

# FUN GUS

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*The idea for this story came to me in the winter of 2024.  
I created the outline for it in the spring of 2025 and in  
September of 2025, while on vacation in the Telemark  
region of Norway, I finished writing Gus's story.*

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# **PART 1**

## Chapter 1

She'd said something to him, but the party was too loud around them and he didn't quite catch it. As he expressed this to her, she seemed to recede from him, as did the entire party, the whole thing disappointed in him for missing another opportunity. As his surroundings changed, morphed into his childhood home's kitchen, a light started flashing and he...

...woke up to the sound of his alarm on his phone. Not entirely sure what had just happened, or where he had just been, he was left only with the feeling of inadequacy and a vague sense of loss, that would, he was sure, follow him the rest of the day.

Gus felt uncomfortable in his bed, aches in his arm, where he'd lain on it all night. Slightly out of breath and already a heart rate that he knew was too high, he got up and sat on the side of his bed for a moment, gauging how tired he was. It was a bad

idea, but he looked at the app on his phone to find out exactly how little he had slept last night.

Five hours and forty-two minutes, with a heart rate in the seventies, a *poor* rating staring at him, like another accusation. He had showered last night, had sweated a bit during the night, the covers too hot at one point, but he didn't feel like showering again this morning. Also, looking at the time, there was no way if he was going to catch the train to work.

He got up with a groan, now also feeling the ache in his back. The bed he'd slept in was old, over twenty years by now, if he had to guess. He only now and then flipped the mattress, but there was a big depression in the middle of the bed, into which his big body would roll, as his weight had worn down any firmness it might have once had.

It was 6:38, he was going to have to hurry if he wanted to make his 7:45 train. Just thinking about the commute to work gave him his first slight panic of the day. He fervently hoped that today would be an okay day for his anxiety, but he didn't have any realistic hope of that. The reality was that every day

spent at work, or out in the world for that matter, he would battle anxiety, expend enormous amounts of energy just to stay calm and maintain a grip on consciousness, which seemed to be always fleeing away from him.

He flicked on the light in the bathroom. Why would bathrooms so prominently feature mirrors, he thought, looking at himself with a familiar aversion bordering on disgust. He was overweight, at 43 he had begun balding, or at least, had started noticing it for the first time. And last year, at 47, he finally had to admit that his eyesight was beginning to seriously deteriorate.

He'd have trouble reading small print on packages at first, but now he couldn't read normal-sized font on his computer or phone and at work he had to increase the font size of all his apps to be able to work. He needed to do something about it, he knew, but the prospect of adding glasses to his appearance made him feel certain that he would look more than ever like a sex offender.

Gus didn't like himself very much. He hadn't for a long time, and he didn't know if he ever really did.

He lost himself to anxiety and living inside his mind sometime in his early twenties, and steadily retreated from the physical world. Eventually being able to afford, due to his modest intelligence and some kind of magic, by virtue of a job he'd somehow been able to hold down for the last fifteen years, a small apartment, that was larger than anything he'd previously inhabited. It was a prison cell, as well as his sanctuary.

He put toothpaste on the electric toothbrush and again thought the familiar thought of how absurd it was to wash your teeth with toothsoap, foaming and brushing, like it was a barbecue grill. His mind felt feverish, buzzy. It was the lack of sleep, he knew, but it wasn't a good sign, because it meant he would probably feel a lack of headspace today.

Not being able to handle stimuli well when he felt like this made him feel dizzy, like when he'd be in a full train compartment, or when he'd have to turn his head to look at something. Feeling dizzy could escalate into panic, he knew. Thinking about factors contributing to panic, could do the same. He put on deodorant, combed his remaining hair and went back to his bedroom to put on clothes.

Gus usually tried to avoid people. People were difficult, they represented so much input, causing an overload of stimuli. Not even taking into account all the things they were thinking about him, or judging him for. And him thinking about all of that. He could feel a familiar feeling emanating from his gut. A feeling of pressure, discomfort, making him feel like he needed a bathroom, urgently. The feeling also crept up, up through his core to his heart, making it beat fast, up to his brain, confusing his thoughts, before leaking out of him as sweat, making him self-conscious, reinforcing the cycle.

But as he pulled the door of his apartment shut and turned the key in the lock, he realized that there was no avoiding people for the next nine to ten hours. With growing tension in his stomach, he walked down the hallway toward the stairwell of the apartment building.

## Chapter 2

It seemed to Gus that nobody ever used the stairwell in his apartment building. He could recall only one occasion a couple of years ago, when the elevator on his side of the building was out of order for a couple of days, that people had used the stairwell. But he hadn't seen anybody in there since.

The stairwell was badly lit, making it a bit gloomy. There were textured and frosted windows allowing in just a bit of daylight, but not much. It wasn't cold in here, but it was cool, a lot of concrete, except for the top floors where there was still some wood visible in the upper regions of the shaft, most likely left over from an earlier incarnation of the building.

He liked the stairwell. Gus thought of it as a very quiet and non-demanding friend. He had started taking the stairwell every day two years before, to try and add some exercise to his daily routine, in hopes that it would help him shed some weight.

Also, he knew, because he'd realized suddenly that it would cut out a daily source of anxiety, riding the building's elevator. The apartment building was heavily occupied, making the entrance, the elevator and the corridors a minefield of people.

The stairwell provided a moment of quiet and solitude, and welcome gloom. Gus didn't like bright light, it made him feel overwhelmed, as if the light overburdened his senses. So, in the cool darkness of the stairwell he felt more in control and calm.

His apartment was on the sixth floor, so it would take him some time to descend, but it would take the most time to climb the stairs in the evening when he got back from work. He would look forward to the space and its mood at the end of each workday, but dreaded having to heave his overweight body up the stairs. Nothing was ever one thing to Gus.

He felt some pride that he had persisted in taking the stairs over the last two years, but also a bit resentful that it hadn't had the effect on the number on the scale he hoped it would have. He knew that this was due to the excess amount of

calories he consumed, but couldn't help feeling he should have seen a sliver of progress, hadn't he deserved that, at least?

Climbing up the final flight of stairs before reaching his floor, Gus started making a mental inventory of his cupboard and fridge, thinking he would just have to reward himself with food this weekend. He would go food shopping tomorrow, or maybe tonight before the shops closed and get all he needed, so as to not have to leave his house until Monday morning rolled around again. He wheezed, breathing heavily with the effort.

## Chapter 3

Two weeks had passed since that morning and there had been developments at work. Gus had found himself working for a large corporation, when the temp job he'd been doing for them had transitioned into a permanent position at the company. The pay was good, the job was manageable, if a bit boring and his colleagues were fine, for the most part.

His job consisted of checking computer systems, doing maintenance on them. Making sure they ran smoothly. Sometimes he was required to give some instructions, show a new colleague how to work with the systems. But most of it was routine, and thankfully, solitary work. He communicated via internal chat or email. Only occasionally a colleague would come up to him at his desk for a question that was too complicated to write down.

He knew most of his colleagues' names in his department. There were some thirty people working on his floor. He had heard some of them talking about a new project that was about to start, initiated two floors up. He vaguely recalled that being some sort of marketing department, or business development. Gus wasn't too interested in exploring his corporate surroundings, to avoid too much input, sure, but also he felt it would bring about a risk of being familiar to colleagues, which could lead to more questions and demands. He liked to keep his head down.

Today there was a meeting he'd have to attend, at which there would be some sort of announcement. He just now put together the rumor about the new project and the somewhat unexpected meeting. It was sure to be about this new project. He decided he needed the bathroom before the meeting started, so he would not have the sensation of a full bladder to add to the stress of being in a room that was too small to accommodate that many people.

While washing his hands he avoided looking in the mirror because he'd rather be unaware, not be

reminded of how he looked before walking into a room where people were bound to look at him.

He could see that most of his colleagues had assembled outside of the room and there was a thrum of talk wafting toward him as he approached. Looking through the window into the room, he saw his manager, a couple of colleagues and a few people he didn't recognize, or barely recognized. He had fallen into the habit of thinking only of the people on his floor as his colleagues. The people working on other floors were from a different company, in his mind. Even though he knew full well that they were all working in a building that bore the logo of the corporation that signed all their paychecks on its roof.

He slid behind some colleagues gathered at the door into the room and took up a seat closest to the door. The chairs and tables were organized in a big square U-shape, facing the front of the room, where there was a screen and whiteboard. Gus always chose a seat as close to the exit as possible. This way he wouldn't have to make a fuss if he felt he had to leave, due to overwhelming anxiety, compounding his panic by having people look at him.

Sitting there, looking at the people at the front of the room from out of the corner of his eye, but mostly looking longingly at the windy day outside, something caught his attention. He wasn't sure what he'd seen that had pulled him, but when he looked again at the people standing in front of the whiteboard, he could see a young woman standing behind two men, all of them engaged in discussion, lively, excited, with his manager and another one of his colleagues.

When one of the men who were standing in front of this woman moved again, as had just happened before, he saw what had drawn his attention. Her face was beautiful. He looked at her in spite of himself, temporarily forgetting his usual fear of being seen. Her dark hair, her slightly oval-shaped face, dark eyebrows and dark eyes, small nose and lively, somehow open, mouth. She looked kind and sweet and before he knew it, Gus was projecting all sorts of qualities and traits upon her.

He started as one of his colleagues pulled out the chair beside him. He hadn't noticed that people were now entering the room and taking their seats. The man sitting beside him now was Tim, who had

the same job as Gus, except he was responsible for a different system than Gus.

‘Did you hear anything about this new project, Gus?’ Tim asked. ‘Nothing more than was said in the last team meeting and what I heard from Philips.’ Philips was the department’s manager, who had told a couple of them, standing at the coffee machine, about the plans for a new project that was about to start. Something about a plan to integrate a couple of systems to make it easier for marketing or business development to match product offers to client data. ‘I guess we’ll hear all about how much extra work this is going to be,’ Tim said cynically. ‘Do you know any of these people?’ Gus asked, giving a little nod with his chin toward the group at the front of the room, now getting ready to present as the room filled up quickly. ‘That’s William and that’s Ben,’ said Tim, pointing out the two men standing in front of the woman Gus couldn’t keep his eyes off. ‘And that,’ noting Gus’ gaze, ‘is Sandra.’

## Chapter 4

After the meeting ended, Gus felt strange. What he'd just heard would, in other circumstances, have worried him. But that's not how he felt at the moment. He was... Excited? And already a bit nervous, but also, something he didn't recognize immediately since it was a very unfamiliar feeling to him, a bit of joyous nerves.

The reason for this unfamiliar mix of sensations was the meeting he had just attended. Where William, Ben and Sandra, who were not Marketing, nor Business Development, but Customer Intelligence, had laid out their plans to create a connection between a number of systems that would allow them to match certain customer data to behavioral patterns and purchase history to *serve our clients better and offer more relevant opportunities, products and services.*

This business bullshit bingo lingo, as he called it in his head, was not the interesting part of the presentation. What was, was the fact that he and Tim would be liaisons for their department to William, Ben and Sandra. There were no details yet about how the collaboration would take place, but Gus hoped, deep inside himself, almost hidden to his conscious mind, that he would have to work closely with Sandra.

Sandra had had a very pleasant voice, clear, smooth, kind, happy, soft... He realized he was staring out the window instead of looking at his monitor where today's tasks were still waiting for him. He was mesmerized by her face as she spoke and even more so, when William or Ben spoke and she stood silent, slightly smiling, taking a step back to allow her colleague the floor. He had been studying her face, only a couple of times had he allowed himself a look at her body, which seemed full, curvy, but very well proportioned. Her red sweater was tight, revealing a very shapely bosom, her waist was slim, opening up into her broad hips and legs, dressed in a black pair of jeans. She had on black and red trainers that matched her outfit.

At a certain point in the presentation, Philips had stepped forward to talk about his department and team and had introduced Tim and Gus. Ben and William had looked friendly but reservedly in their direction, as if to withhold judgement until the pair had proven their worth to them and the project, but Sandra had smiled warmly in their direction and had met his eyes a couple of times, making his insides feel funny and warm.

Just then an email notification came in, the subject line reading “CI project - coffee?”. Gus opened the email and was in spite of himself, smiling at the screen. It was from Sandra, inviting him to come have a coffee on CI’s floor with her, to talk about the project and their collaboration. She explained that William and Ben would be working with Tim for the duration of the project and that she would be working with him. If he could let her know when would be convenient to meet for a coffee to get acquainted and discuss the project.

Philips had pulled Tim and Gus aside after the meeting to tell them that this project had priority over anything else they were working on, as it had been endorsed by the board and was seen as a high

potential project. He told them he would get updates from CI, but that he expected them to behave as ambassadors for their department and cooperate as best they could. With this in mind, he replied to Sandra's email and proposed to meet this very afternoon.

## Chapter 5

The meeting about the CI project had been on a Tuesday, it was now the next week, Thursday. Gus had met with Sandra four times now. Every time he had been polite, his usual standoffish self, but inwardly he felt lighter than he'd had in a long time. He had been bounding up and down the stairwell coming home and leaving for work in the morning. He felt more energetic, he caught himself humming or smiling a couple of times while cooking or doing the dishes. In the supermarket on Friday evening, he had bought more vegetables and less junk food than usual and not regretted it during the weekend.

During the second meeting, after outlining the timeline for the project and going into a bit of detail of the first phase, Sandra had started asking about him. Where did he live, how long had he worked for the company, where was he born. She wanted to get to know him, he felt. He was a bit nervous whenever he went up to meet her, and it wasn't

until the fourth meeting, today, that he had felt comfortable enough to reciprocate and ask her some personal questions, though he felt stiff and as if behind a thick layer of plexiglass while doing so.

Every time they met she had seemed happy to see him again. In his mind he described her as open and warm, and though those phrases seemed hollow and meaningless to him rationally, they described perfectly and accurately what he felt from her. It was like an embrace, he was unwilling to wrest free from, at the end of their four meetings. He wasn't sure how he came across to her, but if he had to guess, he thought he'd probably appear a bit cold, somewhat distant, businesslike. Perhaps a bit like an out of touch tech nerd. He wanted to be warm and open and charming, and even if he felt all of these things on the outside, it was as though this thick layer was preventing these feelings from surfacing and reaching Sandra.

Tomorrow was Friday, and it was a day off from work. The frustration and duality of his feelings and what he was able to show was now making it hard for him to relocate that lightness that possessed him just a couple of days earlier, making

him hum and smile. He entered his apartment building, opening the door to the always empty stairwell, he felt the familiar embrace of its cool and gloom and slipped into the well-worn vertical womb that was the tall shaft on the side of the building. As the door closer slowly forced the door shut, he could see, in the receding beams of light streaming from the hall into the stairwell, tiny particles floating around everywhere.

## PART 2

## Chapter 6

The weekend had passed with Gus looking out of the window at the clouds more than usual. His mind was drifting and showing him Sandra's face. Sunday was usually a day that was taken up by the leaden mood of having to go to work the next day, but this Sunday he felt much less of this. The foreboding feeling was now largely pushed aside by scenarios in which he would be talking to Sandra. They would laugh, he'd be charming, she'd move closer to him and be soft and open and he'd lean in and...

Monday was a letdown, since Sandra had no time to meet him. She had shot off a curt message in reply to his somewhat bold question on whether she wanted to have lunch; she was in meetings all day with William and Ben. She didn't even propose another day, it was a one-line message. He felt like a dog that was kicked, irrationally thinking about what he could have said or done to make her so

cold. Rationally, he knew that there could be many reasons for this reply, the most likely being that he was low on her list of priorities and something important had come up. Still, he felt like shit all day, hating his life and the job and wanting to be somewhere, no, someone else.

Coming home that evening, as he was trudging up the stairs, he remembered a time he got lost in the woods surrounding the village where he grew up, when he was ten or eleven years old. It had been late autumn, with lots of leaves on the forest floor, fallen branches with mushrooms growing on them, the light quickly fading through the bare trees, and the earthy, musty smell of slowly decaying matter all around him. He was wheezing again, the lightness he had felt now fully gone again, he knew. He'd missed another opportunity.

## Chapter 7

It wasn't until Thursday that he got an email from Sandra. It took him a second to realize that she wasn't emailing just him, but also William, Ben, Tim and Philips. In the email she explained that in the previous few days there had been discussion within CI, whether the project as proposed was the right move, in light of an upcoming strategy refresh the board had announced the previous week. Gus had seen the email, but had deleted it, as he did with all emails coming from the top floor. He wasn't interested. Now he wondered if it would have spared him some bad feelings, had he read the email and put two and two together, explaining Sandra's shift of focus and tone.

She said that the consensus was to continue, but scaled down for now, and to keep abreast of any movements and direction from the board, that would be meeting again in three weeks' time. Since it was Thursday, it would be good if the subteams

could meet today or tomorrow so the project could update the CI management team for their meeting on Monday. Immediately following this email, he got a message from Sandra asking him to get back to her after he'd read her email to set a meeting. He replied to her, proposing a meeting at 1 pm, not daring to propose a lunch meeting again.

At the meeting Sandra explained that since there was no way to know what the strategy refresh would entail and what the consequences for the priorities of her department would be, they were being cautious on spending time, money and capacity on projects that weren't fully endorsed. This meant that the project they were working on would be effectively put on the back burner and she would return to her previous tasks.

William, Ben and she had also spoken to Philips and it was decided that Tim and Gus would be returning to their regular duties, but would be kept in the loop of any new developments. 'Though,' she said, as she glanced away from him out the window, 'my feeling is that this will be scrapped.' She'd looked sad and for the first time had seen something completely different in her face.

He felt his heart leap with compassion and care, as he realized how much he wanted to protect and console her. He wanted to be warm and open, show her he understood her disappointment, how she felt. Unfortunately, what came out was something in between a grunt and the word “okay”. She looked at him with kind, smiling eyes, which he suspected were not much more than her way of being polite.

## Chapter 8

Gus got his mail from the entrance hall, two bills and some paper spam, and then tried to, as inconspicuous as possible, slide behind a couple and an older man who were standing talking in the hallway. Unnoticed, he ducked into the nook that housed the door to the stairwell and slipped inside. As the door closed behind him slowly, the beam of light narrowing and the particles floating and glistening for a couple of seconds, he breathed deeply and leaned against the closed door. He felt a shudder going through him and tears started welling out of his eyes.

He stood there for ten, fifteen minutes, just breathing in and out deeply, his face wet, his eyes blurry, before finally starting his climb up the six flights of stairs. He couldn't smell the wet autumn forest smell he knew to be there, because his nose was stuffy from the crying. He felt more out of breath than usual, not a third of the way up the

stairs. Thinking he must just be tired and affected by his self-recrimination, the pain of lost opportunities and loneliness, he tried to push it aside and ignore the surreal feelings he was starting to experience.

His vision swimming, he climbed to about halfway, when he suddenly felt very dizzy, lightheaded, wrong. The stairs weren't very steep, but they were broad and there wasn't any support in the middle. Only on the sides were there handrails, bolted to the wall on the one side and a metal banister on the other. He was closer to the void of the stairwell than to its walls, so he grabbed the handrail and clung on as his world seemed to start spinning. Sliding down the banister, he sat down on the stairs and held on, waiting for this, whatever it was, to pass.

From his jeans, he pulled out his phone, panic rising in his chest, thinking this might be it, a heart attack, a stroke. He opened the phone, opened the phone on his phone, temporarily distracted by the realization of this absurdity and hovered his fingers over the on-screen keypad, ready to dial emergency services, should another, more definite sign of physical emergency present itself.

He closed his eyes, told himself to breathe in slowly, hold it, breathe out even slower. Breathing out, he noticed a rhythm to his exhalation, there was a shudder. Alarmed that this might be related to his heart, he paid attention to his heartbeat and the shudder, but they were out of sync. It was as though something in his airway was vibrating, or wafting in the air stream coming from his lungs. Panic upon panic upon panic made him slump down further on the stairs and angrily, the only way to break through the fog, he mentally commanded himself to just breathe and stop thinking.

He sat there for a couple of minutes, cold sweat on his forehead, his armpits, chest, back and buttocks, breathing, eyes closed. In moments like this, he sometimes wished it would just happen, just get it over with. He'd at least be done with it. He felt the incongruity of this with the panic he was experiencing, which was diminishing, thankfully. He guessed you could be two things at once.

Opening his eyes, it was dark in the stairwell. The sun had set and the dim lights hadn't come on yet in the stairwell. They were most likely on a timer. He never really noticed before. Tapping his phone,

for light, for companionship, to find out how long he'd been sitting there, he saw more particles floating around the light emanating from his phone.

## Chapter 9

Three weeks had passed since his spell on the stairs. He had not felt so dizzy again he'd had to sit down, but he did feel lightheaded, run-down and a bit out of focus, as he thought of it. He hadn't spoken to Sandra in all that time and there was no news from the board, since the meeting had been postponed for two weeks. He had heard Tim say at a team meeting that even if the board met, it would still be unlikely that there would be a decision regarding the project. The board was a slow-moving organism.

Gus had been more listless than he'd felt in a long time. He dragged himself to and from work, down and up the stairs, now taking closer to ten minutes than five to go down and as much as half an hour to go up them. He dawdled, he stretched his time in the dark, cool, vertical space, because it was, if not any longer a friend, at least a liminal space that would hold him, put him on pause, slip out of reality

for a bit. But yes, he had to admit to himself, physically he felt worse than he had in a long time and wouldn't have been able to make better time going up or down.

This was partly the reason Gus had been to the optician two weeks before, a week after slumping on the stairs. He felt that his deteriorating vision was partly to blame for what happened. Not being able to see very well, he told himself, was a big reason for his dizziness and feeling of diminished control. The optician had not exactly confirmed any of this, but had been in agreement that Gus needed glasses.

The same week, just to get it over with, he went to one of those chains with the results of the optician and they had shown him a number of frames. He picked out a thick frame, that was black and square. His criteria were simple, it shouldn't make him look too creepy and it should be functional. He wasn't sure if he'd succeeded in the first, but the frame was functional, as it locked to his face and didn't slide.

He was still getting used to them, but he noticed that his vision did indeed improve with the glasses.

He had this notion that perhaps glasses did not help at all and it was just a collective scam, that everybody who wore glasses was in on, or perhaps felt pressured into going along with, the emperor's new glasses. He didn't feel less dizzy though. Taking them off after wearing them all day, the dizziness was worse and he was suffused with the realization that physical degradation was permanent and unstoppable.

Today after he'd come home, heated up the leftovers of yesterday's dinner and tired, but fueled by the responsibility and guilt of adult life, he did his chores, did the dishes, put away the dried laundry that was still hanging on the rack and loaded up the washer with a new load. While stuffing his clothes into the washer's metal mouth, he noticed a fine layer of subtly pink-colored dust on his light shirt. He wondered where the dust came from, but was mostly surprised at how effective he now thought his glasses to be, since he was sure that he would not have seen this without them. He turned on the washer and thinking of dust, he pulled the vacuum cleaner out of the space next to the washer.

## Chapter 10

Sandra had been down to his floor only one more time in the following weeks, first to talk to Philips, then, he could see her walking toward him, to talk to him. She had stood next to his desk as she told him that the board had met, that they'd decided that CI would focus on a new client segment for the next quarter and so the project was scuttled. There was more potential for revenue in the new segment than in optimizing the old.

She had looked sad again and he had permitted himself to think for a second that it could be because she wouldn't see him anymore, before Sandra said that in light of this decision and it being in the works for a while, she'd be taking some time off. She had planned to go on leave after the project, but now had asked and received permission to move up her absence. So she was also coming to say goodbye.

She shook his hand, smiled at him, said she hoped to see and talk to him again when she returned, before turning away and walking out the door. He was stunned for a moment, before quickly, as she was walking away, saying he hoped she'd have a wonderful time. She turned her head, smiled, thanked him and was gone.

It felt as if no time had passed between the moment he had watched her walk away and this moment, in the dark stairwell, standing with his back leaning against the door, breathing slowly. He wasn't going to see her again. She hadn't said how long she'd be gone, but he felt a sense of profound loss, as if she'd be gone forever. A deep, black sadness opened up like a void inside him and sucked all that might have been hope and joy down into it. In the dark he saw, what he thought was a trick his eyes were playing on him, white filaments stretching across his field of vision and a new, slightly sickly-sweet smell, barely pungent, not entirely unenticing, filling his nose.

# PART 3

## Chapter 11

The last thing he'd experienced before waking up, gasping for air, was the sensation of drowning in sand. The images were fleeing from him like spectres before the rays of the sun, but he felt the panic still in his stomach and chest. Coughing, quickly sitting up in alarm, he barked and whooped for nearly two minutes, before finally tasting something nasty and gelatinous and swallowing hard. He shuddered, panting breathlessly for another minute before coming out of survival mode into a somewhat normal state of consciousness.

In a gesture of self-pity, the awareness of which he decided to ignore because it made him self-conscious, he raised his hand to his face to touch and soothe himself. He couldn't help but feel very sorry for himself, as he was exhausted, after a night of fitful sleep and the violence with which he'd woken up. He tried to remember what day it was,

but to his mild dread, he couldn't piece together the fragments of reality just yet.

He looked over at his phone, which served as his alarm clock to see if it was buzzing and beeping, not sure he would be able to hear it, if it was. The rectangle was silent and dark as he picked it up and opened the screen to see it was only 5:15 in the morning, a full hour before he would actually have to get up. As he knew from experience he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep anyway, he resigned himself to his day having started. Something in his chest began to itch and burn again, like a bunch of angry, stinging insects.

He got up, walked to the bathroom and turned on the light. A new violent coughing spell had him in its grip and he cough-shouted, expelling air and trying to dislodge whatever the irritant in his windpipe or lungs was. He shuddered with disgust as he felt something thick and slimy enter his mouth from his insides and spit it out into the sink in revulsion. A glob of slightly pink brownish jelly, run through with what looked like thin white filaments was stuck to the curved porcelain.

Taken aback only slightly, since still not completely cogent, he ran water in the sink, washing his expulsion away. He thought he must be coming down with a cold or the flu, now looking up into the mirror for the first time, since entering the bathroom. The light in the bathroom was an old striplight, which gave off a white, yellowish hue. On his best days, the light made him look a bit sickly, but he now started as he looked at his face.

At first, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, he wasn't wearing his glasses and sometimes his eyes were presenting him with a vision of reality that he knew to be morphed and altered, due to his ocular deterioration. He reached for the glasses lying on the vanity top near the mirror and put them on. Not only did the glasses not fix the problematic thing he'd seen, but instead brought it into stark clarity.

## Chapter 12

Even though it was too warm for him, he'd felt too embarrassed by his appearance not to wear the scarf and his collar up. Standing behind three people waiting for the train to slow to a standstill and the doors to open, he felt perspiration on his scalp, down the back of his neck and chest. The affected patches of skin were on his jaw and throat and one was just underneath his left temple. This was the one place he wasn't able to fully cover up, but his hair might at least partially obscure it from sight.

The patches he'd seen this morning had given him a fright and even though he had calmed down a bit, thinking it must be allergies or something, he was still worried to a serious degree. His skin had whitened and greyed in irregular but smoothly bordered splotches, somehow wrinkling a bit, like skin kept underwater too long. He'd felt more than

seen a furriness to the area, as if he'd grown very thin, soft hairs on the patches.

He walked out of the station, toward his office building and wondered if he should call in sick and see a doctor. But seeing a doctor was not a simple matter for Gus. He'd be so nervous to even make the appointment that he usually decided that, unless it was something he knew to be in the realm of self-solving ailments, he'd rather just wait it out and have his immune system deal with it. He didn't want to examine his speculations too closely, so he shorted his analysis to an infection, possibly a histaminic reaction to the flu or a cold. He'd wait it out.

Gus managed to get all the way to his desk without being really seen by anyone, muttering cursory greetings at people he passed. He sat down, turned on his computer and disappeared into the hum of routine for the next two hours. He only looked up when he saw what he thought was a shadow darkening the window across from him. Wanting to stretch his legs anyway, he got up and walked to the window to see if there was anything to be seen.

The space he worked in was dark compared to the rest of the floor. Since he usually worked there by himself, he kept the lights off and had only the window as a light source, pouring in daylight. The window was a horizontal rectangle, starting from chest level to about the top of his head, covering over two-thirds of the wall. He stood there looking out the window for a couple of seconds, down to the plaza below, before he remembered why he'd come to the window.

He thought it might have been a big bird of prey that had flown by, blocking the sun and throwing a shadow. Then, in a flash of insight he would under normal circumstances be proud of, but today was too weary to acknowledge, he realized that the sun was on the other side of the building, so it would not have been possible for a shadow to have been cast on the window.

He thought he must be very tired and yes, sick, and have imagined the dark shape he'd seen from his periphery. Then, this time on his left, he saw a large dark shape bloom into his field of vision, grow large and disappear as soon as he turned his head. It made him think of the swimmers you'd sometimes

see in your eye, that you could never look directly at and were only visible if you paid no attention.

Now above him, above the window, another dark shape was growing and he jerked his head up to either catch it, or dispel it. He saw, with a sense of amazement, the electric white network of tendrils the dark shape was shot through with. At that moment Tim and another colleague were walking by the room in the hallway and both looked in his direction, with a mix of surprise and concern. The shape vanished as he became aware of their presence. He smiled sheepishly at them and half-raised his hand in a greeting.

## Chapter 13

Around three in the afternoon, Gus decided he was justified in clocking off early, opting, if asked, to work a bit from home as he wasn't feeling well. He had had no coughing fits in the office, but his chest still felt like a home to a nest of frantic and mean insects and he dreaded the lack of sleep the coming night was sure to bring. The shapes had plagued him throughout the day, but he'd managed to ignore them, mostly. He gathered his things and quickly strode out to the elevators, barely aware of the glances he was drawing from the people on his floor.

The reflective metal panels of the elevator doors showed him his face and he saw that the patches on his jaw and throat were growing up to his face, the patch under his left temple nearly connecting to the patch on his jaw. He pulled up the collar on his coat and stepped into the elevator that was thankfully empty. For a moment he imagined with dread and

panic Sandra stepping into the elevator and looking at him, disgusted. He hadn't seen her since she'd come to tell him that... That's right, she was on leave, he remembered. That was a week ago.

For the first time since he'd seen her in the conference room, he was happy to be certain not to see her today. Any other day he'd be looking forward to seeing her, hoping to see her. But he felt gross and grotesque and flushed even at the thought of her looking at him. The elevator stopped. As the doors opened, he saw to his dismay four people waiting to get on. He stepped back and turned the side of his face with the most prominent blights away from them as they got on the elevator.

The three women and the one man were talking about work, but he saw the two women standing across from him glancing at him with, at first curiosity and then to his misery, a hint of something he interpreted as disgust. There was a large mirror at the back of the elevator, which he was partly facing now. Morbid curiosity or masochism made him look into the mirror, where he saw his eyes. Behind him he heard the man make a coughing sound and one of the women

giggled. The elevator came to a halt and they stepped out, the man flirtatiously bending his mouth to the giggling woman's ear and whispering just loud enough for Gus to hear something about a smell.

Gus turned to the mirror again and examined his eyes as the doors closed behind him. In the whites of his eyes, he could see a network of fine, off-white threads, seemingly protruding from just under the surface. On either side of him, out of the corner of his eyes, he could see the dark shapes with their electric networks grow again.

## Chapter 14

The stairwell embraced him in its dark and cool, sufficiently separating his senses from himself to allow him to forget the events of the day. Here in the vertical space's gloom, the shapes weren't visible, even if they were there. He felt a very faint touching on his skin, as if tiny raindrops landed on him, standing with his back against the door, breathing in deeply and slowly, so as to not awaken the angry insects in his chest.

It had taken him the better part of an hour to make his way up the stairs. He'd felt unequal to the task physically, but suspected also a significant emotional and psychological component to his limpness. And of course the stairwell had exuded its monasterial gloom, almost tranquilizing him, seducing him to stay within its low-lit cool comfort. The little light there was in the vast space had seemed more blue to him today. The blue of a bruise, slightly purple. He couldn't make much

sense of it, but he enjoyed the softness and the color of it.

The next day he looked worse, his eyes now had clearly visible branching in the whites and the splotches had taken over most of his face. He opted to video call into the team meeting this morning, but forgot he'd wanted to make up an excuse for not turning on the camera and had been visible for a minute or so, on the big monitor in the meeting room, he knew. There were murmurs and concerned glances as Philips said they would start in ten minutes and everybody should get a coffee.

Philips waited until everyone had left the room, then turned to Gus on the screen and said: 'Gus, why don't you take the day off and maybe go see a doctor? You don't look well.' 'I'm okay..' Gus started, but Philips held up his hand and said 'No, seriously Gus, I'm going to report you sick and you shouldn't come in until you're feeling better.' Gus, partly grateful, partly embarrassed, acquiesced, thanked Philips and logged off. He sat at his desk at home, surrounded by the dark glimmering shapes for a moment, before he got up and went to brush his teeth.

Staring in the mirror, holding the electric toothbrush in his right hand, still buzzing, he looked at the white filaments visibly branching out in his pink gums. He didn't need to check to know that these had spread throughout his gums and on the roof of his mouth, down his throat. Feeling fear and panic trying to break through his apathy, he started shaking and making a low, moaning noise.

# PART 4

## Chapter 15

A couple of days had passed in a daze, with Gus sleeping more than he'd usually manage, eating little and avoiding the mirror in the bathroom, every time he needed the toilet. Still he couldn't avoid all the reflective surfaces in his house and he'd seen changes in his face that seemed unreal to him. He found and put on his glasses to face reality.

The patches of skin had, he had no other word for it, ripened and produced swellings, narrow bumps that stood out and up on his skin visibly. The skin on his face, throat and chest was now mostly grey and water-wrinkled, with the bumps showing a shade of blue and pink that made for a deep purple color in places.

The rest of his body was starting to show signs of the same transformation now, as well. His color was no longer that of a human being. Navigating his apartment was becoming more difficult as well, as

the dark shapes were with him now all the time, showing him their electric networks, pulsating white hot in his periphery.

It was a Tuesday morning and tomorrow a week since Philips had told him to stay at home. Sandra should be back at work this week, he dimly recalled. Even through his dread and despair, some wisp of hope and joy reached his core, when he thought of Sandra's sweet face.

Sandra had come in that morning, looking refreshed, not a trace of the sadness that had been there weeks before when she'd had to break the news of the project's uncertain future. She'd come down on the elevator with William and Ben to talk to the systems people about the next steps. As it had been decided that the project would work within the new strategy after all, albeit with a couple of tweaks.

Tim had met them in the conference room, and Philips was finishing up a phone call, when the conversation turned to Sandra's leave, brightness and the new necklace she was wearing. Apparently both Tim and William were more interested in

Sandra than they had seemed, as both noted the changes in her. Sandra smiled coyly and admitted that it wasn't just the time off that had done her good. She'd also met someone.

Ben asked about Gus when Philips joined them in the conference room. Tim said something to the effect that he was glad Gus wasn't here stinking up the room, as Philips admonished him and Sandra giggled. 'He didn't look well at all the last time I saw him,' she said. 'He's got some sort of infection, possibly due to lack of hygiene,' Tim said, only half joking. Now Philips chuckled and...

The room receded, Gus was panting, clinging to a chair. He managed to put on some clothes and oriented himself to the door of his apartment. Not sure what his intention was, only that there would be better chances outside in the world. Chances for help, medical attention, or release, maybe?

## Chapter 16

Supporting himself on the walls, he made his way to the stairwell door. With effort he managed to open the door, as he pushed his back into it. He'd become so weak that he had to fight the door closer to get the door to open. He stumbled backward onto the landing, leaned against the wall and dizzy, closed his eyes for a moment.

The air in the stairwell was warmer than usual, or maybe he was running a fever. Also, the air seemed humid and he had a strange, desiccated, slightly offensive taste in his mouth, when he breathed in. He opened his eyes and thinking he must still be getting used to the low light, he blinked to get rid of the illusion of a fog hanging in the stairwell. Thinking his glasses might have fogged up from the effort of opening the door, he fumbled one hand up to his face to take off the glasses, but even before pulling them completely off his nose, he could see the fog was still there, even without the glasses.

The hand that was still near his face, he waved in front of himself, as to wave away some smoke. He saw the air currents move the... They were particles, he saw, tiny airborne particles everywhere, so many that they filled the entire shaft of the stairwell. He focused his eyes on the opposite wall, across the void of the well and saw there, growing, creeping on the surface, white tendrils, branching out everywhere from everywhere.

The effect of the splayed tendrils was kaleidoscopic and for a moment he felt extremely dizzy, half falling toward the banister, which he grabbed with both hands, his torso tilting over the metal rail as he tried to regain balance. Looking down, the darkness below him seemed to issue a gravity that was stronger than the landing he was on, and he felt a pull. Just a quick tumble and it would be over, he thought.

He didn't know it, but a couple of tears were streaming down his face, making pink streaks in the dust covering his cheeks. The tendrils had nearly reached the bottom of the stairs, he realized as he could see the white on the walls, stretching down. *They had nearly reached*, repeated his

thoughts. Something dawned on him, even as he was struggling to maintain a semblance of mental cohesion and he followed the tendril up the wall with his eyes and up to the ceiling of the stairwell.

# PART 5

## Chapter 17

On the upper parts of the stairwell walls, where he knew the wood parts of the ceiling and upper staircase to be, the tendrils were thick and even more tangled. Now turning around to lean back on the banister to look up, he saw what looked like an upside-down forest, hanging from the ceiling.

Something very old inside of him knew these weren't trees. He recognized even in the dim light, the color, the pink and blue making a bruised purple where the colors converged, the same color as the protrusions on his skin. Above him hung an enormous cluster of gigantic mushrooms.

The spores in front of his face moved violently away from him as he screamed in terror. He understood now what was happening to him. Unaware that he was still screaming, he sank down to the landing floor, his back against the metal bars of the banister.

He sat there for hours, his tears had dried up, feeling numb. He had tried to remember who he was and what had made his life worth living. Some pangs of regret and some stabs of sadness barely touched him.

He decided to do one last thing with his life. He wasn't sure why he knew it was the last thing, but he was sure it was, as he dragged himself slowly toward the wall against which the mycelium came spreading down from above. He lay himself against the wall, making contact. He couldn't tell if he was dreaming. He felt like he was going to be a part of something bigger than himself.

## Chapter 18

After Gus had lost consciousness and after a couple of hours, died, time sped up. The protrusions on his skin burst open to reveal the same genus of mushroom growing upside down above him. The mycelium slowly enveloped his body, merging and mingling with the mycelium now emanating from him, his orifices, his gums, his eyes.

What had been Gus was no more, his body had been fully absorbed. The walls were now covered in an ever-thickening layer of white tendrils. In the next moment, pink, blue and purple mushrooms slowly emerged everywhere along the length of the stairwell.