

**A Case of Black Rock
and other stories**

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A Case of Black Rock Mineral Water

The house was in turmoil, the air filled with an overpowering odour of furniture polish and the deafening roar of vacuums. Vases of fresh cut flowers bloomed miraculously in bay windows while a general air of nervous anticipation pervaded every room. Great Aunt Lucritia had cabled to inform us she was descending for the weekend. I suppose there must have been a time when the Gal, as she was irreverently known behind her back, must have waited to be asked like anyone else. But for the twenty odd years I had known her she had ignored such mundane conventions, preferring to cable directives to her unsuspecting hosts instead. Not that she overstayed. Welcome or not she invariably arrived shortly before lunch on Saturday and departed shortly after the same repast the following day. Even so, each visit proved a tour de force guaranteed to test the stamina of the most seasoned Swiss hotelier.

In the early days she arrived by train. My wife and I would drive to the station to collect her, allowing sufficient time to make the obligatory financial adjustments with the two local porters without condemning ourselves to a longer wait than necessary. Expresses would come and go until, just as we were about to give up hope and return to the car, one of the wheezing little branch trains of which she was so fond would finally creep along the platform and sigh to a grinding halt. The wretched machine was never on time, but then after stopping at every station and giving way to all the more important trains along the line, the delay was scarcely surprising. The Gal would take her time, gathering a multitudinous collection of hand baggage, before finally descending from one of the few first class compartments to greet us with an affectionate if regal graciousness. All this took some while, but there was little cause for concern the train might leave before she was ready, for it took the two struggling porters a great deal longer to unload her heavy oak chest from the guards van.

Just why The Gal was unable to travel with suitcases like everyone else I never dared enquire. I had once been foolish enough to ask why she was so insistent on avoiding express trains, pointing out how much faster and more comfortable they were in comparison to the local feeders she patronised. For what has always seemed one of the longest moments of my life she eyed me pityingly through her pinz nez, then annunciating each word slowly and clearly as though addressing a retarded child she replied. 'The reason I prefer the slow trains, my dear, is they are so much easier to catch.' And with a sad shake of the head she had patted me gently on the cheek

before turning her attention to more important matters. I have no doubt her reasons for travelling with an oak chest would have been equally valid.

Separate first class compartments have long since disappeared, as have the feeder trains, and now on the rare occasions The Gal decides to grace us with her presence she arrives by car. Though perhaps not a vehicle most might choose, for Great Aunt Lucretia the car could have been custom built in heaven. A Daimler of ancient vintage, made in the days when it was mandatory for the roof above the back seat to be high enough to accommodate a tall man wearing a top hat, it was a car born of an era when the bodies of all great motors ended in the glorious S shaped sweep of a well-endowed opera singer. Guided by the shaky hand of Jessop, who until the need for a chauffeur arose had served The Gal for many years in the capacity of gardener driving nothing more sophisticated than a lawnmower. But somehow he had managed to master this majestic machine that purred with an almost feline grace through the city streets, though whether he was officially entitled to drive it I purposely never enquired. Perhaps due to a lack of familiarity with four wheels, or perhaps because all three had reached an age when speed had long lost its allure, Jessop seldom demanded more than thirty five miles per hour from his steed, a pace suitably symbolic of graceful retirement.

But with the passage of time disaster finally struck. The old car developed a tendency to leak in wet weather, a trend that swiftly turned to a disastrous cascade. Repair was a task the experts deemed impossible; the options they opined were simple but stark. A new roof or a new car. The Gal dismissed both possibilities as irrelevant. Irritated though otherwise unmoved by the proposed inconvenience she swiftly brought her own particular brand of pragmatism to bear on the problem solving it at a stroke. Taking advantage of the unusual height above the back seat she took to opening her parasol on rainy days.

Great Aunt Lucretia was the last surviving member of her generation. Sister to my wife's grandmother she had never married, though family gossip suggests that even in those less permissive times she was seldom lonely in her younger days and even then had been recognised as the oddest member of a decidedly eccentric brood. My wife for example is considered mad as a hatter by many but seems almost boringly orthodox when compared to her Great Aunt.

One of the more wearisome idiosyncrasies of this family doyen was her unshakable addiction to Broughton's Black Rock Mineral Water. Not that I begrudge a taste for healthful refreshment, we drink liberal quantities of mineral water ourselves, it was the particular brand she had so typically selected that irritated me. In the first place it was virtually unobtainable. None of the local supermarkets stocked Broughton Black Rock Mineral Water, indeed not a single major London store including Harrods had ever heard of it. The only suppliers of this to my taste brackish Adam's ale was Aluishious Clovis & Sons of Camden Passage.

On exploratory visits to freshly discovered country houses, The Gal would bring her own supply of the wretched brew. But after a couple of weekends and much singing of the products praise she would pointedly leave the address and telephone number of Clovis & Sons prominently displayed on her departure, secure in the expectation that her host of the day would

feel obliged to provide the offensive elixir in future. Despite the skilfully crafted label depicting an oversized buzzard soaring above a village, presumably Broughton, nestling in a sun splashed facsimile of the Yorkshire Dales, I have always mistrusted the origins of the concoction. Mentally picturing a hoard of miserable young Clovi splashing about in a sodden basement beneath the evil aqueous eye of Aluishious himself. Toiling from dawn to dusk in the Herculean task of filling a never ending procession of bottles from rows of gushing taps connected to the mains.

Despite such fantasies, the moment I heard of The Gal's imminent arrival, I at once telephoned Clovis & Sons to order a case of Broughtons Black Rock to be dispatched without delay. Unfortunately it was the lunch hour and the usual efficient staff had temporarily deserted their posts. But since it was a matter of some urgency I persevered with the cretinous substitute left on duty and after several minutes of patient explanation was beginning to feel confident that my order had finally been understood when the voice shrilled in my ear

‘Then you'll be wanting the twenty four, right?’

‘Yes, yes.’ I replied, partially deafened. ‘That's correct, twenty four.’

Returning from the village the following afternoon I found my wife close to hysterics. Almost speechless she pointed to the menacing wall of Broughton's Black Rock Mineral Water that effectively blocked all access to the front door. Since it was already late afternoon on Friday there was no hope of recalling the delivery van to remove the twenty-four offending cases. So while my wife staggered off to the kitchen with one case, I began the backbreaking task of conveying the remainder to the garage, composing rude and vengeful limericks at The Gal's expense along the way to ease my creaking spine.

Saturday dawned, and on the stroke of noon the old Daimler hissed to a halt on the gravel sweep. Jessop slowly lowered himself arthritically from the running board and after allowing time to catch his breath, fished a sheet of thick vellum note paper from his breast pocket and adjusting his glasses turned to address us.

‘Madam sends her apologies,’ he announced in quavering tones, ‘but she has been overcome by ill health and regrets she must postpone the weekend to a future date. She has instructed me to present you with this gift as a token of her affection and to ease your disappointment.’

Carefully replacing the notepaper he removed his glasses and with an attempted flourish, opened the rear door of the Daimler to reveal two cases of Broughtons Black Rock Mineral Water resting regally on the back seat.

‘Shall I take them through to the kitchen for you, sir?’ He enquired.

‘No thank you, Jessop.’ I could feel hysteria rising. ‘I rather think the kitchens quite well stocked at the moment. You might try the garage though; they might bump into a few friends there.’

For a moment Jessop eyed me with concern, then bending to his task slowly lowered the first case to the gravel. As he paused to catch his breath before attacking the second I was swept with shame.

‘That will do Jessop, thank you very much, that will do just fine.’ I rescued the second case then opened the driver's door and helped the old man back into the car. ‘Please give our best regards to Aunt Lucretia and tell her how sad we are to have missed her. Thank her for the mineral water and tell her we look forward to seeing her as soon as she is feeling better.’ I smiled, lying through my teeth.

I watched the old Daimler trundle down the drive then with a sigh bent to the first case. At least we won't go thirsty, I thought groaning softly as I heaved myself erect. Staring up at the sky I took the first unsteady pace forward. It looked like rain.

A Pleasurable Assignment

The man paused at the door for a moment, eyes sweeping the room with a critical glance. But apart from Jasper sprawled peacefully in his armchair, eyes closed and seemingly asleep everything looked undisturbed and in place. The man permitted himself a small smile of satisfaction, from the moment he had gained entry to the flat the entire business had been concluded without fuss in less than twenty minutes, definitely one of his more pleasurable assignments

A short half-hour earlier Jasper had struggled with the shopping, balancing the bags on a raised knee propped against the door as he fumbled for his key. God, he muttered how he detested shopping. Trolleys ramming around aisles like bumper cars, canned announcements extolling everything from aerosols to pork chops to the endless shuffling queues at checkout, the whole business was a total anathema to him. Then without warning the door opened and he nearly dropped the wine on the hall floor. Clutching the slipping carrier bags between his knees he sidled crab wise to the kitchen and dumped the lot on the dresser. Twin necks of Cote de Nuits Village 99 poked seductively from the plastic. Removing them to a side table he paused for a moment to caress the dark green bottles, his mind already focusing on the carnal pleasures to come.

Jasper Porrit was a highly successful young advertising executive. Self-centred, good looking, highly sexed with a leaning to the sadistic, his tastes inclined toward the more easily won gratitude and subsequent subjugation of older women. Rich married women preferably with incomes dependent on their husbands. Great lays, good for expensive presents but unable to cause a fuss when discarded. Silvia was the current pot-boiler and he had promised to cook dinner for her in the discreet little love nest she had rented in a large impersonal apartment block. A confirmed gourmet Jasper had decided on Caneton aux Olives for the evening's main course. He enjoyed creating good food, but only one dish at a time, so he had asked Silvia to bring a dozen oysters and a bottle of Bollinger for starters. He had dismissed desert; they were usually hard at it half way through the third bottle, seldom even making it to the bed, and his mean streak deplored waste. With mouth suddenly dry at the prospect of pleasures to come, he picked up an upended tumbler from the draining board, absent-mindedly pouring cold Frascati from a ready

opened bottle in the fridge. Then, fastidious nature rebelling as he realised his mistake, emptied the offending tumbler in the sink and reached for a wine glass from the cupboard.

Silvia held the present pride of place in his mental trophy room. Not only proving herself gratifyingly adaptable in bed but generous to a fault in dispensing her husband's money when out of it. The perfect combination made even more stimulating by her position as wife of his boss, Cyril Saxby. Cyril Saxby ran his company with a rod of iron disguised beneath a winning smile and jovial laugh. He was a man who revelled in hogging the limelight and though prepared to admit a small measure of his subordinates achievement in private, insisted on receiving all the credit and consequent plaudits in public. Woe betide the employee who stepped forward to take even the slightest share in the general acclaim, however justified. After a generous handshake and disingenuous smile for the cameras, the offender was subsequently quietly fired for an offence never clearly defined, but always accompanied by sufficient unsavoury rumours to guarantee their removal from the advertising world for good.

Jasper was frequently summoned to the presence to be left standing and ignored before the great man's desk and when finally acknowledged only to be told his suit at a previous meeting had been poorly pressed or some other equally trivial complaint. But along with his colleagues he accepted the humiliation without protest as Cyril knew they would. For Cyril paid nearly forty per cent higher than other agencies. There had been moments when he had nearly snapped, told the old frog faced bastard what he could do with his fucking job, but he never had. Because that was precisely what Cyril wanted to hear. Behind that expressionless bug eyed face the man was willing him to break, longing for an opportunity to display his powerful superiority, followed by lofty dismissal. Cyril Saxby enjoyed his games, which was why he paid his players so well.

But now everything was different. He was still summoned before the desk, a penitent waiting to be told of his latest crime, but now when the fat old man finally deigned to acknowledge his presence he could look him straight back in the eye. 'Hey frog face,' he would mentally jeer, 'I'm balling your wife, and when we're not balling we're out spending your money like it's going out of fashion. So go ahead, keep me standing here as long as you bloody like if it makes you feel big. But know this, you pathetic rat arsed mottled old toad, come six O'clock I'm out of here, and the rest of my evening will be spent either on her or on you!' It not only made him feel better, it made him feel superior. But although Jasper was careful never to let a hint of his triumph translate into facial expression, sometimes he had a strange foreboding that somehow Cyril had got the message and knew. Perhaps the old coot was telepathic, he thought idly, and for a moment went cold all over before dismissing the idea.

He had met Silvia at a party to open the Company's new office block. Cyril had connived the opening to coincide with a launch of a charity for underprivileged children and was able to bask in the reflected glory of an attending junior Minister as a result. During the evening Jasper had been introduced to his wife. The moment they shook hands a blast of sexual arousal past between them as potent as a lethal charge of electricity. After a few minutes idle conversation Silvia had excused herself and with a meaningful look left the room. Jasper gave her three minutes before

following in a state of wild excitement to take her standing in a broom closet, with her legs locked round the back of his neck like a feeding python. How they got away with it was a miracle, for it was a busy corridor, there was no lock on the closet door and the noise they made must have rivalled Noah's Ark in spring. Later, as they caught their breath, Silvia had scribbled her telephone number on a scrap of paper before hurrying back to the party. There was a footnote that read, not before 10, but you had better make sure it's tomorrow. 'Gotcha!' He had crowed out loud, and wondered if she had a sexy voice. He liked sexy voices they turned him on but not a word had passed between them in the entire fifteen minutes.

Jasper checked his watch, he was running late, not that he was bothered. He liked to keep them waiting, gave him an edge, but tonight he was hungry and knew food was never uppermost in Silvia's mind. If he was ever going to eat the bloody duck he had better get a move on. Humming tunelessly he refilled his glass then headed for the bedroom to change into more comfortable clothes. But as he passed the open door to the sitting room he noticed a man sitting in the armchair by the window.

Jasper marched into the room. 'Who the hell are you? And what do you think you're doing loafing around my apartment as though you owned the place?' He stormed angrily.

The man smiled politely, he had one of those nondescript everywhere type faces, with thinning ginger hair and colourless eyes. There was an open copy of the Daily Telegraph spread over his lap, suggesting he had been reading the paper before being disturbed which enraged Jasper even further.

'Listen to me, you shitty excuse for a burglar. I'll give you one minute to clear out then I'm calling the police.' Jasper glared in genuine fury.

The man seemed unmoved. 'Mr Jasper Grange?' The enquiry was polite, almost apologetic.

'Yes, I'm Jasper Grange, you bloody little crook, and this is my apartment. Now get the hell out of here!' The man gave a small sigh, though whether of pleasure or regret it was hard to tell. 'Sit down in that chair across from me, if you would be so kind, Mr Grange.' The voice was flat and devoid of emotion, but the newspaper had been removed revealing an automatic pistol complete with bulbous silencer pointed unwaveringly at Jasper's stomach.

'I don't understand,' voice suddenly high pitched bordering on hysteria; Jasper viewed the weapon with terror and for the first time noticed the man was wearing gloves. The silencer reminded him of the one's used in spy movies, and the uncanny stillness of the man convinced Jasper that he meant what he said and would have no hesitation in using it if necessary.

'Yes, I'm afraid so,' The man read the fear in his eyes, 'but only if you force the issue.' The barrel twitched, indicating the chair and Jasper followed obediently and sat down. The man shot a swift glance at the mantelpiece clock while maintaining a watchful eye on Jasper. 'Well, we have about ten minutes to pass together, so please relax, make yourself comfortable. Do you have any particular interest or hobby you would care to discuss?'

'Just tell me what's going on, what this is all about?' Jasper implored, role of indignant householder forgotten. 'If it's money I don't keep much in the flat but there's a couple of

thousand in my account. You're welcome to that, though we would have to go to the bank of course.'

'Relax, Mr Grange, I have no interest in your money.'

'Then what the hell do you want? Jasper sobbed. 'Just tell me, I'm not proud, I'll do anything you say.' He gesticulated wildly, spilling wine from his glass before draining the rest.

'Calm yourself, Mr Grange, providing you make no rash or ill advised moves, I shall do you no harm. You have nothing to fear from me, and I promise your curiosity will be satisfied within minutes.'

'I know, I've got it. It's some kind of office joke. Some of the girls put you up to it, didn't they? Getting their revenge for the mike I stashed in the ladies.' Jasper gave a shaky laugh, 'is that what's behind all this?'

'Not exactly, though you are heading on the right track. But I can say that though I play a leading role in the proceedings, the star part remains yours alone, Mr Grange.' The man permitted himself the ghost of a smile and shot another look at the clock.

'The girls have stashed a video camera somewhere have they? Going to bust in on us are they with some sort of you've been had banner? Is that what we're waiting for?' Jasper's voice sounded shrill as he shot desperate looks at the door. 'Do you mind if I get another glass of wine to pass the time? Perhaps you could do with one too?'

'No thanks, not for me. But by all means get one for yourself.' The man unscrewed the silencer, putting it and the snub nosed automatic in a black case at his feet.

'Christ! I'm glad the James Bond bit's over,' Jasper smiled with relief, 'don't mind admitting that silencer of yours really gave me the creeps!' As he started to get up a puzzled look came over his face. 'Funny, my legs seem to have gone to sleep, all that drama I suppose, must have been tensing my muscles or something.' He tried again, puzzlement giving way to anxiety tinged with fear.

'It's no good I'm afraid,' the man interrupted, 'they're paralysed; the paralysis will spread to the rest of you in a few moments. It always begins in the legs, something to do with the blood supply I'm told. Apparently the stuff collects there, in the legs I mean, particularly when sitting down.'

'Wha the helth's goin on,' Jasper mumbled, finding it difficult to move his tongue.

'I'm glad you asked the question, I would have told you in any event of course, but it's always nice to be asked. The answer, as you will probably have realised by now, Mr Grange, is you've been poisoned.' He raised a hand to silence the hideous grunting sounds emanating from Jasper.

'Please, Mr Grange, we have little time.' He shook his head impatiently then continued, 'if you want an explanation you really must try to calm yourself and listen. The poison is a sophisticated derivative of curare, a paralysing drug used for centuries by South American Indians when hunting game. When taken orally it is quite tasteless, and once in the bloodstream proves lethal within ten minutes or so, depending on the subject's height and weight. There is no antidote; so all handling has to be conducted with extreme caution as even the smallest amount

either swallowed or dropped on broken skin will prove fatal within hours. The victim loses control of his limbs, lungs, and finally heart in that order, but is usually rendered unconscious before the closing stages as I'm sure you will be comforted to hear.'

He lent forward to check Jasper's pulse to ensure he still had his full attention. 'Please believe me when I say I have no personal feelings of animosity towards you, Mr Grange. I am merely a tool in these matters. Carrying out an assignment as quickly and efficiently as possible, like any other technician. In normal circumstances professional courtesy would preclude my divulging the name of my principal. But on this occasion, with the coup de grace already delivered, I think we can dispense with such proprieties.' He smiled; pleased to be able to break his code of confidentiality and share the finer points of the plan. 'As you may have surmised by now the man responsible for ordering your death is your boss Cyril Saxby. I won't waste your time with details, suffice to say Mr Saxby is a jealous and vengeful man, which is why I also called on Mrs Saxby a little earlier this evening and accepted a gracious offer to join her in a gin and tonic at that private little hide away you share.'

Once again he checked the flickering pulse, face momentarily creasing with anxiety. 'Hang in there, Mr Grange; don't leave, at least not yet. Not until I have explained the final dénouement, the ultimate betrayal. It really is the very best part.' Squatting in front of Jasper's slumped form he and began to speak slowly, forming each word graphically with his mouth in hopes that even if his hearing was gone, Jasper might still retain sufficient sight to lip read and understand the gist of what he was saying.

'My usual charge for these matters is £30,000 per disposal. However, Mr Saxby, who by the way struck me as a particularly vain and egotistical man, insisted I report to him in person with a detailed account of your individual passings before paying the final part of the fees due. Needless to say in my business one can never permit such a meeting. I might as well give the man a signed photograph of myself at work along with a detailed confession. So I doubled the usual price, telling him the charge was for both assignments would be £90,000. He made no objection to the figure, but then once decided on this course of action clients seldom do. He was of course unaware that the additional £30,000 represented my fee for his own disposal.

Mr Saxby is a drinking man, a discerning drinking man I grant you, but a drinking man none the less, with a particular weakness for Tres Vieux 1er Cru Grande Champagne cognac. Not a tippie most can afford, but then taking my fees into account I thought I could splash out just the once and purchase a bottle.' He reached into the case and waved the ancient brandy before Jasper's face. 'Now, Mr Saxby always keeps a bottle close at hand on his desk, a fact I ascertained when I made my customary private visit earlier this morning. And when I call him as per his instructions to report our business concluded, I have little doubt that his first reaction will be to reach for a celebration snifter.'

For the first time what might have passed for a smile flitted briefly across the man's face, as with Jasper forgotten he pulled a mobile out of his pocket and punched a number. Almost at once the receiver was picked up at the other end and a voice barked 'Yes?'

‘Contract honoured, business completed,’ the man replied tonelessly.

‘In one hour then.’ The connection was broken abruptly.

‘Hopefully, he will be dead by the time I get there,’ the man continued to describe his plan to a point somewhere above Jasper’s head. ‘Failing which I shall have to persuade him to take a drink one way or another. Either way, once his value to the assignment is at an end, I shall switch bottles, ensuring the only trace of poison found will be in his glass, while at the same time leaving the half used phial of curare in the top drawer of his desk. It won’t take long for the police to discover your affair with Sylvia Saxby, and without any forensic evidence to the contrary they will naturally conclude Cyril Saxby murdered the pair of you in an act of premeditated revenge before taking poison himself.’

He nodded to himself with satisfaction, then sweeping the room with an expert eye began removing all trace of his presence, plumping up the cushions and using a small brush over the area of carpet between the two chairs. Moving to the kitchen he took out the brandy bottle broke the seal and regretfully poured half the contents down the sink before returning it to the case. Then placing the mobile phone in a plastic bag put it on the tiled floor and ground it to pieces under foot for later disposal. He picked up Jasper’s discarded tumbler from the sink and after a moment’s hesitation filled it with water from the tap, downing the lethal draught with a sigh of satisfaction before drying and carefully returning the wiped glass to the cupboard.

Force of habit made the man check the locks on his case to ensure they were secure, then favouring the still figure in the armchair with a final glance he put the empty wine glass in his case and with a final nod of salutation murmured. ‘My apologies for disturbing you, Mr Grange, and my thanks for making the assignment a most pleasurable one.’ The front door closed silently behind him.

One of those Days

Looking down at Harry's body, a lifeless doll lying there loose and disjointed, rain slicking his hair turning the dark welling blood to an anaemic pink, it seemed incredible I had found this pitiful creature so intimidating a few short minutes ago. His eyes were open, staring sightlessly into the void. The same pale fishy grey eyes that moment earlier had gazed at me in sadistic pleasure devoid of compassion as I begged and pleaded with him to make them stop. My chest was on fire from cigar burns and the broken fingers on my right hand made me light headed with pain. Trust Harry to break the right hand, the evil bastard knew just what a right hand of broken fingers meant to a technician. In a fit of rage I stuck my foot under his body and rolled it off the jetty. He hit the dark water with scarcely a splash and sank like a stone. Funny that, I always thought bodies floated. Harry's didn't, but then I think he had a pressing appointment in hell. The effort made me dizzy and I hung on to the rail for a while to catch my breath before tackling the two goons. The force of the bullets had blown one of them over the guard rail, leaving him hanging doubled over like a puppet with the strings cut, while the other lay face down, clutching what was left of his stomach. 'Good, hope it bloody hurt,' I muttered and kicked him over the edge to join Harry.

The effort brought back the dizziness and I lent against the rail as rational thought processes began to return bringing with them the question of who had saved me and why? Who had gunned down Harry and his goons? It had to be either an act of gangster revenge or because they had something the killers wanted. It didn't take an Einstein to work out which and I felt a block of ice begin to form deep in my guts. No professional would hit three people in cold blood and let the fourth live to be a witness out of kindness. I was only alive because whoever they were thought I knew where the case was. Harry, whoever he was, had believed the same thing. I never knew his real name. 'Call me Harry,' he had said, thin lips twisting in parody of a smile. 'That is while you can still talk,' he had added before nodding to his thugs to break the first finger. The sadistic bastard had enjoyed it too. He must have known no sane man would face the agony of having his fingers snapped one after the other for the sake of a God damned suitcase. I would have denied my mother, betrayed my closest friends and bared the secrets of my soul to avoid pain like that. Not that it would have helped, I hadn't a clue what it was all about, didn't even know where the bloody thing was. But of course none of them believed me.

It all began earlier that afternoon; I had been taking some software discs and a repaired flatbed scanner across the city center to a customer. I prided myself on fast service so despite the heat wave had decided to deliver the case personally. Partly because I find satisfied customers often become steady customers, but mainly because this particular man always paid cash on the nail and the way business had been going lately the prospect of cash more than outweighed the inconvenience. The traffic was snarled bumper to bumper as usual so cabs were out and I didn't fancy riding sardine with a bunch gasping commuters which ruled out the subway. The only alternative was to hoof it, taking it slow and easy with the odd pit stop for a refreshing cold beer along the way. Maybe the beer tasted too good or maybe I made one pit stop too many, I don't know. But at some point striding down the street happy and at peace with the world, I suddenly realised I had left the God damned case in the last bar.

I wasn't too bothered about losing the scanner, I had more than enough spare parts in the workshop to put another together and it wouldn't cost much but the loss of my software was something else. I had spent hours sweating blood over those programs, they gave me the ability to diagnose and correct virtually any fault in any customer's computer. They also let me extract whatever information I thought might come in handy at the same time, though I didn't exactly advertise that part of the service. I legged it back through treacle heat to the bar but the case was gone. Gasping for breath in front of the barman, I tried to communicate the problem in sign language. He watched me with quizzical amusement for a moment, then taking pity his smile broadened and he ducked down behind the bar. 'This what you're after?' He surfaced and slapped my green case on the bar.

'Thanks,' I wheezed, 'you've a miracle worker. Please, have a drink of whatever on me. You've saved my life.'

'A beer would go down nicely,' he grinned and popped a can, 'take a tip from me and stick a name tag on that case of yours in future. Someone else came in after you left with an identical one to yours. A real weirdo if you ask me, knocked back a couple of double Jack Daniels, then picked up your case by mistake. He was in such a state he refused to believe it wasn't his until I made him take a look inside. Then he just grabbed the right one and ran out of the back door without a word of thanks as though the hounds of hell were after him. Some people!' He shook his head and made my change.

'Yeah, I hate people like that, makes you want to kick their ass or worse!' I shrugged agreement, picked up my change and with a friendly wave shouldered my way back into the heat.

I was running late now, but at least the traffic was moving so I stood on the sidewalk waiting for a cab. One of those small moving vans with a sliding door on the side pulled up in front of me blocking my view. Looking back I remember thinking it odd at the time, there was nowhere to unload, the rest of the traffic was shifting easily enough and the lights were green. Then without warning the side door slid open and a huge man grabbed hold of me and started to pull me inside. I kicked out and yelled for help; but his pal, who must have climbed down from the

passenger seat, shoved me hard from behind and I landed in a heap on the van floor. Someone pulled a sack over my head, the door slammed shut and the van lurched out into the traffic.

They took me to the old dock area with its rusting cranes and dilapidated warehouses. Then to make doubly sure no one would hear my screams hauled me out to the end of a long jetty used by dockers from across the river in the old days. They had a point too, for after they opened my case and found the discs and scanner my screams would have woken the dead. Well, now they were dead and good bloody riddance. I turned my attention to the new threat, scanning the shoreline for any sign of movement. But wherever they were they were lying doggo, waiting for me to make the first move, presumably hoping I would lead them to the real case. By now my hand was double its normal size and growing, grinding my teeth against the pain I made a rough sling, looping the sleeves of my jacket round my neck, and started back down the jetty forcing myself to think straight. My only hope was to lose them the moment I hit the shore then keep running until I found somewhere nobody knew me. Who these people were and what they wanted I didn't know but they were obviously ruthless professionals who for all I knew would be checking out my usual haunts by now if they hadn't staked them out already. The big question was where to hide?

I took the first street I came across between the warehouses, sprinting to the main road at the top. For once my luck was in and a bus was just pulling in to pick up some fares. I scrambled on board and tried to look inconspicuous. A few people stared strangely at my arm, but the hand was hidden and thanks to the clumsy sling most of the shirt bloodstains and burns were covered. The stream of cars behind the bus made it impossible to see if I was being followed, so I sat back to wait for the city centre and the crowds that went with it.

When the bus stopped on Main Street I hit the ground running the moment the door hissed open, ducking and weaving through the crowd, sprinting for Joe's Pool Hall on the corner of fifth and ninth as though the entire mob was after me. I knew Joe's like the back of my hand, the entry sign opened on a passage with a door halfway down on the right that opened onto the poolroom and bar. At the far end was a fire exit leading to the street at the rear of the building that Joe always left open in summer. But ignoring both I took the rickety stairs to the storeroom on the left. The staircase was a dirty brown and easy to miss if you didn't know it was there, particularly coming in from the brightness of the street outside. I flattened against the first floor landing wall waiting for the pursuit. It didn't take long, footsteps pounded up the passage to the fire exit, then hurried halfway back to pause while the owner checked out the pool room before running back out of the main entrance. So far so good, I eased up the storeroom window, climbed out onto the flat roof and checked the window of the house next door. It was half open. Hallelujah, thank God for summer! I cat burgled inside and locked it behind me. The house was empty, so I helped myself to a handful of aspirin from the bathroom cupboard before letting myself out of the front door to meld with the crowd on the street.

I spent the next two hours shaking off imaginary pursuers, ducking in and out of main entrances, side entrances, goods entrances and staff entrances. I bought the largest summer shirt

in stock from a store called The Bigger Man; it looked ridiculous but covered my arm. I criss crossed the city by cab, bus and subway, even coming up with a safe place to hide while I was at it. My hand had doubled again in size and was throbbing so badly I was tempted to risk a hospital but suspected they would have the casualty departments covered too. In desperation I considered the police, but what could I tell them? Some bad people I didn't know had kidnapped me for a case that didn't exist bust up my hand and burned my chest. But now they were all dead, gunned down by another gang I didn't know and left floating some place in the river and now the other gang were after me and I needed protection. After the laughter had died down they would call an ambulance and tell the medics to fix my hand before taking me to the nearest booby hatch and who would blame them. No, my only hope was to lie low in my bolt hole until dark, then go somewhere very far away and never come back.

Arthur Filmer was to be my unknowing host till nightfall. His name had come to me in the shirt store. Arthur Filmer was a wealthy computer buff who liked to have his systems checked out regularly on a contract basis. I even had a key to carry out these duties when he was away and his housekeeper had been alerted to let me in to get on with my work and not to panic if I turned up with a suspicious looking bag. By now I was becoming light headed with pain, if I was going to make it to Filmer's place I had to get going right away. I took a cab to the apartment block staring at my demented expression in the elevator mirror with horror as it whooshed me up to the pent house floor. I made an attempt at smoothing my hair with my left hand but it wasn't a success. Still the housekeeper had been warned to expect a weird computer nerd, I only hoped she wouldn't flip when she saw one. As I let myself in I could hear her clattering away with dishes or something in the kitchen, so I called out everything was OK and that I was the computer man and got a muffled response to go right ahead and she would be out shortly.

It was a beautiful room with large low-slung sofas and nice pictures on the walls. The French windows were open letting a welcome breeze blow in gently from the terrace. For a moment I looked longingly at the twin sofas but knew if I lay down on one I would never get up, so I made myself sit on the hard computer chair by the window instead. The aspirin was making me sleepy while the throbbing of my hand had induced the same kind of hypnotic state that train wheels do clicking over sleepers. Far away I heard the peel of the apartment bell followed by a muffled shriek, then the door burst open and I jerked awake.

The housekeeper hung like a rag doll against the chest of the biggest black man I had ever seen, one huge hand covered her face, holding her off the floor while at the same time acting as a suffocating gag. Long ago someone had slashed his mouth with a razor, leaving him with a perpetual leering smile born of nightmares.

'Well, you little shit, thought you'd give Ole Big Sam the slip did you?' Drug crazed eyes locked on mine. 'Thought to make him the run around a little eh? Jump through hoops like a dog for a sweetie, make him really work his ass off for to get his hands on that little old green case of yours.' He wagged his head in parody of refuel understanding, but his eyes stayed locked on me like a turret gun on a moving tank. 'Well I hopes you've got it boy for your own sake. Hopes

you're goin to make Ole Big Sam feel a little more kindly towards you like. Because if you ain't I'm goin to hurt you bad boy, so bad I swear that hand of yours will feel like an itsy bitsy little mosquito bite in comparison.' He treated me to his leering smile and without taking his eyes off my face slit the housekeeper's throat. He kept her dangling a moment then let her slip to the floor, where she flopped about like a headless chicken. 'You got the door Jake?' He called without turning his head. 'I got the door,' a hoarse hidden voice replied.

'Good, because the boy here and me are goin to have ourselves a little chat, get to know each other real well you might say. But before we start I thinks we ought to get properly introduced, don't you boy? Shake hands a little, press the flesh.' He leered and moved slowly towards me cracking his giant knuckles as he came.

I looked into those unblinking eyes glittering with evil anticipation and knew I couldn't go through with it. I had had more pain than I could stand already and even if I let him go ahead and do whatever awful things he had in mind, I knew he meant to kill me in the end. Well, if nothing else I could cheat him of his fun. I smiled with relief at the door behind him, and for a fraction of a second his gaze followed mine. It was all I needed. Heaving back the chair I took four sprinting strides to the balcony and dived over the rail. He was quick, I'll grant him that, I could feel a grip like a vice closing over the toe of my shoe, but only for a moment, then I was free.

It felt real peaceful drifting down through the soft cool evening air. I felt better than I had all day.

Soul Mates

I stepped out of the cool air-conditioned gun shop into a moist cauldron that posters call Midsummer Florida. The sun blazed molten gold through a haze-hidden sky, causing the drooping palms to dance in the shimmering air above the tarmac. The evening breeze that made the place bearable at this time of year was still snoozing somewhere offshore over the horizon, leaving the beach egg frying hot and deserted. I crossed the empty street to the shade of the palms sat on my haunches and lit a cigarette. The smoke tasted of burnt straw. I wished I had headed down town instead to cool little bar I knew owned by a huge Cuban known as Castro. Castro could gauge his customer's moods with a fine tuned antennae some put down to Voodoo, leaving them to brood over their beer in solitude or listen to their problems with a Latin sympathy that lasted as long as their drinking rate remained steady. Considered unsavoury by tourist, the bar had become a kind of club that offered a second home for people who didn't have a first one. For a moment I felt tempted, I had to get myself down there later anyway, but right now it was just too hot to go anywhere. Even Castro and his iced beer would have to wait until things cooled down a shade. I flicked the offending butt into the sand, stared out at the oily sea and tried to think.

The jacket lay heavy on my shoulder. I slipped it off, sliding my hand into the side pocket to caress the cool steel of the snub nosed thirty-eight. A quiver of elation swept through me tightening my throat, throttling the cry of excitement I could feel welling up inside as it was born. It was a strange feeling. At forty three I had never even fired a gun let alone owned one yet each time I held the snub nosed little beauty in my hand or fingered its deadly cargo of shiny squat brass bullets it was like welcoming an old friend I hadn't seen in a while. Perhaps being lonely had something to do with it. Not that I regretted leaving Frieda that was the best move I had made in years. The idea had crystallised without warning in middle of my lunch hour. Suddenly I knew if I had to live with that mewling screwed up complaining excuse for a face one day longer I would do something really terrible. So instead of going back to the shop that afternoon I told her good-bye and went to the bank instead, cashed in the savings account and bought a ticket on the first train out of town. I didn't even ask where it was going. I didn't care. Provided it was a long long way from Frieda that was fine by me. As it turned out the train was scheduled for Miami. Even I didn't need to go that far, so I bought a ticket to Smyrna Beach,

which is about halfway and finished up by getting off at Lutonville because I liked the look of the station.

My marriage to Frieda had been a farce for years, though just when it mutated to an ugly hatred I'm not sure. I was used to her drinking and the sluttish way she kept house so it was probably that day I first noticed her legs had turned puffy with ugly fat ankles that rolled into little creases when she moved her feet. I hate fat dimpling ankles. Most of my adult life had been spent in the drudgery of Hayman's Shoe Store. Spending my days spread eagled like a stretched out monkey on the mobile stairs or down on my knees before large fat women with fatter ankles that creased and dimpled every time I tried to shoehorn their swollen feet into a size too small. I never got a chance to serve the pretty girls with slim legs and dainty feet. They tried on their own shoes, slipping in and out of them like greased butter, leaving me to heave and struggle with the soft pudgy oldies, fighting the urge to look up their skirts for a glimpse of mottled flesh. I hated that too. But in the same way you can't help peeking through your fingers at a horror movie, I couldn't help taking a quick squint at those lardy thighs whenever I got the chance. But thank God all that and Frieda were behind me now.

I was staring out at the ocean, letting my mind drift and ripple with the waves when I saw him. One moment there was nothing out there but sea then suddenly there he was, just standing in the middle of everything. At first I put him down to a mirage like the dancing palm trees. Nobody wells up out of the sea like that, particularly dressed in a snazzy three piece suit. He was even wearing a tie which was ridiculous in this heat and a broad brimmed white fedora hat like the ones they wore back in the nineteen twenties. He didn't seem to walk exactly but glided up the beach without moving his legs, like he was riding one of those moving walkways you find at airports. He stopped about six feet away and just stood there staring at me a quizzical smile on his face and I noticed his clothes were dry. The irritating thing was I knew him. Not as some passing acquaintance or movie star; not even as a friend, it was much closer than that. Somehow I knew this man as well as I knew myself, but try as I might I just couldn't place from where. How long we stayed there eye balling each other I'm not sure, long enough to remind me of the old he who blinks first game we used to play as kids, but then since neither of us blinked before he spoke I suppose it wasn't that long after all.

'Don't be a bloody fool, Joe.' He shook his head angrily, though his expression remained friendly enough. 'Not again. It's so wasteful and upsets things so.'

'Just who and what the hell are you to tell me...?' I began heatedly, but I was talking to the ocean. Whatever it was that I'd been listening to was gone without trace, not even a footprint in the sand. If it hadn't been for that face I still might have put it down to a mirage or a touch too much sun. But I knew that face so well, knew it better than my own and it bothered me.

Heat or no, I needed a beer. I headed down town to Castro's, keeping to the shady side of the streets while I mulled over the face, racking my brains to put a tag to it. As I neared the bar I could see the front door and windows were wide open, a sure sign the air conditioning was on the blink again. Not that the regulars cared over much, the old system was so ineffectual

whatever doubtful fall in temperature it managed was hardly worth the noisy rattle of the machine. Occasionally a customer complained and Castro would listen with sympathetic courtesy but he had long since noted the resulting increase in beer sales and had no intention of splashing out on any new equipment. Castro was a businessman and not about to destroy a windfall profit. But as a goodwill gesture he had installed a second hand ceiling fan that vaguely moved the turgid air around to keep the clientèle happy while he continued to undercut his competitor's prices.

The big man appeared totally engrossed in conversation with a prime customer who was knocking back imported Heineken larger with whisky chasers, but nothing escaped his notice. As I walked through the door one huge arm snaked beneath the bar and came up with an iced cold can of Schlitz matched by a frosted glass. One of the things I admired about Castro was the man had class. Most people drank their beer direct from the can and if that bothered him he never let it show. But with every beer he always produced the glass, though whether to raise the tone of the place or as an added token on the house I wasn't sure. Except the phrase on the house and Castro didn't sit too well together. I popped the can and gave the room a once over while pouring the cold foaming liquid into my glass.

The usual Poker game was in progress at the round table by the far window. Normally I wouldn't have hesitated, I knew most of the players and could hold my own with the best of them. But these weren't normal times, the savings account was running dry and I owed money to people who considered delay offensive. Right now I had to deal in certainties, this was no time or place for chance. At the far end of the bar a bunch of regulars were putting the World to rights with hoots of alcoholic good humour, and a couple of them waved me over. But I smiled and shook my head, it was still on the early side for The Chicken, but like a shadow at sunset he never stayed anywhere long and I couldn't risk missing him. Then I saw him, leaning forward in his chair, whispering urgently to a man I didn't recognise. They were sitting at what was known as the recess table, in a dark corner as far from the bar as anyone could get. The recess table was where Castro put difficult customers who demanded lunch. Unable to refuse a sale, though convinced that eating lowered the tone of good drinking establishments, the recess table was Castro's compromise. I topped up my glass with the rest of the beer and headed over to join them.

The Chicken saw me first and motioning his companion to silence stared lizard eyed as I made my way towards him. He owed his name to a stupid teenage game where a player stands in the middle of the road in front of an approaching car daring it to stop or jumping clear at the last moment. The Chicken had been the best, but to stay ahead of the gang he had honed his timing to the very last second. Inevitably the day came when he left things that fraction too late, and the hit and run driver left most of his leg mashed to a pulpy mess on the tarmac. That was the day his adoring fans left him as well. The Chicken stayed in hospital for just on a year and came out changed. The feckless youth was gone. In his place a deeply embittered crippled man viewed the world with a profound and vengeful hatred from a wheel chair. Unable to lead a normal life

himself he had found perverse gratification in turning the innocence of others to corruption while turning a profit at the same time. His dubious business affairs were diverse and rumoured to run from prostitution to drugs, protection and white slaving with even the occasional hit if the money was right. Word had it that no fast cash transaction of any size went down on the coast without The Chicken's knowledge which was why I needed his help. With a couple of tons of muscle snapping at my heels he was the only man who could.

He waited until I had pulled out a chair and started to sit down before jerking his head at the men's room he growled. 'I ain't finished yet. Gimme me five.' He watched impassively as I stood up again, waiting until I was out of earshot before leaning forward to continue his whispered conversation.

The men's room was empty. I ran a comb through my hair, washed my hands, then crossed over and stood in front of one of the urinals. After that hot sweaty walk from the beach and only a mouthful of beer the gesture was empty and automatic but I had to pass the time somehow and what else can you do in a men's room. I wondered what sort of job The Chicken had found for me and hoped it wasn't too risky. Not that it mattered. The kind of men looking for me always found the people who owed them money, in their line of business they couldn't afford not to. Anything was preferable to that.

Then someone was standing at the urinal beside me. In normal circumstances I would have ignored him, men make a point of not noticing each other at such times, but I was too edgy to bother with the niceties and turned to check him out. Standing there impeccably dressed and still wearing that ridiculous hat was the same guy who had walked out of the sea earlier on. With a shake of his head he treated me to another of those sickeningly familiar smiles. Then his expression changed and I could see he was running scared too.

'For Christ's sakes leave the Chicken alone! He'll only makes things worse, people like him always do. Their whole lives revolve round misery it's the only currency they understand. For God's sake man, we're only one step from the big one as it is. We can't afford such risks, not now, not when there's so much at stake. Make a run for it or face the goons, they're ministering angels compared to the alternative. You're on a tightrope, Joe, it only needs one false move and we're both lost.'

'Oh yeah! Just what makes you such a fucking expert on my life all of a sudden? What the hell business has it got to do with you? Just who the fuck do you think you are Mr Out Of Bloody Nowhere? What right do you have to tell me to sit around like some dumb rabbit and wait for those creeps to turn up with their arm crackers and razors? Are you nuts or something? Were the loaves left out of your bread basket this morning?'

But I was yelling at some poor ineffectual little guy in a blue shirt with a bad case of the shakes. The face with the white fedora was gone. But by now I was badly scared and had to take it out on someone. 'OK, OK. Go on, tell me you didn't see him.' I hollered, eye balling the little squirt. 'Well just maybe I didn't see him either. Maybe we're both fucking crazy!' I shouldered

the poor guy roughly aside and slammed the door behind me. But it was all show. No matter how big and tough I acted, I could sense everything was falling apart and my legs were jelly.

The Chicken jerked his head at the chair across the table. 'Sitdown, shuddup and listen. You got two minutes,' he rasped round his cigar butt. 'You say you need a job? OK, well that guy I was talking to needs someone for a bag run. I told him about you, and now he's looked you over the jobs yours if you want it.' His mouth twisted in malicious humour. 'It pays, ten big ones less my ten per cent cut.' His blank little eyes stared at me without expression, like a dead squid's from a marble slab in a fish market.

'Seems a lot of cash, just to carry a bag.' Something was wrong here, I could feel it, and anyway The Chicken wasn't famed for generosity.

'Oh you'll earn it all right. I ain't no charity.' He sucked and chewed on the dead cigar butt, sliding it slowly across his mouth like a spider digesting a fly. 'For a start it's life if the cops catch you, or death or worse if them other guys do. So you'll have go in and out fast. But if you play it right you might just get home free, then I'll call off those nightmares before they find you.' He made a slobbering sound I took for laughter checked his watch and released the brakes of his chair. 'Well? I ain't hanging around all day. You want the job or not?'

I took a deep breath. What the hell, the way things were what choice had I got. 'OK, count me in.' I hoped the tremble in my voice didn't show. 'Where do I make the drop?'

'Right now the less detail you know the better. Just stay sober for fuck's sake and make damn sure you're ready and waiting in that rat hole you call a home at ten tonight. The Hump here will bring the merchandise and give you instructions then. And remember, once the job's done we never met till I tell you different.' The Chicken signalled to the skinny dwarf with a hunchback and anthropoid arms who had materialised from the shadows. Then ignoring me sat back in his chair as The Hump deftly flexing his arms every other step to sight the way propelled him swiftly through the tables to the exit.

Now that I was committed everything felt different somehow and didn't know how to occupy myself. I checked my watch. Five long hours to wait. Force of habit walked me to the bar and another Schlitz but though ice cold this time the beer tasted metallic and I left most of it untouched. As I headed for the door I could feel Castro's eyes on my back following me out. It wasn't often I left a drink so I guess he was curious. But then knowing him he would have noted my talk with The Chicken and realise something was up. Probably knew what it was too, which was more than I did. For no reason a cold shiver ran down my back.

I walked aimlessly through the streets making the most of the cooling breeze. Each evening it came without fail, quitting the ocean just long enough to wipe the heat from the sidewalks, before dying away without warning to leave the city sweating and sweltering again beneath another hot airless night. Thunder rumbled far out at sea. With luck we were in for one of the flash storms that hit without warning in midsummer. They didn't last long either, a couple of hours at most, but long enough to kill the dust and bring the desert flowers into bloom for a couple of days like it was spring. I found myself standing by the hot dog stall on the corner of

my apartment block. Strange how we head for home when our minds are preoccupied, maybe we have a little racing pigeon in our genes. I ordered a dog with all the trimmings and carried it up to the one room apartment. But my stomach was knotted with fear of things to come and the smell of the onions made me sick. I dropped the dog down the wall trash and lay on the bed, staring out of the window, watching the gathering dusk turn to night and wondering what the dawn would bring.

I must have dozed off for when I opened my eyes the room was dark barring a pool of neon from the eatery across the street flickering on the only armchair. It was him of course; dapper as ever and still wearing that silly hat perched on his head. But this time he wasn't smiling. This time as he leaned forward the face was white and puckered. This time he looked really scared.

'You can't go through with this, Joe, call it off for fucks sake, get away from here. Do a runner right now, don't bother to pack, just go, go this minute. Get down to the train or bus station and buy a ticket on anything that's going anywhere, but get yourself out of here and do it fast. There's no more time, Joe, for both our sakes don't let it happen. Whatever you do don't let this happen.'

Someone knocked on the door and the thin reedy voice of The Hump shrilled. 'Let me in, boy, let me in, it's time.'

The fear was alive now, a dark nightmare squirming in my guts, draining whatever powers of decision I had left. Desperately I turned back to the face for help, but he was fading fast. For the first time I actually felt his despair as he made one last attempt to communicate. 'Don't do it.' He mouthed. 'Please, Joe, I beg you, don't do this to us.'

The Hump was banging on the door. 'Open up damn you. Open up or I'll leave the stuff right here and tell The Chicken I handed it over as planned.'

For a moment I froze; confused, torn, uncertain what to do. Then logic took over and I moved to the door. After all, in the spot I was in there wasn't much else I could do. Even if I ran the hoods would catch up with me by morning and anyway you need money to run. No, better to do the job or die trying, those guys had habits that turned my bones to jelly. What the hell were a few doom filled prophecies from a doubtful ghost compared to that? Anyway, maybe the guy really was only an hallucination, there was a lot of dope around town and people with a weird sense of humour. It wouldn't be the first time some joker had slipped a snort into someone's beer for fun.

I opened the door and the creepy little dwarf scuttled inside, his grotesque arms wrapped like tentacles round a suitcase. 'What took you so long, entertaining guests in the dining room?' Cackling at his joke he eased the case on to the bed and hopped up to sit beside it.

'Now listen good to what I tell you. It ain't complicated so don't expect me to say it more than once. You're to deliver this case to the Blue Ranch Motel; it's about fifteen miles out of town on route 39. If everything's OK they'll have the No Vacancy sign switched on and blinking but don't let that fool you, the place has been closed down for months. Take the case to reception and put it on the desk, a guy behind the desk will put an identical case next to yours. Pick up the swap, put it in the trunk and drive straight to the Everglades Hotel. Leave the case in the back of a parked

green van with a yellow sticker in the back window, then lose the car somewhere and go home. That's all there is to it. The Chicken says he'll arrange for your pals to be called off and get your share to the apartment in a couple of days.' He fished in his pocket and tossed some keys on the case. 'There's a black Chevy outside. It's hot, but the owner's away for a week so you won't have no problems.'

As I bent forward to pick up the keys a clap of thunder split the sky, shaking the old building to its foundations. 'That does it!' The Hump leapt nimbly to the floor and sidled crablike to the door. 'It's OK for some lucky bastards; you've got a ride, but if I don't find a cab in the next two minutes I'll be stuck in this no good neighbourhood for the night' He reached up, opened the door then paused a moment. 'Oh, one more thing, The Chicken thinks you oughta know the swap case has a million bucks in it. He wanted you to know that he knows what's in it too. Just in case you get any dumb ideas.' The door slammed behind him as the first drops of heavy rain slapped into the window. It looked like I was in for a stormy night.

It was like driving through a river. The windshield wipers did their best but they weren't designed for these kinds of conditions. The only machine truly at home in this sort of weather was a submarine. I crept along route 39 keeping my speed around twenty, even then I could hardly see where I was going. I just hoped no one else was mad enough to be out practising water sports on a night like this. Now and then I felt in my pocket to stroke the snub nosed 38. I had bought it in a moment of senseless desperation to protect myself from the hoods. But now all that was left of my self-confidence was centred in that shiny piece of metal and I knew I wouldn't have had the guts to go anywhere without it. Before leaving I had cleaned and loaded the little beauty and though I didn't intend to use it a part of me longed to give it a try.

A pinprick of light appeared in the gloom quickly swelling to reveal the blinking No Vacancy sign dancing wildly in the storm. I turned the car into a short driveway and headed towards a thin strip of green neon that flickered Reception. Switching off the ignition I slid the lever into park and sat there for a while listening to my heart beating loud enough to call an ambulance. How long I sat there I'm not sure, long enough to know if I didn't get the business over and done with I might as well make a run for it after all. I could taste the fear growing with every breath. I forced myself out of the car, unloaded the case, and with one hand holding the gun in my pocket barged through the swing doors of reception and banged the case on the counter. I stood there for what seemed forever waiting for the other case to be put down next to mine, but nothing happened. The cold feeling that had been plaguing my guts all day turned to a block of ice. Something was very wrong. Reluctantly I raised my head to face the drug dealer and looked into the watery eyes of a scared old man. An equally scared old woman who looked like was his wife stared fixedly at me from the office desk behind him.

No harm had been done. If I could only stop my heart jumping around like a demented frog and say something casual to ease the tension, I could still walk out and no one would be any the wiser. That was when the old woman made a funny noise in her throat and dived for the desk

drawer. She thrust her hand inside and pulled out something black that looked like a gun. Then everything turned into a slow motion dream sequence in which time played no part.

I raised the gun and fired at the desk. A small hole appeared above the old woman's eyes and the back of her head exploded in a mist of blood and brains. For a second she remained sitting bolt upright, a look of great surprise on her face, then as though dissolving from inside she slipped into a shapeless bundle on the floor the dark bottle of pills spilling out of her hand.

Stunned by the sudden turn of events I only became aware of the old man's attack at the last moment. It must have been the shadow of his hand as he raised the paper knife across the wall light that broke the spell. I turned my head to find his hate filled eyes mere inches from my own. He was so close the white hairs of an early beard stood out in sharp relief on his chin while his breath blew flecks of spittle in my face. Sweeping the gun up to his throat I fired again as the paper knife began a lethal downward stroke. The old man sank slowly to his knees, bright arterial blood spewing from his throat, hosing my face and clothes in a hot familiar steaming soup. Then suddenly the room was bathed in a blinding white light and a distorted voice yelled instructions through a bullhorn.

'This is the police. We have you in vision through the window. Stay exactly where you are. Do not move. Put your hands on your head and wait for the arresting officer. Any move will be taken as a direct threat and we will shoot to kill without further warning.'

I followed their instructions to the letter, freezing like a statue. Whoever had tipped off the law I neither knew nor cared. At least I was safe from the hoods for a while; the rest could be sorted out later. I could still feel the old man's blood dripping down my face and the sensation stirred a distant memory that stayed tauntingly out of reach. Outside gravel crunched under booted feet and I heard the swing door creak as it opened behind me.

'OK, fellah, take your gun hand from your head and slowly put the weapon on the counter. Do it slowly now, then put your hand back on your head and turn around. Take it very easy pal, one sudden move and you're dead.'

Fedora hat was back, but this time he seemed more resigned than scared. He must have been standing behind me when I shot the old man for he was covered in blood like me. I did exactly as I was told, making no protest when they cuffed me and put me in the back of the car, and sat quietly as with sirens wailing we fought our way back through the storm.

'Don't say I didn't warn you pal,' Fedora hat looked at me sadly out of the back of the driving seat, 'this time you'll get the chair.'

'Why don't you shut up and fuck off, no one asked you to ride along,' I snapped, 'and while you're at it, go clean yourself up, rinse all that blood and muck off your suit.'

'What the hell's going on back there?' The driver called back to the cops sitting on either side of me.

'Beats me! He's talking to the back of your seat, seems to think it's covered in blood or something.'

‘Probably sees the stuff everywhere. The cops in his home town said by the time he had finished slicing up his old lady she looked more like an old can of leftover cat meat. Even dolled himself up in his best suit to do it. I tell you pal, the sooner this kook's safely behind bars the better I'll feel.’ The driver shook his head. ‘If those guys he owes money to hadn't set him up, I hate to think what sort of blood bath we would have had round here.’

‘How do you know it was them?’

‘The Chief recognised the stool pigeon's voice. Seems they often turn in guys they're sure can't pay, providing they're facing a long stretch. Saves them the expense of the bone breakers.’

‘Hear that Joe? The Chicken set you up, they wanted you to fry.’ Fedora hat sniggered.

‘At least it'll keep you out of my face.’

‘No way, Joe, you and me are stuck with each other for the duration. Like blood brothers you might say.’

‘Let's get one thing straight pal, I'm no fucking brother of yours, blood or any other kind.’

‘For Christ's, Hal, sake stick a gag in the kook's mouth,’ the driver called over his shoulder, ‘we can do without this crap. It's still got a good half hour to the station.’ One of the troopers rammed a handkerchief in my mouth.

‘Sure we are,’ Fedora hat snickered, ‘you knocked off the old guy and his wife in the Motel, and I sliced up your old lady back home. We are closer than blood brothers, you and I, more like soul mates you might say, we belong together.’

He reached out from the seat and put his arms round my neck. Somehow the blood hadn't dried and was still treacle thick and sticky all over him. He pressed a wet gory mouth to my ear.

‘Just you and me, Joe, soul mates together,’ he whispered, and began to climb inside me. I screamed for help, the same way Frieda had screamed, but the gag was in the way, and just as it had been for her, nobody heard.

Evening Reflections

'Don't let the way he looks bother you too much,' the hushed tones of the nurse interrupted his train of thought, 'there's no cause for worry. It's just that the stroke froze the muscles on the left side of his face which makes him look a little strange, but he's not suffering, not in any pain.'

'Well, that's a relief George; I must say that's a relief. Did you hear what the nice lady said? She said he's not in any pain, dear.' Even whispering Gladys's voice had a tendency to sound like shards of cracking glass.

By what right did they stand there making asinine remarks, he thought irritably. Anyway, how the bloody hell did they know if he was in pain or not. He hadn't spoken to anyone for over a day and then only to ask for a double scotch. Not that they had understood a word he was saying. He might as well have been talking to himself, which on reflection he obviously was, despite all the budding doctors hanging around dressed up in their fancy new white coats. A medical fashion show doing the rounds with consultants of this and that, pretending to examine him, squeezing and pinching like a bunch of hungry beach combing crabs while flirting with the nurses whenever they thought the hierarchy wasn't watching. As it happened he wasn't in pain, not that it would have mattered if he were. He could have been in agony all day but provided he didn't make a fuss and disturb the ward no one would have bothered much. Mind you the man at the end of the ward had made such a racket a whole slew of them had hovered round his bed most of the night, so perhaps it did pay to cause a commotion. Then again they carted him off wrapped up in a sheet come morning so it probably didn't.

He turned his attention back to George and Gladys, but they had gone. Some visit! Must be passed six. He could see them now easing their backsides on to bar stools in The Golden Nugget. Well Gladys anyway, her bottom spreading like a toadstool over the top. George would only be leaning on his too scared to take his feet off the ground for fear of losing his balance.

'Anyone been to see Robert?' Gladys's voice would crackle round the bar like earth seeking static. 'No?' She would pause accusingly, effecting surprise before adding the punch line. 'Well, never mind, not to worry, George and I went. Spent the whole afternoon with him as a matter of fact. And I'm glad to tell all those who have been too busy with their own affairs, that though still extremely poorly the poor man's in no pain, no discomfort at all really, considering what he's been through.'

Not that he blamed her; she was no different from the rest of them, including himself. Camaraderie, mood swings and trivial tantrums formed a necessary part of bar life. Along with the petty fibs and oaths of undying friendship or enmity whichever seemed the most appropriate come closing time. All of them individually different yet part of a common whole, a small clique, a microcosm of the swirling mass of humanity that went to make up the city. Most had a sense of loyalty to one another, deep and sincere as long as they remained within the confines of the bar. But once outside that snug and cosy little haven, steadfast promises swiftly evaporated in the face of reality, dissolving with the beer fumes in crisp cold air.

He had never really been a bar person, at least never considered himself one. As a young man he had joined in the usual office highlights, the birthday drinks, retirement drinks, hitting target drinks and the parties in the yearly run up to Christmas. But on the whole he only joined in because it was expected. Once getting blindingly drunk on purpose, satisfied even while retching his guts out in the gents he had earned his spurs at last and was now a true blue office wag who could drink with the best of them. But he had never enjoyed it, for the most part acting drunk as the rest of them, while accompanied by hoots of laughter he tottered unsteadily to the door before walking briskly home.

The nurse was back. He could feel her fingers fiddling around with the tubes in his side, at least he thought it was his side, to be honest he wasn't sure anymore. Drugs he supposed. There was a veritable orchard of plastic drip bags hanging like huge overripe pears above his bed, their tentacle tubes snaking down hungrily to pierce the veins and other assorted parts of his body. The nurse straightened up, smoothed the sheets and with a final satisfied pat disappeared from view. At least it didn't hurt anymore. When he was first admitted it had hurt like hell, making him grit his teeth in dread every time any of them even came near. Still, as they said practice makes perfect and they were certainly much better at it now.

The first time he had seen Jane was in The Golden Nugget. He could see her now as clearly as the day it happened. It was a summer evening and someone, he couldn't remember who, was about to retire so the office had gathered for the obligatory rounds of farewell drinks. The Nugget had a small garden at the back, nothing fancy, just a few tables sporting sunshades on a badly kept lawn, but it made a pleasant change in the summer. He had noticed her the moment he stepped out on to the terrace and fallen in love with her before he reached the grass. It was one of those magical events he had read about but never expected to happen to someone like him. Yet there he was, totally smitten, a love crazed teenager at the sober age of thirty-four. He had always been shy with women and as a rule tried to avoid them when on his own, which made it even more surprising to find himself walking purposefully towards her. He didn't know if she was attached to someone, or even married for that matter. He didn't care. She was just the most beautiful, the most wonderful girl he had ever seen, and he had to talk to her whatever the cost.

'Hello,' he had exclaimed feeling ridiculous, 'I'm Robert, and it would mean everything to me if you would join me for dinner.' He had stood there awkwardly, staring into bottomless sea green eyes framed by a gleaming mass of tumbling raven hair, suddenly realising with horror he

was standing stork like on one leg while rubbing his shoe on the back of the other. It was a nervous reaction, a throwback to long forgotten childhood and he could feel a hot flush of embarrassment burning his face. Rooted to the spot and unable to move he waited for what seemed like a hundred years as the beautiful eyes regarded him steadily, then suddenly the sun came out and she smiled.

‘Why thank you Robert,’ the voice was husky soft, sending shivers down his spine. ‘I’m Jane, and I would like to join you for dinner very much.’

They had been married six weeks later and filled with a new wonderment Robert realised for the first time what it meant to be alive. Never much interested in money and a long way short of a spendthrift, over the years he had paid most of his salary into a savings account. Now with Jane and the possibility of children to come he wanted to turn it all into a house, a home where they could all be happy and safe. Jane had agreed, so putting off the half planned exotic honeymoon to a later date, they had rented a cottage on the outskirts of a small village in the heart of Devon. There was a newsagent come general store, a pub, very little traffic and an occasional villager. Which was just fine, as the only people they wanted to see were each other. The garden was in dire need of attention and a grateful landlord happily gave Robert carte blanche to get it back into shape. They had stayed a full month while the Gods smiled and gave Devon the best recorded summer in twenty years. When the day came to return to the world they had paused at the wicker gate, looking back at the cottage that had brought them such idyllic joy. The garden now boasted a small but perfect lawn, two new flowerbeds and embryo climbing roses and wisteria that would one day cover the front of the house.

‘We must come back one day, see how it’s all grown together,’ he had said wistfully.

‘Yes darling, of course we must. Let’s make a promise to each other we’ll come back right now.’ Jane had exclaimed, and laughing made them swear some childish oath there and then.

‘Feeling all right, old chap? Any new aches and pains?’ The voice jerked him back to reality. But it was only another doctor, a consultant this time judging from his greying hair.

‘Why don’t you piss off and leave me in peace,’ He didn’t mean to be rude, but he wanted to get back to the cottage and surely the man could find someone else to bother. For Heaven’s sakes, the ward was full of them.

‘Fine, you take it easy; old chap, just lie back and have a good rest.’ Ignoring the insult the doctor left his line of sight

He must remember to apologise when he returned. There was no reason to snap at him so rudely like that; the poor man was only trying to help. Now where was he? Where had he been? Oh God yes, the telephone. He could hear it ringing now, reaching forward eagerly to answer it, hoping it was Jane, expecting it to be Jane, she always called him at least four or five times a day. But it wasn’t Jane, it was the police saying there had been an accident and would he go to the hospital right away. They had taken him to the family room, later he had wondered if they realised the irony of the name, and told him his Jane was dead. Knocked down in the street by a hit and run lorry. They were very sorry they said, but there was nothing they could do, she had

been pronounced dead on arrival. He had demanded to see her, said he had a right to see her, said it again and again. Until eventually the soft insistent voice of the nurse penetrated the mists of pain and despair, explaining how on occasions like this it really would be better to remember her the way she was. And finally he understood.

The world of love and colour had turned a gritty grey. He woke each morning and went to work, returning at day's end to sleep, eating somewhere along the way without interest or appetite. His whole being consumed with a need to find the driver responsible and make him pay for what he had done. When his father died he had found an old army 38 revolver along with a small cardboard box of bullets in the attic, a relic left over from his grandfather's days in Second World War. He had meant to turn it in to the police years ago, but something had come up and he had forgotten. Now it would come in handy. It had taken six years, several private detective agencies and most of the now useless mortgage money. But in the end he had found him.

Now that all the pieces had fallen into place he felt strangely at peace. The hatred had gone, replaced with the cold dispassionate determination of an executioner. As he drove north he reviewed the recent history of the man he had come to kill. Things hadn't gone well he had been pleased to discover. After the hit and run the man had turned to drink losing first his job, then his wife and now lived by himself in a one room basement flat at the seedy end of a seedy town. Robert had his photograph and waited patiently in the car for the man to come home. Eventually he came, staggering drunk, half falling down the basement stairs, unaware of Robert standing behind him as he fumbled bemusedly with his door key. The moment the key turned Robert quickly pushed him in and slammed the door. The man stumbled forward to collapse in a filthy armchair. There was nowhere else to sit so Robert leaned against the wall facing his victim and took out the revolver.

'Six years ago you ran over my wife without even bothering to stop and find out if she was badly injured,' he paused for more words but couldn't find any. 'You hurt her so badly she died. I thought you should know that before I kill you,' he ended lamely.

The man stared back, shaking his head, trying to focus. Then his vision cleared and he glared aggressively. 'Well, if that's what you've come for get the hell on with it for Christ's sake. Don't just stand there waving your gun in the air like a squash racquet, you dumb bastard. Either pull the bloody trigger or bugger off, either way I don't give a shit anymore.'

'You mean you don't even care?' He could feel the anger swelling as his finger tighten on the trigger.

'Of course I care you stupid bugger,' the man sighed wearily, 'What the hell do you think I am, some nut case, a serial killer with notches on his steering wheel for every woman run down? Do you think I ran over her on purpose? Is that what you think? Because if that's what you think you need help more than me mate. I've been caring as you call it for the last six bloody years. So kill me if you have to, but when you're finished for God's sake get a life. Better yet get yourself a job, try driving heavy lorries, if nothing else it might help you to understand. Realise how I didn't know anything had even happened until I read about it in the paper next day. When you're

fourteen feet up in the cab of a bloody great forty ton twenty four wheeler you could hit an elephant and not know it. I never even caught a glimpse of her, so she must have tripped or stepped into the road for some reason at the very last minute. Even then I wasn't sure, but I had been in the area that day so I checked the front of the vehicle just in case. There was a faint smear of blood and a torn piece of camel hair material on the left side bumper that was all, otherwise not even a dent. I rang the newspaper to check out the report and they told me the victim had been wearing a camel hair coat. Even then I couldn't be certain, but deep down I knew, knew it was me.'

'If you knew, why didn't you come forward, go to the police?'

'What good would it have done? The lady was dead, there was nothing I could do to change that and I had my own wife to consider. But I couldn't get it out of my mind, night after night I would see that poor lady being hit by the wing with her coat caught in the bumper dragging her down under the wheels. I couldn't get the picture out of my head so in the end I tried to blot it out, drink it away passing out every night and wound up losing my wife and my job as a result. For God's sake man look at me, go on take a good long look. Can't you see you've had your revenge, had it in spades. So do me a favour and pull your bloody trigger.'

And he had tried, God how he had tried, but something stopped him and he couldn't do it. In the end he had left the bastard sitting in his rotten chair, staring blankly at the wall, surrounded by the stink of stale booze and urine. On the way back he had thrown the gun into a river. It had all happened over thirty-five years ago and yet it still seemed like yesterday. The rest of his life had been empty and uneventful. Though not gregarious by nature he still needed company from time to time and became an unofficial member of the Golden Nugget bar club, progressing to full membership as time went by and he was finally accepted as one of the group. Dropping in for an hour or two each evening to chat, reminisce and sometimes even laugh. There were also the memories of his first meeting with Jane. In the beginning he had worried about that in case they made him feel sad or upset. But it had proved quite the reverse, in fact he often had a strange feeling she was there laughing beside him.

'Sleeping it away are you, old chap? That's all right, you take your time, there's no hurry.'

It was that doctor again. If he couldn't leave a man in peace at least he might have the courtesy to come out from behind the curtain so he could see him, say whatever he had to say to his face. On the other hand if he just went away and bothered someone else that would be even better. A storm was gathering now, darkening the windows, reducing the light in the ward to late evening. Why on earth didn't someone switch on the lights for God's sake? Another hospital saving plan he supposed, no extra electricity allowed before the anointed hour. Not that he cared, night or day it was all the same to him. Dismissing the matter he retired back into himself. That was better, in fact it was more than better, it was bloody miraculous.

'Nurse,' the voice was very young, pitched high and shaky with suppressed emotion. 'I think the gentleman's dead!' Eyes huge the student nurse turned to her senior.

'Well, don't just stand there making a fuss, Adelaide, go and tell Sister the good news. She has been crying out for beds all day.'

He was back in the country lane leading to the cottage. He could feel the sun warming his back; the hedgerows were clothed in brilliant summer green, cow parsley edging their borders with a delicate lacework of white. The air was filled with the scent of new mown hay while far off the call of a cuckoo drifted softly over the meadows from distant woods. The cottage lay just round the bend and he quickened his pace, marvelling at the fresh flood of new found strength surging through his limbs. Rounding the corner he paused for a moment at the wicker gate, savouring the sweet rush of happy long forgotten memories, gazing with pleasure at the flower beds he had worked so hard to build now ablaze with blooms.

The front door opened and there was Jane, looking just the way she had the day they met. Her slim figure topped by raven hair falling loosely to her shoulders, the sea green eyes squinting slightly in amusement as he stood there frozen, smitten, dumbstruck, the same way it had been all those years ago. 'Well, are you coming in? Or are you planning to stay out there all day?' She laughed, then he was running up the path towards her.

Jackson

I bought a car last week. It wasn't a spur of the moment decision, well not exactly though Jackson wouldn't agree. But then Jackson and I have less and less in common these days even if we do live together. In fact, though politically incorrect it might be, common is just about the right word to describe Jackson, dead common. Now I'm no snob, if anything I lean to the left in politics and bend over backwards to see other people's points of view, but that said there are limits.

I try to keep an open mind for despite shortcoming he is the most easy going and cheerful companion. It's his habits that get me down. The way he likes sprawl in front of the bathroom door when I need to use the place or flops on the sofa after a walk in the rain. Then there's the way he eats. Now my own background is not exactly silver spoon, but at least I pride myself with a modicum of table manners. But one look at Jackson at table would send a hardened cannibal running for the aspirin. It's not just the offensive way he slurps up everything like a second hand Hoover that sickens, but the awful gulping sounds he makes while he does it. Sounds that conjure horror movies of overweight porkers rootling for baked beans in a swamp. Sounds that sometimes make sharing space with Jackson close to intolerable.

But that's enough of Jackson and his disagreeable habits. Apart from coming along and adding the odd and inevitable crude gesture he took no part in buying the car. As I said this business of finding a suitable vehicle was far from a whim. I had been planning on buying one for the last couple of days. Ever since that fateful evening when with a skinful of vodka I had opened my mouth and promised Debbie an idyllic weekend in Devon.

'We'll take the car, drive down to a cosy little Inn I know on the Oakhampton road, 'I listened to myself babble with horror. 'Spend the day close to nature, picnicking on the moors then head back for a couple of civilised vodka tonics before a snug little candlelight supper for two.' Why oh why do I read those trashy magazines on the train to work?

But the damage was done. Now it was a case of losing face and Debbie or getting a car and hopefully Debbie as well later on. Not much of an option really. At least The Countryman's Guide to Pubs and Hostelrys had produced a manageable overdraft priced hotel in Oakhampton which even boasted some moorland within a half hours drive if one could find it. So now it was just the matter of a car. I had checked the ads in the local paper and was actually heading for the

pub to make the necessary phone calls when I spotted this blue car being washed under the railway viaduct. I am totally lacking in mechanical knowledge, whatever takes place under the bonnet of a car is a topic of total mystery and disinterest to me but at least this one looked clean. So crossing the street I followed the line of tattered bunting to a caravan that had Cars for Rent scribbled in faded pink lipstick on the window and poked my head round the door.

‘Excuse me,’ I asked the man inside, ‘but could you tell me where I can buy a car round here?’

Bald as an egg and grossly overweight, the man massaged a hairy roll of fat that had escaped beneath his oil-smearred sweatshirt. ‘Buy a car eh,’ he echoed, looking surprised.

‘Yes, though I’m afraid it will have to be second hand,’ I added apologetically.

‘Well of course you wants second hand. Who would buy new in these hard times?’ The huge man heaved himself to his feet and scratched an armpit reflectively. ‘But I’m afraid we only rents them here, that is as a rule we only rents them.’ He added thoughtfully, eyeing me slowly up and down. ‘But then what are rules for, if they ain’t for breaking? At least that’s what they say.’ He laughed and belched companionably, ‘and if that’s the way of it then why not break a few more eh? I mean that’s if you’re really set on buying?’ He regarded me fondly. ‘Though naturally, it all hinges on the kind of dosh you have in mind.’ ‘Oh, naturally,’ I agreed hurriedly, ‘dosh must be a major factor.’ And I told him how much I had.

He rasped at the stubble on his chin for a while then regretfully shook his head. ‘Pity you couldn’t run to a couple of hundred more, I mean just a couple. If you could only dig down real deep and spring another double, I was thinking of letting you have that one out there.’ He led the way outside and pointed proudly at the blue car whose wash complete was now being polished to a gleaming sheen.

‘Go on for ever they do,’ he sighed admiringly. ‘Not that she’s old of course, hardly got her second wind you might say. But as the years roll by it’s a comfort to know you’ve got a reliable lively motor purring away there powerfully under the bonnet. Mind you,’ he added sympathetically, ‘if you ain’t got the dosh you ain’t got the dosh and there’s an end to it. But cheer up, don’t let it get you down mate,’ he smiled bravely, ‘You’re bound to come across another motor that takes your fancy one of these days. Maybe not the bargain that one is out there of course but something you can take a shine to none the less.’

‘I suppose I could run to another hundred,’ I said desperately, ‘but that’s my absolute limit.’ Suddenly I wanted that car more than anything in the world.

‘Cash?’ The man rubbed his chin.

‘Oh yes,’ I cried eagerly, ‘I have the money with me.’

‘Well in that case why not? Why not indeed? It always warms the cockles to see them going to a good home.’ He smiled broadly and held out his hand to seal the bargain. As we were going back into the caravan to sign the papers, something made him turn and glance over his shoulders and for the first time his smiling face creased in a frown.

‘Of course she’s your vehicle now so it’s not any business of mine. But I can’t help saying I wouldn’t let that friend of yours do that to any car of mine I held in high regard. Particularly after a good wax polishing.’

Following his gaze I was mortified to see Jackson deliberately peeing over the back wheel. As if sensing my embarrassment he turned his head, looked me straight in the eye, stuck his tongue out and laughed. He seemed surprised when for once I laughed right back in his face. But then he didn’t know that while I was whooping it up with Debbie in Devon, he would be spending his weekend gulping his dinner with the rest of the food slurpers in the local kennels.

The Anniversary

Lydia stared across at the slumped form of her snoring husband, sprawled across a double seat in the empty third class compartment. Chins spilling over his collar, food stains blurring the patterns of his spotted tie, mouth half open with a dribble of spittle coursing down the left gutter he painted an ugly picture. Her eyes passed from the wispy balding head down to the swelling paunch and the thickening thighs obliterating his trouser creases and her lips twitched with distaste. How on earth could he have let himself slide like that, more to the point how could she have allowed it? Indifference she supposed plain lack of interest. She had ceased to care about Julian two years after their marriage. He had gone his way she had gone hers. They continued to share the same shell, but that was all. How quickly time passed. They had lived that way for eight years now for they had been married ten today. Hence the obligatory celebration lunch in the city. Filled with boozy bonhomie Julian had insisted on the idea and in a weak moment of now much regretted emotional nostalgia she had agreed. And how she had paid for her rashness, the whole thing had been one endless excruciating unmitigated disaster.

It was her own fault; she had seen it coming from the very start so there was no excuse. Julian had insisted on making breakfast. 'No, no, just sit where you are my little dove, I shall take care of the cooking this morning. Never let it be said you were allowed to sully those delicate hands on this your special day.' Eyes already glassy he beamed through the smoke of burning butter and sizzling eggs. Vodka? Lydia hazarded a guess, it was too early for the scotch or bourbon and anyway he hadn't started chewing peppermints yet. Though at times it was hard to be sure, there were so many bottles stashed about the place sometimes she found herself hoping he might trip over one and break his neck. She had given up looking for them long ago, told him to cut the shit, come out of the closet and drink in public. She didn't give a damn any more. But he had gone all alky on her, innocent eyes wide with hurt, swearing he had no idea what she meant. 'Go tell it to the squirrels,' she had snapped and flounced out of the room. She should have called the whole thing off right then, but somehow for some perverse reason she really wanted to celebrate her tenth wedding anniversary. If nothing else she deserved it for staying the course.

By ten thirty they were waiting in the hall for the station taxi and Julian seemed no worse for wear. Lydia was beginning to think everything might work out after all when he declared he had to check an oil leak in the lawn mower. To describe Julian's knowledge of mechanics as limited

was an understatement. Even punching the right dishwasher button was beyond him and the only time he noticed grass was when he fell flat on his face on the lawn, Lydia felt her momentary optimism evaporate. He wasn't gone long but long enough. By the time he re-emerged from the garden shed Old Squirrel Nutkin's complexion had assumed a fresh rosy tint and his legs found difficulty in navigating the taxi door. Even so apart from calling the driver, 'a very fine fellow,' which fortunately amused the man and smiling benignly at the countryside in general, the journey to the station was completed without incident. It was only when Julian unsteadily approached the ticket counter that Lydia felt the first stirrings of alarm. She had seen that jovial regal expression too often.

'Good day, my good fellow, a good day indeed, though perhaps a trifle on the chilly side don't you think? What do you say to two tickets to Bangkok, eh? Warm the cockles for a while and all that.' He beamed genially at the booking clerk.

'Mr, if you need places like Bangkok for your kicks, you're a sad, sad man,' the booking clerk viewed Julian with distaste. 'But I'm not here to judge sexual preference, just to sell tickets. Now, tell me where you want to go or get the hell out of my line.'

And that had set the tone for the rest of the day Lydia reflected. The one-hour journey had required three trips to the men's room to empty his bladder, Julian's euphemism for a quick nip from his hip flask and by the time the train arrived at the city his complexion had turned to a bad case of sunburn. Sheer will power drove him to the restaurant table where he sank gratefully into a chair, ordered a double dry Martini and ignoring the menu buried his nose in the wine list. Julian had never had much interest in food so Lydia was touched when he ordered Whitebait followed by Tournedos Rossini from memory, insisting on real foie gras and none of that damned parfait stuff. They were the dishes she had chosen the very first time he had taken her out for dinner and she assumed he would have forgotten such details long ago. Naturally the wine was superb though Julian drank most of it. Halfway through the second bottle he excused himself again, this time for a legitimate trip to the men's room. Lydia had a clear view of the passageway leading to the restaurant door and watched his return with hypnotic fascination as he cannoned like a hard hit billiard ball from wall to wall before being neatly intercepted by the head waiter who discreetly supported him to the waiting chair held thoughtfully out to catch him by a junior colleague. Lunch had finally ended with two strapping waiters almost carrying him out to the waiting taxi, the disgust in their eyes showing through their over tipped smiles. With the aid of a kindly porter Lydia had heaved him onto the train where he had collapsed in a dishevelled heap. Observing the wreck of the man across the carriage she was filled with an unexpected sadness. The beginning had been so bright, so happy, so filled with promise. It was a second marriage for both of them, each having experienced the hurt, anger, emptiness and devastation of divorce. Neither had been in a hurry, taking time to sound out each other's weaknesses and strengths. Treading with suspicious caution to ensure this was no rebound, no act of loneliness. Refusing to allow themselves to be swayed by mutually satisfying sex, determined to make certain this time

everything was as right as it could possibly be before making a final commitment. And they had truly believed it was, Lydia shook her head.

Julian had been forty-three when they met, not that it showed. Over six feet three in his socks, lean, without an ounce of fat on an athletic frame he stood out as an example of health and vitality in any crowd. Handsome, well dressed with blue-black hair dusted a distinguished grey at the temples he looked every inch the successful executive he was. They had been introduced at a book launch. She had been a senior editor with the publishing company he the managing director of the company responsible for the book's promotion. It was an instant mutual attraction and the moment they could politely take their leave he had taken her to dine on whitebait and tournedos Rossini. Two years later they married. Everything had gone so well, all hopes fulfilled, the only blot on the horizon being Julian's infatuation with fishing. There had been times when she wondered if she played second fiddle to salmon and on one occasion at the fishing lodge they frequented had felt certain that even at the moment of climax in his mind Julian was into a fish rather than her. But it was only a momentary twinge; most husbands were prone to irritating hobbies. Then a year later their happiness was crowned by the news Lydia was pregnant. She was over forty by then so although never giving up hope motherhood came as a double blessing. Julian was delirious with joy, busy arranging the transformation of the spare room to nursery, putting his son's name down for every worthwhile potential school he could think of, while at the same time planning the best ways to spoil a daughter.

Then in the twelfth week she miscarried and their world fell to pieces. Lydia retreated into a shell, a private womb of loss and mourning closed to everyone including Julian. He had tried his best to reach her, devoting endless hours to thankless support, taking her to far flung places for exotic holidays, filling their stilted lunches and dinners with quiet patient monologues in place of conversation. She knew he was trying to help and for a while did her best to meet him halfway but there was nothing there any more. It wasn't only she had ceased to love him, it went deeper than that. The doctors had explained the miscarriage was due to chromosomal abnormalities associated with Down's syndrome adding that in the circumstance it would be unwise to attempt a further pregnancy at her age. However irrational she blamed Julian for ruining her only chance of motherhood, and worse for indirectly killing her child. She found it increasingly hard to tolerate his presence and any attempt he made to touch her physically repulsive. She had insisted on separate bedrooms and though the passing years had brought a measure of amiability, their physical life together had remained that way ever since. She had embraced a new love, filling her life with endless committees devoted to local charities and good works.

Peering secretly through semi closed eyelashes; Julian viewed his wife with equal distaste. How could she have let herself go like that? When they first met she had been a sexy attractive woman with an inquiring mind and lilting infectious laugh. A beautiful woman whose overly possessive nature was more than compensated but a rich and fabulous personality making her one to savour and to love. And God how he had loved her. But this dumpy dreary tweed clad figure bore no relation to the woman he remembered. From the sensible brogues to the rimless

chained spectacles dangling round her neck, this woman seemed almost an impostor, some alien life form from hell that had taken the place of his wonderful Lydia, bringing a nightmare world of nagging torment along with her. She was even growing a moustache, to be fair not a full blown growth, even so those long black hairs sprouting at the corners of her mouth hadn't grown there by accident. There had to be a considerable quantity of testosterone lurking somewhere in that matronly frame adding further fuel to his alien theory. Sometimes when he looked back over the past he wondered if memory was playing tricks. Could life have ever been that wonderful? Could anyone really have loved that much?

When Lydia had miscarried he had been devastated with grief both for her and the their child, expecting to share his sorrow and draw strength from their love. But to his horror his shattered world became a place of nightmare. She struggled fiercely to free herself from any embrace, turning to glare at him eyes filled with naked hatred. A white-hot knife had pierced his heart and even now he moaned softly at the memory.

Time, he had told himself she needs time. And the doctors agreed. He had retreated into the background, leaving her undisturbed, taking over the household chores, shopping and cooking. But Lydia seemed unaware, spending her days staring blankly out of the window until he feared for her sanity. Try taking her somewhere new; take her out of herself the doctors suggested. So they had gone to a quiet little island in the Caribbean and when that failed moved on to a noisy one. In growing desperation he tried Miami followed by New York before finally admitting defeat and returning home. But he had neglected his work and there was a downturn in the economy. Julian knew they were in for a shock and would have to tighten their belts. But when it came he was rocked to the core. He had stayed away from the rat race a too long, taken his ear from the ground and the knives had gone in. The letter from the parent organisation was sympathetic but ruthless. He had been made redundant.

To avoid ruffling the waters they offered a golden handshake of a sort, aware he had no alternative but to accept. He had been too busy on the way up with no time to spare on unlikely issues like redundancy so had never bothered to consider possible fall back positions. He went through the motions of looking for a job knowing he hadn't a chance in hell. He was forty-seven with a pack of hungry youngsters snapping at his heels. Another couple of years and he would have made it to the top and once there would have been safely secure. Free to choose from a veritable smorgasbord of boardrooms with the attached salaries and expenses such advisory positions commanded. But in his world a miss was as good as a mile and past achievements held no sway. He had struggled on for a year or so, picking up the odd freelance job, keeping up outward appearances, but his relationship with Lydia remained unchanged and his heart wasn't in it. Slowly at first he began to drink. Alcohol soothed the pain, eased the hurt, dimmed his fear of the future. It was a warm and cosy haven free from dread and grief, a place where hope could be reborn in befuddled daydreams, sirens calling sweetly from the rocks of addiction. And when later they claimed him he was not unwilling. Lydia didn't seem to care or notice secure in her good works and dumpy clothes. Providing he stayed out of the way and caused minimum

embarrassment she was content. At least his drinking ensured she never brought any of her equally boring dumpy pals home which was some consolation

The train tannoy announced their local station. Lydia rose from her seat, smoothed her crumpled skirt and leaned over to prod Julian in the chest with a bony finger.

‘Wakey-wakey, upsy-daisy,’ she cried loudly in an attempt to bring the slumbering form to consciousness.

‘For God’s sake woman, there’s no need to shout,’ his eyes glared with angry resentment. ‘I was only dozing and well aware of our arrival without being prodded about like a performing animal in a circus.’

‘Well, pardon me for trying! But after the way you behaved all day how was I to know you had surfaced from your drunken stupor. And as for performing animals only an elephant could put away the quantities of booze that disappeared down your gullet today. So if the cap fits bloody well wear it.’ She put on her headscarf, jerking the knot sharply under her chin to emphasise the point.

Julian stood up and fastened his top trouser buttons, why did all his clothes seem to shrink nowadays? He allowed himself the luxury of a heavy sigh but there was no point in arguing, Lydia always won. Anyway she was right of course, she usually was. Wiser to stay mum and hurry home he could do with a good stiffener. The train eased to a halt and together they stepped on to the platform. The air was damp, heavy with a scent of rain. A single taxi waited at the rank, he waved his umbrella and headlights flashed acknowledgement. Looking up at the sky he searched for stars, but the falling dusk showed only dark scudding clouds

‘It will be good to be home,’ Julian said aloud, they always said that.

Lydia dragged her thoughts from the coming lunch in aid of the Pensioners Holiday Fund. Why did he always have to say the same thing like a record stuck in a groove? Masking a sigh she swallowed her irritation.

‘Yes,’ she echoed voice flat, devoid of interest. ‘It will be good to be home.’

Gregory

Gregory turned the corner just in time to see his bus pull away in a cloud of spray.

Shit!’ He forced himself to breathe deeply, quelling the tears that welled up all too often for no reason. Pulling the anorak hood over an already soaked head and leaning heavily on the single crutch he limped forward to join the line, resigned to wait with the rest as long as fate demanded. At least it was raining, he was grateful for that. The windblown rain masked the shameful tears that coursed down his cheeks. If nothing else he had learnt to cry well, the tears might flow but the face remained expressionless as a granite rock unmoved by the salty streams.

More sodden forms, walking umbrellas tilted against the wind, stood in a bedraggled but regulated queue. Gregory took up position behind the last like a decoy pigeon in a field of flattened wheat. In no time three further flapping mackintoshes appeared to line up behind him. A heavy lorry swished past, double tyres cleaving passage through the water logged street. A ship in full sail drenching the line with a thigh high bow wave of spray then rumbled on ignoring their cries of outrage snatched away in turn by an indifferent wind. A memory of walking in another day of teaming rain flashed picture bright in his mind. High winds hurling huge seas that pounded against the harbour wall in ground shuddering blasts. Great explosions of water hanging high in the air before crashing down in freezing sheets, sluicing the concrete clean in knee-deep tides soaking them all to the skin. He was laughing head thrown back in wild carefree exhilaration, oblivious of risk, filled with an exaltation of life. Absurdly happy dancing in the rain and spray jubilant in a crazy joy of carefree risk.

If only he could remember the where and who. But as always the memories so graphically precise remained stubbornly obscure when it came to personalities. Who he had been with that day and where had they gone and why? He thought in the plural because he was sure there was more than one and that he loved each of them more deeply than life. They had to be waiting for him somewhere, worrying, wondering where he was and why he had abandoned them for so long and when he would return. His inability to reach out to find them through the misty quick sands of memory was driving him insane with frustration.

A bus loomed large through the wall of grey, bright yellow interior a beckoning haven of warmth and shelter. A quiver of anticipation stirred the queue as people straightened, tightening grips on parcels and briefcases, their heads raised in eager expectation. Only to recoil in

disappointment as they backed away to avoid the spraying wash as the number 7 became clearly visible and the vehicle whooshed past without pause. Only Gregory remained unmoved, statuesque and unaware of the passing traffic, his mind a whirl of chasing dreams and memories.

He was in a hospital but not like the one across the street where he had spent the afternoon. This had been a light airy happy place, filled with smiling nurses and gurgling babies. He was sure one of them must have been his; well almost sure, why else would he be there along with all the other fathers. Holding on to small hands as they hurried along the passageways eager to greet the new arrival. He could still feel the grip of little fingers clutching tightly as they hurried down the corridor while he made half-hearted attempts to restrain the children from skipping forward in uncontrolled excitement as they neared the door. But somehow he could never get beyond that door and no matter how he tried something always stopped him from looking down at the child with a hand in his.

Another bus bore down out of the gloom, this time coming to a halt beside them brake linings squealing in protest at the damp. Gregory moved aside letting the others board first. He was in no hurry and anyway his leg was hurting again, it always did after standing for a while and he knew it would give him trouble when he tried to climb on board. Better to give the rest of them time to settle or someone would only try to help and he dreaded that. They meant well of course which made it all the more churlish to reject their offers and he hated that too. The lawyer had told him to take it easy, forget about buses and use taxis instead; saying money was not a problem. He even had a house somewhere though he hadn't got around to seeing it; material things had lost their significance. The rented room suited him fine and there was a café round the corner when he felt hungry. Most of the time he spent lying on the bed, peering through the mists, fighting for his memory in an endless search to know where he should go to find them.

Two doctors watched Gregory board the bus from a second floor window of the hospital across the street, the twisted leg making it difficult for him to climb the vehicle stairs.

'Can't say I'm happy to discharge a man in his mental state. What happens if his memory returns when he is alone with no one to turn for help and support?'

'What else can we do,' his companion shrugged, 'we have no legal cause to keep him, as it is we are lucky he agreed to come in for treatment once a week. Ease up, Michael, we are here to help and we do as best we can, but there is no way we can protect people from their own passed actions. We are not God after all and the hospital doesn't run to time machines.' 'You're right of course. It's just that I'm afraid he's a likely suicide when he remembers, and if he's out there on his own he will probably succeed.'

'I'm sorry too, I really am. But he will have to face up to it one day. Two young children and a wife with a new babe strapped to her back, all dancing like mad things on a sea wall in the middle of a storm. Let's face it, Michael, it might have been a freak wave but that's no excuse and he'll know it. There's no way he should have allowed any one of them anywhere near the sea wall in such conditions. And I'm sure he wouldn't have if they both hadn't been sky high on coke. If you ask me the real tragedy is he survived'

The bus pulled out to join the rain washed jam of evening traffic and the doctors returned to the wards. Other patients with other problems needed their attention. For the time being Gregory and his amnesia was forgotten.

A Long Day Passing

The Bishop stared out of his study window brow creased in irritation; another one was wending its way up the road. Man or woman he wondered? From this distance it was hard to tell, not that it mattered either would be equally unwelcome. This was his retreat, his hideaway, a place where he came specifically to get away from such people. It really was too bad the way they kept coming, seemingly out of nowhere, as if intent on disturbing this one time of the year he chose for seclusion meditation and peace.

And what a year it had been. Well, he assumed it was a year though to be honest things had been in such a jumble recently he couldn't be sure. He supposed he must have suffered an accident or breakdown of some kind, for though his staff had never actually told him, they must have whisked him away from the trials and burdens of office to this favourite haven of quiet serenity. How else could he have come for he had no memory of arriving. Shaking his head in irritation the Bishop dismissed the matter and turned his attention back to the lone figure coming up the path plague him. There was always a chance whoever it was might walk past to another house to ask for shelter there. But he doubted it. All the others had stopped at his door and despite the inconvenience he couldn't really blame them. Once there had been several houses forming a small hamlet at the foot of what he liked to call his hill. But now all trace of them was gone. Due to that maniac Hitler people were constantly pulling things down to make room for the new priorities of increased food production or extra space needed for new aerodromes and anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Though where they had re-housed all the people he didn't know. He would make a note to ask the Diocesan Archivist if he could throw some light on the matter when he returned to the Palace

He would never forget the last traveller. The poor man had been crazed as a loon though quite harmless as it turned out. He could see him now rounding the final bend to the house, brandishing a gold-topped cane in the air while muttering angrily to himself. Dressed in a black frock coat with a silk top hat set at a jaunty angle on his head, presumably on his way to some fancy dress party for he could think of no other reason to wander around the countryside dressed like an old fashioned funeral director.

'Yes?' The Bishop had sighed, opening the front door in response to the sharp rapping of a cane. 'Can I assist you in anyway?'

‘Good day, my dear sir,’ with a beaming smile the man had pushed his way inside, thrusting his cane into the umbrella stand and crowning it with his hat while looking round the hall as though he owned the place.

‘What joy to see another human face, what joy indeed.’ Then ignoring the Bishop he stalked into the study inspecting the room with a critical eye.

‘One moment, please, just one moment.’ The outraged bishop could scarcely contain his anger. ‘May I ask what you mean by marching into my house and strutting about the place as though you own it, and without so much as a by your leave. I’m afraid I must ask you to go and go this instant. Go on; be off with you, before I call the authorities.’

‘Yes, yes, quite so, quite so, I dare say I would react in much the same way if our positions were reversed.’ The stranger’s head bobbed in vigorous agreement, ‘but times have proved excessively trying since I lost my horse, you see, quite excessively trying. Though just how the wretched animal managed to unbuckle its harness and desert my buggy remains a mystery to me, my dear sir, a total mystery.’ He spread his arms in exasperation. ‘It left me with no alternative but to hoof it, you might say.’ He chuckled delightedly at his pun, ‘and as you have doubtless discovered while taking the air the hill to your house is uncommon steep.’ He paused, head cocked, eyes fixed like a child confronted with a lollipop on a decanter of sherry by the bishop’s desk. ‘So I wondered if perhaps I might help myself to a small restorative.’ The voice faded away and he smiled mechanically at the Bishop, though his eyes remained riveted on the sideboard. ‘Oh very well, help yourself, you will find a glass in the cupboard below. No doubt you will be staying for lunch as well?’ The Bishop remarked caustically, and was horrified to see his sarcasm mistaken for Christian charity.

‘My dear sir, most kind, most kind. Nothing fancy required, nothing fancy. Perhaps a chump chop, yes indeed a chump chop washed down with a mug of good honest English ale?’ He smacked his lips in anticipation causing his whiskers to quiver in an irritating manner. The Bishop viewed his unwelcome guest with ill-concealed distaste. Great Heavens, must the fellow repeat every word like a damned parrot. He decided to order an early lunch, make certain he saw the back of the halfwit before he had time to think of asking for a bed.

‘Oh very well, very well, but I can’t promise a chump chop. I fear we rough it here in the sticks and accept whatever the good Lord provides.’ Dammit, the wretched fellow had got him repeating himself now. He must watch his words; remember to speak with greater care and deliberation.

‘Have you come far?’ The bishop automatically lapsed into the role of host. It was one of his routine questions when attending church functions throughout the diocese, one for reasons he could never fathom proved invariably popular. Not that he listened to the replies, had he paid attention to them he would have become a walking compendium for an Automobile Association long since and his work was too important to be distracted by such trifles. Why people couldn’t find more useful things to do than waste his time with their travel details was a source of

constant irritation. The thought stirred something uncomfortable deep in his subconscious making him temporally uneasy.

‘Shall we go into lunch?’ He said, trying to dismiss them, his voice too loud and laced with exasperation. ‘There’s a panoramic view from the dining room which I’m sure will appeal, you can retrace your walk up the hill, count your steps to Calvary.’

Appalled, he barked laughter to cover his embarrassment. Why had he said that? He had never intended to say anything like that. Levity with the scriptures was a tendency he abhorred. As they settled in their chairs he watched with increasing irritation as his guest cast critically glances about the room like a prospective buyer, before finally granting it an apparent seal of approval with a jerky bob of his head. The Bishop strove to overcome a growing unchristian urge to rap the offending bald pate with one of his heavy silver serving spoons.

‘Strike me dead if it ain’t a chump chop! Yes indeed Bigod, sure as eggs is eggs, a chump chop. My compliments to the cook, sir, and my thanks to you, a more generous host one could never hope to meet. Beaming happily the man picked up his tankard and rising to his feet cried, ‘A health unto Her Majesty and damnation to the Boer.’

‘Lord preserve us the man’s barking mad,’ the Bishop muttered under his breath, checking nervously to ensure the dining room door remained open in case he needed to make a quick escape. ‘I trust the weather holds for your continued journey,’ he added aloud in an attempt to distract the madman from possible violence.

‘No fear of that Bigod. In comparison to the weather down the hill it’s as fine and sunny as Brighton beach in July.’ The man shook his head, ‘you’ve no idea what it’s like down there, a permanent drizzling damp that soaks to the very bone. Cold too and foggy, with air so sooty it’s hard to breathe. My dear sir you can have no conception how fortunate you are to live in such elegant surroundings bathed in all this glorious sunshine.’ He smiled bravely with an air that smacked of martyrdom, while the Bishop’s desire to see the back of him increased tenfold.

‘Why did you stay if you found the place so unpleasant, and what was it that finally induced you to move up the hill? An impulse, a whim of fancy, or did something happen to spur you on your way?’ Aware by now of the capricious nature of the man the Bishop was suspicious of his tales. All that pretence of yearning for a chump chop indeed when he had barely touched the food, merely pushing it about the plate like a lazy housemaid with a broom. Even the much desired glass of Madeira sat ignored, discarded with scarcely a sip. No, more than likely the man had been forced to move on after similar behaviour of some kind had made things too uncomfortable for him to remain.

‘A good question, my dear sir, a good question indeed. But a tricky one to answer Bigod and that’s the truth. The whole business has an almost nightmare quality you might say. You see, as far as I recall, one minute I was driving into town as usual and the next I had arrived, sitting atop my buggy outside the Law Courts but without a horse. Felt a damned fool and no mistake perched up there above an empty pair of shafts like some fairground Aunt Sally. That’s when I first noticed the weather! My dear sir I have known that city all my life man and boy but I swear

to God I have never experienced a day, not one single day of weather like it in all the years I've lived in these parts.'

'Yes, yes,' the Bishop interrupted impatiently, 'that's all very well, you've already mentioned the weather. But what exactly happened to make you leave so abruptly?' He could think of no reason for his sudden interest, but like a dream floating somewhere out of reach in the back of his mind, he had the strangest feeling the answer would be important if he could only grasp hold of it.

'Ah, a rum do that, rum do indeed.' The man nodded knowingly, 'I was walking down Exchange Street as usual, spent a lot of time walking that damned street, not that it seemed to go anywhere particular as far as I recall. Anyway, I had just turned the corner by the bank when I noticed this man leaning against the wall. At first glance there was nothing unusual about him, just an ordinary man leaning against the wall. But as I drew closer I became aware of a strange quality about him, almost a quiet radiance you might say. Not that he was bathed in light or anything like that; it was more an impression of tranquillity and warmth. Then for no apparent reason he smiled at me, and for the first time in a long long while I felt needed.'

'Care for a ride, Judge?' He asked, 'and for a reason I still don't understand every part of me ached to say yes. Yet something held me back, even now I'm not sure what it was, too scared of the unknown perhaps, better the devil you know and all that. Anyway I shook my head, turned on my heel and hurried away back up the street. But he bothered me and I couldn't get him out of my mind. Then one day without thinking instead taking my usual route down Exchange Street I found myself walking out of town, up the hill, and here I am.' He shrugged his shoulders and smiled apologetically at the Bishop.

'You say you are a Judge?' The Bishop viewed the man in disbelief.

'Oh yes indeed, a rather senior one now with a well-deserved reputation for severity. They say most barristers go to some lengths to ensure their clients are never brought before me for sentencing in the hour proceeding luncheon. A time when my gastric juices begin to flow and I'm apt to be a trifle short tempered and perhaps harsher than usual.' He chuckled dryly at what he obviously considered a compliment. 'Still, there it is, a weak judge is a poor judge in my opinion.' He rose to his feet, 'and now, my good sir, I must be on my way, make the most of your glorious sunshine. Much appreciate your generous hospitality, yes indeed much appreciate it, excessively generous in the circumstances. We must meet again one day when I trust it will be my pleasure to play host.' He grabbed the Bishop's hand, nearly shaking the arm from its socket.

Dear God, will he never go! If he likes the sun so much why doesn't he rush out and wallow in it. Personally the Bishop found the light harsh on the eye, not at all like the gentle sunlight back at the palace. Smiling and muttering nonsensical pleasantries, the Bishop firmly escorted the self-proclaimed judge to the front door, flinging it open with a farewell flourish only to freeze in disbelief. A young man was waiting outside, seated in a gleaming royal blue buggy with a magnificent white horse tossing a glossy brushed mane between the shafts.

'Care for a ride Judge?' The young man smiled and the trees sparkled.

‘Oh thank you, yes please. I was beginning to think I might never have another chance.’ With a blissful smile the judge climbed quickly on board.

‘Room for one more, Bishop?’ The young man called.

‘You’re very kind but I fear not, too many demands on my time at the moment.’ He smiled, waving in an attempt to mask the longing he felt to join them and the confusion it caused. Somehow aware the young man had read his thoughts with a compassion devoid of judgement. He watched the buggy clatter through the gates at a spanking pace and turn right up the mountain road. A clump of trees screened them from view and he waited for them to reappear further along the road, though they never did. But then somehow he hadn’t expected them to. With a sigh the Bishop had turned back to his favourite haven that was fast becoming a prison.

And now after he had finally managed to pull himself together, quell most of the fears and uncertainties, here was another stray dog about knock on his door and doubtless bring them all back again. It really was too bad. As though on cue the front door knocker rapped loudly. With a sigh of resignation the bishop went to answer it. That was another thing he thought irritably, the palace was always filled with staff and at least some of them always accompanied him when he went on retreat. Yet though they had to be around the place somewhere, none of them seemed to be about when needed. They were obviously here, someone cleaned the house, cooked the food, turned down the beds. The Bishop went suddenly cold as he realised he hadn’t been to bed since he arrived, there had never been the need, it was always day. Dear God, was he going mad? Close to despair he flung open the door in no mood to listen to anyone else’s problems, ready to tell them in to make themselves scarce no uncertain terms and take their blasted troubles with them.

‘Hi, I’m sorry to bother you, but could I use your phone? I think we had an accident and I’m none too sure where I am.’

Dear God that was all he needed. A girl! The Bishop closed his eyes and prayed for patience, a miracle or both.

‘Hello, is anybody there?’ An attractive voice with an American accent penetrated his defences. Curiosity overrode the desire for prayer and he opened his eyes to take a look. She was small, pretty, with enough paint on her face to smother a battleship. Then to his horror realised the rest of her was largely naked. She was wearing some kind of short-sleeved singlet that stopped abruptly some two inches above her belly button, followed by shorts so brief they left almost nothing to the imagination, and the rest was just endless bare flesh from thighs to a pair of beach shoes. The Bishop gaped, temporarily deprived of speech, even more dumbfounded to discover the girl was actually laughing at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she fought to keep a straight face, ‘but where the heck did you find those trousers with all the buttons?’

‘I’ll have you know young lady, these are not trousers, they are gaiters.’ He glared at her pugnaciously.

‘Well pardon me for not recognising them, Your Majesty, but we keep most of our gators in Florida, so I’ve never seen two of them up close before.’ And with one hand covering her mouth she began to laugh.

The bishop was about to make an angry retort before slamming the door in her face when for no reason he looked into her eyes. There was no viciousness there, no nastiness, just genuine merriment and fun. Something inside him snapped like over stretched elastic and to his surprise he heard himself say, ‘I’m afraid the telephone doesn’t work very well but you’re more than welcome to come inside, have some tea or a cooling drink while we find a way to summon help. And by the way I’m not a majesty, just a bishop.’

‘Great, that’s real cool of you, Bish, do you have any lemonade? I’m trying to kick the hard stuff.’ She followed him inside, sprawling in one of his armchairs with the elegance of a young fawn.

Feeling faintly ridiculous the Bishop hurried to the sideboard, delighted to find a jug of lemonade resting on a silver salver. Making a mental note to give a salary increase to whoever was responsible, he poured a glass and bustled back to his charge. ‘Was anyone hurt in the accident, or were you alone? If you had a companion we really ought to go and find him in case he suffered an injury of some kind.’

‘Harry? That bastard? He was drunk as a skunk and twice as high on coke. Even then if he had kept his hands on the wheel instead of fumbling my thighs we might have made it back. As it was we crashed straight through the barrier and nosedived into a field. By the time I woke up he was long gone, so there’s no need to bother or search for him. If I know Harry he’ll be happy as a sand boy snorting lines by now and I’ll already be yesterday’s news. Pity though, it sure was a beautiful car.’

‘But how did you get here, my dear, and where will you go?’ The bishop was seriously concerned. He didn’t understand half of what the girl said but then she was American after all, which probably explained the extraordinary ring she had pierced through her tummy button. But whatever she said he was determined this pretty fragile young thing shouldn’t be allowed to wander about the countryside on her own.

‘The road ran right past the field, so when I woke up I just followed it here. Can’t have been that far because it didn’t take long to get here, and providing I can get a ride to the nearest town I’ll find my way home in no time. So you don’t have to worry, Bish.’ She smiled and patted him gently on the arm. ‘Though it’s nice of you to care.’

‘Well, I don’t like it, if you insist on walking to the nearest town, then I insist on accompanying you. At least until I see you safely onto a bus or something.’

‘Thank you, Bish darling,’ she kissed him gently on the cheek, ‘you’re a sweetie and I appreciate the offer, I really do, but first I’m going to try calling for help.’ She walked over to the telephone. ‘Hey, where the hell did you find this thing, in a museum?’ She picked up the receiver and began cranking the handle at the side. ‘Hello, hello, Oh Hi there, can you connect me to the nearest taxi service please? My car’s been in an accident and I need a ride into town. What’s

that? You'll come yourself, and you know the address. Say that's just great! OK, I'll sit tight right here and wait for you. Bye.'

'There you go Bish, nothing to it. Your phone works fine.'

'Delighted you're all fixed up, my dear,' the bishop smiled, hiding his desolation bravely. Although he had only known the girl briefly the thought of facing an empty house again after she had gone depressed him more than he could say. Pull yourself together, he told himself sternly. You are a bishop after all and if this is where the good Lord wants you to be then this is where you should be happy to remain. A car horn sounded outside and his heart sank.

'Dear me that was fast the local taxi service should be commended. It seems your ride has arrived.' Forcing a smile he led her to the door. 'I hope you won't mind if an old man tells you what a pleasure it has been to have known you.'

'I don't mind at all, Bish, it's been a pleasure to know you too.' She laughed out loud at his blushes and kissed his cheek again, then opened the door. 'Wow! Is that an Aston Martin or an Aston Martin?'

The Bishop looked over her shoulder at the gleaming new sports car and suddenly the world seemed to stop. The same young man was sitting behind the wheel, smiling at the girl as she skipped down the steps towards the car.

'Well done,' he said quietly, 'you see your detour really was necessary.'

'The girl looked at him puzzled, 'Necessary, I'm sorry, I don't understand.'

'Never mind,' he winked, helping her into the car 'it will come back before long.' He turned his attention to the house. 'Room for one more, Bishop?' He called.

'Yes, come on, Bish darling,' the girl echoed, 'there's plenty of space; I'll sit in the back. Come on now, you don't really want to stay in that spooky old house all on your own now, do you?'

Suddenly he felt strangely happy and carefree, 'No, come to think of it I don't, not in the least. In fact I've never wanted anything less in my life,' and laughing he ran down the steps like a ten year old child and scrambled into the car.

'Are we going anywhere fun?' The girl asked.

'I don't think you will be disappointed,' the young man laughed 'OK, everyone ready?' Something inside each of them seemed to crack like an old eggshell as a beam of sunlight arced down from the sky to bathe the road in sparkling gold.

'Right then,' he smiled, 'let's be on our way,' and gunned the engine.

The Egg

Ben worked his way down the row of nesting boxes and was pleased to see the girls had done him proud. Three or four fresh laid eggs nestling in each one. Whistling tunelessly to himself he began to collect them, making sure to leave a tempter behind to remind the girls what they were about when they next sat down. Ben sold the eggs through the local supermarket though the price they fell far short of what he needed to cover his costs. Not that he minded, he only kept the old girls going for Dot's sake. Dot had really loved her birds, talking about each one by name every evening as though they were the children she never had. When she died Ben knew he didn't have a choice, Dot would never forgive him if he broke up the family. Anyway the farm was a lonely place now she had gone and the girls kept him company.

He was leaning forward to take the eggs from the last box when he saw it. Four normal brown speckled eggs lay nestling in the straw, but at the centre of the clutch and double the size of the others, lay an egg like no other he had ever seen. The shell was a beautiful translucent grey shimmering and sparkling like a baby star. It took a lot to throw Ben, so after a moment's hesitation he continued to gather the remaining eggs in his steady methodical way. Then carefully placing the grey intruder on top of the others, he picked up the basket and returned to the farmhouse. Leaving the ordinary eggs in the larder for boxing he carried his prize through to the kitchen, laying it gently on a dishcloth in the middle of the kitchen table. The egg sat there shimmering and sparkling like a raindrop caught in the sun though it seemed to have grown and was now more the size of a goose egg. Stranger still the translucent grey was changing to an iridescent glow of deeper colours, as though a multi-hued Catherine wheel was spinning away somewhere inside the shell. Ben sat there entranced, then remembering the hungry young bullocks he was fattening for market leapt guiltily to his feet and hurried away to feed them. The lorries from the slaughterhouse were coming next morning and he felt the least he could do was to give them all a decent supper.

It was two hours before Ben had finished his chores and in his eagerness to check on the new arrival he was almost running by the time he reached the kitchen door only to be brought up short in astonishment. For the egg had increased in size to cover most of the kitchen table, a good four feet in length and nearly two deep at its centre. The colour had changed too and was now the purest aquamarine with thin concentric bands of flashing silver moving steadily across its

surface. A strange tinkling rhythm filled the room producing a gentle soothing effect on Ben, who to his surprise found himself sitting at the table with no memory of moving from the door. He sat there patiently watching the egg waiting for something to happen. He had no idea what it would be, he just knew it was going to be wonderful.

The silver bands broadened, rapidly increasing speed until they were flashing across the egg's surface like arcing electric fields growing brighter by the second. In less than a minute it had turned into an ovoid of pure white light that abruptly rose up on its base, increasing to a height of six feet or more. Then before Ben's incredulous gaze the most beautiful woman he had ever seen stepped gracefully out of the dazzling brilliance. Tumbling wheaten hair framed a perfect oval face with cornflower blue eyes set above a soft and generous mouth. Ben took one look at the exquisite vision and all memories of Dot were forgotten. Her legs seemed to go on forever and his hands ached to hold the twin pert breasts that thrust aggressively against a thin sheath of satin material. Once a long time ago Ben had fallen for another girl who had looked a little like this one. He had come across her picture in a magazine while waiting for a dentist's appointment and surreptitiously torn out the page when the receptionist wasn't looking. He was fourteen at the time and had kept the photograph of the beautiful model for over a year, secretly fulfilling his baser teenage fantasies before he discovered the local girls were much more satisfying. But this vision was far more lovely than any of those, even and more gorgeous than the model he had romanticised all those years ago. Stepping out of the shell she held out her hand. 'Hello, Ben, I'm Rushda,' she smiled, and Ben felt his knees go weak, 'I'm so pleased to be here with you, I know we are going to be the best of friends.'

Ben tried to get up, but something seemed to be holding him down, so he stayed where he was smiling feebly in return.

Rushda didn't seem to notice. 'I've brought a present for you Ben,' she smiled, and leaning back into the light for a moment returned with a chicken in her arms. 'You'll find she lays much faster than the ones you keep outside, put her in the armchair over there and you'll see,' she held the bird out to Ben. It was a truly handsome bird, larger than the average chicken with the soft grey plumage of a wood pigeon.

Whatever weakness or force had been holding him in his seat disappeared. Ben stood up obediently, took the bird and put it in the chair as instructed. He was surprised at his submissive behaviour for as a rule he didn't take kindly to being bossed about and usually reacted quite mulishly when ordered to do something. But then looking at Rushda he knew he could never refuse her anything. Even so there was something about her that he found increasingly unsettling. Although every time he sneaked a look at her sexy sinuous figure he was consumed by an aching lust, at the same time surrounded by the dazzling white brightness of the egg, it was somehow impossible to actually see her. It was almost as though he was seeing her body in his mind rather than physically before him and it made him uncomfortable.

The grey hen cackled loudly in boastful triumph from the armchair. 'You see,' Rushda smiled proudly, 'she's laid already. Quickly now, go and see how she's done. Again Ben did as he was

told, lifting up the bird and to his amazement finding twelve perfect translucent grey shimmering eggs.

‘Isn’t she the cleverest girl?’ Rushda clapped her hands with delight, ‘now put her down, but gently mind we mustn’t upset her, she still has the incubation to complete.’

‘Look,’ Ben began, determined to put a halt to this stream of instructions before they became a habit.

‘Dear Ben,’ Rushda interrupted, giving him a dazzling smile, ‘I know ‘what you are going to say and you’re right of course and I’m truly sorry. Please don’t be angry with me, I don’t mean any harm; it’s only that I tend to get a little bossy when excited. Now go and sit down at the table, darling, I have something very important to tell you.’

Ben wasn’t exactly sure what it was that Rushda said, as his memory seemed to become distinctly hazy at that point. The next thing he became aware of was cries of joy as she pointed to twelve handsome young grey hens pecking and scratching at his carpet. ‘There now my beauties,’ she cooed with deep contentment, ‘all of you hatched safe and sound, what clever girls you are. First thing tomorrow morning Uncle Ben will take you to market and find each of you a nice new home where you can begin to lay your own eggs. Won’t you Ben?’ She smiled at him expectantly.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t make it tomorrow,’ Ben shrugged regretfully, for he would truly liked have to have pleased her. ‘The lorries from the slaughter house are coming in the morning for the beef cattle, so I won’t have time for the market’ He brightened, ‘but why don’t we make a day of it next week, then I can take you to lunch as well after the sale?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, the future of the hens is far more important than a herd of cattle; you must make time.’ Rushda’s voice had turned monotone flat and for a fleeting moment a tinge of dark red flooded the corners of the cornflower blue eyes. Then abruptly her tone changed. ‘Please Ben darling, surely you can take them in after you’ve loaded the cattle, the money isn’t important, I just want you to find them nice homes where they can lay their eggs. After all they are such pretty birds I’m sure you will find plenty of people who will be only too happy to have them and I would be so grateful.’ She gave him a devastating smile and Ben’s opposition wavered for a second then collapsed.

‘All right, I’ll make time somehow,’ he nodded, none to sure how, it would mean a hell of a rush. But she was right, they were beautiful birds and fantastic layers as well and since Rushda didn’t seem to care about the money he was sure he would find homes for them in no time. Ben was about to ask her about the money once more, just to be sure, then time kaleidoscoped again and he found himself in the farmyard guiding the first lorry as it reversed through the gate. It took a couple of hours to get the cattle away, and the best part of another to crate the chickens, for Rushda was very fussy about the way they were handled, insisting on an extra layers of fresh straw being laid in each box. But she made no effort to help and wouldn’t even come outside to wave her darlings goodbye.

It was a hell of a drive but luckily the traffic was light and he made it with a half hour to spare before the market closed. Many stallholders were already calling it a day though the usual diehards remained, determined to stick it out to the end in hopes of making a last minute sale. Ben found an empty place in the centre and quickly unloaded the birds. Almost immediately they caught the eye of a particularly voluble farmer's wife who promptly bought a pair with such loud cries of delight that word of something special spread like wildfire, and Ben managed to get shot of the last one just before the police began turning the place back into a car park.

He drove straight home, left the car in the yard and hurried into the house, proudly clutching a fistful of notes for Rushda. She was waiting for him in the light but looked tired and strained. There was a pinkish tinge to her eyes, and when she spoke her soft velvet voice sounded coarsely rough with a grating underlying harshness in tone.

'Put the money on the table,' she rasped coldly, 'and come here.'

Ben froze, hair rising on the nape of his neck, alarm bells ringing in his head, instinctively knowing something was wrong. 'Is something the matter, Rushda? You don't look well, are you feeling all right? Shall I call a doctor?' 'He had wanted to please her so much, make her proud of him, be rewarded by that lovely smile as he gave her the money. But this wasn't the Rushda he had left earlier that morning, something about her had changed, even the brilliant whiteness seemed flecked with a muddy brown. For a fleeting moment he felt almost repelled, then as quickly flooded with guilt. She was ill that was all, his beautiful wonderful girl was ill. What on earth had got into him, how could he behave so badly, think so treacherously at a time when all the poor girl needed was cosseting, sympathy, and understanding. As though reading his thoughts the old Rushda returned. Ben could almost feel what the effort of transformation had cost and loved her all the more.

'I'm sorry I lost control just now darling,' the gorgeous cornflower eyes widened in contrition and her mouth pouted in hope of forgiveness. 'But I need a tonic at regular intervals and like a silly girl I didn't bring one with me,' she beckoned him closer. 'Please Ben, don't let my silly behaviour spoil our friendship, I owe you so much for all your help with the hens, not to mention your hospitality and all the money you so kindly brought back for me. So please, my Ben, please come closer and give your Rushda a kiss to show she's forgiven.'

Beaming with happiness Ben stepped forward to his love, heart almost bursting with joy as for the first time he felt the delicate touch of her arms embrace. Her heady scent of summer jasmine aroused him further and he raised his face eager to kiss those seductive lips at last. He could tell Rushda was equally aroused for her embrace had tightened and he could feel her melding and softening against him. Suddenly Ben found it difficult to breath as her soft embrace turned to a grip of iron and he found himself held in a python grasp of many more arms than two.

'Gently, my darling, gently,' he gasped, the tantalising lips now mere inches from his own, 'you're holding me too tight.'

'Poor Ben,' the lips twisted then smeared into a scarlet gash, 'I'm afraid it's time, my darling. But I know you will understand, because when it comes down to it we both share and work for

the same goals. You see, my Ben, I am a farmer too, of sorts.’ The cornflower eyes had turned to dull red coals and somehow he knew something hideously alien lurked behind the once beautiful face, something Ben didn’t want to see. He closed his eyes as the grip tightened and terrible things started to happen. He tried to scream but something had put a rigid lock on his mind and he no longer had control of his voice. But he couldn’t blot out the whispering voice so hungry with an urgency of need that echoed down the dimming corridors of his brain.

‘And today is my market day, my beautiful Ben, my market day.’

Uncle Silas

While walking the dog one morning it occurred to me how much he resembled my late Uncle Silas. They shared the same eyes, the same coloured beard, and more extraordinary still, both of them dribbled when turning their head to the right. In my Uncle's case this unfortunate lapse of good manners was an ill-fated by product of a crippling stroke. Yet Ferret, as my wife insisted on calling the hapless animal in her aversion to living fur, seemed a picture of good health at the time. Though for a moment I confess to contemplating a visit to the vet to make sure.

Strange, this unreasoned antipathy by so many of the fairer sex when confronted by the hairier creatures of the world. I recall attending a Retreat some years ago where I came across a voluble monk, who despite vows of the strictest silence proved distinctly loquacious on the subject. His beliefs were sufficiently bizarre to remain indelibly imprinted on my memory to this day. Brother Sagacious was convinced it was Lucifer himself who had brought about this state of affairs by brutally raping the Virgin Eve in the guise of a horned and hairy goat. According to Brother Sagacious the Dark One committed this act of defilement long before returning to the Garden of Eden to perform his more famous encore in the role of serpent. And it was this same violation that instilled in Eve's descendants their subconscious distaste for hairy quadrupeds, a distaste that in extreme cases manifests in flaunting their dead skins and sometimes even heads in bodily adornment.

When not fulfilling his more important holy duties Brother Sagacious held the position of keeper of the Abbey Apiary, a post that gave stewardship over not only the bees and their renowned lavender honey but the entire production of the Abbey's justly famed Extra Strong Mead. It was this latter obligation that many of his fellow brethren held accountable for some the more unusual and bizarre credos that plagued the mind of Brother Sagacious from time to time. Even so, I am obliged to acknowledge that even my own dear wife derives considerable pleasure from parading herself in a somewhat mangy mink on every suitable occasion. A coat that in healthier times graced the more litesome figure of her Great Aunt Lucretia, while at the same time never bestowing the slightest act of graciousness on poor Ferret.

But whatever the cause I admit to an ever growing sense of guilt at her behaviour. And though like most of his tribe Ferret displays no outward signs of ill will, there are times when I am sure I detect a momentary flicker of disappointment in the depths of those liquid brown eyes. For some

while the thought of wounding the susceptibilities of such a gentle creature caused me considerable concern and I racked my mind in hopes of finding a political solution which would assuage the hurt feelings of one party without giving cause for any unnecessary outrage in the other. Then, as so often happens in such dilemmas, the problem solved itself. While casually discarding the core of a Cox's Orange Pippin I discovered to my considerable surprise that Ferret was a closet vegetarian.

My wife shared an equal delight where apples were concerned, usually consuming a good pound or so a day from the large selection available from the orchard. She was also a gardener of noteworthy enthusiasm, though singularly lacking in application. To let her delicate administrations loose on an herbaceous border for the merest minutes was to invite carnage of indescribable desolation. Finally persuaded to accept the role of distant admirer she soon lost interest in the practical technicalities, content to sit back and appreciate the labours of others as one would a fine painting or piece of sculpture.

With her mind now committed to higher levels it proved an easy task to convince her that the humble apple core had recently been proven to have lethal properties for slugs and other assorted garden pests. An inborn desire to help swiftly overcame a fastidious nature and in no time she was hurling apple cores in every direction she suspected such vermin might lurk. Meanwhile the ever-attentive Ferret marked the fall of each delicacy and with commendable restraint waited patiently until his unknowing benefactress had returned to the house before claiming his rewards.

In happier days before his stroke Uncle Silas had been an eminent High Court Judge, noted for the novel methods he employed when faced with finding difficult solutions for cases of a particularly sensitive nature. Observing Ferret munching on a freshly retrieved apple core, his eyes half closed in heavenly ecstasy, I like to think he would have approved.

The Medium Game

Psychic Readings the brass plate proclaimed apologetically. Lettering dull with age, edges streaked with mildew, there was an old forgotten air about the sign while still retaining a tempting hint of the unknown. The name Madam Pandora engraved in faded italics below was so weathered, without the printed plastic name slot beside the doorbell it would have been impossible to decipher. Belinda viewed her sign with satisfaction. It was the perfect final touch, just as she had envisioned. The engraver had been expensive but worth every penny. She had given equal care and consideration to the décor of the rented ground floor apartment. Should it be a darkly mysterious Victorian portal to the afterlife? Or brightly modern, suggesting near instant transportation to Sunlit Uplands? In the end she had opted for an intermediate design of middle-income security with a touch of dowdiness thrown in to indicate honesty and thrift. The Finders had been interviewed and selected, though Don with customary enthusiasm had already pre-empted their first efforts, quartering the richer areas of the city to hand pick an initial list of prospective clients. The set up had taken longer than she had expected and cost more than anticipated, but at last they were ready. The game could begin.

Belinda and Don had worked the scam game together for the past five years, ever since they had tried to take each other one night at a medical convention in Florida. Belinda remembered it perfectly. After ensuring the marks had brought their wives along for the ride she had been luring the middle aged doctors to her bed with the aim of a little one shot blackmail. While Don had been playing the dashing young charity executive, desperately working against a crisis deadline to raise funds for sick African children. They had met in the hotel bar, seen though each other in moments, felt an instant mutual attraction and taken the night off for steamy sex with room service. By morning a bond of sorts had been formed and they had worked together ever since. Both had similar backgrounds, brought up in ghetto societies, joining the neighbourhood gangs at an early age for self-protection before later using their innate cunning to lift them out of the slums to broader, more rewarding horizons. Each was highly intelligent, streetwise and totally lacking in humanity. It was an ideal partnership and whatever vestige of feelings they possessed were directed to each other.

Over the years they had criss crossed the country, leaving a wake of broken hopes and ruined households from scams ranging from worthless health insurance policies to guaranteed

protection against mortgage foreclosure. When things grew too hot in the insurance field they switched to fraudulent property and share transactions. Always selecting their marks with care, going to great lengths to check assets and liquidity before moving in for the kill. Devoid of scruple or conscience they wasted no time on consideration or sympathy for their victims. To them a mark was a mark and whether they had a family to look after, were sick or disabled was of no consequence. Satisfaction came through good planning, the kicks with the kill and guilt played no part in the proceedings.

Not that they went out of their way to hurt people other than financially. There had been many scams using the Internet or newspapers where the sums involved were often less than ten dollars. But they used them rarely for although nice little earners in their way they involved large numbers of people with attendant heavy workloads and lacked the excitement of larger well-planned operations. They had just concluded a long-term scam in the death announcement field, sending letters of condolence along with a small outstanding bill of never more than nine odd dollars to the bereaved widow or husband. The sum was so small it was rarely passed to executors and usually settled automatically by return. But to make the profits worthwhile meant posting a good hundred letters a day which even with the aide of computer printing and data filing still involved a great deal of work. It had been Don's idea and so up to him to decide when to call it a day, but when he finally announced it was time to close down and move on Belinda had heaved a sigh of relief. For now it was her turn and she had come up with a beauty. The scam involved a high degree of acting but Belinda was a natural actress who might well have made a successful career on stage had she worked at it. But she had lacked the necessary grit and determination to stay the course and opted for the easier and more immediate rewards of crime. Even so, show business that had provided her name. Her pregnant mother had been briefly employed as a dresser to the minor lunch time soap star Belinda Bailey, and though show, actress and job had sunk without trace within six months, the fleeting involvement with celebrity had left its mark on her mother and subsequently on her.

The Medium Scam was one of the more noted and documented frauds in the business. In the same way financial scams were best conducted in the vicinities of Wall Street or Park Avenue. The Klondike for bogus religions, sects, gurus and séances was the wealthy suburbs of Los Angeles. With birth pangs stretching back to the early twentieth century spiritualism had long been recognised as one of the top evergreen earners in the trade and Belinda had set her sights on running one for a quite a while. In the old days the primitive aids of hidden microphones, ectoplasm, along with assistants swathed in ghostly sheets were enough to separate the gullible from their money. Now things were not so simple. A detailed and meticulously researched data base on the subject's background, financial holdings and family history was essential. But only after a double check to iron out any possible remaining errors was the completed file condensed on computer disk to run through an infra red converter on a fake wall mirror hung behind the mark. Belinda could then look over their shoulders and with the aid of specially coated infra red

glasses and a transistorised mouse disguised as a ring on her little finger; scroll down a list of headings to click on whichever was relevant at any given moment.

Even though hand movement was minimal to ensure the subject's attention was not distracted she insisted on giving psychometry readings as her method for contacting the Other Side. Caressing some object belonging to the mark, or better yet the deceased in her other hand to hold any wandering attention. The results on the marks were mind blowing as Belinda could conjure up long dead relatives and associates, not only describing them perfectly from old photographs reflected in the mirror but matching them to long forgotten events and even conversations filched from diaries and deliberately selected for their secret and personal natures. Don had done an excellent job on selecting reliable Finders from the staff of many exclusive nursing homes, expensive restaurants, and funeral parlours in the Los Angeles area. None of whom knew the real purpose behind their monthly payments, but Don insured the payments were generous enough to ensure that few of the unhappy rich or unstable bereaved escaped the net.

Belinda let herself into the apartment and went directly to the consulting room to check her appointments. There was plenty of time as she never held a consultation before six. People's point of resistance was always at lower ebb by the end of the day. But she liked to read through the mark's file and familiarise herself with their most vulnerable points before each session began. Her lips twitched with amusement at the name, Mrs Augean Darling. Where on earth did anyone come up with a name like Augean, for Christ's sake! Shaking her head she flipped the file open then frowned. The pages were blank; the God damned printer must have run out of ink. There was no one to blame but herself as for obvious reasons they never employed help in the office. Even so as a focused and methodical person who prided herself on attention to detail she was surprised at the slip up. Probably something to do with all those indigestion attacks she had been suffering lately, which were enough to distract anyone. As if by an association of ideas she was hit by another wave of excruciating pain. Belinda flopped in the desk chair, rummaging frantically in her bag for the antacid tablets and emptied the remainder of the bottle directly in her mouth, crunching the tablets like potato crisps before taking a swig of water from the carafe on the desk to wash them down.

For a while she sat without moving, willing the pain to subside and wishing Don was around for help and support. But he was away in Aspen Colorado looking into a possible property scam to take them through the winter. Not that they needed the money, but for quite a while now the business had become a kind of financial treadmill which neither of them knew how to get off. The medium game alone had proved more profitable than their wildest dreams, with the Distressed and Brutalised Orphan Fund already richer by more than \$450,000. Belinda could tell if she had a donating sucker in the first five minutes and immediately concentrated on any recently deceased youth or missing family member before casually mentioning the Distressed and Brutalised Orphan Fund towards the end of the session.

'How kind, what a generous thought,' she would dab dry eyes shielded behind the tinted glasses with a corner of her handkerchief, 'the little ones will appreciate your generosity so.

Please, there is no need to write the entire name, if you would just make out the cheque to DAB that will be just fine. We always try our best to simplify things.'

They had many accounts in many names, but it gave Belinda a special kick to watch total strangers writing cheques for ten and sometimes even twenty five thousand dollars to Don and Belinda. Sometimes she almost found herself liking them. If the mark proved uncooperative she would shorten the session to twenty minutes, accepting the £50 dollar fee before sending the offenders on their way with a few renewed unpleasant memories they had long since managed to forget. The pain was easing now, thank God, once she had finished with this Mrs Augean Darling she would go straight to the local pharmacy, see if they had something stronger. Then tomorrow she would bite the bullet and see a doctor, get the problem sorted once and for all. Much as she hated the idea of doctors no one could go on like this. Taking a real mirror from the desk drawer she pulled on a black haired wig with a severe bun at the back and changed her lipstick to a dark mauve. Then donning the tinted glasses to give her eyes time to adjust she settled back to wait. Most people assumed the art of disguise required endless pots of powders and greasepaint. Ideal for actors who wanted to draw attention to themselves, but the true art lay in being forgettable or remembered as someone else. And for that a change of hair, clothes, lipstick, glasses or contact lenses were all the props a skilled operator required. Dusk was falling and it was almost time. Belinda closed the curtains and switched on the table lamps, their pools of light gave the room a warm homey appearance while leaving the desk in shadow. The doorbell chimed softly. One last critical sweeping glance then satisfied everything was in place she went to answer it.

'Madam Pandora?' The woman smiled, she had beautiful teeth, but then she was beautiful everywhere, with a presence of the great about her. Like an international film star or model, totally at ease and in command of herself. She was also young which was unusual as most marks tended to be in their fifties and sixties, yet despite her air of maturity this woman seemed in her early twenties. A momentary sense of unease swept through Belinda, then the woman held out hand dripping with diamonds and the feeling evaporated.

'Mrs Darling?' The question was automatic, 'please, do come in.' Belinda led the way to the consulting room, indicating the comfortable armchair across the desk. 'You must have made your appointment through my personal secretary or I would have remembered your name. Who could forget a beautiful name like Augean,' she smiled, 'it's so unusual. Does it have family connections? She cocked her head in pretended interest.

'Not really, though I believe it's been around where I work for a while and originally had something to do with the Boss,' Mrs Darling gave a depreciating smile.

'Really? How interesting,' Belinda smiled back, moving smoothly to the business in hand. 'But the main reason I asked is providing you have no objection, I would prefer to call you Augean throughout the séance. Earthly manners and etiquette have no place in the spirit world where all is love and understanding. So the sooner we dispense with the unnecessary clutter and barriers of our physical world the sooner progress can be made.'

'Fine, sounds reasonable to me,' the woman nodded, 'Augean it is then, I have no objection.'

‘I’m so glad, I had a premonition you would understand,’ Belinda beamed; a good dollop of mumbo jumbo never went amiss. ‘Now Augean, at this moment I always ask communicants to give me some item to hold, something perhaps that was important to a dear one since passed on, or failing that some deeply cherished article of your own. I don’t know whether my secretary explained this procedure to you, but like many other mediums I find what we call psychometry the best conduit to the spirit world. The physical touch of a cherished or mutually admired object often quickens the connection between passed over loved ones and those left behind. Anything will do, providing it is close and important to you and ideally still retains the vibrations of the dear departed one. Not that the last part is essential’ Belinda neatly covered both options holding out her left hand expectantly while secretly activating the ring mouse with the other.

Augean reached behind her neck, undid the clasp of a thin silver chain and placed a small gold cross studded with seed pearls in the waiting hand. ‘I hope this will suffice, it holds rich and poignant memories that fill your requirements.’

Belinda took the necklace; it was pleasantly warm from the mark’s neck and felt strangely soothing. ‘I feel a faint presence beginning to materialise,’ she intoned at once. ‘Yes, yes, he is coming though more clearly now. A young man I think, perhaps even a young boy.’ There were always plenty of both in everyone’s background which made it a dead cert for a starter. She clicked the mouse to open the background heading for more details, but nothing happened, the mirror remained crystal clear. Belinda rapped the ring sharply on the desk, if push came to shove she could always improvise, go back to the old fashioned knock routine, once for yes twice for no, but it didn’t go down too well nowadays. But still nothing happened; the mouse was dead as a dodo. Shit! That was all she needed, first the printer and now the damned computer was on the blink. Bloody typical, it would happen when Don was away. He was the only one who understood what made the cranky thing tick. The hell with it, there was nothing for it, without some sort of backup even knocking was out. She would have to close down and take a couple of days off until he got back. But Belinda was a true professional; almost without thinking she went into the feeling dizzy prior to fainting routine which would bring the session to a close without losing the mark. Usually sympathetic concern brought them back at a later date.

‘Come along, Belinda, pull yourself together and stop all this nonsense! It’s not as though it will make any difference, things are long past that stage.’ Augean voice was kind but firm.

‘Christ, the cops! Alarm bells rang in Belinda’s head. But how? Who had squealed? Her mind changed gear, racing for an explanation. Then the answer blazed through her brain like a comet smacking her in the face like a wet fish. It had to be Don! Why that greedy conniving bastard, he must have planned the whole thing, made the appointment for the cops with plans to scoop the pot and do a runner while she was locked away. There was no other way the cop could know her name, apart from Don no one did. She had always made a point of never ever using it. Just wait till she got her hands round that crummy squealing bastard’s neck, she would teach him how to bloody squeal.’

‘No, dear, don’t blame Don; he had nothing to do with it. Nor did anyone else. Your time that ran out that’s all. Look down there on the floor by your chair if you don’t believe me. Your heart was the problem I’m afraid, dear, not indigestion.’

Taking care to keep one eye on the cop, Belinda shot a quick glance at the floor and her mind reeled with shock. Another one of her was lying there doubled up on the carpet, mouth half open like a stranded fish with an unhealthy bluish tinge to her face.

‘I’m sorry, dear; it’s always apt to come as a bit of a shock when you’re not expecting it.’ Mrs Darling’s voice was filled with sympathy.

‘Are you telling me what I think you’re trying to tell me, or am I having a nightmare?’ Belinda’s voice had a distinct wobble, but deep down she knew.

‘I’m afraid so, dear, you have just joined those departed ones you were so eloquent about a few moments earlier.’ Mrs Darling seemed to be having some difficulty controlling a smile.

Belinda took a deep breath, she had her faults but cowardice wasn’t one of them. ‘OK, I get it. Now what? Do I go straight to Hell, or do I have my day in court first, Mrs Darling?’ She drawled the name out in one last sarcastic show of defiance.

‘Of course you will have your day in court,’ Mrs Darling ignored the sarcasm, her voice filled with compassion. ‘though I fear it won’t be easy. There will be no lawyers, no jury, and you will be the only judge after you witness every detail of your life, the reasons for each action you made, and the effect those actions had on the lives of others. And you will view it all dispassionately, without the protective shield of emotional explanation. Then when you decide the trial is over, it is you alone who will make the judgement.’

‘Well, even if I get to look at things my way I guess I’ll still have to do time. How long do you think I’ll give myself?’ Belinda was a practical girl.

‘Things don’t quite work that way here; everything takes as long as it takes. There are no time restrictions, how long it takes is up to you. But I’ll be here when you get back and if you ever feel the need of a friend in the meantime you only have to call.’ She smiled, ‘I’ll be there in a flash, I promise.’

‘I might just hold you to that,’ Belinda muttered under her breath then aloud added. ‘Before I go would you mind telling me just where you came up with that crazy name? I have a weird feeling it has something to do with all this. Am I right or am I right? Does it have some special significance over here?’

Mrs Darling laughed, ‘well yes, it does stand for something quite significant over here; it’s a job title you might say. I was in a rush when you suddenly decided to join us and needed a name in a hurry, so I made up an anagram of the first thing that came into my head. When you find a free moment you might try solving it, if nothing else it might help you understand things.’

Anagram? Was the women nuts? She would get through her sentence OK without wasting time on solving some dumb anagram. Belinda shook her head, pity Don wasn’t around though; she could have done with some friendly support right now. Still, she had always been a dab hand

at crosswords and anagrams came like second nature. Curiosity won and she quickly ran Augean Darling through her head before turning to Augean in bemused amazement.

‘Guardian Angel for God’s Sake?’ She shook her head in denial. ‘Considering where I’m going it seems to me you could do with a lengthy refresher course, Augean.’ With a bitter smile Belinda turned to the door which had appeared from nowhere beside her. Well it wouldn’t be the first time she had faced the unknown on her own. To hell with it, she’d show them. Taking a deep breath she reached for the handle.

‘Er not that one I’m afraid, dear,’ Mrs Darling called sympathetically, ‘ that is not now, not until you come back. Right now you need the other door...on your left.’

Sunrise Paving

The pavement was hot. I could feel the heat burning through the soles of my sandals making me pick up each foot in turn to cool, like the Sahara ants Mrs Bloomfield had told us about in natural history class. Not that I minded, it was fun being a Sahara ant and helped me forget the awful baseball cap Aunt Delia made me wear to keep the sun off my head. I was so busy being a Sahara ant I forgot to look where I was going until it was too late because I was deep into the colours by then.

‘Watch out there, boy, what the hell do you think you’re doing? Take those clumsy great feet of yours out of my meadow!’

An old man with scraggy long yellow hair, an unlit roll up cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, glared at me with angry eyes.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I looked down, ‘I’m afraid didn’t see it there.’ I was standing in the middle of a bright green field with a herd of white cows grazing on rich grass beneath a clear blue sky.

‘Of course you didn’t see it, boy. You didn’t look! Hasn’t anyone told you to watch where you’re going instead of blundering about the place like a blind elephant? You’ve already walked slap through my Storm at Sea, the Desert Oasis, not to mention A Shropshire Sunset. If you keep on trundling carelessly about like that you’ll smash up the bridge of my QE 2 next. Open your eyes boy, see what’s going on in the world around you instead of playing silly games of hopscotch.’

‘I wasn’t playing silly games of hopscotch,’ I said indignantly, ‘I was being a Saharan ant to protect my feet and forget my baseball cap. Aunt Delia won’t let me out of the house if I don’t promise to keep something on my head. And it’s either this or an awful floppy hat like the one Uncle Ben wears when he goes to the beach. But I am sorry if I’ve spoiled your pictures.’ I held out the pound coin Aunt Delia had given me to buy an ice cream, ‘will this pay for the damage? It’s all I have I’m afraid.’

Piercing grey eyes continued to glare at me with disapproval, then suddenly softened as a hint of a smile began to play around the corners of his mouth. Leaning forward he rummaged amongst the loose coins lying in the upturned hat beside him and came up with a matching pound.

‘That baseball cap of yours doesn’t look so bad you know, and it certainly is a hot one. Dare say even a Saharan ant could do with a cooling vanilla or strawberry ice. I’d go myself but I’m stuck with the shop,’ he waved expansively at the pictures. ‘But if you went for both of us I promise I’ll draw you for posterity when you get back.’ He laughed, ‘mind you, that’s if posterity doesn’t walk over it in the next hour or so. But then as you know my work isn’t exactly permanent. He smiled to take the sting out of the words.

When I got back with the ice creams he was on his knees putting the finishing touches to the repairs of A Shropshire Sunset. Catching sight of me he climbed to his feet, put the brightly coloured crayons carefully in a green felt wrap around holdall, wiped the chalk from his fingers on an old rag, then gestured to the wall behind the drawings. ‘Come and join me on one of these mat things, if you rest your back against the wall you’ll find it comfortable enough.’ I did as I was told and for a while we sat companionably silently enjoying the sun, lost in the pleasures of cold ice cream.

‘Comfy things these cushion,’ he broke the silence, ‘gift from God you might say, well a loan anyway.’ He grinned, nodding across the square towards the Abbey. ‘Has to be at least a thousand or more in there so I don’t suppose He will miss a couple, not for a day at least, and I’ll put them back before I go.’

‘Go, go when?’ I had only arrived a day ago and he was the first friend I had made.

Tomorrow I think. I’ve been working my way down to the coast for the past six weeks, and though I’m glad to say business has been pretty good on the whole,’ he jerked a thumb at the hat, ‘with September looming it’s time for me to head south. Doesn’t do to be caught in the cold in my line of work. Liable to wind up in hospital and once there you’ll get sick for sure.

‘But you can’t go any further south than this!’ My geography marks were not the greatest, but even I knew when you reached the South Coast that was it, and the sea was only a few hundred yards away.

‘Well, yes, in a way you are right, boy. But even the South Coast can turn a bitter cold come November, and sometimes it stays that way right through to May if you’re unlucky. So I always make a point of heading a long way further south than here. Work my way down through France to the Mediterranean, cross the Pyrenees into Spain, then try to make it down to Andalusia by autumn. That’s about the southernmost tip of Spain. You can’t go further south than that. Mind you, even Andalusia can get more than nippy at times in winter, but if it gets really cold I take a job for a while, live indoors. Nowhere else to go, unless Africa takes your fancy.’

‘Africa! Have you really been to Africa?’ I had seen some programmes and pictures on the news but never actually met anyone who had been there. ‘What’s it like in a war zone?’ There was always a war or something exciting going on in Africa, at least on the news there was.’

‘Yes, I’ve been there. Not that any war was going on, at least not where I was, but then I only stuck my toe in so to speak. Took the ferry across from Algeciras to Tangiers and came back again the next day. Twenty-four hours in a place like that was more than enough for me, and I’ve never been back. Didn’t take to the place you see, that and the way people kept spitting on my

pictures.' For a moment he looked quite fierce again, then crunched the last of his ice cream cone before grinning like a friend again.

'Nasty habits they have over there, boy, dead nasty. But what about you, staying at your aunt's for the holidays are you, with your Mum and Dad?'

'No, only me. I usually come here for the second half of the summer holidays.'

'Well, there's nothing like a bit of independence I always say, makes a man of you. Where did you spend the first half?'

'Nowhere really, I stay on at school as a rule,' I tried not to sound defiant for I really hated this bit, but people always asked you to explain. 'It's not too bad and not at all like term time. You can even go into town in the afternoon, if you ask first.'

'Your dad in the army or something then, always on the move?'

'Not exactly, but my parents are always on the move, going off somewhere or other, which is why they don't have time to come back for the holidays. But wherever they are I always fly out to join them for Christmas, Dad said Mum insists on that.' I stared hard at a shop across the street, bracing myself for the questions that always followed. But he just nodded and lit his cigarette.

'Know what you mean, spent more time than I care to think in school myself, though being a little older than you I was teaching. Least ways that's what I thought I was doing, at one of those fancy Art Colleges. Not quite the kind of school you go to I know but once you take away the flowery bits they all boil down to the same thing, and the terms still seem to go on for ever.'

'Is that why you left? Because of the terms I mean. God, I wish I could!' I didn't usually bring God into things but it was the first time I had had a real conversation with a grown up and it seemed an adult sort thing to say.

'That was part of it,' he blew a cloud of evil smelling smoke into the still air with evident pleasure. 'But mainly because I found out I was a fraud, well admitted it anyway, I must have known for years of course. But then we all tend to avoid the obvious.... if it's disagreeable.'

'I'm not sure I understand...'

'Of course you don't, boy,' he interrupted, 'and why should you. Pay no attention to me, I was just rambling. Comes from spending too much time on my own, makes you start talking to yourself. Anyway, you have your own problems to face, like those endless school terms stretching out like a life sentence before you, wondering how on earth you're ever going to get through them all. But look at those people,' he waved an arm, embracing the street, 'most of them went through school as well, and I bet a lot of them hated every damned minute. But they survived the experience and I don't suppose many of them give their school days a second thought now. Not that it helps much when you're still going through it.' He smiled as an idea occurred to him. 'Tell you what, before I go I'll let you in on a little secret of mine. Doesn't work for everybody but if you're prepared to practice a little you might find it helps with your school problems and a few more you haven't encountered yet.'

A couple of pretty girls with long tanned legs who had been admiring the pictures bent down to put some coins in the hat. 'Thank you ladies,' he gave them a beaming smile. The ice cream must have gone down a treat, for he had ignored most other people who had added coins to his hat. As if knowing what I was thinking and was somehow embarrassed about it, he rummaged in the hat and came up with a handful of coins.

'Here, boy, take these and get us another round, same as before for me, and don't pocket the change mind!' He winked to show he was joking.

The morning was wearing on and there was quite a queue at the ice cream van, so it was a while before I got back. He was kneeling over a paving stone working busily with his chinks and for a moment or so ignored me, though I sensed he knew I was there. Then he leapt to his feet, flung his arms wide and cried. 'Behold Posterity, de da!'

It was a perfect portrait of me in vibrant living colours and the best present I had ever had. He had even drawn an oval frame to make the setting more real. No one had ever done anything like that for me before. I wanted so much to thank him but suddenly my throat ached and I couldn't speak. So I hugged him fiercely instead. It was the only way I could express the way I felt.

'Hey there,' he disentangled himself gently, 'it's only a picture you know, and I doubt it will last the day. Come on now,' he smiled, 'let's have our ice cream; see what goes into the hat, and whatever it is we'll split. How does that grab you?'

I shook my head. 'Thanks, it's a great idea, but I can't stay. As it is I'm going to be late for lunch even if I run the whole way and Aunt Delia does her top if anyone's late for lunch, even including Uncle Ben. But would you mind telling me your name before I go?' I asked shyly, 'I would like to know, even if we never meet again, because of the picture and that.'

'Why bless you, boy,' he turned a little pink, 'what a nice thought, there's not many who bother to ask. But since you have most call me the Painter Man, and I would be right pleased for you to do the same.'

'Painter Man,' I rolled the name round my tongue. 'I like that, it suits you somehow.'

'Descriptive anyway,' he grinned. 'And if you have to go I had better tell you about that other matter before I forget. Mind you, as I said before you have to put your whole heart in it and even then it's not for everyone.' He paused; rolling another evil smelling cigarette, then changing his mind stuck the scraggy tube behind his ear.

'Everyone needs a secret place to escape to when the going gets tough, somewhere really wonderful and beautiful, specially for you.' Painter Man leaned forward and tapped me gently on the chest with his finger to emphasise the point.

I wasn't sure if he expected a reply but I couldn't think of anything to say so I kept quiet and waited. It was the right move for a moment later he continued.

'But we have to create that place, boy, paint a picture of in our minds. Brush the canvass with bold sweeping strokes of imagination showing where it is you would like to be. The fine detail and artwork of things that mean the most to you. Memories, feelings and such can always be added later as you go along. Though you have to forget the bad ones, because they don't belong

there. This is your own private place, where everything is happy and free. As life moves on new features and new experiences will be added to the treasure without losing any of your familiar favourites. And the picture will remain with you always, a living haven of peace and happiness waiting to welcome you whenever you have need of it.'

'I'm afraid I couldn't do that Painter Man. I don't have much imagination; in fact Aunt Delia says I haven't any at all. So I wouldn't know where to begin.'

'Rubbish boy, doubtless your aunt has many aptitudes but character assessment is obviously not one of them.' He was looking fierce again, though whether at Aunt Delia or me I wasn't sure. 'Of course you have imagination, boy, everyone has. Just picture a scene where you felt really happy. It can be anywhere, a landscape, a garden, an orchard, a house, or even a particular room. Just close your eyes and let it come to you.'

I tried, I truly did. I would have done anything to please the Painter Man but I couldn't come up with a single idea. In the end I just opened them again and stared at him in dumb apology.

'You can't recall being happy anywhere?' He shook his head slowly, some dust or a fly must have flown into his eyes for he blinked rapidly and rubbed them with the heel of his hand.

'Well now, let's see,' he blew his nose loudly on the bit of rag. 'Is there any place you've enjoyed looking at, perhaps at a certain time of day maybe?' He paused, head cocked on one side like a suspicious chicken.

I thought for a moment then smiled happily, at least I could answer him with something. 'I can see the sea from my bedroom window, and if I'm awake in time I love to watch the sun come up from the horizon first thing in the morning.'

His face broke a broad smile and he danced a little jig right there in front of me. 'You see boy, you see, I knew we would find it if we tried hard enough, just knew it.' He grabbed my hand and we jigged wildly together for a moment, uncaring of the curious crowd. Then holding me at arm's length he looked deep in my eyes. 'Now boy, you had better be off or your aunt will kipper you for sure. We probably won't meet again, you and me as my ferry sails soon after five-tomorrow morning. But I want you to promise me you will come back here by seven, no matter how difficult it might be. I can see you're a determined boy, so I want your promise you'll be here no later than seven. Will you give me your word on it?'

I nodded dumbly, not trusting myself to speak. Yet I had to know one last thing about him before he went. Taking a deep breath to steady myself I said. 'Before you go Painter Man will you tell me why you were unhappy at that school?'

'Why bless you boy, of course I will.' He smiled to show he understood how important the matter was to me. 'I had been teaching art to students for more years than I care to remember, until one day I finally had to admit to myself I couldn't paint. No matter how hard I tried I was a fraud you see; a teacher who had pressed his counterfeit knowledge on countless talented students, while my own was restricted to drawing picture post cards,' he pointed at the paving stones. It hurt like hell at the time but then moments of truth often do. But I got over it, and over that bloody school as well, not that it was the schools fault. But instead of being the end of

everything, it turned out to be the beginning. I won't say there haven't been ups and downs; of course there have and the world would be a dull place without them. But it was my admission that day that gave me my freedom. The chance to do what I do well, and to do it when I like and anywhere I please. And mark my words, boy; such freedom represents riches most people can only dream about. So always remember, whatever you think you want may turn out to be not what you need or want at all.' He winked and smiled at me head askew to satisfy himself I would remember what he had said, then satisfied dropped to his knees and began work on a new picture.

I never saw Picture Man again, though I kept my promise, climbing out of the kitchen window in time to get to his pitch by seven the following morning. Fifteen minutes before the street cleaning truck came by to wash the pavements, but just in time to commit my secret place to memory before it was brushed from human eyes forever.

All the pictures had been scuffed beyond recognition by passing pedestrians overnight. All that is bar one, which he must have drawn in the first light of day, long after the last reveller had retired to bed. It was a magic scene looking out from the dunes. The tide was out and beyond the sweep of clean wet sand a gleaming silver sea stretched out to meet the breaking dawn. Bright shafts of sunbeams reached up like searchlights to bathe the morning clouds in gentle hues of pink and gold against a background of growing azure blue. Standing on a sand dune in one corner of the picture, a young boy stood, gazing with hope at the magnificent panorama unfolding before him. A baseball cap on his head and an ice cream cornet in one hand.

Over the years the composition has changed in harmony with events just as he said it would but the basic picture remains the same. I couldn't count the number of times I have visited that beach in times of stress or trouble and watched the breaking dawn from my favourite sand dune. And thanks to Painter Man, I still do.

A Medical Matter

Thanks to graphic directions of the receptionist I found the doctor's surgery without difficulty for as she had said the entire area resembled a motorway building site. The house was set well back from the road, isolated from its neighbours by a deep trench scooped from the soil and rubble like a medieval moat in preparation for battle. The only way to reach the door was by traversing an extremely temporary eighty foot bridge casually constructed from odd sheets of plywood nailed into an unsteady whole. With every step the contraption vibrated and bounced in an alarming manner, like those disagreeable single file suspension bridges built to terrify fishermen when crossing remote rivers in the Scottish Highlands.

One last wobbly bound and I was catapulted into a gloomy hallway which appeared to be doubling as a waiting room. Shadowy figures, presumably patients, huddled in a group corralled by packing cases, buckets, and a large step ladder. A dim light beckoned from afar and like a moth to candle I picked my way through assorted debris towards the distant silhouette of a lady who proved to be the receptionist.

‘Come to see, Doctor, have you?’ Her motherly smile was matched by a matronly figure. ‘Name please, dear.’

I started to comply, irritated by a voice unnaturally high. Perhaps the bouncing bridge had proved more traumatic than I realised.

‘Well, you’re not on the list, dear.’ She interrupted in mild rebuke. ‘What time did you call?’

‘About ten minutes ago. I rang to ask how to find you and you told me to look for the first building site.’

‘Oh yes, of course, dear, I remember now.’ Her eyes smiled kindly at me over the top of her glasses. ‘That means you're new!’ She rummaged through a heap of papers strewn all over the desk before triumphantly extracting a crumpled form.

‘You'll have to fill this in first I'm afraid, to join up so to speak. And I have to warn you we're not one of those smart newfangled group practices either. There's only one doctor here, Dr. Smith. That is there's only Dr Smith when he's here, which he isn't at the moment. Took off on holiday he did while we're being done.’

She gestured vaguely at the general mess. ‘Oh, and fill this for me if you can, will you, dear? We always ask each new patient for a specimen. Doctor says it saves time in the long run.’ She

smiled again this time encouragingly and handed me a small plastic screw top bottle. 'If you look hard enough you'll find the little room at the end of the passage. Please try your very best to leave us a little something before you go, dear. In the meanwhile I'll call you as soon as doctor's ready.'

By now my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom and I was able to make my way back to the waiting area with more confidence. I found a chair as near to the door as possible and opened my newspaper. But it was too dark to read or crossword, so adopting the same bovine stare of my fellow patients, I settled down to wait. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed an old lady begin the traverse across the moat and was mildly irritated to see she was making a much better job of it than I had. With one hand clamped fast to the railing and waving an umbrella like a giant insect's antennae in the other, she shuffled over the great divide with surprising ease –until she reached the door.

'Dear me, it's so dark in here, I can't see a thing! Can anyone tell me if I'm heading in the right direction?' The confidence ebbed from her voice while the other patients looked on with dull hypnotic disinterest as she crashed into the step ladder.

'You've missed the chairs, dear.' Another elderly lady called out helpfully at last. 'I say, I said you missed the chairs, dear. You've left all the chairs behind you. You'll have to turn round now and start walking the other way. That's right, that's the idea. Just keep going like that' She added encouragingly, as the old lady tripped over the first chair to land in a heap on the next. 'There, there you are you then, that's better.' She concluded triumphantly. 'That's you settled.'

I suppose I should have felt some sense of shame, just sitting there passively, making no effort to help while the poor old thing fell about like a clown in the circus. But the atmosphere of the place had affected me somehow, producing an impression that like some alien being I was no longer a part of things, but merely observing the proceedings passionless from above. I pulled myself together and was about to inquire whether the old lady was hurt in any way, when alerted by the crash to a fresh customer the receptionist appeared, delicately picking her way round a pool of wet cement.

'Come to see Doctor have you, dear?' She enquired kindly from her position athwart a bucket of paint brushes.

'Yes, that's right.' The old lady blinked myopically in the direction of her voice. 'I've come to see Dr Smith.'

'Do you have your health number with you, dear?'

'No, I didn't bring it. When I gave it to you last time you said you would write it down so I wouldn't have to bother.'

'I see, and how long ago was that then, dear?'

'Oh I couldn't be sure exactly, but it must have been sometime last year. Yes, now I come to think of it, it must have been about the same time last year, because I seem to remember it was a very bright day too.'

The receptionist clucked her tongue disapprovingly. 'Well, I'm afraid there's no way I'm ever going to find your number if it was that long ago, dear. What with the builders and everything, I'm lucky if I can put my hands on anything that goes back much more than a week. And it's not as though I can ask Dr Smith either, he might have known where to look for your number. He always keeps his own set of records somewhere for some reason. But then he's off on holiday.'

'What a funny man.' The old lady shook her head. 'He wasn't here the last time I came either.'

'Well, if you came the same time last year I can't say I'm surprised, dear. I expect Doctor was on holiday again. Poor man, he works very hard in between you know. He's entitled to one holiday a year, we all are. You had better try to pick another month if you want to see him when you come next time. Providing it's convenient that is.'

A hidden voice loudly calling my name from around the corner interrupted this eavesdropping. I got up and headed for the door marked surgery.

'Come in, come in.' A small spare man in his mid-forties grabbed me firmly and closed the door. 'I'm afraid I'm not Dr Smith you know, he's away on holiday. I'm just standing in for him, temporally so to speak. I come from the services, that is the Air Force to be exact.' He added with strange defiance, presumably in case his services were mistaken for those of the council.

'I see you've put N/A here.' He glared with disapproval at my crumpled form.

'Yes, it was so long ago I couldn't remember. But the reason I came to see you is this pain I've been having in my ear doctor.' I began.

'Yes, yes. All in good time, we'll come to that later. But first we had better get this form filled in correctly.' He looked up accusingly. 'Why did you put not applicable in the section requiring name of your last doctor?'

'I'm sorry?' I said vaguely, the armoured centipede that kept wriggling about inside my ear was making it hard to follow his reasoning.

'I asked why you neglected to fill in the name of your previous doctor in the space provided.'

'Oh, well, I've been abroad for the past ten years, and I can't for the life of me remember who my doctor was back then.'

'But surely you must remember the address of his practice?' His pale blue eyes regarded me in disbelief. 'The street or town at least?'

Having spent a short time in the Army, I know that some military minds are literally unable to function unless they follow a required procedure and this was obviously one of them. If I was to get a prescription and relieve the pain, the sooner I told the man what he wanted to hear the better. Looking back over the years a wine shop I used to frequent floated across my mind.

'Amazing!' I looked suitably impressed. 'You're quite right you know. when you think hard enough it does seem to come back. I remember now, Thresher was the name, and I'm almost certain his practice was in Eccleston Street, number thirty-seven I think.'

'You see!' The eyes blazed with a proud triumph.' Knew it would come, never fails once you put your mind to it, and the post code?'

'SW7,' I lied without hesitation.

‘And your own address?’ He scribbled busily.

‘31 Tight Street.’ It had been a restaurant I knew, but I was enjoying the game now and threw in another non-existent post code to check his reaction. But the good doctor's knowledge of London proved limited and accepting the discrepancy without comment he filled in the necessary squares before screwing the top on his pen and replacing it methodically on the desk. With a sigh of relief I lent forward, tilting my head on one side like a barnyard hen in search of corn to aid the diagnosis.

Ignoring this invitation he rose to his feet. ‘Fine, now if you would just come over here and stand on the scales.’

With a shrug of resignation I did as I was told. This was a man who would never deviate from the path of procedure by so much as a comma. Blind obedience was the path to my prescription; I just hoped gonorrhoea and piles weren't on the official check list.

‘Humph. A bit of ballast thrown overboard here wouldn't go amiss.’ I allowed myself to be manoeuvred to a portable ruler set against the wall. ‘Five eight, your ideal weight is 11 and a half stone. It is my duty to warn you 16 is scarcely prudent.’ Frowning with disapproval he motioned me back to my chair.

‘Yes yes, you're right of course. As it happens I'm dieting this very moment. Lost a stone already and working hard on the second.’ I smiled fawningly. ‘Er now, about this ear, I had some trouble with it a year ago and...’

‘Roll up your sleeve please’ He wrapped a rubber strip roughly round my arm and pumped for blood pressure. I'm a patient man but I could feel my temper grow with each pulsating beat. ‘Do you drink a lot?’ His lips pursed in expectant censure.

‘Frequently, habitually and excessively.’ I glared fiercely at the thin critical face until his eyes dropped.

Unused to a display of such naked insubordination and powerless to correct it, I could almost feel the wretched man's anguish and frustration as he forced himself to abandon laid down procedure and bring this unsatisfactory examination to a close.

‘Well then, we might as well take a peek at those troublesome ears of yours while we're here, eh?’ He made a croaking attempt at civilian joviality and finally bent to his task.

‘But they're severely inflamed!’ His voice rang with accusations of carelessness, and I wondered what threat of extra duties was coming my way. But my previous rebellion must have unnerved him for with a sigh of martyrdom, he finally sat down and scribbled my prescription.

‘I've put you on antibiotics, so make sure you finish the proscribed course.’ He admonished. ‘If you experience any further problems, come back again next week. I won't be here, but I dare say your usual doctor should be able to take care of things.’ The voice sounded pessimistic. Not that I cared, with a lilt in my step and clutching the wretched scrap of paper triumphantly, I hurried happily through the darkness towards the light, the bouncing bridge, the pharmacy, and the blessed relief that lay beyond.

The Big Fella

Edward Cubbington parked the range rover off the road by the old bridge and walked over to peer down at the river below. The heavy rains that had fallen a fortnight before, raising the level and muddying the waters with silt were history and now the river was reborn, running gin clear beneath him. Returning to the car he opened the back door and pulled out the previously made up trout rod, carefully navigating the tip through the open back window, then propping the rod against the bonnet he pulled on his waders, slung the game bag with its fly boxes, spare casts and lunch sandwiches over his shoulder, locked the car and took the small footpath picking his way carefully down to the river bank.

There had been a time when he would take the path at a run on his way home, sprinting up the incline with three or four good sized fish in the folded landing net in his hurry to get back to Lucy and show off the afternoons catch for supper. But those days were long gone, he was in his seventy-sixth year now and Lucy had died four years earlier. He had never got used to life without her, even calling out 'darling, I'm home' to an empty house months after her death and still thought how she would have gone about solving some troublesome problem before taking any action. They had met at a dance shortly after he finished his National Service and was celebrating his new found freedom. He had never taken to the Army and bitterly resented the two years taken from his life, an attitude his commanders found both irritating and unpatriotic. But then they were career soldiers who had volunteered to serve from choice while he had been press-ganged into service and with the honesty of youth he had made the mistake of telling them so. It hadn't gone down well and proved the beginning of a distinctly frosty relationship with his seniors which lasted until Edward's time was up and he left the army to mutual sighs of relief.

He had decided to fish the blind pool mainly because it was the nearest deep pool to the bridge and he needed what small residue of energy he still possessed for fishing rather than walking, and secondly because local lore had it the pool was the main lair of The Big Fella. Edward only half believed the many tales of The Big Fella but like all fisherman the chance, no matter how remote, of catching a brown trout whose size allegedly ranged from eight to twelve pounds depending on the story teller could not be totally ignored. Reaching the pool he lowered himself gratefully onto the bank to catch his breath, resting his feet on a convenient cushion of grassy-topped earth sucked from the edge by the recent high water. One of the few joys of age was the

lack of need to hurry he reflected; there was always plenty of time, though it had taken him a lifetime to find that out, which in turn was ironic considering the small amount of time he had left. Edward sat quietly drinking in the river scene, the sun was fighting a losing battle with the September clouds but occasionally it broke through bringing a burst of warmth and colour to the surrounding countryside, reflecting the flash of cobalt blue as a kingfisher sped to a favoured perch.

Edward slipped off the bank onto the shingle beach caused by the river bend that had formed a flattened U of around twenty feet between the bank and the fast running water. Standing knee deep in the shallows he made his first cast, expertly dropping the fly in the start of the deep water run close to the opposite bank, letting it swim downstream until it ran out of line before casting again. Every three or four casts he moved on a couple of paces downstream to ensure he covered as close to every foot of the deep water he could. Being an old hand at the game his movements quickly became automatic and he let his mind roam free.

They had been married for three years and beginning to despair of having children when Lucy became pregnant. Both were almost delirious with joy with Edward thinking he had reached the highlight of his emotions until Amabel was born. Then when he first held her in his arms he experienced a love that was close to adoration mingled with a sense of such fierce protection it almost scared him. Jonathan arrived two years later and he loved him deeply too but Amabel had captured a special part of his heart where no other child could follow. Thanks to Lucy they had been the happiest of families and though there were the inevitable off days, everyone did their best to bring life back to normal because everyone wanted to. After their tenth birthday Lucy, though not forgetting the children were still children, took to reasoned argument rather than demands to put her wishes across. A process that produced surprisingly adult teenagers, more at ease with themselves than most of their contemporaries and by the time they were grown up they not only loved their parents but considered them best friends as well.

Though far short of being a billionaire Edward admitted to being financially comfortable which was his way of saying he didn't need to work. Lucy's family had considerable estates, which included substantial parts of three quite large country towns so money presented no problems for either of them. But like many men born to wealth Edward nursed a secret guilt which expressed itself in the need to help others, or to put something back as he preferred to say. He took an unpaid job in a large international charity where he worked much harder than his less fortunate contemporaries in the City, but had the satisfaction of knowing he was doing something more worthwhile. When he was promoted to a more senior position in Geneva his lifestyle scarcely changed. He rented a very pleasant villa with gardens running down to the shores of Lac Lamon at a cost considerably in excess of his contemporaries salaries while keeping their comfortable apartment in London. With several daily flights between the two cities both of them were able to continue their social life almost without interruption. Jonathan was at Boarding School so remained largely unaffected by the move while Amabel was already at a finishing school in Vevey which was just down the road from Geneva. In the winter holidays they all went

skiing a sport they all enjoyed, but in summer the family divided. Lucy and Amabel usually headed for the South of France, while unless something more exciting was on offer, Jonathan joined his father at their country house for some serious trout fishing.

Amabel had taken to skiing as naturally as a fledgling bird to flight and excelled at the sport. Once her finishing school days were over she explored beyond the local resorts of Grindelwald, Zermatt and Engleberg to test her skill on the numerous runs America and Canada had to offer. Edward was delighted at his daughter's success until the day with her face flushed with excitement she came home to tell them she had been selected for the British team. He hugged her close and made a great show of opening a bottle of celebratory champagne, but inside a cold hand of premonition closed round his heart. Dismissing his fears as irrational he made a superhuman attempt to put on a cheerful face as he took the family out dinner. As it turned out his fears were misplaced as Amabel won second place in the Giant Slalom that year with no hint of injury.

Edward's reminiscences were brought to an abrupt end by a sharp tug on the line and knew he was into a fish. The fish made a fast run upstream and Edward let it go, keeping the line taut to ensure the hook stayed in place while at the same time tiring the fish with the added strain as it fought both current and the weight of the line. It was an unequal contest and he netted the fish in under five minutes, a good sized one and a quarter pound brown trout, the sheen of its multi-coloured markings shining beautifully in the sunlight. For a moment he toyed with returning it to the river, but only for a moment, the thought of freshly grilled trout for breakfast quickly overcame such altruism and he knocked it sharply on the head before putting it in the keep net. On a normal day he would have gone home content with his catch, for Edward strongly disapproved of killing anything for fun, and though he enjoyed the sport of fishing his catch was always dependent on the number of mouths to feed. If the whole family was at home and the fishing good he would add more fish for the deep freeze but those days were past and now one good fish was all he needed to satisfy him. But something made him stay, perhaps it was the hope of nailing The Big Fella, he wasn't sure but as he waded thigh deep into the deeper waters at the end of the pool he could feel a sense of growing excitement he hadn't felt for years beginning to run through him.

The Geneva job had become pretty much routine, arriving at the office around nine, taking care of emails and correspondence followed by meetings to review operations taking place in different parts of the world. Edward was continually surprised by the organisational problems such operations required and welcomed the occasions when they were teamed with other charities like Medicin Sans Frontiers or Oxfam to share the load. Then it was lunch with a contemporary or visiting member of the active teams. In summer at one of the excellent lakeside bistros famed for their fillets de perches or in winter at one of the restaurants in town renowned for their steaks and game. So when he learned he had been promoted to take charge of operations in one of the small central African republics the news came as an unwelcome surprise, but hardly prepared him for the horrific shock he received on arrival.

The Republic of Mobambo was about the size of Ireland, set at the tail end of the Congo but there all similarity ended. A line of semi dormant volcanoes provided the spine of the country with a large crocodile infested river at their feet, the remaining eighty per cent of space was filled with thick impenetrable jungle, alive with every biting insect and snake known to man and many more yet to be discovered. In comparison to its giant neighbour the finding of Bauxite came late to Mobambo. But once established, and with the help of the Chinese, it had provided a source of great wealth to the country which in turn had created a lethal rivalry between competing tribes for the country's presidency. For as in most emerging African republics all the wealth of the nation together with the added bonus of any outside aid passed directly through the hands of the usually acquisitive incumbent president and his staff.

Edward knew his association with Mobambo was going to be short the moment he stepped from the comparative comfort of the air-conditioned plane into the hot damp fetid atmosphere that was the country's climate. By the time he reached the terminal building he was soaked with sweat, his new tailored tropical suit hanging from his shoulders like so many wet rags, Edward knew he hated Mobambo. He had arrived in the middle of another civil war; the vicious cruelty of both sides displayed by the endless lines of starving people, many of them amputees, heading towards the Capital in hopes of food and treatment. Of course he had seen it all before on film and television but film and television though providing a record of events lacked atmosphere, that vital ingredient of sound, scents and smells that brought the shocking pictures to life. As the days progressed and he saw more and more of these sad people he looked for signs of anger or revenge against their fellow countrymen who had done such terrible things to them. But there were none, only a dull acceptance of their lot reflected in their eyes mixed with the endless patience of Africa. Nor could he get used to the flies that seemed to form a part of everyone's life. Flies crawling into mouths, noses and ears, flies grouped round eyes like cattle drinking at a trough, and couldn't understand why people made no effort to brush them aside until one of the residents explained they were too busy dying, and lacked the time and energy to be bothered by such trifles. But in the end it was the stink that got to him, the stench of gangrene, of dysentery and the endless reek of overflowing latrines. Always a fastidious man Edward realised that front line work just wasn't for him. Perhaps his entire time working in charity had been a fraud, he didn't know. But he did know he had to leave this hellish country and go back to civilisation, to friends and conversation, to baths and comfortable beds, to fine dining and fine wines, to a civilisation where the mere sight of a fly was reason enough to reach for the aerosol. He concocted a ridiculous need for a vital fictitious report to be delivered in person to Head Office and left the next day.

To his surprise no one at Head Office treated his desertion from post as unusual. Curious, he did a quick check on the board and senior executive staff to find that none had ever spent time amongst the nations they provided with help, at best the record showed a few had done flying inspections but the majority had never left the comfort of their homes and offices. Though the

news should have comforted Edward strangely it only increased his shame, causing him to resign and quit the charity world for good.

Lucy was delighted he had retired from business as she called it. Though she had put up with the Geneva house and enjoyed the nearby skiing, in truth she much preferred to be close to Edward in their familiar haunts of London and the country. Not that she had anything against travel; now that the children were grown she planned to see the world with Edward and in considerable style. Amabel was now living with some ski instructor in Aspen, Colorado. Lucy wasn't sure she approved but being a practical woman realised there was nothing she could do about it so had invited both of them for Christmas at the house that year together with Jonathan and current girlfriend, they changed so often she had given up on the effort required to learn their names. Jonathan was now a successful cartoonist for a leading national paper, proving Lucy right when she had defended his doodling in exercise books at school to the despair of teachers, saying in his defence it displayed an imagination which could well prove useful in later life. Edward was content to let such minor problems pass him by, happy to be free at last from the office, the boring detail and people that went with it. Despite adopting the grave demeanour required of a senior dedicated charity executive, secretly he had always resented the loss of time and freedom these self-imposed duties had caused and was delighted to be free once more to utilize his financial strength to follow whatever path he chose, until that day when everything changed.

Edward remembered that day as clearly as yesterday, even now he moaned softly without realising it. It had been a Friday evening, he and Lucy had just returned from a week in London spent going to a couple of first nights, a guild dinner at the Mansion House and catching up with friends. It had been fun but both were pleased to be home for a relaxing country weekend on their own. There was a decided chill in the November air and he was pleased the housekeeper had the foresight to light a roaring fire in the drawing room, central heating may be practical and efficient but to experience the true sensation of homely warmth there was nothing like a blazing log fire. He had poured himself a drink from the sideboard, picked up the local paper and sank into one of the deep armchairs by the fire with a sigh of total contentment when the phone rang. Edward dismissed his rising irritation determined not to spoil the mood. It was Jonathan, his voice masked by tears, saying Amabel had had a fatal accident while practising for the downhill trials. She had suffered a broken her neck and though rushed to hospital she had been pronounced dead on arrival.

The world became surreal to Edward, as in a dream he heard himself soothing and calming Jonathan, saying they would talk again in the morning. Then breaking the news to Lucy, holding her in his arms as she shook with grief, giving her a strong sedative before putting her to bed. Then he went back downstairs and sat calmly in his armchair with the local paper in his lap listening to the rain; until he realised it wasn't rain at all but the sound of his tears hitting the paper. Amabel's death left a deep void in Edward, to the casual acquaintance he seemed normal enough, in conversation he chatted smiled and even laughed if the occasion called for it. But inside he had withdrawn into a shell, watching his own robotic actions with a dangerous

disinterest. The three of them had flown to Aspen for Amabel's funeral, all of them in agreement that she should be buried there rather than be shipped home along with all the other baggage. After it was over Lucy said they may as well start their world trip from Aspen rather than returning to London first, so having said goodbye to Jonathan they flew to San Francisco and boarded a small cargo ship that serviced the larger islands of the south pacific.

It was over two years before they returned to the house. Time as always had proved a great healer, the pain of Amabel's death no longer a constant ache and though a word or situation could bring her back in an instant, the instants grew further and further apart as the years went by. Edward had faced his demons, walking alone on deck at night, looking down as the tempting pacific ocean hissing passed the ship's side calling him to join his beloved Amabel. But the thought of Lucy always stopped him, then suddenly he was past such foolishness and life began once more.

Edward was nearing the end of the pool now, but to place his fly over the fast water by the far bank he needed to go a little deeper. After a couple of paces he could feel the strength of the current pushing angrily against his left side and moved his right foot onto what seemed like a convenient boulder to counteract it.

After Amabel's death the years seem to kaleidoscope. Jonathan married then later took his family off to the States where he had been offered a job on The Chicago Tribune. Suddenly the house once filled young and laughing faces seemed empty and too big for just the two of them. One evening after dinner they had a long discussion on the subject and decided to sell, but that was as far as it ever got for they both knew the house was a part of them and the children. To sell would be a denial of all the happiness and love that had happened there and would always be a part of it. Instead they immersed themselves in local projects, hosting village fêtes in the field at the bottom of the garden, opening the gardens two days a week in summer, paying for the upkeep of the cricket ground and other small public services. They also built a new village hall, subsidised the local cottage hospital and paid for the pensioners annual holiday but these and more were considered private actions and were fronted by their solicitors. Lucy was particularly proud of her herbaceous border that ran the complete length of the south lawn. In fact Edward was idly watching her weeding from the terrace, garden basket beside her as usual, when suddenly she seemed to lean forward at an unnatural angle then freeze. Calling for help Edward ran the hundred odd yards at the closest thing to a sprint he could manage but he was too late. As the doctor later explained there was nothing he could have done, Lucy had suffered an aortic aneurysm and would have died in a matter of seconds. Whether it was shock or the hundred yards sprint no one could be sure but Edward suffered a massive heart attack the same evening and had been plagued with angina ever since.

Edward smiled to himself. The doctors would have a fit if they could see him now, up to his waste in swirling river water casting again and again with a rod that seemed increasingly heavy. Perhaps he should call it a day, they had all warned him about over exertion and his back was aching like hell and he could hardly feel the hand holding the rod. One more cast then home.

Hauling in the line he whipped the rod back, held it steady for a moment then flicked it forward releasing the line at the same time. Fly, cast and line flew out to hover for half a second over the water before dropping gently on the surface without a ripple. It was a perfect cast and Edward could feel himself beaming with pleasure. Then the rod bent double as the line screamed out from the reel and he knew he was into a big fish. Back ache, frozen hands and over exertion warning were forgotten in an instant as the adrenaline pumped through his body. The fish reversed direction zooming directly towards him. Edward pulled in line reeling frantically as he did so for whatever happened the line between fish and rod had to remain firm or risk losing the prize. As the fish passed him running up stream no more than a rods length away for a fleeting moment its huge dorsal fin broke the surface and Edward knew he was into The Big Fella. The fish turned and made another run downstream tearing line from the reel with a high pitched screech before going deep to swim amongst the bottom boulders in an attempt to break the line. The rod bent double with the strain as he used all his strength to lift the fish from the bottom at the same time taking a floundering step back towards the shore, for he knew he could never land a fish this big mid channel, the landing net was too small.

If he was to win this contest of wills he would have to beach the Big Fella on the shingle shore. Waiting for a moment when the fish was inactive Edward took another faltering step backwards, but his right foot slipped on a weed covered rock and losing his balance he fell backwards into the river. As the water closed over his head and his feet scrabbled to find a purchase on the bottom he was conscious of holding on to the rod with a grip of iron in his determination to keep a taught line on the Big Fella. Somehow he found his feet and with waders filled with water staggered to the shore, rod over his shoulder with the line still taught. Once safe in the shallows he turned to face the river again and found that during his fall the line had become a bird's nest of tangled knots and loops that would take a good hour to unravel. His only way of beaching the fish was to haul it in by hand. Ignoring the pain of the line as it cut into his hands he pulled the fish steadily towards him. Then suddenly the Big Fella was there in the shallows, black with age and far bigger than the most fanciful stories he had heard Edward regarded the great fish in awe, then as he bent to haul it in the last few yards he was hit by an agonising pain in his chest. Though his hands involuntarily let loose the line his eyes remained locked on the fish, watching as with pressure gone it gave a shake of its head releasing the hook then with a swirling beat of its great tail turned back to the safety of the river depths.

Edward had never experienced such pain; it came in waves each one greater than the last until it felt as though his entire chest had been brutally ripped open. Then the pain was gone as unknowingly he pitched forward into the river. The water seemed agreeably warm and to his surprise he found no difficulty in breathing. It felt wonderful lying there drifting slowly downstream in the current. He was pleasantly surprised to see the Big Fella swimming companionably beside him and though Edward knew it was impossible it seemed to him big fish was smiling, but then the light was fading fast so he couldn't be sure.