

# ELECTRICITY

*James Quina*

*In the late fifties, a young artist from Mobile, Alabama sent a charcoal drawing of Aldous Huxley to him. The portrait depicted Huxley, wearing a hooded prophet's robe, sitting on a stack of his own books, and looking down on scenes showing the miseries and self-delusions of humankind. The young woman and Huxley became friends, exchanging letters that explored eastern mysticism, telepathy and psychokinetic energy—an energy which, they believed, could be used destructively if harnessed by persons of evil intent. Later, fire spread through Huxley's home, destroying the letters from his artist friend and her portrait of him. Huxley died on November 22, 1963, public knowledge of his death having been obscured by the assassination of JFK on the same day. Shortly after Huxley died, the artist's home caught fire and her only copy of his portrait was destroyed, along with all the handwritten letters she had received from him.*

**S**HE OPENED THE DOOR OF THE TRAILER, but I didn't recognize the person standing before me. Surely, this could not be Felicity, the child-woman I remembered: Felicity, the ballerina; Felicity, the porcelain maiden. Elegant, fragile and petite then, she wore soft, laced collars and smelled of fresh flowers. Ten years had passed since I last saw her, but the woman who opened the door looked twenty years older than did the person I remembered. Gray and pudgy, she wavered in the doorway, and up close, she smelled like sour milk and mildew. Everything about Felicity had changed, except for her voice. Her childlike voice matched my memory of it.

On the phone, she had been distraught about Aldous Huxley's death, occurring just two days before her call. But though she had known Huxley personally, this was no ordinary grief. She had pleaded with me to come to her, and there was fear in her voice. And now I was hearing that same fear as she greeted me.

"Danny? Glad you came." She stepped back and gestured for me to enter.

Inside the trailer, light from a lamp on an end table by the sofa revealed old art magazines and clothes strewn about on chairs, the coffee table, and the floor. A speckled cat slept curled up on the end of her sofa. The faint smell of urine lingered in the air.

"Have a seat, Mr. full professor." She pointed to a stained La-Z-Boy.

"No professor jokes, thank you."

"Well, congratulations on your promotion anyway, " she said, doing a mock curtsy and flashing her beguiling smile.

"I appreciate that. It took long enough," I said, leaning back in the chair.

"Want some wine?"

"Sure, some white if you've got it."

"O.K., kitchen trip. I'll be just a moment," she said, drifting toward the middle of the trailer.

Looking around, I noticed that all the blinds were closed and one small window had been covered with cardboard and duct tape.

"Got something against sunlight?" I asked.

"Hurts my eyes," she said. "And I can think better without it."

I heard the refrigerator open, then close. Then I heard a lot of bumping around and a shattering sound, as of glass breaking. I got up and popped my head into the kitchen.

"Need any help?" I asked. She was cleaning up broken glass on the floor.

"No. I've got it under control. Now you go back and sit," she said, glaring at me.

I glanced around the kitchen. Food-stained paper plates covered most of the kitchen counter. Roaches swarmed over them. I left the kitchen wondering if having the wine was a good idea.

In a few moments she returned to the living room with a bottle of Chardonnay and two Styrofoam cups. She filled the cups to the brim and handed one to me. I raised my cup to her, feeling relieved that she'd decided to use paper cups.

"A toast to your return!" I said.

"Thank you. Seems like only yesterday I left Mobile." She drained her cup and sat back on her sofa, surrounding herself with pillows. Her speckled cat jumped off the sofa and ran into the kitchen. As I looked at her, I remembered how it was for us before she'd disappeared.

Ten years before, I'd walked Fely up the stairs to her apartment on Old Government Street and told her I wasn't ready for marriage. She cried and said she'd leave Mobile. I didn't believe her.

The next week, a strange woman met me at the door of her apartment.

"I'm Mildred; Fely's moved," she said, flipping back her blonde hair. "I've got the place to myself now."

"Moved?"

"Yes, to New York City." She pulled her pink kimono around her, snug.

"New York City?"

"That's what she told me. New York City."

"When's she coming back?" I asked.

"She's not," said Mildred.

"She moved there permanently?"

"Yes."

"I can't believe it," I said. "I mean I didn't think she'd do it."

"She did it," said Mildred, closing the door.

I felt numbed. I walked down the steps wondering what would happen to Fely. Could she handle New York? She was so delicate. So trusting of others. Everywhere she went, she'd strike up casual conversations with street people. Ask them what they thought about communism and the Russians. I had visions of derelicts on the Lower East Side of New York stabbing her and throwing her body in an alley. Only then did I realize I loved her and that I'd wounded her.

I'd tried to reach her, but her number was unlisted and none of her friends seemed to know her number. But now she'd returned. I could, at least, tell her that back then, I'd finally discovered my love for her, and that I would have married her had I been able to find her. Or could I? Everything had changed.

She sat on the sofa with her legs crossed and pulled up under her. In the light her face appeared bovine, a bloated mask, her eyes dark and unfocused. Her body had taken on a stumpy masculine look: squat hips, thick neck, and leathered skin.

"It's strange to be back, Danny. Ten years of traveling around the world and Mobile seems foreign to me. It's like everything's falling apart. And then with the death of Aldous!"

"Huxley's letters—did you keep them?"

"Yes. I kept them all." Fely pointed to the front of the trailer, to her makeshift office. "They're in one of those boxes—or behind them. As you can see, I haven't unpacked everything yet. Only been here a couple of weeks."

I walked over and peeked into her "office". Boxes looked thrown into the room randomly, with some of their contents spilling out. Paintings and empty wine bottles sat on the floor near the walls.

"We can get to them later," she said. "Let's relax and drink our wine. I've something important to tell you."

I returned to the La-Z-Boy, and she sat across from me on the couch.

"Go ahead," I said. "I'm listening."

"Well, it's just that everything's so run down here."

"Yes?"

"I don't know how to put it, but I notice the paint on buildings is all curled and the telephone lines sag. And it wasn't like that in Mobile years ago. The way I remember it, the houses always had fresh paint and the telephone lines were tight and little birds would come and sit on them. Seems like everything's faded."

"So Mobile's run down; what else is new?"

Suddenly, her eyes brightened and she was up and across the room, moving her face close to mine. I thought she was going to kiss me; instead, she asked, "Do you know how electricity works?"

"A little," I said. "What's your point?"

"In the brain?" she stressed, pointing to her head.

"What?"

"In his last letters, Aldous wrote a lot about the brain, particularly how the brain and the entire nervous system are electrical." She ran her fingers down her body, illustrating the flow of the electricity. "Do you know if he explored this idea in any of his published works?"

"He wrote about brain function, for sure. But...electricity in the brain'—I think he was just talking about the synapse."

"No, this is something more. It has to do with influencing the brain from the outside." She made broad sweeping motions with her hands, finally covering her eyes with her palms.

"You've got me there. Remember, my interest in Huxley is mainly literary. You need to talk to a neuroscientist like Dr. Adams at the university."

"You know him?"

"Only casually. I know the dean of the medical school better."

"Then you can help me," she said, drawing closer to me. "Get me an appointment with Dr. Adams or someone who knows how electricity works in the brain."

"You could call the school yourself," I said. I was wondering where all this was leading and what I was getting myself into.

"But why should I do that," she asked, "when I have my very own full professor to introduce me?" She made a flourishing gesture with her hand as though she were knighting me.

"All right. I'll see what I can do," I said, nearly cutting her off. I felt myself beginning to squirm.

"Good. I'd be most appreciative," she said, flashing a broad smile—a smile reminiscent of the Felicity of ten years before.

I recalled we were window-shopping in downtown Mobile when she suddenly turned to me and flashed that same smile. She took off her shoes and began doing pirouettes through Bienville Square. As she danced through the park, she talked to the squirrels, the pigeons, and the flowers. She spoke to the animals and plants in a strange language, a language she seemed to have invented on the spot. At the time I thought what she did was delightfully innocent. Now I wasn't so sure.

Now Fely was into her makeshift office, crawling over boxes.

From behind a desk, made of concrete blocks and plywood, she pulled out a portfolio and a bundle of old letters and brought them to the coffee table. I sat beside her on the sofa as she opened the portfolio. On the inside of the cover page was a sketch of me. In the sketch I still had some curly brown hair and my skin was taut. She had idealized me, made me look like Lord Byron. Then she flipped a page and there was her to-be-famous sketch of Aldous Huxley.

She had depicted Huxley sitting on a stack of his own books: *Brave New World*, *Eyeless in Gaza*, and *The Doors of Perception*. He was wearing a hooded prophet's robe and was looking down on several scenes in the foreground. To the right of the sketch was a drawing of a woman trapped in a wineglass. To the left was a man standing in an expensive convertible, spewing coins out of his pockets. In the center was a man standing on an open Bible, but he was stepping on his glasses, breaking them. Higher up to the right was a group of Ivy Leaguers, waving their school banner. And at the top of the drawing, a man was standing before a bookshelf that contained works of great philosophers. The cosmos swirled in the background.

She held up a bundle of yellowed letters, unfolded one and handed it to me. I recognized Huxley's florid handwriting. In it he shared his interest in Eastern philosophy and his readings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.

"How many letters did Huxley send you?"

"I never counted," she said, throwing up her hands in exasperation.

"But he obviously liked your sketch of him," I said, scrutinizing the drawing from different angles.

"Oh, yes. That's in his first letter." She sorted through the stack of worn letters.

"It's here somewhere," she said, flipping the pages. "I'll have to look for it. Just think, Danny, if you hadn't told me about him—did you ever finish your book on Aldous?"

"No."

"I thought you'd have finished it by now," she said, smiling.

"No, I got into other projects," I said. I downed half the wine in my cup.

Her questions were making me uncomfortable, and I felt an old jealousy welling up in me. I had introduced her to Huxley's writing, and she had sent him a sketch of himself. He loved the sketch and they had developed an immediate friendship. I, on the other hand, had never published my treatise on Huxley's use of satire and he didn't even know I existed. What a dead end! But now I saw an opportunity for redemption.

"This is amazing," I said, holding up the bundle of letters. "This is correspondence that no one knows about. Do you know what happened to the original sketch you sent him?"

"Destroyed in the fire. Like most of his belongings." A mixture of sadness and fear had come back in her voice. She dropped her head and gazed at the floor. Her hair fell forward, partially blocking her face.

"These letters should be copied," I said. "I'd like to take them with me, read them tonight. I'll get them copied and bring them back tomorrow."

"No, that's not a good idea," she said, suddenly snatching the bundle of letters from my hands.

I stood and began to pace around the small room. "I can see a book coming out of this," I said, pointing to the letters. "You can write the preface and I'll edit it."

"But why? What good could it do? Aldous is gone now and I'm not sure he'd want..." She stood, wringing her hands.

"Now that Huxley's dead, scholars like Grover Smith plan to publish his letters," I said. "It'll take them years to collect them, but they won't have your letters."

"I'm just not interested in publishing them, " she said, turning her back on me and moving toward the window near the lamp. I followed her over and stood behind her.

"Those interested in Huxley scholarship have a right to read these letters," I pleaded. "We have a ready-made book here, for God's sake! May I just borrow them to read?"

"You're invited here anytime and I'll tell you what's in them," she said in a quiet voice. "We can look at some of them together."

"Some of them? Not all of them? Don't tell me they're love letters. Why all the secrecy?"

"Let's just say it's not in your best interest or mine to do otherwise. But I'm perfectly willing to share some of them. Just get me that appointment with the neuroscientist."

"I don't get it," I said. "Why all this interest in electricity?"

"Because that's the way they do it."

"Who?"

"The Russians," she said, turning toward me. "I figured it out." She was pointing to her head. The Russians have found a way to pull the electricity out of things so they grow old and the paint peels and letters become yellow, and telephone lines sag."

I recalled that Huxley had been fascinated with psychokinesis and parapsychology and also with Mesmer's theory of magnetism, the idea that bodies could be altered at a distance through magnetic energy.

Fely turned back to the window, cracked open a single blind a fraction of an inch, and peeped out.

"Tell me another good one," I said.

She was silent.

A large cockroach crawled across the blind near where Fely peered out, but she didn't react to it. Either living with roach infestations didn't bother her, or she was oblivious to their presence. How, I asked myself, had she fallen into such an unfortunate state of affairs.

I recalled that a year or so after she'd left Mobile, I began to get letters from her sent from different countries. She had married a musician, Charles Dupre, and together they had traveled the world. In each place they toured, she sent me lengthy explanations of her then-current metaphysical studies—theories about the astral plane, telekinesis and the transmigration of souls. After the death of her husband, she wrote a few times, then years passed and I heard nothing from her.

I began to wonder if she'd been experimenting with psychedelics.

Her physical deterioration and paranoia, her euphoria about electricity and the brain: all of these signs were reminiscent of Huxley's Heaven and Hell, the mental extremes of the psychedelic experience: the basement, full of rats and black beetles; the attic, open to the sky.

She turned abruptly and faced me.

"You think I'm kidding? I'm not kidding," she said, her dark eyes blazing, her hands beginning to tremble. She reached for a note lying on the end table next to her phone. She picked up the note and shoved it in front of my face. It was a telephone number labeled Oak Ridge. "I've talked to Oak Ridge and told them what's happening," she said, "and they keep promising to get back to me, but they're so slow I have to call them again." She returned the note to the table and sat on the couch, tucking her legs up under her. I sat next to her.

"What do you tell them?" I asked.

"About the electricity. Only I tell them I'll be able to explain it a lot better once I read up on the subject. Russia's plan is to pull the electricity out of our brains. They've just begun doing this."

"So this is the way they control us?"

"Yes."

I thought of Huxley's hatcheries: budding standard men and women in uniform batches. I envisioned long lines of men and women strapped to conveyer belts, their brains being reconditioned to function as robots.

"Haven't you noticed how difficult it is to think sometimes?" she asked, cocking her head to one side.

I nodded.

"You can't think clearly because your brain's having to work on low current."

Again, she pointed to her head.

"And I thought I was just getting old," I said, laughing at my own joke.

"That too."

"What?"

"I'm sure the loss of brain current ages people very fast. I can feel it and see it happening all around me." She waved her arms in big circles.

"Is there some way I can become more aware of this energy, or is such an ability an inborn talent?"

"Have some more wine," she said, holding up the bottle of Chardonnay.

She filled my cup and, as she stretched toward me, I noticed her neck was thicker than I had remembered, and red from the sun.

"Just this one, and then I have to go."

"Don't you think it possible for an outside source of energy to invade our brains, to neutralize our natural brain current?"

"You'd better save that one for Dr. Adams. But why are you so convinced this is happening?"

"I can feel it happening to me," she said, rising and moving to the window. She cracked the blind again and peeked out. "I can feel the electricity being drawn out of my brain."

"Is this anything like when you talked to plants? You used to caress trees and say you had to use plant language to communicate because they didn't understand human language." She didn't need psychedelics, I reflected; she could hallucinate without any chemical assistance.

"Did you think I was speaking metaphorically?"

"I didn't know what to think."

"I wasn't speaking metaphorically! I've always had this gift—or curse—as the case may be," she said, pressing both palms against her temples. When she removed her hands, I noticed her profile, her angular jaw. Decidedly masculine, I thought. A kind of cross between the masculine and the feminine. It saddened me to see her in such a deteriorated state.

Suddenly, she snapped her gaze toward me, locking me in eye contact. "I know what you're thinking," she said. She refilled our cups.

"What?"

"That you can't tell if I'm a man or a woman." Standing, she aped the rough movements of some stereotyped conception of the male, propping her foot up on the arm of her couch and thrusting her fist into the air; then, relaxing her body, she slinked against the wall of the trailer, her body pulsing to a softer, more feminine expression. Now she was the coquette, peeking out between strands of hair that covered her face.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, being taken back by her sudden exhibition.

"Now, Danny. You can be honest with me."

"Of course."

"Don't give me that bullshit, 'of course'. Listen to my question. I'm going to ask you a question and you'd better have the right answer. Here goes." She drained her cup. "Am I a man or am I a woman?"

I was silent.

"Am I a man or am I a woman?" she repeated, pointing a forefinger at me.

I looked away from her.

"You look like a woman to me. Unless you had a sex change in New York, you are still a woman."

"Liar!" Her voice broke into rising fits of laughter. "I know I look strange," she said. "But that's all part of it, don't you see. It's the result of their pulling the electricity out of my brain."

I was amazed. How did she know I was thinking her appearance looked masculine? Did she really have paranormal powers? Or did she simply see me staring at her and figure it out. She must know how she looks. But whether she did or didn't, she had always behaved as if she had extraordinary powers.

"Fely. If you really believe all this is going on, why isn't it happening to others?" I asked.

"It is. But just at a slower rate."

"Then why do you have a faster rate?"

"Because I'm on to them. Just like Aldous was on to them before they started the fire that destroyed his home. He knew what was coming."

"And how do you know all this?"

"Because, he told me so." Fely moved to the coffee table and shuffled through her bundle of letters. "I know it's in here; I was just reading it yesterday."

She removed a letter from the bundle and placed it on the coffee table, then she went into the kitchen to get more wine. I picked up the letter and scanned it, but I couldn't make sense of what I read. It was esoteric, like something written in code. When I heard her coming, I stuffed the letter into my pants pocket. She didn't seem to notice, so I didn't have to explain and I felt relieved. But I realized that I'd have to find another way to get to the rest of the letters.

She handed me another cup of wine.

"I really shouldn't," I said, reaching for the wine. I could feel the letter inside my pants pocket pressing against my leg, but wondered if part of it were exposed. Could she see the letter?

"Go ahead. Drink! It's not that often we celebrate my homecoming. Anyway, as I was saying, Aldous was on to them. He knew what was coming."

"But Fely, that was a brush fire that spread to Huxley's home. It was, by all accounts, an accident."

"That's what they want you to think. Do you think it was coincidental that Aldous died the same day JFK was assassinated?" she challenged, pointing a finger at me.

"I never thought about it."

"Exactly."

"So you figure you can outfox them if you learn more about electricity and the brain?"

"I know it," she said, "with your help," and she raised her glass to me in a toast.

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She followed me to my car, shuffling behind me like some refugee ending a long march. Oyster shells covered the yard around her trailer, and a wire fence separated her property from the highway.

The sun was going down and the wind blew her hair in random patterns. She was smiling in that beguiling way of hers and narrowing her eyes. The low light softened her face, and she looked younger. For a moment I had the sense of being in the presence of the Fely of ten years ago and I decided to make one last attempt to appeal to her reason.

"Fely, you don't really think there's a conspiracy going on, do you?" I asked.

She threw back her head in laughter.

Her reaction unnerved me. I fumbled with my car keys and busied myself with unlocking my car door. But I felt her gaze honing in on me.

"You may think differently when you read Aldous' letter," she said.

Her eyes shone with a light of their own. She smiled and a chill passed through me. She had known all along that I took the letter. I was elated and embarrassed at the same time. I had to get out of there—had to read the letter in privacy.

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I broke every speed limit driving home. I couldn't wait to read the letter, but I wanted to read it at home, in my protective cocoon. I changed the station on my radio. The sounds of The Four Seasons' "Walk Like a Man" filled the inside of my car.

I had to figure it out, had to find a way to get those letters. Her deterioration was more advanced than I first realized. Was it schizophrenia, or the debilitating effects of alcoholism?

Had she picked up these ideas from Huxley? After all, he had explored alternate forms of consciousness, predicted human cloning, tranquilizers, and brainwashing techniques. He had also been fascinated with Russian experimentation on psychic phenomena. I recalled Laura Huxley's description of how Aldous would have her lie on a couch while he made magnetic passes over her body. There was no touch involved, no verbalization, and her eyes were closed. Yet, she reports that calmness passed over her, and when she stood, a vibrant energy flowed through her body and she felt that she could levitate, though there is no evidence that she ever did so. Nevertheless, could Huxley have discovered a generalized version of this phenomenon?

I opened the screen door of my house and heard the phone ringing in the living room. I unlocked the front door, pushed it open, and lunged for the phone. It was Fely's voice.

"Danny, come back here now! Hurry!" she shouted.

"What is it?"

"Come now, right now. Hurry! Please!"

I rushed to my car and, at the same time, pulled the letter from my pocket. I had to make sense of it, so I stopped beside my car and read it before I opened the door. It was Huxley's language for sure; I recognized some of the characteristic phrasing. And the content! One thing was clear. Fely's relationship with Huxley was far more bizarre than I had ever imagined. I felt my old jealousy return and expand to a new level.

I backed my car out of the drive and headed toward her trailer.

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On my way to her trailer, a fire engine and two police cars passed me at high speed. When I got there, her place was ablaze. I had to fight my way up to the circle of police and firemen surrounding the trailer.

Three hoses blasted the sides and top of the trailer with powerful jets of water. Police cars blared their sirens and another fire engine roared past me and onto Fely's property. The clanging hurt my ears. Orange flames leaped from every window of the trailer, and billowing black smoke poured out. Periodically, a blinding flash of white light came from the windows.

Fely screamed as medics carried her out on a stretcher. Her face looked burned and her body jerked in spasms. Between coughing episodes, she called my name and I rushed to her just as two EMT's were putting her into an ambulance. One of the medics shouted that she seemed to need me, so I could ride with her to

the hospital. I climbed into the back of the ambulance and knelt beside her. The smell of alcohol lingered inside the vehicle.

They had to strap her down, for she kept flailing her arms and kicking. One EMT checked her pulse and blood pressure, while the other started an IV. He looked at me and said, "she's been burned and is very dehydrated; we have to give her fluid."

"The Russians," she whispered through labored breathing. "The fire."

One medic restrained her head, while the other applied a gel to her facial burn and covered it with a bandage.

"Yes," I said. "How did it start?"

"Aldous..."

"Yes?"

"He said this would happen," she wheezed. "The letters—save the letters."

O My God, I thought—the letters.

I leaped from the ambulance and rushed toward the trailer. The flames had subsided and firemen had gone inside the trailer to search it.

The letters! A sickening fear rose in my stomach. I had to save the letters and the sketch! I rushed into the trailer and felt the heat take away my breath. I couldn't see a thing—only smoke that burned my eyes. My clothes felt as if they would catch fire at any moment. Fear spread through my body and I couldn't move.

Two padded arms encircled my waist. It was a fireman dragging me toward the door. I was out of my head now and screaming.

"The letters!"

He pulled me through the door and continued to drag me away from the trailer.

"Did you find any letters?" I shouted.

"No," he yelled back.

"And a sketch? Did you find a sketch?"

"No."

I looked for the ambulance, but it was gone—probably on its way to the hospital. Then I realized that Fely could die. Guilt spread through my body like liquid poison. Had I not delayed in getting to her, had I not stopped to read the letter—the letter! What had it said, exactly? I pulled it from my pocket and read it again.

It appears, Mrs. Dupre, a genuine possibility that psychic energy can be harnessed and used for good or evil purposes. The manifestation may take the form of other kinds of energy, electrical or heat, for example. Such a force is virtually invisible to those restricted to scientific positivism. And this makes the harnessing of such energy and its use by a malevolent regime all the more terrifying.

Those who hold such power can transform BEING.

And those who can sense this power and its operation—receivers like us—are particularly susceptible to being targeted by those who control the power.

The letter was signed simply as Aldous.

As I returned the letter to my pocket, I felt how hot it was. When I withdrew my hand and looked at my fingers, I saw that they were singed.

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