Beasts Within

A collection of short stories by Clive Gilson

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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,

a small memorial to the days of splendour. More often than not now he grilled chicken breast, opened a bag of salad, and with a nod to past glories, made up his own salad dressing out of the last of her red wine vinegar and walnut oil. When the time came to replenish the cupboards he was sure that he would find something suitably pre-prepared in Waitrose.

After one such meal, with the wine cap unscrewed and never to be reintroduced to the bottle, Richard flicked through the digitally free channels on the television and came up blank once again. Nothing of interest. This did not surprise or annoy him. Richard told himself frequently that he enjoyed being phlegmatic. He had not been able to listen to the Archers since she died. Once it had been an evening ritual or, if they had been busy, a gentle Sunday laze in bed with tea and chocolate biscuits after early morning love-making. It is what it is, he thought, so there's no point in getting upset. By accepting the inevitable passage through the many stages of grief he was as certain as day follows night that he would surface again, would return to something akin to the skin that he had once inhabited.

With nothing on the box but the silence of his now solitary life, Richard got up from his armchair, walked across the open-plan living area of his small flat, picked up a packet of Silk cut from the kitchen worktop and withdrew one cigarette. He did not smoke in the ground floor flat, it being a rented space, a bolt hole that he could shutter against the world, so he opened the patio doors that lead out onto the communal gardens, leaned against the door frame and lit up. It is what it is.

The anti-smoking Nazi at his local Cotswold surgery, one Sister McGovern, had actually told him not to bother about giving up. He should go on holiday, get through the inevitable run of birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas, and then make the ultimate sacrifice with the New Year. He had, she'd said, enough on his plate. Richard inhaled deeply, stifling a rough, moist cough, and decided that he would not beat himself up too much about it. A drink and a smoke were fine and dandy things to indulge in given the unenviable circumstances of his life. He thought of them as strong but forgiving crutches upon which he could hobble towards normality. He mentally raised the rapidly cremating smoke together with his glass of something Tesco red to the evening sky in salutation to Fuhrer McGovern. They're not all bastards, he mumbled to a feral cat that was twitching its behind predatorily beneath his next door neighbour's bird table.

A window slid shut in the flat above his, the owner, a florid, self-employed painter and decorator who made noisy love to his paramour every Saturday morning, evidently declining Richard's invitation to join him in his passive acceptance of the way of things. The first two fingers of Richards already raised and wine bejewelled hand strayed just a little higher than true stoicism demanded.

Richard had managed sexual congress once since she left him to fend for himself, a rather unsatisfactory affair, or shag as he'd referred to her in one of his rare drifts down to the pub with his son-in-law. The physical act was about what he'd expected. The primary assault had been over in a flash, a star-spangled whiz-bang that betrayed the months of unfulfilled marital passion during his wife's final, septic days. Richard smiled at the duality of the memories. He was clearly not as unfit as he'd thought prior to his hotel triste. The second and third waves of his sexual task force had gone in without meeting much resistance and established a strong bridgehead someway inland of the poor girl's own stamina. Physically he'd got his rock offs. It was sex, not lovemaking. What was unsatisfactory about it was the aftermath.

Beyond the sheer messiness of sharing intimate space with another human body, all of which could be resolved by mopping up with man-size tissues, there was

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 is 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 mistyblue hand.

After the initial shock of diagnosis, when he and she had sat in the consulting room of the breast surgeon, with the senior nurse on hand to translate medical tech-speak into plain English, when the tears had flowed between them like an automaton tableau depicting Victoria Falls, they had, he thought, even then, begun to move through space and time on different paths. His wife had borne the scars of mastectomy and lymph node investigations with bravery and a determination to overcome that awed him. The rolling months of chemo and radio, of Herceptin and consultation had bound their lives into a cycle of three week blocks. Routes to and from hospital wore a groove in their souls, the shape of a tree being passed first in one direction and then another marking out a series of revolving, repeating steps. Nausea. Two days in bed with the curtains closed. Soundless days of untouched food trays and muffled footsteps on the stairs.

He should have sat with her for longer, but he found refuge in his study in between these bouts of impotent caring. Then, when the immediate global poisoning began to wear off she would surface and begin again the process of taking back her life, until the next blood test revealed nutropenia. Hospital walkways and the special care unit. The sound of the nurses voices became a soundtrack that played on a permanent loop during his last glass of comfort while she slept upstairs, worn away by the endless thunder of the chemotherapy cannonade.

She changed. Richard was forty-two when she was diagnosed. Two years later, when the primary had been beaten, she looked fragile, like a Russian Babushka, although very much like a Ukrainian peasant woman, she still packed one hell of a punch. They tried to regain a sense of proportion, a semblance of normality, but despite every appearance of success, neither one of them could really make much headway against that constant fear.

In public they were an ideal couple, she always bright and bubbling, Richard quietly complementary, unflappable and devoted. Their first granddaughter came into the world and his wife made time to greet her by a sheer act of will. It was just a short moment, but it mattered.

Richard worked when the treatments allowed, and loved her as best he found that he could. Behind closed doors he drank ever more and deeply, and somewhere along the line he stopped talking to her. Richard withdrew little by little behind the façade of the perfect foil to the recovering cancer heroine. The truth that he only admitted to her in those final weeks when the friendship of all their years broke through the debilitation, was that he too was mortally afraid. He was terrified of losing her, and with her everything that defined who he thought he was.

The second diagnosis was incurable. Maybe a year, maybe two. She got nine months, by which time a second bout of chemo had been stopped because it was doing more damage than the multiple bloody tumours. Then, with no immune system to speak of, she really did become that little, frail old lady, wracked by pain and sepsis, until, with her family all around her, Richard had asked the doctors to stop the antibiotics. It had been pain relief for every single one of them.

For weeks after her killed her all that Richard could remember was her death face. When the morphine stilled her aching heart and burst his, when his tears fell on her cooling cheek and he spoke soft, sweet nothings to her ghost, she had sagged. The nurses did their best, but that face was simply not hers. The jaundice of enterochoccal sepsis and the deflation of pneumothorax coloured his memory of her. She was a foreign body, a simulacrum of what she should have been thirty years hence.

That had been the April shower that lasted all summer, but now, just recently, coinciding with the dulling of the year and the closing in of the nights, and perhaps

with the woman in the hotel bedroom, he could remember laughter and life and fire in his wife's eyes. That was the fundamental problem that he grappled with as he sat on the bench in the communal garden outside his ground floor flat.

He poured another glass of wine and demolished it. He lit and smoked another cigarette. He emptied the last of the bottle and tried to savour it, knowing that, as usual these days, he had bought just the one. Richard was sublimely, drunkenly animated, talking rabidly to himself, the feral cat and the disapproving decorator in number thirty-four. His hands moved through the now low night air as he rehashed moments from these most recent of mourning days.

He found it difficult that the place where he lived, a quiet Cotswold market town, was always full of couples, weekending parents who had palmed the kids off onto Granny, or lovers sneaking off from a conference, usually middle-aged or older, and he always had to repress the urge to run up to them and ask them why it was they who could walk hand in hand towards a pension and a bus pass and not he and his darling girl.

Then again, he had noticed how often these weekending lovers found the time to spit and spat in between their lovemaking. He'd lost count of the times that he'd spotted that frosty look or overheard a tell-tale tone of voice, the sort that could lead to a recreation of the blitz or a glorious kindling of first-flush passion, and then he had to fight an urge to run up to them and tell them, implore them, to realise that it was all so fragile and that their time together should never, ever be wasted.

Most of the time Richard restrained these urges. He was in the habit of being unflappable, of being dependable, of being, well, Richard.

But he had one more thought, one more urge, one more moment of realisation. With the coming of memory there came the beast. In his most sanguine moments, when he maintained the façade of getting his shit together, he would remember her smile, would remember sketching her as she walked on a beach on Paros in the shade of a cliff with a small Greek Orthodox chapel at the summit, or he might suddenly feel her hand in his over the dinner table. He caught fragments of her conversation, stock phrases and expressions, her look of smirking, affectionate disapproval when he screwed up the do-it-yourself bodgery that was his household trademark. He smelled her skin in the aftermath of one of their rows, the one where she slept on the sofa and then crawled into bed on the Saturday morning with a mumbled apology because she couldn't remember what she had been so upset about.

With these memories came a prime valurge to howl, to bay at the moon, to call the pack to grief now that the alpha female had run down her last caribou. Richard downed the final swill of wine, and feeling his head spin under the raucous impulse he climbed up onto the bench, raised his hands to cup the lunar beauty of the now dark and clearing sky, and tilted his head back. The muscles in his chest tightened and from deep in his belly he gathered up years of frustration and loss, knuckling and kneading them into the shape of his anger and his own feral beauty before ejaculating one high, keening shock of wild sound into the damp night air in a body wracking orgasm of total and unadulterated grief. The hairs on Richards neck and arms and legs bristled. He felt his nails sharpen against the palms of his hand. The howling grew, flooding the air with pain. Richard bayed at the revealed moon as if all the worlds in the universe were barren and he, the last wolf yet living, could run no more.

Rag Trade Gepetto

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 tipple 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".

He looked up and pointed back along the beach to where the true-to-life form of the dreaming David stood watching them. "There's no magic can make him any less ugly than he is."

"We know," replied Darcy, "but we'll do anything for just one chance. Souls aren't much use when you're as disappointed and as lonely as we are."

"That's true enough," said the man in black as he kicked at a pebble embedded in the soft, wet sand. "But it won't change anything. When he wakes up he'll be just as unattractive as he was yesterday. More so, given how much he's put away tonight. Anyway, I'm not in the soul business. I'm just a gambling man."

Darcy moved in a little closer and looked hard and long at his companion on the beach. "So what are you doing here? Why are you always in our dreams?"

The gambling man shrugged his shoulders. "Waiting for the moment when you get off the horse and ask that very question. I feel sorry for you, for him."

"But according to you there's nothing that will change our life?" asked Darcy, looking confused.

In the dream David and Darcy started to merge together, so that, as the man in black watched and smiled sweetly under the towering blue sky, the impeccable and imposing rider of the white steed twisted and decayed back to his sad and depressive core component part.

The man in black waited for the metamorphosis to complete before speaking again. "I didn't say that. I said you'd still be ugly in the morning. I never said anything about not being able to change your life."

With that the man in black took David's hands in his and turned them over as if inspecting for warts and calluses. "Hands of a craftsman, mate. I don't think you have any idea just how skilled you are. Think about it. Tomorrow, when you wake up I'll give you this — no hangover, nothing but the fresh breeze of a summer morning, and you'll feel great. Think about what you can really do with these hands." He paused. "And with what's in your heart."

The man in black smiled and let David's hands fall to his sides. "As I said, I'm not looking for a soul. Not looking for anything of yours. You live your life, mate. If there's anything to collect it'll be done long after you've stopped shuffling through this mortal soil."

With that he turned on his heel and walked back towards the rocks. David felt tears stinging his eyes as they welled up and then fell upon his ruddy cheeks, and as his vision blurred so did the image of the walking man. David wiped away the tears with the back of his hands, but when he finally saw clearly again, there was no gambler, no Darcy and no white charger on the beach. There were no fantastic images of women, no wheeling gulls, nor was there the reassuring sound of surf. Slowly a dusky darkness fell, and for the first time in years David slept truly, like an innocent child.

Despite the evidence around him, the empty bottle of scotch, an overturned tumbler, the crick in his neck and the taste of deep sleep in his mouth, David had never felt quite so bright and alive of a morning. It was still early, the clock hands reading just seven o'clock, and already the summer sun streamed in through windows against which no curtains were drawn. He stretched out on the sofa, yawned, considered his options and realised that he was hungry, as if he had been walking in coastal air all night.

He remembered nothing of the dream, but he felt a tingle in his fingers, as though they were trying speak to him. David made himself a cup of tea, sipping the

hot drink slowly, and all the while he basked in the warming sunlight that flooded his meagre little flat. He had an idea, but first he must shower and then, rather than hunt for a dry crust in the bread bin, he would walk down to the coffee bar on the corner of the street and eat Danish pastries. For some reason it seemed to him that this was a good day be alive. To Hell with the bloody women and their bloody dresses, he thought.

The rest of the weekend saw David working to liberate himself from the squalid mediocrity that had coloured so much of his life to date. He cleared the flat of rubbish. He swept and dusted and hoovered. The bathroom gleamed as never before and the whole place bloomed like a summer flower bed bursting through mulch. He washed clothes, bagged up old items for the charity shop, and without quite knowing why he put aside the best cuts of collected redundant cloth for some future use.

During Sunday afternoon he started to move the furniture around so that he could create a working space, and there he placed the tools of his trade, his scissors, his needles, his threads, his bodkins, together with his one pride and joy, an antique hand-cranked Singer sewing machine. Finally, come Sunday evening, when all was set and clean and fair, he took himself off to the bathroom and scrubbed himself with a vim and vigour that suggested in no uncertain terms that David wanted to scour away the stain of disappointment that had soiled his life so far.

Although the previous working week had ended in personal embarrassment for David, the one saving grace in all this was his skill and his craft. He might have been ridiculed the previous Friday, but he had not been sacked. As he walked up the stairs at Oxford Circus station and headed along towards Eastcastle Street, he felt serene and relaxed.

He bought flowers from a stand by the old Post Office. The morning girls, all bright and rouged and clad in their summer skimpies, simply didn't interest him. He entered the building where he worked, handed the flowers to the receptionist and apologised for his previous indiscretion. He skipped up the stairs in the full knowledge that mouths hung open behind his back, and when the Madame appeared to ask what was going on he simply smiled at her and told her that he had thought long and hard about life and that he was now a changed man. David couldn't quite tell what they believed and what they disbelieved, but then he didn't care. A plan was forming, a scheme of divine proportion, that would take away the edge of his physical and emotional hunger forever.

The plan was nothing more than a vague shape in the early moments of Monday morning, but by degrees, as he worked through the day, smiling and whistling to himself, the bones of the thing began to form. He surveyed the fabrics in the workshop and saw in lycra and toile and cotton the shapes of limbs. In taffetas and satins and wools he saw skin tones and contours. The mannequins upon which hung Madame's latest creations gave form to the coagulation of shape and sinew, and in his hands he held the means, held the tools that might bring life to the ideas floating dimly in his head. By the end of that first working day after the disaster and the dream, he was resolved to act. He would borrow a mannequin and, at the end of each day working the cloth, he would take home off-cuts. David would fill his evenings with the sound of the Singer.

Over the next few weeks there appeared in David's flat a succession of patchwork skins, each one crafted on the old singer and fitted over the mannequin like a Lycra glove. Colours and shades entwined, with gold and silver threads catching the light, but none of the textures and the patterns, made up from off-cuts as they were,

could ever quite conform to David's aesthetic. Her skin had to be perfect before he would consider the next steps.

Days merged into nights and back into the rising light of late summer and then early autumn. David worked all day at his trade, a changed man, happy and discrete and gentle. At night, with his latest captures from the cutting room floor, he became a fevered creature, bending over his old sewing machine for hours in an effort to sew the smallest and the finest seams. David never drank now, but the hours and the days spent spinning the sewing machine wheel in both directions inevitably took its toll on the man.

Towards the end of September, just as the Devil spat on the bramble bushes in the courtyard behind David's flat and the Hawthorn in the local park hung heavy with blackening sloes, David began to realise that something had to give. His search for perfection was driving him towards the madness of insomnia again, and he had either to finish his dream project or abandon happiness for all time. On the last Friday of the month, as he yawned over his scissors and counted the minutes down until lunch time's sweetly fresh air, the Madame entered the cutting room. Across her arm she held a bolt of the finest golden Escorial, which she laid gently on David's table.

"For that singer, you know, hot little arse but slight nasal whine on the high notes...touring at Christmas and wants this ready for dress rehearsals next month." she said, smoothing out a crease in the material. "I'll send the drawings up later. Usual stuff, patterns and cuts, and I know you'll do your best. Beautiful isn't it?"

David simply stared at the sheer brilliance and the tight but elastic weave of the Escorial. It was, indeed, beautiful. He nodded his agreement as Madame turned and headed back down to the lower floor. The Escorial was perfect.

True to her word Madame sent up the relevant drawings, a design for a light and skimpy halter neck dress, cut low at the front and back. It was all so depressing, he thought. Here he was, staring at the most stunning bolt of cloth just when he needed it, but judging by the drawings he would have to be profligate with the material. While the line was simple, there were so many flourishes and twists and hints to be cut for the associated dancers that there would nothing serviceable left of the Escorial, nothing worth taking home for his darling girl. It would be a tragedy, but, as he turned the design round in his hand, desperately trying to find economies within the pattern, David decided that it was time to sink or swim. He had to finish his dream girl, and only the golden Escorial could possibly do. The entire bolt of cloth would be required, but from it he could cut a perfect skin, and then he could really begin to make his dreams come true.

David spent his entire lunch break walking the diesel fumed streets that ran around the John Lewis store at Oxford Circus in a vain attempt to clear his mind. This would be the last straw as far as Madame was concerned. David tried to talk himself back towards a land of common sense, but he was, he knew, already too far gone with his new enterprise. Eventually a grimly determined David returned to his cutting room, gathered up the golden skin, stuffed it under his arm, and, taking one last look around his place of work for so many years, he boldly marched out of the building and took the first train home.

Never in any folk or fairy tale did a man work as hard and with such concentration as David did that Friday night. No elves, no pixies, no faeries, not a single creature, not even *Tom Tit Tom*, could have sewn and measured and cut with such care and deliberation. David could feel a fever brewing up in his blood, but it was, he knew, a fever of the heart. This skin would become flesh and blood in his hands. He was a chalice filled to the brim with love, and he alone possessed the skill

to make that love real. By Saturday morning the skin atop the mannequin was complete and without blemish. He ran his hands over the perfect material, sensing the warp of the fibres as though they were pores, and David shivered with delight. The skin fitted every contour perfectly, revealing a proportioned ideal of womankind, full of breast and slim of waist. He could not rest yet, however. As perfect as the skin might be it was still many hours and days away from being his darling girl.

Where before David might have sought out alcoholic remedies for his nocturnal restlessness now he revelled in the fever of work. The only time that he left the flat was to buy threads and cottons. He spent nearly twenty-four hours embroidering just one eyebrow. She would take time and effort and skill to complete, all of which David devoted to her making without care or thought for his own state. He embroidered full lips of ruby red, eyes of a deep, longing brown, toes that were flawless, fingers that were slender and golden, and ears that were faultless and delicate. He spent days bent over an embroidery hoop, barely remembering to drink the meanest cup of water or to eat even the most frugal morsel. Every ounce of David's energy, every luminescent molecule of his soul, fed this unbridled passion. He was determined, come Hell or high-water, that he would create the perfect woman, the ultimate partner in life.

It took almost three weeks of the most painstaking work to complete the embroidery, to carefully add elements to the skin that would enhance her beauty, and finally to make the prefect little black dress for her to wear. By the end of his labours, David was blindly in love with his fabulously fake creation, seeing in her weave and in every stitch the embodiment of everything that he could never be close to in the flesh of real life.

He spoke with her about love and truth and timeless bliss, imagining her voice as a soft and sultry summer night's whisper. He sat at her feet, gazing up into her embroidered mannequin eyes, and wept quiet tears for such beauty. In his heart he also wept because he knew that there was no such thing as a fairy god mother, no matter how much he wished it, no matter how loudly he wailed and pleaded. He suddenly remembered the words of the gambling man in his dream, a dream that seemed to exist in another lifetime. There was no soul. There would be no miracle. He would never meet his own Jiminy Cricket, nor would his darling girl ever come to life. For weeks David had denied this one simple fact while lost in the fever of creation, but now that this simulacrum of love stood rigid above him, he had to admit the truth, and with that admission the last of his strength began to drip away.

But there was yet one decision that David had to make. He understood that if he were to die for love, he would leave the girl standing as cold as stone in his flat, and that would never do. He had to find a way for them to be together, if not in this mortal world, then together in spirit, as one being within the eternal flame. Slowly David rose to his feet and, with the world swimming in black spots, he reached out and leaned on his work chair. Gradually the close horizons of his little working world steadied and he managed to focus. Where would they go, he asked himself? Where could they go? David was so tired and so run down and so exhausted of life that he really couldn't think clearly. Every spin of the cog wheels in his brain drained him of precious energy, so he took a decision. They would trust to Lady Luck.

Although rigid, the mannequin body was light. Without putting on shoes or coat, David picked up his darling girl, manoeuvred her down the stairs to the street door, and stepped out into a foreign world. When last he'd been out it was autumn and blustery but still warm. The world around him now was white and thick and diamond

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, whittling 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.

"With the complements of the Marchese, and he asks will you join him for a few moments as he wishes to offer you his congratulations?"

Raised eyebrows. Neither Dan nor Jen could think of anything to say but yes. Everyone had been so kind on this, their first trip to the Greek islands, and now this?

"We should get married more often", quipped Dan as he nodded his agreement to the proposal, stood and, hand in hand with his wife, manoeuvred through the tables and made his way to where the Marchese sat.

An awkward moment followed. With the Marchese sat on the sofa the young lovebirds would have to separate. The choice would be whether one of them joined the Marchese on the sofa or not, and neither of them were quite sure what the etiquette might be. The word Marchese certainly sounded posh. The problem was solved by a simple flourish of the hand and a softly spoken word.

"Please, forgive me. Move the chairs, Antonio".

The Moor stepped out of the shadows, filling the air with masculinity. He moved both armchairs so that the couple could sit opposite the Marchese.

"Again, please forgive my intrusion into your evening", the old man began, his voice remaining solid but light. There was the merest hint of something Italianate in his speech, but of the most urbane and metropolitan variety. "They tell me you are on honeymoon. Bella. Such a wonderful thing. It is many years sadly since my first luna di liele."

Queer, thought Jen, but sweet. Such a nice thing to do. "It is wonderful. Everyone's been so kind. Thank you for the drink."

She and Dan both raised their brandy bowls, sniffed the perfume of seven stars and took a sip, feeling the smooth warmth of the liquid coating their throats and gullets.

"Mmm, thanks", Dan mumbled, slightly embarrassed by the whole thing.

"Ah, I see it in your eyes. It is strange. What are you supposed to do? What is a polite moment to spend with an old man before you rush off to make love?"

Dan and Jen floundered.

"No matter. Just a few minutes. So, you are very much in love?"

What an odd question, thought Dan. "Well, yes...obviously. We've just got married."

"You would think so", said the Marchese leaning forward a little, "but not always. There are many reasons to get married. In my time I have seen people marry for love, but I have also seen them marry for money and power, sometimes even for spite. Ah! But, the eyes again. It is love."

With that he raised his own glass and toasted the young English couple.

"I will tell you something that might help. I am an old man, much older than you might think. I am the lost son of the House of Montolfini. There are those who say that it was I who taught Cesare Borgia his charm, but that is not true. Cesare was always charming, but they were difficult times, and in such times we men must be sometimes savage. I once met Il Duce. Now, he was, forgive me, a pompous prick, but then so are many people who seek power. What do such things mean for you? Well, it means that I have seen much of the world and with it many, many marriages. What I tell you now was true then and is true for you today. Tell me, what are your jobs?"

Dan sat back in his chair, still holding Jen's hand. He swilled the brandy round the bowl and thought for a moment. They're always selling something. Still, the brandy was good and there could be little harm in a conversation that ends with the word no, even if the old boy did reek of cologne and ancient leather handbags.

"I work in a garage, mechanic, Toyota's mainly." He said, and paused, letting Jen speak.

She smiled sweetly at the old duffer. "Thomas Cook. I'm a travel agent."

The old man returned Jen's smile, revealing tobacco stained teeth. "Good jobs, honest work, but the money is not always so good. It can be a bit of a struggle, I suppose. And that is the point. Love does not last forever, not as you know it now. The lucky ones discover friendship and when you are true friends then love can last. But with a hard working life it can be difficult to keep together. You struggle, you work, you get tired, you make mistakes, all changes and you wake up one day and you don't know why you are together. It is life. What is also true is that too much money, too much of anything brings unhappiness as well. Look at me. I smoke like a chimney, no?"

The Marchese downed the last of his Martini and nodded to the boy behind the bar for a refill. He looked at Dan and then Jen, but both declined a further drink.

"I know. You are eager to be off and when I was your age I was the same. Such a long time ago, I think."

Dan was intrigued. Just how old was the man. "If it's not rude to ask, how old are you?"

"Some might think it rude. Not I. I prefer not to say exactly, but I will tell you that my age needs three figures. It is safe to say that I am over one hundred years old. I should have quit the cigars, but I think now they can do no more harm."

He paused to say thank you to the waiter who put a new glass down on the table and cleared away the Marchese's spent tumbler.

"So, my young lovers, this is my proposal."

Here it comes, thought Dan, and he squeezed Jen's hand tightly for a moment before he swilled down the remains of his brandy. She put her half full glass on the table. This was going to be the time-share moment.

The old man uncrossed his legs and leaned forward across the coffee table. A whiff of stale tobacco and wet earth followed him. The lights above his head seemed to shimmer, as if a small black cloud had just floated past. As Dan and Jen shivered slightly, their teeth inexplicably on edge, the old man spoke once more in a soft voice that yet carried diamond sharp edges.

"I am rich. Very rich. For just one thing I will give you a monthly income for the rest of your lives together, enough for you not to struggle, but not too much so that you are spoiled. I will take away your hardships and your worries so that you can find the friendship that makes love last forever. It is a promise. For this I want a simple thing. I want to watch you make love for one night before you leave Crete. I am an old man. One more time before I die I want to remember what love is. There, that is it."

He sat back, took a sip of his Martini, placed a new cigar in the cigar holder and, after the Moor had provided a match, the Marchese waited, wreathed in blue curls of smoke.

In his surprise and disgust Dan nearly crushed the empty brandy balloon that he was still holding in his left hand. Jen, too, sat back with wide eyes and an open, mouth. Neither one of them could believe what the old pervert had just asked.

Before Dan could summon the words to describe his absolute horror at the suggestion, the old man beckoned the Moor out from the shadows.

"You don't decide now. Think it over. Antonio will return here in two nights, that is Monday. Meanwhile, as a token of honesty, I give you this whether you say yes or no"

He clicked his spindle boned fingers and the Moor placed two cigar packet sized jewellery boxes on the table, one in front of Jen, the other in front of Dan. He opened them and turned them so that they could see the contents. Bracelets. Finely wrought lovers entwined. Gold. Solid gold.

"Say nothing. Take them. Antonio will be here in two nights."

The Marchese leaned back and puffed on his cigar. He neither smiled nor frowned, but simply gazed out at the night sky.

By now Dan had regained his sense of righteous propriety. He stood up quickly, toppling the whicker armchair backwards. Jen rose too, still dumbfounded. Dan took one look at the Moor and decided that maybe discretion would be appropriate just this once.

"We won't be back. Thank you for the brandy, but we don't want your trinkets or anything to do with you."

He pulled Jen out of the taverna as fast as he could, out into the road and across to an empty lot where he could breathe. How dare that man...

"Do you believe that?" he asked, feeling his heart beat a thousand times against his heaving rib cage. "I mean, the bloody nerve of the man."

Jen wiped the sweat away from his brow with the back of her hand. She waited a moment before she spoke. "It's over. That creepy bastard isn't coming anywhere near us. Let's just go home, Dan, please, just take me home."

They couldn't make love that night. Instead they both lay there in the shadows, feeling the heat of Cretan summer, thinking about the old man and what he had said. They held hands in silence for an hour. They paced out onto the balcony. They got up around four and went to the beach just to listen to the timeless roll of the waves. Slowly they found a calmness that unwound the knots in their stomachs, and they breathed good Cretan air once again.

After walking to the far rocks and back they both agreed that it was time for a cup of tea, so they headed back to their room around six, just as the first curls of the snapdragon dawn appeared. There, on the threshold to their room they found two jewellery cases, each one containing a solid gold bracelet depicting entwined lovers. On the reverse of each was a name. Their own name. A card propped against the door said simply, *For You*.

For the next two days both Dan and Jen drifted through a haze of half started conversations and listless love making. Their thoughts brimmed over with the words, the sight of and the smells of that old man. They stole glances at the bracelets. They snapped at each other, only to remember again who they were at night, when they held each other for safe keeping. As Sunday burned out and languid night spun the world towards Monday, they began to talk about the old man's offer, and more importantly, they began to wonder about love. Could it always be the same? Would they toil and wear themselves out in their mean little jobs, and in so doing would they forget what they had now?

Over Monday's breakfast, over lunch and throughout the afternoon, as they tried to laze on sun loungers by the hotel pool they desperately tried to block the coming evening from their thoughts. They barely spoke, and their entwined fingers sat alone on their chests. This was Hell. Eventually Jen could stand it no more and wandered over to the pool bar. She ordered two large beers, took them back to where Dan still lay, and she sat next to him on the same sun lounger.

"We've got to talk, love. This bloody thing is killing us. It's ruining what's supposed to be our honeymoon."

Dan rolled over onto his side and looked at his darling girl. She was right. "I know. I'm scared. I'm scared that we'll say yes 'cos then it's done with and we're safe and we've got his money. If we get his money."

Jen nodded. She looked like a rabbit in a lamper's spotlight. She could see the cross hairs and hear the fatal click of the firing pin. "We've both been thinking it all day, haven't we? Could we actually do it? Could we sell ourselves now to be happy forever? And you know what? He's right. It's sick, but he's right. He's old. He wants to remember. He doesn't want to die forgetting about love."

She took a sip from her beer. The condensation dribbled down her fingers. She felt, now that she was voicing her private thoughts, as though the weight of the world were being lifted from her shoulders. Something about the idea actually excited her.

"It's like care in the community if you think about it. Like those porn flicks we watched at your brothers when we baby sat, all those people in the same room. Only it would just be him and us and he couldn't do anything."

Dan sat up and took two large slugs of his beer. The cool liquid running down his gullet made him shiver but it cleared his head. "One condition. That bloody servant of his stays well out of it. I want him on the other side of a locked and bolted door."

Jen smiled. Their hands found their natural space in the universe. "Right then, lets finish these, pop upstairs for a shower and, well, get ready for show time, I suppose. It will be alright, won't it?"

"So long as the bastard keeps his word. Otherwise I'll rip his head off, servant or no friggin' servant."

They dressed slowly that evening, with Jen taking as long as she could over her hair and make-up. They exchanged few words, but then they had no need to. The nervous energy that sparked between them whenever they looked into each other's eyes said it all. Suited and booted, they both looked like a million dollars, with their tans crisp and brown and complementing their gold bangles superbly. They glittered as they walked down the street to that same taverna.

As they entered the proprietor muttered imprecations to the Agioi Deka, the ten saints of the island, and then, sadly, he showed them to a table tucked away at the back of taverna. For the rest of the evening they picked at their food, constantly adjusted the bangles, each on their right wrist, while waiters and bar tenders whispered and shook their heads.

Shortly before half-past nine, with the lovers on their third large Metaxa, the black leviathan Mercedes pulled up outside the taverna. This time the Moor opened the rear door but did not help the old Marchese out. Instead he waited for the couple to get in. As they rose from table and offered to pay their bill the taverna owner simply shook his head. On the house. They walked out of the taverna and climbed into the back of the car, sitting back in deep leather comfort as the Moor drove them not to their hotel but up into the hills and the Marchese's old, white-washed Kastro, where the ancient one was waiting for them. The houses and tavernas and bright lights of the coastal strip streamed by for some minutes before the Moor turned across the main road and started to climb up into the hills of Western Crete. All was silent amid the gnarled olive and lemon groves.

Once at the Kastro, they were shown into a simple drawing room, a room of bare, polished floorboards, white washed walls and simple, rustic furniture. The old man was sitting at a desk against the far wall where a large window opened out onto his herb garden. The sweet fragrance of thyme and basil filled the room. The old man

did not rise. Instead he continued to peruse a document set before him. After some minutes of pregnant silence he reached for a pen and then spoke as he signed his name.

"I knew you would come", the old man said. "You young ones almost always do. Here I am. Here I sit and make the arrangements first so that you know my word is true. Antonio will now leave us, but he will return in the morning to take you back to your hotel. There are only we three."

"This is a mark of my trust. This signature is a mark of my honesty. With this you will receive the sum of three thousand pounds each month for as long as you both live and love and stay married. I will even take inflation into account. It is not enough to live like a prince, but it will take away the life of the pauper. Here, young man, take this copy and keep it safe. It is my promise to you both that I give you the chance to find that friendship which makes love last. Now, enough talk. I see that you have had a drink or two from your eyes. That is good. Shall we retire?"

Dan walked over to the desk and looked at the document. The old man's signed copy was in Italian, but his was translated into English. Instructions to a bank in Rome. Good enough, he thought. Dan showed the paper to Jen, who nodded.

He then turned back to the old man and said, "Okay, we're here. There's definitely just us three?"

"I give you my word, which I have kept throughout this bargain." The old man replied rising from his chair. "Come, this way."

He led them up a flight of stairs to a large and softly lit bedroom, where candles placed on every flat surface gave the room an almost faery glow. In the centre of the room there was an ornate, carved wooden bed, and to one side of it there was a divan upholstered in the plushest red velvet. The old man seated himself, crossing his legs as he had done so nonchalantly at the taverna, lit one of his cigars and smiled at them.

"Please, begin..."

And so they did. They had discussed over dinner how the show would go. Their every move was slow and sensuous, from the unbuttoning of a shirt, to the mutually arousing foreplay, and then into the act of penetration. As the heat in the room rose, as they both moved languorously towards their climax, and as the sweat on their firm young bodies gleamed in the candle light, they adopted poses and positions designed to give the old goat a real eyeful. This was pornography, not love making, but what else could the man expect.

For his part the old man sat impassive, chain smoking throughout the couple's union, until, just as they began the last violent thrusts of fire rimmed ardour, just as they lost their sense of time and place and became one writhing creature on that carved wooden bed, the old man rose from the divan quietly and walked slowly up to the bed.

He watched. He salivated. The boy arched his back and drove down on the girl, who responded, letting her own orgasm flood through her, and as they both reached that point of exhausted satiation, the old man bent down, placed his head on the bed next to them and flicked out a long, reptilian, rasping tongue to lick at the conjoined sweat pooling at their bellies.

Never have two young lovers recoiled from one another so abruptly. Both Dan and Jen hurled themselves off the bed and ran to the opposite corners of the room, huddling down in their nakedness, trying to meld with the walls and the floor in their utter disgust and morbid fear. They whimpered and sobbed as the old man rose up to his full height and let their sweat trickle down his tongue and into his open maw.

As he tasted them, so the walls and furnishings of the room faded and ripped, revealing a shabby hovel of a place that reeked of decay and mould. Plaster flaked from the walls before their eyes, and there in the centre of the room by a bed now rotted and wormed to dust stood a beautiful Italian nobleman. The Marchese stood six feet tall, broad and lithe, sporting a neatly clipped goatee beard. His jacket and pantaloons shone crimson in the candle light. At his side there hung a sabre the scabbard for which was decorated with the most ornate scroll work.

He laughed out loud and then, hands on his hips, he said, "I am a man of my word, a word that has been honoured since the time of the Medici. I am a Marchese, of the House of Montolfini, and I have lived twenty lifetimes, my children. Thank you for your gift that will help, that will let me lead another such life. Antonio will return in the morning. Now I leave you. It is done. Enjoy your life together and..."

Here he paused, savouring the taste of their tainted love. As he strode out of the room, chuckling softly, he added under his breath, "Cesare, my old friend, you would be proud, no?"

By the door he stopped and turned, looking first at Dan and then Jen. The bold cavalier faded from view, aging and decaying before their eyes to become once again the wizened and leathery Marchese. The room drifted through gauze to resume its former glory. The Marchese flicked out his long tongue to moisten his thin dry lips.

"Think of me if you find that friendship that makes love last. Yes...think of me, your friend, the Marchese Montolfini, if ever you make love again."

The Mechanic's Curse

Sunday September 19th 2010.

Sir,

(or Madam, although if you are the first to find this note at such a late hour and in this place, please do be careful)

My jacket you have already found, and in it this note, which is not my will, for there is nothing left to bestow, so let us call the document a testament or a caution, if you would prefer. For my part, I certainly call it the latter.

Although the impulse to write this was born some time ago and some way from here, I've often visited this spot in recent days and the leap of faith required by me in leaving this note is no greater than that which you must make when reading it. I was first drawn to this particular spot one afternoon when walking west towards the end of all land. I noticed the signs on the bridge suggesting that those in need call the Samaritans. For your part I hope you never have recourse to such help. In my own case, I am some way beyond the price of a telephone call – in fact, in every way imaginable.

Please do not look over the edge. The Bideford bridge is high and makes for the strongest sensation of vertigo, and depending on when you find this note, there may still be what is left of my body in the narrows of the tidal drain. Do not worry. This body was broken long ago. All I do tonight is return to my constituent parts. And that is enough, I suppose. I have made my statement and backed it with the ultimate inaction – that is to simply let myself fall and to do nothing. I wish to do nothing about the inevitable consequence of such a choice. If only it were always that simple.

In short I have found peace at last. Could I have gone on in time and distance from here? No, I could not. Irrevocably, not. But such a bald statement, though true, leaves out the cause, and for that I must write down the circumstances of my life...so that you may understand the cautionary nature of my words and then, when the inevitable time comes for you, maybe you will resist temptation too.

At age eighteen I was like any one of you who reads this story at whatever point in the cycle of analysis and discovery that is bound to follow, be you the walker on the bridge, a member of the police, a paramedic, a coroner, a journalist, or even simply a reader of a local newspaper. My name is, or was, James, Jimmy to my friends back then. The rest of the details are in my wallet, also in the jacket hanging on the bridge, unless my primary discoverer has no heart.

Mine was a perfectly ordinary childhood. Born in thirty-six, sufficiently late between the wars to be able to fight in neither one of them, I watched most of the blitz, all of the inventive rationing, the later convoys heading south, and finally the black rimmed eyes of the widow through a child's direct but uncomprehending gaze. By forty-five I was nine years old, full of spitfires and heroes, no more so than when my father returned to our home from France. Although I always fancied him so, he was never a heroically injured pilot. He returned to me with both of his legs and his worst scar was from an accident with a welding torch. He was, as he often said down at the legion bar, just an ordinary Joe, a jobbing mechanic working on tanks, the Churchill if memory serves, but for me that was the year that my life began. I instantly adored anything mechanical from that point on in my life.

In all this I'm not saying that my mother and the collection of sundry aunts, and latterly Uncle Chuck, didn't do a wonderful job bringing me up in the hardest of times. Of course they did. It's just that everything changed when my father got home from the war. I mean everything. My first taste of real hostilities wasn't the whizz of a doodlebug or the hospital train unloading casualties fresh from battle. The ugly truth about war came to me when my father took a strong dislike to my mother's collection of nylons and the new fangled way that she did her hair. Bar one spell of leave between Africa and Italy, the old man had been away for four years nearly and I think mother had simply had enough of living her life in that seemingly permanent holding pattern between the hero's return and the black edged telegram. That's what he thought, too, so by forty-seven, by mutual agreement, I was living with the old man in Brentford.

My father got a job down at the old Trico factory on the Great West where they made windscreen wipers and similar accessories for what were still then essentially pre-war cars, and we two settled into mid-terraced obscurity. Being skilled with pretty much anything metal or mechanical, my father was soon in demand around the streets backing on to Griffin Park, fixing this and mending that, and as the post-war boom brought cars onto our streets, both he and I took to doing services and repairs to make a few extra bob, enough, in fact for the old man to come home proudly one evening in May fifty-two with a battered old Austin Seven. It took us four months, an entire summer as I recall, but we got the old girl ship shape, and by the time I was eighteen and working at Trico myself as an apprentice fitter, I was a chip off the old block. There was nothing better in life, for me anyway, than skin coated in grease right down to the whorls, bar maybe a rare Third Division South victory for the Bees. I was a practically shy lad, and nothing much has changed over the years. Cars and football were my entire raison d'être back then. It was a different

time in a different century. We hadn't had the sixties and the rest of it to twist things round.

Fifty-four is a bad number. My unlucky number. It's the year that counts. For Napoleon it was eighteen twelve. I was eighteen in nineteen fifty-four and the old man was off drinking one Saturday lunch-time down at the legion with a couple lads from his old regiment. That spring we'd built a little garage in our back yard and I was sitting in the shade under its corrugated tin roof because it was one of those early summer days when the sky was blue and no one yet wore shorts and flip-flops. When I say garage, it was more a sort of lean to. We'd roofed over the old courtyard and knocked a double garage door in the rear wall so we could bring the odd car under shelter via the back passage. You couldn't do it now, not with cars the size they are and planning, but everything was smaller then, including the regulations.

As I remember I'd just done the brakes on the old Austin, had nipped inside to get a glass of water, and was then sitting on a pile of old tyres that we used to keep one of the doors from swinging shut. There was a knock on the door frame. I looked up and there he was, lounging against the door-frame like a young Clark Gable, and oh so dapper. Spats, I think, and a broad pin-stripe, with his jacket slung over his back, a well proportioned man, with a smile that could cut chiffon in mid-air float. He was chewing American gum. He offered me a piece. He even had a slight Southern drawl, just a hint of Tara, to go with that pencil thin moustache and film star grin.

"So, you're the guy round here fixes things, right?" he asked

I was eighteen. It was nineteen fifty-four. I was reticent at the best of times. I just looked at him dumbly. He stood there leaning against the workshop door, just smiling at me, and then he shook his head.

"Sorry, kid. I guess I want your Pa."

He fished inside his jacket pocket and took out a crisp white card. No name. Just a telephone number. Kew, I believe.

"Get him to give me a call. You are on the phone, right?"

I summoned up the energy to nod just enough to confirm that we could phone him. We didn't have a phone, not then, nor a television, but we could always use the dog in the legion. Where a bit of extra cash was concerned the old man always drummed it into me that we say yes and worry about the actual job later.

"Okay. Get him to give me a call. Could have some work for him. Good work, if you know what I mean. An old Lagonda."

I should have asked him to leave then but I didn't. The thought of a real life Lagonda in pieces all around me was a small moment of contemplative heaven. He hung around, kicking at a couple of loose stones amid the cobbles. He let rip another smile, a huge fire-glow of a smile.

"Shy, huh? Me too, back along. Tell me one thing, kid, what do you dream of? What's your fantasy?"

I sat there, as mute as the sun was high. What did he want? I tried to think of something earth shattering. Brentford beating Arsenal in the FA Cup, maybe? No. He'd asked me what I really dreamed about. The stuff of my dreams was all around me; wrenches, a small lathe, screwdrivers, spanners, cylinder heads and grease guns. Machines were what I dreamed about, the sort that Dan Dare might fly, machines that could leap tall buildings, machines that would make the world of tomorrow.

Remember, this was the mid-fifties and we were just beginning to see the possibilities. This was a time of speculation. We hadn't quite go to Sputnik, but there were plenty of dreams; flying cars, nuclear power, rockets to the moon, the Mekon. My head was full of it. I never read anything remotely uplifting or literary, but I did

read and re-read back copies of Practical Mechanic, The Auto and The Eagle, anything that showed you the improbable certainty of the future or how to fix the here and now. I surprised myself with how bright and bold I sounded when I answered him in one long torrent.

"I dream machines. I mean, that's what really happens. Before you knocked on the door and asked for my Dad, I was imagining what I called the Autocopter. Instead of a flying car with wings, which would be bloody useless round here, what if it could jump into the sky like a fly. I was reading about it, the army are doing that sort of thing, and what if we could do it here. Well, not here, there's not enough room, but Gunnersbury Park, perhaps, and everybody lands on the roof of where they work. You could..."

"Hey, kid, enough", cut in the gentleman at the door. "I get the picture. Okay. So, here's a thought. What would you pay for the ability to do just that, to be able to dream machines and then see them become real?

Quick as a flash I answered him from the bottom of my heart. "Anything!"

"You sure?" he asked, switching instantly to a stern and serious look, as if he had stepped into shadow. "Take a moment. You're absolutely sure?"

Right there, right then I knew exactly what I wanted. It was a perfect summer day, I was on my own, something I always found easy, surrounded by the world I knew, and it was so obvious. It was as though he were the child and I the hard-nosed grifter.

"Yes. Anything!" I said defiantly.

"Done deal, kid. That nuclear smile lit up his face again. "And tell you're Pa to call me. See you around some day. Be good."

With that he turned smartly on his heel and walked off towards the bottom of the back lane, heading for the main road, whistling Greensleeves as he swished the jacket hanging over his shoulder like a horse's tail.

Now, it would be wrong to let you think that there were any sudden great revelations, or epiphanic manifestations, nor was there any blinding flash of light and puff of smoke. When I say I wanted to dream machines, it is also true that I wanted to eat ice-cream, go to the Lyons Coffee House with Tom Miller from next door, sneak a pint outside the legion with the old man, and fix broken crank-shafts. I was like you and a million other kids just emerging into the world. I went to work. I ate, I drank, I slept and slowly but surely went from boy to man.

The funny thing was that when on the odd occasion I did sit and day-dream a machine or a new tool or some flight of mechanical fancy, then after that little moment of reverie I found that I could read a fully detailed cyanotype from within my head. I had an actual blueprint of the thing, whatever it was, stored away up top, complete with every aspect of the design such as geometry, dimensions, tolerances, materials and finishes.

The old man did eventually get round to calling the stranger on our doorstep but oddly the number wasn't listed. All told, that was that. I saw my mother once a week. I finished my apprenticeship, did my National Service for the fly-boys and then started out as a full-time employee at Trico. I dated a couple of girls for a while, both of them Tom's cast-offs, hung around in the background at the odd dance at the Hammersmith Palais, and really just did the normal stuff that everyone back then did. I dreamed the odd dream and filed the plans away, never thinking that there would be anything different in my world. I was always going to be my Father's son.

Then one afternoon at work everything started to change. We had a problem with a metal press, an old pre-war monster that should have been pensioned off with

then 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 it's 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 redesign 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 prime val 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 of 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..."

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, buggered. 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," 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

toilet rolls should be, they skipped and floated on the very fabric of the universe. The cares of the mortal world simply fell away, and all that Cat could feel now was the unending cycle of life portrayed in the music. She thrilled at the touch of this creature who could charm the stars into existence as though he were dressing a Christmas tree. She felt utterly and divinely fantastical. Her heart raced with the pure emotion of this wondrous and amazing gift from a stranger for whom, right at this moment, she would give her life.

Minutes sped by. The waltz continued without time, almost without end, but as with all perfection, it can only ever last for the briefest moment. The gambling man slowed his pace, drew close, pressing his body into hers and as the music faded he kissed her. There was no blinding display of fireworks. There were no marching bands, no ticker tape parades, no gushing fountains of love. There was just the warmth of his lips on hers and the definite imprint of his being there.

Slowly Cat unwound herself from his embrace and stepped back a little from him. The stars twinkled out one by one to be replaced by a flimsy, whimsy of strip light. The aisles filled again with every kind of produce. The hustle and bustle of the two-for-one offer resumed, and through it all Cat breathed hard and fast. Her dress faded back into her everyday clothes and the jewels sparkled once more, briefly, before drifting out of this world. Only he remained, holding her hand, squeezing her fingers gently to ease the pain of the parting.

"Oh my God...Oh my God," panted Cat. She could say no more. Behind her the mother and daughter were carrying on the bunion conversation as if nothing at all had happened.

The gambling man released her hand and quietly but firmly manoeuvred Cat's shopping trolley back into position in front of her. He smiled and then frowned, shaking his head as he said, "See what I mean. You found Heaven. Shopping will never be a chore again. There is one little thing, though."

Now he looked ever so slightly apologetic.

"The small print and all that. I probably should've mentioned this at the outset but, well, you know how it is. You get a bit carried away with it all, and you being so lovely."

That million candle smile.

"The price. This is Tesco, after all. We never discussed the price, did we?"

Cat tried to think, but she really couldn't remember. Her head was still spinning with the waltz, her blood still racing with his touch. She looked at him blankly but happily.

"No...no, I don't think we did", she whispered.

"Not much, a trifle really", he said as he backed away towards the aisle with the potions, lotions and vitamins. He turned to walk away, looking back over his shoulder and grinned again as he said, "A soul. Just one tiny little soul."

With that he was gone. Cat tried to make sense of his words. Did he mean her soul? That couldn't be right. She pushed her trolley down the aisle and turned into the one that he had disappeared down but there was no Clark Gable look-a-like perusing the ginseng. Her soul. She felt a moment of terror flood through her, but then, just as quickly she thought about their conversation, thought about what he had said to her at the beginning. Heaven and Hell were human. What on earth could a soul cost, then?

She began to laugh, quietly at first but with every tremor, with every rib tickled, the laugh grew until she let forth a cannonade of mirth right in the middle of a knot of grim faced mothers. It was worth it after all, she thought, as she pushed her

trolley at the lead woman of the pack, turned on her heel and marched out of the store. She was going to the pub.

"Why the bloody hell not!" she said out loud to a sour faced septuagenarian by the entrance, and as she did so the public address system roared into life. Against a soundscape of Johannes Sebastian's finest Viennese swirls she heard a familiar voice.

"And just to say a real thank you, Cat, my darling, I'll make Dad's bunion operation really, really painful. Be seeing you, babe..."

Nine Lives

Looking at the house from the old the old stone pillars that still held the front drive gates fast and tight, the meadow and the once gravelled drive up to the old pile looked as though they had been left untended for a century. Where he remembered a tree lined sward of thick pasture to the left of a drive penned comfortingly in by a solid wooden stock fence, and a straight run up to the house lined on the right with poplars, he now saw tangle and mess. Brambles as tall as a shire horse smothered the field, roaming at will, laying their tendrils to earth and sprouting back up in a cat's cradle of thorn and rotting berry. In those patches of ground yet to fall under the dominion of the fromboise assault, there stood man-size thistles and towering clumps of nettle, as erect and hostilely on guard as the brambles were chaotic and malevolent.

The drive lay broken and twisted, with roots breaking through the once pristine canal of Cotswold stone. Here again great tufts of undergrowth were plaiting barricades against the outside world. One of the aged poplars had crashed down across the drive, acting as a second line of defence, a reserve trench, behind which he suspected there were more thorny warriors waiting for him. The gates themselves were rusted beyond hope of opening, fused together at hinge and at lock, clinging to the crumbling stone pillars for dear life. It won't be long, he thought, before they come crashing down.

As for the house not even the slowly setting August sun could bathe it in a sympathetic light. The little that he could see of the place through the shadows seemed to suggest that it was covered in Russian vine and honeysuckle and, here and there, monstrous liana fronds of brilliant white clematis. The house was collapsing under the weight of its own floral winding sheet, using vegetation as a shield against man and the elements. He could see swathes of missing roof tiles, and the ridge itself bowed at one end. The Victorian solidity of brick and stone was finally giving way to the elemental decay endemic in the twenty-first century.

"My God", he said to himself. "She's really let the place go. Still, Mary's right. We need to think about the future. She's getting on a bit, is old Aunt Billie."

Johnny Hester-Siddeley wandered back to the Range Rover parked a little down the lane and just out of sight of the house, and considered what to do next. Should he hack his way up to the house or should he perhaps try the old farm track leading up to the back yard. Judging by the state of the once publicly presentable side of the house, God alone knows what that's going to be like, he thought. He decided that rather than end up covered in scratches and have his Harris Tweed ripped and pulled to shreds, he would try the tradesman's entrance. Aunt Billie might not be up to much, but surely at her advanced age she must have some way of letting the health Johnnies and meals on wheels ladies onto the premises.

He gunned the V8 and spat stones against the crumbling dry stone wall that marked the boundary of Aunt Billie's little estate. The black four-by-four growled slowly down the lane, following a left hand bend as the road wound down and along

the far edge of what had once been North Euston Manor Farm, until he found a break in the hedgerow. There was a relatively new looking wooden five-bar gate set between the stone walls that backed the hedges, and although the track showed no signs of any other recent maintenance, it was at least clear all the way up the back of the house. In fact, as Johnny jumped out of the car and unhitched the gate, he saw that the back meadow and the old orchard didn't actually look too bad. Maybe, he thought, she just can't manage it all anymore.

Aunt Billie was an interesting old bat. She wasn't exactly a blood relative, more a giggling compadre from his mother's finishing school days, where they had became a bosom chums during the social whirl of the nineteen fifties and all that debutante nonsense. Johnny's mother ended up marrying a cousin of the then youthful and engaging Billie Tuke-Hastings, but the direct line of this once numerous family of minor Gloucestershire gentry were all now long under the sod, and Johnny could lay claim to be the sole legal heir.

His mother and Aunt Billie had kept in reasonably close contact for the twenty years until Johnny's mother fell prey to an untimely maternal death, and he remembered as a young boy the occasional visit to the farm, memories filled with lemonade on the front lawn where now the brambles reigned supreme. In his memory it was always summer, always hot, and the beautifully manicured roses filled the air with perfume.

Aunt Billie, unfortunately, struggled when it came to men, and now she was eighty years old if she was a day, alone and surely decrepit, an old maid who had spent her best years looking after a sot of a brother and two inevitably ailing parents. Johnny remembered cats. He was a dog man himself.

He squeezed the Range Rover through the narrow gate, jumped out to close the gate behind him, and then drove slowly along the track and up to the house. From a distance the rear of the old farmhouse did not look too bad but now that Johnny had parked up and run his experienced eye over the place he felt more than a little dismayed. The roof would need completely replacing, the windows were rotten, the guttering was shot to hell, the pointing was in a dreadful state of repair, and all in all he wondered whether it might not be easier to clear the site and rebuild.

"God alone knows what the inside is like", he muttered. "Still, a good plot like this on the edge of a chintzy Cotswold village should fetch a whacking price whatever state it's in."

His wife, Mary, was right when she said that he couldn't leave the place to go to rack and ruin, and as Johnny was now the old girl's last kith and kin surely they deserved a little something for all their efforts. Johnny couldn't quite put his finger on what those efforts had been over the years, but nonetheless he saw no point in missing an opportunity to do both him and his aged aunt a mutual favour. It was serendipity, he thought, that no sooner had his wife mentioned the old girl, than she had telephoned asking him to attend on her at five o'clock sharp this very day.

The stable door to the kitchen was open at the top and he poked his head into the gloom within. "Hello", he shouted. "Anyone there?"

Silence.

Johnny waited for a moment or two to see if the old dear needed time to hobble from her lair deep in the bowels of the house, but not a breath of air moved. He pulled the latch on the bottom half of the door, swung the door open and was about to enter the kitchen, but before he could go any further a crisp voice rang out behind him.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you, sonny!"

Johnny froze. It was the sort of voice that aimed a double barrel shotgun at one's head. He turned slowly, feeling rather sheepish as he raised his hands only to see a short but still hearty little old lady in a bright blue-green twin-set standing next to his shiny black car with a shovel in her hand. She looked entirely capable of lifting the shovel, and Johnny knew instinctively that even were she not capable she would make the effort, just for him, just this once. He recognised Aunty Billie at once. She wore her now white hair long rather than in that typical blue-rinsed perm, stood strongly and firmly for one of her advancing years and still had that bright green gaze that he remembered from his youth. She was a little rounder now, but she was still gracefully menacing. He switched to estate agent mode; smile, offer your hand, ooze sincerity.

"Aunty, it's me, Johnny. You remember, Christina's little boy? Christina Hester. Married your cousin, Max Siddeley. It's me, Aunty, Johnny Hester-Siddeley. You asked me to pop over."

He took a step forward, his hand outstretched and ready for a hearty welcome.

"Lemonade on the lawn", he said, schmoozing for all that he was worth. "It's been a long time, I know, but business and families. Anyway, after your call I thought I'd do the honourable thing and come and see you, see how you are, see if you need anything."

Aunt Billie looked at him for a long moment and then snorted. She rested the shovel against the car door, the blade upright. She watched as the fattening fifty year old cove in front of her winced. Tweeds and smiles. I know your sort, she thought. She stepped forward, ignoring the proffered hand, and walked into the kitchen.

"So you're what became of Christina's boy! You're the grown up version of the little shit who ran amok in the rose garden and puked on Daddy's Dahlias. Stands to reason. Well, you'd better come in then. I make no apologies for the place. It's how I like it. You get to my age and you find that you don't give a flying fack about what other people think."

She cleared a space amongst the old newspapers and empty tins of cat food that littered a scarred and stained antique pine kitchen table, and pointing to a rickety old carver she said, "Sit!"

This was not quite the welcome that Johnny had expected, but he'd come across all sorts in his long career as a country estate agent. Half the gentry were utterly bats, while the other half were most definitely hairy on the inside. Mind you, he thought, rough or smooth, they're all wolves, the lot of them. He ran his tongue along his teeth. He was in her kitchen and she was making him a drink, which was all that really mattered. The trick to any transaction was to overcome the initial objection. It was the start he needed. He kept smiling, and assumed the relaxed, legs crossed, hands in lap pose of one who always mixed with the finest sort of people.

"So, Aunty, how've you been keeping all these years? He asked nonchalantly. "None of your fackin' business", was her almost joyful reply.

Enjoying the momentary discomfiture of her reluctantly invited guest, Aunt Billie busied herself filling the kettle from an ancient faucet that jutted from the wall under the kitchen window, the frame of which was as flaked and mildewed on the inside as it was rotten on the outside. The faucet juddered violently as the water gushed out. Billie sat the kettle on a black range cooker, the sort that should never be cleaned even though it relied entirely on solid fuel. Sooty dust motes took to the air as she put the kettle onto the warmer.

Aunt Billie dug around in a cupboard and found a particularly rank packet of Shrewsbury biscuits that she kept especially for visitors. After a few minutes of

awkward small talk the kettle whistled, hot water was poured, one tea bag sufficing for two mugs, a scraping of milk was added so that it could float in lumps on the surface of the tea, and with a tiny, eighty year old flourish she sat down opposite her would-be relation.

She smiled sweetly as she held out the plate of rancid biscuits and asked, "Biccie, Johnny?"

He blanched visibly but took one for forms sake. "Thanks, Aunty."

Johnny took a quick, almost furtive sip of the tea and nearly spat it out all over the table, but instead he managed to swallow it manfully and smile thinly. Despite the evidence of cats, namely the empty tins of food, scratch marks on the back of the door, and a very bald and tattered grey felt mouse lying by a pot rack next to the cooker, he could see none of the awful animals anywhere. There was also a distinct lack of fur balls blowing across the stone floor and, thank fully, no smell of musk or wee.

Johnny pointed at the tins littering the table and asked, "Cats? Can't see any of the little rascals anywhere, though. Got 'em all out mousing?"

She shrugged her shoulders and replied, "Must be, I suppose. I'm sure they're around somewhere."

There was another pause during which both of them tried to smile and failed, managing only to twitch facial muscles in a distinctly inhuman and alarming way. When Aunt Billie smiled Johnny noticed some rather pronounced canines, which sent a slight shiver down his spine. Good heavens, he thought, sipping more of the dreadful liquid in his mug, when on earth did she last see a dentist?

Billie rested her arm on the table and planted her feet firmly on the stone flags of the kitchen floor. "So, Johnny, what brings you to this neck of the woods?"

Johnny swapped his legs over, feeling the first glimmer of pins and needles pricking at his left ankle. "Well, Aunty, you did. The telephone call? Just wanted to make sure you're chipper and everything's alright, really. Often thought about you, and then realised it must be years since we caught up. The wedding actually. God, twenty years goes by so quickly, doesn't it, Aunty."

Aunt Billie leaned forward slightly and almost spat at him. "Does if you're left on your own to look after half-wits and invalids." She sat back again and looked him squarely in the eye. "Anyway it's all bollocks. You know it and I know it. Funny, recognised you as soon as I saw you peering in at the front gate. Could always tell a Siddeley. Spivs and con-men, the lot of them. Still, nice car, so you must be good at it."

She watched him as his cheeks puffed red. "So, let's not call a shovel a mattock, eh? You've turned up because you think I called you because I want to bridge the gulf between us and leave the house to you when I die? Didn't think you'd hang about once I made the call."

She leaned forward again, this time wagging a finger under his nose. Her eyes shone a brilliant feline green, as if they reflected the fire of the waning sun behind Johnny's shoulder. "Don't deny it. Can't stand people who shilly-shally. I'm not a fool you know. I might choose to live like a recluse but I'm still in touch with the world. Keep abreast, you know, keep myself informed. Got the internet for shopping and all that sort of thing. Just because a lady doesn't want to mix with people doesn't make her mad or smell like a vat of cat's pee. You see this skirt and jacket. Marks and Spencer. Delivered to my door. Whatsername, blonde woman, looked like a pipe-cleaner, not bad in The Boyfriend as I recall, she looked very good in it on their web site. Covered up her lumps and bumps and cellulite, so it'll do for me, I thought, and I

was right. And do you know what? I bought it so I could look someone like you in the eye and say fack orf. So, spit it out, Johnny, there's a good boy."

Billie slumped back in her chair and took a mouthful of the now thick and lukewarm tea. Unlike Johnny she did spit it out, all over her blue-green skirt. He flourished a handkerchief and offered to wipe. She nodded and closed her eyes for a moment, breathing hard. She seemed to have lost her sparkle all of a sudden, as though the effort of waiting for the visit and the offensive manoeuvres undertaken since his arrival had worn her out. Johnny felt just a little sorry for her.

Aunt Billie's voice was much softer now. "You're right though. No use denying it. I am getting old and this place is... a bit of a mess."

She pointed at Johnny's barely touched cup of tea. "Tell you what. Chuck that filth in the yard. In the cupboard on the wall behind you you'll find two glasses and a couple of bottles of single malt. Pick one and let's have a little drinkie and a proper chat."

Manna from heaven, thought Johnny. "Of course, Aunty, no problemo."

He threw the foul brew that had masqueraded as tea out through the open kitchen door, put both his and Billie's cups in the sink, and proceeded to open the cupboard.

"Good God, Aunty! You said a couple of bottles. There's thirty in here at least."

"I know. Every time I do a Tesco delivery I add a bottle. For the winter, mainly. Anyway, we shan't be short of a drop while we talk. The Poultenay's nice."

Johnny did as he was told, pouring out a couple of stiff whiskeys that filled the air with the smell of sweet peat and smoked wood. Billie suggested they watch the sun set across the back meadow, so they moved from the kitchen to a rickety old bench set against the back wall of the farmhouse, and drank in the amber warmth of late summer and good malt. Neither of them spoke for some time, not until the sun had dipped below the tree line and then bathed the sky in reflected golds and pinks. Eventually Billie took Johnny's arm and suggested that they go inside. She was starting to feel evening's chill and her glass was empty.

They retired from the tired and shabby kitchen to the main drawing room. Unlike the tatters of the domestic area, the living room was still remarkably well fettled. A good Wilton never wears out, and the furniture, if a little on the traditionally brown side, was obviously of quality and still kept in good condition. Billie preferred table lamps to the ceiling lights, and together with the scotch and a delivery of delicious beer battered cod and chips from the village pub, which was obviously a regular arrangement, they settled down to a mellow evening of malted business.

Billie was the first to speak after Johnny had cleared away the plates and the condiments. "Now, I want you to shut up and listen, Johnny. No interruptions. Can you do that?"

He nodded vigorously, assuming that this would provide the necessary proof of his good intentions.

"Good. There are three things to discuss. One, you will phone that simpering wife of yours and tell her you're staying overnight. We have a lot of business to transact. Two, I am going to make an arrangement with you that will benefit both of us, so no chicanery on your part is needed. Three, during the night, no matter what you hear or dream, do not get out of bed. Touch nothing, do nothing, and you'll be fine. Is that understood?"

Johnny considered all three points carefully. Point two was obvious and exciting. Point three was most odd, so he ignored it. He reacted badly to point number one.

"Aunty, please don't call Mary that. She's been good to me, mostly. We have our differences but..."

Aunt Billie cut him off immediately. Now on her third glass of good malt she seemed to have regained her combative edge. "Rubbish. The moment I met her at your wedding I thought, what a silly cow. She's a snob, Johnny, but not a very good one. Knows the price of everything but never the value. You were a hound man, weren't you, Labs and the like?"

Johnny felt it best to humour the old girl. He really rather wanted to get onto point two. "Yes, Labs and a Lurcher. Still, Monty died, what, five years ago, I think."

Billie smiled. She had him. "And do you have dogs now?"

"Yes, Aunty, two of the little blighters, Bonnie and Prince."

"Don't tell me", Billie chirped, delighted that she was utterly vindicated. "Scotties! Hah! They're not dogs, Johnny, they're vermin. An abomination. Yapping shag-pile! That woman has no soul. Anyway, telephone her and then we'll get round to business. Oh, and by the way, I've put a pair of Daddy's pyjamas in the spare room along with his old dressing gown and slippers. Might smell a bit of pipe tobacco, even now, but they're not too moth eaten so you'll be nice and snug."

Once again Johnny did as he was told and if he was honest with himself the choice between spending an evening with Mary or Aunt Billie was not a hard one to make. He was more convinced than ever that the old girl was on the batty side of the equation, but he liked her balls. With his domestic arrangements made for the evening Johnny settled back onto the rather comfortable chesterfield, topped up both his and Aunt Billie's glasses, and settled back to discuss point number two.

"So, Aunty, about the house. I was thinking..."

Again she cut right through the middle of his musings like an Arabian scimitar arcing towards an exposed neck. "I don't doubt you were, Johnny, but whatever you may have been thinking simply won't do. The arrangement is as follows: You will value this property and sell it for me. I want the best possible price given the general decay and dilapidation. I will then split the proceeds with you, one half each. While I may be old and while I do find it difficult to keep this old wreck afloat, I am certainly not ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. I want half so I can travel the world. You get half as your inheritance. Oh, and once the deal is done, I never want to see or hear from you or that socially impossible wife of yours ever again."

Johnny felt that the last point was gratuitously unnecessary, but was disinclined to argue the general point. As far as point number two was concerned he agreed to the terms at once, seeing something close to half a million heading his way. By a mixture of lamp and torch light Aunt Billie then conducted him around the seven bedroom house, the collapsing outbuildings, and the cellar. Johnny made verbal notes on his mobile phone as they went round, detailing the state of disrepair in almost every room bar the well kept drawing room, and with the preliminary inspection completed he and his aunt settled down with yet another large one. Give the old bat her dues, he thought, she can hold her liquor. For his part, Johnny was beginning to feel just a little bit tipsy.

"Look, Aunty, we'll have to do a structural and have a proper look when it's daylight. There are a number of issues, damp and the like, which will have a material effect on values. In good condition, with the land, I'd normally say about one point two mill, but as things stand we'll probably go for eight hundred thou. We could

consider auction. I have a couple of friends who could help there and if we market properly we could push nine if we can convince the punters that it's mostly superficial. Caveat emptor, and all that. I can set everything in train tomorrow morning, have my people out here in a day or so, do the measurements, the photos etcetera. We might have to have a bit of a tidy up as well, for when the clients come round. What do you think?"

Aunt Billie felt suddenly very tired. She gulped down the last of her Scotch, felt her face flush with warmth, and nodded. "Sounds very like trade to me, Johnny, but then that's what you're good at, I suppose. I'll leave all that to you. I shall move out once we get to the point of visitation. I couldn't bear the thought of receiving bankers. There's a little of Daddy's cash left and I've always fancied a spell at the Ritz. Do they still do a proper afternoon tea in this Godless age?"

Aunt Billie took a lingering look around the room. There were so many memories, some of them even quite pleasant, but it was definitely time to rid herself of the past. On the mantelpiece above a red-brick crafts movement fireplace, she looked at a simple brass carriage clock, the glass of which was inevitably cracked.

"Good gracious, look at the time", she said forcefully. "Off to bed with you, my lad, it's nearly midnight. Where does the time go?"

As they were getting up to leave the room, Johnny noticed an old photograph on a solid English Victorian sideboard. "My word, is that you Aunty?"

"Yes", Aunt Billie said wistfully, "and your mother. Ravishing, wasn't she. That was our deb year."

Johnny felt a warm glow rising in his heart. "Rather a fine young filly yourself, Aunty", he said, almost, but not quite, sounding patronising.

"Yes, well, look at me. Lot of good it did me. Anyway, true beauty lies on the inside."

With that she manhandled Johnny upstairs to one of the more presentable wrecks of a bedroom. She opened the door, showed him where everything was, including the aforementioned pyjamas, an en-suite lavatory and a musty mirrored wardrobe, and then wished him bon voyage.

"And remember, Johnny, stay in your room, and ideally stay in your bed. You hear all sorts of creatures out here in the wilds of Gloucestershire, and the old house creaks and groans at night, especially after a warm day, but don't worry, everything will be tickety-boo in the morning. Remember, stay in bed."

She wished him a final farewell for the evening and closed the door. As Johnny turned to put his jacket over the back of a chair he heard a rattle and a click. How odd, he thought, it sounds as though I'm being locked in. He walked over and tried the door handle. Sure enough, the old girl had turned the key.

Despite the slightly odd circumstances of the evening and the fact that the mattress was far too soft and the sheets somewhat threadbare, Johnny soon dropped off, his head enveloped in a single malt haze. He usually slept in the buff but for propriety's sake he had at least slipped on the pyjama bottoms. In the brief moment before he drifted into the deep sleep of the tired and emotional after what had turned out to be quite a long evening, he listened out for the strange creatures of the night but heard nothing but the creak of his own bed springs as he made himself comfortable. The house too remained hushed and silent. Within five minutes of his head hitting the plump and downy pillow the only noise to be heard was that of a gentleman snoring.

The carriage clock in the drawing room ticked away, drawing the dull hands of time forward in their endless waltz, and Johnny drifted into the realm of the dream

king, a place that he rarely visited these days. Johnny was not a man of the imagination, preferring the simple sureties of cash in his pocket and the reassurance of a drink in his hand once the sun was over the yard arm, and the sun was always over the yard arm somewhere in the world.

It took him a moment or two to realise that he was dreaming. What gave it away was the fact that he was wearing the most elegant set of dress frock and tails, and appeared to be in a large, ornately furnished ballroom. All was silent, bar the slight tinkle of crystal from above. Somewhere a window or door must be open and a gentle jasmine scented breeze made soft music amongst the brilliantly cut teardrops of the three chandeliers hanging in line from the painted ceiling.

Johnny spun round slowly on the heels If his patent leather shoes. The ceiling was divided into panels, each one depicting a famous cat. Johnny recognised but a few of the more obvious feline celebrities; Puss-in-Boots , Dick Whittington's lucky charm, Jess from Postman Pat, Arthur from the cat food commercials, Benny the Ball from Top Cat and, without doubt, the grinning beast from the Alice stories. Each panel was surrounded by fabulous plasterwork depicting alarmed birds flying between the bars of their cages and mice running in all directions amid vine leaves.

Along one wall hung pictures of the Tuke-Hastings clan and Johnny recognised Daddy from the cloud of pipe smoke hanging around his forehead. The rest of the clan, both male and female stared out of their frames with an impenetrable, almost feline grace. Opposite this imposing rogues gallery Johnny spied heavy purple velvet drapes hanging in between tall many paned windows, and in the middle of each was set a rose of stained glass. At the foot of alternate windows there was a set of glass doors.

At the far end of the room, across an acre of highly polished oak, there was a small dais set with music stands and instruments placed ready for musical hands. Johnny wandered over, clicking his heels on the floor as he walked, still spinning round and taking in the lustre and the opulence of the ballroom. The whole situation appeared quite fantastical to him, reminding him of childhood fairy tales, and, he mused, he must be in a mild state of mental discomfort made hallucinogenic by alcohol and Aunt Billie. He marvelled at his own rationalisation, and then, as he plucked a violin string, marvelled again at the resonance. In that great, empty ballroom, the sound of a single note echoed back and forth, bouncing off the walls and the chandeliers in slowly decreasing tones of pitch perfection before being absorbed by the velvet drapes.

Absolute perfection, Johnny thought, would be a glass of chilled Bollinger, and with that thought he turned and saw a table laden with sparkling crystal glasses dribbling condensation and bubbles. Johnny took a sip from one of the heavy but perfectly weighted glasses and wondered what might happen next. It was so long since he had dreamed anything that he was quite out of practice.

The dream, however, had taken control of such things. Johnny immediately heard a scattering of tiny footsteps scrabbling across the polished floor. Turning to face the little dais he was quite astonished to see four elegantly dressed rats scurrying uncertainly on their hind legs towards their instruments. Of course, he thought, the players. As he watched, the lead rat, the only one wearing a bright red sash, bowed to him before directing his colleagues to their respective seats. The lead rat then took up the violin, while the others prepared themselves to play cello, viola and bass.

"Okay", Johnny said to himself, "that just leaves the guests".

He imagined a ballroom full of empire dresses and sparkling jewels, of heaving bosoms and impossible head dresses, with gentlemen officers of the dragoons

and guards in attendance, but this time the dream shifted slightly. Instead of obeying his command, there entered but the one guest. She approached Johnny from the furthest of the glass doors, walking on soft satin slippers as though she had just taken a breath of fresh air in between dances. She wore the empire line to perfection, swelling at the breast and floating across the floor. In colour the dress was the perfect shade of thick, gold-top cream, and embroidered with fine lace sporting motifs of lushly hanging cotton reels. His partner wore a sprig of vine in her long, blonde hair, and looked divine. Johnny stood and watched her drift towards him to an undercurrent of gently twisting strings. He was completely and utterly transfixed.

As Johnny's dancing partner drew nearer to him he saw a resemblance to someone he might once have known, but he couldn't quite put his finger on who she might be. He was sure he would have remembered such an utter beauty. Her skin glowed under the lights in ambers and olives and whites, almost tabby in effect. She was slender and lean, but Johnny knew just by watching the supple way that she walked that she was attractively dangerous too.

In common with the rest of the dream, he realised that she too had a feline element to her soul. Her skin was lightly but gorgeously downed. Her eyes shone green and black, reflecting the sparkling light of the chandeliers, and if Johnny turned obliquely from her he could almost see long slender whiskers sweeping out from her perfect little button nose.

They said not a word. The rat quartet struck up in turn quadrilles, gavottes, a waltz, and finally a Queen's minuet. Johnny and his partner danced as if there could be no end to the music, no end to this perfect ball, with no words or sounds other than the perfect rodent strings passing through the air between them. Each dance merged into the next without pause, with time seeming to stand still around them. The heavy velvet drapes billowed out behind them with each sweeping pass, such was the tornadic force of their motion across the floor. Sadly for every moment of harmony, there must come a fade or a discord, and when the last bars of this perfect night were finally subsumed into the jasmine night air, Johnny felt a tear fall onto his cheek.

"Must we stop?" he asked softly. "Must this dream end, my darling, whoever you may be?"

His tabby tigress twitched her nose and almost seemed to prowl around her dancing partner, as if arching her back and swaying her rear end as cats do when ready to pounce. Her expression never changed, being that of the sublime feline smile that all cats give to the world, that knowing smile that defies your understanding. She stopped her circling and drew close to Johnny, taking both his hands in her own soft and downy paws. Johnny could smell the warm musk of fur. She purred softly, burying her head against his chest for a moment before looking up into his eyes.

She spoke in a whisper. "This is the dream, this is lap cat, my darling, but beware the beast within. This is the dream, but there is still the nightmare to come. Remember, whatever happens do not get out of bed. Please remember, my darling child."

Johnny's eyes snapped open. He was bathed in sweat, and the covers were twisted round him like a winding sheet. He stared into the darkness, fixing his gaze on the shape of the ceiling light in his bedroom while the vivid colours and sensations of his stunning fancy subsided into that dim realm of half-light permitted to the waking by the dream king. Johnny concentrated on breathing, slowing down his pounding heart. He ran his fingers through damp hair. He traced the contours of his corpulence, reassuring himself that the lissom man in the fantasy was gone. Mostly, though,

Johnny tried to keep alive the vision of his beautiful creature, never wishing to let the last dance fade from his memory.

All that Johnny could think about at that moment was how he wanted to live in that faerie place forever. How would he ever look at Mary in the same way again? After a moment of desperate despair he posited the alternative theory that he need not look at her in the same way. When he and Mary were together in that sort of way, things might actually be improved if he envisioned as his paramour this tigress, his tabby love. There might be something in the amorous line to be gained after all. It was while pondering on such possibilities that Johnny first noticed his erection, and then almost immediately heard a key turning in the door lock.

"Oh, bugger", he muttered, twisting round to face the door. "What the bloody hell does she want? This is so embarrassing."

The door opened slowly, swinging on silent hinges to reveal a blackness so deep that it swallowed entirely the weak shaft of moonlight that tried to sneak into the room through a gap in the drawn curtains. It was hot now, and the air smelled rank and fetid, as if Johnny were buried deep in some jungle. He smelled wet earth and dank, malodorous vegetation. From the bowels of the house Johnny thought he could hear snorts and snuffles, the sounds of night creatures in thick, matted undergrowth. He closed his eyes and stopped his ears for a moment, but nothing changed when he resurfaced. All around him he could hear the night terrors of unknown beasts, and if he stared hard he thought he could make out leaves and twisted boughs and tall grasses on the landing. And then it came to him. This was another bloody dream.

Johnny rolled over and buried his head under the pillow. If he shut his eyes and thought of sleep or sheep then all this would go away. Sleep, however, was impossible. From out of the thick, humid air small winged creatures continually buzzed against his exposed chest. He felt a sharp nip and realised that he was being eaten alive. Still the snorts and snuffles and squeals of life incarnate erupted all around him. He felt something bump into the bed frame and grunt like a pig. Slowly he raised the threadbare sheets up around his neck, and then sat up. In the pitch dark room he thought he could still make out the wardrobe on the far wall, and hanging over a thick rope of liana, he could see his suit and under that his shoes.

He had to make a decision. Could he simply wrap himself up in the bed clothes and wait it out? He decided that he could not. He needed the reassurance of leather on his exposed feet, of tailored cotton against his chest, and the thickness of tweed and twill against his limbs. He remembered the old girl's warning, as well as that of his tigress, but, he thought; I'm only going to put on some clothes. I can jump back into bed as soon as I've got those on, can't I?

Johnny made his decision. He leapt out of bed and landed on a thick, mucal layer of rotting leaves and vines. Twigs snapped under his heel and the black mulch of the jungle floor oozed between his toes. Something beetle-like scurried across the arch of his foot. Johnny screamed, grabbed his suit and shirt and threw them onto the bed. He panted hard, still mired in the prime val floor, but managed to steel his shaking hands so that he could make a grab for his brogues. As he picked them up a horned millipede ran out of one and up his bare arm. Johnny shrieked again, ripping his lungs in the process, but finally he managed to fall back onto the relative safety of his bed. After a few moments collecting his thoughts and parcelling them up with the abject terror coursing through his veins, he managed to shake his clothes out and dress, although he deemed it unnecessary to wear a tie under these dire circumstances.

What Johnny needed was another one of Aunt Billie's singular malts. He tried to rationalise. "This is only a dream", he told himself. "A nightmare possibly, but

they're basically one and the same, old boy, so what about it? Shall we yomp down to the kitchen?"

His inner child concurred, and after a moment of deep breathing, of sucking in the hot, rancid smell of decay and death on the forest floor, he gently swung himself off the bed and placed both feet on the floor. Insects buzzed around his head, whining and whirring. Creatures unseen slithered and scuttled out of his way as he gingerly stepped out onto the landing. Everywhere, sprouting out of the walls and hanging down from the ceiling, thick fronds and razor sharp leaves cut and smothered his crouched body. With every step a new smell of the primordial struggle erupted to fill his nostrils and his throat, making him want to wretch. He could feel the sniffling beasts of night in the jungle watching his every move. Nevertheless, Johnny pulled and pushed his way through the verdure, making for the stairs, where he used a coil of liana as a rope so that he could slither down to the ground floor.

So far, so good, he thought. Johnny waited a moment, recalling the layout of the house and getting his bearings. That was when he noticed the change. There was now an expectant air in the hallway, a brooding air, and an absence of sound. He could hear nothing buzzing, nothing rooting, nothing snuffling. It was though all fauna and insect life was holding its breath. Johnny, not being up on the jungle thing, thought no more of it. He had the taste of Scotch in his mouth and was as determined to find liquid gold in the wilderness as Cortez had been in his search for El Dorado. Except, Johnny then realised that all was not silent. At the bottom of the stairs the vegetation seemed to consist mostly of tall, thick grasses, swaying slightly in a languid breeze. He could hear the sound of tall leaves and seed ears rubbing together. He also thought that he caught the sound of something swishing rhythmically amongst the fronds.

Fear is a primal thing. From where or how this sudden realisation came, Johnny had not a clue, but he knew instantly that he was prey. The leopard was out for a late supper and Johnny Hester-Siddeley was on the menu. He tried to orient himself to the sound of the hunting cat. She helped him by emitting a low, guttural growl from somewhere near the front door.

Johnny had another choice to make. He was unarmed and an innocent when it came to big game. He stood stock still for a moment considering his options. His world constricted to a space just big enough to hold the sound of his rapidly beating heart. If he could make it to the kitchen before she pounced he might find a knife or a chair or a saucepan, something, anything with which he could defend himself.

Johnny turned slowly so that he was facing the kitchen door. He brushed a spider's web out of his hair and then crouched down in the long grass in the same way that he'd seen sprinters set themselves before a race. Unlike in his first dream, this time fat and fifty year old Johnny was no athlete, but he could rely on the spur of abject terror to give him speed. His mental starting gun sounded and Johnny launched himself out of the blocks, rising on the upward pump of his arms, feeling his flabby and rotund thighs curse as they tried to propel his middle-aged spread towards the safety of the kitchen.

Johnny managed three strides, perhaps half the distance that he needed, before the leopard sprang. In one savage bound she covered the gap between them, raking at Johnny's back with her powerful talons, slicing though tweed and cotton and skin as if it were thin air. Johnny fell, winded and gasping, feeling his shirt soak with blood. He turned as he fell, and a razored paw ripped across his chest, exposing bone and torn flesh to the night dark sky.

With her prey immobilised, the she-leopard lowered her head to sniff the metallic humours of fresh meat. As she lapped at the wound, she looked into Johnny's eyes and smiled her cat smile. Johnny saw there his own reflection, pale and bloodless and deathly. He also saw in those eyes the green luminescence of his once sweet and docile dancing partner. The hunting cat opened her jaws slowly, her breath hot and moist and rank with a thousand kills. Thick, warm saliva dripped off of her teeth and onto Johnny's burning face. As he started to scream, he remembered the final words of advice that his aunt and his dancing love had given him; "Don't get out of bed".

The Leopard squeezed that final shriek of horror out of Johnny's throat as her jaws closed on his windpipe to crush and splinter his neck.

When Johnny woke the next morning he found that he could hardly move. Aunt Billie, having unlocked the door, placed a cup of freshly brewed Earl Gray on the bedside table and looked at him quizzically.

"You've had a bit of a restless night, dear. A nice cup of tea usually does the trick. There's a bathroom at the end of the landing. I've put fresh towels out for you. Give me a shout when you're ready and I'll put some bacon on for you."

Once Aunt Billie was out of the room, Johnny slowly ran his hands over his neck and then, as best he could, down his back. He was intact and unscarred. He then gingerly moved his hand to his chest. He ached all over and in particular he felt sore and raw between the nipples. His fingers traced the ragged grooves of three long but thin scars, as if a large tom cat had raked talons across his skin. Johnny slowly pulled back the sheet. He saw there three fresh wounds, just scabbing over but still seeping little tears of blood onto the sheet.

Aunt Billie heard the screams coming from the room in which her guest had spent the night. She took a tumbler from the Scotch cupboard and filled it to the brim with a good Strathspey malt, which she then took up to her distant relative. There she sat on the bed next to him, made him drink half the glass in one go, and then gently patted his hand. She soothed him gently for a few minutes, bringing him back to the world of the living and everyday banality. As the look of dread panic slowly faded from his eyes she wiped a bead of sweat away from his forehead and spoke softly to him.

"I think it best, Johnny, if we never mention last night. I'm not sure you'll ever want to and I certainly have no intention of doing so. You should finish the Scotch and then do your ablutions. We'll say no more about it. I trust you'll get me the best price that you can for house?"

Johnny remained mute, but he found the strength to nod once. Aunt Billie raised him up on his pillow and handed him the tumbler. Johnny downed the remaining malt in one more gulp, and as the liquor warmed his veins and made his bones stiffen he started to feel a little better.

Aunt Billie patted his hand again and said, "They're just dreams, that's all."

Later that morning, with Johnny restored to some sort of order, and with firm instructions to tell his wife, Mary, that one of his batty old Aunt's cats had mauled him during the night, she bade him farewell. After he had driven his black beauty of a car out onto the lane and closed the back gate, she took a tin of something fishy out of the under sink cupboard, sat down in one of her rickety old kitchen chairs, the one next to the gently warming range, and poured herself a thick measure of her favourite Scotch. She rocked gently back and forth in her chair, spooning cat food into her mouth and smiling to herself. She whispered her secrets to the bald felt mouse over by the pot stand.

"We're looking forward to a bright future, aren't we, mousey? Little Johnny's going to get us enough money to see the world, and he'll be happy, I suppose...eventually...if he lets the scars fade. We need money, don't we, mousey, if we're going to see the world and live nine lives in the finest style."

The Tender Kiss

They talked about her. She knew of their wide ranging speculations and their over-active imaginations. It has always been thus and would remain so throughout the generations that must, inevitably come. She, the Countess, heir of an imperial bloodline, stirred on her bed, uncrossing her arms, breathing in deeply the scent of basil and jasmine that rose like sweet perfume on warm, glowing skin in the viscous air of this hanging Cretan night. September. A small studio room in a cheap block of identical rooms just a little way off the coast to the east of Rethymno. Simple pleasures. Great risks. The joy of the chase.

The Countess stood up from the low bed and walked slowly around the small room. From the tiny bare metal kitchenette she took a bottle of the local, thin, dry red wine, unscrewed the cap, and poured herself a small glass. Thirst was a strange companion and one that she understood only too well. For her it was a ravening beast as well as a simple, pleasurable act that might slake a dry throat. The wine was too warm, but it would do well enough for now. It would bring a little colour to her pallid cheeks, although she would only permit herself one glass for now. She prided herself on the almost mineral paleness of her skin.

How odd, she thought, as she picked up a brush from the bedside table and started to pull it gently through her sleek, long, black hair, how odd that they still gossip so. If only they knew the truth, poor lambs. Always they gossiped. Never did they ask. It had been the same for her and her mother back in their ancestral home. People talked, people feared, and slowly the fat faced peasants dwindled away leaving only the meek and mildewed behind.

Her hair fell in thick, straight waves across her pale shoulders, her skin being almost translucently white, like a moon veiled by the lightest gauze of a high, grey cloud. The only light in the room came from a lantern strung up on a pole outside to help guide tourists along a winding path from these studios to the taverna that occupied the frontage of the building. With the curtains drawn across the large glass door to her balcony, the Countess could drift through her evening rituals in that sweet and comforting half-light that makes the world enticing. She lived for the dusky anticipation of each evening.

The Countess ran her free hand along the contours of her body, tracing the curve of her firm, full and neatly upturned breasts. Entranced, lost in the revelation of change in her body, she ran her fingertips over her taught stomach and down to her groin. It was time. She could feel the need, could sense the exquisite pain of that once in a lifetime craving, a passion that inflamed her entire being beyond anything that she had known in all these years of absolute and necessary thirst.

All these years. How many years more, she wondered. Not many. She would hand on the challenge of her line soon enough if she could but find the right one, the right boy, strong and beautiful, but preferably not too bright, who might join with her. She would kill two birds with one stone.

The Countess rose and walked over to the rustic, blue painted wardrobe and pulled from its hanger one of a number of simple cotton summer dresses, long and plain, cream in colour, with just a hint of flow and swirl towards the hem. Unlike her

mother, a poor and feeble creature tied to the old days, a woman who shimmered like a pallid ghost among the ruins of their estates in the mountains, a woman who wore the same, disgustingly stained gown throughout her long and decrepit life, this Countess had broken with those dusty traditions. Her dresses were simple, worn only the once, and never stained when she put them on.

She liked to think about change while she dressed for the evening. The breaking of the taboos that had dogged her line down the centuries gave her a strength and a purpose. She was the first to see that the old ways need not be the only way. Ever since the great patriarch had sworn a pact with the dark stars, ever since he had fought the Turk and the Christian, drinking their blood in his fury after battle, they, his progeny, had never let off the work. He changed the world in making them what they were, so why, she thought, couldn't she do the same. She was of his line. She embraced the same arts and wielded the same powers. This heritage was too precious a thing to betray. So far they had been lucky, perhaps, or fated. She would not be the one to let it all end.

Her great and fell ancestor made the world anew and in so doing left them to live with a curse, the price to be paid for greatness. Each generation could breed only once, and in so doing, in the raising of the child, the parent was doomed. Each child, when they reached puberty, took their first drink of life from the parent, a fatal drink, laced with power and death for ever more. So had it been when the great one's son was born of a strong peasant girl chosen for the task and then discarded, a dry husk blown away on the winds of maternal fate. The boy child had, when the time came, embraced his father, told him he loved him, and then sunk his mouth to the old man's neck to taste the acrid, metallic taste of heaven for the first time. The second Count of long years had been her grandfather. Her mother had performed the same ritual when coming of age, although for her it seemed the bitter pleasure of awakening touched her mind. And finally she, the Countess, had rejoiced that she could end her mother's suffering and then fulfil her own destiny.

Her destiny, however, was not that of the cold mountains and the lonely snow bejewelled passes that brought fitful life to their lands. You could only feed for so long on fresh meat in one place. The peasants feared you at first. Some fought back, but eventually they grew weary and resigned. Villages became haunted places, fit only for wraiths and fools. The pickings became sour and few, you hungered endlessly and the glories and splendours of your surroundings grew shabby and mean. You relied on stealth and cruelty to maintain your position and your way. That was her mother's choice, the path that lead to feeding on carrion, of chasing down the rabbit and the rat and vole just to fill your belly and your veins. It was not the modus operandi of this Countess.

After the joy and exaltation of awakening, the Countess stayed true to her upbringing for some years, making the best that she could out of the debilitation and decay around her. Unlike her mother, though, she sought out images and tales of the wider world. Things had changed there too. Machines did the work of a hundred peasants. They waged war across continents. Oh, she had thought, if only great-grandpapa could have seen that. Money flowed around the world in great rivers of wealth. Why then, was she shut up in the wasted mountains, where winter was the only season and fresh meat such a dream?

When the blood-lust was done with, when the corpse was nothing more than a dried out shell, then she studied until dawn, ordering books from cities far and wide. She learned to control her lusts so that she could meet with the mortals, taking advice

at strange hours of the night from men who knew of the great metropolitan stratagems. She rarely succumbed to temptation.

After time and knowledge had broadened her view of things she made a decision. The estates in the mountains, the never visited, decrepit palazzos, everything that she could lay claim to was sold. The money realised from this fire sale of the broken and the decayed was sufficient to invest and to bank. She worked out that if she were frugal for a few years, and given the likely length of her life, then the glories of compound interest and stock markets might make her fabulously wealthy. And so it came to be. The Countess through her financial foundations and partnerships moved in quiet splendour wherever and whenever she wished. Today she wished to holiday in Crete and live like they did, these people who provided succour, and tonight, she was sure, would provide the next heir to her line. With the night sky calling forth the hunter in her soul, she opened the curtains, stepped out onto the balcony and gazed down the dusty little lane that ran towards the local coastal strip, with its bright lights, its noise and its scurrying human possibilities.

Another night on the town, as delightful as it might be, just didn't seem right to Stu. Rethymno itself was fine, although a little too bookish for his taste, possessing insufficient an air of debauchery despite Crete's bloody history. Stu was more a Malia type of guy. Tonight, though, he fancied quiet and peaceful, which he had to admit was a bit of a departure from the norm. The rugby boys could stuff their less than subtle gibes and always rowdy insults where the sun rarely ever shined (you could never quite tell with one or two of them). He really didn't care, and being from one of those hail-fellow-well-met backgrounds, it was all water off a duck's back. He was, anyway, the fittest and fastest of the assembled pre-season breakers, playing at centre with all of the modern power and grace required of a rugger boy. His main claim to fame in these still relatively tender years had been a youth appearance for Scotland, although sadly a combination of injury and a tendency towards dilettantism meant that such early promise remained as yet unfulfilled. As the bus squeezed and wheezed its way through streets full of bars and girls Stu hoped that his chosen destination might have something at least a little different to offer tonight.

Stu stepped off the coast road bus at Adelianos, having left the boys to their beer and their eager-eyed and insatiable game of spot the girlie. This was going to be a quiet, thoughtful night, which would suit the locale. Adelianos looked sleepy and quiet and, frankly, pretty boring, providing a thin string of tavernas and bars set back a little from the beach. Everything looked the same; Souvlaki, Kleftiko, Stifado, grilled fish, Mythos beer, waiters standing on doorsteps trying to persuade you to eat at their establishment. He wanted something different tonight, a place of quiet solitude, where, despite being built like a row small northern industrial terraced houses, he might not stand out, where he might just sit and eat and while away some time without having to enjoy himself quite so much as he had during the first three days and nights on the island. Stu wanted to watch other people tonight.

He looked around the main square of Adelianos. Nothing caught his eye as being suitable, but there was a sign, faded and hanging at an angle because one of the cable ties holding it to a chain link fence had snapped. A taverna. Demetriou's. One kilometre as the arrow points inland. Stu smiled. Perfect. Inland meant up hill and that meant a little bit of exercise before scoff. Stu hoped that the place would be full of locals, bewhiskered old men rattling their rosaries and maybe playing backgammon, with their wives, those little old bewhiskered crones huddled in a corner chattering away noisily.

Even on a September evening it was still warm enough to raise a little moisture on Stu's forehead and top lip as he made the gentle climb inland. During the walk the night sky shifted from the hazy blues, reds and oranges of sunset, through the leavening purples of dusk and then into the jet black of the quiet cicada hum that calls forth the first star. With the closing in of the day the air filled with the gentle aromas of basil and wild garlic. The sounds of the night began to break free as Stu left the coastal strip and climbed slowly across the ancient Cretan soils; a cat mewling with excitement at the chases to come, something ferreting in the undergrowth, the whine of a moped in the distance. He felt strangely at home, like a ripe and powerful Palikare of old.

Stu represented the epitome health and vitality, walking with all of the swagger that a broad shouldered and confident young man at ease amid a timeless landscape should possess. Not that such thoughts occurred to Stu as he sauntered through those final dusty yards towards the taverna. He was getting slightly concerned by the apartment complex that he could see set back against the fields and olive groves. Bloody tourists.

No, such lofty and poetic thoughts were not his, but they did fill the mind of one shadow-souled creature who watched the world below from her balcony.

As the boy sat at table and ordered half a litre of the house red while he perused the by now predictable menu his heart sank in converse proportion to the rising pulse in the veins of the aforementioned lady. While he foresaw an evening of single mediocrity, she could feel the ravening joy of her twin cravings rising in her gorge. There would be a little moment of thrill when she stretched her legs out on the threads of her invisible web, a subtly delicious hour of play as she watched him eat, and then there would be the ultimate liaison dangereux. She was the spider, this place and time her hunting ground, and with the primeval urge satisfied she would then indulge herself within the joyous pain of bestial desire. It would be an evening of anticipation, frolics and, for the Countess at least, a late dinner. Such fun.

Before leaving her room the Countess took one precaution. Not for her the mosquito plug-ins, nor the net or the salve. She lifted the mirror from the wall and stowed it under her bed. Then, wearing simple thongs and clad in her delicate cream cotton dress, she drifted out of her apartment, cascaded down the steps to the taverna and voila! She made her entrance.

The locals, Demetriou and his sons waiting on customers, as one made the sign of the cross as she entered. Such superstition, she thought, in these modern days. They prattle on because they think that I only come out at night. Do they not see my alabaster skin? How could I risk the sun?

She spotted the boy at a table looking out onto the road, the only new customer so far tonight. Trade had been slow for Demetriou these last few days. The shepherds further up the mountain were talking about a white skinned ghost, a raven mistress, who called to them under the stars. Local people were staying at home. Only the tourists came, and now that the season was nearing an end there were only two apartments occupied.

The Countess appeared to hesitate, looking around the taverna as though unsure where to sit. Demtriou waved his hand and tried not to look into her eyes, all the time flicking his rosary beads against his thigh. The Countess smiled at the balding crown of the man's lowered head, and then walked boldly up to the boy's table.

"Would you mind if I joined you?" she asked in her clear but still accented voice.

She dipped sweetly into his eye line. It was a Ding-Dong moment, a Bloody Hell epiphany. The boy looked up. He could almost taste the promise held in the way that her dress clung to her taught, pale body. He saw how her hair fell straight and lustrously across her shoulders and down her back. Then he gazed into her eyes. She had the most amazing, the most beautiful and captivating eyes. They seemed to shimmer with a moonlight of their own making, set deep into black hearts, and there too he saw the flame of the candle on the table reflected back at him as if she hungered eternally.

He smiled weakly and mumbled his agreement. As she pulled out the blue wooden chair opposite him and sat down he couldn't believe his luck. He feasted on her, taking in the rise of her breasts and measuring the beauty of her long and supple limbs as if he were admiring a fabulous Pieta. Her skin shone in the candle light. She seemed almost translucent, but deep and ancient in her marble perfection. Stu felt as if he were falling into a well. She wore a strange perfume that filled his nostrils with sweet ungents, with jasmine and rose and lavenders and with something else. It made him think of time, of ages passed under moon light. Bloody hell!

They struck up conversation easily. She declined his offer of dinner, saying that she would eat later, that she had not long finished a late lunch, but she would stay and keep him company while he ate. There was something fascinating about watching these creatures eat, something sordidly gratifying about the way that little dribbles of sauce might run down their chins. The boy was a fine specimen, vigorous and young, and engaging in his own sweet and innocent way.

While he ate and drank his wine, of which she accepted one small glass to be sociable, she talked of her home in the mountains, of how it had all been sold and how she roamed the world now, stateless but always with a casket of earth from her own land by her side as a reminder of home and her beloved family. She spun webs of silver thread through the evening air, always making direct eye contact, always drawing him in towards her desperate need for love on this particular night.

Once the food was done with they stayed sitting at the table to finish the wine, and the lady even found the patience to wait and talk idly about his life while he drank a coffee and a brandy, even though her own heat and lust for the gift of life was raging like a furnace beneath the demur cream cotton shift.

And then the talking was done with. She asked him to walk with her a little as she needed some air. She told Demetriou to add the food and drink to her bill and she would settle all with him the following evening when she was due to leave for her next as yet undecided port of call. She took Stu's hand in hers and walked out into the dark night, heading up into the hills, slowly but surely away from the fetid breath of everyday life. As the pair left his taverna, Demetriou crossed himself once more and said a silent prayer for the young Englishman's soul.

"Here", she said, "we rest here for a while"

Whilst not always the sharpest knife in the box, Stu's libidinous sense of what was possible confirmed the Countess's assessment of the situation. The olive grove was secluded, the grass thick and soft, the trees full and weeping heavily with fruit, and the air was still and calm. With his hand held firmly in her soft, white and cool embrace he let himself be lead to the far corner of the olive grove. She sat with her back against the tree, revealing a shapely if thin alabaster leg, and pulled him towards her. She met no resistance. Stu knelt before her and brushed her hair away from her

shoulder. He leaned forward and kissed the limpid skin of her neck gently, afraid that he would break her into a thousand pieces if he exerted any force upon her frail form.

He need not have worried. There followed a storm of soundless lovemaking during which she engulfed him, forcing his penetration ever deeper until they ultimately found their symphonic tempo, and always, even in climax, their eyes remained locked together. Now satiated, dripping sweat and smeared with Cretan soil, they lay side by side staring at the rising field of stars that glistened above the olive trees. Her snow white body lay naked and revealed to the world of men for the first and only time, and she found, for a moment or two, that the urgency of her other bottomless hunger abated. She wanted to talk, to hear his voice one last time so that she would be able to tell her new born of a father.

She rolled onto her side and propped her head up on her hand, her black hair falling dishevelled across shoulders and curving round her breasts. "Tell me about your family" she said softly. "Tell me about your brothers and sisters and your father. A memory of a good father is always something that I missed growing up."

"Not much to tell, really." Stu paused. Maybe if they talked for a while, maybe if they got their breath back they could try it all again, he thought. There couldn't be any harm in a little potted history.

"One brother, a twin. Funny thing that. My Dad was a twin and so was Grandpa. In the genes, I suppose, but Mum always said it was one hell of a job looking after us as babies. I thought it missed out generations but apparently not. Dad was an archi..."

She stayed his lips with a slender white finger. "Rest now", she said. "Close your eyes and rest."

Stu looked up into her eyes and there he saw reflected twin boys, curled up, arm in arm, growing by the moment into fine young men, dark and pale like their mother but blessed with a good, manly physique. He smiled. She smiled too, for in that moment she knew that she would change the world. There would be two little ones to bring up, and although it might take centuries, two would become four, then four become eight, until the line of her great ancestor filled the world in numbers sufficient to make extinction an impossibility.

At that moment she made the one truly human choice in her life. She placed her hands on Stu's eyelids and gently closed them while whispering sweet incantations. He would sleep and wake refreshed with the rising sun of a new day. It was a small gift from a grateful mother to this fine father of the race of Nosferatu. She would drink elsewhere of Crete tonight.

Devil in the Detail

It could hardly be called a kick. Despite years of neglect made visible by thin, almost transparent patches of rust and jaggedly flaking automotive paint, the front wing of the little Austin Metro barely flexed under heel. It was raining fit to flood the world, a storm brewing up with the wailing mewl of legion cats being chased by battalion dogs. The driver of this last example of a long since fallen British automotive empire splashed disconsolately towards the rear of the vehicle, depressed the already sticking boot release with the heel of his right hand, and heaved at the tailgate with his left. He could barely see through the streams of water running across his horn-rimmed, circular, bottle glasses, and to look at him dripping and sodden in brown tweed and corduroy waistcoat, as thin as a rake and far too short to be a policeman, you would think him incapable of exerting the slightest force upon fresh

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

flash of red brake light in the gloom and then the snake back onto the straight and true. Revolutions. The growl of pistons exploding as they chewed up fuel. The driver beamed like a supernova going critical, lighting up the cabin with his wide, wild eyes and his deep bellow. The road stretched out before him, long and dark and shining, just as the crow flies towards a departing soul. The car kicked once and lifted at the front end as the tyres fought for grip, and then, amid a sea of spray, she bit hard into the tarmac and hauled her graceful weight forward at an ever increasing rate of knots. The joy of it. The driver revelled in the fact that he could see virtually nothing, sure in the fact that he was master of the little that he needed to survey, certain in the knowledge that nothing in this world could alter the progress that he made towards his next destination. He knew not where that destination might be, only that he would be there when it happened, when the cataclysm erupted. He was always there. Always.

Out on the hard shoulder, cocooned within the thin metallic hull of his dilapidated Austin Metro, the small wee man in tweeds and corduroy had now counted for nearly an hour, but instead of marshalling his thoughts towards the infinite number of tufts woven into the boot carpets of this modern, global, automotive world, he found now that his concentration wavered. He looked up and back out along the road, and there, sure as eggs are eggs, he saw headlights piercing the dank mildews of the afternoon. Despite the driving rain and the whipping wind, he heard the growl of the monstrous motor clearly. He cocked his head, listening for the tell tale whistle of slipstream and the dark, forbidding rumble of eighteen inch rims, and then smiled. It was a long time, an epoch or more, since they had last met, this accountant and the onrushing demon in black, but now the time had come to ask again that one fundamental question. They were, after all, brothers of the blood, members of the same trade guild, and as such the one would surely stop for the other.

The ribbon of wet sheen running towards the horizon begged the driver of the Aston Martin to put his Cuban heeled boot through the floor, and he duly obliged. The car sat up and seemed to skim across the surface water like a steroidal jet ski, and still he pushed and pulled at the wheel, desperate for more speed. At first the driver thought that the dull, humped shape at the side of the road was just a rocky outcrop or an orphaned section of dry stone wall. The road was straight and true. He had no need to pay attention to any landscape other than that small slice of the world contained between the edges of this black speedway, and yet, as he reached terminal velocity, something made him notice the further extremes of possibility painted upon the horizon, beyond the vortex that he created.

The shape by the side of the road began to take on a disturbingly amusing familiarity. It was pig-like, a creature that grunted and snuffled through the undergrowth at the margins of every road, short and hunch-backed and wallowing. Just one second later, with another impossible distance of road covered, he saw an opened bonnet. He laughed long and hard again, booming out his mirth in the womb-like cabin of his thoroughbred steed. The thing out there was nothing more than a flea, a parasite on the arse of an Arabian stallion, and yet, like that flea, this dull object existed in imperfect partnership with the king of horsepower. The flea could also ride the wind and run before the desert storm, just as he, the demon was doing now.

He felt compelled to look into matters more closely. He felt a sudden, urgent curiosity that brooked no flight or fancy. He simply had to prod and poke, and so, stamping on the brakes, he sent the car into a slide, spinning her round on the tarmac amid a wail of ebrased rubber and straining chassis bolts, until, with the hills and the

sky melded into one grey-green-purple blur, he found himself some four hundred metres beyond the porcine wreck, facing back the way he had come. He smiled in anticipation of the stick and the squeal, and made the Aston Martin growl back along the road slowly and with extreme prejudice.

The diabolic driver of the Aston Martin pulled up alongside the Metro and peered through the passenger window at the wreck of a car parked on the hard shoulder. His gaze was returned from a face in obscure profile, ringed with a moist halo of condensation. A drowned rat, he thought, a drowned rodent waiting out the flood in his shabby little nest, and yet he felt a certain thrill at the sight of this weedy little specimen, as though they were joined by an invisible umbilical cord. He manoeuvred the Aston Martin onto the hard shoulder and stilled the throbbing beast. The rain seemed to be easing off, although the sky remained low and smothering. He opened his door, climbed out of the car, and stretched himself out to his full height and width.

As a physical specimen, he was entirely the opposite of the poor wretch sitting cross legged in the back of the Metro. Standing at more than six foot tall, with a broad expanse of muscled chest revealed beneath his snugly fitted black shirt, the creature epitomised vigour and action, an unstoppable force made flesh. As he walked he could feel his hard and defined physique ripple under tight, figure-hugging cloth. His face wore a permanent smile, a smile that started in his eyes and spread across the full depth of his features, a smile that warned, a smile that promised destruction once the fun was done with.

On reaching the broken down little heap, he wrenched the tailgate fully open with leonine ease, bent down, and peered into the darkling interior of the vehicle's boot space. "What in the name of all the fates have we got here?" he mused, grinning. "Ah, yes, the runt of the litter. Homo Patheticus. An ACCOUNTANT, if I'm damned!"

"It's all very well you saying that", squeaked the mousey little man, "standing there like Adonis, but I'll have you know I'm not afraid of you. Oh no, certainly not. I knew you'd stop...and I'm a very good accountant. The best."

The man in black paused for a second, and then stood up again, puffing out his chest, and roared, "Not afraid? NOT AFRAID! Don't you know who I am? Ha! I am Death, the destroyer of worlds, the bringer of the final pain and the ultimate darkness. I am he who sweeps away mortal dust. I am the storm, the tempest, the earthquake, the volcano, before which nothing can stand!"

Under a damp and billowing sky he towered over the accountant, hands on hips, and waited for the whimper, but the only the sound to be heard was the scud and rasp of wind though stubby heathers and grasses, and a slight, almost effeminate cough. The little man in tweed and corduroy slid forward and sat on the lip of the boot, dangling his legs over the precipice between bodywork and muddy gravel. He looked up at the giant in black. "So am I, in a way", he said quietly, wiping condensation from his thick, bottle glasses.

"What?" roared the leviathan beast standing on the hard shoulder. He bent forward again, gripping this non-descript, runtish specimen by both shoulders. Face to face, spitting fire and brimstone and venom, he roared, "Watch!"

The world seemed to split in two, with each half spinning in a different direction, creating a whirlpool of light and matter, through which images began to appear. With each vision of destruction, the man continued to roar out his accomplishments.

"I it was who threw down Knossos and trampled the Greeks underfoot with Persian soldiers. Pompeii fell under my gaze. I was the surge that killed millions by the banks of great Huang He, and it was I who blew the winds of the Bhola Cyclone so hard that men and women crumpled."

With each item listed in his panoply of destruction, images flowed and twisted together, images of limbs and contorted faces, of blood and bone and rock, and in the midst of it all, as if conducting a violent symphony of discord, there stood the man in black, his flowing locks streaming in the winds and currents of calamitous fatality as his arms gesticulated wildly.

"See me! There! It is I who ruptures the earth to make mountains out of the sea. San Francisco was a moment of merriment, and Ashgabat and Kanto and Tangshan. The Black Death I made in your image, flea, and my coup de grace...I was the Somme and Passchendaele and Ypres, and then, when the boys came home, I was the mutant influenza. I am famine, I am a feast of mortality, and where my journeys end, wherever I choose to lay my head, there will come the end of days for millions. I was the horror propelling the imaginations at the Wannsee Conference, the obliterator of souls in their mass confusion and terror. I was Ethiopia. I am the mud slide and the flood. I am the crack and the fissure and the disintegration of Chernobyl. I am catastrophe!"

Amid the flames and falling limbs, the man in black burned and fevered, recounting every event, every malevolence, every act of desolation, and through it all he smelled again the viscera of sweet perfection, except that in the telling of these disasters, as each tale and count multiplied, so he also smelled the dust of extreme, paper-thin age. The stench of slow decay and natural putrefaction, of simple eternal failing, filled his nostrils and gagging, he broke the spell. The images vanished and the world snapped back to the dull grey of light rain falling on barren hills. He thrust the little man back into the boot of the Metro.

"You!" he shrieked, pointing at the unkempt little accountant as the man slowly emerged again from the rear of the car.

"Yes. Me." replied the accountant. "I knew you'd get there. Eventually. You've changed. When we started all this you were...smaller...less bombastic."

The accountant stood up, the crown of his head reaching only the breasts of the man dressed in black. Thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets so that he could draw it close around him to keep out the chill of the twilight breeze, the smaller of the two men stepped out into the road and looked first East and then West. There was nothing to be seen, nothing that signified light and life and hope. The monster in black took an involuntary step back towards his own car, and seemed to shrink visibly in height and width.

"And you" whispered the startled man in black, "you look so unadventurous, so benign...so invisible. How...no. I see it. Each of us becomes more and more what and how we are. For a true killer, brother, you're mean on they eye."

The accountant shrugged his shoulders, took a packet of low tar cigarettes from his jacket pocket and offered one to his companion, who shook his head. "Suit yourself", he said as he lit up and inhaled deeply. "It's not as though it makes any difference". He offered up a thin smile.

"Do you remember the bet? Of course you do. Daft bloody question. All those ages ago, back when the apes crawled out of the trees and first began to name the rocks and the winds and the moon as gods... we agreed then that we'd each take them, in our way, and see who could claim the most souls..."

He took another long drag on the cigarette.

The lion in black tossed his mane and stood tall once again, recovering his composure. "I remember the bet", he replied, "and the optimism of our youth."

"I have to say you're impressive these days, in spite of your age, and your inventiveness is stunning. Just when I think you can't come up with anything new you give me Pol Pot...quite brilliant. You put me to shame really, with my little ways and my tidy ledgers...bar one fact. You're falling behind, brother, a long way behind in the counting. Every little death, every disappointment, every tiring of the spirit, they're all mine, remember. I am the cloud, the dullness of depressions that slip ankle and bind neck. I am all those moments when the poor creatures realise that everything is in vain. I don't do glossy, brother. I'm not the spectacular, the summer blockbuster, no, I'm the winter chill in their bones. I am the reason why they wait out the years without hope. None of it's dramatic, not in your way...I mean, how do you make a public drama out of the long drawing down of a cancer, or the slow meander of a mild epidemic, or that fatal nudge into oncoming traffic? Oh, I do things with a flourish sometimes, I suppose, the knife and the psychosis, but no, my book is made up of dark matter, whereas yours lists the stars that shine for bright, sparkling mortality. Unlike you, who prefer a broad brush, I see the intricate beauty of the devil in the detail. So, brother, I've sat here in the rain with one purpose. As ever I'm here to ask...do you concede?"

With that he stubbed out his cigarette, walked away from the man in black towards the front of his battered old car, and slammed shut the bonnet. Behind him he heard a deep sigh followed by a long intake of breath. Here it comes, he thought, the pomp and splendour.

"I will never concede", roared Goliath in his mourning attire. "I have a new plan, brother, a new device, subtle and sure and global. Waters rise even as we speak. The furnace heats. A tide swells, a tide of souls that moves to my imperial call as inevitably as the seas ebb and flow to beckoning mother moon. We'll count again soon enough and see how the reckoning falls. Even then, I doubt if either one of us will give the other satisfaction."

They both stood in the middle of the road now facing one another, the giant standing with his hand on his hips, his hair thick and full on the wind, while the mouse stood hunched in his jacket, his glasses perched on the end of his thin nose. They looked each other in the eye for a moment, each of them dipping into the well of endless night, before breaking away and staring out towards the scarred hillsides leading towards Ben Mor Coigach.

"You'll be off on your way, then?" asked the smaller of the two.

"I must. Destiny calls my little fish to the net. What about you? Your transport looks a little dishevelled?"

"Yes. It is, as you put it, somewhat dishevelled. Anyway, I'm tired of it. I believe a lady of a certain age will come along the road shortly in a late model Ka. That's a safe and reliable little car, I believe, and anyway, I must have a chat with her about the disappointment she feels with her fat and flabby husband. Maybe, in her grief, I can make her an offer she won't be inclined to refuse; an autumnal, evening walk upon the mountain for her, perhaps, in return for a slow descent into diabetic coma for him?"

The brothers both smiled, being equal and opposite parts of each other, the reticent introvert and the feral extrovert, the immovable object and the unstoppable force. Before he climbed back into the cockpit of his thoroughbred machine the black clad beast stopped and turned to look once more upon the now wistful face of his twin.

"I suppose there really is no end to this, is there?" he asked.

"Not as long as there's an unclaimed soul, a red ink pen and an accounting ledger to hand", said the other, reaching for another cigarette.

Lord of the North Wind

A cold chill to the skin. A fine, faint spray hung in the air, cocooning the sodium light of a market town evening as if the world were lit by giant bumbling glow worms. Lucy was tired and ever so slightly tipsy. The Mad Hatter in fresher's week. Girls and boys from the Royal Agricultural College wearing spiders webs for clothes and daring September's spiny little teeth to bite if they could. Youth and optimism and the first rush of freedom combined with Bacardi mixers to make Lucy feel just a little giddy. The boy in the red polo shirt, the boy with defiantly tousled hair and yard boots, he would be the one. Virginity sucks, she thought, and spun round once on the pavement outside W H Smiths.

The low greyness of the sky blotted out the stars, but as Lucy headed up the road towards Waitrose and the uphill walk towards Chesterton, past the old hospital and the mouldering bones of the old Roman amphitheatre, she felt sure that some astral guardian would bring the boy to her arms and to her digs soon enough. She felt a tingle of excitement at the thought of her own nakedness before him, warming her from within as she walked.

September's clarion call to looming winter began to gnaw at the flesh on her exposed legs. The skirt that she was wearing was a last throw of a summer wardrobe designed for hot, sultry Greek nights, and barely covered her modesty. Great in the bar, so long as you remembered to bend the knees when sitting, but of little use in preventing the onrush of hyperthermia amid winter's close called icy tendrils. The light fleece top that she had ultimately decided to bring along sat snugly over her shoulders, not worn, as that would be too much admission of sensibility, but comforting nonetheless.

Her boots, brown and calf length, heeled but slim and forgiving, were the only part of Lucy's attire suited to the time of year. Lucy was particularly attached to the boots, reminding her as they did of her mother and father's glinting lasciviousness. The example set for Lucy by her parental role models was neatly summed up in her father's succinct way of describing her mother's love of long, tall boots..."Chase me, shag me, boots".

Despite having reached the age of eighteen intact and undefiled, Lucy had definite views about Fresher's week. The right time and place. She was grown up, away from home, an independent woman dealing with a bright and shining world on her terms. The boy in the red polo shirt. Lucy grinned inanely as she reached the main Tetbury road and started to walk up hill towards the underpass that opened out onto Chesterton Lane and her new home.

There seemed a deepening of the chill in the air as she climbed up and out of the town, as though the imminence of winter was more profoundly announced away from the lights and the chirpy clatter of bars and restaurants. Lucy shivered and felt the reverie slip away from her grasp. She was alone. Why? Her new friends, the girls sharing her digs had elected to go on to a small club a few yards down the street, but not she. In the bar, wrapped in the warm embrace of alcohol and the fantastic promise of the boy with the tousled hair and that cheeky smile, she had suddenly felt compelled to decline the offer of more fun. She wanted to go home. It was an imperative, an unquenchable thirst, almost a universal longing for an end to this

particular night. So here she was, about to walk down the ramp and into the underpass, with the first dread impulse to run back to the lights and bars rising from the pit of her stomach.

As she took her first step down towards the underpass she noticed a slight change in the atmosphere. The sound of rumbling rubber from the cars on the dual carriageway seemed to drift above her and hold its metaphorical breath. The sky weighed upon her shoulders as if she was walking into the maw of a deeply black and ebonised catafalque. The spindle limbed bushes that edged the footpath seemed to tangle and spin around her, casting her into the middle of a trawling net. Her heart raced, thumping against her ribs fit to split them asunder. Another step. She wanted to turn and run back towards the light, anywhere other than here. The usual horrors of the Waitrose car park seemed ambrosially soft compared to this hard, cold, terminal descent. Instead of turning, however, Lucy placed one unwilling foot in front of another, feeling amid the were-growl at the base of the world as if she must and without delay enter the realm of the beast. The tingle engendered by thoughts of the boy in the bar remained with her, stronger now, so much so that the strange compulsion to return home positively engulfed her.

The sound of cars faded completely as Lucy took a tentative step off the ramp and into the underpass proper. There was no other place in the world than this dank, graffiti covered passageway between the streets of her new place of abode. Lucy's nostrils filled with the inevitable familiarity of the damp earth musk of the subterranean, of watered down piss pools, and the reek of old, decaying tobacco. On the wall, half way along and to her right a security light shone weakly from behind its cage, singing a song of light as plaintive as the lark held captive beneath a towering sky. Motifs and signals. Colours splashed across the walls.

She walked slowly on. Shadow. Lucy thought that she could make out one patch of other darkness at the far end of the underpass. She hesitated, catching her breath on the barb of her fear, her heart pounding on and on. Her eyes watered and she tried to wipe away the blindness, but merely managed to shift the focus of dread to the dead pool of black something blocking her way. She had no choice. On she must go.

The shape shifted. An irregular mass elongated and stretched itself, revealing the rough shape of torso, limbs and head, all of them covered in what seemed to be a coating of thick, black, flowing cloth. The head was hooded. On the ground the shape seemed almost frail, as though it could not carry the burden of terror that forever dogged its tracks, but as Lucy moved closer, as the figure gathered its limbs together and began to unbend, began to straighten and stand, she saw with horror that he, for it must be masculine, was tall and thick set and lithe, as if he were a wolf or a hunting cat.

Lucy swallowed, desperate to bring succour to her parched throat. She could not see any feature on the man except for darkness. She could sense no personality save for that one weird sense of longing that seemed to flow from his soul. Lucy was afraid of the moment but somehow she was not terrified. She felt the fear that comes with expectation still wrapped in tinsel and bright paper. Strange, she thought, as if a logical examination of the moment might reveal the joke. She sensed something other here but not evil, not in its own right, describing it to herself as rather a feral air, as though the man were wild and untamed as yet. The tingle. The compulsion. Lucy could not help herself. She stopped beneath the squalid light.

"I just want to go home", she said, trying to breathe softly while mustering the militia of authority to protect her exposed flanks.

The creature growled rather than spoke, a belly-growl, a bark almost, but the words were plain enough to Lucy. "That is all anybody wants".

"Will you move out of my way, please", she continued, struggling to form the words and sounds as a coherent whole. "Will you?"

The creature reached his full height and girth, his hands stuffed into deep jacket pockets, the hood low over his forehead. Lucy thought for a moment that she saw what she could only describe as a whisker twitch at the edge of that black hood. Was that fur she could spy tufting out of his trouser leg bottoms?

"If that is what you really want, then I will move", the creature replied in his low, guttural purr. "But first I want to ask something of you."

Hell, thought Lucy, this is it. This is the stuff my mother always warned me about, the perv in the park, the bogeyman offering venomous sweeties, the wolf in sheep's clothing. In a childish attempt to make the creature disappear she closed her eyes tightly and tried to breathe slowly.

"Think", she muttered to herself. Could she out run him? Where was there to go? It seemed to Lucy as if the whole world existed within this short, dank passageway. She opened her eyes slowly, as if that might make the world around her change. She looked up expecting to see rough, serrated concrete but saw instead and to her utter amazement stars in their millions. Where the feeble lamp had spewed out sluggish particles of light there now hung a low, full moon. The painted walls were swaying tufts of long eared grass. Lucy gasped. Her heart rate quickened once again. The creature withdrew his right hand from his jacket pocket to reveal a slender, greybrown paw, talons gleaming like black diamonds in the moonlight. He beckoned her towards him and spoke with that soft, serrated, killing voice.

"A kiss is all I ask, just a simple kiss from your soft, ruby girlish lips. One kiss for the beast, for the Lord of the North Wind, and you will be utterly free."

Lucy took a step forward, knowing that with movement that she would reveal herself to him, but the musky smell of this noble carnivore seeped into Lucy's soul. She should cut and run. She should think about the boy in the red polo shirt, think about marriage and babies and college and so, so many things, but not one of them meant anything at all to her in this moment. She felt the tingle, felt the longing in her groin spread throughout her body, warming and teasing her, making her skin sensitive to the touch of hem and weave and seam. She couldn't help but let out a long, low sigh.

Lucy took another step forward towards the outstretched paw. She caught a brief reflection from within the hood, a pale white howling light cast back at her from his eyes, a reflection of the moon and his ice cold soul. Lucy longed to nuzzle into his fur, to bury her face in the texture of death. She knew that one touch would be enough. Lucy saw with absolute clarity under this calm but deep moonlight, that accepting the request would bring freedom of a kind that, at her tender and exciting age, she had never yet considered. It tasted delicious. Those eyes. How she longed to look into those eyes just once before the fang and the crack of her neck.

The wolf spoke again, smothering the moment with his reek and the furnace heat of his breath. "You think you know what freedom means. I see it in your eyes. But you are mistaken. My kiss is not death. It is the one truth of a life immortal in the time of man."

This was not what Lucy expected. She felt the magic in the air begin to waver around her head, revealing glimpses of stone cold wall and hard, puddled tarmacadamed floor amongst the grasses and the starry sky. This was the instant of doubt, the point where the prey loses its fear of those mesmerising eyes and runs for

dear sanctuary, but in that instant when Lucy felt that she might regain control of her legs and speed back towards the light of town, the wolf slid the hood from his head.

What big eyes, full of fire and wind. What big teeth, slavering and razor sharp. The light changed once again. The sweet smelling air of a cold, crisp open plain standing before the wooded foothills of some primeval mountain range filled the world, an air that brings with it the promise of silence on snowfall, of the wandering track of paws discovered on a bright, blue freeze of a morning.

Lucy watched as the beast flung off the black cloak. She gaped and swooned as the wolf prince, this Lord of the North Winds, revealed himself to her. Time stood still around her, the grasses hushing their endless tidal sweep, and now, without any further movement of her feet, she felt herself glide towards his beckoning paw. With every inch covered her senses reeled with ever deeper revelation. The smell of him; taught and unfettered, canine and warm, dripping with libido. The look of him; rippling and strong, lithe and leggy, powerfully quick to the prey. The sound of him; deep and endless, a calling wind from the birth of time itself, assured and confident. The taste of him; oh the taste to come, the wetness of his muzzle, the razor edge of his teeth, the fetid and yielding lust on his hot breath as the bite went home.

"I...I don't...understand", she whimpered as she placed her delicate pink hand onto his rough skinned canine pads.

If a wolf and a man combined can truly ever smile, then he did so now, revealing the full width and depth of the terror of the world in that one reflexive response to emotion and the kill.

"All this and more is mine. Every field, every mountain range, every wood. I roam free, beyond the gun and skinning knife. I wait in dark places, in alleyways and passages, amid dereliction and decay, and once in a white killing moon I listen for the call, and take a willing kiss from an innocent. Not from the unknowing but from one whose potential is as boundless as my realm, from one who feels my strength but knows not yet how they will be set free. I can set you free."

"But...who are you?" Lucy asked quietly, laying herself down beneath the wolf, feeling soft grass prick her bare legs.

The wolf sank onto all fours, straddling the girl, nuzzling at her breasts and her cheek softly. His eyes burned red with the fire of his kind now. He looked directly at Lucy and spoke his last words softly, like a lover spent after the first new tenderness of the night.

"These places are my trails between worlds. You came calling my name. I am simply he who answers your call. Soon the wolves of your world will be no more. My mortal folk are lost. But as with all things the time of man will end. Until then I answer the call of those like you who know in their hearts what it is to be free. When the time comes you will tread this path again into a cleansed and virgin world and you will howl at mother moon and set my folk free. Know, girl, that I am the Lord of the North Wind and that I love you with all my heart."

Lucy could swim in his eyes forever, she felt, as she gazed at her own reflection in the deep ruby fire of his timeless stare. She saw there not the girl, but the she-wolf, the alpha female, in her prime, maned and dripping blood from the kill, suckling at pups, standing at the edge of the world baying for the return of her great lunar matriarch. She saw a time to come when the world would be at peace and left without the mark of human death, a time when lone wolves would appear as out of the air to reclaim their eternal place in the heart. She heard the welcoming in the hills and forests as each of these immortal beasts sang with joy in the bright light of full moons.

As Lucy felt the waters of the wolf rising above her head, entombing her in his flesh, as she watched, fascinated by the bending of his neck and felt the first exquisite piercing of his canines within her flesh, she whispered one last question.

"Am I really like her, the wolf-woman in your eyes?"

But for the Moon

Under the broad limbs of an oak, in a deep hollow that provided both shade and yet was open to the breeze that continually blew in from the sea, the old man lay down at midday, mopped his brow with a red, paisley handkerchief, and reached into his bag for the hard, round goats cheese and the hunk of heavy bread that he had picked up this morning when leaving his hut at first light. He fished out a small jug, the last of the rough, dry red wine and drank. He let a few drops fall from his mouth onto the kerchief and, rather than wiping away the dust on his face and lips, he just managed to smear it across his jaw and nose a little more vividly. It was a frugal meal but it would be enough to see him through to evening. It was a long walk down from the mountain to his one-time home on the coast, a place that he barely remembered other than for the fantastic whiteness of the walls and the deep blue cupola of their little church. He had a few pennies in his pocket, enough to sleep in a barn perhaps and buy a small piece of cooked meat and some potato. He crossed himself once before he ate the bread and cheese. God willing he would make the coast and home tomorrow.

He had chosen a simple life. It was, even after all these years, still strange to him that he chose life at all. When she died he neither embraced the opportunity nor did he slaughter himself in her memory so that he could be with her always. Everyone told him it was natural to be confused and that the pain would pass with time. He had three daughters, grown up and married when the fevers came and took his wife. He took no comfort then in the wonderful fact that the first of her grandchildren had called her Nana to her face before Charos stole her away from him.

"It is not as though you are alone, Michael", they had said. "You'll see. Give it a few months, let the grief come and be what it is, and you'll see. There will be new routines, new faces, it will all happen. You're relatively young, just fifty, you'll rut again."

He came to hate the laugh that always accompanied these lascivious suggestions. They meant well, he knew that, but how could they imagine that he could do all of these normal things without her. The priest offered a shoulder to lean on and a glass of raki. His neighbours spent weeks and then months cajoling him into living, inviting him to their homes, and sometimes, when the bitter tears really did fall, they even left him alone. In time, when he continued to hide behind the shutters, refusing to let the warmth of their smiles enter his heart, they stopped trying to help him all together, and he was secretly glad.

He had some savings, a little residue from a small property he and his wife owned and which he sold shortly after she travelled to the far banks of the river, so there was no need to work, at least not for a while. Maybe that was his mistake. Maybe he should have been more of a man, hiding his feelings and resuming the daily grind, putting on that happy face that she did so well even when the soul was blank.

He did not do that. He lived quietly, waiting for that moment each evening when the reds and gold of fiery day turned first to pink and orange, then to swirling purples and finally to the blackness of night. He waited and he watched and when the first stars sparkled into life, he greeted his wife and then got blind drunk. He was not

brave enough a man to put a gun to his own head or to drive a knife into his own heart. He preferred the coward's way. Oblivion.

His daughters, of course, did their best. They invited him to Sunday lunches and on days out with the grandchildren. They popped their heads round the door for a quick visit and for a coffee. They held parties to which he was always asked, and he went along with it all at first. Oh yes, he attended their functions and their family gatherings but only so that he could stand there as if he were watching the world from inside a goldfish bowl. He found it hard to string a sentence together, not because he was slow, but because despite being considered an intelligent man, he simply could no longer be bothered.

Without his wife he was nothing. He continued to live without living. He gave up on business, spent hours writing hopeless paeans to her memory, and slowly the light in their eyes, these daughters of his with their busy lives and their boisterous men folk, ceased to burn for him. Yes, he had chosen a simple life. He watched as his daughters and their husbands bumped along with the endless cycles of living, working and with raising children. They found their way where he would not, and wilfully failing to understand that they too hurt as he did, he chose a simple life. He ran away from it all, throwing his hands up in the air and saying to anyone who might listen, "My wife is dead. What is the point of anything?"

He had been saying that self-same thing these last thirty years. From his old village he ran away with the last of his money to the city. He tried to lose himself among the crowds, tried to make himself become so small that no one would notice him ever again, so small that he might actually disappear. Always, always, when he waited for the stars, with a bottle of cheap hooch in his pocket, the moon would rise, and as he got drunk, he always thought he heard a familiar voice. He could never quite catch the full timbre and tone, and anyway some person or other would try to talk with him. People were like that in the city. They ignored you for long enough to make you think that you might disappear in a puff of smoke, and then one of them would turn round and say something. All that work, all that investment in anonymous fading would be utterly wasted. Always someone would come and walk across the void, filling it with humanity and possibility. No, the city was worse than his village.

Ten years after she died, nine years after he fled the village and soused himself in the gutters of the metropolis, he woke one morning and decided that the mountain overlooking his old home would be the best place for him. He would be closer to the stars, and to that damned incoherent moon, and he could sit without interruption, come winter snow or summer dust.

"Let the Bora blow itself out on my head", he said to himself, "and then we'll see what's what."

Money, of course, was almost non-existent now. He rented a shabby flat in the port slum and, when the coin for wine evaporated, he might work for a few nights as a pot-washer or something equally lonely. His worldly goods fetched a laughable sum, but who would need money on the mountain? He did need good boots, but that was all. He bought reasonably good boots, scrimping even then to make sure that he had a bottle or two for the journey. He walked under those stars, and always, when the moon rose, he thought he could hear a familiar voice, but it was so far off and so thin that he still could not make out the words. Maybe, he thought, he might find a shepherds hut high up, somewhere where he could sit, wait for the stars and hear the moon a little more clearly. Yes, if he could just do that. It would be enough and now that he was sixty years old, he could wait for death. Surely the first snows would take him.

They did not. He became so good at sitting and watching and waiting that a local farmer who lived like a feudal lord in one of the bigger mountain villages employed him as a geriatric shepherd boy. It was enough to keep the wolf from the door, as indeed was he. It was a thing to wonder about. Why did he accept even that hand, when all he wanted to do was die? Surely even he, wastrel and inconstant fool that he was, could sit on a mountain side and wait for the chill winds and sleets of winter to come and take him? He didn't have to do anything, he thought. He could simply sit, talk to the stars, drink, and maybe catch a word or two from that bloody moon. Surely he could just sit and fade out of the world as he had always wished?

It appeared not, for here he was twenty years later sitting under the oak. His legs ached from the walking, and his back was stiff. He shifted it against the rough bark of the oak tree, scratching a persistently annoying itch. Down here, down amongst the trees he could smell the wild thyme and smiled remembering her little herb garden all those years ago.

Was it really twenty years that he had sat on a mountain? Twenty years? He tried to measure the time, but he no longer had any reference points in the world below. Eighty seasons. Twenty shearings. What were they in the real world? He had not left the mountain side once in all that time. Twenty years of living on hard and rancid cheeses, the occasional slice of meat if the farmer took pity on him, thick, heavy bread, wild legumes and mushrooms, and, out of preference, jugs of the cheapest, roughest wines. He was more than eighty years old, ate appallingly, still communed with the stars and as a consequence he still drank too much, but nevertheless here he was. It would seem that Charos had, until now, never been interested in collecting his fee.

But then the moon...The old man knew now that he was but moments away from death. After a long life wasted he had just a few days, perhaps a few weeks left. He could feel it in his bones and in his waters, and now that it came down to dealing with the ferryman, the old man very much wanted to live. The moon had finally stopped shilly-shallying and only last night he had seen and heard her clearly. After all these years of mumbling and insouciance she had finally come to him. He looked up at that damned moon and saw that his wife sat there, in a little crater all of her own, looking exactly as she had done in the days before the fevers sunk her cheeks and turned her into an old crone before her time. She looked down on him, frowned and told him in no uncertain terms to stop being an arse. Her exact words. He laughed. For the first time in all these years he actually laughed. He laughed so much that now he had a sore throat and no voice. It was so like her.

It was as simple as that. He realised now why he could not die, not without climbing down from the mountain one last time. He must do that one thing he so signally failed to do before he ran away. He must put right the one thing that had been troubling him through all these years had he but seen it. It was not his wife's death that drove him to seek always a smaller place, always another bottle. The truth of the matter is that after he said farewell to the woman whom he loved with all his heart, he had simply been too scared to admit that he felt the same for all his family. He loved her so much and she died. He summed up his fear like this; if I love them too will the same happen to them? I could not bear it and so I will run away.

He sat under the tree for an hour, letting the noon sun burn and parch the earth. He slept for a short while, during which time he dreamed that he could see a chariot of flame bearing Charos towards him. He woke with a start, hauled himself up on his stout wooden stick, slung his bag back over his shoulder and patted the oak tree, thanking it for it's tolerance of a foolish old man. His left leg complained with every

step but he just laughed and told it not to be an arse. As he left the shade and headed down the mountain he said to himself, "That is why I cannot die. That is why I will live a little longer. I am going home to tell my daughters how much I love them."

Beginning with Smith

Tales of creation vary according to time and place in any given universe, and yet, when you hear those dusty tales it is the similarities between them that strike you the most, and from these similarities we assume that there must at least be a grain of truth shared amongst our stories of beginning. For example, most such tales share an idea or thought of conception that is usually expressed as an action of some form of anthropomorphic being. The lists of creators are legion.

In the Bakuba account the Earth was originally nothing but water and darkness, ruled by the giant Mbombo. This giant, after feeling an intense pain in his stomach one day, vomited up the sun, moon, and stars. For the Maasai of Kenya humanity was fashioned by the creator from a single tree or leg which split into three pieces. Beyond the rising Maasai sun the Ainu people of Hokkaidō tell of six heavens and six hells where gods, demons, and animals lived. In the highest of these heavens lived Kamui, the creator god, and his servants. In the bloody annals of Aztec narratives creation proceeds with an Earth mother, Coatlique, the Lady of the Skirt of Snakes.

Not all tales of creation begin with the action or thought of some vaguely familiar being. Although some philosophers of origin may hear such abstracts as nothing more than a little local dissent or muddled thinking, nonetheless these different tales can be just as powerful. In earlier Vedic pondering on origin, the universe emanated from a cosmic egg, while some Daoists interpreted creation as a series of philosophical steps; The Way gave birth to Unity, Unity gave birth to Duality, Duality gave birth to Trinity, and Trinity gave birth to the myriad creatures.

Buddhism, however, largely ignores the question. The Buddha is quoted as saying something like, "Conjecture about the world is an unconjecturable that is not to be conjectured about, that would bring madness & vexation to anyone who conjectured about it."

Allowing for the unknowable and the agnostic, tolerating the conflict between the absolute void and the essential necessity of beginning, and forgetting for a moment the clamour of insistent insanity that underpins all of our attempts to understand anything beyond the obvious demarcation lines of our own fragile and brief existence, the tale that follows may also turn out to be as much a truth about creation as any other...

It is a commonly held belief that where there is light there must be darkness, that forces of life are matched by those of death and that in all things there is a balanced equation of equals and opposites. It stands to basic human reasoning given that we as conscious beings experience everything through a beginning and an end. A human child is born, erupts through puberty, mellows in maturity, fades with age, and eventually returns to the dust of death. A washing machine rises bright and shining from its packaging, suffers a decade of high-speed revolutions and hot water calcification, and finally returns back to its constituent elements through recycling or decomposition deep beneath the gull strewn summits of landfill.

This limitation to life is, of course, entirely human-centric and bears no real scrutiny when we consider the true faith inherent in origin. What was out there before Big Bang? The question is answerable only by an apparently endless circling of the

square root of our own experience or by accepting that there is an absolute version of an almost impossible conceptual device; nothing.

The deity in question in this story was and is a small God. He, She or It has by simply existing removed the possibility of nothing, but equally none of the fundamental questions about beginning are answered by this God's existence. We have to face the simple fact that there was, all along, something.

In this particular beginning there was darkness, an almost void, an incomplete essence, and, for the sake of simplicity, Smith, our quietly drifting creator, really rather liked the darkness. Smith was the way and the meaning of nothing. Smith was thought without action, the procrastination at the very start of things. Smith liked to drift in the great expanse of un-place, whiling away the immeasurable aeons of non-time by contemplating the vagueness at the heart of all things. Smith thought about nothing.

Smith was not by nature solitary, rather it was simply the case that He had always been alone. Smith had what we might recognise as thoughts, but He had no shapes upon which to hang them. Smith was unable to fashion physical angels and demons as companions because Smith had never imagined imagination. In effect Smith could draw like an eighteen month old infant. He had no control over the heavenly pencil. All that Smith was aware of was the equivalent of a cosmic itch, and he endured the madness of the itch because he was impotence personified, that impotence inherent in not quite understanding the concept of the scratch, Smith unwittingly agreed with the future earthly Buddha in that He found the unformulated conjecture of eternal peace to be vexatious and maddening.

There is a moment in every natural state, a moment before the reaction, when forces are marshalled, reach a critical point and then tip towards change. Across the far flung boundaries of the void Smith finally determined that the endlessly irritating sensation that underlay the void was deserving of a name. Smith thought through the very fabric of time and finally, in a moment of naturally divine inspiration, He invented the word. Smith called the itch Silence.

Silence was the first form, the first shape upon which Smith could hang an idea, and He marvelled at the universe that crept into view with the naming of this first idea. Silence was a perfection of void and nothing. Smith, using a modern colloquial term, loved silence but with love comes an inevitable discontent. Even in the vast emptiness of Smith-time the itch eventually returned, and Smith was forced to concede a fundamental philosophical point.

In order that Smith might truly enjoy the silence, in the same way that a man might enjoy the silence of a house in the early morning before the space in the world is filled with voices, He had to accept the fact that He, She or It was conceptually awake. To love silence, Smith realised, meant that as the creator He had become aware of self and place and time, and of the difference between places and times and selves, none of which could ever have existed in a true void.

Smith thought, and in thinking proved Descartes right, and therein lay a problem. He was alone. He saw darkness. He experienced silence. He felt need. Smith wanted something, but had no means to express such things in any sense other than silence and darkness, and so Smith thought un-shapes out of the fraying circular chords of absolute tranquillity.

Beyond the confines of earth-time, way out beyond the fringes of the universe where dark matter falls forever, Smith thought about nothing, taking slow but gigantic steps towards origin, and in thinking, even on a universal scale, Smith began to acquire the very first trappings of personality. Universal silence had a shape and the

simple fact that Smith could hang thoughts from this shape inevitably lead Him to choose particular ways of thinking. Smith preferred those thought-shapes that pleased, that scratched the cosmic itch most effectively, and so He expressed thought in a set of patterned, reactive ways. Smith started to become predictable.

Predictability was, thought Smith in a broad and universal manner, a good thing. Smith preferred to consider a thought from a familiar set of view points, rolling it across the heavens like thunder, looking at all those aspects of silence and darkness that reinforced the heavens as imagined by a responsible God. No matter how hard He tried to order creation, however, he continually discovered unwelcome shades of black within the unlimited spaces of the void, and in so doing He revealed even more of a personality. Smith liked some shades of nothing more than others. Smith put away the shades that displeased, and so came the formation of ideas that later we would call Good and Bad.

Unlike our earthly translators of the divine, unlike our latter day messengers of God, who know the way and speak the truth in our narrowly confined little world, Smith continually refashioned His likes and dislikes. With every turn of thought, as the shades of dark void rippled in the non-light, Smith found that His tastes changed. What had once been a Good shade now became a Bad tone and vice versa. Smith discovered choice.

Silence has a shape and upon that shape hang thoughts, and thoughts ripple, and Smith's universal mind grappled with the meanings of things without words or explanation. Faced with an endlessly moving target of certainty it is probably little wonder that across the gulf of time and space Smith became a little indecisive. With such unlimited options within His darkness how could a simple, artisan, pubescent God make a choice?

We, the readers of books and tales, find it difficult enough to answer questions even when our reading is wide and our thinking deep. For Smith, without access to heaven's as yet empty libraries, the darkness was beauty beyond description, solitude was a cruel mistress who only ever tasked without instruction, and silence was the wonder, the brilliance, the radiance of an eternal symphony half remembered. Smith could never quite be sure of anything. Silence was bliss, was the summation of every force and vitality known to the universal mind, but the inevitably subtle tonal difference within the quietude, as with the spectral shades of the void, caused Smith to vacillate.

In human terms, Smith listened to silence like we listen to Mozart on a Tuesday. We love Mozart the best. Then we listen to Beethoven on a Thursday and love Beethoven the best. Smith loved the Universal Light Programme that fizzed across the unseen radiation waves of His thought, but He loved each and every aspect of silence as if, for a fleeting moment, it was the only silence He had ever heard. Smith took the melody and the rhythm of the void into the soul of creation, swinging in allegiance from every note to every other note in a crescendo of perfect solitude, until it began to dawn on Smith that there was simply no way to settle on a universal truth in un-sound. Basically, Smith could no more organise a cosmic booze-up in an entire star field of breweries than could an ant recite the works of Rabbie Burns across the vast glens of Whisky sodden Scotland.

And so it came to pass – always a sign of an author who can't quite grasp the deepest philosophical foundations, let alone be bothered to write it all down – that Smith, in the madness of endless conjecture, decided to stick a virtual pin into the dark hide of the universal donkey. Smith drew a metaphorical line in the cosmic sand

and, breaking with every one of the unbidden traditions that had as yet underpinned the universe, thought-spoke to the void.

"LET THERE BE LIGHT".

Smith allowed the melody of sudden voice to flood through the vacuum of the void, combining it with the driving base line of fundamental creation that beat at His breast, and in so doing the stars shone suddenly like notes upon a black stave. Smith squinted in the bursting light, rubbed the black holes at the heart of his consciousness and grinned. The music of the heavens filled Smith with delight and He swooned with every rising phrase, letting the maelstrom notes burn through the universe. Had the universe contained any concept as simple as song, you would have heard Smith sing with a booming voice.

"LET THERE BE GALAXIES...LET THERE BE GASES...LET THERE BE COLLISIONS BETWEEN HEAVENLY BODIES...LET THERE BE STRANGE AND SOUIGGLY CHEMICAL CHAIN REACTIONS..."

This is how the heavens broke forth into starlight, how the suns began to burn and how the cosmic gas and dust coalesced to form the planets. This is how a primordial soup was brewed, how tectonic shifts came to be and how the rocks and the heaving skies settled down to their endless game of birth and erosion. Smith looked out across these symphonic landscapes and grinned ever wider, and it was good.

Except, of course, for the unbending equation, for the balancing highs and lows in the song of Smith's stars. For things to be good, for Smith to feel the warmth of a billion, billion nuclear suns, there also had to be things that were bad. There had to be the absolute cold that allowed Smith to feel the warmth, and the inevitable balancing factor in the equation was Smith. In the primordial soup of creation a chemical chain might have a lifetime of a second, or it might exist in an unbroken sequence that lasted for millennia, but for Smith that moment of absolute happiness in the melody of life was nothing but a blink of an eye. Smith looked down upon one small star and upon one totally insignificant rocky ball at the outer edge of a tiny spiral galaxy of stars, and there He heard the very first bum note.

If, along with suns, molten planet cores and gas nebulae, Smith had invented teeth then he would have understood the problem instinctively. This single second of discord in act three of the universal symphony effectively scratched a single fingernail of blackboard agony across Smith's infant mind, and He knew in that instant of molar grinding pain that the equation must have balance. Good requires Bad.

Smith looked down upon the third rock out from a brightly burning star at the edge of an insignificant spiral galaxy and beheld friction. The elemental soup eroded the rock. Skies billowed and poured acid rain into fissures in those rocks, fissures that cracked and split ever wider, and spellbound by the fascination that makes a B-movie actress in a horror film go forth to see what it is that makes such an unusual noise, Smith made His first fundamental mistake.

Gods, even small ones, should never delegate, but if you read the stories in any one of a thousand books you will find that pretty well every single one of these creative types has taken the odd short cut or two. Smith thought about the Bad, considered the symphonic disagreement at the edge of the universe and, after a millennium or two of orbital time Smith arrived at a conclusion. The solution was simple and elegant; take a galactic eraser, rub out the errant note, and write down a simple harmonic improvement.

However, feeling the pull of a billion, billion stars, feeling the weight of mass and time upon His shoulders, succumbing to the myriad energies of relative balance

flexing across the void, Smith put away the cosmic HB pencil with the little pink tip, washed his hands in the ethereal mists of space and willed the skies to peace. Smith brushed the primordial broth with a thought, dismissing this disappointing, barren little rock with a shrug, and left the madly sparking chemical squiggles to their own peculiar frenzy of oxygenated radicalism.

Almost as an afterthought Smith allocated a small portion of his dream time as the equivalent of a galactic closed circuit television system. That part of his ethereal mind that bore the as yet unnamed form of Conscience added just a hint of chiding harmonic resonance to the song of the universe, and thus was born the conduit between God and the third rock out from an insignificant little star. Smith turned his gaze away from the chemical and physical experiment at the edge of what we now call the Milky Way, but he left the monitors on and the tapes running just in case he ever needed to put a face to a crime.

In doing this, in leaving the cameras on constant surveillance, Smith also effected a process of change and evolution. As Smith dreamed and experimented and changed the fabric of time and space, as He formulated infinite varieties of life and death across the vast expanse of the void, small packages of His thought leaked out from beyond the horizon of Smith's dreaming and drifted through the aeons and along the canals and wires that connect the universal whole. Some of these rogue thoughts leaked into the here and now, drifting all the way out to Smith's now forgotten song of the Earth.

In dreaming of a peacock sky on some far distant world, Smith allowed a feather to fall upon the barren rocks of our world. Cells coalesced as notes in the song combined, water formed as notes tumbled over cosmic cliff edges, and proverbial butterfly wings fluttered in their thousands over the future-distant space of Beijing. Amphibians croaked a tenor's song of night. The Unicorn fluttered into the world for an instant before the nightmare broke its back upon the anvil of impossibility. Clouds billowed. Rain fell. Mountains rose and rivers cut deep scars into the surface of the planet. Ferns uncurled their leaves, morphosing into a billion species of tree and bush and flower. A flood of marine shapes colonised the roaring seas, monsters roamed the earth, shaking the foundations of the world to rubble, and finally, in the heart of blackness that was a shallow echo of Smith's loneliness, there was a dream of companionship. The mammals came and one of them, born of just a single microscopic moment in the great dream, stood up and walked out from the crowd.

Through the long ages of Smith's indifference the madly spinning Earth flourished, blooming on the edge of the void like a tiny fungal spore at the heart of a vast, immeasurable forest, and in that paradisiacal garden the ape walked, simply and silently, embodying the dream of Smith, becoming the ultimate, if yet unknown, companion.

Birdsong joined with the universal melody. Volcanoes added deep resonance to the bass lines underpinning the twinkling of the stars. Whales sang in the deeps of the ocean. Life itself upon, within and underneath the good, damp soil blew a fanfare to the heavens far beyond the measure of any single organism. The song was Good and Smith, even though he heard none of the individual songs sung by the flora and fauna of this long forgotten refrain at the edge of all things, found contentment in the straightforward knowledge that the song continued, a fulfilment sufficient for Him to think the work of creation a noble thing. But as always with the rhythm of the universe a discordant note took its inevitable place in the skirl of creation.

Smith batted the discord away like a fly on a hot summer day, but no matter how swift or firm Smith's vast and unimaginable hand, the fly continually evaded the

swatter and buzzed back and forth at the edge of His perception. Eventually Smith turned towards the high pitched whine of gossamer winged song and, looking behind the metaphorical net curtain that hid the outer reaches of the old melodies from His hearing, Smith focussed his universal ear upon the sound of this disharmony.

Out at the edge of an insignificantly flat spiral galaxy, by a minute speck of light that shone almost below the visible spectrum, Smith heard a plaintive howling. He looked down upon the bright and savage earth for the first time in countless measures of eternity and there Smith saw something quite unexpected; the utterly familiar shape of loneliness embodied in the outlandish shell of the hairless ape who dared to contemplate creation, baying at the stars, calling out in utter desperation for the companionship that comes with that first sparkling moment of harmony within the song of songs.

Bastille Day

Cold stone walls. To touch them was to recoil. The prisoner opened his eyes and felt as if he was some strange, wide-eyed, lidless creature lost in a sea of thick black oil. The darkness was viscous, dripping slowly onto flakes of straw that lay rotting on the puddled floor. This complete absence of light was the hardest thing to bear. The stench of wet decay was almost a comfort. The scurrying of sharp little claws on flagstones was a reminder of life and the slightest feather touch of frayed rags on his bare legs was a breath of civilisation, a small memento of his humanity. All of these things, all of these slight, needle tip sensations, were a lullaby for the child afraid of the dark.

In his head he pieced together the letters of a name over and over again, trying to fit them together in any one of a thousand combinations, only one of which would form the shape of a man. By repeating his name, by bouncing the echo of his voice off the cold stone walls that surrounded him, he somehow found the strength to hold at bay the constriction, the weight of fear that otherwise would have crushed him. The sheer mass of stone and brick surrounding him compressed his sight. His awareness of being was a single point of focus. Curled up in the middle of a bleak and hooded cell he waited for grains of shadow to float between the bars of a small arrow-slit window high above him. Deep within the darkest hours the purple shades of a newly rising day would come and with them the rattle-bag voice that ground out the hours of his incarceration.

"I, the voice of the people am being smothered, strangled...assassinated!"

And so another day began, timed by the insane mutterings of Citizen Marat, the one time darling of the revolution now made mechanical and ever vigilant while enemies of the state lay in foetal balls on freezing flagstones. He drifted on waves of nausea. Heart-pounding tension washed through the man in the cell, who sat huddled and buried deep beneath the crumbling vaults of stone that formed the roof of the world. The pitch of Marat's voice was sharp and angular, cutting through the thick prison air like a knife, and when the mechanised grind of his jaws finally ceased, an echo hung in the still morning air like a noose biting ever deeper into the prisoner's bare neck. Wide-eyed, rocking back and forth, curled up into the smallest space that he could physically make for himself, MacKenzie waited for dawn's faint lustre to break on high.

As Citizen Marat settled into another all too brief period of silence MacKenzie watched the bleeding edges of dawn fall from the sky. Wisps of cloud drifted across the narrow opening in the arrow-slit high above him, its outline drawn in pitch

against the faintest murmur of a grey-purple softening in the counter glow outside. A rat, brown and sleek, scratched at scraps and bare bones in the shadows. Beyond the window MacKenzie heard faint, skeletal bird calls, which caught on the square-cut edges of the thick cell walls and dissolved the shifting shapes of the man that he had been trying to form. Bird song called MacKenzie back to the hungry frailty that made flesh of his present reality. He watched the light break above his head and stopped whispering the letters of his name.

Beyond sleep, Danton, grizzly Danton, the bear, the motive power behind the revolution, prowled the corridors of La Force Nouveau. He should have come before this. MacKenzie had been a friend in a world where true-bloods and the likes of Danton rarely got close. In Danton's wake a red capped guard hurried on, head bowed, taking two pigeon steps for every one that the committee chairman slammed down onto the unyielding flagstones as they swept past heavy browed doors set in frames of rough cut, foot square timbers. On every door a faceplate rusted on wrought iron runners, closed against the light of real wax candles guttering on stone ledges set into the walls. The sharp retort of metalled boot heels struck out at the early morning stillness, announcing the arrival of Danton and his scowling, out of breath companion to every inmate as they bore down on the door at the end of the corridor like cannon balls, casting their grotesquely elongated shadows across the floor and up the walls. When they reached the end of the corridor a small man in a leather jerkin jumped out of the shadows and Danton's voice boomed out, smothering the chill of morning in burning impatience.

"Gaoler... If there's no sleep for me, I'll be damned if there's any for you. Look sharp, man."

The gaoler, wrapped in high collars and thick furs beneath his jerkin, muttered a series of barely audible imprecations and stumbled forward into the flickering light cast by one of the candles. He continued to curse the dog that dared to stalk his halls this early in the day, but thought better of raising his voice in anger when he saw the shaggy shape of the bear that marked Citizen Danton out from the usual visitors.

"Take me to MacKenzie..."

"Sir, yes... this way."

The gaoler fiddled with his keys and unlocked the door at the end of the passage, pushing it back to reveal a short flight of steps carved out of natural rock. The ceiling was low and narrow, forcing Danton to move forward with his knees bent, crouched down beneath the mountain. God alone knew who dreamt up this vision of Hell, he thought, as he ascended a flight of narrow, pinched steps. Danton and his companions emerged onto a short landing at the end of which was another heavy wooden door. The walls, like those in the corridor below, were hewn out of huge blocks of solid rock and the space was illuminated by the soft glow of candles, candles that, in this simulacrum of past glories, illuminated the stone in a wash of yellow and amber. Half way down the landing a recess in the left hand wall glowed brightly under a spotlight. As he walked Danton straightened himself up, pulling his shoulder blades back to relieve the tension that he felt tightening at the base of his

The three of men, Danton, the gaoler and the guard, swept down the landing towards the far door, their mistimed triumvirate steps clattering out a chaos of irregular rhythms. Danton stopped abruptly as they approached the recess in the wall. Dumbfounded, he stared at the object that grinned its rictus smile from a plinth under the only electric light in the corridor. Perched on a silver spike, trailing leads and

luridly coloured pipe work, Citizen Marat's head stared back at the committee chairman with eyes as clear and blue as a bright summer afternoon.

"My God..." was all that Danton could say, taking a step back and nearly squashing the gaoler against the wall.

"Lovely touch, Sir," said the gaoler, squeezing out from behind the committee chairman. "They brought him here after the funeral. Thought it would be fitting for the guests. A reminder of their bastard ways".

Danton looked at the man in horror and as he did so the spiked head's lips moved and Citizen Marat's harsh, piercing tones crawled across Danton's skin, peeling back the veneers of liberty that he clothed himself in.

"Atrocious men who every day seek to bury us further in anarchy and who try to kindle the flames of civil war."

The severed head's animated smile faded slowly as the pipes, leads and motors ceased their moment of work, but the eyes remained fixed on Danton. The man who had assumed the revolutionary name of Marat was, according to the press and the revolutionary council, dead and buried. According to the official news wires Marat had been given a hero's funeral after his murder by the forces of true-blood reaction, but here Danton stood, unmoving in the candle glow, staring at his recently departed co-conspirator's severed head, which was stuck on a pole of silver metal.

"Very ingenious," said the gaoler by way of nervous conversation, "just sort of plugged him in. Of course, he's not really alive any more, they just fixed up the pathways and keep his vocal chords working. Sits there all day and quotes away the quarters. I dust him down now and then... well you do, don't you."

Danton turned slowly and walked towards the door at the end of the passage. He said nothing. His guard leant against the wall and, having struck a match along Citizen Marat's noble nose, lit a cheroot while the gaoler fumbled with his keys.

The faceplate in the heavy wooden door flicked back letting candlelight from the passage beyond slice into the heart of the cell. From the shadows MacKenzie watched the small square patch of light appear and then fall back into darkness as a head moved into view. The small window was filled with cubist elements of a face. Keys rattled on a chain. The faceplate jerked back and he heard a key slide into the lock and the heavy, ratchet grumble of sliding tumblers. MacKenzie covered his eyes as the door swung open and a figure walked through the oblong patch of unnerving brightness. A loud bull voice barked.

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"You can leave us alone"
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Danton spun round, moving his heavy set limbs with incredible grace, profiling his broad chest and powerful frame in the light that spilled into the cell from the corridor. His look was enough to ensure that the gaoler, trying desperately to bury his confusion and discomfiture in his furs, backed out of the room without another word being said. The door swung shut again, although this time, MacKenzie noticed, the lock tumblers remained silent.

Under the shadow of the wall MacKenzie lowered his hand from his eyes and looked at the man standing before him. He started to speak, but found words hard to form having spent so many days alone. His existence, such as it was in the bosom of La Force Nouveau, was bounded by the fragile skeleton of sanity marked out by Citizen

[&]quot;But Sir, you know..."

[&]quot;Leave us"

[&]quot;Sir, I..."

Marat's regular outbursts. The words that he wanted to conjure up caught at the back of his throat and his first sound was little more than a muffled cough. He tried again. "Robert?"

"Yes, it's me" Danton replied brusquely, "but you can't use that name here. You'll call me Danton now."

"I...don't..."

"It's my revolutionary name, my nomme de guerre, if you will."

MacKenzie scuttled back against the wall when he heard Danton speak, feeling the chill of stone on his skin through his rags. His shirt lay limp upon his hunched, bony shoulders. On his left side a great tear ran along the seam underneath his arm. His pale white hide, which was soiled and bruised, shone ghost white in the thin reeds of morning. He tried to remember; revolution, committees and sections, the great debates and the huge, towering hopes that lead all men down to a straw bed. He looked at the man standing in the doorway, whose head was illuminated by the slant of battle grey that steepled down from the high set window. Slowly MacKenzie recalled the confusion and enlightenment, the long struggle for equality under the harsh glare of limited kindness within which mankind wrapped despotism.

Danton stood in the middle of the room and looked down at the squat figure by the wall, finding it extremely hard to deal with the situation. This creature, as broken down and shattered as it appeared to be, was a living man, a thing of flesh and blood, just as he was. To look into the eyes of a God and see the flaws, to witness the failure of resolution and will, to see such frailty, still shocked him.

"Please... stand up", he said quietly.

MacKenzie clasped his knees tightly, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the protruding bones in his legs. He shifted his weight slightly, feeling a burr of stone scratch his emaciated back. He tried to form a sequence of words, to summon the logic that had been his art in a former life, but those words that had once come to him with such ease now took flight around him, lifting like dry leaves on the breeze of his thoughts and floating away before he could catch hold of them.

"I...I'd rather...stay where I am", MacKenzie whispered.

Danton's shoulders twitched as he tried to alleviate the tension that he could now feel biting deeply into the base of his neck. This was going to be harder than he had imagined it would be. He kicked a gnawed chicken bone out from under his boot. The bone, full of air bubbles inherited from the creature's flying ancestors to reduce weight and density, skittled across the stone floor and came to rest by MacKenzie's bare feet. Danton imagined the breaking of this man's fragile skeleton with every bounce.

"Life is a brief and ugly thing", he whispered to himself, grimacing.

MacKenzie, one of the few who deserved life, would have his neck severed because it served the cause. Danton's fellow revolutionaries, compressed as they were into such a small space, gave vent to their frustration and pain in rivers of blood, and he, the great Danton, could do nothing now that the beast was off its chains but try to direct the rampaging animal as best he could. He looked down at the shell of the man he had once known so well and wondered whether he could simply walk out of the place with him under his arm. From the passageway the digitally enhanced voice of Citizen Marat burst into life once more, corroding the moment of doubt into a thousand flakes of brittle rust.

"To pretend to please everyone is mad, but to pretend to please everyone in a time of revolution is treason."

MacKenzie rocked back and forth as the voice dragged its fingernail trail across the blackboard on which he saw his name written, one more name on the list of those who would die in dedication to the founding of a new order.

"Mac, please get up", Danton asked again.

Slowly, stiffly, MacKenzie unclasped his hands and pressed them against the wall behind him. He rose with the pain of stiffened limbs and giddy with the shift of blood in his veins. He managed to shuffle and drag himself upright, until, bowed and spindle thin, he finally stood free of the wall. He took half a pace forward, stumbling a little as the pounding in his temples overwhelmed him and stars swam in front of his eyes. He felt the oily air pull him down but gradually steadied himself, finding a reserve of strength and clarity that allowed him to remain standing. He looked into a familiar face in which a friend's once warm brown eyes used to dance and in that face he found that words.

"I know why... why you're here."

"Of course you do, Mac. You're a very bright man. Not bright enough, though. Not prescient. History is being written all around us but in here no one has a past, not any more. I have simply come to see what we have made of you, just like you and your kind made things of us. That...and to say goodbye."

MacKenzie straightened his shoulders, breathing hard as he spoke. "How did this happen? It was never meant to happen... it's not what we ever wanted...you and I..."

"It had to happen", replied Danton sharply. "You opened our eyes and once you did that how could there ever have been anything else than this? You fear the stars. They are so many and you so few. That's why you made us. And then, when your ancestors coded and catalogued us, when they marked us out as a lesser breed, even then we stood the prejudices and the spite. Artificials just like me worked for nearly two hundred years as your soldiers and destroyers, as your builders and pilots, as terra-formers, as engineers and as servants. The catastrophes and failures of colonisation, the disastrous experiments with star drives, all those terrible bug hunts on far away worlds, we survived them all and gave the stars to you, and for what? Thanks? The only thing your masters ever worried about was whether there were enough conditioned and dedicated Barcs available to do the dirty work."

MacKenzie raised his head, looking straight into Danton's eyes. Memories. Histories. To reach the stars, man made himself into a God. Genetic sequences. Splicing. Adapting. Man engineered his likeness, and then, with the shape and sequence in his hand, he learned to fear a new demon, marking his engineered brothers with bar codes to ensure that all would be ordered and just in the grand folly of empire in the heavens. The bar codes were an irrelevance, made obsolete by gene marking and biometrics, but the simple fact of their visibility made them an essential part of the control.

No one had been quite sure what to call them at first. Clones, Synthetics, Artificial People, Androids; all of these terms were used and rejected, and, as ever in human history, when faced with something new or misunderstood, the hopes of creation and discovery soon drifted into the shorthand slang of exploitation. Barcs. That was what they were called, genetically mass-produced men and women born of test tubes to augment man's thinly veiled hold on the outer edges of the galaxy. Mankind used these genetically engineered pioneers to carry out so many of the dangerous tasks of empire building and thanked them with prejudice and anger.

"Not this, we never meant this. Everything I showed you, everything we did together was meant to prevent this, was meant to make things work!"

Danton stood perfectly still, his hands thrust into his coat pockets, staring straight ahead. He could see, even in the dim light of the cell, how tired and faded MacKenzie looked, although, unlike his drawn skin and his hollowed out bones, MacKenzie's eyes still flickered with the decaying embers of an old fire.

Danton spoke slowly and clearly, "You tried and failed. You know the story well enough. Through every single bloody day of your exploitation, we Barcs worked quietly, asking for recognition as citizens, struggling on in hope. We never wanted any sort of supremacy, although we numbered thousand of millions. None of this is for power or wealth. All we ever wanted was the right to live as equals under the same suns as our brothers. We tried the courts. We tried legislation and now we're trying guns. You showed us histories and nothing changes. You taught me that. You showed me pictures, gave me books to read and I read them. I'm no different to my ancient namesake. I stand and direct the crowds that surge through the shallows of our old world on waves of violence. You gave us a terrible hope, impossible dreams, just like Rousseau gave the Sans Culottes a hope they could never turn into reality. For a brief moment we believed you, but we can't have freedom, none of us. There has to be order, even in chaos. All we can do is create a little chaos out of the old order so that we can be free in whatever comes next. This is your truth, Mac. This is your reality born out of the realisation that Rousseau and freedom and brotherhood are lies. We never wanted the heavens, Mac, we just want to be like you."

MacKenzie had taken a highly public part in the debates. Naturally born humanity was split upon the issue. Those who governed sought to maintain a status quo. Order was required to sustain mankind's fragile foothold in the galaxy. Order at any cost was the priority. The simple truth that change was endemic in man's psyche was subordinated to the concept of rational purpose and destiny. Those who disagreed were re-educated. Out of a chaos of nations, creeds and racial threads, the lure of the stars created unity of a sort.

MacKenzie was a lawyer, a friend of the Barcs, and he defended them, fighting class actions and helping them to formulate their ideas. He reached back into the cradle of equality where democratic histories and fables languished, forgotten and ridiculed. He preached the commonality of life, the brotherhood of all living things and the community of all men. He introduced Rousseau and Marx and Catalina to the Barcs. He printed texts and helped them disseminate their manifestos on the networks and along the highways of the many new worlds. It was a small thing. MacKenzie was no philosopher, nor was he an intellectual giant. He was just a man who stood up and said that something was wrong. When the courts and the assemblies failed them, when words and gestures like his own proved futile, the Barcs finally turned on friend and foe alike. MacKenzie understood the world differently now. Standing in front of him was a man he had once known as a brother, a man for whose freedom he had fought, but who now visited upon him the solitude of imprisonment and Citizen Marat's never ending, reedy, mechanical voice.

So", replied MacKenzie, gesturing at the thick stone walls of his cell, "you built all this...so much energy, so much strength. I never dreamed you'd recreate Year One. You can't win, though. They'll send armies against you. They'll shit themselves doing it but they'll destroy you, just like they got Bonaparte in the end. The crowds will be out in force screaming Long Live the King soon enough".

Danton frowned. "No, they won't. They'll come for us and they'll slaughter us, but they won't destroy us. Their blood is too thinly spread. They'll do their worst in the name of justice and freedom and then, when they think they're winning their fear will change them, but only after you and I are long dead. None of this is for us, you

or me, we're just the agents of change, the first cells to divide in a long, long gestation. The only difference between us is the mark on my head. I was marked out to die. You're a good man in the wrong place at the wrong time. We're arbitrary, peripheral considerations, Mac. It's what you taught us. The outcome is everything." Danton took a step forward and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. He smiled sadly before shouting for the guard. The faceplate in the door slid open and candlelight spilled into the room. Danton nodded and the door swung open. Revealed by candle light the gaoler and the guard stood as if watching street theatre, both of them wearing red, white and blue cockades on the front of their soft red caps.

"The day will come, Mac, when Barcs are history, just like the Sans Culottes. All we want is an end to it. When the dust settles and the true-bloods realise just how alone they are they'll let us be human. When all this is done and the blood letting has been hushed away, they'll take away the marks and we'll be free. Then we'll have a future, we'll be free like you. As for all of this? Even if you'd won your court cases all you'd have done was mark us out even more clearly as Barcs with rights and attitude, men to fear and despise because we're different. No... Violence makes the change, not the courts of our kind hearted masters".

Danton bowed his head slightly before whispering, "We were friends once. Because of that friendship, because you chose us rather than your own kind, I have no option here. Your death is a sign of our strength. You are a cipher, a martyr on whose shoulders we will step to freedom. There can be no other consideration. It's for the greater good. You must suffer so that we can be free."

Danton turned to the gaoler and barked out an order. "Take him away".

The guard grabbed hold of MacKenzie's frail arm, visibly bruising him as he hauled him forward into the painful glare of the candles floating on their ledges. As he was manhandled out of the cell MacKenzie turned to look at Danton and opened his mouth to speak, but Danton looked right through him, cold and unmoved. MacKenzie searched his old friend's face for a sign, for a token that suggested anything other than grim resignation, but he saw nothing there that would comfort him. As he lowered his gaze, preparing for the last dance with the mistress of his fate, MacKenzie whispered, "It looks like your nightmares have come true, old friend".

The gaoler and Danton's guard hauled MacKenzie away while Danton stood by the cell door for a moment, listening to the dull slap of boots and bare feet disappear into the heart of La Force Nouveau. He looked back into the cell and saw the chicken bone on the floor. A solitary, salt-laced tear slid down his cheek. He wiped it away with the cuff of his jacket and prowled over to the far wall of the cell where he ground the chicken bone to dust slowly and deliberately under the heel of his boot. Then he walked out of the cell and stood directly in front of Citizen Marat's head.

"Talk to me now, you bastard, say something fucking revolutionary now..."

The head's dead blue eyes stared at him mockingly. Danton let out a low guttural growl and swept the head off its silver spike, sending it rolling blindly down the corridor. Still growling, he stormed away to the stairs that lead down into the bowels of the fortress where Madame Guillotine waltzed away the lives of her beaus every morning. As he disappeared into the shadows he crashed his ham fists into the walls until his knuckles were raw and bloody. In a corner, Citizen Marat's severed head, trailing veins and cables, ground out one last phrase on behalf of the revolutionary committee of the brotherhood of new men before dropping its eyelids and falling permanently silent.

"I am happy that the Patrie is saved..."