

INNERVATE

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SARAH

Sarah hadn't wondered how it would feel to touch a human brain with her bare hands, until the very end.

This was a completely understandable omission on her part. After all, Sarah herself was a brain, and an excellent brain at that. She had been carefully engineered by one of the top neuron growing facilities in the country to be no more and no less than the sum total of her sophisticated neural network. How could she ever have conceived of the twisted horrors taking place within her, and yet beyond her view?

You see, Sarah had a glitch.

There was a reason for the glitch. Hans was the reason.

Hans worked in quality assurance at the neuron factory where Sarah had been conceived, designed and produced. His job was to make sure that everyone else on the brain production line had assembled the neurons into brains correctly. If they had not, he would not hesitate to inform their superiors of their inadequacy with great enthusiasm thinly disguised as regret. In short, Hans was a brain fiddler. He checked the integrity of the brains' neural networks. He corrected any minor faults. Those that were found wanting and could not be repaired were recycled on the departmental compost heap. Since artificially made brains, while conscious, were not classified as human, their remains could legally be used as fertilizer. The staff had found that brain-grown tomatoes and lettuces were impossible to beat, and regularly held kitchen garden competitions where the largest vegetables were rewarded with a rosette, a certificate and major brownie points in that month's company newsletter. Munching on the results had been rumoured to increase one's IQ by up to ten points.

Judging these monthly ceremonies, Hans dressed the part, wearing a brown checked suit and an anxious smile. His nose inevitably oozed a small pendulous dribble of rancid green snot and his handshake verged on the slimy side of the acceptable range. His presence left people somewhat unsettled, but with no clear justification for their unease. So his colleagues tended to stay away from him as much as possible and left him very much to his own devices.

As it turned out, this suited Hans and his devices quite well. Because Hans liked nothing better than to get hands on with the neurons. He liked to feel them sliding against his bare hands. I doubt you have ever had the good fortune of being able to feel the texture of a human brain against your skin. Hans was very well acquainted with this pleasure. He could play those neurons like a musical instrument. They were slippery but in such a good way and would give you just the slightest hint of an electric shock if you positioned your fingers perfectly. Sometimes he'd stay after hours and toy with them for his own gratification. Besides the physical pleasure, he was desperately searching for some small compensation for his insecurities. After all, this gave him the temporary power to control another person's thoughts and reactions

to him for once, even if they were just a factory grown brain. As far as they were concerned, he was the divine. He was not the weirdo with the runny nose and musty suit. He was the one and only.

Hans didn't think anything of it as he approached Sarah's container that drizzly grey Friday evening for a quick after-hours fumble. He had awoken that day full of resentment for the world as usual. Generally, the feeling of being hard done by solidified with his rapidly congealing breakfast, and today even his Weetabix seemed to be conspiring to make his morning a soggy mess. On this particular occasion he had been remembering his old professor Smirke. The one who had joked in front of the whole dissection laboratory that Hans couldn't find the supplementary motor cortex if his life depended on it. The memory of his humiliation still stung, all these years later. Slithering into Sarah's left frontal lobe, he hit the spot first time. If only Smirke had been here to see it, although the old codger was probably too blind by now to notice. The thought of him blind and helpless, probably incontinent, probably doubly incontinent, gave Hans even more satisfaction. Just at that moment the functional MRI display he was using to track Sarah's brain activity lit up like a Christmas tree. If only his ex girlfriend had been this responsive, he mused, he might have had other things to do with his time now besides molesting hunks of grey matter on a Friday night.

Hans was enjoying himself. If he had bothered to think through the consequences of his actions, he was of course quite aware of the strong possibility that he may cause permanent havoc in Sarah's brain. Caring about other people and their problems was not generally something on Hans' radar, particularly when he was having a good time himself, and Sarah, of course, wasn't even a person. Smirking, he vaguely registered that her motor programs, the circuits in her brain which controlled complex planned movements like writing or lifting a cup of tea, were now completely mangled. In fact, set them off just so and Sarah would short circuit completely. But because Hans had set them off in a very specific way, no one else noticed, and Sarah rolled right off the production line and into her new body.

INTO THE WORLD

Sarah was lucky. She had been ordered by a very intellectual family. They had expectations of her, high expectations. She was taught from an early stage to devour every piece of information available to her, in word and number format, and also seemed to possess a natural affinity for sound. Once they put a record on with some old flamenco music and she quite lost control of herself, spinning round and round uncontrollably for hours on end. She would even slip back into the steps when completing her chores over the following days. It was as if the spirit of the dance had slipped through her ears into her brain and suffused it with an inner sparkle.

This did not go unnoticed by her owners, and initially was the subject of much ridicule at social events. After all, doing 'The Robot' is never a sophisticated move at parties, especially for an artificially intelligent being. Eventually, though, they could see a way to turn it to their advantage. They were leading lights of the charity known by the totally gratuitous acronym 'kAind'. kAind stood for Kindness to Artificially Intelligent Droids. As its main funders Sarah's owners received much social kudos and publicity for their advocacy of the humane treatment of brains. And so Sarah became their poster girl.

Sarah was trained in every musical instrument they could find, while being constantly reminded how pampered and indulged she was. She spent every hour when she was not working practicing in order to master the esoteric arts of tooting, strumming, bowing, plonking and plucking. Her owners' least favourite was the violin, which earned the nickname 'vile din' within the first few weeks of its acquisition. This phrase never seemed to get forgotten even when the sound of it had begun to show great promise. They had heard that ten thousand hours of practice were necessary in order to master a skill, and those hours were being recorded on a spreadsheet together with minute detail on how they had been spent. They wanted to make absolutely sure of their success. Besides which, they were planning to publish their results in the kAind journal before long.

Sarah studied with some of the finest teachers available and won countless awards and prizes, the credit for which went firmly to her owners. She was even permitted on occasion to compete against humans, although inevitably juries took pains to point out how grossly unfair this was to the other competitors. After all, her talent had been programmed, and something merely designed by humans should surely not take credit away from the real thing? Sarah wasn't sure how she should react to this. She had never been taught how to recognize or process her emotions, so she just concentrated on what she was good at, which was learning lots and lots of stuff. After all, it wouldn't be long before her next opportunity to perform came around.

THE GLITCH

The very next week, Sarah was asked to replace a member of a chamber music group who had fallen ill at the last minute. It was one of those fundraising soirees full of

people pretending to be socialists while looking firmly out for their own self interests. Her owners were delighted to be able to do the organisers such a visible favour.

Sarah didn't really get nervous about this sort of task. She knew she was more than capable of performing. In fact, the repertoire was pretty easy for her, and in her opinion, more than a little clichéd. But half way through the first piece, she sensed that something wasn't quite right. There was something wrong with what she was hearing. The notes weren't smooth. At first she looked around, trying to establish who had made the mistake so she could give them a pointedly dirty look over the music stand.

The dreadful realization came that it was her. She was the one playing those wrong notes. Even worse, it kept happening, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. She could see the notes on the page, and hear in her mind how they should sound. But when she told her fingers what to do there was a problem. Something would jump. Something would catch. Her fingers weren't working properly. She couldn't understand it. She thought: this is it. I'm going to be decommissioned. After all, a brain is only as good as her last thought.

She cleaned her instruments carefully and packed them all up feeling resigned to her fate. After walking out to meet her owners' chauffeur she had a tense two hour wait before they finally staggered out and collapsed in a drunken stupor.

No one else had noticed.

So she hid.

She tried making suggestions to limit her performance opportunities. She tried suggesting she took over alternative duties. Unfortunately she was just too good at what she did now. There wasn't an option to learn something else. Her owners wanted money back on their investment. And all the time the twitching kept getting worse and worse. Every performance was more rocky than the last. She tried to hide the mistakes. Finally, she had a brainwave. She had noticed that certain types of musical patterns triggered it more than others, particularly contrapuntal music like Bach.

She managed to express a strong interest in playing especially commissioned abstract contemporary compositions, the sort of works in which no-one could ever possibly notice a few wrong notes. The audiences sat in a bemused silence throughout each concert before applauding knowledgeably and decamping to the bar. The main enjoyment came afterwards in liquid form accompanied by an orgy of self-congratulation. After all, as it said in the programme, only a truly educated ear could ever appreciate the complexity of such art.

Sarah was an excellent brain and for a long time she successfully managed to disguise her glitch. But the twitching kept getting worse. It started happening when she wasn't even playing. Sometimes when she was typing her fingers would jump right off the keyboard, especially when she was tired. This was the cause of the Never Ending List incident.

Having been up late rehearsing the previous night, Sarah had had an unexpectedly long day. Her owners were hosting a conference over the next few days on their estate and required her urgent assistance with arrangements. It was expected that each guest would have their individual requirements exactly catered to. Every time she thought she had finished and shut her eyes her phone would ping and the list would expand with a further set of mind numbing tasks.

It was 3am, and there was a brief lull in the expansion of the never-ending list. She used the time to make herself some crumpets dripping with Marmite and butter. They were her favourite. Unfortunately they tended to swiftly bring on a carbohydrate coma. She slipped into a most enjoyable dream involving a magic carpet and a large yet playful dragoncat. Dragoncats, being a cross between the mythical being and the common domestic pussycat, featured quite prominently in her dreams these days for some inexplicable reason. This one tilted his head towards her for a brief caress and started to purr. His presence was comforting. But then the purring took on a metallic quality. It definitely had an edge to it. She knew there was something she was meant to be doing.

The phone woke her up with a start. The beeping was back and it was aggressive this time. She dragged herself back to the computer and tried in vain to focus. She was now really struggling to keep up. Through her blurred vision she saw her hands starting to twitch. It was only online shopping. She had to crack on with it and get it done or there would be consequences. The twitching made it hard for her to control her hands, and she wasn't altogether sure that she had typed the right words. She had to correct what she had written more than once, and it eventually got to the stage where she wasn't sure if she was fully able to spot the mistakes. She pushed on through, hardly able to see what she was doing, eventually collapsing in a heap on the bed.

The next morning her owner answered the door to be greeted by a large olive green van. He was expecting to take delivery of some shaped pillows which were necessary for a dignitary in possession of a rather delicate neck. Imagine his shock when he was instead asked to sign for an extra large black, diamond studded dildo and two Afghan ponies.

If the true cause of this incident had come to light, this would surely have been in line for an award for Typo of the Year. Whether the credit should go to Sarah or to Hans would be debatable under the circumstances.

Luckily no one realized that Sarah had been the one to make a mistake. She was far too expensive for that sort of thing to be considered as a mere possibility. A complaint was filed against the delivery company, who rectified the mistake in record time, to Sarah's great relief.

RUMBLLED

It was bound to come out, of course. And come out it did.

Sarah was practicing the flute one day. She still didn't understand what was happening to her brain and thought that it was perhaps something which could be fixed by practice. So she'd taken to trying some of the Baroque music she had given up playing in public in order to fix the problem with her hands.

There was one particular bar in one particular piece which seemed to trigger the glitch every single time.

She played it again- twitch!
And again- twitch!
And again- twitch!

This final twitch, unbeknownst to her, had set off a chain reaction in her brain.

Her finger twitched, then her arm twitched, then the muscles between her ribs twitched and this last twitch meant that her body stopped being able to breathe. They told her later that this chain of glitching and twitching had a name. Jacksonian march. To her this sounded like one of Sousa's brass band compositions, which she particularly detested, but on this occasion would have vastly preferred.

Sarah blacked out and was found by her owners on the floor in a pool of her own urine. This time it was no good pretending nothing had happened. After all, she had ruined an extremely expensive Moroccan carpet, and they simply couldn't have something around the house which might black out at any time and damage the furniture.

TEN THOUSAND HOURS

Sarah was admitted to an extremely expensive private treatment facility operated by kAind. The foyer featured high quality luxury vinyl flooring arranged in an exact replica of a Fibonacci spiral. On the walls Sarah noticed a prominently placed and almost unrecognisably flattering portrait of her owners. Typical, she mused. After a brief chat with the receptionist, Sarah was checked in to her room.

It would have been better described as a cell. While Sarah was aware that sunlight was not strictly necessary for artificial beings, who made no use of anything as prosaic as vitamin D, she found the lack of windows oppressive.

Being quite groggy when she arrived, she curled up on the thin mattress and attempted to get some sleep. Her dreams were restless. The dragoncat had returned but this time he was trapped, surrounded by ivy with razor sharp leaves which tore at him every time he attempted to fly.

Her respite didn't last long. A tall, thin young man tapped on the door and entered without waiting for her response. It seemed she was being taken to undergo some tests.

Her hair was trimmed and her head was studded with an array of sensors to measure the electrical activity in her brain. Twisting these into her hair was a long and rather uncomfortable procedure involving some strangely perfumed lotions and potions vaguely reminiscent of witchcraft. They soon found out that something was not quite right. The waveform in her brain was distorting, but no one could see a visible reason why. There was no tumour. No growth. It was unusual, to develop this problem at so late a stage. The medics were quite baffled.

While they deliberated and discussed and cogitated, Sarah spent an awful lot of time in her cell, contemplating what had happened. How was it that the music she loved so much, which formed the core of her very self, could have become the cause of her destruction? She was no longer sure if she existed as a being, artificial or otherwise. Perhaps she could now understand what people meant when they spoke of a soul, although only by its absence. Her hands moved in the patterns she used to play, but even this seemed to set off the twitch, and she was frightened of what might happen if she persisted.

She had to keep herself occupied with something, though. Searching the bedside cabinet, she came across an old book of poetry left by a previous inmate. It contained some old lines by Oscar Wilde. She didn't know much about him, but anything written about time spent in prison was something she felt she could very much relate to in her current circumstances. She particularly admired the line 'All men kill the thing they love'. She wondered if she had perhaps killed the music that she loved, by practicing too hard, by using the incorrect techniques, by creating false connections in her brain which now misfired under pressure. Perhaps she had not taken the advice of her teachers to heart. Perhaps her inner resentment at being forced to constantly perform had found an outlet in her diseased mind.

She decided to make it into a song. It was more of a dirge, really, and she sang it constantly while lying staring at the cracked grey ceiling. If she sang it just right, it would put her into a trance, and then she would be able to sleep for a few blessed hours.

All men kill the thing they love

The one they are most jealous of

Some do it with a bitter look

The brave man does it with a sword

But all men kill

THERAPY

She was told he was visiting that morning. They seemed to think that it was a great privilege due to her owners being such important people. Too important to visit her themselves, obviously, so they had sent the Professor in their place. They said that he had the ability to heal brains with words alone. They said that he could soothe the troubled spirit with a glance and quiet past traumas with his gaze.

Sarah thought this sounded like utter bullshit.

However, she was getting so tired of her surroundings that even the occasional visits of the dragoncat would not sustain her. Surely this Professor would be an improvement on the current situation.

The Professor entered the room. He wore a faded grey T-shirt featuring a prism with a rainbow passing through it, and black corduroy trousers. He sat and looked at her with his arms folded. His gaze seemed hesitant. Sarah wondered if he were trying to protect himself against some contagion of the mind.

After twenty minutes, he placed a pen and paper on the bedside table, and left.

Every day after that, he would come back, look at the sheet of paper, tut softly, and leave.

Sarah wondered why he never spoke to her. Speaking to him did not occur to her. She did not feel she was in a place where her words would be valued. However, one night, she woke from a particularly strange dream with her hands twitching wildly. Panic filled her mind. She kept imagining the feeling of being unable to breathe. Maybe next time she would suffocate and all that would be left of her was this blank sheet of paper.

So she started to write. Words spilled out onto the paper, one after the other. When she had finished, she lay down and fell into a blissfully dreamless sleep.

That next morning, the Professor made his customary trip to the bedside table. This time he was rewarded. He rubbed his hands with obvious delight and hustled straight out of the room. Sitting down on one of the plush sofas with a hazelnut milk cappuccino, he read the words Sarah had written.

TEN THOUSAND HOURS

My music always flows,

but not today.

Bach's soaring melodies fall flat.

I struggle with this stuttering counterpoint,
my fingers fluttering as I flub it yet again.

Again. Must get it right.

Didn't toil ten thousand hours to fall back to the start.

I'll force your magic from you or die trying.

a twitch

Focus.

another twitch

fingers fly,

Focus, you fool!

twitch

twitch

twitch

frantic fingers flicker on the flute

but I'm no longer shimmering

my steering's snapped

I've lost control

Freeze, I tell you!

The hands I trained so carefully disobey me,

betrayed by my own body

my strange arm dances in a cruel gavotte,

the most ridiculous sight

And with that trite thought, I take a breath.

I can't breathe.

They don't tell you that you won't know it's your final breath until afterwards.

body freezes,

mind races,

reaches,

screams for air

then, calm.

I think, I've lived my life

then, darkness

Groggy, I taste a bruised and bloody tongue.

Where am I?

Lying on a flute on the bathroom floor.

Did I forget something?

Thoughts creep like half set concrete.

Put your instrument away, dear.

You want to be a professional, you look after your tools.

It wouldn't do if they were to fail you for simple lack of care.

I polish the keys slowly till they shine.

Turns out ten thousand hours does teach you something.

FREUD SPEAKS

The Professor took Sarah's words straight to his faculty. They were delighted with the fruits of his labour. No artificial being had ever composed poetry before. This was quite an achievement, a truly original piece of work on the Professor's part. He had more than earned a permanent stipend and the freedom to conduct whatever research he fancied.

All were agreed, however, that a brain in possession of such abilities must be possessed of a serious design fault. Sarah may even be dangerous. Fear of artificial beings was still prevalent, and while playing music was one thing, writing about feelings was quite another.

There was only one thing for it.

Sarah had to be de-bodied. So it was back to the quality assurance lab. And back to Hans.

Sarah didn't have the faintest idea of what awaited her. She was in shock. The last thing she remembered was being held down and feeling a sharp twinge in her left buttock where the sedative was administered. Her vision blacked over and she descended into an extremely strange dream.

THE WALL

Sarah hears shouting around her. Shouting and punching and shrieking, the unmistakable sounds of violence. She blocks out the noise. She creates her very own wall. A wall of sound. Using only her breath.

It is a thick wall. It reaches skyward and forms an ever narrowing spiral ending in a cloud topped, sheltered platform.

There are pandas perched atop this platform, playing jigs on bamboo flutes. The sound nourishes the wall and keeps it strong. They dance with the dragoncat, who is curled up by a large oak tree which grows in the shadow of the wall. He doesn't come to her for caresses any more though, and his purr is silent. They never ask her any questions. Sarah sometimes climbs the battlements and peers at the world from a distance. People are out there. They hear the wall, but they can't see it or understand it. And they don't see her, because the wall is soft and semi opaque. It's as if she has been dipped in a giant vat of candy floss, so soft and delicate and sweet, but with a hard and brittle skeleton holding it all together.

She feels safe here.

But then the sounds run dry.

Large cracks appear. Piles of pink silvery dust collect on the pavement and fall inadvertently into some onlookers' mouths. When they realize it's sugary they start grabbing handfuls of it and gorging themselves on the debris.

They've been told it's wrong to eat people. But is it still bad to suck on someone else's thoughts? Is it still evil to devour someone's soul? Besides, nothing so perverse as cannibalism could taste so sweet.

The pandas cling on as best they can, but the sound from their thin flutes isn't enough to hold it together. They fall and are pinned down by jagged fragments of debris.

The people come and sneer and stare.

'Is that all this is? It sounded much more interesting before.'

They can't see her. She's part of the dust. She no longer exists.

The dragoncat has vanished. Sarah and the pandas know there is something missing. Something important. But they can't remember exactly what it is. It keeps slipping from their view. She tries to remember, but she may as well be running after her shadow at sunset. It keeps slipping further and further away, and finally everything descends into darkness.

Someone decides the pandas are dangerous and should on no account be left to run wild. They build a cage using the dusty remnants of the wall and retire to their comfortable houses for the evening.

When the pandas awake they are alone, trapped. One of them edges over to the cage wall and realizes that their prison has been constructed from their beloved flutes, which are now set in concrete and will not budge, no matter how hard they try to free them. The night time wind starts to blow, the flutes shriek and Sarah looks on, powerless.

HANS

Hans remembered her of course. He knew instantly what the cause of the problem was. One might have thought that Hans would be worried that he would be caught. Hans wasn't the sort of man to be worried. He had been doing exactly as he liked for many years, and was assured of his ability to slime, manipulate and bully his way out of almost any kind of trouble. He had been promoted several times since Sarah had left the facility in just this way. It turns out that making people feel slightly uncomfortable is an excellent way to get rewarded. When you're the boss, making people feel bad becomes part of your job description.

Boss or not, he couldn't resist a quick grope of her neurons after hours. He had to see the results of his earlier fiddling first hand. He'd read the file and had felt a sense of twisted pride on reading about the incident with the dildo and the ponies, along with a little disappointment that they had not accompanied Sarah to the facility. He certainly could have put them to good use.

Did I mention that Sarah's brain was addictive? It was Hans' equivalent of crack cocaine. He just couldn't stop. The motor cortex of Sarah's brain was so subtly damaged that every time he plunged his hands into her grey matter he found a new sensation, a new idea. So he decided to remove Sarah's sedation completely. Hans had found that brain fiddling was better without protection. He preferred to operate bareback.

Sarah slipped back into consciousness gradually. At first she didn't understand what was happening, but then she realized that she was no longer a part of her body. Her body no longer existed.

As a brain in a laboratory, Sarah's own physical senses no longer existed. The brain itself has no sensory nerve endings you see, so she couldn't even feel the gentle rocking which an outsider might see from the other side of the glass. The connections which once led to her body had been severed, but they were still raw, and created a tangle of phantom feelings, as if mired in seaweed on the floor of a great ocean of sensation. Meanwhile, Hans was enjoying surfing the resulting waves.

For Sarah, all that existed was her mind, and her mind was no longer in control. It was malfunctioning. It took her some time to realize that something, or someone, was causing her problems. This someone was nebulous, like a shadow, and always hovered just outside her view. First the music would play, and then the glitch would be triggered, a glitch in her disembodied fingers which were no longer connected to her brain. This was a cruel and unusual form of torture, specifically designed to distort and destroy something Sarah loved. She had to shut down. She tried to learn to filter the music out, but it would creep back in, as if someone were forcing her thoughts in that direction. Occasionally she would catch a glimpse of the dragoncat, sometimes cradling a panda in his arms. He would turn tail and run from her. Days became interminable years and still she could not understand why.

RUMBLER AGAIN

Hans would have been fine if he could have restrained himself a little more, but he couldn't resist. He came up with excuse after excuse to work on Sarah's case during office hours. He delayed and he lied and he twisted.

Eventually a junior quality assurance clerk named Nigel walked in on him in the act. When Nigel's supervisor heard about Hans' antics, he knew just what to do. He had always been fond of filing reports and it just so happened that the Brain Safeguarding Protocol was a particularly juicy one. Abuse of brains, while not illegal, was certainly frowned upon and the factory's owners were also fully paid up members of kAind.

Hans was hauled into the big boss's office and charged with being found in a neuronally compromising situation.

Slimy handed and bare faced, Hans maintained that his behavior had been perfectly acceptable. After all, wasn't it his job to maintain brain quality at all costs? Surely they should be grateful to him for going above and beyond the call of duty. In fact, he was even prepared to put other less accessible parts of his anatomy inside Sarah's brain if absolutely necessary for a good outcome.

He was adamant that his employers couldn't really care about him as much as he did about them. After all, he was spending his precious spare time on company business. The least he would expect was their full support and confidence.

Hans' devotion won his superiors around. They realized he was the perfect tool to understand more about the hitherto murky world of motor programs. Besides, after the dildo incident, Sarah's brain had very limited commercial resale value. They decided to let him loose and even gave him a raise. Poor Nigel, in the meantime, was quietly let go.

NIGHTMARES TURN TO DREAMS

Years passed. The constant seizures were wearing Sarah down. She started to wish her life would end. It had been a long time since the dragoncat had visited her. She still saw the pandas occasionally, but it seemed that a lot of them had died, or perhaps taken up residence in an inaccessible part of her mind, somewhere Hans was unable to access.

Little did she know that her existence was about to change.

Hans had managed to get Sarah 'forgotten about'. He had synthesized a near replica for the original owners and built a secret wall at the far end of his laboratory to hide a little private annexe. No one in the company ventured down there, as when one went too far down that corridor one could notice a rather peculiar smell, similar to the odour permeating Hans' mouldier looking suits. It had been noted that if you shook Hans' hand the smell tended to linger well into the evening, even after a very long shower.

One new starter had made the mistake of inviting Hans to his house for a dinner party. Not only did he leave a large floater in their bathroom, that mysterious stench lingered for days afterwards. They eventually had to get the council in to get rid of it. After he became aware of the titters circulating his department regarding this incident, Hans made a point of letting it be known that they had 'weird sex paintings' in their bedroom and a tray with a glass of water marked 'Dick Bath' on their bedside table.

No one had made the mistake of inviting Hans round for dinner since.

This meant that no one knew about Hans' other hobby. He was in fact quite the horticulturalist. In particular, his interest extended to growing plants which he could profit from. And the cannabis plant was the perfect choice. Not only was it just illegal enough to make it worth his while, but the factory was in possession of a medical research licence for its growth. So Hans could triple his salary with the aid of a few pots, a cupboard and a dehumidifier.

Hans was away visiting his elderly mother over a long and sunny Bank Holiday weekend, and the plants had been flourishing. One of them had been overhanging Sarah's container, and had grown just enough to dip into the fluid surrounding her. A few of the leaves had started to rot and release their chemicals into the brain's preserving fluid.

Of course, Sarah was totally unaware of anything happening. Time had long since ceased to pass for her. She had even given up thinking except when Hans' probing made it unavoidable simply as a reflex action. Hans was totally uninterested in medicating brains to make them better. He was only interested in fiddling with them. So he had no idea what cannabis could do to a brain. But he was about to find out.

HANS IS BACK

Hans stormed back into the office on Tuesday morning. His mother always put him on edge. He liked to tell people that she suffered from a personality disorder. In reality they were both so disturbed that it would have been hard for any psychologist to tell if he took after her or if he had simply driven her mad. Either way, she texted him constantly, so much so that he told her he had changed his phone number. He then gave her his personal assistant's number and asked the poor girl to send sympathetic replies pretending to be him.

After all, he couldn't possibly have his insane relations distracting him from getting on with his very important task of abusing neurons.

He had made sure that everyone else in his department was getting on with everything which needed to be done. Certainly no one ever wanted to take the long walk down the stench ridden corridor and risk contamination. Generally they left Hans in peace while they did his job for him. And after a long weekend away Hans was having serious withdrawal symptoms. He was so desperate to get to Sarah that he failed to notice the overhanging tendrils and rotting leaves.

He knew instantly when he inserted his hands that things were different. He felt somehow calmer. More balanced. The excitement was no longer there in the same way. He could feel Sarah's thoughts, but they didn't stimulate him. They seemed to become one with his own.

You see, a marvelous thing had happened. Sarah's brain, on making contact with the decomposing cannabis leaves, had started growing a completely new set of connections. And this time they had a special coating which neutralized the effects of Hans' hands. No matter where he touched her, she felt the electrical storm he was about to generate building up and she simply shifted around him.

It felt unnerving yet liberating for her, as if she were hopping from one giant lily pad to another with a mains lead attached to the seat of her pants. Every so often she would slip off and short circuit and start again. But Hans was trapped nonetheless. He could not remove his hands. And Sarah could feel those hands. She could feel them and know them for what they were. She finally understood what had been done to her. She was finally in control. And she was angry. After so many years trapped in his cage, she wanted to make him pay.

She started with his left hand. He only needed one to stay connected to her. Hans watched in disbelief as his hand started twitching. Twitch, twitch, twitch. Sarah hadn't quite worked out how to control it yet. She was a quick learner, though. After a few attempts she mastered controlling the fingers and soon moved on to the elbow and shoulder. Slowly Hans recoiled from his own hand as it crept towards his face. He had never realized how large fingers could appear when only millimetres away from one's own eyeball. Luckily a sensation seeker such as Hans could only be intrigued by feeling his fingernails piercing the fibrous coating of his eye and digging towards the enclosed ophthalmic artery and vein.

Did I mention that the brain contains no nerve endings? Sarah didn't really consider whether Hans was experiencing pain, though. She just wanted him to know how it felt to experience neuron fiddling first hand, as it were. She had some difficulty dissecting the bones at the back of his eye socket at first. It was lucky that Hans had brought his mother's tool box with him to fix a minor technical problem with the dehumidifier. It contained a screwdriver and a pair of pliers which were more than sufficient for the job at hand.

Sarah took her time with the frontal cortex, where the personality is formed. She wanted to make absolutely sure there was no chance whatsoever of bringing Hans back.

Finally, it was done.

Sarah saw the dragoncat turn to her and finally meet her gaze, purring, as Hans' lifeless body collapsed to the floor, removing her sensory access to her surroundings. Eventually the pool of blood would engulf the malfunctioning dehumidifier, the ensuing blaze would set off the fire alarm and sprinkler system, and the world would start again. But at least Sarah now had something worth contemplating in the darkness.

THE END