

The Machine
by Michael Grant

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“Look at that. Isn’t she a beauty?”

Laura Bennett could have chosen any number of words to describe her husband’s new purchase, but she definitely wouldn’t have called it ‘a beauty’. It was a typewriter. And not a particularly nice typewriter at that. It had clearly endured a lot in its time, and the wear and tear that it displayed made it difficult to imagine what it must have been like when new. Its metallic casing, presumably once smooth and sleek, had surrendered itself to rust, and the letters on the keys were now faded and yellowed with age. The keys themselves were mostly intact, although a couple were bent out of place and one was missing completely. Laura had often used typewriters in her youth when undertaking secretarial work, and she knew better than most that a well-preserved typewriter could be a delight of mechanical perfection, almost a work of art in fact. But this one just looked sad. That typewriter was many things. But it was certainly not a beauty.

She dodged the question, knowing that Brian wouldn’t notice in his post-purchase excitement:

“Where did you get it?” she asked.

“They had it in Carter and Blaxton’s. You know, the antique shop just on the corner of Price Street? I was lucky to get it actually; there was a guy who came in to ask about it just as I was leaving.”

Brian knelt down beside the desk on which the contraption was resting and took a closer look at it. He was like a schoolchild with a new toy, reluctant to take his eyes off it even for a second. He was always like this when he found something new to add to his collection. For the next few days he would obsess over it, examining it in the finest detail in order to discover all of its secrets. Then eventually, when he knew and understood it as completely as possible, he would find a permanent place for it in his study amongst the assortment of other trinkets he had collected over the years.

He must have had well over a hundred artefacts in that room, spanning almost five hundred years of human history. Each one was placed meticulously on its shelf, or in one of the three glass display cases positioned around the study, and all were labelled with a small card that gave the specifics of the object and its origins. It was in that study that Brian and Laura

new found themselves evaluating the latest addition to their own private museum.

“Alright, next question,” Laura continued, “Why did you get it?”

A look of hurt crossed Brian’s face as he glanced up at her. It clearly hadn’t occurred to him that his beloved new typewriter might not be to everyone’s taste.

“Well have you seen it? It’s brilliant!” he said, trying not to show his surprise at her reaction. “This thing’s got stories to tell. It’s been places. How could you not be fascinated by such a piece?”

Despite herself, Laura smiled at his childlike enthusiasm.

“O.K., fair enough. But you’ve got to admit it’s not the most visually appealing thing you’ve ever bought.”

He replied hesitantly: “No, I suppose not. But I didn’t really buy it for the aesthetics anyway. The important thing is the story behind it.”

Ah yes, the story. Whatever Brian bought, it always had to come with a story, otherwise it was worthless to him. She had frequently heard him say that he wasn’t a collector of objects. Rather, he was a collector of history.

Upon seeing Brian’s collection for the first time, most visitors would remark what a bizarre assortment of odds and ends it contained. There was everything from cutlery racks to door handles to pairs of slippers, and to the uninitiated these appeared to have no connection whatsoever between them. But what they didn’t understand was that only when the stories of the objects are known does the link between them, and therefore the nature of the collection itself, become clear.

Brian had always had a fascination with the macabre. Anything grizzly or gruesome had always intrigued him in a strange sort of way. He never stopped being amazed by the depths to which humans would sink and the resulting acts they would commit, and it was this obsession that was the true focus of his collection. Those marks on the cutlery rack, for instance. They were not simply dirt. They were dried blood. The door handle had once incarcerated a woman in her house as it burned at the hands of a jealous lover. The slippers had been worn by Sir Anthony Cartigan on the night when, after encountering a tripwire placed by greedy heirs, he had fallen down a whole flight of stairs and had subsequently gone to meet his maker. And the typewriter... Well, Laura was about to find out.

“Go on then,” she said, taking a seat. “I can see you’re itching to tell me. What’s the story?”

Brian chuckled and settled himself in an armchair opposite Laura. As he did so, he switched on a lamp on a small side table. Although it was only four

o'clock, it was the middle of November so the darkness was already drawing in. The brewing storm outside only served to increase the gloom, and therefore the lamp filled the centre of the room with a very welcome glow.

"The story..." Brian smiled, considering how best to begin. "Let me start by asking, have you ever heard of Hector Lawson?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I don't suppose you should. I didn't expect you to. In fact it was only last week that I came across him myself. He was an interesting character, Mister Lawson. He lived about two miles down the road from here, over a hundred years ago. A watchmaker by trade, very highly respected in the community. Everyone knew Hector Lawson. He was the kind of person who would always say hello if you bumped into him in the street. Always give a handshake, ask how the family was getting on. Everyone would tip their hats to him or offer their greetings. They all knew him as a pillar of their society. Yes, by all accounts Lawson was an incredibly nice man. He was also a killer."

Laura smiled inwardly. If there was one thing she had learnt during their twenty-three years of marriage, it was that Brian loved to be melodramatic. It was part of what made him such an excellent storyteller.

"You see," Brian continued, "Lawson was not what you might call 'the full shilling'. Although he seemed to outsiders to be a very down-to-earth and rational individual, there was something inside him that wasn't quite right. Perhaps all those hours spent in the workshop trying to fit miniscule cogs and springs into clock mechanisms had affected him mentally. More likely it was down to more personal reasons. He had no family, for he had been unfortunate enough to lose them all at different stages, including a wife and child that he had loved with all his heart. That must have contributed massively to his psychological state, and in a time when mental illness was poorly understood his was a condition that never saw any treatment. Somehow this imbalance within him caused him to come to loathe the town in which he lived and all of its residents. He continued to play the part of an amiable gentleman well enough, but inside he was rotting with irrational hatred of the place and people with which he spent his life. Nobody could have known, but he despised all of those who called themselves his friends, and gradually he began plotting their downfalls.

"I think it was in 1882 when he took his first victim, a young teacher at the local school. All of a sudden, this innocent man had started receiving anonymous typewritten notes through his door, saying things like 'Beware' and 'I'm coming for you'. Short notes, but that must have made them all the

more powerful. Lawson was toying with him, like a cat taunts a mouse. And with every note came a number. First there was a five. Then a four. A three. A two, a one... And when the countdown reached zero, that was the day the man would die. That particular teacher was found on his living room floor, stabbed through the heart with a kitchen knife.”

Brian paused to gather his thoughts, allowing a tangible silence to fill the room. Laura didn't speak. She just stared straight ahead, completely absorbed in the tale. The only sound was the battering of the rain against the window and the accompanying plaintive moan of the wind. Eventually Brian carried on.

“Of course, all his victims took the notes to the police. They must have been terrified. After a short while the whole town became aware of the messages, and anyone receiving the first ‘Beware 5’ warning instantly knew that it was the equivalent of a death sentence and that it was only a matter of time before they would meet a similar fate to the unfortunate teacher. Several of them tried to escape to relatives’ houses or to hotels in other towns, but they couldn’t stay away for ever and as soon as they returned home the notes would resume. The police tried their best – they took people in for questioning, even made some arrests to make it look like they were doing something. But nobody suspected nice old Mister Lawson. The cornerstone of the community. Nobody suspected his inner madness, or that it could drive him to such actions.

“Lawson got through seven victims before things went wrong. It wasn’t that the police had caught on to him – he had been very careful, even hiding the typewriter when not in use in case someone should call round. No, the thing that doomed Hector Lawson was himself.

“For through all the twisted thoughts in his mind, which had allowed him to do such atrocious things to those who trusted him, there must have penetrated some small spark of conscience. Deep down he felt an immense guilt at the things he had done, and this guilt began to torture him almost as much as his notes had tortured his victims. He came to realise that he could no longer live with the knowledge of his terrible crimes, of how he had taken delight in taunting people before ending their lives completely. He knew what he had to do to make things right.

“Lawson now hated himself more than he had ever hated any of his victims. So he resumed writing notes. But this time it was himself that he tormented with the letters: ‘Beware 5’, ‘I’m coming for you 4’ and so on. It’s as though, in a perverse way, he was imposing justice on himself.”

Brian sighed, and glanced at the window. The storm was really brewing now. Despite the darkness it was now possible to see the rain hammering at the window. But Laura didn't notice. Her eyes were transfixed to the instrument of death that her husband had acquired that very afternoon. To her it was no longer just ugly. It was evil.

"One Saturday in the middle of that summer, Lawson's neighbours became uneasy when they didn't meet him on his habitual trip to the greengrocer's. Lawson was a man of astonishingly regular habits, and such a small thing was enough to alert people to the fact that something was wrong. When they tried the door to his house they found it unlocked. And upon stepping through to the kitchen, they discovered Hector Lawson hanging from a low beam, clutching a single typewritten note: 'Today 0'. On the table, typed neatly on sheets of cream-coloured paper, was his confession.

"I don't think we will ever truly understand what possessed him to do the things he did. I don't think we ever can. But don't you think it's fascinating to think about?"

Laura didn't reply. She was still staring absently at the machine. Brian found it odd that she didn't give him any response at all – usually she would acknowledge his stories in some way, even if it was merely by voicing her disapproval. But this time it was different. He must have really unsettled her, for still she didn't react. Eventually Brian made an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Did you say we needed more milk?" he asked.

This brought Laura out of her reverie.

"Hmm? Milk? Oh, yes, milk and cereal. Why, are you going out?"

"Yes, I think I'll have a walk down to the corner shop. Are you staying here?"

"I think I will. There's a load of ironing I need to finish off."

Conversation continued in this mundane fashion as they both rose and left the room. As she closed the door behind her Laura caught one last glimpse of the machine, sitting there, watching her. And then it was gone, obscured behind a panel of solid wood.

The next morning, when Brian Bennett went downstairs for breakfast, he was greeted by a highly unusual set of circumstances. Laura was already up and about – there was nothing strange about that, for she was an early riser and always awoke before him. What immediately made Brian uneasy, though, was her manner. Normally she would be bustling around fairly contentedly, sorting things and preparing for the day ahead. Today she was standing

perfectly still, staring down at a sheet of paper on the kitchen table. As soon as Brian crossed the threshold she snapped her head up and looked him directly in the eye.

“Was it you who wrote this?” Her voice was quivering – he had never seen her like this. What could possibly be the matter?

“Wrote what?” He paced round to the other side of the table and stood beside her to get a better view of the page. As he did so she backed away from it slightly, as though from revulsion, although she didn’t take her gaze off it for a split second

The writing was quite small. Without his glasses Brian could barely read it. He had to pick the sheet up and hold it at the right distance to see what it said, then immediately he dropped it back on the table. What he read there sent a chill through his entire being. He turned away. He didn’t understand it. How could this have happened? His head was swirling and he struggled to maintain his composure.

“Well? Did you write it?” she repeated.

“No of course I didn’t write it.” He was ashamed of the brusqueness of his reply, but the bizarre situation was making him tense. “Where did you find this?”

“It was just here on the table.”

Brian couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was impossible.

“Then how on earth did it get here?” he wondered aloud.

“I was hoping you’d be able to answer that.”

Brian glanced around. He didn’t feel safe.

“Someone must have got in -” he began

“No, I’ve checked all the doors and windows. No sign of a break in.”

He was shifting around on his feet, for once uncertain of how to proceed. It was impossible. There was no-one else in the house.

“Then how did it get here?” he repeated. “How did it get here?” He turned to Laura. “You’re sure you didn’t write it?”

“What do you think I am? Why would I do a thing like that?” She was almost in tears now. Brian knew he had to calm her down. After all, it was probably nothing. One of them must have done it last night as an experiment, and their tiredness had affected their memory. He took Laura in his arms and stroked her hair to try and sooth her. She buried her head in his shoulder.

“Look,” he said, “it’s probably nothing important.” He was trying to convince himself as much as anything. “No-one could have got in, so it must have been you or me, we’ve just forgotten. In fact, it may well have been me before I went to bed. I’ll have wanted to try the thing out and see what it was

like. I was tired so I forgot to throw the paper away afterwards. You know how I tend to do stupid things like that.”

It was true. He often did slightly eccentric things before retiring to bed at night. Laura looked up at him.

“Are you sure?”

“It must have been like that. Just a little mix-up. Nothing to worry about.”

For a while they stayed as they were, each taking comfort from the other’s presence. Then Laura spoke.

“O.K.” They slowly let go of each other. “But I don’t like that typewriter,” Laura said as she moved off to continue tidying.

“I’m sorry.” Brian fetched some bread and put it in the toaster. He had lost his appetite somewhat, but habit would never let him miss breakfast. “I’m sorry I spooked you yesterday with that story. But it is just a machine at the end of the day – an object, nothing more.”

Laura smiled faintly at how silly she had been. “I know,” she said, although she still found it difficult to view the thing as nothing more than a mere object. To her it seemed to have a spirit of some sort, and no matter how much she told herself that it was completely inanimate, still she couldn’t quite be in the study without a peculiar feeling that it was observing her every move. “Anyway, what are your plans for today?”

As Brian answered and things settled back into normality, he took one last look at that sheet of paper:

Beware 5

It was strange that he’d forgotten having typed it, but then again it had been a tiring week and he had been pretty exhausted last night. Hardly surprising, really, that his memory had deceived him.

He tore the note up and threw it in the bin, then set about buttering his toast.

Apart from its unnerving start, that day turned out to be remarkable in its ordinariness. For Brian it was simply another work day and so consisted mainly of reading and writing emails, working on a new filing system and meeting with the heads of other council departments to discuss plans for the refurbishment of the town hall. For Laura the day involved finishing tidying the house, then heading off to a local community centre to participate in her weekly art class. After lunch she went into town to try and find a present for

her sister's birthday, before reading a few chapters of a novel and finally getting round to repairing the living room curtain.

All in all, a surprisingly average day.

That night Laura was going out for a meal with friends to celebrate someone-or-other's retirement, so Brian had offered to cook his own dinner. Aware as he was of how unstoppably talkative Laura's friends could be, he knew that she would be out late and consequently didn't wait up for her. He went to bed at half past ten, having already forgotten the morning's excitement.

Brian would never have been able to predict the vastly different circumstances in which he would spend the following night. He had expected, as would have anyone else, that life had completely returned to normal after the most minor of interruptions the previous morning. As he sat huddled in a low wing-backed armchair, wrapping his rug more tightly around him in an attempt to keep warm, he reflected on how wrong he had been.

That morning he had proceeded downstairs as usual, and had again come across a most distressing sight. His wife had been sitting at the kitchen table rocking slowly back and forth with her head in her hands. She didn't look up when he walked in, and still didn't react to his presence when he approached the table. The sense of *déjà vu* he experienced in that moment would stay with him for the rest of his life. He knew what was coming next.

As he looked down at the sheet of paper on the kitchen table it felt as though he were looking down into his past, present and future all condensed into one point in space and time. Everything collapsed into a single dizzying moment. He tried to tear his eyes away but couldn't – they were out of his control, inexplicably fixed to the text in front of him. He took in all of the words at once, his head spinning:

I'm coming for you 4

He had to sit down. Clumsily he dragged another chair from under the table and collapsed into it, not knowing what to do. Laura still hadn't moved an inch. He tried to think but couldn't. Why had this happened? More to the point, *what* had happened? The more he tried to answer those questions, the further they slipped from his grasp.

It was several minutes before either of them made a move. Eventually Brian recovered from his stupor and spoke:

"Did you find this here?"

Laura nodded, head still in her hands.

“No sign of a break in?”

She shook her head.

Brian sighed, a long, weary sigh. He didn’t know what to say. There were no words that would suffice. Then he heard Laura mumble something incomprehensible.

“What was that?”

She lifted her head and looked at him as though for the first time. Her own eyes were red and glistening with tears. Her mouth was twisted by her anguish.

“It’s Hector Lawson.”

Brian didn’t know why that phrase shocked him so much. After all, hadn’t it been at the back of his mind since the appearance of that first note the previous day? The thought that just maybe when he had brought home that typewriter he had also brought home something else with it? Something else that wasn’t entirely natural?

But he was a rational man and quickly stamped such thoughts out of his head. He couldn’t afford to be hysterical, for Laura’s sake. The point of the matter was that they had a problem, and it was up to him to put it right.

He put his arm around his wife.

“Darling, Lawson’s dead and gone. This can’t have anything to do with him.”

“But it must do! You said yourself that these are the notes he would send people before... Anyway, at the end of the day he must be playing some part in this!”

Brian spent a few seconds trying to collect his thoughts.

“Look,” he said, “there’s no point getting worked up about this. Whoever’s been writing these things is clearly trying to intimidate us. We can’t let them do that.”

“But who would want to threaten us? And who *could*? They must have a key if they can get in and out. And they must know about the typewriter and the story behind it and everything. It’s not right, I’m worried.”

She had a point. Whichever way you looked at it, somebody was up to no good. But who? And how? And why? He tried approaching it logically.

“Alright, so they must have a key to get in. You haven’t lost any keys recently have you?”

She shook her head.

“Right,” he continued, “and I’ve still got all of mine. They’re by the bed. So who else has a set of keys?” He considered for a moment. “Only Sophie and James.”

Sophie and James were their children, now aged 25 and 28. But neither had been home for months. What could they possibly have to do with it? Brian didn’t want to consider that disturbing question just yet so he carried on with his analysis:

“O.K., so the first thing we should do is check if either of them has misplaced their keys. That’s the first step.”

Laura, however, wasn’t satisfied with this approach.

“We can’t just try and figure it out ourselves,” she said. “Don’t you see that this is serious? Someone is threatening us! We have to go to the police first of all!”

“The police?” Brian didn’t like the sound of where this was going. As soon as the police got involved, things would become a lot more complicated. What might still just be a childish prank would suddenly become a criminal case. Everything could quickly get out of hand. The thought troubled him.

Still, he didn’t want to worry Laura so he told her that he would inform the police that afternoon, during his lunch break. That seemed to reassure her considerably, but there was still something on her mind.

“And there’s one more thing, Brian,” she said. “We need to get rid of that typewriter.”

Brian was shocked – so much so that it took him several seconds to formulate a reply.

“Get rid of it? How? *Why?*”

“Isn’t it obvious? The trouble started when you got that thing. I don’t know what the problem is with it, but there’s something very wrong and I won’t be happy until it’s gone.”

Brian couldn’t believe it. Get rid of his typewriter? That wonderful artefact with so much history? What was she thinking? She had obviously got it into her head that the typewriter itself was playing a part in their troubles. What a lot of nonsense. It was a pile of inanimate metal. It would have been scrapped had it not been passed down the generations by keen-eyed collectors. He certainly wasn’t going to dispose of it at the first sign of a practical joker. Brian didn’t care if Laura thought it was possessed by Hector Lawson – he didn’t care if she thought it was possessed by Satan himself. He wasn’t getting rid of it.

He told her this, and using firmer language than maybe he should have. The whole business frustrated him. What had he done to deserve all this? It was ridiculous.

Laura hadn't looked too pleased with his response, but she must have seen the reason behind it because she hadn't protested any further. And with that the matter had been temporarily resolved.

Part of Brian now wished that he had gone to the police after all. It would have saved him sitting there, freezing his socks off and struggling to keep alert as the hands on the clock face edged ever closer to midnight. But he was convinced that there must be a simple explanation. The police needn't have anything to do with it.

He hadn't considered that perhaps this time it was him who was being stupid. Like the seriously ill man who refuses to see a doctor because he believes that denial is better than the cure, Brian had somehow come to think that the best way to get rid of his problem was to pretend that it didn't exist. Of course, this was a highly dangerous attitude.

He was currently seated in the corner of his study, curled up in an armchair under a tartan rug that he had owned as long as he could remember. The only illumination came from a small table lamp. This he had placed beside him on his right hand side, ready to be turned off at a moment's notice should he hear anyone approaching. In his lap lay an old revolver – actually part of his collection – that would be sure to stop any intruder in their tracks. He didn't have any ammunition for it, but that shouldn't matter. The threat should be sufficient to give him the upper hand. The only other items in his makeshift den were a thermos flask full of coffee and a novel, both of which rested open on the floor. He felt like he was at the centre of a fort, ready for any outsider who dared attempt entry. And directly in front of him, on the desk in the centre of the room, was the typewriter. His bait. All he needed to do was wait, and he would soon discover who had been typing those messages.

The weather must have been calm outside, for no sound penetrated through the double glazing. No rushing of wind. No tapping of rain. Just silent nothingness, pressing in. In many ways the silence was more noticeable than any sound could have been. It was oppressive. Stifling.

There was, however, one slight sound brave enough to pierce the otherwise complete silence, and that was the frantic ticking of the tiny carriage clock, tucked away on a shelf on the other side of the room. The ticking was high-pitched and rapid on account of the small mechanism. But Brian didn't

want to think about clock mechanisms at that precise moment, for they brought to mind other less pleasant thoughts.

Had it not been for the reflective surface of the clock's hands, it would have been too far away for Brian to read. But the light from the lamp just managed to catch the hands, allowing him to tell the time with relative ease. He couldn't see much more on that side of the room though, for the shadows cast by his lamp were so large as to swallow up any detail, ultimately obscuring more than the light itself revealed. They gathered around the walls, behind the furniture, under the shelves. They combined, they grew, they almost seemed to conspire. The room didn't feel like a physical space into which some shadows had crept. It felt like an entire area of shadow, with a small number of physical objects allowed in.

Brian picked up his book and tried to read, but for some reason he couldn't concentrate. Maybe the extreme quiet was putting him off. Or maybe there were too many thoughts circulating round his head. His primary concern was what Laura would say when she learnt of how he had lied to her. After all, he'd have to tell her eventually. How else would he explain how he'd solved the mystery? He hoped that her surprise and joy at his having fixed everything would outweigh any anger at having been lied to. He'd told her that evening that he'd spoken to the police, that they hadn't been able to do anything about it immediately and that they would send someone round the next day. In fairness, that's probably what they would have said if he *had* gone round to talk to them. If anything, he was merely saving them more hassle.

It was a weird light that the lamp gave off. Made everything fuzzy. Almost... blurred.

Brian felt his mind wandering, and he looked at the clock in an attempt to keep himself alert. It was past midnight. Still no sign of anything out of the ordinary. Laura would be fast asleep by now. She would have been asleep for a long time. Completely oblivious to the strange set-up downstairs.

But the light *was* weird. It smoothed over the edges. It was actually quite nice. A pleasant light.

And the ticking. The clock. One of those sounds that you only hear when you listen for it. Then if you stop listening it goes.

A bit like the room itself, really. Look, when you see it only you look for it. Then when you stop hearing, it looks...

The chair... So comfortable... So swallowy... So chair...

It was only when Brian awoke that he realised he had allowed himself to drift into sleep. At first he panicked, thinking it was morning and he had

missed his one opportunity to discover the truth about what was going on. But then he caught sight of the clock, its hands glinting from the other end of the room – half past one. Good. He sat back in relief at only having missed a small part of the night.

Then immediately he sat bolt upright as a thought occurred to him. He was normally a very heavy sleeper. What had woken him?

A split second later he noticed something peculiar: the light in the hall. It was on. The door was closed, but he could see the light streaming through the crack underneath. Had he left the hall light on before? He couldn't remember. Surely not. No... no, he hadn't. He distinctly remembered turning it off. What was going on?

He had barely had time to consider this when he heard a creak in the hallway. Probably just the house settling. There was another creak. No, there was someone in the hall. There was someone in *his house*. And they were progressing ever closer to the study.

He fumbled for the revolver in his lap, and managed to manoeuvre it into his unsteady right hand.

Another creak.

He was ready for them. Let them come. He would show them that he was not someone to be messed with.

Another creak.

No, wait... The lamp!

Another creak.

It was still on – he had to switch it off or he would lose the advantage of surprise. Its light now seemed incredibly bright, all-encompassing, incriminating.

A hand on the door handle.

His right hand was holding the gun so he was forced to twist round in his seat and try and switch the lamp off with his left hand...

The door began to open.

His left hand missed and sent the lamp tumbling to the ground. As it fell, the shadows leapt up, stretched to impossible heights. There was a thud as the lamp hit the thick carpet.

In walked a figure.

Brian froze.

When Laura woke, she immediately knew that something was different.

According to the clock beside the bed it was seven o'clock in the morning. She raised her head and noticed that the light was on. That did seem

odd. Finally, she sat up, placing the pillow behind her back to rest on, and found out what was really out of place.

“Brian?” she said. “Why are you up?”

He was standing at the bedroom door, fully clothed with a tray in his hands. It must have been him who had put the light on. From where she was sitting she couldn’t tell what was on the tray, but as he moved closer she saw that it carried a bowl of cereal, a cup of tea and some toast. Breakfast in bed? It wasn’t her birthday was it?

“I’ll explain in a minute,” said Brian as he laid the tray down on the bed, seating it carefully so it didn’t wobble.

Laura was quite taken aback.

“Well, this is very nice I must say,” she said, “but I don’t see what the occasion is. Why are you up so early?”

He sat down on a wooden chair that they kept by the bed.

“You just eat your breakfast. All will become clear soon.”

Very grateful, if a little puzzled, Laura did as she was told. Normally she would have been delighted with such a nice surprise to start her day, but she was put on edge by the nagging feeling that something was ever so slightly wrong.

When she was half way through her cereal, Brian began to explain.

He started by confessing how he had lied to her and taken matters into his own hands. Where else could he begin? If she didn’t know that then none of the rest would make sense. Even so, he found it difficult to own up, mainly because he knew exactly how she would react.

“Brian!” she said when he had finished. “What were you thinking! This is a matter for the police, not for you to go prowling around like some amateur detective! Did you not consider you might be in danger?”

All of a sudden Brian was back at school, being admonished by a teacher for running in the corridor. Laura had stopped eating. Her toast lay untouched – it would be going cold.

Brian prepared himself, then launched into the defence he had been planning for the past few hours.

“But there wasn’t any danger, you see. It’s all fine, there’s nothing to worry about. I know where the messages have been coming from and it’s all perfectly simple. It turns out that everything’s alright after all.”

She looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” He took a deep breath. “I mean... Those notes were coming from... the person who’s been writing them is... well... it’s you.”

What? Surely he didn't mean *her*. She had nothing to do with it. He must have got mixed up somewhere. Maybe he had fallen asleep without realising and dreamt it all. It certainly couldn't be her.

"Me?" she said. "What do you mean, me? It wasn't me."

Brian shook his head slowly.

"Laura. Darling. You've been sleepwalking."

No, that couldn't be right. Brian had got something wrong there. She had never sleepwalked. It couldn't be that.

"But I've never sleepwalked," she said. "That's stupid. Are you sure you didn't fall asleep or something and then dream it was me and really the whole –"

Brian raised his hand.

"Laura, I promise you. I didn't dream it. It was you who typed the notes. You were sleepwalking."

Laura was dumbstruck. She didn't speak. She didn't want to speak. She was embarrassed. She wished Brian would stop looking at her. She wished he'd go away and leave her alone and then they'd both be able to pretend that the whole thing had never happened. Had it really been all her fault?

Still Brian kept talking:

"Don't you see this is a good thing though dear? It means nobody's trying to threaten us, or break into the house or anything. It's all O.K."

"But... why?" she said.

She looked dazed, as Brian had anticipated. He knew it would take her a while to come to terms with what she had learned.

"I did look it up actually, to see what might be behind it. Nobody really knows what brings on sleepwalking. It can apparently be caused by a number of things – sleep deprivation, anxiety... What I suggest we do is make an appointment with the doctor for the weekend, and she'll be able to shed some light on matters. Until then, you must promise that you won't worry about it any more. Do you promise me that?"

What a stupid thing to ask. Of course she couldn't promise that.

"I promise," she said.

Brian stood up and smiled.

"Alright then," he said. "You finish your breakfast and I'll go and get ready for work. And don't worry – everything's fine."

He walked out, leaving Laura to her soggy corn flakes and cold toast.

Two days later, and Friday brought with it yet more foul weather. The house seemed to shudder with each fresh onslaught of wind, the trees and

bushes in the garden cowering under the fearsome blasts of the elements. Doors rattled and the wind howled in competition. It was as though nature was engaged in a never-ending battle with itself.

Inside the house it was surprisingly calm.

Laura was kneeling in front of the desk in the study.

Alone with her thoughts.

And the machine.

There it was, on the table before her. Looking at her. Watching. Its casing rusted and corroded. Its keys faded and broken. Yet somehow it could still function. It wasn't dead yet.

What do you want?

The machine gave no response.

What do you want?

Again, it merely watched. Was it mocking her? Or perhaps just waiting for the right question?

Brian didn't understand. He never did and he never would. How could he, when it was her the machine wanted?

You want me.

Did it move then, a tiny flicker of recognition? Could it know that she was there? Did it somehow sense her presence? Was that a nod of some sort, or merely the light shifting?

Why are you using me?

Still the machine did nothing. Just sat there, observing. Strange that it should be so quiet now. So understated, so calm, so peaceful, when all around it things were falling apart. Did it know what it had done – was doing – to her? How it was changing her? It must do. It must do.

She stared at it.

It stared at her.

Why?

The house creaked. The wind blew. Neither of them moved.

Where was Brian? At work. Of course. That's what he did on weekdays. He thought that the notes had stopped after he had discovered their source. Stupid Brian. He didn't understand. The notes weren't meant for him. They were meant for her.

It's all you know. It's all you've learned. It's what you do.

Did the light shift? Did the machine give a nod of recognition? Both? Either?

They weren't meant for him. He didn't discover them every morning, waiting for him. He didn't even know about the last two. She hadn't told him. There was no point. He wouldn't understand. He couldn't understand.

Laura understood. Laura knew that the machine was now as much a part of her as she was of it. They were linked. Somehow there was a bond between them. They knew each other's thoughts, shared each other's feelings. They could not be separated. They had a connection. They must have always had a connection.

Laura felt it drawing her in. It was almost seducing her. She felt herself giving herself up to its power, letting it take her over completely. After all, it had got this far. It had only been a matter of time before she gave it complete control.

No!

What was happening to her? She surely wasn't giving in? After all the fighting and resistance, to give up now was madness. So close to day zero. It wasn't going to beat her!

Still it drew her in, though. Didn't it know better than her? Didn't it have a plan? Wasn't it the one truly in control? With the vision? Wasn't it?

No!

She was stronger than it. She had to be. It could try to take her over. It could induce her to write those notes. It could threaten her. It could bully her. It could taunt her. But she was stronger! She could beat it! She would win! She had to.

I could destroy you!

But the machine didn't care. It sat, passive as ever. Defenceless. Sad. It was decayed and worn. It didn't deserve harsh treatment, or her harsh words. It had done nothing wrong.

No!

It was doing it again. Trying to pull her in, control her. She fought the feelings of sympathy that had been rising inside her. She wouldn't let it take over. She was stronger. She had to fight it. She couldn't let it win.

I could destroy you. You have no power over me. I am the one in control.

No reaction. Not a thing. Laura found it difficult to maintain her anger at such a passive object, but she had to. It may look passive, because it wanted her to think it innocent and harmless and defenceless. She kept telling herself not to believe its lies. It was cursed. It would use her, and she couldn't let it do that.

Brian would never let her destroy it. He thought it was a mere object. He wanted to preserve it for historical interest, like the fool that he was. How could he see that it was evil and would make them suffer? He would never do anything about it until it was too late and they had become powerless. Tomorrow. Day zero. It was already nearly too late.

In that moment Laura understood it all. What she had to do. She must destroy the machine before it destroyed them. That night. It had to be. Brian would try to stop her, but she would wait until he was not around. She would destroy it. And finally they would be free.

Slowly the room came back into focus. She looked up, looked around. What time was it? She spotted the carriage clock, and gave a start when she saw it was almost half past eleven. She had a train to catch in half an hour, so she needed to get a move on. Hurriedly she stood up and straightened out her clothing. She was meant to be meeting a friend early that afternoon, but if she didn't hurry then she'd miss the train and they'd have to re-schedule. There wasn't time to be hanging about.

As she left the study she didn't look back, but a gentle smile did briefly cross her face. For the first time she felt in control. She knew how to fix everything. She had a plan. It was all going to be fine after all.

It wasn't until almost six o'clock that evening that Laura returned home. She was in high spirits, and this was only partly due to her spending the afternoon with a friend she hadn't seen in years. Yes, she had enjoyed their lunch and the conversation surrounding it. She always enjoyed the chance to catch up on things and find out how people were getting on, and despite the rain she had had a brilliant time. But the thing that was really putting a spring in her step was the knowledge that very soon she would take control and free herself and Brian from the shadow that had almost engulfed them. That was what was making her truly happy.

As she entered at the front door, she called to her husband:

"Brian?" she said. "I'm back."

"O.K."

The brief reply had come from the living room, directly across the hall. Normally Laura's first move would have been to go and greet him, but today she had other things on her mind. Besides, he was probably engrossed in the Friday paper, feet in slippers, with a cup of tea close by. He wouldn't want to be disturbed.

Instead, Laura made directly for the study. She wasn't going to put her plan into action until that night, but still she couldn't resist checking that

everything was correct, as she had left it. She tiptoed across the hall and silently opened the study door.

Immediately she stopped. The room wasn't as she had left it. There was the desk, with its pens and paper and assorted stationery. But the machine wasn't there. She looked around, wondering if it had been moved, but no. It had gone. As she stood there she felt a twinge of despair at the thought that her carefully-laid plan might very quickly begin to unravel.

Brian looked up as Laura strided into the living room. Sure enough, the scene was exactly as she had predicted: newspaper, slippers, tea. From Brian's point of view, though, there was something amiss. Laura hadn't even taken her shoes or coat off, and there she was in the living room with a very odd expression on her face. He wondered what was wrong.

"Where is it?" she said without hesitating.

"Where's what?"

"You know what – the machine."

"The typewriter, you mean?"

"Yes, that. Where is it?"

Brian was taken aback by her snappy manner.

"Well, I was going to tell you, but you seem to have beaten me to the subject. I got rid of the typewriter this afternoon."

"What? Why?"

"What's the matter Laura? I thought you didn't like it anyway?"

That wasn't the point. If the machine was still out there then it could still influence her. Tomorrow was day zero. She didn't want to find out what it had planned for her then. She had to find it and destroy it before it was too late.

"I don't. But... Where did you take it?"

"I took it back. To Carter and Blaxton's. Managed to get a full refund as well, although they took a bit of persuading. You know what these shop keepers are like – parasites, all of them."

"I don't understand. You did this today?"

"Yes, over my lunch break. I wanted to get it done and out of the way, otherwise it would have dragged over into next week."

Laura was very confused. She sat down and began to take off her shoes.

"But that typewriter was one of your favourites. I thought you liked it. When I suggested you get rid of it you completely refused. What's changed?"

Brian smiled.

"The only thing that's changed is my depth of knowledge. You see, it's really very simple. That typewriter was made by Ford. I found out this

morning that the instrument used by Hector Lawson was a Remington. Those people in the shop sold me a load of rubbish.”

That couldn't be right. He must have made a mistake.

“You mean that all along...”

“Yes. That typewriter that I bought never belonged to Lawson at all. It could have been anybody's but it certainly wasn't his.”

They were both silent for at least a minute. Brian went back to his paper, but Laura sat perfectly still and stared straight ahead as her world collapsed quietly around her. All the panic, the fear, the paranoia... it had all been in her own head?

Before long Brian became a little concerned at her peculiar behaviour.

“Are you sure you're alright dear?” he said, lifting his head from his paper. “You look very pale.”

Laura looked at him and smiled. But it was not a happy smile. If anything it was a smile of acceptance.

“I'm fine,” she said quietly.

She rose and picked up her shoes to carry them back into the hall. But before she went, she spoke:

“Brian?”

“Yes?”

“You know that doctor's appointment you suggested?”

He nodded.

“Could we make it tomorrow?”

And with that she left the room.