

# Harmless

by David W Brown on December 13, 2020. © All rights reserved

The old man was almost perfectly nondescript; looking like most people his age probably feel, almost invisible in his ordinariness.

He sat quietly at the small, laminated kitchen table, wearing a taupe terrycloth robe, striped flannel pyjamas and a pair of well-worn leather slippers.

"Dennis?", I called out to him from the front door.

The volunteer coordinator had provided me with a house key and a printed page of instructions that noted he had "difficulty hearing" combined with "advanced dementia".

My wife had been one of the first to be treated in the new wing of the hospital and the care she received before her passing inspired me to want to give something back. I had taken early retirement to care for her when she developed cancer and a year had disappeared in a tragic flurry of treatments, worsening diagnoses and finally, her death.

I was admittedly lost; we'd been together for our entire adult lives and the vacuum of her leaving was an incalculable void. A month after her passing, I went to the hospital to drop off a card for the staff who'd cared for her. A poster of an aged face smiling up over the shoulder of a figure holding a teapot caught my eye in the elevator.

Recruiting for volunteers. Caregivers, home visits, readers.

I remembered just such a volunteer, a woman who had brightened my wife's day one particularly gloomy Wednesday. What was I going to do with my time now, without her? I felt as hollow as the Sơn Đoòng cave, memories echoing endlessly through the empty space that once held her so dear.

They started me off easily, greeting and helping visitors find the right wing and ward. That moved to reading to patients who'd lost their sight or were lonely. I really loved doing that and Sally, the coordinator, asked me one day if I wanted to visit outpatients in their homes.

"You really connect with people, Peter", she said. "They love listening to you and you're easy to talk to. I think this might be your calling".

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That, and I was retired and had a car.

But she didn't have to convince me, I actually was excited to meet people outside of the hospital setting. Most of my 'clients' – that's what we were supposed to call them – were elderly and suffering from one or more debilitating conditions. Dennis' previous volunteer had suddenly stopped taking shifts, not even bothering to explain to Sally why. She was more upset for the clients as change is often more difficult for the vulnerable.

Sally said that Dennis loved science fiction, particularly classics by authors like Asimov, Heinlein or Philip K. Dick. That was a perfectly lovely coincidence, I told Sally. "As do I, I have a shelf of their books at home".

I brought along one from each author, fussing over the titles like a suitor getting ready for a date.

"Dennis, it's Peter. Your volunteer from the hospital. I'm here to read to you", I called out again.

He turned towards me and smiled. "Oh yes, please come in, come in".

My first visit to a client with dementia had been quite disturbing and Sally had told me to remember, "they're harmless, Peter. They get angry sometimes, but we can't take it personally".

I felt foolish recalling my reaction and ashamed of my anxiousness in meeting Dennis especially after we had a lovely visit.

He was in fact, far more partial to Dick than any of the others and I read almost half of *Ubik* to him before I had to leave. Dennis was only fifteen years older than me, but he had a grandfatherly presence about him that added to my pleasure in spending time there.

He said he'd been married for twenty years, "before she just vanished, Peter. Like a hologram in one of those books. Poof. Gone".

Dennis said that people seemed to do that to him often. "It's like they just disappear", he said while we were drinking tea one day. "I don't know Peter, am I scary or something?".

The training the hospital had provided had taught me that people with Dennis' form of dementia are often confused by the vicious randomness of their memory loss. People they'd known for decades might be forgotten, while mere acquaintances seemed bonded in their

minds as if by concrete.

I was reading stories from 'We Can Remember It for You Wholesale' to him one afternoon and his attention noticeably sparked when I got to 'Impostor'.

"I think I caught one of them myself, Peter", he said. "The last one who came to read to me, like you do".

He tugged on the sleeve of my sweater, forcing my attention towards his suddenly intense eyes.

"An android, just like the one Mr. Olham caught in the story". He pulled harder on my sleeve, leaning closer to my face. "I can show you if you promise not to tell anyone, Peter".

Not wanting to upset him, I decided to humour Dennis. What harm would there be in indulging the imaginings of a lonely old man?

He led me to the basement door, pulling on a cord that turned on a single, bare bulb that lit the way. His mobility was still impressive for a man of his age and I was relieved that he made it easily down the steep, narrow wooden staircase to the basement.

It was an old house, built before the second world war and the basement was truly unfinished. Bare concrete walls topped by plywood and studs with a couple of painted over windows and a hardpacked dirt floor.

He looked around the basement soberly, hand on his chin like a sage calculating a complex formula. "Ah yes, that last one's over there", he said pointing towards the northeast corner of the basement.

"That last one?", I asked, "do you mean there's more than one android, Dennis?".

He turned to me with a smile and I noticed a large kitchen knife in his right hand.

"Oh yes Peter. There are many of your type down here".

**Author notes**

Sơn Đoòng in Vietnam is the world's largest cave system.

We Can Remember It for You Wholesale(collection) is a collection of short stories by Philip K Dick. Impostor is one of the stories in the collection, about a man who is mistaken for an android sent by aliens to attack earth.