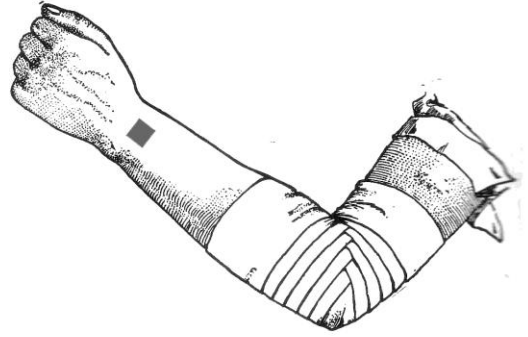


Subcutaneous

An Internet play for a small group by David Pennant,
inspired by Tony Blair's call for digital ids on wrists in
June 2020

Subcutaneous, adj., [sub - cute - A - knee - us] = under
the skin



Dramatis Personae

Peter Merrifellow, an important man

Anthea, his personal assistant

Mark Makinghis, a brilliant surgeon

Karen Makinghis, his wife who works in medical records

Hunding, their dog (rhymes with pudding (and enjoys it too))

Philip Takenill, a retired teacher

Sharon, a nurse

SFX (sound effects)

The action takes place in a London suburb during and after lockdown. The play should be performed without a break. It lasts 30 - 35 minutes.

The play can be performed by as few as two people taking all the parts between them, but four or more is better.

Hunding's dog noises should be voiced by a dog lover. For the sound effects (SFX), if you are using the online version, simply click on the link. They can also be downloaded from www.pennantpublishing.co.uk.

Performance advice: avoid leaving pauses and gaps, except where shown by ... and talk over the sound effects, except for the music.

-oOo-

"He made everyone, small and great, wealthy and poor, free and slave, receive a mark on their right arm or forehead so that nobody could buy or sell without the mark..." (Revelation 13:16-17)

Scene 1

The outer room of a government office. Anthea seated behind a desk.

Enter Mark Makinghis

SFX Opening music

Anthea Come in, Mr. Makinghis.

Mark Good morning... (*reads label on desk*) Anthea. Nice to meet you. Everybody calls me Mark.

Anthea Mr. Merrifellow will see you shortly. There are one or two things to attend to first.

Mark Fine. Do you know, those people downstairs kept me for forty minutes with all their form-filling. How am I expected to know the maiden names of my great grandmothers? They even wanted a DNA swab from me.

Anthea Of course. You would only expect the highest standards of security from us. Now, we have one or two procedures of our own. Please come over here so that I can scan your iris. Just stand where the two feet are outlined on the mat... thank you. Now, try not to blink...

SFX Puff of cold air

Mark Ooh!

Anthea No, that's not come out well. Try to keep your eyes open please.

SFX Puff of cold air

Mark Ouch!

Anthea Good, that's better. Now, we need your finger prints on this pad please. Press firmly... please try to press firmly Mr. Makinghis!

Mark I'm doing my best!

Anthea Thank you. Those will do. Now we will take your personal details as read from downstairs, but I do need a photo (*produces a camera*). No, DON'T smile for the lens. Just relax. Mr. Makinghis, will you please relax? Can you look a little less awkward, please? Try to look natural... There, it's not brilliant but that will have to do.

Mark Anything else I can help you with, Anthea?

Anthea No, that will be all. Just take a seat. Mr. Merrifellow knows you are waiting.

Mark (in alarm) What's that?

SFX Robot vacuum cleaner approaches, cleans Mark's shoes, and enters snooze mode

Anthea Ah, you must have brought in some mud on your shoes. It manages the environment. The machine is very sensitive. Let it do its work – please lift your feet a few inches off the floor. That's it. Yes, it's a useful gadget. It also checks the air quality, and controls the air conditioning, dispenses air freshener and so forth, and turns the heating up or down to maintain temperature.

Mark How marvellous. I love it. Whatever will they think of next?!

Anthea Ah, Mr. Merrifellow is ready now. Through that door please.

Mark Thank you Anthea. Nice to have met you.

Anthea You're welcome.

Scene Two

Peter Merrifellow's Office. Bookshelves filled with volumes of Hansard. Victorian kneehole desk. Stained glass window. Bag of old-fashioned golf clubs. Peter Merrifellow seated at desk.

Enter Mark

Peter Good morning, Mark. Peter Merrifellow, spelt with an I. So glad you could come. Please take a seat.

Mark What a lovely room. I do admire your stained glass.

Peter Yes, splendid isn't it. Glorious when the sun shines through. It's sunflowers, you know, done by a friend of ours. She's very talented.

Mark She certainly is. I'm intrigued by your antique golf clubs. My father had a set like that.

Peter Oh good, a golfer. Yes, I keep that old set there as a conversation starter. What's your handicap? I can't get mine below eight.

Mark No, no – I don't play myself, although I did try it once. Life is too busy. Also we have a dog and it takes priority when we are outdoors.

Peter A dog is not an obstacle to golf. I have trained mine to find the ball when I land in the long grass or the bushes. Did you know you can get scented balls now? What type of dog do

you have?

Mark He's a mongrel. A rescue. His name is Hunding, after the character in Wagner's Ring, because he is a bit of a hunter. Also Hund is German for dog.

Peter A fellow Wagnerite. Better and better. Hunding – Act One of the Valkyries if I recall. We have a lot in common, I can see. Still, no time for that now. Now Mark, before we go any further, I need your word as a gentleman that nothing we say in this room is repeated outside these walls. Is that understood?

Mark Of course.

Peter In addition, you will need to sign the official secrets act in two places, here and here.

Mark (*signing*) Well, I am intrigued as to what this is all about.

Peter Right. Here goes. This horrid virus that has thrown us all into confusion. Pandemic and all that. It's been decided that everyone should have a so-called health passport, but rather than a plastic card or something that can get lost, or passed around for purposes of fraud, this is to be a permanent chip on the wrist. Your part is to come up with a design that implants the device under the skin, so that it can't be removed. It's to become part of the arm. You've been chosen for this as the rising star of your generation in the medical world. Are you interested?

Mark Yes I am. I have read something about this idea.

Peter Right, well if you accept the challenge, you will be given a hefty budget – you will be handsomely rewarded yourself by the way – so that you can co-opt all the talent you need. The task is to come up with something that cannot be tampered with, as I say, and also cannot be transferred even if the wearer dies, or the forearm were to be cut off, and passed around, heaven forbid. We don't want any tiniest loophole for organised crime. Do you understand?

Mark Well, yes.

Peter Good. Now about expenses. The trick is not to over-claim. A brand new top of the range electric car is fine, for example, but if you were foolish enough to claim for a personal jet plane, for example, the accountants would come down hard on you and demand receipts for every tiniest thing – even down to meals out, magnums of Champagne and so forth, and you wouldn't want that! Also, I wouldn't draw in more than a couple of hundred advisers or there could be difficulties. If you need to, you can tell them that it's to do with embedding a chip in the arm, you understand, but not that we are involved. I hope that's clear. We don't want speculation, especially from the press. Any questions?

Mark No, I don't think so. It sounds like a fascinating project, and I would be pleased to help.

Peter Fine fellow. We'll put it all into action. Now, a final matter is communication. You are to report directly to me in person, when your results are in, by returning here in my private lift, which I will show you shortly. If I need to communicate with you, it will be by courier. You see this? It looks like a mobile phone, but when you try to start it up, it asks for a password, and then when you are in, there will simply be a message from me. Once you have read the message, the phone will go dead. Understood?

Mark Well yes, but why not just send me a text?

Peter (*shuddering*) Oh! How ghastly. Next you'll be wanting emails. Don't you know that the internet leaks like a sieve?

Mark Sorry. I was just thinking...

Peter Another thing. Everything here is on a strictly need-to-know basis. So please, no more questions. Your instructions are clear and there's nothing to add.

Mark Right. I see.

Peter You'll be fine, I have no doubt. Take up golf, that's my recommendation. Get a few lessons. No good spending your whole life stuck in the operating theatre!

Mark Maybe. I was wondering...

Peter Now, I think that's everything. Let me show you the lift. It's my personal one, and goes non-stop down to the car park in the basement. Cuts out all that security process. Your phone has been cleaned up for you, and will be in secure box CQ13. Your unique password for the lift, secure box and also for messages from me is 8HANDICAP5. Eight is my current handicap, and five is my goal. Easy to remember, OK?

Mark Fine, but I didn't like parting with my phone. Couldn't I have just switched it hard off?

Peter Modern phones never sleep – they only doze. It only looks switched off to you. No, you have to go back to the old analog models, and even those weren't that secure. You have probably never even seen a black Bakelite instrument with a rotating dial.

Mark Can't say I have. I was wondering...

Peter Now Mark, I need to make something clear. Everything here is on a strictly need-to-know basis. To be blunt, you ask far too many questions. Your job is to get the device under the skin and keep it there. It seems simple enough to me.

Mark Well yes, but...

Peter No buts! And less wondering. All will be revealed as and when. HMG's motto you might say. And maybe also its epitaph, but let's not go there. Now, to the lift.

Mark Right. Lead the way.

Peter Now the lift is the latest thing. Non-stop to the car park in the basement. You travel seated, because of the high speed. Think of it as a souped-up stair lift. Strap yourself in here and here, and then when you're ready, feel under the right hand armrest and press the button once. But whatever you do, don't press any of the buttons under the left hand arm rest.

Mark Oh dear, what happens if I do that?

Peter I knew it. I knew you would ask. You really will have to get your inquisitive nature under control, you know. I suppose it's helped get you on in your profession to where you are today, a brilliant surgeon by all accounts, which is why we took you on, but you will need to change your ways if you are to be a success here. Still, I will give you one final piece of information, since you persist in asking questions. It's this: if by chance you do press any of the buttons on the left hand armrest, you'll live to regret it. There. That's enough. When you're ready, press the right hand button, the door will close, and have a pleasant trip home. Goodbye.

SFX *Lift noise. Door closes carefully with a click... High speed whooshing sound*

Mark *(yelling)* Help!

Scene Three

Walking the dog in the local park.

Enter Mark and Karen led by Hunding on a lead sniffing vigorously

Karen Hunding, don't pull so!

Mark He's alright, darling. Just eager.

Karen I know, but it's so tiring. Now how did you get on?

Mark You left your phone at home as I asked?

Karen Yes dear.

Mark Good. So did I. You never know who's listening, even when it appears to be switched off. Well, I had to sign the official secrets act so I can't tell you much, but at the same time I am allowed to co-opt helpers, and I reckon that includes you.

Karen I feel flattered.

Mark What they want...

Hunding gives a loud bark and yanks the lead violently.

Karen Oh Hunding! Let him off, Mark, or we'll have no peace.

Hunding rushes off barking wildly.

Mark I was saying, they want me to help design a chip to be worn on the hand, with your Covid status displayed. My role is to advise how the device can be embedded under the skin, permanently, so that it can't be tampered with even if the forearm itself is removed, and also unique to every person.

Karen Sounds horrible. The last part is easy – link it to their DNA.

Mark Now why didn't I think of that? It's brilliant, darling.

Karen Don't be horrible! You know that was the first thing you thought of.

Mark Well, I suppose it did briefly cross my mind. Where's that dog?

Karen Oh, I can't see him. (calls) Hunding? HUN – ding..? –ding –ding –ding –ding –ding?

Mark You sound like a bell.

Karen With or without an E at the end?

Mark With an E of course. HUN – DING!

Hunding enters, slobbering enthusiastically. Mark gives him a chew and slips on the lead which he now holds.

Karen But how are you going to fix it on permanently?

Mark Yes, that's the tricky part. And isn't the idea of a severed arm repulsive.

Karen The dead hand of tradition.

Mark Making a fist of it.

Karen Strong arm tactics.

Mark Need to knuckle under.

Karen Pulling a finger out.

Mark Alright, you win. I can't think of any more arm phrases. Oh wait... Forewarned is

forearmed. Your turn!

Karen I give up. Anyway, the other surgeons will have some good ideas about it.

Mark Yes. Also the device has to go under the skin.

Karen Subcutaneous.

Mark That's a long word for someone who hates medical jargon.

Karen I know that one because a nurse once told me I had to have a subcutaneous injection, and I said "that sounds awful!" and she replied, "No, it just means under the skin." Then when she did it I barely noticed the pin prick. So I've always remembered that I like subcutaneous injections.

Mark We'll have to try and set up a series of them for you.

Karen Mark Makinghis, sometimes you get under my skin!

Mark Very funny. Hang on – look. Over there. On the road just outside our house.

Karen There's a car is being unloaded from a car transporter.

Mark It must be the top of the range electric model they promised me. How exciting. Come on, let's go.

Hunding barks and whines at the general excitement. Exeunt.

Scene Four

The Operating Theatre.

Mark and Sharon in scrubs. Philip Takenill laid out on the table.

Mark Scalpel.

Sharon Scalpel (*hands scalpel*).

Mark This is a nasty do. Philip has had pancreatitis and a twisted gut at the same time.

Sharon Grim.

Mark The gut has gone through a small hole that should not have been there; the loop has got twisted and lost its blood supply and become gangrenous.

Sharon Horrid.

Mark So I'm going to cut out the dead bit, about three quarters of a metre, and sew the two ends of the gut back together. More light please.

Sharon (adjusting the light) More light.

Mark You don't say much, do you?

Sharon I'm here to work.

SFX *Ripping sound*

Mark (sounds of frustration) This is tricky... just trying to... Ah here is the place. Ooh!
(Disgusting smell)

Mark and Sharon in unison That's gross!

Mark Long handled cutters please.

Sharon Long handled cutters *(passes them)*.

Mark No, the heavy duty ones please. This stuff is as strong as old boots.

Sharon Heavy duty long handled cutters *(passes them)*.

Mark (heavy breathing and exertion)... This is hopeless. Power drill with a number four diamond tipped bit please.

Sharon Power drill with a number four diamond titbit.

Mark No, diamond tipped bit not diamond titbit. Your ears need attention!

Sharon No way, it's you that needs elocution lessons.

Mark Alright. Maybe...

SFX *Drilling sound*

Mark Phew this guy is made of leather!

Philip (yelling) Get me out of the river!

Mark Oh dear, he's coming round. More anesthetic please. Where are the others?

Sharon More anesthetic. They're on coffee half hour, plus extended fag break.

Mark Fag break? Why on earth! None of them smoke.

Sharon That's shocking Mark, trampling on workers' rights. If I told HR you could end up being struck off for that!

Mark Only teasing.

Philip (delirious) Get me out of the river. All the little fish and the green weed on the river bed... I'm drowning... I should be dead, I know, but why can I still think if I am a goner? Stand me on the bank! I want to see the view one last time. Where's the man in charge of corpses? Delayed by a train strike? Somebody take me to the morgue. That's better. Ooh it's cold on this slab under only a single sheet. There's only one attendant on duty overnight – the others are at a new year's eve party, I heard. Kind of him to look after us stiffs. Only thing is, I'm not really dead, I know it. Will I be able to stay still in this cold, or will I need to roll over? Suppose my teeth chatter? Me moving could give the man a heart attack. Could be fatal for him...

Sharon I think he's a bit chilly.

Mark Nearly finished now. Blowtorch.

Sharon Blowtorch (*passes it*).

SFX *Sound of blowtorch*

Mark No don't throw out that length of gut. I want to use the two good ends for research. Bag it up please.

Sharon Gut bagged up.

SFX *Phone call*

Mark Put me on please. Oh, hello darling.

Karen Hi Mark, sorry to be delayed. I'll be with you in about twenty minutes. The electric car is lovely to drive.

Mark Good That's fine. Just about right. See you.

Karen There is one thing. A robot vacuum cleaner was delivered. Do you know anything about it?

Mark Ah, that will be from Anthea. So kind of her. Very thoughtful.

Karen Who's Anthea?

Mark Sorry dear, official secrets act.

Karen Don't you try pulling that one on me!

Mark It's alright dear. I can explain everything.

Karen You'd better. Anyway, I took it out of its box and it switched itself on without me doing anything. I put it on the floor, and after a few clicks and groans, it started out towards Hunding and began harassing him. Wouldn't leave him alone, poor dear. Even his best growling and snapping did no good. I tried to turn the machine off, but there is no switch, and no battery compartment either. I had to put it in the bath in the end.

Mark Full or empty?

Karen Empty. It keeps trying to make its way up the side of the bath but then slips back. Your precious Anthea has a lot to answer for!

Mark Don't worry. I'll sort it. Just clean up Hunding's paws and coat as best you can. Get any mud off him. See you soon. Oh, don't fall foul of the long arm of the law!

Karen Long arm of the law..? Oh, very funny. See you.

Mark Bye! (*rings off*). Sharon, that's all done now. Can you close?

Sharon Mark you know that's above my pay grade.

Mark Oh well, it was worth a try. Bodkin and fishing line please – fifty pound breaking strain.

Sharon Bodkin and fishing line – fifty pound breaking strain (*passes them*).

Mark (*humming to himself*) A stitch in time saves nine...

Scene Five

Mark Karen and Hunding in their kitchen.

SFX *Sound of cooking on a hot stove*

Hunding makes beseeching noises for food.

Mark Mmm, that smells good.

Karen It's only a stir fry, using up some scraps.

Mark You're so clever. I'll feed the dog. Here boy!

Hunding eats fast with slobbering noises.

SFX Doorbell

Hunding barks but continues eating.

Mark I'll go. *(faint sound from front door)* Yes, I'll sign for it.

Hunding finishes eating and charges out, barking.

Mark Hunding!

SFX Door shuts

Mark (returning) That dog. He almost took the courier's leg off. Naughty!

Karen But he's a good guard dog. What's in that padded bag?

Mark Let's see. Aha!

Karen A mobile phone. I didn't know you needed a new one.

Mark No it's preloaded... official secrets act again. Now, I turn it on... put in the password Peter gave me... and here comes the message... 'Hand over in exchange?' What on earth does that mean?

Karen I don't know what you're talking about.

Mark Don't worry dear. It's very puzzling I admit. I'm baffled. And now the phone's gone dead already.

SFX Doorbell

Hunding furious barking, dashes out.

Karen Keep the door on the chain, Mark!

Mark (faint sound) You want the other one? Oh I see! Karen, can you bring that phone?

Karen OK

SFX Door shuts

Mark Another phone package I think. But a different courier. Weird. I'll open it.

Karen It's identical to the first one.

SFX Sound of cooking

Mark Yes. OK, I'll start this one up... Password again... Here comes the message. Oh no, it's an hour glass turning over and over, with the word 'updating'. What's that about?

Karen It all strikes me as completely daft.

Mark Me too. Here we go... There is a message – 'back of head as well'. Nothing more, and now this phone has gone dead too. They don't give you long!

Karen Where's the first phone? I'd like to start collecting dead phones.

Mark Sorry dear. I had to give that to the second courier, to get the second package. Ah, I think I've got it. My entering the correct password into the first phone has proved my identity, which has unlocked the message in the second phone. Very cloak and dagger. So the question is, what does 'back of head as well' actually mean?

Karen I reckon it's from your beloved Anthea. As well as the mark you are working on being on the wrist, it is to be available on the back of the head as well. I had wondered about that myself. It will be so that the wearer can be permanently connected to the internet in their brain.

Mark Gracious!

Karen Permanent internet connection is definitely the coming thing. There's a girl at work who is full of it. Silicon in your skull. A tiny glass tube goes in your ear, and you need to wear special glasses with it or have eye surgery. It doesn't appeal to me.

Mark So that's what you do in Medical Records all day.

Karen The work is so routine that we can chat away while we're at it. And there's a techie man there who explains it all.

Mark Well if your understanding is right, then...

SFX *Doorbell*

Hunding barks furiously and scrabbles on the door with his feet.

Karen Not again! How ever many more?

Mark I'll go. Keep Hunding here. *(takes phone number two with him. Faintly)* Yes, here's the old phone. Thank you! *(returns to kitchen).*

SFX *Door shuts.*

Karen So a third phone from a third courier I suppose. No expense spared then. What's this

one, I wonder?

Mark Open it up..., tap in the password... wait for it... 'Unsay, forehead rather'. My word these people are cryptic.

Karen Unsay must mean disregard what they said earlier. Crazy.

SFX *Sound of cooking*

Mark Or does it mean, change the last bit? The additional mark is to be on the forehead perhaps rather than the back of the skull? Yes, I think that's it.

Karen Yes, I agree. If I had to have this beastly mark on my head, I would much rather have it where I could see other people approaching it than coming up on me unawares from behind.

Mark I guess that's it. Karen, you're a born sleuth. So the mark is to be on hand and forehead. Shouldn't be a problem.

Karen Unless someone cuts your head off for the mark.

Mark That would be getting ahead.

Karen Mark, no more please! Now, supper's ready so take a seat.

Mark Yum yum!

Mark and Karen *Happy eating noises*

Hunding *gives a contented yawn.*

Scene Six

The outer room of a government office. Anthea seated at desk.

Enter Peter

SFX *Middle music*

Peter Anthea, Mark Makinghis came to see me yesterday and brought his report. He's done ever so well. It took him just three months. He only had to consult with four other colleagues. The ridiculous thing is that he has claimed virtually no expenses. Not much more than the cost of preparing the report. He really did not get the idea!

Anthea What does the report say?

Peter As we thought, the practice of putting a microchip under the skin is already well

established. Dogs and cats have them on the back of their neck. He's looked into it and he says that a chip can be made to grow onto the bone as well, making it hard to get off. The way to personalise it is to link it to the wearer's DNA profile. Each chip will be unique and will only work with the right wearer.

Anthea So it's just as we thought.

Peter There's more. He was able to obtain two short lengths of tissue from an emergency operation which were healthy at one end and gangrenous at the other end. By experimenting, he was able to work out a way in which the microchip could sense if its host tissue was healthy or not. Proper flow of blood and nutrients and all that. So that research helps with the severed hand issue.

Anthea Splendid.

Peter And there were many pages containing long words and detailed diagrams to go with the main recommendations, including cost projections for development and large scale manufacture. He really has done us very well.

Anthea Anything else?

Peter Not really. He still has no interest in golf. They are pleased with the car and the vacuum cleaner. His work was so good that I felt we owed him a favour, so I hinted at one point that it might be wise to carry some cash, but he said he gave up using cash a while ago, so I didn't press it. On his own head be it.

Anthea You fool! Whatever came over you? Now, the moment the banks go down, he will link it to us. He will definitely have to go now. He knows too much.

Peter But darling...

Anthea Don't you darling me. I'll see to it, but just you make sure you attend the funeral. No sending an underling. Observe the widow like mad. Introduce yourself if you need to – yes I think that's probably a good idea, and say how pleased we were with his work and sorry to hear etc. Anything to create a good impression. If there's the slightest sign that she suspects anything then she will have to go too, but we don't want to go down that path unless we must, as two unexplained deaths in one family will look suspicious.

Peter Dear I'm so sorry...

Anthea You really have done it now Peter. I can't think what possessed you. No, get out. I'm going to have to do some serious thinking about this. And for goodness sake watch out or you'll be next!

Peter Right. Sorry dear. I just thought he had done such a good job...

Anthea Fool! Did you really think that was the real point of it all? With unreliable testing, and flaky immunity, the health passport idea always was a non-starter. No, it was just a ruse to get the mark on everybody. It's all part of the bigger picture. Do away with cash first so that everybody's money is just a string of numbers in a computer that we control, and then force them to use the mark to buy and sell so that they all have to have the mark on them, and then we control the people as well as the money. Just clear out!

Peter Goodness! *Exits.*

Scene Seven

Hospital Medical Records Office. Karen standing behind reception desk.

Philip Takenill enters.

Karen Hello. How can I help?

Philip Hello. My name is Philip Takenill. I had an operation here a while back, and I wondered if it was possible to have a copy of my medical records?

Karen Yes, that can be done. Can I see some photo ID please?

Philip Of course.

Karen Philip Takenill... That name rings a bell.

Philip Oh really?

Karen Yes. Now I remember. I think you had pancreatitis.

Philip Well yes I did, but how on earth would you know that? Are these matters broadcast around on the hospital radio?

Karen No, it's not that. It was my husband who did your surgery. We used to talk over his day's work in the evening, like couples do, and I was interested in your case because... I really don't know why I am telling you all this. I'm sorry. It must sound bad. Let me go and see if I can find your notes.

Philip No wait. I'm intrigued. Tell me more.

Karen OK. It really doesn't matter now. It was the piece of your gut that he removed which proved so helpful to him in his research into semi-living tissue.

Philip How so?

Karen Mark had been taken on as some kind of adviser for the new mark we are all to wear on our wrist or forehead containing our Covid status. The challenge was for the chip in our wrists to be able to detect whether the host tissue was alive or not.

Philip And my operation has contributed to all this? I feel gutted.

Karen (*laughing*) Oh dear. That's a Mark joke. He would have loved that. Do you know, that's the first time I have laughed since the funeral.

Philip What funeral?

Karen Mark simply dropped dead one day. His heart stopped. It's not common in one so young, but it can happen at any age apparently.

Philip I'm so sorry. Sounds horrid.

Karen Thank you. He was a brilliant man, and a lovely husband. I miss him dreadfully.

Philip I'm very sorry for your loss. I only met him twice, but in that short time I developed the greatest respect for him. It's my wife Susan who wants the medical notes. She reckons the diagnosis was much too slow. They missed the bowel problem for a week apparently. Turned what should have been routine into an emergency.

Karen I know nothing about that.

Philip She wants to sue, but I told her I'm delighted with the result. I'm in fine health now, so why make a fuss? Still, the best way to pacify her is to get the notes. But it's my body, and there's no way I'm going to make a fuss. Everyone was doing their best, and we all often make mistakes.

Karen That's generous of you.

Philip No it isn't. We all need to support the NHS. But I do feel upset at the idea that my body has made a contribution to this vile mark notion.

Karen What's so wrong about it? Mark was all for it.

Philip I'll carry a card or a chip in my wallet happily, but a mark on my body? No way. Branding is for animals, not humans. Once you accept a mark like that you are allowing yourself to become somebody else's property. It's a great evil to my mind.

Karen Oh. I never thought of it that way before.

Philip Look, forget the notes. Susan will just have to lump it. Now, is there anything I can do to help you? You're clearly upset. I would love to do something out of gratitude to your husband.

Karen You're very kind. It's nearly home time. Might you be driving in my direction? Our car was taken, and it's an awkward bus journey with a change in it. I'd be so grateful, as I have left the dog long enough already.

Philip Of course. No problem. That's terrible to lose your car on top of the bereavement. What happened to it?

Karen It was a fabulous electric car that came as part of the project. I'm sure Mark said it was a gift on expenses, but after he died, a low loader just turned up one day and removed it. I wasn't even there – a neighbour saw it. They didn't even put a note through the door. We had sold the car we already had, so now I'm left without anything.

Philip Monstrous. Who are these people?

Karen I don't know. Mark had to sign the official secrets act. They did do one kind thing, however. They advised Mark to carry some cash, so on Domino Day, the day of the crash when the banks toppled over and the ATMs stopped paying out, we had a cushion. Then with the two for one offer, we doubled it. It was enough to pay for the funeral.

Philip Shame you did that.

Karen What do you mean?

Philip That scheme – hand in a tenner and get twenty, hand in your twenty pound note and get forty, but credited to your national account. I don't trust it one bit.

Karen Why not?

Philip Physical cash circulates independently of government. But in a cashless society, it's all numbers in a machine, and that smacks of somebody being in control of it all. Before you know it, the only way to buy and sell will be through the mark, and then when everyone's been branded, they have us all in their fist. Charming!

Karen Oh dear. I hadn't thought of any of that. But isn't it still pounds Sterling?

Philip Well, I don't know what Sterling is any more. Time was when the sum of one pound meant a pound of gold. Then we went off the gold standard between the wars and it was just notes and coins, and if cash goes it will only be numbers in the ether. It worries me! Come on. Enough gloom for one day. Let's get you home!

Final Scene

Outside Karen's front door.

Karen and Philip, with Hunding in the house.

SFX Sound of keys jangling and door opening

Karen There. (*upset*) Oh no!

Philip Whatever is it?

Karen I know I locked the porch, because we never do, but something inside me said lock it this time so I did, and now it's gone too.

Philip I'm sorry, I don't...

Karen The robot vacuum cleaner. Sent from the ministry. It was a great machine, but it stopped working on the day Mark died. Two deaths in one day. Hunding, that's our dog, had become very attached to it. It was as if they had become friends. He used to curl up round it, and it would hum gently. I suppose it was warm for him.

Philip Well, I don't see...

Karen I couldn't get it to go, and there was no way of getting inside it to change batteries or whatever, so it was waiting to go to the dump, but I couldn't take it without a car, so it was sitting in the porch. Now it's gone. But how did they get in through a locked door?

Philip It's a fairly simple lock to pick.

Karen But how dare they enter at all without my say so?

Hunding gives a whine from indoors.

Karen Oh, the poor lamb!

SFX Sound of keys - inner door opens

Hunding runs out and greets Philip enthusiastically.

Philip Woah! Good boy.

Karen Down Hunding! I do apologise.

Philip No problem. We love dogs. Fine fellow!

Karen Philip... You've been very kind... I don't know why, but I'm suddenly afraid. What's going on? All this talk of the mark being a threat and money becoming suspect and now this burglary. I feel scared. I don't even want to go into my own home!

Philip You have had a nasty shock, on top of everything else. Come and have a cup of tea with us. We are only round the corner. Susan will know what to do.

Karen The whole world seems to be going dark. What is going on? And where will it end? I feel frightened.

Philip A cup of tea will do wonders, and there's a fresh fruit cake as well. One of Susan's best.

Karen I don't think I will ever be able to go back into that house. Philip, please help me.

Philip Of course we will. And it isn't a hello cake.

Karen A hello cake? Whatever do you mean?

Philip My aunt told me when I was young that during the war, when cherries were scarce, if by any chance there was a fruit cake for tea, the cherries in it would be so few that when you came across one, you would say hello in surprise. There's no danger of that with one of Susan's cakes. Plenty of cherries in it.

Karen A slice of cake. I could do with something comforting. Yes, I'll come. Is Hunding welcome?

Philip Of course. Jump in. We'll be there in three minutes. Susan will know what to do. We've got all the time in the world.

Hunding yelps with pleasure and jumps in.

Karen Goodbye home... I wonder what's going to happen..?

SFX Car drives off and closing music. *Finis.*

For Discussion

1. Is the story believable?
2. What do you think of Philip's views about the mark and the cashless society (scene seven)?
3. Read Revelation chapter 13 verses 11 - 18 and chapter 14 verses 9 – 12. Why is the penalty for accepting the mark of the beast so severe?

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