

Fragile Reality

Robert a 25-year-old restaurant cook sat in front of his computer surfing the web, while his girlfriend was away at school. All the lights in the house were turned off. The only sources of light were the glow of the computer monitor and the television that he sat directly next to. There was a basketball game on television but the sound was muted. He had his 100 CD changer playing on random play and it was playing Prodigy's up-tempo electronica song *Firestarter*.

Robert was in a great mood this evening even though there were things in his life that just were not going in his favor. Mainly his mother was fighting a bout with Cancer, which was more than he wanted to deal with, so he chose to ignore it. He looked over at the television and noticed that the ball game was over, so he switched the channel and saw teenage kids running from a school. Then it cut over to a teenage kid falling out of a broken window, then images of crying teens and parents. He looked at the caption and it said, "student massacre."

The station continued to replay all the same images over and over. The images sickened his stomach and quickly depressed his mood. He turned the television off and looked over at the lava lamp that was sitting on the edge of the desk and noticed that it was turned off. *I know that I turned it on*, he thought

to himself as he examined the lamp. The song on the stereo switched to a depressing slow song that a woman sung with only piano to accompany her voice filled with pain.

He noticed that the content of the lava lamp was melted, as if were just on and the lamp itself was warm to the touch, so *why is it off now* he thought to himself.

He looked into the kitchen where the microwave was on a stand. On top of the microwave was a collectable blue M&M man that was playing the saxophone (it was a candy dispenser). As he stared at the blue M&M man that stood about 6 inches high, he noticed the wall sway out and then back in. Not believing what he had just seen, he rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He looked back into the kitchen, specifically at the same wall and nothing happened. He looked back over at the lamp and tried to turn it back on still with no success.

Behind him, he could hear the walls were crackling like they were on fire. This sent chills up Roberts's spine. He looked back into the kitchen and focused on the wall, and saw it sway in and out again. The crackling noise in the room grew louder. Then it hit him that the house was on fire. He feverishly looked around the living room to locate where a fire could be burning with no success. He stood in the center of the living room and thought that maybe he should get out of the house. He walked over to the front door and opened it. He looked

outside but just could not muster enough courage to cross the threshold to leave the house. He stuck his head out to see if he could see the fire, but again nothing, not even the smell of smoke.

Fear and panic started to set in as he felt he was going crazy. He shut off the stereo and went to turn on all the lights. He looked down to find his cat standing in perfect poise with her front paws against her back paws and her tail wrapped around her body. Though she was in a relaxed poise her eyes glared, showing that she was ready to attack. He quickly went from room to room turning on every light in the house and the cat followed him to each and every room as if she were waiting for the perfect time to attack.

He raced to the cordless phone and dialed his trusted friend Aaron. The phone rang 8 times before an out of breath voice answered the phone with an annoyed tone, "Hello?"

"Aaron!" Robert exclaimed with a nervous tone in his voice.

"Uh yeah?" Aaron replied... "Robert?" Aaron said, realizing who it was that was calling him.

"Yeah it's me," he redundantly replied.

"Oh what's up?" Aaron asked.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Okay what you call for?" Aaron asked.

Aaron's voice seemed like it originated inside Roberts's

head, though he could feel the pressure of the phone on his ear. The sounds of his voice continued to crawl across Robert's mind as if it had been there forever. Was it his own thoughts that he was hearing? Was he even on the phone? In a burst of brilliance he questioned loudly, "Is that you Aaron?"

"Yes, you alright man?" Aaron replied with concern in his voice.

"Yeah I am fine, I think," Robert said and then got lost into his mind again. He could hear exactly what Aaron was saying and understood it yet he was not able to reply. It was as he was entranced by the voice inside his head.

"Robert!" Aaron exclaimed.

This startled Robert and he replied, "Yes?"

"You need to tell me what is going on. You are scaring me," Aaron said.

"Nothing, just calling to see what is up with you," he answered.

"Don't lie man. I know something is up. You are acting way weird," Aaron said with concern.

"Nothing.. well actually I think my house is on fire," he said with fear but little urgency.

"What?" Aaron asked.

Getting no response he asked, "Robert what is going on?"

"I don't know. I heard the wall burning but I cannot find

and flames in the house," he answered.

"What do you mean? Is there any smoke?" Aaron asked again with great concern.

"No," Robert nonchalantly answered.

"Then why do you think there is a fire?" Aaron asked.

"Well I was on the computer and watching the basketball game with the radio on when I noticed the walls moving and my Lava lamp was off then I heard the wall crackling as if they were on fire," he answered never taking a breath.

"What are you talking about?" Aaron asked.

"I was on the computer and watching a basketball game and listening to the radio when I noticed the walls moving..." he started again before Aaron interrupted him by saying, "I heard what you said but that doesn't make sense."

"Did you take something?" Aaron asked.

"Nope," Robert again nonchalantly answered.

"You are scaring me man. I don't have my car to come over either," Aaron said with concern.

"I'm fine," Robert said.

"You don't sound fine to me. Are you drinking?" Aaron asked trying to make sense of Robert's uncharacteristic behavior.

"Just my Power drink," he answered.

"Nothing else?" Aaron asked.

"Nope...well I did put a little mushroom dust in it," he

answered.

"Awww, now I understand. So you are tripping?" Aaron asked.

"Can you overdose on it? Because I think I took to much," Robert asked with great fear in his voice.

"I don't know. I don't think so. At least I have never heard of it before," Aaron answered.

"Well I think I took too much. You think I should throw it up?" Robert asked.

"I wouldn't, it might freak you out if you do. How much did you take?" Aaron asked.

"Not a lot. I just poured the dust from the bottom of the bag in my drink about an hour ago," Robert answered.

"Okay well just stay on the phone with me okay?" Aaron said with concern.

Every light was on inside the house and Robert was sitting Indian style in the middle of the living room floor staring down at the carpet. Aaron's voice still sounded as if it was literally coming from inside Robert's head. Aaron rambled on talking about nothing just to keep the one-sided conversation flowing. The longer Robert listened the more the voice seemed more from inside his mind and not from the phone. He would occasionally adjust the phone against his ear to make sure it was still there.

Then he looked up and the cat was standing directly in front of him. "My cat is freaking me out man!" he said cutting off Aaron in mid sentence.

"What you mean?" he asked.

"She is standing right in front of me staring at me as if she is about to attack me. She has been following me around the entire house tonight. I can't get away from her," he said with a slight slur.

"Oh," Aaron replied not knowing how to respond.

"I am going to go. I think I am going to throw up," Robert said.

"I don't advise that Robert. That might freak you out worse," Aaron replied.

"Well I am freaking out right now, so I want to get whatever hasn't gone through my system out right now," Robert said with panic in his voice.

"I don't have any way to get over to your house, but if you need anything call me," Aaron stated. "You shouldn't have moved so far away Robert," he trailed off.

"Yeah, well alright man later," Robert said and removed the phone from his ear and set it down.

The warmth of holding the phone to his ear made his ear feel as if it were the only thing on his head. He knew that his entire head was there but his ear was the only thing he could

feel. He sat silent and he felt the warmth dissipate from his ear until his ear was just as numb as the rest of his body. No thoughts crossed his mind. He stared into nothingness as his numb body and mind sat motionless for what seemed like an eternity.

Then he noticed his cat was standing just in front of him, looking like she was just waiting for him to move to give her an excuse to attack him. She stared through his eyes and would slightly flinch towards him as if that moment was the time to attack. Then she would sniff the air as if she could smell Robert's fear.

Being completely freaked out by the way the cat was acting he slowly stood up and then broke the silence of the house by saying, "Hey girl what's wrong? Why don't you go play or something."

She didn't change her poise or the pattern of her flinching towards him. "Okay you are seriously freaking me out! Get out of here!" he said with great fear of what the cat was going to do.

With a surge of confidence that the cat was not going to move he started to walk out of the room towards the bathroom. He looked over his shoulder and saw that she was following right behind him. Robert stopped, turned around and said, "What is your deal? Leave me alone."

The cat stopped and in fluent clear English said, "I cannot leave your side."

Not comprehending that it was a cat talking to him he replied, "Why not?"

"I am your guide to get you through this trip," the cat callously said.

Realizing that it was a cat talking to him Robert ran into the bathroom and dropped to his knees in front of the toilet. He slid his finger into his throat and began to move it around to tickle it enough to gag him into throwing up. He heard Aaron's voice run through his head saying, " I don't advise that Robert. That might freak you out worse."

His finger felt as if it were too small as he bounced it from one side of his throat to the other like it was a needle trying to fill a five-gallon bucket. Sweat beads popped up all over his face until they were too large to stay at the place that they formed. They slide into other sweat beads gaining size and speed running down the contours of his face. His stomach convulsed reacting to the gagging sensation in his throat but nothing came out. He persisted to leave his finger in his throat wanting to empty the contents of his stomach. Sweat began to drip from the tip of his nose as the first thrust of liquid came up from his stomach and out his mouth. His stomach convulsed multiple times, pushing out the contents of his stomach.

Once he felt that there was nothing left to get out he wiped the moisture from his mouth. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and thought to himself, *Man, he was right that was too freaky.*

He stood up, went over to the mirror, and looked at his reflection in it. He saw a face that he hadn't really seen in a long time. He leaned closer to the mirror, looked into his own eyes, and thought to himself, *Wow, look at all the lines on your face.*

In his mind, he traced the newly found lines that were on his face. He followed each one till its end. It was the first time in his life that he really looked closely at himself in a mirror. He was surprised to see how many lines that he could see on his face and he said aloud, "You need to take better care of yourself."

He smiled to see the expression change on his face and noticed that was where some of the lines had developed. *Where did the others come from then?* He thought to himself.

He then frowned and that exposed all the lines of his face including the ones that he saw when he smiled. "Am I really that unhappy?" He said aloud while watching his own reaction in the mirror.

He leaned away from the mirror and said aloud, "No I am not

unhappy. At least I think I am happy, but maybe the lines on my face prove that I am really not."

He leaned forward again, stared closely at his face, and lost himself looking at each attribute of his face. His stomach began to feel sick and sweat again began to build up on his forehead. He decided that he probably should go lay down. He took one more long good look at himself in the mirror. Then he opened the bathroom door to find his cat patiently waiting directly outside the door.

Not acknowledging that she was right there he stepped over her and quickly walked to the bedroom, went in, and closed the door making sure that the cat was unable to follow him inside the room.

He laid down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. It swayed like a huge flag would on a hot summer day. Feeling sick and hot he stripped down to his boxers with the hopes that that would help make him feel better. He laid on top the blankets and thought to himself, *Don't worry you just have to ride this trip out and everything will be better tomorrow. Yeah I have to work in the morning.*

Then something strange happened he couldn't convince himself that he really had a job and even worse he couldn't convince himself that there would be a tomorrow or that there was a today. He laid on the bed and realized that he really

poisoned himself and he was dying. He had little time left in his life before he was going to slip away into eternal sleep.

"No I didn't poison myself!" he said aloud trying to comfort himself.

"Yes you did. Don't you remember taking me?" A voice said to him.

"I know I bought some shrooms from Bob and that is what I took," he said defiantly.

Laughter filled the room as the voice said, "Come on. You bought it from Bob? You are Bob! You took me now you are mine."

He ran both his hands from his forehead then through his hair and said aloud, "I know I have to work tomorrow."

"What is work?" The mysterious voice said.

"I know I have a mom. I know I have a dad..." he said aloud then the mysterious voice cut him off by saying, "What's a mom? What's a dad? You're dying Robert. Reality has gone away forever for you."

That worm just wants me to give up and die for him, he thought to himself.

Then in a burst of defiance he said aloud, "I am not giving up because I have to work tomorrow and I have mom."

Again laughter filled the room and then the voice said, "You were dead way before today my friend. After today you will just be physically dead too."

"I am not going to die," he said aloud to the empty room and mysterious voice.

"You only care for yourself and have distanced yourself from your dying mother, hurting her more than any cancer ever could," the voice said.

"I am too scared to show her my true feelings. I think if I do accept that she is dying and show her how much I love her, it is then she will die and be gone forever," he said and then realized for the first time why he had put so much distance between him and his mother.

"Then you are dead already," the voice arrogantly said.

"No I can still change. I can accept that she is sick and make the most of the time we have left together," he said to the voice.

"You couldn't before. Why is now different?" The voice questioned.

He then saw the cat on the shelf standing next to a doll. The cat was sniffing the shirt of the doll where he had the remaining mushrooms hidden. He stood up and cautiously grabbed the cat and tossed her out the door. He then laid back on the bed but he saw that the cat was already back up on the shelf. Again he went over to the cat and cautiously tossed her out the door. He noticed then that the door to the closet was open. This closet had a door that opened to the hallway and that must be

how the cat kept getting in the room. He securely closed the closet door then laid back down on the bed.

The only light in the room was on the ceiling shining directly down on him. The ceiling was still swaying graciously like a flag in a light wind as his body sank into the bed. He struggled to convince himself that he really bought mushrooms from a guy name Bob and not that he poisoned himself, as the worm wanted him to believe. His limbs felt so heavy that he no longer had the strength to move. He shifted his eyes to look around the room and he could barely see the walls that were just five feet away. Reality was melting away faster than he could convince himself that it was just a matter of time before the trip would be over. His thoughts were consumed with convincing himself that it was just a bad trip. The worm insisted that it was the poison that Robert took and gave him life that would eventually take Roberts life away from him. Robert fought to keep his eyes open in fear if he closed them he would never be able to open them again. His eyelids were so heavy that it took every bit of his remaining strength to keep them open. He was even afraid to let them blink thinking it was a rouse to get them to close and then not be able to open again. The only thing that was real to Robert was his fight over who would keep his body forever. He was dying and the worm was winning. He didn't

want to die. He wanted to live to grow old, even if that meant watching his mother die before his eyes.

Just as he thought about how much he really wanted to live he heard the front door of the house open. It was his girlfriend, Kat, better yet it was something that was reality. Forgetting that his limbs were too heavy to lift he popped up and bolted out the bedroom meeting Kat at the kitchen table. Kat looked at him with a concerned and surprised look and said, "What's going on?"

Robert went over to her to hug her but she stopped him by putting her hand on his bare chest and holding him away and said, "What is going on Robert?"

"Nothing, I am just so glad you are home is all," he said being to embarrass to tell her the truth.

"Why are all the lights on and why are you basically naked?" She asked with an accusatory look on her face.

"Who is in the room?" She quickly followed.

"No one," he answered innocently not understanding what she was getting at.

"Then why are you almost naked?" She again asked with an aggravated tone.

"Well I took something and I think I am having a very bad trip," he said hanging his head in embarrassment.

"Oh," she answered not knowing how to reply to what he just

told her.

"Why what did you think was going on?" He asked.

"Nothing," she said with some skepticism in her tone.

"Come on tell me," he persisted.

"Well you came out of the room with only your boxers on, completely full of sweat and with a guilty look on your face, I thought you were cheating on me," she answered with a relieved tone then let her hand down allowing him to come close to her.

He didn't realize that just the sight of her face and the presence on her voice had brought him right back into reality. He was still tripping but at least he didn't feel like he was dead anymore. He pulled away from her and said, "Man I didn't think you were ever going to come home."

"I had to stop and pick up the pictures at the store," she said taking the pictures out of the bag and started to shuffle through them.

Her face went pale and she said, "Oh no."

"What?" Robert asked not being able to control his fear.

"These are not our pictures!" She said with panic in her voice.

"Whose pictures are they?" he asked.

"I don't know," she snapped then fanned the pictures out showing him what they were.

Then she put them back into the package and said, "I will

be right back."

"No you can't go!" Robert said in a panic and grabbed her arm.

"Robert I have to," she answered.

"No you don't," he childishly answered.

"Robert, we have some one else's pictures. That means that they are going to get our pictures," she said slowly trying to keep her composure.

"You can go tomorrow and take them back," he answered thinking he had solved the problem.

"I don't think you understand. Those were the pictures you took of me," she said sternly to him.

"Oh those pictures," he mumbled.

"Exactly, I have to go before they give them our pictures," she said grabbing her purse to head out the door.

"You just can't leave me right now," he said dramatically knowing that if she left he could fall right back into the bad trip.

"Robert, I have to take these back and get ours before the other people gets ours," she said in more of a horrified tone than an annoyed.

Robert grabbed her and hugged her and said, "Please don't go. I really need you to stay."

"But the pictures," she protested.

"I need you to stay. I am to scared to stay her alone," he said looking into her eyes.

With a heavy sigh Kat said, "You're lucky I love you so much."

"You don't know how much I need you right now," he said hugging her tightly.

She returned the hug and they stood in the kitchen for a few minutes before Robert said, "I think I need to lay down."

They both went into the bedroom and Robert laid down with his head at the foot of the bed and Kat laid down next to him and began to rub his head. Then like a bolt of lightening striking Robert he said, "I got it!"

"You got what?" Kat asked startled by the abrupt break in silence.

Robert turn his head to look at Kat and said, "You know how Roman said that every time he trips he finds the meaning of life and by the time he comes down he forgets it."

"I don't think I ever heard that before but okay," she answered wondering what he was getting at.

"Well he did say that and I know the meaning of life right now Kat," he said and sat up and grabbed her hands and looked into her eyes the best that he could.

"What I need you do is remember what I am about to tell you," he said like he was really holding the key to life.

"Okay I will," she answered with sincerity.

"Money is not important!" He said as with such great conviction as if God himself was speaking through him.

"And I need to be there for my mother and accept that she is going to die and it might be soon. Because if I don't deal with it now she is going to be gone and never know how much I love her and how much she means to me in my life," Robert said as a single tear fell from his eye.

Kat had known that Robert had shut his mother out because of his fear that she would die the day he accepted that she was going to die of cancer. Tears began to stream down her face as she listened to him open up to her for the first time ever about his true feelings.

Then Robert said, "You think I should call her?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should wait till tomorrow," she answered with some concern that the phone call could go wrong.

"No, I have to call her now. I can't wait another day to let her know how I feel," he said then left the room and got the phone.

He came back into the room with the cordless phone and had already begun to dial the number. The phone rang a few times before his father answered the phone. Robert made small talk with his father for a few minutes and then asked to speak with his mother. He talked with her for a half hour or so, telling

her all about how he found the meaning of life and how he had been shutting her out because he did not want to lose her. He explained that because he had pushed her away that he had already lost out on precious time and that he was committed to making the remaining time that she had left like the relationship that they shared before she was diagnosed with cancer. His mom told him that she didn't know why he was having this revelation but she hoped as well that things will be like they used to be. She also explained that things like Robert shaving her head the first time (because of the chemotherapy was making it fall out) instead of a stranger was the type of things that helped her and she cherished.

The conversation ended by Robert telling her that he loved her more than anything and that he couldn't wait another minute to make sure she knew that. After he hung the phone up, Kat hugged him and they cried together for the first time.

An hour or so later Kat had fallen asleep because she had to get up early for work the following day and Robert was laying down in the dark room staring at the ceiling that was still swaying like a flag on a warm summer day. Thoughts crawled through his mind retracing the different experiences that he had throughout the night. He relived the roller coaster of the night over and over in his head till his eyes involuntarily started to

blink slowly until he didn't have the strength to open them again.

The following day the sun rose and shined into the room that Robert slept. The light came in through the window and cut across his face warming his cold pale skin. The world didn't wait for him to wake up, it just moved on as it did when for so many years when he was walking dead.