



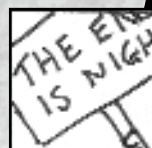
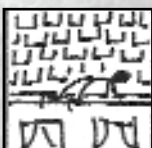
Theaker's
Quarterly
Fiction 15



The Silver Age Treasury of FANTASTIC LITERATURE

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23 GREAT STORIES!



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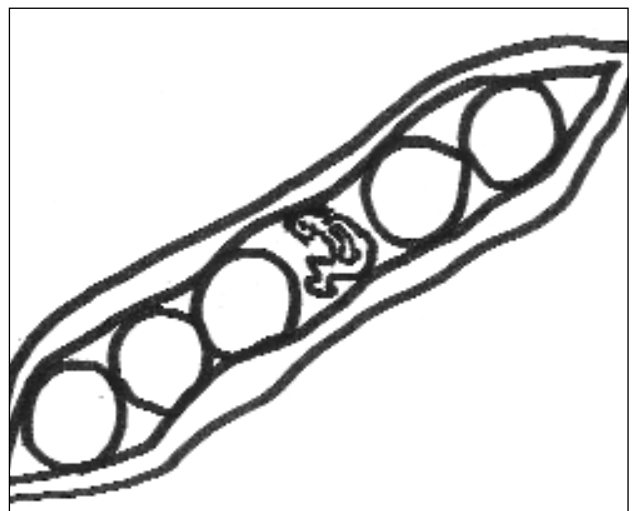
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The Silver Age Treasury of Fantastic Literature

The Strange Story of Roland Parsimony

It was generally agreed that Roland Parsimony was an unusual boy. He was sometimes described as an orphan, but this was not really the case. Even orphans have had biological parents at some point in their lives. Roland was found curled up inside a pea-pod by a Saturday assistant at Parsimony's Plant World in the long hot summer of 1975, alongside five normal, edible peas, which were carefully preserved by the Saturday assistant's duty manager, and which Roland himself kept in a special velvet-lined display case in his breast pocket, until they were eaten by a mouse when he lying dead drunk, aged thirty one, in an upstairs bedroom at a party given by the Princess

of Mauritania at her Hampstead apartments. The mouse, a pet belonging to the performance artist Griswold Copstick, died weeks later, apparently poisoned, although the poisoner was never conclusively identified. Copstick himself committed suicide, during one of his performances at the Edinburgh Festival, by eating rat poison, but it was several hours before any of the audience realised that his on-stage antics were no charade. – JG



The Return of Jak Perceval: Death in the Darkness!

On that particular day, Jak Perceval, one of the greatest heroes the world had ever seen, was fighting for his life. He had woken in the morning to the sound of something scuttling through the cave in which he had made his camp. Rolling over slowly, feigning sleep, he had reached out to grasp his sword, only to find it missing. He closed his eyes, muttered a prayer to the gods in which he believed (and had on occasion met), and leapt to his feet. The cloak in which he had wrapped himself for the sake of sleep made an impromptu shield – it would provide no protection against a well-aimed blow, but in the darkness of the cave, perhaps it would lead an attacker to misjudge his attack. For whatever reason, Jak’s sword was gone, and so he had to grasp every hope as if it was his last.

What waited for him in the dark?

He wished he knew. The scuttling had briefly ceased, in response, he imagined, to the sudden movements of its prey, but then resumed, and began its approach once more. Was it some kind of crab – the ocean was nearby, and it wasn’t inconceivable that it might be – or a scorpion, or something more deadly yet?

Now he was on his feet, it was easier to make sense of the sounds he could hear – they were approaching from further within the cave than he had gone. Upon finding it, an hour or so after sunset, he had thanked his luck, thrown a few rocks into the dark depths, and upon being reasonably sure there were no beasts within, had

settled down to sleep. He knew it had been reckless, but he had been tired, and he had trusted the gods to wake him should there be danger. They needed him for something, he knew, and so they would not let him die at the hands of a bear.

It sounded as if the creature should be upon him, but he could see nothing, and despite the dimness of the starlight that found its way into the cave, he should have been able to see it by now.

But no, the sounds continued to approach, and began to grow louder. Although the echoes made it sound like a hundred feet were scratching their way toward him, listening carefully to their pattern, he was sure that only one creature came. Why could he not see it yet?

And then the answer struck him. This was not a small thing that was nearby – it was something large that was still a distance off!

How far down did this cave run? How long would he have before it arrived? Its steps grew ever louder, now almost tangibly filling the darkness around him.

Jak began to back away to the entrance – it was blocked! A tree, fallen during the night, barred the way.

How could he have missed that? How could that not have woken him up? He reached up to his head – to find a bump the size of a strawberry. Now it made sense – thieves must have found him asleep, knocked him on the head before (or immediately after) he awoke, taken his sword and valuables, and then blocked the exit. If anyone later found his corpse, it would be put down to natural causes. No one would even know that thieves were operating in the area. That could have been it, he supposed, even as the beast reached him – it was huge, a terrifically large insect with at least a dozen claws, and mandibles the size of his thighs – but while he engaged the monster in a deadly combat to the death, he reconsidered. That was a lot of trouble for ordinary thieves to go to, just for the sake of a few valuables. It was much more likely that he had been the victim of purposeful treachery, and if he survived this day, he would find out who was behind it. – *SWT*

The Crumbling Time

Philip woke up to find his teeth crumbling. At first he wasn't too concerned. He assumed it was a nightmare – one that he had had many times before. Even now, dreaming, he was able to tell himself it was a common sign of anxiety, probably about changes in his life, so he didn't get up. He stayed in bed, waited for the bad dream to go away, and resolved to take it easy that day.

This time, though, the dream didn't go away.

He began to move his tongue around his mouth, pushing through the debris to find out what was left. There wasn't much, but he still wasn't all that concerned – it was clearly just a more persistent dream than usual. Then a fragment of tooth, dislodged by his exploration, fell back towards his throat, and caught there, throwing him coughing to his feet.

He spat it all out into his hand, and ran for the bathroom, but the hallway carpet had frayed, and his foot caught in a loop. He fell to the ground. He thought he felt his toe break as it twisted the wrong way. A brief shout escaped from his lips, but he got back on his feet and continued to the bathroom.

"Phil," called Briony, from downstairs. She always got up half an hour before him; she had to take an extra bus to get to work. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he replied, though he wondered if she'd be able to understand him still.

"You should come down and see the news," she said.

"I'll be down in a minute," he said, irritably. "I just have to check something out first."

"Just come down quickly," she called up, then went back into the living room, closing the door behind her.

He shook his head, and entered the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. His teeth, at least half a dozen of them, had simply crumbled away.

They must have hollowed out, he thought, without me realising. He wondered if he had

been drinking enough milk. After rinsing his mouth out, he sat down on the toilet.

The pain was excruciating, and this time he screamed. After a second or two, it became clear that it wasn't going to pass – he reached down, under the thigh which was in such agony, and found a crack in the toilet seat in which his skin had become trapped. He pulled the seat on either side of the crack apart, letting his bruised leg escape. Everything was going wrong today, everything. He put a flannel over the gap and sat back down. A few minutes later he joined Briony in the living room.

"Good Lord," he exclaimed, with what energy he could find. "What happened to you?" Her face was covered in spots, her hair was split to the roots, and there seemed to be a burn running the length of her left forearm. "Aren't you going to work today?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Let me put the news on for you."

She walked over to the television, and thumped it a couple of times.

"Hey!" shouted Philip. "What are you doing?"

"It started fizzing when I turned it on this morning – you have to do this to get a picture."

It worked, anyway – soon a picture was on the screen, accompanied by a crackling soundtrack. He wished it hadn't worked. There had been a series of calamitous disasters, beginning just an hour ago, and spanning the entire world. Bridges had fallen, planes had crashed, trains had derailed, buildings collapsed – everywhere it was the same story, and by this point the news-readers were struggling to make any sense of it.

Briony put her arm around Philip, and gave him a hug. "At first they thought it was terrorism, but it's happening everywhere, all at once, and not just out there, but in here too. Everything's breaking down, everything's going wrong. It's as if this morning the universe lurched, and entropy sped up. It's all winding down faster than we can wind it up again."

Philip looked at her eyes. "What can we do?"

She shrugged. "I think I'd just like a cuddle."

So they sat down on the couch, cuddled, and waited for something more serious to go wrong for them. It wasn't long before it did. – *SWT*

Insight

In their millions, like a sentient cloud, starlings were circling the Town Hall. Dusk had arrived just as the shops on the high street shut. The Sunday streets were emptying, and he found himself amongst the stragglers: beggars and gangs of children wandering aimlessly up and down the steep, wet pavements.

But he had a higher purpose. He zipped up his anorak, kept a tight grip on the petrol can, put his head down against the wind, and pushed on. Pigeons barely stumbled clear of his quick footsteps. At the dual carriageway he headed straight across without looking. The traffic flowed around him. Past the war memorial, and his destination slid into view. The building stood in the exact centre of the city, but he had never been inside, could not even remember it open.

Doric pillars, smeared with uncounted layers of graffiti, framed the boarded-up entrance. The flyposts were peeling, advertising products that could no longer be bought, and musicians whose music could no longer be heard. He noticed the symbol, unhappily familiar: two concentric squares vigorously crossed out in red marker.

He recalled: third panel from the left. He found it and knocked. Could it all be a trick? There was no sign of anybody inside, but that was how it should be. He waited, watching leaves circling on the tiled steps. A siren wailed in the distance. Hurry up, he thought, trying to peer into the crack between the chipboard and the broken glass. He glanced behind him: the street was empty, apart from a stream of cars.

“Go away,” said a woman’s voice.

Startled, he turned to go, then thought better and said, “Jerry sent me.”

“No such person as Jerry,” said the woman from the other side of the door. “He doesn’t exist. Go away.”

“I’m Tom,” he said. “I brought fuel.” He sloshed the plastic petrol can.

That did it. He heard a bolt slide back, and the

door swung ajar. He saw a pinched face swaddled in a rainbow scarf. Red eyes blinked back at him. “Quick, then,” she said, pulling the door open an inch wider.

It was barely warmer inside. The carpet, scarlet and threadbare, stuck to his feet. There was even a till, dusty and battered, but no posters. Hundreds of paper cups spewed across the floor. He stood there breathlessly, trying to take it all in.

“Don’t hang about, you’ll miss it,” said the woman.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She frowned her disapproval. “Minnie,” she said. “Don’t ask stupid questions. No need to ask you if it’s your first time.”

She led the way through a chrome door that swung back silently into darkness. He followed her up a ramp, with the impression of being in an enormous space, like a church hall.

“Bring that can up, I think we might need it tonight.” She led the way up between rows of seats. At a door in the back wall she took the can from his hand and passed it to someone within. He caught a glimpse of antique machinery, and heard the rumble of a petrol generator, then the door slammed shut without a word.

“No tickets tonight,” smirked the woman, a joke she had made many times before. “Sit anywhere you like.”

In the gloom made out a dozen isolated figures hunched in chairs, wrapped in thick coats. He could see his breath in front of him.

“Where are you sitting?” he asked.

“I’m on lookout duty,” she said.

He found a seat on the front row, away from anybody else, and waited in silence, hugging himself to keep warm.

First there was only light, a long rectangle of light. Then, the miracle. Right there in front of his eyes, a giant mouse appeared and began to sing. – JG

Shadowplay

The nights were getting longer. It got people worrying. Somebody timed it, and found out: the sun was coming up four minutes later each morning, and going back down four minutes earlier. Before long, they said, there wouldn't be any day left. Some comedian joked that dusk would have to get started before dawn had finished. People tried to laugh, but it wasn't funny. What if he was right? Nobody wanted to live like that.

It was getting colder too. Everybody moaned about the cold. Were the two things linked? Hard to say. Plants that had thrived just a few weeks ago were dying off. Trees were shedding red and brown leaves by the million, and the pavements were clogged with the sodden debris. People took photographs, astonished by the colours. The children enjoyed kicking through the gathering drifts of leaves, but the adults fretted. The TV news showed footage of the nation's great forests, where some trees, hundreds of years old, were already bare, black skeletons. Was a disease to blame for this mass wilting? Nobody could say for sure. Why was the sun visiting them less and less? It was a mystery.

Only William understood what was happening to the world, and that was because he alone was responsible. He hadn't told anybody yet. He was still hoping it might sort itself out without him getting into trouble.

It had all happened one Sunday morning when he was alone in his bedroom, listening to the sounds of his mother making lunch downstairs. Light and warmth was pulsing in through the half-open curtains, caressing his arms and face, playing with the shadows on the bedspread. Deliciously idle, lying on his bed, staring at some patterns in the cracks on the ceiling, he wondered whether they most resembled an elephant wearing a hat, or a leering monster with outsized fangs.

William began to unfocus his eyes, and the

elephant slid into two elephants; the monster gained a twin. He relaxed his gaze still more, and the images drifted further apart. But which one of these elephants was the real one? And where had the other one come from? Had it been borrowed from some other world, where another William lay on another sun-drenched bedspread, wondering where his ceiling elephant had disappeared to?

A police siren whined past in the road outside his window, and the shadows flickered. Perhaps, William thought to himself, he ought to send the borrowed elephant and monster back where they came from, lest he be accused of theft. He stared hard, and concentrated on bringing the doubled images back together. The two elephants wavered, but remained stubbornly estranged. The monsters shivered as though frightened by their reflection. William tried and tried, but nothing seemed to work. He screwed his eyes shut, then opened them again: the borrowed clones glared back at him from the ceiling as before.

He heard his mother calling him to dinner, and panicked. What if he could not fix this? He made a strenuous effort, willing the pictures into non-existence. He wished he'd never seen them, that they had never been anything more than a few lines on the plaster.

That's when it happened. William didn't exactly hear it, and he didn't exactly see it. But he certainly felt it: something important had been irretrievably damaged, and it was all his fault. Immediately the room grew slightly darker, and ardent shadows streamed in through the half-open curtains. William knew instinctively what was happening: the light was leaking out from his world like tea from a cracked mug, and in some other universe of perpetual darkness, the first ever dawn was about to break. –

JG

Zombie Beach Party Kids

A few days ago, the dead had returned to life, which had been a real bummer for Pete. The beach house had been a really cool place to hang out for most of the summer. It had just been one long party, but once the living dead turned up, the scene went bad – real bad. No one knew what had reanimated the recently deceased – there had been no mysterious meteor shower, or any strange sunspot activity, and no one knew of any secret military installations nearby (though why would they? asked some of the smarter kids).

At least, though, it was only the recently deceased who had returned to life. Most graves remained undisturbed, most cemeteries relatively quiet.

So a few corpses had popped up, and most of them had been put back in the ground just as quickly.

What had ruined Pete's beach party was that a couple of the guys had bought the big one just a few days earlier. After a night spent unsuccessfully making their somewhat lame moves on any girls whose standards might possibly have been lowered by their drunkenness, Jason and Mike had jumped in their car, and sped along the beachfront road, in search of a liquor store willing to ignore their obviously fake IDs, but finding only an oncoming truck that rewrote the rest of their lives – and it was a stern edit, that left nothing but a single period.

No one had been all that close with those guys. Most people, upon hearing of their deaths, had merely shrugged, or said, "Whoa!"

Which is to say, they were just glad it wasn't them, and for the next few minutes thoughts of death might spoil their buzz, but within the hour they would have been chugging another beer or two.

Anyway, when Mike and Jason turned up at the party again, with most of their bits and pieces either missing already or dropping off

them as they walked, no one was particularly happy. They hadn't been invited to the party in the first place; they had simply shown up, the first time, with a party keg, and that had got them in. Once they were in, no one had had the heart to kick them out, and that went double now that they were dead. Everyone figured the poor guys had been through enough already.

So no one said anything, no one called the cops, and no one went to find a shovel, but in ones, twos, and threes, they drifted away, night by night, until by the end of the week only Pete, a few of his friends from back home and the two zombies were left in the beach house by evening.

"What do you want to do?" asked Pete.

His friends shrugged. Then Mason started to say something, but a groan from the guest room drowned him out. Jason and Mike were in there, chained by their ankles to the bed.

"I'm really sorry about this," said Pete. "If we're going to get the party going again, I guess we're gonna have to do the business with those guys."

His friends agreed. There was nothing else for it. But they decided to give the guys the send off they deserved. First order of business was to give each of them a few beers, then, both flesh-eating monsters being safely sedated, they took them out onto the beach to look for hot women. When they found a pair of decent-looking girls in bikinis, they let the guys have a last meal, then knocked their heads off with an oar they grabbed from a nearby boat.

The two girls were already dead, so Pete and his friends picked them up, took them back to the beach house, and chained them to the bed in the guest house. They would reanimate within the hour, from what they understood.

"The party will really get going now," said Pete. "We've still got zombies, but now we've got zombies the guys can screw."

"Huh," said Mason. "You mean you didn't have a go on Jason and Mike? These zombies have got holes all over. One's as good as another."

Pete nodded. "I didn't think of that. I don't know why." – *WB*

In The Colony

I had been standing at the North Intersection where the tunnel narrows to only a hundred metres in diameter. Some say that there's a section here thinner than the rest. In a good light, you can still glimpse the world outside. Of course, it would be madness to look, for anything more than the briefest moment while walking by.

That day, I happened to be there on official business. My new contact Webster had arranged to meet me there, but he was late. Harding had never been late, not once in twenty years. But Harding was dead, or so I assumed. Now I was stuck with this Webster.

I spotted him long before he spotted me. He was sauntering along the Westbound tunnel. Crowds of commuters passed him by on either side, jostling his shoulders and stepping on the back of his shoes. Webster didn't seem to mind, but I did. He was conspicuously idle.

I wasn't much surprised to see, as he came into focus, that Webster was a younger man. He wore a conical hat covered in cornflower blue and mauve hexagons, which might have looked a little less ridiculous had they not been quite so *de rigueur* at that precise moment in time. In fact, just behind him on the tunnel wall, a similarly attractive, young man sported an identical hat above a rakish smile, as though mocking Webster behind his back. Webster hadn't noticed. I guessed that he had blown his first wages in a fit of exuberance. But soon the giant smiling face behind him would begin to melt and shift. Even now the conical paper hat was shrinking and curving towards a dome, and the hexagons were spreading apart, softening their edges, on their way to what? Emerald polka dots? Or spirals, like last week? Only the Ministry knew. There was one certainty: soon,

perhaps sooner than Webster imagined, he would find himself, by infinitesimal degrees, in possession of a deeply unfashionable hat.

We exchanged formal greetings, and I handed over my report, compiled with great care, detailing the activities and conversations of my colleagues over the past month. Webster looked at it for a second, as if lost, then said, "Oh yes, that thing. Right," and stuffed the report into his briefcase as though it were entirely incidental to our meeting. I could not decide whether he was very subtle, or merely a buffoon.

I was about to turn and go, when he stopped me. "It's a funny thing," he said. "I only found out by accident."

This threw me. "Funny thing?" I said.

"Yes," said Webster. "Turns out you're my father. They confirmed it at the breeding pods. I know a fellow who works there. Did me a favour. Apparently there's no room for doubt. Small world, isn't it?"

I stared at him. "You have placed us both in great danger," I said slowly and clearly, not looking at him at all, but staring straight ahead at the yellowed plastic tube that rose up from my feet. We had already been standing together for thirty seconds too long. The cameras would have already picked us up.

Webster winked at me. "Trying to see outside?" he said. "It's true what they say, this is the best place to try. I've seen them lots of times, moving about. Whatever can they be doing?"

"Have you?" I said placidly, gazing at the far side of the tunnel, unfocusing my eyes. It was too late to do anything else now. And he was right. There *were* shapes, giant silhouettes, lumbering across the invisible countryside, and once an actual pincer, reaching, twisting, tearing. – JG

Ice Age

It had been threatening to snow all morning, but at lunchtime he pulled on his anorak and left the office. The sky was loaded. The wind whipped across his legs. There was still slush on the ground from the last snowfall, and his work shoes had begun to leak. He could feel his socks soaking up the ice-water.

He never lit up until he was within sight of the park. He had three cigarettes left in the packet: one for now, one for the way home, and one for tomorrow morning waiting for the train. Beyond that he dared not look.

The tiny public park, surrounded by Georgian terraces and a square of black iron railings, had a dip in the middle. Usually the dip was full of muddy water, but now the water had begun to freeze over. He stepped through the gate, lit his cigarette with cupped hands, and began to scan the area for a dry bench. The most likely location was the picnic table underneath the willow tree. The table was free, but the bench was wet through. He used the free newspaper from his briefcase to sponge off the worst of it, then used the plastic bag from the sandwich shop to sit on. He was slightly too wide for the bag, and immediately felt the cold seeping in at the edges of his thighs, so he managed to wrap the edge of his anorak around his legs in such a way as to place a barrier between him and the plastic bag.

He stubbed out the cigarette. It was time for

his lunch: a cheese sandwich. He unwrapped the sandwich from its cellophane and cardboard wrapper and looked at it. It had been the last sandwich in the fridge at the sandwich shop. He would have thrown the sandwich to the pigeons, but he knew he didn't have enough money to buy another.

It began to snow. The park was empty apart from pigeons and a homeless man wearing plastic bags on his feet who was pulling litter out of one of the bins.

He pulled his hood up and ate the sandwich in a hurry. That's when it struck him: cheese sandwiches represented everything that was wrong with his life. When had this all started? He hated cheese sandwiches, and yet he had eaten one almost every day for the last four years.

For four years he had been like a woolly mammoth frozen inside a block of ice. But the freezing process had been so slow, so subtle, that he hadn't noticed it happening. He'd been walking around inside a block of ice all that time, going to work, coming home, watching TV and eating cheese sandwiches.

He finished the sandwich, gathered up the wrapper and the carrier bag from underneath him, and wandered over to the litter bin where the man with plastic bags for shoes was still digging out rubbish and throwing it onto the grass.

He'd hoped that by the time he reached the bin, the tramp would have given up, but he was still there. He held out the wrapper and motioned for the tramp to stand aside. The tramp watched him drop the bag into the bin, then straight away leaned in and pulled it out and tossed it onto the ground.

"Not keen on this weather," he said to the tramp to ease the awkwardness of their encounter. "Do you think it'll stop?"

The tramp shook his head.

He wondered where the tramp would be sleeping tonight, and wanted to say something positive. "Still, it'll be spring soon enough."

The old man scratched his beard then looked at him with animation. "No, not this time," he wheezed. "It's the new ice age. That's it for us. It'll just snow and snow." — JG

Big Ben

Benjamin Platelet had always been very punctual and so had his mother. Mrs Platelet had often told her son that he had been born, not only on the correct due date, but that he had arrived a quarter of an hour early, and not begun crying until exactly nine months after his conception, neither a second early nor a moment late. One should always aim to arrive fifteen minutes early, Benjamin learned as an infant, to allow for traffic. It was a lesson he took greatly to heart, and every year he won the school attendance award.

Despite his record of punctuality, Benjamin's physical growth was tardy. He lagged behind all the other children in his class, and could barely reach with outstretched arms the pencil marks on the height chart where other boys' crowns had rested. A class comedian fashioned the soubriquet Little Ben, and the nickname, once attached, was impossible to shake off.

At the end of his every school day, the young Platelet walked home alone, arriving there at 3.57 pm, just in time for the four o'clock news on the radio. Mrs Platelet set her watch by the hourly news, listening to the chimes before the newsreader began to announce the day's headlines.

"Why is there a pause?" Benjamin asked his mother one day.

His mother, her ear to the radio, glanced over at him distractedly. "Pause? What pause?"

"Between the bells and the start of the news," Benjamin said. "They always wait."

"Because they have to wait for Big Ben to finish chiming," she told him. "They broadcast Big Ben live every evening – that's how you know it's the correct time."

Big Ben! Benjamin imagined a giant, grizzly-bearded man consulting his silver pocket watch with one hand, and getting ready to sound an enormous hand bell in the other. He was the master of the nation's timekeeping, and even the news could not be read until he gave the go ahead. Every evening, when Benjamin listened to the news on the radio with his mother, he imagined this imperious figure standing behind the newsreader, raising his tremendous hand bell in anticipation while a sound engineer stood to the side holding a quivering microphone.

A few years later, when the Platelet family invested in a television set, Benjamin learned his mistake: Big Ben was no man, but a tower, and in fact not even a tower, but a bell housed within the tower. Benjamin was not disappointed by this revelation. Instead, it became his ambition to visit this incredible bell that held the nation's clocks and watches in thrall. He had never heard of Greenwich: for Benjamin, it was Big Ben that was king, dictating the hour to lesser timepieces.

At night Little Ben often dreamed that he had been transformed into a giant clock-tower, Big Ben's sidekick, a merciless enforcer who strode across the City of London, reprimanding the unacceptably tardy, and terrifying dawdlers and lollygaggers with his resounding gong. – *JG*

New Dawn Fades

There were a hundred of us there, more or less, in Staircore Four. I had a few memories, already fading, of what things had been like before, but my younger brother had been born there, on the Floor Six landing. He didn't believe what I told him about the outside.

I knew every square inch of that square yard, and the steps leading up to Floor Seven which were ours. The steps leading down to Floor Five belonged to another family, who we despised and who despised us in turn. We fought them every day.

I think I must have been about six when they closed us in. Since that day, the only door that opened was the Fire Exit in the basement, to take the dead out, to take the slops out, and to bring the food in. There was a man in charge of that Fire Exit, and he'd had that job ever since Shut In.

Nobody else was allowed to open the Fire Exit except the Manager and his Assistant, a boy who I'd grown up with. I badly wanted to see what was on the other side of that door. One day, I killed the boy, and became the new Fire Exit Assistant. The Manager said he never liked the old Assistant anyway. He was lazy. I wasn't lazy.

I was about twenty when I became the Assistant. It was an important job, perhaps the fourth most important job in Staircore Four, after the Stairfather, Stairmother and the Fire Exit Manager. Our family got extra food, and the family on Floor Five stopped fighting us, and gave us their best blanket. We didn't need another blanket, but we took it. They were always complaining about the draught, and it made my brother and I laugh that they had given away their only good blanket.

I think one of the Floor Fivers, an old woman,

died soon after. The Fire Exit Manager and I had to carry her body down to the Ground Floor. She was heavy. When we got to the bottom of Floor One, the Floor Oners had all gone up to the roof to wash, so we just tossed the body down the last flight of steps. The Manager said it didn't matter.

We waited a few days before they came to take her away. I don't know how they knew to come. Maybe it was the smell. We could smell it all the way up to the roof. When they did come, they banged on the Fire Exit door. I'd never seen it open, but the Manager told me to get lost – I hadn't been there long enough yet. He smiled and said, "Another few years."

They were banging again, so I had to get out, quick. I pretended to go up to the First Floor, but crept back down, and peered over the railing. I could see a green triangle, part of the Fire Exit, which shrank and became a grey triangle, part of the outside. I could hear the Manager's voice.

I don't know why I did it. Sometimes I wonder.

I remember the Manager tried to hold me back, but I fought him off. The people from outside just stood back and let me through. They were dressed in strange clothes. I stood outside, and looked around at the building behind me. Orange light was bleeding over the rooftop. I had seen it before: it was the sun. I stared at it, but after a while I it hurt my eyes, so I stopped staring.

I walked around. I saw other buildings, other people. I never went back through the Fire Exit. They wouldn't let me back in.

Nowadays I think about it a lot: the damp concrete walls, the blue and red fire extinguishers, the feel of metal railings under my hands. – *JG*

The Great Quatroom

When I was very small, much smaller than I am now, my grandfather used to tell me stories about the Great Quatroom, among other things. Quatroom lived on a planet with no name, inhabited by a race of beings so absent-minded that they frequently forgot to breathe, and fell down dead. The problem was getting so serious that the survival of the species was at stake. Fortunately, the Great Quatroom was not typical of his people, but was a brilliant scientist and thinker, famed throughout the known world for his brilliant mind, and he was determined to discover a way to save his forgetful fellows from extinction.

Quatroom decided that there were two possible solutions to this problem: he could cure the rest of his race of their absent-mindedness, or he could invent a device which would breathe for them, even when they forgot to do it themselves.

Quatroom thought about it long and hard, and decided that he did not much like the first method. If his fellow creatures were no longer absent-minded, perhaps they would all become diligent and brilliant thinkers, and Quatroom would no longer be the most famous and clever scientist on the planet. The second method, to invent a means for his fellows to be both absent-minded, but no longer at risk of asphyxiation, seemed by far the superior plan.

Sequestered in his laboratory, Quatroom's giant brain began to cogitate. He considered the notion of harnessing the gravitational pull of the planet itself, and redirecting this energy to microscopic engines attached to the lungs of his

careless compatriots. So long as they remained on the surface of their planet, gravity would continue to inflate and deflate their lungs without them even having to think about it.

One day, while tinkering with a prototype, the Great Quatroom accidentally invented a device that rendered him impervious to the force of gravity. He had installed the miniscule motor inside his own body for testing purposes, but when he switched it on, he rose gently from the ground and began floating around his laboratory as if he were immersed in a large, invisible swimming pool. The sensation was not unpleasant, and for several minutes the Great Quatroom swooped and dove through the empty air. He swung himself from a table top, pushed off with his tentacles against the far wall, and sprang forward through the open window at considerable speed, into the open air, and began to float upwards towards the silver green sky.

As the Great Quatroom's body drifted further and further away from his laboratory, and from the surface of his nameless planet, his celebrated brain was cogitating faster than it had ever cogitated before. He knew that unless he collided with some other sky-borne object, he would continue on this trajectory indefinitely, to the edge of the atmosphere and beyond. He could always turn off the gravity-defying motors that were attached to his lungs, but then gravity would return with sudden vengeance, plummeting him back to the planet's surface with deadly speed. Although the Great Quatroom was an invertebrate, and in no danger of breaking any bones, still the impact could fatally damage his delicate brain.

It was a risk Quatroom was unwilling to take, and instead he bargained that the passage through the upper edge of the atmosphere would be less traumatic to his gelatinous body. He might melt a little in the heat, but he could always congeal again once he had passed into the frigid atmosphere of space.

As so it was that the Great Quatroom was never seen or heard of again on his home planet, but it was no great loss, for within a few days even his friends and family had forgotten he had ever existed. – *JG*

The Secret Destination

Harry was sitting at his computer, tapping away idling, trying to find something to write about, when someone walked past the window. As usual, he jumped at this excuse for distraction, and glanced up. Ah – it was his friend, Diana. He waited for the doorbell to ring, but it did not. He frowned, and got up – maybe the doorbell had stopped working? He opened the door, all ready to yell a greeting – but no one was there.

Very peculiar, he thought. What reason would Diana have to be in this area, if she wasn't here to see him? She lived miles away – it took her two buses to get from her house to his, and she tried to get him to meet her in town whenever possible. There was only one way to find out why she was here, and low as it might be, he wouldn't let that stop him. There was a mystery here, and his nose was as twitchy as that of Ralph Dibny.

He quickly put on his shoes and coat, and let himself out. Diana was just turning the corner – was she heading in the direction of the park? – and he dashed after, running on his toes to avoid making too much noise.

He turned the corner just in time to see that she was indeed heading for the park. Perhaps this solved the mystery – maybe she was going to swim at the leisure centre – there was no reason why she would get in touch to let him know about that. For all he knew, she might have planned to drop in on the way back, or even on the way there, but found herself too short of time in the end.

But no – she didn't head towards the entrance to the leisure centre! Was she going for a jog, then? No, it wasn't that either. She continued to

stroll, not slowly, but casually, further into the park.

She was not wearing the clothes for a jog anyway, thought Harry, as he drew close enough to see. As they walked, he tried to keep a tree between them whenever possible – he did not want her to spot him, at least not yet – but finding out what she was wearing was worth the risk. Her clothes were surprisingly unseasonal – it was autumn, but she wore a flowery summer dress. It was nice, the kind of thing she wore that occasionally made him wonder if they should try being more than just friends. She must be chilly, he thought, and it wasn't long before a shiver confirmed that she was.

His frown deepened. Was she in some kind of trance – sleepwalking, or something like that? Drunk? Was she on drugs? He thought it unlikely – he had seen her drunk a hundred times, and she rarely became hazy or dozy from it – she became sharper, harder, more scathing.

Then she cut away from the path, and headed into a patch of trees. He had to follow, but he took it slow. Was she here to meet a lover, then? That would explain the dress. She might have met someone from this area, maybe when she was waiting for a bus or something. He should have stopped following her already, he knew, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. They weren't a couple, but he still didn't like the idea of her seeing someone else. It offended his vanity, that someone so close to him should have eyes for another man. (Even honest and faithful married men want the women they know to pine for them, they say, and single men even more so.)

There was someone there with her, but it was hard to tell who it was – there were too many

trees between them. Then he found a clear view. No – it was his closest male friend, Donal – and the two of them were kissing!

But only for a moment, and it was remarkably passionless. The embrace was over as soon as it began, and as they parted Henry breathed a sigh of relief. Then Donal put an object into her hands – it was too hard to tell what it was from this distance, so Henry moved closer – then they stepped away from each other, turned, raised their guns, and fired.

Harry let out a yell, as they both fell to the floor. Donal was dead even before Harry

reached him, his eyes glassy, the gun fallen from his hand.

He moved on to Diana. She, too, was seriously wounded, and blood poured from her mouth as she tried to speak. “We wanted you to find us, but we couldn’t let you try to stop us.”

“Why?” shouted Harry. “What was it for?”

“A duel,” she said, with a bitter and blood-splattering laugh. “It would only hurt you to know the details.”

Then she died, and Harry took a few minutes to cry before going home to call the police. – *SWT*

The Wizard Who Chose to Wait

Two wizards sat in their club, in their comfortable leather chairs, smoking their pipes and drinking some hot tea. Outside, on the castle walls and beyond, the battle raged. Men died, creatures died, and the night was rent with the lightning casts of a thousand petty magicians, on both sides.

“Did you summon Consolatrice tonight?” said one to the other. The one went by the name, at the moment, of Arnault. The other, at the moment, was calling himself Wynnt.

“No,” said Wynnt. “I am trying something new. Have you noticed, that when you do not summon the beast yourself, when you, instead, wait for it to come to you, then it fights better, longer, and more intensely?”

“I suppose,” replied Arnault. “But how can we wait? We need it to battle with us every night, or the castle will be lost.”

“I believe it will be worth waiting for,” said Wynnt.

The following day, the second day of waiting, when he returned to the battle, Wynnt prepared himself for the coming of Consolatrice. Mentally, he prepared himself for the communion that would follow, but he did nothing to bring the beast himself.

Later, in the club, Arnault raised an eyebrow. “Any luck? Did Consolatrice come to you?”

Wynnt shook his head. “We know that it will come from time to time – I must just be patient.”

“Are you sure the castle will survive?”

“If it comes of its own accord, and that same night, or just before, I have forced a summoning, I will not be able to take full advantage of it. I will be exhausted, and only able to go through the motions. If I wait, with the patience that is the gift of every true wizard, when it comes I

will be fully charged and ready, and will rain such destruction down upon the heads of the enemy as they could never have imagined.”

On the third day of his waiting, Consolatrice did not come again. By now he was beginning to grow angry with it. He had waited, in order to make it as perfect as possible. Did it prefer the mediocrity of a cheap and easy summoning, after all? He did not go to the club that night, but went to sleep early.

On the fourth day of his waiting, there was again no visit from the demon. He stormed into the club in a rage, and sat fuming in his usual chair.

“The battle is going badly,” observed Arnault.

Wynnt lost his temper. “I know it is, you fool. I’m doing my best, but that’s all I can.”

“Just summon it yourself, then, Wynnt. It isn’t too late to turn the tide.”

“I cannot.” Wynnt shook his head, but not in sorrow – with angry determination. “It is a matter of pride now. It will come to me because it wants to.”

On the fifth day of his waiting, he no longer took the effort to prepare himself mentally for communion. In fact, he did not even bathe or change his clothes, but took to the battle in the robe he had slept in. Consolatrice did not come to him, and now he began to doubt that it ever would. He fought as well as he could without it, and threw mighty blast after blast into the enemy, but it was not enough, and he saw the men looking at him with puzzlement and fear in their eyes.

“Where is the Consolatrice?” asked one, with desperation. “We can’t hold on any longer.”

“I’m sorry,” said Wynnt, though the tone of his voice said otherwise, “but I won’t lower myself to that level. There’s a better way to do it, don’t you see?”

“I only see my friends dying, every day.”

“Then join them,” said the wizard, flinging him off the battlements with a petulant wave of the hand. Wynnt ignored the incredulous gasps all around and went back to the club, where he drank for the rest of the day. No one would dare to punish him, he knew.

On the sixth day the desire for communion

burned so deep within him that he looked with envy on the demons summoned by his fellow wizards. None matched the Consolatrice, but if it wouldn’t come to him, it was de facto driving him away. His stomach was a pit, of flame and fury, and he had to absent himself from the battle once more, for fear of doing something stupid.

On the seventh day of his waiting, the battle was almost at an end. Most of the men lay dead or dying, and the enemy massed its forces in readiness for a final attack. At the break of dawn the senior wizards and generals gathered around Wynnt’s bed, and pressed their case even before his eyes were fully open.

“You have to summon it,” said Arnault, with urgency. “You must swallow your pride and do it, otherwise it will be the end of us all. The enemy is ready to crush us mercilessly, while you absent yourself from the fray on a point of pride!”

“Please, stop,” said Wynnt, sadly, for he had already decided to do as they asked. He went to the battlements and summoned Consolatrice. Though pressed into battle, it still fought well, and taking the enemy unawares it tore them apart. By the time it left, if the battle was not fully won, it was at least evened out again.

“Thank you,” said Arnault, clapping him on the back. “Do you feel better now?”

“Yes,” said Wynnt, and in fact he did. He was calm once again, and the fire had gone from his belly. His body relaxed, and his mind cleared. Suddenly, the fog that had obscured his thoughts whenever he had thought about demons and the like over the last week was gone, and he found the wherewithal even to smile at his friend. “I feel much better – I don’t know what got into me.”

And at that moment, he felt the communion again, and Consolatrice burst once more from the sky, this time of its own accord, and flew down to utterly destroy the enemy soldiers. The feeling of communion, though, was not as intense as it might have been, knew Wynnt, had he not already been exhausted from summoning it himself, and that left him feeling immeasurably sad, even as his work was done, the battle won. – *SWT*

Wilderness

Tom slept in fits, and waited for the dawn. When it grew light, he struggled out of his sleeping bag and unzipped the tent. Snow had fallen during the night, and he stumbled onto the scrubby grass, rubbing his aching limbs. The morning was horribly cold, but he was glad to be up, and no longer lying on a damp groundsheet on top of stony earth.

He could hear Faith snoring loudly in the tent. He looked for a moment at her freckled face, her dishevelled, dirty-blond hair wrapped around the hood of the sleeping bag. Last night she'd surprised him by climbing on top of him in the pitch darkness. They still hadn't spoken about it. She didn't wake when he zipped the tent flap back up.

The grey mountains behind him looked half finished in the mist, and the tarn was like a metallic mirror. He stomped down to the water's edge in his unlaced hiking boots, squelching across tussocks and avoiding peat bogs, to fill the kettle. Ten minutes later he was squatting on the grass, pouring tea into plastic mugs.

Her head emerged from the tent, bleary-eyed but lovely. "I think I'll have Eggs Benedict this morning," she croaked. "Christ, why is it so bloody cold up here?"

"I'd guess it's something to do with winter," said Tom, handing her a mug. "But I'm no meteorologist."

"Well, if God really did exist, you think he'd have sorted it out," she grumbled, sitting cross-legged in the tent doorway.

Tom smiled. "I think we're probably here," he said, pointing to a spot on his map. "Just to the North of the 'S' in 'Steel Fell', on this path."

"If we really are on Steel Fell," she said, half-joking. They'd discussed it the previous day on the ascent. They could well have wandered miles away from their intended route, but until they were confronted with evidence to the contrary, they had to assume they were where they thought they were.

"I reckon we should be able to get down to this village, Stonethwaite, by the end of the day, if we crack on," said Tom.

They looked at the map together, and fell silent. The distance they had covered since they ran away last night could be covered by Tom's thumbnail. Ahead of them lay a vast expanse of green and grey paper extending to the coast. Their goal was to reach the sea, and track down their contact in Whitehaven. All they had was a name. Oliver, it was rumoured, had smuggled fugitives out of the country in fishing boats to Ireland, and from there all the way to Canada, and safety. But they had no idea where Oliver could be found, or what he looked like.

"How far do you think it is?" she asked glumly.

"I don't know," he lied. He'd already calculated the distance, and it was too depressing a figure to reveal. But they had no other choice: they couldn't risk travelling by road: soon they would be sending search parties out. They had left home on Friday afternoon, just after Church, giving them two days' head start. But today it was Sunday, and in a few hours their friends and neighbours would be exchanging worried glances as two places in the pews remained stubbornly empty. The vicar would send his register to the local police station, and Constable Perry would probably be sent over on his bicycle to call in. No doubt he would expect them to be in bed with the flu or hangovers, but he would find each house locked and silent. The wheels of justice would grind slowly into motion. Tom had gone through it all a hundred times in his head. Now it was really happening.

"It's not as far as it looks," said Tom. "We've done most of the uphill yesterday. From here on it's all ridge walking."

Faith looked at the tightly packed bands of contour lines that separated them like rows of barbed wire from the yellow ribbon of sand to the west. Yesterday had been a hard slog. Neither of them had been brought up in the countryside, and they weren't used to the exercise. Tom had escaped from a Baptist community in Manchester, hoping to find anonymity and solitude in the Lake District hills. He

couldn't have been more mistaken: in Clappersgate his every move had been closely monitored by the Neighbourhood Watch. Everyone knew everyone else's business, and everyone liked it that way. Churchgoing was still obligatory, and his forged doctor's notes didn't fool the vicar.

After six months he thought he was going to go out of his mind. At least in Manchester there had been one or two freethinkers he could talk to, even if they were mostly retired university lecturers, pompous and cynical. Out here in the countryside there was nobody, or so he thought until he'd met Faith. When he met her she was working in a charity shop in Ambleside. She'd been sat behind the counter reading an old Richard Dawkins book that somebody had accidentally donated.

"You know that's illegal," Tom said. That's when he'd first seen her smile.

"Is it?" she asked, innocently. "Maybe you could hand it in to the Police Station for me."

She gave him the book with her phone number written inside the cover. They met up and formed a cell: the Cumbrian Atheists' Union. They were the only two members. It had been a bit of a laugh. Faith had a little store of banned books she kept in the back room of the charity shop, and Tom read them all avidly. They had been friends, until last night. Now he wasn't sure what they were.

"Do you think it was that bitch Karen Harper?" she asked. "You know: behind the bar at the Crown, shagging the Verger."

It was a game they'd been playing ever since Tom had found his flat broken into, and his books and papers missing. Who had betrayed them? It was a futile game, but it passed the time.

Tom shrugged. "Did she have any particular grudge against you?"

"I think she had a grudge against life itself."

"Don't they all?" he muttered, munching on a dry cracker, their breakfast for the last two days.

"Whoever it was, why the Christ did they have to do it in February?" she said, hugging herself. "Oh, it almost makes me wish we were

in Church, next to that heavenly radiator on the back row."

It reminded Tom of a quote from Bertrand Russell that he'd memorised: "Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver after the cosy indoor warmth of traditional humanizing myths, in the end the fresh air brings vigour, and the great spaces have a splendour all their own."

They could both do with a bit of cosy indoor warmth right now, he thought. Then he stood up abruptly, having come to a decision.

"Fancy a quick bath before we set out?"

For a second she didn't understand, then noticed the tarn, black and choppy.

"I don't believe you," she laughed.

Tom stripped off his jumper. Even with his t-shirt on, the cold was making the hairs on his arms stand up. "You don't have to believe anything without evidence," he smiled, pulling off the rest of his clothes. He had to do it now, he realised. The wind was stinging his legs.

Faith was laughing hysterically by the time he made his way to the tarn, wearing only his hiking boots. At the lapping edge, he kicked them off, and stepped gingerly into the water. It was shockingly cold, and he almost jumped straight back out again from pure instinct. But Tom knew what he had to do. Unless he waded straight in now, quickly, he would never accomplish what he had committed himself to.

He turned around and waved at Faith, who was sat hugging her knees outside the tent. Then, on a count of three, he strode forward. His feet scraped on the sharp limestone pebbles. The water was cruelly cold. He was hyperventilating as the water reached his groin, then he threw himself forward gulping air like a drowning fish. It was as though his blood had frozen solid and ceased to flow. Then, after swimming a few strokes, his body began to compensate for the cold. He felt that strange sense of inner warmth he had been anticipating when he'd decided to do this.

He floated on his back and beckoned to Faith. "Come on in! It's not too bad!" he shouted. She shook her head in a determined way. Tom made

some chicken noises, then cried, "It's so refreshing!"

She disappeared back into the tent for a moment. Then, to his astonishment, she emerged wearing only a beach towel and began to walk towards him.

"Close your eyes!" she called.

"Don't be daft!"

"I'm not joking!" she said, looking cross. "You're making me feel self-conscious. Close your eyes, or else I won't come in."

"Alright," he said, peeking out between half-closed eyelids.

At the water's edge, she removed and folded the towel neatly, and placed it on top of his boots. Her naked body looked impossibly white and vulnerable against the grey mountains looming over her like morose gods.

"I know I'm going to regret this!" she said, as she tiptoed across the sharp rocks.

"The trick is not to hesitate," shouted Tom, still pretending that he wasn't looking. "Just take the plunge. Take a leap of Faith."

"Ha ha, can't say I've heard that one before."

She stood there for a second shivering, then almost ran towards him, screaming and splashing.

She reached where he was swimming and pinched his arm. "You liar! It's not refreshing, it's bloody suicide!"

But her eyes were smiling, and Tom kissed her, then swam back to the shore. "I think I've had enough," he said. "I'm going to get out."

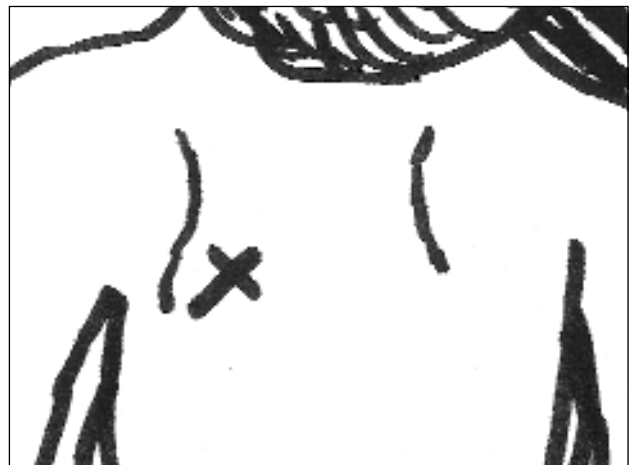
"Wait for me, I'm coming too," she said, laughing. "Don't leave me here to drown."

It felt worse once he'd got out of the water, and was in range of the wind again. He was about to make a dash for the tent, when he turned and looked at her. She was standing at the water's edge, with her back to him. She made a grab for the towel. She hurriedly wrapped it around her shoulders like a long dress, but not quick enough. Tom only saw it for a fraction of a second, but long enough for him to be sure: a black crucifix tattooed beneath her left shoulder blade.

"I've got to pee," she said. "I'm going to have to go behind those bushes."

Tom turned his face away, and walked back to the tent as calmly as he could. So that's why she had chosen to seduce him last night, on a mountain top in the total darkness. Tom struggled back into his clothes, his heart beating horribly fast. He glanced back at the tarn: she had still not emerged from the bushes. So what was her objective? To find Oliver, and eliminate him? It made sense. He felt a sickness gripping his stomach.

Shouldering his own backpack, he hoisted hers upright, and stuffed her jeans and jumper into one of the large side pockets. He surveyed the inside of the tent: her sleeping bag was still there, and he dragged it out and rolled it up any old how.



There was no time to think about it. He ran awkwardly up the slope, her rucksack bouncing painfully against his chest, her sleeping bag trailing behind him. He didn't look back to see if she'd noticed, and when he reached the path, he carried on running until it hurt to breathe and he had a stitch. A little further on, the path narrowed and began to hug the side of the mountain. To his right, the summit of Steel Fell rose above him. To his left, a steep precipice fell away to a stream, hundreds of metres below. He threw the rucksack and sleeping bag down the cliff, and carried on walking.

It was beginning to snow. He wondered how long the towel would keep her alive. He wondered what he would say to Oliver, if he ever got there. He wondered whether anyone would forgive him. – JG

The Infinity Puppets

Eugene Walter Frinkle read his obituary with evident displeasure. His copy of the latest issue of *Weird Worlds* had arrived in the post that morning, and he was now sat in bed in a dressing gown that had seen better days and more careful owners, reading what until that morning had been his favourite science-fiction magazine.

“A lesser light, and always on the periphery of the genre, Frinkle nevertheless managed to churn out over thirty novels of high-octane, low-brow space opera, as well as many hundreds of short stories, several of which have appeared within these pages.”

Frinkle dropped the magazine onto the bedspread. He could not read another word. All his plans to get started on Chapter Five of *The Infinity Puppets* were now ruined: it would take him all day, if not the rest of the week, to recover from this blow.

And the manner of death they had invented for him: “... apparently broke his neck after a fall from the roof of his house. It is believed the author was trying to recover a shoe he had inadvertently thrown up there.”

The indignity of it! He had neither thrown a shoe, nor climbed onto a roof, in his life. Was this Hardcastle’s perverse notion of a joke? E.W. Frinkle did not like the current Editor of *Weird Worlds*, and considered him unpredictable, if not mentally unbalanced. He would write Hardcastle a strongly worded letter, demanding a retraction and apology. Thrown a shoe onto the roof of his

own house! He would make Hardcastle eat his words.

A horrible thought came to mind: what if they cancelled his subscription? After several wrangles with his newsagent, Frinkle knew all too well the difficulties of buying a copy of *Weird Worlds* in the shops. Reluctantly, he manoeuvred his grey bulk out of bed, and shuffled down the hall in his slippers to the phone. Seconds later he was talking to a young lady who claimed to be called Aurora in Subscriptions.

“The database has you down as subscription cancelled due to... customer deceased,” said Aurora.

“There’s been a mistake,” said Frinkle.

“I’m sorry, Sir, but once you’ve cancelled your subscription, it is not the policy of *Weird Worlds* magazine to offer refunds.”

“I haven’t cancelled my subscription,” fumed Frinkle. “Somebody at your end must have done it, probably whoever wrote this outrageous obituary.”

“Oh obituaries, that’s not us. That’s Gary’s bag,” said Aurora with relief. “Just putting you through...”

Frinkle listened to a tinny snatch of Vivaldi while Caliope, one of his two beloved cats, gnawed uninhibitedly at his bare ankle, demanding brunch, or whatever was the appropriate meal for the time of day. Frinkle had lost track.

“Classified and Notices,” said a breezy male voice.

Frinkle took a deep breath. “Right! Here’s

the thing: you've printed an obituary of E.W. Frinkle on page 24 of the Autumn issue of *Weird Worlds*, but it's an error. I have not broken my neck, nor have I ever been foolhardy enough to go clambering on roofs in pursuit of lost shoes. I would be grateful if you could print a correction to this effect in the next issue of your magazine."

"What's that? Hang on a sec."

Frinkle could hear a rustle of paper as Gary consulted the article in question.

"No, that's all correct, I wrote that one myself."

"Correct? Do you quite realise who you are speaking to? If you did, I am sure you would quickly revise that opinion."

"Look, sir," said Gary in a weary voice. "We employ a very highly-respected team of fact checkers, and they have assured me that all these details are perfectly accurate."

Caliope had now been joined by Oeagrus, and both cats were now leaping onto the drooping telephone cord, dragging it down. "Yes, yes, my darlings, in a moment," Frinkle assured them. "Look, Gary," he said into the phone, placing a sarcastic emphasis on the name, "I am Eugene Frinkle, and I can assure you that your fact checkers have been sleeping on the job. Quite apart from the fact that I am still alive, I can barely find a single detail that's not absolute gibberish. 'His most critically-acclaimed work, *The Prosthetic Soul*' was written during his military service in Burma.' Well! I have yet to visit Burma, have never served in the army, and *The Prosthetic Soul* is definitely not among my oeuvre."

"Hmm," said Gary. "Pity. It's a good title."

"Yes, it is a good title," agreed Frinkle. "Perhaps I should write a book about it... look, why don't you just put me through to the editor?"

He heard Gary's intake of breath. "I'm afraid I can't really do that, Mr...?"

"Frinkle!" said Frinkle. "E.W. Frinkle!"

"Right, well, Mr Hardcastle's very busy at the moment and..."

Frinkle was about to remonstrate, but heard Mrs Grayling closing the front door on her way

out. "I'll call you back," he told Gary. "Don't think I've finished with you!"

The cats followed him down the hallway to the kitchen window, where he leaned out, just in time to catch the old lady before she disappeared round the corner.

"Mrs Grayling!" he called, "Mrs Grayling! Up here!"

His neighbour, dressed in a series of thick, woolen coats, and carrying a shopping basket, waved up at him.

"Are you going to be passing the Mini-Mart, by any chance?"

Mrs Grayling nodded.

"Do you think you could be a darling and pick up a couple of tins of Gourmet Tabby for me? Any flavour will do, apart from liver. They simply can't abide liver. You'd be doing me such a favour. I'll square the money as soon as you get back, of course."

Mrs Grayling nodded again a little wearily, and waved goodbye, then tramped off through the melting slush. Frinkle rarely bought the cat food himself, as it proved so much more convenient for Mrs Grayling, who enjoyed shopping so much more than he did, to get it for him. Now he thought about it, he probably owed her for the last batch she'd bought him, and maybe even the time before that too. He reached up to the top shelf in the kitchen and took down a coffee tin, from which he shook out some coins onto the table. Frinkle made some rough calculations and pursed his lips. It looked like he would have to go to the bank again soon. He hated going, but Mrs Grayling refused to assist him on that score.

It meant going outside. Maybe tomorrow he could manage it. Once he'd got this stupid business sorted out with Hardcastle. He had Hardcastle's direct phone number written down somewhere. It was never listed in the pages of *Weird Worlds*, but he'd engaged in some correspondence with the editor about one of his submissions a few years ago.

Half an hour of digging through his files produced the number he was looking for. He stomped back down to the phone, with Caliope now attached to his dressing gown cord, whining piteously.

“Yes?” That was how Hardcastle answered his phone.

“Hardcastle?” said Frinkle, in a hard, business-like way. “Frinkle here. Look, we’ve got a problem.”

“Frinkle?” said the editor wryly. “I thought I might hear from you before too long. I’ve just been chatting to Gary. How’s the afterlife?”

“Don’t be facetious!” said Frinkle.

“Why not?”

“Because there is a serious principle at stake here.”

“All the more reason not to take it too seriously,” said Hardcastle.

“Look, sir,” barked Frinkle, gently trying to kick the two starving cats away from the telephone cord. “Perhaps you find all this very amusing, and if you intend to turn one of our most respected science-fiction journals into some kind of sophomore dadaist manifesto of paradoxes, well that’s your business. I doubt the readers of *Weird Worlds* will stand for it, but that’s not my problem. What I do object to, and object most strongly, is the defamation of my character, the mockery of my person, and the trashing of my literary reputation in this spiteful and totally unbalanced obituary.”

“You’d rather we printed a more complimentary obituary?” asked Hardcastle.



“Of course not! I demand that you withdraw the obituary entirely!”

“Why? What have you got to lose?”

Frinkle paused. “What?”

“Well, now that you’re dead, your sales are bound to go up. Somebody might even want to reprint some of your better known work, *The Prosthetic Soul* and so on...”

“I’ll have to write it first,” said Frinkle.

“Well these are all just details,” said Hardcastle. “The fact is that your critical reputation is bound to improve *post mortem*.”

“Well if it does it’ll be no thanks to the hatchet job you’ve printed here!”

“That’s Gary’s handiwork actually,” said Hardcastle. “Don’t take it personally. His tastes are very modern. He’s very hard to please.”

“But what about all these mistakes?” demanded Frinkle. “Born on a Cross-Channel ferry? Where did he get that one from?”

“From one of these online news agencies,” explained the editor. “They let us know when anyone noteworthy has just died, and provide us with a barebones biography and the details of how they died. They’re incredibly efficient, you know. They find out about kicked buckets before the bucket knows it’s been kicked. In all my time as editor, this is the first time they’ve slipped up.”

“I’d call it more than a slip-up.”

“Relax, Eugene,” said Hardcastle, sounding very relaxed himself. “They’ve probably got you mixed up with W.E. Fankler, or somebody like that. I’ll make some calls.”

“Can’t you just print a correction?” asked Frinkle, who had the familiar feeling of being gently bamboozled.

“Well strictly speaking, it’s not *Weird Worlds* policy to print corrections,” said the editor. “Just think of this as a new career direction. You might enjoy it. Being a dead author has a lot of advantages. No taxes for one thing.”

“But no royalty cheques either,” pointed out Frinkle.

“Those would be paid to your estate – I’m sure your solicitor can sort all that legal stuff out.”

“I’m not sure,” said Frinkle. “How could I get

new work published if everyone believed I was dead?"

"Oh, there are always manuscripts discovered in attics."

"No, it's too risky," muttered Frinkle. "What if I were found out?"

You remember G.G. Routledge?" asked the editor. "Wrote that book, *The Neo-necronomicon*?"

"Of course!" said Frinkle. "A great loss to science-fiction."

"He's moved into a static caravan in Devon," said Hardcastle. "*Dark Matter Press* are publishing a 'best of' next year to mark the tenth anniversary of his death. He must be raking it in."

"Are you sure?" asked Frinkle.

"Well, it depends who you ask. One encyclopaedia says one thing, one website says something else. I think that's the way Routledge likes it – keeps people guessing. Stimulates interest, you know? There are a dozen others I could name playing the same trick. Why not join them? It can't do your career any harm."

Frinkle sucked his teeth. "I'm really not sure about this."

Sleep on it," said Hardcastle confidently. "I'm sure you'll come around. Keep in touch."

"Yes, of course," said Frinkle.

"I'll keep the ouija board set up for you."

Frinkle said nothing, but put the phone down, extracted his two cats from the tangle of phone wire, and carried them both, struggling and mewling in each of his fleshy hands, into the kitchen, where he peered out of the open window.

He was just in time. There was Mrs Grayling rounding the corner now. He waved a cat aloft to catch her attention, and she looked up and nodded twice. This meant, Frinkle understood, that she had managed to get the cat food, and had also managed to avoid liver. Frinkle smiled in relief and kissed Caliope on the scruff of her neck.

Mrs Grayling was used to the system that Frinkle had rigged up for the delivery of his morning milk. A plastic bucket, suspended from the flagpole outside his kitchen window by a

long piece of string, was lowered to the ground. From the bucket, Mrs Grayling retrieved part-payment for the cat food, along with a note from Frinkle promising the remainder in a few days. She then deposited the two small sachets of cat food in the bucket, and Frinkle began to wind up the string onto a bobbin originally designed for a child's kite.

As the bucket neared the open window, the two cats began to mew with desperate anticipation. Frinkle reached out to grab the bucket but wasn't quick enough. A grey squirrel had appeared from nowhere, and scampered across the roof tiles, hesitated for a split-second before snatching one of the sachets in its tiny jaws and leaping away out of reach.

"Come back here!" yelled Frinkle. "You glorified rat! Give that back!"

The squirrel sat calmly watching him, holding the packet of cat food in its nimble paws and nibbling the plastic wrapper. Frinkle watched in despair. Behind him, the cats were hysterical. Oeagrus had dragged off one of Frinkle's slippers, and was clawing at it. Frinkle reached down, and, after a brief struggle, retrieved the slipper. He looked out of the window. The squirrel was still looking at him insolently.

"I'll wring your bloody neck!" he shouted, before he noticed that Mrs Grayling was still standing in the back yard, watching with interest.

"It's a squirrel," Frinkle shouted down to her. "A squirrel has stolen the cat food."

Mrs Grayling could not hear him, but the squirrel did, and scampered a few feet away. Afraid that the thief was about to flee the scene for good, Frinkle threw the slipper at him. It missed, and the squirrel hopped out of range.

"What a disaster," muttered Frinkle. Still, at least he had one packet of cat food – Calista and Oeagrus would have to share for once. The slipper was still sitting there on the roof tiles. Frinkle leaned out, and strained, but his fat arms could not reach. Grunting with the effort, he climbed up onto the kitchen work surface on his hands and knees, and began to crawl forward through the open window. – JG

Glass

Professor Ong was still bent over her monitor, studying the readouts from the first and, as it turned out, last experiment to be conducted using the International Linear Collider, when Treslow arrived with what looked like a small army of armed police officers in black combat suits.

“Come on Sandra, we’ve got to get out while we can,” said Treslow in an unnaturally calm voice, his grey face taut and immobile. “They’re calling for our heads out there.”

“Right, coming,” she said, and slipped a memory stick into her pocket before powering down the computer. She walked briskly out into the corridor with Treslow, their bodyguard keeping step in front and behind them. All the other staff had been evacuated hours ago, and the place was strangely empty, but far from quiet. She could hear angry voices chanting, but couldn’t make out the words. Perhaps that was for the best.

“They sound like they’re right outside the front door,” she joked to her colleague.

Treslow didn’t smile. “They are,” he said. “They broke through the perimeter fence. There must be thousands of them.”

A shudder of animal fear went through Professor Ong. So this is what it felt like to be hunted down, trapped in a corner. But she was determined to survive this, if only for the chance to prove them wrong.

A police officer turned to the two scientists

and said, “There’s a car outside. We’ve got it as close to the front door as possible, but it could be a bit hairy. It’ll be over in a few seconds.”

“Right, good, thanks,” said Treslow, far from reassured.

As they neared the fire exit, the noise of the crowd grew louder. It was impossible to ignore. Sandra took a deep breath. There was an intolerable delay while the guards consulted with their colleagues on the other side via radio. Then the fire door swung open, and Sandra was hustled down a narrow corridor of pavement between two lines of helmeted police officers to the open door of a black car. Behind the cordon, a thousand furious human faces yelled hoarse abuse at her. She caught sight of one or two of the placards: “Man was not meant to meddle in the Works of the Lord”, “The End is Nigh for the Godless”, and of course, “Shut down the evil International Linear Collider”.

The car began to move slowly through the furious mass of people, who banged on the windows and doors with their fists and placards. Sandra closed her eyes and tried to shut it all out. Freeman was already there in the passenger seat, smiling as though they were on a drive in the country. He turned round to face the two scientists on the back seat.

“You should be pleased,” he said. “Most science experiments don’t cause this much of a stir. Then again, most science experiments don’t kill people.”

"We didn't kill anybody," shouted Treslow, leaning forward.

Freeman's smile vanished. "Well, try telling those people back there," he said. "There's twenty two thousand deaths to account for, and the President's putting the squeeze on me to come up with some names. If it's not going to be yours, you'd better start explaining a few things."

"We can't come up with a solution just like that," said Professor Ong. "This is science, not politics. It may take years to understand."

Freeman shook his head. "Wrong, this is politics. Whenever somebody dies, that's politics. Somebody's got to take the blame. We need to figure out who."

"How long have we got?" asked Treslow.

"I can give you about 48 hours," said Freeman.

"Okay."

"James!" cried Ong. "Don't play along with this! It's madness!"

Treslow was wearing a strange expression she didn't recognise, cold and distant. "We don't have any choice," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Mr Freeman is right. There are a lot of grieving people out there who are entitled to some answers. They pay our salaries after all."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," said Sandra, turning away to look out of the window. The car had left the compound and the crowds behind now and was heading up the ramp onto the freeway. Half an hour later they dropped her off outside her hotel.

"What if somebody recognises me?" she asked Freeman, as she climbed out of the passenger door.

"We've got some of our people here," said Freeman. "You won't see them, but they'll be watching you. You're quite safe here. No need to go running off anywhere."

Sandra went straight up to her room, took a long shower, and tried to eat. Then, after putting it off for over an hour, she turned on the TV news. She didn't have to look hard – there was live coverage on almost every channel. She watched an aerial shot from a news helicopter: the broken fence around the compound, the

crowds of demonstrators pouring through, riot police moving forward in an undulating black line to repel them.

"Some commentators are saying it's the end of the world," said the newsreader in her jaunty tone. "They claim that the new high-powered particle accelerator has invoked God's wrath, and that he is punishing humanity for meddling with the laws of nature. Others claim that the device, unveiled last month to search for evidence of the Higgs-Boson Particle, has inadvertently created miniature black holes. These black holes are being blamed for the unexplained deaths of just under 22,000 residents living within a 16 mile radius of the machine."

They're both wrong, thought Sandra, but she had no way of proving it. There was no doubt in her mind that the deaths were linked to the first test-run. The timing was too close to be a coincidence. But there was no known mechanism linking the two phenomena. And it wasn't as if all the victims had died of the same physical causes: some had suffered heart failures, some had succumbed to cancers they had been fighting against for months or years. Some of them walked in front of cars, or committed suicide. Taken separately, each death was easily explained, even predictable. But they had all taken place simultaneously. Over 10% of the city's population had been lost within the space of a minute. It was absurd. No wonder some people turned to absurd explanations.

Sandra opened her laptop and began to study the figures again, all the data the machine had managed to produce before they were forced to shut it down as news of the tragedy reached them. She'd been over them a dozen times before, and as before, it all looked perfectly normal. Professor Ong had been working on particle accelerators for 15 years, and knew them inside out. What was so special about this one? She knew that Treslow would be doing much the same in his hotel room on the other side of town. But something about his tone of voice back in the car had worried her. Was he thinking about the scientific explanation, or plotting how he could pin the blame on Sandra, while emerging unscathed himself.

No, that couldn't be it, Sandra thought. That was paranoia. She and Treslow had worked together on this project for the last five years. She told herself that she could trust him, had always trusted him, but it didn't work. Things were different now. It was impossible to predict how people would behave. She turned back to the computer. At least she knew where she was with the figures.

After an hour of painful concentration, Sandra turned from the glare of the laptop screen and realised she had the beginnings of a migraine. She stood up, fished inside her briefcase for a tube of pills, then went to the sink to fill a glass of water. As she stood at the window, swallowing her pills, she gazed out onto the floodlit lawn in the courtyard outside. It had just stopped raining, and birds were stalking across the grass, dragging worms out of the ground. A crow took off, flapping heavily, heading straight for her. Surely not, thought Sandra. The black shape grew, and there was a loud bang as the bird sprawled on the window, inches away from Sandra's face, black feather splayed, black beak and claws scratching against the glass. The window pane vibrated. Then, in an instant, the crow recovered, flapped frantically once or twice, and swooped away, over the trees, gone.

Professor Ong stood there for a long moment, staring at the strange ghostly grey crow-shaped print on the window. Then she unfolded her phone and called Treslow.

"Any progress?" he said straight away. From his tone of voice, Sandra could guess that he wasn't getting anywhere either.

"No," she said. "But I've had a thought."

"Oh? A thought?" said Treslow with a touch of sarcasm.

"Yes," said Sandra, "Why do birds fly into windows?"

"What?"

"Just hear me out, okay? Why do birds fly into glass windows?"

"Because they don't know the glass is there?" said Treslow slowly.

"Right," said Sandra. "There's an invisible barrier which they don't expect and can't be expected to predict. Suddenly the air becomes

solid, for no discernable reason. And they do it again and again, smashing into the glass, sometimes injuring themselves. They just can't understand what's wrong."

"So... where are you going with this?" asked her colleague.

"What if we've just hit a pane of glass?" she asked.

"Look, Sandra, we're both very tired," Treslow said. "And I've got to speak to..."

"Listen!" insisted Professor Ong. "What if there was a barrier, one that humans couldn't perceive or make any sense out of, an obstacle deliberately designed so we couldn't perceive it, a barrier that our theories wouldn't predict and that our experiments couldn't verify?"

"You mean some kind of upper limit to particle velocity?" asked Treslow.

"Not really," said Sandra, not knowing what she did mean exactly. "I mean a wall, an artificial construct, buried in the laws of physics."

"A wall? To stop us finding the Higgs-Boson?" asked Treslow. "But why?"

"To protect us?" suggested Sandra. "Or to protect them?"

"Them? Who? God? Are you saying those idiots with the placards are right? Who is this 'them'?"

"No! I don't know! Whoever built the wall." It was the only answer she could come up with.

"So that's your explanation for 22,000 deaths?" said Treslow, bristling with indignation. "Some unknown intelligence has built a wall around certain fundamental particles, and these poor dead people just happened to bump into it? Is that what we tell Freeman?"

"I don't know," she said, staring at the crow-print on the pane of glass. "I'm just throwing ideas around. Forget I said it."

"I think I will," said Treslow. "Get some sleep, Sandra. You sound like you need it."

"Yeah. Speak to you later." She hung up the phone, but didn't move. She was wondering how many millennia it would take for crows to manufacture glass cutters. – JG

The Lodger

When Mrs Cramphorn died, I attained the dubious honour of becoming the most longstanding resident of Larch House. Miss Fotheringill, our landlady, met the grieving relatives and disposed humanely of Tommy Tiggles, Mrs Cramphorn's cat, before announcing to the surviving guests at breakfast, not two months after the old lady's departure, that a new lodger had already been found, and would be moving in the following Saturday. Miss Fotheringill is an exceedingly efficient woman, but she has a tendency to be a trifle stingy with the condiments, as I noted that morning while trying to excavate the last few shreds of marmalade from the jar for my single slice of toast.

The announcement made, Miss Fotheringill left the room to supervise the cleaning lady, and Bates, my next-door neighbour for the last three years, remarked, "Jolly efficient woman, that."

I murmured my agreement, but indicated with a nod to the empty marmalade jar that efficiency could be taken a step too far. It being a subject that Bates and I had discussed privately on numerous occasions, he understood my meaning perfectly.

There have been other lodgers in my time at Larch House. Some, like Bates, after a brief period of adjustment, and the mutual rubbing away of sharp corners, have fitted in and found their place in the congenial little community maintained by our landlady. Others, and it

saddens me to say that this latter group forms a distinct majority, have not. I could not count the number of short-term residents who have come and gone since I first set up base in Room Six, but this was the first time that one of our number had departed not merely Larch House, but also this mortal coil.

The new lodger introduced himself to me as Mr Gerund. That was my first clue. The second was that he wore his hat backwards. Mrs Fotheringill gave him Room Five, directly above mine, and the room that had seen the most heavy turnover in the last few years, to the extent that Bates and I were in the frivolous habit of referring to all short-term guests of Larch House as Fivers, whether they occupied that particular room or not.

On the day he moved in, I allowed him a decent interval to get himself settled, remembering my own first day, and the uneasy feelings that accompany any change of residence. After a couple of hours, I wandered upstairs, holding a packet of cigarillos in one hand and a fifth of bourbon in the other, intent on showing the fellow that not all his neighbours were as frosty or snobbish as Mrs and Miss Prestwich on the top floor.

The door to Room Five was ajar: I knocked, then entered gingerly. Mr Gerund stood in the dead centre of the room, still holding his suitcase, as though in a trance, his hat jammed backwards onto his small, bald head. He turned

around when I coughed, and smiled at me. He looked normal enough, like a door-to-door salesman in his cheap and slightly flashy suit. His smile seemed genuine, though, and his features were crowded together in the centre of his fleshy, oval face.

"Settling in alright?" I said, and offered him a smoke. He looked at the proffered box strangely, then took a cigar and examined the label minutely, before placing the item carefully on the pillow of his newly made bed.

"Bit strange at first, isn't it?" I said. "But you'll soon settle in. We're a pretty straightforward bunch here, you know. Apart from that Bates fellow in Room Four. You want to watch him. He'll slit your throat if you're not careful." I grinned.

Gerund paled. "He wants to slit my throat?" he asked, horrified.

"Just joshing you!" I cried. "Bates and I, we love having a bit of a joke. Don't worry, we're quite harmless!"

The new man smiled his relief, and I produced the bourbon from behind my back. "Toast to your new abode?" I asked. "Got any glasses?"

"Yes," he said, removing the heavy black spectacles from the bridge of his nose.

"I mean, for the whisky. Unless you want to drink out of the bottle," I said.

"Ah yes," said Gerund. "Glasses. A homonym."

"Indeed," I said. "Try the bedside cabinet. So, I see you're an educated man. What line of work are you in, if you don't mind me asking?"

Gerund found a couple of dusty shot glasses exactly where I thought they'd be, and he set them down on the top of the cabinet, then sat down on the bed, still wearing his overcoat, while I pulled up one of Mrs Fotheringill's extra-hard hard chairs.

"No, I don't mind you asking at all," said Gerund. "I'm a researcher."

"Oh, a college man, eh?" I said, pouring him a generous shot. "I do a little bit of teaching myself, but I imagine it's small potatoes in comparison."

Mr Gerund looked at me blankly. I poured myself a shot, and offered a toast. "To your new

life at Larch House!" I said. "May it be everything you imagined, and nothing you feared!"

We clinked glasses, and I knocked it back. Mr Gerund hesitated for a second, and I feared he might be about to carefully place the brimming glass down on the bedspread next to the cigarillo, but he followed my example.

"You said something about small potatoes?" he said. "You are fond of them?"

"What? Oh, yes, I'm a private tutor, for my sins," I explained. "I teach mainly the overindulged boys of fretful mothers. Try to get them up to speed on their French and Latin, you know, coaching for university entrance." I shrugged. "It pays the rent, and for a few necessities like this." I held up the bottle and began to pour us both another drink.

Mr Gerund looked as though he had suddenly had a good idea. There was a glimmer in his eyes, but maybe he just wasn't used to the drink.

"You are a teacher!" he said.

I sipped. "In a manner of speaking."

"Could you teach me?"

I frowned. "Well, I doubt there's much that I could teach a university chap like yourself."

The new man looked downcast, so I said, "What kind of research are you involved in anyway?"

Immediately he brought out a neatly typed list from his breast pocket, and handed it over. "I need help in learning about these subjects," he said eagerly.

I fished my reading glasses out and scanned down the list.

WORLD HISTORY
UNITED STATES HISTORY
HUMAN CULTURES
EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION
UNITED STATES
GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS
GEOGRAPHY OF THE
EASTERN SEABOARD
DEFENCE POLICIES OF THE
UNITED STATES
MILITARY INSTALLATIONS OF
THE UNITED STATES

I looked up. Gerund was still smiling at me. Had

Bates set me up?

"That's quite a curriculum you've set yourself," I commented. "Have you tried the university library? Or even the public one? They might be able to help. I mean, I'd be more than willing to help you out wherever I can, but I can't claim any expertise on these subjects."

"The library!" said Mr Gerund, delighted with the suggestion. I had to ask myself what kind of researcher he could be. It was well known that Mrs Fotheringill was not the best judge of character, but I wondered whether this time she might have landed herself with a genuine charlatan.

That evening at supper, Mr Gerund showed himself in a very different light, and entertained his fellow lodgers with several very witty anecdotes and aphorisms on all manner of subjects. His sense of humour was not to the taste of all guests: Mrs and Miss Prestwich clearly considered some of his comments impertinent, if not ungentlemanly. But Bates and I could not stifle our laughter when the new lodger, as he piled his plate with a third helping of mashed potatoes, commented, "How wondrous it must have been for those living in the time of Sir Walter Raleigh, to be the first generation of Englishmen to taste a potato! It must have seemed an ambrosia, after all those swedes and turnips!"

"I'm glad you like them," said Miss Fotheringill. "They've come straight out my vegetable plot this morning."

"Swedes and turnips have a very important part to play in the diet," said Mrs Prestwich, whose digestive system required constant monitoring by a small team of specialists. "They are less starchy than the potato, for one thing."

"And don't you know the old story about Raleigh and the potatoes?" asked Bates. "Apparently, Raleigh thought it such an excel-

lent vegetable, and so cheap to produce, that he tried to give bags of spuds away to the local peasantry, but they didn't like the look of them, and chucked them away untasted. So instead, Raleigh tells his men to plant a field full of potatoes, but to keep it guarded day and night, and arrest anybody who tries to steal even a single tuber. Of course, rumours of this valuable delicacy leak out, and before you know it, potatoes are being poached from under the noses of Raleigh's guards, and enjoyed by one and all." Bates scratched his head with the tines of his fork, a dreadful habit that ensures he will never gain the favours of the lovely Miss Prestwich. "At least I think it was Raleigh," he said. "It may have been Queen Elizabeth, or her dad, Henry the Eighth..."

As always with Bates's anecdotes, the story trailed away into silence and uncertainty. Mr Gerund was the next to chime in. "I believe we can verify these facts at the public library, which I visited today. An excellent institution. I shall be returning there tomorrow, and will make enquiries on your behalf," he told Bates.

Bates was rather taken aback. "Don't go to any trouble," he said, raising his eyebrows for my benefit. I shrugged back at him, while Mr Gerund proceeded to bore the Prestwiches about the treasure trove of information he had already obtained that afternoon from the Encyclopaedia Britannica in the Reference Section.

Bates and I broke the bad news to Miss Fotheringill the next morning: her new tenant had absconded after only a day – a new record for Larch House. There was some consolation for our landlady: Gerund had paid a month's rent in advance, and the same as a deposit on the room, which he now forfeited. But that would hardly cover the cost of the damage to Miss Fotheringill's back garden. Bates and I tried to persuade her not to go outside, but she insisted on seeing for herself. Strangely enough, despite the devastation, only the potato plants had been taken. The runner beans, carrots and the rest were untouched. But the shed was beyond repair, a blackened ruin at the bottom of the smouldering crater that stood where Miss Fotheringill's rockery should have been. – *JG*



A Mistake At the Fancy Dress Shop

Just before lunchtime, if anyone had been watching, they might have seen a particularly tall man with unusually short legs crossing the road rather badly, at the junction of Regents Road and Porter Street. As a taxi braked hard to avoid running him over, the man waved discreetly to a cleaner pushing a rubbish cart on the other side of the road. The cleaner, wearing a fluorescent yellow jacket, returned the wave, although the two had never met before. The rubbish cart disappeared around the corner, and the peculiarly tall man pushed open the door of Crazy Mick's Fancy Dress and Costumery.

At the counter, against a backdrop of superhero capes, French maid outfits and gorilla suits on clothes hangers, the shopkeeper watched the customer enter. The tall man was oddly dressed, wearing a long, flapping black trench coat over a pair of voluminous blue denim dungarees that did not reach all the way to his ankles. A tie-dyed shirt depicting dolphins capped off the ensemble. The shopkeeper showed no surprise. He was never surprised.

The tall man waved and smiled briefly as he approached the counter.

"Can I help?" asked the shopkeeper.

"I've got a complaint," said the tall man.

The shopkeeper's face remained immobile. "Oh? What seems to be the trouble?"

"This one you've given me – it doesn't fit properly."

"Well, you've only been wearing it a few days," said the shopkeeper. "It will stretch with time."

"That's not all. I think you've given me an incomplete set. Some of it doesn't match." The tall man dragged up the sleeve of his black trench coat and showed the shopkeeper his wrist. "That can't be right, can it?"

The shopkeeper looked, then raised his eyebrows. He rubbed his chin. "Yes, there seems to be a problem there."

The tall man's hand was the pink of an unripe peach, but at a ragged line on his wrist, the skin changed colour abruptly, and from there on up his arm was pale olive.

The shopkeeper pressed a button on the underside of the counter, and the door of Crazy Mick's locked itself with a soft click. "Are you sure you haven't damaged it?"

The tall man was indignant. "Damaged it? What do I look like? An amateur? I've been doing this for ten years, you know!"

"Alright, alright, let me take a look," said the shopkeeper, pulling a compact black instrument from his pocket and attaching it to his eye socket.

"Do you want me to take it off?" said the tall man.

"No, no, not in public," fussed the shopkeeper. "Just keep still." He bent over the wrist, and examined the join minutely, making thoughtful noises. The tall man sighed, and checked the watch on his other wrist.

Eventually, the shopkeeper straightened up. "Yep, you've got a mismatch."

"I could have told you that."

"The hand's Caucasian, but the rest of you is East Asian. Are you sure you haven't got the right hand but the wrong body?"

"Of course not!" snapped the tall man. "My name's Zhang Zimou. Look!" The tall man fished a wallet from the pocket of his trench coat and flipped it open to reveal a driving license.

"Just checking," said the shopkeeper. "Which means that somewhere..."

"...there's somebody walking about with my hand!" exclaimed the tall man.

The two of them exchanged a look of panic. "I'll check the books," said the shopkeeper, turning to a heavy, leather-bound ledger. He traced his forefinger down a list of names and figures. "You've got body number 476/B-91, but we've given you the left hand for 476/91-B. Currently in the possession of one I. Pritchard."

"Ivy Pritchard?" said the tall man, smiling with relief.

"Know her?"

"Oh yes, me and Ivy go way back," said the tall man. "We trained together, back home. We were actually part of the first wave, if you can believe that, on Landmass 4."

"Landmass 4?" said the shopkeeper. "You mean Australia?"

"Yes, that's the one. I'm terrible with names," said the tall man. "Well, what a coincidence! Ivy Pritchard walking off with my hand, the minx! How come she needed a new outfit? She's been old Mrs Pritchard for as long as I remember."

The shopkeeper, relaxed now, consulted his ledger again. "It says here accidental damage. Oh, I remember this one now. Rodney dealt with it. A dog bit off her old one."

"That's a shame," said the tall man.

"Yes," said the shopkeeper. "Apparently she mistook it for a child, tried to pick it up."

The tall man shook his head and chuckled. "She was always doing things like that when I knew her! Good old Ivy!"

"So I'm assuming you two can sort this out between yourselves?" said the shopkeeper. "She only lives a couple of miles from here."

The tall man smiled. "Oh yes, it'll be good to catch up with him."

"Her," corrected the shopkeeper.

"Yes, of course. Lucky this happened really. I had no idea Ivy had been posted to this landmass. HQ keeping things close to their chest as usual."

"I think there's a lot of folk being relocated here at the moment," said the shopkeeper, as he scribbled down the address on the back of one of

his business cards. "What with Stage Two coming up in a few months. Business is booming here, I can tell you. Me and Rodney can hardly keep up with the orders. He's down at the hospital as we speak, trying to acquire more stock."

"Still got that part-time job at the mortuary then?" asked the tall man.

"Oh yes, that's been a godsend," said the shopkeeper. "Otherwise I don't know how we'd have managed."

The tall man was getting ready to go, but turned back as a thought occurred to him. "That reminds me," he said, removing his baseball cap. "You couldn't do anything about this, could you?" He bowed low and showed the shopkeeper the bald spot on top of his head. "I keep losing bits of it."

"Entirely normal," the shopkeeper reassured him. "Nothing to worry about. It looks more authentic that way."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, a lot of them get that after a few years. The XY ones, at any rate."

The tall man shrugged and took the business card from the shopkeeper's outstretched hand. "Well, I suppose I'll be pushing along to Ivy's place then. I'll probably see you again before Stage Two kicks off in earnest."

"No doubt you will," said the shopkeeper.

The tall man smiled dreamily. "I can hardly wait. For Stage Three, I mean. I'm absolutely ravenous."

"Tell me about it," said the shopkeeper. "We all are. Anyway, give my apologies to Ivy, when you see her."

"I will," said the tall man, already at the door. He pushed the door open, and a little brass bell on a spring rang out.

"Sorry?" said the tall man. "Did you say something?"

"No," said the shopkeeper. "That was the bell."

"Righty-oh."

The tall man emerged into the noon sunshine and walked briskly back across the road, narrowly avoiding the bus which was beeping its horn angrily at him. — JG

I Remember Nothing

It is a truism, but a notable one nonetheless, that it is impossible to catch oneself in the act of forgetting something. This thought flashed through the King's mind as he sat down one morning to breakfast at his favourite table, with his favourite view of the river, which doodled a long, crazy loop through the blue meadows, and of the vaporous, lilac mountains beyond.

The Chancellor entered, with the morning's paper rolled up inside a large piece of conical coral.

"It is impossible to catch oneself in the act of forgetting something," the King said to him. He was so pleased with the notion, that he immediately began to write it down in his book of aphorisms.

"What is it that you have forgotten, Your Highness?" asked the Chancellor with exaggerated concern, tugging at his prosthetic forelock.

The King, who was trying to concentrate on the best wording for his new nugget of wisdom, merely tutted and waved his hand impatiently.

"I wonder whether Your Highness has had a chance to peruse the morning papers yet?" said the Chancellor, crossing the famous crystalline carpet of the South Breakfast Room on silent slippers, and holding the coral receptacle in his outstretched arms.

The King snapped his notebook shut and sighed. "Well, considering that you are holding my copy of today's newspaper in your hand, I think your question rather fatuous, don't you think?"

"As you wish, Your Highness," bowed the Chancellor. "However, I would draw your attention to a certain advertisement published on page 27."

The King grabbed the still-warm newspaper and began to leaf through it. "Why? Not another political diatribe against me, I hope. I don't want to go through all that hanging business again."

"No, Your Highness, it is something of a very

different nature, but still, I think, requiring your attention. There, at the bottom." He leaned over the monarch's shoulder and pointed to a small box filled with tiny type, squeezed in between an advertisement for Liver Powder, and one for Hypnotising Dust Mites.

"I haven't got my glasses," said the King, patting his pockets uselessly. "Read it out for me."

"A gentleman who goes by the name of Mr Eustace Anstruthers, claims to have no memory at all. I paraphrase of course. He invites any curious parties to interview him on any subject, for a small fee, and promises that he will be unable to recall a single event ever having taken place during his lifetime."

"Well that's clearly nonsense!" snorted the King. "He managed to remember to place this advert in the paper, didn't he?"

"A very salient objection, Your Highness," commented the Chancellor. "Although it is feasible that a relative or other mentor assisted him in this endeavour. In any case, this case certainly falls under the category of Extracting Goods and Money Based on False or Unprovable Premises. I think Your Highness would be very wise in summoning him to the Palace and testing his claims."

"Yes, that's an excellent idea. Get the chap to come along this afternoon. I haven't got any appointments, have I?"

"None that cannot be rearranged."

So that afternoon, Eustace Anstruthers was arrested by the City Guard and brought to the palace cells, which were slightly larger and slightly cleaner than the regular guardhouse cells, although the food, paradoxically, was worse.

The King made his visit to Anstruthers' cell accompanied by the Chancellor and a squadron of his elite personal bodyguards. He wore a protective suit of padded leather underneath his royal robes as an added precaution.

Anstruthers was the only occupant of the palace cells, apart from the gaoler, who was blind and lame and a drunkard to boot. Once the bodyguards had shaken him awake, he spent several minutes locating the keys, then led the royal party down a draughty stone corridor to where the Memoryless Man, as he had been advertised, was incarcerated.

The King observed him through the metal bars. Anstruthers was a small, well-fed, cheerful looking man, with thinning hair and a red nose. He was sitting on his plank bed, examining his chubby fingers with minute attention. The King coughed, and Anstruthers looked up with trusting eyes.

"You have been brought here," said the King, "Because of outrageous claims made on your behalf in a certain newspaper advertisement. I take it that you yourself are responsible for these absurd declarations."

"Am I?" asked Anstruthers, smiling at nothing much.

The King was disappointed. He had hoped to call the man's bluff in that way. He tried again.

"You are Eustace Anstruthers, are you not?"

"That's what I've been told."

"Ah hah!" said the King, glancing at his Chancellor with a look of minor triumph. "So you remember somebody telling you your name!"

"You just told me it a second ago, I think," said Anstruthers. "Now what is it? Anthony Euston? But is that my name or yours?" He looked faintly puzzled, then shook his head with a weary smile, as if to indicate that such matters were hardly worth bothering about.

"That name belongs to neither of us!" said the King, feeling that this charlatan was playing an elaborate trick on him.

"Good, that's that settled then," said Anstruthers, swinging his short legs over the plank bench.

"Ask him if he is the Famous Memoryless Man," suggested the Chancellor, pointing to the advert in the newspaper.

"That's no use," snapped the King. "Whatever we ask him, he can very easily deny all knowledge. We need a more subtle method."

The King and the Chancellor, and indeed all the bodyguards too, stood in silence for a minute, thinking hard of a way to catch Anstruthers out, to prove that he did remember at least something.

"Anstruthers!" shouted the King suddenly.

The little man looked up. "What?"

"Ah! I have you now! So you can remember your own name!"

"No," said Anstruthers. "I was merely asking you to repeat what you said, as I didn't understand it the first time. Did you say, 'Ants to others'?"

"No, I did not," said the King. "Do you think it likely that I would spout such inanities?"

"I can't remember you ever having spouted them before," said Anstruthers, "so I would say probably not."

The King stamped his foot and cracked his knuckles. "I will return," he said, wagging an angry finger at the prisoner. Then he turned on his heel and marched back down the draughty corridor, out of the palace cells, and went straight to the palace library, where he hoped to find a foolproof method of disproving Anstruthers' forgetfulness. He thought long and hard about the question, and spent many days and nights marching back and forth between the library and the cells, putting new questions to the Memoryless Man. But he never seemed to get any closer to catching Anstruthers out. Anstruthers was unperturbed by these regular interrogations, and quite enjoyed the King's visits, which proved a welcome distraction from the tedium of life behind bars.

Meanwhile, the job of running the Kingdom was largely delegated to the Chancellor, who used the opportunity to manoeuvre himself into a position of unassailable power. Within a few weeks, he had won the overwhelming backing of the King's Advisors, and with their support, ousted the King, and was crowned the following year. His protégé, Eustace Anstruthers, along with the advertisement the Chancellor had placed in the daily newspaper, were both soon forgotten by its readership, although nobody could recall forgetting about them. – JG

The Rubber Plant

They had been on the station for three months now, and relationships between them were becoming strained. The tension was different in each case, though. The way in which Yuri, the Russian astronaut, fell out with Peters, the British biologist, was quite different from the way in which he squabbled with Vikram Singh, the Indian astrophysicist. Whereas the former irritated Yuri with his arrogance and seeming indifference to the ideas of others, the latter frustrated Yuri a hundred times a day with his oversensitivity and secretiveness. In turn, the relationship between Peters and Vikram Singh had a flavour all of its own, as Peters tried to bully the Indian, who in response would display bursts of astonishing aggression. It was a good thing – and all of them felt it, despite their attempts to maintain at least a minimum of decorum – that they were due to be picked up by the shuttle the following day, because if they had not had that to look forward to, they might well have ended up doing or saying something that might compromise the mission objectives. A fistfight might be a good way to release aggression, but on board a space station, especially one in which there was so little room to move, it would also be a good way

to destroy a month's work in seconds.

On that penultimate day of their sojourn upon the station, Vikram Singh was going through his notes, tidying them up and checking his working, while the others got some sleep. He was feeling pretty worn out himself, but he kept on at the work, forcing himself through the fatigue to get the job done.

He heard someone climb into the lab, and turned to see Yuri in the doorway.

He looked confused.

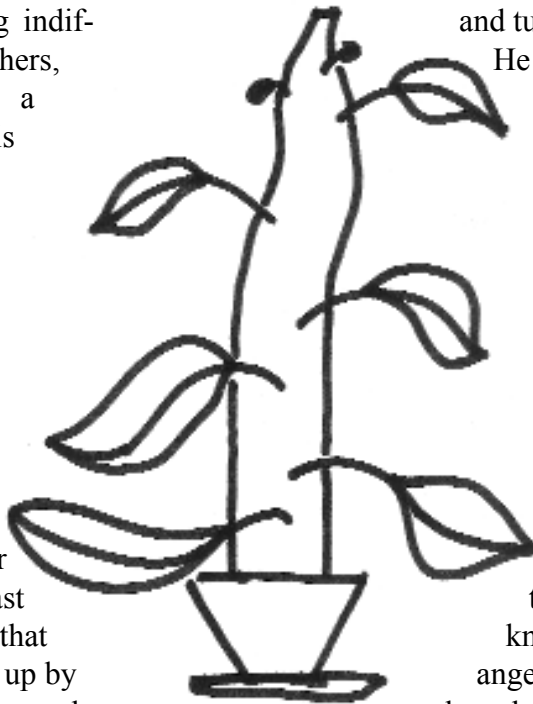
"You should still be sleeping," said Vikram Singh.

"You don't give me orders," said Yuri. "I'm still in charge, aren't I?"

Vikram Singh nodded. "Yes, you are. You are still in charge. Till tomorrow, at least."

Both of them knew that this would be Yuri's last mission. He was the oldest of the three, by some margin, but that wasn't it. All Vikram Singh

knew was that the Russian had angered the wrong people in the days before take-off. Their departure had been put back a half dozen times, while one problem and another was identified and put right, while the weather shifted and changed, while launch windows came and went. He had probably slept with the wrong man's wife, the other crew members had concluded one night, or at least talked to her in an unsuitable manner.



Either way, everyone knew that for Yuri, space was over.

“What’s that?” demanded the Russian.

“What?” replied Vikram Singh. He looked around the laboratory, but saw nothing of note.

Yuri was incredulous. “That!” he shouted, pointing to a work surface. “That rubber plant!”

“I don’t see it,” said Vikram Singh, but then he did, which drew a frown upon his face. “Oh that, the rubber plant. Hasn’t it always been there?” It was about two feet tall, and standing in a red plastic pot. Its trunk was an inch and a half thick.

Yuri shook his head. “No. No, it hasn’t. Where did it come from?”

“Calm down, it’s nothing to get excited about. You probably just didn’t notice it. Peters must have moved it here from somewhere.”

“He didn’t. He did not. Let’s talk to him. Right now.” Yuri began to pull himself back towards the sleeping quarters.

“Oh, Yuri, let him sleep,” said Vikram Singh. “And get some sleep yourself.” But it was clear from the scowl on Yuri’s face that he had no intention of going to sleep. For some reason this

has taken a hold of him. Vikram Singh stayed where he was. He had work to finish, and had no time for his colleague’s foolishness.

Yuri dragged Peters out of bed and quizzed him about the rubber plant. Peters denied any knowledge of it, but when brought to the laboratory he was forced to admit its presence.

Soon the tension told, and the three began to fight.

By the time the shuttle arrived to pick them up, amid concern on Earth that communications with the station had been lost, all were dead.

Before entering the station, the shuttle crew analysed the atmosphere within. There was nothing wrong – but a vibration caught their attention, a noise entering the shuttle through its connection with the station. They found that a transmitter on the outer hull had been damaged, causing infrasonic waves to permeate the station. Eventually, it had driven the three of them quite, quite insane, causing hallucinations and violence.

“At least,” considered the captain of the shuttle, “it wasn’t anything personal.” – *SWT*

After All

I walked up the lane and back. It was all fog. Not that the fog was a pea-souper. Still, when something brushed against my cheek, I couldn’t be sure that it was a rogue twig. It felt like one: like the way twigs had brushed my cheek... well, back there. Back then.

She’d been away for a couple of days, Karen, so I’d done the supermarket run myself. “Now don’t do your usual stunt,” she’d said. But I had. Somehow, I could never avoid rush-hour if I was

shopping on my own – Friday rush-hour at that. So naturally, this time... that last time... there I was in the car-park, boot loaded up after the pyrrhic battle up and down the aisles, watching the four cars waiting to exit in front of me – no, five: some sporty job slid in craftily from the right, the driver’s hand raised to me in that annoying gesture which says, “Just barging in, chief. Cheers!” That’s the last I remember of back there. The smooth lines of that car, the

man's hand. There was no collision, not with everyone doing a less-than-stately two miles an hour. Heart attack? I was no-one's idea of tanned and toned, but I wasn't due one for years, if at all. But that's what they might have thought: anyone looking in at me. I can't say. All it felt like was – one long melt. Nothing painful. Quite comfortable, actually, as though every cell in my body was saying goodbye to its neighbour and settling down for an open-ended hibernation.

Presumably I was given the standard rites and decencies. I wasn't present, of course, not in that rather saccharine movie way you sometimes see: a group of black-clad figures round an open hole among rainy trees, with the object of their respect floating spirit-like above them, watching them as they murmur and weep and straggle away. I can't say for sure that the rites took place. Even now, I don't know if I actually... you know – whatever the euphemism of the moment is. There's a rich choice, of course. Just wander round any churchyard. All that passing, being called, gathered in.

It's good enough, the house allocated to me (or I've been allocated to – never quite got the hang of how that word works – like so much, it hardly matters now). Modern. Spacious. Appropriate fitments in quiet tones – but not so quiet that it seems like a neatly-appointed morgue, a space for someone who actually has... you know.

And designed for more than one person. That's what struck me as I returned along the foggy lane, glancing to left and right, thinking over and over that I'd never expected it all to look like this. Remembering books in junior school showing a figure in robes with other figures about him and his hand pointing aloft. What he invariably pointed at was... well, it wasn't much, really, not to the mortal eye. Baggy clouds and sunsets, usually – although at least one of the clouds had some kind of glow to it, suggesting that it would break open at any moment and reveal what he was really pointing at. But that's as far as it went. Books didn't try to show what was – how should I say? – pulsing away behind the clouds. Not back then. I don't know how I'd have felt if one of them did



show... you know. And if a baggy cloud had split apart to reveal a foggy lane... well, I'd have probably laughed. Got a clip round the ear, too.

I was right about the house. When I got back, there was someone else in the lounge. An elderly lady, motherly-looking, filling up one of the armchairs. Like me, she had no luggage – or, it seemed, the remotest idea of how she'd got there. “Marjory,” she said, holding out her hand, making an effort to rise. I gave my name, took her hand, told her not to bestir herself. “From Ealing,” she said. “I was waiting for a friend at the station. Just getting coffee from the machine. The last 10p kept coming back down the chute. Four times I tried. The fifth time –”

“You began to melt?” I interrupted gently. Taking her open mouth for assent, I described that Friday, the car-park. Her brow contracted:

“You don't think we're in the other place?”

I just knew we weren't. Had we been, I felt sure that all would be foul and livid – not to say a deal hotter than that lounge, that foggy lane. I started trying to assure her.

There was a knock at the door. – *MWT*

Otherwise Detritus

What does he want with me? He will never say. Who has sent him another matter. Never to be answered. Is he there? Don't look. Just tell me can you hear his steps? Have you noticed anything, any sign of him? No matter, he is there, no matter. Who is he? No matter. Call him M. Call you N. That is all that need be. Is he there? Yes, always. Always somewhere, no matter whether you perceive him.

Keep moving. That is key. Keep going. He will catch you, in the end he always catches you, but keep going. Don't look round.

A poor story this. Poor in vocabulary, in grammar. Characters unmemorable. Morality negligible. Plot indefensible. Material insufficient. A story of little interest and less truth. There may be more than one, or not, as shall become apparent. There, that shall serve as a pre-amble. Such as it is. A poor preamble, certainly, of consequence trivial. Fitting, therefore. Nothing to be gained from it. Or by it. I begin my first, perhaps only, story on a concrete stairwell. He is standing on a concrete stairwell when the lights flicker off for a moment. He swears, glances behind him. The lights return. No, that's not the case. Nothing to be gained by going down that road. Nothing to be gained in any case. That story goes nowhere. I am standing on the concrete stairwell. I am standing on the concrete stairwell looking north? North? That's surely not right. No matter. I am standing on the concrete stairwell looking out of the window towards the car-park. Description of the car-park. Multi-storey. Storeys: 3. Possibly three. Concrete slabs impressed with a granite pattern, arranged in three horizontal strips. Above each: a white metal railing. Above each; view into the interior of cars, other vehicles all

in shadow. The top level is unroofed. Above: blue sky. Some clouds, if necessary. He stands there on the stairwell looking at that. At that! What an object of contemplation! It could be worse. That's always true. He's standing on a concrete stairwell, holding onto the metal handrail (square, brown, paint peeling, pleasantly cold) and he sees on the left extremity of the car-park a strange sight. Not such a very strange sight. On the extreme left extremity of the car-park through a series of four large windows, safety glass embedded with a wire mesh, arranged in a vertical column, he sees another concrete stairwell. Through the wire mesh, he sees the concrete steps in shadow. Like his own, but not the same. This all at a distance of say 20 metres. But empty the other. He loiters alone, unobserved. Those other steps: deserted, in shadow. Strong sunlight, strong shadows. Patchy light. Oh beautiful shadows. No getting around it. But gone now. Four windows, each looking in on a different section of the stairwell. Four windows, four angles. Blue handrail. Then the lights flicker out, just for a moment. He swears. Then back on. Glances behind him at what? The door. The door leading to the room with the machines. What has happened? A power cut? Perhaps.

I stand and look at the stains on the walls. The beautiful walls.

Little enough there. But I must move on. The other one is close, closing in. He must be evaded, for now. While we tell the story he must be evaded. He will come anyway. He's here. Already I hear him breathing.

It will all come right in the end.

It will all go wrong in the end.

I'm being tailed. Get rid of the evidence.

The faces, that's what I can't stand. Most of them anyway.

Call one M, and the other N.

He's standing on a concrete stairwell when the lights flicker out. He swears, glances behind him. That was a mistake. Fatal error. He can hear the breathing and now he knows that it was there all along. He's standing on a concrete stairwell and there's no escape. There never was any escape. He ascends. Where does he think he is going? Next floor looks different. But marginal differences. Behind one door an office, voices, laughter. Avoid that. Fatal error. Stay away from them. Down a corridor his shambling gait takes him. More doors. Fatal error. Avoid doors. Back to stairwell, and ascend anew. Next floor looks identical. But significant differences. Ascend anew to much the same. Repeat until he reaches top floor. Only way up now is to climb out onto the roof. He climbs out onto the roof. Now perhaps he has given him the slip! But he has misjudged. Fatal error. Description of roof: flat, pastel gravel set into black tar. Rough surface. A low wall encircles the area of irregular shape. Objects: an old shoe. There must be an old shoe. Otherwise: detritus. Wandering on the roof of an office block, strong breeze blows his hair, unburdened he strolls. Utterly alone. M confounded. A view of the motorway and distant towers, trees. A bracing air, an old shoe. What a laugh, an old shoe. How would that have got up here? He laughs softly to himself. Fatal error. No matter. But then the voice begins.

Usual garbage the voice says. Over and over. Over and over.

He looks down over the handrail. Vertical column of space dropping down into darkness. Crooked spiral of the handrail, leading the way down into darkness. Down to the basement perhaps. But no. No basement. You can always go down another floor. Solid ground a myth. That's always possible.

He climbs out onto the roof. Steps confidently to the edge. Raises arms, steps away into space. Floats off. Solid ground a myth.

What a story. What garbage. Regrettable in every particular. This is my evidence. Poor evidence says the voice. It proves nothing. But

then why continue the game? No-one convinced. A poor story. Metaphors few and those few inane. M says all these things and worse. He's indefatigable.

Who are you? No answer. No need. This proves nothing says M.

There's a woman too, let's say. Let's say there's a woman called O. She's as bad as M. Worse, maybe. Let's say that N is in love with O. O will betray him though, to M. She will betray him because he's in love with her. But he claims that he's not. He shuns her. Feigns indifference. So here's N. He standing in a concrete stairwell, staring across to an almost identical stairwell at a distance of say 20 metres when he spots O. She's walking down the staircase in the opposite building. He's never seen O before. No, that's not the case. He knows O very well. But she doesn't know him. She wouldn't recognise him. That makes him suffer. He wants to get O's attention. Bangs on the glass. To no avail. O will never hear him. That's what M says. M says forget O. She'll never hear you. And even if she does, and even if you meet her, even then, she will betray you. N doesn't care about this. He doesn't care about the betrayal. He doesn't believe what M says anyway. Not now. Not now that he's got O in his sights. Yes. Yes. He must speak to O, get her to listen. She will understand him. She will know what he needs. M says no. M always says no. But he doesn't listen. Fatal error.

N goes into a bar. He's been walking all day, trying to give M the slip. He goes into a bar. He goes into a bar and sits at the bar. Man sitting next to him says, you know he's playing with you don't you? What says N. The man says have you ever watched the way a cat plays with a mouse its caught? Keeps letting it go, then pounces again. Doesn't kill it straight off. Keeps letting it go. Might as well get its money's worth out of that mouse. Doesn't kill it, just pounces, holds the mouse down, watches it struggle awhile, then lets it go. The mouse keeps on thinking it's escaped. Every time it gets free it thinks finally I am free. But the cat keeps the game going as long as it can, until the mouse too

bad to attempt another escape. Then it's no longer any fun. The guy at the bar says all this.

Singularly miserable notion

Proof, if proof were needed

Correct me if I am wrong but

Interminable rambling

An indication of the esteem in which he is universally held

Undoubtedly his finest work to date

Combinatoire

Carotid artery

I first noticed him from the window seat in the coffee shop that I visit every day without fail. I order tea, and cake, and invariably sit in the window seat. The window seat of the Italian café is my usual location at that time of the day. I like to look out of the window. I like to watch the people, going about their business, their faces. But that day I noticed a man who was not going about his business. He was standing on the other side of the street, leaning against, of all things, a lamp-post. He looked like he was waiting for someone. I didn't pay him much notice, but when, a good half hour later, I looked up from my newspaper, I saw that he was still there, in the same spot. He too had now taken out a newspaper which he was studying intently. I began to wonder why anyone would want to stand on a street corner reading a newspaper for a prolonged length of time, when he could visit any of the innumerable cafes, bars or restaurants in the city. Perhaps if he had no money, perhaps if he was some kind of vagrant, this behaviour would not seem to aberrant. But this was clearly not the case. The man wore a smart, grey overcoat over a dark suit. He looked unshaven, but that meant little. I decided that there was little point spending any more time in speculation on the meaning of this thoroughly ordinary man's actions, and returned to my newspaper, my tea and my cake, resolving to put this trivial matter out of my mind. This was to prove impossible, for the next time I looked up, merely to rest my eyes or in response to some slight, random noise

such as are common in any busy café or restaurant, my eyes almost involuntarily returned to the window and to the spot on the corner of the street where the smart suited man remained still. Did I imagine then that as I glanced in his direction he was looking in mine and immediately averted his eyes back towards the familiar newspaper, the newspaper that I then realised was the twin of my own? While this coincidence, if that was what it was, caused me some measure of disquiet however irrational, I was determined not to allow it to intrude upon my pleasant daily ritual and, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, I dallied purposely over my tea and cake, before settling my bill and leaving the establishment in as leisurely a manner as I thought was appropriate to resume my daily schedule.

The sound of footsteps behind one as one walks down a street is by no means an uncommon phenomenon. Indeed in any urban milieu it would rather be the absence of footsteps behind one, in front of one, and in fact all around, that would be a cause of curiosity if not alarm. Yet a regular unwavering rhythm of steps that seems to remain at a constant and discreet distance from oneself, regardless of the route, its length, destination or lack thereof, is indeed a source of anxiety. In my circuitous constitutional I have frequently been known to choose paths that others might consider whimsical, but on this occasion my trail could only be called perverse. I made double backs, I paused unaccountably at locations where there could be no reasonable incentive to pause, I doubled back again, retraced my route, crossed busy roads at unfavourable intersections and then re-crossed them, entered shops of which I knew that I could gain alternative egress, made sudden and unprovoked detours down unpromising side-streets, alleyways, ginnels, snickets and otherwise nameless passages. At last, vexed and short of breath, I returned home, with the indistinct yet unshakeable sound of footsteps always present. Finally, when hope of ridding myself of this unwanted companion had all but vanished, the footsteps ceased. I was only a few streets from home. Only then did I allow myself the briefest and most circumspect of glances behind me. The

street was deserted. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked the familiar last stretch, and turned the familiar corner, but was stopped by a sudden irrational fear. I quickly retraced my steps back to the main road and marched around the block to the parallel road, intending to reach home by a scarcely visible alleyway that ran behind the building and which allowed access to a secondary entrance, a small and dim fire-exit next to the bins. I had not made so many tiresome detours only to advertise my location to my pursuer by using the ostentatious main entrance. No, I had a little more cunning than to let myself be trapped in that way. Thus complimenting myself I turned rapidly down the dank passage between two grey towers, and almost ran for the recessed doorway. I had gambled on the little door having been left ajar, and I was not mistaken. Fortunately for me on this occasion, the caretaker was a slovenly creature of poor memory. There was no handle on the outside, but pressing my fingertips against the exposed edge of the door, I was able with some effort to pull it wide. I was safe, I thought, as I prepared to squeeze myself through the gap, my eyes happened to turn towards the end of the dim passage, where a sliver of the adjoining street seemed almost painfully bright, and where a silhouetted shape, something like the figure of a man, shrank back into the shadows.

Listen to the sonorous rhythms of the words that mean nothing.

Walking along the railway lines, my feet crunching over the bones of past generations.

Was that before or after

Consequently and in view of this

Can help reduce errors

Help to reduce the number of security alerts by

A singing moaning

Nothing erased, but all forgotten, still there nevertheless, somewhere lost.

A telephone is ringing in a darkened room. The ringtone is loud, insistent, inducing anxiety. It continues to ring for approx. one minute. After this time, there is a shuffling sound, bedclothes

are being dragged off. There is an incoherent human sound, a sound as of a man waking from bad dreams, but struggling to rise into full consciousness. The telephone continues to ring the while. There is a crash of something falling off a table. And again. More grunting, tone of annoyance. The telephone continues. After a prolonged period of confusion in which the telephone continues to ring, and is accompanied by more distinct sounds of effort and objects being grasped and dropped, a bedside lamp is switched on. The lamp lies on its side on the floor next to the telephone and half under the bed. It has evidently been dropped from the bedside table in the previous period of disarray. It is partly covered by the bedspread and sheds little light. It illuminates only the telephone and a hemisphere around it of about two feet in diameter. The lamp has a grey/brown ceramic base and a dirty beige conical shade. It is as nondescript as it is possible for a lamp to be. The bedside table, the front of which is illuminated, is made of beech, as if that mattered. The bedspread, part of which is also illuminated by the lamp, is covered with a garish orange and aquamarine pattern of large and exotic fruits and leaves. The bedspread is made from a man-made fibre and suggests the kind of cheap, mass-produced brand that is used by chains of motels. The carpet is nondescript. Once the lamp has been lit, an arm, bare, male, reaches out from above and immediately picks up the telephone receiver, but once grasped, raises it somewhat tentatively towards the protagonist's ear, which is at the moment in darkness, outside the reach of the lamplight. There is a pause. Each response of the protagonist is punctuated by a pause of between 5 and 15 seconds. His voice is tired and uncertain to begin with, increasingly anxious towards the middle, terror-stricken towards the end.

Protagonist: Hello? (Pause) Hello? (Pause) I'm sorry? (Pause) I'm sorry I don't understand... (He is interrupted. Pause) I'm sorry? (Pause) I'm sorry, who's speaking please? (Pause) Who is this? (Pause) I'm sorry, who is this please? (Pause) Hello? (Pause) Who do you want to speak to? (Pause) What? (Pause) Who? (Pause) I'm sorry, I don't know what you're

saying. (Pause) I'm sorry I don't speak that... (He is interrupted. Pause) I don't speak... (He is interrupted. Pause) Do you speak English? (Pause) What? (Pause) I'm sorry? (Pause) Please could you speak more slowly? (Pause) I'm sorry you're speaking too quickly. (Pause) What? (Pause) Taxi? (Pause) Did you say a taxi? (Pause) What taxi? (Pause) What taxi? (Pause) Where is the taxi going? (Pause) The airport? (Pause) The taxi is going to the airport? (Pause) No, no. (Pause) No, I haven't ordered a taxi. (Pause) No, not me. (Pause) I don't know anything about a taxi to the airport. (Pause) What? (Pause) Who? (Pause) Mr Who? (Pause) Who is this? (Pause) Who? (Pause) That's not my name. (Pause) No, that's not me. (Pause) No, there must have been a mistake. (Pause) What? (Pause) A mistake. (Pause) What? (Pause) What's my name? (Pause) You want to know

what's my name? (Pause) Who is this? (Pause) The receptionist? (Pause) What receptionist? (Pause) What hotel? (Pause) Where? (Pause) Where am I? (Pause) I'm sorry I don't understand where... (He is interrupted. Pause) Where? (Pause) Where am I? (Pause) What am I doing here? (Pause) I'm sorry I didn't get that... (He is interrupted. Pause) What's going on here? (Pause) What am I supposed to be doing... (He is interrupted. Pause) Me? (Pause) My name? (Pause) You want to know what my name is? (Long pause.)

The hand holding the receiver re-enters the hemisphere of lamplight and replaces the receiver on the handset. The hand rests on the receiver for a moment before being withdrawn. After a while the hand reappears and fumbles for a moment with the lamp before finding the switch and turning it off. Darkness. – *BC*

Master Zangpan's Resolution

Zangpan's World was running itself quite nicely now, thought its proprietor. The visit by Professor Challenger and his friends had caused quite a lot of disruption, but

everyone seemed happy now, and settled. Maybe they were too settled, he thought to himself. – *SWT*

Key to Storytellers

BC	.....	Ben Chadwick
JG	.....	John Greenwood
MWT	.....	Michael Wyndham Thomas
SWT	.....	SW Theaker
WB.	.....	Walt Brunston

HELEN AND HER MAGIC CAT

