





The University of the Bleeding Obvious Presents:  
**Death, Doom and Disaster**

by Paul Farnsworth



## Death, Doom and Disaster

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Published 2006

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# **Death, Doom and Disaster**



# 1

I stopped the car at last and let the fog close in around me, enveloping me in its thick, undulating billows of grey. It was strangely comforting, like being swathed in a warm woollen blanket. It softened the edges of the outside world, dulled each sound to a murmur and, despite the isolation and the darkness, it made this seem like a safe place.

Nevertheless, it had caused me to lose my way. I had decided to take a different route this evening, skirting the common in order to avoid the traffic and shave a few minutes off my seemingly interminable journey home. Christ, this job in the city was dragging me down - I seemed to have surrendered whole chunks of my life to a parade of pointless paperwork. As each day went by I felt that I was sinking ever deeper into a morass of mediocrity. But it was the travelling that really got me down, grid locked in traffic for hour after hour, fumes building, horns blaring and tempers becoming increasingly fragile. It just made me all the more desperate to put my foot down and go; to drive and keep driving until I had left my old life behind and was far, far away. And so I had attempted this 'short cut' in order to claw back a few moments of my life. Some hope.

Sadly the weather had conspired against me. The mists had become thicker and thicker,

blinding me. I had slowed my pace to a crawl so that I might pick out my way, but at some point I must have taken a wrong turn, and now I was hopelessly lost. I sighed and stared out into the gloomy night, desperately searching for some feature or landmark that I might recognise. I saw nothing but nebulous banks of fog as they floated out across the common, mixing and merging into weird, twisted patterns, then just melting away to reform into different shapes a moment later.

My breath had begun to steam up the windscreen. To amuse myself I idly wrote my name in the condensation, staring vacantly at the letters until they began to mist over. I sat for a moment in the pitch silence, listening to the rattling of the fog on the window and taking in the colourful smell of the radiant moonlight. Then, curiously, I heard the sound of running feet approaching along the road ahead.

Was it real?

What kind of maniac would be out here on a night like this - apart from me, that is? I shook my head, hoping that this would dislodge the hallucination from my tired mind, but the sound was still there. Tap, tap, tappy tap on the damp tarmac. And it was getting closer. I leaned forward, wiping the windscreen clean as I tried to penetrate the fog.

Suddenly a woman appeared in the beam of my headlamps. The shock of her abrupt arrival caused me to throw myself backwards in my seat. She seemed equally surprised to come upon me and failed to check her headlong flight. There was a thud and the car rocked as she slammed into the front of the vehicle. I sat in stunned amazement as she rolled around on the bonnet, clutching her knee and moaning pathetically. Then she dropped back onto the road, out of sight, but still groaning to herself. Coming to my senses at last, I quickly jumped out of the car and went around to the front to examine the paintwork.

“Cathy, Cathy,” I heard the woman moan behind me as I crouched at the roadside.

“I’m not Cathy, you stupid bitch!” I said angrily, frowning at my shattered headlamps. “The name’s Dickson - Geoff Dickson. Remember that name, you’ll need it when you come to write out the cheque, because I’m going to make damn sure you pay for the damage you’ve done to my car.”

A cursory inspection had revealed the damage to be minimal, but this did nothing to curb my indignation. In fact, the woman’s callous disregard for the trouble she had caused only served to increase my irritation. That, and her subsequent attempts to involve me in her own misfortunes.

“No, Cathy’s over there in the road,” she rattled on. She reached out and grabbed hold of my leg. “We had an accident. She’s badly hurt.”

I’m not an uncharitable person, but by now she was beginning to get my back up. I could sense we were not going to be the best of friends, and the way she was quite deliberately bleeding over my turn-ups only served to make the situation more fraught.

I tried to shake her loose, but she only clung on tighter. “You’ve got to help her,” she pleaded, her face a mess of tears and gravel. “She could be bleeding to death!”

“Well, that’s as maybe,” I responded, unmoved by her tale of woe. “It’s got nothing to do with me, now has it? Quite frankly, it’s not my problem.”

“B-but,” she stammered in what I took to be an incredulous voice, “you must help us.”

I folded my arms nonchalantly. “Oh, must I?” I replied. “Explain the logic behind that, why don’t you? Just because some demented woman takes a flying leap at my headlights, I’m automatically obliged to help, is that it?”

“But, but...”

“But nothing,” I continued, riding roughshod over her objections. “Where would I be if every time some sappy tart threw herself at my car, I just

dropped everything and leapt to her assistance? Who do you think I am - Batman?"

"But, we've had an accident," the mad woman croaked, raising herself just enough to point along the road.

"So you keep harping on about," I responded. "Quite frankly, I'm sick of hearing about it, you daft cow. You've got no right trying to drag other people into your mess."

"But she's horribly injured," she persisted. I rolled my eyes skyward and sighed. "Oh, you just don't get it, do you?" I said. "I don't care. I don't give a damn. Now will you please let go of my leg, you're wasting your time. There is nothing that you can possibly say that will make me want to help your friend."

"I have money," she said.

"Where is she?" I replied.

The woman informed me that her name was Janet. I told her that I wasn't the slightest bit interested, but it didn't stop her explaining the circumstances of her accident. She told me that she worked with Cathy at the local meat rendering plant and had been giving her a lift home in her combination motorbike and sidecar, when the road had disappeared and a tree had leapt out in front of them. It was at this point that her voice began to

falter. Clearly she was becoming quite upset, and so I walked several paces in front of her to avoid embarrassment.

Eventually we reached the scene of the accident. A mangled and twisted mess of steel lay at the foot of an ancient oak, which had a sidecar in its uppermost branches and a surprised expression on its trunk. But there was no sign of Cathy.

“There’s no sign of Cathy,” I pointed out unnecessarily. “Is this a wind up?”

“No, of course not,” she replied defensively, a resolute expression on her upturned face. For a brief moment the moonlight glistened enchantingly in her glass eye. “She was right here.” Janet pointed to a spot on the ground, then frowned as she reconsidered. “Well actually, she was more sort of that direction, with her feet bent up over there and her arm twisted around there.”

She was gesticulating wildly, so I hit her. I don’t know if it helped calm her down, but it certainly did me a power of good. “How badly was she hurt?” I asked once she’d stopped gibbering.

“She had a graze on her knee and a button had come off her blouse,” Janet replied.

“That bad, eh?” I mused. I rubbed my chin slowly as I contemplated the situation. The mists

seemed to close about me. I felt icy cold, but it wasn't just the chill night air that made me shiver. Suddenly the silence was disturbed by a faint but razor-sharp crack, like that made by a brittle twig being broken underfoot.

"What's that?" I hissed, startled.

Janet hazarded a guess. "It sounds like a faint but razor sharp crack," she whispered.

"That's what I was thinking," I breathed.

"It's almost like the noise made by a brittle twig being broken underfoot," she added.

She could well have been right, although I didn't like to admit it. I muttered something uncomplimentary beneath my breath, then called out, "Who is it? Who's there?"

For a moment all was silent, then came the reply.

"It's me," a voice returned. "I'm sorry, but I think I've just broken someone's twig."

By now my trepidation was rapidly giving way to irritation. "Who are you?" I demanded of the phantom twig snapper, but the only reply I got was the wind whistling through the trees and the disgruntled chatter of a nearby squirrel complaining that someone had trodden on its nuts.

Janet suddenly caught her breath. "Perhaps it's Cathy's father?" she said hopefully. "I think he's a pharmacist or something. Maybe he's come out to

look for us?” But she didn’t sound too sure of herself. I could feel her trembling with fear as she drew closer to me, so I pushed her away.

“Or then again,” she continued, “it might be some foul and demonic creature of the night, lusting to feast on our warm blood.”

I looked at her askance, but she was obviously on a roll. Her hand went to her mouth and when next she spoke it was in a hoarse, melodramatic whisper.

“Or could it be,” she hissed, “a mad, axe-wielding mentalist with a fetish for jelly?”

I stared at her for a moment or two, trying to think of a suitable put-down, but words failed me. “Nutter,” I managed to mumble at last. Just then a noise behind me made me turn. At first I could see nothing beyond the impenetrable wall of fog, but then I perceived a tiny point of light in the gloom. It seemed to be approaching. Eventually I was able to discern a figure coming towards us. He was a squat man in his late fifties, with a thick, black, pudding-bowl haircut, which rippled like a cornfield in response to the slightest breeze. He was wearing a long white lab coat - which is to say that he was wearing a lab coat that had once been white but which was now a patchwork of charred fabric and multi-coloured stains. He was holding a burning match to light his way, but it was pretty

much redundant since some of the patches on his coat glowed with an eerie brightness of their own and gave off considerably more illumination.

The strange man stopped several feet in front of me, motionless. His chin was thrust upwards and he looked down the length of his nose at me with a touch of haughty disdain, a superior twinkle in his eyes.

“I think I’ve just trodden in something,” he said, and the match burnt down and scalded his fingers. “Bugger it!” he cried, dropped the match and started to jump up and down, rubbing his hand.

As I watched him prancing about, any feelings of awe I might have had towards him rapidly dispersed. “Are you Cathy’s father, the pharmacist?” I asked.

“Pharmacist!” he cried indignantly, momentarily distracted from his pain. “I’ll have you know that I am Professor Samuel Mendes!” he exclaimed.

“Professor Samuel Mendes!” I exclaimed right back at him.

“Ah ha!” he continued exclaiming. “I thought you’d be impressed!”

“Impressed!” I repeated, exclaiming out of habit now, rather than anything else. “Never heard of you.”

“Pah!” he spat at me. And such was his contempt that he did quite literally spit at me. “You young dolt! You’ve never heard of the world famous inventor of the wind-powered torch? Or the everlasting kebab? Surely you’ve heard of my patented disposable chocolate?”

“Disposable chocolate?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he explained. “Tastes like shit. Only thing it’s good for is being thrown away.”

I shook my head. “Sorry Prof,” I said. “It’s a new one on me.”

“Me too,” said Janet.

The Professor shrugged. “Well the marketing’s been a problem,” he said philosophically. Then his manner changed abruptly and he eyed us both suspiciously. “The question is, what are you two young people doing all the way out here on a night like this. Up to no good, I’ll warrant.”

He started to circle me slowly, never shifting his piercing gaze from me. I felt myself wilt slightly, but stood my ground. “We could ask the same of you,” I replied.

“I’m looking for something,” he snapped in reply, and there was something in his voice that made that simple statement sound like a challenge. “Cathy’s key, she wore it around her neck,” he explained. He came to a halt in front of me and brought his face close to mine. The smell of

cheese and onion was almost unbearable. “You haven’t seen it at all, have you?”

The question was left lingering in the air like an accusation. One that I was compelled to refute. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Are you sure?” asked Professor Mendes. “You can’t miss it - it’s about four foot long and made of solid lead.”

He tilted his head to one side, his eyes searching for the faintest flicker of deception in my expression. But before I could answer, Janet interceded. “Is this it, Professor?” she said, pointing at something on the ground.

The Professor snorted and gave the object a cursory glance. “No, that’s the rear bumper from a 1962 Morris Oxford,” he said. He kicked the bumper aside and spied the key underneath. “Now this is more like it!” he exclaimed delightedly. He bent down to recover it, but before he could pick it up I leapt over and stomped on it.

“Owww, my bloody fingers!” the Professor cried, snatching back his hand. He glared at me reproachfully. “What do you think you’re playing at, stamping on people’s hands like that? You’re a bloody madman!”

“I’m sorry,” I said firmly, “but I can’t let you have that key. How do we know that you really are Cathy’s father?”

“What are you talking about, you freakin’ lunatic?” the Professor snapped, sucking his bruised fingers.

“Well look at it this way - some poor girl’s gone missing and you just happen to be wandering round on the common,” I argued. “How do we know that you’re not some kind of deviant?”

“Yes!” Janet chipped in. “Or a mad, axe-wielding mentalist with a fetish for jelly?”

“I am,” the Professor freely admitted. “But I’m also Cathy’s father, and I want that key!”

With that, he launched himself at me, shoulder barging me to the ground. For such a small man he was surprisingly strong. In fact, the smell of him alone was enough to overpower me. However, I was not about to let this malodorous maniac get the better of me. As the Professor tried once more to recover the key, I scrambled to my feet and made a dive for him. Before he knew it I was on his back, my hands clasped tightly over his eyes.

“Get off me!” he spluttered.

“Say you submit,” I demanded, tightening my grip.

“Oww, you’re hurting me!” the Professor exclaimed. He spun around, trying to shake me loose, but there was no shifting me.

“Submit!” I insisted.

“Stop bugging about!” Professor Mendes responded. “Let go of me this instant, you fucking lunatic! What kind of madman goes around attacking harmless men of science in the middle of the night?”

With that, this ‘harmless man of science’ managed to sink his teeth into my right hand. I let go and jumped back. He wheeled around to face me, an evil gleam in his eye as he flashed me a broad, toothless grin. I looked down to see his teeth still embedded in my hand. I shrieked in horror and shook my hand violently. The teeth flew off into the darkness, where they could be heard scurrying about the undergrowth, harassing the local wildlife.

Okay, so now the gloves were off.

“I’m sorry Professor,” I said firmly, “but there is no way that you are going to get that key.” My jaw was set in an attitude of grim determination. I narrowed my eyes and fixed him with a cold, dark stare as I slowly advanced towards him. The Professor stood his ground, but I felt that by now I had the measure of him. “Now, are you going to tell us where Cathy is?”

I had got to within three feet of him when the Professor suddenly pulled a cricket bat from inside his coat and knocked me to the ground. Leaving

me lying in a dazed stupor, he deftly snatched up the key and ran off into the woods.

I was impressed. Someone who could lay their hands on dangerous sports equipment at a moment's notice was obviously a force to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, I was more than a match for him, and I was determined he would not get away. Wasting no time, I changed into my tracksuit and running shoes and set off after him.

The ground was treacherous underfoot, and the darkness turned even the smallest obstacle into a potential death trap. Vaguely I was aware of Janet running behind me, shouting something about pork luncheon meat, but my attention was firmly fixed on the Professor as he stealthily hobbled from tree to tree. He seemed to know exactly where he was heading and eventually the hazy yellow glow of a solitary farmhouse appeared from the gloom. Spurred on by the lights, the Professor quickened his pace and I soon had serious problems keeping up with him. I just managed to keep him in sight as he deftly vaulted the rickety wooden fence at the back of the house. Moments later I reached the fence myself but negotiated it with embarrassingly less aplomb, becoming ensnared by the rusted knots of barbed wire that held it together. By the time I had extricated myself, the Professor was gone.

I paused a moment to catch my breath. I may have lost track of Professor Mendes, but there was only really one place he could have gone. I strode purposefully up the tangled and overgrown lawn towards the rear of the house. Suddenly I heard a door slam behind me, and I turned. There, at the bottom of the garden stood a small brick building, a monument to the efficiency of early twentieth century waste disposal. Or, in other words, an outside toilet. So, the crafty little bleeder thought he could hide out from me in there, did he?

I strode up to the door and rapped on it sharply with my knuckle. "Come on, come on!" I barked. "Are you going to be much longer in there?"

"Go away!" replied the Professor's muffled voice. "There's no one here."

"Listen Prof," I persisted. "If you're not gonna come out, then I'm gonna come in."

"I should give it a few minutes first," he replied.

"Okay, if that's the way you want to play it," I said. I took a few steps back then hurled myself at the door with all my weight. It was less sturdy than I had imagined and, with an explosion of splintering wood, I careered headlong into the toilet. After that things got a little confusing. I remember seeing a young girl standing in front of me, a look of horror on her face. And I recall

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seeing strange pipes, and levers, and tubes, and valves - certainly not the kind of thing you usually find in an outside toilet. Then there was a sharp crack on the back of my head, my legs turned to jelly, the floor came up to meet me and all I saw after that were stars.

## 2

Strange haunted dreams assailed my helpless, unconscious mind. In the darkness I sensed I was falling, falling, falling, and yet I never reached the ground. Familiar objects from my waking life seemed surreal, unworldly. The office where I worked, my car, the journey home - all the things that were normally so reassuringly solid seemed to just melt away. I reached out in the darkness, my fingers clawing at reality, but everything I touched crumbled to dust. I was left with nothing but a succession of half-formed, dreamlike sensations - a strange, incomprehensible woman stretched across the front of my car, a headlong flight through the woods, a fog-shrouded farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, and a curiously unpleasant outside toilet filled with strange equipment. And always there was that little man in the white coat, Professor Mendes, standing over me, rocking backwards and forwards on his heels as he shook with silent laughter.

Suddenly there seemed to be a light above me. I felt myself being drawn towards it, as if I was ascending from the darkest, murkiest depths of the ocean. Gradually the real world fell back into place...

I awoke with the sensation of water splashing my face. Seeing that I was conscious, Janet stopped licking me and helped me to my feet, which the Professor had put over in the corner out of the way. I stood swaying for a moment, my head feeling like someone was repeatedly hitting it with a tin of baked beans.

“Where am I?” I asked as I slapped Cathy around the face and told her to put the baked bean tin down.

The Professor came and stood before me and grasped the lapels of his lab coat in an unnecessarily camp manner. “You are standing on the threshold of a new era in space exploration, Mr Dickson,” he announced grandly.

“No, I’m standing in a craphouse,” I corrected him.

The Professor was instantly outraged. “How dare you!” he roared. “Is it not enough that you barge in here uninvited? This is my life’s work - the Cosmic Podulator. You ignorant young thug! The technology on display before you will revolutionise the world!”

He seemed quite serious. Unhealthily so. “I’m sorry,” I managed to say without sounding even the slightest bit apologetic. “But it looks like a craphouse to me.” I sniffed the air. “And it certainly smells like a craphouse.” However, as I

spoke I became more aware of my surroundings and it gradually began to dawn on me that this was no ordinary caphouse. Firstly, there were four of us crammed into it - the Professor, his daughter Cathy, that strange woman Janet and myself. That sort of thing wasn't typical for a start - not where I came from anyway. Then there was the confusion of pipes and cables that I had witnessed when I had first entered, woven into a nightmare cat's cradle of twists and turns. If that wasn't unusual enough, I couldn't help but notice that shoehorned into every conceivable nook and cranny were odd pieces of electronic and mechanical equipment, which either hummed, whined, hissed or sometimes even burbled.

The only source of light was a single, cobwebbed-festooned light bulb, but it was sufficient for the Professor to see the brief shadow of confusion that crossed my face. "Go on, go on," he crooned. "Take a look around you, young man. I can see that the truth is beginning to dawn. Your disbelief is turning to awe. You realise, quite rightly, that my Podulator represents the most outstanding leap forward in human technology since the invention of the wheel. And soon, very soon, the rest of the world is going to realise it too!"

“Is that right?” I mumbled. The Professor was clearly involved in some odd activities, but I seriously doubted that ‘making outstanding leaps forward in human technology’ was one of them. “Spend a lot of time in here, do you?” I asked him brightly. “Alone?”

“Pah!” blurted the Professor in disgust, then turned to his daughter. “Here, you have a word with him,” he said, shaking his head. “I just can’t get through to the ignorant twat.”

“Everything my father says is true,” Cathy obediently piped up in defence of her old man. “Oh, I know it looks like an old toilet to you - but believe me, some of the things that my father has been up to in here will shock the world.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I replied.

“Mr Dickson, you don’t understand. The Podulator is capable of travelling to the furthest corners of the universe in the blink of an eye. Father has succeeded where others before him have only dreamed - he has perfected matter transmission!”

There was a brief, uneasy silence. I surveyed the three of them: Cathy, Professor Mendes - even Janet was looking deadly serious. “Matter transmission?” I said.

Cathy nodded.

“You’re nuts,” I said matter-of-factly.

“What Cathy says is perfectly correct,” the Professor interceded.

“And you’re not exactly the perfect character witness, are you?” I snorted. “You’re as whacko as she is.” I gestured around. “I mean, even assuming that matter transmission is possible - which it isn’t - why would anybody want to build such a device into a toilet?”

“Convenience?” suggested Janet, unhelpfully. I flashed her a cruel stare and she slunk back into the shadows. It was because of this woman that I had found myself in this stinking hole in the first place, and I wasn’t about to let her forget it.

“This seemed to be the ideal location for my work,” Professor Mendes explained. “I needed somewhere quiet. Somewhere away from the prying eyes of visitors. Somewhere that was reasonably well ventilated and had a plentiful supply of paper.”

I rocked backwards on my heel and folded my arms across my chest. I decided that it might profit me to humour him for the moment. “Okay,” I said after a brief pause. “So, all this...” I waved my hand around airily. “This ‘Cosmic Podulator’ thing - how does it work?”

“I doubt you’d understand,” the Professor replied abruptly.

Ah, so the smelly dropout was going to get stroppy, was he? “In layman’s terms then?” I pressed him, and waited expectantly.

The Professor sighed. “Oh very well,” he responded irritably. “It works on the principal of counter-phased electron osmosis.”

“Counter-phased electric what?” I repeated doubtfully, and I frowned. “Did you just make that up?” I asked him.

Professor Mendes replied with a sharp intake of breath, signifying that I had succeeded in annoying him “Of course I made it up, you bloody idiot!” he snapped. “I invented the damn thing. Doesn’t it stand to reason that if I invent a whole new process, I’m inevitably going to have to invent a name for it as well?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” I said, smiling. “I’m sorry. Do go on.”

“Very well, but please try to pay attention, you irritating little prick. Now, this unit here...” The Professor pointed to a small box fixed to the wall, next to the toilet roll holder. “...is responsible for supercharging the electron beam. It is then fed via this pipe...” He indicated a plastic pipe. “...to the spatial reactor chamber, here.” He pointed upwards.

“That’s the toilet cistern,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” he continued. “And it’s also the very heart of the Podulator. It literally punches a hole in the fabric of reality and allows my machine to slip through and reappear at a completely different point in space.”

“Fascinating,” I said flatly. I pointed to the toilet bowl. “And what’s this bit for?” I asked.

“What do you think?” the Professor replied. “This machine is capable of flipping you halfway across the universe in the blink of an eye. It’s as well to take a few home comforts with you.”

“Well there’s nothing worse than having to use a strange loo, is there?” I sympathised.

“Exactly,” said the Professor.

“I mean, who knows what sort of horrible nastiness you could catch from an alien space toilet?” I added. “Probably made for creatures with a different number of bottoms anyway.”

“Oh, now look - ”

“No you look, Professor Mendes - if you really are a Professor, which I seriously doubt.” He returned a rather pathetic, sullen expression, but I was not to be put off. “You’re living in a fantasy world - which is fine, go ahead, just don’t try and drag me into it. Instantaneous travel is a scientific impossibility.”

“An impossibility, is it?” the Professor replied. “Ha! Well listen, it wasn’t all that long ago that we

thought it was impossible to transmit pork sausages through telegraph wires.”

I paused to let those words sink in. “It *is* impossible,” I answered at last.

“All right, bad example,” the Professor conceded. “But the frontiers of science are constantly being pushed forward. What is impossible today will be commonplace tomorrow - even the sausage thing. You don’t believe me, of course - but then, you don’t really *want* to believe me.”

“You’re a freak,” I replied. “Your daughter’s a freak, and I suspect that if there are any more members of your family lurking around here, they’ll register pretty high up on the freakometer as well. So - bearing that in mind, all things being equal, and I think I can say this without fear of ending up with egg on my face - no, Professor Whatever-Your-Name-Is, no I *don’t* want to believe you.”

I was quite happy with my remarks, but the Professor just smiled. It was a strangely confident smile, considering the roasting I’d just given him, and I must confess that I found it more than a little unnerving. He turned to Janet. “And what about you, my dear?” he said.

Janet looked suddenly startled. She clearly had no desire to be drawn into the debate - which was

fine by me, since in my estimation her opinion was worth something in the region of sod all. “Well...” she began, unpromisingly.

“Oh come on!” I snapped at her. “Surely you’re not going to let yourself get taken in by this ridiculous old tosser?”

She was wavering, I could tell. “It’s just that...” She shrugged. “Well, what the Professor was saying does kind of make sense - not the bits about the sausages, obviously, but all the other stuff rings true. And he *is* a Professor after all - he’s got the lab coat and everything.”

“Oh well, that makes it all right then,” I sneered. “Christ! Some people will allow themselves to fall for any old crap. All I see here is a sad man in a dirty coat, lurking in a toilet. I’m sorry, but you’ll excuse me if I prefer to believe the evidence of my own eyes.”

“The evidence of your own eyes?” Professor Mendes said softly. “Well, if that’s what it’s going to take...”

He turned and reached out to the cistern behind him, but Cathy sprung forward with a shriek. “No Father!” she cried. “No, we can’t go. Not yet, we’re not ready. We need to prepare - to make sure we have the right equipment, the right clothes. I haven’t even made the sandwiches yet.”

The Professor shook himself free. “Nonsense girl, it’s just a quick trip, that’s all. There and back again, I promise.” And with that he reached out and pulled the chain.

I staggered, in spite of myself. Pipes around me started to shake and clatter, and the vibrations were so bad that it seemed almost as if the floor I was standing on was moving. A terrible gushing, gurgling noise filled the air and a modest gale seemed to spring from nowhere and swirl around inside the tiny room.

“Good grief Professor!” I said, raising my voice above the howl of the wind. “I think you need to get a plumber in.”

“Oh, there won’t be any plumbers where we’re going,” he said calmly, and he sat down to read the paper.

A series of thuds, like tiny explosions, rocked the pipes above my head. The Professor didn’t seem the slightest bit perturbed, but I was starting to get more and more uneasy. “All right, all right,” I blustered, trying not to sound too panicky. “A joke’s a joke - switch it off now Professor.”

“No need to worry,” Professor Mendes said as he turned to the sports section. “Be there soon.”

“Enough of this!” I demanded. “Someone could get hurt, Professor - and if you don’t stop

this contraption right now, that ‘someone’ is going to be you.”

“Pah,” said the Professor without looking up. “Oh, I’ve had enough of this,” I muttered. I turned to Janet. “Oy you - daft woman! I’m getting out of here, are you coming?”

Janet was plastered up against a wall, a desperate look in her eyes and an expression of sheer terror on her face. She didn’t look as though she was having fun. Nevertheless, with a barely perceptible shake of the head she indicated that she was quite happy to remain where she was, and so I resolved to leave her to fend for herself. I made for the door, but before I had taken two steps towards it, Cathy barred my way.

“You can’t go out there, Mr Dickson,” she said. “Not while the Podulator is in motion.”

“Now, now,” I warned her. “I don’t want any trouble. So you just stand aside and I promise I won’t report this little freak show to Social Services, okay?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that,” Cathy steadfastly replied. “It’s for your own good. The cosmic forces out there would rip you to shreds, and then you’d be all cross.”

I was beginning to wonder whether ripping *her* to pieces would make me all happy and smiley, but the opportunity did not arise. Examining her

earnest features, I noticed for the first time that she shared her father's wide-eyed expression of faint but constant distress. In other words, she looked like a mental, and so I thought it best not to antagonise her.

A sudden tremor seemed to ripple through the walls. The gurgling noises from the pipes swelled to a crescendo. I felt an uncomfortable sensation of intense pressure in my head, as if my eardrums were about to burst. Then there was a single loud 'pop!' the wind fell, the room became still and all was silent.

The Professor neatly folded his paper, got to his feet and washed his hands. "We've landed," he said simply when he had finished.

"Landed?" I said. I looked first at the Professor, then at Cathy, then at Janet who was still cowering against the wall, her hair awry and a glistening trail of dribble on her chin. Then I looked at the door - could I see thin glimmers of light around the frame, or was it just my imagination? "Landed!" I said again, delivering the word with a throaty laugh. But it was forced, I wasn't sure of myself now. I wasn't sure at all.

Janet peeled herself off the wall. "My mother told me about places like this," she said with a shudder.

“My mother told me about women like you,” I muttered. “I should have listened.” I turned to the Professor. “Okay then Einstein,” I said, trying to disguise my uncertainty, “are we going to step outside and end this pantomime once and for all?”

“Certainly,” the Professor said. “After you, young man.”

Cathy stood aside. I paused for a moment, then reached out, unlatched the door and stepped outside - to receive the shock of my life. Far from the fog enshrouded night air of the common, I was suddenly breathing in the warm, damp atmosphere of some other place. I found myself looking out onto a very different landscape: a barren forest of white sterile trees that stood listlessly under a frigid, ashen sky. Everywhere, in every direction, I witnessed the same dismal picture of devastation and decay.

The Professor came and stood beside me. “Well, young man,” he said smugly. “Is that proof enough for you? You are one of the first men in history to look out upon the landscape of an alien world.”

I scanned the devastated scene and slowly, disbelievingly I shook my head. “You don’t fool me, Professor,” I replied stubbornly. “This is Swansea - I’d recognise it anywhere.”

“What did you just say?” the Professor demanded, each syllable metered out with venom and laden with contempt.

I took a moment to gather my senses. Here I was, standing in the doorway of an outside toilet, next to some lunatic who seemed to think that he was a cross between Albert Einstein and Buck Rogers, staring at a landscape that I could have sworn was not there when I had first walked in. It was eerie, oddly threatening and I got the distinct impression that it was not at all a nice place to be. I concluded that it made no sense at all, and I suspected that I was going to have some trouble coming to terms with that.

“All I said was - “ I began uncertainly, but the old man did not allow my explanation to proceed.

“Swansea!” Professor Mendes blustered, and to my startled ears it sounded like a pistol crack. He dug his heel into my foot with thinly disguised vindictiveness.

“Swansea!” he repeated as I writhed in pain. “Really! I transport you halfway across the galaxy, deliver you into this strange and alien landscape, and you have the audacity to claim that we’ve landed in Swansea. My dear Mr Dickinson, you are the most cynical young twat I have ever had the misfortune to encounter.” With that, he gave his

heel a final toe-crunching twist, then stepped out into the open.

“The name’s Dickson,” I called after him, uselessly. “Not Dickinson.” Then I felt Janet draw near, replacing the Professor at my side. Instinctively I flinched. Hadn’t I suffered enough?

“It’s not the most hospitable place, is it?” she murmured as she stared through the open doorway, utterly oblivious to my discomfort. “All this devastation, this empty bleakness. It’s all so cold, so dead - as if it remembers some terrible atrocity that was once enacted here.”

I gave her a harsh stare as she scratched her nose with the hook on her left arm. “Great,” I said, my words bristling with sarcasm. “Cheer me up, why don’t you! Can’t you just put a sock in it, you insensitive tart.” At this point she started to cry, but I was past caring. She followed the Professor outside, and then it was Cathy’s turn to harass me.

“I’ve got a special badge for knot tying,” she said apropos of nothing, but with evident pride. Then she too went out. Painfully I hobbled after them.

The Professor had wasted no time in surveying our new surroundings and by now he was crouched on the ground, examining a small shrivelled looking plant. “Fascinating,

fascinating,” he muttered. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I peered over his shoulder at the wilted shrub and couldn’t for the life of me see what he found so special about it. After all, it was only a dead plant. I had a window box full of them at home and I said as much, but he just growled at me in reply.

“What is it Father?” Cathy said as she came over to join us. “What have you found?”

“He’s found a dead plant,” I said helpfully, but they both ignored me.

“It’s an extremely unusual species of ivy,” the Professor said as he snipped a portion of partially-desiccated leaf between his thumb and forefinger then stood up and held it up towards the light. “I’ve seen something very similar to it on Earth, but only in fossils.”

“Ah!” I felt bound to comment. “Then it’s obviously deader than I thought.”

They continued to disregard my interjections. “It really is most intriguing,” the Professor continued. “What we see here is a pattern of evolution that mirrors development on Earth. Except here this particular plant has managed to escape extinction. Remarkable.”

“Remarkable,” I mumbled to myself. I had followed the Professor’s lecture up to a point, but

by now it had become too tedious for me. I twisted around to Janet. “The old boy’s found a dead plant,” I informed her. “He seems to think it’s interesting.”

Janet obviously seemed to think it was interesting too. She trotted over to the Professor and the three of them stared at it with the same sort of disbelief and wonder that would be engendered by the sight of the Pope juggling live piranhas whilst balancing on a flaming tightrope. I grabbed her roughly by the elbow and pulled her aside. “Oh pull yourself together, woman!” I hissed. “You really do think we’re on some alien planet, don’t you?”

“Well, don’t you?” Janet replied. “Just look around you.”

I shrugged. “I’m pretty sure we’re somewhere in Wales,” I said. I looked around and pointed at the distant horizon. “If we head in that direction we should hit the M4.”

Janet seemed quite shocked at my casual assertion. “But the Podulator?” she said. “The journey? I mean, how do you imagine we got here? The Professor must be telling the truth!”

“Oh I don’t doubt that it’s all very clever,” I admitted. “But it’s a trick, that’s all. It’s all done with mirrors, or something. Or maybe we were drugged? Whatever - the point is, you can’t

seriously believe that this...this..." I glanced over at the Professor and suddenly the words came easily enough. "...this irritating little freak is really capable of transporting us to the other side of the universe in a souped-up outhouse?"

"Well..." She began. Anybody who begins a sentence with a 'well' like that is clearly in need of further convincing.

"I'll tell you exactly what has happened," I said firmly. "This Professor has drugged us both, then while the two of us were insensible, he and his monkey-faced daughter loaded us into the back of van and drove us out here into the middle of nowhere."

"Along with the Cosmic Podulator?" Janet said, indicating the toilet behind us. I was going to reply, but suddenly she burst out with, "Oh Mr Dickson! Why can't you accept what's really happening?" I took a step back out of regard for my own safety. This Janet person was turning out to be something of a loose cannon. "Isn't it obvious that this really is an alien planet?"

"It's no good, Janet my dear," the Professor interjected upon overhearing her outburst. "This intolerable young man's mind is closed to the possibility." He seemed to be staring over my shoulder. Something had obviously caught his eye and his face brightened. "But perhaps we may yet

be able to convince him. Turn around slowly. Don't make a noise. Tell me what you see."

Both Janet and I turned around slowly. Neither of us made a noise. We saw sod all, and I was not afraid to say so.

The Professor was annoyed. "There!" he insisted. "Nestling in those shrubs beside the Podulator. Do you see it? Now, how do you explain that, Mr Dickens?"

"Dickson," I corrected him absently as I stared at the spot Professor Mendes indicated. There was only really one thing that he could possibly be pointing at. "It's a crisp packet," I said.

"What?" the Professor replied.

"A crisp packet," I repeated. "An empty crisp packet, that's all. I can't see why you're making such a fuss about it."

"Nonsense!" replied the Professor, sounding most offended. "It's clearly an example of alien fauna; some sort of rodent that can be found nowhere on Earth," he claimed. "I have already observed several more foraging in a clump of grass over in that direction. Evidently, these animals flourish on this part of the planet."

I stared more closely at the disputed object. "A rodent?" I said.

"Most certainly," the Professor replied smugly.

“I see,” I said, nodding slowly. “So why does it say ‘cheese and onion’ on it?”

“Cheese and...” The Professor broke off. He cautiously approached his ‘rodent’, then pulled out a pair of half-moon spectacles, perched them on his nose and bent to examine it. I heard him sigh gently. Then he straightened up and came back to join us.

“You’re imagining things,” he said to me.

“No, I’m not,” I replied. “You can see it as clear as day!”

The Professor shook his head. “No, no,” he said. “What you can see are just random markings. We are definitely looking at alien animal life. And a most fascinating creature it appears to be too. I wish I could capture one so that I could add it to my collection.”

His collection? Clearly, in the Professor’s little fantasy world, the simplest everyday objects could be misinterpreted as something marvellous and strange. I wondered what other items of extraneous jetsam might comprise his private zoo. Did he, I pondered, have a room somewhere stacked high with old drink cans, newspapers and discarded condoms, all carefully labelled and lovingly watered every day?

I decided that the only decent thing to do would be to expose this fiction. I walked over to

the shrub, picked up the crisp packet and held it up for all to see. “See,” I said triumphantly. “Cheese and onion.”

“No it isn’t,” Cathy suddenly said.

I starred daggers at her. “I beg your pardon?” I said.

“It doesn’t say cheese and onion,” said Cathy. “It says cheese and mushroom.”

“Ha ha!” roared the Professor victoriously. “Cheese and mushroom - a combination which is unknown on Earth. Well, that proves that we’re on another planet doesn’t it?” And with that he wandered off, giggling to himself.

I lifted up the empty packet to my face. It did indeed say ‘cheese and mushroom’. I’d never heard of cheese and mushroom crisps before, but that wasn’t to say that they didn’t exist. I mean, there was no reason why cheese and mushroom crisps couldn’t exist, was there? The two flavours didn’t explode on contact, did they? Perhaps they did. Perhaps crisp manufacturers had been secretly attempting to combine them for years, but had never proved able. And perhaps we now found ourselves on an alien world in a distant galaxy, where alien crisp technologists had finally succeeded where their Earth counterparts had failed, and had managed to bond the two entirely incompatible flavours.

I looked at the crisp packet more closely. Was this really incontrovertible confirmation of the Professor's theory? I dropped it again. I wasn't sure about all this. I really didn't want the Professor to be right, but I thought I'd better try and keep my doubts to myself for the time being, just in case I turned out to be wrong.

For the next couple of hours I sat in the dust with my back against the cold, damp wall of the Podulator. The others accused me of sulking, but the truth of the matter was that this strange place unnerved me and I felt more at ease whilst I was in contact with the bricks and mortar of the Professor's extraordinary toilet. It was as if it somehow connected me with home.

The others had no such qualms. Cathy and Janet went off exploring, although they promised Professor Mendes that they would not stray from earshot. The Professor, meanwhile, contented himself with gathering up various specimens from the immediate vicinity of the Podulator. I watched him for a while as he used a pair of tweezers to carefully select dead leaves, bits of rock and discarded litter and post them into little plastic bags.

After a while the sky began to darken. It was an odd sort of sky - scattered with eerie purple

clouds, shot through with veins of yellow and green. Then the moon rose above the horizon. Shortly afterwards, a second moon presented itself, delivering another blow to my ‘Welsh’ theory. Did they have two moons in Wales? Probably not. I tried not to look at it in the hope that it would go away.

Just as darkness was beginning to fall in earnest, Janet and Cathy returned from their little jaunt. The Professor was keen to learn what they had discovered.

“Oh well!” a breathless Cathy began excitedly. “First we went in that direction,” she said, pointing wildly, “and we found some trees and stuff. Then we tried over in that direction there.” Her arm swung around. “And we found some trees and stuff. But then we tried over there.” She pointed behind me. “And we found a hotel.”

I pricked up my ears. “A hotel?” I asked, hopeful for any indication of normality.

“No, not really,” she said, dashing my dreams. “We just found some more trees and stuff.” She turned to the Professor. “What about you, Father?” she asked. “What have you discovered?”

“Oh, just trees and stuff,” Professor Mendes replied. “From my brief analysis of various soil samples and bits of old twigs, I would guess that

some great catastrophe once happened here. Probably something nuclear.”

Janet nodded knowingly. “Ah yes, nuclear,” she said ominously, and she sniffed the air. “You can smell it.”

“I would say that only the hardiest of species would be able to survive here for any length of time now,” Professor Mendes posited. “Which, I’m afraid, doesn’t include us. It’s high time we were leaving, so back into the Podulator everybody.”

If there had ever been a time when I had felt happier to be squeezing into a smelly toilet with three complete strangers, then I’m afraid it escaped my memory. Actually, there was one night at a club in Bradford that springs to mind, but my reasons and motives on that occasion were entirely different.

I was the last in, pulling the door shut behind me. It was gloomy, stuffy, extremely cramped and the heady smell of air freshener did little to disguise that familiar, ever-present stench common to toilets everywhere. Nevertheless, I felt relieved that we were leaving.

“Everybody ready?” the Professor called out. “Okay then, hold tight!” He reached out and pulled the chain. There was a gushing noise, a gurgle, a weak sounding ‘pop’ and then... nothing.

No shuddering, no lurching. No tumultuous wind or tempestuous thunderclaps. Just silence.

The Professor cleared his throat. "Yes, sorry about that," he said. "Let's give it another go."

He pulled the chain again - purposefully, definitely and somehow more emphatically. In short, he gave the chain no cause to doubt that it had been pulled. Nevertheless, the action did not produce the required result. This time the only response was a slight 'putt-putt-putt', the distant sound of a wispy pneumatic fart and a slight fall of dust from above my head.

"What is it Father?" Cathy said. "What's the problem?"

Professor Mendes' face was grave. Without replying, he stepped up onto the toilet bowl and balanced there as he lifted the lid of the cistern and peered inside. When he stepped down again, his expression had shifted from grave to crestfallen.

"What is it?" Janet asked.

"It's the ballcock," the Professor said. "It's had it, I'm afraid."

"Well surely that's no problem?" I said anxiously. "It's just a question of fitting a new ballcock, then we can be on our way."

"Oh yes," the Professor agreed. "A new ballcock would do it, no doubt about that. The only problem is, we don't carry a spare." He

paused to let us consider this news, and if the implications hadn't already sunk in, he underlined them for us.

“I'm very much afraid,” he said with a voice of pure steel, “that without a new ballcock we are marooned on this planet... Forever!”

I never really knew how hard the ground could be until I had to sleep on it. I mean, intellectually I was aware that the ground was hard. It stands to reason that it must possess a certain degree of rigidity, otherwise you'd sink right through it every time you went for a walk, and that sort of thing wasn't on at all.

Oh yes, I knew it was hard, all right. It wasn't the first time I had slept rough, of course, but on those occasions there had been a certain element of choice, not to mention a sleeping bag, an old blanket or a gut full of alcohol to cushion my discomfort. This time I had the benefit of none of those things. My bed was, if the Professor was to be believed, half a universe away - along with my pyjamas, my slippers and my hot water bottle in the shape of a panda. There was, therefore, no choice for any of us but to spend the night beneath the stars - strange, unfamiliar and disquieting stars, at that.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the Janet's stentorian snoring, Cathy's unnerving bouts of whimpering, and the Professor's Herculean farting, I managed to drift into an uncomfortable, hard and lumpy sleep. And for a few fitful hours I managed to dream myself back into normality - or at least a kind of normality. My journey to work,

my job at the office, my in-tray piled high, the giant rabbit in accounts called Mildred, being chased round the canteen by a Cyclops with carrots for toes, riding home on a conveyor belt, being pulled over by the police only to discover that I had been completely naked all day. And yet, strangely, it all seemed so much more reasonable than being whisked away to an alien planet in a toilet.

But then slowly the sharp, brittle stones began to dig in. The cold, damp air bit into my bones. The strange, hazy light greeted my opening eyes and I felt that horrible, sickening, sinking feeling that accompanies all early risers when they realise that the real world has snatched them brutally out of the arms of Morpheus.

I propped myself up on one arm, dusting the dirt from my jacket with my free hand. Janet was still fast asleep, her face lying in a bubbling pool of dribble. Cathy seemed to be awake, but as she was sitting with a stunned expression on her face, simply rocking backwards and forwards like a mental, it was rather difficult to tell. Of the Professor there was no sign at first. Then a noise behind me made me turn and I spied him standing on top of the Podulator.

I got to my feet. "What the hell are you doing up there?" I asked.

“Ah, Mr Dickins,” he said. “Awake at last, are you?”

“Ah Professor,” I countered grumpily. “A great one for pointing out the blindingly obvious, aren’t you? So, are you going to tell me what you’re up to?”

“Well now, let’s see,” the Professor began patronisingly. “What could I possibly be doing standing on top of the Podulator with these in my hand?” He waved what appeared to be a pair of binoculars at me. “I would have thought it was ‘blindingly obvious’, as you put it, but if you really want me to explain the relative merits of this vantage point and the benefits of getting a complete picture of our surroundings, then - “

“All right, all right!” I replied, cutting him off mid-gabble. It was too early in the morning for that sort of nonsense, and as it didn’t look as though I would be getting a cup of coffee in the immediate future, I was really in no mood for such peevishness. I rose and hoisted myself up onto the Podulator beside the Professor, and looked around. “Well,” I said. “I guess being up here gives you a better view of the trees. So what?”

“Not just trees, Mr Dickinson,” said the Professor. He pointed at the far off horizon. “Look!”

I looked. I saw trees. On closer inspection I saw further trees, and it wasn't beyond my admittedly pedestrian imagination to suspect that still more trees lay beyond the reaches of my field of vision. I said so.

"No, no, no!" the Professor responded, more urgently. "*Look!*"

I looked again. Was there a faint glimmer of grey where the ground met the sky? Or was I just imagining it? I nudged the Professor keenly. "You might be right," I murmured. "Here, let me borrow those binoculars."

"*Trinoculars,*" the Professor corrected me.

I was momentarily distracted, and for a brief second I didn't register what the old tosser was saying. My look of puzzlement must have been obvious.

"They're *tri*-noculars," Professor Mendes repeated, and he handed me said item. "My own special invention - three lenses, see?"

I held them up before me. They did indeed have three eyepieces. I was quite dumbfounded, and the Professor obviously took my silence as a sign that I was impressed. However, when I finally spoke his expression of evident pride quickly fell.

"Well, what's the bloody point of that?" I asked.

“Look,” he said, pointing to his invention, as if this would explain all. “*Three* lenses?”

“Fantastic,” I said dryly. “Why?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious?” he replied.

“It’s obvious that you’re freakin’ deluded,” I said. “But that’s all”

“But there are three lenses!” he insisted, and when I still failed to understand, he was forced to explain. “Look, with two lenses, you can see in three dimensions.”

“Obviously,” I said.

“Obviously,” the Professor repeated. “And it must be equally obvious that if you have *three* lenses, you would be able to see in *four* dimensions.” He began to grow misty eyed. “You would,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, “be able to see into the future!”

I looked at the Professor’s invention, the trinoculars. Then I looked up at the sky and muttered a curse. Finally I looked at the Professor, standing there all smug and pleased with himself. “But I’ve only got two eyes,” I said.

“Ha!” the Professor replied in disgust. “I can’t be held responsible for the deficiencies inherent in human physiognomy!”

“It’s your own inherent deficiencies which ought to concern you, you mad bastard,” I retorted. “Do you really expect people to take you

seriously when you come out with crap like this. No wonder you spend most of your time in a toilet.”

By this time the Professor was livid. In fact, he actually stamped his foot, something I'd only ever seen before in cartoons. “How dare you!” he roared. “I have perfected a device capable of seeing through time itself, and you simply mock it. That's the trouble with the younger generation today - they lack vision.”

“Damn right we do,” I said. “By about thirty-three percent, if your ‘trinoculars’ are anything to go by, you dozy sod.”

He was about to come back with another blistering retort, but in his rage he stumbled and fell off the top of the Podulator. He landed in the dirt next to Janet, waking her up. In her bleary-eyed stupor she simply prodded him curiously before glancing around her and finally realising where she was. “Ere, what you up to?” she demanded of him, then slapped him across the face before he had the opportunity to reply. Stunned, dishevelled and covered in shit, Professor Mendes climbed shakily to his feet, made a perfunctory attempt to brush himself down then started to scramble back onto the top of the Podulator.

Looking down at him, I could hear somebody laughing, and moments later I realised that it was me. I hadn't enjoyed myself this much since Tuesday. My all too evident mirth only served to make the Professor more annoyed. "I fail to see what's so funny," he huffed and puffed as he struggled to pull himself onto the roof. "I suppose it's too much trouble for you to help me up, isn't it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"I suppose you're happy to just stand there," he continued, "and watch a frail old man flail about helplessly, aren't you?"

"Yes," I affirmed.

"Arsehole!" he muttered, and slipped backwards again.

I turned away from him, raising the trinoculars to scan the horizon. The grey object at the edge of the forest resolved into a series of squat, concrete structures. "Hey, there does seem to be something over there," I said out loud. Everything suddenly went dark.

"Exactly," said the Professor. I lowered the trinoculars to find him standing directly in front of me. His coat was torn, he was scratched and he was covered in dirt. The sight of him like this lifted my spirits no end. "I think it's some kind of futuristic city," he said. "We should investigate."

“I think its probably some out-of-town retail park,” I opined. “But either way, we should be able to find help there.”

“Agreed,” he replied. “So we’ll set out immediately after breakfast.” He turned around, a look of supreme satisfaction on his face, took a deep breath and fell off the Podulator again.

“Breakfast!” exclaimed Cathy as she jumped up and down, clapping her hands excitedly. I was acutely aware that my own stomach was growling hungrily, and so I shared some of her enthusiasm. Unlike her, however, I managed to maintain some degree of dignity, and somehow found the strength to prevent myself from leaping up and down like a retard.

We waited - Cathy, Janet and I - outside the Podulator, whilst Professor Mendes rummaged around inside in search of our repast. I must admit to being impressed the old boy’s foresight in bringing provisions. Well, perhaps ‘impressed’ is the wrong word. Let’s just say that the promise of food had made me slightly less inclined to beat his skull to a pulp against the nearest boulder.

Peering inside, I was a touch disheartened to see him pull a damp cardboard box from behind the U-bend - but hey, food was food and at that point I’d have been happy to eat anything.

“Well here we are,” the Professor proclaimed to his expectant audience as he emerged blinking into the light. “Allow me to introduce the modern miracle that is my patent Food Mangle.” He held up the box with evident pride.

Now, I’m not very technically minded, and I’d be the first to admit it, but even I could see that the Professor’s patent Food Mangle was nothing more than an old shoe box with a slot cut in the front, a cardboard handle on the side and decorated with silver paper. Still, if it kept him happy, where was the harm?

“Go on then,” I said. “Open it up. Dish out the goodies.”

The Professor clutched the box to his chest. “And just what makes you think there’ll be any breakfast for you?” he snapped. “You insult my work, you force your way into my toilet and you use up all the paper. Why should I extend any hospitality to you?”

I baulked slightly. “But Professor, be reasonable,” I said, knowing full well that I was asking way too much of the uppity old tosser. “We have nothing to eat.”

“Well, I can’t help that,” the Professor snorted. “You people can’t come crashing in here and expect me to feed you. You should have brought sandwiches.”

“You selfless unfeeling old goat!” I exclaimed, my stomach gurgling and my anger rising. “Look at Janet - can’t you see that the poor woman is starving?”

“Actually, I’m all right, thanks,” Janet replied.

“She hasn’t eaten for hours,” I continued.

“I had a Twix before I came out,” she said.

“Look how pale she’s gone,” I proceeded regardless. “Clearly she’s on the point of collapse.”

“Honestly, I feel fine,” said Janet. I hit her hard in the stomach, and she doubled up in pain and dropped to the floor.

“Look Professor,” I said, gesturing to her prostrate form. “She’s delirious with hunger.”

The Professor sighed. “Very well,” he conceded. “But I’m not doing this out of any sense of charity, or because it’s ‘the decent thing’. I’m just doing it because it’s the only way I can stop your blasted whining.”

“That’s fair enough Prof,” I said.

“And if you call me ‘Prof’ again, I’ll poke your bastard eyes out,” he warned.

I watched as the old swine attended to his ‘Food Mangle’. There were two dials on the top, made out of the caps from tubes of toothpaste. With tongue clamped between his teeth in concentration, he started to tweak them this way and that, like a safecracker trying to discover a

combination. Then, having evidently made something of a breakthrough, he suddenly cranked the handle and a small, blue sausage slid from the slot at the front of the machine.

“Ta-da!” he announced musically.  
“Breakfast!”

I reached out and took the sausage, which was cold and clammy to the touch. I looked at the Professor. Then I looked at the sausage. Finally I looked back at the Professor. “What the hell is this?” I said at last.

“That, young Dickbury, is steak tartare,” the Professor huffed with pride.

“That,” I responded, holding up the sausage between forefinger and thumb, “is a piece of blue crap.”

“Go on,” the Professor urged me. “Eat it.” He cranked the handle of his machine again and produced similar sausages for the others.

“You want me to eat crap?” I queried, as if I really needed to ask.

“Well I will,” Janet said, and she hungrily tucked into hers. Seeing that she hadn’t come to any immediate harm, I cautiously did the same.

“You see,” the Professor explained, “taste is very much like paint. As you can mix two colours together to make a third, so you can do a similar thing with taste.”

I took another bite and grimaced as I swallowed. I thought the old boy was talking rubbish. Still, it would explain why it tasted like matt emulsion.

“Mine tastes like WD40,” said Janet.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the Professor. “Let me change it for you.”

“No, no,” said Janet. “I like WD40.”

I imagined she was just being polite. The thing was disgusting, but I suppose it was better than nothing. “So this sausage contains all the nutrients and goodness of regular food, yes?” I asked.

“No,” said the Professor. “That’s the bit I’m working on.”

I stopped myself taking another bite. “Then why the hell am I eating this crap?” I suddenly shouted angrily, and I slammed the sausage down on the floor. I guess I did it with rather too much force, as it bounced up again and struck the Professor on the nose. He ran off screaming into the depths of the jungle, clutching his face. Rather embarrassed, I turned to my two remaining companions.

“Whoops,” I said, feeling rather awkward. “I never guessed it was going to bounce that high.”

Cathy nodded sagaciously, as if she was suddenly possessed of some inner wisdom.

“Ah,” she crooned. “Food can be very dangerous

in the wrong hands. If you can't treat it with a certain degree of respect, then you should leave it well alone."

I suppose she had a point, I conceded, and as she and Janet went off to bring back the Professor, I set about retrieving my sausage.

Once again I sat in the dust outside the podulator, my back against the cold brick wall, idly jabbing at the dirt with a broken stick. Muffled voices came from within, accompanied by irritable protestations and the occasional high-pitched scream. Janet and Cathy were attempting to bandage the Professor's nose. Good luck to 'em. I had offered to help, but the Professor had refused my assistance, explaining, very calmly, that it might be better for all concerned if I was to go and fuck myself. Well, I *had* hit him with my breakfast, so I suppose he had a perfect right to be a little miffed.

And so I sat and waited, scrabbling around lazily in the dust and wondering how the hell I had managed to find myself here. More to the point, where was here? The other three were still insistent that we were on some alien world, but in spite of all that I had seen, I was reluctant to believe them. This dirt beneath me seemed like ordinary dirt. These rocks and twigs seemed like ordinary rocks and twigs. I noticed a little bug weaving towards me - a millipede or a centipede, or something like that. An ordinary little bug. It stopped before me, raised its hat and smiled. Then it said something in a bizarre alien tongue and carried on its merry way, whistling as it went.

I Jumped to my feet and stamped on the little bastard before it could get away. Just an ordinary little bug.

“Making new friends?” the Professor asked me in muffled tones as he emerged from the Podulator, Janet and Cathy in his wake. I was amused to see that his nose was in a splint, but I tried not to grin too broadly.

“It looked at me funny,” I responded in a deadpan voice. The Professor just huffed and walked past me, and stood staring out across the forest. “Okay,” I said. “So what do we do now?”

“Let’s play strip poker?” Janet suggested.

I looked at her with some distaste. “Maybe not,” I replied.

“Anyone fancy a game of table tennis?” said Cathy brightly.

“Table...?” I shook my head. “No, no, no - what I mean is, what are we going to do about exploring this place?” I turned to the Professor. “Or are you content to just sulk?”

The Professor suddenly snapped to attention. “Sulk!” he said. He turned sharply on his heel and marched up to me, stopping barely inches from my face. I looked deep into his bloodshot eyes and examined every blackhead on the end of his greasy nose in minute detail. When he opened

his mouth to speak I was hit by a sudden hot blast of pure cheese and onion that made my eyes water and my stomach churn. “No time like the present,” he said. “Let’s go.”

With some difficulty I tore my eyes away from him. “Right,” I said purposefully, “well I suggest we head off in this direction. The going seems to be easier.” I began to lead the way, but he roughly grabbed me by the collar and swung me around. “What the -”

“Not so fast, you young idiot,” he snapped. “An expedition like this requires preparation. You don’t just go marching off into God-knows-what?”

“So, wha -?”

“So, change into this wetsuit and put a plastic bag on your head,” the Professor said smartly, producing the aforementioned items from behind his back.

I’ll say this for Professor Mendes: he can be a persuasive old boiler when he wants to be. I know this from experience, for several minutes later I emerged from the Podulator ready to begin our excursion, clad in a wetsuit and wearing a Woolworth’s carrier bag over my head. Apparently the bag would help to filter out any pockets of noxious gas we might pass through on our journey, and the wetsuit would protect me

from the harmful rays of the alien sun. Something like that, anyway. Of course, now I come to think about it, the whole thing does seem a little suspicious, but at the time I thought it seemed perfectly reasonable. Like I said, the Prof. could be very persuasive.

“Right then!” the old git announced brightly. “Are we all set?”

“Well, I’ve got the sandwiches,” replied Cathy.

“And I’ve got the thermos,” said Janet.

“Then off we go,” said the Professor.

“Err, Professor,” I called out. I was beginning to have my doubts about all this. “Erm, I just, err...”

“Oh what is it, you insufferable little tit!” the Professor snapped.

“It’s this bag,” I said. “I know there’s a very good reason why I have to wear it. It’s just that it’s kind of, erm... awkward.”

“Awkward!” replied the Prof. “Yeah, well I dare say it is. Of course, you could take it off, but when the sunlight shrivels your head to the size of a walnut, you might find that kind of awkward as well. But if you want to take it off, then I’m not stopping you. On your own head be it - or not, as would seem to be the case.”

“No, no, no,” I protested. “I understand that. It’s just that, well, shouldn’t we have cut holes in it?”

“Holes?” the Professor said, and something in his voice seemed to suggest that the concept was entirely alien to him.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s just that I can’t see out.”

“Oh, I get it,” the Professor said. “You want to see out.”

“Well, it would be nice,” I replied.

“And what about when giant eagles come and peck your eyes out?” the Professor asked. “How much would you be able to see then? Or what about if a giant squid attacks and sucks your eyeballs through your nose?”

“Is that really likely?”

“Happened once to my sister,” Janet chipped in.

“But of course, if you’re happy to take that chance...” the Professor said, and his voice tailed off into an ominous void.

“No, no, I’m sure everything will be all right,” I returned hastily.

“She was in the supermarket,” Janet continued, oblivious to the fact that no one was listening to her. “She had just rounded the corner of the freezer section when WHACK! Giant squid right in the face. She didn’t stand a chance.”

“Very well then,” the Professor said, and although I couldn’t see his face, I could tell from the tone of his voice that he must be wearing an expression of smug satisfaction. “If everybody’s happy, I think we can begin.”

And so stumbling and uncertain, I was led down into the forest, with nothing more to guide me than the small crescent of earth visible at my feet, an occasional prod from one of my companions and the sound of Janet’s inane gabbling drifting back to me on the wind.

“Well that’s your squid for you though, isn’t it?” she was saying. “Turn your back on them for one minute and they suck out your eyeballs and make off with your tinned peas... Bastards.”

I didn’t have an easy time of it in the forest. I don’t know if you have ever tried to cover any distance overland in a wetsuit and a plastic bag, but I can tell you from experience that it’s no picnic. The flippers and snorkel didn’t help matters much either. Neither was I given much assistance by Professor Mendes, who had made it his personal responsibility to guide me through the tangled undergrowth.

“Mind that rock,” he would say momentarily too late as I stumbled and crashed to the forest floor. “Watch out for that branch there,” he

would chirp happily, shortly after I had smashed my face in on an overhanging bough. I was beginning to think that there was something very wrong with this situation; something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I was starting to suspect that the Prof. was having a joke at my expense, a suspicion that was further fuelled by his unsuccessful attempts to stifle his giggles after each of my many mishaps.

"Professor?" I broached, after about twenty minutes of this treatment.

"Hmm?" he replied languidly.

"I was just wondering ... oof!"

"Oh, mind that branch, Dickington," said the Professor as I picked myself off the floor.

"Perhaps," I suggested bitterly, "you could warn me of any impending danger *before* I actually walk into the obstacle?"

"That's an interesting notion," the Professor said in a jolly fashion. "I'll bear it in mind."

I grunted in reply and trudged onwards. Then suddenly something occurred to me. There had been something bugging me all along, and I finally realised what it was. "Professor!" I called out.

"Oh what is it now!" he snapped. "Why all these insufferable questions?"

“Professor!” I repeated, more emphatically. I wasn’t to be put off. “Tell me this: how are you able to guide me when - “

I didn’t get to finish the sentence. Abruptly the ground fell away from me and I suddenly found myself spinning and rattling down a steep slope, accompanied by an avalanche of rocks and earth. The air was full of dust, and sharp stones tore at my skin and clothes as I tumbled over and over and over. “Ooh, careful of that ravine,” I heard Professor Mendes’ hollow voice shout after me, followed by gales of raucous laughter.

Then suddenly my journey stopped. My head was spinning and I could still hear the wind rushing past my ears, but I was quite certain that I had come to a halt. I jumped unsteadily to my feet, ripped the bag angrily from my head and found myself looking up at an awesome, shale-strewn slope. Janet, Cathy and the Professor were standing at the top, the latter almost doubled up with laughter. I was dismayed to note that the three of them were attired quite normally – no wetsuits, no snorkels, and certainly no tatty carrier bags pulled over their heads,

“Hey!” I shouted angrily. I paused to brush the dust from my hair and blow the gravel from my nose. “How come you’re not taking the same precautions as me?”

The Professor stilled his laughter and wiped a tear from his eye. “A valid question, young man,” he replied with easy confidence, a broad grin stretching from ear to ear. “The fact is that the atmosphere doesn’t affect us in the same way it does you.”

“Why not?” I demanded indignantly, although I knew deep down that I was not going to like the answer.

“Because we’re not as gullible as you,” said the Professor simply and then gave way to further waves of laughter and guffaws. In fact, he was so overcome with hilarity, I am pleased to recount, that he quite lost his footing and tumbled over the edge of the precipice. Now it was my turn to laugh as I watched him ricocheting down the slope like a discarded football, emitting squeals and wails with each rock he bounced from. Then the danger of my own situation suddenly struck home as I realised that he was heading straight towards me. I stood aside at the last moment and watched him slide to a halt, face first, beside me.

“Nice of you to drop in,” I said.

“I don’t believe you just said that,” he groaned as he raised himself up with some difficulty.

“Well, it lightens the mood,” I said with a shrug.

He kicked me in the shin out of spite, then pointed back up the slope down which we had both so hastily descended. “Now look what you’ve done!” he barked. “How are we going to get back up there?”

I looked. It was obviously too steep to climb, but the Professor nevertheless felt it necessary to demonstrate the difficulty by attempting to scramble up on his hands and knees. For a brief moment he was a flurry of flailing limbs and furious curses, and to his credit he managed to climb about four feet before giving up and sliding back down again on his arse. It was a splendidly comical sight and I enjoyed it immensely.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug. “We can just continue along the floor of the ravine.”

“And leave Cathy and Janet to fend for themselves up there?” the Professor said.

I looked up to the two women silhouetted on the lip of the ravine, and waved out of courtesy. Cathy obviously mistook my gesture for a signal that it was ‘her turn’ and hurled herself headfirst off the edge. With a wail of delight she hurtled down the slope at terrifying speed and buried herself in a small mound of earth to my left.

Grabbing a leg each, the Professor and I pulled her out, whereupon she shook the dirt from her ears and cried excitedly, “Again! Again!”

We sat her down on a rock, gave her a biscuit and reassessed our predicament. “Okay then,” I said, “so the three of us can just continue along the floor of the ravine.”

“And leave Janet to fend for herself up there?” said the Professor. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Yeah, okay then... No, no, no – what am I thinking? We can’t leave the poor woman up there. She may be an irritating bitch, but we have to look out for one another.”

“Very well,” I sighed, and then I called up to Janet. “You’re going to have to lower yourself down gently, Janet,” I shouted.

She shouted something back, but she was too high up for me to make it out.

“I said you’ll have to join us down here, Janet,” I called again.

Once more I heard her brief reply, but could not make out the words.

“There’s nothing to it, Janet,” I tried to reassure her. “The slope looks worse than it really is. Just take it steady and you’ll have no problem.”

She seemed very, very nervous and actually took a step back from the edge. Once more I heard her call out, but the words were snatched

away by the wind. "What's wrong with her?" I muttered. "What's she saying?"

"I think her actual words were 'get stuffed'," the Professor informed me. "Or something along those lines, anyway. It's no good, Dickbury. If we're going to get her down, we'll have to help her."

"Fair enough," I replied, found a small, cricket ball-sized rock on the ground, and hurled it with all my might. It struck Janet a glancing blow to the temple. She staggered, backwards at first, then to the left, then a couple of paces to the right, and finally she pitched forward over the edge of the ravine. She was with us within the space of five seconds.

"Very well," I said with some satisfaction. "So now the *four* of us can just continue along the floor of the ravine."

"Yes!" said the Professor.

"Err, no," said Janet, climbing unsteadily to her feet and pointing behind us. "I think that thing might have something to say about that."

The Professor and I turned in unison and our mouths fell open in horror. Perched squarely on the trail before us was the most hideous thing I had ever seen. As tall as a man, if not taller, it appeared to be a huge amorphous, gelatinous sack, with terrible black eyes, a formless slit for a mouth

and stubby feelers atop its head, swinging and bobbing in constant motion. Its body continued for some distance behind it, and appeared to be surmounted with some kind of armoured protuberance, and as it moved slowly and steadily towards us, its whole frame seemed to undulate and wobble. It was truly disgusting, and yet the really disturbing thing was that it seemed somehow familiar.

“What the hell is that?” breathed the Professor, and I was pleased to detect that he was as mortified as I was.

“I don’t know,” I replied in hushed, almost reverent tones. “But I think I once went out with its sister.”

They say that fear can paralyse you; that terror can strike you like a bolt from above, fusing you to the spot, stifling the scream in your throat, stopping your heart and turning your blood to ice. Fortunately, in my case, mortal dread makes me run like a bastard, which seems to me to be a far more sensible approach to impending disaster.

So when that huge sack of animated mucus reared up before me I lost no time in executing a swift, orderly retreat... Only to find my way blocked by two more of the disgusting things. Spinning round, I quickly ascertained that we were surrounded. There was no escape! Now would be a good time to panic

“What the hell are they?” I demanded.

“They do look very familiar,” said Professor Mendes.

One of the creatures leaned in towards me and I flinched as I felt its hot breath issuing from the shapeless slit of a mouth. Its antennae were in constant motion, twitching this way and that, entirely independently. Its skin was greenish-grey, and glistened with slime. “It-it-it looks like a...”  
“It looks like a giant snail,” Cathy suddenly shouted excitedly. She clapped her hands. “Oh please, can I keep one?”

She was right, they did look like snails - although, judging by the size of them, this lot could have devoured your vegetable patch in ten seconds flat, then followed it up with your garage for dessert. Worryingly, they seemed to have something of a malevolent glint in their dead, black eyes. Not only that, but they were shuffling closer, gradually closing the circle around us.

“What are we going to do?” I spluttered. “They’re going to eat us, I know it. They’re going to mush us up and make us into soup.”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous,” the Professor snapped. “Why would they want to do that? I’m sure they’re perfectly harmless and friendly.” He stepped forward towards the closest of them. It checked its advance, motionless save for the antennae that constantly probed the air.

The Professor coughed to clear his throat. The noise echoed along the ravine. Then he looked up into the amorphous face of the snail. “Good morning,” he announced. He gestured back at the three of us. “We are strangers on your world,” he said. “We come in peace to offer the hand of friendship.”

And to demonstrate this he stretched out his right hand. Quite what he expected the snail thing to do was beyond me, since it clearly didn’t have the social skills necessary to reciprocate.

Nevertheless, it displayed some interest, craning its great head slowly forwards until what passed for its face was directly level with the Professor's.

“Ah good,” Professor Mendes began, staring at his mirror image reflected in the snail's great glassy eyes. “I'm sure this will prove to be a great day for our respective species. We stand here and the dawn of a new era of mmmgggghhg...”

The Professor's words were cut short when, with a completely unexpected turn of speed, the snail suddenly opened its great gaping mouth and clamped itself over his head and shoulders. I watched with an odd mix of horror and amusement as the old boy started to flap and flail helplessly. “Help, help,” I heard his muffled cries. “It's sucking my brain! It's sucking my brain!”

My mirth was soon cut short as I realised that the others were moving in on us. One of them got close enough to touch me. Its skin was cold and clammy. I started, twisted around, only to find another of the slimy bastards coming straight for me. “We're done for!” I shouted.

Cathy let out a piercing cry and made a run for it. “They're going to kill us!” she shouted, but she didn't get two yards before one of the monsters took hold of her leg and dragged her screaming to the ground.

“I don’t think they’re going to be our friends,” I heard the Professor shouting from halfway down the gullet of the ghastly gastropod.

“Hit them with sticks! Hit them with sticks!” I shouted, then dived to the floor and made a desperate attempt to burrow beneath a small rock for protection. I felt one of them glide straight over my back, and the feeling of that slimy residue pasted to my skin remains one of the most truly awful experiences of my life.

“I give up! I give up!” I screamed in absolute panic. “Just don’t eat my head.” And then, lying there with my face pressed into the dirt, I did the only thing a grown man in my position could do - I started to cry. As the shrieks and cries carried on the above me, as my prostrate form was buffeted by the struggling forms of my fellows, I gave myself over to great ear-splitting wails and shudders. Again and again I pleaded for release - and as I listened to the screams and shouts, and the terrible rending of flesh, all I could do was press my hands tightly over my ears, push myself harder into the ground and wait for my inevitable demise.

It never came. The sounds stopped. I was aware of stillness. Then someone tapped me gently on the shoulder. I rolled over and found myself looking up at Janet. She was streaked with

dirt, and blood, and mucus. Her face was set hard, a strange gleam in her eyes. She gripped a sturdy branch in her right hand, freshly splintered halfway along its length, and that too was covered in dirt and slime. She was saying something now. I couldn't hear anything, but I could see her lips moving. Oh my God, the attack had rendered me deaf! Oh... no... I suddenly realised that I was still covering my ears. I slowly, cautiously moved my hands away, as if I was still worried about hearing something that might upset me. "Sorry," I said. "What did you say?"

"I said," Janet repeated, "it's okay, you can get up now."

I took Janet's arm and she helped me to my feet. Tremulously, I looked around me. There was no sign of the giant snails. Actually, that's not strictly true - there was more than a little indication of one of them. It was smeared fairly liberally around the immediate vicinity, blobs of soft tissue clinging listlessly to fragments of its shattered shell. Janet threw down the stick. "They're not so tough," she said with a shrug.

I searched around again. "The Professor?" I hardly dared to ask. "And Cathy?"

Janet frowned. "The other snails beat a retreat when this one, erm..."

"Exploded?" I offered helpfully.

“Pretty much,” Janet agreed, nodding vigorously.

“Good,” I said distractedly as I wiped the dirt and debris from my face.

“They took the Professor and Cathy with them,” Janet added.

“Good,” I said again as I peeled a couple of fallen leaves and an old crisp packet from my forehead - Prawn and Lemon flavour, I think.

“God knows what’s going to happen to them,” Janet said. “They must have taken them back to their lair. Look, you can see their slime trails. I think we’d better get moving before it’s too late.”

I followed her pointing finger. You could clearly make out a number of glistening lines, weaving and criss-crossing as they snaked along the valley floor and into the distance. Janet was quite right, we really did ought to move. “Come on then,” I said. “Let’s get out of here before they come back with reinforcements.” I started to walk off in the opposite direction to the slime trails, but stopped after several paces when I realised that Janet wasn’t following. Looking back I saw that she was still standing on the same spot, surrounded by bits of dismembered snail.

“Well come on!”

“We have to go after them,” Janet said simply. “We have to rescue the Professor and Cathy.”

“Rescue...?” I spluttered. “Are you quite insane?” I asked, and as soon as I spoke I realised that I already knew the answer to that question. “Look, I’m all for comradeship and sticking by your buddies, and all that, but I’m not going to tussle with those snails again for anybody.” By ‘tussle’ I meant that I wasn’t prepared to roll around in the dirt, crying and pleading for mercy. It lacks dignity. So does running away, of course, but at least it doesn’t get your trousers dirty.

Janet, however, did not share my point of view. “Well I’m going to help them, even if you won’t,” she said, and she turned and started off. I did the same, in the opposite direction. My plan was to head back to the Podulator. And then? Well, if I couldn’t get it working, I’d phone a cab or something. Just then I caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye. Was there something moving up there on the edge of the ravine? I thought I glimpsed a flash of russet fur, the flick of a bushy tail. It was probably nothing. Maybe it was just my imagination. Even so, I suddenly felt quite vulnerable and alone.

I turned around. “Hey wait for me!” I shouted after Janet. “Wait! Wait! I’m coming with you!” I ran to catch up with her. Hell, she may have been as mad a lemon in a hula skirt, but there was

safety in numbers, and she wasn't half handy with that stick.

The ravine twisted and turned for some considerable distance. In places it got quite narrow, and the cliffs on either side seemed to loom over us menacingly. Other sections were wider, shallower, but the loose shale that crunched underfoot made the going difficult and often treacherous. As we walked we spent the time in conversation, albeit a very one-sided one. Janet took it upon herself to tell me, completely unbidden, about her life, her loves, her pets, her family, and anything else that popped into existence in the space between her ears.

It is a tragic fact of life that the most loquacious people you meet are almost always the most boring. Janet spent at least half an hour telling me all about her hobby of collecting hinges: door hinges, drawer hinges, closet hinges, gate hinges, the fascinating variety of hinges you can get for drop-leaf tables, early mediaeval hinges, steel hinges, aluminium hinges, bronze hinges... bored yet? Well imagine that for half an hour. I never knew that there were so many hinges. Frankly, I never cared, and if the daft tart had possessed the decency to pause for breath once in a while, I would have told her so.

Admittedly, she did make the effort to draw me into the conversation on several occasions, but my responses to her questions were confined to monosyllabic muttering, accompanied by unenthusiastic grunts and nods. To be honest, I was giving more attention to our surroundings. I couldn't help feeling that we were being watched, and several times I thought I saw movement up on the cliff edge.

Eventually the slime trail led us to a pathway that rose up out of the ravine. It was steep, very steep. Quite early on in my life I had made a conscious decision to forego the pleasures of hill walking to concentrate instead on the far more pleasurable vocation of sitting in front of the TV and eating pizza. This was why I now found myself seriously out of breath, and my heart was pounding fit to burst from my chest. Janet seemed to have no problem at all, and bounded up the hill with a breezy casualness that I found insufferable. I would have kicked the smug cow, if only I'd been able to catch her.

When I reached the top, some considerable time later, I found her waiting for me. She was grinning stupidly, but I didn't have the energy to hit her. This area was thick with vegetation: long winding tendrils, wiry little bushes, tough creepers winding around thick trunks, upwards to a tightly

meshed canopy of green that allowed little light to penetrate beneath. At least there was a pathway through it. Two boulders stood either side of a much-travelled track of hard, compacted earth. All the same, I didn't like the look of it.

"We're still hot on the trail," Janet said, far too jauntily for my liking. I could see the slime trail of the snails, coating the ground, glistening from rocks and protruding roots. She took my hand and led me into the forest, as an over-protective mother might lead her child around a department store. At any other time I would have pulled free and slapped her for her impertinence, but as the foliage closed around us I found it oddly comforting.

We pressed on. She was quiet now. It might have been because she had nothing left to say, but I suspect the real reason was that she was starting to feel as nervous as I was. Several times we stopped and listened, and the looks we exchanged seemed to say it all. We could both feel it: we were being followed by someone - or *something*.

Suddenly Janet flung out a pointing finger, inadvertently striking me in the face. "Look!" she cried, genuine alarm in her voice. "What is it?"

"It's my nose," I said painfully as I extracted the stupid woman's digit from my nostril, and thus

cut short her nasal adventure. “And I’ll thank you not to shove your grubby digits up it.”

“No, no, no,” she cried, still pointing. “I mean behind your nose.”

*Behind* my nose? Could she mean my face? “That strange, twisted artefact,” she continued. I don’t *think* she meant my face. “Over there, by that tree,” she further elaborated. Ah! So she *didn’t* mean my face.

I looked to where she was pointing. Beyond a tangle of vegetation I could make out a patch of blue. It looked like metal. I took a step closer. “Be careful,” Janet called behind me. I took another step towards it - partly out of bravado, partly out of curiosity, but mostly because I had glimpsed a headlight.

“It’s all right,” I said. I started to clear away some of the vines and fronds and smothered it. “It’s nothing, look. Just an old car that’s someone’s dumped here.”

The windscreen was smashed, the nearside wing buckled and two of the wheels were missing. It was quite obviously a family hatchback, but Janet put an entirely different interpretation on it.

“It’s some sort of creature,” she said, her voice a mixture of wonder and fear. “A metallic creature. A life form entirely alien to our own. Is it dead.”

“Dead?” I repeated. “What are you talking about? It’s a Ford Fiesta.”

“No, no, no,” she insisted. “I tell you, it’s some kind of alien creature whose body chemistry is completely different from our own.”

“And I tell you it’s a Ford bloody Fiesta,” I replied, equally adamant. “Come on, even you must admit that any creature with wing mirrors, furry dice and two-speed windscreen wipers is implausible, not to say impossible.”

I moved closer, and peered in through the driver’s window. There was broken glass on the floor and seat, a tattered old map on the dashboard and a half-eaten packet of Beef and Cucumber crisps. “Of course, the real mystery is how it came to be here,” I said. “We’re nowhere near a road. Strange place to find an abandoned car.”

I walked around the front of the vehicle, and as I did so I jumped with alarm at a brief, sharp metallic growl. “Come away from there Geoff!” Janet screamed.

I silenced her. “It’s nothing,” I said, my heart gradually returning to its normal pace as I realised that all we had heard had been the shifting of metal. “I must have just disturbed something when I cleared that creeper.” I was standing directly in front of it now, staring at its bent front bumper and feeling fairly confident, when it did a

most curious thing. In fact, I'm still not sure, even now, that I didn't imagine it. It winked. One of the headlights just flicked closed for a moment. I remember standing there, not frightened as such, but riveted to the spot in a state of confusion.

"Janet," I said slowly. "Janet, I think we'd better leave."

"What is it?" she said, and the stupid woman took a step closer.

"Go, go now!" I said. Again we heard that weird metallic growl, longer this time. The car suddenly lurched forwards, straight towards me. I staggered backwards and fell, tangled up in a mesh of creeper and vine. The car reared up above me, growling once more, and with a shower of brake fluid dripping from its slaving engine compartment, it triumphantly blew its horn.

As I lay there, desperately trying to free myself of the binding undergrowth, it bore down upon me, and I knew that even Janet's stick would not be able to save me now.

The car shuddered and boomed as it reared above me, headlights flashing, front wheels spinning, its chassis creaking and groaning as it twisted its frame, ready for the lunge. I felt the breath catch in my throat, too terrified even to breathe. It was as if the air had turned into one solid lump. The ground shook - thump! thump! thump! - with every step as the great metal beast stomped steadily towards me on its powerful hind wheels. And when it blotted out the sun; when it toward over me, its great belly glistening with mud and rust and underseal; when it let out that final terrifying roar, accompanied by the ear-splitting shriek of its air horn, that's when I knew I was finished.

I curled up into a ball, hands covering my face. The car came down towards me...

Suddenly I heard a dull thud. Then another and several more in quick succession. Looking up I saw the car shudder and stagger back several paces. There were arrows protruding from its belly, and more appearing all the time. Volley after volley of slender wooden shafts were being fired into the creature from all around me; from bushes, from treetops. The car roared in agony and rage. It lashed out wildly at the foliage around it, but the onslaught did not cease. Bolt after bolt sliced through its thin, fragile bodywork until it was

bristling with tiny spines like some monstrous kind of porcupine. It wheeled around and I managed to drag myself behind a tree stump just in time to stop myself being trampled. Then one well-aimed arrow sliced straight through a brake pipe and a shower of fluid burst from the car's engine compartment. The creature's squeal of agony was drowned, reduced to a rasping, pathetic gurgle. It was weakening now; it was dying. As it lumbered close to me, I could see its body glistening with oil. Its fan belt had snapped, it was shedding bearings at an alarming rate and most of its exhaust pipe had come away and was dragging on the ground.

But it wasn't quite finished yet. I watched with a mixture of horror and fascination as it stole itself for one last assault. That blank, emotionless stare of its headlights had fixed on me. It hunched forward and revved its engine, then, its windscreen wipers waving in one last defiant act, it spun its wheels in the mud and accelerated straight towards me.

There was nowhere I could run; nowhere I could hide. I would have surely died had the vehicle not been blinded by an arrow to its left headlight. Sightless and confused, the car veered sharply to the left, collided with a tree and came to



glowing with shame. "It takes more than a rust-riddled homicidal hatchback to phase me."

At that moment the car creaked and shuddered, then with a final burst of life it tried to raise its shattered chassis from the ground. As it did so, a small figure stepped from the bushes: he was about two foot high, covered in red fur and with a long bushy tail arching up behind him. He was wearing a tin hat and chomping on a stubby cigar. Casually he pulled a large pistol from inside his flak jacket, levelled it at the underside of the car and shot it twice through the transmission. The car fell back to earth with a thump then lay still. The tiny figure calmly walked up to the vehicle, kicked the tyres to make sure it was dead, then turned to face us.

"It's okay lady," he said, without taking the cigar from his mouth. "It's a goner. You can put your boyfriend down now."

Put your boyfriend down? While I was pondering this strange statement, I was suddenly embarrassed to discover that I had leapt into Janet's arms. "Hmm, well caught," I mumbled and sheepishly climbed down.

"Thank you for saving us," Janet replied politely. "But who are you?"

"General Twitchy Bushtail, ma'am," the hairy little feller replied. "Pleased to you're your

acquaintance. Now, we gotta get clear of this area, people - there may be more of the automons about.”

“Hang on a minute,” I said, in earnest amazement.. “You’re a-a-a... You’re a *squirrel*.”

“Yeah, and you’re a dick” he replied. “Now let’s get moving. Squad forward!”

At his command the bushes around us swayed and shook and dozens of other squirrels stepped forward. Each wore a tiny uniform and carried a bow and arrow. Quickly and noiselessly they fell into rank and file, more orderly and more disciplined than any other woodland creatures I had ever seen.

“Okay, Squad leader,” the General ordered. “Move ‘em out!”

I winced as another voice started barking commands behind me. “At the double lads! Get those ‘orrible little paws moving, you idle lot!”

I looked down. The orders were coming from a vicious looking creature known, as I was to learn later, as Squad Leader Scratchy Knothole. He was a grizzled old thug, tough as boots with an appearance to match. His fur was dark and wiry, and a long purple scar ran down the side of his face, just missing his left eye. He stopped and glared at me. “Come on, move it!” he barked.

“Hang on -”

“I said move it, fat boy!” he snapped, and jabbed me painfully in the arse with a pointy stick. I felt it wise not to argue and fell into line with the others.

\* \* \*

My question, the one I had not been allowed to complete, was answered in due course. General Bushtail explained to us that night was fast approaching, and that the forest was not safe after dark. From my experience it seemed that the place wasn't exactly an ideal picnic location during the daytime either. The General went on to tell us that we were being taken back to his village. It was, so he said, only a small colony now, numbering about two thousand in total. The war, he explained, had taken a heavy toll on their numbers, but he assured us that they weren't finished yet. They were planning one final push, which would decide this conflict once and for all.

As to the matter of who they were fighting and why, I'm afraid that information passed me by. He did tell us, but I just couldn't be bothered to listen. In retrospect I now know this to have been a mistake, but at the time he was boring my tits off and I found myself unable to take any of it in.

I was much more interested in joining in with the dirty songs that the rest of the squad were

singing to keep their spirits up. They all seemed to revolve around obvious double entendres involving the word 'nuts', but I enjoyed them in spite of their lack of sophistication. Even so, I soon began to get bored and increasingly restless.

The path we took seemed to twist and turn alarmingly, and I quickly got the feeling that we were doubling back on ourselves. The vegetation began to get thicker, the atmosphere oppressive. I caught up with General Bushtail, who was still banging on to Janet about God knows what.

"Hey," I said. "This is getting ridiculous. Do you people know where you're going?"

The General was still chewing on his apparently everlasting cigar. "Hell, yes," he said. "Do you, son?"

"Do I?" I repeated. "Haven't got a clue," I replied honestly.

"Guess you'd better quit bellyaching and try to stay in our good books then?" the General said. He briefly removed his cigar and spat out a thick wad of phlegm that may or may not have been meant for me. Either way, it missed and hit a tree by the side of the trail, killing it instantly.

"We've had to take the long way round," Janet explained, "to avoid the breeding grounds of the automons."

“Ah right,” I said. Then, after a pause, “And who are the automons?”

“Haven’t you been listening to anything the General’s been saying?” she replied in disgust.

I shrugged. “Not a word,” I said. “I didn’t know there was going to be a test.”

“That creature that attacked us,” Janet explained. “The thing that looked like a car - that was an automon. They live here in the forest, and we’ve arrived right in the middle of their breeding season. They’re very jumpy at this time of year.”

“You were lucky,” General Bushtail added. “The one that attacked you was a Ford. They’re usually very timid, very docile. It takes a helluva lot to get them started. You must have chanced across its nest. Of course, if it had been a Volkswagen or a Peugeot, you wouldn’t be standing here now.” His face twisted into a grin. “Which might not have been a bad thing, of course.”

“Look, there’s no need-”

General Bushtail suddenly help up his paw and the whole squad came to a well-practised halt. Only I carried on walking, cannoning straight into the back of Janet, and earning myself a mouthful of perm and a crumpled nose. “What is it?” I demanded angrily.

“Shush!” General Bushtail hissed.

“What is it?” I repeated, this time in a whisper.

The General crouched down and scooped something up from the forest floor. “They’ve been here,” he said. “Three at least, maybe more.” He opened out his paw for me to see. He was holding a small selection of spark plugs of various sizes. “Two Audis and a Maserati. And they’re still warm, so it can’t have been very long ago.”

He seemed very concerned, and suddenly so was I. “What do we do?” I asked.

The General grinned. “We shut up and keep moving,” he said. He threw the sparkplugs back into the undergrowth and brushed his hands. “Squad forward,” he barked, “at the double!”

And we were off again. As we quick marched along the tangled trail, Squad Leader Knothole nudged my elbow. “I shouldn’t worry too much,” he said, with an evil leer. “The General will look after you. I once saw him take on a fork lift truck single-handed.”

I looked at the General - squat and furry, with his stubby little paws held out in front of him - and tried to imagine him facing down a large piece of machinery. It was difficult to picture, but something in Squad Leader Knothole’s voice made me believe every word.

“Tied its prongs in a bow, so he did,” the Squad Leader said. “No contest, really.”

I don't know whether General Bushtail's easy dominance over various methods of vehicular transportation made me feel more or less on edge. Thankfully, however, the squirrels' village was not far away. Before very long the path became less overgrown, the floor was sandy and strewn with small boulders as the trail started to head downwards. I could see buildings below us, made of bamboo and straw. Smoke curled up from open fires, and the whole settlement was ringed with watchtowers and walkways slung from tall trees. Rather more curiously, through the trees around us I saw open fields of neatly trimmed grass. There were little groups of squirrels ambling about, chatting, laughing and apparently poking at the ground with metal poles. It was only when I noticed the bags they were wheeling around with them that I realised what they were doing.

“Yeah, erm, golf is very popular around here,” General Bushtail explained, with a hint of embarrassment.

“No kidding,” I said, and I shuddered.

Janet was uncharacteristically quick to pick up on my reaction. “What's the matter?” she asked. “Don't you like golf?”

“Like it?” I said. “I live in mortal fear of it.”

She shrugged. “I think that’s a bit of an over reaction.”

Oh the poor woman. She didn’t understand. When you watch someone playing golf, you’re being given a glimpse of your future. It gets us all in the end, as predictable and unavoidable as death, taxes and yearning for a kebab after six pints of lager. “Listen, Janet” I said. “One day, perhaps not too far from now, once industry and imagination have finally failed me, there will come a time when I will be unable to think of anything better to do than wander around a series of immaculately kept lawns, knocking a little white ball down holes with a stick. When that happens - and I want you to promise me this now - when that happens I want you to take me somewhere quiet - somewhere near a softly babbling brook, surrounded by fields of gently swaying corn, where the only sound is the wind in the treetops and the gentle chatter of the birds - and put a bullet between my eyes.”

“Okay,” Janet said, in far too casual a manner for my liking. “Shame though. Personally I rather like a round of golf.”

Too late. It had got her already.

We moved on down the last stretch of the trail. The pickets on the perimeter saluted smartly

and let us enter the village. It was really quite an impressive settlement, with row upon row of dwellings, tall communal buildings, forges and sawmills powered by rickety looking wind turbines, a post office, two bingo halls and a cinema. Over on the far side of the settlement I could see some vast construction taking shape. “What’s happening over there?” I asked.

“New airport,” said General Bushtail, with some pride.

“You’ve discovered the principal of flight?” I asked, impressed.

“Not yet,” he replied. “But it’s only a matter of time. And by the time we’ve mastered it, we’ll already have the departure lounge up and running.”

We were shown into the King’s hut, a huge, domed structure, bedecked with ornamental acorns. The King wasn’t there, he was still out playing golf, but we didn’t have long to wait. His arrival was announced by a glorious fanfare, played by eight members of his personal guard on paper and comb.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please be upstanding for His Majesty King Flaky Nibbles IV!” announced a courtier. The King then swaggered in, a nine iron held jauntily over his shoulder. He

sighed loudly, tossed the golf club into a corner then threw himself down on a cushion.

“I’m knackered!” he said, royally. Then he looked up and saw us for the first time. “Hello, what have we got here then?”

General Bushtail cleared his throat. “Ahem, your Majesty,” he began. “We found these two in the forest and rescued them from one of the automons.”

“Ooh nasty,” said the King.

“Err, yes,” General Bushtail said. “So anyway, we thought we’d better bring them to you and - ”

“Yes, yes, jolly good,” said King Flaky Nibbles IV as he jumped up and rubbed his paws together busily. “Well then,” he said, addressing Janet and I, “you two must have had a hell of a time of it. I expect you’ll want to get yourselves cleaned up?”

“Well yes,” I began, “we - ”

“Good, good,” his Kinginess continued. “So you two run along and get yourselves sorted out. Then it’s back here and we should just have enough time for a bite to eat and a drop to drink before the sacrifice. Okay?”

“Oh thank you,” I said. “That’s very kind of you, I...” Something made me stop; something he had said. Or rather, it was the *way* he had said it that made me uneasy. “Sacrifice?” I asked. “Err, what... I mean, who is...?”

“Why you, of course,” King Flaky Nibbles said with relish. Two of his guards stepped forwards and took a firm grip of my arms. “You’re to be the sacrifice.” He stepped up towards me and briefly tickled me in the trouser area with far too much familiarity.

“We’re going to harvest your nuts,” he said with a wink.

My arms were pinned behind me and I was half-dragged, half-kicked through the streets of the squirrel village towards the temple. The great doors were swung open and they heaved me into the dark space beyond. I stumbled as they tumbled me up onto a platform, slammed me back against a steel post and lashed me to it firmly with thick cables.

It was dark but I was not alone. I heard them out there in the blackness: the chattering, the whispering and soft cackling of many, many squirrels. That it should come to this; that I should meet my end not though a noble act of sacrifice, or some desperately futile heroic struggle, but at the grasping paws of a bunch of woodland vermin with a nut fixation. Well, fair enough, I suppose a less-than-dignified demise was always on the cards for me, but I never guessed it would be as bad as this.

Light suddenly struck my face, blinding me. I shut my eyes and tried to twist away, to shield myself from the glare, but I was too firmly restrained and my frantic struggling was in vain.

“Comfy?” I heard the voice of King Flaky Nibbles IV, coming from somewhere close by.

“Not really,” I replied, as cordially as I could manage under the circumstances.

“Good, good,” said the King, with a noticeable lack of sympathy. “Jolly good.”

I tried to open my eyes. The glare was intensely painful at first, but gradually I began to perceive my surroundings, and was surprised to see rows of tables in front of me, groups of squirrels seated around each one, gossiping and joking amongst themselves. I was further dumbfounded to see a mobile disco on my right, all flashing lights and spangly banners. I had no time to ponder what this could mean, for at this point King Flaky Nibbles stepped forward to address the crowd.

“People of Squirreltopia!” he proclaimed, his voice ringing around the great temple and pressing the squirrels gathered within into silence. “People of the Russet Forests, sturdy of tail, strong of nut and long of tooth! Noble brethren of the woodland... How y’doing? Is everyone all right?”

A cheer from the crowd.

“Smashing!” said His Majesty, warming to his audience. “Well, y’know, it’s lovely to be here again. I know we’re going to have a fantastic time. We’ve got some great acts tonight, including the Fabulous Maple Twins, the Amazing Spendo and his Inflatable Badger, and the gorgeous Makita Muff, female vocalist, who went down so well at last month’s hanging.”

Another big cheer from the crowd. He was working well tonight.

“Aw, you’re wonderful,” said King Flaky Nibbles, with real sincerity. “But let us not forget the main attraction.”

Two of the King’s personal guard entered, carrying some sort of contraption covered in a sheet. They placed it directly in front of me, and I really didn’t care for the way they leered at me as they shuffled back to the wings.

“That’s right!” The King announced. “It’s Geoff Dickson and his extraordinary removable nuts!” As he spoke he pulled off the sheet with a flourish, revealing a small guillotine, alarmingly set at waist height. A weak man would have soiled himself at this point. I soiled myself at this point. I also think I may have begun to cry.

“But all that’s to come later,” promised Flaky Nibbles. “In the meantime, the buffet’s open, and Davey Spandex is here with his wheels of steel. Take it away Davey!”

And so this was the countdown to my demise: a selection of Abba tunes blasting out of gaudily illuminated twin turntables, whilst a constant line of gabbling squirrels grabbed plates and serviettes and trawled the buffet that was laid out on a series of long tables down the length of the temple. This, I remember thinking at the time, was one of

the strangest sacrifices I had ever been to. Admittedly, it was the *only* sacrifice I had ever been to, but even had I been a regular at these occasions, I reckoned this would still rank amongst the top ten weirdest.

It was then that I spotted my salvation, hovering by the egg and cress sandwiches. It was Janet, plate in hand, prodding and fingering various eatables with the practised eye of a professional partygoer. I tried to attract her attention, but she was far too absorbed in examining a bowl of cheesy snacks. She picked up one between thumb and forefinger, perused it closely, sniffed it, licked it, then put it back and moved on. It was then that she noticed me, and came over.

“Oh hi,” she said, as though she had just bumped into an acquaintance she recognised but couldn’t quite place. “How are you?”

“I could be better,” I responded tersely.

She ignored the retort. “It’s a great spread they’ve laid on,” she said chattily as she held up the pyramid of sandwiches that she had managed to balance on her plate. “There’s ham, chicken, cheese and onion. They’ve spared no expense.” She glanced up at me, her expression momentarily tinged with curiosity. “Are you not having anything?”

“What?” I replied, that single word heavy with indignation. “Well of course I’m not having anything! It may have escaped your attention, but they’re going to cut my balls off in a little while.”

“Ah yes,” she replied, nodding sagely. “Of course. I understand.”

“Understand?” I repeated. “Understand what?”

“Pre-show nerves,” she said, as she levered a tuna and sweet corn sandwich into her mouth. “No wonder you can’t eat anything,” she continued, spitting crumbs. “I shouldn’t worry, even the best performers get stage fright.”

“Janet!” I snapped, hardly able to believe her cavalier attitude. “You’ve got to help me!”

“Oh don’t worry,” she assured me. “I’ll grab you a plate full of stuff for afterwards,” she said, and headed off back towards the buffet.

I watched her go with a horrible, horrible sinking feeling. Would she do nothing to help me? Apparently not. It seemed that her dedication to feeding her face would not allow such distractions. By the time the gorgeous Makita Muff, female vocalist, shimmied off stage after her second encore, the buffet was little more than a desolate battleground; the scene of a conflict in which Janet had played no small part. Even the plate she had been saving for me was empty, as she

demonstrated by holding up the aforesaid item of crockery and mouthing the word 'sorry' accompanied with an apologetic shrug.

I can't claim that I was too miffed about that. Right now I had far more pressing worries: the acts had all finished and it was time for the finale. I was on.

"It's chopping time!" cried King Flaky Nibbles, with far more relish than was seemly. The crowd, equally over the top, were suddenly on their feet, clapping and cheering wildly. Hairy little paws undid my belt and lowered my trousers, exposing me to the evil glint of the guillotine blade.

"Oh-oh-oh, c-come on now," I stammered. "Be reasonable." I gave a shrill, nervous little laugh. "A joke's a joke, and all that."

"Hey, who's laughing?" said King Flaky Nibbles. "This is high drama."

I glanced around wildly, desperate for someone to come to my aid, but there was no one. "Why are you doing this?" I screamed, as the guillotine was moved into position. "Why? Why? Why?"

King Flaky Nibbles shrugged. "Tradition, isn't it," he said. "You've got to keep up traditions, haven't you? That's the whole point of traditions - they're sort of... well... traditional."

He reached out and ran a paw over the frame of the guillotine, then bent to inspect the mechanism.

“Yes... well... good...” I mumbled, panic taking a firm hold of me now. “But is that... is that... I mean, tradition: is that really a good enough reason to cut someone’s balls off?”

“Interesting point,” said the King as he reached out and placed his hand on the release mechanism. “Perhaps we can discuss it further after I’ve cut your balls off?” He turned to address the crowd. “Okay people here we go,” he said and he began a countdown. “Five... Four...”

“Wait! Wait!” I yelled. “Oh God, no!”

“Three... Two...” The crowd were all counting down together.

“Please! For pity’s sake. Leave my balls alone!”

“One!” announced King Flaky Nibbles.  
“Make a wish!”

“WAIT!”

The mighty double doors of the temple were suddenly thrown violently open. As one, the audience of squirrels drew breath and twisted around to see what the commotion was. Bright light streamed in from the outside world, solid beams flitting around a silhouette framed in the doorway.

“I’m back!” came that voice again, deep, commanding, eminently trustworthy. The figure came forward, swaggered slightly to the left, countered it with a shimmy to the right, staggered forward, snatched up a champagne glass from a nearby table and downed it in one fluid movement.

King Flaky Nibbles shielded his eyes against the light. “Hello?” he said. “Who’s this?”

The figure came forward, resolving into a tall, handsome looking squirrel of obviously noble bearing, but with a hint of a rakish gleam in his eye. “Hamilton Shagpaw!” he announced, as he tripped confidently down the central aisle.

“Hamilton Shagpaw!” chorused the audience happily.

“Hamilton Shagpaw!” cried the King with delight.

“Hamilton Shagpaw!” exclaimed Janet as she pushed a substantial wedge of quiche down her neck.

“The same,” said the newcomer. He came up sharply before the King, snapped to attention and saluted smartly. “*Commander* Hamilton Shagpaw of the Secret Squirrel Squadron - expert in espionage, deadly in hand-to-hand combat and licensed to shit in the woods.”

“Flipping heck,” said the King.

“I should say so, Your Majesty,” said Commander Shagpaw, unabashed. “Sorry I’m late. I’ve just come back from a dangerous mission to the enemy command complex. Barely managed to get out with my life.”

A thrill of excitement passed through the crowd at the words ‘dangerous mission’. This Hamilton Shagpaw was clearly something of a local hero. He certainly had a sort of easy charm about him - the elegantly coiffured fur, the confident stance and honest manner. And I for one have to admit, with some degree of admiration, that this was the first time I had ever seen a squirrel with a moustache.

“Sorry to spoil your little shindig, your plumptiousness,” the Commander apologised. “Hope I haven’t interrupted anything important.”

“No, no, no - you’re just in time,” said King Flaky Nibbles, and he jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “We’re just about to cut this feller’s balls off.”

Hamilton Shagpaw glanced briefly at me. “Hello,” he said politely, then turned his full attention back to his esteemed superior. Well, sir, I’ll give you a full account of my mission when it’s more convenient.”

He started to go, but the King stopped him and, much to the delight of the crowd, asked him

to deliver his account immediately. And so Commander Shagpaw launched into his story with great relish. He told of how he had been out on patrol when he had spotted four 'hairless monkeys'. These monkeys, it emerged, turned out to be the Professor, Cathy, Janet and myself. He had watched as we were attacked by the giant slugs - Mucons, he called them - and was amazed to witness Janet laying about them for all she was worth with a pointy stick. She had driven them off, of course, but they had taken the Professor and Cathy with them, and so he had followed them, trailing them back to their city. However, he had been spotted by a Mucon patrol that had pelted him with hot gravel and old biscuits, but the Commander managed to escape by the skin of his teeth, using nothing more than an umbrella and a rolled up newspaper.

"And that's exactly how it happened," he concluded, accompanied by a tumultuous round of applause from the audience.

"Super," said the King.

"Wait a minute!" Commander Shagpaw suddenly struck a pose, stabbing out a furry finger. "That's her!" he cried, pointing at Janet. "That's the woman!"

Janet froze, a vol-au-vent halfway to her mouth. “Eh?” she murmured, turning scarlet. “What?”

“That woman beat off a whole platoon of Mucons armed only with a stick!” Shagpaw claimed.

“It’s the prophecy!” ejaculated King Flaky Nibbles. “Long ago it was foretold that a woman would come from the stars with the ability to beat off Mucons with a stick, and that she would be proclaimed divine and lead us to triumph. So it is written.”

For the first time Commander Shagpaw expressed a modicum of doubt. “Oh yes?” he said.

“Yeah, sure,” replied the King. “It’s written in the ancient scrolls. You get to know all this when you’re king. There’s some good stuff about sea lions in there too, but we won’t go into all that now.” He raised his voice to address the audience. “This woman has come to save our people!” he announced. “We must treat her as a God and obey her every command. Nothing should be denied to her.” King Flaky Nibbles IV turned to an increasingly confused looking Janet. “Speak, anointed one, so that we may carry out your every command. What do you wish of us?”

Janet looked nonplussed for a moment. Then, seeing the half eaten vol-au-vent in her hand, she said, “Well some more of these wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Janet!” I hissed, feeling it prudent to remind her of my predicament.

“It shall be done!” King Flaky Nibbles clapped his paws together smartly. Some of his personal guard exchanged curious glances, but none of them actually rushed off to get anything. “Anything else?” he asked.

“Janet! What about me?” I persisted.

“Erm, well the pork pie’s all gone,” Janet continued, ignoring me. “And, erm... oh, I could do with a new battery for my watch.”

“As you command, so it shall be.” King Flaky Nibbles clapped again. Once again his personal guard looked uneasily at each other, shrugged and did nothing. “Anything more?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t think, I really...”

“Janet! Janet! For God’s sake!” I cried.

“There’s nothing I can think of that...”

“Janet, you evil bastard!” I growled, “tell them to let me go.”

“Oh yes,” Janet suddenly said with a start. Then in a deep, authoritative voice she said, “And I command that you release my faithful servant

this instant - you know, the irritating chap tied to the pole.”

“Certainly,” said the King. “He’s all yours... Do you want him with or without nuts?”

And so, later that evening, Janet and I joined King Flaky Nibbles and some of the other important squirrels of the village around a traditional squirrel campfire. It was a surreal occasion, and an unsettling one. The demonic way the crimson firelight played across the earnest furry faces of our hosts was disturbing enough, but when several attendants came in carrying four bowls of squirming green animals and set them down in front of us, I had a sudden strong urge to be somewhere else. However, I was a prisoner of the squirrels’ hospitality and getting away wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Ah fantastic,” said the squirrel sitting next to me, nudging my arm. “Go on, try one. They’re great.”

I leaned over and peered in the bowl nearest to me. The little creatures looked like frogs, but they were slightly greener, slightly stringier and about fifteen percent slimier. “What are they?” I asked, uneasily.

“We call them ‘slimy green things,’” said my new friend, and with that he picked up a stick and

speared one of the creatures, which responded with a tiny sigh. Then he thrust it into the fire. The little green creature hissed, sizzled, then I heard a soft, plaintive murmur of ‘cor blimey’. Moments later there was a sharp ‘pop’ and my neighbour pulled the toasted remains from the fire and began chewing on it hungrily.

“You have to wait until you hear the pop,” he explained, chewing on the glistening green lumps. “That’s the sound of its arse cheeks exploding. When you hear that, you know that it’s cooked. Go on, tuck in. You won’t regret it.”

I declined, deciding that I was not going to give myself the opportunity of regretting it. Just the sight of all the other squirrels munching away was enough to turn my stomach. All around me I could hear the sounds of the little creatures cooking. The soft sigh as the animals were speared, the hiss, then the sizzle, the ‘cor blimey’ and the eventual arse pop. Even Janet was eating. She was sitting opposite me, between Commander Shagpaw and King Flaky Nibbles. The King in particular was all over her like a rash. He was even letting her stroke his guinea pig.

“Go on, touch him, he likes you,” the King said.

The animal in question was an ungainly, corpulent beast, about the size of a small dog. He

was curled up next to the King in an attitude that suggested he wasn't planning on going anywhere in the next six months. Clearly he was a treasured pet, and the King doted on him in an embarrassing fashion.

"Magnificent creature, isn't he?" said the King.

"Oh yes, yes," said Janet.

"His name's Simon," said King Flaky Nibbles.

"I sometimes think that he's my best friend in the whole world."

"Really?" said Janet.

"Yeah, well, I'm not very sociable really," said the King. "But Simon here has got such a wonderful temperament for a rodent. You can touch his balls if you like."

"No, really, that's fine," Janet said. "Why don't you tell me about your people? How did you come to be here, and where do I fit into it all?"

"Ah well," said His Kinginess, "it's like this." He paused to spear another of the slimy green things (sigh). "Many many years ago (hiss) our people and the Mucons (sizzle, cor blimey) lived together in peace (pop, munch, munch, munch)."

I leaned over to the squirrel next to me. "These Mucons," I said. "They're the big snail things, right?"

My neighbour just looked at me and shrugged. "I know nothing of these 'big snail things' of which you speak," he replied.

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Well then," continued King Flaky Nibbles as he playfully tickled his guinea pig behind the ear, "one of our greatest scientists, Professor Cyril Nutkins, invented a wonderful new machine which he built out of clothes pegs, papier mâché and bicycle inner tubes. It was capable of blending two entirely separate substances or entities to create something completely new."

"Wow," said Janet, sounding almost genuinely impressed. "And what was this wonderful machine called?"

"We called it a 'blender'," explained the King, with evident pride. "And it proved invaluable to us. With it we were able to fuse nuts with cows and create giant nut-cows that roamed the fields in great herds. A single nut-cow could feed an entire family for many weeks. It was a wonderful achievement."

"Until the Mucons found out about it," added Commander Shagpaw, with a hint of bitterness.

"What happened then?" asked Janet.

"I thought you might ask that," said King Flaky Nibbles, nodding wisely as he stabbed at the last slimy green thing as it slid around the bowl,

desperate to escape. “Which is why I have asked General Bushtail to prepare a short presentation.”

“Okay people listen up!” General Bushtail announced as he strode to the front of the group. “This is the situation regarding the Mucon menace.”

By this time Squad Leader Knothole had already erected a screen and was standing to attention beside a slide projector.

“First slide please, Squad Leader,” barked the General. The picture showed a map of the squirrel village. “Now ten years ago we were subjected to a lightening raid by the Mucons.” He whipped out a pointing stick and began to indicate various places on the map. “They first infiltrated the village here, here and here, but the alarm was not raised until they reached the inner perimeter here.”

King Flaky Nibbles leaned over to Janet. “He’s very good, isn’t he?” he opined proudly. Janet nodded in agreement.

“Now, I was just a young lieutenant at the time,” the General continued, “but I well remember the panic caused by the sudden appearance of the enemy. We were completely unprepared. In short, gentlemen, they kicked our collective butt. We were totally unable to stop them as they made their way here... Next slide please Squad Leader.”

The picture changed to an enlarged view of one corner of the village. “Here, gentlemen, to the laboratory of Professor Nutkins. They took possession of the Professor’s blender, and made their way to the edge of the village here, where they were able to make their getaway using three Minis and a specially converted bus.”

“They took our machine,” said King Flaky Nibbles ruefully.

“Well can’t your Professor Nutkins just build another one?” said Janet.

“Sadly not,” said the King. “He was killed in a bizarre beetroot accident shortly afterwards. No, now we must survive on twigs and bits of string, and the fields where the nut-cows once roamed are now all golf courses.”

“Well then, we must get this machine back,” said Janet with grim determination.

“Not that simple, lady,” said General Bushtail. “Next slide please, Squad Leader.” The new picture was a photo of some vast city complex, as seen from the air. “The Mucons built a massive command complex in which to carry out their secret machinations,” he explained. “This aerial reconnaissance photo was bravely obtained for us by Lieutenant Hairy Muffchoke of the the First Division Special Catapult Squadron - commiserations to his family, by the way.”

There was an embarrassed mumble from the other squirrels.

“You can see that the complex has very heavy defences,” General Bushtail continued. “To the east it is protected by large spiky things - very nasty. To the south and west giant mangley things threaten to reduce all trespassers to a pulp. To the north there are crunchy, whirry, grindy things that can do serious damage to your future prospects.”

“And hot gravel,” piped up Commander Shagpaw. “They pelt you with hot gravel, as well. It really stings.”

“Exactly,” said General Bushtail. “And so, thus far, all attempts at penetrating the city have proved fruitless. Now, any questions?”

The squirrels all glanced around and nudged each other, but none of them seemed to have the nerve to raise a paw. Eventually I felt the need to break the silence myself, and caught General Bushtail’s attention.

“Yeah, you there,” he said, levelling his pointing stick at me. “The ugly guy at the back.”

“Yeah thanks,” I said. “I was just wondering what these Mucon things want this blending machine for? Are they making nut-cows too?”

“Good question,” said the General. He motioned to the Squad Leader Knothole to change the slide once more. It seemed to show a

collection of empty crisp packets. “Potato chips!” said the General. “Or, at least, that’s what our best intelligence reports indicate, at any rate. They’re experimenting with combining different flavours.”

“Cheese and mushroom!” I said.

“Prawn and Lemon!” said Janet.

“We’ve seen some of those empty crisp packets lying around,” I explained.

“Well, I hope you didn’t touch any of ‘em,” General Bushtail said ominously. “Our backroom boys reckon the Mucons are working to combine unnatural flavours in order to make evil snacks.”

“*Evil* snacks?” I queried. “How does that work, then?”

“I guess they must be cursed, or something,” the General said vaguely. “Some kind of Voodoo. Or maybe they’ve got some new kind of toxin? Hell, I don’t know. Whatever the Mucons are doing, it stands to reason that they’re up to no good. If only we could get inside, we could put paid to their plans for good.”

“Well that’s exactly what we’re going to do!” Janet suddenly said. She sprang to her feet, scattering the glowing embers of the fire everywhere and igniting one unfortunate animal, who ran out into the night, screaming. “Tomorrow, we’re going to the Mucon city!”

“Hurrah,” said the King, rather prosaically.

“Oh yes,” Janet continued, a mad gleam in her eye. “We’re going to retrieve your machine and rescue our friends. Isn’t that right, Geoff?”

She looked down at me and, with horror, I realised that she intended to include me in her madcap scheme. “Oh no,” I said. “No, no, no - I can’t. I mean... I’ve got to be at home tomorrow morning: I’ve got a man coming to measure up for double glazing. And, I’ve just remembered, I’ve got a dentist’s appointment, and not only that but I think I’m coming down with a cold, so I reckon I should be excused heroic rescue missions.”

Deep down I knew my protestations were futile. Janet wasn’t listening to me; she was lost in a world of her own. “Oh yes, my furry brethren,” she said. “Tomorrow - tomorrow we shall strike a decisive blow for squirrel-kind...”

We climbed upwards, along the sandy path out of the village, Janet, myself and a thirty-strong squad of highly trained commando squirrels. Most of the village had turned out to see us off. King Flaky Nibbles had made a short, impassioned speech before presenting Janet with a new fighting stick, delicately engraved with the words 'Stitch that slimeball'. He then kissed Commander Shagpaw firmly on the lips, kicked me in the bollocks and waved us goodbye. Ah, parting can be such sweet sorrow, I reflected, still bitterly aware of the constant throbbing of my family jewels.

Morning had barely broken, and the air was still crunchy enough to hurt your lungs. Already the dew-sodden golf courses were filling up with squirrels, and they wished us luck as we passed on by. Before long we had left them far behind and had plunged into the depths of the forest, General Bushtail marching at the head of the column, whilst Shagpaw scouted on ahead, zig-zagging randomly across the path like a manic bluebottle, alert for the slightest whisper of a rustle in the undergrowth. Occasionally he would disappear into the bushes and we would hear a frantic crashing and banging before he would return to the path, announce calmly that everything was all right, then disappear again to tussle with more

potential hazards. Quite frankly, he was getting on my tits, but the squirrels seemed to be reassured by his constant vigilance, at least.

At one point he stopped dead and held up his hand, signalling us to remain motionless. He was staring down at the ground: at a rock half buried in the path. He watched it for quite a while. I, for one, failed to see what the fascination was, but when I calmly suggested that the Commander may have finally flipped, General Bushtail shushed me into silence. After a while, Shagpaw bent down to examine the rock more carefully, and held this position for a good three minutes, being careful not to get too close. Then he straightened up, told everyone that it was all right and our party proceeded.

As I passed over the rock in question - a perfectly normal rock, to all intents and purposes, I gave it an exploratory prod with the toe of my boot. It growled at me in response, and so I doubled my pace and caught up with the others.

We continued in this ridiculous fashion, shuffling along the pathway behind Commander Shagpaw, occasionally stopping whilst he inspected more potential hazards: a sly looking twig here, a suspect piece of rubble there - and an evil looking turd, to which the Commander instructed us to give a wide berth, lest we should awaken it from its

slumber. It was all a bit over-the-top, but at least we weren't leaving the squad open to a surprise attack.

That said, after a while I began to get a little uneasy. Having grown bored of Janet's inane conversation, I had left her chatting to the General and had fallen back, trailing some distance behind the rest of the party. It wasn't long before I began to get the impression we were being followed. It was just an odd feeling, that's all, nothing concrete. I stopped a couple of times to check, but neither heard nor saw anything. Maybe I was letting my imagination run away with me? After all, the gentle swinging of the branches could easily have been precipitated by our own passage; the sharp crack of twigs could be just my imagination. I stopped to look around once more, and this time I *did* see something. It was brief, but unmistakable: something moved in the undergrowth.

I felt the blood run cold through my veins. "General!" I tried to call out, but my voice emerged as a whisper, as dry and dusty as the leaves that littered the forest floor. I was rooted to the spot. "General!" I called out again, more successfully this time. "General Bushtail, there's something following us!"

“Yeah,” I heard the General’s voice float back to me. “Whatever.”

I risked a glance over my shoulder. The squad marched on, without breaking their stride. General Bushtail himself was deep in conversation with Janet, and didn’t spare me a second look. Turning back, I caught my breath: there was no movement *in* the undergrowth; *the undergrowth was moving!* Thick green leaves promptly wrapped themselves about my face, blocking off the air. All I could see was a mask of green; and all I could smell was mould and caterpillars.

Wriggling about helplessly, I was suddenly much relieved to hear muffled footsteps running back along the path. I was pulled clear, falling backwards in a heap on top of Janet, and since she was far too bony to be comfortable, I sprang quickly to my feet.

It was then that I saw my attacker for the first time: about ten feet tall, wrapped in a cocoon of dark green leaves, something white and glistening at the centre, like a massive brain. With a start I recognised my assailant was a cauliflower: a giant cauliflower, wriggling and squirming as the squirrel platoon around it tried to subdue it with small arms fire.

This was no ordinary cauliflower. I had seen ordinary cauliflowers before. Ordinary

cauliflowers don't try to rip your face off. Ordinary cauliflowers don't stage surprise attacks on you while you're wandering around the fruit and veg section of your local grocery store. Ordinary cauliflowers don't - and I think I can say this without fear of contradiction, although I admit I am in no way an expert on the subject - they don't execute a full frontal attack at the head of a small army of baby carrots whilst you're walking past a farmyard.

This one was displaying a disturbing degree of animosity. What's more, it seemed to be practically impervious to assault. The squirrels' attempts to subdue it had about as much effect as attacking a cathedral with a toffee apple. Bullets just maddened it. I watched it roll forward and two of the platoon went beneath it. I didn't see what happened to them, but from the sound of their agonised screams, I doubted whether we'd see them in one piece again.

"Fall back!" cried the General. "Fall back!" And as the squirrels retreated, the General himself stepped forward to tackle the mutant vegetable single-handed.

"What's he doing?" Janet gasped. "How do you kill a cauliflower? He'll be pulverised."

And then suddenly I knew - *I knew how to kill it!* I snatched Janet's engraved stick, ran forward and

shoved the General aside. He muttered an oath as he fell to the floor, and I stood before the giant creature alone. It reared up and roared as only a giant cauliflower can. And then, as it fell back down towards me, I lunged at it.

“Die, you bastard! Die!” I screamed, and I plunged the stick into its fleshy white heart.

Much to my surprise, the creature didn't die. Actually, ‘surprise’ isn't really the word - much to my *abject horror*, the creature didn't die. It didn't even arrest its headlong flight towards me, and so I did the only thing anybody could do in a situation like this: I curled up into a ball, hands over my head and started to cry like a baby.

Moments later, I saw a blinding white flash and felt a searing wave of heat. By rights, by this time, I should have been dead, torn limb from limb. Instead, I was most definitely alive, if somewhat scorched and covered in something that I strongly suspected was shredded cauliflower. I slowly stood up, finding myself amongst the debris of the vegetable, which General Bushtail had very kindly, and in the nick of time, disassembled for me with the help of a small grenade.

He walked over to me, brushed the dirt from his uniform, lit a cigar and blew smoke into my eye. “Wanna tell me what all that was about?”

I looked down at the stick in my hand. It was broken. “Well, I thought...” I began, then quietly tailed off. “Stick,” I said, holding up the weapon, hoping that would explain everything.

“Are you a retard?” the General asked simply, with no discernible hint of malice.

“No, no,” I responded. “I just thought, you know, it’s a cauliflower - so I’d go for its heart.”

The General nodded disparagingly. “Uh huh,” he said. “The heart... Well, you know, I think we may have learnt a valuable lesson. You see, what you’ve done there is you’ve confused ‘heart’ - i.e. the muscular organ that plays such a vital part in the cardiovascular system of most animal life - with the ‘heart’ of a cabbage - which is just a thick lump of jack shit that doesn’t really do much at all. Just because it’s the same word, boy, don’t mean it’s the same thing.”

I nodded. “Yes, yes, I did,” I mumbled in my humiliation.

“Hell, you might find truth in mathematics, boy, but you ain’t gonna find it in lingo,” the General continued. “Words are just a whole bunch of airy-fairy nonsense, popularised by the type of know-nothing writers and faggot poets who are gonna find themselves getting seriously killed by giant vegetables if they don’t wise-up

pretty damn sharpish. You should leave this kind of thing to us.”

“Sorry,” I replied. “I didn’t think.”

The General grinned. “Yeah well, that’s the fundamental difference between you and me kid,” he said. “You’re a stupid bastard and destined to die young. I’m smart and I’m gonna live to a ripe old age.”

As he spoke we all heard a sudden, loud hissing noise. The sky turned dark, the ground shook, and moments later a huge crater had opened up in exactly the spot where General Bushtail had been standing. As the dust cleared, I leaned over and looked down into the smoking chasm. The earth was scorched and blacked, small fires burned here and there, and there seemed to be a thin layer of squirrel pâté spread across the floor of the crater. Moments later I was joined by Commander Shagpaw, who made a sucking noise through his teeth as he stared down into the hole.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Struck by meteorite,” Commander Shagpaw replied simply. He shrugged, as if this sort of thing happened on a daily basis. “Shit happens,” he added, then led me away from the edge. “Come on, we’d better keep moving.”

“Yeah, this is the spot,” said Commander Shagpaw with a degree of satisfaction.

We were at the edge of the forest, before a vast plain of scrub that surrounded the Mucon city. Shagpaw was propped against a fallen tree trunk, watching the mighty walls through imaginary binoculars, made by looking through the pinched thumb and forefinger of both hands. “This is probably going to be the best way in,” he said, “but it won’t be easy. Here, see for yourself.”

He passed me the imaginary binoculars. I could see the imposing concrete walls, and beyond them tall, functional looking structures that reached up to the sky.

“Are you sure this is the Mucon city?” I asked doubtfully. “It looks more like a multi-storey car park to me.”

“Yeah, well, I expect this is where they park their cars,” said Shagpaw.

I looked again. There was a gatehouse about two thirds of the way along the wall. “It’s heavily guarded,” I said doubtfully. I passed the imaginary binoculars to Janet. “Here,” I said, “take a look.”

Janet already had one hand held up to her eye. “It’s all right,” she said. “I’ve already got a pretend telescope. I can see the gatehouse, and I

think you're right. We're going to need some sort of plan."

"A plan?" said Commander Shagpaw. "Ah well, if it's a plan you're wanting..."

Who would have thought that Commander Shagpaw would have had the presence of mind to bring an overhead projector with him? He seated the whole platoon before it and, with the help of various charts and diagrams, outlined his plan to get us into the Mucon city. Not that it was much of a plan - basically it was the old 'prisoner and escort' routine, with several of us disguised as Mucons using whatever materials we could scavenge from the immediate locality. And so, an hour later, I found myself ambling across the plain, wearing a couple of cardboard boxes and with an old waste bin strapped to my back.

There were five of us in disguise, including Commander Shagpaw. Janet and some of the other squirrels were masquerading as our 'captives'. To complete the illusion, and to maximise my discomfort, I had been liberally smeared with axle grease, which made the journey not only foolhardy, but also treacherous underfoot.

It was a nerve-wracking trek to the gatehouse. I could barely make out anything through the slit

cut in the cardboard box covering my face, but I could see the Mucons on guard watching our approach, at first with alarm, then with curiosity, then, bizarrely, with a sense of welcome. It seemed that the dumb bastards were actually going to fall for our subterfuge. In fact, as we drew close, one of them actually waved to me.

“All right Dave?” it said as we came to a halt before them. It leaned in towards me, its feelers constantly moving as it brought its black, glistening face next to mine. Its voice was soft and sibilant, its breath was hot and smelt of crisps. “How’s the family?”

I was shaking by now. Surely it must have spotted the words ‘this way up’ stamped across my cardboard torso? What’s more, I wasn’t really prepared for the small talk. “Oh, you know...” I mumbled. “Err, not bad... Dotting along... Can’t complain.”

The Mucon nodded. “How’s your eldest, then?” it enquired. “Does the daft bastard still want to be a tightrope walker?”

“Err, yeah,” I said, and I shrugged, rolled my eyes and tried to affect a polite laugh. “Heh heh, daft bastard, eh?” Commander Shagpaw gently nudged me, prompting me to get to the point. “Yeah, anyway,” I said, “we’ve got these here

prisoners, to be taken for questioning. So if you could just let us through -”

“Prisoners, eh?” said the Mucon, looking down and consulting a clipboard. “Questioning, you say? Have you got a G-38b?”

“Erm...?” I began, uncertainly. I didn’t know what a G-38b was, but I was reasonably confident that I wasn’t currently in possession of one. I made a great show of patting imaginary pockets. “You know, I can’t seem to... that is, to say... well, I think I may have left it in my other shell.”

“Oh come on, Dave,” said the Mucon guard in a playfully exasperated tone. “You know we can’t let prisoners through without the right form. We need a properly signed and dated G-38b before we can let you through the gate, let alone start interrogating and and torturing them.”

“Ah yes,” I said, beginning to understand. “Silly me. I don’t suppose you could just overlook it this time?”

“Don’t even ask,” the Mucon guard responded. “You know as well as I do that they’d have my stripes if I did that.”

I took a good long look at him. He didn’t actually have stripes, but I reasoned that he was speaking metaphorically. “Oh come on,” I said, trying one last time. “For old times’ sake?”

“More than my job’s worth,” said the big snail, and so we turned and trudged disappointedly away.

“Okay, so we were defeated by paperwork that time,” said Commander Shagpaw, standing at his overhead projector once more. “But my next idea is bound to succeed. I call it my ‘look at what you could have won’ routine.”

As plans go it was daring, certainly; audacious, undoubtedly. It would require great planning and organisation, and no small measure of craftsmanship. Personally, I thought it was bloody stupid, but despite the strength of my convictions, my feelings were not taken into consideration.

We built a giant speedboat out of wicker and old shoelaces, dragged it out onto the plain and hid inside it. Meanwhile, Commander Shagpaw, wearing an enormous false moustache over the top of his own - not inconsiderable - whiskers, trotted up to the gatehouse to announce to the Mucons that they had won this magnificent gift in a prize draw.

The idea, you will no doubt have gathered, was that they would take the speedboat into the city, and us along with it. It wasn’t the most original of schemes, admittedly, but it did have the advantage of having succeeded once before, and on that

occasion our historic predecessors had made a much less exotic offering.

We waited in silence, our faces lit by the speckled patterns of light flitting through the wicker walls, alert for any movement, any sound. Eventually we heard Commander Shagpaw's voice outside. "It's all right, lads, you may as well come out," he said gloomily. "They didn't go for it."

We unhooked the door and filed out onto the plain. "They turned it down?" I said, trying to effect surprise, but only managing to sound vaguely sarcastic.

"They said that they are essentially a terrestrial species," Commander Shagpaw said with a sigh, "and since their city is land-locked they really have no use for a speedboat." He shrugged. "They asked if there was a cash alternative."

"How about a giant wicker tea service?" Janet suggested helpfully.

"No," said Shagpaw. "I think what we need is a far less subtle approach."

Plan C worked! and no one was more surprised that myself. Hiding around the corner, we watched as Squad Leader Knothole approached the Mucon guards and asked them if they had ever thought about letting Jesus into their lives. Whilst they were distracted by the Squad Leader's

devilishly convoluted religious arguments, we were able to slip past them completely unnoticed.

We headed straight for the main building and stopped to get our bearings. Passageways led off left and right, leading to further junctions and intersections. “Corridors!” I said. “I just knew there’d be corridors. So which way now?”

“We need to find Nutkins’ blender,” said Janet.

“Obviously,” I replied.

“And Professor Mendes and Cathy,” she added.

“If we must,” I muttered.

“Hang on, this should help,” said Commander Shagpaw, unrolling a large map. It showed the bare outline of the Mucon city, inside which was an empty white square with the words ‘Here Be Snails’ printed in large letters. “I think we must be somewhere here,” he said pointing to the blank space.

“Here, who are you?” said a voice behind us. We turned to find ourselves facing a Mucon.

“We’ve come about the guttering,” I replied, thinking quickly.

“Oh, that’s all right then,” the Mucon said, then looked puzzled. “Wait a minute, you’re not due until Wednesday.”

“Scatter!” Commander Shagpaw shouted.

“What?” I replied, as I found myself deserted. Suddenly Janet grabbed me and dragged me down an adjacent corridor, where we ran head first into an advancing detachment of Mucons.

We skidded to a halt. “Err, guttering?” I said hopefully.

The lead Mucon slowly shook his head.

“Oh, all right then,” I said, and suddenly pointed down the corridor. “They went that way!” I cried.

Again the Mucon shook his head and he and his squad started sliding steadily towards us.

“Don’t like that one either, eh?” I responded dejectedly as they grabbed us.

I looked at Janet with thinly veiled hatred as we were dragged, pushed, pummelled and kicked in the direction of the detainment cells. Promising to deal with us later, they threw us inside, and the door thumped closed behind us.

“You can’t do this to me!” I shouted in desperation, hammering on the impenetrable, immovable barrier. “You can’t keep me here - *Doctor Who* is on, and I haven’t set the video!”

Realising it was useless, I turned to find myself facing two familiar faces. There, sitting on a bench in front of us, looking pretty dishevelled and distraught, were Cathy and the Professor.

The Professor gazed up at me, a spark of recognition in his eyes. “Dickson!” he said, rising shakily to his feet. “Dickson, good heavens... Where the fuck have *you* been?”

“...And so these creatures brought us here and demanded that I sort out their plumbing,” explained Professor Mendes, with a shrug.

I was slumped on the bench with my chin in my hands, while the Professor, contrary to my wishes, told me about what kind of day he’d had.

“Apparently they get terrible trouble with blocked pipes,” the old boy continued. “Obviously, when they captured us, it must have been perfectly apparent to them that I am something of a technical genius.”

“Father is *very* clever,” Cathy chipped in.

“Well, quite,” the Professor acknowledged immodestly. “And so they naturally decided to harness my abilities. They demanded that I fix their waste disposal unit, then locked us in this impenetrable room, with no hope of escape.”

“Yes,” I said gloomily. “It’s something of a problem, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” the Professor shrugged. “All it needed was a new washer.”

“Not the waste disposal,” I snapped. “I meant that getting out of this room is going to be a problem.” I looked around at the four bare walls, and knew that if I didn’t escape soon, I would be driven insane. It wasn’t the confinement so much as the company that I found so distressing. “What

I don't understand is why lock us up at all?" I asked. "What can they want with us? Why not just finish us off and have done with it?"

"My, my," said Professor Mendes, laying on the sarcasm. "You *are* a cheery soul, aren't you? I'm glad you dropped in, you've really brightened my day. The fact is, you ignorant young tit, these snail things have a lot of very exotic machinery in this city of theirs, and they're not too good at maintaining it themselves."

"Yes, well," I said, "I don't suppose they have the technical know-how."

"It's not that," said the Professor. "They just can't hold a screwdriver. But they do seem somewhat ignorant of technology. I think they buy a lot of it from the catalogue on easy terms. They have all sorts of stuff: juice extractors, vibrating foot massagers, electric tin openers. Do you know, they even have this wonderful machine that can blend two entirely different objects into one entity. They use it to make exotically flavoured crisps."

"Professor Nutkins' blender!" Janet exclaimed. And at the Professor's puzzled expression she went on to explain all about our adventures: our meeting with the squirrel people, the origin of the blending machine, our assault on the city. She had just got to the bit with the

speedboat when the door opened and one of the Mucons came in. It left a tray on the floor in front of us, then reversed backwards over its own trail, sealing the door once more.

“Ah!” the Professor said, clapping his hands together in delight. “Food.”

I looked down at the tray. On it were four bowls filled with a thick brown substance that looked not entirely unlike excrement. “What is it?” I asked.

“It’s excrement,” said the Professor.

“The Mucons seemed to have got it into their heads that this is what we eat,” Cathy said. “It’s really quite unpleasant. We’ve tried explaining to them that their menu is inadequate, but we’ve had trouble getting through to them.”

The Professor nevertheless scooped up one of the bowls and started to tuck in. “Oh, it’s not so bad,” he said, as he shovelled in another fork full. “You develop a taste for it after a while.”

I must admit that watching him eat was making me feel a little ill. I looked down at the remaining three bowls, then away at the door. “Well, I’m not putting up with this shit,” I said. “I mean to escape.”

“Escape!” said the Professor, looking up from his lunch. “Quite impossible!” he exclaimed. “If you seriously think you can get away from here,

then you're a bigger twat than I took you for - and I'll have you know that I think you're a pretty big twat."

"Nevertheless," I said, sounding far more determined than I actually felt. "I *am*, going to escape from here - and *you're* coming with me."

"Aww," the Professor sighed. "But I like it here. I've got quite comfortable. And the Mucons have promised me a plate of sick for breakfast tomorrow."

"Okay," I said. "I've changed my mind: *I'm* going to escape and *you're* going to stay here, you twisted old bastard."

Despite my determination, I realised it wasn't going to be as easy as all that. I asked everybody to turn out their pockets to see that if there was anything we could use. All I had was a set of keys and a cigarette lighter. Janet had a packet of tissues, a comb and a small book of stamps. Cathy had a pocket diary, a miniature trampoline, two chainsaws and a small bag of charcoal briquettes. Nothing we could use amongst that lot, although the stamps might come in handy. Still, there was always the Professor. Unfortunately he stubbornly refused to turn out his pockets.

"An Englishman's pockets are his castle," he said. He patted his jacket pockets. "See, nothing there anyway."

“What about your trousers?” I said.

“Ha!” replied the old coot. “If you think I’m letting you into my trousers, you can think again, you deviant.”

“Listen, the thought of going through your trousers gives me no pleasure, whatsoever,” I told him, and, indeed, the very mention of it made me shiver. “Nevertheless, you may have something in there that will help us out of this mess.”

The Professor grasped his waistband and adopted a firm stance. “How dare you!” he said. “I’ll have you know that the contents of my trousers are of no use to anybody!”

“That I can believe,” I muttered beneath my breath and turned away.

“What? What’s that?” the Professor responded. He fiddled around with something in his ear. “I can’t hear you. I think my batteries must be low.”

I turned to look at him. “You’re wearing a hearing aid?” I said. This could be the very thing we needed. Persuading Janet and Cathy to hold the protesting old man down, I used my front door key as a makeshift screwdriver and started to adjust the discreet little device in the Professor’s ear.

“Now, then,” I explained as I worked. “What we need is some sort of distraction. Something that

will throw the Mucons into a panic. Something that they're really not going to expect."

The Professor wriggled and struggled, but he calmed down a little after Janet had thumped him a few times.

"So," I continued, "simply by modifying the output range of the Prof's hearing aid, looping back the signal, cross-fazing with the multi-wave inducer, reversing the polarity of the neutron flow and then flicking this switch to the on position..."

I finished working and stood back. "...We can generate a nice little effect."

The Professor got slowly to his feet. There was a look of deep concern on his face. "I'm not going to like this, am I?" he said in an ominous voice.

I steadily shook my head. "No," I said. "Not one bit."

Suddenly there was a flash from the Professor's left ear, we all heard a sharp crack, then his head caught fire.

"Cool!" said Cathy. "Where did you learn to do that?"

I shrugged. "Internet," I replied. But there wasn't a moment to lose. I hammered on the cell door. "Help! Help!" I shouted. "We've got a head fire!"

The door opened and the Mucon guard glided in, stopped dead in its slimy tracks and looked at

the Professor with something approaching awe. Maybe it thought that the burning old man was some kind of deity sent from on high? Or maybe it thought that human beings regularly spontaneously ignited as a matter of habit? I guess we'll never know, for while it was still trying to work out what was going on, Janet hit it with a chair and we all ran out into the corridor. Thankfully the Mucons took matters of health and safety very seriously, and we found a fire bucket full of sand just around the corner. We took a moment to snub out the Professor's head, then Janet spotted a sign saying 'Blending Room'. We hurried along, found the room vacant, and blocked the door after us with some furniture.

"This is it!" Janet said. "Professor Nutkins' blender will be in here somewhere."

"Oh, screw the blender!" I replied. I looked around. There was equipment piled up everywhere - gadgets, appliances, scraps of half-completed electronic apparatus. "We don't even know what the damn thing looks like. Let's just concentrate on getting out of here."

"Father will know what it looks like," said Cathy, and we all turned to look at the old man. I wasn't too hopeful. From the look of him, it was doubtful whether the Prof even knew who he was. He wore a dazed expression, his face was black

with soot and there were still wisps of grey smoke coming from his ears. Cathy tried to rouse him.

“Father, father,” she said. “Can you hear me father?”

“Hmmm,” muttered Professor Mendes. “Yes, yes... what? Tell the Arch Deacon he can have all the soup he wants. We won’t be needing the donkey until Tuesday.”

“Professor Mendes?” said Janet. “We need your help, Professor Mendes. The blender - where is it?”

The Professor suddenly looked up at her with wide eyes. “Do you know, I once met a man who could swallow his own foot,” he remarked. “Of course, it left him with a terrible taste in his mouth, and unable to walk for a fortnight.”

“Let me try,” I said. I bent over him. “Professor Mendes,” I said softly. “Professor Mendes, it’s me, Geoff.”

Then I hit him with a table lamp. That seemed to do the trick. He suddenly leapt up, hands reaching out for my neck, and roared: “You bastard! You set fire to my head!”

I hit him with the lamp again, and he careered head-first into the opposite wall. He slumped to the floor, got up again and staggered slightly as he tried to fix me in his sights.

“We don’t have time for this,” I said. “We need to get the blender and get out of here.”

He nodded his understanding. “Fair enough,” he said, rubbing his head. The blow seemed to have brought him to his senses. “I’ll kill you later. It’s that one - that one there.”

He pointed to a squat, dome-shaped device of polished steel. Two parabolic arms emerged on either side, and a third protrusion emerged from the rear, arched over the top and ended in something like an old fashioned gramophone horn, pointing forward. It looked like something cobbled together for a laugh in someone’s lunch hour.

“Is that it?” I said.

“Yes, not very impressive, is it?” the Professor said, somehow knowing exactly what I was thinking. “It looks like something cobbled together in someone’s lunch hour. Nevertheless, it is remarkably effective. The Mucons only seem to be interested in making crisps, but the machine is capable of combining anything - flavours, colours, metals, electronic components. Anything you care to mention.”

“Even living things?” asked Janet.

“Yes, yes, theoretically,” the Professor said. “I don’t see why not.” He moved nearer to the machine in order to point out its functions. “You

see, the two objects are placed in the receptor fields generated by these two dishes here, and the resulting combination emerges from the funnel that - ”

There was a sudden sharp banging at the door. “Mucons!” said Janet. “They’ve found us.”

“Time for the lecture later, Prof,” I said, snatching up the machine. “We’ve gotta make a move.” I looked around for an escape route, but we seemed to be short of options.

“What about the ventilation duct?” said Cathy. Yes, it looked like the only way. It would probably be a bit tight, but it was bound to lead to the outside. I knelt beside it and frantically started to unscrew the cover. Janet was less than encouraging.

“It looks a bit grubby,” she said, doubtfully.

“Yeah, well, that can’t be helped, can it?” I replied grumpily.

“Are you sure we’ll be able to get through it?” Janet persisted.

“We’ll have to,” I muttered, still struggling with the cover.

“It’s just that - ”

“Give it a rest, you sappy woman!” I snapped. I paused, looking up. The banging on the door had increased and the barrier had started to give way. “You can either grit your teeth and bear it,

or you can stay here and wait for the Mucons,” I told her bluntly. “Unless, that is, you have a better idea?”

“Well, yes,” said Janet. “We could just use the fire exit.” She pointed to a door with an illuminated ‘Fire Exit’ sign above it.

“Ooh, excellent idea,” said Professor Mendes.

“Nice one,” said Cathy.

“Yes, a fire exit,” I said, stumbling over the words. “Well, yes, I was wondering when you were going to spot that.” Realising that I wasn’t fooling anyone, I tucked the blender beneath my arm and led the way through. We found ourselves outside, on a patch of gravel near the outer wall.

“Now which way?” said Janet.

I was about to reply, when suddenly there was a voice at my elbow. “This way,” said Commander Shagpaw, suddenly appearing from the shadow of a nearby building. Follow me, I’ve got a car waiting.”

The car was a Ford, exactly the same model and colour as the one that had attacked me in the forest the previous day. I held back, the memory of that fearful encounter still fresh in my mind. Commander Shagpaw, acknowledging my reticence assured me that it was quite dead, then held open the door for me. It was also quite full.

The survivors of the squirrel raiding party were all crammed inside, a tangle of limbs and torsos, wet noses pressed up against windows. Finding a space amongst them was something of an ordeal in itself. Nevertheless, Cathy, Professor Mendes and I managed to squeeze into the back, while Janet sat up front.

“Hang on,” I said. A thought had occurred to me. “If this car is dead, how is it going to move?”

Commander Shagpaw clambered into the driving seat and buckled up. “Watch,” he said mysteriously. “Squad Leader Knothole, if you please.”

“Sir!” barked the Squad Leader, from somewhere amongst the melee of fur. “Platoon - engage motive units!”

At his command the squirrels all stuck their legs through holes in the floor and started to punt us along. Surprisingly, we began to move forward at something approaching a respectable pace. We were out through the main gate and halfway across the plain before Janet, leaning out of the open window, announced that we had been spotted.

“They’re giving chase!” she cried in alarm.

“Fat lot of good that will do them,” I scoffed, confident that we weren’t likely to be outstripped by a bunch of snails. “What would you say their top speed is? About three metres per day, with the

wind behind them - and that's providing they don't get distracted by the odd lettuce leaf."

I laughed, but I saw that Janet was very worried. "You don't understand," she said. "They've got a motorbike."

"They're on motorbikes?" I responded.

"Not 'motorbikes' - *a* motorbike," Janet clarified. "They're all balanced on the back of it in pyramid formation."

I twisted around to see, roughly heaving a couple of my furry fellow passengers aside to afford a proper view. Janet was quite right. A pyramid of fifteen Mucons, balanced on the back of a battered but perfectly serviceable motorbike was giving chase. What's more, they were gaining on us."

The Professor had seen it too. "Can't this thing go any faster?" he demanded.

"Quick march!" Squad Leader Knothole commanded. The vehicle picked up speed, but we were still going too slowly. Nevertheless, we were nearing the edge of the forest, and Commander Shagpaw was confident that we would lose them there. Entering the cover of the trees, he announced that we were going to take a shortcut. He wrenched the steering wheel hard to the right and we left the track, crashing through bushes and narrowly avoiding thick trunks and tangled vines.

Much to my surprise we suddenly found ourselves racing across a busy market square where a cosmopolitan selection of woodland creatures were busily searching for bargains. Narrowly missing a badger pushing a pram, Commander Shagpaw swerved, ploughed through a stack of cardboard boxes and demolished a barrow full of shellfish, before hurtling once more into the depths of the forest.

“That was close,” I said, as I wiped the wrinkles from my eyes.

“I’ll say,” said Professor Mendes. “Two feet to the left and we’d have scored a direct hit on the fish stall.” He shook his head and dislodged five whelks and a king prawn. “There’s no knowing what might have happened if this car had been hit by a turbot at this sort of velocity.”

Janet had crabs up her nose. “The Mucons!” she said, staring anxiously out of the window. “They’re still following us!”

Actually, I seem to recall that she’d had crabs up her nose when I’d first met her, so circumstances don’t seem to have altered all that much for her.

“No need to worry,” Commander Shagpaw promised. “We’ll shake them off at the bridge,” he said, and we veered off sharply down a side trail.

“Ah yes, the bridge,” I said.

“The bridge, indeed,” the Professor said, with some satisfaction.

“Yes, we’ll lose them at the bridge,” Janet said, nodding her agreement.

“Hey!” Cathy said. “This is just like one of those movies, isn’t it?” she observed. “You know, where the good guys are being chased by the evil police sheriff, and they have to jump the river because the bridge is out.” She smiled. Janet, the Professor and myself exchanged a look of trepidation. Then we passed a painted wooden sign that said ‘bridge out’.

“Don’t panic, we can make this,” Commander Shagpaw said, as we crashed through a barrier, and the broken bridge came in sight.

“I’d like to get out now, please,” I said calmly and firmly.

“Everybody hold tight, it’s going to be a bit rough,” he hissed through gritted teeth.

“Anywhere just here will be fine,” I said, not wanting to be any trouble.

“Here we go!” The Commander gripped the wheel. The squirrels but on an extra spurt of speed. We hit the first section of the bridge then launched ourselves into the space beyond.

I shouted something about wanting the catch the bus, then started to cry; Janet screamed with

delight and called out for more; Cathy said that she could see her house from here; and the Professor shit himself. Then, moments later, I was delighted to realise that we had reached the opposite bank, that we were still moving and that I wasn't dead.

“Done it!” Commander Shagpaw announced with delight, and there was something in his voice that suggested he was more surprised than any of us.

Through the trees we could now see the neat, closely cropped greens of neighbouring golf courses. “We can't be far from the village now,” Shagpaw said. Suddenly the car hit a rock, one of the squirrels had a blowout and we careered wildly out of control. Wrestling frantically with the wheel, the Commander desperately tried to keep the vehicle steady, but we burst through the trees onto the links, ricocheted off the flag marking the fifteenth hole, leapt a bunker and charged recklessly down the fairway. We clipped an abandoned golf cart and went into a spin, flipped over several times and finally landed in the ornamental fountain in the market square.

We sat for a moment to catch our breath, get our bearings and check to see that there hadn't been any displacement of our internal organs. Then, finally, Commander Shagpaw spoke. “Well,” he said, unnecessarily. “We're home”

He wound up his window, opened the door and jumped out. We followed, unceremoniously scrambling over each other as we squeezed out of the car.

“Hallo!” shouted Commander Shagpaw. “We’re back!”

The market square was empty, no one about. In fact, we hadn’t seen a soul playing golf, either. It was all very strange.

“Is there anybody here?” I shouted. “We’re back, and we’ve got the blender!”

Nothing. Shop doors stood open, with no sign of life. Half-eaten meals congealed on the tables outside a nearby restaurant.

“Where is everybody?” said Cathy. “Surely they wouldn’t just - ”

“Shush,” the Professor hissed. He stepped forward, head to one side as he strained to listen. At least, I think that’s what he was doing. It’s just possible that he had wet himself. However, we could all hear something approaching. It was a soft, rustling, leathery sound; the noise of something very big dragging itself over the rough ground.

“It sounds like -” I began, and then stopped suddenly when I realised it had gone dark. There was something behind us. Something large enough to blot out the sun. I turned slowly to see

a giant vegetable towering over the buildings to the rear: a cauliflower, dark green, its leaves like thick canvas, and ten times the size of the one that had attacked us on the trail.

“It sounds,” I said, and pointed up at the monster that filled my field of vision. “It sounds like one of those...”

The monster cauliflower shuffled forwards, its thick leaves dragging over the adjacent rooftops and bringing chimneystacks and roof tiles crashing to the ground. I backed up, slowly, step by step, not daring to take my eyes from the terrible vegetable - until I collided with Commander Shagpaw.

“Why... why... why is it so *big?*” I hissed.

“Why are you so small?” the Commander replied unhelpfully.

“But the one we met in the forest was - ” I began.

“Just a baby,” Shagpaw completed for me. “That was a sprout compared to this. This one is an adult: a fully grown bull cauliflower.”

“Well do something!” I said, still staring at the monstrosity. “*Do something!*”

“I *have* done something,” Commander Shagpaw said, and for the first time I detected a shade of genuine fear in his voice. “I’ve soiled myself.”

I turned to look at him. The great Hamilton Shagpaw - undercover operative, tactical expert and secret squirrel - was terrified. “It must have got our scent,” he said. “They don’t normally bother us, but this one must have followed our trail back to the village after we blew up the

youngster. Yeah, that's it. That must have really pissed them off."

Cathy suddenly screamed. Instinctively, I turned around and slapped her. The Professor slapped me in response, and an unruly scuffle broke out, until Janet broke it up by threatening to hit me with a big rock. "There's another, look!" she said, and as we looked behind us we saw what had made Cathy scream: another of the giant creatures coming up from the rear.

"We're trapped!" I said.

"We must try to reason with them," said the Professor, "it's our only chance."

"How do you reason with a cauliflower, you mad bastard?" I responded, rapidly succumbing to panic. "Offer it cheese and biscuits and settle down to talk it over?"

"There is no reasoning with these things," Commander Shagpaw said, suddenly sounding very determined; suddenly in control. "They're tenacious, stubborn, utterly resistant to logic. They're a lot like parsnips in that respect. No, we must stand and fight!"

He returned to the car, leapt up onto the roof and as he spun around to address us, there was something in his manner that made it obvious that he had been born to lead, to inspire and to win!

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends,” he announced, “once more; or close the wall up with our squirrel dead... In peace, there’s nothing so becomes a squirrel as modest stillness, and humility: but when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the Volkswagen, stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage, then lend the eye a terrible aspect.”

“What’s he talking about?” I whispered to Janet.

She shrugged. “I think it’s a quote,” she said. “Sounds like Jean-Claude Van Damme.”

Shagpaw ripped a strut from the roof-rack and swung it menacingly through the air. “Show us here the mettle of your pasture,” he continued. “Let us swear that you are worth your breeding - which I doubt not.”

“Hang on, he’s missed a bit,” said Janet.

“Probably keen to get to the good part,” I suggested.

“For there is none of you,” the Commander announced, his voice rising in pitch and volume, “so mean and base that hath not noble lustre in your eyes. I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start. The game’s afoot: follow your spirit, and upon this charge cry, ‘God for Shagpaw, Squirreltopia and Saint Nuts!’”

At this point the squad cheered and the cauliflower let out an almighty raw.

“Fuck that,” I said, and I ran and hid under a water trough

Shagpaw jumped down from the car, then he and the others grabbed whatever weapons they could find and formed a defensive circle, waiting for the onslaught. Waiting, to be eaten, in fact - which I doubted not. As the cauliflowers closed in I just hoped that there would be enough panic, death and dismemberment to allow me to escape in the confusion. I lay on my belly in the dirt, waiting for the optimum moment to scarper, then I heard a door creak open behind me. “Hey, quick!” a voice hissed. “In here!”

I scabbled round. There was a squirrel leaning out of the open door of the meeting hall, beckoning me over. “You?” I said, recognising the animal from our earlier meeting around the King’s campfire.

“Hurry!” he hissed. I jumped to my feet and ran to the door, but he stopped me as I tried to squeeze through. “What about the others?” he said, indicating the rest of our party as they prepared to make their final stand.

“What about them?” I answered peevishly.

“Surely you not going to leave them out there to die?”

I thought about this long and hard, then noting the expression on his little furry face I realised that the question was rhetorical. “No, no,” I said. “Of course not.” I whistled them over. Moments earlier they had been dead set on making their last stand, but I was pleased to note that an open door and a possible hiding place were more than enough to crack their resolve. They charged at the door, practically foaming at the mouth in their fervour, like senior citizens at a wedding buffet. I was roughly pushed aside in the panic. As soon as they were in, the door was closed and barred, leaving me on the outside.

“Hey!” I cried, hammering frantically on the door. “Come on! Come on! Stop pissing about and let me in!”

The door opened. A hairy arm reached out and pulled me inside, then the door was slammed behind me.

“My God,” breathed Commander Shagpaw, once we were all in. “Oh my God.”

Thousands of squirrel faces were turned upon us. The entire village seemed to be sheltering here, crammed into every conceivable space. You could taste their fear in the air, see the hopelessness reflected in each pair of tiny, beady eyes. But on seeing Commander Shagpaw, their demeanour changed. Their hero had returned.

They pressed forward, chattering, gossiping, barely suppressing whoops of delight. “Quiet!” Shagpaw hissed. “Quiet now!” Their murmuring subsided. Shagpaw sought out a Lieutenant, one of the city guard, and asked him what had happened. The frightened young squirrel told of how the sentries had been taken by surprise. By the time the alarm had been raised, it was too late. The cauliflowers were already rampaging through the settlement. Many were dead or missing, homes had been destroyed, families torn apart -

“Yes, it’s a bit of a to-do, isn’t it?” This last comment came from King Flaky Nibbles IV. He scythed his way through the crowd, almost casually, carrying his beloved guinea pig beneath his arm. “Simon here got quite restless at one point.”

“Your Majesty!” said Commander Shagpaw. “Thank heavens you’re safe.”

“Yeah, whatever,” said the King. “Have you got the machine, then?”

“First things first, sir,” said Shagpaw. “I think our most important priority is to reinforce the doors. If these vegetables find out that - ”

“Oh, vegetables, smegetables,” said King Flaky Nibbles, with a grin. “The machine, Commander. The blending machine - did you get it?”

“But the safety of your subjects, sir,” the Commander protested.

“Stuff ‘em!” said the King. “Hand over the bloody machine!”

I was still holding the machine. Not wishing to draw any attention to myself, I slipped it behind my back. Luckily, the Professor chose this moment to interfere. He stepped forward.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said rather haughtily. “I don’t think you seemed to have grasped the gravity of the situation. We are in a great deal of danger here - all of us. Those things outside mean to kill us. We need to act now.”

The King looked at me quizzically. “Who’s this old twat?” he said, nodding in the Professor’s direction. I shrugged and pretended that I didn’t know him, so the King was forced to address the Professor directly: “Okay, so who are you - you old twat?”

“How dare you sir?” the Professor replied. “Why, I’ll have you know that - ”

He did not say another word, for at that moment the King pulled out a gun and shot him in the stomach. There was a stifled gasp from the rest of the room and then silence. Professor Mendes slumped to the floor. King Flaky Nibbles blew the smoke from the barrel of the gun like some Hollywood cowboy, then laughed.

“He shot him!” Cathy said, in a barely audible whisper. She knelt beside his prostrate form.

“He shot my father!”

But the Professor was still with us. He groaned. He winced. Then Cathy helped him to his feet. “Straight in the colostomy bag,” he said. “Direct hit. That lamb chop I had yesterday just saved my life.”

The King turned scarlet with sudden rage. He levelled the gun again, this time at the Professor’s head. “Your lunch won’t save you next time,” he said. “Hand over the machine.”

“Go on, shoot him!” I said, recklessly. “Do your worst. We’re not scared.”

“Fair enough,” said the King.

“Hang on, hang on!” the Professor protested wildly. “I don’t remember anyone electing him as spokesman.”

It was then that I felt a paw upon my shoulder. “Hand over the machine,” said Commander Shagpaw in my ear. Reluctantly, I stepped forward and set down the blender in front of King Flaky Nibbles. His Majesty’s eyes lit up with wonder.

“What are you up to?” the Professor demanded. “What’s your fascination with that machine?”

“Power!” said the King simply. “The ultimate power.”

“I thought you wanted it to help your people,” Janet said. “To produce food to feed your starving citizens.”

“What, them?” King Flaky Nibbles said, spitting out the words in disgust as his subjects cowered in the gloom behind him. “All they’re interested in his golf and nuts. No, no - this machine is for me. With it, I shall become bigger, stronger, more terrifying than ever before. No one will laugh at my pointy little teeth and silly bushy tail again!”

“Ah, bullied at school, were you?” I taunted. “Well, exactly how are you going to do this?” I asked. “How is this machine going to make you less insignificant?”

“This is how,” said the King. Keeping his gun trained on us all the while, he placed his pet guinea pig in one of the machine’s receptor fields, then he himself stood in the other. “I shall combine myself with Simon here. I will become the ultimate creature - all the cunning, resourcefulness and intelligence of the squirrel, combined with the powerful dignity, the stamina and the ability to amuse myself by running around in a little wheel of a guinea pig. I will be unstoppable!” He reached out with his toe and activated the main switch. “Maximum blend!”

“Nuttier than a wheelbarrow full of pistachios!” exclaimed Professor Mendes.

We all jumped back as the machine hummed into life. The King and his pet both shimmied, shook, shuddered. We looked on in horror as their bodies were twisted and torn out of shape. Steadily they dissolved, unravelled, were pulled into the machine in wispy strands, until there was nothing left. The machine fell silent. Then with a sudden, terrifying electric belch - the kind of noise that a washing machine would make if it was throwing up - a strange amorphous shape began to squeeze out of the horn. Gradually it coalesced, wobbling uncertainly until it solidified into a horrific shape: half-squirrel, half-guinea pig, it stood up on its hind legs, a good fourteen feet tall if it was an inch, and roared in a way that only a half-squirrel, half-guinea pig can.

As it did so, the doors of the meeting hall bust open under the force of powerful, grasping leaves. The walls began to crumble and crack as the giant cauliflowers slowly started to grind the building into dust. We were finished; caught between a rock and a hard place; caught between a monster and a freak. But in a moment we witnessed our salvation.

The chimera that had once been King Flaky Nibbles looked upon the invader with sheer,

unadulterated peckishness. He suddenly leapt up and began tearing them leaf from leaf. The creatures howled and made to escape, but they couldn't get away, and within the space of a few short minutes they had been reduced to a couple of stubby stalks.

"Well, I think that your glorious leader had inadvertently provided a solution to your rampant vegetable problem," Professor Mendes said, as he led the squirrels blinking out into the daylight. King Flaky Nibbles, his appetite satiated and his belly uncomfortably bloated, lay on his back and dozed in the sun. He even let Janet tickle his chest. "I imagine his new-found appetite will prove to be more than a match for them," the Professor professed. "King Flaky Nibbles has done you a great favour."

"Has he professor?" I said. I was standing over the blender - or rather, the remains of it. It had been smashed to pieces in the confusion.

"Yes," the Professor said, most emphatically. "Oh yes, indeed." He came over and sifted through the wreckage of the device with the toe of his boot. "This machine is a menace. Nobody should be in possession of such power."

"But - " Commander Shagpaw began.

"Nobody, I tell you," the Professor insisted. "Just look at the Mucons. I suspect that without

the influence of this device they will return to their normal, peaceable selves. All those additives in the snacks they were making were probably responsible for their sudden bouts of aggression. No, trust me - no good would ever come of this machine.”

At this point he spotted something and reached down to pick it up. “On the other hand, its destruction may well have done us a service.”

“What is it?” I asked.

The professor held up a bright orange ball on a stick. “A new ballcock, Dickson,” he said. “For the Podulator - finally, we can leave this place.”

We said our goodbyes and returned to the Podulator. I have never been so grateful to enter a smelly old toilet before in my life. Actually, I tell a lie, there was an occasion once in Weston Super Mare, but we won't go into that right now. Professor Mendes fitted the new ballcock, stood back and wiped his hands on his coat.

“Fine, are we all right?” he said. “Everyone ready to go?”

“The sooner you pull that chain, the better,” I replied.

“Sure you don't want to stay here?” he asked me one last time. He'd been trying to persuade me to remain ever since we'd left the squirrel

settlement. “I mean, I can’t imagine that anyone’s going to miss you at home.”

“I’m coming with you,” I said firmly.

“Oh shit,” Professor Mendes muttered philosophically. “Never mind. Hold tight, here goes.”

He reached up and yanked on the chain. Once more the plumbing around us began to rattle and shake. The floor dipped and swayed, the stale air was rent by a fearsome gale as the Professor’s bizarre machine forced its way through the gaps in the fabric of the universe. It seemed like the walls around us were being dismantled, brick by brick, each one swirling around our heads in an impossible procession. I heard something screaming, then realised it was me. Slowly reality began to reform around me. My surroundings snapped back into place and Professor Mendes’ toilet came to a shuddering halt.

“Ah, I feel better for that,” the Professor said. He lifted the latch and stepped outside. We followed, expecting to find ourselves, as promised, back in Professor Mendes’ back garden, but instead we stepped out onto a baking hot plain of barren earth. Broken buildings littered the landscape; half-buried slabs of concrete, rusted girders and rotting timbers. Giant birds wheeled in the sky above us, occasionally diving down in

great, swooping, suicidal arcs and smashing their tiny brains to atoms on the compacted ground. This was a truly horrible place.

“You’ve got it wrong,” I said. “This isn’t Earth.”

The Professor scowled at me. Then he stepped forward to a large metal sign, and wiped the dust from it with one sweep of his handkerchief. “Not Earth?” he said, and he stepped back. We could read the lettering now. It said ‘Cardiff 35 Miles’.

“It think you’ll find this is Swansea.”



# Board Meeting



## Board Meeting

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, clasping 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 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 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.

“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 Woolworth’s,” 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?”

“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.”

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.

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.”

“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 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 tabletop. 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 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 video recorders to seize up, 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.

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 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!"

**Dirty Doings at  
Featherstone Manor**



## 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."

"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?”

“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.”

“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.”

“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 a 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.

“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 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 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 any more.”

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.”

“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 - arrrrgghhh!”

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 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 the matter in some detail.”

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? 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.

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 library.

She says she prefers him like that.



# **Barry Buys a Broom**



## Barry Buys a Broom

I never told you, did I, of the day I went to buy a new broom? Well then, now seems like as good a time as any. One day we found ourselves sorely in need of broom, for our existing one was all broken and smashed and rubbish and useless. It had been a good broom to us over the years, and had served us faithfully and well, and my wife and I, and our many, many children, and our menagerie of interesting pets were all very sad to see it go. But go it must, and so I resolved to buy a replacement - not an easy task, for the nearest hardware store was many, many miles distant, in a foreign land of strange manners and customs. The journey would be long and hard, and not without its many dangers. Nevertheless, a new brush was what was needed, and so a new brush I must get.

I set out early the following day, fortified by a hearty breakfast and weighed down with provisions. The whole village turned out to see me off, and I was greatly moved by their kind words and sentiments. Tearfully I waved to my loving family, kissed my favourite goat goodbye, and made my way along the snaking road that led out of the village. Before very long I was out of sight of my home, all alone on a stony trackway, with little to keep me company but the whining wind that swept down off the hillsides. I walked all morning, I walked all afternoon, but saw nary a soul, nor detected any trace of a convenience store

or small rural petrol station where I could buy my broom. The cold wind ate into my bones and the drizzle soaked my skin. As evening drew in, I came to a tiny hamlet of stone cottages, with warm yellow lights shining from their windows and smoke curling from chimney pots. The inhabitants wore strange clothes and talked in a foreign tongue, but through a system of hand signals and judicious pointing I managed to ask if I could buy a broom here. They forlornly shook their heads and made it clear to me that there were no such articles to be had. One kindly old woman offered me the use of a dustpan and brush, and I thanked her for her generosity but declined her largesse and carried on my way.

I had resolved to continue walking through the night, but come the witching hour I was footsore and greatly discouraged. I stopped to rest by a storm-blasted willow tree, and before I knew it I had drifted into a deep and troubled sleep. Strange shapes assailed my unconscious mind; fearful visions of a far away land. A gnarled old man leered at me from a shadow in the rock, his face twisted and squeezed, like a squished-up rag. Then I seemed to find myself on a shale-strewn pathway, leading up over the distant hillside. A croaking, cackling voice filled my mind. "The willow points the way," it said, then laughed, and

laughed, and laughed some more as it faded away to nothing. “The willow, the willow, the willow points the way...”

I awoke feeling cramped, and confused, and slightly damp around the trouser area. But the words of my dream kept on echoing around my head, and when I looked up at the tree I saw that one blackened bough pointed like a ragged skeletal finger towards the distant hills. And there, winding up towards the mist-shrouded summit, I saw the path that I was fated to follow.

The going was tough, the rubble strewn slopes treacherous, but by mid-morning I had reached the peak and found myself looking down onto a stretch of rugged coastline. Descending rapidly, I soon reached the edge of a sea of pure acid. Was I destined to cross? Surely not, for no man could negotiate such a hazard without being reduced to a fizzing blob of guck. And yet, somehow, I felt as if I was *meant* to traverse this great frothing wilderness; as if this was some kind of ordeal to test my worthiness. I skirted the shoreline, searching about me for some means of crossing, and presently chanced across a cave. From the dark shadows emerged a wrinkled old hermit - the man from my dream! He told me that he had a glass boat, capable of navigating the acid sea, but his glass-boating days were over and he no longer

had any need of it. I offered him a tenner for it. He wasn't sure at first, but when I pointed out that it would save him the trouble of putting it on eBay, he decided to accept.

And so I rowed out across the terrible waters, using a pair of asbestos oars, which the hermit had let me have for an extra £2.75 plus p&p. It was not an easy journey. At times, mighty waves buffeted my tiny craft, and threatened to capsize me. At others, my boat was besieged by spiny metal fish, their diamond-tipped teeth scraping and scratching on my crystal hull. But eventually I sighted land and pulled towards it with renewed vigour. I landed on a rainbow-coloured beach of tiny glass beads, and dragged my boat ashore, camouflaging it as best I could with branches and leaves to prevent it being stolen by wolves. Then I made my way inland and soon chanced upon the outskirts of a vast city, the inhabitants of which all wore gloriously amusing facial hair and a seemingly infinite variety of *fascinating* headgear. Evidently, I had entered into a land of hats, where precariously balanced top hats stretched skywards like mighty skyscrapers, and the trilby was king. This was all very wonderful to me, as hats were pretty much unknown in my small village. Many years ago, my great great uncle had owned a deerstalker, or so I've been told, but he was run over by donkey just

after his sixty-eighth birthday, and - according to parish records - they had buried his bonnet with him.

I strode through the busy streets of this wonderful new metropolis, marvelling at the glorious parade of boaters, Balaclavas and bowlers that passed me by. At first I was overcome by the spectacle of it all, but then I suddenly realised something that made me quite uncomfortable: it wasn't that *most* people were wearing hats, it was that *everybody* was wearing hats. Everybody, that was, except me. These people were all looking at me strangely, as if I was some kind of freak. Children laughed and jeered as I passed. Even cats and dogs took a break from their perennial battle of wits to nudge each other, point and giggle beneath their breaths.

Feeling horribly exposed, I darted into the nearest shop and found myself in a dark, dusty, cluttered space, surrounded by rows and rows and rows and rows of brooms. Brooms of all sizes, brooms of all colours, brooms of pine, and willow, and cedar and oak. Bright yellow signs were pinned hither and thither, proclaiming:

***Brooms - 50% off,***

***Brooms - Massive Stock Clearance,***

and:

***Buy 2 Brooms, Get 1 Broom Free.***

And turning around I saw, written backwards in blurred black letters on the window, the words:

**Mustapha's Broom Emporium**

Now this, I couldn't fail to admit to myself, was a piece of luck.

After taking in all this broomery, I noticed the shopkeeper standing behind the counter, peering at me from beneath a heavily bejewelled neon fez. He flinched slightly as his eyes met mine - probably a shocked reaction to my bare head, but he was polite enough not to pursue the matter. After I outlined my needs, he presented me with a bewildering selection of brooms. There were brooms which were capable of flight; brooms which gave their owners command over all the creatures of nature; brooms which conferred on their owners the gift of invisibility. There were time-travelling brooms, transmutation brooms, and brooms to render thine enemies immobile. These were all of no use to me. I explained, politely, that I did not want a broom to produce an endless supply of wealth. I did not want a broom that would open my eyes to all the secrets of the universe. I merely wanted a broom to sweep up with, since my previous broom had broken and my house was a bit of a tip.

Ah... this was going to be a problem. It transpired that this was a *magic* broom shop and he

didn't have any ordinary brooms at all. He apologised profusely then, curiosity evidently having got the better of him, he asked me why I wasn't wearing a hat? Thinking quickly, I said I had head-crabs, and my apothecary had advised against it. It was then that he took pity on me and offered me a magic teleportation broom that was faulty and was only really any good for sweeping up. I accepted his offer, and he bid me farewell, and gave me a crash helmet for the journey back, just to be on the safe side.

And so it was I returned to my village full of joy and crisps, with my new broom, my crash helmet and my many stories of exotic and far away places. But somehow, something was wrong. Something had changed. The place seemed smaller, the people foreign. Neighbours looked at me oddly; friends whom I had known since childhood behaved as if I were a stranger. Even my own family seemed distant and remote. As the weeks wore on, so the feeling of alienation became stronger and I realised that it was *me* that was different, not them. My experiences of the outside world had changed me and opened up a gulf between myself and those people who had rarely ever strayed further than the end of the village.

That was many, many years ago now. I still live in the village, but I have never felt settled here.

## Barry Buys a Broom

My wife has gone off with a shepherd, my children have moved away to open a discotheque in Dulwich and I now live alone. I'm not bitter, but occasionally, when I'm in a maudlin mood, I go to the cupboard beneath the stairs and get out my crash helmet. I never wear it, of course. Such a thing would frighten the locals. But sometimes I will sit and stroke it, and fantasise that I will one day return to that land of magic brooms and wonderful hats. Oh yes, one day I *shall* return. One day.

# **Tall Story in a Short Glass**



## 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, 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 any more.”

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 any more’? 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 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."

"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 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 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.”

**Made in Heaven**



## 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 Mudswirler 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 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 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 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.”

“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.

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.

“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.