Headless

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THE FIRST THING Alistair Eldridge noticed when he awoke was that he had somehow lost his head. To be precise, it was the second thing he noticed. The first was that his bedroom had somehow reached an intolerably frigid temperature during the night. The first observation of any particular note, however, was most certainly his lack of a head.

To his surprise, he managed to remain composed upon ascertaining that he was missing a rather important body part. Instead, he focused intently on the void on his pillow and slid a tentative hand up his neck. The delicate skin was otherwise undamaged, but stopped abruptly where his head should have been, a clean line forming a plateau above his body. He was quite sure he had previously possessed a head, and wondered who he might have wronged to drive them to such an act.

Alistair opened his eyes, and everything changed. He could see the twisted mahogany of his bed leg, could feel the cold press of polished wood on his cheek. Perplexed, he flung an arm over the edge of the bed and watched as it appeared before him, brushing his nose. He hadn't lost his head at all. It had simply rolled off during the night. Alistair breathed a sigh of relief and watched the dust on the boards scatter away from him.

His body launched upright. This wasn't a relief. That he was alive and still in possession of his own head was good news indeed, but heads were not supposed to detach themselves

without cause. Furthermore, that he had separated so significantly and still consciously controlled both parts was a scientific impossibility. This was nonsense. And yet, as Alistair sat on the edge of his bed and stared at his feet in an unusually literal fashion he was forced to confront the reality.

Scooping his head from the floor, Alistair saw himself brush the dust from his cheek as though he was polishing a vase. He gazed back at his thin body before gently placing his head on the bed and rising to get dressed, careful to position himself so that he could see where he was going.

Getting dressed proved far simpler without his cumbersome head impeding progress, but he paused as he pulled on a jumper with unnatural ease. A wealth of existential issues flooded his strangely separated brain. He was, after all, now in possession of two entities, and yet bore the identity of one man and controlled both body and head with one mind.

Alistair would have shaken the thoughts off if he was still attached to the neck muscles responsible for doing so. Instead, he opted for a simple wave of his distant hand. Now was not the time for philosophising. He had more important things to attend to, such as how his head had inconveniently extricated itself from his torso and, more importantly, how he would reattach it.

Lifting his head from the bed and tucking it carefully under one arm, Alistair briskly left his room.

'Maurice!' his mouth cried, apparently without need for an attached set of lungs. 'Maurice, get up!'

He hurried over to his roommate's door and thundered on it with his free hand. Eventually his roommate relented, and the sound of footsteps precipitated his arrival.

'What?' Maurice asked blearily as the worn teak door peeled open.

'Did anyone come into my room last night?'

Maurice lifted his head and attempted to open the iron shutters of his eyelids. He failed.

'Don't think so.'

'Are you sure?'

'I dunno, man.' Maurice succeeded in cracking open the heavy curtain over his right eye. 'You alright?'

Alistair gave him a patronising look from beneath his armpit before holding his head forward. 'My head came off.'

'Oh yeah. Jeez.' Maurice began to edge behind his door. 'You should, uh … You should get that looked at.'

'No suggestions?'

Maurice began to close his door. 'Uh, no. Nope. But it's definitely not normal.'

'I know that!' Alistair cried in frustration.

'Yeah well I got … stuff … to do. I'll, uh … see you later.'

Maurice's door clicked shut. Alistair turned and gazed at the wall as if it would offer an answer. For a moment he considered returning to bed in the hope that sleep would solve his unique problem, but he knew he would be incapable of rest. Instead, he ensured his head was comfortable and strode purposefully forward. He could fix this.

Alistair tried everything. He began with the duct tape beneath the kitchen sink. Resting his head where he felt it belonged, he grabbed the roll in one hand and wound it around repeatedly until a thick silver band adorned his neck. For a moment he thought it had worked, but as he bent down to put the tape away it popped off and wedged itself behind the piping. It took him fifteen minutes to retrieve it.

He tried glue, but it would not stick; he tried a scarf, but the wool slackened; he tried binding it with rope, but the knots would not hold. In a moment of desperation, he tried to staple them together, but the disparity was too great for their small metal frames, and the staples abruptly tumbled out. They were all temporary remedies that made the problem no less obvious.

Weary, desperate, and deeply concerned, Alistair resolved to leave the house in search of a more permanent solution.

Already fragile, the descent into the city preyed on his diffidence. Everywhere he went people would shrink away. They gazed at him with a look of frightened pity and quickly looked elsewhere, ashamed of their curiosity; ashamed of the monster. Doctors would not treat him, salesmen would not serve him, and barely anybody spoke to him. This continued well into the afternoon, and Alistair was finding, if anything, his head had only a greater repulsion from his neck.

That was when he saw the woman.

She stood amid the crowd in a flowing navy dress. Curls of brown hair fell around her in tightly wound coils, framing a grey mask that covered her face. The mask was desperate in its simplicity, pleading in a whisper to be ignored, accepted. Strangers would note the mask almost before it reached there consciousness and move along before they registered the wearer. But Alistair noticed none of this.

Alistair noticed only that she did not look away.

He shifted his head to the crook of his left arm as he approached her. She barely moved, watching cautiously as the headless man approached her. Alistair held out his newly freed right hand.

'I'm Alistair.'

She tipped her head to one side and studied him before taking the hand. 'Chloe.'

'You don't look away,' Alistair said. 'Aren't you afraid of the monster?'

'You are not a monster,' she replied, a concealed smile audible in her tone. 'You have merely come apart.'

'I suppose I have,' he said. 'Is that not enough to incite fear?'

Chloe shook her head. 'I do not think people fear you. I think they do not know what to do with you or how to treat

you. You are something different and they cannot fix you. I think it is their ignorance they fear.'

Alistair smiled. 'Is that why you wear the mask?'

'No.' Chloe looked to one side. 'I wear this because I fear what I am.'

'What are you?'

'I do not know.' She returned her gaze to his detached head. 'Or perhaps I do know and am concerned that others will not. I no longer remember. These people expect certain things of their fellows. I am not sure I am those things.'

'You wear it to blend in?'

'In a way. I'm not sure my appearance is enough for this world.'

'You are concerned with your looks, then.'

'Looks matter. You have learned that yourself.'

Alistair scratched his head as though it were a pet. 'And yet for all the people in this city the only one worth meeting stands before me because she gazed beyond my facade.'

Chloe shifted and remained silent. Crowds washed around them without touching them, unable to enter their private island of difference. A pale pink had begun to creep across the sky when Chloe next spoke.

'I may have a solution for you.'

Alistair, who had been staring at the ground in considera- tion of sitting, gazed up. 'For what?'

'Your predicament; your detachment.'

'Really?' Alistair perked up, excited by the possibility of walking with two free arms.

Chloe nodded. 'It will take a great deal of trust.'

'I trust you.'

Chloe wrung her hands before stiffening with resolve. 'Alright.'

She reached up to her mask with a trembling hand and gingerly stroked the grey, lifeless mould. The sky shifted to a

vibrant orange and Chloe tightened her grip, pulling at the hollow face. It lifted away soundlessly. She hovered a moment, terrified. Then she sighed and dropped her hand.

There was no face behind the mask. There was not even a head. There was instead a darkness; a swirling mess of lightless air hidden beneath her curls. She expected Alistair to hesitate. She expected his eyes to widen in horror. She expected him to flee.

But Alistair did none of those things. Instead, he simply smiled and held out a reassuring hand. In a way, he had always expected this. Without needing to be instructed he grasped his head and held it forward. He couldn't see Chloe's face, but he knew she smiled as she took it, and he let go.

Gingerly, Chloe turned Alistair's head around until he was staring at where his body had once stood. It was no longer there. It must have disappeared shortly after he released his head. Of course it did. It was the only possible outcome.

He felt the gentle caress of Chloe's fingers, felt the brush of her hair against his skin, felt her smile as she rested his head on her neck. Something gave within him. There was a surge, then a pull. He felt Chloe gasp as he did the same.

And they became whole again.

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Ryan Parker wrote this in 2013 as a postgraduate university student in Victoria.