

# THEAKER'S

## QUARTERLY FICTION

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# Editorial

## Which Button Should I Press?

Howard Phillips

*Marketing and Machismo*

I am sure most readers will join me in commiserating that this issue is devoted to the feeble-minded fool of a writer who has placed his name in the title of this magazine. More to the point, next issue will follow suit, featuring the second half of his addle-brained semi-fascistic power fantasy, *The Fear Man*. He has tried and failed to earn himself such an appellation among the staff at the Silver Age offices, resulting only in lowering their opinion of him to such levels that astound even such a confirmed enemy of Theaker as I.

Should I make allowances for him having published my transcript of a motion picture dream in issue four? I think not – look at the way he chose to introduce it! “Stink has not faded”, indeed! And here, in *The Fear Man*, while choosing to quote large passages of one of my unfinished novels, *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*, he describes me as a hack, and my novel as one that a reader of the future would be ashamed to be seen reading!

Were that not enough to earn the squat-faced ninyhammer my opprobrium, consider his editorial to the previous issue, where he talks of “the maggot-ridden corpse of verse” in such disparaging terms. I thank the reader who took umbrage at this appalling display of ignorance on the part of Theaker.

This gentleman wrote as follows:

“Dear Sir,

Thank you for informing me of the appearance of the latest issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. However, I must take issue with the editorial comments contained therein, particularly as regards the negative comments directed at the field of poetry and the practitioners thereof. Only if one is to take, for example, the so-called ‘science-fiction poetry’ of Howard Phillips as representative of the form, can the editor's scorn of verse be justified.

I remain,  
A Reader.”

Perhaps I should have read that letter to the end before committing it to paper! Never mind, this typewriter goes only forward, ever on, and obstacles of that kind will be met with the crushing force of intelligence they deserve. And if my intelligence fails me, I shall find the writer of that letter and confront him, bottle in one hand and an epee in the other, and we shall see whose scorn is justified.

Thank goodness, then, that we can leave that matter to one side for the moment, to look forward to the final piece to appear in this issue. You must wade through page after tedious page of Theaker to get there, but at the end of this issue you will find a wonderful short story by the hand of John Greenwood. Should we call it Lovecraftian? It is in many ways, and the story's “halls of academia” opening may seem distressingly similar in tone to that of *The Fear Man*, but persist and you will be rewarded.

And so my stewardship of this column comes to a perhaps temporary end. In three months time, given the chance, I will return, to help build your strength in preparation for another thirty pages of Theaker. If it becomes too much, retreat to last issue, where you were graced by Gilligan's pure adventure, or the issue before that, where you were able to step into my nightmares. If your copies of those publications are worn out, why not try our new journal, *November Spawned*, the first issue of which is now available. No fiction by Stephen William Theaker will appear therein, at least for the first year, and to the best of my knowledge. Thus, make haste, it is safe to enter!

If I may, I will end with a short poem:

“Ending come  
And we are done  
Finished in the eyes of June  
But stay a while  
Remember to smile  
And we will meet again soon.”

Regards and friendship, always ours to share – HP

# The Fear Man

Stephen William Theaker

*Dedicated to Rano, Lorelei, Stan and Jack*

## The Birth of the President's Baby

Due to the circumstances in which the third President of Earth, Bardello Fatloch, left his post, putting together a comprehensive biography has always been troublesome, at least for respectable writers. However, in coming to consider the imminence of my own death – I write this at the respectable age of 84, and the death I expect is a comfortable one in my own bed, so no tears please, unless you must – as I said, in coming to consider my own death, I also came to consider the imminence of the death – by natural causes, or otherwise, and to whom I refer in that second regard you may surmise for yourself upon reading about the various secondary characters of this story – the imminence of the death, as I said, of the few surviving witnesses to the events of this history. The matter that troubles me, the risk that I take, is that those witnesses who do survive are so unreliable. So much of what I am about to write is, by necessity, a drawing together of rumour, myth, innuendo, braggartry and potentially flat out lies that I suspect upon leaving this world to join the massed ranks of the historians of posterity I will find them sadly shaking their heads in shame and indicating, without actually saying as much, that it might be better if I went to find myself a place among the hagiographers and propagandists. However, if this book had not been written now, it might never have been written at all, and if my studies of history have shown me anything, it is that even an untrustworthy source is better than none at all.

Thus, I have endeavoured to make the best of a bad lot, to present the facts of the matter in so far as I have been able, but in the interests of telling a story not being too beholden to the normal acceptable rules of historical writing. My extensive footnotes

(omitted from this “popular” edition, but available to read in full in the academic edition) will make it clear where I have less than full confidence in my sources. I will try not to interject my doubts into the main body of the text, as the publisher has requested, for the sake of readability – given that he hopes, as I do, that this book will be very widely read, in order to counteract some of the less desirable legends and (dare I say it without offending his memory to the point of incurring a ghastly vengeance from the underworld?) cults that are beginning to spring up around his name – but I fear that upon occasion the reader will find that I was unable to help myself. It almost goes without saying, but say it I must for my conscience’s sake, that some of the dialogue to be found in this story is of my own invention, an attempt to dramatise the questions which I am sure must have concerned the protagonists at given times. Again, this is poor history and poor biography, but I am told it is what you want to read and who am I to deny my public? I am, in fact, contractually no one in the face of your demands. Again I refer serious students of history to my footnotes in the academic edition, which my publisher assures me will see publication shortly after this one. Those reservations expressed, I have tried to capture the spirit of the dialogue of the figures upon this great stage, gathering as I can their moods, enthusiasms and inclinations from my conversations with witnesses and reference to such historical records as exist (in many cases, if I may be blunt, these were often records of the prison variety – this was not a time during which the third President of Earth made it his business to associate with the well-to-do).

So where does our story begin? A difficult question for any historian, if we are not to read about big bangs and dinosaurs during the opening chapters of every book. I have made the decision not to cover the early years of the Fatloch presidency, or indeed of his shady youth, or the media empire built in his twenties and thirties, simply because those events are now

largely a matter of record. It is true that my researches, involving as they did some who knew him as the boy as well as the man, did turn up a few choice anecdotes, but most of those will form part of this narrative, where relevant. The others I will save for my retirement fund. (You will allow an old man his joke, I hope?)

So let us begin.

We meet our President for the first time shortly before what should have been one of the happiest moments of his life.

He was in a meeting of his Ministers, discussing the need for increased vigilance along the border with the Religizone, when he received a call – it was time to attend his wife at the hospital. She had been pregnant for nine months and so the summons was both expected and prepared for.

“Well, my friends,” said the President, getting to his feet and allowing himself to be pushed into his finest ceremonial jacket. “It looks like it’s time!”

“Good luck,” said the Minister of the Interior, “and give our love and best wishes to your wife and, soon, I hope, your daughter.”

“My esteemed colleague,” replied Bardello Fatloch, “how can I possibly pass on your love when the love I bear for them myself is so great that it threatens to bear me down to the ground and weep at any second!”

“Then in that case,” replied the Minister, “simply mention that I will attend them as soon as is seemly to pay them my love and respects in person.”

Seeing that the President was not planning to reply, being already halfway to the door, the other Ministers tried to take the chance to pay their own respects, but he turned back to them and held up his hand. “I am afraid my ears no longer hear you – for the next year they are attuned to but one frequency: that on which my new-born baby daughter chooses to make her needs known. I refer you now to the Minister of Galactic Affairs, who will stand in my stead during this time of paternal leave – I have no doubt he will pass on all official congratulations at the appropriate time. Now, sirs and madams, I have to leave.”

The Cabinet stood as one and applauded him out of the door.

On the other side of that door waited his batman. Though in actual fact his most trusted assistant was a woman, it tickled him so much to use the antiquated phrase that he was willing to overlook its technical inaccuracy. Her name was Margaret Fielding, and he had recruited her many, many years before, long before he met his wife, after the first disastrous week

of his first honest job. Although he had naturally been stunned to discover that twisting the fingers of advertisers was not really the way above-board business was done, he had been savvy enough to know that he needed help, so that weekend he found and hired Margaret, who attended him at all times, helping him to keep in check his natural aggression, simply by virtue of the fact that she reminded him of his grandmother. She was also, of course, a superb organiser and personal secretary, and he would be the first to admit that he owed a good deal of his subsequent success to her assistance in that regard, as well as in that of quelling the murderous rages imputed to him by popular rumour.

She had a car waiting, and tugged off the cumbersome ceremonial jacket as he strode past. He thanked her with a smile and a nod and then he was in the car, where a glass of whisky bubbled in a jacuzzi glass.

Margaret climbed in and sat opposite. He stared out of the window.

“What word is there on progress?” he asked, allowing, in this private forum, a note of anxiousness to creep into his voice for the first time.

Margaret smiled. “Mother and baby both seem to be doing fine. Both are of course being monitored at all times, and all signs are good. At one point, the monitor seemed to show the heart rate of the baby dropping off a little during the contractions, which caused Mrs Fatloch’s personal assistant some concern, but further enquiry revealed that that is a normal result of the drugs given to Arabella to help her rest before the strain of delivery, and to stop her from pushing too soon.”

“Thank goodness,” said the President. “I have waited so long for this moment; all the worry, heartache, secrecy and tears – not to mention all the money. It would have been a great shame had the birth not been successful.”

“A great shame indeed, sir,” said Margaret, busily checking her hand held computer.

The President looked at her askance, wondering what to make of her comment. Did she mean that he was heartless to consider and mention the potential loss of his baby in such a casual way? Surely she knew how deep his feelings ran in this matter, that he understated for fear of breaking into tears if he let his feelings run true? Or was it something else, was she making an off-hand comment during a moment of distraction, a slip showing her true feelings about the pregnancy? Did she suspect the truth about his daughter’s conception? Was that the shame she referred to? He put it to the back of his mind – there would be time enough later to find out what she

really meant. And even if she did suspect, how could her heart not be melted at the sight of a beautiful baby girl?

However, by the time they arrived at the hospital, the baby had already gone.

## Heartache

Fatloch and Margaret, both still unaware of the awful events that had taken place, approached the hospital entrance, only to find the way blocked by police officers. Naturally they recognised their President almost immediately, only to wave him through with ashen faces, looking at each other to find who would be the one to give the bad news. In the end it fell to none of them, Margaret's handheld computer giving a warning beep – her eyes crumbled at what she read on-screen.

“What is it?” asked the President, grabbing her shoulder roughly. “Is it the baby?”

“Sir, I'm sorry, something has happened – the baby is missing.”

“Kidnapped, do you mean?”

“They are not sure as yet – we had better go to see the doctors attending your wife.”

Within seconds the two of them were speaking to the hospital's chief medical officer outside Mrs Fatloch's room. There was a frosted window, and through it the President could see vague dark shapes as they swirled around his wife looking for any signs or clues as to what had happened.

The chief medical officer was not a confident man, nor an especially well-presented one. He had somehow managed to reach his position through ability and dedication, rather than politics or ruthlessness, and the President had enjoyed working with him on various health projects in the past. That was one of the reasons that the President had chosen this hospital to be the birthplace of his daughter. One of the other reasons was that they had first met when both were much much younger, and although Doctor Sykes had endeavoured to live a very honest life since then, it had often been useful to the President to have him available. This special relationship had been useful enough for the President to relocate the Cabinet to this provincial city as his wife came to full term, much to the displeasure (part of him thought with a laugh as all other parts brought themselves to bear on the problem in hand) of the hedonists and sybarites who populated his board of advisors. Being

so far from the capital and their customary vices left some of them flapping like fish. Of course, those vices were still to be found here – the difference was that discretion could not always be so thoroughly assured.

That part of Fatloch was always ticking over, always calculating, always hunting for (and engineering when necessary) weaknesses that he could use to further the points on his own private agenda. It had been fortunate for Earth that he had become President, because ever since that day his only goal had been to ensure a peaceful and happy existence for the people of Earth and its federation of friendly planets. Well, that was not quite the only item on his agenda – you might call that his business goal. He had also had a quite personal objective, one that many had speculated on without ever being quite sure of, and that had been to have a child. Now it looked as if he had been thwarted in that, and the galaxy might well have to pay.

“So the baby was gone?” asked the President.

“Yes, I think so, at least,” said Dr Sykes.

“What do you mean by that?” The President had no time for prevarication. He had no idea what he had to do, but he had a feeling that it would have to be done quickly.

“I mean,” said the doctor, looking sidewise at Margaret, “that this was a new procedure, as you know.”

“What's new about delivering a baby?” asked the batman, before Fatloch was able to shush her. “It's been done a billion times and more. What was special about this time? I was monitoring the baby's life signs via my handheld and nothing at all abnormal showed until you broke the connection.”

“That isn't what happened,” replied the doctor, sidling past her questions and responding to the part that it would be healthier for him to argue. Though he knew better than to try to predict the reactions of Bardello Fatloch, he had long ago learnt that he preferred to hear the truth in any difficult situation – that was one of the reasons he was better able than most psychopaths to pass in normal society, and also why, despite all the odds, he had turned out to be a reasonably good President. “I didn't break the connection, there simply wasn't anything there to monitor any more. One minute we were getting life signs, the next nothing. At first we feared the worst, that the baby was in difficulty, and we prepared for an emergency Caesarean. Mrs Fatloch, of course, became almost deranged when she heard what the attending staff were saying to each other. Add that to the fact that she had only recently woken up from the nap

induced by the relaxant we had given her, and at first we didn't really pay much attention to what she was saying. Only as the gas mask was lowered over her face did she manage true coherence, and only then did we realise that her cries, of 'she's gone, she's gone!', were literal in sense. I placed my hand on her abdomen to feel for the baby's shape, but there was nothing there, and I don't mean that there was no movement – I mean that there was nothing there at all. I summoned a scanner and we were able to see with our own eyes – where there had once been a baby there was a baby no more. I might have wondered if there had never been a pregnancy at all, were it not for the fact that Mrs Fatloch showed every possible physical sign of having carried a child, and, of course, that I have myself performed so many examinations of mother and child since the conception."

"Margaret," said the President quickly, "please find the chief of police and organise the search for the kidnappers. I will feel much better knowing it is in your hands. Banish all matters of state from your mind."

"Sir," she said with a nod, "at this moment I know nothing of politics but what might help this search."

"Well, that's one possibility which we will have to consider when time is at less of a premium. I have political enemies, but it is hard to imagine any of those popinjays in the Cabinet even allowing themselves to conceive of a plot as daring as this, let alone actually participate in conspiring to bring it to fruition. Regardless, at the moment our concern must be to discover the perpetrators, who will probably be hired men or mercenaries. It looks like some kind of teleportation has been used to take my daughter. Such a method of abstraction suggests skill, but it takes no skill to point a gun at a scientist, so make no assumptions."

"I understand, sir," said Margaret.

"Find Inspector Grimmett – if he isn't already here and in charge, get him here and get him on the case."

"Yes, sir," said Margaret, and she set off down the corridor, tapping at her handheld computer. As Fatloch and Sykes began to talk once more, she paused and turned back. "Sir, about your daughter, I must say how sorry I am, and how much I was looking forward to meeting the young lady."

"Of course," said the President, dismissing her with a wave, "that goes without saying. But the game isn't over yet, not by a long chalk, and I think there may still be a chance for us. A teleportation this precise, so precise that it did not rip out my wife's guts as it took place, cannot have been done from a great distance. That means the kidnappers, and my

baby, are not far away. But with every second that you stand here idling with me that distance could grow, so get out of here and do your job."

"Were you not a bit harsh on her?" asked the doctor after she had left earshot.

"It keeps her on her toes, and anyway, do you think this is an appropriate time to be questioning my judgment?"

The doctor twitched. "No, I suppose not."

"Now that she's out of the way we can talk more openly. She keeps me honest, as you know, but this has not been a matter in which honesty has been possible."

"Can you trust her? Does she suspect?"

"I would be amazed if she did not, but it may be that she realises the limits of her influence. I say that, believing that the limits she imagines fall quite short of their status in actuality. Until this matter arose, I barely dirtied my fingers, except where it was absolutely necessary, for the good of the planet."

The President took a moment to draw in a few deep breaths.

"So what other possibilities are there? Could this be related to the way she got pregnant?"

"It's possible – I admit that in the past ten minutes a hundred wild ideas have passed through my mind. For example, what if there was no pregnancy, and the Baboose simply hypnotised us? What if the baby was some kind of hybrid alien/human genetic weapon? What if it disappeared itself out of here? Who knows, really, and that was the chance we took. How history will judge my actions in this I cannot say."

"Don't start with that nonsense," said the President angrily. "You had no choice and you know it. And I had no choice either, unless it was to die childless, and I am not going to let that happen."

"It may be out of your hands now."

"Don't try my patience, Doctor. I want you to provide a list of anyone of your acquaintance who might possibly suspect the provenance of this pregnancy, and you can begin with any colleagues who took notice of your extended leave last year. Mark the list 'suspected anti-democrats and potential criminals' and send it to Margaret and Grimmett."

The door to the room flew open and Mrs Fatloch sped past on a gurney. The President gave her a nod and turned to Doctor Sykes. "How will she be?"

"The disappearance of the baby caused no gross damage to her internal organs, but the abrupt severance of the umbilical cord led to excessive bleeding. That they are taking her away now must mean that the bleeding is temporarily under control. She'll be taken straight to surgery. Do you want to speak to her

before they operate?”

“What’s there to say?” said the President with a grimace.

## The Investigation

By the time Margaret had finished listening to the President’s rant, she had already used her handheld computer to bring up plans of the hospital, and cross-referenced it with the police computers to identify the location of all officers in the building, using the locating devices embedded under the skin of every one of them. Being the personal assistant to the President of Earth was very useful when it came to security clearances. (One result of her extensive access was that she was perhaps more fully au fait with the President’s past history than he realised. This had never stopped her from doing her job – in fact it made it much easier since she knew the kind of situations and reactions that had tended to get him in trouble as a youngster, and she was well able to steer him away from anyone likely to cause a recurrence. And of course her perusal of police records meant that she knew that his life since going into business had been exceptionally violence-free.) She wasn’t able to identify any obvious gaps in the distribution of the officers, but she needed to talk with whoever was in charge on the ground, as per the President’s orders, and get Inspector Barry Grimmatt involved. She had already sent an electronic communication to alert him to the crisis, but he had yet to answer, and she hoped that was because he was already too busy investigating the disappearance of the President’s baby. The distribution of the officers made it seem likely that they had set up headquarters in the office of Doctor Sykes – continuing to monitor the electronic display confirmed her reasoning, as it showed groups of green lights gliding into the room, and then gliding out, having been given their orders.

As she hurried through the hospital corridors, she passed knots of unhappy patients and doctors, huddled in waiting rooms, covered by the guns of armed police. More than once she had to step over bullet-riddled bodies, she guessed of people who had been a bit too slow to follow orders. The terror on the faces of the patients and the anger on the faces of the doctors who had been prevented from treating them told her that it was time to let the public know what had happened – this discontent had to be turned into sympathy before the President’s popular support

turned sour. There was only one year to the next election, and the last thing she wanted was a hospital full of terrified people talking to the press about a tyrannical and unilateral President (more than anyone, she knew that he worked hard to curb those tendencies). By the time she was half-way to Sykes’ office she had drafted and issued a press release explaining the situation. By the time she was three-quarters of the way there she was passing patients who had already watched the announcement on the news.

She kept the plan of the hospital minimised in a corner of the screen as she worked. Three lights did not leave the room at all during the time that she watched, presumably the officers in charge. She considered checking to see if one of them was Grimmatt, but decided to let herself be surprised – she was almost there now, after all.

She walked up to the office and went in through the door unchallenged – she had used her handheld computer to advise officers throughout the building of her route.

Inside, there was one woman and two men, paying close attention to a plan of the hospital spread out on the table. Even if she had not met Grimmatt before, she would have known which of the men he was immediately. That is not to say the other of the two men was unimpressive in any way. Like his female colleague, he looked efficient, focused and dangerous. But Grimmatt was a man apart from other men, as Margaret had once verified for herself at a party hosted by the President to celebrate his inauguration. That she was quite older than him, and far from surgically augmented, had not seemed to be a problem for him. He had been drunk at the time, naturally, but the following morning he had not been, and his desire to be with her had not faltered. He had been keen to continue the relationship, but she had not. Altruistically, she put it to herself, and to him, that she had to make him available to other women. But that really wasn’t it. Other women of a certain age might have ended such a relationship for fear of being hurt, if he turned his attentions to a younger girl, but that had been far from her mind. When men said that they found her attractive because of her personality, they truly meant it, so powerful was her force of will, rabid intelligence and love of intellectual communion. No, she had ended the relationship because she had another lover waiting for her that afternoon. It had pained her to do so, and she had wished fervently that she had still been young enough to bear children, because if she were, his genetic heritage marked him out as the perfect partner. The exploits of his ancestors were common

knowledge, and had even been the subject of novels, films and at least one symphony. Eight paternal generations previously, Detective Jim Grimmett of Scotland Yard had caught such evil villains as Manx Dan, the Deadly Scholburg, and the Miss With No Twist. Nobody knew how many of those unreliably chronicled stories were true, in particular those which described his encounter with the terrible Tin Can Brains (given that humans had as yet only encountered one other spacefaring species, the Baboose, and they had never mentioned meeting any homicidal metal maniacs), but they had entertained wave after wave of children. Then there were the accounts of Gordon Grimmett who had lived in the twentieth century, supposedly combating supernatural and other menaces to the British Isles, only to die heroically trying to prevent the zombie holocaust that annihilated the population of that brave nation at the dawn of the twenty-first century. If he had not previously had a son to a wife who had moved to the other side of the world after their divorce, the line of Grimmetts would have ended there. But it had continued, resulting in the brave and serious man she was now with.

He glanced up at her and smiled, very briefly, but warmly, before returning to the plans.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, without looking up again. "We need all the help we can get."

She smiled back, wearily. "Are you in charge yet? No slight to your colleagues, but the President will only be happy with someone he personally knows and can trust without doubt on this case."

"We totally understand," interjected the woman, holding out her hand. "All the signs are that this must have been carefully planned, most likely with help from domestic sources. The President will have to be very careful in investigating this. I'm Superintendent Maestri, by the way, and this is Superintendent Godal."

Margaret put her handheld computer down on the table, on top of one corner of the plan, and took her hand, shaking it firmly.

"We head up the police force in this town," said Godal, taking his turn to shake Margaret's hand. "We're doing our best, but we fully expect to be sent home once the government folks arrive."

"That's not going to happen," replied Margaret. "Or at least, they will arrive, but you will not be sent home. There were many reasons for the President choosing for his baby to be born here, and one of those was that he has less than total faith in the loyalty of the police chief in the capital. The way the police behaved during the election was almost

openly partisan, and the President will not want politics to interfere with the search for his daughter. Putting Inspector Grimmett and myself at the heart of the investigation should be enough to ensure total co-operation from all necessary government agencies."

"Does the missing girl have a name yet?" asked Godal. The others looked at him, slightly surprised. "Well, assuming they didn't just teleport her into space (although we can't totally discount the possibility of that, especially if the motive was revenge), she has been born. It would make things easier administratively if we had a name to call her by – it'll also make it easier to galvanise public support, which might be important if we are forced again to be as rough as we were here."

"Her name will be Taio," said Margaret.

"Had they already chosen the name, then?" asked Maestri.

"It was my mother's name," replied Margaret. "It's not the kind of thing either of the parents wants or needs to think about right now. I will tell Fatloch that she chose the name, and tell her she named the child after asking me for a suggestion while sedated. Could you update me on your actions?"

"So far," said Maestri, "we have been searching the hospital room by room, checking patients against patient lists, checking doctors against attendance records, confirming the identities of everyone in the building. So far, apart from a pair of idiot youths who were in here with gunshot wounds, and had given fake names, everyone seems to be who they say they are, but we haven't yet finished."

Godal spoke next. "If we establish the identity of everyone in here, and that there are no unexplained absences, we will then have to look at less obvious dangers – such as sleeper agents for the Religizone, terrorist organisations, or even, although I'd say it is a very remote possibility, whether anyone in here is a Baboose in disguise."

Margaret raised an eyebrow.

"We know next to nothing about them," said Grimmett with a shrug. "There is no reason so far to suspect them of hostility, but we know of their interest in medical matters. For all we know they could have the ability to take on human forms."

"Don't forget the disgusting suggestions they have made in the past," said Godal. "How could they not understand how repulsed humans would be by such a bestial proposal?"

"Well," said Margaret, "I suppose we must consider the possibility that they might have been upset by the rejection. And if they were to enact some kind

of revenge, the child of the President of Earth would be an obvious target. Unlikely as it is, let us arrange to have to have the hospital's diagnostic scanners put to use in checking for any alien infiltration."

"Okay," said Grimmatt. "Maestri, I want you to handle that. Have yourself checked first, then doctors, and then patients. Godal, I want you to oversee background checks on everyone. Check for family histories, psychological profiles done in the course of employment applications, attendance at educational establishments, or as ordered by the courts, and for anything at all that could indicate any allegiance to Religizone or other antidemocratic causes."

The two of them left, and Margaret was left alone with Inspector Barry Grimmatt for a moment. He was as handsome as ever, the extra couple of years of hard underground police work having done nothing to dull his beautiful eyes, or coarsen his soft lips, which she kissed.

"Do your best," she asked him, and left.

Back inside, Grimmatt turned back to the plan on the desk, no longer masking the real concern he felt. Was the girl even alive any more? They had already begun, but where the hell should he start?

## Grimmett Reading

Two months later, with almost all leads followed or at least under surveillance, Grimmatt sat on a bunk in an empty jail cell and took out his favourite book, *First the Eyes, Then the Brains*, by a hack from the early twenty-first century by the name of Howard Phillips. He would rarely admit to anyone that it was his favourite, or that he carried a copy, the same copy he had been given as a child, with him at all times. The novel concerned, in parts, one of his illustrious ancestors, Gordon Grimmatt, and his heroic death. He had read this novel so often that it had become a form of meditation for him, a way to access the workings of his own subconscious mind. When inspiration was needed, he let the book fall open where it would.

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In the years since the terrible incident at Birmingham, and the death thereby of her old friend (and erstwhile lover) Cornelius Gilligan, Savita Gill had tried to pass her life as best as she could. After the horrors she had seen, the world could never again

be looked at in the same way. Even minor events, like a trip to the shops or a visit to the library, seemed to her full of evil portents, as if the devil were dogging her steps. Little did she know that he was not pacing behind her, but waiting up ahead.

At that time, in fact, all was well with the world, or at least as well as it ever was, even if all was not well with Savita. There were wars here and there of course, and murders, atrocities and assassinations, crimes of hate against women, against homosexuals, against all manner of people because of the colour of their skin, or the shape of their eyes or noses, and so on – that is to say, things were as well with the world as ever they were, but not as bad as they might get.

Savita on the other hand was not doing so well. She had tried lovers, male, female, and at least once without looking, and even sunk to the depths of a marriage once, but all had ended in either boredom or defeat, as the very nature of the things she had seen meant there was no way to share the burden with anyone, since almost all the protagonists in those dreadful events were either dead or amnesiac. The one person who might have helped her come to terms with it all was Detective Gordon Grimmatt, but after they had saved the world together he had faded into the background as if he had never been. One moment they had been celebrating the defeat of the dread Mohander, and commiserating their losses, and the next he had been gone, presumably to work on some other case of national importance, leaving Savita to fend for herself in a world she no longer trusted.

Unfortunately for Savita, unfortunately for the world, though Detective Gordon Grimmatt had done as much as he could in those missing years to keep the world safe for humanity, as Savita made her way to town that day, he was embroiled in his most difficult and impenetrable mission to date, one which, by the end of the day, would have claimed his life. By the end of the week, Savita would be wishing she could have died on that day too.

But for now, she was going into town. As the 101 bus wove its winding way past the prison, past the new housing developments, and through the wine bars and financial buildings that led to the city centre, she gazed out of the window, disappointed at herself for not being able to grasp this new chance at life, so hard won, and at such cost. Through the windows of the buildings she saw the people as maggots, feasting on a world they did not even see as rotten. The people on the streets she saw as shrews and field mice, but vainglorious rodents, ignorant in their pride of the eagles circling above their heads.

When the blow came, she thought, they would be too busy hee-hawing their disapproval of each other's shoes to even hear the rush of wind that would snatch away their piddling lives. But she did not envy them, as some might in a similar situation. At least she knew where she stood with the universe, and though it made her so unhappy, she preferred that to being a fool. She didn't know why, though, and if she had actually had a choice to make on the matter, she might not have made the choice she would have expected.

The bus arrived at the final stop before it started off again on its roundabout journey of the city. Savita paused for a few seconds before standing, unsure whether to just stick with the bus and let it take her back home, but pretty quickly the thought was banished by others of an empty house, and she got to her feet. The people coming down from the top deck wouldn't stop to let her past, and she resolved to accidentally bang into any of them that she saw again.

She began to walk in the direction of the town hall, moving along Colmore Row with all the enthusiasm she could muster. She was jostled by a guy in his late twenties talking with animation to a pair of friends, a couple holding hands.

"I hate it when people do that," said the man, digging his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket with venom. Savita wondered if he was talking about her.

"Do what?" said the male half of the couple, clearly puzzled. Savita put a bit of speed to make sure she didn't miss the answer.

"Walk slowly down the street. It really bugs me. They know other people are trying to get places..."

Savita didn't hear any more of the conversation – she turned back to see if she could catch the bus before it left. It had already set off, and as it rushed towards her, eager to get other people home, she found her feet moving to the edge of the pavement, almost involuntarily, but she wasn't sure. As she began to step off, the bus honked its horn. She took a dazed step back, bumping into someone, and as the driver waved an angry fist at her she felt an elbow digging into her back.

She walked away without looking behind her and headed for the library. She went straight up to the sixth floor, the academic books, and sat in the seating reserved for women, ridiculously she had always felt, until a boy had to her dismay spent a good half hour pursuing her around the English shelves, and she had decided to take advantage of the women-only refuge. Today, she was taking refuge not only

from boys, but from the world in general, of which the events on Colmore Row had done nothing to improve her opinion.

However, after five minutes of cradling her head in her hands, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Excuse me, miss," said a quavering voice. "Are you all right?"

Savita lifted her head. "I don't know. Is it worth living at all if you know death is coming?"

"Well," said the librarian, taking a seat beside Savita, "that's the oldest question of them all, isn't it? Death is coming, there isn't a thing we can do about it. I think most people give in to their genetic dispositions and do the things that make them happy – the same things that would have made their ancestors happy sixty million years ago. They fornicate, defecate and masticate, if I might try my hand at an epigram."

"I don't mean death as a far-off distant thing; I mean death as something that gets right up close, something that has been right in your face, and no matter how hard you scrub, the stench won't leave you."

The old lady placed a hand on Savita's and gave it a squeeze. "It's obvious that you are a very intelligent young lady, and you have thought about these things a lot. Have you had quite a difficult time of it lately?"

Savita pulled her chin up and pushed out her bottom lip bravely, but couldn't say a word.

"You must consider, my dear, that death is not such a far-off thing for all of us as it is for a young woman like you. I dare say I stray much closer to those icy fingers nowadays than you, however bad things have been for you in the past."

Savita began to feel a bit silly and self-indulgent. It wasn't as if she had had to fight for her life for years now, and this lovely librarian was trying to engage her in conversation, trying to reach through her anger at the world, despite having every reason not to.

"Most people," said the librarian, "don't think about these things at all. They pleasure themselves and take what they can, getting the most for themselves during a life they know by instinct is awfully short, only sharing with others when they can get something out of it."

"And what about other people?" asked Savita. "How do they cope with all the hypocrisy and selfishness?"

"Some people," the older lady said with a kind smile, "believe that death is not the end."

"You mean like Christians?" said Savita.

"That's right, my dear."

“But what about serious people? How do they cope?”

The librarian leant back and pursed her lips, slowly taking her hand away from Savita’s. “I am very serious about my faith. It is a real consolation to me in difficult times – such as this conversation, I might say.” She laughed at her own joke.

“I’m sorry,” said Savita, “I didn’t mean to offend you.” (Though I suppose, she thought to herself, I must admit I didn’t care much whether any passing God-botherers heard me. In fact I suppose I relished that possibility.) “I simply don’t understand why anyone would go for what seems like such a load of cobblers. My problem is that I don’t know how to be happy in the face of death. If you buy into the idea that death is not the end, that just becomes an excuse for being unhappy in this life – to me, it’s just a way to keep unhappy people quiet.”

“On the other hand,” replied the librarian, “perhaps the promise that death is not the end makes us a bit happier in life, less desperate, less acquisitive, and generally more relaxed. We don’t mind the approach of death so much because we know we can find happiness afterwards.”

That she said that was ironic, because the next time Savita met the librarian, the old lady would be dead and feasting upon human flesh.

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It was the end of the chapter. Grimmett stretched his arms out and let the book find its own place again.

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Having subdued her quarry, Savita proceeded to eat him.

Of course, her hunger at first was ferocious, having only recently awoken to this new life. So her first action was to plunge her fingers, now become as hard as steel, through what seemed to her a brittle eggshell of a skull. She scooped out a handful of delicious brimy brain and wolfed it down in seconds. Never had food tasted so good. A few more handfuls assuaged her immediate hunger, and she began to give thought to the need to protect this food from others of her kind who might seek to take it from her.

She got to her feet, stumbling a bit from her own new-found clumsiness, but almost lazily managing to right herself again, and then she reached her hand into the man’s skull, grasped it through the eyesockets and began to drag him away to a quieter spot.

However, as her fingers pushed into those eyesockets, the eyeballs themselves began to protrude.

She continued as long as she could, and had actually reached one of the alleys that led off Colmore Row before the eyes popped stickily out. One hung from the optic nerve and dangled on the cheek, the other escaped and fell onto the floor.

Savita dropped the body and dived at the rolling eyeball, somehow finding a way to prevent it from falling into an unwelcome drain. She popped it straight into her mouth, savouring the splash of cool liquid on her palate. She reflected, in a hazy way, that she must have lost some of her normal fastidiousness – the last food she had eaten from the floor must have been crisps from the school playground. She supposed that she was now beyond the reach of any harm that bacteria or germs or lurgies could do to her.

She had enjoyed the first eyeball so much that she quickly grabbed the other – it tasted just as fresh and delightful, but it left her wanting to eat more, somewhat unsatisfied. She made a mental note to in future treat the eyeballs as aperitifs to the main course – that is, first the eyes, then the brains.

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Whatever his subconscious was trying to say to him, Grimmett was darned if he knew what language it was speaking in. He put the book down and fell asleep.

## The Disappearance of Mrs Fatloch

Seconds later he was awake again. The alarm was urgent – Mrs Fatloch had now disappeared.

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One hour before that alarm was raised, while Grimmett was still engrossed in the zombie novel, Bardello Fatloch poured himself another glass of whisky. Two months had passed since the disappearance of his baby daughter, Taio, with nothing to show for it. The search of the hospital patients by scanner had of course turned up no aliens, as he had been certain it would not, though it had uncovered an unusually large number of individuals with foreign objects lodged within their bodies. The thoroughness of the search had thus led the investigating officers into areas which they would rather not have entered. Where the individuals in question were doctors, the

objects in question often turned out to be receptacles for drugs or electronic equipment that might find a use in the illegal economy. This had led the President to give hospital workers worldwide the choice of a pay rise or a whipping. Where the individuals in question were patients, the majority of the objects, once extracted, were found to be auto-stimulators, but, to the delight of the police department's technical division, each had to be (washed and) checked for any signs of teleportation or relay technology. But nothing was found, although the distaste of the police department for the general public was soundly reinforced.

From the cordon of police that had surrounded the hospital there had come no reports of odd behaviour, suspicious activity, or even anyone making a run for it. No one had seen any spaceships in the sky, and no one had felt the rumble of subterranean burrowers beneath their feet.

There had been only one conclusion, Grimmett had told him. It had been an inside job. Someone in the government, or at the hospital, or in the police, must have been involved. The problem with that was that the background checks had turned up motives for virtually everyone in the hospital, as a start. Hence, they all had to be interned, and the hospital was the obvious place to do it, given that that was where they had been to begin with.

Some of them, for example, had family members who had left to go and live in the Religizone – of course there was nothing illegal about that, but it showed that there was a propensity for muddy thinking in the family, and muddy thinking was after all not very far away from downright dirty thinking.

Many many others, as one might expect with regard to any incumbent President, had some personal reason to be dissatisfied with the world they saw him as having made. Grimmett was careful in choosing his words at that point, since he had seen the President's temper first hand in the past. Some had lost jobs, others had sons or husbands or wives or daughters in service who had died or been wounded in skirmishes on the Religizone border. (Though anyone was free to cross that border, as per the dictates of their conscience, disputes still flared up on occasion as to that border's exact location.) One or two had had more direct contact with Fatloch, mainly during his days at the head of the Fatloch business empire, and they had been paid particular attention, to no avail. One weird guy had actually professed a desire to see the President dead at his feet, given his cancellation of some trashy fantasy tv show – perhaps an unwise statement in the presence

of so many armed agents of the state, but he had sworn on his mother's grave that he would have done nothing to hurt any baby in the world, and he had had an honest face, so they had let him go.

The President winced at his own self-editing. No journalists had their cameras upon him now; there was no need to put on a show of morality. Of course they had not let him go – the idiot was still being interrogated, and subjected to various means of pressure that just about fell short of breaching the human rights laws. Damn those laws, the President thought to himself. I might have forced the bill through myself (a wise form of insurance, he had thought, since he did not know who would succeed him in the Presidential seat), but it was really getting in the way. Strictly speaking, the man's detention was illegal, but he would be able to get compensation for that in the courts. Perhaps, thought the President, I should instruct them to pull out a few fingernails, and then he'll be able to make the bloody tv show himself.

So they had got nothing.

To make matters worse, there was at least one journalistic agency on the trail of the one lead that he did not want followed. If the involvement of the Baboose in the conception of his baby became public knowledge, not only would his career be ruined, he would be lucky to escape a lynching. The public's hostility to alien assisted fertility treatment ran deep, so much so that, officially, it was still illegal. Unofficially, the President of Earth had wanted an heir and he had been determined to get one. Sykes was already being tailed wherever he went, and although he had apparently said nothing as yet, as soon as they found out, for example, what the President had on him, he would talk. Brilliant administrator that he was, he was not a brave man. For that matter, forget what the President had on him, if they came up with solid evidence to connect Sykes to the Baboose, he would cave and the President would be finished.

But Fatloch knew that the minute he acted to follow that lead, or to have it followed by others, the clock would begin to tick on his Presidency, and if he lost that, his chances of ever seeing his daughter again would be severely compromised.

So he had to sit, and wait, and hope that Grimmett would find a way, despite being almost totally in the dark as to the most significant lead, that he would stumble into it in a way that would not set alarm bells ringing all over the world.

At that point he decided to go and see his wife. They had argued earlier, and he supposed he should pretend to care. He doubted that he would be able to

bring himself to hold her – the very idea of rewarding her weakness in that way was distasteful to him – but at least he should make the effort to be present.

After all, the original reason for their marriage still pertained. Ten years ago, following Fatloch's many unsuccessful attempts to father children (an inherited genetic disorder, caused by his mother's work in a seafood restaurant, prevented his sperm from ever bonding correctly with an egg), he had used the illicit resources of his media empire to conduct a search of all recorded human DNA. There was an element to the DNA of the members of his wife's family that meant that one of them might possibly be able to receive his genetic donation, and so he had resolved to marry Arabella, she being the only female in the family under 50. Still there had been many failures, and they had taken their toll on her, until, in desperation, he had decided to try the illegal means that had finally brought success. So he could not let her leave him yet. If Taio was found safely, his wife could go to hell, but for now he needed her to stay.

There was of course also the outside chance that she knew something about the disappearance of his baby daughter, so it would pay to keep her close. If she had been involved, she might eventually make a slip.

But when he entered her room, she was not there, and that was why Inspector Grimmett was called so suddenly to the alarm.

## The Story of the Man with the Fiery Face

While waiting for the police to arrive, Bardello began pacing his study and talking out loud.

"Now," he said, "I think that there is a 50/50 chance that I am under surveillance right now, and after that perhaps a 25% chance that any eyes upon me are those of the kidnappers of my baby daughter. So, if you are watching, or listening, here is a little bedtime story that for the last nine months I had been planning to be telling my baby daughter tonight. Though perhaps it would have been tomorrow night – perhaps tonight she could not be consoled by anything except the warmth of her mother. I don't know. But if you are watching, or listening, and if tonight it is your turn to help my baby daughter to sleep, if she hasn't been murdered or cryogenically frozen, or non-cryogenically frozen, for that matter, though I

suppose that would be covered by the first category, perhaps you might like to use this story that my mother once told me."

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### The Man with the Fiery Face

Once upon a time there was a man with a very fiery face. It was so fiery that every day it was very sore, and it hurt his hands even to touch it. He couldn't use any balm to soothe it, because the balm evaporated as soon as it approached his fiery skin. He found it very difficult to eat, and had eventually discovered that if he let food burn up in the fire of his face it still nourished him. That was no way to eat. The saddest thing of all was that he had a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, and he could not kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their noses into his eyes, because if he had, his beautiful wife and his lovely little daughter would have been burned to a crisp.

One day, after he singed his lovely daughter's favourite dolly and made the poor girl cry her eyes out, he decided it was time to see if anyone had a cure.

First, of course, he went to see a doctor.

"Good morning," said the doctor. "That's a very fiery face you have. Do you mind if I wear sunglasses during this consultation?"

"I understand completely," said the man with the fiery face, taking a seat. "That's actually why I came to see you."

"You're wondering if there is a cure?" asked the doctor.

The man with the fiery face nodded. "I have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but I cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into my eyes."

"That's terrible," said the doctor sadly. "My heart goes out to you."

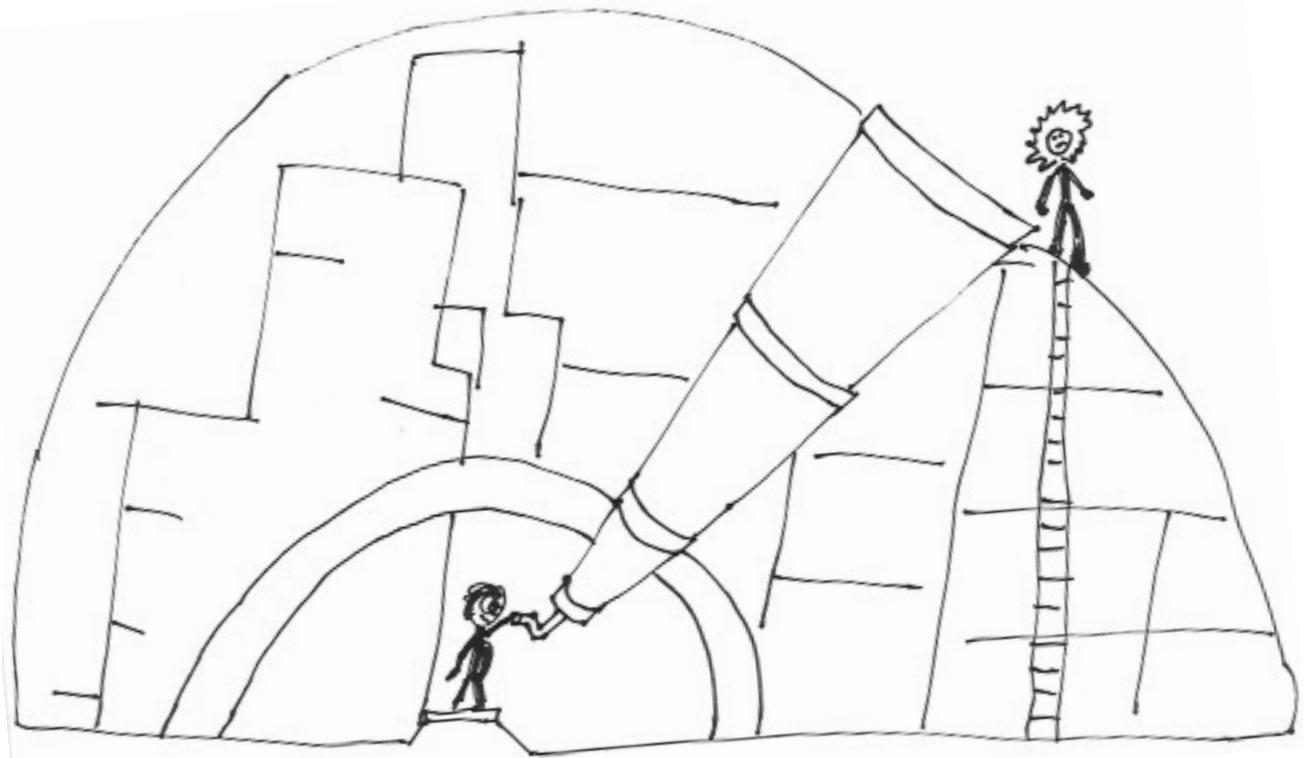
"Can you help?" asked the man with the fiery face.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "Let me take a look at you."

So the man with the fiery face reclined on the doctor's examination couch while the doctor poked and prodded his head with various instruments, all of which were quite badly melted by the time he was finished.

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "There's nothing I can do. The problem seems to be that your face is part of the sun, and I don't know enough about that to help you. I suggest that you go to see an astronomer."

The man with the fiery face was very disappointed



but he politely thanked the doctor and left.

The next day it was raining and he planned to spend the day sitting in the garden, letting the cool rain sooth his sore, sore face, but the steam soon began to bother the whole street, cracking their windows and cooking their vegetables, whether the family was ready to eat or not. When his lovely daughter came out of their house with tears streaming down her face because her kitten had been scalded by the steam, he decided it was time to take the doctor's advice and go to see an astronomer. He headed for the city observatory.

The astronomer was very pleased to see him. He had spent all night looking through his telescope and had made many exciting discoveries which he could not wait to talk about.

The man with the fiery face found the astronomer's new discoveries so fascinating that he almost forgot to bring up his reason for visiting, but when he did, the astronomer was very sympathetic.

"So you are telling me," said the astronomer, pushing his spectacles back up his nose (the fiery face was making him sweat a little, which made his glasses slip off), "that you have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but you cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into your eyes?"

"That is precisely the problem," said the man with the fiery face. "I went to see a doctor, but he told me that he could not help because the fire on my face is

a part of the sun."

"Very wise," said the astronomer. "Had he made a mistake while trying to help he might well have triggered a devastating thermonuclear reaction. We are lucky that nothing of the sort has happened so far."

"Not to mention that I have singed my little girl's favourite dolly and scalded her kitten. Is there anything you can do to help?"

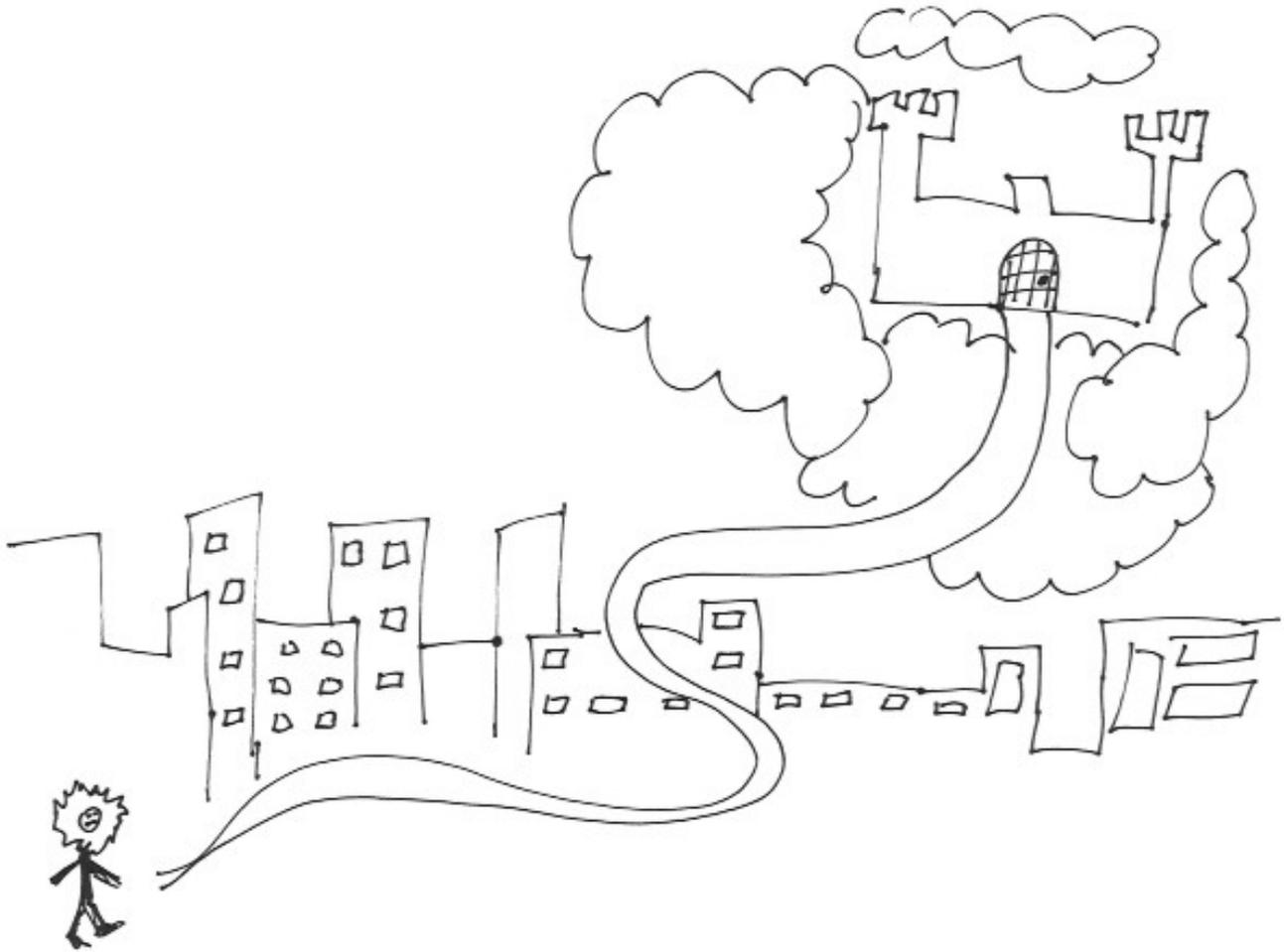
"Well, let's see," said the astronomer. "Do you think you could climb up to the top of the observatory so that I could point my telescope at you?"

"I'll give it a try," said the man with the fiery face. "I would climb to the top of Mount Everest for the chance to give a kiss to each of my two best girls."

So the man with the fiery face climbed to the top of the observatory, and the astronomer pointed his telescope at him. It was daytime, so the light from the sun would normally make it impossible to see any stars through the telescope, but since the man with the fiery face was so bright, and so close by, the astronomer was able to study him. He did a full spectrographic analysis and studied the results carefully. He had to be especially careful because he would normally be sleeping at this time of day, having stayed up all night studying the stars, but he was quite sure that he was correct in his conclusions.

The man with the fiery face was very disappointed. He said, "Are you sure you cannot help me?"

"I'm sorry," said the astronomer. "I would love for



you to be able to give each of your two best girls a kiss, but I cannot help. The fire on your face, although it does indeed appear to be part of the sun, does not behave in the ways one would usually expect of a scientific phenomenon. It is my conclusion that it is in fact a magical phenomenon, and you will probably have to see a wizard to have it assuaged.”

The man with the fiery face knew that the astronomer had done his best, despite being very hot and tired, and so he thanked him and went home.

The next day it was very sunny, and so the man with the fiery face didn't fancy going out at all. He was hot enough as it was. He decided to stay indoors in the shade and turn on a fan. But the air pushed around by the fan made the flames on his face go all over the place and one of them set the television on fire. His daughter had been about to watch her favourite program and she began to cry again, which broke his heart. He decided to go out, despite the hot weather, to see the wizard.

This was not like going to see the doctor or the astronomer, who were well known for being friendly and approachable. The wizard was reputed to be capricious and mean-spirited. His castle, which was

at the farthest end of the city, at the top of a flight of stairs that ended halfway to the sky, was shrouded in cloud all day long and all year round, and although the man with the fiery face would be glad to get out of the sun, he did not relish going to see the wizard.

He began to climb the stairs. He was very frightened to see the city growing small beneath his feet, and especially frightened by the gusts of wind that threatened to push him off the staircase, but whenever he thought about turning back all he could see was the teary face of his lovely little girl after he had singed her dolly, scalded her kitten, and burnt the television, and that gave him the courage to keep on climbing. He did not want to make her cry again.

When he reached the halfway point of the stairs, the most frightening thing happened. The winds that had been gusting about him suddenly grasped him by the arms and legs and pushed him forward, up the stairs. His feet had no purchase and he could not control the helter skelter flight that brought him faster and faster to the castle door, which was huge, wooden and imposing. Faster and faster he went, until he reached the door and slammed into it. He felt his body disappear, his thoughts dissolve, and then, a moment later, he found himself standing at that door.

The man with a fiery face took a deep breath and knocked on the door. There was no door knocker so he had to knock with his hand, and it hurt.

The door opened and the wizard was there.

"Oh, it's you," said the wizard. "It's you. The man with the fiery face."

"Hello, sir," said the man with the fiery face. "My fiery face has been causing me some problems. I have a beautiful wife and a lovely little daughter, but I cannot kiss them, or blow raspberries on their bellies, or let them press their pretty noses into my eyes, because if they did they would be sizzled dead. I went to see a doctor, and he said that he could not help because the fire on my face was a part of the sun. He recommended that I see an astronomer. The astronomer said that he could not help because although the fire on my face is a part of the sun, its being on my face is not a scientific phenomenon but rather one that is magical. He suggested that I consult a wizard. Do you think you can help me?"

"Of course I can, if I want to," replied the wizard, "since I was the one who gave you a fiery face. Our paths have crossed before."

The man with the fiery face was astonished. He had not expected this.

"Perhaps you had better come inside," said the wizard. "We can both have a cup of cocoa."

Soon they were sitting on large couches in the wizard's study. The wizard was gently sipping his cocoa, since it was still hot, while the man with the fiery face had already poured his into the nuclear inferno that was his face. It made him cry to think that he might never taste chocolate again, but the teardrop evaporated the instant it left his eye.

"So you gave me a fiery face?" asked the man with the fiery face. "I don't remember that happening. I thought I had always had a face like this."

"I am responsible for that too," said the wizard. "After I gave you such a fiery face I was worried that you might come back here and singe me with it, so I made sure that no one remembered the time when your face was as normal as mine or anyone else's."

"But why did you do this to me?" asked the man with the fiery face. "I am sure I would never have done anything to hurt you or make you angry in any way. It just isn't in my nature. I just get on with my life and try to make people happy wherever I can."

"Well," said the wizard, "I might be prepared to reconsider my decision, especially if you can explain your offensive actions. I was in a very bad mood that day, having had a very important magical experiment blow up in my face. That was probably what gave me the idea for your punishment. Having washed the

soot off I went to the balcony of my castle to look out into the clouds for inspiration. As I contemplated the cumulo nimbus, the cirrus and the wispy threads that joined them in the throng around my castle in the air, what did I hear from below? What but the sound of a flatulent expulsion of stinky, sour gas. You trumped, right beneath my castle. How offensive! It could only be a deliberate insult! In time, I began to wonder if I had been too hasty, if I had only been living down to the poor opinion that the city people have of me, but now that my thoughts return to your deeds instead of mine, I grow angry and vengeful once more! Perhaps I was too lenient!"

He drank the rest of his cocoa in one go and began to run a long, spindly finger along the spines of the magical books that lined his study, looking for another punishment.

"Wait, wait!" shouted the man with the fiery face, panic-stricken. "Let me explain!"

The wizard paused his perusal of the shelves and pursed his wrinkly old lips. "Go on..."

The man with the fiery face explained, "I trump all the time! I cannot help it. Whenever and wherever I walk my trumps come out. There is so much parping when I walk down the street that people think there is a brass band marching by! In fact, it has been very difficult for me, because whenever I trump it makes my fiery face flare up. So you see, when you heard me trumping beneath your castle, I had no intention of insulting you, I was just doing what came naturally."

Once he had heard the explanation, the wizard laughed and quickly made the man's face normal again.

"Thank you so much," said the man with the normal face.

"Perhaps you should consider chewing your food more," suggested the wizard. "Or eating with a child's spoon."

The man with the normal face thanked him for those suggestions and promised to try them. It would be nice to be able to go into a shop without people holding their noses and looking at him.

Then the man with the normal face went back to his home and he kissed his beautiful wife and he kissed his lovely little daughter, and then he blew raspberries on their bellies, and then he let them press their pretty noses into his eyes.

**THE END**

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"And what is the moral of that bedtime story, my

invisible, insidious friends?” said Bardello Fatloch to his inferred audience. “If you have harmed a hair on the head of my baby daughter (if she was born with hair, or has grown any since then), or indeed on the head of my daughter’s mother, I will find you and flay your faces with a razor’s edge so that you too know what it is to be the man with the fiery face.”

## The Mystery of the Missing Mrs Fatloch

Inspector Barry Grimmett was able to enter the Presidential residence without the aid of a butler, flunky or guard – weeks ago the building had been told to let him straight in upon detection of his subcutaneous chip. He strolled straight in through the door, which was large, wooden and imposing. As he did so, the sound of the President expostulating with the air came to his ears. He knew that the last few weeks had been very difficult for the father of the lost baby, but he had not known that such a low had been reached. Though it did not seem to affect the case, he allowed his subconscious to file the information where it would.

Perhaps your narrator should intercede at this point, to explain that the President’s behaviour was not as odd as it might seem. He had used this technique before, I have found during my researches, learning early on in his quasi-criminal career as a youth that telling a good children’s story was an extremely intimidating thing to do. As children we hear these stories, and we learn their rhythms. We learn what to expect, and we learn to be comforted by them, lulled by them – the perfect mood, that is, to be hit with a sucker punch. The President didn’t know if anyone was listening, but if they were, he knew that they had just had a terrible fright. Such a threat coming from a private citizen would be bad enough, but coming from the President of Earth it would be no less than terrifying, even to the hardest of criminals.

I have searched high and low for the story that the President told that day, but I have not been able to trace the story of “The Man with the Fiery Face” despite my best efforts. The President said that his mother had told him the story, and perhaps she made it up for him, but if I may express a personal opinion, I believe that it was the habit of Fatloch to conjure up these stories extempore. Though the theme of the

story might superficially seem unsuited to the situation, regardless of the glib connection made by the President in his bellicose threat, I believe his subconscious was at work in the telling. Although the story had a happy ending, the man’s face being returned to normal, consider the main thrust of the tale: a man’s life could be destroyed by anything, by the mere mood of another, by total chance occurrence, by coincidence. By any of these unruly whims of fate we can be destroyed. With that in mind, how might one feel to think that fate was not only prepared to brush you aside, sending you flying into the ditch, with as little regard as a buffalo would give a grasshopper; not only that, as I say, but what if fate had set her charge directly against you? In this matter, the President saw himself as the agent of fate. For the time being, he was allowing matters to play out by the usual channels, but he was beginning to fret at their limitations, and he was ready to break their bounds.

You might wonder at this point how we are privy to the words of the President, how we are able to repeat the words of his story with such confidence, given that the question of whether he is being listened to by spies is still up in the air at this point in the narrative. You may simply have given thought to the disclaimer I gave earlier regarding dialogue, but in this case that does not apply. The Government of Earth had taken the invaluable precaution of requiring all Presidents of Earth to be implanted with a subcutaneous recording chip, which would actually release a poison were the President to decide that he would rather have a private conversation this time, thank you very much. Equally, though, to show respect for the President’s privacy, if anyone should attempt to acquire the chip less than 50 years after the President’s death, it would destroy itself.

“Hello,” said the President, when he saw Grimmett standing there.

“Hello,” said Grimmett. “Arabella has gone missing? I am very sorry.”

“Yes,” said the President. “I was just remonstrating with any potential spies of the kidnapers.”

“You were threatening torture,” said Grimmett with a tone of disapproval. He did not really think that it was rational behaviour, but the only way to find out what was on the President’s mind would be to play along. “That’s not really the way the police operate nowadays, you know.”

The President waved his objections away. “That was a purely private matter, between me and the kidnapers. Don’t concern yourself with it. If I ever catch up with them, it’ll be their problem, not yours.”

"Don't make it my problem," said Grimmatt sternly. "You may be the President, but I've took you downtown once before when you stepped over the line and I would do it again if need be."

"I know you would," said Fatloch, "that's why I like having you around. Like Margaret, you keep me honest. However, the time when being honest no longer serves my purpose fast approaches. Shall I show you where she was before she went missing?"

"If that's not too much trouble."

"Fine. I will just refill this glass of whisky. Fancy one, Grimmatt?"

"Not while I'm on duty, sir."

The President barked a short thick laugh. "Of course not. Have you really ever given thought to trying it, though? You couldn't really have done any worse in the search for my daughter if you had been drunk the whole time, could you?"

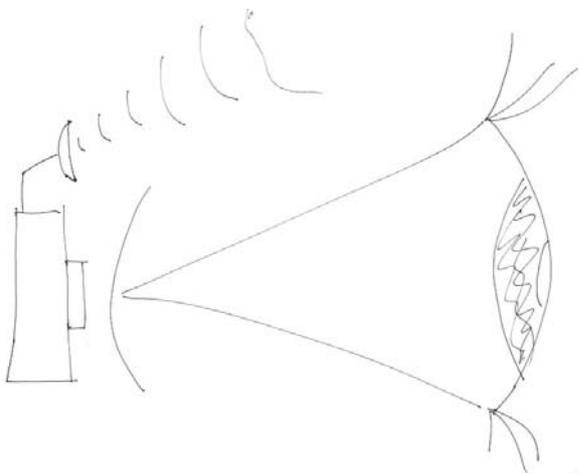
"Probably not, Mr President, but if I were drunk I would be taken off the case and then the search would go no better, I suspect."

"Quite so, unfortunately. That is why I turn to you again, now that this accursed woman has been taken too. Come into her room, then. That was where I saw her last."

Grimatt followed the President into the First Lady's bedroom. It was very nice, as one might expect of the Presidential residence, lined with book-cases and softly furnished. He noted that the bed was a single.

"Are you sure, then," said the detective, "that she has been kidnapped? Might she have left of her own will. Have you argued lately? Things must have been very stressful for you both these past weeks."

"We did have a big row this morning," said the President. "But I don't think she has left on her own. None of her clothes have been taken."



Grimatt raised an eyebrow. "Do you mind if I ask what the argument was about? Or did it concern the disappearance of your daughter – in such tense circumstances I imagine an argument would never be far from breaking out."

"No, it went back further than that." The President went to sit on the bed, and stretched his arms and fingers out as far as they would go, as if he were testing them out for the first time in years. "I don't want to go into too much detail, but it related to the manner of the baby's conception."

Grimatt looked at the single bed and thought he might have an idea of what the argument had been about.

"I take your point about the clothes being all here. If it is true, that would seem to argue for her having left against her will. If she had absconded, or merely walked out on you, she would at least have packed a bag."

He began to browse the books on the shelves, looking for any clues. They were arranged in alphabetical order by author, with occasional groupings here and there of books grouped by topic. All the classics were there: Abernathy, Aldiss, Asimov, and so on. He had never known that she was a literary woman, else they might have found more to talk about on the rare occasions they had met. He discovered a small clump of popular science books, and in another place a handful of books on healthy eating and exercise. Nothing struck him as relevant to the case. It wasn't as if he had hoped to discover a set of travel books outlining her itinerary, or a collection of volumes regarding safe teleportation, but he was disappointed. Discovering that she too had a copy of Howard Phillips' *First the Eyes, Then the Brains* brought a sad smile to his face, and he picked up the book to leaf through it.

"Should you be disturbing the crime scene?" asked the President.

"That is not such an issue in this day and age, Mr President," replied Grimmatt. "Upon promotion to detective corneal wetware is forced upon us. My eyes have taken a hundred thousand crime scene photographs already."

The book was not well worn, but was an original edition. It would have been priceless even before having been owned by the President's wife, and it was part of a collection of similarly valuable and incredible books. Here was a copy of the rare fourteenth edition of Gilligan's *Elsewhere*, the one that had been quickly superseded by a movie tie-in edition, and there, next to it, the original hardback of the same author's *The Indigo Skies of Home*. On the



same shelf he found both Greenwood's *A Balance of Seeds and Stones* and the illegally printed collection of his short stories, *There Are Now a Billion Flowers*. He had never so much as seen a copy of either before, and he was tempted to throw over the whole case and sit down to start reading. Even as he turned away his eye was caught by a copy of Ranjna Theaker's *Being an Alien*, one of the undisputed classics of its type.

One thing was for sure: the bibliophile who put together this collection for her bedroom would not willingly have left it behind, unless she had been even more unhappy than he could as yet imagine. He turned to the President.

"Maestri is on her way here. Will you be able to grant her access to your wife's bank accounts?"

"Of course," said the President.

"Maestri has experience in working with forensic accountants, and they will cross check everything your wife has bought against everything in the house. They will look for discrepancies in anything – items that cannot be found, prices that seem abnormally high, unusual cash withdrawals, that kind of thing. They may also require access to your accounts, for the same purpose."

The President shook his head. "I'm afraid that will not be possible. As President, I do not want the details of my spending being leaked to the press by a policeman after an easy retirement fund. The most innocuous detail could be twisted into some ridiculous scandal, and I cannot allow that."

"I see," replied Grimmnett.

"In any case," continued the President, "everything in here was bought by my wife except the whisky. I keep a bottle for occasions such as this."

Grimmett frowned. "Such as your wife and child being kidnapped? Have there been occasions such as this before?"

"I just mean when I am stressed. But take that as an example – your forensic accountant analyses my whisky spending and before the end of the day the press have labelled me an alcoholic. It is not going to happen, Grimmnett, so confine yourself and your investigators to the possible."

He left his wife's bedroom and slammed the door behind him. Inspector Barry Grimmnett was surprised to see such petulant behaviour from the President of Earth – a man he knew to have nerves of steel, and synapses that fired like pistons – and not a little suspicious. But there was a wall full of rare books waiting for his attention, so he left that suspicion to his subconscious and picked up Gilligan's *The Ephemeral Homunculus* to read while he waited for Maestri to arrive.

## Grimmett Breaks Through

Inspector Barry Grimmnett continued to investigate. He left Godal and Maestri to get on with the routine

detective work (the most important kind of all), and found his feet leading him back to the hospital, and Doctor Sykes.

He had a nagging feeling that there was something there that he had missed. The more he thought about it, the less he doubted that the doctor knew something about this case, something that the President had not wanted to be made public. If the President did not want to speak about it, there was no way of forcing him to, but the doctor, on the other hand, might not be so canny.

He arrived at the hospital an hour or so after setting off. He could have called for a car to pick him up, but he valued these times. In a taxi or a police car, he would be stuck in a conversation, especially being publicly involved in such a high-profile case. There would be no time to think. Driving a car himself would be little better. His body, as it operated the car, would need the supervision of his mind, whereas walking was something he could trust his body to deal with automatically, only paying it conscious attention when it came to crossing roads. Walking, his mind was free to think, to concentrate, to ponder. The pounding of his feet provided a rhythm for his thoughts, a framework to contain the ideas, and suggested places to break them off and move to others.

The city that he walked through was quiet, the rain damping down the spirits of everyone it fell on, but he liked it, he loved the pitter patter, the music of the weather.

He thought about the baby, about the wife, and about the husband. He thought of how angry the President had been when Taio disappeared, and how unsurprised he had seemed when his wife had done the same. He thought about the President's fortune, and about his political career. He thought about Margaret, and about the doctor. What could the doctor know about the President, the wife and the baby that would have been kept from the President's most trusted advisor? What actions would have meant the impeachment of the President, the ruin of the wife, and the striking off of the doctor?

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became, and since he had quite a way to walk, by the time he reached the doctor's office he was very, very certain.

He knocked on the door and let himself in. "Doctor Sykes?"

The doctor looked up, surprised. "Oh, hello, detective."

"Hello there, Doctor Sykes. I hope you don't mind me popping in like this." He stayed by the door for the time being.

"Well, I am very busy, as you can imagine. After what happened, there is so much to do. New security arrangements to implement, patients to reassure, that kind of thing. Is it something very important? Perhaps you could make an appointment?" He moved some files around on his desk, as if to show how busy he was.

"I won't take up too much of your time. It's just a couple of small details that I would like to clear up. It would be a big help to me, doctor."

"Well, if it won't take too long. Do you want to take a seat?"

"No, no – it won't take that long."

"Go ahead, then, detective. How can I help you?"

Grimmett took out his handheld computer and began to press buttons here and there. "Thank you, doctor, that's very kind of you. Let me just get this thing going."

"I really am very busy."

"I know. I'm very sorry about that. Can you believe I have police issue corneal implants, but I still have trouble with this stuff. You would think that I would have gained some affinity for machines, having pretty much become one myself." He finished setting up the notepad to make a record of the questions and answers. "Well, I just wanted to ask how long you had known the President."

The doctor held up his hands, palms outward. "I'm not sure. Is that relevant to the investigation?"

Grimmett shrugged. "If you don't remember, no problem. It's just a matter of completing the reports. I like to join the dots."

"Well, let me think. I think it was a couple of years ago. He was looking for advice, with regard to the problems his wife was having conceiving. We had met professionally, of course, from time to time."

"I see. Well, that's me done." Grimmett put away his handheld.

"Oh, that's all?" asked Doctor Sykes, getting up to see him out of the door.

"I should think so," replied Grimmett. "I had hoped that there might be something, I don't know what, that you could tell me about the President, but I'll just have to keep on thinking."

Sykes opened the door for him. "Goodbye, then. Good luck with the investigation."

Just as he was walking out, his handheld beeped.

"Ah," said Grimmett, halfway out of the door, "I'd better have a look at this. It might be important."

Sykes' smile was strained, as he stood awkwardly holding the door open. Grimmett made a show of struggling to operate the device, which, of course, he was entirely proficient with.

“Ah,” said Grimmert again, “it’s nothing. I think this thing must be malfunctioning.”

Sykes pretended to be interested. “Oh? Perhaps you pressed the wrong button.”

“That is very possible, Doctor Sykes. Very likely, indeed, I should think, because what it is saying does not make sense. Can I just check the facts with you again?”

“If you must. Go ahead.”

“Well, you said that you first met the President a couple of years ago, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” said the doctor, pursing his lips.

“And you wouldn’t forget that, would you? Even if you had met someone in your childhood, you would still remember them later, especially if they became President, and you saw them on tv every day, wouldn’t you?”

“I think so, but I never knew him. Or at least I thought I didn’t. Are you saying that he was at school with me or something? I don’t remember him if I did.”

“Well, this sounds crazy to me,” said Grimmert. “It must be a case of mistaken identity. The computer cross-referenced what you told me about having met him against its records. It is claiming to have found, in a search of historical surveillance photographs, a series of pictures showing you and Mr Fatloch enjoying a cup of coffee together, almost fifteen years ago.”

“Let me have a look at that,” said Sykes angrily.

Grimmert had of course found those pictures himself, during a routine check, but had waited to see if the doctor would reveal the prior relationship before bringing it up. The computer had beeped entirely at his command.

Sykes examined the photographs for a moment, but quickly realised there would be no explaining them away, no possibility of arguing coincidence. It showed the two of them in deep conversation.

Grimmert went back into the office and took a seat. Slowly, Sykes went back to his own seat.

Sykes continued to look at the photographs, but finally he looked up at Grimmert, who was waiting patiently. “I suppose you want an explanation?”

The detective smiled. “I am sure it can’t be anything untoward, doctor, not with a man of your standing involved.”

“You don’t know what my standing is, detective. I have barely known myself since the first day I met Fatloch.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?”

“To be honest, it will be something of a relief to have it all out in the open. I’ll lose my job, of course,

and though I think I did well for the hospital, did I really deserve it? You can judge for yourself.”

When he had been a young doctor, only recently having found a job at a hospital, he had found himself treating a young man in a business suit, Fatloch, no less, who had got himself into some kind of fight. When the doctor had finished stitching him up, Fatloch had offered him an envelope full of money. Let’s go and see the other guy now, the young brawler had said.

“It was over a year’s salary,” Sykes told Grimmert. “And I was having trouble paying my university fees. There was a possibility that my degree might be revoked.”

“I understand,” said Grimmert. “Everyone gets into scrapes like that from time to time.”

Fatloch had driven Sykes to his flat, and inside there was a man, bloodied, on the kitchen floor. Fatloch explained that he had not meant to hurt the man, a rival from work, but that he had got carried away. He wanted the man fixed up, but he didn’t want any record of it. And if the injured man did not make it, he wanted Sykes to keep his mouth shut.

“I told him it wouldn’t come to that, and got on with treating the man. That, I could do in clear conscience. The man’s condition was serious, but not critical. I stayed there for three days until he was back on his feet. At that point Fatloch took out a bundle of cash even bigger than the one he had given me, and gave it to the man he had beaten up, telling him to keep the whole thing quiet, that he was really making an effort to stay on the straight and narrow, but had slipped in a moment of anger, and for that the man had his apologies... You don’t seem surprised to hear any of this about our wonderful President.”

Grimmert leant forward, speaking quietly. “I had to arrest Mr Fatloch once, in his early twenties, for getting into a very public fight with a colleague at work. The man was not badly hurt, and he chose not to press charges.”

“I see,” said Sykes. “Perhaps the fight the aftermath of which I attended came later than that, and he had decided that further police attention would be best avoided. Anyway, I met Fatloch once more at that time. He sat himself down at my table, at a cafe near the hospital. He told me that he had his eye on me, and to point out that he had overpaid me a little. If he ever needed me again he would be in touch. As a matter of fact I didn’t meet him again until he became President. Then I found myself promoted to this job, the type of promotion for which I had been unfairly passed over a half dozen times over the years. I was glad to have a patron.”

"What happened then?"

"He came to see me one day, explained that he and his wife had been having trouble conceiving, and talked to me about the possibility of undergoing an alien assisted fertility procedure. He told me that the rumours had been true, that the Baboose had made an offer to him, but that he would need my help to make it happen."

"Do you think this is connected to the kidnapping of the baby?"

"I don't doubt it for a minute. You know how strongly people feel about this kind of thing. People are suspicious of the Baboose, and why shouldn't they be? I think someone found out somehow, and took the baby to make a point."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Are you joking? Now that it's out, I'll be ruined. I have broken every rule of medical ethics, and that's even before I went to the world of the Baboose. My only hope now is to sell my story and hope I get enough to make my stay in prison comfortable."

## Riots and Protests

Once Sykes had spoken to the police, Fatloch knew it would only be matter of time before he sold his story to the press. He could not blame Sykes for that – someone was going to make money from it and why should it be some sleazy cop nosing through the files on his neighbour's desk? And that was exactly what happened – the news broke the very next morning. He had a feeling it would have happened sooner if the agency had not been waiting for the morning news shows to make the biggest impact.

So now the clock was ticking.

By the end of the day there had been rioting in London, Rio de Janeiro and Moscow. No particular moral attitudes connected those cities, so he took that as a sign that other cities would soon follow suit, that they were merely the leaders of what would be a rising swell of disgust and dismay across the world. He was finished as President; there was no question of that. The only question was whether he still had any cards to play as a father.

Maestri and Godal were waiting for him when he left what he assumed would be the last Cabinet meeting to which he would be invited.

Maestri had made an essential breakthrough – Arabella Fatloch had been pilfering money from herself for the last year, slowly accumulating enough

to pay for her passage.

"Her passage where?" asked Fatloch. "Did she take the baby?"

"We cannot be sure of that," replied Godal. "It would seem a very roundabout way of kidnapping her own child."

"But she might have thought that it would leave them untraceable, her complicity unsuspected," suggested Maestri.

Maestri and Godal left.

Margaret was waiting for him too, but she greeted him with a sharp nod and did not speak until they reached the Presidential Residence. As they rode through the city in silence, the President did not know whether to feel hope or despair. There must be a good reason for her wordlessness. It might be that she had evidence about his daughter's death, and wanted to wait till he was in a position to give vent to his grief while maintaining his dignity. More likely – did he dare to think that? – she had learnt something essential as to his daughter's whereabouts and did not want to risk discussing it until they were in the Residence, the most secure and private building on the planet.

There was one other possibility, the thought of which saddened him. They had not yet spoken about the alien assisted fertility treatment, and he had no idea what her feelings about that would be. He had debated the question of whether to tell her with his wife and Doctor Sykes, and they had been against telling her, against telling anyone whatsoever. He had, at first, planned to simply do the whole thing openly, and let the people measure this so-called crime against his many achievements, but he had let Arabella and the doctor convince him that that could do nothing but harm any child's life.

He was still not sure they had been right in that. Allowing the people to build their excitement over the imminent birth of a natural heir to the President's fortune, the founding of a dynasty, as it was seen, seemed to have made the shock all the greater when the truth came out. If he had made the announcement on his own terms, perhaps linking it to the signing of an official treaty of some kind with the Baboose, at the height of his Presidential power, maybe then the people would, in time, after some unrest, have come to accept his child for the boon she was. Would that have prevented the kidnapping of his daughter?

Of course, the problem with openness would have been the demand from the world's scientists and the public themselves for the details of the procedure. No one (as far as anyone knew) had ever gone through it, and the Baboose were not known for their

verbosity, which had led to disgusting rumours and fictions and malevolent innuendo about its precise nature. The problem was, he thought with a silent laugh, that some of those rumours, fictions and innuendos were exactly correct.

So he had told no one, not even his trusted batman. At the time, he had thought he was conceding nothing, that Margaret would discover the truth for herself regardless, but if she had not, then finding out today, from the news, might have shook her. Her silence now might just be down to her revulsion at what he had done, or a sense of betrayal that he had not trusted her enough to tell her before.

As it was, he should have allowed himself to hope. Margaret had made a discovery of her own – the Minister for Galactic Affairs had allowed a ship to pass through Earth's defences that day.

## Desperation and Torture

The former President was leaving his home by way of a specially built exit from the wine cellar. He did not know if he would be able to return, but he was confident of being able to cope if not. As he had said to Grimmett, almost everything in the house had been his wife's – everything that mattered to him had been kept in more practical locations. He had always known that the Presidency would not last for ever, though he had hoped it might have ended in a slightly more civilised way.

Thinking about his wife's possessions made him think of her personal library, and the way Grimmett had responded to it. Still in the tunnel – it extended for well over fifty metres even before the wine storage ended – he called the detective. He would have to speak quickly; it would be Grimmett's duty to try and locate him. He did not want to be located. In all normal circumstances he would have respected the rule of law, but if he did that right now there would be no hope for his daughter.

Grimmett answered immediately. "President! I did not expect to hear from you."

"I know. Listen, Grimmett..."

The detective interrupted. "Actually, a few of us are on our way over to see you right now. You should wait for us, or not, depending on your plans, President."

"You know I'm only President as long as it takes

to sort out the paperwork, Grimmett, else you would be on your way to see someone else."

"Who would that be? It sounds like you are walking quickly. Are you on your way to see that person?"

Fatloch heard the noise of someone putting their hand over the receiver, and the muted jabber of a sprinted consultation.

"Listen, gumshoe, I just rang to say that you still have access to the Presidential Residence – you should use it to clear out the library before the people make their democracy felt."

Grimmett unmuffled the receiver. "Thank you, sir – that's very classy of you. Any chance you could tell us who you are on your way to see? Has someone made a breakthrough in your daughter's case? Should I not know about it if so?"

Fatloch ended the call. It would not take long for Grimmett to realise, if he had not already, that the most likely source of a lead would be Margaret, if it was not Fatloch or Grimmett himself. Once they knew who had cracked the case, it would only be a matter of time before they retraced her steps, analysed her analyses, and discovered her discovery. As soon as that happened, his target would become inaccessible. That meant his time was limited.

Reaching the final, and oldest, bottle of wine, he grabbed it, smashed off the neck and took a long drink. It had been a long time since he had done what he was about to do, and it was probably best that he do it slightly under the influence of alcohol, allowing his body to remember what it had learnt so long ago, free of the self-imposed restraint which had bound it all these honest years.

The drink might not have been whiskey, not by a long way, but it helped nevertheless. He felt something uncurl within his belly that had not stirred for decades.

He knew where to find the Minister for Galactic Affairs, since his target had had no reason to suspect it might be wise to keep his movements quiet. He had mentioned at that afternoon's Cabinet meeting that he would be attending the opening of a restaurant that evening, the Goulash Flowers.

There was plenty of time to get there, so the President took it easy. He was really too recognisable to walk on the streets, but in a way he thought that might be working for him, since no one would ever really believe it was him. He had kept the wine bottle in his hand and deliberately jumped in a puddle, and any time someone seemed to be looking at him too curiously he ran up to their faces and yelled, "I'm the President I am, the President of the whole world." No

one took him at his word.

He reached the Goulash Flowers. It was four stories high (and some amazing intuition told him that that might be a problem later on), with a roof modelled after the Sydney Opera House. The lights from the front of the building dazzled him, coming from near darkness as he was – the bright beams of cars that were pulling up, the flashes of photographers' cameras, the sparkling of diamonds. Relative to that, he was virtually invisible as he approached the rear, an alley that went nowhere and was full of boxes and packaging thrown from the windows as the contractors had rushed to get the restaurant ready in time. Normally it would have been a tramp's paradise, and from the fact that it was empty he deduced that someone had the job of keeping it that way.

He found a comfortable spot close to one of the back doors and hunkered down for a nap. By the time a security guard came and kicked him he was very nearly asleep. It had been a tiring day, after all.

Fatloch rolled over, letting the guard think he was done, then grabbed the foot that dared to try another kick. He twisted it sharply, and the guard fell to the ground in agony. Despite being a miserable sadist, the man was obviously a dutiful employee, as his first thought was to raise the alarm rather than protect himself. He reached for his communicator, but Fatloch had got quickly to his feet, and stamped on the guard's hand before he could press the panic button.

After delivering one solid blow to the man's head the President hid him in a packing box and took his clothes. Luckily they were a good fit.

He used the security guard's pass to open a back door and went inside.

He carefully made his way to the top floor, where the opulence made it clear the very best people would be entertained. He benefited from the restaurant's newness, in that none of the employees had quite got to the point where they recognised each other yet. He was waved through at each level, and where he might usually have been challenged by the guards, he amused himself by being offended when they failed to remember his name. After all, they all knew his face, but none of them were given the time to place it in context. He thanked himself for having failed to overcome the apathy of so many people towards politics that the President was able to pass among them unnoticed.

Of course that would not apply to the guests who would soon begin to arrive, many of whom would know him personally, so he was not able to stay in plain view.

He went into the male toilets. He had to move quickly – if he was found loitering in here someone might be suspicious, and the game would no longer be afoot. He went into a cubicle, stood on the lavatory seat, and lifted one of the ceiling panels. He pulled himself up into the crawlspace, replaced the panel, and tried to distribute his weight as best he could over the thin steel rods that held the ceiling in place.

He poked a tiny hole in one of the panels and waited.

Before long, the first of the guests had arrived, and a few came straight to the toilet. Unfortunately the Minister for Galactic Affairs was not among them. As it turned out, Fatloch had to watch a lot of people go to the toilet, and being above the cubicle meant that that was as unpleasant as it could possibly be. Two hours had passed, and the President was beginning to wonder whether the Minister had changed his mind about coming there that night, or whether he had some kind of cybernetic bladder implant.

His arms and legs were burning with agony, and his nose was in a pretty similar state, by the time the Minister finally entered.

Fatloch silently let himself down into the cubicle, then barred the door and strode over to where the Minister stood at a urinal.

"Hello, Minister," said Fatloch, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "I understand we have matters to discuss. Something of mine has gone missing."

The Minister was aghast. He stepped back, struggling to tuck himself back into his trousers. He managed in that, but failed to fully halt the flow, and a dark patch of wetness began to spread over them. He winced.

Bardello thought he might cry. "Be a man," he said scornfully. "Take off the pants."

"Do you promise not to go for my genitals?" asked the Minister fearfully. He would rather they were wet than vulnerable.

The President shrugged. "I'm angry, not aroused, but who knows how a little torture might affect my mood."

"I don't know what you think I know."

The President took three steps towards him and grabbed him by the hair, wresting him over to a cubicle. He laughed, saying, "Let's find out together."

Eventually the Minister cracked and revealed that the ship was a mercenary ship on its way to the Bandits' Planet. He was paid to let it through, as he had been a dozen times before – he had assumed it was just a smuggler, like all the rest.



“Is my daughter still alive? Why did they take her?”

“I d-d-don’t know,” spluttered the man through bloody gums. “I don’t know anything about who it was.”

When they were done, Fatloch tied up the Minister and stuffed him into a cubicle. He would have gagged him but for the danger that the blood pouring from his nose would coagulate, leaving him unable to breathe. Leaving the door to the toilets barred, he leapt up to a window, punched through it, and crawled out to the roof.

He paused there to think for a moment, looking out over the city. Here and there fires still burned. One of them was very likely his former presidential residence. (Some vaguely human part of him hoped that Grimmatt had got Arabella’s library out in time.) There was no real decision for him to make – there

was nothing left for him on Earth but inquiries, trials and punishment. He knew that his wife had left for the Bandits’ Planet, and so had the mercenaries who had taken his baby daughter. Whether the two things were a coincidence or not didn’t matter – that den of villains was plainly where he had to go. Even the matter of whether his daughter still lived did not affect his destination – he would go there, for revenge, or rescue.

He almost began to look forward to it. It had been years since his last holiday.

## Finding the Marabian

His decision made, Bardello Fatloch had to get a

team together. Travelling to the Bandits' Planet was not to be done lightly. He had no idea what the circumstances would be when he got there.

First, of course, he needed to get Margaret on board. He had never met anyone so calmly efficient and naturally effective, and whatever he had to do on the Bandits' Planet, he wanted it done well.

He climbed down the outside of the restaurant, using drainpipes and architectural outcroppings of the Goulash Flowers to help his progress. He had one tight moment where a ledge began to crumble, but he was moving so quickly that he was past it before it had a chance to fall.

Reaching the ground, he dashed off into the darkness, throwing away the security guard's hat, and tearing the insignia from the shirt. As they fell to the floor, he doubled back and headed in the opposite direction. The police would be after him in force very soon. It was no longer merely an administrative matter, a tidying up operation – he had now shown himself to be dangerous and lacking in principles, at least when it came to anyone standing between him and his daughter.

He travelled through the city to reach Margaret – or rather, he made his way to an isolated place, a bolthole he had used as a teenager, a small tunnel under a motorway originally put in place to allow wolves and deer to get by safely (or at least one of them, if they were travelling at the same time), and when he got there he waited for her to work out where he would be. A car pulled off the motorway and drew up outside the tunnel within twenty minutes.

"I thought you would be here," she said, looking away while Fatloch dressed himself in the spare set of clothes she had brought. "Where else, after what you did?"

"I was expecting you, you know," replied Fatloch.

"Of course you were. You brought me here once before – it is where you hid after the last time you killed somebody."

Fatloch was surprised. "Is the Minister dead? I thought I left him in a salvageable state."

"On the news they are making it sound like he is at death's door, but that could just be propaganda, to encourage people to watch out for you." Margaret went back to the car and brought back some sandwiches and a drink, and offered them to him. She had also brought him a bag, though she did not comment on it. Fatloch hoped it was a disguise kit. She asked, "Do you still expect me to work for you?"

Fatloch shrugged. "I suppose I do, but I cannot insist upon it. What I did tonight was necessary for

me to find my daughter. I got the information I needed, if that is any consolation."

It took a lot to persuade Margaret to join him, honest as she was. The only way he was able to manage it was by convincing her that any criminality in which he indulged would be directed at those of a criminal nature themselves.

"I will help," said Margaret, "but it is for the baby, not you, that I do it."

She agreed to meet him at the spaceport the next day. He knew where to find the ship he wanted, but now he had to find the pilot, the Marabian. If he could not be located, they would jimmy the ship's entrance and get it going anyway, but Fatloch thought the Marabian would be a very useful individual to have at their disposal on the Bandits' Planet.

So Margaret left to prepare for the journey, and Fatloch had now to find the Marabian. But it would be difficult to show his face around the city without being arrested on sight. He opened the bag Margaret had brought for him and was very happy to find that it was indeed his disguise pack. It had been essential to him as a youth, while pretending to be this or that while acting as a look-out or a spy for his gang, and he had kept it into his middle age, even finding occasional uses for it as President. He did not actually do a King Henry and go among his people to gauge their mood, but he had used it now and then to have a quiet meal or drink in a pub.

He quickly got to work. Face paste let him glue back his ears, and raise the level of his eyebrows. He would look a bit startled, but that was not like his usual imperturbable self at all, so as a disguise it was perfect. He shaved, simply because anyone on the run would automatically be expected to be unshaven, and he washed away the blood from his knuckles and teeth, which would probably have been dead giveaways, he thought with a laugh, as he spat out the toothpaste. His mouth clean, a set of false teeth did much to change the shape of his mouth. His clothes were nondescript, cheap and off-the-rack. Needless to say, they were very comfortable and warm.

He headed for the grimmest pubs in the dirtiest parts of the city – that is, the only places that would have served such scum as the Marabian.

The first place he went to was the Spitted Calf, just off the main street in terms of location, but light years away from it in terms of customers. No one wandered in by accident, and if they did, they did not tend to wander out again in one piece. He had drank there from time to time as a teenager, and when he reached it he was glad to see, by the boards over the

doors and windows, and official notices pasted upon them, that it was still keeping up the old tradition of being regularly closed down by the police. If it wasn't for drugs being sold on the premises, it would be for consumption. In fact, if it wasn't for drugs the place wouldn't really have a reason to ever open again.

He went round the back and found one set of boards, over a window, that were broken, swinging gently from nails at just one end. He pushed them down and climbed inside, to find a party in full effect. Cork panelling on the walls prevented much sound from escaping, and payments to local officers made what sound there was ignorable.

Fatloch would have been glad to find the old neighbourhood just as he had left it, if it did not reflect so badly upon his Presidency.

There was loud music playing – always a sign of degeneracy! – and a dozen or so youngsters dancing (if that was what you could call their aimless flailing of limbs at each other) in the middle of the room, on a piece of linoleum whose type had done good service as a dancefloor in that room on Friday nights for fifty years or more. Around the edge of the room sat slightly older youths, the ones who now considered themselves too cool to dance, but, paradoxically, cool enough to take enough drugs to make them soil their underwear (though that would probably come later). And at the bar sat the positively ancient who were just there to watch the younger girls dancing.

He had hoped he might get lucky and find the Marabian among that last group, if not squeezing himself between the first, but he was not there this time. Maybe he was out of money, or out of town. If the same guy was in charge he would know where to find him.

Fatloch felt very, very old, probably even too old to watch the girls dancing, nice as that might have been for someone who had spent almost a year sleeping alone, but he went to the bar anyway, hoping to find that the owner he had known had not passed on the grimy torch. He was disappointed to find a young guy there that he did not recognise, though he knew the type, with a single overgrown sideburn and too much eyeliner.

“Hey old man!” he shouted over the noise of the music. “You looking for your kid?”

Fatloch laughed, very loudly, making the others at the bar turn to look at him with puzzled, glassy eyes. “I am, in fact.”

“Sorry, dude, I haven't seen her,” laughed the barman, passing him a beer.

“I should hope not, for your sake,” replied Fatloch, handing over some money.

“What's that?” the barman shouted. “I can't hear you, man!”

Fatloch leant over the bar and grabbed his sideburn, ramming his head down onto the bar. “I said, I should hope not, for your sake.”

The other guys at the bar were too stoned to react, probably not really believing their eyes.

The barman's face was contorted with anger. He tried to twist away from Fatloch's grip. “You're making a big mistake!”

Fatloch ripped off the sideburn and slapped the kid's head hard against the counter. The barman began to scream with the pain. “Don't cry now,” said Fatloch, bending to speak in his ear. “Your girlfriend does that every week to her legs for your sake. Can't you take it?” He slapped the man's head against the bar again. By this point the music had come to a stop as everyone else noticed what was happening. I'd better bring these shenanigans to an end soon, thought Fatloch. Who knows how many drug dealers are in this place? I've let myself get carried away, having too much fun. He never got the chance to do this kind of thing in Cabinet meetings.

“Where is your boss?” he asked the barman, trying to be nice.

“Upstairs,” he replied instantly. “You only had to ask – it wasn't a secret or anything, you bloody psycho. What did you have to go and do that for?”

“I hate sideburns,” replied the President. “I couldn't even remember what my question was with one of them in my face like that. Sorry, dude.”

To the accompaniment of a few girlish screams, not all of them from girls, he wiped the blood off his hand with a bar towel and went upstairs. The music was back on and people were dancing again before he was even halfway up, so he allowed himself a single salacious glance back at the dancefloor. Girls had not changed all that much since his time, he thought. If only he had known how to talk to them before he got too old for them to listen.

There were four different doors off the landing, three of which had their own set of armed guards. He was a bit surprised that they had not reacted to what had gone on downstairs, but reflected that there probably was not anything down there that they cared about in the slightest.

“Hi guys,” he said with a wave.

The only reaction was a raised eyebrow from one. Actually he was the only one not wearing huge sunglasses, so the others might have raised eyebrows and Fatloch would not have known.

"I'm not after drugs, I'm afraid. I just want to have a chat with the owner."

"No," said the one without sunglasses, "you want to buy drugs."

"No, I really don't," said Fatloch.

"I think you should," replied the bodyguard.

It is obvious, thought Fatloch, that he does not wear sunglasses because he is the communicator of the group. "Maybe I should introduce myself?" He mentioned the name he had gone by during his days on the street.

The guy without sunglasses pointed to the door without a guard. "The owner is in there – and if by chance you decide you would like any drugs later, you can have all of ours, free of charge."

"That will not be necessary," said Fatloch, "but if I ever fancy eating your eyeballs off a plate I'll get in touch. Have a nice evening."

He went through the guardless door, and was delighted to see his old friend, Sajun the Usher, still in charge.

"Sajun!" he said with a clap. "Good to see you!"

The proprietor of the Spitted Calf already had a gun in his hand. There was a reason he had no guard on his door: his speed with a gun was notorious. And he was not just known for being quick to pull it, he was known for being quick to use it too.

He said, "I don't know you, I'm afraid. If you truly know me, you should know that I have only ever had one friend in life, and it is in my hand right now."

"I hope that you are talking about the hand that is above the table," said Fatloch with a smile. "You would not recognise me, since I'm in disguise. Although now I think about it, I doubt very much if you ever saw me without a disguise. It's me, your erstwhile neighbour from the streets." He mentioned his name again.

My readers might wonder at my reluctance to give Bardello Fatloch's street name in this book, despite my lack of reticence in showing him involved in several scenes of torture. It might seem odd, I admit, but I strongly feel that if you never hear that name, you will sleep better for it. I am quite an old man, and my hours of sleep are few enough, without waking in sweat-drenched fear screaming... well, I am not

going to tell you what I wake screaming. It is for your own good.

The Usher rocked back on the chair legs, though he did not stop pointing his gun at Fatloch. "Interesting. I have not seen you around for a while. Everyone assumed you were dead, most likely by your own hand, since no one else was ever able to do you in. If someone else had done for you, we would never have heard the end of it."

"Well, I'm back, though it is probably just a flying visit."

"Take a seat," said the Usher. "It is booby trapped, of course, so don't get any ideas if I put my gun down. We might as well have the appearance of gentlemen, if not the intentions."

Fatloch took a seat. "I have no untoward intentions towards you. I'm just looking for someone."

"Untoward attentions are not always unwelcome, as you should know," said the Usher, making Fatloch laugh. "But enough reminiscing: who has your attention now?"

"It's the Marabian," replied the President.

"That scum!" spat Sajun the Usher. "I have had nothing to do with him for ten years. He knows better than to come here anymore. You really have been out of touch. What have you been doing all these years?"

"I became a good citizen."

The Usher almost choked on his own laughter. Fatloch waited patiently.

"It is you, after all this time," said the Usher. "A lesser man, or an undercover cop, would have come up with some lame excuse about being stuck in jail, or marrying a good woman, or setting up shop in a different city. Only you would have the balls to say something so totally unbelievable."

"I'm glad you recognise me now."

"Okay, I'll tell you where to find that louse-sucking scumbag. I hear things, even when I would rather not. I don't know what you want with him, but I hope it will involve pain."

Fatloch thanked him and left. He found the Marabian just where Sajun the Usher had said he might be found: under a bridge by a school, pretending to be a troll, and frightening the children whenever they tried to cross.

# The Loper

## A Short Story

John Greenwood

*One step beyond*

The bare facts of this story are already so well known in society at large that a further retelling might seem superfluous, but the tale has become so familiar to most well informed citizens that the initial shock of our discovery has been blunted by repetition. Consequently I feel that the general reader might find some interest in a version of the events told by one who was intimately involved with the expedition, who was present at the actual moment of revelation. I cannot claim to have made the discovery myself. That honour must go to my colleague, Professor A—, whose curiosity outweighed the skepticism that is its natural companion in the scientific mind. Had that not been the case, then the confused and outrageous rumours that began to reach him at his research station in Sumatra might easily have been branded a piece of crazed speculation unalloyed with truth, a product of febrile minds driven beyond breaking point by the fierce heat of the rainforest. To his credit, and to the ultimate and lasting benefit of Natural History, he did not dismiss these reports where a less imaginative, perhaps more sensible researcher might have turned away, anxious to protect his reputation. Instead he called me.

At first I thought Professor A— mistaken, and told him so. I am, as I assured him when he first contacted me, a specialist solely in the study of primates, in particular the extinct anthropoids, as distinguished from the prosimians (of which a miserable few species of lemurs still cling to life in protected environments). My sole business is with the fossilised remains of those long vanished higher primates, the apes and monkeys whose existence we know of only by the skeletal forms of those individuals whom chance dictated be preserved through the millennia. In short, while primate paleontology is by no means a sedentary trade, it deals almost exclusively with rocks. I had no experience of the kind of expedition

the Professor was proposing, nor could I foresee what possible benefit my presence could bring to his already highly qualified research team. My work has brought me into contact with living specimens but rarely and incidentally. The notion of plunging into the jungles of Sumatra in search of a species new to science struck me as not only beyond my range of expertise, but frankly outside my field entirely. Had Professor A— confused me with another? Once, while attending a conference, I was mistaken for a botanist who shares my exact name, an authority on certain types of tree fern. Perhaps this was a similar error?

But no: Professor A— was quite certain, and it was only then, in cautious terms lest he himself appear too credible a believer, that the entire story was revealed to me. It transpired that the Professor was stationed in a remote district of Sumatra while engaged in a three-year study of the breeding patterns of bats. Through his sporadic contacts with the local inhabitants, he soon learned of their belief in an improbable and malformed beast who dwelt in the dense forests of the island. Popular wisdom held that the creature was chronically shy and averse to any contact with the bustling colonies dotted around the coastline. Only those who dared to leave the civilised world behind, to penetrate the pathless interior, might happen upon the awful creature. He featured heavily in the panoply of legends peddled by the island's inhabitants, and was used to frighten infants who might otherwise be tempted to stray from the safety of the nursery. The Loper, for such was the animal known in the local dialect, had long been a figure of both terror and fascination amongst the native populace, and it seemed that everyone knew someone who knew someone who had encountered the beast at first hand. Descriptions of the Loper were predictably inconsistent. In some accounts the

creature had the tail of a scorpion. In others he lacked eyes, or a head. Other eyewitnesses swore they had seen antlers or antennae. Even wings were attributed to the monster. The singular point of concordance among these accounts was the peculiar method of perambulation the creature was supposed to employ. All agreed that the Loper walked almost exclusively on his hind legs, using his forelegs to grasp fruits and other objects, hence his unusual name.

Naturally Professor A— paid such stories no more attention or credence than one might give to the whimsical imaginings of an infant. He continued his examination of bats, concluding that such mythical creatures as the Loper undoubtedly existed in all cultures where irrational prejudice held sway over undisciplined minds. It was not until two of his most experienced and sober-minded researchers returned from an extended survey of the uncharted jungle, and admitted that they too had spied the fabled beast, that Professor A— began to give serious consideration to the possibility of the Loper's existence. The two witnesses, Dr B— and Dr C—, had glimpsed the animal only momentarily, before he had discovered their intrusion and bounded away in fright at a prodigious pace. The researchers gave chase, but quickly abandoned their pursuit for fear that they might lose their way and be swallowed up by the insatiable wilderness. Despite the brevity of the encounter, their descriptions of the quarry were almost identical, and of an unembellished clarity that only those trained to observe systematically and dispassionately are generally capable of. Gone were the stinging tail, the wings and antennae, and all the fanciful adornments attributed to the Loper of popular belief. The actual creature reported by Dr B— and Dr C— was estimated at a little under two metres long from the end of his hind legs to the crown of his skull. It undoubtedly had four limbs and – on this point scientific observation and local superstition seemed to agree – the hind legs alone were generally used for propulsion along the ground, while the agile forelegs were employed in a wide variety of tasks: picking fruit and leaves, climbing up into the branches of trees and pushing aside the thick undergrowth as the Loper fled from his pursuers.

While keen to avoid overhasty conclusions, the two witnesses stood firm in their belief that the creature must belong to a species of mammal. The thick, matted fur which covered much of its body, so typical of the terrestrial mammals, seemed to rule out any other class of organisms. But to what order of mammals did the elusive Loper belong? Several factors seemed to indicate a definite but entirely

impossible answer. The Loper had two rather small eyes on an almost entirely flattened face. Of this fact the witnesses were adamant. It has, of course, long been held by primatologists that the extinct anthropoids may have evolved their foreshortened muzzles as they became increasingly reliant on vision to locate food, avoid predators and possibly to signal to each other, although this is to assume that those ancient primates possessed sufficient intelligence to warrant such a sophisticated system of communication. Studies of fossilised ape skulls have suggested that the frontally located eyes may have even allowed some species of higher primates to develop stereoscopic vision to a relatively high level. Whether the extinct apes and monkeys could accurately judge depth and distance may never be known, but these facial characteristics, combined with the Loper's vertical posture and two-limbed gait, persuaded Professor A— that he was dealing with some form of higher primate, miraculously shielded from the modern world by an encircling band of impenetrable vegetation.

After consultation with his colleagues, and no small amount of soul searching, Professor A— decided to shelve his work on the reproductive habits of bats, in order to mount an expedition to discover, and if possible capture, the Loper. It was to this end that I was made aware of the extraordinary notion that the anthropoid primates might not be confined to the fossil record alone. I must confess that my first instinct was that of disbelief. There had been several sensational claims of surviving monkey species over the past few decades, notably in those few remaining pockets of jungle in the Amazon Basin, but not one of these assertions had ever been verified. Most reputable authorities dismissed the possibility that any primate could have escaped the fervent eye of science for so long, and I agreed with them wholeheartedly. But we were all wrong.

Given that I remained wholly unconvinced of the Loper's existence, and privately calculated our chances of success at zero, it remains something of a mystery to me why I agreed to join Professor A—'s expedition in the capacity of expert primatologist. Dissatisfaction with the predictable routine of academic life; flattery that one of Professor A—'s standing should have chosen me; a long buried but unsated hankering after the unknown: perhaps all these influences played their part in my acceptance of the invitation. There was scant time for background study. I was expected at the Professor's research station within the week. The rest of the hunting party was already assembled and awaited only my presence

before plunging into the Sumatran forests. I remember quite distinctly, as I left my study on the day of departure, thinking to myself how fortunate I was. I watched the orderly procession of my fellow citizens marching briskly through the corridors and tunnels of our great city, each with his allotted task and place in the grand scheme of civilisation. I thought of the Loper, naked, alone and without shelter in the indifferent wilderness, and I pitied him. Perhaps I feared for my own peace of mind too, for very soon I would be wrenched away from the friendly warmth of our teeming city to be thrust into that same lonely forest which the Loper, if he even existed, must call home.

My natural horror of solitude was happily misplaced. I could not have hoped to find more congenial companions in that desolate corner of the world than Professor A— and his team. The pleasure I had in their company greatly helped to diminish, if not entirely dispel, the unease and discomfort that such an undertaking inevitably entails, particularly for one not used to these deprivations, as I certainly was not. The humidity of the rainforest is incomprehensible to one who has not experienced it for himself. The very atmosphere seems denser, and movement through it takes more effort, a problem compounded by the thick vegetation, which must be laboriously removed if any progress is to be made. Our initial objective was to reach the area where the Loper had been spotted. It was a very general aim, in that the two witnesses could not be entirely sure where the encounter had taken place. No sign remained of the path they had cut, although only a few weeks had passed, so vigorously did the undergrowth renew itself.

Seven days we spent battling through that intolerable heat and moisture without the least indication of the Loper's presence, but I never ceased to speculate as to the true nature of our quarry. Would he resemble the barrel-chested, long-limbed apes preserved in the fossil record? Reconstructions of these extinct giants must depend to a degree on analogies with other, extant species of mammals, and no small amount of guesswork. Musculature can be estimated from the bone structure with reasonable confidence, but skin pigment, fur colourings and markings are entirely unknown. Perhaps we would come face to face with the monstrous *Gorilla gorilla*, the *Pan troglodytes*, or even the bizarre *Pongo pygmaeus*? And if we did, would we be able to recognise the creature as such? These and a thousand more unanswerable questions plagued me in equal measure to the mosquitoes while we made our slow passage into the interior.

Answers came suddenly and with violence. A rock

was thrown from above and struck me sharply on the back. At first we thought it mere chance, but more of the crude missiles rained down, followed by a wild crashing of branches, as our unseen assailant made good his escape. Here then was a positive indication that the ancient anthropoids were in fact tool users! Our party pursued him desperately, but once more we were hampered by the natural obstacles of the forest floor, while the Loper, if it was indeed he, moved with unhindered ease through the lower branches. Twice we caught a glimpse of a slender, brown shape, unmistakably ape-like, with its long forelimbs and flexible jointed front paws, flashing across our path, half-obscured by the foliage. These momentary visions spurred us on with renewed hope, and we all but forgot the heat and our own exhaustion. We threw ourselves into the task, calling to each other in shrill cries lest we lose one of our number in the mad chase. Several times we feared the Loper had evaded us entirely, and we stood motionless, regaining our strength while we watched the surrounding trees for the smallest sign of movement. Each time our patience was rewarded, for that unambiguous brown form would briefly reappear in the canopy above us, and we would once again charge after him in clumsy pursuit.

I do not know exactly how long this enervating routine continued, but I do recall that I began to wonder to myself why the Loper did not simply sit quietly among the branches and wait for us to abandon the search. Did he not possess the intelligence to realise that it was his recurrent movements that gave him away? It seems highly unlikely that a species possessed of such poor skills of concealment could have survived for so long, unless perhaps it had no natural predators. Moreover, scientific studies subsequent to our discovery have shown that the Loper is a relatively intelligent primate, with a marked, if limited, capacity for cooperative hunting and food sharing. Then why did the creature repeatedly allow us to discover his hiding place? Could it be possible that he was beckoning us, guiding us towards our final destination? It may appear an improbable, even absurd explanation, but there is much about the Loper's behaviour that we do not understand, even to this day. It remains a fact that within a few hours of first sighting the creature, we found ourselves at the very threshold of his secret lair.

We emerged at last on the banks of a small, stagnant pool. On the far side of the water, a layer of overhanging rock formed a natural shelter above a narrow strip of bare earth. A movement in the

shadows alerted us to the Loper's presence, but to our utmost astonishment there appeared not one creature, but dozens. We were observing a whole community of Lopers of all sizes and ages, eating, sleeping, bickering amongst themselves, quite unaware of our presence. It was only now that we had the chance to examine these almost mythical animals at our leisure. At first there was a sense of jubilation on having set eyes on the only surviving species of an order of mammals previously considered extinct, a creature we had dismissed as nothing more than a ghost story.

Beyond the initial thrill of discovery, I recall that my first impressions of the Loper were accompanied by a strong sensation of utter revulsion. The living creatures before us scarcely resembled anything I had seen in museum reconstructions or artists' impressions of the extinct anthropoids. There was something unsettling about the way they moved, balancing upright on the two muscular hind legs and thrusting their whole torsos forward with long, ungainly strides. I realized that the Loper had not been named for nothing. The smaller forelimbs of the Loper were continually moving, grasping, twitching, as if possessed of a will independent to that of their owners. Their two small, closely spaced eyes were equally mobile, the circular black pupils swivelling restlessly in all directions, surrounded by oval sheaths of wrinkled skin. The Loper's teeth and other mouthparts lay concealed behind its mouth, a mere

hole in the flesh of the face, but one horribly flexible, so that it quivered and stretched as the creature ate. It was from this orifice too that the creatures uttered unearthly noises, created by expelling air from the lungs. We understood these shrieks and roars to form some form of rudimentary communication system, and subsequent research on individuals in captivity has confirmed our suspicions.

Most significantly, my first sight of the Loper at close range corrected a mistaken assumption of mine. What I had perceived as dark fur covering the Loper's body was in fact a combination of animal skins and an ingenious flexible covering, which the creature produced itself by knotting together long strands of vegetable fibre in an intricate pattern. In reality the Loper appeared virtually hairless apart from a small area on the crown of the head and around the reproductive organs. This is what struck me as the most repulsive aspect of the Loper: the pale, soft, almost translucent skin, beneath which I fancied I could make out the muscle tissues rippling and the blood flowing through the veins. It was a sickening spectacle, and I wondered whether these grotesque creatures belonged not to our world, but to some long forgotten era of the planet's history over which they had reigned until some natural cataclysm all but destroyed them. In that moment of horrified confrontation, I am ashamed to say, I thought it perhaps would have been better had they not survived it.