

DOUBLE VISION

by Michael Watson

Rubella can be a nasty complaint in an adult: it affects the brain and causes double vision. I caught it only a fortnight after starting my new job as a design engineer. When the doctor asked about my working conditions and I told him that there were several young females in the office, he insisted that I stay at home. Rubella, he explained, is contagious and can have tragic effects on the unborn child. It was really embarrassing to have to phone the boss to say I needed sick leave so soon after joining the team. I heard him mutter and someone laugh. Big joke.

'Home' was another problem. I was lodging with my widowed aunt while looking for a place to rent. She wasn't keen on putting me up but admitted that there were jobs I could do in her pottery studio. We did a deal: I moved into the back bedroom of her cottage - a cramped chintzy dormer totally unsuitable for a six foot four prop forward - and in return I sorted the decrepit wiring in her studio.

She was busy on her exhibits for a craft fair and had persuaded a student named Rachel to help at weekends. Auntie had taken on far too much for a woman in her seventies.

When I relayed the doctor's diagnosis, she went ape.

"Rubella? Oh, my God. You'll have to stay in your room, David - I can't risk Rachel catching it. For one, we've to get the pots ready and for another I wouldn't be surprised if she's been careless. That can't all be puppy fat. The birth rate in her college is a disgrace - like rabbits ..."

"But Auntie, I've still got to finish checking the wiring ..." I protested.

"Never mind that. You're to stay upstairs until the doctor can swear you're not infectious."

The pills he prescribed for my fever knocked me sideways. When the sunlight woke me mid-afternoon on that May Friday, my first impression was of the beauty of the lilacs and viburnams in the garden. A robin sang below the window. In the paddock there was a Cleveland Bay mare and her foal. It was a pretty scene ...

"Pretty? Viburnams? Cleveland Bay?" I muttered. 'Pretty' is not a word I use a lot and I know bugger all about horses. And what's a viburnam? I'm a chartered mechanical engineer - I design transmission systems for rally cars. They're not 'pretty'; prettiness is not a quality that comes to mind when you have to put five hundred BHP through a gearbox. Karen, my girlfriend, might be called 'pretty' by her mother but to me she's just a good looker - in the page 3 sense.

So why should I suddenly start saying things are 'pretty'? Am I delirious?

The mare moved away, the foal teetered on unsure lanky legs. How sweet, I thought: motherhood is wonderful. The foal splayed its legs as it reached to suck at the mare's nipple. I had an urge to go to the horses, to stroke the mare's head as she suckled her foal - but I knew I couldn't. I had to stay in my room - my lovely room scented by the lilac sprays that had been put beside the dressing-table mirror ...

I frowned: I hadn't noticed the flowers before. The vase shimmered and went out of focus. The forecast double vision had taken over.

It was then that I saw the hand.

I have ginger hair - a lot of it everywhere, as giggling Karen tells people after a third vodka. The backs of my hands look like an orang utan's. I held one up. It began to change shape: it peeled backwards and blurred. From my wrist arose a second hand which was hairless and had long pointed fingers - it was a woman's hand.

I blinked. The vision disappeared and things returned to sharp focus. So I could force myself out of delirium by sheer will-power. The horses in the field munched grass as before and, when I thought about it, I remembered that the lilac sprays had been brought in by my aunt at lunch-time. I hadn't been deluded for long.

I glanced at the clock. My aunt had promised to wake me at four with a cup of tea. It was past four. Many old people are careless of time, but I find broken promises extremely irritating. I'm never late for anything - a reason why I got my new job.

Another of Auntie's faults is her indecisiveness. She hummed and hawed for days when I suggested basing myself here (it cost a fortune on my mobile phone bill) and then she refused point-blank. I had to remind her that she used to take in girl students as paying guests. (When I was about eight, I had to sleep downstairs on the settee; they used to keep me awake with their giggling and moaning). She claimed that she'd stopped taking in students when my uncle died but under pressure admitted that a male student had stayed a night recently. I went into attack mode by reminding her that I'm her nearest relative; one day she might need my help. That made her think.

So I got the room - although she insisted prudishly that I mustn't invite Karen to stay the weekend. That really annoyed me. I felt like telling her straight out that one day this cottage will be mine. The chintz will go on Day 2 and Karen will bring me my tea - topless, of course - at precisely four o'clock.

What a dreadful thought! Why is it so important to be on time? Why should she be a slave to the clock? Look outside at the foal with her mother, full of trust and love - she has no inkling of time. And look at the snowball bushes; listen to that robin - it doesn't care that it's past four o'clock. Hmmm, the lilacs' scent is so delicious ...

For a second time, my thoughts were taken over by an obsession with prettiness. Obviously, the delusion was caused by the pills rather than the infection. I'm probably allergic to one of the ingredients. It must have a psychedelic side-effect which is why I imagined seeing a female hand.

I looked down again - and froze: the hand had reappeared, this time partnered by a left hand. I jerked upright, my heart pounding. The hands were too real.

I wish you'd keep still and watch the foal, a girl's voice said in my head.

I lay back stiffly, my eyes wide open, my pulse racing and the hair on the nape of my neck tingling.

Please relax, it's so difficult if you struggle, the voice implored.

The speaker was not in the room. The voice with the West Country accent sounded in my head in the way I might remember a song on the radio - though this voice was unfamiliar.

"Who's there?" I croaked.

Please relax, the voice repeated.

I shut my eyes tightly and tried to concentrate on something I knew to be real: I recalled the scene in my aunt's studio where I'd fixed the power supply for the potter's wheel. I saw finished pots on the shelf, the kiln, the treadle ... Treadle? There is no treadle, the wheel has a three-phase motor ...

You must try to understand, the voice interrupted. Look at me.

I raised myself and stared at the mirror. For an instant, I saw - not my face topped by wiry ginger curls - but the oval face of a girl with long brown hair. It was only a glimpse but I noticed real sadness in the eyes.

"What's happening?" I gasped.

I had to re-establish normality. To help, I reeled off a few facts as if reading a CV: I'm a chartered engineer, I got a goodish degree from Brunel, two A levels in Maths and one in Physics, I play rugger and ride a trials bike, I never use the word 'pretty'. Karen is a good lay but that's about it; she's thick, she's clumsy and works as a shop assistant; she lives next door to my parents and was my first proper girlfriend.

"I've had others and am looking out for someone more exciting but ..."

I caught myself thinking aloud again; my reflection in the mirror was gaping at me. But then the other image - which was not of Karen - reappeared, frowning.

"Oh, God," I groaned.

Don't call on Him, He'll hear you - and being so disgustingly rude about Karen isn't nice either, even if it does make things easier for me.

"What do you mean - 'easier'?"

We'll come to that. First, you must admit my existence, she told me.

"I can't, I work with facts not delusion and fantasy."

Fantasy? she echoed and started to cry, fading into my own reflection.

I felt real tears roll down my cheeks. I haven't cried since I was twelve - that's for over sixteen years - and then only because my father slapped my head. If this was a symptom of rubella, I thought, I'm glad I'm not at work.

I need your help desperately, David. she sobbed. You're the first to sleep in this room for ages - I'd given up hope. Once there were girl students - but not since ...

"My aunt won't allow girls to stay here," I interrupted. "Not since ..."

... your uncle died, she superimposed. He was the one who put me here fifteen years ago. I didn't intend to kill myself.

"Huh? Are you telling me you're a ghost?" I gasped.

My reflection nodded. I threw my head back onto the pillow. This is ridiculous, I thought. I should have been warned that the medicine would cause hallucinations. I'm delirious because of the rubella and fantasising about Karen because I've been away from her for a fortnight. Next weekend, I'll be well enough to go home, we'll end up in bed as usual and this crap will be forgotten.

No, it won't - and it's not crap, the voice in my head protested sharply. You've got to help me.

"Why do people think they can call on me whenever they've a problem?" I complained. "If you're a ghost, how the hell can I help? I'm not an exorcist."

It's quite simple, she made me think. But first, I'll demonstrate the process I intend to use - I know you have to experience things for yourself before you'll accept a new idea - so I'll replace your spirit with mine for a while.

"What utter balls," I scoffed. "There are no such things as ghosts and people's minds can't be transferred from one body to another. The human brain is a complex electro-chemical computer which works in parallel mode to produce images of which some are extrapolated from memories and others come directly from the senses. That's why we dream or - when affected by certain drugs - we hallucinate."

Please don't call me an hallucination, she whimpered.

"You are one. You don't exist outside my mind and you can't replace my mind with someone else's. When the effect of the pills wears off you'll be forgotten ..."

... as a dream dies at the opening day, she added mournfully. There was a moment's silence. I thought she'd given up.

No I haven't, I was deciding how best to tackle an awful, logical, typically male brain like yours, she retorted angrily, resuming the offensive. Right, here comes your first lesson in metaphysics: the spirit - or mind, as you call it - exists independently. Mine once inhabited an eighteen-year old girl named Sarah, an art student of your aunt's who got pregnant and killed herself with an overdose in that bed. I only meant to attract attention, she added quietly.

My hands - or the late Sarah's - twisted their fingers on the bed cover.

I felt an overwhelming - and uncharacteristic - sympathy for her. Slowly, I eased myself up so that I could see the mirror again. The spirit's face returned. Her hair hung over bare sloping shoulders. I tried to peep further down her body. The effort tensed the muscles of my abdomen; without thinking, I ran my hand over my stomach. Instead of ridged muscle and hair I felt a smooth swelling.

"You're trying to take me over by stages," I snapped, "but I won't let you."

Please trust me, the vision pleaded.

"I don't want to be a woman," I told her. The whole thing's beyond belief - physically impossible. No, it's Kafka-esque. It may be a difficult concept, but why should the soul not survive death? I admit there is an argument. Perhaps there is sense in what she says.

Kafka? I thought, who the hell's she? That wasn't me thinking, it was Sarah.

"Stop changing my logic into your subjective fancying," I shouted. "you'll not convince me you exist that way. Get out of my mind and let me work things out."

Very well, but take the advantages of spirit transfer into account, she replied. For example, I could take over your girlfriend Karen's body. It would be fun, she promised. When I'm in Karen's body, you'll have the same girlfriend physically but all my advantages. I had a place waiting at the Slade while I took a year off. I was a talented artist, a good cook and I played the violin. We'd have a wonderful life together, David. I'd make a better wife than Karen even though she's good in bed ...

"Wife?" I interrupted. "Sleeping with her doesn't mean I want to marry her."

But I knew what Sarah meant: my parents and Karen's seemed to expect us to get married and deep down I suspected that - unless I found someone new very soon - I'd settle for Karen. A thought struck me: how did Sarah know about Karen? Could she access my memory?

She might be good in bed but ... the vision faltered, ... so was I. That's why I'm here, she ended almost inaudibly.

"Who made you pregnant?" I demanded.

She sniffed - or rather, I did.

Your uncle, she murmured.

"No way, he wouldn't have the nerve, you're just trying to get my sympathy and it won't work. And there's a fatal flaw in your plan: if you took over Karen's body, she'd become pregnant and her parents would think I'm to blame. I can't let that happen; I'll not be forced into marrying anyone - it's got to be my decision."

She won't become pregnant. It was my physical body which conceived - and that body was destroyed. They had me cremated after the postmortem.

"Yuk. Gruesome. Did you feel anything?" It was an interesting aspect.

Of course I didn't, you idiot. I stayed in this room. I've been in limbo here for fifteen years.

"Did you kill my uncle?"

Not directly, he had a heart attack in that bed. My materialisation was too much for him. I often wonder why: he used to like my body.

She rearranged her hair - and revealed more cleavage. I surveyed the room, half-expecting to see my uncle's apparition.

Don't worry, his spirit left immediately because he died naturally. It's only us suicides and murder victims whose spirits go into limbo.

My uncle had never struck me as a libidinous man; quite the reverse, he was a boring, middle-aged bank clerk, balding and paunchy. It seemed, however, that he had made full use of the succession of female students. All that giggling and moaning when I was sleeping downstairs must have been his doing.

And Sarah's story explained why Auntie suddenly stopped taking in girl students - and Sarah's keenness to take over someone else's body explained why no-one had stayed in the room for so long.

Could it be, I wondered, that Auntie knows about Sarah's spirit?

But it was impossible to think of my Uncle going through those girls like a prize stallion.

"How did he ...?" I asked tentatively.

I know what you're thinking and therefore why you asked that question. You're a typical man; a voyeur just like him. My occupation of male brains has taught me a thing or two. You should have heard the ghastly things that male student thought of when he stayed here. Men think of sex far more than I ever did. And don't think I didn't notice you trying to see my nipples in the mirror a moment ago. I suppose I shall have to materialise my whole body for you as I did for your uncle.

I squirmed.

Well, she went on, to satisfy your unhealthy curiosity I'll tell you how he seduced me. We used to ride out to the woods - the mare you admired in the paddock was a foal then - I used to ride her dam and your uncle rode the stallion. It started when he set his horse to mine and we watched them together. But, if you think I'm merely an hallucination, why do you need the details? Do you intend to use them in some pathetic male fantasy?

"It's nothing to do with fantasy. I need proof that you existed," I protested. "I intend to ask my aunt if you used to go riding with my uncle." Actually, I was already half-convinced that she did: Uncle had once invited me to watch the horses coupling.

We've made progress: you believe in me, the spirit deduced. Does this mean I don't have to materialise?

I nodded. A more interesting thought had occurred to me - but it was one I needed to keep to myself for a while: Sarah's version of Karen - a great improvement on the current one - would have to be treated as a new girlfriend. Sarah was right: we would have fun together.

Why this change of heart? she asked.

I smiled - she had shown that she couldn't read my mind if I chose to prevent her. To prove the point, I relaxed my guard and imagined the scene years ago when I first tried to make love to Karen - and had to explain what premature ejaculation was.

Sarah giggled as she read my thoughts.

I think it's time for something less stimulating, David. Would you like to know what it feels like to be a disembodied spirit? How about trying an out-of-body experience?

"OK," I agreed.

Relax your toes then your legs then your chest - think of floating above the bed as if you were weightless, Sarah suggested.

I did so and felt myself rising.

Good. Now let your mind go blank.

And there I was, staring down at my own body from a point on the ceiling. I watched my face crease into a broad grin and give a shout of laughter. It was like looking into a mirror except that I knew I hadn't laughed.

"What's so funny?" asked my aunt. She stood at the door bearing a tray of tea things.

My face froze.

I didn't hear you come in, I stammered, but my physical body made no sound.

"Get out of that body at once, Sarah," my aunt barked, "you've no right to do this to David. If I'd known you'd break your promise and take advantage of a sick man I would never have allowed him to stay."

Oh, for pity's sake, the spirit groaned within me.

"Auntie, Sarah and I have worked things out, she hasn't tricked me."

I caught my eye and felt myself float down to rejoin my body. Sarah had returned to limbo.

"Why?" my aunt demanded.

I told her about Karen and her drawbacks, how Sarah wanted to help in the pottery and play the violin for us. It was not my logic, I realised, it was Sarah's argument.

To my surprise, my aunt calmed and sat on the edge of my bed. She remained quiet while I drank my tea. There was no sign of Sarah.

"But if you do that, Sarah," my aunt said solemnly, staring at the mirror, "you'll become old. You've no idea what it's like to have a constant backache. And loading the kiln is a terrible struggle." She fell silent once more, nodding gravely at intervals. Finally, she sighed deeply, smiled and lay down beside me.

I recoiled, completely at a loss. To my horror, my aunt - my mother's elder sister - snuggled up to me and smiled saucily. She would be seventy-two in August but her osteoporosis makes her look older. She held up her wrinkled hands and to my astonishment, I saw the double vision again: long, young fingers peeled back from hers - Sarah was in residence.

"I'd better tell David what we've decided," my aunt said with a smile. It was her voice but it sounded more powerful than before.

She didn't have to explain. Somewhere in the room Auntie's spirit floated free, as mine had, waiting - a voice told me - for its new host to be fetched.

"No," I objected, "you can't live in Karen, Auntie."

I don't intend to, my aunt replied in my head. You must persuade my student Rachel to come up here next weekend - you should have passed the contagious stage by then. She's a good potter but hasn't the imagination to make an artist so I intend to take over her body; I shall be able to live and work for another half century at least. Whilst we're waiting for you to get better, Sarah must stay in my old body and take over the pottery. She had marvellous ideas for new designs, it was a shame she died before she could fulfil her potential. I've agreed to let her produce some of her own work for the craft fair.

My aunt - or was it Sarah - turned her head on the pillow beside me and smiled lovingly. Her wrinkled face bright with happiness. I felt her bony hand in mine.

"And then we'll come to our little plan," Sarah's ghost told me in Auntie's voice. "You must bring Karen here, I'll give this old body to Rachel's spirit and slip into Karen's body. You must book us a room at the village pub. We'll celebrate."

I felt the bony fingers intertwine with mine.

"What about Karen's spirit?" I asked my aunt's body.

She laughed musically.

"She can watch the foal grow up in the paddock just as I watched her mother grow up," she replied.

On the Thursday afternoon I was allowed by the doctor to leave the house but didn't feel like returning to work. The prospect of a new version of Karen had grown on me so I phoned her.

There had been awkward moments since Auntie's intervention had complicated Sarah's plan. My 'aunt' had announced on the first evening that, as the rubella wouldn't affect her, we could sleep together in her room - but I couldn't face it even though I knew it was Sarah's spirit speaking. Whilst feverish, I brought to mind my uncle's behaviour and upset Auntie's spirit - who, in retaliation, wished on me an horrendous nightmare. It appeared that Auntie had no idea her husband had seduced Sarah and the other students until the poor girl committed suicide. But by the time the doctor declared me fit to leave the back bedroom, the three of us were getting on well.

Karen was amazed by my sudden insistence that she should leave her job to live with me. She agreed to stay the weekend in the village inn and then, after a good deal of coaxing, agreed to come with me to my aunt's cottage on the Sunday morning. She was not pleased when the door was opened by Auntie's student.

Rachel welcomed me as if she had known me for years, which made Karen suspicious. When she gave me a peck on the cheek it dawned on me that my aunt's spirit had taken over the girl's body. Karen scowled.

"Where's your aunt?" she demanded of me.

"She's in the pottery," the student replied on my behalf. "We've been terribly busy this weekend getting ready for the craft fair on Tuesday. I'll take you to her but I can't stay: I've a load of pots to drive over to the parish hall."

We walked to the outhouse which served as a studio. It was silent.

"That's strange," the girl remarked.

We found my aunt sprawled grotesquely across her wheel. I realised at once what must have happened. I turned the power off at the main.

"Are you there, Sarah?" I asked the corpse, fearing the worst. Karen stared at the twisted features, uncomprehending. The student shook her head slowly.

"Poor Sarah," she said to me, "she's gone, - you've lost her."

"Who the hell is Sarah - I thought your aunt's name was ..."

"Look, Karen, this is awkward," I interrupted. "It seems that Auntie died because I didn't check over the wiring job I did for her. People might think that I killed her so's I'd inherit this place sooner - for us, that is."

Karen's expression changed to one of compassion. Inadvertently, I had proposed to her. She clasped me to her and kissed my lips. Rachel moved to the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To phone for an ambulance."

"Shouldn't we get our story straight first? The police will ask questions."

"I'll phone, if you like," Karen offered.

I closed the door behind her. Rachel was looking grim.

"You've to make a decision, David," she remarked. "Now Sarah's gone, you either stay with your boring girlfriend or come to me."

"Auntie, what a disgusting idea. You're my mother's sister," I objected.

"Not as far as the real world knows. We'll be very happy here - and I have pots to throw." She smiled broadly and pulled at the hem of her tee-shirt so that her breasts stood out like Karen's. "I think I'm already in love with you," she added.

I shook my head sadly at the corpse and realised that if ever I had been in love with anyone it was Sarah. I suppose it was her vivacity that I liked most.

"You've done her a favour: she's released from limbo," Rachel pointed out.

Not yet, I'm not, Sarah's voice said feebly in my head. You'd make a rotten doctor, you can't even feel a pulse properly. For heaven's sake give me mouth-to-mouth before I do die: I can't hold on much longer.

I tumbled my aunt's corpse off the wheel and bent over her face to start resuscitation. Rachel cursed, pounced on me and tried to drag me off. There was a squeal from the doorway: Karen rushed in and pushed the student aside.

"She's still alive," I gasped.

"Oh, David, well done."

I was about to continue the mouth-to-mouth when Rachel grabbed a thick piece of wood and raised it high above her head. I was horrified to see her hit Karen hard on the temple. Poor Karen crumpled to the floor.

"Stupid bitch," Rachel spat. She tried again to pull me off Auntie. "Let her die, you fool," she shouted.

Keep going, David, Sarah pleaded, I'm going to try to get into Karen's body whilst she's unconscious. I only need a couple of minutes.

It wasn't easy. Rachel was strong: she used all her weight to force me off poor Auntie and then sat astride me. But neither the student nor her new spirit had experience of escaping from a maul. I threw her off-balance. She scrambled to her feet, reaching for her club; I flung myself forward, grabbed her waist and head butted her. She fell back and struck her head on the bench.

But it was too late: my aunt really was dead this time.

Karen stirred and asked how Auntie was.

"We've lost her. If Rachel hadn't bloody-well interfered she might have survived."

Karen stared at Rachel who was stirring.

"So what happened to your aunt, David?" Karen asked.

"I've just told you, she's dead," I frowned.

"No, stupid, not her old body - her new one over there, the student's. And was Karen hit with something? All I remember is you blowing into my mouth and then a flash. And how did I end up over here?"

She got to her feet and ran her hands down her body then through her hair. Her face lit up.

"David, I did it!" she shrieked. "Look, I'm in Karen's body. It's me, Sarah."

She twirled about as if showing off a dress.

Rachel groaned and collapsed back onto the floor.

A siren wailed. The real world was upon us. Sarah - or Karen - put her arms about me. We waited in silence for the arrival of the ambulance crew.

"My aunt was electrocuted," I told the first paramedic. "It was an accident, I tried to revive her ..."

"You turned off the juice first, I hope," the man interrupted.

The second paramedic shook his head at me and tutted.

"A lesson learnt the hard way, eh? It looks as if your friend here took quite a belt," he added, moving to Rachel.

Sarah nuzzled into my shoulder. I put a hand on her breast as I always did when we began to make love. She flinched but recovered quickly and kissed me.

“I’ll soon get used to you, my love,” she smiled.

She turned to Rachel who groaned then bent to kiss my aunt’s forehead.

“I’m sorry, Karen,” she whispered in the corpse’s ear, “but I’ve a lot more pots to make. Rest in peace, my dear.”

The paramedics looked at each other.

“We’d better take that girl in for observation,” one said.

I led Sarah (whom I must remember to call Karen) into the fresh air. She breathed in deeply as if she had been imprisoned for years - which, of course, she had.

“Let’s go and see the horses, David,” she suggested, taking my hand. “The foal is really pretty, isn’t she?”

Having seen the beast through different eyes, I had to agree.

END