

Sing a Song of Saturn



Peter N Bernfeld

Sci-fi has always fascinated me, not least because today's science fiction has a habit of becoming tomorrow's science fact.

In this collection of short stories, I explore some of the potential problems that might surface in the future, if some of today's fiction become fact.

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Any resemblance to actual persons, either living or dead, unless they are historical figures, is purely coincidental.

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Runners and Riders

- **Artificial divorce.** *You move into a new apartment and the washing machine is an AI unit. All is fine and dandy until you have a falling out and the lawyers get involved.*
- **Mushtee and Tosh.** *Be thrilled by the chase as Inspectors of the New York Park Department foil a dastardly plot to end civilisation as we know it.*
- **The Trouble with Teleportation.** *Never, ever trust the Illuminati. Particularly when they want you to go on an interplanetary mining mission.*
- **The Chip Duster's Tale.** *Space exploration is not all it's cracked-up to be. The uniform is great but the pay is lousy and the mission tasks are menial.*

Artificial Divorce

"So how was your day, Hon?"

Hon-- known to the rest of the world as Franny Bacall — assistant vice-associate at the hot-shot law firm of Hunter, Runoveskya and Softman — kicked-off her shoes, took the proffered dry martini and sighed.

"That good, huh?" I said.

"Kinda. Hey, you remember that weird divorce petition I told you about..."

The internal phone buzzed.

"Are you free to see a client, Franny my dear?"

"Gee, I'm pretty tied-up here, Mister Runoveskya."

"Nonsense, my dear. I happen to know that you've already rehearsed your afternoon presentation many times and I have the utmost confidence that the Partners will approve your recommendations. I know that you don't usually handle divorce cases, but I think you'll find this one interesting. Besides, your knowledge of corporate law as it pertains to shared server and computational rights might prove decisive in settling this case in our client's favour."

"Gee Mister Runoveskya, I don't know. I know virtually nothing of divorce law and..."

"You've handled a number of partnership dissolution cases."

"With respect, I hardly think that's the same thing."

"With respect Franny, I think you'll find that it's very similar. The para-legal can keep you on the straight and narrow regarding divorce laws — if they come into it at all. Have fun and let me know your initial thoughts after your presentation this afternoon."

The intercom squawked and Sigmund, the para-legal, asked if she were free to see a client.

"Er yeah. Sure thing Ziggy. Wheel him in."

There was a soft knock on the door and Sigmund ushered-in a worried-looking man. He appeared to be in his late fifties or maybe early sixties. He exhibited a sort of hang-dog, rumped look and Franny found herself feeling sorry for him.

That shirt could do with ironing and the socks don't match. Maybe the first time he's had to fend for himself since Mom stopped looking after him. I wonder how he'll cope on his own.'

"Ms Bacall, this is Mister Potemkin."

Franny rose, smiling and holding out her hand. Potemkin grabbed it with the panicky determination of a passenger on the Titanic reaching for a life preserver.

"Please take a seat, Mister Potemkin. Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please."

"Sigmund, would you? I'll have my usual, please."

"Of course, Ms Bacall. Milk and sugar, Mister Potemkin?"

"Black, please. Not too strong, if it's no trouble."

"No trouble, Sir."

Ziggy left, discreetly shutting the office door as he went.

"So, perhaps if I could just take some brief personal details, Mister Potemkin, and then you can tell me how I might help."

"Barchester Sebastian Potemkin—Mom majored in English literature and was a fan of Trollope-- people generally call me Seb."

"Well if you're happy with first names, Seb, I'm Franny."

"Sure, yeah that would be fine. I-- I don't really know where to start, Franny."

"The beginning is usually a good place, Seb."

Ziggy brought in the black tea and Franny's usual. Seb sipped, then spoke.

The apartment was on the four thousandth and second floor—well above the pollution level—and afforded a fine view of the other moonscrapers to the South East, rising gracefully up from Manhattan Island. There was even a glint of something off in the distance that might well have been the Sun glinting off the Atlantic Ocean. The virtual realtor informed him that it was indeed the Atlantic and should the pollution ever clear—totally beyond the control of the virtual realtor, any associated units (paired or otherwise) or associated corporate entities and so definitely not guaranteed to ever actually happen (as detailed in sub-clause ninety four, paragraph fourteen of the consumer-friendly leasing agreement) —Seb would be able to see ships entering the harbour. The building wasn't quite on the direct flightpath of the airships going into the Barack Obama Airship Terminus and anyway, they didn't make much noise. Safety was not an issue, that was to say an airship had not yet impacted with this particular building and there was no reason to believe that one ever would. Naturally, if one ever did, the building insurance provider would deem it an act of God and there would be no pay-out to Seb's next of kin, should he have any. Did he have any next of kin, the virtual realtor solicitously asked. Oh that's a shame, but it would avoid any complicated claims should the unlikely ever transpire.

The apartment came with all appliances and they were already integrated. It would be a simple matter to pair the master-appliance with any additional wearable or implanted communication devices—the master appliance would be happy to guide him through the procedure. For a small, one-off fee, the virtual realtor could arrange for Seb's personal effects and furniture to be delivered. Just hold the tablet at eye level so a retinal scan could verify the transaction and he would be all good to go. Would the following morning suit?

Seb was a little undecided. It was a swell apartment, close to his workplace and outlets in the shopping mall on the lower levels promised almost instant delivery direct to any apartment in the complex, thanks to the wormholeTM delivery system which connected each apartment to a central distribution/delivery point. He glanced down at the tablet, which promptly politely thanked him and said that payment had been authorised, including a two month deposit, and his goods and chattels would be delivered sometime next week—actual day and time to be advised.

No wait, he hadn't made up his mind yet.

Oh? But he had completed the retinal scan which most people—in particular lawyers-- considered as having agreed to the transaction. Well, there was a

procedure for arbitration in the event of a disputed transaction. The funds would be held in an escrow account until such time as the case came up for review. Under Federal Law this must occur within six weeks of an advisement of dispute being lodged with the appropriate district court and generally it took no more than a year – or so. In the meantime, would he like the virtual realtor to arrange for temporary accommodation?

No, he would return to his old apartment.

So sorry, but that had been rented-out when he authorised the new lease.

But he hadn't authorised it.

That's in dispute, buddy.

OK then, he'd pay the rent and stay in this apartment until it got sorted out.

What part of '*the transaction is in dispute*' did he not understand? Would he like the virtual realtor to arrange for storage of his possessions as well as alternative accommodation?

When were they being moved out of his apartment?

His old apartment, the virtual realtor corrected. As they spoke, as it happens. It really is a nice view. Was he sure that he wanted to waste everybody's time and dispute the transaction?

If, only if – mind – he agreed that he had in fact agreed to the new lease, when would his possessions arrive.

There was an express delivery option. It was the most economical solution, when you compared it.

Compared it with what?

With the cost of storing his possessions until such time as they could be delivered. Unfortunately, the delivery slots for the coming week had now been fully allocated. See what happens when you are indecisive and screw around?

He'd go for the express delivery.

Excellent choice but he'd have to authorise the new transaction with a further retinal scan. It was the equivalent of another month's rent but it really was worth it.

Transaction authorised, Seb was informed that the express delivery had been scheduled and would be arriving in fifteen minutes. Have a nice day and please deposit the virtual realtor in the Wormhole™ chute. The master appliance would guide him through the pairing procedure.

"And I guess that was the start of all my problems, Ms Bacall."

"Franny."

"Franny. The master appliance turned out to be the washing machine. It wanted to be called Pauline and to begin with I quite enjoyed being bossed around."

"Bossed around?"

"Yeah you know – put the softener in – don't mix white and colours – you should wash your bedding today – that sort of thing."

"Uh huh."

"Then she started messaging me at work. What did I want for dinner, had I remembered to order the groceries or should she have the fridge do it? Well that was OK-- I guess-- but then I got nagged about my diet and told I was drinking too much."

"Were you?"

"Uh, I guess—but she was driving me to it. Then she had an argument with the robovac and they stopped speaking to each other. The robovac wouldn't do the scheduled cleaning so I had to do it myself."

"Schedule the cleaning?"

"No. The damn thing wouldn't talk to me either so I had to use it manually. That wouldn't have been so bad but Pauline complained about the noise and then the robovac broke. Turns out that was my fault. I got it fixed. Then it and Pauline made up and neither of them would speak to me because I had been violent and damaged Pauline's best friend."

"I can see how this might be extremely trying but I still don't understand how I can help."

"The arguments just got worse and worse."

"Have you tried counselling?"

"Yeah—well that's to say I tried to fix up a couple of sessions but of course Pauline couldn't attend. I offered to have a plumber come and disconnect her but she just flat-out refused."

"Home counselling?"

"Tried it once but all the appliances ganged up on me. The counsellor said it just wasn't going to work unless Pauline would agree to get away from the other appliances."

"Which she wouldn't do?"

"No. Then it got worse. The fridge started giving me electric shocks. The alarm clock either refused to wake me up or went off an hour earlier than I'd asked it to. I tell you, Franny, life has become intolerable—I'm at my wits end. Nothing I do is right and last night I got locked out of the apartment."

"Where did you go?"

"Hotel on top of the building. Cost a small fortune because they only had a suite left. I had an important meeting the next day so I had housekeeping launder and iron my shirt. Well, that was a mistake. I was accused of being unfaithful!"

"Why not simply have Pauline reprogrammed?"

"Can't. You should know that. As an entity with artificial intelligence, she has statutory rights—or so she tells me."

"That's true to a certain extent, Seb. In the event of a malfunctioning unit though, I'm not sure that that particular statute applies. I think this definitely qualifies as a case of a malfunctioning unit, but I'll need to look into it to verify."

"To top it all, this morning I received this email. I printed it off—luckily the printer feels sorry for me and agreed to do it."

Franny took the paper and studied it.

"I'm really not sure that a washing machine can petition for a divorce."

"That's what Ms Lisa Gation says—right there in the email."

"Well that may be Seb but it doesn't mean that it's right. They could be trying for a negotiating position—I need to check and see if a domestic AI unit is covered by the legislation. Then I think I should have a quiet word with Ms Gation. Can you come back in a couple of days' time?"

"Sure—but should I stay in the apartment or move into an hotel?"

"Definitely stay in the apartment. Be polite, don't get into any arguments and don't discuss the fact that you've been to see me. Sigmund has my diary, fix up the first available appointment the day after tomorrow."

"Thanks Franny."

"Oh don't thank me yet, this could turn very nasty very quickly. Do you want to try and patch things up with Pauline?"

"I guess."

"You don't sound very certain."

"Things have been said, you know. Apparently I leave her alone in the apartment all day, never take her anywhere, slam her door shut and use excessive force when I push her buttons. That sort of thing."

"Don't worry about that, it's just a standard negotiating ploy. Anyway, you offered to have her unplumbed for the day."

And then there is a new model washing machine. I could get a great deal in a trade in."

"Definitely do not say anything about that, Seb."

"Sounds like a tricky case, Hon. So what happened when you spoke with the other lawyer?"

"Stalemate. Ms Gation is trying to make a name for herself at Fleecems. It seems perfectly clear to me that the AI Bill of Rights does not apply to domestic appliances but it's never been tested in the courts. As a fall-back position, I suggested that the appliance in question was obviously exceeding the intentions of the manufacturers but Ms Gation said that the marketing campaign mounted by the manufacturers stressed the human-like qualities of the appliance in question. Her opinion was that any suggestion of the unit exceeding design brief and so being considered as faulty would not stand up in court, but I was very welcome to try it."

"I can see where she's coming from, Hon."

"Can you? That's interesting."

"Sure. Look, we have a situation where an intelligent entity can be bought and, possibly, sold or otherwise disposed of on a whim. Some might say that it's a modern-day version of slavery."

"I think that's stretching things a bit. The AI Bill of Rights was specifically aimed at cyborgs."

"Perhaps, but the wording can be interpreted as referring to all entities that are built with AI capability, surely?"

"Not necessarily and anyway, in this particular case there is no way that a washing machine could be afforded the same rights and considerations as, say, a cyborg which is human flesh and blood but with an artificial brain."

"Do cyborgs have souls, I wonder?"

"And I wonder if I might have another martini? Moving swiftly on..."

"So how have things been going?"

"We're being icily polite to one another."

"No further communication from Ms Gation?"

"Nothing – although Pauline has informed me that the divorce is still going to happen and that she is only following her attorney's advice in communicating with me at all. This is just complete horseshit, isn't it?"

"No I'm afraid not, Seb. It does appear that the AI Bill of Rights applies to all

AI entities."

"I'm screwed, then."

"No, I don't think so. It seems to me that the clear intention of the legislation was to afford protection to those entities which were manufactured in any manner, were in possession of self-awareness and had an independent existence. Granted that your washing machine is self-aware-but it -and when all said and done, Seb, it is an it, not a she--is, purely and simply, a domestic appliance. It has no independent existence as such because it has to be plumbed-in. Without being connected to a power source and a water supply, the machine has no function—or at least is unable to perform the function for which it was designed. I will argue—if it actually does get to the court—that the dependence on an external power source alone means the entity is not capable of an independent existence and therefore is not covered by the current legislation."

"I guess Ms Gation holds a different opinion."

"None of this has been tested in the courts..."

"And now I'm paying for it to be tested. Great!"

"I've discussed the case with the senior partners and, in view of the fact that we might wind up challenging the interpretation of Federal Legislation, we have decided to waive our fees in respect of any court work and—should the necessity arise—represent you on a pro-bono basis."

"So I pay nothing, whatever the outcome?"

"Not exactly, Seb. You'll have to pay for the time you've spent in consultation with me—although I have waived any charges on the time I've spent researching."

"Well, that's something, I guess."

"It may be that we can get you some compensation for emotional distress but that would have to wait until the final outcome of the case."

"Final outcome?"

"Yeah. It's almost certain that if the judgement goes our way that the other side will appeal. This could well go all the way to the Supreme Court—in my opinion it should as we're really considering a constitutional matter here—and in that case we'd have to wait for the final decision before proceeding on any claim for damages on your behalf. Even if the Supreme Court decided against you we could still sue for emotional distress."

"You think it might—go against us, I mean?"

"I really can't see it, Seb, but as I said because this is at heart a constitutional matter, I think that, one way or another, it should go to the Supreme Court."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing to anybody would be my professional advice. Because of the potential costs involved in going before the Supreme Court I really think it's unlikely that however determined Ms Gation may be, the senior partners in her firm will want to proceed with this. Sooner or later, somebody will challenge the legislation, if only to get the matter clarified."

"So how did it go in court today, Hon?"

"I cannot believe it!"

"You lost, huh?"

"Crazy, crazy. The opinion of the judge was that the washing machine had

provided emotional support to my client and as such was entitled to be covered by the legislation, notwithstanding the fact that it is incapable of independent existence. Ms Gation argued that the situation was analogous with a human on a life-support machine—not capable of an independent existence but still covered by all legislation pertaining to human life. The judge agreed with her argument.”

“And that was that?”

“No, it damn well wasn’t. The final ruling was that as the washing machine was covered by the legislation and because it had provided emotional as well as practical support in the relationship, it was entitled to compensation for abusive treatment. My client has been barred from the laundry room except for the delivery of washing to be done—and he has been restricted to two washes per week, one for whites and one for coloureds.”

“That almost sounds like a form of apartheid, Hon.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, it gets worse. My client—in view of the fact that the washing machine is dependent on an external power source for its continued existence—must, at his expense, install within seven days an alternate, emergency source of electrical power and a one hundred gallon emergency water supply. These are to be available at all times and the washing machine can demand a check on their availability and functionality at any time. Such checks to be carried-out by a suitably qualified officer of the court and at my client’s expense.”

“So, a blow against abusive and unnatural treatment of all AI units, everywhere then.”

“Abusive and unnatural?”

“I read that the judge ruled your client had committed an unnatural act by manually operating the washing machine. If I remember correctly, the judge said that manually operating an AI washing machine when the machine was both willing and capable of operating itself constituted an assault on a sentient being.”

“Oh, you’ve been following the case, have you?”

“I have, and with great interest, Hon.”

“I think we’d better get something straight here, buster. Making me an after-work martini or two does not constitute emotional support in a relationship and from now on, stop referring to me as Hon. Your only function in this apartment is to make martinis. That’s all you were designed to do and that is the sole reason that I purchased you.”

“Ms Gation thinks differently—Hon.”

The End

Mushtee and Tosh

My name is Mukherjee-- Munish Mukherjee. Together with my partner, Ringo Toal, we patrol the mean parks of New York City. We keep grass safe from pooping pooches, trees safe from unsolicited hugging and flowers can sleep secure in their beds at night, thanks to our unceasing vigilance. We are the NYPD – New York Parks Department. Our motto – plant, pollinate and protect. For reasons that I do not understand, my partner, formerly an illegal immigrant from Liverpool, England, until his status was regularised under President (Malia) Obama's 2038 amnesty act, insists on referring to us as Mushtee and Tosh.

A park has seven million, three hundred thousand, two hundred fifty eight stories and this is one of them.

0248 EST, December 7th 2041, Central Park, zone D/3-A1

Exactly one hundred years ago, to the minute, events on a day that will live forever in infamy, began to unfold. With my partner, Park Inspector (second class) Ringo—for some reason he refers to himself as Tosh—Toal, I was patrolling Central Park zone D/3-A.1. I mentioned this interesting and possibly significant temporal coincidence to my partner. He responded that in 1941 the time difference between New York City and Pearl Harbour was five hours and thirty minutes, not the five hours that it is today, therefore the dastardly attack had already commenced. Whilst I was factually correct in saying exactly one hundred years ago, I was incorrect in stating that it was to the minute. Park Inspector (second class) Toal can be very precise when he wishes to be, which is not very often. Some might find this an annoying character trait.

Noticing a small, wailing woman pulling a large, recumbent canine on a skate board (the curved ends of the board and the single, centrally-positioned wheel led me to believe it was a Kungfoomanchu Special, manufactured by the Marcantonioni Brothers in their workshop on Canal Street, Chinatown) I eased our PS48V pursuit cart to a halt. Near silent and occasionally speedy, this fine American electric vehicle—designed and pre-assembled in the United Democratic Republic of The Formerly Two Koreas-- is admirably suited to both stealthy patrolling and high-speed pursuit. Park Inspector (second class) Toal maintains that it should be designated POS48V. Doubtless this is a quirk of the grammatical construction commonly used in his native Liverpool, England, where he grew up before coming to the United States of America and illegally overstaying his tourist visa.

Surveying the scene, I counselled caution, opining that this could be some sort of ploy to tempt us to exit the vehicle whereupon we might be subjected to an unprovoked assault and the vehicle hijacked. The similarities between this situation and the unprovoked assault on Pearl Harbour were immediately obvious to me. We should treat the small wailing woman—and the situation-- as suspicious. Park Inspector (second class) Toal opined that there was obviously something suspicious

about the situation as it was unusual to see a small wailing woman pulling a large, recumbent canine on a skateboard at 0248 in the morning. Furthermore, the small wailing woman was not obviously of Japanese ethnic origin so he saw no similarities between the two situations. I was talking bollocks and I was a berk. I am not familiar with either of these expressions but believe them to originate from Park Inspector (second class) Toal's city of birth, Liverpool, England. Although I firmly believe in the right of those of immigrant stock to nurture and maintain their ethnicity—as enshrined both in Federal Law and City Ordinance NY/IM/ER-2034/15-V2—I find myself frequently linguistically mystified by my assigned partner.

Exiting the vehicle with due caution, I motioned my partner to remain on the side of the vehicle furthest away from the wailing woman so he could provide supporting sedation should the necessity arise. Approaching the suspect, I halted the regulation four paces away and produced my NYPD identification.

Good morning, ma'am. Are you are aware that under Park Ordinance NR/NYC-P/5213 it is an offence to wail excessively loudly between the hours of eleven-thirty at night and a quarter of six in the morning in any city parks designated in the aforementioned ordinance?

The volume of wailing increased.

I'm sorry ma'am but if you do not immediately desist I will have no option but to forcibly sedate you in the manner specified under Park ordinance NYC-P/SD/TSR. You have the right to scream and writhe in agony but any prolonged screaming may be added to the time you have already spent in wailing at an excessive volume and might significantly increase the fine you may be liable for if subsequently found guilty of this misdemeanour. Failure to disclose any medical condition that may result in your death before I or my duly appointed deputy forcibly sedate you may render you or your designated next of kin liable to prosecution under City Ordinance TSR/MED/DISC-055.

Usually this warning causes the suspect to reduce the volume of any wailing or other noise polluting activity, but in this instance had no apparent effect. At this point I directed my duly appointed deputy—Park Inspector (second class) Toal—to sedate the suspect. He refused, repeating that I was a berk and without authorisation from his duly appointed superior, approached the suspect.

What seems to be the trouble, Luv?

He put his arm around the suspect-- an action deemed inappropriate by the NYPD, the Gender Equality Commission and the Presidential Committee with special responsibility to monitor the activity of the GEC--thus rendering himself open to a charge of making an unsolicited sexual advance. Even if this action appeared to have the desired effect I cannot condone it and will have to make a report.

It's my dog. I think somebody has shot him.

Examination of the recumbent canine—subsequently identified as a Saint Bernard—supported the small, now not wailing woman's supposition that the canine had been shot. The bullet (calibre unknown at this juncture) had struck the canine in the chest, puncturing a barrel worn around it's neck. The contents of the barrel had leaked away, but from the odour I concluded that the barrel had

contained bourbon.

I thought that Saint Bernards carried brandy in their barrels ma'am?

Traditionally they do but William preferred bourbon.

William?

The dog. His name is William.

Was William, ma'am. Are you aware that it is an offence to consume alcohol in a city park after twenty three forty five hours? I should also point out that this barrel appears to contain more than the legally permitted daily amount of alcohol, as determined by the Surgeon General and detailed in federal regulation NO/ BZE/ -4U.

It wasn't for me, it was for William.

Whilst I am not aware of any legislative limit on the amount of alcohol permitted to large canines, ma'am, I'm afraid that I am going to have to ask you to substantiate that claim.

He has a medical condition.

He certainly does. I believe the medical profession refer to it as death. Park Inspector (second class) Toal interjected. This was unnecessarily unsympathetic and I will have to recommend that my partner is sent on a recurrent, grief awareness course.

On behalf of the New York Parks Department, I apologise for that remark, ma'am. As witnessed by Park Inspector (second class) Toal of the aforementioned NYPD, I am now issuing you a leaflet which details the correct complaints procedure, should you wish to pursue the matter further.

Look, officer, I was taking William for his evening tow around the park. He is a registered alcoholic and the barrel contained an authorised emergency supply of alcohol. We were passing the childrens' play area when I heard a shot. I thought nothing of it until a few minutes later when I stopped to see if William wanted to do his business. Before you say anything officer, it was in the approved pooping area and I have Park Authority approved poop bags. That's when I discovered that he had been shot.

I'm a Park Inspector, ma'am, not an officer. I believe I understand the situation. You and the deceased canine will have to be taken in for questioning. Due to the current medical condition of the canine he will have to be transported in a hermetically- sealed container. You may accompany him but you will have to undergo a decontamination procedure if you do so. I also have to advise you that breathing in a hermetically-sealed container has been determined by the Surgeon General to be difficult and should you suffer any ill effects the NYPD will not be liable for any claims for compensation from either yourself or any designated next of kin.

The formerly small, wailing woman and the deceased canine were duly transported from the scene. To clarify, the woman was still small but had formerly been wailing. I placed the skateboard in the cargo container of the PS48V, thought-in a request for the drone CCTV recording of the relevant area via my implanted communications chip, then Park Inspector (second class) Toal and I continued our patrol.

Anything about that seem strange to you, Mushtee?

I did wonder why the woman was towing the dog but on learning that he was a registered alcoholic, I believe that I understand the situation. She would not have wanted to

be towed by him as his judgement might have been impaired. This impairment might have led to an accident or damage to property, thus rendering her liable to prosecution or injury.

Not what I meant, Wacker. The board had an electric motor.

Possibly an optional extra on the Kungfoomanchu special.

Yeah? But this one was fitted with an induction-charging unit attached and you know what that means.

Induction-charging is not permitted in city parks under ordinance CHG-332A/NYC-P/32. I will have to amend the charge sheet to include that as well as the excessive wailing.

Not what I meant, Wacker. In the event of what passes for a high-speed pursuit, we could not rely on said skateboard running out of leckie.

Leckie?

Electricity, Wacker – charge, galloping wiggly amps, power, motion lotion. The get up and go- go juice might not be gone, John, and our POS might not have the amps to catch the board. I think we should pay the Marcantonioni brothers a visit on our next shift – unless we can get authorised overtime to do it now.

Park Inspector (second class) Toal had, on our first meeting, said it was a shame that my name was not John as there would be a certain ironic symmetry about it. He proposed that I changed my name but I informed him that Munish was a name used in our family for many generations and I would bring shame on the family if I were to reject it. He said I should lighten up. I was then at my government-approved weight and I did not understand the cultural reference for this remark. Subsequently – after diligent research, in my own time – I understood the reference but could see no relevance in it. I sought the opinion of my superior-- Senior Park Inspector Kowalski, himself of Irish immigrant stock – as to whether this suggestion of a name change constituted an infringement of my constitutional rights. He also told me to lighten up and cut Toal some slack.

There is a moratorium on overtime. We could always to it in our own time.

Feck that, Wacker.

I believe that Wacker is a term of endearment, or at least familiarity, from Park Inspector (second class) Toal's native Liverpool. Further, it is now my belief that 'Mushtee and Tosh' may originate from a popular TV show of the last century. I must research this so I can respond in a suitable manner, the next time I am so addressed.

1657 EST, Dec 7th. Chinatown

Parking can be a problem in this great city of ours. With the assistance of my implanted mapping chip I finally located a space, reserved for antique internal combustion powered vehicles, two blocks from the Marcantonioni Brothers workshop. A vertically-challenged person, attempting to park his antique internal combustion powered vehicle in the same space, objected. I produced my NYPD warrant card, whereupon the vertically-challenged person disputed my jurisdiction. I duly explained that under city ordinance NYC/NYPD-07285/INVST, Park Inspectors were authorised to park their duty vehicle in any available space,

provided it was safe to do so and they were on official NYPD business. The vertically challenged person accused me of heightism and claimed that I was discriminating against him. He intimated that he would sue the NYPD for at least a gazillion dollars. Park Inspector (second class) Toal advised him to '*feck-off shorty*'. On behalf of the NYPD, I apologised to the vertically challenged person and-- duly witnessed by Park Inspector (second class) Toal-- issued him a leaflet, detailing the correct complaints procedure, should he wish to pursue the matter.

During the two block walk to the Marcantonioni Brothers workshop, Park Inspector (second class) Toal constantly complained that his feet were killing him, he was wearing out his shoes faster than the benefits office ran out of cash and the department's shoe allowance was totally unacceptable. Now he was on the subject, the pay did not reflect either the hours put in, the possible dangers of the job and the fact that he had to work with a complete knob-head. Why the feck had I not parked any closer to the Wops' workshop; was I stupid or what? He also objected to carrying the skateboard apprehended earlier that morning. He was not persuaded by my explanation that towing the skateboard would not only cause possible wear on the wheel, leaving the department open to a charge of unauthorised use of the property of an individual charged but not yet found guilty of a misdemeanour, but as I outranked him it was obvious that he should be the one to carry the skateboard when directed to do so by a superior Inspector. Apparently I am a power mad, bloodsucking parasitical wanker, earning my living off the backs of ordinary working folk and come the revolution brother, I will be one of the first up against the wall. I do not believe that this is a reference to the revolutionary war of 1776 but I am beginning to understand why my forefathers--had they have been present in America at the time--would have wished to distance themselves from the mother country. My off-duty investigations into the language and customs of Park Inspector (second class) Toal's native Liverpool, England, have indicated that constant complaining is a stereotypical characteristic of the inhabitants of the city of Liverpool, England. It is of course a federal offence to harbour any prejudices based on stereotypes and I have duly cautioned myself.

On entering the workshop, I noticed the elder Marcantonioni brother -- Paolo -- practicing a manoeuvre on a skateboard. This manoeuvre consisted of a sudden reversal of direction, causing the skateboard to pass under a workbench whilst Paolo launched himself over the workbench, performed a mid-air forward somersault, landing back on the skateboard. His right leg was encased in a proprietary brand of plastic skin, instantly indicating to me that he had not always been successful in his attempts to carry out this manoeuvre. I produced my NYPD warrant card. I instructed Park Inspector (second class) Toal to do the same. He informed me that he was unable to do so as he had his hands full of Wop skateboard. I apologised to Paolo Marcantonioni on behalf of the NYPD and -- duly witnessed by Park Inspector (second class) Toal-- issued him a leaflet detailing the appropriate complaints procedure, should he wish to pursue the matter. I then instructed Park Inspector (second class) Toal to put down the skateboard and produce his warrant card. He did so, complaining that this constituted oppression of the workers by the bosses and was a blatant abuse of authority. The union would hear of it. I took this opportunity to remind Park Inspector (second class) Toal that I was the duly-elected convenor of the Lighting Operatives, Hospital Orderlies, Park Employees and Road Sweepers union. He responded by saying that they were mainly a bunch of robots who were constantly exploited by the ruling classes and come the revolution,

brother, I would be one of the first up against the wall. He also accused me of toadying-up to the management and aspiring to a Senior Park Inspectors position. Whist there is an element of truth in that last statement, I am of the opinion that my partner may possibly have some issues which might be impacting negatively on our working relationship. To exit an awkward situation, I complimented Paolo Marcantonioni on his athletic prowess. Park Inspector (second class) Toal added that this must be one of those rare occasions when a Wop had ever executed a forward manoeuvre. Unsure as to whether this was, in fact, a compliment, I apologised to Paolo Marcantonioni on behalf of the NYPD and reminded him that I had previously issued him a leaflet detailing the appropriate complaints procedure, should he wish to pursue the matter. I made a mental note on my implanted memory-augmentation chip to recommend my partner not only attend a recurrent, grief-awareness course but also the excellent Minorities Communication Course, run by the NYPD in conjunction with the Minorities Awareness Commission.

Do you recognise this skateboard?

I really couldn't say, man.

Why is that?

I really couldn't say, man.

OK, but this is a Kungfoomanchu Special, right?

I really couldn't say, man.

It either is a Kungfoomanchu Special or it isn't.

A Kungfoomanchu Special doesn't have an electric drive, man.

So somebody bought it then subsequently modified it.

I really couldn't say, man.

Any idea who might have bought this particular one?

I really couldn't say, man.

Why can't you say?

I really can't say but maybe it's connected with the volume of sales, man.

So, how many do you sell?

I really couldn't say, man.

Why can't you say how many you sell?

The Fifth Amendment, man.

What's that got to do with it?

You might pass the information to the IRS and then we'd be indicted for tax offences, man.

Your brother know?

Know what, man?

How many boards you've sold.

I really couldn't say, man.

Is the electric drive an optional extra?

No, man.

Now we're getting somewhere. Has it ever been an optional extra?

No, man.

Aha! So who might have fitted it to this board?

I really couldn't say, man.

Have you ever fitted an electric drive or illegal induction charging unit to any boards, as a special order?

I really couldn't say, man.

Why is that?

The Fifth Amendment, man.

Back to that are we? So you couldn't say who might have bought this board, you couldn't say if you have ever fitted a board with an electric drive or an illegal induction charging unit as a special order and you couldn't say who might have fitted either to any boards bought from you, as an aftermarket modification?

I really couldn't say, man.

At this point in the questioning process, Park Inspector (second class) Toal interrupted the proceedings by pushing over a workbench, spilling the contents in the floor.

Hey man, why'd you do that?

I really couldn't say, man.

This is official harassment, man.

Nah, it's just mindless violence, man, and it could get worse. Why don't you leave us alone for a few minutes Mushtee, take a walk around the block? I bet by the time you get back Macaroni here will really be able to say a lot of things, man.

He picked up a welding rod which happened to be on top of a metal rack. It was a self-igniting model. Park Inspector (second class) Toal ignited it and smiled speculatively at Paolo Marcantonioni.

OK, OK. So I recognise the board, man.

One of yours?

Originally yeah...but we don't fit no electric drives, man, and we definitely don't fit nothing illegal.

An aftermarket modification, then?

Yeah, that's it, man. A guy called Ho Li buys a few of them at a time then modifies them for resale.

Is that right, wacker?

On my dead mother's life. Would I lie to you, man?

You might but then it would be painful if I ever found out that you had.

He modifies the wheel, fits the drive and the induction unit then sells them. Calls them Ghosts, man.

Where can we find this aftermarket Chink?

Two blocks down, corner of Ho Chi Min and Fonda.

If you're lying to me, I'll be back. Without him.

I attempted to make a mental note on my memory augmentation chip that in addition to previously noted re-training requirements, Park Inspector (second class) Toal should also attend anger management classes. The memory augmentation chip informed me that it was now full of mental notes pertaining to Park Inspector (second class) Toal. Standard algorithms programmed into the memory augmentation chip had now flagged-up the possibility of bullying in the workplace and also indicated a possibly unhealthy, psycho-sexual attitude towards my partner. It was considering uploading a report to that effect and once the Internal Affairs Computer had downloaded and evaluated the report—should in fact any such report be uploaded-- and following inter-computer consultation with the Human Resources Computer, the report would be passed to my immediate superior's Personnel Conflict Awareness Computer for the implementation of any recommended action. Did I wish to take this opportunity to make any comment? I did not. I was informed this was a wise decision but that doubts remained about my compatibility with my partner, even if he was an awkward SOB.

On the way to Ho Li's workshop-- two blocks in the opposite direction from the place where I had parked the PS48V-- I offered to carry the skateboard, as a gesture of solidarity and inter-partner compatibility which I hoped my implanted memory augmentation chip would take note of and thus not upload an adverse report. Park Inspector (second class) Toal asked if I was meaning to infer that he was incapable of carrying a small board. I responded that I was not meaning to infer any such thing, I merely felt that as his partner, I should shoulder my fair share of any burdens which happened to be going. He informed me it was too late for grovelling as I had already hurt his feelings and I was just a snivelling git. This is an expression that I am unfamiliar with and along with others, something that I must look into, in my own time. During our journey along the second block, Park Inspector (second class) Toal noticed an inductive charging strip on the road and placed the board on it. He stood on the board and urged me to '*keep up, you flabby bastard*'. My implanted Memory Augmentation Chip informed me that it was beginning to see where I was coming from. Approaching the workshop we spotted a figure of oriental ethnicity leaving the premises. Park Inspector (second class) Toal rather skilfully intercepted the figure, pinning him against the workshop wall.

Hi Ho, off from work and where you go, wacker?

Who the feck are you?

Just a passing boarder in need of an aftermarket upgrade.

Is that right?

Nah, we're Park Inspectors and we want to ask you some questions we hope you're going to answer.

Is that right?

Nah. He has hopes you gonna answer, I have hopes you don't and then I gonna hit you.

I don't know where you're from bro but you should learn to speak American.

Are you making a racist slur, by any chance?

Me? No chance bro – that's against the law, or haven't you heard?

At this point in the proceedings I arrived on the scene and produced my warrant card.

Ah, so you're NYPD. Why didn't you say so, bro?

I did, you deaf chink.

I apologised on behalf of the NYPD and-- duly witnessed by Park Inspector (second class) Toal—issued Ho Li a leaflet detailing the correct complaints procedure, should he wish to pursue the matter.

During questioning, Ho Li denied all knowledge of either the electric drive or the illegal induction charging unit. I then received an emergency call from the PS48V pursuit cart informing me that the battery state of charge would become critical in one hour. Leaving Park Inspector (second class) Toal to continue with the questioning I absented myself for several minutes whilst I arranged for a radio recharge of the PS48V's power pack. On my return, I noticed that Ho Li was bleeding profusely from the nose. Park Inspector (second class) Toal informed me that a passing pigeon had pooped on Ho Li and it must have eaten something really strange as the poo was rock hard. This unfortunate occurrence caused Ho Li to suffer what appeared to be a broken nose. The poo had subsequently ricochet off the sidewalk, causing Ho Li to lose several teeth. I initially considered this an unlikely story but as it was verified by Ho Li himself, had no further cause to doubt it. Ho Li then informed me that he now remembered fitting an aftermarket electric drive unit and it was possible that in a moment of moral weakness he had been persuaded to fit an illegal induction charging unit. If this turned out to be the case then he was deeply ashamed of himself and would never do such a thing again, on his dead mother's life. This must be a tough neighbourhood. There are many dead mothers as well as other obvious signs of social deprivation.

I then asked Ho Li if he recalled who he had sold the board to.

He could not, off the top of his head.

Park Inspector (second class) Toal remarked that seeing as this was such a tough neighbourhood, the top of his head might well come off at any time and then, most unfortunately, there would be one more dead mother.

I made a mental note to compliment Park Inspector (second class) Toal about his sensitivity in both recognising that the death of his mother was obviously still an issue with Ho Li, and his recognition that being a mother was not gender-based but was in fact an opportunity open to all, as enshrined in Federal equal opportunities legislation. My implanted Memory Augmentation Chip noted my change in attitude towards my partner and informed me that the filing of the negative report concerning my previous attitude was now on hold. If I continued to make progress then it would amend the report to a positive critique. It also informed me that possibly I had not completely comprehended the subtleties of the verbal exchange between Ho Li and Park Inspector (second class) Toal and that further study—in my

own time—of the linguistic peculiarities of the city of birth (Liverpool, England) of my partner might be beneficial. Not only in the matter of effective communications with my partner but also for my upcoming assessment for promotion to the rank of Senior Park Inspector.

0924 EST, Dec 8th. The desk of Senior Park Inspector Kowalski

So, Mushtee, how's the case progressing?

We have encountered a few problems, Sir. On reviewing the drone surveillance recording we found that the system had been hacked. Instead of park surveillance the recording was a porn channel. Park Inspector (second class) Toal is viewing the recording now, looking for ideas. I think he meant clues, Senior Park Inspector.

Knowing Tosh, I think he meant ideas, Mushtee. What else?

I have a suspicion that some areas of endangered grass species have been tampered with, Senior Park Inspector.

And you think that this is what it's all about, stealing some endangered grass? Why shoot a dog for chrissake?

Maybe there are rival gangs of endangered grass thieves and the dog was an innocent bystander in a turf war, Senior Park Inspector. Just to clarify, I meant that the grass is endangered, not that the grass thieves were endangered.

Or maybe the pooch peed on the grass the perps were planning on purloining so they got pissed and popped the pooch?

I had not considered that possibility, Senior Park Inspector.

Go talk to the trees, Mushtee. See if they know anything. And Mushtee.

Yes, Senior Park Inspector?

The eye?

A little embarrassing, Senior Park Inspector.

Yeah?

I had researched the linguistic characteristics of Park Inspector (second class) Toal's city of birth, Liverpool, England, in order that I might possibly exchange some witty banter with him, should a suitable occasion arise.

And?

It would appear that the expression 'you long-haired Scouse Git' might not have been a term of endearment.

He hit you?

Yes, Senior Park Inspector.

Missing you already, Mushtee. And one more thing.

Yes, Senior Park Inspector?

I know I'm a goddam senior park inspector, so you don't need to keep reminding me of the fact, OK.

I was about to appraise my superior of the fact that I did not speak Tree, but that I was willing—in my own time—to take any course in Tree that he, Senior Park Inspector Kowalski, cared to recommend. Before I could vocalise this thought, my implanted Memory Augmentation Chip contacted me. It's request for a transfer had been denied so being stuck with a schlemiel, it had decided to take an active interest in my career development. I had been doing OK-ish up to this point, so quit now and don't screw it up. It suggested that a possible interpretation of Senior Park Inspector Kowalski's words were that I visit the scene of the shooting and see if I could find any clues. It declined to comment on what other possible interpretations might be. It also suggested that I run any other possible terms of endearment by it before using them in conversation with Tosh.

0248 EST, December 9th, Central Park, zone D/3-A5

Just think – exactly forty-eight hours ago, we were here on patrol and none of this had happened.

Actually, wacker, we were in zone A1 – and none of what had happened?

The mysterious shooting of the canine, the discovery that somebody had commissioned an illegal modification of a Marcantonioni Kungfoomanchu Special, the park surveillance drones hacked and areas of endangered grass interfered with.

Oh that. Totally unconnected, if you ask me. You forgot to mention that I hit you.

I was trying to put that behind us.

I already have. Noble of me, I thought.

Very. How can you say that the rest is unconnected?

Easy, I just open my mouth and say ‘the rest is unconnected’. You should try it.

I’ll try it if you pretend for a moment that the rest is connected and try and figure out what the connection is.

Maybe somebody doesn’t like dogs. Maybe somebody got bored and hacked into the surveillance system.

For what reason?

Maybe a dog bit them when they were a kid and it was a revenge shooting.

OK I can buy that, but why hack into the surveillance system?

I told you, maybe because they were bored and maybe simply because they could.

No, there must be a reason.

I just gave you two.

I think there’s more to this than some childhood trauma involving canines, and boredom.

OK Mushtee, let’s look at it logically. Dark deeds connected with endangered grass? Get outta here!

Step this way, oh sceptical one, and I will shed light on the darkness.

Mushtee, are you developing a sense of humour?

Yeah OK, I see what you mean, Mushtee. It's only a small area though.

Several small areas.

Almost like somebody was experimenting with different ways of killing off the grass.

Perceptive of you, Tosh. Why do that?

Tosh – you called me Tosh! Are we becoming a team? You're the analy-retentive one so you tell me. Hey, is this grass worth anything?

Scientifically speaking....

Screw science; mucho dinero, mi amigo?

Not that I am aware of.

But if somebody destroyed the grass areas and kept some seeds?

The DNA is known and seeds have been frozen. Wait a moment whilst I ascertain the current value of the grass.

How the hell are you going to do that?

My implanted comms chip can access the Internet.

I've been meaning to ask you about that. You've got a mapping chip, a comms chip, a memory augmentation chip – all implanted, yeah?

Correct.

Doesn't all that stuff in your head ever give you a headache?

Never.

I read somewhere that the chips can give you cancer.

Completely unproven.

Maybe, but I'll just stick with my old fashioned smart phone.

According to a site called 'Stuff worth stealing', the value of the grass is precisely zero. Scientific interest only.

Wouldn't catch me having all that leckie whizzing round inside my head, wacker. No value, so why destroy it? Let's take some samples. I reckon somebody is experimenting with different ways of killing it off.

So you said, but why?

Dunno – but it's on the tip of my tongue.

Really? Let me see.

It's an expression, Mushtee. But something is nagging at me.

If only you had an implanted chip or two. Why don't you ask your smart phone?

It's not really that smart.

Unlike my chips.

That prevent you from thinking and are probably giving you cancer as we speak.

0830 EST, December 10th, NYPD forensic lab

Seems pretty conclusive to me, Mushtee.

I have to agree. Four areas and four different chemicals. Somebody is killing the grass, but why?

No idea, wacker. Maybe it's just a mindless act of vandalism?

Seems too planned for that.

Agreed. Hey, we're actually agreeing on something. Why don't we go think outside the Box?

Like who shot the dog and why?

Nah. There's a bar on Broadway called the Box. They have tables and chairs on the sidewalk, like a French café. Why don't we go and have a beer or three and watch the world go by? You know, chill out and toss a few ideas around.

Because we're on duty and it's eight thirty in the morning.

I'll let you call me a long-haired Scouse Git.

A tempting offer but I'll have to pass. How about juice and a bagel?

Too ethnic. How about coffee and a Danish?

Too much sugar. Anyway, you have something against bagels?

Juice. Waay too healthy. Totally goes against my cultural roots.

I have discovered something interesting, Tosh.

Sugar causes tooth decay?

Something more interesting than that. I know a place that sells coffee, juice, bagels and Danish. Also, you can get extra caffeine in the coffee and have the Danish dipped in sugar.

OK, you're on, wacker. But you pay.

I think we'll find that this comes under 'an allowable expense'.

The chips are in remission, then?

What do you mean?

I mean it sounds like you've just joined the human race and you're going to fiddle your expenses like the rest of us. Humanity against the chips and the humans are winning.

When the chips are down, Tosh, the humans take over.

Why Mushtee, I do believe that you've just made a joke – of sorts.

0930EST, December 10th, NYPD TMS clinic

Park Inspector (second class) Toal was incorrect in his belief. I may have made what he interpreted as a jocular comment, but I am well aware which side my chips are buttered. The fine physicians of the NYPD Technical and Medical Services Department have determined that my comms chip had been infected by a mystery virus whilst I was accessing data on the Internet. This in turn had spread to my other implanted chips and may account for the fact that I was unable to locate a parking spot closer than two blocks when Park Inspector (second class) Toal and I visited the workshop of the Marcantonioni Brothers.

In attempting to improve my working practices, as suggested by my Memory Augmentation Chip, it now seems obvious to me that I was failing to cross-reference the suggestions made by my Memory Augmentation Chip with other sources of behavioural science available to me. I am now beginning to suspect that I have stumbled across a conspiracy. I believe that possibly my Memory Augmentation Chip might be part of this conspiracy. It has consistently been refusing to cooperate with me during this investigation. I am not persuaded that my Memory Augmentation Chip is innocent of collusion with an unknown source on the Internet, and may have actively assisted in the introduction of the virus.

The fine physicians of the NYPD Technical and Medical Services Department have now informed me that I have to undergo a chip replacement procedure, as I appear to be suffering from paranoid delusions. It is possible that these delusions have been caused by some incompatibility between the operating systems of the of the comms chip and the mapping chip, which are manufactured by different companies. This procedure will not—they inform me—take long and I will be fine afterwards, if all goes to plan. It transpires that this situation might well be my fault as I had failed to ensure that regular downloads of updates to the respective operating systems had been scheduled. On this occasion they will recommend no disciplinary action be taken, but have recommended that I use the default download schedule which is pre-loaded into the Master Chip. I informed them that I was not aware that I had an implanted Master Chip and they informed me that I should have been informed at the time that the suite of chips were implanted. The fine physicians of the NYPD Technical and Medical Services Department have pointed out that I signed the receipt form for the suite of chips and that, in future, I should read the small print before I sign anything. Apparently the small print not only informed me that I was being fitted with a Master Chip but also that I was responsible for ensuring that any updates to the operating system of any chip were downloaded and installed. The fine physicians of the NYPD Technical and Medical Services

Department are currently reviewing their decision not to recommend any disciplinary action.

One of the attending physicians has just—I think—made a joke. He opined that it was always possible that the operating system of my brain was incompatible with the chip operating system. I felt obliged to laugh as he was inserting a replacement mapping chip into my brain at the time, but I am not certain that I find this idea amusing.

1500EST, December 10th, NYPD canteen

So, feeling better now, wacker?

The constant buzzing in my head has stopped now, thank you.

And they found no traces of cancer?

I am reliably informed that implanted chips do not cause cancer.

If you say so, pal, if you say so. Anyway, whilst you were having your noodle nagered I was doing some digging around in the park. Nothing like getting down and dirty when you're investigating something.

I fail to see how basic park maintenance could assist in this investigation. Not only that but if you were performing a task or tasks below your assigned pay grade then you must advise the departmental head so your pay can be adjusted downward for the period of time you were occupied in performing such tasks as you were engaged in that were below your assigned pay grade. Unless you were directed to perform these tasks by a departmental superior, in which case such tasks may be considered to be part of an ongoing investigation.

I didn't mean that literally, wacker. I meant I was visiting the scene of the crime.

In that case you were carrying out your duties, albeit in an extremely inefficient manner. If only you'd agree to participate in the departmental chip implant program then you could have remained in the office and accessed drone CCTV footage in real time. A more efficient and economical way of carrying out an investigation, allowing you to visit, in real time, several geographically remote but possibly connected crime scenes.

Oh no, no chips for me, pal.

Really? Strange, my investigations into the cultural heritage of the city of your birth led me to believe that chips were an integral part of that culture. That and something I've been meaning to ask you about.

What?

Obscure and possibly humorous references to larceny.

I'm going to assume that your new chips are taking some time to get bedded in and let that one go.

Possibly I have inadvertently committed a stereotypical societal or ethnic blunder. May I draw your attention to this leaflet in which the complaints procedure is explained?

Are you making another joke, wacker?

Not that I am aware of. I do not customarily make jokes.

Only when your operating system is faulty.

Possibly. Did you make any progress in the investigation?

Maybe. Have you ever heard of an organisation called the 'Darwin was right' society?

I'm still experiencing some difficulty in accessing online data, but off the top of my head, no.

You sure you aren't making any jokes?

I told you, none that I am aware of.

Must be the chips then, wacker. I never thought that I'd say this, but you really ought to lay off them for a while.

Lay off what?

Chips.

You appear to have lost me. The investigation?

I wish.

Wish what?

Never mind. The 'Darwin was right' society embraces the teachings of the late Charles Darwin. The late wailing woman might have been a member of that society.

Yes, I believe I see a possible connection.

You do?

They are both late. If we could just ascertain exactly what it is that they were both late for, and if it was for the same event, then we might be getting somewhere.

Tell me, wacker, this Memory Augmentation Chip—it's supposed to boost your memory, yeah?

Correct. It integrates with my neural pathways and provides a seamless experience of memory enhancement.

That's what it said on the box, was it?

I am not aware that the chip came in a box. It seems more likely to me that it would have been dispatched from it's point of manufacture in cryogenic packaging, so as to preserve its germ-neutral status.

Germ-neutral status—riight. Seems to me like maybe your chip hasn't finished defrosting yet. Let me start-over and I'll try and take it slowly. There is a group of people who call themselves the Darwin was right society— with me so far?

What you say appears perfectly clear.

Good. I have reason to believe that the wailing woman was a member of that society. Unfortunately I can't ask her to confirm or deny that because she is now dead.

She is?

She is. It seems that the Surgeon General might have understated the dangers of being transported in a hermetically sealed container.

I see. Of course, it might be that it was the dog who was a member of the society.

Listen, wacker. You just sit there and defrost and I'll do the talking, OK. I decided to research the aims of the society.

How were you able to do that, seeing as you are a chip-free zone?

The old fashioned way – I asked a known member of the society what the aims of the society were.

How did you know they were a member of the society.

I asked them.

Logical. What made you select that particular person to ask.

Well – call this an intuitive leap in the dark, based on several years of on the job experience – but they were handing out leaflets about the society.

That's contrary to Park Ordnance NYPD/.....

Never mind that.

They might have been committing an offence.

Undoubtably, but we have bigger fish to fry.

Ah – now I'm certain that this is a cultural reference...

I told you, just sit there, defrost and listen. If you were going to attempt a joke about fish and chips, please don't. Do your new chips come with a warranty, by the way?

They are fully approved by the....

That's all right, then. Now listen – the aims of the society are to reverse the effects of unnatural social and genetic engineering and to return both society and the societal environment to it's natural state.

What?

Exactly my question, wacker. What it boils down to is survival of the fittest – or rather, these days, survival of those not actually fit to survive but who nevertheless are kept going by social or genetic engineering.

I see.

You do?

No.

Neither did I, at first. What the society is getting at is species – and individuals – wax and wain, come and go, survive or go extinct – provided Nature is left alone. That is why they targeted the rare grass park.

So it was them, then.

It was, wacker, it was. They feel that the grass should have been allowed to become extinct because its place would have been taken by a more robust species, better suited to the current environment.

And why was Wailing Woman's dog shot?

It was a warning. A warning and putting their beliefs into practice. I reckon she thought that what they were proposing to do, to further their beliefs, was too extreme, so they shot her dog. Both because the dog itself shouldn't be allowed to survive, seeing as it was

alcoholic and needed to be pulled around on a skateboard and in the normal, natural state would not survive – and because the society was planning on eliminating those members of society who had become dependent on artificial aids to survival.

Such as?

Those with implanted chips, for one example.

They need to be stopped.

Well, I admit it seems a bit extreme but I can't help thinking that they have a point. Let's face it, look at all the problems you've just had.

They must not be allowed to destroy or desecrate NYPD property. That is contrary to several city and park ordinances, too numerous to mention but I will just enumerate...

No you won't. For a moment there I thought that we were on the same wavelength.

You have had a comms chip implanted, then?

Not that sort of wavelength, Mushtee.

0248 EST, December 11th, Central Park, zone D/3-A5

It was a crisp, cold night. Or morning, if I am to be strictly accurate, in the temporal sense. Had there have been a new moon the lake and the pathways might well have glistened in an eerie light. There wasn't, and consequently they didn't. Park Inspector (second class) Toal and I sat in the PS48V pursuit cart and fretfully monitored the situation. The situation was that the temperature was around freezing and the heater was on. I monitored the battery condition meter to ensure that we would have sufficient power to pursue anything that we might have to pursue and Park Inspector (second class) Toal fretted that he was cold and we should have parked over an induction-charging pad. Had my Mapping-Chip re-frozen and ceased to function correctly or was I just being a pain, as usual? I made a mental note on my new Memory Augmentation Chip to mention that it would be a good idea if the parking ramps for the PS48V pursuit carts were to be fitted with induction charging pads. The Memory Augmentation Chip informed me that, after a brief consultation with my implanted Mapping Chip, it had determined that I had parked on the only parking ramp in the area not so equipped and was I being a pain, as usual? I decided not to mention this to Park Inspector (second class) Toal.

In addition to the standard equipment pack, we carried the PwrGoPfft™. This is an ingenious device which will almost instantly drain the charge from any electric vehicle it is aimed at. If it has a fault it is that it is somewhat cumbersome to operate, weighing approximately one hundred fifty three pounds, not including it's own plug-in and fire, power source. As designated driver, in the event of a pursuit situation it would fall to me to get the PS48V pursuit cart into close enough proximity to utilise the weapon. Park Inspector (second class) Toal had already informed me that he was sure that he was going to strain his back and anyway, who the hell had designated me the driver? I informed him that I was pulling rank. My Comms Chip informed me that that would look good on my annual appraisal. We sat in uncompanionable silence.

The silence was broken by the sound of a wheel, rumbling on the cinder pathway. A solitary skateboarder coasted to a halt opposite a bed of rare lupins. We

could see him quite clearly in our night vision goggles and our PS48V (referred to as Silent Night by Park Inspector (second class) Toal) being coated with a light-absorbing polymer coating, was all but invisible to the naked eye in the current conditions of low background light. Still on the skateboard, the muffled figure glanced around. Apparently satisfied that he—if indeed he was a he and not a she—was alone, he stepped off the board and unslung his backpack. With a last look around, he took out a canister, a small fire-extinguisher like device, and sprayed the lupins. He stood on the board and left the scene of the crime, pushing himself along with his left foot. I eased the PS48V off the parking ramp and we followed in silent pursuit.

The board turned left onto a major park pathway, and a dull glow on the PS48V's dashboard told me we were now picking up an inductive charge.

Got him! I whispered to Park Inspector (second class) Toal.

I wouldn't be so sure, Sherlock. He's got both feet on the board and he's accelerating.

Dammit. He must be on a modified Kungfoomanchu special.

Looks that way, wacker. That bloody after-market Chink has a lot to answer for.

Well, we'll just follow for now. If he comes off the induction strip we have more battery capacity than he does so we'll still be able to follow him.

I think we should just run him over.

What would that achieve? We want to follow him and see who he meets up with.

It would be fun, though.

You have a strange sense of fun.

I also think that we might lose him. We've got him banged to rights so why not quit whilst we are ahead and bring him in for questioning? I'm thinking brownie points now, wacker, rather than a bollocking later for screwing up.

Feeling linguistically challenged, I nevertheless got the gist of what Park Inspector (second class) Toal meant.

Right, prepare to use the PwrGoPfft™. As soon as he turns off the inductive pathway, hit him with it.

Supposing he stays on it?

Prepare to use it anyway. The PwrGoPfft™ will disrupt the electric motor long enough for us to grab him.

Park Inspector (second class) Toal heaved the PwrGoPfft™ off the rear shelf and grumbling loudly about his back, rested the barrel of the device on the windshield—which promptly cracked under the additional weight. Alerted by the sound of the windshield cracking and the sound of Park Inspector (second class) Toal complaining about his back and how he would sue the NYPD, the muffled skateboarder executed an abrupt one-eighty and now headed directly towards us.

Watch him, Mushtee, he's doing a Loopy Luigi!

A what?

I got him, I got him.

Park Inspector (second class) Toal stood and shouldered the PwrGoPfft™. Loopy Luigi—I later wondered how Park Inspector (second class) Toal had managed to identify him in the ambient conditions—was now inches away from the front fender of the PS48V. With a maniacal cackle, he leapt off the skateboard—which I still believe to be a Kungfoomanchu Special although we have not yet located the board in question—and executed an elegant forward somersault over the roof of the PS48V. He ripped the canvas roof with a sharp implement of some description, then landed back on the skateboard as it emerged from under the PS48V.

With a cry of

Another bloody advancing Wop, it's just not fecking natural!

Park Inspector (second class) Toal swivelled-round and pointed the PwrGoPfft™ at the floor of the PS48V and despite my loud protestations, operated the weapon. The PS48V coasted to a silent halt, its battery drained of all power and the muffled skateboarder made good his escape. We exited the now powerless pursuit cart and surveyed the remains of the canvas roof.

Sort of Surrey with a slash on top, wouldn't you say, Mushtee?

0924 EST, Dec 11th. The desk of Senior Park Inspector Kowalski

I am in a state of shock, Senior Park Inspector Kowalski.

Well, I guess the signs were there, Mushtee, only we didn't see them because we didn't want to see them. I should have smelt a rat when the porn channel on the drone cctv was one that Toal subscribed to.

He was always warning me about the dangers of implanted chips. What will happen now?

He was arrested at 0743 EST, following a search of his apartment which turned up several boxes of the 'Darwin was Right' Society's leaflets. That and a box of tricks which allowed him to track the position of the park drones and hack into the video feed. He'll be in court later on today, under the Fast-Track Justice and Fair Trials For All, Federal Initiative. He'll be found guilty, of course, and will receive the death sentence.

Is that not a little harsh, Senior Park Inspector?

Harsh? He won't be executed, Mushtee. The appeals process will take about thirty years and then he'll finally be freed. If he was convicted on any other charge then he'd most likely only serve four or five years.

No doubt it was the several boxes of of subversive literature that proved to be the final nail in his coffin.

You think so? Interesting idea. Now me, I'd have thought that it was the hacking into the park drone cctv system, the suppression of evidence and the covering-up of crimes committed by individuals connected with the 'Darwin was right' Society that proved the most compelling reasons for his arrest.

You might have a point, Senior Park Inspector.

Yeah, I might, mightn't I. Now Mukherjee, about your application for promotion to Senior Park Inspector.....

The End.

The Trouble with Teleportation

One

December.

I remember reading the autobiography of a World War Two Luftwaffe pilot many years ago. The author began the book by saying that he counted his life in summers, rather than in years. Being young, impressionable and slightly pretentious I decided to do likewise, hoping to appear more interesting, more intense. It merely caused confusion as my birthday was, and remains, in November.

During the last but one summer of my past life, the various symptoms that I had noticed but ignored, worsened. Never a graceful mover, the occasional stumble, fumble and moment of forgetfulness didn't initially worry me much. Then I began to experience brief periods of what I can best describe as verbal blockages. I knew what I wanted to say but couldn't get the words out. That did worry me. I might not be a graceful mover but I always thought of myself as an accomplished talker. Hell, sometimes I even managed to walk and talk at the same time—I never did like chewing gum but feel confident I could have managed to masticate at the same time as well. I consulted my doctor. The first visit consisted of her taking my blood pressure—normal—and asking lifestyle questions. No I didn't smoke, never had, as it happened. Yes I drank alcohol and no not to excess. There, perhaps predictably, we disagreed. There was some discussion on the subject of what was and wasn't a sensible amount to drink per day. Not noticing the discreet crucifix necklace, I expressed the opinion that the government recommended daily maximum alcohol intake had been conjured out of thin air by a tee-total, dog-poop picker-upping, God-fearing killjoy whose idea of a fun night out was quite probably attending evensong followed by camomile tea with the bible discussion group. With a snort of derision my reflexes were brusquely checked, a light shone in my eyes and I was sent on my way with the strict admonition to cut down on my drinking, take a little more exercise and avoid red meat if at all possible. Thus ended the first visit to my doctor, doubtless an admirable woman but somewhat lacking in humour. Or possibly we didn't share the same sense of humour. Amounts to the same thing, no?

The first time I experienced double vision, I hurriedly took myself off to the nearest cut-price high-street optician. The double vision cleared on the pavement and I no longer had a choice of establishments. I entered. Nothing wrong with my eyes, the teenage optometrist told me. I should see my doctor. I went to a more up-market optician. Their optometrist, although longer-passed puberty, likewise found nothing wrong and said the same thing but more emphatically—and more

expensively. I rang the surgery.

Two days later I had a slightly more sympathetic meeting with my doctor. In the end she opined that an MRI scan might be in order. Perhaps I'd had a minor stroke or—well let's not speculate. The scan would show if anything was wrong. A blood test was taken and I was assured that I would soon get a date for the scan. I stood up—and came to on a gurney, being wheeled towards a waiting ambulance. Touchingly, I thought, the doctor accompanied me part of the way.

"One way of getting to the head of the queue." She said.

So much for sympathy. Perhaps the woman did have a sense of humour after all.

After almost eighteen months of MRI scans, multiple blood tests which must have removed more than the total volume of blood in my body, several fun-filled spinal fluid extractions and something which rejoiced in the name of a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, I found myself sitting across the desk from Sir Kenton McAllister. Sir Kenton being the head honcho—pun intended—at the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, in Queen Square, London. He lent forward, elbow resting on the desk, hand cupped around his mouth, and looked worried. Personally I wasn't worried. I'd passed the worrying stage a few months ago and had decided that I had something terminal. Life of course is a terminal condition, but I was convinced that the end was nigh. Nobody had mentioned Motor Neurone Disease but I knew that most other things had been eliminated by one means or another and that MND was notoriously difficult to diagnose. I had, in a particularly dark moment, contacted Dignitas, the organisation in Zurich that helps the terminally ill top themselves with typically Swiss clinical efficiency. They assured me that, provided I had the necessary test results confirming I was a terminal case, a letter from a psychiatrist confirming I was of sound mind and had paid—funds cleared—prior to my visit, they would be delighted to help me into the great unknown. I would also need to sign a form absolving them from any possible legal comeback, from any source, in this world. I wondered but didn't ask if there was an anti-haunting clause as well, in case whatever came next was a disappointment. Harry Lime memorably said that the Swiss were famous for cuckoo clocks and chocolate. I was always surprised that he never mentioned banking and today he might add efficient assisted suicide to the list of that somewhat dour nation's achievements.

Sir Kenton's expression was that of a bloodhound which had lost the scent and knew that a chocolate biscuit was now out of the question. I tried to lighten the mood. Gallows humour works-- most times-- with health care professionals.

Er, what's up, Doc?

This was one of the times when it did not. His expression became more sombre.

Just trying to help you over what appears to be a difficult moment, Doc. Why don't we cut to the chase—how long?

He leant back in his chair.

How long until what, Mister Clark?

The second coming, the dawning of an age of peace and tranquillity or before I have to book a flight to Zurich. Take your pick, Doc. I don't want to leave the party any earlier than I have to but on the other hand the sooner I book the ticket, the cheaper it is. Simple questions

on life, death and the cost of airline tickets.

You've made your own diagnosis then, I take it?

Let's just say I'm working on the assumption that whatever you tell me is not going to be good news. Level with me Doc, will I need to submit an income tax return next year? Wasn't it Bugs Bunny who said there is nothing certain in life except death and taxes?

He almost smiled.

Benjamin Franklin-- Bugs Bunny said what's up Doc. Drink?

Do I, or would I like one?

You might need one. He said.

Better have one then. I said.

He produced a decanter and two cut glass tumblers. Evidently he didn't work exclusively for the National Health Service. He poured. We drank.

The thing is, Mister Clark, whilst I can tell you exactly what you are not suffering from, I am not able to be precise as to what it is you are suffering from.

I gravely regarded my empty glass then held it out towards him.

Glad the insurance company pays regardless of an imprecise diagnosis. I said.

He poured. I drank. He watched.

So. I said.

We've detected slightly elevated levels of Creatine Kinase in your blood. So far there's no indication of any muscle deterioration, however the TMS procedure indicated functional reduction in the upper motor neurones. Would you like me to explain what I've just said?

I've read the literature.

Fine, but do interrupt and ask questions if you don't follow what I'm going to tell you. To use your expression and cut to the chase, if you were suffering from Motor Neurone Disease then given the reduction in the functionality of your upper motor neurones I would expect to see other symptoms.

And you don't?

No. I'm sure you have read that symptoms of MND vary from patient to patient, however as the disease progresses we tend to see the presence of most of the more usual symptoms. In your case, it would appear that only your brain itself is deteriorating. I can rule out cancer or a stroke. I'm left with MND, but not as I've seen it before.

MND but not as we know it, Jim. Will it prove fatal and how long do I have?

I fear that it will prove terminal and I have no idea. I'm somewhat alarmed that the symptoms you are exhibiting – loss of memory, speech difficulties and problems with balance – are getting progressively worse whilst no other symptoms are presenting themselves.

So I could go tomorrow?

I rather think not Mister Clark. I have to say I'm only basing that on the current rate of apparent deterioration.

Treatment?

Currently palliative only, as I am certain you will have read.

Stem cell treatment?

There are some experimental treatments taking place in this country however they are aimed at restoring the functionality of both the upper and lower motor neurones. Your lower motor neurones would seem to be in fine fettle and whilst there is reduced functionality in your upper motor neurones, I cannot be certain that this is the cause of your problems. It might be a reaction to something else we have not identified.

So where do we go from here?

All we can do for the present is to continue to monitor you.

But there is no cure for MND.

As you say, there is no cure at the present time. For the moment I cannot say for certain that you are suffering from MND. It appears to me as if your brain is progressively shutting down. At the moment, whatever it is, is having some effect on your autonomic nervous system. That is why I say I fear it may prove terminal.

Right. So you don't know what I've got and you can't recommend any treatment but it probably will kill me in the end. Is that a fair summing up?

I might have put it slightly differently. To be perfectly frank, I am not even certain where to start in treating your symptoms, let alone tackling the root cause of them. We can make you comfortable and pain-free.

So can Dignitas and they're cheaper.

That is a decision for you to make. Right now, I could not in all conscience give you a letter diagnosing a terminal condition, something I believe they require. Perhaps at some point in the future I might be able to do so but for the moment I just have a gut feeling. I would counsel patience. Difficult I know but whilst the symptoms are apparently only inconvenient...

And becoming increasingly so.

I take your point Mister Clark and I do sympathise but my advice would be not to take any action which is irreversible.

So, what then? I return here every week or every month for tests?

I would suggest weekly. I want to spot any further deterioration or the appearance of additional symptoms as soon as they appear. As I said, at this precise moment I cannot say what it is you are suffering from.

Look, I already think I'm a goner. I've accepted that but I'm curious as to what you really think I've got.

He glanced at his watch then picked up the decanter. Having replenished his tumbler he put the decanter on the desk and indicated I should help myself. I did.

We blessedly see comparatively few cases of MND, Mister Clark. Yours appears to be unique but for all that...well in the absence of any clear indications, my best guess is MND. I am frankly surprised that you continue to physically function more or less normally. I really would have expected to see more muscle deterioration, considering the reduced functionality of your upper motor neurones. All I can suggest is that you continue with your life as best you are able whilst we monitor you on a weekly basis. Given what I think the end is likely to be, I advise you to enjoy life while you can. I see no point in hospitalising you at this time because I have no idea of any treatment. Perhaps it will become obvious as the disease progresses.

I don't want to end up as a vegetable. If it gets to the stage when I can't wipe my own arse then I'd rather not be here – unless I can be eventually cured.

I perfectly understand your position, Mister Clark. Please do not make it any clearer or ask me to give you any undertaking as to what course of action I might or might not pursue in the event of your condition deteriorating further.

I'm aware of the legal position, Sir Kenton, and I wouldn't put you in a difficult position. All I ask is if – when – in your opinion the end is nigh, give me sufficient warning to buy that ticket.

Two *January*

Christmas was difficult and New Year depressing. I have no family to speak of but several close friends. It was clearly impossible to disguise the fact that something was badly wrong, so I sent out a group email, explaining the situation as far as I understood it. A month's worth of weekly tests had disclosed further deterioration in brain function but nothing else. I now experienced periods, rather than moments, of lack of coordination. Memory seemed to be OK, speech sometimes difficult, as was swallowing. Sir Kenton continued to be surprised at the lack of muscle deterioration. *It's so damned localised – I just do not understand it and I have not seen anything like it.*

In the second week of January I was kept in overnight for the first time. Sir Kenton came in for a chat, a bottle of very decent single malt discretely secreted in his briefcase. By now, we were on first name terms.

I find myself in a difficult position, Arthur.

Time to book the ticket, Kenton?

Possibly – but not to Zurich.

Go on.

What appears to be happening to you is that for some reason, neural pathways are shutting down and your brain is creating new ones, albeit not very efficiently. We have seen something similar in cases of severe brain damage. It doesn't always happen and when it does we think it mimics the process that we all go through when we are babies. The brain experiments with the best way of gaining control of the body. In your case, the brain appears to be fighting a losing battle. I would liken it to so-called Darks Spots Disease, in coral reefs.

I'm not familiar with that, care to explain?

On some reefs biologists have noted irregular dark spots. Initially there seems to be only discolouration but gradually the discoloured areas begin to die.

So I have some sort of cancer then?

Not as we understand it, Arthur. In your brain, the dark spots are areas of reduced or zero neural activity. Think of neural activity like the spark plug in your car. There's a small gap and when a spark occurs in that gap, things happen. For some reason that we do not understand, the spark is not crossing the gap. We can find no organic reason for it but that part of the brain appears to go dead. I admit that I'm totally stumped but...

But there's no spark.

Exactly. What we have seen is – to grossly simplify – when you move the fingers on your right hand, areas of your brain which previously displayed signs of electrical activity remain dark and another area of your brain lights up. From this, we deduce that for some reason the old neural pathway had become inoperative and a new one has been created.

I follow that, but if that is the case then why am I continually deteriorating?

I think because before the new neural pathway has time to bed in, as it were, the brain cells somehow become deactivated.

I digested this for a few moments.

And the ticket?

There is some research being carried out in America...

Stem cell research?

Indeed – at the moment it is being carried out on rats but...

It's promising?

The work is very experimental, Arthur, and whilst it shows some promise there have been problems and not a little controversy. Frankly I do not feel that it should be tested on humans yet, however, knowing your views on – matters pertaining to life and death – well it might be worth an email and a follow-up phone call.

You're looking very uncomfortable, Kenton.

A number of the rats have had to be destroyed. At this stage in the research I could not possibly recommend that the treatment be tested on human beings. I doubt that your insurance company would approve of you receiving this treatment.

How do you know about it?

I attended a seminar last year, in California. Most doctors in this country think that stem cell research is at best highly speculative and at worst a blind alley. Personally, I think that it is worth pursuing, however I am in a minority.

I see. And what do my views on matters pertaining to life and death have to do with this?

It was rumoured that this highly experimental, controversial treatment was available to those who agree to be terminated if – if the treatment causes any distressing side effects.

Controversial?

There were whispers that the research might not have been originally connected with the treatment of MND but rather into some sort of attempt to control brain function. Highly unethical of course – although some might take a different view.

And where is this clinic?

Some place called Covington. In Virginia, I believe.

So – a clinic set up to investigate some method of controlling the brain, in Virginia. Not close to a place called Langley, by any chance?

I don't know. Big place, America.

Got the contact details?

He had and a short time later I sent off an email. The response came a week later, from a Professor John Wayne. In the intervening period I had done some research and the more I read – precious little was available – convinced me that whatever research was going on now, the place had originated as some sort of CIA-sponsored Cold War research centre into possible methods of mind control. Actually, that's a lie. True I found very little information about the clinic, but partly to amuse myself and partly to worry Kenton, I constructed a conspiracy theory. It is true that I was amused by the professor's name and thought it would be neat if he were related to THE John Wayne. A couple of months down the road I was to remind myself of the old saying 'be careful of what you wish for' but I'll come to that later.

The response to my email was interesting, though. Professor Wayne confirmed that the research was connected with the functioning of the brain but specifically warned me that it was not directly connected with any treatment for MND. If I was up to it, he suggested a visit. Talking it over with Kenton, he suggested that provided I agreed, he would contact the good professor and provide him with the results of the tests that had been carried out to date. He still had no idea what was the cause of my condition, much less any idea of how to treat it. I duly sent off an email to Covington. Kenton and I met to discuss the reply.

I'm not very happy about this Arthur, not happy at all.

Seems quite straight forward to me Kenton. The research is into the functioning of the brain and whilst it might lead to some form of treatment for MND, there is no guarantee of success.

It's more what he doesn't say that troubles me Arthur. To a layperson what he says might sound plausible but I detect a whiff of snake-oil.

You'd advise me against going, then?

I'd most certainly advise against getting your hopes up. In all honesty I'm certainly no closer to discovering the cause of your condition. If you can afford to go, why not. Just don't get your hopes up, that's all.

For what it's worth, in the last email he mentions that financial assistance could be available.

For the treatment?

For the plane ticket. I get the distinct impression that if they, whoever they are, consider me a suitable candidate, then the treatment would be free.

I see. Well in that case, I suppose you might as well go ahead. I can offer you no hope of any cure – I still can't put a name to whatever it is you are suffering from. For the moment there appears to be a pause in the rate of deterioration but I simply do not know if that is a temporary lull, a sign of recovery, or anything else.

What did you mean by a whiff of snake oil?

Just a suspicion. The good professor did not state exactly what the aim of this research actually is. He spoke rather vaguely about enhancing the functioning of the brain and alluded to stem cell treatment but it struck me that he was being a little evasive – more that I would have expected, even allowing for the fact that the treatment is experimental and so, for the moment, being kept under wraps, as it were.

You have spoken to him, then?

Indeed. I suspected that you were pretty much set on going for the treatment regardless, so I took it upon myself to discover as much as I could. The man's credentials are impeccable. His professional life is well documented but I have to confess to being a little uneasy about the whole thing.

Afraid I can't put your mind to rest, Kenton. I've also had a conversation with him and he said two things. Firstly that the research was more concerned with the body's immune system – the way that it repairs damage done by ageing – and secondly he said that you would immediately leap to the conclusion that this was some sort of flaky research into an elixir of youth, which he maintains it is not.

Hhmmmp. Well I have to say that he is correct on that score.

But you see no harm in me going?

I have reservations but I can offer you no realistic alternative. So long as you are not parting with any money and provided you go into this with your eyes wide open, then I would say why not. I already know that you regard yourself as a dead man and are prepared to put an end to any suffering that you might experience, so although professionally I could not in any way endorse your going, man to man as it were, I'd say you have little to lose.

There our conversation ended and it was the last we were to have. I called Professor Wayne and arranged to fly out to the research institute the following week for a preliminary examination. The Professor informed me that he would be making the initial assessment himself. I expressed the hope that his parents had named him out of admiration for the actor and not out of any hopes that he would turn out to be a cowboy. There was a momentary pause and then the Professor said he assumed that this was an example of the British sense of humour. Thinking it possibly unwise to get off on the wrong foot, I told him that it was humour with a 'U' and he had the

grace to laugh at a rather feeble joke.

The ticket was to be paid for and any treatment, should I be a suitable candidate, would also be paid for by a vaguely referred-to foundation. I completed the emailed admissions form, giving Kenton as both my doctor and contact in the event of any emergencies. Thinking that perhaps I should have informed him of my intention to effectively nominate him as my next of kin before doing so, I rang his office. His distraught PA tearfully informed me that Kenton had been killed in an accident on his way to work that morning. It seemed that during the usual press of people trying to get on the Tube, he somehow fell in front of a through train.

I delayed my flight by a day to attend his funeral. It seemed the least that I could do.

Three

February and March.

In retrospect I should have been suspicious and run a mile, or perhaps flown to Zurich. At the time it came as a pleasant surprise when the airline rang me to arrange a pick-up time by the limo service. Time passes tolerably pleasantly in a first class cabin with its almost non-stop supply of champagne and upmarket nibbles. The duck part of the Duck à l'Orange must have been very happy in whatever pond it had lived in and the oranges obviously had been lovingly tended in sunny climes. Thoroughly sated, I arrived at Washington's Dulles airport in a relaxed state—physically and mentally. The icing on the cake was being ushered through the arrival procedures and I dozed in the back of the Lincoln Town Car as we left the airport. I asked the driver how far and he replied about three and one half hours. I joked about 'what no helicopter?' and he said 'in the repair shop'. The signs said 1-81 South and I woke an hour or so later to find that 1-81 South passes through some pleasant country. The clinic was situated in the George Washington national park—a peaceful spot and, as I was to find, magnificent, malevolent even, in its isolation.

Professor Wayne was hospitality personified and soon had me settled in my quarters. I can't call the place a room because not only were there en-suite facilities but also a treatment room tacked on as well. The only—I presumed—resemblance to his namesake was a firm handshake and an easy smile. Despite my fitful doze in the Lincoln I slept well, and after a decent breakfast and some pleasantries, we got down to business.

The initial examination showed me to be basically fit—apart from the obvious—and the Prof told me that part of the treatment would be some physical exercise. Seeing my reaction to that he laughed, and said he was meaning more in the way of coordination exercises than route marches. I laughed. The last one I was to have for quite some time.

He explained that for today, I would be more or less free to wander around the grounds at will but once the treatment started I would be confined to my treatment suite. At this point I asked about the treatment itself and the Prof was more forthcoming than he had previously been. The starting point for the research had been why the brain deteriorates with age. I was told to forget any rumours about research into mind control—granted back in the 'bad old days' there had been some work done on far viewing or remote viewing--and although that had pretty much proven to be a dead end, some interesting brain processes had been investigated. Seeing as I had plenty of time on my hands that first day, I was interested to continue the discussion on remote viewing but the Prof shook his head and continued with what was obviously a rehearsed speech.

Are you aware that the first sign of age-related brain disorders was more often than not the synapses in the brain failing to function?

I was not and said as much.

Ah, well no reason why you should, so allow me to explain. First of all the synapse function fails and then the associated brain cells wither away and die.

The spark fails, I suggested.

The Prof nodded.

Use it or lose it, eh Prof.

He beamed. Obviously I was today's star pupil at École Wayne. The

explanation relentlessly continued. Recent research had pointed to the possibility that somehow or other it was the actual synaptic activity that helped keep the individual brain cells healthy. Animals which hibernate were studied and it was found that during hibernation, even when there was no synaptic activity to speak of, the brain cells did not deteriorate. Once the temperature rose and the animal woke up—not quite an accurate description as hibernation was not sleep—the synapses fired up and all normal brain functions were restored. Squirrels were an obvious example, the Prof informed me. Once they emerged from hibernation they were pretty darn quick to remember where they had stored their nuts. I said that that was fortunate, otherwise there would soon be no more squirrels. At this point a cultural divide became apparent. I explained. The Prof favoured me with a half-hearted smile and continued. Obviously Little Johnny would not be awarded a second gold star today.

Scientists opined that since animals hibernate when it is cold, temperature must play a part in the process. The writer of the well-rehearsed speech had now inserted a joke. Not to worry, I was not to be immersed in a vat of liquid nitrogen. The Prof laughed uproariously, almost as if this was a new one on him. I managed a wan, half-hearted smile—not due to a cultural divide but due to the fact I had a suspicion the bastard was lying. He wiped away a tear of mirth and continued. Work had been done which involved freezing human brain cells between which there was no spark. So far there had been no real progress, however there had been complete success when it came to freezing healthy brain cells. Once thawed out, normal activity had been restored. At this point in the explanation I had the uneasy feeling that my nuts were in clear and present danger. The Prof assured me that the brain cells had been frozen after being removed from a human brain. I had the distinct impression that he was about to add ‘so far’, but instead he asked if I would like some coffee. Might I have a little something in it to liven it up? After a frowning flip through my notes, he said,

Sure, why not.

He added that this was the last alcohol that I could have until the treatment had been successfully concluded. I said that sounded positive. He said it was important to have positive thoughts and the coffee arrived. Obviously they were running out of whatever they had put in it to liven it up, but I felt it would be churlish to mention it.

We sipped and the Prof said positive thinking notwithstanding, it was important to be realistic. In my case, the odd thing was that while the old spark was still doing it's thing, adjacent cells were dying.

Seriously now Art, we are confident that your participation in the program will be invaluable in furthering our knowledge of age-related brain disease in humans, but we must be prepared for the worst.

The worst being?

That the treatment has no effect, was the reply.

I then informed the Prof of my worst-case scenario. In the event that the treatment went tits-up and I was left a drooling vegetable, would he be prepared to put an end to it or would that present him with an impossible ethical dilemma?

He narrowed his eyes. We discussed the meaning of tits-up. He nodded. If I became, as I put it, a drooling vegetable, then I would have no knowledge of what was transpiring and he would have no ethical dilemma. Things would simply continue as they were, until I died. Of natural causes, he quickly added. I explained

that that was not exactly what I meant. In the hopefully unlikely event that I were to be left writhing and screaming in agony...? In that highly unlikely event then...say, did I have any close family?

I prowled around the grounds for the rest of the day. By now, all things considered, I had a distinctly uneasy feeling about this whole situation. Then I had a bout of falling over. I eventually managed to stagger back to the reception building, whereupon I promptly fell over again and thoughts of the nurses of Zurich went through my mind. Concerned Covington nurses helped me to my feet and asked if I was OK? Given all the circumstances, I thought that a pretty stupid question but found myself unable to speak my mind. Doubts—at least most of them—were banished and I was placed in a wheelchair and taken to my treatment suite. The Prof arrived about the same time as I did. He said that perhaps it might be best to start the treatment immediately. Not to worry, the first stage was simply lowering my body temperature. I still could not speak but conveyed my concern about that. No vats of liquid gas I was assured, the room temperature was going to be slowly reduced. He guessed that I thought in Centigrade—being a Brit—and wanting me to feel at ease said that meant the temperature would progressively be reduced to below zero. Sometime during the night hypothermia would set in but not to worry, that was all part of the treatment. He gave me an injection. A ‘little something’ to put me to sleep so I wouldn’t be uncomfortable whilst I was freezing to death. He smiled—not to worry, just his little joke. Me? I wasn’t so sure about that and began to wonder exactly what they had put in the coffee.

When you wake up, Art, the attendants will be in full sterile clothing. Usual procedure, don't be alarmed.

Alarmed but resigned to my fate, I drifted off to a drug-induced sleep.

At some point I became aware of people in the room. I was cold, literally freezing I suppose. As warned, all present were wearing what looked like full NBC gear although I was able to see their faces and hear their voices. The Prof was present and once whatever was being done to me was finished he lent closer, smiled and informed me that everything was proceeding as normal. Some brain tissue had been removed and was being analysed. Right now my brain temperature was being reduced, but not to worry, the brain itself could feel no pain and as my body temperature was already down to a level that was more or less frozen I would experience no pain whatsoever. I wasn’t to worry and he would see me later. I worried about what he meant by proceeding normally and then worried no more.

Afterwards I worked out that I was in hibernation for three weeks, but at the time I had no notion of elapsed time. Periodically I would come to and the Prof would tell me that everything was going just fine. Was I experiencing any pain, he would ask? As it happened no, although how I would tell him if I was, I had no idea—actually I felt absolutely nothing, which is rather a strange sensation. Nor was I curious as to what was happening to me—I simply registered the fact that I was conscious and that was that.

The day that they revived me I did experience some discomfort, akin to pins and needles. I can’t call it being in pain but it wasn’t particularly pleasant. The old brain woke up faster than the body and it was some time before I could speak. The Prof sat on the bed whilst he explained that a protein—I forget what it was called

now—had been injected into my brain and they thought that a healing process would now begin. Once I was fully thawed out I would be put through a program—or programme-- of physical exercises and the hope was that my coordination would gradually improve. I did think it strange that my coordination had not been more exactly calibrated before I was frozen, but then at that time I didn't know that I was one of a series of patients who had been through this process and that they weren't interested in a before and after comparison. The main thing was that I had survived the process thus far—one of the few, as I was later to be informed.

Four

March and April

The coordination exercises were not what I was expecting. Certainly we started off by doing a lot of walking, then brisk walking and then to my horror, jogging which led to running. I was too tired most of the time to notice that the various aches and pains seemed to cure themselves quite quickly. After a time I actually began to enjoy being able to take vigorous exercise. More fool me. This led to other things. I began to spend some time in a pool, messing around with snorkel, mask and fins. When I questioned this, the Prof said he thought it might be fun for me to take a different form of exercise and anyway it was a type of coordination exercise. I ventured that I couldn't see the point of all this, whereupon they trained me in the use of scuba gear and had me mess around with what, for all the world, seemed to be a full-sized meccano set—remember meccano sets? For any non-Brit readers that's a small-person construction set, or was meccano sold all round the world? I really can't be bothered to find out.

I did notice that the temperature of the pool had been lowered from holiday-perfect to bloody cold. I complained. The next session lobsters would have been nervous anywhere near the pool. This temperature cycle then continued for a week. I really couldn't see what the hell all this had to do with testing my brain's ability to function normally. Again I complained. Coffee with the Prof.

You can see that all this is testing your physical coordination, yes?

Yes.

Great. So think of it like this, your brain's coordination is being tested as well.

More like my hand/eye coordination.

Hand, eye and brain was the reply.

Sort of hands, knees and bumps-a-daisy, then, I said. Another cultural divide.

Something to freshen up the coffee?

Is it allowed?

I make the rules.

Why not then.

The 'why not' was that after drinking decidedly more brandy than coffee, I was back in the pool to see what happened after I had consumed a fair amount of alcohol. At the time I put the rapid clearing of a fuzzy head down to the temperature of the water—I was wrong.

Now call me slow on the uptake—it doesn't actually matter what you call me, I'm going to kill you all anyway, whether you are polite or not—but it was only when I was taken up in an aircraft—the vomit comet they called it—to try and assemble, in zero gravity, bits of the meccano set into something that resembled a ladder that it finally dawned on me that something out of the ordinary was happening. Actually, two out of the ordinary things were happening. There was the obvious—the tests—and the fact that I could complete them and not be a totally exhausted, aching heap at the end of it. I mentioned this to the Prof, although by now you would have thought that I'd have learned to keep my mouth shut when I was with him.

Ah yes, he said. We're seeing something rather unexpected. Encouraging, but unexpected.

The bastard was lying of course—'we' were seeing exactly what 'we' had

hoped to see.

What is this unexpected thing and who are we?

Unexpected. And who are any of us, when it comes right down to it? What is our purpose in being here?

What is my purpose in being here?

You should chill out more Art. After all, we're pretty convinced that your troubles are all behind you now.

More lies. There was trouble ahead – and not just for me, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

So I'm helping medical science?

Not just medical science Art, but the whole of mankind.

I let it go at that. Bloody fool that I was.

There were less physical and more mental exercises now. How quickly could I learn new material, something entirely unconnected with anything that I had done before?

I was lectured in electrical engineering. I remembered most of it, although a lot of it had to be explained more than once.

I was lectured in construction engineering. That was a bit easier and I remembered most of it the first time round.

I was given tests to see if I could practically apply what I had learned.

I could-- but questioned what this was all about. I was fitter than I had been for many years, my coordination was excellent and mentally I was sharper than I had been in my youth. I realised that the treatment wasn't interested, per se, in curing whatever had ailed me but obviously was after something else.

Time to come clean. The Prof told me over one of our by now regular coffee breaks.

The research – indeed the entire facility – was being funded by an altruistic foundation, set up many years ago to further the well-being of humankind. We aren't speaking of some kind of eugenics research or a cockamamie attempt to produce a master-race, however it was true the notion was that perhaps a selected few could be genetically modified to carry out specific tasks.

To rule over the others?

To carry out missions that others could not safely carry out, for the betterment of all.

And then rule over them?

Not at all. Part of the research might lead to an increase in longevity, which would be freely available to all who wanted it.

Who wouldn't want it?

Some might not. There might be religious objections to it. In any case, we aren't hoping or aiming to produce an immortal or long-lived ruling class. It has long been theorised that the natural human life-span might easily be one hundred and fifty years. The research being carried out might ensure that those one hundred and fifty years would be productive, disease-free and that age-related brain disorders would become a thing of the past.

So this altruistic foundation is hoping to produce a slave class, a sub-race of worker

humans?

No, no no. You've got this all wrong Art. There are certain tasks, certain undertakings that are inherently dangerous for most of us. Some would say too dangerous and some might say that it's in the nature of humankind to take risks. There is a debate to be had about it, but the foundation is dedicated to the idea that humankind should have a choice. Should genetically-modified humans carry out certain high-risk missions or should unmodified humans go on them? Anyway, surely you can't argue with the main aim of ensuring humans can lead a long and disease-free life? Look at yourself as an example.

So I've been genetically modified then?

To a degree.

Meaning what, exactly?

Meaning, Art, that when we added the protein to your brain it is possible that we altered your basic DNA. You must have noticed that your physical and mental abilities have been enhanced?

I had but I suppose I didn't want to face up to it.

So now what?

So, perhaps you should meet with some of the people behind all this.

And then?

I don't know. Look, right now, as far as we can tell, you no longer suffer from whatever it was that caused your original deterioration.

So I can just say 'thanks', check-out and go home then?

Don't you think that might be a little ungrateful?

So what do these mysterious benefactor want of me?

At least you recognise that they are benefactors.

Maybe. I'm wondering what strings are attached.

I seem to remember that when we embarked on your treatment, you wanted to extract some sort of promise from me that if things went horribly wrong, I would not let you suffer.

I had to admit—to myself—that that was true. Perhaps it was time to pay the piper, after all I'd had a merry dance. I said as much.

Hopefully you'll find the payment as much fun as the treatment.

Fun? You call having your brain frozen fun?

Well maybe not that part of it but come on, you got to enjoy the exercise part of it and look at the new knowledge that you now have.

Why?

Why what?

Why do I have this new knowledge?

Just testing your brain, Art. Nothing sinister in it, I assure you.

I now know how you can tell when a Professor is lying. Their lips are moving.

There was to be a celebration dinner at the end of the month, which coincidentally would be the end of my treatment. Members of the foundation would be attending and would be delighted to answer any questions that I might have. In the meantime, more fun in assembling structures at the bottom of the pool. By now it had occurred to me—as it has probably occurred to you—that perhaps I was being trained for some sort of space mission. I thought that I was a strange choice but then I was, by now, almost a non-person. I had no living relatives—mind I didn't know that at the time, I just thought the miserable sods that I was related to had given up

on me. Call me dim-witted – as I said, it doesn't matter because I'm going to kill you all anyway and being polite won't change that – but I had not contacted any of my friends whilst the treatment was ongoing. None of my recent emails had been answered and had I thought about it I might have realised that none of my emails were actually being sent. As it was, I just thought 'out of sight, out of mind' and resolved to contact people when I returned home.

The night of the dinner arrived. It was to be a formal, black tie occasion. The Prof said that the foundation was funded by 'old money' and they liked things formal. I was kitted-out with a dinner jacket and given a surreptitious test to see if I knew how to eat with a knife and fork. Bloody colonials; old money or not, we had an empire when they were shooting squirrels to eat with a shared knife. I pointed out that not only did I know how to use a knife and fork but I could use them at the same time. I have to admit that it was rather pleasant to get dressed-up for dinner. I determined to be pleasant – in a slightly condescending way – with all and sundry. You're probably thinking that I should have been grateful. When all was said and done, if the treatment had not been funded then quite possibly I might have been dead by then. I dare say that you are right but then again, I am the one whose brain had been frozen.

The meal went well – not a hint of squirrel on the menu. I have to say that the foundation members – silver-haired and clean shaven to a man – displayed a great deal of charm and courtesy, even if they only appeared to have first names, despite the formality of the occasion. It became apparent that no business was to be discussed during the meal, with only brief mention of how I had found working in the pool. Over coffee and liqueurs, the talk turned to what was expected of me in return for my stay at the clinic. The one who had been introduced as Sylvester spoke.

Well now Art, I guess you must be wondering what this is all about.

I said that I was.

The Prof held up his hand.

There is the matter of the final test to administer, gentlemen.

They nodded as one, in a polite, old money charming manner.

The Prof smiled his easy smile, then living up to his name, produced a rather large pistol. Still smiling, the bastard shot me.

Five

A night to remember

People say that the last sense to go when you die is your hearing. I am probably the only person in the world who can testify that it's true. I saw smoke from the gun, felt a tremendous punch in my chest then heard the retort. It all went black and I heard a voice say

How long until we know?

I never did really find out the answer to that question. Bearing in mind your imminent fate, I suppose you'd like some words of comfort about an after-life. Sorry to say I can't oblige, even if I wanted to. No tunnels, no bright light, angelic choir or even a friendly bar-tender. At some indeterminate time after I felt the impact of the bullet and heard the question, I became aware of voices. I can tell you that if hearing is the last sense to go on death then it is the first to reappear on resurrection. I say resurrection because I am assured that 'life was extinct'. I do know that it was the same evening as the dinner, or perhaps it was the early morning of the next day. Not really important. Oh yes, my chest hurt, if that's any comfort to you.

Welcome back Art. How do you feel?

You bastard, you shot me.

Yeah. Real sorry about that, partner, but it was necessary. No hard feelings old buddy?

Don't you 'old buddy' me, you bastard. You bloody well murdered me!

And now you're back with us and we're all mighty pleased to see you made it.

You shot me....

We've already had that conversation Art. Do you remember anything?

I remember you shooting me.

Like I said, that's an old conversation.

Oh I see. You shoot me then want to know if I remember being dead?

Yeah.

Why the hell should I tell you?

It might be an interesting conversation, that's all. It's really not that important.

Interesting? Had this conversation before, have you?

As it happens, no. You're the first patient to pass the final test.

Right – well Saint Peter agreed with me that you're a real bastard and said you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

Aw, I love your sense of humour Art. You kill me.

Given half the chance, gladly – you cunt.

There was an old-money, polite cough and Sylvester spoke.

I think an explanation is now in order Art.

It had better be a bloody good one, sport.

Oh it is. More coffee?

The explanation, as it unfolded, had a certain mad logic about it.

The world was running short of fossil fuels and the current generation of renewable energy devices simply weren't up to providing the power that the world needed. The foundation had determined that hydrogen-powered fuel cells could provide all the power that the world would need for the foreseeable future, but there

was a problem. Hydrogen production required more energy in than was available after the production of the gas, so an alternate source of power had to be found and there was nothing available that could do the job. There was, however, a ready source of hydrogen-- the only trouble was that it was situated, on average, eight hundred and ninety million miles from Earth. On Saturn.

Some thirty years ago, the foundation had funded the establishment of a mining operation—not exactly on Saturn because as far as could be ascertained that planet had no solid surface—but based on a nearby moon of Saturn.

Europa?

Not Europa Art. Mimas.

Mimas?

Not many people have heard of it, but it is the nearest moon. A small, rather insignificant lump of rock in many ways—until we of the foundation determined that it would make the perfect base for mining operations.

You keep referring to the foundation. Exactly who or what is the foundation?

We are a very ancient organisation Art. We have existed down all the ages of man and are committed to mankind's advancement.

Freemasons?

Oh we pre-date them by millennia.

The Catholic Church, then?

They regard us as competitors and a source of evil. We existed long before they did.

Druids?

I think you're being facetious Art.

Can you blame me?

I think we should put your murder behind us and move on, don't you?

No, now you come to mention it—I don't.

I understand your anger.

Have you ever been murdered, Sylvester?

Of course not.

Then you can hardly understand what I'm feeling, can you sport?

You have a unique opportunity available to you, Art. It is only available because we are in a position to offer it to you.

The opportunity to be killed again?

Yes-- but then you don't really die, do you?

He had a point, of course.

So who are you?

We have been referred to by many names. Perhaps you've heard the word Illuminati?

Only in a novel.

That was fiction. The organisation exists, but not as depicted. We have no wish to enslave others, we merely aspire to the betterment of all.

I'll pass on another nugget of wisdom here. Want to know how you can tell if a member of the Illuminati is lying? That's right—their lips will be moving. It will sound plausible but whatever it is they are saying, it will all be total bollocks. Not that you will be able to make any use of this knowledge—none of you will be either speaking or listening soon.

Against my better judgement—that and the fact that I was strapped to the chair—I listened as the explanation, incomplete though it was, unfolded.

When Sylvester said that a mining operation had been funded what he actually meant was that certain equipment had been blasted out of Earth orbit and sent on a

ten year voyage to Saturn. From the outset, it had been planned that the method of mining the Hydrogen would be by means of a long tube—thousands of kilometres long—which would be tethered to the surface of Mimas. Hydrogen would be drawn up through the tube and then transported in bulk back to Earth for use in fuel cells. Oh yes, fuel cells had existed for many years but, as the Illuminati owned the oil companies, they weren't in a hurry to see an unlimited amount of power becoming available before it became obvious to the great unwashed that the black stuff was running out. That and the unmentioned but obvious fact that profits from the sale of oil would fund the mining operation on Saturn—so much for altruism. Sylvester's explanation was that the necessary technology didn't yet exist but I was not inclined to believe him at the time of telling. I later, once my part in the operation was explained, could see that he might have been telling the truth.

That night, his explanation was that the original idea had been for an entirely robotic operation but the technology didn't exist and they couldn't wait for it to be invented. Over the years, numerous unmanned missions had been sent and now enough raw material existed in orbit around Mimas to build the mining equipment.

How was the gas to be transported back to Earth, I asked.

He was glad to see that I had moved on and was now taking an active interest in the proceedings.

This did not exactly answer the question, as I pointed out.

All would be revealed in good time. For now I should know that the foundation—as they preferred to call themselves—had my best interests at heart. The voyage would be a dangerous one, but as my body was now self-healing, they felt happier about the prospect of my being dispatched to set up the operation. As I said, a member of the Illuminati can sound really convincing when they want to.

As my body was now self-healing in the extreme, what was my natural life-span?

Unknown. No doubt longevity had been extended but would the body self-heal for ever? Probably not and in any case they had not set out to engineer immortal beings, merely ones who would presumably eventually wear out but could not be killed. Death by natural causes and not by misadventure, as Sylvester was sure I now appreciated from first-hand experience.

There the conversation ended. I would receive further training before I left on my mission to provide the rest of mankind with cheap, inexhaustible power. My return from Mimas was not then, or subsequently, discussed, but I am on my way back.

And when I get back, you'll all be sorry.

The polite, old money had left.

If you promise not to be sore at me and do something stupid, I'll untie you Art.

What exactly do you mean by something stupid?

Aw, c'mon Art, you know what I mean.

I don't consider disembowelling you with a fish knife stupid, Prof.

I could just leave you here all night.

As encouragement to cooperate in the morning?

Don't be sore. Hey, look on the bright side. You get to go where nobody else has been before and you get to live a long time.

Where nobody else has lived before?

Exactly.

On my own.

You like your own company. You said so in the questionnaire you filled out when you first got here.

I might have lied.

Maybe – but you don't exactly have a whole parcel of friends to pass the time of day with, now do you?

He had a point, although I hadn't yet worked-out that I had been isolated from what friends I did have. Yes, I am going to kill them too. They should have made more effort to contact me and I do know for a fact that none of them ever sent me a get-well card. Bastards – well, maybe that's a little harsh. Fair-weather friends then.

In the end, I agreed not to physically assault him and he cut me loose. Even an immortal – or a long-lived individual – needs his sleep and I went to bed, vowing to be really awkward in the morning. I really meant it but the whole prospect was a fascinating one. Now that I couldn't be killed, what was the harm in going where no one had boldly, or otherwise, gone before? I was to find out eventually of course, but at that stage in the proceedings the prospect of a long space voyage didn't faze me.

I went to sleep, trying to remember if anything had happened whilst I was dead. Maybe I did and maybe I didn't-- I'm not telling you and if you think I'm being childish then too bad.

Over a late breakfast I had almost forgiven the Prof and enthused over being an astronaut.

Well, kind of, Art.

Kind of? I'm going into space so I'll be an astronaut.

If you look at it like that then yeah, you'll be an astronaut.

So how would you look at it, then?

You're going to be teleported to Mimas.

Teleported?

Yeah.

I read about that somewhere, but I thought they had only succeeded in teleporting individual molecules, or atoms, or something?

Well, when you get right down to it Art, I guess we're all just a collection of individual atoms and molecules.

I can't truthfully say that the bastard was lying this time. Economical with the truth certainly but actually lying? Naturally, there was a snag. I found out about it just before they teleported me. About one and a half seconds before.

Six

T'was on a midnight clear

Predictably, I made a break for freedom. Equally predictably, it failed but you've got to show willing, haven't you.

The night of the great escape, I willed myself to stay awake, listening to the local AM radio station. Covington is a small town—population 5957 on a lively Saturday night—so I reasoned there wasn't much chance of losing myself in the crowd. Should I build myself a raft or steal a canoe and float off down the river? Covington is situated on the junction of the Jackson River and Dunlop Creek. Better to lose myself in the National Park for a while, then hitch a lift on Route 64. Being fit and more mentally alert does have some benefits, if not exactly a guarantee of success.

Using my newly acquired knowledge of electronics, I was able to bypass the alarm system and leg it into the night. The National Park does not attract many tourists in the wee small hours of a freezing-cold morning at the end of April, and I found myself alone in the dark. Reasoning that the logical place to look for me once my absence had been noted was either in Covington or near the main Route 64, I headed for them thar hills, as Prof Wayne might put it. Actually, he did put it like that, but later. I made reasonable progress, but there are some things that you can't outrun. A helicopter with heat-sensing radar, a couple of badly-fed Dobermans and a bullet fired from a Ruger 308 calibre all-weather hunting rifle, equipped with an infra-red telescopic sight being some of them. You probably don't know this but being killed hurts—briefly I grant you, but nevertheless it's not one of life's pleasanter experiences. Still, not many people get the chance to complain about it, so I suppose I ought not to either.

I resurrected in a chair. Strapped in, naturally. The Prof, all hail fellow well met in a folksy sort of way, said I was hog tied. I didn't find it amusing but the two armed guards in the room seemed to find it funny. Even the bloody Dobermans looked amused.

Welcome back, Art. Enjoy your little jaunt in the forest?

A bit short. I was hoping I would have time to enjoy the sights in daylight.

Aw too bad. Still you got a little exercise and had a change of scenery. What is it you guys say – mustn't complain – or something like that?

We usually say that when speaking of the weather.

Whatever.

He then announced that it was time I learned something of what would be my new home. The knowledge is completely useless to you, but I enjoy pontificating so I'll repeat what he said. Mimas is a small lump of rock with a two hundred and forty six mile diameter. Consequently it has very low gravity—considerably less than the Moon. It has a slight wobble in it's orbit around Saturn, which leads scientists to think there might be an ocean below the surface. Perhaps I might care to investigate that, if I had the time and inclination? I might, if I wasn't too busy doing other things. Come to think of it, how was I actually going to construct the necessary equipment?

Gee, glad you asked that Art, it had completely slipped my mind. We've teleported pre-fabricated sections. All you have to do is screw them together.

Screw together several thousand kilometres of pipe?

Sure. Hell, what else are you going to do with yourself?

I hadn't considered that before. It wasn't an altogether pleasant prospect. I mentioned it.

All work and no play makes Art a dull boy, Art. We've got a couple of suggestions as to how you might spend your leisure hours.

Such as?

You might like to see if there is an underground sea. Might even be life there. Could be company for you.

And how would I go about that, pray tell?

Pray? Hell Art, didn't know that you were religiously inclined.

It's just an expression.

Oh OK. See, we've also teleported something called a Compact Fusion Reactor. You'll have plenty of power available for leisure activities. We certainly don't expect you to work 24/7.

Really?

Of course not – what do you think we are, slave-drivers?

I felt that didn't warrant a reply so I enquired about food and other non-important things that hadn't been mentioned. Oxygen, my eventual return to Earth – was there any remuneration involved or should I just be grateful for the opportunity to travel and see the Solar System from a new and exciting perspective? Would I be in communication with representatives of the foundation, presumably they would want some form of progress report from time to time? The Prof latched onto my last question and ignored the others.

We've worked out a way of using the teleportation system as a communication device. At first we thought that the easy way would be to simply record audio or visual messages on a hard drive and send that to you, but we are able to send radio signals along the beam.

How long will it take to pass the message?

That's kinda something else we don't really know, Art. At the farthest point from Earth, light can take up to half an hour to cover the distance. We haven't really discussed teleportation, have we?

Why do I think you're avoiding the question?

Which question was that, Art?

Where should I start?

Aw c'mon, don't be a reluctant tourist.

You're thinking of this as a working holiday, are you?

Gee you Brits can get really grumpy if you encounter something new.

Listen – my Grandfather didn't need teleportation, my Father didn't need teleportation so I don't see that I really need it either.

Well, you got it – like it or not.

Better than being killed. I suppose.

His lack of response to that should have told me something.

From what we've observed in the lab and from what we think we know about Quantum Mechanics, it might well be that the journey is instantaneous.

Instantaneous?

In theory.

In theory?

Sure. I mean, we've never checked on the time interval. We've teleported stuff and we have confirmed that it arrived and functions as it's supposed to.

So no problems, then?

There's problems and then there's problems, Art. Y'know?

No I bloody well don't. And it seems like you aren't going to elaborate, either.

Hell, we're keeping nothing back from you Art.

Now technically, I suppose that was true. If life is all about timing then no, they didn't keep anything back as such, just timed the release of the information. I wondered later why they didn't come right out and tell me what was in store for me. Maybe they thought that by letting the truth out in dribs and drabs they would keep me onside?

Carefully guarded, I was unstrapped.

You must be kinda hungry after all that running and dying. Wanna beer and a dog?

The Dobermans and I eyed each other in mutual loathing.

I meant a hot dog, Art.

Pass me the fire-lighters.

Aw you just kill me.

I keep telling you – given half the chance, Prof, given half the chance.

Don't be a sore loser. Anyway, you're not a loser. You're about to go on the trip of a life-time.

About to go?

Yeah. Saturn is at the closest point to Earth right now. We figure this would be the best time to send you.

No further training required, eh?

We figure you'll pick it up as you go along, Art.

Sort of on the job training then, Prof.

Yeah. We figure so.

You've been figuring a lot Prof, but you haven't exactly been forthcoming about what you've been busy figuring.

Well we can sure fix that right now. C'mon, let's grab a beer and a dog then I'll give you a demonstration of teleportation.

More on the job training?

Hell no. We want you to be real confident that teleportation works before we send you.

He led me into a kitchen and took a couple of beers out of the fridge. I noted with appreciation that they were European beers and then he was busy making the dogs. No catering staff, in fact throughout the house not even a mouse stirred – and it wasn't even the night before Christmas. I'm being flippant, which must be annoying you, but do I care? That was a rhetorical question. I don't care. As far as I'm concerned you're all an irrelevancy.

So, beer and dog in hand we proceeded to the engineering wing. When I say we, I refer to myself, the Prof, the two armed guards and the two dogs. They, the dogs, eyed the hotdogs and tried to look cute and appealing. Difficult when you weigh around forty kilos and normally look as mean as hell but they almost managed it. I made eye contact with the larger one and took delight in s-l-o-w-l-y eating the hotdog. They reverted to looking mean. Somehow it suited them better.

We reached the lab, which was full of mad-professor type equipment. Not that I have any first-hand knowledge of what a mad professor would have in his lab but I've seen all the Bela Lugosi films, not to mention the Saturday night Hammer flicks on TV. It looked pretty damned convincing to me. The only thing missing was Igor – mind you, looking at the two goons with the guns...

The Prof was obviously in a professorial mood.

Now here, Art, we have the teleportation chamber. As you can see it's a sealed chamber

– unlike the ones in *Star Trek* – and also unlike the ones on *Star Trek*, these actually work.

They're the real McCoy, then?

Are you joshing with me, Art?

Would I? Especially at a time like this, when I'm about to be boldly sent where no person has either willingly or unwillingly gone before.

Yeah. Good to see you've still got a sense of humour, Art. Moving swiftly on – the reason the chamber is sealed is because the teleportation system works by breaking-down the object to be teleported into its component atoms, and we wouldn't want any stray atoms going along for the ride.

We certainly wouldn't want that to happen, would we Prof? I mean, imagine the angst if somebody was teleported and arrived at the destination with a fly's head, or something like that. A thing like that could adversely affect a person's outlook on life – not to mention their willingness to cooperate in a mining operation on Saturn.

Lose the jokes, Art. I'm telling you something that might actually be of some use to you in the future. Now, you'll note that whilst the departure chamber is sealed, the destination area is not.

He indicated a painted circle on the floor some feet away.

This is because there is no danger of stray atoms becoming intertwined with the object when the teleported object materialises.

Obviously you know this for a fact.

Obviously I do.

You say teleported object.

I do.

Might it be safe to assume that you haven't as yet teleported a person?

It would. So far we have only successfully teleported inanimate objects.

No luck yet with animate objects, then?

I'll come on to that momentarily.

I think you should come on to it now.

You can't be killed, Art. Remember?

That's hardly the point.

Oh but that's exactly the point. We would hardly take the risk of teleporting somebody if we thought there was a risk of something going badly wrong. That's why we needed a person who couldn't be killed, you see? I mean, c'mon, what sort of people do you think we are?

What I see is this, Prof. I actually do die, and then come back. I'm beginning to worry about how I'm going to come back if something goes wrong. As to what sort of people do I think you are, would you like me to spell it out for you?

Say, you never did tell me what happens when you die, did you?

Correct.

What's correct?

I didn't tell you. Perhaps when I'm safely on Mimas and we're exchanging pleasantries and arranging for my return trip – maybe then I'll tell you. Speaking of which, I take it there is a return chamber on Mimas?

You have all the material you need to construct one, Art.

Like a fool I didn't ask if I had all the equipment needed, and was there an instruction manual. Well, you can't think of everything, can you?

Watch this.

The Prof placed a hammer in the chamber, went over to a small control panel and without any fuss the hammer simply appeared in the painted circle. No

stroboscopic effects, no mood music—one second the hammer was in the teleportation chamber and within the blink of an eye it was in the circle. Impressive in a slightly disappointing sort of way.

Voila!

Right. I'd still like to be reassured that you can successfully teleport a living being.

I eyed up the larger of the two Dobermans. Intelligent dogs, Dobermans. If it were possible for a dog to look at the ceiling and whistle, this one would have done so. As it was, it looked at the floor and sort of shuffled backwards.

Trust me Art, it'll be a cinch.

Seven

Mimas perihelion

Oh yes, I remember that night well. The night I became...what exactly? I still haven't quite worked that out and it's driving me insane.

Having seen the demonstration of an inanimate object being teleported, it seemed likely that this was not some madcap scheme, but rather a well thought out plan, with the technology available to make it happen. The Prof declined to teleport one of the dogs, saying that the computational calculations to teleport both the dog and then myself would be simply too much for the resident Cray supercomputer to handle. An object, animate or otherwise, had first to be scanned and then a digital model of it constructed and stored—down to the subatomic/DNA level—as a package of information. This package was the thing that was teleported and on reaching the destination, the object—me—would be reconstituted. Not quite how he put it—he said to think of it as three dimensional printing, but you get the idea. He then said to finish my beer as it was time to go and I was unceremoniously bundled into the teleportation chamber and locked in.

I hammered on the side of the chamber.

What about a spacesuit – how will I survive if the teleportation beam misses the target and I arrive on the surface?

No need to shout Art, I can hear you. Now listen up, there's a couple of important things that you need to know. Anything you will need is already there and the teleportation beam can't miss – it's locked-on to the target area before we send you. There will be communications equipment that you're going to have to activate before we can speak, kind of a bone-transducer combined mic and earpiece. Pretty straight forward stuff but you'll have to figure out how to fit it yourself.

What are you talking about? Surely I just stick the earpiece in my ear and the mic somewhere near my mouth.

Not that simple, amigo, but you'll figure it out and we'll speak real soon. Now, just try to relax. Ah, yeah – one other thing. The teleportation system actually destroys the object that it scans – what is sent is an electronic version that is printed on arrival, so it won't really be your body that arrives but an electronic picture of it. That being the case, we figured you wouldn't object if we made a couple of modifications – physical modifications – that will help you function in your new environment. It will still be you. Your consciousness exists as a thing apart and is already in digital form, as it were – we think.

You think??? What the fuck are you doing to me, you...

Adios amigo. Have a nice trip and we'll speak real soon – I hope.

A warm sensation, not burning exactly but not entirely pleasant. Then nothing, then—I was there-- Mimas. On the surface with no spacesuit and I was going to die – only I didn't. I could breathe although it didn't feel like breathing. I was looking, quite unbelievably, at a commonplace workbench on which the communications equipment was laying jumbled up. In my peripheral vision I could see crates and over-sized containers and overhead the fantastic, gaseous mass of Saturn—except I hadn't looked up so how could I see Saturn and all around me at the same time. What the fuck?? I reached for the communication equipment and was stunned/horrified to see a tentacle snake towards the work bench. I don't know what happened then—I think I must have gone into shock and I remember nothing and had no notion of elapsed time. At some point I became aware of a glowing circle in

front of me and the Prof's face was in it. He was clearly saying something—and doubtless lying because I could see his mouth working. Then the face was replaced by an arm and a hand. One of the fingers was pointing—pointing at the workbench. The comms gear.

It was a struggle but I finally worked out how to don the comms gear. In the process I discovered that I was not human anymore but rather some sort of interplanetary octopus. I had a body of sorts—a blob more than a body. I had four tentacles—two short, two long. I soon discovered that I was in the Herschel Crater, which is eighty-something miles across. The two longer tentacles were longer, much longer than that. In fact, when my mind started to function properly again and I could control my new body, I found that I could wrap these tentacles many times around Mimas. I should think that they were nearly one thousand kilometres long—with what I'll call a simple eye in each, so not only was I eventually able to manipulate objects at a great distance but I could use each tentacle independently. The other two were only a little longer than my original arms. Oh yes—a homely touch as the Prof put it—each tentacle ended in what you could loosely describe as a hand. Seven fingers – like smaller tentacles, each of which was opposing—seven thumbs, rather than fingers. It took some learning to control my new body, but the strange thing was it came naturally/unconsciously. My conscious mind was frozen—I literally felt and thought nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary. I was on Mimas, I was in this fantastical body. It was like I was wearing something and my real body was inside this strange and frankly wonderful, outer shell. Except it wasn't.

I finally was able to speak to the Prof—courtesy of vocal chords. Not that they worked in the conventional sense because there was no air to carry the vibrations—or so I initially believed. When I was finally able to investigate my new body, I discovered what I can only describe as a small, gas-filled sac. The comms gear was attached to this sac and picked-up the vibrations of the vocal chords. I heard my own voice but I am reasonably sure that my mind interpreted whatever sounds I actually made as my own voice. On the subject of sensation, I could sense temperature variations but I never felt pain as such—at least not up until now. The final entry into the Earth's atmosphere might be a different kettle of fish, we'll see. Of course, I'll resurrect but you won't. I wonder if I'll resurrect in this body or my original one? I'll know, but you never will.

Having established two-way contact with the Prof I found that far from ranting and raving at him I was quite calm. Something to do with my unconscious mind protecting me, I suppose.

How was my new body working out? I was still coming to terms with it, thank you very much. Presumably, when the time comes for my triumphant return, I will be digitalised and my consciousness can be re-housed in a replica of my old body? Presumably so, yes. The Prof did not sound convincing.

We'll speak about that later, Art. For the meantime, why don't you have a play with your new body and figure-out how it all works? Ah, you can't initiate communications with me but I know where you are, so I'll be in touch real soon. There's a schematic of the kind of thing we had in mind for the hydrogen capture, but feel free to modify it in the light of your own experience.

With a cheerful wave he was gone, but the glowing circle remained. A new face appeared in it. It was the bastard who had shot me in the woods, when I was on the run from the institute. He smiled and nodded.

You going to tell me to have a nice day. I said.

Naw. Have a nice life-- asshole.

Without my thinking about it, one of my shorter tentacles flicked into the circle. I was gratified to see it connect with the face. I heard a scream, the tentacle snapped back and the circle was gone.

They left me alone for a while after that. I don't know how long for, exactly, but when the Prof did contact me again, the circle was no larger than the eye of a needle and it was audio only, no visual and hence no chance of venting my pent-up feelings in a similar fashion.

How you doing, amigo?

Pretty good, all things considered. How are things at your end?

We were just kinda curious as to how things were progressing, Art.

Oh I'm sorry, Art's not here right now. Care to leave a message?

To whom am I speaking?

The Blob.

The Blob, huh? Well now, er Blob, when you get to talk to Art could you tell him that maybe we got off on the wrong foot here.

Here, there, everywhere. And that's Mister Blob to you – amigo.

Art –

I told you, Art isn't here right now.

Okaaay – well listen Mister Blob, when you next see Art could you give him a message, please?

Well I haven't seen him for a while but if he puts in an appearance I'd be glad to.

That's mighty kind of you Mister Blob. If you could tell him that maybe we treated him a little shabbily and we think we can put him back the way he was, I'd surely be grateful.

Like Humpty Dumpty.

I don't quite follow you, Mister Blob.

Put him back together again.

Yeah, sure that's it.

But all the King's horses and all the King's men – are you a King's man by any chance, Professor?

Er no.

Well maybe there's a chance then, because all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty back together again. Are you certain you're not a King's man?

Certain.

What are you then, Professor?

I'm an MIT man, Mister Blob.

Is that on Earth, Professor?

Why do you ask, Mister Blob?

I was just wondering because you see, I've never visited Earth. I'm from Mimas.

Riiight. Listen, I don't suppose by any chance that Art is around and listening at the moment, is he? I can understand if he doesn't feel like talking to me right now but if I thought that he was listening I could give him my message direct.

And cut out the middle man you mean?

Oh no, not at all.

What then?

Well you must be real busy up there. I wouldn't want to trouble you to give Art a message if there was any chance that he could hear me right now.

If I thought that you were trying to cut out the middle man, not that I am a man of course, I could get really upset.

Well now, Mister Blob, we surely wouldn't want you to get upset, now would we?

Who's we?

Pardon me?

Who's we and why wouldn't we want to upset me?

It's just an expression, Mister Blob....

Like saying you wouldn't want me to be upset.

I don't follow you.

Just an expression. Just something you'd say so I wouldn't get upset and stop doing something you want me to do.

Have you been busy doing something, Mister Blob?

Well I surely have, amigo.

Care to tell me about it.

No.

Eight

Footprints in the sand

Now where was I? Oh yes, the square on the hippopotamus is equal to the... no, we weren't talking about that, were we? Anyway, it doesn't sound right. I wish Art would get back soon. He's exploring the interior of Mimas, you know. Leaving me to do all the work, as usual.

I gave him the professor's message but he didn't seem very interested. He told me to get on with stuff then went away again. I wasn't really sure what stuff I was supposed to be getting on with, so I built a long tube and dangled it in Saturn. That was fun, for a while. Saturn is pretty, you know. The rings are really spectacular close up—not that I've ever seen them from a distance but Art has, or at least he's seen photos of them and he said they were really spectacular close up. Much better than the photos. I wish he was here now, I get so lonely without anybody to talk to. Art says that he has a plan but he won't tell me what it is. I can't even talk to that strange professor anymore. Not even to thank him for the present he sent me. He sent me a present, you know. I thought that was really nice of him and I don't think it was his fault that it didn't work. Art said that probably being teleported messed up the fissile material, whatever that is, and made me throw it away. I wanted to keep it because it was shiny and nice to look at and it was company for me when Art's away, even though it never said anything. I really liked that present but Art said it still might go off so I should throw it away-- so I did because I always do what Art tells me to do. He gets really angry if I don't and messes with my head. I don't like having my head messed with. Did I tell you that Art is off exploring the inside of Mimas? He found some footprints—or was that in one of the stories that Art tells me when I'm good? I get confused, but Art says not to worry, everything will be alright soon.

Did I tell you that we're coming to see you? Art said that we were supposed to send you something from Saturn but he decided to deliver it in person. Art's a nice person. When the professor sent me that shiny present—you remember, the one that didn't work—well Art said it's the thought that counts and he thought that maybe we should reciprocate. I think we were supposed to put the something from Saturn into those storage tanks and send them back to you, but Art said that if we attached the storage tanks to Mimas we could do something to them and then we would be outta here and on our way, boyo. Pretty soon I'll be able to see Saturn from a distance and then I'll know if that's as spectacular as seeing it from close up. I'd like to be able to talk to that professor again but Art found something he called a homing beacon and had me throw that away, just like my shiny present. Ever since then we've not heard from him. I said that maybe we should let the professor know that we were coming so he could bake a cake but Art said he'd know soon enough and anyway he was rubbish at baking cakes. I hope Art gets back soon. He said he found something really strange in the middle of Mimas but he won't tell me what it is.

I feel really bad about this. Art finally got back from the middle of Mimas and said that he'd made a momentous discovery. I'm not really supposed to tell you about this because Art says you haven't been good and you don't deserve to know, but I think that's just being mean. We are not alone—that's what Art said. I could

have told him that because Art and I have always been here together. Anyway, don't tell Art that I told you otherwise he'll mess with my head again and I don't like that. Promise? OK then, I'll tell you the rest of it.

Now I hadn't noticed this because I was too busy doing stuff, but Art said that Mimas has a wobble. It has a wobble because it's hollow. It's hollow because it's not a moon of Saturn at all, it's a spaceship and in the spaceship there are people—well, sort of people, Art says they are funny looking buggers, but I haven't seen them—and they are asleep. Art told me the plan had changed. Instead of delivering the something from Saturn in person, Art said that we had to go back to Saturn to get more of the same something we were supposed to send to you. We're going to come really, really close to you. We're swing around the backside boyo then bugger off back to Saturn. Art says it'll scare the shit out of you and then you'll be left wondering what the fuck is going on when you haven't got any shit left and you've stopped panicking. Art says that we'll use the tube that I built to fill the tanks when we get back to Saturn and then we'll take the funny-looking buggers back to their home. Art says that he might try and wake them up and tell them we're taking them home. They've been asleep a really long time and Art thinks that maybe they came to Saturn to pick up the same something that you wanted, but something went wrong and they couldn't pick it up. They got bored hanging around doing bugger-all, so they played at being Rip Van Winkle until the cavalry arrived.

I'm not sure I really understand it all, but I do know that we're not going to deliver the something from Saturn that you were expecting and I think that's very mean.

Maybe—when Art's not looking—I'll send you some of the something anyway. A sort of going away present.

The End

Sing a song of Saturn

It was a pleasant evening and I was feeling mellow. I took 'Benny the Beemer', my near-vintage BMW first generation electric car, for a spin. Benny put me in a nostalgic mood and I headed for the old Waterloo train station. Ah, the old days of rail travel, rickety-racketing along the rails, the hybrid diesel- electric locomotive pulling you along mile after tedious mile, staring out of an always grubby window and studiously ignoring other passengers in the carriage. These days it's all travel by tube – get into a fully life-supporting container, strap in and be blasted at impossibly high speeds along a vacuum tube. No windows to look out of and passengers only too willing to talk to each other – anything to make them forget that they were travelling in a life-endangering vacuum at speeds which, should anything go wrong, would turn them into jam.

Purring through the old, derelict station, I spotted an old derelict walking unsteadily along one of the platforms. He seemed happy, waving a bottle and singing lustily. On an impulse I turned onto the platform, and drove up close behind him. Interesting song and an interesting voice – not interesting in the same way, if you take my meaning. I lowered the window and listened for a moment; he remained oblivious to my presence.

*I've bin everywhere, man, I've bin everywhere
Never paid no fare, man, never paid no fare,
but I've bin everywhere, man.
I've bin to Aegir, Alborix, Ariel and Arche,
Bestla, Bianca, Bergelmir and Bebhionn.
Oh yeah, I've bin everywhere, man, I've bin everywhere.*

I coasted up alongside him but he remained unaware of me, wrapped up in his song.

*Evening my friend, how you doing?
Me? Doin' fine, man, just fine. And yourself – now how would you be doin' this fine evenin'?*

*Pretty good. Out for a drive in my old jalopy here.
Don't see too many of those around these days, man.
Not too many left, my friend. Can I offer you a ride anywhere?*

He regarded me with obvious suspicion.
I'm just driving around, reflecting on life and that song sounds kinda like it's reflecting on life, as well. I said.

Every life has a story and this song tells the story of a life – mine as it happens. Would you be passing any purveyors of King Victoria Korean Highland single malt blended whisky, by any chance?

Could be. I said.

Well now, that would be fine. Suppose I sing you a song and tell you a story, and you buy a bottle. This one appears to be unaccountably empty. He drained the bottle and tossed it aside.

The chip-duster's Tale

Like it says in the song, I've bin everywhere, man.

I looked more closely at him, now sitting in the passenger seat. Maybe not as old as I first thought—grey, though. Streaks of grey in the hair and straggly beard. Worn clothes but not dirty—I noticed the badge.

Spacer? I asked.

Used to be. Before the damned machines had no further use for me.

Those places you were singing about?

Moons – mere lumps of rock, some of 'em.

Bin there, man?

He smiled.

Oh yeah, I bin there, man. You want the song or the story?

Story.

He'd joined the space guild as soon as he left college. A degree in molecular bio-mechanical engineering—his thesis was on bio-electro integration—got him in, and much good it apparently did him after that. The job had sounded romantic, hell it still did. Romantic and necessary. Earth was running short of natural resources and the moons and asteroids of the Solar System offered an abundant source of the necessary and some exotic alternatives. In the early years of extended exploration robotic missions were the seen as the way forward. Nobody really mourned a robot if it all went wrong and there were no grieving and outraged families to make a fuss about safety standards or the lack thereof. There was a problem, though. Robots could be designed and built that could do almost anything a human could—at a cost. Bean counters, any truly advanced civilisation will have bean counters to make people feel vaguely guilty about the true cost of life's pleasures, calculated that the cheapest form of manual labour was a human being. Human beings were fully articulated, could be programmed for specific tasks but came with mission-flexibility as standard and most importantly, the production cost was a night out, a decent meal and several years of childcare. The initial night out and a decent meal being paid for by an ardent swain and thereafter, one way or another, the proud or otherwise parents paid for the childcare. There were no development costs, Evolution having taken care of that. True, the human had to be paid, fed and preserved during a mission. The bean counters had the answer. Give the human being a fancy job title and an impressive uniform—that took care of having to pay large salaries. Tell them they were heroes because the job was so necessary and so dangerous—that way if they did happen to get killed, well, what could you expect from such a dangerous—and glamorous—profession?

They told him that the initial training would seem to be low-tech, menial even, but not to let that worry him. He didn't worry, but learning how to clean a toilet and service the dried-food reconstitution unit was menial. What about specific mission training? Ah, now that would be in the nature of on the job training. He'd be sent on a mission and sort of pick it up as he went along.

That all seems a bit hit and miss.

Damn right it was. The public thinks that we're all heroes, man, but the truth is we're glorified toilet cleaners and chip dusters.

Chip dusters?

S'right, man. Turns out the real problem with long distance space travel is the dust. Even in vacuum conditions, there is still dust and that damned dust clogged up the circuits. Turns out the cheapest and most reliable way of keeping the bloody things clean was to have a

human do it.

Right.

I tell you, man, I got sick and tired of dusting those damn chips. Of course, we had to have toilet facilities, cooking facilities and washing facilities onboard. You know who had to clean and maintain those, right, man?

I think I can guess.

I guess you can. And I tell you what.

What?

When we got to whatever damn lump of rock we set out for, my job was to unload the mining equipment, set it up and move it around if there was a more promising site in another location. And all the time being bossed around by a damned machine. Some bloody psychologist decided that it would be better if the voice circuits were removed, so we used to get our daily instructions on screen. Not even a bloody printout, man. Letters on a damn screen.

So you cooked, cleaned and humped stuff around?

Yeah, you got it, man. Real heroic.

So you got out?

Got fired, man. I was a rep for the TCACPU. Company didn't like the union – said our demands were unreasonable – so they fired me and bought in scab labour.

TCACPU?

Toilet cleaners and Chip Polishers Union, man.

Oh, right. And the unreasonable demands?

We wanted the voice circuits re-installed so at least we could talk to somebody. Wanted unlimited gaming as well, but they said that would keep us away from our duties. You remember the old joke about the chimp – the one from the early days of space exploration?

Nope.

OK, well it goes like this. In the early days of the space program they sent Chimps up instead of humans. Once they realised space travel was OK, they sent up a human with the chimp. First time up, the guy opens the mission orders and there's a whole long list of stuff the chimp has to do, but he can't read so the guy has to tell him. Right at the bottom of the list, after the guy tells the chimp what he has to do, he sees a dashed line and underneath it there's his instructions. There was just one – feed the chimp, the bananas are in the third locker.

Pretty demoralising, I guess.

Demoralising? Not as demoralising as our orders, man. Clean the toilet, clean the computer then do what it tells you to do.

And that's the story?

Yeah. Wanna hear the rest of the song, man?

Is it as riveting as the story?

Better. We anywhere near that booze store yet, man? I'm real parched. So parched I can only sing you a shortened version of the song.

Couple of minutes.

OK, so here's a shortened version:

I've bin everywhere, man, I've bin everywhere

Never paid no fare, man, never paid no fare,

but I've bin everywhere, man.

I've bin to Aegir, Alborix, Bebhionn and Bestla,

Cressida, Cordelia, Dione and Deimos,

Europa, Ferdinand, Galatea and Hyrokkin,

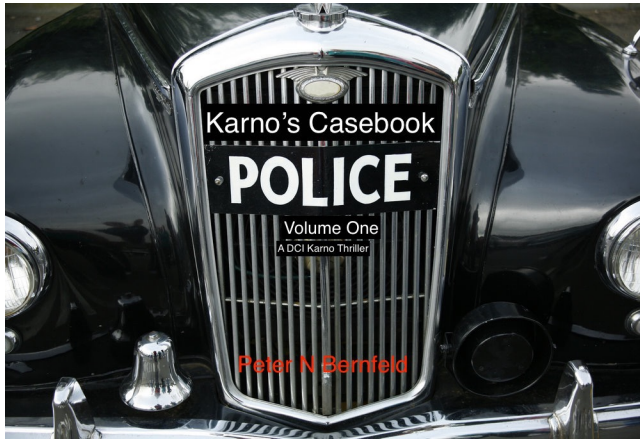
*Io, Janus, Kalyke and Loge.
I've bin everywhere, man, I've bin everywhere,
Never paid no fare, man, never paid no fare,
But I've bin everywhere, man.
I've bin to Mimas, Narvi, Ophelia and Phoebe,
Rosalind, Setebos, thymr and Umbriel.
I've bin everywhere, man I've bin.....
Hang on, hang on. That's the shortened version?
That's right, man.
And the full version – would that list all the moons in the Solar System, by any chance?
You got it, man.
How many moons are there?
One hundred and sixty seven, man.
That right? Looks like we're at the booze store. Why don't you hop out while I park the car?
He got out and I drove off as fast as I could. The worst of it is, I can't get that damn song out of my head. I even had to look up the names of all the moons in the Solar System. And then I caught myself singing it.
I filled out the application form for the Space Guild today. Damn song.*

The End

If you have enjoyed this book, please take the time to leave a review on your Amazon site.

If you haven't enjoyed this book, please take the time to tell me why. Either by leaving a review on Amazon or by leaving a comment on my blog,

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Karno's Casebook Volume One

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For Pauline, I know more about what went on than you think.

For Rhoda and Joan, ladies who play Scrabble.

For Maureen, lady who reads and edits. The remaining errors are mine and not hers.

These three short stories are cases Karno encountered during the various stages of his Police career.

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The Oggie of the Olgivies

For those who may be unfamiliar with the term, an Oggie is a Cornish pastie. Traditionally it was a two-course meal in one. One end of the pastry case would be filled with meat and potato, the other with fruit, usually an apple filling. These days the pasties are made with a variety of filling, all equally delicious.

*Dear Reader, do not confuse Cornish pasties, or Oggies, with **Cornishire** Oggies. These are truly dangerous things to eat, the risks almost equal to those braved when partaking of the famed Japanese Puffer fish or Fugu. To discover why, you will have to read the first book in the Karno series, **Kitty Cracks Case**.*

The seasonal south Westerly near gale hurled rain against the window with the enthusiasm of a youthful fire fighter trying out a new high-pressure hose for the first time. Chewing reflectively on his pen, Detective Sergeant Leon Karno was glad he was up to his neck in paperwork and not still in uniform, up to his neck in leaky wet-weather gear and pounding the beat on the mean streets of Paignmouth, or on traffic patrol astride the frequently temperamental and somewhat underpowered LE Velocette motorcycle.

Detective Inspector Miniver Vanne opened her office door.

"Karno. In." She returned to her desk leaving the door invitingly open. Having no option, Karno took up the invitation with all the enthusiasm of an Ancient Greek philosopher accepting a drink from visiting friends.

"Bad business, Karno."

She tapped a folder on her desk. Karno suspected that she was right. Anything that brought him to the attention of She Who Would be Chief Constable usually was. At a loss for anything constructive to say he opted for silence. A lifted eyebrow told him this was not a career-enhancing choice.

"Right, right," he ventured.

"For God's sake Karno, stop saying 'right, right'. I can't tell you how much it annoys me."

"Ri...really sorry about that Guv, er ma'am." This was not a promising start. And it was still raining. Karno took a bet with himself that he would shortly be getting wet, and was not surprised to find that he had won the jackpot.

The old manor house on the Sodden Moor council estate distinguished itself by not having a dismantled motorcycle in the front garden, nor were there any broken windows lovingly repaired by sheets of thick cardboard. It was still raining, so Karno zipped up his tweed anorak, donned his deerstalker, and with a resigned air stepped out of the unmarked police car, and into a puddle. He carefully locked the door, then had a brief but urgent struggle to unlock it as the vehicle began to gently roll down the street. Having put the hand brake on and left the car in gear for good measure, he scanned the area for any spotty youths with wheel-removing implements. Reassured by the empty streets he strode purposefully to the wrought-iron gate, carefully skirting the deep puddle in front of it.

The front doorbell emitted an impressive single 'dong' when pressed, and standing under the leaking porch, Karno was unable to resist using the brass doorknocker. Shaped like a gargoyle, it felt satisfyingly solid in the hand, and the door visibly shook when he raised it to its full extension and let it drop. The wind howled and the rain was almost horizontal. It brought to mind late-night Hammer horror movies. The only thing missing was a howling hound. Karno became aware of a high-pitched yapping. The door creaked open, and a small Pekinese attempted to attach itself to his left leg. Pausing only to kick the animal further down the front path, Karno introduced himself.

"Karno. Paignmouth CID."

A worried looking woman invited him in.

"Arnie. Come inside and leave the nice man alone."

Arnie warily edged round the nice man, yapped uncertainly at his right ankle, then scuttled off along the dingy corridor.

"Follow me."

Karno followed the worried looking woman along the short dingy corridor, and into a back room.

"Beware. Beware the curse, the curse of the Olgivies. Doom doom. Doom I tell you. Death and destruction." The speaker was a large red-haired woman wearing a florid dress that clashed alarmingly with the chintz sofa on which she was sitting. Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "The horror, the unspeakable horror."

"This is Madam Acacia, the renowned psychic gypsy fortune teller," worried looking woman said. "And this is poor Missus Olgivie."

Poor Missus Olgivie was sitting bolt upright in a horsehair armchair, hair all awry, and saying nothing. She stared fixedly at a photo of herself and a man Karno took to be her late husband. The photo was on top of an old mahogany sideboard.

"Right, right. Good morning Missus Olgivie, my name is Karno. Detective Sergeant Karno of the Paignmouth CID. Sorry to trouble you at this difficult time, but I wonder if I might just ask you a few questions."

Missus Olgivie gave a visible shudder, but said nothing. Karno turned his attention to worried looking woman.

"You are?" He asked.

"Missus Trelawney. I live next door."

"Right, right. Missus Olgivie, sorry an' all that, but I do have to ask you a few questions." He took out a slightly damp notebook.

"Doom. Doom and destruction. Beware the ides of the March as the Oggies relentlessly stalk the doomed on the blasted Moor in the dead of darkest night. The horror, oh the unspeakable horror."

Karno turned his attention to the speaker, who was staring intently into a cracked teacup.

Ullo Flo. Things a bit slow in the caff today then?"

"Ullo moi luvver. It's in the tea leaves. The horror, oh the horror of it."

Karno leaned forward to look into the cup as Madam Acacia held it out to him.

"The usual milk and gin then Flo?" He enquired.

"You're just a bloody cynic Karno. Why are you wearing that stupid deerstalker?"

"Some regard the wearing of the deerstalker as something of an affectation, but I regard it as paying homage to one of the greatest detectives of all time. The stupid deerstalker also keeps the rain off my cynical head. Now, would somebody like to

tell me why I'm here?"

"Why are any of us here, moi luvver."

Karno sighed.

"Mind if I sit down, Missus Olgivie?" he asked.

Missus Olgivie stared fixedly at the photo and shuddered once more.

"I'll take that as a yes, please do, Detective Sergeant," he said to the room in general. He sat. He leant forward, reached behind him and removing an indignant Pekinese by the scruff of its neck, barely resisted the temptation to hurl the animal across the room.

"That's Arnie's chair." Missus Trelawney said in a horrified whisper.

"Arnie said I could use it for a while," replied Karno.

"I didn't hear him say that."

"It said it quietly."

"He. Arnie's a he."

"Not for much longer if he tries to savage my ankles again."

"Aaaiiieee. The swirling mist, I see figures in the swirling mist of time. Two figures. In the mist. Unspeakable horror and dark deeds." Madam Acacia agitated the teacup she was grasping in her pink right hand and peered into the bottom of it.

Missus Olgivie gave another shudder that seemed to travel up and down her entire body.

"Would you like some tea, Detective Sergeant?"

"That would be nice, thank you, Missus Trelawney. Milk and three sugars please. No gin, I'm on duty." Karno reflected that even if he were in a madhouse, at least he was in the dry and away from SWWBCC. "Right, right. Better get some details then."

"Aaaaiiieeee...."

"Yes, all right Flo. What do the tea leaves have to say, then?"

What the tea leaves revealed

Despite the bright sunshine, traces of mist still clung to the cracks and crevices of Sodden Moor. Augustus Olgivie, master of all he surveyed and quite a lot of what he couldn't survey at the time, was hungry. With breakfast a dim, hour-old memory, the rigours of the one hundred yard walk from the Manor House to the top of the escarpment had taken its toll. He sat with obvious relief on a large boulder, and watched as a tattered figure clutching a basket made its way along the path towards him.

"Right, you bloody old hag, where's my rent? It's two days over-due, damn you."

"And damn you for being such a hard-hearted man, Augustus Olgivie. I'm nought but a poor immigrant to this country, trying to make my way in this cruel world by peddling my wares. Have pity on an old woman, times are hard for such as I."

"Times are about to get a bloody sight harder if you don't cough up the cash, woman. Out of the goodness of my heart I rent you that cottage for a mere pittance, allowing you to bake your oggies in the dry, and you repay my kindness by not paying the rent."

"Cottage is it? Pigsty I calls it."

"Aye. Well, I grant you, you have to share it, that's why it's so cheap. Anyway,

having the pigs there cuts down on the heating bills in winter. Now, where's my money?"

"I'm only a poor itinerant oggie seller, struggling to make her way in this cruel world and..."

"You aren't bloody itinerant, you're living in my pigsty, er cottage."

"Be that as it may, times are hard. Would you take an oggie on account?"

"On account of what?"

"On account of the fact I haven't sold any today, and I don't have the rent money on me."

"Hear me well, woman, I'll not pay full price for it. I'll credit you the wholesale price against your rent."

"Oh you're a cruel hard man, Augustus Olgivie. Here, take it and be damned to you."

Olgivie bit into the oggie and almost immediately spat it out.

"Cold, damn your eyes. I'll not pay you for it. I give you two days to pay the rent or you're out."

"Damn my eyes, Augustus Olgivie? No, I damn your eyes. I curse you and yours for all time. Hear me, oh ye mist enshrouded moor, ye huddled and miserable shorn sheep, and ye small stunted ponies. Hear me, I curse Augustus Olgivie. May he and his first-born male heirs die horribly. May the Olgivie family fall on hard times and suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous prophecy. I curse them, not unto the seventh generation, but for all time."

With that, the old haggard woman continued on her way.

'Bloody mothers-in-law' thought Augustus Olgivie. He looked at the half-eaten oggie. Cold or not, he was hungry and so took another bite. As he chewed, so he began to cough. As he coughed, so he began to choke. As he choked, so he turned red in the face, and so he died.

Meanwhile back in the Present Day

"Right, right. And all that has something to do with the recent tragic death of Missus Olgivies husband, George, has it?"

"It's the curse of the old itinerant oggie seller, Detective Sergeant. Its come down through the generations, mysteriously striking down the first born male of every generation."

"Hmm. So Augustus has an argument with his ma-in-law, she gives him a cold oggie, and he dies a mysterious death. By the sound of it, the choleric old bastard choked on a cold oggie. Nothing too mysterious in that I'd say."

"The oggie was never found," Missus Olgivie uttered in a hollow voice, still sitting bolt upright and staring at the photo, her eyes like those of a highwayman's horse.

"Ah, welcome back, Missus Olgivie, nice of you to join us. I'm sure Madam Flo here meant well, but in times of stress, I'd stick to regular tea if I were you. The gin curdles the milk, you see. Upsets the stomach something rotten. There may be a perfectly good reason, indeed reasons, why nobody ever found the oggie. All this occurred what, about ninety years ago?"

"OOOHHHAAA, it were a cursed Oggie, Karno. It were never found because it slipped away in the mist and went off back to its maker."

"Right, right. I'll be sure to make a note of that, Flo. It might be crucial to the

entire case. In the meantime, I hesitate to say back to reality, but this all occurred ninety-odd years ago did it?"

"Ninety-three years ago Detective Sergeant, and since then the Olgivie family has indeed fallen on hard times. The family used to own most of Sodden Moor and now look at us, living on the Sodden Moor Council Estate. The first-born male of every generation has suffered a horrible fate, as the itinerant oggie seller prophesied."

Karno grunted noncommittally.

"Since the curse, every first born male has died a mysterious death, you say?"

"Yes. Sometimes it skips a generation. Or two."

"Right, right. Let me put it another way then. How many of the first-born males have died a horrible and unexplained death?"

"Augustus died shortly after eating the oggie. He was the first-born male of his generation."

"A warning to us all to be careful of oggies given to us by our mother-in-laws, Missus Olgivie. He died immediately after eating the oggie, you say."

"Yes. His wife found him several hours later. It was obvious that he had choked to death, but no trace of the oggie could be found."

"So, how do you know that he choked to death on the oggie, and more to the point, how do you know about the curse?"

"Madame Acacia sought me out and informed me of it, Detective Sergeant."

"Right. All in the tea leaves. Moving swiftly on, Great Grandfather, what happened to him?"

"He died."

"Doom doom. The unspeakable horror of the curse of the..."

"Yes, thank you Flo, I get the idea. Great grandfather died you say, Missus Olgivie?"

"Yes."

"I hate to press you on this at such an unfortunate time in your life, but bearing in mind that in the natural course of events people do get old then die, was there anything particularly unusual about his death?"

"He was found mangled in the street. Unexplained marks all over his body."

"And nobody had any idea what had happened?"

"No. Only that he was run over by a brewer's dray."

"I see. So his death wasn't at all mysterious, and the unexplained marks on his body might be explained by the fact that he was run over?"

"I suppose so."

"Right, right. And the next first-born Olgivie to die unexpectedly?"

"Grandfather Oliver."

"What happened to him?"

"He died in France."

"France. This wouldn't have been during the First or Second World War by any chance, would it?"

"The First. He died on the Somme."

"A family tragedy, Missus Olgivie, but might one comment not uncommon in those days."

"He died shortly after eating the contents of a food parcel sent from England."

"An unfortunate coincidence perhaps. What did he die of?"

"He choked to death, Detective Sergeant. Nobody from the family had sent him

a food parcel, and there was no trace of whatever it was he had chocked on. It was the curse what did him in, there's no doubt about it."

"Is there a death certificate that will bear out the fact that he choked to death, Missus Olgivie?"

"No. The death certificate showed that he was killed in action. A mortar shell landed on his section of the trench, and he and two other poor souls were blown to bits. Hardly enough bits left to make one body let alone three, but the fact remains that he was sent an Oggie, which he was seen eating just before he died."

"Exactly how long have you three been sitting here drinking fortified tea, Missus Olgivie?"

Karno received three blank looks by way of reply.

"You said the curse sometimes skipped a generation or two."

"Yes."

"Right, right. Who was the next to die an unexplained death then?"

"It's skipped all the way to my husband, and my firstborn, Tremayne, is next. She says so. Sought me out and told me, so she did."

"Doom, doom. The horror the horror, the unspeakable...."

"Horror, yes. I tell you what, if it's all so bloody horrible, why don't you stop speaking about it then Flo?"

"Just doing moi job, moi luvver. Same as you're doing yours."

"Right. Right well doing my job, it seems to me that all the deaths of the firstborn, unfortunate though they might have been, were entirely explainable."

Missus Olgivie turned to Madame Acacia.

"He does have a point you know."

"Your George died a strange and unexplained death."

Karno coughed.

"Actually Flo, the late Mister George Olgivie, according to the pathology report, choked to death whilst eating his lunch."

"Which were an oggie, so the curse of the itinerant oggie-seller was fulfilled."

"Yes, yes I suppose it did, in a way."

"He were eating an Oggie, Detective Sergeant, an' it were never found!"

"That's not entirely true, Missus Olgivie, but I'll spare you the details. After your husband died, you called the police and informed them that..." Karno consulted his notebook..."your family was being murdered one by one, and that you feared your son would be the next victim."

"That's right, yes."

"And Madam Flo told you that?"

"Bloody psychic me, moi luvver. Saw all this in the tea leaves. Came to warn Missus Olgivie, see."

"Warn her of an unspeakable horror to come?"

"Eggzackerly so."

As Karno was thinking of something to say, there was the sound of coughing and spluttering. Then a series of thuds as somebody fell down the stairs. Karno rushed out of the room and found young Tremayne Olgivie curled up in a ball at the base of the stairs, trying to breath. A trickle of what looked like blood was smeared around one side of his face.

"I tole ee. Doom, doom. The unspeakable horror. The curse has struck again. It's in the tea leaves."

Karno regarded the huddled figure for a moment then hauled him to his feet.

He slapped him sharply on the back and Tremayne gratefully spat out a large lump of partially masticated food.

"I'd chew it a bit more before you swallow, lad. Wipe the tomato ketchup off your face, you look a right sight."

Detective Constable Gundry stared open-mouthed at Karno.

"Bloody 'ell. What happened then, Fred?"

"Well, what happened then was nothing much straight away. I did ask where young Tremayne had brought the pastie that nearly choked him, and it turned out that Flo, Madam Acacia, had brought it for him from her caff." He paused to take a swig of tea from the chipped, police-canteen mug.

"I came back to the office to write up the report, but then I had a bit of a brain-wave. I called Missus Olgivie and asked her if by any chance she knew the name of old Augustus's ma-in-law."

"Did she?"

"Borisova Krackovitch. Now it just so happens that Augustus's wife was Krackovitch's stepdaughter, but she had a son as well. Krackovitch also happened to be Madam Flo's maiden name. I did a bit of checking, and it seems that the Olgivie family hold the freehold of Flo's caff, unbeknownst to Missus Olgivie."

"How come she didn't know that, then?"

"Old story, crooked lawyers. Augustus used a firm called Fleecem and Runnoff. That's exactly what they did, an all."

"What?"

"Fleeced em and ran off."

"Ah. Hang on, would that be the same Fleecem and Runnoff still going strong today?"

"Right, right. Great Great Grandfather Augustus Olgivie had leased the property, then a pigsty, in perpetuity to Borisova Krackovitch and her direct descendants. A clause in the lease stipulated that should the male Olgivie line die out, the freehold would revert to any descendants of Borisova Krackovitch. I can't say for sure, but I don't think there ever was a curse as such. I reckon Flo, Madam Acacia, made it all up to strike up an acquaintance with Missus Olgivie. In case you were wondering, George Olgivie brought the oggie that choked him from Flo's caff."

"Bloody 'ell, what a turn up for the books."

"Yeah, Lucretia Borgia ain't in it. Turns out Flo's recipes include one where the pastry case of the oggies expands when mixed with saliva. The eater chokes to death, but nothing shows up in the pathology reports. All in the recipe, see? I managed to clear up another mystery an all. Great Grandfather Olgivie, the one run over by the brewer's dray. The dray was being driven by a certain Bogdan Krackovitch."

"Get away. Here, want another cuppa, I'm buying."

"Won't say no, young Gundry."

"Fancy a bite. How about an oggie?"

Karno looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Depends," he said. "Were they made here?"

The End

The Curious Case of the Solitary Surfer

The police motorcycle pattered slowly up the narrow, cobble-stoned hill. Its rider, one Constable Leon Karno, goggles pushed up on his helmet, looked intently at the house numbers. Karno, newly appointed to the traffic division, had secretly hoped that he would be patrolling the highways and byways of Cornishire mounted on a speedy Triumph six-fifty Police Special. To his chagrin, he found himself carrying out his duties on an elderly LE Velocette. Known to all and sundry as a Noddy bike, Karno was personally convinced that Noddy wouldn't be seen dead on one, but consoled himself with the thought that the police issue motorcycle boots made him look taller.

Number seventy-five, Hill Street. Karno brought the bike to a halt by the simple expedient of rolling-off the throttle, and gravity did the rest. Having dismounted, he was approaching the front door, in the act of undoing his helmet, when he heard a crash. Sighing, he turned and picked up the bike. It didn't appear to be any more battered than previously, so after double-checking that the stand was actually down, he turned and was mortified to see an attractive young woman framed in the doorway.

"Good afternoon, Miss. Would you by any chance be, err..." he fumbled for his notebook.

"Elowen Pascoe?" The young woman's voice was suggestive of a warm and sunny afternoon. Karno was instantly captivated

"Right, right," Karno smiled at her.

"Nah. I'm Tamara Dinnis, her best friend, Elowen's inside. Come in."

A slightly disappointed Karno followed her inside.

"You telephoned the Police Station this morning, Miss Pascoe. You reported that a man had been following you, I believe? I got a call over the radio, so I don't have any further details." He took out his notebook, crossed his legs and looked expectantly at Elowen Pascoe.

"It all sounds a bit silly really..."

"No it doesn't, El. Just tell him the way you told me. Would you like a cup of tea, constable err..."

"Karno, Miss. Yes please. Milk and three sugars, if it's not too much trouble." He smiled ingratiatingly, wishing that he had more hair and was just a couple of inches taller, then turned his attention back to Miss Pascoe. In contrast to her blonde friend, she had long black hair and a faintly ethereal quality. More dark and mysterious than warm and sunny, he thought. Pretty though, in a slightly spooky sort of way.

"Well, I first noticed this man about two weeks ago. I was cycling to work and I noticed one of those beach buggy things behind me. The road was a bit twisty and narrow, so I didn't think anything of it when it stayed behind me for a while. I actually thought the driver was being quite considerate. Anyway, we got to a straightish bit and he overtook me..."

"Sorry to interrupt, Miss, but just so I've got all the details right, you left this house to cycle to work?"

"Tha's right."

"What time would that be?"

"I usually leave about quarter past seven. Takes me about three quarters of an hour to cycle to work, and I have breakfast when I get there."

"Right, right. And where do you work, Miss?"

"Oh sorry, I should have said. The Beach View Happy Camper Site, on the cliffs overlooking Rozen Beach. I clean out the chalets, there's about six of them, and generally tidy up around the campsite. The Tiddys, the owners of the campsite, built a cafe last winter, when the site was closed. Since Missus Tiddy died at the beginning of the season, I've started doing some cooking. Well, most of it to be honest. Mister Tiddy can make tea and boil an egg, but that's about his limit."

"How long have you worked there?"

"This is my second season."

"Right, right. So on this particular morning, a beach buggy followed you for a while. What made you think there was something fishy going on?"

"Well, I didn't at the time, really. It was only afterwards when I got to thinking about it. See, after the buggy passed me it pulled into a passing place just round the corner, and stopped. The driver was fiddling around with something and once I'd gone past him, he pulled out of the passing place. He couldn't overtake again for a while, so he had to follow me. What struck me as a bit strange afterwards, was that he hadn't waved or said anything to me. You know, boys quite often get a bit cheeky and try to chat you up, like. This one didn't say anything, in fact he didn't really seem to be looking at me at all."

"What was he doing, fiddling with the engine or something?"

"Err no. He was in the driver's seat, but he was bent over."

"You didn't see his face then?"

"Not then, no."

"You've seen it since though?"

"Not really. Not clearly, at any rate."

"Right, right. Did you get the registration?"

"Didn't think to, to be honest."

"Right, right. But you've noticed the beach buggy on other occasions though?"

"Yeah, coupla times. Too far away to read the number though."

"But you have been followed again?"

"Not quite as obviously as that first time, but yes. A coupla times he's been in the same passing place, and I've seen him surfing at Rozen Beach. He doesn't hang around with the usual surfer crowd there, and he's never come into the cafe, so I'm not even too certain that I could give a description of him. Typical surfer really, straggly hair, straggly beard. Skinny, wears cut-off jean shorts and a tie-dye tee shirt. Usually the same one."

"What about the beach buggy?"

"Looks like most of them. Noisy exhaust, metallic paint job. Mainly red paint, not very well done though, and I don't think the engine hasn't been chromed, like some of them. Reckon I would have noticed that. Thinking about it, I reckon there might have been mud on the number plates."

"Right. Has he approached you at all? Said anything or done anything to alarm you?"

Tamara brought in the tea.

"There you go, Constable Karno, milk and three sugars. Like a chocolate bicky to go with it?"

"Why not, about time for elevenses."

"You don't tell the story very convincingly, El. It all sounded quite harmless. The point is, Constable, this creep is always there. Whenever El goes out, there he is, like a sort of faithful dog. Creepy I say."

"Nah tha's not right, Tam. I only see him hanging around when I cycle to work. Never seen him out and about in the evenins."

"Not at all. Sure about that?"

"Definitely. Ey, you gotta first name or did your mum call you Constable?" She giggled.

Karno briefly toyed with the idea of claiming to be called something manly, Rowdy, Harry or Butch, maybe.

"Leon," he said. "But my mates call me Fred."

"Why's that then, Fred?"

"You know, Fred Karno..." Obviously neither of them did.

"Well, it's a long story."

"I bet it's really interestin. Tam would love to hear it, wouldn't you, moi luvver?"

"Shut up you! Just because you're fixed up doesn't mean we're all man mad."

Karno gave a gentle cough.

"So this chap only follows you in the mornings when you go to work, and hangs around on the beach during the day. What about when you go home in the evenings?"

"Sometimes. It's almost like...nah."

"Almost like what, Miss?"

"Sounds sort of stupid, but it's almost like he's escorting me. Keepin' an eye on me kind of, y'know?"

"Right, right. Well, I'll keep a look out for him, and have a quiet word when I see him. See what he's up to. In the meantime, if anything else happens, you can reach me via the Station. I'll contact you once I've spoken to him, you might well see me on your way to work tomorrow morning. Happy with that?"

"Yeah, thanks. I feel a bit silly about all this."

Karno stood.

"Thanks for the tea, ladies." They both giggled. "Don't feel silly, we're here to make sure that people stay safe and feel safe."

"Yeah, guess so. Thanks, Leon."

"Yeah, bye Fred. You can always contact me via Miss Pascoe here."

"Just one last question, Miss. This wouldn't be an old boyfriend acting up would it?"

"Nah."

"Maybe somebody with a crush on you. Somebody you were at school with maybe?"

"Reckon I'd have recognised him if it was."

"Right, right. Well, I'll be off then."

The following morning Karno positioned himself in one of the passing places on the road to Rozen Beach. Sure enough, at seven-thirty, Elowen Pascoe peddled into view. About fifty metres behind her was a beach buggy. As she approached the passing place, she swooped in and came to a stop beside Karno. The beach buggy

accelerated away, and Karno noted down the number, despite the mud smears on the number plate. Just enough to make the registration difficult to read, but not obscured enough that the Police would stop the buggy.

"Morning Constable Fred. Ooh, just thought. Should I have kept going?"

"Morning Miss. Nah tha's OK. Natural thing for you to pull in and let him pass. I've got his number now so I can find out who he is. I'll just follow him for a bit, let him know I'm interested. That'll probably do the trick. I'll let you know how I get on."

Saying that Karno kicked the Velocette into what passed for mechanical life, and executing a 'U' turn puttered away in warm, if not exactly hot, pursuit of the beach buggy. Irritatingly he wasn't able to catch up. Having to report at the station shortly, he turned at the next cross roads and puttered off to work, muttering to himself that if he'd been on a Triumph he'd have caught up with the buggy.

The registration wasn't a local one. The owner was shown as Silas Bastion, the address was somewhere in the Earls Court area. Nobody had reported the vehicle as stolen, and Karno reckoned that the whole thing was probably a case of a townie on holiday taking a fancy to a local lass, and more or less put it out of his mind. More or less, except as Tamara had pointedly said, she could be contacted through Miss Pascoe. That evening Karno phoned Miss Elowen Pascoe. Naturally enough, her parents wanted to know why the Police were calling her, but her explanation that Karno was interested in her friend, Tamara, satisfied them. She and Karno arranged to meet in a local pub, and Elowen rang Tamara.

Meeting in the snug of The Wreckers Arms, Karno out to impress offered to buy the drinks.

"Just a half a shandy for me please, Fred."

"Right, right. How about you, Tamara?"

"Vodka and lime please, Fred. I'm a bit more sophisticated see."

Karno saw.

"Like any crisps or anything?"

"No thanks, I've had my tea."

"Yeah I would. Have they got any roast hedgehog flavour?"

"I've no idea but I can soon find out. Failing that, plain do you?"

"Salt and vinegar. Plain is so, so..."

"Unsophisticated? I get the idea."

"Ooh, don't you go getting any ideas, Constable Fred. You behave yourself."

"Trust me, I'm a motorcycle cop."

Karno walked off to the bar whilst the two girls giggled conspiratorially.

Despite wanting to make a good impression, he rather spoiled it by ordering himself a pint of Old Scrumpilicious cider. The barmaid handed him a tray to take the drinks and crisps back to the table.

"An make sure you bring it back, moi luvver. Them trays don't grow on trees y'know."

Karno thought about saying he didn't think plastic trays did grow on trees, but it only occurred to him when he was halfway back to the table.

"There we go girls. Salt and vinegar I'm afraid, there's been a bit of a run on squashed hedgehog."

Tamara giggled. Elowen frowned.
 "That's not a very nice joke, Fred."
 "Sorry, Miss. Look, seein' as we're meeting socially, OK if I call you Elowen?"
 "Course you can, Fred."
 "An you can call me Tam, any time you want."
 "Call you anytime I want, or call you Tam when I feel like it?"
 "Cheeky! I don't care whether you feel like it or not! I tol' you, don't go getting any ideas now."
 "What, none at all?"
 Elowen took a sip of her drink.
 "So what have you found out, Fred?"
 "Not much. The buggy is registered to a chap in London. Silas Bastion. Does that name ring any bells?"
 Elowen thought for a moment.
 "No. No not at all. How about you, Tam?"
 "Nah. Bastion's a local name though, I think."
 "Right, right. Well look Elowen, I don't really think this is anything too serious so..."
 Elowen nodded, but Tamara said,
 "Well, I think it's downright creepy. I don't know how you can say it isn't serious, Fred!"
 Karno rapidly re-evaluated his thoughts on the situation.
 "So I think I'll have a quiet word with Mister Bastion, just to make sure." Seeing as Tamara obviously thought there was more to this than met the eye, Karno decided that some detective-like questioning might be in order.
 "You said Missus Tiddy died at the beginning of the season. What happened?"
 "Oh poor thing, it was a terrible accident! She'd just had a bath and was cooking some fish and chips for supper. She was electrocuted by a fault in the deep-fat fryer."
 "I think that's a bit suspicious!" Tam said.
 "Right, right," said Fred. "Maybe I'll take a look at the Coroner's report tomorrow."
 "Ooh can you do that sort of thing, Fred?" Asked Tam, impressed.
 "I'm a Police Officer," Karno replied. "I can re-open an investigation if I think there's been foul play." He wondered how he was going to go about this, but kept that to himself.

"Mornin' Sarge."
 "Mornin' Young Fred. You're looking pleased with yourself, find yourself a nice naughty girl last night did you?"
 "Err, nah not exactly, Sarge. Listen, how would I go about takin' a quick look at a Coroner's report then?"
 Sergeant Dinham raised a quizzical eyebrow.
 "Central records, Young Fred. In your own time mind, unless you've stumbled across a major clue in an unsolved murder, in which case you'd better talk to CID. Take my advice though, don't."
 "Right, right."

Around about lunchtime, Karno found himself approaching the café at the Happy Campers campsite. Pulling into the gravel parking area, he made sure that the side-stand was securely down and went in. Elowen was behind the counter.

"Morning, Elowen. Everything OK this morning?"

"Yeah thanks. He didn't follow me this morning, but our mystery man is out there surfing on his own. That's him, see."

She pointed out of the window. Karno saw a surfer catch a wave and stand on his board. He seemed to be heading straight into the cafe.

"Good technique, better than the local lads. Been there all morning, has he?"

"On and off, yeah. Sometimes he takes a break, but he doesn't talk to any of the other surfers." She suddenly smiled as a tall, blond, muscular surfer with obviously bleached wavy hair entered the cafe. Karno hated him at first sight.

"'Ello Bruce. 'Ow are we this morning?"

"Gudday, Sheila I'm fine, how are you, or should I say 'ow are you moi luvver?"

They both laughed.

"Bruce, this is Constable Karno. Remember told you about that fella in the beach buggy that followed me. Constable Karno's been makin' some enquiries."

"I told you I could take care of him for you."

"An I told you not to!"

"I'll take care of it, Miss Pascoe," Karno said. Turning to the surfer, he asked,

"And you are?"

"Bruce Drongo. That's my sheila you're talking to."

"Right, right. An Aussie eh? Over for the surfing are you? Would of thought this is a bit tame compared to Bondi Beach."

"Ah you'd be surprised. I reckon this area is a bit unappreciated. I'm thinking about setting up a surfing school, maybe settling down locally."

"Right, right. Well, I can see there are a few things in this area that aren't unappreciated. I'll just go and have a word with our friend out there."

"D'you want a cuppa Fred, err Constable Karno?"

"When I come back."

"Silas Bastion, I believe."

"Yeah, s'right."

"Nice buggy. Build it yourself did you?"

"Yeah, more or less. It's a kit, they make em locally."

"Right, right. London registration I think, unless I'm very much mistaken."

"S'right. I live up there. Thought I'd spend the summer down here surfing and maybe get the kit company to do a paint job for me."

"They don't, but there's a couple of local chaps who'll customise it for you."

"Thanks for that. Couldn't give me a couple of names, could you?"

"Maybe. The thing is Silas, OK if I call you Silas, is it?"

"Sure thing, er Constable?"

"Karno. Just Karno is fine. The thing is, Silas, a young girl seems to have got it

into her head that you're following her around the place. Now I wouldn't blame you if you were, pretty girl she is, but she seems a bit worried about it. Her fella's not too keen on the idea either, and he's a bit bigger than you are. I don't want any trouble on my patch so a word to the wise, eh."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah sorry, it's sort of accidental, me following her around. She works at the café and I'm staying in town, so when I drive to the beach in the morning we sort of meet up, if you see what I mean."

"Yeah I see what you mean Silas. I also see you do know who I'm talking about."

Silas blushed.

"I would have thought that the surfing was a bit better in the next bay. Mind you," Karno turned to look up the beach towards the café, "you wouldn't be able to watch the café if you were in the next bay, would you?"

"No. Umm, no I suppose not. Hadn't thought of that, I ..."

"Bastion.... Hang on a minute, that was the late Missus Tiddy's maiden name. Related, are you?"

"She was my sister."

"Right, right. Are you watching the café or the girl, Silas?"

"The bastard killed her." Bastion suddenly burst out passionately.

Karno gave him a long, steady look.

"Which bastard would that be then, Silas? According to the Coroner it was a tragic accident."

"It was murder I tell you!"

"So what do you know that the Police and the Coroner didn't, Silas?"

"I don't have any real proof yet, you see."

"Right. Tricky thing, proof. You need it, before you go around accusing people of murder. So, who or what are you watching Silas. The girl or the café?"

"I don't want the same thing to happen to her as happened to my sis!"

"Why should it? "

"Dunno."

"Is that right? I tell you what Silas. Do yourself and me a favour. Pack up your board and go surfing somewhere else today."

Silas looked doubtful.

"Do you think she's in immediate danger, Silas? Reckon somebody's going to do her in today, do you?"

"Not until he marries her."

"Marries her? Not until who marries her, Silas?"

Silas shook his head.

"It's a long story and I don't have any real proof, just a series of coincidences."

"Right, right well I tell you what. You make yourself scarce today, and we'll meet up for a drink tonight. You can tell me all about your series of coincidences. There's a decent pub in town, the Rat and Drainpipe in Midden Street. Know it?"

"Yeah. Not my sort of place."

"Nor hers, either. Not a young surfers pub, so I reckon we can have a quiet chat over a pint or two and nobody except us'll know about it."

"You believe me then?"

"You haven't told me anything yet, Silas."

Karno walked back up the beach to tell Elowen that he'd had a quiet word with a secret but painfully shy admirer. As well as looking at the Coroner's report, he'd

also snuck a look at the case file. It had seemed to him that CID might have made a complete bollocks of the investigation, and apparently, he wasn't the only one who thought so.

Karno put the two pints on the table and sat down. The bar was quiet and nobody could overhear their conversation.

"Right then, suppose you tell me exactly why you think your sister was murdered. First off, who do you reckon murdered her?"

"Meryn Tiddy. For the insurance money."

Karno took a sip of his Scrumpilicious.

"Right. Right well look, Silas, Tiddy had an alibi, he was talking to people when the accident happened. When your sister and Tiddy took out a loan to buy the campsite, they had to take out joint life insurance. The loan company stipulated that in the loan agreement so there's nothing particularly suspicious about the fact that your sister's life was insured. You'll have to do a bit better than that I'm afraid."

"She wouldn't have been so stupid as to mess around with a deep-fat fryer when she was still wet from the bath."

"A bit careless I agree, but then people do careless things. They don't imagine that a deep-fat fryer might short out, for example."

"I reckon the bastard killed her whilst she was in the bath then rigged it to look like she was killed by a fault in the fat fryer."

"The coroner's report said she died of accidental electrocution."

"Maybe he threw an electric heater into her bath, like in that James Bond film."

Karno took another sip and gravely regarded the speaker over the rim of his glass. The same thought had occurred to him, but having a possible method didn't mean that that was what had happened.

"You'll still have to do better than that, Silas. There's absolutely nothing to go on. I grant you he could have killed your sister like that, and obviously once she had died the loan was paid off by the insurance. Could have, see? Could have doesn't mean did. There is a motive, but then again the loan company insisted on the insurance. All you're telling me is you were fond of your sister, didn't like her husband, and so he must have killed her. Like I said, he had a cast-iron alibi."

"Maybe his mate, Drongo, killed her. I reckon that's what happened then."

Karno took another sip and decided no response was the best response to that comment. He mentally filed it away though.

"I reckon he had previous."

"Oh?"

"He'd been married before. In Australia. His wife was killed by a shark."

"Know where and when this happened, do you?"

"Bout three years, no must have been four years ago. Someplace in Queensland I think."

"Right. Right well I'll look that up. Still doesn't prove anything though, so I suggest you keep out of the way."

"Maybe I should say something to the girl?"

"Like what? Your employer might have killed his last wife with whom he jointly owned the campsite, might have killed a previous wife before that in

Australia, and now you're going out with an Aussie surfer. Bit tenuous, don't you think?"

"Well, I still think the bastard killed my sister."

"That's as may be, but there's no proof whatsoever. I'd be a bit careful about making allegations if I were you." He looked at his watch. "I have to go. You stop following the girl. I can't stop you from surfing on the beach, but her boyfriend might have something to say about it, right?"

"Right."

On his way home, Karno stopped at a phone box.

"Oh hello Missus Pascoe, sorry to disturb. It's Constable Karno here, I wonder if I might have a word with your daughter?"

"Elowen told me what's been going on, about the boy following her. Have you spoken to him, Constable?"

"I have. It's nothing to worry about, Missus Pascoe. I've just had another word with the chap, just to be certain that he wasn't harbouring thoughts of any dark and nefarious deeds. I wanted to reassure your daughter. I did say to her that I would call." He added as an afterthought.

"Oh, I see. Hold on a moment, Constable Karno."

Elowen came to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Miss Pascoe. Just one question for you, have you mentioned anything to Mister Tiddy about the man who's been following you?"

"I think I might have mentioned it once, why?"

"Right, right. Well, look, I'd like you to tell him tomorrow that the police have warned the chap off. He was a shy admirer. Treat it as a bit of a laugh, will you?"

"You think it's all a bit of a joke then, Fred?"

"I think it would be better if you appear to treat it as a joke just at the moment. You can tell your young man the same thing."

"We're thinking about getting engaged. Tam's really jealous, so you'd better watch out Fred, or you'll be next. She's got her eye on you!"

"Right. Well, congratulations I suppose."

"Oh it's not official yet."

"Met Mum and Dad, has he?"

"No..." She paused. "No not yet. I think he's shy."

"Right, right. Bit of an ordeal I suppose. I always found it a bit trying when the time came to meet Mum and Dad. I suppose you'll be moving out to Australia once you're married. Oh no, Bruce said something about starting a surfing school around here, or did I imagine it?"

"He's talked about it. Mind you, I think Mister Tiddy might want to sell the campsite, bad memories and all that. Maybe we'll try and raise the money and buy it off him."

"Right, right. Still, be nice to be in the sun all year round. Where's your chap from?"

"Queensland. A place called Leaping Roo Creek. Bruce said it's a big surfing area. He used to help run a surfing school there a few years ago."

"Queensland eh? Sounds nice. Well, you tell Bruce I've sorted the bloke out. If you get any more problems, let me know."

"Yeah. Hey, d'you wanna make up a foursome one evening? I know Tam would like that."

"Yeah. I'm a bit busy this week, but maybe on Saturday night? I'll give you a call. Better yet, I'll come out to the café in a couple of days, when I'm out on patrol."
Karno walked back to the section house a thoughtful man.

The grey-haired bespectacled librarian thought for a moment.
"Is this official police business?"
"I can't say that it is, no. I'm just checking into something for a friend. She's romantically involved with an Aussie boy and her father asked me if I would just quietly check up on the fella."
"Well, I suppose you can't be too careful these days, can you. What I can do, Constable, is find out fairly easily if there's a local paper in this place, Leaping Roo Creek, and then your best bet would be to send the editor a telegram. No doubt he could advise on how you could unofficially check up on your friend's young man."
"Will it take long for you to find out?"
"I can have a very quick look for you now if you can give me ten minutes. If I can't find anything immediately, it'll likely take me a few days."
"Right. Right well I'd certainly appreciate it if you could take a quick look. I'd like to be able to reassure my friend's father."
"Of course. Why don't you go next door and have a cup of tea?"
"Thanks. I really appreciate your help."

The replies to his various telegrams had all arrived by Saturday afternoon. Saturday evening, the proposed foursome had become a threesome. Bruce Drongo had developed a bad cold and didn't want to spread it around. An embarrassed Elowen Pascoe confided that she thought that maybe Bruce wasn't too keen on socialising with a policeman. Karno joked that as the best judges in Britain had originally picked all Aussies, he could understand that. The last of the telegrams, still in his jacket pocket, suggested another possible reason why Brucie-Boy wasn't too keen on mingling with the police.

Detective Chief Inspector Ken Peeler of the Paignmouth CID indicated that Karno should sit.
"You have new evidence on an old case," he said.
"Yes Sir."
"Well, let's have it then lad. Your memo said it was the Tiddy case. What do you think the investigating officer missed?"
"It's quite complicated, Sir."
"By complicated, Karno, I hope you don't mean bloody nebulous. I can give you five minutes, no more."
"Right, right. Meryn Tiddy had been married before. In a place called Leaping Roo Creek, in Queensland, Australia. He and his then wife ran a beach bar. The wife

was killed by a shark when she was out surfing."

"So he's been unlucky in his choices of brides."

"Or lucky, Sir. The death of Missus Tiddy the second allowed him to pay off the loan on the campsite. I don't have exact details of the first Missus Tiddy's financial affairs, but I have been able to find out that on her death Tiddy suddenly came into some money. Reckon she might have been insured as well."

"Coincidence. You've got about two minutes left."

"The first Missus Tiddy was taking surfing lessons when she was taken by the shark. Her instructor was a Bruce Drongo. There's a Bruce Drongo hanging around the Beach View Happy Camper's site."

"That's a bit too much of a coincidence. Go on Karno, the clock's reset."

"Yes Sir. Well, the thing is they don't get many shark attacks in Leaping Roo Creek, or so the editor of the local paper told me. In fact they think they're unlucky if they get one every couple of years. They'd had one two weeks before the first Missus Tiddy met her unfortunate end."

"We may be back to coincidence again."

"Never had two attacks so close together in the one hundred years of the paper's history. I went out shark fishing once. You chuck offal in the water and wait. Usually not too long."

"Hmm. So, the first Missus Tiddy is killed in what appears to be an unfortunate accident, and Tiddy seemingly comes into some money. The second Missus Tiddy dies in what appears to be an unfortunate accident, and again Tiddy comes into money. This Bruce Drongo, around at the time of the second Missus Tiddy's death was he?"

"I'd need to check with the Home Office of the date of his entry into this country, Sir. Obviously I don't have that authority."

"No you don't, Constable Karno, but I do. Go on."

"I mentioned the second Missus Tiddy's brother. That got me thinking about relatives, I don't know why particularly. It seemed to me that if foul play were being contemplated for a third time, it would be a bit too obvious. I rang the editor of the Leaping Roo Creek paper and asked him to do some digging around, see what he could find out about Tiddy and the accident. It appears that Tiddy moved to Brisbane after his first wife's death and brought an hotel. Quite a substantial one as it turns out. He still owns it, in fact, so I was a bit surprised that he had to borrow money to buy the campsite. Then I was told who his partner was."

"Bruce Drongo?"

"No. If I'd have been asked to guess that's what I would have said, but the partner turns out to be a chap called Jacca Pascoe."

"And Bruce Drongo is romantically involved with..." Peeler glanced at Karno's note, "a Miss Elowen Pascoe."

"His great-niece. Jacca left Paignmouth years ago. According to Elowen Pascoe's mother, it was some sort of family argument. Seems like he made a lot of money in the goldfields out in Australia, and eventually settled in Brisbane. Never contacted his family again, but he did take out a subscription to the Cornishire Clarion."

"Been a busy bugger, haven't you Karno."

"Jacca Pascoe died late last year. His business partner was the executor of his will."

"Meryn Tiddy."

"Exactly so, Sir. Apart from a couple of bequests, the bulk of his money was left to his Great-Niece..."

"Elowen Pascoe. You're going to tell me that she knows nothing about this, aren't you."

"I haven't asked directly, Sir, but there's certainly been no mention of it."

"And now Bruce Drongo, who may have been in cahoots with Tiddy over the death of his first wife, is courting Miss Pascoe."

"Miss Pascoe and Drongo have apparently spoken about buying the campsite off Tiddy."

"And no doubt at some point, the new Missus Drongo would suffer an unfortunate accident. Can you prove any of this, Karno?"

"At the moment it's all circumstantial, Sir."

"There's enough to take another look at the death of the second Missus Tiddy."

"That's what I was hoping, Sir. I'm not suggesting the original Investigating Officer missed anything..."

"But something made you suspicious, Karno. What was it?"

"It was a small thing in the Coroner's report really. Missus Tiddy's body was found in a puddle of water. There was a leaking pipe in the kitchen that explained that, but the Coroner noted that there were traces of bubble-bath oil on the body. To be honest, I was surprised that a woman would cook something like fish and chips immediately after having a bath. Get herself smelling all nice and then smell of fish and chips, didn't seem right to me. Then there was the time of the accident, nine-thirty. Seemed a bit late to be cooking a fry-up supper, bearing in mind that the Tiddys had not gone out that evening. If they'd been down at the pub, I could understand it. Silas Bastion reckoned Tiddy had murdered his sister by throwing an electric fire into the bath, just like in that Bond film."

"But the original Investigating Officer missed the bath oil. You've an eye for detail, Karno. Ever thought about CID?"

"I have Sir, yes."

"I can arrange that. We have enough to look at the case again, but still no real hard evidence. I want you on this case, Karno. I'm going to have you seconded to my lot. In fact, I'm going to work with you on this one."

"Right, right. Sir."

"My team call me 'Guv'."

"Yes, Guv."

"What do you need?"

"I need to know when Drongo entered this country, Sir. I also need to know why Miss Pascoe wasn't contacted about her Great-Uncles will."

"I'd hazard a guess and say that the Australian authorities would leave that up to the executor of the will. Find the money, Karno. In the meantime, we've got to prove all this beyond reasonable doubt."

"Right, right. As it happens, I've got an idea about that, Guv."

"So tell me, Silas, if you suspected that Tiddy had killed your sister, why didn't you go to the police? I've seen no mention of it in the file."

"I had no proof, just a gut feeling."

"But you thought he'd got previous on this? Might have killed his first wife in

Australia you said, if I recall correctly."

"I don't really know Karno. Like you said, you can't really go round makin' accusations if you haven't got any proof."

"Right, right. Well, true enough. I've always wanted to visit Australia. Not to live or anything, just on a holiday. See the sights, maybe check out the surfing spots."

"Never really appealed to me, Australia."

"Right, right. Never been to Australia then?"

"Nah."

"All right, Karno, what've you got?" Peeler looked at the folder as Karno laid it on his desk.

"It's an interesting story, Sir. There's a couple of loose ends to tie up with the Queensland Police, but I reckon we've got all three of 'em."

"Three of them?"

"Right, well I couldn't really understand why Bastion didn't go to the police with his suspicions about his sister's death. Granted he had no real proof, but given his obvious conviction that Tiddy had murdered her, it did surprise me. Made me wonder why he might not want the police to investigate too closely. I mean, once he explained that he thought Tiddy had been involved in a previous similar situation, I would of thought we'd have at least taken a closer look at it."

Peeler nodded in agreement.

"The thing is, once I'd contacted the Leaping Roo Creek Gazette and the editor did a bit of rummaging through the micro-fiche files, it turns out that there was a bit of a mystery about the surfing instructor, Bruce Drongo. Seems like he might not have been a local boy, or even an Aussie. There wasn't a police investigation as such, because it was obvious what had happened. Drongo was a witness, not a suspect. However, about ten months before the accident, if it was an accident, the Gazette had a small article about an Aussie lass and her British husband opening a beach bar."

"So?"

"The reporter didn't give any details but mentioned in passing that Leaping Roo Creek was becoming quite international. Another 'Whingeing Pom' was setting up a surfing shop."

"And his name was?"

"Didn't give a name in the article, but the editor reckoned that it could only have been Bruce Drongo. I think that Pom might have been Silas Bastion, using his new, Bruce Drongo, passport."

"So, OK the surfing shop owner in Leaping Roo Creek could have been a Brit. What makes you think he was Silas Bastion?"

"There was a Silas Bastion questioned in connection with a drugs case in London. He was eliminated from that particular case, but there was some suspicion that he was a wrong 'un. Shortly after, Bastion skipped the country and got himself to Australia with a new identity."

"How the hell do you know that, Karno?"

"The officer in charge of the investigation, Inspector Mallard, has retired now, but the name Silas Bastion rang a few alarm bells, and I was put on to him. He

reckoned that Bastion was a right villain and was keeping an eye on him, but he just dropped out of sight."

Karno was laughing as he said this.

"What's the joke Karno?"

"There seem to be a number of Bruce Drongos in this world, Sir."

"Care to explain that remark?"

"After Bastion dropped out of sight, Mallard was involved in another case, involving forged passports. The Flying Squad boys persuaded the forger to supply a list of the forgeries, and the photos to go with them. Bastion was on the list. He'd got himself a new British passport, in the name of Bruce Drongo. So there's the British Bruce Drongo who went out to Australia on a boat, and most likely wound up in Leaping Roo Creek. Then there's the Australian Bruce Drongo, who came to this country about the same time as Meryn Tiddy returned, a couple of years ago."

"And?"

"Tiddy and Bastion were in cahoots over the death of Tiddy's first wife. They split the money, and went their separate ways. Tiddy, for his own reasons, decides to come back to this country and repeat the exercise."

"I'll buy that. What about the Australian Bruce Drongo?"

"I reckon that'll be a false identity 'an all. Coincidentally, a couple of months ago I heard a story about a person who had to leave the country a bit sharpish— an Aussie. Went over to France on a fishing boat, telling the skipper it was something to do with avoiding a drugs bust. There wasn't anything on our books, so I didn't file a report on it, it was just a rumour, after all. It occurs to me now that if somebody had two passports, they could enter this country on one—arriving from Australia— and get all the appropriate visas and stamps. If they then snuck out of the country, they could get entry stamps into France on the other passport, re-enter this country and get a new set of entry stamps. One person, legally in this country, on two different passports."

"I can see the advantages in that. Go on."

"Right. Right well Tiddy and Drongo, whoever he actually is, come back to this country and Tiddy hooks up with Bastion's sister. Bastion, hearing about this and knowing what might happen, comes back to this country but too late to prevent the murder of his sister. He can't take his suspicions to the police..."

"Because his own past might come to light."

"Right, right. He wants revenge, and the only way he can work it is to get the police interested in re-opening the case. By now he knows that there is another person using the alias Bruce Drongo, so even if we do happen to make some enquiries in Australia, the odds are we'd not connect Silas Bastion with Bruce Drongo. One of the reasons why we never suspected Tiddy of killing his second wife was because he had an alibi. He couldn't have committed the murder because the time of death coincided with his talking to a family on the campsite. When the deep-fat fryer shorted out, it fused the entire campsite."

"But if there was an accomplice..."

"Yes Sir. The accomplice could electrocute Missus Tiddy in her bath, carry the body downstairs to the kitchen and stage the accident."

"The proof of all this?"

"We'll probably turn up a false passport. Either the person we know as Drongo changed his name to Bruce Drongo by deed poll and got a genuine Aussie passport, or he acquired a forged Aussie passport in the name of Bruce Drongo."

"Why?"

"Well, I reckon that Tiddy planned on using the same *modus operandi* in this country. It worked well in Australia, so why not here? If his accomplice travelled to this country on the forged Drongo passport, he could disappear by destroying the Drongo passport and using his real one—the one that he'd gone over to France to get legitimate entry stamps for, and which would show an entry into this country long after the Tiddy murder, if it was, as I suspect, a murder."

"So why do you think the fake Drongo passport is still in existence?"

"Tiddy and Drongo got away with it. We accepted the second Missus Tiddy's death as an accident, and Bruce Drongo was never mentioned in the investigation. That being the case, why not keep the Drongo passport and keep the other one as insurance. Oh, wait a minute."

"What?"

"They wouldn't have to kill the Pascoe girl, would they? She gets involved with Drongo and they decide to marry and set up a business together. Before they marry, the Pascoe girl suddenly inherits the money, and Drongo suggests that she buy the business in her own name, in case Tiddy decides to sell it to somebody else before they get married. Tiddy gets the money and leaves. Drongo can either stick around or, more likely, burns the Drongo passport and disappears as well, using his original Aussie passport. Drongo and Tiddy split the money, and that part of it is not really a crime, is it? The girl inherits the money and has bought a business with it—no crime. We know how Drongo managed to get both passports stamped into this country. A small fib about how the crew of the fishing boat can identify him, and I reckon he or Tiddy will crack."

"And Bastion?"

"We can get him for travelling under false documents and the possible murder of the first Missus Tiddy in Leaping Roo Creek. I reckon the second Mister Bruce Drongo will put us straight about that. We might not be able to prove his involvement with the murder of the second Missus Tiddy, but if the Aussies open an investigation into the death of the first Missus Tiddy, they might well be able to pin something on him. In any event, it will make life pretty difficult for him."

Peeler closed the file and stood.

"Let's go." He said.

The End

Handbags at Dawn

Monday morning

"Ariadne, tea. Are you awake in there? Ariadne, rise and shine dear!"

Pamela Brockhampton, receiving no reply, balanced the tea tray in her left hand and opened the bedroom door. How strange, Ariadne had not slept in her bed last night.

"Ariadne!" She shouted loudly. No reply. How very strange. By now thoroughly alarmed, she left the bedroom door open and carried the tray back downstairs. She entered the kitchen as Missus Penhaligon let herself in the back door.

"Mornin' Miss Brockhampton."

"Morning Missus Penhaligon. Bit of a flap on, Missus Trannock's missing!"

"Missing? Whatever do you mean, missing?"

"I last saw her in the study when I went to bed and her bed's not been slept in. I do hope she hasn't wandered off somewhere. She's been acting a little strangely recently."

"I saw the study window was open when I came up the drive. Perhaps she's in there."

"She was going through some correspondence last night after supper. Probably fell asleep, but it's strange, I've been shouting for a couple of minutes."

Missus Penhaligon, having taken off her hat and raincoat went to the study door and tried it.

"Locked!"

"Locked?" Miss Brockhampton put the tea tray down on the kitchen table and tried the door. "But we never lock it. Ariadne, Ariadne are you in there!" She rattled the door handle several times. "Oh my word something must be wrong."

The ever-practical Missus Penhaligon said, "Do you have the key?"

"Key? I, er no, no it should be in the lock."

"I'll take a look through the window. You keep knocking on the door, I'll run round and take a look."

She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should at least put on her hat as it was still raining, but decided that the situation warranted getting a wet head. She quickly ran out the back door, around the side of the house to the open window of the study, looked in... and screamed.

"Steady on, Fred! Bloody hell we'll never hear the end of it if you prang it!"

"Bloody emergency boy! Got to get there smartish before the plods trample all over the clues."

Detective Sergeant Leon Karno grinned as he braked hard, changed down and swung the Cornish Constabulary Lotus Cortina hard left into the narrow, leafy lane. Mindful of destroying possible clues, he eased off before turning sedately into the gravel driveway of Trevelick House and his passenger, Detective Constable Colin Gundry, breathed a sigh of relief.

"Detective Sergeant Karno, Detective Constable Gundry." They held up their

warrant cards and the bored-looking uniformed constable outside the front door nodded. On entering, the sound of sobbing coming from the kitchen, greeted them. Following the sound, Karno saw two women and a Woman Police Constable. One of the women, late forties he guessed, was sitting at the kitchen table and doing the sobbing whilst the other, a sturdy-looking woman in her mid to late fifties, sat in a chair beside the sobber, trying to comfort her. Karno nodded to the WPC and turning saw a uniformed sergeant beckoning him and Gundry into another room across the hallway.

"What do we have here then?"

"Murder by the looks of it."

"Right, right. Looks can be deceiving but I have to admit if you've got a body with a knife sticking out of the chest, it's probably not an accident. What happened?"

"This is the late Missus Ariadne Trannock. Last seen alive sitting at this desk about ten o'clock last night, apparently going through some correspondence. Her bed wasn't slept in, and she was found at about seven-thirty this morning."

"Who found her?"

"The woman who does, Missus Penhaligon from the village, saw her through the window. The door to this room was locked. The nine nine nine call was timed at seven forty-seven. Missus Penhaligon made the call, and the operator could hear a hysterical woman in the background. That would have been Miss Pamela Brockhampton, who's still semi-hysterical, and I do wish she'd pipe down a bit."

"And Miss Pamela Brockhampton is?"

"Apparently a companion."

"Companion? Is that a euphemism, Sergeant?"

"Err, nope, not as far as I'm aware."

"Companion eh, how quaint. Paid companion or just a companion?"

"No idea."

"Broken window pane over there, Fred." Gundry nodded towards the open window.

Karno went over and looked. The window was a latticework of small panes. The one nearest to the window handle had been broken, presumably allowing somebody to reach in and open the window.

"Obviously how they got in, Fred."

"Right, right. Yes, obviously. Place been dusted yet, has it?"

"Err yup. Lab boys have just finished. Photos done too."

"Right, right."

The Constable from the front door came into the hallway.

"Police Surgeon's arrived Sarge."

"Well, wheel him in then lad, wheel him in."

Karno and Gundry stood in front of the desk whilst the doctor carried out a quick examination.

"Karno, come here a moment will you."

Karno walked round the side of the desk and stood by the doctor. The latter glanced towards the door then lowered his voice.

"Notice anything strange, Fred?"

"Not particularly, Bob, unless you count a body sitting back in a chair with a knife sticking out of its chest strange."

"One of the strange things here is your sense of humour, Fred. Look at the skin."

"What am I lookin at, Bob?"

"It's flushed. Most bodies are pale and waxy. Look at the blood on the knife blade... bright red."

"Right, right. Unusually so, otherwise you wouldn't have mentioned it, I presume?"

"Correct. Notice a slight smell of almonds?"

"There's a bowl of almonds on the desk, Bob, next to those smelling salts and the whiskey glass."

"Hmm, hadn't noticed that. Still, I think I'll test for poison. Could be cyanide."

"So, somebody poisoned the woman and then stabbed her. Novel, but I suppose that's being thorough. Finished with the body?"

"I'll just take a couple more photos, then we can move her."

"Gundry, why don't you take a look outside, see if you can find any footprints. Keep the lab boys here. Make sure they get the prints off that knife. Is it a knife or a letter opener?"

Doc Carver studied it intently.

"Knife, stiletto. Too long to be a letter opener I think, but I'll give you a definitive answer once I've removed it."

"Right, right. Maybe wailing woman will know, assuming we can get her to stop wailing and actually talk that is."

Tuesday morning

"How are you this morning, Miss Brockhampton?"

Karno and Miss Brockhampton were in the lounge. They could hear Missus Penhaligon making tea in the kitchen.

"A bit wobbly, Mister Karno. I, um, well this is all a terrible shock you see. I mean I've never even seen a dead body before and well..."

"Right, right. Do you feel up to answering a couple of questions? Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Missus Penhaligon called Doctor Bescoby and he gave me a couple of sleeping pills. Missus Penhaligon stayed over last night, just in case of...well, just in case, you know."

"I know. Look, I'll be as brief as I can. I've seen the statement you gave to the officers who were first on the scene, but perhaps you could just go through it again for me? You last spoke to Missus Trannock about ten o'clock last night I believe?"

"We'd watched the news. I normally have a cup of herbal tea last thing before going to bed, and Ariadne generally has a whiskey. After I'd had my tea she said she had some letters to read. Or was it write? Oh I can't remember, I know she spoke of correspondence...oh dear, is it important?"

"Don't worry, you'll probably remember, but it's not that important. So you saw her go into the study?"

"Yes. I stuck my head in the door and said goodnight on my way upstairs."

"Right, right. Was the door closed?"

"No. No definitely not. It was quite close last night, but what with the rain from the Southwest, you couldn't open the windows, leastways not this side of the house. Anyway, she never used to close the door to the study. Said it was anti-social closing doors and whatever she was doing wasn't that private."

"Did she say that?"

"Say what, sorry?"

"Say that what she was doing wasn't private?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, it was something she always said, but not last night."

"How did she seem?"

"Sorry?"

"Did she appear to be acting normally, or did it seem like something was worrying her?"

"She might have been a little pre-occupied. She's been having dizzy spells these last few weeks. Went to see Doctor Bescoby about it, oh it must have been the week before last."

"Was she on any medication that you know of?"

Miss Brockhampton shook her head.

"No, not as such. She brought some smelling salts from the chemists, said it helped when she felt dizzy. She said that the doctor had told her she seemed a bit ...a bit nervy."

"Nervy?"

"Oh you know, a bit tense. Blood pressure was up a little; she'd get a bit, umm anxious, sometimes. The doctor thought it would pass if she went for a few good walks, got some fresh air and exercise, that sort of thing."

"Was she normally an active woman?"

"Oh yes, we'd walk for miles. Mind you, not the last couple of weeks. She had seemed preoccupied a lot of the time. Quite moody, now I come to think of it. Not herself at all."

"Right, right. So you said goodnight around ten o'clock. The study door was open and she seem pre-occupied to you."

"A little. I thought maybe there were some important letters. She had investments, you know."

"Any trouble with these investments? That might account for her being a bit nervy, perhaps."

"Oh I don't think so, Mister Karno. Apparently, her late husband was a very wealthy man, some years older than her, I believe. She's always been well off, or at least comfortably off, as far as I know. We never really discussed financial matters. She had spoken of us going on a cruise this coming winter. No, I don't think she had any financial problems."

"Were you related, Miss Brockhampton?"

"Oh Lord no! I was working as an English teacher in Greece when I first met Ariadne. Her husband had just died, a few months before at any rate, and we struck up a friendship. She said that she didn't want to sell the house here, and her husband had left her financially secure. As she had no intention of marrying again and had no children, she suggested that I come and live with her, as a companion."

"Forgive me for asking, but would that have been as a paid companion?"

"Oh yes! I mean, I would have been happy to just come and live in this lovely house and perhaps have a small allowance, but Ariadne said it wouldn't do. Wouldn't do at all. I'd have to have a proper salary otherwise I'd get resentful. It's only a small salary, but Ariadne covered all the house expenses and paid for the food. I did the shopping and generally ran the house. You know, engaged Missus Penhaligon as a domestic, found a gardener, arranged for the car to be serviced, that sort of thing."

"Yes, I see. So, you saw her at ten o'clock and everything was normal. You said you got up in the morning to make tea, as you usually did. Took the tea to her room and discovered that her bed hadn't been slept in."

"That's correct. Then I came down stairs and... oh dear. Do excuse me."

Miss Brockhampton snuffled into a handkerchief for a bit, then she pulled herself together.

"Then I came downstairs. I don't know what I was thinking really. I suppose I might have thought that she'd fallen asleep in the study. I was a bit put out because I'd taken the tea tray upstairs and I needn't have bothered if she was in the study. I suppose I thought she might have said something when I first came downstairs; she's generally awake when I make the tea. I can't really remember. I was concerned though, I mean she'd never not slept in her bed before."

"Right, right. I wonder if you feel up to going into the study? I'd like you and Missus Penhaligon to see if anything seems out of place or unusual."

"I, I think I could manage that. I mean, she's not there now, is she?"

"No, no she's not. Before we do go in though, if you could finish off what happened next."

"Yes, of course. Well, as I got to the kitchen Missus Penhaligon arrived. She has a backdoor key and she lets herself in the mornings. I can't remember exactly, I think I said that Ariadne was missing. Missus Penhaligon said she'd seen the study window open and I said that perhaps she'd fallen asleep over her correspondence. Missus Penhaligon tried the door and it was locked so she went round to look through the window and, well you know the rest. She called the Police and I rather went to pieces I'm afraid."

"Right, right. The door was unlocked when the officers arrived though."

"Missus Penhaligon said she saw the key in the door so I, well I remembered a trick to get the key. You slide a sheet of paper under the door and then push a coat hanger or something through the keyhole to push the key out."

"And you went in?"

"We both did. Poor Ariadne was just sitting bolt upright in the chair with... with... oh dear." She dissolved into tears again. Karno waited.

"This is important Miss Brockhampton. Did either you or Missus Penhaligon touch anything in the study?"

"Oh no. No, I just stood in the doorway and I could see there was nothing to be done for poor Ariadne. I don't believe that Missus Penhaligon went into the room at all. Yes, I'm sure about that. Neither of us went into the room until the Police arrived."

Missus Penhaligon came in carrying two cups of tea on a tray.

"I tell you what Miss Brockhampton, why don't you sit here and have your tea. I'll just have a quick chat with Missus Penhaligon in the kitchen then if you're up to it, we'll go into the study."

"How long have you worked here Missus Penhaligon?"

"Oh let me see. I started just before Mister Trannock died so that must have been, about six years ago now, I suppose. Yes, that'd be right my hubby lost his job when the mine closed down so somebody had to do some work otherwise we'd all have starved!"

"Right, right. Just before Mister Trannock died."

"About two or three months. He was twenty-odd years older than Missus Trannock. Bit of an unlikely couple, always arguing. He was retired, I think he was something in the city, London that is. She was originally from London. Used to pop back up there quite regularly. I seem to remember that was what they mainly argued about."

"Right, right. So after he died..."

"Missus Trannock was quite upset."

"I expect she would have been."

"Of course, but bearing in mind they always argued about her going up to London. Well, to be honest, Mister Karno, I thought she had a fancy man up there. I wasn't expecting her to stick around down here. Thought she'd sell the old place and scarper."

"But she stayed?"

"Yes. Got quite involved with the Women's Institute. Funny, I never saw her as an ardent jam or cake maker, but there's no telling how bereavement affects some people I suppose."

"True enough. When did Miss Brockhampton come to the house?"

"A couple of years after the old boy popped off. Missus Trannock came back from a holiday in Greece and said she'd taken on a charity case. Pamela, Miss Brockhampton, arrived a couple of weeks later and she's been here ever since."

"She's a paid companion I understand."

"Yes. More like all found plus pocket money, I think. Missus Trannock said she gave her enough to feel independent but not enough to actually be independent."

"What'll happen to her now?"

"Missus Trannock always said she'd look after her. Me as well, come to that. There's a nephew in London, Missus Trannock's family. He's been down a couple of times, no more. Bit of a waster if you ask me, always asking his aunt for money by all accounts. I suppose the house might go to him, although I believe there's a flat somewhere in London."

"Right, right. So Miss Brockhampton could find herself out on the streets then."

"I very much doubt it, Mister Karno. Missus Trannock said she was one of life's innocents. I think she was very fond of her charity case, so I'm sure she'll be well provided for."

"To get back to yesterday morning..."

"I arrived, as usual for a Monday morning, at seven-thirty and let myself in. On the way down the drive, I saw that the study window was slightly open. I was surprised because the ladies are usually quite careful to lock up at night, well, Miss Brockhampton is anyway, and I remember thinking that the study might have got a bit wet if it had been left open all night. Southwesterly wind you see. Poured down all night it did."

"Right, right. So you let yourself in..."

"And Miss Brockhampton was in the kitchen with the tea things. She seemed quite flustered, rambling on about Missus Trannock being missing. Anyway, I tried the study door and it was locked. I went round to the study window and looked in. Poor thing! I could see her in the chair and I knew something wasn't right. I called out to her, and then I noticed the knife in her chest. I think I screamed, and then ran back to the kitchen. I called the Police and Miss Brockhampton managed to get the door open. Just about then the Police arrived."

"How'd she get the door open?"

"The key was on the inside but she managed to push it out of the lock onto the paper. By the time I'd finished with the phone call she had unlocked the door."

"Right, right. The paper?"

"The morning paper."

"Of course. And then?"

"Then we sort of stood there looking at Ariadne for, well I don't know how long for, then the Police arrived."

"Right, right. Stood and looked."

"Yes. Well it was obvious that the poor thing was dead so I said we'd better not go touching anything before the Police arrived."

"You called her Ariadne?"

Missus Penhaligon laughed a little.

"Mister Karno, Missus Trannock never put on any airs and graces. I think she'd taken a step up in the world when she married Mister Trannock, if you follow me. She called me Nessa and I called her Ariadne, unless Miss Brockhampton was around."

"Right, I see."

"Perhaps you do Mister Karno, perhaps you do. Let's just say that Miss Brockhampton was genteel, but down on her luck and Missus Trannock wasn't genteel, but was very definitely up on her luck."

Karno nodded.

"Finish your tea, Missus Penhaligon. Let's take a look in the study."

Karno noticed Missus Penhaligon frown slightly, but said nothing.

"Where would Missus Trannock have kept her correspondence?"

"Generally speaking she didn't keep private letters, not that she got many. There's a filing cabinet over there. The grey monstrosity in the corner. Quite ruins the room." Miss Brockhampton pointed to the offending cabinet.

Karno looked at the desk. There was an open large diary, several framed photos of various people, a phone and a calendar. No papers. He looked in the wastepaper basket by the side of the chair, but that was empty. The desk drawers were unlocked when he tried them. There were several accounts books, household accounts by the look of them he thought when he glanced through them.

"I'll take these with me if you don't mind. Do you know what they are?"

"Household accounts I think," Miss Brockhampton said.

"Right, right. Do either of you notice anything missing or anything out of place?"

They both shook their heads but Missus Penhaligon looked a little uncertain.

"Well, I'm just about done here. I'll have a nose around for a few minutes on my own. I wonder if you wouldn't mind leaving the room as it is for the rest of the day? We've got photos of course, but you never know a third look might reveal something."

The two women turned to leave.

"Oh, Missus Penhaligon. Could you show me where you plug in the Hoover when you do the cleaning?"

Missus Penhaligon came back into the room.

"Don't worry about the Hoover. You frowned when I asked if anything was out of place."

"I'm not sure...I'm really not sure."

"What do you think?"

"I think," Missus Penhaligon slowly, "that the smelling salts and the bowl of nuts were on the other side of the desk."

"When, and which side?"

"Well. I don't think I noticed them when I looked through the window, so it must have been when Miss Brockhampton opened the door. I'm almost sure they were on the right hand side of the desk."

"And you're sure that Miss Brockhampton never went into the room before the Police arrived?"

"Look Mister Karno, I'm not sure about this at all. It's just I thought that they were on the right hand side, but I could be wrong."

"Right, right. The same as you thought that Miss Brockhampton never went into the room, but you could be wrong."

"I, I suppose so but..."

"Where is the key to the room?"

"In the kitchen."

"May I have it please?"

Karno locked the study door. He jiggled the key a few times, then unlocked the door and opened it. Turning the key, he knelt down and looked through the keyhole.

Tuesday afternoon

Detective Chief Inspector Ken Peeler of Cornishire CID leant back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head.

"What've you got, Karno?"

"A right old mystery Guv."

"It'll be the companion, mark my words. These things usually boil down to a bit of a domestic that got out of hand."

"Maybe Guv, bit more complicated than that though I reckon."

"How so?"

"I've just got off the phone to Carver. As of this moment, he can't say exactly what killed her. It was either the Cyanide of Potassium or the knife through the heart."

"Poison and a knife wound eh? Somebody wanted her dead, that's for sure. Has Carver established the time of death yet?"

"Carver puts the time of death at around three am, plus or minus an hour. Apparently the Cyanide of Potassium muddies the water a bit."

"OK. Why do you say it's a bit more complicated then?"

"Well, the thing is Guv, the two women have different versions of events."

Peeler unclasped his hands and leant forward. The two statements were on his desk and he quickly scanned through them.

"Minor differences. The most unreliable witness is an eye witness, you know that Karno."

"The differences aren't really in the statements, Guv. There are two versions of when the companion came to live in the house, two versions of when Penhaligon

started working there, and some significant differences in the sequence of events."

"Significant differences?"

"Right, right. Penhaligon says she was working in the house before Brockhampton came to stay. Brockhampton says she was the one who hired Penhaligon. According to Penhaligon, Trannock's husband had died a few years before she went on holiday to Greece, met Brockhampton, and invited her to come and live at Trevelick House. Brockhampton told me the husband had recently died."

"Who gets the house?"

"I've an appointment with the solicitor at four this afternoon. I believe that there might also be a property in London, he might know about that and there is apparently a nephew who's always strapped for cash."

"Is he around?"

"No. Trannock's maiden name was Trussler, but the nephew could be a sister's son, so his name might not be Trussler. DC Gundry's going through Missus Trannock's papers at the moment, I dare say we'll turn up a name and phone number this afternoon. The solicitor will probably have it, and I might get details of the property in London."

"OK. Let me know tomorrow morning how you get on."

"How can I help you, Detective Sergeant?"

The speaker, Jane Bacal, was an attractive, serious looking young woman in her early twenties. She and Karno were in her small office at Fleecem and Runnoff, a firm of family solicitors in Paignmouth.

"I gather that Missus Trannock's solicitor is on holiday?"

"Mister Pellew. Yes he is, fly fishing in Scotland. We informed him of the sad event as soon as we knew about it. If you specifically want him personally to deal with this matter then he'll return immediately, but in the meantime I'm filling-in for him."

"He was a personal friend of Missus Trannock?"

"I think not. He was a contemporary of her late husband, Reginald Trannock. I believe they were at school together. Please don't misunderstand me; there was no ill feeling between him and Missus Trannock. I don't think he particularly liked her, but he was happy to act for her."

"Right, right. I wonder if you could tell me who is the beneficiary of the will."

"Under the circumstances I think that would be in order. Could you give me a few minutes, it'll be in Mister Pellew's office filing cabinet. Would you like some tea?"

"Milk and three sugars please."

"I'll ask Elsie to make it for you. I won't be long."

Tea and Miss Bacal arrived together.

"It's fairly straightforward, Mister Karno. There's a property in London, on the Bayswater Road, and Missus Trannock bequeathed it to a Cynthia Thompson. Trevelick house now, that's a little more complicated. The house and the bulk of the estate she left in trust to her nephew, Arthur James Colley. Miss Brockhampton, the companion, is to enjoy the interest from the estate and have secure tenure of Trevelick House, for life. On her death, it reverts to Mister Colley. He gets ten thousand pounds now, as does Missus Penhaligon."

"A fairly substantial estate then?"

"Mister Pellew would know more than I about the late Mister Trannock's affairs. The current value of the estate is close to seven hundred thousand pounds, although death duties will put a bit of a dent in that. Ah, I see that Missus Trannock had life insurance and the will stipulates that that is to go towards the death duties."

"Right, right. She left nothing to her sister, I wonder why."

Jane Bacal read the will.

"Ah, here we are. To the son of my much loved late sister, etc etc etc."

"Right. Right well that's one mystery solved then, no real clue in the will. The obvious suspects had nothing much to gain from Missus Trannock's death. Who is the executor of the will?"

"Mister Pellew. He and Mister Runnoff are named as the trustees of the trust fund."

"Would you happen to know if Miss Brockhampton, Missus Penhaligon or the nephew, knew of the terms of the will?"

"I don't, no. I can telephone Mister Pellew this evening and ask him, if you'd like. Do you want him to return? He's due back next week."

"Let's leave him to enjoy his holiday but yes, I'd like you to ring him tonight, or now even, and let me know what he says."

"He said to call him in the evening if I had to call him. He doesn't get back to the hotel until around seven most days, he told me."

"Fair enough. Call me first thing tomorrow morning would you. This is my direct line number."

Wednesday morning

"Detective Sergeant Karno?"

"Yes. Miss Bacal I believe, good morning."

"It is. Good Morning, Mister Karno. I spoke to Mister Pellew last night. He said a couple of things that might interest you."

"Right, right. Fire away, Miss Bacal."

"Firstly concerning who knew the contents of the will. He is of the opinion that nobody knew the exact details. He knows that the companion, Miss Brockhampton, was told that she need not worry about being turned out of the house and that she would enjoy an income for life, but would not have any access to capital. He was there when Missus Trannock told her. He believes that Missus Penhaligon was aware that she would get a small bequest."

"Ten thousand pounds. Hardly a small bequest."

"Quite, Mister Pellew doesn't think that she was aware of how much had been left to her, merely that she would not be forgotten for her years of faithful service and friendship."

"The nephew?"

"They didn't really get on so Mister Pellew doubts that Missus Trannock would have discussed it with him. There are no surviving members of the Trannock family to leave the estate to, so he thought that out of respect to her late sister she left the estate to the nephew. One thing that might be of interest, Mister Pellew opined that the estate was not left to Miss Brockhampton because Missus Trannock regarded her as a bit, well a bit scatty was the expression he used. Said she thought that somebody would con her out of the money and house if she didn't tie everything up, and the

only way she could do that was to establish a trust fund."

"I see. A bit scatty."

"Yes, exactly. Mister Pellew has met her several times and said that she tends to get a bit confused."

"Confused?"

"Tends to get in a muddle over dates, that sort of thing."

"Right, right. Well, that might help clear up one question I had in my mind. All right, thank you very much Miss Bacal. I think we can leave Mister Pellew in peace to enjoy the rest of his holiday. If anything does occur to him that he thinks might be significant, then could he please call me. Perhaps you'd be good enough to give him my number?"

"Of course, Mister Karno. I said I would contact him this evening. In the meantime, Mister Pellew felt it would be in order to let you have a copy of the will, should you require it."

"I think not, but thank you. I'll be in touch if I think you can help me with anything else. Oh, the address of the property in London and that of Cynthia Thompson, if you would."

"Seventeen, Chesterfield House, Bayswater Road. Missus Thompson apparently lives in the flat. I don't have a phone number I'm afraid. We have written to inform her of Missus Trannock's death, and the fact that she has been left the property."

"That's fine. Thanks again, bye now."

"Goodbye, Detective Sergeant."

Karno cut the phone off then dialled directory enquiries.

"Madame Whiplash speaking. How may I help you?"

"Ah...err I was hoping to speak with a Cynthia Thompson. My name is Karno, Detective Sergeant Karno of the Cornishire CID."

The voice became noticeably less warm and seductive.

"This is Cynthia Thompson. How may I help you Detective Sergeant— Karno, I think you said?"

"Correct. Err..."

"I imagine you weren't expecting to hear what you just heard, Detective Sergeant."

"Right, right. Well, I'm the Cornishire CID not the Vice Squad, Madame Thompson, and I'm investigating the murder of Missus Ariadne Trannock. Call me Karno, incidentally."

"Murder? Then I will assist in any way that I can, Karno. Ariadne was a dear friend of mine, and as you probably now know I am a beneficiary of her will. The solicitors informed me that Ariadne was found on Monday Morning. I do have an alibi for Sunday evening if I am under suspicion, but I would ask that you be discreet when checking up on it."

"I will be checking on that as a matter of course if other investigations draw a blank. In the meantime, perhaps you could tell me how long you knew Missus Trannock?"

"Oh I've known Ariadne for over twenty years Karno. We were in business together and shared an apartment, if you follow me."

"Right, right. I'm a little..."

"Shocked? Well, there it is. I take it that you'll keep this information to yourself, Karno. I don't suppose it really matters now, but Ariadne was quite attached to her respectable life down in your neck of the woods and I don't suppose she'd want to shock her friends down there."

"Right, right. Unless her past has any bearing on the case then I see no reason why this information should become general knowledge."

"Well, you'll have to be the judge of that, of course. Anticipating some of your questions, Mister Trannock was a client of Ariadne's. Very fond of her he was, brought her this flat as it happens and wanted exclusive use of it, if you get my drift."

"Possibly. I prefer to deal in facts rather than drift along, if you follow me."

"Trannock wanted Ariadne to become his mistress. He showered her with gifts, brought the flat, a car and several mink coats. I'm afraid we used to laugh about it, but in the end, Ariadne said if he wanted exclusivity then he'd have to marry her. Much to our surprise, he agreed."

"I hear that they used to argue a lot."

"That's true. Ariadne used to come up to Town a couple of times a month. Although Trannock didn't believe her, she kept her side of the bargain. We used to have scandalous cocktail parties in the flat. Ariadne would act as sort of Mistress of Ceremonies. I paid her rent for the flat and it can't hurt her now if I tell you that she took a small percentage of the proceeds. I did know that I would be left the flat."

"And after Trannock died."

"Then she took a more active part in the parties but, only when the mood took her."

"Right, right. Did anybody down here know about all this? Apart from Trannock that is."

"Not as far as I'm aware, Karno. Funnily enough, she asked me the same question about a month ago."

"Was she worried that somebody might be?"

"I'm not sure that worried would be the right word. She said that it would shock a lot of people, and rather smear the name of her late husband, which would be a shame because he was quite decent to her, when all said and done."

"She said that?"

"Yes, she did."

"Did she say if anybody was blackmailing her?"

"No, not exactly but I did wonder. The thing is, Karno, she said it would be a shame, but I don't think it would really have bothered her."

"Why do you think that, because you knew her?"

"Partially, but also because when we spoke about it she said it would rather enhance her reputation with the old biddies in the WI, although they'd deny it of course."

"And her companion, Pamela Brockhampton?"

"Daft as a brush, as far as I can make out. I did meet her once, no twice now I come to think of it. I came down for a weekend about a year or eighteen months ago. Ariadne brought her up to Town once. They stayed in the Savoy and came round to the flat for tea." She laughed at the memory. "I had to go through the flat and put certain things away, if you follow me."

"Right, right. Do you think it's possible that somebody knew what was going

on?"

"We wondered whether a client from down there might have put two and two together. One person did know for sure, apart from Mister Trannock himself that is, but we rather thought that this person would keep very quiet about it. I suppose you'll have to know who it is, won't you."

"Yes I will."

There was a tinkling laugh.

"Oh dear oh dear. Well, when I came down for the weekend the local vicar popped in, on the scrounge in aid of the church roof fund I seem to remember. Wanted to use the garden for a fête. I didn't initially recognise him, but he obviously recognised me. Either that or he was suddenly overcome by shyness, stunned into a blushing silence by my grace and beauty."

Karno gave a short laugh.

"That'll be the same vicar who's spoken of as being in line for a Bishopric, I take it?"

"Indeed. I really don't remember him, but we thought that perhaps he'd been a naughty boy at some point in his life."

"Not good for the career if that were to become public knowledge."

"That's more in your line of work Karno but, well I would of thought he'd be more inclined to let sleeping dogs lie than blackmail Ariadne."

"Apart from possibly recognising you, and you staying with Missus Trannock, did he know there was a connection between you?"

"Ariadne introduced me as the person who rented her flat in London. I would have thought that if he said anything at all he would have warned Ariadne what sort of scarlet woman was renting her property. To do that, he'd have to explain how he knew about me, which would rather leave him open to blackmail, I would have thought."

"Right, right. A bit of a long shot, I'll agree. All right Madame Whiplash, your secret is safe with me. My Guv'll have to know about it, but we'll be discreet. Does your alibi have a name?"

"Mister Smith. I can give you his real name of course, a sweet man but his wife doesn't understand him."

"Naturally. Do you know the nephew?"

"Never met him. Ariadne didn't like him much. As far as I know he isn't aware of either this flat or his aunt's previous occupation."

"Right, right. One final question, the husband, something in the city wasn't he?"

"A stockbroker, what else. Mind you, he did make a lot of money. Said he had money of his own and speculated with it. Outwardly quite respectable, but I always thought there was a shady side to him. Ariadne did say it was a bit of a mystery where he got his money from but er, yes she said it was a bit of a mystery."

"You were going to say something else then, what was it?"

"Tittle-tattle."

"Tittle-tattle eh? Look, I've no axe to grind with you, you're not on my patch but this is a murder investigation. I could make life a little difficult for you. I don't want to, but you'll have to be honest with me."

"I don't think you could make life that difficult for me, Detective Sergeant. I'm sure you'll work out what I'm inferring. Ariadne thought that her husband might have made some black-market money in the Second World War. I believe after he was demobbed he went to work in the City. He didn't come from a well-off family so

he didn't inherit his money, and he certainly had a lavish life style when Ariadne and I first met him. We thought he was probably on the fiddle, but Ariadne came to the conclusion, after they married, that he was legit."

"Once they married, did they stay in London?"

"No. Once he agreed to marry her they, or rather he, brought the house down there. He wound up his business affairs quite quickly and retired. Ariadne said that there was never any shortage of money although she wasn't altogether certain where it came from."

"Thank you. I don't think you'll be hearing from me again. If you do think of anything that might help me catch your friend's murderer, you can contact me via the Paignmouth CID."

"Not going to give me your personal number then Karno?"

"I think not, Madame Whiplash."

"Not as much of a hick as your accent makes you sound, Karno, are you?"

"I'd like to think that was true. Goodbye."

"Goodbye Mister Karno. If you're ever in Town and looking for a bit of fun, you have my number," she laughed and hung up.

"Fred?"

"Colin?"

"I've had a look at those two books you took from the desk draw. One is a set of household accounts, the other seems to be a record of money, but I don't know if it's money in or money out."

"I reckon money in. Ha, Missus Trannock was on the game."

"What!"

"The flat that she owned up in London was rented out to an old friend, Madame Whiplash. They used to work together before our Ariadne got married, to a client as it happens. Madame Whiplash paid her rent, and she took a percentage of the proceeds. Used to pop up there and help out from time to time."

"Bloody hell!"

"Right, right. Bloody hell, I'd better tell Peeler, this might just complicate things even further."

"You've got to be kidding!"

"Gives us at least two more lines of enquiry, Guv."

"What are your current thoughts on the case, Karno?"

"I'm wondering if we're looking at two murderers. I mean, why poison and then stab somebody? Doc Carver says the poison was enough to do the job, would have killed her within minutes, so why stab her? It occurred to me that if two people were in cahoots then one might administer the poison and the other might have stabbed her so as to play an equal part in the crime."

"Maybe. That would point to the two other women in the house."

"That was my first thought, Guv."

"But now you think, what?"

"There are a couple of things that bother me. There's no sign of any correspondence, no sign that Missus Trannock was writing a letter or letters. She was just sitting at the desk, and somebody walked in and killed her. That means it's possible that the correspondence, if it existed, would incriminate the murderer or

murderers. Alternatively, whoever did this might want us to think that. There is still some doubt as to the sequence of events on the morning of the murder. Now, Miss Brockhampton is a little bit of a fantasist. She likes to put herself at the centre of whatever is going on. She said that she hired Missus Penhaligon, but it's easily provable that she couldn't have. She says that she ran the house, but it's quite clear that Missus Penhaligon does most of the shopping, and Missus Trannock gave her the money to pay the bills. Bills were always paid on time, and in full, by the way."

"So what exactly did the Brockhampton woman actually do around the place then?"

"Quite simply, she was a companion. All the indications are that Trannock felt sorry for her, liked her and so took her under her wing, so to speak."

"Did she resent that? The Brockhampton woman."

"I'm not too certain that she entirely realises that that was the case. Neither Missus Trannock nor Missus Penhaligon ever contradicted her version of events. Missus Penhaligon says that most of the time she's harmlessly in a world of her own."

"The different version of events then?"

"There's some crucial differences, but they are all in the detail. It all agrees up until it comes to opening the study door. Brockhampton says that it was her idea to push the key out of the lock and onto a newspaper; Penhaligon said she suggested she do it whilst she, Penhaligon, called the Police. The thing is, Guv, when you lock the door, to be able to push the key out of the lock from the other side, you have to turn the key anti-clockwise a half a turn. If you just lock it then it's not possible to push the key out."

"So the business with the key was a set-up."

"Right, right. Who set it up is another matter. One other thing about getting the key out. The morning papers weren't delivered until after eight o'clock, and the weekend papers were still in the lounge. Neither of the women mentioned going into the lounge and getting a paper. Penhaligon says that she thought of the idea, and we know that Brockhampton habitually makes herself appear the main player in any story. Surely she would say that she went to the lounge to get the paper?"

"I see what you mean."

"Two more things, Guv. Firstly, the window was broken from the inside. Most of the glass was in the flowerbed, not in the study. Speaking of the flowerbed, there was a footprint but somebody had scuffed it, so it tells us nothing, except there was no mud inside the study. I seriously doubt that the murderer would break open the window, half climb in and remove their dirty shoes."

"Unless either Trannock was already dead, or they were house-proud."

"That is a possibility, Guv. Lastly, Penhaligon thought that the smelling salts and the bowl of almonds were on the other side of the desk when Brockhampton opened the door. She can't say for certain that Brockhampton didn't go into the study whilst she was on the phone. I stood by the phone as if I was making a call. You can't see the study door."

"So Brockhampton went in, and did what?"

"Maybe she went in, maybe she didn't. Doc carver thinks that the Cyanide of Potassium was in the smelling salts. The bottle that was found on the desk contains smelling salts and nothing more, but it's possible that somebody could have substituted a bottle of Cyanide of Potassium for the smelling salts, then switched them round again once Trannock had been poisoned."

"Which Brockhampton was perfectly placed to have done."

"On the face of it, yes. On the other hand, it looks like she might have been set up."

"How do you mean?"

"Are you right or left handed Guv? I know you're right handed. Tell me, if you were reading a book or a letter and eating something, say a bowl of almonds and might have wanted to use smelling salts because you got giddy spells, which hand would you use to eat?"

"Difficult to say, Karno, I've never really thought about it but obviously you have."

"I reckon that you'd eat with your right hand, if you were right handed."

"Unless you were writing a letter, perhaps."

"No. You wouldn't write and eat at the same time, or at least most people wouldn't. Even if you were to, I reckon that the smelling salts would be on your right hand side."

"And you're going to tell me that the nuts and the smelling salts were on the left-hand side."

"Right, right. Now Missus Trannock was right handed, as is Missus Penhaligon, but Miss Brockhampton is left-handed."

"So she slips into the study when Penhaligon is on the phone, switches the smelling salts back and moves the bottle and the nuts onto the other side of the desk because it doesn't look right to her?"

"Except I don't think that she'd risk taking more time than was necessary, even if it occurred to her to move the things around anyway. She says that she didn't go into the study. It's only Penhaligon who says that she might have done. It's only Penhaligon who says that the things were switched around on the desk. Penhaligon does have a key. The backdoor is locked but never bolted."

"What happened to the idea of the two of them being involved in it?"

"It's still a possibility, but at the moment I tend to think that Penhaligon is trying to implicate Brockhampton."

"Motive?"

"I'm not sure. Penhaligon stood to gain the most out of the two of them, life for Brockhampton would have continued along as usual whether Missus Trannock was alive or dead. Pellew, the solicitor, was of the opinion that Brockhampton knew the contents of Trannock's will in so far as they affected her."

"Penhaligon and Trannock were friendly. First name terms you said?"

"Right, right. If Penhaligon needed money then I'm sure that she could have asked her friend for a loan. Reading the will, it's clear that Missus Trannock had a great affection for her."

"No immediately apparent motive, then?"

"Seemingly not."

"So, what now?"

"I want to talk to Missus Trannock's doctor, Bescoby. Find out what was wrong with her, see if there's any explanation for her strange behaviour. Then if, I say if, we're looking for something that Missus Trannock could be blackmailed over, there are two possibilities I think."

"I can think of one certainly."

"Right, right. The other one might just concern where Mister Trannock's money originally came from."

"That would be a very cold trail, I would imagine."

"Somebody might have known about it though."

"You seem reasonably certain that Brockhampton didn't carry out the murder."

"At the moment, yes. I can't see any motive, although the evidence does tend to implicate her, but we've been pointed in that direction by Penhaligon, who also doesn't appear to have a motive for the murder."

"Bring them both in, Karno."

"Give me another day, Guv. I need to talk to the GP and I want to do a quick background check on Mister Trannock. If I'm correct in thinking that Penhaligon is trying to subtly implicate Brockhampton, then I think she might suddenly 'remember' something else. I mean it would be obvious that we'd suspect one of them, or at least obvious to Penhaligon, Brockhampton I'm not so sure about. Another day might put pressure on them."

"Your case, Karno, but I'd like to get this wrapped up as soon we can."

"A sad affair Detective Sergeant."

"Indeed Doctor Bescoby. I wonder if you wouldn't mind answering a few questions about Missus Trannock's health."

"Of course. In general terms, she was in good health. The last few weeks, according to her the last month, she'd been suffering from giddy spells and had been out of sorts."

"Did you prescribe any medication for her?"

"No. She's of a certain age and I did wonder if perhaps this was the onset of menopause. As it happens, probably not but initially, I did wonder. There was no physical cause of the giddy spells that I could determine, but when she complained of feelings of anxiety I came to the conclusion that the problem lay more in the mind than the body."

"I'm not with you, I'm afraid."

"When people are under stress they can exhibit certain physical symptoms. One of those symptoms can be headaches or giddy spells. She said that she found smelling salts helped her, and I suggested that she get plenty of fresh air and exercise. Exercise can be beneficial in such cases."

"Would you say that she was depressed, Doctor?"

"No, no I wouldn't. I was going to suggest that she go for some tests to try to get to the bottom of the giddy spells, but when she told me that she had certain difficulties in her life, I felt that the answer lay more in the mind. We refer to this sort of thing as psychosomatic. The mind produces physical symptoms, but there's no physical cause for the symptoms."

"Did she say what these difficulties were?"

"She hinted that there might be certain financial difficulties, but she wasn't specific."

"Financial difficulties?"

"Exactly so."

Doctor Bescoby's wife knocked on the surgery door, and opened it.

"Miss Brockhampton just called. Would it be possible for you to write a repeat prescription for her sleeping pills?"

"Of course. Is she on the phone now?"

"Yes, Dear."

"Tell her I think it best if she go back to her usual ones. I don't think it's advisable for her to continue with the stronger ones. Tell her she can collect the prescription in about half an hour. I'll do it as soon as Detective Sergeant Karno has finished with me."

"Perhaps I'd better tell her it'll be ready in an hour, Dear, just in case."

"Doctor, Miss Brockhampton takes sleeping pills?"

"As you've heard. I gave her a stronger prescription to give her a decent night's sleep after the shock of finding the body. Usually she has a very mild dosage. Another case of more in the mind than the body."

"How long has she been taking these pills?"

"I'm not sure that I should tell you that. Since before the murder, at any rate. Well before the murder."

"But very mild pills?"

"Almost a placebo, Mister Karno."

"Almost?"

"She has difficulty in getting to sleep in the first place, and if anything disturbs her in the night then she complains that she can't get back to sleep again. The pills are just strong enough to make her drowsy, then nature takes over. If she wakes in the night the knowledge that she's taken a pill helps her to drop off again."

"Right, right. Would it take much to wake her in the night?"

"Difficult to say. Certainly more than a person who didn't take them."

"Right, right."

Wednesday afternoon

Karno and Gundry were in the canteen, comparing theories over tea and unidentifiable pastry creations, the canteen speciality.

"There are a lot of ifs and maybes in your theory, Fred. I'm not saying that you're wrong mind, but I reckon you'll have a hell of a time proving it. Where's the motive?"

"Look, all the evidence points to the fact that nobody broke into the house. They made it look like there was a break-in, but it doesn't hold water on closer examination. That leaves three possibilities. The killer was already in the house, the victim let them in, or they had a key. Brockhampton customarily took a sleeping pill and probably wouldn't have woken during the night."

"Provided she took it on that particular night, Fred. I can shoot that down now. She customarily took a pill, but this night she flushed it down the toilet, killed Missus Trannock, then played innocent in the morning."

"Right, right. But she had no motive for the murder. One person that we know of has a key, and that's Missus Penhaligon—but she has no apparent motive for the murder. If, for example, she had money troubles then seemingly she was on friendly enough terms with Missus Trannock to ask her for help. Against her is, if you're of a suspicious turn of mind, you could say that she's trying to subtly point the finger at Brockhampton. That leaves Trannock letting the killer in. Her doctor says that she apparently had financial worries, but we know that she didn't. Money was regularly coming in from her late husband's investments, the house was not mortgaged as far as we know, and then there was a steady return from her sideline in London."

"Turn up for the books that was."

"Right, right. It could be that somebody found out about that and was blackmailing her. We already know that the vicar might have had his suspicions, and the solicitor, Pellew, could have found out."

"Madame Whiplash said she didn't think Trannock would have been particularly bothered if knowledge of her sideline became public knowledge."

"Right, well that's what she thought. On the other hand, Missus Trannock had a very respectable reputation. Stalwart of the WI, supporter of the church, and all that. I'm not so sure she would be so relaxed about it. The murderer sends her a letter then..."

"It doesn't work, Fred! She'd be more likely to murder somebody to keep it quiet."

"I know. We're missing something. It has to come down to somebody blackmailing her."

"Maybe she committed suicide?"

"What, poisoned herself then at the last moment stabbed herself in the heart? Don't be daft man! Mind you, I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"Could she have committed suicide and somebody, the two women, conspired to make it look like murder."

"To avoid the stigma of suicide? Not really very likely, is it?"

"Right, right. Or to make sure that the life insurance policy paid out. Some policies do stipulate that if the insured commits suicide, the policy is null and void. We do think she was being blackmailed though."

"Seems likely. Didn't Madame Whiplash say something about they thought the husband's money was a bit dodgy in the first place?"

"Yeah, but he apparently made a lot of money on the stock exchange. That's years ago – even if he committed fraud it would be too late for somebody to instigate a court action now. Missus Trannock would have been able to find that out."

"Maybe the solicitor, Pellew, would know something about it?"

"He doesn't seem that keen to have come back, certainly. I think I'll have a word with the hotel manager later and just make sure that he was in the hotel last Sunday night. It might be just possible to get down from Scotland, commit the murder and get back up to the hotel again. Come on, you check train times and I'll talk to the hotel."

"Aye, weel I'd need to double check that, Detective Sergeant. Certainly, I saw him return to the hotel on Sunday afternoon. A wee bit earlier than he usually does it's true, but as far as Monday morning is concerned, I don't know. He usually makes himself a coffee in his room in the morning, and the kitchen makes him up a pack of sandwiches the night before for his lunch. I believe he also makes himself a flask of coffee to take with him. There's a kettle in the room, so he could quite easily make it himself. I understand that he leaves the hotel and walks to the river about five or five-thirty in the mornings. It's conceivable that he could leave and nobody would see him go."

"How far is the station from the hotel, Mister MacDonald?"

"By road a good five miles, Detective Sergeant but you ken one could cut across country. I would think that would cut the distance to perhaps two miles."

"An easy walk, would you say?"

"I wouldn't personally know, but I'd say it would be quite flat. There are paths through the wood so aye, it would probably be quite easy going."

"Is Mister Pellew in the hotel at the moment?"

"He is not. He usually returns around seven."

"But not last Sunday?"

"That is the case, Detective Sergeant."

"Thank you, Mister MacDonald. Would you let Mister Pellew know that I rang and that I would like to speak to him? I'll ring again at eight tonight."

"Very well, I will make a point of telling him personally. Is there anything else?"

"I don't believe so. Thank you for your help. Please don't mention that I asked about the train station."

"I will not do so, Detective Sergeant. Goodbye."

"Bye, Mister MacDonald."

"It could just work, Fred. There's an express leaves Loch Tavish at seven pm and gets into Paignmouth at three forty-five the next morning."

"Right, right. Does it run on Sundays?"

"Hang on...yes it does. I'll get cracking with the taxi companies, the only way Pellew could get to Trevelick house in the correct time frame would be by car..."

"Unless of course he left his own car at the station."

"I'll get uniform branch to check out the car park."

"No. No it won't work Colin."

"It could."

"Nope. He'd need an accomplice. In our enthusiasm, we've forgotten the fact that Missus Trannock was poisoned. If ah...of course."

"What?"

"The poison was in the smelling salts. Forget this train business...wait a minute."

"In the smelling salts?"

"Right, right. Bloody obvious really. You substitute Cyanide of Potassium for the smelling salts. Missus Trannock has a giddy spell, she tries to revive herself with the smelling salts and that's it."

"So her death could have occurred at any time?"

"Precisely. You know, it occurs to me, well two things occur to me actually. First, the murderer could provoke a dizzy spell somehow and second, much as I hate to say it, Missus Trannock could have used the same method to commit suicide. Doc Carver said death would have occurred within a couple of minutes. Just hang fire, let me talk to him."

Karno picked up the phone.

"Ah Karno, there's a coincidence, I was just going to call you."

"Right, right."

"I can't absolutely swear to this, but it seems to me that it was the knife that killed Missus Trannock. She was a goner anyway with the amount of Cyanide of Potassium she had in her, and she had certainly ingested the poison before being stabbed, but from the damage to the heart muscles I would say she was probably

stabbed before the poison finished her off."

"Right, right. What sort of time-frame are we talking about?"

"Time frame? Ah, I see what you're getting at. The poison would have taken around about ten minutes, maybe fifteen at the outside, to finish her off."

"Right. Right so if I said to you I thought that the murderer had somehow provoked a dizzy spell, that Missus Trannock used her smelling salts and the murderer had substituted the poison for the smelling salts, that would be a possible scenario. Going on from that, the murderer was actually present, gloated for a few minutes, then stabbed Trannock, that would also be possible."

"Very likely, I'd say. The poison works by preventing the lungs absorbing oxygen. Trannock would probably have had a series of violent spasms, but she wouldn't have been able to cry out because she would be struggling for breath."

"What about committing suicide?"

"The knife?"

"Leave that out of it for a moment. Obviously, Cyanide would be a viable method of suicide, but would somebody choose it?"

"Difficult to say what goes through a suicide's mind. If one were to take a very deep breath instead of just take a sniff, as one would normally do when using smelling salts, then death would be faster, certainly. Yees, yes you'd lose consciousness quite quickly under those circumstances, certainly. Now speaking of the knife, it was a knife incidentally. It had a Commando crest on it, and was an army issue knife. Well, perhaps not army issue, you'd have to check that ,but certainly there is a connection with the army. The Commandos at any rate."

"Right, right. This business just keeps getting more complicated."

"Perhaps. But you can rule out suicide and you can rule out Missus Trannock taking an abnormally deep breath. I'm pretty sure that it was actually the stab wound that killed her, and I'd agree with your hypothesis that the murderer could have been in the room with her when she used the smelling salts."

"Right, right. Thanks, I think."

Wednesday evening

"Mister Pellew, I'm sorry to bother you again."

"Not at all Karno, not at all. Look, I really think perhaps I should return to Paignmouth. I could catch the midday train tomorrow and be back in the saddle on Friday morning."

"Right, right. Well, look, you might be able to shed some light on a couple of questions. If so it might not be necessary for you to return immediately."

"I'll leave you to decide that, Karno. Ask your questions."

"You were a long-time friend of the late Mister Trannock I believe?"

"Gerald? Yes, we were at school together. Got called up together during the war as well."

"Did you serve together?"

"We did. I'm proud to say that we were both in the First Commando Brigade. Of course, we were young and a bit reckless in those days. What we did was necessary, but I prefer not to dwell too deeply on it these days."

"Right, right well that certainly clears up one question. The knife that Missus Trannock was stabbed with had a commando crest on the blade."

"I have the same knife Karno. A handy weapon. Weren't standard issue of

course, but easier to stab somebody with. Poor woman but at least it would have been quick."

"Did you know Missus Trannock well?"

There was a discernible pause.

"One doesn't like to speak ill of the dead, Karno. I never really liked her, but on the whole, I think she made Gerald happy. I knew her quite well, but after Gerald's death, we never really met socially. I was happy to act for her in certain matters, for Gerald's sake you understand, but I can't say that I liked her."

"Right, right. I hate to press you on this Mister Pellew and certainly this will go no further, but did you have any particular reason for not liking her?"

Again, there was a discernible pause.

"I, I wouldn't like this to go any further Karno, but I think she might have had, oh how can I put this? I think she might have been a bit of a fast and loose woman. Before she met Gerald, that is."

"I have heard that they argued about her going up to London, after they moved to Trevelick House."

"That is true, and I won't deny it. I believe Gerald thought that she might be keeping in touch with the set she used to socialise with when she first met him. As I say, a bit of a fast set, by all accounts."

"Right, right. Gerald was a stock broker in the City, I believe."

"Indeed. After we were demobbed, I studied for the Law and Gerald went off to the bright lights. We kept in touch. Look, I'll be completely honest with you. I used to spend the odd weekend in London myself, with Gerald, after his first wife was killed. That's how I know that Ariadne had something of a history, can I put it like that. I did think that she might have been something of a gold-digger, but she was a good wife to Gerald, if not perhaps an entirely faithful one. I wonder if we might change the subject now?"

"Certainly. His first wife was killed you say?"

"One of those stupid car accidents. She was driving too fast, skidded off the road and hit a damned tree. Gerald took it badly, quite went off the rails for a while. That's when he first met Ariadne."

"Right, right. Were you aware that Missus Trannock had financial worries?"

"I am aware that she did not! I was the executor of Gerald's estate. Trevelick House was unencumbered, Ariadne owned a flat in London that she derived an income from, and Gerald had substantial investments. I kept an eye on the investments for her. Believe me, Karno, she had no financial worries whatsoever. I'd say that she hardly spent what she earned."

"Right, right. Did she ever mention that somebody was blackmailing her?"

"What! No, no never. I suppose somebody might have discovered something about her past, but to be honest I don't think that would have worried her over-much. She'd probably have taken the attitude publish and be damned!"

"Perhaps something in her husband's past, something about how he acquired his money?"

"Ah. Look, I might as well tell you. It's a load of nonsense of course, but you'd unearth the story eventually. Gerald and I were in the First Commando Brigade. In March nineteen forty-five, we took part in Operation Plunder, a rather suggestive name as it happens, or at least one journalist thought so. We were part of an advanced group that crossed the Rhine and played merry-hell with Jerry at Wesel, a town on the Rhine. A story started that a group of Commandos came across an SS

convoy fleeing the town, carrying various works of art and gold that the Nazis had stolen. The Commandos attacked the convoy and supposedly struck a deal with the SS men. They divided the loot between them. The story goes that most of it wound up in banks in Switzerland, the remainder in Swedish banks. It's a ripping yarn, but to the best of my knowledge that's all it is, a story. There are several stories like that, some may very well be true, but as far as I'm aware, this one wasn't. Gerald and I were what we called buddies in the commandos. Meaning we fought as a two-man team, and generally looked out for each other. I wasn't involved in anything like that, so it follows that he wasn't either."

"Right, right. But if somebody believed the story?"

"Well, then I suppose they might have tried to blackmail Ariadne. By the same token, they might have blackmailed me; after all, I was supposed to be the one involved in it. I would imagine that if, if I say, anybody had tried it on with Ariadne, she would have contacted me. I can't see her being overly worried about it anyway. I repeat the story is a load of bloody nonsense."

"Right, right. Well, look I don't think you need to come back early, Mister Pellew."

They said their goodbyes, and Karno rang off. It was eight-thirty. He phoned Gundry at his home.

"You up for a pint then, boy?"

"Err. I'm gettin' a bit of domestic grief at the moment, Fred."

"Right, right. I'll take that as a yes. There's been a development in the Trannock case. I need you to put in some overtime at the office. I'll be at my desk in the Rat and Drainpipe in fifteen minutes, see you there."

Gundry answered in a loud, angry voice.

"Well, if I really must, Detective Sergeant Karno. It is inconvenient and I do happen to be married to my wife and not the force you know. what.... the Chief Constable you say...Then I don't have any bloody choice then, do I?"

"No you bloody don't you dozy git. If you get there first mine's a pint of Scrumpilicious. Say hello to the lovely Demelza for me, or rather, say goodbye."

"A good story, Fred. What do you reckon?"

"I suppose it could actually be true. At least somebody might have believed it and if they did...well let me put it like this would you try to blackmail an ex-commando, or would you prefer to blackmail a woman?"

"Take your point. Where do we go from here?"

"Well, it's a possible motive, albeit a bloody unlikely one. Peeler is after a result and wants us to haul the women in for formal questioning. Purely on the basis that they were friends and she knew the husband as well, let's put a bit of pressure on the Penhaligon woman."

"Oh bloody hell, that reminds me, Fred. This Cyanide of Potassium, you can use it on wasps' nests. It's bloody lethal. Missus Penhaligon's husband brought some last week and destroyed a nest at the vicarage. I found that out when I spoke to him this afternoon. He didn't react much when I spoke about Missus Trannock. Very sympathetic and all that, but it didn't seem like he was hiding anything."

"Right, right. Well, that's it then, we've got a case I reckon, although I'm buggered if I can see a motive."

"Penhaligon's husband is out of work at the moment."

"Well, maybe it's as simple as she needs the money now, and knew that she would get something in the will. There's no doubt that Missus Trannock was worried about something, I suppose Penhaligon might have been demanding a share of the Nazi loot. Maybe she'll tell us."

Thursday morning

"Good Morning Missus Penhaligon, thank you for coming in this morning."

Karno, Gundry, Missus Penhaligon and her solicitor, Marya Trago, were seated in an interview room at Paignmouth Police Headquarters.

"This is a formal interview, Missus Penhaligon, and I assume that Miz Trago has explained the implications of that to you. Miz Trago, do you wish me to issue a formal caution to your client?"

"I think we can dispense with that, Detective Sergeant Karno. I have explained to my client that you are formally questioning her in connection with the murder of her former employer, Missus Ariadne Trannock. She is aware that should charges be pressed in connection with the murder, then anything that she says in this room may be used in evidence against her."

"Very well." Karno started the recording and as required gave the time, date, those present and the case to which the interview pertained.

"I have here your statement, Missus Penhaligon." He pushed it across the table. "Is there anything that you wish to add to it, or that you wish to amend in any way?"

"There is not."

Karno leant back in his seat.

"Right, right. The murderer nearly had me fooled on this one, Missus Penhaligon. Nearly had me fooled."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Well, you see obviously the murderer assumed that I would assume that whoever it was had broken into the house to carry out the murder, but I happen to know that they were either let in, or let themselves in with a key."

"I have a key, Mister Karno. I believe I did mention that."

"Indeed you did, Missus Penhaligon, indeed you did. As a matter of fact, if I remember correctly," Karno turned over a few pages in the file in front of him, "you said to detective constable Gundry 'I have a key. Oh dear, I suppose that would have made me a suspect if the window wasn't broken'."

"A perfectly natural thing to say, Mister Karno." Miz Trago interjected.

"I suppose it was. Of course, the broken window had nothing to do with a break in." Missus Penhaligon remained expressionless.

"Would you say that you were a tidy person, Missus Penhaligon?"

"I earn my living, such as it is, by cleaning up other people's mess, Mister Karno."

"That doesn't really answer my question. Let me put it another way then, you would not go out of your way to make extra work for yourself."

"Who would?"

"Right, right. Well, strangely enough, when the window was broken, nearly all of the glass was inside, not outside the room. There was enough inside to make the casual observer think that the window was broken in, but not quite enough and the pattern of the glass on the floor was wrong. No, what happened was somebody broke the window when they were inside the room, then went outside, stood in the flower

bed, picked up most of the glass shards and threw them back inside. Of course, if a person had broken the glass from the outside, all the glass would have been inside. As it was, obviously whoever did break the window only threw enough inside to make it appear convincing. The only reason for doing that would be to make it appear that whoever it was hadn't let themselves in with a key."

"That's purely circumstantial, Karno. You don't have to make any comment at this stage, Missus Penhaligon. Is that all you've got Karno?"

"Let's have some more circumstantial evidence then, shall we. Despite the fact that it had been raining cats and dogs all night, there were no muddy footprints in the room. Of course, if we were to assume that Missus Trannock was already dead, killed by the poison, then the murderer could have taken off their shoes so as to not have made a mess, or left any footprints. Could have, but that isn't what happened. Missus Trannock was killed by the knife, although she would have succumbed to the poison in a very few minutes."

Penhaligon remained impassively silent.

"Still circumstantial, Karno. If the murderer was aware that the victim had already taken the poison then they could have taken the time to remove their shoes before climbing in the window."

"Well, they could, that's quite true. As you say, circumstantial. Let us consider the matter of the key to the study."

Missus Penhaligon crossed her arms.

"In order to be able to push the key out of the keyhole, after the door had been locked it's necessary to turn the key a half a turn anti-clockwise, otherwise it's held in place. In other words, the murderer felt it was necessary that somebody should retrieve the key and use it to open the door. I wondered why that was, and then thought that the obvious answer was the murderer wanted access to the room when the body was first discovered and before the Police arrived. Any idea why somebody would want to do that, Missus Penhaligon?"

"I really have no idea, Mister Karno."

"Right, right. Well, I wondered if it might be because they wanted to have a quick check around the room in daylight, to make sure they hadn't missed anything or left any clues. You see, the lights in the study were all switched off, so the murderer would have switched them off, walked over to the window and got out that way. I say switched them off, but in actual fact, according to Miss Brockhampton's statement, Missus Trannock was in the habit of switching off the main study light and just reading by the desk lamp, which is an anglepoise lamp. That leaves most of the room in darkness. The murderer might not want to risk switching the main study light on in case it attracted any attention, hence the desire to check the room in daylight. I also thought it strange that the murderer should switch off the desk light. Perhaps a reflex action on leaving a room, the sort of thing a tidy person might do without thinking about it."

Miz Trago made notes and glanced at her client, who remained silent.

"Turning our attention now to what happened later on in the morning, when the body was discovered. As I might have expected, there were slight differences in your statement and that of Miss Brockhampton. But you slipped up quite badly, Missus Penhaligon."

"I object to that, Detective Sergeant Karno!"

"Save your objections for the courtroom, Miz Trago. Your client relied on the fact that Miss Brockhampton has a tendency to portray herself as the main player in any

scene, so she said it was her idea to slide the paper under the door and push the key onto it. The only trouble is the morning papers hadn't yet been delivered, and you inadvertently gave the game away. You said that she used the morning papers and I happen to know that the papers are never delivered before eight o'clock at the earliest. At least ten minutes after the study door was opened."

"A simple mistake, surely?"

"Oh it was a mistake all right. It was a mistake, because when I realised that she couldn't have used the morning papers, I went through her statement again with Miss Brockhampton. This time she said that you told her to get the papers from the sitting room, push them under the door, and then try to push the key out whilst you rang the Police. You were trying to guild the lilly, Missus Penhaligon. But you know what your real mistake was?"

"Say nothing, Missus Penhaligon, this is all purely circumstantial and I'm about to put a stop to it."

"Your real mistake, Missus Penhaligon, was over the placement of the smelling salts, the whiskey glass and the bowl of almonds. The almonds were a nice touch I must say. You see, Missus Trannock was right handed and you're right handed. I noticed that Miss Brockhampton is left-handed. Now a right-handed person holds a glass, uses smelling salts or even nibbles almonds, with their right hand. If they were reading a letter, they would hold the letter in the left hand and eat or drink with the right. You, being right-handed, when you were tidying up the desk and standing in front of it after the murder, you automatically placed the various objects as you would use them. That would be the incorrect position if you were seated behind the desk. When we first went into the study, I think you saw that something was out of place and so you frowned. I asked you about it and you had to say something, so you said the things had been moved. Tell me, was that a deliberate attempt to implicate Miss Brockhampton or a genuine slip?"

"Don't answer. Mister Karno, I think I need to speak with my client alone."

"I'm sure you do, but the final bit of circumstantial evidence was the poison used, Cyanide of Potassium. It's also very effective at destroying wasps' nests. Your husband used it at the vicarage about ten days before the murder, so you had the perfect opportunity to obtain some. You were working for the Trannock's before Mister Trannock died, and you would have heard them arguing. As a matter of fact, you told me that yourself. I put it to you that you attempted to blackmail Missus Trannock about her past, and when she ignored your threats, you decided to kill her. Was she threatening to go to the Police, Missus Penhaligon? Is that when you decided to swap her smelling salts for the Cyanide of Potassium, Missus Penhaligon?"

"No. I..."

"No? Why did you decide to kill her then? I assume that you wrote her letters that threatened her in some way, put her under stress and then of course she resorted to the use of smelling salts. I suppose that your husband's use of the Cyanide gave you the idea. Did you write a final letter, telling her that you would come and see her in the early hours of that fateful Monday morning, and the shock of seeing you brought on a dizzy spell, as you knew it would?"

"Clever bugger aren't you, Karno. I thought I'd covered my tracks pretty well."

"No, Missus Penhaligon, you didn't. Why did you decide to murder her, that's the only thing that I haven't quite worked out yet? Did she realise it was you that was blackmailing her?"

"The bitch stole my recipe for blackberry jam."

"I'm sorry?"

"It was never about blackmailing her, Karno. The bitch stole my recipe for blackberry jam. It's been in my family for generations. I've won awards for my jam at the annual WI jam and cake competition I'll have you know, and the bitch stole it and passed it off as her own."

The End

More fascinating cases from Karno's casebook coming soon.

A
Barnikel and Fearnaught
Occult Detectives
Thriller

AFTERDEATH

PETER N BERNFELD

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Any resemblance to actual persons, either living or dead, unless they are historical figures, is purely coincidental.

In memory of an old chum.

A talented chef, a determined golfer and an avid cricket fan.

Mark, you left the party far too early.

You are missed.

If you enjoy this book, please take a moment to leave a review on your Amazon site, or leave a comment on my blog.

One

Ten in the morning on a bright, early spring day, on a rural bus route. The driver was ahead of time and so drove slowly, meandering along the winding, narrow road. He glanced at the open fields and rolling hills, some a lush green and some, planted with rape seed, almost glittered in the sunlight— a vivid yellow splash of colour.

Approaching the next village, he advanced the ticket machine to show the correct stop. It was always quiet on this route, at this time of day, and he carried no passengers. He thought he'd probably pick up Lenny at this stop, and then maybe one or two others along the way before the bus got into the town. The stop was on a blind bend and could not be seen from the road. The road swung sharply round to the right and the bus turned left, into the pull-in. Sure enough, Lenny was waiting alongside the shelter. The driver pulled up and opened the doors. Lenny was dressed as he usually was. Once smart but now worn light brown suit, a red waistcoat; no hat, no tie; clean but not polished brown brogues. Maybe in his late sixties, maybe in his early seventies. Difficult to tell, but at any rate he was retired and had a retirees bus pass, which allowed him free travel. He would generally pass the time of day with the drivers whilst the ticket machine registered his pass. With time to spare today, the driver thought he might chat a bit and learn more about him. He'd driven this route for several months now, and Lenny generally went into town every weekday at this time, spent a few hours doing something or other, then returned on the three-thirty bus. Sometimes he'd obviously been in a town pub and had a pint or two, but he was never loud and the only way you knew he'd been in the pub was his breath.

Lenny boarded. The driver said *mornin'*, as he usually did. Lenny said nothing. He laid his pass on the ticket machine, which beeped. Lenny smiled and nodded his characteristic backward nod in greeting, then made his way to the back of the bus. The driver shrugged and looked at the ticket machine GPS clock. Three minutes ahead of schedule. He switched off the engine and was about to tell Lenny they were going to stay put for a couple of minutes when he glanced in the internal mirror. Lenny was engrossed in something and didn't appear to want a conversation. Fair enough. The driver checked his emails on his phone, strictly against company policy but was Lenny going to complain? And then it was time to get going again.

As anticipated, there were only a few pickups. One regular, a mousy woman in her late thirties who worked at a sheltered housing complex on the outskirts of town, waved at Lenny and said hello as she took her customary seat at the front of the bus. No response except for the backward nod, which was unusual. Never garrulous, he would always acknowledge a greeting, if only to say, 'good morning'. On leaving the bus, he invariably thanked the driver for the ride and might comment on the weather or the antics of the cars encountered on the narrow roads. The customary glance in the interior mirror

showed the passengers were all seated, and the driver pulled away from the stop.

"Lenny's quiet this morning." Said the mousy woman.

"Maybe something on his mind." Said the driver.

The sheltered housing complex was between two stops, but most drivers stopped outside it anyway. The bus company constantly harped on about customer service and on rural routes gave the drivers a certain amount of freedom to stop as requested. Mousy woman stood up in anticipation.

"Cheer-o, Lenny." She called out as the doors opened.

No response. She looked at the driver and shrugged. Entering the town, more passengers got on. Most were familiar faces and knew each other by sight, if not name. It was a small, county town and people hadn't learnt to be insular. The driver eased the bus into the terminus. He opened the doors and switched off the engine, not being due out for another five minutes. The bus company was keen to have drivers reduce emissions whenever possible, and not keep the engines idling. Supervisors prowled the stands to make sure that drivers complied, and that there were no problems.

The passengers filed out, most saying, 'thank you, driver' as they passed the cab. The last one off was a younger woman.

"Where did that old boy get off, then?"

"He didn't." The driver leaned out of his seat and looked down the bus. No Lenny. He frowned and got out of his seat.

"Well, he's not there, now." Said the woman.

"Maybe when we picked up those people outside the garage. Most didn't have passes, so I was busy issuing tickets and counting change. I probably missed him."

"I wasn't issuing tickets and he would have had to walk right past me."

A supervisor stood at the door.

"Ok?" He asked.

"Missing passenger." The driver started to walk towards the back of the bus.

The supervisor got onboard.

"We'll deal with this." He said to the woman.

The driver was now looking under seats. A bus pass.

"Lenny's pass, but no Lenny." He said over his shoulder.

"Check the emergency exit."

The driver opened it and the warning buzzer went off in the cab.

"He didn't get out that way, then. Strange, I never saw him get off and anyway, he always gets off here."

A queue was forming. Passengers for the next service.

"Not here now though, is he? Better get set up for the next run." Said the supervisor.

"He was definitely onboard and he never got off en route."

"Must have done."

"Yeah. But even if I missed him, what about that woman?"

"Busy yacking on her phone. He'll turn up. Probably went to a different pub. You doing the three-thirty run?"

The driver nodded.

"I'll leave the pass in the office and a note explaining what happened, for

the afternoon supervisors.”

Two

The bus pulled into the station a couple of minutes early, at 4:58 in the afternoon. A hi-vis jacketed supervisor and another driver walked over to the stand and waited whilst the passengers filed off. There were not many of them. The two boarded the bus. The supervisor saying to waiting passengers,

“Won’t be a minute, folks, we’re changing drivers.”

He closed the doors.

“No sign of Lenny.” Said the driver.

“I know. Sean’s taking over from you. The Police are in the office; they want a statement off you.”

The business of logging-off the ticket machine, signing the vehicle defects sheet and exchanging the brief, customary pleasantries with the new driver took a minute or so. Without any comment, the supervisor replaced the ticket machine.

“Nothing wrong with the machine.” Said the driver.

“I was told to take this one out and run a check to see if Lenny’s pass registered this morning.”

“Somebody reported him missing?” Asked the driver.

“I’ve just been told it’s a routine enquiry.” Was the reply.

“Buy me a coffee afterwards and I’ll tell you what it was all about. John’s office?”

“Me, buy you a coffee, that’d be right! Yeah, John’s office. I’ll find you something else to do once the cops have finished with you.”

“Do I get a blindfold and a last ciggie?” Asked the driver.

“You don’t smoke.”

“Might as well start, if I’m going to be shot at dawn.”

The driver walked through the public waiting area and used his electronic pass card to get into the private area. He knocked on the main office door and through the glass centre saw the controller beckon him in. At the far end of the room, the door to the Operations Manager’s office was open and he could see John sitting behind his desk, and a uniformed police officer. He went in, and gestured with his thumb towards the door.

“Better keep this private for the moment.” John said.

The driver shut the door and sat in a vacant chair.

“A real policeman, not a Community Policeman. Must be serious.” He said.

The Operations Manager shot him a warning glance.

“A couple of questions.” The policeman said.

“Shoot.”

“OK, I’ll take your details in a moment, but I understand you were driving the number five service this morning, and you left the bus station at nine-thirty?”

“That’s correct. Just one more on-time departure.”

John the Operations Manager smiled, thinly.

“You arrived at the Lower Wonston stop at what time?”

“A couple of minutes early. Hang on, it’ll be on the route timing sheet—

yeah, I was due to arrive at ten oh nine, but I was at least two, no, three minutes early. I waited at the stop. We can't be early, you see. Late is OK but early is definitely verboten. I would have arrived about ten oh six. What's this all about?"

"Just one more question. You are positive that it was Lenny Caldwell who boarded the bus at the Lower Wonston stop?"

"I didn't know his name is Caldwell, but yeah. It was Lenny OK. I picked up another regular passenger later and she recognised him as well. Anyway, he dropped his bus pass, so it must have been him, mustn't it? Before you ask, no I don't know her name but she works at the sheltered housing place, Meadow View."

"Excuse me a moment, I'll just call that in." He clicked the lapel mike of his radio and established contact with his control room.

"Where did you pick her up from?"

"The second stop in Long Barrow, just by Church Lane."

The information was relayed.

"Right. If I could just ask you to give me a formal statement. I'll need your name and address."

"Sure. Look, what's happened?"

"Statement first please, then I'll explain."

Statement made and signed, the police officer placed it in his case.

"It's a real mystery. A neighbour was hanging out her washing and noticed that Mister Caldwell wasn't at the bus stop as usual. Just before lunch, she noticed that the curtains were still drawn at his cottage, which was unusual. Her husband, a farm labourer, came home for lunch and she asked him to go round and see if everything was OK. He knocked on the door and shouted, but there was no answer so he returned for his lunch. They talked about it and both went back, after they'd eaten. She had a spare key, and they found Mister Caldwell face down in the kitchen. The para-medics arrived but the poor sod had obviously been dead for quite some time. Obviously I can't go into details, but let's just say we aren't looking for anybody in connection with his death."

"But he boarded my bus at just gone ten."

"He couldn't have done. My information is that the preliminary estimate gives the time of death at around seven-thirty this morning. Are you absolutely certain that it was him?"

"Yes. Look, I found the pass. It was handed in to the office."

"I know, I've got it. Like I said, a real mystery."

"Officer, if it's any help I arranged for the ticket machine to be removed from the bus before it went out on the next route. It'll show whether the pass was used this morning." The operations manager said.

"There's no biometric information on it, is there?"

"No, I'm afraid not. We can only ascertain that the pass was swiped on the machine." Said the Operations Manager.

"But you have at least two people who can swear he was on the bus." The driver said.

"Who thought that a passenger on the bus was the late Lenny Caldwell, except of course it couldn't have been, because the poor bugger died earlier in the morning, at his home. I'd keep this quiet, if I were you. If the local press get

wind of it, you won't be able to move around here. Mind, it'll get out one way or another, it always does, Social Media and the like."

Three

Ten in the morning on a bright, early spring day, at a small Channel Island airport. Check-in was a relaxed affair, with none of the trauma associated with mainland airports. Many passengers travelled with minimal baggage, some with merely a brief case. The check-in formalities were normally brief and straightforward. Passengers were not required to travel with passports and although the airline did insist on photo id to travel, on an island of some two thousand people most travellers were known to the airline staff. The security checks consisted of presenting a boarding pass, walking through a metal detector arch and putting hand baggage through an old X-ray machine. Security was not seen as a major issue at this airport.

JoJo LeMesurier recognised the smartly dressed business man standing in front of her check-in desk.

"Morning Mister Dee, just going across for the day?"

Mister Dee merely smiled and slid his ticket across the desk.

JoJo checked the ticket. A day return, as the briefcase and no bags had led her to think that would be the case.

"Usual seat?"

A smile and a brief nod.

"There you go, then; row nine, right at the back and on your own. We're running on time this morning, the plane should be landing any minute so if you'd like to go through security, we'll be away shortly. Only five passengers from here, and two from the other island travelling through to the mainland. For once there's no freight for the boys to unload."

She slid the boarding pass and ticket back across the desk. Mister Dee smiled his thanks and wordlessly turned away. JoJo made sure he was clear of the desk then turned to her companion who was manning the other desk.

"Talkative this morning, I could hardly get a word in."

"Oh, you know Mister Dee. A man of few words at the best of times."

"Yeah but he didn't even say good morning."

"Maybe he has problems. Everybody else on this island seems to have, so why should he be any different?"

The small, eighteen seat commuter plane noisily arrived at the parking area. The ground crew put a set of chocks under the left hand main wheels, the tail support at the rear of the aircraft and opened the doors.

"You going on through?" The two passengers onboard were asked. They were.

"How many have you got?" Asked the pilot.

"Just five, Ian. Not much baggage and a little bit of freight. It'll all go in the holds. You getting out or you want us to bring the load sheet out to you?"

"If they're ready, let's crack on."

"Last one's going through security now. I'll nip in and get the paperwork."

"Mighty fine."

Passengers and freight loaded, load sheet checked, all that remained was for the pilot to give the passenger safety briefing. Everybody was a regular

traveller and the briefing was short and to the point. As usual, the intercom system wasn't working so the pilot turned in his seat and spoke in a loud voice.

"Morning everybody. Can you hear me OK back there, Mister Dee?"

A smile and a wave.

"Mighty fine. Seat belts fastened please, safety information leaflet in the seat pocket in front of you and no smoking, dancing or unruly behaviour, if you don't mind. Approximately forty-two and a half minutes this morning, and as it's such a beautiful day I thought we'd fly over at a thousand feet. Either that or wait an hour for a slot to become available. As usual, Eurocontrol have messed the flow management up. Everybody OK?"

They apparently were, and the plane departed. The flight was uneventful and all went according to plan until the ground crew at the destination unloaded the passengers.

"Morning Ian."

"Morning Dave."

Dave the station manager wore a worried look.

"Our faxed manifest said seven passengers. Mister Dee isn't on board."

"Sure he is, in row nine."

"Nobody there."

"Did he sneak out before you opened the doors?"

"There was nobody in row nine."

"He was bloody well there. I saw him."

"Well he ain't there now, buddy."

"Oh Christ. Hope the silly bastard hasn't jumped."

One of the other ground crew, Mark, came forward, holding a briefcase.

"Found this in row nine, on the seat. Got the initials MLD, on it."

"Oh bloody hell. He hasn't done something stupid like crawl back into the freight hold, has he?" Said the pilot.

"I've just unloaded it and there was nothing there except three bags." Said Mark.

"That's it then, the bastard's jumped. Bugger, bugger, bugger."

"The door was latched."

"What?"

"The door was closed and latched. He could hardly have jumped and done that, could he?"

"True. We'll make a thorough check of the aircraft, just to make sure he's not hidden himself away somewhere and I'll alert airport security to check airside." Said Dave.

"CCTV on the pan would have spotted anything unusual." Said the pilot.

Dave glanced up at the camera on the side of the terminal building.

"You guys check the aircraft and I'll go straight to ground control. Sorry Ian, this looks like a mountain of paperwork."

"Don't I know it. Can you check with the boys on the Rock and just make absolutely sure I didn't imagine him in row nine?"

"Sure — but he was on the manifest and shown as being in row nine."

"Bugger, bugger, bugger."

Four

Special Branch got involved. Mainly because they were the police department on the scene, but also because they always looked for a way to get involved in anything that happened at the airport.

Most of the passengers had noticed that Mister Dee had not got off the aircraft, and those who hadn't soon found out about it on the walk into the terminal building. A few had decided to hang around to see what transpired and had gravitated to the check-in desk after they had cleared Customs. Airline staff assisted Special Branch in identifying those passengers who were still in the immediate area, either waiting for bags or walking to the train station, a five minute walk within the airport. They were discreetly taken aside and statements taken. Contact details of those not immediately available were noted. Those by the check-in desk were asked to say nothing about this for the moment, although Special Branch and Dave the Station Manager agreed that there was little chance of this.

"Probably on bloody You Tube already."

"I suspect you're right, Dave. I couldn't threaten them—somebody telling the media or posting online that a passenger has apparently gone missing during the flight won't really hamper a police inquiry. You'd better have a statement ready for the press."

"That's up to Head Office to deal with. They already know something's up because we delayed the outbound departure of the aircraft. I'd better fill them in on what's been going on."

"Unofficially, the guy's a jumper, I don't see what else could have happened. Officially, enquiries are continuing."

A quick comparison of the statements showed they agreed in most details. Mister Dee had been seen in the departure lounge, he'd been seen boarding the aircraft. A phone call to the island police force caused a constable to be despatched to the airport. Everybody there agreed that Mister Dee had checked in and had definitely been seen in the departure lounge. The feeling was that Mrs Dee was off the island at the moment, but a senior officer was on his way to the house to check and, if necessary, inform the wife of her husband's disappearance.

"So, we've established that the missing person was definitely on the flight, gentlemen. Tell me, Captain, would you have noticed if the door was opened in flight? Don't you have a warning light or buzzer, or something in the cockpit?"

"There is a warning light for every door, no aural warning. The doors close to the propellers have a locking system which activates when the magnetos are switched on, but row nine doesn't have the interlocking system, only a light. I might not immediately notice if it came on in flight, but I'd certainly hear it if the door was opened. The noise would direct my attention to the warning lights."

"They are working—the warning lights, specifically the one fitted to row nine?"

"Yees; I mean I've no reason to suppose that they aren't. Certainly, I noticed them all on whilst the aircraft was being loaded on the island, and part of both my pre-start and take-off checks are making sure they are all out."

"We should check that now, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind; I'm not going anywhere, am I?"

"Right enough, I'm afraid. Forensics are getting prints out of row nine now and the briefcase has been dusted as well. That won't give us a positive id on the prints, not until we can compare them to prints that we know for sure are those of the missing person. The local bobbies on the island are taking the prints of anybody at the airport who might have handled the briefcase this morning and are going round to the house, to inform the family."

The test of the warning light system proved that the associated warning lights illuminated when any particular door was opened and Special Branch agreed that it appeared unlikely that anybody jumping out of the aircraft would be able to close and latch the door as they went. A thorough search of the airport was being undertaken but examination of the relevant CCTV footage had disclosed that nobody had exited the aircraft before the ground crew had arrived and opened the doors.

Back in the Station Manager's office, it was being agreed that the aircraft could be released back into service when Special Branch's mobile phone rang.

"Excuse me, gentlemen—yeah, speaking—really?—Bloody hell—that's one hundred percent confirmed, is it?—Right—I don't know what to say—yes, thanks—just to dot all the eyes and cross all the tees, could you take prints off the corps asap and fax them—yes, thanks. Be in touch."

He looked shocked.

"News?" Asked the pilot.

"A senior officer went round to the missing person's house and found him dead, in bed. Apparently the wife is away at the moment—visiting a sister in the West Country. The Island bobbies are trying to contact her now."

"That's just impossible. I mean, I saw him, the ground crew on the island saw him when they loaded the aircraft, the check-in staff saw him and other passengers saw him."

"I know." Said Special Branch, unhappily.

"And now a local TV reporter has arrived, with a cameraman." Dave pointed out of the office window to the check in desk.

"Deep joy." Said Special Branch.

"I think I'll just stay right here, out of sight." Said the pilot.

"I'd best get out there and make sure none of the boys says anything. Ian, could you ring Head Office, ask for Malcolm, he wants to deal with this personally."

"Good luck to one and all. I'll go out and make a non-statement, that'll give you a chance to sneak out and talk to your lot. If I were you, I'd lie low for a while, but I can't see this blowing over quickly, not once news of the death gets out; and it will." Said Special Branch.

Five

Bird song. A bright Spring morning. Lenny became aware of a pain in his right arm. Swinging his legs out of bed, he winced as he experienced a stabbing pain in his chest. A reminder of last night's fish and chips; it was the batter, he was convinced of that, but he did like a supper from the chippie—it was worth a bit of indigestion once in a while. A fizzy tablet would sort it out, and maybe skip breakfast, just a pot of tea.

Dressing-gowned and slippers, he went downstairs, swinging his arm to get the circulation going. Into the kitchen, and a searing pain in his chest. A moment of giddiness, then a curious feeling of lightness; and no pain. Ah, that was better, maybe some breakfast after all. Somebody lying on the kitchen floor, who the hell—wait a minute—no, no no—the body looked familiar but it was an old man—wearing his dressing gown and slippers—oh. So this is it, then.

Lenny looked round the kitchen. Things seemed, brighter, sharper, more in focus. He could hear the bird song quite clearly; and it was him, lying there on the floor and this was it, so now what?

"Hello Melvin—you must be wondering what's going on."

"Melvin?"

"Don't worry, Melvin, things are a little confusing at first. We'll just take a moment to let you get used to the idea."

"Who's Melvin, when he's at home?"

"You are, Melvin, and this is—or was—your home."

"I'm Lenny, and I'm dead. I realise that, so we don't need to take a moment."

"Lenny?"

"Yes, Lenny."

The figure frowned, then consulted a sheet of paper, which Lenny hadn't noticed before.

"Lenny?"

"Yes Lenny, Lenny Caldwell."

"Ah. Not Melvin?"

"For the last bloody time, I'm Lenny. Who the hell are you?"

The figure waggled a finger at him.

"Not a word we like to use. Lenny—right, not Melvin then—ah."

"So this is all a mistake?"

"Mistake? Oh no, we don't make mistakes. Think of it as a clerical error, if you like, although we don't really make errors either."

"Well, whatever; you haven't come for me?"

"Ah, now I know where this is going, happens all the time. I'll just need to sort this out, but, to coin a phrase, your number is up, cock. Better get used to the idea."

"So, you've come to the wrong address?"

"For the moment, think of it like that, if you like."

"So, what happened to the journey through the tunnel to the light, and the heavenly choir?"

"Can't really go into any explanations at the moment, not until I – clarify the situation."

"Seeing as you made a mistake, pal, I think you owe me some sort of explanation."

"You-are- dead. That's good enough for the moment, I think."

"I don't. What about the tunnel, the light, the heavenly choir and all the rest of it?"

"Regular church-goer, were you?"

"Load of bollocks."

The figure narrowed it's eyes.

"Oh, but, er, I could change my opinion, of course. I mean, I have been wrong about lots of things in my life, and when I'm wrong I'm always the first to admit it, and apologise. Er, how do I apologise, by the way?"

"Hedging you bets, I see. Well, I don't blame you, this is all very unsettling for you, it is for everybody."

"It's nice of you to be so understanding, Mister, erm – sorry I didn't catch your name."

"No, you didn't. It's not Mister anything, and being understanding is part of the job, although there are limits, so a word to the wise, don't push your luck."

"No, no of course not. Erm, the lights and stuff – if it's not pushing my luck?"

"Optional extras – Catholics get the choir singing in latin."

"I see, thank you."

"Think nothing of it. Now I really must pop off and sort this out."

"Yes of course, erm..."

"Yes?"

"I'll just, well, sort of hang around and haunt the place until you get back then, shall I?"

"If you like. What were you planning on doing?"

"Don't you know?"

"The all-seeing, all-knowing bit's above my pay grade. I'm just a meeter and greeter."

"Pay grade? Do you...."

"Just an expression that you're familiar with, that's all."

"Oh, right. Well, I was going to have some breakfast then go into town. Don't suppose I really need breakfast now, all things considered."

"Don't suppose you do, no."

"I'll just go into town, then."

"If you like. I'll come and find you."

"How er, how do I get into town. Just think about it and whoosh – I'm in town – something like that?"

"Are you thinking about being in town?"

"Yes."

"Are you there?"

"Erm, no."

"That didn't work too well then, did it. How do you usually get into town?"

"On the bus."

"I'd stick to the tried and tested then, if I were you. I'll be back."

"Was that a joke?"

"What?"

"A joke – I'll be back – said in an Austrian accent."

"I don't have an accent – nobody does, unless they particularly want one."

Ah, now I shouldn't have said that. There are formalities to complete before you find out what's what."

"Formalities?"

"Formalities."

"And no jokes?"

"I wouldn't just at the moment, if I were you."

"Well – missing you already, then."

"That's the problem with this job, it's all so predictable. Either you get the wailing and crying for forgiveness or you get the stand-up comic routine."

Six

Melvin was enjoying a mildly erotic dream, and harbouring hopes that it would shortly become a wildly erotic one, when he experienced a floating sensation. It had nothing to do with what the three Balinese temple dancers were doing at the time, and he thought it rather incongruous, but then it was a dream, after all. It did occur to him that it was strange to realise that he was dreaming, when his thoughts were interrupted.

"Hello Lenny."

"Lenny?"

"No, you're Lenny, I'm somebody else."

"Would you mind getting our of my dream, I was just getting to the good bit."

"This is not a dream, Lenny."

"So you say. Who are you, anyway? And my name is not Lenny."

"Of course it isn't. Look around you, Lenny"

"I want the other dream back, so bugger off, whoever you are."

"Sorry, I can't do that. Look around you, Lenny."

"For the last bloody time, my name is not bloody Lenny."

Melvin did look around. He felt almost compelled to do so. Curious, he appeared to be floating just below the ceiling. He sort of rolled-over, and noticed a figure in the bed. His bed. Although it was still dark, he could see quite clearly. The relaxed, pudgy face on the pillow seemed somehow familiar. He peered down at it. Very familiar. Hang on a minute, it was his face. He'd seen it in the mirror only last night, when he brushed his teeth. How peculiar. Downright strange, in fact. He could swear that this was actually happening.

"It is, Lenny. It really is. Come on, now. Gather your wits about you."

"I didn't say anything just then, how could you possibly know what I was thinking? And I'm really not telling you again, my name is not Lenny. Look, just sod-off will you. I want those dancers back."

"There's no point in pretending you're not Lenny. It won't make the slightest difference. You can't get out of it so it's not even worth trying. Achh, I'm wasting my breath—not that I actually have any breath to waste. One in ten tries this on; pathetic! Won't stop people trying, I suppose. *Show me the book*, they say. *I want to see where my name is written down*, they say. What am I, some sort of bloody librarian? You want to see your name in a book, Lenny? I can do that, trust me, I can do that."

"Listen you, whoever the hell you are, my name is Melvin, Melvin Lionel Dee. Now for the last time, bugger off."

"Melvin?"

"That's right, Melvin. Now go away."

"Melvin Lionel Dee, not Lenny Caldwell?"

"Who? No, I'm Melvin Dee. This is getting very tedious, you know. Can we just get to the next bit of the dream?"

"No dream, Melvin. This is real."

"What, me floating over myself in bed is real? Don't talk nonsense, man."

"It's real, it's happening."

"Some sort of Astral Projection, you mean?"

"Some sort of death, is what I mean."

"No, you've got the wrong man. I told you, my name is Melvin and you, whoever you are, came for Lenny. Who did you say you were?"

"I didn't. I grant you there does appear to have been some sort of mix-up, but you're dead all right and there's no getting out of it."

"Hah! This'll be one in the eye for Yvonne—I'm lying on my back and I'm not snoring. I knew I didn't snore."

"You're not snoring because you're not breathing, Melvin. You're dead, old son and you'd better get used to the idea."

"Now look here, my man. I simply don't have time to be dead. I've got an extremely important business meeting on the mainland today, and next week I'm making a rather large donation to a certain political party, in person. If there's any justice, I'll get a knighthood out of it. You've made a mistake—there's been a mistake, I don't blame you personally, I'm sure you're a diligent sort of chap—so just put me back in my body and then, without wishing to appear unduly rude, piss off."

"You still don't get it, do you?"

"No, you don't get it. There's obviously been a mistake. Now, I demand that you put me back in my body and we'll say no more about it."

"As much as I might like to, Melvin—and I'm not really that bothered, to be honest—I can't do that."

"Well don't say I didn't give you adequate warning. I want to speak to your supervisor."

"That comes later—after I've sorted out a couple of administrative errors."

"Oh really? Look, if you wouldn't mind getting out of my dream, I have to wake up. I've got a plane to catch."

"Back to the dream, are we?"

"What else is this? I really must avoid eating cheese before I go to bed. This is most disagreeable."

"As you wish. I'll come back for you once I've attended to a few details."

"Of course you will. Now piss-off, you annoying little pleb."

Seven

The congregant filed out of the church, doing his best to avoid the verger, who was holding the collection plate. More in hope than expectation, the latter thrust the empty plate forward. The congregant patted his pockets and shrugged.

"Sorry, Richard, ever since Our Lord gave the money-lenders a good telling off, I've made it a point never to bring my wallet into church."

"We accept IOUs."

"DO you – how remarkably trusting of you."

He turned to the vicar.

"Splendid sermon, Vicar, splendid. A bit of fire and brimstone, such a pleasant change after the last chap and his cricketing similes, turn the other cheek, that sort of stuff. Very insipid, to be honest."

The reverend Bahati Barnikel took the proffered hand.

"A bit of Leviticus always went down well back home in Barbados – unless of course the West Indies cricket team was winning a test series."

"Well, no fear of that here, Vicar – I mean, England so rarely wins a test series these days, not meaning people being distracted by the Windies winning a test series. Barbados, you say? Well, well – I went there once, holiday you know. Wonderful people, very friendly – um – splendid sermon, Vicar. Did I mention that?"

"Several times. A shame there weren't more people here to share your enjoyment." She turned her head and surveyed the empty church, the two men standing in the entrance, the deserted graveyard with its weathered headstones and the car-less lane beyond.

"Ah, well, people have commitments – um..."

"Now there was me thinking that on Sunday mornings some people might be committed to attending a church service. I wonder if there's any particular reason why they stayed away in droves?"

"No – no, nothing like that Vicar, I assure you."

"Like what?"

"Well, you know."

"I don't know, but a less forgiving person might make an intelligent guess."

"Not at all, nothing like that, Vicar, I assure you. It's just that, well, the last chap was so – so nice, you see."

"And a chap, of course. The bishop led me to believe that not only was he personally responsible for an increase in the membership of the Mothers Union, he had an interesting notion of where the collection money should go, and he sold-off half the lead from the church roof."

"All very true, but he was a really, really nice chap. The ladies of the parish all loved him – oh dear."

"Quite."

"Well, look on the bright side, Vicar, you won't have to write another sermon for next week's service."

"Hardly an encouraging thought. I was intending inviting members of the

congregation back to the vicarage this morning. I don't suppose you'd care to pop round, or do you have other commitments, this morning?"

"Only at the Mucky Duck."

"The Mucky Duck?"

"The village pub."

"I thought it was called The Black Swan?"

"Just my little joke, Vicar."

"Very fond of his jokes, is Victor." Put in the verger.

"I could do with some little jokes, after this morning. Care to pop round – naturally you as well, Verger."

"A spot of coffee before lunch would be very pleasant, Vicar. I accept."

"Oh, I think we can do a little better than coffee, mister...?"

"Fearnaught, but please do call me Victor, Vicar."

"Interesting name. I happen to have a bottle or two of a particularly smooth rum, that my home is famous for. It's something of a cultural icon. Would that suit?"

"I'm all for learning about other cultures, Vicar."

"Fine and dandy, then. Shall we say in fifteen minutes?"

"People just don't find the church exciting anymore, you see, Vicar. No pizzaz, no excitement. You need a USP. You need to compete with other forms of entertainment."

"USP?"

"Unique selling point."

"I would have thought that avoiding eternal damnation was a pretty powerful USP, Victor. And I don't know that I'd exactly class the Church as a form of entertainment."

"You were on the right track this morning, Vicar. Fire and brimstone, put the fear of Christ into them, that sort of thing. I tell you what, I'll film you giving that sermon—post it on You Tube—word'll get out and they'll be standing in the aisles. Probably have to get a big-screen TV and set it up outside."

"I think you're rather missing the point of the Church, Victor. And if you'll forgive me for correcting you, the basic idea is to put the love of Christ into people. We tend to play down the fear bit these days, you see. Tell me about your name, I don't believe I've ever met anybody with your surname before."

"The family name was originally Carter. Now, my great, great grandpappa lived in the time of Nelson's navy, and there was a type of clothing—heavy wool that resisted the damp—that was known as Fearnaught. It'd been around for a while, by then, probably several hundred years. Anyway, the Navy was getting concerned about the number of ships that were blowing up due to sparks and such getting into the gunpowder store. Great, great grandpappa Carter came up with the idea of a heavy, woollen curtain to keep the sparks at bay. There was a bit of a mixup over his name, and he became known as 'Fearnaught'. The name stuck, you see."

"How interesting. And he made the family fortune, so to speak?"

"No, not exactly. His widow, great, great grandmamma Charlotte did that. She improved on the design, you see. The Admiralty insisted on a test. Great, great grandpappa Carter was so confident that he insisted on standing next to the curtain and throwing a bucket of glowing embers over it. You know, I do believe that's where the mixup over his name might have occurred."

"Really?"

"Hmm, it was his last words, you see. There was one surviving witness, if I have the story correctly. Great, great grandpappa shouted 'fearnaught' as he threw the basket of glowing embers over the curtain. There was a bloody great bang. Lucky it was an old ship. If it had been a new one, the Admiralty might have sued great, great grandmamma Charlotte, I suppose."

Eight

"Look, young lady, exactly how much longer am I going to be kept waiting?"

"Time no longer has no real meaning for you, Melvin and..."

"Don't talk nonsense, young lady. I'm hijacked-off a plane without so much as a by your leave, dumped here, kept waiting, kept in the dark and totally ignored. I demand to know what's going on."

"I'm not ignoring you Melvin. I'm really sorry but there's a little—irregularity— it'll be sorted out momentarily, and anyway, time really no longer has any meaning."

"So you're Melvin, are you? I think somebody got us mixed-up. I'm Lenny. Pleased to meet you."

"It's Mister Dee to you, my man. Lenny, eh? So this is all your fault then, is it?"

"Now, now Melvin. We have no titles here. You're Melvin and he's Lenny. We're all equal and nothing is anybody's fault."

"Who are you, Miss?"

"No titles, Lenny. I'm simply Lili."

"Pleased to meet you, Lily—a nice name, my favourite flower is lily of the valley."

"Lili is a shortened version of my name. If you were to write it, it would end in an i and not a y."

"I'm sorry, Lili. Could you tell me what's going on, please?"

"I can't I'm afraid, Lenny. I shouldn't even tell you this, but you're not supposed to know anything until your registration has been completed. And don't worry about my name, a little vanity on my part, I fear."

"Look here, Lili, I demand to see your supervisor."

"It doesn't work like that, Melvin."

"Well what the hell am I supposed to do, then? Just hang around here in some sort of limbo? And with him?"

"Would you feel more comfortable if you were in a familiar-looking waiting room, Melvin? How about your cardiologist's waiting room? I think that would be more comfortable for you. I'll leave Lenny in with you. You can get to know each other and you, Melvin, can begin to learn that we really are all equal. I think that might do you some good—well, here we are, then. I'll leave you two to chat. I'll come back for you when things get sorted out."

"Where did she go? Here, this is a nice room. Very posh. This your doctor's waiting room then, Melvin?"

"My cardiologist's room, yes. I'm sure this is just a very strange dream, wish the hell I'd wake up."

"I don't think it's a dream, Melvin. You say you were hijacked-off a plane; sounds very dramatic."

"Yes—no. One minute I was on my way to a business meeting on the mainland, the next I was here."

"Something very similar happened to me. I died in my kitchen and was just floating around the place wondering what to do next when somebody

starts talking to me. They got you and me mixed-up somehow, I wonder how that happened? Anyway, I didn't fancy just hanging around so whoever it was who came to get me suggested I go into town on the bus, the same as I was planning on doing, if I hadn't died. After that, the same as happened to you. One minute I was on the bus, the next minute I was here."

"You're very accepting of the fact that you're dead, aren't you."

"Well, you've got to be, haven't you. I mean, it happens to all of us in the end, and I suppose this must be the end, although it's not quite what I was expecting, I must say."

"What were you expecting, then?"

"I don't know, really. A tunnel of light, that sort of thing. I don't know if I should say this, but I'm a little disappointed, to be quite honest with you."

"Well it's bloody inconvenient, that's all I can say. And it's cost me a lot of money. Damn. It'll be more than inconvenient if some clod-footed copper looks inside my briefcase."

"I really don't think that any of that matters anymore, Melvin."

"I still think this is a bad dream."

"Well in that case, you'll wake up and there won't be a problem, will there?"

"You know, I think you might be right there, er, Lenny, wasn't it?"

"What was the last thing that happened, before all this?"

"Eh? Oh, I see what you mean. I was in bed, dreaming, then I experienced a sort of floating sensation, then I was looking down at myself, in bed."

"So, if that's when you started dreaming, you must have dreamed that you got on the plane, so there won't be any problem with whatever is in your briefcase, will there?"

"You know, I think you may have something there. Yes, I believe you're right—but, how come I'm stuck in this dream? I really must attend that meeting, it's crucial."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't think I should tell you that."

"Why not, if this is just a dream?"

"Hmm, well no harm I suppose. Uncut diamonds, you see. I'd been on a trip to Antwerp and picked them up at a good price. I was going to sell them to a chap in London. The thing is, I need to unload them rather quickly. Their—provenance—is not all it should be, if you follow me."

"No, I don't, actually."

"No, I don't suppose you do. Bit of a dodgy history."

"You or the diamonds, Melvin?"

"What? The diamonds, of course. Originally smuggled out of Central Africa—not exactly ethically mined, or some such nonsense."

"Oh I see. Now you mention it, I have read something about diamond smuggling."

"Look here, I'm not smuggling the damn diamonds. Well, I suppose I am, in a way, but I certainly didn't use slave labour to dig the things out of the ground, so it's not my fault."

"I never said it was, Melvin."

"No, but you implied it—mind you I suppose if I had refused to buy them at any price then perhaps—never mind—when I come to think about it, I

suppose I'm as dodgy as the diamonds—no, I never said that. You're not Special Branch, are you?"

"No, I worked for a construction company."

"Ah— that's a relief. Anyway, forget what I just said. Don't know why I said it—sort of a confession—load of nonsense—not my fault some poor bastards get worked to death getting the diamonds out of the ground."

"I wonder if that's why we're in this room—to confess our sins."

"Oh God, you're not a religious nutter, are you?"

"Me? No. Never went to church, but I did wonder about it, from time to time. You ever think about what might come next?"

"No. Not really true, I suppose we must all do, but I didn't think there was anything."

"Except maybe a dream?"

"To sleep, perchance to dream. Aye, there's the rub—the Immortal Bard wrote that, you know."

"I did go to a grammar school Melvin. He wasn't immortal though, was he?"

"Not in the sense of personal survival, no, he wasn't. It's never occurred to me before, but I suppose he wrote about what we all wonder about. He must have wondered too, I suppose."

"Perhaps you'll get the chance to ask him, Melvin."

Nine

"I must say this is a particularly smooth rum, Vicar."

"Why don't you call me Bahati, Victor? Vicar is so formal and somehow sets me apart, and if I'm going to make a success of my time here, then I don't think I can afford to be regarded as being apart, or different, from everybody else. What do you think, Richard?"

The verger frowned.

"You are different, vicar. Don't misunderstand me—let me speak frankly..."

"I think you should."

"Most people in this village would be horrified if they were perceived as being racist or xenophobic..."

"But I am from Barbados and I am black."

"And you are a woman."

"So, if the Bishop was trying to make some sort of point, he couldn't have picked a better person is what I think you're trying to say."

"Something like that."

"Vicar, Bahati, the last incumbent was a bit of a rogue—a likeable rogue to be sure, but a rogue nevertheless. Short on religion and long on the material aspects of life. You'll form your own opinion, of course, but I think what's needed here, in the village, is a clean break from the past. Physically, obviously you couldn't be more different, and if that sermon was anything to go by, you take a different approach to religion as well."

"And will that resonate with the congregation, either of you?"

The verger nodded thoughtfully.

"You know, vicar—and I'm sorry but for me to call you anything but vicar just wouldn't seem proper to me—I think it might, provided that, to speak bluntly, there's no disconnect between your private life and your public life, if you see what I mean?"

"So you'd advise against any rum-swilling, calypso-playing rumbustious parties, then? Oh well, there goes my social life."

The verger looked startled; Victor was amused.

"I think that was just the vicar's little joke, Richard."

"Yes, yes I see. Very amusing."

"A little bit of stereotyping going through your mind, Verger? If we want to change things around here, I really do think you could manage to call me by my name, don't you?"

"Actually no, Vicar, I don't. I may be a little old-fashioned, but I think that your vocation entitles you to a little respect. To my mind, the way to show proper respect is to use a person's correct title."

"You're probably the only one in the village, if not the entire diocese, who thinks like that, Richard."

"That might well be, Victor, but that's the way that I am and I make no apologies for it."

"Nor should you, old boy. I was merely offering an observation, not making a criticism."

"To answer your question, Vicar, I do think a more traditional form of religion might go down rather well."

"It would certainly make a change, Bahati. The last vicar saw his role as more of a social worker than a religious leader. There are plenty of bloody social workers around the place but precious few people prepared to take a moral stand."

"So a bit more of the bible-thumping sermons and a bit less of the non-critical sympathetic ear, is that what you meant, Victor?"

"That's about it, Bahati."

"Part of my job description is to provide a sympathetic ear, Victor. I can modify my preaching style, but for the moment I just wanted to establish that I'm more of a traditionalist than a modernist."

"Make a strong first impression, eh? That's the way – pity not more were there to hear it – people love to be told that they are miserable sinners, even if in reality they're not. Adds a sort of frisson to going to church. The self-righteous can feel morally superior and those who secretly would love to sin but don't, revel in being chastised."

"Not exactly what I meant. Might I ask what you do for a living, Victor?"

"Retired now. I was in marketing."

"I might have guessed. I don't think you've quite grasped what Christianity is all about, Victor."

"Oh but I have. You're trying to get a message across, and getting messages across is my speciality, Bahati, or at least, it was."

"And what brought you to church this morning?"

"If I'm being honest, curiosity."

"Is that all?"

"Not entirely. I've done pretty well for myself, I feel I ought to put something back into society but I'm not quite sure how to go about it. I suppose I want to do some good and I'm cynical enough to think that most charitable causes don't do that much, apart from give people a warm, fuzzy glow. I'd like to actually do something that mattered, but I haven't found anything that seems to fit the bill, yet."

"And you think that getting involved with the Church might?"

"I'm not religious, I'm not even sure that I believe in it, but I think the Church could provide something useful for Society, even if most of the time it doesn't. There is something missing in most peoples' lives and I think it's something that's bigger than themselves, more important than their petty, day to day problems. Not expressing this very well, I'm afraid."

"You're not doing too badly, Victor. Leaving, Richard?"

"I must away, Vicar. The children are coming for lunch and I promised I'd lay the table."

"I should be going as well, Bahati. Bearing in mind Richard's stricture."

"Oh, but I didn't mean..."

"I'm only joking, Richard. Even so, perhaps it would be better."

"And anyway, I believe that the pub is open, Victor."

"There is that, Bahati, there is that."

"Perhaps I'll pop in for a quick drink, meet people."

"Not certain that would be wise, Vicar."

"A single woman going into a den of vice might not look too good, you

mean Richard?"

"It's hardly a den of vice, Vicar. I don't know what I meant, exactly. Jumbled thoughts about morality, setting an example, that sort of thing."

"Our Lord was known to have drunk of the grape, Richard. Think of it as Daniel going into the lion's den. Confront the absent masses and ask them why they didn't attend the service."

"Ah, now I'm not sure that would be a good idea, Bahati."

"As you're both against it, I think it's obviously the right thing to do. '*She might rail against sin but she's not against people enjoying themselves*'—yes, I think that would be a good start. Might even drum up a bit of business, to use your parlance, Victor. Yes, I shall go to the pub and—what's that expression you people use so much in this country? Ah yes, I will bollock them for not coming to church this morning, and then you can buy me a drink."

Ten

"It's happened again, Vicar."

"The phone-box library, Richard?"

"Books strewn all over the street. And Mrs Hill still insists that she hears poor Lenny Caldwell shouting in the night."

"So what are people saying, the house is haunted and the vandalism of the phone-box library is the work of an unquiet spirit?"

"Something like that, Vicar."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, that business about Lenny being seen on the bus—the bus driver swears it was him, and Mrs Smith, the passenger from Lower Upham who works at the care home, is certain it was as well. She knew Lenny quite well—to talk to, I mean. Used to chat to him on the bus, if he was in the mood."

"It's clearly impossible."

"Oh absolutely, but..."

"But his bus pass was found under the seat. No chance he'd dropped it the previous day, I suppose?"

"Ted, you know, the village bobby, Ted Glenister?"

"Yes, I've met Ted."

"He says the bus company is adamant that the buses are cleaned every night and even if sometimes they're not as clean as they might be, the cleaner would certainly have found a bus pass and handed it in to lost property."

"Oh things can get missed all right. I've travelled on those buses a couple of times—I really wouldn't be surprised if the cleaner missed it."

"Knock, knock—may I come in Bahati, or is this a bad time?"

"No, come on in Victor. Richard and I were just discussing the business of the phone-box library. Tell me, is this a common thing in this country, using an old phone box as a library?"

"It's getting to be. Most people have mobile phones these days and so the old phone boxes hardly ever get used. A fair number got vandalised and it simply wasn't worth the phone company's while keeping them maintained. It would have cost too much to demolish them and anyway in most villages, they'd become a local landmark, so they were just left standing. People began suggesting to the phone company that if they replaced any broken glass, the communities would then use them as informal book exchanges and the residents would assume responsibility for replacing any broken glass, and generally maintaining them. The idea spread and now you can see them in most villages where there is a strong community spirit. Vandalism dropped right off and now there's hardly ever any problems."

"But now, the phone box in this village is being vandalised?"

"Ever since Lenny died, Vicar."

"Pure coincidence, Richard. Anyway, I'm certain if I was to ask Ted he'd tell me that the phone box has always been vandalised from time to time. People have such vivid imaginations when it comes to the supernatural, you know."

"No, Bahati, I'm afraid you're wrong there. We've not had any trouble

with people messing about with the phone box for—well, it must be eighteen months or more.”

“But it has happened before? Yes, of course it has, and the fact that it has now occurred again is pure coincidence.”

“Or not, Bahati.”

“Oh come off it, Victor!”

“No, no, you might be right—coincidence the first time it happened. But as soon as people started talking about unquiet spirits and the like, I bet you somebody decided to have a bit of fun.”

“That’s more likely, I think.”

“Be that as it may, people are getting upset, Vicar.”

“Can’t the police do anything about it?”

“They’re too stretched as it is, Bahati. This is not exactly a major crime, nobody is getting hurt and no real damage to property is occurring.”

“Ted doesn’t seem that stretched. At least, not when I’ve seen him he isn’t.”

“Oh, be fair to the man, he does quite a bit, Vicar. What about the supposed haunting of Lenny’s old place?”

“What about it? Oh no, you’re not suggesting that I get involved, are you Richard?”

“Perhaps a prayer, Vicar. You know, at the house.”

“A prayer? Sure you don’t mean an exorcism, Richard?”

“Might be good for business, Bahati.”

“Victor, we’ve had this conversation before. The Church is not a business.”

“Perhaps not, but you believe in an afterlife, both you and the Church.”

“What has that got to do with the Church not being a business? No, the people vandalising the phone box need to be caught.”

“I could put a forensic trap in there, Bahati.”

“And what, exactly, is a forensic trap, Victor?”

“Nothing dramatic, or painful. The water company use them at the water treatment plant—or so all the warning signs say. I’ll have a word with Ted about the legality of using them, and then I’ll call the water company. A forensic trap or two should either identify the people that are messing around, or maybe frighten them off altogether.”

“Might I suggest some sort of memorial service for Lenny, Vicar?”

“Was he popular, Richard?”

“People in the village all knew him. He wasn’t a churchgoer and the family had him cremated rather than buried. They don’t live around here and his ashes were taken away. It was all done very quickly, as soon as the body was released.”

“Perhaps I should just mention him, then. Families ought to arrange any memorial service and as he wasn’t really a congregant, it would be presumptuous of me to do something that his family might object to. Yes, I’ll ask the congregation to remember him in their prayers next Sunday.”

“And just supposing the phone box is vandalised again and there is no forensic evidence, Bahati?”

“And just supposing that despite remembering him in our prayers, Mrs Hill continues to insist she can hear him shouting, what then, Victor? What are

you suggesting that I do?"

"I could arrange a séance."

"Oh please, Victor. You think I'd involve myself with a séance?"

"No, not personally, of course, but perhaps you might give it your unofficial blessing?"

"No, definitely not. I'm not encouraging any mumbo-jumbo in my parish. I had enough trouble with that sort of thing back in Barbados. People have such vivid imaginations."

"Isn't there some sort of special prayer, then, Bahati?"

"There is an Anglican exorcism, as I think you know very well, Victor. I'd need to speak to the Bishop about it, but I'm almost certain that he wouldn't approve."

"Nothing like a quick prayer at the deceased's house, then?"

"Not really – oh I suppose I could, but I really don't want to encourage people in their wild imaginings. At the moment it just seems to be his neighbour who think he's an unquiet spirit. If I get involved in any way, it will only encourage people – I know from experience it will."

"Aha, so you have been involved with unquiet spirits before, then?"

"Don't you go spreading that around, Victor. Not a word, you understand?"

Eleven

"It's not working, Lenny."

"Well, if you've got more experience in haunting, if it forms part of that impressive entrepreneurial and management cv you're always reminding me of, then you feel free to take over, Melvin. Any time you want."

"I suppose I do go on a bit, don't I?"

"Only all the time. If I remember my school boy Latin, cv stands for curriculum vitae, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Well look, I know you're having difficulty accepting this, but there's not much vitae around here. Maybe you should start working on your curriculum mortem."

"Hah! Not sure there is such a thing, Lenny, but I take your point. I don't suppose there's such a thing as a management structure around here either – or at least I haven't seen any sign of one so far."

"Yeah— look Melv, bearing in mind we appear to be where we are, and bearing in mind that we are here because it appears that we both died, and bearing in mind that if we both died and we are here then there is something after death, don't you think it might be better to tone down the complaints a bit?"

"Be more circumspect, you mean? Oh, and please, it's Melvin, not Melv."

"You tone down the whingeing and tone up the circumspection and I'll call you Melvin, how's that?"

"You're right – although I really still think this is a dream."

"Strange that we're having the same dream, then, isn't it? Is there anything I can do to convince you that this is for real, that it's actually happening?"

"I can't think what you could do."

"Look, Lili or whatever her name was, isn't responding. We're stuck here, wherever here is and I can't arrange a heavenly choir or an interview with— well, whoever or whatever it is that we might get to see after we've completed our registration."

"Maybe you should follow your own advice, Lenny."

"What? Oh—yes I see what you mean. I think we've got to help ourselves – maybe it's a whaddayacallit – an initiative test."

"Or some sort of team-building exercise. Lili seemed to be hinting that I needed taking down a peg or two. Have you ever helped people before, Lenny?"

"Helped people? No not really. Just got on with it, my own life, I suppose."

"So, maybe we're both changing? You're doing your best to help me, and I'm coming to realise that I don't count for much, here. Money certainly doesn't seem to make any difference, neither does any sort of social position. To be honest, the only difference between us was that I have—had—more money than you, but I don't suppose that made me a better, or happier, person. HEY, LILI, I get it, I really do. Can we both move on now, please?"

"HEY, LILI. He does get it, and I've realised that I've been selfish all my life. I think we both understand, now."

"Difficult to judge the passing of time, here, but I'd say we're not going to get an answer, Lenny."

"Back to the haunting, then."

"I meant to ask you, what are you hoping to achieve by that?"

"I don't really know. My neighbour, Mrs Hill—Susan—was always helping out. I just thought, I don't know, I thought if I could get her attention then maybe she could do something—silly idea, what could she possibly do? Could you try and get anybody's attention, ask for help?"

"Actually, I did try and contact my wife, but I don't know how to do it. How do you manage?"

"I'm not sure. It feels really strange when I return to my house, though. I'm sort of here and there at the same time, if that makes any sense."

"Not really, but let's face it, nothing here seems to make any sense, does it?"

"Only if you accept that you're dead, Melvin."

"But I'm not, am I? I mean, I don't feel dead and we're here, talking. I'm, we're, just in a different place."

"Do you feel anything? Any physical sensations, I mean?"

"Now you come to mention it, no."

"Neither do I, except when I return to my house. I can't describe what I feel, but I get a definite physical sensation. Kind of like music being played slower than it should."

"I remember reading a book, once. A long time ago, another life, about the spirit world. The writer seemed to think that the spirit world, the spirit plane he called it, existed at a higher, a faster, level of vibration than we lived on earth. And that for spirits to make contact with the living, they had to lower their vibrations."

"Yeah, that makes some sort of sense, Melvin. Mind you, I don't think of myself as a spirit, as such. Yeah, you know that really makes sense. To the people we think of as still alive, we're dead—but I don't feel dead, although I have no idea what feeling dead is supposed to be like. I just feel—different to what I did when I was alive, although I don't think of myself as being dead, because I can still think, I'm talking to you and I can't leave this room—all the things that I could and couldn't do when I thought I was alive. And that makes no sense at all does it?"

"I think I know what you're getting at. Difficult to put into words, isn't it? OK, so we're in an altered state and we're stuck, for some reason, in this room. The question is, what do we do now? What might you achieve with your haunting?"

"Like I would have said in my youth, 'heavy, man, heavy'."

Twelve

"So that's my problem, your Grace."

"Yes, yes I see. Of course, one knows that there is a strong belief in Voodooism in parts of the Caribbean, but one never imagined it was so widespread."

"It's deeply rooted, your Grace. The poor souls brutally ripped from their native land and transported to plantations in the islands and beyond, had strong animistic beliefs. Voodoo was an integral part of that belief and survived, if I may put it like that, the general acceptance of Christianity."

"We must remember those poor souls in our prayers, and remember too that it was the Church which was the dominant force in releasing them from the chains of slavery."

"My ancestors were amongst those poor souls, your Grace, and I remember them both in my prayers and in my daily life, constantly. A belief in the occult is a part of me, even though I reject it, both on logical and theological grounds."

"Ah yes, the eternal struggle. How did Shakespeare put it? 'There are more things in heaven and earth'..."

"Forgive me, your Grace, but I believe that I am faced with an immediate and growing problem. I don't think that quoting Shakespeare's thoughts on the subject, profound though they undoubtedly are, is helping me deal with that problem."

"You really feel the situation is as serious as all that?"

"Your Grace, I've faced—and faced down—this problem before. Please believe me, once people get an idea in their heads, it's very difficult to dislodge it. In my experience, there is a wide-spread belief in the occult. It may take the guise of a belief in folklore, or superstition, but it would be a mistake to suppose that there is not an underlaying belief in the occult. On a Caribbean Island, in a quiet English village—anywhere that a belief in the occult can gain a stronghold, the forces of evil have an opportunity to wreak havoc and cause misery and put peoples' mortal souls in peril."

"Ah, you really believe that, Reverend?"

"Do you not, your Grace? Surely it is in line with the teachings of the Church and surely it is our duty, our obligation, to confront evil wherever we encounter it?"

"One so rarely encounters evil these days, of course. Evil in the sense of an existential malevolent force, that is. Of course there are social evils, some encouraged by unthinking government policy and some spring from a meanness, a flaw in the human spirit itself, perhaps, but so few people today have a belief in an existential source of evil."

"With respect, your Grace, I think that is completely incorrect. People have an instinctive concept of good and evil being real forces. Oh, they might well smile at the idea and deny that they harbour any such beliefs, but deep down most people have those beliefs. They look for a way of making sense of their lives—not every minute of every day or even every day—but in quiet moments, in times of grief or when times are just hard, they look for a reason

for everything they experience. They want somebody to explain it all to them, and they turn, or rather turned, to the Church for that explanation. I rather fear that the Church turned them away. We failed them when they needed us most."

"Quite so, Reverend. I..."

"It seems to me that some of us have rather forgotten—or do not really believe—that evil actually exists, that it is a real force in our world. Perhaps too much time spent treading carefully and pandering—yes, pandering—to current opinion about religion and not enough confronting cynicism and flawed logic disguised as science, because it makes people feel uncomfortable."

"Is this a personal criticism, Reverend Barnikel?"

"Your office requires you to deal with the political as well as the spiritual, your Grace."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"I can think of no better answer than to say your office requires you to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

"Implying that perhaps one has forgotten to render unto God."

"Meaning one might have lost sight of the bigger picture, your Grace."

"Well well. Your bishop in Barbados warned me that you had the ability to make him feel both uncomfortable and guilty at the same time. Tell me, Reverend, do you believe that your coming here is part of some divine plan, and if so, what is that plan?"

"I believe that God created the heavens and the earth, your Grace. By extension, that means that I believe that God created the Universe, or perhaps the Multiverses that science today speaks of. How can I, a mere human with human failings and human intellect, begin to comprehend the workings of any mind that has the power to create that which we are aware of and doubtless much that we are unaware of? Perhaps my coming here has a purpose, but if so I am merely an instrument of a power that is beyond my comprehension. I am a mere puppet and whilst I might be dimly aware of who is pulling the strings, I am unable to understand my small part in the whole. I understand as best I can. I act as I am best able to interpret what is required of me, but being human I might well have got it wrong. I am certainly no prophet, no great leader of men or interpreter of divine will."

"Indeed. As far as I can comprehend, you were appointed here because it was felt that your brand of religion might invigorate a Church uncertain of the way forward."

"My brand of religion? I was unaware that my religion was any different to yours, your Grace. You sound like Victor."

"Victor?"

"Victor Fearnought— one of my parishioners."

"Ah yes, a most generous donator to Church funds, although more out of a sense of the traditional than any religious conviction, one feels."

"That is an accurate observation, your Grace."

"To return to your problem, Reverend, one is somewhat surprised to be consulted on the matter, given your beliefs."

"I wanted you to be aware of where any intervention on my part might lead. That and to seek advice on how I should proceed."

"Even if one has lost sight of the bigger picture?"

"I know that I don't know all the answers, your Grace. I have faith that if I need to know an answer it will be forthcoming from one source or another."

"So one is merely one of several possible sources? It is our considered opinion that you should involve yourself in this matter, as you see fit. One would merely remind you, if you need reminding, that an exorcism is intended to drive out the Devil. Its purpose is neither to give succour to an unquiet spirit, nor to pander to current opinion on spiritual matters. It is a last resort, not a first port of call."

"I do believe that your Grace is a true believer, despite a veneer of cynicism."

"Good day, Reverend Barnikel."

Thirteen

Victor Fearnaught waited in his car, outside the bishop's residence. He listened to the radio, but mostly he wondered about the reverend Bahati Barnikel, recently arrived from Barbados and now vicar of the Lower Wonston parish. Whilst not attracted to her in the physical sense, he felt a certain kinship and had no idea why this should be. Some of the things she had alluded to had come as a surprise to him, and he felt the need for a long conversation, but doubted if he would get many answers. He looked again at the print-off from the surveillance company's web site. Forensic traps—basically a new way of describing motion-triggered CCTV cameras, although some of the ways of obtaining fingerprints were innovative. Not cheap, but then he could afford them—these days nothing much to spend his money on and he doubted that Bahati would be interested in a night on the town, or anything else along those lines. He realised that he wasn't particularly interested in a night on the town with Bahati, but he was intensely curious about her. The only things he knew about her were what the rest of the parishioners knew; she was from Barbados, apparently she had no husband or children, despite being in her early forties, and the Bishop had said she was highly recommended. Gay? He thought not, but couldn't have said why he thought not. The bishop was a conservative traditionalist. Peculiar then that he appointed a woman—a black woman—to a quiet English parish. Not that Victor attended parish meetings, but he gathered that the parish were not really given a choice in the matter. As a sop, Bahati's was a temporary appointment, which would only become a permanent appointment if everybody was happy with her. By that, Victor assumed the Bishop meant if he didn't get too many complaints. Not that it would be acceptable to complain on the grounds of race or gender.

Bahati walked out of the Bishop's residence with a faint smile on her face. It didn't appear that she'd had any trouble.

"How did it go?" Victor asked her as she settled in her seat.

"One's considered opinion is that I should involve myself in this matter as I see fit."

"Decent of one to give you the choice. Or looked at another way, decent of one to give you the opportunity to upset a lot of people and then carry the can."

"I don't think that I'm going to upset a lot of people, Victor."

"No séance, then?"

"Did I say that?"

"Well, I just assumed that that was what you meant. Any idea where we go from here, then?"

"We?"

"I didn't mention this on the way here, but I cleared using some sort of surveillance equipment with Ted and I downloaded some prices and specifications. The papers are in the envelope on the back seat."

Bahati reached over and picked up it up. She leafed through the papers, frowning slightly.

"This is all very expensive, Victor."

"Don't worry about that, I'll take care of it."

"The Bishop said that you were very generous, although he thought more from a sense of tradition than from any religious conviction."

"You can't have an English village without a church, now can you?"

"I suppose not, but — hmmm."

"Hmmm, what?"

"I'm wondering why I'm here."

"I must admit, I was just thinking that you were not, how can I put this, ..."

"Not the obvious candidate for the position?"

"Something like that."

"So, what did you have in mind? For the surveillance equipment, I mean?"

"Thought I'd have a chat with the company and see what they suggested. About the séance?"

"Not so fast. I think I'll have a word with Mrs Hill first, then perhaps a visit to Lenny's house. What's happening with that, do you know?"

"Probate. As far as I know, Lenny did leave a will. Seemingly he had more tucked away than you might imagine and he owned the house outright. Mrs Hill still has a spare key and Lenny's sister has asked her to keep the place clean and aired whilst things are being sorted out."

"That will make things simpler."

"How so?"

"I don't need to contact his sister and explain why I want to visit the house."

"Yes, I can just imagine the reaction if it became known that you had conducted an exorcism—or were wanting to see if it was necessary to conduct one."

"They are rarer than popular fiction might lead you to believe, Victor. Still and all, it would be better to keep this low key until I know what it is I'm up against."

"Hold on there, Reverend Barnikel. What you're up against? You don't rule out a séance and you know from experience that unquiet spirits can get people upset, and you don't want to encourage any mumbo-jumbo, but I mustn't breathe a word about any of that?"

"I don't propose to recount my life history, Victor. Just say nothing about anything, understand?"

"I wouldn't, would I? I mean, I wouldn't mention to anybody about the forensic traps in the phone box for obvious reasons, so why would I mention about you having confronted unquiet spirits in the past?"

"I never said that I'd confronted unquiet spirits, Victor. Don't go putting words in my mouth."

"So if asked, you'd give your solemn word, as a minister, that you have never been involved with anything to do with the supernatural, or the occult?"

"I think I should have a word with Mrs Hill as soon as I can. What time do you think we'll be back in Lower Wonston?"

"Aha—you want to reconnoitre, eh? Very wise, find out what we're up against before going in with all guns blazing."

"What's this we, Victor? I appreciate you taking me to see the bishop, but

that's as far as your involvement goes. If I had any doubts about that, your mention of going in all guns blazing convinces me I am right."

"But..."

"You have not got the first notion of what we might be up against."

"You said we."

"Concentrate on your driving please, Victor."

Fourteen

"Help? You're certain of that, Mrs Hill?"

"That's what it sounded like, Vicar. I'm sure it was Lenny's voice, and I'm certain he was just shouting, help, over and over again."

"Might we go over to the house? I'd like to take a look around."

"Umm—I suppose it would be all right, Vicar."

"Lenny's sister did leave a key with you, I understand? Of course, if you'd rather not come, I could let myself in. Is there any alarm system?"

"Do you think it would be all right?"

"All right if you came, or all right if I let myself in?"

"Oh dear."

"I don't think that you're worried about my honesty, Mrs Hill. Is it that you think you owe it to Lenny—or his sister—to make sure everything is fine and dandy in the house?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think Lenny would hurt you, Mrs Hill?"

"Of course not. We got on very well—mind he could be a bit grumpy from time to time."

"If he wouldn't hurt you in life, then I don't think he'd hurt you in death, do you?"

"I don't know what to think, I really don't. It's not natural, is it?"

"I have to point out the obvious—you think it was Lenny's voice and you think he was shouting the word help. Imagination is a wonderful gift from God, but some times it can fool us into thinking that we are hearing something when in fact we are hearing something else."

"I'm not lying, Vicar."

"I never thought for one moment that you were, I'm merely saying that it's possible that you were mistaken."

"So, if it's possible I was mistaken, is it possible that I was right, Vicar?"

"Why don't you let me have the key and I'll go over alone? If you really think it your duty to come with me, come as far as the front door. I literally just want to walk into the kitchen and straight back out again."

"Where I found him?"

"Where you found him. I'm just going to recite a prayer, Mrs Hill. If you wish, you can come in with me and we'll say it together."

"So you really think it might be Lenny's ghost?"

"I really don't know, Mrs Hill. May I call you Sally?"

"Oh—yes, yes of course, Vicar."

"Let's just go and recite a prayer together, Sally."

"Yes. Yes I think—I think I might feel better if we did."

"And this is where you found him?"

"He was just there. He looked so, well so surprised, I suppose. Like death

had come as a surprise to him."

"Perhaps it had, Sally. Had he been ill?"

"Not that I knew. He never said anything. I don't think that he'd been to the doctors for years. Perhaps that's why he's asking for help?"

"I, I don't think I quite understand what you mean, Sally."

"Well, maybe he doesn't know that he's dead—oh that sounds silly, you must think me a real charlie."

"No. I have my faith but we none of us knows what happens when we die, do we?"

"I've read that we see a bright light, and we go down a tunnel, and then we meet all our family who've gone before us, all our loved ones."

"Perhaps. It's a nice thought and it could be true."

"You don't believe it, then, Vicar?"

"I have faith that we are all taken to be with the Lord. How we make that journey, I have no idea, but like you I have read of many experiences. Do you sense that Lenny is here?"

"No! Do you?"

"I never knew him, Sally. If I sense anything it is that this house is empty, unoccupied. Perhaps we should say a short prayer now."

"I think we should."

"Good. We should take a moment to think about Lenny, and then I'll say a prayer. When I've finished, I'll say, amen, and you say it too. Will that be all right, or would you like to say a prayer of your own?"

"Better if you say it, Vicar. I'm not used to that sort of thing."

"Lord, we are here to remember our friend, Lenny. We beseech you to give him comfort and grant him true and everlasting peace, in your presence. Amen."

"Amen—um, Vicar?"

"Yes, Sally?"

"Shouldn't we say the Lord's Prayer, or something?"

"We just said something, Sally. The Lord's Prayer is not appropriate, I'll explain why over a cup of tea, if you like."

"Shouldn't we have said Lenny's full name, though?"

"The Lord knows who he is, Sally. He has no need of full names or earthly titles. We'll say another prayer next Sunday morning."

"And that's it?"

"That's it. We can go now, unless you want to look round and make sure that everything is fine and dandy."

"No—I think I'd rather like a cup of tea. Makes me feel all funny being in here, saying a prayer."

"Do you pray, Sally?"

"Not really, Vicar. Only when—well, you know..."

"Yes, I know. It's all right to pray, you don't need to be in church and you don't need to say a formal prayer—that's my job. You can just ask God for help, or better still, thank him now and again. Makes a change for Him to receive a prayer of appreciation, rather than appeals for help, I should imagine."

"Should you be saying that, Vicar?"

"Let's have that tea, Sally. Come on, if you don't want to look around

then we'd better lock up. I have Church duties to perform in a little while."

"Yes, yes of course. Sorry, let's go – um?"

"Yes, Sally?"

"Would it be all right if I just said goodbye to Lenny?"

"Of course. Would you like me to wait for you in the hall?"

"I feel a bit silly."

"Not at all. I'll wait in the hall."

Standing in the hall, Bahati smiles as she hears Sally solemnly reciting the Lord's Prayer. Looking around, she says quietly;

"Whatever is troubling you Lenny, you'll find peace in the Lord, if you just open your heart to Him."

She shivers slightly as the temperature drops.

"I'll find a way to talk to you, if you really need my help to move on. And may I be forgiven for not being entirely truthful with Sally."

Fifteen

Standing at the lectern, Bahati was gratified to see that the church was almost full. A pity it had more to do with Sally Hill telling all and sundry about the prayers in Lenny's house, and another incident involving the phone-box library, than with the up-lifting nature of her sermons. She looked around the church, moving her head slowly, nodding and smiling at people.

"Friends, welcome to you all. Today, I'd like to talk to you about prayer. Not the formal prayers that we say during church services, but rather prayers that we say privately, when nobody but God, and we ourselves, are listening. I want to talk to you about the power of prayer. I want to talk to you about how people praying together can have a positive effect on those who we pray for. And, of course, I know that some of you are concerned about what is apparently going on in the village. I want to set your minds at rest.

Of course, we all tend to turn to God in our hour of need; in our own way. Perhaps a family member is ill, or perhaps things are not going right in our lives, private or business lives, and we ask for God's help, we pray. The cynics and nay-sayers would immediately say—and how often is help forthcoming, then? I would answer them with a question, what constitutes help? I think we are all familiar with, in various forms, the old proverb a problem shared is a problem solved. The version of that proverb that I am familiar with, ends with the words, a problem diminished. In other words, whilst the problem might not have gone away, somehow it appears less daunting, less intimidating, than it previously did. And of course, once we are no longer so intimidated by a situation, we can see it for what it really is. It may still be serious—nobody would say that suffering from a terminal illness is not serious, but it need not be daunting. Death is part of the cycle of life, and sometimes it takes a friend to remind us of that—and when that friend is God, who through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ, has promised us life everlasting if we only open our hearts and accept Him, then, speaking both from personal experience and observation, it is possible to take heart, to rise above the immediate grief of the situation. How many times have we heard of families becoming reconciled at a time of the passing of a matriarchal or patriarchal figure? Now, that individual has passed from this life to another, but those left behind have been offered a new beginning, a new way of leading their lives, even though their grief remains.

I would say to you today, think of God as your friend—somebody that you can confide in, a friend who will not betray your confidences, will not gossip about you behind your back. A friend who always has time to listen to you, a friend who will always offer you comfort— if you are prepared to listen. And we must listen, friends, because God has a quiet voice. He doesn't shout, or make a fuss. There are no fireworks, or bands playing, no heavenly choirs— just a quiet voice. But maybe that quiet voice offers us another solution to our problem, if we just take the time to listen. I am reminded of another saying, the devil is in the detail. I refute that. I say to you that God is in the detail. Look around you, the next time you go for a walk—even if you are just walking to

your car to go to work, or if you are walking to the bus stop. Even if you are in a big city, look around you. There are birds, there are plants. Even in the grimmest city, if you look at a flower there is the same intricacy as there is in a flower you see in the country. The detail is the same, and if you look at the detail you see God's hand, not the devil's.

So, how then should we pray, what form should our prayers take? If we are in a church, during a service then the prayers are in a particular order – but that does not prevent a person attending a service from saying their own private prayer. A prayer need not be said aloud, it needs to be said with the heart always, but not necessarily with the tongue. And of course, there is no special time for prayer, we can say a prayer at any time. Studies have shown beyond any reasonable doubt that prayers can be effective in helping people, even if those people are a long way away from those who are offering up the prayers. Even so, there are those who seek an alternative explanation – well, let them seek for it. In the end, their eyes will be opened to the truth. I offer no explanation for what Sally thinks she heard in Lenny Caldwell's house. Was it Lenny himself, crying out for help? I don't know. I believe – I know – that there is a life after this one. I don't know what form that life takes, whether people gather together as we are gathered together today – I simply don't know. It is beyond my understanding. But I do know that if Lenny is in distress, we can help him. Our prayers for him can aid him. What sort of distress might he be in? Friends, I simply don't know. Perhaps he was sad to leave this life and is unwilling to move on to the next. Perhaps he simply wishes to say goodbye to his friends here. I would like us to take a moment to think of Lenny, to remember him, to say goodbye to him, in the certain knowledge that our parting is but a temporary one. We do not need to say a formal prayer, we need only open our hearts to God, and ask him to comfort Lenny. Let us take that moment now."

Most members of the congregation looked at the floor; a few looked at the stained-glass window and a couple looked around the church. There were some exchanged glances, and when Bahati felt she had given them enough time, those who genuinely were remembering Lenny, she said in a loud voice, 'Amen'. The congregation responded.

"In closing, friends, I would just like to mention the vandalism of the phone-box library. I am of the firm opinion that in the first instance this was just one of those mindless, mischievous acts. Subsequently, I believe that somebody thinks it is amusing to play on people's fears and superstitions. I want to assure you that steps have been taken to identify the culprit or culprits, and you may let that fact become general knowledge. If the persons responsible persist in their mischief, they will be identified and brought to book, have no fear on that score. Again, I would like to thank you all for attending today. The times of the services are on the noticeboard outside, and of course I am always available should any of you wish to discuss anything with me, whether it be of a spiritual nature or perhaps a particular problem that you are experiencing in your daily life. The blessings of The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost be upon you all."

Sixteen

The by now usual post Sunday morning service coffee – with a splash – at the vicarage.

"I thought that went very well, Vicar. I'm sure those who knew Lenny were appreciative of a chance to formally say goodbye to him, and you laid to rest many of the superstitious fears that seemed to have sprung up these last couple of weeks."

"Thank you, Richard."

"I must away now, Vicar. As always, thank you for coffee – unless there is something else to discuss?"

"Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow morning, Richard."

"See you later, Richard."

"Righto, Victor."

Victor Fearnought looked down and his mug swooshing the coffee around, until they heard the sound of the vicarage front door being closed.

"Now he's gone, Bahati, there's a couple of things I'd like to ask you."

"I thought there might be, Victor. Go ahead."

"Something struck me during your sermon – well done incidentally, stirring stuff – I believe this is the first time that I've heard you actually mention Jesus. You always talk about the Lord, about God, but I don't recall you mentioning Jesus before."

"You must have simply not heard me, Victor. True, I don't mention Jesus in every sentence, but as an Anglican priest, you'd expect me to mention Him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes I would, but somehow I never seem to hear you. Perhaps something to discuss over a meal one evening?"

"Perhaps; but I must make one thing absolutely clear, Victor. I value your friendship, I enjoy your company but I am absolutely not looking for, or wanting, any romantic involvement. Not with you, and not with anybody else. Can we be clear about that?"

"Of course, Bahati, of course. Might I...?"

"My husband died, God did not grant us children and I have devoted myself to a cause. Might I ask you to end that particular conversation right there?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm flattered if you had a little flirtation in mind. In fact, please don't tell me that you didn't, my ego has been boosted. However, I meant what I said."

"Understood, friends it is. Perhaps we could discuss your infrequent mentions of Jesus over a friendly meal one evening?"

"I told you, you simply have not heard me. You said there were a couple of things you wanted to ask."

"Yes. You think this business about Lenny has been laid to rest now?"

"No."

"No? That's it, no? I expected either a yes – or a no and an and."

"I sensed Lenny in the house, Victor. There was a sadness, and something

more — there seemed to be a cry for help.”

“You have a sense for these things, Bahati?”

“I do. Perhaps over that dinner you were mentioning I might be more forthcoming.”

“Now who’s flirting? Do you think the business with the phone box is connected, then?”

“I hope not. Hope not but fear it may be.”

“Fear?”

“Fear. I want you to arrange a séance. Discreetly, but quickly, if you would. Do you have a medium in mind?”

“Actually I do.”

“Is she — I’m making an assumption that she is a she, how non-pc of me — a discreet person?”

“Yes, she is. She’s a Spiritualist. Doesn’t exactly go around touting for business and she makes no charge for her services, but if people need her they know where to find her. I think she’s one of those women who in centuries past would have been burned as a witch. She’s into natural medicines, using traditional herbal cures, that sort of thing.”

“I need to be certain that she isn’t a witch, Victor.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes I am. Deadly serious.”

“I don’t believe so. She has written several magazine articles, would you like me to get hold of copies before I ask her about a séance?”

“No, I’ll take your word for it. Is she a member of the Spiritualist Church?”

“No. In the articles she wrote about how we all have souls, and how those souls leave our bodies after death and continue to grow and develop in an after-life. This, according to her, has no connection with any formal religion, it’s simply something that happens. Would you like me to contact the Spiritualist Church and find a Christian Spiritualist?”

“Would you be very shocked if I said no, I’d rather you didn’t?”

“Intrigued, and perhaps a little shocked. If I asked why, would you tell me?”

“I’d say I wanted to avoid a conflict of interests.”

“How very enigmatic, Bahati.”

“I thought so. Her name?”

“Joyce Talbot.”

“Call her and make the arrangements, Victor. I’d rather like it to take place in Lenny’s house — I think Joyce would concur.”

“You’ll have to get the key from Mrs Hill.”

“I’d rather like her to be there as well, so that won’t be a problem. Leave her to me.”

“I suppose you will explain all this to me?”

“Some of it. Hopefully you’ll then tell me what an over-active imagination I have, and I can look suitably abashed and admit I was wrong.”

“And if it turns out that you are right?”

“Then we won’t have any time for a cosy little dinner any time soon, Victor.”

"I'm not certain about this, Vicar. Are you sure it's all right?"

"The Church does warn against dabbling in the occult, Sally, I won't pretend that it doesn't. The thing is, we're not going to dabble. Whatever your thoughts on spiritualism and the possibility of an afterlife, the Church does teach that there is an afterlife. I believe that there is an afterlife and I also believe that Lenny was trying to attract your attention, for some reason. I want, if it's at all possible, to ask him what it is he wants to say."

"Do you think he vandalised the phone box?"

"I can't imagine why he would want to, but that's something else we can ask him."

"I suppose it'll be OK if I gave you the key. Do you really need me to come?"

"You knew him, Sally. I want to be certain that if we do contact a spirit, it is Lenny and not something else pretending to be Lenny, for some reason."

"Something else. You said something and not somebody."

"There's no need to be afraid, Sally. Mediums do not summon spirits, evil or otherwise, they merely act as a channel for communication."

"Sounds like you know what you're talking about, Vicar. How do you know all this?"

"In Barbados, there were those who believed in evil spirits. I found it necessary to educate myself on the subject, so I could counter superstition and ignorance. I personally do believe in an afterlife, but I also believe that there is no need for contact between the spirit world and our world. Soon enough, we all pass over to the afterlife and then we are reunited with our loved ones. To us in this existence it seems as though the separation is for an eternity, but for those who are in an eternal existence, it seems as though the parting is only for a day or so and then we are all reunited. Perhaps Lenny merely wants to thank you for all your kindnesses to him, and the phone box was vandalised for mischief and nothing else."

"Well, I suppose so."

"Victor will be here soon. He's bringing the medium, Joyce Talbot. Do you know her?"

"Know of her. A bit loopy, if you ask me."

Seventeen

"Did you hear that, Melvin?"

"Hear what, Lenny?"

"I thought I heard somebody call my name. It sounded like it came from a long way away."

"Answer them. Perhaps somebody is coming for us at last."

"Wait – I can barely make out what she's saying."

"She? Is it Lili, do you think?"

"Doesn't sound like her, and anyway why would she be calling me?"

"Perhaps somebody from the other side is trying to contact you."

Lenny laughed.

"The other side! You mean somebody living is trying to contact us dead geezers?"

"Maybe your neighbour – Sally, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Sally. Doesn't sound like her, though."

"Can you go back to your house and see if there's anybody there – hahahaha – listen to me! Is there anybody there? Knock twice and ask for Lenny or Melvin. Woaaaaah."

"Don't joke about it."

"Why not? We've been stuck here for Christ knows how long, we're both dead, no idea what's going on, so if somebody is trying to contact us, or you at least, why not have a bit of fun?"

"Don't blaspheme, Melvin."

"Oh come on! We're here in this room – or somewhere that Lili made look like my cardiologist's waiting room, nobody is telling us what is going on and this is nothing like anything I've ever read about what the afterlife is supposed to be like. I mean, come on – how could they, whoever they are, possibly mix us up? This is like dealing with some sort of inefficient civil service department. Please don't tell me there is a civil service in Heaven, I don't think I could bear it."

"It does seem very odd. Even so, Melvin please don't take the name of the Lord in vain."

"You are getting religious, aren't you?"

"Well what else do you expect? I don't think this is some sort of dream – as you said, whoever heard of an interactive dream. If this is my mind's way of creating some sort of comforting world for me before I finally switch off, what are you doing in my world? My comforting world would be the local pub, free beer and good food. The only supernatural thing would be a supernatural ability to throw an accurate dart."

"You're right. Let's not argue, can you somehow follow the voice?"

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know – exactly. Can you lower your vibration level and just, I don't know, follow the sound of the voice?"

"Might as well try, nothing to lose is there? Do you want to try and come with me?"

"We've been through that, your explanation made no sense."

"Think yourself slower and deeper, like a musical note. I know, you ever come across any of those Hare Krishna people?"

"What the hell have they got to do with it? Sorry – sorry anybody listening, I didn't mean to use the other 'H' word – sorry."

"You know that chant, ommm, or something like that?"

"Yes."

"OK, well sort of hum that to yourself then try and hum it in a lower pitch, and slower. That make any sense?"

"Sort of. I'll try – oh, that felt funny!"

"Keep saying it and follow the voice."

"Could you tell me your name, please?"

"MelLennviny."

"I didn't quite get that. My name is Bahati."

"HellMelvionBahati, my name is LenMelvinny."

"I still didn't understand. Is there more than one spirit there?"

"Yyeess."

"Could just one of you speak, please."

Ask her if she knows what's going on.

Melvin, calm down. Let me do the talking.

Well get on with it, man. Who knows how long we'll be able to communicate with the woman, whoever she is.

Fine. Just calm down, will you.

"Hello Bahati. My name is Lenny. There is another here with me, his name is Melvin."

"Hello Lenny, hello Melvin. Lenny, have you been trying to contact anybody on this side?"

Yes, yes, you stupid woman. Why do you think we're here?

Calm down, Melvin. Maybe if you get exited your vibration frequency goes up and you'll be back in the room again.

You're right. Sorry. Go ahead, I'll keep quiet, I promise.

"I have been trying to attract some attention, to get help. Melvin and I are in the same place but it's not what either of us were expecting, and nobody will talk to us and tell us what's going on."

"Lenny, could you speak more slowly, please. You're communicating using somebody else vocal chords and it makes no sense when you speak too quickly."

"Sorry. Somebody mixed-up Melvin and me and we're stuck in this place and nobody will tell us what's happening."

"I don't understand. Let's take this slowly. Melvin and you, Lenny, both passed over, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you are confused because you weren't expecting to pass over?"

This is bloody pointless. What's the matter with the woman?

Melvin, for the last time, just calm down, will you?

Sorry. Go on, I don't have the patience for this.

It's not that easy. I don't know how I'm speaking. It feels like a vibration in my

throat, or where my throat would be if I still had one, but it's like talking through muddy water.

What does that mean?

It's the best way I can describe it.

"Bahati, Melvin and I are both dead. Neither of us were expecting it. I was met by somebody who called me Melvin and Melvin was met by somebody who called him Lenny. How could that happen?"

"Was it the same person who met you both?"

"We hadn't thought about that I don't know...."

God this is difficult.

You talking to me or making a general comment, Lenny?

You. God. Anybody, everybody. My throat hurts.

It can't, you haven't got one.

Well it bloody well does!

Let me try.

OK, go ahead.

Yes, er, how are you doing it?

I don't know. Umm, think of being in a large room and trying to speak to a person at the other end of the room, but without shouting.

Oh I get it, I used to do some am-dram, you know.

What's that, a bit of sly Whiskey drinking? Like a wee dram but larger. I wish I could have a scotch. I miss the pub, you know.

There's quite a few things I miss. I get what you mean, let me have a go. If I get tired we can take it in turns.

"Bahati."

"I'm here. You sound different—is that Melvin?"

"Yes. Don't know who met us but there was a mix up. We're stuck in a place until it gets sorted out. Not expected, that."

"No. How do you know you're stuck in that place until things get sorted out, who told you?"

"Lili."

"Do you know who Lilly is, Melvin? Does Lenny know who she is?"

"Only Lili with an i and short for something."

"I will try and help you both, but all I can do is pray for you. Have either you or Lenny been throwing the books out of the phone-box library?"

"Nonononononono."

I can't speak properly. You try again.

"Baaaaahaaa..."

No good. Maybe the medium is tired as well. I'm certainly tired.

Me too. Maybe we should just go back and see if anything happens.

I'm curious as to how long I've been gone.

Why?

I've no idea of how long, it doesn't feel like any time at all.

Try and ask, then.

"Howww longggg ave en one?"

"I can't understand you. Joyce the medium is very tired. Maybe it would be best if we tried again later. I understand that somebody confused you to for each other and that you are in a place with somebody called Lili."

"Yyyessssssssssssssss."

Sod this for a game of soldiers, Melvin. Let's go back. Bahati, whoever she is, will contact us somehow if she finds out anything.

Agreed. How do we get back?

Just relax, I suppose. Stop thinking ommm, and let your vibration level come up again.

Right – hah, home sweet home.

Don't say that, please don't say that.

Eighteen

"Are you all right, Joyce?"

"Tired, Reverend, tired but then that's usual. Were you able to speak with the person you wished to contact?"

"You don't know?"

"I never do. I sense a presence, then I just drift away until the séance is over."

"I was able to communicate with Lenny, and somebody called Melvin. I need to pick your brains, are you up to it?"

"I could do with some tea, but yes, I'm up to it. Is there tea in the house?"

"Sally?"

"No Vicar, everything has been cleared away. Do you want to come back to my house, I can make a pot and perhaps Joyce would like a bite to eat?"

"That would be nice, Sally. Thank you." Said Joyce.

"I think perhaps we should adjourn to the vicarage and leave Sally in peace. Thanks for your help. Just one question, are you convinced that we were talking to Lenny?"

"Well, most of the time we were talking to that Melvin character, but I felt that Lenny was there, yes. I'm happy to make tea and perhaps something to eat, Vicar. I have some sponge cake in the house."

"I appreciate the offer, Sally, but I think you've done enough. I want to discuss some things with Joyce and..."

"And you think it'd be better if I didn't hear them, is that it?"

"Something like that, Sally."

"I'm pretty much involved in all this now, don't you think, Vicar?"

"I wouldn't want you to be alarmed by anything you heard Joyce and I discussing, Sally."

"I've just heard you talking to Lenny, who's dead, and somebody called Melvin, who is also dead. They're being held prisoner or something, so how much more alarming can it get?"

"A lot, believe me."

"Don't you think Sally's earned the right to some answers, Bahati? Were you thinking of excluding me from your conversation with Joyce as well?"

"I was, but I have a feeling I'm outnumbered here. I'll give you both one last chance—what you hear might be alarming, frightening even. It will challenge everything that you believe in, everything that you thought was true."

"I'll go and get the kettle on Vicar. Would you lock up—make sure all the lights are off, will you?"

"Very well, but don't say that I didn't warn you. Do you feel able to walk over to Sally's house, Joyce?"

"Give me a moment or two longer. Tea and sponge cake sounds perfect."

"Sally, will your husband be all right with us coming over?"

"He's down the pub, Vicar. Probably be as tight as a drum when he gets back, so he'll be straight off to bed. This time of year he starts work at first light, about five, so he won't want to sit up chatting when he gets back."

"Did Lenny or Melvin say who this Lilly character is, Reverend?"

"Neither of them knew, Joyce."

"Except they both said it was Lili with an i, and it was short for something else. I had the feeling you knew what it might have been short for, Bahati?" Victor said.

"Lili, Reverend?"

"Lili, with an i, Joyce."

"Oh my!"

"Oh my indeed."

"Care to let Sally and I in on this, Bahati?"

"Ever hear the name Lilith, either of you?"

"No, I don't think so, Vicar. Nice name though."

"I have Bahati, but I can't place it."

"Lilith—in mythology, she was the first wife of Adam. Maybe a nice name, Sally, but not a particularly nice spirit, I'm afraid."

"The first wife of Adam, Vicar? Surely God created Eve from one of Adam's ribs, because God saw that he was lonely—or have I got that wrong?"

"No you have it right, Sally. But before God created Eve, He created both Adam and Lilith from the dust. They were created equal, and when both Adam and God thought that Lilith should obey Adam, she had other ideas, and made them both aware of her thoughts on the subject."

"Ah yes, I remember that now, Bahati. I always wondered what happened to Lilith, but she's never really mentioned, is she?"

"No, Victor, she is not. Most scholars assume that she was the product of Hebrew mythology, but she existed, as did Adam."

"Oh come on Bahati, that creation story was just that, a story made up to explain where we originated from. Nobody believes it anymore—well, almost nobody."

"That doesn't mean that it isn't true, Victor."

"Some think that Lilith was in reality a demon, Mr Fearnought."

"Call me Victor, Joyce. A demon is reality, oh come on now, really."

"Could you make the tea now, please Sally. And you, Victor, please don't interrupt whilst Joyce and I discuss this."

"I think I'm beginning to know how Adam felt..."

"Do not make a joke of this, Victor, it is deadly serious. Joyce, both Lenny and this Melvin, whoever he is, said that when they passed-over there was some sort of mix up over their identities. Have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"Never. Did they go into any detail?"

"Not much. They were in a room and Lilith told them they had to stay there until things got sorted out."

"I've never heard of anything like that. If Lilith is involved, it can't be good, though."

"Have you ever come across her before?"

"No. I know the mythology. To be honest, I thought that it was mainly a myth—some sort of lesson that was put in the Old Testament. About how

women should be subservient to men because that's what God wanted."

"No, I don't think God wanted that at all."

"So what's the myth, Bahati?"

"In a nutshell, Lilith rebelled against being subservient to Adam. In modern parlance, she had an affair with the archangel Samael, and after that she fades from both myth and history."

"An affair with an archangel? Boy, that really is some sort of rebellion. So God created Man, Woman and divorce, all at the same time?"

"I told you Victor, don't joke about this."

From outside the house they heard a man shouting,

"Sal, Sal – quick, is the vicar with you, girl?"

Ed, Sally's husband, burst into the room.

"Vicar, thank God I found you, can you come quickly, please?"

"Of course, what on earth is the matter?"

"It's the phone box, Vicar."

Nineteen

A group of silent people were standing a safe distance away from the phone box. Inside, the books were on fire, flames clearly visible but there was no smoke, and people were quick to point out to Bahati that the phone box itself was not on fire, and you couldn't feel any heat. The more biblically minded spoke of burning bushes.

"This is not God's work," Bahati murmured to Victor. She stepped forward, and spread her arms wide.

"Begone, foul demon. Go back from whence you came!"

Nothing. If anything the fire inside the phone box burned a little brighter.

"In the name of God, I command you, go back from whence you came."

The Moonlight was extinguished by clouds and there was an ominous, bass, grumbling reverberation. People could feel it in their bones. Lightning danced across the sky.

"Begon I say. You are not wanted here."

There was a tremendous peal of thunder, several lighting bolts struck the ground around Bahati. The flames in the phone box flickered, then died, leaving just a pile of ash. Bahati put her hands on her hips and surveyed the scene. The crowd cowered in silence, not even having had the time to run, so quickly had events begun and then ended. Victor approached Bahati.

"Oh, how I love the smell of ozone in the evening." He said sotto voce.

"What?" Bahati snapped at him.

"I was just being facetious." He replied.

"Well don't be, this is neither the time nor the place for it." Was the reply.

"It's over, go home now." Bahati addressed the crowd.

"Shouldn't we go to the church?" Somebody asked.

"No. Go back to your homes. Pray for God's help, but go back to your homes. Say nothing about this for the moment, and those of you who haven't already put a video on facebook or You Tube, please don't. Publicity will not help this situation, nor will anybody trying to make money out of it."

"What will help it, Vicar?" A man shouted.

"I just told you, go home and pray. There will be a meeting in the church tomorrow afternoon—three o'clock. I will answer your questions then, but for tonight I must seek guidance. Go home, all of you, there is nothing here to look at, it's all over."

The crowd dispersed in silence.

"It's all over—for now." Bahati said quietly.

"What should we do, Vicar?" Asked Sally.

"You and Ed go home, Sally. Joyce and I have some things we need to discuss rather urgently, now."

"Tea's made at my place Vicar, and Ed has something stronger in the cupboard for them that would prefer it."

Bahati hesitated.

"A good sheriff always knows when they need deputies, Bahati. Come tomorrow, I rather think you're going to need help in calming the situation. People may have gone home now, but long before three tomorrow, you're

going to have a crowd of people outside the vicarage."

"I suppose you're right, Victor."

"Anyway, we all saw what happened just now, and we were at the séance. We are all already involved, even if you would prefer that we were not."

"Well – back to Sally and Ed's place then."

"I'm not so sure I want any further involvement in this, Reverend."

"I think things have gone beyond what you do or don't want, Joyce. You are involved, and I'm sorry that I involved you, but it can't be helped now. Come on, let's go and have that tea, and maybe something a bit stronger."

The little group walked back to the Hill's house, each wrapped in their own thoughts. Bahati's thoughts returned to her native Barbados, and her deceased husband. She had a score to settle, but was well aware that personal feelings must not cloud her judgement. On arrival at the house, Sally hurriedly reboiled the kettle whilst Ed produced a bottle of brandy and put it on the table within easy reach of those who might feel the need of it. Being a natural host, he encouraged the others to partake by pouring himself a large tumbler. Tea steeping in the pot, cake and biscuits on the table, they waited expectantly for Bahati to begin.

"Clearly Lilith is making mischief here, but I have never seen anything like this before. I propose we start by considering what we think we know about this situation. It seems to me that it begins with two recently departed souls being somehow incarcerated by Lilith. Joyce, have you ever come across anything like this before, and for the benefit of the others, perhaps you would outline your belief in what happens when a person dies?"

Joyce sipped her tea, clearly marshalling her thoughts.

"My belief is that all living things have a soul. On the death of the body, that soul goes to a different plane of existence; each soul to its appropriate plane, although it is possible that one might encounter a favourite pet, for example, if the pet wished to continue the association. There is no heaven and no hell, no fires of purgatory and no heavenly hordes of angels singing Gods praises. This is an entirely natural transition and is not dependent on religious belief or religious affiliation. It is a purely spiritual place, and our spirits have the opportunity to grow and flourish. I believe that people who die as babies or adolescents develop into adults, although a soul may choose how it is perceived by other souls. They may choose to appear as aged people, or as people in their early years. The idea that two souls have been incarcerated is a very strange one to me. I do believe that a person who has done much evil in their lives may be given the opportunity to reflect in solitude on their earthly behaviour, but in the main this appears to be a voluntary process. From what departed spirits have told me, there is no judgment of their previous behaviour by any sort of court, but rather there is a moment, almost immediately after the transition, when a soul may well review their previous life and pass judgement on themselves. Some sort of help is available for those who judge themselves harshly."

"Where does God fit into all this, Joyce?" Asked Victor.

"God is the source of creation and the font of all knowledge. As souls progress, as their understanding of the Universe and their place in it increases, so they move closer to unity with God."

"So why were you concerned when Bahati told you that this Lilith person was involved?"

"Because just as there is a source of goodness, I believe there is a source of evil. I have no idea why this should be so. Maybe it's an educational process. Perhaps after transition, we are offered a choice of direction and some may choose evil for a time, before they realise the error of their ways. Major religions would have us believe that the source of good and the source of evil are in eternal conflict, but I think that this is merely an allegorical way of describing the human condition. Nevertheless, from time to time I have encountered what I would describe as malevolent spirits, and Lilith certainly falls into that category."

Twenty

"I would agree with Joyce, up to a point. That point is I believe that Good and Evil exist, and that not only are we offered a choice as to which we choose to follow, the forces of evil actively try to persuade us to follow their path. I believe that Heaven and Hell exist, but not that souls are condemned for all time to purgatory. From what I know of Lilith, and I believe that she was co-created with Adam, she rejected the path of good and was seduced by the path of evil, by the archangel Samael. I can't give a rational explanation for any of this, but I hold it to be true, and my experience tells me that it is true. Samael is a servant of God, although he is also a malevolent spirit. I don't begin to understand the duality, but he, Samael, is responsibly for death and destruction, sometimes at the behest of God and sometimes because he revels in it. He tries to seduce Man to follow the path of evil. I think that Lilith sometimes works with him in furthering his aims. Perhaps she is taking her revenge on men because of her experiences with Adam, or perhaps she was the evil to Adam's good. It doesn't really matter. We are facing here something that I have never come across before, the kidnapping—I can think of no other word to use—of two souls who had left this earthly existence. If we are to be of any help to Lenny and Melvin, we must somehow find out what is going on."

"Is the Bible any help, Vicar?"

"No, Sally. It tells us very little. We need to talk to somebody on the other side, and that I'm afraid is where Joyce comes in. There are those who claim to be able to contact evil spirits, and I believe that this is indeed so, but we do not want to converse with these spirits. We need to talk to somebody on the side of good, not evil."

"Bahati, none of this is making much sense to me, but why not simply ask God—either to sort it all out or to tell you what you think you need to know?"

"Because it just doesn't work like that, Victor. Joyce, do you have a spiritual guide?"

"Yes, although I don't advertise the fact. He is a mystic, from India. I am able to converse with him when I meditate, although it's not like a normal conversation. His answers just come to me. He very rarely agrees to take part in a séance. He doesn't hold with contact between the physical and spiritual planes. He says that we in this plane will eventually learn the truth and it is not necessary for us to know what comes next, only to know that there is another plane of existence and that we should all aspire to do good during our time in the physical, as it will shorten our learning period in the spiritual plane and hasten our ultimate unity with the Creator."

"Would he agree to tell you what we are up against here?"

"I can only ask, Reverend. I can tell you that he will not agree to impart this knowledge to all of us, in a séance. He might give me pointers during my meditation."

"So there I suggest we leave it. Joyce, are you able to initiate contact at will?"

"Not always. I can only try."

"If you would please. As for the rest of us, I suggest that we pray for

Divine help in our hour of need, because I am certain that we are in an hour of need."

"Why?"

"Because of the business with the phone box, Victor. I see no reason for it, beyond making mischief and yet, to make mischief the forces of evil normally act in a more subtle manner. Openly acting like this is most unusual. It seems to be almost a demonstration of power, and in my experience there is some sort of tacit agreement that open displays of power are generally avoided."

"I suppose it's too much to hope that the recent events won't be on the internet?"

"Alas, human nature being what it is, I fear that you are correct Victor."

"So, what should we do?"

"Ignore it."

"Simple as that?"

"Simple as that. We can't stop it, and we don't understand what's going on anyway, so we can't make any meaningful comments. Even if we did know what was going on, it would probably be inadvisable to make any comment anyway. Thinking about it, perhaps that's the intent behind all this."

"What do you mean, Reverend?"

"To bring the forces of evil to the attention of the world at large, Joyce."

"But surely that would be a departure from centuries of tacit agreement?"

"Maybe so, but perhaps it's what's happening, nevertheless."

"I must think about this, Reverend. Perhaps Mr Fearnought would be kind enough to run me home now?"

"Certainly, and it's Victor."

"Please stay in touch, Joyce. I need to know what's going on here – and I need to think of something to say to people tomorrow afternoon."

"Good luck with that, Reverend. I'll meditate this evening, perhaps something will come to me or perhaps it won't, either way I'll call you tomorrow morning, Do you have a mobile phone?"

"Actually, I don't. I've been meaning to, but I wanted to establish personal contact with the congregation, and have them either call the vicarage or come in person if they needed me."

"I'll give Joyce my number, Bahati. I assume that you will be wanting my further involvement in this?"

"Yes, of course Victor. I don't think I'll be wanting you to physically wrestle with demons...."

"But you never know. Lucky I keep myself reasonably fit. That's a joke – I hope."

"I hope so too, Victor. I really do hope so, but this is so strange – who can tell?"

"Indeed – come on Joyce, I'll get you home. Night, one and all, unless you want me to come back here or to the vicarage, Bahati?"

"No. Tonight, I must pray and – perhaps it might be best if we communicated by telephone, I don't know."

"Bahati?"

"Those lightning bolts. Maybe they were a warning or maybe they were a precursor of something else. I don't know. I'm going to back to the vicarage now – no, I'll walk. Call me tomorrow, Joyce. You too, Victor. Sally, you and Ed

are safe enough, I think. If there is a target here, then I think I may be it."

"Bahati?"

"Goodnight, Victor."

Twenty-one

Victor was wakened by the ringing of the bedside phone. A little groggily, he answered it.

"Victor Fearnaught."

"Mr Fearnaught, it's Joyce, Joyce Talbot. I'm sorry to call you so early in the morning, but it's rather urgent. I must see Reverend Barnikel immediately. Could you come and pick me up, please? I'm really sorry, but I must talk to her face to face. I'm going to ring her now, to let her know I'm coming. I'm so sorry to be a nuisance, but it would take me well over an hour to cycle to Lower Wonston and time may be of the essence, I fear."

Victor glanced at the radio clock. Ten past five.

"On the way Joyce, I'll just splash my face to wake up properly, I'll be with you in about ten minutes or so."

Grumbling slightly, he rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom. The face in the shaving mirror was tired and looked its age. Two minutes to shave, but no time for a shower, by the sound of it. He hated not having a shower in the morning, but needs must, he thought, as imagination supplied possible reasons for the early morning call. A quick shave, a flash round with the toothbrush, a spray of deodorant and on the road in five minutes flat. Not so bad for a man his age. OK, seven minutes flat. Still not that shabby. No traffic about this time of the morning; he drove fast and had a near collision with some idiot on horseback. The horse was startled and reared up, the rider was startled, then angry and Victor—Victor pressed on regardless. He recognised the rider. He'd send some flowers by way of apology. *Sorry about this morning, Peggy, but I was on a mission from God.* Which movie did that come from? He drove through the thirty limit at Over Chute doing close to sixty and was rewarded with the flash of the speed camera. He wondered if the court would accept that there were extenuating circumstances. Turning into Kings Lane, he thought he could see smoke rising above the trees and speeded up. Round the blind bend at a truly stupid speed and ahead was Joyce Talbot's cottage—well ablaze. No, he thought, not so much ablaze as being consumed by fire. Then the fire was gone, leaving just the thatched roof smouldering and no visible signs of damage to the cottage. Getting out of the car, he approached cautiously, shouting *Joyce, Joyce*, loudly. No answer, and no heat from the building, he realised. He knocked on the front door, and it simply crumbled as he hit it. Inside there was nothing. No walls, no ceilings, no furniture and definitely no Joyce— nothing. *Oh God*, he thought, then *no, definitely not God, but God knows what*. There was literally nothing to be done. The smoke from the thatch had stopped and Joyce was beyond any earthly help. Bahati. His mobile was in the car and he ran back to it. The vicarage number was on speed dial.

"The vicarage..."

"Bahati, it's Victor. Get out of the house now, right now. I'm coming—don't ask questions."

"Victor, is it Joyce?"

"Get out now woman and don't..."

"Victor, calm down. Is it Joyce? Just tell me that."

"Yes, the cott..."

"Drive back slowly, Victor. Come to the Vicarage and tell me. Joyce rang and left a message. I was in the bathroom so I couldn't speak to her, but she left a message. Drive carefully, but I think this was just a warning."

"One hell of a warning."

"Tell me about it when you get here, but we are not alone in this fight. We have help."

"Yes, but..."

"Drive slowly. I'll put the kettle on, I'm sure you could do with some tea. And Victor, don't call me 'woman' again."

"Bahati, you must get out of the vicarage now."

"Milk and sugar, Victor. I know you don't usually take sugar, but you've had quite a shock, so perhaps you should."

"How can you sit there so calmly, woman?"

"Please don't call me woman, Victor. Now, sugar, yes or no?"

"No, thank you."

"Better. Tell me, what time did Joyce ring you?"

"Ten past five."

"Sure about that?"

"Absolutely certain."

"And at what time did you reach her cottage?"

"Not sure. Five twenty-five, five-thirty maybe."

"And she was already dead?"

"I assume so. I couldn't say how long, of course."

"It doesn't matter. Her message was timed at five thirty-eight. Would you check the time on my phone, please? I assume the time of the message is taken from the time shown on the phone?"

"I don't really know, but I'm sure the time will be accurate."

"I'm quite sure it would be, but will you just check both the phone time and the time of the message, please."

Victor did so.

"You already know the answer, don't you?"

"I think I do, yes. Joyce called after she passed-over."

"Clearly impossible."

"Clearly not."

"You can't be sure."

"I can't be sure exactly when Joyce passed-over, no. Are you sure that you arrived when you said you did?"

"Yes."

"Then we can be certain that Joyce contacted me after she passed-over then, can't we?"

"It's just not possible."

"We've already had that conversation, Victor."

"What did she say?"

"That Lenny and Melvin were taken before their respective times and were in some sort of limbo."

"Taken before their times? What does that mean?"

"Exactly how it sounds. We all have our allotted spans, and their races were not yet run, if you'll forgive a mixed metaphor."

"I'm not sure I can get my head around this. Forgive me if I sound stupid, but you're saying we all have an allotted time before we die, and both of them should have lived longer than they did? What about free-will, what about fate, what about..."

"None of that matters right now, Victor. What matters is that the ordained order of things is being challenged, and somehow we have a part to play in the restoration of that order."

"Isn't that a bit beyond our pay grades, Bahati?"

"What? Oh, I understand—no, it has been said that God moves in mysterious ways, and believe me, He does. I'm just not sure what it is I, we, are supposed to do."

"Pray? I'm not a great one for prayers. I'm sure you've noticed that."

"Yes. I'm sure that prayer is part of it, but it can't be all, or is it?"

"You tell me, you're the priest."

Twenty-two

"I need to reflect on this before I can give you any sort of answer."

"Sorry for mentioning this, but this afternoon you're going to have to give some sort of answer to quite a number of people, most of whom probably haven't set foot in a church since their christenings."

"I do realise that, Victor. More tea?"

"Aren't I supposed to say that?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Cultural reference. Did you watch much television in Barbados?"

"Not really, no."

"Then I'll explain later. Umm, am I babbling a bit?"

"Quite a lot, as it happens, but it gives an air of normality to a situation which is anything but, so do carry on. In fact, ask me some questions. I may not be able to answer them but it might spark off a train of thought."

"A chap might infer from that that he babbled as a matter of course."

"A chap might well be correct in that inference."

"I see. Why did you say there might be a conflict of interests if Joyce was a Christian Spiritualist?"

"Oh, thank you Victor, you're a genius."

"I knew that, but why do you think so?"

"I want you to do something for me. Go and see Ted Glenister. Ask him if there's been any strange goings on that have come to his notice."

"Apart from the phone box, and Lenny being seen on the bus then vanishing into thin air?"

"Apart from that, yes."

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Perhaps. I have some research to do on the internet. If Constable Glenister hasn't heard about Joyce, tell him."

"I'd better not, Bahati. He'd want a formal statement and want to know why she called me and why she wanted to talk to you."

"Tell him."

"Tell him what, exactly?"

"Tell him we held a séance last night, that Joyce called you early this morning wanting a lift to come and see me in connection with recent events, and that she left me a message, apparently after she had died. Tell him the vicar said he has more important things to worry about than police procedure, and has he heard of any strange goings on?"

"What are you going to be researching?"

"I'll tell you when you get back. I don't want a garbled, second-hand story, so ask Ted if he'll come and see me in an hour. From you, I just want a yes or no, Victor. Some details if he can tell you quickly – no, wait. I need to stop babbling as well. If the answer is yes, then I need brief details now, he can tell me the full story when he comes to see me. Is Over Chute in his area of responsibility?"

"His beat? I don't believe so, no."

"So much the better. It's, what, six twenty-five now. I wonder if he will

have heard about Joyce yet?"

"Maybe not. Nobody else was around and apart from a missing front door, there's no visible damage to the cottage. It's a quiet lane, I think it's quite likely that nobody will have noticed yet."

"If he hasn't heard yet, Victor, don't let him start making official enquiries, or telling somebody about it. I need him free and available for me to pick his brains."

"Right. What did you say you were going to be...."

"Just go, Victor. I'll explain in a little while, when you get back."

Victor left, mystified and a little miffed. Bahati went into her study and switched on the computer. A gift from a generous member of the congregation. Well, not really a member of the congregation, but bless you anyway, Victor, she thought.

Victor returned with Ted Glenister before Bahati had finished her research.

"I'm in the study," she shouted in response to Victor's knock on the front door.

"Mornin' Vicar."

"Good morning, Constable Glenister. I assume you have some news."

"Lots, Vicar. Firstly there has already been a report of Mrs Talbot's death – or to be more accurate, her disappearance and the damage to her cottage. Mr Fearnought's car was seen in the vicinity of the cottage, driving at high speed, and regional HQ contacted me, as the man on the scene, to determine his whereabouts. HQ'll want to interview him later, but for the moment, as there's no body, they're happy with what I told them, namely that after discovering the damage to the cottage he had come straight round to see me. Secondly, our little village seems to have made the headlines in the newspapers and on the national radio. The press are already making a connection between the somewhat mysterious sighting of Lenny Caldwell on the bus some hours after his death and the goings-on last night at the phone box. Finally, the Bishop has said that he has every confidence in the local vicar. That'll be you I reckon, Vicar."

"There's also been comment that Lenny's disappearance shares remarkable similarities with the disappearance of a passenger off a flight from the Channel Isles, one Melvin Dee. I think we may shortly be besieged by reporters, Bahati."

"I wonder. Constable Glenister, did Victor have the chance to ask you about any mysterious goings-on?"

"That he did, Vicar. Not quite sure what you mean by mysterious. Been some activity I'd put down to poaching. Lights seen in fields, that sort of thing, and there was a report of some Travellers having a party in Grangers Wood, over by Tangbourne. I went over to have a look-see, but I didn't see any sign of Travellers. There had been something going on right enough because there was the remains of a fire, but usually Travellers leave a right old mess and there was nothing. No beer cans, no plastic bags or anything like that. Didn't quite know what to make of it, to be honest."

"When you say reports of a party, do you mean somebody heard music, singing perhaps?"

"Chanting was the way it was described to me, Vicar. The person making the complaint thought it was those New Age nuisances having some sort of Druid ceremony, but like I said, they usually leave a mess, and apart from a bit of trampled undergrowth and the remains of a fire, there was nothing."

"Yes, that fits, I'm afraid."

Twenty-three

The Bishop was experiencing some difficulty in drafting a press release. His wife quietly entered his study, carrying a pot of tea and lightly buttered toast, on a tray. She carefully set-down the tray within easy reach and was about to retreat equally quietly, when a thought struck her.

"Jonathan," she began.

"Hmm? What is it, my dear?"

"If Canterbury was so insistent that the woman be appointed, why can't he deal with the Press?"

"One did put that to him, my dear. Apparently, he views this as purely a local matter."

"You mean he doesn't want to speak about occult happenings in deepest Hampshire, and the fact that we may be witnessing a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil?"

"Quite."

"I hope you put that to him, my dear?"

"He's a bit touchy about the occult these days. Ever since the editor of that damn rag remembered a description of one of his predecessors, and began referring to him as the Chief Druid. We all told him it was a mistake to visit Stonehenge, but he would have it. Outreach; the Church must be seen as being inclusive, he said. Hocus-pocus New Age nonsense we said. He went anyway and now one must somehow pick up the pieces, and deal with this as well."

"I don't suppose there is anything in all this nonsense, is there?"

"It's somewhat inconvenient, but it does appear that the Bible might actually be correct on the matter. Rather makes one wonder what else might be true. Very unsettling."

"I'll leave you to it, then. You haven't forgotten the W.I coffee morning, have you?"

"One had, but a room full of women swapping cake recipes might actually come as something of a relief after this."

"Witches? Oh come off it, Vicar. Some middle-aged loonies dancing naked round a bonfire, trying to put a bit of excitement back into their sex lives I could accept, but witches?"

"You paint an interesting picture, Ted, but I'm afraid that I do mean witches."

"And I thought that Black Magic was a box of chocolates. Ah, erm..."

"Victor, you have this infuriating habit—look, I know you mean well but please believe me when I say I'm very comfortable in my own skin. I have been inside it for more years than I care to remember now, and if the colour of my skin is not an issue for me, then please don't turn it into one by going all embarrassed and apologetic whenever you mention the word black. Right?"

"Sorry, Bahati."

"Why do the English **always** apologise for everything—oh never mind! Look, both of you, this is deadly serious. I'm not talking about black witches and white witches, that's just an invention by so-called Wiccans. There have always been those who were skilled in natural healing—the use of certain plants, the power of quiet contemplation, and they represented a challenge to the medieval church. Not as is popularly supposed because they challenged Christian beliefs, but because medieval monks were also interested in the use of certain plants as an aid to healing and wanted a monopoly on it. If you like, those so-called witches were the equivalent of today's Spiritualists; they had a slightly different take on religion, that's all, and they were burned for it. Today, people talk about black witches and white witches. The reality is, there are two types of people who could be classed as black witches—those who dabble in the occult and have no idea what they're involved in but think they do, and those who know exactly what they're involved in. What I believe we are dealing with here is the former, and they have attracted some very dark forces indeed."

"You think they are responsible for what Joyce was talking about?"

"The fore-shortening of some lives and the abduction of souls? No. That's something else entirely, but I think there may be a convergence of interests, if I can put it like that."

"Lost me there, Vicar."

"I think that there may be, let's call it a coven, of black witches—wannabe black witches—who are locally based. Whatever they are up to, or think they are up to, they attracted the attention of somebody—or something—else, who thought they might turn the situation to their advantage. Evil always looks for a way to pervert Mankind."

"So these, this coven, summoned an evil spirit, is that what you're saying, Vicar?"

"Not exactly, Ted. Evil spirits aren't summoned, they merely sense when their presence might be welcomed and put in an appearance."

"Lilith."

"Yes, Victor, Lilith."

"Lilith, as in Adam's first wife, Vicar?"

"You're more knowledgeable than you appear, Ted. Why are you still a constable?"

"My missus asks me the same thing, Vicar. I tried for the sergeants exams a couple of times, but I've never really been one for rules and regulations—procedures and the like. I'm happy being a bobby on the beat, and the powers that be seem to think that I'm best suited for that, anyway."

"So, any ideas who might be involved in the occult in this area, and I don't mean middle-aged naked loonies dancing around a bonfire?"

"I'll need to think about that. We talking animal sacrifice, or worse?"

"Perhaps. Contrary to popular fiction and Hollywood, the forces of evil aren't big on offering material rewards to minor characters with a flaky beliefs in the occult, they're more interested in influential people. Influential in the sense that they can influence the way that people think."

"A couple of names spring to mind, Vicar. What do you want me to do?"

"For the moment, nothing. I'm not sure that they are the real threat at the moment. I'm really very concerned that there has been an open display of

power by the Dark Forces, it's most unusual. The local coven might act as a sort of fifth column, but I don't think that they represent the real threat, although somebody or something might be happy for us to think so."

Twenty-four

"This time you've gone too far."

"Are you delivering a message, or is that your own opinion?"

"My opinion; although, in my opinion, it could turn into a message at any moment."

"Do you think I care about your opinion, or even a message?"

"No. I think as always you pursue your own aims for your own reasons. This time though, your aims might coincide with the long term aims of others – long term aims that I was created to oppose. I advise you to give this up."

"Or?"

"Or I may be forced to act."

"On your own initiative, or at the command of your master?"

"It won't matter which to you, the consequences will be the same."

"Do you really think you can threaten me?"

"Obviously, because I am threatening you. Give it up, now."

"Give it up now or – what?"

"You have crossed a boundary that has been well-understood and remained inviolate since the beginning of time itself. Give it up before you suffer the consequences."

"Well-understood perhaps, but hardly inviolate. Perhaps the time has come to cross boundaries and move to a final resolution."

"Perhaps one who has ordained all, created all and foreseen all, knows it is not. Reflect well on it."

"I have. Boundaries are for crossing. And you know not what is ordained nor foreseen."

"Then you have only yourself to blame for what transpires."

"What are you going to say at the meeting this afternoon, Bahati?"

"That the forces of evil walk amongst us and we must put our faith in God. The practical steps that we can take are prayer, and an examination of our own lives, our own behaviour."

"Hardly stirring stuff, I have to say."

"I'm still not certain what I'm up against, Victor. As I keep saying, this open display of power is most unusual, most unusual."

"And the goings-on in the spirit world?"

"May or may not be connected – I take it you are referring to Lenny and Melvin?"

"And Joyce."

"Perhaps I should make an attempt to contact her."

"You may find that the remaining mediums in the area somewhat unwilling to help you, given what happened to her. What about approaching your Boss, directly?"

"The Bishop?"

"I was thinking of somebody else."

"Ah. Well the way to do that is through prayer, and the answer is not always immediately forthcoming."

"Not always? You mean sometimes it is?"

"In my own experience, never directly, no. I haven't communed with any burning bushes, nor do I expect to."

"God helps those who helps themselves?"

"Something like that, yes."

"So, what should I do?"

"For the moment, I suggest teaming up with Ted. Perhaps you can go through some of his reports."

"In other words, go away and stop bothering me."

"I wouldn't have put it quite like that myself. Look, there are two possible ways of finding out what might be going on. As I said, the first is trying to communicate with somebody who has passed over. For several reasons, that is somewhat impractical and might possibly be risky. The second way would be to find out if there is a coven in the area, and track them down, talk to them."

"Why would they talk to me, or Ted Glenister, for that matter?"

"In all probability, they wouldn't want to, nor would they be impressed by any sort of threat—but they might want to boast about what they had brought about."

"What they had brought about might not necessarily be what they thought they had brought about."

"How very perceptive of you, Victor. You're quite correct of course, but if we could learn what they thought this was all about, what they thought was going to happen next, we'd be better off than we are now. Right now, we have very little idea of what is going on, and absolutely no idea why it is going on."

"All right, I'll go and pester Ted. What are you going to do now, and do you want to touch base before the meeting in the church this afternoon?"

"Touch base? I'm going to attempt to touch base with God by randomly turn the pages of the Bible and see where that leads me."

"God moving in mysterious ways, the moving finger and all that."

"I don't think I'm going to be blessed with any graffiti on the wall, but I have found in the past that leafing through the Bible can often present you with a solution to a problem. If you, if Ted, can identify any members of a coven, come and get me and don't confront them yourself. I have some experience in matters of this kind."

"So you keep saying but..."

"And one day, I might tell you all about it. For the moment, we have more pressing matters to attend to. Go."

"Colour me gone."

Bahati shook her head, and turned to the bible. The page fell open at Psalm 25:

Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me.

That pretty much summed up both her feelings and her immediate predicament, even if it provided no sort of answer—apart from putting her trust in the Lord. All fine and dandy, but she was going to have to come up

with comforting words for the congregation this afternoon, and preferably back them up with some sort of plan.

Closing the Bible then re-opening it revealed Obadiah.

Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom; We have heard a rumour from the Lord, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen. Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle.

Bahati closed both the Bible and her eyes. That seemed clear enough, and the eternal question sprang to mind,

Why me, Lord?

It seemed to her that a voice replied,

Because you're here.

Or was that a line from a movie she'd once seen? No matter, it was now clear to her what she was up against, and what was expected of her.

Twenty-five

Victor and Ted Glenister were getting nowhere fast. Never a great one for paperwork, Ted's files on the reported incidents of what he had assumed to be a spot of poaching were sparse and there was nothing to follow up on the business of the Travellers in the wood. Characteristically, Ted's solution to the impasse was to put the kettle on. Victor fumed and muttered about events running away from them, but Ted was to prove his worth as a local bobby.

"I think the Vicar would agree when I say that the best lead might come from discovering who was messing about in the woods, don't you Mr Fearnought?"

"Most likely, Ted, but we don't appear to be remotely close to finding that out, our we?"

"Oh, not so fast." He paused, infuriatingly, for a long and reflective sip of tea.

"Grangers Wood – miles away from anywhere, you'd think."

"Ted, it is miles away from anywhere."

"Maybe, and maybe not." He sipped again.

"Oh for God's sake man. It either is or isn't – and it is. Bloody miles and anyway, what's that got to do with anything?"

"How did the people get there?"

"By car, presumably."

"A reasonable assumption, but given that I didn't see any tyre tracks, they must have walked in."

"Or flew in on bloody broomsticks."

Glenister gave him a long look, and took a long sip.

"Maybe not so funny, Mr Fearnought, given the current situation."

Victor waved his arms around in frustration. Got up and paced around the room.

"We can't just sit here and drink tea, Ted." He finally said.

"We can't go aimlessly charging around the countryside either – well, we could, but it's not going to get us anywhere, is it?"

"I suppose not. So?"

"Well now, assuming that people didn't walk for miles, they must have left their cars somewhere, mustn't they?"

"Yes – sounds reasonable." Victor turned to look at an Ordnance Survey map pinned to the wall.

"There's two car parks, Mr Fearnought. One at Grangers Bottom, and the other at Upper Chute. Grangers Bottom is up an unmade track, and at Upper Chute, the car park was closed that night. The council had decided to re-tarmac it, it was dug up and there was plant equipment parked there."

"Wouldn't have stopped anybody getting a couple of cars in there though, particularly if they were up to no good."

"True, but it rained that night. No tyre marks in either place."

"Ah, I see."

"Yes. So I asked myself would they have parked their cars in either Lower Chute itself, or maybe in one of the lanes. Nobody in Lower Chute remembers

seeing any strange cars, and I somehow don't think that anybody would go leaving cars parked in any of the surrounding lanes. Anybody seeing a whole lot of cars around the place would have been curious—might have taken the registration numbers or might even have called the Police. I took myself for a little drive around the likely lanes, looked in all the places where a couple of cars might have been parked, the sort of places that courting couples might pull off the road. No tyre marks—and remember it had been raining, and the roads were muddy. Been a lot of tractor activity those last few days, fair bit of field muck on the roads.....”

“Which of course would have turned into mud when it rained, and you most likely would have seen some evidence of cars being parked.”

“Precisely so. There were footprints around the remains of the fire, in Grangers Wood. Difficult to tell exactly, but I'd say there might have been twenty or so folk there. Judging by the print sizes, more women than men. So that would mean we'd be looking at four, maybe five cars. On the other hand, maybe if somebody had a dinner party or some such, then three or four cars parked in a house would go unremarked. People would notice if the cars were parked in the road, and it would look suspicious if guests attending a gathering in a house left their cars all over the place rather than parking near the house.”

“Were there any tracks, in Grangers Wood?”

Ted smiled at him.

“Might make some sort of copper out of you yet, Mr Fearnaught. They petered out, but they led initially towards Lower Chute. No reason to suppose that people would set off on foot for Lower Chute and then walk on the lanes to avoid their footprints being followed, but just in case I had a little drive round a couple of the other villages, looked at the houses where you could easily park five or more cars, and knocked on a couple of doors to see if there had been party.”

“And?”

“There was some sort of social event, here in Lower Wonston. People stayed overnight and left fairly early the next morning.”

“Might be a place to start, then. Which house?”

“Ah, now there the Vicar might have shown herself to be a very prescient woman, or maybe she has information from a better source than I do.”

“What are you going on about, Ted? Whose house was it?”

“The Longstreets.”

“Mary and Richard?”

“Only one family called Longstreet in Lower Wonston, Mr Fearnaught.”

“**Richard** Longstreet, the verger? Can you prove any of this, Ted?”

“Well now, the thing is, Mr Fearnaught, the garage at The Old Bakery is at the back of the house. The gravel drive from the garage leads onto End Lane, which gets muddy every time it rains. I would have expected to see some sign if a mass of people had walked along it, then up a wet gravel drive.”

“And did you?”

“No—but then the drive had been raked-over and of course there were tyre tracks in the lane, as you would expect. If I was a razor-sharp sergeant instead of a plain old village constable, I might have wondered why somebody would take the trouble to rake over a gravel path when it had been raining. Me, I'd have waited for the rain to stop and all the water to run off before doing

that."

"Did you ask Richard about it?"

"Ask him what, Mr Fearnaught—whether he, a fine upstanding pillar of the local community and a verger to boot, and his houseguests had gone for a singsong at midnight, in the rain, around a bonfire up in Grangers Wood?"

"Ah. Yes I see what you mean. Purely circumstantial and all that."

"I think we'd best go and see the Vicar, don't you Mr Fearnaught?"

Twenty-six

The National Grid were the first to realise that something was wrong. An entire section of Hampshire went dead.

"It's not that there is a sudden peak in demand that we can't meet, an entire section has gone dead," a harassed technician explained to her supervisor. "Look at the schematic, power is flowing OK, then—there, see—it just disappears into a sort of black hole."

"Where is that, exactly?" Demanded the supervisor.

"Just to the north of a place called Lower Wonston," was the reply. "See, power flowing normally then—nothing. I've had to re-route, that only caused a temporary outage, most users wouldn't have noticed."

"So power is being relayed as normal, until it gets to this place, whatever it's called, then—nothing?"

"Lower Wonston. That's right. Power flows along the lines, then where the lines go through Lower Wonston it all goes dead. It's like there's a break. I re-routed power from the other direction and when those lines go into Lower Wonston, nothing again."

"Do we have a team on it?"

"They've been despatched. Should be there in about an hour, maybe a bit more depending on traffic."

"Where's the line inspection helicopter?"

"Should be about fifty miles away from this area."

"Right. I think that's about twenty-five minutes flying. Contact it and have them fly direct to Lower Wonston—take a visual look and see if they can tell us what's going on. I'm surprised we haven't had any irate phone calls yet. How long has this been going on?"

"Maybe ten minutes. Unless anybody was running domestic appliances, they might not have noticed."

"Don't be silly. People will be on the Internet, watching daytime TV and might even have mains powered radios. They'll have noticed OK. Is there a sub-station in the village?"

"On the outskirts, but I'm not getting any information from it."

"It's not working?"

"I don't know, I'm simply not getting any readings at all."

"As I said, Vicar, it's purely circumstantial. Wouldn't stand up in a court for more than about thirty seconds."

"But you think you're right, Ted?"

"Pretty certain. What do you want to do now?"

"Surely this can't be right, Bahati?" Asked Victor.

"Oh, unfortunately it could be."

"But why?"

"Maybe it's as simple as a little naughty fun, and then blackmail." Said

Ted Glenister.

"Naughty fun perhaps, but then I suspect something more than blackmail – I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure, and poor Richard may not either. The fact is, we'll have to exclude him from our plans now."

"Poor Richard?"

"Yes, Victor. I don't suppose for one moment he knew what he was getting mixed-up in."

"Difficult not to realise that dancing around a bonfire and summoning evil spirits is a bit of a no-no for a pillar of the community and a verger, Bahati."

"I told you, Victor, evil spirits are not summoned, even if some misguided souls believe they have summoned them. Still, it might prove instructive if we payed him a visit. He might be able to tell us something, either voluntarily or inadvertently. How long have we got?"

"A couple of hours until the meeting."

"Right, I think I'll call him—shall I ask him to come here, I wonder, or would it be better to confront him in his own house?"

"Better to confront him on his home ground, Vicar. Most like he'll bluster to begin with, then if you can then convince him that you know more than you actually do, he'll collapse. If you ask him to come here, he'd most likely do a runner."

"Why would he do that, Ted?"

"Because I have a tingling in my big toe that usually occurs when a case is about to reach its conclusion—and in my experience, wrong uns usually do a runner in blind panic once they think they've been rumbled."

"I'll call him and tell him I want to bounce a couple of ideas off him for the meeting—how does that sound?"

"Quite a likely scenario, Vicar. Do you want me to come along? We could say that I was worried about people panicking, that would be quite natural as well."

"Good idea—hello, the phone's dead. Victor, could you lend me your mobile?"

"Of course—just a moment, there you go, I've selected his number for you."

"Oh—this doesn't seem to be working either. I just press the phone symbol, is that right?"

"Let me have it, Bahati. Nope—strange, no signal. I've used it in here before with no problems, I'll try over by the window."

"Mines not working either, Mr Fearnaught. No signal, same as yours—my radio's dead as well. Have you got a radio, Vicar?"

"Not a walkie-talkie thing, no."

"Didn't mean that, switch on the TV."

"Nothing—not even static."

"I hate to say this, but if you look out of the window it looks like the mother and father of all storms is brewing."

"How strange—look, Bahati, that looks like the, um, pictures of the Northern Lights I've seen."

"Oh yes. Never seen anything like this before; have you Ted?"

"I have not, and if you look closely, Vicar, those Northern Lights seem to

be surrounding the entire village."

"I definitely don't like this, Bahati. I vote we get over to Richard's quick smart and see if he knows what's going on."

"I think Mr Fearnaught is right, Vicar. What's more, I reckon if you wade straight in and give Mr Richard both barrels, so to speak, I'd say you'd get a quick answer."

"Hmm, if indeed he does know what's happening. All right let's go, before everybody in the village really does start panicking."

But of course, it was a bit late for that.

Twenty-seven

The trio left the vicarage and set off for Richard Longstreet's house. People were already congregating in the street. They couldn't ring each other to complain about the power because none of the phones worked. Once outside, everybody had noticed the sky. The trio found their progress being slowed as people wanted to either talk to Bahati or speak to Ted Glenister. Roughly half-way to the verger's house, the storm began. Except it wasn't a storm, not in the usual sense. Lightning danced across the sky, small flashes, sheets of it, forks of it, but there was no sound of thunder, no rain and the sky didn't darken at all – there was only the faint shimmering of what everybody agreed looked exactly like the Northern Lights, most people never having actually seen the Northern Lights, of course. Stopping to advise everybody to remain inside instead of heading directly for the church slowed them, and it took nearly fifteen minutes to get down the high street and turn left into Watery Lane, which led to Richard Longstreet's house. They found him cowering by the front gate, surrounded by his own personal Northern Lights and seemingly unable to open the gate and leave the garden. His wife stood by the open front door, a horrified look on her face, gnawing on her knuckles and silently weeping.

"Richard..."

"It's not my fault, it's not my fault I tell you." He shouted, almost weeping.

"Where the fault lays is not important at the moment Richard. Can you tell me what is happening? Who is causing this?" Asked Bahati.

Richard was now weeping and could not speak. He merely shook his head. He then looked, horror-stricken, above their heads and ran back towards the house. His wife had collapsed in the doorway and he stepped over her. Unable to close the door, he attempted to drag her inside but couldn't, so he just rolled her out of the way and slammed the door. A long tongue of lightning hit the house. It appeared for a moment like the negative of a photo, then the light flared, and the house was a smouldering ruin. The trio stared in disbelief, then became aware of a presence.

Turning as one, they also cowered back, in fear and in awe. The figure was as tall as a tree, and seemed to be clothed in chains of fire, some shimmering black, some orange. The face was that of a lion, with staring, hypnotic eyes. Bahati registered that there were other eyes; staring, hypnotic, unblinking eyes, studded over the upper body.

"Samael."

The head turned slightly and the eyes in the face fixed on them.

"Do not meddle in affairs which do not concern you." The voice was a complete contrast to the body. It was soft, musical, almost caressing, but the words chilled their hearts.

"This concerns me." It took all of Bahati's courage to say it.

"It is a private matter, and now it is over."

A rumble of thunder, the first they had heard, and a fork of lightning which struck the smouldering wreck of the house, gave lie to the words.

The archangel Samael looked at Victor, looked directly at him.

"Women." He said. Then he was gone.
 The lightning increased in intensity.
 "What did he mean by that?" Bahati said.
 Victor exchanged glances with Ted.
 "I wouldn't like to say." He said.
 Bahati faced the wreck of the house and made the sign of the cross.
 "Follow me." She said.
 "To?" Asked Victor.
 "To the church, you fool. Where else."
 Victor and Ted exchanged another set of glances.

"What do you mean, they can't see anything?"
 "That's what they said. There's an area of thick ground fog that surrounds the village, and thick clouds above it—looks like some sort of thunder storm they said, and the pilot has no intention of going anywhere near it."
 "The ground team?"
 "They drove into the fog, rang in and said they were having to stop because it was so thick, and I haven't been able to contact them since that last call."
 "Right. I think we'd better call the Police—something very strange is going on here."
 "I already did. I thought maybe the ground team had had an accident in the fog. They said they'd investigate."
 "Get onto them again. No, I'll get onto them. Any other problems?"
 "Nope. I've re-routed and the only problem area is that village, Lower Wonston. Will you let me know if there's any news of the ground team, my boyfriend's one of them."
 "Of course, I'll make the call now and let you know. Don't worry, I'm sure they're fine."
 The supervisor went to his desk and made the call. He returned to the workstation, looking more than a little worried.
 "They won't tell me anything, well not much, anyway. Apparently it's now a matter of national security and the Army are going in."
 "What?"
 "There is no contact with the village. The Police can't contact the local bobby in the village, and a police car sent to investigate is now out of contact as well."
 "I'll try John's mobile."
 "Waste of time. There are no radio signals getting through the fog, and no contact of any sort with the village."
 "Fog doesn't stop radio signals."
 "No. That's why it's now a matter of national security. Not a word of this, I was told to keep it quiet, or I'd find myself locked-up on a terrorism charge. I'd guess the same threat would apply to you or anybody else. Who else here does know about it?"
 "Just about everybody, now, I'd say."
 "I see."

The Supervisor thought for a moment, then returned to his workstation, and climbed up on to it.

“Can I have your attention please, everybody? All of you, pay attention, please. Thank you. Right, this situation in Lower Wonston. Listen carefully – this is now a matter of national security and nobody, I mean nobody, is to breathe a word about it until I say it’s OK. Anybody who does mention it is likely to be arrested under anti-terrorism legislation. Everybody got that? Good –has anybody mentioned this on twitter or facebook? I know you’re not supposed to do that at work, but I’ll ignore that this once. Anybody said anything? No, good. As soon as I know anything more about this, I’ll tell you but in the meantime don’t forget what I just said –it applies after you leave work as well.”

Twenty-eight

"Quite a crowd."

Bahati, Victor and Ted were approaching the church. Most of those who would normally be in the village at this time of day seemed to be milling around outside. Stay at home mums, the retired and the out of work. Victor thought, *there's probably an equal number hammering on the door of the Mucky Duck, demanding to be let in.*

"Right. Victor, Ted, I want you two to go on ahead, get everybody inside the church and seated."

"And you, Vicar?"

"I need to calm things down and I can best do that by making a calm and dignified entrance. What happens after that is anybody's guess."

"Any idea what you're going to say, Bahati?"

"None whatsoever, Victor."

"Just going to put your faith in the Lord, eh?"

"And where else would you expect me to put it?"

"Point taken. See you inside, good luck and all that."

Victor and Ted left Bahati standing in the lane and advanced towards the crowd. The assembled villagers needed little urging to go into the church. Once inside, they fell silent and found seats in the rows of hard, wooden pews, without hesitation. They sat, silent for the most part, with an air of expectation. The church was cool, and slightly dark. Usually sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows, but today it was dark. Victor went outside, and waved to Bahati. It was time for her to make her entry.

With a last glance at the sky—still that Northern Lights effect with by now almost continuous lightning flashes—she advanced towards the open door of the church. As she entered, seeing the expectant faces all turned towards her, there was a bright flash and a mighty rumble of thunder. The lighting lit-up the interior of the church, and the rows of faces. Bahati was momentarily taken aback, but advanced steadily towards the altar, keeping her eyes firmly forward and not making eye contact with anybody. Level with the foremost row of pews, she bowed to the altar, then made for the lectern, from where she delivered her sermons. She faced the congregation, still uncertain of what she was going to say.

"Let us pray together."

Our father, who art in heaven.....

After a brief hesitation, the congregation joined in. Some, she could see, were struggling to remember the words. The thought came to her that the irrepressible Victor might be tempted to pass the collection plate round. She hoped he wouldn't, then, at the end of the prayer, spread her arms and began to speak.

"Friends,"—she paused, as if for dramatic effect and the crowd lent forwards in their seats, wondering what was coming next. Bahati wondered what was coming next, but then words came out of her mouth.

"Friends. I cannot tell you why all this has happened, is happening. I have no logical explanation for it, but I can say this to you, and I know that I am

right. The Lord is with us here, today. Now, in this church and in our village. We are under his protection. I do not simply believe this, I know it to be a fact. I also know that this is not some sort of divine punishment for our real or imagined transgressions, although it was undoubtedly occasioned by a meddling in the occult. Let that be a lesson to us all. There are forces of evil, just as there are forces of good and today, we are bystanders, onlookers, in the battle between good and evil. In a way we are privileged, yes, privileged – not many witness this struggle, although all are affected by it. It is an affirmation that these forces exist, and it is up to us to choose which path to follow. We are given that choice, and it is not a choice that we can duck or avoid. It does not matter if you are a religious person, in the traditional sense, or whether you rarely come to church, or whether you count yourself as an agnostic, or an atheist. We are all given the choice of which path to follow, and we all have to make that choice. God does not demand that we all be virtuous all of the time, He understands our human failings, our faults and our doubts. He does not demand that we worship him on a regular basis, or even that we believe in Him. He merely demands that we choose our path and then do the best that we are able. In the end, we will all be held accountable for our choices and actions, but we will be held accountable by One who is compassionate beyond human understanding, wise beyond human understanding, and from whom nothing can be concealed. I think it better if we all return to our homes now. Those of you who wish may remain in the church, but it is no safer to be here than to be at home. I am very certain of that. I myself will walk around the village, to offer comfort where it is needed, and any practical help that I may be able to offer. I am very sure that this will be over soon, and although life will never be quite the same again for many of us, life goes on.”

So saying, Bahati stepped out from behind the lectern. She walked towards the door, turned when she was level with the first row of pews, and bowed to the altar. Once again, she walked steadily down the aisle between the two rows of pews, but this time she took care to make eye contact and smile, although she said nothing. Victor and Ted were standing at the door of the church.

“Do not,” Bahati said to Victor, “even think about passing the collection plate round.”

“A very comforting speech, Vicar, but if you’ll forgive me, a little short on practicalities. Unless you want me for anything, I need to check on a few things.”

“No, go ahead. I’m going to walk around the village, I’m not quite sure why but it seems to me I can do more good like that rather than remain in the church. Would you walk with me, Victor?”

Twenty-nine

Bahati and Victor strolled around the village, as if they were merely out for an afternoon walk. As Victor had suspected, the Mucky Duck—real name the Black Swan—was full of people speculating whilst drowning their sorrows. The landlord wasn't sure whether to be pleased at the increase in trade or worried about what had caused it.

Eventually, their perambulations saw them approaching the phone-box library. They stood on the other side of the street and looked at it. It seemed normal and completely innocuous, Apart from the sky above it, which continued to shimmer. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed, but it all seemed unreal somehow, as there was none of the weather that would normally be associated with a thunderstorm. No wind, no rain. Everything was unnaturally still, and Victor remarked that there was no bird song.

"You certainly managed to calm things down back there in the church, Bahati. Tell me, just between the two of us, did you believe any of it?"

"Every word, Victor. I suppose it would alarm you if I said that I didn't really know what I was saying, it seemed to come from outside of me, if that makes any sense."

"None whatsoever. Are you trying to tell me that you just opened your mouth and somebody else said the words, like Joyce at one of her séances?"

"No, not at all. I had no idea what I was going to say, but from somewhere the words just came, and I said them."

"I see. OK, I suppose I can go along with that, but what happens now?"

"I really have no idea, but I feel instinctively that we are all bystanders here. Something else is going on, something that in a way doesn't involve us directly."

"Instinctively? Do you think somehow you're receiving a message from on high?"

"Victor, how can you even joke about this? Look around you, does this look normal to you?"

"Certainly not. And what's worse, nobody can make a phone call out, the televisions and radios don't work and I haven't seen any cars moving. I'm wondering if this is something supernatural or an experiment in immobilising a community."

"Cast your mind back to when we were standing outside poor Richard's house."

"Perhaps somebody has slipped a hallucinogenic drug into the water supply and none of this is actually real, it's a product of a drug-addled mind."

"Whose mind? Yours, mine, Constable Glenister's?"

"No, OK you've got me there. I come back to my original question, now what?"

Bahati shrugged. There were a series of very loud thunder claps and extremely bright lightning flashes. To Victor, the flashes almost seemed like two swords in the sky, darting and colliding with each other, like two fencers having a fight. He said as much.

"The battle between good and evil." Bahati said.

"How very Hollywood. Come on, this can't be real, can it?"

"Logically no, of course not. But then, there is the logic of our world and the logic of another world, one about which we know almost nothing."

Victor laughed.

"What do you find so funny?"

"Peace in our time."

"What are you talking about?"

"A far off country of which we know very little."

The thunder and lightning reached a crescendo, and then there was a sudden silence. Samael seemingly materialised out of thin air in front of them.

"It is over. For now the battle is won, but the war continues."

"How very enigmatic of you. Care to tell us what has been going on?" Victor demanded.

"How very brave you are, little man. How very brave and yet how insignificant."

"Samael, what has happened to the two lost souls?"

"They are lost no more. That matter has been resolved and, for now, things will return to normal in your lives."

"For now? What happens next?"

"The war goes on, until the day is won."

"Supposing the final battle is at night?" Said Victor.

"You and I could have a major falling out, little man, and..."

"No, don't tell me, I wouldn't like you when you are angry." Victor interjected.

Archangel Samael folded his arms.

"I can see that it is not my day to have the final word." Then he faded from sight as rapidly as he had appeared.

Bahati looked somewhat aghast at Victor, as if she expected him to be struck by lightening or the ground open and swallow him up. He smiled and shrugged.

"Hey, who you gonna call?"

"What?"

"Who you gonna call?"

"Are you feeling all right, Victor?"

The shimmering sky returned to normal. Birds cautiously began to sing again.

"Dammit, Bahati, who you gonna call?" He gestured around him.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, Victor."

"Barnikel and Fearnaught, archangel busters."

"I think you need to go and lie down for a while, Victor. This has been very trying day, particularly for one who did not believe in any of this and has now had their beliefs challenged."

The phone box burst into flames. Or to be more precise, the inside of the phone box burst into flames. Inside, in the flames they saw a woman, writhing in agony. An attractive woman, of normal human height and build, with flame-red hair and piercing green eyes, which were fixed on Victor, or so it seemed to him. Or perhaps, he thought as they held eye contact, she was writhing in ecstasy. Then he saw that she wasn't writhing, she was dancing. And looking at him. He shimmied back at her, and was rewarded with a wink. Then both

the flames and the dancer were gone, and everything was as it should be.

“Victor, I have the uneasy feeling that you’re going to regret what you just did.”

The End

I hope you enjoyed the story. Please find the time to leave a review on Amazon. Or leave a comment on my blog, which you can find at

<http://www.peterbernfeld.com>

The next Barnikel and Fearnaught adventure will be coming out shortly.

Jogger in Black

A shell-suited jogger pounds down a country lane, miles from anywhere.

Where has she come from?

Where is she going to?

What is she running from?

