

This Location of Unknown Possibilities

brett josef grubisic



THIS LOCATION OF UNKNOWN POSSIBILITIES

THIS LOCATION OF UNKNOWN
POSSIBILITIES

a novel

BRETT JOSEF GRUBISIC

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CANADA

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It is an error to divide people into the living and the dead: there are people who are dead-alive, and people who are alive-alive. The dead-alive also write, walk, speak, act. But they make no mistakes; only machines make no mistakes, and they produce only dead things. The alive-alive are constantly in error, in search, in questions, in torment.

—Yevgeny Zamyatin (trans. Mirra Ginsburg)
On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters (1923)

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Uncapped medium point felt pen in hand, the woman sat poised to read at the desk—ankle crossed, spine a staunch column. Before peeling back the script's cover page, she noted that so far as attention-grabbing goes, *The Prisoner of Djoun* gleamed with potential. Though shelling out for *The Spanish Prisoner* would never happen—the endless manly posturing and ulterior motives, all that Mamet talk, talk, talk—she slid *The Fugitive* into the player once a year at least. Titles rich with implication? Typically 24-carat.

She signed approval with a thick check mark and watched black ink bleed into the paper's filament. "Okay, let's find out about this prisoner." The low rumble of commuters along Ventura met her words.

The woman wore a favourite pinstripe blouse beneath a charcoal cotton-linen suit; tortoiseshell reading glasses rode low on her nose. The look meant *getting down to business*. Freshly delivered from the panoramic office suite of the Man Upstairs, a stack of three scripts brooded next to the water glasses on the credenza; she expected to chew through them before lunch.

Focussing, the woman ran an index finger along the page. Noix d'Amazonie, the new nail color Byung-soon had applied yesterday, caught her eye. The woman followed trends selectively and had pounced on the forest-tone polishes of the season. A touch of glam earthiness would soften God-given edges, she reasoned. And as much her stomach might twinge at the term *lipstick lesbian*—what a godawful relic from the '90s, as ugly as those navy suits with the NFL silhouette she'd once scrimped for—experience had revealed over and again that approachability was key in the industry.

At first glance the script's opening paragraph—the scene establisher—seemed reliably professional, centred and laser-printed, its author had the presence of mind to buff his words with a recent version of Final Draft. That, she'd wager. While no guarantee of quality, neatness aggravated her infinitely less than the tatty, crudely stapled masterpieces complete with red ballpoint annotations in feverish physician's scrawl that showed up with surprising regularity and incited speculation about the sender's mental competence. Other than Unabomber types holed up in log cabins, who used a manual typewriter anymore?

Returning to the page the woman said, "Okay, here goes nothing."

SCENE 1

Split screen. Two authors at their desks, clothed circa 1900. On the left, a woman in a dark shawl writes at night, candles the only illumination. Her desk is neat, but the slope-roofed attic room appears cramped and shopworn. On the right, a man dressed in brown tweed trousers, a matching vest, and a white shirt reads in a sunny room. The room and desk are messy, but modern art and bright flowers in a vase suggest a well-heeled bohemian atmosphere.

FADE TO:

INT. LONDON - ATTIC OFFICE, Feb. 1897 - NIGHT

The woman tagged "WTF?!?" on the script's right margin.

Oh my Christ, she thought, *another Liberal Arts major who's spent a couple of semesters in film school, now dreaming of hitting the big time with an art house crossover extravaganza, a highbrow drama that will have brand name critics fighting over the kudos needed to describe a powerful unapologetic work of art. American Beauty meets The Hours meets The English Patient, starring Judi Dench, Cate Blanchett, Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, Nicole Kidman, Jude Law, and Anthony bloody*

Hopkins. Abracadabra: armfuls of awards, doors of opportunity across the globe swinging wide open reputations set in thick bronze. Cash for the asking, naturally.

Shoulders back and eyes closed, she took in a deep breath. A slow count to ten tapped on the desk glass surface, the woman resumed.

FADE TO:

INT. LONDON - ATTIC OFFICE, Feb. 1897 - NIGHT

A homely woman sits at a desk and writes by candlelight. EMILY MORSE SYMONDS, age 37, appears tired, as though ground down by life's progressive hardships. Dour attire and the room's spare furnishings hint at Symonds' lack of wealth and an avowed commitment to the ideals of women's suffrage. Leaning close to a flame, Symonds recites words from a sheaf of paper titled "Lady Hester Stanhope."

EMILY MORSE SYMONDS

Seldom are true stories distinguished by a well-marked moral.

(pauses)

If we study human chronicles we often find the ungodly flourishing like rodents, and the righteous apparently forsaken and begging his meal. On occasional a human life illustrates moral lessons with the crudity of a Sunday-school story.

Symonds marks deletions and hastily scribbles in replacements. On a fresh sheet she writes:

There are few true stories that are distinguished by a well-marked moral. If we study human chronicles we generally find the ungodly flourishing like

(pauses)

a green bay-tree, and the righteous apparently forsaken and begging his bread. But it occasionally happens that a human life illustrates some moral lesson with the triteness and crudity of a Sunday-school book.

Clearing her throat, the woman circled standout phrases in the ensuing paragraphs—Pride goeth before the fall; All earthy glory is but vanity; Ambition that o'erleaps itself.

"This 'repent sinner' BS tests well in the Bible Belt," she said. "Flyover states can't get enough of that fire and brimstone spiel from the pulpit."

Seeking a break from the speechifying, she ran the marker down the page.

Satisfied, the writer stands, walks to the window, and watches the roofs of London basking in moonlight.

"Holy Toledo," the woman muttered. "Incredible! What's next, 'The writer searches the thesaurus for a synonym'? 'Symonds adjusts her corset for a minute'?" For a moment she considered shooting an email to the screenwriter—"Dear Mr. Dumbass." But, really, what could she hope to convey? The woman breathed different air, apparently.

She returned to the script. In the midst of character assassination, the garret-dwelling moralist's pen rejected the smallest breath of Christian mercy.

She was ambitious, and her ambition had been foiled; she loved irresponsible command, but the time had come when those over whom she ruled defied her; she was dictatorial and exacting, but she had lost the influence which alone makes people tolerate control. She entertained visionary projects of aggrandizement, and was met by the derision of the world.

"Okay, okay, we get it—you disapprove. This Lady Hester was hell in petticoats and paid the price. But. Why. So. Many. Words?" The woman granted that way back then people had nothing better to do at night than read. From Symonds' point of view, voices emitting from a radio speaker would represent the very height of futuristic.

In a word, Lady Hester died as she had lived, alone and miserable in a strange land, bankrupt in affection and credit, because, in spite of her great gifts and innate benevolence, her overbearing temper had estranged friends and kinsfolk alike.

‘Estranged’?

Perhaps ‘alienated’ will suffice.

The woman spread ZZZZZZZ across the page. Sugarcoating belonged in a nursery.

Annoyed, brow furrowed, and fighting the temptation to hurl the script to the floor, the woman plunged a fat green straw into a morning-sized takeout cup. Straws in lattes currently served time the latest in a short line of cigarette replacements, and this month being jittery and motor-mouthed had become second nature. A pound or two of fresh muffin top showed too. Better that than cancer she’d remind herself whenever passing by any traitorous mirror.

“Okay, lady, you relax now, let’s take a little breather.” She shut her eyes again *with intent*, as the facilitator of the anxiety management class taught.

Regulating air intake and imagining breath flowing down to the toes while keeping the body alert were, she remembered, the next steps in the meditation exercise. Today, gentle downward air waves stood no chance. Sarcastic exclamations rather than the placid rhythm of deep inhalation gushed from her brain; and annoyance caused teensy eyelid muscles to spasm.

The script’s clueless high-mindedness astonished her, that dogged and hopeful—naïve? blind?—disregard of the market, not to mention the pretentious, in-your-face intellectualism. All of it spelled commercial suicide: death by a thousand syllables. Who would pay good money to stare at a drab wallflower from days of yore reading from one sheaf of paper and then scratching in corrections for five goddamned minutes? Librarians? Tweedy professors, maybe. Monks.

For everyone else on the planet five minutes on screen felt like eternity. Five minutes! Christopher Michael Bay makes two hundred cuts in that time and look at the vaults of ka-ching he earns. But here: no talking, no action to speak of, zero tension—writing doesn’t count. And three steps to the window? They barely registered.

“This la-di-da Masterpiece Theatre crap might catch buzz at a multiplex in Oxford,” she said, wondering, *Is there such a thing?* “But here in the real world? Not an iota.”

The woman turned to the cover page and wrote a peeved X through the title. The name of the screenwriter meant nothing.

Stretching, she rested her palms atop the desk’s sole personal touch, a chunky lucite frame. The sepia-tinted photograph suspended within had been the advice of Tamara, a Professional Strategic Life Coach highly recommended by a friend of the Ex, and comfortably matter-of-fact at the first assessment: “Simple, right, without a groundstone that office environment will bleed you dry. Balance your mental energies there. Success will follow.”

Improbable with a Nantucket-evoking white Brooks Brothers seersucker dress and fortune cookie advice, Tamara insisted that the special item must bridge the present to the past. “Breathe and let go. Make space for the object’s appearance in your mind’s eye.”

Like seance ectoplasm the photo had materialized.

In a cramped trailer-studio decades ago a rushed photographer had snapped her, Elizabeth-Anne, then, in a flour-sack shift of rosette print calico; smiling gamely, she’d cradled a shallow iron pan over wet gravel. The novelty set up—her mother’s inspiration—was meant as an homage to a legendary family matriarch, the plucky wife of a ’49er believed to have staked a bountiful claim upriver while ne’er-do-well husband guzzled whiskey and played cards in the tent settlement along the flats.

When the woman’s parents finally swapped the Pasadena rancher for a retirement condo in Gardnerville Ranchos, they’d sent an envelope stuffed with photos inside a box of jumbled keepsakes. Never overcome with nostalgia when studying her twelve year-old face—having agreed to the cor-

idea only to keep the peace—she nevertheless admired her mother’s inscription on the reverse side
“A prospector has to trudge through a lot of mud before striking gold. —Knott’s Berry Farm, 1979.”

Balanced mood reached, more or less, the woman sighed. *Trudge, trudge, I’m such a pushover*, she thought, recommitting to *The Prisoner of Djoun*—

As Symonds continues to scribble emendations, the screen returns to the split view momentarily. The focus shifts to the man on the right.

FADE IN:

EXT. TIDMARSH, VILLAGE IN S.E. ENGLAND, FEB. 1919 - DAY

CUT TO:

INT. THE MILL HOUSE - DRAWING ROOM - DAY

A man—tall, bearded, and thin—grabs a book from the haphazard pile on his desk. He stands at a window and reads the cover page—Little Memoirs of the Nineteenth Century by George Paston.**
He flips to the fourth essay and samples a passage.

“More books & silence?!?,” the woman jotted in the margin. She sought out the companion asterisks at the bottom of the page: **Emily Morse Symonds published under the pen-name of George Paston. The woman imagined words materializing on the screen to explain this crucial point. “Very artful,” she said. “Who cares?” Interest flagging, she rallied with reminders of a potential nugget trove and professional courtesy.

Pacing, the man reads a sentence aloud.

LYTTON STRACHEY

‘In a word, Lady Hester died as she had lived, alone and miserable in a strange land—’

(Drops the book to the floor)

Emily Morse Symonds, who are you to pass judgement, you resentful old cow? Sanctimonious Puritan!

The man walks to a desk to compose a note.

Mr. Murry:

Thank you for the letter of inquiry. The biographical sketch of Lady Stanhope will be completed shortly as per our recent conversation. The Athenaeum shall have it within a fortnight.

Yours in gratitude,

L. Strachey.”

“ZZZZZ,” the woman wrote, picturing a smothering quicksand of words.

The man folds the letter and replaces it with another sheet, entitled “Lady Hester Stanhope.”

He begins to write.

“She renounced the world.”

He pauses at the period.

Leaving a few inches of blank space, he continues to write further down the page.

“The end came in June, 1839. Her servants immediately possessed themselves of every moveable object in the house. But Lady Hester cared no longer: she was lying back in her bed—inexplicable, grand, preposterous, with her nose in the air.”

STRACHEY

‘Inexplicable, grand, preposterous.’ Yes, that’s it.

The scene dissolves.

I'll say, the woman thought. It dissolves way before that.

After poring over pages at random she skipped to the last scene. Eyes wandering from script to picture frame to credenza, the woman resolved only to push on to the next script. "As for you, last scene, prisoner in the desert, I'm going to let you stew for a bit."

2.

The woman pressed an intercom button. "Can you step in here for a minute, Søren?"

"Sure, I'm free right now," the assistant said.

The woman looked up as Søren—chestnut tanned, the Nordic white hair of ABBA's Agnetha, and dressed as if ready for a country club tennis match—opened the office door and brought in the steady hum of Studio City traffic.

"You're looking a tad frazzled, Liz." He paused at the door. "How many of those have you chugged today?"

"What are you, my mother? It's this script. I'm tearing out my hair."

"Yes, I can see stray platinum strands there, not to mention black roots." He enjoyed the daily dramatics of his boss and the boyish inability to let one hour pass without newly stained clothing and mussed hair. "Or is that grey?"

"Watch your tongue, spray tan," the woman said, smiling. "You're not here to talk hair-dos, much as I'm sure you'd love to. This, this divine script." She tapped the cover page with the Sharpie. "How did it get in here?"

"I don't know. The usual way?"

"Who the fuck let it through my door?"

"Technically, me. Mea culpa." He bowed in mock-penitence. "I dropped it off with the other three. But they arrived as a parcel, and that always means the same thing: direct passage to the holding tray on your credenza."

"Okay then, you're off the hook. Let me read a morsel to you. Just to whet your appetite."

"If you must." Søren placed a clipboard and cellphone on the glass desktop. "I'm counting calories though."

"I must. Sit, please." She indicated a chair. "And close the damned door. Thank you."

The woman cleared her throat. "Alright then," she said, adopting a posh British accent, "are you ready?"

"Yes, Liz, any time. Tick tock."

"Alright, alright. In this scene the heroine is sick with plague and her kinda sorta boyfriend is tending to her." She read:

FADE IN:

EXT. THE DESERT, 1813 - NEAR DJOUN - NIGHT

In the near distance a straw-brick walled home, at which two figures stand in front of a double-door gate. As a horse approaches, the men hurry to open the gate.

CUT TO:

INT. DJOUN - CANDLELIT BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

DR. MERYON

There, there, Lady Hester. Calm yourself.

LADY HESTER STANHOPE

Your suggestion is difficult to obey, my friend. I fear I may pass over soon.
(She coughs.)

MERYON

The illness courses through you. We can but wait.

STANHOPE

But wait?

MERYON

That is all one can do.

STANHOPE

Plague is a portent, a punishment.

MERYON

Nonsense. You are one amongst many. The lowly shepherd, the pasha's infant daughter—will you have me believe that each is a recipient of divine punishment for mortal sins?

“P U,” Søren said. “When does fur-faced Moses show up with stone tablets?”

“Wait a sec, I’m nearly done.” Neck tilted, she peered over low-slung glasses.

MERYON

Rest, my lady. This cool cloth will vanquish the fever's rage.

STANHOPE

You are too kind to a foolish old woman. I should sing your praises... although you are aware I am no Margaret Martyr!

MERYON

(smiles)

Your humour returns! It can be nothing if not auspicious.

STANHOPE

I cannot help but wonder, Doctor . . .

MERYON

Yes?

STANHOPE

If Fate has brought me to the desert.

MERYON

Rest, rest, dear one. Your philosophical musings will be the death of you yet. Here, you must take more of this thorn apple tea.

“I can see the cast's procession to the stage on Oscar night,” Søren said.

“Ha! At first I only saw the script's procession to the shredder. It starts off even worse, but surprise surprise it actually gets better.” Lizzie patted the closed script. “Maybe not this guy's take, but the basic idea of this tough old broad fighting for a piece of the pie. There's potential.”

“And so you want me to . . . ?”

“Oh, sorry. I just wanted a sounding board.”

“Gee, that's me.” Exasperation crept into his voice. “Nothing else to do, not a thing, ma'am.”

“I'm going to run through it again. Get me Zora at V, but not now. I'd say in about ninety, I have a

idea I'd like to fire by her."

Søren tapped a reminder note.

"You know, I think maybe we should send this out, get it in better shape, toughen it up. That script trainer in Silver Lake, what's his face." She doodled flowers over the X slashed across the title page. "It's flab, complete and utter flab, right now. But, and that's a big, big but—ha ha, don't even say it—there's something here. Core strength, let's say. I mapped out a couple of ideas, where the story could go et cetera, so don't forget to include them with the script. And tell whatshisname that VNetwork the vendor I have in mind. He's a pro, he'll know what will and won't snag their interest. Just give me an hour."

"Sure, no problem. Anything else? Another latte?"

"What the hell, sure. I need to keep my mouth occupied. I'm pretty sure my heart can take it."

"Right. I'll be back in fifteen."

"Bueno."

She turned to the list of comments:

—Penniless aristocrat turns her back on England?

—Virgin? In love with doctor?

—Icon re: Elizabeth, Amelia Earhart (sp??), Joan of Arc

—Loses mind? Visionary? Mystic?

—A woman that carves a place for herself in a man's world.

Liz added a final question:

—Where's the drama???

POINT GREY TO BURNABY

It's much more inspiring not to go to places than to go.

—Karl Lagerfeld explains Chanel pre-fall 2012
(December 6, 2011)

A transparent stream of mucous seeped from Marta's left nostril, slow as a glycerin tear. Clasping tissue, she blew gently in hopes of avoiding the unnerving pop—Oh my, is this an aneurysm?—distressed eardrums. *I cannot have caught a cold*, Marta thought. No, not a cold at all, she determined, merely aggravating invisible particles enveloped within nasal drool. Natural, normal, automatic immunoresponse triggered by diminutive organic motes suspended in odourless, life-sustaining air. The bad inseparable from the good. Serpents and fruit trees. Typical. Pseudoephedrine mood swings, too, Marta noted crankily. Springtime. She'd experienced better days.

Tilting the desk chair back, Marta blotted the watery rims and pictured the lids as bee-stung, having swelled and grown blotchy. Bloodshot eyes too, quite possibly. Would students in the impending class look up from their phone screens and comment, believing she'd been crying? Surely they'd have a ready-made explanation for the spectacle of a weepy professor. What soap opera scenario might they spin? A lost grant, perhaps, or tenure unfairly denied. A sniping review. The visible handkerchief and a vague comment about the peril of pollen would suffice to nip murmured speculation in the bud. They'd readily accept that external source over the implausibility of crushing disappointment or another long shot, heartache so fierce that it had spilled into the classroom.

Marta's desk clock and computer agreed: 12:45PM. Exactly five minutes before she must depart for the week's final class. She closed the skinny office window. It wasn't supposed to be opened, anyway. People had heightened sensitivities in these seasons of compromised immune systems. Everyone expressed keen awareness of bounding allergens and environmental flux; rogue microbes failed to recognize personal space, and protection had become imperative.

In lieu of the marvelous transparent domes and lab-engineered enhancements of science fiction, Grounds+Maintenance had just finished with a series of practical paper and email bulletins that explained how the building's renovated ventilation system rendered a breath of fresh air obsolete and *counter-productive*. Marta's eyes had settled on the falsely reassuring scientific language of the latest *cutting edge technology* that *deployed* ozone and ultraviolet light for *optimized ionization and deparicalization*. In short: hinged windows have become an outmoded indulgence, comrade, and the health of you and the university community relies on individual cooperation, thank you for the ongoing compliance.

As she cautiously dabbed the inflamed leaking rims a final time, Marta began to organize the papers on the desk, sliding notes—lined yellow sheets highlighted in purple (key concepts, pointed questions for students) and green (relevant trivia, humorous asides)—into the valise and pitching the scarce unread administrative announcements into the recycling bin.

Two white sheets remained.

Marta placed the letter into a folder labeled Homeward: Admin. She'd already secured a photocopy in the Correspondence: History file in the desk's bottom left drawer. The letter's duality, banal and momentous, was proving so difficult to resist. She'd snatched glances between classes that morning, nothing else the offer promised diversion, a break—ludicrous and unprecedented but invigorating—from routine, she'd been telling herself. *Tempted by celebrity, so facile*, chimed in a background voice, less friendly.

12:48PM. She swiveled the chair away from the wall of books and studied the immense vista. The scene felt underdeveloped, a photographic study Ansel Adams might have discarded, since all the surfaces—turbulent inlet, coniferous mountainsides, densely cumulous sky—seemed mopped by ink.

watercolour. Greywashed, a vision of springtime stripped of the usual green bursts and life-affirming connotations.

Black-pebbled concrete formed a thick frame around the inset window panes of the office. A home away from home, this stout fortress of a building. After the resurgence of seen-but-not-read Tolkien a few years ago, two arts students had said, “In the Dark Tower?” within the same week when arranging an office meeting—as though the roof sprouting paired horns or a wrathful amber eye would surprise no one.

Trends cycling as they did, though, the name’s sticking was anybody’s guess. The matte concrete slabs of the exterior had appeared on cineplex screens more recently as the barricaded compound of a fearsome African warlord in a mutant superhero movie sequel. Perhaps quizzical students no longer exclaimed, “I’ve seen that place somewhere before, I just know it” as they passed by. Or, equally plausible, no one commenting at all.

Marta conceded that the tower’s facade—that of an unadorned modernist bunker—loomed imposingly. After that, she found the Tolkien analogy nonsensical. Early-, mid-, and late-career vanity and politicking flourished, naturally. But brooding evil, Machiavellian tactics? Hardly. Assigning a C+ to an essay barely indicated a sign of power, let alone chthonic malevolence. The *vin ordinaire* of any office environment, professional rivalries, intense resentments, and grievance accretions were likewise known, albeit stored out of sight. As for the elaborate class hierarchy—untanned latter-day devotees of Matthew Arnold still genuflecting toward Oxford nested at the tip of the pecking order; the base, brown-skinned women with broken English providing custodial services: “If you find a moment today, er, Dhatri, will you please vacuum my office?”—Marta supposed that arrangements like good and evil, reached far back, as old as tragedy.

The portentous architecture, then, meant nothing except unlucky coincidence. True, alongside the kind- and coldhearted, she did pass by hunched Gollums and tightly-wound Lizzie Borden types muttering in hallways from time to time; as with asylum lifers and feral animals, a simple rule applied: *steer clear, don’t meet their eyes.*

Marta withdrew the letter and read the familiar words, for an instant miffed by the author’s choice of a nostalgic typewriter font:

Dear Professor Spök:

I have been instructed to contact you because our production team has the good fortune to be in your vicinity. You may have heard that [The Prophet of Djoun](#), a biopic of Lady Hester Stanhope, is currently in pre-production.

Of course not, Marta thought once more, *why would I have? Oh, movie people and their egotism.*

Your expertise, as revealed through your book [Imperial\(ist\) Empress: Mysticism, Écriture Féminine and the Levantine Writings of Lady Hester Stanhope](#), would be a tremendous benefit for our production. If you can spare some time, one of the project’s executives, Mr. Jakob Nugent, would be happy to explain our offer and the technical details over lunch.

We thank you for your time and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Lora Wilkes

Assistant to Jakob Nugent

Folding the letter, Marta shrugged: what’s the harm of one meal? Alongside the usual low moral doldrums coinciding with the school year’s sputtering out, distressed thoughts had been mushrooming about the shiny prestigious career she’d willed—through methodical labour, more or less—in existence, on track now and unwavering until the onset of decrepitude. That legacy brought to mind a luckless character from a Poe story, walled inside a dusty catacomb for eternity by pages instead of

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