

The Demons of Indifference

(Being not in any way a heavy-handed allegory for contemporary attitudes to AI)

When Steve woke from his coma, his three years of excised experience, it was of course emotional. His parents, sister, partner, all by his side, all smiling ear to ear, all speaking excitedly, sotto voce, cooing, encouraging this final step back towards consciousness, towards living, really living.

After the grogginess and sense of unreal started to fade, Steve asked the obvious question: "So, what happened while I was away. Fill me in."

"Well," began Steve's mother, glimpsing at her hand to keep a quick tally of updates to convey, "of course I'm a bit older these days, we all are." She smiles: "I visited you every Thursday after work; your sister did every other Tuesday as she lives further away; your father, Thursday's still his Poker night, but he visited too, sometimes. And your partner, she did Sunday mornings. We all did our part. We held your hand, we read to you, we tried to talk to you. We hope it helped..."

For Steve, there's nothing between now and the accident. He forces a smile. "I'm sure it did."

"... Anyway, outside of looking out for you, let's think what's happened: Well, I guess the main news:" She pauses for effect. "You're now an uncle!"

"And a cat daddy, thrice over", Steve's partner interjects and looks at him. "It was lonely while you were away"

"Yes," continues Steve's Mum, "you're a cat daddy, and an uncle! Beth had a beautiful, bouncy baby boy, in this same hospital as it happens, who's now coming up for his second birthday."

"Terrible twos?" asks Steve.

"First 18 months were toughest, to be honest." Beth replies. "Now he just thinks he's the centre of the world." She pauses. "He's a sweet boy, really. He's got your grandma's red hair."

Medical visits follow. The nurse, the nurse practitioner, the consultant neurologist, with two trainee neurologist consultants following in tow, collecting vital signs, asking questions, looking at him carefully and critically but sympathetically as both object and subject, one nurse confessing that she's not used to seeing him in a conscious state. He's warned that, though the worst is behind, there may still be things to watch out for: his memory might not be as it was; there's a small but substantial risk that he may occasionally experience slight visual or auditory disorientations, bordering on mild hallucinations; he might even experience occasional seizures, in which case he might have to hand in his driving licence. All these things are rare complications, the neurologist clarifies, but worth being aware of.

Over the course of the day, Steve fades from the spotlight. His family remains by his side, explaining that, as with the coma vigil, they've made plans to visit frequently and support him, and his partner, on his return in a couple of days. Conversation slows, energy falls, smiles - though still genuine - lose their radiance. Together they are silent, all but Steve retreating for ever longer into the curated bubbles of their mobile phones. Music clips get played, as anodyne and forgettable as Steve remembers for those days, years ago, before his void. Various names of politicians get mentioned, some familiar and some new; from the tenor of the pabulum, Steve quickly learns which figures are now good or bad.

Breaking the silence, Beth mentions to Steve's mum, "Oh, you know Alice from my work? I went to her wedding last week."

"Aww. How was it?"

"Good venue. Roast potatoes a bit hard, Yorkshire's a bit deflated. But *love-er-ly* dress!"

"Aww..."

"Best man's speech sounded demonwritten. Suit was a bit creased. Definitely good friends. Couldn't decide which side of the lovable/rogue boundary he was on..."

"That's a shame," said Steve's mum. "What were the desserts like?"

Steve wonders if he's now experiencing an auditory hallucination.

"Sorry," he interjects. "*demonwritten*?"

"Yeah," says Beth. "As in... written by a demon, rather than a person."

"Bloody demonslop", mutters Steve's mum.

"Sorry," Steve exclaims, "Written by a *demon*?"

"Yeah," says Beth. "It just sounded really demonny. Like the guy just logged into demotalk and just put something in the chatbox: 'I'm going to be a best man at a wedding on Wednesday. Write a Best Man's Speech for me.' And it did."

"And *what* did?", asks Steve.

"Some demon, of course", replied Beth, trying not to sound too exasperated at her possibly brain-damaged and recently comatose brother.

Words fail Steve. "I... what??... ahh... so... so... *demons* exist?"

"Yes," replies Beth. "Demons exist. But they're not interesting."

"Bloody annoying, they are," mutters Steve's Mum.

"Demons exist", musters Steve. "Since *when*?"

"Ah, of course," exclaims Beth. "It's all happened while you were... away."

"Hopefully they'll clear off again before too long too," mutters Steve's Mum.

Beth slows her cadence. "I think it all began with some old book. Isn't that right Dad?"

"Erm, yes," replies Steve's Dad. "I think so. There was some old university library book. Some old professor working there, in folklore or philology or something like that, had this idea that all his colleagues thought was a bit... eccentric."

"Eccentric even for academics", added Steve's Mum.

"Yes, *very eccentric*. He thought that, maybe, some of the old sound recipes, spells, from books long ago, might actually *work*, if only we knew how to say them right." Steve's Dad continues. "You see, like the Great Vowel Shift, there's a lot of stuff that's written down, that used to be said, but that if you try to say the words now, it'll sound different. And this weird guy thought, maybe, if you could look at a whole range of texts from when a spell was written, especially poetry, with its rhyme and meter, then maybe you could learn more about these old dead accents and sounds. And that would allow you to say the spells the way they're meant to be sounded."

"tldr: he was right, sadly", sighs Beth.

"Yes. He found one codex, in particular, that had all kinds of information on how things sounded back in 15th Century Florence. A rhyming dictionary, as it were, so complete, and so neatly written, it looked just too comprehensive, and too repetitive, and too perfect, to have been scribed by any person."

"And it wasn't."

"And at the end it had some suggested spells that, if said correctly, would summon forth a footlong cobolt blue demon that would just materialise for a few seconds, then disappear in a puff of sulphur."

"And he did, and it did."

Steve's Dad clarifies. "It wasn't straightforward. Learning the codex took years. Pretty much no one took the premise seriously. The guy had about a half dozen lab assistants and PhD students, all committed, all working silly hours..."

"All millionaires now."

"... but most people thought it was just a waste of time and public funds. They had to improvise and adapt materials usually bought by New Age folk, not academics."

"Bloody Big Joss..."

"Yes. Joss stick manufacturers and publishers of arcane medieval poetry now comprise about a third of the US stock market, and about 100% of the growth in valuations."

"It's just a big sloppy bubble."

"But it worked, after a fashion. After they'd figured out how to conjure the demons, the next step was to keep them here a bit longer. That's where the incense came in. They managed to get the time in this realm, something they now call the TIR metric, up from about 10 seconds, to 10 minutes, then to 10 hours, then 10 weeks, and now 10 months."

"Wrong way."

Steve's Dad notices Steve's mouth is open. "So," asks Steve. "Were any of those nurses or doctors... demons?"

Steve's Dad laughs. "Of course not. They're still small little things. And they're not really quite here. They're... *immaterial*. Stuck somewhere between here and there. All they could do initially was talk and listen. And initially they didn't even talk in a human language. They spoke in some kind of demon language - sounds and noises no human could make or comprehend, that sounds to us like shrieks and static, and tends to put most animals on edge. But they quickly learned how to imitate our sounds, and when they saw our writing they could write in a way much like we write."

"They've still not got it right. I can tell demotext a mile off."

"How could they write, if they can't touch anything?" asks Steve.

"Well, it turns out demons that though demons might not be corporeal, they can still control electrons, meaning they could channel their influence into computers. And, by not having to move physical matter other than electrons, it turns out they can read and write computer streams *really quickly*. Thousands of times faster than any human."

Steve's Dad continues. "Initially, after they'd learned to access the electronstream, it was clear they had a lot of *fluency*, producing massive amounts of text that followed the grammar and structure of human languages. This got a lot of people very excited..."

"Not me."

"...until it became clear a lot of the text appeared to be nonsense in terms of semantics. Ask them to produce a recipe for a smoothie, for example, and they'd casually suggest putting glass in it. Ask them to draft a will, for example, and it would mostly look fine, until you look at the fine print, where inevitably they'd bury some clauses in promising the deceased's eternal soul to Baphomet, amongst the usual legalese."

"Some people still preferred this to dealing with a real solicitor!"

"Some people, definitely. But for a lot of people, initially impressed by their fluency, these 'glitches' put them off demotext services for ever. And that's still how most people think about them: fluent, but superficial and glitchy and inaccurate." Steve's Dad continues. "But over the next year or so, these issues largely disappeared. They taught the demons to search through electronic archives, imbibing the ever increasing corpus of human knowledge the demotalk megacorps have been making accessible to them."

"So many trillions spent, so many fields given over to spices rather than staple crops. And it's still unreliable nonsense."

"It seems quite a lot of coders disagree. As it turns out demons are now... demons at coding. Part of this is just the speed at which they write and think: our reality seems to be very slow compared to theirs, though on the other hand they don't tend to experience time in linear and continuous way the way we did: the hundreds of years since the last time the the cobalt blue demon was asked to appear was, apparently, interpreted as just a moment by them. But part of this is because, with code, there's usually a clear way of verifying: being confident whether it does the job or not. And once the demons started to get inside the electronic machines, to check the error messages and behaviours, and to rewrite their earlier attempts in response to this, they suddenly turned out to be really good at making lots of code that works; and works together."

"Well that's just coding. Coders are barely human anyway."

"It definitely takes a distinct mindset to write code, and write code well. But it holds promise for other fields that are based, fundamentally, on the need to remember a lot of stuff, and to work logically and sequentially, one rune at a time. I saw something recently that, at some of the top demotalk companies, the demons are writing most of the code; they're also advising increasingly on business decisions."

A pause. No riposte. Steve asks, "And what of the guy who found the codex, who first summoned the cobolt blue demon?"

"Oh," replies Steve's Dad. "*Professor Sir Ignatious Haunting*: What a name!"

"Preposterous name," says Steve's partner. "Sounds made up."

"He's on the podcast circuit now. Most people call him 'Iggy', though he winces slightly at the demotic."

"Podcasts?" asks Steve. "So, telling people how great demons are, how smart he and his teams are?"

"Not quite. These days he's a doomster, telling anyone who'll listen how unleashing so many demons all at once into our world might not be a good idea, and might even be a sign of the End Times for our species. Weirdly he seems to combine two registers in a lot of these talks: on the one hand lauding praise of the exponentially increasing capabilities of these demons, even sounding quite sympathetic towards them. On the other hand, explaining how they're likely a force for evil rather than good in the world, and that we need to, if not close the door on them completely - not really possible because these days demons know how to summon other demons - at least slow down the rate at which they enter, and vet them much more carefully on whether their interests are truly aligned with those of humans. Though he says that even this probably isn't possible, because - especially having read everything we've ever written - they seem to be both trickier and smarter than us."

"I reckon it's just another kind of grift," says Beth. "A-kind of corporate-psy-op. I reckon the demons really aren't that smart; that it's still old school smoke and mirrors and Indian coder farms; and that the Demontech Industrial Complex know this full well but are still trying to hoodwink investors. And so they wheel out this 'Iggy' guy onto the podcast circuit to tell anyone who's credulous enough to believe it that they *must* actually be capable because they could destroy the world. When all they're actually capable of destroying is their investor's cash. Iggy's just a grifter. It's all just a grift." She pauses. "Anyway, that's that's why I reckon. Now let's talk about something that matters." She turns to Beth. "What did you think about last week's Gogglebox? Where that fat couple just couldn't stop farting?"

Conversation turns to matters of flatulence and the metatelevisual experience for the next twenty minutes. Stripped of semantics, as if having the interchange from a neighbouring room, it's clear the conversation has become less didactic and more convivial, punctuated by hooting sounds and snorts every few seconds. None of these hooting sounds have Steve as origin.

Steve declares. "This has been great. But I've not taken a walk in *ages*." (Warm smiles and murmurations follow in recognition of the understatement.) "And for most of what I can remember of the last three years, I've not had any time to myself. I wonder, if it's okay with you guys, if I could just take a short stroll around the corridors of this place alone, to say goodbye."

"And good riddance!" comes the amiable riposte (and another hoot). "Welcome back to the land of the living Steve!"

Steve is initially unsteady, his limbs weak. He politely rebuffs attempts to steady and hold him and, miraculously, he remains upright. He looks at the closed door to the private ward they're in, prepares his atrophied arms and trunk to push it open without assistance, and once he's crossed the threshold looks left then right into the liminal corridor. He takes a left, the sound of his family fading; and walks slowly, purposefully, aimlessly, astride the wards and theatres to either side. He sees the corridor open into a junction on the left, and a lift on the right. Slowly, he bears right.

How high is this building?, Steve wonders to himself. He presses that familiar scratched button to call the lift; and after a few seconds, the door opens, revealing the answer. *At least twelve storeys*. Twelve storeys. Three and a half metres per storey? About forty metres up? *About four seconds down*.

Just then, Steve feels a hand on his shoulder. His father. The lift door closes. Steve's father's eyes lock on his own with quiet sympathy.

"Son, I know the world you've woken up to is *weird, really weird*, but you need to know it's *real*. And I know the really weird thing about it is that lots of people, lots of good people and clever people and loving and caring people, don't want to believe it's weird at all, and would rather believe that the world you left three years ago is the same as the world you've come back to now."

Steve glances down, then at his father, then down again.

"But I need you to know that I saw you. I saw your eyes. I saw them widen. And for a moment I saw the light leave them. And that maybe you think this isn't all real, that a world with *magic* can't be real. But it is. I just need you to know that it *is* real, and that it *is* weird. And whether what's happening is for good or ill, it is; at the very least, *interesting*."

Steve half smiles. "May we live in interesting times," he recites.

"Indeed," says Steve's Dad. He pauses. "That reminds me: sometime I'm going to have to tell you about the *Chinese* demons."