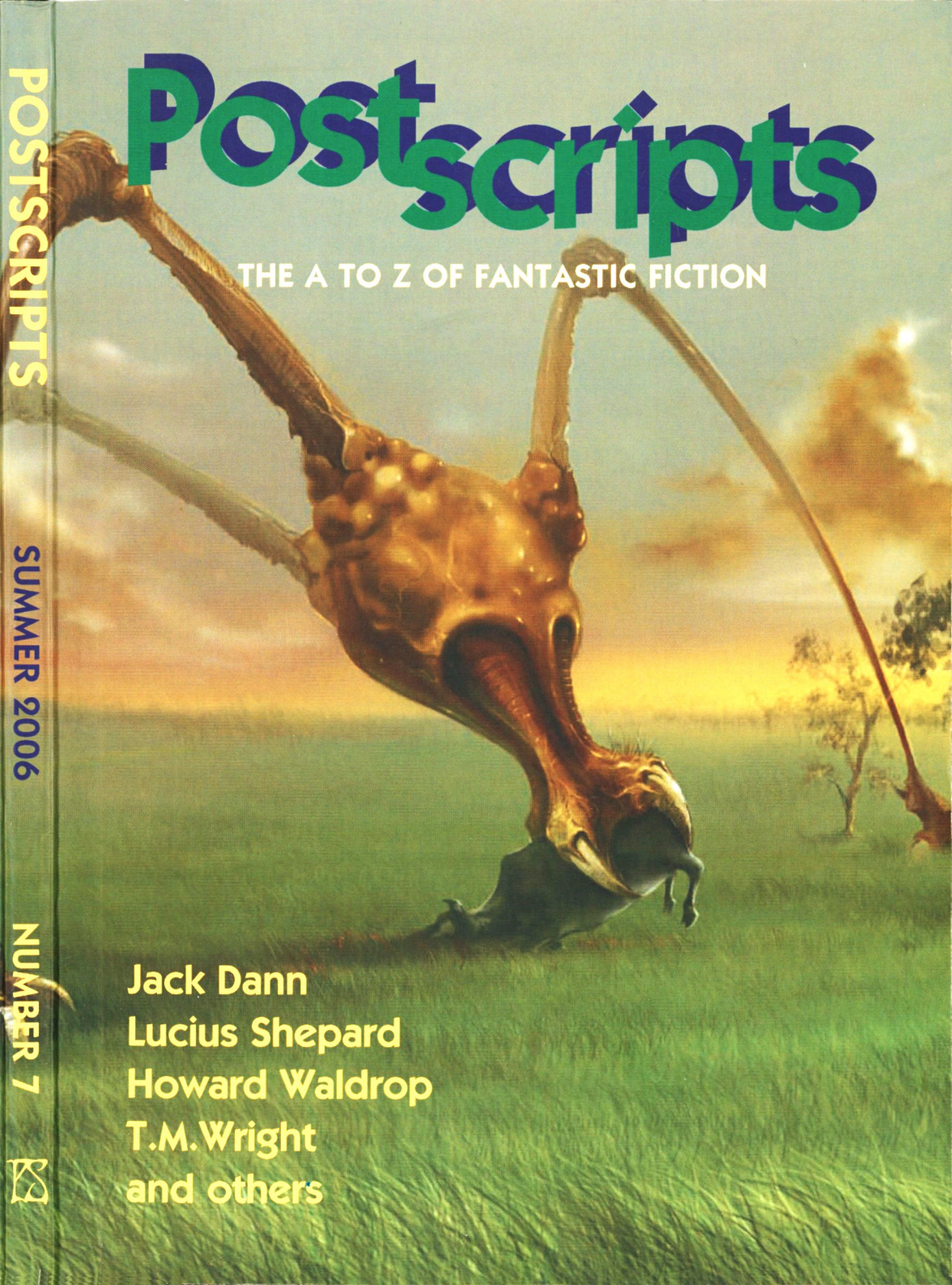
Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION



Jack Dann
Lucius Shepard
Howard Waldrop
T.M.Wright
and others

POSTSCRIPTS SUMMER 2006 NUMBER 7

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Lucius Shepard says of his current writing projects, "Forthcoming are a short novel, Softspoken, *kind of a ghost story, and a non-fiction book, half-memoir, half a meditation on corruption, Central American politics, and American folly, called* Christmas in Honduras. *I'm currently working on a novel about and perhaps involving vampires . . . but perhaps not. I haven't yet decided. It may wind up being aggressively and overtly a non-vampire novel."*

Editorial

Lucius Shepard

I love the fume and bubble of words, sucked up through the waterpipe of the brain and gusted forth as a smoke of poetry or prose. The doing of it, I mean. The indulging in the addiction, the acting out of the art. I am content producing words for money, even when the work goes badly, as in most cases it does, and the product is malformed, not as I imagined, as in many cases it is. I never set about doing it for reasons less than love, though often that love is spent before the work is done, made diffuse by having to produce a result too quickly, by growing weary of theme or character, or from the sheer effort involved in trying to attain what often seems unattainable, i.e., a good story. Lately, however, I've been trying to think about fiction in terms that relate less to the pleasure it affords me than to the service, however minute, it might provide.

The first stories, we're led to believe, were mere enlargements of facts, relations of hunts and battles embellished and given form, enough so as to make a tale (though I suspect they were fantasies told by a parent to a child about the moon or the stars or the darkness, imbued—whether or not unconsciously—with some moral or philosophical resonance). Audiences then were, in general, hungry for information, starved for entertainment, and were more appreciative than critical. Today, the conditions are quite different. We are so oversaturated with information, it's difficult to discern which of a trillion accessible bits have relevance to our lives; we live in a society in which a myriad varieties of entertainment are beamed non-stop by satellite into the tiniest cracks of the world. As evidence of this proliferation, if evidence is needed, while in Honduras not long ago, in the jungles of the Mosquito Coast, in a shanty bar surrounded by Miskitia Indians, with a generator rattling in the background, I watched on a portable television set the bootleg of a rough cut of a yet unreleased Hollywood movie, followed by a retrospective of *Miami Vice* episodes.

The problem, then, for the contemporary writer has been to find new ways to convey whatever information they wish to convey, and over the last fifty years or so,

the art of narrative has become increasingly oblique, this in part due to the fact than many readers, if not most of them, do not want to hear a fiction writer on topics that assail them from newspaper headlines and the cable news. Human beings have always evinced a talent for indifference; indeed, it might be argued that this fundamental indifference to the suffering of others permits us to live surrounded, as we are, by a multiplicity of disaster and slaughter. With the internet having become a cesspool of opinion, the effect of the polemicist has been muted and is thought of as being too strident for politically correct ears, this despite the fact that no more is gained by saying, May I have a moment of your time?, than by announcing oneself forcefully. We have grown desensitized to information that makes us uncomfortable, and more desirous of escape, of unchallenging entertainment; thus much of modern fiction is unchallenging, formulaic, or, in its more artistic expressions, baroque in its attempt to conceal the fact that it is about something . . . or else it has utilized newer forms of narration, newer fictive architectures, to pretend that it is about something, whereas, in actuality, it is only concerned with its own cleverness. For every writer of skill and conscience who embraces these newer forms, who seeks by such means to break a fresh tunnel into the reader's brain, there are dozens of shoddy imitators whose embrace of newness is less than passionate, less than competent, and, as a consequence, much of what passes for literate writing has become decadent and, like *Seinfeld*, is a show about nothing that mythologizes the superficial and the deeply trivial. Movies, too, have failed us. Hollywood, to single out one among its many grievous faults, has given us dozens of films that testify "to the triumph of the human spirit." Survival stories, the bulk of them. Yet you might ask, Can mere survival be said to constitute a triumph? And you might further inquire as to what significant triumph the human spirit has accomplished, when it appears that human history is on the verge of achieving its entropic resolution, when it is becoming difficult to resist the notion that the world, as a more renowned writer than I once said, is ". . . going to the shagging dogs."

Compounding the problem of a desensitized audience averse to information is the sorry truth that journalism as a means of conveying information is on the wane. By virtue of corporate design or the audience's demands (really a which-came-first-egg-or-chicken issue), journalists have grown sensitive to our desensitization and rarely seek to challenge us. The mass media either ignores the truth, presenting the news as entertainment or, in cases where the truth cannot be ignored (Katrina, the tsunami, etc.), makes it irrelevant, obfuscates it behind a screen of celebrity involvement, so-called "human interest" stories, mind-numbing repetition, and what is called in Mexico *notas rotas* ("red news"), the sort of thing defined by this excerpt from an unfinished story of mine:

"In the eighteen years during which he had supplied images of the dead to the city's

daily newspapers, Hugo Lis had photographed more than ten thousand corpses, the victims of shootings, decapitations, car crashes, mass murders, electrocutions accidental or otherwise, wild dogs, and so forth. The majority of those pictures, despite the relative anonymity of the victims, had been run on the front page above the fold, often in conjunction with the photograph of a half-naked starlet or singer, and when asked—as he sometimes was—to explain this apparent opposition, Hugo would say that in a place where life has little or no meaning, death tends to acquire a certain glamour. Mexico City had seventy-five thousand streets and death was a celebrity on each and every one. He had visited homes in which his photograph of a family member's bloody remains had been snipped from a newspaper and now served as the centerpiece of a shrine. It was as if the violated flesh and its public celebration had been deemed a truer emblem of a loved one's memory than the sunny smile of a confirmation photo or the purposeful, forward-looking pose of a graduation shot . . . "

Gruesome and wrong-headed as it may be, red news strikes me as contemporary journalism at its finest, its most honest, in that it accurately reflects the context of its embedded information, the moral tenor of our milieu.

I began writing in the early Eighties, during Reagan's "It's morning in America" period, when I was in El Salvador, an experience that made clear it was another time of day altogether in Central America. Upon my return to the States, I achieved a small success with my writing and, still shaken by the demonic excesses I had witnessed, I tended in casual conversation, at publishing parties and such, to go on at length about El Salvador. "Nice weather we're having," someone might say, and I would respond, "Yes, perfect weather in which to support the oppressed indigenous peoples of Central America." Though it was not my intent, I suppose I may have come off a bit self-righteous. Even my friends rolled their eyes and said, "Oh, God. He's off again!" Today, twenty-odd years later, I am still possessed, politically speaking, by a simplistic (some would say, naive) point of view that flies in the face of realpolitik, and I'm writing at a time when, according to certain televised ads, "Freedom is spreading across the world like a golden sunrise." Despite the buttery grandiloquence of that metaphor, it appears little has changed, and what change there has been, has not been for the better. The media has tightened its grasp on our thoughts, cutting off the blood to our brain, and what Allen Ginsberg once termed "the roar of life insurance" has come to outvoice the tumultuous outcry of life.

Writers, I've found, tend for the most part to make poor activists. They live in their heads, they spend too much time alone. They're arrogant, paranoid, lazy. I won't bother to deny that I've been lulled by the writing life into a sense not of complacency, not precisely, but one of stuporous indignation, and I must admit to having spent innumerable hours watching video of the latest disaster or war while

drinking a beer and determining—rather muzzily—that I need to get involved in a way other than exchanging insults on a message board with some equally contrary madman. Since I don't have a great sum of money at my disposal; since I have little power and am poorly qualified to exert myself on behalf of a political concern in any discipline except, perhaps, the writing of fiction; since the problem posed is one of an increasingly self-absorbed audience desensitized to information, yet badly in need of information that journalism no longer cares to provide; and given the proposition that we have a century or less to get right with global warming and the countless other ills that plague us, or else we may find ourselves paddling over the falls, pretending it's all a dream and mommy or God will be there with milk and cookies when it's over and say, "There, there. Time to rest your weary head . . . " Well, like I said, I've been thinking about what a fiction writer might do in light of all this.

It's absolutely insane, of course, to presume that a book could engender a paradigm shift of the magnitude necessary to change anything, but hey, we are, many of us, writers, and we all have entertained that conceit at one time or another. Admittedly I haven't come up with much thus far. I've thought about a children's book designed to loose little red rats into the kiddies' brains that will scurry about shouting, "The sky is falling! For real!" And I've contemplated a novel utilizing certain techniques and tropes of "red news" that might persuade someone raised on the tabloids and True Crime video games to read it. The more I think about it, the more certain I am that this is the way I should go—perhaps a hypertext novel, a psychodrama with pictures, capable of transmitting a shock, of convincing the reader that a crisis is imminent, when they are being told by more powerful media that none exists. Perhaps it's a fantasy, but where's the harm in indulging it?

At any rate, when asked to write this piece, I inquired as to the guidelines. I assumed the editors were looking for something that related to fiction in a writerly sense, but they told me to do whatever I wanted and, at that moment, I was thinking about my grandson Max, just born, his future, his expectations. My view of the future being bleak, I thought now might be a good time to applaud the writing of political fiction (of whatever cast) and give a shout out to those who practice the art. To say to you, ignore the brickbats and the gadflies, those with scads of attitude but little talent in their arsenals, who take you to task for overstatement. To beg you to write well and often, to punish your readers with your measure of the truth, even as you please them. To encourage you to sell it however you must, to wrap said truth in a hamburger bun and slather on the special sauce, if needs be, so as to make it go down easily, and to imbue the secret ingredient with an explosive striking force and a lingering contagion, like those shells with uranium casings currently so popular in parts of the Middle East. To urge you to be incautious in your pronouncements and, at the same time, canny in your concealments, to make the

reader feel the dimension and nature of their own peril, even while addicting them to your product—to be fiercely subversive in your cause, yet speak plainly when the opportunity arises and the occasion demands, because we badly need all such speech and subversion as it's possible to muster.

With journalism having tarted itself up into a variety of drags, with the cable news services delivering what in essence are corporate mission statements in lieu of opinion, I believe that fiction is one of the last remaining mediums that affords a place in which an effective political message can be transmitted. People still get excited about books, about stories. A very few people, to be sure. But you never know when one of your arrows may spark an actual triumph of the human spirit. It could happen. Chances are, it won't, but to hope otherwise and not to try would be supremely foolish.

"In 'A Paper Tissue' I was intrigued by the unnerving possibility that someone else's bad fortune does not necessarily bring out the most heroic impulses," says Stephen Volk. For the film and TV writer of the notorious BBC Halloween hoax Ghostwatch *and the award-winning paranormal drama series* Afterlife, *short stories are a tantalising chance to play with more minimal storytelling. "How often do we cross to the other side of the street, and what does that do to us? And is it always bad?" Other such conundrums are explored in his first wide-ranging collection of stories,* Dark Corners, *published by Gray Friar Press, which includes his story from* Postscripts #3, *"Curious Green Colours Sleep Furiously".*

A Paper Tissue

Stephen Volk

By the time they reached the *campio*, it was midday and time to shelter from the sun. Liz shielded her eyes with a flattened hand and set her sights with eagerness on the Museo Civico, but David's attention was on the surrounding bright crescents of white tables of an outdoor restaurant, created by the shadows of a herd of umbrellas.

She mistook his sideways glances. "God, you can't be thinking about food already. It's only two hours since we had breakfast."

Maybe the wafting smell of pizza *had* been the catalyst. If so, David denied it.

"I just think we should sit down for a minute, that's all. Before we take on the town hall. You know the stone floors of these art galleries. It's more tiring than you think. Anyway, I'm really thirsty."

They reached a compromise, and ordered two drinks. David, on impulse, asked the waiter if they did a milk shake by any chance. He knew instantly that the boy was confused, and changed his order to a Diet Coke, and a mineral water—*aqua minerale*—for his wife. She was looking at him through her sunglasses, accusingly. Liz took out the guide book and pretended to read it.

"We come all this way, to these wonderful places, with this wonderful art, and all you want to do is stop and eat all the time."

He didn't know why she mumbled, as if it were an aside he wasn't supposed to hear. Of course he was supposed to hear.

"I'm tired, that's all. I can't help it, can I?"

"You're always bloody tired. I don't know why you don't just stay at home."

The waiter returned with the drinks, and they drank without speaking. Rather than look at her pursed lips, David turned and watched the animated teenagers with tanned knees and designer rucksacks scattered across the square like lizards on a rock.

He'd been tired from the moment he woke up. He'd been sullen at breakfast, arching to pop his back in the way the chiropractor recommended. The drive down the N2 from Monteriggioni into Siena in the bright sunshine had made his eyelids heavy, and by the time they arrived he felt exhausted. He wondered whether the last few days were catching up with him, but what had they been doing for the last few days? Relaxing.

Why was he so tired? Why was he so damned *tired*, all the time?

Twenty years ago when they were first married and living in north London, he would see old couples in pubs who sat behind their drinks without exchanging a word for hours on end, and he would wonder how could a married couple ever get like that? Be trapped in each other's company, with nothing more to say, nothing more to discover?

Perhaps it was the heat. The heat slows you down. For years they never went abroad because he never liked holidays on the beach. Just let me have the umbrella, he thought: just let me stay here, you go and do your Art. But he didn't say it. They would do things together. They always did. Inextricably.

If only he could shut his eyes for a while, perhaps everything would be all right.

Liz said, "Smile, will you, for God's sake? You're supposed to be enjoying yourself." After the requisite pause, she added, as she always did, "Go on. 'What have I got to smile about?'"

He smiled, not disguising the fact that it was an effort.

She said, "You're such a miserable sod. Sometimes I don't know why I'm with you. I really don't." She finished her drink and pushed away the glass.

He took the last ice cube into his mouth and rolled it around. He put his elbows on his knees and stared at his own shadow on the hot cobbles.

"Here," she said, throwing the Insight *Pocket Guide to Tuscany* at him. "You decide, you do it for a change. You make some bloody decisions for once. I'm sick of this." She adjusted the camera strap on her shoulder and strutted into the sunlight, standing with her back to him as he waved for the bill.

Her behind was stretched wide in the navy blue shorts that had been baggy two years ago. Her legs were white, even through the lenses of his sunglasses.

By the side of the pool, next to their tiny cell-like apartment in Castel Strove, he had rubbed sun tan oil into the same pale skin on her back and shoulders, feeling the doughy flesh under his fingers. He smeared the cream onto his own belly and breasts and bulges with the same distaste, and had been eager to clean his fingers in the towel.

As they ate the first night in the tiny

kitchen, they heard three New Zealand ladies in the apartment downstairs laughing and playing music. He yearned for one of them to say hello as they walked to and from to the pool, but they never did. What made him think that this middle-aged, middle-class couple from Sussex could possibly be of interest to three dynamic, good-humoured, life-loving independent travelling ladies from the Southern Hemisphere?

He was adamant that when they arrived back in England, he would write and complain about the inadequacy of the facilities in the apartment. What the brochure had described as a "fully-equipped modern kitchen" was in fact without either an oven or a fridge. It was no good trying to make himself understood to that Italian in a vest with the endless children and whose idea of the English language was to talk, very slowly, in Italian. He would write to head office and demand a refund. Plus, they specified a short walk to the shops, when the supermarket in Strove was non-existent. Liz wasn't interested in complaining: she never was.

"Just relax and enjoy yourself," she would say.

And he would say, "How can I?"

He realised increasingly that he now remembered holidays for the peaks of fear and anxiety more than any calming influence. Climbing up the campanile of the Piazza Duomo in Florence he was overcome by a fear of leaning out and losing his glasses. He remembered the terrors of being squashed in the lift up the Eiffel tower, of the attack of claustrophobia in the Paris catacombs, or the breathless confined space ascending St Peter's Basilica in Rome. These experiences were much more vivid than the red tomatoes of the Via de Macci or the Africans selling wares from suitcases in the Mercato Centrale, or anything in the Uffizi, where he remembered the interminable agonised queuing more than any work of the Renaissance.

Outside the Cathedral, Liz had been approached by one of the many unctuous portrait-painters, calling her a "beautiful lady." She was about to succumb, stupidly, when David whisked her away, telling her, "Don't be ridiculous, it's a take-on. They say that to everybody."

She said, "Thank you," and it took longer than it should for him to understand what she meant.

Each night they would go through the guide book for the next day, plan it out, and go to bed. Liz was reading Roddy Doyle and he saw out of the corner of his eye that she smiled occasionally. David said that his Stephen King book was going on and on, and not getting anywhere.

"Give it up then, if you don't like it. Read another book."

"No, I'll see it to the end. In case something interesting happens. I've gone this far."

"You're supposed to enjoy it, it's not supposed to be penance." Liz turned over and switched off the light.

He read ten more pages, in irritation.

"By the way, why do you think those birds dive bomb the swimming pool?"

She said, "I think they see this bird, they swoop down, they try to mate with it, and they get a sloosh of cold water for their trouble. Funny thing is, the same bird goes round and comes back and does the same thing all over again."

David switched out his light.

"Food. I think they're after food."

He had been aware for some time that he no longer strove to fill the silences between them. Liz often accused him of not listening to her when she reported on the long list of her daily foibles and fripperies. It wasn't that he wasn't listening: it was just that his listening seemed unnecessary.

She repeatedly accused him of irritating her. He never made the same accusation of her. She sometimes said she hated him. He had never once said he hated her. He preferred sulking to confrontation. Confrontation was a sport he inevitably lost. Roughly once every six months, she said it was all over between them, that she had had enough, and that unless he changed, she would walk out. The truth was, he never changed, and she never walked out.

His wife had always had a fiery temperament. It was particularly this that attracted him to her across the floor of that office party. It was not so much that he was an introvert in search of an extravert, but that he wanted somebody to protect him from the outside world. ("Cancer the crab in his shell," an astrologically-minded friend once observed.) She was vivacious, and she was stunningly beautiful. That was a long time ago, of course, and the hard edges of mutual need had been worn down after twenty years of marriage and two children.

They had not had sex for two years. Liz had given up smoking, and went on a downward spiral. David had always fought paunchiness unsuccessfully, and seeing his wife fill out gave him a subtextual excuse to lose his shape—that was it exactly, losing shape. They both felt, physically, on the road of no return, but without the willpower to turn off. Each wanted the other to take the initiative to diet. Neither did. They were unhappily rolling towards their fifties, with no physical side to their relationship, and, more sadly, on his part, no wish for one. David was repulsed by the thought of his own lurching and puffing and blowing, the gasping for breath, his crushing weight on her. He would bring her to tears of disappointment, then suffer the recriminations, the analysis, the shame, guilt, the sick feeling of inadequacy. Better not to try, than to try and fail so miserably. He knew that she believed he was repulsed by her body. The real truth was that the body which repulsed him was his own.

He would have preferred to stay there all day, in the *campio* under a sun umbrella, but Liz was clearly impatient, and he sorted out the Italian

money, paying the bill for the Coke and the mineral water.

Was she going to say, "I can't stand this relationship any more?" Was this going to degenerate into an autopsy of their marriage again? If it did, would he for once tell her that he was fed up with *her* lack of attention, that *he* needed tactile contact and sweet nothings to be whispered occasionally? Would she go silent—as had happened so many times before—and say nothing was wrong, then admit weeks later that she felt like telling him it was all over there and then? That she felt like leaving him, getting back to the airport, going home, filing for divorce, sorting out the belongings, dividing the record collection? Could he ever, *ever*, say to her, out loud, that sometimes he felt all those things?

She had the courage to say them, perhaps, secure in the knowledge that things could be patched up, put right. He had no such certainty. He was afraid that if the words, those thoughts, came from his mouth, they might (and the thought of it gave him a chill), sound inescapably final.

But sometimes, as at this particular moment in the *campio*, he thought: Nothing can be worse than this.

"Artoo! Artoo!"

At first he thought someone was calling out in Italian. Out of context, he didn't even recognise the

nickname he hadn't heard for over ten years: nor the voice that called it.

"Artoo! As I live and breathe heavily!"

The quote from *The Two Ronnies* clinched it, followed by the yacking Sid James laugh. He recognised the man rising from a chair at another table instantly. Apart from a French-polished tan and a light brush of grey in his thick black hair, he hadn't changed at all.

"Niven? Good Lord."

"Hey . . . " said Niven in that drawn-out black American streetwise fashion (he imbibed and regurgitated all things American). He moved in a slender 32-inch hipped shimmy towards David with outstretched hand.

"I don't believe it," said David. "Liz? Liz, look who it is."

Liz was already moving towards Niven and David, still locked as they were in an over-zealous handshake. "I don't believe it," she said without smiling.

"That's what I said."

"Hello, Liz. How are you doing, babe?" Niven turned to kiss David's wife, but she visibly recoiled from the dentally over-subscribed mouth and perpetual seven-o'clock shadow, and then laughed as if covering up her reaction. He pulled her into a hug. She met David's eyes awkwardly in the second or so before she was released. Her expression, he knew, asked: Please, how do we get out of this? David himself was thinking the same.

"Well. Well . . . " he said, and laughed through tightened lips. "Gosh . . . "

Niven made no mention of the incredible coincidence. He was neither

shocked nor overwhelmed. He was as calm as if he had been sitting, expecting an old colleague from ten years ago in London to appear. "Sit down, sit down. Join us for a minute."

"Actually . . . "

David glanced at Liz, like a child wordlessly asking its mother for permission to leave the table. Then he decided it was preposterous: here was someone that had virtually been one of the family for six months, for God's sake—of course they had to sit down.

"You look well," said Niven, patting the flat of his hand on David's tummy. David imagined he meant the opposite. With Niven's sense of humour, you could never tell. He remembered him telling a secretary in a Noel Coward voice that she looked *terribly terribly handsome this morning* when she patently looked dog-rough after a night on the tiles. "Lost a bit of weight?"

"You're joking. Put some on. A lot, actually."

"No, really? You used to be—you used to look—really . . . " Niven made an expansive gesture with his arms which didn't need to be embellished with words.

David laughed. Niven always made him feel like an old man, even though there were probably no more than five years difference in their ages.

Join us. David only registered the "us" as they arrived at Niven's table. In the shadow of the umbrella sat an Italian girl of around twenty-five. David's heart suddenly felt like a stone in his chest. He had not seen such a gorgeous woman outside the soft focus of a TV commercial. He noticed not so much the blackness of her eyes but the whiteness that surrounded her irises, set off by an evenly biscuit coloured skin. Her lips were thick and sensual, and she had the look of a gypsy. Yet she shifted in her seat with an *ingenue* shyness. Her eyes did not make contact. Her shoulders seemed to tighten as the strangers came closer.

"This is Gabriella," said Niven, pulling out chairs for his guests. In fluent Italian he added, "Gabriella, these are my old friends David and Liz, from London." She nodded her head and flickered a smile. The hand that David shook was small and light. He could feel the bones beneath the skin. It was like the hand of a child.

"OK. What are you having, you guys?" Niven pulled in his own chair closer to the table with a metallic rasp.

"We're not eating," said Liz. "We had a late breakfast. We've got a lot to see."

"Joke, is it? I mean a drink. You'll have a drink with us, won't you?"

"Actually, we just . . . " David began, then felt foolish. "Yes of course. Of course we will. Thanks." He didn't look at Liz until after he'd said it.

"What do you want? What about a Martini?"

"No, not for us," said Liz.

"No, this heat is too much for alcohol," said David. "I don't find it that thirst—quenching in this weather."

"Who's talking about thirst-quench-

ing?" said Niven. He grinned, displaying toothpaste-white teeth against the tan he had acquired, and gave the waiter an impressive prattle of Italian. The waiter disappeared.

"So, how are you doing? Still working in advertising?"

"Sort of," said David. "Yes. Got out of the agency rat race, though. Not a moment too soon."

"Too much for your mental health, eh?" Niven said.

"Something like that."

"Too many wankers."

"Something like that."

"Well. Life's too short if you're not cut out for it."

David tried to give the impression that his opted lifestyle was a change for the better, that he hadn't backed out of London out of cowardice—he knew that was what Niven was thinking. "There are small set-ups in Sussex. Some of them just copywriters who farm in from outside for the visuals. I'm much happier since going freelance. Aren't I, Liz? Pieces of illustration work. I'm my own boss. You can do it all by phone now. Phone and fax, and colour photocopies."

"You don't miss London then? The buzz?"

"I don't miss going into work every day wondering if the new creative director is going to make me redundant."

"Yes. There is that."

Niven looked at Gabriella and spoke a few sentences in Italian, as if summarising the conversation so far. Gabriella nodded without showing any real interest.

"Well, I must say, you've, ah—certainly fallen on your feet, Niv," said Liz.

"I have. I know. Bigtime. No bout adout it."

Niven's hand rested on Gabriella's thigh. It made David imagine the warmth of her brown skin through the white cotton of the skirt.

"Last I heard, you'd upped sticks and gone to an agency in Paris."

"Two years, it was time to move on," said Niven. "I got headhunted. Became a co-creative director of this Italian agency, they wet their knickers over English admen. Quite right too, most of it out here is shite. Two seconds flat I was the MD. Bought in Mike Remmer from London, you know, oldest oldest friend, and Diane Francis on the media side—the old crowd. I've got an office of forty-five people now. We do work for Porsche. TV, cinema ads, the lot. Shoots in the Seychelles. It feels like being back in Covent Garden in days of yore, except I'm in the driving seat now."

Niven Page, that fair-weather friend. The phrase that Liz used to use between clenched teeth summed it up.

David had become a visualizer at the agency in the days when copywriters from Oxford or Cambridge had the ideas and slipped them under the door to the art department and said "Draw a line around that." He was happy with that. He was a magic marker man, not an intellectual. During the eighties

everything changed, and visualisers became Art Directors and were expected to sit in sweaty rooms, shooting pool and coming up with great campaigns with graduates of Watford copywriting school. They were expected to agonise like painters or novelists, work through midnight, drink hard, read *Campaign* from cover to cover, and live and breathe "ads".

With a new, dynamic creative director, came sackings. David hung on by the skin of his teeth after the night of the long knives, simply, he knew, because they didn't have the money to make the entire department redundant. And so there was a new intake of bright young things. One being perhaps one of the first "live, breathe, read *Campaign*" mentality copywriters: Niven Page. Flying jacket, jeans, T-shirt. The new breed. Flashy. Wild. Mr No-Self-Doubt.

David wasn't expecting to like him. It was like a dinosaur forging a bond with a furry mammal whose species he knew would proliferate and replace his own. But Niven was unlike anyone in the old agency: full of life, energy, obsession. He was sharp, witty, bright—and incredibly funny. It was like working on a creative team with Lenny Bruce. He'd use words in headlines like machine gun fire. He would worry over the right word for hours, days. He would shout and scream at Account Executives and shoot them down in flames for pedantry, stupidity, lack of imagination. Clients, too. And he won every time.

He would say to the straightest of Suits that he was sure he saw him boogying at a disco the night before,

"getting on down". The Suit would deny it, sucking his pipe, not knowing that the rest of the department was stifling laughter behind cupped hands.

Niven worked hard and played hard. David was a strictly nine till five man, and his regimen was neatly dictated by the 5.35 train from Waterloo. Niven rarely wandered in before 11 o'clock and only warmed up after a liquid lunch. He expected to do his best work between six and ten, with Elvis Costello blasting from the speakers. He then would get "rat-arsed", "running with the pack" as he called his Soho excursions with a nameless ragtag troop of reprobates and piss artists from various agencies he had inhabited. Sometimes he would arrive in the morning with a torn shirt, and someone would ask what the hell he'd been doing, and he would turn his lips to the ceiling and let out a wolf howl. He blamed "the pack" for leading him astray, but the others in the creative department wondered who exactly was leading whom.

He was mad, obsessive.

He was obsessed by all things American, especially movies. Long before it was published, he wrote a typescript of the film *Taxi Driver* by watching it scene by scene, line by line, into the early hours of the night. He did the same with *Mean Streets*. This was during his Martin Scorsese phase. He went through a similar devotion to Sergio

Leone. And he took up the guitar in order to learn the songs composed by Bob Dylan for *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. He temporarily took up whisky drinking when he was empathising with Sam Peckinpah, and said he'd seen *The Wild Bunch* twelve times in one week.

Niven was married, which came as a surprise to David, since for weeks if not months, it never came out in conversation. His wife was a pretty Irish girl called Brigit. David and Liz met her once. She was a junior doctor.

Since Niven seemed hardly ever to be rushing to go home, it came as little surprise after a few months to learn that they were getting divorced.

His emotional life was a mystery to all concerned. Once, one of the secretaries had been determined to seduce him. He was an attractive man, dark and pointed, growing bony and tautly muscled out of the punk era. She ended up in his flat at three in the morning, falling asleep as he read out his script transcript of *Chinatown*. Or that's the story she told. David never saw the two of them speak after that.

After the breakdown of Niven's marriage, Liz had taken pity on him. He was an entertaining but essentially sad character, and she felt that for all his pretensions, he was adrift and basically friendless. They took him under their wing. Niven moved into the room their son had vacated to go to college. He had a job in a different agency by them, but they were still close friends, the three of them. Liz enjoyed his company, his eccentricities. His sudden infatuation with Johnny Cash and country music, then, just as suddenly, a switch to Truman Capote, and the true life crime he depicted in *In Cold Blood*: he began to collect cuttings of crimes from the newspapers and duplicate Capote's style in describing them. Like a Walter Mitty, he toyed with giving up the agency stuff and becoming an investigative journalist.

He was Toad of Toad Hall. That's exactly what he was. Toot-toot! Toot-toot!

And it became clear that just as obscure subjects suddenly fascinated him in every detail, it was the same with women. He told David one evening that he was seeing a girl he'd met in a pub in the West End. He knew everything about her, described her in infinite detail, but gave no hint of his opinion of her at all, whether or how much he *liked* her.

He stayed out late, at this girl's flat, presumably, two or three times that week, and on one occasion didn't turn up when Liz had dinner on the table. Liz said, "That's it. He's treating this place like a doss house. It's not fair. You talk to him." David talked to him, and without a hint of surprise or argument, Niven said he would leave. Whether he immediately moved in with the girl, they never found out.

He fell completely out of contact with them.

He didn't so much as ring them.

Weeks went by, and this friend, whom they had imagined had become

so close to them in the previous six months, this man who had sat around their Christmas table with a paper hat on his head and raised his wineglass in a toast, had completely dropped out of their lives.

They felt used. It was not even that there had been a massive falling out and they separated on bad terms. Niven had simply been with them for a while, and moved on without a backwards glance.

A year went by, and occasionally he would pop up in David and Liz's conversation, and one or other would say: *Niven Page: that fair-weather friend.*

Then, one evening, they happened to go for a quick drink in Brahms & Liszt in Covent Garden before meeting friends for a meal, and there he was, sitting at the bar, chatting animatedly to a girl. David and Liz had their drinks, and it was clear that Niven had seen them. He couldn't avoid seeing them. But he didn't say a word. When he went to the gents, he walked right past their table. It was as if they were invisible.

"He didn't even say hello," said Liz when they were on the train home. "He could at least have said hello."

The Italian waiter placed the tray with drinks in the shade of the umbrella. They were Martinis with ice.

Niven finished his first Martini and started on the new one. "Think you'd fancy it out here, then Artoo?"

David cringed at the nickname again. His name was David Davies. Ever since being a child, he cursed the fact that his parents were so lacking in imagination. From their first introduction, Niven had called him D2 for short, and this became warped into R2 after Artoo Deetoo, the bucket-shaped robot in the *Star Wars* films.

"No, it's not for me. Here. Italy, I mean."

"It's paradise! Look at it."

"No," David grappled for a succinct way of putting it. "Family back home. You know how it is . . . "

"Change. Does a person a world of good."

"Does it?"

"Look at me."

David shook his head. "Horses for courses, I suppose." He was stroking the condensation from the outside of the tall stemmed glass with his index finger. He took out the slice of lemon and the sprig of mint and placed them in the ashtray.

"How did you meet? The two of you?" Liz found she addressed the question to Gabriella.

"Gabriella doesn't speak English," Niven said, and repeated it in Italian for her. "Doesn't answer back." He obviously expected laughter in response to this, so Liz and David obliged. As they did, he leaned over and kissed Gabriella, first on the cheek, and then on her full, dry, abnormally pink, lips. It was not a public kiss, it was the kind of kiss teenagers gave in an alley, alone, at night. Averting his eyes with embarrassment, David looked at Liz. She too was looking away, though not at him.

Something came to David's mind. When they had been exploring Florence, they had taken a walk one evening to the church of Santa Croce, to see Dante and Michelangelo's tombs. In the square outside, a great arena was being constructed, with tiered metal seating as if for a rock concert. A thick layer of sawdust was being spread on the ground. The barman back at the hotel in the Via Borgo Pinti said that it was a football pitch. He had said, "You don't want to go there. They are bad people, play. Criminals. Only bad people. Ruffians." David had imagined the more sultry faces from Italian frescoes. He then realised that in preparation for brutality, the sawdust was spread to absorb blood. He thought of the same word—ruffian—as he watched Niven kiss the girl.

"Do you ever come back to London?" Liz asked.

Niven laughed. "Come on. Would you?"

"Don't you have—connections?"

Niven thought for a few seconds, shaking his head, then clicked his fingers. "Do you ever see Ray Mooney? Is he still at Saatchi's?"

"I don't know," said David.

"Do you still live in that house in Thames Ditton?"

"No. Brighton."

"Oh. Interesting. You know what someone said about Brighton. That it looked like a town that was helping the police with their enquiries."

David made a chuckle. "A bit, yes." He'd heard the line before.

"Not like Siena, I suppose," said Liz.

"Oh don't you believe it," said Niven. "You look around at all this shining, harmonious medieval perfection. But Siena was at war with Florence for bloody centuries. The Florentines used to come and lob excrement and donkey corpses over the city walls, in order to give them the plague. Forerunner of biological warfare, it was. Yeah. Remember that when you're looking at all those beautiful, elegant Renaissance works of art. No pain, no gain."

He looked at Gabriella and smiled and rattled the Martini glass against his teeth—one of his old trademarks. Gabriella didn't smile. She clung a little tighter to his arm. "Gabriella's getting bored," he said, then something to here in Italian which made her let go.

She sat back in the chair.

Liz drew David's attention to the fact she had finished her drink. She looked at her watch. "I'm sorry. If we don't move ourselves . . . "

David stood up too, tidying his chair back under the table.

"I understand," said Niven. "The world is your lobster. You want to see it all. Take the old holiday snaps, eh? Do a slide show when you get home. All of that."

He made a wave, as extravagant as a drowning man, or an Italian traffic policeman, for the bill.

"I'll get these," said David, raising a hand to attract the waiter's eye.

"Bollocks you will," said Niven, already on his feet. "I can afford it. I've

got so much money I don't know what to do with it. You sit down." He took a lightweight cotton jacket from behind his chair and slipped it on. He headed towards the till, back in the shade of the restaurant proper.

"I'd better take advantage of the ladies," said Liz. "I'll only be a second."

David watched her go in and out of the tables. He was self-conscious being at the table alone with Gabriella. He realised he couldn't avoid eye contact. He looked at her and smiled. He picked up Liz's Nikon and took a photograph. Gabriella raised her hand at the last minute and ducked away. It flashed.

One of the other waiters cleared the two plates from the table, with Gabriella and Niven's half-eaten wedges of pizza. The knives and forks rattled.

"*Grazie*," said Gabriella, almost a whisper.

"*Prego.*"

The girl still had her hand pressed down on a paper napkin. She looked up into David's eyes. Her eyes pressed into his, held him. There was no expression in her face as she slid the paper tissue across the table until it sat right in front of him.

He looked down at it dumbly. It formed a white triangle against the white table. He held down the two sides with two index fingers, wondering what to do, when Niven was back at the table—his hands were on Gabriella's shoulders and instantly her eyes were downcast again. David noticed a tremor of fear in her shoulders as he touched her.

David folded the paper napkin and put it in his pocket. He stood up.

"I'll leave a tip."

"Too late, old chum. It's done."

David looked at the notes in his hand, desperately unsure of their worth. He folded them in half and slid then back into his pocket, where he could feel the paper tissue against his fingers.

Gabriella took out a cigarette from a packet. Niven took out a Zippo lighter and lit it with an ebullient flame. She combed her long hair from her face, tossing it back over her shoulder. Niven spoke a few sentences in Italian to her. Everything in Italian, to David, sounded like seduction. She took Niven's swarthy face in her hands and kissed him on the lips. David glimpsed the dark hair of her armpit and the soft skin at the side of her breast.

Liz squeezed behind his chair.

"Well. It's been nice. A nice surprise. Hasn't it, David? Sorry we have to, you know . . . "

"No, we have to go, anyway," said Niven, beating a fanfare on his chest with his hands. "We've got to hit the old *strada*. You know. People to do. Things to meet." He grinned, poking a pair of Jean Paul Gaultier sunglasses up the bridge of his nose. He took Gabriella by the arm.

"Good to see you," said David.

"Yeah, Artoo. Good to see you, man. Keep cool, all right?" They shook hands again and he kissed Liz on

the cheek. "One thing I do miss, though."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Christmas dinner."

Liz broke into a girlish smile, as if he had complimented her looks. "No . . . "

"Christmas dinner. Nice thick gravy. Nobody knows how to do gravy out here. She bloody doesn't." He poked Gabriella playfully in the ribs. "We're off. We'll see you around."

Liz thought, I doubt it.

"Bye."

"Bye bye. Or as they say in this neck of the woods—*Auf Wiedersehn!*"

David watched the couple meander through the white topped tables. Niven's hand gripped the girl's arm quite firmly. David could see his hard fingers digging into her skin. Neither of them looked around, and soon they had disappeared up one of the steep alleyways, against the current of tourists, away from the *campio*, Gabriella's long black hair dancing on her shoulders.

"Of all people," said Liz, as they crossed to the Museo Civico. "Unbelievable."

"I know."

"Well don't you think so?"

"Pretty incredible, yes."

They went inside and David paid for tickets. From the heat of the square, the interior of the building felt like an oxygen tent. It was cool, dark, restful. Even the distant scuffing of sandals on stone steps had a comforting resonance. They walked around in quiet awe.

In one vaulted, catacomb-like room, David cricked his neck to admire a Mantegna mural of a knight on horseback, high on the wall. Liz was playing with an interactive CD Rom which described the restoration of the vast painting of a Madonna on the opposite wall.

While her back was turned, he took out the paper tissue from his pocket and unfolded it. There were two words written hurriedly on it in blue ballpoint pen:

HELP ME

He folded the paper tissue and put it back in his pocket. The room felt colder, perhaps a stray draught from an open window.

He looked up again at the horse and rider and their drapery of diamond-shapes in yellow and black. He was familiar with the image from books, but this was the first time he had seen it in the flesh. Its scale and the vividness of its colour were an entirely different experience, first hand.

He went to the window and looked out at the sun-drenched *campio*. The restaurant tables were half full, but the table where they'd been seated was still empty.

His eyes lost focus.

He slowly walked across to Liz and looked over her shoulder at the computer images on the CD Rom. She was playing with the mouse, flipping caption after caption, but they were all in Italian. She couldn't understand a word.

He took her hand.

"You feel cold. You're cold," she said.

"Am I?"

She took his hand in hers and rubbed it.

It felt tingly and warm.

She smiled. "I love this place. Look at it. If I died and went to heaven, and it looked like this, I'd be happy."

She stood in front of the restored mural. David stood beside her, looking at her the way she was looking at the painting. Candle light caught the corners of her eyes. She looked like a child at Christmas. She caught him looking at her. "What?"

He shook his head.

He held out his hand.

She took it.

All that afternoon, as they wandered through the streets of Siena, window-shopping, David somehow expected to catch a glimpse of Niven and Gabriella. Had they said they were going home? What was home? Did they even live together? Niven hadn't said where he worked—not even the name of the city. Florence? Rome? He looked at every face, every ruffian, every long-haired Italian girl. He turned at every voice, at every cotton jacket.

They drove back to the apartment. It was much cooler now. David didn't feel the sting of the sun on his cheek, the tired pricking in his eyes. They reached the castle at about 5pm and went to the pool for an hour before coming back for a siesta. He read a chapter of the Stephen King but realized at almost every page he hadn't taken in a single word of the page before. He closed his eyes and felt the weight of the book on his chest for a while.

Undressing for a shower, David sat naked on the toilet seat and took the paper napkin from his trouser pocket. It was rumpled now. He flattened it against the wall using his fist and read it over and over, or at least stared at it, contemplating its meaning.

HELP ME

He heard the New Zealand ladies going to the pool. They were chattering and laughing. He put the tissue back in his pocket and stood under the shower. He rubbed his eyes under the spray. When he came out, his glasses, set on the cistern, were dappled with beads of water, and he used some of the toilet roll to wipe them off.

That night they drove to San Gimignano, a fortress town with tall towers built to show off power to surrounding fortress towns. Almost every shop seemed to have at least one boar's head, fully furred and tusked, in the window, if not the entire boar. Massive legs of pork hung, hairy, trottered, without any apology for the animal from which they'd come.

There were several beggars on the streets, as there were in Siena and had been in Florence, and over his spaghetti carbonara and her ravioli in *pomodoro* sauce, they talked about those less well off than themselves. Liz said at the end of the conversation, "We should never forget how lucky we are, really."

"I'll drink to that."

"We should never take things for granted. Including each other. That's where things always go wrong. You know that, don't you? Things get like they get, and I want you to do something about it, but I don't want to have to tell you to do something about it. I want you to know. I want you to do something about it before I have to lose my top and go mad, for once."

He looked into his red wine. "I know. I know when I'm doing it. It's almost like I know I'm—I know, pushing you to the limit."

"We can't go on like this, David."

"I know."

"We have to talk about it."

"We are talking. We're talking now, aren't we?"

They got lost on the way home. They took some wrong turning somewhere. Liz was getting edgy, but David remained inexplicably calm.

"Thank you," she said, kissing him on the cheek when they got home. The softness of her lips tingled against the fine, shaved bristles.

"What's that for?"

"Not blowing a gasket because we got lost."

He put the hire car keys on the kitchen table and took off his jacket. "What's the point in blowing a gasket? I knew we couldn't be more than five minutes from the main road, it was just a case of driving till we found a junction we recognised."

That night he slept deeply. There was quiet for the first time. No chatter from below or the incessant click of high heels and vespas as in the hotel in Florence. Perhaps it was the red wine, but he slept like a log.

The next day he woke with the birdsong, and as he dressed he realised he no longer had the dreadful ache between the shoulder blades. By the time Liz had roused, he'd had his shower and was making toast and slicing cheese for breakfast. She sat in her night-dress at the table and he reached from behind her and cupped her breasts with his hands.

"What's up with you?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She chuckled and said, "Get off."

He poured the coffee and spread out the map between them, talking with enthusiasm about his plan for the day.

As they drove through the Tuscan countryside a few hours later, Liz said, at a pause in their otherwise continuous conversation, "Do other people always argue all the time like us?"

David said, "We don't argue all the time."

They visited the volcanic springs at Volterra, where they sat drinking cappuccino as a funny brass band, led by a fat man with his fly buttons held together with a safety pin, banging a big drum, came by. They stopped at an alabaster showroom on a hillside. David ran his hand over a beautiful, half-finished sculpture of a woman. "Beautiful. Don't you think? Beautiful. Look."

They made love that night. Insects clicked in the crop fields outside the

castle shutters.

Afterwards, lying in the dark, he said: "Sometimes you feel your life has reached a plateau. There's no more to give, to have, there's nothing left to happen."

She said, "You have to make it happen."

He took her hand in the dark and kissed it.

He slept well, for the second night in a row. And when he woke up the following morning, he realised he wasn't tired any more.

It was their last full day on the Friday and they went to Monteriggioni, another fortress town, near the junction where they had left the *autostrada* from Florence. It was the kind of place seen in the background of Renaissance portraits. A village with hardly any tourists, just locals working and chatting, children, barking dogs. Liz bought two ice creams and they sat eating them like naughty children. She said, "Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we diet."

He said, "That would be good on a T-shirt. I'm going to get us some T-shirts with that on."

"We'll have to diet before we can get *into* a T-shirt."

He laughed.

On the Saturday morning, they drove and left off the car hire Fiat Punto at the Hertz place in Pisa Airport. They killed time, sitting outside, near the station platform, until it was time to walk through to Departures.

"You seem happy," she said, squinting at her husband in the sunshine.

"I am. God knows why."

She said, "Don't knock it."

While she was reading her book, he walked across to a waste paper bin, took out the paper tissue from his pocket, and, without looking at it, dropped it in.

A few weeks later, at home in Sussex, he was setting the dining table for a dinner party while Liz was cooking a Rick Stein Thai curry out the kitchen. Their daughter Jody was on her way from London, with a new boyfriend they hadn't met before. Fats Domino was on the cassette player, louder than usual. Liz had just said it was surprising how much more you hear when the volume is higher. David folded navy blue cloth napkins in tight, flat triangles and laid them on the dinner plates. Then, reconsidering, he called out, "Do you want the napkins on the main plates or the side plates?"

"You know how to do it," she called. "You do it best. I leave it up to you."

She looked in a moment later, crunching a carrot. He was standing admiring his table layout as if it were a work of art.

She said, "Perfect."

He followed her to the sink, brushed up her hair at the back with the flat of his hand, and kissed the back of her neck, and felt the warmth of her body in his lips.

"What was that for?"

He said, "Nothing." ⊠

Jack Dann remarks, "I tried to make this iconic interaction between Jack Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe as realistic as possible, even though the actual encounter is pure fiction. I've taken liberties, of course, such as the secret tunnel to JFK's hotel; but the politics, anecdotes, and people are as authentic as I could make them. 'The Method' is part of my James Dean alternate universe, which includes my novel The Rebel: An Imagined Life of James Dean *and the forthcoming collection* Promised Land. *I've been interested in pushing the envelope by writing speculative fiction (to borrow that old chestnut from the 70s) as mainstream fiction. However, this story isn't slipstream or speculative—at least not in the SF sense; I think it just broke loose and landed squarely in mainstream territory.*

"I'm currently editing a number of anthologies, writing short stories and short novels (I just can't help myself), and am presently knee-deep in research for a novel about Niccolo Machiavelli. Tentative title: Prince Machiavelli. *(Some may remember that Machiavelli was a main character in my novel* The Memory Cathedral. *That wasn't intentional; the character just took over, which sometimes happens. Now Machiavelli, devious as always, seems to be demanding his own show.)"*

The Method

Jack Dann

Marilyn Monroe's eyes were streaming tears, and she was still shaking.

She wore sunglasses, a white silk scarf, and a great woolen coat with a collar that flopped against her shoulders as she walked; she seemed to disappear inside the coat. She was determined to walk off everything that was bad, stomp it under her feet. She pretended that the sidewalk along Madison Avenue was just one long spit-soiled, flattened version of Mr. Milton Green, her business partner, and that she was walking right over his smooth, flat, oily, self-satisfied kike face.

Not that she had anything against Jewish people . . . after all, she was going to marry Arthur Miller . . . once she divorced her wop baseball player, God love him.

She smiled and suddenly wondered what it would be like to be blind. She squinted her eyes to block everything out except the square of sidewalk ahead of her and pressed ahead, walking a straight line as if she were indeed blind. If she ignored everything around her, perhaps it would all disappear, poof, disappear Mr. Zipped-Up Tight-assed Mr. Milton Green. And you can take your skinny-assed wife Amy who minds everybody else's business with you. Poof, there you go Amy, Mrs. I-know-all-the-"niceties"-and-you-don't. And

fuck you and the horse you came in on . . .

The air was damp, and the mist that softened the dirty stone geometry of the city would surely turn to rain. It was cold, October misery cold, the prelude to winter cold. She burped and tasted the lobster thermidor she'd had for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel. Then she straightened up and talked positively to herself, just like Lee Strasberg had taught her to do. Lee was probably the smartest person in New York, better than any tin star shrink, she thought, and certainly the best acting teacher in the entire world. He presided over the Actors' Studio and had taken her, Marilyn, on as his premier pupil. She visualized Lee as she walked: his shock of thinning, white hair; scrunched up cute little face, like a ferret or something; black rimmed glasses; pencil thin mouth; and, oh, could he cut you to pieces with that mouth . . . to pieces.

Marilyn felt better now, even if just a little sick.

She didn't have to think about Milton or his cunt-faced fashion designer model wife. Marilyn had an important meeting with an important man, and she was going to think herself beautiful, blind and blond and beautiful piggly wiggly Marilyn; but not yet, not until she was off the street because she certainly didn't want to be recognized.

She rubbed her eyes—which were burning from her exercise of being blind—as she passed the Carlyle Hotel, a forty story yellow brick and limestone skyscraper. She didn't look up at it because she was a real New Yorker now, at least part of the time, and didn't gawk. She had never really looked at the old Art Deco building that was supposed to have been inspired by the Westminster Cathedral in London, but she knew all about it because she'd studied up. She knew it was designed by Bien and Prince, whoever the fuck they were, and completed in 1930.

It was important that she could talk intelligently. The person she was going to meet wasn't just an actor.

Although Marilyn's destination was The Carlyle Hotel, she went around the corner to 77th Street and ducked into the unprepossessing entrance of an apartment building. She asked the desk clerk for the key to 109, and the clerk, a man in his late sixties who never seemed to speak—perhaps he was foreign—turned to the key and letterboxes on the wall and handed her an unmarked key. She left quickly and felt his hot gaze on her neck, as if he knew who she was and who she was going to meet. She should have her own key, but that wasn't the way things worked. She took the elevator to G-109, where she would take a few minutes to freshen up; put on her face, Marilyn's face; and think of all the things she'd planned to say. But when she opened the door, she got a fright because there was a stranger standing in the doorway.

"Uh, excuse me," she said, and backed out of the room; she was going to get the hell out of there as fast as her little feet would carry her.

"No, hold on, wait, I'm Red . . . Red Fay. I'm a friend of Jack's; we served together in the Navy. He asked me to wait here for you."

"Now why would he do that?" Marilyn asked warily, although she'd heard Jack talk about him.

"To take you through to the room." He went to the dressing table and picked up a large flashlight, which he clicked on and off. "Please, come in."

She did, and closed the door behind her. So this was The Redhead. Grand Old Loveable. The Big Shot. Jack Kennedy's best friend.

"There are lights in the tunnel, you know," Marilyn said. "Seems to me that I found my way before without any trouble. Where were you then?"

Red smiled. His narrow eyes seemed to be squinting, as if trying to get a better look at her. He was of medium height, average build, and he wore his brownish-red hair short-cropped. He was Mr. Joe Average with dumbbell Dumbo ears, but on him they somehow looked . . . cute. In fact, he was just that: not handsome, just cute. One of Marilyn's girlfriends would have called him "fucky"; and Marilyn could imagine him as the life of the party, the noisy one, chasing around, drinking, grab-assing and full of energy when everyone else was ready to go sleepy-bye-baby. In short, a good fuck.

"I suppose I was bereft and lonely in California," Red said.

"And what are you doing here now?"

"Taking you to see the great man himself," Red said magnanimously; then, as if sensing that he had just taken the wrong approach, he said, "Look, this was supposed to be a nice thing. Jack said you're afraid of the dark and claustrophobic and aren't comfortable coming through the tunnel. So he asked me to guide you through and whack any monsters that might be hiding in the corners."

She couldn't help but smile back at him.

"You want to see my driver's license as proof?"

"No, I know who you are, but from what I heard, I'd probably be safer alone."

"Well, I can go on ahead . . . "

"Give me a minute to powder my nose. And it's not so much that I'm afraid of the dark; it's just I hate that goddamn tunnel, and all this secrecy. I'm not some ten dollar whore he's sneaking into his hotel room."

Red shrugged, looking embarrassed; he was definitely the one who had to make everything all better in every circumstance. "Well, if Jackie found out, she might get a tad nervous."

"Screw Jackie," Marilyn said.

Red smiled again. "That's something that's occurred to me before, too."

Goddamn, but that man's smile was catching, like a cold or something; and Marilyn found herself grinning stupidly back at him. It was a sort of power that he had, Mr. Joe Average's charisma, and it made Marilyn feel nervous and insecure and idiotically horny as if she was on a first date

with every girl's jug-eared dreamboy jock with a letter-sweater. She closeted herself in the bathroom, draped her coat over the tub, and said, "And how's Jackie going to find out anything?"

She worried her lipsticks and makeup compacts out of her duffel bag pocketbook, put on her face, then studied herself in the mirror. She was wearing a devastating strapless black satin gown just like the one worn by Rita Hayworth in Gilda. She had no use for Rita, who was a sniping bitch, but the woman certainly had good taste in clothes. Marilyn giggled at herself. The last time she met Jack, she had worn a sweater dress over jeans and was bare-footed. She had told Jack she was barefoot and pregnant, and he almost spilled his bowl of Boston clam chowder all over his lap. Clam chowder. God, she hated the goddamn stuff. Milk and honkers, she called it. "Well, this should get his attention," she said to the mirror as she pulled down the bodice of her gown and rubbed some eye shadow between her breasts to accentuate her cleavage. She stared into her reflection in the mirror, staring into her eyes until she started getting scared . . . until she felt something pass out of the mirror and into her, something that was strong and absolutely focused like one bright shaft of light cutting into a dark cellar. I'm not afraid of the dark, she told herself and then stood up straight and strode into the living room.

"Holy shit," Red said. Then regaining his composure, "A bit overdressed for the occasion are we?"

"Are we?"

"I won't argue. As my Pappy used to say, 'There is a God.'"

I hope so, she thought as she followed him to the library, which contained a wet bar, red leather stools, a matching leather couch, and floor to ceiling bookshelves. All leather-bound decoration. The smell of old men trying unsuccessfully to hold in their farts. The smell of flabby-assed producers who wanted their blowjobs as due consideration. Red unlocked a door behind a false bookcase, and they ducked into the tunnel.

Red was right. The lights were out. It was dark and cold as a tomb. Must be a fuse, the whole circuit was out. Red talked about the old days with Jack and held her hand. The flashlight was certainly powerful, so bright that it caused long, jumpy shadows to scatter and careen around them.

"I don't like this," Marilyn heard herself say, panicking, as if she were caught in an elevator. She couldn't stand closed-in spaces. They might not be able to unlock the door at the other end and get out. She was caught, she wasn't in control; this might as well be a goddamn elevator. She listened to the constant dull background noise, which sounded like distant traffic or factory machines.

No comfort.

"It's fine, we're almost there."

"There's supposed to be lights in here."

"Well, I guess sometimes there aren't," and Red gripped her hand harder. She walked faster, bumped into him, smelled his perfume—Old Spice—and suddenly thought that he'd be a good father, that's what she wanted from him, for him to be Daddy, and she felt herself flush and wondered what he would look like naked with those big ears . . . and she wondered if he had muscles, what athletes called "definition". His Old Spice was the only smell in the dry and dusty corridor. Anything here would be as brittle and desiccated as dead flies on a windowsill. Marilyn figured this place was like hell. Just cold and darkness and empty machine noise, a place where even a fart would be a relief; and she had a terrific, and silly, urge to put Red's big, clammy hand between her legs, just to see his reaction; and then Red was jiggling open a service elevator door, which creaked and rattled. The elevator took them to a private floor in the Carlyle Hotel.

They stood in the foyer of Senator John F. Kennedy's penthouse suite, which was furnished with scrolled, claw-footed mahogany furniture, as if this was 1855 instead of 1955; and Red shouted, "Hey, Jack, where the hell are you?"

"I'm in heah," came a voice from the direction of the bathroom. "Marilyn, hey, Marilyn."

"She's right here," Red said, but Marilyn cut in front of him. She knew where the bathroom was. Jack Kennedy practically lived in the bathtub, and sure enough, there he was in the large, ornate, old-fashioned tub that sat on the black and white checkered tile floor. The water almost reached the wooden board placed across the tub above his waist. The board was covered with bottles of after shave lotion, a discolored and dirty looking shaving mug, a large badger-bristle shaving brush with a mother of pearl handle, a collection of pens and pencils, a beige telephone, and stacks of notepaper, letters, and books. On top of a pile of books and magazines were T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom and John Buchan's Pilgrim's Way; they were both open . . . and water-splashed. Steam rose from the bath water; and even though the bathroom door was open, the mirror over the sink was opaque with mist. But Marilyn was struck by him, as she was every time they met. She felt something tighten in her throat, and her glands opened up, releasing something wet and hot inside her. It was as if Jack was somehow much more than the knobby-kneed, chestnut haired, boyish-looking man in the tub. She loved his tight wide face and thick bushy hair, and she just now noticed that he was filling out, as if he were suddenly maturing, but his eyes were the same: deeply set, dangerous, as if they were cold, hard, blue mirrors, or ray-guns; that's it, Marilyn thought, his eyes were like ray guns, and she could feel them burning into her above his smiling mouth. But the mouth had nothing to do with it. It was all in the eyes.

"My, God, you look terrific," Jack said, yet the surprise in his voice didn't jibe with his steady look, as if she were just one more object, one more book, one more personage to contemplate. She might as well be clam chowder. There was no lechery in his face, no anticipation, yet it was full of smile lines, animated, the absolute simulacrum of good cheer and lover's intention. "Now I certainly won't be able to get out of this bath tub."

Marilyn smiled and bent over to kiss him. According to Jack, everything was terrific; it was a family thing, she was told. Everything was terrific or not to be noticed. Terrific or not worth a shit. She reached for his groin, and he reached for her breasts with a wet hand and smeared her eye shadow between her cleavage. "Ah, no fair," Jack said with a grin. "Cheating."

Marilyn wiped herself with a towel. "Okay, Mr. Hot-shit-senator, all gone, no more tits like Diana Dors," and then she broke into tears. Red was still standing outside the bathroom, but Jack waved him in, even while he spoke to her.

"Marilyn, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass . . . to—"

"No, Jack, I'm sorry," she said, dabbing her eyes with the towel and smearing her mascara. She wiped the mirror, looked at herself, and laughed. "Now I really look like a clown."

"You look beautiful," Jack said, but made no move to get out of the tub.

"Well, I will in a minute."

"Here, honey, I'll get you a chair," Red said, and came back with a desk chair for her.

"Thanks."

"It's just been a bad day," she told Jack as she sat down next to the tub. "And I wanted something to be perfect, especially after the last time."

"Last time was wonderful. Red, remember, I told you all about that?"

"You bastard," Marilyn said, grinning.

"So what do you think of Red?"

"I don't know. He's . . . cute," Marilyn said. "But he didn't tell me what he's doing here."

"Babysitting me."

"Then maybe I should let you two be together."

"Oh, no, he's your responsibility now," Red said, grinning at Jack. "I'm taking my flashlight and leaving."

"Where are you going?" Jack asked.

"I've got some errands to run. You wanted some books from the library, remember?"

"Yes, but that can wait," Jack said. "We can send somebody to do that."

Red laughed. "Yeah, who, Mr. Senator? You're looking at the somebody."

"Why do you need a babysitter?" Marilyn asked.

Jack looked at Red quickly, then at Marilyn. "He's helping me with my book."

"The one about John Quincy Adams?" Marilyn asked.

"And Daniel Webster and Thomas Hart Benton and Sam Houston and Robert Taft—"

"Okay, I get it."

"You think you might like to read what I've got? Tell me what you think?"

"Sure," Marilyn said, "although I don't know how much a help it'll be to have me read it."

"I think it will. I value your opinion."

"So that's what they're calling it now," Marilyn said. "Christ, if I'd have known that, I'd be a senator, too, by now."

Red, who was standing behind her, chuckled.

"Honey, if you wanted to, you probably could become senator, governor, or the goddamn president, for that matter."

"'I like Marilyn' doesn't quite have the ring of 'I like Ike', but that's why I'm here, Jack. To learn all the secrets from you and your boy friend."

Jack gave her one of his withering looks, but couldn't maintain it with Marilyn grinning at him. She had a lopsided, sexy grin, which was as contagious as Red's boy-next-door smile.

"So tell me your secrets."

"I gotta go," Red said, bowing. "Marilyn, it was a privilege to meet you."

"Hold your horses, Red," Jack said. "Have you lost all your manners? Tell Marilyn our secrets."

"I'm not quite sure I—"

"Okay, honey, my secret is that I owe everything to my brother Bobbie," Jack said. "Uh, and, of course, to Red over here."

Unfazed, Marilyn asked, "Why, what'd your brother do that you didn't?"

"That's what I love best about you, Marilyn."

"What?"

"You're serious."

She nodded and waited for an answer; he could wriggle around as much as he pleased.

"I guess because Bobbie and Red are the only ones who don't stick knives in my back." Jack glanced up at Red, then gazed into the water, as if he were a schoolboy who had just given the wrong answer.

Red laughed and said to Marilyn, "During Jack's last campaign, everybody called Bobbie 'The Black Prince' because there was no such thing as fooling around for Bobbie. You didn't talk, laugh, grab a sandwich, or go to the bathroom. You just worked. You want something done, you ask Bobbie . . . and it's done. And, man, he loved those goddamn three-by-five cards of his. Everybody was in those cards. Every enemy, friend, ally—anything and everything —could be found in those cards. If he wanted to, Bobby could look up how many pimples Henry Cabot Lodge had on the lower quadrant of the left cheek of his ass."

"Manners." Jack didn't smile; only his eyes narrowed: it was a Kennedy grin.

"Excuse me, m'am," Red said to Marilyn, then went on. "Do you remember when Bobby threatened to kick everybody out of Kilby Street unless they addressed envelopes? Or

the time he got so pissed off because nobody would go up a ladder and put up one of your posters?" He looked at Marilyn and said, "Bobby wanted commuters to be able to see Jack's poster when they drove over the bridge between North Boston and Charlestown. I got to tell you . . . you wouldn't get me to climb up there for love or money. It was inaccessible. But that didn't stop Bobbie. He climbed up an extension ladder, which was swaying all over the place in the wind; and, who was it, Dave Powers, I think, he held the bottom of the ladder and said about a gazillion Hail Marys. Bobbie got that sucker up there, though.

"But Jack's real secret weapon was those goddamn tea parties."

"Okay, that's enough," Jack said, kicking the hot water faucet on with his foot. Steam started to rise immediately. "Didn't you have to go to the library or something?"

"Well, it was Lodge himself who said you beat him on account of those tea parties. And he thought he was going to beat you by three hundred thousand votes, remember? Christ, at the first reception something like eight thousand women were waiting in front of the hotel. And how many could the room hold?"

"Four hundred," Jack said, obviously enjoying this.

"You see?" Red said to Marilyn. "All the old hens wanted to mother Mr. Sweetheart over here, and all the babes wanted to marry him. Stupid bastard couldn't lose. There was no way old Henry could fight that. He was about as sexy as a corncob pipe. But the real in-fighting, slick wheeler-dealer was Jack's granddaddy, Honey Fitz." Red was obviously warming to this. "Now, if you really want to know the family secrets—"

"Red, go to the library," Jack said.

"Honey Fitz was running in this Boston congressional fight," Red continued. "You see, in those early days in Boston, elections were called fights. For pretty good reasons, too. Anyway, all the voters were given these stickers with the name of each candidate printed on them. You'd stick the candidate of your choice onto the ballot, and that was that. Well, old Fitzie knew everybody in the world, including somebody who worked in the printing plant that had the contract to print up the stickers, and Fitz came up with a very simple strategy: leave the stickum off the other candidate's stickers. Voters could put as many stickers as they liked on the ballot—but the only ones that would actually stick were Fitzie's. Now let me guess who won? So, you see, Marilyn, as my Pappy used to say, 'Apple doesn't fall far from the tree.'"

Jack threw a wet bar of soap at Red, who ducked out of harm's way, bowed to Marilyn, and disappeared.

"Crazy asshole," Jack said. He had splashed water everywhere, including all over Marilyn's dress.

"You're the crazy asshole. Well, like Red said, Apple doesn't fall—"

"Et, tu, Brutus? I'm a sick man."

"You don't look sick to me, just . . . clean."

Jack grinned at her.

"Is your back any better?" Marilyn asked.

"Yeah, it's getting thah," Jack said, looking uncomfortable. "I'm not using crutches hardly at all, certainly not in public, anyway."

Marilyn remembered looking at his back after his last operation. He'd almost died after infection set in, but he knew the risks: he had Addison's something-or-other, and the chances were fifty-fifty that the infection would get him. But he said he'd rather be dead than a cripple. It was funny, Marilyn thought. Everybody thinks he's so healthy. And that tan of his isn't a tan; it's skin discoloration from the drugs he takes. And he injects and pops pills worse than a junkie and tells everybody that the Japanese ship that cut his torpedo boat in half caused all his back problems. But she remembered the hole in his back after his last operation . . . she could have put her fist in it and still had room. Although he rarely let on, he was in constant, excruciating pain. The only thing that seemed to help were baths—hot as he could stand them, injections of novocaine and some new wonder drug called cortisone, and Marilyn. Or so he said.

But every day, somehow, he overcame the pain.

Every day, somehow, he got stronger, more energetic, sexier.

She was going to learn to do that.

"Looks like you're gaining weight," Marilyn said, and she felt everything welling up inside her again and she couldn't help it, although she knew she was just using her sense memory, which was part of "the method" that Lee and Paula Strasberg were teaching her. It was the way to remember and capture her emotions. She cried and wheezed like a baby. She couldn't breathe right, and then she was wet and her forehead was leaning against Jack's shoulder and he smelled of soap and something astringent, a hospital smell; and for all the soap and water and medicine, she could smell his armpit, strong, sour heavy like mince pie, and she remembered Sunday dinners with her first husband, Jim Dougherty; she remembered weekends with him on Sherwood Lake, fishing in rented rowboats, and although she couldn't bait the hook or even take the fish off the hook, she would cook the fish, and she was secure then, secure with Jim who had his steady job at Lockheed; he loved her and was content just to be with her, and she remembered . . . she remembered that while he fished, she would look into the water, stare into its depths, as if she could find herself there in her shattering reflection. She stared into the water now, again, but it was breathing heat, and she had no reflection in the opaque, soap-slick bathwater.

"Now, now, what it is, honey?" Jack asked, holding her, being big and strong and sweet, and getting her wet. "Where did all this come from?

"I don't know." She sniffled. "It's just—"

"Just what?"

She pulled away from him, combed her fingers through her wet hair, and giggled. "I should take off these wet clothes."

"I think that's a very good idea."

But Marilyn just sat in the chair beside Jack in his tub. She was concentrating.

"Marilyn . . . Marilyn?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Jack."

"What's bothering you?"

"What's not bothering me," she said. "I had the most terrible lunch with my film partner. He thinks he knows everything, and he disapproves of everything. He disapproves of the way I spend his money. I make all the money, but according to him I'm spending all his money. He disapproves of my acting teacher, who is only the best and most famous in the world, and he hates Arthur, dear, sweet Arthur, who only wants only the best for everyone. Arthur tries to make nice with him, but it's no use. Milton Green is just a shit. But that's not it either."

"What then?" Jack asked. He looked around the room quickly, as if he'd misplaced something, or was looking—or hoping—that Red would return and fix everything so he could get past this, and get on with Marilyn.

"I don't know. Sometimes I just start crying. Stupid, isn't it? Does that ever happen to you?"

"No," he said without a beat. "Now come on, Marilyn, tell me what's really bothering you."

Jack was staring hard at her.

"It's Arthur."

"What?" Jack asked, which was a dead giveaway: he always said that when he didn't want to answer a question or deal with something; usually, he'd just say "What?" and ignore it by turning away immediately.

"Forget it," Marilyn said. "Look, you asked me."

"I know I did, and I'm interested. Now tell me."

"It's about that goddamn subcommittee on Un-American whatever-the-fuck."

"I wish there was something I could do, but Joe McCarthy is dead in the water. He's not even close to anything . . . or anyone. I know you're worried about Arthur, but you're just going to have to let this thing play out."

"They're out to get him, Jack. They had no right to reject his application to get a passport. Christ, he couldn't go to Brussels or London or wherever the hell it was to see his own goddamn play. He's not a Commie, but he sure as hell isn't going to roll over like Elia Kazan did. He thinks Elia's a scumbag for talking to the committee, but I figure Elia just did what he had to do to survive."

"He played it the only way he could. If he didn't give them what they wanted, they'd have cited him for contempt, and he'd have done a year in jail."

"Well, Arthur won't tell them anything. He says he'll go to jail first. He says that they're abusing his rights as a

citizen and using him to get themselves headlines in the newspapers."

"I doubt if they—"

"It's not him they want to use," Marilyn continued, and her voice became wavery, as if she were going to start crying again. "It's me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how in the last few weeks, the press has been having a field day over Arthur and me being together?"

"How could I not know?" Jack said. "I'm jealous."

"Don't tease me, I'm telling you something important, that I wouldn't tell anybody else in the whole world. And you don't have anything to be jealous about. You know how I feel about you. You ready to give up Jackie? Because I'm ready if you are. Right now."

Jack looked away from her, and she said, "Somebody contacted Joe Rauh, Arthur's lawyer, and said that if Arthur and I get married, then maybe something could be done."

"What?" Jack asked, meaning it this time.

"Yeah, well the deal is that once we're married I'm supposed to have my picture taken with Walter somebody who's on the committee, and that's supposed to show how concerned I am about my husband. That's the bullshit they were shoveling. It's just a bribe to get Walter whateverhisnameis in the papers."

"Shit, you mean Francis Walter. I'll be damned. I wouldn't've figured him for that, but"—Jack shrugged—"what the hell, why don't you just plan to do it." He chuckled and repeated the congressman's name.

"I'd do it in a hot second. I don't care, but Arthur is outraged. He'd sooner punch the guy in the nose. "

"Somehow I can't imagine Arthur Miller punching anybody in the nose."

"Well, he won't change his mind. And all the publicity about Arthur and me is upsetting Arthur. My shithead partner Milton thinks Arthur is feeling upstaged and is just jealous. I don't think Arthur has a jealous bone in his body. If anybody's jealous it's Milton." She paused, then asked, "Do you think Arthur could be jealous?"

"The pope would feel upstaged standing next to you, honey. You're electricity." Jack laughed again. "Francis Walter. Can you beat that."

"What do you think I should I do?"

"Are the rumors true? Are you going to marry Arthur Miller?"

"I don't know. It's too early to—" She stopped herself and said, "Yes, Jack, I love him. Not in the same way that I love you, but I love him just the same. He's what I need. But I don't want him going to jail. I don't want to be a widow before I start."

"Maybe someone can talk to Francis," Jack said.

"Could you?"

"I said someone. Now stop fretting over it. You and Arthur have got plenty of time. The wheels of the state grind very slowly, even when one of the big wheels needs to keep his career going

by getting seen with the most beautiful woman in the world." He grinned at her, and they both started laughing like teenagers. He grabbed her and said, "Come on in, the water's fine."

"I'd scald myself."

"The water's lukewarm, feel it."

"It's hot."

Jack kicked the faucet with his heel, and cold water splashed into the tub. Without taking her dress off, she climbed into the bath with him. That surprised him, and he jerked backward, as if frightened; and she saw him flinch in pain.

"Did I hurt your back?" she asked.

"No, just surprised the shit out of me," and he started feeling her up, kneading her, pressing himself between her legs. "I love it that you never wear panties."

"I love it, too," she said dreamily; and when he was finished, for Jack Kennedy was anything but slow, she said, "Let's make a phone call."

"To who?"

"To Arthur."

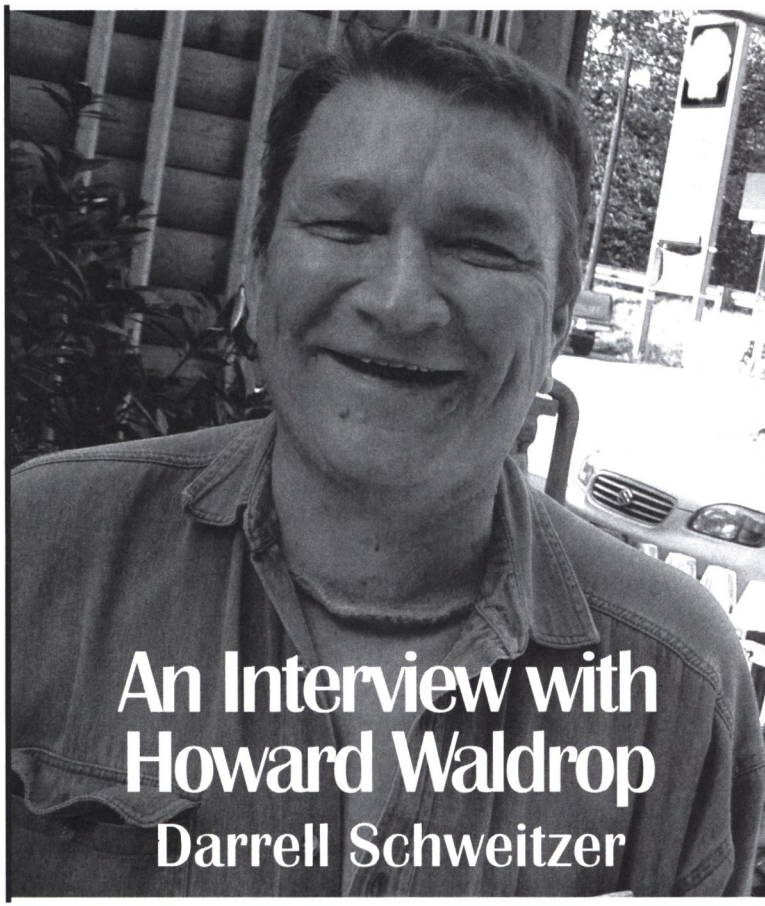
"What? I don't even know him, and I'm not going to—"

"I'll talk to him, and after that you can tell me about your secret weapon."

"Red already told you."

"I want to know how to win."

As she dialed, Jack became excited again.



Darrell Schweitzer has been lurking at science fiction gatherings, tape-recorder in hand, for more than thirty years, and has recorded conversations with many of the field's legendary figures, including Alfred Bester, Isaac Asimov, Edmond Hamilton, Roger Zelazny, and Jack Williamson. His most recent book of interviews is Speaking Of The Fantastic II *from Wildside Press. He is also a novelist and short-story writer, whose work has appeared in* Interzone, Twilight Zone, *and* Realms of Fantasy*; a story is scheduled for an upcoming issue of* Postscripts. *Look for his novel* The Mask Of The Sorcerer *and any of his collections, the most recent of which is* Sekenre: The Book Of The Sorcerer.

Darrell says of this Howard Waldrop interview. "Howard appeared as guest of honor at a small convention in Silver Springs, Maryland. I had never actually met him before but he's a neat guy, personable, funny, and very articulate. If he's featured at a convention, go. If he's on a panel, go. You will not be disappointed." The interview was conduced at Capclave, in Silver Springs MD, Oct 16, 2005.

DS: Let's start with something of your background. Who is the guy who writes all these neat things?

HW: I'm Howard Waldrop and I was born in Mississippi in 1946, but I moved to Texas with my family in 1950, so I didn't have much chance to develop a real Southern accent. People from Texas can tell I am not from Texas. Most other people think I've got a Texas accent, but that's not what I have. I have a Texas laid on a slight Mississippi accent.

I lived mostly in Arlington Texas, which is halfway between Dallas and Fort Worth, growing up. I went back to Mississippi every summer, for periods ranging from six weeks to three months, the whole summer sometimes. I grew up in Arlington, graduated from high school there. I went to University of Texas, Arlington on and off for five and a half years but never graduated. I was drafted out of college into the army in 1970. I was at Fort Ord and Fort Gordon and Fort Bragg. I got out at Fort Bragg and moved back to Texas, and as soon as I could, I got to Austin. I spent a little time in College Station, but I moved to Austin. I lived there until 1995, moved to the Pacific Northwest for seven and a half years, then moved back to Austin two years ago.

DS: Was Austin where you first made contact with science fiction and fandom? I've always associated you with the Austin and College Station scene, with Joe Pumilia, Lisa Tuttle, Steve Utley, and that lot.

HW: It was amazing. I'd sold my first story when I first went *into* the army, but it came out when I was *leaving* the army, in 1972. In six months, around that time period, Lisa and Joe and Steve Utley and George Proctor and Bill Wallace and all these people had sold their first stories. So that's why we started the Turkey City Writers Workshop in 1972. The first one was at mine and Buddy Saunders's duplex in Grand Prairie, Texas, next to Arlington. For a while we were doing the workshops *every two months*, and moving it around the state. Everybody ended up eventually in Austin for one reason or another, but we all started somewhere else. It took anywhere from a year to two or three years to get to Austin, but Austin was *the* place where everybody was.

DS: You ended up collaborating with most of these people, so there must have been a lot of creative cross-fertilization going on.

HW: I explained it in *Custer's Last Jump*, which is a book of collaborations. We would work and work on our own stories. Sometimes they would sell and sometimes they wouldn't. They would go out and come back. For a while there, *everything* we were collaborating on sold *first time out, every time.* So this is an incentive, when you're starting out as a writer. As I said in the book, one plus one isn't two, it's two point one five or something. The collaboration you do becomes a third thing, which is smarter than both of you. It's working against your weaknesses and with your strengths, with what each of you can do. Mainly we were young and full of piss and vinegar and we had time and energy left over when we finished our own stuff. You'd give somebody a story you were having trouble with and you'd say, "I'm having trouble with this. What's wrong with this?" and they would say, "I know how to fix this." So you'd say, "Well *fix* it," so they would sit down and write another draft and figure out how to fix the story.

Mainly, we were young, and we had a lot of time and energy. That was the main reason we were collaborating.

DS: There certainly was a kind of crazy fusion going on. Typical of your collaborations is "Custer's Last Jump," with Steve Utley. Didn't you say that started with each of you trying to top the other?

HW: Yes. I called Steve up and I read him a short section that I'd written about Crazy Horse's airplane, and an hour later he called me up with part of the Mark Twain stuff. We essentially wrote that story *in five days on the phone*, back and forth. We did our own parts, and—neither one of us remembers it—but evidently we got together at some point and put the drafts together. I think Steve typed up the final draft and sent it off.

DS: It's quite an innovative story in many ways. It is one of the few I can think of that works in the form of a history lecture and notes, rather than a conventional narrative.

HW: That's one reason it was easier to write, because it is in three sections, and one is a magazine article, one is a *Smithsonian Annals of Flight* volume, and one is Mark Twain's notes for his interviews when he took a zeppelin trip out West. But it was easier to write that way because each of us was writing a different section. That was written way early. It was written in 1972, although it was not published until 1976. Terry Carr and Silverberg each had it at one time for *New Dimensions* or *Universe*, and they kept *losing* publishers, and then they'd give it back to the other guy who had a publisher.

He'd lose his publisher. It ended up exactly where we sent it the first time, and for the book it was supposed to be in, but meanwhile, a couple of other people had it or tried to get it.

DS: My point about the form of the story is that it's not in dramatic scenes, but as exposition and notes. I can think of few successful stories like that. Borges did a few.

HW: Yeah, but that *seemed* to be the way to do it. We were smart enough then, in the second or third year of our writing careers, to know that you had to do something like that to get all the background stuff in. When it was printed in Germany in 1977 or so, the German editor added a few references to the bibliography, and we've always kept those in the American reprints since then. A couple of book references, because he liked it so much that he made up his own and stuck them right in there in the middle of ours.

DS: A lot of people writing a story in such a manner would just be dull. I think what makes it work is the humor. You are one of the few people to write funny alternate history. Did you do this deliberately, or did it just come out that way?

HW: Essentially it just came out that way. I have never thought that for something to be important it has to be long and dull and boring, which is what most people expect of something important. Real life has funny things in the middle of terror. If you've seen the movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. The gun-fight in the banana plantation between the helicopter and the Communist bandits. The machine-guns are shooting down bananas all over the place. One guy is running and slips on a banana. [Laughs] Here in the middle of this horrible firefight. Stuff like that happens in real life and we put in humor just because it's part of it.

DS: A lot of your stories are striking that way. I think of "Fin de Cyclé," in which Marcel Proust is a bicycle soldier.

HW: No, it was Jarry who was the bicycle soldier. Proust was in the artillery *in real life* when he had to do his national service, as we say. But they're telling Meliés how to make a movie, in the story.

DS: You seem to have been drawn to the alternate-history form well before it

became a fad. You may have helped make it a fad. What makes you want to screw around with history?

HW: Someone once said that at one time alternate history stories were so rare that all the examples were good. All the examples, like "Remember the Alamo!" by Fehrenbach and *Bring the Jubilee* by Ward Moore, *The Lost Years* by Oscar Lewis, the one about Lincoln retiring to California. When we started doing it, mostly in the early '70s, it was still an oddity in the field. Alternate-history stories were fairly rare. But by the end of the '70s they weren't rare anymore. I don't know if we're responsible for part of that, or if it was just time for everybody to start realizing what a great thing alternate history was.

The reason I do it is because there has got to be a better world than *this* one. You know what I mean? Deep down inside that's essentially it. It's not a constant, nagging thing, but if you look at *all* the possibilities, you say "Why did we end up with *this* one?" You start taking the steps backwards, and there's no point at which a step one way or the other would have changed *everything*. The small changes start adding up. Other people write the alternate histories about the big battles, the big political stuff, and I think it's the small, incremental changes along the way that would have produced a widely divergent world from the one we have now, without having a change in a big battle like the South winning the Civil War or Hitler winning World War II. It could have been small things started changing in the '20s and you'd have a wholly different present.

DS: So you are not a big believer in the Great Man theory of history, but more in the Accumulation of Circumstances theory.

HW: For want of the nail, as Ben Franklin said, the horse was lost, and for want of the horse the messenger was lost, and for want of the messenger the battle was lost. I think it's *even smaller* than that. It's like "The Sound of Thunder" before the movie destroyed the story. [Laughs.] "The Sound of Thunder" is like, a guy steps on a butterfly seventy million years ago, and the whole world's changed from the time he left. It's like that. I think it's small, incremental changes along the way that would tend to accumulate. Of course as somebody said, how would you *know* it's different if you were in a *version* of the world. You *wouldn't*. It would be the one you're in. It would be the timeline you're in. One thing had changed two hundred years ago that leads to a *different than now*, you would have no idea that the one *we* experience *now* exists, because that possibility would have been cut off.

DS: That's the *Bring the Jubilee* principle. The hero accidentally changed history into the one we know. He didn't intend to.

HW: There's a difference between time-paradox stuff and alternate history. Both have the same idea. It's an existential thing. You're inside the timeline, so you have no view outside of it. Our view right now is that everything outside is speculation. Is there a timeline right beside this one where Hitler did win World War II, and we're talking in the Nazi Silver Springs, Maryland? If you get into that and time paradoxes, like if you killed your grandfather before he met your grandmother, would you be alive? There have been stories in which a number of people pop out of existence as soon as a guy gets in a time machine.

DS: If there's an infinite number of possibilities, most of them probably aren't very interesting. Somewhere there is an alternate universe in which this coffee cup is over there . . . and nothing else has changed.

HW: [Laughs.] Exactly. And, like I said, it doesn't make any difference in life. But one of the two novelettes I wrote for the Capclave book starts out with some things that happened to me and my sister when we were kids, and it goes off completely differently. It's a time-travel thing, but the changes that the character effects aren't that big. He comes back and his sister has moved a couple of miles from where she is now. [Laughs.] He's changed history but it doesn't amount to much. He *knows* he's changed history, and nobody else in the whole world does.

DS: It occurs to me that if you were traveling between parallel universes like this, there would be no way you could possibly know that you have come home. The coffee cup on the other side of the table could be in China. That might be the only difference. But it's not *your* time-track.

HW: I don't know if you ever saw the "Treehouse of Horror" episode of *The Simpsons*, where Homer is trying to fix the toaster. It is every time-travel paradox in the history of the universe. That thing should have won a Hugo, because in seven and a half minutes they go through the *whole thing*. He keeps coming back and trying to figure out if he's home or if he's in this other timestream. You hear him running back in to short the toaster some more to get back to another timestream. It's brilliant. It should have won the Hugo that year, it really should have, because they knew *exactly* what they were doing. They refer to every time-paradox story there's ever been. There's a "Sound of Thunder" segment.

DS: This does get back to the idea of serious science fiction ideas presented as humor. You have probably seen a lot of science fiction novels that would be a lot more entertaining if they were funny, and possibly should have been.

HW: Like I said, for a long time they felt that to be important they had to be long *and* dull. In other words, to get across any serious idea at all, they had to be just deadly, *deadly* dull. But all the great stuff has had some humor in it, or has been humorous, to get it across. Like the scene in "Remember the Alamo!" [by Fehrenbach] in which Travis gets up and makes a great speech and draws a line in the dirt and says, "Texas or liberty, God or death!" and Crockett and Bowie say, "That's talkin' awful big, Bill." Of course they end up surrendering the Alamo, but it doesn't change things in the long run. They delayed what was going to happen for two weeks. They say, "That's talkin' awful tough, Bill. I'm not sure this death thing is a good idea." It's a wonderful story.

DS: Do you start out with a neat idea like this? Do you regard yourself as a notion writer?

HW: It's happened before. I don't sit down and toss around ideas and stuff. Either the ideas will just come to me for *no reason* at all, or I will start with a scene or something, visualizing a scene, and I will say, "How did these people get here? What led up to this? What happens next?" You know, all that kind of stuff. It's like that more often than not. A lot of people get ideas first and figure out a character to go with it. Damon Knight always used to say that if you get an idea first, ask yourself, "Who does this idea *hurt* most?" There's your character. You write about the character whom this idea is messing up the most.

Let's say . . . what? I don't know. Free fusion energy in every house. Who would that hurt most. So you write the story about him. Exactly. There's your viewpoint character.

DS: You don't seem to be the sort of writer who writes on the basis of what's popular in science fiction now. I didn't see you try to jump onto the Cyberpunk bandwagon.

HW: No. In fact, I was talking about this with somebody last night. I said, "I am so tired of being the avatar of the zeitgeist," because I'll write a story, and ten years later or so, *other* people will start writing stories about *that* sub-

ject. Like when I wrote "Us," five or six years ago, you know, the one about Lindbergh Jr. and the lives he could have had. Now Philip Roth comes and writes a book and makes a ton of money, *The Plot Against America*. My story should have been out in a collection a year before it was. I've written a lot of stuff, and other people have written about the same subject area ten years later, both in and out of the field. I've already been through with that for ten or eleven years and suddenly the idea gets hot again. Remember when Doctorow wrote *Ragtime*, that was the first time that had ever been done, incorporating all that detail, and it wasn't more than two or three years later that there were all these alternate New York City type novels out, set in the end of the 19th Century. As George Martin said, he didn't write *Black and White and Read All Over*, his book about the Yellow Journalism period, but now you can read *The Alienist* by Caleb Carr, which is set in exactly the same era with exactly the same people in it.

People do tend to write books like the hottest book around. Gibson's *Neuromancer* came out of nowhere. There were a couple precursors, but it was like a year later there were fifty cyberpunk books out on the stands. That book has *such* an influence on people. It was a new SF trope. Up until *Neuromancer*, the use of science was the *official* use. In other words, it was technocrat-approved scientific discoveries being used in the way they were *supposed* to be used, unless there were mad scientists. But when you got to *Neuromancer*, it was inappropriate use of approved technology. That was the thing. It was ground-level use. Kids would look at some new development and say, "What can we do with this?" Like encrypt all their friends' stuff so their parents couldn't spy on them. It was unapproved use of approved technology.

DS: It's a proud and lonely thing, but it is an honorable thing to be ahead of the curve, and it is probably better to be ahead of the curve than *behind* it.

HW: Right.

DS: Walter Mosley has just brought out his cyberpunk novel *now*.

HW: There are some things where if you get the idea for it, you're going to do it no matter what has been done, or where or when. I think that novels have a certain time in a writer's life in which they *should* be written, and if they go past that time, they shouldn't be written. You know what I mean?

DS: Yes. You shouldn't write your novel of adolescence when you're seventy.

HW: Exactly. That kind of thing. Or let's say you're going to write a novel involving certain parameters, and the time for those parameters goes by. You can still write the same novel, but you have to refer to it, as if there'd been a paradigm shift. You'd have to refer to it in pre-paradigm-shift terms, from the viewpoint of somebody *past* that, rather than from *within* that paradigm.

DS: You're looking back on the subject-matter.

HW: You're looking back, narrating it from the viewpoint of somebody who *has been through it all* or is older and wiser. The "Wonder Years" approach.

DS: Judith Berman has raised the point in a celebrated essay that there is a kind of paralysis in science fiction right now. Nobody is addressing the future anymore. Maybe the way to do it is with humor.

HW: I was talking to someone about *that.* I said the hardest novel in the world to write right now is the one set within the next ten years. We used to be afraid of history in the last ten years, because we hadn't got enough distance. But looking into the future, you can figure out some things. We're still going to be having terrorism. We're going to be in an energy crisis, and all that kind of stuff. But looking ten years in the future: are we going to Mars? Maybe not, but for a while we're going to *pretend* we are. Are we going *back* to the Moon? Maybe. We probably will a few times. But trying to predict, socially, what is going to happen, the closer you are, the harder it is. It used to be, in the old days, the further it got, the harder it was.

DS: But it would also be longer before anybody caught you being wrong.

HW: Exactly. That's the thing. If there's a paralysis it's because the writers are looking for, but haven't hit on, anything that could *actually* happen, or that could be posited from what you got now. What you've got now is scared people who won't admit they're wrong.

DS: In film terms, the difference is between the dreadfully earnest movie *Journey to Mars* and something like *Red Dwarf* or *Futurama.* Now those last two make sense. They're good science fiction. The other wasn't very convincing.

HW: Right. You're in the far future. You've got 'droids and all that—and it's funny. They're making fun of all the things that *could* go wrong. As some-

body said, melodrama dates less than any other form. Good vs. evil, that sort of thing. It dates less, no matter where it's set because people are still interested in the conflict and it's almost timeless. You can watch a movie from the '30s and you can apply it to up to about ten or fifteen years ago. Nobody has cell phones. What's going on in there? In other words, you have to use a car to get from one place to another, or a plane—that dates less than something keyed in exactly, like a World War II movie. They take place in a period of five years. But a melodrama from the '30s was still valid in 1970 or 1980, whatever was going on in the melodrama.

DS: I suppose the writer can't *really* obsess about this too much. But how long do you think humor holds up over time?

HW: Good, basic Aristophanic humor holds up forever. It's always easy to hit somebody over the head with a bag of *merde*. That gets a laugh even now, if you set it up. Certain kinds of humor don't date at all, and certain kinds are keyed *right to* their time. Those date, but the basic slapstick and stuff like that doesn't change. Verbal humor, although humor is based on somebody else's pain or discomfort, of course, that never changes.

DS: A story of yours, "Mister Goober's Show," strikes me as a wonderful story, but it's very specifically for Baby-Boomers. It's about a certain time in which television was still new and unique. I suspect that an eleven-year-old today would not understand that story.

HW: It was set in a time when TV was unique and just catching on, but it refers back to a time twenty years before that, when TV was first really new, right when they had just figured out the concept and started constructing the first early sets. The technology had already changed completely twice between the time they started making televisions and the time the story takes place, in early 1951. Then it follows the characters up until the late '80s. But, yeah, it is a Boomer type story, but it refers back to the flapper generation. That was when the mechanical TV was first made. I was trying to get those two eras together into one story, because it's all about outmoded technology.

Did you read "Major Spacer in the 21st Century," the one that starts in the '50s and then has the fifty-year space-break, and ends in the year 2000? It's about a guy who had a TV show in the early '50s, and there is a Y2K type thing, although it is not Y2K, it's a terrorist thing, right after the turn of 2000. I wrote it to show the difference between the technology

we had in 1950 and the technology of 2000, which everybody takes for granted. They *didn't* have actual videotape in 1950. They shot audiotape through a stationary head at *10,000 feet a minute*. You had to put a refrigerator box there and shoot this tape through it. So that to have a thirty-second commercial you'd have to have a mile of tape. It would all be in the box when you got through, because there wouldn't be a reel that could turn fast enough to take it up. They were just first developing that. But I wanted to show the differences that fifty years have brought in TV technology.

DS: Just like a real hard-science fiction writer, you have a real preoccupation with technology.

HW: My collection *Dream Factories and Radio Pictures*, besides being all the stories, is a history of motion picture technology through the past century. You're right about that. People don't even think that motion pictures are a science and a technology besides being an entertainment medium. Especially the changes that have come in the past ten years are as phenomenal as anything that has happened. They've been used wrong, just like the first innovations were used wrong in most cases. Like the moving camera and the pan-shot and all that stuff—they knew they could do it but they didn't know what to use it for yet. It took another fifteen years until they figured out how to use a tracking-shot or a zoom-shot or whatever else they needed. Right now they're trying to figure out what to do with CGI. The answer is, like, stick it in your eye, most of the time, because they can. They can make it come and get you. That's what they've been using it for, for special effects they couldn't have gotten any other way.

DS: I also note your great interest in movies . . .

HW: I was talking about the appropriate use of CGI on the panel today. It was like what Billy Crystal did in *1961*, which is about Mantle and Maris. You know the home-run thing between Mantle and Maris. It's just that there wasn't any special effects, but every time you looked outside of Yankee Stadium, it was *1961*. The right buildings, and all that. That was a very restrained use of CGI.

DS: The best example I can think of is in *The Devil's Backbone*, which is a Spanish ghost film made by Guillermo del Toro, the guy who made *Hellboy*. There is the ghost of a kid who's been drowned. As he appears to people,

he doesn't look all that well, but there are always little bubbles floating around his face. They could have had exploding guts, but they settled for bubbles.

HW: That's restraint. Usually when they pay money for CGI, they want something big and splashy that you can see up on the screen to show where the money went. But the *little bubbles* are just as hard to do as making *the whole screen explode*. Very few directors have the restraint to do just what they need to do and then quit.

DS: Have you ever been involved in films?

HW: Like I was saying at the panel today, we made a short movie in 1966 at a convention, about a theft at a comic convention. It goes on from there. The usual stupid thing.

People have tried to option my stories and make them and adapt them to TV but nothing has ever happened. You get the first six-month option money, and that's the last time you hear from them.

DS: I note that you once "discovered" a lost screenplay of Mortimer Morbius Moamrath, *Cthulhublanca*. But beyond that, have you ever written screenplays?

HW: Me and Tom Reamy wrote a screenplay together that he took to Hollywood when he moved there in '69 or '70 or whenever that was, and he later turned that into the story "The Detweiler Boy," which appeared in *F&SF*, and I think it was up for a Nebula. But you can see what the screenplay was about from that story. Essentially it's *Basket Case* ten years before *Basket Case*. We thought that the easiest thing you could get produced then was a cheap horror movie, so we wrote a horror movie you could film cheap.

DS: Do you still yearn to do this? Do you feel Hollywood calling?

HW: No. I don't even get excited anymore when they first get ahold of me, like you do when you're younger. Like I said, the most you're going to get is the first six months option money, and then you'll never hear from them again.

Zelazny used to say, "Just take the money. If they ever actually make the movie and it turns out good, you can say, 'They had such wonderful material to work from,' and if it turns out bad you say, 'I just took the money.'" [Laughs.] Right.

DS: So what are you doing these days.

HW: I'm writing my butt off. I got to turn in *The Search for Tom Purdue* to Subterranean by December 1st. It's a short novel I've been working on for a long, long time. It'll be about 40,000 words, something like that. Real long for me. Then I hope to get back to *I, John Mandeville?* and *The Moone World*, which eventually *will* happen. Those are novels I have been working for about twenty and thirty years apiece.

DS: As we were saying earlier, if you've been working on a novel for twenty or thirty years, it'll be a different book from when you envisioned when you started.

HW: Even *Tom Purdue*, which is a short novel, has changed two or three times. I've been working on that for about twenty. It's changed in concept in even the last ten or twelve years. But *Mandeville* has essentially stayed in the same form in my mind. But then again I conceived it in a weird form that doesn't *seem* weird by now. The way I was going to narrate it doesn't seem weird at all anymore. So that's holding its own with my aging brain. The stuff that changed, obviously I didn't have it right when I thought of it. If it stays the same, then you had it pretty much the way it should be.

DS: You're not one of these guys who writes a novel in two weeks then? Not fast.

HW: No. [Laughs.] Typing is the hard part. I hate typing and I am a two-fingered typist and it takes *forever* to type something as long as a novel. But the actual writing of *The Texas-Israeli War*, our first book, we wrote that end-to-end in ninety days. But that was because there were two of us. I wrote a complete first draft in thirty days. Buddy wrote a complete second draft in thirty days, and we each rewrote half of the third draft, so we had fifteen days apiece. And we sat down with that time-table when we started writing the book. That's what we knew we *had* to do, and then turned it in. I *can* write the first draft of novel in thirty days if I *really* want to hurt myself. But I don't want to do that.

DS: I guess this is the difference between quality and career.

HW: [Laughing.] It's not much of a career.

DS: A careerist has to turn out a book about every year.

HW: If I wrote novels I would have a lot more money than I do right now. I can guarantee I would have *some* money, which is more than I do right now. But I work too hard on short stories. It would have been wonderful if, the older I got, the faster and easier they would have come. But it's turned out the exact opposite. The older I get the slower and the more difficult they come to me, the actual work of getting the story done, I mean. The ideas are coming to me all the time, but I am just not doing anything with most of them.

DS: Are you at least keeping notes?

HW: Yes. I make notes on stuff and put them in the thing called "the undeveloped file," which gets thicker and thicker as time goes on. Then I will look back through that occasionally, when I'm looking for a piece of information that I wrote down, and see if I can find it and if anything happens. But, yeah, I work too hard on short stories.

DS: It's not too hard. Not everybody can be an Avatar of the Zeitgeist. That would make a good book title, maybe for your next collection.

HW: Yes, I think so. [Laughing.] But I will have to write a *story* called that. Then of course if you name the thing, you scare it away. You know the old superstition that if you talk about it beforehand, you won't want to write the story. That's why I will usually refer to the story titles while I am thinking about them by a general term, not what becomes a real title, but "the Africa story" or whatever. Only in the last stages does it get a title, though some times I have thought of the title first. I've held off putting it on a manuscript until I was almost done. It's not a superstition. It's just that most of them didn't have a title until the end.

But like I said, the stories are getting harder and harder all the time. I'm getting into them further every time, I think. This would be easier if you were reading the two novelettes [for the delayed Capclave chapbook—DS], because they're the freshest in my mind. They were just really hard to do, because I was trying to do two totally different kinds of writing.

DS: Do you find it more rewarding if you put more effort in? You get, presumably, a richer story.

HW: This is what we all *hope* for. This's why I keep doing this, right? As I asked myself on the panel the other night, "Are you getting better or are you just getting weirder? Are you just talking to yourself louder?" You can become recursive, and you have to say, "Am I doing this because it will make a better story, or am I doing this because it's easier to do this?" You keep questioning your own motives. Why am I doing it *this* way instead of *that?* Why am I telling it this way? Is there a *better* way to tell it? Like I said, one of the two novelettes starts as a dialogue, an interview, turns into a monologue, and finishes up with a letter being read for about seven or eight pages. So it's three different styles of narrative all in the same story and two-thirds of it in half the same voice. I don't know if it worked or not. We'll see.

Rhys Hughes comments, "I have long been interested in using diagrams and pictures within text, not merely to illustrate a story but to serve the narrative on a level equal to words. These pictures were created by Anthony Lewis, bald-headed singer, historian and one time fellow worker in a grotesque shampoo warehouse. This story, a companion piece to "The Mermaid of Curitiba" [in Postscripts *6], has no plot and no characterisation, something that fills me with delight."*

False Dawn of Parrots

Rhys Hughes

We sailed to the island of Madeira. A huge glass of wine and giant cake awaited us.

We went ashore and explored many buildings.

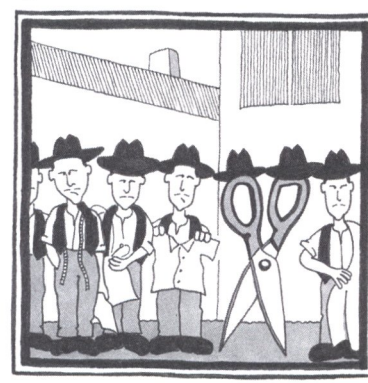
We found a house whose owner was a tree. He often held parties for his friends, who were also trees, but his neighbours, who were human, kept complaining about the oddness of it all. The front door was sometimes locked, sometimes open. If open it was possible to step into the house.

It was like entering a forest. Trees everywhere, growing out of the carpets, in the lounge and kitchen, on the stairs, in the bedrooms, silent and motionless as trees are meant to be. But at night when the music began, the shadows of dancing trees would pass to and fro on the closed curtains . . .

What did this mean?

Nothing much. They were just enjoying themselves, not doing anything sinister.

Not like the tailors in the next street along:



The rumour was that two of them were a pair of scissors.

There were many other houses. We visited some of them.

- ◊ A House of Parrots,
- ◊ House of Millipedes: the noise of feet moving around was unbearable,
- ◊ House of Bubbles,
- ◊ House of Thighs: I have been informed that when house thighs get out of control they are soothed by a handyman,
- ◊ House of Trumpets: this house was surrounded by other houses that were in the process of collapsing onto it, but the trumpets protruding from every door and window played loudly enough to keep them standing,
- ◊ House of Liars: always empty and full at the same time,
- ◊ House of Houses,
- ◊ House of Meteors: full of vacuum in which meteors whizzed around, bouncing off the rubber walls. The windows were sealed tight. If anyone opened a window the vacuum would escape and the meteors would die.
- ◊ House of Sour Moods: yes they have been remembered and preserved for others to view, including yours.

We explored a House of Moons by moonlight. The moons hung from the high ceiling on silken cords. Some were full, others were half, crescent or new. A few were blue or bad. Periodically the silken cords lengthened and the moons would drop down into rivers or the craters of volcanoes. One silken cord had nothing on the end. Its moon was missing, one of the silliest moons, the moon made of cheese. This moon had been destroyed in a collision with a comet shaped like a loaf of bread.

One house was more like a museum. It was:

> A House of Dropped Names where people continuously dropped names without bothering to pick them up. We wandered around a bit. As we were leaving we bumped into Robert Louis Stevenson, Fernando Pessoa and Dante Alighieri. We also met the Man in the Iron Mask, but to be honest I am not convinced he belonged there.

Further along, there was a theatre where the audience were puppets. These puppets filled every seat and were controlled by the motions of the actors. Hidden springs under the stage were connected to springs inside the puppets. If the actors did not act convincingly enough the puppets would jump up and point accusingly or laugh or leave the theatre in disgust.

It is strange to relate but the inhabitants of Madeira do not age as other people do. They grow old differently. From the ages of one to nine everything proceeds normally, but when they reach double figures something remarkable occurs. The order of those figures is reversed.

For instance, a child on Madeira

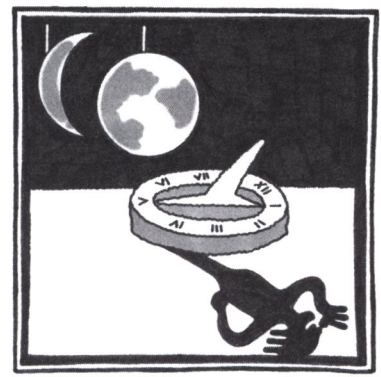
does not proceed from his 11th to 12th year—he jumps from 11 to 21 (because 21 is a reversal of the figures in the number 12). From 21 he jumps to 31, and then 41, 51, 61, and so on, aging a decade every year until his twentieth year, at which point he reverts to the age of two. The jumps begin again from this point, 12, 22, 32, 42, and so on.

Some of these jumps are gigantic, none more so than from the grand old age of 99 back to an infant of one year!

This system can make friendships difficult. One day a young woman might find herself playing perfectly innocently with a boy eight years old, bouncing him on her knee, the following morning he is a lusty youth of eighteen and trying to bounce her.

But somehow they manage . . .

We visited a House of Sundials. This house contained the largest sundial ever constructed. Originally it stood on a hill in Italy overlooking the village of Vico del Gargano. The sundial worked very well but it cast such a big shadow that the village was completely covered by it and the people who lived there never saw the sun. They lived in a permanent night. Because of the perpetual darkness they were unable to use their own sundials to tell the time. To avoid being late for meetings they had to discover an alternative method of telling the time. They were forced to invent the mechanical clock.



When moons and sundials meet, the result is often unnatural.

In the House of Sundials I learned that we still had plenty of time to explore Madeira before looking for a place to stay. We continued our investigations.

We passed a House of Sea Captains. A dozen men rushed out and tried to abduct Captain Faraway to add him to the collection, but he resisted bravely. I peered through one of the windows and saw rigging and poop decks. Captive Captains issued contradictory orders and kept journals. Most of these journals were also available in the House of Journals. One of them began as follows:

> We have been at sea for almost a year and still no sign of land. Falling down that whirlpool in the realms of the boreal pole into the centre of the Earth probably did not help . . . Since then we have been attacked by monsters and pirates and lashed

by storms. An inevitable doom shadows this ship . . . Thankfully I have found enough time to perfect the ultimate drinking game.

Two parallel rows of goblets are set up, six in each row, all filled with four measures of rum. The players sit opposite each other and claim ownership of the nearest row of goblets. The first player takes a ladle and redistributes the contents of any of his goblets, ladling a single measure into the goblet next to it, and so on, until the original goblet is empty. If he reaches the end of his own row he continues along the row of the other player, circling the whole display in a clockwise direction.

The game continues in this manner, alternating between players, until a turn ends with the ladle leaving a goblet with two or three measures of rum inside it. When this happens that goblet is drunk dry. So are any adjacent goblets containing two or three measures. The object of the game is to consume the largest amount of run as quickly as possible. There is enough rum in the hold to play this game indefinitely . . . But what is that I spy on the horizon through my spyglass? A giant face reading this entry!

The remainder of the journal was smudged by the juice of yawns.

"In Africa," said Captain Faraway, "they play that game with beans. It is called mancala. One year I was sailing along the coast of . . . "

The rest of his anecdote can be found in the House of Anecdotes. We did not go there. It was closed for renovation.

We kept walking.

Luís Rodrigues played a little song on his little guitar:

Three Augurs

True masochist —
denying himself
the pleasure of pain!

True sceptic —
denying the validity
of his disbelief!

True liar —
denying those denials
and even this denial!

As if summoned by this song, something floated over a nearby hill. I thought at first that Captain Faraway's brother, the pilot Distanto, was coming to join us but I was wrong. The object was not an airship but a man.

It was Xelucha Dowson Laocoön, the meanest man who ever lived!

Mean men are lighter than kind ones. I know this is true because when people are mean to me I get the urge to throw them around. Also sneaks and thieves are notoriously light on their

feet and often get light sentences when they are caught.

This Xelucha fellow was so mean he could fly . . . ◊

We ignored him and visited the next house. It was constructed like a labyrinth.

There was a rumour that the remains of the minotaur could still be found inside. But what were these remains? Romantics said horns and a tail. Sceptics said, "Bullshit!"

Completists thought both answers were correct.

We unpicked our cardigans and used the wool as thread to help us find our way back out. Then we entered. At the heart of the labyrinth we found a library. This library was another labyrinth, even more complex than the first. At its centre we discovered a book and at the centre of the book we found this story, the story you are currently reading, and at the centre of this story we found these words:

Beware! The librarian is a blind Argentinian poet.

We passed the geographical centre of this story without undue incident.

◊ Some authorities believe that a personage by the name of Cuneiform de Sade is an even meaner man. He has a corrugated beard, feet like the bottom step of a ziggurat and a heart inflated with Assyrian cynicism.

Captain Faraway said, "That's a relief. For a moment I feared the words we were going to find at the centre of this story would be:

At the centre of this story we found these words:
At the centre of this story we found these words:
At the centre of this story we found these words: . . . "

Thankfully that irritating literary trick did not happen!

We shrugged and exited the labyrinth. It was time for something to eat and a drink.

We found a café. The waitresses who serve in the cafés of Madeira pour coffee directly from their breasts into little cups. Depending on how suntanned their bosoms are, this coffee will be cappuccino, mocha or espresso.

We met Gulliver from *Gulliver's Travels* sitting in this café smoking a cigar. Having travelled to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnagg and the Country of the Houyhnhnms (as well as his lesser known destinations of Faremido, Capillaria and Kazohinia) he was delighted to be able to relax in such a peaceful place as Madeira.

But we soon made him unhappy by exclaiming how strange it was to meet a fictional character on a real island. He was dismayed that the written accounts of his adventures were regarded as

invented tales. "Is there any way out of being a fiction?" he asked.

We shook our heads because we did not know.

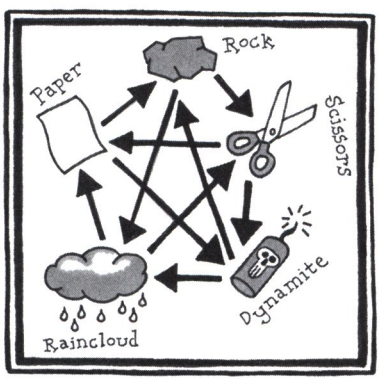
Not yet, at any rate.

We remained at that café table and invented an improved version of the game "Rock, Paper, Scissors." This famous game, as I am sure you are aware, is played with no more equipment than empty hands. On the count of three, the two players each make a symbol with one hand, a clenched fist represents a Rock, two extended fingers are Scissors and a flat palm is a piece of Paper.

A Rock blunts the Scissors, the Scissors cuts the Paper and the Paper smothers the Rock.

We added a pair of new symbols: Dynamite and Raincloud.

This made the game more complex:



As can be seen, the Rock blunts the Scissors but it also smashes the Raincloud, the Scissors cuts Paper but it also severs the fuse of the stick of Dynamite, the Dynamite blows the Rock to pieces but it also disperses the Raincloud with shockwaves, the Raincloud rusts the Scissors but it also makes the Paper soggy, and the Paper still smothers the Rock but now it also becomes a letter of complaint to the authorities about the owner of the Dynamite, who is subsequently arrested.

The more new symbols added, the more complex the game. Here are some other symbols we considered adding:

- Ship (carries away, as cargo, the Scissors and Paper: but is sunk by Rock, Dynamite and Raincloud),
- Pump (clears away floodwater from Raincloud, pulls feathers off Harpy and defeats Thirst: but is clogged by Paper and Rock and irreparably damaged by Dynamite),
- Umbrella (thwarts Harpy and beats Mocking Scowl From Balcony: but is lost in Library and punctured by Crossbow),
- Melancholia (defeats Hope and Faith: but is somewhat cheated by Spicy Food and Sensual Massage),
- Mandolin (breaks Mocking Scowl From Balcony, slices Boiled Egg, blisters Thumb: but helps to express Melancholia and is ignored by deaf ears of Embittered Critic),
- Supernova (burns Paper and sails of Ship: but it shielded against by Umbrella and Eclipse and welcomed by Melancholia).

And the finest symbol of all:

◊ Mermaid (charms everything else into submission).

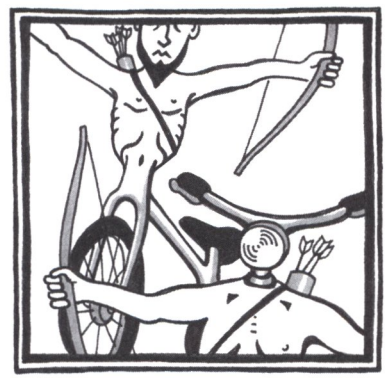
When the café closed for the afternoon siesta we moved on. We spoke to a personage by the name of Edward Dandycat, though he preferred to be known as 'Monsieur le Purr'. His whiskers picked up transmissions from radio stations around the world. We listened to the broadcasts and conjured images in our minds.

One of the broadcasts was the following news item from Crete:

> *"There are still centaurs on the island of Crete. The island of Crete is not like the island of Madeira. Obviously. A centaur is half man and half horse. Men and horses age at different speeds. By the time a horse is fully grown a man is still a child, by the time a man is fully grown a horse is a skeleton. The island of Crete is rife with grotesque scenes. To avoid grotesque scenes, centaurs are not a good idea. Instead men should combine with animals that have similar lifespans. Such animals include elephants and parrots. Learn a lesson, you other islands, from the situation on the island of Crete!"*

A centaur on Madeira would sometimes work, however, because of the non-linear way (already explained) in which the inhabitants grow older.

It seemed to me it would be even better to combine men with machines. A bicycle-centaur would be an improvement over the horse kind. But which half would be human and which half machine?



Bicycle-centaurs often find employment as peddlers.

I went swimming with the mermaid Caroline Moreira in a lagoon near the sea. Her vitality made me feel young again. Ah those lost days of youth! Hot blood, sparkling eyes and cress sandwiches, lusty loins and wine in a skin, roaring too fast on a frisky scooter, apples, pink elbows and black coffee, white lies and silk shirts unbuttoned to the navel, crises of identity and tear-streaked cheeks!

Where are they now, those lost days? Those dear lost days! Where are they, O where? Come with me, hand in hand, let us run to find them, laughing, splashing in the surf of Reckless Joy, your necklace jangling, my hot tongue lolling, socks full of holes, teeth chomping on imaginary toffees! O

those days! Bright and rolling and ripe with sighs! Where can those days be, dear heart, these days?

Little did I know they were all tucked up safe in the House of Lost Days, Youth Section.

As the afternoon wore on it grew hotter and hotter. We sweltered even in the shade. It was clear what we had to do—open a window.

When you are too hot, you open a window. That is what you do.

We opened every window on the island.

Long before we finished opening all of them, the day was over. The sun went down in the sea. We opened windows all through the night. It was an hour before dawn when I opened the window of the House of Meteors.

I had forgotten not to open that window!

The vacuum rushed out and the meteors began to suffocate.

We had to close that window fast!

One way of closing a window is to open a door. If a door is left open, a window will often slam shut by itself.

But only on windy days.

Today was not a windy day and the window did not close. Instead the meteors flew out of the wide open door!

Many meteors, many wishes. A spare wish for all of us.

I made my own wish. I wished for the blame for opening the window of the House of Meteors to be passed onto somebody else.

Captain Faraway suddenly blushed with guilt. My wish had worked.

But a wish is supposed to be kept secret. If it is revealed it is cancelled out—and I have just revealed it to you!

So the guilt was no longer on the shoulders of Captain Faraway.

But I refused to have it back.

So the situation worked out just fine for everyone!

Not quite.

The escaped meteors caused all sorts of chaos. When a meteor strikes another object it becomes a meteorite. The trumpets sticking out from the doors and windows of the House of Trumpets were plugged and the buildings around it fell down. The sudden silence was very noticeable.

The roof of the House of Parrots was torn clean off. The parrots flew into the sky all at the same time.

It looked like the dawn.

The colours and beauty made a false dawn one hour before the real dawn, a dawn of parrots.

A false dawn over the island of Madeira.

This confused the inhabitants. They woke an hour early and because nobody informed them of what had happened, they lived the rest of their lives one hour ahead of everybody else, in relative terms.

Fictional characters exist ahead of their readers, who are real. A reader cannot read about a fictional character *before* that character has been invented. However, because the inhabitants of Madeira now lived ahead of themselves they had caught up with the timeframe of fictional characters. To all intents and purposes, all fictional characters on Madeira had become real.

This was the answer to Gulliver's earlier question.

Unfortunately for him, he was a fictional character borrowed from another author. In essence, he was a double fiction. He lost one of his fictional conditions, but not both. He remained fictional, the exact child of his original creator.

But for the rest of us . . . We acquired flesh and beating hearts and true emotions . . . We lost some qualities, gained others . . . For example, the real Luís Rodrigues does not play the little guitar but he is far more intelligent than his fictional counterpart . . .

The most dramatic change happened to Caroline Moreira:

I looked at her and she was no longer just a mermaid but also a real girl who I just happened to meet one day one summer and decided to put into a story.

⁂

According to Tony Ballantyne, the following story is about how some people justify their actions. "The fact that they can sit down and calmly discuss the atrocities they have perpetrated," Tony says, with undisguised incredulity, "is something that, I hope, this story takes to its logical conclusion."

Tony's second novel, Capacity, *was published by Tor UK in November 2005. He has just completed his third,* Divergence.

The Exchange

Tony Ballantyne

"*Hast du Angst bei Uns?*"

The rolling of the waves was making Billy feel sick; that and the belly full of pie and mash he had eaten in the café outside Kings Cross Station. The dull roar of aeroplane engines criss-crossing the dark night sky above seemed to rumble in his stomach.

"How much longer?" shouted Grace, sitting on the bench opposite. Billy couldn't help but notice the generous mounds of her breasts, obvious even through the thick wool of her coat. Grace was holding tight to Christine's hand as her friend hunched forward, head beïtween her knees, retching. Thin yellow vomit slicked across the wooden strips of the deck.

It stank. Billy stood up to try and see how much longer they had to go.

"Sit down you stupid boy!" called Mr Crossley, his words whipped away by the wind.

"I think I saw the beach," said Billy, ducking back down. He rolled his eyes at the others. "I don't know what Crossley's shouting about. I haven't heard any shooting." He pulled the notepad from his inside pocket and scribbled on it.

"*Sit down you stupid boy*"

He closed the fluttering pad and pushed it back into his pocket. There was a sudden bump, and then another. The landing craft slid to a halt in a whoosh of wet sand. The captain steadied himself with one hand and turned to shout back at the children.

"Okay! Boots and socks off! The water's not that deep here. The beach is mined so keep to the marked section. You'll see the Krauts waiting for you at the top."

Billy tied his boots around his neck, watching as Grace rolled down her thick woollen stockings. She saw him looking and stuck her tongue out at him. Then the school party was clutching their cardboard suitcases and running down the ramp into the salt water. There were screams at the sudden cold slapping around their legs, the feel of

sand between their toes, and of course, the excitement of being fifteen years old and visiting a foreign country for the first time. Gasping and chattering, twenty-seven children ran up the beach towards the waiting lorries, their headlights uncovered to shine a yellow path down to the sea. Shielding his eyes from the glare, Billy stepped into the darkness behind them and saw his first real Germans. Young soldiers in grey uniforms were waiting with big towels and amused smiles.

"Wilkommen!" they called. "Welcome, English friends."

Billy watched them as they took the suitcases from the girls and bent to rub their feet dry. Grace and Christine were smiling hugely at the attention.

"Come on," called Mr Crossley. "This beach will only be clear for another ten minutes. Get on the lorries!"

Chattering and laughing the girls were helped up into the waiting vehicles. A smiling young man took hold of Billy's arm.

"Upla!" he called, boosting Billy into the covered interior. It smelt of canvas and machine oil. More children climbed onto the lorry; there was the sound of an engine starting: a rich, powerful, throaty, grumble, so unlike the noise the British trucks made. And then they were driving into the night, following a Parlay Path through the lines of retreating British soldiers, rumbling through French lanes heading for Germany. It was late May, 1940, and Billy Platt was going where no Platt had gone before.

The sound of the German lorry, Christine and Grace trying to sleep on each other's shoulders

"What are you looking at, Billy Platt? Are you writing about me?"

"Think a lot of yourself, don't you?" said Billy. Christine rolled her eyes dismissively, and then laid back down her head and dozed.

Billy was exhausted by the time he got to the Schummels' household. He remembered shaking hands with Martin, his pen friend and with Frau Schummel. Herr Schummel was away at the front. He had a vague recollection of sitting down at a table and eating a few mouthfuls of pork chop and fried potatoes before Frau Schummel politely asked him if he wanted to sleep.

"Ja," said Billy, yawning. "Ich bin sehr mude."

As he lay down in the bed and rested his head on the odd rolled up tube that served as a pillow, the room kept on moving. The motion of the train and the boat and the lorry had got into his body and had stayed there. He fell asleep at two o'clock in the afternoon and slept soundly, rousing only when Frau Schummel came into the room to see if he wanted to join them for Abendessen. Sleepily he shook his head.

"Schlafen . . . " he said. Too much time spent awake on the trains, chatting in wide-eyed excitement.

"Schlaf gut," said Frau Schummel. She gave him a strange smile and glanced at his notepad, lying by the clock on the little table by the bed. She read the words. "*Welcome, English friends!*" and then walked gently from the room.

Billy slept through the night and was woken the next morning by Frau Schummel rubbing the side of his head gently.

"Billy," she said softly. "Billy. Frühstück— Breakfast. Komm!"

Billy looked up at her and smiled. She wasn't like his mother. Frau Schummel seemed younger. Sexier. She smelled nice. Of flowers. Foreign flowers.

He staggered through into the dining room. A large platter of cold meat and cheese was laid out there. Martin, his pen friend, was sitting waiting for him, slowly losing the battle against acne.

"Guten Morgen," said Billy.

"Good morning! You have slept well?"

"Ja. Er . . . Sehr gut. Danke."

Frau Schummel smiled. "Gut!" She took Billy's hand, "So, du mußt Deutsch sprechen," she brushed his shoulder, smiling, "und du, Martin, mußt Englisch sprechen. Ja?"

"Yes, yes," said Martin dismissively. "I speak English very well. Now, Billy. Would you like some breakfast?" He waved to the table.

Billy looked at the cold meat and cheese in confusion. Nobody had told him about German breakfasts. Or if they had, he had been too busy staring at the girls in his class to pay attention.

"Isn't that last night's tea?" he asked.

"D*o you live in a house?"*
Christine looked confused.
"Of course I live in a house."
"I mean, not an apartment. Your own house."

Billy met Mr Crossley and his other classmates in a classroom of the Hans Schnittke Realschule. The talk was electric.

"I had sauerkraut for tea last night!" squealed Christine. "Sauerkraut!"

"What did it taste like?"

"Puke! And the sausage was funny. All hard and spicy!"

"We had cold meat for breakfast. Cold meat and cheese! For breakfast! Who has meat for breakfast?"

"You have bacon, don't you?" said Brian, quietly.

Mr Crossley walked into the room; his good spirits fuelled by the Wurst and Schnapps dispensed last night by his convivial host. He waved them all to silence.

"Now, I want you to remember that we are guests in this country. We have come to learn about how our hosts live, not to insult their cooking."

He sucked at his teeth, unsuccessfully trying to loosen a stray morsel of food.

"Now, by way of introduction, we are about to take part in a question and answer session. This will allow those German students who have not been lucky enough to have an exchange pupil to stay at their house to find out about life in England. Any questions?"

Grace raised her hand.

"Yes, Mr Crossley. How is the British retreat going on? I couldn't understand what the Germans were saying on the radio last night. They all spoke so quickly."

Mr Crossley gave a dismissive shrug of the shoulders.

"Not good. I'm sure that it is just a tactical retreat. Our boys will turn and fight soon. Anyway, time for that later. Now, let's go in."

They filed into a large hall. Billy had never seen or heard of a lecture theatre before, but it seemed a good idea to him, the way the benches were arranged in tiers so that everyone could look down upon them.

"*Hast du Angst bei Uns?*"

The Germans sat in rows, immaculate in white shirts and black shorts. They looked tall and tanned and healthy, their teeth showing shiny white as they spoke. Mr Crossley was laughing with Herr Bruckner at the front of the room, cracking jokes in German. Billy felt suddenly very small and uncultured and out of place in comparison to his hosts. He looked along the line of English schoolchildren and their drab clothes, their pale skin and crooked teeth.

Herr Bruckner began speaking to the German pupils. Between each sentence he paused and twitched his ridiculous little Hitler moustache like a rabbit twitching its nose. He introduced the Engländer to the silent pupils, and then called for questions. A thin beanpole of a boy in the front row put up his hand.

"Yes. Good morning, English pupils. Welcome to Germany. How are you liking our town?"

The English pupils looked up and down the row at each other. Grace answered first.

"It's very nice. Pretty. And clean, very clean." She struggled a moment, thinking of the word. "Sauber! Sehr sauber."

There was a ripple of laughter at her accent, and Herr Bruckner glared at his class. Another boy put his hand up. He wore a red armband on his arm, a black swastika clearly visible.

"Good morning. My name is Wilhelm. Was your journey comfortable? How did you travel here?"

Christine stepped forward to answer this question. She gave the handsome young man a smile.

"Our journey was all right. We came by train and ship and lorry."

"And did you see any fighting?"

"No. The soldiers stopped as we approached. There was one time, we saw three English soldiers sitting having coffee with the crew of a German tank. I think they were glad of the rest! Mr Crossley said they would resume fighting when we were out of range."

Wilhelm wore an odd expression.

"It is good to see that visitors are looked after."

Christine smiled at Grace.

"The German soldiers on the lorry made us feel very welcome."

Billy scowled at her. She didn't notice.

"Why are you wearing that armband?" asked Christine, pointing. "Are you in the Hitler Youth?"

"I am," said the young man proudly, and a number of other pupils in the audience wearing armbands sat up a little straighter at that.

"Oh!" said Christine, impressed, and she blinked rapidly at him.

A girl in the front row put her hand up. She had blonde hair, plaited across her head in the way that Billy imagined German girls would. Her starched white shirt was buttoned over a perfectly lovely pair of breasts.

"I have a question for the young man over there with the dark hair." She was looking straight at Billy. He gave her a smile.

"What are you writing in that book?"

Billy looked at his pad, covered in his neat looping handwriting.

"Conversations," he said. "English. German. Descriptions. Things to remember my trip by. It's my diary, if you like."

"Oh," said the girl. Her smile widened. "I have another question for the young man, Herr Bruckner."

"Go ahead, Gabi," said Herr Bruckner.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

All the pupils began to laugh.

"My mother works in the Mill," said Grace.

One of the German girls muttered something.

"What was that?" asked Grace, hands on her hips.

"Kinder, Kirche, Küche," said Herr Bruckner. "It means . . . "

"I know what it means," said Grace, dangerously. "Children, Church, Kitchen. Is she having a go at me?"

They drove through the gates of the factory in a grey bus that smelled of oil and polished metal. The English and German children looked out through the windows at the clean modern lines of the factory buildings, all brick and neat metal roofing and immaculate paintwork.

"Look over there," said Martin who was sharing the seat with Billy. He pointed to a long row of flatbed railway trucks rolling slowly along in one of the many sidings that ran by the factory. "Soon they will be loaded with tanks. German industry! How does your country compare?"

Billy wasn't listening. He was too taken by Gabi, sitting just across the aisle; smiling at him and looking away every time he smiled back.

The bus came to a halt. The children were led off and formed into a neat crocodile. Through careful manoeuvring on both their parts, Billy found himself standing next to Gabi.

"Let me see what you've written," she said, taking the notebook from his unresisting hands. She leafed through until she came to the last entry.

"Yes, I have a boyfriend. He's eighteen. He's in the Navy."

Gabi gave a frown.

"You were listening to what Christine and I were saying?" she said with mock severity. "And are you jealous of Christine's boyfriend?"

Billy firmly took the pad from her hands and gazed at her. She had bright blue eyes that seemed to dance as she looked at him. She smelled so clean. He gave a sudden grin and wrote something in his pad. Two sentences. Smiling, he pushed it back into his pocket.

"What did you write?" she asked.

"Ah," said Billy, tapping the side of his nose.

"And what does this mean?" asked Gabi, copying his gesture. But Mr Crossley and Herr Bruckner silenced the classes. They were about to enter the factory.

"Aren't you coming in, Mr Crossley?" asked Grace. Two grey uniformed soldiers had quietly taken up position either side of him. He gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Of course not, Grace," he said. "I'm an adult. I have sworn an allegiance to the King. If I were to go in there I would be shot as a spy."

"Oh," said Grace, face pink with embarrassment. She followed the other children through the door of the factory as Mr Crossley was led away by the two soldiers.

Inside they were given white hats and gloves to wear and told to be careful and to do what they were told and to stay between the lines and lots of other things that Billy didn't hear: he was too busy watching Gabi. Watching the way she placed the white hat at a jaunty angle on her blonde plaits, watching as she carefully pulled on the white gloves.

They moved onto the factory floor and for a moment all the children were silent as they saw lines of tank bodies, stretching back into the distance. The pupils gazed wide-eyed at the busy efficiency, the clean metal parts being slotted into place by the white-gloved women who manned the production lines.

"*Gott im Himmel.*" Someone swore under their breath at Billy's side. Martin. He was looking around, eyes wide with wonder. He looked up as one by one, a line of tank turrets sailed smoothly by overhead. He turned to Billy, a look of sudden triumph on his face. Billy felt sick.

"Good morning, Children." A grey-faced man had appeared unnoticed before them. He was carefully placing a white hat over the thin grey hair that

was brushed flat against his head. He wore a grey suit, white shirt, grey tie.

"My name is Herr Braun." He spoke in a dull grey voice that matched his suit. "Welcome to Tankfabrik Schiller. Here we make Panther tanks, most of which will be used in the push to retake land in the Netherlands and France . . . "

And then on to England, went the unspoken end of the sentence. All the English children looked down the line to where pretty little Anna stood, looking at the floor.

Someone brushed against Billy. Gabi. She was after his pad. He moved away.

The tour began. They walked around the factory looking at the lines of tanks, listening to the rhythm of the machinery as it clanked and echoed in the wide space.

"Will these tanks be used in the attack upon England?" asked Wilhelm, the Nazi Youth.

English and German children gasped at the rudeness of the question.

"Possibly," said Herr Braun, seeming not to notice how inappropriate the query had been. "Now, let us look over here . . . "

He strode off and the crocodile followed. Gabi was walking next to Billy, shapely legs showing from beneath her black pleated skirt. Billy noticed some of the German boys scowling at this.

Herr Braun began to explain the workings of a lathe in his monotonous way, and Herr Bruckner snapped at the pupils to pay attention.

The tour went on for an hour. By the end of it, all of the children were fed up. Even Martin wore a bored expression, fed up with the smell of machine oil and the soporific hum of Herr Braun's explanations. By the time they were led back out onto the bus, Gabi and Billy were making jokes about Herr Braun. They were imagining him speaking to his wife at night, inviting her into bed in the same dreary monotone.

"Mr Crossley!" called Grace, seeing her teacher walking back towards the bus, escorted by the two soldiers.

"It's okay, Grace," he smiled. "They didn't shoot me."

The English children laughed and Billy was aware of a sudden flurry of movement at his side. Gabi had lifted the pad from his pocket whilst he had been distracted. Laughing, she dodged his grasp as she flicked through the pages to his last entry. Billy gave up trying and stood still, his face unreadable as Gabi read what was written there.

"Can I kiss you?" asked Billy

"Oh yes," said Gabi. "I wish you would."

She looked up at Billy.

"And what makes you think I would say that?" she asked.

"I hope you will," replied Billy, looking at the floor. "*Du bist aber schön.*"

The English pupils attended lessons with their penfriends in the Hans Schnittke Realschule. Billy sat next to Martin, listening to the Lehrer as he

translated the maths question he had set the class into perfect English.

"A Sturmkampfflieger on take off carries twelve dozen bombs, each weighing ten kilos. The aircraft makes for Warsaw, the centre of international Jewry. On take-off with all the bombs on board and a fuel tank containing 1,500 kilos of fuel, the aircraft weighed about eight tonnes. When it returns from the crusade, there are still 230 kilos of fuel left. What is the weight of the aircraft when empty?"

Gabi was in the same class as Martin, and she and Billy spent most of the lessons exchanging glances. Martin had just begun working out the answer to the problem when Billy felt a tap on his back. A plump fräulein in a starched white blouse slid a note into his hand.

Under the cover of the desk, he unfolded the yellow paper and read what was written there.

Kino Hollywood 19:30pm tomorrow night. You and Martin, Stefanie and me.
Gabi xxx

He looked across the classroom, met her eyes, and nodded, just as the Lehrer brought the lesson to an end by writing the answer on the board and briskly underlining it twice.

"And now," he said in heavily ac-0cented English, "we have ten minutes left. Who would like to ask our visitors some questions?"

A forest of hands sprang up.

"Wilhelm," said the teacher, looking at the tall, good-looking Hitler Youth that Christine had taken a fancy to. Wilhelm gave a self-satisfied smile.

"Yes. I have a question. Is Manchester a pretty place?"

He was staring at Brian, who shifted uncomfortably on his seat. Brian was quiet, he didn't like to have to speak up and Wilhelm realised this. That was why he asked him questions whenever he could. Brian licked his lips.

"Oldham," he said, in his thin nasal voice. "We live in Oldham. It's on the hills to the north of Manchester. You can look down and see Manchester from Oldham."

"Oh, I am sorry. And so, is Oldham a pretty place?"

"It's alright," said Brian, defensively.

Wilhelm gave his classmates a big smile. Billy felt a tap on his shoulder again. Another note was pushed into his hand. Billy looked down at it, but his attention was drawn back to the little game being played out before him. Wilhelm was still harassing Brian.

"My friend Hans tells me that you did not eat all of your breakfast this morning. Was it not to your taste?"

"No. It was just that I . . . "

"So tell me, what is your favourite food?"

"Fish and Chip Pie," said Brian, quickly.

"What is that?"

"You take a bowl to the chip shop and they put scraps on the bottom, and then peas, then a layer of chips, then fish, then more scraps and peas and fish, all the way up to the top. They push it down hard, and then you put salt and vinegar over it all."

"Ah, Essig! Vinegar!" Wilhelm pulled a face and looked around the classroom. "It's true! The English put vinegar on everything!"

"Not everything," said Brian, hurt.

The bell went at that moment. The English pupils looked at each other, confused. Everyone had been so polite up until that moment. Wilhelm's mocking attack brought home the fact that they were far from home. Trapped in enemy territory.

"That is Wilhelm," said Martin, apologetically. "He is a . . . a . . . bully."

"That's okay," said Billy. "I understand. We have people like that in England."

Outside in the corridor he opened up the second note and looked at it. It wasn't from Gabi. This one read *"English go home."*

"Look at this," said Martin. He had a pile of magazines by his bed. Aeroplanes and tanks swooped and rumbled across their front covers. Messerschmitts and Junkers, Panthers and Tigers, decorated in dark stripes and patches of mottled sand, all of them bearing the black cross.

"Me-109," said Billy, pointing to one cover. "A very good plane."

"It is the best fighter plane in the world," said Martin.

"Nah. The Spitfire is better."

"Not at all," said Martin, assuming his lecturer pose. "Listen and I will explain . . . The Me 109 engine produces 1080 horsepower at 18,000 feet . . . "

"The Spitfire has 1175 at 20,000 feet," interrupted Billy smugly. Nobody could beat him on fighter trivia.

"Ah, but power is not all. You see, the Me 109 is the more manoeuvrable."

"No it isn't," said Billy.

"Yes it is," said Martin . . .

The Panther tanks fill the factory. They look so much bigger and stronger than the English Churchills.

Wilhelm said something in German that none of the English children got, and then he repeated it in his perfect English.

"Look at the armour plating. Nothing could get through that. Nothing."

"

. . . Anyway, we are not looking at magazines," said Martin, pulling something from between the covers of one of them. "My brother is in the Wehrmacht. He gets me these."

It was a glossy black and white photograph of a woman, wonderfully, gloriously naked except for her shoes.

"She is nice? No? And look at this one?"

Martin pulled some more pictures from between the covers of the magazines, and Billy stared at them in astonished delight. White, creamy flesh poured across the glossy paper for his delectation, smooth thighs and little

tummies and, best of all, plump round breasts, staring up at him, spilling over beds, flopping back, nipples standing to attention.

"Cor . . . " said Billy. "Can I have one? I'll swap you something."

"I'll give you one," said Martin, generously. "A present."

Billy pored over the array of bodies. Standing up, lying back, legs apart, on their front, backsides in the air.

"The German girls are the best, are they not?" asked Martin. "Like Gabi?" he said, slyly. Billy ignored him. He was too busy looking at the women. One of them was wearing a Nazi cap and holding a whip, a naughty look on her face. But there, suddenly, in the middle of that adolescent parade . . .

"A Sambo!"

Martin looked confused.

"The black one," explained Billy, pointing.

"That should not be there. I am meaning to throw it away."

"I'll have it."

"No. You must be careful. If they catch it on you when you are leaving the country . . . " His eyes widened at the enormity of the thought. "You might as well have a picture of a Jewess!"

Martin had the look of a connoisseur. He carefully selected the one of the woman in the Nazi cap. Billy smiled. He liked her breasts, the way the nipples were shaped like cones.

"Here. Take this one," said Martin. "You can always say it is a souvenir of Germany."

The street outside the cinema was clean, the warm evening lit up by white lights. Martin was full of schnitzel and fried potatoes, and yet he was still hungry.

"What is it?" asked Billy, looking at the warm golden brown twist of bread he had been given. Large white crystals of salt studded its side like diamonds.

"It's a pretzel," said Martin, wondering at Billy's ignorance. Billy took a bite.

"Mm. Not bad. Salty." He took another bite and the white square of paper that was wrapped around it fluttered free in the wind.

"I've never had . . . "

But Martin was running down the neat brick street after the paper. He stamped on it with his foot and bent to pick it up. He walked back to Billy, shaking his head.

"Were you just going to leave it to blow away?" he asked. Billy blushed.

"Sorry," he said.

Wordlessly, Martin pushed the paper into a waste bin just inside the cinema entrance.

"I wonder where the girls are?" complained Billy, changing the subject. The street was still quite busy; men strolled by, their wives on their arms. The German women always look so immaculate, thought Billy. They made him think of Frau Schummel, Martin's mother. And then he saw Gabi and Stefanie approaching and he forgot all about that. He gave them a wave. Stefanie scowled as she saw Martin and said something to her friend.

Martin's acne lit up a furious red as he blushed.

"Just ignore her," said Billy. "Pretend you don't care."

"I know how to behave with girls," said Martin, tightly.

A big black car drove down the street, red pennants with black swastikas fluttering, and Billy paused to watch it go by. Gabi took hold of his hand possessively: he tucked it under his arm then turned to enter the cinema.

Three boys stood in front of them, blocking their path. They were staring at Billy. Martin said something in rapid German, and the leader of the group replied. He was pointing at Gabi. She flushed and put her hands on her hips. Martin was looking worried. Billy didn't care. What were they going to do, here on the street, with so many onlookers? And him a guest in this country, too. He put his head down and walked straight into the group, shouldering them aside. He threw a few marks onto the metal tray in the ticket booth.

"Vier Personen, bitte."

He didn't look back, but he could feel the boys standing there, their gaze burning into his back. He felt a delicious mix of fear and bravado.

In the cinema he slid his arm across the back of Gabi's seat. He leant across and whispered in her ear.

"Can I kiss you?"

She laughed.

"Oh yes. I wish you would. Is that what I was supposed to say?"

She turned towards him and they kissed. She tasted of spearmint.

Another day in school, more lessons, more notes being passed, more dark looks from the German boys.

The obligatory question and answer sessions.

"You, the girl with the beautiful long black hair."

There were giggles. Margaret smiled at the boy who had asked the question. Herr Bruckner gave a warning twitch of his moustache.

"Which do you prefer? Oldham or Breisach?"

Margaret gave a smile.

"Oh, Breisach is very nice. It's a lot greener. The buildings in the town centre are very nice. Redder, not covered in soot. And the shops smell nice. And the houses all have electricity."

"Not all of them," said the young man who had asked the question, politely. He had a nice smile.

Margaret smiled back at him and began to fiddle with the buttons of her cardigan.

"Breisach is very nice. But I miss Oldham. I miss the hills, and the smell of yeast coming from the brewery. I even miss the smell of litter in the back alley."

She saw the superior smile on Wilhelm's face.

"I do," she said. "Don't smile at me like that. You must understand. Breisach is very nice, but it's not home."

"That's right," said Billy, coming to her defence. "It's like my Dad always says . . . "

"And what does your father do?" interrupted Wilhelm.

"He's in the Signals. He rides a motorbike." Billy stared at him, held his gaze. Wilhelm wasn't fazed.

"Before the war, I mean."

"He worked in the Mill."

Billy gave a smile at the thought of his father. Small and dark and smelling of woodbine cigarettes. A scrawny little man, really. But generous. Everyone said so. He laughed a lot, too. And then the treacherous thought hit him. But how would that help him stand up to these big German boys with their white teeth and their well built bodies? What would he do when one of Herr Braun's Panther tanks came bearing down on him? Billy tried to squash the thought, but the conversation had moved on.

With unerring skill, Wilhelm had moved onto Anna. Pretty little Anna who had spent the last few days looking miserably around at the Germans with wide eyes.

"And what does your Father do?" he asked. Christine had been smiling proudly at Wilhelm as he spoke, now she sat up straight, began to speak, to interrupt, but Anna was already speaking.

"He was shot in Belgium," she said, tears forming on her face. "My Daddy was shot in Belgium by a German."

There was a rising murmur in the classroom. Herr Bruckner looked at Mr Crossley, who leant forward and spoke in a low voice.

"Not by a German, Anna. By the German State."

Emily put her arm around Anna. Anna gave a nod.

"Sorry Mr Crossley. That's what I meant. By the German State."

Mr Crossley gave her a supportive little smile.

"That's right. In war, individuals don't kill. Rather, two States enter a period of competition to determine which of their ideologies is the superior."

"I know, Mr Crossley," said Anna, another tear squeezing from the corner of her eye and falling to make a shining splash on the floor.

"Very well put," said Herr Bruckner. He turned to his students and spoke in rapid German. Then a pause, and rabbit twitch of his moustache and he translated into English.

"It is the mark of two civilised peoples to realise this. A State is made up of people, and yet its actions transcend those of the individual beings, just as the actions of an ant hive transcend those of an individual ant."

"Ant nest," corrected Mr Crossley. "And in these enlightened times, students such as yourself, Anna, can witness firsthand the make up of a State, and then choose the most viable of the alternatives presented to you."

There was a footpath that followed the railway lines into the station.

Gabi had led Billy to a concrete bench, set back from the path where nothing could be seen but the busy movements of the trains on the tracks. They sat there and kissed. And talked.

"Kristallnacht?" said Gabi, stroking his cheek. "Ah yes, but you heard Herr Bruckner. That was not an attack on Jews as individuals, but rather Jewishness itself. If the spirit of Judaism vanishes from Germany, then that is proof that it is not a viable state."

"I never met a Jew," said Billy, thoughtfully. He gave her a gentle kiss. "Three years and you and I could be fighting each other, Gabi."

"No, our States will be fighting," said Gabi. "We will just be the . . . the *physical expression* of the argument." She gave a giggle leant forward and kissed him. "Did I say that right?" she asked. He put his arms around her and closed his eyes. And opened them. A train was rolling slowly by. Bump bump . . . bump bump. Not even moving at walking pace. Low trucks slid past loaded with tank after tank, their turrets neatly rotated to point backwards. Bump bump. Sleek German efficiency. Billy had thought that England was the most advanced country in the world. Now he realised that was wrong. Two covered wagons were at the end of the train, the doors slid open. Soldiers sat inside, drinking coffee and laughing. They saw Gabi and waved to her. Wolfwhistled. She jumped back, out of his arms, embarrassed. They laughed louder. And then one of them caught on.

"Engländer?" he called, pointing at Billy.

"Ja," said Gabi, defiantly.

Another lifted his rifle and pointed it at Billy, pretended to fire. The first knocked the gun away and scowled at his comrade. The train rolled slowly past, off to the death and destruction of the front.

"I'm sorry about that," said Gabi. "Not every German is like that."

Billy shivered. He was fifteen. In three more years he would be in the army. People would point a rifle at him for real.

She took his hands.

"Two more days and you go home. Are you looking forward to the dance tomorrow?"

"Of course."

She smiled.

"We'll be out in the forest. I know a place we can go."

She reached into his pocket for his pad. Smiling, she began to write something in it. Billy smiled back, half in excitement, half in fear. He didn't know why. He couldn't help thinking that he was pushing his luck.

"Hast du Angst bei Uns?" asked Frau Schummel, her head tilted in concern. She was holding up his shirt, letting him see how neatly she had ironed it.

Do you feel nervous about staying with us? thought Billy. Not nervous. Intimidated. He tried to frame the words in reply. It would be so much

easier if Martin were here. He spoke English so much better than Billy spoke German.

"Nein," he began. "Ich bin . . . er . . . All so different here. Erm. You have been polite. Du bist sehr höflich. No. Sie . . . "

Martin could explain it. Germany wasn't what he had expected. Everything was so much bigger and cleaner and, well, better . . .

Frau Schummel draped the shirt neatly on the bed and came closer to him. She put her hand on his forehead and gave a smile.

"Du bist aber schön. Das meinen sicher auch die Mädchen!"

The sound of polka music drifted from the hall behind them into the night. Billy and Gabi sat on a bench on a terrace overlooking the dark woods, kissing.

Gradually he slipped a hand into Gabi's shirt as she slipped her tongue into his mouth. Slowly, he worked his hand up between her vest and her smooth, warm skin until he found her left breast and squeezed it, played with the nipple, rolled it gently between thumb and forefinger, suppressed a gasp of astonishment as he felt her hand pressing against his crotch, fumbling with his fly buttons . . .

"Er ist hier!"

The hissing call split the still air. Billy quickly pulled his hand free of Gabi's vest and looked up to see the three young men walking towards him. He recognised them from the cinema. A fourth hung around in the shadows of the trees, barely seen.

"I know that's you hiding over there, Wilhelm," called Billy, his voice cracking slightly from fear.

The fourth figure said nothing. Billy heard a laugh, a soft chuckle carried through the warm resin air. There was a flurry of movement and Billy was wrestled to the ground, his cheek pushed into the old pine needles that littered the floor. With a jerk he was hauled up and found himself being held by two of the impossibly tall and strong young men that seemed to populate this country. Gabi was shouting at them, a rapid stream of incomprehensible German. The third boy ignored her. He pressed his face so close that Billy could smell the onions on his breath. A pale fluffy proto-moustache grew on his upper lip.

"Go home, English. You are not welcome here."

Billy gave a laugh. It sounded hollow, even to him.

"She's making me feel welcome," he said, looking at Gabi.

"She is a . . . a . . . " He paused, trying to remember the English word. Gabi came forward and slapped him. He turned around and punched her hard in the face. She fell backwards and began to cry, more from shock than pain. Billy was struggling in anger; his two captors bent his arms backwards until he gave out a cry of pain and stopped. Gabi sat up and wiped her

nose. She choked back a sob. The third man remembered the word.

"She is a slut," he said. He drew back his fist and punched Billy hard in the stomach. He doubled over with pain and felt a knee slam into his chin. And then he was thrown onto the ground as they started with their boots.

"No," said Martin. "It's pronounced *Junkers*."

"Young-kers," said Billy, looking at the square-bodied shape of the aeroplane on the runway before them. His voice still sounded mushy. No wonder when he could barely move his jaw. One of his teeth was cracked; it hurt every time he breathed in.

"Mr Crossley, I'm too scared," said Grace.

"Don't be silly, Grace," said Mr Crossley. "You'll be perfectly safe on board. This plane is an excellent example of German engineering."

Over the distant sea, English and German 'planes disengaged from dogfights as a safe passage was prepared for the children's flight home.

Billy swayed and took hold of Martin's arm. Martin supported him, but he looked pale. In a few minutes Billy would be gone and he would be left alone to face the mob. In a few weeks time, Billy would come to see just how brave Martin was, just how true to his principles. For the moment, he hated all Germans.

Well, maybe not all.

"Are you okay, Billy?" asked Grace, concerned.

"I'm fine," lied Billy. It hurt to say the words, that sharp pain in his tooth made him wish he could breathe through his nose. The swelling on his face was starting to go down, the plaster on his right arm knocked against his body when he walked. He could stand all that. It was funny; the actual beating hadn't really hurt. What he had experienced was an unnerving series of discontinuities. He was on his front, and then *thud* and he was on his back, and then a jarring sensation and he was on his side. He kept trying to get up, he could hear Gabi screaming, but they would just kick at him and the world would jump again.

And then his attackers had just melted into the night as Gabi's screams had finally been heard. The hall had emptied as people came running to look. He was bundled into a car, as the angry accusations between the English and German pupils had begun. Herr Bruckner had had to call the police as Billy was carried into a doctor's surgery, Mr Crossley arguing loudly in German with some half-seen figure. The sullen faces. The exchange of money. The feeling that he got what he deserved.

"No," said Grace, flushing red. She had to shout to make herself heard over the noise of the propellers. "NO! It's not right, Mr Crossley. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this! Tell them, Mr Crossley."

Billy almost laughed. Yes, him and whose army?

"That will be enough Miss Chadderton," said Mr Crossley. "These people are still our hosts."

The Junkers had come to a halt. A door swung open. The English children clutched their cardboard suitcases. Scared and excited. The feeling that they would all be in trouble when they got home.

Wilhelm came across, his Hitler youth badge proudly displayed. He stood before Billy and smiled.

"It is a shame your visit is cut short. Still, you get to fly home." He held out a hand.

"I know it was you in the woods," said Billy softly.

Wilhelm pretended not to hear.

"It is probably just as well you leave, I hear the British retreat is not going well." His smile widened, became nastier. "*Hast du Angst bei uns?*"

Mr Bruckner shouted something at him, his face red with anger. Wilhelm smiled.

"Oh I am sorry, that was so rude of me."

He moved along the line, came to Christine. Kissed her on the cheek, patted her arm. She smiled and kissed him back. Grace looked at her and her eyes widened.

"Christine," she said, "How could you?"

"Why not?" she asked. "Billy has a friend."

Not for the moment, thought Billy. Gabi wasn't there. It wasn't felt appropriate that she be present. He patted the pocket of his coat; it felt strangely empty now. Gabi had the pad, Billy's address written in the back.

Herr Bruckner stepped up and gave a cough. Twitched his moustache.

"Friends," he said. "It is always sad that such partings should take place. Sadder still that some of us may not be reunited for some years yet, not until this war is over.

"And yet, maybe not. In these sane times, you have been given something denied to people throughout history. Choice! You have experienced the German State first hand. Maybe, in a couple of years, when you are of age, what you have seen will help you to choose sides when you are given a chance to fight for your beliefs."

He looked along the line of English children. Christine was nodding. Herr Bruckner shook hands with Mr Crossley and concluded his speech to the roar of aeroplane engines.

"In the meantime, we look forward to next November when our own children can return to your country in order to enjoy English hospitality!"

Oh yes, thought Billy. We certainly do.

"'Touching Distance' comes loaded with autobiographical elements," Vaughan Stanger tells us. "I spent much of the 1990s with my head stuck in a VR helmet, nominally conducting cutting-edge R&D for the company I worked for at the time, but mostly just having fun—and weird dreams, too." He regrets never having the opportunity to test an interface of the type featured here—and reports that, at age 13, he was indeed run over by a car. Friends say "That explains a lot" when reminded of either aspect of his past.

Touching Distance

Vaughan Stanger

When I was a child I was terrified of the dark. From the moment my mother turned out the light, I would stare wide-eyed at the bedroom curtains while I waited for the black to turn to grey. Several minutes would pass while my eyes adapted to the gloom. Only then could I dismiss the bedroom demons and safely fall asleep.

Thirty years later, those demons found a way into my dreams. And it was the darkness I awoke to that brought blessed relief.

My belly itched so fiercely I felt convinced I had developed a rash. Memories of Chicken Pox and Measles prickled in my mind, but I kept those childhood reminiscences to myself. During my first day at the Somatic Sciences Institute, I wanted to seem fully focused on my assignment. In any case, there had been little opportunity for small talk.

"How does that feel?" asked Dr. Kenna.

Whenever she spoke an image of a middle-aged woman with a plain face and heavy-rimmed glasses popped into my mind. But whether this representation was true to her appearance, I could not say.

"Itchy but bearable," I replied.

Dr. Kenna grunted, which I took to be a sign that things were about to get worse. My guess was correct. Within seconds the rash had spread over my entire body.

"And now?" she asked.

"The effect is stronger on my hands and chest, weaker on my arms and legs."

"That is not surprising, Mr. Markheim," she said. "Your skin is more sensitive in some places than others. Please be patient while I normalize the stimulation pattern."

After half-a-dozen adjustments, the itchiness felt much more uniform. "That's a lot better," I told her.

"You may not think so in a minute or two. . . "

Her comment was typically cryptic. From the start, Dr. Kenna had given

me the impression that she preferred to interact with her computer than talk to a human being. That she tolerated my presence seemed to boil down to two factors. Firstly, being blind, I was the ideal person to test her tactile body suit, which she claimed was a vital component of the personal sonar system being developed elsewhere in the institute. Secondly, with her funding almost gone, she was desperate for any kind of help. In fact, I had been happy to volunteer. When Dr. Chalmers mentioned the *Persona* project at my case review, it had seemed the perfect opportunity to shake off the torpor that had afflicted me ever since the accident.

Dr. Kenna cleared her throat. "Are you ready for the next stage?"

"Ready when you are . . . "

This time, a wave of itchiness rippled over my body like an army of ants. I squirmed in disgust.

"Stand still, please. This will not take long."

I counted each second of my torment, reaching thirty before the ants stopped moving.

"All done." Said like a dentist comforting a child.

With the test completed, the urge to scratch myself was irresistible. But Dr. Kenna must have guessed my intention, because she grabbed hold of my hands, thereby averting any risk of damage to the gloves or body suit. I took a deep breath and tried to recover my composure.

"What is this stuff?" I asked, wiggling my fingers.

She let my hands slide out of hers. "Government scientists have designated it a *Smart Material.*" She spoke the words with pride, as if the link with the Establishment served to validate her work.

"Does it look good on me then?"

My question drew a rare chuckle from her. "I'm afraid khaki is not really your colour, Mr. Markheim."

"Please call me Joe," I said for the umpteenth time.

"But the good news, *Mr. Markheim*, is that the tactile feedback supplied by the body suit should help you keep in touch with the world."

I was seven years old when I experienced blindness for the first time. Confined to bed after a bout of flu, I awoke one morning to find that my eyes would not open. My piercing screams soon roused my parents.

Mother bathed my eyelids with careful dabs of a spit-dampened handkerchief. After each gasping sob I was able to glimpse a little more daylight. When the last of the mucus was wiped away, my world of primary colours was restored in all its glory.

But that night my dreams were full of darkness.

My second day at the Institute began much as the first ended, with a lengthy session of calibration. Prompted by the computer, I traipsed

along various predetermined paths around the laboratory, while Dr. Kenna tried to configure the imaging sensors to her satisfaction. For an hour or more, the laboratory echoed with her curses.

"That will do, Mr. Markheim," she said at last.

It was a relief to stand still, but Dr. Kenna seemed unwilling to permit me a break.

"Please turn to your right," she said. "Then take three steps forward."

As I completed the manoeuvre, I felt my right hip brush against something. I explored the space with my hands and discovered that I had bumped against the edge of a simulated workbench. The tactile illusion was surprisingly convincing; I could even feel the woodgrain as I rubbed my fingertips along the top surface.

"See what else you can find," said Dr. Kenna.

Chuckling at her lapse, I reached forward until my fingertips bumped against another object. The sensation was fleeting. I tried again. This time I achieved a firm grip on what felt like a plastic sphere, perhaps half a metre in diameter. As I rubbed my hands over its taut skin, I was reminded of a beachball.

"Try throwing it to me," she said.

It seemed a ridiculous suggestion, but I lobbed the ball towards her anyway. Maybe the computer would intercept it on her behalf.

"Now try catching it," she said.

"You must be joking!"

"Just try."

I flapped my hands in the air, but to no avail. A moment later the ball tapped against my chest.

"That wasn't fair," I told her.

"True," she said, sounding unconcerned.

I bent down and retrieved the ball. "Anyway, how will a *virtual* sense of touch help me to perceive the physical environment?"

"That should become apparent when I activate the spatio-temporal projection system. In the meantime, please be patient."

Dr. Kenna resumed programming her computer, while I tried to imagine what she might have in store for me. Unfortunately, I failed to come up with anything pleasant.

"Ready when you are," she announced.

I muttered my assent. A moment later, I experienced a prickling sensation near the top of my left thigh. Heedless of possible damage to the fabric, I rubbed at the spot. Beneath my fingertips was a pea-sized bulge.

For once Dr. Kenna ignored my faux pas. "Right, Mr. Markheim. The computer is throwing the ball... now!"

The blip sneaked out from under my fingers and began ascending the left side of my torso. So rapidly did it move across my ribs and shoulder that I scarcely had time to swat at it with my right hand. This time the virtual beachball collided with my left elbow. I stepped backwards, surprised

less by the impact than its bizarre harbinger.

"Not bad at all," said Dr. Kenna. I understood that the praise was meant for her, not me.

After six failures, I succeeded in catching the beachball, an achievement that pleased me despite its absurdity. Dr. Kenna's response was to bombard me from random directions, so as to exercise my new, omni-directional "vision" as thoroughly as possible. I dodged the projectiles as best I could, coerced by the blips that scuttled over my body.

Dr. Kenna's intention was becoming clear to me at last. Equipped with her tactile interface, my body was going to be transformed into a map of the world.

Throughout my teenage years I followed the path of least resistance, in the academic sense at least. Unlike my classmates, I relished the annual cycle of lessons and exams, which I felt sure would culminate in a degree in the Humanities from some metropolitan university. A career in teaching seemed inevitable.

The paths I followed through the local housing estate were selected with much greater care. I zigzagged across the roads, always seeking the shortest route from A to B. I counted the seconds, convinced that time was the only valid measure of distance.

A collision with a blind man jolted me out of my complacency. Even as I helped him to his feet, my mind was wrestling with the problem of what to do if disease or old age robbed me of my sight. Having given the matter considerable thought, I closed my eyes and taught myself to steer a reliable course through the darkness.

The thought that some irresponsible engineer might one day build a silent car filled me with fear.

It was mid-morning on the third day before the trials proper got underway.

"Please turn around and walk down the length of the room," said Dr. Kenna.

"You will stop me before I hit the far wall, won't you?"

Having failed to provoke a response, I began walking. At first I sensed nothing unusual, just the cool touch of the floor against the soles of my smartly shod feet. Then, without warning, I felt a series of rectilinear shapes impinge upon both sides of my body. I turned back and forth, letting the edges scuff over my skin.

"Two rows of houses?"

"Close enough," she said. "You are walking along the main street of a small town. Please continue."

At first I could perceive only the basic structure of the scene: the outlines of buildings and the layout of the roads. But as I explored the simulation, I learned to focus on the fine detail of my body-map. By the time Dr. Kenna directed me into a shopping plaza, I had little difficulty in discerning the

blips generated by lampposts and rubbish bins. I found myself wishing that their physical counterparts were as easy to avoid.

After what seemed like an hour, but may have been less, Dr. Kenna interrupted my wanderings.

"Please keep still while I reset the scenario."

The harsh outlines of the roads and buildings blanked out and then reformed. After a brief period of disorientation, I realised that I was standing at the edge of the plaza, roughly two metres from the kerb.

"What comes next?" I asked.

"Movement, of course."

Before I could respond, a tiny blip formed just above my right heel and started to climb up the calf muscle. It accelerated past the back of my knee, growing in size all the time, before traversing my buttock and hip. When it reached my belly, its trajectory reversed. Descent mirrored ascent, with the blip shrinking as it slid down the front of my leg. Five seconds later all that remained was a slight itch near the base of the shin.

A beachball could not have generated such a fast-moving signature—that much was certain. As I contemplated other possibilities, a sense of foreboding seeped into my mind.

"This time I am going to run the sequence with full sensory playback," said Dr. Kenna.

Traffic noise erupted from the speakers, accompanied by a whiff of exhaust fumes. I heard the swish of tyres on a wet road. The sound was exactly the same as on the day I was knocked down by a car.

I was fifteen years old: more thoughtful than most of my peers, yet still prone to odd moments of inattention.

The rain was dripping down the back of my neck as I performed my kerb-drill. I spotted a gap in the traffic, but in my haste I forgot to look over my right shoulder. When I stepped into the road, a left-turning Austin 1100 knocked me off my feet like a Rugby fullback tackling a winger. I landed on my backside, having flown just far enough to avoid a second impact.

Dazed but unharmed, I clambered to my feet and wiped the splashes of mud from my grey flannel trousers. The driver got out of his car, lingered just long enough to ascertain that I was uninjured, before driving off towards Chatham town centre.

A more considerate driver offered me a lift home. Sitting in the back of his Ford Cortina, I consoled myself with the thought that if I ever did lose my sight I would take much greater care when crossing a road.

By the fourth day, the repetitive nature of Dr. Kenna's experiments was becoming tiresome to me. I had been standing on the pavement of her *Anytown* for what seemed like hours, monitoring the traffic as it flowed up and down the High Street. Although the presence of moving vehicles no longer made me shudder, I found the

idea that we might continue in the same vein for another four weeks depressing to say the least.

"That will be all for today, Mr. Markheim," she said.

I felt the tension drain out of my muscles. *Thank goodness*, I muttered under my breath.

The traffic noise decreased in small steps as each vehicle was deleted from the simulation. Finally, only a single blip remained. Strangely variable in shape, this lone survivor of Dr. Kenna's purge continued to creep up the inside of my right calf. I decided not to report my observation, for I was sure she would eliminate the anomaly when she was ready.

"More of the same tomorrow?"

Dr. Kenna cleared her throat. "No, we must push ahead as fast as possible. Tomorrow, I want to introduce some pedestrians into the simulation."

The prospect made me feel sick in my stomach.

"There is no reason to worry, Mr. Markheim." She must have noticed my discomfort, for her tone was more soothing than usual. Even so, her words failed to reassure me.

The previous afternoon, I had described precisely this scenario to Dr. Chalmers. He told me that he understood my misgivings, but recommended that I continue to participate in the trials. After a lengthy argument, we agreed that I should return to the laboratory.

Now that my worst fears had been confirmed, I turned once again to mental rehearsal. I tried to imagine the tactile signature a pedestrian would generate as it walked along the street. The scissoring pattern I came up with seemed strangely familiar. My heart missed a beat when I realised that the blip crawling up my leg was morphing in exactly the same way.

"Dr. Kenna, why did you lie to me?"

"What are you talking about?" She sounded nonplussed.

"You know damned well what I'm talking about! Your simulation already contains a pedestrian." I gestured in the direction indicated by the blip. "It's walking along the pavement on the other side of this road, about thirty metres from here."

"Mr. Markheim, there are no pedestrians in this version of the simulation, only vehicles. And I have deleted every one of them already."

I double-checked my body-map. "There *is* a pedestrian. And it's getting closer all the time."

I heard the sound of equipment being clipped together. When Dr. Kenna spoke again, her voice sounded muffled, presumably because she was wearing some kind of VR headset. "I have just entered the simulation," she said. "Please monitor my movements while I walk around the plaza."

Her tactile signature began creeping across my abdomen, morphing continuously. When she had completed one circuit, I reported my findings.

"At the moment, you're located roughly ten metres to my right, moving in a clockwise direction."

"Good, that proves that the projection system is working correctly." She sounded relieved. "Is that other signature still present?"

"No; it has gone now." I felt relieved but annoyed too, for now Dr. Kenna would be even harder to convince.

"Are you sure it was there in the first place?"

"Definitely!"

"I could try boosting the tactile output . . . "

I gave my consent before she could change her mind.

After the adjustment my skin was prickling more fiercely than ever, but the detail in my body map was noticeably sharper. Unfortunately, this enhancement had come too late. There was no sign of movement anywhere in the scene.

"Still nothing," I gasped.

I heard Dr. Kenna pacing around the laboratory. "It was probably just a system glitch," she said after a few seconds. "There's nothing to worry about."

Her explanation was unconvincing. It was obvious to me that there was a ghost in Dr. Kenna's machine.

That night I dreamt of a woman who stood at the foot of my bed, shrouded in darkness, silent as death. I cowered beneath her implacable gaze, begging for release. After what seemed like an eternity, she stumbled forward like a marionette released from its strings. Her lacerated face loomed over me, dripping blood onto my skin, where it fizzed momentarily, leaving behind a rash of blisters. One by one, they started to burst . . .

Overcome by panic, I tumbled out of bed, dragging the bedclothes with me like a demented ghost. When my hip collided with the door handle, some obsolete instinct made me fumble for the light switch, an action that illuminated the state of my psyche, if nothing else. I held my breath, counted to sixty and regained my composure by slow degrees.

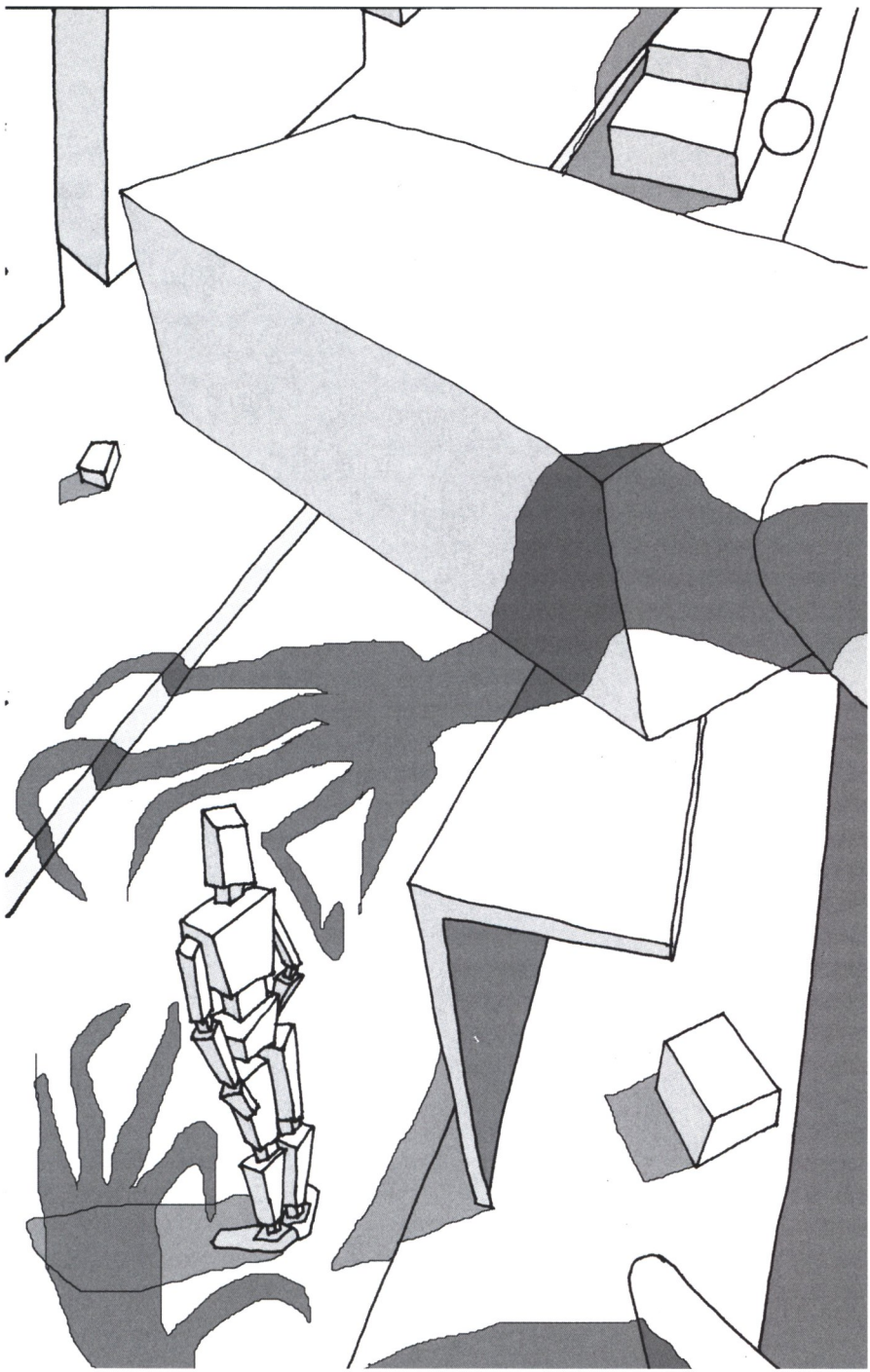
The itchiness wore off, but sleep would not come.

On the fifth day, Dr. Kenna populated the simulation with a crowd of pedestrians. I pleaded with her to give me more time to prepare, but she reminded me that the project's deadline was drawing near. An hour was to pass before I ceased flinching in the presence of my virtual brethren.

Dr. Kenna cleared her throat. "I am going to reintroduce the traffic now."

I sighed with relief. Compared with the unpredictable movements of the pedestrians, the vehicles traversed my body with a simplicity that had begun to seem pleasing.

After I reported my observations, Dr. Kenna directed me to face a group of pedestrians who were standing next to a bus stop. As I turned around, the quartet of blips migrated around my right hip. But when the formation stabilised I noticed that one of the blips was missing.



"Your projection system doesn't seem to work properly at certain angles," I told her, feeling rather smug.

I heard her speak to the computer. A moment later, the missing blip reappeared in a location guaranteed to get my full attention. I rubbed my groin gingerly.

"You have just experienced the optional projection mode for head-on trajectories," she remarked tartly.

And I had just experienced one of Dr. Kenna's rare flashes of humour.

The trials resumed. Before long, I found myself envying the pedestrians; unlike me they did not suffer from boredom.

A glancing contact snapped me out of my daydream. I took a step backwards, then another, but failed to disengage from the pedestrian. It seemed unable—or unwilling—to let go of my arm.

"Is the simulation operating normally?" I asked, aware that I was trembling.

"Yes, of course it is," replied Dr. Kenna.

"So why hasn't the pedestrian released me?"

There was a brief pause while Dr. Kenna interrogated the computer. "The nearest pedestrian is three metres from you," she said. "Are you quite sure you experienced a collision?"

As if on cue, the pedestrian let go of my arm. I spun around with my arms outstretched, but failed to make contact with my assailant. *Concentrate on your body-map*, I told myself. The reminder came too late though, for now there were several pedestrians nearby—and their tactile signatures all felt alike.

"What happened there?" Dr. Kenna asked.

"I think yesterday's 'system glitch' has returned."

She clicked her tongue loudly. "I cannot afford another wild goose chase, Mr. Markheim."

"Nor can you afford to conduct these trials using an unreliable simulation."

This time there was no response from Dr. Kenna. Satisfied that I had her full attention, I continued: "I want to find out why the pedestrian attacked me. Will you help?"

"I seem to have little choice in the matter," she said, sounding weary. "So, what do you want me do?"

"You can start by boosting the body suit's tactile output to its maximum setting."

"That would be risky."

"Just do as I ask, please."

"If you insist."

Pain erupted everywhere at once, as if my entire body was being consumed by fire. But within seconds the sensation had diminished appreciably, suggesting that my nervous system had adapted to even this extreme level of stimulation.

"Now delete every moving object," I gasped.

Dr. Kenna complied without comment. As each signature was erased from my body-map, I experienced a

localised reduction in pain. By the time I had counted to thirty, all but one of the blips had disappeared. I made no attempt to retreat from the pedestrian as it walked towards me. Instead, I turned to face the road. A moment later I felt a pair of hands resting against the small of my back. My hunch was correct: the pedestrian wanted me to step into the road, in front of an oncoming car. But this would be no mere replay of an accident from my childhood, I realised. Instead, a much more recent incident was about to be reenacted.

"Have you located the pedestrian?" asked Dr. Kenna.

"To be precise, she has located me."

"Mr. Markheim, the pedestrians have no gender attributes. So why do you perceive this one to be female?"

"Read my case notes, if you haven't done so already. You will find the answer there."

She said nothing, which to my mind was a tacit admission of her collusion with Dr. Chalmers. But tempting though it was to berate Dr. Kenna for her duplicity, I knew that my own guilt was paramount now.

"Dr. Kenna, please program the simulation so that it contains a single car travelling at fifty kilometres per hour along the north-bound carriageway."

"Anything else?"

"No, that's all. When the simulation is running, please cue me in fifteen seconds before the car is due to pass my current position." I felt the hands touch my back again, as if to remind me that I had my own part to play. "And don't interfere, whatever happens."

Dr. Kenna grumbled to herself, but the lack of overt resistance indicated that she was willing to obey my instructions. A brief session of verbal programming ensued, after which she declared that the simulation was ready.

Hugging myself tightly, I tried to summon up what little courage I possessed. I told myself that what was to come had happened before, that I had lived through it once and would do so again. The thought provided little comfort though, for this time I would be experiencing the incident from a quite different standpoint. The prospect terrified me, but I realised that I had entered into a tacit agreement that could not be revoked at this late stage.

"Start the run," I said.

"The car is moving towards you." Dr. Kenna sounded relieved that she had relinquished control of the scenario. "Fifteen seconds to closest approach . . . Ten . . . Nine . . . "

Her voice lapsed into silence. Not that it mattered, for I had long ago learned to conduct a flawless countdown in my head.

Five.

Engine noise growled from the speakers, building up to a crescendo of fear.

Four.

The tactile signature ascended my tingling body, mapping out the fatal trajectory.

Three.

I turned to face my nemesis, masking it with my blind spot.

Two.

Trembling with terror, I fought the urge to jump clear.

One.

Trapped in a freeze-frame of anticipation, I begged for forgiveness.

Zero.

The impact was a stinging, body-wide kiss.

I lay on the road, curled up in a foetal position, listening to the car accelerating into the distance. Dr. Kenna knelt beside me and rested a hand on my shoulder. I shrugged off her assistance and got to my feet. I stood in silence with my head bowed, while I tried to come to terms with the fact that I was unhurt.

In real life, the pedestrian had not been so fortunate.

I should not have been driving that morning, not in my flu-ridden state. I remember mopping my face with a sodden handkerchief and thinking that if my car's ventilation system could demist the windscreen, then surely the cold-cure I had taken an hour earlier should have done the same for my streaming eyes.

The accident happened while I was driving along Maidstone road, a few hundred metres north of Chatham railway station. I was approaching a pedestrian crossing when a fierce itch inside my nose triggered an uncontrollable bout of sneezing. As my eyes blinked shut, my hands jerked free of the steering wheel. I stamped on the brake pedal, but the car skidded on the slippery tarmac. I heard a shouted warning, but too late, too late . . .

The woman never regained consciousness. Three months after her death and a week after my conviction for dangerous driving, I became blind overnight. Following a series of tests, mostly of a psychological nature, I was referred to Dr. Chalmers, who diagnosed my condition as "psychosomatic blindness."

In truth, I had chosen not to see.

I have been lying on this bed for hours, trying to resist the onset of sleep. Though my mind is buzzing with anticipation, my skin is prickling no less fiercely.

Dr. Chalmers has diagnosed my condition as tactile tinnitus, an epidermal reaction brought on by prolonged exposure to high levels of stimulation. For that I can blame Dr. Kenna . . . and perhaps my own impetuosity.

One week after the incident, the Health and Safety Board suspended Dr. Kenna, pending a full inquiry. Whatever the eventual outcome, the hiatus must surely have ruined her bid for a second round of funding. So we may never find out whether the personal sonar system would have worked outdoors. Dr. Chalmers believes the *Persona* concept was flawed, citing the operational problems posed by the body suit. In his view, Dr. Kenna was just as blind as me.

As I ponder this irony, I gradually

become aware that the prickling sensation is subsiding. Soon all that remains is a gentle tickling near my belly button. I try to remain calm as the tactile signature ripples over my ribs and up onto my face. Supple fingers stroke my eyes, stimulating muscles that atrophied many months ago. Slowly, my sticky eyelids pull apart, admitting the true darkness at last.

She sits beside me—invisible and untouchable—while I wait for the black to turn to grey.

As he says is true of most of his work. T.M. Wright started "Tomato as Metaphor" not really knowing what, precisely, was going on in his head. "I knew only that my protagonist was having some extremely odd problems with his morning . . . and with his breakfast," Terry explains, "and that it meant something terribly important—mortally important, perhaps—was happening to him. But that's about all." Mortally important turned out to be the thrust of the story—a fact Terry had probably realized from word one, but wasn't consciously aware of. "If I had been consciously aware of it, my protagonist might not have acted as spontaneously as he does, might not have become the real person I hope he is, might have been, instead, someone who was merely doing my bidding for the sake of my story, when, in reality, it was his story."

NYX Books just published Terry's novella, A Spider On My Tongue, *third in the Manhattan Ghost Story universe. "NYX is also publishing, by subscription, The T. M. Wright Library, 12 of my out-of-print novels made available, one every three months—beginning in September –, in spiffy new hardcover, autographed editions. They'll also be offering a new Ryerson Biergarten, Psychic Detective novel later in the year." Meanwhile, Cemetery Dance is putting out* Bone Soup, *Wright's first collection (another late 2006 release), and PS is publishing what is unquestionably one of Wright's best stories, the novella* I Am The Bird. *Keep checking the website for details. But while you're waiting, why not try a slice of this . . .*

Tomato as Metaphor

T.M. Wright

George Bloom couldn't believe he was eating tomatoes for breakfast. He didn't like tomatoes, except on toast, with mayonnaise, and, for God's sake, he hardly ever ate breakfast, anyway, and, when he did, it was almost always one poached egg and an English muffin, half of which he usually gave to Chef Brody, his bully dog.

Chef Brody was looking questioningly at George, now, and George was thinking, *This is a very strange morning.* First, no sun, only sleet, which poured from a deep red sky, then his wife left early for work (and she was more-often-than-not late for work, bless her heart), then the mail came at 8:00, and it usually came at 10:30, then his mother called to say, "Oh, I'm so terribly sorry, George," and when he asked what she was sorry about, she said, "Well, you know. Everybody knows," and hung up. When he called back, her phone simply rang and rang.

But he had to admit that he liked these tomatoes. They tasted very different than tomatoes usually did—they were tangier, tastier, meatier, as if he weren't eating tomatoes at all, but a unique new species of vegetable (was it a fruit?) that masked itself as a tomato.

Good Lord, he didn't even need to put anything on the tomato to make it palatable—no salt and pepper, no mayonnaise, no honey Dijon dressing . . . Was this how tomatoes had always tasted? What a revelation!

Chef Brody barked at him, once; it was a quick, low-pitched bark, but because Chef Brody was barrel-chested and healthy, it was also very intimidating, though not to George, who had raised the dog from a puppy. "What do you want?" George said, and gave Chef Brody a questioning look. "You can't have my tomato. Dogs don't eat tomatoes."

Chef Brody barked again, in the same way he had barked a moment earlier, and George realized he was asking to be let out. This pleased George because it was a part of his morning routine that hadn't changed on this otherwise very strange morning. He reached and gave Chef Brody a pat on the head, then stood, went to the side door, and put his hand on the knob. When he looked back, he saw that Chef Brody hadn't followed him, as he'd expected. "C'mon now," George said, and slapped his thigh.

Chef Brody looked questioningly at him.

"C'mon, dog!" George said, and slapped his thigh once more. But Chef Brody still looked questioningly at him, as if, George thought now, the dog didn't recognize him. How very odd. How perturbing.

He went back to his seat at the table, back to his (half-eaten) tomato, and said to Chef Brody, "I'm *George*. You've known me for years."

Chef Brody looked questioningly at him.

George looked at the back door again.

Chef Brody looked at the back door.

Someone knocked softly at it. *Who could that be?* George wondered, and Chef Brody barked.

"Who's there?" George called, but got no answer, only another soft knock, and another deep-throated bark from Chef Brody, who usually ran to the door when someone knocked at it. George looked at him: "Well, go ahead!"

Chef Brody stayed put.

George sighed, got up, went to the door, opened it.

A short balding man, in a crisp gray suit and dark gray bow tie, smiled flatly at George and extended his hand, which George took: the man's grip was soft and cool. The man said, "Do you like the tomato?"

George let go of the man's hand. What was this? Why would this man appear at his back door and ask about a tomato? This was more than perturbing or odd, this was . . . *disturbing*.

George said, "I'm sorry; did you ask about the tomato?"

The man nodded. "Do you like it?"

"How in hell did you know I was eating a tomato?"

The man nodded to indicate the kitchen table. "Well, I can see it there.

Half a tomato." He grinned in a friendly, playful way. "It's an odd thing to have in the morning. A tomato."

Chef Brody barked.

George looked back, said, "Quiet, dog!" and Chef Brody barked again.

The short balding man said, "I represent The Terminal Company of East St. Louis and Other Points East." He grinned again.

"You're a salesman?" George asked.

The man shook his head. "Oh, no. I'm selling nothing. I'm here on behalf of my client."

"Who is?"

"Why, you, of course, Mr. Bloom."

George sighed. He'd had enough. First his wife had left so early in the morning that he hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye, then his mother had called with strange, unnamed regrets, then the sky had poured hailstones all over his lawn, then he'd chosen something utterly unusual for breakfast (though, yes, it had turned out to be an appealing choice).

He closed the door in the balding man's face and waited, expecting the man to knock again. After a minute, and no knock, he opened the door again, but the man wasn't there. He looked at his lawn: it was green. He worked hard at that lawn and it was always green, except in winter. He looked at the sky; it was red. He craned his head out the door. Jesus, where was the sun? What was this perpetual sunrise? He closed the door, went back to the kitchen table.

His tomato was there. Still half-eaten. And, next to his plate, the mail. *Field and Stream*, a bill from the cable company, a letter in a pale blue envelope that didn't have a return address. This caught his attention. He picked it up, looked at the handwriting on the envelope: it seemed to be a woman's handwriting. How odd. Why would a woman be writing to him? He sniffed the envelope. It smelled of nothing at all. He put it down, glanced at Chef Brody, who glanced back, then glanced at the back door, then at George again, who said, "A woman is writing to me, dog. Why is that, do you think?"

Chef Brody barked, which gave George a start. "Jesus, dog!" he said.

He opened the envelope and took out the letter. It read:

Dear George,
Delete one thing.
Your good friend,
Greta

"Huh?" George said. He reread the letter silently, then aloud:

"Dear George," he said, "Delete one thing. Your good friend, Greta."

He furrowed his brow, read the letter yet again, said, "Huh?" once more, glanced at Chef Brody (who merely glanced back), glanced at the letter, at Chef Brody, put the letter on the table, next to *Field and Stream*, looked at it, picked it up again, put it down. "Jesus, dog," he said.

He knew no one named Greta. The only Greta he knew of was Greta Van Sustern, the Fox News commentator

who'd changed her face to please her public. But the change hadn't taken well. She'd begun to look unattractive, again, after only six months.

And why would *she* tell him to "Delete one thing," anyway?

So it was another Greta, of course. A Greta he couldn't remember. Christ, there had to be hundreds of thousands of Gretas extant, so it would be easy for him to forget just one of those Gretas, right?

What *was* he thinking? There were no Gretas in his life. There was a Sandy, a Cecile, a Berenice, two Carols, a Reneé, a Sally (his wife), a Vivian, and three Nancys. But there were absolutely no *Gretas*!

He looked over at his tomato, thought it looked a bit paler than it had only minutes earlier, glanced at the back door, expecting another knock, glanced at the letter, thought of picking it up again, didn't.

"Delete one thing?" he said. What for? For God's sake, *what for*? And *what* thing? A channel on the TV, a CD from his CD collection, a can of soup from the larder, a friend from his very short list of friends, a pet (but Chef Brody was his only pet, and he wasn't about to delete *him*), a meal from his daily meals, a hat, a coat, a pair of gloves, a painting, a book, a memory . . . A memory? A *memory*?

A memory?

What memory?

And only *one*? How was that possible? How could you go into your head and delete a memory? How could you reach into your gray matter, pick out a memory—say, the memory of your first kiss—and *delete it*? How would you know you'd deleted it if you'd *actually* deleted it? Would there still be a label attached—"Memory of First Kiss"—but when you tried to peer beneath the label, you'd see nothing?

He looked at his tomato, again. It was very pale, now. Too pale for eating. Why had it grown so pale so quickly? He glanced at the back door. Night. Hadn't it just been morning? He couldn't remember. He glanced at the letter, at Chef Brody—sitting by with a look of anticipation, Lord knew why—at the back door again. Day. Early. Yes. Of course it was day, early. It was morning.

He looked at the letter, picked it up, put it down, cocked his head at it, looked at Chef Brody, who was still sitting by with an anticipatory expression, said, "What do you want?"

Chef Brody kept silence.

George said again, "What do you want?" and added, after a moment, "Dog."

Chef Brody looked obliquely to his left, as if in response to a noise, though George had heard no noise, then back at George, and barked once, quickly.

"Stop that!" George said. "What are you doing here?"

Chef Brody made no response.

George glanced at the table. It was empty. Of course it was empty, he thought. He hadn't eaten. He needed to eat. It was morning. He should have breakfast—first meal of the day. He

glanced at the back door. Night. It was night. Not morning. Night. He shrugged. Dinner, then.

He looked at the cupboards, wondered what he'd eat. Thin spaghetti with marinara? Mushrooms and salad greens? Cornflakes? Wheetabix? Veal scalapini?

Chef Brody barked.

George looked at him, said, "What?" and Chef Brody barked again, a good, deep, rumble-up bark that, because he was sitting, made his front paws lift from the floor.

A knock sounded at the back door. George snapped his gaze to it, muttered, "Yes?" thought whoever knocked hadn't heard him and said, louder, "Yes?" but got no answer, so he went to the back door and opened it, found only sleet and red sky and dark green lawn, so he closed the door, turned, looked at Chef Brody, said, "What are you doing here?"

Chef Brody kept silence.

George muttered, "Well . . . oh . . . " saw the pale green letter, went over and picked it up, read, "Delete one thing," put the letter down, said, "What thing?" looked at the empty kitchen, the red windows, thought, "Delete what? Delete what?" heard a knock at the back door, looked at the door, called, "Yes?" got no answer, set the letter down, went to the back door, opened it, saw light blue sky, pale green lawn, closed the door gently, turned to the empty kitchen, wondered briefly why it was so empty, thought it had always been empty, of course, thought *Delete what? Delete what?* turned to the clear blue sky, saw no sun, saw no clouds.

Heard nothing at all. ⌧

Ian Creasey's recent publications include stories in Asimov's Science Fiction *and* Oceans of the Mind.

"The Fisherman of Northolt" is a rare departure into Fantasy from his usual SF territory. When he sent us this story, we commented that it had shades of Lord Dunsany's work. Ian says that this wasn't a conscious influence, but he does indeed have several of Dunsany's classics on his bookshelf. "In pre-Internet days, finding good out-of-print books was much more a matter of chance than it is now. I spent many, many hours haunting second-hand bookshops, looking for the gold amid the spoil. I can still recall the dusty smell of old words, the myriad tall bookcases crammed together like a maze of myths in which one might—or might not—find a treasure. Perhaps one day this story will find its own place on the electronic equivalent of those ancient shelves, an attic of musty websites where dead words await being clicked into life."

The Fisherman of Northolt

Ian Creasey

They say the sea eats love when it can't drink bones. When a man reaches harbour, safe from the storm, his house may hold only cold words and a colder bed. Does he wonder who has held his wife while he held his nets? Does she wish he wouldn't go so far, so long? Or does the ocean hoard a secret in every shell on its bed?

The sea looked placid when Farran threw open the attic's shutters to check the weather. The rain had stopped, and gulls screeched overhead as they wheeled on the last of the wind. Though clouds greyed out the sky, Farran reckoned they'd clear by evening. The stars would shine tonight, bright lamps in the houses of the gods, although sometimes the gods forget whose turn it is to watch the earth and sea.

Voices caught his ear. Farran lingered to watch the village children scampering along the shoreline, collecting driftwood and squabbling over choicer scraps thrown up by the storm. He knew them all—nephews and friends' brats—and he wondered when he would ever see his own child gathering seaweed from the beach.

The smell of frying onions rose from the kitchen, and soon Ellia's soft voice called him to the table. He sat down and began eating bread and lentils. Ellia never cooked fish. Farran had eaten fish almost every day of his life before he married, and at first he'd welcomed the variety, but lately the ribbing from his friends had started to grate on him. He couldn't deny that it looked ridiculous for a fisherman never to eat fish.

His wife was short, pale-haired, slender as a kayak. Her large grey eyes

flashed silver when roused to anger. Farran waited until he finished his meal before speaking. He had learned to eat in peace.

When Ellia fetched the ale, he didn't pour his usual measure. "I need a clear head tonight."

"Tonight?" she said. "The weather's too bad to go out."

"It'll be calm. The storm has passed."

She shook her head. "Don't go. Please, stay home."

Farran sighed, wondering what had turned the woman he loved into a nagging fishwife. Last year she had tried to persuade him to give up fishing and become a farmer; as she was new to Northolt, he'd had to explain that all the land around was already farmed and owned and far beyond their means to buy. Now she tried to tell him when to fish and when not, as if she knew more about the sea than a lifetime fisherman.

"Ellia, I'm going to sea tonight. The gods know why, but fish come close to shore after a storm."

"Crashing waves stir up food from the sea bed, and that attracts the fish," said Ellia.

"Then why are you saying I shouldn't go?"

Her head dropped, and she turned away without speaking. She picked up the plates and began scrubbing them fiercely. If there were ever any pattern on those plates, it had long gone.

How like Ellia, thought Farran, to start an argument and then refuse to have it out. Because she wouldn't make her point, he couldn't answer it, and that left him in the wrong.

He heard her clattering around as she put the ale away and brought another jug to the table. He recognised the elderflower cordial she was so proud of learning how to make. It surprised him that she would bring this out now, but perhaps she wanted to sweeten the sour atmosphere. When he caught her gaze, he saw concern in her eyes.

"Ellia, darling, do we have to argue like this? I know you don't like me going out—"

He stopped. Once he would have continued, "and the gods know I don't like being away from you." But that was less true than it had once been. Now he said, "I'm a fisherman. It's what I do." The tang of the elderflower stung his throat; some new spice must have reached the market last month.

"I know," she said, still sounding unhappy. She sat next to him and clasped his hand. "That's what makes it so hard."

Farran woke with a muzzy head, and a sore back from the awkward position he had slumped into at the table. He swore quietly. He hadn't meant to sleep. After limbering his stiff muscles, he looked out at the sky. Not yet midnight, judging by the stars.

He fetched a crock of oil, filled the water-bottle, and gathered his other supplies. He wondered whether to go upstairs and say farewell to Ellia, but

she would probably be asleep, and he didn't want to wake her just to say he was leaving. So he slipped out of the house, and carried his gear down to the harbour.

His boat had no name, being just a rowboat for getting around the sheltered coastal waters. In Northolt they only name sailing vessels that brave the open ocean.

Farran carefully manoeuvred out of the harbour, then put his back into the strokes as he pulled away from the shore. From long experience he knew where the fish liked to run, and he stowed the oars when he reached a favoured spot.

He dipped a bundle of dead reeds in oil, and tied them with old netting around the end of a spar. Grateful for the still night's lack of wind, he opened the lamp and set the reeds alight. Then he secured the spar's other end to the prow, so the flames danced above the water.

Finally, Farran cast his net over the stern. He sat down and rested for a while, keeping an eye on the waves and the weather. A resinous smell drifted back from the burning reeds. The sea gently plashed and gurgled around him.

He enjoyed the quiet peace of the ocean. But he had already lost half the night, so he couldn't sit around for too long. He picked up the oars and nudged the boat a little, so that the fiery bowsprit darted and circled. Then he rowed forward, to scoop up any fish lured by the light.

Each time he pulled his net from the water, it contained a small catch of mackerel or flounder, snook or croaker. Gradually the crate filled with flapping, wriggling silver creatures. The night was cold under the cloudless sky, and despite his exertion Farran felt chilled, his sweat condensing into clammy droplets.

As he hauled another catch, it suddenly became much heavier. The boat rocked under the weight. He tottered forward, almost losing his balance as he dropped the net.

His eyes widened. In the crate lay a woman. Naked and shivering, she tried to squirm free of the net entangling her. As she struggled, her pale hair fell away from her angry face.

"Ellia!" The shock hit him like a crashing wave, dragging him down into a sea of bewilderment. Farran looked up at the stars as if calling on the gods to bear witness.

"Husband," she said. "Set me free, please." She spoke with a dignity that belied her position, tangled in a net, sprawled on a pile of wet fish.

Farran couldn't move. His sense of the possible and the impossible had gone adrift, and he felt as if he might now see the stars fall down to earth, or find himself sailing in the sky and fishing for birds. Yet as his mind struggled to reorient itself, he found it sorting through facts and memories, making new sense of them. Why she never cooked fish. Why she had asked him to stay home tonight.

"Now I understand," he said, and then realised that he didn't, he didn't at all. Questions surged into his mouth like fish swimming up to the light. "How long?" he demanded. "Did I marry a fish, or did you become one afterward?"

"Farran, I will tell you everything you want to know, but not while I lie naked and bound, on a heap of dead fish. Let me up, give me your spare coat, and then we can talk."

Once he would have done whatever she asked. But now he knew she'd been deceiving him, and he took a moment to think it through. If he freed her from the net, she might simply jump over the side, and become a fish once more.

Yet his love for her had not completely faded. And perhaps only this secret had eaten it up. With the mystery revealed, could they be true with each other in future?

He wanted to believe that they could go back to the beginning. He wanted Ellia's explanation to be soothing and reasonable and make everything all right again. If she had good cause, he could forgive her deception.

Farran reached down to disentangle his wife. "Now I know why we never had children," he said, as his fingers fumbled for the edge of the net.

Ellia's expression flickered. Silver flashed in her grey eyes.

"We've had children?" he asked, hardly daring to hope.

The pause stretched. At last she nodded fractionally, her jaw set firm.

"They are in the sea below us," Farran said in wonder. "Bring me my children!" Joy swelled within him, followed by anger for the years of not knowing.

"There is but one."

"Then bring him."

"Her." Ellia did not move.

Farran saw reluctance etched into her face, and it enraged him past bearing. He had been willing to forgive her deceit at slipping to the ocean behind his back—but this was too much. All the years he'd longed for a child, there had been one hidden away.

"Bring her!" cried Farran, his voice loud in the vast silence of the sea. He leant into the crate, grasped hold of the net, and wrenched it tight around his wife. "Or I'll take you home, and keep you locked inside my house, and you will never see our daughter again. Just as you have kept me from her, I will keep you from her."

Ellia looked at him with an expression as icy as the vast blue bergs that chilled the northern seas. Farran only gazed at her, waiting. The flames on the bowsprit began to sputter and die.

She slumped a little, and tugged at the net. "I can only call her underwater."

Farran smiled sourly. "I'm sure you understand why I don't quite trust you. I'll keep you in the net."

He heaved Ellia from the fish crate. A flash of his old love made him shiver at the horror she surely endured as she slid across the dead stinking bodies of her own kind. Yet his anger at her

monstrous deceit overwhelmed his empathy, and he tugged as ruthlessly as a farmer dragging a porker to the slaughterhouse.

He held the net securely as she splashed into the sea. He strained his eyes to see her transformation, but the dark waves hid it. When he felt the weight diminish, he knew then that she had changed.

Waiting for his unknown daughter to arrive, he suddenly felt the absurdity of the situation. He remembered, as a boy, being told that a coin had fallen into the water butt, and spending long cold minutes trying to fetch out the non-existent silver. How the villagers would laugh once more, if they could see him trying to fish a daughter from the sea!

Minutes passed. When his patience snapped, he pulled the net out of the water, and swung it to the rowing bench rather than the catch crate. This time he saw the change, as two fish—one large, one so tiny it must have swum in through the mesh—became human forms.

Farran rushed to scrabble the net aside. He lifted up the smaller figure, a girl of about three years old. Her hair gleamed silver in the starlight. She regarded him with wide dark eyes and open mouth, but didn't speak. Neither did Farran speak. He had no words to express the emotions he felt. They swirled within him like storm winds—joy at finally knowing himself a father, rage at being deprived of this simple sight for so long, and determination. Determination above all.

Long moments later, he grew aware of Ellia gazing at them both. He said, more gently than before, "Maybe you had your reasons for all this—I won't squabble over bygones now. But we can't go on this way, with a marriage full of secrets and deceit. It's time you made a choice: feet or fins. Come home, or stay here."

His wife's eyes darkened from silver to storm-cloud grey. "I'll come home," she said quietly. Yet she looked at the child, not him.

Farran realised he had given her no choice at all. No mother would have said otherwise.

He longed to believe it would become a true choice in time, that they could become a family like any other. But Ellia had been lying to him for so long about so much. Could he trust her to raise the child on land?

If he once let his daughter out of his sight, would he ever see her again?

Farran knew that if it had only been his wife, he would have taken her home and let her stay or stray as she would. But his daughter, his new daughter—he wouldn't even set her down to pick up the oars. He held her close in the crook of his left arm.

Ellia's expression wilted as she read the determination in his eyes. "Please . . . " she said, her voice husky and broken.

It almost swayed him. Yet his anger was fresher and stronger than his love. He grasped Ellia's wet, goose-pimpled

arm, and in one practised heave—*like casting nets*, he thought—threw her into the ocean.

A single splash, then silence ruled the sea once more. His daughter didn't shout, didn't cry. She hadn't made a sound since emerging from the sea. Farran had heard that midwives sometimes slapped a newborn babe to spark its voice into life. He couldn't bring himself to do it. Why should her first taste of human shape be one of pain?

He gently put her down, now that he didn't fear Ellia grabbing the child and jumping over the side. After wrapping her in a spare coat and settling her on a soft mound of nets, he picked up the oars and began rowing with swift, hard strokes. Farran no longer felt safe upon the water. Somewhere under the boat, his wife swam in the sea gods' realm. What else swam down there? What fell creatures of the deep could she call upon?

Maybe she could summon a storm to wreck the boat. Anything seemed possible. The sea had more secrets than he had ever dreamed, and all its familiar rules had vanished in one night. He rowed in blind terror, constantly expecting waves to rise up and swamp the boat, or a sea-serpent to stave in the side. His daughter watched him, uncomplaining, unmoving.

And nothing happened. No lightning cracked down from the sky. No creatures surged from the sea-bed to bar his passage to harbour. When he stepped out of the boat, he slumped exhausted onto the stone quay, shaking with relief and fatigue.

Farran stumbled to the factor's hut, where someone always waited, day and night, for the sea's harvest. He left heavy with coin, having sold not only the catch but the boat too.

At the house he quickly gathered a few things, then improvised a sling for carrying the child. With a pack on his shoulders and the girl at his chest, he found it a hard climb up the steep path away from Northolt, into the dawn.

But he didn't look back at the sea.

He counted the days by his daughter's words. As he hitched a lift on a cart carrying salted fish inland, he began talking to her and fussing over her. She gurgled and said, "Gah." In a grimy tavern in Slathwaite, she waved her tiny fist and said, "Dee!" As the roads widened and the travellers' accents changed, she said, "Horse." Really it was more like "orz", but there was a pony nearby at the time, and so to Farran it was "horse".

He had never been so far from the coast. The dry air parched his throat. The hard eyes of strangers shocked him with their reserve and hostility. His money disappeared with horrifying speed.

Away from the sea, Farran had no skills. He only had strength. And though he would work at whatever task might be set him, many could not be done with a child underfoot. He had to

teach her the words "Stay" and "Stop that" and "Come here now!"

Not to mention, "Don't pee in the man's hat!"

She spoke freely now, learning ever faster as if determined to make up for the missing silent years. He gave her a name, Mairin, in remembrance of an infant sister who had died of the cough. He taught her to say "Farran" and "Father" and "Dad".

But he could not teach her "mother".

No matter how many miles passed, he couldn't forget Ellia, not when Mairin's large eyes and pale hair reminded him every day. And the time spent with his daughter was so intense, so full of laughter and frustration and joy, that he couldn't help knowing how hurt Ellia must be, missing her child.

Fish don't feel, he told himself, trying to picture Ellia swimming in the wide ocean, heedless of land and everything on it. Yet he kept imagining her walking ashore, finding the empty house, asking the villagers what road Farran had taken—and following.

The heat of summer baked the inland plains like oatcakes left too long on the griddle. Everything was dry and hard and full of grit. Tempers shortened, and overseers swore at their labourers. Farran wondered why they bothered paving a dirt road that was already hard as stone, and learned that they had to damn well get it finished by winter or the whole thing would become a sea of mud.

A sea, even of mud, would be a fine thing, thought Farran. He hated the heat, and Mairin hated it more. Her skin reddened and peeled and blistered. She kicked at him when he rubbed her face with pig fat. As they drew near to the Niss River, and barrels of water came back by cart, he dodged away from the whipmen and spent some time soothing her and washing her.

She stopped crying at the sound of water, the touch of it on her skin. Her smile arrowed through his heart.

What was he doing here? He had no connection to this harsh dry land. He only had his daughter, whose misery reproached his selfishness.

Farran volunteered to take the empty barrels back to the river. He smuggled Mairin in one of them, and when he reached the Niss, they slipped away downstream.

After two days, he ran out of food. He didn't know how to live off the land. He could catch fish in the river, perhaps, but while he would eat fish himself, he would not give it to Mairin. And he wouldn't eat while she couldn't.

Mairin was wailing with hunger when they reached Port Leven. He used the last of his coins to buy soup. She revived a little, and when he carried her along the cliff path, she perked up at the salty tang in the air.

Farran found a little bay that he had once seen from the sea. Mairin scampered toward the waves, her face full of delight. She splashed in the spray. White breakers boomed onto the beach, hissing as they fell back. The

tide was coming in. Evening drew near, but Mairin didn't tire. She turned over shells, poked into seaweed, picked up pebbles. He showed her how to skim flat stones into the sea.

The waves crashed higher up the rocks as the sun descended behind a blanket of cloud. Farran watched his daughter playing in the water. Her happy cries resounded off the cliff face. Gulls circled overhead. Farran's throat tightened, but he didn't speak.

Night stole away his sight. Clouds obscured the moon and stars, and he saw only the lights of the Port Leven fleet, far out on the deep. He couldn't hear Mairin's voice, nor any feet splashing along the shoreline.

Salt tears met salt spray. The night was long, sleep a distant myth.

In the morning he stood on sand washed clean by the tide. Farran paced the bay from end to end. It began to rain. Gathering stones and wood and washed-up scraps, he began making a little shack to keep off the weather while he waited.

The shack is still there, down in the bay. It's crooked and unsteady and needs patching up after storms—it's built from driftwood, after all. Sometimes a man comes out and hunts for shellfish on the rocks. He trades them for old boots, or a metal knife, or any useful trinket. He'll trade for almost anything.

Except nets.

Now and then, a shout echoes off the cliff and along the beach. Sometimes the man talks to himself. It's lonely on the beach, especially in the autumn rain and the winter frosts.

But once in a while, at night under the moon, female voices rise above the spray. Laughter comes from the shack. And then, for a few golden hours, it's as if an ordinary family lived there, down among the seaweed. ⌧

Coming Soon In Postscripts

Our Autumn issue (#8) kicks off with Michael Swanwick's "The Bordello in Faerie" and features stories from K.W. Jeter, Robert Edric, Matt Hughes, Gene Wolfe and others. The Winter issue (#9) features stories from Jack Dann and John Grant and, of course, subscribers will also be receiving the Postscripts winter chapbook . . . this year coming from Elizabeth Hand. That takes us up to our first double-digit issue, #10, a special World Horror Convention edition due out next March and featuring several stories from Michael Marshall Smith (Convention Writer GoH) and a cover from John Picacio (Artist GoH) . . . and our very own Pete Crowther (Publisher GoH) will be on hand to supervise the proceedings.

"The Elevator" is the fourth and final part of Zoran Zivkovic's story suite Four Stories till the End, *which we've serialized since Issue Four. As often happens in Zoran's works, the protagonists of the previous three parts appear again here, rounding the quartet into an organic whole. Reading this novelette should help you realize that taking a simple elevator ride isn't as harmless as might appear. Who knows where it could take you . . .*

Zoran's story cycle Twelve Collections *(to be published in late 2006 by PS Publishing) is currently being turned into a TV series by the Belgrade Television company Studio B. His novel* Hidden Camera *was recently optioned by the UK producer Chocolate Films.*

The Elevator

Zoran Živković

Someone knocked on the elevator door.

"Come in," I said, sitting at a small table covered with a brown tablecloth. The place before me was set for dinner. In the middle of the table was a slender vase resembling the neck of a giraffe, dotted with yellow and red flowers, and facing me was another chair, its back to the door.

The elevator door opened in the middle. The two halves slid aside, revealing a lift attendant holding a tray. He was a lad of rather short stature with a trim moustache, wearing a brown uniform, and a round cap on his head. The neon lighting in the elevator did not make even a dent in the darkness behind him.

"Here is your appetizer," said the lift attendant with a bow.

"Thank you," I replied.

He entered the elevator, approached me from the right side, lowered the tray and set on the table an oval plate containing slices of prosciutto and cheese with olives scattered around them. Then he took a bottle of mineral water from the tray, poured a small amount into the tall glass and took half a step back, waiting.

I raised the glass, took a sip of the water and nodded my head.

With a smile, the lift attendant filled my glass, then placed the bottle on the table.

"Enjoy your meal," he said.

"Thank you."

The young man bowed again. No sooner had he left the elevator, than the two parts of the door conjoined behind him.

I took the brown napkin from the table and tucked it into my shirt collar. First I tried the olives. They were fresh and not too salty. Then the cheese, which was spiced with herbs that

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tošić

brought out its flavor. Just as I was bringing a bite of prosciutto to my mouth, there was another knock on the door.

I lowered the fork to the table and wiped my mouth with the napkin.

"Come in," I said.

The two halves of the door separated and there stood a young man in a striped prison uniform carrying a bow and violin. A brightly colored bird was perched on his left shoulder.

"Hello," he said cordially.

"Hello," I replied in the same tone.

"Please excuse me for interrupting your meal."

"Think nothing of it. Please come in." I stood up and gestured with my hand to enter.

"You are very kind. I won't be long. Just to the first floor."

He stepped inside and the elevator door closed behind him.

"Please sit down," I said, indicating the empty chair.

"Thank you."

He sat down, placed the violin in his lap, then caressed the bird. It didn't move, as though it were stuffed. Only its eyes darted about vivaciously.

"I would ask you to join me," I said, "but the table, regrettably, is only set for one."

"Please don't give it a second thought. Even if there were another table setting, I would have to decline your offer." He turned his head briefly to the left. "I couldn't eat anything of animal origin in front of her."

The fork with its bite of prosciutto stopped once again on its way to my mouth. This time I lowered it with a feeling of discomfort, then quickly reached for another olive.

"Surely you've heard what they call the first floor?"

I shook my head. "No, I haven't."

"The killer floor."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but I assure you the epithet is quite malicious and undeserved."

"Why do they call it that?"

"Because killers live there."

"Oh, that's why," I said after a brief pause.

"Technically, though, you can't object to the name. Everyone on the first floor has committed at least one murder. But is that the most important trait that characterizes the wonderful people who live there?"

"I wouldn't know . . . "

"Of course it isn't. It would be, let's say, just like a vegetarian derisively calling someone who loves fine literature a carnivore. All right, most of them are, and thus strictly speaking they deserve the vegetarian's scorn, but should one vice be allowed to blight the many virtues they might possess? And one of them is immediately apparent—their refinement. Have you ever run across an admirer of fine literature who wasn't refined?"

"No, I haven't."

"There, you see. That's how it is with the residents of the first floor. They are indeed killers, but that

shouldn't cast a shadow on their many good attributes. It would be quite unfair to neglect those. Don't you think so?"

"I do," I said, having to agree.

"Moreover, the crimes they committed aren't the usual sort you find in grim chronicles, inspired by dishonorable motives or base instincts. There are many extenuating circumstances; these might not exonerate them in the strictly legal sense, but one should take a broader view. The best way to reach your own conclusions about this would be to allow me to tell you one of the stories from our floor. I hope that this won't interfere with your meal?"

I looked at the full oval plate in front of me, then removed the napkin from my collar and placed it on the table.

"Not in the least."

"Let's take, for example, the case of the man from apartment number one. He's an extremely polished gentleman with exemplary manners, always well-dressed as befits the former literature professor that he is. In addition, he's slight of build and already well along in years, giving the impression that he couldn't harm a fly even if he wanted to. But looks can deceive. That man has no fewer than forty-four murders on his conscience."

"Forty-four?"

"Yes. And committed in only eleven days. Based on these two facts alone, wouldn't it be said that he must be a monstrous serial killer?"

I hesitated briefly. "Yes, it would."

"But that's not at all the case. Wait until you hear the whole story, then I'm sure you'll change your mind. First of all, the killer's gentle nature is best shown by the way he took his victims' lives. There wasn't a hint of the sadistic pleasure so characteristic of serial killers. Not a single drop of blood was spilled. Instead of cold steel or firearms, he used a poison whose effects were undetectable. The victims didn't feel the slightest pain or malaise. They just became drowsy and fell asleep. Unfortunately, they didn't wake up, but even so they should be envied. When you think of all the horrible ways there are to die, ending your life like that seems the best way to go, don't you agree?"

"I suppose so. But why did he kill them, anyway, and why so many?"

"Ah, yes, the motive. That's what redeems him most of all, if you look at things with an unbiased eye. By killing so many people he was actually punishing a terrible vice that has taken more and more of us in its grip in modern times. You certainly are aware of what it is."

I thought for a moment. "I'm afraid not."

The look he gave me was a mixture of reproof and disappointment. "The vice of not reading, of course."

"Of course," I agreed, this time without hesitation.

"While the gentleman from apartment number one was still teaching literature, he was confronted by the increasingly dramatic and lamentable fact that people were reading appal-

lingly little. He did his level best to convince his students, if no one else, that if they didn't read enough they'd be left without the admirable qualities that fine literature instills in us—charity, magnanimity, compassion, kindness. Nothing, however, did any good. No one heeded his warning, not even those majoring in literature, who were supposedly making it their profession. Terrible, isn't it?"

"Terrible."

"He hoped that retirement would bring some relief, but this wasn't to be. He was in the grip of obsession, haunted by the feeling that his whole life's work had been in vain and that the world was plummeting madly to its ruin. His conscience wouldn't let him sit there twiddling his thumbs as he watched this freefall. He had to do something. He studied the state of affairs very carefully and concluded that only drastic measures would have any result. And so he devised a test."

"A test?"

"Yes. A very simple test. He made a list of forty-four great works of world literature. He felt that anyone who cared the least about himself had to have read at least these capital works, if nothing else. Those who hadn't read them didn't deserve to live. No harm would be done by removing such people. They would even serve a purpose. They'd be a warning to others about what awaited them if they didn't come to their senses and start reading."

"But that's being too strict. I mean, what about those who hadn't read just a few of the forty-four works, or maybe just one of them? Should they be punished too? For that matter, the professor's choice of books might be challenged. Someone else might have compiled a somewhat different list."

"You're right. The professor also realized that the criteria he'd set were too stringent. As an honorable man he abhorred the thought of wronging an innocent person. So he decided to lower the criteria. First he halved the number of works that had to be read to stay alive, but then he felt that this was still too much, and so he continued to reduce the number until in the end the only criterion was to have read one single work! Now, you tell me—was that asking too much?"

I shook my head. "No, it wasn't."

"Of course it wasn't. And to make matters easier for those who took the test, no proof was required that they'd actually read that one work from the list of forty-four. It was enough to say that they'd read it. The professor made no attempt to verify their claims. As an honorable man he took people at their word. Isn't that admirable?"

"Yes, it is."

"Unfortunately, although he'd been very accommodating, a great disappointment lay in store for him. True, he'd expected there to be people among those he tested who hadn't read a single work on the list, but for them all to be like that went beyond his darkest fears. And that is exactly what happened. All the people he encountered

were total literary ignoramuses. Can you believe that?"

"Unbelievable."

"This was not what upset him the most, however. In spite of everything, he might have spared the lives of these lost souls out of compassion, but they had one trait in common that finally turned him into a cold-blooded serial killer: they didn't feel the slightest remorse for not reading, and all of them without exception were proud of it, as though it were a virtue. Just imagine!"

"Horrible."

"You said it. Blinded by this horror, he started killing those he'd tested, one after the other. Four a day. Luckily, he kept his wits about him enough to do it painlessly, almost like euthanasia, although at times he was tempted to get rough. Some of the particularly arrogant nonreaders practically begged to be removed in the nastiest way possible. But if he'd succumbed to this temptation, he would have been no different from his victims and that, you will agree, would have served no purpose whatsoever."

I nodded my head in agreement.

"It is quite likely that his crimes would never have been discovered if he hadn't turned himself in."

"He turned himself in?"

"Yes. When the number of victims was the same as the number of books on his list, something snapped inside the professor. Perhaps he realized that he'd set out to do a job that had no end. Perhaps he came to doubt his intention to save the world. And perhaps the weight on his conscience became too heavy, because after all he was not a born killer. It's hard to say. He is reluctant to talk about it. In any case, after the forty-fourth murder he went straight to the police."

"And?"

"And nothing. What happened was inevitable. It didn't bother him that justice was deaf and blind to the noble reasons behind what he'd done. He became reconciled to the fact that there was no place for him in this hopelessly rotten human society. He did not appeal the sentence. All that was left was to atone for his sins somehow, to make amends so he could look himself in the eye. When he came here to the first floor, he finally got the chance. I don't suppose you'd ever guess what he chose as his penance."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Cutting out letters."

"Excuse me?"

"He's cutting out the letters of the forty-four books on his list."

"All the letters?"

"All of them—from the first to the last. He bought two copies of each work for this purpose."

"Why, that's an enormous job."

"Yes, it is. And very tricky. Have you ever cut letters out of a book?"

"No, I haven't."

"I don't suggest you try it unless there's an urgent need. A great deal of patience is required. The letters are very tiny so you have to take extreme care to cut them right along the edge. And it destroys your eyesight in no

time at all. The professor had proudly reached retirement without wearing glasses and now he has very thick lenses."

"It will take him a very long time to cut out all the letters."

"It will. But what kind of penance would it be if it were of short duration? There's plenty of time here, so he will eventually finish the job."

"And then what? What will he do with all those letters?"

"No one knows. He bought forty-four large jars, stuck labels on them with the titles of the books, and the cut out letters go inside. Each work has its own jar."

"Literature like winter preserves."

"Yes, figuratively speaking. Since the professor refuses to tell us, various rumors are circulating about what will happen when he finally fills all the jars. Some feel that nothing will happen. His penance will be over and his conscience will be clear again. Others, however, think things aren't that simple. Perhaps cutting out the letters is only preparation."

"For what?"

"He might, for example, take the letters out of a jar and try to put back together the work that he'd previously cut into its smallest component parts."

"But why would he do that?"

"Because he thinks that cutting is not enough. Don't forget he's a serial killer, not an ordinary killer, regardless of how justified he was. If you were in his shoes, would you be satisfied with a halfway penance?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Other possibilities are also mentioned. One of them is that he wants to use the letters from one great work of world literature to put together another great work."

"But that's impossible."

"It might be, but then again it might not. You can't tell in advance. As far as I know, no one's tried it yet. Have you heard of any attempt?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then the best thing is to wait and see what the professor achieves, if that's what he really intends to do. But maybe it's not. Some claim the whole thing was inspired by alchemy."

"What did alchemy inspire?"

"Apparently he's going to add various chemicals and other magic ingredients to the jars with the letters."

"And what will he get?"

"Most likely not the usual things that alchemists seek. There's not much use here for gold obtained by transforming other metals, or for the philosopher's stone."

"So what would it be?"

"Maybe a universal literary solvent. Or a novelistic truth serum. Or maybe poison letter gas. If you ask me, though, I think that's all a lot of claptrap to make fun of the professor, although he certainly doesn't deserve it. You might find it a bit unseemly, but there are a lot of jokers among killers. Sometimes they go a bit too far."

"Well, I never."

"It's nothing unusual, if you think about it. If it weren't for a bit of humor

here and there, who could make it through the long sojourn on the first floor? If you were to pay us a visit, you'd see for yourself how important it is. But I'm afraid that won't be possible unless you're a killer too. Anyone else is forbidden inside. Did you kill anyone by any chance?"

"No, I didn't."

"Not a single person? It's not at all necessary to have killed a lot of people. One murder is enough."

I shook my head.

"Even involuntary manslaughter."

I shook my head again.

"Too bad. I'm sure you'd like it where we are."

The door to the elevator opened unexpectedly onto an impenetrable darkness.

"Ah, we have arrived," said the visitor. He took the violin and bow from his lap and stood up. "Unfortunately I didn't have a chance to tell you some of the other stories from our floor, but such is life. Once again, please excuse me for disturbing your meal."

"You didn't in the slightest," I replied, glancing at the oval plate that was missing just one piece of cheese and two olives. I stood up and held out my hand. We shook hands firmly, smiling. As soon as he left the elevator, the door started to close. Just before the two halves joined, the bird on the man's shoulder turned my way. For a moment it seemed that her beak twisted a little, as though she too were smiling.

I sat down on my chair, picked up the napkin and tucked it into my collar once again. The forkful of prosciutto, however, was not destined to end up in my mouth. It was already very close, but another knock prevented me from finishing the movement. I put it on the plate for a third time with a sigh.

"Come in!"

This time the lift attendant was carrying a large porcelain tureen with handles that looked like ears. It had an oval lid that was not quite airtight because of the ladle sticking out of the tureen. Steam from whatever was inside seeped out of a thin opening along the edge of the lid.

"Here's the goose soup!" said the lift attendant, smiling.

He put it on the table, and then his face darkened. He indicated the oval plate.

"Didn't you like the appetizer?"

"Yes, yes. It was excellent."

"But you barely touched it."

"Inadvertently . . . " I started, but couldn't find the right words to continue.

"I understand. It makes no difference. I hope you find the soup to your liking. It's first rate."

He moved the plate with the fork and two olive pits to a corner of the table. Then he took the lid off the tureen, releasing a cloud of steam, scooped a ladle full of soup, and poured it into the soup plate that had been under the plate for the appetizer. Then he did it again. Soup filled the plate. He put the ladle back in the tureen and covered it.

"There! Enjoy your soup."

"Thank you."

The lift attendant picked up first the oval plate and then the one with the olive pits, placing them along his left forearm. Then he bowed and went out, and the two sections of the door quickly joined together in the middle.

I picked up the spoon and stirred the soup for a few moments to cool it a bit. It was dark yellow and thick, with pieces of white meat. It looked very tasty. I took a spoonful, raised it to my lips and started to blow on it. I was just about to put it in my mouth when there came another knock. A feeling of defeat went through me. Inside me a brief battle was waged between my craving for food and good manners. The latter, of course, prevailed in the end, but I wasn't exactly proud of the fact.

"Come in!" I said, more stridently than courtesy demanded.

An elderly man appeared at the door wearing a brown bathrobe of the kind usually worn in hospitals. Beneath it were striped pajamas, and he had slippers on his feet. His hands were full. He was holding three goose quills, a brass inkpot, a blotter and a bundle of yellow paper resembling parchment.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said as he entered. The door closed after him.

"Not at all," I replied, the spoon still at my lips.

"Please continue with your meal. I'm only going to the second floor."

I had to return his kindness. I indicated the chair across the table. "Please sit down."

"Thank you very much," he said, sitting down and placing the objects he was carrying on the table in front of him. "It's hard for me to stand."

His face suddenly darkened. He leaned forward a little towards the steaming plate and sniffed.

"Goose soup?"

I nodded.

The face he made articulated his disgust.

"You don't like goose soup?" I asked judiciously.

"It would be a veritable sacrilege if I took even one spoonful."

I hesitated a bit before asking, "Why?"

Instead of replying, the man picked up the three goose quills from the table.

"Ah," I said, with another nod. And then I did what couldn't be avoided. I put the spoon back into the plate and took off the napkin once again. I was rewarded with a broad smile of gratitude.

"You surely know what they call the second floor?"

"No, I don't."

"The critically ill floor."

"Really?"

"Really. The name does indeed correspond to the truth, but what hurts us is the derisive tone that goes with it. As though we were a lower caste that doesn't even deserve to be here. And that is quite offensive, because we aren't your ordinary critically ill. Far

from it. Each of us fell ill because of one of the arts. Did you know that the arts can be very detrimental to your health?"

"No, I didn't."

"They certainly can. Nothing triggers disease more insidiously, although medicine for some reason doesn't recognize this fact. It's enough to hear the experiences of those residing on the second floor to realize the true state of affairs. What do you think, which of the arts is the most lethal?"

"I wouldn't know," I replied after pondering for a moment.

"Music."

"Music?"

"Yes. There are more victims of music on the second floor than all the others combined."

"I never would have suspected. How can music have a harmful effect?"

"There are different ways. Each case is a story in itself. Take, for example, what happened to the spinster from apartment number two. She was a very prominent piano teacher. Some of her students became world renowned pianists. She had a unique pedagogical method and even though many disapproved of it, no one could deny its effectiveness. She regularly beat her students."

"Beat them?"

"Quite so. Don't be surprised. It turned out that nothing was better at removing piano students' inherent lethargy, slackness, inattention and disobedience than a nice little beating. Although small and slight of build, she was very skilled at handling a switch. No one was unresponsive to her blows. Have you ever been beaten with a switch?"

"No, I haven't."

"You've missed a lot. It awakens the best in you, particularly in the artistic sense. The students came to her classes terrified and went home tear-streaked, but in the end they were all grateful to her. And why wouldn't they be, when she turned the most untalented into real virtuosos? What are a few scars from a thin switch on a place where they normally aren't seen compared to a brilliant career in music? In any case it's a well-known fact that the road to the summit of the arts is strewn with thorns. You didn't expect it to be covered with rose petals, did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, she was already thinking of taking her well-earned retirement when a young girl came to study with her who finally was her ruin. It was clear from the very first glance that she wouldn't have an easy time of it. The girl's fingers were short and fat, she was extremely clumsy, and she gave no sign of having any ear for music. These drawbacks, however, did not discourage the teacher. She'd come across worse cases, and she trusted the power of her switch. The most important thing in life is to have a reliable method, isn't that so?"

"Yes, it is."

"Unfortunately, that method, which had never let her down, failed for the first time. Not one of her former stu-

dents had received as many beatings as this little girl, but to no avail. Under her fingers the piano produced nothing but offensive noise. What the teacher found even more exasperating, however, was the way the girl took her blows. She didn't let out even the tiniest whimper nor did a single tear roll down her cheek. She seemed to be defying her. You can imagine the effect this had on the teacher's pedagogical authority and particularly on her ego."

"I can."

"But even worse humiliation was to come. After letting loose a powerful and unbridled blow, the switch that had faithfully served her for years snapped in two. Owing to its great merits, it was to have ended up in the elegant display window of a museum of music, with the same status as a prized violin. Ghastly, don't you think?"

I nodded my head.

"The teacher was dazed, of course. And as she stared in helpless disbelief at the two halves of the broken switch, her student, affected not in the slightest by what had happened, calmly pulled up her lowered underpants, put on her skirt and sat at the piano. And that's when a miracle happened."

The gentleman with his writing supplies paused dramatically and gave me a knowing look.

"What miracle?" I asked, right on cue.

"When the little girl's fingers started flying over the keyboard, her astonished teacher let go of the now useless halves of the switch, and her mouth dropped open. In all her long years working in the world of music she had never heard a piano yield to someone so submissively. Sitting before her was not an unpromising beginner but a prodigy without equal. But that's not all."

There was another pause.

"Not all?" I repeated.

"No, it's not. Her performance was only part of the surprise. The composition that the little girl played was the very quintessence of perfection. The teacher, of course, was highly knowledgeable about the history of music, yet she simply could not identify the magical work. Enraptured, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the pure joy of listening. Would you have done otherwise if you'd been in her place, in spite of the exasperation of a moment before?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"She was so enthralled that she didn't open her eyes at the end of the music. When she finally did, there was no one sitting at the piano. She hadn't heard the girl get up and leave. The teacher lunged for the front door, but the stairwell was empty. She returned to the practice room in a woebegone state, longing with all her heart to talk with the girl. Her head was filled with so many questions and she had to find out the answers. She would have given anything for them. She would even have agreed to do what had seemed utterly impossible just ten minutes earlier—apologize for the furious beating she'd given the girl."

"Even that?"

"Yes. But the girl never reappeared, and the teacher didn't know where to look for her. As she waited in vain, her feelings grew worse and worse, and she fell prey to listlessness and depression. She started canceling her classes and withdrew into herself. She hardly ever left her apartment anymore, lost her appetite and suffered from insomnia. Things didn't end with just these problems, however. I'm sure you've heard that mental exhaustion facilitates the onset of physical ailments?"

"So I've heard."

"This is exactly what happened to the teacher. Soon thereafter she had to be hospitalized. All the doctors could do was conclude with regret that nothing could save her. They, of course, couldn't have imagined that the real cause of her critical illness was music. Particularly since the teacher never confided in anyone to the very end. Sad, isn't it?"

"Very."

"Now the situation is much better. Ever since the teacher came to our floor she's been able to devote herself entirely to finding that perfect composition."

"But how can she when she knows nothing about it?"

"When you have time on your hands, many possibilities open up. She simply sits at the piano and tries every possible combination of notes. When she hits the right thing, she will have no trouble recognizing it."

"But such combinations are infinite!"

"That's right, but infinity isn't all that much here. There's another problem, though. After every unsuccessful composition the professor beats herself viciously. She acquired a new switch for this purpose. This one is guaranteed to be unbreakable."

"How cruel!"

"Yes, but as an honorable and punctilious individual, how could she spare herself such reproach? Would you be soft on yourself and fail to punish yourself properly for the sins you had committed?"

Before I had a chance to reply, the elevator door opened.

"Ah, here's the second floor. I hope I wasn't too much of a bother."

I looked at the plate of soup before me that was no longer steaming.

"You weren't in the slightest."

"Perhaps you'd care to visit us? The teacher would be very pleased, and there are plenty of other interesting people I didn't have time to tell you about. There's only one condition for coming to our floor. You have to have been terminally ill."

"Unfortunately I haven't."

"Well, maybe it doesn't have to be terminal. It would be enough to have been just critically ill."

"I was never critically ill either."

"How about something not so critical?"

I shook my head.

"At least measles or mumps? Everyone's had them."

"I haven't."

The elderly man in the hospital robe shrugged his shoulders. "More's the pity. Well, all right. I guess you can't have everything in life. So it's farewell."

He stood up, collected his writing supplies and held out his hand.

"Farewell," I replied, rising to shake it.

We shook hands briefly, and then he went out into the darkness. The door to the elevator quickly closed behind him.

I sat down again, then picked up the soup spoon from the plate. I lifted it a little but didn't bring it to my mouth. As I looked at it in distaste, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

The lift attendant was carrying a large plate with a dome-shaped cover. He frowned when he reached the table.

"The soup wasn't to your liking?"

"Yes, it was, but the circumstances, you know . . . " I said, returning the spoon to the plate.

"I know, I know, you don't have to explain anything. I hope you have better luck with this."

He put the new plate on the table, removed the soup plate that was in front of me, then took off the cover. Underneath was a rather large breaded cutlet, puréed potatoes and steamed carrots. He put the plate in front of me. My mouth started to water.

Seeing my expression, the lift attendant smiled.

"Don't let anything interfere this time."

"I won't," was my reply as I firmly took hold of the knife and fork. I didn't bother to tuck in the napkin again.

The lift attendant took the cover and the plate full of soup.

"Enjoy your meal," he said with a bow and headed out.

"Thank you," I replied after him, as the door started to close.

I'd just cut a large piece of meat when the inevitable took place. Someone knocked on the elevator door again. I hesitated for a moment and then put the piece in my mouth. I started chewing happily, paying no attention to the repeated knock. It was not until the sound came a third time that I finally replied, my mouth still full.

"Come in!"

The door split open silently in the middle and a middle-aged man carrying a basketful of apples stepped in.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "I'm only going to the third floor. Pay no attention to me."

"Come now," I replied, struggling with the bite in my mouth. I stood up and indicated the chair across from me. "Please take a seat."

"Thank you, but I don't want to disturb you while you're eating."

"Don't worry, I'm used to it already."

The man hesitated a moment longer and then sat down, placing the basket on a corner of the table.

"Please continue. Enjoy your meal."

"Thank you." I pushed a bit of purée and a carrot onto the fork with my knife.

"It looks very tasty."

"Yes, it is. The cutlet is excellent." The potatoes and carrot were so soft that I swallowed them without chewing.

"I used to love cutlets too, but I stopped eating them after what happened to me in a hotel."

"What happened to you?" I asked, starting to cut a new piece of meat.

"There was a packing plant in the hotel."

I stopped cutting.

"A packing plant?"

"Yes. I didn't actually visit it, but what I learned about it was enough to put me off meat for good, even though I'm not a vegetarian. Would you like me to tell you about it?"

I put down the knife and fork and pushed the plate away a bit.

"I'd rather you didn't."

"I understand you completely. I shouldn't even have mentioned it."

I looked with regret at the barely eaten meal. "It doesn't matter. I'm not hungry, anyway."

As I drank a little mineral water, the man looked at me apologetically.

"I hope you don't have any prejudice with regard to the third floor," he said after I'd set down the glass.

"Why would I?"

"Because that's the suicide floor."

"Really? I didn't know."

"But not your ordinary suicides, to be sure. There are none of the simple folk who kill themselves for such banalities as unrequited love, financial difficulties, or disappointment with life in general."

"Then why do they commit suicide?"

"Exclusively for artistic reasons."

"Artistic?"

"That's right. You might not be aware of it, but art offers a profusion of first-class reasons to do away with oneself. The residents of the third floor are the best confirmation of that. The stories there are extraordinary! Each one is more exciting than the last. They would make a wonderful anthology. Take, for example, what happened to the man from apartment number three. Would you be interested in hearing his case?"

I glanced at the cutlet once again, then nodded my head.

"Certainly."

The man's face broadened into a smile, erasing his apologetic expression.

"He's an excellent sculptor. His works are the pride and joy of the best museums in the world, and his monuments decorate the most beautiful parks. He was particularly noted for his busts. He not only depicted his models to perfection, but seemed to endow the marble with a soul. And even more than that. Has anyone ever carved your bust?"

"No, they haven't."

"If the man from apartment number three had done it, you might have suffered the same fate as many of his models. Each seemed to become hypnotized by their stone replica. They

would sit there and stare at it, unable to tear their eyes away. The bust had to be covered in order for them to snap out of this enchantment. Some of them turned aggressive when they weren't allowed to look at their busts. Force had to be used, for their own good, to tear them away from the bewitched marble looking-glass. Not even that did the trick for some of the models and they ended up in an insane asylum."

"I never suspected that sculpture could be so dangerous."

"That's nothing. Wait until you hear the whole story. When he was just about to retire, the sculptor decided to make a bust of himself, something he'd never done before. It's not clear what led him to do it. Perhaps a guilty conscience for the fact that his art had brought misfortune to the people he'd immortalized in stone, even though he'd had only the best intentions. Did he want to punish himself, hoping that he would suffer the same fate as most of his models? All we can do is surmise."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"We did, but silence was his only answer. When he finished his bust, a punishment did indeed ensue, but not the one he expected. For the first time he was not satisfied with his work. He'd made the spitting image of himself, yet something was missing."

"The soul?"

"In all likelihood. So he broke the first bust and immediately set to making another one, sparing no effort. But the outcome was the same. Although physically true to life, once again the marble face had no life inside it. The sculptor's chisel destroyed this bust too and he began to make a third one."

"And that one didn't turn out right, either?"

"No, it didn't. Nor the one after it. The outside world ceased to exist for the sculptor. He was consumed by his frenzied work on his own busts. He destroyed them one after another, sinking ever deeper into despair. Finally, after the eleventh bust, his atelier was filled with ominous silence. When the authorities broke inside, a terrible sight awaited them. He was lying on the floor with the chisel stabbed into his heart, and the hammer was in his hand."

"Gruesome. I've never heard of someone killing themselves like that."

"Gruesome, yes, but if you think about it, what suicide could be more fitting for a sculptor?"

I thought it over. "No other."

"No other, of course. It didn't bring him deliverance, however."

"It didn't?"

"No. He's continued his penance here in this place."

"Does he still make busts in his likeness?"

"Yes, but not in stone. There isn't a lot of marble on the third floor."

"Then what does he use?"

"Flesh."

"Excuse me?"

"His own flesh. He stands in front of the mirror and changes his face with a hammer and chisel. Every day all over again from the beginning."

"That must be very painful."

"It is indeed painful. Yet who has ever heard of penance that is painless?"

"No one."

"But the pain is not his primary worry. He would endure it gladly if he knew that one day he would finally look in the mirror and see his ensouled likeness. That hasn't happened yet, and no one guarantees that it ever will, even though there is no dearth of time here. All that's left for him is to hope."

The elevator door opened at that very moment onto pitch black space. The man stood up and took his basket of apples.

"Here we are on the third floor, and I only managed to tell you one story. If you were to come and visit us you'd hear many more of them, some even more amazing than this one. But for that to happen you need to be a suicide. Did you take your own life?"

"No, I didn't."

"It doesn't have to be something spectacular, like with the sculptor. Even a completely unimaginative suicide would be enough. Hanging yourself, for example, taking poison or cutting your veins."

"I didn't kill myself."

"Even an unsuccessful suicide attempt would do."

I shook my head.

"Well, never mind. The time has come to say goodbye. I wish you all the best."

"I wish you the same."

After shaking hands, the man with the basket went out into the darkness.

I kept my eyes fixed on the door after it closed behind him, but my intuition let me down. There wasn't any knock. With no advance warning, the two halves were once again pulled aside and the lift attendant entered the elevator, carrying a tray with a dessert plate of raisin cake.

I was almost certain that he would chide me for barely touching the main course, at least by the expression on his face, but there was no reproach.

"And here is your dessert for the end," he said, as he picked up the large plate in front of me and replaced it with the small one he'd just brought.

"I love raisin cake."

The lift attendant smiled but did not leave as he'd done before. He stood next to me and the door quickly closed.

"I hope you don't mind if I stay with you until the fourth floor."

"I will be happy to have the company. Please take a seat."

"I really shouldn't. It's against regulations."

"But I insist."

The lift attendant sat reluctantly on the edge of the chair and put the plate with the barely touched cutlet on the table.

"Thank you. I envy you for finding pleasure in cake."

"Would you like to try it? I'd be happy to share it with you." I took the knife and fork to cut it.

"No, no, you didn't understand me. I don't eat sweets at all."

"Do you have a problem with sugar?"

"No, I don't, and I don't want to have any either. It's a well-known fact that sweets are harmful to your health, but people still gobble them up, even though their lives are at stake. Of course, if you eat sweets in moderation nothing should happen to you, although medical books do mention cases of an onset of diabetes from just one piece of cake, even smaller than this one here. But it's highly unlikely that you of all people would have such bad luck. Please, go ahead and help yourself. Particularly since you haven't eaten much else."

I wavered a moment, then laid the knife and fork on the plate.

"I think I'll hold back."

"Wise decision. Many people consider themselves immune to bad luck, that it only happens to others. But that is a big mistake. Bad luck is lurking all around us. We on the fourth floor are the best evidence of that. Bad luck is what brought us together there."

"Really?"

"Yes. And not just your ordinary bad luck. There a man slips on a banana peel, falls, hits his head on the pavement. Or passes unsuspectingly by a building and a flowerpot lands on his head. Our cases are far more discriminating, and what they have in common is the fact that one of the arts is involved."

"I didn't know that art had anything to do with bad luck."

"It certainly does. I could tell you a whole host of unbelievable stories. I don't have the time, of course, but perhaps you'd like to hear just one. From the lady in apartment number four. It is truly exceptional."

"I'm all ears," I said with a sigh.

"The woman is a brilliant painter. Her landscapes are without equal. When you stand before her paintings of the countryside it's like looking out of a window into a perfect reality. Everything is presented so convincingly that you think you can hear the gurgling stream, the chirping birds, the sound of the wind in the treetops. A feeling of contentment fills you. It's no wonder that clusters of viewers often formed around her paintings in the galleries. People would stand there patiently, at length, absorbing the bliss that radiated from them. Did you know about this calming effect that works of art can have?"

"Yes, I did."

"In the end even doctors started to recommend the viewing of her pictures. It was scientifically proven that they had a beneficial effect on many mental problems. Not only simple neuroses and psychoses but depression, paranoid obsessions and different manias. Even mild forms of schizophrenia. Do you have any experience of one of these illnesses, perhaps?"

"No, I don't."

"Too bad. You could have cured yourself in an instant. Well, let me continue the story about the painter. Everything in her life was above reproach until the moment she recklessly listened to the advice of her greedy gallery owner about charging a

fee to view her paintings for medicinal purposes."

"Why, that's inhumane."

"Inhumane, of course. That's the reason for the punishment she received, even though as a very caring woman she had reduced the fee to less than one-tenth of the price that the gallery owner first proposed."

"What punishment?"

"Bad luck started to plague her, one incident stranger than the next. The first happened at the seashore, where she had gone to paint a tropical seascape with a long sandy beach, palms swaying over the turquoise water and the sun sinking over a bay. Only a tiny bit of work remained to complete the canvas, when something terrible shattered the tranquility that surrounded her. Can you imagine what it was?"

"Was she attacked by a shark?"

The lift attendant shook his head. "Something much worse than a shark. A tsunami."

"Tsunami?"

"Yes. A veritable tidal wave. It was more than twenty-seven and a half meters high. An enormous wall of water, such as had never been seen before in that region known for its mild climate, suddenly sped towards her from the open sea. Its cause was never discovered. The painter lost several precious moments staring in panic at the monstrous mass hurtling towards her. She finally came to her senses, grabbed the painting off the easel and ran from the beach, but it was too late."

"Did she perish?"

"No, she didn't, although at first everyone thought she had. It seemed impossible that anyone near the beach could survive the tremendous crash of the wave's front, scattering the palm trees like toothpicks. When the giant wave withdrew, the painter was found alive, although terribly bruised and with several broken bones. Unfortunately, there was no trace of the unfinished painting."

"That was the least thing that mattered."

The lift attendant sighed. "If that were only true. But wait until you hear the whole story. After she recovered, the painter decided to paint her next canvas as far as possible from the sea. The chances of her being the victim of another tidal wave were practically nil, but after what she'd experienced, can we blame her for not wanting to be by water?"

"No, we can't."

"She went to the top of a mountain deep in the hinterland. There wasn't even a creek nearby to remind her of the trauma of the seashore. She took great pleasure in painting the idyllic mountain landscape. She was surrounded by tall firs, pure blue sky, a deep covering of grass, broad vistas. She was just about to finish the canvas when bad luck struck once again. Surely you can guess what it was."

"Was she attacked by a grizzly bear?"

"A grizzly would have been a godsend compared to what happened.

Although the region wasn't at all volcanic, the top of the mountain suddenly opened with a horrific roar, glowing hot rocks streamed into the air, and lava started to flow all around her. Disbelief froze the painter to the spot once again. She didn't get over the shock until the molten innards of the earth reached her feet. As she raced headlong down the hill, fiery rain pelted down all around her. She barely made it out alive. Indeed, she spent more than two and a half months in the hospital recovering from the burns she'd received all over her body. Although they were very painful, the fact that she'd been unable to save the almost finished painting gave her even greater pain. It had ended up somewhere on the mountain slope, set on fire by lava. Is there any worse fate for an artist than to be left without their work of art?"

"But at least she was alive."

"That is little consolation, as you will see. When she'd recuperated enough to be able to work again, the painter decided not to take any risks. She wouldn't go near the mountains or the sea. Her next canvas would be a desert landscape. The setting only seemed unchanging at first glance. The artist's experienced eye discerned a unique beauty in the curves of the waving dunes, the incomparable blush of the sky, the hint of distant oases, and the quivering, unearthly mirages. She set to work in earnest, but once more was not allowed to finish the painting, although several strokes of the brush were all that remained."

"What could happen to her there? Was she attacked by a wild animal? A lion or a snake? I'm not very well acquainted with desert zoology."

"Nothing of the sort. The bad luck was yet again of much greater proportions. The desert has always been considered a very stable tectonic region, but when lady luck has turned her back, you can't depend on anything. The earthquake that suddenly rocked the area was so strong that an enormous crack opened up in the earth right where the painter was standing. At the last moment she somehow managed to grab hold of the edge of the fissure. But when she saw the easel and canvas plunge into the abyss, she almost dropped into it herself. As crazy as that might seem, it's understandable, isn't it?"

"I would have climbed up to safe ground instead."

"That's only because you've probably never seen one of your works of art disappear forever. All kinds of dark thoughts run through your mind. Finally, after hanging over the chasm for seven hours and thirteen minutes, the painter pulled herself out of the crack. Then she wandered about the desert for another four days and seven hours because she'd lost her jeep in the earthquake. She was found at the end of her strength, completely exhausted and dehydrated. They barely brought her back to life."

"So in the end everything turned out all right."

"It all depends. After this unbelievable turn of bad luck the painter almost decided to abandon her art. She became superstitious, which isn't at all strange. Would you see mere coincidence in everything that happened to her?"

"I wouldn't."

"Of course you wouldn't. One stroke of bad luck maybe, but three in a row is really too much. This is why she didn't pick up a paintbrush for a long time. When she finally did, inspired by a pastoral landscape she couldn't resist, she took every precautionary measure that crossed her mind. She had a large first aid kit next to her, almost a small field hospital. There was also a rubber boat on a powered paraglider. She was wearing firefighter overalls with a canister of oxygen. There was a parachute on her back and she had a commando survival kit. One would say she was prepared for just about any disaster that could possibly happen, right?"

"One would say."

"Well, that's not what happened. One hundred percent protection from bad luck doesn't exist, as you will soon see. The initial tension inside her slowly subsided when work on the painting progressed without any interference. There was no sign of gigantic waves, eruptions, temblors or any other natural disaster. Everything around her was serene and harmless, just like in her paintings. But this landscape was never finished either. What do you think was the reason?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I wouldn't know. Was she attacked by an animal? There aren't any wild animals in pastoral landscapes, but even domesticated animals can be dangerous at times. A raging bull, for example, or a rabid dog. Maybe a piqued turkey?"

The lift attendant gave me a dubious look. "There weren't any animals in the vicinity, either wild or domestic. When the painter was found lying next to the easel with its almost finished picture, she was surrounded by an untouched idyll. It was not at all clear what had happened to her. She had no visible scars. The first assumption was that she'd had a heart attack. It wasn't until later that they established the cause. I doubt you would ever guess what it was."

"I'm sure I wouldn't."

"A meteorite hit the back of her head. It was smaller than a pinhead. Her hair covered the tiny trace at the spot where it had pierced her skull. The chances of something like that are practically nonexistent. But when bad luck is at your heels, probability ceases to play a role."

"A truly unbelievable way to die."

"It wasn't until the painter came to the fourth floor that she realized what lay behind the succession of calamities that had befallen her. She accepted her punishment for greed without complaint, and even increased it. Do you know what she chose for her penance?"

"No, I don't."

"She paints landscapes, but doesn't finish them."

"Is she still hounded by bad luck?"

"No, there is no bad luck here. She does it of her own free will. Her apartment is filled with paintings that need just their finishing touches."

"How hard she is on herself."

"Yes, but should she be indulgent of her transgression and finish her paintings as though nothing had happened?"

"No, she shouldn't," I agreed after a moment's hesitation.

Impenetrable darkness appeared once again behind the opening elevator door. The lift attendant got up.

"We're here. It's too bad there wasn't time for you to hear more stories from our floor. Would you like to drop by? You'd meet many interesting people with amazing fates. For that, however, you would have to have had an unfortunate encounter with bad luck."

"I haven't."

"It doesn't have to be of cosmic proportions like with the painter. Smaller unbelievable turns of bad luck also count. For example, getting hit by a stray bullet in the crossfire of a gangster fight, falling into the only open sewer shaft in the whole town or getting overexcited by winning the lottery and your heart giving out."

"I've never played the lottery."

"In the extreme case a banana skin or flowerpot?"

I shook my head.

The lift attendant looked at me for several moments without speaking. "That means that you keep going."

"I keep going."

There was another brief pause. "Up?" he pointed his thumb upwards.

"Up."

A smiled flickered briefly on his face. "I wish you lots of luck."

"Thank you."

"Allow me to take care of this." He indicated the table and chairs.

"Certainly." I stood up and moved into a corner.

The lift attendant adroitly lifted the table with everything on it and took it out of the elevator.

"I'm sorry you didn't manage to eat anything," he said after coming back for the chairs.

"It couldn't be helped."

He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but just smiled briefly again, raised the chairs a little as though shrugging his shoulders to exonerate himself of something, then went out. He was swiftly swallowed up by darkness.

The door closed behind him. The elevator didn't seem to be moving, but I knew that was just an illusion.

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Jay Lake comments, "'Journal of an Inmate' was a story I took a crack at in the mid-1990s, then set aside for a number of years. I returned to the idea recently, and addressed it again from scratch. I think the original impulse was the idea that we choose the gates we hide behind, and often there's nothing outside in the night save our darker selves."

Jay has novels upcoming with Night Shade Books and Tor Books, and continues to publish short fiction regularly in markets worldwide. He is currently researching a historical novel set during Tulipomania in the Netherlands.

Journal of an Inmate

Jay Lake

March 9th, Year of 89.

I despair. The trial was a farce of the highest order. No one's loyalty could be stronger than mine! Why, I am a twice-decorated veteran of the recent war against our neighbors to the west, commended by the Premier himself for taking an enemy artillery battery at bayonet's point with only the few survivors of my shattered company.

My attorney says not to fear, that the appeals process takes time and I will surely be freed once the charges and testimony have been reviewed by higher authority immune to the bribes and blandishments of my petty rivals in the Capital. In the mean time, I must not discuss them, even here within these pages, for my attorney advises that any words I write here may be read by my jailors, and sent to the courts for review.

Surely justice will prevail, for our State is the perfection of social evolution, and no one is ever made victim without it being his just dessert.

I shall write nothing herein that might be prejudicial to my case.

May 17th, Year of 89.

It has been a journey of some weeks to my prison, traveling with the first supply caravan of the spring. The pass at V____ does not open before the lindens take leaf in the Capital, and so I was held a while at the great hussars' camp on the banks of our noble river. There I dined with the officers and was permitted to ride, and even hunt a time or two. In their company I sought hints as to my situation, and tried to play upon a soldier's natural sympathy for a veteran, but to no avail. They would chatter like birds on every other topic, but fall silent as bones when I mentioned myself. Still, the life was comfortable for that short while.

How terrible the contrast, then, when I was chained to a mule and forced to walk so many miles into the mountains, mud and excrement churning beneath my feet at every step. I had

no notion that our little country had borders that extended so high and far.

The prison, which I shall not name in an effort not to undermine my appeal, lies beyond the V____ Pass in the high Vale of V____ filled mostly with swamps and pines. Bears may be heard to growl at night, and the air is bitterly cold even after the end of the winter season. The mule caravan descended from the saddle of the pass late in the day, the sun at our backs staining the snow banks a lambent rose, the valley below us already cloaked in shadow. Watery fens glowed silver within the darkness. The prison was little more than a flickering spark in the distance, perhaps another half day's march by the measure of a mule's tread, but those were the first lights we had seen aside from our own fire in better than a week, and I rejoiced in a feeling of deliverance.

As we made camp that night, the detestable Sergeant F____ who led the mule train began to laugh at me, the sole prisoner in the supply train. Soon his entire band of men chuckled and guffawed, boisterous expressions of crude humor, though none would let me in upon the joke.

May 21st, Year of 89.

I am praying for my appeal to advance with alacrity. This place is a den of gentleman lunatics. There are no other words to describe what I have seen thus far. It is to be expected that so far from the Capital, perched on a border made hostile by both Nature and Man, such a place as this prison should loosen some of the strictures of civilized society. The State even in its august perfection does have some limits, though I shudder at my disrespect in even voicing such opinions.

Regardless of the State's omnipotence, there are boundaries within every cultured man, limits that go deeper than the question of tails or tuxedo at dinner and which age of cognac to serve over raisin trifle. I fear I shall never taste of my ample cellar again. The most basic of needs will not be met here. My attorney is far from this place, and there are no mails.

I must therefore begin my efforts at appeal with the Warden. He is a distinguished gentleman, to be sure, who served for a time in the Constituent Assembly at the Capital whilst pursuing a career in the imports business. His is a name that would surely be known to you were I to mention it here, even by his initials only, so suffice to call him the Warden. There was some scandal, when I was still a boy, and he entered service to the State in a civil capacity to avoid the unpleasantness of investigation or trial. The Warden, then, has sat in this place like a toad on a stone for more than two decades. I would say that prison life has not treated him well.

The Warden's carriage is good enough, and he maintains the great walrus-moustache that was popular

among gentlemen of our fathers' youth. He is slim yet, despite advancing age and silver hair, and would doubtless fill out his Assembly robes with dignity even now. But when I stumbled in amongst the jackanapes of the dreadful Sergeant F____'s mule train, did the Warden greet me as a gentleman should? Not in the slightest. Rather, he ran to Sergeant F____, hugged that worm of a man as if they were brothers, and demanded of the Sergeant whether the mule train had brought any ink to the prison.

Ink, I say. Once a tradesman, always a tradesman. This despicable concern with commerce that so overruns the Capital is obviously an older and deeper infection than most of us had realized, for it to have roots decades old here on the frontiers.

The Warden did not deign to greet me until after he had read through a thick portfolio of orders and dispatches, while I toiled under the curses and kicking boots of Sergeant F____'s two Caporals, men even lower and less couth than he. Finally the old gentleman walked over to me, looked me up and down, then grabbed my hand. He studied my fingers and palm for a moment with no more dignity or purpose than a traveling fortune-teller before peering into my eyes.

"Tell me, Citizen J____," he said. "You have soft hands. Can you do sums?"

I told him that I was a gentleman, not a clerk, but that my education had in fact extended to the mathematical arts, including arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry and even rudiments of the calculus. I began to explain the error of my assignment to this desolate place, but he interrupted me.

"Yes, yes," the Warden said. His gaze was steady, burning as if with fever, "but can you do sums?"

I admitted I could, whereupon he spun on his heel and began calling for the commissary, paying me no further mind than he did one of the mules. It pains me now to write this account of how low I have already fallen, and they are shouting for me in the main office, so I must go.

May 23rd, Year of 89.

This place perhaps bears some careful description before my eyes grow so accustomed to the view that I can no longer see what lies before me. The high vale of the V____ is an ancient frontier, contested by one and another tribe and kingdom long before Rome's noble banners unfurled over all the lands of our portion of the Continent. I have already been told in leering confidence—by a one-eyed man with scarred lips and ropy burns where his scalp should be, no less—that many of the pine-topped hummocks of the vale are in fact graves of kings, and that a man with wit, a steel shovel and a good lantern may dig fortunes out of the bog any night of the year.

One cannot eat the red gold of the ancients, and jeweled diadems will not

enlarge my cell, and besides I already hate the tiny red midges that swarm over the water everywhere here, so this is not an item of great interest to me. Once my appeal succeeds, I might imagine coming back here at the head of an army of porters and laborers, but for now, this rumor shall rest safely in the bosom of the vale.

I recount it here in my journal only to give some perspective on the nature of the prison. I, who have fought in the recent war, and traveled extensively as far even as Kiel and Marseilles to the west and Tbilisi to the east, can clearly recognize the structure as a defensive fortification. The foundations are broad, built up out of the swamps and extending back into the rise of a hill the inmates call Hangbranch. These retaining walls are sturdy enough for mighty towers of stone, though they now support only vegetable gardens tended by the more menial of the prisoners. There are rubble-filled depressions among the gardens that are clearly the remnants of stairways leading down to magazines, barracks or dungeons beneath what was the old castle.

The prison itself is a substantial structure, even though it is only a portion of what clearly once stood here. It has grim, gray walls of close-set stone that does not match the exposed rock on the slopes of Hangbranch Hill, though it is of a kind with the foundation courses. Someone once quarried and hauled a great deal of stone up into this vale.

The architecture of the prison has some ceremonial vestiges of Medieval siege architecture, though I would estimate the main portion of it as being no older than the end of the past century. It is built, like a castle, in a rectangle, and the southern wall rises with the hill, essentially part of a carved-away cliff. That south wall is much older than the balance of the structure, being composed of shaped cliff face and cyclopean stones, and riddled with bricked-up doors and passages that once led back into the bones of the hill. The four corners feature square towers rising perhaps fifty feet above the ramparts, which themselves have a waist-high battlement, though not crenellated. The other three walls have rows of cells built against them, so that the gatehouse is a sort of tunnel between the cells on the north wall, leading into the court surrounded on three sides by cells and on the fourth by the ancient structures of the south wall.

The whole effect is that of a dungeon, or a particularly grim military prison, brought to scale.

We are divided into three wards, with the Warden over us all. The first ward inhabits the western cells, which are deemed the least desirable as they face the prevailing easterly winds during the winter. They are primarily the violent criminals, career incorrigibles, men of the gypsy, the Turk, or other foreign races—in general, those with no hope of rehabilitation.

The second ward calls the northern cells home, which also contain the offices and apartments of the keepers of the prison. These are the trusties, for the most part, as there are very few staff assigned to this place other than the Warden and the commissary. The trusties are men promoted to supervise the gardens and fields around the prison, or run the orchards higher up on Hangbranch Hill, as well as guard the walls and gates. The prison contends with little in the way of escape attempts, for there is nowhere to go, and this high country is inhabited by Hostile tribes who have never accepted the suzerainty of the Capital. Also kept here are those convicted of moral or social deviancy, and those unspeakable crimes that are normally met with a swift execution but were for some purpose spared by the kindness of Lady Justice.

The third ward lives in the eastern cells. Here I have been placed, in a high cell on the fourth level as befits my lowly status as a newcomer. We are the politicals, those convicted of crimes against the State, defrocked priests and disbarred attorneys, as well as the merely unclassifiable, such as Petit Cochin, a man whom I am told arrived some years ago alone, without papers, who seemed to possess only those two words of vocabulary that gave him his name. Petit works in the orchards in the summer, and otherwise labors in the laundries beneath the second ward, and was held up to me as an example of uncomplaining obedience.

June 10th, Year of 89.

The despicable Sergeant F____ is gone with his mules and his men. I am given to hope that his return with the autumn caravan will bring me word of the success of my appeal. I briefly considered sending a letter home to my attorney, but that seems moot. First of all, he certainly knows where I am. Second of all, the likelihood that Sergeant F____ and his merry hooligans would actually manage to bring the letter all the way to the Capital intact and in confidence seems a foolish hope.

In accordance with the orders of the Warden I have been set to work with the commissary. That worthy manages the logistical affairs of the prison. His old clerk died of some unspecified illness last winter, that seems to still have people whispering behind their hands, though none will tell me of it. The clerk's office has been shut up ever since, and I was given a torch, a long knife, and a stout stick and told to clean it out and bring the accounts up to date.

These people are crazed, whether by time, isolation, or inner nature I cannot tell.

August 7th, Year of 89.

I should note, I suppose with some shame, that I have taken up smoking of the yellowleaf. This is an herb which grows here in our high vale, and many of the inmates and prison staff alike use

it in lieu of the far more civilized but unattainable vices of tobacco or hashish. Yellowleaf tastes like nothing so much as burning horsehair, and overconsumption will induce bloody visions and a sense of hysterical strength, which is by luck for all of us quite false, but it remains something to while away hours in this place where there is so little to occupy a thinking man's time.

I found myself outside the main gates one day, smoking a yellowleaf "troc," as the inmates call the little hand-rolled cigarette, allegedly from a word from the language of one of the Hostile tribes of this benighted region. The trusty on duty was one Teodor Borogov, a heavy-lipped man with cow eyes who is a convicted panderer and launderer of funds. Borogov claims to have been sent here because one of the women in his string was in fact the daughter of a judge. Her father had brought his case to the bench after meeting the little chit in his already rampant state in a silk-curtained room Borogov maintained for that purpose. I keep meaning to look into his file, for this seems an unlikely abuse of power in our noble State, but have not found the time, even though one of the few privileges of my position as clerk is access to such normally forbidden material.

Borogov and I were passing the troc when I noticed a party of men digging along the edge of the marshlands some small distance below the edge of the artificial plateau on which the prison rests. Thinking back on the rumors of ancient treasure, I asked him what they were about.

"Graves," Borogov said, and spat across his shoulder as is the superstitious wont of those crude Bulgars who are a substantial minority of our country's peasantry.

I was fairly certain no one had died since my arrival, and stated the same.

He laughed, took a very long drag on the troc, then stared at me with a countryman's shrewd eye. "You'll see, my friend. Just try to strike shovel into the earth up here when winter's got us in 'er cast iron grip."

I asked how many died in the winter, but he just laughed again.

September 21st, Year of 89.

One of the trusties, that same scarred, one-eyed man that I now know as Moseley Iamandu, reported today that the autumn caravan has been spotted in the V___ Pass. We are preparing for it tomorrow, myself torn between the expectation of news of the success of my appeal, and the desire for some decent writing materials in this wretched place.

I have come to appreciate the Warden's obsession with ink. The account books are difficult to keep without it, and I have already been forced to introduce strict economies, taking my notes with handmade charcoal pencils provided me by Petit Cochin, a man of unexpected talents. The Warden fears, perhaps as a result of his experiences in

the Capital, to ever break the chain of official forms and record keeping which is the due of every enterprise of the State.

Yet it would help if the Capital ever sent us those supplies we requested, instead of what is apparently in each season the detritus of some warehouse or other. According to the records kept by the old clerk, in the Year of 87 the prison received as part of its autumn caravan one gross of reciprocating rods as replacement parts for steam-driven looms of British manufacture. As there is neither steam engine nor loom within many leagues of this vale, I am at a loss as to understand the logic of hauling such items at great expense and trouble all the way here from the Capital. Every season since, the clerk has returned a form countersigned by the commissary and the Warden requesting permission to reject the shipment, but these have gone unanswered so far.

As for my appeal, surely the State's machinery of justice has already seen to the rectification of my conviction in the matters in which I stood accused. Upon my return to the Capital, I shall lay down the finest meal in town to be shared between myself, my attorney, and some young ladies of Borogov's recommendation.

September 23rd, Year of 89.

Despair! Again I despair! There has been a failure, of the courts, of the mails, of the despicable and vile Sergeant F____ I cannot determine, but there is no letter at all from my attorney. The miscreant sergeant, of course, denies all knowledge of me and my case, and is full only of talk of new unpleasantness between the Russians and the Ottoman Turks. As the State has military alliances with neither power, I fail to see the fascination with such matters in the face of the far more important question of my freedom.

I did receive four barrels of ink and a case of dispatches. I set the dispatch case aside and drafted a letter of query to my attorney. I have yet to imagine a method by which I might reliably convince Sergeant F____ to deliver the letter. My former wealth in the Capital is lost to me, held in trust by my attorney if it has not been attached by the courts. I have nothing here with which to bribe him, and no power to intimidate. It has occurred to me to conceal my missive among the outbound dispatches, but that would be an abuse of the privileges so generously extended to me by the State.

This is something upon which I shall have to think.

September 26th, Year of 89.

Sergeant F____ has departed today, disappearing with his men, breath steaming about their heads and mules braying amid the first flurries of snow. I concealed my letter among a selection of memoranda variously destined for the Ministry of Resources and the Bureau of Penal Statistics, artfully arranging the papers so that

my letter's inclusion appeared to be an innocent mistake in order to further its chances of being sent on to my attorney.

The arrival of snow has set the prison to a furious stir of activity. Safe in my little office in the second ward, I have ignored the footfalls and the shouting, but it seems that the Warden and the trusties have turned virtually everyone out to finish harvesting the orchards and the root vegetables, and to bring in all the deadfall and cut wood which remains within a day's walk of the walls.

How cold does it get up here?

Also, I should note that the Warden has pulled me aside to inform me that he expects no more prisoners to come for some time. "You were a surprise, in fact, Citizen J____," he said, "and must have incurred the considerable wrath of someone of stature in the Capital, for we have had no other inmates sent to us for more than two years. This last round of dispatches included the advisory that our institution is being formally removed from the sentencing lists, though we are charged with continuing our work of incarceration and reform with the inmates we have to hand."

I thanked him, though I was not sure for what, and went back to checking the accounts of the old clerk, who seems to have possessed either an astonishing incompetence or a talent for corruption unrivalled since the departure of the Ottomans from our region.

December 1st, Year of 89.

It is cold here. The troc has already run out. Two men of the first ward have died of the weather. And today the Hostiles attacked. I almost welcomed the bloodshed as an alternative to the painful crackling of the air within my lungs.

They came from the pine breaks to the east, and must have been leading their horses with muffled hooves until they were close to our walls. Even in this cold we would have noted their approach mounted. I was on the walls with Iamandu, carrying hot water steeped with dried sage to the trusties on watch, when the Hostiles erupted from the woods. For one brief moment I rejoiced in the thought that the dire Sergeant F____ had come back for me. Then I realized that the oncomers moved too fast for the State's supply mules.

Iamandu took a bullet in his neck even as he screamed at me to get down below the parapet. He fell then, his tray spinning away from him as the mugs of hot water took flight of their own. I watched the steaming streams arc in different directions like Iamandu's soul seeking the next life as he gargled out the last red streaks of this one. His harsh, ragged breath was the only sound I could hear save for the drumming of hoofbeats, which seemed more like the farewell measure of Iamandu's heart.

Then there was a great clashing of gongs from the northeast tower. The

trusties tipped boulders over and screamed insults at the Hostiles, who screamed back in their Heathen tongue. Though the prison has some few firearms, we are under strict orders from the Warden not to expend ammunition except in the gravest of need. Forty feet of wall below us would seem to remove the gravity of this need, save for Iamandu.

He needed little now, though I held his hand until his heels stopped drumming. After a while the gunfire from below stopped, too, and the Hostiles vanished into the snow as surely as if they had never come. I could see no purpose to their attack at all.

Three of the winter graves are already filled and it is not yet even the solstice. I never thought I would long for my time in the war, but this place is more terrible than the western front in the late war, for all that death comes more slowly here.

February 11th, Year of 90.

The prison has a library. It is of moderate size, crowded with towering shelves, tucked high in the north wall just above the tannery. The library is no warmer than any other place in this icy stone shell of a building, but it does contain books. Judging by the flat sheets of ash clinging to the ancient iron stove, some appear to have been burned for warmth in winters past. There is nothing left of zoology and paleontology except a flame-damaged example of Lambshead's long-discredited treatise on disease theory. Little is left also of law, drama, or the apparently once-vast section concerning medical curiosities.

Still, the shelves of political science, ethics, and citizenship virtually bulge with books, most of them editions from the end of the last century if not, in a few cases, somewhat earlier. With some gentle hints from the Warden I have come to the conclusion that my general attitude toward the State and our inherently perfected system of justice is of less than optimal quality. Perhaps this is what the court saw in me when they sentenced me to this frozen exile. At any rate, it is clear that the Warden can exert influence over my case through letters back to the Capital, and so I have taken his hint and retired to the library for a course of re-education in the fundamentals of our glorious society.

It is my hope that by re-establishing my best, right loyalties, I may be able to communicate to my attorney the changed nature of my outlook, and that further in my position as the commissary's clerk, I may influence the Warden in the preparation of his dispatches so that he in turn may commend me to the courts.

Also, I should record the total number perished of cold has risen to eleven, plus Iamandu felled by Hostiles. We will soon be out of graves. Borogov tells me that in the bad winters the bodies are stacked frozen in the wood ricks, as the numbers of dead increase

in direct proportion to the diminishment of our combustibles.

May 10th, Year of 90.

The anniversary of my incarceration approaches. There has not yet been a sign of the dreadful Sergeant F____ and his caravan, but everyone tells me they will soon come. Spring certainly has, with a suddenness of which only mountain weather is capable. There was snow across the entire vale two weeks ago, then a day dawned rose-pink and not much warmer than before, but it was enough to set the snow to slush, then water, in the course of a few hours. After that the snow on the mountains melted as well, flowing downward to transform the Vale of V____ from a maze of fens to a broad, shallow lake.

Some of the trusties went rafting on the broad water using a little boat made of lashed-together coffins. There they cast nets for a tiny silver fish that shoals among the trunks of the pine trees. The commissary went with them, and was attacked by a fish-eagle for his troubles.

I stayed upon the wall, marking the hours and watching the V____ Pass for signs of our spring caravan. There should be a letter from my attorney, a fresh wind of justice blown up from the low lands of the Capital. By way of spiritual insurance, I have also written letters to my attorney and the judge of my case, seeking to demonstrate my own progress as an ideal citizen of the State.

I go now to the wall again, having borrowed the commissary's spyglass to watch for the caravan which will bear my salvation.

May 28th, Year of 90.

There is a letter here upon my desk. The envelope is simple and plain, unmarked brown paper of a crude make, the grain grossly visible within. Handwritten on the face is a name, an address, in an ink not much better than lampblack. The writer must have been shaking when he made out the envelope, with nerves, or fear, or desperation.

Though Sergeant F____ arrived two days ago, late even by his usual imprecise standards, I have not yet opened the letter. I do not need to. It is my own, sent in the dispatches of last autumn, returned to me by some prickle of fate in this place where no legitimate correspondence ever seems to reach. I could try to send it again, by means fair or foul.

But to what end? All my hopes are false.

I believe I shall open my veins, instead.

August 1st, Year of 90.

Worked in the orchards today. Meditated on citizenship and loyalty. Left wrist still very stiff. Petit Cochin fell off a ladder, had to be carried down to the prison. Alone on the hill a while, I saw a Hostile. Bared my chest for the bullet. He took his aim and stared down the barrel a while.

Welcomed him to finish what I could not do. Seeing my smile he spat and walked away.

September 20th, Year of 90.

They have been watching me. All of them. I had trained the sights of my misappropriated carbine on Sergeant F____ as he approached the prison, when Borogov attacked me. They will not let a man be!

"You can be hanged, even here," he warned me after he took the weapon from me.

I hid from the Sergeant and the commissary alike, taking refuge in a close and musty shelf low in the library, of just barely enough size to accommodate my substantial frame. Perhaps my absence will spur my messages onward.

September 28th, Year of 90.

There were no new prisoners, again, and no new dispatches either. Along with various mundane supplies, Sergeant F____ brought bullets, lamp oil, a hundredweight of Arabica coffee, and three hundred telegraph keys. Perhaps we could throw them at the Hostiles.

The Warden asked me today if I wished to be a trusty scout. I inquired what need a prison had of scouts. "The movements of the Hostiles are of interest to us," he said. "They shoot most of us on sight, when found alone. Only you seem to be immune to their bellicose nature."

So they have been reading my journal. The State cares for all its children in different ways, but I do not like this kind of surrogacy. I told him I would take on the role, if that meant privacy and peace of mind.

"Privacy I can guarantee you," the Warden told me, "once you are well away from these walls. Peace of mind . . . " Then he shrugged, seeming to forget the intent of his words.

I do not know how far I will go, but to leave the gates without being under the guns of trusties will seem a fine, private escape from this hellish place.

October 11th, Year of 90.

These mountains are a glory as great as any work of the State. I know we are alleged to be within the borders of my country, but surely only a creator deity could lay claim to such a land as this. No wonder the Hostiles worry at us, drawing blood and taking lives where they can. We pale, squamous lowlanders are like a canker on their pure land.

From where I sit now I can see a great herd of elk picking its way across a stream. The watercourse foams over tumbled rocks, drops in little falls, loses itself among tiny fens, forms larger pools where beaver live. There are stands of divers pines and firs around me, that creak in the wind like a ship under sail. Eagles scream in the cold air, and the stars above glitter like diamond knives that have cut the fabric of night.

I am a poor outdoorsman, but it is not yet cold enough to kill me here if I

wear my woolens always and make a small fire of moss and twigs each night to keep my fingers unfrozen. I shall have to go back soon to that great square tomb of men, for simple shelter if nothing else, but out here I have discovered a freedom no one within the shelter of the State could ever imagine.

No longer do I need to go home. I am home.

I must thank the Warden.

October 13th, Year of 90.

Attempted to cross the vale in blizzard conditions. The slopes were too harsh. Prison is somewhere south of my position. No hope of finding it now as visibility has become perhaps an armspan. Made a shelter of folded reeds which has become walled with snow.

Another Hostile came to me here. He wore furs and white wool, with a red woolen sash. More daggers than I can count, and more bullets than daggers. His skin is dark, cannot tell if he is well-oiled against cold or that color from birth.

I prepared for death, praying that perdition would at least be warm, but the Hostile smiled. He settled into my shelter, and we shared our heat side by side as he passed a leather flask of something that tasted of steel and brought sparks to my vision.

Later there were ice devils and blue-furred monkeys, though I am fairly certain they were citizens of the leather flask rather than inhabitants of this desolate country of our glorious State.

October 14th, Year of 90.

Woke alone. Sky the color of ice. Snow deep as my neck. A path has been broken for me, heading south. I will follow.

April 7th, Year of 91.

This spring I have a weapon of my own.

I suppose that means I am a permanent trusty now. There has been no ceremony. I have come to see that the Warden made me a scout to turn me out. Some of the men, even from among the hard cases in the first ward, turn away from me and mutter when we chance to meet in the corridors or courtyard. The Warden has made it clear that I am to be well away from the prison when Sergeant F___ arrives.

I shall scout east this spring, mapping the vale to its farther reaches and looking into whatever countries lie there beyond the borders of our glorious State. There is a weighty treatise on the obligations of citizens I am to take with me, reading it before I use the pages to wipe my bum and light my cook fires.

June 21st, Year of 91.

Herein I make my report to the Warden:

I have seen walls of blue-veined marble like giant slabs of goat cheese in the mountains to the east. I have walked a broken road that spiraled up a peak so tall the air thinned to a pained

emptiness in my lungs, as if the builders could evacuate their lungs and still travel smiling onward. Three golden statues stand watch over a plunging waterfall, that I finally named Justice, Loyalty, and Citizenship after their solemn clothes and dour countenances. I hiked days through a valley of pale roses, where the smell cloyed so deep in me that it dyed my passwater pink and made even my shit sweet scented.

Nowhere did I see railroads, telegraph lines, border posts, men with guns, men without guns, animal herds, crops, or any other sign of military or political significance. I know the Black Sea lies to the south and east, and the great wheatfields of the Ukraine almost due east, but some inimical angel has removed them all and replaced them with mountains the likes of which have never been chronicled by the State's geographers.

There were no Hostiles to report, either, though once when I shot a tiny white deer it spoke to me, prophesying good fortune for my family and a larger house on Wilhelmstrasse in the Capital. I hesitated with it in my sights, as that Hostile in the orchard had once hesitated with me in his sights. But I am civilized, so I shot it again and ate it, and had no more visions. I have kept with me one of its delicate bones, on a thong beneath my shirt.

I can see the prison from my camp now at the east end of the Vale. Some of the men are having sport outside the walls, dancing and playing in the thin heat of the mountain summer. Or perhaps they are Hostiles assaulting us. I cannot tell from this distance, though upon reflection I realize that the white puffs I have taken for the smoke of troc cigarettes are more likely from the firing of guns.

June 23rd, Year of 91

Upon arriving at the prison, I found thirty were dead, mostly lawyers. It seems some of the trusties took advantage of the confusion of the recent battle to eliminate the worst of our troublemakers. The commissary is dead as well, of an honest Hostile bullet, but as Sergeant F____ seems not to have come this spring, that late worthy's role is less than it might otherwise have been.

"Citizen J____," the Warden said to me. His voice was immensely sad, as my father's had been at pronouncing punishments upon me when I was a child. "I have a mind to appoint you to the duties of the commissary."

I demurred, insisting instead on presenting my report of my journey east. One of the men lounging about shovel in hand loudly declared that they had all seen the smoke of my campfire the entire time of my alleged travels toward an airless Heaven, but the Warden shushed him.

"It is an important job," he told me. "And will grant you much privacy in the taking of inventories and balancing of the books."

Though I longed for that privacy, I resented the Warden's assumption that he understood my requirements. Still, such work was a steady improvement

on shoveling graves or tending apple orchards, and I could scarcely spend my life voyaging among the glittering wonders of the State's corner of Europe.

I told him I would take on the labors he asked of me.

September 5th, Year of 91

A caravan was spotted in the V____ Pass today. I have examined my feelings concerning the devious Sergeant F____ and determined that perhaps I should remain busy somewhere within the warren of corridors and rooms that form the second ward and prison offices. I see no need for further violence. The voice of the white deer haunts me yet, and there are graves aplenty outside.

I do wonder a bit about the contents of his dispatch case. Perhaps I should write another letter. Surely my interests in the Capital have been too long neglected already. At the least I will send my attorney a lovely pine cone I found in my journey east, that the winds twisted into the face of a screaming man.

September 12th, Year of 91

The Warden has informed me that due to reasons of economy of State, the deleterious Sergeant F____ will be making only one trip per annum to our prison, in the fall. There were no dispatches pertaining to my case, he has said, nor indeed dispatches pertaining to much of any use to us. The primary communication was a revision to the standing orders from the Ministry of Justice requiring the prison to maintain at least one electric lamp for every ten yards of corridors, and mandating a new style of lock for our cell block doors.

As we have no electricity here in the Vale of V____ save what nature provides during our summer thunderstorms, and no one is sure where the keys to cell blocks may be found since the death of the commissary—there is speculation that he was inadvertently buried with them upon his person, and the Warden has grown forgetful in his latter years—the standing orders were sent to the kitchen to be used as tinder for the stoves.

Otherwise there were a few memoranda concerning naval operations, which seems odd as the State lacks a coastline upon any of Europe's seas, and some inventory lists bound for the consulate in Alexandria, Egypt, which had been misdelivered to us.

It is clear that the State intends me to serve out my life here in obscurity. I can do no less as a citizen than make that effort with the purest heart and clearest head I can bring to the task.

Besides, the mountains *are* beautiful.

October 7th, Year of 91

The Hostiles attacked at dawn. It is difficult for me to say, given my own unique experiences with them, what their goals might be, other than the sheer joy of harassment, but they killed one Anton Boordmann, a trusty

charged with manning the southeast tower. Their assault put a fright into a number of others, including Petit Cochin, who screamed like a woman.

I sickened finally of the crackle of gunfire and the screams from the battlements, and showed myself upon the walls, clutching the white deer's bone close in my hand. As soon as the Hostiles caught sight of me, they left off firing their weapons and drove their horses in a tight circle for some few minutes before racing off into the swamps of the vale, water splashing around them in brilliant curtains.

Most of the prisoners will no longer speak to me, save Borogov who remains my friend, and the Warden, who is like a father unto me. In our little circle of three, we are a mirror of society—the Warden the wise power of the State, Borogov the impulsive but essentially obedient citizen, and I the august machinery of law and government that mediates between the State and its people.

January 1st, Year of 92.

I have built a sculpture from the telegraph keys left to us by the droll Sergeant F____. I will not say it is a thing of beauty, for a law machine like myself is no judge of such, but it is a thing of awe. I believe that were we to face it into the fires of the sun, we might send a pulsed signal of bright focused light all the way to the Capital, and show the people there what constitutes true loyalty to the State.

Borogov assisted me in hauling my sculpture down to the courtyard, then outside the gates to that trampled field of snow where the prisoners stage their icy battles by way of sport. We set it in the center, and I twisted the thing for a while, trying to catch some of the feeble rays from our enervated winter sun. Eventually I was forced to leave off by dint of the skin ripping from my fingertips to remain behind on the chilled brass of the telegraph keys. I laughed to consider it my signature, work of my hand.

"You have gone beyond strangeness, my friend," Borogov said to me, "into some dark country of holiness."

I told him the only dark country was that pathless waste of the human heart, and that loyalty to the State and obedience to the precepts of good citizenship were the lighted path out of such a desert.

"You only prove my point, Citizen J____," Borogov told me, then he hugged me.

I sometimes wonder if he is my friend mostly because the Hostiles will not fire upon me.

July 11th, Year of 99.

The Warden is dead. He was found in bed by his orderly, one Shadrach McKiernan of the first ward, an Irish-Jewish murderer originally hailing from Constantinople. I can scarce believe that this bedrock of our lives has passed. He seemed as if he would live as long as the mountains that surround us.

As commissary and therefore by

implication second officer of the prison I instructed Borogov to convene a meeting of the trusties to establish the will of the men. We have not seen the dallying Sergeant F____ since the year of 96, and have thus received no guidance from the State concerning the affairs of the prison. I find it unlikely another Warden will be assigned us in a timely manner.

While Borogov met with the trusties I visited the Warden on his deathbed. He had a sad smile upon his face, and McKiernan had laid two coppers upon the Warden's eyes. Close examination revealed one to be a kopeck and the other to be an Albanian lek, so I suppose the Warden will see two different visions of paradise, should his soul ever find its way free of our mountainous home.

At least he died in the warm season.

I searched his files, but found no record of the Warden himself. It has occurred to me that I can no longer recall his name, but only his title as a servant of the State. As a servant he lived, as a servant he died.

Surely I knew him when I came to this place.

Borogov comes. I must attend to his news.

July 11th, Year of 99. Second entry.

The trusties have asked me to take on the duties of the Warden. I do not know what to make of this request. They fear me, for the most part, and those who do not fear me hate me instead. I know their superstitious dread of the Hostiles has somehow bound itself to me, and so I have kept apart from the society of the prison these past years.

How can I, outside all their hopes and desires, lead them into the future?

Borogov has pointed out that this makes me the perfect candidate to replace the Warden. My peculiar relationship with Hostiles might extend to all of them. Furthermore, I have no interest in the petty squabbles between the Wards, but as commissary have served only the interests of the institution as a whole. He put the matter in succinct words in his colorful way, "Your cock ain't got no spurs in this ring."

I told Citizen Borogov that was well said. I will not take the title, though, for that would be presuming too much on the powers of the State. I shall call myself Acting Warden, and make Borogov commissary in my place.

July 13th, Year of 99.

The Warden was buried today. We made a grave for him among the apple orchards, picking the broken cornices and cobbles out of the ground for hours to widen the trench sufficiently for even his poor coffin. Borogov surprised me by having some of the barrators and usurers haul my sculpture of the telegraph keys up from the forecourt onto the mountain to stand between the trees as the Warden's marker.

No one else could recall his name, either, so I said the service only to the Warden, as if we buried the office rather than the man. After calling on the beneficence of the State and enjoining all my prisoners—for they are indeed now mine—to good citizenship and hope of rehabilitation, I closed the ceremony with a moment of silent contemplation. Those among the men who follow God, or some god, deserved their moment of prayer, though the precepts of the State enjoined me from calling it so. Instead I clutched the white deer's bone and thought as little aspossible.

When I raised my eyes I saw a band of Hostiles among the trees farther up the slope. One of them smiled at me, and they all bowed, whether to me or to the late Warden I cannot say, before they moved off like the shadows of clouds will do.

I said nothing to the men, wishing not to spread alarm.

February 2nd, Year of 05.

One of the main gates collapsed this morning under the weight of snow. We have not the timbers to repair it, which means these walls will never more stand closed against Hostile assault.

I have come to a certain knowledge of their ways. They battle us from time to time because we are here, the same way they battle winter snow and summer storms and the hard, tough life they wring from the stony soil and vast forests clothing these mountains. It is something of a sport and something of a prayer for them when they ride against our walls and fell our men. They stand off from me because for them I am like that tiny white deer prophesying great houses and phantom success—somehow I am a symbol of the life within, or perhaps beyond, their everyday world.

I have not sought to turn them to the loyal service of the State. There seems little point. Wild nature serves a purpose as well after all, standing as contrast to the structured life we lead. Without the Hostiles, we would not know ourselves as civilized.

June 11th, Year of 09.

Borogov is getting old. We all are. The youngest of the inmates is well over forty years of age, and we now lose more each year to senility and the diseases of advanced years than to cold or Hostile attack. We all live in the second ward, those three dozen or so of us left, querulous old men cheating one another at cards and hunting rabbits in the spring with snares in order to conserve ammunition for the occasional shooting matches with our neighbors. Always we observe the precepts of the State, enjoined by time and these stone walls to a narrow, correct form of citizenship.

But I am concerned for my commissary. Borogov has spent the past week abed, now when it should be his best time of year. He is a lying, thieving old

peasant bastard, and my best friend in the world. I went to visit him in his cell today, where he lay wheezing, and asked him if he was wanting of his grave just yet, for we have dug all that will yet be needed, and each picked one for ourselves, so that some men have even chiseled their own memorial stones.

"I'll not lead you underground," Borogov said with a gummy smile. His teeth had finally fled him several winters ago. "I'll throw the last spade on your grave, you Capital dandy." Coughing took him away to a faded place of pain where I could no longer reach him.

I clapped my commissary on the shoulder and commended his spirit, then went to the trusties and told them to ready his coffin.

July 23rd, Year of 09.

After Borogov's funeral, I determined to set the inmate files in order. I had never paid them much mind, as no person has been committed to or discharged from the prison during my tenure as Acting Warden, but it seemed a fitting thing to do. I could bring the death lists up to date, and mark each man's file with the manner and date of his passing, so that when the State finally turns its beneficent regard once again upon our prison, agents of the Ministry of Justice will find the records in order.

Today I finally opened my own file. I have avoided the temptation for years, in the interests of setting an example for the prisoners, but it was the last one left to me.

Inside there was a record of my sentencing, some notes upon my early years in the prison, a complaint from one of the lawyers in the first ward about my being a danger to myself and others. No different from any other file.

Except for the letter which lay within.

The outside was dated May, Year of 89, written in the Warden's hand with a charcoal pencil. Shortly after my sentencing. The address was to the Warden, written in a fine copperplate script that I recognized as that of my attorney from those long ago days in the Capital.

I turned it over. The envelope had been opened, then resealed with wax and an impression of the Warden's seal. He had read it, then set it aside for my files.

The envelope crinkled as I held it tight in my hand. What did it say? Was this the secret of my endless incarceration?

Who was I to doubt the wisdom of the State, acting through my attorney, the courts, the Warden? If this had been meant for me to read, he would not have sealed it again.

Everything I had wondered, my fears, my hopes, all of it could be answered inside this envelope. It trembled in my hand like the wing of a cliff swallow.

I am a servant of the State, I told

myself, both in my person and in my office. Who I once was, what I once feared, have vanished in the crucible of my loyalty. I laid a tiny fire in the stove and burned the letter unopened, though I confess I later tried to read some wisdom in the unknowable ashes.

June 6th, Year of 15.

We are ever fewer, thirteen now. I fear the last of us shall have to lay ourselves in our own graves and trust the curious Hostiles to shovel in the remaining dirt from beneath the grassy mounds that stand beside each shallow pit.

There are no more doors in the prison. We only stay because it is our home. I have difficulty imagining what duty old men such as we still have, but until we are discharged we will do that duty to the State even if only by shivering in the common room of the Warden's old apartment where we all now dwell.

Except for me. I want to see the three golden statues once more, follow the blue-veined walls, and climb that ultimately airless road so that when my soul finally flees my body it can readily find its way among the dagger-sharp stars of our mountain sky.

I will not last another winter. Already I hear Borogov's footsteps in the hall, as if he has come back to fetch me onward. Petit Cochin still lives, and of late has begun to mutter at length, words none of us have ever heard from him in all his years in the prison.

We are undone, all of us.

Though it makes of me a rebel to the State, I would be the white deer in the woods before I die. I whispered my plan to Petit Cochin, who muttered and nodded, then told him he had charge of the prison in my absence. I will take no weapons nor gear, save only my boots and a decent wool blanket not too far eaten by moths.

It may be that in truth at the far end of the Vale of V____ there are only more slopes leading down to Slavic villages and surly guards lining the border of a neighboring country. It may be that the Hostiles will slay me as I walk and leave me to feed the ravens and eagles that haunt these heights. It may be that the ghosts of the people who lived here long before the prison will haunt me to a stumbling death in shallow water.

But I will leave my sentence and the State behind. Wherever I die, the golden statues will stand gleaming before me, and my thin breath will gasp free in the unforgiving light of the sharp stars.

For my crimes, whatever they may have been, I beg forgiveness. For my soul, I beg no pity at all. Envy me my freedom, you who read this, as I envy myself.

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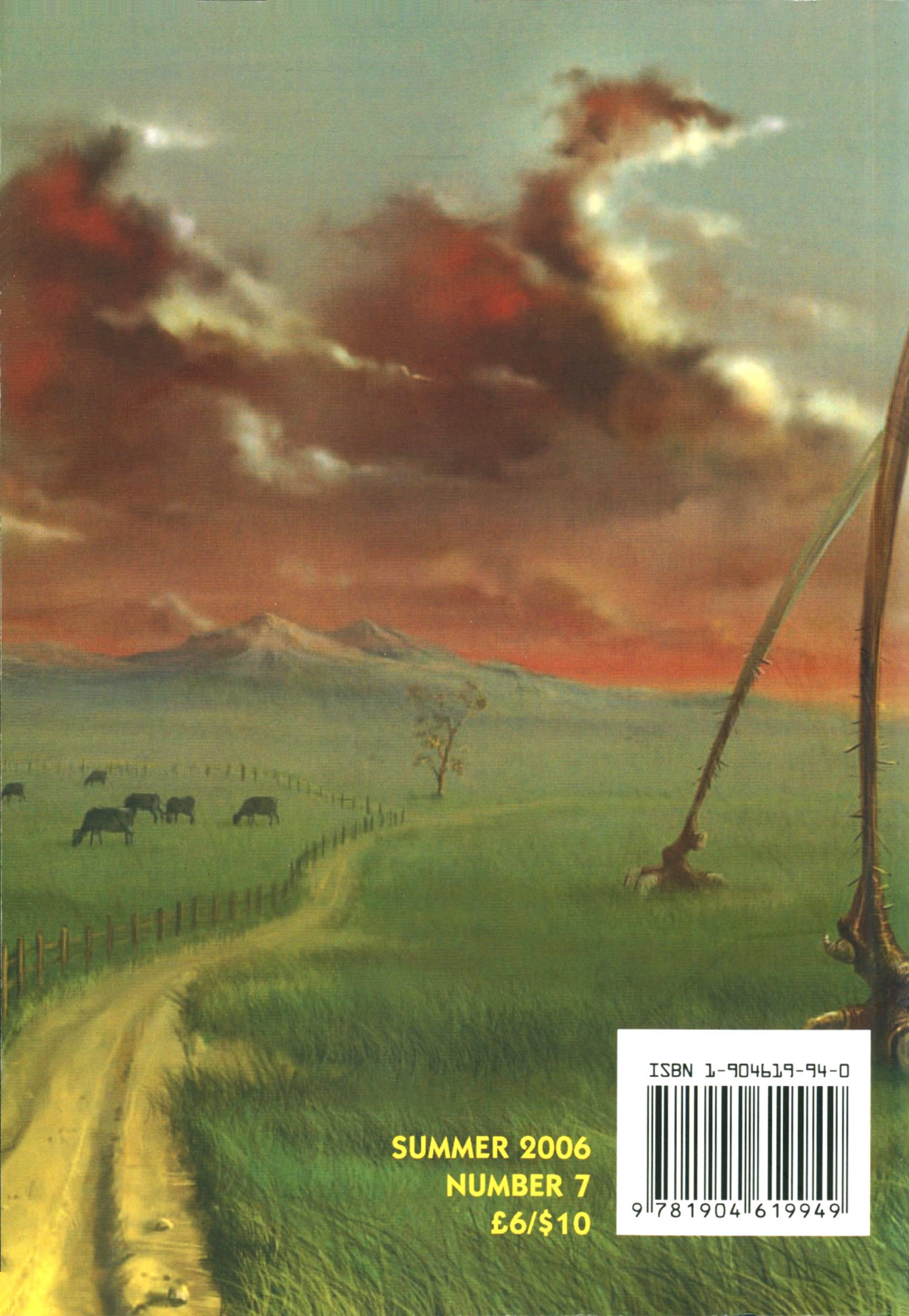

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