

Hub *Special*

Issue 01

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Welcome

Welcome to a special edition of *Hub*. We may slip one of these in every now and then. Your regular weekly fayre will be with you on Friday, as usual. This is an extra bite-size portion.

When *Hub* first began way, way back in December 2006 (ok, it's not that long ago, but it so much has happened it feels like a lifetime ago) we were a printed magazine with a pretty decent readership for a Small Press start-up.

We received many emails and letters telling us how much people liked the fiction we were publishing. Not an inconsiderable number of these were concerned with the tale reprinted in this *Hub Special*.

At under 1,000 words Alasdair Stuart's *Connected* is a very short tale, but it packs a punch. It was recently recommended for the British Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction.

If you are a member of the British Fantasy Society, or if you were present at FantasyCon 2006 you are eligible to vote (and should have received your voting papers by now).

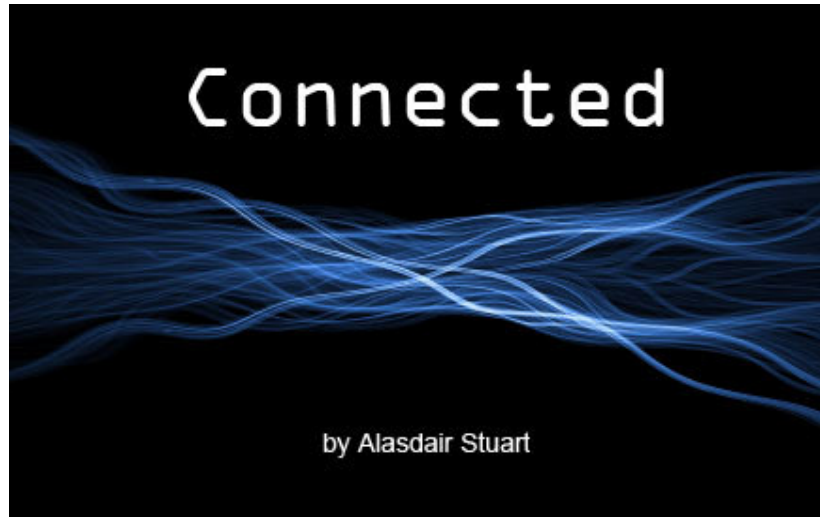
If you enjoy the following tale, please consider it when voting.

As always, you can also leave your comments at hubmag.wordpress.com.



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I was having dinner with an old friend a little while back. Lucy and I have known one another for years, we grew up together, worked together for a time and then drifted apart. I ran into her a little while ago, and it was like finding a photo album that talked. We chatted for an hour and promised to meet up for dinner. Which we did.

Lucy was exactly as I remembered her, witty, self-deprecating and frighteningly intelligent. She was also wildly eccentric and had been prone, in our younger years, to near criminal acts in order to relieve her boredom. It was Lucy who was chased over the roof of our school by the headmaster when, in the summer holidays, she decided to go climbing. It was Lucy who to this day has a straight, two inch scar running down the centre of her forehead from when she fell through a window doing the same thing later that year. And it was Lucy who had once stood up to a school bully by keying his dad's car. Thirteen times.

Which is why it was so odd when she jumped at my mobile phone. Not just in that surprised way either, but she went white as a sheet and looked at it for a second with absolute terror. This woman, this beautiful, wild young woman whom I'd spent much of my teens lusting after from afar was scared of my Nokia 2310.

Of course, she tried to laugh it off at first, but I was persistent. There was a brittle look to her eyes, and she refused to meet my gaze until I asked her outright why the hell she was scared of my phone. She looked me straight in the eyes and I swear if she hadn't looked so frightened I would have laughed.

"I thought it was for me."

It came spilling out after that. It seems that a couple of years prior to us meeting up again, Lucy and a couple of friends had been text freaks. They messaged one another everywhere they went, kept up to date on the latest phones and talked constantly. It was

when mobile chic was at its height, when anyone who was anyone had a little metal box clamped to the side of their head.

As it turns out, they got talking one night and began to wonder idly about who had the next number "up." If Lucy's number was 769594 then who had 595? Or 593 for that matter? They were drunk and bored and so they started ringing their nearly numbers.

Most of course, were either not in use or had their voice mails on. They left pleasant, drunk messages about how they were "exploring" the phone lines. This carried on for quite a while, until they hit a number that Lucy couldn't quite remember. They rung it and a recorded voice on the other end said:

"You are forbidden to use this number. Please disconnect immediately."

Lucy being Lucy, this was like a red rag to a bull. She put the number on redial and sat there for at least an hour, screaming with vodka fueled laughter as the number rang over and over and over again. She went home and thought nothing more of it.

On the way to work that morning, every phonebox rang as she passed.

At work, her office phone rang once an hour, every hour for precisely thirty seconds. There was the sound of her own laughter from the previous night, recorded on the other end.

Her mobile no longer needed recharging, and there were ten text messages waiting for her. When she opened them, they all said the same thing.

WHO'S LAUGHING NOW?

She changed her number, contacted the authorities, all the usuals. It didn't help, the calls persisted and after a while she threw her phone away, moved and stopped talking to the friends who had been with her. They, she said, had the same look she did. The look of someone being toyed with. Someone being hunted.

After two months, the calls stopped. By this time Lucy had used all her sicktime from work and had been disciplined twice for insubordination and unprofessionalism. She set to work rebuilding herself and then, two years on had met me. And my phone.

I asked her who she thought the number was and she said that a friend of hers had some suspicions. He thought it could be a government number, the sort of thing that only a few people in the country should ever ring. Alternately, it was a phone company employee who happened to be a psycho. Or, and she smiled despite herself at this, it was a haunted line. We laughed, and I paid the bill and went home, alone. As I always did with Lucy.

When I got home, there was a text message on my mobile. It was the call that had sparked the conversation in the first place, the one I'd ignored when Lucy had looked so terrified.

The message is simple and very short, but I've been reading it over and over for the last twenty minutes.

STAY AWAY FROM HER.

The caller withheld their number.