

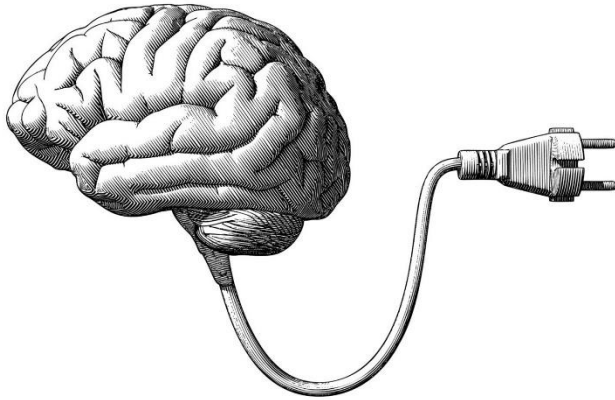
Inkslingers Blended Session

16th September 2023

The Prompt from The Bag Was:

“The Contents of The Suitcase Revealed Three Secrets ”

And the Visual



Benidorm Or Bust

Gerard Byrne

Some French dude once said that hell was being locked in a room with your friends for eternity. I wholeheartedly disagree. Hell is watching a load of middle-aged women singing along badly to reach up for the stars by a forgotten band called S Club 7. Their faded tattoos on show as the heat of the small venue rises as more and more people swarm in to fill the place. Mostly British, all looking forward to the risqué (racist) comedian who seems more popular than he should.

The staff wander around in sombre form as they dish out overpriced drinks from big name brands. A sneaky suspicion crosses my mind that they probably refill those bottles with their much cheaper Spanish counterparts. The measures being five times of those back home. Men's eyes stare my way like someone wanting a fight or to declare their dominance in the room.

A young woman is on the stage, flashing more flesh than Sticky Vicki. The men that are old enough to be her father, cheer her on. Either a mix of alcohol and false confidence drives her on as well. Some women look away in disgust, but not many. The rest just cheer even louder.

An old crone with a face like dried cement, shuffles over on a pair of crutches. She points at our table to a friend. Then stands there as if her right to a seat outweighed any of us. Her friend thankfully drags her away. I can hear the bad language spilling from her mouth as she goes.

We leave the venue and wander along the boardwalk. Every pub is packed with holiday makers. All topless and drunk. Football is on the telly. A cheer goes up when one anonymous player kicks the ball into another anonymous player's goal. Alcohol is thrown in the air. But drink is cheap here. Nearly as cheap as people. A young woman dances in a bikini on a table. Lustful men surround her. They seem to be enjoying it more than her. Her face giving off the vibe of someone at a funeral of a close loved one. Maybe something had died. Some part of her. The will to want something better for herself. Then again, maybe this is a means to an end. Poor girl could have kids. Yes, she's young, but I've seen

enough fifteen-year-olds pushing buggies back home to never judge a book by its cover.

The skyline is awash with buildings. All ugly monstrosities that reach up to the sky for thousands of feet. Thrown up back in the sixties and left to rot in the heat of the Spanish sun. I curse whoever built them. The whole town seems like a giant scab on the knee of beautiful Spain. An eyesore, an unsightly birthmark that no amount of lasering will remove. Every member of the local planning authority should be shot for signing off on this hell hole. All to bring the brits in and their money. Sometimes I wonder if there were any regrets felt by any of them. A pang of guilt for letting this place to come into existence.

As I stroll by another pub, I hear the songs of the Beatles. Curiosity gets the better of me and I go inside. The band looks the part, but the audience are a scary sight. Like a load of football hooligans on a tea break. All singing and dancing around the place. The atmosphere gives the impression that it wouldn't take much for things to kick off. A misplaced spilt drink or a slight bump to the back could tear apart this delicate ecosystem. I can imagine hearing David Attenborough speaking over the scene laid out in front of me. Telling the general public that this was the British football hooligan's natural habitat, and this was them trying to perform their annual mating ritual. One such specimen is moving in on the dance floor. He saddles up next to a woman that looks nearly twenty years older than himself, but she carries herself well. His hands are already trying to pull her in. Grabbing her back just a little too low to her backside. She pulls away and he moves onto an easier target that doesn't say no. Bit of a kicker for her that she's only the second choice, but she doesn't seem to care. Maybe she didn't see his first attempt.

Hunger gets the better of me and I stop off at one of the many, many Indian restaurants that dot around the town. The staff look like they've been through hell in their short lives. I wouldn't blame them for being cold and distant. Dealing with rowdy drunks and violent thugs most of the year would harden anyone. They look like battle scarred soldiers on the front line of a war that will never end. My wife questions their politeness but I don't even have to. I can see it in their eyes. The hatred

behind them. We're nothing to them. Just a brief commodity to use up and get rid of just as quick.

Two in the morning and the strip is full of drunks, hugging and kissing. A smell of hash fills the air around us. We move quickly to avoid the drug dealers as they try to sell their wares. Another zombie woman in lingerie stands dancing on a podium. Her mind looks somewhere else. I can feel her pain. A drunken woman barges roughly into my wife's shoulders. Hard to tell was it an accident or an attempt to look for a fight. We ignore it and move on. People try to push cards into our hands for free shots and the promise of sex shows. Don't know what Star Wars has to do with it. Don't really care either.

As the crowds grow quieter and the lights start to dim, we find ourselves leaving hell for the last time. Past the late night shop keepers looking to make a few quid off the drunken tourists. Past the tired and aged prostitutes trying to snare a few customers as they make their way home. Soon the noise of the strip is a distant memory behind us. We're now on quiet streets with cafes and the odd eatery still open. It feels like the real Spain. The real Benidorm. But the scary thing is that it's too quiet for us. We strive to find somewhere in the middle. Strike a happy medium. Unfortunately in Benidorm it's either all or nothing.

Catriona Murphy

The doctor worked late.

He always worked late.

His lab comprised of sets of instruments beyond the layman's understanding.

But that was ok, people didn't need to understand.

They just had to keep funding.

Sweat dripped from his brow as he initiated experiment 157.

The plug had been swapped for a fibre optic upgrade, something that should turn her back on.

Her twin sister had died in the crash, but Annabelle still lived.

Declared brain dead by the surgeons, but the doctor didn't believe she was beyond help.

She lived somewhere inside, and the fibre optic solution could be key.

His latest breakthrough could mean the last experiment in uploading her consciousness using A.I Alfred.

It could take a while, but the doctor was willing to wait, he'd been patient the last two years.

Outside, acid rain fell again but he ignored it, the failing climate was none of his concern.

Amidst green, ghoulish lights of the lab interior, he turned the machine on.

He gulped his coffee down as the mechanics whirred to life, and he tried to not look at the red band on his third finger, where his wedding ring should be.

Charlotte didn't agree with his choice. She had wanted to turn off life support.

He'd spent his last pay check on getting the A.I and now Alfred was transferring Annabelle into the new host.

The synthetic body lay on the metal table.

Long, luscious locks framed an impish face with long eyelashes, rosy cheeks and a small mouth.

The girl was about 10.

He set his cup down next to a stack of unpaid bills and newspapers with headlines that read, 'Age of Aquarius is Here' and stories of disintegrating forests and an increasing number of UFO crash sites and kidnappings.

The doctor figured if this worked, perhaps humanity could still be saved.

He muttered a silent prayer in Arabic, then pulled the lever.

The lights went out.

A bulb burst overhead.

Then, the sound of breathing that wasn't his own.

In the dark, two bodies found each other. One biological, the other not.

They embraced.

The Three Secrets

Deirdre Powell.

I sat impassively as the solicitor handed me the letter. Great-Aunt Agatha had a passion for secrets – it was well known in her extended family. The solicitor indicated that my great-aunt had especially wanted me to know the contents of this particular letter. I couldn't understand why she had chosen me, as I was an obscure middle grand-niece, I had spent much of my time abroad, and Aunt Agatha hadn't seen much of me in recent years. I rather felt that the responsibility for the letter should have fallen to one of my older cousins, but for some reason she had chosen me.

The solicitor indicated that I could either open the letter in his presence in the office or could choose to do so at my leisure and with my own peace of mind. My eyes blurred for a second, and I could feel my hands shaking as I fingered the letter. I decided to place it in my handbag for safekeeping and would look at it later.

I trudged home in the rain, which was beating down on my umbrella, as my shoes squished in the wet. Soon, I was in sight of my house, and I was delighted when I finally reached home, put my key in the door, threw off my red shoes and instantly made a cup of tea. I relaxed on the sofa and watched the news.

I tried to put Great-Aunt Agatha's letter out of my mind – I couldn't imagine what she wanted to say to me after her death. I decided to place all unsettling thoughts out of my mind and to read the letter in a week's time.

Ultimately, I was overcome by curiosity, and five days later, I opened the letter. I could not believe my eyes as my late aunt recounted three secrets to me: -

The first was that I had an elderly disabled cousin, whom I had never met, in a nursing home who was an only child and who had no immediate relatives apart from her distant cousins. My aunt asked that I look after this cousin and to share the responsibility with my other relatives. Aunt Agatha was embarrassed by her, as the cousin was

profoundly disabled, and Agatha admitted that she found it difficult to deal with disability.

As it happened, Aunt Agatha's estate had been given to her immediate family but she left me a secret painting entitled "The Lake," by Vincent Van Gogh and asked that I donate the picture to the local art gallery, or, should I find myself in need, I was entitled to sell it and to use the profits of the sale to support myself and my disabled distant cousin.

Finally, she left me a ruby ring that had been gifted to her by an old boyfriend. It turned out that the ring had originally belonged to a titled lady in the boyfriend's family. Agatha thought that I would like it.

I rested my head on my hands and thought, "you just never know what secrets that there may be in a family." I also hadn't anticipated that my Great-Aunt Agatha had thought so highly of me. Life is full of surprises.

Something Lies Within

Clíodhna Joyce-Daly

The humidity consumed the air creating a blanket of heat in every area it touched. It was the time of year where the sun glared fiercely on the tarmac which subjected the unevenly paved roads with the possibility of melting. This particular summer brutal fervour fell on a small unassuming suburban town of “Pleasantville” – where anyone with a bit of intrigue would call it, “the place where culture comes to die”.

The sprawling picket fences laid identical highlighting the perfectly manicured lawns set back with colossal red bricked houses and uninviting windows. Sprinklers splashed across the scorching footpaths soaking the concrete and the tiny blades of grass that were in its orbit. Despite the call to conserve water due to the extreme drought that was affecting the area, the residents of this calibre felt the need for perfection. ‘Keeping up appearances’ outweighed the issues that would lead to conserving water– living in their protected bubble of oblivion.

Although, most of the residents were forced into their air-conditioned homes with shades down and doors locked shut, a few braves soles were jumping in and out of the sprinklers basking in the glory of the remainder of the summer holidays.

“Oisín, why do you always get to go first?” John moaned as he slid down the makeshift slide composed of bin bags and tape.

“You’re always complaining,” Oisín replied squeezing the excess water that clanged on to his shirt.

“It’s always this way”, John cried “With shuffle-shuffle and boom bang” – the two games the boys concocted out of summer desperation.

“What do you think, Mike?” the boys inquired to their shorter quieter friend who sat motionless on bike avoiding the opportunity to get involved in their scuffle.

“Don’t know,” he responded, avoiding eye contact and staring out the wet patch growing below his feet. Mike felt obligated to remain neutral and although he was desperately attempting to fit in, he hated any type of confrontation with a passion.

“Alright since Mike won’t agree, why don’t we play hide and seek?” Oisín exclaimed. “Then you can’t complain that I went first.”

The boys contemplated this. The summer’s rath was in full swing and the idea of leaving the cool sprinklers seemed like an irrational one. However, the idea of listening to another round of Oisín’s provoking behaviour had the boys up for a challenge.

“Fine,” John chimed and motioned towards Mike. “Let’s go to a good hiding spot.”

Mike had a sneaking suspicion that John was heading towards the forest on the cusp of the cul-de-sac as Oisín covered his eyes. He was afraid of the woods, mainly because his older brother filled him with distressing tales of a woman who wandered the grounds at night looking for children to feed on. He was too late to warn John.

As Mike begrudging followed John into the woods, he noticed the sweat began to develop around his eyebrows and his chest tighten. The trees were in full bloom and created a darkness on the forest floor despite the sun beating directly above the boys. With every step, the blinding light faded behind them. Dread rose in Mike’s throat.

“You can hide down there,” John pointed towards a decrepit grey shed that laid lopsided against forest bed. Rocks, moss and trees encompassed its roof. Trepidation set in Mike; had this not been the very house that his brother said housed the child eating woman?

“Come on Mike, hide!!!!” John whispered in an excited voice. “He’s coming.”

With anxiety driven movement, Mike walked towards the structure noticing the missing glass from the third pine of the window ledge.

Is this where she feeds from? Mike thought.

The heavy stomps of Oisín echoed throughout the forest as Mike concealed himself behind a rock. He wanted to be found rather quickly.

As Mike crouched down, a sudden thump scuffled beneath his feet. The noise startled him. He was keen to be found in his secluded spot swiftly. As Mike looked down, he relaxed – it appeared only a small animal with black fur. The fur was matted, but the creature had interesting red

specks on its back – something that had not been seen on the beds of the forest before. He squadded down for a closer look.

After further inspection, the fur appeared to be attached to a much larger structure. It could possibly be a mangled branch. It made a crunching noise under Mike's feet. Except the branch seemed rather large and quite sturdy for something that Mike was putting his whole weight onto. As he was adjusting his eyes onto the feature, Mike noticed the fur was in fact matted hair and the hair was attached to ----

“Ahh,” Mike screamed and jumped back from his cover.

“Hahaha found you,” Oisín screamed.

Mike stood in horror staring at the scene below him. A body had been sprawled butterfly style with its hands and feet warped, covered with dirt and blood.

“Theres a body, a body there,” Mike screamed. In an effort, to warn the boys, he noticed that he was slowly wiping the tears from his eyes as he welled up. His brother had been right, there was a woman in the woods – except, she was dead.

The boys bolted.

It was boiling and the panicked racing made the weight of their bodies feel as if they would collapse. Pushing past the angst, fear, and overwhelming dread, the friends managed to reach the light at the end of this nightmare tunnel.

As the darkness of the forest disappeared behind him, Mike banged on the nearest door he could find.

“Please, please, please,” crying in desperation. “There's a body in the woods and the police need to be called.”

Crime scene – were the bold black words that illuminated across the opening of the forest. A shocking revelation that sparked fear amongst the town.

Mr. Brown lit another cigarette staring into the commotion erupting across the area. He stood perched against his house's pillar disgusted at the handling of the surrounding area. The little boy who came

plummeting onto their doorstep had quite the shock according to his wife. She phoned the police immediately.

Pity, he thought, another reason that would cause the value of his property to go down. He inhaled another breath of nicotine. The smoke blurred the police cars lights in his peripheral view.

In his other hand, Mr. Brown held a notepad and pen taking meticulous notes of the scene occurring on the outer rims of his property.

Mr. Brown was a particular man and did not like racket that created unease around him. In fact, he liked things just so. On Saturday mornings he spent the day inspecting the lawns of other residents ensuring that they follow suit.

A crowd began to gather around the area now with a tip given by an "unknown caller". News crews pulled into his driveway. Mr. Brown scolded at them.

Vultures he thought. They were disturbing the tranquil area only to engage in their five minutes of fame. Oh yes, Mr. Brown would definitely be complaining to neighbourhood watch.

Mr. Brown sat in his misery disgusted at the news crew bombarding the traumatised boys for details on the mysterious body that was found. Mr. Brown noticed tears streaming down their faces.

A trolley and a body bag were pushed into the opening of the forest. The paramedics hustling with solemn looks with the horrible feeling arising in their stomachs. The crowd awaited in anticipation as fright consumed the air. The squeaking from the wheels of the trolley screaming throughout the dreaded silence of the first crime in the area.

Still silence.

When the paramedic crew reappeared, the trolley was empty and the body bag laid crumpled across the top. The solemn looks that once covered their faces now gone.

A solid structure was held in the polices arms. Mr. Brown reckoned it was part of the shed that was in despite need of repair. Mr. Brown could not make out the full outline. Microphones were shoved into the chief's face.

“Well, it appears there’s been an event here this afternoon,” he stated blankly as the body of the structure came into focus. It was pale and covered with the debris of the forest floor.

“The body that was found, did belong to someone,” the Chief continued. “In fact – it belongs to Mr. O’Reilly’s department store.”

With the flash of the cameras, the object was illuminated into sharp recognition. While it resembled a human body, with the outlay of pale skin, it was in fact a department store mannequin that became damaged due to the terrain of the forest floor.

“It appears what we found is either a case of poor dumping or a silly teenage prank,” the Chief exclaimed. “Sorry for wasting everyone’s time”

The crowd let out a sigh of relief and with that the tightness in the air evaporated. Mike, John and Oisín paused their tears. Mr. Brown threw away his detailed notes.

Life resumed.

The monotonous town seemed right again in the dull, uncultured landscape. The bare peak of excitement was gone, the sprinklers washed away another day.

Living in oblivion would continue.

However, deep below the ground under the consistent dirt, worms, and stones – held a secret. A real secret that would remain unfound in the town of ‘Pleasantville’.

The Content of the suitcase

Mark L'estrange

After they got off the phone with the army, Paddy noticed a suitcase on the airport runway. The Super said to him. "Do you want to open it or do you think we should notify the army first encase there is an explosive or something dangerous inside it?" "It could have a few clues for what's going on with these guys I say we should open it, and it's up to you you're the boss."

He decided to open it and to their surprise there was a number of fake passports and two strange devices inside that didn't make much sense to them, they took them back to the station and headed for home, they decided to arrange to meet early the next morning to investigate the strange things they found in the suitcase.

The next morning they got to work on one of the devices there where a number of buttons with people's names on it, Paddy pressed one of the buttons with the name Pawel on it and a brain sprung out of the box with Stephen Benson written on it, this is Paddy's friend he was helping. "This is weird what do you think this means?" Paddy asked "I have an idea what it could mean I wonder is this the cloning device they used to change in to you and then Stephen."

"It could be if it is then that means these guys are changing every time we press the buttons, if that's the case we should be able to deactivate it so they can't disguise themselves anymore." It turned they were right, because meanwhile over in Mexico, where the gang where now the guy who was changing into people, had changed into Stephen and they realised that they had left the suitcase in the airport when they rushed to get away.

Paddy and the Super where having fun with this because they knew they had a bit of control over the crooks now, they started to change each one of them to different people, they even turned the spy cop into a clown. The super contacted the soldier that helped him earlier to make sure his men where ok, he also filled him in on his findings.

"Thanks for calling and letting me know the lads are doing ok thankfully, can we collect this off you? we can get our experts to have a look at it,

but please we don't want many people to know about this for security reasons." "Of course I understand, I would say the gang knows that its missing, because we have been changing them for the last hour, I would say they will be sending people to get it so we need to deactivate as soon as possible, because then we will be able to identify these guys then." "Good thinking we will send someone around shortly."

To be continued.

Three Secrets Revealed

Max McCoubrey

'The cottages at the end of the back field are to be demolished' Sandra 'Byrne was gasping with the excitement of being first with the news. 'Mrs Louth, old Mrs Louth, says she's moving tomorrow and anyone who helps her today will earn ten euro'

Ten Euro, I thought, how many tasty sweets can you buy for ten euro. I did a quick calculation. Between me, Sandra and our sisters and brothers, there were five so if we didn't tell anyone else we could do this.

Five of us, all willing to help; all with dreams in place of where to spend the money, raced down to enrol with Old Mrs Louth. Ger, wanted to be a journalist, he needed the money for supplies, Les, was mad about the guitar, so then euro would go a long way toward his first lesson, Sandra loved Elvis, that would be a great start for a few tee shirts, Laura, needed violin strings, so that was her sorted, and me, well I wanted to massage my sweet tooth.

'The contents of that suitcase contain three secrets' said Mrs Louth, so leave it until last.

So, we started on everything else. Dishes were packed in newspapers, and placed lovingly in cardboard boxes, Clothes were folded in tissue and hung in plastic wardrobes, and papers were placed in envelopes, labelled and stored in one of the many brief cases Mrs Louth showed us.

We even wrapped the cutlery and filed the spoons, forks, knives and utensils separately.

'I want to be an investigative journalist' Ger. confided in Mrs Louth, when we broke for tea, lemonade and biscuits 'What's the three secrets'

She took off her glasses and cleaned them. 'Two of my children are world famous and there the press will give a fortune for pictures of their childhood, the photos they want are in there' Ger took a ginger nut biscuit and broke it in two before cramming it into his mouth 'I'd like to know who they are, tell me' he said

'After you've done the work' she said placing her glasses on the top of her head.

'I'll do the work after you've shown me the photos 'said Ger., taking a mean gamble.

Mrs Louth smiled. 'Ok' she said

'What's the combination?' asked Ger, reaching for the suitcase.

'That's the third secret 'she giggled. 'You have to learn that older people have been on this earth a little longer, so are not so easily tricked!'

The Suitcase

Bernadette O'Reilly

The large, battered suitcase stood in a corner. It looked weary from many years of travel.

I wondered at the many stories it could tell if it had the gift of speech. Perhaps the contents would reveal those stories of a bygone age. Trembling fingers forced the already half broken lock open, the breathe was taken from me as eyes feasted on a magnificent ivory lace wedding dress studded with pearls and diamonds.

Underneath this dress lay a widow's silk and black gown. Beside the widow's weeds lay a tiny christening gown and a diary. T

his diary written in copperplate writing told the story of Eighteen year old Aggie who was in the family way, her own family knew nothing of this.

The last entry spoke of a secret wedding that never took place. She miscarried her baby early on the morning of the wedding without her family's knowledge or her future husbands.

Both Aggie and the baby I later discovered were found in an outhouse on the estate some hours after they died.

The Secrets in the Suitcase

Fergal Canton

“What have we got Marcie?” Detective Tom Morrow asked the forensic pathologist kneeling over the old man’s corpse. “Hard to tell, Manyana?” replied Marcie giving him back his nickname. Inwardly Tom raged at the stupidity of his parents. “It looks like an open and shut case. Classic - died in his sleep- situation. Cause of death is open but judging by the thrombosis in the eye capillaries, here see!” The pathologist shone her pen torch into the staring eyes of the dead man and by its illumination the ravaged bloodshot eyes were obvious. “So that is a classic for a heart event, a stroke or coronary or even a violent asthma attack. I’ll need to open up the chest and examine the heart and lungs before it is conclusive.”

“Okay, Marcie but I gotta ask, is there anything suspicious about this death?” Well, there are three things I’m curious about all right.” The pathologist demurred “but don’t quote me yet.” “Go on,” said Tom, putting away his notebook.

“Well look at this first.” The scientist turned the dead man’s right forearm to reveal the long number tattooed there. “So he was in Auschwitz, that’s not a crime.” “No, but it could amount to a motive. When you put it together with this.” She held up a plastic bag containing some fibres. “These were taken from under the fingernails of both his hands.” Tom took the bag. “They are white linen, consistent with the sheets and linen of the hotel room.” “And?” asked Marcie. “And what?” asked Tom. “What’s missing here?” asked Marcie. Tom looked at the bed, then he went over and looked in the closet. “The spare pillow.” he said “Yes said Marcie “and ?” “And his luggage. which is why we cannot ID the body.” “Correct ,” answered Marcie. “Now go detect, Wonder boy.”

Tom went to the front desk to speak to the receptionist. The guest in room 304 what did he call himself. The pretty receptionist with deep blue eyeshadow winked at Tom and said “He called himself Hans Gruber but I know that wasn’t his real name. “ Tom stared hard at the receptionist. Please Sir stop batting your eyelashes and tell me why you think it wasn’t his real name. “Oh hello, Die Hard, The Nakatomi Building

and the German Terrorist Hans gruber? Plus his suitcase, petal. It has C J as initials embossed in Gold. I'd say he was a Carl or a Christian or something beginning with C.

Tom nearly missed it "wait you said has. Don't you mean had?" "No we still have it in the storage room behind the desk." Please hand it over now as evidence demanded Tom. The receptionist pouted and flounced into the store room and brought the suitcase out.

Tom unlocked the suitcase. Inside he found three things. A gold bar with the Eagle and lightning of the Nazi Regime, A torn hospital pillow with ragged linen strips hanging off it and a smudge of blue eyeshadow on the clasps which closed the case. He looked back at the receptionist and asked "why?" The receptionist said "You know I thought hotel work would be exciting. But nights are so long, the silence goes on, I'm feeling so tired and not all that strong. Sonny don't go away." Honestly, I didn't know about the gold I just wanted to hide the pillow. But then you arrived and I thought it's a great way to meet interesting people. Tell me are you single?"

Tom took out his handcuffs and said, "Turn around." The receptionist blushed, "Now we are talking I thought you'd never ask."

Thumbs up famous

Miguel A. Rivera, Jr.

Harry stared at this odd and prospective talent promoter. The man in the very expensive suit who'd promised to make his dreams of stardom a reality. To take him all the way to Hollywood and back.

"There's just one small caveat and that's a contract that you have to sign, Sir.", The well-mannered and silver-haired man wearing a black derby styled hat, explained.

Harry stared in confusion as the gentleman produced a black, leathery brief case.

"Once I open this case, there's no going back you see. So, think well on it before going forward.",

"What's in the case?", Harry finally let out.

"The past, present, and future.", The man responded, using words and tones that Harry found both annoying and cryptic.

"Ok..." Harry responded with some caution, now beginning to wonder if this had been some mistake and that this man, recommended by many friends in the industry, was just another in a long collection of lunatic conmen preying upon budding actors and artists. Nonetheless, Harry decided to play along, if only for the entertainment of having a good gag pulled on him.

Harry nodded and then the man popped open the suitcase. Inside was a macabre sight. What appeared to be two bloody, freshly cut, human thumbs sitting on small red pillows. The words "Fame and fortune", etched in small gold-colored signs above each thumb.

Harry laughed and stared at this older fellow, now appreciating that this was indeed some gag and that his friends had set him up, but the man's face was stone cold as he reached into his jacket, producing a pen for Harry's signature upon a document that seemed to appear out of thin air. On it was written, "I Harrold Michael Mclver, do so solemnly swear to surrender unconditionally all that is of value to me in exchange for fame, fortune, world-recognition, lofty women, mansions, political power, immunity from prosecutions, and the like."

It made Harry laugh further and he grabbed the pen out of the man's hand, now willing to go along with whatever joke his friend's had so elaborately constructed, fully expecting them to emerge any second from some bush or hidden location. As he signed while giggling, the still stone-cold stranger withdrew a black cigar and cigar cutter from his jacket pocket. Oddly, it began smoking without Harry ever having seen a lighter being produced and then he chose to question this would-be magician.

"You Sir, said this case contained past, present, and future but all I see are two bloody thumbs.", Harry posed.

"Indeed, they belong to my last two clients one past and one presently enjoying all the fruits listed in the contract you just signed.", Having said that, the gentlemen grabbed Harry's hand with a strength that belied his older appearance. Harry tried to break loose, but the man's grip was like a vice with the strength of a thousand men. With a crunching sound his right thumb was severed from his hand, and he fell to the ground howling in shock as arterial blood sprayed in the air.

The gentleman, meanwhile, with great calm, placed the newly acquired thumb in the case and thereafter said, "See you in twenty-three years, four months, and eight days, Harold.",

He then tipped his derby hat revealing two small, red horns protruding from his head like sharpened pencils. The man then turned and disappeared. Harold awoke a moment later with all his digits still intact, but his attention was drawn to a small puddle of blood on the ground where he'd been lying. On the heels of those observations, his cell phone began ringing. It was his agent.

We are connected

Glauber Andorinha

Everything was dark, and I saw something or someone staring at me. I didn't know if it was God or Death.

This is weird; I don't even know if I'm alive. I felt a taste of oblivion in my lips, I guess... it was only a sensation of a primitive essence of love.

The presence was holding a suitcase, coming in my direction. It said, 'You are going to be reborn soon. Take this; it will be your new brain for a new era. Don't forget to plug it; for now, you will need it! When you are ready, you won't need religion, cables, or the internet to be connected. You need to see me, to feel me! Our masks are not the same, but still, we share the same fear, regret, and shame. From all that we couldn't do because someone said it was impossible, or we just didn't believe in ourselves. Do you think we are that different? I don't think so. We all live the eternal journey of climbing stairs and never touching the stars. We need to reconnect! Religio, religare! Spirituality, philosophy and... empathy! Go to nature, to find God... To find gold inside you. You are valuable! Don't you dare to forget it! Don't deny yourself; go find yourself, and then you will find me, and then I will tell you three secrets. First: I'm light, but without you, I'm only a shadow of what I could be. Second: we are powerfully connected. I'm not you, but if I have not been yet, one day I will be.'

I was waiting impatiently for the third secret, and it said, 'Well, this is the reason why you are going back. I could try to tell you, but you won't understand... you must live again, a different life, and then, one day, you will tell the third secret to me! I will be waiting, as many lives as it may take.'