action, he lowered his ear closer to the door in anticipation of a call instructing him to enter.

A call that did not come.

He rasped his knuckles swiftly onto the flat of the door once again.

When, again, no reply arrived, Julian lost it.

After throwing his hands into the air, stamping his feet, and altogether “acting his shoe-size rather than his age”, as his wife regularly remarks when he lost his temper, he clamped his hand roughly over the round door knob and twisted.

Despite the lack of the usual invitation to enter, Julian was still fully expecting there to actually *be* a doctor, or at least some ilk of medical professional, waiting in the room. He worked himself in to such a frenzy that he almost hoped that they were sitting at their desk on their mobile, earphones in, completely oblivious to his entry. He’d have a field day.

So, when the first thing that Julian saw was absolutely nothing, he was completely thrown. The room was in total darkness, a pitch-black fuzz that lay in utter contrast to the cheerful sunflower wallpaper outside. Squinting heavily in an attempt to make out anything in the gloom, Julian called out:

“Hello?”

Realising it unlikely that someone was sat there completely in the dark, he scratched his balding head and looked up at the metal number affixed to the door.

*Well, it's still number 8, Julian...*

He debated going back to the waiting room, only for the fear of another assault by television to deter him. He thought about knocking on door number 5, where his wife was still being assessed by Doctor Guptill. Also a bad idea.

Before closing the door of number 8, Julian took one final look back into the room when something glinting caught his eye.

The gloom was certainly still thick, but his eyes had somewhat attuned enough to allow him to make out various objects in front of him. The desk, of course, was one of them, sitting against the side wall. The assessment bed on the opposite wall was there, too. In the summer months, light would have been flooding in through the window, fully illuminating the contents of the room. This being the depths of a

wintery January, and his wife's appointment squeezed into an evening slot, the window offered no further help to Julian peering through the darkness.

There was one source of light, though. It lay on the doctor's desk, so close to the computer monitor sitting upon it that at first Julian assumed it to be merely the standby light on the bottom of the screen. He realised it was too large, and too bright, for this on second glance.

*Some kind of tablet computer?* Julian thought. *Now that would be something at a doctor's surgery!* Julian snorted.

Could it be this tablet that's going haywire and sending out all these all the notifications in the waiting room? And mixing up the appointments?

He checked back into the corridor one last time, half hoping that someone with a suitable-looking clipboard and stethoscope would appear from nowhere and dash along and take charge. Either that or his wife.

"To hell with it," he muttered.

He stepped over the threshold into the consultation room. Immediately, he noticed the change of temperature; it sure was cold in here.

As Julian approached the desk, the light from the corridor suddenly disappeared. The door clicked shut behind him. His decision to not look for a light switch irked him.

From the glimmer of the device, he had just enough light to continue, shuffling around the patient's chair with his arms outstretched.

"Well I'll be jiggered..."

Looking directly down on top of the source of light, what he had assumed to be a computer of some kind he now realised was in fact something far more traditional.

"A notepad..."

It was cool to the touch, though as it had been sitting in this icy room all day, Julian thought nothing of it. He hadn't even noticed it.

What he had noticed was something flash across the page.

An expression of wonder danced over Julian's face before he'd even had time to process what he'd seen. It breathed and died across the page too quickly for Julian to utter a sound, but standing silently rooted in the pitch-black doctor's room, he felt an energy pulse through his fibres, the lethargy of the waiting room chair long forgotten.

He held his finger to the notepad once again. Longer this time, pressing down firmly as though providing his print to the authorities. As before, a blaze of pigment appeared on the notepad, clinging to Julian's touch as a child would to their parent's finger.

As soon as Julian removed his finger, the illusion vanished, as quick as it had arrived. When he returned his finger, it reappeared; vibrant shades of indigo and turquoise serenading one another as they danced across the pad.

Like a child with a wide grin plastered over his face, Julian picked up the notepad and lay it flat in the palm of his hand.

Julian flipped over the page. It was blank.

He tried placing his finger onto the page again. This time nothing. No flash. No colour.

Once more, he turned the page. No reaction.

Still resting in the palm of his hand, Julian began rifling through the pages of the notepad, intent on delving deeper.

Approaching the middle of the pad, he stopped.

It was a child's drawing. Thick, dark pencil lines etched across the page. Julian smiled.

He followed the pencil lines across the page and after joining them up found a scraggly, lopsided face smiling back at him!



The child must have been young, thought Julian. Even his 5 year old grandson could pull off a face slightly more coherently than this one. Although they do say that a child who draws happy pictures is a happy child, so that's something.

Another face, again smiling, though drawn this time with a little more dexterity than the poor thing on the previous sheet appeared next. Sure, it was still a little balloon-esque, the eyes far too near the hairline to be considerate of the forehead, but at least this lucky soul had teeth!

As Julian flicked through the following ten or so pages, the child's disjointed attempts had manifested into something rather artistic.

"Sweet", Julian muttered, flashes of his own daughter's fledgling artwork creeping into his mind.

The final few drawings towards the end of the notepad were beautiful to behold; surely no longer the work of a youngster. Intricate age lines on faces, sweeping vistas over fields and rivers, high-rise skyscrapers stretching upwards for silk blue skies.

With a tinge of sadness, Julian flipped over the last page of the notepad, unwilling to break the connection he'd forged with the artist which had grown with every turn.

A pretty young girl now stared inquisitively back at Julian, her flowing black locks pictured rustling in the breeze. She was standing on a grassy bank of sorts, pointing into the distance with her arm stretched out fully as though imploring Julian to peer in closer. He obliged, squinting into the sketched distance. A bank sloped lazily down from the grass, giving way to a strip of blonde jagging towards the horizon and, right over on the far side of the picture, a dash of aquamarine.

It was more realistic than any of the others, and yet had a simplicity to it that gave it the feel of a moment frozen in time, as though Julian were staring at a photograph rather than a work of art.

He glanced back at the young girl.

*Had she been smiling a second ago? She was now anyway. Though, hang on; her hair now lay limp around her shoulders rather than dancing with the wind. Heck, are these pictures moving now too?*

Sure enough, the longer he peered at the drawing, little flickers of life began to appear. At the edges first; the deep blue sea began to shimmer where Julian's fingers gripped onto the notepad, little waves dancing across the delicately painted beach.

Julian stroked his fingers over the edges of the painting, more than a little disappointed when he felt nothing more than the bare material beneath his skin. Yet the waves still twirled.

The girl had moved again. Still smiling, she now held out her arm in front of her, reaching out as children do when they want someone to hold their hand.

"My Julia did that, holding her hand out for attention", casting his mind back to his daughter.

Hovering his hand over the girl, he tenderly touched his thumb to her face, imagining rubbing away the mud from her cheeks, or salty tears from her eyes; care in which he was well-versed.

He placed his finger onto the upturned palm of the girl's outstretched hand, remembering the softness of his daughter's as they would walk together on countless weekends gone by.

"AHH!" Julian cried out as his ears were flooded with a fierce popping sound, attacking his eardrums with such ferocity he clamped his eyes shut with the pain. As the noise reached its crescendo, Julian felt his feet lift clean off the floor and for the first time in his long life he realised that this is what fainting must feel like.

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"Caroline!"

"Hey, Mama"

The two women embraced as an elder newcomer strode into the hospital ward, her daughter nestling warmly into her chest, fresh tears flowing as she hugged tighter.

Speaking softly in English, Caroline sobbed as she brought her mother up to speed on what the doctor had told them so far, the elder parent's face remaining as austere as her daughter had ever known it to be. Thin lipped and furrowed brow, Caroline had never known her mother as someone to be trifled with.

Keeping her child close to her breast, she took in the doctor who had just entered the ward.

“Daphne Dearth. I understand you have been attending to my granddaughter,” she said, switching her tongue seamlessly to Japanese.

“She is currently in recovery,” the surgeon replied with a hint of optimism. “It has been a complex procedure, but the pressure on her brain has been somewhat reduced. We’ve also reset and secured her broken ankle.”

Daphne nodded. She knew all about broken ankles, having been a nurse herself. Brain trauma on the other hand, not so much.

“I must also tell you all...” he hesitated. Kaito who had, until now, been sitting with his head in his hands on the opposite side of the room became suddenly alert and rose from his chair.

“Yes, doctor?” Daphne replied. Caroline untucked herself from her mother’s lapels to peer up at the surgeon.

“The brain activity which your daughter was...somewhat unusually showing pre-op has increased...” He looked perplexed, unfamiliar perhaps with the sensation that he was not utterly in control of the forces at work on his patient.

Daphne, not a fan of beating around the bush, needed to know either way:

“Please tell us doctor. Will she get through this?” Caroline glanced up at her mother, mild horror etched on her face. She had not quite prepared herself to receive an answer to that just yet.

The doctor pondered this a moment, only serving to ratchet the fear swirling in Caroline’s eyes.

He sighed:

“I would advise that you prepare yourselves for any eventuality.”

Caroline threw her head into her mother’s bosom once more. Daphne and Kaito exchanged troubled glances.

“Any other relatives that you’d like to be here? Her grandfather perhaps?” now turning his attention to Daphne.

Even after the best part of five decades that smacked like a brick in the gut. A pang of sorrow danced briefly over her cool blue eyes. Regaining herself, she offered politely:

“No, doctor”

This seemed to satisfy the doctor that he had completed his due diligence. He couldn’t say for sure which way this was going to go. He walked quietly towards the door:

“Very well then, I’ll leave you for a while. I must check on her progress.”

A wave of melancholic tranquillity hung over those remaining in the ward as the door clicked behind the doctor. Lifeless for a moment, Kaito ambled back over to his chair where he slumped in despair.

Caroline remained firmly in the clutches of her mother fearing the worst.

And Daphne, struggling to contain the sensations churning her stomach, could do nothing to stem the memories of her fledgling nursing career flooding back to her. The British Navy serviceman brought to her ward during the war, who she had fallen in love with...and who was Caroline’s father. She could still picture herself standing forlorn on the docks having waved goodbye to him. She hoped to hell that this feeling of loss was not about to be repeated as their granddaughter fought for her life just a few rooms away.

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Julian yelled out as his eyes flooded with light, so caustic in contrast to the pitch black of the doctor’s surgery that he jammed a palm over his face to shield them.

He settled for a moment. At his age in life, shocks were best avoided. Being dragged through notepad drawings was thoroughly inadvisable.

As his senses recovered, he realised he was lying flat on the ground, face down. His free fingers slowly reached out to explore their surroundings. The cool, familiar touch of grass tickled Julian's palm as he ran it over the ground, fine dew drops clinging to his skin.

Slowly, he unpeeled his eyes. Muffled at first, his vision could make out a smooth jade haze ahead of him, long grass swaying peacefully in the breeze. At the furthest point he could make out, jade met sapphire; the heavens stretching out above Julian as he tilted his head back, his sharpening vision swathed in utopian azure. His gaze lingered long enough to catch a lone bird glide over him, far above, distant crooning fainting drifting down to his ears.

Prising himself away from the grass, Julian wrestled with his memory as he strained to remember whether he had visited this place before. He couldn't place it, but...those hills in the distance? And hadn't he heard that sound before? Of course he had, the sea!...

By the time Julian had spotted the girl sitting on the beach, he'd been wandering for what felt like hours. He'd left behind the soft, rolling hills, and now the ocean loomed ever larger before him. It hadn't been long before he'd unlaced his shoes and plunged his pale toes into the warm white sand.

To then come across a teenage girl sitting cross-legged in the middle of the expansive beach was a welcome relief to Julian, who hadn't set eyes on another soul since coming through the picture; something he'd well and truly put down to now being part of an overly vivid dream. He had no doubt that his actual body was tucked away in his bed, his wife beside him. Hopefully. The alternatives were not worth losing his mind over...

"My name is Wynter," the girl replied to Julian's question.

"Wynter? Well that's lovely! Like...like Christmas winter?"

"Close enough," she said, with a well-practiced grin.

As Julian examined the girl closer, he saw that she had something in her lap.

"It's you!" Julian cried out, seeing a sketch pad and crayons laid around her. "*You're* the girl in the paintings. You know, you're an excellent drawer."

She smiled and thanked him, before snatching up a crayon as though she'd neglected her drawings for too long.

"May I sit with you, Wynter?"

She nodded.

"Why do you think I'm having this dream?" he asked her, squidding into the sand as he sat.

This perplexed her:

"What makes you think this is a dream, Julian?"

"Well, I...how do you know my name, Wynter? I don't believe I..."

"How else would you have found my notepad? You have to be."

"I don't understand...people can't be sucked through paintings?" Julian said, feeling less confident that he knew what was going on with each passing comment he made.

She sighed, neatly shading in a section of the page she was working on with an icy blue.

"Do you recognise this scene?" she asked.

At first Julian thought she meant the picture she had in her lap, but then realised she meant the beach.

The ocean. The rolling hills. He didn't really know how to answer:

"I'm not quite sure, to be frank. Perhaps I have. If this is not a dream, as you say, then how did you get here? Are your parents nearby?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "I don't think they're sure where I am at the moment."

A worried look passed over Julian's face:

"Well, you shouldn't really be out here alone, Wynter. The tide looks like it's on its way in before long!

Can I call someone for you?"

"It's fine. Thank you, though," sounding thoroughly unconcerned.

Julian squinted closely at the sheet of paper Wynter had before her. It was really starting to take shape, though he couldn't tell what, yet. In the corner she had scribbled something he couldn't quite make out. Squinting harder...

"Is that Japanese you've written there, Wynter? You're bilingual!"

"No, I am Japanese! We're in Japan! You're speaking Japanese to me now, Julian! Have you not realised?"

"But...no, we're speaking English, Wynter. I can't even speak Japanese!"

"And I can't speak English..." she thought about this for a moment. "Maybe language in the painting world is universal." She nodded as though that satisfied her curiosity, then went back to her drawing.

Julian looked round again. What had he missed? There must be something that explained what on earth was happening here. And why was there an irking feeling in the back of his mind telling him that'd he'd been here before? That he was not on this beach for the first time.

And then it struck him.

*Of course* he'd been here before! Back well over 50 years ago now, at least.

He'd been young, only just out of his teens if he remembered correctly. A fully signed up mechanic on board a Royal Navy Patrol vessel as part of the British Patrol Fleet during the Second World War. He'd never been so scared in his life as he'd plunged into the swirling waters that day, only to wake up bloodied and bruised on a beach. This beach...

"My grandmother has a photo on her wall at home," Wynter said, now looking straight at Julian, sitting opposite. "She's been here before too. Many times."

...He'd fallen unconscious before being rescued and taken to the nearest British forces hospital, just a few miles away.

"You're remembering, at least," Wynter said, noticing the expressions transform across Julian's face as various memories, some clear and some muddled, flooded back to him.

“But how? How can you possibly know about my connection with this place?”

Wynter shrugged:

“My grandmother told me. And my mother too. She doesn’t say it, but I think it was hard for her to grow up without a dad. I’m pleased that I didn’t have to.”

If everything up until this point hadn’t sufficed in utterly confusing Julian, this girl now talking in riddles sure didn’t help.

“Listen, Wynter. I haven’t a clue what’s going on but I think it’s probably time we both went home. Your parents will be wondering where on earth you are!”

“I don’t think they’re too happy with me at the moment,” Wynter reflected sadly. “You see, I did something really stupid. Something that I was told not to do.”

“That’s nonsense. Parents always forgive their children...eventually. What can a young girl like you have done that’s so bad, hmm?”

She told him about the motorcycle accident.

“So, let me understand this fully...” Julian was starting to piece things together, if not fully believe them. “You’re currently injured in hospital...with your parents. But your mind...is here in this place. Like a dream?”

“Sort of.”

“And this place. This beach. The two of us. We’re here for what purpose?”

“Well to meet one another, of course. Why else would you be here in my mind?”

Julian let this sink in. The waves crashed softly in the distance as silence fell between them.

“Do you like it?” she said, finally holding up the drawing to show Julian. “Can you see what it’s meant to be?”



Julian peered closer. He reached to take the drawing in his hand to see closer, only for Wynter to snatch it back.

“Don’t touch! You don’t want to go *there* do you? It’s warm here! I don’t want to be cold, thank you very much.”

“So we’re connected through your pictures, then?”

“Yes, Julian,” this time through gritted teeth. “*You* need to get your head around the fact that *you’re* in *my* mind, and neither of us are going anywhere until you figure out why.”

Exasperated, Julian lifted his hands into the air and flumped them back into the sand:

“What am I doing here Wynter? How do you even know me?”

The shift in her expression took Julian aback; the hard look on her face had melted.

“Because,” she answered, a single tear sinking down her cheek, “You’re my grandpa.”

She forced her head to tilt as far down towards the ground as her spine would allow, as her words sunk into the hush which followed.

“I think,” she said eventually, “I always knew that I would get to meet you one day. I mean I have *seen* you before, in photos. Pictures hanging on the wall at home. At grandma’s too.”

Julian held his breath as he took all of this in, memories which had been cast aside in decades gone by now came flooding back to him.

“Daphne. That’s your grandmother’s name, isn’t it?” Julian finally found his voice, though barely more than a murmur. “Daphne Rivers...”

Wynter looked up now at Julian, her eyes gleaming through the pools of tears in her eyes. Giggling, she flung herself over the sand into Julian’s arms, pressing her cheek to his chest.

“Yes!” she said, elated. “That’s her! Although,” sitting upright and looking into his damp, grey eyes,

“She changed her name when she met grandpa. My other grandpa, I mean.” She thought for a second, “Well actually I have two other grandpas, I suppose. It’s a little confusing.”

Julian chuckled, wiping away tears as more streamed down his face.

“But you’re a *real* grandpa!” she said beaming up at Julian. “Like, big-time related in the blood stuff.”

Again Julian chuckled, dabbing his thumbs against his granddaughter’s cheeks to dry them off. Their happy faces gazed warmly at one another.

Julian looked down at Wynter; her smooth, youthful skin, stretched taut across her beaming cheeks, her wide eyes brimming with joy.

Wynter gazed up at her newfound grandpa, overwhelmed with the kindness flowing from his old, pale eyes.

“But Wynter,” Julian said, the elation finally dampening from his face, “If you are the grandchild I never knew I had...”

“Yes!” she nodded proudly,

“Then I must too have a daughter I never knew of. Your mother...”

“Oh yes. She’s never met you either. You left before she was born. That’s what she told me anyway.”

Julian placed his head in his hands. This was too much to take in. A whole family, a complete missing chapter of his life that he’d never even known about.

Never had he even considered, as he had parted from Daphne Rivers at the docks as he prepared to sail back to England, that he’d be leaving behind something far greater than his love for the woman who had helped nurse him back to life.

“She’s called Caroline,” Wynter said softly, “My mum, I mean.”

“Caroline,” replied Julian. “I have a daughter. A *second* daughter I should say! I have another, Julia...back in England. She’s a doctor, you know.”

“My mum’s a teacher,” Wynter replied proudly.

“A teacher...” Julian played with that for a moment.

A wave of guilt sprung through him. It had not been his choice to leave her behind when he received his papers transferring him back home, but sitting here now, his newfound granddaughter in front him, he was racked with the regret of not trying harder to stay, not returning when he had the chance...

And what would his wife have to say? He’d met her years after he returned, but still...another family half the world away.

“Wynter,” Julian pleaded, “If I’d ever found out about you and your mother...”

“I know,” she smiled, “I knew from you were a nice man when I met you.”

Julian reached out and clutched her tightly, the emotion rolling through his fingertips as he squeezed her to his chest, trying with all his might to send through one embrace the love a grandfather may normally give through thousands; the love for a granddaughter whose mother he had never set eyes upon, and yet for both he felt the same tenderness which he had shared with others for generations.

With Wynter resting under his chin, Julian closed his eyes for what seemed like merely a moment, but when he once again opened them, the sun had moved from its previously imperious throne above to now delicately perching atop the horizon, far out over the expanse of the ocean.

He felt something cold flow against his feet. Looking down he realised the tide had come right up the beach to where they were sitting, the heaps of soft sand now buried beneath the water.

He felt Wynter gently pulling away from their embrace, lifting her head up to kiss him lightly on the cheek.

Her eyes had glassed over, he noticed.

“Wynter? What’s happening?”

“All the colours are running dry for me now, grandpa. It’s time for me to go back. I think I’m going to be OK after all.”

“But where are you going? We’ve only just met!”

“That’s alright, grandpa. You’ll find me again.”

Wynter closed her eyes as she faded away with the last of the sunlight, disappearing as though she’d never been there with Julian at all.

Julian looked down into his lap. Her notepad sat staring him in the face, somehow still dry despite being surrounded by the tide.

Finally, he saw what she had been drawing all along.

She had the shading absolutely spot on. Really, she was a fabulous little artist.

A dark room, facing an open doorway. Cool blue light swept through the opening into the room, beautifully illuminating what appeared to be a very normal, averagely sized, doctor’s surgery, complete with desk and examination bed.

Julian smiled. He knew what he needed to do.

He extended his finger and touched the painting.

\*

It was a softer landing this time. Julian even managed to keep his feet as they slapped back against the floor of the doctor’s surgery, leaning back against the desk to steady himself.

He looked to the doorway as a figure moved in front of the light, their silhouette blocking out the light once more.

“For goodness sake, there you are!” his wife cried out. “He’s here doctor,” she called out down the hallway, “didn’t make it far the old fool. What on earth have you been doing, Julian?”

Julian moved to stand in front of his wife, taking her hands in his.

“Dear,” he said softly, “Do you know where we keep the passports? I think we need to dust them off...”

**THE END**