

# LOVEOID



J.L. MORIN

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An American euthanasist and an Egyptian astrological farmer delve into the evolution of the collective soul, as an extremophile virus targets a select few. This present-day, eco-novel chronicles the search for a cure. In combat with media, governments and corporations, Olivia finds love, and comes to question her own ideals. The impossibly mixed match encounters life-threatening obstacles, as Khalid elicits her darkest fears, yet lights the way with astrology and ancient holistic remedies. Will love allow them to stay human?

Literary Fiction; Eco-fiction; Cli-Fi;  
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## Third Eye

*Messages travel on waves. Radio waves are the lowest frequency of the seven waves in the known electromagnetic spectrum. Internet uses a frequency band between radio waves and microwaves. All matter emits waves.*

IN DEEP MEDITATION where all resolves, Oneness sought awareness, and split to become duality.

*Et tu?* thought the woman in black. Even Oneness, to see itself in mirrors of relatedness, divided. Was life a betrayal of death then, or betrayal just an illusion as remorseless as breathing, another word for evolution; no need for indignance, every infraction merely clearing space for life's next spiral.

A peregrine feinted from its perch atop a lone pine and flapped its wings. The wind yawned, stopping the falcon midair. The woman in the black hijab shielded her eyes against the sun and watched the bird, frozen there. Where the infinite embodied itself in the finite. Bird halted in sky. The gust thrashed at the beach below, littered with death tourists.

Tilting its wings, the falcon wafted higher, feathers separating in the wind. Wouldn't that be something, to fly into this long inhalation of Unity's, as it expanded itself indefinitely before exhaling all back to singularity. You just inhaled, and from inspiration back to expiration, and from negative to

positive, no longer thinking in one direction. Life doubted Oneness. It believed in two, moving dialectically from one pole to its opposite, out warm air, in cool, quieting your inner dialogue, till you became your breath.

A favorable crosscurrent carried the bird out to sea, where it circled in hunt of energy. *Predators at the top love the least.* The thought flew across her mind, before a strange experience.

As if the wind strummed up a trinity, she was suddenly looking down at her own body standing on the cliff, next to the man in the khaki shorts. And strikingly, the man, dressed as trendily as a store window (in signature button-down shirt and red tie flapping in the wind), like a mannequin, had no head. He walked right by without taking notice of her.

She was sure now: he couldn't see her, or anything else; she shouldn't take it personally. Did she speak out loud? because the man responded, jarring her back into her body.

"Love!" He turned around to look at her in her hijab, standing there presently. "We can hardly block the masses from coming to the euthanasia hotel."

He hadn't seen the falcon. Axel hadn't seen a lot of things.

She was also in denial, about her out-of-body experience, already putting it down to the conductivity of copper deposits in the red soil,

which did have something to do with it. She could, feel a remarkable energy coiling through her, though, looking at the chest of the seven-foot man. Suspecting his blindness might reveal the missing puzzle piece, she raised her gaze to his neck, to the razor stubble on his jaw, his head there now...

He was scratching his chin. "And why should we? Extinction levels are a thousand times higher because of humans."

The bird soared above a small flock of Dalmatian pelicans, one of hundreds of local species becoming extinct. The pelicans flew through the pageantry of creation as if sharing one mind. The falcon circled twice. Then it pulled its wings into a teardrop.

The woman peered through black sunglasses. "Oh no!" The saliva in her mouth dried up.

The man turned around. "A falcon! It's going to attack."

The predator shot through the azure at a velocity of 200 miles per hour, transparent third eyelid wiping its cornea to maintain moisture as it locked onto its prey. The falcon hit the pelican. The impact sent the fowl spinning, its webbed feet paddling the air in an orchestra of flapping. The awkward freefall ceased. The pelican toppled onto the shallow waves. Life crashed on the beach.

Involvement with finitude consummate, the absolute returned to infinity.

Her breathing had stopped on the exhale, adrenaline coursing.

Elderly bathers emerged from the sea and collapsed on their striped divans. Under shut eyelids, they warmed their dormant genes and dreamt of a world that had forgotten how to hunt, death (and life) sanitized out of existence, and didn't see the falcon's claws extend eight scythes to retrieve the pelican carcass and fly it down the shore, shadow rippling across the cliff face.

Feeling like a detective uncovering an important clue, she beheld this shard of mirror from her mind's eye.

Crickets cajoled, their mating cacophony drowning out the beach-bar radio and leaving the humans on their divans with their naked dilemma: *The loving don't survive.*

## Wargames

*On the waves of Rising Sun FM — Karaoke is bad for your health, a Hong Kong study has found. No one wants the germs from your version of the hits.*

THE PILOT gunned the power over Tokyo's Peninsula Hotel. Nose pointed into the wind, he prepared for vertical descent. Three minutes later, the CEO of Trident Fuel was walking across the helipad at a brisk pace to the elevator.

The other international delegates from disparate sectors were already out of their trench coats and into the stream of corporate consciousness. Trident's CEO ordered his double espresso from the sprightly attendant at the coffee cart, then lingered while everyone waited. Luther Ainsworth's swift maneuvering through a series of cold and conventional wars had grown Trident Fuel Company from 900 billion into a multi-trillion-dollar player. To say he had a high-profile job was a euphemism. His private fleet of jets and helicopters enabled him to give orders anywhere face-to-face on a spectrum of world-shaping issues. But he still managed to keep up his fascination with women. They offered a flavor of warfare requiring Gordian counter-plotting, frontline technology, and improvisational deceit to

effectually undermine their prying, security, and emotional blackmail.

He handed his bomber jacket to the attendant. There was a measure of posturing before wrinkled hands would flip through photocopies. Still mystified by the item that had worked its way up to the top of the agenda, men of importance from top corporations worldwide needed time to congeal. Luther launched into a lengthy humblebrag on forgetting to send flowers to his mistress when he paid her hospital bill.

“What’s she getting?” asked his colleague Shalom, of the Shalom Armaments dynasty.

“Abdominal liposuction.”

“*Ja*. That is *gut*.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You work on your relationship.”



## Survival of the Meanest

*Desert-FM — Humans are exterminating animal and plant species we depend on so quickly that scientists are observing an acceleration in mutations to keep up.*

THIS EVOLUTIONARY PUZZLE always stumped the woman in the black hijab. Why should those who love least rise to the top? “Surely love isn’t a weakness,” she ventured out loud, as if she could rely on a colleague from the euthanasia hotel.

Presenting a slender torso, Axel placed one foot on a rock. He ran his hand over his golden-gray crew cut and peered down at her. The glint in his eyes recaptured the sun, and she was falling into the blue. The Mediterranean swelled to the horizon. A thin line divided a sky of possibility from the turning planet. The sea, languid, a dark blue stripe where the wind whipped the water. “A religious question, Dr. Murchadha.”

Dismissed. The gleam in Axel’s eye gone now, replaced by a mischievous smirk. She was a casual thought left on the cliff. Her headscarf fluttered. “A scientific question. It’s the reason I went into biology! I studied—”

“I know,” his voice authoritative with the British accent, one blue eye open wide, the other relaxed, so close now, she could smell him. She took in his

angular features and prominent nose. The waves below crashed on the shore with its death tourists. "You studied those shrimp that change sexes." He made it sound trite. *His blindness.*

"Only under environmental duress —"

"What was it called, 'Survival of the Sweetest'?"

A fishhook of a question.

"It's a viable hypothesis," scratching his razor stubble, "parthenogenesis caused by a lack of males."

"That was one of the assumptions."

He held her in dubious regard. "But you did suggest that humans are evolving into an asexual species," draining her energy.

"It was about developing a loveoid to let the loving survive." There was no need for further explanation, not after the kakistocracy's icy reception of her love experiment. Axel knew very well that disease struck the ones who refused to vent their stress. He'd done a study showing the gentlest died of cancer, and he also knew her experiment had worked in the short run. He'd taken pictures of her pack of foxes cuddled up with her litter of rabbits.

But he only circulated the pictures taken of Fluffy and Cotton after the chemical suddenly wore off. She could still see their bunny fuzz caught between the blades of grass. To rub it in, her colleagues spread rumors. No doubt he was setting her up for another one of his pranks. He wanted to hear her say she had no desire to have a baby by herself. Far be it

from Olivia to convince scientists about love. Look where it had gotten her with Axel Harrington. Erased from his grant applications. While she was still writing the spiritual thug into hers. Well, she finally figured it out and crossed him off. Their relationship boiled down to cheap competition. She was dancing alone.

His long body balanced past her from foot to foot, button-down shirt rolled up at the sleeves, red tie flapping over his shoulder. The North African sun beat down undeniably. Sand lashed at her sunglasses as she followed his long strides away from the cliff. He had a perfect ass.

\*

As they approached the other biologists, the men's bravado clamored to a halt.

Her features remained placid; if her position had been suppressed, so be it.

The senior epidemiologist, Faucheux, in his vest full of pockets said to her, "Have you found any interesting organ donors, *Docteur?*" The signal. Despite her scarf, the only woman was fair game.

Their chubby Aussie post-doc picked up this info filtering down from the apex, and jabbed next. "No need for other humans, then?"

"A dire need for human organs, though," Faucheux cackled.

She glared at the post-doc, who blushed, then

pretended not to notice.

A prickly pear cast a black shadow on the cliff. Whatever reason they'd give for firing her, it wouldn't be the real one. Spiny fruits lay on the red Earth above the beach with its elderly bodies waiting to die. Her voice was steady, "I'll be the first to admit that ending human lives is the downside of the job."

"Better than to watch them starve," said the post-doc.

"The sun bounced off Fauchaux's bald head. "Don't you worry, even after we kill off our own food supply, this operation will continue."

*Not if they keep on promoting monads*, she didn't say, and couldn't figure out why they were all stunned, as if a door had slammed. They were actually waiting for Axel to mediate.

He moved his body between her and Fauchaux. "In the future, meaning now, the trend will be toward euthanasia hotels."

Everyone nodded, remembering United Nations Resolution 254, *Noting with concern the situation in desertified territories with foreign countries occupying land...* It had been a discreet revolution. Not a line in the newspapers about euthanasia facilities, and look at the demand. Still, the business conditions to attract normal investors did not exist here. Only one risk taker had an appetite for converting hotels to facilities in an area occupied by foreign troops. Once the rule of law was agreed on, their first-

mover advantage would expire, and demand would bring in competition.

Axel took a firm stance, and tried to paint a motivating picture. "Marry tourism with euthanasia, and you've got a noble cause." He remained thankful for present opportunities in disputed regions undergoing desertification, such as this one. Any fighting over whose laws to apply was convenient. "The problem is the solution." Gray areas made it possible to satisfy a clientele expanding beyond the terminally ill, to include people making rational lifestyle choices.

"I'm going back to the hotel," she said.

Faucheux took a nail clipper out of his pocket. "*Eh oui*, that'll do you good."

But in the end, the men followed Dr. Murchadha along the sandstones covered with scribbles of snail film, and tried not to step on these steady creatures as they marked the pathway to their inner child. On a plant at eye-level went a homeless species without a shell. From this perspective, its slimy body dwarfed a crow flying in the distance. The nine-centimeter slug was ascending a stem leading nowhere. The climber's mucous membrane gleamed in the dew. *You'll be surprised at at the heights I reach...*

"How inspiring, we probably could have it all, if we knew the way to ask," she said. Equipped with both male with female organs, the magnificent hermaphrodite required a two-way exchange of sperm with another slug to proliferate. About the

same size as the slug, a heavy Anglo woman padded onto the sea terrace. Four more women passed behind the branches. Suddenly, a troop of young Arab studs spilled out onto the meeting point. Perfume wafted from a jasmine bush flowering behind the ladies. They waited stock-still.

*A curious relationship.* Dr. Murchadha almost missed the next stepping stone. These unlikely couples had riddled North African resorts for centuries. Sometimes they went so far as to marry, sometimes for more than a visa: for everafter. She had seen a picture of an enormous Welsh bride of sixty contentedly seated next to a youthful stick-figure. The way the old girl basked in her young lover's glory! As if he was the new black.

"These fatties are starving?" the post-doc muttered.

The young Arabs appraised the situation with an air of resignation. It took a degree of professionalism to pull it off, never mentioning the obvious. They let the women make eye contact, then responded to their body language in choosing partners, bantering warmly with the over-ripe ladies, while taking care never to talk to each other. The youths' total lack of machismo was uncanny, despite being witnessed by their peers! A bargain was a bargain. For a month's earnings, the trade was apparently worth it. Even the stud paired with an extremely obese woman didn't show signs of distaste.

Axel looked away in disgust.

Faucheux clapped him on the back. "*Eh bien*, it's

nothing, a little survival of the fittest.”

Axel rolled his eyes. “The fattest.”

“Sure,” she agreed. “Because our systems haven’t totally undermined natural selection, outsourcing our children, incarcerating any advantages evolution might have fitted us with — ”

“And animals are better?” the Aussie post-doc said.

“No,” she said in a schoolteacher tone. “Animals are much better. They don’t destroy their habitat.”

It was up to Faucheux to defend the status quo. “Thanks God for death tourists coming at *L’Hôtel Dido*. *Au contraire*, let them spend their last moments on Earth luxuriating with the natives.”

She walked tall.

The post-doc gasconaded at her heels. “What about that beer?”

“Since you set yourself so high above beast, you should have no trouble delaying gratification.”

“Oooo,” they all guffawed and patted the Aussie on the back. “Another man castrated. Back you go!”

Amanda frowned, unsure of her part in any emasculation, yet positive they weren’t evolving in the right direction. It must be hard to be a man.

Axel lit up. “I’m chuffed to bits.” A mischievous smile played across his lips. “See, I follow the rules.”

She gazed at him with an eye used to resolving paradoxes. It was clear. She needed to go back to yearning, with nothing to yearn for.

“At least Dr. Murchadha’s got the love thing

figured out." Axel was a hopeless flirt. Only kindling burned in that cold heart.

"Now if I can just figure out the work thing."

"The work thing's un-figure-utable," Axel said. "The market is saturated. It doesn't need us or our work."

Sweat beaded on the post-doc's forehead. "Truth! Did you see last week's death toll from opioids?"

Axel stared into a poisonous oleander.

"It may well be the moment for a *petit apéritif*," Faucheux agreed.

"Aye, mate. Com'on Axel, it's on me."

"If money's not a problem, it will be."

The post-doc lengthened his strides. "I can already taste that cold brew."

"All's well in the cosmos," Axel said.

Churlish dimples pierced the post-doc's cheeks. "Axel Harrington, you're an alien."

"Bollocks."

"No, really, my research suggests humans are not from Earth."

The swarm of epidemiologists arrived at Hôtel Dido's back entrance. Squeezing into the glass elevator, she pressed zero and turned around. "You know why there are no aliens on Earth?"

"Why, Dr. Murchadha?" Axel settled his gaze on the tops of their heads.

"They overpopulate their environment before they ever achieve interstellar travel."

Her colleagues tried not to laugh, and looked out



the windows. The glass elevator hummed.

Axel watched the sand blowing across the terrace. "Let's just be thankful for glorious Nature abounding." They ascended over two young men coming up the steps. Axel straightened up to his full height and hit his head on the ceiling. "Blimey! Can I get one of those? Makes me never want to date British blokes again. Oh wow, look. He's so dreamy, so sensual, and at the same time, so manly..."

*Mercy!* She couldn't stand it when he gushed. He could be so porous, outside infiltrating as he leaked into the world. He'd suffocate her. Even if love was just a chemical reaction, she needed some in return. The view of the sea came up. She prayed for another fish. One with Axel's intellect and understanding, a non-smoker, more masculine...

Following Axel's gaze to the sidewalk below the torrid elevator, she scrutinized the well-built worker. He had a goatee. Gold chains glimmered against his white T-shirt. She looked back at Axel, the unattainable, usurping her being. It burned. She felt the suffocating need to get on with her life. She'd even congratulate him on getting his grant, if it meant she didn't have to work with him anymore.

A bead of sweat trickled down her back. She unwrapped the headscarf.

The worker looked up just as Olivia Murchadha's blonde hair came tumbling onto fair shoulders.

She saw him smile.

## The Chorus

*All existence and energy will continue to recur in self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time and space, the waves of Eternal Return.*

THE UNAVOIDABLE QUANDARY soon had accents competing at the other end of the table. The chairman raised his gavel and broke up the noise. “Gentlemen. You’re probably all wondering why the pharmaceutical industry has invited the insurance, fuel, armaments and other sectors to a meeting of this scale — ”

The CEO of an insurance conglomerate puffed his chest. “Who ever heard of such a thing?”

The shuffle subsided.

“Despite our differences, our businesses do have one very important thing in common: they depend on fear. Fear is what keeps people supporting foreign wars, buying oil and insurance and medicating, and fear is what is going to get us out of our current predicament.”

The chairman, not a CEO himself, struggled to rally the egos on display around a nouveau-ancient disease no longer trapped in Arctic ice. To get them to wrap their minds around the virus he came at it from different angles, first describing a dormant seed awaiting favorable conditions to sprout, and

making the painful mistake of introducing new vocabulary. A 'frozen morphology' reanimated when unfrozen was met with unfortunate wisecracks. Now he was trying to explain, without sounding like a lunatic, how the virus had circulated in the air millions of years before the dawn of man, and guess the reason the modern human immune system had no remembrance of the prehistoric plague.

Luther pushed his microphone aside and raised his voice. "This pandemic simply does not exist."

So the chairman raised *his* voice, "...threatening our leadership if this virus becomes a pandemic."

A chorus of panic seized the floor: *Like that flu in Alaska in 1928? It broke out when researchers extracted the frozen cadaver of a woman from the ice, and she killed 100 million people. Five percent of the world's population. Six times the number killed in World War I.*

Luther looked the board members in the eye. "There really is nothing more deadly than a frigid woman."

The chairman squirmed. A look of helplessness undermined his authority.

Desprez from Sanifree Pharmaceutical struggled to switch on his microphone, "...confusing it with the Spanish flu of 1918."

A Spanish CEO interrupted. "Which did not originate in Spain. We were blamed because we were neutral in World War One without press censorship."

"It doesn't pay to be neutral," Luther said.

The CEOs shifted in their seats. An Italian aristocrat took off his Solebans. "Let us not waste time." Now global warming had re-evolved a more hopeless scourge. The possibility of even wilder mutations raised the unwelcome spectre of actual devolution.

"A dozen intelligence agencies have turned over every known cell," the chairman stated. "It doesn't appear to be coming from a known terrorist organization, and none has claimed it."

*Unless Nature's getting in on the terrorism.*

Consensus. They would mount a scientific offensive.

"Gentlemen, let's get down to business. Sanifree Pharmaceutical will present."

Jealous glares fell on the Big Pharma rep. Desprez's wrinkles deepened as he leaned forward again and mouthed a full paragraph before switching on his mic, "...so the hunt for a cure may take too long."

There were a few Mona Lisa smiles. For many, leaving already-afflicted colleagues without a cure would boost their own profits; they just didn't want to catch it themselves.

A suggestion was put forward to fund a preventative medicine. Desprez halted them with his hand. "There's one already being researched." A situation that pleased many. "An unnamed private individual in Monaco has offered to match our

grant.”

*We know who that is.* Board members shuffled through the papers in front of them.

“The funding’s for a loveoid. It works like a vaccine,” Desprez said, “by changing the body’s chemistry to mimic a state of euphoria, much like love. This ‘loveoid’ sets off an effective immune response that we hope will block the mutation.”

“Who’s going to develop the loveoid?” a Norwegian asked.

“A team has already conducted advanced research in the field,” said Desprez. “Two candidates stand out as potential team leaders.”

“This Axel Harrington’s qualified, but look at these delays in his deliverables. He takes too long,” Shalom said.

An uncalled-for smirk twinged Luther’s face. “The woman on the team has a very relevant background. Where’s she applied for funding?”

“With us.” An American from Biogenetic Vaccines, Inc. retrieved the woman scientist’s grant application. He put it up on the screen. It looked precise with reputable sources in footnotes.

A Chinese delegate shook his head. “The man works in more laboratories. He has two times more experience nearly with animal testing.”

“But lacks the desired character traits,” Luther countered.

“We’re not going to bed with them,” said the Brit.

A chuckle rippled down the table. Everyone knew

the Brits would back Axel. All talked at once. Comments shot across the room.

“Be serious. People need leaders to tell them what to do. We’re talking about an incalculable threat. We need a cure, yesterday.”

“Don’t throw good money after bad. We already threw a two-hundred-thousand-dollar crumb to the Axel guy. It’s been three months, and he’s gotten exactly nowhere.”

“Because it wasn’t his idea,” said the American.

“Because he’s spending our precious time looking for a higher bidder to offer his vaccine to,” said the Italian.

“Should we let him know we represent ALL the bidders?” said Desprez.

“Let him figure *something* out.” Luther signalled to the chair to wrap it up. “Seriously. We need a loyal worker bee.”

“Just give it to the woman. She’s programmed to follow instructions. She graduated at the top of her class,” said Shalom. “She’s a drone.”

Hotel pen twirling on thumb, “He’s right. We need an overachiever who follows the rules,” Luther agreed.

An Argentinian’s boney hands crumpled up a memo page. “A meeting gone mad. Come on, the woman?”

“I wouldn’t underestimate the woman,” the American said. “Her loveoid is backed with solid scientific evidence.”

"She could be tougher than the man. Professional women feel they have to compensate," said Shalom. "Nowadays they use artificial insemination and raise their children on their own."

"I'm not sure I trust the woman," said the Brit.

The others reacted: *I'm sure I don't trust the man...ninety-four percent of prison inmates are men.*

*Hey, we're gonna need those guys to fight our next war.*

*Give the woman a chance and she'll outperform him.*

*Her proposal actually implies a man over forty-five isn't qualified: you have to be able to experience love to understand what to look for in a loveoid.*

The men of experience sized each other up: gray slate smeared with the chalk of intrigue and game, where love had been erased. Another chuckle rippled around the table. "Men don't love much."

The chorus prevailed:

*It's true. We don't.*

*I bet women become more loving with age.*

*Another one of life's little jokes.*

"Give it to her. The loveoid was her idea in the first place," said Shalom.

"*Peu importe,*" Desprez said. "All the more reason not to let her develop it."

"She *has* been working on it for years," said the Spaniard.

Luther banged his fist on the table. "Get it done."

The chairman held his gavel suspended in the air. "A show of hands."

A forest of hands sprung from white and gray sleeves.

“Pass.”

“The beauty of it is, she’s still a woman.” Luther was determined to profit from this expensive detour. “She’ll be so busy trying to prove herself, it won’t occur to her to disobey.”

“And if she does, our man Facheux will handle her.” Desprez packed his briefcase.

Luther stood over him. “You’ll be able to afford that after the loveoid comes out.”

Their fate entrusted to the woman, the CEOs rolled out their plan to disseminate the upcoming loveoid amongst themselves.



## The New Black

*Scientists recently found one-billion-year-old fungi in Canada, changing the way we view evolution and the timing of plants and animals here on Earth.... Previous estimates were that the first land plants existed around 470 million years ago and animals around 580 to 500 million years ago.*

— *Forbes*, May 23, 2019

THE BLAST of cool air calmed the epidemiologists. They stepped into the lobby of Hôtel Dido.

The checkered marble floor was polished to a shine. The wall fountain had been turned off due to the drought, the coins picked over, but the jellyfish chandelier maintained the decorum. A cook in an apron crossed the lobby carrying a bowl with a cloth over it and placed it in a refrigerated counter of cakes too perfect to be good. The bronze wall clock behind the reception showed they were eighteen minutes early for lunch.

A tide of people crowded into the lobby, blocking the scientists' passage. Olivia halted, Axel bumped up against her, and Faucheux against Axel. There they waited while the old people ambled past.

Axel's body stayed pressed against hers. Shackled to the past, Olivia's heart was dying to deceive itself again. She had to stop forgetting and forget. Throw

herself into her work, rewrite her grant application for the ninth time.

Feet planted on a black square, Faucheux lit into Olivia. "Let's focus more on reality, shall we? The sick and dying here in front of us."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning a plain anti-viral would be more practical than your little experiment," he said.

He had a way of driving out the best. "It's not the virus that's harmful," Olivia said.

They all stared at her. She noticed Axel flinch. So the \$200,000 funding he'd just received from a UK pharmaceutical was based on the virus premise. Well, that was his problem. He wouldn't be getting a second round of funding without her. She was way ahead of him with her loveoid theory. For Axel, love was a tired game. What a fool she'd been to try to explain it. Some people would never get it.

"*Mais non*. What is it then?" Faucheux demanded over his glasses, eager to hear her theory. "Are you going to tell us?"

Words were trading at such a deep discount; there could only ever be one answer: "Maybe."

"*Eh bien?*"

"Nature has ways of recycling," she said evasively.

"Recycling, and?"

"These scattered fatalities don't fit the mathematics of exponential growth. They're clearly not caused by the virus itself."

“What is it then!”

Olivia looked at her nemesis with a pitying smile. Faucheux only understood symptoms of power. As if she *could* let him in on the Nature of love.

Now that she'd landed in this exile, a mile away from the main facility, to do what headquarters termed 'meaningless work', redundancy was brewing again. She felt it. She had the same bitter taste in her mouth as the last time her job was reshuffled. The machine was in motion. There was nothing she could do to stop it. She exhaled, and cast a pearl. “I don't know, but it's more than the virus.”

Faucheux scoffed, “*Genre.*”

\*

Olivia had to respect these decisive folks padding across the checkered marble, eager for their luxurious going-out party and orientation to the beyond. Those on the lengthening wait lists were more likely to suffer from broken hearts or uncertain futures than one of life's random death sentences. The sick, dispirited and elderly took advantage of this last chance to form meaningful friendships before the transition. Check-in was always heart-wrenching to watch.

A young woman bumped into her. “Oh, sorry. I guess I must be looking forward to this.”

Another death tourist turned to Olivia. “You lasses aren't exactly octogenarians.”

Olivia smiled.

He rocked on his heels. "They seh t'final act is quite painless, but..."

"It is," Olivia said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, ah don't even know you," the old man said.

"That's OK," the young woman said. "We're in this together." Their freedom to die a voluntary death with dignity had been hard-won. People had been killed defending it. The martyrs who died for your sins. Warriors who met heroic death. Poets. Gurus. The wall was lined with quotes from Jesus, Homer, Rilke, Osho, whose words squarely granted *the fundamental right, for those after living enough and tiring of dragging unnecessarily...to leave the body.*

"Well, it's gran' ta hear what others think about it," the Yorkshire relic said. "I was hoping to find like-minded fowk here. That's what kept me going while ah was making t' arrangements."

"Me too," the middle-aged woman said.

"It's not that ah have a terminal illness or anything, but what with all the drought, food prices are just so high. I'm down to my last 2000 quid. Ah couldn't make up my mind anymore whether it was worth getting art of bed in the morning. I'm tormented by the thought of losing my mental faculties. You know, ah almost missed the bus to the airport weighing t' possibilities, thinking about the physical pain that was going ta come if ah didn't nip on, but doubting that ah really could choose to go

my way.”

“Of course you can. I spent my last dime on the plane ticket, too. Then I had to stop over in three countries. If I wait any longer, I won’t be able to go the way I want to.”

“And ‘ow’s that?”

“In a bubble bath.”

“Oh, that’s gran’,” the old man said.

“With violin music,” the woman ventured.

“Oh aye, surely. It’s a wee choice,” the old man said. “It’s our choice, any way we want, they seh.”

For a moment Olivia felt almost important. She softened, and broke her own rules, saying to Axel, “You see, it’s a meaningful job. This is how it should be. The whole world needs to put more love into their work.”

Axel acquiesced in his own brand of passive-aggressive solidarity, “I can’t complain about the variety of human specimens.”

Olivia’s smile froze. And he was her most evolved colleague. How would she ever get what she needed from modern man? A motor was running where his heart should have been. He was completely different when they first met. They must be stuck on some kind of track.

How had love turned to hate? She didn’t believe in alchemy. His feelings toward her couldn’t have metamorphosed so absolutely. Love and hate had to be two poles of the same phenomenon. She took stock of her polarity with Axel, his eyes stone-

cold as if looking at a lobby full of cadavers. You could never pinpoint the moment when love ceased and hate began. Maybe it started with some unspoken doubt. Reconciliation would be a midpoint, where shades of like and dislike were indistinguishable. There was no borderline, just degrees of love/hate, like a thermometer showing degrees of heat or cold or whatever duality the veil pretended to separate, light/dark, East/West. The difference was only a matter of degree.

He still smelled nice.

## Euthanasia

*Medical reports treat assisted suicide the same as euthanasia, despite its other positions in law.*

THOUGH THE JOB wasn't paid as well as working at headquarters, the facility was the best of its kind in the host country. Hôtel Dido had gone above and beyond its remit as the product of a concession in the 2018 United Nations bargain to alleviate overpopulation and bring aid to a climate scorched region. Even if the locals didn't necessarily agree with the cause, many staff members were filled with a sense of purpose, like the waiter proudly jangling his keys while unlocking the door to the bar, and the concierge, who was waving to attract her attention.

She waved back and excused herself. A chance to get out of morning beers with her co-workers. She avoided eye-contact and let the men meander through the lobby in Brownian motion toward the bar for their round before lunch.

Olivia nudged through the crowd.

"Dr. Murchadha!" the concierge said, "How are you?" As a member of the HumanTouch Committee, he made a point of noting hotel residents' moods. She focused on his gold name bar. Latif had her sign a registered mail form and handed over an ordinary looking envelope. The word 'confidential' nagged at

her. Olivia braced herself and slid her finger under the flap. The lobby spun. She tilted it away from the concierge.

He said without flinching, "You are fired."

Olivia's fingers tightened around the letter.

"I am kidding. Ha, ha, ha."

She gasped, hands trembling. The HumanTouch committee had gone overboard. She tried to control herself. Stunned, she stared at the letter regarding her grant acceptance. Her heart leapt. Finally! The next line took her breath away.

Latif shot her a quizzical look.

She blinked to be sure of what she was seeing. She got the grant. Yep, there was her name, and the list of her proposed teammates. But this was not just a grant. It was the largest grant she'd ever heard of. She counted the zeros again. A seven billion dollar grant! She'd heard of four billion to bring a medicine to market, but never this much. Was that really the value of her research? Was that the value of anything? *...funding for tests on animals and humans.* The letterhead was from Biogenetic Vaccines, Inc.

Olivia looked over her shoulder to see if anyone was paying attention to her. Frail tourists fidgeted in line. The trees outside waved in the wind. She was no longer stuck in this familiar pattern, though no one seemed to notice, unless you counted the trees. She recalled that case where the plants were used as witnesses in a murder trial.

The note paper quivered in her hand: *...to develop*



*a loveoid for treatment of the unloving as a preventative measure in order to penetrate the neural cortex...and enable mankind to escape the fate of pre-Neolithic civilizations...*

Of what? She'd never mentioned research on any ancient civilizations. As far as she knew, there was no such thing as pre-Neolithic civilization. *And why the 'Strictly Confidential' stamped in red on the top of the page?* Her proposal was to derive the loveoid from biochemical processes in the brains of people who died while feeling love. Nothing to do with prehistoric caves. She'd proposed finding a formula using data on slides from biopsies, but the money was for sifting through North African archeological sites! — "Whose idea was that?" escaped her lips.

Latif cleared his throat. "Can I help?"

Outside the lobby, the wind blew swirls of sand around the tree trunks. Subject, object; her, the trees. And still, she had the feeling one more thing was seeing her seeing the trees. The palm tops waved with a conviction suggesting consciousness. Their leaves vibrated so intensely in the wind, they appeared at rest, the fracas ready to tip off the scale of human perception. Sunlight flashed through the leaves.

"Thank you," her lips mouthed. Things were about to happen for her, she could feel it. She'd never stayed anywhere this long. Five years. The wind subsided. She had the feeling she was no longer alone. A mandala of sun was shining through

the palm leaves, casting red, yellow, violet rays in all directions.

She was due for a change. Something had to give. The hope of meaningful work coursed through her veins. As with the spectrum of light and the scale of musical notes, when you reached an extreme, you returned to the next band of colors, or higher octave. If you travelled east around the world, you arrived back at west. If love was simply a higher vibration of hate, where there was love, so was hate. Then she should be able to raise the vibration along the axel of polarization and bring back the love. Nature tended toward the positive...

A black taxi pulled up to the entryway. Waves of heat emanated from the hood.

She felt dizzy. *Seven billion!* A massive grant. Twice the amount she'd asked for. Nobody ever got more, always less. Olivia looked around the lobby to see if anyone was watching. No one was. The letter instructed her to communicate by encrypted email. There was a link and a code comprised of a long string of numbers and letters. She punched them in, and wrote a short note thanking her funders and accepting the grant. She folded the paper and put it in her front pocket. Lips pressed shut, a smile escaped.

"OK. You have received good news. Please accept my congratulations," the concierge said. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" Olivia was about to move out of his range when he added, "How does

it feel?"

*Feel?* Her gaze drifted to the entrance where the porter was waving his hands; there was no convincing the taxi to move out of the way. *It feels a little numb.* This kind of backing was the definition of success in her field, in any field, the Elysian Fields. It would change her relations with the team. Axel would freeze over with envy. She'd have better things to do than dream of his long body stretched beside her like a python sizing up its prey.

Seven minutes till lunch. The others were drinking their beers in the hotel bar. No Axel. He'd shed them like old skin.

By now he must be coiled in the shade with his mouth open...she remembered lying next to him, and the nightmare he had. How she tried tipping him back to love, marveling at his magnificent animal health *for your age*, but her flattery only exacerbated his fear of dying...in the nightmare, he had been sitting beside his own deathbed, consoling his morbid self, clinging to the life inside his healthy self. He'd spent his savings to keep his withered self alive. She watched helplessly as he fretted over how he was going to survive the inevitable. The fear went against everything he'd ever learned. Though he kept his body in tremendous condition, he couldn't shake off this dread, from witnessing overpopulation, extinction. Tossing and turning into a series of symbols, he'd just about invented an entire language, when he awoke stupefied at the

good fortune of his continuance. Lying there next to her, Axel stretched his full length...

But she wasn't going to let him charm her into a basketcase. *It feels like hell.* "And you?"

The concierge grinned, teeth clenched, and pointed to a colorful brochure on the reception desk. "Happy. Management wants people to be happy, happy to live, happy to die." He handed her the brochure touting...*a smart system offering customized experiences to connect with guests at every stage of their transition...*

A few old people brambled up to the reception. The concierge handed them brochures. One gasped, turning the page. "Ever arrive in a beachside town and lose all motivation to die?"

"I'll say," her emaciated cohort said. "I wanna go last." Waves of heat radiated from the cars outside the windows with etchings so you didn't walk through. The porter was shouting at the taxi to pull over so a van could get by. The taxi's black windows remained closed.

Olivia's heart beat faster. She flipped through the brochure. Glossy pages offered an array of *mindful* choices: *Massage therapy and cupping. Morphine derivatives and opioids, caring staff, comfortable room with view of the Mediterranean...Final Companions' Escort Service...step-by-step advice on how to savor a realm of new experiences including upgrading to a perfect partner...leading inevitably to the transition.*

The two young workers, one thin, with a

constellation of acne on his cheeks, the other built with the gold chains, sauntered through the service entrance. Adrenaline pumping, Olivia squinted to get a better look at the one Axel admired. She closed the brochure, hands shaking with jealousy. The title page stared up at her. *How Arab Lovers are Making the World a Better Place*. Unforgettable, especially since the ad would later pop up on her phone. For fear of the many becoming one, she turned the brochure over.

“Chic, is it not?” the concierge asked.

“ ‘Going into the universal plasma’ sounds better than staying alive.”

“See? It works!” the concierge said. “We celebrate everything. We celebrate day, and when day ends, we celebrate night!”

\*

The two workers stepped out of the service elevator next to the reception. Over the noise, the scrawny worker exclaimed in Arabic, “Look at all these people here for assisted suicide!”

“They’re trying to kill us,” said the built worker whose goatee almost hid the scar on his neck.

“These old people want to kill us?”

“They want to reduce the Arab population.”

“Says who?” the thin worker asked.

“*Daesh*.”

At the mention of ISIL, Olivia avoided eye contact.

She dusted off her Arabic. As she eavesdropped, the brochure slipped from her hand. It fluttered onto a black square.

The muscular worker stopped in his tracks. "Oh Allah! The blonde."

Olivia blushed, triggering his fascination. She stole a glance at the worker. His eyes smoldered with sensuality. Her stomach descended to the basement; common sense left her head.

"*Laisse tomber*, Khalid," the thin worker said. "Don't pick her paper up for her. She's old enough to be your mother."

"What's she doing here?"

"Who cares? She doesn't want you. They're all brainwashed."

Khalid went on staring. "*Elle est belle.*"

The thin worker glanced at Olivia and conceded, "OK, she's hot. What's that she's wearing?"

"Business smart."

The thin worker gazed at his friend with the admiration often shown Khalid, not just for his good looks, but because he thought things through. Most people went along with everybody else, but Khalid made up his own mind, and seized opportunities other people missed, even if some were too far-fetched. He was as free as you could be.

\*

The clock above the concierge's head said four

minutes till lunch. In the mirror, Olivia could see the black taxi outside blocking the driveway. A bus pulled up behind it and started honking. Passengers without a single gray hair descended into the lobby. Youthful guests started to hand in their passports at the reception. "Now I've seen everything," Olivia said.

The concierge leaned closer. "They come through a dating app."

"As in online dating?"

"Yes. Swipe to choose the perfect partner to assist."

"Assist!"

The concierge straightened the brochures. "They're going to be euthanized by a perfect partner."

"Perfect in what respect?"

"In every respect they checked off. Slim, bubbly, soft-spoken, spiritual, whatever they want. We hire them from a local acting school." Latif was looking over her head.

Olivia turned around.

The four doors of the taxi opened at the same time. Two men in black hoods jumped out bearing Kalashnikovs. One punched the van driver. They made for the hotel entrance.

The commotion beyond the revolving door silenced the two workers. *A fight out front.* All heads turned.

The porter tried to stop the aggressors. Folks were

backing away from the entrance, when another hooded man hurled the porter through the window. The glass entryway shattered.

People gasped. Everyone froze, gaping in horror as four hooded men in dark uniform charged through the broken window and hauled a bazooka in after them. The hooded men took control of the lobby. Mutually exclusive, they aimed at the flock.

The men yelled their final prayer to Allah.

Olivia screamed.



## Where to Find Arab Lovers

*Demonstrators took to the streets to protest government inaction, after drought and severe dust storms caused the deaths of more than 1,500,000 people...*

KHALID LUNGED. His arms encircled his queen as they fell to the checkered floor, under the spray of bullets.

Those who didn't dive also fell.

A fireball zoomed overhead and exploded behind the reception. The blast sent shards of glass flying everywhere. Everyone who could scream was screaming.

Olivia kept her eyes scrunched shut and clung to the hunk covering her.

Through the smoke, Khalid could see the torso of the concierge, still standing erect at the reception. Unable to peel Olivia off him, he lifted his trophy up with him and looked over the reception counter, Khalid's eyes widened.

Olivia opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She gaped at the concierge's neck, burnt plastic with melted wires sticking out where his head had been. His blue suit jacket was burning.

Sparks flared. [end of sample — get *Loveoid* on [Amazon](#), [Smashwords](#), [Kobo](#), [Nook](#)...]