

# Deep

by Lukas J. Maxwell

He could see nothing. This wasn't like standing in a dark room or looking out into night. It wasn't like being blindfolded, or what he imagined being blind must be like. It was much less – as if he didn't possess sight at all. He was surrounded by an absence; not of light, but of everything. If there was light then there was nothing for it to strike and lay itself on, but also nothing to see it. If there was something that could make a sound, then there was nothing to hear it. If there was anything there at all, then there was nothing to feel it. But he could acknowledge the absence – and acknowledgement of absence required knowledge that it was, in fact, an absence. This would mean knowing that where there was once something, there was now nothing.

*No*, he thought, *not nothing*. He was there – a lone island of cognition, trapped in a void that was slowly suffocating him. There was no up or down; no direction or way to move, but somehow, he felt the unmistakable feeling of sinking. Sinking slowly like a small glass marble through black paint, but formless and with no promise of hitting a bottom.

A spark flew through his essence as suddenly he began to remember things, the absent things in this blank chasm. He remembered what the world looked like and how it felt. He remembered himself and his life, and slowly he regained sensations in his body – life stretching back through his arms and legs. With this reclamation of self, he struggled; thrashing and kicking in the direction that he believed was upwards.

Yet he did not move. With the rebirth of his senses, he became conscious of the fact that he was not sinking. With a sudden and powerful wrench, the cold hand wrapped tightly around his ankle tore him downwards into the deep.

\* \* \*

“Is that you finally awake now?”

As he turned his head the nauseatingly familiar smell of a hospital room was trampled by the stench that stampeded outwards from the man at the right of his

bedside. The powerful and sterile smell of the hospital room did little to hide the odour spilling towards him – the smell of years of lax oral hygiene and cheap vodka.

“Three days.” Spat the balding middle-aged man. “Three fuckin’ days ye’ve sat there, Fraser. That’s the longest this year.”

The disorientation of being pulled back into his own mind by his father’s croaking was rapidly wearing off as Fraser pulled himself up on his hospital bed. The medical equipment attached to him sounded its metronomic tone as he took note of his surroundings. Through the curtain surrounding his bed he could see other patients in beds, with variance in age and in states of consciousness.

“You’re in with all the old ones now. There was no point in putting you in intensive care this time – even the nurses are on to you now.” His dad gave a wry smile, made more heinous by the deep scar on his top lip.

Fraser glared at his dad in confusion and with the beginning of anger. “What-” he coughed as he tried to talk for the first time since his apparent three-day rest. “What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“You know exactly what I fuckin’ mean!” shouted Fraser’s dad as he stumbled to his feet, never once breaking eye contact. “Lying there faking it while folk around you are actually dying! Folk that have worked their whole lives to make ends meet while you decide to have a big sad nap for the fortieth time this year. It’s fuckin’ disgraceful. Your mum,” his voice broke and a shiver of despair crossed his face. “Your mum would have been ashamed.”

The dreadful silence between them hung for a few moments before the sound of cheap shoes on hard floor approaching started and the curtains beside his bed shot open, revealing a nurse who’s face of burning anger towards Fraser’s shouting father twisted into surprise and then into something far more caring and brighter.

“Oh, Mr. Cairns, I didn’t know you were awake.” She said, before hastily walking over to the medical equipment at Fraser’s left side. Still maintaining that same line of sight, his dad walked slowly backwards towards the opening in the curtains, newspaper tucked loosely under his arm.

“From now on,” He said through gritted teeth, pointing at his son. “Get someone else to check up on you. I’m done with it. I’m totally sick of it. This was your fuckin’ last. Get your act together and man up.” The grip of his stare held him right up until the last moment before yielding as his dad disappeared behind the curtain and out of the room. Fraser lent back and sighed deeply, closing his eyes. Instantly a wave of dread and fear washed over him as his eyes shot back open and his body twitched wildly. He didn’t feel safe with his eyes closed, not right now.

“How are you feeling, Fraser?” asked the nurse, checking his pupils with a small light.

He had no idea how to answer her question. He had been asked this hundreds of times throughout the years after one of his *‘episodes’*, but the question never became easier to answer.

After a silence he replied “Tired.”, and rolled himself over, away from the nurse.

The nurse collected a clipboard from a table and studied it carefully, with a quizzical expression.

“I’ll ask ye the same question I asked last time you were here; why do you keep refusing our referrals? There’s only so much we can do to diagnose your condition without your cooperation.”

Fraser pulled himself to a sitting position. “Can I go?”

The nurse studied his face with sadness, trying to find some sort of motivation for his defensiveness. “We’re trying to help you. You can’t go on like this – and to be perfectly blunt, you’re taking up hospital resources that can be used on people who *want* to get better.”

They shared a long pause. “There’s nothing wrong with me.” muttered Fraser, “I just need to... get my head right.” He broke off and swung his legs around and off the side of the bed. His legs felt like they belonged to a stranger – they were cold and senseless, but the prickling and slight burning flowing down his thigh’s made him know they would soon be his again.

“Ach, do what you want.” said the nurse, defeated, “but Dr Fischer left me a letter to give to you. It’s not a referral or an appointment slip. Read it.” She pulled a white envelope from the drawer of a nearby cabinet and sat it on the bed before walking out of the gap in the curtains. Fraser looked at the letter for a few moments before turning his attention away from it and to his clothes. Slowly and using all his energy, he pulled himself over to the neatly folded pile of cheap clothes on the bedside table. Standing up, he shot a quick glance at the dark haired and grey nothing of a man in the hospital gown looking back at him in the mirror. His height and broad frame made his low weight even more startling as the convex lower-half of his torso looked like it was collapsing in on itself. He realised that he couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten something, but his appetite was minimal as the bitter taste of ‘hospital’ lingered in his mouth.

Fraser collected his minimal belongings – a half-empty pack of Sterling, a lighter, a set of keys, wallet, and a phone. He unlocked his phone to see the message “16 Missed Calls” and a preview of a text message reading;

*“Henry (Boss):*

*I’ll tell you what Fraser, don’t even fuckin bother coming back in. I’ll post your P45 next week and....”*

“Ah fuck off”, Fraser whispered, locking his phone and making his way out of the ward. He froze in place for a hesitant and thoughtful moment, then turned back to collect the letter addressed to ‘Fraser’ before making his exit.

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Fraser found it hard to focus on anything as the cold, wet bus threw him around every housing scheme in Glasgow, but he would have done anything in that moment to take his mind off the horrendously damp smell of the bus (or was it the people on it? He couldn’t make up his mind). He looked at the white envelope in his shaking hands, mulling over its possibilities. Dr Fischer was relentless – even going as far to show up at Fraser’s house one bad evening. This time, it felt different. Something about this envelope with ‘Fraser’ handwritten on its front felt very definitive – it felt very final. Dr Fischer had called, emailed, visited, contacted him in nearly every way possible, but it was always ‘Mr Cairns’. This time, it was ‘Fraser’ - and something about that made him feel compelled to listen this time. Fraser slowly opened the envelope, and with a final deep breath, he started reading the handwritten letter.

*“Fraser,*

*When I told my father that I was going to study psychology at university, he was beyond livid. He graduated as a surgeon in the 1930’s, when psychology was still young, and he never believed it to be a science. He always said to me that ‘the only medicine is medicine’ and he had wanted me to follow in his footsteps. So, when I went to university, he refused to help me financially. I managed to afford my doctorate myself by working 3 jobs and studying throughout the night for most of my studies. When I graduated, only my mother attended the ceremony. I never forgave him.*

*My point is this: fathers are stubborn. They grow up believing something and they won’t change their opinions for anyone – not the world, and not their children. Don’t let your father’s ignorance hold you back from getting the help that you need. There are enough men out there that ignore their own minds, and it ends horribly for a lot of them.*

*I don't know what your condition is – I'm not sure anyone does, but I can help you. You just need to let me try. Please.*

*If I don't hear from you, at least remember the exercise I taught you. You can move the boulder.*

*William”*

Fraser no longer noticed the cold air of the bus as his face burned with heat. He managed to catch the first tear by covering his eyes with his sleeve as he frantically pressed the stop button for the bus with his other arm. Jolting to his feet, he barged to the front of the swaying bus as it pulled into a stop outside of Queen's Park. As the doors slowly opened and the bus hissed, Fraser dashed from the bus onto the pavement and through the large open metal gates of the park. He crumpled the letter into a ball and punched it into his hoodie pocket, walking with a speed and purpose that was unnecessary without a destination. He frantically pulled a bent cigarette from the crushed packet in his pocket and thankfully lit it on the sixth attempt by sheltering the flame in his hoodie. The nicotine hit his head with a disorientating comfort as he stared into the water of a nearby secluded pond and tried to gather his fragmented thoughts.

His memory of being unconscious felt somewhat different to last time, but also very familiar. He could remember nothing, but he felt like that memory was somehow correct. It was a formless, shapeless prison. A black pool that he had sank into.

No, he hadn't sunk.

As soon as the thought had entered Fraser's mind, he felt a sharp twist of pain in his head. He doubled over; all of his senses numbed by what felt like a blast emanating from inside of his own head. His ears rang endlessly with an intensity that rattled every tooth in his head as the deafening noise like television static made him submit to its will. Defeated by it, he fell to his side, curling himself into a ball and grabbing at his head in an instinctual but futile attempt to stop whatever it was that was happening. After a while, the thunderous static slowly fell into a low hum, and eventually ceased.

Fraser opened his eyes. It was much darker now. He had no idea what time he had come into the park at, and the newly smashed screen of his phone wasn't much help. He jumped to his feet in a panicked jolt and stumbled towards the

gates of the park. Picking the direction that he thought would take him home quickest, he started running.

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*Department for Work and Pensions – APPEAL NOTICE*

*Dear Mr. Cairns,*

*I am writing to you regarding your appeal for the decision that was made regarding your application for Employment and Support Allowance.*

*We reopened your application, and after careful consideration we have decided that we are unable to pay you Employment and Support Allowance. This is due to a lack of information and evidence regarding your declared medical condition, and the fact that you were assessed as being “fit for work” at your last assessment meeting. The details of this assessment can be found on the reverse.*

*Please note that this decision has been passed to Glasgow City Council for their consideration regarding your Housing Benefit application. They will be in contact with you shortly.”*

Fraser rubbed the corners of his eyes with his fingers and breathed deeply, collapsing his head onto the cold glass kitchen table. It wasn't necessarily a surprise to him, but it still sent a cold shock through him. He had eyed the other envelope with “OCCUPANT” and “IMPORTANT” scrawled on the front of it as he had entered the flat, but he had chosen not to think about it until he had finished reading the appeal letter. He had received enough letters from his landlord to know before he opened them who they were from and what they were about. The haphazardly scribble of words and the dirty black fingerprints blemishing the white of the paper was usually enough of a give it away, but what was even more telling was “OCCUPANT”. The landlord had never bothered to learn his name – all he had cared about was the signature on his tenancy agreement and the money in his account every month, and any slight lapse in this was met with “OCCUPANT – IMPORTANT”. He tore open the dirty envelope and read the first few words;

## “NOTICE OF EVICTION”

Fraser rose in a blind anger and paced nervously between his kitchen and living room. His breath was escaping him – his face felt like it would soon burst open from sheer frustration. He grabbed a pillow from his couch and pushed his face into it, screaming with a blind furore and terror that he had never felt before. He fell sideways onto the couch, rolling onto his back and trying to catch his breath. A thousand thoughts overwhelmed his head, all fighting for his individual attention. It was as if this multitude of demanding thoughts all revolved around something greater – a great many dark thoughts and facts encircling one larger core truth: that this was all his fault. Fraser had lost his job, his flat, his father, and seemingly his mind – and he was to blame. There was no good in him. No drive, no ambition, nothing to call his own apart from mistakes. There was nothing for him to grab onto to stop the current from washing him away. Where there was once something, he now had nothing. Fraser was alone with his own worst enemy – himself.

Fraser lay on his couch for a long time with a blank mind – overwhelmed and catatonic, unable to think about anything. After a long time, he inevitably dragged his body over to the kitchen, pulling out a mostly full bottle of blended whisky. He turned to make the journey back over to the living room when he noticed the crumpled letter from Dr Fischer on the kitchen table. With his other hand, he grabbed the ball of paper before heading back to the couch. Fraser pulled the cork of the bottle off with his teeth and spat it across his living room before taking a deep wincing gulp of whisky. Placing the bottle on the floor beside the couch, he unfurled the ball in his hands and glanced over it again. He didn't have to read it again to remember what Dr Fischer had written – those words were already cemented in his brain – but he read it again anyway. There was a warmth to his words and his handwriting that felt comfortable to read. His eyes were pulled towards that last sentence.

*“You can move the boulder.”*

Fraser recalled the first time the doctor said these words to him. It was a mental exercise that the doctor said was meant to ‘clear his mind’. The doctor asked him to picture his polluted thoughts as a boulder and push them away from him, off the cliff edge to the sea below. The idea was met with laughter from Fraser's dad – because of course it was. Any talk about Fraser's condition was always met like

this, with laughter or anger. Nothing in-between. Fraser knew that Dr Fischer would be more help to him than his father ever was, but he couldn't find the willpower to block out his father – not completely. He felt completely powerless, pinned under the weight of his own thoughts with not enough strength to push them off. But he had to try. At least once, he had to try.

Fraser took another long drink of the cheap blend and closed his eyes. He took a few deep breaths and tried to wipe clear his dirty mind. He pictured a high cliff edge, from which the horizon stretched off forever. Blue meeting blue in the distance, the sun hanging high in the sky and reflecting in the sea in front of him. The wind was strong, and gulls glided through the gales like white kites. Using all of his concentration, Fraser tried to picture a large stone boulder in front of him. Creating the image seemed to be draining him, so he took a deep breath and tried again. He thought he could feel the ground shake below him as slowly, the sky darkened slightly. Before him, a sphere of pure black appeared and, with a thundering stomp, landed on the grass in front of him. The very presence of the object sent him into panic. His heart pounded out of his chest as he tried to open his eyes, but it was as if the action of opening his eyes would close them to the sight of this orb – and the orb would not let him look away. The orb stared back at him, with an eyeless gaze that grabbed hold of him by his very soul. He tried to scream but no other sound could be heard through the loud rumbling and static noise coming from this perfect black circle in front of him. The sun in the sky behind the orb began to set, falling downwards towards a horizon on a course that would eclipse it with the dark orb. Something – some instinct – told Fraser that if this course was completed and the sun vanished, he would be somehow lost. The darkness would engulf everything in the world. Everything in his world. He couldn't let this happen. Breaking his stare, he threw all his weight towards the orb and struck its solid, cold surface with his shoulder. Digging his feet through the grass and into the dirt below, he forced his entirety against the orb. Even with all his strength the orb stood completely still, towering over him. He stumbled backwards, observing with horror as the sun slowly eclipsed itself behind the orb before setting completely. The moment the last beam of light vanished behind it, the ground below him shook vigorously as the noise of static engulfed everything.

The static gave way to screaming. Fraser's screams. He stopped, throwing himself to a seated position from the floor. Drenched in sweat and shaking violently, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and looked around him. He was on the wooden floor of his living-room, surrounded by a darkness

that was only slightly broken by the illumination of the red light on his television. Covering his eyes, he laughed to himself in acknowledgement of his defeat. Lifting the bottle from beside the couch, he poured whisky into his grinning mouth to silence the disgusting sound of his own laughter. Pulling himself up onto the couch, he turned on the television and sipped on his bottle.

*“OK times up, let's see how everyone has done.”* said the gothic eccentric man on the television, judging food made by a group of people. Fraser finished the last sips of his bottle he had been nursing for hours and threw it across the room, barely saved from smashing by a thin rug. Fraser laughed again horribly and loudly, lying flat on his back on the couch.

“I’ve lost.” he said bemusedly with a drunken guttural cackle. “I’ve lost!” he shouted, echoing around the room. “Game over, man! Game fuckin’ over.”

His laughter slowly ceased, as did his smile, and he turned his head towards the garbage on the television.

“I’m so tired.” he whispered.

The man on the television took a forkful of a dish from someone's plate and put it in his mouth. Making a disgusted face and wincing, he said *“That is utterly revolting.”* The man turned to look at the camera.

*“I’m so tired of people ruining something perfectly good with stupid mistakes.”*

The image on the television froze and bounced slightly in the screen like a damaged film reel. The noise of static began to slowly increase in volume as the voice of the man in the television repeated the phrase.

*“I’m so tired- I’m so tired- I’m so tired- I’m so tired-”*

The outline of the gothic man on the television slowly began to fade, leaving everything else in the background clear and frozen as it was before. The fade of the man quickly turned from a shade of white into the moving and distorted effect of black and white static. Terrified, Fraser noticed that within the image on the television the static man had started to move. At first just right and left within the screen, but then more. Moving its arms around the screen, the static figure grabbed on to the plastic at the bottom of his television set and pulled itself out of the screen and towards him.

With a loud boom, the right hand that was outstretched from the television set struck the hardwood floor in front of the television. Fraser tried to force himself to move, to scream, to run, anything – but he couldn’t. He sunk into the couch, completely paralysed.

The figure now boomed its left hand on the floor and pulled its entire body out of the screen, sliding forward like someone climbing out of a swimming pool. Two more thuds echoed around the room as the figure's legs hit the floor and it began rising to its feet.

*"I'm so tired- I'm so tired- I'm so tired- I'm so tired-"*

With an eyeless stare the figure pounded towards him. Fraser tried to beg it to go away but if he possessed a voice at this moment, it did not obey his command. Towering over him, the figure of pure static leant its head down slowly to meet Fraser's. Using every ounce of energy he had left, Fraser found his voice and screamed at the shape.

"LET ME SLEEP!"

The voice and the static ceased completely as the creature backed off slightly. The static making up the body of the figure did not disappear, but it stopped dancing and became perfectly still. The figure of suspended static hesitated for a few moments as they both seemed to stare into each other. With seemingly little effort, the figure grabbed Fraser by the shoulders and pushed him into the sofa. The material of the black couch seemed to have suddenly become completely viscous. Pushing him further and harder, they both fell through the couch and sank into a deep black pool.

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There was a sky, but it wasn't right. Even in the dead of winter, the blackest sky was not like this. A night's sky had stars, or at least it had clouds. On a clear night with no light pollution, you could see the arms of the galaxy, or satellites orbiting the earth. You would see the moon, or at certain times of the year you may see Mars, or other specs of light hitting off distant planets. You wouldn't see this. An unequivocal, unbroken black.

Fraser noticed things beginning to take shape in front of him, and a familiar sight materialised itself. He was standing on the edge of a cliff. The cliff. This time there were no birds. There was no breeze or no boulder. The sea didn't wave at him, instead it stretched out endlessly like a gigantic panel of thick black glass.

This was the place he had pictured earlier, but it had been corrupted. Torn apart and rebuilt by whatever poison was in his mind.

He peered off the edge of the cliff and into the sea below. The eerie stillness of it gave Fraser a shiver up his spine, yet he stared into it with a strange longing. Something about it gave him an uneasy comfort in his stomach. An unnatural comfort.

“We can go, together.”

Fraser shot around startled at the sound of his own voice speaking to him to see the figure of static standing firmly on the grass behind him.

“It wouldn’t be so bad.” the figure said in a slightly distorted version of Fraser’s own voice. “We would fall, then we would sink for a while. Then we would slip away, together.”

Fraser breathed heavily through his gritted teeth as his eyes darted back and forward between the figure and the cliff behind him. He took a few steps backwards and turned his head around, looking down to where the ragged darkened rocks below met the formless black sea.

He turned back to the figure. “This isn’t right. This... can’t happen.”

The figure laughed darkly. The sound was a distorted cross between Fraser’s own laughter and that furious howl of his father. The sound of it seemed to shake the earth below his feet.

The sound stopped and the figure returned its attention to Fraser.

“This has been coming for a very long time, Fraser.” The figure took a step towards him. “Let yourself rest.”

Fraser closed his eyes. He knew that the figure was right. He had been heading in this direction for a long time. Every time someone had tried to slow him down on this journey, he had batted them away. Now he had arrived, and it was time to let go.

He turned to face the cliff edge, looking down into the endless deep once again. The figure stood beside him, taking Fraser’s hand in its own.

“It’s time to rest.”

This wasn’t right. He shook his hand from the grip of the static figure and took a few steps back.

“No, this.... this isn’t right.” he muttered. “Anything. *Anything* is better than this.”

Fraser took another step backwards as the figure took an eerie identical step towards him. The light sound of static began ringing in Fraser’s ear.

“You don’t know what you’re saying Fraser.” the figure said. “Think about it, what do you have to go back to that’s better than this option that I’m giving you?”

Fraser and the figure took another identical step backwards and forwards.

“Everything,” said Fraser. “Anything.”

“YOU HAVE NOTHING”, bellowed the figure into his head with a distorted scream. The figure flashed towards him and grabbed him by the shoulders with ease, throwing him across the grass towards the cliff edge.

Fraser jumped to his feet and turned towards the figure, which was sprinting towards him. Fraser dug his feet into the ground and braced for the figures tackle. They struck each other, with the force of the figure inching them closer towards the cliff edge.

“YOU HAVE NOTHING.”

Fraser ducked under the arm of the static creature and manoeuvred himself to behind it. Grabbing it by the shoulders, Fraser pushed the figure towards the cliff edge.

“No,” spat Fraser through his teeth, “down there is nothing.”

With everything in his body, Fraser pushed himself forward and flung the figure from the edge of the cliff into the sea below. As it fell, the sound of static slowly shrank away to nothing. He watched the figure descend further and further, expecting it to disappear below some sort of surface, but it hit no surface. It simply fell, deeper and deeper, until it was gone.

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Fraser opened his eyes. The television was off, and light was beginning to come in through the cracks in his window blinds. Discovering that he was no longer paralysed, he turned his legs around and stood up from the couch. Without hesitation, he picked up the crumpled ball of paper from the floor and made his way into the kitchen. Picking up the landline phone from its dock, he dialled a number and held it to his ear.

After a few long rings, a voice spoke. “Hello?”  
Fraser paused, then said in a hoarse voice, “Dr Fisc-” he stopped himself.  
“William. It’s... its Fraser.”