



# THE 28th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by CLARENCE PAGET



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# **The 28th Pan Book of Horror Stories**

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edited by Clarence Paget

# The 28th Pan Book of Horror Stories

**Pan Original**

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Alan Temperley

## The abandoned dam

Baz Fawcett kicked a stone and scowled. Fingers thrust deeply into the pockets of khaki drill jeans, he slouched against a trunk in the eucalyptus patch behind the house.

It was January. Now, in the early afternoon, the shade temperature was above 40°C. The sky was a hard, pitiless blue. Almost overhead, the sun glittered through the leaves. The farm dogs panted; horses stood still with hanging heads.

Patches of sweat marked Baz's shirt. He was sixteen, and he was fed-up. Worse, he felt bitter. Ten days had passed since his father died; not that the death meant much to him. Ted Fawcett – failure. In Baz's estimation that seemed a pretty fair epitaph for the tired drunkard who somehow, on some unimaginable occasions all those years before, had summoned up enough energy to sire his three sisters and himself. Ted Fawcett – brother of Charles, Lord Fawcett of Windrush, in the county of Oxford. Ted Fawcett – the younger son, who took his cash when he could, and squandered it in a series of mad speculations. Ted Fawcett – farmer, of Koolamarra, a failed sheep-farm in the north-west of Western Australia. Ted Fawcett – who at the age of forty-nine ended up dead on the floor of a wooden outhouse, pop-eyed and covered with ants in a welter of empty whisky bottles.

Baz snorted with contempt. But his thoughts were not principally with his deceased father. In his mind's eye, he sat in the silver Boeing 747 – first class – with his Uncle Charles and Aunt Fern, and their daughter Stephanie, who had flown out to Koolamarra for the funeral. That was much more to his liking. A smart modern aircraft returning to England. He pictured himself in a sharkskin suit, silver-grey to go with his blue eyes and fair hair. A stewardess brought champagne. Stephanie's knee, ever so lightly, pressed his leg.

Baz exhaled softly. Oh, what might have been! Five years older,



she had fancied him. He was sure of it. Sometimes he had caught her looking at him, assessing him, with those cool English eyes. His heart thudded.

But his cousin Stephanie was gone. In her place he was left with her brother, Michael – the Hon. Michael Witney Fawcett – one of those golden English boys of good family, was staying behind for a month. He was the same age as Baz, a first year sixth-former at one of the major English public schools. A place at his father's old Oxford college was more or less guaranteed. It was felt that four weeks in Australia would broaden his outlook. The following morning the two boys were starting out on a ten-day camping expedition to Thirty-Mile Beach, travelling on horseback.

Apart from the sheer boredom of such a venture, Baz did not like his cousin. If he had been asked, he would not have been hard-pressed to find reasons. Michael was so 'nice' all the time. He was polite and ever-helpful, as if he wanted people to like him. His smile was utterly charming. His hair, precisely the same colour as Baz's hanging crop, was cut short for the sun and neatly parted on one side. Whatever he was doing, somehow his clothes remained tidy. His studies caused no problems, and he played both cricket and rugby for the school teams. Yet Baz had caught him – and apparently in a state of some physical excitement – pulling the wings from large butterflies and dropping the struggling bodies into the webs of equally large spiders.

In itself, the act did not shock Baz, though he thought that by the age of sixteen Michael should have grown out of it. He had done such things himself; like most country boys, he was no stranger to acts of cruelty. In a way it was this, and certain incidents involving theft, that had led to his own expulsion from public school in England. What he objected to in Michael's case was the hypocrisy. The fingers that handed his mother an iced Martini had two minutes earlier been torturing insects; the lips that smiled so charmingly had been tight with a small but nasty pleasure.

Baz thrust himself from the eucalyptus trunk with a shoulder and returned towards the house. Little puffs of dust rose about his feet. As he moved from the shelter of the trees, the sun struck his head and shoulders a familiar blow.

The land shimmered. Far off, across the parched Australian

mallee, beyond the stunted trees and sand and spinifex, a range of red hills appeared lifted above the surrounding plain.

The farmhouse was built of wood, with slatted windows and front and back verandas. As Baz reached the door, hung with a beaded bamboo curtain to keep out the flies, the telephone rang. He pushed into the large cool hall and picked up the receiver.

'Hallo, Koolamarra.'

A green lizard, jewel-bright, ran up the wall.

'Hallo. This is the police headquarters in Perth. Sergeant MacKinlay speaking. Could I speak to Mr Fawcett, please.'

Baz hesitated. 'This is Mr Fawcett speaking.'

'Mr Fawcett senior?'

'Yes, that's right. My father died ten days ago.'

There was a pause. 'I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Look, I'm afraid I've got a bit of bad news for you.'

A prickle of nerves, almost like a breath of cold wind, made Baz shiver.

'Have you had another Mr Fawcett, a Mr Charles Fawcett of England, staying with you recently?'

'That's right. Lord Fawcett, actually. He's my uncle. He's on his way home right now, with his wife and daughter.'

'Yes, sir. That's what we're ringing about. He has a son, I believe. Do you know his whereabouts at the moment?'

'Yes, he's staying with us at Koolamarra.'

'Right. Well, I'll leave that in your hands. Look, are you sitting down at the moment? Could you find yourself a chair?'

Baz pulled up the cane chair that stood alongside the hall table. 'Yes, sergeant. All right.'

'Well, I'm afraid there's been a plane crash, sir. Just before they were due to touch down at Singapore.'

An almost palpable silence fell over the telephone line.

'And—?' Baz said.

'I have to tell you sir. There were no survivors.' The policeman paused sympathetically. 'I'm afraid I don't have the details of exactly what happened, but we've been asked to get in touch with relatives at this end.'

'I see,' Baz said. 'Thank you.'

And indeed Baz did see. In his imagination he saw the scattered wreckage, the crumpled fuselage, the leaping flames – and his

uncle and aunt and Stephanie in the heart of the inferno.

'I'm sorry to be the bringer of bad news, sir. One of the least pleasant parts of our job. When you want further details, could you ring Western Australian Airlines? I've got an emergency number here. Do you have a pencil?'

Vaguely Baz looked down at the table and picked up a split biro. He scribbled the number on the edge of the directory.

'I'm sorry to bring such bad news. If there's anything you want us to do, just get in touch.'

'Yes,' Baz said. 'Thank you, sergeant.'

'Thank you, sir. Goodbye.' The telephone went dead.

For two minutes Baz did not move. His Uncle Charles, Aunt Fern, and Stephanie – all dead. All in a moment. Only a few hours earlier they had stood talking in the hall; he had waved them off from the landing strip. He was shocked. It was too much to take in. And yet, almost as if to counteract the sudden void, Baz found that the plane crash had filled him with a shiver of excitement. He sensed that something momentous had occurred – personal, beyond the crash, of great significance – though what it was, he could not for the moment see.

'Who was that, Baz?'

His sister came from the front veranda. Sheila was the oldest of the family. Now aged twenty-two, she had, at the age of fifteen, become pregnant to Eddie Snark, a travelling shearer. They had married and Snark was made farm manager at Koolamarra. He was a crude, physical man with a taste for quantities of lager, well-suited to Sheila, with her love of magazines and make-up. Of all the people in the world, Baz had decided, he despised them most. Their frequent cooing in an armchair disgusted him. Now, as she walked through the hall, Sheila's stomach was swollen with a fourth child. An unattractive and sticky little girl, half-naked, ran before her.

'Who was it on the phone?'

'No one,' Baz said. 'Just Chuck, wanting to know if Michael and I fancied driving over for a beer.'

'And what did you tell him?' His mother followed behind.

Mrs Fawcett was not a tidy woman. Her dress was badly ironed, a toe-strap of her sandals was burst and flapped loose. She looked tired, withered by the sun, old before her time. She found it

difficult to talk to her teenage son.

'I told him we weren't going.' Baz turned away and walked from the house, taking his knowledge with him.

Whenever he had anything to think over, he went to the eucalyptus patch. For half an hour now, mostly hidden from the house, he wandered among the grey trunks. Precisely what the plane crash meant for him personally, he was not sure – save that, so far as he could understand, this placed Michael and himself in approximately the same situation as his father and Uncle Charles, more than thirty years earlier. Only now the position was more extreme. Not only were the two cousins separated by ten thousand miles of ocean; one fell heir to a fortune and the fabulous estate of Windrush, with its great manor house and parks; the other fell heir to a clapped-out sheep-farm, 40,000 acres of scrub and dust on the edge of the Australian desert.

For five minutes Baz sat and stared at the ground between his feet. If only Michael . . . ! Fiercely he jabbed at the stony earth with a sharp stick. His knuckles were white. If only . . . if only! Consciously he relaxed. Some thoughts were not to be admitted. And yet – he rose – it might be a good idea if nothing occurred to prevent their camping trip the following day. He needed time to think.

With this in mind, Baz walked to the end of the eucalyptus patch furthest from the house. Here the telephone line, a single line on bleached wooden posts, ran close to the trees. Hooking a dead branch over the wire, he swung on it with all his weight. The posts shook, the wire bowed low. For a time it held, then abruptly snapped. The wire sprang back and Baz fell to the ground. He brushed the dust from his jeans. Appalled by what he had done, he dragged the branch back into the trees and scuffed away the marks on the ground.

Unremarked by the family, he returned to the house. The two-way radio stayed in the kitchen. It was the work of a moment to prise loose a contact in the back of the set, where it would not easily be spotted. That done, Baz had only to ensure that no one listened to the national news that evening. With his mother and sister's taste for panel games and soap operas, it would not be difficult.

Koolamarra was cut off from the outside world. The nearest

neighbour was nine miles away over badly-maintained tracks. In three or four hours it would be dark. There was little likelihood of an unexpected visitor before the next day. And by then, he and Michael would be away into the desert.

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, Baz ran over the various possibilities in his mind. He nodded. With short sleeves he dabbed the perspiration from his brow, right and left, and reached into the ice-box for a lager.

To avoid the heat of the day, they planned to travel early and late, starting out before sunrise, lying-up in whatever shade they could find while the sun was high, then riding on until dark.

By nine o'clock that first morning, the two boys had put a dozen miles between themselves and Koolamarra. Already the sun was hot, so unimaginably hot to someone newly out from England, that Michael felt light-headed. On every side the desert scrub danced and rippled like water. Clouds of flies made the air sing; scores at a time, they crawled about their shirts and made attacks on the moisture in their eyes. Coats harsh with dried sweat, the horses crossed the baked red earth and stones.

'We'll go by Carter's Hill,' Baz announced, when they were clear of the farm. 'You'll like it there.'

He turned his horse inland on a hard patch of ground where the hoofs left no prints. Michael turned at his cousin's side. In fifty metres the track was lost behind them.

'Your mother said we should stick to the route we planned,' Michael said.

'That's women's talk. She always says that.' Baz smiled easily. 'And I always say, "Of course, Mum. I'll stick to the tracks." Stops her from worrying. But who wants to ride a hundred and fifty miles along roads? This way it'll give you a real taste of the country.' He slapped a stinging fly from his neck. 'See some of the vegetation at the foot of the hills. Go up the creeks. Get a fantastic view from the summits.'

Michael had no doubt his cousin told the truth. He would enjoy it in the hills; it was more adventurous to be off the dusty track. Equally, he was certain they should have told his aunt their plans. But he kept his thoughts to himself, for he had no wish to be lowered still further in his cousin's estimation. In a score of ways,

Baz made him feel childish, inexperienced, inept. Here in the Australian outback his education, his sporting skills, his social graces, were of no account. Michael was thrown back upon his own resources. Repeatedly, in his own judgement, they had seemed inadequate. He did not wish to appear chicken-hearted as well.

For an hour they rode on, then dismounted by a spreading thorn tree in a hollow, where a little water would gather when it rained. But now there was no moisture, just dust and stones split by the heat, and a straggle of shrubs and spinifex. They unsaddled the horses, and turned them loose to graze.

Before he settled down in the shade, Baz walked about the various stones, turning them cautiously to evict any snake or scorpion that might be lurking beneath. He found one of each. With a boot he stamped and screwed the scorpion into a wet patch on the earth. The snake was just under a metre in length, dust-red and hooped with dark bands. With brilliant eyes it regarded him, testing the air with its tongue, then slithered away. Baz carried a heavy stick. One blow broke the snake's back. Mouth gaping, it writhed in agony, then turned its fangs upon itself. Mercilessly he beat it dead, then flicked it out of the hollow, limp as an end of rope.

'Wouldn't last long if that fellow got his teeth stuck in you.' Baz wiped the stick clean. 'Word of warning. Keep your boots on if you're wandering about, specially at night. Make a lot of noise, scare the buggers away.' He took a mouthful of water and lay back, shoulders against the trunk of the thorn tree. 'Ah! That's better!'

The hours that followed were among the longest of Michael's life. He had not learned to doze. In neat handwriting he wrote up half a page in his Australian diary. After that, there was nothing to do but talk and daydream and explore the area where they lay.

Beyond the circle of shade the sun climbed higher and higher, until at midday it stood right overhead. The temperature mounted with it. Michael carried a small thermometer with him. In the early afternoon, set in the sun, it registered 52°C – and in their shaded hollow only 12 degrees less.

Slowly the temperature fell, and a little before four o'clock, though the air was still baking, they loaded the horses once more

and prepared to ride on. They carried the bare essentials – tent and blanket rolls, billy-cans, food and water, and a few odds and ends. For hunting, and in case of danger from man or animal, a .22 rifle hung at Baz's saddle.

He rode a horse called Dancer, a lively four-year-old stallion, dark chestnut with a black mane. For the trip, Baz wore his khaki jeans and khaki bush-shirt. Though he never lay in the sun, his skin, like all Australians in that area, was leather-brown. A floppy cotton hat protected his head from the full force of the sun. Michael, by contrast, wore white, a pair of cricketing trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, already stained red from the earth. Although he had been in Australia for a week and the first burn had darkened to gold, and he wore a straw hat with a brim, the morning sun had scorched his cheeks afresh. He had been given a horse called Meg, a gentle grey mare, the mother of several foals at Koolamarra.

For a time they talked, and then fell silent. Earlier in the day they had passed the ruins of a waterless windmill and the dustbowl remains of a mine; a bush fire had reduced a small plantation to black stumps. Now there was no sign of the hand of man. Civilization was left behind. Though the boys' minds were filled with very different thoughts, the majesty of the desert fell upon both.

High overhead, kites wheeled in the blue. Slowly, infinitely slowly, the range of hills drew closer. But it was not to be reached in one day's ride – or even two.

A little after six o'clock, enormous and molten, the sun sank into the desert. Slowly its light slipped up the face of the hills ahead, tipping the summits with fire.

While there was still daylight in the sky, they drew up to camp for the night. It was the hour of peace, between the settling of the flies and the rising of the mosquitoes, for they had stopped not far from a brackish waterhole, where the horses could drink. At once Baz stripped off his clothes and scrubbed his hard body with his shirt to remove the sweat and dust. Naked, but for his boots, he set about making camp. This was something Baz would have done had he been travelling alone, for it was cool and pleasant to be naked. On this occasion, however, it was also an ostentatious gesture, and well-judged, for Baz understood very well the balance of his relationship with his cousin. Though at school

Michael had showered with a hundred boys, he was taken aback and considerably disturbed by it. For a time he worked on, covertly regarding his cousin, self-conscious of his own physique, uncertain whether to do likewise or to remain fully dressed. In the end he compromised, by stripping to his underpants. Baz was satisfied. Yet again, in comparison with this young cousin and heir to the Windrush estate, he was proved the better man. Apparently oblivious of what Michael did, he hid the shadow of a smile and reached past him for the bag of tent-pegs.

The tent was soon erected. With a small axe, Baz gathered sticks from the bushes and started a fire. The flames leaped up against the swift tropical dusk. As they settled, he hung a billy of water from a rough tripod and unrolled his blankets alongside.

While they were working, the hills changed colour from orange to crimson and purple, and at last became a black cardboard frieze against a sky that blazed with fat stars.

That first night they ate tinned food and biscuits.

'When we reach richer grazing,' said Baz, 'I'll shoot a joey, and there should be rabbits. If you want to go native, you can try snake. Dig out some witchetty grubs and honey ants, if you like – like the boongs.'

Two enamel jugs of tea, stewed black in the billy, assuaged their first thirst. Cooking in mess-tins and eating without plates, they devoured beefburgers and beans, then speared pears on forks and ate them with the juice running down their chins.

'Ah! That's better!' Baz pushed back his plate. 'Here, catch.' He threw a can of lager to Michael and pulled the tab from another. Foam spurted with the warmth and carrying. Belching loudly, he lay back by the flames. 'All we need now is a couple of sheilas, eh? No, I could go a couple myself tonight – two each. God, what I couldn't do with them on a night like this! Out here in the desert – no one to poke their noses in.' He took a long pull on the can of lager.

Michael, who rarely tasted beer, did likewise. It had an acid, metallic taste. Being educated at an all-boys boarding school, his experience of girls was even more limited.

'What's your type, then?'

'I can tell you exactly.' As the mosquitoes began their maddening whine, Baz had pulled on his trousers and shirt. Firelight



touched his young moustache, there was a glint of white teeth. 'English girls. Fair skin. Cool, with blonde hair.'

'I like them dark,' Michael said. 'Big knockers.'

'No, cool and fair. Nice medium-sized tits. I'll tell you – like your sister, Steffie.' Briefly, as he betrayed her memory, Baz had an image of the blazing aircraft. 'That night we went to the party at the Macdonald's place! God, I wish she was here again now.'

Michael was silent. At school, in the dormitory after lights-out, they often indulged in such conversations. But there were things one didn't say – not decent chaps, anyway. One didn't speak about other chaps' sisters. Briefly he recalled his naked cousin, and his sister's slim figure. What had happened? Had Baz and Steffie . . . ? It was a troubling thought.

'I suppose they'll be home again about now,' Baz said. 'Back in England – at Windrush.'

'Yes.' Michael grimaced at another mouthful of the warm lager. A desert wind caressed his skin. He listened to the unending chirrup of crickets. A gecko ventured close in pursuit of moths attracted by the flames. 'It seems a long way away, camped here. Hard to believe they were at Koolamarra just yesterday morning.'

'I loved England,' Baz said nostalgically. 'Summer at Windrush. The big house and the parks. All that greenery . . . I suppose it will all come to you some day.'

'Mm.' Michael was rubbing on more mosquito repellent. His cheek burned, it made his eyes sting.

'What would happen if your dad died?' said Baz. 'Windrush, I mean. Would it come straight to you as the only son? Or would your mother inherit; or Steffie, she's five years older, isn't she?'

'No, it would come straight to me. But I couldn't touch it yet. My mother holds it in trust until I'm twenty-five. I get an allowance – a pretty big one, actually – to see me through Oxford and all that.'

'It's funny,' said Baz. 'What if my dad had been the older brother?'

'Everything would have been different.' Michael shrugged. 'You wouldn't have been born, for a start. Probably I wouldn't either.'

Baz was silent for a moment. 'What is my position, anyway?' He shifted, to see his cousin more clearly across the flames. 'What if there was a car crash, say, and you were all wiped out?'

'Thanks very much,' said Michael.

'No, what would happen then? I'd be the next in line, wouldn't I?'

'I suppose so. There's dad, then me, then Steffie, and mum – then you, as Uncle Ted's only son.' Michael smiled. 'Better make sure you never fix the car, eh?'

Baz realized that his gaze had become intent. He relaxed and looked away.

'No, your dad was very good to me. Public school and all that; air fares; proper introductions. He was all right, was Uncle Charles. He gave me a chance and I blew it. I could have still been there in England, if only I'd kept my nose clean – coming to you for Christmas and part of the summer holiday. It was my own stupid fault.'

'What happened?' Michael began to feel light-headed with the lager. This time it was he who moved to see better. 'Why *were* you kicked out? No one would ever say.'

'Oh, several things. First of all it was the cook's cat.' Baz grinned ruefully. 'A fat, spoiled creature. Some of us reckoned she gave it all the best fish and meat, and gave us the bony bits and fat. So one day we caught it and put it in a sack. Dropped it off the viaduct. Didn't kill it, though, not outright. The sack burst open and the poor bugger crawled away. We couldn't find it – made its way back to the school.' He leaned forward to set a handful of sticks on the fire. 'Then on sports afternoons, we nipped into town and took cars. Went joy-riding. Learned how to fix the wires from the ignition. Pooled our pocket money and bought a few cans. Used to go to the beach; crawl along the pavements trying to pick up girls. That was great fun – until we got caught.' His eyes glinted in the flames. 'But best of all, one night when we were all feeling randy as hell – you know the way schoolboys talk in the dormitory – five of us climbed out and lay in wait at the side of a path through the woods. A short cut from the village to the town. I don't suppose we really thought anything would happen – but anyway, we caught this girl.'

'What happened?'

'What do you think? Five of us there. We gagged her, then four held her down while the other one . . . Do you want me to spell it out? Use your imagination.'

'And you got caught?'

'The next morning, yeah. It was in all the papers. You probably saw it. Didn't give the names, because we were all fourteen and fifteen.' Baz shrugged ruefully. 'So – here I am, back at Koolamarra.'

For a while longer they chatted.

Unsteadily Michael rose, hiding an erection. 'I need a pee.' He turned towards the bushes.

'Got your boots on?' Baz reminded him. 'Remember to make a noise. Could be snakes out there. Frighten the buggers away.'

It was a wild place. The moon was rising, savage and orange above the hills. After he had relieved himself, Michael wandered further from the fire. Images and ungovernable feelings battled within his schoolboy frame. Hidden from sight, in that pagan place, among the desert shrubs, he masturbated to find relief.

'What are you doing?'

'Just having a look round.' Michael's voice was shaky. 'Look at the moon.'

Guiltily, he returned to the fire a minute or two later. Baz lay as he had left him, another can of lager in his hand. More than ever, through his furtive act, Michael felt inferior, an inept schoolboy, beside his wild-spirited cousin.

'Did you look at the horses?'

'Oh, no.' Michael began to scramble to his feet.

'It's all right, I'll go.' Beating the bushes with a stick, Baz strolled off into the shadows.

His heart not yet quiet, Michael watched him go. With the vindictiveness of the weak for the strong, he began to realize that he did not entirely like his Australian cousin.

Two mornings later they reached the foot of the mountains. There had been rain. At the run-off the desert glowed green, startling on the red earth. Whole acres were massed with wild flowers. In addition to the circling kites, there were now vivid finches and flocks of budgerigars. At a distance, wild camels and kangaroos browsed on the herbage.

A tasty joey, not long out of the pouch, was slung across Baz's saddle. It had been necessary to kill the mother kangaroo also. The first shot was not fatal. Baz did not flinch as he looked down

into the doe-like eyes and finished her off with a bullet in the brain. Business-like, he pumped another bullet into the breech and the empty cartridge case sprang over his shoulder. Though Baz maintained his easy-going, carefree manner, there was something chilling about the gesture.

For as they crossed the desert and the trappings of home were left behind, as the savage land fostered ideas that were scarcely thinkable in civilized society, Baz had come to a decision. He *would* get rid of this outwardly charming, cricket-playing cousin. Michael meant nothing to him, and as he saw it, there was really no alternative – unless he wished to spend the rest of his life at Koolamarra, or in some equally dead-end, money-grubbing occupation. One simple act and the world was his oyster – the estate of Windrush, Lord Fawcett, limitless money, access to the smartest clubs and houses in London. How he would do it, Baz did not know – but nothing was simpler. The tilt of a barrel, the pressure of a finger – crack! Yet he hesitated at outright murder. There would be some other way; an opportunity would present itself. There was no hurry. For the moment he need only wait, and hold himself in readiness.

‘Look!’ They had dismounted by an acacia patch several hundred feet above the plain, not the stunted bushes and dwarf mulga of the desert, but fine trees with boughs that stirred against the sky. Baz had been probing with a long knife. Turning to his cousin, he held out his hand. A fat witchetty grub, fully ten centimetres long, lay in his palm. ‘This is what the Abo’s eat when they go walkabout. Do you want to try it?’

‘Ugh! No!’ Fascinated and repelled, Michael examined the twisting white maggot. ‘That snake last night was bad enough.’

‘Get away, you hardly tasted it. Just like chicken – better! You’re sure you don’t want to try this? Might never get another chance.’

‘Quite sure. Absolutely definite.’

‘Suit yourself.’ When he was younger, Baz had eaten witchetty grubs for a bet. Now, hiding his disgust, he took the head in his fingers and popped the wriggling body into his mouth. With a twist, he pulled the head away, burst the swollen skin with his teeth and swallowed it quickly. ‘Tastes quite good actually. You should try one. Put lead in your pencil.’ He returned his knife to its

sheath, feigning awkwardness as he strove to avoid being sick.

They rode on; Michael was impressed.

'Keep going today,' Baz said. 'Should reach the dam by early afternoon, I reckon. We'll camp there for a couple of days. Climb Carter Hill, see all the animals come down at night to drink.'

The slope was steep. In the broiling sun the horses struggled, their mouths lathered with foam. The air sang and swarmed with flies. The eyes of the horses were black, their clothes crawled. Michael pulled up his collar and tied a cloth over his mouth and nose. In droves they invaded the slit that he had left for his eyes.

The desert fell away behind, a limitless plain on every hand. Midday came and went.

'It should be on the far side of this hill,' said Baz.

But as they topped the stony ridge and reined the horses to a halt, no great valley opened before them. Instead they faced a wilderness of hills, range upon range, baking in the full afternoon heat.

'Well, it must be over there, then.' Baz pointed to what seemed a blue cleft several miles distant. 'Too far for the horses right now. We'll lie up for a bit until it gets cooler.'

But in the event the blue cleft did not mark the valley, and they had to camp for the night in the mountains.

It was the fourth morning and they had been riding for several hours when, reaching the crest of yet another high ridge, the vast red earthworks of the dam were revealed beneath them, and the long lake, cool to the eyes and rippling in the currents of air.

'Yeah.' Baz talked as they descended. 'One of the Carters from Perth – about twenty years ago. Made a packet out of mining. Bought a few hundred thousand acres at the foot of the mountains here – something about returning to his roots. All these ranges are named after one of his ancestors. Planned to turn it into a sheep-farm. Catch the water when it rained, run a few hydro generators, irrigate the desert. Great idea.'

Michael viewed the ripped-out sides of the valley and the towering walls that began to curve like pincers across the red gorge. It was a massive project, abandoned half-way through.

'What happened?'

'Ran out of money – that's what everyone says. Also, apparently, it was one of the boongs' sacred sites. New land rights came

in that made things a bit awkward.' He laughed. 'Probably some coon witch-doctor rattled his bones and put a hex on the Carters.'

Half an hour later the two boys stood on the end of the dam. They off-loaded the horses and stacked their gear in the shade of an overhanging rock. It was ten o'clock, the stones were roasting to the touch. The site had a strange, almost eerie atmosphere. Michael gazed around him at the first handiwork of western man that he had seen in three days. No footprint disturbed the drifts of red dust. A broken earth-shifter lay abandoned beneath shattered cliffs. Huge sections of concrete pipe stood on end, as if waiting. He crossed to the edge of the dam and looked down. Far below, the dry river-bed, white stones and tangled scrub, continued down the gorge. Up-river, held back by the base of the dam, the purple lake glittered in the sun.

Baz regarded his cousin. A sudden realization made his scalp prickle. A quick push and – ! Softly he stepped forward. His heart pounded.

Michael turned from the edge and walked to meet him. The moment was lost. Baz exhaled. He felt the blood drain from his cheeks.

'What about a swim?' Michael struck at the tormenting clouds of flies. 'Will it be safe?'

'Yeah.' Baz looked away. 'Of course.'

Leading the horses, they made their way along the side of the valley and down a steep slope to the water's edge. Dragonflies flitted about the surface. Gratefully the animals waded through reeds into the clear water and lowered their muzzles to drink. Meanwhile, the cousins stripped off their clothes and launched themselves into the lake. Baz swam far out and dived into the darkness, into the sudden chill beneath the surface warmth. But Michael was happier to stay close to shore, where he could swim a few strokes and lunge and trail his arms in the limpid water.

Afterwards they explored. Michael sat in the cab of the earth-shifter and tugged the rust-locked levers and steering wheel. A broken-runged ladder lay discarded by the sections of giant pipe. Baz propped it against the side of one, and climbed up to look over the rim. It was huge, fully six metres across and not much short of five metres high. Waves of heat beat up at him, it was like a concrete oven. An old denim jacket and the dessicated remains of

a large bird lay in the bottom. Thin drifts of dust had blown over them. As Baz rested his hands on the edge, the ladder slipped fractionally. His heart lurched. God! he thought. I wouldn't like to fall in there! Never get out!

For the second time in an hour his scalp tingled with the frisson of an idea. *Never get out! Never!* Baz bit his lip, and looked across to where Michael still clambered about the old earth-shifter. Shout as much as you like, he thought, there's no one to hear you out here. No one for nigh on a hundred miles. He twisted his head and looked around into the deserted hills. It was a good idea; it needed thinking about. Slowly, his thoughts already bounding ahead, Baz descended the ladder.

'Hey! Mike!' he called half an hour later. 'Come and look at this.'

He had tied a rope – a strong rope, not rotten – to an angle of iron. Carrying it in his hand, he mounted the ladder, hooked the iron over the rim of the pipe, and dropped the line inside. Hand over hand he descended, and jumped to the ground.

'Hey, Mike! Are you coming?' His voice boomed strangely in his ears.

Michael's head appeared above the projecting ladder. He swung his leg over the rim, and a moment later dropped beside his cousin. The heat was intense. Already perspiring, Michael felt the sweat start from his forehead. His shirt clung to his back.

'Whew!' He took off his hat and beat at the clouds of flies. 'Some heat!' His voice reverberated. 'La!' he sang musically. 'Me – me – me – me! Why was she—e born so beautiful – ?'

The pipe stood on a concrete base. Above them, the rim formed bright arcs against the sky. The sun, mounting towards midday, stunned the senses and cast a diminishing sickle of shadow at the foot of the eastern wall.

Baz caught the dead bird by a wing-tip, a weightless bundle of bones, and tossed it over the side.

'I wouldn't like to be stuck in here!' Michael eyed the rope. 'What if that broke? We'd never get out. Don't reckon we'd last long.' He eased his armpits and rubbed the sweat from his brow with a slippery wrist.

'You're right.' Baz smoothed his moustache. 'Better be careful, eh?'

Baz caught the rope in strong hands. Feet braced against the wall, he pulled himself up. Michael caught the dancing end and held it steady. As he reached the top, Baz hooked a leg over the edge and sat astride the rim. Long strands of hair clung across his face. Roughly he pushed them back.

‘Right. Now you. Let go the end for a minute.’

Innocently, Michael did so. At once Baz twitched the rope away. Thinking it was a joke, Michael grinned. Baz grinned back, then unhooked the angle-iron from the rim and dropped the rope on the ground outside.

‘See you.’

He caught hold of the ladder and began to descend.

‘Hey! Baz!’ If this was his cousin’s idea of a joke, Michael did not like it. It had gone far enough. It was not funny to be trapped inside that concrete pipe during the heat of the day – even if it was only for five minutes. There was no way out – one could *die* in there. He looked around the smooth walls, and down at the ribbed concrete underfoot, and up at the blue sky. Like a brazen gong, the sun beat down upon him with a physical force.

‘Hey! Baz!’ His voice echoed in the silence. ‘Stop messing about!’

The top of the ladder wobbled and disappeared. There was clatter and a soft crunch of footsteps.

‘Baz! Baz! Come on, let me out!’

The footsteps faded into silence.

‘Hey . . . ! Hey . . . ! Baz?’

His shouts rose against the quivering midday heat.

Eighty metres distant, Baz sat in a wedge of shadow beneath the overhanging rock. His cheeks were bloodless, almost yellow, beneath his suntan. His stomach quaked. As far as Michael was aware, nothing had happened so far, nothing Baz could not pass off as a joke. All he had to do was walk back down the dam. But within himself, Baz understood that something terrible had occurred. He would not return to the pipe – not that day, nor the next. He had taken the first step – or the second, or third, if one counted his concealment of the plane crash, and the world’s ignorance of their whereabouts – in the journey from Koolamarra to Windrush. He would *not* spend the rest of his life stagnating on an Australian sheep-farm. His knuckles were white. Consciously he



relaxed. If ever, this was a time for cool thinking.

'Baz!' Already Michael's voice had taken on an urgent note, a frightened note, that strengthened rather than weakened his cousin's resolve. 'Come on, that's enough. I'm roasting! Let me out!'

Baz rose and glanced at his watch. It was fifteen minutes before midday.

Now, of all events in his plan, came the act which sickened him most. He gritted his teeth and turned to the rough hillside.

The horses were grazing contentedly beneath a coolabah tree, close to the water's edge. Tethering his own mount, Dancer, he led Meg back up the hillside to the end of the dam. Obediently the grey mare walked at his side and stood as he strapped Michael's saddle and blankets on to her back.

She was a sweet-natured, docile animal and had been at Koolamarra for as long as Baz could remember. A thousand times, as a child, he had sat astride her broad back and ridden about the farm. Her leggy foals had provided some of his happiest early memories.

Leading the gentle mare by the reins, Baz walked as close to the edge of the dam as she would follow. He was trembling, and as the fearful drop drew close, something of his emotion communicated itself to the horse. Abruptly she halted, and with wild eyes regarded the iron bar in Baz's hand, a crowbar from the earth-works.

A bullet would have been easier, but Baz had decided that nothing must be left to chance. Some time in the future the horse's remains might be found, with a hole in its skull, and a .22 bullet – a .22 with identifiable markings.

'Sshhh! Sshhh! There!' Softly, treacherously, the bar hidden behind his back, he laid his cheek against the soft muzzle and breathed into the wide nostrils. The trusting animal allowed herself to be soothed. 'There, my beauty!'

Baz let go of the reins and stepped back. His own nostrils flared, his heart thudded. He loved horses; liked them more than many people. But this was something that had to be done.

'Sshhh! Who's my good girl?' Softly he raised the bar. Gripped tightly in two hands, it hung behind his shoulders.

A ripple of nerves shivered through the horse's flanks. At the last moment she whinnyed wildly and tossed her head, prancing

back. It was not quick enough. With a terrible, death-dealing blow, Baz thrashed downward with the iron bar. His whole body twisted with effort, his teeth were bared. With a sickening crack the bar struck the faithful grey mare across the head. Dazed, as if pole-axed, Meg collapsed to the ground.

Within his concrete prison, Michael heard the clattering hoofs and whinnying – then Baz's sobs and the thuds as the iron bar finished its dreadful work.

Panting, Baz stood back. He would not allow himself time to think. Seizing the dead horse by one leg, he set his feet and began to heave it towards the edge. Meg was a dead weight, but fortunately the surface was fairly smooth. It took ten minutes to drag the hot carcass to the brink; and at last, using the crowbar as a lever, he tipped it over the edge.

With a series of thuds and scattering stones the horse rebounded from rock to rock. The girth split and the saddle went flying. Far below, Meg's broken body rolled to a halt among bushes in the dry river-bed. Her grey flanks merged with the bleached stones. A smear of red would soon darken.

Baz looked at the crowbar in his hand. With disgust he hurled it far over the edge. With a splash it landed in the glittering water above the dam.

Nothing remained to link him with the cruel act, save whatever sounds his cousin may have heard, and a long smear, already drying in the sun. He tipped water across it and scuffed it with the sole of his boot. As the water evaporated from the hot stones, the mark was gone. A shower of rain would wash away any last traces.

Sickened by what he had done, yet congratulating himself on its completion, Baz retreated to the shelter of the overhanging rock.

The afternoon passed slowly. Michael called from his baking prison. Baz would not have imagined that anyone would shout so loudly or so long.

At four o'clock, as the sun sank westward, straight as a stone towards the horizon, and the intense heat began to abate, Baz saddled Dancer and prepared to leave.

'Be back in three days.' He looked down on his terrified cousin. 'Sorry, Mike – not that that's much comfort. Does you no good, does it? But I've got no option.'

'Three days!' Michael stood in the arc of the blue shadow cast by

the western rim of the pipe. Tongue already sticky, he moistened his lips and blinked up through a thousand flies. 'In three days I'll be . . . ! Baz – what for? For God's sake, tell me!'

'Sorry.' Baz shrugged his shoulders, wrinkled his brow, and began to descend.

'Baz! What have I done? Let me out! Baz! Baz!'

The top of the ladder slid from sight. Panting with fear, coughing as he breathed flies, Michael emerged into the sunlight. 'Aahhhh!' He screamed aloud. But there was no reply.

Baz looked around the spot where he had spent the day. All of Michael's possessions had been flung over the edge of the dam after the horse. Only Michael himself, plus broken grasses and footprints in the dust, remained to tell of their presence. Mounting Dancer, he pressed his heels into the dark flanks and started up the baking hillside.

'Baz! For Christ's sake – come back!' Michael's voice broke. 'Come back! Help!' He subsided into tears. 'Help! Baz!'

The intermittent cries continued as Baz rode on. One mile – two miles. Behind him the great abandoned earthworks and lake shrank into the valley bottom. The sections of concrete pipe grew smaller and smaller, a scatter of napkin rings seen through the wrong end of a telescope. The hum of flies filled his ears. Metal jingled as Dancer chewed his bit into foam. He peered up at a shrill cry and saw kites wheeling against the blue.

Then he topped the ridge. All around him twisted mountains shimmered in the late faternoon heat. Through gaps he could see the desert, infinitely wide, sand and scrub and glittering salt pans, vanishing towards a misty horizon where land and sky became indistinguishable. And when he looked back, the dam had gone.

For three days and four nights Baz camped in the mountains. He hoped this was the right length of time, for equally he dreaded returning before his cousin was dead, or after the sun and flies had started their work on his remains.

As a Western Australian he had heard enough of dying in the desert to know that it was not the easiest of deaths. 'I'd rather go to hell on the rack than die in the outback,' an old sheephand had once told him, describing in graphic detail how fluids grew thick until every joint and organ became an agony, and your tongue

swelled up until it choked you. 'Find someone dead out there,' said the old man with relish, 'see how their bodies are twisted. Almost bent double, some of 'em.'

Baz's sixteen-year-old dreams and waking thoughts were not pleasant. In detail he planned how he would raise Michael's body out of the pipe and drop it from the dam, for were the remains ever found, it must seem that he had ridden straight over the edge. A hundred times, like a video reel that Baz could not stop, images and snatches of conversation turned over and over in his mind. 'I don't know, inspector. Perhaps he's dying now, poor bugger . . . I told you. He went off in the afternoon – when I was asleep. Exploring, I suppose. I woke up around four o'clock and he just wasn't there . . . Yes, I took the telephone call. Well, I knew how much he was looking forward to the trip. What good would it have done? They were dead, weren't they? All burned up . . . What, me? Heir to Windrush? He laughed. Course not, it must be someone in England.'

The details needed polishing. He might change the story, say straight out that Meg took off over the edge, perhaps frightened by a snake. On the whole, though, it seemed better to avoid any mention of the dam. Whatever happened, no one could prove anything. A bit of a blow, a shower of rain, and every last trace would have gone. To bolster his courage and cheer himself up, Baz pictured the life he would live as Lord Fawcett. He had as good a brain as his cousin Michael; perhaps he would do a bit of work and go to Oxford. English Oxford! With lingering pleasure he fantasized about the college balls, the smart clothes, the nightclubs and champagne, those cool desirable women – all available to Lord Fawcett. And best of all, at weekends and vacations, Windrush itself. Windrush! Stately rooms and a grand curving staircase; Georgian windows looking out on green parkland.

What a contrast to the life he would lead at Koolamarra, surrounded by ignorant sheephands, and people like his sister Sheila and Eddie Snark! It was a blow to return to reality and find himself a skinny, horny young Aussie once more, lank-haired and dirty-handed as a navvy, the son of a lush with scarcely ten cents to his name, hiding out in the hills until his cousin died of thirst.

Nights were chill in the mountains. Well before dawn on the fourth morning, after he had knocked out his boots in case of

scorpions or poisonous centipedes, he brewed a billy of tea, then kicked ashes over the fire and broke camp. Pure as the first day of creation, the sky turned blue and the sun, fat and throbbing, tipped the eastern hills as Dancer picked his way over the stony hillside.

Two hours later, the dam came into sight across the crest of a ridge. Baz started down the long slope. Like a rabbit staring into the eye of a snake, his eyes were drawn to the far-off sections of pipe – and to one in particular. What hideous things had happened in the past three days? What would he find when he arrived?

By nine o'clock the sun was high. Already the stones radiated stunning waves of heat as Dancer's hooves clattered to a halt on the end of the dam. Baz swung himself to the ground. Delaying the moment of investigation for as long as possible, he unsaddled and led the horse to graze in the shade of some wattle trees. The air was still, the leaves hung motionless against the sky.

From the end of the dam he looked down on Meg's remains. A few kites still hopped about the strewn bones and flaps of skin. A faint whiff of corruption rose to his nostrils.

Baz turned. Fearfully he regarded the sections of concrete pipe. The time had come. He hitched his trousers and took a deep breath, then started towards the ladder and straggling rope that lay on the ground alongside. The ladder was soon in position. Slinging the rope over his shoulder, he mounted to the rim and looked inside.

The sun had done its work. Michael's body lay huddled at the foot of one concrete wall. To protect himself against the sun and flies, he had pulled the discarded denim jacket over his head.

'Hey! Mike!' Baz called questioningly, and then louder, 'Mike?'

Beneath the shirt and stained cricketing trousers the limbs did not stir.

Baz breathed a sigh of relief. The worst was over – though if Michael had been dead for two days, what he would find beneath the old jacket was better not thought about. His face twisted with anticipatory disgust. Balancing carefully, he slung the rope from his shoulder and hooked the angle-iron over the concrete rim, double-checked that the rope was strong and securely fastened, and dropped it inside. Then, hand over hand, Baz descended.

As he set foot on the ground, he saw that Michael had scratched

words with a sharp pebble on the inside of the pipe.

'Michael Witney Fawcett, of Windrush in Oxford, England. Imprisoned here by his cousin, William Basil Fawcett, of Koolamarra. There is no water.' The date followed, and an afterword. 'He killed the horse and pushed it over the dam.'

For a moment Baz was chilled, then he realized that what could be scratched into the concrete, could equally easily be scratched out again. But first he must get rid of Michael's body. His hands were sweating. Nervously he scrubbed his palms against his shirt and bent above the huddled corpse. At least there was no stink. Slowly he reached down and drew the jacket aside.

For a moment Baz did not understand. They body had no head. Then suddenly realization dawned. He tugged at the shirt. It was stuffed with a rotten sack filled with crushed fern. The boots fell away from the ends of the trousers, revealing lengths of stick. His cousin had gone!

With a cry Baz swung round. He rushed to seize the hanging rope. But even as he did so, a head appeared above the rim of the pipe and the rope was twitched away. It was a blonde head, bitten by mosquitoes, burned by the sun, the lips blistered by heat and drought.

'Mike! For God's sake, how . . . ?'

'Hello, Baz!' Gloating, malevolent, Michael looked down, rope in hand.

The ladder shook and a moment later a second head, and naked shoulders, appeared at Michael's side. It was a black head, with furrowed brow and wide mouth.

'It's an Aborigine holy place, remember.' Michael smiled, but this was not the winning smile he reserved for his mother and social friends. His voice was a croak. 'This is Jarra. He hardly speaks any English – do you? Going walkabout – by camel. Some of his tribal gods live up here – in the mountains. Says they'll be angry at you, defiling a holy place. I was lucky, there probably won't be any more travellers for months, not until the sun's overhead again. That's when the Abos come. And I reckon that won't be until November.'

The aborigine boy was young, probably no more than fourteen, though it was hard to be certain. His hair was dusty from the red earth. Half-wild black eyes glittered in the black face. In fractured

words, and a rather high voice, he murmured something to Michael.

Michael climbed a rung higher. Baz saw that he wore his blanket, rescued from below the dam, tied at the neck by a scrap of string.

'What did you do it for, Baz? What did you leave me in there for? I was almost a gonner when Jarra heard me shouting. It was just after sun-up. He brought some water. I wouldn't have lasted till midday.'

Baz was silent. The sun, rising above Michael's shoulders, hurt his eyes. He looked away.

'Well, I'll never let you out if you don't tell me. Something to do with Windrush, I suppose. You're always going on about it. That's why you asked about the inheritance the first night out. Still,' he prepared to descend, 'suit yourself.'

'You want to know?' Baz moved into the shade. 'Right, I'll tell you! Just before we came away there was a phone call. I took it. It was the police in Perth. There'd been a plane crash! Does that make you feel better?'

'A plane crash! You mean Dad?'

'Yeah.' Baz nodded. 'Uncle Charles. But not only him, all the rest as well, the whole planeload. Just before they were due to land at Singapore!'

Momentarily Michael was silent. 'And you didn't tell me! For Christ's sake, Baz! All dead? Mum, Dad, Steffie? And you didn't tell me!'

'No, I didn't.' Baz stared up at the two heads above him.

'Why?' Michael's mouth hung open. 'What have we ever done to you? What sort of a monster are you?'

'Why?' Baz shouted. 'Why? Why do you think? Cocky little bugger, you've got everything, haven't you? It's all planned out. What sort of a future do you think I've got, stuck out here in the back of beyond? What do you get when your dad dies? Oxford, Windrush, a fancy job. What do I get: Debts and bloody dust; fucking Koolamarra! And yet we both come from the same family! We both had the same grandparents! It hasn't even occurred to you, has it!'

But Michael was not listening. 'All dead! Dad!' His chest was tight, his face puckered. 'Oh, God!' Distraught and nearly falling,

he scrambled down the broken ladder.

For long seconds the young Aborigine regarded Baz. His eyes were burning, hair hung about his face. More carefully, watching the rungs, he followed Michael to the ground.

'That's right!' Baz shouted. 'Typical! Just like your sort – land on your feet every time! Saved by a fucking boong – the only one in a hundred miles! You bastard!'

The ladder lurched and fell with a crash. From inside the pipe Baz heard Michael's first choking sobs. Slowly they faded.

He was alone. Sweat streamed down his face and neck, his hair hung damp. Already the heat was mounting inside the pipe. The air was still. Outside, in the dappled shade above the lake, birds called. Otherwise all was silent, save for the whine and hum of flies. In a maddening cloud, avid for nourishment and moisture, they swarmed about his head. The sun's heat penetrated the concrete walls. Baz sat down in the crescent of diminishing shadow, and hid his head in his arms.

For ten minutes, half-numb with grief, Michael struggled to tell his aboriginal companion what had happened. With arms outstretched he mimed an aeroplane crashing; then fatherhood, and motherhood, and death. His feelings could be restrained no longer. Weeping, he walked away, and though having no particular reason for doing so, made his way down the hillside to the lake.

For minutes he stood motionless in the water. Then, as if by distance he could leave distressing events behind, Michael bowed his head and set off fast along the side of the lake. Stones bruised his feet, bound in scraps of canvas, but the physical effort did him good, and when he returned at midday, sweating and half-exhausted, his emotions were under control.

They ate at the water's edge, where ferns and hanging boughs discouraged the flies. Jarra would not touch Michael's tinned food, but preferred his own dried fish and honey from an ant's nest that he had raided while Michael was away. Ants and comb, scooped out with his fingers, he ate with delicacy and relish. Easily-read emotions flickered over the black face. Dusky limbs curled beneath him. With a delighted smile, he showed his friendship to the white boy.

Though he considered Michael's food rubbish, Dancer and the



rifle were of great interest to the young Aborigine. Time and again, throughout the afternoon, as Michael looked up from his shade at the water's edge, he saw the naked youth high above him on the dam. Lovingly he stroked the blue steel and worked the oiled bolt. As he pulled the trigger, the pin snapped into the empty chamber with a click. Breathing into Dancer's nostrils, as Baz had done with Meg, he looked into the horse's mouth to see the strong young teeth, and ran familiar hands over the joints and silky muscles.

His camel had to be cared for. It was a scraggy creature, worn out with travel and the poor nourishment afforded by the desert shrubs, mostly mulga and wanyu. Haughty of eye and rubber-lipped, the camel regarded Michael as the black boy brought it down to drink at the lake.

At length, worn out by emotion and the heat of the afternoon, Michael slept, huddled from the flies beneath his blanket. When he awoke, the day was far advanced. In less than an hour the sun would set. His head ached. He bathed his face in the cool water and climbed back to the dam. There was no sign of the Aborigine boy.

'Jarra?' he called questioningly. 'Jarra? Jarra!'

But the boy and his camel had gone. Dancer was safely tethered in the shade, the rifle was set back in its place, the box of ammunition lay untouched. Michael was left alone with his imprisoned cousin.

He was stunned, for he had counted on the Aborigine boy for safety, as he had been able to count on someone – his nanny, his father, his teachers, Baz – all his life. Seizing the binoculars, he set off walking up the steep slope above the dam. Steadily, as the sun sank, the valley and surrounding hills opened before him. Far off, something moved. It looked like a camel.

'Jarra!' His voice echoed from mountain to mountain across the gorge. 'Jarra!'

He raised the binoculars. Indeed it was a camel, a group of three, grazing on the mountain vegetation. But there was no sign of the black boy. Sick at heart, as the hills flamed blood-orange in the afterglow of sunset, Michael returned to the dam.

Night came quickly. Long before eight o'clock every last trace of daylight had faded from the sky. The moon would not rise for

another six hours. Enormous stars, equatorial and southern constellations, spangled the velvet sky.

But Michael had no eyes for his primitive and beautiful location. Crouched by the side of his flickering fire, he was terrified. Whichever way his thoughts turned, he was confronted by fear. Fear of Baz, if somehow he should be lurking in the rocks nearby; fear of any other wanderer or black pagan who might be attracted by his fire; fear of scorpions and snakes – he had seen several since he came to the dam; primitive fear of the Aborigine gods; and worst of all, the enemy that must be faced, fear of death in the surrounding desert. From time to time he murmured, as if in conversation, and forced a brief laugh, hoping to convince Baz and imaginary listeners that he was not alone.

All night long, it seemed, he did not sleep, or if he did, it was a brief uneasy slumber that lasted for no more than a few minutes, disturbed by his cousin's calls – taunts and warnings and tormenting promises – from within his concrete prison.

Michael racked his brains. They could not remain at the dam indefinitely, some action had to be taken. But what? Driven by wretchedness, by morning he had reached a decision.

Cruelty answered cruelty. A five-gallon oil drum, long since dried out and rusted, lay among other debris at the end of the dam. The top had been cut open to make a container. As soon as dawn light made the way visible, Michael carried it to the lake. With his free hand he held the blanket about his chest, for the air struck chill. The top of the drum leaked like a colander but the bottom half was sound. Awkwardly, slopping water all the way, he carried it back up the hillside, and tied a metre of rope through a rusted hole at the rim. The he propped the ladder against the pipe.

'Here, Baz!' He rested the drum on the edge. 'Are you thirsty?'

'What do you think?' Baz looked half-wild. His clothes were twisted, his hair was tangled. His eyes, etched with darker lashes, held an expression of scarcely-contained ferocity. With the young moustache, he looked rather splendid. It made the execution of Michael's plan easier.

'Here, then.'

With a vigorous push, he toppled the drum over the rim of the pipe. Baz sprang aside as the heavy object fell on top of him. A chill cascade drenched his shirt and trousers. With a crash the oil

drum struck the ground and the last of the water swilled across the concrete. Instantly Baz snatched it up, but no more than a cupful remained.

'That's all you'll get from me,' Michael said. 'I've given you water – your fault if you spilled it.'

Speechless with hatred, his cousin stared up.

'Right, I'm off now,' Michael said. 'Me and Jarra. When we reach the first farm I'll telephone or radio and get someone to come out and pick you up.' A little thrill of pleasure ran through his legs as he added, 'But I'm afraid that won't be for four or five days.'

'You and Jarra!' Baz's chest rose and fell. 'Ger! You're by yourself! The boong's gone off and left you!'

'No he hasn't.' Michael turned his head. 'He's waiting there at the end of the dam.'

'You're lying!'

Michael shrugged. 'Suit yourself.'

'Well, if he's with you, and you've got the horse and rifle, why don't you let me out?'

'I'll tell you.' Michael touched himself on the chest. 'I'm Lord Fawcett now; you're next in line. Think what you just did – left me in here to die! If you'd do that, you're capable of anything. I'd never be safe again. Shotgun going off, drowning accident – it wouldn't be too difficult to arrange. This way it works out very nicely. All I've got to do is tell people the truth. Jarra knows. And I've scratched what you did on the wall of the pipe.' He pointed. 'Even if you scratch it out, you can't hide the marks. I've got no reason for killing you, whereas you've got a very good reason for killing me – and you spoke to the police in Perth the day before we came away. Probably you did something to the telephone and radio as well. They weren't working remember? And like I said, I have given you water. Even if you chuck the can out, they'll see the rust marks.'

'God! You're even more devious than I thought.'

'More devious! More devious than killing a horse, then coming back to chuck my body after it, over the edge of the dam?'

'All right. There's a pair of us. Maybe it's in the blood. But for Christ's sake, Mike, let me out,' Baz pleaded. 'Let me out now, and I swear – I'll swear on anything you like – that I'll never lay a

hand on you! Ever!

'You'll swear! You're joking! You're a murderer, Baz – or you wanted to be.'

'Ah, Mike, come on! There's no Abo out there. Stop mucking around. You'll die if you try to reach a farm by yourself. We'll both die.'

'No!' Michael shook his head. 'Whether you believe it or not, Jarra's waiting there at the end of the dam. And even if he wasn't, all I've got to do is keep heading west and I'll reach the sea. There's got to be a coast road.'

'On Dancer? You can't handle him. He'll throw you. And anyway, how will you know west without this?' Baz tapped the compass that hung from his belt.

'No trouble. Benefits of a good education. If the sun's overhead at midday, then all morning it's due east, all afternoon it's due west. All I've got to do's follow my shadow until midday, then walk with the sun in my eyes.'

'Me! I! My shadow! What about that young Abo that's with you? Anyway, your navigation's all to hell. Due west! The sun moves in an ellipse – up and overhead and down again. I live here, remember. Still, you're the bright bugger, you're the one with the education! Suit yourself! But I'll tell you this for nothing.' Baz loosened a flap on his trouser leg and pulled out the crumpled map. 'There's 150 miles of desert out there. You head due west and you're a dead man, a bundle of bones, bleached whiter than those cattle we saw at the edge of Koolamarra. You *and* Dancer.'

'So you say.' Michael prepared to descend.

'Come on, Mike. Just chuck the rope over, then you and your black pal – if he exists – can take off into the blue yonder. Leave me behind. I can wait here by the lake until someone comes.'

'No.' Again Michael felt that little thrill of excitement. 'Cheerio, Baz.' He hesitated, but there seemed no more to say. His burned face and neat blond head descended below the rim of the pipe.

'Mike! Mike!'

The head of the ladder shook, then slid sideways and disappeared.

'You'll never make it on your own! Come back! Let me out! Mi-i-ike!'

The shouts followed Michael as he made his way towards

Dancer, already saddled and loaded, who stood tethered at the foot of the slope.

'Hey! Listen!'

Michael was trembling. 'All right, Jarra?' As he set his foot in the stirrup – clumsily, for his feet were still wrapped in canvas – he continued the pretence. 'On we go.' He settled himself in the saddle and nervously touched his heels to the dark flanks.

The strong young stallion, for the time being at least obedient and well-behaved, started up the long slope. As he went, Michael murmured and occasionally laughed softly, as if holding a conversation with the young Aborigine.

Baz's shouts, full of fear, rang after him up the desolate valley.

Daylight was growing. The moon, which for several hours had ruled the heavens, grew pale above the hills, and the first blood-red glow of sun appeared on the eastern horizon.

By eight o'clock the lake and dam were hidden from sight. Time and again Michael shivered, even though the sweat ran down his neck and chest. Now he was alone, truly alone. Facing his mounted shadow on a patch of sage and red sand, he looked due west. A wilderness of mountains confronted him, already shimmering and offering false pools in the heat.

With eyes narrowed, and through the binoculars, he searched the hillsides for a sight of his aboriginal companion. But Jarra and his camel were nowhere to be seen.

As Michael rode on, rocking in Baz's saddle, the sun struck hot on the sliding blanket on his back. Allied to the memory of his cousin's abject helplessness, it awoke feelings of sharp sexuality, which for several miles tempered his almost overwhelming fear of the desert. He indulged fantasies – of Baz naked, and Jarra's dusty black limbs, of photographs, and boys in school, of Baz with Steffie, of Baz tied to four stakes, helpless, spreadeagled in the sun. Unendingly the saddle rocked, the hot blanket brushed his bare back. The outcome was inevitable. Alone on the baking hillside, as helpless as his cousin, the frightened English boy sought comfort and relief. It brought no happiness. Struggling against himself, and at the last uttering little gasps and cries of condemnation, his body convulsed.

Michael remounted and rode on. In ten minutes he realised that he was thirsty, but denied himself a mouthful of water by way of

penance. In half an hour, guilt appeased and more at peace within himself, he realized that he had not been paying sufficient attention to his route. He looked back. The dam and life-preserving lake were long lost behind. Anthills and a swollen baobab tree rose close at hand. He stared at the writhing red hills and arid slopes of wild flowers and woods, fixing them in his memory lest he should need to return.

As they crossed the desert after leaving Koolamarra they had lain up during the heat of the day. Now, Michael wanted to leave the mountains behind him before dark. The sun mounted higher and higher. He drank from the flask. The water was warm and soon his mouth was dry again. Was it thirst or fear? Dancer mumbled on the bit, his mouth lathered with foam. To the west the mountains seemed unending, but through a southern gap, beyond a long valley bedded with white stones, Michael glimpsed the level plain of the desert. There, although the grazing for the horse was poor, the going would be faster. He turned Dancer downhill.

For ten minutes all went well, then suddenly the horse reared, neighing wildly and slashing with sharp hoofs. Two or three metres in front of them, a snake raised its head and hissed a warning. It appeared venomous – to Michael, all Australian snakes were venomous – but whether it was a copperhead, a death adder or a tiger snake, he did not know. For a minute all was confusion. Michael tried to pull Dancer aside. The horse resisted. As his hoofs landed close the snake lunged, but fell short. Dancer struck again, death-dealing blows. Michael had no leisure to watch, all his effort was concentrated on staying on the horse's back. More by good luck than good horsemanship he succeeded, and when he was able to look again, the snake, fully a metre and a half long, was sliding rapidly towards the shelter of some tumbled rocks.

Teeth clenched, Michael tried to calm his mount. 'Sshhh!' He stroked the rough brown neck, sweat and dust had dulled the chestnut gloss, but still Dancer pranced and showed the whites of his eyes. 'Sshhh! There!' Slowly the beautiful young stallion stopped shivering.

Only then, Michael realized that his mount was limping. Had Dancer been bitten? He dismounted and bent to examine the horse's foreleg. Dancer curvetted and knocked him aside. Michael

struck at the soft muzzle as long teeth descended to nip him in the shoulder. The horse recognized his fear. Bucking and kicking high, he trotted forty or fifty metres away. An experienced horseman would have hidden any fear; some, like Baz, would have given the animal a good hiding. Michael persevered with gentleness, and in the end it served well enough. Dancer did not appear to have been bitten, and he could find nothing wrong with the leg or hoof. He remounted and continued down the stony valley.

The incident had frightened Michael considerably. What if the horse had thrown him, or had been bitten by the snake and died! What if it had run off with all his food and equipment – all his water! And it was limping badly. A prickle of fear ran through his back legs, and brought added sweat.

For five miles Michael rode on. The valley debouched into the desert in a delta of flowers. There was no water, but there had been, and the red earth blossomed. For an hour he rested uneasily in the blue-green shade of a eucalyptus, while Dancer grazed on the grass and wild flowers. As he put out a hand to take another mouthful of water, Michael discovered with dismay that the bottle had toppled over. Almost a quarter of his supply had drained away into the dust.

The route west was hidden by a ridge of the mountains. But as he rode on during the afternoon, and the flowers of the run-off gave way to sand and scrub, the extent of the desert – even his corner of it – was borne in upon Michael with a power that stopped him in his tracks.

Mile upon baking mile, the plain spread before him into the golden distance. Sand ridges and parched bushes leaped in the heat. Far off to the south-east, an infinite distance it seemed, a thin ribbon of mountains floated above the desert. To the west – nothing. As far as the eye could see, sand and scrub, stones and bleached spinifex, spread before him until they merged with the golden sky. Dancer stumbled slightly as he eased the weight from his painful hoof. How far was the ocean – fifty miles? A hundred? A hundred and fifty? Michael licked his lips, still scabbed by drought and sunburn.

Uncertainly he touched Dancer with his heels. As if surprised, the horse looked back. He did not want to set off into that trackless waste with Michael on his back. Michael kicked him

again. Reluctantly Dancer started forward. His head hung, his hoofs slipped on a ridge of sand.

Nothing in Michael's background had prepared him for such a venture. Two hours were enough to break his spirit. For the twentieth time he halted and gazed around; for a full three minutes he did not move. Then he pulled on a rein and turned Dancer back the way they had come.

He camped that night in the delta of flowers, frightened that he would not find the lake again, terrified by the occasional trampling and rustles – for it was at night that the desert came to life. But the hours of darkness passed safely, and noon the following day found him dropping once more down the long hillside above the dam. The .22 rifle, with a full magazine and the safety-catch off, rested across his knees.

Michael's fear was universal. He was frightened that Baz was dead, leaving him alone in the empty hills, as solitary as a castaway mariner, marooned in the sea of sand. Equally he was frightened that Baz was alive, and somehow had contrived to escape. Alertly, as he drew close, he watched the sections of concrete pipe, and gave a wide berth to large boulders and clumps of vegetation, lest he should be lying in ambush.

His alarm was groundless, for as Dancer sent stones rattling down the slope, a broken cry, almost a croak, emerged from the pipe where Baz was imprisoned.

'Who's there . . . ? Help!'

Michael did not reply.

'Who is it? Here, in the pipe . . . ? Water!'

A weight fell from Michael's shoulders. He felt so relieved that he could almost have flown. Dancer's hoofs clattered to a halt on the end of the dam. Softly he dismounted.

'Mike? Is that you?'

With swift treachery, Michael's fear was supplanted by a memory of his earlier pleasure in Baz's imprisonment. Smiling, he listened and crept close. Pebbles struck through his clumsy foot-coverings, the blanket flapped from his shoulders.

'Mike . . . ? Who is that?'

For a minute Michael waited, tormenting his cousin. The ladder and straggling rope lay where he had left them. He set the ladder against the pipe and mounted to the rim.



Baz's appearance had altered. Though he had grown a moustache he rarely had to shave, but in the ten days they had been away from Koolamarra, a soft growth shadowed his cheeks and jaw. His clothes and lank hair were unkempt, his lips swollen and blistered. Red mosquito bites inflamed his face and hands. His brow was dry.

In the noonday sun there was no shadow in the pipe, no shelter at all. The heat welled up into Michael's face. In the open, he knew, the temperature would be close on 55°C. In the airless pipe it felt even hotter.

'Well, how are you getting on?' Michael smiled.

Baz had been sheltering beneath his cousin's white shirt. He held it up to blot out the sun.

'Water, Mike! Give me some water!'

'Water? Why should I? You left me to die in there. You didn't bring me any water. But I'm different from you. I came back, didn't I? Yes, I came back to *watch* you die.'

'Ahhh!' With a despairing gesture, Baz turned away and sat in the dust. With difficulty he swallowed. 'Come on, Mike! For Pete's sake! Just a cupful!'

For that moment, Michael's fears were all forgotten. He felt again the small surge of excitement, and leaned against the hot rim of the pipe. 'I'll think about it,' he said at length. 'Just a cupful. That way it will take longer, won't it? Maybe a wet rag to suck.' Carefully avoiding the broken rungs, he descended and lowered the ladder to the ground.

Dancer was soon unsaddled and tethered in shade by the water's edge. Michael threw off his blanket in the sun and swam for half an hour. Water had never been so delightful. Lounging in the shallows, he fantasized about his cousin – the cracked lips, the thirst. How easy it would be for him to bring relief. He raised an arm and let the clear water trickle from his fingers – as easy as that. The sun struck warm on his skin. Poor Baz, swollen with heat; how refreshing he would find it to lie naked and let the water lap his chest and arms. And Jarra, newly dismounted from his camel, stained with travel; the waves would rinse the dust from his hair and black limbs. Michael looked at the sun through closed lashes. He imagined himself with four companions from the school CCF. Together they cast their rough uniforms on the shore and held a

girl down in the shallows. White boys and a white girl with big breasts. No, nice medium-sized breasts, and fair hair. One boy to each hand and each foot. How she would struggle – helpless as a butterfly in a spider's web. No! He was the captive, tied to four stakes. The young soldiers, and girls, drew close.

And if earlier his reason for not giving Baz a drink had been pleasure and a sense of power, afterwards it was cold anger and cruelty.

It was close on five o'clock and the intensity of the day's heat was fading, when at length Michael returned to the end of the dam. In his hand he carried a full water-bottle.

But even at the end of his strength, Baz had spirit. Uncertain what his cousin intended, he had planned a desperate attempt at escape. While Michael lay at the side of the lake, Baz had twisted a crude rope from torn strips of trouser and shirt sleeves. At the end, with the metre of line from the rusty oil drum, he had fashioned a noose. Reduced to underpants, he waited.

As Michael's head appeared at the rim of the pipe, Baz cast his line towards the projecting end of the ladder. By sheer fluke, the noose hooked cleanly over one spar. Teeth gritted with effort, feet braced against the concrete wall, Baz hauled himself upward, hand over hand. In a matter of seconds his hands were at the rim. Michael was terrified. With clenched fists he struck out and hit his cousin in the face. Baz's nails tore his arm. Then suddenly the rope parted. With a cry, Baz fell backwards and landed heavily on the concrete, almost five metres below.

By good fortune Baz was not hurt seriously, though his knee and elbow were painfully skinned. He looked up at his cousin through a cloud of flies.

'You bastard!' He nursed his elbow. 'I nearly had you that time!'

Michael was panting. 'That's right – nearly! And where's it got you?'

He unhooked the noose from the arm of the ladder and flung it aside. In the struggle he had dropped the aluminium water-bottle. He descended to retrieve it.

'Do you know what I was doing? Bringing you this!' He showed the bottle to Baz. 'And do you know why? Because I reckoned maybe you've learned your lesson by this time. Here, catch.'

He threw the bottle down. Eagerly Baz caught it and unscrewed

the cap. The metal clashed against his teeth as he tipped the life-giving water into his mouth. His throat worked. Chill and healing, the water slid down his gullet. It was the most exquisite sensation of his life.

'Oh, God!' Baz finished half the bottle and looked up.

'Is that better?' Michael smiled grimly.

'Yeah.'

'Right, then, I'll tell you what we're going to do. Now listen carefully.'

Baz flexed his knee painfully and moved into the shadow. He took another mouthful of water.

'I did set off with that Abo,' Michael said, 'Jarra. We headed west, like I said, and then down a valley into the desert. Camped there overnight – all wild flowers. But I couldn't sleep. No matter what you did, I couldn't just leave you here to die – which is more than you can say. So, I let Jarra go on – carrying a letter, written by me to the chief of police in Perth.' Michael held out his diary and pen, as if to prove the point. 'It tells him everything that's happened – where we are, what you've done, the scratches in the pipe, the dead horse, Jarra's name and tribe, everything. If we get back safe there'll be no charges. If I don't, you'll be arrested for murder, and probably spend the next ten or fifteen years in jail. And not only that, you'll never inherit Windrush – ever! So, it's in your own interests to get me back safely. Besides, I've got the rifle, and I've got other plans, too. You'll have your hands tied, for a start; and we're heading straight back to Koolamarra.'

Baz nodded wearily. 'Game, set and match. OK. When are we setting off?'

'In the morning, same as usual. Before sun-up.'

'Got to hand it to you, Mike.' Baz grinned ruefully. 'You've got more spunk than I gave you credit for.'

'No shortage of that among the Fawcetts.' The unintentional slang made Michael smirk. 'Right, I'm going down now. Anything you want?'

'Yeah. If we're heading off tomorrow morning, you can let me out now.'

Michael shook his head. 'No.'

'I thought you'd say that.' Baz finished the bottle of water. 'Right, then, you can fill this up again.' He slapped sharply at a

stinging fly and squashed the body underfoot. 'And fetch me something to keep off the flies. These are bad enough, but the mosquitoes are bloody terrible. Even fully dressed they get at you; like this,' he held out his arms, 'they'll eat me alive.'

'All right.' Michael caught the bottle. 'I'll do a deal with you. My boots for your blanket. My feet are all bruised with stones. I'm terrified I'll step on a snake.'

Baz picked up his cousin's boots and threw them over the side. 'Don't be long, eh, Mike?'

As he made the journey down the hillside to refresh all the water bottles, Michael reflected on what had occurred. He thanked heaven for the instinct and good sense that had made him insist he was not alone, that the young Aborigine was still with him. Even if Baz did not believe the story, it was a chance he dare not take. Besides, as Michael had said, he had the rifle and Baz's hands would be tied. His once charming lips tightened, crackling beneath the scabs. When they came close to Koolamarra – or close enough, so that he could complete the journey by himself with safety – it might be a good idea if Baz came no further. One bullet was easy enough. No one would ever find the grave, and if they did, his story was foolproof. He had only to describe truthfully what had happened at the dam, and say that before they reached home, Baz had run off. If he buried the rifle several miles away, no one could prove that his cousin had not been killed by a wanderer, who carried the rifle away with him. With Baz alive, Michael pondered, he would never be safe as Lord Fawcett. It would not be difficult to find someone who, for a price, would fix the brakes on his car, or arrange an 'accident' as he climbed a fence with his shotgun at Windrush.

'Here.' He dropped the water-bottle into Baz's waiting hands. 'And something to eat; got to keep your strength up.' Two tins, stew and meat, clattered to the ground.

'Yeah, I'm starving.' Baz picked them up. 'What about a tin opener? And something for the flies.'

'One thing at a time.' Michael smiled winningly. 'Back in a minute.'

But when he had descended, he lowered the ladder to the ground and walked away.

Night came. Even within the tent, with the mosquito coil

smouldering, Michael heard the incessant whining. Fifty metres away, Dancer stamped in the bushes, tossing his mane and swishing his tail against the onslaught through the long hours of darkness. Occasional cries issued from the concrete pipe, where Baz, failing to pull the torn rags about his body, was being eaten alive. Michael shivered, his eyes pinpoints in the darkness, and pulled a flap of blanket over his face to keep out the bad night air, as the Aborigine boy had taught him.

For six or seven hours the unrelenting attack continued, but as the night advanced it grew colder, and by early morning, when Michael saw from his watch that it was four-thirty and time to rise, the mosquitoes had gone.

The fire was dead. Standing at the mouth of the tent, he fastened his blanket at the throat and double-checked his boots, tapping them on the ground and peering inside with a torch. So far as such horrors as scorpions and eight-inch centipedes were concerned, Michael did not need telling twice. Sitting on a chill stone, he ate breakfast.

It was a perfect morning, cool, insectless, the best time of the day. The moon was rising and, a little to the right, the first light of dawn showed the hills in silhouette.

It had been Michael's intention to break camp, then saddle and load Dancer. Only then, when all was ready for departure, would he release Baz from his prison. But he wanted to see how his cousin had spent the night. Besides, why should he do the work? Baz could break camp. Taking up the rifle, he walked softly to the end of the dam. The scatter of concrete pipes rose above him, strangely eerie in the dawn light.

Quiet as a whisper, Michael tiptoed to the pipe where Baz was held prisoner. He halted and listened. All was silent. Softly he laid the rifle aside and set up the broken ladder. A few metres distant, half-hidden in the early light, the rope straggled on the ground. He bent to pick it up.

As he did so, the 'rope' writhed in his hands, turned, and struck him in the forearm. It was so sudden and unexpected that for the moment Michael did not even cry out. The lithe, muscular body fell from his hand. He jumped back, but not before the snake had struck a second time. He felt the blow above his ankle, the instantaneous double pressure as venom pumped from the fangs –

then nothing. Shadowy, chill as the concrete on which it lay, the snake slithered away in the darkness.

'Ahhh! Baz!' Terrified, Michael cried aloud. 'A snake! It struck me! Ahhh!'

The bites did not hurt. A chill, numb feeling, like a bruise – no more. Michael put his forearm to his mouth. With all his strength he sucked and spat. A bitter tingling on his tongue told of the poison. He sucked again.

'Mike!' Baz was shouting. 'For Christ's sake, let me out! A knife! Cut the wound with a knife. Let the blood flow; wash the poison out!'

Desperately Michael felt for his pockets and at his bare waist. The knife was in the tent. Panting, he ran back along the dam and across the few metres of hillside. On hands and knees he searched for the torch and flashed it around the groundsheets. His knife lay at the bottom of a tumbled saddle-bag.

For cutting food and tent-pegs the blade was sharp enough – but for cutting his own flesh! Sobbing, Michael tried to thrust the point into the place above his wrist where the snake had bitten him. Already a lump was forming, hard and white. His skin resisted. He pushed harder. It hurt. He desisted. Then, laying the blade against his skin, he slashed sideways. A fierce, burning pain made him cry out. The wound was superficial but blood began to flow. He sucked again, and tasted it on his tongue. Licking his arm clean, he examined the place by torchlight. The cut was an inch from the bite.

Meanwhile, his leg begun to throb. Squatting on the ground, Michael set the knife-blade against the white swelling. His teeth were gritted, his hand shook. He could not do it! With a despairing cry, he flung the knife from him. By bending double and tugging his foot, he discovered, he could reach the place with his mouth. For minutes he sucked and spat.

Steadily the pain increased, like a scald. His forearm was swollen, his lower leg also. A hot river, like an ache, ran up the inside of his thigh and formed a swelling in his groin. There was another in his armpit. Hopelessly he stumbled back towards the dam.

All the time, Baz's shouts rose from the concrete pipe. He had unravelled his clumsy rope during the night. Quickly he knotted

the ends together and cast a noose towards the end of the ladder. A score of times he missed, but at length the noose caught. Baz heaved on the line. A knot came unfastened. Torn strips of cricketing trousers trailed in the early light.

'I've had it, Baz!' Michael hung over the concrete rim. The bites in his arm and leg burned like fire. He blinked hard. His cousin swam into focus and then swam back out again.

'Come on, Mike, let me out! Have you cut it?'

'Yes.' Michael began to weep.

'Let me see . . . ! Mike! Come on, pull yourself together! Give me the rope . . . ! If you don't, I'll never get out!'

Michael's shoulders shook.

'Mike, come on! Give me the rope!'

'Yes. All right.' Grey-faced in the growing light, Michael looked up. 'The rope. I'll get it.' He moved as if to descend, then it was as if a veil cleared in his mind. 'The rope! Give *you* the rope! Whose fault is it I've been bitten? Yours, William Basil bloody Fawcett, that's who!' His eyes glared, spittle ran from his lips. 'Let you out – and you inherit Windrush, get everything you want! I should say so! You can rot in there! Rot in hell, you bloody murderer!'

Michael started for the ground. His head spun. His feet skidded from a broken rung and he fell the last few feet. He was not hurt. Lying on his back, he stared up at the concrete cliff above him. Feeling most strange, he scrambled to his feet.

'Let you out! You bastard, Baz! That's how much I'll let you out!'

He heaved the ladder sideways. It skidded along the rim of the pipe and fell with a crash.

'Ha ha! You Hear!' He rubbed spittle from his chin. 'That's the end of Windrush for you! Ha ha ha!' The life-saving rope lay at his side. He snatched it up. 'You know what I've got here – look!' Wildly he swung it so that the rope's end flicked above the edge of the pipe. 'See! But you're not going to get it – not ever!'

Unsteadily Michael ran to the edge of the dam and threw the rope over the edge. Twirling and twisting, it fell through space. He looked down on the bushes and white stones far below, and the silver levels of the lake. The morning air still carried a faint whiff of decay from the rotting horse.

Michael snorted with revulsion. As he turned back towards the pipe, by a strange quirk of the mind he was suddenly aware of the beauty all around him – the wild valley, the flawless blue sky, the peaks of the mountain range touched with sunshine. Abruptly he sat down. The poison fumed in his head. His breathing was tight; his eyes swam in and out of focus.

For a minute, and then another minute, Michael stared at the concrete beyond his bare knees. Raising his head, he was surprised to see a small group of people approaching. He blinked hard. His parents were among them, and Steffie, and one of the masters from school.

‘Hello.’ He smiled foolishly and fell backwards. ‘I’m just going to have a sleep.’

His mother leaned above him. Another figure joined her. It was his sergeant from the CCF, black-eyed and moustached. Their faces merged.

‘That’s right, boy. You lie there.’ With a firm hand the sergeant smoothed Michael’s hair, and held the places where the snake had bitten him. His hand was hot, hot as fire.

‘That’s better.’ Michael smiled.

Softly the moustache touched his brow as the sergeant leaned forward to kiss him.

‘Mmmm.’

Far off, someone was shouting. The sergeant laughed and stood back. With a confident arm he pulled Steffie against his bright buckle. His mother laughed. Everyone was laughing.

Michael’s eyes flickered open as the first dot of sun brightened on a far mountain slope. An early fly settled on his cheek. It ran forward.

Baz’s cries, sixteen years old and frightened, echoed across the red valley.

At eleven o’clock, Jarra, the Aborigine boy, rode down the hillside on his camel. For two burning days and three nights he had communed with his ancestors and tribal gods in a far valley; gods who in the ever-present Dreamtime passed to and fro between earth and sky through the summits of the hills. His black body was finger-painted, white and red. Feathers and sticks were in his hair.

The camel knelt. Light-limbed, Jarra slid to the ground.



Ignoring the shouts that rose from the concrete pipe, he advanced along the dam.

From far off he had seen the kites, homing-in on the abandoned earthworks. Brown-pinioned and fierce-eyed, they hopped about the body. Reluctantly, as he approached waving a stick, they flew off. There was a lot of red. Already, scarcely five hours after Michael's death, the flies massed in his eye sockets. Accustomed to death, the Aborigine boy gazed down. He saw the slashed forearm and thickened ankle, and crouching closer, the twin purple punctures in the bloodless skin. He rose and looked around. On stones and stumps the kites sat waiting.

As Jarra's head appeared above the wall of his concrete prison, Baz looked up. He wore underpants and a torn shirt with no sleeves; his skin shone with grease and sweat. The painted face astonished him.

'Thank God!' He hid a grin. 'Chuck us the rope, Abo mate. I've almost had it in here.'

The black eyes registered nothing.

'The rope.' Baz mimed a rope and climbing. 'Throw it over.'

'Brother.' Jarra looked along the dam. Michael's body was hidden beneath the clambering kites. 'Dead.'

'Yeah, I know. Not brother, though – cousin. A snake got him.' He shielded his eyes with a forearm. 'The rope, eh!'

For a long time the stern black eyes regarded the lean white boy with hanging hair. Without further words, Jarra descended and lowered the ladder to the ground. Heedless of Baz's shouts, as if they did not exist, he returned to his camel and led it and Dancer along the hillside and down to the water's edge.

The young stallion was limping. Placidly he stood while the black boy examined his hoof. A long thorn, hardened by sun, had penetrated deeply at the side of his shoe. With a sharp knife Jarra cut round it, and pulled it from the hoof with white teeth.

For the rest of that day, standing knee-deep in the lake, the young Aborigine fished with spear and line. As he caught the bright fish, he slit the bodies wide and spread them on a rock to dry. And when night came, he wrapped himself in a blanket by his fire, staring towards the hills and bright constellations, and became one with the land that owned him.

Long before sunrise he resumed his travels. His body swayed

rhythmically to the movements of the camel. The rifle rested across his knees, the box of ammunition nestled in his small pouch of possessions. He turned his head. Tied to his saddle by a length of rope that he had rescued from trees below the dam, Dancer followed quietly behind. If Jarra thought of the white boy imprisoned at the dam his furrowed young face did not reveal it.

By midday Baz had stopped sweating. Crouched within the pipe, he held the ragged shirt above his head to keep off the sun, for there was no shelter. His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. With difficulty he licked dry lips and stared at the empty water-bottle.

'Help!' His voice was harsh, his panting audible in the silence.

The white walls radiated heat. Above him, rattling their feathers, two kites stared down. A dozen times he had chased them off, but always they returned. Flies crawled over him. So many had stung his neck and arms that he scarcely felt them any more. In the midday heat even the birds on the hillsides had stopped calling. The only sounds were the shrill scrape of crickets, as if the sun itself was singing, and the death-hum of the flies.

'Help!'

Outside on the dam, a few birds still hopped about the remains of his cousin, searching for scraps on the drying bones. The tent and saddle lay abandoned, as Michael had left them the previous morning. The savage red landscape shimmered in the heat.

*Postscript : Fifteen months later, Sheila and Eddie Snark flew out from Koolamarra to take over their inheritance.*

Rebecca Bradley

## Tea leaves

I watched Edna covertly as she folded and mutilated the morning paper. 'The horoscopes are on page seventeen,' I said mildly, as usual. As usual, she ignored my remark. She had been ignoring my remarks for most of twenty-seven years. I sipped my cup of tea.

'Aha,' she said at last, folding the paper over on page seventeen. 'Taurus. Listen, Alonzo. "Take great care in the morning when disturbances will arise, but look forward to a restful afternoon." That's not very exciting, is it. Would you like to hear yours?'

I didn't, but I knew from experience that she would read it anyway. I said nothing.

'Here it is – Virgo. "A great change is coming for you today. Look forward to a restful afternoon after disturbances in the morning." Why Alonzo, yours is almost the same as mine. How strange!'

For once, I did find Edna's obsessional reading of the horoscopes of interest, but I didn't answer as a matter of principle. I always refuse to answer to the name of Alonzo, just as I refuse to call my wife Velisande. My name is Arthur. My wife's name is Edna. No crackpot numerologist in the world is going to change that, at least not so far as I'm concerned.

'Edna,' I said, 'your tea is getting cold.' She reproached me with a face of hurt resignation, but she did pick up her cup. That look was so habitual and practised that I'm sure it had become a conditioned response to the syllables of 'Edna', like the saliva of Pavlov's dogs.

'Disturbances in the morning . . . ' she mused aloud. 'Oh, I hope it doesn't mean that dreadful Mrs Wilcox is coming to the seance. She has the most ghastly aura, and she's so selfish – nobody else can get a message in edgewise. Did I tell you about the last time she came, when . . . '

Edna had told me, twice in fact, but she proceeded to tell me

again. I turned my ears off and let my mind wander. What a silly woman she was! Of course, I hadn't always thought so, which remains a perpetual source of sorrow and embarrassment to me now. There was a time when I found her supernatural leanings alluring, even sensuous, when I enjoyed the role of sceptical man-of-the-world squiring the slim young mystic from seance to seance. How long did it take me to realize that mystic meant fatuous, and that the dreamy dark eyes were the windows of a vacant mind? Not long. Not long at all.

The penny started to plummet on our wedding night, which I spent miserably in the armchair of our modest honeymoon suite. Edna had observed distressing portents in, of all things, the way the chicken bones were disposed on my plate after the main course of our wedding supper. She proceeded to confirm the inauspiciousness of the night by casting the *I Ching* whilst I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom, tremulous with anticipation. A simple case of bridal nerves, you might say; but that night, in many ways, turned out to be symbolic of our entire marriage.

Have you any idea at all how many supernatural, spiritualistic, parapsychological, astrological and extraterrestrial fads can come and go in the space of twenty-seven years? To tell the truth, I lost count about a decade ago, but I know for certain that Edna picked up each and every one of them, normally retaining the most irritating features of each when its main vogue had ended.

The ouija board phase, for example, went on for nearly six months. It finished only when Edna left the planchette – the little triangular plate with wheels on the bottom which scuttles around the ouija board spelling out messages – on the floor, where I stepped on it and was sent flying into the fireplace. Naturally Edna was not concerned about my broken ankle; she was too upset about her broken planchette.

She had several periods as a spirit medium. All of them were pretty grim from my standpoint, but the most wearing was the time when her spirit guide was an ancient Egyptian pharaoh called (I think) Ramopatra. Predictably, the fact that I could not find this pharaoh mentioned in any Egyptian history book did not deter my Edna. I didn't mind the others quite so much, and was actually quite amused by an Red Indian known as Chief Thunderbottom; but I am even now embittered by the deleterious effects of all that

rapping and turning on my heirloom rosewood table.

Then there was the black magic phase, when Edna (who had already become Velisande) joined a local witches' coven for the celebration of black masses. There were a few perks to this period; I am very partial to chicken, for example, and she never seemed to come home from a sacrifice without one. When roast goat began to appear on the table, however, I drew the line. There was no telling where it would end.

I think the worst time was her conversion to a cult which practised a combination of higher thought, yoga, Vegan diet, spoon-bending, and astral projection following vigorous bodily exercise, but abstained from almost anything else you could name. It was a nightmare. The death of her guru from malnutrition was, I'm sure, as welcome a release for him as for me, though Edna retains a sneaking fondness for lentil and soybean hash to this very day.

Ah, the endless series of minor and major irritations! The time my boss and his wife came over for bridge, and the only pack of cards in the house was a Tarot deck. The black cat she got as a familiar, that had kittens in my golf bag so that I couldn't play for six weeks. The palm-reader who performed some expensive sleight-of-hand with my cheque book, and the mental telepathist who sensed my cherished bottle of old brandy through two closed doors. The list goes on and on.

A gasp from Edna broke into my bitter musings. 'Alonzo!' she cried, 'Look! Look at the tea leaves!' She was staring at the bottom of her cup with an expression of horror and despair, her face an unbecoming green. 'I can see death in the tea leaves, Alonzo! Sudden relentless death!'

'You're wrong, my dear,' I said calmly. 'There's nothing in the tea leaves. I put it in the sugar.'

She looked at me stupidly, then choked and turned an even less becoming purple. Her throat rattled and she crashed down on to the floor, overturning her chair and the table in her final death throes before at last she was still. I sighed. It would be a busy morning – disposing of the body, cleaning up the mess she'd just made, laying false trails for her friends and the police and so forth. Fortunately, we could both be sure of a restful afternoon.

# Johnny Yen

## Upstarts

So far, it had not been a profitable morning for the chimney-sweep. There was too much competition in the area. It wouldn't be so bad if he was paid more for each job. As it was, though, he and the boy had to work from morning to night six days a week just to live.

They both hated the work, but starving to death was not an attractive alternative. The boy never got much to eat from the sweep, anyway. He had been better fed in the workhouse.

It was only the well-off who could afford to have their chimneys cleaned. The sweep was intensely jealous of all of them. Like others of his class, he had little love of the status quo; but, unlike them, he had ambition. It was this ambition that made his work so galling.

The problem was that the system was run *by* the nobs *for* the nobs. There was no earthly justice in the Protestant work ethic, for no matter how many hours and how much effort he put in, he had no chance of aspiring to the heights of the leisured classes.

But he knew that there must be other ways round it. After all, how had the propertied gentry come into their wealth in the first place, if not by crookery and stealth? And it didn't matter that he might not have been born into the nobility. If he had the money, they'd *have* to respect him. He lived in hope. When the time came, he would seize his chance with both hands and bleed it dry.

'Come on, yer little urchin,' he growled as the boy lagged behind. 'We'll try one more 'ouse, then we'll try another distric'. There ain't nothin' 'ere.'

The last house they called at was one they hadn't tried before. The door was answered by a man so scruffy that the only thing that set him apart from them was his accent.

'Sweep yer chimney, guvnor?' inquired the sweep, smiling obsequiously.

The gentleman looked at them blankly for a second, then he became excited. 'Yes, yes! Come in at once,' he exclaimed. 'That's it; sweep my chimney; an excellent idea.'

The sweep glanced knowingly at the boy. The man was clearly some kind of eccentric. He had come across this sort before.

The house hadn't been cleaned for years, and everywhere was thick with dust. It smelt sickly. Most houses belonging to such recluses merely smelt slightly musty. But this one smelt of filth and corruption, as if all the mice and rats had come out to die.

It was clearly a rich house, though. The sweep noticed with interest the crystal chandeliers, the paintings on the walls and the antique clocks and furniture. In the dining-room, both of them saw the silver cutlery scattered over the huge oak table that dominated the room. The sweep's heart raced, and he had difficulty in containing his excitement.

The man laughed indulgently. 'As you can see, the place is in quite a mess,' he said. 'I really can't be bothered with such menial things as keeping the house tidy, and I don't like having people constantly fussing round. Must keep the chimneys clear, though, otherwise I'll choke to death.'

He laughed again, and the sweep noticed the brick dust that covered his shoulders like dandruff. When he made any movement, it came up in clouds.

'I'm a scientist, you see,' the man went on. 'An inventor. I spend most of my time working on new ideas. You see, I don't believe in inventing solely for the purpose of progress. What I'm trying to do is create things that preserve what is good about today's society. Certain things must remain the same.'

He was smiling and looking eagerly at the two of them, his large grey eyes darting from one to the other. The sweep surveyed him in uneasy silence, embarrassed by his familiarity.

'But there,' he resumed, 'I'm keeping you from your work. This is the only chimney I want you to clean. I hope you don't mind if I leave you to it. I have work to do in my laboratory. I shall settle up with you presently.'

The sweep was thoughtful as he laid out a pair of grimy blankets under the fireplace to catch the soot. He moved nervously.

'Notice anyfing, lad?' he asked the boy with a sly grin.

The boy shook his head.

'No? You'll never get nowhere,' he sneered. 'No servants, see? No one to watch all the toff's silver.'

The boy shuddered. In their predicament, there was no room for high Christian morals. Anything was worth pinching if they could get away with it. But his master's greed disconcerted him. The sweep was obsessive, and the boy was sure no good could come of it.

He looked at the little man with inward distaste. The sweep had taken his battered topper off to reveal his thinning pate, his remaining greasy black hair combed forward and wound round like a turban to cover his baldness. He kept one eye almost permanently closed in a squint. The other was beady and rolling. He was rubbing his hands in anticipation.

'Look sharp, lad,' he said. 'You be getting started while I goes an 'as a look round, like. Crafty, see?' He tapped his forehead with a blackened forefinger.

Resignedly, the boy began edging his way up the chimney shaft, bruising his knees and elbows, and stubbing his fingers. The sweep himself would be the only one to benefit from his thieving, of course. The boy wouldn't see a farthing of it.

He took his time now that his master wasn't there to nag and prod him. There was no hurry. Soon, though, his lungs were filled with an odour so foul that he almost retched. It was putrid; rotten and evil. He breathed through his mouth, for it became still more powerful the higher he ascended. Sometimes he came across dead birds in chimneys, and he could only imagine that this was what the odour was. It smelt more like a whole flock of them rotting away, though.

The inside of the chimney became clammy. Then it was slimy. The boy found difficulty in getting purchase on the bricks. He decided to get out. No one would know that the chimney had not been cleaned properly.

As he clambered down, a voice floated up to him.

'Surely you haven't finished yet, boy?' said the gentleman, laughing a little.

'No sir,' exclaimed the boy, startled. He scrambled back up. 'Be done soon, though, sir; not much to do.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said the gentleman. 'I'd say that there was *lots* to do yet.'



The boy was puzzled by the gentleman's words. Soon, though, the sweep would be back. They could finish the job and be off.

He was not to know that the sweep, a silver spoon in his filthy hand, was sprawled across the floor in the room next door, his head severed cleanly from his body. How could either of them guess that he would encounter a lethal man-trap in this respectable house?

The boy reached the slippery area again. He wedged himself against the wall and pushed with his feet. He could see light ahead of him. Suddenly his way was blocked by iron bars.

He called out. 'Sir? Are you there, sir? I can't go no further, if you please, sir. I'll 'ave to come down.'

'I think not,' smiled the gentleman, pulling a lever by the dusty fireplace.

There was a grating sound, and in a second the boy's exit was blocked by more iron bars. He was trapped in a space six feet long.

'Sir! Sir!' he cried, panicking.

'It's no use shouting,' said the gentleman smugly. 'No one will hear you.'

The boy fell silent. He was fearful, but not without hope, for he expected the sweep to return any second.

'Before I kill you,' the not-so-gentle gentleman went on reasonably, 'I shall explain. I told you I was an inventor. I specialize in designing things intended to help preserve the old order. The revolution in France has demonstrated the need for the upper classes to defend themselves. The masses are beginning to take too many liberties, and it is up to individuals like myself to keep them in their places. Take yourself and your master, for example; coming into the houses of gentlefolk to steal from them simply cannot be tolerated.'

With this, he pulled another lever. The boy heard the sound of stone upon stone, and then he was being showered with soot and other, damper, stuff. The stench of decay was sickening.

The boy scrambled at the bars, gibbering with fright. But already the walls of the chimney were closing in upon him. For the first time in his short but unpleasant career as a sweep's boy, he was assailed by feelings of claustrophobia. This sensation was soon replaced by one of intense pain as his bones were bent and broken by the pressure of the bricks. Soon he was squashed flat, his fresh

remains mingling with those older ones already encrusted round the inside of the chimney.

John H. Snellings

## First come, first serve

'Good morning.'

Reluctantly, Bob Morrison glanced up as his wife came into the kitchen and shuffled lazily across the room. He made no effort to return her greeting. He just sat there, watching her across the top of his coffee cup. Her hair was filled with huge plastic curlers and her plump body was wrapped in the brown terry-cloth robe that he'd grown to hate so much.

Frowning, he looked away and put his cup down. 'Why didn't you get me up this morning?' he asked quietly.

Helen poured herself a cup of coffee then went to the refrigerator and brought out a huge container of margarine. She kicked the door shut then sat down at the table across from him. Her face was long, puffy and devoid of make-up. Her eyes were still filled with sleep and her lips were dry, puckered. She looked like death warmed over.

'I didn't hear the alarm,' she said finally. 'I must have really been zonked out.'

Bob could have said something to that, but he let it pass. He learned a long time ago the less he said to her the better things were. Of course, sometimes he just couldn't help himself. Lighting a cigarette, he glanced at the dirty dishes stacked along the countertop and the stove.

'Looks like you had the whole neighbourhood over here last night,' he said.

'Almost,' Helen replied. With a flabby arm, she reached out and pulled the toaster across the table. 'A few of the girls came over and we sat around and talked for a while.' She dropped two pieces of bread into the toaster then sat back waiting, like a vulture waiting on a dying animal.

'And ate,' Bob added, glancing at her thick waist.

Helen ignored his remark.

'Speaking of eating,' she said. 'Aren't you going to have some breakfast? You can't live on coffee alone you know. When you end up in the hospital with ulcers, you'll wish you'd listened to me.'

Bob picked up his coffee and sipped at it slowly.

'That's the trouble with you, Bob,' Helen continued. 'You never listen to me. How many times have I asked you to quit smoking? You know how bad it is for your health. You probably have cancer already. You're up to almost three packs a day. And you've got the whole damn house smelling of cigarette smoke. I can hardly breath at night without gagging.'

The toast popped up and Helen immediately grabbed a piece and plastered it with a thick layer of margarine.

'Did you hear what I said, Bob?'

'Yes, Helen. I heard you. It just so happens that I enjoy smoking. It's one of the few pleasure I have left in this stinking world.'

Bob crushed out his cigarette then purposely lit another one. Everyday, he thought, it was the same old thing. She talked, and he listened. She criticized, and he sat there taking it. Hour after hour he listened to her ploughing up the same old ground. He was slowly going over the edge.

'You want this other piece of toast?' she asked.

'No, knock yourself out.'

Helen sat back in her chair, eating, the toast crunching loudly in the small stagnant kitchen.

Bob drained his coffee cup and sat there, staring at her across the table. What happened to the slim, attractive girl he'd married almost twelve years ago? The woman sitting across from him now was a stranger. Far from being slim. Even farther from being attractive. It was unreal the way she had changed. The soft, sweet voice he'd once known was now harsh and grating. It worked on his nerves like fingernails scraping on a blackboard.

'What time did you come in last night?' Helen asked suddenly.

Bob was silent.

'Did you hear me, Bob?'

'What did you say?'

Helen sighed. 'I said,' she repeated, dragging out the words, 'What time did you get home last night?'

'It wasn't last night, it was more like two this morning.'

'Are you working again tonight?'

'As far as I know, yes.'

'I wish you would stay home for a change. I hardly ever see you anymore.'

'I told you when I got this promotion I'd be working late hours.'

Helen slid two more pieces of bread into the toaster.

'I know, but I never thought it'd be like this. You're down at that office almost eighteen hours a day. You may as well take all your clothes and stay there permanently.'

Bob rose slowly to his feet then went to the coffee pot and poured himself another cup. He turned and gazed out of the window at the trees bending in the wind and the huge black clouds gathering steadily overhead. It was going to be one of those days, he thought. As if things weren't bad enough already.

'Looks like you'd want to stay home once in a while. I sit here day and night, alone. The least you could do is try to come home at a reasonable hour. We never do anything anymore.'

Bob reached down and switched the radio on.

'Are you listening to me, Bob?'

'Yes,' he replied, forcing himself to stay calm. 'I can't help it if the boss has a lot of work for me to do. I'm the only accountant he's got, you know.'

'Well, you're the only husband I've got . . . or had I should say.'

Bob turned his attention to the radio and tried to pick up Rock 104.

'Why do you have to have that stupid radio on first thing in the morning?' Helen asked sourly.

'I'd like to listen to the weather report, if you don't mind.'

'I don't. It's that long-haired rock and roll I can't stand to hear. So, turn it down.' Helen plucked the toast from the toaster and dug once again into the margarine.

Bob eased his breath out, then turned down the volume. He ran his hands through his thick brown hair and walked slowly back to the table. He was a tall man with a face that looked as if it belonged to a soap-opera star. Unlike Helen, his features only subtracted years from his age. He was forty but looked thirty. And she hated him for it. He sat heavily in the chair and crushed out his cigarette.

Drumming his fingers against the table, he pondered his situation. He couldn't go on living with Helen, not without going insane. He was glad he had gone ahead and made that appointment at Strickland and Associates. He had considered every angle and this was the only solution. He only wished he'd taken this step sooner.

Bob glanced up at Helen just as someone knocked on the door.

With the back of her hand, she wiped margarine from her mouth. 'Come on in!' she yelled. 'It's open!'

Bob lifted his coffee cup, then almost dropped it when Linda Mathis walked in.

'It's only me, Helen,' she said, closing the door. 'I was wondering if you could let me have a little coffee until I go to the market.'

'Sure, help yourself, Linda. It's on the counter, near the stove.'

Nervously, Bob sipped at his coffee and watched Linda cross the room. She was wearing a red tank top, cut-off denim shorts and a pair of red and white sandals. Her legs were long and shapely and the tight fitting top barely hid her full breasts. Her face, like her arms and legs, was tanned to a golden brown and her skin seemed to glow flawlessly. She was truly a beautiful woman, he thought.

Suddenly, Bob felt Helen staring at him and he quickly tore his eyes away. No use giving Helen more ammunition, he told himself.

Helen's eyes bored into Bob for several moments before she turned and spoke to Linda again. 'How are things with you, Linda?' she asked. 'You found yourself a man yet?'

Linda snapped the lid on to her bowl then walked over and stood next to Helen. 'Not yet,' she laughed.

'What's wrong? A sexy thing like yourself should have men crawling all over you.'

'I do, but most of them are the wrong kind. A good man is hard to find these days.'

'Don't I know it,' Helen replied, leering at her husband.

Forcing a smile, Bob fumbled another cigarette from his pocket. His heart thudded. His breathing speeded up. It'd been a long time since he'd been with a woman. He and Helen had stopped having sex years ago. Looking at Linda, with all that beautiful flesh, he was about to go up the wall.

'Listen, Helen, I've got to run. I've got a thousand things to do. I'm going to have a yard sale tomorrow and I've got to drag everything out of the garage and see what I want to get rid of. If you're not doing anything later why don't you come over and give me a hand?'

'That sounds like fun. I may just do that. It's certain I won't have anything to do.'

'Well then, I'll see you later. Bye, Bob.'

Speechless, Bob only nodded his head.

She threw him one last glance. A look that, had Helen been watching, would have seemed to linger just a little too long. Smiling, Linda turned and walked out of the door, leaving the air filled with the sweet odour of her perfume.

When the door closed, a heavy silence fell over the room.

Bob sat with his elbows on the table, watching Helen. He knew what was coming next. Any moment now.

'You just couldn't resist it could you, Bob?'

Right on time, he thought.

'Did you hear me, Bob?' she snapped.

Frowning, he nodded.

'I saw you glaring at Linda, like some sex-starved maniac. Did you think I wasn't watching you? You could at least have the decency not to do things like that in front of me. I suppose you'd like to take that little whore out and screw her, wouldn't you?'

Bob glared at her, his face tightening. Of course I'm sex starved, you pig, he thought. I haven't had a piece of ass for almost three years. And yes I'd love to take her out and screw her. I'd love to get her in the back seat of my car and put her long legs up on my shoulders then pound the hell out of her. He would have liked telling Helen those things but he didn't feel like doing battle this morning. She loved to argue but he hated it. Something had to be decided today, he couldn't stand living with her another minute.

He pushed his chair back and stood up. He dropped his cigarette into the ashtray, not bothering to put it out. Let the damn smoke choke her to death.

'I've got to go,' he said.

Helen remained seated. 'What time will you be home tonight?'

'Around eleven, I suppose.'

'I won't be waiting up for you,' Helen said.

Thank God for that, he thought. If she'd been waiting up for him all these nights, he wouldn't be here today. The only way he could tolerate being in the same room with her for a long period of time was when she was asleep. Even then, it wasn't easy. She snored.

'Did you hear me, Bob?'

Bob simply looked at her then, sighing heavily, he opened the door and walked out, slamming it behind him.

'You're right on time, Mr Morrison.' The two men met in the centre of the room and shook hands.

'I always try to be punctual.'

Theodore Strickland waved his hand at the black leather chair opposite his desk. 'Please, have a seat.'

'Thank you,' Bob said, nervously.

Strickland sat down behind his desk then plucked his pipe from the ashtray and lit it, sending rapid clouds of smoke towards the ceiling. He was a big man with salt-and-pepper hair and a broad smile that sat well on his rugged face. The pipe looked tiny in his huge hand.

Smoke trailing from his nostrils, Strickland drew up closer to his desk and looked firmly at Morrison.

'Now, Mr Morrison,' he began, 'the first thing I must ask you is how you learned of our facility.'

'Bo Peterson,' Bob replied.

'I'm sorry, the name strikes no chords.'

'He's a man I work with at the plant. He gave me your card.'

'Has he used our services?'

'Yes, he told me you were the place I should come to. He's a changed man now, thanks to you. I've never seen a guy so happy and contented. You really helped the guy. I was getting worried about his mental condition. Of course, everything's fine now.'

'Good. Glad to hear it. We like nothing better than a satisfied customer.' Strickland sucked on his pipe again then returned it to the ashtray and opened the manila folder lying on the desk in front of him. The first thing he noticed was the three by five photograph. It was a picture of a small plump woman in her mid-fifties, standing out in the lawn, a huge split-level house behind her. She wasn't smiling. He shuffled through the papers, reading bits and



pieces, making mental notes as he worked towards the back of the file.

Bob lit a cigarette and waited anxiously for him to finish.

'Looks like all the forms are in order,' Strickland said finally, returning the papers to their neat bundle inside the folder. He closed the file, put it aside then placed his huge hands on top of the desk, interlocking the fingers. 'Still, there are a few more questions I need to ask you.'

Bob shifted in his chair. 'All right,' he said, leaning forward, flicking his ashes into the ashtray.

Strickland removed his pipe, slid the ashtray towards the edge of the desk, closer to Morrison.

'First of all,' Strickland began, 'I see you have no children.'

'That's right. We never got around to the subject of raising a family. We were too busy fighting.'

'That's sad, Mr Morrison. But, it's just as well. It will probably be to your advantage. We'd rather our customers be childless. Although we have handled people with children it's a lot better for everyone when there aren't any. Sometimes it only creates hardships and hardships are what we try to eliminate. We only want to help people with their difficulties, not add to them. You have also stated that you've been to a marriage counsellor on two different occasions. June, 1971 and October, 1978.'

'That's correct, but it didn't help.'

'Well, the fact that you've tried is all that we're interested in. We don't like to put our services into effect unless we are sure the marriage is truly beyond repair. We had one case, when we first opened our facility, where a young boy, married maybe three years, used our services, then blamed us for the final results. It seemed that he'd had second thoughts, but by then, of course, it was too late. He had wanted to try and save his marriage, work things out, start over. So you see, we need to know that our customers are absolutely sure that our way is the only alternative.'

Bob laughed shortly. 'I assure you, sir, our marriage is beyond repair. You are my only hope. This is the only way.'

'No chance of divorce?'

'No way. She'd take half of everything I own. And I worked my ass off and paid for everything. I'm not about to let her take it from

me. I don't want her to have a single penny. She doesn't deserve it. She does nothing but sit on her ass and feed that fat face of hers. I'd burn in hell before I'd let her take things from me.' Bob crushed his cigarette angrily into the ashtray.

'Calm down, Mr Morrison. I didn't mean to get you all worked up. I just need to know that you're sure you want our assistance. You know, once the money is paid and the final OK is given, there is no turning back. No changing your mind.'

Bob laughed again. 'I'm sure, Mr Strickland,' he said. 'Believe me, I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I've thought of nothing but this for weeks now.'

'I do believe you, Mr Morrison. And I am convinced we're what you need at this point.'

'Does that mean my application for assistance has been approved?'

'Well, it will be as soon as one other little matter is taken care of.'

Bob stared at him for a moment, waiting for further instructions, then he suddenly realized what Strickland was referring to.

'Oh, of course, I forgot,' he said, reaching inside his jacket. He brought out a bulky envelope then slid forward in his chair and handed it across the desk to Strickland. 'The money is all there.'

Strickland took the envelope, opened it and dumped its contents on to the desk. One hand on the stack, he fingered through the bills, counting. There were thirty, one-hundred dollar bills in all. He returned the money to the envelope then placed it inside the folder. He opened his desk drawer and brought out a rubber stamp and pad. Working the stamp against the pad, making sure there was plenty of ink, he slid the file forward and brought the stamp down hard against the cover. When he lifted it away the word **APPROVED** was permanently affixed there in red block letters.

Strickland looked up at Morrison and smiled.

'That's it then,' he said. 'From this second on, Helen Morrison is no longer your problem.'

Bob smiled back at him with relief and amazement.

Strickland put the stamp and pad away. 'Well, you seem very pleased, Mr Morrison. We like to see our customers happy.'

'Oh, I'm happy all right. But, it seems strange, I mean, it's hard to believe I'm in here and I've filled out an application to have my wife murdered.'

Strickland threw up his hand. 'Please Mr Morrison, or may I call you Bob now?'

'Please.'

'Bob, we don't like to use that word around here. We like to think of it as helping our fellow man, or woman I should add, out of a difficult and embarrassing situation.' Strickland slid his chair back then stood up and walked to the window. 'And what's so strange about it, Bob?' he asked. 'Life is based on applications. There are applications for a job, applications for buying a house, applications for buying a car, renting an apartment, trying to get a loan, getting a licence for driving a car, they have applications to apply for welfare, to adopt children, to get married, you have to apply for a passport to go abroad and I'm sure there are hundreds of others. Seems like there's an application for everything. So, why not one for getting rid of someone not wanted?'

'I can see your point. Have women come to you too?'

'This may come to a surprise to you, Bob, but the bulk of our customers are women.'

'I should have guessed.'

'Yes, it seems that women are less content with their mates than we men are.' Strickland came back to the desk and sat down again. 'But the worse part of it is, they usually pay for our services with their husband's money. In effect, he's paying for his own demise.'

'Boy, talk about a kick in the head.'

'Exactly. Sometimes it really gets under my skin, but I do have to make a living.'

'How soon before . . . you know . . . ?'

'It usually takes two days to set things up. Our field operators are very careful as well as efficient. They make absolutely sure there are no witnesses before they take a client. We refer to them as clients, it sounds a lot better than victims. Anyway, it takes many hours of observation and planning. Of course, in your case, we may have it done tomorrow. Your wife doesn't work and she's home alone most of the time so I'd think our operators could easily take her first thing in the morning.'

'What will you do? How does it happen . . . I mean, will there

be any pain?’

‘Do you want there to be?’

‘Of course not. I don’t care anything about her, but I don’t want to be sadistic about it either.’

‘Well, you don’t have to worry. We simply put her to sleep and take her to Room C.’

‘Room C?’

Strickland leaned back in his chair. ‘We have a room in the basement we refer to as Room C. It’s a crematorium. All our clients are taken there. No body, no sign of foul play, no murder. Poof. Gone in a flash. They simply vanish off the face of the earth. Or should I say across the earth, because we spread their ashes to the four winds.’

Bob sat back and lit up another cigarette. He couldn’t believe it. Tomorrow, he’d finally be rid of Helen. He’d be free. He could live again. The house, the boat, the car, it’d all be his and his alone. He could finally put them all to use. Parties, booze and women. He could make up for all he’d missed out on. But most important of all, he wouldn’t have to listen to that damn voice anymore. It was almost too good to be true. But he wasn’t going to pinch himself to see if he were dreaming. If this was a dream, he wanted it to continue.

Suddenly, the intercom buzzed.

Strickland leaned forward, pressed the button.

‘Yes.’

The secretary’s voice came through the speaker.

‘Sir, I have the new approved files from Mr Chadwick and Mr Rosenberg. Shall I bring them in?’

‘Yes, please, Susan.’ He let the button go and turned to Morrison. ‘Well Bob, do you have any more questions before we wrap this up?’

‘No, Mr Strickland, I guess you’ve covered everything.’

The door opened and a tall, attractive blonde walked across the room and handed Strickland a stack of manila folders. She wore a black skirt slit up the front and Bob caught a glimpse of thigh as she turned and left the room. Whistling behind his breath, he turned his attention back to Strickland. He was sitting there, rubbing his chin, studying the top folder. Something about it had caught his full attention. He removed it from the stack and opened it up.

Another fat envelope dropped on to the desk along with a three by five photograph. Bob only had time to make out that it was a picture of a man before Strickland snatched it up. He watched Strickland study the photograph, then scan the application in the folder. His smile turned into a frown.

'Well, well,' he said, returning the items to the folder. He slid it aside, reached forward and pressed the intercom button. 'Susan, will you send up Charlie and Everett from Room C right away. Thank you.' He sat back and reached for his pipe once again. 'Looks like this just isn't your day, Bob.'

Bob straightened in his chair. 'What do you mean? I thought my application was approved.'

'It was, but too late I'm afraid.'

Bob looked at him, puzzled. 'What are you talking about?'

Strickland placed his hand on top of the file he had just closed. 'These are the files that were approved yesterday. And guess whose name is on this one? Yours, Bob. It seems that your wife has beaten you to the punch. She filed an application a week ago. Hers was approved before yours and remember I told you, once they're approved there's no . . . '

'Wait a damn minute! You can't be serious! You can't . . . '

'I'm afraid we'll have to. We have to honour the applications in the order they are approved.'

Bob stood up. 'You mean, because she got hers approved before mine that you're going to . . . you're fucking crazy.'

'I don't like this anymore than you do, Bob. I rather liked you. I'm sorry it has to . . . '

The door opened and two men walked in. They were big men, dressed in white trousers and T-shirts, with huge arms and thick necks. They looked like football players.

Strickland stood up and lit his pipe.

'Boys,' he said behind a cloud of smoke. 'This is our new client. Would you escort him to Room C, please.'

Bob looked at him, horror-stricken. 'You can't do this,' he muttered. 'I paid you my money. I . . . I'll double it . . . triple it . . . anything! You name your price!' He moved towards the desk.

Hands like steel claws grabbed his arms and started hauling him backwards, towards the door.

Bob struggled to free himself, but the two men only tightened their grip. 'You can't do this to me!' he screamed.

'I didn't do it to you,' Strickland corrected him. 'Your wife did. But I do feel sad about the situation. Of course, on the other hand, you are saving my field operators a lot of time and trouble. I apologize for my lack of compassion, but I do run a business here, and this has to be done. There is a bright side to all this you know. Tomorrow morning, your wife will be going to Room C as well.'

'You lousy sonofabitch!'

With little effort, the two men pulled Morrison through the doorway, kicking the door shut behind them.

Strickland sat down and drew from his pipe. He could still hear Morrison screaming as they dragged him towards the elevator. A tiny bell chimed, the elevator doors opened, then he heard nothing. He put his pipe back into the ashtray and went through the new folders, collecting all the money envelopes. There were fourteen in all. Forty-two thousand dollars. Not bad, he thought, for one day's work.

Smiling in spite of himself, he gathered the folders and placed them in the box at the corner of his desk. The tag at the front of the box read NIGHT SHIFT.

The name on the top folder, Helen Morrison.

Stephen King

## Grey matter

They had been predicting a norther all week and along about Thursday we got it, a real screamer that piled up eight inches by four in the afternoon and showed no signs of slowing down. The usual five or six were gathered around the Reliable in Henry's Nite-Owl, which is the only little store on this side of Bangor that stays open right around the clock.

Henry don't do a huge business – mostly, it amounts to selling the college kids their beer and wine – but he gets by and it's a place for us old duffers on Social Security to get together and talk about who's died lately and how the world's going to hell.

This afternoon Henry was at the counter; Bill Pelham, Bertie Connors, Carl Littlefield, and me was tipped up by the stove. Outside, not a car was moving on Ohio Street, and the ploughs was having hard going. The wind was socking drifts across that looked like the backbone on a dinosaur.

Henry'd only had three customers all afternoon – that is, if you want to count in blind Eddie. Eddie's about seventy, and he ain't completely blind. Runs into things, mostly. He comes in once or twice a week and sticks a loaf of bread under his coat and walks out with an expression on his face like: *there, you stupid sonsabitches, fooled you again.*

Bertie once asked Henry why he never put a stop to it.

'I'll tell you,' Henry said. 'A few years back the Air Force wanted twenty million dollars to rig up a flyin' model of an airplane they had planned out. Well, it cost them seventy-five million and then the damn thing wouldn't fly. That happened ten years ago, when blind Eddie and myself were considerable younger, and I voted for the woman who sponsored that bill. Blind Eddie voted against her. And since then I've been buyin' his bread.'

Bertie didn't look like he quite followed all of that, but he sat back to muse over it.

Now the door opened again, letting in a blast of the cold grey air outside, and a young kid came in, stamping snow off his boots. I placed him after a second. He was Richie Grenadine's kid, and he looked like he'd just kissed the wrong end of the baby. His Adam's apple was going up and down and his face was the colour of old oilcloth.

'Mr Parmalee,' he says to Henry, his eyeballs rolling around in his head like ball bearings, 'you got to come. You got to take him his beer and come. I can't stand to go back there. I'm scared.'

'Now slow down,' Henry says, taking off his white butcher's apron and coming around the counter. 'What's the matter? Your dad been on a dunk?'

I realized when he said that that Richie hadn't been in for quite some time. Usually he'd be by once a day to pick up a case of whatever beer was going cheapest at that time, a big fat man with jowls like pork butts and ham-hock arms. Richie always was a pig about his beer, but he handled it okay when he was working at the sawmill out in Clifton. Then something happened – a pulper piled a bad load, or maybe Richie just made it out that way – and Richie was off work, free an' easy, with the sawmill company paying him compensation. Something in his back. Anyway, he got awful fat. He hadn't been in lately, although once in a while I'd seen his boy come in for Richie's nightly case. Nice enough boy. Henry sold him the beer, for he knew it was only the boy doing as his father said.

'He's been on a drunk,' the boy was saying now, 'but that ain't the trouble. It's . . . it's . . . oh Lord, it's *awful*!'

Henry saw he was going to bawl, so he says real quick: 'Carl, will you watch things for a minute?'

'Sure.'

'Now, Timmy, you come back into the stockroom and tell me what's what.'

He led the boy away, and Carl went around behind the counter and sat on Henry's stool. No one said anything for quite a while. We could hear 'em back there, Henry's deep, slow voice and then Timmy Grenadine's high one, speaking very fast. Then the boy commenced to cry, and Bill Pelham cleared his throat and started filling up his pipe.

'I ain't seen Richie for a couple of months,' I said.



Bull grunted. 'No loss.'

'He was in . . . oh, near the end of October,' Carl said. 'Near Hallowe'en. Bought a case of Schlitz beer. He was gettin' awful meaty.'

There wasn't much more to say. The boy was still crying, but he was talking at the same time. Outside the wind kept on whooping and yowling and the radio said we'd have another six inches or so by morning. It was mid-January and it made me wonder if anyone had seen Richie since October – besides his boy, that is.

The talking went on for quite a while, but finally Henry and the boy came out. The boy had taken his coat off, but Henry had put his on. The boy was kinda hitching in his chest the way you do when the worst is past, but his eyes was red and when he glanced at you, he'd look down at the floor.

Henry looked worried. 'I thought I'd send Timmy here upstairs an' have my wife cook him up a toasted cheese or somethin'. Maybe a couple of you fellas'd like to go around to Richie's place with me. Timmy says he wants some beer. He gave me the money'. He tried to smile, but it was a pretty sick affair and he soon gave up.

'Sure,' Bertie says. 'What kind of beer? I'll go fetch her.'

'Get Harrow's Supreme,' Henry said. 'We got some cut-down boxes back there.'

I got up, too. It would have to be Bertie and me. Carl's arthritis gets something awful on days like this, and Billy Pelham don't have much use of his right arm any more.

Bertie got four six-packs of Harrow's and I packed them into a box while Henry took the boy upstairs to the apartment, overhead.

Well, he straightened that out with his missus and came back down, looking over his shoulder once to make sure the upstairs door was closed. Billy spoke up, fairly busting: 'What's up? Has Richie been workin' the kid over?'

'No,' Henry said. 'I'd just as soon not say anything just yet. It'd sound crazy. I will show you somethin', though. The money Timmy had to pay for the beer with.' He shed four dollar bills out of his pocket, holding them by the corner, and I don't blame him. They was all covered with a grey, slimy stuff that looked like the scum on top of bad preserves. He laid them down on the counter

with a funny smile and said to Carl: 'Don't let anybody touch 'em. Not if what the kid says is even half right!'

And he went around to the sink by the meat counter and washed his hands.

I got up, put on my pea coat and scarf and buttoned up. It was no good taking a car; Richie lived in an apartment building down on Curve Street, which is as close to straight up and down as the law allows, and it's the last place the ploughs touch.

As we were going out, Bill Pelham called after us: 'Watch out, now.'

Henry just nodded and put the case of Harrow's on the little handcart he keeps by the door, and out we trundled.

The wind hit us like a sawblade, and right away I pulled my scarf up over my ears. We paused in the doorway just for a second while Bertie pulled on his gloves. He had a pained sort of a wince on his face, and I knew how he felt. It's all well for younger fellows to go out skiing all day and running those goddam wasp-wing snow-mobiles half the night, but when you get up over seventy without an oil change, you feel that north-east wind around your heart.

'I don't want to scare you boys,' Henry said, with that queer, sort of revolted smile still on his mouth, 'but I'm goin' to show you this all the same. And I'm goin' to tell you what the boy told me while we walk up there . . . because I want you to know, you see!'

And he pulled a .45-calibre hogleg out of his coat pocket – the pistol he'd kept loaded and ready under the counter ever since he went to twenty-four hours a day back in 1958. I don't know where he got it, but I do know the one time he flashed it at a stickup guy, the fella just turned around and bolted right out the door. Henry was a cool one, all right. I saw him throw out a college kid that came in one time and gave him a hard time about cashing a cheque. That kid walked away like his ass was on sideways and he had to crap.

Well, I only tell you that because Henry wanted Bertie and me to know he meant business, and we did, too.

So we set out, bent into the wind like washerwomen, Henry trundling that cart and telling us what the boy had said. The wind was trying to rip the words away before we could hear 'em, but we got most of it – more'n we wanted to. I was damn glad Henry had his Frenchman's pecker stowed away in his coat pocket.

The kid said it must have been the beer – you know how you can get a bad can every now and again. Flat or smelly or green as the peestains in an Irishman's underwear. A fella once told me that all it takes is a tiny hole to let in bacteria that'll do some damn strange things. The hole can be so small that the beer won't hardly dribble out, but the bacteria can get in. And beer's good food for some of those bugs.

Anyway, the kid said Richie brought back a case of Golden Light just like always that night in October and sat down to polish it off while Timmy did his homework.

Timmy was just about ready for bed when he hears Richie say, 'Christ Jesus, that ain't right.'

And Timmy says, 'What's that, Pop?'

'That beer,' Richie says. 'God, that's the *worst* taste I ever had in my mouth.'

Most people would wonder why in the name of God he drank it if it tasted so bad, but then, most people have never seen Richie Grenadine go to his beer. I was down in Wally's Spa one afternoon, and I saw him win the goddamndest bet. He bet a fella he could drink twenty two-bit glasses of beer in one minute. Nobody local would take him up, but this salesman from Montepelier laid down a twenty-dollar bill and Richie covered him. He drank all twenty with seven seconds to spare – although when he walked out he was more'n three sails into the wind. So I expect Richie had most of that bad can in his gut before his brain could warn him.

'I'm gonna puke,' Richie says. 'Look out!'

But by the time he got to the head it had passed off, and that was the end of it. The boy said he smelt the can, and it smelt like something crawled in there and died. There was a little grey dribble around the top, too.

Two days later the boy comes home from school and there's Richie sitting in front of the TV and watching the afternoon tear-jerkers with every goddamn shade in the place pulled down.

'What's up?' Timmy asks, for Richie don't hardly ever roll in before nine.

'I'm watchin' the TV,' Richie says. 'I didn't seem to want to go out today.'

Timmy turned on the light over the sink, and Richie yelled at him: 'And turn off that friggin' light!'

So Timmy did, not asking how he's gonna do his homework in the dark. When Richie's in that mood, you don't ask him nothing.

'An' go out an' get me a case,' Richie says. 'Money's on the table.'

When the kid gets back, his dad's still sitting in the dark, only now it's dark outside, too. And the TV's off. The kid starts getting the creeps – well, who wouldn't? Nothing but a dark flat and your daddy setting in the corner like a big lump.

So he puts the beer on the table, knowing that Richie don't like it so cold it spikes his forehead, and when he gets close to his old man he starts to notice a kind of rotten smell, like an old cheese someone left standing on the counter over the weekend. He don't say shit or go blind, though, as the old man was never what you'd call a cleanly soul. Instead he goes into his room and shuts the door and does his homework, and after a while he hears the TV start to go and Richie's popping the top in his first of the evening.

And for two weeks or so, that's the way things went. The kid got up in the morning and went to school an' when he got home Richie'd be in front of the television, and beer money on the table.

The flat was smelling ranker and ranker, too. Richie wouldn't have the shades up at all, and about the middle of November he made Timmy stop studying in his room. Said he couldn't abide the light under the door. So Timmy started going down the block to a friend's house after getting his dad the beer.

Then one day when Timmy came home from school – it was four o'clock and pretty near dark already – Richie says, 'Turn on the light.'

The kid turned on the light over the sink, and damn if Richie ain't all wrapped up in a blanket.

'Look,' Richie says, and one hand creeps out from under the blanket. Only it ain't a hand at all. *Something grey*, is all the kid could tell Henry. *Didn't look like a hand at all. Just a grey lump.*

Well, Timmy Grenadine was scared bad. He says, 'Pop, what's happening to you?'

And Richie says, 'I dunno. But it don't hurt. It feels . . . kinda nice.'

So, Timmy says, 'I'm gonna call Dr Westphail.'

And the blanket starts to tremble all over, like something awful was shaking – *all over* – under there. And Richie says, 'Don't you dare. If you do I'll touch ya and you'll end up just like this.' And he

slides the blanket down over his face for just a minute.

By then we were up to the corner of Harlow and Curve Street, and I was even colder than the temperature had been on Henry's Orange Crush thermometer when we came out. A person doesn't hardly want to believe such things, and yet there's still strange things in the world.

I once knew a fella named George Kelso, who worked for the Bangor Public Works Department. He spent fifteen years fixing water mains and mending electricity cables and all that, an' then one day he just up an' quit, not two years before his retirement. Frankie Haldeman, who knew him, said George went down into a sewer pipe on Essex laughing and joking just like always and came up fifteen minutes later with his hair just as white as snow and his eyes staring like he just looked through a window into hell. He walked straight down to the BPW garage and punched his clock and went down to Wally's Spa and started drinking. It killed him two years later. Frankie said he tried to talk to him about it and George said something one time, and that was when he was pretty well blotto. Turned around on his stool, George did, an' asked Frankie Haldman if he'd ever seen a spider as big as a good-sized dog setting in a web full of kitties an' such all wrapped up in silk thread. Well, what could he say to that? I'm not saying there's any truth in it, but I am saying that there's things in the corners of the world that would drive a man insane to look 'em right in the face.

So we just stood on the corner a minute, in spite of the wind that was whooping up the street.

'What'd he see?' Bertie asked.

'He said he could still see his dad,' Henry answered, 'but he said it was like he was buried in grey jelly . . . and it was all kinda mashed together. He said his clothes were all stickin' in and out of his skin, like they was melted to his body.'

'Holy Jesus,' Bertie said.

'Then he covered right up again and started screaming at the kid to turn off the light.'

'Like he was a fungus,' I said.

'Yes,' Henry said. 'Sorta like that.'

'You keep that pistol handy,' Bertie said.

'Yes, I think I will.' And with that, we started to trundle up Curve Street.

The apartment house where Richie Grenadine had his flat was almost at the top of the hill, one of those big Victorian monsters that were built by the pulp an' paper barons at the turn of the century. They've just about all been turned into apartment houses now. When Bertie got his breath he told us Richie lived on the third floor under that top gable that juttet out like an eyebrow. I took the chance to ask Henry what happened to the kid after that.

Along about the third week in November the kid came back one afternoon to find Richie had gone one further than just pulling the shades down. He'd taken and nailed blankets across every window in the place. It was starting to stink worse, too – kind of a mushy stink, the way fruit gets when it goes to ferment with yeast.

A week or so after that, Richie got the kid to start heating his beer on the stove. Can you feature that? The kid all by himself in that apartment with his dad turning into . . . well, into something . . . an' heating his beer and then having to listen to him – it – drinking it with awful thick slurping sounds, the way an old man eats his chowder: Can you imagine it?

And that's the way things went on until today, when the kid's school let out early because of the storm.

'The boy says he went right home,' Henry told us. 'There's no light in the upstairs hall at all – the boy claims his dad musta snuck out some night and broke it – so he had to sort of creep down to his door.

'Well, he heard somethin' moving around in there, and it suddenly pops into his mind that he don't know what Richie does all day through the week. He ain't seen his dad stir out of that chair for almost a month, and a man's got to sleep and go to the bathroom some time.

'There's a Judas hole in the middle of the door, and it's supposed to have a latch on the inside to fasten it shut, but it's been busted ever since they lived there. So the kid slides up to the door real easy and pushed it open a bit with his thumb and pokes his eye up to it.'

By now we were at the foot of the steps and the house was looming over us like a high, ugly face, with those windows on the third floor for eyes. I looked up there and sure enough those two windows were just as black as pitch. Like somebody's put blankets over 'em or painted 'em up.

'It took him a minute to get his eye adjusted to the gloom. An'

then he seen a great big grey lump, not like a man at all, slitherin' over the floor, leavin' a grey, slimy trail behind it. An' then it sort of snaked out an arm – or something like an arm – and pried a board off'n the wall. And took out a cat.' Henry stopped for a second. Bertie was beating his hands together and it was god-awful cold out there on the street, but none of us was ready to go up just yet. 'A dead cat,' Henry recommenced, 'that had putre-facted. The boy said it looked all swole up stiff . . . and there was little white things crawlin' all over it . . . '

'Stop,' Bertie said. 'For Christ's sake.'

'And then his dad ate it.'

I tried to swallow and something tasted greasy in my throat.

'That's when Timmy closed the peephole.' Henry finished softly.

'And ran.'

'I don't think I can go up there,' Bertie said.

Henry didn't say anything, just looked from Bertie to me and back again.

'I guess we better,' I said. 'We got Richie's beer.'

Bertie didn't say anything to that, so we went up the steps and in through the front hall door. I smelled it right off.

Do you know how a cider house smells in summer? You never get the smell of apples out, but in the fall it's all right because it smells tangy and sharp enough to ream your nose right out. But in the summer, it just smells mean, this smell was like that, but a little bit worse.

There was one light on in the lower hall, a mean yellow thing in a frosted glass that threw a glow as thin as buttermilk. And those stairs that went up into the shadows.

Henry bumped the cart to a stop, and while he was lifting out the case of beer, I thumbed the button at the foot of the stairs that controlled the second-floor-landing bulb. But it was busted, just as the boy said.

Bertie quavered: 'I'll lug the beer. You just take care of that pistol.'

Henry didn't argue. He handed it over and we started up, Henry first, then me, then Bertie with the case in his arms. By the time we had fetched the second-floor landing, the stink was just that much worse. Rotted apples, all fermented, and under that an even uglier stink.

When I lived out in Levant I had a dog one time – Rex, his name was – and he was a good mutt but not very wise about cars. He got hit a lick one afternoon while I was at work and he crawled under the house and died there. My Christ, what a stink. I finally had to go under and haul him out with a pole. That other stench was like that; flyblown and putrid and just as dirty as a borin' cob.

Up till then I had kept thinking that maybe it was some sort of joke, but I saw it wasn't. 'Lord, why don't the neighbours kick up, Harry?' I asked.

'What neighbours?' Henry asked, and he was smiling that queer smile again.

I looked around and saw that the hall had a sort of dusty, unused look and the door of all three second-floor apartments was closed and locked up.

'Who's the landlord, I wonder?' Bertie asked, resting the case on the newel post and getting his breath. 'Gaiteau? Surprised he don't kick 'im out.'

'Who'd go up there and evict him?' Henry asked. 'You?'

Bertie didn't say nothing.

Presently we started up the next flight, which was even narrower and steeper than the last. It was getting hotter, too. It sounded like every radiator in the place was clanking and hissing. The smell was awful, and I started to feel like someone was stirring my guts with a stick.

At the top was a short hall, and one door with a little Judas hole in the middle of it.

Bertie made a soft little cry an' whispered out: 'Look what we're walkin' in!'

I looked down and saw all this slimy stuff on the hall floor, in little puddles. It looked like there'd been a carpet once, but the grey stuff had eaten it all away.

Henry walked down to the foor, and we went after him. I don't know about Bertie, but I was shaking in my shoes. Henry never hesitated, though; he raised up that gun and beat on the door with the butt of it.

'Richie?' he called, and his voice didn't sound a bit scared, although his face was deadly pale. 'This is Henry Parmalee from down at the Nite-Owl. I brought your beer.'

There wasn't any answer for p'raps a full minute, and then a voice



said, 'Where's Timmy? Where's my boy?'

I almost ran right then. That voice wasn't human at all. It was queer an' low an' bubbly, like someone talking through a mouthful of suet.

'He's at my store,' Henry said, 'havin' a decent meal. He's just as skinny as a slat cat, Richie.'

There wasn't nothing for a while, and then some horrible squish-ing noises, like a man in rubber boots walking through mud. Then that decayed voice spoke right through the other side of the door.

'Open the door an' shove that beer through,' it said. 'Only you got to pull all the ring tabs first. I can't.'

'In a minute,' Henry said. 'What kind of shape you in, Richie?'

'Never mind that,' the voice said, and it was horribly eager. 'Just push in the beer and go!'

'It ain't just dead cats any more, is it?' Henry said, and he sounded sad. He wasn't holdin' the gun butt-up any more; now it was business end first.

And suddenly, in a flash of light, I made the mental connection Henry had already made, perhaps even as Timmy was telling his story. The smell of decay and rot seemed to double in my nostrils then I remembered. Two young girls and some old Salvation Army wino had disappeared in town during the last three weeks or so – all after dark.

'Send it in or I'll come out an' get it,' the voice said.

Henry gestured us back, and we went.

'I guess you better, Richie.' He cocked his piece.

There was nothing then, not for a long time. To tell the truth, I began to feel as if it was all over. Then that door burst open, so sudden and so hard that it actually *bulged* before slamming out against the wall. And out came Richie.

It was just a second, just a second before Bertie and me was down those stairs like schoolkids, four an' five at a time, and out the door into the snow, slippin an' sliding.

Going down we heard Henry fire three times, the reports loud as grenades in the closed hallways of that empty, cursed house.

What we saw in that one or two seconds will last me a lifetime – or whatever's left of it. It was like a huge grey wave of jelly, jelly that looked like a man, and leaving a trail of slime behind it.

But that wasn't the worst. Its eyes were flat and yellow and wild,

with no human soul in 'em. Only there wasn't two. There were four, an' right down the centre of the thing, betwixt the two pairs of eyes, was a white, fibrous line with a kind of pulsing pink flesh showing through like a slit in a hog's belly.

It was dividing, you see. Dividing in two.

Bertie and I didn't say nothing to each other going back to the store. I don't know what was going through his mind, but I know well enough what was in mine: the multiplication table. Two times two is four, four times two is eight, eight times two is sixteen, sixteen times two is –

We got back. Carl and Bill Pelham jumped up and started asking questions right off. We wouldn't answer, neither of us. We just turned around and waited to see if Henry was gonna walk in outta the snow. I was up to 32,768 times two is the end of the human race and so we sat there cozied up to all that beer and waited to see which one was going to finally come back; and here we still sit.

I hope it's Henry. I surely do.

## Final call for passenger Paul

Passport. Tickets. Washbag. Walkman. Cassettes. Batteries . . . no, no batteries. Paul pushed everything back into his flight bag and headed for the airport stationery shop, threading his way between hoardes of holidaymakers and pyramids of suitcases. He'd need at least four Duracells for the trip. The ones in his Walkman were dead. He entered the stationery shop, passing racks of brightly coloured trashy paperbacks, tea towels decorated with scenes of Buckingham Palace and St Paul's Cathedral, headsquares and cuddly toys. Outside, the public address system boomed loud and indistinct. Paul pulled a pack of batteries from the stand and paid for them with the last of his English money.

It was early August, and Heathrow Airport was a scene of total chaos. Frazzled check-in clerks dealt patiently with mislaid tickets and last minute arrivals, while passengers complained about missed connections and missing baggage. Queues extended across every concourse. Moslems unrolled prayer mats in the corners and children chased each other around video machines and parents lay stretched out asleep on benches and in chairs, oblivious to the announcements detailing further delays and more cancellations.

Paul hitched his flight bag further on to his shoulder and aimed himself at the upstairs restaurant, past a congregation of confused nuns and a group of fifty elderly American tourists, each one neatly name-tagged, all standing in the middle of the floor waiting to be told what to do next.

The restaurant was no quieter. There were no seats to be found, and tiny Pakistani ladies dragged vast green plastic sacks from table to table, attempting to keep pace with mounting stacks of dirty crockery.

Paul stood his bag down in a corner and fitted the batteries into his personal stereo. At twenty-eight, he was pretty much an old hand at dealing with crowded airports. His job as a record executive saw to

that, regularly requiring him to board the transatlantic flights for Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. This trip, however, was purely for pleasure. The last six months had been hellishly hectic, culminating two nights ago in a spectacular launch party from which Paul was still feeling the effects. Now he was preparing to board the next flight to Larnaca, Cyprus for two weeks of well-earned R&R.

Adjusting the volume on his Walkman, Paul walked through passport control and into the passenger lounge to await the arrival of his flight. On the column ahead of him, the screens announced the first call for Cyprus. Paul decided to wait until the actual departure time was closer before heading for the gate. He sat back in the chair and closed his eyes for a moment, letting the music surround him completely. After working with rock bands every day of the week, he found his own tastes straying to Beethoven and Mozart in his leisure hours.

The voice on the PA system announcing the final call for flight 203 to Larnaca brought him back from Mozart's *Marriage Of Figaro* with a start. Paul swung his bag back up on his shoulder, ran a hand through his cropped blonde hair and made his way to the gate.

The flight was full, mostly of holidaymakers of the worst kind, it seemed. He leaned on the counter while the check-in girl stamped a boarding pass and handed it to him. Just as he thanked her and moved off, she called him back.

'Sorry, sir,' she smiled. 'You'll be needing this.' She pressed a small blue sticker on to his ticket and returned it. Paul looked at the sticker, which had a tiny figure printed on it. The ink had blurred, but it appeared to be a man riding on the back of another – St Christopher, perhaps? It was either a new computer symbol, or the airline had turned religious.

He hung back until the last passenger had moved out into the corridor before handing in his boarding pass. As he made his way on to the Tristar he fingered the control button of his Walkman nervously. Actual flying did not bother him – taking off and landing did.

As soon as he had located his seat he secured the belt in his lap, refastened his earphones, and lay back. He planned to stay that way until they were in the air. There was an elderly man of presumably Turkish origin in the seat next to him, happily emptying the contents of a holdall into both his seat pocket and Paul's, oblivious to the

revving engines outside. Paul shut his eyes and kept them that way until they were safely off the ground.

The first thing Paul saw from the window when he finally opened his eyes was Windsor Castle, far below and briefly glimpsed through racing clouds. He turned from the scuffed plastic porthole and looked around. The palms of his hands were slick with sweat. As the cabin levelled out and the seatbelt sign was turned off he released the back of his chair, kicked off his trackshoes and began to relax. Two weeks away from the office with nothing to do except lie in the sun – it seemed too good to be true. He had been careful to tell no one where he could be reached. He knew only too well how likely it was that he would be called back to deal with a crisis otherwise.

A stewardess arrived with the drinks trolley, and Paul requested a gin and tonic, watching while the girl – tall and tanned, with strong white teeth – continued smiling as she filled the glass. The elderly Turk in the seat next to him had presumably become bored with rummaging around in the seat pockets and was already comatose, remaining so until woken for his meal. Paul ate and drank with a hearty appetite. After idly thumbing through the in-flight magazine as he sipped his brandy, he turned to stare out at the motionless azure sky and his eyelids began to fall. By the time the stewardess quietly slipped his meal tray away and folded his seat flap up, he was lost in a deep and dreamless sleep.

The first thing Paul became aware of upon awakening was the heat, even before he felt the hand shaking him. The steward's face swam before his eyes.

'Sir, wake up, sir, time to get off. All the other passengers have disembarked.'

Paul blinked and rubbed his eyes, then pulled the earphones from his head. The air in the cabin was stiflingly hot. He sat up and stared about at the empty seats surrounding him. Up ahead, two stewardesses stood by the galley entrance talking as the last of the passengers threaded their way through the exit door.

'Boy, I was out cold,' Paul said to the steward, smiling. His mouth felt hot and dry, the after-effect of drinking in an air-conditioned atmosphere. The heat surprised him. Already he could feel sweat forming between his shoulderblades.

'Don't forget your hand luggage, sir,' said the steward, moving

off. Paul pulled his bag from beneath the seat and stood up. The cabin was empty now except for the crew. He checked his seat to make sure that he had not left anything behind, then stooped and peered out of the window. A large white concrete terminal, arched with the architecture of a harem, stood at the end of the blurred, dusty airstrip. Somehow, Paul had expected Cyprus to be prettier at first sight than this. He made his way down the aisle to the exit door, where a smiling stewardess waited to bid him farewell.

'We look forward to seeing you again soon, sir,' she said. 'Have a pleasant stay in Amman.'

He had almost passed through the doorway before he realized what the stewardess had said and turned back to her, puzzled.

'Where?' he asked.

'Amman, sir,' said the stewardess, her smile fading as she realized something was wrong.

'This isn't Cyprus?'

'No, sir. We left Cyprus over an hour and a half ago.'

'Oh my God, I was supposed to get off there,' said Paul. 'Why didn't someone wake me?'

'I'll get the cabin director, sir, if you'll hold on for a moment.'

A tall, square-jawed man in a crisply cut blazer came over.

'What seems to be the problem?' he asked, in a deep, relaxed voice.

'I've gone past my stop,' said Paul, aware that he sounded like someone addressing a bus conductor. Just then, the stewardess who had served Paul his meal came over.

'I didn't wake this gentleman up because I thought Amman was his final destination,' she told the cabin director.

'Did you look at his boarding card?'

'Yes, it was in the seat pocket in front of him.'

'That wasn't mine,' explained Paul, producing his own. 'It must have belonged to the guy sitting next to me.'

'We were on the ground for over an hour,' said the cabin director, turning to the embarrassed-looking stewardess. 'Didn't you think to check?'

'I'm sorry, a lot of people were staying on. I had my hands full.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to sort this out in the terminal', said the cabin director apologetically. 'It shouldn't take long to get you back to Cyprus. In fact, I think there's a flight later on this afternoon.'

Paul sighed and hitched up his flight bag. He couldn't believe how dumb he could be, falling asleep like that. Outside, the temperature was astounding. Before he could reach the terminal building, his face was popping with beads of sweat, and the strap of his bag was leaving a wet bar of heat across his right shoulderblade. The vast white strip of concrete over which he walked glared up at him. Where the hell was Amman? He had a vague recollection that it was somewhere in Jordan. Was it safe here? Jesus, what a way to start a vacation!

Inside the terminal it was fresh and cool. He explained what had happened to the woman on the desk, who happened to be English, and therefore quite amused by the situation, much to Paul's annoyance.

'Oh, it happens all the time, sir,' she said after checking his ticket and examining the small blue sticker.

'We often have people disembarking too early, grandads getting off at Singapore when they're supposed to stay on until Australia. It's just like the buses. We're always leaving passengers in strange places because the flights are full. And where their luggage turns up is nobody's business.'

Paul failed to see the amusement in this.

'Well, when can I get back to Cyprus?' he asked, already suspecting that he knew the answer. The concourse behind him was disturbingly free of passengers.

'That's the trouble, sir. Our direct flight to Larnaca has been cancelled today because of an aircraft fault.' Her smile was extremely apologetic.

'Does that mean I just have to hang around the airport until it gets fixed?' asked Paul with mounting irritation.

'Well, let's see.' The counter clerk consulted her timetable. She looked like a holiday courier, heavily tanned, with auburn hair swept back in a ponytail.

'What we could do is transfer you to an airline which does have a flight going out this afternoon. How about that?'

'Fine, fine,' agreed Paul. 'I just want to get there before nightfall.'

The clerk dutifully transferred his ticket to a local airline, and arranged for his luggage to be forwarded.

So it was that, two hours later, Paul found himself boarding an Alia flight filled with Jordanian businessmen.

At the entrance to the aircraft, the stewardess checked his ticket and directed him to a business-class seat. Obviously he had been upgraded in order to recompense in part for the inconvenience of having to switch airlines. Paul felt uncomfortable in these unfamiliar surroundings. As the plane reached its cruising altitude he found it impossible to concentrate on the pages of his paperback, and instead donned the earphones of his Walkman to relax with a soothing symphony. When he became aware of a voice speaking in a foreign tongue above the sound of the music, he turned down the volume on the Walkman to listen. Unfortunately, the announcement was not repeated in English, so he summoned a stewardess.

‘What was that last message?’ he asked.

‘Owing to a problem at Larnaca airport, we are having to put down in Adana,’ said the stewardess. And then, in a lower tone, she confided ‘I think they are bringing the hostages in to Larnaca airport. No other planes can come in or out for several hours.’

‘Thank you, but where the hell is Adana?’

‘It’s in Turkey, near the coast.’

‘Great, just great.’ Paul was beginning to wonder if he would ever reach his destination. The papers had been full of news about the hostages for the last few days. They had been expected to be released at any moment, but they could not have picked a worse time, he thought uncharitably.

Adana turned out to have an even hotter and dustier airstrip than Amman. Its terminal building was old and filthy and crowded with the most extraordinary people. Despite reassurances from the Alia stewardess that his luggage would be forwarded, Paul doubted that it would ever find its way out of the airport, since it was quite obvious that no one here spoke any English.

Once inside, he fought his way over to the nearest flight desk and attempted to make himself understood to the clerk. By now, he was hot, tired and angry, his sour shirt sticking to his back. The clerk, in hopelessly fractured English, attempted to placate him. Eventually, Paul went to sit with the others from his flight on a long wooden bench by one of the gates. The terminal was packed. There were old men in shawls asleep on the floor, and tired women clutching huge bundles of clothing, and at one point a mange-ridden mongrel hobbled over to where Paul sat and peed against his flight bag.

After he had rinsed off some of the sweat and changed into a



crumpled but fresh T-shirt in the washroom, he returned to his seat to find his fellow passengers swarming through two gates on to a pair of newly arrived planes.

The mad scramble for seats was alarming. Paul tried to gain the attention of one of the passing passengers, a woman he had seen on his previous flight. He waved his ticket before her in a desperate effort to keep her attention. She was obviously torn between helping him and rushing on to the flight herself.

'Larnaca?' he shouted above the babble of the Tannoy. 'Larnaca airport is open again, yes?' The woman stared at his ticket, with the little blue sticker fixed to its corner, and suddenly seemed to comprehend.

'Yes!' she cried. 'You want Larnaca, next gate, hurry, now!'

'Thank you! Thank you very much!' Paul grabbed her arm gratefully, but the woman pulled away in alarm. Quickly he made his way over to the second of the gates and held his ticket before the man at the door. Around them swarmed girls with wicker baskets, ancient men with their belongings bundled into sacks, and children of every size and description. There seemed to be nobody issuing boarding passes. The man at the door glanced at the ticket, then nodded and waved Paul through and on to the aircraft.

He hadn't had a chance to look at the outside of the plane, but inside, the cabin seemed narrow and cramped. Paul found himself without a seat allocation, and after failing to locate either of the stewardesses, seated himself next to a fat Turkish woman bouncing a child on her knee. There seemed to be a 'first come, first served' policy regarding the seating arrangements.

Eventually, the cabin doors were closed, the stewardesses managed to find everyone a seat, and the plane jiggled along the runway in the direction of the afternoon sun. If Paul had been nervous about taking off before, this time he was petrified. The overhead lockers creaked and juddered as the aircraft revealed its stress points in the airstreams of the sky. Children began crying and old men wandered from their seats, attempting to light their pipes until the stewardesses insisted they extinguished them.

Paul slumped back in the uncomfortable seat and plugged into his Walkman once more in an effort to shut out the surrounding noise of the children playing in the aisles. He wanted to ask someone how long the flight would take, but was loathe to become involved in a

linguistic wrestling match with any of his fellow travellers. He was seated in an aisle seat this time, in an area which may or may not have been designated as a smoking zone for all the notice anyone around was taking. As he tried to let the music blot out all other sounds, he imagined the problem of relocating his luggage, and was glad that he had not packed anything of value.

Beyond the cabin window afternoon was slowly turning into evening, and the sky was filled with heliocentric hues. The edges of the scudding clouds were flashed with red and purple, as far below the sea glittered with dying light. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The aircraft was approaching the runway below at an alarming angle. On both sides of the cabin, people were craning out of their windows to see the airport terminal. When Paul managed to locate it, his stomach dropped. This could not be Larnaca. Against the dusty orange walls of the low concrete building ahead lounged two armed policemen. In the distance stood a truck, filled with what looked like goats, and further afield the lights of a small town twinkled against low velvet hills. As the plane taxied to a standstill, he read the cracked sign along the wall of the airstrip.

Ajdabiquh.

They had landed in North Africa. There could be no other explanation. This time Paul contained his rage until he was inside the terminal building, threw his bag on to the counter of the first official he could locate, and demanded to know what was going on. The official, a young customs clerk, spoke no English, and after five minutes of shrugging and face-pulling, went to fetch his superior. He returned with a broad, heavy set African wearing flamboyant gold insignia.

'Do you speak English?'

'Certainly, sir. Now what seems to be the trouble?'

'I've just arrived on this flight . . . ' Paul indicated the candy-striped aircraft standing on the runway outside, 'and I was told that our destination was Larnaca.'

'Well, whoever told you that was wrong, sir,' said the senior official in a simple, placating tone. He looked at the sweating young man with interest.

'Is there any way that I can get back to Larnaca tonight?' asked

Paul. He wiped his forehead with an unsteady hand, refusing to let his paranoia rise to the surface.

'I don't know about that, sir. We have no scheduled flights going there from here . . .'

'Here being where?'

This is Libya, sir.'

'So how am I going to get back?' Paul demanded, panic creeping into his voice. Outside, darkness had fallen, and the runway lights had come on.

'Can I see your ticket for a moment, sir?' The senior official reached out a broad pink palm. Why not? thought Paul. Everybody else has, and handed it to him.

The two men behind the counter examined Paul's ticket closely. The young clerk pointed to the corner of the ticket and said something to his superior, who slowly nodded his head in agreement.

'I think we may be able to help you,' he said as he returned the ticket.

Paul found himself following the two men through the sand-blown terminal towards one of the far exit doors. He had virtually to run to keep pace with them as they chattered on in their native tongue, completely ignoring him. Paul's sole consolation, he told himself, was that he was seeing places he would never otherwise see. And, he mentally added, they were places he'd never bother trying to see again.

The outside of the terminal building was lit with low tin lights that swung crazily in the warm night breeze. Here, on a low bench along a wall were four other travellers, one of whom appeared to be of European extraction. The senior official pointed to a smartly suited pilot who was crossing the tarmac from a small passenger plane.

'He is a charter pilot. He will take you to your correct destination,' said the senior official. 'These other people have been misrouted as well. You should be in Larnaca before midnight. I am sorry you have had such a bad journey.'

'Me too, but thanks for your help, at least,' said Paul. 'I thought I was never going to find anyone who spoke English. Are you sure this pilot knows where he's going?'

'Don't worry, he knows. This sort of thing happens all the time. Enjoy your trip.' He turned to explain what he had just said to the

junior clerk, who let out a snort of laughter.

The pilot walked along past the bench to Paul, took his ticket from his hand, checked the destination and returned it. The officials re-entered the terminal, leaving Paul and the other four passengers alone outside.

The pilot beckoned them forward, and they crossed the tarmac to the steps of the plane. Paul manoeuvred himself so that he was walking by the middle-aged white man he had seen on the bench, and took the opportunity of introducing himself. The man turned out to be a French businessman named Bernard. He spoke a fractured form of English, and was able to explain to Paul as they climbed the aircraft steps that he too had been redirected, and had boarded his flight in Paris at nine-thirty that morning.

Paul was relieved to find a kindred spirit, and decided to sit next to him for the flight. Inside the aircraft, which Paul reckoned would have seated about thirty people, there was no stewardess to be seen. He pushed his flight bag under the seat and sat down by the Frenchman. Within moments, the co-pilot closed the cabin door, the engines revved, and the plane shot up into the night sky, circling the airport once before heading south.

'This cannot be right,' said Bernard. 'We are heading in the wrong direction. We should be going north.' He peered from the window into the blackness beyond.

'You mean Cyprus is to the north?' asked Paul, sensing that something strange was going on. Behind them, the three other passengers were peering from the windows.

'Cyprus?' said Bernard. 'You mean Athens.'

'What?' Paul's eyes widened. He could not believe his ears. 'We're not going to Larnaca?'

'Not to my knowledge. I am supposed to be in Athens. I thought this was where we were heading, but we are going south. Look.' He drew out his travel folder and opened it to reveal a small map of Central Europe and Africa.

'Here, the airport we just left faces north, but we took off to the south. We are heading down into Chad.'

'This can't be happening,' said Paul shakily. 'Let me see your ticket.'

Bernard pulled out his ticket and handed it across. There in the corner was the same square blue sticker that was affixed to Paul's.

'Do you know what this means?' he asked, pointing to the sticker. 'No, I have no idea.'

Paul examined it closely under his seat-light. It definitely showed two men, one of whom appeared to be seated on the other's shoulders. He passed the ticket back and stared helplessly out of the window as the aircraft buzzed on through the cloudless night.

Paul looked at his watch. It read a quarter to twelve. The plane had just come to a stop. Beyond the runway lights, nothing could be seen. The other passengers were looking from one window to another, confused. One of them, a young black girl, was crying. Paul walked back to her seat and took the ticket from her hand. It too had a blue sticker on it. 'What the hell is going on here?' he shouted as the main cabin door suddenly opened from the outside with a dull bang. Grabbing his flight bag from beneath the seat, Paul strode to the front of the plane and trotted down the floodlit steps. The ground beneath his trackshoes was not tarmac, but earth. Beyond the perimeter lights marking the airstrip, there was nothing. Passing in front of the aircraft, Paul spotted a squat, dimly lit building ahead, the only one on an unbroken desert horizon.

'Come on!' he turned and called to the others, but nobody appeared in the cabin doorway. Why were they so reluctant to leave the plane?

As Paul headed towards what he presumed was the terminal building, the cool desert air ruffled his hair and calmed him slightly. He heaved the flight bag back on to his shoulder, and paused to toss the dead batteries from his Walkman into the long grass which rustled drily several feet from the runway.

A hundred yards from the terminal, he realized with mounting horror that it had been completely burnt out. Bats flitted around the cracked bones of rafters which could be seen against open sky through its huge windows. And yet there were moving lights inside. Paul redoubled his pace.

He reached the entry door, which was ajar, and looked back at the plane. One of the remaining passengers was standing in the cabin doorway, hesitating before descending the steps. Turning back to the terminal door, he reached forward and pulled it open.

The building was just a concrete shell. Several fires burned on the remains of the tiled floor. Groups of men stood clustered around the

fires, drinking and laughing. They were dressed in brown ragged cloaks, as if part of a tribe of desert nomads. Against the far wall, just beyond the largest fire of all, the flickering light revealed a sight which made Paul reel.

On a long wooden pole attached to the wall, several bodies hung by their feet. They were naked, and each one had been slit from waist to chin. Beneath their heads the ground was caked with dry brown blood. Paul stumbled back against the door, which banged against the wall and startled the men before him to attention.

There were cries of delight around the gutted room, and several of the men rushed forward to seize Paul's arms. Two of them pulled his flight bag away and tore it open, as the others propelled him across the floor towards the far wall. It was then that Paul noticed that the brown cloaks worn by the tribe members were made of human skin.

One of the tribe, a large, grinning man with gold teeth, revealed a long, hooked knife in his waistband. As Paul shouted, the men holding him ripped the shirt from his back and threw him to the floor.

Before him, painted on the wall ahead, was a huge blue square, a grand version of the sticker attached to his plane ticket. It depicted a man not carrying another on his shoulders but someone donning the complete skin of another human being. The man with the gold teeth advanced towards Paul with the glittering culling knife in his hand.

'Why?' screamed Paul. 'Why me?'

Gold teeth leaned forward until Paul's sweat-sheened face was right beneath him.

'Your airline owes us for our land,' he hissed, then turned and called to the elders of the tribe. 'See! Nice blond boy, soft white skin make very special coat!' Gold teeth smiled spectacularly and nodded to the men surrounding Paul. They fell on him as the elders started the bidding.

They never did figure out what the Walkman was for.

# David Williamson

## The sandman

The pain was incredible!

He had never realized that such agony could exist. The really worrying thing though was that he could feel nothing from his chest downwards, although he knew that both his legs had to be shattered.

His spine must be damaged. It had to be.

He would be crippled for the rest of his days if he didn't get out of this bloody mess, and quickly!

It was a beautiful day, one of the best of the year so far. That was why he had roused himself extra early, attracted by the deep, clear blue sky and the gentle heat, that even at that early hour was filtering through the curtains of his hotel room window and warming the pillow on which he had lain.

Carol, his girlfriend, was still fast asleep beside him. Still, as Mr and Mrs Smith they had had a very late night at one of the local hot spots. She would be asleep for quite a while yet and would only be in a filthy mood for the rest of the day if he tried to wake her now.

He had showered and dressed quickly and quietly, and crept from their room to head out along the rugged coastline towards the magnificent clifftop views that he knew awaited him a mile or so further on.

He loved Cornwall; simply adored the place.

There was nowhere in the world, so far as he was concerned, that could touch the beautiful countryside of this area, and he would cheerfully spend the rest of his days in such a tranquil setting, if he were lucky enough to be allowed to do so.

Then, he had gone too close to the edge of the cliff. The crumbling sandstone had given way, and he had plunged the sixty feet or so on to the beach below, closely followed by a small avalanche of debris that threatened to engulf him, to bury him alive!

He still could not understand *why* he was alive. It was a hell of a

drop from the clifftop, far above, and it could only have been the relative softness of the sand that had saved him from death.

*Saved him?*

As he struggled to look about him, his body buried up to the neck in sand and fallen sandstone and loose earth, he began to wonder just how *safe* he was.

There was no one else on the crescent-shaped sliver of golden sand. It was far too early for that. He could see that the tide was slowly coming in, but it would be a long time before that would pose any sort of threat to him. His more immediate problem was how he was going to get himself out of this predicament, with no one about to help him.

Right then, concentrate! He put every ounce of his strength into trying to move one or either of his arms. Then the pain hit him. He didn't have to be a trained medical man to realize that both his arms had been smashed in the fall.

The agony seared up through them like a thousand tiny blowtorches, tearing up his arms and ripping into his groggy brain that was ill-prepared for such a terrible shock. He blacked out.

When he came to his senses again, his world was one of mind-numbing hell. There had been nothing more than a dull, aching throb until he had tried to move. He must have done himself more harm and the pain was a constant and spiteful reminder that he should not try anything so reckless again.

He must have been out for some time because he could see that the tide had crept further up the beach towards him, having moved closer by several yards. Sweeping slowly, deliberately, closer to the place where he lay trapped, almost entombed by the debris that pinned him to the ground.

The agony that consumed his body was now joined by a deep terror as he watched the sea move ever closer.

He became aware of a sound, somewhere further up the beach. It was the sound of children playing, shouting to one another. And they were coming closer; coming his way. He would be saved, if only he could attract their attention, call them to him. Then he could be out of this mess and on his way to hospital.

The light laughter of the twin five-year-old boys drifted across the



sands towards the rocks where he lay trapped. The boys, together with their mother, were the only other people on the beach, preferring to arrive early before the crowds came.

James and William bounded over the dry sand on their way to the water's edge, where they intended to build sandcastles and try to collect as many different shells as they could find.

William was also a boy who loved to climb, although he had been warned, in no uncertain terms, of the dangers of climbing on these loose and crumbling cliffs. Nevertheless, his first reaction was to head off to the large pile of rocks and rubble that he had spotted lying at the base of the towering cliff.

He was also, therefore, the first of the two boys to hear the faint and pathetic call for help from the man buried there.

The boys stared in open-mouthed astonishment at the bloodied, sandstreaked face of the man, as his dry throat, barely able to speak because of the enormous weight on his chest, tried to make himself understood.

It was a miracle that anyone had heard him at all over the sound of the pounding surf, now only scant feet away from his trapped and shattered legs. He had summoned every remaining ounce of his flagging strength to call to them, fighting against the terrible and ever present urge to pass out from the pain that screamed through his entire body.

The end result had been a high-pitched, reedy little voice that sounded more like something from out of a cartoon than from a fully grown, twenty-two-year-old man.

But they *had* heard him! Thank God, they *had* heard him! 'Please . . . please, help . . . get help!' he whispered through cracked and parched lips.

The two boys merely stood watching him with stoic, unmoving faces. Although not exactly frightened by the strange looking creature buried in the sand, neither of them was quite brave enough to venture closer, therefore neither of them could quite understand what *it* was trying to say to them.

It really was a funny looking thing. It looked like a man, but it didn't have any body or legs!

The man could feel the blood rising in his throat, as the steady pressure from the rocks and debris upon his chest had snapped some of his ribs, puncturing one of his lungs.

His mind reeled in desperation as he croaked another plea for the boys to go and get help before it was too late. There was a sudden shower of dust and the twins looked up to the cliff just in time to see a small rock come plummeting down and strike the man-thing on the back of its head.

It even *bled* like a real person!

The man was unconscious now; stunned by the rock that had hit him, no doubt loosened when he had fallen from the clifftop.

The two boys inched nearer. They knew what to do now. They had found a dead fish on the beach only the other day, and their mother had told them to bury the poor thing.

They did just that with the man-thing's head, piling a neat row of rocks all around it, and then filling in the cracks with wet sand, until nothing, not even a single hair could be seen.

Their mother was yelling from her position on the travelling rug, spread out beside the car.

It was lunchtime already!

They shot off across the sand, little legs pumping, throwing great gouts of sand into the air as they went.

After lunch, William turned to his mother, a familiar look on his tiny upturned face that she knew meant another question was on its way. She smiled and prepared herself.

'Mummy . . . what does the Sandman look like?' he asked in that long drawn-out way that young children have of speaking.

His mother sighed patiently. 'I don't know, Willy. Why do you ask?' she replied.

'Because we've just *seen* him . . . over there!' chipped in the other twin.

Oh. It was one of *those* games, was it? She would play along with them. Anything for a quiet life!

'Oh yes . . . and what was the Sandman *doing* on the beach?' she asked, hoping to catch them out.

'*He was sleeping, of course!*' came the stereophonic reply from the two shrill little voices.

The tide was now well past the spot where the man lay. His head would be under almost two feet of water.

'Any more cake, boys?' asked the mother.

# J. M. Pickles

## More birds

Miss Pennyfeather had a garden, small, but well laid out, with flowers and foliage. Flowers for the summer, berries for the winter – which was just around the corner. The berries brought a splash of bright blood red to the bruised shades of winter. However, long before winter was spent, the berries were all gone into the crops of the greedy birds.

Miss Pennyfeather did not care for birds.

Except for blackbirds, that is. These she found amusing. Small birds were pretty enough, but she could do without them. She had flowers for prettiness. Starlings served no purpose at all; drab ugly creatures. She saw no beauty in the sepias and purples that glinted off their wings in the sunlight. Furthermore, they had appalling manners. Now magpies were birds she definitely disliked. Smart in their black and white, well groomed and opulent, they should have brought to mind gentlemen in their DJs. Instead, they reminded her of undertakers. Indifferent to her dislike, they worked the hedges methodically, leaving devastation and hysterical birds in their wake.

A ball of gold came up the garden at a slow bounce. The neutered tom-cat from goodness knows where was a regular visitor. He followed a large fallen leaf that a little breeze blew playfully before him up the path.

A nice cat that; his orange hair a halo around him, giving the impression that he had just been blow-dried. A tender tom; perfectly happy chasing leaves and kissing his paws. He never bothered the birds. Pity! She tapped on the window, and he minced away.

A coven of magpies, busy on their latest victim's entrails, ignored her. She would have to do something about them.

Miss Pennyfeather was not a woman to be defeated. She started thinking.

The day had woken a mean, heavy grey, but now the sun pushed forward from behind a veneer of cloud. The grey turned to a metallic bronze, and a sulphurous light hung over the afternoon.

The garden still carried a considerable amount of insect life, and the magpies muscled in on everyone's pickings. The poor, portly blackbirds moved to safety in nervous spurts. She decided to do some digging. Clean up the garden for the winter ahead.

The afternoon advanced. Plunging her spade into the soil, she straightened up, pressing her hands into the middle of her back where the stiffness started.

Behind her, there was a little noise, a mere whisper of sound. A magpie, an enormous member of the species, sat on a nearby branch. It was leaning out towards her; its wicked little eyes were bright, and its beak open. She stepped back in alarm, treading on the spade and falling heavily. The bird flew straight at her face, and she automatically put up her hands to protect herself. However, the bird did not attack her face; instead it swooped and gouged her knee, just above her wellies. She was understandably upset and shaken, but this did not account for the fear that so unreasonably gripped her. The bird was sinister.

It had only one leg.

Miss Pennyfeather was a sensible woman. She went to see her GP.

At the surgery, she explained what had happened.

'The central claw, was out of proportion with the rest of it. Huge and hooked,' she ended.

'Humm,' said the doctor. 'Most unpleasant. Did you notice this before or after the bird attacked you?'

'Before, of course! She answered irritably.

'Yes, quite. But wasn't he grasping the branch with it?' The doctor continued cleaning the wound.

'It was sticking out stiffly in front, separated from the others,' she said.

He examined his nails as he thought: 'Freudian? Won't do much harm; ignore that bit. Still, elderly persons with a history of mental instability, should not be allowed to live alone in remote cottages. He looked at her over his spectacles. 'Miss P., you've had so many little accidents this year, wouldn't it be wiser to move to a flat? A good

residential home with people for company is what I would advise myself.'

She glared. 'No thank you.' She didn't like people around.

The doctor scribbled on his pad. 'Take these pills and make an appointment with the receptionist as you go out,' he said. He had already lost interest. The doctor was a very busy man.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who was stubborn; she had no intention of moving from her home.

Her cottage was by no means inaccessible. In fact the bus stopped quite near. The doctor over-reacted to situations. Silly! She smiled bravely at the concerned glances of the people on the bus as she hobbled up the aisle, and a nice man helped her off. 'Will you be all right?' he inquired, and she brushed her infirmity aside. It was just a very deep wound.

On the wall at the entrance to her cottage, the magpie waited. He swayed backwards and forwards on his one leg. His feathers were scruffy and he looked even larger. His expression was evil.

A bubble of hysteria rose up into her throat, and then into her brain where it burst, leaving her clammy. Icy perspiration collected in her armpits. With an immense effort she pulled herself together. What nonsense, allowing a bird to terrorize her! She lifted her umbrella and took a swipe at it – and the magpie fell off the wall! Almost immediately however, it arose and hurtled towards her. She hit out at it again and again, till, with a derisive screech, it flew off into the gathering night.

Miss Pennyfeather was not a woman to be victimized. She decided on what she would do.

In her cosy sitting-room, with its coal-and-log-effect electric fire, she poured herself a little drink. She was not a drinking woman, but she abandoned the sherry in favour of something just a little bit stronger. She enjoyed a little something in the evenings. Pleasantly warm and feeling rather better, she decided to put her plan into operation the following day. Then she popped off to bed with her hot-water bottle feeling definitely pleased with her decision.

Next morning, she awoke to the prodding of excitement and, though her leg was stiff and sore, she cooked a wholesome breakfast. Calorie counting and too much cholesterol – rubbish! She had

always eaten exactly what she fancied. And look at her – the picture of health! Except for the leg, of course and she gave a little giggle. She peered out of the window, but apart from a couple of stout blackbirds and a few damp sparrows, the garden was empty. Her eyes wandered on – and a memory returned.

Leaving her subconscious it slammed into her conscious. She remembered with a sick fullness in her stomach, the day she had found the bird's leg. She had made a trap; a harmless thing to catch the collared doves that were ruining her small vegetable patch. It gave them a fright when they found themselves confined within the mesh netting. Sometimes they freed themselves, and sometimes she freed them. It made them think twice before they did it again. Then she had found the bird's leg, knotted into the net. It had looked as though it had been torn off. Would a bird peck off its own leg to set itself free? The magpie? How strange that, at the time, she had thought nothing of it. Just a vague interest. But that had been so long ago.

Miss Pennyfeather was not a woman to brood. She had a mission.

She put on her coat, and turned the collar up, then her hat with its brim turned down, finally a scarf, and a pair of sunglasses. The effect suited her. She looked ten years younger. She felt mysterious. Unfortunately, the image was somewhat ruined as she had to take her umbrella for protection from the rain – and other things.

Once in the village, she hobbled to Bates and Burleigh, Gunsmiths. She had observed them at other less worrying times. The glint on the gunmetal so sinister, and the sheen on the wood so elegant. She was aware, of course, that it was necessary to own a licence to purchase one of these. But then she wouldn't dream of possessing a lethal weapon. What she wanted was much simpler. What she wanted was an air-pistol.

She limped through the door with purpose, and inquired the price of a very nice looking air-rifle and a pistol. She settled for the pistol, as she had originally intended. A young man helped her choose. 'You have to be over eighteen to use one of these,' he said, looking at her with sudden concern. She simpered. She realized that the hat and coat, scarf and sunglasses did wonders for her – but eighteen? Almost immediately she understood that he thought she was buying them as a gift. For a young son perhaps, or a nephew. She felt a little

silly. Anyway, even the marmalade cat hadn't recognized her at the bus stop. He had walked daintily past her, deep in cat thoughts, and she had had to stop herself from giggling. Now she said a little stiffly, 'That is quite all right.' He looked a bit uncertain; so she bought a box of pellets as well.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman of action; she paid for them with her pension.

Some years ago she had been to see the Hitchcock film, *The Birds* and she had thoroughly enjoyed it. She liked films with a little tension; a little horror. It was exquisite to sit clutching her handbag and be terrified. At the cinema that is, of course – or the television. Never in real life. Goodness no! She hated fright in real life. *The Birds* had played on her imagination at the time. She had to admit it. But that too had been such a long time ago. She had not given it a thought since.

The bus dropped her off at her usual stop, with everyone inquiring about her leg again, and she bravely suffering. A young couple got off at her stop as well, and she smiled at them with pain. Her leg was playing up now, and as she approached her gate she began to feel almost unwell. The mist clung to her, and she peered through the gloom. Strange that it should be so dark. The she discovered that she still had on her sunglasses. What a joke! She giggled softly to herself. Standing under an old elm, she took them off, putting them away carefully in their case.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who enjoyed her own private jokes. She went on giggling a little longer.

Without warning something with great horned claws landed on her shoulder. They dug through the material of her thick mohair coat, and feathers flapped across her face. A beak snapped in her ear and her nostrils were filled with a fetid odour. She stumbled and fell, not because she had lost her footing, but because she was unable to support the weight of the bird – for that was what it was. She fell on her bad knee, opening the wound, and the magpie pulled at her scarf. He was trying to get at her throat, she was quite sure of this. She cringed in a huddle of pain and she screamed. She heard footsteps approaching at a run before she fainted.

When she came to, the young couple who had got off the bus were

leaning over her; supporting her.

'You've had a nasty fall,' the girl said, 'and your leg is bleeding right through your bandage. Would you like us to take you to your doctor, or call him?'

'That's very kind,' she said. 'But I'll be quite all right. That's my cottage there, if you'd just help me home?'

Once they had settled her into her large comfortable armchair, the girl made a cup of tea. Before they left, she said: 'Did you see a very big magpie sitting on my shoulder? Or near me?' They looked surprised, then embarrassed. They exchanged glances, and she knew they thought that she was confused after her fall. Perhaps a bit queer?

Miss Pennyfeather was not a stupid woman; she did not pursue the subject.

She was quite relieved when they left. She needed something stronger than a cup of tea. She would have offered them a drink, but there really wasn't enough left in the bottle to go around. She put some nice soothing antiseptic cream on her leg, replaced the dressing with a handkerchief, then rewound the old stained bandage. She didn't feel like lunch, so she finished off the little bit in the bottle, and went off to bed.

She was awakened by a tapping and lay drowsily for a few moments, trying to locate the sound. The fear the sound produced made her every nerve tense. She opened and shut her mouth several times before she could find spit to ease down her dry throat – and she waited. The tapping continued in quick staccato. It came from her bedroom window. It came from all the windows. Her ears hummed, and a little bile from breakfast spurted into her throat. She lay there feeling ill, and the sharp tapping continued. A decision had to be made. 'You're going soft,' she said, and threw her bedclothes aside. She lowered her good leg, and then the bad one, with infinite care on to the carpet patterned with roses. She limped towards the window, but before she reached it, she stopped to reconsider. 'Don't be a goose,' she said and threw herself forward for the last few steps.

The sight that met her eyes was alarming if not terrifying. The ledge was lined with pretty little blue tits, busily stripping it of paint. Relief made her knees as weak as fear had done before. But the relief gave place to anger. 'Shoo!' she said, tapping on the glass. 'Shoo!



Shoo!' They rose in a flurry of yellow and blue, circled and returned to work in a perfect fury of enthusiasm.

'Little beasts!' she said, but there was little she could do about it, because it was not just the one window, but all the windows. They worked on the doors too till well into late evening. By nightfall she disliked tits intensely.

She awoke again to the tapping, which had grown to a drumming. They were settled on every ledge – a pretty sight. She cut strips of baking-foil and hung them out over the tops of the windows with bits of string. The metallic rustling and tinkling did alarm the little birds for a while.

Then they returned with reinforcements; second and third shifts. They were industrious and dedicated workers, and the crackling and flashing material no longer bothered them. The woodwork was stripped clean of paint. Naked, the ledges cringed before her furious gaze. In a last exhausted attempt she flung open her bedroom window. 'Vandals!' She screamed.

Then her eye caught a shadow – the merest movement. Below her, nestled amidst the clusters of brilliant berries of the *Coccinea lalandei* that grew up to the window, clung the one-legged magpie.

A trick of the light a mixture of mist and late afternoon, made him larger, more mouldy. Mangy patches revealed sick pink skin where feathers should have grown. He leered. She did not shoo him away. She slammed shut the window, and locked it firmly.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman of courage. But enough was enough.

With the rains and snows of winter soaking into the unprotected wood her expenses would be heavy. 'A stitch in time,' she said, and rang a local decorator. A pleasant man arrived. 'Never seen nothing like it,' he said, sucking his teeth in appreciation. 'Something missing in their diet, maybe. Have to admit, though, I've seen nothing like this! In our work, we use this new paint. Not everyone uses it, mind you! Bit on the expensive side, but you'll have no problems after using it, believe me. Thousands of grateful customers to prove it! Fungus repellent; insect repellent and bird repellent. You name it – this is the paint for it!'

The tits left the paint alone, but the magpies collected. They tore the plants to pieces. Snapped little branches off the shrubs, and

amputated the new rhododendron buds that were forming for the following year. They hustled the other birds and strutted in militant aggression across the little lawn. The big magpie hopped on his one obscene leg, marshalling them.

She put a pellet in her pistol. She was amazed she had not done so before. Self-control, that's what it was. The feel of the pistol gave her a glow of security. She stroked the smooth, hard metal and read the name of the British gunsmith engraved on it. Under the name she read 'Made in Spain'. Typical, she thought and opened the newly-painted window.

Her hand never even trembled as she pulled the trigger. The slight 'thut' the gun made, surprised the birds without unduly alarming them. They moved into the trees, however. But not the big magpie – not him and one other. The other lay on the grass, and the one-legged bird looked in her direction. He seemed to look right into her eyes. With a sound like a hiss, he flew straight towards her, and his approach hypnotized her. He was almost at the window when, with a start of terror, she once more shut it, just in time. The enormous bird thumped into it, and a pane cracked. The magpie was not stunned. It teetered on the ledge, throwing itself again and again against the damaged pane.

For those moments she was petrified completely. Then she pulled herself together.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who now had a weapon. She put in another pellet.

She had not been surprised when she had not shot the big magpie; in fact she had been somewhat amazed that she had shot anything at all. She was pleased. The huge bird returned for a further assault, and fear once more became her strongest emotion. She raised the pistol and took aim. The bird paused and looked at her. He seemed to sneer then flew back to his companions. She did not pull the trigger; she didn't want to shoot through the glass.

The other magpies had obviously not realized that the ruffled heap of feathers on the lawn was one of their family group. When the big magpie obviously told them they formed a hostile grieving circle around the corpse. They shrieked and they chattered, the volume of sound everywhere, till it dropped to a low satanic chant. With menace, they mourned.

She needed to hear a human voice. She rang the speaking clock. 'Five forty-eight and three seconds,' the voice said. Good, she thought. It would soon be dark and the birds gone.

The night wrapped the house in a smothering blanket, and strangely the silence made her flesh creep. Goose-pimples of considerable size sprang up on her arms under the protective layers of wool. Drawing shut all the curtains, she turned on the TV. Then she turned on several unnecessary lights.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who was decisive in her actions. She turned the radio on full as well.

A thin rain continued through the next day, but a man came to repair the cracked pane at her insistence. 'Can't guarantee the work in this weather, but I'll do m'best,' he said.

She felt more secure with the new pane, and nothing else awful happened. The dead magpie was no longer there. The gentle tom wouldn't have touched it. Perhaps some other, coarser cat.

She peered through the rain, and her glance stopped at her atalantioides. There was something wrong with it. Wiping the vapour from her breath off the window, she put on her spectacles for a better inspection. Yes, certainly it was not right. Warts and carbuncular growths clustered on it. It never rains but it pours, she thought with a sinking heart.

The tom, its fur clover honey in the pale autumn light, came into view, pausing to smell a very late rose. He looked up at her, and because he thought she was admiring him, he did a little dance for her, before moving into the bushes.

The rain snivelled on for another day, but nothing unpleasant happened. She was content, tucked away in her little cottage. She baked a cake.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who enjoyed the simple pleasures of life. She poured another cup of tea, to go with the cake.

The garden was calm. The blackbirds, their necks out-stretched, sprinted importantly after one another. Two robins, their chests deep with colour, eyed a faded female. What nonsense that no two male robins can share the same manor! Look at these; perfectly happy side by side! The rain eased and the pain in her knee increased. The atalantioides looked grotesque. An elderly cotoneaster beside it didn't look all that good either. A lichenous

fungus embraced it. She looked up into the trees, but they were bare of magpies. Bare of all birds. With immense courage, she unlocked the back door, and went into the garden. She had put on her wellies, and the effort had brought stabs of pain to her injured knee. She squelched up the garden, to inspect the diseased plants.

Something brushed against her legs and in alarm she jerked aside, almost falling. The tom-cat rubbed against her purring in friendship. 'Silly creature!' she stormed in a nasty voice; and he withdrew his friendship and moved away. She trod on something. The dead magpie gazed at her with a milky eye near her foot, and she kicked it behind a crenatoserrata. There was a rustle from behind the sick cotoneaster – and the one-legged magpie lurched out. His gaze was malevolent.

She turned, and as fast as she could move she made for the back door. Close at her heels, terror accompanied her on one ugly leg. She reached the door without attack, and flung herself through it, falling awkwardly on the stone tiles of the kitchen. She did not feel the pain in her wrist; only a sudden searing agony in her heel. She could barely lift herself off the floor, but fear lifted her. She turned in craven terror anticipating further attack, but the magpie stood some paces away. It spat out a sizeable bit of rubber from the heel of her wellington.

She bolted the door and had a little cry. 'Enough of that,' she said to herself.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman made of sterner stuff. She dried her eyes.

The throbbing in her wrist informed her that all was not well with it. Her knee ached intolerably, but her heel was quite numb. A sudden urgent message reached her from her bowels, and she reached the lavatory only just in time. On her nice clean bathroom linoleum ruby blobs marked her passage, and now the pain in her heel made her dizzy. She packed the gaping wound with a good hankie, poured something to help pull her together and rang for a taxi. This last was a mad extravagance.

In the garden, the magpie wobbled backwards and forwards on his one leg as he tried to balance on a small branch of a rogersiana. He was extremely contented. He chewed on a little bit of Miss Pennyfeather's heel. Then he lifted a wing to search for something that irritated him – and several feathers fell out.

'Miss P., not another little accident!' the doctor accused.

He tried being jovial. 'You're starting to look like the retreat from Moscow!' He was not a jovial man, and she was not amused. He

drummed on the table with his well manicured nails. 'What is it this time?'

'The magpie,' she said with satisfaction. 'And it's twice as big!'

'Now I believe you, of course, but that's a very unpleasant wound. Knocking your heel against anything could never do that. Now what was it really?' he coaxed.

'The magpie,' she answered, tightening her lips. He controlled his irritability, humming under his breath. 'I'll arrange for a health visitor to call on you,' he compromised in defeat.

'No thank you,' she said firmly. 'I won't let her in!'

He rang for the next patient.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman of vision. She knew what visits from employees of the Department of Health could lead to.

The pills the doctor had given her lulled her into a state of tranquillity. Delicious relaxation. She woke late, and lay looking blearily at the window. It had been snowing. But of course not! Snow didn't cling to the windows like that! Frost? Yes there must have been a heavy frost. She reached for her glasses and put them on. It looked as if a piece of knitting in thick cotton, in which whole sections of stitches had been dropped and others picked up, had been stretched haphazardly across the window. She moved towards it, gazing stupidly at the whitish mass. Here and there, a little ochre and black speckled the white. 'I don't believe it!' she gasped, her hand to her mouth. 'Bird droppings! Starlings! Filthy, filthy creatures!' All the windows were the same, smothered in it.

She rang the RSPCA. They were understanding, but unhelpful. She rang the pest control. They were kind, but could not liquidate birds on grounds of incontinence. So finally, she rang a window-cleaning service. She did not ring her own window-cleaner, for fear he might never return again.

'Never seen nothing like it,' the man said. 'We get all sorts of foreign birds coming across here. Would have said it was something like that. Still they don't come over at this time, do they? You say it was starlings. Did you say starlings? Hummm – funny business.'

Her windows sparkled wonderfully bright, and the next day she felt brighter herself. The garden was calm, and she potted about the house. She felt detached and languid. Humming 'Bye Bye Blackbird', her eyes moved slowly over the garden, her mind really quite at ease. Therefore, it took a few moments to register that the heaps of feathers in discarded lumps on the lawn were her now extinct blackbirds. It was a desolate sight. They lay with their throats torn out and their entrails still steaming beside them. And

worse, much, much worse, the pretty tom was quite near. He remained in a particularly difficult position, for he had been performing a wash and brush-up on his rear. A large hole in his head split blood over his mustard coat, turning it deep maroon.

She sat down trembling. Then with unsteady hands, she took a pill or two. She couldn't remember if she had already taken any.

Then the tits returned.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who had not yet reached the end of her resources. She went to the store cupboard and produced a container of chilli powder.

The rain held off and the chilli powder sat in little mounds and runs along all the window-ledges. The paint with the deterrent the tits had found quite delicious, but the chilli powder they did not care for. Their appetite was subdued.

Though she occasionally took potshots at the magpies, she never even winged one. Still, she got immense satisfaction out of worrying them. The weather was suddenly most clement, and the scent of burning leaves tickled her nostrils. Silence hung thick and heavy and she welcomed it. There was, perhaps, peace at last. Nothing awful had happened for a couple of days. She peered myopically through the window at her sick shrubs and was pleased to observe that the infection had not spread. Then her garden seemed to explode. It erupted with birdlife! Large birds, redwings and field-fares and birds that had never visited her garden before, weighed down the branches, tearing off the berries. Spitefully, they hurled whole clusters to the ground to rot.

She thumped on the windows, and she loaded her pistol. She took careful aim, and shot at the heaviest of the birds – but she never dropped a feather. They ignored her. Then, as suddenly as they had arrived, as if at a command, they left. In a swirl of wings, like a swarm of giant locusts, they blotted out the sky. Behind them, they left naked shivering trees and shrubs. Her *angustifolia*; her *vicarii*; her *congesta*, *berberis*, *salicifolia*, *pyracanthus*, even her rowan. Beneath them, lay a carpet of red, soon to be brown and slimy. Deep in despair, she looked at the havoc the birds had wrought. There was little she could do about it now. What she needed was cheering-up.

Miss Pennyfeather was a positive woman. She went to the hairdresser.

Her leg was stiff and stuck hotly to her bandage. Her wrist was stiff and throbbed. But her hair was stiff and crisply laquered. She tried catching reflections of herself in the bus windows. She had nice hair,

which she had tinted 'Pearl Mink' when she remembered. She could read the questions in the eyes of the other passengers as they gazed at her well-groomed appearance – and the bandages! With an air of mystery, and with help, she got off at her stop.

The weather had changed. She felt a drop of rain, and looked up into the branches above her. And the one-legged magpie looked down.

Her heart, a bird itself, fluttered and thumped against the cage of her ribs in a mad attempt to escape. Mists fogged her eyes and she felt herself falling. She was not falling from faintness, nor from the weakness of her leg. She was falling from the sudden weight upon her head, which she was unable to support. The magpie rode upon her head.

She screamed wildly, and the bird sunk his talons deep into her hair and scalp. With its wicked beak it wrenched out beakfuls of her beautifully coiffeured hair. She beat at it with her good hand, and made futile attempts with the other, screaming all the time. She must have fainted, for she was suddenly in the midst of a small circle of two children and their parents. An ambulance flashed up in time.

'What happened, dear?' They all asked. In casualty, she told the doctor and nurses about the magpie. They said, 'Hmm, now just you rest. Don't worry about anything. Do you think you could describe him? Did you get a look at him?'

'Of course I did,' she said. 'I've seen him dozens of times. It's a monstrous magpie, and its feathers are falling out! It also only has one leg.' After a while, they wouldn't look at her when they asked questions. They kept her in hospital for a couple of days, and her own doctor came to visit her. He was starting to accept that her injuries could possibly be a case of granny-bashing. But who? 'Miss P., we really do believe your story about the magpie, but do you have any other visitors? Is there someone you are afraid to tell us about? We must know, if we are to help you.'

'I don't know anyone at all. Nobody visits me, and nobody has attacked me. Only the magpie. And what is more, doctor, you don't believe one word of my story!'

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman sensitive to atmosphere. Did they think that she was potty?

Back home the first evening from the hospital, she sat before her TV, lost in a world of millionaires. She soaked in the sunshine and expensive extras that millionaires have. She had taken her little

yellow pills and the rather larger white ones, all washed down with John Haig's best.

She didn't hear the first thud; and she didn't hear the second thud. The third thud, however, was accompanied by the sound of splintering glass, and she heard this. She felt mildly alarmed, but not unduly so; leaving the sun behind, she went to investigate. Fear seemed to have quite left her. She felt light-headed, but determined. A further sound of glass striking wood as it fell reached her. She picked up her heavy walking stick, and went up the stairs. The bedroom door was open; from within came scrabbling sounds.

Before she switched on the light, she smelt the magpie fetid and foul. As the light flooded the room, the bird, which had been squeezing itself inch by inch, through the aperture left by the broken pane, looked up, vicious hatred in its eyes. She raised her heavy stick and struck at it, and it fell to the ground. She brought the stick down again, and again. Then she jumped on it; stamping the life out of it. She forgot the pain in her leg and wrist, till a whisper of air, surely a dying gasp, escaped from the bird's beak. She left it, and stumbled down the stairs. Blindly entering the sitting-room, she crashed into a heavy sideboard, the lower edge of which caught her bad knee. She crumpled to the floor in pain, the agony shooting through her entire body. She hit her head in falling.

Then she heard a flapping and fumbling, a scraping and bumping, coming down the stairs. The euphoria of the tranquilizers and whisky gave way to the strength of fear. She lay and waited; her tongue a thick noiseless sponge; her throat contracted. The sounds came nearer, pausing a moment at the door. Then the magpie, dragging its one remaining but broken leg, shuffled in and edged towards her.

The bird heaved itself up on to her chest. There it sat, wobbling a bit. Its bulk covered the top half of her body. It gazed with interest into her face and cocked its head coquettishly to one side; then it stretched far back, bringing it suddenly forward with immense force. The large beak, a far more efficient weapon than the air pistol, smashed through her skull.

The magpie made a sound of pleasure, and very daintily, with delicate movements, dipped into her brain, plucking out bits of pink and grey matter. The magpie was a very happy bird, but she never knew this.

Miss Pennyfeather was a woman who was very dead.



J. M. Thornton

## Death from autophilia

Seymore Puckett was nervously shy, slightly built and not very tall. Not the type of person you could imagine surviving as a salesman in the demanding and demented city of Los Angeles. But he sold chemicals to dry-cleaning companies and spent most of his time making routine visits to established customers and taking orders to replenish depleted stocks. His success was due to a diffident willingness to give efficient service without pressurizing his customers into buying more than they needed. He didn't harass them, but just accepted their orders and was grateful. His lifestyle was not extravagant so he made enough money to get by.

In a city of eleven million, seemingly populated by a high proportion of people with an aversion to home laundry and incomes that made it an unnecessary chore, the task was relegated to a willing band of professionals. Seymore had no shortage of customers. The only hard selling came from opening new accounts. It was an essential part of his job but an aspect that he didn't much care for.

Unexpectedly, at the age of fifty-five, Seymore found himself widowed and the resolute orderliness of his life drastically transformed. On a downtown shopping trip his wife, jostled by the bustling crowd on the sidewalk, stumbled and fell under a truck. On the surface he accepted his bereavement with a stoical fortitude gained from a lifetime of practice. He continued to visit his customers and carry out his duties as he had always done, making no reference to his personal tragedy, and no one associated the brief newspaper report of a 'Downtown Truck Fatality' with the quiet, nondescript salesman.

Seymore was acutely aware of the depressing emptiness of his home when he returned each day. Without a welcoming wife and a TV dinner awaiting him after a long tiring day on the road, Seymore tended to delay his return to the house. He usually ate out, sometimes taking in a movie or ball-game and frequently spending his

evenings in a bar. Other times he drove around for hours in his little yellow Pinto, or parked on the beach road and watched the comings and goings of other people. He was an observer of life rather than a participator.

In a city thronged with people bent on having a good time, he was a man apart. In a crowded restaurant or coffee shop he preferred to wait for an empty table or go elsewhere rather than have the company of others imposed upon him. At movies or ball-games, in unavoidable physical contact, an invisible barrier separated him from other people. In bars he drank alone and succeeded by his attitude in isolating himself from people who would have been friendly given a chance. He was a recluse in a crowd, insular in his gregariousness. But he hated the empty echoing solitude of his house and eventually he went home only to sleep, shower and change his clothes, spending the minimum amount of time there.

He was happiest when he was driving around, without direction or destination. He could enjoy the crowds and the busy traffic because his car presented a solid barrier between himself and them.

Less and less often did he venture into restaurants to eat, tending to buy take-outs and patronising the places where he could drive up to a window and be served without having to get out of his car. He ate in the car, sometimes taking it to a drive-in where in the company of other vehicles he watched the movie, often seeing it through twice in his reluctance to depart.

More and more often he spent the night in his car wrapped in a blanket. He found it preferable to his large empty bed. He bought his groceries from friendly local storekeepers who accepted his telephone order and carried the bags out to his car when he arrived. Gas stations filled his tank and accepted his credit card through the car window. Then by changing his banking arrangements he was able to use one where he could deal with his financial affairs through a window teller without having to enter the bank at all.

The sales reputation that he had established over the years as a reliable nonentity enabled him to take an increasing number of orders by telephone. This spared him the ordeal of entering the premises, but in order to feel he was not abusing his employer's trust, he continued to patrol his route, parking close to his customers' stores and calling them from a phone booth. Sometimes he could even see his customers answering the calls through the plate

glass of their store windows. As his reluctance to leave his car increased he had a radio telephone installed to reduce the time he had to spend away from it.

He did at one point wonder whether he was suffering from agoraphobia, or perhaps it was claustrophobia – either way he didn't much care and saw no reason to do anything about it.

Though he was able to maintain a certain level of business in this manner, eventually it became insufficient to satisfy his employers. The sales manager summoned Seymore to his office and said in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to keep his job he had better get his ass out on the street and get new business. Though he did his best to comply, the fear of losing his job did not dispel the nameless dread that accompanied Seymore whenever he was separated from his car. Sorties into familiar dry-cleaning stores brought him out in a cold sweat causing him to make sudden panicky departures feeling breathless and nauseous, sometimes clutching an order, more often without. Under pressure from his boss and beset by terror at the thought of leaving his car, his phobias increased in direct proportion to his diminishing sales.

When his presence was once again requested in his sales manager's office he declined the invitation with the inevitable result. But instead of worrying about the loss of his job he was consoled by the fact that he no longer had to face the tribulations of dealing with customers. It was a considerable relief that his car was not a company vehicle and could not be taken from him. He had a small amount of savings and so long as he had money to put gas in his car and keep it on the road he knew he would be all right. He had no intention of seeking other employment.

He spent most nights on some quiet back street, a secluded part of the beach, or in a parking lot where he would not be disturbed. On the rare occasions he returned to his home and garaged his car at the side of the house he didn't sleep in his bed, preferring the car instead. His neighbours, who noticed his odd behaviour and how little time he spent at home, either clucked their tongues and gossiped their disapproval or envied him his freedom. None expressed any concern. But Seymore was indifferent to their opinions. When he decided that he no longer had any use for it, he put his house in the hands of a real estate agent to dispose of.

He spent his days in busy streets, at drive-ins and the beach and in

parking lots where he sought only the company of other vehicles. He felt safe and happy in the security of his metal shell surrounded by other carapaced creatures herding together.

He ventured on to freeways at peak commuter times and found happiness in crawling along as part of a moving herd four or five lanes wide. They honked and belched exhaust fumes and roared their engines and flashed their lights, making erratic darting movements into spaces left by anyone too slow to keep up. He was fascinated by the outburst of rivalry between powerful specimens seeking to dominate and lead the herd but he was content with his place in the following mass. He appreciated those who demonstrated consideration towards his old Pinto and tolerance for its chugging progress and was courteous to them in return. He experienced a wonderful sense of belonging.

They herded in their thousands, kindred spirits but as individual in themselves as members of any other species. There were different colours, shapes and sizes; custom cars with artistic designs, gaudy paintwork and outrageous adornments; standard models announcing their distinctive personalities with the addition of stripes, badges and stickers, or by rusty indifference and battered neglect; beautiful lumbering trucks and buses containing imprisoned passengers displaying bored or curious faces at the windows. Seymore had a place among them and they stimulated his soul. He wished that these journeys could last for ever. Then afterwards, still with a lingering tingle of excitement, he was again content to seek out the peace and quiet of parking lot companionship.

But such undemanding contentment inevitably attracts attention, perhaps inspired by his personal neglect. In a city boasting tolerance of nonconformists and encouraging outrageous behaviour, his simple unobtrusive pleasures were unacceptable.

Parking lot attendants turned him away saying the lot was full when quite obviously it wasn't. Young lovers complained of the unwelcome nearness of his vehicle. He was accused of being a pervert by aggressive young men wishing to demonstrate their machismo to impressionable young women. He was suspected of casing banks and stores by the simple fact of being there. Police officers moved him on, some indifferently, some with threats of arrest if he was caught again.

One day he found himself an unwitting participant in a drama he hadn't bargained for. A liquor store in a shopping mall was robbed at gunpoint. His car was reported as being at the scene of the crime and had been observed driving off shortly after the incident. He was quickly picked up and taken in for questioning by a pair of enthusiastic young officers.

He spent the night in a cell exposed to the company of a garrulous drunk and a couple of intimidating young hoods. It was an indescribable nightmare for Seymore. He was not even allowed to keep his car keys from which he could have derived some meagre comfort. His sanity survived the experience by retreating into a dark silent corner of his mind. He ignored taunts and intimidation by his fellow prisoners until they became bored and left him alone. Throughout the long night his hands clutched the bars of the cell window from where he could just see the rear fender of his car in the police pound where it had been towed after his arrest.

The next morning he was recognized by an experienced member of the force as an eccentric but harmless itinerant and released. He fled to his car. Frantic, he drove through the streets without thinking, unaware of where he was or where he was going. His heart pounded in terror at every patrol car that he saw. The streets seemed filled with them and, fearing they might still be on the look-out for him, he desperately needed to get away from their threat. He dreaded to hear the wailing sirens start up as he passed.

Confused by his panic, he had no idea where he was heading and recognized none of the streets that were normally so familiar to him. He scanned around for signs that would lead him out of the city. He careered round corners and wove recklessly between streams of traffic until he reached the Golden State Freeway and headed north. His panic gradually subsided as the traffic thinned and buildings gave way to open stretches of farmland that gradually turned into wasteland. He was tired but stopped only when thirst or the need for gas forced him to.

By late afternoon he was desperately weary, hot and exhausted as he approached the outskirts of Bakersfield. There he came across a huge wrecker's yard running alongside the freeway, packed with thousands of ravaged and disowned vehicles. He pulled over to gaze at the vast wilderness of unwanted shells, outcasts abandoned by their human owners once their usefulness was past. He drove slowly

along the boundary ditch until he found entry into the compound. It was like discovering a lost city populated by his own kind and he knew suddenly and with complete certainty this was where he belonged.

He crawled around the haphazardly stacked vehicles, auto-heaps inclined and wedged against each other for support, seeking a way into the heart of the mass. When he found it, it was almost hidden between a Plymouth and a grey Chevrolet. A red Buick and a burned-out Lincoln were balanced precariously on top and leaned inwards with a green Mustang bridging the two piles. They presented to Seymour portals and an archway, inviting him to enter. He carefully squeezed his little yellow Pinto into the gap, scraping the paintwork of the blue Plymouth in the process until he clunked fender to fender with a purple Dodge. The column of cars swayed at the impact. The Buick tilted and slid, then gently came to rest on his roof, denting it only slightly. The movement dislodged the Mustang and less graciously it rasped and shrieked, nosedived and smashed behind him. Its wheels spun in the air and for a moment it balanced on its grill before it tipped and crashed against the back of the Pinto, exposing to Seymour the rust encrusted entrails of its underbelly.

When the sound and dust settled he and his Pinto were protected on five sides by car sentinels. With no way out and no way in, he couldn't be reached. He was safe and he was exhausted so he curled up on the back seat and the steady drone of traffic on the freeway lulled him into a deep dreamless sleep.

He slept on in oblivion when work at the wrecker's yard started up the following morning. The clamour of the crushing and baling machine way down at the far end of the compound where it chewed and crumpled cars into neat compressed cubes did not penetrate his sleep.

'A couple of stacks at the bottom end came down during the night,' yelled the foreman to the driver of the grabber, trying to make himself heard above the roar of machinery. 'They don't look too safe so you'd better make them your next job.'

Philip Lorimer

## Under the carpet

There can be few *aficionados* of horror literature who have not at some time delighted in and been chilled by the works of Jason Carlton, surely this century's greatest anthologist of true tales of the macabre. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know the great man remember him as a charming host and lively raconteur who adopted a very tongue-in-cheek attitude to the weird and wonderful stories whose collection was his life's work. His death last year at the age of ninety-four was a cause of considerable sadness but it brings with it one blessing in disguise in that it frees me from my vow never to repeat within his lifetime the one horror story in which Jason Carlton had complete and absolute belief.

Three years ago, as part of a university dissertation on his career, I helped Carlton to compile his fifteenth volume of *True Tales of the Uncanny*. Although I had spent many hours in his company, and he had been very forthcoming on professional matters, he never seemed willing to speak of his private life. Of course this was outside the scope of my research and none of my business to be sure, but I longed to know what had set him off on his bizarre studies. One evening when we had been working late he offered me some port. It was an excellent vintage, well beyond my means, and one way or another between us we got through the whole bottle.

Carlton was a kindly man but there was a forbidding air about him and thus it was only through my large intake of alcohol that I summoned up the courage to pry into his past. He deflected my questions charmingly but expertly and after a while I gave up. Then suddenly he began to speak. The port in my stomach and the heat of a blazing log fire had made me drowsy but when I caught the gist of what he was saying I pulled myself upright, away from the seductive embrace of the soft leather armchair, took in a few deep breaths of air redolent with the aroma of old leather-bound books and gave him my full attention.

When he had finished I sat in awed silence brooding on the mysteries which he had revealed until, quite suddenly and appropriately, I was shocked out of my stupor by the clock striking midnight. I asked him again if what he had told me was really true, not *True Tales of the Uncanny* true. He assured me that all had happened exactly as related and then made me promise not to betray his confidence for as long as he was alive. The reasons that he gave for this request were to do with the public only being to take so much and a necessary adherence to certain levels of good taste and discretion, even in his genre. I knew at once that this was all fudge; and he knew it too. We never spoke of the matter again.

So now he is dead and his tale can be told. That his purpose in withholding it was more a case of self-interest in the face of possible, but highly unlikely, criminal prosecution rather than the satisfaction of some deep moral or aesthetic conviction will shortly become apparent. Naturally I had no notebook or tape recorder with me on that remarkable evening in the presence of a true master craftsman and so I must rely on memory and my own sense of narrative. I present the tale in the first person, as near as possible to the words of Jason Carlton. The paucity of style is uniquely my own.

You want to know how I first became interested in the macabre; why I have spent my life tracking down stories which even I don't believe? Well, the plain truth is that once, a long time ago, I really did see beyond the veil, as it were, and I've been trying to get another glimpse ever since. It was not a pleasant experience. In fact it was probably the most frightful thing that ever happened to me. But it was somehow compulsive, as addictive as opium.

I was only a boy at the time. Not that I knew it then: a proper young man I felt at the age of seventeen. King Edward VII was on the throne and Britain ruled an empire and no one outside of France had ever heard of the Somme. There have been so many man-made horrors in my life, from Passchendaele to Hiroshima to Cambodia. Is it so strange that the supernatural should seem a haven by comparison? A good man and true can defeat those other-worldly forces – I'm convinced of that – but what can he do against governments and big businesses?

Anyhow, it's not my philosophy of life I want to tell you about but the event which provided the cornerstone for it. I was seventeen, as I



said, just about to go up to Oxford to read Classics and I was spending the summer with my uncle in London. I was brought up on a small estate in Oxfordshire and my visits to the capital had been few and far between; so I leapt at the chance of a few months in such an exciting place. You can't imagine what London was like in those days when it really was the only decent-sized city in England and the flower of the world to boot. New York was in its infancy and Tokyo was still in the dark ages. It was everything a young man dreamed of and far more besides.

My uncle was a prosperous businessman in an era when such people were still permitted a conscience. He was always occupied with one thing or another and so I was left to my own devices much of the time. That suited me fine, of course, and I spent a delirious few weeks getting to know London in the only proper way: on foot. I hardly have to say that it wasn't all wonderful in those days: there were squalid tenements and overcrowded streets, the poor, the sick, the homeless. I had no social conscience, I'm afraid, and simply turned tail the minute I saw or, more probably smelt, something offensive.

One day though I found myself in a pretty rough area down Whitechapel way. I doubt if I'd ever heard of Jack the Ripper in those days but it must have been somewhere near where he operated – if you'll pardon the pun. Some praiseworthy piece of architecture among the slums had caught my attention: it was an old coaching inn. As I was admiring it I heard light footsteps behind me and turned round to be greeted by the most lovely young woman I had ever seen. I was a total innocent in matters of the fairer sex, needless to say, and, stricken by shyness, simply stared open-mouthed at her in the most impolite way.

She was about my age and a few inches short of my five foot nine, making it necessary for her to look up to me. She wore no hat, which was very much contrary to fashion, and her golden tresses flowed freely about her head. Her skin was pale and unblemished, with that distinctive sheen which, I was later to learn, came from having only coarse soap to use as a cosmetic. Her eyes were as blue as the Avon at Stratford then was; her nose small and pert; her mouth slim and delicate. I have no idea what she was wearing: those were the days when it was considered more proper for a gentleman to look at a lady's face rather than her legs or breasts. With hindsight I might

concede that she was not the risen Venus that I have described; that I had experienced so little feminine beauty that my standards were pretty low. But I would insist to this day that she was special and that, when all is said and done, is what counts.

Her expression throughout my prolonged examination shifted between casual habitude and nervous uncertainty. After what seemed like an age she spoke. Her accent was unmistakably cockney but quite light; her grammar and diction good. She asked me trivial questions about my destination and purpose, to which I replied in mumbled monosyllables, remarked on the inclemency of the weather and the poor state of the economy, then bade me farewell and left. She was, of course, a prostitute – although not a very experienced one I would still maintain – and had been sizing me up as a potential client. The dear kind girl, on realizing that I was green as grass, had displayed the utmost tact in leaving without more blatant hints at her husiness. I walked home in a daze, very much in love.

That evening I broached the matter, in as roundabout a way as possible, with my cousin James, several years my senior and an army officer in India, whom I considered the fount of all masculine wisdom. He very quickly set me right about the true nature of my encounter, praised my natural goodness for not being led astray and admonished me against further jaunts in that district. He also suggested that the affair be kept strictly between ourselves and not communicated to his father, my uncle, who might misinterpret my reasons for being there in the first place. I assented and the subject was closed. But that night and for many nights afterwards I dreamed of my golden-haired beauty. I dreamed of walking hand-in-hand with her along Park Lane, of taking her boating on the Serpentine, of dancing with her at a May ball. I must confess that I also dreamed, for the first time in my life, of those more intimate acts between young lovers that had been the subject of much speculation and almost as much bragging in the top-year common-room at my public school.

In the days that followed I tried to turn my mind back to the more respectable side of London life, but theatres and restaurants, palaces and churches no longer held the same appeal. My thoughts repeatedly returned to that poor girl trapped by circumstance in a sinful occupation and I pondered long and hard about how I might

rescue her. All in vain. I had no money of my own until I was twenty-one and was hardly likely to elicit a loan from my family in order that I might run away with a woman of such lowly social status and ignoble means of support. The only decision reached was that I must see her again to offer her my services in any way possible. It would be disingenuous to deny that I also had half a mind to accept *her* services, if offered again.

I prepared myself for this great enterprise in a most amazingly boyish way. I still smile now at my naïveté. I got together various supplies and wrapped them in a huge napkin, like some *Oliver Twist* about to flee the workhouse. There were several jars of foodstuffs – mostly impractical things such as ginger preserve and gooseberry jam – a tub or two of best French mustard – which I had for some reason become convinced was essential to life – and an assortment of biscuits and cakes. I really don't know what I can have been thinking of. I suppose my only terms of reference were picnics and secret tuck-parties in the dorm. My resulting experience was to be anything but a picnic, I can assure you.

I did have some sense though and made sure to take as much money as I could lay my hands on, which comprised the few shillings left from my week's allowance and just over a guinea from my savings box. I'm not quite sure what I thought the money was for, but if my intentions were carnal then at sixpence a time, as it was then, I should probably have died of exhaustion or fright long before it was all spent. More likely I intended to present it, without strings, as the first instalment in our elopement fund. Ignorance is indeed blissful!

I had first met my beloved in the early afternoon and so I timed my return to Whitechapel to coincide with what I imagined might be her daily schedule; not that I cared to dwell too much on what that schedule entailed. I did not know what I might do if I found her with another man. I had been the star marksman at my school and quite coolly weighed up my chances of escape after shooting my imaginary rival with an equally imaginary pistol. I need not have worried. Not only was there little sign of potential custom near the inn that day but my darling was nowhere to be seen. I waited for her for four whole hours before giving up and returning dejectedly to my uncle's house. I had been eyed up by a number of street-ladies during this time but the combination of my youth and the package under my

arm, so suggestive of a domestic purpose in my sojourn, spared me any approaches. Mind you, I was half-hoping to be engaged in conversation by someone who might set me on the right track; I certainly could not pluck up the courage to initiate the talk myself.

I went to Whitechapel each day from then on, without my food parcel but with an increasing amount of money. I hung around the corner by the inn doing my best to avoid the suspicious glances of passers-by. I had also begun to worry about the possibility of being robbed and now carried a stout walking-stick. I spent my time going over in my mind the account of a day's visit to some museum or art gallery that I might dutifully produce over dinner that evening. I have always had a good memory and was able to pick up enough in my morning dash to cover for the whole day.

Finally, almost two weeks after I had fallen in love, I was spotted by another girl, far coarser than my dear one, and propositioned in no uncertain terms. I leapt at the chance – no, not that chance, but the possibility of some information. She told me that for a shilling she would give me a very good time and proceeded to reel off a variety of sexual activities most of which I had never heard of and some of which still remain a mystery to me. I halted her half-way through another chapter of the *Kama Sutra* and said that instead of the shilling she asked I would give her five if she could help me find someone. She looked wary and asked if I were a copper or something. I poured out my heart to her, telling my story pure and simple and describing in detail the object of my desire. She looked even more wary when the girl's identity dawned on her. She told me to be a good boy and go home to my family and find a nice girl of my own kind. And that advice was free of charge. She tried to leave but I held her back. She warned me that one scream from her and the local men would have my guts for garters. I declared that I would gladly die on this quest. She was evidently impressed by my simple sincerity and suggested that we go for a drink.

I had never been inside a public house before and was shocked by the smoke and noise. All eyes followed us across the room but my companion made a joke about my being a pupil from the school where she was French mistress and everyone laughed and returned to their revelry. I let her order the drinks and insisted that she kept the change from half-a-crown. She took a huge draft from her tankard such as a grown man might balk at and then told me what I

wanted to know. The girl I sought was called Sally, a new arrival on the manor – my heart soared – who, like so many others as pretty as she was, had quickly been spotted by the toffs. This was, of course, the dream of every girl on the streets but Sally had been lured away by a bad type: an old geezer whom all the street-wise girls steered well clear of. He didn't set the girls up as mistresses or high-class courtesans but instead, it was rumoured, sent them off to India where they existed in such filth and degradation as would make Whitechapel seem like paradise.

I could scarcely believe my ears and, though not entirely convinced by such gossip, the thought of dear Sally being shipped to God knows what fate thousands of miles from home filled me with despair. I asked if she knew the gentleman's name and set a sovereign on the table. She said not but she knew where he lived. How she had gleaned this information I cannot say but it seems highly unlikely that anyone had returned from there to tell it her. I can only imagine that she had some personal experience and, if so, was the luckiest girl on earth to be still alive. After she had whispered the address she led me outside, to further raucous cheers from the assembly, and was gone in a flash.

It was already past the time when I was expected at my uncle's house but the situation was so dire that I went straight off in search of Sally. The house to which I had been directed was a fair walk of some miles away but I shall not identify its location more precisely for it still exists – I can be sure of that as I visit it every year – and the present residents would best be left ignorant of what hellish place lies beneath their feet. I shall not even name the district for the house is sufficiently distinctive to be known throughout the area; but not the whole of London. It was a large double-fronted structure with gabled roof and a narrow central tower. This latter has gone now but it may be remembered by local people and so I shall not describe the several unusual features which it possessed. Along one side of the house at ground level was a row of fanlight windows, presumably giving on to some subterranean room though they had been completely blacked-out. I had no intention in any case of breaking in and, armed only with my stick and the confidence of youth, I marched straight up to the front door and rang the bell.

After a short wait the door was opened by an Indian manservant. I requested audience with his master and gave as my reason for calling discussion of his business affairs in Whitechapel. The servant took

my card and ushered me into the hall, closing the door behind us. He offered to take my outdoor clothes but I declined. Then he led me to a door on the left and knocked. While he was announcing me I took the opportunity to look around. The house seemed ordinary enough, a bit shabby perhaps, but certainly not my idea of a den of iniquity. My determination lessened a little and I became unsure of what I was going to say. I might have lost my nerve entirely had not the servant returned at that very moment to show me in.

The room I entered was cold and sparsely furnished. Standing by the small spluttering fire was a frail but distinguished old gentleman who extended his hand to me, at the same time indicating to the servant that he should withdraw. He asked me what it was I wanted and expressed puzzlement at my reference to Whitechapel where, he assured me, he had no interests. I was still too youthful to be cunning or devious and so I came straight to the point, omitting for the moment that the girl whom I sought was a common prostitute. He welcomed my candour but still denied any knowledge of this Sally. He asked me my specific interest in her and I avoided the question, simply reiterating what I had been told of her whereabouts. This fencing continued for some minutes, he refusing to concede any part in the affair and I shying from defining my precise involvement in it. We both became more agitated and finally, out of desperation, I blurted out that I was Sally's cousin, come to rescue her from reduced circumstances. He almost snarled in triumph and swore that by God and all his saints he'd be damned if the little trollop had any family.

Instantly he recognized his mistake and slumped into a nearby chair, holding his head in his hands. He confessed that he had indeed brought Sally to this house and asked me what I knew of his black deeds. I repeated the gossip of white slavery and he noticeably relaxed. At the time I took this for the relief of a tortured soul who is almost glad that his crimes have been found out. On reflection it was more a case of relief that I had so hopelessly failed to plumb the true depths of his depravity. He rose from the chair and crossed to his desk, saying that he would take me to Sally. Instead he produced a hand-gun of the sort issued to British Army officers and trained it on me.

I feared that my last hour had come and, clutching on straws, reminded him that, unless he was an utter rogue, the gun he held proved that once at least he had been an officer and a gentleman. I

told him that my father, whom I named, had just such a gun from his period of service in the African wars. The mention of my father shifted the balance again and once more he slumped, dropping the gun on the desk. He claimed to know my family and said that this time he really would lead me to my goal. I was still uncertain of this most changeable man and so, as we left the room, I held on to my stick and, for added protection, slipped the discarded pistol into my pocket.

We crossed the hall to another room, even less furnished than the first, but possessing a magnificent Persian carpet. Around the walls were small shrines of some strange sort and tall black candles burned in the four corners. He requested my help with something and I was amazed to see that the job in hand was to roll back the huge carpet. It was quite a struggle but when we reached the middle of the floor our purpose was made clear. The carpet concealed a trapdoor made of stout wood, stronger even than the floorboards, and encrusted with heavy metal fittings. The old man released three giant padlocks and several bar bolts and together we heaved this formidable structure on squealing hinges to the vertical. Beneath me was a flight of stone steps and beyond that a pitchy darkness from which came a cold and unpleasantly scented draught. I was so immersed in my contemplation of this gothic setting that I did not hear the Indian servant sneak up from behind to propel me forward into the abyss.

I regained consciousness lying sprawled on a stone floor, the stick still in my hand and, I was pleased to find, the gun still in my pocket. I sat up and waited for my eyes to become accustomed to the light. But I soon learned that there was none for them to become accustomed to: the room was totally black. The sickly smell of perfume and incense was much greater down here and underlying it there was something still more obnoxious. I resolved to pace carefully round the walls to ascertain the size of my prison. Rising to my feet I soon found the stairs down which I had plummeted and, using them as a starting point, began my tour. The walls were made of brick, and that leading away from the stairs some ten yards long. Some way across the next wall I encountered a pair of shackles and recoiled when I felt a sticky, congealed substance on them that I took for blood. I surmised that a person or persons had been restrained here while they still had the strength to struggle. My captors must have believed me to be in a much worse state than I actually was not to have used them on me.

The rest of the wall was plain but only a few feet after I had turned another corner I met with a large metal door covered in the most intricate raised patterns. The one thing it seemed to lack was a handle and it was while seeking this that I became aware of movement beyond. I pressed my ear close up to the metal and strained to hear the faint noises which betrayed some other living thing. Suddenly there was an almighty scraping next to my head and I scurried backwards as a massive bolt was withdrawn and the door slowly opened.

I spent time in the trenches during the Great War. At the end of the Second I was sent over by the government to write a description of conditions in Auschwitz. So you can take my word for it that I am no stranger to the sight and smell of rotting corpses. But nothing I have experienced since compares with the soul-numbing stench which issued from the room beyond that infernal door. It was not the smell of the dead but of death itself. I tell you now, near to the grave as I am, that if there is somewhere in the depths of Hell set aside for the greatest sinners in our world which is half as bad as that cellar then seemed to me, then I abhor God and his divine justice for its creation. The putrid, rotten stink of that place was the worst thing imaginable. Until, that is, I heard the sound.

The sound of a shuffling monstrosity, as awful in this Stygian darkness as all the legions of the damned in the plain light of day. I reeled back and fell over my walking-stick. I lay on the ground panting and perspiring, fear dripping from my pores, as it approached me, its fetid breath rasping nearer and nearer. In a blind panic I fumbled in my pocket, withdrew the gun, aimed and fired. I was way off target of course but a tinkling of glass gave me hope. I remembered the blacked-out windows by the side of the house and ran for the wall from the top of which now shone the faintest chink of light. The windows were too high for me to reach and I cursed my stupidity for not picking up my fallen stick, which was now separated from me by my demon pursuer. The wall to which I was pinned by fear was that of the shackles and, feeling them brush against my head, I concocted a last desperate plan. Stretching a leg up I managed to hook my foot into the manacle end of one and then pull myself upwards. My fingertips reached the top of the wall and touched the heavy material of the curtain. At that very moment a clawed hand grasped my ankle.

I screamed and with all my strength tugged at the curtains.



Overbalancing I still clung on and as I fell there was a sudden anguished sound of tearing cloth and they came with me.

I have never been a gambling man. I never play cards or back horses or buy lottery tickets. That is because I consider that all the luck I am ever likely to have in my life came to me on that one night. Outside it was dark but the moon was full and perfectly positioned to shine in through the cellar windows. I struggled to my feet and looked in horror at the thing which cowered away from the light in the middle of the floor.

Its skin was off-white, the same shade and texture as that of an earth worm. It squatted down on its haunches, like some African tribesman at a meeting of the elders, and this seemed to be its normal posture. Its scrawny arms, waving madly in front of its face, ended in clawlike hands with terrible ripping nails. Its face has been burned on to my inner eye ever since. It was both human and animal, living and dead, mortal and devil. Its hairless scalp seethed with crawling insects; its cringing mouth revealed razor sharp teeth. Worst of all were its eyes. They were the same milky colour as its skin and had no pupils. It was obviously blind but still sensitive to light.

With a prayer to almighty God for a steady hand I raised the pistol and, holding it at arm's length, fired. The first bullet tore into its chest, releasing a jet of septic pus, diseased blood and horrid wriggling things. The second and third destroyed its hateful head. The fourth was quite unnecessary but I was now in a mad frenzy. Yet some instinct held me back from using my last bullet. If there were any more of these creatures waiting in the other room then I would need that for myself.

Suddenly the trap door opened and the old man hurried down. He cradled the dead thing in his lap like a baby. He cried out that I had killed his son, once a most dashing young man but cursed in India by the plague of the flesh-eating Ghouls. What father, he asked me, could refuse a sick son shelter and warmth and food? I levelled the gun at his head, wanting to kill anything and everything associated with this nightmare, but seeing him in such torment and so evidently close to death I let him live.

There still remained the inner sanctum of the beast and so, treading cautiously and with my gun before me, I passed through the obscenely carved doorway into the room beyond. The light from outside was far weaker in here but it was still too much for any

decent man. Human bones and half-eaten limbs littered the floor. Everywhere there were scraps of female clothing. Imbuing the very structure of the room was that awful, near-animate stench of corruption which had outlived its master.

In one corner, curled up into a ball and whining like a whipped animal, I found Sally. I tried to comfort her but she flinched from my touch. Her lovely face was devastated by fear and loathing, the once attractive paleness now a ghastly pallor. Her emaciated body was draped in a few tattered rags which did nothing to preserve her modesty. I knew little then of the female anatomy but I saw enough to tell me that she had already been used to satisfy bestial appetites worse still than the unholy cannibalistic craving for human flesh. But neither was she entirely spared that: for when she opened her mouth I saw that her tongue had been wrenched from its roots as a first tasty titbit.

I looked into her eyes, tears filling my own, and saw them flash for an instant in recognition. Then I noticed something else and in that very second when I realized what it was that she most required of me so did the woolly dreams of childhood pass away and I became a man. I raised my gun and put the last bullet into her brain. God forgive me if what I did was wrong – simple murder rather than an act of mercy – but I swear, by everything that is holy, that *in articulo mortis* she smiled. I'm sorry. I'm an old man and tears come so easily now. I never married you know.

I fled from that evil place and ran all the way back to my uncle's house. I invented some story about being set upon by thieves and took to my bed. When I was well enough to travel I returned to my home in Oxfordshire to convalesce.

Some years later I went back to the house. The first thing I noticed was the blind brick wall where once had been the skylights which proved my salvation. How happy I should have been to limit my inspection to the exterior but I was there for a purpose and so, with no little inner struggle, I once more approached the front door. There were, of course, new owners, totally ignorant of their predecessor. The only useful information obtained in response to my necessarily oblique questions was that one of the downstairs rooms had a most unusual stone-paved floor.

I can confirm now that it is still there. In a beautiful modernized house occupied by a lawyer and his family. In the room which, for some odd reason, they never use. Under the carpet.

F. R. Welsh

## First blood

A fine summer day does not guarantee happiness: men and women fret, suffer and die in the sunshine as in the rain, but it cannot be denied that an idyll is much improved by the weather. The summer of 1949 was a good one for idylls. Neil's and Lucy's had started at the sixth-form Christmas party. It had been their first term in the sixth and, like their friends, they had spent it in finding their feet and adjusting to the new freedoms. The party had been enlivened by the wicked Alan Redwood, whose father kept the Station Hotel and who had thereby access to the hard stuff, access that was used to sophisticate the soft drinks with an addition of gin. The wicked Alan and his associates had succumbed to their own drink, but Neil and Lucy, both rather proper children, drank only enough to relax their defences and to allow their bodies their own responses. This had happened to an extent that astonished and exhilarated them both.

By the next day they were romantically and hopelessly in love. They were both doing English Literature in the Oxford Higher School Certificate and now, suddenly, they realized what John Donne had been going on about. Christmas, which entailed an unavoidable separation, passed in a happy stupor of the sort that aroused critical comments from their families. The New Year saw them reunited, settling down to doing things together – theatres, concerts, reading the same books from the Literary and Philosophical Society's library – all the delights denied to their unhappy contemporaries in public schools, together with, of course, sex.

By January Neil had Lucy's silver prefect's badge undone and her white Viyella blouse off: the other garments rapidly followed. With the spring they were able to move to the woods and fields: it was a golden spring. They benefited, although this was before the days of permissiveness and the pill, from an extensive literary acquaintance with sex. The Olympia edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had gone the rounds, they had seen all of Hedy Lamarr in *Extase* at the film

club, and they had read the livelier bits of seventeenth-century poetry with priapic pleasure.

Lucy was a happy sensuous girl, and Neil had an amorous inventive streak which served them well enough in place of more advanced instruction. Being children of their times, however, they always stopped short of the final act. This was an object of much serious concern and discussion: there were the examinations to consider – would it perhaps take too much out of them? – and the opinion of their friends – would they be shocked, or was it really required of one? – and of course the possible consequences. Everyone knew what had happened to Thora Lofthouse, who had performed for half the third form, and had a baby in the fourth, and now helped in the British Restaurant in Swalwell, still obliging at weekends.

They finally reached a decision in June, before the mock Highers, lying on Lucy's bed. Neil was nibbling the little golden hairs: he knew that there were other bits he ought to be attending to, but Lucy seemed quite happy with things as they were, so he contented himself with an exploratory lick. This had its effect. Lucy stretched out and caressed his head.

'Does it taste nice?'

'Why don't you try?' He raised his head, moved up, and kissed her. At first a little shocked, Lucy found that it did taste nice. She snuggled closer.

'Do you really love me?'

'Of course I do, you know I do.'

'Then shall we really – you know – *really*? Not now, but very soon – after the mocks. We could go away somewhere together. It wouldn't seem quite right here.'

There was no difficulty in arranging the expedition. The young people had often been away together, although more usually in groups. They either camped or stayed in youth hostels, which had conveyed an air of respectability to parents, and with some reason. There were, after all, separate dormitories, and lubricity among the collective odours of frying bacon and hiking-socks seemed unlikely enough. But Neil and Lucy intended to stay at an hotel, which was something of a different proposition: they had no intention of telling this to their parents.

The question of where to stay had to be considered. This was to be

a serious, almost sacramental, occasion, and a trippery tourist resort such as Whitley Bay would be odious. Makers of romantic films wherein sexual congress is represented by waves breaking on a beach had established in their generation an unquestioned link between the two, and they felt proximity to the sea was essential.

The North-East coast is well equipped with small secluded seaside villages from Robin Hood's Bay up to Eyemouth. Many, like Bamburgh, have good small hotels, but for their purposes one was pre-eminently suitable. Holy Island, Lindisfarne, seat of St Cuthbert, cradle of Christianity in England, outpost of civilization, had the true atmosphere of magic, a position in both time and space that was somehow equivocal, poised between the present and all the pasts, as it lay between land and sea, sharing the nature of both, off the long sands of Northumbria.

Its position, only accessible at low tide, and its ruined priory made it ideal. Both of them had visited it, as they had Bamburgh, Dunstanburgh, Warkworth, and the other great sites, but they had never stayed there.

The mock Highers came and went satisfactorily, and the relaxation of discipline that accompanies ends of terms made it easier for them to slip away and include Monday in their weekend. As the time when the great experience was to take place came nearer, Neil grew more tense: would he soon actually be doing it? Would he know what to do? Would everything be all right? Lucy, however, was entirely happy: always a sunny girl, with a friendly disposition, she was glowing with contentment.

It fell to Neil to make all the arrangements. He was leaving nothing to chance on this most important of weekends and had telephoned some days previously to reserve a room at the Manor House Hotel, the only one on the island. He knew that they would normally have expected written notice, but could hardly run the risk of having a confirmation sent to his home. He had at the same time checked the tide-tables for that Saturday, a very necessary precaution when planning a visit to the island, since the causeway was only clear for a couple of hours or so on either side of the low tide. Provided they made an early start, and if the bus was not too late, they would be on time.

When the day came the journey proved a constant irritant to Neil, but Lucy was quite unperturbed, letting nothing worry her. She had

in her own mind cast the dice and was now content to wait upon events. Neil had to hurry her from the Marlborough Street bus station, where they left the bus from Ryton, to the Haymarket which served the long-distance buses to Scotland. Lucy showed a disposition to look in shop windows, although in that year of continuing austerity there was little to see, and had trouble with her sandals.

But they were on time and the bus was on time – Neil had a schedule which he checked at the successive stops as it made its way through pit villages to the rich Northumberland farmland, past the storybook castle of Alnwick, economically guarded by its stone men-at-arms, to their destination, the Plough Inn on the Great North Road, not far short of Berwick, where taxis waited to take visitors to the island. Taxis that were unlike any others, with raised and strengthened suspension to help them over the shallows, bodies pitted and corroded by years of salt spray, and very little in the way of interior fittings. It was necessary to make the mile-long country-lane journey from the main road to the causeway very gently, but then the taxis came into their own and bucketed steadily through the deepening pools formed by the rising tide. The causeway, such as it was, had marker poles, and near the middle was a refuge, held above high-tide level on stilts, where travellers caught by the sea could spend a safe, if unpleasant, few hours.

After the causeway was negotiated, the taxi crossed another section of sand before the buildings of the island came in sight, seeming to move between the dunes, the small stone houses terminating at one end in the great ruins of the priory, and at the other in the smooth bulk of the castle raised like a warship or a stranded whale from the low line of sand. The hotel, a substantial grey stone building which was the largest house on the island and had in fact been the manor house, faced Neil with his greatest problem, that of negotiating the receptionist. This turned out to be an unnecessary apprehension: a cheery motherly body to whom other peoples' business was a matter of little concern gave him a key and popped back to the kitchen from whence she had come.

Their room was everyting it should be; a sea view south to the Farnes, a picture of Grace Darling, and best of all a large and capacious double bed. Neil felt that he had done well, but they were by now too cramped after their journey and too hungry to take advantage of it. Besides, both came from a culture where beds were

used only at night, and the idea of daytime love-making even on a bed seemed somehow improper and decadent.

It was much too late to lunch at the hotel, and the only other place where food might be had was the pub next to the Priory; indeed, it should have been too late even for that, had licensing hours been observed, but the islanders, at least when the tide was in, were not much concerned with such details. Since there was no policeman on the island, what the landlords and drinkers did at those times was the subject of mutual agreement, and the agreement at weekends was to stay open.

One of the bars was crowded with young men and a few girls, grubby and noisy, their thick Glasgow accents incomprehensible to any outsider. The landlord had given up any attempt to clear the bar and empty bottles filled every table. His expression suggested he was nearing the end of his patience with the Glaswegians, but he served Neil and Lucy willingly with hot pies, brown ale and a cider for Lucy. Neil did not really like beer, but he was going through a phase of reading Belloc and felt that he should, so persevered although he knew quite well he would much rather have drunk cider too.

For the rest of the day they explored the island. They puzzled out the remains of the priory with the help of the Ministry of Works plan, examined St Cuthbert's hermitage, and walked along the beach to the castle. Although looking magnificently medieval, this had in fact been built in the sixteenth century by Henry VIII as a stone man-of-war to discourage French or Scots from approaching the coast, at a time when the Auld Alliance might have been invoked by the Scots reeling under the defeats of Flodden and Halidon Hill. Neil and Lucy were not only doing Modern History from 1489 for Higher, but, being Borderers, had their own special knowledge of Border conflict, and could have given the dates of every fight from Solway Moss onwards.

The beach was no spot for bathing or making sand-castles but the workplace of the island community. On the marram grass above the high-water mark the fishermen had made shelters for their tackle by overturning old boat-hulls and patching them with driftwood and tar. Fish-boxes and rusty windlasses lay scattered about, while further down the beach were the boats themselves, gaily painted blue, green, white, yellow and red, the cobbles of the North-East coast. These interesting vessels are peculiar to that region, from

Berwick to Whitby, and are unlike any boat found elsewhere. They are built with broad strakes giving an odd geometric section, with sharp tumble-home and broad beam. Their fine sterns are cut off with a transom and their deep forefoot gives a high bow. Although entirely open they will cope with the worst, or very nearly the worst, that the North Sea can hand out, which can be very bad indeed. When Henry Greathead invented the lifeboat at South Shields, it was the sea-keeping qualities of the coble that he copied. Until diesels came into common use, they were rowed or sailed with a dipping lug; enthusiasts still sometimes use them as sailing boats, and very effective, although uncomfortable, they are.

It is said that cobs are, like the Shetland sixerns, descendants of the Viking longboats adapted for working off the Northumbrian beaches rather than more northerly fjords; it is certainly difficult to imagine a tougher or safer open boat ever being devised.

Further up the beach, back on a level with the huts, was a curiosity. A brand new coble had been built, and, her paint-work shining, was poised on chocks ready to be slid into the water at the next springs. She was one of the biggest, nearly forty feet long, with her high stern rising eight feet from the ground, all white inboard, with a green and blue hull.

Dinner at seven was predictably but excellently fishy, and left the two young people replete and affectionate, although it was much too early to go to bed with any semblance of decency. Since they did not want to become involved in chatting to fellow guests, in case reports of their presence there might be passed back home, or to listen to the Home Service on the wireless, and since only a crescent moon gave any light at all, making moonlight rambles difficult, there was little for it but another visit to the pub.

As they walked, amiably hand in hand, they knew all the calm certainty of lovers. The clouds fleetingly obscured the moon but not the occulting flashes from the Outer Farnes light, and to the north the loom of the Berwick light could be seen. There was enough light streaming through the clouds to see the gaunt outlines of the priory ruins contrasting with the cheerful aspect of the village.

As soon as they opened the door the happy indolent and expectant mood of the day was shattered. They made for the bar they had used earlier, but as they went inside they saw it to be packed with the



Glaswegians, who had clearly been drinking all day. The room was full of dirty glasses, foul with cigarette smoke and noisy with raucous and aggressive voices: one or two bodies were slumped across tables, dead drunk.

Neil shut the door and went into the other bar, which had been tidied and was now almost empty. The landlord was looking unhappy. 'Aa divvin' min telling you a'm pleased its low tide at closing time and A'll be shot of this lot before they're any dafter.'

Neil could not help thinking there was quite enough time left for them to become a great deal dafter, when one lurched into the bar and staggered over to him. He was older, but not a great deal older, than Neil, smaller, dirty in an entrenched fashion, in an army battledress blouse, navy trousers and filthy canvas shoes. His hair was thick with cream and his ears full of brown wax. 'So, we're not guid enough for you and yon wee hairie,' he shouted. When Neil, embarrassed rather than frightened, did not answer, the youth grabbed him by his jacket and shouted with an effluxion of disgusting breath: 'I'll show ye who's guid enough.'

The hand on Neil's lapel was small, warty, the fingernails bitten to extinction. It was also unpleasantly wet, giving the impression of having been in unpleasant places handling unpleasant things. Neil was still embarrassed rather than apprehensive, but felt the hand was too nasty to be tolerated. His only experience of violence had been in school scraps, years ago, and he had no clear idea of what was expected of him. Argument would not serve, and he could not bear the idea of having to grasp that filthy hand if he was to remove it. A memory of playground tactics came to him. 'Please take your hand away,' – there had always to be a proffered olive branch.

The olive branch was rejected, as was expected, and the riposte 'Fo' in piece o' snot . . . ' was cut short by a quick knee in the groin from Neil.

It worked quite alarmingly well; the youth collapsed on the floor, writhing and spewing, but managing some loud obscenities between gasps. The adjoining door opened and some of the others looked in. Seeing their comrade sprawling on the floor they started for Neil, shouting for revenge: one had a beer bottle grasped by the neck. Neil was now, and rightly, very frightened: he looked around for a way of escape. Lucy, horrified had already backed towards the outside door when it opened.

The man who came in was the most impressive and most welcome person Neil had ever seen. He was massively solid, his face red-brown, seamed and wrinkled like an elephant or rhinoceros, and appearing no less armoured. He must have weighed twenty stone, very little of it superfluous. He wore dungarees, a fisherman's gansey, and a tweed cap; his feet were clad in carpet slippers. Looking neither at Neil nor his victim, now painfully rising, nor at his menacing friends, he walked straight over to the bar and asked for ginger beer. The youths, who had fallen momentarily silent, began to shout abuse in their weird accents at this token of softness.

The large man looked at the landlord, who nodded. He turned deliberately towards the Scotsmen. 'You'll be better off next door, laddies.'

They took no notice, and the one with the beer bottle moved towards Neil. 'Had yer gob aud man, he hut wee Jamie, he did. And a'll smash his face in.' The big man, moving like a panther for all his size, stepped quickly between them. He took the hand holding the broken bottle, quite gently, and squeezed. The young Scot's face went white, he shrank back, the bottle fell.

'That's enough for the neet, now, be off all of you: and don't have any ideas about hanging about outside.' It was enough: the lads slunk off, subdued and sobered. The man was something outside their experience, but they understood he was not to be tampered with.

'And if I were you, young man, I'd wait here a little,' he said turning to Neil, 'and let them take themselves right off.'

The landlord grinned for the first time. 'It is a right relief knowing Thomas is next door when there's a bit o' bother likely: I got the word sent when that young rascal showed his face.'

'Aye,' sighed Thomas, 'I don't hold with violence, nor drunkenness.' He looked old-fashionedly at the landlord. 'There's enough wickedness in the world as it is, and enough fear and death to be found a hundred yards out t'sea, without adding to't gratuitously.' He spoke with a broad Northumbrian burr, trilling his r's in the way his countrymen have done since the days of Harry Hotspur, and enjoying the fine word, another North-Eastern characteristic.

Thomas settled in front of the fire, making way for the two young people to sit alongside in the privileged position: even in July the island nights were cool enough to make a driftwood blaze welcome.

Neil, compromising between Belloc and Thomas, ordered a shandy; he felt that another literary drinking problem had been solved, and wondered what he should do about Zola and absinthe.

Lucy, who had been shaken by the episode, was reassured by the bulk of Thomas and the comforting incongruity between his massive strength and the ginger beer and carpet slippers. She tried the shandy and immediately liked it, tucked her feet up, and prepared to listen to Thomas, who showed himself appreciative of the audience. He told them of his life out fishing, when the weather allowed, with lines for cod and mackerel, nets for the bottom fish, pots for the lobsters that brought such high prices when the luck was in, and the occasional turbot sent straight to the hotels in London: it was a hard life in the winter, and lonely too, so summer visitors provided a bit of variety. Lucy was fascinated by his description of the birds that followed the boat, the seals with their pups, and the porpoises playing. Neil contemplated a Hardy-esque novel of Northumbrian life, with a younger Thomas disappointed in love as its central character.

When all was quiet outside Thomas walked them both back to the hotel, just in case. He paused for a moment before saying, 'Why, ah've got tae see tae the pots in the morning. Mebbe ye'd like a wee trip in the coble? We'd be sure to see some birds, and likely the seals will be about?'

Lucy and Neil were very happy to accept what seemed a timely and serendipitous invitation, and made off to bed. The fresh air and the excitements of the day had, however, been too much for them, and, rather to their surprise in the morning, both fell almost instantly asleep, hand in hand in their big bed.

Breakfast in the Manor House was a serious and sustaining meal; they did full justice to Weetabix, bacon, sausage and egg, toast and tea – they were too wise in the ways of the world to believe that drinkable coffee could be found outside Newcastle. After breakfast they walked through the churchyard before meeting Thomas on the beach. It was still early enough for sea fret to obscure the details, and the ruins of the abbey were spectral in the luminous mist.

Thomas's boat was one of the smaller cobbles, but with a good diesel engine, riding the waves like a seabird. Once they were outside the difficult entrance to the bay, Neil was given the helm while Thomas, who was proving a great talker, talked.

He displayed a wide knowledge of the history of the coast, and a great affection for its inhabitants, indentifying for Lucy's benefit the huddles of guillemots that scattered as their boat approached, startled puffins with their parrot-like beaks skimming the waves, dozing eider ducks that looked at them and sedately swam away, cormorants that, running along the water, took off in an untidy fashion. But most of all Lucy loved the terns and gannets as they dived into the water with grace and elegance.

To their starboard the bulk of Bamburgh Castle solidified out of the mist. 'Lancelot's castle of Joyous Gard, they say that was,' remarked Thomas, 'and one of King Arthur's battles was fought near here. Mind you, that's as much legend as history, if not a bit more so. They couldn't keep the Saxons off for long, and after them the Vikings came from Scandinavia. Bloody folk they were!' Thomas dealt with the Vikings at some length, they being a favourite subject of his. 'They were people of the sea first and last – Viking means 'man of the bays' – and their ships were the finest ever made. They sacked the coasts of France and Spain, and sailed down the Russian rivers right to Constantinople, dragging the ships behind them. A bit later, after they'd settled down in Northern France for a hundred years or so, they became more civilized, and set up their kingdoms from Scotland to Palestine. But in the early days they were a wild lot.

'It was in the summer of 793 that they came to the island and plundered the church, killing everything they could lay their hands on. It really shook England, that did, for Lindisfarne was one of the holiest places and they desecrated it thoroughly. Very nasty habits they had, and a lot of them, especially the ones with the horses, I wouldn't want to tell a young lady about.

'But they knew all about ships and the sea, the Vikings. Lovely things their boats were – you can see one of them still, over at Oslo. These cobbles are the nearest things to them otherwise: look at the high prow on this little one – you can imagine it with a dragon head. The stern's been altered for the beaches, but they're still real Viking ships.

'On the Day of Judgement – only they didn't call it that, being heathen, but Ragnarok – they thought that a great ship would come, packed with giants and monsters from Hel – that was one of the Viking ideas, Hell, only they spelled it differently. She was called

*Naglfar*, that ship, and was made all out of dead mens' nails. The ships were right at the centre of all their legends and superstitions.

'And a lot of those got taken over by the Christians: holy places aren't holy only to one religion. The new priests took over the old holy wells and groves and called them after saints. It might be that people were just used to them or it might be that there was really something strange and powerful about the places themselves. It was the same with ships, which were sacred to them. When we break a bottle of champagne over the bows of a ship at the launch, that's a libation, a sacrifice to the gods that's gone on ever since those days. Only they sacrificed more than wine. Animals mostly, but the pagan Vikings used to run the new ships down to the water over the bodies of slaves.'

Lucy gave a shudder at this, then laughed. 'But they have to be content with champagne now that they're Christians.'

That restored the spirits of the young ones, who had become little subdued at the misdeeds of the Vikings. As soon as they landed on the Longstone, everything was forgotten except the seals and the birds. Thomas had given them a bird identification book, and got lunch ready while the two explored. It was quite late when they returned, more like tea-time really, and Lucy was very excited at having spotted twenty-three different species, to say nothing of the seals.

That night, after saying goodbye to Thomas and promising to pay another visit in the autumn, they avoided the pub and went for a long walk, ending up on the fishing beach beside the boats and huts. It was a warmer night, although the breeze was present, and forsaking the prospect of the double bed they lay down in the shelter of the new coble.

Their love-making was brisk and urgent; it was not long before Lucy was stretched out, legs apart and thighs raised, in an attitude she found new, abandoned, but completely right. As Neil raised himself gently above her she gasped in luxurious anticipation and stretched out her arms, striking one of the props that held the coble.

The solicitor and police surgeon were walking along the north pier at Berwick, watching the sleek heads of the seals that had come in with the tide. There was something they did not want to talk about, but they felt a compulsion, as if to scratch at a sore.

'Nasty business on the Island, Tim.' The solicitor felt he must make a beginning.

'As nasty as anything I have seen, and it might even be a little nastier. You've no proof as to what happened?'

'Not a shadow. The police thought it might have been those tearaways from over the Border, and gave them a very hard time of it, but couldn't find any proof. They put that old Tom Clegg through it, too: he'd spent all day with the children, and he's a bit queer, but he was in the pub at the time and seemed very shaken by the news. It's true there was a breeze, but not that strong. They might have knocked a prop away, but everyone swears that a twenty-ton boat wouldn't move because of that. You couldn't find anything to go on the medical evidence?'

'Nothing I cared to put forward, but, something really rather odd. The boat had crushed the upper parts of the bodies very badly, pretty much inextricably, in fact, but the legs and pelvis were more or less undamaged, except for lacerations where they had been dragged over the beach as the boat rolled on into the sea. I'm not disturbing you, am I?'

'I can't say I relish the detail, but go on.'

'Well, I was able to establish that the girl was *virgo intacta*: I don't think that she would have been so in a few minutes' time, from all indications, but she died a maid nevertheless. I didn't say anything, since it seemed pointless, but you know those old stories about ships, and how the Vikings launched them? They said they always preferred virgins. Well, this boat got one, but only just.'

## All Souls

He awoke from a nightmare of pain and screaming metal to a blur of soft white light. He was floating. He couldn't feel his body. With sad detachment, he wondered if he were dead.

His vision gradually shifted into focus. He saw a pair of brown eyes hanging above him, warm and dark-fringed between a surgical mask and cap. Beyond them was a light fixture of a reassuringly familiar genus against a clean white ceiling. It was hospital, then.

He tested his voice, found it was still there. 'Where am I?' he croaked, cleared his throat, and tried again. 'Which hospital? Is this St Joseph's?'

'No, Dr Rossiter, this is All Souls. You were brought here after your accident. Do you remember what happened?' The nurse's voice was like warm brown silk, matching her eyes.

'No. Yes.' Much good wine and hilarity, with the sure knowledge of bedded bliss to come. Ellen's distracting hands pressing deliciously here and there as he drove. The other car out of nowhere with two round-eyed round-mouthed perfectly white faces framed in the windscreen, before thunder and lightning and a thousand spiked hammers all hit his body at once.

He groaned aloud as the memory crashed into his consciousness, but another part of his brain was busy examining the situation. Except for his eyes he couldn't move, and as far as he knew he had no sensation. This could argue either extensive spinal injuries, or massive doses of numbing anaesthetic, neither of which was good news. Bitterness against Ellen welled up in him – if the stupid bitch had kept her hands to herself, he thought, he'd have seen the other car in time. 'Ellen,' he muttered savagely, his voice croaking again.

The nurse's eyes looked distressed. 'I'm so sorry, Dr Rossiter, but your friend . . . ' She paused. 'I'm afraid your friend wasn't brought here.' The kind brown eyes were lovely with concern, and he felt a substratum of interest form beneath his shock and self-pity.

So much for Ellen. He had started to get tired of her anyway, and had been on the point of throwing her back to her husband; but the waste of that satiny body, presumably reduced to a torn sack of smelly guts, made him shudder with nausea and close his eyes. A gentle hand touched his forehead, and he almost smiled. Good. He still had sensation.

'Try not to think about it,' the nurse said softly. 'Doctor will be with you in a few minutes. Try to rest.' He soaked up her sympathy thirstily; all to the good if she thought he was grieving for Ellen, of course, though in fact he was divided between anxiety for himself, and a speculative lust which he filed away for future reference. He opened his eyes again, but she had moved out of his line of sight. A door quietly opened and closed. Another masked face bent over his.

'Doctor Rossiter,' the mask said, a guttural voice with a suggestion of sibilance behind the rumble, 'I'm Dr Smith, the surgeon assigned to your case. We haven't met, but of course I've followed your works with great interest.' The surgeon's eyes were small to the point of deformity, grey and shiny, nested in a complex system of pouches and counter-pouches which Rossiter found mildly repellent. Ugliness always irritated him.

'I have a few questions, Dr Smith,' he said, trying to keep the distaste out of his voice. 'What are my injuries? Why was I brought to this place, instead of to my own hospital?'

Smith chuckled behind his mask, his little eyes almost disappearing in folds of grainy flesh. 'I've always said doctors make the worst patients. Let me see - you were brought to All Souls because we offer specialist treatment related to your injuries, unavailable at St Joseph's or indeed any other local hospital. As to your injuries, I don't want to load you down with boring details right now. I'll only say at this point that they were extensive, but not unlike many others that we handle everlastingly in this place, and you can trust us to take care of you.'

'That's very reassuring,' said Rossiter. It was true. For all his ugliness, the surgeon exuded confidence and comfort, almost as if he could see into Rossiter's mind, to the exact anxieties imprinted there. As long as he doesn't peer into the dark corners, thought Rossiter with an inward smile. He felt obscurely cheered. 'Can you tell me what treatment is being prescribed? Or how long I should expect to be in here? I have a busy practise . . .'



Smith held up his hand. 'Surgery is indicated – long-term surgery. I'll be frank with you, Dr Rossiter. You'll be in here for a very long time indeed. You are not to worry about anything, not even yourself. Your patients will be taken care of.'

Rossiter was silent for a long bitter moment. He didn't give a damn about the patients, it was the accounts he was worried about. The fiddles were carefully done, but he didn't want them falling into the wrong hands. And what about Mrs Rich-bitch Cunningham, the one with the habit? She'd fall to pieces without her regular supply, and who knew what could be traced back to him? 'Thanks for your frankness,' he said at last.

'Not at all, Dr Rossiter,' said the surgeon. 'You get some rest now. Miss Jones will take good care of you, and I'll see you shortly in the operating room.' The mask stretched grotesquely in front of what was evidently a smile, and then was gone.

Rossiter was depressed, even when the brown-eyed nurse returned and chatted soothingly with him, laying one cool hand on his hot and furrowed brow. Out of habit he found himself laying the foundations for future dalliance and discovered it was a welcome distraction. After a while, he slept.

Rossiter woke again as he was wheeled into a bright sterile room full of shining equipment. For a few seconds he was drowsily pleased with the general familiarity of it. He was the veteran of a hundred operating rooms after all, though never before in the role of patient. The thought amused him. Then suddenly, the details of the room snapped into focus, and he knew everything was wrong.

There were trolleys of surgical instruments laid out in neat gleaming rows, all as they should be, and a business-like bank of monitors along the far wall. But, twisting his eyes from side to side, he could see no anaesthetic equipment, no racks for intravenous drips, no trays of clamps or sponges. A semi-circle of heads and shoulders in green surgical gear bent over him appraisingly, a horse-shoe of speculative professional eyes, but beyond them he could see the strangest anomaly of all. The ceiling was composed of one great mirror, unbroken by light fixtures, though the room was glaringly bright. He saw his own rigid figure, strange under green sheeting, and gazed directly into the disquiet of his own eyes. The figures of the operating team looked menacing and misshapen in the per-

spective of their reflections.

'What is all this?' he asked, trying vainly to suppress a quaver. Appealingly, he caught the small fish-bead eyes of the surgeon. By a curious trick of the light, they were glowing red. He shifted his gaze to the nurse's thick-fringed eyes, and thought he saw points of red fire expanding in the dark pupils. 'Why haven't you put me under? What on earth do you think you're doing?'

'Nothing on earth, doctor,' said the surgeon smoothly. 'You'll understand soon. But first . . . ' He pulled the sheet off Rossiter's naked body. Rossiter looked up at the mirror, braced for the sight of torn flesh, gaping wounds, broken or protruding bones. He caught his breath. His body was smooth and unmarked, lacking even bruises. With growing puzzlement, he noted that his appendectomy scar was gone.

The surgeon giggled. 'No, nothing visible, Dr Rossiter,' he said. 'But your injuries were extensive nonetheless. To others, that is.'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Curious way to put it. I'm talking about your sins, doctor, the several deadly ones you were so careless about. Mainly the women, poor things, but several varieties of moral murder as well. I told you I'd followed your works with interest.'

'You're crazy. I'm getting out of here.' Rossiter tried to move, but apart from his eyes he was completely immobile.

'Also actual murder by negligence,' continued the surgeon, 'not that it mattered much, coming at the last moment. The unfortunate people in the other car were also killed instantly, you see, though the Great Physician chose not to send them here.'

'Also? What do you mean, also? You mean, as well as Ellen?'

'No, Dr Rossiter. You'll be very glad to learn that your little friend survived, and is in the middle of a touching reconciliation with her husband.'

'This is nonsense. This is a nightmare.'

'This is Hell, dear doctor. We've made advances too, you know.'

Rossiter was silent. Out-of-the-body hallucinations were a common reaction to shock and anaesthetic drugs. He did not want to encourage this one.

'But you're very much in the body, dear doctor, at least in an astral sense. That's part of your punishment – or, should I say, your treatment. I want you to know how very pleased I am to have been

put in charge of your case. You'll find our techniques interesting, I think, though somewhat different from your own. For one thing, we like to operate without masks.'

He put a long-taloned claw behind his head and loosened the knots at the back. The mask came away. Rossiter surveyed the chinless reptilian face, yellowish tusks slightly lifting the rubbery upper lip, puckers of grainy flesh where the nose should be rising in loathsome corrugations to meet the pouches around the eyes. The broad mouth opened and a slender forked tongue darted out, accompanied by the surgeon's sibilant laugh. Frantically, Rossiter willed himself to wake up.

'Look around you, doctor. You'll have all eternity with these faces, you'll come to know them very well.'

The nurse's mask was already off. Below the beautiful eyes, the flesh was a mass of oozing pustules clustered around a blunt snout and a dripping sphincter of a mouth. The sphincter twisted. 'Ready, doctor?' she said in her silken voice.

'Ready, nurse. Scalpel.' She slapped a blade competently into his outstretched claw. The surgeon smiled. 'Here we go,' he said, and drew the first long line of unthinkable torment down Rossiter's body. Rossiter screamed. Eternity began.

Brent R. Smith

## Falling in love again

The year was 1973. It was September, and the hot, lazy summer was bowing out with a tapestry of rich browns and golds. The last few swallows were flying high in the cornflower sky gathering up the first brave insects of the night. The golden bountiful land lay far beneath them, rolling in gentle folds and creases, a shimmering patchwork of amber-leaved trees and fields of yellow corn waving softly like a calm sea in the light evening breeze that the coming night would still.

Through high hedgerows laden with red and purple berries, a bus was travelling. It was the final service on the route that day, and both driver and conductor were light-hearted and filled with the special warmth of a perfect September evening. The bus was of an older type not seen nowadays and the platform at the back was open to the air. As the conductor grasped the shiny steel pole and leaned out into the fragrant evening, he reflected that there were plenty of worse jobs than working for a country bus company and riding through this glorious sweet-scented land.

Old Mrs Harper from Cross Lanes Farm had got off a mile or so back, and now they had just one passenger left. He sat on the bench seat opposite the open platform, drinking in the sights and sounds of the countryside as it rolled slowly past the bus in a panorama of exquisite loveliness.

The conductor, a man in his fifties, had paid more than usual attention to the young man sitting at the rear of the bus, and not just because he was a stranger; on this route you got to know nearly everyone, at least by sight. The few tourists who used the buses in the summer were always gone by this time. No, it was more than the fact that the young man was a stranger; he had a look about him that anyone could recognize. The conductor had recognized it as soon as the man had boarded the bus, and wistfully he had envied him; it was the unmistakable look of young love.

He was dressed in a light tweed jacket and checked shirt, and was

wearing polished brown walking-shoes. On the seat by his side lay an olive-coloured rucksack; his arm rested casually on it. He was not particularly good-looking, but nor was he bad-looking, and in the glow of the dying sun on that warm, late-summer evening in 1973, he looked radiant. He had an aura about him that seemed to transfigure him, and with a sweet sigh of nostalgia the conductor recalled seeing the same look in his own bathroom mirror in the bright and hopeful, joyful days of his own youth, thirty-odd years before. He smiled to himself and thought: *he's in love*.

The bus stopped on the crest of a hill. Before it, the road stretched down into a wide, lush valley of ripe fields and little coppices of gilded trees. Here and there a farmhouse was dotted across the valley, and in some of them the first lamps of evening had been lit, endowing the scene with a magical, fairytale romance.

The young man sat there, lost in his thoughts.

'This is where you wanted,' said the conductor, almost sorry to disturb the young man's dreams. 'This is the last stop before the terminus.'

The young man looked up, and for a moment the conductor thought he had not understood. Then, with a sweet smile he took hold of his rucksack and started to rise.

'You did say the last stop before the Dog and Gun, didn't you?' asked the conductor.

The young man nodded.

'Oh, what the heck. We'll take you there, we've got to pass it anyway,' the conductor said. But at the same time he thought, well, even if it was a mile or two out of the way I'd take him there because he's young and in love just like I was, and life for him is beautiful, and he's going to remember these golden days as long as he lives so let's just give him one more happy memory to brighten the coming years. The driver, overhearing, smiled and nodded his approval from the front of the bus. And so they moved off as the conductor pressed the bell, down into the darkening folds of the valley. Far, far above them the last swallow of summer deserted the sky which slowly changed from the deep blue of evening to the calm and tender indigo of night. Behind them the red disc of the sun slipped quietly below the valley's rim and above them a solitary star twinkled in the velvet dark.

Half a mile on, in the warm, still trough of the valley, the bus stopped outside the Dog and Gun. The golden glow of lamplight

streamed across the cobbled forecourt towards them.

'Here we are, son,' said the conductor indulgently.

'Thanks,' said the young man, smiling his sweet smile. He swung his rucksack over his shoulder and jumped lightly down from the platform.

'Wait a minute,' the conductor called after him and hopped down, at the same time taking out a penknife from his coat pocket. The young man turned towards him and the conductor stooped and deftly sliced off a single red rose from a flower-tub on the forecourt.

'Give her this from me,' the older man said with a wistful smile, and winked.

The young man blushed. 'Oh, oh thanks. . . I will,' he stammered, then turned towards the welcoming lights of the Dog and Gun and walked up and across the cobbles with a spring in his step. Half-way to the pub he paused and breathed in deeply the clear night air. Looking up, he saw that several more stars were twinkling frostily above him; looking around the valley, he saw that several more lamps had been placed in several more windows. The bus was cresting the other side of the valley now, engine labouring as it struggled up the hill, and over the top of the engine noise the happy soulful sound of the conductor's whistling drifted down to him on the still night air.

'I'm coming, Catherine,' he said to himself. 'We'll be together again soon.'

And the young man stepped jauntily up to the pub and through the door.

Inside, the Dog and Gun was everything a pub should be. It was warm, low-ceilinged, beamed and cosy. On the walls, horse-brasses and various polished items of harness gleamed in the firelight that radiated from blazing logs heaped in the grate. In front of the fire a labrador was stretched out on the rug. As the young man entered it lifted its head lazily and inspected him, then, obviously satisfied with his appearance, it yawned and stretched itself out again. In one corner a group of four old men were sitting round a table sucking on their pipes and playing cards for matchsticks. When they saw the young man they nudged each other, smiled knowledgeable smiles and renewed their game with a little less gusto than before.

Behind the bar, Mr Henry the landlord was polishing a glass with a large white cloth. He looked up when he heard the door, and beamed as the young man entered. Landlord is perhaps the wrong

word to describe Mr Henry. The noble and ancient title of innkeeper more befitted him, and anyone acquainted with the subtle variations to be found in English pubs will appreciate the difference.

'Is it the young man as booked the room for tonight?' inquired Mr Henry, noticing with a practised eye the red rose and the dreamy look on the young man's face.

'Yes. Just tonight I'm afraid.'

'Don't be afraid, now. It's a pleasure to have you, Here, have a drink with me, on the house' And Mr Henry heaved on the beer-engine and pulled a foaming pint into a dimpled glass.

'Thanks. That's very kind of you,' said the young man. He took a long drink from the glass and instantly felt more relaxed; after all, he thought, there wasn't long to wait; he would see her tomorrow.

Mr Henry watched the young man with a mixture of joy and sadness; joy because he remembered only too well how it felt to be young and in love; sadness because he was no longer young and the love had changed unnoticed into a sort of comfortable companionship.

The innkeeper instantly warmed to the young man; indeed everyone did. The aura of innocent love which radiated out from him seemed able to thaw the chill of the stoniest hearts; he was like a magic mirror held up to all who saw him; people looked at him and they saw themselves as young again; young in a world where it was forever springtime; young and deeply, blindly, irredeemably in love.

Mr Henry questioned the young man as he leaned against the bar sipping on his drink, but questioned him gently, not wishing to appear nosey:

No, the young man didn't live nearby. Yes, he did come from a fair way away. Yes, it had been a glorious day and he had taken the bus and he had enjoyed it. No, he had never stayed at the Dog and Gun before but yes, he did remember it from childhood visits with his parents hereabouts. No, he was not on holiday; more of what you might call a working holiday. That's right, he was a naturalist, or at any rate studying to become one. Yes, he would be up early in the morning. That's right, to try and catch a glimpse of foxes before they went to ground for the day. Yes, he would very much appreciate an early morning cup of tea before he set off, but no, they were not to put themselves to any trouble over breakfast for him. Then finally; Well, yes, but how had Mr Henry guessed? All right, he had to

confess; he *was* going to see his girl tomorrow.

'I knew it' grinned the innkeeper, and slapped his thigh. 'Let me tell you one thing though,' Mr Henry leaned over the bar and lowered his voice in a conspiratorial way. 'You stick by her; love her. Life's got its ups and downs right enough, but if there's two of you it's a damned sight easier than being on your own. Me and Mrs Henry have been together now for longer than you've been alive I'd say, and believe me I've never regretted a minute...maybe the odd day or two I'll grant you' And the innkeeper grinned broadly to indicate the joke.

The young man smiled and Mr Henry's heart felt lighter and somehow more carefree and youthful. The young man offered to buy a drink and after a ritual protest Mr Henry accepted, thinking how the young man was exactly the sort of son he had always wanted but never had.

It had been a long day, and after a while the young man excused himself saying that he was tired and would have an early start in the morning. Mr Henry tried in vain to persuade him to stay and have just one more drink, then realizing that he had failed, summoned his wife to show the young man upstairs. He watched the young man as he followed his wife to the low door which led to the bedrooms, and felt a surge of regret tinged with a little relief; regret because he had reminded him so poignantly of what, through the inevitable passage of time, he had lost.

One of the old men at the table in the corner looked up from the card-game and caught the innkeeper's eye. In that single glance each man exchanged bitter nostalgia for youth and love long gone, and each man came closer than he ever would again to gazing into the soul of another.

The next day the young man was up before the sun. At five o'clock Mrs Henry had left her soundly-sleeping husband and tiptoed down the creaky stairs in the darkness to the kitchen, there to set the kettle on the range and make a pot of tea. She couldn't remember the last time she had risen so early, but the young man was so innocent and charming and, well, so beautiful – and so much in love...

Half an hour later he was thanking her for her kindness and she was tut-tutting and telling him it was nothing at all, she got up at this time *every* day, and he was giving his regards to Mr Henry and asking her to tell her husband that of course he would call in on them whenever he was in the area again. The he stepped out of the kitchen



into the quiet chill of the morning. Mrs Henry ran after him as he was half-way across the yard, clutching the red rose he had left on the kitchen table. He thanked her and wished her well, then walked off into the waking day, a jaunty spring of expectation in his step.

She watched him till he had disappeared from sight. She had felt strangely protective towards him and now she felt the distant sorrow of a loss; it was as though she had lost something she'd never known she had, but the bittersweet yearning was none the less for it. Brushing away a tear, she returned to the warmth of the kitchen, and the consolation of the tea.

The young man swung gaily down the lane which led from the back-yard of the Dog and Gun. After a few hundred yards the path reached the very floor of the valley then continued over an ancient packhorse bridge to climb the opposite slope. Beneath the bridge flowed a fast clear stream, cold in the shade of the valley bottom. A bridlepath followed the course of the stream, and this the young man took.

Almost immediately, he found himself in a different world, The path itself had the look of being used fairly frequently, mostly by solitary walkers, he thought, although in places where the stream was fed by trickles from the valley-side he could discern the prints of horses in the mud.

Trees overhung the stream on both sides; all summer long the place was shrouded in deep shade. In the cool of early morning no breeze stirred; the silence was undisturbed by birds or any other living thing; the air seemed heavier, overladen with oxygen; above him the trees arched and met over the stream, like the golden nave of some great cathedral. Spider-webs, hung with the night's dew, glistened on the ferns which lined the stream like jewelled nets.

From somewhere far behind him the sound of a cock crowing heralded the first glimmer of dawn; the sound, thinned by the distance, was magical but faintly menacing . . .

The young man walked on; the silvery stream chuckled on his right, the ancient woodland stretched away in shadows on his left. Ahead, the first shafts of sunlight were lancing through the auburn canopy of leaves, It was a landscape designed for lovers; a perfect backdrop for a long-awaited reunion. It would be magical; his heartbeat quickened as he thought of her; Catherine, with her open smiling face and her strawberry-blond hair; Catherine, soft and tender with her wide blue eyes and her sweet girl's breath . . . he

could hardly wait . . . it had seemed so long since he had seen her . . . so long . . .

A furtive rustling in the shadows stopped him in his tracks. He held his breath. Silence fell. Seconds passed, marked by his beating heart, then the rustling sound again, but this time closer.

Quietly, and painfully aware of his creaking shoes he sank down, squatting on his haunches. He waited. Then it came again, a dry rustling sound, but now he had its direction, and silently he watched and waited.

An old gnarled oak nearby had fallen, or been uprooted in a storm, leaving beneath its roots a deep hollow; it was sheltered by the dead roots and its bottom was soft with many years deep-drifted leaves. It was from this hollow that the rustling came.

After some time he caught the glint of amber eyes in the darkness; first two, then more, then several pairs . . . Things were moving in the hollow, moving in the dead leaves.

His breathing slowed to almost nothing; high above a bird called with a shrill cry . . . then they came tumbling out of the dark dry hollow, and the young man's face lit up with unexpected pleasure; a vixen and her cubs, she with her ears cocked, scenting the morning air for signs of danger; her cubs toppling and frolicking and playfully batting each other with their fluffy, padded paws . . .

The young man couldn't help it; he laughed aloud. The vixen instantly took fright; the cubs changed in a trice from fluffy toys to feral things. In the blink of an eye they were off, darting like red flashes into the gloom beneath the trees.

He got to his feet, brimming with pleasure; good fortune must be smiling on him. When he had told Mr Henry the previous evening that he was a naturalist and hoping to catch a glimpse of foxes, well, that had been a lie. But now, at a stroke, his lie had been turned into the truth. He was happy. He picked up his rucksack and, humming a merry tune, continued on his way, deeper into the valley.

Half an hour later he stopped. Sunlight was now dappling the woodland floor and glittering off the stream; beyond the canopy of leaves the morning sun was climbing in the sky and burning off the early morning mist. The dawn chorus of birdsong was in full frenzy. He had reached the boulder now; the mossy boulder that marked where he had last seen his love; where they had bid each other a tearful goodbye all those weeks ago . . . he tried to recall how long it had been . . . nine . . . ten . . . no, it must have been at least

twelve weeks . . . twelve hot summer weeks without her. Well, he thought, now I am here. I've come back for you, Catherine, and it's going to be like old times . . . this time you won't say no to me . . . you'll want me as much as I want you . . .

And with his head whirling with sweet thoughts, lover's thoughts, the young man fondly patted the familiar boulder, turned from the bridlepath and slipped into the still, leaf-carpeted shade beneath the ancient trees.

Here it was; the little sun-spotted glade where they had said goodbye and where they had arranged to meet again in the dying glory of the year. It was not large; just twenty feet across, no more, and hemmed in on all sides by the ancient silent wood. He had known it was the perfect place . . .

He was secretly proud of the stealth of his approach; foxes were wily, and would have run from him, but Catherine was just a girl, her senses not nearly so attuned; she could not yet be aware of his presence. Kneeling in the centre of the glade on the soft, yielding earth, he opened his rucksack and took out a little trowel. He would surprise her . . . she always loved a surprise . . .

A trickle of sweat ran down his temple despite the morning chill that lingered under the trees. But now she was coming to him; slowly, slowly she came – but then she always tantalized, he thought. And now he could catch the sweet aroma of her perfume, but it was somehow different; more sickly-sweet than he remembered . . .

She was coming into view now; little by little she came, as he deftly scraped away the leaves and earth with his small shiny trowel . . .

'Catherine,' he softly whispered, and took hold of her blackened, clawlike hand. Gently he spoke to her in his lover's voice; 'Come, Catherine my love, sit up,' and he pulled her tenderly upright, feeling her slimy fingers entwined in his. With a wet, tearing sound her right arm parted from its socket at the shoulder, trailing thin strands of sinew. She slumped back, her head lolling grotesquely to one side on its broken neck; the sickly-sweet perfume of putrefying flesh filled his nostrils. He pulled gingerly on her left arm, fearing that it too might come away, but it did not, and as her reeking corpse sat upright in its shallow trench her head fell limply forwards and small clods of loose earth cascaded from her dry, straw-brittle hair. 'Catherine,' he gasped, trying not to breath the foul air, 'Catherine,

I've come back for you like I promised.'

But his girl said nothing. This was too painful; she was ignoring him just the way she had ignored him when last they had met, at the mossy boulder back down by the stream. He had known then that she loved him; all she needed was a little time by herself, quiet, then she would be ready to admit her love. He had given her time. He had given her twelve hot summer weeks. He had been patient, as only a true lover could be. Was this rejection to be his reward?

'Catherine . . . ' He put his hand gently under her chin and raised her head to gaze again into those pale blue eyes.

But her eyes were gone. Bloated pinky-white maggots writhed in the empty sockets. A worm emerged moistly from one rotted nostril. Her jaw dropped and her ragged mouth hung open in a silent screaming O. Black carrion beetles scuttered across her shrivelled tongue and down the mildewed tunnel of her throat, startled by the sudden light intruding on their rancid feasting.

At first to the young man she had seemed warm, inviting; but it was an illusion. She was faintly warm with the alien crawling life of myriad things that lived and gnawed inside her, but it was the dead warmth of the dunghill; of rotting toadstools; of fleshy corruption. Gradually and with a sinking heart the young man recognized the truth; she would not speak to him again; she had rejected him just like all the others.

Sadly he lowered the gangrenous corpse to lie again in its shallow bed of earth. How could she ignore him this way? The bitter youthful sorrow of unrequited love brimmed up inside him and tears washed down his face as he covered her again with earth and leaves, the little silver trowel glinting in the morning sun that now lit up the glade.

Dejectedly he got to his feet, wiping away his tears; he would leave her there, then, as he had left the others; one day he might return, just to see if she had had a change of heart. But then, he thought, the others never did; some of them had deserted him completely, and only grinning skulls and bones and scraps of rotted cloth remained to greet him when he visited them on his pilgrimage of love . . .

So with a sigh he turned and left the glade, and underground the grubs and maggots resumed their interrupted charnel feast . . .

Slowly and silently he retraced his steps down towards the stream, and as he went the pristine beauty of the morning and the woodland's peaceful solitude began to weave their spells; his spirits lifted;

the pain of loss receded. By the time he reached the moss-covered boulder that held so many memories, Catherine was fading fast. The happy radiant smile again beautified his features. He was a young man in love once more. But not with Catherine; no, that had passed; he was in love with love itself . . .

The sound of running feet on the bridlepath made him turn quickly around, the little dark hairs on the nape of his neck tingling with expectation . . .

Beneath the Autumn-golden trees leaning over the riverbank, a solitary figure ran along. The morning sunlight streaming through the leaves dappled her bronzed limbs and golden hair, and shafts of radiance lancing down illuminated her white jogging-shorts and singlet as she approached along the path.

She saw him by the boulder up ahead and raised her arm in greeting. Her lips broke into a friendly smile, full of the glorious confidence and innocence of gilded youth.

The young man, transfigured by the sight, smiled back. Behind his back he tightly clutched the little silver trowel. Somewhere deep within him a memory stirred; into his mind swam a verse of half-remembered song. The girl drew nearer and the music swelled; sweet singing filled his head . . .

‘What am I to do . . . can’t help it. Falling in love again . . . never wanted to . . .’

In his hand, the trowel grew hot . . .

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