

Crazy

A Collection of Short Stories, Blogs and Sketches

Leo Vine-Knight

The Lottery Win.

"Whoopie!"

"What is it Grandpa?"

"My number's come up."

"Oh.....I'm so sorry.....I thought you were as fit as a flea for you age and glad to be alive."

"No. No, Sally. I mean my lottery numbers have come up. I'm rich, rich, rich!"

"Well, Richard *is* a good stout English name, but I'll still call you grandpa."

Six weeks later, Grandpa had done what most lottery winners do. He'd gone back to work, bought more lottery tickets and lost 90% of his cash to golden-tongued financial leeches. But the few thousand he wisely kept hidden in the allotment shed still enabled him to purchase some new mud flaps for the car, replace his yellowing underpants with silk state-of-the-fart thongs and treat the whole family to a day out in Scarborough.

The sun shone rather shiftily on the agreed day, but grandpa was optimistic as he admired his new mud flaps and waited for the others to join him. The car was always parked outside so it had a cream and black songbird finish, no wing mirrors and a windscreen wallpapered in parking tickets.

"That daft lad's still pretending to be a policeman" murmured Grandpa to himself, as he raked the windows clear.

"They're lovely mud flaps grandpa" said Sally. "Why did you choose orange, though?"

"Why, to match the edges of the wheel arches of course."

"Oh."

"Now. Where have grandma and the others got to?"

"They're coming now."

"Hey! None of your internet porn filth here if you don't mind young lady."

Eventually grandma, Dad, Toby and the dog appeared. Mum was going to relax with a long thin neighbour who shared her interests in Russian literature, phallic symbology and four-poster beds. Even so, it was a bit of a squeeze in the 1961 Fiat 500 and Grandma didn't look too happy in the middle rear seat, her face filling the mirror like a pie in an eggcup, eyes of stone fixed on grandpa's hairy neck.

"Hello playmates!" chortled grandpa.

"Let's burn rubber, grandpa" said Toby

"Hey! None of your internet porn filth here young man."

The eyes of stone turned obsidian.

Blistering sunshine quickly turned the car into an oven as they creaked down the street towards the motorway, poisonous deodorant fumes rapidly giving way to armpit ambiance, while Rufus the dog raced around like a dervish in a wall of death show, bouncing off the dashboard, rear window and armrests at the rate of one revolution every two seconds.

"Can't someone control that dog?" barked grandpa.

"Did you know DOG is GOD in reverse" said Sally.

"And vice versa" said grandma, looking older than her ninety-two years, eyes still fixed on the hairy red neck.

"Nice to see you....." cackled grandpa, looking in the mirror.

Suddenly his false teeth were in the open glove compartment. The car had hit a minefield of sleeping policemen, rumble strips, chicanes and bottomless potholes.

"My Lord! Hold on tight. We've hit some turbulence."

"Didn't you see the signs grandpa?"

"No, sorry love. I need a telescope on one eye and a microscope on the other to see normally these days."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"No not really. That's why the roads are fitted with these Braille systems so we older drivers can tell when things are unsafe by all the bumps and shakes."

"Ooooh. That's clever."

Because Rufus had run about a hundred miles by now and was beginning to tire, his judgement was a little faulty. One leg hit the open window and, with a parting grin, he was swept out of the car and into oblivion.

"Stop the car, grandpa!" shrieked Sally.

"Too late, we're on the motorway now" said Dad.

"I'll miss him" sobbed Sally.

"Well, the following cars haven't" announced Toby, with the forensic interest of a boy at the insect-torturing stage of development.

"All's well that ends well" said grandma.

Thirty minutes after setting off they hit the twenty-five mile traffic jam approaching Scarborough. This was a difficult time for Grandpa because the ten mile an hour rate of progress was a good deal faster than his usual pace on the open road. The sun beat down like a Martian death ray and his usual bonhomie slowly gave way to a mumbling delirium.

"No, no! Not the cooler again..... I'll talk you bastards..... You've broken me at last...."

"The heat's got to him" said Dad.

"He thinks he's back in the war" said Sally.

"No, he had flat feet and a lots of silk stockings for sale in those days. I think he's remembering when he was shop steward in the frozen pea factory."

"He needs some air anyhow."

"Come on grandpa! Park in the lay-by."

"What?....oh.....yes.....er.....just a minute."

From the safety of the lay-by they ate a three course meal, urinated in the undergrowth and listened to grandpa playing his trumpet..

"That little road over there looks clear antway" said grandpa.

"But that's the cycle path, grandpa."

"Rubbish! You've been filling your head with all that internet porn filth, young man."

"Although" he added "Shagtube and those weird bandage sites with whips and tassels can be quite useful for research purposes."

"Research?"

"Oh, yes. I always make sure of my theory, before I apply it" said Grandpa, winking at the mirror.

The obsidian eyes bulged with menace.

"I've got a strange ringing sound in my ears" complained grandpa.

"Its the the twenty cyclists behind, trying to get past" said Toby.

"Bang, crash!"

"Lord Sugar! What was that?"

The purple-faced guy with the mountain bike decided to overtake across the roof."

"I'm going to try second gear in a minute."

"Crash!"

"That was reverse, grandpa."

"Well, it seems to have slowed them down a bit. I hope they're all right in the middle of that mountain of twisted metal. Young fools ought to be more careful."

Stopping at the first set of 32 traffic lights in Scarborough, the family breathed in the familiar scent of road works. This was an 'intelligent' road management system where each set of lights delayed the traffic by five minutes and after four minutes a traffic warden emerged from the bushes writing parking tickets.

"The lights are on green, grandpa! And that man with the black uniform and red armband is coming across."

"Don't be daft, Toby. Everyone knows that cars don't move any quicker on green than they do on red. Only amber gets people weaving."

"It's amber now! And he's almost here!"

"Oh!Well....er....which is it....maybe if I....better check the mirror...er...still plenty of time to scratch my arse.....er.....1932, that was a good year.... "

"Bang!"

"We're off. We're off" grandpa laughed.

"It might be something to do with the irate truck driver behind pushing us down the street at 60 m.p.h" said Dad.

"It's the best way to save petrol" remarked grandpa, tapping the side of his nose.

The obsidian eyes had an eerie glow.

"Well, here we are at last."

"Let's start on the sandwiches."

"Good idea, Sally. We've got chicken, ham, tomato, cheese, Marmite, egg, black pudding, kangaroo and jam. All mixed together, actually."

"What about the cakes and pies?"

"Drinks and nibbles?"

"Wipes and pipes?"

"Flasks and tarts?."

"Litter and titter?"

"It's all here. No need to rush. We've got all day."

"But it's five p.m. Now."

They'd parked on a dingy side street to save the new 50p a microsecond car park charges recently introduced by the town council, but there was still plenty to see. A normal looking bloke with clean jeans, polo shirt and white trainers came ambling down the path with a plastic shopping bag.

"Well, I'll be damned. Can you see that?"

The others just gaped, jaws dropped, mouths open, food spilling and anuses involuntarily rasping. Their heads cranked around 180 degrees in one instinctive, united movement, following the man's progress with vital concentration, their feeding frenzy momentarily suspended by sheer shock.

"Ha ha ha"

"Would you believe it?"

"Huh!"

"A man with a plastic bag in town."

"There was another one near the traffic lights, grandpa."

"Was there? You should have said Sally. We could have all looked."

The street was getting busier now, as people made their way up from the seafront. A large party of overweight, spotty youths in toddlers' clothing meandered around, their tattoos and piercings mingling like Medieval armies while their tongues darting out at flies.

"It's hard to tell the difference between normal people and those that are a bit slow" said Grandpa, diplomatically.

"Yes. I think those are the ones who've come thousands of miles for IVF treatment on the

NHS”

“A grand idea! It's every idiot's human right to have five kids on benefits. No wonder the EC have insisted on it.”

“Hear, here.”

“Hurrah for us.”

“We're nice people, we are.”

“They call it 'I.Q. Challenged syndrome' now grandpa” said Toby.

“Oh. We just used to call them thick bastards when I was at school. But of course we know better these days.”

“In the olden times people used to think intelligence was inherited through genetics.”

“Ha ha. Well, Toby, the I.Q challenged people are having twice as many children as any other group, so it's lucky for us those old ideas are totally wrong.”

“Yes. In three generations the UK would be overrun with morons otherwise.”

“Ha ha ha.”

The obsidian eyes sparked and flashed with venom.

“Hey! Look at that weird guy.”

Oh, yes. I think it's that long lost Japanese soldier. You know, the one that's been occasionally spotted living in the overgrown South Cliff gardens. He's been there since 1941 waiting for orders.”

“He doesn't look too happy.”

“No, his armoured car's got a ticket or two by the look of it.”

“Hey! Look at the size of that.”

“I've told you before young man. No more of your internet porno filth.”

“No grandpa. I mean the the size of that black limo coming down the street.”

“Ooooooh.”

“It's Annie Lummo and Bonehead!” cried Toby.

“Is it true that they were secretly married last week?”

“Yes” said Dad. “They've decided to arrange the Second Coming biologically.”

“And Simon's going to be the baby's manager.” added Sally.

The sun was going down behind the Gothic gables now and the family were getting restless.

“Shall we go for a walk grandpa?”

“No, Sally, there isn't really enough time I'm afraid. But I'm sure we've all enjoyed our day out anyway. We'd better make a start. But before that, I wanna tell you a story.....”

“No, no, no thanks.....”

“It was in 1790 when Monty and Churchill and I were sailing in 'The Beagle'....”

The obsidian eyes lit up. The hands were white and cold.

“Can you hear me mother?” laughed grandpa, looking in the mirror.

* * *

At a quarter to midnight the car finally rattled into life, but stalled as soon as grandpa let the handbrake off

“That's funny. I wonder if we threw too much rubbish out of the windows. The car can't get over it. I'll have to dig the front wheels out”

Levering himself out, grandpa slowly straightened up and then assumed his beloved 1960's trade union posture; thumbs behind his braces, head shaking, each knee lifted up to his chin as he circled the car with clicking tongue and large boots.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!!!”

Unexpectedly, a primordial scream erupted from the car. The engine was gunned, the clutch dropped and.....

“Splat.”

Grandpa lay under the car, only his khaki shorts, varicose veins and ankle suspenders visible, as Dad rushed to his assistance.

“Why did you do it grandma?” sobbed Sally.

“Yes, why?” said Toby with cheerful interest.

“It was.....”

“Yes?”

“It was a mercy killing.”

* * *

Later, at the police station, Toby asked Dad what grandpa's last words were.

“This car needs under-sealing.” said Dad.

The Dirty Weekend

Petra was an interior designer and sometimes she had to go away for a couple of days to visit clients. This time she had to travel to Northumberland, but the firm's van driver, Bill, had kindly offered to take her there, as part of his delivery round.

“Isn't it a bit out of your way Bill?” she enquired.

“Only a hundred miles or so, love, but I enjoy taking people for a ride.”

She was mildly surprised when he turned up in his own car the following morning, dressed in an all white three piece suit, polka dot cravat, gold fob watch and chunky silver rings.

“You look wonderful Bill.”

“Yes.” he said.

The car was quite a sight too, resplendent in wide wheels, England F.C. Flags, 12” diameter exhaust and flashy white paintwork which perfectly matched Bill's teeth.

“Ooooh! What a fantastic car. It must have cost a packet.”

“Well, they were full strength Woodbines” he replied, looking a little put out.

“Is it a Ferrari?”

“Er...of course..... It's a rare Ferrari Reliant actually.”

“Oh. Why has it only got one wheel at the front?”

“Ah! A modern design feature to aid streamlining, Petra. Formula One cars will probably have it next year.”

“You are clever. And so rich.”

“Well, yes, but I'll be even richer when I move into F1 myself. The offer's on the table. Mummy says it's a good idea.”

“I'm surprised you're still living at home Bill.”

“Oh, it's only temporary while the old girl's poorly. I'm a family man at heart.”

“I wish Chris was a family man.....”

“That insufferable, odious, obnoxious fiend!” he interrupted. “Although it's not my place to say” he added mildly, looking like an endearing teddy bear.

“Well..er...he's not quite that bad. Er.....shall we get off now?”

“Indeed” he winked. “Would you like to go all the way?”

“Perhaps we can stop at Whitby for a break?”

For a second, Bill's perfect grinning mouth seemed to include a pair of two inch canines and his widow's peak appeared to move just a little closer to his nose. A classic double-take from Petra instantly dispersed this illusion, however, and the car roared into life.

"Will I have to push it every time?" panted Petra.

"Just a minor technical glitch. These thoroughbred vehicles are a touch temperamental at times. Mummy says it's the sign of a good car."

"Oh. I've never met your mum have I?"

"She very rarely moves from her rocking chair at the Motel. But being a family man. I'm hoping to meet a woman who'll appreciate her taciturn nature and encourage her to eat again....er.....more."

The moors whipped by as Bill topped forty downhill, leaving his pursuers behind in a cloud of dense blue-black smoke. Petra sank down into the luxurious plywood bucket seats and contemplated her prospects. Bill was so long and thin, he was hard to resist and, of course, Jack the Ripper would be far preferable to Chris, so what was holding her back?

It was Bill's left arm, slowly going through the alphabet on her spine.

"Just a chaste and platonic massage, my dear" he leered.

Yes, he was very attractive and obviously trustworthy. Perhaps this was her chance for the big time; seven Oxbridge children, malaria guaranteed foreign holidays, a cosy twenty bedroomed chateau in Times Square, more exotic motors, and the indescribable joy of Bill's perfumed crutch every day of her life. Yes! Yes! She would go for it, given half a chance.

And that gear stick looked so phallic.

After a quick stop for refreshments at Whitby, during which Bill donned oversized. impenetrable sunglasses and sipped red wine, they resumed their journey at a more sedate pace. The radio gave up after a large spring burst through the dashboard, but Bill proved himself an excellent conversationalist and travelling companion, as Petra knew he would.

"The sun's dazzling me Bill."

"Yes, I'm a candidate for the UK space programme. Mummy says I'll be brilliant at it."

"Oh, look at those lovely cows."

"You're right. I might be better off running several farms in Wales. Mummy would love it."

"What do you think of the spending cuts?"

"Well. If I'm elected next year, I'll definitely consider the question.....or mummy will anyway."

"Ummmm." sighed Petra. He was perfect.

And so long and thin.

Petra had booked into a hotel overlooking Lindisfarne and Bill didn't need a second invitation when she invited him up to her room for a coffee. Expecting a degree of token resistance he gently cupped her innocent face and murmured a litany of well-rehearsed endearments.

"Crash!"

Petra hurled the door shut and bounded across the room. Leaping like a professional wrestler, she pinned Bill to the bed and ripped his waistcoat apart with two savage jerks.

"I'm mad for it Bill, wild, lewd and desperate. I want to slobber and slurp all over your quivering body. I want to suck the nipples clean off your chest and devour your....."

"Steady on, old girl!"

"But firstI'm going to give you a massive, throbbing erection."

"I've already got one. Can't you see?"

"What? Oh.....well size isn't everything, Bill. Chris has an absolute tree trunk, but it's you I want. You're so long and thin."

"Chris! That miserable, vile, inhuman bag of shite!" he shrieked "Although it's not really my place to say."

"Take me! Take me!"

"Oh very well. I'll just check with mummy to make sure it's all right."

Sharing a romantic window seat the following morning, they gazed at the waves gently lapping Holy Island.

"Oh, this is such a holy place, Bill."

"Yes, indeed. I've discovered three already." he winked

The Weather Forecast

The family gathered in the lounge to watch the weather forecast. It was a big event these days and

people tended to arrange their commitments around it, often serving Turkish delight, sherry and brandy snaps. The latest HD, digital, wide screen, slimline TV took longer to warm up than their old valve driven Bush, but this didn't prevent a rising tide of euphoria filling the room.

"It's starting love!" cried Dad.

"I'll be there in a minute" replied Mum.

"Hey! There's supposed to be two presenters tonight" said young Ben.

"Two? What for?"

"Well, it's like reading the news and presenting children's telly. The job's too hard for one person and what with all the spare money we've got these days the bosses thought it best."

"Right".

First came the sponsorship ads; Rainy Day Umbrellas, Cool Cat Sunglasses, Percy Pig Pork Pate and One-a-Day Vitamin Bricks. For fifteen minutes Mum carefully made notes for the following day's shopping and then a trumpet fanfare, followed by two drum solos and a thirty-second recorded firework display, heralded the main event.

"Whoopy!" yelled young Betty.

"Quiet in the cheap seats" growled Grandpa, in his corner.

Two searchlights picked out the drawling American impresario.

"Ladies and Gentlemen-n-n-n-n-n-n. We now come to the highlight of the evening, a super-middleweight forecast for the United Kingdom-m-m-m-m-m-m. Introducing in the blue corner, with five correct predictions out of one hundred attempts – William.....(Wet and Windy)..... Wallis-s-s-s-s-s-s.

"Hooray! Hooray!"

"Poor bloke's got a speech impediment" said Grandpa

"Shush Grandpa!"

And in the red corner, challenging for the UK title and already European performing prima donna of the year, having a perfect record of no correct predictions in a professional career spanning fifteen glorious years – Jessy..... (Jolly Jumpers)..... James-s-s-s-s-s-s.

"Hooray! Hooray!"

Then the preliminaries began, the two forecasters twirling and preening for the cameras, their hair extensions shining with good health and their make up applied with Punch and Judy precision. Jessy cleverly attracted the attention of the director to her new engagement ring (why didn't those pesky viewers hurry up with her presents?), while William subtly lifted the tails of his morning suit and wiggled his 'buns' at the audience.

"That bird's got a fat arse" said Grandpa.

"You need your glasses changing" observed Mum.

"Aye. Another Brown Ale would go down very nicely".

It was time for the news presenters to get involved now, and Cheshire Cat #1 soon had everyone laughing hysterically about his last perfect score on 'Strictly Come Prancing', while Cheshire Cat #2 reminisced tearfully about her failure to reach the televised rounds of 'Celebrity Hex Factor'.

Unfortunately, viewing figures were finally going down for these shows, because most of the UK population were now starring in reality TV themselves. There were very few ordinary people left to watch. Everybody was a genius (went to university), a celebrity (had their pubic hair shaved off for charity) or a hero (they were too 'challenged' to do anything but procreate).

"I remember these two newsreaders. It's Mork and Mindy isn't it?"

"Be quiet Grandpa".

"Or is it Dork and Windy?"

"Shut up!"

"Laurel and"

By this time there was so much badinage and merriment in the studio that the director had to step in with buckets of cold water to separate the orgiastic foursome before one of them soiled themselves. The grinning Cheshire cats were joined by a tiny sports presenter who leered madly at

the cameras, whilst trying to draw attention to his latest c.v., cleverly typed in 26pt Ariel Bold.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. You are a wit William.

"Tee hee hee hee hee. But not as funny as you Jessy.

"You were so good on 'Strictly' Micky.

"I'm such a liberal too".

"I love you".

"I love me".

"We love everybody (as long as somebody else is paying for it)"

A tall man in white flannels then came in with some orange juice and bananas on a tray and the forecast took a commercial break.

* * *

By the following morning the commercial break had finished and it was time for the family to climb out of their sleeping bags to find out what the weather had in store. It was well established meteorological practice by this time to wait for the weather to actually occur before predicting it – the cutting edge conclusion of a three million pound computer technology investment programme, begun in 2011.

"For those of you interested in the indoor snooker tournament in Hong Kong we have bravely flown out to give you the most accurate information possible" said Jessy in her new sequinned bikini. This will be followed by further self-sacrificial flights around the world to ensure we meet our broadcasting obligations to you – the paying public. We will pause only to pick up twenty well known but declining TV celebrities who are currently in need of well deserved free holidays...er....I mean who are currently filming travelogues."

"What's the weather going to be like?" said Grandpa, wafting away the overnight fart gas.

"Stop distracting us Grandpa" said young Betty.

After Jessy had thoroughly discussed yesterday's weather in Portugal, South Africa, Mexico and the South of France with appropriate personal anecdotes, the forecast moved on to the popular 'records' section. If a new weather record had not been broken, this would in itself be a record event.

"Upper Nether Thornton in Wessex had the most rainfall over a ten minute period since records began last month" announced William.

"Lower Nether Thornton had more wind from a North by North-West direction since the Middle Ages" trumped Jessy.

"I'm making a record with Simon Cowell" gloated William.

Then came the viewers' photographs, including a wonderful shot of the South Downs in Winter.

"But it's August, William" said Jessy.

"I know, but my house is on this one" replied William

"What's happened to 'Emmerdale Farm'?" said Grandpa

"They've moved it down to London" advised Mum.

"Oh. I was quite enjoying that storyline about the ethnic, dyslexic, gay lovers who'd just had a car crash."

"They're getting married in hospital with matching duvets".

"Touching".

"Plenty of that, naturally".

The dramatic conclusion of the forecast was drawing near and the family shuffled forward onto the edge of their seats. The studio lights dimmed and William moved to centre stage looking a bit like Al Jolson singing 'Mammy'.

"Well, as for the UK forecast, viewers can get an update on my new blog....."

"What!?" bellowed Grandpa.

"Bye for now. We'll see you again for the next show...er....forecast in half an hour".

The presenters joined hands in a recreation of the famous Tiller Girls Palladium routine and the station went on to its default setting.

The Simpsons.

Grandpa went into the kitchen and practised drawing the carving knife across his throat.

It wouldn't be long now.

Falling Through the Windows of Madness

The world came back in gasps and wheezes, shivers of pain and flashes of unwanted light. I seemed to be snared in a cobweb of tubes and cables which hung around the room in fascinating loops and swags. A giant computer screen flickered and died in the distance, as those around me coughed, trembled and began to move.....

Outside the clinic, a group of zombies gazed at the spiralling brown cloud, shooting stars and choking smoke which hung above the jagged teeth of a sacked city.

"Is this a nuclear winter?" I croaked..

"Nah. Just the usual shit British weather" replied a passing clown in Sunday best ensemble.

"It's a lot worse than I remember."

"Oh, you've probably been out of town for a while."

"Yes, that's true....but what are those bright lights over the mountains?"

"Aliens."

"Aliens!"

"Sure. Once they discovered we had nothing left, they simply revealed themselves and started clapping. We're just a dog pit for the tourists now."

"Oh."

* * *

Well, it was obviously a surprise to discover that my suicide hadn't been final after all. Shortly after my demise the government had passed a law banning death, ostensibly because this was a contravention of human rights, but actually a last throw of the dice to retain power. Ergo, all intact bodies had been kept in various cryogenic or vegetative states while they awaited medical advances, rebirth and population of alien planets. Fortunately, my fatal blood loss and oxygen deprivation had somehow been reversed by the interim experimental therapies and I was now free.

Free.

Free to chew my mouldy sandwich in the street corner barter café, a hundred miles away from home, with no travel pass, wondering what had happened during the last fifteen years – and how I could find my wife, my children.....and Kate. I had no idea where to start, but it was clear that a lot of things had finished. There were no gas burners on the streets, for example, because petrol had abruptly run out five years before, while scavenging and looting had replaced benefits and profiteering as the primary means of income. Middle class taxpayers had become an endangered species by 2015, leading to rapid meltdown.

There were a few ageing mobility scooters on the duel carriageway, but the most common mode of transport seemed to be BMX bikes and skateboards, typically ridden by grunting muscle-bound bruisers with brown armbands. These were the so-called 'citizens' who ran a sort of unofficial police force, handing out summary street justice to any unfortunate they came across.

"Are these people paramilitaries?" I asked a man in tattered business suit and water wings.

"They used to be drunk all the time" he agreed, "but booze is so scarce now, they're usually psychopathically sober. These days they tend to get their kicks out of.....well....kicking."

"Ugh" said one of the citizens, approaching the counter with a severed human head, which he exchanged for a burger.

"What possible use will that head be to the café owner" I enquired.

"Recycling" was the response.

"Ha ha ha.....ha.....er....."

The citizen had eaten his burger in one explosive bite and he was now sharpening his knife on a razor strop hanging from his flies. Doing a theatrical double take, I realised that the razor strop was actually a large flaccid penis and that the citizen's red eyes were firmly focused on my neck. I picked up the skirts of my surgical gown and fled.

Nowadays the air was always thick with wood smoke as people used cut down trees and pillaged rafters for fuel, but a few coal burning power stations remained open around the country, generating energy for The Big Man and his machines.....

The Big Man

The identity of The Big Man was a closely guarded secret. He had emerged into the power vacuum created by the 2012 pogrom of criminal politicians, where hundreds of elite embezzlers were stripped of their assets and relocated within specialist training camps or hung from fairy-lit lampposts. As politics and economics had become obsolete, The Big Man had cleverly repositioned his global media empire as the pre-eminent government institution.

His genius was the management of images.

He had short hair and very large trousers.

Having said that, The Big Man was rumoured to be a small man (if you know what I mean) and there were unofficial stories circulating of dissidents fighting brave guerrilla actions around the planet. But my first priority was to get home, so I joined a dozen others raking through the festering remains of Tescos looking for provisions, and filled my haversack.

"Ugh!Ugh!" came the battle cry, as twenty citizens charged towards us, waving razor strops.

"Bloody Hell, they don't have much of a vocabulary" I commented.

"Well, what do you expect?" replied a nearby Mr. Blobby look-a-like, "They only average 5 GCSE's each."

"But I thought all pupils were guaranteed 10 passes in 2011 as a further worthy extension of human rights?"

"Yes, but a highly influential pinko think tank complained that there weren't enough lefts in society to counterbalance all the new rights. This led to a bloodbath of semantic infighting. It was the beginning of the end".

With this, my journey began.

* * *

Two days later and I was trudging along a cracked cart track called the A1, when an ancient hippy hailed me heartily from the hedgerow.

"Do you be going to the big city boss?"

"I do."

"Well, there's trouble looming up North. Why don't you rest here awhile?"

"Thanks, I will."

"Only two tins of beans, or the exchange rate equivalent, per night."

"What? Oh...er.....I suppose so. Here you are then."

With no further conversation we set off towards a mass of colourful tepees which encircled a large wooden stage-like structure in the distance, and then passed through a heavily fortified gateway. A glittering barbed wire fence surrounded the site and this was guarded by a platoon of Frankenstein's monster clones; each supplemented with a slaving hellhound in spiked collar.

"Welcome to our fee festival" the hippy said "We've got somebody with sunglasses and a banjo performing at 2 o'clock. He even plays the banjo sometimes."

"Thank you."

"If you've got another tin of beans, that is."

"Oh. Will rice pudding do?"

"God no! That stuff reminds me of the ruined sperm bank I once rifled through in the summer of '14. There's an ex-TV presenter doing magic tricks with his willy in the beer tent, if that's any use."

"No thanks."

"He can stretch it around his neck and juggle his own balls."

"No thanks."

"He can play a medley of Lois Armstrong tunes with it."

"No thanks."

"He can hit a target 200 yards away."

"No wanks.....er....thanks."

That reminded me. Was good old Sidney still alive? Was the hospital still there? In a few days, I would find out.

"And after the show he's going to give a presentation."

"A presentation! Wow! Count me in" I ejaculated.

That night the ancient hippy gathered people around a huge bonfire and told far-etched stories about his youth. Strange yarns about people who could make things, and others who brought precious materials out of the earth. Fantastic fables about large groups of people called 'nations', who followed dreams. What a romancer he was. As if.

* * *

I was almost there.

The sky had darkened again and below it lay a Romanesque scene of carnage, disgrace and decrepitude. Buildings sagged at strange angles, roads disappeared into bottomless pits, people hobbled about in stained costumes, shrieking and laughing in equal measure. Although curiously reminiscent of the hospital where I once worked, it was obviously an entirely new order of decadence, depravity and vile Saturday evening TV. Could there possibly be order within this chaos?

Just outside the city gates a group of war-painted children straight out of 'Lord of the Flies' were using pointed sticks to prod a poor fellow strung up by his genitals from a climbing frame. Rushing towards this obscene tableau, I proceeded to wave my arms about, remonstrating with the culprits.

"What on earth has this man done to deserve such a gruesome fate?"

"He's the designer of the impossible-to-open supermarket plastic bag, mate."

"Ah! Well why are you being so ridiculously lenient with him?"

"It's his birthday."

Inside the gates, all hell had broken out. Everyone seemed to have a strap on karaoke machine, with the amplifier, speaker and mike apparently powered by rapid leg and arm movements.

Thousands of people were dashing around the streets torturing their favourite songs, bouncing off one another and grinning inanely at the numerous surveillance cameras which tracked their every movement.

"Are they all mad?" I asked the nearest figure.

"Welcome to my turd....er....world" he crooned.

"Are you all mad?" I repeated.

"Welcome to my fart....er...heart."

"S-Sidney! It's you isn't it?"

"My God! Y-y-you look just like that prattling nutcase I used to work with at the hospital."

"I am the prattling nutcase you used to work with at the hospital."

"But that's not possible...."

"I was frozen and stored for future research. When the electricity failed my repaired body started to function again. ...and here I am."

"Fact is certainly stranger than fiction. What can I say.....welcome back Steve."

"Nice to be back Sid..."

"Sssssh. I'm on the run Steve. There was a bit of a misunderstanding after you died. Now I call myself Llewelyn. You can call me Loo."

"Sure, but don't let the world shit on you, Loo. Now, tell me, why is everyone using those karaoke machines?"

"We're the 'aspirants' Steve. The Big Man is kind and good. Every fifteen hours a new group of ministers is elected to replace those who have gone before. He has decreed that every aspirant will hold government office at least once in his or her lifetime. It is our fifteen hours of fame."

"Didn't it used to be fifteen minutes of fame?"

"Yes, so it is said around the log fires, but The Big Man is kind and good. He has been benevolent to his children."

"So, you're trying to attract the attention of The Big Man by continually auditioning?"

"Yes. The Big Man is kind and good. He is constantly searching for talent. He is the guardian of human shites....er....rights."

Just then a large maroon exploded in the sky and everybody stopped singing, freezing in mid-stride, eyes agape. A tumbrel trundled around the corner and ten heavily armed citizens loaded five dribbling aspirants on board.

"The winners of the competition in this section of the city" announced Sid (Loo), in a hushed reverential voice.

"Oh" said I.

"You'd better stay with me tonight" said Loo "The Big Man is kind and good. I have been allocated a large cupboard on the tenth floor of a condemned building."

"Lucky you."

It was only a five-mile walk to Loo's pad and this gave me time to take in some of the changes in my home town. There were apparently no new buildings, but some of the less damaged blocks were now flying garish flags and banners, their doorways flanked by menacing citizens, with sinister black mobility scooters parked outside. Some were evidently receiving power from The Big Man's coal generators and in the larger tenements we could clearly see rows of hideously obese people in white smocks playing computer games. They appeared to be fixed in position by a spaghetti junction of catheters which maintained their day to day biological functions.

"Who are those people Loo?"

"They're the 'boffins' Steve. It is said around the log fires that they were once very intelligent, creative individuals who somehow went completely mad. Because The Big Man is kind and good he has continued to provide them with the entertainment and occupation they were accustomed to before the illness struck them down."

"Bang!"

One of the windows was suddenly covered in a red mass of wiggling maggots.

"Good Lord! What's happened?"

"Oh, sometimes one of the catheters gets blocked up and the corresponding boffin explodes. It's nothing to worry about."

"wnju ijndin mlsyh lmsuu annn ojsi98" said a green nine-foot monster with several waving tentacles, a cluster of bloodshot eyes and a penis resembling a Medieval mace.

"palbx" said Loo.

"One of the visiting aliens I assume? What did he say?"

"The Big Man is kind and good."

On we tramped, across a wasteland of split walls, sagging roofs, cracked paving and weed-infested parks, watching the rats running freely about the streets, big as fat spoilt cats, eating the cockroaches.

"How on earth was all this damage done?"

"A combination of blocked drains, crumbling sewers, flooding, subsidence, a chronic skills shortage – and twenty million people knocking their heads against brick walls in 2013, because they couldn't get through the Hex-Factor auditions."

"So it is said around the log fires?"

"So it is said."

Finally we arrived and Loo immediately retired to his bed; an old chest freezer stuffed with fish and chip papers in the corner. Loo's dog observed me from the rag rug, his tail wagging happily, looking just like the black hound I used to see on my way to work. I stretched across to pat his proud, shapely head.....

"Eeeeeeach!!

He'd bitten me of course.

I found a tiny space amongst the bowls of cold soup and coils of poo, and I slept.

* * *

The following day Loo and I set off early back towards the city centre. He was keen to audition for parliament and I was looking for any clues which might help me locate Carol and the children. There was no point in revisiting my old house, because all the suburbs built after 1950 were now entirely derelict; the three-inch nails and gardening twine which held them all together having failed around 2014. Perhaps I would try the hospitals.

We had reached the inner city area when the chilling sound of drums, shrieks and groans began to echo down the streets. Within minutes a mass of grubby half-naked men and women snaked

around the corner, chained together with heavy manacles, sweating like pigs, wild-eyed and desperate. Alongside, packs of blaspheming citizens kept the prisoners in line with brutal staves and ugly cudgels while, behind, a massive shaven-headed beast cracked his bullwhip above the heads of the whimpering rabble. A trail of bubbling urine and loose stools was left in their wake.

"Good God, who are those poor wretches?"

"They be the 'payers'. Many years ago they were the mindless slaves who did all the work and paid taxes, but by 2015 their numbers had dwindled to about 10% of the population because they had no time left each day to copulate and therefore reproduce. They failed the majority of society, and now they pay."

"The Big Man is kind and good."

"So it said around the log fires."

"How exactly do the payers pay?"

"Some of them gather food from the distant fields and woods, others chop down trees for fuel, and the chosen few become ARSE lickers."

"ARSE lickers?"

"Yes. The chosen few attend members of the Ageing Rockers Special Executive in their private quarters."

"Oh. Are those guys still around?"

"They are our spiritual leaders Steve. They are 'the bishops'. You will have to worship them at noon. It is the Law."

At noon, a loud klaxon droned above the city and members of every caste moved mechanically towards the ruins of the Town Hall. A primitive dais had been constructed with salvaged half-bricks and bleached bones, now encircled by a group of blond-headed brutes with black armbands and catapults. At the sound of an ancient serpent and bongo drums, the doors at the rear of the stage were thrown open, revealing a number of sepulchral forms, dressed from head to foot in white sheets, the eye holes covered in impenetrable sunglasses.

"Behold the ARSE holy ones" boomed the klaxon.

"Praise be" whispered Loo.

Slowly, the white forms floated onto the dais, separating into two files which turned to salute one another; a ritual that involved each member joining their first finger and thumb of their right hands into a circle, and then moving the circle rapidly up and down near the groin. After this solemn ceremony, the leader of group moved to centre stage, where his head swelled to twice its original size and his tongue was seen to dart right and left towards the ears of nearby females. There was something awfully familiar about him and when he turned his back and lifted his sheet there was no room for further doubt.

"Woody (Rock God) Willy!"

"Ssssh" hissed the devoted brethren.

"The Big Man is kind and good, – he thinks, and the rest are wood" chanted Woody in his best bass/falsetto warble.

"The Big Man is kind and good – he thinks, and the rest are wood" replied the spittle-spraying host.

After twenty minutes of these incantations and one public execution (an old, bearded professor condemned for having principles) we were considered spiritually refreshed, and allowed a half-hour lunch break, during which the P.A. system broadcast a series of enlightening news bites.

"The temperature is 17 degrees centigrade. This is the highest temperature since yesterday."

"A new world record has been set for eating bluebottles."

"20,000 people in Yorkshire now have the common cold. Pandemic just around the corner says ecstatic expert."

"Power output increases at National Wind Farm....."

"Where is the wind farm?" I asked Loo.

"Those around the log fires say it located in a big gothic building in London, next to the brown river. The 'pigs' work there."

"Pigs?"

"Yes. It is said that those who once misgoverned the country have now been put to good use. They are strapped to long oak benches designed by Pugin, their heads are inserted in troughs of baked beans, and their fart gas is channelled into machines which generate more power for The Big Man."

"Electricity?"

"No. It is in London city."

"These people are very experienced in the subjects of feeding troughs and wind, I imagine?"

"The word 'imagine' is now banned Steve."

Over the road, the painted children had returned. This time they were pouring a mixture of giant red ants and treacle over the bald pate of a man buried up to his neck in donkey dung.

"What was his crime?" I asked one of the children.

"He was in charge of children's TV in the late 20th century."

"Oh.....so you didn't want 30 year-old presenters in garish clothes laughing endlessly at their own lame jokes?"

"No."

"You didn't want crowds of kids shrieking like banshees in response to a director waving a cue card."

"No."

"You didn't want the volume turned up automatically."

"Not particularly. We just wanted something that didn't insult the intelligence of a chimpanzee."

"Well, I empathise with you. I think it's only right that you express your feelings in unstructured play situations. I'm glad you're owning the problem. Carry on with my blessing – and don't forget to put the cherry on top."

After a hard day scavenging and karaoki singing, we were glad to set off for Loo's flat again. We'd reached the first corner when out of an alleyway popped what appeared to be an anorexic monk, hood pulled well up to disguise his acne and atavism.

"I need coke an' speed an' crack an' skunk an' dope man. Gimme all you've got or I'll cut yer wiv me blade, so help me."

"Crack! Crunch!"

Instantly, the ground opened up and swallowed the miscreant whole.

"Wow! There really is a God after all" said Loo.

"It was certainly the best example of evolution you're ever likely to see."

About a mile up the road I noticed a metal lamppost resting at 45degrees against the remains of a church and when I cocked my ear I could just about make out some music coming from it. It was unusual seeing a lamppost anyway, because most of them had been converted into spears by the larger citizens. It was a hobby they pursued in between producing armies of children they subsequently ignored.

"I think I can hear some music coming from that lamppost, Loo. The metal must be acting like an aerial."

"It will be the bishops practising, Steve."

"No it isn't. I can make out a single voice speaking."

"May Day! May Day! Can anybody here me? It's Professor R— here. I've completed the ascent of Mont Blanc on a pogo stick at last, and now I require rescuing. I need to spread the news and bask in glory. I need to plan my next unnecessary expedition. I need....."

"Oh.....it's a smug overgrown schoolboy who needs rescuing from a mountaintop."

We grabbed a fat rat for tea and walked on, whistling.

I was still no further forward with my search for Carol and the kids, but Loo suggested that I try the main Library and Information Centre. Although this seemed to be an unlikely survivor of the mayhem, Loo reassured me that the place was still operating as a government sponsored drop-in centre for noisy unemployable people, as before.

"There aren't any housing benefits to be claimed any more, of course, but there's a useful needle exchange unit, free nappies for single mothers, plenty of play stations for boffins, soup kitchens and some old porn to browse through. There aren't any books left thankfully – The Big Man donated all of them to the bonfire fund, to make sure we all kept nice and warm."

"How generous."

"Yes The Big Man is kind and good, although there were only three books left in the library anyway by 2014."

"That many?"

"Yes, 'How to Claim Your Full Entitlement of Benefits – An Odyssey', 'My Benefits – An Autobiography' and 'How to Get a Literary Agent if You Aren't Already Famous and Don't Copy Other Writers' (out of print)."

"Anyway, it's a starting point, so I'll get myself over there now. See you later Loo."

"Okay, I think I could be on a roll today. The small hairs covering my scrotal area are bristling with intuitive power."

"Bye."

The library wasn't far away and at first sight little different – the usual scrum of broken, once intellectual alcoholics, professional tax recipients, pram fillers and gesticulating foreign nationals demanding their rights a la mode. It had in fact gone a bit further than I recalled, with the main room now devoid of shelves and serving as a bombed out tea room for itinerants. A hundred or so sprawled about the place slowly stirring their drinks, stinking in harmony, gazing vacantly at the doorway and dreaming of the good old giro days of yore. The nearest one to me was stirring his coffee with his penis.

"Don't you know what that's really for?" I enquired.

"Of course I do you sarcastic twat. I'm just bored that's all."

"You can't think of anything to do in this razed post-Apocalyptic world?"

"Well, I could add two sugars I suppose."

Perhaps the Help Desk could help; I'd always been amazed how completely unflappable the library assistants were, even when faced with a squad of crack-addicted suicide bombers asking for directions to the Town Hall they would carry on smiling through, giving answers, posing no questions. Information so tightly sewn into its ideology, that it had lost all sense.

"Excuse me, I'm trying to trace a missing person. Her name is Carol J——"

"Yes sir, I can assist you. My name is Carol J——"

(stunned silence)

"Surely.....it can't be you Carol....you've changed...."

"Yes, The Big Man is kind and good. He issues fresh undergarments every month to all library staff."

"But....don't you recognise me.... I'm your husband."

` "The word 'husband' is now banned. All females are now married to The Big Man. The rest are wood."

"What happened to the children, Carol?"

"I don't understand sir. I cannot assist you. I cannot assist you. I am biodegradable. I am biodegradable.....fizz.....fizz.....splutter....."

Carol's head lolled to one side and for the first time I noticed something a little strange about her. There was a mechanical appendage sticking out of her left ear, a chrome plated key slowly turning in unison with her revolving eyeballs and wagging tongue.

"Yes, all the assistants are half clockwork now mate" said my friend with the coffee stained penis

"In 2015 psychiatrists turned back to lobotomies as their modus operandi. By that time, everyone was on psychiatric medication as a normal part of their diet, so the experts had to look elsewhere to justify their bow ties."

"I see."

Well, how would I find the kids now.

"The children..." gasped Carol.

"Yes, yes....Carol, what is it?"

"They're....in....the....hospital."

For a moment she held my gaze, and a single tear fell.

* * *

'The hospital' could only mean one place; that black bastion which turned minds into aspic, people into planks and ideas into prison bars. The place where the occult met the chequebook, the blind led the deaf, and the future lay previewed for an absent audience. The psychiatric hospital.

I had unconsciously avoided the hospital since my rebirth, but now was the time to grit my teeth, grasp the nettle, gird my loins, bite the bullet, and.....er.....push Loo well in front. This was no mean feat, in fact, because Loo was convinced it was his day for the dog food factory (where the newly chosen Members of Parliament apparently met with The Big Man).

"Oh, my turd...I mean word....I mean pdf. I suppose I'll have to sacrifice my career as usual, Steve."

"Good man."

And off we went.

The walk was a horrible combination of the familiar and the unworldly, as devastated streets were punctuated with odd, preserved artefacts from my past, curiously preserved in shattered contexts. Pickled organisms in a wrecked laboratory, the duplex flats now lay on end, the Georgian terraces blinked windowless in the sun, the park ran wild, and the corpse of an old lady sat on the white step of her tomb. Rabid boars roamed the avenues, flesh hanging from their jaws, ancient dog shit encrusted the pavements like a new fossil phylum, flattened and crystallised, stamped and ingrained, mixed and fixed. Putrid stench vied with repulsive sights, beggars wiped their arses with tomorrow's newspapers, a Rolls-Royce came around the corner drawn by four sickly horses, a tramp muttered a mantra as he sucked the juice from a dead bird, and the first snow of summer began to fall.

"That Rolls-Royce...." Said Loo.

"Yes."

"The Big Man has one like that."

"Oh."

"Yes! Look, it's pulling into the hospital. Maybe we can get an autograph!"

And then I saw it. Not so much the hospital, as what was left of it. Charred pillars stood around the site like the ribs of a blackened dinosaur, thick grey dust rolled and swirled about the gutted rooms and old ragged sheets fluttered from the ruined turrets. Rusting beds lay twisted on the ground, amidst the scorched grass and shattered glass, while feral beasts scuttled in and out, their eyes glinting with primordial lusts. The hospital was no more than a carcass.

"What on earth has happened here?"

"Ha Ha, that is a good one" said Loo, somewhat mechanically.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Steve, you're the one who burned it down."

(silence).

"Of course I didn't....I...."

"You bloody well did, mate."

So, my pyrotechnic delusions of yesteryear weren't delusions after all. The only delusion was thinking I hadn't done it. I smiled, I laughed, I guffawed, I choked and squealed and howled. I almost crapped myself with hysterical mirth.

I hadn't meant to burn the hospital down. But I had.

And I was glad I had.

Then, as the summer snowstorm blew away, a gargantuan dazzling glass dome appeared through the murk, like a Martian fighting machine, cold, deadly and all-seeing. A cathedral of the future, mortuary of the gods, ice palace in the desolate wastes.

"The n-n-new hospital" said Loo

"B-but it's huge, like a spaceship."

"Well that's about it. The aliens are health service partners now. Them and The Big Man."

"Is it the same old patient club inside?"

"No, the place is full of seriously insane people now – those who think they can explain everything and control the world.

"You mean scientists, philosophers and politicians."

"Yes, such blasphemous terms were once used."

"Psychosurgery?"

"So it is rumoured around the log fires."

"And Carol said my kids were inside that thing."

"We need a plan."

An hour later, shrouded in mist and peering through the twilight, we began crawling towards the colossal dome. Having rolled in mud, pig swill and twigs, we were now virtually invisible amongst the debris and detritus of the eerie surrounding killing fields. Our elbows and knees were raw as we wormed our way through a maze of barbed wire fences, putrid ditches and abandoned bunkers, slowly circling the pulsating monster, looking for a convenient ventilation grill, sleeping guard or unsecured window. With every commando sense tuned to the slightest variation in our environment, we stealthily approached....

"Yikes!"

Surprisingly, we found ourselves swinging in the air, as the giant fists of an angry Troll closed

viciously around our ear lobes and yanked us high into the sky.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

"It's one of the aliens" I cried.

"No, it's a postgraduate" replied Loo. "We should be okay if we use a lot of flattery."

A steel door whooshed upwards and we were inside the hospital, travelling quickly down long metal corridors, past the familiar shouts and groans of patients on either side, and on towards the very heart of the fiendish hive. An archway loomed, and through it we were propelled like a pair of 10-pin bowling balls destined for a spare.

"Ugh! The visitors have arrived your majesty!"

Recovering our senses, we craned our necks around the vast stateroom, where every surface was festooned with rich silks, gold leaf, exotic wood veneers, and tropical fruits. It was Long John Silver's treasure chest magnified a thousand times, and in the centre of it rested a stupendous, bejewelled throne, on which rested.... a....aa grotesquely corpulent form.....

"Richard!"

"Ho ho ho" chortled the abomination, its multiple rings of flab wobbling violently over cage-like artificial limbs, its eyes a pair of video cameras following our every movement, its face a bloated crimson caricature, its cock huge and metallic.

"As always, things are well in hand, Steven" he rasped.

"You've aged a little Richard" I ventured.

"Rubbish! I am the acme of human advancement. A perfect quintessence of biological superiority, technological wizardry and verbal cow clap. I am absolutely impregnable."

"Well, I can't imagine you getting pregnant to be honest."

"Ho ho ho. Always the court jester, Steven. But soon it will be my turn to tell the jokes."

"How's that?"

"Just look over there, old boy."

And in corner of the room I saw my children, apparently hypnotised, occupying two outsize test tubes, flanked by postgraduate trolls with sadistic smiles.

"You hideous lout – release them at once!"

"Ho ho, ho. They'll be released all right. Straight into my lucrative dog food factory. They have served their purpose in luring you here."

"But why?"

"You think I would allow you to remain unpunished for trying to murder me?"

"Murder?"

"On the night of the hospital fire, I was trapped inside. I barely survived the ordeal, but after 1001 gruesome, experimental operations and a ten-year period of recuperation, I was at last ready for revenge. I have been waiting for you, Steven."

(Gulp)

"In fact, we have been waiting," announced a shrill, menacing voice.

"Oh no! Zebulon!"

From behind the massive frontage of Richard's reverberating body, slid a shrunken monkey, with a towering mass of coifed, lacquered hair, bedecked in voguish dead mice, dried spiders and powdered cobwebs.

"B-but I thought everyone escaped from the hospital. I saw both of you outside."

"I returned in order to rescue my collection of rare and irreplaceable porno tapes...erm...erm...I mean a briefcase with some very important, highly confidential healthcare planning documents."

"And thus the damage was done," said Zebulon, climbing up onto Richard's rubbery shoulder and casually pointing a purple ray gun at my spleen. "But now we have lured you here and it is our turn to have some fun."

"Fun! Fun! Fun!" we all chorused (old habits die hard).

"I will begin by vaporising your left testicle," he announced, taking careful aim.

"Zap! Shriek!"

For a moment, everything was a beautifully crafted cinematic still, frozen solid by shock, and etched in memory. Then, a large hole appeared in the top of Zebulon's mile high bushy hair-do and he slowly toppled forward, stone dead. Blood gushed from the wound and a secret was at last revealed. He did not have big hair, he had an extremely big head.

He was an elephant man.

Suddenly, the scene went into fast-forward and the room was full of wrestling bodies, ricocheting

bullets, screams and shouts, whistles and bells, barked orders and muffled explosions. Richard wobbled like a blancmange in an earthquake as dozens of direct hits peppered his folds of protective flab, apparently without effect, and his prosthetic penis pumped out retaliatory bursts of flame and smoke. A somersaulting figure in studded leather dived under the looping arc of fire and stuffed a stick of Semtex where the sun no longer shone.

"Bummmmmffff!"

"Yikes! That smarts!" said Richard, as the red lights on his video cameras went out, his phallus drooped and his head fell forward with an unhealthy 'click'.

"Everything was in hand...." he whispered.

For the first time I noticed a small, gold key in his right ear rotating to a halt, and I realised the truth. Zebulon had been The Big Man, while Richard was merely the stooge, the fall guy; just another surgically enhanced slave dancing to his master's tune. I felt a second's regret when I looked at the lifeless vat of lard which had once been the body of a proud pygmy, but (as this was no time for nostalgia) my memory pressed 'delete', and I turned around.

Kate.

"Kate!"

Somehow I knew it would be her. Looking a little older, perhaps, but still magnificently statuesque in her studs, tattoos, dreadlocks, African initiation scars, and tooth-trophy necklaces. A vision of controlled menace, with armour piercing eyes, toned biceps, boa constrictor thighs and a belt full of blood bespattered butchers' knives, saws and skewers. Just as I remembered her from the 'Steel Balls' heavy metal club, all those years ago.

"Hello stranger, fancy seeing you here" we chorused.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"Oh, think nothing of it. We were due to make a house call anyway."

"And who is 'we'?"

"Why, don't you recognise them Steve?" she laughed.

There was indeed something vaguely familiar about the crack commandos who were now lined up in perfect formation behind Kate.

"Permission to do 200 star jumps while we're waiting, General?" said the Sergeant.

"Carry on Sergeant."

"That surely wasn't....wasn't...."

"You've got it at last Steve. These fine men and women are the residents from the old hospital. You were perfectly right. Once the tea and chocolate biscuits ran out they immediately began showing signs of recovery, and when all state benefits were banned in '13 there was a wholesale revolution of the heart."

"Necessity is the mother of invention?"

"And father."

"Well.....Kate.....what can I say...."

My lips puckered up like those of a bizarre deepwater angler fish and I rushed with open arms towards my saviour, my heroine, my love.....

"Crack!"

Kate cleverly side-stepped my advance and landed a vicious chop to the back of my neck, sending me sprawling ignominiously to the deck.

"Sorry Steve, but that's ancient history. You're still too thin and your ears stick out. 'Bye.'"

And off she went, arm in arm with the Sergeant.

My kids gently led me from the room – they were now a good deal bigger than me, of course.

"I knew I was on a roll today" said Loo.

Record-Breaking is Breaking all Records

On the radio, it was reported that a palaeontologist had discovered a well-preserved carbon footprint in the Himalayas. The creature responsible was said to be a small ape-like mammal with low intelligence and a big head. Professor R—— was incidentally the first man to ascend Everest on a mobility scooter, and he took the opportunity to thank all his family, the search and rescue services of five countries, the Dutch navy and NASA for their invaluable help in his record-breaking

feat. He paid special tribute to his good friend Sherbet Fountain.

"Was he the man who carried you and the mobility scooter on his back for the last mile?" enquired the reporter.

"No, no. That was just a local chap. Sherbet is my personal trainer, body masseur and engine tuner"

"Oh, right."

Professor R—— went on to outline his next 'challenge', which was to include ascending Mont Blanc on a pogo stick, diving off the Victoria Falls in a Belfast sink, and completing a decathlon whilst hog-tied.

"And what is the point of all these challenges?" commented the reporter.

"Point? Point? Good heavens man, we live in Postmodernist times – there's no point to anything".

"No point?"

"All acts of consciousness are completely relative. They have equal ontological validity. There is definitely no one truth" he barked assertively.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

The Manager Makes a Rare Visit

"Hello there!" barked a loud Scottish voice in my left ear.

"Splash" went my biscuit into the oily coffee, as an unwanted head appeared through the office window like an old cover of 'Mad' magazine.

"Oh...er....hello there" I echoed feebly.

Because he was allergic to the front door, this was the nearest our 'Locality Director' ever got to the unit and we lived in dread of one of his rare unannounced visits coinciding with our tea breaks. He invariably appeared at the window when we were admiring the lingerie brochures which fell out of the local paper, or when we were stuffing ourselves with purloined sandwiches from the food trolley, or when we were pulling our flies up. He always reminded me of the old silent film Nosferatu leering through the porthole of a Whitby bound ship at a young maiden preparing for bed; blissfully unaware of her fate until she turned around. He had the ecstatic grin of a sadistic, inbred Mediaeval torturer.

"Is your manager anywhere about laddie?" he roared.

"Aye.....er.....yes.....er....no" I said. "He's in another meeting with the inspectors."

"What are their main impressions?" he boomed.

"Er....well....I'm not really sure, but most people can do Frank Spencer and Prince Charles....."

"No! No! What do they think about your unit?"

"Oh...sorry.....er.....I don't really know..... but Richard said he had things well in hand."

"I'll let you get back to work then laddie!"

"Slam!"

The old sash window fell like a well-greased guillotine on the King's scrawny neck, and I watched with grim satisfaction as the Director's purple lips slowly mouthed the words:

"Oh, God. Please help me".

"Speak up would you?" I said "You seem to have got something stuck in your throat."

"Help.... Help"

"Oh, very well then, but I'll have to ring the porters first – they wouldn't want me to encroach on their job description."

"Help...Help"

"Please don't be impatient. I'll have to complete the incident form first, just in case I forget some of the facts."

"Help."

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What? What?"

"I thought I saw a donkey with an erection coming towards you, but it was just an illusion."

"Oh, please help."

"I'm sure there's a protocol for this in the new Trust Non-Personnel Policy Yellow binder Edition 12. Or perhaps that was the one applicable to chimpanzees who happened to get their heads stuck."

"Help."

"Sorry for being apparently awkward, but I wouldn't want the unit to be exposed to any litigation if I

accidentally dropped the window as I was lifting it without proper training and authority.”

“Help.”

“No, I’m not at all happy with this. We ought to have a planning meeting first and invite half the Administration Block for coffee and sandwiches.”

“Help.”

“It would only take me an hour to set up the flipchart stand. Or perhaps a full Powerpoint presentation would be more professional. I feel strongly that everybody ought to be up to speed on this, before we begin. Yes, a presentation would be the best solution, I think”

“Help. Help. For God’s sake help.”

“Oh, very well. On your head be it” And I lifted the window.

“Crash!”

“Eeeeeaaach!”

“Oops, sorry - I am a butter fingers. Don’t worry, I’ll try again”

Up it went.

“Thank you” he croaked.

“I’d go home sick, if I was you”.

“Yes...Yes...I was going to do that tomorrow anyway” he agreed “sob.....sob.”

“Oh, dear. There’s no need to get so upset. It’s just a bit of shock setting in.”

“No (sniff) it’s not that.”

“What is it then?”

“I’m a bit disappointed about the donkey, that’s all.”

The Ageing Rockers Special Executive

It was without doubt an absolutely stunning view. A full moon had appeared amongst a myriad of twinkling stars as if by magic, and the crowd roared. It was of course the day of the 24-hour televised ARSE concert and Woody (Rock God) Willis had just turned his back on the audience and dropped his kegs, to the smiling approval of his fossilised chums in the vast, smug band.

“Hello, is that the ARSE donation line?”

“Yes, it is. Please state your pledge.”

“I pledge never to watch this self-indulgent garbage ever again.”

“Pardon?”

“And, by the way, if Woody (Rock God) Willis doesn’t retire soon, he’ll be listed under palaeontology, not pop.”

“I’m afraid that’s an ageist comment sir, and I should warn you that this call is being recorded.”

“My objections are not in regard to his age directly, but rather his complete inability to sing in tune any more”.

“I’m afraid that’s a slanderous comment sir and I should warn you that this call is being recorded.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Willis could never sing in tune to start with.”

“Well.....he never could play a musical instrument that’s for sure, apart from that one time he stretched some chewing gum between his teeth and plucked it like a Jew’s harp.”

“I’m afraid that’s a racist remark sir, and I should warn you that this call is being recorded. Now, can I have your credit card number please?”

“Is there anything I can say which isn’t classed as discrimination and prejudice?” I asked.

“Providing you humbly accept the axiomatic de rigueur principle that all human beings are equally intelligent, equally talented, equally valuable, equally attractive and equally deserving – yes..... In fact, you’re allowed to talk endlessly about that.”

(pause)

“Sir?”

(silence)

Lunch Break.

I wandered on past the usual row of people on a pigeon-stained bench watching their lives go by, the greengrocer cracking jokes with his regular customers before turning back grimly to his cold shop, and three pensioners dressed as American children, pushing prams. A germ factory made a beeline towards me, coughing like a bazooka at everyone in his path, while the hive itself buzzed and droned without obvious product. Alongside the parking bays, stood an arms-crossed know-all;

waiting for his daily dose of driving errors and the opportunity to shake his head so sagely (one day he would learn to drive and show them all how it was done properly).

But suddenly he was galvanised into frantic action, hopping from foot to foot, with his arms swinging in unison, like a zoo-mad orang-utan waiting to be fed with cherries. Bessie Bunter in a surgical neck brace had appeared, trying to reverse her rusting Transit van with no mirrors into a tight space between two glittering 30k limos:

"Put her in reverse now" he shouted ".....that's it.....left hand down a bit.....right hand up.....that's good....good.....give a bit of welly now...."

"Just mind you own bloody business" said the heavy petting couple in the Deli doorway "We don't need your effing advice."

I would have liked to put some coins in the plastic R.S.P.C.A. model dog outside the butchers, but I didn't have my gorilla suit with me and there wasn't a T.V. camera in sight. Nor did I particularly want my head shaved, chest waxed, or buttocks submerged in baked beans before parting with my 50p, so I left it all to the experts, and thought about the old Philips screwdriver I used to rake out dog dirt from my hiking boots.

Pear-shaped people with pear-shaped lives jostled each other off the pavements, determined to be first in something, while the 18-30 group capitalised on a half hour break in the November clouds to model their shorts, T-shirts and sun hats, amidst the midday frost. An airship appeared around the corner, arms and legs set at 45 degrees to reduce friction, and from the opposite direction rumbled a stocky harridan bent low over her personal empty supermarket shopping trolley with elbows surgically attached to the handles, like a Dalek without the clothes on. This was the clash of the Titans, the irresistible force meeting the immovable object, and the rematch of King Kong and Godzilla all in one side show. I stood well back as a massive crunch echoed down the street, and a baying crowd gathered. No need for the dancing bear these days.

Roll up. Roll up. Look at each other.

In the post office window 'A mature, large lady willing to body massage clients in their own homes at reasonable rates' now recommended herself before me, while in the reflection of the window a familiar figure sashayed towards a nearby car park. Half turning, I observed my wife pulling herself into the passenger seat of a delivery van, while a nice young man in Rupert Bear trousers chivalrously assisted her; his right hand tightly clenching her left buttock.

"Hee hee hee!" she giggled, as the young man proceeded towards a full per rectum investigation, and then drove off.

Too stunned to think, I filed this interesting information under 'B', and walked towards the unit. The germ factory had met a coughing machine at the 'bus stop and they stood toe-to-toe like bare knuckle fighters in a barrel, spraying murderous salvos of pathogens at each other's numb and uncomprehending faces.

"Forty-thirty" I scored on the way past.

Or did they prefer the quiet of a championship snooker hall, like most habitual coughers?

With the cage doors swinging open, I walked through a zoo at midnight.....

Scarborough Blogs

Character #1

Our next-door neighbour was a very interesting man, and also a member of a dying breed. He had a domed head which towered above a horseshoe of wispy white hair, a time-worn wrinkled face, ill-fitting clothes and big army boots. Handicapped by a hideous curvature of the spine and a pronounced limp, he had a grotesque appearance, yet he was a kindly, tolerant man who would always help anybody out. He was nearing retirement age, but still worked at a college, 50 miles away, where even his colleagues knew him as 'the mad professor'.

The professor had a keen sense of duty, and never missed a day at college, always climbing the hill to the railway station at 6.30 a.m., in good time for his train which departed twenty minutes later. His limp was the product of an old war wound coupled with latter day arthritis, and as the pain gradually worsened, his daily climb became a grim struggle.

One winter morning he found the hill covered in snow and ice. He was weak and very unsteady on his feet, so he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the top of the hill, where an astonished stranger showed pity and helped him to the station. The professor was lathered in sweat, and deeply distressed. For the first time in thirty years, he was going to be late.

It was 6.55a.m. when he finally limped onto platform 3.

Yet, the train was still there.

The guards had delayed its departure, for the man who was more reliable than a clock.

The man who was a proper standard.....

Scarborough Views

Scarborough is said to enjoy one of the best views in Europe, as the bay sweeps around golden sands, fading Victoriana and a colourful harbour, towards the most magnificent, towering headland.

There are many vantage points to the south, including dozens of oak benches dedicated by past visitors, and a variety of shelters with strange oriental embellishments.

But as the years have passed by, we've noticed how quickly people turn away from the wonderful view, and revert to observing each other. They rest their backs on the cast iron railings or perch at right angles on the ends of seats, and watch ordinary human beings walking by. They watch and they watch, and they watch. In fact, one day a middle-aged couple hauled a heavy steel bench completely around, so that they could ignore the annual regatta, and monitor the patrons of a nearby café.

People were unnaturally sociable, Jack said.....

Characters #2

In the 1970's, every cowboy film (or series) seemed to have a resident mad Mexican.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!. You are my special friend gringo" the Mexican would laugh "And tomorrow I shoot your balls off."

We knew exactly how the gringo felt, because one of our friends was a bit like that. He was a good chess player, but whenever he started losing he would embark on a whole series of distracting manoeuvres, including cracking his knuckles, humming inane tunes loudly, and releasing his six pet budgerigars into the room, where they would proceed to chirp, fly and crap. If all else failed, he would somehow contrive to nudge the board onto the floor while he was dunking his ginger biscuits. He had absolutely no shame.

Like some people haven't.

One day Jack left his prized racing bike in his friend's garden shed, and when he returned he found that the bike had been burnt to a crisp (along with the shed itself and half the garden). A rubbish fire had got out of hand his friend announced apologetically, and there was absolutely nothing he could have done about it. It was a year later, when Jack saw his friend coaxing their family cat into the oven, that he could finally see the truth.

Scarborough Drop-in Centre

This place was so popular that a long queue always formed outside the front door before it opened at 9.00 a.m. The patrons were a liquorice all sorts brigade of red-faced, middle-aged men, young mothers, sullen youths with dirty university t-shirts, and those best described as Star Wars extras. The red-faced men generally congregated around the centre of the main room, discussing Iraq,

sport and the Irish question in extremely loud voices, while the less red-faced read newspapers on the periphery. One man always selected the 'Daily Mirror', and then walked out with it through the side door. The youths sat in a purple room, posting CD's and DVD's into the various slots which surrounded them, ready for an hour or two of electronic oblivion, while the young mothers quickly unloaded their offspring into the nearby nursery, and headed for the shops.

Today, a man who looked like an amoebic Charles Manson opened a brief case full of computer games and booked himself onto work station number 7 for five hours, as a harassed member of staff tried to explain to an itinerant, wild-eyed psychopath that the world wasn't perfect, and he might have to take no for an answer.

This place used to be called the public library.....

The Scarborough Scatological Society

Like most elderly people in Scarborough, we love dogs. We always give our six Pekinese-Bull Terrier cross-breds pride of place at the dining table, plumped up cushions on the double bed and lashings of strawberry cheesecake for breakfast. They have lace edged hankies for their slaver, double-strength bog rolls for their bums and bespoke shooting jackets for cold days. We old pair gave up talking to each other in 1969, but the dogs are wonderful surrogate conversationalists. We could talk to them all day.

In fact we do.

Having said this, there are approximately ten million dogs in the UK and nine million of them seem to live in Scarborough. The paths are like Californian wagon trails of pure excrement, many turds still recognisable from their initial deposit during the first world war, while others are baked into the pavement like an antique patina. Expert scatologists travel from the four corners of the world to see our Scarborough stool strata and tough bikers are often seen eating prized specimens to prove 'class' in front of their mates.

Of course, every dog owner these days is 'responsible', looking right and left before leaving stinking piles for posterity. Some even have bags to collect the mess, which they then kindly throw into the hedges for recycling. Yet many are so gossipy when they meet fellow enthusiasts that they don't seem to notice a quiet defecation or two, admiring instead the frenzy of biting, copulating and human genital sniffing which frequently accompanies these social events.

A heavenly tableau indeed.

But like most elderly people in Scarborough, we love dogs. They provide wonderful substitutes for human relationships, allow otherwise powerless people to boss something about, and they make unemployable thugs look so manly in front of their pregnant girlfriends.....

Scarborough Pleasure Parks

Once upon a time, Scarborough could be justifiably proud of its pleasure parks and classic public gardens. Established by farsighted town planners and wealthy local businessmen, these oases of beauty and recreation sprang up all around the borough, becoming havens for visitors and residents alike. But nowadays the places which were once the strolling grounds of Edwardian ladies have become the nocturnal haunts of ghoulish addicts and strange work-phobic tramps, huddled together in Chinese shelters and under bridges like an alien tribe, waiting to inherit the earth. Shelters are dismantled to provide fuel for fires lit on the tarmac paths, rocks are rolled down the tiered gardens to give amusement, and large piles of cider bottles and beer cans are left out for recycling. Some individuals stare into the sea for hours on end like bereft stars of a 1930's melodrama, while others kick the fences to pieces or shout at the tops of their voices (to the person sitting next to them).

Of course, the sea has disappeared, obscured by a hundred years of tree growth, and many of the pathways have been allowed to grow over – the silent victims of many a council cost-cutting exercise. In some places the bushes are so dense that Victorian missionaries occasionally struggle out, blinking in the unaccustomed sunlight. Nearby residents have been known to fell the trees themselves, to reinstate their sea views. They are liable to prosecution if discovered.

The nocturnal ghouls, on the other hand, appear to be welcome.

But Scarborough has always been keen to establish theme parks. On the North Side we have really gone overboard in the last two years, cheerfully bulldozing Art Deco visitor attractions and a much loved children's playground in order to make room for the new Post-Apocalyptic Bomb Site Centre. Here, visitors can marvel at the razed earth and shattered concrete of a previous civilisation, shaking their heads at authentic-looking crater covered wastelands, flattened beer cans and tattooed drug addicts; all standing as an unforgettable monument to human folly.

Most impressively, in the midst of the rubble and spew, looms a strange alien structure, towering like a vast Martian war machine over the foaming sea. This edifice, observers assume, represents the post-modern concepts of stark geometry, quick profit and frequent flooding....

But how could such a tall building be called 'flats' they wonder?

Scarborough in the Snow

We don't usually get much snow here, because of the salt air (as locals put it), but when we do receive a couple of inches, we make the most of it. Some schools are instantly locked and bolted as soon as the weather forecaster appears with an anorak on the previous evening. Head teachers are apparently incapable of distinguishing between 40cm in the Yorkshire Dales and 4cm on the coast. Paths are suddenly impossible to clear and boilers repeatedly break down, while experienced teachers make sure they live twenty miles away down precipitous cart tracks to obviate any possibility of turning up. Another weeks holiday to add to the annual fourteen, it seems.....

This year the big freeze couldn't have been better timed. The authorities have carefully turned Scarborough into a Dickensian Christmas theme park, with libraries closed for a week or more, gritting lorries conspicuous by their absence, pavements like glass, and the bridge which links our town to the Spa boarded off for maintenance. If horse drawn carriages were to drive over sleeping beggars in ragged blankets, it would not seem out of place.

But the Town Hall is large and warm.

A Short Romance

The 'phone rang while I was switching the T.V. off. It was Kate – one of our many ex-nursing assistants.

But a special one.

This was 'kiss me' Kate, a wonderful flaxen-haired, 24-carat beauty with sapphire eyes, serpentine curves, Nordic directness, sugar, spice and all things nice.

"Hi Steve" she said "A few of us are meeting up at the 'Tar and Feathers' on Saturday night. Do you want to come along?"

"Yeah, why not" I replied casually, my mind extrapolating wildly.

“Great. You could bring a bottle back to my place afterwards too, if you like.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks a lot.”

“See you then. 8 o’clock at the Tar and Feathers.”

“Bye Kate.”

I was already in the pub, cutting an elegant but mysterious figure in my Oswald Moseley black shirt, suede winkle-pickers and fashionable wrap-round sunglasses. I exuded an easy confidence as I strolled towards Kate and her perfectly irrelevant friends, whom she had invited merely as a cover for her assignation with me. She was dressed in an ivory-coloured silk blouse, black pencil skirt and sheer tights, with her legs crossed cleverly to exhibit two gorgeous thighs. We chatted amiably about a variety of profound subjects, laughed hilariously at each other’s jokes, and exchanged beautifully synchronised non-verbal cues, before making independent excuses and adjourning to her flat for three hours of blissful sexual congress.

Naturally, our trysts would quickly become a passionate *affaire*, and we would often venture out from our love nest to dine in palatial surroundings, walk silently in Northumbria, or water-ski in the tropics. As an intellectual nymphomaniac, she would be my soul mate for eternity, and it would only remain for me to break the news to a sobbing, heartbroken Carol who would wisely hand over the children to me. They would naturally take this in their stride, live happy successful lives, and be more than pleased to wipe my bottom when the time eventually came.

Dream on.

But sometimes dreams *can* come true, I thought.

* * *

Well, I turned up at the ‘Tar and Feathers’ with my Oswald Moseley black shirt, fashionable wrap-round sunglasses and suede winkle-pickers, but that was where my jolly daydream (previously mentioned) quickly fell apart. Kate just winked at me from the wrestler’s embrace of her Brad Pitt look-alike boyfriend, while the rest of the crew generously made room for me around the corner, amidst the vinegary empties and heaped ashtrays. Even there, I could still observe the wrestler’s hand creeping up Kate’s tights under the distant table, so I glanced away and drank quickly.

I was about two pints behind everybody else and consequently Martian, but I eventually caught up and began to enjoy the general melee. Some of the crowd knew me, which is more than I did, and we exchanged ritual vulgarities until about 10.00 p.m., when I slouched to the bar for my last intended drink. Unfortunately, the Brad Pitt look-a-like was now holding court behind me, and I involuntarily cringed as each of his punch lines reverberated around the room like a dart scorer’s one hundred and eighty and his well-trained audience guffawed and squealed with rapturous delight. A punk rock choir in purgatory would have made a more welcome noise, and I quaffed the frothing beer with grim resignation, ready to leave.

There was an unhealthy collection of vintage whisky bottles running around the top shelf of the bar and I was just about to congratulate the publican on his ingenious wasp trap, when.....

“Hi, Steve.”

It was Kate.

“Hi, Kate. Are you all right?”

“Yes, fine. Sorry we haven’t had a chance to talk, but you were sat so far away I’d have needed a loud hailer.”

“Well, you’ve had one stuck down your throat all night.” (I thought), but instead I said “Yeah, I was a bit late arriving. But there’ll be other times.”

“Oh.... but I thought you were bringing a bottle back to my place?”

“I’d love to, but it’s getting a bit late now and you’ll probably have a house full anyway.”

“No, most of them are going on to a club. Come on Steve, you’re not getting too old for it are you?”

“Well, if you’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Oh, all right then” I laughed; capitulating too readily.

“Do you know Percy?” she said, pointing to Brad Pitt.

“Not in the biblical sense” I replied with false bonhomie (acknowledging him graciously).

“Ha ha...very good.... I’ll see you later then.”

“Okay.”

So, I bought a bottle of Chateau Shite and followed the crocodile back to Kate’s flat, where Brad Pitt (surprisingly) made his spit and polish farewell, and joined the disco-bound majority. Kate and I sat a lot closer together this time, and as I admired the soft whiteness of her recently licked skin, I wondered whether this would be the ideal opportunity to talk about a variety of profound subjects, laugh hilariously at each other’s jokes, and exchange beautifully synchronised non-verbal cues (as previously imagined).

It wasn’t.

In fact, we were two opposites. She had extremely correct, code of practice worshipping views about psychiatric nursing, while I was lost on the roundabout somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan, yet well to the left of Karl Marx. She was tender and kind, while I was jaundiced and insensitive. She was occasionally wry and whimsical, while I was constitutionally sardonic. We were both direct. We argued about anything and everything.

We liked each other.

But the evening began to taper off as the loo filled with noodles, Leonard Cohen filled the speakers, one guest fell down the stairs after another.... and my confidence left with them. There was definitely a spark in the air, but I was never a chat-up merchant and didn’t dare fan the flames, so Kate and I lingered on the doorstep for awkward non-committal moments, while the milkman floated by, and the cats howled. Telepathy failed me just when I needed it, and as Kate moved slightly towards me, I simply launched a clumsy kiss at her left cheek, and hoped for the rest. She smiled brightly, and closed the door with a gentle click.

I went home then; with a future as well as a past.

Or so I thought.

* * *

“That’s five-turdy” the assistant said in an odd accent, difficult to place.

I was at the supermarket check-out, watching a line of six people juggle their credit cards, consider cash-back, redeem multifarious vouchers, wait for the crashed link to restore itself, wrestle with impenetrable plastic bags, and deliver the latest instalment in their riveting life stories to a goon-like operative. All around me, there seemed to be armies of unsmiling hermaphrodites with excruciatingly short haircuts, dark-tinted glasses and voluminous grey trousers, like psychopathic attendants in a 1960’s Hollywood asylum, waiting for the tiniest excuse to wade in with meaty sticks. An avalanche of hatred and venom seemed to be only one misplaced word, or deed, away.

So, when I started mentally unrolling my sleeping bag, ready for a long wait in the cashless world, and somebody tapping me on the shoulder, I jumped like a scalded cat.

But it was only Kate.

Only.

"Hello Steve" she said.

"Hello Kate." I replied. "Day off?"

"Yes"

"You look pleased with yourself."

"Guess what?" she enthused. "I'm starting the training next month."

"Oh..... marvellous.....well done" I said, rather unconvincingly.

It was one of the saddest things in my life that people could actually aspire to the sort of job that I had, as if it was a peak achievement of humankind and the best thing that they themselves could possibly imagine doing. After three years of 'the training' and another three of the dream, they were likely to think differently – but there was no point in saying this to a new convert. Ergo:

"May I congratulate you in traditional carnal fashion?" I winked.

"No thanks Steve" she laughed. "You're too thin and your ears stick out."

"Well, if you're absolutely sure..."

"Oh, go on then" she giggled. "Just for old times sake."

"But there aren't any old times."

"Well let's make some then."

"Really?"

"Really."

Falling Madly in Love

Without noticing the intervening distance shrink, I suddenly felt a warm kiss and a hint of velvet tongue, the taste of strawberry bubble-gum, and thighs subtly interlocking with mine. A line of dominos began to fall, and they fell rapidly.

I couldn't believe it, but almost as though I was on page 74 of an escapist novel, I found myself walking up the stairs to her flat, watching the slight rise and fall of her wonderfully curvaceous cheeks; and feeling a delightful scrotal twitch. There was absolutely nothing in the way of preliminary coffee or verbal chess, just a quick tangle of limbs and some theatrical panting, as we crashed onto the bed with animalistic crudity, and her top came off like a magic trick.

For half an hour or so the world lay forgotten, as delicious thrills neutralised moral guilt, our flesh talked and fingers walked. I could have stayed for a lifetime, but when Kate gripped my behind with claws of steel and started the old hula-hoop routine with her hips, a bolt of lightning seemed to arc between my gonads, and that was that. Hot spasms transported me to the minor gods, perfume wafted and there was a touch of silk.

Gulp.

Mars was surely in conjunction with Venus.

"Christ, what did I do to deserve that?"

"Nothing, I was just in a good mood that's all."

"But what about you're boyfriend?"

"He isn't really my boyfriend Steve. We've had our moments, but it's nothing serious."

"Anyway...."

"Anyway....what?"

"What about your *wife*....that's more to the point."

So I told her about the state of play, both at home and at work. I pulled no punches, made no excuses, just laid it all out like a lacklustre picnic on a cold day. She made no comment, and with the coffee appearing a little later, I settled for the dock and she for the jury.

"The pub's open. How about celebrating?"

"Celebrating my R.M.N. training..... or celebrating us?"

"Both"

The pub was like all pubs that are real pubs, and we lolled in a dark corner, feeling the warmth of a smoky fire, admiring the anachronistic brass, watching a few regulars through the forest of ebony pump handles, and feeling so good it couldn't be bettered. This was the stage of rose-coloured spectacles, where disagreements didn't occur or didn't matter, bodily functions were only pleasant ones, blemishes remained unnoticed, and a shared present blinded us to a divergent future. The mundane seemed new, anything was fine, and the beautiful became divine.

I remembered one young couple who were so in love, they could even make a joke about who left the longest stools in the toilet every morning. I wondered what they were doing now.

A shiny black cockroach walked around the brass footrest, and a fat man slumped to the floor in a pool of piss, while his pals knocked their dominos on the rough-grained table, and we savoured our unspoken pact. Two bags of salted peanuts later, we left, and I followed those perfect shapes up the rickety stairs.

Once again.

"Fancy a joint, Steve?" she said later.

"Oh, I thought you were vegetarian?"

"You're always joking.... Now get rolling."

In everybody's life there is usually one glorious idyll. A few weeks, or months, of pure bliss. A time when heaven is glimpsed.

A ride on the beautiful bubble.

* * *

Kate and I continued to meet after our shifts, on staff nights out and even during official breaks. The retirement home where she worked was just around the corner from the hospital, in a converted red brick suburban villa on the road to the crematorium. Her flat was even closer, and so were we.

All relationships seem to follow a mathematical curve, and ours was peaking, as we rocked and rolled, drank and drank, obliterated the past and future with explorative lust, and stole away from our haven in twilight. I felt guilty all right, but it was repressed like a pain under heroin, and I sped on, blind, eager, intoxicated, and greedy. I was bad, but not yet mad.

One evening, for the first time, we began to think of a plan. Nothing particularly critical or risk-laden – just something which would lead to a temporary escape from our beautiful cage, a touch of normality, and a taste of social life. We had often ventured to favourite pubs in unfashionable parts of town, but never before had we spent more than a few hours together at any one time. Several of the nurses at the unit had been away on courses recently (as always), and I knew it wouldn't look at all suspicious if I 'joined them' for a couple of days. Kate was due for some annual leave, so we agreed to arrange an off-season break in a small seaside town, thirty miles to the West.

The day arrived, and we drove carefully along the Jurassic cliff tops, following the grey ribbon road through undulating hills, frozen hamlets and empty holiday parks, past the flashing gritting lorries, and on towards decisions. We arrived in a squall of sleet, parked on the deserted promenade, and made our way towards the gate of a five-storey terraced house with salt flecked, peeling paint, a wreath on the door, and a beaming middle-aged lady stood at the window.

"Noo then, you've picked a reet queer time for a holiday, and no mistake. Still you'll have plenty of room" she said, as we entered.

"How many guests have you got Mrs. H-----?"

"Er....now you two are here we have abahter.... er.....two" she grinned. "The Christmas trade int what it used to be."

"That suits us fine" Kate said.

"Well, theer's your keys. I'll just let you settle in. Tea's at five."

"Thanks a lot."

We knew what would happen next, but nothing was said, as we lumbered up the four flights of narrow stairs with our luggage, ending up in the gable-ended top room, facing the foaming sea.

"God, it's cold up here" Kate said.

"Yes, I don't suppose you've got a brazier I could warm my hands on, have you?"

"Naughty boy, you know I rarely wear one."

"Titter, titter" came the onomatopoeic response.

(silence)

Then Kate symbolically drew the curtains over the view, and just sat on the edge of the big brass bed with her pink cheeks glowing and her eyes lowered, like a Jane Austen heroine on the unwritten wedding night. I needed no further invitation, and I kissed her feverishly over her clothes, feeling her serpentine shape with lavish sweeps of my hands, as they hunted for easy routes to the smooth heat beneath. There was indeed no brazier, but instead a wonderfully familiar strawberries and cream torso, sprayed with scent, and looking remarkably similar to Batgirl's body armour. She sighed appreciatively as I confirmed her contours, and then rolled easily around onto her hands and knees, encouraging me with whispered phrases, as I pulled down her ragged jeans and gently nudged an entry around her plain black pants. Like co-stars in a Michael Douglas film, we bucked and groaned, with long strokes and short minutes, perfectly united, delirious with pleasure-pain, finally spent and done. Deliciously quick.

Then the door clicked shut behind us.

Frozen in post-coital stupor, we eventually uncoupled, and discovered two clean towels outside the door; the clearest possible evidence of our shame and humiliation.

“Whoops” I said.

We hardly had the courage to go down for tea, but we needn't have worried because Mrs. H was still beaming widely, especially at the bald man with a beer pot across the kitchen (Mr. H as it transpired) who looked desperately tired, but happy enough.

“You younguns have certainly given me an idea or two, since you arrived” she winked.

After tea, it was too dark to explore the deserted shore, so we removed to the nearest bar, drank a succession of warming shorts, and subscribed heavily to the vintage jukebox in its cob-webbed, coal-black corner. Pictures of Edwardian cricket teams hung lopsidedly along the walls and obese young men played darts, while their girlfriends giggled for Britain, and a mongrel farted in its sleep, next to the blazing Yule log. A series of snorts, coughs and honks emanated from the snug, where several shrivelled septuagenarians removed mucous from their sinuses, with well-practised ease.

Notwithstanding these ambient charms, we were unusually contemplative, spoke little, and so returned early to the boarding house, where we watched an old version of ‘Wuthering Heights’ with Mr and Mrs H, before retiring to bed; two spoons in the centre of our big brass nest.

“Good neet lass” I said

“Good neet lad” she answered.

The atmosphere was certainly addictive.

There was a blanket of snow over the town when we pulled the curtains back. Thick, crisp and unblemished, it filled the streets and covered the beach, muffled sounds and hurt the eyes; a fine virginal retort to our sweet depravities, it seemed. But after breakfast we wrapped up warmly and ventured out, saying little again, wandering past the Sunday silent shops and empty school, around the deserted park, and down to the shoreline, where a solitary black dog barked at the sea. There we found a dilapidated shelter just below the promenade and watched the great rollers battering chalk cliffs on either side, a single amusement arcade defying logic with its open shutters, and one small boy standing outside, looking in.

We hugged each other, and Kate felt just as wonderful in her fake fur coat and bobble hat as she did in her exotic white lingerie, acquired especially for our sins.

“Where do we go from here?” she said, at last.

“You’re starting with the difficult ones first” I stupidly quipped.

“I just can’t see you leaving Carol and the kids, Steve.”

“You know it’s difficult Kate, especially about the kids.”

“I know.”

(silence)

“Maybe we’re not right for each other, anyway” she continued “We disagree on so many things.”

“Like what?”

“Well....nearly everything to do with work. You sometimes sound as though you despise the residents at your unit, and that can’t be right.”

“I don’t despise them – I’m too callused to feel any emotion.....”

“So you’re indifferent – that’s just as bad.....”

“I’m emotionally indifferent it’s true, but that doesn’t mean I don’t think about the situation. I probably think about it too much. I think the whole damn place is a sham and a con, and it’s

actually doing harm to the very people you're defending. They need self-respect, not spoon-feeding like babies....."

"But there are compelling reasons why they behave the way they do. Some of them come from abusing families, poor backgrounds, traumatic circumstances....."

"Yes... yes....you sound like a full-on advert for the therapy industry Kate. But for every person who blames their disordered life on past circumstances, there are many others who have experienced the same sorts of problems and lived without disorder. These things aren't really 'causes' at all, they're more like negative influences in a person's life which can be either overcome, or accepted, depending on the person's character. That's the critical variable."

"So, people choose to be mentally disordered?"

"Well, people don't wake up one morning and make a single life-changing decision to be mentally ill – of course not. What I'm saying is that some people end up in care because they drift through a lifetime of expedient decisions. They evade immediate social responsibilities so often, that they finish up either unnecessarily over-dependent, or dangerously anti-social. In their cases, the whole process is driven by personality disorder, not mental illness – just look through a few histories and see what I mean....."

"Oh, that's rubbish, Steve. They do need therapy. Medication, support, care....."

"There isn't any medication for the absence of willpower or conscience, Kate. That's why the existing drugs rarely 'cure' mental health problems where personality disorder is an underlying feature. And that's exactly why psychiatric settings have to give direction and motivation."

"These people need compassion, Steve...."

"No!" I shouted "that's just where you're wrong. They need more structure around them, a positive working environment, and less time to fixate on their own problems. They need to be part of a constructive community, not an open-ended institutional charity which effectively encourages people to be self-obsessed and asocial. Some people need to be parachuted into Africa or Iraq to see what a big problem actually looks like....."

I could see by her white face that I'd gone too far, but it was far too late to correct the mistake.

"You'll be telling me you're in favour of euthanasia for the mentally ill next, Steve."

"Under certain strict conditions, I'm in favour of euthanasia for anybody who's enduring a legalised torture chamber. But that's a red herring – the vast majority of mentally disordered people can certainly lead a positive life, if only we'd stop being 'saints' and genuinely encourage them."

"By 'encourage' them, I suppose you mean force them to work at something."

"The only force necessary to get most people to work in a decent society is to give them a conscience, show them a useful goal, and withhold the soft options."

"We're never going to agree on this Steve. You just come across as being heartless."

(silence).

That was a terminal indictment of a lover.

The argument effectively ended our 'break' (or rather it began it), and in the middle of the afternoon we said goodbye to Mr. And Mrs H, and followed the snowplough home. We were too adult to sulk, but our conversation said less than our previous silences, our body language remained foreign, and our past waved farewell to our future. We kissed chastely, and looked uneasily at each other.

"I suppose that's it, then."

"It's for the best."

Plans were those things we made to remain sane, while we waited for fate.

Back home that night, I fell straight back into the Scalextric slot, going round and round and round the circular arguments, just doing more laps of the track because I'd been away. Falling asleep in my chair, I thought about Kate and what she'd said. I listened to the old slate mantle clock. Tick tock. Tick tock.

* * *

I thought if I played it cool and didn't contact Kate, she might ring to see how I was, send me a conciliatory note, or turn up at the unit door in a tearful, contrite state.

But she didn't.

In fact, there was no communication at all, and I found myself yearning for her company like an abandoned puppy. I began to wonder whether I could somehow engineer a 'coincidental' meeting on neutral ground, and when Sidney mentioned a staff night out at the local heavy metal club (The Steel Balls), this got me thinking. Kate often went there on Saturday nights with her mates, and there was a fair chance we might bump into each other. Then, who knows?

Of course, I would be incredibly nonchalant and barely notice her at first, but my luminous persona and studded biker jacket would soon attract her, like a helpless moth to the flickering flame. I would make her work hard to recover my favour and patronage, while various other women basked in my sun-like charms and wove themselves around my legs like adoring eels. But then, with an impatient snap of my fingers they would be gone, and Kate would gradually reassume her proper place in my munificent affections.

There would be visits to high mountains, Tantric sex, world cruises, emigration, flavoured condoms, brilliant children, separate bathrooms, unwavering rapture, and a storybook ending. We would rerun the past, and change the final cut.

Well, that was the general idea.

When the Saturday night actually arrived, I was as nervous as a kitten, and racked by indecision. Should I turn up as an old sod in the wrong place, or an aging hippy in the wrong time? My wardrobe was painfully limited, and in the end I was forced to settle for an itinerant grunge look, which was appropriately dishevelled; but exactly like Worzel Cummidge's Sunday best. That would be just fine, though, if I could only win Aunt Sally back.

The unit staff met at the 'Iron Rod', which was a tough pub around the corner from 'The Steel Balls', owned by the same outfit. It was a spit and sawdust place with long tables, listing chairs, multifarious beers of unknown strengths, and a 1950's jukebox which glowed expensively in the marijuana-tinted fog. There was no decorative theme as such, but the chanting barbarian hordes who hung from the rafters undoubtedly lent a certain je ne sais quoi to the proceedings and, all in all, we felt quite at home.

Indeed, we got well tanked up - crunching crisps and laughing loudly at each other's clothes and spots, whilst carefully avoiding the menacing looks of some territorial regulars in their elite, twilight corner. But after half an hour or so of leering through the murk for interested members of the opposite sex (and finding none) we abruptly ran out of conversation, upped sticks and lumbered out towards the club.

The 'Steel Balls' was a remarkable institution, converted from the cellars of a huge Victorian tenement building in the centre of town. The bottom storey was famous for being externally wallpapered in fly posters, and musicologists were often seen picking their way through grimy layers of paste and pap to discover some prized artefact of 'Blue Oyster Cult', 'The Scorpions' or 'UFO' et al. The entrance to the club was really more like a trapdoor which dropped unwary patrons down a precipitous chute of well-oiled stairs towards a distant pink neon pay desk and a network of Vietcong tunnels beyond. The pay desk was always occupied by an ancient, shrivelled termagant and two red-necked bouncers, who bulged out of their incongruous dinner jackets like butchers on

a stag night. The three of them had reputedly sat there every weekend since the club was used for ballroom dancing in the 1960's.

So, down the chute we went, arriving at the desk in a heap, where we paid across an exorbitant sum and merrily joined the column of tittering misfits, weekend gothic rock gods, and leather-clad fetishists, as it wormed its way towards the sweaty catacombs of the deep interior. On arrival at the bar, we waited twenty minutes or so for our pints of flat brown ale in fingerprinted glasses and began vibrating sympathetically to the earthquake roar of Pearl Jam - booming like the Apocalypse from towering black speakers dotted generously around the labyrinth. Cigarette smoke rolled lazily around us like a sea fret and the open bog door revealed a dozen bodies draped over sinks and bowls in various stages of purgative agony, while those still on their feet stared vacantly through double-glazed, gobstopper eyes. It was rather like being keel-hauled in a cesspool, but the throbbing mass gradually pushed us towards the demonic, strobe-lit dance floor, and it was there that I spotted Kate.

Kate.

She stood amidst the butting heads, whirling limbs and soaring Gibson air guitars, dressed in a sprayed-on black cat suit, her yellow hair swinging wildly around her waist, while Brad Pitt swivelled his hips like Elvis on a bad burger day, and openly drooled. I watched from the shadows as they returned to their seats, and was greatly relieved to see Brad sit next to another girl, who he proceeded to lick and prod. He then circulated around the group like a fly in a jam factory, and I began to wonder if he was really a harmless eunuch, hired by the girls' parents to amuse and protect their offspring in dubious environs. Possibly his crutch had been burnt off in a sixth-form chemistry accident, and now he was compensating with endless, conspicuous flirtation.

Foreplay instead of foreskin, as it were.

Anyway, I was completely pissed by this time, and when Van Halen came on I couldn't resist strutting my stuff on the dance floor, carving quite a space in the sardine can crowd, and only falling over once, during the guitar solo. I expected Kate to be quite impressed, but when I turned around, there was just an empty chair with Brad Pitt sprawled in it (if you see what I mean). Predictably pissed off, as well as up, I headed for the door like Elizabeth Bennett in a drawing room huff, and didn't look back. Unfortunately, I couldn't actually find the door and when I eventually turned around - there was Kate with two clacking black beer bottles held in one hand.

"Hello stranger, I thought you might like one of these" she yelled.

"Hi Kate - fancy seeing you here."

"Well, I did once tell you it was a regular haunt of mine."

She wasn't fooled for a minute, and clearly knew that I'd come out looking for her, but as usual I covered my embarrassment with a poor joke.

"'Haunt' is the right word for it. I've seen less horror in a slaughter-house."

"You're so hard to please, Steve. That's your big problem."

I saw a pattern beginning to repeat itself, so I changed the course of the conversation rapidly, and we elbowed our way back to the seats. Luckily, we had the perfect situation in which to avoid unpleasant topics, because under the coffin-shaped speakers it was virtually impossible to hear anything but rampant death metal and a high-pitched singing noise in the middle ear. As the evening wore on, we danced together two or three times, and I felt a bit like Father Christmas with one of the grotto's older children, but her primitive gyrations were certainly eye-popping, and I hoped for more. More came, but not quite the way I expected.

She danced with some of the other blokes too (as well as a couple of the women), and I couldn't help feeling insanely jealous, even though I was overtly phlegmatic, and very keen to beam avuncular smiles at all the young studs as they returned to their seats. I was beginning to see for the first time just how popular Kate was, and just how democratic she and her friends were with their affections. But it was me she chose to take her home, and for a while my mind repressed a growing unease, as we retraced our past, up those old rickety stairs, to Kate's joss-stick scented boudoir.

This time there was coffee, and God did I need it, as my middle-aged constitution did battle with a young man's habits, and the room quaked. But we eventually adjourned to the bed, doing everything at half the speed of that very first encounter, leaving time to think, and room to judge. It should have been a dazzling reconciliation, as we went through our full repertoire of moves and countermoves, but somehow the intuitive had become mechanical, and the novel, almost dull. Worse still, there was a sense of reserve and qualification. Nothing obvious, but it was undoubtedly there. Like a knife under the pillow.

We ended in our favourite position, and I felt a tingle run around my body as Kate moaned and twisted, like a dozen times before. But this time, for the first time, there was a post-coital depression, a sort of sickly dissatisfaction and disquiet, an acute awareness of irritating little things that had probably always been there, but were now salient. I'd seen three toothbrushes in the bathroom, a pair of men's socks on top of the laundry basket, lots of masculine faces grinning out of photograph frames, Christ knows how many different alpha-male de-odorant sprays, and some light bruises on Kate's upper arms. Thumb and finger marks, I was sure.

Naturally, being half-cut, spent, temporarily deaf and precariously placed, I just had to push the situation over the edge (even if it meant falling on my face), simply to secure a certainty of one form or another. So I went through my list of forensic observations like Columbo cornering a suspect, secretly hoping for a mistake in the logic, but instead finding Kate laughing like a drain, and setting the alarm clock. She was in the end perfectly candid about the love interests in her life, admitting freely that she was seeing 'two or three' parties, just like me.

Just like me.

"Just like me?"

"Yes, Steve. I don't take any of it that seriously."

"But I thought you and I were serious?"

Well, maybe we were for a short while, but that couldn't last forever.... and it didn't."

"Surely you weren't seeing other people when things were good between us?"

"No, I don't think I was. But like I say, we're just mates now."

"So, you sleep with all your mates?"

"No, just those I fancy"

"Isn't that promiscuity?"

"God, you're so quaint Steve" she laughed "that's what I like about you."

Quaint.

"But some people would say you're simply a slag."

That hurt, and her face dropped.

"Perhaps it's time to say goodnight, then. I wouldn't want you mixing with the wrong people."

"Kate....."

"Time to go, Steve. Your wife will be expecting you."

"But...."

"No buts. I'll see you around."

I'd blown it, big time.

I felt as though my emergency chute had just failed to open, and I was now hurtling towards the ground at a zillion knots, with a shriek stuck in my throat, and a wrist-mounted altimeter whizzing

madly around to zero. Like a crazy watch with a red line.

Tick tock.

* * *

A year later...

I woke up without the alarm, and looked through the bedroom window, seeing before me a panorama of green hills, glittering streams, yellow fields and market gardens. The church and community hall were also in sight, and I admired the way their striking, Scandinavian lines still somehow harmonised with the ancient English landscape. I wasn't the first one up, and our 'family' now numbered ten people; six adults and four children. We shared the domestic chores between us, and today it was the turn of myself and two other residents to make the breakfast.

There were many houses like this in the village, and together we ran the farms, workshops and training centres which made up the community. We lived and worked together, took turns with the jobs and talked things through when problems arose. There were some arguments, but not many, because the cows and fields wouldn't wait for debate, and our lives followed well-established routines rather than 'progressive' projects. We received no money, lived quite basically and followed the seasons rather than our ambitions. We lived only on what we made, grew and earned, and we agreed that the community as a whole was just as important as the individuals within it.

To us, a constructive act was worth a thousand words.

I had now revised my views of psychiatry, the unit's patients, my marriage and me. We had been on collision course from day one, and it was probably pointless to attach blame, theorise causes or crave reforms. The collision was driven by unfathomable chaos, massive seamless shifts in personal, political and organisational affairs, and the rolling storm of existence which ultimately buried the individual alive. For those reasons, I could no longer blame society for being puerile and materialistic, managers for being bureaucratic, patients for being over-dependent, and colleagues for being irresponsible. They in turn could easily blame the conditions and constraints which surrounded them.

So I boiled our eggs and toasted our bread, casting my mind back to the painful days before I came to C-----, and giving thanks that the recycling thoughts were now less frequent and less vivid. I had learned the hard way that life could only be enjoyed by swimming with the tide, and that my foolish attempts to grasp parts of life to myself were always destined to fail; each experience slipping through my fingers like water. Life was naturally dynamic, and at times I had resisted the changes, inviting pressure to grow around me. In a ship riding broadside against the rising swell, I had seen the anchor chain snap, and I'd plunged into the depths.

But helpful hands had pulled me out, and I'd moved away from competition, acquisition, exploitation and anger, towards a safer harbour of community, sharing, equality and acceptance. My new family had supported me, I had listened to my own heart and left my vanities behind. I had regained the human spirit, and become well again.

Carol had been more shocked than she'd admitted when I'd had the breakdown and (strangely enough) good old 'Bill' had been relegated to the past as soon as the size of his debts and the target of his ambitions had fully emerged. He had been "very keen" on providing my wife with a third child, but initially failed to mention the vasectomy he had received five years earlier – an oversight which cast many of my own failings into a more amenable light. She had certainly advanced as far down the road of infidelity as my tortured dreams had indicated, but my own chequered past clearly made this forgivable, and for a while the dropped jigsaw was back on the table. She disapproved of C----- Village, however, and her letters were becoming less frequent.

I leaned over, switched off the radio, and went out to work. It was late summer and hot, the harvest had started, and my lean brown body ached enjoyably as I greeted the others and we walked down the dusty path, towards the farm. A row of rooks watched us from the bough of an ancient oak tree, and wreaths of wild flowers covered the nearby hills, while behind us trudged the oldest resident in the village, with his incongruous blunt scythe.

I carried on walking, adding a merry whistle to my skipping gait, surprising my companions who hadn't heard me whistle before, and who no doubt wished they would never hear it again. We arrived at the East Field and began the day's work, gradually feeling the sun climb and fall on our backs, seeing the gold sheaves multiply, and the land gradually return to earth. Then, late in the evening, we turned for home, the old black sheepdog ran ahead, and (being sensitive sorts) we lifted our heads to the shimmering horizon.

Along the bumpy track, heading for the main road, came a little blue car with vintage go-faster stripes and rusty wheel arches. The window wound down and a girl asked one of my friends if this was the right way out. She turned in my direction, and the harps played.

It was Kate.

It was corny.

But it was very nice.

She had come to see me, but couldn't find anyone who knew the nurse called Steven J----. This was probably because at C----- we only called each other by our preferred names or nicknames, and I was known usually as.....well.....something else. I was of course no longer a nurse.

The others left us, and we looked at each other with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, Steve" she said, moving a little closer.

"No Brad Pitt today?"

"Definitely no Brad Pitt."

The church clock struck six, and we walked towards our new home, in a dream.

Without shadows.

An Apocryphal Story:

The Future of Madness

1964

Tarp was always a bit headstrong and self-centred, but the impact of school left him in no doubt that the ordinary conventions of life were not for him. He regularly played truant, and was often seen hanging around kiddies play equipment in parks, or listening to rock and roll in the public library. Nevertheless, his egalitarian schoolteachers were quite happy to award him his 12-plus examination (even though his scores plumbed new minima), just to make sure he didn't feel a

failure and to give him every possible chance in life. So, at 16 he left the local Grammar with ten (grade 1) 'O' levels, masses of confidence and oceans of self-belief; as well as a noticeable inability to read, write or talk coherently.

While his contemporaries started work, or began A level courses, he opted instead for sitting at home watching 'Rag, Tag and Bobtail' on his mum's telly, or sniffing old balls of plasticine, to see if he could get high. He told the neighbours that he wasn't interested in work, and that he expected to be paid by the government for doing exactly what he wanted for the next fifty years, because that was his basic human right. In the early hours, he was usually seen with a tin of gloss paint and a 4" brush, embellishing the nearby police station with union jacks and pictures of genitalia. The police sometimes came out and had a quiet word, but it was "only natural" for lads to behave that way - what else could young people do? It was 1964 after all.

At the age of 20, he put his football kit on every morning and played with his hoop and stick or marbles in the back alley until lunch was ready, after which he would ride his little red tricycle on the pavements into town, where he would shoplift and swagger. The local university heard about his maverick behaviour and soon identified it as a worthy expression of 'inarticulate social critique'; later offering him an honorary place on their sociology degree course. He refused in fine four-letter fashion, but was less pleased a year later, when his mother died.

Although he didn't bother going to the funeral, he soon noticed her absence by the proliferation of dust and bills in the house, as well as his own unaccountable malnutrition. Passing the big hospital on his roller skates one day, he had a flash

of inspiration, and decided to go in and ask for help. The bearded doctor welcomed him onto the couch with open arms, and then began a detailed, trail-blazing psychiatric assessment. At the end of it, he said:

"So, you say you're "dyslergic" to work and responsibility, Tarp?"

"Fucking right, I do."

"Well, this is what we call a 'neologism' in our business. It means that you are creating new words as part of your delusion about life."

"Whatever you say, Doc, as long as I can stay in here for a bit."

"Yes, you can certainly stay. In fact you can stay indefinitely."

"Fucking brilliant – cheers mate!"

With that, Tarp was shown to the bed he would sleep in for the next twenty-five years, while the psychiatrist massaged a braless bust of Sigmund Freud and carefully placed a piece of pink water-marked paper on his leather topped desk. A man born before his time, and a regular contributor to the 'Lancet', he wrote:

Responsibility phobia: the first case in a modern epidemic?

Yes (he thought) the world is going into reverse. Good old Tarp.

The Asylum

The Bathroom

The main bathroom at the unit was an aircraft hanger of a place made from a pair of large bedrooms knocked together. It was of Romanesque proportions, with the toilet, washbasin and specialist lifting equipment dotted around distant walls, and a huge bath occupying centre stage. 'The hoist' (as we called the lifting equipment) was occasionally wheeled out to swing the larger residents around the room like Peter Pan at the theatre, but this was generally for the benefit of staff members who wanted to demonstrate their skills to students, or for histrionic patients who had decided against walking.

The toilet was the purest form of grotesquery the unit had to offer. The bowl would often contain two different evacuations of faeces, together with a garish soup of fetid yellow urine and phlegm. Sometimes blood from piles and periods would be added to the melange and - if we were really lucky - there might be an entire toilet roll floating gaily on top. However, it was much more likely that the toilet paper wouldn't be used at all, while the toilet handle probably remained the cleanest thing in the entire unit. It was rarely touched.

Interestingly, a combination of warm water and unusual exercise would frequently stimulate a sluggish bowel into belated action, so the bath itself would also double as a toilet. For that reason, a residual brown sludge traditionally occupied the bottom of the tub; mysteriously reforming after every rinsing attempt.

The contents of the U-bend were best left unimagined.

The Smoking Room

For many years the smoking room could be immediately identified by its fire door, which was invariably wedged open with a soup spoon, or flattened against the wall by a convenient armchair. Now, a splendid extractor fan had been installed to provide ventilation and the fire door was generally shut (box ticked). However, because people forgot to turn the fan on, the room was almost always fog-bound on entry and sometimes residents could only be identified by the whites of their eyes.

After fifteen years of replacing burnt carpets, management had decided to tile the area and it now resembled a rather cold changing room at the public swimming baths. The chairs were scorched leatherette, with parallel brown lines running down the arms like notches on an outlaw's cudgel. Cigarette ash covered the floors in drifts of grey snow, the walls were stained a bright nicotine-yellow, and the aluminium ashtrays remained pristine and empty. There was always a collection of seven or eight scummy half-empty cups on the floor - the arcane mysteries of washing-up continuing to baffle most residents.

This was the haunt of hard men, where solitary self-poisoning was occasionally augmented with sanguinary violence, as tab ends were rifled from buckled bins, and pecking orders ferociously restored. One window was nearly always boarded up, adding to the charm.

Just as a single, hard pea could always be found somewhere on the dining room floor, the smoking room would always yield a shard of broken glass to the assiduous cleaner, looking in a corner.

I

Bedroom Number 8

There was a 1960's Olivetti typewriter on the dressing table, with a half finished letter cock-eyed in the carriage and three keys locked together in one metallic embrace - the consequence of a large yellow index finger striking them simultaneously. In the wardrobe lay three large sacks of letters (dating back to 1971) which had never seen a stamp. There was no need for the mail, when a man

was corresponding with his past.

Cassette tapes, toiletries, cups and matches lay confused on every horizontal surface, while the man's clothes modelled Mount Blanc on the floor, and his 'patient's charter' fluttered in the breeze – countersigned by a key worker who emigrated to New Zealand in 1999.

On the bed, lay the man himself, trousers and underpants down to his ankles, waiting for his regular intra-muscular injection, fast asleep.

The Office

A state-of-the-art adjustable chair stood in front of the grubby 1970's beech desk and our emblematic computer with Windows 98, and the charge nurse's interesting personnel files – left on overnight by mistake. Drawers sat in the desk front at 30 degrees to the horizontal, like a Muller-Lier illusion, making the desk look as though it was subsiding into the corner. Perhaps, weighed down by files, and files, and more files.

Bent, vintage filing cabinets lined the walls, while shelves sagged and moaned in the old plaster; first victims of our administrative overkill. Five staff members sat around drinking coffee, tearing strips of flesh of each other's backs, winning arguments, winning races, winning smiles.

The real office furniture.

Break Time in the Madhouse

Those on night duty were entitled to an hour's break during the ten hour shift, although many preferred to reverse this ratio, cramming the entire workload into two thirty minute sprints (one at the beginning, another at the end) and 'resting' for the interim. Some would sleep like the dead for long periods, apparently immune to the surrounding fumes and prehistoric noises, while others would remain in a half-conscious stupor; suspended somewhere between slumber and a hypnotic trance.

The first group could be creative to the point of genius in their construction of suitable sleeping quarters. In scenes reminiscent of the 'Krypton Factor', they would expertly transform jumbles of chairs, cushions, sheets and coffee tables into magnificent double beds, rarely seen outside the confines of a lush BBC costume drama. Although wary neophytes might content themselves with rolling out state-of-the-art sleeping bags, or adopting a variety of unlikely yogic positions on the small sofas, the most decadent staff of all would simply commandeer spare bedrooms upstairs, set their alarm clocks, and disappear. If both staff members fell into this 'sleep' category, it would seem like a very short shift indeed, but on the down side they might wake up at 0600 hours to discover the unit had been burgled, important telephone calls had been unheard, or the manager on call had been unable to check the unit (oops).

But they never missed the pizza man when he turned up with their supper.

Those who chose instead to stay 'awake' in a curious state of suspended animation, would normally sink into a capacious easy chair, put their feet up on a footstool, and cover themselves in three or four hairy blankets like a chrysalis in the corner of a door frame. They would then remain immobile for the entire night in front of the flickering, inaudible TV set, just occasionally showing signs of life by moving a scaly, telescopic arm towards the cornucopia of food and drink conveniently parked on an adjacent coffee table. Their senses were so finely tuned to signs of unrest upstairs, that they would remain completely unaware of other staff members if they walked into the room.

Almost as if they were asleep too.

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party

When Llewelyn went upstairs they were already adding the morning harvest to a Waldorf salad. There were quite a few dubious specimens with blue tinges and strange shapes, but the majority

had that familiar phallic profile, so he ate his and waited for take off.

After twenty minutes or so, the tingling started and everything seemed funny. His mates began to smell a lot and a twist of fear ran around the group, as they reassured themselves with grins and sniggers. Somebody began picking their nose and the disturbed nostril swelled like a crater, while others swung their cigarettes around to leave bright orange arcs hanging in the air. There was some broken wind from the salad, and it fell on them like giant fly spit.

They were painfully inarticulate, then silent, experiencing periodic waves of euphoria and nausea, as the outside world shrank to a vague penumbra, and the room drifted like a raft in the beyond. Pink Floyd played, and they rode the rhythms of breath and heartbeat, while the wallpaper illusions shimmered and changed. Distinctions between object and subject began to blur, and they felt the thrill of disembodiment, loosing the feeling in arms and legs, swimming in the air, entering the music, leaving egos behind. Fragmenting.

But all too soon their minds sprung back into place, alcohol and joints were passed around, conversation returned, and they stepped back from the edge; personalities restored to what they weren't.

They looked through the window and saw the zebra crossing, rising to the centre of the road in a perfect half circle; like a hill.

Raindrops on the Window

The rain comes down in gusts and sheets, raging against the steel-framed windows like an omen. The house creaks and groans in its suburban nest, while I watch the wood lice scuttle. I'm locked in the shed around the back, but I can still hear my mother flinging the young seedlings I've been growing into the bin.

"You're bone bloody idle, that's your problem. Wasting your time with this rubbish!"

Yes, I'm idle (I don't do enough gardening), my underpants are disgusting, and I'm disloyal. The man who collects our monthly insurance premium agrees. He will be given the full, unexpurgated account again – his fixed professional grin slowly cracking around the edges as he sidles towards the bolted door.

"He's a little bastard, like his dad" she'll explain.

But I'm looking forward to having a father at last and sometimes I sit on the staircase late at night listening closely to the murmured conversations, and lengthy mysterious silences.....

August

"They're all after one thing..... I don't trust any of them.....never again!"

Oh, that's a shame. The shining knight isn't going to appear after all. I'd better content myself with looking at old car magazines, and working out how long it will take me to save up for an 'E' type Jag if I get a part-time job after school. I sense that my irrational cravings are beginning to reach out of the house like the hand of a drowning man. I reread 'The War of the Worlds', regularly massage my groin and sneak peaks at the Test Cricket while my mother goes to the shops. I play the sea front slot machines, oil my bike, wait for the rare call of a friend.

A count the coils of crusty dog poo down the street. Some are new, some are old. Nothing changes. The summer holidays are here. Ali and Kennedy are making history. The gardens are full of marigolds and butterflies, tended by old people who never seem to get older. The tar on the road begins to melt.

My mother has taken to her bed, complaining of vague 'female' problems and a lifetime of drudgery.

"You've worn me out" she whispers.

"But, how?"

"Don't be cheeky."

I urged her to visit the doctor, but she sent me instead to the chemist for a strange parcel which was handed over with exchanged looks, and no comment.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's rude, don't ask" she replies.

Now, every evening I walk home from school wondering if she's got up during the day, and whether

the windows will be dark as I turn the corner with a queasy feeling rising in my gut. But more and more she remains in bed and the breakfast pots stare at me through the half-light, as I draw the curtains and walk upstairs past the picture of the weeping urchin, and into the shadows of my mother's bedroom. A sickly sweet smell meets me and, like travelling on a macabre roulette wheel, I wait to see if rage, silence or tears will greet my inadequate hello. Then it's down to the kitchen to select some tins for our tea, put on the telly and hope that 'Blue Peter' will be on. Although I'm too old to watch it really, I still like its cheerful faces, cardboard castles and licking pups. There's comfort in the familiar. Safety in the bubble.

But the dog with the wagging tail doesn't drive away the probing blackness that far and after tea I squat in front of our smoking fire, looking through the 40-watt smog at the tatty remnants of our 1950's heyday; the building blocks of my mind being slowly rearranged.

The sky is full of rain. My dinky toys are packed away for the last time. I'll always remember the huge pine toy box; a legacy of divorce and travels. Now filled with plastic models, pop guns and the shifting memories of a hazy past.

One neighbour has been duped into shifting a single bed downstairs so that my mother can sleep permanently in the living room. I just drift along hoping for the best, terrified of the worst. Still a silly child.

"How's your mother today?"

"Oh, a bit better I think."

"Good, good. If you need anything just pop 'round."

My mother has moved from white-faced secrecy to appalling openness as she begins describing her problems in the starkest detail. She's "haemorrhaging badly", "bleeding both ways", and she's having to use a bucket as a toilet downstairs. She's scared of what the doctor might tell her and she's getting through a pack of large external sanitary towels every day. My head spins and I turn away.

"My mother went the same way" she weeps.

The meal is cold, the sobs are only half suppressed and the TV is turned off. James Bond and The Man from UNCLE aren't so important this year. It's Christmas Day and she gathers me into her arms to say:

"I think I've got cancer."

I am dead, my mind is blank, my emotions silently scream. A man with a paper party hat walks past the window. He carries a bottle of wine and laughs. The mad dog next door barks and barks. A neighbour sends for our old doctor and tests soon reveal that my mother has..... a non-cancerous growth in her womb. We've been sharing the agonies of the last year for no good reason, and a hysterectomy will set things right. I don't realise that the problems are in many ways just beginning and that in this world 'right' can still be wrong. I breathe a sigh of relief, but the air is poisonous.

The time my mother spends in hospital is like a morbid religious holiday, as I hang warily between feelings of loneliness, and newly discovered independence. When she returns she's strangely obsessed with the whole experience of illness and doesn't really expect a full physical recovery, or the resumption of a normal life. She's pessimistic about her future and seems to take little interest in anything but her ordeal. Gradually she develops brittle bones, a weak stomach, high blood pressure and nervous complaints. She is fiercely proud of the growing tally.

"I'll soon be dead" she says in the mornings.

"I'm finished" at bedtime.

"Get out! Out! Go and stay with your bloody friends if they'll have you!"

I've left school, got a job, bought a motorbike and moved away, but I visit at the weekends, strangely pinned by the past.

My mother spends most of her time sat in the fireside chair, with eyes closed and arms crossed. She avoids doing any household chores and the house is untidy, cluttered and dirty. There are maggots in a bar of chocolate. Any challenge is greeted with massive temper loss, embarrassing scenes, threats and tears. She's finally trained the professionals to leave her well alone. Social Security payments have become sickness benefit. Librium has replaced talk.

"I've given up" she says. "I'm jiggered."

The rain still beats against the windows. Many of them are cracked now and their frames are rusty.

The hedges have grown and darken the rooms. Fashion has passed the house by. The big wardrobe is full of deserted evening dresses and fur coats. Moths feed. Spiders lurk.

My mother has her feet up on the chipped, 1930's tiled mantle piece, surrounded by unopened mail order catalogue parcels and mountains of magazines, picking the dead skin off her shins. She seems to love the miserable silence and razor tension. Sometimes a thin smile flickers around her lips at my discomfort. She is now a martyr.

"I haven't the strength to go on" she said one day. "I'm....."

"Finished" I unwisely interjected.

"Smack!" came the response, as she leapt across the room like a kangaroo and landed a smart right-handed slap to my temple.

I do something to offend my mother, and she charges after me like a rhino through to the kitchen, her eyes wild with fury, screaming abuse, raining slaps around my defensive arms, mad as Hell. My first impulse is to escape into the garden and just hang around outside until she'd cooled down, but for some reason the door's locked. As I wrestle with the handle and fiddle with the key, I feel further blows stinging the back of my head and neck. Multiplying and getting harder. Much harder. "You're bloody useless! Useless! Useless!"

Like a cornered animal, I turn around and fight, pushing her hard against the old washing machine. I hear her gasp as I make for cover upstairs, and as I pass her astonished face, I instinctively know that something has changed. The sitting duck is no longer sitting, and temper has found its place, like all things. The physical attacks have finished.

I've grown up.

But the boy is the father of the man.

It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World

The sun is in your sign and nothing can stop you. Venus turning retrograde may cause snags and hold-ups. Property prices are set to rise 5% over the next year. Property prices may crash next year warns academic. Weather conditions are rather changeable at the moment with showers and sunny spells in most parts of the country, but with some exceptions. Most people hope to retire early and enjoy the good life. Unemployment in your 50's can double the risk of strokes and heart attacks says recent study. Too many cooks spoil the broth. Many hands make light work. Older couples are now often forced to stay together for financial reasons. Many over-50's feel empowered to divorce their partners and start a new life. Parents should ensure that all children eat five portions of fruit or vegetables each day. Pesticides found on all fruit and vegetables in schools says health watchdog. Avoid stress. Keep busy. People will be flooding the sun hotspots this weekend. Skin cancer toll rises.

Circularity, conflict and contradiction.

The dope of our times.

We believe everything and trust nothing.