

STUPID STORIES

The title 'STUPID STORIES' is rendered in large, bold, black, 3D-style block letters. The letters are decorated with various elements: a black beetle with red eyes sits on top of the 'D' in 'STUPID'; a small white printer is inside the 'U'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'I'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'S' in 'STORIES'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'O'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'R'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'I'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'E'; a small black and white bird is perched on the 'S'. Green vines with leaves are wrapped around the 'S', 'T', 'U', 'P', 'I', 'D', 'S', 'T', 'O', 'R', 'I', 'E', 'S'. A wooden ladder is leaning against the 'S' in 'STORIES'. A small black and white bird is perched on the 'I' in 'STORIES'.

Some more stupid than others



Paul Farnsworth

Stupid Stories

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Cooker Island

A nerve-shredding howl was the last thing that Beth wanted to hear. On an island that no one visits, a place that was supposed to be inhabited by only a few harmless herbivorous rodents, it was supremely disconcerting to be roused in the small hours by a blood-bubbling wail that seemed more than equal to the task of scaring the doings out of a fresh-out-of-university field researcher looking to secure a reputation in an exciting new field of archeology. Which is what she was, if you're interested.

She sat up and swung her legs off the edge of the bunk as it sounded again, and was acutely sensitive to the slenderness of the aluminium walls that separated her from the darkness outside. This fragile trailer couldn't hope to stand up to the kinds of things that made a noise like that, and for the first time in the three days since she had been here, she was grateful that she shared her accommodation with Laura.

Not that Laura was in any state to provide moral support. Like all students, she rarely ever allowed anything to divert her from the serious business of sleeping. Her only gesture of solidarity in this moment of crisis was to roll over and mutter something indistinct on the subject of cheese.

Beth pressed her cheek against the foggy plastic window and peeked out across the

moonlight-dappled clearing, to where the silhouettes of the nearest trees stood green-black against a purple-black sky. Nobody had mentioned anything about mysterious nocturnal noises when she had volunteered to join Professor Eastlight's dig. She hadn't been prepared for this sort of nonsense. More importantly, she hadn't been insured for it.

There were no signs of activity from the boys' trailer. Perhaps they hadn't heard it? Perhaps *she* hadn't heard it? She toyed with the possibility of the noise being imaginary, but it crashed through her flimsy fantasy once again - louder, closer and unmistakably real. Ignoring it was unlikely to make it go away. She dressed quickly and slipped outside.

The air was cold enough to muffle sensation. A light breeze playfully ruffled the tops of the trees, making them whisper and creak. Light was now spilling from the open door of the other trailer. Richard, Professor Eastlight's son, was already walking towards her. Behind him, bounding along like an excited puppy, was the posh boy.

'You heard it?' Richard asked, his voice softly breaking on the night air.

'Just a bit,' Beth replied in a whisper.

'It sounds awfully angry,' the posh boy said. His name was Gareth, but Beth couldn't get 'the posh boy' out of her head. That's how Laura had

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first introduced him. Beth didn't know whether he was genuinely as privileged as the epithet implied, but she had never been able to shake the impression that archaeology was, to him, more of an idle pursuit than a career.

'I thought I saw... Maybe... Something in the darkness...' Beth faced the dark woodland and strained to see beyond the dancing patterns on her retinas, an ear cocked to the softest brush of noise.

'I really think we ought to wake the Professor,' Gareth advised them. 'I'm sure he'll know what to do.'

'Off you trot then,' mumbled Richard.

Gareth started to go, but stopped dead when they observed an unmistakable shudder in the undergrowth.

'There!' shouted Richard.

'I saw!' Beth responded. Startled, the mysterious nocturnal interloper slipped back into the trees. 'Come on!' she cried out. With enthusiasm bordering on reckless glee, she pushed through a twisted grotto of knotted vines and into the hidden forest beyond. Frantically, she forced her way through branches and brambles, unimpeded by the thorns that tore at her skin. But in a handful of heartbeats she was lost in the blackness.

Beth stopped, and with gut-wrenching dismay she realised that she was alone: neither

Richard nor Gareth had followed. What's more, she had no idea which direction she had come from. Even in daylight, gloom gathered around the bases of these tall trunks. Now, hidden even from the moonlight, there was nothing to guide her save half-imaginary shapes that sprang from murky shadows.

She held her breath and listened to the pop and crackle of the damp, fractured undergrowth as it gently sprang back in the wake of her passage. Then the unexpected crunch of trampled branches made her wheel around. Something thundered towards her from within the nightmarish tangle of shadows - solid, square, gleaming with a sickly pale sheen. A hard, harsh edge struck her shoulder, spinning her about. Beth's howl of pain mingled with the angry metallic bellow of her attacker. Stunned and bruised, she managed to remain on her feet, but it charged again. The impact slammed her to the ground, forcing the air from her lungs.

Instinct told her to keep moving. She rolled over, sprang to her feet and bolted, but her assailant stayed close behind her. She felt its heavy, pounding gait shudder through the soft forest floor; heard the snapping and slapping of branches on its hard shell. It seemed unimpeded by the thick vegetation, or the crippling darkness, but Beth knew these would be her ultimate downfall. Every hidden pothole and

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unseen tree root threatened her undoing, and it was with a sickening sense of inevitability that she suddenly found herself falling. The next thing she knew, she was lying face down on a mat of soggy leaves, the taste of soil in her mouth. Her shoulder burned with pain, her bruised ribs throbbed and the blood pounded in her head.

She heard the roar again: a cold, clanking, hollow exhortation of triumph. Beth rolled onto her back, stuck in a moment of paralysing confusion, and saw her attacker up close for the first time. Sturdy, rectangular and about six feet tall, it shambled towards her. Its skin had a glossy white lustre and was featureless save for a discreet insignia and a feebly glowing green light. As it moved in for the kill, it started to open its door.

It was a fridge.

Beth wished she had more time to take this in. No, she wasn't imagining it. The human animal is capable of many extraordinary things when it finds itself in dire straits, but Beth simply lay there, because at no time had experience or evolution ever thought to instruct her on what to do when being attacked by a household appliance.

A bright stripe of light from within fanned out into a radiant beam as the door swung open. Beth winced in its painful glare as she shrank

from a fusty breath of mouldy cheese and sour milk, and consoled herself with the final thought that although her demise would not be dignified, it would at least be novel.

She pressed herself back into the soft dirt. Her fingers clawed uselessly at the earth, and then unexpectedly closed around a sturdy branch. Fine - so she wasn't going without a fight! She heaved upwards and thrust the branch through the open door, striking deep into its icebox. The creature howled in agony and tottered backwards, the branch still protruding from the shattered plastic flap of its freezer compartment.

Beth staggered to her feet and ran. The furious wailing of the appliance reached a crescendo as she burst from the undergrowth onto a winding trail. She was some distance from the camp and the spread-eagled boughs of an ancient yew tree slouched across the path offered the only obvious sanctuary. She scrambled up just in time to feel the cold draught of her pursuer behind her, and fought to regain her breath as she settled into place on a suitable branch.

Could fridges climb? Beth hoped they couldn't. The angry appliance jumped up and down, and snapped at her feet hanging just out of reach, and Beth observed with some satisfaction that this one, at least, could not. It

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was nevertheless remarkably persistent, for a fridge, and it was likely that she would be stuck up this tree for a while.

There was a sharp crack and the branch on which she was sitting dipped alarmingly. Distressingly, she realised that she might be returning to terra firma sooner than she had planned. Beth reached for an adjacent branch to take some of her weight, but it slipped through her fingers. Her perch sagged again, bringing her within reach of the fridge. She felt it brush the underside of her foot, and prepared herself for that first crunch of metal on bone, when two gunshots pealed out in rapid succession. The fridge howled in pain, reeled around then dragged itself away, whimpering as it retreated into the forest.

Beth dropped to the ground as Richard approached along the trail, shotgun beneath his arm. 'It was a -'

'I saw,' Richard muttered. 'Come and look at this.'

He led her back to a chalky embankment that rose up beside the path. Strokes of morning light were beginning to paint themselves across the cobalt sky as she followed him up the crumbling slope. From the top, she looked down along a spiny tree-lined ridge, which bottomed out into a grassy river valley. In the east, where a crashing torrent burst from the confines of a

craggy gully, the first few rays of dawn were reaching up to pull clouds from the sky like candyfloss. Something was coming. She heard them; saw them. A thousand or more, leaping, whirling, snorting, stumbling, rolling and rearing as they stampeded along the flood plain.

'Gas cookers,' Richard said, and thereafter the two or them stood in mute astonishment as they witnessed the glorious spectacle pass by below them.

'I don't get it,' Laura said, upending a milk carton over her cereal. She joined the others at the breakfast table. 'What are the chances that something could evolve to look like a fridge?'

'It didn't *look like* a fridge,' Richard corrected her. 'It *was* a fridge.'

'An ordinary fridge?' Laura asked, wrinkling up her nose.

'Ordinary?' Beth replied, perhaps sounding a little pricklier than she intended. 'The bloody thing chased me up a tree, and if Richard hadn't shot it through the pump it would probably have done for me. That's fairly atypical behaviour, even for the most petulant of white goods.'

'Maybe it didn't evolve *into* a fridge, but *from* a fridge?' Gareth suggested.

'Rubbish,' said Laura. There had always been something snide about her, Beth thought. Perhaps she was doing the girl a disservice, but

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she got the impression that Laura thought 'other people' were far more trouble than they were worth.

'Oh, I think Gareth may have a point,' Professor Eastlight said. Until now he had listened to Beth's story with quiet fascination. 'Even the most trivial gadgets are possessed of rudimentary intelligence. For instance, a tumble dryer can automatically detect the types of fabrics that are placed inside, and program itself accordingly. It seems perfectly feasible to me that such a device could develop a basic instinct for survival.'

Gareth was encouraged to elaborate. 'Survival comes as standard,' he continued, sounding at least ten percent smarmier. 'They have built-in fault-diagnosis and self-repair systems.'

'Quite the expert, posh boy,' Laura observed.

'Well I'm not, but my father is,' Gareth replied, with a touch more humility. 'He's CEO of one of the leading -'

'Ah right,' Laura interrupted. 'King of the tumble dryers, is he? Very swish.'

'Okay, let's not waste any more time,' Richard said. He leaned over the table and dropped a series of aerial photographs in front of them. 'These are the surveys we carried out prior to the expedition.' He pointed out a feature in one of the pictures: a pattern of solid lines and surfaces, half-hidden by vegetation. 'Some kind

of structure here: buildings, possibly, or a crash site. Either way, it's the only thing on the island that might provide an explanation. We need to be ready in about an hour.'

'Oh no,' Professor Eastlight interjected. 'You want to explore? No, no - I don't think that's a good idea at all. This is not why we're here.'

Richard looked up at him in disbelief. 'This is one of the most extraordinary discoveries of all time,' he said, shaking his head. 'You don't seriously propose to just ignore it?'

'Oh, now look, Richard,' Professor Eastlight began, and the weariness in his voice suggested he'd had many similar conversations before. 'I'm not at all happy about blundering into a situation that I'm ill equipped to deal with. The proper procedure would be to call in someone with the expertise to handle this.'

'Who?' Richard fumed. 'This is something outside anyone's experience.' He slapped the table in frustration. 'I don't believe this! You're perfectly happy to carry on scrabbling around in the dust for bits of old pot, and let the real opportunities slip through your fingers. Is that what grandfather would have done?'

Richard stormed out before his father had chance to answer. The uncomfortable silence seemed to last forever, before Beth was finally brave enough to break it. 'Professor Eastlight,'

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she said cautiously, 'I appreciate your concerns, but...'

Beth found Richard outside, perched on an equipment box with his back to her.

'When I was eight,' he said, unprompted, as she sat beside him, 'I went on my first dig. I found a sword. Imagine! That's when I knew I wanted to be an archaeologist like my grandfather. You know of my grandfather?'

Beth nodded. Everyone had heard of Sir Leonard Eastlight. In academic circles he had been known as an opportunist, self-publicist and possible fraud. But to the popular media he had been an adventurer, wreathed in mystery and romance, whose exploits had been lapped up eagerly by an adoring public. Even his mysterious disappearance ten years ago had been a source of limitless fascination, and a wellspring for countless conspiracy theories. Ordinary people died in bed, or quietly faded away in some retirement home, but not Sir Leonard, who had disappeared without trace whilst on an expedition.

'He was a great man, but him...' Richard jerked his head back at his father's trailer.

'That's not fair,' Beth responded. 'We're not treasure seekers.'

Richard snorted. 'There are different kinds of treasure,' he said. 'But while my father remains

unwilling to look beyond his little spotlight of experience, he'll never find it.'

'Well, I guess he's feeling adventurous today,' Beth said as she stood up, 'because he's had a change of heart. Pull your boots on sunshine, we leave in an hour.'

By ten o'clock the sun had swept the frothy morning mists aside with a dramatic flourish. The dewy dampness of night had been boiled up into a sticky, humid casserole of a day, and Beth's rucksack pressed damply against her back.

Shortly after setting out, a flock of sandwich toasters had swooped overhead: a shifting, shimmying cloud that twisted and turned before settling in the distant treetops. Further on they found an elderly television set sunning itself on a rock, broadcasting old episodes of *Sergeant Bilko* to a gaggle of excited blenders. After that they had picked their way through a grazing herd of what Gareth identified as 'thingies for shaving the bobbles off jumpers'. Every step of the way offered up some new assault on their preconceived notions of sentient life.

'So whatever happened to Occam's Razor?' Laura asked as they walked. 'I think you're getting carried away with this idea that these things are somehow reproducing. People make

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tumble driers, they make dishwashers - why couldn't someone have made all this?'

'Some evil genius?' Beth suggested, ominously.

'But you're multiplying your entities, my dear,' the Professor answered as he mopped his brow. 'You're assuming that some other agency is at work, when we already know of a mechanism by which this could happen.'

They stopped in the shade of a tree festooned with steam irons, hanging down from its upper branches. Professor Eastlight reached out to touch one but it shot him a cloud of steam and rapidly curled upwards out of sight.

'Modern self-repair systems are capable of duplicating individual components,' Gareth explained. 'Why not complete units? Maybe even baby versions of themselves.'

'Well of course,' Laura scoffed. 'When a mummy fridge and a daddy fridge love each other very much...'

'Hear me out,' Gareth continued. 'If a unit created a very basic version of itself, then that "child's" own self-repair system could take over the job and build itself up into an adult version. It's more economical, and there would be less downtime in which the parent unit is vulnerable. Jolly clever, don't you think?'

'But these creatures are not just multiplying,' Beth pointed out. 'They're evolving.'

'Good point, Beth,' said the Professor. 'Imagine a faulty self-repair system, which introduces faults into the copies. In most instances those faults will cause the new units to fail, but occasionally they may provide a survival advantage.'

'Natural selection?' Beth said.

Richard, who had been trailing behind, finally caught up. 'Why have we stopped?' he asked abruptly. He seemed wary, gripping his shotgun tightly as if in expectation of imminent attack. 'We need to keep moving,' he said and carried on past them, leaving them to fall in dutifully in his wake.

'What's his problem?' Laura asked.

'He thinks we're being followed,' Beth replied.

'Delusional,' Laura opined, confidently. 'Classic case - constantly needs attention.' She spoke with the easy authority of someone who had once read a magazine article about psychology. 'Has he told you his "sword" story?'

Beth nodded. 'Is it not true?'

'What do you think?' Laura replied. She nodded at Richard. 'How does an eight-year-old boy just wander onto a dig and start excavating priceless artefacts with a plastic spade?'

Ahead of them, an upright vacuum cleaner suddenly broke from the bushes, leading six baby cleaners behind it. It crossed the trail and disappeared into the undergrowth opposite.

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Gareth turned back and grinned at Laura infuriatingly. 'Hey, if it walks like a baby vacuum cleaner, and it cleans like a baby vacuum cleaner, then I call it a baby vacuum cleaner.'

On this occasion, Laura resisted the urge to smash his face off.

They ate lunch beside a sparkling stream that gurgled and slopped into a crystal pool. Beth took great delight in dangling her fingers in the cool water as a glittering shoal of electric toothbrushes darted between them. They made better progress in the afternoon, in spite of the heat, and when Beth paused to consult the map she was able to tell them that their destination lay in the adjacent valley.

She pointed portentously to the steep sandstone ridge on their right. 'We have to get over that.'

Professor Eastlight studied the slope and sighed. 'Might there not be an easier way?' he asked.

Beth consulted the map again and struggled to formulate a tactful reply, but her train of thought was shattered by a strange noise, a kind of *Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!* from above. Looking up she saw the treetops bend and sway as something moved swiftly through the tangled canopy.

Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! A flurry of leaves cascaded to the ground.

'Good grief!' the Professor breathed. Beth followed his pointing finger, squinting against the diamond shards of sunlight that pierced the mottled leaf cover, and saw a washing machine perched delicately on a bobbing branch.

Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! It launched itself confidently into the air, looped around a thick bough and sailed gracefully overhead. It was unstoppable, majestic - until a single gunshot snatched it cruelly from the sky. Beth watched with dismay as the extraordinary creature plunged through a fragile cradle of brittle branches and thumped into the ground with a sickening thud. Its crumpled, broken casing creaked and sagged at one corner, its door swung open, it spat out a sock and expired.

Beth snatched Richard's still-smoking shotgun from his startled fingers, and hurled it into the undergrowth. 'It was harmless!' she stormed. 'Look at the rust. Look at the way the rubber seal on the door has perished. It wasn't capable of hurting a fly!'

Richard said nothing, but held her scornful glare with a look of equal contempt. Then, turning to retrieve the gun, he stopped dead as the familiar outline of a refrigerator lurched out in front of him. Beth's blood ran cold; the ragged bullet hole in the door, the trickle of fluid that

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spat and fizzed from its flank - this was the very same creature that had attacked her.

'Run!' Richard shouted. 'I'll hold it off!'

Beth looked round and saw that the others were paralysed with indecision. 'Well, you heard him, run!'

She turned back to Richard. He was slowly edging towards the stock of his shotgun, which protruded from a clump of ferns. The rogue fridge, wheezing pitifully, mirrored his every move. Richard made a bolt for the gun, but the fridge suddenly rushed him.

Beth grabbed Richard's arm and snatched him away. 'Leave it!' she told him. The Professor, Gareth and Laura had already disappeared from sight around a teetering outcrop of rock. Beth and Richard hurried after them while the fridge, dragging its injured carcass pitifully but relentlessly onwards, tottered doggedly in their wake. But when they rounded the rock the others were nowhere in sight.

'Where'd they go?' Beth stopped. To the right was a solid sandstone wall; ahead and to the left the forest thinned out and gave no opportunity of cover.

Richard was in no mood for speculation, and motioned for them to keep moving. He pressed on and Beth was about to follow when a hand reached out and touched her forearm. She uttered a brief, startled cry that instantly robbed

her of every last shred of dignity, then relaxed when she saw Laura beckoning her from a fissure in the rock.

She called Richard back and the two of them squeezed into the crevice, pressing themselves against the cold stone. The rhythmic *thump, drag, thump, drag* of the approaching fridge grew louder. It drew level with the opening and paused, rocking slightly as if sampling the air. Then it moved on, the noise of its painful motion gradually receding into the distance.

Beth waited until it was well out of earshot before thanking Laura. Richard was more concerned about his father.

'The Professor and Gareth have gone on ahead,' Laura explained. 'This fissure emerges on the other side of the ridge - we've found a ship!'

The broken black metal hull of a modest sized cargo ship dominated the valley, overgrown and entangled by creepers and vines, like a mechanical Gulliver in Lilliput. Unusually for a boat, it seemed perfectly at home here amongst the trees, despite being several miles from the coast and exhibiting no signs of how it got there.

'Freak storm,' Laura said, fairly confidently.

'Yeah, right,' said Beth.

Laura led them up a rusted ladder onto the deck, then down a stairwell into a massive but

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gloomy cargo bay that put Beth in mind of a cathedral to the god of cobwebs.

Gareth was waiting for them. 'The professor has made an awfully exciting discovery,' he said brightly. He was holding a flashlight while Professor Eastlight shuffled through a tattered and grubby folder stuffed with equally tattered and grubby pages.

'Ship's manifest,' the Professor said, waving the folder and scattering half its contents across the deck. 'This ship is the *Comet* and it was carrying a consignment of faulty domestic appliances.'

'Faulty domestic appliances,' Gareth repeated, nodding along.

The Professor reached into his pocket and gave him a biscuit. 'I think it was deliberately scuttled, just to get shot of its cargo.'

Beth looked dubious. 'You're saying... what... they were fly-tipping?'

'Makes sense,' said Laura. 'Get rid of your unwanted junk by sinking the ship somewhere remote.'

Beth looked even more dubious. 'In the middle of a jungle?'

'Makes sense,' Laura insisted. 'Can you think of a more remote place to sink a ship?'

'Bingo!' a new and unexpected voice exploded from the dark recesses of the hold. 'Give that girl a coconut!' The words were shadowed by a

slight crackle and fizz, falling like the cascading sparks of a firework before plunging them once more into black silence.

Beth looked to her companions, but they were as puzzled as she was. Falteringly, she took a few steps deeper into the hold. She could see a faint flickering glimmer at the back.

'Ditch the ship and claim on the insurance,' bubbled the voice again. 'A smart lawyer might even get you compensation as well. "Have you had an accident at work that wasn't your fault? Would you like to stitch up your employer for a fat sack of cash?" Job's a good 'un.'

Beth watched the glimmer become a glow, blinking intermittently. One light became many, like a cloud of distant fireflies, flickering and popping in the night. Then, with a rush, a series of greasy fluorescent lights thrummed into startled life, scattering a sickly purple light over a confusion of cables and panels and casings and pipes.

At first glance it looked like junk: the buckled and bent carcasses of several dozen domestic appliances, heaped together in homage to the god of built-in obsolescence, but with nod to the demigod of dirt and also, quite possibly, the immortal overlord of dust and grime. But here was purpose; here was life. Pumps whirred and rattled in rusted housings, feeding strange liquids through washing machine hoses,

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bubbling up through the clear plastic cylinders taken from liquidisers and food processors. Fans whirled and whistled, making dirty strings of cobwebs billow and sway, and a line of vacuum cleaner bags softly inflated and deflated in a hypnotic rhythm. And there, at the centre of this macabre Heath Robinson contrivance, amongst the riveted sheets and ribbons of cables, was a human head.

'Father!'

Professor Eastlight stepped forward as his own startled cry echoed back to him.

The face that stared out of the hideous mechanical vault was pale and grey, lank silver hair plastered across its scalp with grease and oil. But Beth recognised it. It had stared out at her from a hundred magazines, smugly announced its latest discoveries on TV chat shows, beamed annoyingly from the dust jackets of countless coffee table books. This was Sir Leonard Eastlight.

'You took your time getting here, Lad!' what remained of Sir Leonard barked, as he set his gaze upon the Professor. His head was entirely immobile, his jaw hung limply and his speech was slightly slurred. But those eyes - those eyes were as fierce and as piercing as they had ever been.

'Still, you're here now,' he spat from thin, cracked lips. 'No time to waste. We have much to do.'

'How?' Professor Eastlight muttered. 'How can you be here? The last we knew, you were lost at sea whilst trying to prove that it was possible to sail from Indonesia to New Zealand on an ironing board.'

'And it would have been possible too!' Sir Leonard insisted. 'Had my cowardly crew not mutinied and cast me adrift in a wash basket. But I'm a survivor. Always have been. I was half dead when I fetched up on this island. Shortly after landing, I found myself fleeing from a ravenous horde of toasters; then I was attacked after inadvertently disturbing the nest of an electric carving knife. Eventually I found my way here.'

'And this?' Professor Eastlight gestured at the motley collection of scrap that somehow seemed to be keeping his father alive.

'I lay here, broken, in the darkness,' Sir Leonard explained. 'The lifeblood ebbing from my shattered form. It seemed I was finished, but how could fate possibly deliver me - *me*, of all people - to such an ignoble end? I had to survive and so through the appliance of science I cheated death. Using the fauna of this place for my pattern book, I replaced my blood with coolant, stored my vital organs in a chest

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freezer, then cut away the injured flesh and swapped it for aluminium and plastic and steel.'

'Magnificent!' Richard declared joyously.

Sir Leonard's cold gaze fell upon his grandson. 'Eh?' he grunted. Never had Beth heard so meagre a statement seasoned with such disapproval. 'Who's this?'

'You remember Richard,' Professor Eastlight reminded him.

Sir Leonard sniffed. 'Is this the one that joined the convent?'

'No,' answered the Professor. 'That was his sister.'

'Richard!' Sir Leonard's overcast frown suddenly cleared. 'I remember him - whiney little creature. Always thought you needed to kick some life into him.' He suddenly giggled. It was an inhuman, mechanical sound, and it made Beth shudder. 'Do you remember that holiday?' he blurted merrily. 'You buried that sword! Go on, you remember - cheap plastic sword that you buried in the sand for him to find? For the rest of the summer he went round telling everybody that he'd discovered this "priceless artefact". We laughed about that for years!'

Professor Eastlight looked anxiously at his son, but Richard would not meet his eye. Beth felt it was time to take charge of the conversation. 'Sir Leonard -' she began, but got no further.

'Is this another one of your brood?' Sir Leonard cut in, addressing the Professor.

'No, no, Beth is -'

'Jolly good,' Sir Leonard responded, and treated Beth to a greasy leer. 'In that case I may I decide to have a pop at you, my dear.'

Beth laughed. 'Really? I'm flattered, but you're not my type,' she returned. 'You haven't got the watts.'

'Oh don't imagine that I'm any less of a man just because of my present reduced circumstances,' Sir Leonard purred. 'There's nothing wrong with me that a new fan belt wouldn't fix. What about it? I've got some very interesting attachments. No? Okay.' Without missing a beat he turned his attention to Laura. 'What about you love? How are you fixed?'

'All right, that's enough!' Beth snapped.

Her outburst brought him up sharp. He said nothing, but fixed her for a moment with a hateful stare. When he finally spoke, his voice was level and contained, and he addressed himself to the Professor.

'We must make arrangements,' he said.

'Arrangements?' Professor Eastlight asked.

'For my return to the public eye,' Sir Leonard explained. 'This will eclipse everything I've done before. Cooker Island! Come see the cooks as they frolic and play in their natural habitat. Wonder at the majesty of the leaping

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dishwashers. Gasp in astonishment at the mighty giant vegomatic and its wondrous array of interesting functions.'

'We didn't see a giant vegomatic,' said Gareth.

Sir Leonard ignored him. 'And at its heart, the main attraction - the Eastlight Experience. My life and work celebrated in a fascinating collection of interactive displays, animatronic installations and painstakingly reconstructed dioramas. We must begin at once!'

'No,' Professor Eastlight said simply and struck what was quite a dangerously dramatic stance for a man of his age.

Sir Leonard glared at his son in silence, but the Professor held his gaze, unblinkingly. It was the Professor who spoke next.

'This environment is unique throughout the entire planet,' he said softly. 'I will not allow it to be exploited for the sake of some tawdry theme park.'

'You never did have any vision,' Sir Leonard retorted with disgust.

'Father, the world has moved on,' the Professor said. 'You can't just turn up after ten years in the wilderness and churn out the same old nonsense as before.'

'This is my comeback,' Sir Leonard said, and now the booming voice was shot through with something pitiful and small. 'I have skulked here in the darkness for a decade, planning my return

to the light. You would deny me my one final chance at glory? You, who is happy enough to bask in the light of my legacy?'

'I have suffered because of your legacy,' Professor Eastlight said. He attempted to adopt a noble pose now, and it nearly put his back out. 'I've lived in your shadow, where nothing grows, blighted by a name associated with chicanery and showmanship. And yet, I have the things that you never had: a family, a proper career and the respect of my peers.'

'Transient, ephemeral pleasures,' Sir Leonard opined. 'They wither and fade. Only fame is immortal.' He seemed lost for a moment, spirited away by proud memories of more celebrated times. Then he was suddenly back in the present. 'Everything dies' he said. 'Everything ends.'

He was looking past them now. The deck shuddered. Instinctively, Beth turned around and saw the silhouette of the fridge dragging itself down the stairs into the hold, shaking and spluttering but refusing to die. It seemed to recognise Richard; it drew steadily towards him, and there was nowhere he could run.

Gareth found something heavy close to hand, he picked it up and made to attack. He had a notion it was a spanner - he'd once seen workmen using one when the Bentley had broken down - and although he had no idea how

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it worked, he was sure he could get a pretty good swing with it.

'Put it down!' the Professor ordered. 'No sudden movements. We don't want to alarm it.'

'This is the end,' Sir Leonard pronounced, taunting them. 'Can you not feel the breath of destiny blowing cold about your neck? Can you not feel our story drawing to its completion?'

With a penetrating roar, the fridge lunged at Richard.

'The end!' Sir Leonard screamed.

Professor Eastlight threw himself at his son, hurling him aside. The fridge connected with him instead, knocking him to the ground, then careered onwards into the collection of equipment that enshrined Sir Leonard. There was a dull crump of an explosion, then a cloud of black smoke rolled out and engulfed everything.

'I hate it when fridges do that,' Laura observed.

Hand to her mouth, Beth fought her way through the smog. As it cleared, she saw the stricken fridge lying on its back, its door wide open, kicking and bucking as it tried to get up. Seizing the opportunity, she snatched up a crowbar and thrust it downwards, deep into the beast's innards. There was a horrible, sickening crack. The fridge spasmed, the tiny glowing light on the front panel slowly died away and it was still.

'It's dead,' she breathed.

'So is this chap,' said Gareth. He was standing beside the smouldering remains of Sir Leonard's life support. Fluid bubbled weakly from split tubes, and Sir Leonard's head hung limply and immobile at the centre of his makeshift contraption.

'Beth.'

Beth twisted round. Richard was kneeling over his father's broken form. She hurried to join them.

'It's all right,' she said automatically. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

But as she spoke it became obvious to everyone that Professor Eastlight only had a few moments left to him. He reached out and his hand found Richard's. 'The sword,' he said.

'It doesn't matter,' said Richard, his face twisted and distraught. 'I know why you did it: you were just trying to bring a bit of wonder and magic into a young boy's life.'

'No, you don't understand,' the Professor said, struggling to form the words. 'We just thought it was hilarious. I mean, it was plastic. How could you ever believe it was real? You... you... you dick!'

His grip on Richard's hand relaxed, his head fell back and he was gone.

* * *

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Beth found Richard perched on a log some distance from the ship, watching the late afternoon sunshine turning to purple and gold. 'Are you all right?'

'Not really,' Richard replied. He looked at her and smiled. 'But I'll be fine. Thanks Beth. You know, thanks for everything.'

She returned his smile.

'It's getting late,' Richard said. 'We ought to be getting back.'

Beth agreed, then drew a breath before broaching the next subject. 'We've been talking - Gareth, Laura and me - about what to tell people about this place.'

'I think it's best kept a secret,' Richard said, before she could continue. 'That's what my father wanted. Besides, who's going to believe a tall story like this?'

'I suppose it's all in the details,' Beth replied, and she slipped away to fetch the others.

In a nearby treetop a radio alarm clock started singing. Elsewhere, a potential mate answered with a traffic report. Beth wished them well, and was reasonably optimistic that here, on an island where no one ever goes, they might just manage to live happily ever after.

Dirty Doings at Featherstone Manor

My name is Daniel Rose and, as luck would have it, I was with Lady Featherstone at the time of her husband's unfortunate death. We were taking tea in the sitting room when we heard a gunshot from the direction of the greenhouse. I rushed outside. Lady Featherstone tried to follow me but her corset became wedged in the French windows, and consequentially I was the first to arrive at the scene.

Even now, the thought of what greeted me there fills me with horror. Shattered glass lay around the greenhouse, wherein Lord Featherstone lay dead amongst his tomatoes, a smoking revolver at his side.

"What is it?" Lady Featherstone called as she frantically struggled to free herself from the window. "What has happened?"

"It's your husband," I called back, my voice shaking. "I'm - I'm sorry, but I'm afraid he's not a pretty sight."

"I know that," Lady Featherstone replied, "Good grief, I should do - I've been married to him long enough."

"No, no," I interrupted her, finding it difficult to express myself. "You don't understand - he's dead."

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“Dead, eh?” Lady Featherstone said, as she finally struggled through the windows and hobbled across the lawn towards me. “I thought he’d died years ago. He never used to say much anyway - just used to sit there while we poured brandy into him.” She started poking the corpse with her walking stick, and nodded. “But yes, he certainly seems deader than usual now.”

“I don’t think we should disturb anything,” I said, and taking Lady Featherstone’s arm I led her back into the house, where we played strip poker as we waited for the police. By the time Inspector Plankton arrived, I was losing badly.

“Good evening, Inspector,” I greeted him as I pulled on my anorak and trousers. “Thank goodness you’re here! I was almost down to my socks.”

“Indeed sir,” said the Inspector. “May I introduce you to Monsieur Anton La Cranque, the internationally renowned Belgian detective?”

“Certainly, you may Inspector,” warbled her Ladyship. “Is he house trained?”

Monsieur La Cranque inclined his head slightly. “Madame, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I hope I will be of some assistance in bringing the perpetrator of this terrible crime to justice.”

“What’s that?” Lady F replied. “A crime, you say?”

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“Why, the callous murder of your husband, Madame,” the Belgian reminded her.

“Oh yes, that,” Lady Featherstone mumbled. She balanced her spectacles on the bridge of her nose and examined him. “So, you are a private dick, Monsieur La Cranque?”

“No Madame,” said La Cranque graciously. “Just a clever dick.”

We sat down as the maid bought some tea and buns, and I related the events of that afternoon in as much detail as I could remember. As I spoke, Inspector Plankton scribbled away in his notebook and when I had finished my account he looked up sternly.

“So, let me just clarify this,” he said. “Lord and Lady Featherstone were in the sitting room when they heard a shot. They rushed outside to find your good self dead in the greenhouse?”

“No, no,” I said. “You’ve got it the wrong way round.”

“Have I?” said the Inspector, taken aback. “So Lord and Lady Featherstone were in the greenhouse when they heard your good self. They rushed inside to find a shot, dead in the sitting room?” He paused. “It doesn’t make an awful lot of sense to me sir. I think you’d better run it by me one more time.”

“It’s perfectly simple, Inspector,” I said. “Featherstone was shot in the greenhouse.”

“Nasty.”

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“Shot dead!”

Monsieur La Crank had been picking the currants out of an Eccles cake, and he chose this moment to speak. “Shot dead?” he said and he turned to Lady Featherstone. “Were you my dear? How very distressing for you. Did it hurt?”

“Lady Featherstone isn’t dead,” I interrupted. “*Lord* Featherstone was the one who was shot.”

“Of course, of course,” said La Cranque with an embarrassed laugh. “Why, it is quite obvious that this woman is not dead. Not yet, anyway. Very soon I should imagine, but not today. Very well, we’d better speak to Lord Featherstone.”

“Lord Featherstone is dead,” I replied wearily. “I thought we’d established that.”

“I know that!” said La Cranque, with a touch of anger. “Lord Featherstone is dead, otherwise there would be no crime here. But does that mean that we cannot ask him questions, Monsieur?”

“You can ask him as many questions as you like,” I said. “He’s not going to give you any answers.”

Monsieur La Cranque tapped the side of his nose and smiled. “There are many ways to make a man talk.”

“Well, I can’t sit here all day,” said Inspector Plankton as he stood up. “I have to go and fetch the wife from the acupuncturists.”

Dirty Doings at Featherstone Manor

“Inspector,” I said as I followed him to the door, “surely you’re not leaving?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave you in the capable hands of Monsieur La Cranque - he’ll have this whole case sewn up in no time.” The Inspector moved closer to me and spoke in a low voice. “He usually gets tanked up before an investigation, but it wears off after a while.” He patted my shoulder then left quickly.

For a man reputed to be the foremost detective of his time, Monsieur La Cranque didn’t seem to have much of clue about anything. I thought it prudent to stick close by him during the course of his investigation. He announced his intention to interview the staff and so we began in the scullery, where La Cranque put a series of searching questions to the maid.

“What is your favourite colour?” La Cranque screamed in his most vicious and frightful voice.

The servant girl quaked in her chair. “Blue,” she squeaked, in a terrified whisper.

“What is your favourite flower?” La Cranque shouted, in a voice that surpassed both the viciousness and the frightfulness of his previously most vicious and frightful voice.

The servant girl was rapidly becoming a quivering wreck and it was at this point that I felt it necessary to intercede. I called a temporary halt to the proceedings and led La

Cranque over to a corner of the room. "Are these questions really necessary?"

"Of course," La Cranque replied, a little petulantly.

"But surely such matters are immaterial?"

"You may well think so, Monsieur," La Cranque said. "But then you are not a great detective. You do not see the things which I see."

"Maybe not," I said, "but I don't understand why you need to frighten the poor girl silly. You're behaving as if *she* murdered Lord Featherstone."

"Is that so impossible Monsieur?" La Cranque crooned, with an air of Belgian mystery. "Everyone is a suspect and yet nobody is a suspect. All are guilty and yet all are innocent. We can eliminate no one. The butcher, the baker, the beggar, the thief - all come under the ever watchful eye of Monsieur La Cranque." He pointed to his right eye. "This one."

He turned and stalked back towards the maid. She cowered as he approached. "Very well, my dear," said La Cranque. "It is about time you stopped giving me all this crap about favourite colours and started answering some straight questions, no? Where were you when the Featherstone family were murdered?"

"I was in town," the maid replied briskly.

"Whereabouts in town?" snapped Monsieur La Cranque.

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“In the High Street,” said the maid.

“But whereabouts in the high street?” La Cranque demanded.

“In the Co-op,” the maid replied.

“Whereabouts in the Co-op?” La Cranque barked.

“Just next to the tinned peas,” said the maid.

“Ha! A likely story,” the great detective responded. “How many times have I heard that same excuse?”

The maid suddenly stood up. “Look I’ve had enough of this,” she said. “Who the hell are you?”

“I,” said La Cranque, with customary arrogance, “am the most famous detective in all of Belgium.”

“Oh, I see,” the maid replied, nodding. “A private dick?”

“No, just a clever dick,” said La Cranque, again. “Now Mademoiselle, about these tinned peas.”

“Stuff the tinned peas!” said the maid. “I had nothing to do with the murder. You’d be better off talking to the gardener. He hated his Lordship, and they were always arguing. I’ll lay odds that he’s the murderer.”

We withdrew from the scullery, leaving the maid to resume her duties. Now that we had this valuable lead, I assumed that the case would soon be solved. However, to my considerable

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surprise, La Cranque totally dismissed the maid's comments. Instead of finding the gardener we sought out the butler, and he was not pleased to see us.

"I am not at all pleased to see you," said the butler.

"People seldom are, Monsieur butler chappy," said the eminent Belgian. "But I'm afraid I must ask you a few questions."

"I assume you are the private detective?" the butler inquired.

"No, just a clever dick," replied Monsieur La Cranque. "And I must tell you that I have an infallible nose for the truth. If you attempt to lie to me, I will know in an instant. So, what were you doing at the time Lord Featherstone exploded?"

"I was being chased down the M1 by a giant chicken wearing Wellington boots," responded the butler.

"A watertight alibi!" declared La Cranque. "It seems we must consider another suspect."

"If I might make a suggestion, sir," the butler said. "Why don't you speak to Evans, the gardener? I understand that he and Lord Featherstone were bitter enemies."

I thanked the butler for his help, and we left him to get on with his polishing. Surely now Monsieur La Cranque would not fail to follow up

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this avenue of investigation? But the great Belgian sighed and slowly shook his head.

"We are getting nowhere," he said.

"But the gardener!" I exclaimed.

"The gardener?" La Cranque said, raising a single eyebrow. "No, that is rather too convenient. I believe that there is more to this case than meets the eye. What we really need is a witness."

"But there are no witnesses," I protested.

"Oh yes Monsieur, there is one," La Cranque said enigmatically. "The victim himself. Come, let us speak with Lord Featherstone."

In spite of my objections, we went to find the late Lord Featherstone. His body had been laid out in the parlour. His skin was pale and grey, his eyes cold and dead - but none of this deterred the eminent Belgian detective, Anton La Cranque.

"Lord Featherstone?" La Cranque said, leaning over the body.

"Really, Monsieur La Cranque," I said. "There is no point to any of this."

"Please be quiet," La Cranque said and he tried again. "Lord Featherstone? I wonder if we could ask you a few questions? I am sorry for disturbing you at this hour. I realise that this may be a very difficult time for you, what with you being dead and everything. Regretfully,

however, there are a few things that we need to clear up.”

I sighed loudly. “What do you hope to learn from a dead man?” I asked.

“A great deal,” La Cranque snapped back at me, then continued to address the corpse. “Lord Featherstone, could you please tell us exactly where you were at the time of your own murder?”

“Ha!” I cried. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Nothing is obvious in a case of this nature,” La Cranque replied. “Lord Featherstone, would you like me to repeat the question?”

“I don’t think he can hear you.”

La Cranque looked up at me. “Is his Lordship hard of hearing?”

“No,” I said. “I think it’s something to do with him not being alive anymore.”

La Cranque let out a huge sigh and straightened. “Clearly, Lord Featherstone is reluctant to talk about this matter. It is a great pity. Now, I think we ought to visit the scene of the crime.”

“Ah good!” I exclaimed delightedly. This was the first sane suggestion that the detective had made. “The greenhouse!”

“No,” the Belgian replied. “Manchester.”

My hopes were dashed. “Manchester?” I repeated quizzically. “I thought you said that we were going to visit the scene of the crime.”

Dirty Doings at Featherstone Manor

“Ah yes,” La Cranque said. “But what you are forgetting is that, although the body was found in the greenhouse, he could easily have been killed elsewhere. Like Manchester.”

And so we found ourselves on the next train to Manchester. After wandering around the city centre for almost an hour, La Cranque led us into a back street cafe ‘on a hunch’. There he questioned a waitress on the possibility of obtaining a cheese and tomato sandwich and when this matter had reached a satisfactory conclusion we returned home.

“I think,” said the great detective as he stepped off the train, “that we shall - arrrgghhh!”

That’s what happens if you try to get off a train while it’s still doing forty miles an hour.

“I think we shall interview the gardener next,” La Cranque told me when I caught up with him at the hospital. At last! We set out immediately - myself on the crest of a new wave of optimism and La Cranque on crutches. We found the gardener in the potting shed, slicing up a dead body with his hedge shears.

“You must be the private cock,” said the gardener when he saw us.

“Dick,” said La Cranque.

“Suit yourself,” said the gardener.

La Cranque squared up to him. “Now I am going to ask you just one question, and I want

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you to think very carefully before you answer. Did you kill Lord Featherstone?"

The gardener thought very carefully. "No," he said.

"Are you sure?" La Cranque asked slyly.

"Positive," answered the gardener. "I would have remembered."

Monsieur La Cranque sighed. "Well that is that, then," he said. "It seems we have drawn a blank."

"But just look at the fellow," I protested. "He's caked in blood."

"I cut myself shaving," the gardener explained.

"But of course," said La Cranque, with a shrug. "It happens to us all."

"But he was there, in the greenhouse - the scene of the crime!" I argued.

"So what?" said the gardener. "So was the wheelbarrow, why don't you interrogate that?"

La Cranque shook his head sorrowfully and placed his hand on my shoulder. "You know my friend," he said, "if he wasn't already dead, I would be almost certain that Lord Featherstone himself was the murderer."

"If Lord Featherstone wasn't dead, there wouldn't *be* a murderer," I argued.

"Ah yes, good point," he agreed. "This is indeed a difficult case. I shall have to deliberate on the matter in some detail."

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He patted me on the back and then wandered off, deep in thought.

The great detective spent the rest of the day moping about the gardens, occasionally taking time out to interview the wheelbarrow and other garden implements. In my exasperation, I left him to it. As evening approached he requested that the entire household assemble in the library. Since Featherstone Manor did not have a library, we had no choice but to build one, and - even if I do say so myself - the brickwork was splendid, considering the limited time we had to complete it.

Monsieur La Cranque was late, but when he did arrive he had the wheelbarrow with him.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the butler. "Why have you gathered us here in this ridiculously clichéd fashion?"

"Please sit down and I shall explain," La Cranque said calmly. "I have gathered you here because a crime has been committed and a murderer walks amongst us. Also because I want to show off."

He wandered casually over to the maid. "During the course of my inquiries, I have had occasion to question all of you. The maid here, with her unreasonable fixation for tinned peas." He turned to the butler. "And you sir, the smart-arsed butler, who is clearly asking for a slap, no?"

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I have even questioned Lord Featherstone himself, who seems to think that being dead somehow excludes him from my investigation. In many ways he is responsible for all of this, for had he not been reckless enough to get himself killed in the first place, none of this would be happening.”

“And what have you discovered?” I interrupted.

“You may well ask,” La Cranque replied.

“I am asking,” I said. “Have you found out who the killer is?”

There was a long, long pause. “No,” he finally admitted. “But does it really matter who killed him? The man is dead, and that is that.”

An uneasy silence settled over the room. La Cranque walked over to the wheelbarrow and laid a gentle palm on its handle.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced grandly. “I found something very special today; I found love. A very special kind of love: the kind of love that can only exist between a man and an inanimate piece of garden equipment. I’m going to marry this wheelbarrow and you’re all invited to the wedding.”

And what a wonderful wedding it was. I cried. The wheelbarrow looked radiant in its full-length gown and tiara and even La Cranque was resplendent in his Bacofoil trousers and tin hat.

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As for Lord Featherstone, we never did find out who killed him. Not that Lady Featherstone was greatly concerned. She had her husband stuffed and mounted, and now he's on display in the new library.

She says she prefers him like that.

Jacob Wanting

Chapter 12

(excerpt from a previously unpublished novel
by Charles Dickens)

The not insubstantial figure of Mr Rudolph Snickerty was as familiar a landmark as the spire of St Jasper's to those various persons within the orbits of the little house at the corner of Bimini Square. The bootblacks and the broadsheet vendors picked out his silhouette, moving through the dawn mists, with easy familiarity, as he tumbled from his street door into the waiting cab at precisely just after seven each morning, without fail. And the lamplighters and road sweepers marked his return with equal dependability, as the cold vapours began to congregate in dark corners and beneath sagging eaves, at very nearly exactly just before eight each evening. Each of these public appearances, was met with polite expressions of greeting from all those who encountered Mr Snickerty, and such felicitations were volleyed by that latter gentlemen in the same respectful and formal manner as they were served up, as was only to be expected of such an accomplished and esteemed authority. It would hardly have been proper to err towards the casual in one's relations with Mr Rudolph Snickerty, known to all as 'The Adjudicator' in connexion with his

official position relating to the administration of relief to the poor and needy. Many there were who, being without the means to support themselves, were grateful for his judgements when they fell in their favour, and no less respectful when the decision went otherwise.

The weight of this responsibility hung heavy around Mr Snickerty's shoulders tonight, as he climbed down from his cabriolet with the stately ponderousness expected of a man of his circumference. If, of late, his movements had become more laboured or his gait a touch more sluggish, then the cause was surely, in equal measure, as much the constant burden of his professional obligations as the sumptuous lunches which he forced himself to endure, in order to maintain both his strength and his spirits. And who would deny him sustenance, either of body or mind? Being both the first and final arbiter of whom should receive financial assistance from the state, was a responsibility that was not without its stresses and strains, and Mr Rudolph Snickerty's contribution to society had not escaped recognition. Indeed, popular opinion held that it would only be a matter of time before that *Mr* Rudolph became *Sir* Rudolph, and in consequence it was entirely appropriate that a respectful distance should traditionally separate that gentleman from his neighbours, both socially and, secretly to the

great relief of all parties, physically. It is generally known that all men of greatness should, whenever possible, be kept at arm's length.

This evening, so far proving to be much as any other, Mr Snickerty drew his fob from his waistcoat pocket and noted, with some satisfaction, that it was precisely just about nearly eight. Snapping the watch lid shut, he bandied a few insignificant pleasantries with a correspondingly inconsequential neighbour, and went inside; thence, pausing briefly to catch his breath before the ascent, he proceeded up the stairs to his apartments on the first floor.

While there was little doubt that this house had seen better days, it would be impolitic to suggest that these dark and wormholed stairs had ever creaked beneath the boots of a more commendable gentleman than he who now ascended, grunting and wheezing as he did so. Certainly, none worthier numbered amongst its present inhabitants, all of whom were cognizant of the fact that they lived in the shadow of an astonishing man.

Mr Snickerty halted mid-step and clutched the railing. "Pilfer!" he called, upstairs. He paused again, briefly winded by the effort of exposition. "Mrs Pilfer! Supper on the table if you will." And the command being issued, he continued to climb. This clarion call was part of

his familiar routine, as his neighbours well understood. Miss Mimsy, the little seamstress who occupied the ground floor parlour, knew that every evening as he returned from his offices, Mr Snickerty would call for his supper, like the Merry Old King Cole of the nursery rhyme. And Mr Blotter, the unseasoned young clerk who availed himself of the attic, knew that at that signal, Mrs Pilfer, the goodly gentleman's cook, housekeeper and much more besides, would quickly wash down the brandy and water that she was nursing, and rush to charge Mr Snickerty's table with such vittles as are required by a gentleman of import, when he returns home from a busy day in his chambers.

On occasion, Mr Snickerty might append other trifles of conversation to his instruction, regaling Mrs Pilfer, and thus the other occupants of the building, with details of his day, the state of his health, or some scandal or other with which he had become acquainted. This evening he started upon an enquiry, but got as far as "And has that -" before thinking better of it and reverting to silence. What he had intended to say was, "And has that fool Pinscher arrived yet?" but being a gentleman of some foresight, he stopped himself when it occurred to him that the expected person may indeed be present, and may not express any great delight in being referred to as a fool.

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It was a wise precaution, for Mr Snickerty gained his apartment to find that Mrs Pilfer had already been busy. A vigorous fire crackled in the grate, the table was submerged beneath a satisfying quantity of cold meats and cheeses, and the aforesaid gentleman, Mr Martin Pinscher, had his legs firmly beneath it, sucking the meat off a chicken drumstick.

"Ah Snickerty, old fellow!" said Mr Pinscher with such evident surprise, that it did not occur to him to stop eating as he spoke. "Excellent bird, this," he continued, scattering morsels of masticated meat across the table in his haste to sing its praises. Anyone meeting Mr Pinscher for the first time might forgive him this discourtesy, since the fellow looked as thin and emaciated as the chicken bone he waved so enthusiastically in the air. What they would not be aware of, is that this appearance was Mr Pinscher's natural state. No matter how many fowl he devoured, bones and all - and it had amounted to a fair few during his lifetime - Mr Pinscher retained the appearance of a frail and listless marionette, that has been abandoned by its master. His long, splinter-like limbs never appeared to develop any meat on them, despite the dizzying number of pies and pastries that he consumed. His pale, sunken cheeks remained concave, even as he was filling them with divers biscuits and puddings. It was a wonder that Mr Pinscher

ever found the strength to lift food to his mouth, but lift it he did and in quantities that would cripple another man, and bankrupt Mr Pinscher if ever he was required to pay for it himself.

He was momentarily distracted by the arrival of a large pie, borne aloft by Mrs Pilfer, who evidently feared that the banquet was not extensive enough already. Mrs Pilfer was not the sturdiest of housekeepers. Certainly, she was not nearly as substantial as the pasty that she endeavoured to transport, and as a result her progress towards the table was somewhat faltering and uncertain. This, combined with her wayward limbs, a bearing that was naturally off-centre and a shakiness arising from an afternoon spent making an inventory of her master's liquor cabinet, gave rise to grave doubts that the plate would ever arrive at the table replete with its original contents. If Mr Pinscher was a betting man - and this history will go some distance towards establishing that he was - he would have laid a handsome wager on the pie coming to grief, upended on the floor.

As it turned out, he would have lost his stake, since Mrs Pilfer managed to land the pie safely on an uncluttered corner of the table. This achievement came not only as a surprise to Mr Pinscher, but also to one other, for accompanying both pie and Pilfer into the room, and gazing at the former with a lustiness almost

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equal to Pinscher's, was a plump and sluggish brown and white terrier. The disappointment on its chubby, tufted face at Mrs Pilfer's successful delivery of the foodstuff was very nearly heart-breaking, and it whimpered softly once it became apparent that the pie was not destined for the floor. Not that the animal would have suffered greatly by forgoing the occasional meal. Lacking a son and heir, Mr Snickerty had seen fit to lavish all his attention and favour on his pet and, such favour being mostly dietary, the animal's bowed legs and sagging belly endowed it with more than a little resemblance to its owner.

"Settle down, Hermes," Mr Snickerty told the dog absently, falsely labouring under the impression that the creature was all of a dither at his return. In fact, the dog showed barely any regard for its master's presence, and as Mrs Pilfer swept from the room, a good deal more nimbly now that she was unburdened, and returned to the kitchen in search of something to settle her nerves, the dog, without taking its eyes off the heaving table, lay down to patiently wait its turn.

"I hope you're feeling lucky tonight, Snickerty," Mr Pinscher declared, reluctantly setting the drumstick aside so that he could better concentrate on the pie, and ignoring a low and menacing growl from the dog. "I aim to win

back every penny I lost last week, and twice more besides."

Mr Snickerty sighed. His weekly games of Shove-a-Duck or Three Card Spaniard were a tradition that had been established many years ago. At first these evenings had proved a pleasant diversion, then a routine, and finally an ordeal that he nevertheless attempted to endure in the best humour. Whatever pleasure he gained was moderated by a growing undercurrent of impatience, and whatever monies he won, when he won, was more than offset by the devastating impact that Mr Pinscher invariably had upon his larder. Nevertheless, he made the effort because he knew how happy it made Mr Pinscher to spend one evening in each week away from his wife and family.

"And how is Mrs Pinscher?" Snickerty asked, too well versed in the social niceties to omit enquiring after the good lady's health, even if his friend would rather she wasn't recalled to mind at this point.

"She is well," Pinscher replied, putting a brave face on it. "Leastways, she was trilling to herself like a linnet when I left her this morning, so I assumed she was in fine spirits."

"And the children?" Mr Snickerty asked.

"Full of devilment, as children often are," Mr Pinscher replied. "They want for nothing, save

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perhaps a little discipline, but that I leave to their mother. I confess I don't have the energy to keep abreast of them." Mr Pinscher shook his head, and for a moment he looked genuinely crestfallen. "Listen Snickerty, you don't know how lucky you are. I envy you your bachelorhood."

Mr Snickerty drew his breath sharply over his teeth. "Surely not?" he responded, though with little in the way of verisimilitude. Much to Mr Pinscher's dismay, he reached out for the largest and plumpest of the drumsticks, settled into an elbow chair, and embarked on a series of exploratory nibbles. "Here speaks a man with a devoted wife," he said, jabbing the drumstick into the air to punctuate his speech, "an adoring family, and a position which affords him the respect of the district, invites the jealousy of his inferiors and provides for a most comfortable mode of living indeed. And what has such a man to envy in me? These dusty and dismal rooms? Mrs Pilfer, perhaps? Sir, say the word and you may have her. Or perhaps you crave the companionship of this flea-bitten hound here?"

To emphasise the question, Mr Snickety tossed the chicken bone to the dog, having decided, after barely denting the item, that he wasn't really hungry at all. Mr Pinscher could not disguise his dismay, as the animal proceeded to tear it apart.

"No sir," Mr Snickerty continued, too preoccupied to mark the tear that sprang to his friend's eye. "It is I who should envy you."

Mr Pinscher could only nod. Everything Mr Snickerty said was true: his wife, his family, and most especially his position. For although Mr Pinscher could never hope to be held in the same reverence as his celebrated acquaintance, his role as gatherer of the council's taxes afforded him equal power. If Mr Snickerty was known to all as 'The Adjudicator', then Mr Pinscher enjoyed equal notoriety as 'The Collector' and his appearance at the door in pursuit of arrears invariably guaranteed a satisfying quantum of deference.

Nevertheless, Mr Pinscher could not allow the notion that he lived a life of domestic and professional bliss to go entirely unchallenged. "Yes, yes," he said, as he picked up a boiled egg and absently rolled it around his palm. "You are right, of course, about all those things. My wife is devoted, though she often chooses to express this as disapproval of some of my more innocent habits. And my children idolise me, although they occasionally allow their idolatry to be overshadowed by their adoration of their mother. And my position does indeed allow me to enjoy some measure of respect, although it is frequently not without its trials." Warming to his subject, he abandoned the egg on a side plate

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and clapped his hands. "By way of example, today I visited a most irresponsible citizen in Cardew Street." His own words caused him a momentary shiver, and his hand went to his forehead. "Cardew Street!" he cried. "If ever there was a more loathsome cauldron of humankind than that which you are unlucky to find bubbling away in Cardew Street, then I have yet to encounter it. And I have no wish to ever encounter it, for the people of Cardew Street give me more than my fill of trouble as it is. No public responsibility, that's the trouble. They're happy to enjoy all the perks and the amenities that the borough council, in its munificence, has the good grace to supply, but will they pay their taxes? No sir, they will not."

Mr Snickerty sorrowfully shook his head. Suddenly overcome with thirst, he searched round for refreshment, and upon finding none, commanded Mrs Pilfer to bring in the port. Then, seeing that his friend was all wind and thunder, and that the storm was not about to blow itself out, he permitted him to proceed.

"This fellow I called upon today was hewn of the same stuff," The Collector continued. "Hadn't paid a penny this last six months, and it came very plain to me during the course of our talk that he had no intention of doing so. He spun me stories, sir. Told me fanciful tales of having no money, no work and no prospects. He

took off his shoe, showed me the leather all worn through and tattered. Then he took me to the kitchen and showed me the stove, cold and lifeless and unused - he had no fuel, he said, to fire it; and no food to cook upon it if he had. And these stories, are what he offered me in lieu of money. Consider what we might do with tales of worn out shoes and empty pans, I told him, but my words had little effect. How is the borough to provide for him?"

"It is indeed a strain on the public purse," Mr Snickerty agreed. "It is a marvel that the council is generous enough to do all these things for this fellow."

"Generosity is perhaps our greatest fault when it comes to dealing with such unsociable attitudes," Mr Pinscher replied. "Perhaps tomorrow the bailiff may have more success where I had none, but I think not. The stories are the same wherever I go."

"I little doubt it, for I am well acquainted with those same fictions," Mr Snickerty grumbled. He leaned back into his chair, head slumped in a posture that was designed to take some of the weight off his chins. "One hears every day the same tawdry tales from people who claim they are unable to feed and clothe themselves. They turn up at our office daily, plump and well-shod and making demands on our charity."

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As he spoke, Mrs Pilfer tottered in with a tarnished silver tray bearing the port, already uncorked, and two mismatched goblets. She began making her way to the table, red faced and glassy eyed, when Mr Snickerty diverted her with a gesture and bid her set the tray down on the occasional table beside his chair. This done, she moved off in the same manner as she arrived, managing to find the doorway on only the third attempt, and finally exited the room.

"Why just last week," Mr Snickerty began, but was interrupted by a crash and a clatter from the kitchen. He cocked an ear and listened, and taking the low moan that issued from that quarter to be a signal that his housekeeper was alive and well, he began again. "Why, just last week," he said, picking up the port and registering a brief stutter of surprise at its lack of weight. He upended it into his goblet, but it issued barely enough liquid to wet the bottom of the glass. Mumbling to himself, he set it down and, determined to ignore the soft whimpering that now drifted from the kitchen, he began once more.

"Last week," he said, folding his hands across his belly, like a proud father embracing his child, "we received a visit from a most extraordinary woman, who rode into town on a pig. Twenty miles, all told, the animal had carried her, and no doubt she had been cheered on her way by many

low and disreputable characters along the route. She claimed to be lame, which infirmity was the sole cause of her inability to find employment. This pig, so she explained, was the only means of transport available to her."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Mr Pinscher, although it was not certain whether his interest was roused by this uncommon mode of conveyance, or by the vague suggestion of sausages. "A pig, you say? The ingenuity of these people! She wanted assistance, I take it?"

"She wanted money, Mr Pinscher, let us not be coy," said Mr Snickerty. "Pounds, shillings and pence were what she was after, and by this ridiculous stunt, pounds, shillings and pence is what she hoped to get."

"I take it that you disappointed her?" the collector asked.

"Unquestionably," returned the adjudicator. "The Department of Working Peoples is, as I am sure you know, the very jewel in the coronet of our modern state. We pride ourselves that through the provision of funds for those individuals who find themselves, through illness or injury, unable to work, no man may suffer to go to his bed feeling hungry and cold. The dark days of poverty and despair are long behind us now that the state has made this contract with the people to ensure the welfare of all, from its richest and most noble gentry, to the humblest

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and most vulnerable infant. Now, we can't very well maintain such a commitment by handing out money to all and sundry. Why, it is plain to see that the whole scheme would come crashing down around our ears if we engaged in such foolhardy benevolence. And so I told this woman, pig or no pig, if we were to - "

Mr Snickerty was interrupted by a sharp rap at the door, which occasioned sufficient surprise to very nearly cause him to jump from his chair. He wasn't expecting anyone at this hour. He looked to Mr Pinscher and was about to ask him if he anticipated a visit, when he realised that this might seem a foolish question to ask of a guest. A second knock brought him to his senses, and he reasoned that a knock on a person's door naturally demanded an answer. He called for Mrs Pincher, but the only sounds now coming from the kitchen were heavy snoring, and so he rose and unfastened the door himself.

"Mr Snickerty?" said the silhouette framed in the doorway. The landing was dark, and Mr Snickerty could not make out the man's features, but his outline was ragged, his posture was stooped and he had about him the odour of old leather and horses.

"The same," acknowledged Mr Snickerty, managing to imbue those meagre words with a palpable measure of impatience.

The visitor moved forward slightly so that the light from within fell across his face. His eyes were dark and hooded. Hair hung limply around his forehead and the skin of his cheeks and chin was pock-marked and grey. Yet despite this striking appearance his demeanour remained respectful, and his voice was shot through with soft humility. "Mr Snickerty, I am wery sorry to intrude upon you in private, sir," he said, keeping his voice low. "I wondered if I could have a word. I know the hour is late - so it is for me, sir, perhaps more than you can know, but it cannot wait."

Mr Snickerty writhed irritably, but the fellow appeared in earnest, and the adjudicator reasoned that it would be more expedient to hear him out, than turn him away. He grunted, and beckoned him in, and returned to his elbow chair and his empty goblet. The visitor nodded a polite acknowledgement upon seeing Mr Pinscher, and remained standing, restlessly fiddling with the tattered hem of his threadbare coat, as he waited his turn to speak. But before he could, Mr Pinscher startled him with a sudden exclamation. "I know this man!" he declared, as he paused with a hunk of beef that he had speared with his fork, mid-way to his mouth. He set the implement down on the side of his plate. "Well, well! Another one of those wretched citizens of Cardew Street who does not feel the

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need to pay his council taxes. I've had occasion to visit the fellow more than once. Mr Gates, is it not?"

"Wanting, sir," the visitor corrected him. "The name is Jacob Wanting, Mr Pinscher, sir, and Blacktop Road is where you have visited me in my 'umble home. You remember, I'm sure, what I told you that day, and never did I ever speak a truer word, or bless me, let the shade of my dear old departed mother strike me down. I told you I had paid my taxes for many years, sir, before my present misfortunes were visited upon me, since when I have been unable."

"Ha!" Mr Pinscher cried. "And yet, despite your lack of contributions, you nevertheless remain capable of enjoying the benefits that we provide: your streets are illuminated, your roads are mended, your refuse is hauled away and there is even a constable to keep you safe while you and your family lie abed. What do you say to that, Mr Wanting? Are you not looked after?"

"I'm sure I must be, sir, I don't doubt," replied Jacob Wanting. "Between yourself and Mr Snickerty here, and my old missus and my blessed departed mother, I must be wery well looked after indeed. Although I should say that Blacktop Road is a dark and dirty neighbourhood, and the constables, they never come nowhere near it. But I know that the borough has provided those splendid new

council chambers, for us all, and by all accounts it is a most magnificent building, although I myself am not allowed admittance, sir. And I have heard that a 'andsome sum has been lavished on the mayor's new coach. A very impressive carriage it is too, because I have watched it from a distance, and it does me good to know that his worshipfulness and his fine friends can travel in such comfort and style, sir."

Mr Pinscher did not reply. He merely grunted and picked up his fork to continue his assault on the table. Jacob Wanting turned to address the adjudicator. "And Mr Snickerty, sir, we have also met, not one week ago when I came to your offices to ask for an allowance, though I didn't never ask for any charity before, this being the first time and out of absolute necessity."

Mr Snickerty shrugged, and failed to meet the visitor's eye. "I see so many people," he said. "I cannot be expected to remember every face."

"Of course, sir, of course," Jacob Wanting said. He shuffled restlessly. "Only, on that occasion, my request was turned down, sir."

Mr Snickerty waved a hand. "So many are," he said. "Even our generosity can only stretch to the most deserving of cases."

"The most deserving indeed, Mr Snickerty, sir, and I have no doubt that those most deserving folk are so wery thankful for your kindness," said Jacob Wanting, and hesitated before he

spoke next. "And for the others," he said slowly. "Them that don't deserve - well, I'm sure that they are no less grateful that you should have taken the time to make a judgement. But I wonder whether there might be some situation where you might want to..."

And here words failed Jacob Wanting. Mr Snickerty looked up and briefly caught his eye, before the visitor turned his attention to the floor. "Well?" Mr Snickerty demanded, leaning forward in his chair. "You will do me a great disservice if you disrupt me at this hour merely to examine my floorboards and leave me guessing as to the nature of your business. Situations where I might want to what?"

"To reconsider, Mr Snickerty, sir," Jacob Wanting said quietly.

"Reconsider!" Mr Snickerty said. "Why I've never heard of such a thing." Mr Snickerty glanced to his friend, the collector. "Reconsider, he says! I am the adjudicator! Mr Wanting, when I judge something to be so, it remains so, and requires no reconsideration. It is your own case that you wish me to reconsider, I take it?" Mr Snickerty calmed down a little and leaned back in his chair, and then somewhat surprisingly said: "Very well, I will hear your story, and I shall pronounce judgement. But I warn you, by this act I will demonstrate two things: firstly that I am as charitable with my

time as I am with the departments funds; and secondly, that my decisions never - never, I tell you - necessitate revision."

Jacob Wanting nodded in gratitude. "I won't take much of your time, Mr Snickerty, sir," he said. "If you'll allow me to acquaint you with a little of my history. I have worked all my life, sir, since I was a boy. Lately I have earned a 'umble but honest wage in the stables of some rich and respectable gentlemen of this city. I have paid my taxes to the council, when I could." Here he politely acknowledged Mr Pinscher. "And I have discharged my duties to the crown. No man could ever claim that I shirked my responsibilities to my family or to my country. Neither have I ever given my employers cause for complaint, so strike me down if I utter a false word. And during my working years, Mr Snickerty, sir, if I did not earn myself a fortune, at least I earned myself a reputation as a trustworthy and dependable fellow. "

"My, how the wretch goes on!" remarked Mr Pinscher, idly fingering a crust.

"Indeed he does," Mr Snickerty agreed, making great theatre of stifling a yawn. He addressed Jacob sharply: "You have done all that is expected of you, and nothing more besides. In this there is nothing so remarkable as to explain you waiting upon me now. Come sir; explain the purpose of your visit."

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"My purpose is this, sirs," Jacob continued, though he gave no indication that he would be hurried. "You gentlemen would agree, I'm sure, that a man cannot live on his reputation alone. He must have bread and water, and a roof above his head, and clothes for himself and his family. Reputation cannot give a man such things. Hard toil can, but ever since I suffered a horse's kick in the service of my master, I can work no more. The blow from that wayward mare did not just break my back, it crushed my spirit and any hope I ever had of earning another penny in my chosen trade."

Mr Pinscher chuckled softly to himself, and Jacob was sufficiently disturbed by this unexpected reaction, that he momentarily abandoned etiquette, and asked him what he found so funny. "I believe I comprehend exactly why that poor nag delivered you such a knock," The Collector replied with a sneer. "I fear the animal must have been driven to distraction by your meandering monologues."

A flicker of a smile played around Mr Snickerty's lips, but he resisted the temptation of an open display of mirth. "Nevertheless," the adjudicator said. "This fellow's story is a familiar one, and his visit is now recalled to me. Correct me if I am wrong, Mr Wanting, but am I mistaken in remembering that your assessment was interrupted?"

"That's right, Mr Snickerty, sir," said Jacob. "The pain overtook me, as it often does nowadays, and I couldn't finish the tests."

"We subject applicants to a number of simple tests," Mr Snickerty explained, in response to Mr Pinscher's quizzical look. "We make them stand, make them sit, ask them to pick up items from the floor, and we award points for each task they cannot perform. By such means we can establish whether the applicant really is as inconvenienced as he claims to be."

"Capital!" Mr Pinscher said approvingly. "Make sure the fellows are not playing you for a fool and taking advantage of your charity, eh? Very wise." He gestured lazily at Jacob. "And this chap got found out, did he? Is that it?"

"I was unable to finish the tests, Mr Pinscher, sir," said Jacob, "on account of the pain that took a hold of my back, and shot down through my legs, and made it so that I couldn't stand, nor sit, nor do any of the things that Mr Snickerty would have me do. And that is why I would like you to reconsider my case, Mr Snickerty sir, if you would see your way to do so."

Mr Snickerty made a steeple of his fingers and pressed them thoughtfully to his lips. Then he tutted and gently shook his head. "Well, I really don't see that there is any cause," he pronounced. "The situation, as it presents itself, is very clear. Everyone who is awarded an

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allowance must score at least fifteen points in the assessment. You did not. There really is no need for re-evaluation."

"But Mr Snickerty, sir," Jacob protested. "I didn't take the tests."

Mr Snickerty grew irritable. "And therefore you scored nought," he snapped testily. "Really, I fail to see why you need to labour this point. It is surely apparent to even the most muddle-headed of fellows that a failure to take the test will result in a failure to be awarded the allowance?"

"Yes, but..." Jacob Wanting haltingly continued. Circumstances were such that he had no option but to persevere, and no hope unless he was able to persuade the adjudicator to reverse his decision. "Mr Snickerty, sir, I don't like to have to beleaguer you like this, but there is no food on my table, and I have no means to earn it. The missus, she says I should come here and ask if you will think again, and she's right, is my missus, because if you won't help, then we will starve."

"Listen, you ill-mannered windbag," Mr Pinscher abruptly interceded, having found that this visitor's words were interfering with his digestion, at a time when his digestive system had more than enough to contend with already. "Mr Snickerty here has had the good manners to consider your plea." That eminent gentleman

shot his friend a look which seemed to suggest that he was more than equal to dealing with this increasingly annoying intrusion himself, but Mr Pinscher failed to read the meaning of the expression, and carried on regardless. "He has decided to stand by his original decision," the collector continued. "It is not for you to question his verdict, nor to encroach upon his time a moment longer."

Jacob Wanting stood his ground, with the stubborn resignation of a man with no other options left open to him. "But, gentlemen, is it fair?" he implored. "I ask you now, here am I a man incapable of earning a farthing for himself by the sweat of his own brow, and I am denied help because I am too ill to even to undertake the tests. This cannot be right."

Mr Snickerty got to his feet. "My judgement stands, just as I said it would," he said. "It is unnatural that you should question it. Society determines that we live by certain rules, and that where judgements need to be made, decisions are taken only by those persons possessed of the impeccable good sense to take them. By these rules, and by my judgement, you do not qualify for assistance, and therefore assistance you shall not have. That is my final word, sir."

By Mr Snickerty's lofty demeanour, Jacob Wanting knew that further argument would be fruitless, so he thanked the gentlemen that they

had at least heard him out, and then he left quietly. Mr Snickerty did not feel in the best of humours, as he fastened the door behind him. His friend, Mr Pinscher, was more animated as he remarked upon the nerve of their visitor. But Mr Snickerty dismissed his comments. Such encounters were commonplace in his business, he said. "Though very rarely do they follow me home," he added as he returned to the table and began to load up a plate with a variety of meats and cheeses.

"Not even when they come riding swine?" Mr Pinscher asked impishly, recalling their earlier conversation, and causing Mr Snickerty to laugh.

"No," the adjudicator replied, returning to his chair with his plate fully laden. "No, not even then."

"Curious though," said the collector, "that this woman you spoke of should arrive at your chambers, claiming to be incapable of feeding herself. Now that I have given the matter some thought, it occurs to me that all the while she is pleading poverty, she is in possession of an animal that could grace her table for the best part of a month."

Mr Snickerty agreed. "I was sensible of just such a possibility," he said. "But when I raised the point, the woman protested that she could not eat her only means of transport, and so there the matter rested. Or at least, so I thought, for

several days later I learned that the pig had expired whilst it was carrying her home. I am optimistic that, unless she can acquire another sturdy hog to carry her to my door, I will have seen the last of her." He tore off a chunk of bread, and chewed it thoughtfully. "It's a pity of course," he said. "A very real shame."

"You feel sorry for the woman?" the collector asked.

"Heavens no!" the adjudicator answered. "There's no cause for sympathy in the case of a duplicitous, malingering burden on the state such as she... But that was a very impressive pig. Oh yes, I would have given a great deal for a pig like that."

Mr Snickerty shouted for more port, but his demands went unheeded. Mrs Pilfer was sound asleep on the kitchen table, and far too wound up in her own befuddled dreams to answer her employer's call. Mr Snickerty fetched the bottle for himself, and he and Mr Pinscher spent the remainder of the evening in pleasant conversation, as they gradually picked the table clean. Meanwhile, Hermes, the little dog, sat at their feet where he received a steady supply of scraps and morsels, and remained the only recipient of Messrs Snickerty and Pinscher's munificence that evening.

Made in Heaven

The hustle and bustle, the chatter, the gossip of people half a galaxy away from anywhere rose above the crowded bar room. A group of Scatterlings in the corner chirruped away amongst themselves as they caught up with the news from home. They competed to deliver the tastiest morsels of scandal, and tried their utmost to ignore the two Octogoids at the next table, who loudly poked fun as they sucked on their pleb pipes and filled the air with a heady, damp fog.

A Divellian mudswirller dragged itself past them as it made its way to the toilets, crackling and hissing as it puffed out waves of noxious fumes into its immediate vicinity. The conversation was momentarily reduced to a murmur, as people held their breaths. Then, once the creature had passed, there was a communal gasp for air and the chatter resumed.

Sam Neutron ignored the smell, and tried to shut out the babbling and blubbering around him. He sat alone at the bar, hunched over his Malarian brandy, cupping the bulbous glass in his hands to warm it. He came here a lot. So did everyone else - not because they liked the place, but because it was just a stone's throw from Praxis spaceport; and Praxis Spaceport was just about the nearest thing to civilisation this side of the Horseshoe Nebula.

Not that Praxis bore a particularly close resemblance to civilisation in the accepted sense of the word. It was a God-forsaken planet, whose only export was sand, and whose only claim to fame was the Praxis Dragon - a large, lizard like creature, about four foot long, which would ingest its prey by grasping it in its huge jaws and then literally turn itself inside out, enveloping its victim completely. The Dragon's thick hide made it impervious to any form of attack, except when caught in the act of feeding. At such times, its major organs were outside its body, thus rendering it vulnerable.

Or at least, that's what they said. Much of it was hearsay, since no one had ever studied the animal in any great detail. The only people who came here were just passing through - traders, Space Rangers and long haul freight-drivers like Sam himself. There were plenty of them, but they only ever stopped long enough to take on supplies, and maybe kill a little time in the bar while their ships were refuelled.

Sam took another gulp of brandy and sighed. Down by the video box there was a group of Droog Minders, shouting and jeering at one another as they took it in turns to rack up scores on the *Cosmic Blaster* machine. Sam scowled at them. Everyone hated Droog Minders. They were all the same - noisy, arrogant, thick-skinned slobs. No doubt someone would be

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waiting outside to give them a good kicking when they left.

Sam smiled at the thought, and then nodded at Titalia, the barmaid. One of her heads smiled back at him and promised to serve him in a moment. Then some kind of seventh sense warned him of an imminent arrival, and he twisted around to look at the door. It was Marty Pound - he was standing there in the doorway, looking around. Sam hunched over and tried to look small, but it was too late. Marty had seen him and he came over.

"Quart of freezel juice, please Titalia," Marty yapped. He slapped his briefcase onto the bar and jumped up onto a stool beside Sam. "So how's it hanging, buddy?" he asked.

Sam groaned inwardly. Marty's stock greeting, all grins and 'buddy' stuff. Predictable to the end. "I feel like shit," Sam answered truthfully.

"Good one," Marty replied, without listening. "Blazing, absolutely blazing!"

Marty was one of the worst sorts of people you could meet out here. He was a Vacumatix agent - he travelled the outer rim planets selling suckers to suckers, living on his commission and whatever kudos he could gain from being a frontiersman for the household cleaning products retail trade.

"I've just cracked a big one up on the western spiral," he boasted, so full of himself that he looked like he might burst. "Shifted four dozen units to the salt miners."

"I'm very pleased for you," Sam said, with little enthusiasm.

"Deluxe models, too," Marty added. "Suckmaster 500s - the ones with the revolving nozzles and detachable heads." His drink arrived. Marty looked up. "And whatever Sam's having, Titalia," he said. "I can afford to be generous, what with the commission I'll get from this lot."

Sam accepted the drink with as much grace as he could muster. A crowd of Jambleboks tussled them on their way to the exit. Sam waited until they had passed by. "Sometimes I don't know how you can live with yourself, Marty."

"What do you mean?"

"I know those salt miners," Sam explained. "Most of them have hardly two credits to rub together. Then along you come to sell them expensive gadgets that they don't need and can ill afford. Don't you feel guilty?"

Marty sat up straight. "Guilty?" he said, genuinely surprised by the accusation. "I have nothing to feel guilty about."

"Oh come off it!" Sam responded.

"Listen here Sam," Marty said earnestly. "There is no one in the universe that would not

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benefit from the unique cleaning properties of the Vacumatix Suckmaster 500. You know, I really do believe in this product. I'm not into ripping people off."

"Yeah, well you're bound to say that, aren't you?"

Marty shook his head slowly and placed his hand on Sam's shoulder. "You really don't understand, do you?" he said, and he sighed. "The Suckmaster 500 is much more than a mere labour saving device, albeit an extraordinarily efficient one. It's a status symbol. No, it's more than that - it's a symbol of hope in an uncertain universe."

Sam frowned at him. "What are you talking about?" he responded.

"Everyone needs hope, Sam," Marty said. "Those salt miners spend sixteen hours at a time toiling in the baking heat underground. The sweat stings their eyes, the air is so thick and cloying that they can hardly manage to breathe it. They can't even tell day from night down there. And what do they get in return?"

"Well they - "

"Let's be honest, they get a whole load of nothing," Marty continued. "They are paid a pittance - subsistence wages, that's all. If they have a full belly at the end of the week, then that's a bonus. You can't live like that, Sam. You just can't."

"I'm sorry," said Sam. "Are we still talking about vacuum cleaners?"

"Sure we are!" Marty replied. "See, this is where I come in. I'm their light at the end of the tunnel. Thanks to me they can come home, look at their brand spanking new Suckmaster and feel good about themselves. I have given them something to live for."

"You have a seriously warped view of the universe, do you know that Marty?"

"Listen, everybody's happy," Marty reasoned. "They're happy, 'cos they've got their vacuum cleaner; I'm happy because I'm earning myself a major wad. Blazing! It's smiles all round."

"But they're gonna be paying for it for the next ten years," Sam pointed out. "I shouldn't think they'll be smiling about that."

Marty shrugged. "Hey, I never said I was a miracle worker, now did I?" he grumbled. "Is it my fault that these schmucks wanna get themselves into a whole loada debt over a vacuum cleaner? No, I don't think it is. All I'm saying is that I sleep easy in my bed at night."

Sam drained his glass and slammed it down on the bar. "I'm sure you do," he muttered.

"You don't understand, Sam," Marty told him. "Drive, ambition, the hunger for success - you just don't get it. Now, don't take offence at this Sam, but you're just a freighter skipper. You can't possibly know what it's like to operate in

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the high pressure world of executive marketing and retail sales.”

“Maybe I understand it too well?” Sam replied. “Maybe I can see it a little clearer than you can?”

“No, no, no, no,” Marty said languidly, shaking his head condescendingly. “I can see that you’re a bright sort of guy. You’re trying very hard to appreciate the ins and outs of it all, but in the end it’s useless. It’s in the blood, see. In the genes. I was born to be a high flying sales bandit, and you Sam - ” He paused and looked apologetically at him. “Well,” he said, “you weren’t.”

“Crap!” Sam blurted out.

“You see?” Marty replied casually. “That’s just the sort of reaction I would expect from someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” Sam snapped back at him. “What do you mean ‘someone like me’?”

“Now don’t take offence, Sam,” Marty said.

“I’m not taking offence,” Sam replied.

“Well, you sound like you have taken offence,” Marty insisted.

“I have not taken offence!” Sam repeated deliberately, then went on to contradict himself. “And anyway, why shouldn’t I take offence, when you come out with a bunch of crap like that?”

“Well maybe I didn’t explain myself too well,” Marty admitted, attempting to placate him. “It’s just that some people were meant to be great, to do great things; and other people - through no fault of their own - are destined to just keep bumming along, barely keeping their heads above the water, so to speak. It’s, like, built-in.”

“And you believe this?” Sam said. “Nature over nurture, and there’s no help for the poor bastards who’ve been dealt a raw hand?”

Marty shrugged. “The evidence is all there,” he said simply.

“What evidence?” Sam responded quickly. “There is no evidence.”

Marty thought about this. “Well no, maybe not,” he conceded. “But it makes sense, doesn’t it? Think about it Sam - have you ever wondered why some people just never seem to get the breaks? Destiny, Sam. That’s what it is.”

Sam let out a long, deep sigh and ordered up another drink.

Marty carried on talking. “Do you know,” he said, “that there are tribes on the ice worlds of Detrosco who believe that a man’s destiny is etched onto the inside of his skull?”

“So you’re trying to back up your claim with some primitive superstition?” Sam muttered, rubbing his neck and suddenly feeling tired. “You’re on shaky ground, Marty.”

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“Is it just a superstition, though?” Marty countered. “There could be something in it. It’s a fascinating idea, nevertheless. Think of it: all those people wondering what fate has in store for them - and all the time the answer is within them, etched inside their heads.”

“And you believe this?” Sam asked.

“I know what it says in my head,” Marty replied, nodding slowly. “It says that I was born to be the best damn salesman this side of Hydrox-Beta.”

“So you really do believe it?”

Marty was gazing off into space. “Yeah,” he said after a moment’s thought. “Yeah, sure I do.”

“Okay,” said Sam, standing up. “Let’s put it to the test.”

Sam suddenly reached out and grabbed Marty by the ears, dragging him towards him. Marty screamed and tried to pull away, but Sam had a firm grip. He started to rock the salesman’s head from side to side, tugging all the while.

“What the hell are you doing?” Marty screamed.

“Testing a theory,” Sam grunted.

“But you’re hurting me!” shouted Marty. “Let me go!”

Sam held on tight. “Hell, it’s your theory,” he said. “You’ve gotta expect to make a few sacrifices in the name of truth.”

Conversation throughout the room was rapidly dying to a whisper as people turned to watch the extraordinary scene unfolding at the bar. Sam twisted round and locked Marty's head beneath his arm.

"Let go of me, you maniac!" Marty screamed as he was dragged from his stool.

"Come on Marty, don't you want to find out what's written inside your head?" said Sam, as he struggled to get a tighter grip around the other man's neck. "If your damn head hadn't been screwed on so tight in the first place, we wouldn't have to go through all this."

"Tight is okay with me," said Marty, struggling to speak as the arm closed around his windpipe. "I like tight. There is nothing worse, in this world or the next, than having a loose head."

"Whatever," said Sam. "I think it's freeing up a little now. Brace yourself."

Sam wrenched the head sharply to the left. There was a horrible crunching noise and Marty went limp, his head hanging at an unhealthy angle.

"Nearly there," Sam said beneath his breath. He gave one final tug, and Marty's head came away completely. There was a bang, a flash and then a huge shower of sparks burst from Marty's gaping neck. Bare wires buzzed and crackled and a puff of black smoke emerged from Marty's headless body as it slumped back onto the stool.

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Sam whooped triumphantly and grinned at the crowd, holding up the head like a trophy. They rewarded him with a huge burst of applause. He bowed graciously, then jumped up onto his stool and rested the upturned head on his knee.

“Now what have we here?” he muttered to himself as he looked into the gaping, blackened neck socket. Inside was layer after layer of circuit boards, power relays and processors. Some of the components were still giving off feeble sparks, and there was a horrible smell of smouldering. There was a metal plate screwed to the inside of the skull. It was dirty and black, and Sam tried to rub it clean with his thumb.

“Well?” demanded the severed head impatiently, rolling its eyes. “Can you see anything?”

“Oh, are you still with us?” Sam asked.

“Well of course I am,” said the head, and then repeated the question more urgently. “Can you see anything?”

“There’s something here,” said Sam. “Can’t quite make it out.”

“I knew it! I knew it!” the head said excitedly. “Come on, what does it say?”

“I’m trying to read it,” Sam told him. “Oh hell, it’s filthy in here. Don’t you ever clean yourself out?”

“Get on with it, Sam,” said the head.

Made in Heaven

“Bits of fluff, and grease, and dirt,” Sam muttered. “There’s even a chocolate bar wrapper in here.”

“Can you see anything?”

Sam squinted into the dark cavity to read the faint lettering. “Yeah, he said. I can just make it out.”

“Well, out with it!” demanded the head.

“It’s very faint,” said Sam.

“Read it! Read it!”

Sam drew a breath. “It says...”

“Yes! Yes!” said the head.

“It says,” Sam repeated, making a meal of it.

“Come on, stop jerking about!”

“It says *Made in Taiwan*,” said Sam, and he dropped the head onto the bar, settled his tab, and left.

Venus by Catapult

In those heady days before the Great War it seemed that hardly a week went by without science offering up yet another exciting advancement. It was a time of great innovations, when men like Edison and Bell were pointing the way towards our bright new future. My name is Vincent Hendry and in the summer of 1912 I was residing in Hampstead. I remember those days with great fondness, although life was never easy. My father had been eaten by an ocelot in Sutton Coldfield not two years previously, leaving my mother and me to fend for ourselves. We managed to stave off the more distressing consequences of poverty, but I dreamed of bettering myself, and lived for the day I would be able to prove myself in my chosen profession.

In this climate of greatness it was not unreasonable that I - like many lads of my tender years - should aspire to join the ranks of those great pioneers. I was lucky, for I could look to my own uncle for inspiration: the great Frederick Maitland, inventor of the steam driven commode and winner of the 1896 Royal Academy prize for Extreme Cleverness. It was therefore a great thrill for me when he invited me to join him at Cedarville, his house in Essex, where he was busy working on his latest project.

Venus by Catapult

I was quite giddy with excitement as I waved goodbye to my mother at the station, clutching my suitcase and a packet of jelly sandwiches that she had so thoughtfully provided for the trip. It was my first time away from home and I was, not unnaturally, quite anxious. I whiled away the journey with thoughts of the life I was leaving behind, desperately trying to ignore the man who sat opposite me in the carriage as he repeatedly cracked his knuckles, leered at me in a most unsettling way and recited the word 'cheese' over and over beneath his breath.

I felt awash with relief when eventually the train pulled into the tumbledown station at Lower Critchley. I disembarked most hastily as my strange companion struggled to extract a blow up doll from the luggage rack. I was met by Cripes, my uncle's butler: a brawny, rugged sort of chap who always seemed ill at ease in his smart black uniform. I had only ever met him once before, one Christmas long ago when he amused us all by performing an extraordinary trick with a bicycle pump and an oven ready chicken. Nevertheless, I recognised his duelling scar and squinty little eyes immediately.

Clinging to him tightly, I rode pillion on the back of his motorcycle all the way up to my uncle's house, and let out a whoop of joy as we popped an impressive wheelie all the way up the long gravel drive. I waited in the hall as Cripes

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dispensed with his crash helmet and leathers, looking around at the delicately carved cornices and the beautiful painted ceiling, which depicted Joseph of Arimathea alighting at Grimsby docks. Cedarville was a large, sprawling property, replete with fascinating little nooks, deceptively commodious crannies, and labyrinthine and barely navigable passageways, which only seemed to bring you back to where you started. Cripes reappeared to escort me to my uncle, but despite his familiarity with the house he still managed to get us lost more than once.

Eventually we found ourselves on a narrow twisting staircase that took us up to a small attic room in the west wing. As we approached, I detected some curious noises coming from behind the door. The sounds were muffled and difficult to determine at first. I listened harder, but only succeeded in becoming more and more baffled. I could hear a dog barking, although it clearly was not a real dog. It sounded like a gramophone record, all fuzzy and scratched. Then the barking stopped and was replaced by a human voice. It spoke slowly, deliberately, but I could not make out the words.

Cripes cleared his throat and rapped on the door with his warty knuckle. A moment later I heard my uncle's voice bid us enter.

"Young master Hendry," Cripes announced as he stood aside to allow me into the room.

Venus by Catapult

My uncle was sitting over a gramophone player, which was perched precariously on a rickety chair in front of him. He looked up at me and smiled. "Ah, Vincent, my dear boy!" he cried. "Come on in. Listen to this!"

My uncle dismissed Cripes, then began to tinker with his gramophone. Trying not to let my puzzlement become too apparent, I drew up a chair and waited patiently. My uncle gently lowered the needle onto the gramophone record, and then sat back, cocking his ear expectantly to the horn.

For a few seconds we heard nothing but the soft purr and crackle of the stylus over the disk, and then suddenly I heard that dog barking again. *Woof, woof, woof*, it went. Then there was a pause before a gentle but authoritative male voice was heard to intone: *Where is my bone?*

My uncle looked at me with a broad smile on his face, but for my own part I could only reply with a sort of quizzical frown. My vague sense of puzzlement had now given way to stark confusion.

The barking returned again. *Woof, bark, woof*, it crackled from the funnel, and again it was succeeded by the man's voice. *My name is Spot*, it said this time.

"I'm learning to speak dog," Uncle Frederick explained.

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Woof, growl, bark, said the record, followed by the translation: *I want to go walkies*.

"Woof, growl, bark," repeated my uncle. "I want to go walkies." He turned to me with a gleam in his eye. "See, Vincent!" he said. "Isn't it extraordinary?"

I nodded uncertainly as the gramophone issued another pearl of doggy wisdom. *Growl, growl, woof*, it said. *Please stroke my back*.

"Growl, growl, woof," Uncle Frederick chanted. "Please stroke my back." He clapped his hands together animatedly. "Just think of it, my dear boy. Think what we could learn if we could talk to the animals."

Bark, growl, whimper, said the gramophone. *Please can I smell your bottom?*

"Of course the problem with dogs," Uncle Frederick admitted with a shrug, "is that their conversation can be a trifle limited."

He leaned over the gramophone and lifted the needle, then gently removed the record. "Think about the possibilities, Vincent!" he said, and I must admit that his enthusiasm was contagious. "Communication is the key to everything, and if we could learn to converse with our animal cousins there would be no limit to what we could accomplish. Listen to this one."

He pulled a different record from its crinkled paper sleeve, placed it on the gramophone and

set it going. Amongst all the scratching and crackling I could hear a sort of bubbling noise.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Trout," replied my uncle.

I frowned. "It just sounds like a lot of bubbles to me."

"Yes, yes," Uncle Frederick said animatedly. "You have to listen very carefully. It's a very specialised dialect." He tilted his head to the speaker and suddenly laughed out loud.

I leaned forward in my seat, becoming quite concerned. "What is it?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

My uncle fought to control his giggling as he pointed to the gramophone. "That's actually very funny, if you're a fish."

I smiled and nodded. Uncle Frederick removed the record and carefully slipped it back into its sleeve. Then he searched through the extensive pile at his feet for another disk.

"I get these recordings from a mail order company in Belgium," he explained as he held one of the records up to the light and peered at the label. "They are sending me Sloth and Gazelle next month. I wanted to learn caterpillar, but apparently their conversation is too high pitched for human hearing."

He was obviously enthralled by this latest scheme, but I had certain doubts about the whole thing. "It's certainly remarkable," I told

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him. "But I'm not sure where it's leading. Even if you do learn to speak to certain animals, I can't see that you'll be able to learn very much from them."

As ever, my uncle had an answer. "Well, admittedly, you're not going to glean some new insight into the workings of the universe and the nature of reality by talking to a hamster, for instance," he confessed. "You might find out where to find the yummiest sunflower seeds, or pick up a few tips on running around in a little wheel, but that's about it. But, on the other hand, *they* might be able to learn a great deal from *us*."

"How do you mean?"

My uncle leaned forward and tapped my knee. "Well, you used to have a dog didn't you?" he said.

"Yes," I replied, nodding, though I wasn't quite sure where his argument was leading. "I had a golden retriever called Samuel. He was sacrificed by devil worshippers on my eleventh birthday."

"And did you teach Samuel any tricks?" Uncle Frederick asked.

I recalled that Samuel had indeed learnt to respond to a few rudimentary instructions. "I taught him to roll over and play dead," I said. It was quite ironic really.

"Exactly!" my uncle cried. "Dogs are taught basic, menial functions - play dead, fetch that

stick, sit, stay. But if you could communicate with the animal in its own language, you could teach it to carry out more complex and ultimately more useful tasks."

At last I saw the point he was trying to make, but I was still doubtful. "You mean, you could train a dog to operate a lathe?" I said, and I slowly shook my head. "I hardly think so."

Uncle Frederick responded with a degree of indignation. "Why ever not?" he demanded. "Mark my words, one day animals will be a common sight in the workplace. Dogs will operate lathes, cats will man switchboards, pigs will deliver letters. Oh I'm not suggesting that it will be easy. There are certain limitations that it will be impossible to overcome - you are never going to be able to teach a goldfish to type, for instance, but it still might be able to take shorthand. You could wedge the pencil under its fin."

I swallowed my objections and simply offered a feeble shrug. "And is this the great scheme that I am to assist you with?"

"This?" Uncle Frederick seemed to be quite stunned at the suggestion. "Good gracious no," he said. "Learning the languages of the animal kingdom is a massive undertaking: one that won't be completed until well after I am dead and gone. No, I am merely dabbling. My 'great

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scheme' as you put it, is far more spectacular. I am planning a trip to Venus!"

I was very nearly struck speechless by this announcement. I managed to squeeze out just one word of query. "Venus?"

Uncle Frederick nodded. "Yes, I thought you would be impressed."

"You mean, Venus?" I felt the need to ask once more. "The planet?"

"Indeed," my uncle replied. "The morning star!"

For a moment I forgot myself and blurted out a heartfelt protest. "But that's an insane idea!"

"Insane?" returned Uncle Frederick. "My dear young Vincent," he said, rather condescendingly, "we have just been discussing, in all sincerity, the possibility of talking to fish. I would have thought that a joyride to Venus would be quite mundane by comparison."

He was clearly quite earnest about this, but I stuck to my guns. "But it's impossible!" I claimed. "It's the stuff of some silly scientific romance. Surely you're not serious?"

"Now, now Vincent," Uncle Frederick crooned, wagging his finger at me in warning. "History teaches us to keep an open mind. Revolutionary ideas have always been met with derision. But was Copernicus deterred by his critics when he described the motion of the planets, eh? And what about Faraday: didn't his

ideas about magnetism turn out to be correct? And was the late lamented Flo Clementine so terribly wrong when she attempted to demonstrate that the Earth's core is made out of marzipan?"

"Yes," I pointed out.

"All right, that was a bad example," my uncle conceded. "But have a little faith in me, Vincent. You should know that I am not given over to dreams of the impossible. Come, the atmosphere is rather stifling in here. We will take a turn around the gardens, and I shall explain how I plan to achieve my ambition."

The afternoon was wearing on as we strolled across the immaculately manicured lawns of Cedarville. My uncle's property was extensive, and included not only the well-tended gardens, but also the meadows beyond and two acres of woodland to the east.

Uncle Frederick tilted his head back, closing his eyes as he let the golden sunlight play over his features. "I love the gardens at this time of day," he said. "I like to watch the glimmering sun as it sinks between the trees. Smell that air, Vincent. It will do your lungs good to be away from filthy old London for a while."

"I feel better already," I told him.

Uncle Frederick smiled. "Listen to the birdsong," he said. "The gentle fluting tones of

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the song thrush; the raucous calls of the crow; the staccato, warbling cry of the house-martin. You know, I often bring my work out here and sit beneath the shade of the big oak."

He pointed to the big tree that spread its twisted, deformed boughs over the corner of the lawn. "Yes," I said, nodding. "It must be very peaceful."

"Peaceful?" said my uncle. "Heavens no! You can't hear yourself think for all that blasted racket."

"Oh, right," I said, somewhat awkwardly. I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "You, erm - you said you would explain how you're going to reach Venus?"

Uncle Frederick perked up a little. "Ah yes, indeed I did." He stopped and pulled something out of his pocket. "Here, see this?"

He had produced an ordinary catapult. I looked at him in puzzlement. "It's just a catapult. I used to have one myself. Mother confiscated it when she caught me harassing the postman." I smiled and laughed uneasily. "Surely you're not suggesting that you're going to catapult yourself to Venus?" I joked.

"That is exactly what I'm suggesting!" Uncle Frederick replied.

I became aware that my mouth was hanging open and I closed it quickly. "Is it actually

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possible to catapult yourself off the planet?" I asked, failing to disguise my scepticism.

"I believe so," my uncle replied with surprising confidence. "Allow me to demonstrate. Pass me that stone there."

I knelt down and picked up the stone that my uncle had indicated. He carefully loaded his catapult, and then craned backwards so that it was pointing skywards.

"Now see what happens when I aim the catapult straight up into the air."

He pulled the elastic back to its full extent, paused for just one moment, then released it. I shielded my eyes as I looked up. The stone sailed up into the air, reached the top of its arc and fell back to earth with gathering speed. It thudded into the ground at my feet.

My uncle seemed to be inordinately pleased with this demonstration. "You can see that the stone travels only a short distance before it is pulled back to earth," he pointed out.

"Of course," I replied. "But -"

"Can you please pick it up for me again, Vincent?" Uncle Frederick interrupted. "I have trouble with my back."

I did as I was asked. Uncle Frederick thanked me and reloaded his catapult. "You see," he explained, "the energy required to launch an object vertically into space is phenomenal. It's quite an impossible situation. In order to

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overcome the problem we have to think laterally." He took aim once more, this time pointing his weapon at a gardener tending to a laurel bush some way off. "Now, this time we're going to aim the catapult horizontally. Watch carefully."

He fired again. The missile flew through the air and struck the gardener on the back of the head. The poor man gave a short yelp of pain and collapsed, head first, into the bush.

"There you are!" Uncle Frederick proclaimed delightedly. "This time the stone travels much further before falling to earth - or, at least, it would have done had it not hit the gardener." He handed the catapult to me. "Here, have a go."

I took the weapon from him and tested the grip. Then I reached down for another stone and loaded. "All right, so I just keep it parallel to the ground?" I said. My uncle gave a nod of encouragement as I aimed at the gardener, who was still rubbing the back of his bruised head and pulling bits of shrubbery from his jumper. I stretched the elastic back as far as it would go, released the stone and once more the unfortunate man screamed as he was knocked to the floor.

"Oh yes, I see what you mean," I said. "But I'm still not certain what good it will do you?"

"Oh Vincent, surely it's obvious?" my uncle replied. "Think about it. The surface of the earth

is curved, but the stone travels in a straight line. Now, if you could project a stone with enough force laterally, it would leave the surface of the earth and shoot out into space."

"Oh, I see," I responded. Coming from anyone else, I feel sure that I would have dismissed this theory out of hand. But my uncle had always been terribly persuasive. "But surely you're going to need an awfully big catapult?"

"Yes," Uncle Frederick replied, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "And we shall build one."

It was at this time that we heard Cripes calling out to us. He was steadily making his way across the lawn, informing us as he walked that my uncle's dinner guests had arrived. Uncle Frederick pulled out his pocket watch. "Good gad, is it that time already?" he observed.

"Guests, uncle?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, Vincent," Uncle Frederick said. "I have invited Reverend Black and Doctor Wentworth to dinner. Both are very well respected in their own particular fields, and learned men to boot. I thought it wise to seek out a few opinions before I progress with my scheme. Come, I shall introduce you to them."

And then, pausing only to let loose one more shot at the harassed gardener, we made our way back to the house for dinner.

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And what a dinner it was! Throughout the years, my uncle had built up a modest fortune from the sale of his many inventions - most notably the ratchet condom and the left handed bath plug - and though he was by no means a reckless spender, he was never short on hospitality. That evening was no exception. We were treated to giant shrimps fried in garlic, followed by shark steaks, roast horse and a soup made out of small furry marsupials of indeterminate origin.

People of my uncle's station in life were trained to tackle extraordinary quantities of food, but such a meal could easily cripple a man like me. As the servants cleared away the dinner things, I sat like a beached whale at the table, staring at my bloated stomach as my uncle regaled Reverend Black and Doctor Wentworth with some of his marvellous anecdotes.

"...And then of course I developed my mechanical jam spreader."

"And what a marvellous innovation it was too!" Doctor Wentworth declared. His cheeks were glowing, partly as a result of his natural exuberance, but mostly due to the quite staggering quantity of wine he had consumed throughout the meal. "Every home should have one. I'm sure that I would be lost without mine."

"That's very kind of you, Wentworth," said Uncle Frederick. "I must admit that I was always rather proud of it. It only really failed to catch on

because Nathaniel Slater brought out his Pneumatic Jam Redistribution System, more's the pity."

Reverend Black interceded before the conversation could lapse into a thoughtful silence. "Well, Mr Maitland, I really must thank you for an excellent meal."

"Yes, yes - splendid old chap," the doctor concurred.

"You are both very welcome," Uncle Frederick responded graciously. "I really am most privileged to have enjoyed your company this evening."

The vicar gently dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "I must be honest, it really is quite a relief to have met you at last. After all the rumours that are circulating around the village, it is most edifying to learn that you are, well, 'normal'. Not that I give any credence to that sort of malicious gossip, of course."

"Of course," my uncle said politely.

"To hear some folk speak, one would think you were some sort of eccentric lunatic," said Reverend Black with a gauche little laugh. "I don't know if you're aware of the latest slanderous notion that's doing the rounds - they say that you're planning a trip to the moon!"

"Is that so?"

"Would you credit it?" the Reverend declared, warming to his theme. "It never fails to astound

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me when apparently sane and level headed people are prepared to believe such preposterous stories."

"Well it's plainly absurd," Uncle Frederick replied.

"Of course it is!" said the vicar.

"Going to the moon!" said my uncle. "My word! It's unthinkable. I thought that everyone already knew that I'm going to Venus."

A rather uneasy silence suddenly descended over the table. Reverend Black's face fell. He looked to the doctor, then at me, then finally back to my uncle.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm going to Venus," my uncle replied simply. "I'm surprised you didn't know, Reverend. After all, I've never made any secret of the fact."

Doctor Wentworth nudged the vicar's arm. "Hey," he said, his speech sounding a little slurred. "Why would Freddie want to go to the moon - there's no atmosphere?"

The Reverend shook his head and henceforth ignored the doctor, addressing his remarks across the table to my uncle. "Surely you are not serious about this?" he said. "I suspect that you are playing some game with me, yes?"

"Did you hear what I said just then?" the doctor piped up, refusing to let a bad joke die with dignity. "I said that there's no atmosphere."

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"Reverend Black," Uncle Frederick said, "let me make it quite plain that I am deadly serious about my intention to become the first human man to set foot on Venus."

The Reverend was appalled by the whole idea. "What you are proposing is frankly impossible," he claimed. "You can't just hop on the next train to Venus, you know?"

"I know," said Uncle Frederick. "I've tried. But I have devised a method by which I can achieve my goal. I'm building a giant catapult. By September at the very latest I will be on the planet Venus, with the pixies."

Reverend Black looked at him suspiciously from the corner of his eye. "Pixies?" he asked. Suddenly a new element had been added to the conversation, and he wasn't at all sure how to take it.

"That's right vicar. The pixies come from Venus. My dear Reverend Black, I would have expected that you, of all people, would know that."

"You've lost your mind man!" the vicar suddenly blurted out.

"There's no atmosphere - get it?" mumbled the doctor. "It's a joke, you see?"

"Venus! Pixies!" said the Reverend, raising his voice. "Sir, this is arrant nonsense!"

"Arrant nonsense?" my uncle replied, and I could see that he was struggling to keep his

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temper. He turned to the doctor. "Wentworth," he said. "You're a man of science."

Doctor Wentworth looked faintly startled at his sudden inclusion in the conversation. "What's that?" he said. "A man of science? Well yes, but only in the loosest possible sense, of course."

"Then, scientifically speaking, tell me whether you think my plan is arrant nonsense," Uncle Frederick requested of him. "Surely you can accept that it is not beyond the realms of possibility for a man to travel to the planets?"

"Well, yes, maybe," the doctor replied, flustered at being put on the spot in this fashion. "I suppose that it is theoretically possible."

"Well there you are then!" Uncle Frederick declared.

"I'm not sure about all this pixie business though," Doctor Wentworth said.

"But the important thing is that you consider a trip to Venus to be feasible?" my uncle pressed him.

Wentworth looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. "Well, you know, I wouldn't like to comment on something outside of my own field of expertise, old boy. Technically, yes, I don't see why not. But physically, well, that's quite another matter."

"Physically?"

"Well, I suppose I mean biologically," said the good doctor. "I feel that it is my professional duty to make you fully aware of the limitations of the human body. There are several very serious problems you will need to address before you can go ahead with this expedition."

"Problems, Doctor Wentworth?" Uncle Frederick queried, keen to dismiss these doubts. "I foresee no problems in that department. Look at me doctor - am I not at the very peak of physical fitness?"

"No."

Uncle Frederick was stung by this remark, but he let it pass. "I assure you, I have an iron constitution. I am perfectly capable of withstanding the rigours of spaceflight."

"But Freddie," Doctor Wentworth protested. "Whether you are a physical wreck or a world class athlete, it would make no difference. The fact of the matter is that we simply do not know for certain how space travel affects the human body. There is a theory, for example, that without the influence of gravity to hold them in place, the major organs of the body would begin to rove about of their own accord. Imagine that Freddie: your heart where your kidneys should be, and your liver hanging down around your knees!"

I began to feel rather queasy at this point; unable to prevent myself from imagining how

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my own insides might feel in this state. Uncle Frederick, however, took it very much in his stride.

"A minor discomfort, Doctor Wentworth. That's all."

"No, my dear fellow - that is not all," the doctor responded. "It is now more or less a proven fact that travelling at speeds in excess of forty miles an hour for any length of time can destroy the nervous system and cause the larynx to turn itself inside out. You could end up talking backwards. Think about it carefully, Freddie. You're taking a tremendous personal risk if you proceed with this venture."

My uncle shrugged. "I accept that there are certain risks, doctor," he said. "There always are when great projects are afoot. But risks are there to be taken, Doctor Wentworth, else mankind would have made no progress at all. Whatever happened to that great spirit of discovery that stood our ancestors so proud?" Uncle Frederick leaned across to me. "Do you hear this, young Vincent?" he asked me. "What think you of my guests, so utterly devoid of any sense of adventure?"

I squinted up at him, and I must admit that my mind was elsewhere. I had rather indulged on the jam roly-poly, and the doctor's talk of jumbled organs had only added to my

feelings of nausea. "I feel sick," I mumbled by way of a reply.

"Indeed," my uncle agreed. "Such a lack of enterprise sickens me also."

"No, I really do feel sick," I said, keen to clarify my position in advance of any ensuing embarrassment. "I shouldn't have had that second helping of pudding. It hit the first lot halfway down, and now it's coming back."

Reverend Black sighed and sat back in his seat. "Well, I'm sorry Mr Maitland, but I'm just not having any of this," he asserted.

"Very wise," I intoned knowingly. "Just stick to the cheese and biscuits, that's my advice."

The vicar, however, cared little for my advice. "I have sat here patiently whilst you have talked of pixies and wandering organs and all manner of half-baked poppycock," he said irritably. "I am afraid that I can tolerate no more! Am I the only one present who is still sane?"

Uncle Frederick looked around the room, and then spoke in a hushed voice. "Well, I've noticed that one of the serving girls isn't twitching as much as the rest of us," he said.

"This whole charade is beyond reason!" insisted the vicar.

"But don't you see that we're standing on the threshold of a new dawn of discovery?"

Reverend Black would not be swayed. "You are standing on the threshold of sheer lunacy,"

he opined. "Damn it sir, but you've gone too far this time."

Uncle Frederick steadily shook his head. "You know, I am most disappointed in you, Reverend Black," he said slowly. "But there is an easy way to settle this matter. I have arranged a test flight tomorrow, to see how well my survival capsule performs. Why don't you drop by see for yourself? You too Doctor."

"Delighted to, old chap," replied the doctor enthusiastically.

Reverend Black sneered. "Survival capsule?" he scoffed. "My word, you really do believe in all this nonsense, don't you?"

The servants began to move amongst us as they cleared away the dinner things. Uncle Frederick pushed back his chair. "I certainly do, Reverend," he replied as he got to his feet. "And I promise that tomorrow morning, you too will believe that it's possible to catapult a man to Venus."

I could hardly sleep that night, overcome with excitement for the following day. Was it really possible for man to travel to other worlds? I rose early, enjoyed a light breakfast, and then joined my uncle in the meadow behind the house. Preparations for the test flight were already well under way. There were about a dozen men, all hurrying backwards and forwards as they

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carried out their own allotted tasks. It was an impressive operation, but most impressive of all was the catapult itself.

"Well Vincent," said Uncle Frederick as I approached. "What do you think of it?"

I nodded appreciatively, and for the first time I really did believe that my uncle might reach Venus. "It's extraordinary," I said. "And so simple, it's beautiful."

There were two wooden posts driven deep into the ground, about twenty feet apart. Stretched between them was a thick band of rubber, which had been drawn back around a trigger mechanism and could be released by the pull of a ripcord. The capsule itself - a large iron shell, about eight feet long and shaped like a giant bullet - was resting on a wooden runway, poised for take-off.

Uncle Frederick introduced me to Wardle, his chief engineer. Wardle grasped my hand in his greasy paw and pumped it energetically. "Pleased to make you acquaintance, Mr Vincent sir," he said. He gestured proudly to the catapult. "Well, what do you think of her?"

"Very impressive," I answered in all honesty.

"Aye, she's that right enough," Wardle said with a grin. "Now don't you go worrying about your uncle. We'll get him to Venus in one piece."

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"I'm sure you will, Mr Wardle," I said, heartened by his confidence. "Is this the first time that the catapult has been tested?"

"The first time?" said Wardle. "Oh no. We've already had half a dozen test flights, only we've had to limit it these last few weeks, because of complaints."

"Complaints?"

"Nothing serious," Wardle said quickly. "It's just that, apparently, one or two of the locals have been quite offended by the sight of your uncle tearing down the high street, screaming blue murder before skidding to a halt outside the post office."

"Yes," I sympathised. "I can see how that might be a source of some concern."

"Well, I think we've ironed out most of the major problems now, haven't we Wardle?" Uncle Frederick butted in.

"Aye."

"We're just concerned with fine tuning," said my uncle.

Uncle Frederick was about to explain further, but we were suddenly hailed by Doctor Wentworth. We looked up to see the doctor and Reverend Black approaching across the meadow.

"Morning Freddie," the doctor called. "All set for lift off?"

"Of course, of course!" Uncle Frederick responded. "You're just in time. I'm so glad that you both decided to attend my little demonstration."

"I've no objection to watching you make an idiot of yourself," the Reverend replied scornfully.

Uncle Frederick tut-tutted. "Still so sceptical?" he enquired. "Well, we will soon change your mind about that. You are witnessing the beginning of a whole new era in transport. One day travelling between the planets will be as commonplace as going into town to pick up your groceries. Vast launching stations will be built, stretching across whole counties, capable of hurling hundreds of paying passengers out into space. We are all hurtling towards our future on a non-stop catapult to the stars."

"I'm hurtling nowhere," said the vicar, screwing up his face and folding his arms tightly across his chest. "You wouldn't get me onto one of those contraptions. Tell me, how do you propose to breathe in this capsule of yours, whilst you are winging your way through the cosmos?"

"Simple," my uncle said with a smile. "I shall take a regular dose of oxygen pills. Two tablets, twice a day before meals."

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"Oxygen pills?" Doctor Wentworth said, looking slightly perplexed. "I wasn't aware that such things existed."

Uncle Frederick looked apologetic. "They don't yet," he admitted. "I'm hoping that someone is on the verge of discovering them. Otherwise I'll just have to hold my breath."

"I see," said Reverend Black, with a touch of sarcasm. "And have you considered how you are going to return home once you've reached Venus?"

"I can see that you have taken time to think the whole idea through, Reverend Black," Uncle Frederick said shrewdly. "But once again the solution is simple. I shall prevail upon the pixie people to build me a similar catapult, pointing Earthward."

"Of course," the vicar said. "How silly of me not to realise."

"Not your fault vicar," said my uncle, clapping him heartily on the back. "It takes a certain kind of analytical mind to figure these things out. Right, I think we're ready for the off."

Uncle Frederick donned his crash helmet and we helped him into the capsule. "Will you do me the honour of pulling the ripcord, Vincent?" he asked.

I nodded eagerly. "The honour is all mine, uncle."

Venus by Catapult

"Wish me luck then, everybody!" Uncle Frederick said. He waved at his little audience and then pulled the iron door closed with a solid clang. The others stood well back, and I took up my position by the ripcord. From inside the capsule I heard my uncle's muffled voice counting down.

"Five, four..."

I must admit, I was very nervous.

"...three, two..."

I wiped my perspiring palms and took a firm grip of the rope.

"...one - Fire!"

I tugged on the ripcord. For one brief moment, nothing seemed to happen. It was as though time itself had paused to savour this momentous instant. Then everything seemed to happen at once. There was a calamitous 'twang', the catapult fired and the capsule launched into the air.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the doctor. "Look at it go."

Wardle was softly, almost reverently, shaking his head. "What a magnificent piece of engineering," he said in a whisper.

"It looks a bit low," observed the doctor.

The capsule did seem to be dangerously low. From where we were standing it looked like it would clip the church steeple.

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"Stop it someone!" Reverend Black cried, fearing the worst.

"No, it's all right," I said. "It's going to miss."

Suddenly capsule and church collided. We heard the echoes of the impact rolling towards us, followed by the pitter-patter of falling masonry. In that moment, I felt my heart sink to somewhere around my knees. A terrible, deathly silence descended upon us. I turned to see that the vicar had turned a bright beetroot colour, and seeing he was about to explode with fury, I diplomatically moved one pace backwards.

"You've demolished my steeple!" he roared.

"I say, it didn't half give it one hell of a clout, what!" Doctor Wentworth said, greatly amused by the incident.

"That church has been standing for four hundred years," Reverend Black fumed. "Look what you vandals have done!"

I tried to placate him, though I must admit that I had never before seen a man of the cloth with such bloodlust in his eyes. "Calm down please, Reverend - it's just an accident, that's all."

"Yes, old boy," said Doctor Wentworth, coming to my aid. "Accidents will happen. I think you're overreacting just a little." He pointed to the damaged steeple. "Look, it's just taken the pointy bit off the top of the spire. Soon have that

fixed: a dab of mortar and a new weathercock and it will be as good as new."

"Oh, you're a buffoon, Wentworth!" Reverend Black responded, most uncharitably. "I shall go and get the police. I shall write to my MP. No, I shall contact the Bishop!" He started to leave. "You won't get away with this," he warned. "I shall make it my business to see that Maitland's ridiculous project is stopped immediately."

Once Reverend Black had gone, the doctor turned to me and sighed. "Something tells me that the vicar is not a happy man," he intimated.

"The vicar is the least of our problems, Doctor Wentworth," I said. "Right at this moment I'm rather more concerned about my uncle."

Mr Wardle, obviously thinking ahead of me, had already fetched the cart. He drew up alongside us and we jumped on the back. "I think the capsule came down on that hillside," he said, pointing beyond the shattered steeple, to a dust cloud rising slowly into the air. Wardle geed on the horse and we moved off.

We trundled along a rough track that snaked up the hillside. There was long grass on either side, swaying gently in the breeze and making it virtually impossible to see anything. However, it didn't take us long to find a broad furrow of churned up earth. And there, at the end of it, was the capsule.

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The door was open, indicating that Uncle Frederick had been thrown clear. We started to search the immediate vicinity for any sign of him.

"Freddie!" the doctor shouted. "Freddie, old boy, are you there?"

"Uncle?" I called as I combed the long grass. Suddenly we all heard a deep, aching groan that could only have been my uncle. Doctor Wentworth found him first, lying in a clump of grass and looking rather the worse for wear.

"Are you all right, old chap?" the doctor said as he knelt beside him.

We helped Uncle Frederick to sit upright. He looked around, apparently in a state of some confusion. "Wow," he breathed. "What a ride!"

I crouched down in front of him and held up three fingers. "Uncle?" I said, fighting to keep his attention. "Uncle, how many fingers am I holding up?"

He smiled at me like a simpleton. "My head hurts, Matilda," he said. "Fetch the bacon and we'll have a party."

"He's delirious," Wardle observed.

"Took a bit of a knock, I shouldn't wonder," Doctor Wentworth said. "He's probably concussed. We ought to get him to a doctor."

"But you are a doctor," I pointed out.

Venus by Catapult

"So I am!" Doctor Wentworth replied. "I say, that's jolly old piece of luck." He bent to examine my uncle, looking deep into his eyes.

"Ah Lord Snowdon!" Uncle Frederick said quite merrily. "I see that you've met my proctologist already. How many times have I told you: never phone me when I'm on the golf course?"

The doctor moved back, letting my uncle's head fall back onto the ground as he gave us his verdict. "Yes," he's concussed, he concluded.

I looked down at him. "Well, he is now," I said.

"We should get him back to the house immediately," Doctor Wentworth said firmly. "This man needs complete rest and relaxation."

Suddenly my uncle reared up, clutching at Wardle's sleeve. There was a wild look in his eye, and I knew in that instant that there would be no hope of dissuading him from continuing with this perilous venture.

"A bigger catapult!" he hissed, the passion burning through his befuddled, semi-conscious thoughts. "That's what we need Wardle, build me a bigger catapult."

And with that he fell back to the ground. Doctor Wentworth and I looked at each other, both sharing the same grave misgivings, then we hefted Uncle Frederick up onto the cart.

* * *

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Over the next few weeks, Wardle and I worked tirelessly to refine the catapult, calculating optimum weight ratios and experimenting with angles of flight. During this time my uncle was confined to bed, but he still took a keen interest in our activities, directing our efforts as best he could. He still had occasional moments of delirium, but with proper medical supervision he was making a gradual recovery. All seemed to be going well until one day, whilst scanning the early morning papers, I chanced across a most disturbing piece of news. I wasted no time in rushing up to my uncle's room, and burst in upon him just as Doctor Wentworth was about to administer a raspberry and vanilla flavoured enema.

"Uncle!"

"Vincent, thank god you're here!" Uncle Frederick cried. "Have you seen what this man is trying to do to me?"

"It's for your own good, Freddie," Doctor Wentworth said, as he stood with his equipment poised.

"Never mind about that," I said, waving the newspaper. "Look at this!"

My uncle suddenly brightened. "Have our lottery numbers come up?" he asked, flushed with optimism.

"No, there's a story here about Nathaniel Slater."

At the mention of that name, my uncle suddenly became most grave. Slater was also an inventor and engineer, and Uncle Frederick's sworn rival. Long ago they had been partners, and together they had successfully developed a system of pneumatic shoulder pads for hod carriers. To celebrate this achievement they had visited an Indian restaurant and it was there that the tragedy had occurred. Half of Slater's face had been blown off by a chicken madras, leaving him horribly disfigured. After all these years, he still blamed my uncle for the accident.

"What does it say?" Uncle Frederick asked quietly.

I folded back the paper, taking a moment to crease it neatly, then cleared my throat and began to read aloud.

"Celebrated engineer and innovator Nathaniel Slater has announced his intention to become the first human man to reach the planet Mars by trampoline. Speaking from his Oxford workshop, Mr Slater said 'We are witnessing the beginning of a new era. My invention, the Slater Springomatic Trampolator, will revolutionise our whole concept of transport. We are all bouncing towards our future on a non-stop trampoline to the stars.'"

I looked up from the newspaper and saw that my uncle's face was grim. "By gad," he hissed. "Slater means to steal my thunder!" He gestured

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anxiously at the paper. "Does it say when he plans to make this attempt?"

I searched the article quickly and found the appropriate paragraph. "Next Tuesday."

"Next Tuesday!" exclaimed Uncle Frederick. He slammed his fist down hard, but as it only impacted on the surrounding bedclothes it did little to vent his frustration. "I will not allow him to eclipse my achievement. I shall make my attempt on Venus this very afternoon!"

"But uncle!" I protested.

"Everything is ready, is it not?"

"Well yes," I replied. "But -"

"Then this afternoon it will be!" Uncle Frederick affirmed. He started to lever himself out of bed, much to the consternation of the doctor.

"Frederick, I forbid it!" Wentworth said. "You haven't fully recovered yet."

"Oh, Wentworth, for heaven's sake!" Uncle Frederick said tetchily. "If I haven't recovered by now, I never will. I've had pills. I've had potions. I've had my head sandpapered and bathed in paint stripper. Yesterday you pumped all the blood out of my body, boiled it up and pumped it all back. If I've survived all that, I am sure I can survive anything. No, I've made up my mind."

"But uncle," I pleaded with him, "won't you please reconsider?"

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Uncle Frederick got shakily to his feet. I knew that there was no chance of him seeing reason - or rather, he was too possessed by reasons of his own. He was a stubborn soul and once he got an idea into his head it was impossible to shift it.

"Make the preparations Vincent," he instructed me stoically. "This afternoon, I fly to Venus!"

There was a curious air of tranquillity as Wardle and myself made ready the catapult. I think that we were both struck by a sense of occasion: the feeling that history was in the making. At three o'clock everything was in order, and Uncle Frederick emerged from the house, clad in his crash helmet and tin foil survival suit. As he mounted the steps to the capsule, I pleaded with him one more time.

"Must you go through with this right now?" I said. "There are more tests that we could carry out; more calculations on the angle of take-off."

"There are *always* more tests to be done," Uncle Frederick said softly. "Always more calculations to make. But until someone actually flies in this thing, we shall never know for certain if we are right. If we become overcautious, we may never get this thing off the ground."

I couldn't help but frown, and seeing my concern, my uncle smiled to reassure me. "Now

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don't you worry yourself, young Vincent," he chastised me. "I predict that this will be a great success. I shall be quite safe and secure in my survival capsule. I have some bread, some milk, and some cheese. I have a good book to read should I grow tired of looking out of the window at the stars. And most importantly, I have a sixteen piece earthenware tea set."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "A tea set?" I repeated. "What on earth for?"

"A gift for the pixie people," Uncle Frederick explained. "It is a well-documented fact that the pixie people of Venus have no concept of pottery. My gift will be a cause of some excitement."

"Of course," I felt bound to agree.

"Well then, must get on," Uncle Frederick said matter-of-factly. "I can't stand around here chatting all day, otherwise I'll miss my launch window."

He was about to climb up into the capsule, when the most raucous and disagreeable cacophony assailed our ears. We turned on our heels to see a mob of angry villagers stalking towards us across the meadow. They were chanting and shouting in the most fearsome way, and at their head, shouting the loudest of them all, was Reverend Black.

"I don't like the look of this," I muttered.

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"Stop this abomination!" the vicar shouted.
"Stop it now!"

As the mob neared us, my uncle, refusing to bow to intimidation, squared up to them. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"The meaning of this, Mr Maitland," said Reverend Black, "is to prevent this hideous and unnatural act from taking place. This machine of yours is nothing short of an abomination. We do not want this sort of thing happening on our doorstep, and so I have requested that the council officially declares this area a Catapult Free Zone."

"You have no right to do this," Uncle Frederick said firmly. "Sir, you should know that I consider it a grave crime to stand in the way of progress, and your blinkered attitude disheartens me."

"I will not allow this," the Reverend insisted.

"Reverend Black, you simply cannot stop it," my Uncle Frederick told him simply. "Vincent," he called to me. "Make ready!"

With that parting shot, my uncle climbed up into the capsule and pulled the door closed behind him. It slammed in his wake with a solid, metallic clang, whose echo, even now, seems to reverberate in my ears.

However, Reverend Black was determined that Uncle Frederick should not defy him. "Maitland!" he shouted. "Maitland, come out of

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there this instant!" He rushed forward and started scrabbling at the hatchway, trying to find a way in.

"Reverend Black, please come away from there!" I demanded. "We are all set for blast off."

"No, I forbid it!" Reverend Black insisted. He turned to the angry villagers and raised his voice. "We must not suffer this evil scheme to continue," he told them. "Destroy this machine!"

Driven to distraction by their rage, whipped into a frenzy by the vicar's words, the villagers set about wrecking the catapult. We tried valiantly to stop them but were overcome by the sheer weight of numbers.

"Stop it!" I cried. "Stop this at once!"

I turned to the Reverend, hoping that I might appeal to his sense of reason, but it soon became clear that he was beyond that noble attribute. He had climbed onto the front of the capsule and was hammering repeatedly on the riveted iron plates.

"Come out Maitland!" he shouted. "It's no good hiding in there!"

I tried to drag him away but he lashed out and sent me spinning to the ground.

"You'll burn in hell for this, Maitland," Reverend Black screamed furiously. "This contraption is the work of the devil."

Venus by Catapult

Climbing to my feet, I noticed that one of the villagers had a hold of the ripcord. "Hey you," I shouted. "Put that down!"

He ignored me.

"Put it down!" I repeated frantically. "You are tampering with forces beyond your ken."

The vicar, meanwhile, had worked himself up into a state of apoplexy, and was beating the capsule so violently that his knuckles were raw.

"We're going to pluck your eyeballs out, Maitland," he howled. "We're going to rip your head off and spit down your neck!"

But Reverend Black was not my main source of concern. The man with the ripcord was picking at the knot that held it secure. "No!" I screamed desperately. I made a lunge for him, but I was too late. There was a huge elastic twang, a phenomenal, ear cracking 'whoosh', and then a stunned silence descended. When I turned around, the capsule was gone.

And so was the vicar.

That, I am afraid to say, was the last that anyone saw of my Uncle Frederick; likewise the Reverend Black. These days, of course, voyages to other planets are practically commonplace - though rocketry has replaced catapult technology and my uncle's place in this history of the space race is all but forgotten.

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But I still wonder about him. Did he ever reach Venus, I ask myself? Maybe, just maybe, he is sitting in some palace on that other world - king of the pixie people, with his sixteen piece earthenware tea set by his side. In reality, I suspect that the truth is far stranger.

The other day I heard of a curious thing. There is an tribe living deep in the jungles of South America who worship a strange and mysterious god - a god who appears to them for a few brief moments every year. For the last forty years tribespeople have come from all around to gather on the slopes of one of their highest mountains and witness the manifestation of this peculiar entity. He appears to them as a man dressed in black, riding a giant silver bullet, and he tears across the sky, shrieking strange things before disappearing over the horizon. The tribespeople have no inkling of the meaning of these odd words, but they have been able to repeat them phonetically for the benefit of Western explorers. It is, apparently, a heart breaking and mournful cry, and it sounds something akin to, 'Help! Get me off this bleeding thing!'

Of course, it could just be coincidence... but I'd like to think that it isn't.

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Searing streams of lava sliced through the rocky foothills, ran together in pools and lakes, rolled into rivers and flowed sluggishly, scorching the earth. Acrid fumes bubbled upwards, caught in the air, drifted out across the poisoned landscape in lethal black clouds. A deep rumble, a subterranean grumble, shattered through the valley. The ground quaked and deep chasms were wrenched open, releasing foul vapours like stale breath. The sky was dark; dark and angry; dark and lethal; raining fire.

Ah, home sweet home.

Nick De Ville tapped his long slender talons against the glass and bared his pointed yellow teeth in a parody of a smile. He brushed a mote of dust from his sleeve and straightened his tie as he turned away from the window.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, gentlemen, gentlemen,” he crooned, clasp his hands together. His smile grew broader, becoming a leer.

The boardroom was square, functional, finished in shiny black marble. Twelve foul and loathsome demons sat around the long oval table; twelve heads of department. Old Jed, The Horned One, had just finished reading the minutes of the previous meeting. He laid his papers down on the table, meticulously

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arranged them so that they sat in a neat pile, then looked up at Mr De Ville.

“And might I just add, on a personal note,” he said pleasantly, “how delighted we all are to have you back amongst us after your recent trip.”

“It’s good to be back,” De Ville acknowledged. He took his seat at the head of the table. “Much as I abhor these business excursions to the mortal world, I am afraid they are becoming increasingly necessary. The odd ‘personal appearance’ here and there can pay great dividends to our operation.”

De Ville sat back, closed his eyes and recalled his most recent engagement. It had been, he thought immodestly, a sterling appearance. He had appeared to a city stock broker at the stroke of midnight (timing was everything) spitting fire and brimstone, roaring and cursing in some arcane tongue, and smelling like the darkest, dankest filth pit in Hades. To say that the stockbroker in question had been somewhat impressed would be putting it mildly. He had immediately signed over his soul in return for a pot full of cash and the attentions of a slightly saggy former Playboy model. Sadly, De Ville had neglected to inform him that he only had forty-eight hours to enjoy his spoils, before fate decreed that his worthless life should be

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snubbed out beneath the rear axle of the 3.30 to Shepherd's Bush. Ah well, ignorance is bliss.

De Ville suddenly scrunched up his face and sneezed. Tiny flames leapt from his nostrils and mouth. He found his attention abruptly jolted back to the meeting.

"Do excuse me," he apologised. He pulled a pair of half-moon spectacles from his top pocket and perched them on the bridge of his spiky nose. Then he glanced down at his agenda sheet. "Right, shall we proceed? Mr Bezzlecrag, perhaps you would like to start us off by filling us all in on the progress made by your department while I've been away?"

Bezzlecrag grunted and leaned forward. He was a wiry, fidgety little creature with pale, damp skin, angular limbs and a slender, barbed tail that curled up over his head like a scorpion's sting. Or, in a certain light, like the pick-up on a dodgem car.

"We've had a quiet month in the Natural Catastrophes Department, I'm very much afraid to say," he reported. His voice was hoarse, coarse, and difficult to follow. Furthermore, a faint tremble underlined each word: when he said he was 'afraid to say', he meant it. Mr De Ville, perhaps understandably, had a very draconian attitude to staff relations.

"Oh dear," De Ville said disappointedly, giving his minion little room for hope.

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“But we have got something exciting lined up for February,” Bezzlecrag added quickly. “A major season of earthquakes, plus a few one-off specials - a typhoon in South East Asia, some tidal waves in Australia and a really spectacular volcanic eruption that we’ve got pencilled in for the 25th. They won’t be expecting that.”

“No?” said De Ville, peering at him inquisitively over the top of his spectacles.

“No - it’s in Coventry,” said Bezzlecrag.

De Ville smiled approvingly. “Nice one,” he said.

“Right outside Pizza Express,” Bezzlecrag added with some relief. He drew a sharp intake of breath, then belched loudly. An abominable stench began to waft through the room.

“Bless you,” someone thoughtfully intoned.

Bezzlecrag thanked him and continued, his confidence growing. “Now, as you know, we’ve been giving Trinidad a hard time just lately - hurricanes, plagues of locusts, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, I’ve been keeping my eye on that one,” said De Ville with a giggle.

“Their population is decimated,” Bezzlecrag expounded. “Their economy is shattered, their crops are ruined. Nevertheless, the islanders have struggled admirably against all the odds; they’ve shown considerable courage and resolve in the face of such tragedy.”

“Yes?”

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“Well, we thought it might be a bit of a giggle to have the whole island suddenly sink into the sea,” Bezzlecrag said gleefully. “We’re working very closely with Mr Scarramank and his people in the Implausible Coincidences Department on this one.”

Scarramank acknowledged the name-check with a wave of one bloated, blood-red paw.

“Good, very good,” De Ville said. “Which brings us very neatly onto you, Mr Scarramank. What else has your department been up to?”

Scarramank scratched his head - a blotchy, crimson dome, hairless save for the odd tuft of curly black fur. “Well, I can’t claim to have caused quite as much havoc as my colleagues in Natural Disasters,” he said guardedly.

“Of course,” De Ville acknowledged gracefully. “I appreciate that your particular area of expertise is indeed a fine art.”

“I like to think so,” Scarramank said smugly. He opened a file, took out a large glossy photograph and held it aloft for the others to see. It was a head-and-shoulders shot of a pasty-faced man in his forties, his thinning hair scraped unconvincingly over the top of his head. “This is Mr Francis Wimble of 46 Mercia Terrace, Scarborough,” Scarramank explained. “This one has been on our books for some time, actually. Oh yes, we’ve had quite a lot of fun with this gentleman over the years.”

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A low murmur passed around the others present. This was going to be a good one, they could feel it. Scarramank could almost taste their anticipation and, ever the showman, he paused to savour the moment before resuming.

“In his childhood,” he continued, “Mr Wimble contracted measles five times, chicken pox three times and tonsillitis twice. More recently we’ve given him appendicitis, meningitis, scurvy and the clap. He’s been in fourteen car accidents, nine industrial accidents, three plane crashes and an incident with a hovercraft. In 1974 we arranged for him to be struck by lightning on six consecutive evenings - one of my personal favourites, that one.”

Mr De Ville nodded. “Ah yes, Wimble. We all have a good laugh about him at home, when there’s nothing on the telly.”

“Then you will know,” Scarramank continued, “that for the last ten years he’s been imprisoned in Dartmoor for a crime he did not commit. He gets out next week, and seeing as how he’s got off lightly so far, we thought it might be a nice idea for him to be struck by a meteorite.”

“Oh bravo!” an enthusiastic admirer called out.

“Very good, very good!” De Ville commended him, as a ripple of applause carried around the table.

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De Ville allowed the jollity to die down of its own accord. Then his gaze came to rest on a small, impish figure, almost dwarfed by the chair in which he sat. His skin was pale green, except for the tips of his pointed ears, which faded to yellow. His eyes were red and slanted, restlessly darting left and right.

“Mr Frutterbugs?”

“Sir,” the impish creature croaked nervously.

“This is young Mr Frutterbugs,” De Ville announced to the rest of the table. “Mr Frutterbugs has recently been promoted to the head of the Electrical Appliances Department. As I’m sure you will know, it is his responsibility to ensure that all gizmos, gadgets and suchlike break down the very day after the guarantee has expired. So, how are things in your department, Mr Frutterbugs?”

“Err, very well,” Frutterbugs said, noticeably anxious. “Yes, erm, there’s not much to report really. It’s all pretty routine stuff.”

“Oh come now, Mr Frutterbugs,” De Ville said in friendly, parental tones. “Please don’t be intimidated by all this talk of earthquakes and meteorites. We do appreciate just how important your department is to our operation. It might seem to you that your work involves only minor devilry, but do I assure you that the cumulative effect of all your efforts is quite devastating.”

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"It's just that, ah - "

"Problems, Mr Frutterbugs?" De Ville pressed him.

"Well no, not really," Frutterbugs replied. "I just wondered, erm, well, you see - "

"Well come on, out with it," De Ville encouraged him gently. "I'm not really as unapproachable as my reputation suggests, you know. If there is something wrong, then I would like to think I can help."

De Ville smiled; an evil, twisted, leering smile. Nevertheless, Frutterbugs found it comforting. He gave a big, heavy sigh and shrugged.

"I just wondered why we're doing all this?" he said.

A stifled gasp from the others present as they caught their breath. All eyes were on him. Suddenly it seemed that there wasn't a friendly face in the room, except maybe the inscrutable features of the head of the board himself.

De Ville rocked forward slightly. He slowly removed his spectacles and his eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Why?" he repeated, sounding genuinely puzzled. "I'm not sure that I know what you mean."

"Well, why are we making life so difficult for everyone?" Frutterbugs said. Again, his words were met by a deathly silence, but it was too late to turn back now. He made a half-hearted

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attempt to justify his question. "It just seems so unproductive," he murmured softly.

A low mutter passed around his fellow heads of department.

"Why?" De Ville repeated once more, ponderously. His voice sounded as old as the rocks, as dark and impenetrable as the night. "Because," he said deliberately, but he didn't get around to finishing his sentence. He was lost in thought, staring down at his own reflection on the polished table top. A slender digit tapped on the veneer: tap, tap, tap. Then suddenly Mr De Ville looked up.

"Gentlemen!"

He slowly pushed his chair back and stood up. Then he bent forward and rested his warty knuckles on the table.

"Gentlemen, it is important to have goals," he declared. "Every organisation must have an aim: a game plan if you like. Our aim is to make as much trouble for mortals as we possibly can, and might I say it is something we do extremely well."

"Hear! Hear!" called out Old Jed.

"Let's face it," De Ville continued, warming to his argument, "anything else would be a waste of our considerable talents. You are new to us, Mr Frutterbugs, and relatively inexperienced. But you must realise that the people around this table have been responsible for some of the

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most calamitous events in history - the sinking of the Titanic, the destruction of Pompeii, S Club 7. How can you possibly accuse us of being unproductive?"

"Well yes, I appreciate what you say," Frutterbugs ventured nervously, "but it just seems so pointless. Take my job, for example. I spend all day causing boilers to break down, toasters to burn out, microwave ovens to go up in smoke. What for? If it's that important then why don't we just stop them all from working in the first place? Isn't that within our power? Then at least we would be free to get on with something more worthwhile."

"Oh dear, dear me," Scarramank remarked, rather patronisingly. "Indeed! Stop them from working in the first place - don't be so ridiculous."

"Well why not?" Frutterbugs retorted. "Why couldn't we do that?"

"Well, because it would mean altering the laws of physics," Scarramank answered, with a contemptuous little laugh. "You're keen Frutterbugs, but you've got a lot to learn."

De Ville turned sharply on Scarramank. "Say that again!" he barked abruptly.

"What?" Scarramank blurted, suddenly taken aback.

"What you just said about physics," De Ville prompted him.

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Scarramank shrugged. "All I said was that to stop all this electrical stuff from working you would have to change the laws of physics," he repeated. "You'd have to prevent the electrons from flowing along the - "

"Brilliant! Brilliant! Brilliant! Brilliant!" De Ville enthused, suddenly overcome with excitement. "This one of the best ideas we've had in centuries. Change the laws of physics! Mr Frutterbugs, you're a genius. You're going to go a long way in this organisation."

"I was only joking," Frutterbugs mumbled. "Just trying to make a point, that's all."

De Ville, however, wouldn't let it go. "Quickly everyone, take notes," he instructed. He began to pace up and down, his leathery tail dragging along the smooth floor. "I want light to travel in curved lines! I want gravity thrown into reverse! I want time to flow backwards. Oh yes! People won't know if they're coming or going. Or even if they've been before they got there."

"I beg your pardon?" said Scarramank.

De Ville ignored him and continued unrelentingly. Once he got an idea into his head, there was no shaking it. "This is going to be great!" he enthused. "Just think how mixed up people are going to be when they think about going somewhere, then find out that they have already gone to a different place than they'd

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been thinking about going to, before they thought about coming back - I think.”

The others looked blankly at him, but De Ville was on a roll. He stood with his hands on his hips, eyes alive with a million devilish schemes.

“This is the biggie!” he thundered, his smouldering breath igniting the table in his excitement. “Get me to a phone, somebody. I’m going to win awards with this one!”

Tall Story in a Short Glass

So there I am, washing the dust from my throat in a roadhouse that clings to a strip of baking asphalt somewhere between Darwin and Alice Springs. A battered radio behind the bar buzzes and crackles as it pays out a succession of soft rock ballads and the occasional Beatles tune. A fruit machine tucked in a corner broadcasts 'six ways to win'. Letter by letter it spells out 'ACKPOT' - the 'J' flickers briefly then gives up the ghost. Nobody's put money in it since 1986.

There are half a dozen other people in here, but no one's talking. The guy behind the bar is in no mood for conversation. Ruddy, rotund, with a whiskey nose, he's draped over a stool like a discarded overcoat, reading the paper.

So I look out the window. There are a bunch of trucks and the occasional car parked outside, but my pick-up looks like it's the only one that's moved in a month. The road is empty, reaching in each direction towards a flat and featureless horizon. The desert offers nothing on either side - no landmarks, no life, no nothing - just the promise of a cool night as the shimmering disc of the crimson sun sinks slowly into the earth.

And then he appears: one tiny little figure in the distance. He comes from nowhere, from the wilderness; a black form flickering in the heat haze like a guttering candle. He draws closer, steadily coalescing into a recognisable shape,

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becoming more and more real with each step he takes. He's dressed in just a t-shirt and jeans, dusty and parched, carrying no pack, no map, no water. He reaches the road and marches straight across, bounds up onto the porch and through the open door.

Nobody looks at him as he orders a drink and pays for it with the last few coins salvaged from the lining of his pocket. Nobody speaks to him, until he comes to sit near me.

"I've come from the meter," he says, but all the while he keeps his eyes fixed on the glass in front of him. He takes a long pull on his beer, downing half of it in one go. He closes his eyes and lets out a gasp of sheer joy. Then he looks out of the window. "Out there," he says. "Out in the desert."

He takes another drink and drains his glass. I offer to buy him another, and when I return he accepts it thirstily. As he drinks, I look out into the desert. Daylight is just a thin band of purple on the horizon by now.

"So where did you say you'd come from?" I ask.

"From the meter," he replies.

"The meter?" I ask.

He sets down his glass. He seems to have recovered some of his senses by now. "Of course," he says. "You know nothing about it, do you?"

I shrug. "I know nothing about what?" I say, and he grins.

"Well exactly." He looks around cautiously, as if he's worried he'll be overheard, but no one is listening. No one is interested. "Okay," he says. "I'll tell you all about it. It's all been kept secret, of course, but I don't suppose it really matters anymore."

Suddenly I'm being pulled in two directions. He's got some story to tell me, and my curiosity is piqued. Who is this guy? Where has he come from? Where was he going? I had the promise of an answer to these questions. But what did he mean by 'I don't suppose it matters anymore'? There was something uncomfortable in that.

"They've been here, you know," he says to me. His pale green eyes are staring at me, challenging me to disbelieve him.

"Who?" I say. "Who have been here?"

He furrows his brow and points upwards. "They have," he says in a low voice. His eyes dart almost imperceptibly from left to right, then he silently mouths the word 'Aliens!' complete with the exclamation mark.

So, here's one question answered - this guy's a fruitcake. But he's deadly serious. And he *did* just walk in here out of nowhere. I'm compelled to listen further. "Aliens?" I respond, saying the dreaded word out loud. He quickly motions me to silence and glances around again, like he

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expects the all-seeing, all-knowing 'powers-that-be' to swoop in on him at any moment. I'm intrigued and I want him to tell me more. It's like I'm probing an open wound - I know I should really leave it alone, but I'm possessed by a ghoulish curiosity.

I lean in towards him and in a low voice I ask, "When? When were these..." I run shy of using the word again. "When were 'they' here?"

He mimics my own posture. "Few years back," he responds, quick as a flash. "They came in two ships. They landed in Sydney, slap-bang next to the Opera House. You remember they had that bomb scare?"

I sit back. "Bomb scare?" I reply, and I am genuinely trying to recall it. "I - I don't remember," I say.

"Sure you do," he tells me. "It was on the news, in all the papers. Well, it was really just a cover story, you see. They didn't want anyone to know about the saucers."

"The saucers?" I repeat. I'm saying the words and in my head I'm laughing, but my voice is heavy with solemnity.

His eyes widen. "Oh yes, I've seen the pictures," he informs me. "There's video footage. They tried to suppress it, but I've seen it." He nods knowingly. "You can see the two saucers - all gleaming silver with rows of tiny portholes. They were exactly like you'd expect to see in the

movies." He shrugs. "Maybe those people knew something we didn't, hey?"

"Maybe," I say. "Go on."

He didn't really need prompting. "So," he says, "there was this big commotion, and the military arrived on the scene and made damn sure that everyone was kept well away. Meanwhile, the aliens were demanding to meet with the world's leaders."

"I see," I say, nodding. "And these aliens: were they green?"

He suddenly suspects that I'm not taking him seriously, and he looks at me with contempt. "They were not green," he says. And me, I suddenly feel very embarrassed. I thought I was treading the fine and uncertain line between humouring a madman and playing along with an elaborate joke. Now I'm not so sure.

"Please," I say diplomatically, "continue."

He does. "Over the twenty-four hours that followed," he says, "leaders from around the world began to assemble at a specially built complex in Sydney - Presidents, Prime Ministers, the Secretary General of the United Nations. Even the Pope turned up to conduct a special service in the shadow of one of the saucers. And there were others too - specially invited celebrities and VIPs. Movie actors, pop stars - some people claim that Elvis showed up as well, but frankly those kind of ridiculous rumours

only serve to make a mockery of the whole thing.”

At this point he stops and lifts his drink once more, draining it to the final third. I find myself irritated at the break in the narrative. I'm eager to hear more. Lunatic or not, he's a compelling storyteller and I'm determined to make it to the end of his tale. He relinquishes his glass and looks up at me, green eyes sparkling. The bastard's got me hooked, and he knows it.

“I suppose you want to know what the aliens wanted?” he asks me, and without waiting for my answer, he obliges. “There was much speculation at the time, and a great deal of anxiety. Were they here to warn us of imminent Armageddon? Did they come to bring peace and harmony to our troubled world? Did they want to suck our brains out, turn us into mindless zombie slaves and eat all our children? Well, no - it was none of these things. The aliens had come to read the meter.”

The meter? There he goes with this ‘meter’ thing again. What meter?

“What meter?” I ask.

He nods, recognising my confusion. “All the world leaders were just as puzzled as you are,” he says. “What was this meter? What was it for? Well, as it turns out, it seems that it was for the sun.”

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“Oh come off it!” I blurt out. Suddenly it’s got just a little bit too silly, and I can’t help my outburst.

“Straight up,” he tells me, without any trace of offence. “Not a word of a lie. The sun - which we’d all taken for granted - was on a meter, and these aliens had come to read it. What’s more, the last reading had been well over three thousand years ago and apparently we were considerably behind in our payments.”

Okay, so now his story has shifted from bizarre to downright ludicrous, but I can’t help feeling that he’s drawing me on to some inevitable conclusion. “Okay,” I say, a hint of a challenge in my voice. “So this meter...” I point out into the dark desert. “It’s out there?”

He smiles. “Took us ages to find it,” he says wryly. “We asked around, but no one could remember seeing it. Eminent scientists from all over the globe were snatched from their universities and corporate laboratories, sworn to secrecy and set to work on locating it. The aliens did their best to help - told us what to look for: a box about a mile wide with numbers on the front. They said that people usually kept it under the stairs. When the Secretary General explained that nobody on Earth had stairs that big, the aliens started to get antsy. They stated, in no uncertain terms, that it was an offence to deny them access to the meter, and could result

in a hefty fine and the possible eradication of the entire planet.”

“That’s a bit rough,” I say, with a frown.

He nods. “Just a little,” he agrees. “Luckily, just when things were starting to get nasty, a weather satellite passing over northern Australia detected an oddly symmetrical square plateau in the Tanami Desert. Men and machinery began to pour into the area. After two months of painstaking ultrasonic surveys, detailed historical research and extensive excavation, a man with a spade struck something hard beneath the surface.”

“The meter?”

“The meter,” he confirms. “It had been buried there for thousands of years, and no one had ever known anything about it. Well, almost no one. Ancient Aboriginal carvings found in the area have since been identified as a man in a peak cap, holding a clipboard. Bit of a giveaway.”

“Just a bit,” I agree.

He shuffles in his chair. “So, anyhow,” he says, “the aliens read the meter then retired to their spaceship. There was a lot of calculator work and eventually they emerged with the final demand, which they promptly handed over to the world leaders. Well, you know how these things work. They tried to divide up the bill, but couldn’t come to any agreement. Countries in cold climates thought they should pay less than

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those in warm climates, because they didn't use the sun as much. Holiday resorts said that they should be able to impose a sun tax on foreign tourists. It all got very messy and complicated, and no one really wanted to take responsibility for it. You can imagine how the aliens felt about that?"

"Can I?" I say.

"Well they weren't too happy," he says.

"Oh well, of course," I have to agree.

"The bill had to be paid, or we'd be in breach of contract - which, as it turned out, was an extensive document etched in fifteen-foot high letters on a cliff face in the Alps. We had thirty days to pay, they said - just thirty days. And if we didn't cough up, they'd cut us off."

With that nugget of wisdom, he drains the last of his drink, pushes back his chair and gets up to leave. Where he thinks he's going is anyone's guess, but I know I can't let him end his story there.

"Hang on a minute," I say. "What happened?"

"What happened?" he repeats.

"The bill?" I say. "When did this happen? How long have we got?"

He smiles. "Not long," he says, with a half-hearted shrug. "Not long now."

He thanks me for the drink and then he's gone. I watch through the window as he crosses the road and strides out into the desert. His

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silhouette dissolves into the darkness and I'm left looking at the big black star-splattered sky.

"Not long," I find myself murmuring to myself, and I wonder if I'll ever see the sunrise. "Not long now."

Donna Quixote

In a certain town beyond the orbit of a cracked concrete by-pass that ran rings around a midlands city that I should not like the mention, there lived a young woman of some thirty-two years going by the unfortunate name of Donna Connor. Donna had lived her life so far on the unremarkable side of average, had distinguished herself in no way whatsoever, and had been judged none the worse for it. Nevertheless, Donna had a passion for the cult of celebrity and professed such avid devotion to the lives of reality TV stars, celebrity makeover experts and manufactured one hit wonders that it dominated every moment of her day. References to the slightly rich and briefly famous peppered her conversations. She spent hour upon hour glued to her television, sucking in trash TV, and she lived for the glossy magazines with their colourful stories of glitz and glamour and gossip.

None of this was evident in *her* neighbourhood. No sparkle, no spectacle, nothing to lift the dreary everyday monotony of real life. No film stars peering through the blacked out windows of gleaming limousines; no fans desperate to get a glimpse of the latest designer fashions; no paparazzi snapping and sniping in pursuit of scandal. Nothing.

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Nothing, that is, until Donna's road-to-Damascus moment when her destiny was suddenly revealed to her. *She* could be that person. *She* could bring a desperately needed dash of pizzazz to her home town. *She* could be a celebrity! After all, she had won the karaoke competition at The Windmill pub last New Year's eve. She was born to be a star! In fact, now she came to think about it, did she not have a duty to 'be seen' by her public?

And so Donna Connor was no more because, well, you can't be a star with a name like 'Donna Connor'. Henceforth she would be known as Donna Quixote and she would need to dress the part. She raided her wardrobe and found a silver mini dress that she'd bought for a party ten years ago. She had never worn it: it had been too tight then, and it was even more of a struggle to get into it now, but, hey, it was silver! Nothing says showbiz more than silver, right? And with all the bells and whistles and such - some gaudy costume jewellery and too much make up - she was ready to take on the town. Specifically she was ready to return to the scene of her first triumph, The Windmill.

It was sure to be a glorious homecoming. This was where it had all happened, The Windmill. This was where she had taken her first faltering steps on the rocky road to stardom. How

astonished they would all be when she smooched through those peeling painted doors, the girl-next-door who had made it big, returning to her roots. She hadn't forgotten them, see, the little people. She made her entrance.

"Oh how magical it is to be back here again!" she cried. The coterie of middle class, middle-aged women being awfully wayward by the dartboard looked baffled. She basked in their attention, waved and blew them a showbiz kiss. Then she sidled up to the bar, where a tired and dishevelled delivery driver had just dropped off his last consignment of the day and was waiting, clipboard in hand, for a signature.

"My autograph? Why of course!" Donna declared, seizing the clipboard from his startled hands. "So who is it to?"

"Ay? What?" the driver responded.

"Ooh, we are being formal. Mr A Watt," she said as she signed with a showbiz flourish and punctuated it with a pair of linked hearts, which she had just decided was going to be her 'thing'. "There you go. Now, don't go putting it on eBay, will you?"

The driver took the clipboard back, decided that the day had been long enough already, and left. Donna leaned on the bar and smiled at the landlady, who had been watching all this with one eyebrow permanently arched. "Yes, it really

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is me," Donna admitted with a shrug. Then, suddenly spying a huddle of pensioners playing dominoes at a corner table, she streamed over and planted a big wet kiss on the wispy-haired head of the nearest. "Milton, you old rogue!" she declared. "Look at you!" She spun around to introduce him to the rest of the bar. "This guy is an entertainment legend. Gave me my first break in the business."

'Milton' - who had never gone by that name, never given anybody their first break in anything, and had spent most of his working life as an electrician - did his best to cope with this confusing situation by excusing himself to go to the gents. By this time Donna had already lost interest in him and was sprawled over the pool table, fluttering her eyelashes at two blokes who were suddenly quite annoyed to find that their game had been interrupted by a delusional woman wearing a smug grin and a dress that was two sizes too small for her.

"Do you mind, love?" one of them said, irritably.

Donna, misunderstanding the question, interpreted it as a request for a performance. "Of course! How could I possibly disappoint my fans?" She slipped off the table and slithered over to the small stage where a keyboard and a microphone stood lonely and unloved. "Okay," she said, adjusting the mic, undeterred by the

fact that it wasn't turned on. "This is a song that's been good to me over the years. I think you might just recognise it."

No sooner had she opened her mouth than she found the landlady at her elbow and her first quavering note was left quivering in the air.

"Hello," the landlady said, and gently took her to one side. "I take it you are about to sing for us?" She had been in the hospitality business long enough to have witnessed most of the stranger forms of behaviour, and knew enough to recognise that perplexing situations are best approached with caution."

"Well yes," Donna replied. "Donna Quixote never lets her public down." She gestured at her public, scattered in silence around the bar.

"Donna Quixote?" queried the landlady.

"*The* Donna Quixote," Donna countered.

"Ah, *that* Donna Quixote," the landlady acknowledged, none the wiser but playing along gamely.

"Well, of course, we'd be delighted to have the great Donna Quixote perform for us. But it's just not possible, is it?"

"Isn't it?"

"Well no," the landlady explained, steadily steering our megastar across the room. "I mean, just think what would happen. Word would get out that you were giving an impromptu performance. People would flock here from all

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over town. We'd need a bigger PA system, more staff, security and so on. We just wouldn't be able to cope."

"Ah, I see what you mean," Donna sympathised. Well, of course, she didn't want to cause a riot. "Perhaps I ought to forget it then?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps I ought to come back and sing another night?" she suggested. "When you've had time to lay on the extra security and everything?"

"Absolutely," the landlady replied enthusiastically. "Or even," she added, "you might like to go somewhere else. To a different venue, one where they can properly 'look after' people like you. Now, is there anyone here with you? Someone who takes care of you?"

"You mean like a manager?" Donna said.

"Yes, possibly, something like that," the landlady said. "Or perhaps someone who works for the local adult care services? No? Any friends that might be out looking for you? An entourage, perhaps - that's what you celebrities have, isn't it? You should have an entourage."

Donna agreed that she should indeed have an entourage, and that she would give serious thought to getting hold of one as soon as possible. In the meantime the landlady took the opportunity to suggest that she ought to leave before the press got wind of her presence. Good

advice. And so, slipping out of the fire exit to avoid any photographers, Donna made her way home.

"What I need is an entourage," Donna posited. "All proper celebrities have an entourage. I am a proper celebrity, therefore I should have an entourage. Nobody's going to take me seriously unless I'm surrounded by sycophants and hangers-on."

The cold logic of this statement found its proper place in the cold light of morning. It seemed agonisingly obvious to her that she had been foolish to step out without an army of supporters. What was less certain, at least to everyone other than Donna herself, was whether this role could be filled by her next door neighbour, Sandra.

"What *I* always thought," Sandra said doubtfully, "was that an entourage was actually a *group* of people – four or five, maybe. Probably no fewer than three. And most certainly not just the one. I mean, if it's just me following you everywhere, that's makes me more of a stalker, surely?"

"Well, eventually there will be more, certainly," Donna admitted. "But you've got to start somewhere, now haven't you? I mean, there's always got to be a first person to join. Stands to reason."

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Sandra didn't appear to be terribly convinced by this, but her manner suggested that at some deeper level she somehow knew that, like it or not, she had already been roped in.

"All right," she said. "I guess I'm on board. How much does it pay?"

"Sandra!" Donna exclaimed, and she seemed to be genuinely surprised and upset. "I expected so much more of you than that. Entourages don't get paid. It's all about hanging out with celebrities, meeting influential people, getting a flavour of that showbiz lifestyle."

"No money?" Sandra said.

"You get to share in the glory!"

"Exactly," Sandra said grumpily. "No money."

"Now don't be disappointed," Donna lectured her. "Remember, it's not everyone that gets access to the inner circle. You're about to be introduced to a whole new world – a world of glamorous premieres and sophisticated magazine shoots. You'll get invited to all the best parties, rub shoulders with celebrities like Eamon Holmes, Noel Edmonds and will.i.am?"

"Will.i.am?"

"The very same," Donna promised.

Sandra looked thoughtful, then doubtful, then thoughtful again. One thing was certain: it was perhaps best that someone was around to keep an eye on Donna. She shrugged, which appeared to indicate acquiescence.

"Excellent!" Donna gushed. "In that case, get into your best party frock, Sandra Panza. They're not going to know what hit them!"

What kind of person would think that 'The Purple Mango' was a good name for a nightclub? The owners of The Purple Mango presumably did, and Donna was the kind of person who thought that this was the most prestigious venue at which to be seen. As was befitting a star of Donna's calibre, she marched straight to the front of the queue, deaf to the jeers and the shouts of abuse that rippled along the line as they passed.

"Listen to them, Sandra," Donna swooned. "Listen to my fans as they call out to me. How thrilled they must be to have a famous person walk amongst them! You see, although they know me as an A-list celebrity, hob-nobbing with the rich and powerful, it's important that they understand that back in the beginning I was just like them. Oh yes, I may have come a long way since those humble beginnings, they may see my face on the covers of magazines but, you know, at heart I'm really just an ordinary girl."

"What magazines?"

"Oh, all the magazines," Donna crooned with enforced modesty.

"*Practical Woodworker*, maybe," said Sandra. "Anyway, I don't think they're all that pleased."

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There seems to be some resentment about you cutting to the head of the queue."

A single shoe came spinning through the air and ricocheted off the back of Donna's head. She didn't appear to notice. "Oh Sandra," she said. "Nobody really expects a celebrity to wait in line. These people aren't angry. They're just excited."

The doorman didn't appear to be that excited. He stared down at them with a stern and immutable look and said, "Get to the back of the fucking queue." Actually, I'm paraphrasing - he wasn't as polite as that.

Donna halted mid-stride and moved one pace back - partially out of surprise, but mostly to prevent herself from ricocheting from the man's pectorals. "I beg your pardon?"

"I fucking said get to the fucking back of the fuck queue," the doorman repeated helpfully. Again, his actual wording was rather more coarse.

"This is outrageous," Donna bristled, feeling suddenly faint with emotion. "Do you not know who I am? Sandra, tell this gentleman who I am."

With no little embarrassment, Sandra did as she was instructed then turned back to Donna. "I told him who you are," she reported. "He didn't appear to be impressed. Let's just go, shall we, while we still have our..." She was

going to say 'dignity' but then realised that it might be a little late for that. "...teeth."

Donna was having none of it. This was a direct assault on her celebrity status, a challenge she was determined to meet. She tried to take a step forward but the doorman was like an unexpected atoll thrust up from a windless ocean - rocky, immovable and a danger to shipping. "Are you trying to tell me that I cannot come in?" she shrieked, teetering on the edge of a celebrity tantrum.

"No," replied the doorman in a voice that could be described as 'affable' for a gentlemen of his size and density. "You *can* come in, *after* you've queued up with everybody else. Now, get!" This final command was issued as a kind of guttural remark, and since it didn't appear to invite further argument, Donna turned on her heel and mooched back down the line.

Sandra scurried after her. "Probably for the best," she said when she caught up. "Tell you what, why don't we go and get a pizza, go home and watch - "

"Of course, I could see what his problem was," Donna said, talking over her. "He was intimidated."

Sandra looked back at the man, filling the doorway and blocking out the light. "Intimidated?"

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"Oh yes, he was clearly threatened by my celebrity status," Donna continued. "Didn't know how to react, poor thing. So he tries to play it cool, pretend he's never heard of me. Oh yes, I've seen it many, many times. It can be really hard for ordinary people when they come into contact with someone famous."

"Yes," Sandra said slowly. "Yes, that will be it. So, home it is. We'll pick up a bottle of -"

"And anyway, I think he's done us a favour," Donna continued. "It will good for me to queue up with the ordinary people - get in amongst my fans, so to speak."

"Queue up?" said Sandra. "We're not still going in?"

"Of course we are," Donna decreed. "People will be expecting me. I don't want to disappoint. I mean look, see how they're all cheering for me now."

People were indeed cheering as they gradually moseyed towards the back of the queue - cheering and laughing. Well, mostly laughing. Donna waved at them as she passed and remained curiously selective about acknowledging some of the choicer insults that were hurled at them along the way. Her manner changed abruptly, however, when they walked in front of a young woman using her phone to take a picture of her friends.

"Paparazzi!" she cried. "Give me that phone!"

"What you on about, you mental tart?" responded the photographer, not unreasonably.

"Delete that picture immediately, media scum!" Donna insisted. "You people are all the same. Just because I'm famous you think it's okay to invade my privacy. Well, I will not put up with it, do you hear?"

"What you mean you famous?" the young woman said. "I ain't never seen you before. Get out of my face, bitch." Or words to that effect.

"How dare you speak to me like that? Sandra!" Donna commanded. "Get me that phone."

Before Sandra could process what kind of a mess she'd just been dropped into, Donna was away down the street and the young woman and her friends were moving towards her.

"Ok blonde, you want to make something of it?"

"Now, now," Sandra warned them. "Let's not do anything silly."

In retrospect, Sandra thought that the patronising, schoolmistress tone that she had adopted may have only served to antagonise the women. Certainly, she thought as she was roughly bundled into a wheelie bin, it hadn't helped to deescalate the situation. Trapped in the darkness, wondering what the smell was and trying not to think about the slimy object she had just placed her hand in, she felt the bin

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being tipped backwards. Then it bumped and bucked as it was trundled down the road at speed. Finally it was pitched forwards and she fell flat on her face in the darkness. The hoarse, snorting laughter that had accompanied this undignified jaunt subsided and, believing it was now safe to emerge, Sandra pushed open the lid and crawled out. She found herself in an alley, the greasy yellow light from a kebab shop illuminating cracked tarmac and piles of soggy cardboard.

"Oh, there you are," said Donna. She was eating a kebab and she offered some to Sandra. "Try some of this, it's marvellous. It's named after me - can you believe it?"

Sandra got to her feet and stood swaying dizzily. "Can we go home now," she said as she pulled strips of rotting lettuce from her hair.

"Probably a good idea," Donna agreed. "I don't want to be seen with you looking like that. Taxi!"

When Sandra answered her front door to find Donna standing there ready to do battle once more in her silver dress and tasteless earrings, her reactions were lightning fast. She slammed the door in her face, leant back on it and shouted, "No, no, absolutely not! I'm not going out tonight."

"But my public needs me," Donna's muffled voice came back. "And I need my trusty companion."

"What you need is..." Sandra began, but thought better of it. "What you need is a night in."

"But I'm an internet sensation," Donna replied. "Whatever that is."

"Very good," said Sandra. "I'm very pleased for you. There is such a thing as over-exposure, you know."

"I can't turn my back on my fans now," Donna pleaded. "Please, Sandra. I'm trending, I think. There's a video of me from the other night. Everybody's seen it."

"Fantastic."

"You're in it too."

Sandra whipped open the front door and lurched out. Donna held up her phone - Sandra snatched it off her, clutching at it like a bus driver pouncing on a pasty, and started to check out the video. It was from the previous evening and it showed her being crammed into the bin and wheeled away. She winced at the memory.

"This is me," Sandra said. "You're not in this video."

"Yes I am," Donna said, taking the phone back. "See, there I am in the background - running away. Come on, we've got to go and show this to as many people as possible."

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"What!" said Sandra, horrified. "No, no - no way."

"Very well, I'll go on my own," Donna said with a shrug and she wheeled around. "It shouldn't be hard for me to get a new entourage - not if I show them this. Hey, maybe that doorman at The Purple Mango will let me in once he's seen it?"

"Wait!" Sandra shouted. "Come back!" She grabbed her coat and bag, and rushed out after the errant celebrity.

It's amazing how fast a confused, self-deluding, fame-obsessed narcissist can move when they're desperate to show strangers video footage of themselves. By the time Sandra caught up with her, Donna had already worked several queues and everyone Sandra passed seemed to recognise her, if all the pointing and giggling was anything to go by.

Donna herself had attracted quite a crowd by now. Sandra found her surrounded by a group of about a dozen perilously intoxicated people, who all seemed to be revelling in her friend's fictitious tales of fame and notoriety. So much so that Sandra struggled to be admitted to the circle.

"Do you mind!" one man exclaimed theatrically as she tried to elbow her way in. "Do you realise that you're in the presence of

Donna Quixote! The actual proper famous Donna Quixote! She doesn't associate with just anyone, you know."

"Eh?" Sandra replied, blindsided by this unexpected display of sycophancy.

"Miss Quixote, would you like us to remove this unworthy individual from your sight?" offered another.

"Oh, I see," Sandra mumbled. "You're taking the piss."

Donna looked down at her, regally. "No, let her be," she replied graciously. "She used to be my entourage."

"Used to be?" Sandra responded. She was stung by this, and it surprised her since until this point she hadn't realised that she cared.

"I have a *real* entourage now," Donna said, gesturing at her new friends. "I'm sorry, but when you move in exalted circles like I do, I'm afraid that you sometimes have to leave some of the little people behind."

Little people! Sandra started to feel her scalp itch and she grew hot behind the ears, which was never a good sign.

"Miss Quixote has been telling us all her wonderful showbiz stories," explained one of the entourage. "And all about her wonderful friends, such as Eamon Holmes, Noel Edmonds and will.i.am."

"Will.i.am?" said Sandra.

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"She's shown us her wonderful, Oscar-winning video of her being stuffed into a bin."

"That was me!" Sandra shouted. "I was the bin girl! Donna, they're just winding you up. Come on, let's go."

Donna sighed and sorrowfully shook her head. "Oh Sandra, you poor girl," she cooed with an almost ecclesiastical level of pity. "I never thought that you would be the type to get jealous. Of course they're not winding me up."

"No, of course we're not winding her up," echoed one of the entourage. "How could we possibly wind up the nation's sweetheart? I mean, was it not Donna Quixote who won our hearts when she triumphed on *Celebrity Cake Bake*?"

"Well, it was nothing," Donna said with a modest shrug.

"Wasn't the whole country rooting for her when our beloved Donna Quixote got through to the final of *Britain's Greatest Singer*?"

"If one has a talent, it is one's duty to share it," said Donna, blushing.

"And weren't we all overcome with emotion when we tuned in to watch Donna Quixote eat a live slug in the last series of *Celebrities Eat the Nastiest Things*? A feat that she has kindly agreed to repeat for us here tonight."

"Well... what?" Donna looked down. One of the party had gone to the trouble of finding a

slug, which was now lying in the palm of his hand, and which he was holding up to her. She found herself staring into what she assumed was its squishy little face. "Well now," she said, "I'm not sure that - "

"She did indeed," confirmed the slug man, all big eyes and faux disappointment. "And you wouldn't disappoint your adoring public, now would you?"

"The thing is, I've already eaten - "

"Of course Donna Quixote wouldn't disappoint us," the slug guy said. "I'm sure if Eamon Holmes or Noel Edmonds were here, they'd eat it. Even will.i.am would probably have a nibble."

Donna looked down at the fat, brown squirming sack of mucus and started to wonder whether this celebrity business was all it was cracked up to be.

Once they had got back to Donna's house, Sandra wasted no time in tearing into the pizza while Donna herself opened the wine and fetched the glasses. "Do you know, Sandra," she said, returning from the kitchen. "I appreciate that I have a duty to my public - after all, it is they who put me where I am now - but sometimes even a star like me needs to take a step back."

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"Mmmm," Sandra agreed, immersed in pepperoni.

Donna poured the wine, nodding sagaciously in time with each glug glug glug. "I mean, there is such a thing as over-exposure," she mused, recollecting that she had heard someone else make that very point earlier that evening. "It's all very well rubbing shoulders with your fans, but I think that it doesn't hurt to distance oneself, now and then. It preserves the mystique."

"Oh yes," Sandra said, embarking on her second slice. "Mystique, absolutely."

"So I have decided that, for the foreseeable future, I will remain behind closed doors," Donna said. "Yes, I shall keep myself to myself. Now don't try to persuade me otherwise."

"I won't." Slice three.

"It's time to hang up the silver dress and become an enigma. I'm sorry, but that's all there is to it."

"Very wise," Sandra said and she pushed the pizza box towards her friend while there was still some left.

"Yes, fans can be so demanding and there is a limit on what one will do for fame. So in order to preserve my dignity I have made it my intention to become a recluse," Donna announced. "I might consider a comeback at some point, but for now this girl stays at home."

Donna Quixote

"I think you've made the right choice," Sandra agreed as she drained her glass and gave an encouraging thumbs up of approval.

"Yes, me too," said Donna, then she grimaced. "Anyway, let me have some of this pizza. The quicker I get the taste of slug out of my mouth, the better."

Scruffy's Magic Juju Shoppe

At Scruffy's Magic Juju shoppe you could get whizzy fizz bombs, and liquorice danglers and all sorts of wonderful sugary flopsicles. And sticky pillows and sherbet bubbles too - but this wasn't why most people went to Scruffy's Magic Juju shoppe. Oh no. People went because Scruffy was the wisest old badger in all the forest and whenever you had a problem, Scruffy would have the answer.

That's why Marty Fuzztail went. Marty had a problem, a big big problem. You see, every year, when the conkers fell, all the forest folk would hurry and scurry about the undergrowth to gather them all up and store them for winter in a big old hopper. And as everyone knew that Marty owned the biggest and bestest conker tree of all, he was put in charge of distributing the conkers to whoever needed them.

So when Moley needed conkers to shore up the embankment after the spring thaw, he would trundle his little wheelbarrow along to the hopper, Marty would pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga the conkers would rumble down the chute and fill his little barrow. And when the Hedgehog twins needed conkers to clear the path by the meadow, Marty would pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga,

the conkers would tumble down the chute and fill their buckets. And when Mrs Gander needed to repair the fences around the duck pond, or Yappy Woofworth wanted to gather up the dewdrop harvest, or Flaps Feathertop had to clean up the leaf moss in the dell, all Marty had to do was pull the chain and with a chugga-chugga-chugga they would have all the conkers that they needed.

But that was all before Slippy Wriggleton came along. Slippy was the leader of the weasels, and he told Marty that he was going about it all wrong. Through a combination of better management, more efficient allocation and careful investment, Slippy said that they could meet all their regular conker requirements, and still have a surplus at the end of the year. Well, Slippy was *very* persuasive, and he also had a certificate in Conker Management, which none of the other forest folk did, so Marty agreed to let him handle the conker distribution.

And that's where it all started to go wrong, because after a while it seemed that there weren't enough conkers to go round. Oh, there were plenty of conkers for Slippy's friends - the weasels, the slimy toads and the crafty foxes - but the rest of the forest folk had to go without. So the embankment crumbled after the thaw. The path by the meadow became impassable. The fences around the duck pond rotted away,

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the dewdrops turned sour before they could be harvested and the leaf moss was left to fester in the dell.

Scrufty pawed at his grizzled grey chin as he listened to Marty's sorry story. "Hmm," he grumbled thoughtfully. "And what did Slippy say when you told him you weren't happy?" Marty looked embarrassed, and admitted that he hadn't mentioned it. "But why ever not?" Scrufty asked. "Slippy is supposed to be looking after the conkers for all the forest folk, not just his slimy friends. You need to remind him of his responsibilities."

"But Slippy is a big bad nasty weasel," protested Marty timidly. "Why, he'll never listen to me."

"He'll jolly well have to listen to you," said Scrufty. "After all, they're your conkers. Here take this, it will help you to be heard." And with that Scrufty pulled a gleaming brass instrument from beneath the counter. "It's a magic trumpet. Blow it three times, and Slippy will do exactly what you tell him."

And so, clutching the magic trumpet, Marty ambled back through the forest, hopping over the stepping-stones in the rushing white water brook, past the ivy grotto by the old weeping willow, until he reached the clearing where the conker hopper stood. It seemed very busy and

bustling these days, far busier than it ever used to be. All sorts of weasels and stoats and toads and foxes stood in line with their sacks and barrows and buckets and bags. The queues were constantly shuffling and bustling as they stepped up to receive their conkers. And there, right in the middle, was Slippy Wriggleton. Every few seconds he would pull the chain and, with a chugga-chugga-chugga, another batch of conkers would rumble down the chute, tumble into some deep receptacle and get carried off into the forest.

Marty took a deep breath and marched on up to the wily weasel. "Now see here, Slippy," he said firmly. "All this handing out of conkers willy-nilly has got to stop."

"Can't talk now," Slippy said, as he tugged on the chain once more. "Very busy." With a chugga-chugga-chugga another sack full of conkers disappeared.

"But Slippy!" Marty protested. "The embankment is now beyond repair, the duck pond is in a terrible state and I dread to think about what's going on in the dell. Something has to be done." Seeing that Slippy wasn't paying any attention, Marty held up the magic trumpet. "Okay, so you're not listening to me right now, but three blasts on this - "

"Oh, but my dear Marty!" Slippy said, suddenly taking an interest. "There's no need

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for that. No need at all." He put one arm around Marty's hairy shoulders, and gently twizzled his weasely moustache. "You know I'm only acting for the best."

"Well, I..."

"And you understand that times are particularly hard at the moment," he continued unctuously.

"Oh yes, but..."

"It's at difficult times like this that we all have to make sacrifices." Slippy smiled an unpleasant, thin-lipped, pointy-toothed smile. "Now, I suppose I could just accept that you're not happy with my work and leave you in the lurch, but that's just not the kind of weasel that I am. After all, I do have a certificate in Conker Management, so I feel that it's my duty to stay and help you through this difficult time. What do you say?"

"Uh, I suppose..."

"Good! Good!" Slippy slapped Marty heartily on the back. "So just hand over the trumpet and we'll say no more about it."

Marty did as he was told. "It's just that..." he began but broke off when he realised that Slippy was no longer listening. Chugga-chugga-chugga went the hopper, and Marty shambled away as the conkers continued to rumble down the chute.

"You gave him my trumpet?" Scruffy asked when Marty returned to the shoppe. "Bless my bunions, why ever would you do a thing like that?"

Marty shuffled nervously. "Well, you see, Slippy is a big bad nasty weasel. That silly old trumpet would never make him listen. Surely you must have something else that will help me?"

Scruffy scratched his grizzled badgery head. "Well I don't know, young Marty," he said after a long sigh. "It strikes me that you're the kind of squirrel that goes around giving trumpets to weasels. Not a good move. Frankly, I'm buggered if I know what I can do."

"Oh please Scruffy," Marty pleaded. "My conkers are at stake here."

Scruffy huffed. "Indeed. And perhaps you should have thought of that before you started handing over other people's instruments to nasty weasels. Well really, I never did!" Seeing the desperate look in Marty's eyes, Scruffy took pity and grumpily conceded. "Oh alright. Look, what you need is the law on your side. Here, take this." He reached behind the counter and produced a crooked stick.

Marty viewed it uncertainly. "Bit of a step down from the trumpet, isn't it?" he sniffed.

"It's the Magic Wand of Justice," Scruffy said irritably. "Just wave it through the air, and Slippy

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will have to obey all the laws of the forest... But, if you don't want it -"

"No, no - I'll give it a go," Marty said, trying to summon up some enthusiasm, and he sighed as he took the wand and left the shop.

Scrufty heard no more of Marty until later that evening. He was sitting in his little room behind the counter, tucking into a scrummy chicken dinner, when he heard the bell tinkle. "Shop!" he heard Marty call. Passing through the little archway, he found Marty leaning on the counter, chin resting dejectedly on his hands.

"Fat lot of good that was!" he said.

"Did you use the Magic Wand of Justice?" Scrufty asked.

Marty nodded. "Sort of," he said, and he held up a slim black box. "I swapped it for an iPhone."

"You..." Scrufty drew a sharp intake of breath through clenched teeth. "You know Marty, you're starting to get right on my tits," he mumbled.

Marty ignored the remark. "So, anyway," he said, looking around him. "What can we try next?"

"Nothing," Scrufty said. "Nothing at all."

"What about this magic rock, here?" Marty said, pointing to a jaggedy stone on the counter.

"It's not magic," Scrufty said. "It's just a

paperweight."

"Okay, okay," Marty said, searching around again before his eyes fixed on a crooked wooden box high up on a shelf. "Ah ha!" he exclaimed. "An enchanted box."

"It's not enchanted," Scruffy sighed. "It's just where I keep my paperclips. And no, before you ask, they're not *magic* paperclips. Look Marty, there's nothing more I can do for you. I gave you a trumpet so you would have a voice, but you didn't want to be heard. I gave you a wand so you could use the law of the forest, but you didn't want to exercise your rights. I can't help you if you're not prepared to help yourself."

Marty fell silent. He shuffled his feet dejectedly for a while. Then he looked up and spied something behind Scruffy, beyond the archway. "What about that?" he asked. "The higgledy-piggledy bone basket."

Scruffy turned. Marty seemed to be talking about the chicken carcass on the table. He was about to explain that it was his dinner, when he had a sudden thought. He popped through and retrieved a small piece of bone, and placed it in Marty's paw. "That," Scruffy said, gesturing back at the remains of his supper, "is the preserved skeleton of the last known Mystical Valiant Bird - the bravest and noblest of all creatures that ever hobbled around a farmyard and pecked at corn." Scruffy pointed to the piece

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of bone in Marty's palm. "That is a piece of its spine. Keep it with you, young Marty. Hold it tight, for it will transform you into the bravest little squirrel this side of the Shining Cliffs."

Marty looked at the bone, awestruck. "Golly," he said.

"Golly indeed," said Scruffy. "Now go! Go and give that nasty Weasel what for!"

With a newfound spring in his step, Marty scampered from the shoppe. Scruffy watched him go, then bolted the door after him and settled down to watch the snooker.

Marty stood in the shadows at the edge of the clearing. This time he wasn't going to let Slippy get the better of him. This time he was jolly well going to give him a stiff talking to, and no mistake. He clutched the piece of chicken spine tightly and marched out into the clearing.

"Stop this!" he cried, as he pushed through the queues. "Stop this at once! You there, yes you - put those conkers down. And you over there - yes, I can see you, stuffing them in your cheeks. Put the conkers back and step away from the barrow. There will be no more handouts today!"

The weasels and the slimy toads and the crafty foxes quickly fell silent. Who was this fuzzy little person? Who had the nerve to stop them from helping themselves to what was

rightfully someone else's? What was the world coming to?

Everyone watched in astonishment as little Marty Fuzztail, owner of the biggest bestest conker tree in the forest, boldly stepped up to big bad Slippy Wriggleton. "Marty?" Slippy said. The slimy weasel froze in the act of dispensing another batch of conkers, his hand still clasped around the chain.

Marty gazed at that cruel mouth and those jaggedy teeth, and he almost backed down. Then he felt the piece of spine pressing into his palm, giving him courage, and he looked Slippy straight in the eye.

"These are not your conkers," Marty said. "You have no right to go handing them out to all your friends. You have done a bad thing, and I jolly well want you to leave."

For a moment the two of them just stared at each other: Marty with grim determination, Slippy with glassy-eyed loathing. Everyone looked on with bated breath. Then suddenly Slippy let go of the chain. "Fair enough," he said. "Come on lads, the jig's up."

And with that he led everyone away. One by one they filed from the clearing, the weasels, the slimy toads and the crafty foxes, until Marty was left quite alone. Slippy Wriggleton was never seen again, the forest folk lived happily ever after and, from that day on, Marty vowed he

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would never allow anyone to abuse his conkers again.

And the moral of this story? Well, sometimes, all that it takes to deal with a nasty problem is a bit of backbone.

Also, when some weasel's got his hands on your conkers, it doesn't mean he can yank your chain whenever he feels like it.

The Hedgehog King

You will have heard of Sherringham, the lawyer, I'm sure. Most people have. I know him but slightly, although I have been fortunate enough to hear this curious tale from his own lips. It concerns an episode from his personal history which took place in 1870 or thereabouts, long before he became the celebrated figure that he is today. At that time he had just come down from Cambridge and was due to be apprenticed to a firm of solicitors in Russell Square when he was struck down by some malady that quite set him aback for a space. So it was that, on the advice of his physician, he decided to spend some time in the country in order that he might recuperate.

I don't know the name of the village that he chose as his retreat. Sherringham was vague upon the subject, perhaps deliberately so, saying only that it was a picturesque and moderately-sized settlement somewhere in Oxfordshire. He described his delight upon seeing the place for the first time after alighting from the train: the tumbledown cottages that gathered around the village green, the Saxon church with its sturdy walls of flint and chert, the road that wound around the buildings, twisting and turning and folding back on itself. There were few other distractions, just a grocery shop and a tavern

with the unusual designation of The Hedgehog King, an establishment which we will visit later in this account. For now we must be content with Sherringham's first impressions, which were favourable since he owns that once the locomotive that had brought him to this idyll had steamed out of earshot, a silence descended quite unlike anything he had known before, punctuated only with a little birdsong and the soft breath of the wind.

The house in which Sherringham had arranged to stay was a former manor whose owners had transformed into a guesthouse for paying customers. It had been recommended to him by, I believe, a school friend and was about a mile from the village. He had hoped there might have been a dog cart on hand to convey him thence, but there was no such transport to be had and so he had no choice but to walk. This inconvenience was one that he very quickly met with gratitude, for it afforded him the opportunity of a pleasant stroll and very soon he began to feel reinvigorated by his surroundings.

His path took him along a neat little coach road which looped around the perimeter of an ancient wood of alder, oak and ash. Before him, and to the right, he had a near uninterrupted view of rolling farmland, dotted here and there with an occasional building or copse, climbing up to a ridge in the far distance. The afternoon

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sun was bright, though not warm, and so low in the winter sky that it induced him to squint.

Sherringham was delighted with all of it, and became all the more overjoyed when his destination came in sight. It was, he reports, a most curious building. To this day he famously has a passion for matters architectural - you may have read his monograph on the subject - so you can imagine his elation at finding that his home for the week was to be a manor house built on the model of many similar seventeenth century buildings, but boasting the most extraordinary agglomeration of alterations and additions. At some stage in its history, some person of the most astonishing audacity and imagination had done their level best to transform the place into a ramshackle simulacrum of a medieval castle. It was fabricated on a much smaller scale, of course, and it was certainly not a fortification in any functioning sense: the turret that teetered over the west wing most probably concealed a chimney stack and it was unlikely that there was easy access to the battlements that crowned the façade. It was a folly but, in its own way, a charming one and Sherringham couldn't help but beam in satisfaction as he tromped up the gravel driveway.

He says nothing of how he passed the rest of the day, although he speaks with some affection

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of the highly individual nature of the house and its furnishings. It isn't necessary to dwell upon his observations here, save to mention one detail whose significance I will make plain in a later portion of this story: a suit of armour that stood in the main hall, in front of a portrait of a figure wearing the same. It struck him quite powerfully upon his arrival and he had the opportunity to examine it more closely the following morning before he went in to breakfast.

Never having professed to be an expert in such matters, Sherringham freely admits that he had no idea of its antiquity, but he estimated from its general state of dilapidation that it was medieval rather than a more modern reproduction. He was wrong in this regard, although the error is understandable since the metal plates were buckled and pitted with tiny indentations, like pinpricks. It had been posed in such a way that one leg was slightly raised and the right arm was held aloft. A shield was strapped to the other limb and was held across the body, and this too was similarly distressed.

The entire tableau was evidently meant to closely approximate the attitude of the figure in the picture behind. This was a portrait of a heavily whiskered gentleman of about fifty, wearing this very suit of armour prior to it having sustained damage. Sherringham

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observed that the upstretched arm in the portrait wielded a sword, a highly decorated weapon with an ornate hilt and emerald pommel, but such a magnificent object was disappointingly absent from the display.

He would have to make every effort to find out more during the course of his stay, he decided, but for now his immediate concern dealt with the subject of breakfast. As far as he was aware, there were only two other people staying in the house at the time. One was a young woman whom he had noticed sketching in the garden the previous day. The other was a somewhat plump middle-aged man called Mr Barnaby, a commercial traveller who supplied local estates. Barnaby was the only other occupant in the breakfast room as he entered, but he was absorbed in the study of a catalogue of agricultural equipment and so Sherringham sat in silence and contemplated how he might spend his day. It didn't take him too long to decide upon his itinerary: he was keen to explore the area and he wasn't so frail that he would permit the thick bands of early morning mist to dissuade him. On completing his meal he went to his room, dug out his thick coat, pulled on a stout pair of boots and set out to enjoy the countryside.

The morning was spent profitably in wandering along footpaths and farm tracks,

allowing himself to be guided by impulse and caprice. By midday he had found his way to the ridge that he had noticed upon his arrival, which feature revealed itself to be an old trackway. He followed its course until it delivered him to the remnants of a Neolithic hill fort and from here he had an excellent view of his surroundings. Looking down he could trace the line of the railway as it bisected the landscape, as a knife might score a piece of paper. There was the village and beside it the woodland, stretching west and south west until it touched the horizon. Before it, curving around its edge in an almost complete horseshoe, was the coach road and it occurred to him that had he cut through the woods the previous day he might have halved the distance between the village and the manor.

By this time the sun had finally emerged to boil away the morning mists, although damp wreaths still hung around in places, particularly over the top of the dark mass of trees. Sherringham gave an involuntary shudder and quickly turned his thoughts to the subject of lunch. He reasonably supposed that something might be obtained at the tavern in the village and so, taking a sighting on the church tower, he started down the hill.

There were just two other patrons enjoying the hospitality of The Hedgehog King when he

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arrived, further enhancing the impression that the village was almost deserted. The landlord was a wiry and sallow gentleman, somewhat withdrawn in comparison with most others in his profession, but he was not unhospitable and informed Sherringham that he could provide him with a light collation of bread and meat. Sherringham took a seat beside the fire while he waited for it to be brought to him, feeling tired but contented by the exertions of the morning. The tavern was small but discerningly appointed, with miniatures and brasses decorating its whitewashed walls. By far the most striking aspect was the fireplace, whose black mahogany surround was ornamented with carvings: long sinuous trunks ran upwards and curled round in spirals in stylised depictions of trees, branches and foliage; folded up within them were representations of numerous small round creatures. Sherringham squinted in the hope of identifying them and when recognition finally struck he could not help but give his discovery voice.

“Good grief, those things are hedgehogs!”

“Yes sir,” the landlord confirmed as he arrived with Sherringham’s meal. “I’m told that the design is unique in all of England, as is the name of this house.”

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“Yes, yes - The Hedgehog King!” Sherringham enthused. “I feel sure there should be some extraordinary tale behind it. You must tell me.”

The landlord appeared uncomfortable upon receiving this request but he reluctantly acquiesced. “I’m not so sure about extraordinary,” he said ruefully. “A lot of silliness, it is. There’s a local tradition that the Hedgehog King has dominion over Collier’s Wood and suffers no man to set foot there after dark.”

“Collier’s Wood - the wood on the edge of the village?”

“Indeed sir,” the landlord confirmed. “And such a d---d lot of nonsense I never did hear. All the invention of Sir Ronald, I’m sure.”

“Sir Ronald?”

“Sir Ronald Collier. Lord of the Manor some hundred and fifty years ago. You’re staying at the manor, I take it? Yes, well, by all accounts that was just your regular country house before Sir Ronald took up residence, and did his best to turn it into a castle afore gallivanting around in a tin suit like something left over from the Battle of Agincourt.”

“Quite! I’ve seen his portrait. So, a regular Don Quixote then?”

The landlord shrugged. “Well, I’m sure I don’t know anything about your Mr Quixote, but Sir Ronald certainly had a bee in his bonnet about

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something. He insisted that there was this thing living in the woods, the Hedgehog King he said, and he pledged to meet it in mortal combat and see that the creature was vanquished. And when he did - or leastways, when he *said* he did - he commissioned this here carving and renamed this tavern in honour of the event."

Sherringham studied the carvings again. He could see why the landlord might be embarrassed by the tale. "You don't approve of this little bit of whimsy?"

"Well, I don't reckon it does us any favours. Makes us out to be superstitious yokels to visitors like yourself. If I had my way I'd tear all this out and we'd make a bonfire of it. *If* I had my way. Unfortunately, this tavern and nigh on half the village is still owned by the Collier family, so my hands are tied."

Having given his opinion, the landlord left Sherringham to his lunch, which, by all accounts must have been a good one for afterwards he drowsily settled back into his chair and stared contentedly into the fire. The warmth, combined with the hypnotic flicker of the flames, did its work and he began to feel his eyelids drooping. He dozed for a little while but before sleep took hold of him completely he quite unexpectedly became fully alert to the feeling that he was being watched. He flinched, startled from his reverie, and then leaned

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forward towards the fire as the glowing coals crackled and spat. The temperature had dropped, or so it seemed to him, and there was a sensation as if of ice flooding through his body. Here was something horrible, something nameless and primordial; he felt it, but didn't see it; knew it, but it was unknown. The dancing halo of light cast around the fireplace seemed to make the carvings come to life, shapes twisting and cavorting on the edge of his vision. But it was the heart of the fire that drew his gaze. He leaned in closer, closer, his breath held, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. Then he saw it - just for a moment. His mouth fell open in a silent, gaping yawn as he fixed upon two eyes deep amongst the embers, red and blazing and watching him with an unnerving intensity.

He sat back with a cry and then the apparition was gone. Something terrible must have told upon his face, for the landlord, who had come to collect his plate, was full of concern.

"Is everything all right sir?"

"What? Yes, I think... Yes absolutely fine I - " Sherringham ran a hand over his face. "I've not been too well just lately; not quite myself." He got shakily to his feet, announcing that fresh air would no doubt do him the world of good, then after settling his bill he made for the door.

"Perhaps we'll see you tonight at the concert?" the landlord asked, and in answer to

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Sherringham's confused expression he added: "In the church - the local choir give a recital every month. It's very popular."

Sherringham doesn't recollect his response. Clearly he was still feeling the effects of his recent illness and his overriding thought was to get outside. Once he was out in the open the confusion began to pass, but he felt frail and uneasy. A few hours' sleep might be what was needed and so he started to walk back to the manor with all haste. As the coach road delivered him to the outskirts of the village he noticed for the first time a footpath that departed from the road and trailed into the woods. Might this be the shortcut that he felt sure must exist? Should he chance it? Undecided, he stood for a while, looking along the path as it plunged into the dark canopy of trees and once again he shivered: a faded echo of the feeling that had come over him as he had sat beside the fire.

No, he would not. He told himself that he could not be certain that it wouldn't lead him elsewhere and although he noted a corresponding path emerging from the woods as he reached the manor, he could not regret his decision. There had been something unsettling about those woods; something that had quickened his step as he had paced along the road. He had felt, imagined perhaps, that

something had been watching him from the gloom, a thousand tiny eyes hidden amongst the leaves and branches, and it was with some relief that he left the road and hurried up the drive to his lodgings.

He felt much better after he had rested. There was still some vestige of unease, as though he was affected by the nebulous sensations of a half-remembered dream. Could he recollect being lost in the midst of an endless woodland, panic rising as he became conscious of many, many tiny red eyes watching him from the blackness? Could he remember running and running and running, and all the while something malevolent and indistinct always and forever at his heels? He shook the sensations clear, dismissed these thoughts from his head and by the time he went down to dinner he recalled nothing of them.

Afterwards, he once more paused before the suit of armour and the portrait that he now knew to be Sir Ronald Collier. It was easy to see that the artist had captured something wild and unsettling about his subject. Perhaps it was the way those eyes glared out with something halfway between fear and manic zeal. A man haunted by his delusions, perhaps?

“What do you make of him?” asked a voice at his elbow.

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Sherringham turned to find the young lady whom he had espied sketching in the gardens the day before. This was Miss Banks: he had briefly been introduced to her at dinner, and now she furnished him with the additional information that she was a distant relation of the Collier family. Anxious to avoid any allusions to insanity that might run in her line, Sherringham evaded the question and substituted it with one of his own. "You're an artist?" he asked, pointing to the sketchpad in her hand.

"Only in a strictly amateur sense," she admitted. "I thought I might soak up some atmosphere. And of course, I'm curious about *him*." Sherringham followed her gaze to the picture and felt it would be safe to reveal what he had learnt about Sir Ronald from the landlord at The Hedgehog King. "You're lucky to have found out so much," she said once he had concluded his account. "They're not proud of him. Of course, you don't believe the tales?"

Sherringham was slightly taken off guard by her manner. She was challenging him to believe something that was absolutely ludicrous and she smiled at his puzzled silence. "Look at the armour, Mr Sherringham. What do you think caused that damage?" Sherringham took a closer look at the battered armour, pockmarked with little dents. Could those marks be, no,

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surely not... could they have been made by tiny spines?

“They call them pricklemice,” Miss Banks said. “Local dialect word for hedgehogs. Charming, don’t you think?” When Sherringham looked back she was gone.

Sherringham had no wish to return to his room and, being at a loose end, he was reminded of the invitation to the choir recital and decided that he might as well look in. He was glad that he did as it afforded him the opportunity to see the village in a different light, for the church was quite packed and it happily dispelled the impression that the entire place had been abandoned. After the concert he found himself falling into conversation with a number of the locals and in consequence it was late by the time that he left. So late, in fact, that he considered whether to seek a room at the tavern rather than walk back to the manor, but ultimately he dismissed the idea. After all, it wasn’t far. In fact, the journey might take no time at all if he cut through the woods. Some hours had passed since the sun had gone down but there was a bright moon to light his way, and as he came upon the point where the woodland path met the road he saw that it presented itself as broad and well defined. Any reticence to explore that he may have felt previously had now well and

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truly dissipated and before very long the familiar coach road was out of sight behind him.

The going seemed easy enough at first: the ground was firm and dry, and bright columns of moonlight struck down through the canopy to guide him, but gradually he began to feel uneasy. There was something uncomfortable in the silence. When he stopped to listen, all he could hear was a soft whispering from above as the wind played through the tops of the trees. Over this, the thunderous sound of his own passage as he rustled through the fallen leaves was hideously conspicuous. He began to fancy that from the dark spaces that the moonlight couldn't touch he was being watched by a thousand tiny eyes which tracked his journey, like something from a half-remembered dream.

He hastened onwards, ever more eager to emerge at his destination, but the path grew narrower and became more overgrown until finally it split in two and offered Sherringham an unlooked for choice. The left hand fork was broader and more clearly marked but it seemed to rise upwards, which indicated that it was likely to lead deeper into the woods. The other way was the more obvious option as it continued on in a more or less straight line, but it was dark, overgrown and looked barely used.

As he paused to consider, Sherringham was startled by a sharp blow to his shoulder from

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something which fell from above, and he cried out, more in alarm than in pain. Wheeling around he saw something small and round shuffling off into the undergrowth. He put his hand beneath his shirt where the object had struck and when he pulled it away he could see that it was covered with tiny spots of blood; little red pinpricks arranged in a regular pattern. As he wondered at this he shuddered at the sound of another falling object close by. This time he saw what it was before it could hide: a hedgehog which can only have fallen from the branches above him. Fallen, or *jumped*. An absurd vision of the creature leaping from the treetops passed through his mind, but he hardly had any time to consider this before he detected the sounds of further falls all around him. One creature struck him aside his head and he cried out. It was tangled in his hair, hissing and squealing, and frantically he tore it free, hurled it aside and began to run, instinctively taking the narrow right hand path. All the while he could hear the continued sounds of the plummeting animals in his wake, hurling themselves from the trees. He was outdistancing them, thankfully, but then he found his way blocked by a tangle of thick bushes.

Sherringham says that at that moment he felt terror like nothing he had ever experienced before. He knew he was trapped, that there was

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no way back, and the only escape was to desperately fight his way through the obstacle. The branches tore at his clothes, clawed at his skin as if they were alive, holding him down, smothering him in clammy leaves and cobwebs. Then, he knew not how, he burst though into a clearing, where he slumped down upon the earth, exhausted.

All he heard as he sat there was the thumping of the blood in his ears and his own laboured breathing, and he recalls that for some indeterminate time he did not care to move. His energies were spent, but eventually, sluggishly, he regained his senses and an interest in his immediate surroundings. The noise of falling animals seemed to be absent, but now he could hear something new: a kind of soft, gentle scratching or ticking noise. Before him, in the centre of the clearing, illuminated by a shaft of silver as if it stood in a spotlight, was an oak tree. It was very old and largely hollow and Sherringham fancied that he could make out a faint red glow emanating from a void in its trunk.

After all that he had just experienced, Sherringham didn't know how he had the nerve to investigate the phenomenon, but he somehow felt drawn to it. He climbed to his feet and tentatively approached, leaning into the hole in the trunk and peering down into the dark cavity.

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There was something glinting, something only just within reach. He manoeuvred so that he could get his arm down inside and the tips of his fingers brushed the dry and crumbling interior of the trunk until they closed on a metal object. He adjusted his position again, got a firm grip and pulled. It wouldn't move at first, as if it was being held by something that was loathe to give it up. After one more heave he felt it working loose, and then with gathering momentum he pulled it free.

It was a sword and one that was entirely familiar to Sherringham for he had seen it before. The ornately decorated hilt, the emerald pommel - he knew with absolute certainty that this was Sir Ronald Collier's weapon as depicted in the portrait. But there was also something else: the red glow issuing up from the hollow trunk of the tree was brighter now. He craned into the hole once more and then with a sudden cry he fell back. He had seen an eye: a single, red glowing eye deep within the hollow oak, glaring like a red hot coal. And it had been *looking at him*.

He had no time to consider this vision, since from nowhere there erupted a rising storm of chattering, scratching and chirping. There was movement all around as every branch, every bough seemed suddenly full of spiny little creatures. They ran down every trunk, coursed

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through the fallen leaves in streams to converge on a spot in the centre of the clearing. Sherringham took a stumbling step backwards as he watched a growing mound of creatures running over each other, twisting, turning and somehow *merging* into a single mass. Still they came, more and ever more of them, running together until some hideous and unnatural entity began to form before him. It was a solid, spiky, malignant orb with one single demonic red eye glowing in its centre, growing, and growing, and growing. *The Hedgehog King!* Sherringham turned and he ran.

What Sherringham recollects of his terrified flight is, by his own admission, hazy and confused. He is not aware that he was in control of his own actions; rather he was in the grip of some primordial instinct to escape. He didn't look back but was aware that the creature was behind him. He heard it rolling through the woodland, crushing and scattering everything in its path and letting nothing impede its journey. There was a moment, Sherringham acknowledges, when he feared that he would never leave Collier's Wood and the instant that he caught sight of the road beyond the trees is one that he still counts as one of the most joyous revelations of his life. Upon gaining the protection of the highway - for instinctively he

knew that here he would be safe - he collapsed and remembers little else.

Sherringham later learnt how the staff at the manor had discovered him and put him to bed, where he had slept on until midday. It was Mr Barnaby who woke him by paying him a visit in order to reassure himself as to Sherringham's state of health. Barnaby had been amongst those who had helped him inside and related how shocked everyone had been to have discovered him in such distress. The tattered and torn appearance of his clothing suggested that he had been set upon by someone and the staff were anxious to know if they should call for the local constable.

"Everyone is also rather curious about that?" Barnaby added, pointing to the corner of the room. Sherringham sat up and looked to where Sir Ronald's sword was lying across a chair. For a moment the only thing he could see was that single burning red eye.

"It has to go back!" he said.

Barnaby was startled at the ferocity with which Sherringham spoke. "My dear fellow, whatever is going on?"

"Please, it must go back," Sherringham insisted, and as he looked at Barnaby the latter gentleman flinched for there must have been something of the same wild look in his eye that was present in Sir Ronald's portrait. "Mr

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Barnaby, I wonder if you would do me a very great favour, although I realise that I have no right to ask it." Sherringham then told him as much as he was able about the events of the previous night, and of his conviction that the sword must go back whence it came, and that it should do so as soon as possible. Mr Barnaby was rightly taken aback when Sherringham asked him to perform this service, but nevertheless agreed. Sherringham was relieved at his reply and some of the tenseness seemed to leave him instantly. "But mark you do it soon," he warned, "before darkness falls. And mark you thrust it deep into the heart of that old oak."

There ended Sherringham's story. He admits that there has never been any corroboration for his odd tale and he is quite prepared to accept that the entire episode might have been an hallucination occasioned by fatigue and stress, but he says there are still times when he dreams of that one horrible red eye.

Whereas this may be the end of Sherringham's account there is a sequel that came to me quite recently. There is a young man by the name of Barnaby who has lately been admitted to my club, and who tells a story concerning something that happened to his uncle during his time as a commercial traveller in and around Oxfordshire. Most of this narrative I'm sure I need not relate

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since it will already be familiar to you, but it does add one further detail. Mr Barnaby, it seems, followed Sherringham's directions most faithfully. He had no difficulty identifying the clearing and the oak tree from the description he had been given, and he carried out his instructions most faithfully, thrusting the sword deep into the hollow cavity as far as it would go. He has, according to his nephew, never made any comment as to the veracity of Sherringham's tale, but he does say this: upon plunging that sword down through the dry bark, he heard, most distinctly, a tiny heartfelt squeak.

The Mystery of the Shit Faced Man

My name is Daniel Rose and the tale that I am about to tell took place in the summer of 1927, as I was travelling to the annual Squirrel Taunting Championships in Wakefield. I do not claim, you must understand, to be an accomplished squirrel taunter myself, but there is something about those furry little gits that really sets my teeth on edge, so I feel that it is important that I should play a modest but important part in their downfall.

I recall that the train out of Weybridge was very busy. No doubt there were a few who were as eager as I was to get in on the squirrel action, although the local paper had just announced that the Prince of Wales was planning a visit to our humble town, and I imagine that it was this that prompted the mass exodus.

I had been fortunate enough to find myself a seat in a quiet compartment. My companions numbered three. There was a bluff looking fellow in the uniform of an air-vice-marshal, sporting a huge but aerodynamic moustache that extended for about a foot on either side of his face. The ends of this extraordinary structure appeared to be capable of independent movement and I would not have been the least

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bit surprised if they had shown evidence of an ability use simple tools.

To my right was a vicar, naturally. He was a tall, angular chap - a youngish man, but somehow he appeared frail. Almost transparent, in fact. The curious thing was that if I squinted at him it was almost as if I could see right through to the pattern of the seat in which he sat. I noticed that he was getting nervous and was fingering his crucifix restlessly, so I thought it wise to stop squinting at him for the present.

Finally, to my left was a richly upholstered middle-aged woman of ample proportions who had caked her face in so much makeup that I took it to be an attempt at weatherproofing. She was staring down her nose at me - a good trick if you can do it. I'm nothing if not civil and so I said hello, but the words dried to nothing in my throat and so I turned to look out of the window and resolved not to look at her again for the duration of the journey, if I could possibly manage it.

Moments later the door slid open. A man in a sharp suit and a felt hat leaned in, pointed directly at the seat where I was sitting and said, "I say, is anyone sitting there?"

"No, I don't think so," replied the woman.

"Yes," I replied.

"Excellent, then I'll pitch in with you good people." The man came in, hefted a travelling

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case into the luggage rack and sat in my lap. "The name's Benchley," he said with a smile. Or at least I assumed he was smiling. He was sitting on me, so it was a bit difficult for me to tell.

"Delighted, Mr Benchley," said the woman, who subsequently introduced herself as Miss Kershaw.

"Excuse me!" I protested indignantly, but my words were muffled as this man called Benchley leaned back further into his seat. Or rather, into *my* seat.

"Air-Vice-Marshal Sidney Totters," the RAF man introduced himself. "And the padre here is the Reverend Snoop."

Benchley leaned forward to shake their hands and as he did so I wriggled and prodded him in the back. This prompted a response, but only a minor one. "I say," he said. "This chair is dashed uncomfortable.

"I am not a chair," I protested.

"And it talks!" exclaimed Benchley.

"Gad! Now isn't that novel!" said the Air-Vice-Marshal. "A talking chair. What will they think of next?"

"I am not a talking chair," I insisted and I poked my passenger once more.

"Steady on!" he cried, twisted round and saw me for the first time. "Good lord, how did you get there?"

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"I've been here all the time," I said. "You sat on me."

"What's that?" said the Air-Vice-Marshal. "What's that he's saying?"

"He's says that he's been here all along and that I sat on him," said Benchley, sounding genuinely confused.

"Ha! A likely story," responded the Air-Vice-Marshal. "I reckon that what you've got there is a stowaway. Must have smuggled himself on board in your trousers. What do you reckon, vicar?"

"Well I really don't know," Reverend Snoop replied, understandably. Clergymen are rarely given sufficient training to form opinions these days.

"I am not a stowaway," I retorted. "And I have never been anywhere near this man's trousers - not until he sat on me anyway."

"He's right about that," Benchley agreed. "I always make a thorough inspection of my trousers before I board public transport, and I always tuck my trouser legs into my socks precisely to stop this sort of thing happening."

"Perhaps he dropped out of a tree?" ventured the vicar. "When I was doing missionary work in Malaya, we would often get snakes dropping out of trees and sliding down your back. Very unpleasant."

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"No trees in here, padre," said the Air-Vice-Marshal.

"Ah yes, I was forgetting. Must be the trousers then."

"Oh this is ridiculous," I said. "I've been here all along. You've all seen me." I looked to Miss Kershaw to corroborate my story, but her eyes were now pulsing with a strange demonic light, and so I turned instead to the Air-Vice-Marshal. "You remember me, surely? You can't have missed me, I'm sitting directly opposite."

The Air-Vice-Marshal twitched his moustache contemplatively and one end of it traced a line through the condensation on the window whilst the other playfully brushed Miss Kershaw's knee. "Hmm," he said. "I don't know. What did you look like?"

"What did I look like?" I repeated in exasperation. "You mean, what did I look like just a few moments ago? Well, I looked exactly like I do now, of course, only less crumpled and without a twelve-stone man sitting on me."

"Hmm," the Air-Vice-Marshal said again, his keen military mind churning over the facts of the case. "Well, now I come to think of it, there *was* someone sitting there before. Could be the same feller, I suppose."

"Of course I'm the same fellow," I replied. "Who else would I be?"

"Harvey Chumbles," said the vicar.

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"What's that, padre?"

"Harvey Chumbles," Reverend Snoop repeated. "He said 'who else would I be?'. Well he could be Harvey Chumbles."

"And who is Harvey Chumbles?" the Air-Vice-Marshall asked.

"I have no idea," said Reverend Snoop. "I thought he was a friend of yours."

"Look, look here," I said. I'd had an idea how we might resolve this once and for all. I reached into my pocket, searching for the evidence that would exonerate me. This is a tricky manoeuvre when you have someone sitting in your lap and things did get rather confused. At one point I found myself fumbling through Mr Benchley's pockets by mistake - not something I would ever recommend as the contents of another man's trousers are so often an unpleasant surprise. Eventually I found what I was looking for and held up a small piece of paper. "My ticket."

The Air-Vice-Marshall examined it and found it to be genuine. Mr Benchley graciously apologised and asked me if I would like him to get off me. I told him I would like that very much, and he went and sat by the window. Moments later the door opened, a vicar craned in, pointed at my seat and said, "Is anyone sitting there?"

I was about to respond to this enquiry both clearly and forcefully, but the Air-Vice-Marshall

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beat me to it. "Sorry, padre," he said and he pointed to the Reverend Snoop. "We've got one already."

As I am sure you are aware, ever since the notorious harvest festival riots of '23 it has been illegal for two or more vicars to share the same compartment on a train. This new vicar noted that we had already reached our quota, blessed us all enthusiastically then shuffled off. Moments later the guard blew his whistle, the carriage shuddered and jolted and we were on our way.

Railway travel is in its infancy and the modern English gentleman is still acclimatised to passing his time quietly in his sitting room, staring at the walls and waiting for someone to invent television. It is not yet known exactly what hurtling along at speeds in excess of twenty or sometimes twenty-five miles an hour can do to a person. Stories are told of horrific injuries, terrifying episodes of mental confusion and excruciating lapses of etiquette. I once heard of one fellow who, by inadvertently boarding the wrong connecting train at Crewe, managed to end up in Bristol half an hour before he set out and was disowned by all his friends in consequence. Imagine that - Bristol!

I count myself fortunate that no such railway-related mishaps have ever touched upon my life

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- or at least they hadn't until I embarked upon this journey, for I found myself experiencing a most curious sensation. We had been sitting in silence for an hour. That is, *I* had been sitting in silence. My fellow travellers were happy to engage in light conversation but did not feel it necessary to involve me. I believe there may still have been some lingering animosity or suspicion, though I could not fathom why they should have been so aggrieved since it was I who had been so callously sat on and was therefore the injured party. Nevertheless, ignored I was, although this was no great hardship as it left me at liberty to practise my potato printing. I was just peeling my second spud when we went into a tunnel and everything went dark.

There are certain conventions that custom dictates when entering a tunnel, namely that no one says a word, everybody holds their breath and under no circumstances should anyone ever, ever fart. I held it all in and waited for the darkness to pass, but suddenly I felt a sharp stinging sensation on my cheek, just under my left eye. As we emerged from the tunnel I checked my reflection in the polished surface of my patent Whittley stainless steel potato peeler and saw a red mark on my face, rapidly ripening into a bruise.

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Strange, I thought, this had never happened before. I looked at my companions but there did not appear to be anything troubling them. In fact, they all looked quite happy - the Air-Vice-Marshal in particular looked very pleased with himself. I shrugged it off and carried on with my potato printing. I had just carved a particularly splendid 'g' into a Maris Piper when we went through another tunnel and I felt that odd sensation again - this time on the side of my head. Emerging from the tunnel, I rubbed my sore ear and looked around the compartment. Again, none of my companions appeared to be suffering any ill effects. The Air-Vice-Marshal was even laughing.

I knew that there were two more tunnels on this stretch of the line and that we would be approaching the first of them very shortly. I braced myself, determined to get to the bottom of this matter and once more we were plunged into darkness. But this time I felt nothing. I did *hear* something though: a series of scuffling noises, then something heavy being dropped and then finally a belch (unpleasant, but the rules only apply to bottom vapours and make no mention of oral wind, so it is allowed). Once we were out of the tunnel I saw that we had been joined by another man. He looked worn and dishevelled, his clothes were dirty and torn, and judging by his ruddy complexion and the way he

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was leaning on the Air-Vice-Marshal, licking his face and calling him his best mate, he was as inebriated as a newt.

"Please desist, sir," the Air-Vice-Marshal demanded, to little avail.

"Aww, go on, don't be a..." The inebriated man paused to belch again. "You know what your problem is? You... you... you... Aw, poo." He fell back into the seat and started to giggle and dribble at the same time.

"Friend of yours?" I asked.

The Air-Vice-Marshal sneered at me and had he been able to call in a ground attack at that point, I'm sure I would have been for it. "How dare you, sir?" he declared. "To suggest that I am in the habit of associating with dipsomaniacs and - "

I was prevented from hearing about who else the Air-Vice-Marshal wasn't in the habit of associating with when we plunged into the final tunnel. This time we appeared to pass through it without incident - no one made a sound, no one got punched in the face - and yet, when we emerged, the drunkard had disappeared and Mr Benchley was sprawled dead in his seat, his lifeless eyes staring straight ahead, a gunshot wound on his forehead, a knife lodged in his chest and a noose around his neck.

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Miss Kershaw screamed. "Who...?" she said, her voice quavering. She pointed directly at me. "Who are you?"

"What?" My heart sank. Surely we didn't have to go through all this again. "What do you mean, who am I? I've been sitting here this whole time. Don't you think we ought to be more concerned about the body?"

"What body?" Miss Kershaw asked.

I pointed to the body, despairing that this should be necessary. She didn't seem to be interested and asked me again who I was. And if that wasn't enough, the Air-Vice-Marshal got involved. "Stop trying to change the subject and answer the lady," he said, lightly prodding me in the chest with the tip of his moustache. "Come on laddie, account for yourself."

"I'm a legitimate passenger on this train," I said, becoming increasingly flustered. "You have already seen my ticket. I have been here the whole time. Now, don't you think it is rather more important that Mr Benchley has been murdered?"

"Mr Benchley?"

"Him! Him! Him!" I said, pointing at the corpse.

The Air-Vice-Marshal cast a brief glance at Benchley. "Oh yes?" he said. "And what makes you think he's been murdered?"

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"Well, if all the noose did was to succeed in giving him a sore throat, then I'm pretty sure the knife and the gunshot wound would have finished the job."

The Air-Vice-Marshal seemed to accept this, but remained unconcerned. "Well, murdered or not murdered, it's really none of our business. If a man wants to get assassinated on a railway locomotive, in his own free time, of his own free will, then as long as he has a valid ticket I don't see that it's anyone else's business. What do you think, padre?"

The vicar nodded, smiled and said simply in a sing-song voice, "Ah, yes. Very true. Very true."

"Well there you have it," said the Air-Vice-Marshal. "If the vicar says it, then it's practically the voice of god."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A man had just been murdered in front of us and of my three remaining companions, two couldn't care less and the third was clearly some kind of ecclesiastical imbecile. For what it was worth I was about to protest further when the door slid open and a dapper, dark suited man with a keen eye and a neat moustache leaned in. I recognised him immediately: it was Monsieur Anton La Cranque, the eminent Belgian detective. It is La Cranque's proud boast that he has never yet had a case that has defeated him, although the many individuals who have sued

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for wrongful arrest might dispute this. Nevertheless, his services are still widely employed by Scotland Yard - mostly when they need someone to clear out the drains, but occasionally they let him loose on a case. I had been fortunate enough to receive assistance from Monsieur La Cranque once before, so I recognised him immediately.

"Monsieur La Cranque!" I exclaimed delightedly.

"Non monsieur," he said in his familiar Belgian tones. "I am not the eminent detective Monsieur La Cranque, whoever he might be. My name is Lemuel Crackers and I am a duvet cover salesman from York."

"But you're Monsieur Anton La Cranque," I insisted.

"Non, non," he insisted right back at me. "I am Mr Crackers. I am from York. I sell duvet covers. For duvets."

"But I don't understand," I spluttered. "I was sure you... Well, you look just like -"

"Please monsieur," said the man who looked like Mr La Cranque, with some urgency. "Please could I trouble you for a light? Out here in the corridor, where there is no draught and the fire will work better, please." He helped me firmly to my feet and led me out into the corridor.

"Monsieur Rose, it is good to see you again," he said, once we were out of earshot.

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"It *is* you!" I said excitedly. "I knew it! I knew it was you!"

"Shush, please," La Cranque said in low, conspiratorial tones. "I am working under cover, hence the reason I have adopted an alias. I am an undercover duvet cover salesman."

"That's extraordinary!" I enthused. "Hang on though, have you got that right? Don't you mean that you're an undercover detective?"

"Yes Monsieur, that is what I have said."

"No, no," I corrected him. "You said that you are an undercover duvet cover salesman."

"Of course. I have said this. What is the difference, please?"

"Well," I explained. "If you were an undercover duvet cover salesman, you'd actually be posing as a detective in order to secretly sell people duvets. But what you're doing is -"

He stopped me at this point, held up his hand and rubbed his forehead. "Please monsieur," he implored. "I have had a most busy morning following a shitfaced man, who has -"

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"A shitfaced man. Ah... How do you say? An inebriate. A drunkard. An enthusiastic imbiber of the amber nectar."

"He was here," I said. "He was getting friendly with the Air-Vice-Marshal, just before the murder."

"There has been a murder?"

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I told Monsieur La Cranque about the body, and expressed some surprise that he hadn't seen it when he had looked into the compartment. He explained that he had been distracted but that it probably wasn't important anyway. Then he suggested that we return to the compartment before we were missed and he implored me to remember his cover story. However, before we stepped back inside, I reminded him that he had asked me for a light.

"But of course," said La Cranque. "And it would look suspicious if I do not have a cigarette or a pipe. The problem is, I do not smoke. No matter - you had better light something else instead."

And so I set fire to Monsieur La Cranque's hat and we returned to our fellow passengers. "Well, what a great deal of interesting information you have given me about duvet covers, Mr Crackers," I said loudly as we sat down. "I really must get myself one."

"Oh yes, monsieur, you really should," Monsieur La Cranque said. "They are quite good. I cannot recommend them enough. And they are even better if you actually have a duvet."

And so we continued our journey, just two ordinary passengers, one on his way to a squirrel taunting competition and the other a keen-eyed duvet cover salesman in a

smouldering hat. Of course, although Monsieur La Cranque had taken me into his confidence, the opportunity had not yet arisen for him to fill me in on the details of the case. It nevertheless became clear to me that he was hoping to extract information from the other passengers about the mysterious drunkard. I was in the enviable position of watching the master at work as, with skill and subtlety, he probed the Air-Vice-Marshal for information.

"So Monsieur Wing-Commander, who was your drunken friend?"

"You ask a lot of questions for a duvet cover salesman," observed the Air-Vice-Marshal.

"Ah monsieur, in my business it is important to ask many questions," Monsieur La Cranque replied, tapping the side of his nose conspiratorially.

"Really? Why is that then?" asked the Air-Vice-Marshal, not unreasonably. "I would have thought that the questions you would have to ask were quite limited. 'Would you like to buy a duvet cover?' for instance. Or possibly 'What colour duvet cover would you prefer?' That kind of thing, yes?"

"Ah yes, but in the end are we not all just duvet covers, Monsieur?" La Cranque said mysteriously.

"No," said the Air-Vice-Marshal. He leaned back in his seat and studied La Cranque for a

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moment or two through narrowed eyes, then said, "Do all duvet cover salesman talk rot like this, or have you made a speciality of it?"

Monsieur La Cranque tried to meet his eye but he was distracted when Reverend Snoop reached across and tapped him urgently on the knee. "Excuse me," the vicar said. La Cranque ignored him.

"But, Monsieur Biggles," La Cranque continued. "Has it not been said that when a man is tired of duvet covers..."

"Mr Crackers, excuse me," the vicar continued. Again, he was ignored.

"... when he is tired of duvet covers, a young man's gaze will turn to..."

"Do you think I might just ask a question?" asked the vicar.

"... A young man's gaze will turn, if he is not cautious, to the question of what..."

"Only I have this duvet, you see, and it's a king size, or so they say, and - "

"Yes, what is it?" Monsieur La Cranque snapped angrily. "What is it, Monsieur, that you disrupt me in this way?"

"Well, you see, I really can't find a duvet cover to fit anywhere," said the reverend pathetically. "So I wondered what sizes do you do?"

"Many sizes," La Cranque replied impatiently. "All of the sizes that you can imagine. But enough of duvet covers. I think it is time we all

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started to address the elephant in the room, yes? I refer, of course, to this!" He pointed dramatically at the body of Mr Benchley.

"No, that's not an elephant, old boy," the Air-Vice-Marshal corrected him. "I know an elephant when I see one, and that isn't one."

"I remember when I was doing missionary work in central Africa," the vicar reminisced. "Saw an awful lot of elephants out there. They used to eat fruit with their noses. Frightfully unhygienic."

"I refer to a metaphorical elephant, you silly man," said La Cranque.

"Ah well these were African elephants," the reverend mused.

"Listen, old man," the Air-Vice-Marshal interjected. "I have to say that this is really not on. Now, I don't know what the form is where you come from."

"I am from York, monsieur. I am a Yorkshireman. From York, non?"

"Well, whatever funny part of York you come from," said the Air-Vice-Marshal, "where I come from we have the good manners to keep ourselves to ourselves and not interfere in other people's business. Just because Mr Benchley here has, for whatever reason, got himself murdered, it does not mean that he should be made the subject of gossip and tittle-tattle. How would you like it if you got yourself impaled on

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an ice pick and then people started openly discussing your affairs? You should be grateful if the entire matter was treated with discretion, I imagine."

"Curious, Mr Airman," Monsieur La Cranque said, fixing him with a suspicious glare. "You are keen, I see, that we should not delve too deeply into the matter of this man's demise. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Simple manners," the Air-Vice-Marshal replied briskly. "A matter of breeding. I wouldn't expect someone like you, a foreigner from 'York', to understand that."

If Monsieur La Cranque had intended to respond, the opportunity was now lost when the train guard appeared at the door, looking flustered and distressed. "There's been an incident," he wheezed as he fought for his breath. "Would any of you gentlemen happen to be a duvet cover salesman?" La Cranque signalled that he was and the guard displayed evident relief. "Thank heavens sir. Would you come this way, please? We urgently need your help."

The guard led the eminent Belgian duvet cover salesman down the line of clanking, rattling carriages to the goods van at the rear. Naturally, I followed, keen to offer what assistance I could. Opening the door we were met by racks and

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cages full of packing trunks, cases, crates and numerous parcels, including a horse which had been wrapped head to hoof in brown paper and which whinnied irritably as I inadvertently stumbled against it.

Hanging from the roof, to which it had been nailed by its feet, was the lifeless body of an unknown man. The guard pushed his way past it and drew our attention to a suitcase that had been prised open, half of the contents strewn haphazardly across the floor. "Here we are sir," he said. "I had come down here for a cough and a drag - me being on my break, you understand - and when I opened the door I disturbed this bloke rifling through this here case."

"*This* bloke?" I asked, pointing not unnaturally to the dangling corpse.

"What?" said the guard. "No. Some other bloke. Going through the case like something not right, he was. Well, I thought, that's not on, is it?"

"Indeed not, monsieur," Monsieur La Cranque agreed. "You challenged this fellow, of course?"

"You bet your life I did, sir," the guard replied. "I said 'Ere! 'Ere, I said. You got no business going through them cases. Clear off, I said."

"Very good, monsieur guard," La Cranque said approvingly. "And what did this man say?"

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"He told *me* to clear off," said the guard. "Only, he put it a bit more colourfully than that, so I went for my whistle and that's when he panicked, pushed past me and ran off."

Monsieur La Cranque nodded knowingly. "Ah yes," he said. "There is very little that the criminal fears more than a railwayman's whistle. Did you recognise this man, monsieur guard?"

The guard shook his head vigorously, dislodging a small colony of head lice as he did so. "Never seen the bloke before. He looked the worse for wear though. I reckon he'd been drinking."

"Ah ha! The shitfaced man!"

"Well, if you want to put it in those terms, then yes, I suppose so."

It was my turn to question him now. "And what about the body?" I asked.

"What body?" said the guard. At this point the train swung around a gentle bend. The body of the man nailed to the roof swung sideways and lightly bumped the guard on the shoulder. "Oh *that* body," he said. "Sorry, I don't know anything about that."

"I see. Well, presumably the inebriated man had been here for some time if he had had time to nail this man to the roof," I pondered, but Monsieur La Cranque quickly interrupted me.

"Do not be so quick to jump to conclusions, Monsieur Rose," he warned me. "We have no

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reason to suppose that the shitfaced man is responsible for this unfortunate gentleman's current condition. It may be simply coincidence."

"Coincidence?"

"Indeed yes," said La Cranque. "He might have been nailed up by someone completely different. Or it could be suicide."

"Do people usually commit suicide by nailing themselves to train roofs?" I asked.

"Wouldn't be the first time," the guard muttered.

"Well, there you have it," said La Cranque. "Tell me monsieur guard, when was the last time you were in this room?"

"Well now, just before the train departed, I reckon," the guard replied. "Yes, I came in to check that everything had been stowed away securely."

"I see, yes," said La Cranque. "Think carefully now - was there a body nailed to the roof then?"

The guard thoughtfully rubbed his chin and looked around. La Cranque told him to take his time. "Now then," he said at length, "I'm not sure I can really say one way or the other. I certainly can't say for definite that there *wasn't*."

"I see," said La Cranque. "Let us therefore concentrate on what we *do* know." He started to poke through the contents of the open case, casually tossing items aside. "What do we have

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here? Half a kilo of unsalted butter, a pair of dried kangaroo testicles, some novelty spats bearing the legend 'I Love Leighton Buzzard', an enamelled wrought iron cake stand, a letter of introduction from the Polish ambassador, a set of playing cards with pictures of naughty ladies on them, a single glove with six fingers on one hand and a book describing how to build scale models of famous European cathedrals out of pasta. Well, I see nothing very unusual here." He glanced at the name tag on the case then dismissed the guard and bid him return to his duties.

Once the guard had left I took the opportunity to check the name tag for myself. "Reverend Snoop!" I said.

I was astonished. Monsieur La Cranque, however, hadn't registered any surprise at all, and this astonished me further. "But of course," he said to me. "I knew from the moment I saw the kangaroo's testicles that this case must belong to a man of the cloth. Plus, there is an unmistakable odour of religion - I could smell it a mile off. My friend Mr Rose, I think it is about time I filled you in on a few details. You have heard of the great turnip of Hinkley Parva, yes?"

I had indeed, although I had not yet had the opportunity to visit it. The Hinkley Parva turnip first came to prominence two summers ago when it was reported by *The Times* to have

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reached a size of about six feet in circumference. Such an extraordinary vegetable was rightly considered a miracle of our age and crowds had been flocking to visit it ever since.

"Not a miracle," Monsieur La Cranque corrected me. "A product of science. The Hinkley Parva turnip is the result of an experimental formula - a compound called Massivo, which has been developed by Professor Ernest Fluke."

"You mean the inventor of the double-decker jam sandwich?" I gasped.

"The very same," confirmed Monsieur La Cranque. "Massivo can cause any organic matter to grow to extraordinary dimensions: turnips, carrots, chickens, cows, wheelbarrows."

"Wheelbarrows are not organic."

"Very well, not wheelbarrows," said La Cranque. "But many other things that are not wheelbarrows can all be made bigger by Massivo. You can see how this would be of great interest to farmers, gardeners, manufacturers of wheelbarrows and such like."

"Not wheelbarrows," I corrected him again.

"Mr Rose, will you please desist in this preoccupation with wheelbarrows!" La Cranque snapped irritably. "Anyhow, during the course of a burglary at the home of Professor Fluke, the formula was stolen and I was called in to investigate. I chanced across the shitfaced man

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behaving suspiciously and followed him onto this train, disguising myself as duvet cover salesman. Shortly afterwards, I entered the compartment in which you were travelling, at which point you recognised me."

"Ah yes," I said. "And we know what happened next."

"Yes, I asked you to step outside on the pretext of asking for a light," Monsieur La Cranque said.

"Yes, yes, I know, I was there."

"I asked for your assistance in my subterfuge and - "

"Please, Monsieur La Cranque," I interrupted. "I am aware of what happened next. What I don't understand is why the shitfa... the inebriated man was going through the vicar's case?"

"Indeed," Monsieur La Cranque replied. "Here is a mystery that needs to be solved. Let us go and ask Reverend Snoop why someone should be so interested in riffling through his knickknacks."

We returned to my compartment to find that Air-Vice-Marshal Totters was now reclining lifelessly in his seat, staring open-mouthed at the ceiling with an arrow through his neck. "Tut tut," said Monsieur La Cranque. "How typical it is that a man such as this should shirk his

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responsibilities in so cowardly a way by being dead. I fear that traditional values such as honour and duty are very much things of the past, more is the pity."

Monsieur La Cranque gently pushed the body aside and sat down opposite Reverend Snoop, fixing him with a keen gaze. "Monsieur vicar, I am greatly interested in the contents of your case."

"I've never seen those photographs before in my life," Reverend Snoop responded precipitately. "They are nothing to do with me, they are a gift. In fact, what photographs? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Monsieur, I know nothing about any photographs," said La Cranque. "What I am interested in was why someone should break your case open and scatter its contents over the floor."

Reverend Snoop relaxed slightly. "I've no idea," he responded, watching Monsieur La Cranque suspiciously. "For a bet?"

"I think not."

"Well, it's possible," said the vicar. "One fellow says to another fellow, I bet you can't break open that case and throw the contents all over the floor. And then the other fellow says, oh yes I jolly well can, and then he goes and does just that."

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"I think maybe he was looking for something, yes?" La Cranque suggested. "What do you think that might have been, hmm?"

Reverend Snoop looked nonplussed. He frowned, grimaced, shrugged then after a pause he answered, "Sandwiches?"

While all this had been going on I had made a discovery of my own, right there in the middle of the floor between the two seats. It was a vaulting horse. "I say, Monsieur... er... Mr Crackers," I said, quickly remembering the eminent detective's cover story. "What do you think this is?"

"What?" La Cranque said. I thumped the side of the vaulting horse to indicate the obstruction. La Cranque took off his spectacles, cleaned them and replaced them on the bridge of his nose. Actually, La Cranque did not wear spectacles but like all his countrymen he was an accomplished mime artist. "A vaulting horse! This was not here before, no? I thought not. Interesting. Now then, wherever you find a vaulting horse you quite often also find... "

He put his shoulder to the vaulting horse and firmly slid it aside, revealing a black, gaping hole in the floor of the train.

"... a tunnel. It seems as though someone has tried to effect an escape from this railway locomotive."

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"Astonishing!" I replied. "Is it actually possible to dig your way off a speeding train?"

"If a man is desperate enough, all things are possible," Monsieur La Cranque said. "Come, let us see where it leads."

Lighting a flare from his still burning hat, Monsieur La Cranque led the way down into the tunnel. It took us through the bowels of the train, along a twisting, roughhewn passageway that led us past bubbling oil sumps, swinging chains, pounding pistons, half-buried dinosaur bones and the body of the guard who appeared to have been crushed to death in a giant vice, then folded up neatly and slid behind a water tank. Eventually we came to a hatchway above us and, pushing our way through, emerged into the buffet car.

"Outrageous!" Monsieur La Cranque exclaimed, examining the menu. "To charge this much for a pork pie is inhuman."

I was rather more interested in the group of people assembled there than the price of the food. We had seen most of them elsewhere just moments ago. Three of them were dead: the Air-Vice-Marshal, Mr Benchley and the man from the goods van, who had now been nailed into a new position hanging from the buffet car roof. They were joined by the Reverend Snoop, Miss Kershaw and, finally, the inebriated man, all of whom were still alive for the moment.

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Monsieur La Cranque strode up to this latter individual, a triumphant gleam in his eye.

"Sir, I must inform you that you are under citizen's arrest, for whatever it is you have done," La Cranque announced. "We will fill in the details when we find out just what that is. For the meantime it is sufficient for you to know that you are arrested."

"Steady on there, old boy," said the inebriated man, although he suddenly seemed much more sober now. "We're on the same side, don't you know. The name's Featherstonhaugh - British intelligence."

"There's no such thing," spat La Cranque.

"There very much is, old chap," said Featherstonhaugh. "And I'm it. I've been hot on the trail of the miscreant responsible for pinching the formula for Massivo, posing as a sozzled wastrel to throw off suspicion. Rather good, wasn't I?"

"Very good, monsieur," La Cranque agreed. "Being shitfaced must be second nature, yes? But I think you have not got to the bottom of this mystery, no?"

Featherstonhaugh beamed. "Oh, don't be so sure, old boy," he said. "I've been on to this crowd from the beginning."

"All of them?" I asked.

"Most of them," confirmed Featherstonhaugh with a smile. "Miss Kershaw I believe to be

entirely innocent. But Mr Benchley here worked for one of the country's biggest suppliers of agricultural fertiliser."

"A bullshit merchant?"

"Precisely," said Featherstonhaugh. "Massivo would have had dire consequences for his business so he was tasked with preventing the formula from ever entering into production. The Air-Vice-Marshal, on the other hand, was fully aware of the military potential for the compound. Imagine a giant armoured marrow, twelve feet long and impervious to all forms of attack."

"Why, with such a marrow you could rule the world," I said.

"Precisely," Featherstonhaugh agreed. "And every foreign power in the world knows it too, which is why the Air-Vice-Marshal decided to steal the formula and sell it to the highest bidder. Which leaves the vicar here."

"Ah hem!" Monsieur La Cranque coughed to gain Featherstonhaugh's attention. "I think you are forgetting someone, yes? The man nailed to the roof."

"Oh him," said Featherstonhaugh. "He's irrelevant. He's been nailed up there for weeks. I think the railway company really need to look at replacing their cleaning crews. No, I'm afraid we're left with the vicar here, who just happens to be on the judging panels of most of the parish

vegetable competitions throughout the south east of England. Vegetable competitions are big business, aren't they vicar, and there are no prizes for guessing how much Massivo is worth to someone in his position. Enough to make it worthwhile to bump off the competition, isn't that right, Reverend Snoop?"

"Superb!" I responded eagerly. "Why, Mr Featherstonhaugh, your deductive skills are almost on a par with Monsieur La Cranque himself."

La Cranque was somewhat less enthusiastic. "I would not say this, Monsieur Rose. Not at all. Oh no, not at all."

"Indeed," agreed Featherstonhaugh modestly. "I'm sure I could never hope to match the peerless Monsieur La Cranque. Your reputation precedes you sir."

"Ah, it is nothing," La Cranque responded with an airy wave of the hand.

"Why, I'm sure Monsieur La Cranque would have got there in the end," continued Featherstonhaugh. "After a few weeks or so, once everybody else was dead, the truth would have dawned on even the great detective."

"Ah, I see - this is your English sarcasm, yes?" La Cranque took me by the elbow and gently led me to the door. "I think it is time we left, Monsieur Rose," he said. "We must, how to do you say, 'chalk this case up to experience'."

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"Not to worry, La Cranque," we heard Mr Featherstonhaugh say behind us. "No need to be so hard on yourself."

La Cranque muttered something ungentlemanly beneath his breath.

"It was a really tough case," Featherstonhaugh continued. "I expect - "

His words ceased abruptly. Monsieur La Cranque didn't pause nor even break his stride; he swept out of the buffet car. But I stopped for a moment to look over my shoulder and saw that Mr Featherstonhaugh appeared to have been impaled on a pike and that, against all odds, the Reverend Snoop had been flattened under an anvil. Miss Kershaw was now the only person left alive in the carriage and the really odd thing was that for the first time ever, I thought I saw her smile.

Noblock and Kerfanderbuck

Noblock and Kerfanderbuck,
All smileytangled cockrock strop,
When down upon their midnight luck,
Came to fanglekirk the Mage of Lop.

With grindleslate held tight in hand
And trosset firmly held aloft,
They knocked three times in Slambercand
And waited for the Mage to sloft.

An age had passed, he sloft at last
And drew the heavy bolts aside.
The ancient breath was fannyflast
Like spastic pig formaldehyde.

Said the Mage of Lop, "What brings you here,
To disturb me in my posset bed?"
And at his voice, all full of fear,
The fenny bentleys all dropped dead.

His dreaded words hung in the air,
Like splap pigeons on a callowphratt,
And all good men should have a care
Or jocker like a mimsy twatt.

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Said Noblock and Kerfanderbuck
As they grimly fell upon their knees,
"We come in search of Monstatruk
He owes us fifty quid for cheese."

The Mage of Lop was full of glin
And bid them rise up from the floor:
"There is no Monstruck within
I think you boys should try next door."

So Noblock and his next of kin
Resolved to call another day.
The grindleslate went in the bin,
They said 'goodbye' and went away.

The Day Before Tomorrow

How could anyone have known that there was a world lying hidden between the last tick of Tuesday night and the first tock of Wednesday morning? Who could have foreseen that the steady, predictable progression of our seven-day week hid a secret? Concealed within a fold of time: an eighth day, unknown and unseen by mortal men. And who else has visited this place - or am I the only one?

It was a discovery unlooked for, unguessed at, made in circumstances which were by no means out of the ordinary. I had been at home for some few days. This was a matter of weeks before the Christmas of 1882 and the seasonal slowing of trade meant that my business in the city would not suffer from my extended absence. I had taken the opportunity to retire to my country residence with the intention of catching up with friends and relatives, reading an improving book and taking regular brisk walks around the neighbourhood. All activities which would have been essential to the recreation of my health following such a hectic period over the summer but, as is always the way, I proved unequal to putting these noble intentions into practice and had so far spent the week unproductively,

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lounging around the house or practising shots in the billiard room.

On Tuesday evening I ate heartily, perhaps too heartily, drank merrily, certainly too merrily, and retired to bed early. I had a touch of indigestion as proof of my excesses, accompanied by a nagging feeling of another day wasted. Predictably, a restless night was the price I paid for my indolence and gluttony, and I awoke several times after being so cruelly rejected by the arms of Morpheus.

On the final occasion, after twisting and turning for several minutes in a vain attempt to succumb to unconsciousness, I arose defeated to see if stretching my legs might bring some relief. I felt, I recall, distinctly peculiar. It is customary, when one rises, that one should take a few moments to acclimatise to a proper state of wakefulness; to allow the remaining fetters of slumber to fall and leave one free to meet the day with a clear gaze. On this occasion I found that I could not ascribe these odd sensations to the lingering bewilderment of oblivion; I was, I felt sure, fully awake and had been for some time.

I clearly recall the distant chimes of the clock in the hall as it struck midnight, its muted, sombre tones echoing throughout the silent house. Odd - outside it seemed to be uncharacteristically bright. I moved to the thick

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curtains and twitched the heavy velvet folds aside. There had been a light fall of snow earlier in the day and at first I thought it might be reflecting the moonlight. But tonight there was a moonless sky. Odder still, there was a golden glow upon the horizon, unmistakably an indication of the coming dawn. The clock in the hall - it must be wrong. I should ask Jenkins to send for someone to repair it. But still... Could it really be daybreak?

I asked myself that question once more as I watched the new-born sun bob up over the horizon like an apple rising to the surface of a water barrel. How could there be any doubt, the fact of the matter was quite literally as clear as day? But the sun rose so quickly, so unusually quickly, as if impatient for the day to begin, that I could not but question the reality of what I was witnessing. It felt like minutes were being compressed into mere moments as I observed the sky brighten, the dark blue shot through with veins of amber and red, burning away the mist, glistening off the icy fields and roadways and gleaming through the treetops until every last shadow was dispelled.

I snatched up my watch, lying on the bedside table and freshly wound before I had retired. The faintly glowing hands told me that it was moments after midnight. I dressed quickly and went downstairs. Save for the ticking of the

hallway clock, the house was deathly quiet. Not a creak, not a sigh, no signal of movement to suggest a fresh new day had begun. I collected my hat, slid back the bolts on the front door and went outside.

The air outside was crisp and sharp and fresh. A crust of frost lay across the fallen snow, making it sparkle and shine. Everything seemed clean and bright and intense as my hot breath hung in wispy clouds about me. I stepped briskly down the path and out into the lane beyond, the ground crunching softly beneath my feet.

This was no ordinary day. By what power I knew this I cannot say, but I was absolutely certain that this was not the Tuesday that I had just lived through, nor the Wednesday that I had expected to greet me upon my awakening. This was something other, hidden between the two and more vivid and more intense than anything I had ever experienced.

I started down Horsham Lane towards the green, finding to my delight that the neighbourhood I knew so well seemed cast in a wondrously exciting hue. The early birds that twittered in the trees and hedgerows seemed more vigorous; the little stream, that bubbled and popped beside the lane, more vibrant. Bands of mist still swathed the patchwork fields to the east, which twitched with a hundred dark shapes as a murder of crows pecked at the

freshly ploughed soil for worms and grubs. At some signal unintelligible to all but our avian cousins, they simultaneously rose up into the air, one billowing black cloud of feather and wing, carrying themselves over the treetops and away towards some unseen destination.

I was keenly aware that I was alone here. Some supernatural intelligence informed me that no one else had witnessed the daybreak this morning, as I had. No human being, in any case. The grand houses that stood beside the lane displayed no sign or symptom of activity. The windows were curtained and barred as their owners slept on and I knew that the same pattern would be repeated in the towns and villages beyond. This was not the world of men. I alone was abroad to bear witness to the strange phenomenon that had replaced night with day.

What would happen, I wondered if I went up to one of those big houses right now and rapped upon the door? Would I be able to wake anyone? I doubted it. Whatever enchantment had enabled me to witness this anomaly would, I knew, keep them soundly asleep. When I reached the village green the story was the same. The buildings that gathered around that communal space, with its duck pond and its water pump and its pretty little flower beds, were silent. On any other morning this would be

such a lively place, criss-crossed with people making ready for the busy day ahead. Now it was frozen, immobilised, as static as an insect trapped in amber.

The loneliness of my situation suddenly struck me quite profoundly and I felt a sickly surge of panic well up from the pit of my stomach. And yet, in the same moment, I knew that I was *not* alone. There were others here, I could feel them, but I could also sense that they were not of my kind. I have heard people speak before of the sensation that they are being watched. I had not experienced this before, but I felt it there and then for the first time in my life. It was not a pleasant feeling. I had the impression that there was something behind me, lurking out of sight, and yet when I turned I saw nothing.

That is, *at first* I saw nothing. My gaze was drawn to a spot further down the road where the bright sunlight struck the dark wet earth, kicking up a glare that was uncomfortable on my eyes. Could I see something moving? I forced myself to study the spot harder. Something was emerging, shapes coalescing gradually from thin air as if they were fashioned from wisps of mist. Each was a white shadow, a smoky outline imprinted on the air itself. There were so many of them somehow issuing from that single point

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in space, moving towards me, each one roughly the size and shape of a man.

Had they seen me? Was I as unreal to them as they were to me? I swung myself through the gateway of a nearby cottage and took cover behind a hedge. From this position I could watch them as they shuffled up the lane, their sluggish and laboured movements suggestive of some unseen burden. The closer they came, the more substantial they seemed to become until, at the point where they passed the cottage, it was possible to make out features and forms. And although they appeared much like mortal men in shape and attitude, they were less than human: misshapen, broken and incomplete.

I must have counted nearly forty of them as they filed past, slowly but deliberately, with some unknown purpose. When they were gone I leaned back against the gatepost and contemplated the meaning of what I had just seen, but before my thoughts had chance to settle I felt cold, rubbery hands about my neck and shoulders, pulling me down from behind. A deathly grey arm locked across my throat, pale flesh pressed about me, smothering me and I felt myself sinking down into a senseless gloom. I tried to fight, tried to struggle but I was powerless to break free and oblivion promptly overcame me.

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I was dimly aware of being marched along, half senseless, bundled and tumbled by twisted limbs, cold breath on my face and neck. I recall a kaleidoscope of colours, at one time blinded by the bright sunlight stabbing like needles through a leafy canopy above; at others I was in darkness, a world of charcoal grey, with hardly any sensation save the singing in my ears.

Finally we reached our destination and they pressed me down upon a rocky seat. I gulped in the air and searched about me for some clue as to my whereabouts. I was confused, disorientated. I seemed to have been deposited within the skeletal remains of some once great building, the fractured walls and columns thrusting upwards from the rutted ground like broken teeth. I knew this place! This was the folly in Ogilvy Woods, built when such fanciful constructions were fashionable amongst the idle rich; a monument to frivolity and wastefulness.

I had played here as a boy; had enjoyed the loneliness and isolation. I wasn't alone now - I was ringed by a multitude of distorted simulacra of the human form. A great gathering, motionless, watching me. I blinked, struggling to focus, trying to make out the detail of these strange and disturbing beings. Was it me, or did my eyes simply fall away from them? The harder I looked, the more indistinct they

became, as though they weren't really there at all.

I rose to my feet, pushing myself up from the toppled column on which they had left me. I tottered unsteadily, anxious to hold my balance. The air was warm and muggy, as if it were late afternoon. Surely the day could not be so advanced already? How long had we taken to get here? Or should it be no great surprise to me that time here passed at an unfamiliar rate?

"Who are you?"

My words came out falteringly and met no response. Not one of these creatures moved, not one of them spoke.

"Why have you brought me here?"

Again, no reply, but this time there was motion from within their ranks as one of the figures pushed its way through. It approached, moving softly for all the clumsiness of its frame, hardly disturbing the ground underfoot, and stopped barely two feet in front of me. Even at this distance it was an effort to perceive anything but its basic form. I got the impression of skin that was watery and pockmarked, features twisted in a gruesome parody of a man, hair matted and damp. The most disturbing aspect of this encounter was that, in spite of its strangeness, it seemed somehow familiar.

"This is not your time," it said. Its words came out breathy and reedy. I repeated my

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demand for an explanation and my own voice seemed tremulous and faint.

"This is not your time," the creature said again. Such words I knew to be indisputable: I could not claim to belong here in this curious fold of existence.

"*What* are you?" I asked.

"We are what you have left behind," it said and I noticed that although its mouth was moving, the voice seemed to come from somewhere else; somehow it emanated from within my head, the words tumbling effortlessly through my conscious mind.

"We are the mark you make upon the earth, the footprint in the sand, the outline beneath the crumpled sheet. We are the echo of your passing, the memory of your deeds and the promise of everything you could have been. We are the spilt blood, sloughed skin, the shed hair, the spent breath of your every moment, gathered together, given form and set upon the earth this day to fulfil ambitions left unfulfilled, tasks left undone, dreams that were never realised. We are *you*."

We are you, it had said and with those words I suddenly understood why I had felt that this creature was known to me. He *was* me! A roughhewn, incomplete and hideous copy; a facsimile of myself. And then it grinned; a horrifying grimace that at once set my nerves

jangling, for I knew for certain that this thing meant me harm.

"Ambitions left unfulfilled," I repeated, trying not to betray my dread. "What do you mean?"

"Everything that you set out to do and failed," it breathed. "Every stillborn ambition and aborted endeavour. Every moment you wasted in idleness. We are the shadows cast upon this unseen splinter of time, striving to accomplish everything that you had the power to achieve but did not. We are what could have been and we have been doomed to fail, until now. Until you came. Now *I* can be all that you can be."

If I had ever had occasion to lament a misspent existence, then I surely did so at that moment. The repressed guilt of every squandered minute had been brought into being. Given form, given purpose and the power to seek redress. But how, I asked?

"By *becoming* you," it replied and reached out to touch me.

And so I ran. I ran because I knew that had I not taken the opportunity to flee at that moment, the chance would not come again. I broke through their ranks, keeping clear of their groping, outstretched hands, plunging into the wood, crashing through the nettles and branches that snagged my legs and feet until I found a path.

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I had no idea where I was headed but the track led steeply downwards and I knew this must take me out of the woods. The way was criss-crossed with roots and vines, threatening to trip me at every step. At one point I entered a narrow, steep-sided chicane, where my foot struck a protruding rock and I stumbled into a thick bush of brittle leaves and thorns. It tore at my clothes and hands as I freed myself but I could not stop to check my injuries, for I knew that I those terrifying shadow creatures were in pursuit.

I skittered down the path with a speed and nimbleness that I had never been called upon to exhibit before, and which I hope I may never need to rely upon again. I could not see my pursuers but I knew they were close. I could hear them, feel them, and I was certain that if I tripped again they would be upon me before I could recover. Twice I found myself sliding, a rattling of stones spraying out from beneath my soles; and once I narrowly missed a tree stump, avoiding catastrophe only by good fortune.

Just as it seemed that my descent might never end, the gradient began to grow more shallow and I reached a little stream on the edge of the wood. The path took me across two stepping stones and into a neighbouring field and I paused for one brief moment to risk a glance behind me. The vision of those creatures

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through the trees is one that remains as vivid to me now as it was upon that day. In my dreams I still relive the sight of them rolling and tumbling over each other like a grey tide in their haste to reach me.

I pressed on, doubling my pace as I followed the path, skirting the edge of the field and then striking off, away from the wood and towards a stone wall, shining golden beneath the sinking sun. The sinking sun? Was evening approaching already?

I had to get home before nightfall. Something told me that if I didn't I would be trapped here forever. And then with a sudden burst of joy I recognised where I was: I was not so very far from my house! Wading through the long grass I reached the wall, squeezed through a stile and found myself in Horsham Lane! My own pretty little road with its carpet of fallen leaves - it had never looked so welcoming.

Long shadows had grown all about me now. The sun was almost upon the horizon, the sky red and gold, fading quickly to deep purple as the light failed. I started towards my house but, horrifyingly, I found myself being dragged backwards. My pursuers had overtaken me! But now, in this broken light, they had once more become shadowy and indistinct. I struggled to free myself but I was engulfed, drowning in their murky tide. Smoky and

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obscure faces emerged before me, rising and falling in the melee, but their grip was diminishing. As the daylight waned so too did their strength. Moment by moment, they melted into the evening until, at last, I could break free!

I ran past those slumbering houses until I reached my own door. All the while I felt my pursuers keeping pace close behind me - invisible, their rasping voices whispering, their smoky fingers reaching out and brushing me but with no power to hold me. I went inside and slammed the door, listening in terror as they scratched and scrapped at the wood. I could not stay there. I took the stairs two at a time up to my bedroom, pulled the curtains closed and tumbled onto my bed. How I was able to fall asleep I could not say and yet, with those persistent hissing voices still echoing through my mind, this is precisely what I did. It seemed that unconsciousness was somehow forced upon me with the closing of the day; a blackout, as in a play, to assist my transition to the next scene. And as I slept, the scenery changed.

Wednesday morning met me when I next awoke. A bright and glorious Wednesday morning. A golden beam of sunlight infiltrated the room through a chink in the curtains. Downstairs I could hear the sounds of my housekeeper as she prepared breakfast. From outside in the lane

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came the welcome noises of everyday life as people went about their business. Ordinary.

We are familiar, all of us, with dreams that leave such a vivid impression upon us that we carry those sleeping fantasies over into waking life. The thoughts, the feelings and the memories stay with us. That's how my disturbing experience seemed to me when I awoke: the memory of a dream: intense, persistent but too strange and inexplicable to have actually happened, surely? And yet I had slept in my clothes. And there, on the floor, were my muddy boots and the wet footprints that I had left just a few hours ago.

I went to the window and threw open the curtains. I needed to look out upon the world I knew; a place I felt at home. The drayman's cart rattled by with the man's eldest boy hanging lazily off the back. The postmistress struggled with an overflowing basket. The paperboy, tromping up my garden path to deliver the morning's *Times*, saw me at the window and waved, and I waved back. All of these people were going about their lives unaware of the desperate hours concealed in the crease between one day and another; unconscious of the existence of a realm populated by pitiful echoes of ourselves.

Here was a place where hours and minutes marched by at a steady rate; a place whose

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citizens could, if they so wished, fritter away their precious time in any way they saw fit. But I had seen another world and knowledge of it meant that I could no longer tolerate such waste. I had been shown that every minute was precious, every moment a miracle. I had to make them count.

I pulled on my shoes, put on my hat and headed downstairs, calling to my housekeeper to let her know that I would forgo breakfast. I had things to do, people to see, errands that I had put off for too long, promises that I had failed to keep. This much I owed to myself: to make the most of every second allotted to me.

I paused to look at the clock in the hallway as it steadily counted out each second of my life, and as I did so I focused for a moment on my reflection in its face. The imperfect glass summoned forth a roughhewn and incomplete facsimile. Yes, this much I owed, also, to my abandoned shadow, a creature to be pitied, who would forever occupy the space between the last tick of Tuesday night and the first tock of Wednesday morning. I went out to make this day my own.

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Dinner time was a heavy number. It was when the whole household gathered together. The *only* time. Martin would have spent the day wandering around the echoing empty manor house, poking his nose in here, fiddling about with this or that; roller skating in the cobweb-festooned ballroom among the shattered shards of a once magnificent chandelier, or pulling faces at himself in the long mirrors. Or when he wasn't doing that he would have been in the gallery, doodling on all the old masters. There were hundreds of paintings in there, stacked against the walls, lurking under dusty sheets, piled high against the windows, blocking out the blue October sunshine. Someone here had once been quite the collector. They were worthless now. Fit only for doodles.

Occasionally he would zoom by the study, which The Colonel habituated seemingly at all hours of the day and night - when he wasn't at dinner, that is. He would be hunkered down into a cracked and stained leather armchair, steadily steeping himself in brandy and port and vintage sherries, of which he seemed to have an unending supply. Martin had never found out where it was hidden. The routine was always the same: Martin would fly past the open doorway on his skates, down the long oak-

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blocked hallway, and shout "Ullo Colonel!" The Colonel would respond "What there, boy!" long after he was gone.

And then there was Mrs Cowling. Martin didn't know where she spent her time. There must have been some dark, private corner of the manor that Martin had yet to discover. Somewhere that Mrs Cowling could while away the empty hours trying on dresses, for whenever the three of them gathered for dinner she always had something new to wear.

So here they were, all three present at seven o'clock sharp, just as they had been every evening for as long as Martin could remember, with the Colonel taking his rightful place at the head of the table. Strict etiquette had to be observed. The Colonel insisted upon it. Formal attire had to be worn, insofar as that was possible, although only Mrs Cowling seemed to have the means to achieve this. Martin wore the same dirty shirt and tattered jeans that he always wore. The only clothes he owned. Rags really - the fraying gashes at the knees testament to many a skating misadventure.

The Colonel himself wore the same dinner jacket day and night. Martin knew it was the same dinner jacket because it had the same dinner on it - splashes of gravy about the left sleeve, a smudge of mashed potato around the hem and the ghostly imprint of a broccoli floret

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above the breast pocket. The Colonel, it seemed, collected mementos of his various meals with the same assiduity as a squirrel gathers nuts for the winter.

"What is it tonight then, Colonel?" Martin asked hungrily as he eyed the silver-plated tureen that demanded everyone's attention in the centre of the table. The Colonel reached forward and lifted the lid with a palpable theatrical fervour, like he was a circus huckster unveiling his latest curiosity to a hushed and expectant crowd.

"Stew," he said. Mrs Cowling actually applauded. It had been stew for the last three weeks. "Ah yes," The Colonel breathed, taking in the hot steam that rose from the dish. "I always said that Cook makes a wonderful stew."

As was the custom, The Colonel took it upon himself to serve, ladling the thin, anaemic fluid into the outstretched dishes of his fellow diners with a delicate accuracy of delivery that, if his bespattered jacket was anything to go by, did not come naturally to him. "Although," he went on, as he played mother, "I fear that this shall be the last of it." And in a timely confirmation of his prediction, they heard the ominous chime of the ladle scraping along the bottom as The Colonel chased the last few drops around the tureen.

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Mrs Cowling's countenance grew dark and troubled, an expression which The Colonel noted immediately, for he promptly moved to placate the lady's fears. "Oh worry not," he said. "We are creatures born to survive. The larder may be empty but, mark my words, something will turn up. Once we dined like kings, you remember, and one day we shall do so once more. Why, I recall when this table was heaving with - "

"*This* table?" Martin interjected.

"Well, no, not this table, but one very much like it," The Colonel replied. "Before I was here. At the other place. Please don't interrupt, boy, when I am reminiscing about food. You know it is my favourite subject."

Martin apologised and settled down to work on his stew, and to listen to The Colonel's stories. He had heard these tales of 'the other place' a thousand times before, but he never tired of revisiting them. He didn't know where 'the other place' was, but that didn't matter. Wherever it lay, The Colonel seemed to have lived a charmed life there.

"Roast beef! Roast chicken! Roast parsnip!" Each item rolled deliciously off The Colonel's tongue as he listed them.

"Parsnip's a vegetable!" Martin exclaimed. He'd seen a picture of one once.

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"Didn't matter," said The Colonel. "Everything got roasted in those days. There were great big hunks of meat carved straight off the bone. And mounds of potatoes - boiled, steamed, fried and, yes, roasted. We would eat until we could eat no more, and then we would eat some more. And the wines! Let me tell you about the wines."

The sound of a terrific explosion outside punctured The Colonel's recollections. It was powerful enough for the table to jump slightly and for the ladle to clatter in the empty tureen.

"That was closer than last night," Martin said after a pause to allow the ringing in their ears to desist.

"No, surely not, lad," said The Colonel, but as he looked across at Mrs Cowling, her anxious pop-eyed glare seemed to support Martin's estimation.

"I thought I heard sirens earlier today," Martin said.

"Never," The Colonel objected. "Why, there haven't been any police around here for over a year. They retreated south."

"Well," Martin continued, "I know what I heard. This morning I saw smoke coming from the cathedral. Maybe someone got hold of a fire engine?"

"Good luck to them! It's about time someone showed some public spirit," The Colonel

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declared. "Maybe this is the turning point? Maybe soon the riots will be over?"

"Sirens didn't last long," Martin added. "They sort of... died away. Maybe they set fire to the fire engine?"

Mrs Cowling shook her head sorrowfully, gazed across at The Colonel and frowned. "I know, I know," The Colonel said, reading her thoughts. "How did we get to all this, hum? People can fend for themselves, we said. Seems so long ago now. We have spent so long cosseting, nannying and providing for their welfare. Time had come to set them free. Time for the disadvantaged, the poor, the sick, the homeless and the hungry to stand upon their own two feet. To realise their potential, we said."

Martin sat bolt upright. "Listen!" he hissed.

They listened. "I can hear nothing," The Colonel said at length.

"The mob," Martin said. "They're getting closer."

They strained to hear and caught the soft, almost melodic ripple of noise that, at a distance, rolled in like the gentle swelling of a far off ocean, rather than the angry crashing, foaming and bursting that they would have heard at closer quarters. Even so, they knew what they were listening to: a fearsome tide rushing inland, crashing and crushing everything in its

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path; uprooting and tearing, and leaving in its wake nothing but smashed and burnt flotsam.

"And this is what they have done with their freedom," The Colonel said, his voice breaking above the encroaching tempest. "This is what they have done with their independence. They have turned upon their liberators. We, who sold off their hospitals, their public spaces and their libraries that they might be free of such burdens. We, who pulled back the smothering blanket of the welfare state and dragged them blinking into the light of self-reliance. This is how they thank us for their sovereignty."

Three chimes rang out; metallic clanks, rending iron and the explosive splintering of wood. "That was the main gate," Martin commentated.

"Don't worry, they can't get in," The Colonel assured them briskly in response to Mrs Cowling's suddenly pale and wan appearance. "This place used to be a fortress in old times. Well, not *this* place. The other place. It stood up to Cromwell and shall not fail to defend us against these rogues." He was getting confused now. "No, we are securely barricaded. Please, Mrs Cowling, relax and enjoy your stew. It really is most excellent."

"It must have been the high life indeed, back at the other place," Martin observed, not wishing The Colonel to desist in his nostalgic

wanderings, and hoping he might encourage him to return to the path. "Were there many servants?"

"Many servants," The Colonel said. "There were pastry chefs, and boot boys, and butlers."

"Like Mr Hargreaves, who used to do our butling here?" Martin asked.

"Yes, just like Mr Hargreaves," The Colonel affirmed. "And more besides. There were under-butlers, and master-butlers, and butlers that I cannot recall the names for. All gone now."

"Just like Mr Hargreaves has gone," Martin reminded him.

"Yes, just like Hargreaves, lad," said The Colonel. "And there were scullery maids, and parlour maids, and footmen, and stable lads. All gone."

"Just like Gwen. She was our scullery maid here, wasn't she?" said Martin.

"Aye, something of the sort."

"And what about the errand boy?" Martin quizzed him. "Was there an errand boy, like John, the errand boy we had here?"

"Oh yes," The Colonel remembered fondly. "There were teams of errand boys who used to fetch and carry, and bring in groceries from the farms and the villages."

"Gone now," Martin completed for him. "Just like John has gone. And what shall we do now

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that he cannot bring us provisions, and the last of the stew is gone? Shall one of us have to go outside?"

A crash of cascading broken glass reached them from somewhere at the rear of the manor. The shouts and cries were suddenly louder, more distinct. They were in the house. Mrs Cowling, in her alarm, dropped her spoon into her dish and splashed her dinner up the front of her latest new dress.

"Best not," The Colonel said. "Best wait for it all to blow over before we venture out."

Mrs Cowling paused briefly in dabbing her outfit with a handkerchief and gave one of her now familiar startled looks. It should be observed that Mrs Cowling had looked consistently startled for a period of not less than six months, but The Colonel had become sensitive to the distinctions between the peaks of her most extreme agitation and the troughs that reached the baseline of her general background panic.

"Don't you worry, Mrs Cowling, dear" he reassured her. "Blow over it most assuredly will. Take it from me, most riots tend to peter out once they get into their tenth year. I've seen them all before: the hunt saboteurs, the benefit scroungers, the strikes and the pickets. Granted, nothing on quite the size of our current troubles,

but things are bound to die down just as soon as people realise how silly they're being."

The frenetic shouts and sounds of destruction were drawing nearer. Martin heard people trampling through the gallery, fracturing frames and slashing the canvasses of his artfully amended masterpieces. Mrs Cowling could also detect the unmistakable tearing of fabric, in this case coming from her hitherto hidden corner of their retreat, and she hung her head in dismay. Even The Colonel could not fail to register the smashing of a bottle of French brandy in his study. Indeed, it was almost as if he could determine its vintage from the tinkling of the shards, and had anybody been keen enough to notice it they would have seen a single tear run down his cheek.

"As I say," The Colonel repeated, in spite of his private grief, "nothing to worry about." Notwithstanding this earnest prophesy, he asked Martin to drag the sideboard against the door to 'block out the draught'. "But enough of all this talk of high politics and social complications," he continued brightly. "We are not gathered here to set the world to rights. Our responsibilities are only to sit and be at peace and enjoy this wonderful stew."

To emphasise this he raised a spoonful to his mouth, dealt with it lovingly and let out a satisfied 'aaaahhhh!' It was as if all thoughts of

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the approaching mob had been driven from his mind; as if the fact that they could be here in a heartbeat had no relevance to him. He did not even flinch when a brutal crack on the dining room door signalled their arrival. Martin and Mrs Cowling both twirled round in their seats, but The Colonel kept on lapping his stew as if this was an evening just like any other. Behaving, in fact, as if he was back in that other place, long ago, surrounded by his rich and influential friends, and his many and varied maids, butlers and footmen.

"The time will come again, companions of mine, when our lives will be enriched by all the fine things that we could desire. My cellar shall be stocked with all the best wines and liqueurs. You, Mrs Cowling, shall have the latest fashions, direct from Paris, or wherever it is that the latest fashions come from these days. And you, boy - you shall have whatever it is that young boys want. Whatever that may be."

Neither Martin nor Mrs Cowling heard him. They were both preoccupied with dragging more furniture across the room to pile it before the door, the panels of which were beginning to sag before a hurricane of blows.

"We shall spend our days in idle retreat, just like the old times," The Colonel continued in between slurps of stew. "Hunting, shooting and fishing. We shall have not a care."

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The top half of the door burst inwards under pressure of the mob. Heads, arms and shoulders reached through. Mrs Cowling was grabbed by grasping hands and hauled over the barricade, swallowed up by the mob as completely as an alligator gulping down a defenceless rodent. Martin jumped back out of reach, his back pressed against the edge of the table as the door was forced inexorably open.

"Sit down lad!" The Colonel barked. "Eat your dinner. Don't worry about them - they'll never get in, that sideboard is solid mahogany. This trouble will blow over very soon, and then we can all go back to the other place."

"But Mrs Cowling!" Martin protested.

"Well yes, it seems Mrs Cowling will not be joining us," The Colonel admitted. "Gone, like the rest of them. Like the butler, the errand boy and the maid."

"We have to do something!" Martin insisted. "The barricade won't stop them."

"Do something?" The Colonel quizzed him. "What's to do, boy? Nothing we *can* do, apart from sit and enjoy this delicious stew. He scraped his spoon along the bottom of the bowl and lifted out the final piece of moist gristle, which he had been saving until last. He chewed thoughtfully. "Yes, they're all gone: Mrs Cowling and the errand boy and the rest."

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The mob erupted into the room, tumbling over themselves to get at Martin. There was nowhere he could go; nothing he could do. He was grabbed by a hundred different hands and they tore into him. The Colonel paid no regard as they came for him next. He was chewing on something hard - a bone, perhaps - which he spat out into the dish. It was a wedding ring.

"Ah yes," he said wistfully as he was engulfed. "Now even Cook has gone. I always said she made an excellent stew."

These eleven short stories, previously featured on *The University of the Bleeding Obvious*, plus two brand new tales, take us to a lost island where kitchen appliances have turned feral, to a fold in time normally hidden from view of ordinary mortals, and to the dark and deathly lair of the Hedgehog King. We join an intrepid adventurer as he attempts to catapult himself to Venus, eavesdrop on the plans and plots of devils and demons, and marvel at the eminent Monsieur La Cranque's attempts to unlock The Mystery of the Shit Faced Man.

There's also a poem, but it's very short, so don't let that put you off.



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