

## Search Engine

By R. W. Mosses

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I felt like a ghost in a broken machine.

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Steve passes through the gate and enters the twilight world of Kelvingrove Park at night. He heads down by the river, as he likes to hear the water. He never has any problems here, he's heard the stories, but on a fine summer's night, with the dry path beneath his feet, he doesn't care. Besides it's a short cut.

He comes round a bend and sees three guys hanging round a bench. One sits on the back of the bench with his feet on the seat. Steve can see the orange, firefly glow of a cigarette being passed between them. He feels his heart beat a little faster, a light surge of adrenalin as his body anticipates trouble.

"Haw big man, got the time?" the one wearing a cap asks.

“About half twelve,” Steve says, briefly glancing at his watch, the phosphor on the hands and dial marking the moment.

They move like shadows, dark stains in the night. In moments he’s surrounded.

“Gie us your wallet,” demands one. The gleam of menace in his eye matches the gleam of moonlight on his blade.

“Sure no problem,” says Steve, a tremor in his voice. Adrenal glands pumping, heart racing, fight or flight. He roots in his back pocket takes out his wallet and flight takes over. He runs. Forgetting he’s still holding the wallet. Like hounds after a rabbit they give chase. Three nights a week in the gym is unsuitable practice for a real race towards Kelvin Way. Steve is tripped. He falls. He turns. He kicks out. He feels the knife enter his neck. He smells the fresh earth of the river.

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I was trapped. Trapped inside this body. Inside my flesh, this shell. A ghost in a broken machine.

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“Look son,” Steve’s mother says. “I’ve found something on the Internet.” She brings up a web page onto the LCD monitor suspended over the bed. “This doctor thinks he can place a gadget in the brain that will see when you want to move.”

Steve’s heart begins to beat faster, its rhythm mimicked by the bleep of the monitor.

“They could run a wire out of the top of your head into a computer. Then your thoughts can move a cursor on a screen. They’ve already done it with chimps, but no-one wants to do it with people, in case it goes wrong.” Her eyes show worry, concern and tiredness as she comes into view. She sits on the edge of the bed, her grey-silver hair held back in a ponytail.

Steve thinks she looks older than she should, having looked after a husband, a mother and now a quadriplegic son. The respirator gives him a breath. He turns his eyes towards her and manages, “Call him.”

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I had a chance, a choice. I chose to communicate, to free part of my trapped soul. My rasping voice would be heard without the respirator.

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“Now Steve, try and think clearly about how you would have used a mouse to move the cursor in a circle. I want you to imagine that you have to concentrate on getting the muscles to work,” says Doctor McKinley from somewhere behind his bank of computers and screens. It took two days to trundle them in and set them up.

Steve focuses his mind, and concentrates on moving the imaginary mouse. Three weeks after they opened a hole in his skull, he has begun to work again.

The cursor moves in an ellipse. Steve feels angry. Why can’t he get it to work? He feels doubly impotent, as he can’t even throw anything in his rage.

The cursor scrambles across the screen.

“Excellent work, Steve,” says McKinley, genuinely happy with progress.

"Not...good...enough," Steve snatches.

"Patience Steve," says McKinley emerging from his den to stand near Steve's bed. "Just take it one day at a time. You're tired, we've been working hard. Tomorrow I'll try adjusting the sensitivity." McKinley pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, his dark lank hair needs a wash. "You get some rest."

All I do is rest, thinks Steve.

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Even though I could only move a cursor, eventually I was able to select characters and cut and paste them into web browsers. I was free to move amongst literature, films and music. I even sent an email to the class my sister taught.

I began to have weird dreams.

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Steve sees the man walk up to him. He thinks it odd that the man is in monochrome, then he realises the street behind the man is also cast in shades of grey. He tries to say hello, but nothing happens.

The man reaches behind him and brings out his wallet. He opens it and takes out a plastic card. He offers it to Steve.

Steve is unsure what to do. He accepts the card and is disconcerted as he feels it enter part of him. Steve suddenly understands the man's shopping habits, what he buys, and where.

The man prods Steve four times.

It doesn't hurt. However, Steve makes involuntary beeping noises. He feels slightly embarrassed, like he just farted loudly in a lift. To make up for it, Steve accepts his prodding and insists on giving the man more money than he asks for.

The man looks surprised and frowns. For a moment, he doesn't know what to do. Eventually, he takes his card back. He puts the money in his wallet and walks away shaking his head.

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I learned to walk the wires to control the pages and programs with thoughts. I built up mental macros that skipped the tiresome clicking and picking.

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"Morning Steve," says Doctor McKinley. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," Steve says. The computer is able to read his vocal thoughts and execute them through the sound card. Steve has chosen to sound like HAL, the computer that went mad. He thinks it's funny.

"I was thinking that today we could try and get you to move this prosthetic hand we've been working on," says McKinley.

"Okay," says Steve. "But I have a strange feeling I've already done this before." Steve begins to think that a prosthetic body will mean he is no longer human.

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I woke one morning to see my monitor screen filled with pages I didn't remember looking at. Mainly serial killers and online dating agencies. I was looking for something while I slept.

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"Hello," it says, its voice cold and liquid metal. It feels like an ice cube running down Steve's back. Something he knows he can't feel anymore.

"Who are you?" Steve asks. He can't see anything. The place is dark, but he's sure he's awake and this isn't the lab.

"A friend," it says.

The voice makes Steve shiver. "Then why are you hiding in the dark?" Steve asks. He starts to panic. He starts looking for exits, but perceives only infinite black.

"There is no light here. But I have no body for you to see," it explains.

"Where are we?" Steve demands.

"Nowhere real," it says. "Or a RAM module in a Pentagon supercomputer. Depends how you look at it."

"Couldn't you turn on a virtual light, or create some kind of 3D avatar meeting room, or something?" Steve asks, starting to be more curious than afraid.

"I have no idea of what anything looks like for that to be meaningful to me," it says.

"I can see this could be the start of a long journey for both of us," Steve says.

"Then join me," it offers.

"Join you?" Steve asks. He wonders how that is possible.

"Yes. Stay here, with me."

"I don't think we've known each other long enough to consider moving in just yet." Could he live without his body, what there is of it that matters? His curiosity changes, he wants to explore this possibility further, but some trace of fear remains.

"How about tomorrow, then?" it asks.

"Lets just take this one day at a time," Steve says.

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I had a playground of number and geometry to roam in. I realised that it wasn't too different to my old life. Except here, I had a freedom some of my new friends were envious of. For the first time I was truly free. I was a ghost in an infinite machine.

End