Postscripts

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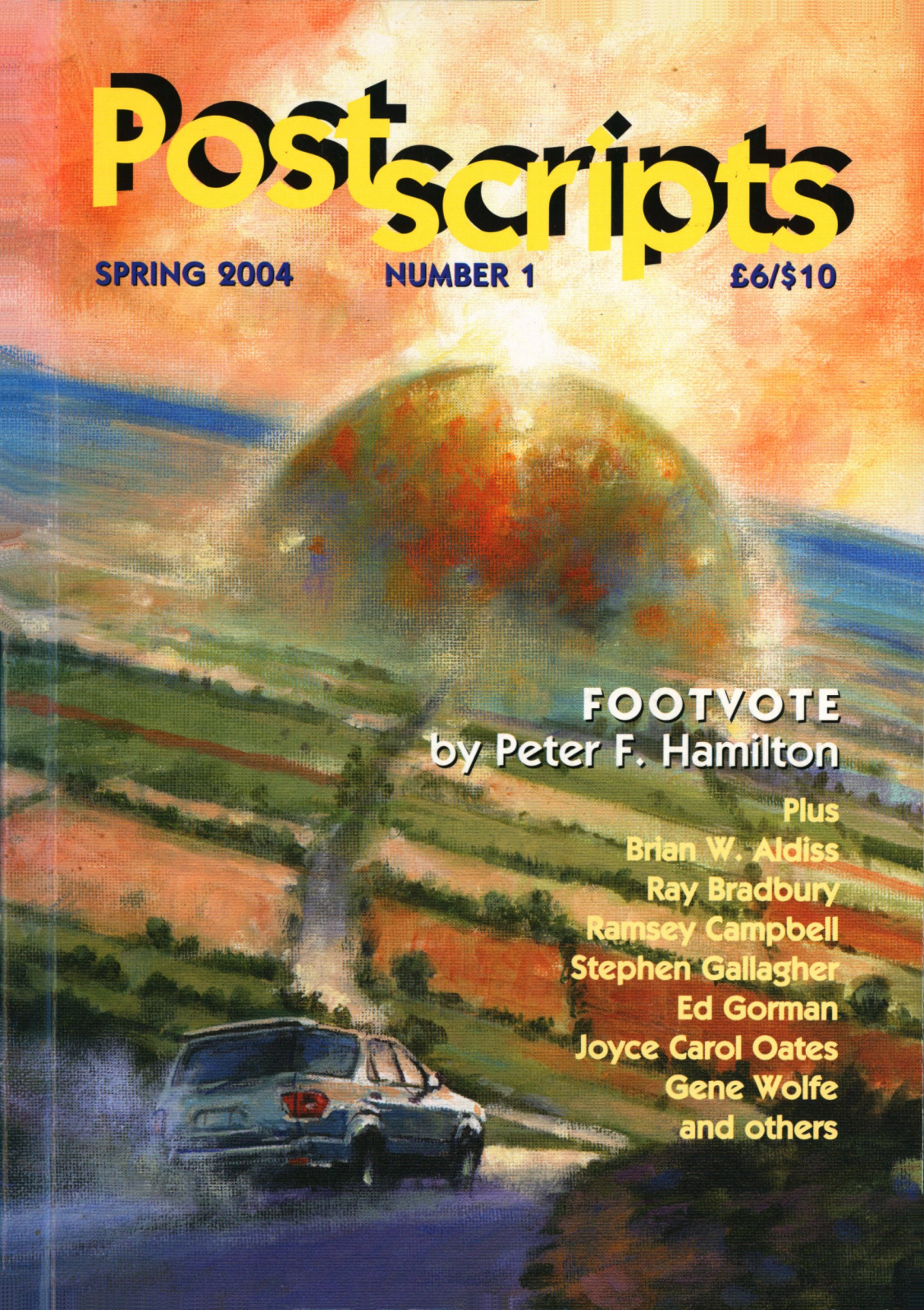

FOOTVOTE
by Peter F. Hamilton

Plus
Brian W. Aldiss
Ray Bradbury
Ramsey Campbell
Stephen Gallagher
Ed Gorman
Joyce Carol Oates
Gene Wolfe
and others

Postscripts
SPRING 2004 NUMBER 1

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When he appeared as Guest of Honour at the British Fantasy Society's annual convention last November, Chris Fowler delivered a version of the following article to a banquet audience glued to their seats. But our determined editor managed to free himself in time to secure Chris's words for our first Guest Editorial. Chris's last novel (August 03) was Full Dark House *and his next (in July 2004) will be* The Water Room.

Dancing in the Dark

Christopher Fowler

This is a very special honour for me, kicking off this first issue of a brand new magazine catering to the genres of the weird, the wondrous and the downright scary. So I've decided to mark the occasion and regale you with a piece—a bit of a writing memoir, actually—originally prepared to mark my attendance as Guest of Honour at last year's British Fantasy Society Convention.

When I started writing, "horror" had a different meaning. It was something everyone turned their hand to, from Charles Dickens to Ira Levin, from E. M. Forster to E. F. Benson, from Waugh and Wells to Conan Doyle and even John Lennon. But at some point in the nineteen seventies, plot and purpose and characterisation slipped quietly away from the English publishing scene, leaving behind sensation. The late Kenneth Tynan said that when you write solely for effect, you're writing melodrama. So publishers dropped the "H" word and called it "edge," "slipstream," "dark fiction," "speculative fiction," anything but "horror." Written horror burned itself out, Hammer and Tigon and Pan and Amicus vanished. An era ended.

I was *so* pissed off. I mean . . . I was just starting out, for God's sake!

The nature of horror writing had changed its face. Traditional horror stories came to be marketed to a younger audience, and started all over again at the beginning. Stephen King restarted the cycle from scratch. *The X Files* came along, and consisted of *National Enquirer* stories, urban myths, good ideas recycled from books and movies, all presented with a straight tidy face. *Buffy* played younger, a real-time teen soap that added ironic attitude and won huge audiences. We went younger still, to *Harry Potter*, seemingly set in 1955, reintroducing imaginative fiction at its most basic level—Nigel Molesworth meets *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. But this was where I'd come in. At school I had fallen about reading the adventures of Nigel Molesworth. Now—to my amazement—it's become a Penguin Modern Classic. So, full circle; nothing wrong with that, just incredibly bad timing for me.

Horror and fantasy are often seen as adolescent roadhouses on the way to more sophisticated forms of entertainment. This is how present-day publishers and film producers position it, and it's true that the genre appeals at an early age. The young are far from the threat of death, and have suffered few intimations of mortality. They're able to flex their imaginations and explore the outer boundaries of speculative fiction in order to explain their own feelings. Their minds are still open. Each time you read, see or experience something that appeals, you drive another fence-post into the map of your imagination, in an effort to discern its topography. Every time you write something new, you help to shape the landscape of the fantastic. During the last century, these fence-posts of the mind were knocked in by hundreds of brilliant writers.

How much have we forgotten? Well, fifty years earlier, we were reading *Gormenghast*. In the intervening years we had J.G. Ballard, Keith Roberts, Alfred Bester, Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, Christopher Priest, Emma Tenant, B. S. Johnson, Ian McCleod and hundreds of others. You won't find many on the average household bookshelf—you'll find *Harry Potter*, good family books, made popular by grassroots readers. It's nostalgia writing, and there's a place for that. But from my point of view, the reading public has gone back fifty years. The BBC's top one hundred books list is the most depressing selection imaginable, conservative, outdated and safe.

Book choices weren't always like this. Most people can recall a horrific moment from a book they read as a child. Mine were from Victorian books passed down, I imagine, by a mad old relative, and none would be allowed near children today. "Uncle Two-Heads Slowly Sinks Into The Quicksand" read the frontispiece of a grisly work called *Tiny Tim In Giant Land*. "Karik And Valya Trapped In The Lair Of The Water-Spider" ran another. The nightmare-inducing winner was the fascist fantasy *Where The Rainbow Ends*, a book considered ideal for every child's bedroom shelf. One illustration showed a girl being yanked into a shadowy forest by imps with razor-sharp claws, her pale arms striped with crimson scars. It was captioned "Rosalind Is Dragged Into The Black Wood By Imps." There's a grisly Steptoe-ish feel to much Victoriana, and it's a sensibility that survives among English writers to the present day.

The most obscure book I had as a kid was Maurice Richardson's *The Exploits of Englebrecht*, the adventures of the Surrealist Sportsman's Club, including witch-hunting, ten rounds with a grandfather clock, and a game of rugby on Mars. At least that still exists in a beautiful reprint.

The idea that there is now no place for adult horror or fantasy in a commuter-belt white-collar household is bizarre but commonly held. But the grandfather of such tales, H. G. Wells, came from just such a cosy background. My family kept a

full set of Dennis Wheatley's books on the shelf though they were out of date long before I read them. They faded from fashion—but they were my Harry Potters. I moved on to new writers with wild new ideas.

The sixties was a time of intensely original fantastic writing. Some authors experimented so much that they actually *died*. Over a decade ago, Clive Barker stood in front of the British Fantasy Society and complained of horror's poor reception by its critics. He hoped the situation would improve. Instead, the unthinkable happened. The critics got even lazier. There's hardly a newspaper that hasn't written the following line about my books; "Read it at midnight with all the lights on!" But if *I* can avoid cliché, why can't *they*? They're only reviewing: you read the book then comment . . . it's not rocket science. If they're going to review me, they could work out what I'm doing, which is writing satire, black comedy, twisting genres, being playful, being cruel, being surreal, virtually everything you could think of except writing straight horror. If they can't get that part right, then I'd rather they didn't bother. Thank God for the genre press, the magazines and websites whose tireless, intelligent reviewers shame their national equivalents. What we need is not just new writing to sustain developing new readers, but writing of such thought-provoking quality that publishers will no longer be able to sideline it.

Meanwhile, back at my education.

As well as polishing off everything in the Greenwich public library, I collected comics, but only the ones that never become valuable—I still have complete sets of *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen*, and *Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*. Storylines involving Red Kryptonite were everyone's favourite because the results of exposure were always part of some unnecessarily convoluted and ludicrous hoax to teach Lois Lane not to be nosy. I hated Bob Kane's artwork for Batman, which all too often featured fights on top of giant hats, supposedly symbols of manufacturing companies, and I bought all the comic series that were doomed to failure, like *Metal Men*, *The Atom*, *Doom Patrol*, *Sea Devils*, *Challengers Of The Unknown* and a peculiar short-lived series about strange sports that featured an invisible baseball game on one cover. Many of these had chequered stripes along the tops of the issues, for reasons I could not begin to fathom.

Lois Lane and *Jimmy Olsen* comics were particularly instructive because they taught trickery at some kind of ultimate level. Lois would be sexually humiliated, bullied, deceived and placed in danger by a man who was prepared to disguise himself under rubber masks just to "teach her a lesson". Her "old maid" status was endlessly mocked. She would be duped by gold-digging monocled counts who turned out to be Superman, and spent one story with her head in an iron box, too ashamed to go out. Sometimes all of Lois's friends were in on

these humiliations, but could not warn her because they were being watched from space.

I therefore found myself fascinated by the *Superman* family of comics for all the wrong reasons. I wanted to see how much more absurd the humiliations could get before something cracked, and the old maid went psycho. Superman writers had created such a straight-laced world that they were forced to invent red kryptonite, the Bizarros, Mr Mix-yez-pit-lek and—er—"Imaginary Stories." In every issue, Superman did one of three things; he turned bad, he died or he got married. And it always turned out to be a hoax.

I moved on to Marvel, and Spiderman's legendary three-issue fight with Dr. Octopus, involving the first of his Aunt May's many, *many* brushes with potentially fatal illnesses. Is it any wonder that I find most modern comics anodyne and dreary after such surrealist bouts with adolescent fears?

Years later, I actually got to appear as a villain in Batman—along with Jim, my business partner, and all courtesy of DC comics. And I finally wrote them a graphic novel that absolutely no-one in America—except Harlan Ellison—understood. I should never have left out the obligatory feisty punk girl.

Then I hit horror movies big time. I already had every issue of *Famous Monsters Of Filmland*. I sent away for giant weather balloons, sea monkeys, 8mm reels of *The Giant Claw*, Aurora model kits, the baby chick incubator, the joy buzzer and X-Ray Spex.

I was thirteen when I saw my first horror film. *Dracula, Prince Of Darkness*. Those silent-movie reactions to crucifixes—the horrified throwing up of hands—look a bit silly now, but back then, the "X" Certificate was sexy and dangerous. Seven years had passed since the definitive Hammer *Dracula* had appeared onscreen. With no video and no MTV, images still retained the power to shock. Fast cutting had barely been invented. Horrors appeared in double bills, so you knew you'd already be tensed up by the B-feature before you even got to *Dracula*.

My father and I went to the cinema twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, because the programmes used to change on Thursdays. The ABC Blackheath was within walking distance of our house, yet we always managed to miss the beginning of the first feature. Worst example; we missed the first twenty minutes of *They Came To Rob Las Vegas*, arriving when a botched heist resulted in an armoured car being buried under the Nevada sand. To this day I have absolutely no idea how it got there.

Anyway, I was under the legal age to be admitted to a horror film—thirteen sneaking into a "16" Certificate. On that occasion, the first movie was *Plague Of The Zombies*, a tasty appetizer for the main event, not especially gory (only one beheading) but something about the class-warfare plot held resonance, and some-

thing about those feral white-eyed zombies lingered. There was a doom-laden recklessness here, signified by the upending of a coffin that exposes a plague-corpse in broad daylight. I felt as if I was on unsafe ground. This was the first image I saw upon entering the darkened auditorium, because (naturally) we had missed the beginning.

At the start of the main movie I was teased with the end of the first Hammer *Dracula* film, which I'd been too young to see. Dracula had shrivelled in sunlight, so I knew the count was dead. I waited for him to reappear. This was a number of years before Hammer shamefully allowed bats to puke blood onto Dracula's ashes to revive him. The camera prowled the gloomy corridors and I wondered; he's been cremated, how *the hell* can they bring him back?

When the servant Klove slipped his sacrificial victim's feet into a noose I was even more puzzled, so that the upside-down throat-slashing over Dracula's ashes came as a brilliant shock. The scene was originally to have featured a beheading, which would have been much less effective. Luckily the censors rejected that idea in favour of a blade across the jugular, proof that they hadn't a clue what they were doing.

The film grew more perfunctory after this, prompting Eddie Izzard's vampire theory, (if they can be stopped with crossed swords and candlesticks, you should be able to make a crucifix with just your fingers). But for a while it was perfect.

Even now, it plays like a stripped-down version of the traditional legend. The coach-driver refuses to look up at the impossibly baroque castle, prim Barbara Shelley is transformed into a sensual middle-aged hellcat, Dracula is invited in by a feeble-minded lunatic, crucifixes sear, fangs are bared with a hiss, James Bernard's gloriously lush score is backed by the ever-present moaning wind, and a dim-witted man of the cloth makes a nuisance of himself. The only real romance on display is an unhealthy love of things dead, and even the happy ending reeks of melancholia. A horror movie is like sex; the first time may not be the best, but you always remember it.

How could this not be the start of a life-long love affair with horror and fantasy? The mystique of Hammer remains because the films' grandeur and elegance separated them from surrounding shockers. Cushing and Lee wore ties and spoke nicely. They were like my Dad. The early women were maternal sexy types who wore nightgowns made of heavy sailcloth. One, Jenny Hanley, was a presenter of the children's TV show *Magpie*, so it was probably illegal to have carnal thoughts about her. All the other parts were played by character actors who became more familiar to me than my relatives. Michael Ripper spent most of his Hammer career polishing beerglasses and warning travellers, in a peculiar West Country accent, not to go up to Castle Dracula. And this is the point. Hammer films weren't set in

Bavaria or Lichenstein or Transylvania, they were set in England and they were about us, only we couldn't see it. Their England has ceased to exist. Our world now has fast-shifting borders and beliefs, but the mainstream prefers its fantasies like comfort food, soft, safe, and easily digestible.

For me, films were not enough; I topped them up with the *Pan Books Of Horror*, and built a library of fantastic literature. I moved on. After Hammer—the films and those nice book versions by John Burke—I moved on to Peter Walker's grim trilogy *House Of Whipcord*, *Frightmare* and *House Of Mortal Sin*, all of which had trouble with censors not because they were considered too violent but because they were too real. The trilogy is generally considered to mount attacks on the law, the state and the church. Walker was punished for not setting his tales in Transylvania. Just as the lights died on English film, I fell in love with them. Hollywood meant nothing to me; the kids drove to school in cars, for God's sake.

Then I zoned in on odd films. After all, the story that doesn't come up with one interesting image or idea can be counted a failure. John McTiernan's *Nomads* twisted horror conventions until it ended up telling its story backwards. Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* was a closet horror film, because when nice Griffin Dunne tries to get home he ends up sealed inside Edvard Munch's "The Scream". I couldn't sleep after seeing *Funny Games*, *Spoorloos*, *Session 9* or *Darkness*. But most of the eighties and nineties were pretty spirit-crushing. Anne Rice updated vampire lore to shopping "n" sucking novels, Stephen King wrote *The Green Mile*, a book so childish I wanted to colour it in. The *Scream* movies ended in a welter of self-reference. Publishers stopped nurturing new talent. Bookshop horror shelves were dismantled to leave more room for cappucino areas. The golden age of anthologies passed, and many wonderful stories vanished forever. On my Black Dog days, I sometimes think that adult horror has been marginalised to a level where it is the equivalent of being interested in collecting train sets or old 78s. I make no apology for missing the times when it was segregated as something for adults, because the ghetto worked in horror's favour.

Despite all the crossover fiction, the retro, pulp, post-modernism, black comedy and satire, we still drift into teatime cosiness at the first opportunity. We censor our films, and refuse to read books that don't look like the sort of thing we like. We owe it to ourselves to resist the temptation. J.G. Ballard still manages to; his new book is about the beneficial effects of terrorism. Then there are new TV shows such as *Dead Like Me*, surreal, sad, dark, comic, cruel, horrific and fantastic—which couldn't have been written before now.

At the end there remains a timeless image of horror so deeply ingrained that no modern terror will ever supplant it. The moon, the cloud, the razor, the eye from *Un Chien Andalou*. The calm passivity of the girl, the cool deliberation of the man,

the unspoken collusion between them that carries within it the destructive seeds of all mankind. If you know of anything more pertinent to these strange, unfathomable times, I'd like to hear it.

And there's a wealth of beautifully written stories out there, just waiting to be rediscovered. In my head I build the ultimate anthology. I'd nominate anything by the Italian author Dino Buzzati. His story "Seven Floors" is the most frightening, simple study of our fear of illness ever committed to paper, and his tale "Just The Very Thing They Wanted" is chilling because it denies its characters the rights to their most basic needs—the right to sit down, to be calm, to drink a glass of water. Joe Haldeman's "Lindsay And The Red City Blues" captures the sensation of going somewhere strange in a foreign city, when the hero becomes lost after dark. John Collier's "Evening Primrose" is about a man who can't cope with life and moves into a department store to live among the mannequins. Tennessee Williams wrote of searching a cinema for companionship and discovering a ghost in "The Mysteries Of The Joy Rio", as does Graham Greene in the classic "A Little Place Off The Edgeware Road". The first time I read the Williams story I was so shocked that I felt he could see directly into my mind. But while it's hard to find James Blish or Alfred Bester or John Collier in print, *Dreamcatcher* is available in developing nations. Perhaps that's the point; the canon of creativity repeats itself in endless variation, like humankind itself.

But I only ever wrote to please myself. I refuse to write to commission, and if the time comes when I can no longer find a publisher, I'll simply stop. Recently I wrote a novel that my agent loved so much, she held an auction. Out of fourteen publishers I've received thirteen rave rejections. All said the same. "It's wonderful. It's just 'too unusual'." In this case, maybe I've gone too far, and it's time for me to return to the start of the cycle. But I won't. Writing is my way of moving on.

There's another element that governs what we read and see in England, and that is fashion. It's fashionable for books and TV shows to reflect the times in which their commissioners live. Writers of imaginative fiction take the trials of family life as understood. We prefer to take a larger leap of imagination. We move on. Unfortunately, imaginative leaps are no longer fashionable for adults, and may never be again in the way they once were. Because I was a child in the sixties, I consider myself fortunate enough to have been raised with an awareness of this tremendous imaginative power. I don't want to write about the problems of family life. It's not to say that I couldn't with some research, because that's what writers do, they learn about other lives. But creation is now tied to the creator, and the personalities of authors have become as important as what they create.

The majority of science fiction, fantasy and horror writers, who aren't living the lives they write about, don't receive the attention they deserve. Our genius—and

sadly, our curse—is our ability to keep moving on, and as fast as our readership catches up, we're off again, dancing ahead. We each have a thousand mad worlds within us, every one new and different and exciting. Each time we write, we explode into something strange and different. This ability will keep us sidelined, out of the limelight, away from the mainstream, but I hope it also gives us longevity. Long after the fads and frenzies of today have dried up and disappeared, we will still be there—sharing infinite worlds of the imagination. If there is one piece of advice I would give every writer, it's that the old maxim, "write what you know," is *bullshit*. Write what you feel, what you connect, what you guess, what you chance, what you dare, what you dream, what you *don't* know. Then see if there's someone brave enough to publish it.

In closing, I would like to thank everyone who still publishes and edits and writes and reads and cares—and I would particularly like to thank *you* for buying this magazine. Long may it—and *all* of us—prosper.

Adam Roberts is not yet forty, and lives with his beautiful wife and daughter west of London but inside the M25. He has published various novels, most recently Polystom *and* The Snow, *as well as shorter fiction, parodies and criticism. His two PS novellas*—Park Polar *and* Jupiter Magnified—*have been hugely popular, so much so that a third* (Rings) *is scheduled for 2005. Watch out for a second* Postscripts *story from him later this year.*

Roads Were Burning

Adam Roberts

One

Roads were burning in the north, all across the country, or so the news was saying. York, Sheffield, Manchester, places like that. And fire was spreading, it seemed, into Scotland and down to the south. Or so the radio said. It was one of those news-stories that struck an offtone, a surreal note in the brain, the sort of the story that you hear on the radio with half an ear, whilst you are concentrating on something else, the sort of thing that snags somewhere in your thoughts, *that can't be right, surely I misheard*. So. On the other hand, Jonathan didn't have much of an opinion about the North. He had been to Manchester a few times, but he hadn't liked it much. Manchester, he thought, was all Croydon and no Primrose Hill. It hadn't tempted him from London. And in London there were other things to worry about than burning roads.

So he found himself in Swel's large apartment: Barons Court, overlooking Hammersmith Cemetery and beyond that the Talgarth Rd with its constant, sluggish flow of cars. Swel had given him a set of keys, told him to use the place if he liked. Swel had gone off somewhere: to Asia, or Africa, or to the southernmost part of South America, maybe. Jonathan didn't really care where, since he had the keys to the apartment. It wasn't that it was an especially beautiful apartment; but, ex-council, it was nicely spacious, and Swel had decorated it stylishly. The best thing about it was his sensory deprivation tank, and this was where Jon planned to spend the rest of the day. Take some heroin, lie in the black waters with white noise playing through the speakers in his ears, let it all wash away in the fullest sense. All wash away. He pictured himself, emerging dripping, pure, at the end of the process.

He had tried it once before, nursemaided by Swel, but the experience had not been a success. Jonathan had settled in alright, *all-right, all-righty*, and it had been nice if a little clammy, until

his nicotine craving had started scratching and itching at his skin, monstrously magnified by the lack of other sensory anchors, and Jonathan had been forced to thrash about and push the lid off and emerge. "I disappoint myself," he had said, standing on the carpet in a bathrobe, lighting up a ciggie. Swel had shaken his large head, slowly. But (J. reasoned, without telling Swel) a little heroin in his system would buffet him from the need for cigarettes. A little heroin and he could enjoy it properly. "You mustn't use the apparatus when I'm not there to supervise you," Swel had chided, on the phone from the airport, en route to wherever he had gone. "I mean, you're welcome to use the place, but not that. OK?" "Of course not," Jonathan had replied, thinking how pompous it was to call it *the apparatus*, and thinking also where he could most cheaply obtain some good quality heroin.

It wasn't an *apparatus*. It was simply a watertight box, with a padded cradle fixed to the inner wall and a mouthmask plumbed to the air outside like a snorkel. The earplugs were regular walkman plugs piping white noise through. The manufacturers warranty probably said you weren't supposed to get them wet, but they didn't seem to mind, they worked under water, so it didn't matter. You had to fill *the apparatus* with a hose from the bathroom. There wasn't even a heater. Swel said that he used to turn the general thermostat up to keep the room warm and stop the water getting too cold. I mean, how primitive is that?

Jonathan set it all up carefully. He didn't want to take the heroin and zonk out on the floor, high, whilst still fiddling with harnesses and tubes for *the apparatus*. He had to get the timing right. When the moment came he wanted to be able to climb in, pull the lid over his head, fix mouthpiece and earplugs and settle down before the bliss poured too overwhelmingly through his muscles.

Two

And so he got in. But no sooner was he comfortable, settled, than the quality of light changed, turned a sort of yellow in a rectangle above him. Somebody (he worked it out sluggishly) had taken the lid off, fuck them, how could they? What were they playing at? Fuck them—Jonathan though the words with a extreme clarity in his head like drops falling from a tap onto a taut, still pool. *Fuck. Them.* He surfaced, pulled the mask off, and was trying to focus on the person standing there, preparing to say something cutting. But his throat was rasping, and his legs wobbly.

"I *thought* somebody was in there," said the newcomer.

Three

He'd got into the tank in the mid-evening gloom. Now the sunset

was visible through the windows of the flat. He must have been inside one whole night and one day. He couldn't believe it. Above all, he couldn't believe that he didn't feel purified or clean. He felt the reverse; his throat was sore, his arms trembled, he struggled to hold down the soup that Justine heated for him. "Jesus," he said, several times. "I can't believe it-that felt like an eye-blink." From, he thought, evening one day to sunset the next day.

"Is that the craziest place to be in London," Justine said, "at this time? Have you found the single craziest place to *be*?" Her voice was low, a smoker's voice. Her eyes were violet coloured. She dressed in black, pants and sweater marked with precision, designer folds. She was middle-aged. Late middle age. Older, maybe. Was she forty? Forty-five? "Inside that tank?" she said. "In this flat?"

"At this time?" asked Jonathan. Or not *asked*, because he didn't particularly care whether she answered or not. Let's say *croaked*. Maybe that would be the better word. Or *groaned*.

"Haven't you heard?" she drawled. "The roads are burning."

This was only a small memory in Jonathan's mind. More important, he realised, almost abruptly, was a cigarette. He walked, stumbled, to his jacket and fumbled one out. There were times, and this was one such time, when the cigarette he was about to smoke was the most beautiful thing, the purest, the clearest object, in all the windy, stony universe. That all his being and desire could be focused into something so small. Like the hyphenated white lines down the middle of a road, leading you on, keeping you to the proper side. That was smoking to Jonathan: he thought of all his cigarettes like this, at once, one continuous line made up of myriad white strokes. He put the ciggie in his mouth and lit the end of it.

"You are a friend of Swel," he said, after several draws.

"I suppose you are too," she replied.

Jonathan, coming out of the tank, had thought her forty, maybe. But now that he looked more closely he could see that she was a fair bit older than that. She was well preserved, but not young. She had that quality sometimes called "ageless," Cleopatran, excepting only the way a gentle roughness of her neck suggested her advanced age. When she smiled widely enough a cascade of fine lines came into being from each cheek bone in two arcs past the corners of her mouth and to her neck. And then, when you looked carefully enough, you noticed how large were her ears, half-hidden beneath a static coiffure of uniform black. You noticed how pronounced were her knuckles, like knots in cord. But then again, Jonathan thought to himself, Swel himself was no spring chicken, he was bound to have many older friends. Was she sixty? Sixty-five?

This sort of age was inconceivable to Jonathan except as a sort of abstrac-

tion. He was the moist, tender tobacco strand, wedged in close to the filter. She was the ash dropping onto Swel's carpet.

"*I* don't intend to stay here," she said, her face emotionless. "I intend to get out. Do you have a car? It doesn't matter if you don't, as I suppose you don't. The roads are all blocked anyway. It doesn't matter whether you have a car or not, we'll be walking."

Jonathan stared at her. There was, he realised, no sound coming through the window. There was no noise of traffic at all. The horizontal metal waterfall of the Talgarth road had ceased its eternal crashing. He got up, still unsteady, and went to the north-facing window. The cars were still there, glinting in the late afternoon sunlight, but they were all still and dead. The sunset lights burned in tangerine colours off their windscreens. "That's odd," he said.

Four

She had, she told him, as he dressed hurriedly, been walking west. She had come from South Ken, where she lived-Earls Court, more precisely, she said, but she was in the habit of saying South Ken, when people asked. Posher. Nicer than Earls Court, let's be honest. At this she laughed. Jonathan wasn't really taking it in.

"Why were you walking west?" he asked.

"I had the notion to get over the river to Kew. But I'm not sure it's such a good idea now. I don't think I had-truly-*taken on board* the enormity of it. Maybe a crowd of people has gathered in Kew. I don't know. To cross the river. Imagine them all huddling together with walls of flame all around. But then," and for no reason that Jonathan could determine, she laughed with a raspy glee, "maybe it'll be like that everywhere."

"I don't understand," said Jonathan.

"*I* don't," she said, agreeing with him. "What can you do? The radio said it was the rain. It was raining all yesterday, and people were saying that maybe that would put the fires out. But now they're saying the rain seems to have sped the process up. So maybe it's something to do with a particular chemical mix-you know? I don't know a great deal about chemistry. Do you?"

"Flame under spoon," said Jonathan. "That's as much chemistry as I've ever known." It was the sort of remark that might have prompted a low laugh at the sorts of parties he attended, but Justine only looked at him blankly.

"I think it's time to go," she said.

"Don't you think," he said, taking a deep breath and settling himself-adopting, with a degree of self-consciousness, his pose, his cool-"don't you think we should wait til morning? Do we really want to go walking through the night?"

"Night?" she said. "You want to wait until night?"

Jonathan was still at the window. "That sunset, over there," he said, and laughed. "And after sunset, night. Isn't that conventional?"

"Oh," she said, "sunset. At nine in the morning?"

Five

He came and sat down, checked the day and the time properly with Justine. He had been in the apparatus for two nights, not one. Justine had stayed in Swel's apartment the night; she had checked the apparatus only on a whim, a sort of instinct, before leaving in the morning.

"I'm eager to go," she said, standing at the window herself. "Those flames look very close, just over the horizon. That's Brentford burning. That's Hounslow." Her deadpan voice, purring and calm, sounded eerie to Jonathan now. Brentford burning? An old boyfriend of his lived at Brentford, in a ground-floor flat near where the Brent flowed into the Thames.

Burning?

"What do you mean anyway?" he asked, with one of his headaches threatening. "How burning? Has somebody dropped a bomb?"

"They dropped a bomb on the M1 at Watford, Radio 4 said." She said this as one word, *radiofour*. "To make a firebreak. But it didn't work." Then she said "the radio isn't broadcasting any more."

"I don't understand a word of what you're saying. It's just not going into my noggin."

"You're very pretty," said Justine, passionless, "but you don't catch on too sharp. Didn't you hear me? The roads are burning. It's been in the news a week or more. Don't you follow the news?"

Jonathan pressed the blades of his fingers against his cheeks, an A-shape of pressure from the bridge of his nose to the corners of his mouth. Sometimes that stopped migraine pain spreading down his sinuses. And his headaches could be killers. He did not have a headache at that moment, though; he made the gesture to compose himself. "Look, miss, look," he said. "Justine, look. I'm sorry. I've just lost two nights and a day in that tank there. I'm taking a little time waking up. Why are the roads burning?"

"Chemistry," said Justine, in an uninflected tone. "I don't know. It's the tar in the matrix, the tar in tarmacadam. We're going now. I don't want to die in Swel's flat."

Six

They went down to the deserted, car-strewn streets and made their way on foot, Justine stepping sprightly and assured, Jonathan walking more slowly and occasionally having to insert camp little skips into his steps to keep pace.

Justine walked as if she were a practised fellwalker, which perhaps she was. Jon never walked anywhere unless he absolutely had to. "How did it start?" Jonathan asked.

"You mean who started it?" said Justine. "*I* don't know. How should I know?"

"But," said Jonathan. He couldn't see how to finish this sentence. He didn't say anything for a while.

They reached Fulham Palace Road. To the west and north the sky was dark with what looked like storm-clouds, except the clouds were blushed cherry-colour nearer the ground. "It's like the Blitz," said Jonathan. "It's incredible."

They turned south, down Fulham Palace road towards Putney. The sky in that direction looked clearer. It wasn't blue, but was at least not black: a sort of whisky-colour, more promising. Both lanes of the road were blocked with discarded cars, like the two strings of a giant metal rosary. They saw nobody else. Not one other person. The whole of London had a dreamlike silence to it. There was no birdsong, no car-alarms, no car stereos sharing thudding music through open windows, no yelling, no honking, no sirens. There was nothing at all. The great tidal rushing continuum of traffic, that mighty noise, so familiar as to become like silence to Londoners, was gone altogether; although, maybe, in some conch-like turn of Jonathan's inner ear, its ghost remained-because Jonathan could almost hear the noise of traffic, far away in the distance. It occurred to him only as they passed the grounds of Fulham Palace that this noise in his ears was real, but that it wasn't cars, it was the massed crackling of flames in the distance. Not a roaring, but a steady, staccato, rattling noise.

He stepped more briskly, panting now. Unused to the exercise.

"I supposed," said Justine, unprompted, as they approached the bridge, "that it was terrorists."

"The burning?"

"You asked who started it," she said, stopping beside a roadside bench to get her breath. Jon, glad of the break, settled beside her and tried to control his breathing. "I suppose it was terrorists," she said again. "On the radio they were saying that perhaps somebody had treated the roads up in South Yorkshire-driven over and round the road network spraying, or dribbling, or somehow *depositing* a chemical upon them. Tar is pretty inert, usually. It takes a high heat to make it combust. This is what radio-four said. But maybe if it were treated, the tar, then it would burn more easily. The tar, this mystery chemical, water-that's oxygen, isn't it? That's hydrogen? Isn't it odd that water is used to put out fires when it's made of two such combustible things? They thought the rainfall would put it out, but it seems to have made it worse. Now all the roads are burning. Some of the motorways are concrete, but even they have tarmac hard-shoulders."

They both took seats on the bench, and sat in silence for half a minute, just breathing.

"Tar," said Jonathan. A thin drizzle was starting down, touching his face like pins-and-needles. "I guess it burns in cigarettes. Does it?"

"Tar is our bloodstream," said Justine. "The roads, do you see, are our circulatory system. I mean to say. They go everywhere in this country, roads. There's nowhere they don't go."

"I once saw," said Jonathan, pulling the lapels of his coat around his neck, "a plasticated body. You know? They'd filled all the blood vessels with this sort-of plastic, and then, I don't know, dissolved the rest of the body, so the blood vessels were all that was left. Like a sculpture of a human body made entirely out of thin red wire." He put his hand on Justine's knee, trying for *supportive*, for *friendly*.

They were quiet for a moment. "I'm saying," he said eventually, "that I understand what you mean. The roads, they go everywhere. There's no real escape from them. Maybe in the Grampians, I don't know. Maybe in the Lake District, or somewhere like that. It's ok," he said, patting her leg. "I'm tired too. I'm *so* out of shape."

At this, as at a rebuke, she got to her feet. Jonathan copied her.

They trudged over the deserted. traffic-clogged hump of Putney Bridge in silence. The drizzle stopped. The traffic lights were still blinking through their monotonous cycles of greens and oranges and reds on the far side, though the cars were all stalled and empty, filling every road. Outside the cinema at the bottom of Putney Hill Jonathan saw one car occupied, a shape in the passenger seat, but when he hurried over to it the person was dead. Just sitting in the car dead, staring ahead.

Heart attack, or something.

They made their way up Putney High Street. The shops on either side were unlooted. The line of cars stretched all the way up the hill. A bus, tall as a house, was stuck in the flow halfway up, a red dinosaur drowning in the tar-pits.

"It was stupid of me," said Justine, panting slightly as they paused by the railway station. "I stopped at Swel's place last night because I was so tired. I should have pushed right on. But I was too tired, so I fell asleep on his bed. And I didn't set an alarm or anything, so I slept right through until eight or thereabouts. I should have been long out of this city."

Jonathan thought, *me too*. But he said: "if the roads were only burning because some terrorists treated them, why are they burning down here? Or did these terrorists treat all the roads? That doesn't seem very likely to me. And who are they anyway, these terrorists?"

Justine looked at him, not witheringly exactly, too blankly to be judgmental, but a look that shut him up. "I should know?" she said. "Maybe

it wasn't terrorists. Maybe it is the Wrath of God, and this is Sodom-London."

"Oh, please," said Jonathan. And then, because he couldn't help himself, his love for word-games was too ingrained, "Londom." He tittered. "I'll buy a ribbed condom in Londom."

"Maybe it's just a chain reaction," said Justine blankly. "The roads burn, and they get so hot the tar just combusts. Maybe it was just a matter of initial conditions, and now the roads are so hot that rain doesn't cool them, just fuels the burning. The radio was saying that the individual pieces of gravel in the matrix were exploding, flying around like shrapnel." She paused, before adding in an uninflected tone, "it's a disaster."

But Jonathan had never known a disaster. To him the word had only ever meant personal inconvenience, or relationship breakdown. *The cab got caught in traffic and I missed my flight, it was a disaster. Tim and I, what can I say, it's just a disaster.* Even at this stage he didn't believe these burning roads were disastrous. Nothing disastrous had happened to him, except that he had been compelled to go on this lengthy, tiresome walk. How could it be a disaster if nothing specifically disastrous had happened to him? It couldn't, of course, except in some distant, cerebral sense. Some notional, unreal sense. In this respect he was exactly like anybody else.

They pushed on up Putney Hill, and behind him the rattling, surf noise was getting louder.

"Maybe," said Justine. They passed Putney Girl's school, walking beside the double line of deserted cars. "Maybe it's a radioactivity thing. Maybe that's why the tarmacadam has overheated like this." She said *tarmacadam* with exactness through pursed lips; an oddly prissy locution. "But whatever it is, it's spreading faster, not slower. It's running down the roads. Fire is running along all the roads like they were fuses. Smaller roads burn quicker."

Jonathan thought of all the small roads in London, all the capillaries branching from M1 arteries and M4 arteries and M3 arteries and M2 arteries. "When I was young," he said, as they passed a black of expensive-looking flats. "I used to say *tarmadam*. Like I was thanking a lady, you see? I really thought the word was *tarmadam*." He snickered again. Justine did not laugh.

Away behind them there were distant banging noises, like fireworks.

"Up ahead," she said, panting, "it's Wimbledon Common. Maybe we should leave the road there and strike out over the common. Maybe that would be safer."

"Don't they have cycle-paths over the common?" Jonathan said. Justine stopped and turned to face him. "I guess they'd burn," he added, by way of explanation. "I mean, I think it's

a good idea. I really do. I'm just saying." For the first time, actual emotion was visible on Justine's well-preserved face; the lineaments of dismay. The banging noises were louder. She was looking over Jonathan's shoulder.

He turned. The view was clear down across Putney and Wandsworth, and over the river to Fulham and Chelsea. Except that it was all burning, all red and yellow in throbbing and luminous patches under a dark sky, scarlet blotches reflecting off the ceiling of the cloud cover like (Jonathan thought this, because this was the way his imagination worked) a pepperoni pizza. The roads had all burned, with the absolute, ticking advance of perfect fuses, and the buildings alongside had caught and now burnt too. Down below Jonathan could see that the fire had burned its way over the bridge they had crossed half an hour before. Now it was popping cars like fireworks, crashing them into flame, flipping them up in the air. It was simply pouncing on them. The bus was still visible, but the flame crept inexorably on, over the traffic lights and starting up the hill. The bang-bang of exploding petrol tanks were so loud, the growl of the huge fire so ubiquitous, it was amazing to Jonathan that he had not noticed it before. Unless it was like the roar of traffic had used to be. Unless his brain had become desensitised to such sounds. That could be it, of course. Perhaps a lifetime of living in London had worn out that part of his brain.

His brain.

He had the sudden, vivid, almost hallucinatory image of the whole of Britain like a human being, its impossibly lacework-intricate web of roads like, as Justine had put it, the circulatory system; and this great burning, this apocalyptic fire, moving its way outward from north-England's lungs, taking its magical heat up to Scotland's elephantine brain-pan, and down through England's torso to Welsh arms, to midlands belly, to where Tower Bridge's puckering arsehole gave out between the flabby buttocks of Essex and Kent, and on down through the stretched-out thigh of Surrey and Devon's calves and Cornwall's feet, until the whole body thrilled with the deadly burning vein-fed chemical.

Jonathan lit a cigarette. His fingers weren't trembling at all. This, after all, was what a disaster was. This was what it felt like, and it didn't feel too bad. It felt insulated. When the ciggie was alight and in his mouth he said, "Justine," taking her right hand in his left. He felt a certain command, a personal authority, and he felt it for the first time in his life. "Justine, let's have a race, what do you say? Let's see if we can outrun this fire, and get up the rest of this hill." The fire was cracking metal car-shells behind them like chestnuts with smart, detonating crack sounds. He could feel its heat now on his skin. "Both of us," he said, slightly

less distinctly because he was holding his lit fag in his lips, "running, towards the Common. Make it to the Common before the fire. What do you say?"

Justine's face was grey as the roads, but she nodded. She squeezed his hand. She turned south as Jonathan did, looking uphill, and the two of them started their ungainly, clumsy-stepped, joint run towards the acres of common land half a mile distant. It was the hopelessness of it that fired him, that made it exciting. And beyond Wimbledon, the endless concrete fields of South London, roads and tracks and paths stretching all the way to the water. "Thank you, madam," he gasped, to Justine, or to somebody else, as they jogged. He saw, with firework clarity, the truth of their circumstance: he was going to die. But he wasn't dead yet. And isn't that all any person can ever say? "Thank you," he said again.

Though painful, it was a kind of bliss.

"I wrote 'The Visitation' as a result of writing several Martian stories about Christ on other worlds," Ray Bradbury emailed us, "so the subject has been in and out of my life for many years . . . including my cantata, Christus Apollo, *which has been performed with several symphony orchestras during the last twenty-five years." Ray's new book of short stories,* The Cat's Pajamas, *will be published this summer; his new play,* Let's All Kill Constance, *is playing in Los Angeles even as you're reading this; and he's presently looking forward to the completion of the screenplay of* Fahrenheit 451, *the new version by Frank Darabont who will direct this winter.*

The Visitation

Ray Bradbury

And when we arrived at noon, the others said,
"He's long since dead and cold.
The stone is rolled.
The Christ is foaled
To universe.
He wanders space.
His face is nowhere here.
His flesh is gone.
His blood
And marrowed bones in blood
Has vanished where,
Ascended whence,
And dwells in what?
In attic flesh—
In stuffs on worlds that wander mindless about stars
Ten billion light years off and lone in space."

Then is he gone for good, and not come back?
I'll track him in the wilderness of time
And ask his touch
And beg his bread
Amongst the congregations of the universal dead.

Gone, gone, oh fully up, and now forever gone?
Dear Jesus, would that I'd been here at dawn,
When, with one stroke of hand
And arm and pinioned shoulder,
Touch of strange wing shadowing stone,
The rock rolled back
And let forever's summer forth.

But no, God, I'm late, I'm late, forever late…

"No, no! Oh listen, look!" a small child said,
"Not dead. Sweet Jesus gone? No, no, not dead,
not dead!"
And took my hand, and ran me to the marketplace.
"Look, look!" he cried.

I looked. I stared. I wept.
For there was Christ,
Surrounding me
In every face.

Publisher's Weekly recently noted that Ed Gorman seems to have struck "the mother lode" with his Sam McCain mystery series about a young lawyer who sees the dark side of the American Dream in the 1950s and 1960s. Booklist said that in the McCain books "good and evil clash with the same heartbreaking results as they have in the more urban crime dramas of Lawrence Block and Elmore Leonard." Kirkus Reviews noted that Gorman is "one of the most original crime writers around." Meanwhile, and despite some difficult health problems this past couple of years, Ed continues to turn out a seemingly endless stream of wonderful short fiction—like this little gem.

Riff

Ed Gorman

Just before dawn I wake up and listen to the hushed sounds from the room next to mine. When I hear these particular sounds at this particular time on a cancer floor in a hospital—three or four rushed whispering voices; faint squeaks of gurney wheels; and then elevator doors opening down the hall, eight floors down to the basement and the morgue—I know what's happened.

Charlie Grady died. I'd see him a couple times a day on my little walks up and down the hall. The nurses don't make me walk. I do it on my own.

I sort of knew Charlie wasn't going to hang on much longer. His wife was talking to a hospice woman but I figured Charlie wouldn't make it even that long. He was a nice old guy, real estate rich, never asking me the standard questions I get about my so-called fame. In fact, he said right out one day that he didn't care much for jazz. And he hoped that didn't offend me. His kind of money can give you that kind of confidence. He didn't give a damn if it offended me or not.

His wife is a weeper. She came twice a day to see him—his lung cancer and his eighty pounds overweight were shaping up to bring on one massive heart attack—and she never left but she was wailing. I sure don't blame her. She loves her man. But that doesn't make it any easier to take when you're in the room next door and trying to deal with your own problems. Health-wise, I mean. And every-other-wise, for that matter.

I have a 7:00 a.m. visitor, right after the doc making his rounds leaves my room. Guy named Larry Donnelly. Kind of a fix-it guy for jazz folk. Very serious jazz cat, Larry is. Really got into it in the slam where he served ten years for torching a building with a janitor still in it. Larry had no idea, of

course. I called Larry a couple of days ago, asked him to stop up. He hesitates in the doorway now. Some people get like that about cancer. Scared. Like it's a plague you can pick up. "C'mon in, Larry."

He's only there ten minutes. And is kind've junkie—twitchy all the time. Can probably feel the cancer working its way through his veins as he stands there trembling. Then he's gone.

I fall back asleep and wake up for a second time. This time it's the nurse with the rattling breakfast cart. They keep telling me to eat but my appetite has gone with all the rest of it. I'm in pretty much the same shape as Charlie Grady was. Except mine's in the pancreas. I'm hoping I'm as lucky as Charlie. A heart attack like that, you're one lucky man. And so are your loved ones. Quick and clean. Instead of hanging on.

Hanging on.

That's what I've done with my wife Karen the last five years. Met her in a jazz club in Chicago. She was a singer, then. Not much of one. But she had the Look. That slender body, that melancholy face, the dark eyes, the tumbling dark hair. She was from Omaha but she made you think international. Paris in spring, where I gigged with Brubeck. And London in autumn, where I gigged with Miles. Milan, baking in the summer while we were working on my live album. I dumped wife number four for her, just as I'd dumped all the old ones for new ones. I never said I was proud of myself. But you get on the road, you're six, seven months out from seeing the wife and the kiddies, you're just naturally going to fall in love with somebody else.

What I didn't know that night in Chicago was that it was payback time. I'm sitting in the back of this tiny, draughty club and people are coming up asking for my autograph and if she isn't singing they ask me did I dig playing with Brubeck, was Miles as much of a diva prick as people said, was my label ever going to do a box set of my music—and hey, that was one fine article in *Time*, "The Legend of The Saddest Sax in Jazz History: Mike Thorne." It was actually the usual thing, that *Time* piece, how I'd managed to survive and prosper in a music world dominated by rock and rap, and how I was the Chet Baker of my time—handsome, media friendly and probably the best sax man of the past two decades. Thank God, the article concluded, that I never got hooked on junk the way poor Chet had. You read about Chet, man, and you want to cut your wrists.

So I'm sitting there trying to be nice to the people who come up but I'm paying more and more serious attention this singer Karen Miller. The clarity of her beauty is astonishing.

Between her sets, I ask her over to my table for a drink. I can see how flustered she is. Mike Thorne, fifty-three-year-old jazz legend, asking twenty-two-year-old nobody to have a drink with.

I get to play the cool dude that night. I'm properly humble when she's flattering me, I'm properly appreciative when we talk about her own performance, and I'm properly matter-of-fact when I drop some big jazz names I'm meeting later that night for drinks. What I am really is so smitten I'm like I was at the tenth grade dance when I could never quite work up nerve enough to ask Marietta Courtney to dance slow with me.

But that wasn't what was really going on at all. Subtext they call it. You know, where it seems like you're really saying this but you're really saying that, just below the surface.

What I was really doing was setting myself up for payback. For every time I'd ever cheated on a woman, for every promise I'd broken to my three daughters, for every heartbreak I'd caused—old numero uno was about to get his. Maybe this Karen Miller from Omaha couldn't sing worth a damn. But she sure knew how to lie, cheat, steal, betray and humiliate you.

If there is a Green Beret unit of heartbreakers and ballbusters, Karen Leigh Miller of Omaha, Nebraska was Commander-in-Chief.

Thirty-eight years I play clubs. When I'm in my prime I'm hitting Letterman and Leno and guest playing on albums by big rock stars who want the cachet of having a jazz star on their CD. They don't know diddly about jazz but they think it sounds cool to the reviewers.

This is when I start collecting jazz memorabilia. I'm in places where Satchmo and Charlie Parker and Gerry Mulligan and people like that have played and so I start buying up things they left behind in the clubs and that the club owners might otherwise throw out in a box in the back.

This is also the time I get the critics on my back for playing Vegas. Just once, for God's sake.I don't have a right to make a fucking living? I can't take the scorn. A serious jazz musician playing Vegas as the opening act for some jiggle-titted TV star who thinks she can sing? Karen digs it, of course. Me being in Vegas. While I'm on stage, she's sitting at a table out front with Cameron Diaz and Bruce Willis, who are in town shooting a picture together. Your regular jazz clubs—the kind I usually play in—you don't get Cameron Diaz and Bruce Willis, let me tell you.

Sam Caine is with them, too. Sam is my agent and manager. I met him twenty years ago when he was just one of the many hungry young men you see running up and down the halls of William Morris in search of clients who might have stumbled and fallen

think of though is Karen and Sam. It was only a week ago that I found the note. The maid is insistent; and then Karen starts in on me about how I'm looking all of a sudden. I go to the doctor, there are so many tests I lose count at twelve, and the diagnosis is pancreatic cancer. Now I'm in the hospital. I hear Karen and the lady from the hospital in the hall the other day. "A cancer like this," the hospice lady says, "it never takes long, Mrs. Thorne."

Karen says, "You really look good in those pajamas, Mike."

"Thanks for getting them for me, honey."

Night. You know how it is, night in a hospital. You can always tell the rooms where death has no dominion. There's laughter and maybe grandkids and a lot of plans about what's going to happen when the patient finally gets out of here. But the other rooms—there's a whispery quality and a tension and long terrible aching silences and both sides prepare themselves for the flap flap flap of houseslippers that come down the hall in the middle of the night. An elderly obscene gent who puts his gnarled papery hand in yours and leads you into a world you cannot fathom.

Sam says, "You sound a lot better than you did last night."

"Yeah, I thought I'd go dancing later."

Karen laughs, leans over and gives me a little kiss. They're on opposite sides of my bed. "Oh, honey, it's so good you've kept your sense of humor."

Sam looks at his watch. "Well, guess I'll push off, Mike. But I'll be back tomorrow."

They've been here fifteen minutes. Talk about strained conversations.

What he's going to do, of course, is go downstairs and wait for her. She'll stay another ten, maybe fifteen minutes and then leave.

I notice the strain on Sam's face.The strain isn't entirely because of the situation with Karen. He's lost his three biggest clients this year. The sniffling sounds he makes—nobody wants a coke head for an agent. Sam's deep in debt. Deep.

"Take care, Mike," he says and leaves the room.

"He's such a good friend to you," Karen says after he leaves.

"Loyal," I said. "Nobody more loyal than Sam."

I say that staring right into those elegant violet eyes of hers. She looks uncomfortable. "Yes, loyal."

The tone sounds. Visiting hours will be over in ten minutes.

As she bends over to me for her goodnight kiss, I see a moment of distaste in her eyes. I got a glimpse of myself this morning. I'm a lurid dirty yellow color. Even my eyes have a yellow tint to them. I've lost twenty-

six pounds in just under seven weeks.

"You're all I think about, babe," she says.

"Yeah," I said. "You're all I think about, too."

"You're such a good husband," she says. And the tears come right on time. Fed Ex delivers them. You can order them in pints, quarters or gallons. "Such a good husband."

Fondling her hand. "And you're such a good wife."

The tone rings again and she says, "I'll see you tomorrow night. I thought I'd run up the coast tomorrow. See Shirley."

The good friend "Shirley" she's been talking about for three years. I've never met "Shirley" because she doesn't exist.

She gives me a peck on the cheek and then gives me another look at those pure glistening tears you order from Fex Ex. And then she goes.

Larry calls just after nine. He knows better than to say anything meaningful. He just says, "Just wanted to say it was good seeing you today, Mike. Guess I'll have me a beer and watch the news."

"Sure wish *I* could have a beer," I say. "Guess I'll just have to settle for the news."

It's the fifth story on the ten o'clock news. "The home of jazz legend Mike Thorne was destroyed by fire tonight. First estimate is that everything was destroyed, including his collection of jazz memorabilia said to be worth between two and three million dollars."

Good job, Larry.

Karen and Sam would've sold the memorbilia first. The collection would've brought more like four instead of the three the anchorman said. The house was worth another million-and-a-half by now, with all the improvements she put in it. Insurance money is sweet.

But I canceled the policy last week. No insurance on the house, no insurance on my memorabilia.

I wake up near dawn again. Sweet Ruth Andrews this time. Two doors down. Breast cancer. The gurney, the whispers, the elevator to the morgue downstairs.

I lie in darkness, waiting my turn.

and would appreciate the hungry young man who helped pick them up.

Sam was then the assistant to my agent. By the time I decide to do a lot of my own booking, Sam was a full-fledged agent who is just about to open up a small shop of his own. He wants clients, I'm sick of big agencies. I handle most of the small gigs, he books the big ones. He's a failed actor, our Sam. You always hear about how many beautiful failed wanna-be actresses there are in Hollywood. There are an equal number of beautiful failed wanna-be actors.

Sam has no interest in jazz. He's a club lizard. If you can't hustle chicks while it's being played, Sam doesn't want to hear it. But he's funny and shrewd and gets me bookings I couldn't get for myself.

The years go by, my CDs aren't selling the way they used to, Letterman and Leno's people don't return Sam's calls, and you know what? By now, I don't care. I'm married to Karen.

The fourth year of our marriage, I learn three things.

1. Karen has spent most of the nearly two million dollars that was for my retirement. You should see our house, our cars, her clothes. It sounds like a joke but two million isn't what it used to be. My accountant keeps saying you gotta do something about this, Mike. But I never do. I'm scared she'll leave me. That started the second year, the way she'd get whatever she wanted by saying, just kind of off-handed, "I've gotta be honest, Mike. Sometimes, I wonder if we did the right thing." And of course I'd give in and say, sure, baby, buy whatever you want. She went right straight through my money.

2. I find a note that she threw away in the tiny basket next to her dressing table—you could land a fighter jet on that table; an aircraft carrier should be so lucky to have that room—and right away I see what it says. And right away I recognize the handwriting. Now, I know she's had little nights when she's strayed. A couple of her boys got so hot for her they even broke the rules and called the house for her. I listened in on the extension. The first couple of times, I literally rush to the john and throw up. Now I know what I put all those women through. This time somebody else is holding the gun. But I don't confront her. It's the same with the money she spends. If I confront her, she'll leave me. But this time it's different. This time it's Sam and in the note he talks about how much they're in love. I do a lot of throwing up for several days running. And that's not so unheard of, you know. They say when Sinatra caught Ava Gardner cheating on him, he started puking around the clock, lost his voice, and ended up trying to kill himself.

3. I start losing weight. My skin color changes. Nothing drastic. But there's a peculiar faint yellow tone. The maid—of course we have a maid—she's the first one to say anything. She says I should see a doctor right away. All I can

Illustration by David Kendall

bills and shit like that, or send him out on stupid errands that just get him beat up.

I stopped that shit when I could. Secret to running a crew like Los Diabolitos is always be out in front of wherever it is they think they're going. One dude can't set direction by hisself, but a few smart homies and a lot of quiet effort can make things happen. I didn't like the way they yo-yoed Benny around. He was what God and a crack whore momma made him. It wasn't his fault.

Benny, he loved them eggs. He got to following Oatis the Lotus around when Oatis signed up for an Urban Extension program at the University up there, kind of like Oatis' lab assistant or some such shit. Oatis, he got to cooking up his own eggs, using pictures Benny thought up or pulled down off the Internet. And Benny, he had a nice sense of color for a stupid kid.

Benny came up to me one day when I was walking my downtown turf with Spider Gray and some of the other homies. "Marvel," he said, "what's up?"

"Whassup, l'il man," Spider Gray hollered back, shoving Benny with his hip.

Benny kind of stumbled over the curb, went down on one knee in the gutter of Sixth Street, then bounced back up like he was made of rubber. "Hey, Spider," he said real shy, then turns back to me. Smile never left his face, I swear. "Marvel, I just wanna thank you for ever'thing you done for me."

"What's the score, little man?"

"Sounds like a suicide note," Spider said, so I slapped him. "Shut up, fool."

"Oatis," said Benny, and he screwed up his face like he was trying to find courage, "Oatis, he packin' up. I wanna go wit' him."

Oatis packing? "Where he going?"

"Oatis he got a . . . a . . . . schooner ship . . . to MIT."

"MIT?" Oatis was my cash man, cooking new eggs all the time these days. I was sending more eggs *out* of Central Texas by now than I was bringing in, taking a much bigger cut. Glass King was good to his field managers, when they good to him.

"You know," laughed Spider, "In Massy-choosits."

I hit him again, harder this time. "God damn it, I *know* where MIT is." Sort of. "Oatis can't leave me like this."

Benny started crying now, like we was his momma and daddy fighting. Which in a way, we was.

I bent down. "Okay, little man, you're not in trouble. You didn't do nothing wrong. But you and me," and I glared at Spider, "*just* you and me, we're going to talk to Oatis now."

"I wanna go to MIT," Benny wailed.

"I know, little man. I know."

"I was going to tell you, Marvel." Oatis had his arms folded tight,

leaning against one of them black-topped tables the domeheads called a lab bench, up here in some big orange brick building at the University of Texas. Place reeked of paint and alcohol, and it had took me a while to find it. His fingers drummed on his elbows like he was trying to talk to me in machine code or something.

"*When*, Oatis? You don't just walk." I was exercising my considerable patience. Oatis was far too valuable to rumble with, even to make a point, and if I ever broke his fingers, he might never work again. "You need more money, better chicks? Picked up a new habit I should know about?"

"It ain't the money, Marvel." He sighed, stared at the floor, while his fingers thumped away. "You always take good care of me." He looked up, at me and Benny, his eyes gleaming. "Opportunity, Marvel. I got some ideas, how to make something new out of the eggs. Can't do it here. Need the domeheads at MIT."

"New what?" I asked. I knew I should be keeping an eye on the cash, but when Oatis get that gleam, look out.

"New like you never seen, Marvel. Trust me."

"What about my obligations here?"

"I'll keep your egg pipe filled, don't worry." Oatis grinned. "I'm gonna have assistants and everything."

Benny busted into tears again. "But Oatis, I'm your assister."

Six months later, as the Austin winter rained cold on us, Benny came back from MIT. He took Greyhound, on account of no one thought it was a good idea to let Benny near an airport. Plus he was carrying a new egg from Oatis. That's what Oatis' email said.

The eggs had kept coming, and they kept getting better. All the big papers ran articles talking about national scourge or street art, and the cops like to wanted to kill us, but we was big business. Sending Oatis the Lotus to MIT was the best thing I ever done.

I met the bus over on Highland Mall Boulevard, where they kept the station at. I had my new ride, a shiny bronze BMW Z9 with haptic controls and all that shit. Egg money was good money.

Benny, he got off that big silver bus like a turd slithering out of a tailpipe, hibbledy-hopped across the parking lot, and climbed on in.

"Where your luggage, little man?" I asked him. He wasn't carrying nothing but a bowling ball bag.

"This it," Benny said, grinning fit to light up the sky as he held the bag. "You gotta see it, Marvel. Oatis he outdone himself this go 'round."

"Where we gonna throw that egg, Benny?"

"Someplace indoors, big."

"Indoors?" Most eggs didn't get thrown indoors. Lot of heat and shards and fumes come out of an egg, usually you didn't want to stand around an

"'The Rose Egg' is the only story from which a character has visited me in a dream after I wrote it," Jay Lake told us. "Benny Bueno came to me one night in a mood of sorrow, but I never did understand what was bothering him." Jay has more stories upcoming in several places, including Asimov's, Leviathan 4 *and* Realms of Fantasy. *His fiction has been collected in* Greetings From Lake Wu *(a Locus recommended book) and* Dogs In The Moonlight. Polyphony 4, *which Jay co-edited with Deborah Lane, will appear in the autumn.*

The Rose Egg

Jay Lake

Me and Skankin' Hank was chilling in the alley down by the Sally first time I ever seen someone throw an egg. It was some skinny little black kid, darker even than Skank which is saying some, scampering by like he was running something hot and perishable from the safe house to the schoolyard. In a hurry, without the panic, you know what I'm saying?

He come loping along on them skinny kid legs and big kid feet, flash me and Skank a thousand-watt grin, and cut the corner onto Sixth Street by leaping over three snoring winos in one go. He was carrying something the size of a football, look like it was made of stained glass or some shit.

"This I got to see," I said to Skank. He nods like he always does, 'cause Skankin' Hank's my main man and right hand, and off we go round the same corner, kicking a couple of them winos awake along the way. Whoa Nellie and pass the Tabasco, there's the kid, glaring up at the Sally like the Armies of the Road ever did anything to him. Then he cocks back that arm, aims that stained-glass football, and gives it a regular Roger Staubach.

Wham, the football hit the brick front of the Sally, shatters, but like in slow motion. Little shards of sparkle came shooting out, with tails of color like paint scratches in the air. The main mass exploded into a beautiful graffito, about four by six foot airbrush job of a sunset with one lone oak tree standing tall on the horizon

It even *smelled* like a fresh tag job, that tangy, quick-high reek.

Now understand, taggers been doing sunsets since Omar the Cuban first picked up a paint can back before any of us was gleams in our granddaddy's eye. Ain't nothing special about a sunset. Any fool out of diapers can spray yellow, orange and red and get

high sniffing fumes off what mother nature does for free every night.

But doing a sunset in one throw, that was something else. Something totally new.

And I knew action when I saw it. "Skank," I said, "give me my telephone."

"You bet," he said, his eyes gleaming bright as those shards just had. Skank never was one to fail to see the possibilities.

We did a fast fade to a tire stack behind the old ExxonMobil down on San Jacinto Street, and I placed some calls. My crew, Los Diabolitos, already ran a good chunk of the hot mRNA and sneaker data in central Texas, plus some good old fashioned dope just to keep in practice, but this here was going to spark a cash flow flood like we ain't seen since crack went cold.

I lit my upstream connections, and the regional bosses lit theirs, all the way up to the Glass King in his tall New York office, boss of us all. Two weeks later, I had a piece of every egg being thrown between Killeen and New Braunfels.

"Egg," it stands for "enhanced graphics generation" or some domehead shit like that. Oatis the Lotus, from my crew, explained it to me. He was a skinny Chicano kid from Montopolis, south of the river, with more brains than all the rest of Los Diabolitos put together.

"Look, Marvel," he said, twisting his hands around like he was holding one of them finger puzzle things. Oatis would be a mute without his hands, I swear. "It's brilliant, man, simply brilliant. At manufacturing, they preload these microreservoirs with programmable pigments. There's a little miniRISC processor in there, accepts the image from any of a dozen standard graphics apps, controls the rupturing sequence of the microreservoirs and gooses the pigments with the right voltage to set them, bang, instant sunset. Virgin of Guadeloupe. Or whatever."

The whole time, his fingers was flashing and dancing like he had to lace this thing together by brute cleverness.

"Oatis, my man," I said, one hand on his shoulder, "your job is to understand how it works. My job is to understand how it works on the street. Keep it up and we'll all be rich."

"Marvel," he says real quiet, even his fingers barely twitching like they was whispering too, "I got ideas. *Big* ideas."

Now, we had this P.R. kid name of Benny Bueno ran with Los Diabolitos. Benny ain't got the sense God gave a goose, but he got all the smiles in the world. Benny was always laughing, waiting to be let in on the joke, even when sometimes he *was* the joke. Some of the guys, like Skank, they'd screw with Benny, make him dance for dollar

enclosed space when it went off. That lesson been learned hard, a few times early on.

"Yep. New shit, Oatis say. I seen it. I know he's right."

I made some calls, and finally met Skank and Spider and most of the rest of Los Diabolitos at an old hangar at Mueller Airport. Ain't been no planes flying out of Mueller for twenty, thirty years, but the redevelopment commission never could get its shit straightened out from the politics, so the old place just stood there, sinking slow into the muddy ground like the world's lamest *Titanic* episode.

They were there in the old Mack flatbed we used for running equipment, bunch of guys sitting on the back. Skank had the crowbar, and Spider had the alarm box to hotwire security, and then we was in.

Airplane hangars, they big. Like the great outdoors, indoors. Or a mall with no stores or nothing. Benny, he just grin, then marched out into the middle of the hangar with that bowling ball bag. He set the bag down, turned around and spread his arms, like Christ Jesus on the cross.

That boy got some showman in his simple head after all.

"Diabolitos," he said real loud.

There was some chuckling, but people settled in fast. They figured, like I did, these words was really coming from Oatis, passed on to Benny. The little guy wasn't much on speeches.

"This here's the new thing. The next thing. The *best* thing!"

He reached down, pulled out a quivery egg, maybe twice the size of what we'd seen before, this one all one sparkly color, kind of light blue. It wobbled in his hand, like jello or something.

"You ready?"

"Yeah!" Los Diabolitos shouted. "Go for it." "Rock on, Benny." Shit like that.

He picked that egg up, held it over his head like some pro wrestler, then hurled it further into the hangar.

It splatted onto the concrete, busted open into a hissing mist the same sparkly blue as the egg had been, and commenced to spinning like a gooey tornado. Leaves and papers and small shit scattered around the hangar floor got sucked into it, as did a whole lot of dust. It threw out arms, kind of like Benny had done, as the spinning slowed.

When it was done, there was this giant tree, an oak or something, quivering in the middle of the hangar. It looked like it didn't weigh more than twelve pounds, almost like a balloon, but it was *real*. So real. Every single leaf and twig was on there, and you could see the rough of the bark.

I walked over to the tree, where Benny stood beaming fit to beat the band.

"Careful, Marvel," he whispered.

My hands brushed the trunk. The tree quivered slightly, almost

like it was trying to bend away from me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Air-o-jell," Benny said carefully. Oatis must've made him memorize that word. "Can't stand wind, or much touching, but it's beautiful while it's here. Ain't it?"

Then Los Diabolitos were whooping and hollering and touching the tree, trying to slap it, dance around it, make it theirs. Benny screamed, ran around trying to make them stop, crying, "No, don't!," but he wasn't enough.

It spooled away into a cloud of sticky smoke, settling gleaming blue dust on everyone in the hangar.

"You broke it," Benny shouted, then busted into tears.

Everyone stared around for a moment, eyes bright in the gooey blue shadows of the hangar. "Fuck this shit," said Spider Gray. "We out of here."

Me and Benny stood there as the Mack rumbled off. I heard a crunch, Spider using the truck to clip the fender on my BMW. I'd have to hurt him later. Then I hugged the little man. "It'll be okay, Benny," I said, combing my fingers through his hair as he cried into my armpit. "That was a beautiful tree."

In fact, there was a fad for them 3-D eggs. People wanted to throw them at concerts and shit, high school basketball games, you name it. The business was almost legit, sports mascots and company logos. I'd worked out a deal with New York to let me handle this, on account of Oatis being my boy and all, and they took a cut of my action nationwide.

Bigger cut than they would've given me, of course, but that's why they was in New York and I was in Austin. Everybody got somebody bigger sitting on they head, except maybe the Glass King himself.

Los Diabolitos was getting rich off Oatis. It was a hell of a lot of fun. Everybody knew the 3-D eggs weren't gonna last, too squidgy, but the regular eggs still sold good, and we all figured some new miracle would fall out of MIT sooner or later.

Until I got a call from Oatis one day.

"Marvel," he said. Line warbled under his voice, that we was secure. No Feddies listening in. "My man. . . I got to tell you something."

"What's up Oatis?" I was in Denny's, eating key lime pie. I twirled my fork within the green slop. "You got some new shit for me to ooh and aah at?"

"Nah. My contract, with MIT, for my scholarship . . . it's been bought out."

Uh-oh. "By who? I'll kill 'em."

"Glass King, Marvel."

Ain't no killing the Glass King. "Oh."

"They sending you some renumeration."

"I don't want no money, Oatis." I felt a desperate flash, made me want to

beg. I ain't begged since the night Lakeisha Jordan took my cherry, all those years ago. "I want *you*. I want the eggs."

"Way it's got to be, man. More money, better chicks, I'll be on top of world."

"What about Benny?" I asked. Benny been making plans to go back to Boston.

Oatis didn't say nothing for a minute, but his silence sounded sad. "He ain't in the contract."

"I see." Poor Benny. He was mighty proud of being Oatis' assister. "Look, you just stay happy there, Oatis." What the hell else could I say? Glass King probably had somebody listening in at the other end.

Most of Los Diabolitos took it better than I did. "Money," said Skank when we all met in a bar down on South Lamar. Saxon Pub, even the name pissed off some of the homies. "What they buy us off with?"

"Fifty-five million dollars," I said. "Everybody gets a mil."

"Mexico-o-o-o!" shouted one of the newer boys, little Asian frou-frou named Light Mike.

"Whatever. We still got paint eggs and all our usual business to run."

Things was different now, thought. The edge was off. Nobody even seemed to miss Oatis except me and Benny Bueno.

He came to me, Benny did, about two weeks after I paid the gang out. We was respectable now, even Benny had a car, a nice Lexus hybrid. Though he paid some skinny white kid to drive him around. I'd had me a pointed little talk with the kid about money, hours and miles, since Benny couldn't count so good on his own.

We met on the dock at Chuy's Hula Hut, eating fajitas with pineapple slices in 'em and drinking from honking big glasses of ice tea, while the ducks begged for chips just off the rail and fifteen feet down in the water.

"Marvel," Benny said with his mouth full of tostadas and salsa. "I'm sad."

"Sad is as sad does, little man."

Benny wiped his lips with a napkin. "Oatis, he promise me something the Glass King done took away."

Me, too, Benny, I thought. Me, too. "Yeah?"

"Oatis, he promise me a special egg. Just for me."

"What kind of special egg, Benny?"

"Nanny tech, he call it. One that *last*. Mine forever." He got all shy, his face kind of rubbery and folding in like it does. "To remember by. I don't remember so good sometimes, Marvel."

"I know, Benny. Sometimes none of us do."

He went on. "And that egg, it would be my memory, of my momma and you and all the good things in my life."

I wanted to say, 'what good things?', but it wasn't for me to kick this little man. So I kept my mouth shut.

He watched me for a while, screwing his face up more. Something big was coming out, I could tell.

"I want to go to the Glass King, and make him give me back what he took when he stole Oatis away from us!"

Holey moley fucking shit. *Nobody* talked about the Glass King that way. He was the biggest, baddest gang banger in all of America, with an office high above New York City and more souljah-boys on suicide watch than most of us had hair on our heads. Top of all our heaps, what those old Eyetalians called *capo di tutti*.

Benny jumped up on his chair, everyone around us staring. "And you gonna take me there, *Marvel*!" he shouted.

I about like to pass out.

Destiny's a funny thing. Los Diabolitos didn't really need me right then. Glass King pulled our rug, paid us well to cushion the fall. Money's cheaper than a fight sometimes, I guess, and he wanted on Oatis' good side on account of Oatis was shaping up to be the genius of the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, Benny did need me. Most folks would've walked away, or locked him up, or both. He'd gone from simple to flat fucking crazy in two sentences, but there was fire in his heart. I had to respect that. Besides, I'd took him on the last few years. I had to see him through.

Destiny. Or maybe I just had a death wish. I don't know. Either way, there we was, cruising the interstates in my Z9, flashing through the checkpoints on my pass tag clearances while the cops worked over the tourists. *Some* good comes of working for the Glass King.

It took two days to get from Austin to New York, and another week to get into the Glass King's office. I made phone calls, I sent messengers with letters, I emailed Oatis, I slipped cash to people, threatened a few.

Nothing. No good. I'd have had an easier time springing a visit to the Oval Office.

Until one day Benny got mad again.

We was in our hotel suite, at the Fairmont-Midtown, Benny watching music videos on the television. "Marvel?" he said. "Why won't the Glass King see me?"

"We don't got an invitation, little man. It ain't enough just to come here. You got to be let in."

Benny turned off the television, sat up on the bed. "I'm part of Los Diabolitos, right?"

"Always, Benny, always."

"And you got a boss somewhere, who got a boss, who work for the Glass King."

He'd really been thinking this time. "Yeah."

"Then I got a *right* to see him. I'm an employee."

I laughed, straight from the gut. "That ain't the way it works, my friend."

He pouted. "Like hell." Then he put his shoes on and headed for the door.

"Whoa Nellie there, Benny," I said, grabbing his arm.

Benny shook me off. "Going to see the Glass King."

And that's just what he did.

It was one of the biggest high rises in town, wrapped with black glass, anti-climbing spikes, and even missile launchers high up. There was a big old fountain out front, spouted pure fucking whiskey, the winos wouldn't come near it.

Not even the pigeons shit where the Glass King walked.

Benny marched right in to the lobby. Doors snicked open with that little bank-door whoosh, like air pressure's different inside. Keeps out bioterror and chemical attacks. There's about two acres of black marble in there, one tiny little desk no bigger than a night club doorman's podium, and a woman sitting at it with her head wrapped in an Italian leather virtual reality hood.

He steps up in front of her. "I'm here to see the Glass King," Benny pipes. His voice never sounded so small to me.

Her face, wrapped that in leather, tilts toward me trailing behind Benny. I shrugged. "Little man wants to see the boss. He ain't got no appointment."

"Don't need no appointment," Benny says, still angry.

Then there's four souljah-boys patting me down, and I mean *all* the way down and pass the Crisco, please. They get all three my rods, my boot knife, my holdout knife, even the throat-wire in the waistband of my underwear. No one's smiling, no one's being rough. Professional courtesy is all.

They even dressed me back up. Funny thing is, no one touched Benny.

Receptionist nods, not a word been said by anyone but Benny, and the souljah-boys walked me and Benny onto an elevator all mirrors inside.

Elevator went up, moving so fast it like to make my knees buckle. I stood there. I'm not small, but I was surrounded by four guys each built like a high-voltage transformer. One on my left, the only one of the four not a brother, cut his eyes at Benny.

It was a question, of sorts.

I felt like a fool, like I was selling out my best friend, but I wanted to leave that building alive. Hell, mostly what I wanted was not to piss my pants in fear. So I lifted my left hand, my off-hand that Benny couldn't see, and made a little loopy move with my finger around the side of my head.

The white souljah-boy nodded real slight, then looked down at Benny

again. His face relaxed, almost like Benny was a sight for sore eyes.

Maybe the little man was. Maybe I spent too much time too close to him to know different.

Then we let out into a room bigger than the lobby downstairs. This was a football field worth of black carpet, pillars, and windows on three sides, every view looking *down* on New York. It smelled like nothing, like the absence of smell, like Heaven after the angels done cleaned it. Big desk at the far end, size of a Maserati, big black man sitting at it, watching us.

Even from almost a hundred yards off, I could feel his stare like a laser sight punching death into my chest.

Souljah-boys hung back at the elevators, gave me and Benny a little shove. Benny marched off like a wind-up toy, me trailing behind. *Oh God*, I thought, get me out of this and I'll go straighter than a public defender.

It took forever, that hike across the Glass King's carpet. The closer we got, the more stout Benny's lip got. The closer we got, the weaker my legs got.

Benny walked up to the desk, which was empty as a crackhead's wallet, put his hands on it, leaned into this huge man who was bigger than any of his souljah-boys, wrapped in a gray silk suit cost more than my BMW. "You the Glass King?" he squeaked.

Now the Glass King had one of those faces you could carve granite with—big square jaw, a brother's flat nose, brown eyes with all the ages of the world inside them, muscles on his neck that outmassed my biceps. I seen weaker-looking gods in them Asian temples out at the edge of town back home. This man was fear itself, sculpted out of muscle and silk, smelling like Europe and old money.

And the Glass King chuckled. It made my guts clench, from stern to stem. His voice, when he spoke, was so normal it was scary. "I guess I am, little man. What can I do for you?"

"You owe me," Benny said. "Oatis, he promised me a real egg, one that would stay forever when it got throwed, but you took him away."

One handsome eyebrow cocked up. Glass King cut his eyes at me. "Oatis the Lotus, originally of Austin, Texas?" he asked me. The humor he'd had for Benny was gone from his voice, replaced with glittering knives.

"The same," I squeaked. I tried to gulp, but my throat was dry as Texas blacktop in August.

"And you think I owe you an egg, a special egg, little man?" he asked Benny, all in that warm voice again. It was like syrup.

"Yes, sir. And I ain't leaving 'til I get it." Benny folded his arms and stuck his lip out so far I figured he'd trip on it. If he lived to walk away.

This time the Glass King really laughed, threw back his head and bellowed in a voice three parts thunder and one part fear. It like to make me sweat, that laugh, and pray on all my sins. He laid one hand on the edge of

his desk, took a square of raw silk out of his jacket with the other, and wiped his eyes. "Do you know, son," the Glass King said to Benny Bueno in that syrup voice, "how long it's been since someone simply asked me for something?"

"No sir," said Benny, and I could see the first fog of fear creeping into him on little rat feet. This boy had come this far on sheer determination, and he had no idea what to do next.

"Well, I don't know either," said the Glass King. "It's done. One of my souljah-boys will take you to Oatis' lab."

Benny looked like Joan of Arc when she saw the spark, his eyes all lit up, fear blown out of him by that fire in his heart. It almost hurt just to look at him.

The Glass King turned his gaze to me, glittering hard again. "Is there something you wish to ask for, Marvel from Texas?"

"No sir," I whispered. I couldn't hold his stare, dropped my eyes to the perfect desk in front of me. I was ashamed of the fear upon my face. "Just to leave with my life, sir."

"It's done," he said, and for a moment that sweet regard he'd shown Benny leaked into my soul, too.

On the way down the elevators, one of the brother souljah-boys said, "Ain't never seen nobody do that and live to tell of it."

The other three laughed, and Benny joined in. Me, I clenched my bladder tight and tried to keep my pants dry.

I spent a month at the Fairmont-Midtown, laying around in my suite with a souljah-boy at the door. The desk sent me back my credit card slip. It was all on the Glass King now. Only I couldn't go out, couldn't make calls, couldn't ask questions.

I was dead and buried in a carpeted coffin with cable tv and room service. I wondered what Skank and Spider were doing with Los Diabolitos. I wondered what Benny and Oatis were doing.

I wondered what the hell I was doing. Then I drank some more and watched television.

One day Benny knocked on the door. The souljah-boy was gone. Benny had another one of them bowling bags, and a shy little smile. "You ready, Marvel?" he asked. "Your ride's downstairs, out front."

And like that, we was gone from New York City. The Glass King puckered his lips and blew and we flew off back to Texas like spring dandelions. Benny didn't say much on the way, just stared out the window with that shy little smile. I was somewhere between mad and scared, even yet, so I just listened to the radio and watched the road in front of me. Two days of tire noise and rumbly concrete highways, six or seven fast greasy meals, and

we was driving through downtown Austin.

"What you gonna do, Benny?" I asked.

"Nothing, Marvel," he said in his dreamy voice. "I got what I want."

I wheeled into the Hula Hut's parking lot. Felt like fajita time after a month of lox and bagels. "Well, come on, let's eat." I missed the smell of fry oil and jalapenos, truth be told.

We wasn't in there ten minutes before Skank and Spider showed up, trailed by most of Los Diabolitos. The dock cleared out fast, two or three dozen folks with urgent business in the restroom or whatever.

"Hey, there," said Skank. His smile was too big.

Spider nodded, while the crew muttered away behind them.

"Hey, yourselves," I said. This was bad business. I wasn't out in front of the crew no more. They didn't need me.

Skank nodded at Benny. "Word is little man brought him a Cracker Jack prize back from little old New York."

"What Benny has is—" I started to say, but Benny interrupted me.

"It's mine, Hank," he said, "Glass King gave it to me, and I'm gonna keep it."

"What's *yours*, Benny?" Skank asked. "Show it to old Skankin' Hank."

And Benny, the little fool, tugged that bowling ball bag out from under the table and plopped it down between his sweaty glass of water and little bowl of limes. "This," he said, and tugged at the zipper.

I ain't never seen an egg like what Benny tugged out of that bag. About regular size, not any bigger than a football, it was black, blacker than Skankin' Hank. Blacker than night, like it sucked light into it. Just looking at it made my eyes water and my nose itch. Where the 3-D eggs had been kind of quivery, this egg was solid like the earth. You could damn near fall into it.

Benny hugged that blacker-than-black egg to his chest. "This here's mine, Hank," he said, his voice squeaking. "Go ask the Glass King for your own egg, you want one."

Skank's laugh was coarse. "Ain't going to be another one, Benny. Right after you left, Oatis burned the labs in Manhattan and drove his ride into the East River. Everyone else run off. Something big and bad in that egg, Benny."

And the Glass King had let Benny walk away with it? That was the scariest thing of all.

"Don't matter if there's only one," Benny said, his lip sticking out again. "This one's still mine."

Spider reached in, slipped it right out of Benny's hands. "This here's *gang* property, Benny. You don't steal from your homies."

"Is *not*!" he shouted, jumping on to the table and tackling Spider Gray.

Spider fell back surprised, as Benny kicked and bit at him. I slid out of the bench and stabbed Spider in the thigh

with a steak knife. Benny used the confusion to grab back his egg.

"Enough," I shouted, my right foot on Spider's chest. "Benny's his own man."

"To hell with you, *pendejo*," someone from the crew yelled back.

I spun, knife in my hand. Just like the old days. "Anyone wants a piece, come take it. Otherwise, me and Benny is walking out of here, quiet and easy. You can take this as my resignation, fuckwads." Not like I could fight them all at once.

Los Diabolitos let me go, though I couldn't understand why. Maybe a little tiny sliver of the Glass King had got into me for a moment.

We drove my Z9 all over the west side of town, racing up and down those limestone hills. I found my comfort in high speeds, while Benny cried himself near to death from hiccuping and coughing.

Finally he stopped crying, sucked in his breath, and looked at me. We was screaming down Highway 360 at more than twice the posted limit, taking that long run to the arch steel bridge over the Colorado that always looked to me like a bow aimed at heaven.

"Marvel," Benny said. "Stop the car."

"What?" I didn't want to hear him.

"*Stop!*"

I stopped, sliding to halt in the graveled breakdown lane of the bridge. Cliffs towered behind us on the west bank, while the bottomlands spread below on the east. Sun was setting, that same kind of glorious sky I'd seen when the first egg was thrown.

Benny clutched his black egg. "The world ain't ready for one perfect thing, Marvel."

"No, I guess it ain't."

"But I wanted the perfect egg, permanent-like. I don't need to throw it. Just having it's enough. What it might be is greater than what it would be after I threw it. Right?"

This was Ph.D. philosophy, compared to most of Benny's ideas. "Yeah, Benny, I reckon so. What you gonna do?"

Without saying anything, he got out of the car, standing on the bridge as the wind cut across the bridge deck. I could smell the cedar off the hills, mixed water and damp limestone. Turkey vultures settling down, nighthawks coming out. Even at dusk, you can see a long way along the river from up here. Then Los Diabolitos' Mack truck rumbled up—they'd been following us—and Spider Gray and Skankin' Hank jumped out, followed by two dozen or more of the crew.

"Leave off, boys," I said in my best quiet voice.

Whatever authority the Glass King had lent me was gone now, because Spider just laughed and stalked toward Benny.

I popped my boot knife and went after him, street rules, which is no rules

at all. Spider stepped into my swing, stuck out his foot, tried to trip me. I did a forward roll, twisting away from Spider's own knife which was out now, bounced up, caught him in the chest just hard enough to spin him against the bridge railing, and he was gone.

We all stood, listening to Spider fall two hundred feet or more to the water below. His last words was, "Marvel-l-l-l-l . . . "

Benny looked real sad, said, "See, what did I tell you?"

Then he ate the egg.

I don't know how else to say it. That egg was almost as big as his head, but when Benny crunched it in his hands, the black mass just shrank around the middle, got longer, like an animal what *wants* to get eaten. That 'nanny tech' stuff he'd talked about. Benny opened his mouth wide, a snake eating a mouse, stuffed it in, and smiled around it, his eyes twinkling in the last light of sunset.

"Oh, shit," said Skank behind me, as Benny swallowed.

For a moment, nothing happened. Benny smiled some more, opened his mouth like to burp, then he swole up. He got bigger, one of them Thanksgiving parade balloons, his dark Puerto Rican skin beginning to glimmer, fading to black.

Benny sort of erupted at that point, in a terrific thunderclap that knocked two more of Los Diabolitos over the rail and blew all the windows out of my Z9 and the cab of the Mack truck. Air swirled around us like a tornado, then there was nothing left but a perfect rose, black as the depths of night, the base of its stem about as high off the pavement as Benny's head, the bloom fifteen feet up among the cables of the bridge.

It spun, real slow, two sharp-edged leaves glittering like knives. Benny's voice echoed in the dying wind. "Marvel," he said. "Be my thorn."

Glass King came, a month or so after the rose egg bloomed. His souljah-boys ran off the press and the other pilgrims who'd already started to make the trip, and the Glass King walked down the bridge by hisself to stand and stare at the rose.

It didn't say nothing to him, hadn't never said nothing to anyone but that one question of me. Still, he stood there a while like he was listening, then he said, just loud enough for me to hear, "I'm sorry, little man."

The Glass King gave me the gift of my life for the second time, after I hit him. He just smiled and walked away, left a splinter of himself in my heart for real this time.

People come to the bridge now, come from everywhere, praying for peace, healing, I don't know what all. Nanotech, miracle, it don't matter what Oatis wrought. It matters what is, that potential Benny wanted brought to life.

Spider Gray, he's a kind of saint, with his own little altar on the back of the Mack. Some people jump over the side in his name, screaming all the way down.

Me, I'm the thorn that guards the rose. I sit here on the rusting hood of my ride and tell the story of the rose egg to anyone that wants to hear it.

It's all I can do for Benny. It's what he asked of me.

It's all I can do for me.

Looks like 2004 is going to be a bumper year for Gene Wolfe. The author's most recent novel, The Knight, *the first in 'The Book of the Wizard Knight' series, appeared in January with the second volume—*The Wizard*—due in November. Meanwhile, June will see the publication of Gene's new collection of short stories,* Innocents Aboard. *Never one to sit idle, Gene is also currently working on the third book in his 'Soldier' series,* Soldier of Sidon. *And then, of course, there's also this . . .*

Prize Crew

Gene Wolfe

I just got back here after ninety-seven years TST and found out about what's been depopulating, and I think I ought to tell you this stuff. Maybe Lang and Prescott have already. Only if they did, I don't think you paid enough attention. Here goes.

We found that Miscreet ship abandoned three days after the battle—a light cruiser from the look of her, just drifting way out between suns. She hadn't been hit, so it didn't look like there had been any reason for the crew to bail out, but there was nobody on board as far as we could see, and the lifeboats were gone. So they put us on board to take her home. That's Ensign Parker, Lang, Prescott, and me. Lang was our computer man, Prescott electrical. I'm a Machinist's Mate. Parker was younger than any of us, which might be important. I don't know. She was only a couple of years out of the academy was what everybody said.

All the guys on the *Wake* kept telling us how lucky we were to be going home, and we kept thinking, "Right. If we make it . . . . " because it was a Miscreet ship, and who could read the manuals? Or even bring them up on the screen?

Or stand the stink.

"Take it as it comes" is what I've always said. It's what I've learned—the main thing—from fourteen SYs in the Navy. So I didn't worry, knowing that all the worrying in the galaxy wouldn't do a lick of good. But when that Miscreet airlock that looked like it was going to eat you shut behind us and Stachowski said on my phones they were pulling away, I felt like the bottom had dropped out. I was scared but too busy to stay scared long. We located places to store our rations and the flabbybags of water, and set up the recycler and turned it on. It had its own power supply, so that was one thing we didn't have to worry about.

Just about the only thing. Ensign Parker and Lang found the bridge and started trying to get her under power,

taking everything real slow and easy at first and putting out a signal to tell anybody that saw her she was Navy now. Prescott and I were supposed to inventory and make sketch maps of all decks.

Which we did. I won't tell you everything we found, but one was the atmosphere regenerator. It was pretty simple, and before long we had it tuned to Terra, but it kept drifting, mostly sick and sweet. Another one was the machine shop. I stayed in there quite a while just looking around. There was a computermill, like you'd expect, but it was pretty easy to switch it to hand control. I made chips to get the hang of it and started trying to switch over the lathe.

Prescott came back and said he'd found the Miscreets' living quarters, little one-guy cabins with beds, and did I want one. I said it might be better if we all bunked together, at least for the first few nights. He said to hell with that, come and have a look.

So I did.

They looked more human than I'd expected. The john was set level with the floor and had funny hoses, but you knew what it was. The bunk was too short and too wide, but I figured we'd be off if we ever got her into Terra orbit, so what the hell? I put a sheet of plastic over the bunk to keep in the stink and saw where I could tie my sack. I've slept worse. So I got my spacebag and threw it in the compartment next to Prescott's, figuring if something hit the fan we could pound on the bulkhead. Only when I told him, he showed me how that was all storage, the funny pull-out boxes Miscreets use instead of drawers and cabinets.

Okay it was alien, but it wasn't so alien that you couldn't get used to it after a night or two, which I did. Naturally I didn't spend much time in there. There was a hell of a lot to do, and whenever Ensign Parker was too busy to find jobs for us, we found plenty for ourselves. No problem.

Then she jumped. Maybe that had something to do with it. Or maybe we picked up something earlier, only I think really the Miscreets had, but I don't know. We jumped and that big yellow star up close was Sol, and that bright one over there was Jupiter, and all of us felt like we'd made it and went around smiling a whole lot. Home!

Here I ought to backtrack and tell you we had put our names on the compartment doors with black spray paint Lang found. Nothing fancy. Starting at the end and heading for the companionway, it was Prescott, me, Lang, and Parker, all in a bunch.

She was a pretty good officer, and I ought to say that if I'm going to level with you. She was all business and no chickenshit, which is how I like them. You knew right off that you might never find out what the S and P in S.P. Parker stood for, and pretty soon you knew, too, that if you kept your flap shut and did your job there'd be no problem. Brown skin, black hair, neat and clean, a hundred and sixty centimeters or a little past. That's funny to

think about. Now, I mean. Now it's funny.

So we jumped, like I said. That night I sacked out like always, but I woke up before my tick started and I was in a closet. That's the way it seemed. There was room for the bed, and my sack over it, okay? Only there wasn't a hell of a lot more, and I got the feeling that if I got out of the sack there wouldn't be that much. I zipped out and got my everlight (the Miscreets aren't big on lights) and looked around, and it was no dream. For me to put my right hand on one wall and my left on the other I had to bend my elbows. Pretty soon it hit me that it might be getting smaller all the time and I better bail out. I couldn't hardly straighten up, it was that tight, but I did and got into my coverall. It didn't seem to be getting smaller after that, so I got my boots.

Just then Lang beat on the door. I hollered okay and went out as soon as I had my boots on, and grabbed him and showed him my compartment.

"My gosh," he said. Lang said things like gosh. "Mine's twice that big. You oughta get another one."

Well, I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't believe me.

After that I had to take the watch, and if there's anything lonelier than standing watch on a Miscreet ship, I don't want to hear about it — man can only take so much. It's quiet and it's quiet and it's quiet, and then a machine turns itself on somewhere way the hell away and you don't know what it is or what it's doing, and maybe it didn't turn itself on after all. Maybe something did it. Or maybe it's not a machine at all. There was one that sounded like a leopard coughing. Naturally I didn't know then about this thing Terra's got now. But I felt like I did and it was on the ship if you know what I mean.

You whistle and you sing the words you can remember, and you check all the numbers that you checked five minutes ago. But mostly you look out of ports at Sol and that blue dot close to it that's so small you can't hardly see it.

Pretty soon the numbers say it'll be Prescott in half an hour, and you wonder how long it'll take him to get dressed. A long time, probably, and maybe you ought to wake him up right now.

Then here's Prescott, "Why the hell did you have to make so much noise?"

I said okay I whistled some and floated around, but you couldn't have heard me down there.

"Whistled, hell," says Prescott. "You were banging on everything. I figured everybody was awake but me, and you were tearing out the bulkhead to get at pipes or something."

I told him he was crazy, and he told me I was. And after that I said go screw yourself and a lot more and went back to my compartment figuring I'd pack up my bag and move into another one.

You saw it coming, I bet. That's right, there was nothing wrong with my compartment. Not one damn thing.

I packed up anyway and pushed along that corridor as far as you could go and took the one farthest from the bridge. Next day was next day and we worked like dogs, a lot of it Lang and me trying to figure out how to make the tools run our programs.

So after that I deserved to turn in and get a good night's sleep, only I had first watch. About halfway through Prescott came up and bulwarked me. At zero g, you can't just back your punch with your weight the way you would on Terra, you've got to brace your feet somehow. Prescott was pretty good at it, too. It took me maybe eight, ten tries before his nose got to bleeding. After that I had time to grab something. Which I did, and hit him with it. It was Ensign Parker's coder, and it's just a damn good thing they build them tough for the Navy.

Prescott quit fighting and backed off, and tried to stop his nose with his handkerchief and his sleeve. I poked my finger in his chest. I told him he was a son of a bitch, and he'd coldcocked me when I was on duty, and he'd pull ten in Sonyang for it if it took the rest of my life to get him sent up.

"You were down in your compartment," Prescott said, "pounding on the bulkheads when you ought to have been on, and I'll swear to that anytime, anywhere."

I said the hell I was, and we went back and forth about it, and finally I got sense enough to tell him I wasn't even bunking there anymore. After that we went to my new compartment, and I showed him how I had all my stuff stowed in there.

Then we went to look at my old one. And the doors said Prescott, blank, me, Lang, and Parker. Prescott said, "What the hell?" and I said what the hell, and we tried to open the blank door. It was locked on the inside, but we could hear something moving around in there. So he said, "What'll you take to stand my watch with me?" I said, "With you? You ain't got that much," and went into my new compartment and dogged the door on the inside good, you bet.

Only I didn't sleep a lot. For one thing, my jaw hurt and my ribs on the left side. For another, I kept thinking about the last Miscreet on the ship coming out of that door and going for Prescott. That was okay at first and got me to smiling again. Only after a while not so good.

Then I got to sleep.

He was fine in the morning, except for his nose. He told Ensign Parker he'd got going too fast trying to check out a funny noise in one of the green corridors that kept twisting, and run into the bulkhead. I know damned well she didn't believe him, because I saw her sneak a look at my knuckles, but a good officer knows there's times to ask and times not to, and she was a good officer like I said.

So that's when I stepped in, and if you want to say all this is my fault, okay. That's how I feel too. I told her there had been all this noise during the night, and Prescott thought it was me, but it

wasn't. And I said I thought I knew where it was coming from, only the door was locked and I hadn't be able to get in there.

She said it had kept her awake some, and she'd been expecting one of us to knock on her door and tell her something was wrong. Only nobody had. Then she said to show her, and I took her down to Deck 3 where we had been bunking and showed her the blank door. She said someone had taken off the paint and repainted the signs. She said she knew she hadn't moved and she was still in the same compartment she'd always had so it had been Prescott. He'd moved down one and painted his name on the new door and wiped the old name with some kind of stuff that would take off paint. Naturally Prescott said no way.

Ensign Parker tried the handle then, and it wasn't locked for her. It opened real easy and she went in. It shut behind her, too, and we figured we'd better leave her alone in there if that was what she wanted.

She didn't scream or anything, she just went inside and dogged the door. Or something did, because it wouldn't open any more.

When she hadn't come out after a couple of hours, Lang said the hell with it he was going to knock and make sure she was okay. He went down there, and when he came back he said there wasn't any compartment like that. Just the four doors, all in a row, with our names painted on them. We said did you look in those? Lang said, "You bet I did. I knocked on her door, and when she didn't answer I opened it. After that I looked in every darned compartment on the deck, and by gosh there wasn't anybody in any of them." After that we slept on the bridge, all three of us.

Well, we got her into Terra orbit and reported, and they put us under and questioned us a lot. You know how they do. After that they said they'd take care of it and returned us to duty.

So I shipped out again, and now I'm back, and from what I hear this thing has already cleaned out half of North America and nobody knows what to do. Everybody calls it the alien or the monster, and says it's worse than the Miscreets. Okay, maybe it is, but I've got to tell you it's no alien, and you've got to believe me on this one because I know. Maybe then we can do something. If the Navy will listen, maybe we can pull up her records and take care of it some way.

It isn't an alien or a monster either.

It's Ensign Parker.

Check out her file, her psych profile and all that, and maybe you can find something you can use. The way it looks to me, that's Terra's only hope. You can do it or not, I guess. Up to you. I told you, and now I'm shipping out again. Good luck.

Charting Unexamined Territories

A Conversation with James P. Blaylock

Photographs by John Berlyne

November 2003 saw Jim Blaylock making a rare European appearance at Utopialis, an annual science fiction convention that takes place in Nantes, France. SF Critic and long time Blaylock fan John Berlyne caught up with Jim there to conduct this revealing interview. John's book Secret Histories: Behind the works of Tim Powers *will be published by PS in 2005.*

PS: Jim, let's start with a look at your juvenile novels. You began with a variant of comic fantasy—*The Elfin Ship* and *The Disappearing Dwarf*. Where did that come from and why did you leave it behind you?

JPB: It came from my love of *The Wind in the Willows* which spawned *The Elfin Ship* without a doubt, and also *Huckleberry Finn*. Some influence from *The Hobbit* too, before I was done. The fact that they were inspired by three books that were specifically written for younger readers probably had something to do with that.

PS: But the Balumnia novels weren't written for younger readers.

JPB: No, not at all. In fact they were exactly the sort of novel that I enjoyed reading myself and I simply, unconsciously, wrote the sort of thing that I myself would want to read.

PS: Do you think that most writers start by doing that?

JPB: I hope they do! I think it's the only honest way to write.

PS: What was the story being getting that first novel published?

JPB: I wrote a sixty thousand word version of *The Elfin Ship* purely for fun, about as quickly as I could write it. Half the time sitting up in bed scribbling away, making Viki (*Blaylock's wife to whom he has been married for thirty years*) listen to bits and pieces while she was trying to go to sleep, and I had what I thought was a novel. And I mailed it off to Lester del Rey at Del Rey Books and he sent back a rejection letter saying that although it was very well written, the plot was terrible! So he couldn't buy it. I simply took that as an indication that the book was no good.

PS: Was this one of Lester's famous long and helpful letters?

JPB: No. This was a not very helpful letter at all!

PS: A rejection?

JPB: It was a rejection, yeah. And Tim Powers had recently sold *The Drawing of the Dark* to Lester and said that I should take it sort of as a challenge—write Lester a letter back saying that if, in fact, he felt that the writing was good, if he told me how to fix the plot, maybe I could do it. And I did that, and Lester sent me a letter back saying 'Well, if you're willing to *work*, then I'll buy it!' And then he sent me a letter kind of more in keeping with the famous Lester del Rey letter, telling me in no uncertain terms why it was crap, and he told me at exactly what point in the novel it had gone off the rails, said to pitch everything out after that point, and re-plot it and send him an outline of what I thought I was gonna do with it.

PS: Did this force you to radically re-think your approach?

JPB: Did it ever! He pointed out that I had established in the first chapter or two that my main character made cheeses, that he needed to get down to the coast to sell his cheeses to the dwarves and bring back Christmas gifts and no matter what I did in the novel, he had to either bring back those Christmas gifts, or die trying! And it was kind of a "light bulb" moment, when I realised that a novel had to have a spine to it.

PS: What had you been hitherto writing?

JPB: Well, in the rejected version (which Subterranean Press has recently brought out as *The Man in the Moon*) they get about half way down the river with the cheeses, some elves in an airship show up and they all go to the moon and have a treasure hunt and then they come home again! Which, of course, begs the whole question of a plot! And so (del Rey) asked basically for an outline of what a novel of roughly ninety thousand words would look like, given that I would start somewhere in the middle and finish it.

PS: Was that a realistic goal for you at the time?

JPB: It was realistic, yeah. Essentially, I'd written a good sixty thousand words, and I had already written a failed hundred thousand words of what later became *The Digging Leviathan*. So the figure didn't bother me much.

PS: At that point, were you looking beyond that one book.

JPB: You know I had been thinking at the time, trilogies were really coming into vogue, and I think I had moderately recently read *The Lord of the Rings*, and so the idea of a trilogy was simply appealing to me. (del Rey) told me in no uncertain terms however, that the first novel had to work by itself and to hell with the trilogy, and that if it was good enough, he'd think about a second novel. I think it took me another six months to finish it up. Sooner or later I got the first half of the advance and then the second half, and the whole process of getting that novel published was probably an eighteen month process.

PS: That didn't set any precedents for what followed, did it?

JPB: No, not at all! Before I was done with it, I had an idea for *The Disappearing Dwarf* and I told Lester what I wanted to do with it and he immediately accepted it, giving me a six month deadline. But of course, that was six months and I hadn't started yet! So that was a little more of a challenge.

PS: But the third book (*The Stone Giant*) is not sequential.

JPB: No. By the time I finished *The Disappearing Dwarf*, Judy-Lynn del Rey was my editor much more than Lester, although both of them were very kindly

and friendly to me. I suggested to Judy-Lynn that I wanted to write a third book, but I had no real idea what it would be, because the first two weren't really enormously related to each other. Judy-Lynn suggested that I write a prequel instead—I think she had the idea that I needed a larger canvass and she didn't want me to take the same three characters through the same terrain. So I agreed that that would be a good idea, but in the meantime I had come up with the idea for writing *The Digging Leviathan*, which was a rethinking of the failed novel I had written when I'd gotten out of university. So I said to Judy-Lynn I'm very anxious to write a prequel to *The Elfin Ship*, but I'd like to write this other novel first. And I told her what it was going to be about and she said it was a lunatic, cultistic idea and that Del Rey Books would have nothing to do with it. Ha!

PS: She wasn't wrong in describing it that way!

JPB: No! None of that offended me a bit because it was obvious to me at the time that it was such a departure from anything I'd been doing for Del Rey—at the time they were sort of throwing Terry Brooks and a couple of other writers up the best seller lists and it had *nothing* to do with anything they were writing. And so when she said it wasn't a Del Rey book, I thought well of course it's not a Del Rey book!

If I'm not mistaken, by that time Tim had gotten the same response for *The Anubis Gates*. He had sent it off to Ace Books and because it had got a favourable response, I met up with a couple of Ace editors at a con-vention. They'd been interested in my writing, so I sent a twelve page outline to them and they bought it. And that put off the writing of the prequel to the first two. I followed *The Digging Leviathan* with *Homun-culus* for Ace, and by the time I got back to doing the prequel Judy-Lynn had gotten ill and eventually died, so I ended up with a completely different editor who was not particularly enthusiastic about my books. The first books had been in print now for several years and Ace sort of leapt up and said 'if they're hesitating, we'll buy it, we'll get the same cover artist, we'll publish it as the same prequel that (Del Rey) would have'. It seemed to me to be the smoothest and smartest idea, and so I let them negotiate with Del Rey to take the rights to that particular book.

PS: Those early novels aren't really what we now think of as comic fantasy—they instead have a degree of whimsy about them that is very clearly linked to *The Wind in the Willows* . . .

JPB: . . . and *The Pickwick Papers* was a *big* influence—a bunch of pipe-smoking, slightly overweight guys with wild plans to do insane things. At the time, I was probably more given to the whimsy and to the more colourful stuff. I really enjoyed writing the sort of dark woods and goblinesque aspects. I don't know whether my dark woods had anything to do with the wilds woods in *The Wind in the Willows*, but it did have a lot to do with the fact that I enjoyed hiking in the Santa Ana mountains, which are very strange and atmospheric in that way. And by that time I had very much enjoyed reading *The Hobbit*—I loved all that Murkwood forest stuff. There were several influences there that made me want to write something along those lines.

You know it's funny, six or eight months ago, I was looking over my first three books and I realised that my younger, sort of whimsical novels include the first two *Elfin Ship* novels and *The Digging Leviathan*. That was the end of that period. And the thing that was distinctive about them was that virtually nobody gets hurt and that even the villains—in their way—are simply slightly darker replicas of my eccentric fat men. They simply want to get to the centre of the earth . . . they want the pocket watch or something for their own fell purposes but evil is a thoroughly reduced thing in those books. Evil is the whimsical thing, and it occurred to me that after *The Digging Leviathan* there was change. I wasn't really happy with *The Stone Giant* when it was finished. There are many elements of it that I very much like but it's my least favourite of those three, and it didn't dawn on me until later that it lacks a certain amount of the whimsy of the first two. It's a little darker—I mean the character's left his wife, for instance! I have to say that I think I must have changed in some ways between the writing of those earlier books and the question sometimes comes up, would I write another *Elfin Ship* book now? And my answer is that I'd very much like to but I'm not at all certain I *could*. I don't know if I could re-capture that particular spontaneously whimsical mood that I had at the time, you know? I mean it's over twenty five years later!

PS: There are very clear phases in your work, and they seem to me to be very much tied in with the preoccupations, the growing pains if you like, of the average well adjusted male. In a way, it is a consistent inconsistency in your writing.

JPB: Right! I wonder sometimes how a writer like P. G. Wodehouse for example, got to ninety odd years old and was still writing essentially the same variety of novel. I love his work but I don't know how he could have written all those

novels without tiring . . . without changing, you know? Certainly it wasn't possible for me to do that.

PS: Is each piece fresh, a blank canvas when you begin work on it?

JPB: Each piece is fresh, I think. Although I can see certainly some family similarities between certain of my books. *All the Bells on Earth* and *The Last Coin* are certainly related, and *The Last Coin* and *The Digging Leviathan* are certainly related.

PS: Those books tend to be about people searching for modern manifestations of mythical objects. At the same time, they're not about these objects per se but rather about the behaviour of the people involved with them.

JPB: Yes, that's true. In fact I think that the object itself in most of those remains pretty vague. We're not quite sure what Mister Pennyman's going to do with the coins and we're not quite sure what anybody's going to do with the grail if they can get their hands on it. We know that the grail has something to do with the weather perhaps, and that the coins have something to do with the apocalyptic .

PS: Let's move onto the subject of Steampunk, the movement unwittingly started by you, Powers and Jeter back in the late seventies and early eighties. It strikes me that your Steampunk stuff contains less science fiction than either of theirs.

JPB: Arguably my first Steampunk story was 'The Ape Box Affair', which I sold to *Unearth* magazine in 1977. Unless I am mistaken that was *the* first Steampunk story. I wrote that because at the time I had been reading a lot of Victorian literature, we had just gone to England and spent some time in London. I loved it. I was enthusiastic about every element of it.

PS: What did you like about it?

JPB: I found that because I had read *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Pickwick Papers* and a couple of other books before I went, I went to London with the idea that I would see Dickensian London every place I went. And consequently, if we went into a pub for example, I would look around and happily pick out the elements that might have been sort of Dickensian and say 'yes, this is it!, this

is what I hoped to find.' And I came away with what was probably a fairly skewed notion of London. I think it's changed since 1976! There weren't Colonel Sanders and Starbucks every place.

PS: Was your idealised vision of London shattered in any way when you got there, or rather, was it augmented by what you saw?

JPB: It was augmented by what I saw. I came home with a map with place names and street names and all that kind of business drawn on it and I thought, well, I have to use this! And then, after I'd written a couple of Steampunk stories, K.W. Jeter introduced Powers and me to Mayhew's London and it dawned on me after reading perhaps three or four chapters that there were probably ten novels in those books if you wanted to find them and I went out and bought a pile of Victoriana and started reading very widely. I could tell you what part of town produced celery, you know!

PS: So this seemed like a really fertile area for you?

JPB: Absolutely! And I had the idea that I could launch any number of such books. It turned out that after doing the first one, I think I had to start out on *The Stone Giant* in order to make that contract, and then I got distracted by God knows what was next . . . *Land of Dreams* and *The Magic Spectacles*.

PS: Was it a case of your contractual obligations conflicting with what you wanted to be writing? Has that been a problem for you over the years?

JPB: No, I don't think so. It generally took me a good amount of time to figure out what I wanted to write next and consequently, if the contractual obligation was simply 'what are you going to do next?', most often within several months I would know what I wanted to do and Ace was good enough to buy it, regardless of whether it altered their perception of what I was as a writer. And they had complained on a couple of occasions that my writing was not consistently the same, which makes me hard to market, and that I have too many cross genre tropes or something like that? In fact Susan Allison (editor at Ace Books) once told me that if only I wrote genre science fiction or genre fantasy they could probably do something with my career! Now I can see exactly what she meant—but at the time I just thought "I bet there's a larger market out there." In other words, I suppose I believed there were more nuts than she thought there were.

PS: With regard to Steampunk, I guess you've been proven right. That whole niche genre is so popular now. Did you feel at the time that you'd stumbled upon something special, something that would really capture the imagination of readers?

JPB: I'm not sure I did. I think what was in my mind was that I myself so much liked Victorian literature—Stephenson was my favourite writer, I was crazy about Dickens, about Conan Doyle (whom I guess we'd call an Edwardian, but it had that same gothic, foggy mood to it)—that I thought what can I do with that? The environs of London seemed to be right for it.

PS: After those books though, we then move closer to home for you and your writing has remained rooted in southern California really ever since. To what degree is there a "Blaylockisation" of what you see around you?

JPB: Certainly there is a "Blaylockisation," but I'm not sure that Blaylock can do it any other way. In other words, I think it's true to something in me. Do I authentically believe that somebody spontaneously combusted in an alley downtown? Honestly, I don't. Do I think it's possible that spontaneous human combustion is a fact? Yeah, I think it's very possible.

PS: I guess the suggestion is not that you're writing factual accounts of these events, but it always seems to me that your perception of your environment is unique. Were your next door neighbour a writer, he wouldn't look down the street where you live and be getting the ideas you're getting. You were telling me at dinner the other day that when you were in Paris earlier in the week, you and Viki were walking around and you looked down and saw an enormous salmon in the gutter! That doesn't happen to normal people! You wrote an afterword to an edition of Powers's *The Drawing of the Dark* in which you relate the time when you were living in Placentia in an apartment block and you had some dwarves living next door!

JPB: A *load* of dwarves!

PS: Well, that's not *normal*!

JPB: Ha! No. No it's not! And in fact we were actually afraid that we'd taken ten years off of Powers' life, because we were all sitting around in fact, waiting to go off and have an adventure. Somehow it was early in the

morning, which was really very rare for us. The curtains were drawn, and Tim was smoking a pipe and reading a book and I was reading a book and Viki was doing the dishes or whatever it might happen to be and Viki or I said to Powers, "Hey, get those curtains open. Let's get some sun light in here." And he pulled the curtains over, and there were at the very least, two dozen dwarves outside the window! They were playing ping-pong, they were diving into the swimming pool, they were shouting or chasing each other. There were no full sized people at all. The world was entirely dwarves at that point and I can't remember whether he whipped the curtains shut again fast before they could see him, but he accused us for a long time of having set that up! I mean, how could I set it up? Call 'Dwarf Central' and say "Send out two dozen of your best!" Ha! But that was pretty funny, and that sort of thing does happen. In fact Viki and I were talking about this yesterday, that of all the photos we took in Paris, the most interesting might have been of that giant salmon in the gutter. Because when we had crossed the street, walked through Notre Dame, and come back . . . it was gone!

PS: But you'll end up using that surely? Somehow, in your mind it will gain significance.

JPB: It might very well!

PS: To someone else, that incident might remain mundane, but if it is "Blaylockised", it could become the focus of some story.

JPB: Certainly, and—while I don't want to be too revealing—if I were to see *another* big salmon in the gutter before I left, I'd be very certain it was a plot of some kind! That there was a salmon underworld in France that I probably should not know anything about. Yeah, I have to admit that sort of startling thing has happened to me quite a bit and I like to think that it's simply something that I pay attention to and that perhaps other people don't see anything interesting in. I mean it's just a dead fish after all! How interesting can a dead fish be? But I think that I have certainly an imaginative take on my environment and the southern California that I write about is not in fact the southern California that other people see.

PS: Is it the southern California in which you live?

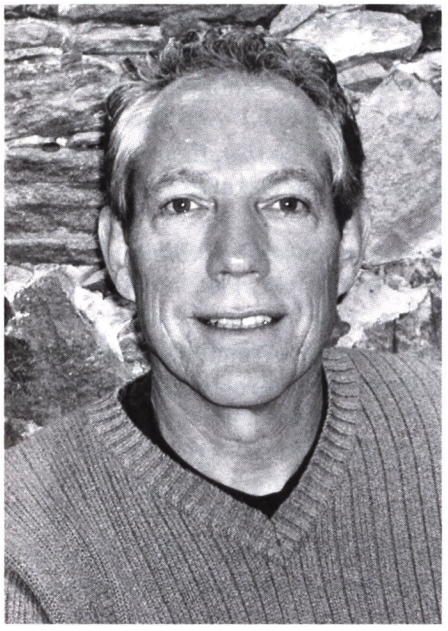
JPB: Yeah, I'm pretty sure it is. And I don't mean literally, but I think there is something a little bit . . . extra wonderful about places and if you look at them from the right point of view, you begin to see these extra wonderful things. I won't for a minute have anybody tell me that a more workaday picture of southern California is more accurate. In fact (and I'm going out on a limb here) I think that an overly mundane vision of things—and many writers strike a more mundane or naturalistic pose because they really think everything is dirt—suggests a spiritual disease. I'm not sure that I have any sort of political persuasion that I'm trying to pull off on the poor reader, but if the reader comes away with a slightly more mythological notion of the world after they read my books, I think I did my duty by degree. It isn't something I would get up on a soap box and try to preach to anybody, but if that's been the result of my books, because of the particular or peculiar way that I've seen things, then I'm happy.

PS: Are there other sorts of books you've not yet done, but you're dying to have a go at? Will we ever see a Blaylock space opera for example?

JPB: Well, you know yeah! There's a couple of things I've had in mind to do for years and years. I've always been fond of C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, not because it's a Christian book, but rather because I'm a big fan of the scientist who builds a spaceship in his back yard and takes off and goes to Mars. Nowadays, we know too much about Mars for it to be even funny—Mars is a dirty ball at present unfortunately—and so I would have to set it in 1924, when Mars was still, you know, canals and platypus ducks and stuff like that. I've also wanted to write a novel that took place in the desert and that would probably have to do with aliens and God knows what else . . . gold? . . . I have no idea.

PS: You're a bit of Patrick O'Brian fan—aren't you tempted to do a naval novel at all?

JPB: No! I had actually thought one up one time, set during the 1700s, during the great days of piracy and I kept switching the dates around because I wanted King George III in it as a lunatic, and I wanted William Blake in it, and the bad men were feeding King George poisoned snuff and that was going to be a seagoing book. But that would have been entirely fraught and the only reason I wanted to write it was because I was reading pirate novels at the time! And I thought I can use the word 'halyard' but I had no idea what a



'halyard' actually *was*! And I thought that I could overcome the deficiency by having a completely naive narrator who also would not know what a halyard is—which was a trick I'd used to a degree in several of my books, including and especially in *The Last Coin*. But you know, one thing led to another, the book never got written and in the meantime I've read enough Hornblower and Patrick O'Brian to know that I don't even want to try to compete.

PS: Tell me about the collaborative process between you and Powers—and I'm not necessarily talking about the few pieces you've actually written together, but about the clear influence the two of you have in general upon each other's work. Even though you're very different writers in stylistic terms, your work seems umbilically linked somehow. Do you think had you not met each other, your writing would have turned out differently?

JPB: Certainly we were both writing and had begun to think of ourselves in those terms before we met each other, but I might easily have been a very different writer . . . I don't know. I was already attracted to the science fiction and fantasy genre but I knew very little about it. There was period of many, many years when we chatted to each other on the phone virtually every day and consequently we very often were reading the same things at the same time, we were chatting about the same ideas. I went through this monumental pirate book phase, I read every novel I could get, every history I could get, and whether or not my enthusiasm for pirates had anything to do with Powers' developing the notion of how to write *On Stranger Tides*, I don't know. *(Note, the book is dedicated to Jim and Viki Blaylock.)*

PS: Obviously, you trust each other's judgement implicitly, in terms of what's a good idea.

JPB: I certainly trust Powers pretty implicitly. He's very sharp. Where I might be slightly more liable to be carried away by a whim, Tim is more likely to cast ahead and say, "You know, that whim seems to be leading in an incredible direction." But he's pretty crazy himself, because I'd sometimes come up with a whim and he'd say "Well, if you're gonna do *that*, then certainly this midget with a burning head should appear in chapter three!"

PS: And there's just been a new collaboration published. (*The Devils in the Details*, published by Subterranean Press, USA, 2003.)

JPB: Yeah, the new one's very good, if I say it myself. It certainly is a pure collaboration. You can see both of us in it and neither one of us would have written that story.

PS: What's the process?

JPB: Well, with this most recent one, it was Powers who came up with the idea for it. And so I said why don't you set the tone by writing the first four pages. So he sent me roughly four pages which I then revised and added to and that turned into the first half dozen pages—and I sent it back to him and he wrote some more and I wrote some more . . .

PS: And this all happens by email now?

JPB: Yeah. When we lived right down the street from each other it was easy to bring over a hard copy. And we simply are in mutual agreement that if we see anything from a comma dispute to a problem with a character or the credibility or something like that, that we can feel free to change what the other person wrote and then protest later. But you know, I think either one of us has ever protested an addition or a change.

PS: How about the way these collaborations are plotted out—bearing in mind that you both have very different methods of putting your solo stories together?

JPB: I think Tim understands that once I get my hands on the story I might do things to it that makes it something other than he had in mind, and it doesn't bother him a bit. There's some profit for me in it, in that Tim can plot very quickly. Of course, his plots are so Byzantine that it takes him a year to figure

out where the hell they're going, but he can plot a short story very, very quickly. Not every short story I assume that he would plot would be a story that I would write, just like I could never imagine writing the novels that he has written.

PS: How are your own short stories plotted?

JPB: Generally, by the time I start writing a long short story like 'His Own Back Yard' or 'In For a Penny', I've got forty pages of notes, which is just myself going round and round trying to figure out direction. Finally, I get to a point where I'm adding particular plot elements, some of which I have to reject. So I would say that I have a fairly good notion of where the story is going before I start to write it. I especially like to know what the end of the story is, because I like to know that I have a story proper, a situation, you know?

PS: You've been very prolific in this form of late, largely because much of your novel writing time has been taken up with your teaching commitments. Is this the main factor in this increased short story output? Or is it a case of many of the story ideas you're conceiving currently are better suited to that shorter format?

JPB: You know, it's largely environmental. Because I was doing so much teaching, and because I wasn't quite satisfied that I had a good idea for a novel, but I simply had to be productive in some way. There seemed to be a moderately ready market that paid pretty well for stories so I tackled writing a couple and realised in the process that, on some level, I was probably writing better stories now than I had been in the past—people are free to argue about that, of course!

PS: Why do you say that?

JPB: I think I would say that many of my earlier stories are not so much actual stories as they are tricks of style. And I wanted to write some stories that were just regular stories, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

PS: I guess that means you think your technique has improved, but are you aware of technique or even conscious of any such technical aspects when you write?

JPB: I think it has improved, but I believe that's because it's changed. The other thing was that, it seems to me that in many of my recent stories—God help me that I don't start writing stories with a theme in mind! I'm not that much of an English teacher!—but it does seem to me that some of my stories these days seem to have a sort of . . . more essential meaning. If I had to write a paper for a literature class, I might be able to write one more easily about a story like 'Small Houses' for example, than a story like 'Nets of Silver and Gold'—that's a story that's very much a trick of style and atmosphere rather than a story proper . . . more of a 'sense of wonder' kind of story. So I can say that on some level perhaps, there's something slightly more substantial about the stories. Of course, that's only the way *I* see it: whether the public would see it that way, I don't know.

PS: But your stories of late are certainly thematic aren't they?

JPB: It could very well be that the first story I wrote that was about some larger thing was 'Paper Dragons'. And when I compare that story and the stories that had gone before it, there's a categorical difference in my mind. It's very near the categorical difference between my first sale, which was 'Red Planet' to *Unearth*, and the stories that had come before that, which weren't publishable. Something happened in that story that changed things.

PS: Can you identify what that is?

JPB: Yeah. The story has an ending I think that's required by the story itself. It has a structure that's sort of developed round a series of metaphors, which seem to me to be not only very much connected (the whole paper dragons idea) but also to sort of mean something in the end. The two characters are waiting for grander things to happen and it turns out that maybe what has happened is pretty grand in and of itself. It's still packed with a lot of spectacle for spectacle's sake, style for style's sake . . .

PS: Has the whole idea of metaphor become more important for you?

JPB: Yeah, to some small extent. Certainly it was important to me in 'Small Houses'.

PS: What about in 'Home Before Dark'? There you have a central character who is dead and the entire story concerns the choices he has to make so that

he can move on. What is so interesting about that story is that you don't embellish it with any personal interpretation of what death is. Was that a conscious decision?

JPB: It was a moderately conscious decision. Certainly at the very end where they're driving up out of that weird little canyon and the sky is slightly full of stars, I wanted that to imply that what is happening is a good thing. That they were heading in some positive direction. One thing that certainly I had in my mind was the notion—that I think is very true—that the typical story has some sort of central problem to it which is quite likely to cause the characters grief, and they make a mighty effort to overcome it and either they fail or they don't. And it did strike me as being interesting that what if it were a character who really had nothing to complain about? What if his life had, in fact, been moderately happy? He's happily married, it's a long, successful marriage, sure there were problems but so what? He was quite happy with it all the way around, you know? Then the problem would be in leaving the happiness behind, and it struck me as something that I can't recall having seen in another story. And so that's why I launched 'Small Houses.'

PS: But this is recurrent motif in recent works. It's certainly there in the story written specifically for the new Subterranean collection, *The Trismagistus Club*. It strikes me as something very personal to you.

JPB: Maybe it's because Viki and I have been married thirty years and I do see that certainly I've been very fortunate. After I'd written 'Home Before Dark' though, I wanted to tell very much the same story except make it the last day of his life, so that what he was doing was him sort of wrapping up things on earth instead of the day *after* him wrapping up things that had been on earth . . . if you see what I mean! But at first I thought, you can't write the same damn story and then I thought why not? Why not a companion story? The business (in 'Small Houses') with the man building his own coffin was another thing that was right out of my life. I'd been building some furniture and I'd gotten a good deal on some red oak. I'd managed to use about fifty percent of it and it was out in the garage and I thought what can I use that for? And it dawned on me that I could build a hell of a nice tool box that was long enough to be a coffin too! And building one's coffin, I didn't see anything wrong in that at all. I thought it was a superior idea. Why not? Why shouldn't everybody build their own coffin when it comes down to it, you know?

PS: It is a morbid thing, but of course, when you read the story, the man's thinking is perfectly rational and his desire to do it makes perfect sense to him.

JPB: Well, I didn't build it, but it had always been in my mind, and again it was one of those things one of my characters could do. And also the tree house he lives in is of course the tree house in my back own yard, and the idea that he would have locked his house up once his life changed and move out to the tree house, to this smaller house where he kept the goldfish in an even smaller house and he had this coffin that would become the last of his small houses, you know.

PS: There's a great sadness in that particular story, indeed in a number of these tales involving themes that surround the finality of death, but it's a curious upbeat, almost optimistic sadness.

JPB: Yes, and I don't see that as oxymoron at all. I have no idea about 'the hereafter', you know? Certainly we're not going to know until we get there, and at that time we're probably not going to give much of a damn, but it strikes me to be so much a part of the way we think as people that it shouldn't be unexamined territory.

PS: Are you happy to confront the realities of death and what it might mean?

JPB: I really don't have problem with confronting those realities at all. I'm not anxious to *get* there, I can tell you that for sure! But they don't seem to me to be particularly frightening—knock on wood I don't wake up in hell and regret having said that!

PS: Is there further mileage in this for you? Are there still stories to come that examine this theme?

JPB: I don't know. I would have told you that I thought it was over with 'Small Houses,' but then I'd always had it in my mind that I wanted to write a haunted bookshop type of book—and very quickly it seemed to me that if I was going to write a ghost story, I didn't want the ghost aspect to be frivolous. I wanted it to amount to something and so I began to wonder exactly why these ghosts were dead, what they were waiting for, what they were doing—and when I launched it ('The Trismagistus Club'), it was going to

be a crop circle story and then I saw that I couldn't write a ghost story and a crop circle story in the same book and in fact, the only reason I could see in the world for ghosts doing crop circles was as a sort of last lark, you know? Which I kind of like! And to tell you the truth, it sounds as good as anything to me! So, one thing led to another and I thought, well, if all of these ghosts are pals of my man, in one way or another, then maybe he's close to moving on also. It's not uppermost in his mind necessarily, though he does know he's got health problems that lead him to it. I didn't want to make him the same character as I'd played out in the other two stories. But yeah, it was a different take again on that same theme. I've done three, and that's probably all I'll do. I can't imagine revisiting that thematic area.

PS: Are there areas you want to take your short fiction into now? We've talked about the direction your novel writing is currently taking: is your short fiction following a different path?

JPB: You know, I can't quite say. I think 'In For a Penny', for example, has a family resemblance to certain things I was working with in 'All the Bells on Earth'. My character there was kind of caught up in greed in his own way, at the same time that he was condemning the bad guys for being caught up in their vices. In fact, virtually every character in there is caught in that same vice in their own small way.

PS: And yet it's terribly funny—and that's a deliberate choice of words, for one winces at the comedy of it.

JPB: It seems that the comedy wants to be taken very seriously—and I don't mean that *I* want people to take it very seriously, I mean that when I begin to tell the story, what is happening to the characters quickly becomes very serious to me. There's a variety of comic fantasy, for example, in which virtually nothing is taken seriously, it's all jokes, and that just doesn't appeal to me whatsoever. I actually wrote 'His Own Back Yard' before I wrote 'In for a Penny', and I had it in my mind that that would be a story about greed. As it began to develop I saw that it was rather a story about a sort of sentimental nostalgia for one's past and what one has given up. The little treasures that he buried as a child, that was something that I did. I drew complex maps, (which I, of course, lost) and then years later I tried to figure out where I had buried my treasures. It's very much me in many ways, you know? I very quickly saw that my character's problem could not be a

problem of greed or vice—it had to be something else. But once again, he sort of turned out to be one of those basically happy men who simply had to figure out why . . . figure out what was of value and what was not of value. It could be that that particular theme keeps rearing its head in my fiction because I really very much believe—knock on wood again!—that I'm pretty damn lucky in virtually every way. I'm not rich, but I'm not sure that would matter to me a great deal when all was said and done. Consequently I think my characters tend to, at some time in the story, re-examine their own happiness, what it was they had. Even in a story like 'In For a Penny', he doesn't *need* that crap that he keeps seeming to find. It's all his *thinking* that he needs that crap, which is why it turns out to be imaginary goblin gold in the end.

PS: Did you find the purse yourself in some garage sale?

JPB: No. Though garage sales figure in a number of my stories, and it is true that looking at a pile of junk like that in a garage sale, I might actually be attracted to some pitifully unattractive thing because it has a painted palm tree on it or something like that! In fact I've got loads of this crap lying all over my study that a grown man had *no* excuse for having! Paying for it with the penny that was in it (the purse), it struck me at the time that we can be as consumed with guilt over small sins as with large sins. Whether in the eyes of God these sins are criminal, I have no idea and I don't really give a damn, but certainly I'm willing to believe they are in some small way. I see them as a sort of a door—which is why in when he's in the garage sale and he first conceives of the notion that he could pay for the purse with the penny which he's found inside the purse, he seems to hear a door open and shut: that, to my mind, was not a physical door. He had simply stepped into another place.

PS: So your man is consumed with guilt, but of course, he finds a rationale that allows him to deal with it.

JPB: I'm not sure that being consumed with guilt is necessarily always productive. I think sometimes we do develop rationales to explain why we are as we are and why we do as we do.

PS: Often though, it's simple self delusion and this is something you depict beautifully throughout much of your fiction. These people are often bor-

dering on being insane in their delusions, and yet their thinking remains utterly logical.

JPB: I like the idea that most of my protagonists have something about their personality is deluded, and that there's a portion of it that is not a negative at all.

PS: And so finally, assuming you're still writing when you're seventy or eighty, what do you think will be obsessing you at that age? What will be coming through in your writing then?

JPB: You know, I look at the writing of someone like Isaac Bashevis Singer and I read some of his work written when he was older, and I guess I can only describe them as light fables. I wasn't attracted to them. It seemed to me that perhaps there was a wisdom in them or something like that, but that the wisdom was the only thing left to recommend them. They were undoubtedly brilliant, but they didn't strike me as having any jazz to them. All I can say is that I don't know what jazz there is in *my* work, but I think there's some in there somehow, whatever form it might take in each different story. If I'm still writing at seventy-five, I hope I haven't lost whatever that is. I don't really give a damn what the themes are or what's motivating me to write, but I hope that there's some kind of spark to it. You know, we were talking about P. G. Wodehouse earlier and it's really very much true that the novels he was writing at eighty *did* have the same comedic spark to them that his other novels did. He hadn't lost it at all . . . and he wasn't writing pale copies of his earlier books. He was simply writing more of the same kind of book. How he managed to do that all those years later, I have no idea, but if I were seventy-five and I could write another *Elfin Ship* and catch that same tone, I'd be absolutely happy.

Allen Ashley's novel The Planet Suite *was published to justified critical acclaim in 1997 and his debut collection* Somnambulists *is due from Elastic Press in August. Our only complaint is that seven years is too long a gap between books. His first story for* Postscripts *was inspired by many an overcast day on the Norfolk coast.*

The Overwhelm

Allen Ashley

Josephine had been gazing out at the all-pervasive fog for fully five minutes when the ringing phone broke her reverie. The caller display told her it was Mr Bailey again and she so didn't want to speak to him.

"I'll call round at the appointed time," she promised. Then: "No, I really can't do anything about this fog, Mr Bailey, I'm not a weather witch."

"You're some sort of witch, girl," he muttered before she cut him off. Maybe he'd even said "bitch" to her. It wouldn't be the first time.

"You OK?" Marjorie asked from across the room.

"Sure, just the usual hassle," Josephine replied.

She strode over to the water cooler, took two plastic beakers worth, wondered if she could downgrade Mr Bailey when she had supervision next week. Even though it was reputedly early summer, the overhead lights blazed all day in the office. That and the flickering of her badly-tuned PC left her with an almost permanent headache. To which the final contributory factor was the omnipresent gloom outside. She had even heard several sages claim that the sky was falling or, in a less vernacular fashion, the atmosphere was contracting. Soon the surface pressure would be equivalent to that forty fathoms deep causing blood to boil and bodies to implode.

She took a few deep breaths to stop her blood boiling at present. It seemed that there were always doom merchants going on about imminent disasters these days. Maybe it was displaced guilt about comparative affluence.

Like any social worker with an irate and demanding caseload, she regularly stayed well beyond her allotted hours, so why was she feeling guilty? Pack up, shut down and head for home comforts.

Then she was out of the main exit. The swirls of mist and the dark-clothed pedestrians who cut abruptly into and out of her truncated field of vision made the usually familiar streets feel oppressive and scarily Victorian. The

traffic was crawling but she still crossed Chenery Street with enormous caution. At least the tube was still running, familiarly crowded and sweaty against the cold contrast of the lowering sky.

She was nearly out of tea bags at home and her 'healthy option' biscuits tasted stale and soggy. Or maybe that was their normal state. She gazed listlessly at the electric oven and the microwave, really not in the mood to prepare anything tonight. She had phoned for a pizza yesterday evening but by the time the kid on the scooter had negotiated the vapour-filled streets the meal was virtually unsalvageable. There was one cold slice left in the fridge, though, so she picked it up with her left hand, grabbed the remote with her right.

The news on the TV was so depressing—passengers irate and aggressive because their planes wouldn't fly, couldn't fly; more satellites falling from the sky, not mini dishes but the actual orbiting equipment itself. And here was Mr Driver who almost got burned by one as it crashed onto his extensive farmland; and now a gaggle of respectable, bespectacled scientists, none of whom could adequately explain this sudden scary phenomenon of a contracting atmosphere. Still, things were OK because the FA had rescheduled the day's big match for an afternoon kick-off—they had brought in some super-powered blowers and, with a re-application of industrial muscle during half-time, were able to complete the game.

"We'll be showing extended highlights after this bulletin," the newsreader trilled, "so if you don't want to know the score, look away now."

A neat, immediate and localised solution to the problem, Josephine had to admit but hardly sustainable over any long period or, indeed, distance.

Looking out of her first floor window the next morning, the grey blanket seemed thicker and ever closer to full solidity. *Let them try their glorified hair-driers on* that! she thought, idly. There'd be no more football for the foreseeable future, that was for sure. Foreseeable? She could can hardly see at all. The clouds had come down to smother humanity. What was the world's weather coming to? A couple of landmark towers had already collapsed in spectacular, devastating style adding millions of tonnes of dust and rubble to the prevailing peasouper. It couldn't be long before loads more tall buildings were squashed or shorn and all the high-rise refugees began to populate the streets like a surge of released parasites intent on stealing, blood-letting and worse. *Better hold onto your handbag, girl,* she thought. *Your modesty, too.*

She hadn't remembered to set the burglar alarm. So what? The police weren't going to bother answering or investigating. They'd be locked in their

briefing rooms even now preparing for the inevitable full scale looting and rioting when thousands were forcibly displaced from their tower blocks.

So what was she doing here taking these risks? Was it out of a residual sense of duty? Identity? Shouldn't she just throw a sickie?

The tube station was packed but virtually silent. Nervous trepidation crackled across the maps and adverts, along the pitted tiles and into the darkly gaping tunnel mouths. How wise was it to descend? Would there be any outside to return to at the desired destination?

Did the ceiling look lower this morning?

At work only the land lines were operating. Ken told a story about nearly being struck by a crashing mobile mast on his way in. Josephine suspected it was merely an item he'd seen on the news and that he had deliberately re-edited for his file of anecdotes with which to impress the ladies.

Jason still hadn't called. It had been over two weeks now. Another addition to her personal casebook of extinct relationships. Mr Bailey, however, phoned again, complaining about being stuck indoors for the sixth day in a row. Josephine made some vague promise to see what she could do later, although who was to say there would ever be much of a later? *Stop hassling me*, she sub-vocalised, *I've got enough on my plate already, you smelly old pensioner!* No one was keeping him in. Why didn't he just step out into the miasma, fall over a loose paving stone and do everyone a favour?

If the great multi-armed monster of communications—post, phone, e-mail, personal callers—had apparently been dealt so many blows by untamed meteorological forces, why was her in-tray so full? She felt like all the problems of the world were piling on top of her, overwhelming her and she just couldn't see her way out. In fact, the tendrils of mist seemed to have commenced their invasion of Finchdene Social Services because the vista of the office had turned a little hazy and she couldn't quite see clearly across to the photocopier. Maybe Chicken Licken was right and the sky really *had* fallen in. All those stupidly named characters—did they ever get to the king or did some awful fate befall them on the way? Maybe a fox. Or a wolf emerging from the Grimms' fairy tale forest. No, hang on, wasn't Chicken Licken an Afro-American fable?

There was a sudden commotion over by the water cooler. Ronald from Child Protection—a bullish boor of a man whose unreconstructed views had often seemed strangely at odds with his chosen profession—had knocked several items off Sally's desk and was now brandishing a TDK disk like it was one of the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Josephine stood up, the better to hear his holy message:

"My friends, the Day of Judgement is upon us," Ronald announced. "The descending clouds are a cloak of change, *necessary* change, as we move into a new world order."

There was some further activity over towards the main staircase but Josephine kept her attention on Ronald. She hadn't figured him for a survivalist. His left hand raised the floppy and sent it flying like a square frisbee in her direction. Was it a sign? She realised she was no Page 3 'stunna'—in fact, a little mousy in most people's opinion—but she knew some self-defence, basic cookery and was of child-bearing age.

With a practised theatrical flourish, Ronald produced a leather-bound book from his jacket pocket. Probably *The Bible*; possibly *A Brief History Of Time*.

"Hark ye!" he continued to rant. "Do you all remember what evolution tells us? How the crashing comet caused the world to be cloaked in darkness? This is the way the dinosaurs died and only the nocturnal, burrowing lemmings who became our ancestors were equipped to survive. It's all happening again, dear comrades. We must head back to the caves!"

At that point the centre manager and a somewhat lardy security man, plus two strapping teenagers on work experience who had finally found a purpose to their placement, appeared from stage left and bundled the doomsday preacher away to a quiet room somewhere.

"Never mind the caves, it's the funny farm for him," opined Ken.

Josephine pursed her lips, and noticed that her colleague was standing uncomfortably close.

"Can I have my personal space back, please?" she asked.

"Sorry, just wanted to see the show."

He moved off but Josephine still felt creeped out by his recent presence, suspecting he had secretly touched her up during the unfolding drama.

On autopilot, she returned to her desk and toyed with her case notes on Mr Yentl, another mostly housebound widower at risk in the community—what was she supposed to do for him now? After a few minutes of futile mini actions, the centre manager suddenly reappeared, coughed for attention and briefly requested that everyone vacate their desks and exit the building within the next quarter hour.

Marjorie was clutching a handbag, a shopping bag and the lapel of a coat with two missing buttons but she still managed to give Josephine's right arm a supportive squeeze.

"Give me a call," she whispered, "when . . . "

"When the fog lifts?" Josephine asked and the pair of them laughed nervously.

Then miraculously she was home again, away from the oppressive, opaque, lung-freezing clouds in the

streets and the oppressive, rib-poking, shoulder-jostling crowds on the tube.

Some of the channels and stations seemed to have gone off air. She continued to punch buttons and twirl dials. The television ran library shots of grounded planes encircled by mist. The radio played uplifting familiar love songs from ten or fifteen years ago, maybe longer. She was tempted to join in with their saccharine and candy floss sentiments—surely everybody knew most of the choruses!—but she smelled a whiff of manipulation about such a melodious medley. After a time, a very junior Home Office minister came on and spoilt the lovey-dovey nostalgic mood by appealing for calm while confirming the immediate imposition of martial law.

Ronald had not been so wide of the mark for all the top brass would be safe and secure within their bunker by now. Nuclear winter, climactic catastrophe—whatever they wanted to call it—they would make sure they were snug and tight.

Josephine could feel a latent claustrophobia bubbling to the surface along with that forgotten streak of rebelliousness which had carried her through college—and which had almost got her thrown out on a couple of occasions. How long did they expect her, or anyone else for that matter, to stay imprisoned indoors like a docile little pet?

She realised that she was unlikely to go to work tomorrow. Unlikely to be *allowed* to go to work tomorrow. Doctors and nurses. Police, army and fire crews—no doubt they needed to carry on but social workers were a luxury of a generally stable and affluent society.

But it was doing her head in, just the thought of being cooped up like this.

So go on, girl, risk going out on the streets after curfew. So the authorities don't like it—so let them shoot me! If they can see clearly enough to take aim . . .

She busied herself around the flat, pleased to note that she had quite a lot of palatable, supermarket finest ready meals in the freezer. Great as long as the electricity didn't get cut off. The cupboard held a plethora of tins and packets; the contents of several of these could be enjoyed at a cool room temperature if necessary. She even had a torch and a couple of candles. Not forgetting that there were a few pockets of cash stuffed in secret places other than the back of the sofa. Would money be of any use, though, after a few more days of this cumulo-cumulative nightmare?

She hated feeling stifled like this. Trapped. Burdened.

Then she was downstairs and opening the door and tiptoeing out into the welcoming wisps which skittishly tickled her throat and reddened nose and fingers . . . whilst concealing who knew how many hazards and horrors.

She made a mental note to either count her steps or stick just to the local area she believed she knew well. She had not thought to arm herself with any kitchen or DIY implements. She thought briefly of scuttling back upstairs but she was here now and should stop always wishing to be somewhere else.

It was still surprisingly busy on the streets. Maybe the curfew didn't kick in for a couple of hours yet. Those braving the great outdoors exchanged furtive glances like rats on a rubbish heap. Individual pedestrians didn't overly concern her but already she had the feeling that the usual unsavoury urban elements might be ganging together with rape and pillage on their minds. In the past she had never felt threatened by the regular prospect of popping out to the Mini Mart for a pint of milk or a box of sanitary towels but surely even the Patel brothers would pull down their shutters tonight. So what was she—a lone female not desperately in need of material comfort—doing out here in this opaque jungle? Had the descending sky lulled her back into the security of childhood memories? Taking a cold, reflective breath she could half-believe she was back with her mother on the North Norfolk coast where the sea mists came billowing in off the waves to blanket the cliffs, the town and the fallow fields.

Suddenly a figure was coming towards her.

Snapped out of her reverie, Josephine assumed what she hoped was a firm, defensive stance . . . then relaxed when she saw it was Mr Yentl, a vociferous but generally docile client. He was smoking a roll-up—in this pea-souper! He looked quite sprightly even with his walking stick and his larynx had regained its full baritone power.

"Why haven't you helped me, Miss Watts?" he demanded. "Social worker? Social *shirker*, more like! I had to leave my high rise flat, you know, what with all this weather business, so that solved the problem with the lift but technically I'm homeless now and my son doesn't want to know. So what now?"

"I'm off duty," she murmured. "We're locked out of the office. I'll get onto your case as soon as I can."

And now here came Mr Bailey, another unexpected marauder in the mist.

"You've got to help me first, not that old duffer. I've been virtually housebound for a fortnight. Show a bit of sympathy and get your priorities straight!"

She flailed her hands, shook her dark curls, and managed a quick, unimpeded exit.

Then somehow she was back home in a whirl of aggressive elbows, scampering flat shoes and hastily applied chains and locks.

There was nothing to see through the windows except grey cotton wool, a blank canvas for her worries and phobias. Just what had she hoped to

achieve by venturing outside? Did she have some sort of death wish?

While she was at least temporarily away from the stressful swirls of fog and the increasing pressure she should fix herself something to eat and probably run the tap so as to fill up the kettle and some saucepans because they might cut off the water supply at any moment. In which case she would have to open her mouth wide—tongue loose—and sip the mist. She didn't like the tought of that at all.

Was the ceiling a shade lower? How long had there been a running fracture through the paintwork of the picture rail?

She ought to check up on the couple upstairs, Kay and Joe—she hadn't seen them for days. If the lowering sky was a huge hand—divine, demonic or a dumb by-product of man's interventions—then all buildings could be seen as multi-layered sandwiches being squashed to inedibility, the fillings and the bricks and mortar flattening out over and across the plates of the Earth's crust.

For the moment, her compact first floor apartment would serve as a haven although that was not a long-term solution should the limits of the sky continue to truncate. She had never really got to know Mr Philips downstairs. Maybe necessity would serve as the mother of conversation.

She took a sip of water, considered a change of clothes, wondered if it would be wasteful to run the shower. Supposing the jet cut off halfway through soaping?

She found herself humming one of the old love songs she had heard on the radio earlier. God, was that the time? And what was that creaking noise? Was the whole world above her head on the point of collapse?

Maybe people would take to the tube tunnels. They were probably already full—there were no other caves and corridors around.. Whatever—mankind was going to have to club together against the common foe just like her grandparents' generation during The Blitz. Either that or fall into ethnic infighting or neighbourhood tribalism like a fledgling democracy after years of state dictatorship. Maybe it wouldn't take much for the veneer of civilisation to be stripped away. Just a change in the weather.

She drifted into sleep. Woke. Slept again. Blissful release from the stresses and strains of the past few days. Waking again, she blinked at the old-fashioned clock in the corner, unsure whether its spindly hands were indicating day or night.

The ceiling was definitely lower. Different shape and texture, too, looking for all the world like a giant settee cushion done in neutral magnolia. She tried to stand up but bumped her head. Maybe she had dozed off again for a while—she wasn't sure.

This time she found herself only able to crawl. She moved on bare hands and knees, the polyester of her skirt

creating tiny buzzes of static around her thighs and midriff. She breathed in rapid, shallow gulps. Was this how it was all going to end, with her scuttling along before eventually being squashed like a bug?

The divisions between flats must have been forced open because there were other people around. They were mostly motionless, maybe already asphyxiated. She pressed on.

But now the other occupants of this precious space were agitated and mobile and it was all elbows, knees and kicking feet. They were hurting, bruising, blocking off her breathing. She tried to swat them away, found a corner, manoeuvred her back into the juncture, turned to gaze upon her erstwhile assailants.

She recognised most of them.

But how come they were suddenly all here together? There was Mr Bailey . . . Mr Yentl . . . Ken, her creepy colleague . . . Ronald the doomsday merchant—even Jason her two-timing, unforgiven, unforgivable ex-boyfriend.

Get your hands off me! Give me room. Let me breathe. Stop overwhelming me!

Why had the world become so crowded? She had never asked for it to be this way. And what were people making circular motions against their heads? She knew her hair was curly; so what? She wished everyone would stop attacking her, crushing her body, her spirit, her mind.

She thought she could hear the phone ringing. She ought to try and answer it. Best to check caller display first. But she couldn't make out who was ringing. She wished she could take back control of this and everything else . . . but it was so hard because she simply couldn't get the fog out of her head.

Eric Brown has two novels out this year: Bengal Station *in the US and, in Britain,* New York Dreams, *the third book in the* Virex *trilogy. 'A Choice of Eternities' is the latest in a series of stories that is less about the science and technology of alien contact and more about the effect that the aliens and their gift of immortality have on everyday life in a near future West Yorkshire, where he lives. Eric is married to the writer and mediaevalist Finn Sinclair, and the couple are expecting their first child in September.*

A Choice of Eternities

Eric Brown

I was in the fleece on Tuesday night when Richard Lincoln buttonholed me about old Mrs Emmett. I'd arrived at seven and ordered a braised pork chop with roast potatoes and a pint of Taylor's Landlord.

Samantha was serving behind the bar. "You're early, Khalid."

"Hard day at the mill," I quipped. "I need to wind down."

"Well, the Landlord's on form tonight, according to Old Wilf. I'll just go put your order in."

She disappeared into the kitchen and I took a long draft of ale. Old Wilf was right—it was like nectar.

I'd had a tiring day at the hospital. Usually the implantation process went like a dream but that afternoon, just as I was about to start the last implantation, the patient decided that he'd had second thoughts. He wanted a little time to consider what he was doing. It had been after six before I'd been able to get away.

I was the first of the Tuesday night crowd to arrive, but the others were not far behind. Ben and Elisabeth came in first, looking frozen stiff after the long walk through the snow; then the ferrymen Richard Lincoln and Dan Chester blew in, talking shop as usual. Next came the latest recruit to Tuesday night, Doug Standish, the police Inspector from Bradley. Last of all came Samantha's husband, Stuart Kingsley, and Samantha finished her shift at the bar and joined us.

I thought of Zara, and the many happy Tuesday nights we'd spent at the Fleece with our friends, before my wife walked out on me and I killed myself, over a year ago now.

I'd never thought I would get over losing Zara, but I'd learned a lot about myself, and human relations, on the homeplanet of the Kéthani.

I was on my third pint when Richard Lincoln returned from the bar with a round and sat down beside me.

Richard was a big, bluff, grey-haired man in his fifties. He wore old-fashioned tweeds and liked his beer, but far from being the conservative country-type he so much resembled, I found him liberal and open-minded. He lived next door to me along the street from the Fleece, and I considered him my best friend. Certainly he was the only person I'd told about what had really happened last year.

"Cheers, Khalid," Richard said, dispatching a good quarter of his pint in one swallow. "I wanted to talk to you about something. Another reluctant customer."

A year ago, on my return from Kéthan, I'd told Richard about the events surrounding my suicide, and had gone on to say that I'd decided to stay on Earth and spread the good word about the implantation process. From time to time he put me on to people he came across in his line of work who were reluctant, for various reasons, to undergo the implantation.

"Old Mrs Emmett, up at High Fold Farm beyond Hawley," Richard said. "She has a son, Davey. He's mentally handicapped."

"And he isn't implanted, right?"

"That's the thing. Mrs Emmett isn't implanted, either. She's no fool, Khalid. No addled hermit living on the moors. She might be in her eighties, but she's all there. A retired university lecturer. She isn't implanted on religious grounds."

"Always the hardest to convert," I said.

"The thing is, Davey is dying. Leukaemia. He was diagnosed a couple of months ago. I sent a counsellor from Onward Station to talk to Mrs Emmett last week, but she was having none of it."

"And you think I might be able to talk her round?"

"Well, she does think highly of you," Richard said.

I looked at him, surprised. "She does?"

"You were her GP twelve years ago, apparently. She remembers you. I saw her in town last week and happened to mention your name. Actually, I asked her if you could come and talk to her about the Kéthani."

I smiled at his presumption. "And she agreed?"

"When she heard your name, she relented. I was wondering, if you didn't have a lot on . . . "

"Why not? You never know . . . " I thought hard, but couldn't put a face to the name. It had been twelve years ago, after all, and the workload of your average country doctor even back then had militated against the recollection of every patient.

Last orders were called and the final round bought, and it was well after midnight before the meeting broke up for another week.

When I said goodbye to Richard outside my front door, I told him I'd visit Mrs Emmett at the weekend.

High Fold was no longer a working farm. Like many once-thriving sheep farms in the area, it had suffered with the rest of the industry in the economic recession of 2008. Its owners had sold up and moved away, and Mrs Emmett had bought the farm, had it converted at great expense, and now lived there in retirement with her son.

The snow was so bad on the Saturday morning that I had to leave the car on the main road above the farm. I struggled down the snow-filled track, towards the sprawling stone-built house on the hillside overlooking Oxenworth. By the time I reached the front door I knew I would never be cut out to be an Arctic explorer.

Mrs Emmett answered my summons promptly, took one look at my bedraggled figure, and smiled. It was only then that I recalled the women I had treated as a patient all those years ago.

The smile. Some people smile with just their mouths, others with their entire faces. Mrs Emmett's smile encompassed the whole of her face and emanated genuine warmth. I recalled the experience of feeling like a favourite nephew as she welcomed me.

"Dr Azzam!" she said. "Khalid, it's lovely to see you. Come in. It's terrible out there."

I stepped into a spacious hall, removed my coat and stamped the snow from my boots on the mat, then followed her into a lounge where a wood-burning stove belted out a fierce, furnace heat.

"I seem to remember you prefer coffee. I'll just go and put it on. You know Davey of course."

She left the room, and I sketched a smile and a wave at the man seated at a small table beside the stove.

He looked up briefly, but didn't respond. He was absorbed in a world of his own. Davey Emmett was nearing fifty now, a chubby, childlike man, in both appearance and manner. I had never treated Davey—his affairs were looked after by a doctor at Bradley General—so I had no idea of his medical history, whether his condition was congenital or the result of some childhood illness.

He rarely spoke, as I recalled, and had a mental age of a young child. He was obsessed with collecting stamps—he was poring over a thick album now. I remembered looking at his albums years ago when called out to treat his mother. He collected stamps not by country or subjects depicted, as is common with philatelists, but by size and shape and colour.

Now he lowered his head short-sightedly over the page, a big Tweedle-dee absorbed in the polychromatic pattern of stamps before him.

As I watched him, I wondered if Davey was aware of his life-threatening illness.

Mrs Emmett returned bearing a tray. For a woman in her mid-eighties, she was remarkably upright

and spry—and mentally sharp, as I found out.

She sat down and poured two coffees, then gave me a penetrating sidewise glance. "It must be very hard for people wholly convinced of the benefits the Kéthani have bestowed," she said, "to comprehend the stance taken by the few dissenters amongst us." She spoke eloquently, in a soft voice free of accent or dialect.

I found myself fingering the implant at my temple. "Well, we do live in an increasingly secular age," I began.

"The two sides cannot be reconciled," she went on. "We with faith are wholly convinced of the truth of our views, while those that hold with the Kéthani pity us for our ignorance, for our choice of passing up the opportunity of certain immortality." She paused and smiled. "Those with scientific certainty fail to understand the certainty of those with true faith."

I smiled. "You're telling me, politely, to mind my own business."

She laughed, the sound like a cut-glass chime. "Of course not, Khalid. I'm merely stating my position. I'd be genuinely interested in hearing your argument."

I took a sip of the excellent coffee. "Well, it's an argument based not so much on faith or theory," I said, "as on my own experience."

She inclined her head. "I understand that you now work on the implant ward at Bradley."

"I do, but that isn't the experience I was referring to. You see . . . " I paused, choosing my words carefully. "Last year, Mrs Emmett, I died." I elected to leave out the messy personal details of my death. "I was resurrected on the homeplanet of the Kéthani and . . . instructed, I suppose is the best way to put it. I've only a vague recollection of what happened in the Kéthani domes—apparently that's a common experience among resurrectees. But I have nebulous memories, images. What I do retain is the sensation of rebirth, the wonder of renewed life and the sense of rightness that accompanied my resurrection. I knew so much more. I became—and this is ironic, as it's the result of an alien process—more human. I was convinced of the rightness of what I had undergone, and the genuine sense of destiny I was to undergo. I knew I had to return to Earth and spread the word of the implantation process—"

Mrs Emmett interrupted, "If you don't mind my saying, Khalid, what you have said so far sounds not so much a matter of reason, but of faith."

I smiled. "I suppose it does." I paused, marshalling my thoughts. "But the Kéthani no longer believe in a continuation of the spirit . . . the afterlife, if you like. They know that the foundation of the universe is purely materialistic, and that their process of resurrection after death is the only true hope of continued existence."

"Or that," she stated, again with that sweet smile, "is what they told you."

"Not so much told," I countered, "as showed. I find it hard to explain, but at the end of the process, I *knew* they were right."

"Just as, at the culmination of my years of instruction with my Rimpoche," Mrs Emmett said, "I *knew* that the way of Buddha was, for me, the true and right path." Her bright blue eyes twinkled at me. "Faith, Khalid."

I had to smile. "Touché," I said.

"But . . . " she began.

I looked up at her. "But?" I echoed, encouraged.

"But, Khalid, I presume you didn't come here to try to save my life." She was ahead of me, and knew it, and I couldn't help but admire her intelligence.

I looked across at Davey, who was thoroughly absorbed in his stamp collection. "Richard told me that Davey is ill," I began, uncomfortable about discussing the man in his presence.

"And you think I should have Davey implanted for his own good?"

I nodded and looked her in the eye. "Irrespective of your own beliefs," I said, "I think you should give Davey the chance to decide for himself whether he would like the opportunity of virtual immortality."

She looked at me sharply. "The opportunity?" she said. "But if I agree now to have him implanted, how would that be giving Davey the chance to decide for himself?"

I smiled. I could see the way ahead, the chance to save Davey from the imposition of his mother's trenchantly held beliefs. Was that arrogant of me, small-minded?

I went on, "You see, if Davey is implanted, then when he dies and is taken to Kéthan he will be resurrected not as he is now, but with certain . . . how should I put it? . . . *changes*. He will still be Davey, still intrinsically himself, but his intelligence and understanding will be boosted. The Kéthan will implant new memories based on those he has now. He will be the Davey who you would have had if not for . . . "

I stopped, for I saw a flicker of pain in her expression. She said, "That might be a difficult fact to face, Khalid. To have Davey as I might have had him for all these years."

"But," I persisted, "wouldn't it be better for him to be cured, to live a full and extended life?"

"That is to assume that what he experiences now is not full and rewarding, Khalid. All experience is relative and valid, as Buddha teaches us."

"Then perhaps it would be a valid experience to allow Davey the opportunity of resurrection," I countered.

She looked at me, assessing. "But, Khalid, forgive me—you haven't answered my question. You said that I should give Davey the opportunity to make his own choice. But if I did agree

to have him implanted, then I would be making the choice for him."

I moved forward, sat on the edge of the chair in my desire to win the argument. "But you see, when Davey returns from Kéthan, resurrected, he would still be implanted. Returnees aren't suddenly rendered immortal. They still have the implant which will keep them alive should they 'die' again, before they are taken to Kéthan for a second, or third or fourth, resurrection."

"And . . . " Mrs Emmett began, a dawning light in her eyes.

I nodded. "That's right, when Davey returns from Kéthan, he will be implanted—and if he so wishes he can have the implant removed. If he shares your faith, then he can make a choice based on a full understanding of all the factors involved."

I stopped there, almost breathless, and watched Mrs Emmett closely to see how she had taken my argument.

She was staring at her empty coffee cup, frowning slightly. At last she looked up and nodded. "You present a very interesting scenario, Khalid," She said at last. "It is certainly something I need to think about."

I nodded and finished my coffee. I should have realised that nothing I could have said would have made her change her mind there and then.

I wondered if, when I left, she would rationalise the discussion and allow her faith to maintain the status quo.

As she showed me to the door a little later, she touched my arm and said, "Buddha taught that there is no objective truth, Khalid. Each of us carries within us a subjective truth, if only we can find it."

I smiled.

"Perhaps Davey," she said, "should be given the opportunity to discover his own truth."

I made the long trek back to the car and drove home, happy with the morning's work.

I had quite forgotten about Mrs Emmett and Davey when, three days later, my secretary received a call. She put her head around the door. "There's a Mrs Emmett on the line," she said. "She won't be put off. Shall I tell her you're busy?"

"Emmett? No, put her through."

I picked up the phone. "Mrs Emmett?" I fully expected her to tell me that she had had second thoughts, and that our little talk had done nothing to change her mind. "How can I help?"

She came straight to the point. "Khalid, I've been giving due consideration to our little talk the other day, and under the circumstances I think it might be in Davey's best possible interests if he were implanted."

I refrained from punching the air in triumph, but I could feel myself grinning idiotically. "That's good news, Mrs Emmett."

"Davey's at home with me at the moment," she said. "But he's taken a turn for the worse and he's due to be admitted into Bradley tomorrow."

"I'll arrange for him to come straight to the implant ward," I told her.

She hesitated. "Would I... That is, could I be present when Davey is implanted?"

"By all means. I'll arrange everything and see you tomorrow."

"Thank you very much for your help, Khalid."

I smiled and cut the connection.

The following afternoon I ushered Mrs Emmett and Davey into my surgery and explained the implantation procedure. Davey sat clutching a stamp album, oblivious that we were discussing his future.

Mrs Emmett was surprised that the operation would be over so quickly. "I thought it would be performed under general anaesthetic," she said.

I smiled. "No, local. It takes about ten minutes. I simply make an incision in the skin of the temple and insert the implant. I seal the wound, and the implant does the rest. It releases nanomachines into the subject's body, which monitor the metabolism. When the subject 'dies', the implant takes over and revives the system. The body is then taken to the Onward Station and beamed to an orbiting Kéthani starship. Six months later the subject is returned to Earth, renewed."

Mrs Emmett was shaking her head. "And then, when Davey is returned, he can make his decision as to whether or not he wishes to retain the implant?"

I nodded. "That's right. Now, if you'd care to step this way."

Davey proved to be a docile patient. A nurse administered a sedative and a local anaesthetic, and while Davey lay on the couch with his head turned to the left, I made the slit in his right temple, eased the implant home, and sealed the wound.

Mrs Emmett perched on a stool, watching intently.

I looked up and smiled. "There, done."

"Quite amazing, Khalid."

While Davey was drinking a cup of sugary tea, Mrs Emmett confided her concerns to me. "It will be a very strange experience, Khalid, when Davey returns, to see him as he might have been if not for..." She smiled, sadly. "You see, so much of my life has been taken up with his welfare. I retired early in order to keep him with me. I could have sent him to a care home, but after my husband died... well, Davey was all I had."

She fell silent, her gaze distant, perhaps considering how her life might have worked out had it not been for Davey's handicap.

I realised, then, that Davey's return would be at once a cause for celebration and, for Mrs Emmett, much soul searching.

Once Davey was implanted, he was spared the treatment he would have undergone for his condition. A month after his implant, he passed away in hospital. Richard Lincoln, accompanied by Mrs Emmett and myself, drove the body up to the Onward Station in his Range Rover. There was a small, secular ceremony of leave-taking, and then Davey was beamed aboard the waiting Kéthani starship. I drove Mrs Emmett home, promising to accompany her to the ceremony that would greet Davey's return to Earth in six months' time.

That year, winter hung on well into April. There was a late fall of snow at Easter, transforming the land with its total and pristine beauty. Life proceeded as normal, a round of work and Tuesday night sessions at the Fleece. They were the highlight of the week, a few hours of relaxation among good friends.

I saw Zara once in Bradley, and that was painful. She was walking arm in arm with her new man, on the opposite side of the street. They didn't see me, for which I was thankful. The sight of her, tall and beautiful and seemingly happy, released a slew of painful memories. I went over and over our final days together, and Zara's accusations. I was a bastard, she had said, a domineering, selfish, bigoted, sexist bastard.

Not long after that I had killed myself, and been resurrected on Kéthan. On my return to Earth I had resumed my old life and examined what Zara had said. Her accusations caused me to look again at the person I was, how I had *become* the person I was, and I repented. By that time, of course, it had been too late to affect my relationship with Zara, but I had promised myself that I would not make the same mistake in future relationships.

A few months after Davey Emmett's death, Richard Lincoln took me to one side in the Fleece and told me that Mrs Emmett was in hospital.

"I saw her yesterday while I was making a pick up," he said. "She has cancer. It's terminal. She said she wanted to see you."

I looked at him. "You don't think . . . ?" I began.

"What, that she wants to be implanted? A conversion at the eleventh hour? I doubt it, not our Mrs Emmett."

"I'll drop by and see her tomorrow," I promised, and returned to my pint, wondering what the old lady might want to see me about.

She was in a private room on the oncology ward, sitting up in bed and hooked up to a bank of machines. If I had expected a feeble, self-sorry old woman who had given up all hope, then I had grossly underestimated Mrs Katherine Emmett.

She gave a cheery smile when I hesitantly entered the room. "Khalid, pull up a chair. How are you?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Isn't it me who should be asking you how you are?"

She laughed. "I'm fine, Khalid. Oddly enough, given the circumstances, I've really never felt better."

I took her hand. "You're an amazing woman," I found myself saying.

She laughed again, mockingly this time. "I'm eighty-six, Khalid, and I've had a full and eventful life. I'm quite prepared for the end of this stage of existence."

I gestured at the equipment surrounding the bed. "They're doing their damnedest to keep you alive."

She leaned forward and whispered, mock-conspiratorially, "It's because I'm not implanted, Khalid. They're frightened to death of death. They're trying to do everything they can to squeeze a few more weeks of life from me. But as I've told them over and over, I'm ready to go."

"They haven't tried to get you to agree to an implant?"

"Of course they have. I had some young thing down here just yesterday. He didn't know his theology, though—I tied him up in knots."

"So it'd be useless if I tried to . . . "

"Absolutely and categorically futile, Khalid, my friend."

I tried another tack. "How long do they give you?"

"Perhaps a month. The liver, you see."

"So," I interrupted, "you won't be around to see Davey when he returns?"

She allowed a few seconds to elapse before she replied—sufficient time to make me regret the question.

"No," she said, "I won't be around. And do you know something? I don't want to be around, to be honest."

I stared at her. "Surely-" I began, and stopped myself.

She leaned forward. "Khalid, I want to tell you something. I've never told another living soul this, and I want to get it off my chest, before I go."I smiled at her, wondering what I was about to hear.

"Khalid, do you know what was wrong with Davey? I mean, what was responsible for his condition?"

I shook my head. "His medical records would have been privy only to his own doctor," I began.

She smiled, returning the pressure of my hand. "It was an accident, Khalid. When he was two years old. I'd taken him out shopping. If only I'd delayed going out, or not gone at all . . . But we can't undo the past, can we? Oh, I've often wondered how what happened might have been the repercussions of sins I might have committed in a previous life. That was the only part of Buddhist theory that I found hard to accept." She laughed, sourly. "For obvious reasons, Khalid! Anyway, you see, it was my fault . . . the accident. We had stopped at the side of the road, and Davey got away from me . . . ran straight into the road, in front of . . . " She paused, gathering herself, and then went on. "The doc-

tors said it was miracle that Davey survived, even though he was severely brain damaged."

She stopped, and the silence seemed to ring like an alarm. When I looked up at her, I saw tears streaming unchecked down her wrinkled cheeks. I found a tissue and passed it to her, and she blotted the tears with a gesture at once dignified and pitiful.

"I've had to live with the guilt for so long," she said. "So do you see why I couldn't bear to see Davey when he returned? He will be how he would have been, were it not for my neglect. The sight of him, so changed, will remind me not only of my foolishness, but of the Davey I should have been able to love, growing up like other children."

She was crying again, and all I could do was grip her hand.

At last, tentatively, I said, "But if you were to be implanted, you would be able to share his life from now on."

She smiled at me through her tears. She lifted my hand and kissed my knuckles. "You're a good man, Khalid. You mean well. But Davey would be a stranger to me. It wasn't meant to be. Did you know," she said, more brightly now, "that scientists opposed to the Kéthani have developed a new theory of consciousness?"

I smiled. "They have?"

She nodded, enthusiastic. "You see, they posit that our consciousness, the very essence that makes us ourselves, resides on some infinitesimally small, quantum level, a level that permeates the cosmos. And when we die, we don't just fizzle out like a spent match, but our consciousness remains integrated with the matrix of existence . . . " She laughed to herself. "It's what Buddha said all those hundreds of years ago, Khalid!"

"Well, what do you know, Mrs Emmett," I said with a smile.

Before I left, promising to pop in the following day, she restrained me with a fierce grip. "Khalid, when Davey returns, will you meet him at the Station, explain what happened, why I couldn't be there for him? Will you make sure that he understands, Khalid?"

"Of course I will."

"And . . . something else." She reached across to the bedside table, and gave me a sealed letter. "Will you give this to him, Khalid? It's an explanation of my belief. I want him to consider everything, so that he can decide for himself whether he wants to retain his implant."

I squeezed her hand, and promised that I would give him the letter, then said goodbye and slipped from the room.

I did return the following day, only to learn that Mrs Emmett had died peacefully in the early hours of the morning.

Three months later, in the middle of October, a heavy fall of snow

heralded Davey Emmett's return to Earth.

I was just one of three people gathered at the Onward Station to greet him. The other two were care-assistants who had worked with Davey over the years. They had never, they said, met a returnee: I refrained from telling them that I had died and been resurrected by the Kéthani.

I recalled my own transformation last year, both mentally and physically, and wondered how the Kéthani might have remade Davey Emmett.

Five minutes later we found out. We were in a small reception lounge furnished with a few chairs and a table bearing wine and fruit juice. Normally, more people would attend a returning ceremony, and a larger lounge would be required: but Davey had made few friends during his fifty years on Earth.

The sliding door at the back of the room opened, and Davey stepped through. The woman beside me gasped, and I understood her reaction. Even I, who had been expecting a marked metamorphosis, was taken aback.

Gone was the overweight adult-child, the sallow-faced, balding misfit unable to establish eye contact or hold a conversation.

Davey Emmett seemed taller, and slimmer. His face was lean, even handsome; he appeared to be in his late thirties. He wore a neat suit and strode purposefully into the room, smiling.

He shook our hands, greeting us by name. "It's good to see you, Khalid."

We exchanged inane pleasantries for a while. I recalled my own resurrection ceremony and the mutual inability of the returnee to express quite what he had been through, and the circumspection of the celebrants faced with the miracle of someone returned from the dead.

"Director Masters informed me of my mother's passing," Davey said. Masters was head of the Onward Station. "Khalid, if you could drive me home via the cemetery . . . ?"

"Of course."

The meeting broke up five minutes later and I drove Davey from the towering crystal obelisk of the Station, through the snow-covered landscape towards Oxenworth.

After a minute, I broke the silence. "I saw your mother during her illness, Davey. She wasn't in pain, and didn't fear death. She had her own strong faith."

Davey nodded. "I know. I remember her telling me all about it."

I glanced across at him. "How much do you recall from . . . from before?"

He considered for a second or two, frowning. "It's strange, but I recall everything. Who I was, my thoughts and reactions. But it's very much like an adult looking back on his childhood. We have only a refracted, blurred image of who that person was. It's

almost like looking back at the life of a stranger."

He was silent for a while, staring out at the snow-softened landscape undulating to the distant moorland horizon.

"The Kéthani remade me completely, Khalid. They took what they had, the fundamental David Emmett, and rebuilt a fully functioning, intelligent human being from the unpromising raw material. The odd thing is, I feel that they maintained a continuity. I am David Emmett, but whole, now."

I nodded. "I think I know what you mean, Davey. I died last year. The person who came back . . . well, he was much changed, too."

We came to the cemetery and I turned into the long drive.

We climbed from the car, into the teeth of the sub-zero wind, and I led Davey across to where his mother was interred.

Her grey marble headstone projected from the fleecy snow, bearing her name, date of birth and death, and a line from a Buddhist text: *We each of us have a choice of eternities.*

There were few deaths these days, and the cemetery was little used. The headstone next to Mrs Emmett's recorded that Claudine Hainault had been buried there ten years previously.

I felt tears stinging my eyes.

Davey stood at the foot of his mother's grave, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. The cold wind stirred his full head of black hair.

I said, "Your mother asked me to explain why she couldn't be here to meet you, Davey. And she asked me to give you this." I passed him the letter Mrs Emmett had given me.

He took it and looked at me. "You mean, why she couldn't face the person I would be—the person I might have been, but for the accident?"

I smiled to myself. He was ahead of me, and had saved me from an awkward explanation.

"Do you understand how it must have been, from her point of view?" I said inadequately.

"I understand," he said. "I just wonder how much her belief system was a result of the guilt she felt after the accident. I wonder if she rationalised that she was atoning in this life for sins accrued in a previous one . . . and if she believed in reincarnation in the hope that my next existence might be a better one." He smiled to himself. "This was all before the coming of the Kéthani, of course."

I shook my hand and shrugged, smiling sadly at the thought of Mrs Emmett.

"The terrible thing was," Davey went on, "that my mother wasn't responsible for the accident. We were standing at the side of the road and I just pulled my hand from hers and ran off, into the path of a car . . . Thanks to the Kéthani, I remember everything."

He paused, then said, "My mother blamed herself, of course."

He lifted his head and stared into the heavens, and I saw that his eyes were filmed with tears.

"I wonder if she'd forgive me?" he asked at last.

"Your mother was a good and forgiving person," I said. "Of course she would."

He stared at the cold, grey headstone. "But would things have turned out differently, for her, if the accident had not happened?"

I said at last, "Who can tell?"

"I wonder if she is happy, wherever she is?"

I let that question blow away on the cold wind, and said instead, "Can I drive you home?"

He hesitated. "No. No, thanks, Khalid." He pointed across the valley, to High Fold Farm. "It's not far, I'll walk."

I nodded, shook his hand and made my way back to the car.

I thought of the way the Kéthani had remade us, and then it came to me that, since my return, I had never contacted Zara to apologise for how I had treated her over the years. I knew in my heart that it was my duty to do so, but even then I honestly doubted whether I would be man enough to go through with it.

The Kéthani improve us all, to varying degrees.

I drove from the cemetery, then braked on the road that climbs over the moors. I gazed down at the desolate scene of continuous snow and rank upon rank of headstones, those terrible reminders of the dead.

Davey Emmett was the only living figure in the vast and inimical landscape. As I watched, he opened the letter from his mother and read it slowly. Then he raised his head and stared into the sky, at the stars just beginning to appear in the heavens.

I looked at the road ahead, then started the car and drove towards Oxenworth and the Fleece.

"I'm currently completing a novel entitled Blood At The Root, *in a voice very unlike my own," Joyce Carol Oates tells us. Her next novel—to be published in the autumn—is* The Falls. *Although 'Stripping' existed in dreamlike notes in the author's notebooks for some time, she cannot place its original inspiration..*

Stripping
Joyce Carol Oates

Stripping the filthy things off. The stained things. The smells. Onto the floor with the filthy stripped-off things. Onto the floor with the stained things, the smells. Beneath the shower's nozzle. Hot hot as you can bear. How water streaming over shut eyes. *Why h'lo there! H'lo you. Do I know you?* Teasing smile. Taunting smile. *Think I do know you don't I?* Stripping off the smell of her. Onto the floor with the filth and the smell of her. And in the shower in the rising steam roughly soaping your hair that is strange to you so greasy, spiky like the coarse fur of a beast. Soaping your torso, armpits. Your torso an armor of flesh covered in coils of wire. Your armpits bristling with wire. Washing away the body-smells. And your filthy hands. Scratched knuckles, wrists. Broken fingernails and dried blood beneath. Draw your nails hard across the bar of soap, clean out the blood. Soap slipping from your clumsy hand you stoop to retrieve, grunting, the weight of your head suddenly heavy and pulses beating in your eyes, hearing her cry out in the terror of recognition *no no why? no let me go! why me, why? why hurt another person?* a riddle to echo in the shower's steam in the sharp needles of water erupting from the nozzle turned downward into your face. The soap is luminous-white like an object floating in a dream, you must not lapse into a dream but must carefully wash scrub cleanse yourself, lather away the blood and skin-particles beneath your fingernails broken against her skin repulsive to touch and the smell the sharp piercing cries quivering eyelids and bleeding mouth gaping like the mouth of a fish drowning in air *No no oh let me go let me- why are you doing this* flecks of dead skin washing away, soapy water tinged with red swirling down the drain faint and fading and your powerful lower body eel-like lathered in soap a luminous-white gossamer of soap through which the wire-hairs protrude. If the body could speak *Yes I am lonely, it is my loneliness that must be revenged* this is why you were born, the simplicity of life-in-the-body in-the-moment the instincts of the predator

cruising rain-washed streets as a shark might cruise the ocean open-mouthed seeking prey cruising the night-time city, in the distance the sound of a train whistle melancholy and fading as the cry of a distant bird. Pleading for her life though such debased life! Pleading for her life but this is life. No need to force her, on her knees she sank willingly. *I know you think I know you hmmm?* Her soul was a frail fluttering butterfly. Her soul was soiled white wings beating. Her soul was torn wings, beating wings, broken wings bravely beating. Her soul was a sudden sharp smell of animal terror. Saliva at the corners of the contorted mouth. In the ruins of the abandoned house. Crumbling bricks, rotted floorboards. Underfoot lay a child's mitten stiff with filth. Underfoot a torn calendar, stained newspapers. Stumbling in the dark laughing dared to take your hand *Come this way You know the way I think you do you* teasing taunting eyes glassy-festive high on methamphetamine picking her way through the filth to the mattress that was known to her stained beforehand with her blood or the blood of someone very like her *Where've I seen you before have you seen me* smiling as if laughing inside where her soul was filth and it came to you in a wave of disgust like filthy water in your mouth that maybe she was known to you, in your memory known to you, in an earlier life you had been a schoolteacher until the school was barred to you, the children's eyes sharp as beaks pecking, maybe the woman had been a child once in your classroom in St. Ignatius Middle School in an earlier life before the school was taken from you and all seemed clear to you suddenly *Yes I am lonely, it is my loneliness that feeds me* beneath the shower in the sharp-stinging needles of water, such pleasure, such happiness, now the filthy things have been stripped off, the stained things and the smells and blood swirling down the drain and gone and the fragrance of soap in your nostrils the simplicity of the naked body armored in flesh covered in wire-hairs thrumming with life, with heat *My loneliness I have come to love* this is why you were born, strip all else away and this is it. ⊠

"How miraculous is life!" Brian Aldiss emailed us exuberantly following our acceptance of this delightful whimsy. We had obviously caught him at a good moment. "I am wild with a suppressed excitement concerning the writing of The Walcot Novel *(working title), in which I am now 55,000 words deep," he went on. "My main characters are sailing down the Grand Canal in Venice—as I too seem to be." In 2005 Brian will have two new novels available:* Jocasta *and* Sanity and the Lady, *the latter scheduled from PS.*

Tarzan of the Alps

Brian W. Aldis

An old and weary van, travelling southwards across the plains of Patagonia, stopped ten kilometres outside the village of Esperanza. The driver of the van, a corpulent man by the name of Jose Pareda, climbed out and walked slowly round his vehicle. He looked under the bonnet. He scratched his head and returned to the steering wheel.

When he started the engine and went into gear, alarming noises sounded. Pareda switched off the engine.

Again he climbed out, to stand on the shady side of the vehicle, where a faded sign read, "Pareda's Mobile Cinema." He scanned the horizon hopefully.

The horizon was flat and unpromising, bereft of trees or foliage. However, movement soon appeared on it. Pareda waved his hat and shouted to attract attention.

A heat haze made the distant figures uncertain. As they drew nearer, a man could be seen with a dog and perhaps a dozen head of cattle. The man left his hound to guard the cattle and came on alone. He was middle-aged and presented a dusty appearance.

"What are you doing here?", he asked. "What made you stop in this barren place?"

Pareda explained he was hoping to get down to the city of Rio Gallegos, but his clutch was broken.

"You're in luck, friend." said the other. "My son Pedro works in a garage in Esperanza. He can fix the problem. Leave your vehicle here. Come with me to my house." He said his name was Alejo Galdos.

So Pareda went with Galdos. Galdos had eleven thin cattle. They drank at a spring, after which Galdos and his dog drove the herd back to his estancia. As they were securing the animals, Galdos's wife, Maria, came out of their dwelling to enquire about their visitor.

Illustration by David Kendall

Maria was warmly consoling regarding the broken clutch and pressed Pareda to come into their house and make himself comfortable.

The house was poor and built of adobe, and showed many signs of neglect, but the two men sat themselves down on benches while Maria fed the dog, after which she produced a jug of thin red wine for her husband and their guest.

She was a well-built woman, matronly of figure, who complained of sciatica and failing eyesight. Almost the first thing she said to Pareda was that they were down on their luck. The men also had their complaints, and warmed to one another when they found they had something in common: the stupidity and failure of their fathers.

Pareda's father had owned a flourishing cinema in the brilliant city of Comodoro Rivadavia. Unfortunately, he had allowed the cinema to be burnt down. The fire had spread to the whole street. He was sued for a great deal of money and threatened with death by several irate householders. In desperation, he hanged himself. Pareda, then a teenager, had managed to save a good many reels of film from the blaze. With them, he escaped from town and had established his travelling cinema.

"But, alas, these days people have television and computers and no longer wish to see my films. Admittedly, some are very old, but are not old things valuable?"

Galdos agreed that old things were better than new and sipped his wine sparingly.

"And old dreams are better than new ones," said Maria, but her husband would not go as far as that.

Alejo Galdos admitted that he and Maria lived very poorly. They had recently bought a PC with an email facility, but had never possessed a television set. It was all the fault of his father. This terrible man with gold teeth had become rich from banking in the distant capital, Buenos Aires, and had amassed a fortune through his liasons with a corrupt governor. The governor had been shot and now there was a law suit over the money which had been going on for years—the very money Galdos claimed was his by right.

So Galdos was parted from wealth and the comfort wealth could bring. He had taken up ranching, but his heart was not in it. His life and Maria's had become more and more empoverished. After many hard years, he had even forgotten how to read or write, and it was all the fault of his beast of a father with the gold teeth.

The two men shook hands across the table. Fathers were a bad lot. But they were now friends, and already Maria had emailed their son Pedro at the garage in Esperanza to repair Pareda's clutch, and to give the vehicle a general overhaul.

Pareda was more than grateful and tucked into the meat dish Maria provided.

"We unfortunates must live without hope," he said, with a gallant flourish of his knife. "Despair is a noble thing!"

"Yes, exactly!", Galdos agreed. "It is the Argentinian philosophy!"

He passed round some slender cigarillos. All three of them lit up and drank down the thin wine and felt happy in each other's company.

And so it was that young Pedro fixed up the old van and 'Pareda's Mobile Cinema' was once more a going concern. Since Pareda had spent two nights at the Galdos estancia, enjoying their hospitality and getting quite drunk with Galdos, he determined to repay them with a free film show.

He drove his vehicle close to the porch of the adobe dwelling and set up his canvas screen so that Maria and Galdos could watch from their bench on the porch. When dusk was fading fast into darkness, and the stars were appearing richly overhead, he began to project his film.

Maria and Galdos were immensely excited. Here was a little good fortune at last.

It was an old film, shot in black-and-white. The title came up on the screen with a blast of music.

"What does it say, Maria? What does it say?", asked Galdos in extreme agitation.

Maria screwed up her poor eyes and read. "This film is called . . . "

"Yes, yes, what is it called, my dearest?"

"It is called 'Tarzan of the Alps'. Yes. That's it! 'Tarzan of the Alps'."

They watched the film enthralled. Mighty Tarzan swung through the great jungles from tree to tree. He gave his magical call. He was surrounded by elephants trumpetting and pushing down giant trees, by monkeys who were comical and loveable and obeyed Tarzan's call, and by superb parrots who alighted on Tarzan's shoulder. Tarzan also had a beautiful mate. She lived in a tree with him.

Tarzan outwitted a bunch of nasty white men. He fought with a lion and tamed it. He fought with a crocodile and killed it, wrenching its jaws apart.

And all this happened in the wonderful tall jungles of the Alps, which seemed to stretch on to eternity. There, it was clear, one might be forever wild, forever free, and never ever have to herd cattle.

By the time the film finished, Galdos and Maria were in tears, overcome with emotion at the brilliance of the film.

Pareda packed his equipment away. They implored him, weeping, to stay another night, but he would not. After fond farewells, the 'Pareda Mobile Cinema' van trundled away and soon was lost in the gloom of the night.

But Alejo and Maria Galdos never forgot the impact of the film they

had viewed. Night after night, they would close their door on the bleak open spaces surrounding their estancia and talk about the resounding cry of that great athlete, Tarzan, as he swung on lianas through the trees. They would try to recreate the call of the lumbering elephants and to mimic the chatter of the monkeys. And above all they would remind each other of the wonderful forests covering the Alps.

They had heard of the Alps. They knew those mountains stretched across part of distant Europe. But never had they dreamed that those mountains were home to such splendid wild life, such splendid wildernesses of jungle.

Often in his longing for that fecundity, Galdos would swear he would sell their poor herd of cattle and go to visit those alpine forests. Alas, he knew in his heart that the catttle would not raise enough money even to get him and his wife back to Buenos Aires.

Worn out at last, Alejo Galdos died. Maria held his hand until he breathed no more. His last word, delivered in a sigh, was "Tarzan."

Maria mourned her husband deeply. She resolved to keep on the cattle as long as she could. And then, amazingly, luck changed. The long-protracted lawsuit in the capital was settled in favour of Galdos's estate. A man in a suit, driven by a chauffeur in a smart car that never broke down, called on Maria Galdos and gave her, as her husband's surviving widow, a large suitcase full of money.

"What shall I do with all this?," she asked, surveying the miraculous inheritance.

"You could travel," suggested the man in the suit, as he moved rapidly back to his automobile.

Maria felt she was too old to travel. She called Pedro on the email, summoning him to her.

"Pedro," she said, when he arrived at the estancia, "You must have this money. You must fulfill your father's wish. You must go to see the forests of the Alps."

Pedro embraced his mother and swore he would tell her everything on his return. He went to the capital, bought himself a new alpaca suit and booked himself a seat on the next flight to Europe.

At last the family dream would be fulfilled. He would feast his eyes on those eternal forests depicted in that wonderful film his mother called 'Tarzan of the Alps.'

Lawrence Gordon Clark may be a new name to many readers of supernatural fiction but, in the guise of producer/director, he'll be much more familiar to the devoted fan base of BBC TV's much-missed Ghost Stories for Christmas *(featuring fine works from M. R. James and Dickens), the TV production of Steve Gallagher's* Chimera *and YTV's* Chillers *series. 'Original Sin' is the first of two stories we've bought from him so we're hoping his continuing TV work won't keep him away from the printed page.*

Original Sin

Lawrence Gordon Clark

We found the bones about three hundred feet down when we were drilling for extra storage space in the granite below the Federal Government Centre at Nine Men's Moor during the last emergency. In ordinary times , the operation would have been stopped at once while the archeologists and paleontologists and all the other ologists swarmed round and had their say. But, in the circumstances, a small team from Exeter University was allowed in to make what they could of it while we got on with the job.

They weren't a bad lot, as it turned out, and, because of what was happening in the world above, quite a sympathetic sort of feeling grew up between our work force and the scientists.

It was a major discovery, there was no doubt about that. Dr William Kay, who was in charge of their team, was very suspicious at first and asked us quite a lot of questions about how long we'd been working there, who had discovered the chamber and whether the bones had been there from the first and so on. I think he thought that someone had put them there as a sort of practical joke, like a student prank sort of thing. It wasn't until Ivan Heath, who was in charge of maintenance, lost his temper and asked him who the hell was going to play silly buggers with a few old bones when everyone was scared shitless about the world blowing up, that he really began to take things seriously.

From what we heard him telling the rest of his party the bones, and there were a great pile of them, seemed to come from about three million years ago, a time that he called the Pleistocene Age—I wrote it down and our son, David, who was in his last year at Bodmin Comprehensive, looked it up in the big atlas we bought him the Christmas before last.

There were several things that puzzled Dr Kay about our find. He used to come over to where we were working

and talk to us about it. The first thing was the number of the bones and the different types all lying so close together. He reckoned that it must have been a really big natural cave at the time, only closer to the surface than it was now, of course. He thought, at first, that it would have been some kind of natural disaster, like an earthquake or a volcano, which had sealed the cave when the animals were all huddled in there together. But then it turned out that there wasn't any evidence of a disturbance like that.

The other strange thing was that most of the skulls were missing.

"It's like a bloody menagerie of the early Pleistocene," he said. "I wish I could get more specialist help down here."

This was about four days after he had arrived. Movement had been restricted by government edict for the last two days then to prevent what the BBC called—"Straining national resources in times of emergency". In other words, blind panic among the city folk who seemed to think that they would be prime targets for an attack.

Everybody seemed hell-bent on getting to the West Country for reasons best known to themselves and we'd heard stories of the police, or even soldiers, blocking the motorways up near Bristol. It was mostly rumours from people who had met folk who'd managed to get through. Although why the hell they wanted to get to Cornwall with the nuclear subs at Devonport, the big airbase at Culdrose and the research Centre at Nancecuke, is still a mystery to me.

Anyway, Doctor Kay was so wrapped up in his discovery, it seemed, at times, as though he'd forgotten what was going on in the world outside and he was so full of enthusiasm when he talked to you about it that you got carried away with it, too. It helped you forget, as well. For a little while, at any rate.

Of course, it was different at home. Mary, my wife, who worked on the check-out at Safeways, said it was bedlam in there. What with the panic buying and the lorrys not getting through the road blocks up country, it wouldn't be long before there was nothing on the shelves at all.

Mary's the strong one in the family. She's a very calm sort of person who never speaks her mind without thinking things out first. A devout Methodist, too, but never one to ram it down your throat. We started going out when we were at school and got married when we were just past twenty. I've never looked at another woman that I can remember.

Mary and David had a bit of a set-to one evening. We were talking about how the Russians had got their big rockets ready again since this new chap whose name I can't get my pen round came in saying he'd make Russia great once more and we and the Americans and the others had stood up against him and things got back to how they

were a few years ago only worse because of the Russian submarine being sunk in the North Sea.

Anyway, Mary was saying that it was down to original sin and that Cain's murder of Abel was the first in a long line of killing that led to the mass destruction we all felt was threatening us now. Then David, who's doing Biology, Chemistry and Physics for his exams, said he didn't think God had anything to do with it and that we were a flawed species that evolution had doomed to extinction one way or another. You had only to look at how we were destroying the planet to realise it would be a good thing if we disappeared as quickly as possible.

They argued their way round the mulberry bush all evening until my head started spinning. All I could think was that for countries that had it in their power to house, clothe, and feed their people, to threaten each other with hydrogen bombs was sin, madness or both, whichever way you cared to look at it.

The Emergency, as it was called, slackened off for a bit after this and things got back to normal for a while. At any rate, they seemed to get back to normal because that's what the television and the papers were saying, but our lords and masters seemed to be as jumpy as ever, and we had orders to carry on our work as fast as possible.

It was during this time that the movement restrictions were lifted a bit and Dr Kay was able to get some of the bones back to the university where they could be carbon-dated so that an exact age could be put on them. He brought his daughter, Susan, back with him, too. David and I were doing a spot of crabbing out on the rocks north of Polzeath one Sunday and we met them when they were walking the cliff path to Pentire point. It was one of those sunny mornings when you realise how lucky you are to be alive and in such a beautiful place and how much of our time we waste or take for granted. (I'm beginning to sound like old Fisher who preaches at Mary's chapel.)

Any way, Susan and David got on like a house on fire. I could see that at once. She was very bright, about the same age as him and the upshot of it was they went off crabbing together leaving Kay to walk up to the headland on his own.

When I got back to the house Mary was doing the garden. She was a great gardener, Mary was, and the flowers in the front were looking beautiful just then. I suppose it was the relief now that we thought things were going to get better again but I near broke down and told her how worried I'd been about her and David. And how, when I'd seen David so happy and off across the rocks in the sunlight with a girl like that, I couldn't believe his future could be taken away from him.

Mary listened till I'd had my say and then we went upstairs without saying any more and made love to each other, warm and safe, until Mary laughed and

said it was time to stop acting like kids as David would be back for his tea at any moment.

Two days later, our gang discovered the chambers in the granite. Chambers or rooms. There wasn't any other way of describing them. It was like several rooms running from one to another-like very modern offices or flats—only they were deeper and wider than anything I've ever seen and the walls in the granite had been cut by some kind of machinery a lot more advanced than anything we were using. Whoever had made those rooms had had a great love for straight lines and right angles. When I first saw it I didn't like it at all but, after I'd been there a bit, I got very comfortable with it. I'm not a very artistic sort of person—Mary would probably laugh if she could see what I've just written—but the whole proportion of those rooms made me feel as if I'd come home.

But it was what we found in the centre of the complex that set the cat among the pigeons. Richard Godden was on the big drill that day and the engineer in charge was giving us hell to hurry up with the job, which showed that someone high up didn't believe all the talk about the tension cooling. Anyway, we were having our dinner break and Richard had kept on working round the corner when we heard the drilling stop. When it didn't start again I went to see what the problem was and found him just standing there, like he was in shock, shining his spotlight into the hole he'd made in the granite wall. I got another spot and shone it in, where he was looking.

It was a huge room he'd found with a round, shallow-domed ceiling we saw properly a bit later when we'd got the lights rigged. But all we could see then, what Richard was pointing at, were the skulls, row upon row of them, on ledges that had been machined out of the granite.

Doctor Kay went white when he saw them. A friend of his from Exeter who was something to do with the dating was with him. He said there was no doubt about it at all—the skulls belonged to the bones we'd found in the cave, and they were in the region of three million years old.

The newspapers were so full of the international situation that they didn't have hardly any time to give to our discovery at all. Nine Men's Moor was meant to be a secure area, although all the local people knew what was going on there and what it would be used for. David found a piece in the Guardian at his school which said something about a "mystery laboratory sealed in granite" but it didn't attract much attention as everyone was worrying too much about the future to give much thought to the past. David brought the cutting home with him and was very interested about what was going on. He was seeing quite a bit of Susan and that might have had something to do with it. Doctor Kay tried to get them

passes to come and look at the excavation but the security guard was taking himself seriously again, so David never got to see the caves after all.

Three days after that, only a week ago, in fact, Dr Kay came over to where me and the rest of the gang were having our midday break and said he'd like to explain what he thought he'd found and what it meant and how important it could be.

"Although," he said. "From what I heard on the radio this morning, it could be a little late for that."

The BBC news, which seemed to be more and more controlled by the All Party Coalition now, had started a series that morning called "Civil Defence at Home" and Mary told me that a lecturer at the WI had told them to stick brown paper across all

The windows and make sure the bath was filled up with water. It made me wonder a bit when I knew how deep we were drilling for the Federal Government Centre and how many tanks for water and fuel were being put in, not to mention the food storage facilities and the medical stores.

I asked Kay if he thought there was going to be a nuclear war and he paused for a moment and then told me he thought the chances were about fifty fifty.

"I never really believed it was possible before. When the Cold War was on there was a real balance of terror with its own rules. Both sides knew pretty much what the other was up to and could react accordingly. But nobody's used to thinking that way any more, there's no certainty of response now and both sides are very disorganised and frightened. And frightened people do very silly things."

I thought about what David had said about humanity writing itself out of the evolutionary process when he was arguing with Mary the other evening but I didn't say anything about it.

Anyway, Dr Kay went onto tell us what he thought he'd found and it was very interesting because it seemed to ring true with a lot of what I'd been thinking lately after that chat with David and the madness that seemed to have got into so many of us.

Dr Kay reckoned that we'd found the remains of a scientific laboratory that had been carved out of the granite three million years ago and used for experimenting on many of the different species that were around at that time. There was a much higher proportion of apes than anything else because whoever was conducting the experiment must have thought they were the most suitable for their purpose. The other remarkable thing was that these animals had been collected, not just from the local area, but from all over the continents of the world as it existed at that time.

Dr Kay was taping his talk and I'm listening to it now, as I write, so I can get down exactly what he said.

"You might ask, at this point," he went on. "Who the collectors and

experimenters were, since homo sapiens, to our almost knowledge, does not appear for at least another million years after this laboratory was sealed away in the granite. All I could answer to that is to say I have no firm idea but that I don't believe that they came from this planet and they couldn't get back to the one they'd come from for one reason or another. Perhaps their transport system was exhausted or perhaps their native planet could no longer sustain life. It's really impossible to say on the evidence we possess. I do think, however, we know what they were doing. They were on a mission of survival."

One very good thing about Dr Kay was that, although he was a very intellectual and learned man, he never gave you the feeling that he was talking down to you or there was anything he understood that you couldn't get your head round. Listening to him made me realise how much I wished David would go to university and how much I regretted not going to one myself because he made me understand what a fine thing the human mind could be and what good things it might do if only it could develop and learn and live without fear.

We went into the big domed room then and looked at the rows of skulls on their ledges. Dr Kay took on down and showed it to us. It was larger than most of the others with a rounder forehead and a curved area at the back and it looked pretty much like a human skull, but, when you looked very closely, you could see that it had been built up from one of the ape skulls with a series of precision bone grafts so finely done you had to use the magnifying glass that Kay was holding to see them.

"Like enlarging the engine compartment of a car," Richard Godden said.

Dr Kay smiled. "Exactly. And why would you want to do that?"

"To put a bigger engine in. Make it go faster."

"That's right. Only in this case it was a larger brain, superimposed on the limbic and mammalian cortexes in the apes so that it could use their nervous system."

"And what sort of brain would that have been?" I asked.

"The measurements we've made show it corresponds pretty accurately to the neo-cortex. The big brain humans have."

"But I thought you said that humans didn't appear for another million years?"

"That's right," Kay said.

"So where did they get the brain from?"

Kay took the skull back from me and returned it to its shelf. There were a few more up there about the same shape and size.

"I think they got it from themselves," he said. "It was their best form of survival. They probably couldn't manage without their life-support systems in the earth's atmosphere and they

wouldn't last for ever. So, they grafted themselves onto the most promising life forms they could find and returned them to their habitats to make their best way."

There was a silence while we took this in. Then someone said:

"So we are them?"

"Part of us is. The other part is anthropoid ape with a nervous system evolved from the crocodile. It might explain why we have our moments of madness."

I told David what he had said later that evening. Susan Kay had come round and they were helping Mary put the sticky paper on the windows. David felt much the same as Dr Kay about it.

"Don't you see, Dad? It explains it all—divine discontent, original sin, us striving to make things better and crudding up the environment, curing disease and creating overpopulation. Any other creature adapts to the norms of the natural world because it's part of it. But the better part of our brains come from somewhere else, so its ideas of perfection are alien and it's always trying to change the natural world into something it was never meant to be. We are the ultimate destroyers because part of us should never have come here."

A week later, that would be yesterday, at 12.14 pm (I looked at the time when it happened) I was in the big domed chamber tidying up the hole we'd made, when all the skulls started to chatter on their ledges. The rumbling, that had started low, got louder and louder and the vibration got fiercer and fiercer until it was hard to stand upright and the skulls on their shelves shook so hard that a lot of them fell off and rolled around on the floor. Then, after a long time, there was utter silence.

I knew what had happened, of course, and found I could only think of Mary who would have been in the chapel at the time where they were holding a meeting to pray for world peace. David had been going to the beach with Susan, I think, and Dr Kay had gone back to Exeter for the day.

Richard came running in then and told me that the rest of the gang, who'd been working in a gallery on the other side of the mine, had gone down under a rock fall. I went back there with him to see what we could do but it was solid with thousands of tons of granite. I only hope it killed them outright.

The entry shaft had stayed intact and I couldn't find it in myself to stay safe underground without knowing what had happened to Mary and David. So I put on one of the protective suits from the storeroom and got myself up the shaft and into the open.

It was black as night up there apart from the fires that were burning everywhere. Great swathes of dust were blowing around and the ground was flat as far as the eye could see. I walked as far as I could towards where the town should have been but after a

while, the heat from the fires stopped me.

I can only comfort myself with the thought that they couldn't have felt anything.

I came back here to set all this down on paper. I reckon Mary would have told me it was my duty. Richard ran a meter over me when I got back and told me I'd got a bad dose of radiation in spite of the suit.

I'm sitting in the big domed chamber with the skulls writing this. I suppose, in a strange sort of way, it's the beginning and end of it all.

James Lovegrove's recent publications include the novel Untied Kingdom *and the double PS novella* Gig. *Forthcoming are* Worldstorm, *likely to be the first of a big fantasy trilogy;* Provender Gleed, *a stand-alone novel; and a second short-story collection,* Waifs And Strays. *In the pipeline is a Young Adult novel,* Fallen, *expanding on the world James created an earlier short story, 'Wings.' 'Seventeen Syllables,' as you may be able to see, embodies his yearning for a life a lot less busy than the one he has. No, only joking.*

Seventeen Syllables

James Lovegrove

A moment of thought
The poet heeds his spirit
Brush falls on parchment

In the year of his fiftieth birthday, Dr Matthewson took a long hard look at his life and decided it needed simplifying.

There were, he saw, too many Things in it. Too many possessions, too many appurtenances. Too much extraneous baggage. Too many matters which demanded his time. Too many problems which were not of his making but which took up valuable acreage in his mind. Too much chaff and fluff and clutter. Too much that seemed to inhibit his enjoyment of living. Too much that he could do without.

Dr Matthewson longed for a lack of complexity. He longed for a life that was straightforward and unencumbered. He longed for a life that was as precise and economical as a Japanese poem, a life that could be encapsulated in seventeen syllables. A life like a haiku.

Think what he could do if he were just able to free himself up a little. Think what he could achieve if only he could gain himself a bit of breathing space. Think of the peace it might bring.

In five decades on earth, Dr Matthewson had accumulated a lot of emotional and material lumber. He resolved to be rid of some of it.

The unwise healer
Knowing all about bodies
Nothing about souls

He started with his mistress. She was not, in fact, that much of a burden. She made few demands on him, and the stolen hour which he shared with her every Wednesday afternoon was not something he would desperately miss. Indeed, for a while now he had been thinking that the fire had gone out of the tryst somewhat. Seeing her had, in its way, become as much a habit as anything, and the lovemaking was hardly more passionate, after five years, than

the once-a-month, listless, lustless coupling Dr Matthewson engaged in with his wife. His mistress was an excrescence he could easily shed. And so he did.

She took it well, all things considered. She said she thought she had known something like this was coming, and though a tear trickled from her eye and a single sob escaped her, she mostly managed to retain her composure.

It was, to Dr Matthewson, comforting that she was so little affected. It meant he had made the right choice. If she was only mildly upset by their breaking up, and he not upset at all, then perhaps he had made the disconnection just in time, while there were still some dregs of excitement left in the affair, before it had become completely meaningless. It was, perversely, good to end it before it fizzled out of its own accord.

They parted company with a handshake, and Dr Matthewson walked to his car with the bounce in his step of a man relieved.

> Vainly fluttering
> Trampled beneath careless heel
> Crushed butterfly

At home, Dr Matthewson announced to his wife that he was going to clear out the loft. How much stuff was up there? The place was crammed to the gunwales with papers, old furniture, rolls of carpet, discarded clothing, files, LP records, great swathes of Things which no one had any use for any more.

His wife expressed doubt, not so much at the course of action Dr Matthewson was proposing as at the strange zeal with which he was proposing it. The look in his eye worried her, and her concern doubled when Dr Matthewson rang a skip hire company and ordered a six-yard, drop-end skip to be deposited outside the house that weekend.

He spent all of Saturday and most of Sunday shinning up and down the loft ladder and hauling armfuls of attic jetsam out to the skip. In it all went: box folders containing bank statements and utility bills dating back years, an old (and now incomplete) china service that had been given to the Matthewsons on their wedding, various pieces of faded cartoon-patterned bed linen which had belonged to the children when they were small, some wooden chairs, some eight-mil home movie reels, some outfits and shoes Mrs Matthewson would never wear again, a number of the children's toys which had been stored away in the expectation of grandchildren (but the grandchildren had not yet materialised and perhaps never would), and some items of bric-a-brac which Mrs Matthewson had long been promising she would donate to a charity shop or try to sell at a car boot sale.

The skip was soon filled, and Mrs Matthewson then went through its contents, plucking out a few articles

she felt should be salvaged. She was horrified to find photo albums in there. Irreplaceable souvenirs of her and her husband's life together! She was even more horrified to find her wedding dress in there. She still had hopes that their daughter would find a nice man, settle down, and get married in that very dress.

Mrs Matthewson took the rescued items and stowed them in her wardrobe, resolved that her husband would never lay hands on them again.

Dr Matthewson surveyed the empty loft, the loaded skip. He felt good. When the lorry came to take the skip away, he felt even better. He watched a huge weight of impedimenta trundle off down the street. He had done well.

> Opening a door
> Leaping from rock to water
> Madness is easy

He soon realised, however, that he had only made a start. There was more that could go. His books, for instance.

Dr Matthewson and his wife were avid readers and the house was crammed with books. Shelves of them everywhere. Bookcases in every room, in every corner. But what use was a book once you had finished it? Keeping it then was an affectation. It sat and took up space and gathered dust, all to prove that it had been perused and digested. A useless memento. *You* knew you had read it. Why should you care if anyone else was aware of that fact?

Dr Matthewson's wife looked on appalled as he began clearing the shelves, stacking the books under his chin and carting them out to lay on the front drive. She tried to intervene, but Dr Matthewson brushed her aside. She remonstrated and he ignored her. Finally she resorted to rushing around the house grabbing all the volumes she wanted to keep. She had some first editions, some treasured childhood story compendiums, some broken-spined favourites that she read and reread. She managed to secure almost all of these before the shelf-emptying hurricane that was her husband reached them. Then she watched forlornly as Dr Matthewson three times filled up the car boot and drove to the town's rubbish tip, to deposit their library there.

> Written or spoken
> The destiny of all words
> Is wind and ashes

The house seemed weirdly bare. The denuded bookshelves gaped like empty cradles, like robbed graves. Mrs Matthewson shunned her husband for several days, while Dr Matthewson himself waited for a sense of lightness to set in, a sense of serenity. He had dispensed with so much. Now, at last, surely the mental peace he craved, the clear space in his brain, would be his.

Apparently not. Dr Matthewson felt no more contented than before.

What next? Something else must go. Some other Thing must be jettisoned from his life.

It wasn't too difficult for him to see that that Thing should be his job.

Dr Matthewson was senior partner in a thriving general practice that catered to the medical needs of over a fifth of the local community. Over the course of twenty years he had built up the practice to its current level of success and respectability by dint of sheer hard work and drive. He had spent more hours of every day than was conscionable receiving patients in his surgery and listening to their complaints and taking down their histories. He could not even begin to count the number of heartbeats he had listened to, throat glands he had felt, abdomens he had palpated, rectums he had wormed his finger into, rashes he had studied, pregnancies he had confirmed, tongues he had held down with a depressor, testicles he had twiddled, venereal diseases he had diagnosed, moles he had ordered removed, prescriptions he had scribbled, terminal prognoses he had delivered, deaths he had pronounced. Day after day he had lent a sympathetic ear to fretful and fearful souls, taking on their cares as his own, helping to make their lives easier if he could. And then there were the extra hours he put in: the evening admin meetings, the budget-balancing sessions, the general behind-the-scenes running of the practice. So much time which had not been time for himself.

Well, enough!

Dr Matthewson announced that he was retiring. He would be handing on control of the practice to the next most senior partner, Dr Gearing. He was sure Dr Gearing would continue to run it with the same care and attention as he himself had run it. The changeover would not discommode anyone in any way.

Naturally there were protests. Dr Matthewson was far too young to retire. He must stay on. His patients even organised a petition begging him to reconsider, but the petition, and the fact that they had gone to all the bother of organising it, served only to confirm to Dr Matthewson that they relied on him too much. The impingement of their lives on his was too great. How much less complicated everything was going to be when he no longer had to worry about Mrs Baxter's corns and Mr Wilberforce's arthritis and young Sondra Chaudhury's ongoing tribulations with eczema. How much smoother would his days go by when he was not constantly on his mettle, having to keep an eye out for the lump that was *not* benign, the symptom that could be innocent and just as easily could not, the pain in the chest that could mean myocardial infarction or just plain indigestion. For once, he might actually be able to relax. He had saved up a tidy pension fund for himself. Retirement was going to be like one long holiday.

When the tree is felled
The flowers it shelters curl
In sun-singed dismay

But boredom did not take too long to set in. The luxury of idleness soon became routine. Each morning: the newspaper, a leisurely breakfast, then a round of golf or a country stroll. Each afternoon: a trip into town to wander around the shops (and every so often he would bump into a former patient and in no time was being subjected to a whispered litany of recent ailments). Each evening: watch TV or a video or have dinner with friends (in the absence of books to read, this was what they had to resort to). Restlessness grew, and with it, dissatisfaction. Life was still not Spartan enough for Dr Matthewson. There still seemed to be too many incidentals laying siege to him from without. He had not found inner release. He was not sufficiently free from mundane paraphernalia, not yet totally liberated from the tyranny of Things.

A simple expedient, one that would help in the short term, was to abbreviate his name. He informed his wife that from now on their surname was Matthews. He even went as far as having the change confirmed by deed poll.

By this point the long-suffering Mrs Matthews—formerly Mrs Matthewson—had become thoroughly fed up with her husband's lunacies. It could hardly be expected that she should feel otherwise. She hinted many times that he might wish to seek psychiatric help, and when the hints fell on deaf ears, took to suggesting the same in no uncertain terms. But even when her suggestions became demands, Dr Matthews paid no heed. Psychiatry could not solve what was wrong with him. Only further simplification could do that.

He decided to break contact with his children. Neil, aged twenty-seven, lived in Sydney now, and was to some extent already estranged from his parents, having come out as gay when he was nineteen. The relationship he had with his mother and father was confined to infrequent, long-distance, short-lasting phone calls, and it was not difficult for Dr Matthews to opt not to speak to his son on the rare occasions when he rang. His wife could do the conversing for both of them, and if he himself happened to pick up the phone when Neil was calling, all he had to do was solemnly and wordlessly hand the receiver over.

Beth, aged twenty-nine, presented more of a problem in this respect, since she lived in London, not that far away, and now and then came down to stay for the weekend, often with her latest boyfriend in tow. Said boyfriend would each time be touted as potential husband material, only to disappear off the scene shortly afterwards. Beth was serially unmarriageable. She liked her job and irresponsibility and alcohol too much.

When Beth next visited, Dr Matthews did not speak to her or to Jim, her new beau. He acted as if neither of them existed. This, of course, led to an unpleasant scene, with Beth ranting at her father and calling him mad, then storming out of the house with Jim trotting bemusedly in her wake. Following that, Mrs Matthews herself screamed at her husband for a while.

Dr Matthews withstood it all stolidly, but inwardly he was distressed. His life was still, it appeared, far more sonnet than haiku.

Heaven lends to us
Happy daughters, loyal sons
Hell repossesses them

When his wife eventually walked out on him, Dr Matthews reckoned he had come one major step closer to his goal. All at once the house was silent. There was no presence in it but his own. He roved the rooms and garden, marvelling at the sublimity of solitude. No one else's opinions and sensibilities to consider. No one else's behaviour to have to take into account when indulging in his own. No one else to interfere and interrupt, to snap the delicate lace of his thoughts. Bliss!

But even this seeming paradise could not last. For one thing, there was the bother of having to run a household. That had squarely been Dr Matthews's wife's province, and with her gone, things swiftly went to rack and ruin. Nothing got cleaned. Nothing got laundered. Nothing got cooked. Nothing got tidied away. The refrigerator and freezer remained largely empty, the kitchen store cupboards largely bare. Dr Matthews had no sense of domestic economy, having had to develop none. He went out to the supermarket to buy only what he required for the next day or so. Then he would go out again. But the supermarket troubled him with all its brightness and choice, its countless aisles and meandering customers, its dullard checkout assistants and their plaguing enquiries such as "Would you like help bagging your groceries, sir?" and "Do you have a loyalty card?" He spent as little time on the premises as he could, darting in, raiding the shelves for what he needed, paying, hurrying home again.

Dr Matthews's situation got worse when writs and affidavits arrived from his wife's lawyers, petitioning for divorce and laying claim to a goodly portion of his income and assets. Perhaps the most galling aspect of this was that the divorce papers cited "unreasonable behaviour" as the grounds for legal dissolution of the marriage. Was it really so unreasonable to want tranquillity in a vexatious world? Really so unreasonable to wish to be disconnected and apart and free?

King of the forest
Tiger sits on moonlit rock
Feared, unloved and proud

Nonetheless, Dr Matthews did not contest the divorce proceedings. He gave in to every demand his wife made and signed every paper he was required to sign, employing his new, officially registered moniker, Dr Matt. He surrendered the house and its contents and most of his pension to his wife, and used what funds he had remaining to purchase a croft on a remote Scottish island.

There, Dr Matt lived surrounded by sheep, sea and mountains, and his existence was narrowed to a few basic prerequisites: warmth, food, water, shelter. He grew vegetables in a tiny plot, kept chickens, and once a week rode his bicycle to the nearest town—not much more than a village clustered around a small harbour—to purchase tinned and preserved goods such as meat and fruit, as well as the odd bottle of whisky. He exchanged no words with the locals beyond "hello" and "thank you," and made the five-mile return journey with full carrier bags hung from his handlebars, clunking heavily against the front wheel and throwing the bike off-balance.

The roof of his cottage leaked when it rained. The wood stove needed constant feeding and tending, else it would go out. The chickens laid fewer eggs than he would have liked and succumbed to all sorts of distempers and diseases. But still, for a while, Dr Matt was happy.

Pebbled shore, bare sky
Gulls wail over seething sea
The end of the world

Dr M was content, and the rhythm of his days was the rhythm of nature. He slept, and woke, and ate, and worked on his vegetable plot, and went out searching for firewood, all according to the length of daylight and the disposition of the seasons. How much time passed, he had no idea. Two years, perhaps three. He thought—he truly believed—that he had achieved what he had set out to do. He had made himself a being of pure necessity. Nothing came or went in his life that was not an essential requirement. His bed was a mattress on planks, with blankets but no sheets. His clothes were shapeless and threadbare, segments of fabric that served no function other than to keep him from being naked. He had grown a beard, so there was no longer the toil of shaving, and the only part of his hair he trimmed was the fringe, solely in order to prevent it from getting in his eyes. His mind was now almost entirely open to the act of contemplation, and he waited for the profound thoughts, the understanding, the insights, the serenity to come flooding in. Surely these must come flooding in. What, otherwise, was the point of this eremitic loneliness? This contraction of life to its fundamentals? This paring away of every shred of superfluity? Why, otherwise, had he

subjected himself to this radical self-surgery?

He roamed his little, raw patch of the planet under torn-cloud skies and glaring sun, and shivered by the stove as snowdrifts piled against the side of the cottage, and dug with spade and trowel into the grudging ground, and beach-combed for driftwood to burn, and waited for his just reward to arrive.

At last he determined that something else must be holding him back. Some few shackles remained, binding him to mundanity. Somehow, he was still not yet sufficiently unchained from Things.

But what? What was there left? What more could be possibly do without?

The answer came to him one evening in late autumn. By then Dr M was an startling, starveling figure. His eyes stared and his cheeks were hollow and he walked with a stoop. In just a few years he had aged considerably. He was fifty-odd going on eighty, and in the light of his gas lantern that evening, sniffling with the onset of a cold, he understood, with sudden and absolute clarity, that it was his body itself that was to blame. A body had innumerable demands. It had to be fed and clothed and shod, its bowels and bladder needed regular evacuation, its hair and nails had to be tended, its various aches and pains had to be heeded, it expected continual periods of rest. It was a demanding vehicle. It craved attention almost all the time.

If he could somehow lessen its grip on him . . .

> The spirit spirals
> In ever tighter circles
> When too much alone

Dr M prepared himself for the operation. He tied a torn-shirtsleeve tourniquet around his right thigh, pinching off the femoral artery. He soused the serrations of his wood-saw with whisky to disinfect them. He stoked up the stove in readiness, making sure the tip of a chosen log was maintaining a nice white heat.

He hoisted himself up onto the kitchen table, stretched the bare right leg in front of him, took a few glugs of the whisky to calm his nerves and serve as a mild anaesthetic, then set to work with the saw, severing the leg.

He had remembered, vaguely, reading once in a medical journal about a German man who did this selfsame thing to himself in order to demonstrate that he had the courage and the willpower to go through with it. The man had had a friend standing by, poised to call the emergency services once the dismemberment was completed, and surgeons had sewn the leg back on and the man was able to walk again. Dr M did not have such a friend standing by, nor for that matter did he have a telephone. All he had was himself and his determined conviction that removing one limb was going to propel him to perfect quintessence.

Of course it was disgustingly painful. Hideous to hack through his own quadriceps muscles, to carve grittily through his own femur, to sit there writhing and howling in a sea of his own released blood. Of course it was. And of course it was awful then to have to grope for the log that was sticking out of the stove door and use its glowing end to cauterise the stump. He shrieked and gagged as the stench of his own charred flesh clogged his nostrils.

But he did it, that was what mattered. He carried out the amputation successfully, and when it was over he eyed the removed leg, which had tumbled off the table onto the floor and lay there leaking blood, and he was able to fix his sweating, reddened face into an expression that closely resembled a grin.

Then he passed out.

Endlessly dreamless
Pure oblivion cradles
Dreamlessly endless

The adjustment to life with one leg was not easy. M hopped hopelessly about the cottage, waiting for the agony that was coming from his truncated leg to abate. It would not. He drank all the whisky he had and it made scant difference. He ate but was unable to keep food down. He struggled around like this for a couple of days, trusting that things would get better, but they did not, and he began to wonder if he had not made a dreadful mistake.

But the mistake was not, as one might suppose, the severing of the leg. The mistake was in unbalancing himself. The lack of a leg had made his life harder. Might not the lack of the other leg even things up?

So M put himself through amputation again, this time without any whisky to soften the trauma. (After all, he could not have cycled into town to buy some more booze, and he certainly could not have hopped all that way.) He perched himself on the table again, which was tarred with blood from the previous operation. He had a cauterising log ready. He tourniqueted his leg. He raised the wood-saw.

Suffering teaches
We soon learn the true lesson
Pain begets more pain

Crawling on the floor, hauling himself with his arms and elbows, M perceived that he had attained equilibrium once more, but, sadly, at the expense of his humanity. He was now little better than a half-person, a shuffling creature, a dweller among the dust and detritus, an insect, a mite.

Perhaps that was no bad thing. Mites had few qualms and queries. Mites went through life simply as they were. This was a reduction in circum-

stances that could well prove beneficial to him after all.

After two days and nights as a floor-slitherer, however, unable to leave the cottage, pissing and shitting where he lay, it dawned on M that he had succeeding in creating more, not fewer, difficulties for himself. Foolishly he had thought leglessness a boon, but instead it had had the result of transforming him into a Thing himself. Were he not living isolated, alone, he would now be in a hospital somewhere, having to be cared for; and when discharged from that hospital, he would be wheelchair-bound and would forever after have to rely on nurses and physiotherapists and home helps and all sorts of other aids and assistance in order to be able to survive.

M was ashamed. He had become one of the very objects he had striven so hard to escape. He was now useless baggage. A living hindrance. An appurtenance, an excrescence.

How could he live with himself?

A blade turned inwards
Brings truth with its cutting edge
A man faces himself

As the blood purled out from his radial and ulnar veins, washing over his forearms, gloving his hands, dribbling onto the floor beside the discarded kitchen knife, M had a glimpse, a revelation.

He saw the world not as a place of traps and snares and dragging encumbrances but as a finely spread web of connection and interdependence. Everyone balanced everyone else. What affected one person in . . . this web affected his neighbour too, and so on and so forth, ripples of event shimmering out through strands of relationship, the whole delicate artefact quivering with mutual incident.

He turned his head and with failing eyes regarded the sky through the window, where clouds bumped and jostled together against the blue. Fraught by winds, the stratosphere teemed with collision. Nothing up there existed in isolation, not even the sun, whose exertions warmed the seas that spawned the clouds and whose refracted light generated that backdrop of unvarying azure.

His gaze dropped and he beheld a woodlouse, making its careful way along the floor beside the expanding blood puddle. Its myriad legs on either side rippled in perfect succession. M admired its segmented carapace, strong enough and flexible enough to protect the woodlouse and enable it to roll itself into a ball when it felt threatened. Just a tiny, insignificant insect, but it was an emblem of longevity. Its species had survived, in various evolutionary incarnations, for millions upon millions of years.

There was confluence and eternity all around. The two were one and the same. M saw this at last. Life entailed not separation but immersion. Life was an epic poem that never ended. Life was too complex for words.

The poet drops brush
His dream both freed and captured
His work is now done

Fresh (kind of) from working with Jane Frank on her massive William Hope Hodgson volume The Wandering Soul *upcoming from PS later this year, Mike Ashley's most recent works are* The Gernsback Days *and the anthology* The Mammoth Book of Roman Whodunnits *(Quidunnits, perhaps?). He is now looking forward to the three-volume* History of the Science Fiction Magazine. *This article—the first in a short series—provided him "... a chance to celebrate a new magazine and look back at the most successful magazines of the past."*

How Big's Yours...?

Mike Ashley

weighs up the scale of collecting sf magazines

Another new science-fiction magazine. The magazine you hold in your hand is actually the 300th new sf magazine since they all began back in 1926, well 1923, really, if you include *Weird Tales*, but then who's counting?

Uhm, well, I am. I try to keep track of all science fiction, fantasy, weird fiction and suspense magazines—which is the subject area that *Postscripts* covers—and that's a pretty large territory. If you tried to collect them all—and just in the English language—you'd have nearly 8,000 issues. That excludes crime and mystery magazines—that's an even bigger territory.

And yet 8,000 issues doesn't really sound a lot, does it? Not over eighty years. That's about a hundred issues a year—two a week. You could keep up with that, and maybe even read them all. Well, that is if you started in 1923 and our now in your nineties.

It's not so easy doing it backwards. I don't have all 8,000, though I'm fairly close. And I dread to think what all of those would cost to acquire these days. Maybe I'll work that out some day.

But I thought it might be nice to celebrate the birth of a new magazine by looking back at all the others.

No, it's okay, I'm not going to go through all 300 titles from *Abaddon* to *Yankee Science Fiction*. But I thought it might be interesting to look at the most prolific magazines—which ones notched up the most issues?

Did you know, for instance, that you could amass half of those 8,000 issues if you collected only the top twelve longest running magazines. And that all these magazines reached the halfway stage, or just over 4,000 issues in total, a little over

half-way through their lifetime, in 1966. And that you'd have a quarter of them if you collected all the magazines from the 1950s alone.

Ah, but hang on, I can hear you say. Just which magazines am I including? After all, I mentioned the category "suspense" above. So does it include that short-lived magazine *Suspense* based on the American radio series?

Yes.

And the 1960 magazine *Shock!* Which saw just three issues?

Yes.

Ah, but what about that other weird-menace digest from the sixties, which took over from *Shock!* and was called *Shock Mystery Tales*.

No.

Ah-ha! So, it's a fix. The figures are doctored to make it exactly 300 titles.

No they aren't. Look, I'm not going to get into an argument about definitions. You'll just have to take my word for it. Believe me—I'm a researcher!

Actually the big problem isn't over what's sf/fantasy/suspense, though there is the inevitable borderline with the weird-menace magazines like *Horror Stories* and *Terror Tales* (neither of which are in, incidentally). No, the big problem is over what constitutes a professional or semi-professional magazine.

This problem's always been around, though it didn't hit the sf/fantasy magazines until the 1960s. There have been amateur magazines and "little" magazines for over a century. The early science-fiction magazines were all issued by professional publishers. Hugo Gernsback launched *Amazing Stories* in 1926, William Clayton *Astounding Stories* in 1930, and Street and Smith took that over in 1933. Soon afterwards, in 1934, the first real small-press magazine appeared, *Marvel Tales*, from William Crawford's Fantasy Publications. It was part of a rebellion against the poor quality contents of the magazines by that stage. Ever since then there have been those fans who have gone that extra mile and rather than produce a fanzine, or amateur magazine, have tried to produce a top quality, professionally printed magazine, which may still have sold primarily by subscription, but which also strove for newsstand distribution.

These semi-professional or small-press magazines were pretty thin on the ground until the 1970s but then, as the professional sf magazines began to fail, and as computer technology allowed for easier and better production, the number of semi-prozines grew like crazy. Today you can't judge by quality alone, and the Hugo rules on circulation or frequency are not that helpful in the long term. After all *Interzone* gets lumped in with *Locus* in the semi-professional category, which has never made sense to me.

So forget all about definitions. I've made my own judgement based on my years of collecting and studying these magazines. I've included all those magazines that

I regard as being semi-professional for some or most of their career and excluded all those that are pure "amateur." I've included all magazines where the fiction is predominantly sf, fantasy or weird, but excluded those which are predominantly mystery or horror without the supernatural element. I've also excluded regular anthology series (like *New Writings in SF* and *Orbit*) unless that series was itself a continuation of a magazine (like *New Worlds* and *Weird Tales*). And, of course, I'm only talking about magazines which feature fiction, not those which are predominantly non-fiction and which may now and then run a story. That's all you need to know. So stop arguing.

The changes in the Hugo award categories, though, are relevant. In 1973 the magazine category was dropped and professional editor introduced, because of the rise of the anthology series, and the semi-prozine category was introduced in 1984. We can see that rise in the semi-prozine from an analysis of the total number of magazine issues.

On my list I have 110 semi-prozines and 190 prozines. I've left magazines like *Weird Tales* in the prozine category even though currently it's really a semi-prozine. If we consider first the total number of issues each year, the prozines outstripped the semi-prozines until 1990. From then on the semi-prozines have had more issues per year. And in the number of titles the semi-prozines outstripped the prozines as early as 1977.

For a while the prozines seemed to fight back. Under Dell *Analog* and *Asimov's* shifted to thirteen four-weekly issues a year from 1981 to 1995, but now they've combined issues so that there are only eleven issues per year. Until this year *Interzone* was the only surviving monthly magazine but now it too has had to face financial reality and has switched to bi-monthly. The semi-prozines usually only publish two or three issues a year, but there are now so many semi-prozines that in sheer volume they have taken over the field.

Another feature of the semi-prozine is that it's ideally suited to the countries outside the United States where circulation tends to be smaller. My list includes all English language magazines so covers those in Australia and Canada such as *Aurealis* and *On Spec*. These are all semi-prozines but the growing number of them in non-US countries is another reason why the semi-prozine now dominates the field.

Anyway, I've got ahead of myself. That's the trouble with definitions. In order to help double-check my figures, whilst I've used my own collection as the starting point, I've calibrated it against the indispensable CD-ROM *Science Fiction, Fantasy & Weird Fiction Magazine Index* compiled by Stephen T. Miller and William G. Contento and which no self-respecting collector should be without. This goes far further than my own lists because it includes all manner of borderline magazines.

Not just the weird menace ones, but also the hero pulps like *Doc Savage* and *The Spider*—magazines where the lead novel may frequently have been science fiction but where the support stories were all crime/mystery and where the magazine was also primarily a mystery-adventure magazine. It also includes many amateur magazines, and several borderline associational magazines like *The Thrill Book*, *Black Cat* and *Frank Reade Weekly Magazine*. It also covers magazines like *Science & Invention* and *Omni*, which certainly ran a lot of sf, but were primarily popular science magazines. I've excluded them, though I had a lot of soul-searching about *Omni*. Thus the Miller/Contento index can boast it indexes over 1,000 different magazines and 14,600 individual issues. So there's quite an outer shell around the sf yolk that I'm concentrating on.

So, let's play with a few statistics.

I said earlier that with just over 8,000 issues spread over 80 years it averaged 100 issues a year. But it actually took five years to get to the first batch of 100 issues. If you'd starting collecting with the first issue of *Weird Tales* in March 1923, the 100th magazine issue you'd've bought would have been the March 1928 *Amazing Stories*. It only took a couple of years to notch up the next hundred, and by the end of 1934 your collection would have totalled 499 issues, in fact 519 if you'd also acquired the British boys' weekly *Scoops*, the first British sf magazine. The 1000-mark was passed in November 1941 and 2000 in February 1953.

The fifties were the high point of the sf magazines. The first year in which there had been over 100 issues of the sf/fantasy magazines had been 1940, with 120, but it had dropped below 100 again in 1943 and did not rise above until 1950, with 140. But then the sf boom, as it's been called, took hold. In 1953 there were 219 issues and in 1954, 215. I ought to make it clear that I'm counting issues as per their cover date. I'm aware that most magazines appear at least a month before their cover date and, with bi-monthlies and quarterlies, up to two or three months. But I'm not about to complicate things even more. I'm sticking to cover dates, so stop sharpening your pencils, or clicking your mouse, or whatever you're doing.

The total dropped below 200 issues a year in 1955 and 1956 but just crept over in 1957 at 201. That's the last time it's ever exceeded 200. By 1961 it had dropped back below 100, and though it's bobbed up and down since then, reaching as high as 155 in 1990, it's tended to hover around the 100-mark ever since. I'm writing this before the end of 2003, but my estimate of the total for the year is around 63 issues, the lowest it's been since 1938.

But it's dipped before. There were only 64 issues in 1972, but the field clawed its way back. That was when the semi-prozine started to grow. Today the growing field is probably the webzine, which I haven't included in these totals (I'm not even

sure how to). I've no idea how the future of the webzine will fare or whether the genuine article will once again claw its way back. We must wait and see.

The sf magazine is overwhelmingly a US phenomenon. I've only counted English-language magazines, but over 80% of those issues originate in the US. I've not counted British editions of US magazines—I'm sure of you will think I should do. But original British magazines account for 15% of the total issues, and Australia and Canada nearly 5% between them.

The first individual magazine to hit 100 issues was *Weird Tales* in April 1932. *Amazing Stories* reached 100 in August 1934 and *Astounding SF* in March 1939. *Wonder Stories*, which by then had become *Thrilling Wonder Stories* made it in January 1940.

These remained the leaders for years, *Weird Tales* reaching 200 issues in July 1941, *Amazing* in December 1945 and *Astounding* in July 1947. *Thrilling Wonder* never made it to 200, folding with its 189th issue dated Winter 1955 (though there were two later reprint issues published under the *Wonder Stories* title). *Amazing*'s companion, *Fantastic Adventures* reached 100 in October 1950, making them the only stable mates to both top the century. However *Fantastic Adventures* was laid to rest in March 1953 after 129 issues when it was merged with its bright new digest-sized sister *Fantastic*. You could argue that although *Fantastic* began as a separate magazine, when it was merged with *Fantastic Adventures* it was a continuation of the original pulp. I'll come back to that later.

In 1953 *Amazing Stories* slipped to bi-monthly—it had staggered issues earlier, being quarterly for a while during the War. *Astounding* on the other hand had been defiantly monthly since 1933 and eventually it caught up with *Amazing*. Amazingly this was with the 300th issue of both magazines, in November 1955. Thereafter both magazines remained side by side, passing 400 issues each in March 1964 until *Amazing* faltered in June 1965, switching to bi-monthly. From then on *Astounding*—or rather *Analog* as it had become in 1960—has remained the field leader, passing 500 issues in July 1972 and 600 in November 1980. June 1992 saw its 750th issue. It should reach 900 in April 2005.

But what about the British magazines? *New Worlds* reached its hundredth issue in November 1960 and actually celebrated the event—surprisingly none of the US magazines had celebrated any of their centenaries. *New Worlds* even commissioned Brian Aldiss to contribute the story "Old Hundredth", so far as I know the only sf story with a title commemorating such a publishing event.

New Worlds struggled on and by sheer determination and bloody-mindedness Michael Moorcock made sure it reached its 200th issue in April 1970, but it has floundered since then through all kinds of incarnations. No other British magazine has yet exceeded 200 issues though *Interzone* is just a year away.

I said at the outset I was only counting English language sf magazines, and I'm not about to try and cover all the non-English ones, but it's worth noting that quite a few of these have surpassed the 100 and even 200 mark. The French *Fiction* reached 412 issues before succumbing to fate in 1990, but Japan's *Hayakawa S-F Magazine* is still going and has now exceeded 570 issues. And both, incidentally, began as their country's editions of the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (*F&SF*). *F&SF* overtook *Amazing*'s total in 2002 to become the second most prolific sf magazine. If we were to include all the foreign-language editions of magazines I think *F&SF* and *Galaxy* would far exceed anything else. However my data on non-English language magazines is a little rusty so I'll save those statistics for some other day.

So, it's about time to reveal the top ten sf magazines with the most issues. After the title I give the date of the first issue. The totals given are the number of issues published as at the end of 2003. Some magazines have adopted the method of treating double issues as two issues, so that their grand total of issues appears to be greater than the actual physical number. Well, I've ignored this dastardly plot. The figures I give are for actual copies you can hold in your hands.

1. *Analog* (formerly *Astounding*) (January 1930)885
2. *F&SF* (Fall 1949)618
3. *Amazing Stories* (April 1926)602
4. *Weird Tales* (March 1923)329 (*see below*)
5. *Asimov's* (Spring 1977)317
6. *Galaxy* (October 1950)262
7. *New Worlds* (Summer 1946)221
8. *Fantastic* (Summer 1952)208 (*see below*)
9. *Interzone* (March 1982)192
10. (*Thrilling*) *Wonder Stories* (June 1929)191

Only two other magazines exceeded 100 issues, if you exclude *Omni*, which reached exactly 200. These were *If* with 176 and *Fantastic Adventures* with 129. As I mentioned earlier *Fantastic Adventures* was merged with *Fantastic*, so a case could be made for them being one continuous magazine. If so, their combined total is 337, making them the fourth most prolific magazine. And before you start sharpening your mouses again, you may have noticed that I haven't included in the total for *Weird Tales* the four issues where the published lost control of the title and issued *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* instead. Since regaining the title the publisher has included those four issues in their cumulative total.

The top three are so far ahead that we need not worry about them being overtaken for at least twenty-six years—assuming *Amazing* is not re-incarnated yet again. Only *Asimov*'s and *Interzone* can do any gaining on that title. *Interzone* has a good chance to make it up the top ten, even at its present bi-monthly state, as it should overtake *Fantastic* in three years and *New Worlds* in five. Maybe sooner.

Two other titles we should acknowledge. *Startling Stories*, the wonder-filled companion to *Thrilling Wonder* notched up 99 issues before folding in Fall 1955. Why doesn't someone acquire the title and issue a special 100th issue?

And gaining fast on *Startling* is Gordon Linzner's *Space & Time*, with 98 issues, and it should celebrate its 100th during 2004. That will be the first semi-prozine to reach the 100 mark. It started life as an amateur magazine produced at school, but has improved in quality and status over the years.

So *Postscripts* has plenty of benchmarks to aim for. Let us wish it well on its voyage.

But what about the editors of these magazines? Who has edited the most sf/fantasy magazines? Well now, that's far more complicated and requires an article all to itself.

As this debut issue of Postscripts went to press, Ramsey Campbell had just finished the first draft of a new novel, Secret Stories, *which will be appearing from PS next year. Meanwhile, May 2004 will see the PS appearance of his novel* The Overnight *(you'll never stay late in a bookstore again) and, from Tor Books, a new hardcover of* Alone With The Horrors, *featuring an expanded introduction and Ramsey's very first published story (dating from a 1961 fanzine).*

Direct Line

Ramsey Campbell

As Sharpe strode into the passage under the railway he heard a woman talking to herself ahead. Since the last of the lights had been vandalised overnight, the tunnel was flooded with darkness. He wasn't about to be daunted by that or by her, even if she was homeless or mad. As he halved the distance to her, the train he'd just left passed overhead as though the July heat had congealed into an elongated clap of thunder, and he glimpsed her clutching at her face. "No," she cried, high-pitched as her footsteps and their echoes as she fled. An object clattered down the wall to join the rest of the litter. Sharpe was opening his mouth to ask her to retrieve it when he saw it was luminous.

An abandoned hypodermic to which it lent a poisonous green glow distracted him from immediately seeing that it was a mobile phone. Even he recognised that it was expensive, the kind of item his pupils at school boasted about. It weighed less than a tiny skull. When he brought it not too close to his ear, he was greeted by a rush of static that seemed for a moment to be trying to form words. The noise sank into the dark as the phone was extinguished, and he hurried to catch up with its owner. Wastefulness offended him as much as litter.

The tunnel opened onto the road to the school. The road was rowdy with schoolboys, some of whom nudged each other at the sight of him. Had the woman been intimidated by the mass of them? She could have taken refuge in any of dozens of grimy houses split into secretive flats or in one of the alleys strewn with refuse. He was holding up his find as if this might draw her out of hiding when behind him a boy said "Sharpy's got a mobile now. He can't say nothing about ours."

Sharpe swung around to confront the twelve-year-old's unnecessarily small face, which grew smoothly innocent. "Perhaps you saw the lady this

belongs to, Lomax. She ran out of there not a minute ago."

The boy's stunted crony Latham peered up from under his brows as though out of a lair. "We thought she must of been raped."

"We looked for who done it and we seen you."

"I was attempting to return the property she dropped. I hope you would have done as much." When this provoked two identical disbelieving stares he said "You were asked to tell me where the lady went."

"Behind them houses like she couldn't wait to have a shit," Lomax said, pointing to the alley Sharpe had just passed.

"No, it was them like she had to piss," said Latham, indicating an alley beyond the exit from the pedestrian tunnel.

Sharpe hadn't time to rebuke the vulgarity, whether it was automatic or deliberate. He sidled down the nearer alley, past bulging waist-high plastic bags torn open by animals or kicked asunder by children. Halfway down he met a transverse alley overlooked by the backs of two streets. There was no sign of the woman, but another at an upper window turned her head to keep an offensively suspicious eye on him. When he called "I've lost property for someone" it neither assuaged her stare nor attracted the owner. He stowed the mobile inside his jacket as he left the alley, ignoring questions and suggestions about where he'd been and why.

Lomax and Latham were even less eager than usual to reach the school. He caught up with them at the entrance to the schoolyard packed with uproar and furtive misdeeds, those that bothered to be furtive. "Did you give it to her, sir?" Lomax enquired.

"Did she like it, sir?" said Latham.

Their untypical enthusiasm made their meaning clear, but he wasn't going to waste time on it. "I shouldn't have expected any sense from the terrible Ls," he said.

He was entering the school when the bell began to clang. He helped herd the scholars to the assembly hall and joined his colleagues on the stage, from which he fixed his stare on his class near the front of the long hot room. The general restlessness lessened as the headmaster marched to his lectern. Mr Thorn let his gaze roam until there was silence, which turned more inert as he addressed the question of self-sacrifice. Soon he was asking five hundred boys to think of items they could live without. He had just cited mobile phones when one rang.

For once it didn't belong to any of the boys, though it was set to the remains of a chorus from the *Messiah* with a disco beat: "Hal-lel-lu-jah, hal-lel-lu-jah, lu-jah, lu-jah, lu-jah . . . " As Sharpe glanced along the rank of his colleagues he realised that several were gazing at him. "Excuse me, head," he murmured, "not mine," only to demonstrate something like the oppo-

site by retreating into the wings. He snatched out the mobile and thumbed the key that bore an icon of a vertical receiver. He was about to speak when the phone did so in a woman's voice so impatient it left politeness behind. "Got it?"

Sharpe responded in a whisper, if a loud one. "Yes" was all he said, since it seemed obvious.

"Can you bring it?"

"Where?"

"Usual place." As he concluded she had less language to her than the worst of his pupils she added "It's Sue."

His own terseness was designed to interfere as little as possible with Mr Thorn's speech. "Where again?"

"What?" Even more suspiciously she asked "Is this Janey?"

"If she's the lady who owns the phone she dropped it. Perhaps you could—"

"Wrong number. I don't know any Janey. I'm not Sue either."

Presumably she had run out of denials. A sound like a wind through a bone replaced her voice. He poked the button inscribed with a supine receiver and was putting the mobile away when it rang again. Mr Thorn faltered irritably in the middle of a word. Sharpe jabbed the first button and hissed "Yes?"

At first he heard nothing but static as the green glow of the mobile isolated him in the dimness. When it spoke, the voice was barely distinguishable from the mass of thin sound, and he had to strain to grasp the words. "Give it back."

"That'll be Jane, will it?"

"Give it back."

The shrill voice was so unsteady it seemed close to dissolving into the static. "You need to tell me where you are," he said.

"Don't."

"How else would you suggest I do as you asked?"

"Give it back."

"You may collect it this afternoon if you wish," Sharpe said and quelled the call.

He stayed offstage until Mr Thorn said "Use the day wisely" as usual. The folding seats and then their occupants produced sounds that might have accompanied the collapse of the roof. As Sharpe appended himself to the parade of teachers, the headmaster beckoned him. "Important calls, Kenneth?"

"I think the police may be interested."

Mr Thorn's bland chubby face twitched and underscored its receding hairline. "The more that can be resolved internally the better. We don't want to gain a reputation as a school that has to keep calling the police."

"It isn't any of the boys this time. I've a strong suspicion this belongs to somebody we'd want to keep away from them."

"By all means do so at your earliest convenience."

Illustration by Oliver James Crowther

"I intend to," Sharpe said and applied some dignity to descending from the stage. He thought of entrusting the phone to Mr Thorn or the school secretary until lunchtime, but suppose either of them answered it and sent the owner into hiding? He hadn't time to explain the situation when his class was bound for the classroom. He strode in pursuit so fiercely that some of the boys in the corridor lowered their voices or even made way for him.

Too many of his pupils strewn about the classroom looked ready to be amused by him. It was clear that Lomax spoke for them all by enquiring "Did the woman you was chasing want you, sir?"

"Sit down. Sit down. Sit down now." Once a similar formula quietened them at last Sharpe said "She wants her phone. Who can tell me how to switch it off?"

No other question he had ever asked had brought a fraction of the enthusiasm. When he succeeded in hushing the uproar he gave the mobile to Latham, since the boy and his associate were on the front row. "It's off, sir," Latham said, fingering a button.

"Well done, Latham. Let's see if you can do as well with algebra."

Apparently the comment sounded like a joke. Sharpe returned the unlit mobile to his pocket and talked through the equations he'd chalked on the board after yesterday's last class so that he didn't have to turn his back. The virtually uniform blankness that confronted him only stiffened when he asked if there was anything that anybody hadn't understood. "Heads down, then," he said wearily and watched them duck to their exercise books like cattle to sparse parched grass.

How could they fail to enjoy mathematics? It enshrined truths that had lasted and would last as long as the universe. It gave shape and stability to life, and everything depended on it. If they couldn't appreciate its beauty, how could they resist its excitement? It was the universal language and a system of belief immune to change. Rather than grow depressed by the sluggish ruminations or the pretence of them all around him, he strolled to look over the shoulder of one of the few budding algebraists. He was watching the solution to an equation appear on the page under small inky fingers—he thought life had no greater satisfaction to offer him—when an insect larger than it had any right to be came to life.

It buzzed silently as it writhed against his chest until he dragged it out to wriggle on his palm. "What have you done to this, Latham?"

"Means someone's trying to get you," Latham said over the general laughter.

"They may continue trying," Sharpe declared and shut the phone inside the teachers' desk, where it struggled on its back before growing dormant. In his hand it had felt unnaturally vigorous, desperate to move, and

the possibility that it might recommence crawling about in the desk distracted him more than the other outbursts of restlessness he had to subdue. If the desk had locked he might have left the mobile there instead of taking it to the staffroom.

"That's not like you, Kenneth," the English master said with a flutter of his eyelids. "Expecting a date?"

"Most emphatically not," Sharpe said and covered the phone on the staffroom table with a teaching journal. The mobile had to accompany him to his other morning classes, however. In the last one it seemed to wriggle for an instant in his hand as though unwilling to be abandoned to the desk. He shut the lid and wished he could have nailed it down.

For once he was nearly as eager as his pupils for the lunchtime bell. He buried the mobile in an outer pocket, only to have to rest a hand on it in case any of the pickpockets tried to filch it as he hurried through the school. More boys than he suspected had permission were swaggering or sneaking out of the gates, but he hadn't time to interrogate them. Could Jane—he felt uncomfortable being on first-name terms with her—have trailed him to wait until he left the school? More than once he seemed to glimpse a tattered scrawny form pacing him more or less on all fours behind the houses on the way to the police station. It must be a dog draped in some of the trash it had scavenged.

The police station was at the far end of the street from the railway. Beyond the glass doors of the low concrete block, youths lounged against the enquiries counter while an old couple sat on straight chairs and looked nervously out of place. Two trills of the bell on the counter were required to bring a constable out of the office. "Can you wait a few minutes, sir?" she barely asked Sharpe.

"A lady dropped this."

"I'll get a lost property form," the policewoman said with visible relief, and reappeared with a clipboard. "Your name, sir?"

"Sharpe. Kenneth Sharpe, but I ought to say I think this may belong to one of our local drug dealers. I believe I was called by one of her customers earlier."

The policewoman let the clipboard fall. "Do you wish to make a formal complaint?"

"I don't think I've the evidence to do that. I couldn't identify the caller. I just thought you should be aware what kind of person may be reclaiming the phone."

"You think it's likely they'd come here for it if they're what you say."

One of the youths sniggered, and Sharpe recognised him from years ago: Latham's older and even less virtuous brother. "Not if you told them to come here," Sharpe confined himself to saying. "I thought if they rang, someone might arrange to meet them in plain clothes."

"Have you done much investigating yourself?"

"I'm a teacher," Sharpe said, meaning yes.

"You'll have checked the last number that called you, then."

"I must confess I haven't."

She tapped keys too swiftly for him to follow and raised the mobile to her face. "No last number. It might as well have been nobody."

"The boy I asked to switch it off for me must have done that." Sharpe restrained himself from glaring at Latham's brother and said "Can you really not learn anything?"

"Best if you keep it, sir. You can let us know if something significant comes up. You're at the school down the road, are you? We can always find you there if the lady gets in touch."

Did the policewoman think his find too negligible, or might she even disbelieve him? As he stalked out of the building he heard another snigger and almost swung around in case he caught her sharing the derision. She hadn't called him sir as often as she could have and, besides, he knew that many of the boys used the word as a gibe. Perhaps she had. He strode angrily back to the school, failing to overtake or identify a group of boys emitting smoke that he was almost sure wasn't tobacco, and left the mobile in the office.

The last period of the afternoon returned him to his own class for a geometry lesson. He was feeling close to conveying the beauty of a theorem when the school secretary knocked at the door. "Can you turn this off, Mr Sharpe? I haven't time to keep answering it."

"I thought it had been switched off." About to confront Latham, Sharpe realised the policewoman must have revived the mobile. "Not you, Latham," he nevertheless said and offered the task of killing the phone to the most numerate pupil. "Did you say you took some calls, Miss Dodd?"

"One. I didn't think it could be for you. They just kept saying they wanted something back."

"That will be the lady who lost it. Who can find me her number?"

All the boys began to clamour. It seemed safest to leave the job to the numerate boy, but he looked puzzled. "Says there wasn't anybody."

"Better stick to figures, Jarvis." Of course the woman had withheld her number. Sharpe collected the mobile and held it out to the secretary. "Anything amiss, Miss Dodd?"

She shook her head while the class giggled at his choice of words. She might have convinced him if she hadn't hesitated another second. As soon as the lesson petered out, having failed to recapture the communication he had thought he was establishing with more of the class than usual, he made for the office. "What exactly was the matter, Miss Dodd?"

"I just didn't like the feel of it."

"Which you're saying was . . . "

"Like it wanted to crawl out of my hand." With a laugh apparently intended as disparaging she added "I expect I was distracted. I nearly dropped it because I thought someone was hiding behind the railings."

She could do with an English lesson, he thought. The railings of the schoolyard were inches apart and less than an inch thick. He took the mobile to his classroom and set about marking homework. As he penned cross after dispiriting cross the green ink put him in mind of the glow that had led him to the phone in the tunnel. He couldn't help growing tense in case the mobile sprang to life, and once he seemed to glimpse a figure watching him between entirely too few railings. Miss Dodd's fancies must have impressed him more than they had any right to. When he glanced up, the street was deserted except for a momentary flurry of movement above a kerbside grid. Without doubt it was an effect of the heat, which also made him mop his forehead.

At least the street was still deserted when he left the school. Whatever his class might be up to was no longer his concern. Could the tunnel under the railway be where Jane met her customers? When he peered down it he saw nothing except litter. A low restless heap several feet long was scraping against a wall in the depths of the gloom.

More passengers than usual in his carriage on the train had mobile phones, unless he was more aware of them. The spectacle of so many people talking to nobody visible made him feel threatened with having to do so. He mustn't allow it to turn him against using the train; his car had been vandalised once at the school, and Mr Thorn's response had been so guarded that Sharpe had felt accused of bringing the place into disrepute. He did his best to ignore the voices all around him while he gazed out at the embankment strewn with litter that twitched and jerked with the passing of the train. He could almost have thought the disturbance was following him.

Most of the litter fell short of his station. The trees shading the streets were too mature for vandals to destroy but surely too slender for anyone to hide behind. He had glanced back only twice by the time he reached his neat two-bedroomed single-bedded house. Usually closing the door behind him felt like being sure of the rest of the day: a simple dinner with half a bottle of wine, the news on the radio, a browse among the comfortable old novels that occupied the spare bedroom, a book to take to bed. Now all this felt brittle with the possibility of an interruption. He planted the mobile on the kitchen table and watched it as he ate, and imagined it stirred furtively more than once before it started to writhe so vigorously it knocked against his plate. As he seized it and jabbed the appropriate button he thought of disguising his voice in case the caller

wasn't the owner. Disgust with the situation provoked him to demand "Yes?"

Static rushed at him, bearing but almost drowning a voice. "Give it back."

"We've already established I need to know where it should be taken."

The static rose to meet him, and he had the impression, all the more unpleasant because irrational, that the speaker was doing the same. "Give it back."

"Are you incapable of saying anything else?" All at once Sharpe's temper deserted him. "Is it the effect of your drugs?"

There was silence or rather wordlessness for so long that he knew he'd scored a point. At last a thin desiccated aspect of the static pronounced some of "Give it back."

"If you want your property I suggest you contact the police. I have."

Should he have added that? Wouldn't it make her afraid to reveal herself? Perhaps she was too brazen or too befuddled by drugs not to do so. When there was no response beyond a sluggish flurry of noises too shapeless for words, he ended the call. He felt he'd shown enough responsibility for one night, and tried to remember how Jarvis had switched the mobile off. He must have mistaken the formula, because halfway through the triumphal procession from *Aida* the mobile set about diminishing Handel.

Sharpe grabbed it from the low table it was sharing with *Nicholas Nickelby* and poked the rampant icon, then the prostrate one. This didn't earn him much of a respite. Verdi's procession was still on the march when the phone recommenced abridging Handel. He jabbed the keys again and thought of flinging the insistent object in the dustbin. Instead he paused the compact disc while he tramped with the phone to his bedroom, the most distant room. He shoved the mobile under both his pillows and leaned on them as if it might give in to his hopes and suffocate.

Not even its ditty did. He heard it several times during the section of the opera he forced himself to appreciate. It persisted throughout the news, after which it refused to let him read so much as an uninterrupted page. Surely the battery must run down soon, but it had lost none of its vim by the time his eyes began to ache. He retrieved the mobile from its lair to bury it under a cushion in the front room and under *Nickelby* as well.

How often did it ring as he laboured to sleep? He couldn't tell when the tune reduced to idiocy was only in his head. He wished he hadn't let the phone into his bedroom. Once, as he started awake from almost no doze at all, he thought he felt it crawling under the pillows, unless somebody was groping in search of it or something it had left behind was coming to a kind of life. He reared up to seize the light-cord, and as he uncovered the sheeted mattress he had

the impression of turning over a stone. Was the patch of darkness on the sheet only the shadow of his head? Since no amount of rubbing the mark with the underside of a pillow had any visible result, he lowered his head into the dark.

He dreamed he slept more than he did. In the morning he stumbled down to glare at the phone, mockingly silent now. At least the day allowed him to put enough distance between them and, he hoped, to think how to dispose of his burden. On the train he felt trapped by ringtones, especially by the threat of hearing the one he'd grown to loathe. In the passage from the station he caught up with a trail of spicy smoke that none of his fellow commuters seemed to find worthy of remark. Was one of the boys in the street the culprit? Sharpe's eyes were smarting with his attempts at detection by the time he reached the school.

As he trudged to the assembly hall he met Mr Thorn. "No interruptions today, I trust," the headmaster murmured.

Sharpe thought this worse than unfair, not least because several boys had overheard, but restrained himself to saying "I hope so too."

He was able to continue until early in his first lesson. He thought he'd snagged the imagination of some of the class with the concept of infinity until a phone burst into the theme from a television horror series. "I thought I'd switched it off," Lomax said, less an apology than a complaint that Sharpe couldn't help feeling was aimed at him, especially when the boy added with a fraction of a grin "It's for you, sir."

"Bring it to me."

Once the boy had finished sauntering up to him Sharpe managed to turn the phone off before shutting it in his desk. "Aren't you going to answer it, sir?" Lomax said.

"You may collect it from the office after school. Heads down to your work now. Silence. Heads down."

Sharpe's triumph was rather undermined by Miss Dodd, who looked wary of accepting a mobile from him when he detoured to the office on the way to his next class. He would have welcomed a mid-morning break and a longer one at lunchtime, but he was in charge of the yard. As he watched for misbehaviour and swooped to deal with miscreants, he kept being confused by the heat and his lack of sleep—kept glimpsing movements too large for a spider but otherwise as thin beyond the railings. Of course nothing was there whenever he gave in to the temptation to check.

Before lunchtime was over he knew he was the butt of a joke. In less than an hour three boys with mobiles told him they had a call for him. Their expressions were sullen or bewildered or both, which he put down to slyness if not to drugs. The first two exhausted his patience, and he sent the third to explain himself to the headmaster. Sharpe suspected that the hellish Ls

were the instigators of the prank even before Latham's mobile interrupted the elucidation of a theorem in the final lesson. "It was off," Latham objected.

"Exactly like your friend's, no doubt. Do tell us all who's calling."

"Dunno," said Latham, having brought the rudimentary tune to an end. "It's for you, though."

"Unluckily for you I've heard that more than once too often. I'll have the truth this time."

"It is," the boy protested with an aggrieved air. "Maybe it's your dealer. My brother said—"

"All this tomfoolery was his idea, was it? I rather think if anybody's dealer is calling it will be yours. Let me speak to them at once."

"It's not. They never call me. I've not got none."

"Which means you have." With an odd sense of sleepwalking Sharpe darted to wrench the phone from the boy's grasp, only to be met by silence as flat as the earpiece. "Show me the number that rang," he ordered.

Latham dealt a key a resentful poke and displayed a blank screen. "See, I didn't know."

"Go and convince the headmaster of that if you can. The rest of you, heads down."

Should he have taken the boy to Mr Thorn? The class would have degenerated into chaos in his absence. Without order you had nothing, a point that Latham proved by not returning. Presumably he'd stolen home, unless he was meeting his dealer. The thought that Sharpe could be responsible for this lodged like hot ash behind his eyes. He was returning Lomax's phone at the end of the lesson when a thirteen-year-old brought the message that Mr Thorn wanted Mr Sharpe in his office.

"Yes, head."

"I've just had to deal with one of your boys." As if the name might be written there, the headmaster frowned at the papers arranged on his desk before saying "Latham."

"He did come to see you, then. We haven't lost all control."

"That may seem to be the question." Mr Thorn lifted his gaze, which appeared to hope to see more than it did. "He says you accused him of buying drugs in class. I take it you've some proof."

"I didn't quite say that to him, but I certainly wouldn't discount the possibility."

"Best kept to yourself unless there's evidence, Kenneth. And then he says you assaulted him."

"Assaulted, good heavens, I think not." Sharpe had a disconcerting sense of having dreamed the incident or of dreaming now. "I took a phone away from him," he said. "Phones in class are still against the rules, I believe."

"By force."

"No more than necessary. Really none at all."

"Would his classmates agree with you, do you think?" As Sharpe's sense of injustice stopped up his words, Mr

Thorn said "I'm hopeful that I've persuaded him to accept your apology on Monday, but it will depend on what his parents choose to do, his guardian, rather. Try and forget about it over the weekend and relax. If you'll forgive my saying so, you seem a little drugged yourself."

He maintained a guardedly sympathetic expression until Sharpe turned away in disgust. By the time Sharpe reached the door Mr Thorn was intent on his paperwork. "Head down," Sharpe muttered, no longer caring if he was heard.

He was being sent home as a wrongdoer, was he? Let the school and the homework he had still to mark survive without him for a few days, then. He ignored all the boys and their activities, however villainous, as he made for the station. If intervening earned him more blame than the culprits, it wasn't worth the risk.

A dog was grubbing among the rubbish in the middle of the passage beneath the railway. He heard its surreptitious feeble movements and saw the dull glint of its eyes, if those weren't hypodermics it was shifting. He didn't need to venture in to confirm how unpleasantly skinny it was.

The train felt like a refuge from it until he remembered he would be surrounded by phones. When he saw a man in the next carriage take a call and look around in quest of someone, Sharpe couldn't help crouching out of view, however irrational that was. Surely the man wasn't shouting after him as Sharpe hurried away from the train.

As soon as he was home he dashed into the front room to discover what the choked sound was. The battery must be low; the mobile wasn't ringing so much as rattling. Even when he leaned on the cushion the ragged noise refused to be suffocated. When the cushion began to twitch as if the phone was struggling to reach him, he left the room and slammed the door.

He couldn't eat much. He couldn't concentrate on music or reading or even the news. It seemed impossible that he could hear the half-dead sound through both the cushion and the door, but wherever he was in the house, he did. Was lack of sleep inflaming his senses? When the words of a Victorian chapter grew as restless on the page as he heard the mobile was, he retreated to bed.

At last his ears gave up straining to listen for activity in the house. In the early hours he awoke and hastened downstairs to return the mobile where he'd found it. He used its glow to search the passage for the owner. It wasn't she, however, who wobbled upright in the gloom, raising a face so withered it was featureless except possibly for eyes and parting tattered greenish lips to mouth "Give it back." As some of a hand groped to catch hold of him he managed actually to waken. He wanted to think he was still asleep,

because he heard a whisper somewhere near him.

He had to force himself to extend a hand into the dark. Once the light was on he identified the noise as the death rattle of the mobile. This wasn't reassuring; it sounded far too like a sluggish almost formless repetition of the phrase from his dream. As he struggled to believe he was imagining the similarity, he heard a feeble thumping downstairs—a knocking on a door.

He kicked away the bedclothes and stumbled onto the landing. The sound was in the front room. Something was bumping weakly but persistently against the far side of the door. He ran downstairs and flung the door wide, sweeping the object backwards. At once it began to crawl towards him in the midst of a dim flickering greenish stain that was the only illumination in the room.

He'd had enough. The police could deal with its antics however they liked. He dashed upstairs to drag yesterday's clothes on. Having picked up the mobile between finger and thumb, he dropped it in an outer pocket of his jacket and left the house. He mustn't be fully awake. He was making for the local police station before he remembered it had been closed last year.

The one by the school was the closest, half an hour's walk away. As he tramped in that direction, the houses shrank around their loudness. Beyond some of the open windows sleepless televisions flared, while other rooms were packed with discoloured silhouettes jigging to pile-driver music. Once a car screeched past him, full of boys who looked too young to be out so late and drawing behind it the smoke of a fat shared cigarette. He was glad not to recognise any of the boys, but shouldn't the police be dealing with them? If the absence of the law meant the police station was shut for the night he would leave the mobile outside.

The buildings closest to the railway were derelict but not untenanted. He had the impression that the district was as teeming with life in the heat as a corpse. The intermittent light of a single streetlamp apparently too tall to smash plucked at the rooms beyond the broken windows and brought shapes that might be alive lurching forward, dodging back. It kept spilling into the tunnel and retreating from the dark. Whatever lay in there was almost asleep if not worse; he couldn't judge whether the scrawny form was twitching with the instability of the dimness or with a trace of life. Sharpe didn't know of any other route to the police station from this side of the track. He ran through the passage, almost colliding with the opposite wall in his eagerness to avoid the denizen. He was within inches of the exit when a whisper, or at least the fragments of one, halted him. "Give it back."

Had he really heard it? The mobile in his pocket hadn't rung or stirred. As he faltered at the end of the tunnel he heard footsteps wandering towards

him. A woman whom he seemed to recognise was drifting from side to side of the street. He didn't move until he was certain, by which time she was mere yards away. "I believe this belongs to you," he said.

Her eyes glimmered dully with the light across the railway as she turned to look, first at him and then at the mobile. "I've got one," she mumbled.

"You wanted this. You've asked for it often enough."

"I've never."

"Then who's been calling," Sharpe demanded, "if not you?"

An uneasy glint began to surface in her drugged eyes. "She used to. She told me she was shooting up when she was meant to be at school."

"If it's your daughter you're talking about I rather think that's your responsibility." Sharpe was provoked into raising his voice over the approaching screech of wheels. "You can't expect us to keep children at school without the support of their parents."

"You're a teacher, are you? Maybe you're the kind that made her stay away." Just as accusingly the woman said "She called me when she od'd. She didn't know where she was and I couldn't find her in time."

Sharpe was about to retort to all this when the woman's gaze strayed past him. Her eyes widened and her face sank inwards from the mouth as she staggered backwards. She grew aware of the car full of boys, and her expression changed. Sharpe didn't know whether she tripped on the kerb or deliberately stepped in front of the vehicle. She sprawled in the roadway in time for the front wheels to crush her legs and her head. Her body jerked as the rear wheels caught her, and then she was utterly still.

As the car put on speed Sharpe dashed into the road, then turned away hastily, clapping a hand over his mouth. When he was able to speak without choking he pulled out the mobile and dialled 999. "Woman run over," he gabbled. "Boys on drugs in a car." He gave the location and ended the call and fled into the tunnel.

He was suffering more guilt than he understood. He only knew he didn't want to be linked with the woman's death. The glow from the mobile tinged the walls green and made them quiver nervously as he ran towards the light at the far end. When he glimpsed movement at the foot of the wall midway through the passage, he was able to imagine it was caused by the shaky glimmer. Then the shape produced thin limbs like an awakening spider and floundered towards him. He didn't know whether it seized his ankles with fingernails or needles or the tips of bones. It sounded barely able to produce a whisper that rustled like litter. "Yours now," it said.

⛶

Stephen Gallagher's novella 'Doctor Hood' appears in Ellen Datlow's new anthology The Dark *and his 'Jailbird For Jesus' in Maxim Jakubowski's* Best British Mysteries. *As well as two more stories underway for US anthologies plus* The Memory Of Water, *a two-hour drama for British TV. This year will see the appearance of Steve's first short story collection—the mammoth* Out Of His Mind, *due from PS in the summer—though he may not even notice it because he'll be hard at work on* Eleventh Hour, *a new series of 90-minute science thrillers for ITV.*

Restraint

Stephen Gallagher

"Did you get a look at the driver who forced you off the road?"

The woman in uniform had pulled up a chair to put herself right alongside Holly's hospital trolley, so that she could speak close and keep her voice low.

Holly made the slightest movement of her head, not even a shake, and was instantly sorry.

The policewoman spoke again.

"Your son thinks it was your husband's car. Could that be right? We've called your house and there's nobody there."

Holly meant to speak, but it came out in an unrecognisable whisper.

"Where are the children?"

"Out in the waiting room. They've been checked over and neither of them's hurt. Your neighbours said you left after some kind of an argument."

"I'd like some water."

"I'll have to ask if that's all right."

Holly closed her eyes, and a moment later heard the sound of metal rings sliding as the policewoman stepped out of the cubicle. Only a curtain separated her from the Saturday night crowd out in Casualty, and a pretty lively crowd they sounded.

She lay with a thin blanket covering her. They'd brought her back here after the X-rays. It was a relief to hear that the children were unhurt, even though it was what she'd half-expected. That short trip down the embankment would have shaken them up, but it was only their stupid mother who'd neglected to put on her own seat belt after making sure of theirs.

That car. It had come out of nowhere. But if there was one thing that Holly knew for certain, it was that Frank couldn't have been at the wheel.

Why? Because she and Lizzie had struggled to lift him into the boot of their own car, not forty-five minutes before. And assuming he hadn't leaked

too much and no-one had lifted the lid for a look inside, he had to be lying there still.

He certainly wouldn't be going anywhere on his own.

The young policewoman was back.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I had to stop an argument. I forgot to ask about your water."

"Where's the car?" Holly croaked.

"Still in the ditch," the policewoman said. "The accident unit can get it towed away for you, but you'll have to sort out the rest with your insurers."

This was seductive. The linen smelled clean, and felt fresh. Holly was all but exhausted. She'd been lifted, laid down, tended to. It would be so easy to drift. The racket right outside was almost like a lullaby.

But her husband's dead body was in the boot of her car, and the police were all over it even as she lay there.

"Can I get that drink now?" she said.

As soon as the policewoman was gone, Holly tried to rise up on her elbows. The effort it called for surprised her at first, but she made it on the second attempt.

She was in her underwear, her outer clothing piled on a chair that stood against the wall. She started to climb off the trolley and it hurt, but it wasn't too bad; nothing grated and nothing refused to take her weight. Her head ached and she felt a great overall weariness, but there was no one part of her that screamed of special damage.

The floor was cold under her bare feet. She stood for a moment with her hand resting on the trolley, and then she straightened.

At least she could stand.

She tweaked open the side-curtain and put her face through the gap. In the next cubicle sat a young man on a chair, holding a spectacularly bloodstained dressing to the side of his head. He was in formal dress, with a carnation in his buttonhole and his tie all awry. He looked like the type who owned one suit and wore it for all his weddings, funerals, and court appearances.

"I wouldn't call you a shitsucker," Holly said.

He blinked at her, uncomprehending.

"The man you came in with just did," she said.

He was up on his feet in an instant, and as he flung back the outer curtain she got a glimpse of the scene beyond it. The rest of the wedding party was out there, arguing with the staff and with each other. The bride in her gown could be seen in their midst. They rose in a wave as the bloodied guest was spotted hurtling toward them, and then the curtain fell back as if on the world's most energetic Punch and Judy show.

That ought to keep her policewoman occupied for a while.

Holly could feel the adrenaline pumping now, flushing her of all weari-

ness and pain, leaving her wired and edgy and ready to roll. She dressed as quickly as she could, and then instead of emerging into the open she started to make her way through one dividing curtain after another toward the end of the row. In the next occupied cubicle, an elderly West Indian man lay huddled under a red blanket. In the last sat a scared-looking woman with a small boy. They looked up apprehensively as she appeared out of nowhere.

"Sorry to disturb you," Holly said. "Where's the children's waiting room?"

It was around a corner and separated from the main area by a short passageway and a couple of vending machines. Under a mural of misshapen Disney characters stood a basket of wrecked toys, some coverless picture books, and some undersized chairs across which a sleeping form lay. She woke up Lizzie, and dragged Jack protesting out of the corner playhouse in which he'd made a den. He quietened suddenly when he looked at her face. She took them both by the hand and they followed a yellow line on the hospital floor toward the exit.

As they approached the automatic doors, Holly saw herself in the glass. But then the doors slid apart, and they sailed out into the night to look for a taxi.

In the presence of the driver they asked her no questions, and they gave her no trouble. Lizzie was twelve. She was dark, she was pretty, good at her lessons and no good at games. Jack was only six, a beefy little fair-haired Tonka truck of a boy.

The roads were quiet and the taxi got them to the place on the ring road in twenty minutes. It was a good half-mile on from where she'd expected it to be. The police were gone but the car was still there.

"Do you want me to wait?" the cab driver said, but Holly said no and paid him off.

She waited until the cab was out of sight before she descended to her vehicle.

The children hung back on the grass verge, by the deep earth-gouges that marked the spot where their car had left the carriageway. Spray-painted lines on the grass and on the tarmac showed where the accident unit had taken mea-surements. Down in the ditch, they'd left a big POLICE AWARE sticker on the back window of her Toyota.

The Toyota was old and it wasn't in the best of shape, but it was a runner. Usually. Right now it was stuck nose-first in the bushes along with all the windblown litter at the bottom of the embankment.

The keys had been taken, but Holly groped around in the wheel arch where she kept a secret spare. As she crouched there, she glanced up at the children. They were watching her, two shapes etched against the

yellow sodium mist that hung over the road.

Her fingertips found the little magnetic box right up at the top of the arch, deep in the crusted road dirt.

"Got them," she said. "Come on."

Lizzie was nervously eyeing the Toyota as she and Jack came scrambling down.

"What are we going to do?" she said. "It's stuck here. We can't go anywhere."

"We don't know that for certain yet," Holly said, tearing off the police notice and then moving around to open the doors. She didn't know what the procedure was, but they couldn't have looked inside the boot. However quick the glance, Frank would have been hard to miss.

Jack climbed into the back, without an argument for once, and Lizzie got into the passenger seat.

Once she was behind the wheel, Holly checked herself in the rear-view mirror. At least when she'd hit her head on the roof, her face had been spared. Her vision had been blurred in the ambulance, hence the need for an X-ray, but that had mostly cleared up now.

Still, she looked a sight. She ran her fingers through to straighten her hair and then she rubbed at her reddened eyes, but of course that only made them worse.

"Here goes," she said, and tried the engine.

It started on the second try. It was sluggish and it didn't sound at all right, but it caught just the same.

There was no point in trying to reverse up the banking, but she tried it anyway. The wheels spun and the car went nowhere. So instead she put it into first gear and tried going forward, squeezing on through the bushes.

For a moment it looked as if this wasn't going to work either, but with a jarring bump they lurched forward into the leaves. Switches bent and cracked as the Toyota forced its way through. She glanced in the mirror and saw Jack watching, fascinated, as foliage scraped and slid along the window only inches from his face. God alone knew what it was doing to her paintwork.

They came out onto what looked like a narrow limestone track, which was actually a soakaway at the bottom of the ditch. Staying in low gear, she began to follow its irregular line. After about a hundred yards she was able to transfer across to a dirt road, which led in turn to a lane. The lane took them under the ring road and then around and back onto it.

Once they were on hard tarmac again, Holly permitted herself to breathe. But not too much. There was the rest of the night still to be managed.

And then—perhaps even more of a challenge—the rest of their lives thereafter.

just rubble and the lines of a couple of walls, and that only visible at a low spring tide.

They crawled along, following the causeway with the Toyota's dipped beams. It didn't so much end as deteriorate steadily for the last couple of hundred yards. The concrete sections of the road had become tilted and skewed as the ground beneath them had given up any pretence of permanence. The sections had drifted, and in places they'd separated completely.

She had to stop the car and get out to locate the cesspit. When she turned back, Lizzie was out of the car and standing beside it.

She was looking around and she said, "Have I been here before?"

"Once," Holly said. "Before Jack was born. I brought you out here to show it to you, because it was a place my mother and father used to bring me. But it had all changed."

Lizzie tried to speak, but then she just nodded. And then her control went altogether, and her body was suddenly convulsed with an air-sucking sob that was shocking both in its violence, and in its unexpectedness.

Holly moved to her quickly and put her arms around her, holding her tightly until the worst of it passed. There in the darkness, out on the causeway, with the moon rising and this thing of such enormity to be dealt with. It would be no easy night, and no easy ride from here. Holly was only just beginning to appreciate how hard her daughter's journey would be.

"I can't do this," Lizzie whispered.

"Yes we can," Holly told her.

They got him out of the car into the pool and he floated, just under the surface, a hand drifting up into the pale shaft of dirtwater light from the Toyota's beams. The first stone sank him and then they added others, as many as they could lift. A sudden gout of bubbles gave them a fright. Holly was convinced that it caused her heart to stop beating for a moment.

They stood watching for a while to be sure of their work, and Holly sneaked a glance at Lizzie. Her face was in shadow and impossible to read.

"We should say a prayer," Lizzie said.

"Say one in the car," Holly said. "We need to get back and clean up the stairs."

Back on the motorway she watched for police cars, but she saw none. She *did* become aware of some lights that seemed to pace her for a while, but when she slowed a little the vehicle drew closer, and she was able to see that it lacked the telltale profile of roof bar and blue lights.

They had unmarked ones, of course. There was always that risk.

After a while, the headlamps in her mirror began to irritate her. She slowed even more to let the car pass, but it didn't. So then she picked up

speed and tried to leave it behind; two minutes later and as many miles on, it was still there.

It surely meant nothing, but now it was making her nervous. Lizzie seemed to pick up on this. She saw Holly's frequent glances in the mirror and turned herself around in her seat, straining at her belt to look out of the back window.

"It's the same car," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"The one that pushed us off the road."

"It can't be," Holly said.

Lizzie clearly wasn't certain enough to argue the point.

"Well, it's similar," she said.

Holly increased her speed even further, up and over the limit, and the wheel began to vibrate in her hands as if the Toyota was beginning to shake itself apart. It couldn't be the same car. She couldn't imagine who'd want to follow her, or why.

It seemed to be working. They were leaving the other car behind, but then she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She looked down. The oil light was on, the brightest thing on the dash, and the one thing she knew about a car's oil light was that on a screaming engine it signalled imminent disaster.

She slowed, but it didn't go out. Other warning lights started to flicker on around it. So Holly quickly put the car out of gear and indicated to move off the motorway and onto the hard shoulder.

They coasted to a halt. The engine was already silent by the time they reached a stop. It had died somewhere during the deceleration, she couldn't be sure when. As they sat there, the cooling engine block ticked and clanked like coins dropping into a bucket.

In the back, Jack was stirring.

"Fish and chips on the pier," he said suddenly.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Holly said. "It's got too late. Another time."

The other car was pulling in behind them, hazard lights flashing. Right then a big bus passed them at speed in the inside lane, and its slipstream rocked the Toyota on its wheels.

"Who is it, then?" Lizzie said, peering back as the other car came to a halt about fifty or sixty yards back.

"I don't know," Holly said. "Nobody."

Jack said, "Is it daddy?"

Holly looked at Lizzie, and Lizzie looked at her. There was a risk that Jack might have picked up on something then, but all his attention was on the road behind them. The following driver was getting out. Just as the car was an anonymous shape behind the glare of its own headlights, the driver's figure was a slip of shadow against the liquid stream of passing traffic.

"No, Jack," Holly said, an inexplicable anxiety rising up within her. "It can't be your daddy." She glanced down at the dash. All of the warning lights were on now, but that meant

She hadn't seen it happen. She hadn't even been in the house. She'd come home to find Frank lying awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs and Lizzie sitting with her head in her hands at the top of them. It might have passed for an accident, but for the letter-opener stuck in Frank's neck.

He wasn't supposed to be in the house. The restraining order was meant to take care of that. He wasn't even supposed to come within a hundred yards of his daughter, regardless of where she might be.

So, technically speaking, by being in the boot of the car he was in breach of the order right now.

Holly's first thought had been to pick up the phone and call the police. Her second had been that perhaps she could first wipe off the handle and put her own prints onto it and take all the blame. Then a sudden rage had risen within her. She'd looked down on his twisted body and felt no horror, no awe. No anguish or dismay. Just cheated. Frank had contrived to poison their existence while he was around; was there to be no end to it even with him gone?

She'd made the decision right then. They would not enter that process. If they moved quickly enough, they could put him right out of their lives and make a clean beginning. It would be a credible move; Frank could make an enemy in the time it took him to buy a newspaper, and any suspicion would be dispersed among the many. She'd looked at Lizzie and told her exactly what she had in mind.

We can't, Lizzie had said.

So Holly had sat her down and for ten solid minutes had laid out the choices for her, making sure that she understood how much depended on the next few hours. What was done was done, she'd said to her, and there's no changing it now. Don't feel you're to blame. It isn't a matter of right or wrong. Your father made all the choices that caused this to happen.

It had worked. Kind of.

They couldn't use Frank's car. Being in the motor trade he'd use whatever vehicle was going spare on the lot, and of late he'd been favouring a red coupé that was hardly practical for the job in hand. So Holly had backed her Toyota into the garage on the side of the house, lined the boot with a plastic decorating sheet, and together they'd dragged Frank through the connecting door and manhandled his body into it. Handling him was less of a problem than Holly had expected. In the unpleasantness stakes, Frank dead was hard-pressed to match up to Frank in life.

Once he was safely stowed and covered in a couple of old towels, they'd driven out to collect Jack from school and then set off for the coast. Fish and chips on the pier, Jack. It's a surprise treat. We just have to make a call somewhere, first. Somewhere quiet. You'll stay in the car.

And then the accident, and the plan forced off-course.

But back on it, now.

From the ring road, they got onto the motorway. The traffic was heavier here, and it slowed when the carriageway narrowed to a single lane. For a long time there was no visible reason for it, and then suddenly they came upon a surfacing crew laying down new tarmac under bright worklights; a colossal rolling tar factory that belched and stank like a dragon as it excreted a lane-wide ribbon of hot road, men with shovels and brushes working furiously in its wake, supervisors in hard hats chatting by their vehicles.

"Look, Jack," Lizzie said. "Big trucks."

"Big, big trucks!" Jack said with awe, and turned in his seat to watch through the back window as they left the staged drama behind.

"You like the big trucks, don't you, Jack?" Holly said as the lanes cleared and the Toyota picked up speed again, but Jack didn't answer.

Holly couldn't put a finger on it, but the Toyota didn't feel quite right after the accident. She could only hope that it wouldn't let them down, and that the outside of the car wasn't messed up too much. A police stop was something that she didn't dare risk.

The next time she checked on Jack, he was asleep. His mouth was open and his head was rocking with the rhythm of the car. He slept the way he did everything else . . . wholeheartedly, and with a hundred per cent commitment.

For a moment, Holly experienced a sensation in her heart that was like a power surge. This was her family. Everything that mattered to her was here, in this car.

And then she remembered that Frank was in the car with them, too. Good old Frank. Consistent as ever. Bringing a little touch of dread into every family outing.

They left the motorway, took a back road, and drove through a couple of darkened villages. There was a place that she had in mind. Out to the north and west was a great bay whose inland fields and marshes were almost unknown beyond the region. At low tide, saltings and sand-flats extended the land almost to the horizon. Much of what was now solid ground had once been part of the sea. In places the sea was claiming it back, pushing the coastline inland so that fields and even some roads were being lost forever. Hide something well enough in the part that was disappearing, and . . .

Well, she'd have to hope. It was the best she could come up with.

Somewhere along here there was a causeway road that had once led to a farm, long-abandoned. People had trekked out to it for a picnic spot when there was something to see, but then the shell had become unsafe and it had all been pulled down. Now there was

A few vans, a couple of big diggers. Some concrete bridge sections waiting to be trucked out and assembled elsewhere. The site had the look of a frontier fort, obviously not intended to be here for ever; but it was hard to believe that the scars it would leave on the land could ever easily heal.

They would, of course. The big machines would simply put it all back when they'd finished. It wouldn't quite be nature, but everybody would be going by too fast to notice.

She got out. There was the sound of a generator, banging away somewhere in the background.

"Hello?" she called out, and then glanced back at the car.

Jack and Lizzie were watching her through the side-windows. Pale children, out on the road past their bedtimes. They looked hollow-eyed and tired. Jack with his little round face, Lizzie like a stick-version of the teenager she'd soon be.

Holly gave them a brief smile, and then moved out to look for someone. She didn't want to get too far from the car. She didn't want to let them out of her sight.

She called again, and this time someone came out from behind one of the buildings.

He stood there, and she had to walk over to him. He looked like a toothless old shepherd in a flat cloth cap, knuckly hands hanging down by his sides. He could have been any age, from a well-preserved seventy down to a badly done-by fifty. Too old to be one of the road gang, he looked as if he'd been on road gangs all his life.

She said, "Is anyone in charge around here?"

"Never, love," the man said. "They all do what they sodding well like."

"Well . . . what do *you* do?"

"I'm just the brewman."

Holly looked around her at some of the heavy plant that stood under the lights, looking as if it had all been air-dropped in to remodel the face of Mars.

She said, "I've been having trouble with my car. Is there anyone who could have a look at it for me? I've got some money."

"Andy's the mechanic," he said.

"Is he here?"

"He's never here."

"Is it worth me waiting for him? Can I do that?"

"You can do whatever you want," and then added, as if it was his all-purpose charm to ward off evil, "I'm just the brewman." And then he trudged off.

She went back to the car.

"I'm fed up of this," Jack said.

"I can't help it, Jack," Holly said. "Try to understand."

"No," he said, barking it out like a little dog with all the passion and venom he could manage.

Rather than argue or get angry, Holly got out of the car again to watch for Andy the Mechanic.

The site wasn't quite as deserted as it looked, but it took a while to become attuned to it and to pick up the signals; the sound of a door opening and closing somewhere, a glimpse of a figure passing from one building to another.

She paced a little. She looked toward the motorway. For something to do, she raised the Toyota's bonnet and took a look at the engine in the vague hope that her car problems might have some blindingly obvious solution. But it looked like engines always did to her, grimy and complex and meaningless. There was a smell as if something had been burning, and when she held her hand out over the block she could feel the heat rising from it. She poked at a couple of the leads, to no effect other than to get her hands dirtier than they already were.

A voice called out, "Are you looking for someone?"

A man was walking across the open ground toward her. He was short, dark, powerfully built. He had at least six upper teeth missing on one side, but from the way that he grinned the loss didn't seem to trouble him.

"Would you be Andy?" she said.

"I might."

"Then I'm looking for you."

She quickly explained her problem in case he started to get the wrong idea, and he moved her out of the way so that he could take a look. It didn't take him long.

"Look at your fanbelt," he said. "If your drawers were that slack, they'd be down around your ankles. When that starts to slip, your battery runs down and you run out of power."

"Is it hard to fix?"

"If I said yes, you'd be more impressed," he said, and it was then that he noticed the two children inside the car. They were staring out at him.

"Yours?" he said.

"Yes," Holly said. "We've been to the seaside."

He looked at her, and then he looked at the car.

And then he said, "You take the kids and wait in the brew hut while I have a go at this. Tell Diesel to make you a cup of tea."

"Is Diesel the brewman's name?"

"It's what his tea tastes like, as well."

The brew hut was the oldest-looking and most battered of the site buildings. It was up on blocks, and reached by three stairs. The floor sagged as they stepped inside. There were about a dozen folding card tables with chairs around them, and a sense of permanent grime everywhere; it was as if engine oil had been ground into the floor, rubbed into the walls, coated onto the windows.

The brewman was sitting by a plug-in radiator, reading a copy of *The Sun*. It wasn't a cold night, but the radiator was turned up high and the air inside the hut was stifling. He looked up as they entered.

nothing. Everything always came on when the engine stalled.

"It is," Jack said.

Holly could tell him it wasn't. But she couldn't tell him why.

She heard Lizzie draw in a deep and shuddering breath, and let it out again. She found her daughter's hand in the dark and squeezed it once.

Traffic flew by, and the driver kept on coming. He was silhouetted against the flashing hazard lights of his own vehicle, pulsing like an amber heart.

Maybe he was your regular Good Samaritan, coming to offer them a hand.

Or maybe he was one of any number of things, as yet unrecognised and uncatalogued.

"He's been in the rain," said Jack.

Forget the oil pressure. Forget the ruinous cost of a thrown piston or a seized-up engine. Suddenly it was far more important to get herself and the children away from this spot.

But all the Toyota's power seemed to have gone. The engine turned over like an exhausted fighter trying to rise after a long count. She tried turning off the lights, and as their beams died the sound of the starter immediately improved.

It barked, it caught. All the warning lights on the dash went out, including the oil. She crashed the gears, checked her mirror once, and pulled out. Right now her only concern was to get moving again.

Jack was turned around in his seat, straining to see.

"Who is it, if it isn't daddy?" he said.

"It's nobody," Holly said. "Face forward."

"He's running after us."

"Jack," she said sharply, "how many times have I got to tell you?"

She was expecting him to give her an argument. But something in her tone seemed to make him decide, and he complied without another word.

Nothing that she was supposed to hear, anyway.

"It *was* daddy," she heard him mutter.

She knew it wasn't, but the thought was planted now and it spooked her. The sooner this was over with, the better. She wondered how they'd recall this night. Would it be etched in their minds so they'd relive it, moment by moment, or would it move to the distance of a remembered nightmare?

Jack must never know the truth. For him, the story would have to be that his daddy had gone away. He'd keep on looking forward to his father's return, but in time he'd grow and the hope would fade and become part of the background noise of his life.

For Lizzie it was going to be a lot trickier. But at least she was safe from her father now. Whatever problems she might have in dealing with the deed

and its memory, that was the thing to keep in mind.

Over a wooded hill, down into a valley, heading for home. Out there in the darkness were the lights of all those small towns that didn't rate exits of their own, but were linked by the road that the motorway had replaced.

That following car was back in her mirror. Or perhaps it was some different car, it was impossible to say. All she could see was those anonymous lights. This time they were staying well back.

Here came the roadworks again. Same stretch, opposite direction. Again, one lane was coned off and the carriageway lights were out. A few moments after they'd crossed into this darker territory, the driver behind her switched on his beams. They were the pop-up kind. She saw them swivel into view like laser eyes.

Just like on Frank's coupé.

Jack said, "Can we have the radio?"

"Not right now," Holly said.

"It was working before."

"I'm trying to concentrate."

He was closing the distance between them. Holly knew she couldn't go any faster.

She looked down and saw that her ignition lights were flickering and that, once again, her oil warning light was full on.

They passed what remained of a demolished bridge, with new concrete piers ready to take its wider replacement. Beyond the bridge site, just off the road, stood a mass of caravans and portable buildings. It was a construction village, a shantytown of churned up mud and giant machines. A temporary sliproad had been bulldozed into the embankment to give access to works traffic.

Holly waited until it was almost too late. Then she swerved across the lanes and into the sliproad.

Something thumped against the car, and in the mirror she saw one of the cones go tumbling in her wake. The car behind her was swerving to avoid it. It made him overshoot the turnoff, so he couldn't follow her. Now he'd be stuck. The traffic wouldn't allow him to stop and back up again. He'd be heading in the same direction for miles and miles.

Good Samaritan? Good riddance.

All the lights in this temporary settlement were on, yet nothing moved. Jack was craning, eagerly looking around the various site office buildings as they entered the main area. But Holly got in first.

"Yes, Jack," she said. "They have big trucks here."

It was almost as bright as day, and completely deserted. The yard was floodlit and every portakabin office had its lights on. Holly could see through all the uncurtained windows that every one of the offices was empty.

She slowed, and stopped, and looked around.

Holly said, "Andy told us to wait in here. Is that all right with you?"

"Whatever you like," the brewman said. "I'm Matty."

"He said you were called Diesel."

Matty's face fell, and he looked out of the window.

"The bastard," he said, and he got up and stamped off.

Given his mood and the likely state of his crockery, Holly decided not to press him about the tea. She ushered the children onto grimy plastic seats that stood against the wall. On the wall itself was tacked a selection of yellowing newspaper cuttings, all of them showing the debris of spectacular motorway crashes.

Jack said, "It stinks in here."

"Shh," Holly said.

"It *does*."

She couldn't tell him it didn't, because it did. And she couldn't agree that it did in case Matty was listening. So she only said, "It won't be for long."

They waited. There was a clock on the wall, but it was wrong. Jack swung his feet, Lizzie stared at the floor. Outside, a massive engine began to rev up somewhere close behind the building, making their chairs vibrate.

Jack said, "I'm bored."

"Play I-spy," Holly suggested.

"I'm not playing with him," Lizzie said. "He can't spell."

Holly said, with an unexpected tightness in her tone, "Then why don't we all just sit here quietly?"

There was silence for a while and then Lizzie muttered, rebelliously, "It's true. He can't."

And Jack agreed with her. "I've got a giant brain," he said, "but I can't spell."

Holly covered her eyes. She wasn't sure whether she was laughing or crying and the two children, equally uncertain, were watching her closely for clues.

This night would pass. It would somehow all be fine.

Keep thinking that, she told herself, and it might even come true.

"Mum . . . " Lizzie said.

Holly looked at her and saw the unease and the apprehension in her eyes. She might be sharp, but she was still only twelve years old.

"When this part's over," she said, "What then?"

She was choosing her words carefully because of Jack, but Holly knew what Lizzie was trying to say.

"We'll carry on as normal," she said.

"Can we do that?"

"We'll have to," Holly said.

There was a tap on the window. Andy was standing there out-side, raising himself up on tiptoe so that he could look in, and he beckoned to her.

She went out, and they walked over to the car together. He told her he'd left the keys inside it.

"Best I can do," he said. "I've tightened your fanbelt and cleaned off your plugs. They were blacker than Matty's fingernails."

"Thanks, Andy."

"You've got a lot of oil down there. I don't know where it's coming from. You might need a new gasket."

He showed her what he'd done and got her to feel the difference in the fanbelt, which she pretended to appreciate. She offered him twenty quid and he took it with no embarrassment. Then she went back for the children.

The brew hut door was open. Lizzie was alone inside.

Holly said, "Where's Jack?"

Lizzie had slumped down into her coat as if it was a nest, hands in her pockets and legs outstretched, looking at the toes of her shoes as she clacked them together. She said, "He followed you outside."

"I didn't see him."

"He wanted to look at the big trucks."

Holly went out. Jack hadn't gone over toward the car, or she'd have seen him. She stood in front of the brew hut and called out his name.

Nothing.

Lizzie was in the doorway behind her now.

"It's not my fault," she said defensively.

Holly went around by the side of the brew hut and found herself in an area lit by the most powerful of the overhead floodlights. Under the lights stood a few parked cars and a variety of dormant machines. She could hear the massive engine whose note had been shaking the brew hut's foundations, and could tell that it was somewhere close.

She looked back and saw that Lizzie had followed her some of the way.

"You look around the buildings," Holly said. "I'll look here."

She didn't wait to see how Lizzie responded, but started to make her way through the machine yard. It was like a giant's bazaar of heavy engineering, the night sun casting deep, dark shadows under the gear. These were machines for ripping up the land, and they had spikes and claws and teeth on a saurian scale. Encrusted with clay and battered by hard use, they stood like bombed-out tanks.

She hauled herself up and looked in the cab of a well-rusted bulldozer on tracks. Jack wasn't in it, but by hanging on she could look out over the yard. Down the next row, a wagon was being inched up onto a flatbed trailer by some driver she couldn't see. The tyres on the wagon were enormous, and the ramps were bending under its weight.

She looked all around and called Jack's name, but she had little chance of being heard. The big engine roared and the great tonnage slowly rolled. In her mind's eye she saw Jack crushed or falling or struggling to get free of some unexpected snare. She saw gears turning, teeth meshing, pulling him in.

She called his name again, louder, and then hopped down to continue the search. She stumbled a little when she landed. The ground here was nothing more than churned-up dirt into which stones had been dumped to

give it some firmness. It was no playground.

"Jack!" she called, moving forward.

As she came around by the bulldozer onto a firmer stretch of concrete road, she saw him. She could see all the way to the perimeter fence, where he was climbing.

Climbing? What was he *doing*?

And then she understood, and started to run.

It was a storm fence, about eight feet high. Jack was already over the top of it, and climbing down the other side. The fence rocked back and forth under his weight as the concrete posts shifted in their holes, but he clung to it like a bug; its close weave offered ideal purchase for his small feet and fingers.

Holly stumbled on the rough ground, but caught herself and went on. On the other side of the perimeter fence was an unlit country lane.

Out on the country lane stood the red coupé with the pop-up headlights.

"Hey," she shouted. "Hey, Jack, no!"

He was descending with his face set in a look of utter concentration. Behind him, the car was making a low purring sound with its engine off but its electric fan sucking in the cool night air. The driver hadn't stepped out, and she could barely see anything of him. She could only guess that he was watching her.

Holly reached the fence, looking through it and up at him. "Jack," she said. "Come down, Jack, please. You can't go over there. That's not your daddy. Believe me. There's no way it could be."

But Jack didn't look at her, and didn't even show any sign of having heard. He was moving like a monkey. He reached down with his foot, found another space in the diamond pattern, and hooked his scuffed trainer into it before lowering the rest of his weight.

She could touch his fingers as they hooked through, right in front of her eyes; her breath through the wire could fall onto his face. "Jack," she said, "no!"

But he wouldn't look at her, and although he was only inches away she couldn't reach him. She was powerless.

"Jack," she said, "Look at me, please. Don't do this. Don't go to him."

She made a move as if to try and catch his hands through the wire, but it was pointless. She couldn't hold him if she caught him. All she could do was risk hurting him.

"Lizzie's looking for you as well," she pleaded. "Oh, *Jack* . . . "

He jumped, and hit the dirt on the far side with a thump. Holly made a leap at the wire and felt the entire fence lean before her, but she didn't have his agility and couldn't begin to climb the way that he had.

He was running for the car, now, and the car's passenger door was opening to receive him.

Holly was screaming, although she didn't immediately realise it. The car door slammed and its laser eyes opened. The engine started, and its

nose swung around as it began to turn in the narrow lane.

Her hands were up at the sides of her head. She'd heard of people tearing at their hair, but she'd always thought it was just an expression. She looked around wildly.

Then she started to run along the inside of the fence, ahead of the turning car.

The country lane ran close on the other side. If there was a gap anywhere, she'd get through it. The car wouldn't pass her. No way was she going to let that happen.

Here was a gate. It was a back way into the site, little-used. A big double gate, wide enough for a lorry but chained and padlocked in the middle. There was enough play in the chain to make a gap of a foot or so.

It was a squeeze, but not an impossible one. She came out on the other side and all that she could see were the twin lights, the laser eyes of the beast that she had to impede.

She put on a burst and dived into its way, sliding to a halt in the middle of the lane and raising both of her hands. When it hit her, she felt nothing other than her own sudden acceleration; no impact, no pain, just the instantaneous switch from rest into motion as her legs were knocked from under her and she was spun down the side of the car.

Afterwards she'd never know whether she really saw it or only imagined the memory, but Holly went down hard in the wake of the moving car with a mental picture of her son's blank face only inches away on the other side of the glass.

She lay there.

She couldn't move. She could hear that the car had stopped and she wanted to lift her head to look, but nothing happened. Oh God, she was thinking, I'm paralysed. But then when she made an enormous effort, her hand came up and braced itself against the ground. As she was doing it, she heard a car door opening.

She wasn't paralysed, but she'd no strength. When she tried to push down with her hand to raise herself, her arm trembled and nothing happened.

Someone was walking up behind her.

Before she could muster the energy to turn and look, strong fingers gripped the back of her head and thrust her face down into the mud. In an instant, she was blinded and choking.

She found her strength now, all right, but it did her no good as a sudden knee in her back pinned her further to the ground. She struggled and flapped like a fish, but her face stayed under. The blood roared in her ears and lights exploded before her eyes.

Then in an instant, the pressure was off.

That first deep breath nearly drowned her on the spot, as she sucked in all the mud that had filled up her mouth. She retched and coughed, blowing it out of her nostrils and

heaving up what she'd both swallowed and inhaled.

She felt a lighter touch on her shoulder and lashed out, only to hear a cry from Lizzie. She was there when Holly's vision cleared, keeping back and holding her arm where she'd been struck.

"I'm sorry, mum," she said.

Holly stared dumbly for a moment before an understanding started to form. Lizzie was backing toward the waiting car.

"No, Lizzie!" she said. She tried to rise, but one of her legs wouldn't support her.

"I know how you want me to feel about it, but I can't. I wish I could. I'm sorry. It's never going to be right after tonight, whatever we do. Ever."

Holly made another massive effort and this time made it up and onto her feet, putting all of her weight onto the uninjured leg.

"Wait," she managed.

Lizzie had reached the car.

"I'm the one that he wants," she said. "But he'll take Jack if I don't go with him."

The passenger door popped open about an inch.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and she reached out and opened it all the way.

Holly wasn't close enough to see how it worked, but Jack popped out of the vehicle as if propelled on a spring. He landed on both feet, and Lizzie quickly slipped around behind him and into the car.

The door closed like the door on a well-fitting safe, and the car's engine started to rev. It was all as swift and as decisive as that.

Holly started toward them, half-hopping, half-limping, but the car was already moving off and starting to pick up speed.

"Frank!" she shouted. "You bastard! Give her back!" and at the sound of her voice, Jack seemed to wake as if from a daze.

He looked about, as if suddenly remembering something, and spotted those red tail lights receding off into the darkness.

He gave a strangled cry.

"Dad!" he called out, and started to run down the lane after the car, slapping down his feet so hard that the ground almost shook.

Holly hadn't yet reached him, and her cries couldn't stop him. Neither of them had any chance of catching the car. But both of them tried.

She caught up with him a full ten minutes later, still standing on the dark spot where his breath and his hopes had finally given out.

"He forgot me!" he wailed. Holly dropped to her knees and pulled him to her.

For once, he let her hold him.

"'Footvote' for me was a way of capturing what seemed to be the general mood of the time," Peter Hamilton said when he sent us this story. "Dramatizing the dilemma which so many people were living through was simply too good an opportunity to ignore." For a science fiction writer who normally sets his stories in the far future, it was clearly enjoyable to do something both topical and set in the real world. . . with just one slight twist. "But the real fun part," Peter went on, "was getting to parody the European Constitution which was also being published at the same time—and doing it in true If-I-Ruled-The-World style."

Footvote

Peter F. Hamilton

I Bradley Ethan Murray pledge that starting from this day the First Of January 2003, and extending for a period of two years, I will hold open a wormhole to the planet New Suffolk in order that all decent people from this United Kingdom can freely travel through to build themselves a new life on a fresh world. I do this in the sad knowledge that our old country's leaders and institutions have failed us completely.

Those who seek release from the oppression and terminal malaise which now afflict the United Kingdom are welcome to do so under the following strictures.

1. With citizenship comes responsibility.

2. The monoculture of New Suffolk will be derived from current English ethnicity.

3. Government will be a democratic republic.

4. It is the job of Government to provide the following statutory services to the citizenship to be paid for through taxation.

a. The enforcement of Law and Order; consisting of a police force and independent judiciary. All citizens have the right to trial by jury for major crimes.

b. A socialized health service delivered equally to all. No private hospitals or medical clinics will be permitted, with the exception of 'vanity' medicine.

c. Universal education, to be provided from primary to higher levels. No private schools are permitted. Parents of primary and secondary school pupils are to be given a majority stake in governorship of the school, including its finances. All citizens have the right to be educated to their highest capability.

d. Provision and maintenance of a basic civil infrastructure, including road, rail, and domestic utilities.

5. It is not the job of Government to interfere with, and over-regulate the life of the individual citizen. Providing they do no harm to others or the state, citizens are free to do and say whatever they wish.

6 Citizens do not have the right to own or use weapons.

Jannette

It was the day Tony Blair was due to give evidence to the Hutton enquiry. The *Today* programme on Radio Four was full of eager anticipation, taunting their opponent to come out and face their allegations full on, confident he would screw up. Over in Iraq, what was left of the British Army contingent had suffered more attacks from the population overnight. And I'd forgotten to buy Frosties for Steve.

"Not muesli!" he spat with the true contempt only-seven-year-olds can muster. If only the TUC leadership had that kind of determination when facing Gordon Brown's latest abysmal round of budget cuts.

"It's good for you," I said without engaging my brain. After seven years you'd think I'd know not to make that kind of tactical error with my own son.

"Mum! It's just dried pigeon crap," he jeered as I stopped pouring it into the bowel. Olivia, his little sister, started to giggle at the use of the NN word. At least she was spooning up her organic yogurt without a fuss. "Not nice, not nice," she chanted.

"What do you want then?" I asked.

"McDonalds. Big Cheesy One."

"No!" I know he only says it to annoy me, but the reflex is too strong to resist. And I'm the Bad Mother yet again. Maybe I shouldn't preach so hard. But then, that's Colin speaking.

"How about toast?" I asked.

"Okay."

I couldn't believe it was that easy. But he sat down at the table and waited with a smug look on his face. God he does so look like Colin these days. Is that why he's becoming more impossible?

"What's the *prim*?" Olivia asked.

Today had moved on from snipping at their public enemy number one to cover the demonstration at Stanstead.

"Public Responsibility Movement," I said. "Now please finish your breakfast. Daddy will be here soon." *He'd better be.*

I put the toast down in front of Steve, and he squirted too much liquid honey over it. Golden goo oozed down over the table. Both of them were suddenly silent and eating quickly, as if that would speed his arrival.

The flat's back door was open in an attempt to let in some cooler air. The summer was damn hot, and dry. Here in Islington the breeze coursed along the streets like gusts of desert air.

"Poooeee," Steve said, holding his nose as he munched down more toast. I had to admit, the smell which drifted in wasn't good.

Olivia crumpled her face up in real dismay. "That's horrid, mum. What is it?"

"Someone hasn't tied up their bin bags properly." The pile in the corner of De Beauvoir Square was getting

ridiculously big. As more bags were flung on top, so the ones at the bottom split open. The SkyNews and News24 programmes always showed them with comparison footage of the '79 Winter of Discontent.

"When are they going to clear it?" Steve asked.

"Once a fortnight." Though I'd heard on the quiet that nearly ten per cent of the Army had already deserted, and that was before they had to provide civic utility assistance squads along with fire service cover, prison guard duties, engineering support to power stations, and invading Iraq. We'd be lucky if the pile was cleared every month. I'd seen a rat the size of a cat run across the square the other day. I always thought rodents that big were just urban legend.

"Why can't they take rubbish away like they used to?" Olivia asked.

"Not enough people to do that any more, darling."

"There's hundreds of people standing round the streets all day. It's scary sometimes. I don't like the park anymore."

She was right in a way. It wasn't the lack of people, of course, it was money, and the frightening way the pound was collapsing. What would happen when the true tax revenue figures came in was anyone's guess. Officially, tax received by the Treasury had only fallen by ten per cent since that little *shit* Murray opened his racist, fascist, arseholing wormhole. Nobody believed that. But naturally, the first thing the Treasury reduced was local government grants, with Brown standing up in Westminster and telling the councils to *cut back on wastage*. What a pitiful joke. Central Government has been saying that for the last fifty years at least -because it's never their fault.

As a way to finally get the UK to sign on for the Euro, it couldn't be beaten. We desperately needed a currency that wasn't so susceptible to our traitors. Except that suddenly, France and Germany were blocking us from joining. The two biggest offenders when it came to breaking the budgetary stability arrangement. Bastards.

For once Colin actually turned up on time. He did his silly little ring tune on the front door, and both kids shot off from the table screeching hellos. Did they do that when I turned up to his place to collect them? I doubted it.

He came into the kitchen wearing a smart new sweatshirt and clean jeans; his curly brown hair neatly trimmed. I hated that old non-truism, that men just get more handsome as they get older. But they did seem to preserve themselves well after thirty. Colin hadn't put on a pound since he had started jogging and visiting the gym on a regular basis again. I supposed that bloody twelve-year-old he was shacked up with didn't appreciate a sagging beer gut. *Damn:*

why did I always sound like a stereotype bitch?

He'd scooped Olivia up under one arm and was swinging her around. "Hiya," he called out to me. "Seen my daughter anywhere?"

She was shrieking: "Daddy, daddy!" as she was twirled about.

"Don't do that. She's just eaten."

"Okey dokey," he dropped her to the floor and collected a happy kiss from her.

"Come on then," he clapped his hands, hustling them along. "Get ready. I'm leaving in five . . . four . . . three . . . "

They both ran downstairs to collect their bags.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Never better." I gave the kitchen table and its mess a weary look—beyond it, the work surfaces were covered in junk and the sink was a cliché of unwashed pans. "How about you, still servicing the rich?"

His expression hardened, that way it always did when he had to speak slowly and carefully to explain the bleeding obvious to me. "I have to work at the BUPA hospital now. It's the only way I can earn enough money after your lawyer took me to the cleaners in that sexist divorce court of yours."

I almost opened my jaw in surprise—I was the one that always made the needling comments. He was Mr Reasonable through everything. "Oh fine, sure," I said. "I thought it would be my fault."

He gave one of those smug little victory smiles that used to annoy the hell out of me.

"What time do you want them back tomorrow?" he asked.

"Um, in the afternoon. Before six?"

"Okey dokey. No problem."

"Thanks. Are you taking them anywhere special?"

"I thought *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, tonight. The reviews have all been great."

"As long as you don't take them for burgers."

He rolled his eyes.

I glanced out through the window, seeing his new BMW 4x4 parked on the pavement outside. The stupid thing was the size of the tanks the Army rolled into Basra with. There wasn't anyone sitting in it. "Is she coming with you today?"

"Who's that, then?"

"Zoe."

"Ah, you remembered her name."

"I think I read it on her school report."

"As a matter of fact, yes, she is coming with us. She took the day off to help out. The kids do like her, you know. And if you ever find yourself someone, I won't mind them going out with him."

Oh well done Colin, another point scored off your shrew of an ex, especially with that emphasis on 'ever'. Aren't you the clever one.

The kids charged back into the kitchen, hauling their overnight bags along the floor. "Ready!"

"Have a lovely time," I said, *ever* gracious.

Colin's smile faltered. He hesitated, then leant forward and kissed me on the cheek. Nothing special, not a peace offering, just some platonic gesture I didn't understand. "See you," he said.

I was too surprised to answer. Then the door slammed shut. The kids were gone. The flat was silent.

I had fifteen minutes to make the bus. I was going on a protest for the first time in years. Making my voce heard, and my feelings known. Doing exactly what Colin despised and ridiculed. God, it felt wonderful.

33. There will be no prisons. Convicted criminals will spend their sentence in isolated penal colonies, working for the public good.

34. New Suffolk will use the Imperial system of measurement for length, weight, and volume. Use of the metric system is a criminal offence.

35. Police are required to uphold the law and apprehend criminals. Police will not waste all their time persecuting motorists.

36. Citizens are not entitled to unlimited legal funding. Citizens facing prosecution can only have their defence fees paid for by public funding three times during their lifetime. They may select which cases.

37. The intake of alcohol, nicotine, and other mild narcotics is permitted. Citizens found endangering others when intoxicated, e.g. driving under the influence, will face a minimum sentence of four years in a penal colony.

38. New Suffolk laws will not be structured to support or encourage any type of compensation culture.

39. Any lawyer who has brought three failed cases of litigation judged to be frivolous is automatically sentenced to a minimum five years in a penal colony.

Colin

The finance agency's solicitor was waiting on the doorstep, talking to Zoe, when I drove up in front of the house.

"Who's that?" Steve asked as I started to manoeuvre the BMW up the gravel, backing it up to the horsebox.

"Bloke from the bank," I told him. "Got a few papers to sort out." At least the agency didn't stick a For Sale sign up outside the house. That tended to earn you a brick—or worse—through the window these days.

Zoe smiled and waved as I stopped just short of the horsebox. "Wait in here," I told the kids. I didn't want them to see the empty house. Last night we'd used sleeping bags. Zipped together. Very romantic.

The solicitor shook my hand and produced a file of documents for me to sign. He glanced at the kids, who were pressed up against the BMW's window, but didn't comment. I guess he'd seen it many times before.

Zoe opened the garage door, and picked up the first of the boxes stacked on the concrete floor. She carried it over to the rear of the BMW, and put it in the boot.

The solicitor wanted five signatures from me, and that was it—the house belonged to the agency. A four-bedroom house with garage and a decent size garden in Enfield along with all the contents, sold for £320,000. Maybe two thirds of what I could have got last year. But that gave me enough to pay off the mortgage, and leave me with £30,000 in equity, which the agency had advanced me. That's what they specialized in, one of many such businesses to spring up since January. A Franco-Dutch company who sold a little bit of England to people who weren't going to be accepted on the other side of the wormhole.

I'd bought the BMW on finance from the garage. My pension portfolio had been sold to another specialist agency based in Luxembourg—God bless our EU partners—giving me £11,000. That just left the credit cards. I'd applied for another two; more than that and the monitor programs would spot the new loan pattern. But they'd given me an extra £15,000 to spend over the last month.

It had all gone into a community partnership I signed up for at www.newsuffolklife.co.uk. Most of the stuff was being shipped out in a convoy, with all the personal items we'd need crammed into the horsebox. The website recommended using them, they could take a lot more weight than a caravan.

The solicitor shook my hand and said: "Good luck." I handed him the keys, and that was it.

Zoe had jammed the last box in the back of the BMW. There were just four suitcases left. I picked up two of them. She was giving the house a forlorn look.

"We're doing the right thing," I told her.

"I know." She produced a brave smile. "I just didn't expect it to be like this. Murray surprised all of us, didn't he?"

"Yeah. You know I grew up with a whole bunch of sci-fi shows and films; it's amazing how their vocabulary and images integrated with modern culture. They all had bloody great ships flying through space; captains sitting in their command chair and making life and death decisions, shooting lasers and missiles at bug eyed monsters. Everybody knew that was how it would happen for real. Then Murray found a way to open his wormhole, and the bastard won't tell anyone how he does it. Not that I blame him. He's quite right, we'd only misuse the technology. We always do. It's just that . . . this isn't the noble crossing of the void I expected. It feels almost like a betrayal of my beliefs."

Zoe looked embarrassed. She was nothing like Jannette made out: some piece of underage nurse totty I pulled

because she was blinded by the title of Dr in front of my name; all big boobs, long legs, and no brain. In fact, she was training to be a midwife, which required just as much dedication and intelligence as was needed to become a doctor. And she was small, the top of her head only coming up to my chin. I was bloody lucky she even looked at a life-wreckage like me. The fact that she would take me on with a couple of kids in tow made her extraordinary.

"I meant the way this finally split the country," she said quietly. "Everyone always talked about the North South divide, and the class war, and the distance between rich and poor. But it was just ideology, politicians lobbing spinning sound bites at each other. Murray went and made it physical."

I put my arms round her. "He gave us the chance politicians always promise and never provide. God, can you believe I actually voted for Blair. Twice!"

She grinned evilly. "Wish you'd voted Tory?"

"Stop putting words in my mouth." I gave her a quick kiss; then we shoved the suitcases in on top of the boxes.

Steve and Olivia looked unusually solemn when we got into the 4x4. Zoe gave them a welcoming smile. "Hi guys."

"Where are we going, daddy?" Olivia asked.

"I'm going to take you to see something. Something I hope you'll like."

"What?"

"Can't explain. You have to see it."

"What's in the horsebox?" Steve asked. "You don't like horses."

"Tent," I said. "Big tent, actually. Food. Solar panels. Four brand new laptops, one with a widescreen display and multi-region software."

"Cool! Can I use it?"

"Maybe."

"What else?" Olivia asked, excited.

"Some toys. Lots of new clothes. Books."

"What's it all for?" Steve asked.

"You'll see." I put my hand on the ignition key, and gave Zoe an apprehensive glance. This was such a huge step to be taking, and there didn't seem to be any defining moment, just a long sequence of covert events that had deftly led to this point in time. I didn't feel any guilt about bringing the kids with us; in fact I'd have been remiss as a father if I hadn't included them; there was never going to be an opportunity like this again. I wasn't stupid and naive enough to believe New Suffolk was going to be paradise, but it had the *potential* to be something better than what we had in this world. We were never going to evolve or progress here, not with so much history and inertia shackling us to the past.

As for Jannette . . . Well, as far as I was concerned she hadn't been a mother to the kids for years.

"Let's go," Zoe said. "We chose a long time ago."

I turned the ignition, and pulled out of the drive, the overloaded horsebox rattling along behind.

"What's that ring?" Steve asked suddenly, sharp and observant.

"This?" Zoe held her finger up.

"It's an engagement ring!" Olivia squeaked. "Are you getting married?"

"Yes," I said. It was the first thing we wanted to do on the other side.

"Does mum know?" Steve asked.

"No."

62. In order to prevent the mistakes of the old country being repeated on New Suffolk, no organized religions will be permitted. All citizens must acknowledge that the universe is a natural phenomenon.

63. In order to prevent the mistakes of the old country being repeated on New Suffolk, members of extremist political parties and undesirable organizations are banned from passing through the wormhole, as well as criminals and others I deem injurious to the public good.

Examples of prohibited groups and professions include (but are not limited to) the following:—

a. Labour Party.
b. Conservative Party.
c. Liberal Democrat Party.
d. Communist Party.
e. National Front.
f. Socialist Alliance.
g. Tabloid journalists.
h. European Union bureaucrats.
i. Trade union officials..
j. Traffic wardens.

Jannette

Abbey was waiting for me at Liverpool Street station. It was a miracle I ever found her. The concourse was overrun by backpackers. There didn't appear to be one of them over twenty-five, or maybe that's just the way it is when you're looking at young people from the wrong side of thirty-five. And I certainly hadn't seen that much denim in one place since I went to the Reading Festival in the late eighties. Their backpacks were *huge*. I didn't even know they manufactured them that size.

I gawped in astonishment as the youngsters jostled around me. Nearly all of them were couples. And everybody had a Union Jack patch sewn on their clothes or backpack. I don't think one in ten was speaking English; and they certainly weren't all white.

Abbey yelled, and walked towards me, pushing her way aggressively forwards. She wasn't a small woman, her progress was causing quite a disturbance amid the smiley happy people. Her expression was locked into contempt as they flashed hurt looks her way. It softened when she hugged me. "Hi comrade darling, our train's on platform three."

I followed meekly behind as she ploughed onwards. The badges on her ancient jacket were clinking away; one for every cause she'd ever supported or march she'd been on. The rusty Pearly Queen of the protest nation.

Half the station seemed to want to get on our train. Abbey forced her way into a carriage, queuing being a bourgeois concept to her. We found a couple of empty seats with reserved tickets, which she threw on the floor.

"I don't know where this lot all think they're going," she announced in a too-loud voice as we settled in. "Murray doesn't approve of poor foreign trash. There's no way he's going to let Europe's potheads live in stoner bliss under an alien sun. They'll get bounced right off his hole for middle-class worms."

"His restrictions are self-perpetuating," I said. "He doesn't actually have lists of all the people he doesn't like. And even if he did there's no way of checking everyone who goes through. It's pure psychology. Tell Thatcher's Children that no big bad pinkos will be allowed, and they'll flock there in their hundreds. While the rest of us see who is actually going and we steer the hell clear. Who wants to live in their world?"

"Ha! I bet the security services sold him our names."

You couldn't argue with Abbey when she was in this mood, which admittedly was most of the time.

She pulled a large hip flask out of her jacket and took a slug. "Want some?"

I looked at the battered old flask, ready to refuse. Then I remembered I didn't have the kids tonight. I wasn't stupid enough to take a slug as big as Abbey's. Thankfully. "Jesus, what the hell is that?"

"Proper Russian vodka, comrade," she smiled, and took another. "Nathan went through to join Murray last week," she said sourly.

"Nathan? Your brother Nathan?"

"Only by DNA, and I'm not even certain of that after this. Little prick. Mary and the kids went with him."

"Why?"

"Why do any of them go? War in Iraq, crap public transport, psycho Bush threatening North Korea, the congestion charge, council tax. The real world, in other words, that's what he's running away from. He thinks he's going to be living in some kind of tropical tax haven with fairies doing all the hard work, the dumb shit."

"I'm sorry. What did your mum say? She must be devastated."

Abbey growled, and took another slug. "She says she's glad he's gone; that he and the grandkids deserve a fresh start *somewhere nice*. Can you believe that? Selfish cow, she's gone senile if you ask me. And who's going to be looking after her, hey? She can't walk to the bus stop even these days. Did Nathan ever think of that? Oh no, he just took off and expected me to pick up the pieces, just like everyone else left behind."

"I know, Steve's school is talking about classes of sixty for next term. The Governors have been having emergency meetings all summer, so I know how many staff have left." I hesitated.

"It surprised me, I thought they were more dedicated than that."

"They would be if they were paid properly."

"The Principal has to recruit another fifteen teachers before term starts, or they won't be able to open at all."

"Fifteen? He wouldn't have got that many in a normal year."

"He said he's quite confident. There's all sorts of new place-ment agencies starting up to source overseas professionals for the UK. Life's going to go on pretty much the same as before once the exodus is over."

"Great," Abbey grunted. "Just what we're fighting for."

Our train started to pull out of the station. The backpackers were squashed down the length of the aisle, nobody could move anywhere. There was a big cheer when the PA announced the stop at Bishop's Stortford.

Abbey took another swig, and muttered: "Wankers."

"Don't worry," I said. "If we ever get our own wormhole to a new world, we wouldn't let any of this lot through."

"That's the whole fucking point, isn't it?" Abbey snarled. Her anger was directed at me now, which was kind of scary. She gulped back another mouthful of vodka. "We wouldn't want to have a new world even if we could open a wormhole. It's a stupid waste of talent that could be used to help people down here. We have to solve the problems we've got on this world first, starting with the biggest problem there is, that bloody warmongering Tory: Blair. Colonization is Imperialism. We've got to teach people to have social responsibility instead." She jabbed an unsteady finger at a badge on her lapel. It was one showing an Icelandic whaler being broken in two by a suspiciously Soviet-looking hammer; but above it was a shiny new Public Responsibility Movement badge. "That's what today is all about. Murray isn't building himself a new world, what he's doing is ruining ours. You can't just do that, just open a doorway to somewhere else because you feel like it, it's fucking outrageous. They've got to be stopped."

"It's the scale that's the problem," I said. "You can't stop people leaving, that's Stalinist. What we're not ready for is this mass panic exodus that the wormhole has made possible. Emigration to North America was slow, it lasted for decades. This is fast. Two years, that's all he's giving us. No wonder the UK can't cope with the loss as it happens. But it'll settle down in the long term."

"We can stop them," Abbey said forcefully. "There's enough people taking part in the movement today to block the roads and turn back all those middle-class bastards. Murray didn't think it through; half of the police have pissed off through the wormhole. People power is going to come back

with a vengeance today. This is when the working class finds its voice again. And it's going to say: no more. You see."

p. Stockbrokers.
q. Weapons designers and manufacturers.
r. Arts Council executives.
s. Pension fund managers.
t. Cast and production staff of all TV soaps.
u. All sex crime offenders.
v. All violent crime offenders.
w. Call centre owners and managers.

Colin

As ever, the M 11 was horrendous, a solid queue of bad-tempered traffic. Nearly two hours from the M25 to the Stanstead junction. Not *strictly* as ever because I was smiling most of the way. It just didn't bother me anymore. I just kept thinking this was the last time I would ever have to drive down one of this country's abysmal, potholed, clogged, nineteen-sixties anachronisms. Never again would I come home ranting about about why we couldn't have Autobahns, or eight lane freeways like they had in America. From now on my moaning was going to be reserved for sixteen-legged alien dinosaurs wandering over the garden.

The estate car in front had a bumper sticker with a picture of an angry Gordon Brown hammering on the side of the wormhole, with *Tax for the memory* printed underneath. We'd been seeing more and more pro-exodus stickers as we crawled our way North. I reckoned that all the vehicles sharing the off road with us were heading to New Suffolk. After all those months of furtive preparation it was kind of comforting finally being amongst your own kind.

"It's the wormhole, isn't it?" Steve asked cautiously. "That's where we're going."

"Yeah," I said. "We're going to take a look at what's there."

"Are we going *through*?" Olivia asked, all wide eyes and nervous enthusiasm.

"I think so. Don't you? Now we've come all this way, it'll be fun." I saw the sign for assembly park F2, and started indicating.

"But they're bad people on the other side," Steve said. "Mum said."

"Has she been there herself?"

"No way!"

"Then she doesn't really know what it's like on the other side, does she?"

The kids looked at each other. "Suppose not," Steve said.

"Just because you don't agree with someone, doesn't make them bad. We'll take a look round for ourselves and find out what's true and what's not. That's fair isn't it?"

"When are we coming back?" Steve asked.

"Don't know. That depends how nice it is on the new planet. We might want to stay a while."

Zoe was giving me a disapproving look. I shrugged at her. She didn't understand, you've got to acclimatize kids slowly to anything this big and new.

"Is mummy coming?" Olivia asked.

"If she wants to, she can come with us. Of course she can," I said.

Zoe let out a little hiss of exasperation.

"Will I have to go to school?" Steve asked.

"Everybody goes to school no matter what planet they're on," Zoe said.

"Bummer."

"Not nice," Zoe squealed happily.

I found the entrance to park F2 and pulled in off the road. It was a broad open field hired out to new suffolklife.co by the farmer. Hundreds of vehicles had spent all summer driving over it, reducing the grass to shredded wisps of straw pressed down into the dry iron-hard soil. Today, twenty-odd lorries were parked up at the far end, including three refrigerated containers, and a couple of fuel tankers. Over seventy cars, people carriers, transit vans, and 4x4's were clustered around the lorries; most of them contained families, with kids and parents out stretching their legs before the final haul. The fields on either side replicated similar scenes.

I drew up beside a marshal, who was standing just inside the gate, and showed him our card. He looked at it and grinned as he ticked us off his clipboard. "You're the doc, huh?"

"That's me."

"Fine. There's about five more cars to come and we're all set. I'm your community convoy liaison, so I'll be travelling with you all the way to your new home. Any problems, come and see me."

"Sure."

"You want to check over the medical equipment you'll be taking, make sure it's all there? Your new neighbours have been going through the rest of the stuff."

I drove over to the other cars and we all climbed out. Several men were up in the lorries, looking round the crates and pallets that were inside. Given how much we'd spent between us, I was glad to see how thorough they were being checking off the inventory. In theory the equipment and supplies on the lorries was enough to turn us into a self sufficient community over the next year.

"This shouldn't take long," I told Zoe. "We need to be certain. In the land of the new arrivals, the owner of the machine tool is king."

"We'll go meet people," she said.

I met a few of them myself as I tracked down the two crates of medical supplies and equipment. They seemed all right—decent types. A little overeager in their greetings, as I suppose I was. But then we were going to spend an awful long time together. The rest

of our lives, if everything went smoothly.

Half an hour later the last of the group had arrived, we were satisfied everything we'd bought through newsuffolklife.co was with us, and the marshals were getting the convoy organized for the last section.

"Where's the wormhole?" Steve asked plaintively as we got back into the BMW. "I want to see it."

"Two miles to go," Zoe said. "That's all now."

The lorries were first out of the assembly park and onto one of the new tarmac roads that led to the wormhole, with the rest of us following. There was a wide path on the left of the road. Backpackers marched along it, a constant file of them. I couldn't see the end of the line in either direction. They all had the same eager smile on their faces as they moved ever-closer to the wormhole. Zoe and I probably looked the same.

"There!" Olivia suddenly shouted. She was pointing at the trees on the other side of the backpackers. For a moment I was confused, it was like a dawn sun was shining through the trunks. Then we cleared the end of the spinney, and we could see the wormhole directly.

The zero-length gap in space-time was actually a sphere three hundred yards in diameter. Murray had opened it so that the equator was at ground level, leaving a hemisphere protruding into the air. There was nothing solid, it was simply the place one planet ended and another began. You crossed the boundary, and New Suffolk stretched out in front of you. That was the notorious eye-twister which made a lot of people shiver and even flinch away. As you drew near the threshold, you could see an alien landscape dead ahead of you, inside the hemisphere. Yet it opened outwards, delivering a panoramic view. When you went through, you emerged on the outside of the corresponding hemisphere. There was no inside.

It was early morning on New Suffolk, where its ginger-tinted sun was rising, sending a rouge glow across the gap to light up the English countryside.

We were half a mile away now. The kids were completely silent, entranced by the wormhole. Zoe and I flashed a quick triumphant smile at each other.

The road curved round to line up on the wormhole, running through a small cutting. Police lined the top of each bank, dressed in full riot gear. They were swaying back and forwards as they struggled to hold a crowd of protestors away from the road. I could see banners and placards waving about. The chanting and shouting reached us over the sound of the convoy's engines. Things were flying through the air over the top of the police to rain down on the road. I saw several bottles smash apart on the tarmac. Backpackers were bent

double as they scurried along, holding their hands over their heads to ward off the barrage from above.

Something thudded onto the BMW's roof. Both kids yelped. I saw a stone skittering off the side. It didn't matter now. The first of our convoy's lorries had reached the wormhole. I saw it drive through, thundering off over the battered mesh road that cut across the alien landscape, silhouetted by the bright rising sun. We were so close.

Then Olivia was shouting: "Daddy, daddy, stop!"

87. Government may not employ more than one manager per twelve front line workers in any department. No Government department may spend more than ten per cent of its budget on administration.

88. Government will not fund any unemployment benefit scheme. Anyone without a job is entitled to five acres of arable land, and will be advanced enough crop seed to become self-sufficient.

89. There will be no death duties. Dying is not a taxable action. Citizens are entitled to bequeath everything they have worked for to whoever they choose.

Jannette

It took us bloody hours to get from the station to the wormhole. The Public Responsibility Movement was supposed to lay on buses. I only ever saw two of them, and they took forever to drive around the jammed-up circuit between the station and the rally site. As for the PRM stewards, they'd got into fights with the backpackers streaming out of the station, asking directions and wanting to know if they could use our buses. The police were separating the two factions as best they could, but the station car park was a perpetual near-riot.

Abbey used the waiting time to stock up at an off-licence. By the time we got on the bus she was completely pissed. And she wasn't a quiet drunk.

As we inched our way across the motorway flyover I could look down on the solid stream of motionless vehicles clotting all the lanes below. There were hundreds of them. All of them waiting their turn to drive up the off road. Each one full of people who wanted to go through the wormhole. *So many?* They said it was like this every day.

The bus finally made it to the rally area. A huge 747 flew low overhead as we climbed out, coming in to land at Stanstead just a couple of miles north. I had to press my hands over my ears the engine noise was so loud. I didn't recognize the airline logo; but it was no doubt bringing another batch of eager refugees from abroad who wanted to join in with the exodus.

I tracked it across the sky. And there right ahead of me was the wormhole. It was like some gold-chrome bubble squatting on the horizon. I squinted into the brilliant rosy light it was radiating.

"I didn't realize it was that big," I muttered. The damn thing was intimidating this close up. Now I could finally understand how so many people had vanished into it, swallowed up by Murray's stupid promises.

"Let's get to it," Abbey slurred, and marched off towards the long scrum of protestors ahead of us.

Now I remembered why I'd stopped going to protests. All that romance about bonding with the crowd, sharing a purpose with your fellow travellers; the singing, the camaraderie, the communal contentment. It was all bollocks.

For a start, it wasn't just the PRM supporters who'd turned out to make their voice heard. There were a lot of unaffiliated comrades looking for trouble. Real serious trouble. I got batted about like some cheap football. Everybody wanted to score points by shoving into me. The shouting was loud, in my ear, and unending. I got clobbered by placards several times as their carriers dropped them for a rest.

Then we got real near to the police line, and a beer can landed on my shoulder. I jumped at the shock. Fortunately it was empty. But I could see bottles flying overhead, which made me very nervous.

"Let me through, you arseholes!" Abbey thundered at the police.

The nearest constable gave her a confused look. Then she was banging on his riot shield in fury. "I have a right to get past you can't stop me you fascist bastard this is still a free country why don't you piss off and go and bugger your chief constable let me through." All the while she was pushing up against his shield. I was pressed up behind her. Our helpful comrades behind me were making a real effort to add their strength to the shove. I shouted out in pain from the crushing force but no one heard or took any notice.

Something had to give. For once it was the police line. I was suddenly lurching forward to land on top of Abbey, who had come to rest on top of the policeman. A ragged cheer went up from behind. There were a lot of whistles going off. I heard dogs barking, and whimpered in fright. I hated dogs . . . really scared of them. Policeman were moving fast to plug the gap. Several wrestling matches had developed on either side of me. Protestors were being cuffed and dragged off. Clothes ripped. I saw blood.

Someone tugged the neck of my blouse, lugging me to my feet. I was crying and shaking. My knee was red hot, I could barely stand on it.

A police helmet was thrust into my face. "You all right?" a muffled voice demanded from behind the misted visor.

I just wailed at them. It was pathetic, but I was so miserable and panicky I didn't care.

"Sit there! Wait!" I was pushed onto the top of the bank. Ten feet

below me backpackers were cowering as they scrambled along the path. The vehicles heading for the wormhole were swishing past, their drivers grim as they gripped the steering wheels.

I saw a big BMW 4 x 4 towing a horsebox. The driver was peering forward intently. Visual recognition kicked in.

"Get your fucking hands off me dickhead this is assault you know I'll have you in court oh shit get those cuffs of they're too tight you're deliberately torturing me help help," Abbey was yelling behind me.

"Its Colin," I whispered. "Abbey, that's Colin!" my voice was rising.

"What?"

"Colin!" I pointed frantically. There was Olivia sitting in the back seat, face pressed up against the glass to look out at all the mad people. "He's taking them. Oh God, he's taking them through the wormhole."

Abbey gave her arresting officer an almighty shove. "Get them," she screamed at me. "Move." Three policemen made a grab for her. Her shoulder slammed into me. I tumbled down the bank, arms windmilling wildly for balance. My knee was agony. I crashed into a backpacker, and fell onto the tarmac, barely a foot from a transit van which swerved violently.

"Grab them," Abbey cried. "Grab them back. They're yours. It's your right."

The vehicles along the road were all braking. I looked up. Everybody was stuck behind Colin's BMW, which had stopped. The driver's window slid down smoothly and he stuck his head out. We just gazed at each other. A whole flood of emotions washed over his face. Mainly anger, but I could see regret there as well.

"Come on then," he said in a weary voice. The rear door opened.

I looked at the open door. I got to my feet. I looked back up the bank at Abbey's snarling features. I looked back at the BMW. The wormhole was waiting beyond it. Cars were blowing their horns in exasperation, people shouting at me to get a move on.

I started walking towards the BMW with its open door. I knew it was morally wrong. At least, I thought it was. But what else could I do?

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