

Chapter 1: What Have I Done?

DYLAN CASHEW DID NOT WANT TO BE THERE. There were many other places in the world he also did not want to be, but this staid room, this pen-etched desk, these monotone unpolished tiles and four unforgiving walls comprised a standard by which all other places Dylan did not want to be could be judged.

From a coalmine canary's perspective, it was not all bad: the room had a window. But mostly bad: the window was Photoshop black, peering out as it did to the cropping lines of an airplane hangar. So dark in fact that he could see himself and his unkempt hair slightly better than the assorted aircraft below.

His first few days as Assistant Technical Editor, Aerosystems Establishment Canada. *What have I done?* Things were bound to get better, if they didn't get worse, which was more likely since things had a way of bottoming out before scampering for the light of day if they didn't have anything more pressing to do at that warp of space-time.

'It could be worse,' a voice in an East Midlands accent said out of nowhere.

Dylan wheeled around from the window, his gaze probing the recesses. 'It can't be!'

'The indefinite pronoun should never be used to refer to an Author of Note,' the voice chided.

'Where are you?'

'In your head - until you give me permission to metabolise.'

'*Metabolise?* That's a new one on me.'

'I'll take that as a yes, then?'

'You said we were finished in Edmonton!'

'Because you gave up.'

'Not on writing – just writing about *you!*'

D. H. Lawrence – or rather a hologram very much like him – came into view.

Dylan blinked. Then winced. Then winced again.

'I had high hopes for you,' said D. H. 'It's not too late to admit you were wrong.'

'There's my future to think of,' sniffed Dylan.

'Oh, is that all?' scoffed D. H.

'*Now* who's using the indefinite pronoun carelessly?'

'Not to mention my wife.'

'Teach you to get married so young.'

'I'm twenty-three years old, D. H.'

In that frozen instant between galaxies, Dylan had accepted that talking to a hologram was not only acceptable in the circumstances but perfectly natural.

'Too young to know better,' D. H. nodded. 'I was nearly thirty before Frieda and I got married. I already had three novels, a book of poetry and a play notched on my belt by then.'

'Well, la-de-dah for you.' Dylan paused for effect. 'Of course I knew all that.'

'We were on a roll,' said D. H. 'And then you had to go and spoil everything!'

'I didn't have a choice,' Dylan stammered. '*She* proposed.'

'Caught off guard, eh?'

'No. Well, yes. Yes – and no!'

There was a knock at the door, so D. H. took his cue and vanished.

A tallish man in a tweed jacket, definite threadbare pants and sporting a bright tie that cried out for attention, leaned in and looked around.

'To whom were you talking to – just now?'

Dylan broke into a controlled sweat.

'I'm sorry, Mr Lehmann. I forgot to mention that I occasionally talk to myself when... my blood sugar gets low.'

Mr Lehmann was Dylan's superior, the Chief Editor who had interviewed him back in Edmonton, and, to Dylan's amazement, had actually offered him the job. Lehmann was an ex-pat Austrian, whose Germanic accent was so slight Dylan could either assume he'd been living in Canada for many years or had embarked on a deliberate campaign to camouflage his roots to blend in with the natives. Lehmann had greasy hair that would have suited him to a bit part in a 50s black and white film by a struggling Norwegian director. And his way of speaking with overdrawn inflections on the wrong words reminded Dylan of auditions he'd imagined attending in his student days but never quite did.

'That's fine,' said Lehmann, straining to sound reassuring, as if out of a rules book. 'It's a lonely job - editing. Until you learn the ropes.'

Dylan eyed the sheath of papers Lehmann was clutching to his chest like an injured pigeon. 'Is that for me?'

'Yes,' said Lehmann. 'Your first *report* - on the Mirage.'

'Let me guess. It's an aircraft?'

'Quite so. *Pride* of the Armée de l'air¹.'

D. H. materialised behind him. 'Ah, yes, the Mirage - ancestor of the Rafale². Now there's a bitch of an aircraft!'

Dylan glanced nervously from D. H. to Lehmann, but the latter was none the wiser. Still, Dylan waved the hologram away. Since he had no way of sneaking into D. H.'s parallel universe without an iris scan, he had no idea what a Rafale was.

'I'm sure you'll find the draft report interesting,' said Lehmann, setting it down on the desk, pressing the creased corners flat again. 'Lieutenant Rousseau will report here at 10am tomorrow to review your edit.'

¹ <http://bit.ly/2CfCII2>

² <http://bit.ly/2BZz0N8>

Dylan gulped. 'What if I'm not ready?'

'Chop, chop,' chuckled Lehmann. 'There's plenty more where this came from. *Deadlines, deadlines!*' He backed away, straight through D. H. 'Feel free to *ring* me about any queries.'

Two hours later and Dylan's hair was so disheveled that it was looking neat. And only three pages into the twenty-odd page document.

'Arrgh!' he declared, thrusting it aside and glaring at his coffee cup. 'More caffeine. Better yet, make that jet fuel!'

'Life is a travelling to the edge of knowledge, then a leap taken³,' said D. H., leaning over his shoulder.

Dylan shuffled pages. 'What? Where did you read that?'

'I didn't read it - I *wrote* it.'

Dylan slammed the report closed. 'Congratulations. Another one of your memorable throw away lines to keep the critics guessing?'

'Not so memorable as it happens if you didn't recall it.'

'I wish I could *leap* over this report,' said Dylan. 'Now I know why no one else wanted this job.'

'Ah,' said D. H. 'But you must have been chosen from a cast of thousands. Or at least a few word-mongers after a pay cheque.'

Dylan nodded. 'I'd prefer to believe the former. But I could tell I was probably the only one who applied.'

[It seemed like only yesterday, and it actually was well before yesterday - if you discounted virtual time...]

Dylan, in an ill-fitting suit and an even tighter tie, grasping his résumé, waiting for a door to open at the appointed time, expelling the previous, and doubtlessly better qualified, candidate. The door opens seconds later, but no one emerges, just the long and impressively narrow nose of Lehmann, followed soon after by a face that invites

³ <http://bit.ly/2zEinjG>

him into the interview room.

Awkward seconds limp past as Dylan tries to remember the pose he should strike on the padded interrogation chair according to *The Idiot's Guide to Successful Interviewing*⁴.

The question he's dreading – what's your background in aeronautics? – never comes. Instead, Lehmann mumbles on about the small town near the Base where most of the civvies live.

'Everyone knows everyone else's business,' he explains. 'Which isn't a bad thing if a bear has broken into your house.'

[Bears are the stuff of legend for Dylan, not quite Disney-style but close.]

Like all experienced editors, Lehmann picks up on the slightest whiff of ambivalence. 'You've never encountered a bear?'

'No,' says Dylan. 'But I'm happy to offer it an escort out if one strays onto my property.'

'You've got the job!' exclaims Lehmann.

'Are you sure?' Dylan says. 'I'm inexperienced!'

'Great,' says Lehmann. 'No one likes a know-it-all!'

'I'm terrible at parts of speech. I... I can't remember the difference between a misplaced and dangling modifier!'⁵

'Even better. Pilots hate dealing with elitists and their jargon.'

Dylan decides to use his ultimate weapon. 'What possible connection is there between my research into D. H. Lawrence and technical reports?'

'None,' Lehmann says. 'But that's beside the point.'

'Which is?'

'The job is yours!'

'You see?' Dylan said, as if D. H. was still there, which apparently he wasn't, at least not in this particular universe.

⁴ <http://bit.ly/2E2SJbO>

⁵ <http://bit.ly/2E1xC9P>