

# Beasts Within

A collection of short stories by Clive Gilson

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Published by Dancing Pig Media

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## The Beast Within

Throughout the dark days of illness when he watched her life being sliced away in thin, almost transparent curls of prosciutto ham in the morbidly sweet smelling delicatessen that served only the finest of cancerous dishes, Richard had never once doubted that he would cope. He thought of the slow unravelling of all that they had assumed and planned for in terms of food because she was, she had been, such a visionary in the kitchen, and ham in particular because of some long-ago account that he had read of island tribesman calling cannibalised victims of ritualistic ante-deluvian warfare Long-Pigs.

Richard cooked dishes for one now using a simple book of recipes probably designed for students. Her own library, a cornucopia of Rhodes, Oliver, Burton-Race, Fearnley-Whittingstall, Stein and David, sat on the bookshelves in his flat untouched,



the inherently dirty feeling of betrayal. Ridiculous but true. His wife had been cold in her urn for months, and here he was, his ears ringing with the words of his counsellor about doing things for his own benefit now, still feeling as though he was committing treason. The thought of that night made him shudder on the doorstep. He could hear his wife cocking the firing pins for each member of the firing squad before which he sometimes dreamed that he stood. Emotional compensation; more wine and another fag.

What made it worse were the phone calls. In that moment of self congratulatory euphoria, under the influence of the endorphin rush, he had exchanged phone numbers with the shag. Recently she had started to ring two or three times a day. Richard had added her by name to his contacts list, which meant that he could leave her to make plaintive noises on his voice mail. He instinctively deleted them after the first syllable.

In the old days, before that moment when he had looked into his future wife's eyes and known the absolute truth of his dependence on her, he had remained resolutely single. On more than one occasion he had been the bit on the side, the other man in the cuckold equation, and it had not bothered him one little bit. Now that he was single again, and even though the object of his momentary lust was reaching terminal velocity in the divorce courts, he could not square the circle of his crime. Her breathing in of air that should have been his wife's just made him angry.

It should, therefore, be easy, he thought, as he poured another glass of the dry red and pulled another cigarette from its snugly reassuring and mechanically sorted place in the packet, to answer the woman's calls and tell her that this thing between them was a one off, was done and dusted. The problem, which Richard acknowledged with a flick of his finger on the rough flint of the lighter, was that he had an addictive nature. When things got desperate he would take one of her calls, apologise and say that it was a hard time for him, and they would meet for another dose of something scabrous and itchy. Richard managed a low chuckle. Why, oh why, couldn't he take the great Billy Mac's advice and just get drunk and watch porn?

Questions about Richard's sexual reintegration with the wider world were, he felt, largely a distraction from the more important realisation that this thing, this disease, this inevitably bankrupting game of dice with the beast, was what it was. Acceptance was the key. Richard stepped out into the autumn evening, watching low, grey clouds scud across the tree tops at the far end of the communal garden, and was about to make for a bench over by a massive Copper Beech, when he stopped, turned, and fetched from the flat the bottle and the packet of cigarettes. If he was going to muse, he thought, best to do it professionally.

The nights were closing in now, the leaves falling with the strengthening breeze that blew in the cold winds from the northern lands, a gift from the Snow Queen of yore. Despite showers earlier in the day that same leaf stripping breeze had dried out the bench seat, leaving streaks of dampness in the wood at the margins and around the rusting screw heads that held his weight as he sat down. It was not yet the full blown season for decay but already the manicured lawn was strewn with wet, black leaves.

Looking back at the block of flats he caught a glimpse of the florid painter caught in the glare of ceiling spot lights as he watched Richard in the garden, no doubt muttering about polluting neighbours and the irony of a survivor of one cancer ineluctably feeding the tumours of his own demise. The ruddy faced little man moved away from the window the instant that he saw Richard look back and wave a misty-blue hand.





Sleep was a stranger to David. Our gentle friend, that warmth of embrace and soft comfort at the end of a long day, had always seemed to be at one remove from his soul. He tried in vain to count sheep, failing miserably each night to imagine any flock big enough, and through that imagination to will his limbs to slumber. David lay at night amid the intermittent tics and spasms of sagging brickwork and leeching pipes. Minutes might turn into decades of waiting, during which time he focussed on liver spots on the painted ceiling above his dishevelled bed. He always returned to the same theme, and in so doing he inevitably banished all hope of that slow decline into the unconscious world of the dream king. And so, wiping the grit from the corners of his eyes, he would rise, usually around two in the morning, make a pot of tea, and sit in front of the television flicking between the educational and the banal.

On occasions David tried alternative tacks, pouring himself liberal measures of cheap brandy in an effort to knock himself out, and but for the persistent worry that his liver would explode, he might have considered alcoholism as a cure for insomnia. Fridays were his favourite tinkle days, as he generally did not work on a Saturday and then had time to recover before Monday. Even here, though, when sweet oblivion coursed through his veins and he collapsed on the sofa, he couldn't ever say that he slept. Rather he entered a twisted world where the great theme of his life was made real, and the tempting began all over again. In some ways, these weekly diversions seemed more real to David, more full of the visceral sharpness of existence, than did the mundane world of rag trade cutting on Eastcastle Street in London's West End.

David's inability to enter the altered state of mind that brings mental recharge and balance was caused directly by his chosen trade. David worked the cutting benches for those 'B' list designers who stitch their way through one financial crisis after another at the back of Oxford Street. He spent his days surrounded by fittings, by models, and by the spike-tongued hopefuls trampling their way towards the catwalk, and all of them, the girls, the boys, the madames, the couturiers, only ever saw him as a pair of sharp blades.

David, however, saw beyond the chalk line and the pattern book. David saw girls and women. He watched them move and twist within their fabric shrouds, and surrounded by skin and bone and muscle and the imposing beauty of the fashionista, he wept internally. Summer was the worst time of all with acres of breast exposed to draw his gaze down into the realm of the lascivious. David was one of life's luckless men. He smiled and made a threat of it. He laughed and drew fingernails across a blackboard. He held a woman's hand for just a moment too long. He tried too hard.

He was barely thirty years old, skilled and adept at his trade, but he was already balding, noticeably overweight, had crooked teeth and one eye that stared manically out of its socket. He knew instinctively that he was never noticed for who he might be, but only ever for what he could do. Those paragons of perfection who employed him would not see the man because his flesh offended them.

At night, David thought about one thing; his ideal woman. In spending his sleepless nights imagining perfection, and then in the morning looking at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, he committed himself to a cycle of despair that he was convinced would only ever end when he put out the lights...permanently. It wasn't as though David wanted too much of the world. He recognised in the sea of fake perfection that ebbed and flowed around his salt bleached rock, that beyond the make-over shores, where bleary eyed beauties awoke in their raw state, there might be a little nook or tight cranny where he could find happiness. All he wanted was a cuddle, was warmth other than his own in bed on a cold night, and in the throes of such thinking, when the alcohol finally bit, his dreams took him into strange

encounters with girls made of glass and wax, girls who beckoned to him and then shattered at his touch. He dreamed of feminine peacocks, creatures of fan and feather and piercing shrillness. He dreamed of the hunting tigress with cubs mewling in the undergrowth and he knew the bite of her rancid fangs. David also dreamed of a man, who sat at the edge of the disillusionarium that his drunken world inevitably became, a man who never spoke, who never moved, but watched and waited, and waited and watched, a man dressed in the threads of deep, black time, threads woven into a riverboat gambler's brocaded frock and embroidered waistcoat.

It was on one such Friday amid the high heat and low cut bosom of June that David forsook the usual Fundador and splashed out on two bottles of Grouse. He never drank Scotch. It made him unduly maudlin, but, he decided while wandering disconsolately down the drinks aisle at his local Tesco Metro, that it had been a fucking maudlin day, and the cause of his melancholy was the new girl on reception.

During a quick introduction by the owner of the salon, David had let his gaze linger too long on the new girl's breasts and rather than the usual snort of disgust he'd received a round, heavy slap in the face. The sound of her palm on his cheek filled the air with thunder, rattling across the downstairs showroom, and he had fled in horror to the workshop on the first floor. No matter how large the stone he overturned, he found no place to hide, and blushing crimson the day long he'd chalked and cut and made one ham-fisted, embarrassed mistake after another, until *She Who Must Be Obeyed* had waved her finely manicured hand at him and told him to go home. The fact that she added words like creepy and weird and skin-crawling to the usual terms of abuse that he periodically suffered was, he felt, a little gratuitous. He had never actually touched a girl's breast, nor would he dare to do so, but sometimes he just couldn't help where he looked, afflicted as he was with the blow of the birthing ugly-stick.

"It isn't weird or creepy", he told himself repeatedly as he stared at the rack full of spirits in Tesco. "I just lose track of where I am looking sometimes. For God's sake!"

David caught sight of another shopper looking at him as if he were the nutter on the bus, so he picked up the two bottles of scotch, bowed his head, and walked quickly to the check-out counter.

Slumped on the sofa, with the world drifting into an amber haze fuelled by an empty bottle of the blend, David closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately. All he wanted on this night of all nights was the blackness of absolute torpor, but even in his befuddled state he still staggered into the kingdom of impossible dreams. David stood on a beach watching the waves crash in, swaying in drunken rhythm with the surf.

In the distance he saw his alter ego, Mister Darcy on a white charger, galloping along the shore line with whipping hair and muscular abandon. Unlike his previous dream incarnations, however, there was no immediate object of the chase, no impossibly fragile maiden to save. Instead, his imagined avatar turned the horse to face a rocky spur at one end of the beach, and there he saw the man in black. Again, breaking with all tradition, the usually passive and silent man stood, climbed down from the rocks and started to walk towards the Darcy figure, who dismounted with a jump and a flourish. The two figures met in the curl of receding water at the shore line. They stared at each other for a moment before Darcy spoke.

"Are you the Devil?" he asked. "Have you come to make a pact? Is this my Faustian temptation?"

The man in black looked down at the wet sand and shook his head. "Nothing to do with me, mate, all that Devil nonsense".









clear. Snow had come to blanket the world outside, marking the end of living time for another year with the coming of the sterile freeze.

David felt the cold for just a moment as the snow underfoot melted into his socks and the cold air scratched at his throat. The only question in David's mind was where should they go. A church? A bar? None of the obvious places for seeking happy oblivion seemed appropriate. Instead, David and his perfect woman set off towards the south, heading slowly down from the smothered heights of the city towards the equally hidden river valley below. It was early in the morning, judging by the sense of quiet slumber that emanated from under the snow covered duvet that lay snug upon the streets, something for which David was rather grateful. Even in his befuddled state he still remembered the tattered edges of reason that came with ridicule.

After a mile or so, David began to lose all feeling in his feet and hands. He nearly dropped his perfect girl while negotiating kerbs, and he cursed the fates that might yet ruin his work. To make the river meant another mile or so of heavy trudge through the soft snow, and David began to doubt whether he had the strength to make it. He forced himself to take another step, and another, until, rounding the corner of some municipally grey building, David saw the flicker of bright red and yellow flames in a brazier at the end of an otherwise isolated and dark alley.

"Oh, yes," he whispered to his love. "Forgive me my dear, but I need to spend a minute or two by the fire."

There was a pause, as though she was answering him, and then he replied, "I know, but the river will take us down to the eternal sea. Just a moment of warmth, my love, just one minute, and then we'll be on our way again."

David dragged both his own shattered body and his frigid lover towards the brazier. There was no one in sight, although signs of itinerant occupation remained; an abandoned overcoat, an overturned mug next to a half full bottle of cider, cans and cigarette butts, a ravaged pizza box, and what looked like a used condom. David shuddered and told his darling girl not to look. He spread the overcoat out onto the bare snow and lay down in front of the brazier, letting the feeble flames work their magic, but magic, as David had already surmised, does not exist for people like us. Slowly as the effects of hyperthermia set in and the cold and the fatigue settled into the unconscious descent to coma and death, David muttered one last word; "Soon."

Without strength and without a word from his one true love, he slipped away towards the great sea of eternity, sailing towards his death just as he had always navigated the oceans of his life; alone.

The world was silent for a moment but then there came a footstep in the snow, followed by another and another. The footsteps were slow and measured. Slowly, taking shape in the feeble fire light from the brazier, the form of a man dressed in a black frock-coat and waistcoat appeared. He knelt down where David lay next to the perfect mannequin, and placed a hand on David's forehead and then at his neck. He held his hand there for a moment and then with a shake of his head he turned his attention to the mannequin. In running his fingers along her seams, in tracing the contours of the plastic body under her dress, and in touching her fantastically embroidered lips and eyes, he marvelled at the workmanship. She was truly the most beautiful creature that he had ever seen.

He turned back towards David's body and said, "I knew you could do it. If anybody could do it, it was always you." He patted David's cold leg. "And I meant what I said. No souls. It's like Michaelangelo, you know, that one great work, the one that uses up your life. Still, it's worth it, isn't it, mate. She's stunning."

The man in black turned back to the mannequin, took both of her rigid cloth covered hands in his, and to her he whispered that simple phrase that brings life to the world; “Love you, babe”.

The air suddenly grew warm and tropical around the brazier, melting snow and ice in an instant. The golden cloth shimmered in the fire light. Every stitch and every thread strained and writhed as the inner plastic of the shop-window mannequin twisted and buckled and then snapped back into place. Textures mingled and changed, and the world suspended belief for just one second, during which the man in black stood up and helped a gorgeous young woman to her feet. She wore a simple black dress over olive-golden skin, her dark hair falling in long cascades about her shoulders.

He looked into her eyes and smiled. “Been a long time waiting for you, babe.” He bent forward and kissed her on her ruby-red lips.

She smiled too and then looked down at the crumpled body of the cloth cutter. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Long story, babe. I’ll tell you sometime. Right now I’d wager you’re just a wee bit hungry. What do you say we head down to the river where I know a great all night café?”

The girl prodded the body with the toe of her bare right foot and shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah”, she said, “I am a bit peckish, now you come to mention it.”

## **The Marchese’s Gift**

Love’s young dream made even more perfect by the setting; candle light, sparklers in the ice creams, chilled wine, the warm glow of a Cretan evening laced with hints of Basil, Marjoram and Honeysuckle, and all set off perfectly by the warming sight of fingers entwined across a crumbed tablecloth. They whispered and giggled, whistling away at the last splinters of another wonderful day that would inevitably and gleefully merge into the solid mahogany of another steamy night. She, the young bride, sat back in her chair, slowly trailing her hand away from that of her newly beloved husband, teasing him in her withdrawal from physical contact. She flicked her shoulder length blonde hair, flashed a brilliant white smile at him and asked him to take her home with one flash of her radiant blue eyes.

Shared laughter. He twisted round in his chair, caught the attention of one of the waiters, and made the universal scribble motion that means the bill and fruit. True to form the dish arrived with two forks, watermelon and grapes. The waiter presented the bill in a black plastic wallet and with that delightful hint of gravel in the Greek voice, asked, “I hope everything was good for you tonight?”

The young bride could hardly contain herself, bubbling fit to burst with happiness as she was. “Oh yes, it was lovely. Everything’s lovely. We’re on honeymoon!”

Hands clasped once more on the tablecloth. The young man’s foot shifted under the table, seeking out the bare calf of his now life-long lover. He nodded to the waiter and smiled.

“Yeah, just right, mate. Spot on.”

The waiter hovered over the table. The young couple sat oblivious for a moment, wrapped up in each other’s lustfully loving stare, but even they couldn’t ignore the fidgeting and nervous presence just to their side.

“Scuse. I sorry, but I have some advice”, said the waiter.

He squatted down next to the young man so as not to be overheard. His olive tan and dark lidded eyes made the words sound dark and brooding. "Please, don't tell people you are honeymooning. Is not such a good idea."

The young man twitched his head slightly as if to say; you're mad, but he thought better of it. The young couple exchanged a quick glance before he replied. "Sorry, mate, but I don't understand. There's loads of people come here on honeymoon. You know, sun, sea and sex."

The young bride giggled and then bubbled into the conversation once more. "We're so happy. I want to shout it from the rooftops." She jumped out of her chair, spread her arms wide in glorious welcome and shouted, "We're on honeymoon!"

The waiter stood bolt upright and put his fingers to his lips, a look of genuine alarm in his eyes now. "Please, not so loud. Enjoy everything, yes, but quietly or else the gentleman will get to hear. He has many friends, many ears in the walls."

The other diners had all stopped their conversations and were staring at the girl, who suddenly felt very sheepish. She sat down with an apologetic look on her face. One or two glasses were raised towards the young couple as she said, "Sorry, I just feel so full of it"

The young man fished out a fifty Euro note and slid it into the plastic wallet. "Keep the change", he said quietly and then added, "What gentleman?"

The waiter simply rolled his eyes and said, "Thank you very much. Please I don't want to worry you. You think I am mad, yes? Just be careful." With that he gave a weak and thin smile, turned on his heels and walked back towards the bar shaking his head.

The young man stood and held out his hand for his new bride to take. "Weird or what?"

She joined him, took the offered hand and planted a soft, ruby lipped kiss on his cheek. "Forget it, Dan, who cares about silly old waiters and mysterious gentlemen. I know just how to take your mind off it."

She giggled and squeezed his hand as she led him out of the taverna and into the sweet smelling night.

A week passed in what seemed like a day. The couple woke late, always missing breakfast in their hotel, although they felt no need for food on waking. They fed on each other until late each morning before drifting down to the pool snack bar for a gyros platter. They lazed through the afternoons until, at around four, when the shadows started to creep across the sun loungers, with the sky still a brilliant blue, they made their slow and relaxed way up to their room for a siesta. Each evening they emerged from their slumbering afternoon exertions to greet the reddening sky of dusk with a glass of wine from the chilled bottle that they kept in the little fridge in their room. As the night air grew heavy on the scent of herbs and ripening lemons they showered, dressed and wandered out into the warm and welcoming darkness to find another taverna and another souvlaki.

Saturday night. The start of their final week. They were at that delicious point in a holiday when everything is relaxed and lethargic. Even their lovemaking had slowed just a little, not through any lack of passion, but rather assuming a Greek manner of time and fervour. They had forgotten about the waiter and the warning. There were no signs of any mysterious gentlemen, and the couple could hardly be described as discreet. They had forgotten the brooding warning, believing in modernity rather than the traditions of old wives tales and silly Greek flummery.

With that night's taverna chosen for its beach view and cooling sea breeze, the couple settled down for another meal under the stars, Kleftiko this time for each of them with a half-litre of house red. The lamb was soft and succulent and the potatoes roasted with the meat juices were divine, melting in the mouth so sweetly. If a meal could summon up the succulent nature of their relationship, then this might just do the trick. Everything was perfect. They were perfect, in tune and braising nicely under the Greek sun.

Towards the end of the meal, with hands and fingers entwined as ever, and with eyes locked in their own soul-deep and soundless embrace, the couple began to think about the slow walk home and the long lustrous night ahead, their bodies defined by the contours and ripples of a thin white sheet. As cocooned as they were in their own little world, they could hardly be blamed for missing the commotion taking place by the road frontage of the taverna.

Under the same star spangled sky that gave the lovers such simple satisfaction there came a darkness, one single patch that moved in synchronicity with the black leviathan of a Mercedes limousine. The immense mass of the vehicle swept along the coast road, leaving eddies of paper and plastic in its wake, before slowing and then pulling up outside the taverna. From the driver's seat a tall, almost black skinned driver climbed out and walked round the rear of the car, where he opened one of the huge, slab-like doors, into which he bent so that he could give his arm to a frail old man sitting on the back seat.

The old man's uncurling of himself was almost snake like, an impression reinforced by the sound made by his linen suit trousers as they rubbed over his rough, corrugated skin. From within the taverna the owner and his two senior waiters came bustling out to form a welcoming committee, a gathering of nerves and sweat on brows.

On the arm of his Moor, the old man straightened his cuffs, walked to the taverna entrance and exchanged a brief word with the proprietor. His usual table. His usual dry Martini. A dish of black olives. The two senior waiters were despatched and the Moor together with the proprietor of the taverna assisted the older gentleman to a quiet area at the back of the bar where a coffee table, sofa and two armchairs were always reserved. The same would be done in any one of the tavernas that the old man might visit, but he came here frequently enough to have a permanent place set aside.

The old man settled back on the sofa, debonairly crisp and clean in cream linen and white cotton. He held himself firmly, although a little shrunken now and but for the tell-tale liver spotting upon his sagging hands he clearly had once been a broad beamed specimen of a man. From his jacket pocket he took a small cigarette holder and a packet of Sigaro Toscano, fitted the holder onto the butt of his cigar and the Moor offered him a light. When the Martini arrived together with a dish of black olives, the old man sipped, nodded his approval, and then beckoned to the proprietor. They exchanged a few words after which the old man pointed to a young couple sitting at a table overlooking the sea. The proprietor looked over to them and nodded. As he walked to the bar to fulfil his patron's wish he sighed once and made the sign of the cross three times.

For Dan and Jen, the evening was drawing towards its inevitable close and they were anxious to be off. Hailing a waiter right now seemed to be a little difficult and Dan had almost got to the point of whistling one over when, to his obvious relief, the owner of the place made a bee-line for their table carrying two brandy bowls liberally dosed with the finest seven star Metaxa. He bowed slightly as he reached their table and delivered the drinks with a flourish.



















the ark, but British management had a blind spot when it came to investment back then and so we limped along with the damned thing for years, eking out ever thinning profits in the assumption that frugality is best. One afternoon, while the machine was in another one of its recalcitrant moods I sat idling away a couple of minutes thinking about how we could improve things, nothing spectacular, just a typical machine operator musing on how his job could be more efficient. Basically, my thought process went something like this; if we took the old girl apart and re-jigged her so that instead of one single repetitive operation on a large sheet we could punch out smaller lighter components and then fit them together later, we might be able to prolong her life while the egg-heads and the bean counters sort out the future. It meant a small re-design of the product, and given that spending money was anathema back then, I forgot about it.

A week later, while suffering another one of our down periods, the Production Manager and I had a bit of a set to. He objected to me being away with the faeries. I should be sweeping up the swarf or something similar. It all culminated with him asking me what I would bloody well do about it if I was so clever. I told him bluntly exactly what we should do. Thankfully one of our design bods was on the shop floor at the time and he overheard my ideas about the re-design. Instead of picking up my cards and heading down to the labour exchange I found myself ensconced with that same designer describing the detailed plans in my head. We got it right first time, and I got a change of career and damned good pay rise.

To cut a long story short, over the next two years I swapped overalls for a shirt and tie. While I never actually became a designer or a draughtsman, I did spend my days up in the offices coming up with tweaks and changes, some new designs and some pretty nifty solutions for the rapidly changing requirements of the good old British automotive industry. Bear in mind this was the period when we went from things like the essentially pre-war Jaguar XK 150 and hit the fast lane with the E-type. At first the old man, a foreman now, thought I'd sold out my class, but slowly, and not without the odd slanging match between me and him in the Legion, he and the boys on the shop floor came round. I seemed to make life easier for people, not just in terms of their workload, but when a company is successful and produces quality goods, then people's souls are fed.

It was sixty-three when our Managing Director called me into his office and there to greet me was the head of design at Imperial Engineering, then the single biggest and most successful British based engineering company operating in the wider world. Word spreads and like Johnny Haynes I was being transferred for a record fee and, frankly, a record wage. Harold Nottingham was the man's name, and he wanted an edge. Competition was starting to bite from Germany and Japan, and he paid well for the man who could dream machines.

So, was I happily married by then? The answer is no. As I said earlier, I'd dated, had the odd fumble, but a bit like Destiny, that Bond girl who reads the Tarot cards, I was so wrapped up in my work that I just never got round to the opposite sex. I had yet to have my 'Oh, James' moment. Leaving the old man and heading off down to the South Coast and the company laboratories was the biggest emotional event in my life up until that point. We shed a tear or two as I left him on the doorstep in West London, got into my re-assigned company Ford Prefect, and headed south. Did I have regrets? Some, but I was twenty-seven and still living at home, it was a bright April day, and it was time to spread my wings.

At the time I thought that the next thirteen years were the happiest of my life. We started small, making improvements here and there across so many fields of the

company's operational activities. Then they set me problems in new markets and with new solutions. The one contractual proviso I insisted on was that we never did defence.

They ran batteries of tests, plugging me into scanners and polygraphs and the like, but we never discovered the killer gene or the bump that made the difference. It was, we decided, a gift, like Leonardo's or Michaelangelo's or, on occasions, Heath Robinson's. I had my own small team, my own design studio, and an apartment paid for by the company. I reached the age of forty without a real care in the world. I had little need of company, as devoted as I was to the day-dream, and even when the primeval urge did rise it was taken care of on expenses. Over one cup of tea I could save the organisation millions. Happy Days.

Happiness, of course, is a relative thing. I was rapidly approaching middle-age, but I was gifted, cosseted, and by now looking after my father, who had retired to the same South Coast area that I worked in. I felt settled and comfortable. My work was going well, and hardly ever a chore. I made a difference, both to the company and, I felt, to the world. I was a smug bastard, but then it was nineteen seventy-six. I wore bright colours, drove a rag-top and wanted for nothing, until, that is, Eva came on the scene. When she walked into our design studio, the new software specialist from America blew our tiny little minds. It was not that she was tall, leggy and blonde, although she was, nor was it that she held a double first from both Oxford and Harvard, although she did. It was her laugh, and the spark of life that she ushered into the by now dry and dusty world that I inhabited. She was twenty-eight and a recent capture from Big Blue. I was in physical decline, readying myself for the inevitability of pipe and slippers, but in capturing my heart she restored the vital flow to me in so many ways, and that is how the nightmares began.

I suppose it's why I used the Bond analogy, although in my case it wasn't simply sex that changed my gift. While I'd had no compunction about eschewing love in favour of high-class satisfaction during my career with the company, Eva was something else, something foreign and exotic and untouchable. You got a full on sea breeze in your face when she smiled at you. I lost my heart to her over the winter of seventy-seven, when the world around us was crashing down amid the discontent of post-war social failure. She stayed with me at my apartment, we drank good French Burgundies, snuggled under the new fangled duvet when Channel storms lashed the windows, and I fell hopelessly in love. I don't remember her ever telling me that she loved me, not in so many words, but I didn't care. The rush of it all was utterly intoxicating. I could barely focus on the work at hand in our little studio, because every time I sank into one of my reveries I saw Eva. The trick to dreaming machines is not having any distractions, and I was in deep, deep, trouble on that count.

But, of course, I was in lust and love and infatuated. She, it turns out, had done what she came to do. She had shagged the man with the weird machine-mind. She left us in the May of seventy-eight and no amount of begging on my part would convince her to stay, let alone be mine. She smiled that big American smile of hers and was gone. The sea breeze never blew for me again, no matter how long I stood on the sea wall. Eva leaving didn't help the machine imagining either, given that a broken heart fixates on the breaker. It took months to get the day job back in hand, but the night job, well, that was altogether easier.

As soon as it became clear that Eva was definitely going, I started to dream at night, something I had never experienced, not in the machine sense. I'd fallen off cliffs never to land, seen long dead aunts and travelled the world as a dread pirate, but never had I seen machines in my sleep. Dreaming machines had been a controlled,

suggestive, conscious and programmed process until then. With the lights out my mind started to take me to places that I simply didn't want to see, a world of sliding Dali motifs and Bosch devilry. On the morning when I awoke from the first nightmare, the bedclothes drenched and bitten through, there was a new, steel, flat filing cabinet in my head. It remained without a name plate or any sort of reference system, but I knew what was in there. It was the inferno, the black pit, the desolation of millions. My nightmares brought forth Mars, the Destroyer of Worlds.

At first I thought it a passing phase, a natural consequence of a failed first true love in late years, the absolute synthesis of heartbreak, and so I resolved to concentrate. Let the nightmares come, I thought, I can handle this, and during the day nothing else will matter. For a short while it worked well enough. The once sublime notion of closing my eyes for an hour during the day still worked after a fashion, but it became real work. I had to force the day-dream, and with it the results became less elegant and less refined. As the pressures of coping with my changed mental state started to fray the edges of my world view, I tried different strategies, like drinking until late to knock myself out, or when my liver complained and so did the company quack, I tried just not sleeping. I looked terrible and started to become more and more erratic around my colleagues.

In eighty-one my father died. The one safe haven in my life was sunk beneath the waves of madness. I became unknowable. The company hired shrinks and analysts, made or bought the latest medical diagnostics kit, basically did everything possible to protect its investment, but the truth of it was that I was frying on the inside. It got to the point where nothing worked. I popped pills and potions, tried yoga and meditation, but during the day I could dream neither nut nor bolt.

At night, however... oh, at night the flood gates opened. I dreamed of pilotless planes and of laser reflectors capable of incinerating cities. I dreamed of gas and severed limbs and burned skin. I spun on the vortex of man-made tornadoes, and danced on the head of a pin withdrawn from splinter grenades. My mind was vengeance writ large, and that was when the company tried their one last, desperate stratagem.

They argued that if I let the nightmares out into the real world, then they might stop coming in dread night to torment me. By realising the designs I might release the pressure and restore myself to some sort of equilibrium. They promised safeguards, principally that they would reference the designs only for opportunities, techniques and technologies suitable for civil projects. By then I was so desperate to have someone end it all that I would have agreed to anything. I was the screaming vision seen by Munsch.

So, we cooperated. I worked with new colleagues and let open the gates of Hell, and for a while this new approach also seemed to offer some hope for a stable future. The endless throbbing in my temples, that explosive force held at bay by brittle bone and soft grey tissue, slowly dissipated. It never entirely left me, but it became manageable. I could live with it. The one side effect of giving free reign to the night darks was, however, that it became apparent pretty quickly that the day-dreams were shot. I was now a creature of the blackest night, but even then I thought that if we can turn this gift mutated into affliction to some good then all may not be lost.

What a perfidious man I was. For nearly ten years I shut myself away from all but the most trusted draughtsmen precisely because I did not want to see pictures or read news stories. I knew in my heart that my infernal machines of death would come into being. The company obeyed not the laws of the jungle, where the beast is simply what it is. The company was a global financial-industrial monster driven by the

insatiable hunger of the market and by then I had become their principal source of profit. The inevitable, of course, happened. I saw a picture of a military drone in some war zone or other. I saw limbs and bomb blasts and the wreckage of a market place. I ran.

You would think that security was an issue, that I would be kept behind unbreakable glass, but that was never the case. Even in my most troubled times I was still allowed the freedom of an apartment on the coast, somewhere that I could retreat to on my own when the night freaks came calling.

I was an intelligent man. I knew that my place was bugged, and that they watched and listened. I was pretty certain that they followed me. I suspected that my clothes and my car were wired too, but it was no matter to me. My affliction came to my rescue. I dreamed counter-measures, had them made up, kept the prototypes and simply slipped out unnoticed late one night with a set of new clothes wrapped in water-tight plastic together with some cash. I stripped naked on the beach at Eastney, swam a little way out and then headed back to shore just a little way down the coast. I knew enough about cars to hot-wire a Vauxhall, put some miles between me and Portsmouth and then started walking. I have been walking slowly towards the end of land ever since.

I never dream during the day now. I never sleep at night. Mine is a continual waking, which, at seventy-four years of age, is finally taking its toll. Were I to close my eyes the nightmares would still come. I watch television through shop windows and see all of those things that you take for granted, but which I dreamed. The Never-Flat wheel. The liquid crystal imagination. The Fermat engine. The ion accelerator. The unlockable wrench. The bringer of death.

I have during these last years of wandering and beggary often considered the price asked of me by the man leaning against our old garage door. A soul? Heaven and Hell reduced to carbon ashes? The inventiveness of the torturer? Elevation to an Augustan God-head? No, I don't think it is any of these things. The price we pay for simply being human is that we so often forget that we always, always have a choice. By walking and keeping awake I've tried to stop the machines, but it is no good. I dozed for a while last night and dreamed of a field generator capable of cloaking a warship. It is, I think, time to stop.

Do I have any one last thought for you? Yes I do. Think carefully before you answer any well-dressed man who springs up as if from nowhere offering you the world.

Farewell, friend.

## **Fancy and the Flutter**

“Bloody Tesco. Bloody rain. Bloody, bloody, bloody...”

November's dim witted cudgel was flailing at the world with all its might, smothering life and expectation under a blanket of grey cloud. The world existed only as a collection of cold, dank, fetid streets. This was the inevitable killing time in the gardens, the woods and the fields of this watery land, the dreaded days that heralded the arrival of Christmas.

Goodwill to all men? Not as far as Cat was concerned. It was pissing down, she couldn't find a space anywhere near the covered walk way, and that meant the place would be heaving, and worst of all, heaving with angry, frustrated, miseries being induced to enjoy the miracle of marketing. The immaculate conception had

nothing to do with any God. It was something dreamed up by the Devils of this world - the run up to Christmas. Cat hated the whole thing with a vengeance.

Cat reached over into the littered passenger side footwell of her battered blue Ford hatchback to fish out her trusty little fold-away umbrella but a sudden, unwelcome and chilling realisation hit her squarely in the chest. She'd used it this morning when she'd brought the bins in and it was still sitting, dripping puddles onto the parquet in the back lobby of her compact stone cottage in the outer, now leafless suburb of Cheltenham where she lived. Cat screamed internally. She took a breath and with seemingly nothing left to fume about Cat opened the door, pulled the collar of her jacket tight around her neck and prepared to brave the elements. Right foot first. Splash. Ankle deep water, cold and oozing November's scum of oil and decaying vegetation, soaked through the sole of her boot.

"Fuck!"

The rain fell in a curtain drizzle, neither hard enough to be impressive nor light enough to be shrugged off as a minor inconvenience. This sort of rain persisted, becoming an oppressive shroud on the world, especially in the late afternoon dusk, when Cat felt like a caged mouse. She scurried across the car park as if it were the exposed wood shaving floor of her tin cell yard, feeling as though she ran under the baleful yellow eyes of a thousand feline predators all lined up just beyond the bars, waiting for the catch to drop, for the cage door to spring open, and for dinner to be playfully served. By the time she reached the covered area by the main doors she was drenched and bedraggled. Her hair, always long and black and quietly coiffured, now curled impossibly and stuck to her forehead and cheek. Her right foot felt cold and clammy from the puddle by the car. The first shopping trolley that she womanfully tried to haul towards the bright inner sanctum of the modern retail experience was, of course, bugged. Cat mouthed another expletive, using the unmentionable word with a venom that would have turned hearts instantly to stone had she dared to say it out loud. Things could not get any worse.

No worse that is until having found a trolley without a wonky wheel, having negotiated the log jam of the entrance, and having pushed her way into the aisle with the stationery, books, CDs and housewares just to escape the murderous melee taking place around the vegetable racks, Cat found herself pushing her empty trolley towards a grinning man dressed up like a riverboat gambler. The dreaded promotional geek. It was most definitely time to turn and flee, to dive deep beneath the turgid sea of morose fathers and screaming brats down by the frozen ready meals.

Except that she couldn't. From nowhere a mother and daughter combination, two trolleys strong, laden to the gunwales with Christmas crackers, wreaths of tinsel and a thousand other essentials for the great day, had blocked her only escape route. To cap it all they appeared to have stopped mid aisle for a chat about Dad's forthcoming bunion procedure. The riverboat Dapper-Dan could not be avoided. Cat steeled herself for the moment, for the delivery of her cold impregnable stare towards the far end of the aisle, and set off towards her nemesis. He stood quite still, letting the grin fade to a thin, charming little smile, then cocking his head slightly as if to say, "I know, I know", and slowly he moved aside.

Cat looked into his eyes. It is always a mistake to do that, she thought, remembering the weekend before and the chap in the bar with the rugby pectorals and the deep brown smoulder that, by the end of the evening, turned into nothing more than a misguided drunken fumble. Leopards and spots came to mind. Once again she was lost in the jungle undergrowth where you only see the predator's eyes for what they really are in that instant before the beast leaps towards you. As ever, the first

words were both inane and laced with hidden undercurrents, suffused with that sparkle in the eyes of the hunter and the hunted.

"If you've got a moment", he said softly, smiling again to reveal perfect white teeth.

"Not really. Very pushed for time." replied Cat summoning up her finest hard-pressed housewife look.

Still he smiled, ignoring her attempt to fend him off.

"It's just that we've got a little promotion going on. It might interest you. Certainly better than this Hell".

He looked over Cat's shoulder at the mother and daughter combination further down the aisle.

"That's what it's about, really, changing the shopping experience. Changing you and the shopping experience. It doesn't cost a penny, just a few club card points, but in return you get...well...heaven, really."

"Heaven?" Cat asked, incredulously. The man was clearly stark raving mad. "Heaven in Tesco? I know the buggers are taking over the world but that's just a little far fetched, isn't it?"

She had broken cardinal rule number one. Instead of smiling sweetly, staring at the far wall and pushing on past the gambling man, she had responded. The hook had been taken and Cat knew instinctively that he was about to play the line.

"I don't mean Heaven and Hell, not in the biblical sense". He rested one hand on Cat's trolley. That smile again. She melted just a little. Such a warm and forgiving smile.

"I mean", he continued, "we all know that's a load of hocus-pocus dreamed up by our less than bright cave dwelling ancestors, don't we?"

Was that a wink?

"Truth is, Heaven and Hell are entirely human things. And I could tell by the look on your face when you walked in here that this may well be Hell for you. And think of those starving kids in Africa or the poor maimed sods in war zones. That's human Hell. Nothing beats it, not even Old Nick. No, what I'm taking about is heaven with a small h. The real thing. Or hell with a small h, of course. Small print and all that."

"Yeah..." Cat mumbled, more to herself than anyone else. The feral air amongst the shoppers seemed to thin around her. She didn't quite understand. The pitch was interesting but hardly your average bit of foreign cheese on a cocktail stick. She focussed on the situation. He edged a little closer along the trolley, brushing a display of disgustingly twee kiddie birthday cards with his shoulder and knocking both cards and envelopes to the floor. They fell in slow motion.

"You're for real?" she asked. "I mean working for Tesco? Not just some chancer with a bit of patter?"

The smile faded. Hang dog. Big eyes and a slightly mocking downwards curl of the mouth.

"Pretty much. They know I'm here, let's put it that way. Can't really miss a bloke dressed up like Fort Laramie, can you. You certainly didn't."

His hand moved to Cat's elbow. He gently pushed the trolley away and she let go. She ought, she thought, to be banging on about invasion of her private space. She ought to be calling security, but none of that mattered. He was close. She could smell his male musk. Those eyes of his were so bright, dancing almost, rich and dark and endless. He moved her with a firm but gentle pressure out of the aisle with the still falling cards into a section with row upon row of discounted DVDs. He was close and

hot and fecund. This was no Saturday fiddler. Cat felt as though she was being lifted out of time itself.

He paused, looked directly into her eyes, and said earnestly, "It's about choices. Taking a bit of a risk. Having a flutter, as it were. Walk away now and you stay in Hell. Stay with me, take a moment to dance with me down these aisles, and I guarantee that shopping will never be the same again. Whenever you walk into a supermarket your heart will lift. Raindrops will be your dancing partners, puddles will become oceans for paper boats again, just like they were when you were little. It's a simple question. If you believe that Heaven and Hell are here on earth, what have you got to lose? What do you say?"

Cat had never sailed paper boats in puddles, but she got the gist of it.

"It's not like any promotion I've seen before. And why club card points? What do you get for those? How many do you want?"

That smile again, burning a thousand fold. "Actually, I lied about the points. I don't want them. This is about you. Instead of grumbling about the world, instead of living with continual resentment, rather than looking at the old man most of the time as though he's a moron, why not lighten the load, free your mind and spirit, let loose your soul? One dance is all it takes."

As Cat pondered on that last statement, the noise of twenty-four hour bustle under the ever ticking clock-face of consumer excess faded out completely. There was no old man at home, anyway, only the dog, and Cat never thought of her as a moron. Actually, she did, but in a sweet way. Now the aisles were suddenly and miraculously clear of traffic. The cavernous roof with its harsh strip lights folded into starry night. There were palm trees over by where the wine used to be and Cat was sure that she could hear the gentle break of surf on golden sand. The shelves and racks were dotted with candelabra, and on their vast, open surfaces were displayed sweetmeats, butter biscuits, tarts dusted with cinnamon and so, so many other sugary trifles and temptations. Over the public address system there came the first strains of a waltz, low and hazy to begin with but building slowly and surely to the point where Cat would have to dance.

Cat stopped in front of a long oval mirror that had suddenly plopped into existence. She felt, then heard and finally saw the metamorphosis. She was dressed in the most fabulous red velvet ball gown, suffused with diamonds and adorning her neck, ears and head were jewels beyond the imagination even of Tiffany or Faberge. She was tripping. She had to be on some mad hallucinatory spree. The gambling man was standing in front of her now in a Fred Astaire pose, arm outstretched, calling her into the rhythm and the pulse of the dance. Cat tried to think. What had she eaten? Tinned soup for lunch. It couldn't be that, could it? She felt hot and faint and exhilarated all at the same time. The music was in her bones, was in her blood, cascading around her mind like a red-hot fury.

"I don't even know your name", she gasped, as she took his hand and was twirled into his firm embrace. His mouth was inches away from hers. His breath was almost feverish. She melted once again into his gaze.

"I'll be whoever you want me to be", he whispered. "Just dance."

He spun her round, stepped towards her, took the lead, and off they sped, twisting and shimmering in brilliantly mellow candlelight. He was divine, a gazelle, lithe and firm. For Cat, who had never accumulated any sort of ballroom skill in her thirty years on the planet, the spiral and the vortex were all consuming. Her feet and body moved of their own volition in perfect time with her beaming beau. With every step, with every heartbeat, through shampoos, down cat food lane, up to where the







































air. He pulled at the tailgate, screwing up his scrawny, twitching features, and slowly but surely, emitting mineral groans and metallic shrieks, the metal and glass door began to inch upwards until, with the tailgate at seventy-five degrees, the little man was able to clamber onto the space made by the flattened seats, cross his legs, and utter a loud harrumph.

“Bloody car”, he muttered. “Bloody sodding British Leyland. Bloody Red Robbo. Seemed like such a good idea at the time. Just goes to show you, doesn’t it!”

The little man, who looked to all intents and purposes like a fifty-year old accounts clerk, the sort of man who is equally hen-pecked and ignored because his entire being is made up of nothing but disappointment, pulled a red handkerchief from his jacket pocket, wiped first his brow and then his glasses, and then finally, and with an almighty bulge, he blew his nose. It was just a question of time, he thought, just a question of waiting. He stared out of the back of the Metro, stared down the long, straight highland road, and settled himself into a damp and steamy slump. He seemed to know instinctively that eye of the storm would come from the east, from the direction that lay behind him, in his long distant past, and slumped forward as he was, he began, as he always did in such circumstances, to count the tufts in the grey and threadbare boot carpet.

Moving like a dense, liquid shadow across the deeps of the ocean, a black Aston Martin swept spray and stones out from under its wheels as though the driver was desperate to dam the flood before it should lift Noah’s ark from dry-dock. The car bent the feeble light of afternoon, absorbing the dull residue of day under dusky thunder-heads, so that nothing definite, no edge, no gleam of paintwork could be discerned by the passer-by, and with good reason. The vehicle sported crepuscular additions and modifications such as fins and bat wings, horns, antlers, crossed bones and the flying remains of bloody pelts, and hanging from the rear-view mirror was a collection of shrunken Jivaroan heads, each one bobbling with every bump and twist as if in wild, drunken conversation. The driver of the diabolical sports coupe hammered the throttle at every turn, singing raucously and with absolute abandon every word of O Fortuna from the opening of Carmina Burana.

He wore black from head to toe, was tanned and lean under a shock of black, flowing hair, showing the aquiline profile of a true son of the Julian clan, except for the silver bar that pierced the bridge of his nose. He wore eye-liner as black as coal, and constantly flipped the sun visor up and down to check his reflection in the mirror as he spun the car through sluicing puddle and gravitational turn. To finish the demonic effect, a stuffed raven mounted on a piece of polished mahogany was nailed to the rear parcel shelf. The driver laughed out loud as he surveyed his little world of perfectly stitched cow hide, walnut veneer and deathly totem. The effect was just as he wished it to be today. In the fullest and most satisfied of baritones he let rip the lines:

*“hateful life  
first oppresses  
and then soothes  
as fancy takes it”*

With the rain slanting across the road and the windshield wipers sweeping furiously across glass, the black Aston shimmied around a tight right hand bend, sliding out at the back. Opposite lock. Ease off the power and then on again. A brief













































