

Brigadoon Inn

by [Andy Thomas](#) (February 2021)



Tavern, Martin Kainz, 1930s

“The Cloud is down,” said Leo to his designated *social buddy*, Jaxon.

“I’ve lost signal as well,” replied Jaxon, speaking through the perspex safety screen which separated them.

The self-driving EV in which they were travelling rolled to a standstill high on a remote mountain pass somewhere in the English Lake District. The road was just

beginning to plateau as they were almost at the very the top.

“And we’ve stopped,” said Leo in surprise.

Why the vehicle had selected this route there was anyone’s guess, for the road they were on carried almost no traffic these days. Perhaps the route finding algorithm had gone wrong or it had found an unusual short-cut. Whatever the reason, the car had somehow gotten lost and then died on them.

These two young men had never driven for themselves, nor had they ever had the need to navigate or, for that matter, even to know where they were. They placed unthinking trust in the vehicle’s Cloud-based navigation system, as everyone did these days. Both had been immersed, cocooned inside VR and social media throughout the entire journey. They had never even looked out of the window—until now.

Jaxon tried speaking to the car. “Teri,” he said to the dashboard.

There was no reply.

“Teri,” he repeated.

“Teri!”

There was still no reply. They were on their own.

“Perhaps she’s lost connection as well,” he said finally, now with a hint of concern.

Just then, a smiley face flashed up on the car’s display and Teri announced in her synthetically buoyant tone: “Oops! I seem to be having a problem. Sorry about that.”

“Yes. Teri’s down as well,” said Leo. “She’ll be back up soon,” he added reassuringly.

They waited.

Every minute or so, each of them would reach for their handset—only to put it down again when they remembered that there was no 6G signal. This instinctive pattern of behaviour was to be repeated uselessly by both of them many times over the next few hours, but always to no avail. Periodically, Teri would remind them that she was having a problem too, but that's all she would say.

Leo looked out the window. "I think we are high in the mountains," he thought out loud, "But we can't be."

"No, we can't be. We would never have come this way," his buddy agreed.

Leo, however, was beginning to realise why the last part of their journey had felt like they were going up a hill. They had been!

It was getting cold inside the vehicle. The Cloud was ubiquitous and everything was connected to it—even the car's heating. Without it, nothing worked.

Jaxon became anxious, but Leo continued gazing out of the window and began to wonder on their surroundings. The road snaked upward a short distance and vanished over the top of the pass. On both sides of them lay steep rolling hills of various shades of green and brown and, on some of the peaks, there was snow. Rocky outcrops littered the landscape here and there. And dark foreboding clouds traversed the pale blue sky above, casting fast moving shadows against the hills.

Beside the car, only a few feet away, a stonewall stretched upward alongside the road. Leo noticed that the stones were of various shapes and sizes, but all locked together perfectly nevertheless. It would be hard to make all those stones fit together like that, he thought to himself, as he wondered who had built it. Then, looking back over his shoulder, he realised that there were miles and miles of such walls stretching across the hills in all directions.

The hours passed and the sun began to dip behind the mountains. It became dark and very cold. Neither had any clothes other than those they were wearing.

Jaxon tried many times to get Teri to switch on the heater and interior light, but she remained stubbornly quiet. Both had started to shiver and the wind picked up, occasionally buffeting the car.

“Why doesn’t someone come?” complained Jaxon, “I’m freezing.”

Leo didn’t answer. In the distance, further up the road and at the very top of the pass, he thought he could see a light. It appeared a little unusual to his eyes because, in his world, all lighting was made by LEDs and all gave out the same blue-white colour. This one had a yellow hue.

How strange, he thought as he watched. It was rather dim, but occasionally it would brighten a little for a second or two.

Finally he said, “I can see a light.”

“About time,” replied Jaxon, listlessly.

“I don’t think it’s moving though.”

Jaxon looked, but said nothing.

Until that moment, it had never occurred to either of them to try to get out of the car. There was no internal door handle in any case. The doors in modern vehicles were like those of washing machines; they remained locked for unknown safety reasons until a timer had expired—even after the power was cut.

Leo, for the first time, tried pushing at the door.

“The door’s open,” he said in a hushed voice. There

was a long moment of silence between them.

“We can’t get out!” Jaxon exclaimed, having contemplated the implication. “We have to stay safe.”

“There may be someone over there. They may be able to get help for us.”

Leo pulled down his full face visor over the mask he was already wearing. All vehicles were legally required to carry a supply of disposable gloves and he put on a new pair from the dispenser.

“You can’t leave me here!” cried Jaxon, becoming agitated.

“We shall go together. It will be OK,” Leo replied, doing his best to sound reassuring.

Jaxon, realising he would be left alone, reluctantly agreed. He applied sterilizer from the in-car dispenser and donned his extra protective equipment. When he had finished, they slowly pushed open the car doors and the pair stepped hesitantly into the night wind.

The dark shadows that were the mountains surrounded them all around and above, while the lightweight clothes they were wearing did nothing to stop the wind. In the moments when it died down a little, the sound of a running stream could just be heard somewhere nearby.

They were explorers in an alien landscape.

Leo led the way, and they began to walk toward the light while holding on to their face visors. The incline soon became mild as the road flattened off.

Within a few hundred yards or so, the source of mystery had revealed itself to be an old building with light coming from its windows. There was smoke coming from the

chimney which the wind blew sideways.

Suddenly, a heavy-set woman emerged from its entrance. Leo was close enough to see that she wore old fashioned dress, but Jaxon was a little behind. She did not notice them in the dark, but collected a pair of logs from a stack at the side of building and quickly returned inside.

Shivering, the two of them went up to a window and peered in together. And what they saw was a scene from another time.

The interior was lit by oil lamps, and a real fire burned in the hearth. The woman who they had just seen outside was now doing something behind the bar, and a man in a black jacket stood leaning against it with his back to them.

"I can't believe this. It looks just like a pub!" Leo exclaimed in surprise, turning to Jaxon.

"It can't be. How is this even being allowed?"

There were a dozen or so people inside, and a couple were sitting together at a table not far from the window through which Leo and Jaxon were looking. He was wearing a black waistcoat and a flat cap, while she wore a plain coloured simple dress. They caught the sound of muffled conversation.

Leo's eyes, however, were drawn to a girl who was sitting on her own by fire. She was about his age, he guessed, and had thick black hair that fell to her shoulders.

She's beautiful, he thought, feeling ashamed for thinking so.

"They're not wearing any protection and that guy over there is actually smoking," said Jaxon under his breath.

"I know. It looks like a simulation of the past. But

it looks so real. What is it doing out here?"

Leo kept watching, but Jaxon stepped back from the window and hugged himself to try to keep warm. While he did so, he checked his smartphone again, hoping for a connection. His device, however, was useless—he couldn't even take a video of the scene through the window as all modern devices saved their data *direct to Cloud*.

In this place, here and now, there was no Cloud.

Leo was also extremely cold, and found himself contemplating guilty thoughts of being inside in the warmth, with the girl and the fire, regardless of the consequences. Eventually, he could bear it no longer.

"I think we need to go in. We're freezing out here."

Jaxon's reaction was one of horror: "What do you mean? In there with them? We need to get back to car!"

"We'll freeze if we go back. We've no heating."

"But they're not even socially distanced!"

"I'm going to go in. You stay here."

"You can't leave me!" Jaxon whined.

Leo took a step toward the heavy wooden door that was the entrance. It did not open automatically, but he could see that it had a handle that needed to be turned.

He took a breath, gripped the handle and pushed. It opened inward and he was met with the warm air of the interior, the smell of pipe smoke, and the sound of conversation. There was nothing for it now. He stepped fully inside. His social buddy clung to him just behind.

"Oh my God!" the landlady cried out.

All conversation ceased as a wave of a silence washed across the room and echoed off the walls. All eyes were on them.

The moment of silence endured, but was eventually broken by a sudden shout from a huddle of young men in the corner...

"Spacemen!" some spark called out, and the denizens of this long lost place all burst into laughter.

Leo stood hapless, not knowing what to do or say. Jaxon remained in the doorway, holding the door wide open so that he could draw breath from the safe air outside.

"Where have you two come from, Mars?" the landlady asked, trying to keep a straight face.

"No, Stockport," Leo replied earnestly. There was more laughter.

"Well, you better come in then. Hadn't you?"

Leo looked at Jaxon. Behind his face visor, his eyes were wide.

"Are you coming in or not?" she demanded, but this time sternly. "And shut that bloody door! You're causing a draft."

Jaxon, now more afraid of the landlady than the atmosphere, reluctantly let the door swing shut. But he remained stood with his back to it, with one hand holding the handle just in case. The laughter was beginning to die down now.

"And what are you two doing in these parts?"

The question came from the man standing at the bar. As he turned toward them, they could see he was wearing a police

uniform of yesteryear, but one which they recognised from images they had seen on the web.

"We have permission," Jaxon said quickly, as he let go of the door handle to reach for his smartphone. "Look!"

He was going to show their *travel authorisation QR code*, but the screen displayed only manufacturer's corporate tag-line, "Making life better", and a yellow smiley.

There's no connectivity, he remembered again.

"Please," said Leo, "Our EV is not working. And we are cold."

"No wifi either," said Jaxon, still shivering, while looking forlornly at the thing in his hand.

"I don't know what tha's talking about, lad. Speak sense!"

"Awwh, leave them alone, Bob. They look lost," said the woman at the table they had seen from the window.

"Are you lost?" she asked Leo.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Give them both a drink, Barbara," she called to the landlady, "Something hot maybe. They look half frozen to death."

"What do you two want then?" Barbara asked Leo, but this time a little more kindly or, at least, less sternly.

"A latte," he replied, not knowing what else to say.

"Well, not sure we have one of those, but I can do a hot toddy. You look like you both could do with one."

Leo wasn't sure what that was, but nodded anyway.

"They can come and sit with us," said the woman at the table to the man who was her husband.

"Suppose," he said back.

"Come and sit with us you two," she called to them.

Leo glanced again at Jaxon who looked positively stricken.

"We just need to...", but Leo trailed off. He was about to say, "submit an emergency request," but had caught himself. "We've just broken down," he finished instead.

"We'll run you down to the village on our way home," said the woman looking to her husband who nodded. "There's a call box there."

Leo looked around at the surreality of where they were. There was a thick oak beam which spanned the low ceiling and bare stone flags made the floor. The beam looked real, rather than fake. The stone walls had been painted white and were decorated with small paintings and various gold coloured tranklements which looked like they had something to do with horses. Oil lamps were strategically positioned here and there.

The girl with the black hair, whom he had seen from window, was sitting beside the fireplace. She had been watching them, but now turned back to fire. A new log was just beginning to burn fiercely. He could almost feel its warmth from where he stood.

If this is not a VR game or a prank, he thought, then it is a dream. But it was a dream he dearly wanted to remember. The pressing reality of just a few moments ago were receding, and he made a curious decision.

"I'm Rosey," the woman said as he reached the table where the couple were sitting, "and this is Tom, my husband."

"I'm Leo," he replied, not knowing whether to add anything.

"Well sit down lad, and tell us all about yourself," said Tom. "And what's that thing on your face for?"

Leo hesitated one final time, and then pulled up chair.

As he sat down, he caught Jaxon glaring at him with fierce eyes from his position at the door. He knew that his buddy wasn't going to join him, but it didn't seem to matter anymore.

"It's to do with my job," Leo replied eventually. Something told him not to talk about viruses.

"Do you work for the government, Leo?" Rosy asked.

"Well..." he started. He thought for a moment. What did his job actually mean here? "I work in the media," he said finally.

"You mean like newspapers?"

"Kind of. But more like radio," he answered.

"Oh, we don't have a wireless, do we Tom? There's no electricity in these parts."

"Don't need no electrickerly if you ask me," Tom muttered as he picked up his pint pot and took a swig.

Leo's mind filled with questions but before he could ask them, the landlady placed a glass of hot whiskey on the table for him. The questions faded.

"I'm not sure how I'm going to pay?" he said, remembering that his phone wasn't working and that they probably did not accept *UK-Coin* payments anyway.

“Don’t worry about it this time. It looks like you need it,” she said over her shoulder as she headed back toward the bar.

Leo glanced again at the girl beside the fire. He noticed her scruffy brown cardigan which was far too big for her. Her dress was tattered and on her feet were heavy black boots. He decided, however, that he liked how she looked. She brushed the long black hair over her shoulder and caught him looking as she did so.

She smiled at him. Leo looked away.

“Oh that’s Harriet,” said Rosy noticing, “She keeps herself to herself that one. But she’s a good little worker.”

“Why? What does she do here?” he asked.

“We’re both work at the mill. She often catches a lift up here with us,” Rosy answered.

Leo became aware of Jaxon once more. He hadn’t moved, but seemed so very far away now.

“You like her, don’t you? Harriet I mean,” asked Rosy softly.

“Yes,” he replied, because it was the truth.

Tom pulled out a pipe and began knocking it on the table. “If you’re staying, hadn’t you better take that thing off your face then?” he asked.

Leo looked at him for a moment. “Yes,” he replied again.

Jaxon, having watched powerless from afar, had suddenly snapped. He left his safety spot by the door and rushed over to the table where Leo was now sitting.

“Leo! We have to go right now!” he demanded in terror.

"I'm not leaving," Leo answered quietly.

"But it's not safe!" Jaxon shouted, his voice becoming shrill.

"I don't ever want to leave here."

At this, Jaxon turned on his heels and fled. Leo saw the door swing shut as he ran out of the pub.

Outside in the wind, Jaxon tried his phone in desperation, but still it wasn't working. He started to push through the gale back along the road to the EV, his mind reeling in despair. He clung to his full face visor with both hands to keep it from blowing away.

Leo had never experienced a real fireplace in *actual reality*. Unlike the ones in VR, this one was mesmerising.

"I could watch the flames forever," Harriet said as they sat together beside the fire.

"So could I," he replied to her.

She reached over to him and lifted his visor.

"There," she said, "I can see a bit more of you now."

Leo looked into her eyes—they were blue. He took his face visor and dropped it to floor beside his chair. Then he removed his mask and watched it burn on the fire.

"You have a nice smile," she said.

Back at the car, the door opened for Jaxon. The interior light came on and there was a comforting chime from the dashboard as he climbed in.

"Hi there!" spoke Teri in her faux-friendly synthetic female voice. Oh thank you, Jaxon thought as the door closed, locking him in.

He looked out through the car's windscreen and back up along the road to where he had just come from. The light that had shone earlier for them had gone.

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Andy Thomas is an independent software author and writer with working class roots in the north of England. He is what the liberal elites dislike: working class and largely self-educated. He holds a degree in Physics and Space Physics and began a career in spacecraft engineering but later moved into programming and telecommunications. He was among the first generation of school children who learned to program and was enthralled at the prospect of machine intelligence at a very young age. However, he regards much of what passes for "AI" in modern times as a nihilistic anathema. In more recent years, he has become interested in culture and the world of human affairs having rejected fashionable ideological notions of domestic violence. Instead, he subscribes to the understanding of inter-generational family abuse as offered by the works of Erin Pizzey. The current focus of his work is that of financial algorithmic trading. Despite this, or perhaps in part because of it, he is motivated by the philosophical implications of science, the nature of nature, and the things in life which hold "value" and all that that means.

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