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Equations of Life

Written by Simon Morden

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A story: once upon a time, way back when, I was just finding my feet in the publishing world. I didn't really know what was going on, or how to do it – write, for sure, but how to write better, how to edit, how to find markets for finished stories, how to write a covering letter – but I was fortunate to find a number of people who held my hand gently and guided me through the maze with encouragement, good advice and honest opinions.

One of these was an American writer and editor called Brian Hopkins. Brian had his own e-publishing outfit long before the Kindle was a twinkle in Amazon's eye, and he was putting together an anthology of fantasy and horror short stories “from the ends of the Earth”. I could do that, I thought in my naivety: he was in the USA, I was in Britain, and I could set something just down the road and make it look exotic. So I wrote something, sent it off, had it rejected with kind words. Rinse and repeat. But finally, I wore him down. He accepted one of my stories.

The first anthology eventually stretched to a series of five. I ended up in all of them. Then I pitched something different – a collection of linked stories, twenty in all, about the lives of people caught up in a wave of religiously inspired nuclear terrorism that would sweep across Europe and leave chaos in its wake. That collection has become, eight years later on, the world of *Equations of Life* and the books that follow. They are stories that probably wouldn't have happened otherwise.

So this one's for Brian. Thank you.

I

Petrovitch woke up. The room was in the filtered yellow half-light of rain-washed window and thin curtain. He lay perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the city.

For a moment, all he could hear was the all-pervading hum of machines: those that made power, those that used it, pushing, pulling, winding, spinning, sucking, blowing, filtering, pumping, heating and cooling.

In the next moment, he did the city-dweller's trick of blanking that whole frequency out. In the gap it left, he could discern individual sources of noise: traffic on the street fluxing in phase with the cycle of red-amber-green, the rhythmic metallic grinding of a worn windmill bearing on the roof, helicopter blades cutting the grey dawn air. A door slamming, voices rising – a man's low bellow and a woman's shriek, going at it hard. Leaking in through the steel walls, the babel chatter of a hundred different channels all turned up too high.

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Another morning in the London Metrozone, and Petrovitch had survived to see it: *God, I love this place.*

Closer, in the same room as him, was another sound, one that carried meaning and promise. He blinked his pale eyes, flicking his unfocused gaze to search his world, searching . . .

There. His hand snaked out, his fingers closed around thin wire, and he turned his head slightly to allow the approaching glasses to fit over his ears. There was a thumbprint dead centre on his right lens. He looked around it as he sat up.

It was two steps from his bed to the chair where he'd thrown his clothes the night before. It was May, and it wasn't cold, so he sat down naked, moving his belt buckle from under one arse cheek. He looked at the screen glued to the wall.

His reflection stared back, high-cheeked, white-skinned, pale-haired. Like an angel, or maybe a ghost: he could count the faint shadows cast by his ribs.

Back on the screen, an icon was flashing. Two telephone numbers had appeared in a self-opening box: one was his, albeit temporarily, to be discarded after a single use. In front of him on the desk were two fine black gloves and a small red switch. He slipped the gloves on, and pressed the switch.

"Yeah?" he said into the air.

A woman's voice, breathless from effort. "I'm looking for Petrovitch."

His index finger was poised to cut the connection. "You are who?"

"Triple A couriers. I've got a package for an S. Petrovitch." She was panting less now, and her cut-glass accent started to reassert itself. "I'm at the drop-off: the café on the corner of South Side and Rookery Road. The proprietor says he doesn't know you."

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“Yeah, and Wong’s a *pizdabol*,” he said. His finger drifted from the cut-off switch and dragged through the air, pulling a window open to display all his current transactions. “Give me the order number.”

“Fine,” sighed the courier woman. He could hear traffic noise over her headset, and the sound of clattering plates in the background. He would never have described Wong’s as a café, and resolved to tell him later. They’d both laugh. She read off a number, and it matched one of his purchases. It was here at last.

“I’ll be with you in five,” he said, and cut off her protests about another job to go to with a slap of the red switch.

He peeled off the gloves. He pulled on yesterday’s clothes and scraped his fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp vigorously. He stepped into his boots and grabbed his own battered courier bag.

Urban camouflage. Just another immigrant, not worth shaking down. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and palmed the door open. When it closed behind him, it locked repeatedly, automatically.

The corridor echoed with noise, with voices, music, footsteps. Above all, the soft moan of poverty. People were everywhere, their shoulders against his, their feet under his, their faces – wet-mouthed, hollow-eyed, filthy skinned – close to his.

The floor, the walls, the ceiling were made from bare sheet metal that boomed. Doors punctured the way to the stairs, which had been dropped into deliberately-left voids and welded into place. There was a lift, which sometimes even worked, but he wasn’t stupid. The stairs were safer because he was fitter than the addicts who’d try to roll him.

Fitness was relative, of course, but it was enough.

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He clanked his way down to the ground floor, five storeys away, ten landings, squeezing past the stair dwellers and avoiding spatters of noxious waste. At no point did he look up in case he caught someone's eye.

It wasn't safe, calling a post-Armageddon container home, but neither was living in a smart, surveillance-rich neighbourhood with no visible means of support – something that was going to attract police attention, which wasn't what he wanted at all. As it stood, he was just another immigrant with a clean record renting an identikit two-by-four domik module in the middle of Clapham Common. He'd never given anyone an excuse to notice him, had no intention of ever doing so.

Street level. Cracked pavements dark with drying rain, humidity high, the heat already uncomfortable. An endless stream of traffic that ran like a ribbon throughout the city, always moving with a stop-start, never seeming to arrive. There was elbow-room here, and he could stride out to the pedestrian crossing. The lights changed as he approached, and the cars parted as if for Moses. The crowd of bowed-head, hunch-shouldered people shuffled drably across the tarmac to the other side and, in the middle, a shock of white-blond hair.

Wong's was on the corner. Wong himself was kicking some plastic furniture out onto the pavement to add an air of unwarranted sophistication to his shop. The windows were streaming condensation inside, and stale, steamy air blew out the door.

"Hey, Petrovitch. She your girlfriend? You keep her waiting like that, she leave you."

"She's a courier, you *perdoon stary*. Where is she?"

Wong looked at the opaque glass front, and pointed through it. "There," the shopkeeper said, "right there. Eyes of love never blind."

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“I’ll have a coffee, thanks.” Petrovitch pushed a chair out of his path.

“I should charge you double. You use my shop as office!”

Petrovitch put his hands on Wong’s shoulders and leaned down. “If I didn’t come here, your life would be less interesting. And you wouldn’t want that.”

Wong wagged his finger but stood aside, and Petrovitch went in.

The woman was easy to spot. Woman: girl almost, all adolescent gawkiness and nerves, playing with her ponytail, twisting and untwisting it in red spirals around her index finger.

She saw him moving towards her, and stopped fiddling, sat up, tried to look professional. All she managed was younger.

“Petrovitch?”

“Yeah,” he said, dropping into the seat opposite her. “Do you have ID?”

“Do you?”

They opened their bags simultaneously. She brought out a thumb scanner, he produced a cash card. They went through the ritual of confirming their identities, checking the price of the item, debiting the money from the card. Then she laid a padded package on the table, and waited for the security tag to unlock.

Somewhere during this, a cup of coffee appeared at Petrovitch’s side. He took a sharp, scalding sip.

“So what is it?” the courier asked, nodding at the package.

“It’s kind of your job to deliver it, my job to pay for it.” He dragged the packet towards him. “I don’t have to tell you what’s in it.”

“You’re an arrogant little fuck, aren’t you?” Her cheeks flushed.

Petrovitch took another sip of coffee, then centred his cup

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on his saucer. "It has been mentioned once or twice before." He looked up again, and pushed his glasses up to see her better. "I have trust issues, so I don't tend to do the people-stuff very well."

"It wouldn't hurt you to try." The security tag popped open, and she pushed her chair back with a scrape.

"Yeah, but it's not like I'm going to ever see you again, is it?" said Petrovitch.

"If you'd played your cards right, you might well have done. Sure, you're good-looking, but right now I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire." She picked up her courier bag with studied determination and strode to the door.

Petrovitch watched her go: she bent over, lean and lithe in her one-piece skating gear, to extrude the wheels from her shoes. The other people in the shop fell silent as the door slammed shut, just to increase his discomfort.

Wong leaned over the counter. "You bad man, Petrovitch. One day you need friend, and where you be? Up shit creek with no paddle."

"I've always got you, Wong." He put his hand to his face and scrubbed at his chin. He could try and catch her up, apologise for being . . . what? Himself? He was half out of his seat, then let himself fall back with a bang. He stopped being the centre of attention, and he drank more coffee.

The package in its mesh pocket called to him. He reached over and tore it open. As the disabled security tag clattered to the tabletop, Wong took the courier's place opposite him.

"I don't need relationship advice, yeah?"

Wong rubbed at a sticky patch with a damp cloth. "This not about girl, that girl, any girl. You not like people, fine. But you smart, Petrovitch. You smartest guy I know. Maybe you smart enough to fake liking, yes? Else."

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“Else what?” Petrovitch’s gaze slipped from Wong to the device in his hand, a slim, brushed steel case, heavy with promise.

“Else one day, pow.” Wong mimed a gun against his temple, and his finger jerked with imaginary recoil. “Fortune cookie says you do great things. If you live.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Destined for greatness.” Petrovitch snorted and caressed the surface of the case, leaving misty fingerprints behind. “How long have you lived here, Wong?”

“Metrozone born and bred,” said Wong. “I remember when Clapham Common was green, like park.”

“Then why the *chyort* can’t you speak better English?”

Wong leaned forward over the table, and beckoned Petrovitch to do the same. Their noses were almost touching.

“Because, old chap,” whispered Wong faultlessly, “we hide behind our masks, all of us, every day. All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. I play my part of eccentric Chinese shopkeeper; everyone knows what to expect from me, and they don’t ask for any more. What about you, Petrovitch? What part are you playing?” He leaned back, and Petrovitch shut his goldfish-gaping mouth.

A man and a woman came in and, on seeing every table full, started to back out again.

Wong sprung to his feet. “Hey, wait. Table here.” He kicked Petrovitch’s chair-leg hard enough to cause them both to wince. “Coffee? Coffee hot and strong today.” He bustled behind the counter, leaving Petrovitch to wearily slide his device back into its delivery pouch and then into his shoulder bag.

His watch told him it was time to go. He stood, finished the last of his drink in three hot gulps, and made for the door.

“Hey,” called Wong. “You no pay.”

Petrovitch pulled out his cash card and held it up.

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“You pay next time, Petrovitch.” He shrugged and almost smiled. The lines around his eyes crinkled.

“Yeah, whatever.” He put the card back in his bag. It had only a few euros on it now, anyway. “Thanks, Wong.”

Back out onto the street and the roar of noise. The leaden sky squeezed out a drizzle and speckled the lenses in Petrovitch’s glasses so that he started to see the world like a fly would.

He’d take the tube. It’d be hot, dirty, smelly, crowded: at least it would be dry. He turned his collar up and started down the road towards Clapham South.

The shock of the new had barely reached the Underground. The tiled walls were twentieth-century curdled cream and bottle green, the tunnels they lined unchanged since they’d been hollowed out two centuries earlier, the fans that ineffectually stirred the air on the platforms were ancient with age.

There was the security screen, though: the long arched passage of shiny white plastic, manned by armed paycops and monitored by grey-covered watchers.

Petrovitch’s travelcard talked to the turnstile as he waited in line to pass. It flashed a green light, clicked and he pushed through. Then came the screen which saw everything, saw through everything, measured it and resolved it into three dimensions, running the images it gained against a database of offensive weapons and banned technology.

After the enforced single file, it was abruptly back to being shoulder to shoulder. Down the escalator, groaning and creaking, getting hotter and more airless as it descended. Closer to the centre of the Earth.

He popped like a cork onto the northbound platform, and glanced up to the display barely visible over the heads of the

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other passengers. A full quarter of the elements were faulty, making the scrolling writing appear either coded or mystical. But he'd had practice. There was a train in three minutes.

Whether or not there was room for anyone to get on was a different matter, but that possibility was one of the few advantages in living out along the far reaches of the line. He knew of people he worked with who walked away from the centre of the city in order to travel back.

It became impossible even to move. He waited more or less patiently, and kept a tight hold of his bag.

To his left, a tall man, air bottle strapped to his Savile Row suit and soft mask misting with each breath. To his right, a Japanese woman, patriotically displaying Hello Kitty and the Rising Sun, hollow-eyed with loss.

The train, rattling and howling, preceded by a blast of foulness almost tangible, hurtled out from the tunnel mouth. If there hadn't been barriers along the edge of the platform, the track would have been choked with mangled corpses. As it was, there was a collective strain, an audible tightening of muscle and sinew.

The carriages squealed to a stop, accompanied by the inevitable multi-language announcements: the train was heading for the central zones and out again to the distant, unassailable riches of High Barnet, and please – mind the gap.

The doors hissed open, and no one got out. Those on the platform eyed the empty seats and the hang-straps greedily. Then the electromagnetic locks on the gates loosened their grip. They banged back under the pressure of so many bodies, and people ran on, claiming their prizes as they could.

And when the carriages were full, the last few squeezed on, pulled aboard by sympathetic arms until they were crammed in like pressed meat.

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The chimes sounded, the speakers rustled with static before running through a litany of “doors closing” phrases: English, French, Russian, Urdu, Japanese, Kikuyu, Mandarin, Spanish. The engine span, the wheels turned, the train jerked and swayed.

Inside, Petrovitch, face pressed uncomfortably against a glass partition, ribs tight against someone’s back, took shallow sips of breath and wondered again why he’d chosen the Metrozone above other, less crowded and more distant cities. He wondered why it still had to be like this, seven thirty-five in the morning, two decades after Armageddon.

He was disgorged at Leicester Square, where he spent a minute hauling air that was neither clean nor cold into his lungs. It tasted of electricity and sweat: its saving grace was that it was abundant.

He had to walk now, through the city streets, moving in time with the lights and the crowds, stealing the occasional glance up at the spires and slabs of mutely reflective glass that rose above and blotted out the sky, a sky that was itself crowded with private helicopters flitting from rooftop to rooftop without ever touching the ground.

He knew the route well, no need for HatNav or gawking like a tourist at the holographic signposts. The route that still – and he marvelled at the inefficiency of it – still followed the medieval roads and possessed names that no longer had any meaning save to denote an address.

So Leicester Square was square, but there was no Leicester: Shakespeare brooded on his grimy plinth, and the trees were all dead. Coventry Street remembered a city destroyed and rebuilt,

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then abandoned. Then through Piccadilly, with its love-lorn statue sealed in a dust-spattered plexiglas dome.

Onwards. Thousands of people, all of them having to be somewhere, moving in dense streams, sometimes spilling out onto the roads and into the gutters. Couriers running and gliding down the lines that separated the traffic, millimetres from disaster.

Green Park. No longer green, no longer a park, the domik sprawl thrown up on it in the first spasm of Armageddon long gone. Towers grew there now, brilliant high buildings that reflected the grey sky all the way to their zeniths. At their feet, marble and granite blocks wet with fountains. Workers filing in to the lobbies, suited, smart, plugged in to the day's to-do list and already voicing memos, compiling reports, buying, selling.

A woman was coming the other way, out of one of the towers and against the flow of bodies. Her boldness caught his eye. She crossed the plaza, repelling people with an invisible field composed of fear and deference. In the time it took Petrovitch to shuffle another twenty metres, she'd strode fifty, her silks and perfume trailing in her wake.

He thought that, surely, there had to be someone with her. From the backward stares of those she passed, he wasn't alone in that thought. The woman – the girl – no, he couldn't decide which – should have had a retinue with her, glasses, earpieces, bulges under their jackets, the works. There was no one like her, but there was no one with her.

They were on a collision course. She was walking like she meant it, expecting a path to open up before her, until they were no more than a metre apart. She looked up from under her asymmetric black fringe, and saw the seething mass of humanity passing before her.

She hesitated, breaking step, as if she'd never seen such a

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sight before. Petrovitch tried to slow down, found that it wasn't possible. He was carried on, and she looked through him as he passed in front of her. He had the memory of her slanting eyes glazed with indecision.

Then, abruptly, stupidly, he was moving backwards. For a moment, he couldn't understand why, because crowds like the one he was in had their own momentum: they went, and you went with them.

A slab of chest pushed him aside as if he were no more than a swinging door. An arm reached out, and a hand tightened around the woman's shoulder, engulfing it in thick, pink fingers.

The man who owned the chest and the hand lifted her off her feet and started for the kerb, wading through the crowd like it was thigh-deep water. And somehow, Petrovitch was caught up in the bow wave. He struggled this way and that and always found himself inexorably propelled towards a waiting car, its rear door open and its interior dark.

He knew what this was. He knew intimately. He knew because he'd seen this from the other side.

She was being kidnapped. She wore the mask of mute incomprehension, the one that would transform into blind rage at any moment.

He waited, and waited, and her reaction still didn't come.

They were at the car, and there were figures inside: two in the front, another in the rear, and they were staring at him, wondering who the hell this kid was, either too inept or too stupid to get out of the way.

The steroid-pumped man wanted him gone: Petrovitch was blocking his path. He raised his free hand to swat at him, a blow that would send him flying and leave him insensible and bleeding.

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Petrovitch ducked instinctively, and the hand brushed the top of his head. As he looked up, he caught sight of the one vulnerable point amidst all the muscle. Still, he should have run, stepped back, crouched down. It wasn't his fight.

But he couldn't help but ball a fist, point a knuckle, and drive it as hard as he could at the man's exposed Adam's apple.

The woman landed next to him, her hands steadying herself against the filth-covered pavement.

He had one more chance. He could turn his back, make good his escape, disappear into the crowd. She could work her own salvation out from here.

Petrovitch reached out a hand, and hers slapped into it, palm against gritty palm.

They were off, not back towards the glittering towers of Green Park. That way was blocked by too many people and the rising man gagging and clutching at his throat. He dragged her out into the road, round the back of the car, back down the street against the flow of traffic – because that car would never be able to turn around. He pulled her behind him like a streamer, his own legs skipping like hers to turn their bodies sideways to avoid the wing-mirrors that rushed at their midribs. Horns blared, collision warnings squealed, drivers beat on their windows and mouthed obscenities.

Behind them, the lights changed. The traffic stiffened to a halt, and Petrovitch vaulted over a bonnet to the faded white lines that marked the centre of the road. The vehicles coming the other way were like a wall of glass, reflecting their fear off every smooth surface.

He stopped for the first time since . . . since he'd got involved in someone else's madness, and wondered what the *chyort* he thought he was doing. He looked down his arm at the woman

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still attached to the other end, trying – like he was – to make herself as thin as possible.

Two men from the car were moving purposefully down the line of stopped traffic. Not running, but striding in that way that meant nothing but trouble. The lights changed and the one lane that was still free to proceed jerked into life. The men in dark suits stumbled and shouted, and Petrovitch saw his chance: the cars in front were slowing. He ran to match their speed, then weaved between bumpers until he made the other pavement.

She was still there. She wasn't going to let go.

Neither were the men. One, fed up with barking his shins and negotiating his vast muscles through the narrowest of gaps, pulled a flat-black automatic out and sighted down his arm. A red dot flickered across Petrovitch's chest like a fly trying to land, and a shot banged out, amplified by the facades of the buildings.

A man, a black man with a phone clipped to his ear and in the middle of a conversation, span violently round and vanished backwards into the crowd.

Petrovitch blinked once, tightened his grip and fled. He was aware of the sounds around him: there were shouts, cries, and screams, varying in pitch and intensity, and there was the methodical crack of a pistol. Every time he heard it, he expected to feel bright pain, and every time it was someone close by who spasmed and sank to the ground. Not him, not yet.

It was impossible to judge how far ahead he was. The closeness of the structures, the intensity of the crowded pavement, the noise that was washing back and forth: all he knew was that he was ahead, a metre or ten or fifty, enough that whoever was trying to kill him couldn't target him long enough to make sure.