

## New York Syndrome

Alec Maynard

They named the pill *New York* after the city that never sleeps, despite originating from a Chinese replica developed in Boston. Aaron Knight's grandfather, George Knight senior, often fondly spoke of a time when NYs were optional, when people would waste hours every day lain in bed doing nothing. Aaron considered him a Dozer; a pervert. We frequently excuse the elderly for their eccentricities, but Aaron found it difficult to understand and forgive his grandfather's obsession with sleep. George Knight senior was the last of Aaron's grandparents having died only twelve years prior; at the unusually old age of seventy-two. Aaron was born too late to meet the rest of his forebears, they were merely names rarely recounted in passing conversation, however, he retained fond memories of George senior.

Aaron Knight lived in London, which was drastically different to the city George senior recounted in his bedtime stories. This was a time when overpopulation was a worldwide problem, with the United Kingdom's capital alone exceeding 50 million inhabitants. People were packed together like **camerae**.

**Camerae** are the husky, slender chambers that compose the interior of a spiralling Ammonite shell.

Aaron was proud of his apartment. Although it was cramped and owned by Government Ltd he was content with his borrowed independence. It had been assigned to him, along with his career as an engineer at the Sunlight factory, following graduation from university. His job and home were guaranteed as a citizen under the Efficient Society Scheme. Aaron had worked on the same factory floor his entire adult life; where, for 12 hours a day, he tirelessly produced the patented Sunlight light bulbs. London was covered in their product, which created a dynamic daytime environment throughout the city. People's lives were dictated by their work schedule rather than the Sun and the bulbs provided almost all of the benefits of natural sunlight. They were an essential addition to the New York pill. Aaron took his pill every twelve hours as recommended; once at the start of his shift and once at the end. He had never missed a measure, but if he did the symptoms would set in within twelve hours. The box listed the side effects as: drowsiness, headaches, muscle ache, lethargy and hallucinations. Prolonged exposure led to long-term mental health issues or even death. Aaron found it difficult to believe that these were the effects Dozers craved, those his grandfather so fondly recalled.

He flipped the pill from the side engraved with a 'N' to the other engraved with a 'Y' and back again, before swallowing it. It tasted like cardboard-vanilla and instantly dissolved as it slid down his throat. Moments later, a looming headache subsided. Aaron shrugged and stared at himself in the mirror. The man who stared back had greying brown hair, brown eyes and pale skin. They were tall and gaunt, but moderately well-kept. According to [government-ltd-statistics.com](http://government-ltd-statistics.com) Aaron's features were the most common in the United Kingdom. Wrinkles had formed along his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. At the age of twenty-five he looked far more youthful than many of his peers and was proud of that fact. Breakfast consisted of a sandwich, which Aaron prepared on a cheap, foldable kitchen surface within the narrow apartment. Madam, his overweight, tabby cat, pounced onto the edge and demanded attention. A newspaper fell into the basket beneath Aaron's

letterbox. Aaron made out 'China' written in the headline. The news continually printed a running commentary of the manufacturing race between Europe, China and the United States. The monotony of which, was only ever broken to report the latest terrorist actions of Dozer perverts. The group had recently made several kidnappings in the area and all of the victims, without exception, had joined their cause. Aaron pushed his fat cat off the surface and onto the floor. She hissed at him and skulked off. Aaron finished his sandwich and then headed to work.

The journey took Aaron through the London streets of perpetual light. His twelve hour shift began as the sun set; its faint red glow shrouded by the capital's smog. Columns of Sunlight bulbs, which lined the walls of every building, slowly powered on. The factory was vast and sat on the outskirts of the city. Even at a distance, its hulking concrete form distorted the aesthetics of the surrounding area.

Aaron was one of the newer staff members of the factory having only worked there for a few years. Citizens did not regularly change jobs as they were nearly impossible to come by. Rare enough that somebody quitting quickly became the subject of factory floor gossip. Bill hadn't arrived for work. He was never late; no one ever was. When Aaron first joined Bill took him under his wing. On a daily basis he quoted Chauncey Depew, *'An optimist will tell you the glass is half-full; the pessimist, half-empty; and the engineer will tell you the glass is twice the size it needs to be.'* and always proceeded to laugh and slap him on the back. Aaron found his efforts of endearment irritating and uncomfortable. The pair worked in quality control along with five hundred others. They held the patented glass bulbs up to the light and thoroughly checked each and every one for flaws. They both wore shades to protect their eyes but Bill had stopped using his long ago. His co-worker had developed an enjoyment for watching light refract through the bulbs. Aaron was certain this deviant habit was somehow responsible for his absence.

After ten hours of the monotonous examination of glass without a break, though fresh and full of energy, Aaron felt bored. However, he wouldn't dare to admit it, at the risk of being sectioned for mental health issues. The thought of sipping a cold, bubbling beverage in the downtime between twelve hour shifts was enough to tide him over. NYs doubled as a fantastic hangover cure.

Aaron noticed a tiny crack in an otherwise flawless bulb as he held it up to the fluorescent glare above, when somebody grabbed his shoulder and Bill's familiar voice rung in his ears.

'I need to talk to you.' His co-worker said. A multitude of questions sprung into Aaron's mind. A sudden burst of adrenaline caused an unfamiliar irregularity to his heartbeat, which made him feel anxious.

'I'm on the clock, Bill, can it wait?' Bill was a broad man; old, bald and brash. Aaron, being slight, felt intimidated and thus unable to resist him.

'No, it can't.'

They agreed to meet the following hour behind the factory. A pit in Aaron's stomach warned him that it was wrong. He had abandoned his post, skipping work, he would be sacked for sure. Bill was not in his right mind. Aaron questioned why he was stood outdoors, at the back of the factory, behind the spare shipping boxes waiting to talk to his former colleague. Bill emerged from the shadows and walked towards him.

'We are in a great deal of trouble Aaron.'

'Excuse me?' Aaron replied. Bill impressed himself on Aaron and rifled through his jacket.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing?’

‘I think you’ve been bugged. Listen to me.’ Bill took his colleague by the shoulders in deranged desperation. ‘The police suspect you of being a Dozer. They were at my apartment. They planted evidence. I’m certain that they will hit yours next. You must go home right now so they don’t screw you too.’ Aaron stared at his friend, mouth hanging aghast.

‘You insane?’

‘They found a pillow in my house, Aaron. Before I realised that my NYs had been stolen the police arrived.’

‘And what has this got to do with me? We shouldn't even be talking, get out of my way!’

Aaron tried to push past Bill who shoved him backwards.

‘It’s my fault Aaron. They pressed me for names, said I would get away with a caution. I *accidentally* gave them yours.’

‘You did what?’ Aaron said. Bill grimaced as the question echoed around the area.

‘I panicked and it just came out, I’m so, so sorry. Please, my car is waiting. Let’s hurry to your place to make sure it’s clean. I’ll have you back here before they’ve realised you’re gone. Trust me Aaron, we don’t have much time.’ Aaron could not believe himself as he nodded. In a single conversation his entire life had fallen apart.

During the journey home, Aaron sat glaring at his supposed friend. Beads of sweat broke

across Bill's thick forehead as he concentrated on the road. The traffic was worse than ever and their route took them through three separate standstills. Aaron pondered whether he could beg his bosses to save his job, after all, he had a perfect record up until that day. Upon their arrival at his apartment, Aaron was shocked to find his front door unlocked; seemingly picked. The first thing he noticed as he entered the narrow apartment, to his horror, was a plump, white pillow which lay on the kitchen worktop. Bill beckoned and the pair desperately rummaged around for his pills, but they were nowhere to be found. Madam had also disappeared, along with her bowl and food. Aaron violently jolted as the front door slammed shut and the lock clicked into place.

A woman, unlike any Aaron had seen before, stood in front of the door. Aaron was mesmerised by her. She was tall and stood with a wide stance. Her clothing was rough, torn and left her stomach exposed. Despite their similar ages, her creamy-chocolate skin shone with youthful vigour. Her hair was silky and straight and full of vibrancy; without a hint of grey. Large, doughy, brown eyes gazed at him and reduced his mind to jelly.

'Do I know you?' He blurted out.

'Lottie, this is the guy I was telling you about.' said Bill.

Aaron realised that his headache was returning and reached for his NYs. He gasped and scrambled through the rest of his pockets then double-checked in desperation. His NY dispenser had disappeared.

'I'm sorry Aaron.' Aaron half-turned before he felt a sharp impact on the base of his skull. Bill stood over him as he collapsed to the cold floor. He held a rubber truncheon in one hand and Aaron's pills in the other.

‘Relax honey, you're safe now. Close your eyes,’ Lottie said as she wandered over to him. The final image he saw was that of Lottie’s toned figure set to a darkening haze before he passed out.

--- --- ---

When Aaron awoke the room was spinning and his head felt as though it might burst. He tried to stand up but hadn't the strength. He retched. This level of physical discomfort was completely alien. Sweat layered his skin and his heart beat with such ferocity that he thought it would explode. A figure bathed in shadow stood at the opposite end of the room. They spoke to him, though he could ascertain only some of their words.

‘We are rehabilitating you, reviving your soul, weaning you off the drugs you've been addicted to your whole life. Keep calm and carry on.’ Aaron’s eyelids flickered open. He was wearing nothing but his underwear. His clammy, pale skin glistened. He was bound at his feet by a belt and his hands were cuffed to a pipe.

‘What are you doing to me?’

‘You're suffering a lifetime-worth of withdrawal. You experienced unconsciousness! The passage of time flows differently in our world and it'll take some adjusting to. It’s for your own benefit, promise.’

‘Where are my pills? Where are they?’ Aaron yelled. He thrashed against his restraints and frothed at the mouth. ‘Give them back, give them back!’ Lottie reached out but he snapped at her

like a feral dog. She drew close to him, cupped his crotch and pressed her lips to his.

‘Relax.’ The tension in his body lessened as they tasted each other's saliva.

‘We really can't stay here much longer, Lottie. The factory will have noticed his absence and called the police.’ Lottie withdrew, wiped her mouth and wandered over to Bill. Aaron felt light and his eyelids fluttered before he fell asleep once again.

Reality drifted for Aaron. A kaleidoscope of coloured lights and memories flashed behind his eyes. Stories of yesteryear played out over and over in his mind. On Christmas day, his mother, his father and George senior were sat around a table at the retirement home. Aaron passed a plate of sliced turkey to George, but he refused it. He tried and tried again, but his grandfather complained that it was cold. His father grabbed the elderly man, blocked his nose and restrained him. A powerless Aaron watched himself force the meat down his grandfather's throat; much to his father's contentment. Aaron sobbed for forgiveness, but didn't stop until George senior had eaten every last slice. The old man gagged, choked, suffocated and died with a gaping mouthful of cold, white meat.

--- --- ---

Aaron screamed and awoke once more. This time he wore clothes and felt healthier; hazy but energised in a way that made him feel more whole. He lay on top of a small mattress in the centre of a darkened room with his head rested against the pillow from his kitchen worktop. It felt warm and oddly comforting.

‘You,’ he pointed at Lottie, who stretched at his bedside. ‘You're the voice of the Dozers in London. I've heard you in the news.’

‘We Dozers call that feeling, the one you have right now, *‘The Wellness’*. It is how the human body should feel after a proper sleep cycle.’ Lottie said. She passed Aaron a glass of water. ‘I think you had your first nightmare. You’ve been tossing and turning more than most. And yes that was me, Lottie, voice of the *perverted* and *uncouth* Dozers.’

‘I’ll report you to the authorities.’ Lottie tried to hold a straight face but burst out laughing.

‘For what, honey? All I did was give you a good rest.’ Lottie said. Aaron held a long, tired glare and then sighed.

‘How long... how long have you had me like this?’

‘Six cycles,’ said Bill. He emerged from a room and zipped up his flies to the serenade of a flushing toilet. ‘You’ve been dreaming for nearly a week. Before you ask, no, we won’t be supplying you with any more NYs.’

Aaron sat bolt-upright, but his back cramped and he collapsed to the mattress. His small, brown eyes darted between Lottie and Bill.

‘Are all dreams like that? It was awful, the things I saw...’

‘Dreams are many things to many people, honey. An escape, hopes, dark desires, hidden guilt, white noise, visions of the future... or visions of your past.’ Lottie said.

‘I saw my grandfather.’

‘You remember your grandfather?’ Lottie glanced at Bill with a surprised expression.

‘He was always talking about him at the factory.’ Bill said.

‘Yes, I was one of a privileged few. I loved him, even if he was a filthy Dozer.’

‘You were extremely lucky. Do you think it’s a coincidence that the elderly are rare? That the average life expectancy of a healthy human dropped to fifty in just three generations? You’re in your twenties and have grey hair!’ said Lottie. Aaron shrugged. She walked over to a small, black bag which sat on a table. ‘The world doesn’t sleep anymore. It is overcrowded and decaying; unsustainable. The NY pill kept us in contention with China. It *solved* the problems of productivity and unemployment yet is killing us, and fast.’ Aaron wanted to retort, but hesitated when he caught sight of his greying hair in the reflective surface of the wall opposite. Lottie produced a small box and sat beside her captive. ‘We were forced to take this pill and now it is embedded in our society.’

‘No! Citizens chose to take the pill. It’s a choice, we want it.’ Aaron said in defiance.

‘You are painfully naïve and wrong. Citizens chose it because they had to. The original drug manufacturer and supermarket chain bought and became the government. They were cheered into office too, as they already had a monopoly on most products and services in the country. People were forced to work longer hours and those who took the pill were prioritised over those who wouldn’t. Soon it became a requirement to get a job. Then came the scare tactics. Then NYs became fashionable, common and culturally accepted. This is all true, ask anyone without a share in Government Ltd. However, it is what people don’t know that is genuinely horrific. We have evidence that proves the original, oldest generation were force-fed the pill in retirement homes and hospitals.

They murdered your granddad, Aaron. In fact, all of your grandparents were likely forced to swallow the pill and killed. And now, you're willingly letting them kill you too.' Aaron's heart sank, his eyes welled-up and his face flushed red.

'That can't be...'

'Don't you see, Aaron? We're all cogs in a machine; prisoners of a system we cannot escape!' Bill implored.

'Society gives us everything we need. We are free.'

'If we cannot dream we are not free.' Lottie said. Aaron felt a pinch on his arm. Lottie had injected him with a syringe. He let out a scream, which was lost as his vocal chords loosened.

'Relax honey, it's just an anaesthetic. When you awaken all will become clear.' Lottie said, as she pulled the hypodermic from his arm. Aaron gazed up at the hypnotic beauty of Lottie's face. He pecked her on the lips, and then she kissed him back with such passion that he erupted. His heart elated and pounded against his chest. The drained dullness of his face flooded with colour, which washed over him as he drifted away.

'Wake up.'

Madam licked Aaron's face as he regained consciousness. Lottie and Bill had disappeared and he was back inside his apartment; the mattress, pillow and restraints were gone. Aaron picked up the cat as he groggily clambered to his feet. Two objects were on the kitchen surface. A dull ache emanated from his body as he wandered over. He kissed Madam and then put her down to one side.

Aaron examined the objects, one in either hand. In his left hand was his NY pill dispenser, and in his right hand was a pamphlet. The pamphlet's title read: *'New York Syndrome'*.