

IS LOVE STILL POSSIBLE?

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Even though everything in the Universe was accelerating away from everything else and domestic life had become increasingly strange with widespread disintegration expected, Harry Plum, who was editing vowels, only really started to worry when the 'a' disappeared from the line he was working on. Bewildered he watched as the letter detached itself from its neighbours moved smartly to the edge of the screen and with a little asterisk winked out. He tried retyping the line but no 'a' appeared. He scrolled back up the page but could find no 'a's at all in this morning's work. He accessed his archives and found that the 'a' had vanished from all his transcriptions.

'You should have printed it first,' called Colbert smugly from across the way. Harry didn't reply. He'd already perused the printouts that Colbert had stacked up around his workstation and it was apparent that hardcopy was no defence against the depredations of semiotic slippage; much of Colbert's stockpile was gibberish.

Harry called IT and soon a young propeller was installing maximum-coherence software onto his VDU. 'Should hold until this afternoon's upgrade.'

Harry smiled at the tech and asked, 'Do you think love is still possible?'

The young man was perplexed but smiled crookedly. 'Sure,' he replied but then bent forward and whispered, 'if the problem persists try this,' and palmed Harry a fat roll of sticky-tape.

By midday Harry had taped everything down: his keyboard to the desk, screen to the box, box to the desk, papers, pencils and so on. He was about to start on the chair when an icon pinged on his screen indicating incoming mail. It was from the Director: 'Hrry, Meeting my office 15 mins.' Harry considered the import of this: was the Director introducing a new level of informality into their communications or was the 'u' in jeopardy as well? In which case he'd better hurry.

Although dissociation was now widespread, the level of dispersal varied from location to location. While the vowels on Harry's floor were in trouble,

upstairs was worse: the office was festooned with cabling hanging down like lianas and there were jungle effects down most corridors; the editors spent their time in pitched battles with the office machines which, having lost their instruction books, had rebelled.

Led by the photocopiers the machines had corralled most of the staff into a few offices and lashed their erstwhile superiors with sniggering and incomprehensible error messages. As a result only a few made it to the meeting.

Harry was shocked to see the change these last few weeks had wrought on the Director: usually sober and conservative in her dress, she now wore an apricot scarf and a violet cap; her hair, normally contained at her collar in a concentric brown bun was bleached white and flying about. Yet her voice remained firm with purpose as she addressed the meeting, 'Friends, I've some b-d news. It seems th-t this morning we lost - vowel.' Someone cried out, others groaned, most were silent. Overriding protests from some of the youngsters, the Director insisted that they abandon transcription and limit their efforts to reiterating the remaining alphabet. The consonants would leave their floor to the rampant machines and they would have to share desks. It was then that Harry asked the question on everyone's mind, 'Director, do you think love is still possible?'

Gravely she looked at Harry and around the room at the expectant faces. 'I don't know H-rry, I just don't know.'

Following the meeting the assignments were posted and Harry was billeted with one of the consonant editors, Judith. Although Harry normally eschewed collaboration, he knew that strange times called for unusual measures and besides he had admired, albeit from a distance, Judith's tenacious transliteration of Herve Hubner one of the most abstruse mid-European sociometrists.

Peeling away some of the sticky-tape from the keyboard they began. Judith started by typing the first letter 'B'. Without thinking Harry keyed 'is for bedroom'. The brazenness of this initial definition caused Judith to blush. Indeed, it took Harry by surprise but the current events were upsetting and he felt reckless and brave.

She then typed 'C' and Harry plumped for, 'is for crème de menthe'. Judith's laugh was a fountain of spangles. He typed 'D' and after a moment

Judith keyed 'is for dissolve'. They both stopped and looked around sadly at the blooming disarray in the office: E is for entropy, F is for fidelity.

They had only reached 'J' when the lights flickered and, although it was only two o'clock in the afternoon, night fell. Most of the editors had elected to spend their remaining certainty with their families but Harry and Judith, having little but language in their lives, remained. Harry also felt some obligation towards Colbert who by this time had turned into a large centipede and was scuttling about under desks flexing his mandibles and chewing through the manuscripts piled around him.

Then with a whoosh the windows left their frames and flew off cawing into the night. Excited pens and letterhead rushed gawping towards the precipice and were sucked into the darkness.

Quickly, Harry whipped out the roll of sticky-tape and taped Judith into her chair and then secured himself.

Through the rushing decompression, Judith smiled, stretched out and typed an 'L'. Unbelieving Harry responded with an 'O'. She turned to him and shouted against the howling wind, 'V' and then unable to find the keyboard Harry raised his finger in the blue air and drew the last letter just before they started flying apart.
