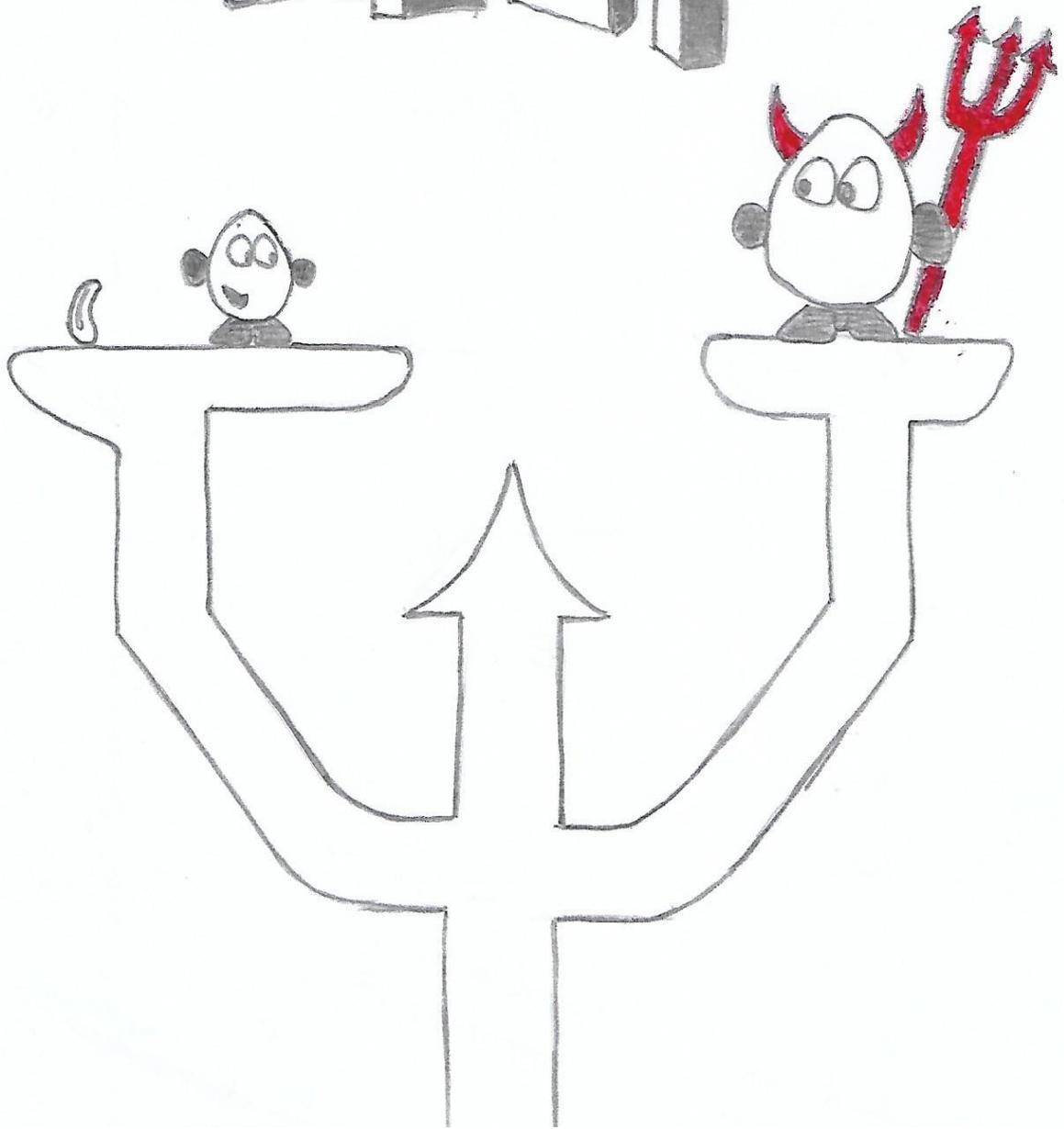


Oli

Johns

the fantastic adventures of

DIZZY



Faint glint

then it's gone *yune tsuen*, just like the one Daisy talked about the other day, in her hut, another star, the exact same thing, isn't it weird, Dizz, stars should not a] be that tiny, and b] disintegrate. I wonder who put them there?

Now it's *I wonder who keeps putting them here* as they're in my hut too, but that's not important because today is the day I get out of this pit no matter what Granddad or Dora or any of the others say.

Outside there are not only more stars, but also spiders and ants and a keyboard melody that reminds me of the old NES game I used to play with Denzel, the one that on some level is exactly the same as the tree village-shaped world I'm stuck in now.

Wood everything, even the rope.

It's called a tree village though fuck knows who built it.

I've never seen a construction worker around here, just Denzel and his headphones, pretending to drill into the ground.

And now the spiders.

the ants

the prince [lost?]

the fruit that just hangs there.

According to Delaney's ID it's

sly to bury plot thirty five miles behind the words so I walk up to Granddad's hut to tell him the news.

I'm going on an adventure, Granddad, just like you did when you shot deserters and Japanese people.

On the way I walk head on into every one of those tiny stars, I don't really know why. I just don't like the idea of leaving any of them behind.

Dora pops into my head, counting to herself while washing her hands, screaming at me for flushing the toilet when the washing machine's on, watching Cadfael.

The pipes aren't connected, you loopy fuck.

The walk up to Granddad's hut is long and tedious, way more tedious than it usually is. Did they stretch out these platforms while I was asleep?

Godot I'm bored.

As soon as I think this a plant appears in front of me, a loose cousin of the psychopath from that psychopathic plant film I watched in the graveyard that time.

Audrey 3.

The 3 is silent.

I know about you, it says, snapping its jaws.

Where did you come from?

I know about Dora too.

Are you real?

And her precious fibreglass.

Can I get past?

No.

Can I walk around you?

No.

I try walking around it, pinning my hands close to my waist, but it's no use, the lack of a third dimension stops me.

Fuck.

Who put this thing here?

Granddad?

Rick Moranis?

I sit down and fold my arms.

I don't sleep, says Audrey 3.

Says a plant.

Your family's weird.

I'm not listening.

It's not normal for her to lay newspaper down like that.

Shut up.

How long did she keep you in that bathtub?

I'm going.

Coward.

The thing about the tree village is that it's large and intricately-designed, but not unending so if you want to go somewhere away from everyone else then all you have to do is walk to the far left or the far right of the village and jump.

If you're lucky, you'll land on a remote platform.

If you're not, you'll just hit the ground

and be wispy for a few seconds

but no broken ankles

and no hospital

because we don't have one here, not even a clinic.

Medicine is basically herbs

and soup

sometimes Panadol.

Before I jump left to hang out with myself on a platform that has no reason to be coded there, I walk into another star hovering nearby because...

I don't know.

I can't just leave it there.

It's not right.

Dylan puts speakers everywhere in the tree village.

In our huts.

Among the leaves.

On the spiders?

The music is constant and happy, maybe infinite.

I can't sit down while this is playing, no way, I have to continue walking and pick up all these items someone keeps dropping on the ground.

Rope

Roast Chicken

Weed killer

I put them all inside my jacket, sure that someone will want a roast chicken at some point in my life.

Actually, I'm not wearing a jacket.

But I do have three item boxes

From Japan!

In the town, in the graveyard, in Fukuoka Shi, it's all I will ever need.

Four, five, eleven item boxes?

No ka.

Three is enough.

I'm not a vain egg.

Wait a minute, weed killer!

Plants have weeds and if those weeds are killed then maybe the plant will stop talking shit about my mother.

Yes!

I don't know how much I need or how long it'll take to kill the fucker, but I do know that I love the idea of puzzles and

solving them and I love it even more when the answer is an item only four screens away.

Hello there, Audrey 3, I say, pointing the ~~nozel~~ nozzle at the smug little fucker.

You're not gonna use that.

Keep talking plant.

There'll be others.

Sure.

They'll know about you too.

Right.

And your weirdo family.

Goodbye.

And if they don't know, if you somehow manage to reinvent yourself and your history and pretend you're not who I know you are, who you are in this tree village then they'll still guess the truth eventually.

No, they won't.

You'll be staring at washing machines too, one day.

Will not.

It's inevitable.

You're just a plant.

Or inexorable.

You don't know anything.

One of the two.

Shut up.

The weed killer works even better than I hoped.

One spray and the thing's dead.

Which means it was wrong.

It said I wasn't going to use the weed killer, but I've just used it so it was wrong.

And if it was wrong about its very first sentence then it was wrong about its very last sentence too.

Walking up the tree platform with two spiders and no fruit, I feel a tiny, tiny bit guilty about killing the plant.

It wasn't doing anything, was it?

Nope.

Just talking shit
and hanging from the platform
mysteriously.

It was no worse than these spiders
not really
and they never get sprayed.

I picture every hut in the village and change from guilty to sad, sad that the huts don't have wheels, sad that all the others are stuck here inexorably.

Dora with her fibreglass.

Granddad with his racism.

The other ones with whatever it is they have.

Ah, they're not so bad.

Not as bad as Dora.

They just don't do anything with their lives
except

play old NES games like Battletoads and Mega Man.

No, Mega Man is too hard

they never touch it

Mega Man 2

the one with heatman and airman

that's a better one.

It's weird though

How can you watch Mega Man fight an air robot in the sky and not want to do more with your life?

Or maybe it's different

maybe it's the danger of airman

of the world he created and

those little spikes that make you sweat and fall a thousand something feet to you death.

That might be it.

Or

shit

I remember three, four years earlier, the time Dozy went as far as the mine entrance...no, to the plant that spits out pink bits of plastic

or whatever that stuff is

and Dozy

he looked at that plant and

the pink bits and

the poor guy nearly had a panic attack.

And the other time

the trip to Argentina

just to see if there were really Welsh people living there

he fucked that one up too

or his mind did

and

Jesus

he didn't even make it past the airport.

I can't do it, I can't do it

Dizz, I can't do it.

We got him back to his hut okay in the end but we didn't talk about it the next day or any other time really.

We never sat down and tried to cure him.

Was that Granddad's fault?

Or Dora's?

How far back did it go?

Granddad's hut is empty apart from some fruit and a corpse.

The fruit is hanging there like a ghost.

I grab one and it tastes okay.

Just like the other one I tried.

I look at the corpse, laid out on the table.

It looks like Granddad

but it can't be

there's too much make-up.

Granddad?

I'm leaving the village, Granddad. I'm going on an adventure.

No answer.

I knew you wouldn't mind.

Outside it's dark but the keyboard melody is still playing.

Death is no obstacle to optimism.

Not with this composer.

Ah well

at least granddad went quickly

and painlessly

At least he didn't die fighting an air robot coddled by Hiro from Heroes.

I walk down to all the other huts, obliterating tiny stars on the way, and even the spiders seem more positive than before, *seem* being exactly the right word cos as soon as I touch one

of those fuckers a damage bar appears at the bottom of the screen and steals half my health away.

I hit another spider by accident with my glove and the bar's now flashing red.

Do what?

That's how my life is measured?

On a four centimetre bar?

Shit

I've gotta get out of here

right now

to Japan, Mexico, Hong Kong, anywhere.

Fuck the others.

~~Despite the music, death was near.~~

~~Luckily unidentified fruit saved me.~~

Granddad never told me this, but hovering fruit is good for you. Even better than herbs

and soup and

Panadol.

I grab one and my damage bar is cut in half.

Another piece and I'm 100% again.

Yeah

it's a bit unnerving that I have a damage bar at all but I imagine everyone does so it's probably not that bad

though

they could at least call it a health bar.

The others are in their huts, not doing much.

Denzel is stuck in an ice cube.

Dozy's asleep.

Dylan's watching TV.

Daisy's fucking her boyfriend.

Ah, that guy.

I like him, but it's weird

he's 23

Daisy's 15.

I'm no law expert but

isn't that illegal?

Granddad used to say there was no need for laws in the tree village, only in those other places, but generally we should all try to be conservative.

He also told us to hate the Japanese because they put him in a prison camp and didn't give him much food.

He said they'd do it again, all of them, if we gave them enough rope.

Luckily Dora was around whenever he talked about the old days.

Socialist Dora

who told Granddad to ~~bottle~~ zip it when Dylan went to teach in Japan for a year.

We don't need to hear your thoughts about the Japanese, Dad.

Just watch the TV

okay?

Dora isn't in her hut.

She's in the communal kitchen, washing her hands.

I walk in and wait for her to finish.

Her fingers are bright pink as she only ever uses cold water.

Warm water is no good cos

it's contaminated.

I wonder if it's possible to get frostbite from keeping your hands under cold water for too long and as soon as I decide that, yeah, it's possible, I start to worry.

I don't say anything though.

I've told her before

many times

and she never listens cos nothing beats the power and reach of fibreglass.

She stops and looks at the washing machine, muttering something to herself.

I can't understand a word.

Maybe it's French.

She says she's fluent, that she used to date a French guy when she was young and things weren't as contaminated.

Yeah, that guy

I wonder if she still talks to him.

There's no internet here, but she can always go to the town. The guy with the magic bean might have a computer.

Or the castle

All you have to do is murder five guards with a crossbow and they let you in.

Or so I've heard.

But anyway

if she can find somewhere with internet then she can look him up and maybe send an e-mail, if he isn't married or...

No, no, no, no...

What's wrong?

You fucked it up, you've fucked it all up...

I didn't...

Have to start again...start it all again, all of it, the whole wash...

Mum...

No, you've fucked it all up, get out...

I didn't do anything.

Have to start it all again, all of it...1 load, 2 loads...3 times each...2 loads...

What did I do?

It's too much...2 loads, 3 times...it's too much, I can't cope...

What?

Stop it, get out...you're distracting me, get out...

I didn't...

Get out, get out, get out, get out, get out, get out...

Okay, I say, hands up in the air. Okay, I'm going. You mad fucking cunt.

...get out, get out, get out, get out...

There are many things I do or can do that will contaminate things and even after all these years I still don't understand any of them.

How can turning on a tap ruin the washing?

It doesn't make sense.

Fucking mad bitch.

What am I still doing here?

No one deserves to live like this.

For fuck's sake

Can't even watch TV without that witch coming in and screaming at us.

Can't visit Dad without being hosed down outside and left in a bathtub for four hours.

And she can't cope?

Jesus

What the fuck am I still doing here? I shout, lashing out hard, and the plant takes it on the jaw, no sound, cos it's limp and dead and I killed it and it can wash its hands as much as it likes cos I'm getting out of this place.

Plant boxing eventually makes my arms limp so I let go of the poor fucker's neck and go up a screen.

Night turns to day in an instant just like physics promised.

I wonder what the others are up to

and if they know about Granddad.

Probably not.

They barely ever leave their huts.

It's funny

Denzel doesn't play turtles in time often because he says it's too easy and repetitive and he isn't playing it now cos he's still trapped in an ice cube.

I am though.

I'm Donatello poking the rat king with my amazingly long stick.

Whacking him on the head too.

Ha

He doesn't last long

despite his endless supply of

sewer to air missiles.

Denzel's right, it is an easy game, maybe the easiest of all time, but I never get tired of throwing those purple foot soldiers towards the screen.

My favourite level is either the pirate ship or the frontier train because they're both going somewhere.

It must've been nice back then, I say to Denzel. To not know where you're going. No lonely planet or other tourists or liars pretending to speak Spanish.

Denzel doesn't agree.

He doesn't do anything.

He might be dead, I don't know.

I heard ice cubes can just lower your ~~body system~~ blood circulation and breathing rate, so that's what I figure he's doing.

Dora's having a fit again, I say. Not sure what I did, but of course it's my fault. Mad fucker.

The turtles finish the pirate ship level and move on to the neon wonderland, 2088.

Ah, she'll be okay in an hour or two.

I guess.

Until the next wash at least.

Poor Dora.

It takes me another four days to notice but there's a note next to Denzel.

It says, brrrr, I'm so cold, dude.

I put the note down and feel a little bad that I've just been walking around the tree village for four days, collecting stars, taking damage, avoiding Dora, when all this time Denzel's been cold.

Does he want me to help him?

Is it my responsibility?

Maybe.

The town isn't that far away. A five minute walk, usually, long as I don't hit too many spiders or mistime my jump onto the barrel.

Maybe I can go there and buy some matches for him?

Or a heater?

I look at Denzel's implacable frozen face, his headphones still clamped to his ears.

But then

It's not my fault he's like this.

I didn't put him in an ice cube.

Someone else did.

And anyway

I've got other things to do.

NOTICE:

The dark wizard in neon purple robes, Zak, has been spotted in the nearby vicinity during recent weeks. If you see him, do not engage, even if you have a mirror. Call the local law enforcement on: 41rs673ffsj54637{3}

Notices pop up all the time, I think, standing near the Prince at the bottom of the tree village.

Doesn't mean anything's gonna happen.

Besides

I should probably go get a match so I can thaw out Denzel.

I walk through the next few screens towards the town. Two new spiders play mind games and hit me twice, but there's an eggplant close by so I'm okay.

Next up is the barrel jump.

I watch it roll down the waterfall five miles away and prepare to jump.

Who's rolling those barrels?

Don't they have a job?

The barrel appears on top of the waterfall in front of me and I jump.

My feet land okay, but there's no grip to jump to the grass on the other side so I slide off the edge

Down the waterfall and into the pool.

I climb out, walk back up the path and try again.

This time I time it right but don't jump far enough, hitting the edge of the cliff as I fall down into the pool.

There's a watermelon, I eat it, the gash on my head disappears.

I climb up and jump again.

Fail again.

Fuck, this barrel, it's...

I can't even reach the town

What about milk and groceries? We can't grow it, we don't have a cow, the field above the mine has grade three radiation, we have to go to the town, past this barrel

No one's ever made it first time

Not in my family anyway.

Even the Prince has to call a taxi.

I sit at the side of the waterfall, typing out an e-mail to the local council.

'Tired of barrel jump. Requesting redirection of funds to code a bridge. Can have a crack or a hole in it if you want to keep things exciting. Yours, Dizzy.'

I get up and try the jump again.

This time I make it.

I pull out my phone and delete the e-mail.

In the town, there are rats blocking the 7-11, so no matches for Denzel.

Ja, Kaero.

It's saturday tomorrow

dad day

which means sunday is season of the witch.

I try to think of excuses but

none are good enough

to get me out of this.

I wait with Daisy and Dylan by the ground elevator, hoping he's not just late, but not even coming.

He's gonna take us to the pirate ship again, says Daisy.

I know.

I hate that fucking ship.

Yup.

Maybe he won't come.

He will.

Dad arrives an hour late, mumbling something about last minute work.

We get in the car and turn on the radio.

Where's Denzel? he asks.

Ice cube.

And Dora?

Hiding, says Daisy.

Really?

Yes.

I can see her on the platform, up there.

Hiding badly, adds Daisy.

Is she okay?

Same as usual.

Uptight?

Very.

Dad's house is only ten minutes away on foot, but as always he decides to go via the town and the graveyard.

He tells us a story on the way

about what Zak's up to

and the castle guards

and how someone who looked kinda like Zak hired him to build a doric temple next to the creepy church.

We pass the church and slow down and
the topic changes.

The graveyard wasn't always a graveyard, it actually used to be a village, says dad. But then it got re-coded. And a new composer came in, so the melody changed. Yeah, now it's spookier, more electronic. If you ask me, the old one was much better.

We listen but don't care.

Or we care, a little bit, but we're more worried about how long she's gonna keep us in the bath this time.

You kids are pretty quiet.

Tired, says Daisy.

How about we go check out the beach tomorrow?

And the pirate ship?

Sure, if there's time.

The next day we drive down to the beach and look at the pirate ship.

Or dad does

we just sit in the car listening to
the urban cookie collective.

On the drive back to the treehouse village, no one says a word.

We all know what's coming, even dad.

He never talks about it

and I'm too young to remember

but I heard from Dylan that she used to make Dad shower in the garage because he was covered in fibreglass and he couldn't come into the house and eat dinner and relax until she was sure it was all gone.

Dora hoses us one at a time
right next to the ground elevator.
Luckily
the prince is at the castle so
no one else knows about it
except us.

It's not easy climbing the platform to the shower hut, not
without stepping off the newspaper she's laid down, but we all
manage it cos we've done this about seventy four times before.

We sit naked in the bathtub, waiting.

How long do you think..

Don't talk to me, Dora says, socks rolled up over her
leggings. I need to concentrate.

Okay.

Four hours later, I'm back in my hut, eating one of the fruits
left over from the previous day.

Despite being in a bathtub for half the night

with two other people

I feel lonely.

There's an ant walking up and down outside, I can hear it, but
it's not enough.

The remote platform is a good place to sit and make plans so
that's what I do, I sit and make plans to get out of this
place because if I don't I'll be stuck here, standing by the
ground elevator getting hosed down by a mad cunt in rolled up
socks for the rest of my life.

Denzel's still in an ice cube, I say the next morning.

I know, says Dora, looking exhausted.

We should thaw him out.

Didn't you say that yesterday?

I'm gonna head into town, buy him some matches.

We have matches, somewhere.

I'll buy some more.

There's no need.

I won't go far.

Dizzy, we already have some.

Bye, Mum.

I said I'm leaving to buy matches, that's what I told Daisy and Dylan too, but really me and my three item boxes, one filled with flashcards, are heading off to Japan.

Dylan only lasted a year there and totally failed to learn the language because it's the hardest language in the world and only wizards like Zak who use dark magic to remember vocab and grammar can learn it well.

That's what he told us.

Seriously, Dizzy, it's all backwards

the verbs are at the end

and the reasons are before the actions

and no one ever speaks it to you

cos they all want to speak English

Diligent fuckers

the lot of them.

I nod at the spider next to the ground elevator even though the conversation was two years ago.

Yeah, sure, Dylan

that's how it was

their fault, not yours.

Sure.

The prince slaps me on the back as I walk past, asking me to pick him up a whore if I'm going into town.

I ignore him, sticking with Dylan and Japanese.

It's true

I never challenged him at the time but I know better now, and I know him, and all he was doing was laying out excuses cos he was lazy and it was hard.

I will do better.

To get to Japan I have to go through the town and the graveyard and the desert island that may be Guam, I don't know, until I finally wash up in Fukuoka, for some reason in the airport even though I did not take a plane.

I attempt no missions or side missions or anything task-related along the way cos I'm tired of that shit.

It's incredible

in the tree village there are no signs and no electricity and no plug sockets.

Okay, that's not entirely true, there is some kind of power source as we do have a TV and a washing machine and Nintendo and the speakers that play that happy music day and night, but there isn't anywhere near the same amount of power as Fukuoka has.

Not even close.

The first month or so I use my three item boxes for the following:

Japanese textbook - intermediate

Japanese textbook - slang & idioms

Roast Chicken

There's no point in the flashcards, no one understands a word I say.

Dora e-mails sometimes, to tell me about Denzel and how he's still stuck in the ice cube, but it's okay, they got the doctor to come and check on him and he isn't dead, he's just not a main character, and Daisy's boyfriend's been ditched cos he got a job at the supermarket doing the night shift and Daisy thought that was really depressing so she got rid of him even though he seemed like a nice boy.

I e-mail back to the last piece of news, asking if it's weird that he's 23 and Daisy is 15, and Dora writes back saying, no, it's fine, Daisy's sixteen now.

I ask her each time if she's doing okay, if things are under control, and each time she writes back telling me she's fine.

I don't say a word about hosing or washing machines, not even a joke.

It's better this way.

What I don't ever tell her is that Fukuoka, on an atomic level, isn't much different from the treehouse village, and my days are spent pretty much the same way, only instead of spiders and mysterious fruit, I now walk past prostitutes and neon kanji.

One day I hear a rumour that the evil wizard Zak has consolidated his position in the sky above the graveyard and is now trying to buy property in the town, specifically the pirate ship and one of the buildings with a rat outside.

I don't believe it and

besides

it's nothing to do with me now.

I take the train to the teaching centre in Kurume on saturday, sunday, monday, tuesday and wednesday and take the rest of the week off.

Most nights I walk around my new neighbourhood and stare at the signs I can't read and the people who don't look like me.

The quietest place nearby is a school playground.

I sit down on the swing

and stare at the trees lining the cement.

I remember the Chinese takeaway back in the town, just past the castle.

Let's go to the chink tonight, Dora used to say

let's go to the chink

which now I think about it isn't much better than the things granddad came out with about the Japanese, but with Dora, none of us ever called her on it

we couldn't

because we said it too.

The students in Kurume are fine except one guy who complains one time that I don't use the textbook.

He's right, I don't

but it's not my fault

it's my nature

the way I'm coded

the same thing that always got me into trouble back home

the thing that made me ask, hey, what the hell's happening in that mine?

all that noise and stuff

why don't I go check it out?

The complainer comes back the next day.

I don't want to be paranoid

but they put him on my schedule

even when I told them not to.

I think about hiding in the teachers' room or

opening some kind of portal back

to the treehouse village or the mines

but then I think

fuck it

he's not a big guy

and he's no wizard

so

I walk into the classroom and teach him again using a map of the world.

I point at things I know

speaking clearly

'This is the town. This is the graveyard. How do you get from one to the other?'

He walks out halfway through.

There's a girl at the teaching centre who looks Japanese-Mexican mix and one day I meet her on the train, early morning, her on the way to work, me on the way back home after singing karaoke all night with the hostess in Kurume, well, singing and touching her up and learning the word for endurance - gaman suru - which she only teaches me because I'm trying to fuck her in the karaoke room but she's too shy, or too reluctant, way more reluctant than she was the week before when she dragged me to a love hotel just to have a bath and practise English, no sex, but after the bath there was nothing else to do but have sex so we had sex and it was over pretty fast as I'd never had someone that experienced before whereas she'd had 30 men in 2 years, thirty, and my next question in bad Japanese was have you been to the hospital for a check-up and she said, sure, I went half a year ago. Half a year? What about the seven and a half guys you've had since? I didn't know, and I never found out cos the only time I saw her after that was in the karaoke room when I turned into an animal and learnt the word for endurance - guman suru - and even as I was doing it, I was thinking of Daisy back home, the time she'd pulled me into her bed when Dora was upstairs doing the washing and taught me how to put on a condom, and then how to put it inside her, and that was it, the only other weird experience I've had cos there's no one else near the tree village except the prince, the pirate and the guy selling the magic bean.

Anyway

I say hello to the Japanese-Mexican girl and 2 stations later
get off and walk back home

which is for the best.

She's way too good for a perv like me.

I walk from my apartment to minami something station and then
turn right into alleys that don't run straight and past
buildings that don't change theme and all the time I've got my
eyes on the ground, looking for items.

It's no good

nobody's dropped a thing.

I sit on the swing, in the quiet playground and think

God

There is no mission here.

No puzzles to solve.

No mini-tasks.

No washing machines running through the night.

I mean

they don't even have graveyards.

Time passes slowly

and joylessly

and inexorably

except when I'm looking for sex.

A woman from the same building gets into the elevator one
night, drunk. She tells me in lower intermediate English that
she thinks I'm cool and do I want to come to her place. I say
I don't know. The elevator stops on the third floor and she

holds the button, telling me again that I'm cool and she wants to show me her front door so we can talk. I say, okay, not now, but maybe next time. She breathes on my face then leaves.

Two months later, I go down to her flat, drunk, and knock on the door. I don't feel good, but if she can show me her front door I might recover.

The door opens and a man is standing there.

I still have the three item boxes, but now they're filled with DVDs from Tsutaya [and the roast chicken].

There are no textbooks, I threw them away.

It's not my fault though

it's whichever ancient Japanese person constructed this fucking language and turned everything upside down and backwards until it was 90% counter-intuitive to speak the thing cos you have to end with the verb and do the reason before the action, which makes no sense at all, and even when I do speak it no one speaks it back to me, not even when I pretend to be lost and desperate and half-Japanese.

One time I read that all it takes is three months to learn a language, but only if you speak it every day.

I speak Japanese once a month.

But to everyone back home

I can just say a few words and

they'll think I'm fluent.

Two years is the length of time it takes for that evil cunt Zak to jam his hand in the door and get immigration to realise Dizzy isn't a real name and people shaped like eggs can't really teach English.

I come back not vowing revenge, not vowing anything cos I'm way too low to do that.

So yes

it's back home

to the tree village

where everyone talks about what's happening in the town and everyone in the town talks about what's happening in the town too.

Except Dora

her mind is elsewhere

Jesus

I can hear that fucking washing machine from the airport.

Instead of going home, I decide to stay on the beach. Not the one near my father, a different one.

I fill my item boxes with:

flippers

scuba tank

rope.

I don't know what's happened to the chicken.

I suppose someone must've eaten it.

I roam the island during the day, the graveyard at night, and then vice versa to avoid routine.

It's annoying cos

every night I spend in the graveyard

there are tourists

telling the same story again and again

how

Jim Morrison is buried there

or if they're slightly older

someone more obscure.

The weirdest one I hear is

a guy called Cometbust who makes a zine sometimes but

far as I know

that guy is still alive.

On a slow day, I go back home and drink ginger beer at Dylan's place. He asks me if I learnt any Japanese.

I lie and say yes.

Say something.

'Nani hanashitai desu ka?'

Nani means what, right?

Yup.

What's the word for relief?

Nani?

I wanna say that's a relief. How do you say relief?

Guman suru.

That's relief?

Yup.

I thought it was something else.

What else has been going on around here?

Not much. Zak is running for Mayor of the town and if he wins he'll actually give the place a name.

What name?

Also, he's campaigning from his sky castle. Don't know about name. The crux of his campaign is infrastructure, get rid of the rats in the town, the pirates too, tax the prince, hire more thugs as police, mollify white nationalists.

Fuck...

He'll never win though.

During the night, I get a vision from the part of my subconscious that prescribes GOD.

The vision was vague but one image was clear. Zak dating four-year old girls.

I wake up, resolute.

After falling off the barrel seven times, I make it to the town and straight away I notice a stray puzzle in one of the alleys.

I enter it and fail.

My body is spat out next to the castle. I pick up the crossbow and murder enough guards to get through the front gate.

It always impresses me how they manage to recruit more of those guys, do they have a death wish, maybe we're all firing rubber arrows?

The castle has a small museum area, with an outline of the castle's history stitched onto several parchments.

Apparently, kings used to do whatever the fuck they liked, then they were forced to do only a few things they liked, then, finally, after Wat Tailor got himself stabbed [after stabbing others], they were forced to sit down and sign whatever the the town mayor felt like doing that day.

The last few mayors had been hippies

The current one a drunk

So

According to my knowledge of politics,

Zak is a dead cert.

I leave the castle, walk across the graveyard and plant the bean that'll take me up to Zak's campaign HQ.

It isn't that high up, and the door is open, so in I go, and there he is, the future mayor Zak, rehearsing his 'waterfalls of blood' speech but still with enough time to pick up his wand and magick up a lightning bolt.

Not much you can do about a lightning bolt, especially in an enclosed space.

I fall down two floors, then Zak's campaign manager drags me outside and throws me off the whole cloud.

The graveyard breaks my fall, no irony.

What do I do now, I think? Legs not working, spine snapped, brain fried.

Luckily, Yorrick's nephew is passing by and calls an ambulance.

Due to chronic underfunding, it arrives two days later.

'You'll have to take it easy for a while,' says the doctor.

'How long?'

'Two months at least.'

'Okay.'

'A nurse will come by for the first month and stroke your spine. Apart from that, a therapist will be offered free of charge, four sessions max. Any questions?'

'Can I watch TV?'

'That's about the only thing you can do.'

'Got it.'

The first month passes slowly, so I shun the TV and read some Alfred Bester.

Didn't know he was Iranian.

The second month starts badly, another vision, Zak sucking off King John in a sauna, so I force my brain the other way and think up some film ideas.

- 1] Poor people on Mars
- 2] Poor people on Eris
- 3] Poor people travelling through a wormhole
- 4] Life in a tree village

The last one seems relatable so I write out ten pages, tell Dora it's great, write out the rest of it, tell Dylan he can be my agent, then print out four copies, keep one for myself and send the other three to Good Wizard Theodore, Spike Lee and Joan Severance.

While waiting for a response, the election takes place.

Despite receiving only 27% of the vote overall, Zak wins cos of superdelegates, who actually look fainter the closer you get to them.

I recall the sauna and shudder.

Can't be that bad though,

He's only got 4 years.

One week later, Dylan bursts in and asks if I've heard the news.

Nope.

Zak's going after the rats.

How?

Every night this month, there's a rat stabbing contest. Whoever stabs the most rats, gets a ribbon.

I gulp.

He said we'd be doing them a favour.

Time to leave.

Again.

I ignore the e-mail from Spike Lee's intern, and message as many foreign learning centres as I can put my claws on.

There's another job post too, working for a Spanish language newspaper in Honduras, so I give it a shot.

The Hondurans call a day later and ask if I speak any Spanish.

Nope.

Never mind, you can pick it up when you get here.

All of it?

When can you get here?

I dig out an old map, full of dust and dust mites and dust enablers.

The island is a small place by itself, but if you swim a little you can find yourself in Barcelona, Genoa, Bucharest, Loobylana.

To think, while I'm walking up this icy path to a castle at two in the Slovenian morning, the rest of them are watching TV in the tree village.

While Dora's staring at that washing machine, I'm sneaking into the mines and stealing a golden egg from the dragon.

While Denzel's stuck in an ice cube, I'm eating yok jun ee fan alone in a shitty restaurant in To Kwa Wan.

with no friends

and no intention or ability

to make friends.

Like a Dora-engineered virus it's
wormed its way into me.

It's not washing machines and it's not contamination.

It's heat.

And being trapped

and anxiety

and

and it's all inside my own treacherous head.

I know my next move is to go back home and defeat Mayor Zak, but I can't, I can't move, I can't even step outside of the apartment.

There's a train to the airport, and buses too, but I can't be sure about the air con and I don't know if there will be any really long stretches between stations or stops where I'll be stuck without any way out or any way to jaunte out of existence completely so I don't leave.

Instead I go to the school that doesn't look anything like a school, in a tucked away alley in Yau Ma Tei, away from everyone, and I make just enough money to keep my tiny apartment and internet connection and that's about it cos

I can't go to a proper school

they're too big

there are too many students

and

I can't control the air-con like I can here.

I try to explain my dread

to a nine year old called

Ian Ng

but he doesn't understand

he's too busy stabbing me with the pencil.

At night I disappear into the internet and type the line, 'I really want to fuck you,' to women from a sex group on adult friendfinder.

Seven vagina avatars reply to me

but I'm only interested

in a face avatar called

Sze Wah

She comes round and we watch some of the spy who loved me on late night tv before I jump on her and

the morning after I feel bad

but I don't want to get rid of her so

we go to the beach at Shek O and swim to the shark nets.

Same as Ian Ng

I try to explain myself to her

but it doesn't work cos

she doesn't know what dread means

and I don't know any other word for it except nervous

and I'm not nervous.

I e-mail Dora and tell her what's happening to me and even though it's not about fibreglass or washing machines, she understands

at least on some level.

You can come back home, she says the next day, calling me for the first time in four years.

I can't.

If you think you need to.

I won't.

If it gets too hard.

No.

I remember what the pirate told me that time, just before I handed him the barrel of rum.

If you retreat back [into your tree village], you'll never move forward again.

Of course life is easier for him.

Sail, ransack, drink, rape.

He never has to worry about his own mind turning in on itself.

Does he?

I won't go back to the tree village, no matter how bad it gets
in Hong Kong.

If need be, I'll sleep in the alleys
with the rats.

They also cause me damage,
just like the spiders,
but that's not the worst thing

no

the worst thing is

I'm getting white hairs
and the fruit's running out.

The summer's nearly done and

I don't want to win by default so

I risk taking the bus again, the one I used to take, to try
and beat this thing

even though Dora said not to

as it's not something that can be conquered
or overcome

like a fear of heights

with a parachute jump

it's a constant, suffocating thing

that never goes away

and I half believe her when she says it but

not completely cos

the bus is already in the tunnel and I'm looking at the other
faces around me and thinking, it's not so bad, Dora,
I can beat this thing
no problem
I could even pick up a few stars on the way
if I wanted to
but then I remember
there are no stars here
no fruit or spiders and
it's still quite far to To Kwa Wan and
the tunnel's still here and
the people are watching and
my brain starts telling me the same thing
over and over and over...
It's gonna happen.
They're strangers.
They're against you.
You're gonna break.
...but it doesn't get a hold, not like last time, cos the air
con's too strong and there's no one next to me and a few
minutes later the bus leaves the tunnel and I get back to the
apartment and lock the cage behind me and
I'm safe again
for now.

Winter comes earlier than usual
in November
and I feel better

calmer

more creative

my mind full of adventure again.

I return home for a visit, spending most of my time in the mine. The dragon pretends I'm not there, though one night he comes in and asks if he can use my name to sign up for a credit card.

Why me?

Rent.

You can't do it yourself?

Nao.

Fala Portugues?

Falo.

While in the town one night, I find a tattoo artist called Soren and get him to draw on me the following message:

NEVER GO BACK TO THE TREE VILLAGE

It seems to cement things until

the next day

when an internet girl I don't even like tells me that the tattoo is bullshit, family is important, because if you don't keep your family close then there'll be no one left to bury you when you die.

I fly back to Hong Kong.

It's weird,

even though I can die by touching a spider for more than 3 seconds, I've never really thought about death.

But the internet girl is right

wandering towns

and graveyards

and other countries

collecting stars

taking damage

eating fruit

can only get you so far.

To forty, probably

and then you'll look like a granddad picking your kids up from school.

Unless you're Scotty from Star Trek.

Ha, Star Trek.

Denzel and Daisy and me used to watch that on Sunday mornings.

I wonder if it's still on

and if Denzel ever made it out of that ice cube.

I hope so.

The girl I don't even like turns out to be 17 years old and from the Mainland so I fuck her a few more times and then end it when she stops calling me.

I message her a few times over a few weeks but she never replies.

Maybe she got bored of all that stuff

I said about the tree village

every time we met.

Granddad never told me this, and neither did Dora, but the best way to stop thinking about death is to collect stars and keep moving, even if your 'moving' is generally around the same seven locations.

I move generally around the same two locations, Yau Ma Tei and To Kwa Wan, until I get bored of them both and try Kwun Tong.

There's a zine shop on
the fourth floor
that I've never heard of before but
there it is
in Kwun Tong
selling a sci fi zine called Moss Piglet.

I meet a woman I've met before, but this time it's on a bench at two in the morning somewhere near Shatin and unlike the last time, something sticks.

I take buses again.

I look at strangers as people instead of walking computers who want to fuck me up
most of the time.

I visit London and read a zine about anarchism and realise it's not what the Joker from Batman represents, not really.

I start re-using my item boxes.

The flippers are out, so is the scuba tank, and so is the rope as I'm tired of fucking around.

Instead I store zines
and Cantonese
and phone calls to Dora.

I stop sitting in the graveyard and the mines and by the water at the edge of the beach and start doing things that have a purpose even if that purpose is zine-based and the spiders look at me like I'm out of my Vulcan mind.

I remember I'm in Hong Kong, not back home, and breathe out, relieved.

I search out pictures online: the beautiful landscapes from the Fantastic adventures of Dizzy.

Look, there's the graveyard, I say to Joanna. That's where granddad is buried. Pretty, isn't it?

She doesn't agree.

She says it looks like a shithole.

And really, really grey.

I tell her I love her,

let's get married.

I go to Berlin with Dora and manage to go the whole trip without contaminating anything.

Though she does tell me not to touch her keys

or her hands

as there aren't always taps around, and even if there are, she can't be sure who made them and if they've ever ridden in the same circles as Dad or his dreaded fibreglass.

Even in Germany, I ask.

Especially in Germany.

Huh?

One of his ex-employees was called Wolfgang.

Oh.

I get the crossbow and kill the guards and study Cantonese in the castle with someone who actually uses the language instead of turning everything back round to English.

The tattoo I got reminds me every day, don't go back to the tree village, and I don't, even when Dora rings and tells me she's got cancer.

There's no need for you to be here, she says.

I should come back.

It's better if I'm alone. I can deal with it more easily that way.

No, I'll come back.

Besides, Denzel is here

I'll book a flight tonight.

He's not in the ice cube anymore so he can help, if I need any, which I won't.

You can't be alone, Mum.

I'm not.

There's not even a hospital in the tree village.

I go to the town for chemo.

There's a hospital?

Yeah, it's quite new. They built it after Zak was shot.

Zak was shot?

Last year.

I didn't know that.

Yeah, everyone was happy, especially the rats. My doctor is Sudanese, btw.

Wow.

It's completely different here now.

Yeah.

More modern.

Seems like it.

I'll be fine.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Okay. Well, if you need me I'm only 13 hours away.

I know.

The next day I get into the mine cart and ride along the tracks until I've got all the stars available and when I get back to my apartment I tell Joanna that we should have kids as soon as possible, within a year if we can.

What brought this on?

Nothing.

Are you okay?

I am.

You sure?

Yup.

It turns out you need to take three injections before you can have kids, so there's time to kill before responsibility.

I spend more time doing valuable stuff

like

learning Cantonese

jumping on clouds

talking once a week to Dora

and thinking of convincing ways to reduce the number of guests at my wedding.

I grew up in a treehouse village,

I'm used to quiet places

is the best excuse I've got so far.

It's okay, I tell myself later,
in a park surrounded by small trees
and no spiders
Sisko said it was good to have a small wedding
and Dora had a big one
so
it's not the same thing
not at all.

There's a bridge near our flat that reminds me of the one back
home, the one with the grassy area and the triceratops, and
whenever I'm feeling pissed off with those fuckers pushing
onto the train at Kowloon Tong or the fuckers staring at me
like I'm Nick Nolte or the fuckers giving Jo a hard time at
work, I grab a barrel and jump over the side and sometimes, if
I'm lucky, I can make it all the way to the end without the
rock monkeys or the crocodiles hitting me
and if I do that
and read a zine afterwards
zico tek dut ho or
grad plenty
then I feel like I can do anything.

Denzel sends me an e-mail saying Dora is fine, chemo is once
every three weeks, the doctor's optimistic, and Sudanese, it's
true, really, they have Sudanese and Poles and Greeks here
now, the whole town's changed, and I tell him I know all that,
she told me last week.

Wait, you're talking to her?

Every Tuesday.

I didn't know that.

Didn't she tell you?

No.

When was the last time you saw her?

Don't know.

When?

I don't know, Dizz. Two weeks ago.

What?

Maybe three.

Denzel...

You don't understand. She doesn't want to see me. Says I'm contaminated. You know what she's like.

I know, but...

I'll phone her tomorrow, he says. I'll even go up to her hut, knock on the door. Okay?

Okay.

Joanna is elsewhere

with her friends

or family

I can't remember which

and I have no one else to eat with so

I go to the same place I always go to

when Joanna's not around

Dah Fai Wood

the place with the orange sign

and the strangers.

Actually,

it's quite similar to the fast food place back in town

the one the prince used to eat at

to pretend he was one of us

except this one's wall to wall Chinese and there's no English
and it doesn't really matter cos I don't want to understand
them right now

I just want to eat and get out fast so

I sit down among them

eating ga lei au lan fan

reading Tariq Ali

dreaming of socialism

when suddenly I stop and look around, at the strangers not
looking back at me, at the lack of air coming from the vents,
at the amount of food I have left and I think of the near
future, the seating plan for the wedding ceremony and the vows
I'll have to say in Cantonese and all the people I don't know
staring back at me when I try to say it and the thirty degree
heat beating back the tiny breaths of wind coming out of those
fans we're gonna rent and right then it all comes back, that
old feeling, or part of it does, and I look around again and
there aren't people here anymore, there are fake people,
possibly made by Zak, possibly disguised spiders, I don't
know, but they're definitely fake, fake people

fake spider people out to fuck me up

and I can't move

I can't move cos

I still have this food

and

they're watching

they're watching for something like that

so I have to stay here

pinned down

being watched

sweating

and thinking over and over and over

I can't move

I can't move

It's too hot

I can't move

I can't

until the phone rings and I ignore it and then it rings again
and I pick up and it's Joanna and she tells me she's coming
back and if I'm at home can I boil the kettle and

as soon as she hangs up I look around

and realise

the people aren't watching

the food's almost done

there are no spiders

and it isn't quite as hot in here

as I thought it was,

not anymore.

