**AND WEEP LIKE ALEXANDER**

**NEIL GAIMAN**

T

he little man hurried into the Fountain and ordered a very large whisky. "Because," he announced to the pub in general, "I deserve it."

He looked exhausted, sweaty and rumpled, as if he had not slept in several days. He wore a tie, but it was so loose as to be almost undone. He had graying hair that might once have been ginger.

“I’m sure you do," said Brian Dalton.

"I do!" said the man. He took a sip of the whisky as if to find out if he liked it, then, satisfied, gulped down half the glass. He stood completely still, for a moment, like a statue. "Listen," he said. "Can you hear it?"

"What?" I said.

"A sort of background whispering white noise that actually becomes whatever song you wish to hear when you sort of half-concentrate upon it?"

I listened. "No," I said.

"Exactly," said the man, extraordinarily pleased with himself. "Isn't it *wonderful?* Only yesterday, everybody in the Fountain was complaining about the Wispamuzak. Professor Mackintosh here was grumbling about having Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" stuck in his head and how it was now following him across London. Today, it's gone, as if it had never been. None of you can even remember that it existed. And that is all due to me."

"I what?" said Professor Mackintosh. "Something about the Queen?" And then, "Do I know you?"

"We've met," said the little man. "But people forget me, alas. It is because of my job." He took out his wallet, produced a card, passed it to me.

**Obediah Polkinghorn**

...it read, and beneath that in small letters,

UNINVENTOR

"If you don't mind my asking," I said. "What's an uninventor?"

"It's somebody who uninvents things," he said. He raised his glass, which was quite empty. "Ah. Excuse me, Sally, I need another very large whisky."

The rest of the crowd there that evening seemed to have decided that the man was both mad and uninteresting. They had returned to their conversations. I, on the other hand, was caught. "So," I said, resigning myself to my conversational fate. "Have you been an uninventor long?"

"Since I was fairly young," he said. "I started uninventing when I was eighteen. Have you never wondered why we do not have jet-packs?"

I had, actually.

"Saw a bit on Tomorrow's World about them, when I was a lad," said Michael, the landlord. "Man went up in one. Then he came down. Raymond Burr seemed to think we'd all have them soon enough."

"Ah, but we don't," said Obediah Polkinghorn, "because I uninvented them about twenty years ago. I had to. They were driving everybody mad. I mean, they seemed so attractive, and so cheap, but you just had to have a few thousand bored teenagers strapping them on, zooming all over the place, hovering outside bedroom windows, crashing into the flying cars . . ."

"Hold on," said Sally."There aren't any flying cars."

"True," said the little man, "But there were. You wouldn't believe the traffic jams they'd cause. You'd look up and it was just the bottoms of bloody flying cars from horizon to horizon. Some days I couldn't see the skies at all. People throwing rubbish out of their car windows . . . They were easy to run-ran off gravitosolar power, obviously-but I didn't realise that they needed to go until I heard a lady talking about them on Radio Four, all 'Why Oh Why Didn't We Stick With Non-Flying Cars?' She had a point. Something needed to be done. I uninvented them. I made a list of inventions the world would be better off without and, one by one, I uninvented them all.”

By now he had started to gather a small audience. I was pleased I'd grabbed a good seat.

"It was a lot of work, too," he continued."You see, it's almost impossible *not* to invent the Flying Car, as soon as you've invented the Lumenbubble. So eventually I had to uninvent that too. And I miss the individual Lumenbubble: a massless portable light-source that floated half a metre above your head and went on when you wanted it to. Such a wonderful invention. Still, no use crying over unspilt milk, and you can't mend an omelette without unbreaking a few eggs."

"You also can't expect us actually to believe any of this," said someone, and I think it was Jocelyn.

"Right," said Brian. "I mean, next thing you'll be telling us that you uninvented the space ship."

"But I did," said Obediah Polkinghorn. He seemed extremely pleased with himself. "Twice. I had to. You see, the moment we whizz off into space and head out to the planets and beyond, we bump into things that spur so many other inventions. The Polaroid Instant Transporter. That was the worst. And the Mockett Telepathic Translator. That was the worst as well. But as long as it's nothing worse than a rocket to the moon, I can keep everything under control."

"So, how exactly do you go about uninventing things?" I asked.

"It’s hard," he admitted. "It's all about unpicking probability threads from the fabric of creation. But they tend to be long and tangled, like spaghetti. So it's rather like having to unpick a strand of spaghetti from a haystack."

"Sounds like thirsty work," said Michael, and I signalled him to pour me another pint of Old Badger.

"Fiddly," said the little man."Yes. But I pride myself on doing good. Each day I wake, and, even if I've unhappened something that might have been wonderful, I think, Obediah Polkington, the world is a happier place because of something that you've uninvented ."

He looked into his remaining scotch, swirled the liquid around in his glass.

"The trouble is," he said, "with the Wispamuzak gone, that's it. I'm done. It's all been uninvented. There are no more horizons left to undiscover, no more mountains left to unclimb."

"Nuclear Power?" suggested 'Tweet' Peston.

"Before my time," said Obediah. "Can't uninvent things invented before I was born. Otherwise I might uninvent something that would have led to my birth, and then where would we be?" Nobody had any suggestions. "Knee­ high in jet-packs and flying cars, that's where," he told us. "Not to mention Morrison's Martian Emolument." For a moment, he looked quite grim. "Ooh. That stuff was nasty. And a cure for cancer. But frankly, given what it did to the oceans, I'd rather have the cancer.

"No. I have uninvented everything that was on my list. I shall go home," said Obediah Polkinghorn, bravely, "and weep, like Alexander, because there are no more worlds to unconquer. What is there left to uninvent?"

There was silence in the Fountain.

In the silence, Brian's iPhone rang. His ring-tone was The Rutles singing 'Cheese and Onions'. "Yeah?" he said. Then, ''I'll call you back."

It is unfortunate that the pulling out of one phone can have such an effect on other people around. Sometimes I think it's because we remember when we could smoke in pubs, and that we pull out our phones together as once we pulled out our cigarette packets. But probably it's because we're easily bored.

Whatever the reason, the phones came out.

Crown Baker took a photo of us all, and then Twitpicced it. Jocelyn started to read her text messages. Tweet Peston tweeted that he was in the Fountain and had met his first uninventor. Professor Mackintosh checked the Test Match scores, told us what they were and emailed his brother in Inverness to grumble about them. The phones were out and the conversation was over.

"What's that?" asked Obediah Polkinghorn.

"It's the iPhone 5," said Ray Arnold, holding his up. "Crown's using the Nexus X. That's the Android system. Phones. Internet. Camera. Music. But it's the apps. I mean, do you know, there are over a thousand fart sound­effect apps on the iPhone alone? You want to hear the unofficial Simpsons Fart App?"

"No," said Obediah. "I most definitely do not want to. I do *not."* He put down his drink, unfinished. Pulled his tie up. Did up his coat. "It's not going to be easy," he said, as if to himself. "But, for the good of all . . . " And then he stopped. And he grinned. "It's been marvellous talking to you all," he announced to nobody in particular as he left the Fountain.