

## Introduction

The machine had been invented a few years ago: a machine that could tell, from just a sample of your blood, how you were going to die. It didn't give you the date and it didn't give you specifics. It just spat out a sliver of paper upon which were printed, in careful block letters, the words "DROWNED" or "CANCER" or "OLD AGE" or "CHOKED ON A HANDFUL OF POPCORN". It let people know how they were going to die.

The problem with the machine is that nobody really knew how it worked, which wouldn't actually have been that much of a problem if the machine worked as well as we wished it would. But the machine was frustratingly vague in its predictions: dark, and seemingly delighting in the ambiguities of language. "OLD AGE", it had already turned out, could mean either dying of natural causes, or shot by an bedridden man in a botched home invasion. The machine captured that old-world sense of irony in death – you can know how it's going to happen, but you'll still be surprised when it does.

The realization that we could now know how we were going to die had changed the world: people became at once less fearful and more afraid. There's no reason not to go skydiving if you know your sliver of paper says "BURIED ALIVE". The realization that these predictions seemed to revel in turnabout and surprise put a damper on things. It made the predictions more sinister – yes, if you were going to be buried alive you weren't going to be electrocuted in the bathtub, but what if in skydiving you landed in a gravel pit? What if you were buried alive not in dirt but in something else? And would being caught in a collapsing building count as being buried alive? For every possibility the machine closed, it seemed to open several more, with varying degrees of plausibility.

By that time, of course, the machine had been reverse engineered and duplicated, its internal workings being rather simple to construct, given our example. And yes, we found out that its predictions weren't as straightforward as they seemed upon initial discovery at about the same time as everyone else did. We tested it before announcing it to the world, but testing took time – too much, since we had to wait for people to die. After four years had gone by and three people died as the machine predicted, we shipped it out the door. There were now machines in every doctor's office and in booths at the mall. You could pay someone or you could probably get it done for free, but the result was the same no matter what machine you went to. They were, at least, consistent.

## Crash

by James Kelly

"You're deliberately setting yourself apart from everyone, Adam, it's just silly."

"How many times do we have to do this?" I replied, dropping onto the sofa next to her and doing my best not to sigh; she hated that.

"Until you tell me why this is such a problem." She laid a hand on my knee and gave it a squeeze.

"You're the only one this is a problem for, Jess." That wasn't strictly true, but it was my usual response for this argument. I didn't have the energy to try anything innovative after a long day at work. "I'm happy with my blissful ignorance. It doesn't affect you in the slightest."

"It affects me because it affects you, baby." That made me grind my teeth. I hate being called 'baby'. "Even if we ignore the fact that I want to be tested and I want to be tested with you, you can't tell me it wouldn't make our lives easier."

"Maybe. But I prefer not knowing." I pulled myself up from the sofa. It wasn't as relaxing as I'd hoped. "And you know what I think about this Waiting thing."

She stood too. "I think it's very romantic."

"I think it's macabre."

"Are you calling me macabre?"

"Did I say that?"

"Well it sounded like it!"

We stood like that for a moment. Willing the other to continue the argument so that we could beat them into submission for once.

I decided I wasn't interested right now. "I can't be bothered with cooking," I murmured. "I'm going to find a take-out menu."

When I was four or five my dad bought an SUV. For a little boy, this was the coolest car a dad could buy. It was big, it was shiny, and it had a big, shiny, noisy engine. I loved that car. I remember driving to the shops in it was something to look forward to.

That changed the day my dad was tested. He pulled me away from my toy cars and sat me down, explaining that the slips of paper he and my mum had received told them how they were going to die. I don't remember much of the conversation. All that stuck in my mind was that death meant someone going away forever, and my dad would go away because he would be in a crash of some kind. Car, train, plane, the slip didn't say. Just a crash.

Our shiny SUV changed that day. The resplendent shine of a fresh polish became dazzling and sinister, as if it was trying to hide something. The powerful roar of the engine became a barely contained growl. It's imposing height seemed unstable and precarious. It began to frighten me a little, even to the point of giving me nightmares, and to this day if I look at an SUV my stomach clenches. Just a little.

"Is that what we should be talking about right now?" She followed me into the kitchen and watched me pretend to look for a take-out menu. "Pizza?"

"Actually, I was thinking chinese." Why wasn't she letting this go? This argument never went anywhere, and I was tired of it being a stumbling block in our relationship.

“Adam, why are you avoiding this? This is serious.” I kept my attention on my search but she was stood too close to me. It struck me as odd that a woman I couldn’t bear to be apart from could stand too close to me.

“I’m not saying it’s not serious, love, I just don’t want to talk about it right now. I’ve had a long day, I’m tired, and I’m not in the mood.”

“And when will you be in the mood? Come on, Adam, we need to get past this.” She put her hands on my arm. I gave up my charade and just closed my eyes, as if by closing them I could stop the snapped remarks from escaping.

“You. You need to get past this.” I regretted every word but I couldn’t stop. “You’ve known how I feel about getting tested since we met. I’ve not changed that for anyone, so why should I change it for you?”

She took her hands from my arm just as that part of my brain said to me ‘Because you love her?’

“Because I thought you loved me.”

Damn it, this wasn’t going the way it was meant to.

I met Jess at a boring house party while I was at university. What had promised to be a wild pack of young students turned out to be a rather sober affair. Literally. There were only three bottles of cheap red wine for twelve of us, and the conversation was interrupted by long stretches of silence. It was during one of those stretches that Jess declared that anyone who picked the gherkin out of burgers had no taste. That one remark turned the awkward chat into a long, meandering debate that ranged from burgers to Shakespeare and went on well into the early morning.

“Good work with the gherkins.” I’d offered to help Jess get some drinks from the kitchen, desperate to get to know this girl better.

“Thanks.” She smiled and tucked her chin, looking oddly shy. “It was the first thing that popped into my head.”

“I’m glad it did.” I smiled in what I hoped was a carefree and confident manner. “You saved me from my I-was-going-to-buy-some-gloves-today-but-didn’t story.”

Her laugh was perfect, completely carefree and unabashed, without the guarded edge so many people have when talking to someone new. “Shame. That sounds like a great story.”

“It’s thrill-a-minute. Summer blockbuster stuff.” I held out my hand. “Adam.”

“Jessica. Jess.” She took my hand, held it for a brief moment. It’s a cliché, but I felt a spark run up my arm.

We chatted for a while longer. I can’t remember what we said. Jess told me later that the only thing she remembered was how inane she sounded. I was fascinated, of course, and enjoying every moment until the inevitable question.

“So, Adam, how are you going to die?”

It spoiled my mood instantly, as it always does. It’s a question I dread because I dread the response. I’ve never lied about it; god knows it would be easier if I did, but I’m not embarrassed by the fact I’m untested. It just seems to freak everyone out. They usually bombard me with questions and I spend hours explaining myself.

“Don’t know,” I said. “I never got myself tested.”

“Really?” She cocked her head. It felt like she was daring me to change my mind.

“Really.”

The interest in her eyes sharpened. That in itself wasn't unusual. People were always intrigued by the oddity that hasn't been tested. But Jess looked different from the others. She seemed almost pleased. Excited.

"Me neither," she replied. And then she kissed me.

I knew, right then, I'd found someone special.

"For god's sake, Jess, of course I love you." I'd meant to say that softly, gently. Instead it sounded angry and impatient.

"Really?" She had her arms folded, head cocked. "Because I was under the impression that people in love could talk about anything."

"And we can, love-" I began.

"Then why are we arguing instead? Come on, Adam, tell me. When I wanted to talk about us getting tested, why did you decide to mess about with take-out menus?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before speaking. "Okay, Jess, let's talk. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to come with me to the local Machine and get tested."

"Okay. Why?"

"Because it's the right time."

"To find out how we'll die? Why do we need to know? Have our lives been so screwed up because we don't have a flashing sign over our heads saying 'car crash'?" I'd started out calm and gathered, but we were going around in circles.

"Don't shout at me."

"Well I don't see what the bloody point is! Am I the only person that thinks life is better lived without your death hanging over it?"

"That's not what it's like."

"How would you know? Sounds to me like it's just going to get in the way of our lives."

The first time Jess met my dad was ironically the last time I saw him alive. We were visiting my parents for Christmas and the day before we went home my dad took me to the pub.

"A fine lass, Jess." He sat back down and passed my pint to me. "How does she feel about you being untested?"

I took a moment to sip my drink before I replied. The first sip is always the best. "She's fine with it. She's a Waiter, so she's not been tested either."

"I see. And you've told her you don't ever plan to get tested?"

I nodded. "She says she's going to bring me round."

My dad laughed, a short bark that could have sounded harsh save for the warmth that came off him in waves. "That never changes. They always try to bring you around."

"Whereas you gave up a long time ago."

That sobered him, and I regretted saying it. "You're as stubborn as I am, sunshine. Big enough and ugly enough to make your own decisions." He looked past me into the distance. "And if I'm honest there are times I wish I hadn't got myself tested either. I've never told anyone this, but sometimes I feel guilty being in a car or train with someone."

I was shocked. My dad had never seemed worried about his death, always making jokes and laughing away concerns. "Why?" I asked.

"It's silly," he replied. "I feel like I'm putting my family at risk by being there. As if it would be my fault if there was an accident." His gaze came back to me and he shrugged.

"I never knew."

"I couldn't let on, sunshine. I wanted you all to feel happy and safe. I wanted to set a good example to you." He leaned forward. "I've always believed that if there's anything getting in the way of you living your life, get rid of it. Whatever it is."

I nodded. Though his eyes were slightly glazed from drink, I could feel the weight of the wisdom he was imparting. "I understand."

He leaned back and smiled. "Good boy." He raised his glass. "So. To your future with Jess."

We glared at each other for a long time. I couldn't tell what was going on in her head, and I didn't care. I was sick and tired of having this same fight over and over. Each time it felt like an ambush she designed to trap me once I'd come through the front door, tired and hungry and vulnerable. I wanted to shout, to storm out of the house, but somehow I stayed still and rational.

"So," I began. "Let's try again. What do you want from me?"

"Is that all you can say?" All of a sudden her anger seemed to abandon her. Her shoulders slumped and she put a hand to her forehead. "Didn't it occur to you to act of your own accord this time? Instead of standing there like a dog, wagging your tail and waiting for me to tell you whether to roll over or sit?"

"Didn't it occur to you that I'm not psychic?" I wasn't interested in regretting these snarky little comments anymore.

"Great. Sarcasm." Her anger still hadn't returned; she just stared at the floor. "That's going to help this relationship."

I was sober in an instant. Up until that point I'd thought the argument would eventually fizzle out, we'd have dinner in silence and go to bed. It took that peculiarly quiet moment to make me realise the fallout would be more serious than that.

Our first summer in the house was a hot one. I remember standing in the garden one day feeling so hot I felt breathless. I could actually feel the sweat spreading through the new shirt I was wearing.

"Hey."

I turned at her voice. Even though I was upset I couldn't help but smile. Jess was wearing some old jeans she'd cut the legs off, a tatty t-shirt stained with paint and she was covered in a fine film of sweat. She looked gorgeous.

"Hi," I replied, holding my arms open and inviting her into a hug. "How's the decorating?"

"Okay. Definitely time for a hug-break." She stepped into my arms and kissed my chin. "How did the interview go?"

I gave her a smile and a shrug to try to make things look okay. "I didn't get it."

"Oh. I'm sorry, baby." She rested her head on my shoulder. "Did they say why?"

"They don't employ people who haven't been tested." I wondered whether that counted as discrimination.

"I'm sorry," she said again. Then she gave me one of her pauses. Jess was always so obvious about waiting the required moment before speaking again. "By the way, I called the insurance people. About the renewal?"

"Did they tell you why we didn't get one?"

"Uninsurable risk. We haven't been tested."

I held in my sigh and I didn't let my shoulders sag. "You're joking."

She gave me another pause in response. While I waited for her to speak, I tried to just enjoy her body in my arms and the sun on my face. But both were starting to make me uncomfortably hot.

"Maybe it's time we rethought this?" she said.

My first instinct was to say 'no' and end the conversation there. I didn't want the knowledge of how I was going to die hanging over my every waking moment. It wasn't that I thought it was morally wrong or anything, not like those hardcore religious types. If a person wanted to get tested that was their choice. But it seemed like it wasn't so much of a choice anymore. More something you did as a matter of course.

I made a noncommittal noise.

"I know. Neither of us wants to. Not yet." She lifted her head, and I looked down into her eyes. "But the world has moved on, baby. And it's leaving us behind."

"How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Voice the thoughts I haven't finished yet?"

"Genius?" She smiled, squinting slightly as a cloud shifted and splashed the sun onto her face. "So what do you think? Should we get tested?"

She was right, and I knew it; we needed to talk about this. I kissed her forehead. "Tell you what: why don't we focus on getting a job? We'll talk about it then."

She held my gaze for a few moments, and I knew I wasn't fooling her. She knew I was putting this off. "Okay."

I didn't say anything for a long time. Neither did she. I let the weight and implications of what she said sink in. She seemed to be waiting, just staring at the kitchen floor. The ball was definitely in my court.

"So this is it?" I managed. "This is going to decide whether or not we stay together?"

"You sound so shocked." She finally met my gaze. "You didn't see this coming, did you?"

There wasn't any point in denying it. I shook my head.

"Damn it, Adam, why can't you see that my feelings about this are just as strong as yours?"

"I didn't..." I floundered, trying to find something worth saying. "I don't know what to do."

"I know. That's why we're here." She ended our standoff by walking over to me and kissing my chin. "I'm sorry. But you need to choose. Us, or your stupid principles."

"That's not much of a choice," I said.

"I didn't think so either," she replied. She lingered for a moment, then turned to leave the room.

I found myself resenting her a little for putting this ultimatum to me. I'd made the decision to remain untested and stuck with it ever since I was nine years old. But I

didn't want to lose her. I loved her so much it scared me sometimes. Late at night it seemed too big, like it would swallow me whole and nothing of me would remain. I'd be possessed by a ridiculous terror, be ready to run out screaming into the night, until she murmured in her sleep beside me. Then I'd smile, close my eyes, and the sound of her breathing would lull me to sleep.

"I can't," I blurted out.

She turned back, but I didn't have anything else to say. I wasn't sure what I'd meant yet.

"You can't what?" Her voice had a flat, dead quality.

It only took one look into her eyes to figure out my answer. I knew I would never find anyone like her. But I imagined my dad working on the SUV, desperately hiding his fear. All because of that slip of paper that told him how he was going to die. And I knew couldn't live like that. Not even for her.

"I'm sorry, Jess."

I'd expected disbelief, anger, tears. But she just spoke again with that horrible dull voice. "You've decided already?"

I just nodded. Saying anything else would only hurt her more.

"Fine." She hesitated, perhaps to give me a chance to say something. Then, "Goodbye, Adam. Maybe you can call me when you join the future."

She left and I heard the front door slam. All I wanted to do was chase her, to change my mind and stop caring about tests and Machines. It would be so easy. But being untested defined me. Giving that up would mean hollowing out my identity and I wasn't sure what I could fill that void with. So I didn't move. I stood alone in my kitchen and stared at the floor.

Let her keep her future. I was happy where I was.