

A Thing Among Things

By

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“That doesn’t look like anything to me.”

The doctor turned his chair to face Dek again. On the monitor behind him the image of Dek’s liver, modelled in three dimensions and slowly rotating around some arbitrary axis, faded away to be replaced with the blue and silver shape of the Obratech logo. Dek had never been able to figure out what it was supposed to look like; it was a strange, almost non-Euclidean shape, a mass of splines and rods that was somehow meant to visually encompass everything that Obratech represented. It was a mess, but one that had become so familiar that Dek rarely paid it much attention.

The doctor was staring at him, waiting for a response. As Dek realised he had distracted himself again, as his attention snapped away from Obratech's twisted corporate identity and back to the man sitting opposite him, an odd rippled ran over the doctor's face. It was the spasm of a man trying to keep his true feelings out of his expression, a man doing his best to repress the deep resentment that inattentive patients provoked in him.

"Sorry," Dek said, and the doctor waved it away. "What did you say?"

"I said it doesn't look like anything to me, Mr Martin. It looks to me like--"

"That's what you said to me the first time."

"Excuse me?"

"The first time I came to you. That's what you said."

The doctor sat back in his chair and pulled the glasses from his face. He began to clean them, looking down at his hands as he spoke. The handkerchief he used to buff the glasses was embroidered with a crude two-dimensional representation of the Obratech logo. Dek noticed it left tiny flecks of blue fluff on the lenses as the doctor worked it across the glass.

"That was fifteen years ago, Mr Martin. Diagnostic techniques have come a long way since then. Medicine has come a long way since then." He replaced the glasses on his face. Dek thought they didn't look any cleaner than when they had first been removed. "A long way, Mr Martin. I would think you, of all people, should appreciate that."

"That doesn't look like anything to me. That's what you said. Those exact words."

"As I said, Mr--"

"Was it nothing?"

"As I said, Mr--"

"Was it nothing?"

The doctor sighed and seemed to shrink in his seat. On the monitor behind him the Obratech logo had begun to twist itself apart, tearing and reforming over and over again, remaking itself into what Dek assumed was the same shape it had held initially.

“No,” the doctor said. “No it was not.”

The issues with Dek’s health had probably begun gradually. Only probably, because he hadn’t noticed until things were already bad - and when he did notice it was quite sudden, not gradual at all.

He had gone to take a piss, and his world had fallen apart. Standing there, staring blankly at the tiled wall ahead of him, he had begun to feel what he could only describe as hollow. He had a sense that he was drifting, his mind or his consciousness or whatever you wanted to call it somehow pulling up and away from his body, lifting out of his skull to give him a top-down view of the pale, scrawny skin-suit it had previously been wearing.

He hadn’t noticed the darkness encroaching on the edges of this peculiar vision until it vanished into blackness. He woke again with no conception of how much time might have passed. All he knew was that he had been standing, and now was not, and that he had begun by pissing into the toilet but had ended by pissing onto his shins, his shoes, and, somehow, the wall some six feet above his vantage point on the wet floor.

A scramble for clean clothes later and he’d found himself stumbling off a bus and into work, still feeling like he wasn’t entirely present within his body. It wasn’t until his boss had taken a look at him and declared that he should “fuck off to the doctor’s, you look like the walking dead” that he realised exactly what had happened.

He’d blacked out - something he had managed to go thirty-something years without ever previously doing. And he’d pissed on himself - which, admittedly, he had been less successful at avoiding throughout his adult life, but it was still unusual.

So he had gone to hospital, and the whole saga of Dek Martin and Obratech began.

“That doesn’t look like anything to me.”

The office was older, the doctor younger, the Obratech logo the same. There wasn’t a three-dimensional scan of Dek’s liver - not for years, yet. Instead there was an ECG machine that had squealed and popped like ‘90s internet while it measured his heartrate through some means that seemed more like magic than science to Dek.

Dek wasn’t even sure what the doctor was looking at to make this underwhelming diagnosis. From what he could see it was a chart of numbers that had no relation to the arcane noises the ECG had made - but the doctor seemed to decipher some meaning from them.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and the doctor shrugged. He didn’t wear glasses then, not yet, but he was already beginning to squint. It made him look as though his face had shrugged along with his body, and afterwards Dek would laugh about it more than he felt was appropriate.

“I don’t know what else to tell you, Mr Martin. Not at this point, at any rate. The ECG is clear. Your heartrate is slow, and we’ll need to look into that of course, but there certainly doesn’t appear to be anything obviously wrong with your heart.”

“But I passed out. Surely that’s not right?”

Again the doctor shrugged, his shoulders and his face. It was a habit that Dek would grow to loathe, over the years.

“That might happen from time to time. Normally, when we stand up our blood pressure spikes briefly, to stop the blood rushing away from our brain. It seems like your body isn’t doing that, or isn’t doing it as successfully as it should be doing. It’s not normal, certainly, but it’s nothing to be overly concerned about.”

“But that and the low heartrate? Surely-“

“Again, I wouldn’t be overly concerned. If you were an athlete we wouldn’t be worried about your heartrate at all.”

Dek looked down at himself. When he looked up he saw that the doctor was doing the same.

“Well, I’m clearly not an athlete.”

“No. Quite.” There was a pause in which Dek considered the relative merits of reaching over and strangling the doctor, but he thought better of it. “But, again, it’s nothing life-threatening. The tests are clear. Stand up slower, eat more salt, and you’ll be fine.”

“I’m honestly not sure about this. It doesn’t feel right.”

The doctor smiled - or maybe he grimaced. Dek was never sure if that had been real, or something he inserted into the memory later.

“You’ll be fine. Like I said, it doesn’t look like anything to me.”

Two weeks later, Dek’s heart exploded in his chest.

Exploded would be an exaggeration, obviously. But that’s certainly what it felt like. There was no out of body experience this time. This time - this second time in as many weeks that he had fallen face first towards the ground - there was only a ripping, a tearing in his chest, a pain so great that it silenced Dek’s internal monologue until it was done. There was just pain with no thought, and then darkness.

Darkness, warm and gentle and seeming as though it would go on for an eternity, had been going on for an eternity, the moment when sleep turns to wakefulness and dreams stretch time out like rubber inside your head. Darkness that gave way to light and the resurgence of pain in a literal heartbeat.

He woke to a white room, and doctors, and the Obratech sigil looming over everything.

He woke to intubation in his throat, to cannulas in his forearm and the back of his hand, to a surgical blanket pulled up between his face and his chest.

He woke to a stab of pain that faded into gooey, sticky anaesthesia. He could still feel the pain lurking beyond the numbness, promising a return, but for now it was mostly absent.

After the doctors stopped him fighting the intubation, a surgical mask lowered into his eyeline and spoke to him in the forced calm tones of somebody on the verge of complete panic.

“Mr Martin, you can hear me? Good. I’m putting a pen into your hand. Squeeze. Can you feel that? Good. You need to sign a document.”

Dek began to say something, but the intubation hadn’t been removed.

“There’s no time for you to read it and no time for me to explain what it is, Mr Martin. Please, just sign. The best approximation of your signature. If you don’t, you are going to die. I promise you that.”

So Dek signed, and he didn’t die. Or, at least, he didn’t think he had died.

“Obratech have been good to you, have they not, Mr Martin?”

Another doctor, another office, an intervening span of years. The same Obratech symbol. An older Dek.

“So they keep telling me.”

“You would be dead, Mr Martin. You know that.”

“That might be better.”

“I don’t see how that’s accurate, Mr Martin. Not by any metric I can see.”

One thing Dek had noticed over the years; the more you annoyed a person, the more they used your name. In the early days he had thrived on that; tired of doctors who condescended to him, who spoke to him like an ungrateful child rather than a sick, confused, scared man, he became obstinate and argumentative. Every use of his name in a sentence was another point he had scored.

“What purpose do I serve?” Dek asked. “What’s the point of all this?”

“You’re advancing science, Mr Martin. You’re at the bleeding edge of what is possible. You’re a living testament to what medicine can achieve.”

“So I’m a lab rat. A guinea pig. I’m an experiment, is what you’re saying.”

“Not at all. Nobody owns you, or keeps you in a cage.”

“I spend my life in these offices.”

“In this hospital, Mr Martin. And you come here when you need our help, do you not? The rest of the time you’re free to do as you please.”

He had heard this from a few doctors, and had thus far completely failed to see his point. And what was his point?

His point, frankly, was that he was bored.

The papers Dek signed turned out to be consent forms that enrolled him in a medical trial of a technology so new that the emphasis was definitely on the ‘trial’ aspect of the project. He was aware of 3D printing - a friend with more money than sense had bought himself an ugly thing that sat in the corner of his living room and was mostly used to make shoddy-looking monster toys for his Dungeons and Dragons game, and he had seen a documentary about people who called themselves ‘makers’ - but as far as he was concerned it was a fringe technology, a cringe that would pass along with yo-yos and phones without headphone jacks.

“Not at all,” the doctor said, once Dek had woken from his surgery and the heart they had given him could be trusted to beat unaided, and Dek had expressed this view. “The consumer side of it is still in its infancy, but Obratech has put a lot of time and money into this. We’ve moved beyond plastic.”

The doctor leaned forward, tapping gloved fingers gently against the stitching that ran up Dek’s chest like a zip.

“What we’ve put inside you couldn’t come out of your friend’s printer. It’s not plastic; it’s flesh, and blood, and tissue, and your body will treat it as such.”

“It’s not real flesh, though,” Dek said. “It’s not human. It’s man-made.”

“Yes and no. It’s designed by humans, certainly. It was grown - we say grown, not printed, by the way - with man-made technology. But on a molecular level it’s identical to a human heart. If anything it’s better - more efficient. Stronger. It shouldn’t ever fail you.”

“But it’s not natural.”

“Mr Martin,” the doctor said, “very little of what we do in modern medicine could be called ‘natural’. Widespread use of antibiotics is not natural, but without it millions upon millions of people would die. We know this because they did, in the past. You would be dead.”

At that point Dek hadn’t decided that he might have been happier - or at least content - to die, so he didn’t say anything of the sort. But in hindsight, the seed of that discontent was planted in that room, in that bed. Dek simply wouldn’t realise it for quite some time.

After he recovered from the surgery, Dek decided the best thing to do would be to go back to work. But he had lost his job, it transpired; he had lain in that hospital bed for weeks before returning to consciousness, before his heart was taken off the machines that pumped it and allowed to work on its own, and nobody had known he was there. None of his friends had

checked in on him - it seemed they had all failed to notice that he had simply dropped off the face of the planet for the best part of two months. His boss, sympathetic (at least partially) when Dek had walked in on the day of his fall, had received a similar amount of radio silence to Dek's friends. He, of course, expected Dek to show up every day - and when he hadn't, and the messages left for him had gone unanswered, Dek's employment status had been modified to match his attendance.

It turned out that it didn't much matter. After a brief but sincere panic, Dek began opening the post that had arrived during his institutionalization. His intention had been to identify the bills, the demands for money, in a bid to ascertain exactly how fucked he was going to be financially now that he was lacking in the job department. And there were bills to be found - plenty of them. But there was also the letter confirming his participation in the trial - along with a copy of the forms he had signed, and an 'informational leaflet' that resembled a technical manual - and also confirmed the compensation he would receive in exchange for said participation.

His first reward, the first gift Obratech were to bestow on him, was continued life. They made that very clear.

The second reward was a rather large sum of money - and the promise of more, a nice income in exchange for Dek continuing to make himself available for study and consultation.

At the time he was ecstatic. Who wouldn't want to be paid a handsome sum in exchange for simply existing? But that soon changed.

Dek had always assumed that his hobbies were his hobbies because he enjoyed them, and that he enjoyed them because they were enjoyable. He had never considered that he only enjoyed them because they provided a respite from the rest of his life, and without the drudgery of work they would cease to interest him. Dek was wrong.

Something did begin to break the drudgery, but it wasn't something Dek welcomed. A few months after being fitted with a new heart, Dek began to piss blood. Whether it had been lurking already or was some unforeseen by-product of his vat-grown heart, nobody knew. All they did know was that Dek's bowels and prostate were riddled with cancer.

Chemo was never an option. Obratech was there, with their vats and their forms and their shrugging surgeons. Obratech would grow him new, benign parts.

A year later it was his lungs. Three months after that, his pancreas. Then his throat, his colon, his left eye.

Obratech replaced them all, and everything continued to work. The things Dek had grown himself, the organs that had been with him since birth, began to shut down. But Obratech was there, always. Some of the faces changed, some of them disappeared completely as the years passed, but the twisted blue and silver sigil of Obratech became a constant.

And, somehow, against the odds, against the very clear fact that some force of nature wanted him dead, Dek survived.

But he was bored. Jobs were hard to come by and harder to keep. He would get settled, get into a routine, start to feel like he was reclaiming his life. Then his kidneys would shut down in his sleep, and he'd once again be back at Obratech, to have more failing flesh cut out and another vat-organ inserted in its place.

After a few years, the Obratech doctors suggested that he might be better served if he chose to live off the money Obratech provided him with. He could take up painting, or writing, or crochet, if he needed mental stimulation. But a job? Oh, a job was probably a bad

idea. Too much stress involved in a job. Your body is failing you, Mr Martin. It's best not to tax it too much. Best you take things easy.

He took up painting, but Dek was bad at painting and he stopped.

He took up crochet, but Dek was bored by crochet almost immediately. He only stopped it if you'd allow that he'd actually started in the first place, and he was apt to disagree on that point.

So he tried writing, and found he was good at it. He wrote strange science fiction stories, all seeming to revolve around the creations of man running amok, about vat-grown super-humans who rose to dominate and subjugate their creators, about the perils of science straying too close to god. He even managed to sell one, to a respected semi-pro zine that had produced a few Hugo winners. Finally, he had found something he enjoyed, something that he seemed to be good at.

Dek had never overheard a conversation being had about him before. He had talked about people when they weren't present - of course he had - so objectively he knew how callous and cruel humans could be when talking about somebody absent, somebody not well known and not respected. But he had never heard it directed towards him.

As he walked to his appointment, treading along the long white corridors of Obratech, he passed an examination room. The door had been left ajar, and as he passed it he overheard the two men inside - whether they were doctors, or nurses, or cleaners, he never knew - laughing. He didn't know why he stopped to listen, only that he immediately knew they were laughing at him. For a moment he felt like a character in a film lurking outside an open window, visible to the audience but invisible to the characters in the kitchen plotting his murder. He was transported, no longer in the Obratech complex but instead in

INT. OBRATECH EXAM ROOM. DAY.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR

Are you fucking serious?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
As cancer. It's in this month's
Speculate. Look.

Rustling, indicative of a bag being opened and a magazine
being removed from it.

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
See? 'A Thing Among Things' by
Dek Martin.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR
That's him? Really?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
Yeah, the freak with all the
fake organs.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR
And the fake name, by the sound
of it. Dek Martin. Seriously.
What's it about?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
Get this - remember The
Bicentennial Man? It's basically
that in reverse. Like, exactly
the same. This guy starts
getting implanted with all these
robot parts, and eventually
everyone turns round and decides
he isn't actually human any
more. They make him go and work
in a mine, or something.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR
(laughing)
Fuck. That's a bit on the nose
isn't it?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
Just a bit. He might not be
wrong though.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR
About what?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR
Him not being human. Fuck, at
this rate he's riddled with
cancer and he's still going to
outlive us all. The big guys
won't like this, though.

POSSIBLY A DOCTOR
Why not?

POSSIBLY ANOTHER DOCTOR

Puts them in a bad light,
doesn't it? Their pet science
project, getting all--

Dek never discovered what he was “getting all”; at that point the door began to open, and he beat a hasty retreat. But the sentiment took root deep inside him, and it began to fester. It multiplied like the treacherous cells that had consumed his organs - but this time there was nothing Obratech could do for him.

He stopped writing. They didn't need to ask (although they did ask).

“I've already stopped,” was all he said, when his doctor tried to broach the subject. Nothing more was said on the matter - or at least, not explicitly. But from then on he began to fall, to spiral, to feel less and less like a man with worth every day.

He had lacked purpose, and the doctors had told him to find some. So he found some purpose. But now it was gone, taken away because the big guys didn't like it.

So Dek continued to survive, inasmuch as continuing to breathe and eat and sleep and shit can be called surviving. And Obratech continued to fix him when he broke, inasmuch as installing new parts and hoping for the best can be called fixing.

As far as Dek was concerned, it was only a matter of time before he broke for good.

“That doesn't look like anything to me.”

“That's what you said the first time.”

And we're back.

“Yes, Mr Martin. We've been over this countless times.” The doctor sat forward in his chair, more excited than Dek had ever seen him. “Of course, if it does turn out to be something - if the cancer is back, if it's in your liver as you suspect - Obratech can of course do something about that.”

A pause.

“In fact, do you know, if we were to replace your liver, I think - and I may be wrong here, but I don't think I am - I think we may have reached a point where more than fifty per cent of your body has been replaced by Obratech vat-flesh. Can you imagine that? Do you know what the implications of that are?”

A long silence followed that question. Behind the doctor, the Obratech sigil continued its endless loop, pulling itself apart and reforming, again and again, a meaningless symbol that seemed to Dek to resemble himself more and more with every day that passed.

END.