

The Erstwhile Lives of Alek Inch

by Zeph Auerbach

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Needless to say it had come as a shock to Alek Inch to realise that he had been reincarnated as the entire human race, give or take. He certainly never asked to have existed as you, and as your mother, and as just under 104 billion homo sapiens.

In fact, Alek Inch's only real hope – other than be left alone – had been that his body would go kaput before his mind.

Like his father's body, which had been straightforwardly lacerated, punctured, torn and terminated in a car crash involving his yellow Nissan Sunny, on an unremarkable stretch of the M25, near Croydon, where it had been left in assorted warm lumps. As a 10-year-old Alek had seen his father's body cremated, had declared honest love and gratitude through teary eyes, and was back to school on the Thursday.

Now, at 18, he appreciated the merciful abruptness of his father's end. His mother – who he loved more than anything else in the world – was by contrast *alive*, but was operating with a brain that had been under siege for years. Episode after episode, Alek had witnessed her splendid mind being worn down to rubble by the incessant conflict of competing thoughts – the rational and the irrational, memories and dreams, a grotesque battle-royale. “I am broken,” she would say. To which she would often add a little joke, for levity, because she was all Alek had.

It was his mother who he was now freeing from her luxuriant confines at the Princess Royal University Hospital's Mental Health Unit, in Bromley, where she was being detained for her own and everyone else's good, suffering as she was from manic depression. Alek knew that all that ‘manic depression’ meant was that sometimes she was sad and sometimes she was mad. The degrees of each would vary, of course, with either dull or disastrous consequences. Fortunately she was now at a place very low on the sliding scale, where she was lucid enough to hold her own in a break-out.

“Run, mum! We're going to *escape*!”

(Incidentally, they were breaking *out* of the very door that she had broken *into* only a month ago, after Alek had patiently brought her here neither against nor according to her will. She'd sprinted away from him and up the stairs [wailing, boiling, mind exploding], determined to find The Answer behind the bolted-shut, double-glazed doors of the asylum.)

Frantically now they barged past nurses and patients – some of the latter taking it much in their stride, almost wanting to join in – as a piercing alarm rang through the building. Hand in hand they tore down the stairs, giddy with panic, their only feelings of guilt directed at the angelic Dr. Hilary (male) Zeus Stein, who was in hot pursuit.

It was not that Alek Inch had a plan. This was typical Alek, his mother would say – ‘thoughtless’, through and through. This was a term she employed when she seemingly admonished Alek for some reckless, impulsive act, although they both knew it wasn't really an admonishment at all.

Of course, Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein would interpret Alek's actions rather as incipient madness – poor boy, such pressure, and don't forget his genetics. Yet his interpretation would be incorrect, for Alek Inch was by no measure crazy.

It was just that he had recently found an expansion of his memory. He could remember ever so much, since Tuesday.

A frankly dull setting for an unprecedented realisation: Room 39b, Maths, 32 desks lined up facing Mr. Thompson, walls covered with error-ridden posters created by Year 7s, faint smells of body odour, pencil lead and damp. Board awash with calculus. Alek Inch – 18-years-old, native of Bromley, Kent – idly listening to teacher, idly doodling in book, idly staring at the exposed thigh of Amanda Louria, one row in front and two to the right.

So far, everything commonplace. This was only last Tuesday. Almost every Tuesday Alek would find a time to slouch in his seat, glance to his right, and think up sordid dreams inspired by Amanda Louria's thigh.

He had been fantasising unimaginationally: first that thigh, then the whole leg, her midriff, her back, her breasts, his hands on her breasts, his mouth – variations on a familiar theme. Alek in full swing of longing. Watching attentively as Amanda fiddled with her old lion-shaped pencil case – not the transparent plastic one she'd recently started to use – and she tucked a tissue into a fold in her navy blue skirt – a fine colour for her, Alex had concluded.

It was then – in a nothing-lesson, in a nothing-town, on a nothing-Tuesday – when Alek Inch – a nothing-person, truth be told – started to remember.

He remembered wearing that same navy blue skirt almost everyday for two years. He remembered that lion-shaped pencil case he'd got for a birthday once. Always finding this part of calculus tricky. That nagging anxiety: did I remember to shave my legs this morning? The dull ache of second-morning menstruation. He remembered (but only just) turning around, looking at Alek – looking at himself – surely it was just a glance, just a shy, indifferent look, but the face on Alek Inch – of himself, through other eyes – he remembered that well: deranged, dazed and delighted, all at the same time.

And with a thud of utter conviction Alek Inch knew he had *been* Amanda Louria, from the cradle to the grave.

[**AMANDA LOURIA**] As a young girl he had been scared of dogs, one dog in particular, a white one on a chain. He'd had dreams of becoming a fashion model that he'd never shared with anybody else. He'd had a mild crush on that odd-looking boy from maths, Alek Inch, but he never told Alek and he'd eventually lost his virginity to a so-so boy called Terrence Hammond at Exeter University.

Alek squirmed and adjusted himself in his seat as he remembered Terrence wriggling and slurping all over his thighs.

[**AMANDA LOURIA**] He'd always thought his thighs were too fat. As Amanda, Alek had gotten married and become a friendly primary school teacher, Mrs. Hammond, which made sense because he'd always wanted to put children's worries to rest. He'd still had an ok set of thighs that he'd never really been grateful for when he was 51, when he'd died, a beautiful woman with a faulty heart, sprawled out in Hyde Park.

In the maths classroom it felt odd for Alek Inch to remember making love to a man called Terrence, and reaching 50, but even odder to remember dying. In the long run it'd obviously turned out to be a bit of a non-event.

Looking into those eyes – it was just like looking back at an old photo of himself. Then Alek had looked around to all his friends in his maths class and slowly, one by one, the memories of being each of them had marched back to him, as if coming home. He had then felt coursing through his veins a joy akin to skydiving on heroin, and the terror of losing his mind.

So that was Tuesday.

Back to today. The conversation preceding the break-out taking place between Alek Inch and his mother's psychiatrist, Dr. Hilary (male) Zeus Stein had held no portent of things to come. It had been a breath of fresh air for Alek to finally get his blessing-come-curse off his chest.

Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein was an adequate chatting companion because he smiled generously and he smelt good, like black pepper. Alek – reclining on a leather chaise longue – had told the anecdote from Tuesday and tried to explain *everything* as Dr. Stein listened attentively and considerately.

“Apart from all this Alek, do you have any problems?”

“Problems? What *problems* do I have? Well, apart from worrying that maybe I've lost my mind, apart from having the suspicion that I'm immortal, or possibly God, I guess my only problems are... I don't know, well I *used* to have a lousy memory, and I'm still always horny. A slushy brain and a needy penis.”

Although obviously wary of him, Alek had always admired Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein as a well-meaning psychiatrist armed with helpful words and potions. The doctor clearly viewed mental illness as a puzzle, like a challenging game with a clear and achievable goal. Hence the chess-art posters on his walls, his mountain of half-finished Sudoku, and the Go pebbles which littered his floor. He was a gamesmaster of the mind, who happened to conform to all the cuter Jewish stereotypes.

“Well I'm fine with your brain and your penis,” Dr. Stein assured Alek, “I've never met a man who doesn't want a faster mind and better serviced genitals.” He raised one hedge-like eyebrow. What move to make?

“It's obviously this reincarnation stuff then.” He looked at his watch. “Just one more time – tell me how it works, one more time.”

Alek smiled an “of course” and prepared to tell the doctor what he had already told him in quite elaborate detail. He implored him:

“Listen carefully.”

Alek Inch had been serially reincarnated billions of times throughout the history of mankind. When he walked down a street – any street – he had lived as approximately all of the people on that street. Once, Alek was you. He died as you – sorry, it happens – and after he was you he could have been anyone: a shepherd from the dark ages, or Moses, or the first human to think to wipe his bottom. His rollercoasting soul had a total disregard for the linear flow of time. Everything was as spaghetti.

He used to have one simple life with one simple chronology. A mother to look after, A-levels to study for, Mario 64 to complete, Amanda Louri's interest to pique, her thigh to touch, the rest of the female population to one day impregnate. But in that instant on last Tuesday most of this had become fairly parochial and trivial.

Just why this would come to happen to Alek Inch was something that baffled the boy himself. He had seven hairy moles, two unmentionable bad habits and one wonky elbow. Not to mention the fact that he lightly despised the common man and considered even the most genial of folk to be niggling inconveniences. He was an *alright* guy, sure enough – he wasn't a pervert or a serial killer or a racist or anything – but you would've thought that if anybody was going to turn out to have been everyone else in the history of the species at least they'd be a Buddhist or something, or maybe someone big like Brad Pitt. But Alek was just a white atheist geek from Bromley (if you don't know where Bromley is, don't bother looking it up).

Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein had listened through all this once again, massaging his chin ponderously. This was a puzzle that his brain would have to chew over.

“Alek, I don’t think it’d be wise for you to see your mother for a while.”

“No-no-no, I came to visit her today, she was practically normal, and-”

“She’s made excellent progress, yes, in fact she’s doing superbly, but I don’t want this to upset the balance.”

Alek sighed. These people.

“I just want to say hi and bye, it’s been a week.”

“Well yes, I suppose we can do that. I’ll accompany you there in a moment.”

“Sure.”

Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein shuffled some papers and pretended he was changing the topic by asking, “And how are you coping with your mother’s illness?” From his perspective this was – obviously – what they had been talking about all along.

“I’m used to it. It’s fine. Look, can I see her now?”

“Just one second. Do you want to talk about anything else? Do you want to talk about your negative feelings towards other people and-”

“Nope.”

“I think there’s more here, Alek, and you want to talk about it. You’re a nice boy really, Alek.”

“So you say.”

“Your mother really does love you. And from what you say, your father was a decent bloke, who-”

“Look, doctor, you’ve been the first person I’ve ever told about what may be the most miraculous and remarkable thing that’s *ever* happened, and you’re trying to palm me off by saying I had an ok dad, I just... can I see her?”

“Certainly Alek, but I want you to return tomorrow so we can have another chat, is that ok?”

“Sure.”

Alek lifted himself off the chaise-longue a little too fast and waited a while for the spinning to fade.

“Of course,” Dr. Stein said as they made their way out, “I can’t truly believe any of your tale.” He could be a little smarmy at times.

“That’s fine,” Alek replied, “I didn’t believe any of it when I was you either.”

The doctor perked up.

“You’ve been *me*?” he asked. “What was it like to be me, this old schlemiel?”

Despite all that Alek knew – all that he had experienced first-hand – he simply replied, “You tell me.”

Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein laughed – he should’ve expected that move.

“At least tell me how old I am? As a simple test.” Alek thought hard about this as they walked down the corridor to his mother’s ward.

“Don’t you remember what I said about having a slushy brain? Can *you* remember how old you are in every photo of yourself? I can’t even remember my date of birth as Genghis Khan, supreme ruler of the Mongol empire. I have to check an encyclopaedia to find out my own age, how embarrassing is that?”

The doctor thought that this was all very convenient. He had so many more questions, but he knew he had to save them for tomorrow. They turned the corner and there, by the supervisor’s desk, was Alek’s mum. They could both see she was staring into a mirror, a placid look of concentration on her face. Alek had one simple, warm, cosy thought: *that’s my mum*. She was wearing what looked like a cross between an awful tracksuit and an awful set of pyjamas. He knew that she would love to know, more than anyone.

They were only a few strides away and Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein was clearing his throat, ready to greet her, when he took one last look at Alek. There was a trace of pleading in the

doctor's eyes. He was thinking: this peculiar adolescent – wouldn't it be spectacular if he *could* tell me about myself?

In an emotional surge brought on by the sight of his ill mother Alek locked looks with Dr. Stein's wistful eyes. Suddenly a whole slew of stagnant memories gushed into his conscious.

This is what he could have told Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein; this is what it had felt like, to be that old schlemiel:

[DR. HILARY ZEUS STEIN] In his teens Alek would dress up as David Bowie in front of his mirror, thrusting his pelvis into his chessboard imagining it to be Brigitte Bardot. He'd still do it well into middle-age – once his wife found him and he thought she was going to scowl at him but she just ignored him. Boys. His favourite posters had been of David Bowie-

[DAVID BOWIE] And Alek grew up as David Bowie in Bromley, too. He got bad money for painting bad designs on bad raincoats, as he dreamed of playing sax with Little Richard and using music to get to the moon.

[DR. HILARY ZEUS STEIN] As pre-University Hilary he'd shaken David Bowie's hand and got his autograph, two years ago. He hadn't had a clue that he'd *been* Bowie, and that he was writing his own autograph, 'David Bowie' with his erstwhile hand, whilst smiling with his erstwhile mouth.

He'd grown (mostly) out of all this, he'd gone to Edinburgh University to study medicine: to learn how to play one of the greatest game of all.

There was that spot on his back he'd always scratch and think nothing of. This was the cancer that would eventually kill him, but – like Alek now – he was always grateful it was his body which went before his mind.

He'd worked hard to keep some close friends over the decades, although when put together they looked like such an odd bunch. There was his old school friend, Ernst Soussa, who became a businessman, a single-minded money-maker, who-

[ERNST SOUSSA] Alek remembered loving the taste of sweat and the buzz of competition. Playing squash with kind-hearted Hilary. He'd been a soaring multi-millionaire at that point and he would fantasise about getting blood out of a stone. Maybe that's why he'd always stayed friends with Hilary, despite their differences – because they both worked so hard but essentially they'd *played* life.

Over squash they'd discuss money and madness. He tried to explain bonds, broking, futures, spread-betting – but they'd also toyed with the idea of somehow cashing in on Ernst's experiences with the mentally colourful. There was so much fruit to harvest there – the romantic fabrications, the wild and outspoken individuals. As Ernst he'd been very into ancient Chinese Teachings, one of which he'd translated as: "Everything has exploitable features but not everyone sees them."

[CONFUCIUS] "Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it", Alek had once told somebody to write that down, as Confucius. He'd woken up with that one floating around his head.

[MONEY MAN ERNST SOUSSA] As Ernst he had always been happiest when he was achieving his own flavour of zen: a way of converting stress into energy, and energy into revenue. Hilary had laughed at this: "all that *schvitzing*, just for coins?"

[DR. STEIN] He'd never had a better squash partner – not for the rest of his life. Their golden era had been when he was working at Princess Royal University

Hospital, in Bromley. But there'd been that one time – or maybe that *period* – when he felt guilty about not discussing work. A worrying time-

Alek's mind was racing through these lives, jumping along the bonds which connected them, while walking along that corridor in the hospital ward with his mum in front of him. A vertiginous feeling suddenly struck him: something ominous, something critical, something *now*.

[THE LOVABLE DOCTOR HILARY ZEUS STEIN] It had been himself – Alek Inch – who as Dr. Hilary Zeus Stein he had kept secret from Ernst. He remembered that squash game with Ernst Soussa where he'd had so much to tell about a peculiar adolescent patient – no, not a patient, but the son of a patient. He'd lost the game and remembered blaming it on “an itchy back.”

He'd feared that Ernst would see this boy as somehow exploitable and saleable. He'd not wanted Ernst to bargain for him, and for him to hand him over like a freak for a circus. It'd all been so irrational – of course Ernst wouldn't have done that, he wasn't a monster! – but he'd felt the need to *protect* Alek. He was just a boy on the brink of something awful. And Alek had been *his* puzzle, nobody else's.

Having not entertained these memories for countless millennia, Alek Inch was afraid. A week before now, he'd had no idea that he featured so prominently in Dr. Stein's life and memories. Sweating in a panic, his mum right in front of him, he racked his considerable memory for more.

[DR. HILARY ZEUS STEIN] He'd had that strange, recurring nightmare about himself – Alek – where he'd put Alek into a dismal prison with bars made of squash racquets. He'd told Alek – in the dream – to wither away and die there but Alek had just smiled and yawned as if waking up at noon on a holiday. As Hilary he'd been assured this: dying is fine, because I have done it all before, so many times.

One of Hilary's colleagues at hospital had analysed the dream for free and told him it was because he had neglected his own son.

Whether or not that was a long-term cause, the immediate precipitating factor of the dream had been... that incident.

They had escaped.

It was for this reason that Alek Inch – acting thinklessly as he did – decided on a course of action purely on the basis of him having done that exact thing in the past, albeit someone else's past. Out of practical necessity – and not remembering through his doctor's memory any crucial details – he frantically stared from nurse to doctor, doctor to patient. Security was high in the ward; he was looking for some chink in the armour. He scrambled through whole lives of memories for one tiny clue.

[DR. HILARY ZEUS STEIN] He had been a very trusting man, but he had to follow the rules and keep the sectioned patients in. The break-out had happened with such a surreal lack of warning, all at once, and he'd never worked out how Alek had known the code to get out-

[SCHIZOPHRENIC BILL] Everything was chaos back then, and a little chaos inside a larger chaos was barely perceivable.

[NURSE WESLEY] He remembered – somewhere between being born and dying – a security panel, under the supervisor's desk-

[ALEK'S MUM] *Nothing – no memories.*

[NURSE DOROTHY] Alek – as Dorothy – just remembered that there was some commotion, but he'd been so curious about why that boy with Dr. Stein was looking

so red and worried that he didn't really see it happen. One second they were in, the next they were out!

[NURSE WESLEY] How remarkable, he'd always thought, that the PIN for the mental hospital's security panel had been the word 'ILLS' spelt upside down.

Surprising everybody and without a word, Alek groped underneath the supervisor's desk and prodded '5771' into the security panel. Locks clunked back, and before anybody could react Alek had his mother's hand in his own and they were charging out of the door that she had broken into only a month ago.

"*Run, mum! We're going to escape!*"