



CONFESSIONS

JAY FORTUNE

"Phenomenal. Fortune writes like a modern-day Poe."

Ian Stapleton, Book Lover

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CONFESSIONS COLLECTOR'S EDITION

5-Star Reader Reviews

"Phenomenal! What a rollercoaster of a book. For fans of the adult books by Roald Dahl, Alfred Hitchcock presents and Eerie Indiana! Highlights for me were The Waiting Room, The Samaritan and The Dream Field. The black envelope that came with the [collector's edition] book added to the reading experience. You've knocked it out the park yet again, Jay."—Ian S.

"On the edge of my seat! I thought that having a book of short stories would be simpler for me as I rarely have the time or headspace to do a long novel but these stories were so engrossing I literally read the whole book in one sitting (almost!). Fantastic stuff. Fantasy stuff too. I really enjoyed the variety of the stories. My favourite was probably The Dream Field. It's the longest story in the collection and had me biting my nails at various times in anticipation of what would happen next. It's a very dark and disturbing story that's for sure but I found it totally engrossing. I also loved the artwork for each confession in the book. Oh and I loved how the author writes an introduction and also puts his inspiration down for each story at the end of the book. As a budding author myself (one day!), I found these reflections really fascinating. I opened the envelope first... but won't spoil it for other readers. 10 out of 10 (or 5 stars) from me. I really loved this and can see me reading it again... and again. Can't wait for your next book, Jay!"—K. Frost

"Fortune's latest collection of short stories, all featuring a grim/surprising/bizarre confession of some kind will keep you turning pages, long after your bedtime. I must make my own confession... I'm glad I snagged a ltd edition signed copy before they all sell out!"—Barry J.

"Great! The stories hook you in, with a twist you won't see coming. Jay makes it easy to picture the scenes and characters as the stories play out making everything so vivid. I decided NOT to open the mystery envelope until I'd finished the final story. (Nearly there!!) Those who grew up reading or watching twisted/dark tales on TV will certainly enjoy this book. As I am currently. Recommended."—Paul S.

"Remarkable! I took this with me on a recent trip. I was so engrossed I almost missed the boarding call for the plane!"—Marc D.

"These stories, all featuring a confession of some kind, contain twists, surprises and whilst each is totally different to the others, fit into a cohesive whole that will make you want to find out what happens next. Now, I must confess... I'm glad I snapped up my limited edition before they are all gone."—Anon

"Excellent! Loved my signed copy. My favourite stories were The Waiting Room and The Samaritan."—Joy F.

"Pulls you in from the first word! Jay Fortune's writing grabs your attention from the first word and compels you to keep reading. The stories are as fantastic and fanciful as they are just believable enough—which I think is what made them most compelling for me. As wild as the circumstances were, we can see ourselves in each story, invited to wonder how we might react or respond if we found ourselves dropped into them. There are moments of darkness to be found here, yet embedded in even those dark hours is how we are able to find our way back to the light. Confessions is an absolute gem. Highly recommended!"—Jonas C.

"5-stars. Another great read from Jay Fortune!"—Bryce K.

Introduction

I have a confession to make.

I don't know where this story came from (or any story for that matter). I can say that this tale is entirely from my imagination but feel that all stories already exist somewhere, complete, lurking in the shadows, waiting to be discovered. For me, being an author is like being an archaeologist; I begin digging in the Palace of the Mind where stories might be found. Often just a glimmer of an idea presents itself. It's then my job to unearth it, let the story breathe and interpret it as best I can.

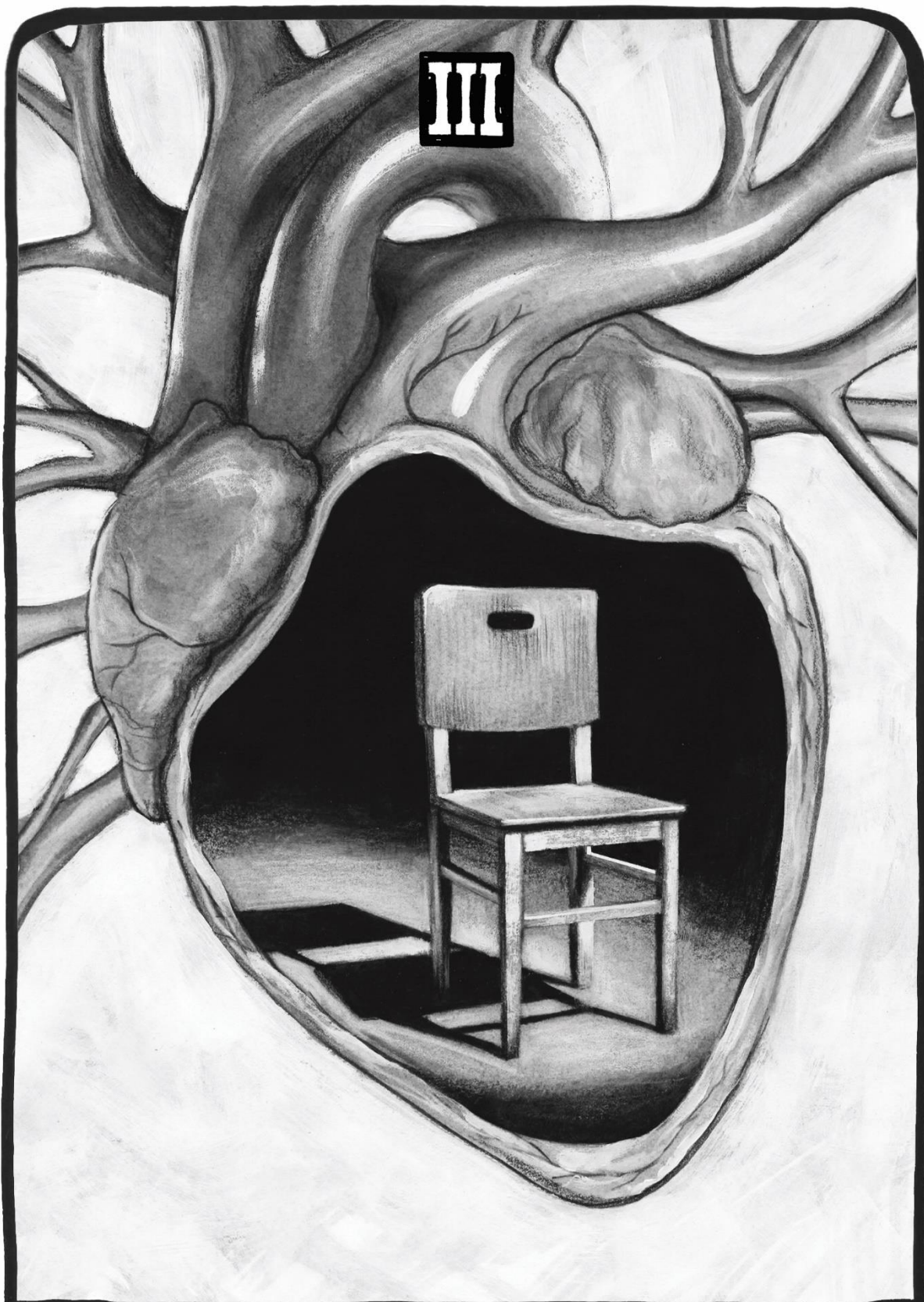
After my debut novel was published (**All Fall Down**, Chronos Publishing, 2022), readers emailed asking how I came up with the plot, especially the twist. Here's the thing; I don't plot any of my stories. They come to me in different ways, as mentioned above, often just showing the tiniest glimmer and then it's down to me to give chase or dismiss the initial glint of potential gold. Once I decide to start digging—to start uncovering the story—I let the various characters have free reign in my mind and I simply write it all down. It is a leap of faith and, especially with a novel, I trust they are taking me on an interesting journey with a satisfying ending.

I love the short story format and the tales in **Confessions** were hidden in the ether but didn't glint of gold. They are dark tales. Reader discretion is advised.

I hope you enjoy The Waiting Room, just one of the eight stories in my new short-story collection. If you do, you may like to own the hardback limited Collector's Edition (which also comes with a special souvenir and a decision for you to make before you begin reading), or the paperback or eBook editions available from all UK bookstores and online.



The fairy tales were wrong. Sometimes they don't all live happily ever after.



THE WAITING ROOM

The Waiting Room by Jay Fortune

Chapter One

Dear diary,

It's been over a year now and I need to write this down. I need to get it out of my head once and for all.

I dreamt of them yesterday. First time in nearly a year. Same women. Same hunched backs and, yes, same red uniforms. In my dream, I was on the bus when I saw them. It had pulled in to collect passengers. The women in red were on the pavement. They looked totally out of place. It was just like it was in the waiting room that day, no-one else seemed to be able to see them. One of them held a tray, just like in the hospital. On it was a foetus. I knew this unborn baby was called either Jacob or Denise. The other woman in red raised her arm and pointed right at me as I sat on the bus. She mouthed the words, 'Your time is coming.' (And, dear diary, I need to be honest with you. I did pop a pill again yesterday to help me sleep. I wish I could kick the habit but the pills... they, well, they stop my mind from thinking, just so I can rest. I'm always so tired.)

They're close, the women in red, I know that now. They will be visiting me soon. I don't know how much longer I have. This might be the last diary entry I'll make.

Let me go back to that day I first saw them (at least, I'm pretty sure I did). It was hot and I was dehydrated that day. Something was going on with my heart.

I was anxious.

It's too easy, too obvious to blame all this on the humidity and the pill they gave me before I left the hospital. The *red* pill of all colours!

But I know what I saw (at least, I think I do). They were real. Well, to me they were, anyway... and to the people they served.

But, dear diary, let me start at the beginning and tell you why I was in hospital. I had self-inflicted my own problems that day. You're going to think it was a waste of the doctor's and nurse's time, especially given the heatwave. A&E was practically bursting with the dehydrated and the sunburnt. Like me, those fools had done the damage to themselves.

I did what any responsible citizen would do; I rang 111. After explaining my symptoms, they arranged for me to go to the walk-in centre and see a doctor. I wouldn't have to wait, they said. And right they were. That place was packed; why is it that if a child or baby is slightly ill the *entire*

family shows up? Those places are crawling with germs which spread so fast, why can't people just stay away and let the mother or father take the toddler?

Anyway, I digress. I don't have children of my own; never wanted them. I don't have the maternal instinct many people speak of. Don't even enjoy being an auntie either. Christmas is an annual headache, painting on the smiling face to see my 'beloved' nieces and nephews. It's also a hugely expensive time buying tat for them all.

Again, I digress. I'm procrastinating. I'm haunted by the women in red. It's taken me a year just to put this down on paper. I tell you everything, dear diary, but this particular thing seems too personal to share. Yes, even with you. Even now, despite seeing them in my dream (my nightmare), I'm anxiously waiting for the women in red to come visit me for real.

To bring me my last meal.

They'll come soon. I know they will. I feel it. Can a person sense their own death? I believe they can. *I can anyway. It's a smell thing.* Or, maybe it's more than that. I can almost feel the air change, like sensing an oncoming storm. You know, when the air gets static and humid. It's sort of like that.

Years ago, I cared for my then partner's grandfather. He had cancer. The nurses – these were also bringers of death but not like the women in red – did their act of kindness and dripped the morphine in, filling his body with drugs and forcing his spirit out. That's how I see it; the human body can only be filled with so much or it'll burst. So, they fill you with drugs forcing your soul out, *squeezing* it out, like air from an overinflated tyre. Anyhow, as he lay in the last stages of dying, I was in the room with him. The only person: the nurses were downstairs making tea for his wife. He died as I left the room to call for the nurses. I only left because I sensed Death entering.

Sounds crazy right? And get this; I'm not even what you'd call a spiritual person. Far from it. I believe that we're just on a lump of rock in a vast, meaningless universe, rotating around a rather insignificant star among billions upon billions of others. Yes, despite all I've seen, despite sleeping with one eye open watching the foot of my bed, waiting for the appearance of the women in red asking me what I'd like for my last meal: despite sensing – *knowing* – Death was entering the room of my partner's grandfather all those years ago, knowing I had to get out and let Death take him; despite all that, I still don't feel I'm a spiritual person.

I think some things happen at a different frequency to how most of us live. Some can maybe tap into that, such as psychics. Others perhaps get a glimpse of what happens beyond the curtain, just a glimpse now and again. But is it ghosts or spirits? No, I don't think so.

Or, should I say, I don't *feel* so.

It's all just feeling, right? Some people feel they have a gift and can communicate with the 'other side'. I feel there's maybe different lives being lived at the same time at different frequencies. Call it Spirit if you want. I don't. It just is. No woo-woo, nothing metaphysical.

It just is.

Chapter Two

I've gone down a rabbit-hole. I knew I'd do that. I think it's because I'm not sure if I really can bring myself to write this down. Yes, even after a year since that day. It'll all sound, well, crazy.

It's easy to blame it on the pill I took that day. I do keep returning to that being a possible reason for what I think I saw that day...

No, that's horseshit! I know what I saw and what I felt. Yes, despite that pill, despite the heat and my anxiety... It happened. They were real, those women in red.

I'm in the walk-in centre and got straight in, past the crowds of others all waiting their turn (those who actually did what they were supposed to and *walk*-in. Me, I dialled in. Hence straight to the front).

Plus, it was a heart issue, so I guess that takes priority. If that stops then we stop, right? It's an old argument, when is a person truly dead? Is it when their heart stops or when their brain stops? I'm on the heart side of that one. If that isn't beating, then you can't think, can't breathe and can't, well, *be*. But if the mind goes, you're still alive, still breathing, still being.

They hooked me up to an ECG. Oh, that in itself was a sign of the times of how broken our health system is! It took two machines and two nurses to get any of the ECG readers to work properly. Just what you need when you've got a bizarre heart rhythm.

That's why I was there, dear diary. I'd been practicing re-regulating my nervous system doing Qi Gong and various kinds of deep-breathing exercises. One area of exploration was on the Vagus Nerve. It's a massive nerve running from head to bowel, essentially, it's our entire nervous system. I was doing work on re-setting it to calm me down. Turns out I over did it! I woke that morning and couldn't feel my heart. I couldn't get a pulse anywhere! Yet, I knew I was alive; I could move, eat, drink. And there wasn't that sense of death looming. No smell, no cloying atmosphere.

But I felt so... so... *out of myself*. Again, this wasn't a spiritual thing for me. You know how I said about my partner's grandfather and how his soul was being squeezed out by the drugs? I didn't feel that was happening to me. It was almost the opposite. I felt that perhaps, for the first time in my life, I had *room* for my soul. Explain that?

I guess you think there's a contradiction in my thinking on my talking about the soul and yet saying I'm not a believer in the spiritual world. I don't think there's any contradiction. Just so you understand me; I believe our soul is what makes us, *us*. What makes me, me. Sort of programmed personality. But it needs room to manifest. When the body dies – when the heart stops – then that programmed personality gets expelled as energy. I think of it like one big, final, soundless fart. (Although, having been there when people have taken their final breath, that infamous death rattle is a thing, I can attest to that. Maybe that's exactly what it is; the energy that was our unique programmed personality being forced out. The final fart.)

Yep, another rabbit-hole. I'll keep on doing it, that's just how I am. Part of my programmed personality.

Back to my pulse. Or, rather, lack of finding one.

I woke feeling different. I felt panicky, like I was in someone else's body. I know, of course, that I wasn't. But that's how I felt. So, I rang 111.

At the walk-in centre, they couldn't find any irregularity but there wasn't equipment good enough to rule anything dire out. So, they sent for an ambulance and off I toddled to A&E.

At the hospital, my papers were already in place thanks to the staff at the walk-in centre. (The equipment didn't work but the people? They were angels. I've heard it said by many health workers that it is a calling to do what they do as their chosen vocation. I think that's such an appropriate phrase, a calling. It sure is. And, now I've seen the women in red, I am even more of a believer that that is indeed the case. They – we – are being called. But that still hasn't changed my thoughts on a spiritual afterlife.)

I had to wait in A&E, which was expected. The waiting room was full, as is always the case. I sat people-watching (one of my favourite pastimes) wondering what each person's story was. Some were there with carers and loved ones, helping them (I remember mothers and daughters making up a lot of those relationships. Don't recall seeing any father and son duo. Now I think about it, that might also explain the women in red, there weren't, or at least I didn't see, any men in red that day). Some patients were on their own (isn't *that* the right word! Patience... you need it in spades at any hospital, waiting hours just to be seen). One patient was with a police escort. I remember he stood – the patient, prisoner – and looked right at me. He was in 'cuffs yet I saw slash marks on his wrist. They looked old as I know from a friend of mine who is in the Police that they can't put self-harmers in 'cuffs due to their wrists being slashed and cut. I do wonder what we're doing to ourselves and our young. Why do they feel the need to depart from life?

Has it always been this way, dear diary?

That prisoner-patient, I'll call him Mark. I don't know if that was his name but he was *covered* in marks of all kinds. A huge scar ran across his throat, like his neck was grinning. His arms and legs were covered in cuts and slashes (being summer, almost everyone was in shorts and t-shirts). None looked fresh. His story was written on his skin. All twenty years of it. He was just a child. Yet his face was untouched and when he looked right at me, he smiled and I saw the *chance* in him.

Yes, I appreciate that's a strange choice of words but it's how I felt and still do. Maybe I should call him Chance? Because that's what I saw. The chance to be someone other than the scarred tormented man he had grown into. His face lit up, his eyes sparkled and he smiled so freely, without any restraint. Maybe he was on drugs and was away with the faeries? I don't know but prefer to think that he – the *real* him – was still inside that damaged body, waiting to shine and take over what, up until that point, had become of his life.

Are we all dealt a random hand at birth, dear diary? Does that continue all throughout the few decades we wander around this planet? Or is there some other higher power determining our fate? That's probably why I'm an atheist. Seeing Mark/Chance that day, seeing the tales of woe forever carved into his beautiful body, made me once again dismiss the idea of any God. If you are a believer, then you must justify how your God created someone like Mark/Chance to live the life of suffering he has endured.

I'd rather believe it is purely that, chance.

And to me, this kid still had a chance. Funny, as I mentioned above, I'm not a mother, not really into children. Never wanted them. When I looked around that waiting room and saw the daughters caring for their elderly mothers, I did feel a pang of regret but for a purely selfish reason; who would care for me when I was old?

Well, until that day, until I saw the women in red, I had no idea. Who *would* be there for me in old age? I mean *really* there for me? There because they wanted to be. Although, that's perhaps a good point; how many of those daughters in A&E that day really wanted to be there? Perhaps the majority, if not all, were there out of duty rather than love?

Oh, I don't know.

That's one of the beauties of people-watching. I love trying to work out their life stories up to the moment when I see them. From the way they walk, talk and how they act. The way they engage with strangers, look at their phone, how often and which magazines they pick up. I watch carefully, seeing if they are really engaged with the content or simply flicking through, passing time. When they catch my eye, that's when I feel I've been rumbled in my game. I often feel guilty

as if they now know that I've been watching them, analysing them and making up their story in my mind.

But when Mark/Chance looked at me, I didn't feel any guilt or accusation in his stare. I felt warmth and, yeah, guess I'll say it; I felt love. He literally shone. I did just say his face lit up, didn't I, dear diary? Well, I guess I really meant it.

But sure, maybe it was the drugs he was probably on. He looked more alive than the policeman and woman with him.

He looked more alive than the women in red. It was as I sat looking at others in that waiting room, that I first noticed them.

Chapter Three

At first, I thought there was only one. Even then, I almost missed her. She was tiny. Maybe four foot (if that) and slightly hunched. She had a red uniform on with a red apron over the top. I know what you're thinking, dear diary: How could I miss a four-foot human fire extinguisher? Indeed, how?

The waiting room was busy. People were sitting, others standing, some squatting by loved ones in wheelchairs, others lying on trolleys with IV drips and monitors around them. So, there was a lot of distraction. Nurses and doctors were walking to and fro. Oh, and the police, of course.

The first woman in red was almost on top of me before I even realised. She was leaning in close to an elderly gentleman who was seated opposite, well, slightly to my right. His chair was facing side-on to me, so I could only see his profile. I remember that he was within touching distance, yet I hadn't noticed him. Had he been there since I arrived and took my seat? Or had he come while I was people-watching elsewhere?

He looked baggage-less.

I'll explain what I mean by that. When I people-watch, I often imagine not only their stories – their past – but also what baggage they are carrying. We all have baggage. Even those people whom we think have it all figured out, truly don't. I repeat; we *all* have baggage. Some more than others.

So, as I sit watching people go by, whether in a café or park, I imagine seeing how much baggage they are dragging behind them. Some people almost glide along, shoulders back, head held high. They're the ones with the least baggage in my mind's-eye. Maybe just a small bag hop-skipping along behind them. There's nothing too heavy in their past.

Others, well, they look like the weight of the world is on their shoulders. Literally. They're the ones who are hunched over, eyes downcast, sluggishly dragging their feet along, scuffing their shoes on the pavement. These people move slowly and they drag *tons* of baggage. I often imagine some of these burdened folk being overshadowed by the sheer volume of baggage they drag behind them; old, battered suitcases with black bags stacked upon them like a mountain of emotional rubbish. And here's the worst part; they can't let it go. No, *here's* the worst part; they don't even know they're carrying it with them.

I often daydream when I see couples walking hand-in-hand. With younger couples, I imagine seeing two different sets of baggage being dragged behind them. Usually nothing too heavy. They're got a lifetime to acquire that shit! Older folks get more interesting. I often imagine them sharing their baggage and, usually, they're quite light in their step. Maybe they've worked through their clutter and shed most of their life's turmoil along the way. I'd like to think I've done that.

Oh, then there's those with kids. Ha! Yeah, those folks are usually carrying a shed-load of baggage while the kids have small cardboard boxes in their wake. If the parents start yelling or have a row in public, I imagine the kids filling their boxes there and then, each box growing and changing colour and shape, turning into something more solid as they begin to carry their life's shit around with them. It starts young.

So, back to A&E and the old man sat sort of opposite me. He looked like he had little baggage with him. Metaphorically and physically. Maybe he'd dealt with his stuff. Maybe he'd cut the ties holding it to him.

Maybe.

But the woman in red was leaning right *into* him. I couldn't see her face but got the impression she was a jolly grandmother-type figure, looking after this lonely man. She was there in some official capacity – I didn't know how I knew that but just felt it.

I watched her for a while. Her back kept lifting like she was either struggling to breathe properly or she was laughing and talking with the old bag-less man. She then turned and shuffled onto another person. I spied a small notepad in her hand and a pen or pencil. It was red. Everything about her was red.

I couldn't imagine any baggage on her. Nothing. That was odd. When I see an older person, especially one stooping over and hunched, I imagine seeing bags and bags of stuff dragging behind them. But not this woman. For the life of me, I couldn't dream up a single solitary suitcase.

The old man turned and looked at me. The saddest smile crossed his lips. He had hairy eyebrows that put me in mind of him being an old dog. He blinked at me and then turned away staring into space.

I wondered what the woman in red had written down.

And then I wondered where she had gone.

Chapter Four

Gone. Just like that.

How, dear diary, can a woman dressed entirely in red firstly appear out of nowhere (which I'm sure she didn't, only I never saw her enter the waiting room or approach the old man who was sat literally within touching distance of me) and then disappear?

The waiting room was crowded. Yet, I had a good view and could see between almost everyone in it. The vast majority were sitting down in some way and only the police and medical staff were standing. They were all in uniform and easily identifiable; police in black, nurses in blue, and the rare few doctors in white. So, where the hell was the woman in red?

At that time, I remember being distracted by a nurse calling my name. I got up slowly, aware I may faint given I hadn't been able to find any heartbeat anywhere on my body. But to my surprise, I was feeling fine. I followed the nurse into a corner. She pulled a curtain around me. So much for privacy! I could hear every word from the waiting room and felt both embarrassed and vulnerable, knowing that those closest to the nurse's station would also be able to hear me and my diagnosis... whatever it may be.

It was on my mind to ask about the woman in red, but I was distracted; the nurse was pregnant and she touched her belly as she looked at my forms and smiled. 'Oh,' she said. 'He's restless.'

I smiled back. Not having a maternal bone in my body, I didn't want to hear all about her new baby. Not right then, anyway. Perhaps if we'd met in a park I'd be up for a chat about life. Plus, I'd have seen her approach and been able to give some thought to how much baggage she was carrying.

But it wasn't meant to be. She wanted to talk even if I didn't.

'Jacob if it's a boy and Denise if it's a girl.'

I think I smiled.

'Right, so, no pulse or heartbeat.' She frowned and looked at me. 'Well, you're alive, so you must have one.' Her hand still stroked her belly.

Watch out Jacob or Denise, you've got a witty one here, I thought.

'Let's get you hooked up and get a proper reading of what's going on, shall we?'

I think I smiled again.

The nurse pulled the curtain back a fraction and wandered off, leaving enough of a gap for some in the waiting room to look in. I was on show. I hated it.

At that moment, the woman in red walked right past the gap! She hesitated, turned and looked in. Yes, right into where I was sat waiting. She stared right at me! Her brow furrowed and her eyes turned to slits. I remember thinking, *what is she doing?*

Then she smiled and said, 'Not today.'

I was baffled. Who was she? Was she even the same woman I saw the back of moments ago, the one laughing with the old man? I wondered if she *had* been laughing.

As I pondered what she had said, the nurse reappeared. I was about to ask her who the old woman in red was, when another nurse pulled back the curtain and joined us (allowing even more of those in the waiting room to judge me). She absentmindedly reached up behind her and lamely pulled the curtain back into place, leaving a good 3-inch gap where some of those waiting could still spy on me. I could hear them in my imagination: *Is she even unwell? Does she need to be here? Why does she get priority?*

Bitching, bitching, bitching.

'Hey, Jasmine. I'm Sally. So, stay nice and calm and we'll find out what's going on with you. OK?'

I smiled. Again. I think.

Chapter Five

That was an odd thing.

I did feel calm. Despite everything, I was calm. Had never felt calmer. That's highly unusual, especially in hospital. The very place makes most people feel unwell. White Coat Syndrome, I think it's called.

But calm I was.

The two nurses soon had me hooked up to an ECG. Little sticky plasters placed over my chest, tummy and legs. The machine beeped into life and everything went green. The nurse who introduced herself as Sally smiled. 'Better green than all reds,' she said.

Reds.

It reminded me to ask.

‘Who is the woman—?’

That was as far as I got. The other nurse stroked her belly once again. Jacob or Denise took the nurses' attention away from me and my unfinished question about the woman in red.

‘Oh, can I, Steph?’ The one called Steph nodded, smiling away. And so, Sally and Steph went off into their own little world of chit-chat and motherly waffle, leaving me laced with wires and hooked up to a beeping machine like some kind of bionic woman.

A doctor appeared, dragging the curtain even wider for the prying eyes of my accusers, asking after Sally. Sally left without a word, leaving me with Steph and the yet unknown Jacob or Denise.

‘Well, your readings are fine, your temperature is a little high but it’s a hot day. Your blood pressure is also quite high. I’d like to do a blood test, so please go back and wait and someone will call you in as soon as they can.’ Steph touched my arm in the caring way nurses do and then ripped each sticker from me in a contradictory act of non-love. I stopped smiling.

As I gathered my things and lowered my T-shirt, I walked back into the waiting room. My accusers all dropped their gaze immediately.

Chapter Six

My seat was still vacant.

I sat back down, reclaiming my territory, putting my handbag to one side and realising I hadn’t had anything to eat and drink for a few hours.

Steph was right, it was a hot day. I needed water.

I looked at the old man, now sat in profile, staring into space. I noticed he had a sandwich and a cup of tea, or it may have been coffee, in a Styrofoam cup. How had he got that? Where had he got—

There was a vending machine across the waiting room, currently being banged on by a rather tubby man in a suit. Wrong clothing for such a day and he was clearly stressed. The machine appeared to have jammed his snack between its coiled release mechanism and the glass front. He gave it a good kick, attracting the attention of the police. It worked. His snack fell to the bottom. He reached in, pulled it out and ripped the packet open with his mouth. He pulled his necktie loose and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. I could see sweat on his neck and chest from where I sat.

He stuffed his mouth with the chocolate bar or whatever it was that he'd kicked free from the machine. It wasn't a pretty sight. He made me feel dirty. I wanted to leave there and then, go home and take a nice cool shower.

'She brought it to me.'

I blinked a few times, bringing me out of my sweaty-man trance of disgust. The old man was talking to me.

I leaned forward, 'Sorry?'

He bit into his sandwich, crumbs falling onto his lap. He mumbled as he chewed. 'Pheee mawt ifffooo mway.'

I assumed he was gaga. Medication or heat or whatever.

I sat back, smiling politely and reached out for the magazine on a nearby coffee table. Reader's Digest. Isn't it always?

I began flicking through, not really interested in anything. Then his words fell into perfect clarity in my mind.

She brought it to me.

She.

The woman in red.

Chapter Seven

I ceased flicking through the pages and looked at the old man. He was already looking away again, with only one side of his face visible to me. The story of his life was carved into the wrinkles, especially around his eye, under his bushy eyebrow.

She brought it to me.

If that was the case, then maybe the woman in red could bring me a drink and perhaps a bite to eat.

Not today.

Her words echoed in my mind and hit me like a thunderbolt. I was surprised not to hear my heart suddenly thundering in my chest (which would have either been cause for celebration, given my reason for being in hospital in the first place, or cause for concern given my looming blood test).

Not today.

She'd looked right at me when she said those words. No, that's not quite true. Her eyes *bore* into me as if she were looking into the very depths of who I was.

Not today.

What did she mean by that? Why had she been laughing with the old man? Why did he get special treatment? Was he a VIP? Someone famous?

Must be his wife. Must be.

My reason seemed satisfactory on the surface but didn't feel true. I considered leaning forward and engaging the old man in conversation.

As I did, a nurse came and spoke to him. He blinked at her, his aged eyes appearing yellow – more than they had when I had first looked at him. Perhaps, I simply hadn't noticed. The old man finished his bite of sandwich and was helped to his shaky feet. He held the nurse's arm as she led him slowly away, his feet shuffling on the lino floor.

I gazed at his vacated seat for a while, lost in a daydream. My stomach rumbled and I licked my lips. I was beyond parched. I needed—

There she was.

Back in the room.

She was across the far side of the waiting room. I could see her a little more fully this time as she was facing my direction, talking to someone who appeared to be attached to a drip. (I say appeared, as I could only see the back of this person and the drip was next to them, so I assumed it was in their arm.)

The woman in red reached out and smoothed the man's head (yes, it was a man, that much I could make out) and she smiled at the same time. Her smile seemed so genuine that, if I didn't know any better, I'd say she was the man's mother or grandmother.

She stood to her full height, which hardly made any difference to how she'd been when she stooped a fraction to talk to the drip-man.

Then I got called again. My blood tests.

I took a moment to respond to the call, knowing the nurse (a different one this time, no signs of pregnancy showing, which would have been a medical miracle anyway; it was a male nurse) was waiting for me. The woman in red had my attention. To me it was simple; she worked for the hospital and was simply going round and taking food and drink to those on their own who were too unwell to get it for themselves.

Simple.

Not today.

Yet that phrase nagged me.

‘Jasmine Parker?’ The nurse was getting impatient. I begrudgingly looked away from the woman in red and acknowledged my presence. The nurse smiled and gestured for me to follow him.

I stood, cradling my handbag and walked after him, taking one last look over my shoulder at the woman in red.

She had already vanished.

Chapter Eight

He was sweet. Todd, his name badge said.

We talked about why I was there and he smiled, doing the mandatory tapping of my forearm to assure me I was in the best place and would be sorted and on my way soon. ‘Nothing to worry about’ and ‘Gosh, isn’t it a hot one today?’ were among his many pleasantries which I expect he’d used for the hundredth time already that day with other patients.

‘Do you faint at the sight of blood?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I replied, smiling back at him, masking my anxiety.

‘Funny,’ he said, ‘some people simply can’t look at it. Odd really, as it’s literally all that we’re made of. Thankfully for those people, well for all of us really, it’s hidden under our skin.’ He laughed.

I had the feeling I could be in the presence of a mad man.

He put the needle in my arm and I chanced a quick look. A tiny bit of blood spurted onto my forearm, nothing major. The colour red immediately brought her back to my mind.

‘Todd? What’s the deal with that woman in red? I’m starving and she seems to be taking food to people? Is there a priority list or something? Have they been waiting longer than others?’

‘Hmmm?’

Not the response I was hoping for. Todd was filling the third syringe with my dark red blood which looked healthy enough and seemed to be flowing well.

But what did I know?

‘The woman in red, serving food and drink. In the waiting room?’

Todd pulled the syringe out and placed a cotton pad over where the needle had been under my skin.

‘Bend your arm for me,’ he said. ‘Good, keep the pressure on. We’ll get these tests done. It’s busy as you know, so it may take a few hours. Please wait back in the waiting room and the doctor will call you when he’s had chance to look at the results. As I say, you’re in good hands and nothing to worry about, I’m sure.’ He smiled.

I went to stand.

‘Todd?’ He was just leaving the curtained cubicle and turned back.

‘Oh, yes, sorry. Don’t know who you mean. Must be someone’s relative getting them some food. You can eat if you need to, and drink. There’s no issue with the kind of blood tests they’ll be running on your samples.’

With that, he turned and left me alone in the cubicle.

Chapter Nine

I made a slight detour on my way back to the waiting room. A Marks & Spencer’s food outlet was part of the complex and I was famished. If Todd was right and the woman in red was there for a family member, then I’d have to sort myself out.

No problem. I was used to that.

Except... she had got the old man his food. Old yellow-eyes. And then she was with drip-man the other side of the waiting room. She’d touched both of them, so surely she wouldn’t be that familiar with strangers, would she? Especially in a hospital with contamination controls and such things.

I couldn’t wait to pay for my sandwich and carrots with houmous and get back to the waiting room. I felt like a detective, determined to discover who the mysterious woman in red was.

Todd said he didn’t know who I meant. Could it be that she was part of the hospital team and he didn’t know about them? Seems unlikely.

Which leaves the only other option; she knew both men, somehow.

Not today.

The words haunted me.

There was, of course, another option. One my non-spiritual, non-afterlife mind refused to accept.

But if that option was the truth, then the rumours were wrong; Death didn't have a black cloak and scythe.

And he wasn't a He.

Death was a 4ft old woman dressed entirely in red.

Chapter Ten

OK, I realise this is my private diary but I know someone – some nosy parker – will read my words, one day. A nosy parker reading the words of me, Jasmine Parker. So, *Nosy*, before you decide to stop reading my diary, let me be clear.

The woman in red wasn't Death.

How do I know? Because when I got back to the waiting room, there were *two* women in red doing the rounds.

Nowhere, have I ever read about there being two Deaths.

So, I was back to my first hunch; they worked for the hospital as food matrons. Case closed, Miss Marple. Pat on the back, Columbo.

Except... *Not today*.

Those words, the... *finality* of them. The way she looked through me: glimpsing my future perhaps? I shudder thinking about it.

The two women were almost identical in appearance; both short, both stooping, both dressed entirely in red. They reminded me of dinner-ladies from my childhood (except those ladies were in blue) - that same grandmother embodiment. Caring but stern. Wanting the best for you.

They wandered the room, taking what I presumed were food and drink orders. I noticed how they weren't approached by anyone, not a single person in that waiting room. Rather, *they* approached people. Nobody asked them who they were or to get them anything. They shuffled among the ill in that room with a kind smile and tender touch to those who they did choose to stop and talk with. None of the conversations were long; just enough to take an order.

I sat nibbling on my sandwich, watching them as they scurried around. Kafka's metamorphosis entered my mind, the two women almost like beetles, given their rounded backs and shoulders, as they busied themselves with their task.

As I watched them work, I noticed that I seemed to be the only one who was watching them. Other patients and their relatives and friends (the few who had someone else with them) were all hypnotised by their phones.

Then it happened.

I returned my gaze to the women in red to find them both staring back at me. One held a tray (had she always been carrying it?) on which were paper cups with steam coming from them and what looked like a packaged sandwich or two, plus a few bags of crisps. The one with the tray looked like the woman who saw me earlier as I was having my heart monitored. Mrs Not-Today. The other was similar, they could have been sisters, but I knew she wasn't the one who'd spoken to me earlier.

I felt guilty as they both stood there and stared at me. I looked away, opened my bottle of drink and took a welcome swig, my eyes averted.

I dared to glance back and still they stared.

Then they both walked towards me.

Chapter Eleven

My heart came alive (that was the good news) as the women approached. I felt absolute fear. Paralysing fear. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But that's all I can recall feeling right then and there. I thought my blood would turn to ice and freeze in my veins. I felt panic, realising I was holding my breath. I released it in an unsteady stream. I held my drink in my lap, my other hand holding my sandwich - I was like a cat in the headlights.

They shuffled past people, no-one knocking into them or getting in their way. Nobody even *looked* at them as they made their way over to me.

The air around me was growing thicker, oppressive, making me feel as if I was in a vacuum, struggling to breathe.

Part of me wanted to run, just get up and run. Illogical and hysterical. Yet, I was frozen. Even thoughts were struggling to come to me. At that point, there was only me and those two women in that room; everyone else paled into non-existence.

Before I knew it, they were standing next to me.

I waited, feeling my chest cramp, expecting my heart to give out. And then—

Chapter Twelve

It's disappointing what happened then, dear diary.

No, I didn't wake up, it wasn't all a dream.

No, at that moment, just when I got a glimpse of what those ladies were, what their reason for being there was, *right then*, a nurse called my name.

More than that, a nurse was touching my arm.

'Miss Parker? Are you OK?'

Todd.

I must have looked like I'd seen a ghost as that's exactly what he said to me as I looked up at him.

'You look like you've seen a ghost!'

I opened my mouth to say something, anything.

'Let me get you some water,' said Todd, concerned.

The two women in red were still standing before me, the cups of tea or coffee still steaming. Then they smiled.

'Not today, dear. Your last meal will come... oh, not too long from now. You shouldn't be seeing us yet. So, go with the nurse.'

Todd reappeared with some water. I opened and closed my mouth like a goldfish gasping for air.

'Miss Parker? Have a sip of this, please.' Todd put the water between my stare and the women. I knew Todd couldn't see them; he was literally standing on top of them.

The women in red shuffled away.

My heart skipped a beat.

'We have your results and the doctor will see you now.' Todd touched my arm and helped me to my feet. 'A bit of sunstroke, I expect,' he added as his diagnosis for my current state. I knew otherwise. I knew I'd come close. Close to what exactly, I don't know.

Death?

As Todd led me toward the doctor, allowing me to lean on his arm, I glanced back, looking for the women in red one more time. I couldn't see them. They must have been there yet whatever veil had lifted that allowed me that glimpse of them had been pulled over my eyes once again.

All I saw were two elderly people, sat apart, each with a paper cup and a sandwich.

Chapter Thirteen

Can't leave this diary entry without one final note about that day.

The consultation with the doctor.

He talked through my results, everything was fine. He explained how the work I'd been doing had re-regulated my nervous system, which would explain the change of my resting pulse and where it may be felt in my body. He said I looked pale and should have plenty of water, especially on a hot day like today.

And then he offered me a pill which he said would help calm me down.

It was red.

Chapter Fourteen

Well, dear diary, that event was just over a year ago. I've not had cause to revisit the hospital since, which can only be a good thing. I've grown used to not being able to feel my heart beating as heavily in my chest as it had been before that day (and when the women in red were standing before me).

I often think back to what happened.

I've done research online and found out that there are indeed staff at the hospital – at most A&E departments – who do make sure patients are eating and staying hydrated as they wait for their turn to see the doctor. These women wear their own distinct uniform.

Orange.

Yet, I know, *know* that the women I saw that day were wearing red. No, it wasn't a trick of the light. *They were wearing red.*

Plus, they spoke to me; of that I'm certain. Although... now I think back to it, maybe they didn't say exactly what I remember them saying? I *was* dehydrated that day. I was also anxious given my heart issue. Perhaps those symptoms combined to make me see something I didn't really see and hear something I didn't really hear?

I've replayed it many, many times in my mind. Were they some gift from another realm, a parallel reality, angels in grandmotherly form giving the sick and infirm their final meal before Death took them?

Or were they simply staff – volunteers at that, as I have since discovered – doing what we do best; caring for others, the mark of a civilised society?

I think back to the first curtained cubicle with the two nurses, Steph and Sally, discussing the baby names. I remember the first woman in red (was she wearing orange, after all?) looking in, staring *into* me and her words, 'Not today.' Was she really talking to me? Steph had gone to get Sally, leaving me alone for a matter of, what, minutes, if that? Had the woman in red been talking to them and not me, as they'd walked back to where I was? Do the women in red get the staff sandwiches too and was either Steph or Sally simply declining something that day, at that moment?

If so, then why was the woman in red staring at me?

And, of course, that final encounter. The one with both women in red. The one with Todd standing almost on top of them, him being totally unaware of them. How could he miss seeing two old ladies in bright red? He said he didn't know anything about them. Maybe because he was busy? Could it be that simple? Hospitals are big places, after all.

And the final line she spoke to me. I remember it clearly (I'm pretty sure I do anyhow); 'Not today, dear. Your last meal will come... oh, not too long from now. You shouldn't be seeing us yet. So, go with the nurse.'

What else could they have said, even if I have misremembered or, in my delirious state, misheard? Maybe they said something different. Maybe I looked famished and they were asking how long had it been since my last meal? I looked like death at that time, even Todd confirmed that. Maybe they said I shouldn't be seeing them yet as in I needed to get my results or see the doctor before they could get me some food? Then again, they could see I had my own food and drink. So, why would they stop and speak to me?

And how long *is* 'not too long from now'?

The events of that day go round and round in my head.

Maybe it's false memory; the red pill they gave me, the heat, the lack of water, my anxiety about my heart: all that has shaped what really happened that day into what I *think* happened that day.

Although...

I'd like to believe I got a glimpse of something other. I'd like to believe that I'll be cared for, we all will, when our time is near.

I'd like to believe that a grandmother figure will appear and offer to take care of me.

I'd like to believe that. No matter how long I have left (and, after last night's dream, I sense they're close).

I'd like to believe.

But I'm a non-believer and so, dear diary, I don't expect you to believe me.

And I wonder... how many more diary entries will I write? Is this my last? Is this why I'm writing this down, so someone might find an answer, a *cause*, should my lifeless body be found one day soon? Well, if it is and if my beliefs about an afterlife prove to be wrong, I don't want to die alone. I hope my transition will be smooth, painless and someone will be there to guide me and hold my hand.

Perhaps a woman dressed in red.



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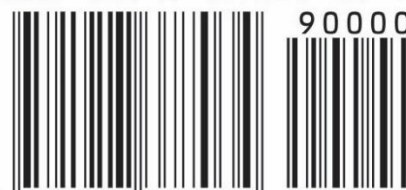
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About the Author



Jay Fortune has lived all over England. He currently resides in Blackpool which embodies his love of entertainment and art. A full-time artist and writer, Jay spends his days reading, painting, writing and ‘Tourist Dodging’, cycling along the promenade whilst avoiding the holiday-makers. He loves books, art, magic, camomile tea* and cake. Jay recently celebrated his second decade of non-TV ownership. His debut novel, the highly praised ***All Fall Down***, a dystopian psychological thriller was published in 2022. Never one to be pigeon-holed, Jay’s first Young Adult novel, ***Snowlands Book 1 – Zak and the Wanderer*** (2022) followed, bringing his writing to a new audience. With the release of his first short-story collection, ***Confessions***, (2024) Jay continues to delight his growing fanbase across the world with his fantastical imagination, conjuring characters, plots, twists and turns that leave his readers eager for more. (*Or ‘Green Jasmine’ if they’re out of Camomile) www.jayfortune.co.uk

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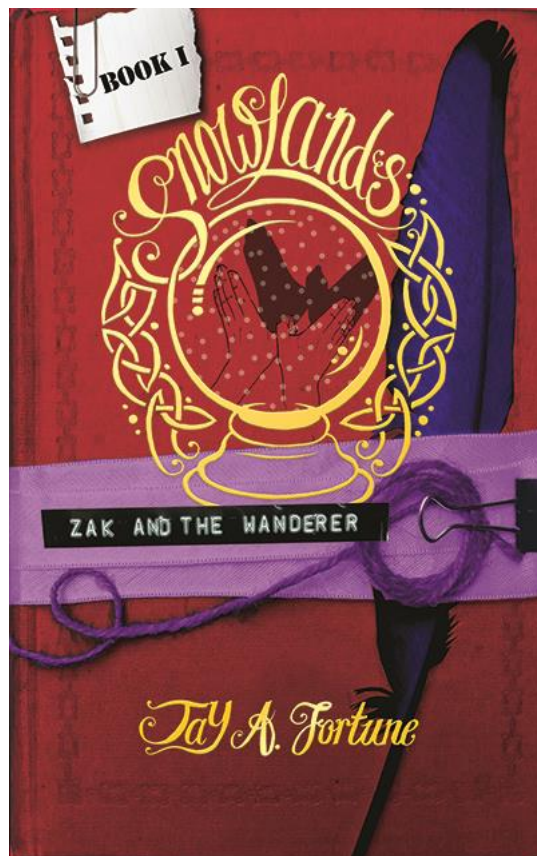
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