

Change for the Machine

A short story about alien abduction; set in Stockport, just a little in the future.

“Frank would have said his future was likely to mirror that of his dad. But the multiverse can play tricks on even the most boring life.”

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Frank Hartley was enjoying his usual Sunday at home, dreading Monday morning. The fact that most of the world dreaded Mondays too didn't make him feel any better. Jimmy was looking at him hopefully; the poor dog hadn't been out since breakfast. Jimmy was a mixture, a Heinz, a real fifty seven varieties, as Paula often said. Part Terrier, with a huge chunk of Labrador, Jimmy was keen to get out and empty his bladder, maybe his bowels too.

“Ok lad, I need cigarettes anyway.”

It's strange how all of us assume the multiverse and pure luck, good or bad, will leave us alone to get on with our lives. Frank was fifty one and rarely thought about the future. If pushed, he'd have probably expected to moan about Monday morning until he retired and then concentrated on his hobbies for another ten or so years. Death was morbid, something he'd never talked about to his family, as if hiding might make it miss him. Somewhere in him lurked a memory of his father, dying in hospital when he was seventy seven. If pushed pretty hard, which no one had ever done, Frank would have said his future was likely to mirror that of his dad. But the multiverse can play tricks on even the most boring life. Frank put on his slippers and threw on a threadbare jumper. October in Stockport was cold. Not Russian winter cold, but cold enough.

“Come on Jimmy, time for a walk.”

Frank spent most of his time in the converted attic of their house; it was where he brought his friends. A comfortable conversion with heating and a dormer window, so that he could look out at the Stockport weather. A sort of gender apartheid had happened in their home, an unintended separation of his wife and her friends, from him and his. They loved each other and their sex life was fantastic, for people their age. It was just that they had few interests in common and some of his friends were a bit abrasive, as were some of hers. Their daughter, Becky, was still living at home and was treated as a neutral nation, allowed to inhabit both camps. Gender integration just hadn't suited Frank and Paula, loving co-existence did.

“I'm going out for cigarettes.” He said. “Anyone want anything?”

His wife was on her own in the lounge, watching something loud on the TV.

“No, but take Jimmy for a walk or he'll explode.”

“Yes, he's coming with me.”

Jimmy's lead hung by the door and there was the usual frantic excited barking as he reached for it. Becky put her head round the kitchen door.

“Pilchards dad.” She said. “Get a big tin of pilchards and I'll do us all pilchards on toast.”

Becky was looking at his slippers and worn out jumper.

“You can't go out like that, it's a cold night dad.”

“I'll be fine, I'm only going to Scar's shop.”

As he closed the front door, a biting wind hit him. There was something wicked about the coldness of the wind in Stockport, it seemed to come straight off the arctic tundra. Not that his dog cared, Jimmy was still jumping about.

“Oh, you could have at least waited until we crossed the street.”

His dog evacuated his nether regions into the gutter outside their door and there was no way Frank was going to clear that mess up. No one was around and he rarely cleared up after his pet in cold weather.

“Come on boy, I’m freezing.”

Scar’s shop was just over the road. It was run by an Asian family now, but it had been owned by a guy called Scar in the fifties and would probably always be known as Scar’s. It had once been a proper newsagents who sold a few tinned goods. Now it seemed to survive by selling cheap booze and dodgy cigarettes from under the counter. There was a pretty young Asian girl behind the counter. Frank nodded at her and went to find tinned pilchards. They knew him of course, he was a regular. They never even made a fuss when he brought Jimmy into the shop.

“Got any pilchards?”

“Back wall, near the loo rolls.”

A few large tins, a bit dusty and looking neglected. Still, tinned stuff lasted forever, everyone knew that. He put the tin on the counter and gave his usual nod of the head towards the right of the counter.

“Forty ciggies.”

Illegal imports, counterfeit from China? He didn’t know or care about the origin of the cigarettes. They hit the right spot and cost a lot less than the famous brands. Twenty was no good, he’d smoke them all before bedtime. Forty would give him enough to take him through another Monday morning. Frank looked at his change and there was just a single pound coin.

“Can you break a ten pound note?” He asked. “Change for the machine.”

They were everywhere once, in the mini-cab office, even the chip shop had once had two of them. Then the law changed and the gambling machines had almost vanished from his neighbourhood. Scar’s had one though, in an alcove, behind a curtain made of plastic strips, with ‘Staff only,’ written above it. No one was ever going to inform the local council, it was just about the only local entertainment they had. Betting shops in the town centre had more modern machines. You could lose a month’s pay on them without realising it. The machine in Scar’s was older, less brutal if you lost. The pretty young girl was frowning.

“Sorry. Lots of fifty pence pieces, but no pound coins.” She said. “There’s the Shell garage.”

It wasn’t far, but it was cold and his slippers were wearing a bit thin in places. Jimmy didn’t care of course, he had a nice thick built in fur coat.

“Don’t you get the coins when they empty it?”

“Sorry. It’s my dad who deals with all that.”

“Ok.”

Frank would never admit to being hooked on that machine, but he set out to trudge a good two hundred yards against a biting wind. It wasn’t worth going home for his car. Besides, Paula would wonder why he needed car keys to buy ciggies. He dug his hands into his trouser pockets, lowered his head and trudged towards the lights of the Shell petrol station. His fingers were numb, by the time he needed to dig a ten pound note out of his wallet. He knew the guy behind the glass payment window of course, he knew just about everyone in the area.

“Hi Sammy, can you spare some pound coins?”

Sammy nodded at him and exchanged his crisp new ten pound note for a pile of grubby and heavy pound coins. To Frank that handful of coins meant a few minutes of excitement and the chance to win big money.

“Thanks Sammy.”

Jimmy had used the opportunity to pee against the office wall. Frank began the trudge back to the machine, the biting wind now behind him. He was about halfway back, just crossing the road near the chip shop, when something happened.

“Wait a minute boy.”

Frank had to lean against a no parking sign, hoping the dizziness passed. He knew that it was important to keep your extremities warm as you got older. His son, Patrick had joined the police and now lived in Preston. Patrick seemed to believe that being a copper made him an expert at everything. He was always giving him unwanted advice, like wearing sensible winter clothing. A stroke ? Just thinking of the possibility made his heart beat faster. He closed his eyes for a good five minutes. The world had stopped spinning and Jimmy was sat there, looking up at him.

“Better now.”

He stroked his dog and carried on walking, thinking that something didn't look quite right. There had been single yellow lines for years, but now they were double lines. And the streetlights were no longer yellow, the light was a harsh, almost daylight white. It had to be his mind, maybe just a minor stroke ?

“Looks like a trip to see the doctor Jimmy.”

Whatever else his memory might be playing tricks with, Scar's shop was still there. The familiar red painted woodwork, the same stickers on the window, advertising Coca-Cola. But it wasn't the same ! Frank stopped and looked at the words above the shop door.

‘Westway News.’

That hadn't been there earlier, he'd have bet his life on it. For the first time Frank began to think there was something very wrong with the world, something that had nothing to do with his mental state. Still, he had the coins and despite everything, he wanted to use the machine.

“You can't bring a dog in here !”

A middle aged man, an Asian guy he didn't recognise. The shop was different too, there was food, proper food. There was even a section for fruit and veg, some of it looked quite good. As for the plastic strip door to the betting machine ? That had gone, replaced by a strong looking wooden door, with ‘No Admittance,’ on it. Frank nodded at the door.

“I was in earlier.” He said. “I just want to use the machine.”

“What machine ?”

“You know..... the betting machine.”

The middle aged man wasn't smiling at him. Instead he was examining the man wearing slippers, who'd brought a dog into his shop.

“That was the previous owner ! There's nothing here now for the likes of you.”

For the likes of him ! Frank was a qualified heating engineer, he had the certificates to prove it. Something was wrong with the world and just maybe an early night might cure it.

“Sorry.” He muttered.

He stood by the kerb and closely examined his house. Nothing had changed ! Same curtains in the lounge, same orange glow from a lamp in the corner, same light in the hallway. Frank crossed the road and put his key in the lock.

“Crap Jimmy ! Is it just you and me who are normal ?”

His key wouldn't turn in the lock, no matter how much he fiddled with it. He opened the letterbox, intending shout out for his wife. That might bring the neighbours out though and Paula would never forgive him for that. It had to be a minor stroke. Maybe his memory was screwed up ? Frank calmed himself and pressed the doorbell. At least the chimes were the same. He saw the light in the hallway

change, as the lounge door was opened. Paula opened the door and seemed shocked by his presence. He looked down and saw the same slippers and worn cardigan that he'd been wearing when he left.

"Sorry." He said. "I know I've been a while, but I went to get change for the machine."

She was backing away from him and looking terrified. She looked him up and down a few more times before beginning to scream.

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A month later and Frank was still sleeping on the sofa in the attic. It was a comfortable sofa, but he missed sleeping in his own bed. He missed sleeping with Paula.

"Give her time dad." Becky had told him. "You were gone for ten years."

Ten years ! Becky was the only one who didn't have an accusing look in her eyes. How could anyone go out for cigarettes on a Sunday night and return ten years later ? Especially as he had no memory at all of where he'd been all that time. Living with a mistress, tried a new life and made a hash of it, wanted the insurance money. Those and more were the rumours he heard and read about in the local paper. Not just the local, a few national tabloids had run the story. Only Becky believed him and he'd missed a busy ten years of her life. She'd married a loser called Nick. Divorced after two years and was now living back home again. Becky was working at the local garden centre now. Honest work, but minimum wage and not what he'd hoped for her.

"Could have been worse dad. I might have moved back home with two kids."

It might have been better if there had been children in their marriage. Paula would make a good grandmother and it would give Becky something in her life. His daughter seemed such a lonely person now, a shadow of the bright and bouncy girl who'd asked him to buy pilchards that night.

Frank sighed and looked out of the dormer window, at another grey Stockport morning. He had to get dressed, they were coming again. A policeman was coming to see him, a big noise travelling all the way from London and bringing a medical expert with him.

"You look no different dad." Becky had told him. "Neither does Jimmy. You can see why they want to give you all these tests."

People aged differently anyway, there were sixty year olds who looked better than some forty year olds. Sixty one or fifty one, he looked in the mirror and just saw a man on the wrong side of middle age, looking back at him. Jimmy though was different. His dog's birthday was a little uncertain, he'd belonged to a relative who'd passed away. He'd already begun to show signs of age on that fateful Sunday night. Eyes slightly glazed over, hearing not as sharp as it once was. Jimmy had to have been a good fifteen years old and now he was twenty five. That wasn't just a good age for a scruffy mongrel, it was damn near miraculous.

"Do you remember where we went boy ?"

Jimmy turned his head slightly sideways and just looked at him. If his dog was twenty five, he was a Chinaman. Something odd was going on, or had gone on ten years ago. Frank heard the front door bell, they were early. He pulled up his trousers and put on his slippers, the same worn slippers he'd been wearing that night. Jimmy followed him downstairs and into the lounge. Their visitors were busy introducing themselves to his wife.

"I'm Detective Inspector Fowler and this is Doctor Angela Forbes."

"I normally do consultancy work for the Home Office." Said the Doctor. "The police have asked me to look at your husband's case."

They turned towards him as he entered the room with that look in their eyes. The look that always made him feel like a lab rat. His main worry was that some bright spark, might decide to dissect his

dog, just to see if he really was twenty five years old. The Detective Inspector was putting his hand out, which Frank ignored.

“Mr Hartley, I’m Detective.....”

“I heard who you are, what do you want ?”

“They’ve come a long way Frank.” Said Paula. “I’ll make us some tea.”

He sat in an old but comfy chair and Jimmy curled up on the floor beside him. He was alone, with the people from London. Frank was developing a jaundiced view of officialdom. Two days previously he’d had a rough morning at the Job Centre. A young guy who looked about twenty, had hinted that he should try to think of something to fill the missing ten years in his CV. There had been a suggestion about retraining for the wonderful and growing world of retail. Frank knew what that meant ! Probably rounding up supermarket trolleys, out in the rain for silly wages. At his age !

“We want to help you understand where you might have been for the last ten years.”

It was her talking, the doctor. Good idea sending her, she had a definite northern dialect when she pronounced some words. Not that he was falling for it.

“The letter mentioned tests in London.” Said Frank.

He’d ignored the letter and told a consultant from their local hospital to get lost. Actually he’d told him to bugger off and not to bother him again.

“A week at a London teaching hospital.” Said Angela. “You won’t be out of pocket, we’ll pay all your travel costs and a hotel room for your wife. There might even be a bit of spending money too.”

“That would be nice.” Said Paula.

She’d returned, with a tray full of tea cups and the other paraphernalia of tea for guests. She’d even used the best china, the Noritake that only came out for Christmas.

“I’ve already been dug into and prodded by the local hospital.” Said Frank. “Lots of invasive procedures that were often painful and always unpleasant.”

“But a week in London Frank !”

Paula wasn’t helping, she was supposed to be on his side.

“There is the still the matter of the insurance fraud.”

The big noise copper now, using a less than subtle threat. After seven years he’d been officially pronounced as being the deceased Frank Hartley. The insurance company had paid up, enough to pay off the mortgage and provide a few comforts for Paula. Only he wasn’t dead and the insurance company weren’t happy about it. Frank was naturally taciturn, unless angry and he was becoming angry.

“So, unless I agree to be your lab rat,” he said, “you’ll charge me with insurance fraud ?”

“No of course not. No threat was intended !”

“You’re a medical conundrum.” Added Angela. “A puzzle to be solved.”

“Becky can take time off. We could go to Madame Tussauds.” Said Paula.

It was all about them ! Frank saw that clearly now. Everyone seemed to want something from him, while he gained nothing from it. A week of nasty tests, just to make them happy. Paula wasn’t even sharing a bed with him, to make him feel happier.

“No.” He said.

“Sorry Frank, what do you mean by no ?” Asked Angela Forbes.

“I mean no, isn’t that what it usually means ? Try to threaten me or my family with bogus charges and I’ll take it all to the press. Not the local rags, the big boys in London. They’d love to hear about all this !”

There were a lot of apologies and denials that they were attempting to put pressure in him.

“Of course, any tests would be completely voluntary.” Angela had said.

They left and he was alone with a disappointed wife. She’d wanted to visit Madame Tussauds for years.

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A year later and he was still sleeping on the sofa in the attic room. It wasn’t even something they talked about now, it had become the status quo. Jimmy was a year older of course, now about the equivalent of a hundred and twenty in human years. He didn’t seem it though and still bounded up to the attic like a puppy.

“At least you don’t get letters from the job centre.”

Jimmy wagged his tail and sat beside him. It was ten thirty on a Monday morning and Frank was still sat on the edge of his bed. Was it worth getting up at all ?

Every post seemed to bring more bad news. The insurance company had referred his case to a firm of solicitors. They’d hounded him for the last year, twenty calls a day for a while. Now they were going for a court date, the paperwork had arrived the previous week. Frank had gone in to see the people at Citizens Advice, but they had only told him the obvious.

“They paid out on your death and well..... you’re not..... Dead.”

It seemed to be a constant problem now, him not being dead. They might well lose the house and the local council already had long queues of people needing homes.

Yesterday the Job Centre had written to him. He’d been signing on for a year and that meant he’d won their booby prize. A referral to a private training provider, to be trained up for work in retail. Yay and shouts of joy, at sixty two, he was going to be trained to flip burgers or collect supermarket trolleys.

“Is it just me, or is the world now madder than it was ten years ago ?”

Jimmy looked at him and then curled up again. Frank decided to get up and brave the day. With luck there wouldn’t be more letters waiting for him downstairs.

The converted attic had proper stairs down to the rest of the house. They were steep though, steeper than most stairs in houses. Becky had often joked about them being vaguely nautical.

“Like going up to another deck on a yacht dad.”

Frank had never seriously thought of suicide, but he wasn’t really thinking about much at all. The noises in his head, about court dates and the Job Centre, filled his entire mind. There was no room for things like focusing on getting downstairs in one piece. There was no shower or toilet in the attic, he needed to go down a floor for that. He stepped onto the first stair and something went wrong. His pyjama leg got caught up somewhere, or his slippers finally fell apart. Whatever the cause, he fell and tumbled end over end. His head hit the hallway floor and Frank was unconscious.

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Pain was the next thing he was aware of, pain from the right side of his face. A nurse was calling for someone, just before he drifted into unconsciousness again. Gradually he remained awake for longer and longer periods. By the time Becky was allowed to see him, he was just about back to being his normal self. She looked upset and huddled onto the uncomfortable hospital chair.

“Oh dad, what did you think you were doing ?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself love. I just fell.”

She didn’t believe him and he wasn’t sure if he believed it. Maybe he’d deliberately let himself fall ? Or even his unconscious mind might have thought ‘enough is enough’ ? He’d convinced the doctor it was an accident, so no period on a psychiatric ward to look forward to.

“Mum is really upset. She wants you back in your own bed when you get out.”

Ahh, so that was why she'd sent Becky on her own. Paula would be too embarrassed to tell him that herself. His wife was from Yorkshire, where the neighbours talked about your sex life more than you did.

"I didn't fall on Jimmy did I?"

"No dad, he's fine. He came and made enough noise to wake the dead, until mum came to look for you."

She was crying, his Becky. She'd prided herself on rarely crying as a child, but he'd made her cry.

"Don't cry girl, I'm fine now. Or will be by the time they let me out."

"But they had to operate dad, you had a brain bleed. You nearly died!"

Frank knew something had happened to his mind. He now remembered everything about the missing period in his life. All of it, in perfect detail.

"There is some good news. A local paper picked up your story again."

"Oh them! Parasites Becky, have nothing to do with them. Leeches!"

"No, it was a good piece about all the stress you've been under. An MP saw it and took an interest. Not sure if it was our MP, but they had a solicitor call mum."

"What did they say?"

"There was no-fault dad, no blame. You did nothing wrong. It's not certain, but there's a good chance that we won't lose the house. Especially after the way they harassed you."

He wanted to tell his daughter about where he'd been. He just didn't want her telling anyone else.

Frank had been through a year of being treated like a freak or a nutter. A year was enough.

"Who are you seeing these days?" He asked.

She gave a long sigh and hunched herself up even more.

"No one dad. If you spent some time downstairs, you'd know. You shouldn't spend so much time up there alone, it's not healthy."

"Ok, fine, I'll come downstairs more. I remember about the time I was missing. Must have been the bang on the bonce, knocking something loose. You can't tell anyone though."

She was sat forward on her seat now, back to being his bright eyed daughter again.

"I won't, promise."

"Really, not tell anyone Becky! No girls, no boys, especially no boys. If Prince William turns up wanting to date you..... you don't tell him. Swear it!"

She was laughing, far better than tears.

"Ok dad, I swear to never tell anyone! Now, where were you?"

Her face suddenly changed.

"You weren't shacked up with some trollop were you?"

It was his turn to laugh. Nearly everyone, including the police, had accused him of doing just that.

"No! I was....."

He looked at her trusting face and hoped it didn't change to derision, or worse. What he was about to tell her, would need a lot of faith to believe.

"Dad?"

"I was abducted Becky and it wasn't for ten years. I think it was the way the craft travelled so fast. I was only away for a month at most."

She was still smiling, but her brow had furrowed.

"It's true Becky! I remember every detail. Apart from being picked up and brought back. I think they must use some sort of anaesthetic gas."

"Are you sure dad? You did get a really bad bash on the head."

“Do I look any different ? Does Jimmy ? How do you think we ended up with a scruffy mutt, on his way to getting into the Guinness book of records ?”

“The record is an Australian dog, twenty nine and a half years.” She replied. “I looked it up on google.”

“See, you’ve been wondering about Jimmy ! I remember it as clearly as I remember you being born and holding you in my arms for the first time. It seemed to be an automatic system that picked us up. Like the things we send to Mars, but far bigger. There didn’t seem to be any malice in what it was doing. It was just collecting samples for study.”

“You used to joke about alien abductions.”

“I know I did. Why would intelligent life, come billions of miles, to kidnap a chicken farmer in Ohio? Well they picked me up, a heating engineer from Stockport. I suppose that if you want to study humans, any human body will do.”

“Did they hurt you dad ?”

“In the beginning, before the alien craft took us off the drone. Nothing that bad, just needles to take samples. To be honest, the hospital hurt me far worse when I came back..... with all their prodding and poking.”

She came and sat beside him on the bed, holding his hand.

“The notion of pets didn’t seem to occur to the drone.” He continued. “I think poor Jimmy was sampled and studied too. The aliens understood though and gave him back to me after a couple of days.”

“They obviously fed you though.”

“Yes, they seemed to learn as we went along. I ate the things I liked and they gave me more of those foods. Jimmy seemed to excite them, he ate just about everything they gave him. There was a lot of noise and waving of branches about that.”

“Branch waving ? What did they look like ?”

“Alien ! I saw no eyes, ears or mouth, yet they could see, hear and make a lot of strange noises. They were like a short tree, with a thick brown trunk and lots of leafless branches. The ends of the branches changed. One moment a sharp pointer, the next they’d become six or seven delicate fingers. They could put out more branches too. I saw one of them doing some delicate work and it was truly amazing. It was able to use over a dozen limbs, with perfect dexterity.”

“Did they pick up other people ?”

“I never saw other humans, but they did study creatures from other places, other planets I suppose. I barely recognised some as being living things.”

“What were they like dad ?”

“I’m tired now, but we’ll talk about this again. As long as you remember your promise !”

“I know..... if Prince William calls.... I tell him nothing. But tell me ! What were the other creatures like ?”

Frank leant back on the heap of hospital pillows. His daughter obviously wasn’t going to leave him in peace without hearing something.

“I can tell you one thing.” He said. “If astronauts do get to other worlds, they’ll be in for a hell of a shock.”

He gripped her hand a little tighter.

“I think they’re preparing for something, something huge ! They’re doing what we’re doing with all our Mars probes. They’re checking everything over, studying and learning. Maybe not in my lifetime, but I really do think that you might get to meet them.”

“That scares me !”

He patted her hand, barely able to keep his eyes open. Reliving the memories had drained him.

“Oh no, don’t be anxious. I’m sure that there’s nothing to be scared about.”

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Frank had spent his life avoiding fuss. He’d rarely visited his doctor and had never complained about anything in his life. He was one of the great army of people who put up with things, rather than making a song and dance about them. Strangely enough it was the publicity he hated, which led to the turn round in his life. The piece in the local paper caught the interest of their local MP. That meant a larger article in the mainstream press and a lot of adverse publicity for the insurance company. Another year passed and Frank Hartley had a job, a car and prospects again. Even if the world did think he was ten years older than he really was. It was October again and much to his own amazement, Frank was on TV and loving it. A BBC show, designed for watching by the entire family over dinner. Two presenters who seemed to smile inanely at anything and anyone. Frank loathed the show, but kept that to himself. The woman presenter was asking him questions, she was far prettier in real life.

“So, Frank. I hear that you’re back at work ?”

“Yes. The owner of a heating company in Droylsden read about me and offered me a supervisor’s job. There’s even a company car.”

They smiled at him and the audience applauded. He realised they’d have probably applauded the zombie apocalypse, so he wasn’t going to let it go to his head.

“And I hear that you won’t have to sell your house ?”

“Yes. The insurance company have decided to write off the full amount they paid out after my presumed death. We can stay in our home.”

Paula and Becky were in the front row of the studio audience, both applauding like crazy. Patrick had wanted to be there, but he was on duty that day. The presenter was moving closer now, actually had her hand on his.

“We’re all friends here Frank.” She said. “You can tell us.”

She looked round at the audience, who were grinning back at her.

“It’s been two years since you returned from who knows where. Do you remember anything about those ten years ?”

Something inside him wanted to tell the whole world about the aliens. They were preparing to come and say hello to mankind, he was certain of it. The desire to tell the whole story was almost irresistible. He had a job again though and a few prospects. He was back in his own bed and their sex life was bloody fantastic. He looked at his wife and daughter, they just wanted a normal life. There was a lot to be said for living an ordinary life.

“No. I still don’t remember anything. I think it will always be a mystery.”

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Jimmy died at an official age of thirty one years and eleven days. He never did get a mention in the Guinness book of records. No one could find a record of his birth date.

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~ The End ~