

The Tag Club

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The Tag Club is a thriller that follows the numerous assassination attempts on the life of Charlie. Is he a soldier about to be inducted into a sinister club or an agitator on the brink of insanity trying to escape this world and the world of the asylum? Charlie has a mission, but whose side is he on? Will Hugh catch him, will the man in the tartan slippers fill in the missing gaps in his relationship with his father, will his love for Maria survive and exactly why is this disturbed individual so important a cog in the machine?

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The Tag Club

The

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To Gena

A bee was drowning slowly in a pond. An old man, noticed, took a fallen leaf off the ground and scooped the half dead bee out from the water. The bee bumbled onto a long stem of grass, dried itself off and flew into the distance. Alone the old man thought aloud to himself:

â Our destiny is changed because this life is saved. The possibilities from now on are endlessâ .

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The old man began to tell of a voyage and of it this is what I heard.

PART 1: THE TAG CLUB

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I have not told half

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I HAVE NOT TOLD HALF

"I am God today!" A jump or B I'll push you.

"Ironic, your last cigarette," Hugh laughed as he placed it between Charlie's lips and lit it. Charlie could barely stand. Interrogated for months, it could have been just hours, his end was in sight. Hugh slapped the cigarette from Charlie's mouth and ordered the assistants to hold Charlie's ankles and walk them till the heels of his feet were on the edge of the chair.

Charlie was numb and dazed, the noose tightened around his neck. Suddenly an unforgettable, violent and exact shove hit Charlie's spine. It sent him flying forward. The rope jerked sharp around his neck while his heels were held to the edge of the chair.

Hugh looked at his handy work.

"Think I'll have a cigarette," he searched but his pockets were empty.

"I am going to the shop you better be dead when I get back."

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Charlie knew his time was limited. Hugh and the assistants left the garage. Charlie was left precariously tilted between the rope around his neck and his bare heels caught on the chair.

As possibilities and probabilities collide, the percentages for the unlikely increase rapidly. The odds that Charlie would strangle were high. He wriggled around nearly toppling the chair. In doing so he managed to grab the rope from behind his neck and correct his position on the chair. Gasping for breath he undid the knot and in an instant started alternating between tears and laughter. He knew his time was limited. He had to get back to base. Assessing the situation he got up and moved towards the garage door his sanity would become unhinged, he was orbiting between calm and mad like the flick of a switch.

A few months earlier,

Charlie was in a lonely pub. This guy walks over cool as a breeze.

“Buy you a pint mate?”

Next thing Charlie knew there was music and chat and “why don’t you join this club?” A card with a membership number on it in the high 100’s was handed to Charlie.

“At least I’m not the only one”, Charlie smiled.

“Do you know what it means?” Hugh replied.

Charlie remembered destroying the card. It lay in pieces on the floor.

Rising early the following morning Charlie decided to see the sights of the city. His head began to buzz, still slightly intoxicated after his night out. As he walked, the foreign streets took on a familiar identity. It was like his home town. “Like looking at your twin in a mirror”, he mused. He became very faint. It all started coming back like honey gradually dripping off a spoon!..he couldn’t quite get away from the feeling that he was stuck. The situation had turned as it progressed into a sticky glue setting slowly as it trailed towards an end.

Charlie struggled from and shrugged the thoughts off of him. He moved quickly out through the garage door. He was in rural terrain now and his only chance of survival was flagging down a car.

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Charlie stood at the side of the road. He had no shoes on and his feet were raw. He was taking a chance by being out in the open but he had to put miles between him and Hugh. Just as the sky opened up a car pulled up beside Charlie.

â Perfectâ .

Charlie sat in and reached to put his seat belt on.

â I can only take you a mile up the road no need for the beltâ .

The driver slapped the gear stick into first and sped off.

There was little conversation between the driver and Charlie. Charlie placed his shins up against the dashboard, hiding his bare feet and making him snug. He noticed the driver speed up and direct the car towards an oncoming vehicle.

â Set up!â

There was a loud crash followed by a thud. The car came to a sudden halt. Charlieâ s shins against the dashboard prevented him from being thrown through the windscreen. The adrenalin was pumping through his veins. He knew he had to get back to base. The man next to him lay unconscious. Charlie took the manâ s shoes and ran for the ditch next to the wrecked car.

Charlie ran, his mindâ s voice grinding into his thoughts like his school P.E. teacher shouting â Faster you loser, fasterâ . He thought of the first time he met Hugh in the pub in London and the invitation to join The Tag Club. Hugh had seemed nice, it was that first impressions thing, and they are more often wrong. Things suddenly turned nasty when he learned that he was bait to train a would-be assassin. This was Charlieâ s job now and there was only one way out, Hugh had done it to him, he would have to do it to someone, Charlie would have to tag someone.

â Come on you Loser!â

â They make you functionally unhingedâ , Charlie said in a whisper.

â Mind gamesâ .

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Charlie wasn't long tagged and back in his home when Hugh showed up at his front door looking for a place to stay.

"It'll only be for a short while."

"I'm just passing through."

.

That night they got plastered. Charlie knew something was wrong. His arms and legs were telescopic and the cigarette smoke trailed out of his mouth spectacularly. The last thing he remembered was an animated Hugh walking off down a corridor that was breathing. Everything seemed so alive. So vivid.

Suddenly Charlie is awake and restrained to a chair. The rope is cutting in. Charlie is tied to a chair. Hugh is standing above him with a revolver.

"I'm only going to ask you two questions."

"How many pieces did you tear the card into?"

"Where are the pieces?"

"You crazy bastard."

But that's all Charlie could say. White light raced through his brain. A pain gushed from the centre. Hugh was not alone. Someone behind Charlie was administering an electric shock.

"Fuh, Fuh, Fuh, five times," Charlie said near collapse. Hugh smiled he knew how and the art of torture. People always spoke. The question was when and making sure they didn't die before that point and the point of telling the truth.

"Don't fool yourself," Hugh said, "I know when you lie."

He snapped his fingers and one of his assistants cut Charlie free. They grabbed him under the arms and led him up the stairs to the bathroom. Steam was rising from the half filled bath tub.

"There's a better life at the end of the tunnel soldier."

"There's a better life at the end of the tunnel soldier."

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Charlie could feel his lungs fill and tighten as the air escaped into the water. Charlie's eyes were blurred under the water but he could just about manage to see the light beckoning. Again, face first he was smashed into the bathtub of hot water.

There's a better life at the end of the tunnel

This was repeated for several minutes, Charlie awoke at the base of the bathtub in a pool of water coughing his lungs out and gasping for air. He had looked into the tunnel long enough. He was about to pass out. Hugh's voice whispered "4". A white light, a buzz and burning pain entered into Charlie's head again and he wished the tunnel was a little shorter this time.

When Charlie woke he was tied in the chair.

Hugh spoke, "Have you ever played 5 or 6?"

Charlie tried counting how many people were in the room.

Hugh emptied the drum of his revolver, "We're going to play a little game now".

It's called 5 or 6.

Hugh put the bullets back in the drum and spun it. Pulling the hammer back, he squeezed the trigger "CLUCK!"

Charlie didn't see how many bullets were put into the revolver. He had tried to count them. He thought he counted 5.

Hugh began to pull the trigger again.

"They make you functionally unhinged" Charlie bit his lip. "Make you functionally unhinged".

Charlie remembered. He was young. Charlie built a fence. The joints were loose so his father told Charlie to tighten them up by wedging rocks and pebbles into the gaping cracks. Every time he came near to finishing a pebble or stone would come loose and fall. Every time he would walk away his father would make him return to the task and restart.

Late that night he finished and ran to show his father. His father looked at the fence, examined it and said "Good".

"Now take each stone and pebble out and start again".

Charlie looked up to the sky, he saw a rainbow.

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â I must go onâ .

He made it 5 miles when Hugh and the Tag Club caught up with him.

They brought him in a car to a dimly lit interrogation room. Charlie sat in a chair. A clock ticked loudly. Sweat gathered on his brow and as quickly rolled down his face. The room smelt stale. The table in front of him was unkept. Papers lay strewn across it. A coffee cup surrounded by crumbs sat like a messy devil. Charlie was thirsty and the clock was drowning out his thoughts. He only had a minute to act. Hugh entered the room. â Whatâ s your membership number?â

â No replyâ .

â Hostileâ .

â O.K. interview commences at --/--â .

â Thatâ s not the correct timeâ , Charlie looks up startled.

Hugh turns to look at the time on the wall clock.

â Hang on a minuteâ .

But Hugh didnâ t have a minute. His time was up.

Charlie gathered his thoughts asserted himself and assessed the situation then moved towards the door. Hugh lay on the floor, blood rolling from his wound. The minute hand from the clock stopped twitching in his neck.

â I guess youâ re itâ .

I guess youâ re it!

Charlie ran down the corridor looking for a means of escape. He was chased and cordoned off by the assistants. A man in a pristine suit approached him.

â Bravo you are itâ .

â You have just secured a place in the system. Youâ re a cog in the Tag Club. The most powerful mechanism ever wound. First we will freshen up then I will answer your questionsâ .

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They bandage you up to send you out again.

COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Charlie apprehensively lowered himself into the bath. The water moved back and forth like small waves with the motion of his bulk lying in.

â It looks like I am holding all the cardsâ .

â Now all I need to know is the name of the gameâ .

The intercom above the door intruded with an abrasive voice.

â Proceed to the Directorâ s officeâ .

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Charlie got out of the bath, still wet, he put on his clothes.

They break you down to build you up again

Charlie walked a pale walled corridor. There was no shadow or sound along its length. Each door was indistinguishable from the one that followed. Suddenly one opened and a man escorted soldier inside.

â You can go nowâ .

â Not you soldierâ .

The slim man behind the desk rolled his eyes to heaven. He was shuffling a deck of cards in his hands, moving them back and forwards in rhythm with his voice. He wore a pristine suit.

â 25 years in the job and I never lost a man to a traineeâ .

â You owe us bigâ

â You canâ t train instinct!â â You have tons of instinctâ .

â Are you trying to recruit me?â

The man stopped and put one of the cards on the table.

â No kid youâ re shit deep in itâ .

â You took a top operative out and the only way you can get out alive is to accept our offerâ .

The man put another card on the table.

â Youâ re going to have to do a job for usâ .

â Weâ ll send you over some background information on the hit, time, date, travel and accommodation arrangements. Access to a weapon will be arrangedâ .

He took the cards back up, placed them in the deck and started to shuffle again.

â Thatâ s all for nowâ .

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Charlie was in shock. By the time he got back to his quarters, a pile of documents lay on the table with F.Y.I. written on top. This was someone else's reality thought Charlie, but it wasn't. Charlie opened the folder, it contained a picture. Underneath was typed the single word, Target.

Charlie put the picture into his back pocket.

The phone rang. You will be leaving in ten minutes. The Director said to wish you luck.

GOING UP

Every time one of us falls down 10 get up.

At least that was what Charlie believed the man at the departure desk whispered in his ear.

What was that?

If one of those bags fall down don't pick it up, the man repeated.

Charlie felt he was being observed because he was beginning to act differently.

He would have to bide his time till an opportunity to escape presented itself.

Can you escape after being tagged?

When last was I free?

Charlie sat in the waiting lounge and closed his eyes. It was getting hot. He drifted off. His feet were raw.

The nurse meticulously cut the dead skin while lifting it from Charlie's ankle.

She was beautiful and pale. Noticing burns on each side of each ankle she drew circles around them.

We can see if they are getting better. She smiled.

Turning her attention to the worst burn she cleaned it.

Yes, I think they will heal.

It will be very sore taking the bandages off, she remarked.

Charlie looked down at the plasters circled with black ink.

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â Cats eyesâ , he thought

â Meowâ

A doctor came in.

â Police will want to question you about the fire. Iâ m sure it is routineâ .

â Seems someone fell asleep with a cigarette in their hand, no one was killed thank God. The blaze was contained to the lounge.â

Charlie excused himself from the emergency room. He hurried down the corridor of the hospital and into the elevator.

Confined to a lift, sarcastically, his mind reached for the incandescent answer to the illusive question he found himself speaking aloud:

â Why meâ !?â

â Why notâ !?â The just yet apathetic reply from a corner spoke.

Charlie looked at the man in the wheelchair next to him in the elevator.

â Hugh?â

â Minutes only slow you down; itâ s the hours that kill youâ .

â Yeah, I know, I should be dead. Iâ m like a bad fart, youâ re not quite sure you smell me till you follow through and youâ re sitting in itâ .

â And believe me you are neck deep in itâ .

â Iâ m going to tell you something, you were made for this job. This is your one job, up to now they have kept you bobbing for apples. Itâ s hot and there is no way outâ .

The elevator went DING!

GODâ S MILL

If you cannot walk,

Crawl,

Till you are fit

to run.

If you cannot

Take giant steps,

Take baby.

If it has to be done 100 times,

Will you do it 100 times?

If it takes 101 times,

Will you do it the extra

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“ Powder and ink ”, Charlie said as the doors of the elevator opened and he ran out.

Charlie’s father told the tale of powder and ink. Powder made fireworks but also made gun powder. Ink made calligraphy possible but calligraphy came from swordsmanship. Powder and Ink were meant to be glorious things. Both could destroy one another both could be the source of good and bad.

His Dad use to joke:

“ You’re explosive, going off at the slightest thing. No wonder others stay clear. They are like ink. When mixed both are rendered useless ”.

“ Better stay clear of powder if you are ink ”.

Charlie’s father was right! Charlie was destructive. That was the dilemma. “ Powder and Ink ”.

Charlie ran down the hospital corridor. The Director of the Tag Club was waiting for him with the assistants.

“ Wait, I owe you an explanation ”.

“ The bee and the hive both need each other to exist. Both will die without the other ”. “ We don’t know if you are a bee or a hornet, we need bees for the industry? ”

“ If you are a hornet it might be better to leave the hive? ”

Charlie took the picture out of his back pocket. It was him in the photograph all along.

There was a window to his left. He leaped.

The Director got into his car. The engine was running. The radio was on.

“ This report is coming to you from outside the location of the city hospital where the body of a man is being pulled out of the hospital water fountain after he threw himself from the third level of the building; the scene is being preserved for examination by police ” buzz “.

BACK TO BASICS

IS IT BETTER FOR A FRIEND TO TRY AND KILL YOU THEN AN ENEMY?

Clip, clop, clip clop, went the nebulizer like a lame mule following the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

“ I guess if you are going to throw yourself from the third floor of a building and you are going to land somewhere” “well you know what I mean to say” .

“ Very lucky” , replied the other nurse.

Charlie was at peace. Minutes, hours, seconds” “none of them seemed to matter now.

Charlie was sitting in what looked like the lost and found department of a railway company.

His Dad’s watch lay on the table, dismantled.

“ Seconds, minutes, hours?”

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“Which are more important?” his father’s voice drifted in.

Charlie had tried to reattach a fallen off hand from the beloved watch.

Both were lost now.

“Seconds?”

“Dad would say seconds?”

“It’s the difference between minutes and an hour?”

Charlie began to rest again in the hospital bed. In his dream he was putting the remains of the watch into an envelope.

“Expensive lesson?” he murmured in his restlessness.

In the distance someone who didn’t want to be seen shuffled his feet and observed.

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“You’re lucky you are not down the morgue with a tag on your toe”, the nurse said to Solider. He lay oblivious to it all.

“Can you hear me?”

“Who are you?”

You look in a person’s life for a defining moment. It is often a time where they stand separate from the crowd or those who surround them. It can comprise of a word, action, trait, thought or choice that defines them for as little as one brief glorious moment. It will stand out and be associated as them for ever.

Charlie had no family, no wife or children. He had no major academic abilities but he did have that defining moment that made him stand out. The kind of quality the Tag Club was looking for in a candidate.

Before he dropped out of college, Charlie had a chess game with a candidate for the Tag Club. It was a winner take all match with both players pride up for stake. Charlie had made a jibe at the far more confident student and a circle of spectators gathered around the pending challenge like perched vultures ready to swoop condemningly. Charlie delivered them a victim when he pinned and check-mated his opponent after a handful of moves. The cheer from the crowd assured him of the unbelievable win, and the annihilation of any retaliation. From then Charlie stood out. He was noticed. People appreciated his quirky way. Found him charming. Charlie felt akin to a shark in a gold-fish bowl. Charlie won against the odds. It was like sending out a flare in the middle of the night, it was noticed.

Charlie had the uncanny knack for seeing any weakness in securities be it environment, computer or personnel. That was an advantage to certain organisations. Organisations that kept the rules and bended the rules when suited.

Charlie didn’t look strong or fit or intelligent but he knew how to wrestle with a pattern, sequence or a dilemma. Charlie thought like the machine and was able to reveal the machine’s mystery. Lift its veil. He’d mimic and gain access like a bee into a hive and he could come and go as easily.

The problem was Charlie. He was a hornet.

He looked like everyone else. In most cases he was the same. Charlie was the same but different. His difference made him gifted but his similarity made him cautious. It was like Charlie was two sides of the

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same coin. Charlie could never decide which side to fall on, so he perpetually log-rolled on the coin's edge. In between two worlds, never fitting in, an outcast of his own making. The Tag Club was for Charlie like looking into a mirror and seeing both good and bad. The lesson it was teaching Charlie was self-realisation. He saw it as corrupt and flawed. It was his eye alone that was the eye of the beholder. Charlie was kicking against it. He had built a wall to keep the realisation out, now he was running through each and every brick.

He didn't like people, people irritated him. He wanted out of the hive, but he had nowhere to run. More inconvenient, The Tag Club saw him as an investment and indispensable. They were willing to chase this hornet. Smoke him out where ever he went.

The hospital room was now empty.

A man came in leaned on the bed and moved his weight from side to side on his feet.

â Wake up you God damn piece of shit .

Charlie moaned. His eyes opened slowly. He looked up. It was Hugh.

â Have you come to kill me ?

Hugh laughed. He laughed hard.

â You were in a wheelchair .

â And you were in a comma .

Hugh laughed again.

â I have one last job for you .

â We want you to decode an encryption .

â Do it and you escape ?

â We are not negotiating .

â We want you to think of it as Sudoku with attitude. The only problem is if you get your numbers crossed, we all fry . â Remember basics â Problems make Solutions , well guess what lâ lâ 'you' re part of the situation which-ever way you look at it .

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â Sometimes when you stare into the abyssâ , something other than the abyss stares back.

Hughâ s defining moment was when he proposed to his wife and she accepted.

THE MAGIC NUMBER

â Does the chicken look back at the egg shell and say that is what I amâ .

Charlie and Hugh walked down a dimly lit corridor in the base of the Tag Club. The base resembled a disused nuclear war bunker. It was isolated, barren and impregnable. Charlie had definitely landed on one side of the coin. Fortune would choose if his destiny would be a long way off or not. They were on the way to do encryption tests and number associations. There was a global threat, satellite signals had being encoded and some intelligent person or organisation was scrambling access to the internet, airport radar and many other high tech instruments. Governments were effected, more importantly the consumer driven economy had grinded to a halt with people unable to view advertisements for product A or product B, on station c or d.

The revolution had begun, riots were worldwide and escalating.

In clandestine operations as in golf the following maxim holds true, NEVER take your eye off the ball.

Back in the laboratory Charlie was hooked up to a maze of pipes, tubes, elastic bands, wires, cheese graters, egg whisks and light bulbs that would measure his responses. He was asked a series of questions:

â How many points does a compass have?â

â 4â .

â Where do you find 4â s?â

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“4, 4 corners of a house” .

“ Good” .

Hugh sat outside observing.

“ Subliminal interrogation works just as well as hanging and dunking” . “ I will have the answers to my questions” .

The Director stood outside suitably impressed, shuffling a deck of cards. He picked one out of the deck.

“ Maybe not” .

We all live in prisons. Different sizes and different dimensions but, still prisons.

The director waved his hand and cried “ Stop” . The wires, tubes, pipes and elastic bands were taken off. The cheese grater was restrained and the light bulb was turned off.

“ Take him to the room” .

“ The room” !? “ Charlie repeated.

It sounded as ominous as a dungeon. The room could be at that moment everywhere or down the corridor, last door on the left. It was the latter. It was 4 walls and a bed. Charlie lay down and prepared to start fighting the sleep.

Charlie entered dream world. The world was in strife and nature had receded. “ Think, think, think” , he laughed at the words then raised his index finger skywards. In his dream Charlie saw an oasis. It looked like a park? “ If I could talk to someone, even a stranger, the sound of their voice, would assure me I exist” .

Charlie felt young and giddy.

“ Iâ m not a shadow” , he sang.

He couldnâ t rest. The wind shook the branches of a nearby blossom tree.

“ I am alone” and petals fell like confetti upon Charlie. Everything seemed beautiful. The wind swept the petals away. Charlie lay faint on the ground. The honeymoon was over. Charlie realised he was truly alone. Not for the first time, nor just at that moment, but always and forever. Lost in a sea of noise, normalities, trends and the giddiness that visited him was always the delusion that would fade again, dashing him helplessly back to the rocks of reality and this empty life of his. All gone washed out of the grey man he had become. Charlie didnâ t have tears to cry. Charlie wasnâ t free to walk directionless. It was too late. Charlie was too late. A shadow caught in the noon day sun.

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The Director snapped his fingers. Charlie woke briefly.

â You are sitting in a dilapidated room.â

Charlieâ s eyes closed. He was sitting in a dilapidated room. The wallpaper was peeling off the wall. Curtains were blowing, torn and dirty, the windows cracked and broken. The ceiling was caving in and the floor was uprooted. A television buzzed in the corner, the signal had being encrypted.

â Where is the beauty?â

â Where is it gone?â

Out of the corner of his eye Charlie thought he saw something. He did, he was certain. It was a butterfly. It was flying towards the house. It was all the beautiful colours you could imagine, like petrol floating in a pool. It flew closer. Than Charlie realised the butterfly had a body off a slug and it was coming to land on him. It attached itself to Charlieâ s arm. The pain was excruciating. He tried and tried but couldnâ t get the insect off his arm. Charlie felt faint and sickly. The insect pulsed and secreted a frothy substance similar to the white of an egg. Charlieâ s skin burned.

Charlie let a blistering yell out. The insect detached itself and flew off into the distance. Charlieâ s arm was bulbous. He scratched it. There was something beneath the skin. He tore at it. Six large eggs lay inside.

Charlie got up and scraped his arm off the wall. He gouged the eggs out. One cracked, a little insect crawled out. Charlie stamped on it, killing it. He heard another egg crackâ !â !..crack!

Charlie woke up suddenly. The director was by his side.

â See you are a killerâ .

Charlie knew this was brainwashing. He also knew if they told him not to think of the number 6 it would be imbedded in his head. He would see 6 everywhere he went. Charlie knew it was just another system to crack. He had to find a way of wiping his mind and starting again, is that how he got here in the first place. DeJaVu put a cold shudder down his spine like someone walking over his grave. Charlie didnâ t know if he could take much more. He didnâ t even know if he was asleep or awake. With the exhaustion came the realisations, the more you value something the more others want it and generally speaking friends donâ t try to kill you.

â MIND LIKE THE WINDâ .

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“He has nothing to lose.”

The Director knew a liability when he saw one.

“F.U. Sir.”

“What?” replied the Director with a raised voice?

“Functionally unhinged,” Hugh replied.

“Functionally Unhinged, so make it”

The Tag Club went about realising, Charlie’s paranoia, by making him unpopular with minorities in the community, soon making him unpopular with the majority. They made his enemies numerous so he would find it impossible to pin-point who first launched an attack. The Tag Club instigated and installed in Charlie’s programme conspiracy theories, complex and simple but many. They took away his identity, his opinions, and his means of supporting himself. They made him a yes man and they wiped from his mind any happy memory and his defining moment. They gave him a job with unreasonable bosses, a television and a loan he would be nearly paying off for most of his life.

The Tag Club deleted Charlie.

He was no one.

He was controlled and categorised.

“Functionally Unhinged.”

“F. U.”

“The only place for him is here” and an ambulance came and took Charlie to the asylum.

He stared at the clock on the wall. Watching the minute movements of the hands and counting the yells and screams between each tick of time. The silences were worse. A whole night without a snore or snort just the sound of the nurse’s footsteps pacing in and out with torches and needles and then the sound of rubber gloves being prepared for hands. The loneliness ;

An inability to communicate or be communicated with ;

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Understand or be understood.

The alienation and exclusion,

Intimidation.

Trolleys with squeaky wheels,

Tea-pots that leaked,

Nicotine,

Claustrophobia.

Urine splashed toilet seats and floors.

Charlie saw his rightâ slip away from him, he lost the ability to voice an objection, lost his self-respect and his freedom, the most important thing of all, taken by The Tag Club. Charlie had nothing to live for but his medication. Charlie had nothing to remember but his medication. Charlie had nothing to keep him going but his medication.

Paranoia is your best weapon when you donât have anything else.

They were all trying to get at him.

â Stop trying to control meâ.

Switching his stuff, taking his batteries, mumbling in the corridors when he passed by. They all were talking about him. They kept him awake. They were trying to kill him. They said it was in his head.

â They, who are they?â the doctor asked.

â Oh yes, the Tag Clubâ.

Itâs unbelievable. People look at the probabilities and possibilities separately. They never consider when each collide that when the percentages are assessed it is more than fiction that materializes.

Charlie relaxed his gaze and sank deeper into the seat in the psychiatristâs office. He concluded he would be here for a long time. He got into a routine and he took his tablets but inside Charlie knew nothing had changed. He learned to ignore the voices, the people talking, and the missing possessions. He would be extra vigilant. Alert. Ready and primed. Inside he had a mind that could change and flare with a notion. It would

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rise in full height like a wave and then crash ferociously. His legs kicked and his nostrils twitched, spitting foam. They wouldn't tame him. He wouldn't let go.

They break you down to re-build you.

Problems make solutions, where did that phrase come from asked Charlie?

They are breaking me down but I have moments of clarity and reason. What sort of man do I want to be? Reasonable, I want to be reasonable

The reasonable man profits with spirit and material. The reasonable man negotiates and is a diplomat. Reason begets reason.

With that a warm reassuring glow came over Charlie, he welcomed it in to his heart. He would listen and communicate, understand and be understood. The sense of urgency that made his body taught left his sinews. The importance of events relaxed and Charlie whoever he was began to let go. His recovery improved. His enemies lay down their arms and Charlie walked unscathed among them.

The true art of war is winning without engaging. You heal a wound by finding its source. You need look no further than yourself to find the enemy. The enemy uses deception. You gotta make friends with the flies but you gotta keep your flies at bay, he repeated the mantras over and over. Charlie said goodbye, to a chapter in his life, goodbye, he was letting go. He was free falling through a veil of passing clouds. Charlie tore a table cloth off the table in the asylum's canteen. Toro, Toro, he waved the cloth skyward, twirled it around himself. The canteen staff took the plates off the table; the nurses ran for needles, the patients looked on. The disbelief was broken by an old man, shouting: Matador with his bolero. Charlie crouched down. Placing the cloth above his head like a parachute it opened and the rush of new life that entered Charlie was intoxicating. Where he would fall now was up to the wind, he was free.

FREEDOM ARRIVES SLOWLY.

No amount of needles could take that rush away he thought at that precise moment.

FRIEND OR FOE

The Tag Club

The first thing Charlie saw when he woke was a face like Rip-van-winkle. The man's hair was grey, long and he had a similar beard. His wrinkles traversed every inch of his face, like they were drawn on by a cartographer.

“You’ve been asleep for a very long time”

“Are you the doctor”, asked Charlie.

The man was 6 foot plus, slim well groomed, immaculately turned out. Possibly close to eighty years of hard life. As he walked over to the window Charlie saw his tartan slippers.

“No I was a friend of your fathers”.

Charlie looked. He strained his eyes. He knew this man. He remembered him from his childhood. So much time had passed.

“I thought you were dead Sir”.

“No, do you still smoke Charlie”, he enquired.

He put a cigarette in Charlie's hand.

“Light it and you’ll go to hell but smoke it and you’ll go to heaven”.

Charlie wanted to go to heaven or some sort of paradise, but he refused to light the cigarette.

“If I light it I’ll go to hell”. Charlie has always been in hell. He had nothing to lose by lighting it but he didn't feel the urge.

The old man stood back

“Good, we all go through hell to get to heaven but heaven can wait”.

Euphoria swam over Charlie. The old man noticed his happiness.

“It's our password”

The Tag Club

“Are we friends or foe?” asked Charlie.

“We’ve always been friends,” the old man replied and they hugged.

Autumn is such a funny season, what with the men hiding in the trees with bags of withered brown leaves, throwing a fist full out when no one is looking. Animal spirits roamed the ward at night, howling in the corners. Later as if exorcised they would pray on their knees offering abstinence and cold bargaining. The walls spoke. The marrow of the dead ground into the concrete. It bled in a certain light.

“The teeth of the insane are cemented into the floor. It’ll take months to wash the nicotine out,” the old man would comment.

Days would go by with nothing said. The patients would listen to the rain falling. Wish for rainbows, bet on how long they’d last and let in joy for brief moments of beauty.

Charlie turned himself inside out and his concept of trust also. The old man was becoming a close combatant, a friend. It was inevitable that Charlie would ask about his father.

“What was he like?”

“Who?” the old man asked.

“My father.”

Charlie knew what his father was like but he had to ask. He was curious as to the old man’s opinion.

“He was an asshole, argumentative, opinionated, quarrelsome, asshole. He loved you over everyone else, but he is gone now you have to leave go. The old man started to sing:

“Young English Soldier

Billy

Runs from the trenches

“The officers say

“I’ve killed our

Own man

The Tag Club

Say I must swingâ!

Thatâs English law mate

How do you

French plea meâ

â Prove your innocence

Or prove youâre guilty

Youâll swing by which

Ever law

Wishes to lynch youâ.

Charlie turned to walk out. The old manâs lips fluttered slightly.

â Waitâ.

â Iâm going to tell you something you will find very hard to believe. The Tag Club are the so-called good guys. For the most part they fight terrorism, acts of war and criminality, encourage peace and equality. But like all systems it has become large and flawed. The bigger it got the more prone to flaws and corruption it became. Men like your father decided it was time to break the system. Along with him I trained you to bring it to its knees, at any cost, by any method, by any means. But we became as flawed as the machine, we had as many loop holes. We became the machine itâs true you know: You are what you fight. Do you know what is even funnier? The encryption of satellites that they want you to decode is your own creation. You are the ying and the yang, the sun and the moon; youâre a Goddamn wizard and an alchemist. You made it, and you made it a chaotic ball of beauty. You are the author of the encryptionâ.

Right at this moment the world had ground to a halt. Life was stopped, the day to day running of the economy by government and dealings by business corporations stood still. Hospitals, airports, televisions, all ceased and desisted. The authorities had called an emergency, declared marshal law and the riots on the streets were like a blast of colour, a beautiful beacon of hope in the dust of a cityâs cinders. Funny had got very real.

THE VISITOR

She came to see the old man in the tartan slippers. They had the same green eyes that would chill you when they were cross. Right now she was cross. Very cross. She was yelling and throwing the newspaper around the ward, shouting violently at the old man. How could he possibly be thinking of dying while this grenade was ready to explode in his face and take half of the room with her? The old man lost his reserve, he tried to placate her but she erupted again. Each time she was interrupted a wave of annoyance would follow. One patient hid in the toilet. Others pretended to sleep, two left the room. With the old man scuttled the young lady looked for her next victim. The only man standing was Charlie.

“You have a nerve filling that man with your nonsense.”

She picked up the glass beside her and flung the water on to Charlie.

She prepared to storm out.

“Wait what’s your name?” he asked.

“Huh”, she replied and turned on her heels.

Charlie smirked a little for the rest of the day when he thought about her. She was good looking, but God she was angry. He dreamt of her that night.

The next day there was a parcel beside his bed. “Bit early for Christmas”.

He opened it, carefully and precisely. It was a large moleskin diary. Inside the front cover was written:

“Write a page a day, my name is Maria”.

The Tag Club

The old man in the tartan slippers slept a lot these days. Charlie spent a lot of time in the day room with his diary and pen. He started to write and sketch and work out a lot of the puzzles he had set aside in his brain. Maria would visit regularly and they would talk.

Eventuality their friendship led to chemistry. They went for a walk together in the grounds of the hospital.

They looked at the Dickensian building, its tall daunting chimneys, peaked roof and skinny tall turrets. Everything about it was unwelcoming and it seemed as if to whisper "you will never be free".

Charlie picked up a stone from the ground. He cleaned it and gave it to Maria. She smiled and threw it into a pond, "I'll marry you if you find it".

Charlie leaped in shouting:

"Geronimo!"

Charlie didn't find the stone. They laughed, he looked like a fool, and it was nice to be light hearted. He had taken a leap. A new journey was beginning. He had a beautiful flower to hold. Charlie had gone full circle, starting now with a new adventure and mystery to unfold. In the cold frost of reality it would retreat in the light and warmth of love. Everything grew into perspective.

The Tag Club lost its immediateness and importance. It's emergency. His focus was on the now, Maria, love and getting out of the jealous asylum.

The Tag Club

DEPARTURE.

Charlie woke. The old man was gone. His tartan slippers lay vacant by the bed.

Charlie attended the funeral. Hugh was at it

â We all fall on the same sideâ , he remarked.

Charlie saw Maria. She was close to tears. She put out her hand. Charlie put a stone into her palm.

â Youâ ve got to believeâ .

ALTERNATE ENDINGS:

The Tag Club

MAGIC IS THE ART OF MISDIRECTION. SURVIVAL IN NATURE IS THE ART OF PLAYING DEAD.

ENDING A

Charlie recovered quickly. He had found a glitch in the diagnostic system. Tell them what they want to hear. Agree. He didn't make waves. He was released and given the means to provide for himself. He was quite happy taking his medication and replacing one routine with a short fix. You would have never guessed he was functionally unhinged.

You were happy to see the rat when you thought it a wren.

Late one night he was flagged down by a hitch-hiker.

"Can only bring you up the road a small bit", he said as he rolled down the window. He tuned in the radio that was intermittently playing white noise. The man got in and they drove off. Suddenly a car swiped past. The rear seat passenger threw something in the driver side window. It hit Charlie's face.

The impact of the bee distracted Charlie. He swerved and hit an on-coming car. The hitch-hiker was alive. The last thing Charlie saw of him was his bare feet walking away from the wreckage.

ENDING B

The Tag Club

Charlie had a visitor. Someone he hadn't seen for a while. They had a history. There was a chemical more effective between them than any medication. They both smiled a lot.

Then they would hold hands and kiss.

Someone once said to me your best chance of finding the stone thrown into the lake is to follow the ripples caused by the impact. That's how this visitor found Charlie. That's what she told people at their wedding.

His heart sent out ripples to me and I followed the ripples straight back to his heart.

Any reasonable man would choose love first. With it comes peace and happiness. If you are going to imagine a reality, it might as well be pleasant and happy. It might as well have roses, late dinners out, dancing and romance. Having a vision of happiness was the first step in making it a reality, believing it could be the next, and living it was the third. Reasonable begets reasonable.

Charlie raised his glass looked at those close friends gathered at the table. Raised his glass high above his head and said:

Here is to when we are free.

PART 2: THE FOLLOW UP

Next time we drop Charlie, you can pack my chute.

What if I get it wrong?

What if I get your one wrong?

I'll shit myself, Charlie smiles.

And when we hit the ground we will bounce?

No we will fall into the hands of our loved ones.

And if they can't be there?

The Tag Club

â Then weâ ll fall into each-others hands!â

And if we canâ t reach each other?â

â Into the arms of those who have died, got up and walked awayâ .

But,

WE ALL FALL CHARLIE!

APRIL MAKES A FOOL OF US

Charlie knew it was murder. They wouldnâ t believe him. Not where he was now. He was six days out of a coma. Dan was found at the bottom of an alley dead.

Of course he was murdered. Charlie knew the bastards did it. He knew why. The nurse told Charlie to get ready he had a dayâ s leave to attend the funeral. Charlieâ s foot was burnt raw. He shaved and waited for Maria to collect him at the hospital reception. All the patients were looking at the floor when he passed. Half the nurses thought Charlie was a liar. They sneered at him. Maria came in Charlie choked back the tears and hugged her.

You do your worshipping while living.

They drove in silence out of the hospital gates and onto the motorway heading for the service. Charlie canâ t remember much of it. People looked half there, as if made of vapour. They carried Danâ s coffin to the open grave where his father lay. Like two ends of twine their life was unravelled from beginning to end, in the cold hollow of ground it was to be bound together again. Strands united in the next world.

SCAR TISSUE

Charlie looked at his face. It seemed to have more scars on it then he remembered, on his feet also, his chest, between his nose and lip, on his back. They seemed to fade into the distance but in a certain light he could see them all.

Charlie knew some scars healed. He hung onto this.

The Tag Club

Charlie was now in the system. It was unyielding and suffocating. He had been categorised. They had to fit him into some sort of box. What they cannot categorise they cannot control. What they cannot control they cannot manipulate. What they cannot manipulate they have no use for.

He struggled and danced to their call. The master pulled the strings and could cut them when he dared. It would take time before Charlie would realise that he was in charge of his destiny. He would dare cut the strings. He would fall to freedom. He knew this system was not sustained by itself.

The system fed off profit. Profit dictated the operation, movement and direction it took. The system had no momentum of itself. It needed fuel. The system's consumption outweighed its benefits. This wasn't Charlie's system it was the system's own making, their problem, their burden, they own it. They were turning up the heat when there was nothing left to burn.

â Calm downâ .

â Nurse the needleâ .

How can you fight this when all your rights are taken like your very clothes?

The answer came to Charlie, fight it any way you can.

Subversive is as subversive does.

This hospital is just one hive, a microcosm, buckle it buckle the whole.

â Get the electricâ the doctor shouted

â Get the electricâ .

A white light, a buzz and burning pain entered into Charlie's head.

â Familiarity breeds contemptâ .

Get the Electric

The Tag Club

Charlie lay beneath the electricity pylon. Maria was by his side.

â 10 secondsâ !kiss?â

Buzzzzz!

The entire grid for another county was decommissioned.

They were kicking back.

They were getting the electric.

Dan would say:

â It is one thing to free your-self, another thing to free a friend but an entire different thing to free an enemyâ .

The New Forward realised that progress was linked to agitating. They were the wedge, society was the gap, and some-thing would have to give. As Charlie and Maria came back from demolishing a pylon, Dan was in the middle of a recruitment rally surrounded by spectators and banners and food.

â They have given us an unjust reality. Our vision will be martyred by their reality. Out of the ashes our dreams will rise and replace their corruption with a new forward. Out of this new forward, Liberty and Equality will be born and if it lies to us like the old system our children will rise against it, because we will be free!â

â What gives is the first foot hold as we climb out of this abyss. The chaos left in the systemâ s wake is a tear that will dry. We have seen many flags above our heads but now there is questionâ s and can we live with those rather than die within a fucked up system. Something has got to give, something has got to change. We donâ t want to wait. We destroy, we createâ !â !â

Things were changing fast the protestors were cheering loudly, chanting:

â How many times have they failed us?â

Dan interrupted â You talk of the revolution; will you go hungry in our fields? You talk of education, can you share the curriculum? You talk of art and culture and what of art and culture? Are we tribes and boundaries? You talk of peace with that fucking gun!â

The sirens were shattering the silence as the orbit of the street was broken by the police coming to take the resistance off to hospital.

â When the revolution comes if it is not us I hope it is our children and not our grandchildren who are pulling the proverbial trigger.â

The securities ran out of their squad cars, took cameras off people, lined people up against the wall, truncheon people, kicked people on the ground, and threw people into the backs of black vans. In a matter of minutes the protest had turned into a slaughter house it was witnessed by thousands.

The Tag Club

As the protestors scurried for foot holds a kid with a spray can left a slogan on a wall:

Absurd all of it

Charlie and Maria were captured. There was no sign of Dan. He wasn't in the same wagon as Charlie, but the authorities often separated what they pin pointed to be the leaders or main agitators. Divide the force was a tactic employed by both sides.

Across the town a similar riot was in progress and they were moving as this one was to converge in the centre of the city. Agitators had taken over the roof tops and sealed off access and exits from the town square. The security forces were well armed.&

The Tag Club

The Tag Club

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